

**IMPORTANT**

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NATIONAL LIFE STORY COLLECTION

**ARTISTS' LIVES**

**WILLIAM GEAR**

interviewed by Tessa Sidey

**F4737 Side A**

First tape of an interview with William Gear in George Road, Edgbaston, Birmingham, on the twelfth of July. And I know, Bill, we are going to be celebrating your eightieth birthday on the second of August.

That's right.

Could you tell me where were you born in fact?

Well, I was born in a small town in Fife, Scotland, a town called Methil, but my father was a miner and they moved when I was about three years old, they moved to a...another mining village nearby called East Wemyss.

Did he come from a mining family?

Yes, my Grandfather was a miner, as did his father and my Great Grandmother was a miner (laughs) so that, you know, I remember my father saying that, in his Scots voice, he would say, 'me fether's muther worked doon the pit'[ph] and, of course, would

take, we are going right back to about 1840s or so when girls were employed in the mines and, of course, this was abolished around that time, but anyhow, so this was very much... My Grandfather was a miner and this is how the...

Your Grandmother actually went down the pit?

Yes, yes, yes, my Great Grandmother.

Your Great Grandmother? What? Would she have been assisting or...?

Yes, they employed the girls as, to pulling hutches and helping out, they weren't, you know, full-scale miners digging coal, but they just helped out by dragging the hutches around and helping with whatever, you know, but they employed girls, they employed girls and there was...

Did you know, you didn't know your Great Grandparents?

Oh no, no, no, no.

You knew your Grandfather?

I knew my Grand, my Grandfather...

What was he like?

He was a sweet old man, I mean he was, they were all, apart from the mining thing, they were all military, they had all been in the army, you know, there was a kind of army tradition among them, too. And he was very smart. He lived until he was eighty-four and I remember him quite well, you know...

The same, in Methil?

Well, the thing was he, there was, apart from my own father and family there was another, he had another brother who lived in Methil and another sister, so that in his, in my Grandfather's old age he would spend six months with us, and six months with the other... He was, he was shipped around, and finally he died in, well, I was a student at the time, it must have been around 1930 or something like it, he died anyway.

So he must have been quite an influence or presence in your childhood?

Well, I, you know I, I wasn't really, you know particularly aware of him, you know, but he was around and, and I was at school I suppose, and so on, anyway...

Your Grandmother, did she come from a nearby...?

Well, his, my Grandmother on that side, he had, she had died many years before...

His wife?

But I never knew him, knew her. But my mother's family, I knew her, I mean my mother's mother and, again, my Grandfather on that side, he had died early, you see, he died quite young, leaving, the old story, leaving a widow with seven children, or something like that,

you see, and of course the tradition in those days was that the girls, as soon as they left school, went into service, and the boys went 'doon the pit', and that was the standard thing, and it had to be, I mean, they had to earn some money because the income from mining and anything else was minimal in those days and this was the normal sort of routine.

Did your mother...?

However...

Did your mother? Stick to your mother. Did she actually go into service then?

Yes, yes, she went into service, when, I presume, when she left school, and she went into service in East Wemyss, where my father was by this time, and it was where they met, in East Wemyss...

Do you know how they met?

I wouldn't know how they met. But I mean she, she was in service in a, in a house of a factory manager, which was quite near where my father would live, you know, within a few hundred yards, but they would, you know, I suppose they would meet around that time. This, and they were married in 1915 or, I suppose, 1915. I was born in 1915. But he was a miner as I say...

Was he already, what age would he have become a miner?

Well, he would, again, he would have gone 'doon the pit' when he was fourteen...

Yes.

.....you see. When he got married...

Which mine was he actually working in, one mine or...?

A mine called the Michael, which is now closed, the Michael was one of the big pits in Fife at the time. But, the, you know, that was the tradition and, of course, I was going to say that since he was a miner they, he didn't go into the army, in the First World War, even though he had been what they called a volunteer, the equivalent of Territorials. I even have a photograph of him in uniform somewhere. But the miners were kept back, to produce coal for the industry in the railways and so on. So the miners, some of them I suppose, the younger unmarried, unmarried ones went into the armies and were slaughtered of course. And of course...

Would he have been in his twenties when he...?

He was probably, let me see, '81, he was about thirty-three or four I suppose.

He was born in '81?

He was born in '81, he was born in '81.

And your mother was born...?

A little later, I think 1890 thereabouts, yes. Somewhere about there.

Nine years difference?

Yes, there was a few years difference, she was younger, slightly younger I suppose, yes.

Yes, yes. Did you have, come from a large family?

No, my, there was only myself and a sister, in due course.

Yes.

She did have, my mother did have another child who died in infancy, when I was a kiddie, a toddler I suppose...

Do you remember that? Do you remember that?

I vaguely remember the funeral. I can still - a kind of vision of a, the, the tiny white coffin. I was probably not more than three and a half or something like this at the time. But I still have a picture of us, a tiny, a pretty little box so to speak, I mean, I wouldn't, I wasn't aware of funerals and death and these sort of things, but, anyhow, she died. I don't know of what, pneumonia or something like this, as an infant, a few weeks old I should think. That was it, you see. And I think, I'm not sure, but I think at the time I would suspect that the doctors then said, 'Oh, no more,' I'm not sure, but I would think that was the case probably. 'No more,' you know.

Where did you live in fact? What, what was...?

Well the, at the time there was, as I say we moved to East Wemyss when I was, I think in fact they got, first, when they were first married they didn't have a house, and accommodation was very difficult, and so they lived with my, my mother's mother, with my Granny, you know, but they, they got a house in East Wemyss, a miners', in a miners' row, in East Wemyss.

So where were you born in fact?

In Methil, in Methil...

In a house they were renting...?

Yes.

.....or with...?

It was the house of my mother's mother...

.....So, was it...?

.....my Granny.

.....your Grandmother?

Yes.

Yes.

But they lived with her for the first couple of years anyway.

So in fact you were born there, at home. Were you born, born at home?

I presume so. I mean how would I know? In those days one was. You didn't have things like hospitals and so on.

And so was, your first kind of memories were not of Methil particularly, no...?

No. Of course, we, we were all the time we were continually up, and going down to, to Methil, to see Granny and so on, and aunts and so on, and there was a big family on that side.

A couple of mil...how many miles...?

Oh, there was only about three or four miles apart. Methil and East Wemyss, I think three miles or so...

Right.

Maybe, yes, that's all, or quite nearly so. Methil in fact was the main docks, for exporting coal, abroad. You know, there was quite an, quite an area of coal mines over in that area of Fife and most of the coal was exported from Methil docks, and, you know, it was just a couple of miles apart. The, in-between Methil and East Wemyss there was this other town called Buckhaven, which is where I went to the High School, in Buckhaven. I went to school in East Wemyss to start with, the



local Primary School, I suppose. And at the age of ten or eleven if you, you had a kind of thing called a Control Examination - rather like an Eleven Plus in those days - and if you were good enough you went on to the local High School, which was at Buckhaven. And when they travelled backwards and forwards there on the tram, there was a tramway system which was meant, went from Kirkcaldy to Leven via East Wemyss and Buckhaven and we had a free pass on the trams, oh yes.

At least you weren't walking to school.

No, no, no, there was a bit of a walk from the tram down to the school, but it was, it was feasible, it wasn't bad you know.

Perhaps before we talk about your school. What was home like, I mean how, how would you describe your...?

Well, it was just, it was one large room which they just, they called it the kitchen, but it wasn't a kit..., it was one large room with two beds and a partition between the two beds, two kind of great box beds. And then there was what you might call a parlour, one other room which was kept for special occasions, it was hardly used. (laughs) And they kept, and you know, they...

It sounds...

Yes, well there was no, and that was it. There was a place, which they called a scullery - which we would call a kitchen - where they cooked food and washed the dish...there wasn't a bath, there wasn't a bathroom, there was a toilet, but that was all. And there was a garden at the back, but that was it. In all this, in this miners' row of cottages, or houses in one strong row called Randolph Street I think it was called at the time, but

we were there up until I went to college and so on.

So this was a mining community?

Absolutely, oh absolutely. I mean, most of the men worked down the mine, the local mine, most of them, oh, yes. It was absolutely a mining community and most of the housing had been built for the miners in fact.

Did they, were they a certain type of architecture then?

Well, it was a kind of fairly basic architecture, it was well built but there was nothing luxurious about it. As I say, there wasn't even a bathroom in those days. And you know, it was primitive but cheap, I suppose and the, the, the properties were owned by the coal company and they, your, the rent was deducted from your wages.

When did your father, was he very committed to mining?

Well, (laughs) Nobody is committed to mining dear! In fact he tried his damndest to get out of it because there were frequent strikes when I mean, they were, I mean, I remember them as a boy, I mean when I was at school and so on, the strikes, and even soup kitchens for the kids at school and all this stuff.

Was he involved in the strikes?

Oh yes. Well, of course he was a great strike..., one knows about the General Strike of 1926. Well really it was essentially a miners' strike. Well the miners stuck out for six months, nothing coming in, you imagine how did they manage? But my father, he took jobs as he

could, labouring somewhere or, you know, helping out, and, in fact, he - as the saying that came into the region in more recent time - he 'got on his bike.' And they were building a sugarbeet factory at Cupar, at Cupar in Fife and he and a pal, they went up, they got jobs, and I remember them, my mother making a tent for them to live in. Making a tent! in the house and great discussions about using boiled linseed oils. She used, she got normal sheets and made a tent and had to paint it with boiled linseed oil! I'm not joking. And I was then, this was in something like July, July '26, that's right, the Strike was on, I was ten plus. I was just about to go to the High School in the, in September say, and I went up, I, I went up and lived with them to keep an eye on the tent. To keep an eye on the things when they were out working you see.

That was...?

It was just in a field. There was a lot of men, unemployed men, and all kinds of odd sorts there working in this building this beet factory. And, you know, to earn some money, simple as that. And then of course he tried to stay out of the mine but, you know, he got jobs here and there, but finally he had to go back to the mine.

Was he a member of a union?

Well, he was yes, but he was not, he was never a kind of ardent union, in fact, he quarrelled with the union, I mean, I was never aware of these things, but I could see later on, because I remember a particular case where he developed dermatitis on his hands, and the doctor, the doctor, he would hope to claim compensation, industrial compensation, there wasn't the same security thing as there is nowadays. But the doctor had more or less said, apparently, that, well he could have got it anywhere,

he could have got it off your plants or anywhere, and he couldn't, he couldn't give him a statement saying that he got this as a result of his work down the pit. And he asked the union to help him, and they wouldn't take it up, so he didn't like the union. (laughs) But there were those times where it was really very, very difficult money-wise and, you know, they were really poor. There was no question and, I mean, I'm not selling anything, but they were really very poor. And I felt it too, you know, even getting any clothes or any food or, you know, it really was very tough.

Was your sister, she was...?

My sister was younger than me of course.

Were you quite close to your sister?

Yes, I suppose so, though, you know, I was very much a boy and interested in boys' things and knocking around with other boys and so on. And of course I, I went to the High School, she was still at the local Primary School I suppose in, in East Wemyss.

Did you have, was interested, did you have, to your home, did your parents have things on the wall?

No. Nothing in the way of pictures of anything. I mean...

Were they religious? Did they belong...?

Well, my father, my mother, my mother was church-going shall I say, but my father not at all. In fact he used to be rather naughty, he used to play a trick on my mother, but, she would

want him to go to, to church but he would, he would alter the clock (laughs) so that he would put the clock back so that she would realise that it was too late now, and so, well, he did tricks like that anyway. But he was, he was never, but my mother, my mother was 'churchy' shall I say. The whole, her family were you see, her, her mother and her sisters were all 'churchy' shall we say and Church of Scotland of course, you know. And we went to Sunday School of course, and I used to go to church, occasionally, with my mother when I, when I was home and she would ask me to, to accompany her so to speak. And this was the Free Church of Scotland, I suppose, in the village, you know.

So a traditional Sunday would be going to church?

Well, it didn't, wouldn't happen every Sunday, but now and again, I would think maybe every two or three weeks we'd go to church. And my father never, she, I mean, now and again she would drag him, but he was never a church man at all.

Was this a kind of a family, not a joke, but...?

Well, it was taken, it was taken in good part. I mean my mother would accept it. She would never argue about it, or make him, you know, you know, and he, he, they were very good pals in that sense, you know, I mean she tolerated him very well. I mean, he liked his pint but he never, he would never, my mother wouldn't have any whisky, drink in the house. Jamais - but she knew and didn't mind him having his, going down to the pub having his pint. But I never saw my father drunk. For instance, he would have his pint and that was it, but he always did these, and he never smoked for instance either, not, never smoked. Nor did my Grandfather either for instance, which is interesting, and of course most men smoked in those days, miners especially, usually

a pipe. But...

Do you think that was the influence of your mother or just perhaps a habit?

No, no I think this was just, this was, you know, the family didn't smoke for some good reason I don't know why, but they never did. I know my Grandfather neither. I think his brother did, probably. He was older, one of his brothers. But, you know, they were very pally together really.

Did you begin to, I mean, what age did you begin to read for example?

Well, of course, I was in the High School mainly and, you know, we had to do the English, French, Latin and Science and all these...

.....a bit earlier were you, do you recall being introduced to books?

Not at home, not particularly, no. But I helped myself a lot in that respect in that there was a library in the village and I used to take books home and read them a bit, you know, but not necessarily, I mean, I just grabbed anything, I didn't make a kind of campaign of studying Philosophy or any damn thing but of course when you went to the High School you were, you were expected to read certain books and so on.

So you had to, to teach yourself reading?

Well, you know, it didn't, it didn't really happen that way. I suppose you, you know you gravitated to things you were interested in and of course I was also interested in, well, not in art necessarily, but in mechanics and things like science and, you know, practical science,

astronomy or any of these sort of things that a boy would be interested in, I suppose, as opposed to pure literature say, you know.

Yes, but your first school was, do you remember...?

Well, it was simply, that was the, the village school. They went on, there was the Junior School, I suppose, they took kids right up to the age of fourteen, but, as I say, at the age of ten there was this Control Examination and, you know, the Headmaster or the Head Teacher would put you in to, you solemnly went to Buckhaven and sat an exam. And if you passed, I suppose, then you went to the High School.

So was that in...?

And from my...

.....English, say, the basics - English...?

Well, it was, I don't know, I mean, it was a basic kind of exam which lasted most of a day. English and sums and a bit of History and Geog...you know, the usual kind of basic stuff. But I can't remember now, but from my class put it, I mean, to give some idea of proportion, from my class of thirty plus at the High School, at the Junior School, there were probably not more than say five or six of us went to the High School from that class to Buckhaven.

It was quite a tough exam...?

Well, it was, no, no, but they, it was, but they hand picked the ones who were worthy of sitting it at all...

Yes.

....You know, the teachers, because they, they and, of course, even your Junior School you had little tests now and again, nothing serious, but little tests and so they got some idea who were the bright kids and so on, and so it worked like this you see. And of course, as I say, I was ten at that time you don't know about these, what's going on really, you just did what you were told so to speak. (laughs)

So your first teachers must have been pretty good...?

Well, they were just normal kind of Scots teachers I suppose and they, they were just, I don't know, I mean you can't judge what they were like, you can't compare these things, at that distance really.

Your first interest then, you mentioned that this area of a kind of mechanical?

Well, I mean, as I say, like any, any kid, you know liked the same thing as I, probably got a meccano for my Christmas or something, you know, there's a boys' thing, you know, and we, we used to make things, little boys used to make things, too, you know.

What kind of things?



You make a scooter or you make fishing rods or make 'creeks' to catch fish or you made fishing lines you know, it was boys' things damn it all, I mean, you weren't going to invent an atomic bomb exactly but they were just normal boys' activities, that's all I suppose. The one thing that I do remember funnily enough, some people ask me how the first, the first instance of my having any talent in the field of art was, I still remember the, still at this, this Junior School, we did drawing of course there was one, that was one of the, we did drawing, that was the name of the word drawing. (laughs) It was a class, maybe on a Friday after, you did drawing, in the same way as you have a one afternoon a week singing, it was...

What age was this? Do you remember?

At ten, ten, at ten say, just ten.

You started your drawing lessons then?

Well, no before then, during, during the, the class you would normally have drawing. I mean once a week say, but there was this occasion I remember where the teacher solemnly put a handbag on, you know, of course there was about thirty odd kids in this class, and we sat two by two, of course, so one in these seats, you see, and the handbag in front of the class on a kind of table with a bit of paper behind it and she announced that the one with the best drawing would get a shilling from my handbag you see, so I could, so I won the prize. (laughs) So...

Do you remember what you actually sketched then?

I, the handbag! You had to draw this, her handbag. This is it, this was still life, you drew the handbag. But the idea that in that handbag there was a shilling, that was incentive. (laughs)  
And a shilling to a kid of ten in those days was serious money.

(laughs) I remember going home and showing this my mother, 'Where did you get that?'

(laughs) But anyhow, that was my first inkling that I was good at art so to speak. (laughs)

And the drawing lessons continue...did they, did you just...?

Well, there was very little teaching of it, you know I suppose actually, they did, they did have what was called an Itinerant Art Master who went round the schools, and he would maybe show up about once a term or something like this, I mean, he was what was called an Itinerant Art Master and he probably had about twenty schools to go around, you know. (laughs) But he made you a kind of little demo on the blackboard or something you know, I don't know, but I hardly remember about that in that time. But then when, when I went to the High School we did have art one afternoon a week I suppose, somewhere like that you see, there was a whole range of classes of course.

When was that taught?

Well, at the time again, we, the teacher, the main teacher that I remember was a, quite a sweet old man, he was a watercolour painter called Bennet and he, you did watercolours, still, usually still life watercolours, and now and again he would vary the thing and you would be asked to do posters of, you know, but, I gradually began to find that I was getting good marks and of course all these were solemnly marked, they were exams and they were marked you know. (laughs) But then when I was probably about fourteen, fifteen I suppose, the old man, the old art master died in fact, he died in school. And we got a youngish, a bright younger art, art master called Morris, Bob Morris,

who had been at the College of Art in Edinburgh and actually was a friend of people like Gillies and that group, I mean he had been to Paris even and so on, so he was aware of you might call twentieth-century and he, I suppose, he spotted me and encouraged me and gave me books, new books on Cezanne and Modern Art and so on to look at and so on, and then I find myself being the top of the, the class and winning prizes and so on, and deciding at the age of say fifteen plus or sixteen minus or whatever it was that I would like to go to the Art School and being encouraged to do so by this, by this art master and announcing to my parents that I wanted to go to the Art School. They didn't mind, this is great, that's fine, but the other thing, the other tradition of course in that, in those families, especially mining families, most miners, most miners would say 'my son's not going down the pit', you know, they would do everything to help. And, the lucky thing was, I mean, I didn't realise it at the time, but they encouraged me, but the lucky thing was that when applying for grants and through the Fife Education Authority, and they were very good and they did give grants to, to students going to university what not. And there was a thing called the 'Carnegie' and if you had four A'Levels or whatever it was called at the time, four Highers, I suppose, they would give you a small grant towards fees. And there was also the Miners' Welfare thing, and so one way and the other I got literally enough money to manage on as a student in Edinburgh, without being a, a problem...having to resort to my parents. And of course during the vacations I generally..well, certainly the summer vacation, I generally went berry-picking in Perthshire with other students, you see. So I wasn't a drag on my parents but I certainly wasn't contributing to the family income in any way.

They weren't pressurising you...?

No, no, no, on the contrary. But this was pretty lucky and it was rather a special Scottish thing, or even a Fife thing, because the Fife Education Authority was quite Left-wing, even Communist at one time, and they were very, very much encouraged it, the education. And they were very helpful in that way. And, of course, the Carnegie and the Miners and in one way and the other I was able to, to function and that, and of course Edinburgh College of Art in Edinburgh, apart from anything else, was also very wealthy and they, they used to give little travel grants for a visit to London say, I mean, I went two or three times. I got nearly £25 to spend a month in London and this sort of thing, so they were marvellously well equipped and the corresponding thing in England was pretty well zero, I mean, I, later on was meeting chaps of my generation who had tried to go through college in, in London or wherever, and very few of them had got any exams at all. I mean there was, I don't know what the system was, but there might be one and a half grants for the whole of Devonshire or something, and you had to be the most brilliant kid in the ..in the county to get anything at all. (laughs) But there, very few of them had anything like the kind of provision that I had, so I was very lucky.

Before we talk more about that, that college time in Edinburgh, do you recall your first visit to a gallery?

Very well, as I mentioned to you, you see, the, the local, the nearest local gallery was in Kirkcaldy which is only five miles away from East Wemyss, of course, we used to go to Kirkcaldy frequently, I mean my mother used to go for you might call extra shopping, through Kirkcaldy and, you know, Kirkcaldy was the local market town. And, apart from anything else, so as soon as I was interested in art I mean from the age of say fifteen anyway, I would go to the Art Gallery in Kirkcaldy which is quite a nice gallery, but they especially had a remarkable collection of paintings by Old McTaggart and Peploe especially and other Scottish artists. These are in the main, loaned by a local collector...

**END OF F4737 SIDE A**

**F4737 Side B**

He [Peploe] made quite an impression...?

Yes, indeed you know, he was the, the first painter I was really aware of I suppose. And then of course, by that time, by the time I was say fifteen, sixteen I would be going over to Edinburgh, too, and visiting the National Gallery and/or the, the exhibitions that might be on in the Royal Scottish Academy. And I remember for instance these, the Scottish, the Scottish, the Society of Scottish Artists who had normally, annually, have an invited exhibition and I can still remember, I think it, it was probably...it must have been about 1931/32, a big loan exhibition of the work of Eduard Munch for instance. Now that was remarkable, this in Edinburgh. And similarly following, this is already of course, by this time I had gone to the Art School later on, but a similar exhibition of Paul Klee or Braque, or Dufy, or such people, Picasso prints. So that one, even in Edinburgh, one was familiar with the, to some extent with the, the work of European artists, you know. And then of course...

So you, in a sense, you were looking at painting, Scottish painting from quite early on...?

Oh, yes.

.....from the age of fourteen and fifteen...

Oh, yes, yes certainly yes.

.....and, and that your teacher, Morris was a great inspiration. Did you go to galleries with him?

Not with him no, no. But, you know, he would be always very encouraging and I would report back to him about the time I had been over and seen something and discuss it with him and so on. And of course I kept up with him long after I had, when I went to college, and even after that, you know, until, oh well into the '50s, I used to, any time I was back in, in Scotland, even after the army, after the War, I would go down and see him. He lived in Leven actually and his wife had been a student with him, there was no children I remember, and he died finally, of course.

So the work that you were seeing was a combination of Scottish work from the 1930s...?

Well, of course the other thing was this, that you know, I, I was a devotee of magazines and books and the, the college library had a very good library, and not only the library in the College of Art but also the City Library had a very good Fine Art department and they were getting all the, the latest magazines from Paris and, you know I was always looking through these and getting familiar with them. I mean I knew the names of most of these artists of the period and even the Surrealists but without necessarily seeing them in, in the flesh so to speak. So that, you know, I was very, and then of course, in due course I went to Paris and I had a scholarship and that's another story, you see.

Would you like to say something about, I mean, what was the Edinburgh College of Art like?

Well, it was actually, it was, it was a mixture so to speak, because, there was still the, the traditional structure and there was a fair number of traditional staff still there...

What was that exactly?

Well, you know, you had a timetable and in the, in the first year you, you hardly touched paint at all as I remember. You drew from the antique or you (laughs) you, you did perspective and anatomy and, oh yes drawing from plants. (laughs) All that side of it you see. And, you know, though I was already doing my own thing a bit, and being hauled over the coals for it, you know, and being advised by one of these Masters to, to look at Ingres and not these German books or something like that you see. (laughs) But, anyhow, the other side of it was of course that

they had a nucleus of the bright, the brighter, younger artists, Edinburgh artists, on the staff. People like Gillies and Maxwell and McTaggart and Peplow, in fact briefly, the old Peplow. And one or two others like that who were aware of the outside world so to speak. So that gradually, one was able to explore a bit. But even then it was certainly much more liberal and adventurous in its approach than the London colleges for instance.

You seem to be describing a combination of tradition and openness.

Well, this is it, this is it, and of course gradually that tradition, the old tradition, died out I suppose with the staff more or less, and though it wasn't a bad thing to do, as I say. But it was heartbreaking. I mean, there was I, you know, reading about Van Gogh and Picasso and Matisse and having to stand, I remember stand...we used to stand in this bloody sculpture court drawing, drawing from the antique with a pencil and for hour after hour until you were just dropping and you know you couldn't escape. And you know, I, I sometimes think that the thing was to, to either break you, if you could take it rather like going in the army (laughs) if you could take it for a couple of sessions (laughs) then you were worthy of continuing but, hopefully some of you will drop out. (laughs) I don't know, but it was really rather a, you know, but I suppose it learned you discipline and the necessity of draughtsmanship and whatever. But all, even in my very first year, very first days I remember being, you were interviewed by the, by the Principal and



Secretary chap, and they would give you your timetable, you had sort of a timetable of what you were doing and we were two evenings a week, one was Perspective and the other Solid Geometry. I mean solemnly, oh yes, Solid Geometry and Perspective. And I said, 'What about the other evenings?' And they said, 'Oh, no, no.' And I said, 'Could I do some, could I go to the, do life drawing?' And they said, looked at me as if I was, and he said, 'Well, yes why not,' sort of thing, but he said, 'If you have to drop any of these classes, don't drop Perspective and Solid Geometry.' (laughs) That was, he said, but that's absolutely crazy when I think of it now. The worst aspect of this was that I had a cousin who had gone through the medical course at the University and become a doctor, and graduated, but he had been in the same digs all the seven years, or whenever he was there, six years or so, and his landlady, the landlady, a Mrs Dogherty, I mean she was even a friend of the family, she had been over to Fife and one way, so, there was nothing for it, but when Willie went to the Art School this would be his digs you see. Now the digs were in a place in Edinburgh about two miles or more from the Art School and the system was that I would have breakfast and then run, literally run, about four or five hundred yards to the tram stop. Get on this tram, all the way up to the Infirmary, one penny, and that was the first stage, if you stayed on to the Art School, it was another penny. So we got off at the Infirmary and run along to the Art School to get in by 9.30 or something like that. Then at lunchtime, I'd run all the way back to the Infirmary, down in the tram, up this five, this five flights of steps, have a big lunch. I mean it was a dinner, it was a great bowl of soup, and then mince and potatoes and vegetables and suet pudding and tea, and then knock this back - and run back to the, and this happened about three or four times a day. Of course I was just seventeen, I didn't know any better. But this was the system. (laughs) So, and of course, in the evening too, I went to these in the evening, you see. So, finally, finally I said to the to the landlady, I said, 'You know, I could have lunch at the College, they have a restaurant, a

cafeteria there, and, you know, I wouldn't have to come...' and she agreed that this is possible, so I didn't have to rush home at lunchtime. So life was a little bit better. And then, as I say, fortunately, after my, after the first year or so, she died (laughs) and, so I was able to escape and I got digs literally a hundred yards from the College, so life was with a musician and his family. (laughs) He was a violinist and he played in the local orchestra. (laughs) But, you know, life was much better then and, but that first year was absolutely crazy. Of course I was young and fit then and I could take it, but an awful waste of time and money, running up and down these bloody stairs.

Do you remember any of your teachers in particular at Edinburgh, or what are your memories?

Well, I remember all of them, you know, I mean the, I can't remember all the names now.

Who was in painting, who...?

Well the, the, yes, the, the main paintings was a man called Adam Bruce Thompson who, who was chiefly painting and still life and such like. And then there was a man called Westwater. And then Gillies and Maxwell. These are the chief, chief people in the paintings. And then of course the Head of School, the Head of the School of Painting was a man called David Allison who didn't take much, he was actually a portrait painter and he was technically Head of the School. And now and again he would come in and paint, paint on your canvas, I mean you would do a life painting and he would correct it by doing the whole painting all over again on your canvas. (laughs) But...

Was there such a thing, I mean now we talk about kind of, in a sense the Glasgow School.

Was there something about Edinburgh that you think defined it as...?

Well, it was certainly different. I think at the, there is a different tradition. I think, I'm not, you can't, it's difficult to define, but I think Edinburgh was always, put it this way, that there was first of all, there was this basic thing. The, what I call the Edinburgh-Paris axis. That all these great people I mentioned, and of course the earlier group, the, the Scottish colours - Peplow, Fergusson, Cadell, Hunter - were, were all, all worked and lived much of their time in Paris or France, so that there was this Edinburgh-Paris axis. There wasn't that same element in, from Glasgow, I don't think. There had possibly been earlier on. But in the '20s and '30s the, the key people were, you might call the Edinburgh School. And, they, of course the people like Gillies and Maxwell and others. So that there was much more of a link with the Paris scene from Edinburgh than there would have been in Glasgow. And I think the Glasgow thing was much more destined to a kind of figurative element. And of course has since proved the case, it still is happening. An accent on the figuration. Not so, not so much in Edinburgh, the two, two are quite different institutions really.

Do you, do you recall how you might have been introduced to that, in the sense the Paris modern connection at that time? Would it have been in lectures...?

Well, books, books as I say and the odd exhibition. The odd visit to London and seeing Léger for instance in London. I mean I remember seeing exhibitions of Léger in London and such like, but...

What was your work like then as a student?

Well it was, you see, you know it was a mixture I suppose of, efficient, I mean, put it this way, if you are doing a life painting, you do a life painting in front of a model in a class. I

mean you, you can't do, you can't very well do an abstract life painting (laughs) as a nineteen year old student so to speak. And/or life drawing, and we did that and, but, there was also other things that one could do. For instance, I would do things off my own in my, in my digs and exhibit in the Royal Academy...in the Royal Scottish Academy or the Society of Scottish Artists. Or of course we had, we had a kind of thing called a Fine Arts Society where we had an annual exhibition. We organised this. There was a group from the University in the College of Art and we would do our own thing so to speak, and I would, I would exhibit my own modern things so to speak. But as a student, you know as I say, you were, you would, you would be doing a life painting, you did a life painting and do it well. And of course the at the end of the day, there were rewards, put it this way, that out of a class say the, the painting group, I had in my particular group, I can't remember now, maybe about twenty, something like that, and four of us, four of the painters would be given a Postgraduate Scholarship. And we, we had the quite a useful Scholarship money-wise. And we had a studio, well two of us shared a studio, quite a nice...

Who did you share with?

I stayed there was another of my colleagues, a chap called Rogers. He was more interested in golf than painting in fact. And then there was another two in another studio, Postgraduates. And there, at that point you were able to do your own thing more and more.

Because your Scholarship, I thought was also to study History of Art?

No, no, well it's another point, one of the conditions of this Postgraduate Scholarship was that you take the History of Art class at the University as part of the Postgraduate thing. Which I did. And the, the, like the Professor was Professor Talbot Rice and I, I can't remember now,

but I think it was maybe two, two afternoons a week or something like that, I can't remember now, for two terms, something like that. And it was a proper University History of Art course. And of course there were, apart from, apart from us we four, there was also, I think, there was also a Postgraduates course in Design and Sculpture probably, I think, probably a total of maybe seven or eight. And we all took this class together with students from the University who were taking that course as well. And that included people like Andrew McClaren Young and Morris Carstairs and Oswald, I mean, it was a good thing. There were, we were, so to speak, rubbing shoulders with, with students from the University who were, who were doing arts of various kinds or medicine or whatever. Because the History of Art, it wasn't a degree course at the time, it was just, I don't know, you would call a supplementary course or something, I suppose.

So it was quite, I mean it was...?

But there was a solemn examination and I got a, a First Class Certificate or something from it, you know.

So it's unusual now even to, to in a sense bring the 'doers' the painters together with ..?

Well, it's not unusual. I mean since then, there are joint courses, in Edinburgh certainly, which include, I think Elizabeth MacGregor is for instance a graduate, it's part Fine Art proper and History of Art, a kind of dual nationality sort of thing. They have certainly combined other courses in History and practical Fine Art as well now, which is a good idea.

It must have been something to receive lectures from Talbot Rice?

Well, it was, it was very valuable I think, because, actually of course in the normal Art School curriculum we did History of Art anyhow in the Art School, you know, History of Architecture and we had lectures and we even had examinations and that, but the, the University thing was something, I don't suppose different in a way, and complimentary, but of course, Talbot Rice's great thing was Byzantine Art. I spent a whole term with black and white glass slides of mosaics in Monreale and Daphni and it got a bit tedious after a while. (laughs) And, anyhow, we solemnly had exams and all this and so on, and of course he covered the whole History of Art in a way, but his main thing was Byzantine art you see.

Some, I know some people have written that, that they sense that, that there is a Byzantine influence in your work...

Well, I actually I believe so, I remember, in fact, many, many years after this, oh first, the thing was after the, that period, this is the Postgraduate period, I was awarded a travelling scholarship of, I think they gave two scholarships of £250 which was tangible money in those days, especially when the pound was strong. So I went to Paris, and had, I don't know, four or five months in Paris and then travelled all round. I got to places like, like Venice for instance, and then all the way down through Yugoslavia to Greece the great Byzantine things there and even into Turkey, I got as far as Istanbul. But suddenly, I mean, I suddenly, rem...saw say in a place like Ravenna, I remember these, you know, we used to see them in black and white slides and now (laughs) and of course they're bouncing with colour. (laughs) You know mosaic, mosaics actually, of course they are more colourful than, than most normal kind of mural paintings you see, frescoes. (laughs) And it was great, and, of course, the, what, what took to me was the actual verticality of much of these Byzantine figures, you see, which I saw and also the, the tesserae and the sparkling colour and as I say, you know, something you find an echo of that sort of thing in my own work.

And I remember, as I say, much later on, oh, probably in the '60s, being in Edinburgh and, I think, yes this is I am pretty sure now, I can't remember in detail, but I had an exhibition in Edinburgh in 1962 or '63 or thereabouts, and Talbot Rice came to the thing and I said to him, I said, 'You see Byzan...' I said (laughs) and he said, 'It is nice to think that one has an influence.' (laughs) [PAUSE, MICROPHONE LOOSE] But of course the great thing was to go to Paris in 1937.

Indeed, 1937 to, and in a sense you went there to, to make contact with Fernand Léger's studio...?

Well, not exact...not exactly, I mean I simply had a travelling scholarship in Paris and this was where you went to, first of all, (laughs) and...

With no plans as such?

Well, not, not originally, but the thing was that Paris was, at the time was, apart from all the fantastic galleries and museums and so on, there was the great International Exhibition 1937 and massive exhibitions of all the masters of Modern Art. There was

I think the Petit Palais, they had a room full of each of the top men, you know of people like Matisse, Braque, Picasso, Léger, Dufy, all the boys you see, and so on, and then the, the great International Exhibition itself with, for instance Picasso's 'Guernica' was there, I mean, as a mural, it was commissioned by the Spanish Government as a mural for the Spanish Pavilion, and there it was. And etcetera, so the whole atmosphere was absolutely marvellous, bags of exhibitions and works to see. Life was great, life was, I mean, you know, you, you, I stayed in a hotel...

You went on your own? You were on your own?

Yes, yes. Though I had one or two friends who were there. There was one particular chap whom I'd known in Edinburgh. He was a poet actually, and we knocked about a bit. And then you met up with other characters, you know, palled about with a bit.

And how did you make contact with the Léger studio?

Well the, in those early days, you know more or less, to keep my hand in, there was this what they called these 'Free Academies' in the rue de la Grand Chaumiere where you, anybody could go in there, and you paid five Francs or something, and you could go and draw the model, a continual change of models, but you know, that wasn't all that satisfactory. So that, I don't know how it came about but somebody may have mentioned Léger or something, so I thought it was a good idea. But I knew of his work. I admired it, I liked it. I thought it was strong and tough and had this strength of colour, I thought it was kind of Scots in a way, this colourful and strong and so on. So I, I went to, to see the, he had what he called an 'Academie' and it was in a studio in Montparnasse somewhere. And, I went in, and I knew where it was because someone had obviously told me, and I had to take along some work to show him, because you couldn't just walk in. I mean he, he would say, 'I can do something for you.' Or, 'You're wasting my time.' Or something. But anyhow he took very few students, I think at the time there was probably not more than maybe nine or ten students. They were in the main young artists actually, or people who had done, been through the Art School or something somewhere. There was two or three Americans, two or three Germans, and a couple of English and the odd, the odd American...the Spaniard or something like that you see. But that was, that was...

It was quite an international school?



Oh yes, it would be. These things always were obviously. And...

How did the interview go?

Well, he, he, you know, he, he though I was Russian. (laughs) The colour, the things I showed, the, the, I suppose rather like these things, the very rich colour, the rich dark reds and blacks and blues and the, and he turned to the, he had a kind of MassiŠre an assistant woman who subsequently became his wife, a Russian woman, and said something like this, 'Est un Russe n'est pas?' 'Non, Non, Je suis un Ecossais, Monsieur'. (laughs) And he said, 'Ah, Ecossais, alors...' He, they always knew about the Scots, they knew, 'Ca c'e quelque chose.' You see. (laughs) So, anyhow, that was a fairly brief thing you see.

How long did you go?

I think about four or five months altogether. And I can't now, I think it was not, it was not every day, it was something like maybe, I can't remember now, maybe two or three afternoons a week sort of thing. You know. And...

How would they be conducted? Would you...?

Well, usually, usually, as I say, he had this woman assistant, I can't honestly remember her name now, she is well known because she became his wife, Madame Nadia or a name like that or something. And she would run the show and Léger himself would come along for an hour or so in the afternoon and go around and have a look at your work and have a wee chat.

[Coughing]

Sorry, Bill, carry on.

It's OK.

Talking about how, how Léger's studio actually was run...?

Yes, as I say he, he would come along for an hour or so in the afternoon and go round the students and have a wee chat with each one. I remember particularly one occasion, of course bear in mind that the, the 'in' thing at the time in Paris was Surrealism, and there was big exhibitions of Surrealism and they were all, they had the hype, there was people like Dali and Magritte and Max Ernst and Tanguy all that group, they were the, the fashionable thing at the time you see. It didn't appeal to me at all, quite honestly. And, but I still remember one thing, one thing they were do in the studio, they would set up quite elaborate still lifes in this and you know, you were expected to draw this but very tight, tough, drawing, no messing about and no distraction in making the nice marks and curly bits and so on, just a wee steely drawing. And I remember I was, was drawing a leek (laughs) and I made the, you know, the stem of the leek is round, and I made it become from round to square or something (laughs) and he looked at it and said, 'Mais, c'est déjà de la fantaisie,' and I knew exactly what he meant, 'Déjà de la fantaisie'. You know, big deal, you know, I say. So, so I didn't do any (laughs) I didn't. But oh yes, another thing that he did of course was that he invited, it must have been about Christmas time I think, he invited the students to his personal studio and, you know, showed us his recent work and, and some of his studies and stuff, which is like a nice experience too. And then later on...

Where was that?

It was in the rue Notre Dame Des Champs. Again in Montparnasse, but you know quite some distance from the, the Academie studio, it was quite separate altogether.

Did he show his work? Did he obviously show you his work?

Oh yes, in his studio yes, yes. And I remember particularly there was an American girl called Constance Wigglesworth, I repeat, that was her name, I remember her very well. She, she had a crush on me I know that, too. Anyhow, Constance, she, yes, she had been sent a hundred dollars from her father I should think for Christmas, she came from she was American. And she bought, she bought a gouache from Léger for a hundred dollars, yes. Yes, on the occasion, you know, and she explained to Léger that she had this hundred dollars and she would love and so on.

What was it, what is it now that draws you to Léger?

Well, still the, you know, of all the painters of that, of the, whole twentieth-century, I mean of the, I mean, first of all, in his earliest period, even the Cubist period, at least there was usually, or always the element of colour in his Cubist work even. And some, some quite exquisite colour. He, there was one some particular things, where they have, which I am echoing here in some of these that are rich, deep maroon, and ultra-marine. And, as I say, as opposed to the Braque, Picasso, Cubism, which was intentionally structural and colourless virtually, I mean it was monotony and so on, but anyhow also though later on, the, the kind of, I don't know, the, you might even say Puritan, Puritanical thing about his work, that it was, there was never any indulgence in matiere or tricky brush work or that, I mean it was, it was sort of dead pan and tough and strong and honest and it had all these qualities which I admire. And you know, as

I say, a profound influence. I think of all the, put it this way, that the, I love the, it's a bit like eating...

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**F4738A Side A**

.....quality of approach. As I say, you know, you can think of the seductive, seductive painters like say Chagall, or Paul Klee or even Bonnard and, you know, they are beautiful and marvellous but, at the end of the day, you want something solid and steady, bread and potatoes as I say, and you come back to Léger. You know, it's a kind of permanent and profound influence which is still there I suppose and...

Do you see something... Léger is obviously, one thinks of his very strong contours and his use of black in these contours...

Yes, yes, yes.

Do you see that as having been quite an influence?

Yes, I think this is true too. You know there is normally, he normally goes from black to bright yellow and all the colours. And there is that contrast in tone and colour which is something that appeals to me, it's as I am saying it is a Scots thing, it is the tough strength that he has and I should think it is still with me, too, I mean, I need that, I need that, that black and that contrast of tone and colour. So that it really comes from there, but...it's not necessarily a Léger thing, I mean, it is something that in me which I presume that Léger sort of brought out at the time, you know. But I mean, I am not, you can't say that my work is obviously Léger-like, I mean you wouldn't mistake me for Léger. (laughs) And of course the other thing is that, the other thing to be aware of, too, is I'm conscious of, is that one shouldn't, it's too easy to be influenced by a major master and stick there and do it for the rest of your life, as you see from my work that we have been looking at, I've ranged wide and all over the place, and I think one has to allow this to happen. I mean, it would be pointless if you produce a kind of

formula, and you knock it up for another twenty, thirty, forty years, I mean that would be pointless. In the same way, you know, I would be untrue to myself if I didn't allow the possibility of experiment and, or be again knocked over by certain, certain artists and, I mean, I was probably influenced for instance briefly by De Staël in the early '50s, you know, and one has to admit...allow this to happen, if, if its important, and I, again I would think that De Staël is certainly the most important post-war artist, you know, again a tough, real painter, and one doesn't need the kind of Bacon and Freud sort of elements. I mean, they have something else, but for a sheer painters' painter you know, you take De Staël.

Would you call yourself an Abstract, non-figurative painter at this time when you were on your first visit to Paris or were you still evolving?

I was still evolving I suppose. I was gravitating to abstraction and, of course, I even, even in those early days, there was always a link with nature, I never denied nature really. Even in those extreme abstract themes we have been looking at, there is an equivalence to, to, observable form. I don't say nature in the naturalistic sense but of observable forms. They may be telegraph poles or stakes or trees or structures or, as I am looking out the window now, I mean, I can see, I can see my painting in two or three different ways. There is the severe architectural modern structure over there and at the same time trees and foliage and blossom and light through the tree. I mean, there is my painting you see. This is where it comes from. I don't necessarily sit down and paint that, but I am aware of it and I can see the equivalence to my painting, I don't say it's nature, but, I don't deny nature, this is it. And I think it's impossible to deny nature really. Even in that thing, that yellow and black thing we were looking at, you can see that as a landscape if you want to, you know. Though I, but what I am

saying is this, that there are, there have been those severely abstract painters who might paint a circular disc and paint it red, and then they have a line across, and then they say, they call it 'Red Disc' and it mustn't be confused. But as I say, the human eye looking at this red disc is bound to associate it with the setting sun, or whatever. I mean, the physiological action of an eye looking at something is going to record and interpret in some way. So it's, it's really rather pointless to say, 'My painting is purely concerned with proportion and structure and so on.' I mean it always has or rather, put it this way, if you try to deny that the physiological aspect of an eye interpreting

whatever you are looking at, then, you know you are missing the point. So, I say that, my, and of course most of my paintings they have, well not necessarily, but sometimes they have a title. It might be like 'Summer Landscape' or 'Spring Landscape' or 'Garden Structure' or names like that. Again, looking at these paintings, you see, you can see the, there is a basic dark structure which can be tree trunks, or stakes, or parts of buildings, or whatever and then, additionally, the effect of foliage and blossom and light coming through the trees as you see it now, or whatever. As I say, I don't depict it. I just paint the thing and if you want to see it that way (laughs) then that's your problem, you know.

Do you...?

Because the thing must stay, it must live in its own right not, it shouldn't, its value should never be to what extent it approaches nature, or it represents nature you see.

Do you recall discussions about this, I mean, in Paris at that time were you meeting a lot of fellow young artists...?

Yes, I probably did at the time because there would be arguments about, of course, the, I, I, of course, later on when I went settled back in Paris after the War, I was in contact with serious artists.

I wondered what, before the War?

No, well, in those days you, you didn't have, you know, you didn't work these things out particularly, you know, you did your own thing and you were, you had to be reasonably humble, damn it all, I was still a student and still open. You had to retain an open mind, I mean, you were seeing the, the greatest masters of the twentieth-century. And it would be ridiculous and apart from the great masters, I mean the great fellows: Braque, Picasso, Matisse, Bonnard, Chagall, Dufy and all these boys, at the same time there was all the, the other claims of the Surrealists and/or even of the Abstract creations boy...there was a score of different potential influences there and you, you couldn't close your mind, at the same time, you didn't want to, or you couldn't opt for one or the other and say, 'This is the only possibility.' I think you had to be at least open-minded and, in due course, you know, your, your sights would settle on what's important. I remember, for instance, when I first, first, saw the big exhibitions, liking Dufy. Dufy is great. And then, a few days after that talking, talking with a artist, an Australian artist as I remember, and saying how I liked Dufy, 'Oh no, Dufy no, he's a, go and look at Bonnard,' or something, you see, and then, of course, it's only by this sort of contact that you begin to see the important thing, or the lesser thing, or whatever and you...

Had you made contact with, with Klee's work or Kandinsky's work in the 1930s?



Klee, of course, I had seen in Edinburgh, first of all. There was a big exhibition of Klee.

Klee was hardly known of in Edin...in, in Paris. And indeed, the German, of course, when I was there, I mean in, say by '37, '38, Hitler was already in power in Germany and there was refugees of course, and of course, the, the, there was never any exhibitions of the Germans in Paris that I am aware of. Certainly not Klee. Klee was discovered, even in Kandinsky too, for instance, until after the War really.

So this was what, you had seen Klee's work in...?

I had seen Klee's work in Ger... in Edinburgh and, of course in books and so on to, but certainly I can't remember seeing any of that in Paris at that time. After the War, certainly.

Were you seeing, were you drawn to, one thinks of his use of watercolour, his watercolour drawing, in particular with Klee, I wonder what you were perhaps drawn to?

Well, he was again, I was attracted to Klee in a way, I mean the technical aspects of Klee's work, because I saw more of it after the War I suppose, in Germany too. And, seductive too, but it's what I come back to, you know Klee can be very seductive. Sweet and charming and delightful, covetable, but, I wouldn't, you can't, 'do' Klee. I mean he couldn't be an influence on one really. I mean, what would be the point of doing little Klees? I mean, his spirit is good, I mean...

There are some, I have seen some work from the mid '40s that are quite sort of, I think, I mean we are looking at one now in a sense a monotype which has got that nervy very particular use of...

Well, yes. This is purely a technical thing really, you see.

You are talking about technical aren't you?

Yes, yes. But I remember, I remember in fact in Edinburgh a lecture on Klee, I can't remember who by, but the, the thing that he used...do you remember him using this? Klee was said to use this expression of, 'Taking, taking a line for a walk,' or something like that you know, and, you know he was a marvellous influence, a marvellous contribution. But as I say, he didn't, didn't found an empire so to speak. I mean Léger is another matter. You could find, he was a base. But Klee was, Klee was Cointreau shall we say. Charming and delightful. Kandinsky is another story I think actually, too. And, of course, it wasn't until well, he wasn't highly thought of Kandinsky, it was rather amusing. His work was hardly known in England, or in Paris even, until later on you see. He lived in Paris of course, but by that time he, he was into this kind of rather tight, sort of decorative abstractions, sweet and nice, but we were not aware of the early stuff. It was only in more comparatively recent years that I, I saw his early paintings in quantity in Munich especially.

So you were seeing Kandinsky a lot in the late 40s, '47, '48, '49...?

Well, but that was, these were, by that time they were not particularly, they weren't, they weren't the revolutionary things that were, he would have been doing from say 1912 to 1918-ish, the great early abstraction expressionist things in fact, you know. There is a fabulous collection of them in Munich especially, and I think there is one in the Tate.

So, presumably, how long were you in Paris in the end? Was it a full, a full year?

When, before the War?

In the 1930s, yes.

No, I was there for about five months first of all and then I set out with a pal, we went, we went, we were actually planning to go to Italy, but we went first of all to Chamonix skiing. And then we went down to the South of France to Marseilles, Monaco, Nice and so on, and then down into Italy. All the way down to Naples, via Pisa and so on, and up through Rome, Sienna, Perugia, Arezzo and all these places to Venice. And then, from Venice I went down through Yugoslavia to Greece and Istanbul.

Did you, did you sketch on that visit...?

Yes, oh yes. You were expected to in a way, I suppose.

Did you keep sketchbooks?

Well, I think most of these were sent, you know, it was part of the, part of the scheme that you were expected to do, you were even expected to do a copy. (laughs) I mean, I did a, solemnly did a copy in the Uffizi. (laughs) And I think I spent about a fortnight or so in Florence. But...

You had to submit so much?

Oh, yes, you had to, you were expected to submit. And you sent it back, you know, now and again, you sent back a batch of your work, you know, which I suppose was, some of it was returned to me, I can't remember, I never saw anything much.

Were you working with colour say when you were sketching at this stage, or...?

Not a great deal. I think I often enough just worked with, worked with pen and ink and black wash. But never anything very elaborate much, you know, because you were travelling like that, and you can't really do a great deal, you know.

So...

No, it was mainly, mainly looking at things, at, there was so much to see of course, obviously.

So, by this time, you had really made a decision that this was going to be your life?

Oh, yes absolutely. I mean I had spent all this time, this was my career, but of course, the thing is this that in those days, it was virtually unthinkable almost without massive funds to be a painter. You know, the ultimate possibility was, what happened in fact was that, when I completed my year abroad, came back, and I came back via Paris. I had another two or three weeks in Paris and, anyhow, was then to go to the training college, to Murray House Training College to be qualified as an art teacher.

Because, this was, I mean, there was no other possibility. You couldn't just say, 'I am a painter,' and starve in a garage in Edinburgh or whatever, I mean. I suppose one could have tried, but it was just not possible in those days. It still isn't really I suppose, I don't know, some people manage. But, of course, probably nowadays there is more ways of getting a few quid to, from Social Security or something, you know. But anyhow, I took the course at Murray House, which ended in 19... in something like June '39. And, of course, within weeks you were at war. (laughs)

Had you sold your first work by then? Do you recall when you first sold...?

Yes, I probably sold a few things. I exhibited in the Royal Scottish Academy, I sold one or two, I mean tiny money, I mean five guineas or... (laughs) And even from my Postgraduate studio, I mean, I sold one or two things to kind of friends sort of thing, but nothing, nothing serious you know. Nothing to live on, I mean there was just trivial things.

It must have been something to get into those exhibitions though?

Oh yes. Well, you know, I used to send into this Royal Scottish Academy or the Society of Scottish Artists and so on in Edinburgh and, yes it was nice to show in there and, or again we had student exhibitions which we organised, Fine Art Society, or we formed a little group and had a mini exhibition, but there was never any serious return from these things in those days.

As you said, the Second World War broke out...

Well, actually what happened was that when I had finished my course at the Murray House Training College, I had already applied for one or two jobs as a teacher. I was solemnly interviewed for a job in Dumfries. And, bear in mind, I had the highest possible qualifications of anybody in Scotland at the time. I mean, I had my normal Diploma, a Postgraduate Diploma, a year's Travelling Scholarship, History of Art I think. (laughs) So I was seven years of specialist studies. Anyhow, I didn't get the job and so there was a pal of mine called Forrester, whose aunt worked for the NAAFI, a thing called the Navy Army and Air Force Institute. Now the War wasn't on, but he said we could get a job as barmen. And we actually got jobs as barmen to a

Terri...with the NAAFI, to a Territorial camp in Ayrshire and (laughs) solemnly we went down there and I was a barman for, in this Territorial camp for about three weeks, which was crazy, under canvas actually, too. And then I was still in the NAAFI and I was posted in the NAAFI to an aerodrome up north of Inverness. A place called Evanton. And, again, it was tough work actually, and very miserably paid. So, I, I escaped from that and hitch-hiked up to Wick. The War hadn't started actually yet. This is all in about July, August '39 and I, I went to the Local Employment Office and said, 'Oh they're taking on men up at the aerodrome,' and they were building an aerodrome in Wick and so I got a job navvying, with your pick and shovel stuff, in building this aerodrome, which of course became a bomber aerodrome during the War. It was, still is an aerodrome. And then the War broke out when I was there and I didn't know what to do, I thought well, of course, nobody knew what was going to happen you see, so I thought I had better get back home at least and, you know. So, I packed in this job and we came back to Fife to my parents home. And, of course, nothing happened in fact.(laughs). So, I got a, I got a job on a farm. Oh, yes, the War was now on and I got a job on a farm with potato harvest, working on a farm. When I finished I was unemployed again for a couple of weeks or something. And then I got a job in a factory, in Kirkcaldy, a linoleum factory which was making gasket material. And it was a hellish job, it was poisonous stuff this thing, I mean, they wouldn't tolerate it nowadays. And hellish hours too, but while there, I suddenly got a telegram, out of the blue, a report to Dumfries for, for teaching job, you see. And what had happened is, the guy who got the job that I had applied for had been called up, and so they needed somebody, and so I immediately went down to Dumfries. And I had this job teaching art for three days a week at an Academy in a nice little town called Annan, and two days in another little town called Lochmaben and this was in,

into, I think, something like February '40 maybe, somewhere around February. And, I was, it was delightful area of course, lovely countryside, and it was really pleasant enough and I had digs in Annan and that sort of thing. And then I was called up, and had to report to a recruiting office in Dumfries, to be sorted out and given my medical and so on, and so on. And I can remember, you know, being interviewed, by, obviously two or three senior officers, they were in civilian clothes but were obviously, you know, colonels and things interviewing me. Now I at least had some kind of education and I was a teacher and I was, you know, called up. There was another twenty or thirty men of my age sort of thing, mainly local workmen or farm labourers and so on, and so I came out obviously. And so I saw this guy putting down, he had this form, and I saw him putting down P O and I thought, and so when I came out there was a kind of sergeant chap looking after us and, so I said, 'look, I'm not keen on the Air Force, I'm not sure I want to be a pilot officer, I don't know,' I said, 'They put P O on my thing, does that mean pilot officer?' He said, 'No, no, that means potential officer.' 'That's all right then, P O for potential officer.' So then, of course, a couple of weeks or three weeks later, I was called up and had to report into, down to the Royal Corps of Signals. I didn't know what I was going into or anything.

What did that exactly entail, the Royal Corps of Signals. You were, were you posted, did you stay in, in the UK, in Scotland to begin with...?

Well, for training yes.

.....And then you were posted...?

I had to report to, to Whitby, actually and, for basic training. And it was while we were in, while I was in Whitby that Dunkirk was taking place. And Whitby, it was actually a major

training establishment for Signals, I mean, there was probably another six or eight hundred men around there somewhere, training in Signals. And (laughs) Dunkirk was on. (laughs) And we had to, I mean, we had been in the army about a month, if that, and we had to form a kind of fortified line on the coast and I was put in charge of about twenty men! (laughs) because I was a P O. (laughs) in tents. And we had to dig sort of what they called slip trenches, you know, oh it was rifles you see (laughs) on the coast, and if, if the Germans had invaded. So, anyhow, they thought this is not good enough, and so they moved us, this training battalion, inland and into Huddersfield. And they, I think they brought a, what I think you might call a regular division to look after the coast. Because they were anticipating invasion of course at this time, this was already into late, into July '40 that's right, yes. So, anyhow, after a few miserable weeks in Huddersfield, they put us, of course, they put us first of all into a disused woollen mill and you could, the, the floor was about an inch thick of grease and muck and mess (laughs) and oil and there was one tap! And I remember there was two hundred men in this...

You were living there?

Oh, yes (laughs) So, so they then moved us, we were there for about a week. It was impossible. They moved us into a disused library, it was the local Huddersfield Public Library which is now, I think they have built a new one, and this was still there you see. And the same thing applied, I mean, there was one little wash basin somewhere there for staff you see (laughs) and one toilet probably. But, we, so we had to use, in the main square outside there was a kind of public toilet you see, which we used.

And so this is still training?



Oh, yes, we are still training after a fashion. And I was already, I was promoted Lance Corporal at this point because I was going to, I was due to go to the Officers' Training Unit. These things are so funny when you think in retrospect. One of my first jobs as a Lance Corporal was, there was of course a medical, you, if anybody needed medical attention, maybe a sore throat or got a cold or something like that, but, I don't know, but they had to march through the medical inspection, the medical room was the other side of the town. (laughs) And I can still remember lining up about twenty men you see, and bringing them to attention and marching them (laughs) all the way along the High Street. (laughs) Imagine! And they are supposed to be sick, sick parade, attention. (laughs) Anyhow, that lasted for about two or three weeks and then I went to 'OCTU' in Aldershot, in Aldershot. Well, that was training to be a Signals Officer, which became, well it was serious and hard work actually, we were put through our paces in our, and, and, of course, while we were there, the Blitz started in, over London especially at the time, we were in Aldershot which is about twenty miles out of London or so. But that was, it was a good life too. It was interesting chaps, I mean, many of the, of the, my chaps in the, in my squad were, were, had been students, or were still students undergraduates at Oxford and Cambridge and so on, you know, they were graduates. And I particularly remember one chap, Christopher Holler, who became a lecturer at the Courtauld Institute, he was a medievalist, and he was, you know he became quite a pal of mine, Christopher. I knew him, I mean, I even had him up to Birmingham. He stayed here once in fact. But he was an extraordinary character. I got him to give a lecture to my, my students at the College, and I left it to him to lecture. He was actually, I think he was giving a lecture at the Gallery, for some reason, and I said well he might just come, I asked him to give a lecture. And left it up for him to give a lecture on Pisa Cathedral (laughs). Oh, well, never mind.

Did you, did you, were you posted abroad?

Well, almost immediately when I was commissioned, I had a week's leave at home and then posted to Bakewell, Bakewell in Derbyshire and didn't know really, I mean of course things were a bit chaotic, still, and there was always this security thing. I reported to the headquarters in Haddon Hall which is a stately home outside of Bakewell, that was our headquarters. I reported to the adjutant, and the first thing he said, 'Have you got your tropical kit, Gear?' I said, 'What do you mean tropical kit?' (laughs) So, of course, we solemnly, none of us knew we were going abroad, and I had to get measurement, get a tailor, there was a local tailor, to get tropical uniform, you know, and so anyhow we were there for about, I don't know, maybe four or five weeks and then went up to Liverpool to get on a trip to the Middle East.

Middle East being where exactly?

Well, we landed in Egypt, and we were based in a Signals Base outside of Cairo for a while and then, I mean we went out, there was probably I don't know, maybe about twenty officers and five hundred men in Signal.

**END OF F4738 SIDE A**

## **F4738 Side B**

In this place called Mahdi, this was a Signals Headquarters we were there for about a fortnight or something, I suppose, as, essentially as to be posted anywhere in, in the whole of the Middle East, which is every where from, you know, Libya, right up way to Persia or anywhere in the Middle East. So, I was interviewed. We were all interviewed individually and what we would like to do and so on, and then the next day your name would be posted up with the unit where you were posted to. And I was posted to 5 LFC Signals and I, I don't know...

What does that mean?

Well, LFC means the Lines of Communication Signals, you see, I mean I knew what LFC meant but I didn't know where this was you see. So I goes into the office and I said, 'I have been posted to 5 LFC Signals,' and the sergeant said to me, 'You'll be all right Sir, that's Jerusalem!' (laughs) I'm not joking! I was solemnly posted to Jerusalem. And so, then in a few days time I had to go with, I had about, oh, a dozen soldiers as well to take with me. I took the train, the train from Cairo, there was a train, and change at, I think it was a place called Ramallah it was a, a junction and up to Jerusalem in the train. And this was heaven, it really was, it was so beautiful, I mean, this was into something like July, July '41 I think it was roughly, yes, July '41. But that part of the world is absolutely exquisite, I mean, the going up, of course, Jerusalem is quite high up, and there's olive trees and orange groves and so on, and landing at Jerusalem. This is really very funny, but I don't know if this is interesting?

Well, I was going to ask because you exhibited in Jerusalem.

Well, this is another thing, you see that, anyhow, I was met at the station, the station in Jerusalem by the Adjutant and the Sergeant Major who took charge of me and sorted me out, and then dumped me somewhere and said, Oh, we'll have to find you digs.'

I mean I, I was just an innocent Second Lieutenant I suppose. And this, this was not, you would hardly believe this, but this is the Adjutant - he took me to an estate agent in Jerusalem and said, 'We want accommodation for this officer,' you know this sort of thing, and, 'What have you got?' and he looked at me and said, 'Have you any preferences?' And I played along, and I said, 'Well, not really, but,' I said, 'I'm an artist you know,' and he said, 'Oh, you're a painter.' 'Yes, yes.' 'Would you like some kind of studio?' I said, 'Oh well, that would be nice.' Well I said, 'Have you got some kind of studio?' He said, 'We've got a nice room.' A nice place in this Rehovot it was, in one of the classy new parts of Jerusalem, Rehovot, and you know, and he took me round there, and this was a Jewish-German family from Nürnberg, he was a lawyer actually, I remember. And he had this lovely room, a separate entrance and a garden and so on. And this is my digs. Now he said, 'We will have to get all the paperwork signed and all that.' Now you wouldn't believe this, these guy...this unit had been a regular unit in Jerus...in Palestine, and of course there had been a war going on in Palestine before the War, and there were British divisions out there, and this lot, and of course they were still working under the old Colonial thing, so that officers had Colonial Allowance and Servant Allowance and Fan Allowance and, I don't know, Overseas Allowance and, I mean, and I had, and this was marvellous. And, of course, he said, 'Well, the best thing, there is two banks and of course your expenses or your fees or your allowances will be paid into the bank.' He said, 'There is two main banks. There is the Ottoman Bank, or Barclay's,' he said, 'You know I think Barclay's is rather spoilt, but the Ottoman Bank you will get good service there, the Ottoman Bank, follow me.' I take out a thing with the Ottoman Bank, and my, all these allowances were paid in there monthly you see, I didn't, I didn't have to spend any money at all, I mean I just, and then, of course...

So you used the studio, you began to use it?

Well, actually I, not as, not right away, because I mean I had a job to do and I had to learn the ropes and so on. I became Signal Master, this is what we did we were, we provided this LFC Signals was the main, we were the main Signals Unit for 9th Army, I suppose, it would be of the lines of communication from Cairo, all the way through Jerusalem up to, of course the British were in Lebanon and Syria and Baghdad and also in Jordan and all round, I mean we had signal links to all these different places from our Headquarters, even to Aqaba and Amman and stuff. Oh, yes, this was (laughs) and Beersheba I remember it used to amuse me to send and despatch a rider to Beersheba, used to have to go to Beersheba. Of course, later on I was, after about, oh, I was in Jerusalem for, oh, certainly ten months I should think at least. But very soon, of course, I made a point of getting to know any artists who were around there and, of course, there were quite a number of artists. And there were one or two little gallery place, too, and I got involved in having a show there with one or two other...

Where did you show at exactly? Where did you show? Do you remember?

Well, there was this gallery, I forget what it was called now, but it was a private gallery, we had, he had little shows of Modern Art, you see, and I remember showing about four or five things, oils, and after I, later I had another place where I did more work, I was in about three different digs, so to speak, in Jerusalem. And, you know, I did some work, I got an easel and worked, you know. And then, of course, I'm not quite sure how it happened, but there was obviously some cultural affairs outfit or something who were trying to do this thing, and they had, they mounted some exhibitions in Tel Aviv and Cairo, you know, and I had odd things in these exhibitions, you know, didn't pay much attention.

Were these one-man shows?

No, no, never one-man shows, no. I mean, I didn't have enough stuff to, but it was just to get a group shows of, there might be a showing of, I don't know, say in Cairo of British, British artists in the forces or something like this you see.

You've actually just shown me this afternoon, Bill, one of your landscapes that you did in Italy...

Oh, yes.

.....later in '44.

That was later on, of course. I mean, oh yes, that was much later on. Because I was in Jerusalem...I was in Paris, and, of course, I went from Jerusalem, then I went up to, I was based up in Haifa. This was all part of the same unit of course, we were all different companies. There was a company in Jerusalem, a company in Haifa and a company in Gaza and I was, went up to Haifa. What happened actually was rather amusing because there were certain units in the Middle East in fact, in the War, cavalry units, cavalry, actually with horses you see, and they had come out to, come out to Palestine at the time and with horses as cavalry. There was the Middlesex Yeomanry, there were Yeomanry units, Yeomanry cavalry units and also the, another one called the Cheshire Yeomanry and they decided to make them into something useful so to speak. I mean horses were 'out' so to speak, but they actually had seen action in Syria, this part of the Cheshire Yeomanry, clearing out the Vichy French from the Lebanon and Syria you see. But anyhow, they decided that to make these people useful, and they wanted to create the Cheshire Yeomanry to become Signals, so they did a bit of training and then they established squadrons, as opposed to companies,

squadrons of the Cheshire Yeomanry, and had some you might call proper signals officers and men with them to keep them in order, so I was, I was attached to the, a company, a squadron of the Cheshire Yeomanry, based in Haifa and we even had to have very fancy hat...cap badges. I can still remember, great silver cap badges with the Prince of Wales' feather and a thing called the Cheshire, Earl of Chester's Yeomanry, you see, a big deal, and silver. (laughs)

(BREAK IN INTERVIEW 'HAVE I PULLED THIS THING AWAY AGAIN')

.....month in Haifa. I was then posted to Gaza. Again still in the, in this Earl of Chester's Yeomanry, Cheshire Yeomanry in Gaza. But the thing is this, what do you think of it, it is so ironic that from the time that I had arrived in Palestine, right through to well after the War, Palestine was at peace, there were no problems, there was no war. Before the War there was Arab revolt and regular scraps and fights and war and so on, then immediately the War was over, they started up again. But during the War it was peaceful, it was quiet, it was lovely, I had no problem. (laughs) And we had a very nice life actually.

So it was quite...?

What?

It was quite a prestigious time for you then, I mean...?

Well, it was actually. I mean, I was never in any danger really, I mean I suppose there was...

You were painting?

I was doing a bit of painting, and enjoying life, and I had a girlfriend or two or three. And, lovely Jewish girls, especially, yes and...

It was a good time?

It was a good time. I mean, I was young and happy and full of beans and getting well paid and no problems and so on. And, anyhow, I never realised this at the time but it was only in more recent years that I realised that, as I say I had girlfriends, but anyhow, one particular girlfriend...

.....What were they like?

What?

What was the girl...?

She was a painter, too actually, she was a painter, yes. But anyhow, while, when, at one time when I was based in Gaza...

How had you met, how had you met her?

Oh, at one of these exhibitions, one of these mixed bag exhibitions, she had come along and I picked her up or something I suppose, anyway, maybe. Anyhow, that's a long time ago. But, anyhow, I'm pretty sure that, as I say when I was based in Gaza, at one time I developed tonsillitis or something and the, the Medical Officer sent me to hospital in, and the hospital was an Australian hospital, you see. Of course there were lots of Australians had been out there, but there was I with tonsillitis in a ward full of Australian



officers most of whom had been wounded at Tobruk (laughs) and chaps with their legs off and eyes out and God knows what, and there was I with, well of course, again, with my fancy thing, you see, I was very much a 'Limey', what would they...a 'Pommy' I was very much a 'Pommy' officer to them, I was Lieutenant I suppose at the time. But anyhow, I got, I got on famously with them, but I can still remember, you know, being regarded as a kind of 'Pommy' with tonsillitis and these guys from Tobruk. (laughs)

Was Italy more of a serious thing?

Oh, yes. Of course, that was later on, but anyhow, yes, this is it, after this, I had a week's leave coming to me as you had been in hospital. I did have a, you know, I had, what had happened, I had a, I had been had my tonsils out when I was a kiddie, and he had made a bad job, and there was this tonsil...I had trouble with it once or twice while in the army but, anyhow, the best thing is to have a proper, taken out and sorted out. Anyhow, they did a little operation and I was in this hospital for maybe ten days or so, but anyhow, I was entitled to a week's leave and I went up to Jerusalem to see my girlfriend in Jerusalem, you see. I remember taking her out to dinner, there was, in a very nice restaurant in Jerusalem. And in the same restaurant, sitting only three or four tables away, were three of the top, the top brass of the Signals, whom I actually knew. I mean, the Chief Signal Officer of this and that, three full Colonels at least, and I thought, well I had better say hello and I did so. I went up and I said, 'Good evening, Sir,' more or less you see. Anyhow, not long after that I was, my, my Company commander in Gaza took me aside and said that he had put me up for promotion to Captain. Oh, thank you very much, I thought it great. I had, when I was in Gaza, I had command of a big section, the Line Section, of about sixty-odd blokes I suppose and was doing communications in the area down to Rafa and Beersheba and, but,

anyhow, it was only about a fortnight after he had mentioned this, he took me aside and said, 'Oh, I'm afraid something's gone wrong,' he said, 'They want to send you to Cyprus,' he said, 'There's an officer in Cyprus who is a very senior Lieutenant and he has been there for some time and he really, they thought...' Well, it was out of my control, this was happening in 9th Army Headquarters or something. And he said, 'Well, they want to send you in to replace him and he will come and take your job and be promoted.' It wasn't until years afterwards, in fact in more recent times, I thought why did this happen? And I remember having a conversation with somebody in, in that area at that time. If the, if the authorities of the military saw that there was any of their young officers getting too close to some of the local girls, 'out'. No fussing about, they just wouldn't have a marriage or involvement of this kind, you see. And, I'm not sure but I think it's the best...it's the only reason, really. I mean this business of this other guy needing to, well. But, obviously, you could imagine my name coming up at Headquarters and saying, 'Oh Gear, he's the guy we saw him in the bloody restaurant, that local girl...' Anyhow, it meant that I went to Cyprus and didn't get promoted. And I had a terrible time in Cyprus, well, not all the time, but it was really a, and of course about this time the invasion of Italy started, off Sicily anyway, and I was getting so desperate in Cyprus. I thought, 'Now's the time,' and I solemnly wrote an official letter to my CO saying how I spoke Italian, I had worked and lived in Italy and I demanded to be posted to Italy, you see. Of course they couldn't refuse, and, so, within weeks I was on my way to Italy.

Where did you learn Italian?

I had been in Italy before the War.

And you had been...?

And I had taken classes in Edinburgh, evening classes, too. I mean, I wasn't fluent, but I spoke more Italian than most British officers after all. But, anyhow, so I landed, I landed in Italy in due course after travelling all the way back round through Beirut and Cairo. I saw this girlfriend again in Cairo of course. Anyhow...

She was quite serious?

Oh, yes. It was fairly serious I suppose.

Did she continue her painting you think, do you, do you know what...?

Well, yes, I mean, she was an accomplished painter, I suppose, yes, and writer, too. She was, at the time she was making a living, or rather, she was translating Gone...believe it or not, she was translating 'Gone With The Wind' into Hebrew. (laughs) That was how she made a, she lived on this, and doing it a few chapters at a time. It was going to be published in Jerusalem or Tel Aviv or something, 'Gone With The Wind' in Hebrew, I ask you? So, anyhow, I got through to Italy and...

Because in Italy, I think in Sienna and Florence, you did have your first one-man shows.

Well, I, yes, again, the same thing applied that anytime I was in Italy I made a point of meeting up with artists, I probably had the odd introduction, or went to a gallery and meet them. And, so that, firstly, in Rome I suppose, yes, in Rome, I got to know a few painters and they were great pals you know, they were marvellous people and very sympathetic, and I went to their studios and I, of course, I was always able to get them a tin of bullied beef or something. I solemnly had them to dinner, I was in a, a kind of officers' billets, it was actually a small hotel, I suppose, in Rome, and the garden behind, and it was

really the same, the original hotel staff, we were just a family hotel type of thing, it wasn't. And I said I would like to make a, have a dinner for some friends, you see, and they, of course, they didn't have food, but I was able to get some, some bullied beef, or Spam and some food and wine. Anyhow, we had a dinner, we had a meal of some kind. They did the cooking. And it was a very nice time actually, for a, you know, for a few, and then of course when I was then move up, move up, though Sienna, I suppose, would be the next stage up, and, oh yes, I was based in Sienna for, oh, about maybe three months altogether I suppose, really I can't remember, but there again I met up with any local artists and I was doing these watercolour things.

And what were they like?

What?

What were they like the watercolours?

Well, like the thing you've just seen, I did a number of them, I've still got a few, but I, as I say. Anyhow, they saw them, you said, and 'Let's make an exhibition' and they had, they had a kind, these tourist chaps, they had a kind of, not a gallery, but a kind of little antique shop type place and they sold a few pictures and bits and pieces, it wasn't anything very formal, they more or less stuck a few things around and so on. And they sold things (laughs) I said, 'I don't want the money, you keep the money.' Of course, there was no point in having fistfuls of Italian lire, it didn't mean anything to me, you see, because we had the Occupational money anyway, you know. We had our own British Army of Occupation money, and of course, you, with, actually with Italian lire, I used a lot of it, I mean, to buy, buy paper and paints and stuff, and you could, you know, and anyhow, then when I, oh, yes, they suggested a place in Florence, so I went up, I saw the guy,

and oh, yes, 'Facciamo da nostre...' So I had a proper exhibition there, about, oh, thirty items, they framed them, but without glass, because you didn't have glass in those days. (laughs) They put some kind of baguette round and stuck them on paper. And there was even a kind of, not a catalogue, but a kind of introduction thing, type thing, an advertisement of some kind, and they had a kind of opening and a lot of the local Italian and Florentine artists came around and, again, I, he sold a number of things and that, I more or less, I took some money and left him the most of it. But that was an amusing experience.

I mean looking back, do you see the fact that during the War you were, you know, an officer, but you were also working, you were allowed to continue painting.

Well, I made a point, you know. It wasn't always possible actually, obviously there was times where you were preoccupied, or busy or you couldn't get, you couldn't, you didn't have a nine to five job after all, you know. But, of course, it was about this time that there was this thing where the, the allies, the allied armies had the collapse of Italy, the allies demanded that the Italians, if they wanted to have any say in matters after the War, they should provide troops to fight against the Germans. And so they provided four divisions plus ancillary troops, and with each division, they would have a British Liaison Unit and since it was on my books, that I, I was still a Lieutenant actually all this time, which was, you know, this collapse in Jerusalem had meant that I was over a year still a Lieutenant, when I could have, anyhow the, I was called up and the, they said I could go as a Signals Officer with this British Liaison Unit to an Italian division. Which was great, and so I solemnly had to go down, they were forming up, and being equipped and training, down near Naples somewhere, I think, and so I joined up with them and then we came up, all the way up gradually, ending up north of Florence somewhere, yes north of Florence, in the line actually, we took over from an Indian division I think it was, and that was actually in the line so to

speaking, you know. I was with this Italian division and I was the Signals Officer for the thing. I had another officer who was my junior, so to speak, and a section of about thirty men, British, and we provided the signals within, within the British command and back to the core headquarters, and then the Italians, I looked after the Italians, you know. Which was interesting, and, of course, my Italian became quite fluent, I had to, I mean I was working with all the time and learning Italian possibly with a funny accent, because most of these Italians were, Italian soldiers, were some of them Sardinians, or Sicilians or from Rome or anywhere you see, a whole lot of them from Venice. There was a brigade of marines, the San Marco Brigade, I mean a rather like the marines, they were mainly from Venice, you know, they were marines actually. Tough guys. And we lost a lot of them too, they were used as kind of combat troops. And the other brigade was of parachutists 'paracadutiste'.

Did you form some good friendships?

Oh, indeed I did actually, I with a, with the officers, I remember their names even, a great pal was Capitano Zannini, Capitano Zannini who spoke decent English, very few, I think, he was about the only one who spoke any English at all, he was actually, he was, he was in the field of cybernetics, he was a, you know, he was a qualified man in the field of cybernetics, in fact, and from Milan. And then there was Capitano Zaputo who was a bit of a crook, I remember him very well, and then there was Tenante Chanchi, Chanchi I remember and Zuppeta, oh, yes, they were quite, quite an amusing bunch actually.

So looking back, I mean, as regards your painting you wouldn't think that this period was in a sense was a, in a sense hindered you at all, it would have added in its own way...?

Well, it was a kind of a relief in a way too I mean, you know, the army, at times it could be at times tedious and boring, it was seldom dangerous where I was, it was seldom really dangerous, I suppose, but you know, it was a marvellous relief to be able to do this and to have that possibility.

And a real job. I mean it was a real job?

Yes, but, the other thing is of course too, that it's something I kept rather quiet about, I mean, put it this way, in the British Army, in those days you didn't let on that you were a poet or an artist or a painter or one of these sort of things, you didn't make a thing of it, you know, if you were they would expect you to do things for them, I mean, they would expect you to paint their portrait or something like this, you could hardly explain, 'Well, I don't do that sort of thing.' But no, it was, it was good that, I was delighted of course to see the, this work by Merlyn Evans whom I'd met on my way round, I met him first of all in Durban, you see. He was teaching in a local art school, but I didn't know that he come up into Italy you know in the army, and he did a bit of painting in Italy too. It's nice to see that we have got that one in the gallery here.

Did you become quite friendly with Merlyn Evans?

I saw a lot of him after the War, of course, I mean back in England I looked up, I saw a lot of him, I had him up to Birmingham once or twice...

The War obviously affected him...?

Well, he, he had a bad time, he first of all his marriage broke up, I don't know the details, but he was away, away on duty in Italy and wherever, and then he had, he had been painting before the War he was painting. He was a bit older than me, he was a few years older, but he had been painting, but, and his, his work that he had done before the War, he had it in store somewhere in London and it was bombed and destroyed, you see. He came back to London and he had lost all of his work, of his work that he had done before the War and then his work wasn't attractive enough, I mean he didn't, he didn't find any galleries particularly interested in his work and so on. So, he did a bit of teaching I suppose, and so on. Well, we were all in the same boat, I mean I was of course based in Paris by then.

You didn't obviously before Paris, in fact you took up a post at Monuments Fine Art and Archives Section...?

Well, this was the...

.....of the Central (Control) Commission?

.....Yes, this was the, the War was over and the system was that I was still in Italy when the War finished, and the system was that there was a system called 'python' which meant that if, after you had served four and a half years overseas, you were entitled to go back home, so I had completed four and a half years overseas and so I came back. Meanwhile, I was up in the north of Italy, near Bolzano and Bressanone. I think I had to come all the way down, this of course was in something like July '45, that's right, all the way back down through Italy to Naples, and I took about, I had a, I had a jeep and a driver and we drove all the way back, stopping at each of the places where I had my feet under the table and been received of course and having a lovely time, and finally down to Naples where the, they were embarking troops back to the UK, and after a few days I was put on a



Lancaster bomber with about twenty other kids, and flown back to England, non-stop, seven hours, in the nose of a Lancaster bomber. (laughs)

How did you...?

**END OF F4738 SIDE B**

**F4739 Side A**

... report to the Scottish Command, I still had about three or four months to do in the army before complete demobilisation, so I had to report to the Chief Signal Officer in Edinburgh Castle, which was Scottish Command, and it so happened I had known him, he had been my Chief Signal Officer in Jerusalem. And, he said, 'Hello, Gear. How are you?' (laughs) So, he said, 'What do you want to do now,' and I said, 'Well, I'm not going to hang around here, I had thought about going to Germany.' He said, 'Sure, no problem.' So, within a week or so, I was on my way to Germany. And I get to Germany, and, you know, again, to a Signals base of some kind somewhere around Bielefeld or some place, anyhow, I was then posted to the 15th Scottish Division with all your Scots boys, this is up near Hamburg somewhere. But then, oh, yes, meanwhile I had been interviewed and they, they spotted that I was an artist and that I had done history of art and so on and this guy said, 'Well, they are looking for chaps like you, there is a thing called Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives,' he said, 'You might be interested.' I said, 'It sounds interesting, you know.' So in due course I was posted to the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives in, in Celle. There was another officer there called Peter Eden and so I was there, and then...

What did you, what was your actual brief?

Well, the, as it suggests, the, the whole, there was a section of military government really of what was called the Control Commission for Germany to look after all the aspects of museums, galleries, libraries, archives, loot and the, the Nazi treasures, which were really all the works from the Berlin Museum...from the various museums which were in salt mines and places of, you know, massive range of things to be done and very little means of doing much anyway. But the, one of the main preoccupations, we had taken over this Schloss, a massive Schloss in Celle and this was the central repository, and...

You were actually bringing in objects?

We, we were bringing in stuff to this repository.

To then redistribute back to their place of origin?

Well, in due, in due course. But, anyhow, the thing was that the, the Germany authorities, to preserve their own museum pieces, had put literally hundreds of packing cases of their treasures in salt mines, near where we were, a place called Grasleben and that was quite near the, the Russian frontier actually, or rather the Russian zone, and we were bringing all the stuff to this central repository. And, then, the idea was to check through it and so we got, as far as possible, in some cases the original specialist art historian curator chaps who had packed it, in some cases it wasn't always possible. Because, first of all, a lot of this stuff had come from Berlin and, you know, there was all kinds of fantastic stuff, there were whole, I mean, dozens of cases of porcelain, for instance, or incunabula, manuscripts, Greek and Roman pottery and jewellery. (laughs)

This was from museums actually...?

From museums, yes, from the Berlin museums mainly and we would, we would go through it and then, and then I decided, of course, this was not long after I was settled there for, well, a couple of months, that this Peter Eden, he was demobbed. So, I was left on my own and then I got another officer, a chap called Donald King, and then he left. But I was more or less on my own most of this time. (laughs) It was really funny because, you see, the British zone, I'm talking about the British zone, there was, it

was about, oh, maybe six different sections of the British zone, we were Land Niedersachsen where we were, Lands, Lander there was another guy called Rolo Charles who was in charge of Land Braunschweig Hildesheim, he, he dropped out too, and handed me the files from Braunschweig Hildesheim. And then there was the other guy, Giles Robertson, who became Professor of History of Art in Edinburgh, he was Land, some...Nordrhein Westfalen or something. (laughs) So, anyhow, it was quite a handful, but, you know, the, anyhow, I decided to put on exhibitions of this stuff, in the Schloss. The first exhibition of course was rather exciting because I had this little man going through the library stuff and the prints and drawings stuff, from Berlin, and he came across, and he came in all excited, he had come across a portfolio of Degenerate Art, Degenerate prints, all excited. And there was this fantastic portfolio, and it was Picasso, Matisse and Chagall, and Schmidt-Rottluff and Munch and all the boys. (laughs) This is all the 'entarte Kunst'. I said, 'Great, let's have an exhibition of it.' And I got it framed up and put on a marvellous exhibition called 'Modern Prints' with a catalogue and everything, you know. Fantastic stuff, I mean, even, I remember the famous Picasso print of the, 'the Frugal Meal' this extraordinarily early one and there was, I mean, and this fabulous German Expressionist was woodcuts of, by Schmidt-Rottluff and the Kirchner 'und so weiter'. And then we would have an exhibition of incunabula and an exhibition of Meissen porcelain and so on and so on.

Who came to the shows? I mean...?

All the local people. Of course this was something for them to do, in the Schloss. And it was very good public relations actually, it was kind of British Council work in a way. But we put on exhibitions and they came to the Schloss and of course it was something for them to do, because there was very little else for them to do, you see, in those days. I mean, there was no

cinema, there was no radio, nor no television, there was, you know, they had a pretty ro...of course, actually, Celle itself was a charming little town, it is a lovely town. I have been back since, more recent times. But, it was not touched by the War.

The feeling was reasonable, as regards what you were doing, I mean?

Oh, yes. Very much so, yes.

You were, I mean, the work had to find its way back to its original home?

Well, in due course. I mean, in most cases the, the museums or galleries where this stuff came from were destroyed anyhow. I mean they were bombed out, say in Berlin or even Hannover and so on, I mean, so there was no point and I, I, you know, the stuff was held there and in due course, I mean after the Allies left Germany and so on, then the stuff would be returned to these museu...if and when they were able to, to look after it, you know, but it was there meanwhile. And...

And you, indeed, had an exhibition of your own work?

Well, indeed, yes, I was working meanwhile and I put on this exhibition in the Schloss of my own work and, then in Hamburg. I made contact with a gallery in Hamburg and we had this exhibition in, in a small gallery in Hamburg.

How did those exhibitions go?

Very well, of course, the other thing was that the, the Germans had never seen any modern work at all really, you see, I mean, soon after, I think soon after starting in 1936, any modern

work was suppressed, absolutely. And, it was what you call Degenerate Art, and there was massive exhibitions in Munich and everywhere else and so on, so that they were not aware of anything and, of course, there still was, there still were artists and connoisseurs and collectors about who wanted to know. There was a very good, great tradition of art lovers in Germany of modern work. So, you know, that, that side of it was a delight to them, it was something and that we, in a sense of the liberation to them too. Because, bear in mind, I mean, the stupid thing that still exists is, as regards the Germans, is that Nazis were very few actual hard core Nazis at all really. You know, most of them, most of them were just people. There was a hard core dominating group Nazis and SS and so on who run the show, and nobody could say anything or do anything or exhibit or work or, outside of that rigid, and especially during the War of course. Because anybody even listening to the radio or arguing about Hitler was always inside and many of them went to Belsen bear in mind, because Belsen was in my area, too, I had to go to Belsen and, well, after the thing was more or less tidied up, but, and of course, again, about this time I was, I, there was this big exhibition in Hannover, well it was not, it was the local society of artists rather like you have the RBSA here, I suppose, and they invited me to exhibit you see. And I, I mean, I had a bit of power after all I had to give them authority...

So this wasn't Hamburg, this was...?

No, no. This is in Hannover.

So you had the Hamburg show?

No, this was after, this is before the Hamburg thing. But, anyhow I, I sent in a couple of things, and I went down to the opening or rather, anyhow. I remember looking around, it was a dreadful exhibition of really amateur or small-scale rubbish, you know, but I remember looking behind a screen and finding some things, and, 'What are these?' and 'These are great, what are you talking about? Let's hang them. Bloody well hang them!' And they jumped to it, no fussing about 'Herr Major' you know. And so these were things by a painter called Karl Otto Götz you see. And in due course...

Was that your introduction to...?

Yes, this was when I, yes, and of course, in due course, I got a hold of him, contacted him, went down to find him in his, he was living with his wife and a small boy in a tiny room, above a cow shed sort of thing, in the middle of nowhere, near Hameln, near Hameln you know, where the, and so, then, I mean, I was amazed at his work, it was so like what I was doing in a way. It was really quite extraordinary.

This was '45 then?

I'm talking about, we're into '46 now, I think, yes, in '46, early, early '46, I think it would be, yes. And so we became great friends, and I had him up to the studio and up to the Schloss, he spent a night or two in the Schloss and I put him up and, he describes a lot of this in his books, his autobiography there. And I helped him with a bit of food and some materials and so on and, of course, we swapped things, I gave him, he gave me a lot of his drawings and prints which I brought to Paris and then I showed these to people like Constant and Corneille and Const...Gilbert and so on in Paris, and they said, 'Hey, this guy's COBRA, sure.' So, I gave him, they contacted him and invited him to show, with, with two other Germans, with

whom I, in the big COBRA exhibition in Amsterdam. And he's still there. I mean he's in that big exhibition in Antwerp.

What was it then that particularly struck you about his work?

The, the, I don't know, the spirit of the work, actually, you know it was very modern, it was a hint of Klee and Kandinsky and Willie Baumeister and that sort of thing, but he had been doing this before the War even, but the astonishing thing was, he had been an officer in the Luftwaffe, I mean there is photographs of him in uniform in front of his Messerschmidt there, in the book there, and that didn't matter to these guys, to the real COBRA artists, 'Never mind, he is a painter, he is one of us.' And solemnly, and of course imagine Dutch and Belgian guy and French, inviting him to participate with them in the big exhibition, (laughs) never mind the, (laughs) but that was what it was about. And he became very much a part of the COBRA scene, and then he did the kind of series of little mini books on COBRA, and so on, I mean the 'Meta' series. But that was interesting, this is the kind of thing...

Of course that was a bit later, but you had actually met Karl Otto Götz quite early on?

Well this is, I met him first of all in '46 and I saw a lot of him. I went down to his, to this miserable little place, two or three times and I always took him, you know this is the, took him some, he talks about it, took him some chocolate or coffee and white bread or, white bread, that was important, some white bread and a bottle of wine or something, you know. I mean, any time I went, and I met a lot of East German artists about that time. Any time I went anywhere I always took something, I mean you always did then. Cigarettes were a must.



Who else were you meeting in fact, at this '46 time, before you in fact settled in Paris? Do you recall anyone in particular?

Well, mainly Götz, Karl Otto Götz, I suppose, but one or two of them I don't even remember names quite honestly. You know, I would be dragged to a studio in Hamburg, or in Hannover or something and, the poor sods, I mean they were so, I mean I was, I was living like a prince in a Schloss, I really was. I was living in the state rooms of Karlina Matilda, I mean, and eating, eating my head off in the mess and so on. There was the Officers' Club in the middle of the town in the Rathaus, Ratskeller, and so on, and so on. So any time I met, went with any of these people, I always took something. But I remember, amusingly enough, going to one of these places and the only thing I had to take was a bottle of champagne and a tin of sardines.

(laughs) Imag...the only thing I happened to have. And I can still remember this funny little studio, it was actually in the country somewhere, in a very beautiful place, a kind of artists' colony-type place, with the river, and nice house...nice little studios.

It was also at this time that I think it is documented that you began to use monotype as a technique. Could you say a bit about how you came in contact with that?

Well, I, I, that's, they were not really monotypes, it was just this technique. Now then, I think I first saw it demonstrated or used in London, actually. There was this Polish painter called Jankel Adler who had been in Germany, I think he had even known Klee and so on, anyhow he was Polish, come to Pol...he had come to England early on, but he, he showed me some of these things, and I did a number of them. But the idea was I, not really monotype, but a kind of offset printing process where you draw through and the, the resultant print, so to speak, is taken up from the imprint of the pressures, and so you get this particular type of line and texture. Now, it was used by Klee,

especially, in the Bauhaus and I used this quite a lot. But, it's not technically a monotype, the monotype is a different process where you would, you'd do the picture on glass or stone and then pick it up with a, on paper, that's a monotype, properly speaking. I haven't come across a satisfactory label for that process I'm talking about, but it's not strictly speaking a monotype.

What did you see in the process?

Well, it was, it was I suppose, the, the quality that you get from a print, from an etching say, that it's, it had that particular texture of this broken black line, something that you couldn't quite get with a direct drawing say. And I found it attractive or interesting, a variation and I did quite a number of things in that way.

So, in fact, the 'Dancing Figure'...?

That's right, that's the sort of thing at the time I was doing that.

And that's the impression that you get from working from an ink base?

Yes, yes. But, you see, it is more interesting in a way, it has other qualities other than the straight forward line drawing might have you see. And, as I say, Klee exploited this a great deal in his work and, then you get that kind of...

It almost has a frottage kind of effect?

Well, that's another, another technique again you see, yes.

And you pursued, I mean, monotype has been quite significant for you in a sense that you have used it in various forms?

Well, I have done monotypes separately too, but that was a question of doing a, making a thing on glass, putting paper in, on, and picking it up, that's a monotype, now I've done a lot of these too. But there's something different...

.....and then worked them up in a sense...?

Not necessarily, no, the monotype is a one-off thing really.

Yes, I, I was reading that you would actually, would then perhaps paint on top of it, work with it, using it as a base.

Well, that could happen too, you know, this could happen as well. I mean, put it this way, the, the, it could be that the image you first get from the monotype thing is, well, it's not, not satisfactory, or it's not final, finite, and you use it as a base and you work on it, I mean that could happen too, surely, yes.

I think also, in the British Museum, 'Avant Garde...

That's right.

.....printmaking' exhibition...

They have some of these things, yes.

.....there's also a reference to this 'Lackdruck' technique of lacquer printing.

Now that, that is something that Götz did especially, and the 'Lack', 'Lack' is a kind of form of varnish really. And he, he would, I remember him showing me how, he would take a base board, just a piece of wood or hardboard or something, and he would pour a very thick heavy varnish or thick paint, quick-drying paint, on, on the surface and when dried, then he could, he would roll ink on this you see, and then take an impression with paper. And that would be quite, that would be 'Lackdruck'. It's really a kind of, a form of relief printing in a sense. But he did a lot of these things and very important stuff actually. He would also use this, like as a paint with it, almost, on, onto a hard surface and then print from that. And some, they're very much COBRA things you see in that, these are the sort of COBRA spirit.

Have these been exhibited?

Yes, yes. Some of these were exhibited in these COBRA exhibitions and I, and I, of course, I showed them these things. In fact, I presented, I presented a number of Götz's things to the British Museum, the Tate Gallery, the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, the Hungarian Gallery, so far. (Laughs) And Götz is overjoyed I mean, too, he likes the idea of being in the British Museum, I mean, that still means something, and the Tate Gallery, that means a lot, and of course, in any, he is a great one for printing books on himself, he's got two or three massive volumes and catalogues, and in any of these catalogues, they will be all listed, all these, his various acquisitions.

You did a few impressions from that 'Lackdruck' technique?

Yes, of course. Yes, of course.

Just a few, what was the number?

Well, I supp...in those days you never thought of doing an edition. I mean I don't know, maybe four or five, you know, because what was the point, you wouldn't have the paper anyway. I mean, bear in mind, we're talking about, again '45, '46.

And where did you get your paper from at this period?

Well, a lot of the things like Götz had were more or less newsprint actually, they were cheap paper, and I...

And where were you getting your paper from?

Well I, I was always, you know, I was always able to get some, indeed, from the odd art shop who'd have a stock, or I was in contact with the, for instance, the big Hannover works, what do you call them? The Pelikan, I mean, they had the Pelikan factory was in Hannover and I used to get paints and stuff from them, for myself, or for Götz. I used to give him things, ink stuff you know.

Did you do any printing together, use of this technique...?

We did. We worked, we worked together, you know, he has a marvellous story where I had him up to my Schloss and we worked together on a great table, I had a glass, glass-topped table, and he worked on the other side doing these funny drawings and so on, drinking whisky, and he talks about me singing phoney Russian songs. I used to sing a lot sing,

[RUSSIAN] you know, funny things, (laughs) and getting drunk, and he talks about it. I mean I had forgotten all about it, but he writes about it in his biography, you see, his autobiography. So, you know, I, we had a good time together. But, as I say, he is, he came up, yes, he, I haven't, I last saw him, I last saw him in, oh, yes, there was that big exhibition in, oh, yes, he came, that's right, he, he came to, I had this exhibition in Munich.

When was that?

That was '87 or '88 or thereabouts, and he came to the opening, and he wrote a blurb in the catalogue for me, and then he, he had an exhibition.

Karl & Faber [Dec 1988-Feb 1989].

Yes. I didn't realise you had that. And, yes, I mean, there's a thing by Götz in there actually. And then he, oh, yes, he came to the big exhibition of COBRA in Amsterdam, in '88, '89.

Do you see yourself as kind of kindred spirits in a sense in your work?

Oh, very much so, yes. Very much so, yes.

How would you like to describe that?

(PAUSE)

Give an indication of...?

Well, he is a different artist from me, but he has this immense skill and a kind of liberal abstraction, it's not Abstract Expressionism strictly speaking, but a kind of fluid, a fluid abstraction, you know, it is akin to me in some ways but not, it's not like me, it's a kind of spirit, I suppose, a kind of 'Zeitgeist' you might say, using a German word. But great to feel that, you know, to discover someone like that in Germany at the time, was really quite thrilling, I mean he, as he reports in his...he talks about this in his book, you see, how I came bearing chocolate and cigarettes and so on, and I sat down and I looked around and I said, he says in English, 'Amazing', I can still, 'Amazing.' To one extent his work was so like mine, the things I was doing at the time in Germany, I said 'Amazing.' (laughs)

And do you see this in a sense, it is amazing, but it was also that if you looked at what had been going on in Paris before the War that, in a sense, there is a continuity there of Expressionism that one also has to recognise.

Well, I think that's true. And he had kept a flame. You see, he had been doing these things before the War. The, but he couldn't, he couldn't, I mean he was a youngish man still, I think he is about the same age as me, maybe a year older or something like that. But, you know, during the War, even when he was in the army, I suppose he did these things, but he couldn't exhibit them or, or try and sell them or anything like that. You know it was 'entarte Kunst'.

This is all works on paper?

Well, he did mainly works on paper, I would think, during the War especially. He couldn't get access to, well, indeed, this was the case that, I don't know technically how it worked, but anybody suspected of being an Abstract, or Surrealist art...couldn't get materials. I don't

know quite if there was some system where you had to be licensed, so to speak, to get materials, I don't know how it worked actually. But he couldn't have functioned as a normal artist with freedom to work in Germany, even if he had the chance. Because he was actually based much of the War in Norway, you know, up in north of Norway. And I think in the latter stages he was concerned with radar, spotting Eng...British planes. (laughs)

There was the additional fact that he was a member of the Luftwaffe, it must have been quite a dilemma for him?

Oh yes, absolutely, yes. Yes, sure, yes. No, no. No, I hope to see him again. The next time that I see him I suppose will be at the opening of this big COBRA Museum in Amstelveen in November. And he will certainly come to that, I should hope.

Perhaps, Bill, to perhaps round up this section of the interview. How did you, in fact, kind of leave the job in Germany, you, how did you complete that?

Well, I, I, as a matter of, what happened of course is that, as I said, I had when I initially went there, I only had three or four months to do before complete demobilisation, but, once I had got into the job, I thought this is great, and so I signed on, so to speak, for an extra year, so I was with this Monuments and Fine Arts thing for about 15 months altogether, and then I, I, oh, yes, I had, well, the thing was winding up anyhow in a kind of way, this...

By '47 we're talking about?



Yes, so we're talking about April, April '47 by this time, and I decided to, I had to demobilise and go to Paris. So I demobbed and went back home to Scotland for a couple of weeks and then straight to Paris.

Beginning of the second session of interviews with William Gear in George Road, Edgbaston.  
Bill, we concluded last time with you arriving in Paris, I think in April 1947?

May, it was, in fact, it doesn't matter. We could do either way, but early May, that's right.

And you acquired a studio quite quickly, can you say something...?

Not really, I mean it was obviously very difficult, I mean there was problems of accommodation in all of Europe, but for the first couple of months I lived in a little hotel and then someone lent me a studio for a month. And then I went to Spain for a couple of weeks, in August, and when I got back there was an old friend, a French doctor, called Pulsford who had a, he had a friend who had a hotel cum caff, place and sent me to him, and this chap had this empty...

**END OF F4739 SIDE A**

**F4739 Side B**

You were saying?

Yes, this chap I had an introduction to, he had, he was the proprietor of this old kind of hotel, on the Quai des Grands Augustins, and he said, I, you know, he gave me the key and said have a look at the top, and so I went up to the very top floor and there was this place, it wasn't very large, but it was, it had this marvellous view onto the Seine above the Pont Saint Michel roughly looking along to the Notre Dame and Place Saint Michel, so it was really a very attractive little place. It needed doing up actually, but I said, 'I'll take it,' and it was very reasonably priced, I can't remember now, but it was probably the equivalent of about five pounds a month or something like that. But, anyhow, I took it, and I did it up, I mean, I whitewashed it and I made it look reasonable and that was my studio for the next three years nearly, I suppose.

Could you describe it a little bit more fully so that we get a picture of it?

Yes, well, as I say it was on the top floor of this seventeenth-century building, literally next door to the, it would be the first house so to speak, on the Quai des Grands Augustins, leaving the Place Saint Michel. The building on the corner was one of these big restaurant/café's which had been built in the nineteenth-century, bearing in mind that, earlier on, that whole façade had been the one continuous quay, but with Haussman wrecking Paris in a way, I mean, he created the Place Saint Michel and the great boulevards and a lot was bulldozed down, so to speak, and, but anyhow, this was left. It's still there. And, well, it was five flights up and, or, six flights, I don't remember, but anyhow, the thing, there was a, there was a wash-hand basin and there was literally no heating. The loo, such as you describe, was two floors down, it was a stand up

affair in the ancient tradition, but, you know, it was adequate for me. There was no question, nobody to phone in those days either, but it was, so I got a lot of work done actually.

Although, as I say, it had the beauty of this lovely view from the window across the Seine and so on.

It was a good window was it?

Well, a smallish window, but it was, you know, it gave good light. There was also a top light, a kind of small top light, so the lighting was not bad actually for working in. So...

And you had a bed in some...?

There was a bed. No, there was all the, there was just the one room, I mean, but there was a kind of large, you could hardly call it a cupboard, a large space, part of the thing, which I could store rubbish in or canvases or that sort of thing. Oh, yes, it was, it was OK for a one-man sort of artist, but as I say, later on I met a girl who was going to become my wife and then we finally got married and settled in there, and we had a baby. Well, it was a bit rough to have a family life, and a baby, and work in the same, one room. And, of course, getting pressure from the landlord to clear out. So, no, it was an interesting and happy time for the few years I was there.

I am going to certainly ask you about meeting Charlotte and, but I wondered, even at this earlier stage, before you met Charlotte, it is very easy to romanticise this idea of the artist arriving in Paris, going to, finding a studio...

Yes, yes.

....but it wasn't at all that kind of over-romantic, this was, I mean you didn't have much money at this time, how would you describe...?

Well, well first of all I, the, my money situation wasn't too bad. I had been an officer in the army, a Major in fact and so that when I, I demobbed, I had quite a substantial gratuity and I, you know, and I was able to, well, initially, I thought well, 'I've got this gratuity I will treat myself to a year in Paris, that was the basic idea, I wasn't going to hang around in London, or in Edinburgh, or wherever. But I had known Paris before the War and I was attuned, shall we say, to a continental style of living, I mean I had, I had been in Italy and in Germany and that, earlier, for previous three years or so. So, this is really why I settled, but I had a basic, I made my, I made a basic income, it wasn't really glamorous or glorious but it was enough to survive on quite happily. And...

This income, I know you acquired at some point a job in French Radio...

Well, was this at the beginning... No, no, well, within weeks, or even, well, yes, course, there was all these sort of incidents that change one's life, I suppose, in fact, it starts off by my travelling, when I was demobbed, travelling by train up to Edinburgh and sharing a compartment with another officer who was demobbing, a chap from Glasgow who had been, I think, in Intelligence, but I, you know, I said I was going to Paris and he said, 'If you go to Paris, look up a pal of mine, David Barr he is in the Embassy in some way.' You see, and the sort of thing, you don't think, but I had been in Paris a week or two and I remembered this, and so I went to the Embassy. He was in the, the visa control section, anyhow, and I, I found him, and he was a delightful Scotsman and, as I met him, like that, and then he invited me to his flat, and met his

wife who was, and so on, and I met a lot of the Embassy people and you know, it, these things grow from that in a way. And, indeed, one of the people whom I met there was a man called Sturge Moore who was actually a remote relative of Sturge of Birmingham in fact. But, anyhow, he was in charge of the English section of the Radio Diffusion Français in the same way as the British BBC has a section, so it is broadcast to France or Germany or wherever, he had this section, and with studios on the Champs Elysees, I remember, but he needed people to read the news and in English, directed to the UK, so he asked me to do this. And so I, it was always in the evening, you know, at seven o'clock in the evening or something. So, I did this two nights a week. There was also other extra things like that. I did one or two interviews with British artists living in Paris, and maybe a review of an exhibition, this sort of, well I did one or two bits and pieces like that, which is, it didn't bring in serious money, it probably paid the rent. But, the, the, it was an interesting group of people, there were really all kinds of characters. There were mainly the French, the French on that side were all kind of ex-commandos or Resistance fighters and this sort of thing. (laughs) A really crazy bunch. But it was interesting and good fun. As I say, it didn't, didn't bring in serious money, but it was useful. And, of course, I was beginning to sell the odd thing too, you know, I had already had exhibitions, beginning to exhibit in the London and also in Paris and a few sales which kept the old pot boiling. But it was never grand or glorious, but adequate shall we say.

How did you, how did those first sales come about, in fact. How, would you kind of describe that to somebody outside...?

Well, you know, I was anxious, obviously, as any young painter is to get established in some way, and I used to take my, and of course Paris was full of galleries and, of course, artists. But I, I might go around to one or two galleries with a portfolio of

gouaches and one or two things, and the odd gallery would take one, you know, just to hang it or buy one even, somebody bought very, very cheap, tiny money, I mean the equivalent of six or eight quid or something like that. But six or eight quid, in those days, you could eat for a fortnight on six or eight quid, I mean, an average meal cost the equivalent of about four or five bob, you see, and sort of, anyhow...

Was it a cautious time after the War? Was it a quiet time, or was it still the vibrance, people wanting a release after the War...?

Well, no, I think, you know, the, because I was really in a sense a stranger to it all, but one was aware to some extent, but not, I mean, it's more or less in more recent times that you began to realise of the trauma that happened in France. Because, you know, there was massive collaboration with the Nazis and massive exportation of the Jews and so on, and the Allies had liberated France, but there was all kinds of undercurrents, so that one wasn't really aware of at the time. I mean, after I had been in Germany for two years or something, I mean, anything that might be happening in France was small beer in a sense, you know, in terms of the destruction and the political overtones and the occupation and so on. But I, it is more or less in retrospect, that I can think that I was courted in a way, I was after all, I was, I had been a Major, a Commandant, in the Allied Army, and that was something you know, everything had been, I wouldn't say

lionised but I met a lot of people, I was taken to, and, you know, I was introduced as 'Monsieur le Commandant', and I said 'What the hell are they talking about?' (laughs).

(PAUSE AS MICROPHONE FALLS OFF)

.....courted, Bill, could you say a little more about that?

Well it's difficult to, at the time you don't realise it, but it's only later on that you beg...that you realise you are something special in a kind of way, because the French, there was still,

there was still this, I'm talking about early-ish '47 now then the War was more or less just over, but there was, there must have been a lot of collab...there was, of course, even in Paris, a lot of denunciations, too, and a lot of pointing of fingers at what you did, or you didn't do, and so on. But to entertain a British officer, I mean, I wasn't in uniform or anything, but I, I, it was only later on that I began to see there was an element there, it wasn't really important, or vital, but there was one or two people who actually bought things in, at, not necessarily, but you know, they would, so to speak, doing their little bit, by thanking the army. (laughs) It was all above my head really at that time. But it was, it was a fascinating period of course, in Europe, because the whole of Europe was turned upside down and Germany especially, and Italy, they were all more or less upside down...and the political situation was so crazy too, because there was violent claims, by the Communists especially, who claimed that they had liberated France or Italy, or wherever, and the Allies didn't like the idea of Communists taking, getting power, and so there was all kinds of interesting goings on on that side. Though again, I wasn't involved or didn't particularly interest myself in local politics, so to speak, I hardly ever read a newspaper at the time even.

Would you agree, Bill, I think some people have written about that a lot of young artists, this is a general kind of statement, that they were turned to Abstraction at this time in a way to satisfy this desire for a new post-war freedom and a creative freedom. Would you go along with that general idea, premise?

Yes, I think this is true. They certainly, the, well, the COBRA people. Put it this way, I found that the most interesting painters, or rather the painters to whom I would gravitate were, in fact, some form of what I call Lyrical Abstraction or what the Americans call Abstract Expressionism or, there was this element of freedom of activity. They weren't going to go back to the Surreal...the Surrealist thing which was just a sick joke after the occupation of the War, the concentration camps and all that,

I mean, funny dreams and this sort of nonsense was just a bad joke, Surrealism, though they tried to revive it, I mean the old timers like Breton and so on. But, so, and the other, the other tendency was of course was the traditional French, strong French School of painting, and you got a number of the, the French especially, French painters, like Bazaine, Manessier, and so on, who were really continuing the strong French tradition. But they, and of course, another, another tradition was perhaps the you might call the, what I called 'Abstract hygienique' the Mondrian, De Stijl tradition, which is still in evidence in France and in the Continent generally. But that was again too hard and cold and theoretical and so on for, anyhow, to attract me and the younger people. So that the, what I found was this, well you had to decide at the time, I mean, you couldn't say Poliakoff is great or Riopelle is the one man or Mathieu but you gravitated along the, I mean, if that is what we were thinking about, or the COBRA boys. And, as it transpired, these in fact were the, the most important contributors it so happens, historically speaking, we're talking about going on fifty years ago. We can now detect that these were the important people in, in Europe at the time. And, of course, the other big thing was we had no knowledge or interest in what might be happening in America, I mean, there was simply no contact at all. Nobody went to America in those days, we're talking about the late '40s. You couldn't. I mean, how the hell do you solemnly go to New York in, I mean in, what was happening was the Ecole de Paris painters who had gone to America during the War, to escape, came back, came back. But they were still, still Léger and Max Ernst and Mondrian and these boys, they were doing the same traditional thing. Mondrian had of course died in New York, but had left their influence, obviously. But, so that it was an ingrown thing, in Paris, and well I gravitated to that particular line of, it had been with me of course, before, I mean, it was not just suddenly opting a new idea because certainly even in the, in the early '40s, even during the War, I was doing this sort of, or in Germany, this, what would be termed a kind of abstractional, lyrical abstraction, or whatever you call it.



Were you giving names to it in a sense. Were you formulating a theory...?

There was no, you didn't have, I was always suspicious of dogma or theories because I think this is really the worst aspect of many of these movements, that you have a movement, so you define it and you write regulations and rules and so on, and, if you are a part of that, you are, so to speak, expected to abide by these, which is crazy. I mean, this is the worst thing, this kind of dogma. It still exists. And you know, in fact, the Surrealists were famous for this, they used to ban people who didn't kow-tow to their regulations. And, but, I would never have anything to do with this sort of nonsense, you see, I mean I think that the individual freedom to search and find was really the prerogative of the artist. It's as simple as that.

Thinking of those people involved with the COBRA you had, in fact, met briefly hadn't you, Asger Jorn?

I had met Asger before the War, he had studied with Léger, you know probably from early '36 I should think, and assisted Léger in, Léger was commissioned, as most of the great artists were, to do some murals in the, in the International Exhibition in Paris in '37 and Asger Jorn helped, assisted him. And I met him a couple of times. I mean, I didn't sort of know him, and of course, actually, shortly after I met him a couple of times he moved, moved back to Denmark, he was Danish of course. And then, of course, he came back to Paris, as most of them did, sooner or later after the War and I met up once or twice in Paris, say in '48, or thereabouts. And he, of course, was one of the key people, there had been of course, in Denmark, there was a kind of avant garde group, which really, in part, became the core of one of the main contributing groups of the COBRA group. And Jorn was the kind of, the key personality in that lot, and of

course then he, he sort of assembled or got together with the Dutch and Belgian and French people.

In Paris?

In Paris. They would meet, I think Paris was really the meeting ground. They came from Denmark, Holland, Belgium, wherever, but Paris was really the meeting ground, in fact, the great, the original declaration or manifesto, whatever is it called, was formulated in Paris.

Where was it formulated?

I believe they sort of documented in a café, on the Quai Saint Michel or something like this where four or five of them got together and decided on the name, the name, and it was a very bright idea, because, as you know, the name is formed from the first letters of the three capitals: Copenhagen, CO; B, Brussels; A, Amsterdam, so it became COBRA, which was a very evocative and strong name, short and powerful, and caught on, I suppose. It has come really to the fore in recent times as you know.

So how would you describe, how did you actually begin to get involved with these people and meet these people?

Well, it is something I have to dig out in my memory, because it is difficult always to, to think of who met whom and when and why and all that. But, as far as I can say, the, the, one of the stages was that these guys, some of them anyhow, would exhibit in one of the big salons in Paris, where anybody could exhibit, it was the Salon des Surindépendents, in which I exhibited a couple of times. But I think it was probably Corneille and Constant, especially, who saw the work of Stephen Gilbert in this

exhibition, and these were works which Stephen had been doing in the '40s, even in, before he came to Paris, in Dublin and in Paris, and they said, 'Oh, this guy's COBRA.' Bearing in mind at the time, early on, before the COBRA name was invented, the actual title of their activity, the big exhibition for instance in Amsterdam in '49, was International Experimental Art. I mean, and of course it was international, and, anyhow they, they adopted Stephen Gilbert so to speak, and, I think it must have been through Stephen, that I met Constant and Corneille, Appel and whoever else. And of course I had known, at about this time I knew Atlan and Dubuffet and, and some of the French people. And they invited me already to exhibit with them in Denmark. And, then, particularly in the big exhibition in Amsterdam in '49, that was the first of the big, the big shows of COBRA as a group. But it was still called, it wasn't Exposition COBRA, it was Exposition Artists International, and so on. But that was the beginning of my associations, but of course they went on, there was other exhibitions about the time and I exhibited in Amsterdam again, with a number of, a group, of the COBRA. It was actually called, I think, something, something like Foreigners, or rather Outsiders, Artists Not, Other than Dutch, or something like that. I've got a kind of document about it. But it included Asger Jorn in that particular mini show and so on, anyway.

Before we talk further about that, had you known Stephen Gilbert, did you know he was in Paris?

No, I, I didn't know, he had, he had, of course, been in Paris before the War, but during the War he, he, I think he was more or less regarded as unfit for military service, and they more or less told him, 'Get out of it,' and he went to, with his wife, to Dublin, and they lived most of the War years in Dublin, or in Ireland, anyhow. And then there was, Stephen tells me, but I didn't realise, but he had seen how I was exhibiting in some mini mixed bag show, somewhere in Paris, and he had come along and seen my work and, I

don't know, met me, I just don't remember. But we must have met up as early as in '47 and then I saw him fairly frequently after that, you see.

We haven't seen much of Stephen Gilbert's work in the UK.

No, you won't have, no.

How would you describe it, I suppose, at this time in relationship to your own work, also?

Well, he, he had what I would call first of all, more of this Book of Kells I like to think that his period in Dublin had been influenced by Celtic illumination. He did all kinds of very curious paintings with crazy looking heads and animals and butterflies and this sort of thing, I mean, there was this element in them, in those early days, this, I'm talking about, say up 'til say 1949, '50, and then he became more abstract. In fact, I have one painting of his downstairs which was 1950. But it became more Abstract and Abstract Expressionist, or Lyrical Abstraction but always very tough and very simple, this, a kind of French nonchalance or sudden, suddenness, that he would employ. Still does, in these gouaches which I have. And then, of course, what was interesting about his work later on, he more or less rejected this kind of approach and started doing very tight, tough, realistic steel sculpture. Oh, yes. I mean minimalist sculpture in a kind of way, which I found very interesting because, this was in the, into the mid-'50s, that I found I was doing much the same thing here, in, well, I think in Littlebourne probably in the mid-'50s, I came down to a kind of minimalist thing about that same time, and doing really things which were really the equivalent of sculpture in a sense. And, of course, additionally very surprised when I went to see Constant in Amsterdam in '59, he had been doing the same sort of thing. So this is a very inter..., and, of course, I didn't, perhaps some others were doing this. But this is a very interesting activity that some of us

had, so to speak, rejected this, this kind of so called COBRA style, and were travelling along another route. Which was you know, which I say was the kind of essential basis of not tying yourself down. Because there were other COBRA artists who continued churning out the same thing, more or less, because it was art...partly because it was commercially successful, or they didn't know what else to do, sort of thing (laughs) But, so I went.

You have mentioned that, in a sense, theory didn't necessarily formulate the COBRA group, would you say a bit more about, because we, we are, again in the UK, unfamiliar with the make-up of this group and what it stood for, in a sense, I mean, how much was it standing, if you like against the School of Paris?

Well, very much, I mean they would, they would make pronouncements about rejecting the Makold[ph] tradition and the bourgeois. Bearing in mind of course that the, all these COBRA artists literally had been under the Nazi yoke, they were from the occupied territories. I mean, they were young men, from say Den...Denmark, Holland, Belgium, France, essentially, or Germany, who had, you know, who had been, where their work, if they were allowed to work, would be strictly 'Verboten'. So that they had this, this, sudden liberation. And, as I said, they weren't going to go back into the comfortable French tradition, no matter how marvellous it was, mind you, I mean they weren't going to be, what could they possibly do, these people? They were going to rebel if you like against the, what had been happening, and they certainly wouldn't be bound by what they called Mondrian's cage. You know, you couldn't go on doing these little kind of Mondrian things, I mean, that was just not on. So, they were, so they would dip back, if you like, into other things which were prevalent in the case of some other artists, I mean, the art of mad men, the art of children, the art of the traditional African artist, or so, you know, anything other than the kind of cosy bourgeois, as they would say, traditional French or European painting. One, one

element which might, certainly would be a factor, would be the, the perhaps, the Expressionists, the original German Expressionists, or people like Munch or Ensor or such people, these were probably artists, whom they would probably admire in some way. But I think they would probably want to get out of the, the, you might call the streamline tradition or the French thing.

This was a northern tradition that they were also bringing with them, and using in their work.

Yes (PAUSE - TELEPHONE RINGING)

We were talking a bit about this northern tradition...

Yes.

.....that in a sense the COBRA artists were bringing with them when they came to Paris...

Yes.

.....that fed into their work.

Well, it was a Northern European thing you know, I suppose, from the German Expressionists and, as I mentioned, people like Munch and Ensor and such people, but it was a different tradition shall we say, from the French, the Ecole de Paris tradition, and it was something else, and of course, as I said earlier, the, all these artists had been under the tyranny of the Nazis and all the problems of the occupation and the difficulties of life in general and so on, and I think there was this natural revulsion,

and a natural revolution in, which came out in that direction. And so, that the kindred spirits got together and realised that they were, you know, from all over the place, and, indeed, the big, and, of course, again in Paris, they were meeting up with people that had similar thoughts, I mean including the odd American. I mean there was this American sculptor, Japanese sculptor, called Tajiri and so on, and people like myself and so on, and so they formed this particular union or group.

Would it have been difficult to, to be associated with the COBRA if you had been French?

On the contrary, no. But the thing is this, there weren't that many French around who were doing that very thing. I mean, actually, I don't know, it may be you see, they didn't hunt around necessarily, you know, they didn't hunt around Par...I mean, they could probably have picked up others, I mean, Dubuffet was one obvious example, but he was probably by that time self-contained, so to speak, with his own gallery and contracts and so on, he was already, he was very much a COBRA type shall we say, but they wouldn't go along and knock on his door and say, 'Would you like to join us?' I mean, he was probably a senior man already, in his way.

**END OF F4739 Side B**

### F4740 Side A

...one or two smallish galleries in Paris, too, which would show especially the inner COBRA group, people, I mean, people like, say, Appel, Constant, Corneille, Jorn, you know, in small scale shows, there was not any massive support really, and more so in Amsterdam and Belgium, I suppose, too, yes. But the thing is this, that COBRA was never a French thing it wasn't really Ecole de Paris, though the, the French authorities now would like to think it was, but it, it would happen, I mean Paris was the obvious magnet for any artists at the time. First of all, it was a traditional home of art in Europe and it hadn't been, it was still a beautiful city, it hadn't been knocked about and destroyed in any way, and there was still a good life to be had, as far as that was possible in, in post-war Europe. So, and, of course, there was still active galleries and painters around and so on. So that most artists gravitated there at some point but it was never really the main base, shall we say, for the COBRA activity. It was more likely to be Amsterdam or Brussels or Copenhagen and so on. It was really a Northern Europe activity, you know, and more especially the, the Dutch, Danish axis, shall we say. Of course I brought in a number of Germans to the thing too, which is really rather significant in a way, I mean, to think that these guys, who had been occupied by the Nazis, were willing to recruit or accept a German like Karl Otto Götz who had been a Luftwaffe officer. You know, this is rather significant, I thought, that, I mean, he was doing what they regarded as a kind of COBRA style work and welcomed him into, into the shows.

You seem to be suggesting a kind of, almost a political co-operation between you, that existed, that certainly as regards...

Well, of course, this is another thing, I mean, the camaraderie of all these people,



none of them had serious money, they were all, well, I wouldn't say they were all starving but none of them had serious money at all, and there was a camaraderie among them all, helping each other where possible and showing together and publishing things together, but they never really had massive commercial success in those days. Perhaps, in due course, perhaps Appel was taken up by one or two galleries as an artist, not necessarily as COBRA, I mean, and also Asger Jorn in a way, too, to a point where later on you get the Tate Gallery, for instance, acquiring an Appel or an Asger Jorn, but they were acquired essentially as individual, important, painters.

I mean was the collective important to the COBRA group?

Well, this is it that it, it, as we would later on see, it was in fact as a group, an activity, the most important activity in post-war Europe certainly and, indeed, I say post-war world because, to my mind, in fact, the, the significance of the New York School was in great measure the sheer novelty of discovering that there were actually painters in America. I mean, there weren't any before the War, you see, but due to all kinds of circumstances and the novel kind of hype that goes on with these things, it was exploded as something fantastic, revolutionary, tremendous. But, in fact, it was an annex, to my mind, it was at best an annex under superbly and much better conditions of work, that is in terms of life style, of acqu...of materials, and all these other things, and or patronage too, of course, that they won out, for a while, but I think that one can now see that the evidence of most recent painting activities in Europe generally, in fact, is a kind of post-COBRA or neo-COBRA activity, I mean, these, especially, these German painters of the last six or eight years, they're really, essentially, neo-COBRA, and, you know, they can be described as such.

Bearing in mind that we're talking about forty, fifty, going on fifty years after the event. I mean, we can talk, we talked about neo-Expressionism, if you like, or Abstract Expressionism which again, again was thirty, forty years after the original events, but this is what is happening in great measure. I mean there is, that is really as far as I can tell, I mean, I don't know in detail, but that in a sense is the main, the main activity in painting. The other activity is the bright ideas thing where you, as happened in the Tate the other day, where you have phials of iodine and they explode occasionally, you have to evacuate the premises, well, thank you very much! We used to do that in, during the War, we dropped bombs on galleries then, but that's another activity, I mean, someone might say, well, that was a, that was a, you know, a bright thing to do, to drop a bomb on a gallery, alright, I had to patch them up sort of thing in Hannover and such places. In Hannover, I ask you, they're at it again you see, they're smashing up, not necessarily the gallery, smashing up each other (laughs) but, anyhow, that's all part of the, the scene.

You mentioned materials, you were describing the American use of materials,

Yes.

Can you say something about what materials were you using?

Well, this was, this was a big problem, I mean, I, I worked a lot on paper for instance, I did lots of gouaches and paper was accessible but you couldn't just go round to the corner shop and buy a dozen canvases, I mean. One thing we did, we used to, it was quite possible to buy old paintings, I mean in a junk shop and sometimes, you know,

you could paint over them, or use the stretchers or, as I say, I had one or two army, army sheets or, when I went back to, to Scotland, I went to a local factory which made a kind of canvas, a linen canvas, and I got a few remnants and, you know. But, anyhow, it was a problem and similarly paint. I mean, you know, it was limited and, indeed, you know, you could get what you might call the basic, rough, basic paints but anything of quality was very difficult to obtain, if you could. I mean, it was very expensive too, probably. I think the, the what you might call the regular customers, the old time French painters, had no problem, I mean the Picassos and Matisse and Légers of this world, well they had no problem, they had their regular gallery merchants who could supply, but for the average artist it was really quite awkward. And there was even a little, an outfit called the Entraide des Artists it was a little kind of co-operative thing which you could join for ten francs or something, but, anyhow, they, now and again, they would have a, they would let you know that there was a stock of canvas come in and you could go and get a few metres of canvas, unprimed probably, I mean jute, even, you know, and, you know, it was, it was a problem. And, again, I did a number of things on board or heavy card, you know, but it was limited, it was a limiting factor, I must say, it really was.

Did this have an effect on the scale that you would work on?

Well, again on scale, I mean you seldom worry, I never did anything or was able to do anything bigger than about four feet square, say, was about the biggest thing that I was able to do in, at the time. Very few artists could do anything, or had the wherewithal, I mean, there wasn't the, though as I say, earlier, in New York, the artists there they had no problem with a hundred yards of cotton duck or whatever and they could, a few gallons of paint and splash it around.

But this was the main impact when it was first shown in Europe or in the UK was the, the scale, I mean we were unaccustomed to seeing such big things and it was impressive. The sheer scale of it all. But, you know, in respect, you could begin to see, well, it's easy enough if you've got twenty yards of the thing then you can spla...you know, it was no problem. But I would probably say to, to students at the time, because they were influenced, I said, well have a look at Schwitters, tiny little Schwitters collages or Paul Klee drawings. It doesn't need to be ten feet, it could be ten inches and more powerful you know, but they had to see that point. Scale is one thing...

I mean, I have here, unfortunately we haven't got the original, a transparency of our 'Winter Phantom' at Birmingham Museums.

Yes.

....and I know that the media that you used for that for example is very interesting.

Well, it simply is...

Would you like to describe that?

It's simply that this is on card, which I bought, you know, a, a dozen, dozen sheets at a time, it was a normal kind of light weight, fairly light weight card, with smooth on one side, just smooth on one side, and I would work on this as opposed to, I mean, if I had the canvases, I would have worked on canvas probably. But this was a convenient way of doing it. Now then the black is, I got some, someone gave me a tin of printers' ink, printers' ink, black, which is very intense black, and I would use this. This is

thinned down slightly as the basic black, you see, then the colour is gouache, but the white, the white, I used to buy, buy a pail full of what they called blanc gelatineux, it was whitewash but with a gelatin base, because you used this for painting the, painting the house, painting the studio, the walls, but it had this gelatine base so it didn't rub off, like ordinary whitewash would, blanc gelatineux which in effect is gouache really. I mean, it's like white gouache, that's all gouache is really, white gouache. And I used this as the white, and it worked perfectly well, no problem. But it was the same white as I would use for painting the studio. (laughs) And I did, oh, scores of works like this, over, you know, over a period of two or three months.

Were you working quite quickly?

Yes, I think so. I would probably do two or three of these in a day, you know, and of course they didn't all come off so to speak, but quite a number of them did, and I sold quite a few. I had, in fact, I had an exhibition in Gimpels, in London, at about this time in 1949, late '49 and showed a number of these things, done in this way actually, some of which were sold at the time, I remember.

So this time, I mean, 'Winter Phantom' has this very strong structure, black armature structure.

Yes, that was typical of my work at the time, yes.

.....against which this colour...

Yes, well, this you get this intensity of contrast of black and white and colour, you know, and of course, I think this comes back to the Léger thing in a way, you know,

it is a typical aspect of Léger's work, so often a black outline and a strong primitive colour so to speak. I mean, it's not an influence, but this is something that I would, if I was asked, I would say this is where it came from in part, you know.

Did this all come immediately on the card, rather than...?

Well, if you are, if you are doing, working like this, and you are doing several a day, and, you know, the thing comes, you know, the, the thing evolves and is repeated or is varied, and you plan variations in style or concept or colour, or you say this is fine and you do a bigger version of it, or a smaller version, so it's all part of the day's work so to speak, you know.

Would you limit the number of colours, were you interested in...?

Usually, yes. Usually. I mean, you probably find maybe three, four black and white and maybe three basic strong colours, I mean, I don't know what there is on that but it's probably not more than three main colours, and maybe yellow, red and blue and something like that, you know.

There are a number of versions of blue.

There could be, yes. Well, usually, it was a fairly simple range of colour and, usually, pure colour straight from a tube usually, yes. I wouldn't mess about with 'tickling him up' and so on, but the pure colours straight from a tube usually, yes.

You were drawn to that, in a sense, the strength of a straight colour?

Well, absolutely. This is what I needed, or wanted, the, the powerful contrast of a colour and the contrast of tone and the black and white too, you know. And, often, usually too, as you see, I am still doing this in a way. The thing is contained as a unit in its own right, I mean, it's not taken to the edge of the canvas or the edge of the thing, it's a contained unit in a way, it's an item, an element, an object, so to speak, in its own right. It's not, it's a different approach from some things I have done later, or before, using the entire canvas so to speak. So this is a kind of, almost an illustration in its way, an identifiable item, so to speak, as it might be a still life object, painted, which is a different approach really than the all over canvas.

Because that make one think of the all over field kind of method of the Americans...

Well, exactly. Yes.

Which in a sense at this time you, you were certainly not doing.

Bearing in mind, of course, that some, some again were shown in New York, in Betty Parsons.

Indeed.

She came to Paris in May '49 and selected a few of these - like that - to take back with her, and some were shown in New York.

We can certainly talk about. I was just thinking, in a sense that this structure has almost space to breath, it has a kind of, and it has a place.

Yes. And the other thing about this particular one is that it's, it's what you might call Baroque in style, I mean, there is virtually no straight lines, it's a, although certain others would have straight lines or a more Cubist sort of approach in a way. But this one is what I might call Baroque in, in the, the activity of the line, you know.

You have said that titles are not that important.

Well, they're, they're, they have an importance of a kind, with two aspects, there's two, three, aspects to the title, for instance, it's useful for reference. I mean I did, as I say, many, many of these and there is not much, I mean, certain artists I knew would just give them a number. I mean people like Hartung for instance he numbered his work, this might be, he would call it 'G 10 31' and it was G for gouache, done in, on, in November, the tenth month and it was number 31. Well, big deal, but supposing you know, you're writing about it and you say, 'Oh, G 10 91 was a beautiful thing, I liked the colour.' What the hell does it mean? That's one side, it's for reference, it's useful. The other thing is, it can, it can evoke the, an idea of a subject. I mean I call this 'Winter Phantom' well, chiefly because it was painted in the winter, I think in February

'49 and there is, if you like to find it, there's a kind of curious phantom-like form there, you know, I mean, but it's just that I know the one you're talking about. And the other thing is, it helps the spectator sometimes. That for other things, for instance, I call that picture 'Autumn Landscape', well they, they can look at it and say, 'Oh yes, it's in the autumn, obviously autumn colouring and I presume these dark vertical forms are trees and the colouring is the autumn leaves and foliage.' So, you know, there is a kind of link there that helps the, the spectator, but I think, titles, for instance, I have just made a list, I have just made a, I got together twenty, twenty works on paper which I am showing in Edinburgh shortly and I have given them all titles,



they all look a bit similar, but I, sometimes the title is as I said, 'Yellow Triangle' or 'Pink and Blue' or a name like, but it's really, in part, I mean supposing when I am up there or when I'm back, someone rings me, 'Oh, Bill, by the way, we've sold the 'Pink and Blue', 'Oh, yes, that's nice.' Whereas if he were to say, 'We have got rid of 'Number 17', 'What was 'Number 17'.' You see what I am saying? It is useful for reference, and it also describes the thing in a way. You will find of course that the COBRA people had all kinds of exotic titles often enough. You know, there is one Asger Jorn called 'Letter to my Son' or something. What on earth has this go...you see?

Is it a kind of a tease in a way?

It can be. There is this kind of degree of whimsy and fun which can be part of the approach, you know, it's not vital, but...

These titles usually come after?

They usually come after. You don't, you don't say, 'I'm going to do a pink and blue picture' and paint a pink and blue picture, I mean, and call it 'Pink and Blue' I mean, that would be ridiculous. No, the titles always come after, you know, but it's a, it's just a, I mean, again, if you are making a catalogue or if you are sending into an exhibition, you always put the number and the date and the title, and it's not much good saying 'Number 10' or something like that title. Although there was a fashion for saying 'Untitled' so you solemnly called things title: 'Untitled.' It's another arrogant thing to say, I think, when you say 'Untitled', I mean, what the hell do you mean? I don't need to title my things for your sake, I mean, it's untitled, it hasn't got a title, well.

It cuts out a kind of door...

Well, it is, if you call it, there is always some kind of title you can use. There's 'Black Spots' or 'Pink and Yellow' or something, or 'Spring Vertical', I usually find a title of some kind for my things, it's not a problem.

In Paris, I mean, in a sense, things moved very quickly for you because I believe by February in 1948 you had your first one-man show at the gallery Arc en Ciel?

That's right. Yes, yes.

Can you say a bit about that? That's a major thing for you.

Well, it was. Actually, again, it was one of these lucky coin, I mean there is a great deal of luck goes in these things, but I, I was, I was visiting, I mean, this is the crazy, I was visiting a chap, I had met a Spanish sculptor called Condoy, I can't remember how, anyhow, I met him, and he said, 'Do come up and see me some time' sort of thing. So I went to his studio and there was a, this man, this elderly man called, well, I met him, introduced him, his name is Henri Pierre Roché, and, you know, and Condoy, oh, yes, Condoy had been to my studio, that's right, too, and seen my things. Anyhow, Condoy said, 'Il est très important' in his Spanish. Anyhow, so anyhow, Henri Pierre Roché, said, I might like to show him some of my things, so he came to my studio, liked them very much, and he solemnly gave me a card of his own saying that, more or less, in French, that he likes very much the work of Gear, or something, words to that effect, and I thought, well, that's very nice. I didn't know who this guy was really, but he was in fact a very important art historian, art critic friend, great friend of Braque, Picasso, Brancusi and all the boys, had a fantastic collection himself. In his bedroom he had six Brancusi's, I repeat, you just

wouldn't believe it.

(laughs)

(PAUSE - MICROPHONE LOOSE)

He had been, had been...

(PAUSE - MICROPHONE LOOSE)

Back on.

Is it still on? Yes, this guy had been a great friend, he was actually a writer too, and an art critic, an art historian, but brilliant man, very well known man, I later on realised, but anyhow he gave me the, the introductions around and including this Galerie Arc en Ciel and I went there and there was a woman directress and she came to me, and said she would give me an exhibition. So it was all arranged and I had an exhibition mainly of works on paper, mainly of gouaches, as at that time, this is still, I can't remember, March, April '48, or thereabouts, it was quite early on you see.

(PAUSE - MICROPHONE LOOSE)

I had his exhibition...

You said mostly gouaches...?

Yes. Well, I hadn't, I hadn't by that time done many oils, you know, a few, but the, the show was almost entirely works on paper, gouaches, framed, and so on. But it was at

the worst possible time, it was snowing, I remember, the, the French authorities worried about the franc and they called in any franc notes, over a thousand francs or more, and there was other problems, there was a strike over the Metro, I mean, everything happened you see. So, but there was a very good turn out at the opening, I still have the, somewhere, the, the signatures of people attending the opening, there was quite a lot of people like Hartung, and Soulages and Atlan and all these boys came to the opening, we had a kind of mini opening. Sold very little, if anything at all, but there was a show. And, of course, it was seen by Jean Gimpel, the brother of the Gimpel Fils who reported back to the Gallery in London, and this meant that they offered me a show in London.

In that same year?

The same year, yes, in July I think it was, the first showing in Gimpels in London, yes.

So did you go back to London?

Yes, I went back to London. This is the thing, I went, I took over a whole lot of stuff, but by that time I had been doing some oils, this say between May and July, and a lot of these oils were shown in, of course, I went to London, taking over some of these things, and I worked in London, I went over, I can't remember, say not long after that exhibition in Paris, maybe in May, or late May, and I had, someone lent me a studio in London. We swopped round actually, somebody came and lived in my place in Paris and I had his place in Radcliffe Gardens or somewhere, and worked there for a while and for towards the show in London, which was in July.

Because Gimpel Fils, they were formulating, in a sense, on their books, very much the Modern Abstract artists?

Well, they were one of the only two or three galleries in London who showed any interest in Modern, in terms of my kind of thing, you see. They have of course this French background very much so and, but they were the, you might say the most avant garde gallery in London at the time.

And what was the arrangement with them, could you...?

Well, simply that they put on a show, they produced a little catalogue thing, and there was some reviews, and they had a kind of opening, nothing serious you know, a few people came along. They sold, I think, from the exhibition, maybe two or three gouaches, and then they held onto a fair number of my things and over the next year or two they sold the odd thing. And then they sort of took me on, I mean, I had another show in '49 as I say, some of these works that I was showing you on card, I took over some of these, and one or two others as well too.

So it happened gradually in a way, your association...?

Yes, yes. Well they supported me and, well they would have a few things in stock and sell the odd item. You know, which was very useful, I was still in Paris and they would send me the odd cheque, I suppose, it was handy.

What was Mr. Gimpel like - the gallery owner?

Well there was two. Essentially there was the two, two brothers, Charles and Peter. You see, the father had been René Gimpel who had a big gallery in Paris, in the Place

Vendôme I think. But he was Jewish and he was, I think, I'm not sure of the full details but I think he saw the writing on the wall and sent a lot of his, he had a fabulous collection, I mean of, of stock, of a lot of Impressionists and such thing, I mean he was a great friend of Monet for instance and Renoir and all these boys. I mean he was a dealer, a big, one of the top dealers in Paris and I think he sent over a lot of his stuff with Charles and Peter and, but he was then arrested and he ended up in Buchenwald or some place. He was killed, he was, by the Nazis, this was René, the father. But the two brothers were in London, as I say, already before the War. Charles, of course they were all bi-lingual anyhow, but Charles went into the, the OSS or whatever it was called OSS, OE, Special Operations and he had a remarkable war. Peter was, went into some British infantry regiment as far as I know, I'm not quite sure which one, but he was in the army, too, Peter. They were both young people of course at that time, I mean they were in their twenties, at the time you see or early, yes. I think Charles I think was the oldest one, but he couldn't have been more than twenty-six, twenty-seven, something like that I suppose. The youngest brother, Jean, stayed on in Paris and he was involved with the Resistance too, you see. But when the War was over they got, Charles and Peter got, got this gallery started in London. It had only been going a few months, you know, when, when I came across them, and they had of course a fair stock of their father's which had been brought across. They had for instance quite a number of paintings by Soutine and such people and, of course, a number of very important Impressionists, some of which are now in the National Gallery. I mean, the big Dégas of 'Mademoiselle Rouart' was one of their paint...I remember seeing it in the gallery, it's in the National Gallery now. But a number of things really which kept them going of course, I mean, they weren't going to make any money on trying to sell Gear (laughs) or anybody else like that. But they showed works by Jankel Adler and they got together a small group, Scottie Wilson was someone they took on later on, and Sandra Blow, James Hull, one or two of the sculptors, early on you see, people like Chadwick, for instance, and Kenneth Armitage, I mean they were,

they were, you know, the Gimpels were the one, the only galleries to pick out and support. And, of course, often what happened, was that later on the bigger galleries with big money, like the Marlborough, would come in and seduce away some of them, you see.

**END OF F4740 SIDE A**

## **F4740 Side B**

Bear in mind that the thing was officially dissolved by the, by the COBRA fellows in 1951 and, you know, the name was hardly known in the UK.

It was short lived?

Oh, yes. Indeed. It was only three years or so of activity and then it was officially dissolved, you know, officially. So that...

It must have been through you, you must have been talking about this...?

Well, it wasn't all that vital or important at the time, you see, you, you know, because there were so many other things happening, you know. Alright, I showed a few things in Amsterdam and a few things in Copenhagen, thank you very much. But, you know, similarly, I had been showing things in, in Paris, or in Germany and, wherever you know, but no big deal, I, it wasn't a world beater or anything at the time. It is only merely in, in re...retrospect that it has been rediscovered, so to speak. It's a bit like, say, Les Fauves, only lasted three years or so, in fact, and it wasn't until much later really that it was seen to be an important development on, on the track through from the, the Van Goghs and through on to the Fauves and the Expressionists and so on, I mean, there was, it was seen to be a part of a vital tradition. And it's only really in the last ten years or so that it has been seen as so vitally important.

So even yourself, at this time, '48, '49, COBRA was just one of the things you were engaged in?



Well, it was just one of the, yes. In the same way as I exhibited at the time in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles or the Salon des Surindépendents. I mean, this was just a little show in Hamburg or in Ger...or in Amsterdam or some, you know, you didn't think this was a world beater and great to be alive, you know, big deal. You know, it was really, it was really, in a way, it wasn't really until the early 1980s, 1982 to be precise, where it was really rediscovered, and the French, the galleries, the great Galerie (Musée) d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris put on this big exhibition of COBRA, invited everybody and it was opened by Monsieur Jacques Chirac in the presence of Monsieur Jacques Lang with maybe some ambassadors, and all the boys, and, in part, I saw it to be an effort on behalf of the French government to imply that COBRA was Ecole de Paris, which it never was. I mean, there was only, there was only one and a half French artists in the group of thirty-odd painters. There was Atlan who really was Algerian, he was an Algerian Jew, in fact, and then there was Doucet, who was French, some of us, some of them had been working in Paris, but like me, or like Gilbert or Tajiri, but it was never a French thing, really. But...

A slight re-writing of history there, I think?

Well, but, well you couldn't get away with it, but at least they were, they put on a marvellous exhibition, a big fat catalogue, and they had all the trimmings, posters in the Metro, and the works and you know, they made a big thing of it. But since then of course, it has been shown all over the world. I repeat, the world. Everywhere from, from Taiwan to Chile, I mean, big, massive, exhibitions of it, except in the UK. I mean, the UK it never has it, never will have, pass,, you know, they missed the boat, never mind.

I found a, I think there is a quote that is known, David Sylvester, I think he wrote for your first one-man show?

That's right, yes, yes.

He used this expression 'Abstraction deformed towards nature'...

Yes.

.....about your work, could you, what do you think he meant by that?

Well, I think that's a good, that's a good expression, or, 'nature deformed towards abstraction' is a better way of putting it actually. As, I repeat, 'nature deformed towards abstraction', but it's what I would say, I think, in the same, in the same article, I think he quotes me as saying that I, I don't want to draw nature, I would like to draw in nature more, or words to that effect. But it's my old contention that pure, purist, pure Abstraction is anathema, I mean you, the, you know, the, as I was saying earlier, this dogmatic approach where a painting must on no account remotely resemble nature, well I can't accept that because I think almost any mark you make, if you make a, a round disc on a blank canvas and entitle it 'Red Disc', well the eye might see it as the setting sun, or an orange or something else. But, the eye, the, the physiological condition of the eye, of the human eyes, is going to interpret whatever it sees, it's, it's a biological function. So, I accept that you see. But, I'm not going to sit and draw these trees, but, as I say, I live among them, I, I, my mind is influenced by them, and I approach its natural condition where it's the natural condition as I am looking out the window now, as I see vertical forms, be it window frames or the trees, or the trunks, and bricks, and tradit...and leaves, and blossom and so on - it's a

part of what I am seeing - and this is really the condition in which I was working. So, you don't deny nature, I work within it, or towards it, but retaining this link with the observable world, but never, never depicting it, but living with it, or marrying with it, you see. Which is, you know, what I, my philosophy, though, again, I wouldn't specify it must be like that, I mean, I'm not going to be bound to that, but certain phases of my work, this is the approach I would say.

This philosophy would be shared by, for example, Constant and Corneille?

Not necessarily. No, no. I think they, they were, they were, in more, interested in, in the Celtic kind of myth and fable and, you know, and also the kind of primitive art forms, children or mad men, or primitive societies. I think there was more of that element. They weren't necessarily concerned, I think I was more, still more of that lot, as in fact is spelt out in some of his books on the topic, I was still more the, the, within the Ecole de Paris proper, which was my tradition. It was Scotland, Edinburgh, Paris, originally, I couldn't suddenly become a kind of Danish wolfhound sort of thing, you know, though, you know, but this was accepted and, of course, others of the COBRA group were similar, in similar vein to the sort I thing I was doing, they weren't, you see, it's, it's not wise to, to try to identify a COBRA style. There are certain, certain artists whose style is nearest a kind of concept of COBRA, but there are others, there is quite a wide range, bear in mind that I think there was over thirty artists involved in the first big shows, or in current shows, wherever they are now, who were not really in that kind of exclusively COBRA-esque tradition of style, you know. So that, the, you know, as I was saying earlier the, the idea was really experimental artists, breaking away from the kind of Ecole de Paris and, or, the Mondrian traditions, or the Surrealist tra...you see. There was an element of Surrealism, I think, perhaps the more, the, the, not necess...the kind of Dali-esque

thing, but the automatic writings and the automatic approach thing, that side of the Surrealist thing.

Again, shortly after the Gimpel Fils exhibition, I think you have mentioned it before, there was this exhibition, a marvellous title 'An International Group of Non-figurative Painters' shown at the Galerie des Deux Iles?

Oh, yes, yes.

What, was that a very large exhibition?

Not really no. The Galerie des Deux Iles was a smallish gallery and I knew the, the proprietress who was married to an Englishman, Madame Brown, I forg...Florence Brown, again, a great enthusiast and...

Was this a COBRA gathering?

Not really no, no, not necessarily. There may have been one or two of the COBRA people involved with it, but it was really an international, a little international show of you might call some of the Avant Garde artists in, in Paris, and we each had maybe two or three things, it wasn't a big thing really. But, again, it was significantly international, that was about, she, she liked to put these shows on, and she sold a few things of mine, I remember Florence.

I mean, the fact, the, the first major COBRA exhibition, this Copenhagen show, which I, I think the title was 'Drawings and Gouaches by Comrades from Abroad'?

That's the one I, but wasn't that in Amsterdam?

I think, I, to be corrected, I thought, no that's the Copenhagen show and then...

Ah.

.....that was prior to the Amsterdam show.

That's probably, yes, that's right, yes.

Now, how did you, did you send your work to Copenhagen first of all?

Yes, no, they had, mm, they had a fair number of my, I think for the big, the big show in Amsterdam, I sent, I think I had two, maybe three, largish oil paintings and a whole batch of gouaches and prints, some prints, and, virtually unknown to me, they would use these, put them in a show, you know, in Copenhagen and, or Amsterdam, as I, what...

Did this follow on? Did you, for example, send a batch of work to Copenhagen and then it got transferred onto...?

No. No. I doubt it. I can't honestly remember. But they, they probably, I would have sent originally with these, now then, the sad story is in a way that, I think it was Corneille, yes, it was Corneille, who, who...

Who suggested in fact that you would exhibit? How did that, what was the story behind that?

Well, I, the, I think the, the key people who were running the show in Amsterdam were probably certainly Corneille and Constant, and wrote to me, I think I still have the letters even for the archives, inviting me to participate. And I sent, as I say, two, I think it was two oils, and a batch of gouaches and some prints. Now, the two oils came back, were sent back, but not the, not the gouaches and, of course, in those days you didn't bother, I mean, frankly. And it was thirty years later, shall we say '49, '50, thirty-two, thirty-three years later in Paris at this big COBRA exhibition, when, you know, there was everybody there and Charlotte comes up to me and said she had just, just met someone who has three works of mine. I said, 'Oh, who's that?' and she brought forward this man, Karel van Stuijvenberg and he boasted that he had three works of mine. I said, 'What's that and where did you get them?' and he got them from Corneille. And the story went, of course, that Corneille hadn't bothered, the same happened to Karl Otto Götz, he rather hadn't bothered about sending gouaches back, he stuffed them in a drawer and when, and when Karel van Stuijvenberg, who was collecting COBRA by this time, he said how could he get any works by Gear, and Corneille pulled out the drawer and said, 'There's some here, help yourself!' So this is how he acquired two very, very good gouaches and a print of mine for nothing, you see. So I remember in the exhibition, Corneille comes up and I said, 'What's all this, I believe you, I believe you sold some of my things to Karel?' He said, 'Oh, no, I gave him them.' 'Oh, thank you very much.' (laughs) Big deal. Anyhow...

There was a curator involved wasn't there, William, Sandberg?

Oh, yes, he was the Director of the...

The Stedelijk?

The Stedelijk Museum at the time. It was he who supported and encouraged the COBRA people, especially the Dutch boys, you see.

Do you recall him, how...

Oh, yes, I...

.....important was he in this COBRA story?

Well, he, he was a very avant garde Director, supporting Modern Art, and, you know, he was aware of the Dutch boys and the COBRA thing, and he put on this exhibition, you know, in the big gallery in Amsterdam, you see, the City Gallery, it's this big public gallery. And of course it was howled down by the press and the local public. It really was attacked viciously, oh, yes. I mean a really terrific attack.

In what way, what was the premise for this?

Well, this was a horrible painting, I mean, you know, the same treatment as one gets, still gets of Modern Art, you know, even in Birmingham. And...

.....somehow it was taken up by the Catholic community, was that right?

Well, I wouldn't be surprised. I mean there was a whole story of riots and so on. (laughs) I mean, I didn't go actually. The thing was that, about the time I had married and my wife was having a baby, this was in October '49, and I was about to have an exhibition in London. So, anyhow, I didn't go to Amsterdam for this occasion, I just got reports as to what had happened.

This would have been a different reaction to, say, in Paris? This reaction in Amsterdam?

I should think so, yes. I think Paris was probably more accustomed to the wild men shall we say, but the, the, I think it was, I don't know, but it was probably the first manifestation or rather official support. It was, you see, this was after all Amsterdam's Municipal Gallery, I mean, rather like the City Gallery here, it was the, the main gallery as opposed to the Rijksmuseum of course, and to put this on, this wild, horrible, stuff by these crazy characters, you see, it was, it was attacked by the, you know, any Modern Art was attacked, in Europe too, in England too, I mean, I got it too, but, the same sort of treatment. It still happens. But it was particularly vicious upon the, in Amsterdam.

Did Sandberg write an introduction, was there a big catalogue or...?

No, there was just a kind of brochure listing, of course, again, bearing in mind in those days paper was, the whole business of reproductions and photographs and slides, they didn't exist and magazines and so on, hardly any of that actually. And, you know, there was a kind of broad sheet with the lists of artists and titles and so on, but nothing very elaborate at all you see, it was a simple affair. You know, the, the, one forgets that we were still in just post-War period and anything like that was severely rationed or difficult.

I mean, was Constant and Corneille's kind of aim fulfilled by that exhibition, if you like, an international platform or what, what would they have wanted out of that, that show in Amsterdam?



Well, you know, it was the natural event of, you know, a group. It was already established, in fact, of COBRA and gathering together a new group, so to speak, of artists with a similar intent. But, as I say, mainly from the COBRA countries, shall we say.

Shortly after that, Bill, in fact, COBRA was disbanded, if that's the word?

Well, yes, in 1951 they said, 'Well, we have done our thing, more or less,' I mean, I wasn't in on this, I was already back in England, of course, I mean, I, I left Paris in October '50 and was no longer aware of anything that might be happening, in those days. And, of course, again, in those days you didn't have telephones, you didn't have faxes or anything like that, you didn't know, you might get the odd letter from somebody. But it certainly wouldn't be reported in the English press, or, you know, you wouldn't know, you wouldn't know about these things. And you don't know how these things happened, but they were probably honest, but bear in mind, think of, think of it this, the other way round that most of the major movements that you hear, that you know about in, in art, only lasted three years or so, anyway. I mean the Fauves you can say 1902, 1905, the Cubists, really, a brief-ish period, they were actually purely Cubist, the Futurists, again, three or four years, you see, the Surrealists, really only three or four years effectively. But there was always a hanging on thing, but the actual key period of these movements is only generally, these things run out or they are just, you know, a continuing churning it out and become a commercial thing really, after a while. So, they are even honest in a sense, to say, 'Well, we have done our thing. Goodbye.' And the other thing was that, you know, individual artists were finding their own track, their own direction, or they were beginning to have galleries or success or showing in, or emigrating even and so on. So that it was the natural thing to happen.

Was, were Constant and Corneille were they very much the kind of driving force of the movement? Or was it more kind of liberal and open in a sense?

Well, they had one or two poets and people associated with them, too, who were active in the public domain, shall we say, writing poetry and, and articles and so on, but I would think that certainly Constant, Corneille, Jorn, were the, the key activists, in terms of organising things and writing, you know, they had a magazine, for instance.

What was that called?

Well, the first ones were called 'Reflex' and then they were called just 'COBRA' and, again, they petered out after the thing closed down. But they produced a kind of magazine and Götz, in Germany, produced a little mini magazine called 'Meta' and so on, so that they were quite active in that sense.

That was involving brought in poets and writers...?

That's right, yes, yes.

Did you write for any of those issues?

Yes, well, I, I, Götz got me to, I was already back in England actually, and he was making...doing this 'Meta' thing and he got me to produce an edition of 'Meta' based on, on England. So I, I got, did a very tiny, of course, on cheap newsprint paper. I mean, a very rough little thing was done in Germany, I mean, he was living in Hannover, I think at the time. But I got reproductions of Peter Lanyon and Alan Davie, a man called Charles Howard, who is now neglected, and myself, and something else, oh, and I had a

poem by my friend, Crieff Williamson, who is a poet-friend of mine, an old Scots boy, and some one or two little things like that, nothing very involved, you know, but. And then I did another one, I did one or two, and he got me to, he asked me to (laughs) he was doing one in Germany and the, he, he wanted, in order to sell it well he wanted to include a lithograph, a small lithograph with each, each copy. He wrote to me asking if I would do this and I couldn't be bothered doing a lithograph, so I did about a hundred little drawings in ink, just with the brush you see (laughs) and these were, these were sold, you know, in the, each, in each copy of the magazine.

Have you got copies of...?

I haven't got copies it. No. I mean he sold them all. (laughs)

.....small editions, I would think?

Oh, yes. They were just little kind of ink, you know, hardly the size of a, but anyhow, that was the sort of thing one did in those days, you know, I didn't think about it.

Perhaps it's the time I, we've mentioned Charlotte...?

Mm.

.....already, Charlotte Chertok I believe was her...?

Yes.

.....was that her maiden name?

Yes.

Would you like to say, I mean, how did you meet?

Well, again, that's one of these crazy stories where a great, great friend of mine, whom I still know and lives locally, called Neil Russell, he, he had looked me up in Paris. I was, I already had my little studio on the Quai des Grands Augustins, he looked me up and he had been in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelles and he had seen two, a couple, an American couple, standing, looking at my painting in the Salon des Réalités Nouvelle and, typical of Neil, he went up and said, 'Do you know this is a friend of mine?' 'Oh, really, a fr..., oh, really.' So apparently he said, 'Well, look, he lives in Paris if you would like to look him up, he would be pleased to meet you.' And he gave them my address. And, it was several weeks later, that this girl comes and knocks at the door, more or less, and this is Charlotte, and told me how, you know, that this guy Russell had given them the address you see, and that was how we met. So, you know, it was love at first sight and all that I suppose, and so she moved in with me and, in due course, we got married and had a baby in Paris, and the baby is now in Cheltenham. (Laughs)

What brought her to Paris?

Well, she, she was American. I think, well, she came really as a tourist, but I think she tried to escape from the Manhattan family, I mean they were a rather dominant Jewish family and I think, in great measure she was hoping to escape. I don't think she had any, any strong ideas of what to do. She had been in Paris already when I met her, of, oh, a good two months or more, you see, and, I mean, she didn't know really what to do.

She had enough money to live on, I suppose, at the time, as a tourist more or less. But anyhow, I think essentially she was glad to get out of the rather stifling family thing in New York, in part, that was one of her reasons anyhow. She was, I think she took to Parisian life, though. When she reported back home that she was now living with a painter in a garret in the Latin Quarter, which was the case, I mean, I was a painter living in a garret in the Latin Quarter, you talk about 'La Boheme', you could imagine the reaction of the parents in Manhattan, especially mother who promptly took to bed for two days, she collapsed more or less! (laughs) The thought of her poor little Charlotte being found in the gutter, like Mimi, or something. (laughs)

Did they come out and...?

Well, they came, they came more or less to rescue her and of course to meet me, and there was all kinds of surreptitious goings on. So that, anyhow, they met me and I don't think he was all that disappointed. But the thought of their daughter living in this miserable little garret, sort of thing, you know, but, anyhow...

Was her father a, a businessman?

Father was a, a, he was a dentist. A big dentist, with a practice in the Empire State building, in fact. And very traditional, but amusingly enough, I think he had a soft spot. He was an amateur sculptor himself, he took, he took lessons in sculpture and he did little plaques of the family in sculpture and so on, and I think he liked the idea of Paris and, though when I first met him, he wore a Homburg, you know typical American businessman-type Homburg. Gradually he started wearing a beret. (laughs) And going, of course I had to take them round, at their expense, to all the, I mean I take them to

quite, quite good restaurants and he would look around and say, 'This is where the artists...'  
you know. (laughs) Anyhow, it was all very amusing, but, they took her back with them and  
then she came back to Paris and we got married. And then the baby was born. And then  
they came to see the baby, and all was well of course. There was a nice little baby, a baby  
boy, and we were very happy, and that was sufficient.

That was David?

David, yes.

So, you started your married life, you stayed in...?

Yes, yes. We stayed, I think we were there nearly three years in that, no, two, it would be  
two years in that way together, in that place. But, of course, gradually the, it was difficult,  
obviously, I mean to, as I say there was one room...

Financially it was difficult...?

What?

Financially...?

Financially it was tight, tight shall we say. But physically, I mean, there was, to have  
everything in the one room, I mean. I was painting, and there was a bed, and there was a  
baby, and we had to cook and wash in the one room. And a loo, two floors  
down, and a gallery, and the landlord anxious to kick us out, and pressing us to leave. I  
mean this is the traditional thing of course. By which time, of course, I was already getting a

bit of success in London and was then invited to participate, by this time, in the forthcoming Festival of Britain. And I said, 'Oh, look, enough, let's pack it in and go back to England.' And so, this is what we did in October '50, I came back to England.

Before we talk about that, we haven't mentioned at all, of course, that Charlotte was involved with the Betty Parsons connection, wasn't she?

Oh, yes, well, this is another story. Of course, what happened was that, yes, she had to go back as I say and I said to her, 'Look, why don't you take some gouaches, perhaps you can show them to a gallery in New York, and, you know.' And there was a sculptor I knew, called Zadkine who had been in New York during the, during the War, as many of them had been and I asked him did he know of any gallery in New York which might be interested in my things and, he said, 'Well, there's this Betty Parsons.' I mean, I didn't even know the name, I don't think, at the time.

Anyhow, Charlotte took a batch of these gouaches with her, under her arm more or less, and in New York she more or less went and knocked at the door of Betty Parsons who, apparently, was extremely excited with them, and wrote back that she liked them very much, and that she, of course, Charlotte came back to Paris about then. Betty Parsons hung onto these things, and then she came to Paris, Betty did, too, in probably around May '49, yes, and saw more things and took more things back with her. And then, in due course, announced, oh, yes, first of all she had an exh...a mixed bag exhibition, called 'Painted in 1949' in which she obviously had two or three of my things, and then announced that she was putting on this show together with one of her artists called Jackson Pollock, thank you very much. I mean, I didn't know him, I never knew him, I never met him of course, but...

You didn't know the name?

I, well, I knew, I had heard the name because I knew some American GI painters in Paris and I, I probably heard one or two of them, they talked about De Kooning you know, and, and Pollock, probably. I mean I heard them, in conversation, mention these names.

**END OF F4740 SIDE B**



**F4741 Side A**

Yes, as I say, I knew some of the American GI painters in Paris and I said to this chap, 'I'm having a show at Betty Parsons with this guy Jackson Pollock, well, what does he do? What is he like?' 'Oh,' he said, 'he's this guy, he lays his canvases on the ground and dribbles painting, and dribbles paint and all that kind of thing.' 'Oh, well, thank you very much, big deal, what have I let myself in for?' I mean, I thought, he dribbles paint, thank you very much, you know. Anyhow, that was Jackson Pollock and, of course, I never, I didn't go to the, I mean, in those days, we're talking about something, it must have been about October, November '49 and, of course, in those days, you didn't even dream of going to New York, I mean, you, if you had the money, a lot of money, you sailed, I mean, you didn't think of flying to New York, nobody flew to New York. Anyhow, I didn't see the show. I got the odd report of it, that it did well and so on, there was even one or two mini write ups, nothing serious.

Were you aware, I mean, I don't know how kind of celebrated Betty Parsons was at this stage when she came to see you?

Well, I, I, you know, they told me she was one of the more organised or was a great supporter of Modern guys in New York, I think she, she showed a number of these, these New York school in fact, and she, and she herself was a painter, apparently, but she was an enthusiast, but you know, she was one of the, and then of course I went to New York, myself, on my own later on in '57, where I had a show organised by Gimpels in a different gallery, the Saidenberg Gallery, and I went, I went to see her, Betty Parsons. And I saw the premises, you see, and...

What was it, I mean, you saw the gallery...?

Typical, yes...

.....that showed your, what was it like?

Well, it was a typical New York style gallery of the time, in Fifty-seven Street or somewhere like that, but it was just, as I remember there was a kind of, one large room, and a kind of office, and then a smaller room, on the side, I mean. Anyhow, the Pollocks were, had been shown, of course, his large dribbled things on this larger room and then...

Separate or were you facing?

They were adjacent shall we say, you know, yes. I mean, there was a large room and a door, well, a passage through to the other rooms.

So, she separated you?

Oh, yes, they were separated, yes, there was two. But, anyhow...

What, what, I know that you recall her actual visit to you in Paris...?

Yes.

.....what, what was she like?

Well, amusingly enough, I remember very well, actually, I mean, again, one didn't have phones of any kind. I knew, he had wrote, she wrote to me that she was coming to Paris and would come to see me, I mean that's as near as you can get, you see. Nobody had phones. And, I can still remember a beautiful day, in May I think it was, and Eduardo Paolozzi was, had come to see us, I mean he, he was living in Paris at the time, he just came up to say hello, and a knock comes to the door and this is Eduardo, this was Betty Parsons, and I introduced them round. And Eduardo had the good sense to say to Charlotte, 'Well, let's go and have a coffee somewhere' and leave it to me to chat with her and show her things. And they went, I can still remember, they went across, across the Pont Saint Michel and sat on the quay on the other side, you know, just over there so to speak. And I showed Betty some of these things I had been doing recently, which she liked, and selected a few to take back with her and talked about she might be able to show some of these some time and so on. But that was about it, you know. Then she left...

Was she very instinctive about her, how she approached work, or...?

I would think so. Well, you know, she was, she wasn't really, she was a very quiet sort of person as I remember and she didn't jump around and go all excited about things, you know, she just calmly studied things and looked at them and selected them, good eye, she had a good eye. But anyhow, oh, yes, when she had gone, I opened the window, it was gabled, and waved to them and they came back to see what had happened you see.

(laughs)

I think you told me once that there was something above your basin, was there, that she went over to see?

This is the extraordinary thing. I must say, this is really quite, when I think of it now. When I, when I had been in Germany I did some dribble things myself actually and I actually got, I was 'Herr Major' after all, and I was very friendly with, or rather acquainted with, the Gunter Wagner, the big artists' materials people in Hannover and they made inks and paints and so on and I got to know the chief chemist there, and I asked him to make me up a pigment, a white pigment, which would, which I could dribble and which would dry reasonably quickly. I mean, obviously, you know, if it was going to be thick it was going to take ages, and he made me up, he mixed me up a kind of what I suppose now would be called an acrylic of some kind. Anyhow, I used this and I did a number of dribble things like this, you see, and when, when it was dry, my, my idea of course was, I wouldn't leave it like that, I would stain over it, or do something, so it was really a, and I would stain over, over this with ink, with oil paint, thin, you know, wash, washes, you see. Now and I had this, there was this wash basin in this, in the studio and I had painted the whole place white, you know, and I wanted to put something behind the sink as a kind of splashboard, and I had this thing and I thought, 'Well, this will do,' you see. It was on card actually, on a kind of thickish card and it, it, for some silly reason it resembled water, this, and I stuck it there you see, as a kind of splashboard, I repeat, this is true. And when she saw it she said, 'That's interesting.' And, of course, I didn't know why at the time. You see, I mean, I didn't know anything about this Pollock people and his dribble thing at all, I mean, this is why she liked it. And I said, 'Oh, you know, I just put it there to keep the place clean.' (laughs) I don't know what, I think I threw it away eventually, it got kind of mucked about with soap and this stuff, you see, washing up stuff. (laughs) But this was it you see, I didn't know that I had been dribbling in Germany in '46 or so. (laughs)

Did she...?

No big deal, I thought it was very amusing to try, but you're not going to spend the rest of your life dribbling, I mean.

So, in fact, what did you exactly show in that New York show?

Well, there was a number of these gouaches on paper, which Charlotte had taken first of all, and then a few of these works, like this one, this black and '49 really. The gouaches were essentially '48.

So there were some canvases were...?

No, no, no. These were gouaches, there was no canvases at all. These were these gouaches on paper, off, which I had done in somewhere like September, October '48 and then some of these works on card, which I had been doing in January, February '49.

Did you feel these, so called, card works were they, were they something distinctive?

Well, they were different, you see, and a different approach and, as I say, they were nearer the kind of thing I might have been doing on oils, in oils on canvas, you see.

Do you feel they had a different texture to them?

Yes. Yes, it was a different approach. They were a different approach. I suppose the other, the earlier things were essentially watercolours really, as opposed to works on, in, in oil on canvas or on card, you see. But, anyhow, they, she showed, she showed, I don't know, maybe a doz...not a great, I can't remember now, I mean, I didn't see the show. But when I went over in '57, I went to see her and asked, 'Where were these,

and what...' and she took me down to her basement and they were there, the remains of them, she didn't sell anything, well, she sold a couple of things I suppose. But there they were, still in the basement, you see, and so I said, 'I may as well take them away.' I didn't see any point in just leaving them there. And I was staying by then at the time with Charlotte's sister in Manhattan, so I took the lot, and got them into a taxi, and took them, and put, took them to Lyn's house. More or less, I don't know, it was rather silly of me I suppose, I should have left them, either left them or taken them over to this other gallery where I was having a show. But anyhow, I left them in Lyn's place, you see, and Lyn later on, she decided in her wisdom to spread them out among the family and gave one to each of the brothers and sisters and nieces and so, (laughs) you know, spread them around, you know. But, interestingly enough, in more recent times, there is a book on Betty Parsons which someone gave me, it came out a couple of years ago, you see, and a lot of the artists whom she'd originally had deserted, left her, in part, because she was really an amateur. She didn't follow up, she didn't press sales or develop clientele or show these things regularly and so on. After a show, she would just put them in the basement, and that was it. She enjoyed knowing artists, or being part of the scene, but she wasn't sufficient of a demon dealer. And many of the artists who had, I didn't know about all this you see, but I had the impression that after my show, after these things, she just stuck them in the basement. There was a basement in the basement of this building, it was, you know, Fifty-seventh Street, I think she was maybe on the fifth floor or something. There was several galleries in the same building of course, at that time. What was the other gall...Shirley? No. Anyhow, there were several galleries around there. I forget the name. But this was it, you see, and I think this was really the thing that...

Was it reviewed that show? Did she send you...?

Well, there was a very brief mention, oh, nothing really elaborate, a kind of couple of mini mentions, I think, one in the 'New Yorker' and one in the, oh, there was a photograph of me in the 'New York Times' or somewhere like that, you see.

I mean, in '49 were you, I mean, what was your kind of, in a sense you were discovering this American thing for the first time, at this time, or even a bit later?

Well, it was later, I mean, I never, the thing was this that, as I say, I, I think by the, by the first, the first occasion that one saw American thing in any quality was in '56 in the Tate I think, the Tate had a big show of the New York School, in '56 I think it was.

I think there was a big exhibition in Paris in around 1950 perhaps you...?

That I wouldn't have seen that probably, no, I don't...

.....Peggy Guggenheim in Venice?

That's another matter. Again, I mean, I was, I didn't see, never got to Venice at that time, but...

Alan Davie...?

Alan Davie did and this is where he saw the Pollocks, I presume.

Were you in contact with Alan Davie during your Paris time?

Well, he came, you see this is it. I had this studio there and my address was known back in Edinburgh and I had a procession of Edinburgh graduates, so whoever had a travelling scholarship would come and knock at my door, usually around lunchtime, or when I was busy, and say something, 'Oh, Charlie gave me your address and I was just wondering if you could help me find a hotel' or something like this, you see, and I would drop everything. And this would be Alan Davie for instance and several others, you know. So Alan came, he was on a travelling scholarship. This must have been about the time that I had this exhibition in the Arc-en-Ciel I remember about that time, I think, he probably saw the show about that. Anyhow, so I had to drop everything and hunt around and find them a hotel. And then take them to a studio party, people like Soulages and Hartung and Atlan would be there, it didn't seem to impress him at all. (laughs) Anyhow, then he came, he went off, he stayed a couple of, I don't know, a few days, a week or so in Paris and then went off down to Italy and to Venice and, and he wrote me back the odd letter of how he was enjoying Par...mm, I think he went on to Switzerland down to...

Did he mention what he saw in Venice at all, or?

Well, yes, he did mention, I think he mentioned this marvellous woman Betty, Peggy Guggenheim, who had bought something and she had this marvellous collection, oh, yes. I remember him mentioning that in a letter. And he had a show. I think he, I don't know how these things happened, you would have to ask Alan, but he settled in Venice for a few weeks, I should think a couple of months maybe, and did some painting and had a show in a gallery there, which was seen by Peggy, who was impressed and bought something and showed, and brought him to her 'Palazzo' where she had a whole collection of Pollocks and other things too.

I think both of you at this time were also doing some monotypes?



I did a whole batch of monotypes about there. Oh, by the way, thank you very much mentioning monotypes! Not mentioning in detail, but I did quite a number of monotypes at the time, oh, this is say about two years ago, a certain gentleman came, wrote to me, and came and collected and bought about five or six monotypes, at very modest prices, which he promptly sold to a gallery in Glasgow, whom you probably know, Bill Hardie, who promptly sold one to the Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, which is hanging beautifully. And not so long ago, I had somebody, I mean some colleague said to me did I have something in the Art Gallery in Perth? I said, 'Not that I know of,' he said, well, he saw something, he can't remember but. So, I wrote to the curator of the Gallery in Perth and he said, 'Yes.' And he sent me a photostat of, of one of these monotypes which he had bought from Bill Hardy, so one way and the other, I am now represented by a monotype in Perth. He sent me a photostat of it, a nice thing, I have it downstairs.

I have only seen...

But I did, I did some about that time, you know.

Are they in black and white?

Oh, always. Nearly always, yes. Pretty well always, yes.

Was that, in a sense, why black and white, because one always associates colour with...?

Well, it was the simplest thing, actually, it is part of the technique that, you know, that you have a piece of the glass or stone and you put ink, and rub it around, and take a print. There

was, this was the principle of the thing in effect, you know, rather like the equivalent of an etching or a lithograph in black and white.

So it would have been, you would have done those in the studio quite easily on a table?

Oh, yes. No problem. Yes, yes, exactly, on a bit of broken glass or something, no problem, and very, you know, you could do a dozen or so in an afternoon and tear one or two up, you know. But as I, as I can, I did some, quite a number at the time in Paris. And then I did some later on in, in England when I was back, you know.

I think there's, there's a story of how you would be, be very careful with remnants of paper, how you would always be re-using and...?

Well, yes, this is true. I mean, actually, this card thing, sometimes I would, I would cut, I mean it would probably wanted a piece, you know, in a certain size, possibly to fit a frame or something, I don't know, and I would cut, cut a chunk off and maybe only four or five or six inches, but I would use these, and why not, I mean, why not? And some of them have been exhibited and sold and commented upon, and why not?

Also, in Paris, you also made contact with this wonderful Jean Pons, the lithographer?

Oh, yes, yes, that's right, he was a eccentric character who, he had a little lithographic studio in a basement, and I met him, and he, he was doing prints, for quite a number of the painters, and he asked me if I would like to come and...

Was he a man in his forties, fifties?

At the time, no, he was probably late thirties at most. He had a wife and a couple of kiddies, he, I remember him saying, 'J'ai trois', 'J'ai trois' meaning three kids. (laughs)

He was a master printer...?

Ach, he, I wouldn't say, he was a, he was a, I wouldn't say, no, he was a bit of a painter come printer, you know, yes, he was, he was, but he wasn't a master printer in terms of Lacouriere or Bourlot or anything like that, he was a, he had this...

.....working on his own?

Yes. Absolutely. He had this, it was very funny actually because he gave me his address, I forget now, it was in the rue des Sevres or some place like that, and I went along to do a print and I saw 123 or whatever it was, and it was a little ladies dress shop. You know, a typical little 'modiste' or something, and I went in and I said, 'Pardon Madame, Je cherche Monsieur Pons?' And she, there was a kind of, a kind of rug on the floor and she swept it aside and lifted a trap door and said 'Jean, Il est quelq'un pour toi' (laughs) And then Pons, 'Vien, Vien' go down the steps into this basement. And there was people like de Staël and Manessier and Lapique doing prints on stone. (laughs) And I said to him, 'This must have been a clandestine printing shop.' 'Yes, that's right, sure.' (laughs) During the War, during the occupation, 'Sure.' (laughs) Anyhow, he...

And he'd give you the space?

Yes, yes, he would do, you did, you did all your drawing on the stone. He produced this lithographic stone for you to work on, and you did your thing and he would do the actual, the

preparation, and the fixing and so on, and take a trial print and show you, and you make some corrections, and so on, and you did, but then and he would produce the edition. And, you know, he asked you what you wanted and you paid so much. It was really very reasonable at the time. I did, certainly, four or five prints with him like that. Also, Stephen Gilbert did some, too.

How did you find lithography, how do you find that as a process working on stone? Was it conducive...?

Well not, not, I wasn't, you know, I wasn't taken to it greatly I must say. I found later on, because first of all, you are working to somebody in a way, you're not really in complete control of what you're doing and it has to be, I mean, it's difficult to muck about and mess around with a, with a, on stone. I mean, later on I discovered, so to speak, silkscreen painting, silkscreen printing and enjoyed it much more because I was very much on my own, I could knock it about and change it, chop it and do what I wanted with it. But the process whereby you're working, so to speak, to a technician, in a difficult medium, it is, it is a difficult medium, lithography, really. In, as I say, that it, you know, is difficult to chop and change you can't, so to speak, rub out. You can, but it's an elaborate process. And, so, I prefer the more immediate thing in a way.

Would you...?

What I can do with screenprinting.

Would you work together with Jean Pons on an image or...?

Not on the image itself. I mean he'd consult you and say, 'Well, could we have this a little darker?' about the colouring or the actual image, you know, he would say, 'Well, could we have this a little sharper?', or, you know, that sort of degree of collaboration. But he wouldn't, he wouldn't say, 'Well, you ought to have done this,' or, 'You must change that,' or something, no, no. No, he worked really as a technician, essentially, you know.

Did they sell these prints? I mean, did you do quite a number?

I did usually editions of twenty-five and they sold a few things here and there, yes, in London, later on, or since then or before then. I think there's some in places like the British Museum even, yes.

You mentioned screenprinting...

Yes.

.....I believe that actually began with a connection with an America artist...?

Well, that's interesting, yes. First of all, there was this American woman painter called Dora Bothwell her name was, whom I met in Paris, and she showed me some of these screenprints that she had been doing, and apparently it was fairly common in the States, screenprinting. And it was much, well, some time later, you know, when I was back in England, in 1952 in fact, I felt like doing some print...printing but, of course, I was living in the country, in fact in small, in a farmhouse in Buckinghamshire but, there came to see me an old friend from Edinburgh days, who had been a commercial artist really...

Was that Sam Wells?

That's right. And he had, he had, he used to do screenprints commercially for a kind of grocer's firm, you know, sort of 'Sale Now On' and so on, this sort of cheap thing, and I remember him doing, watching him doing this you see. And when he came to see me I said, asked him about the screenprinting was it worthwhile trying, and we, on the spot, we more or less made a frame. It is quite a simple, this is the thing about screenprinting, it's very simple. We actually made a little frame with a bit of timber and Charlotte produced some organdie or something, an old dress or whatnot and made a frame, and I had some, some tins of ink of some kind and I actually, we did some, some printing. And, indeed, I did several of them like that, you see.

So was that the first time you did that, rather than in Paris, did Dora Bothwell?

No, I didn't.

.....actually show you the...?

No, no. She mentioned the process, but I didn't even know how it worked until I remembered this guy, you see. Anyhow, this was in '52 and, as far as I know, I was one of the first artists in, in England to do, to do screenprintings more seriously.

And so you found it, it gave you a freedom...?

Oh, yes. Again, you, you could please yourself, I mean there was no, and you know, you play around with it and I did some just using, using torn up paper or dribbling, dribbling, later on. But amusingly enough, the Redfern Gallery at the time, they

used to have an annual exhibition of prints, and I usually exhibited something there, and the then Director, Rex Nan Kivell asked me to bring in some prints. And I remember taking up two or three of the pr...this is already into, oh, 1953 I think it was, and I had been doing some more in, when I went to Littlebourne. And he wasn't sure whether he could exhibit them. I mean he, they, etching, lithography, etcetera were OK, but he wasn't sure that they were legitimate, screenprinting. I mean, well he thought this is, this is purely for commercial, for cinema posters and that sort of thing, you know.

What did you say to that?

I said well, I mean, I'm sure that this is quite, in America they seem to do a lot of this. Anyhow, he showed a couple of these screenprints of mine and (laughs) of course, later on, it became the in thing almost, you see. But the joy of it was that you could do it on the kitchen table, you didn't require massive presses and elaborate inks and stones and all that jazz, you see, you could do it on a kitchen, I made my own little frame and, you know, when you had finished it, you stuck it in a corner, I mean.

And you could do, you know, you didn't need, well, when you were doing a, say an etching, it's a costly business, an etching. You know, but with a screenprinting I could do an edition of ten, or even five, I mean, I didn't need to bother. Or, if you thought this was a good one, I'll do twenty-five. Or you could chop it and change it or knock it about.

You felt, particularly, the screenprinting, it, it fed into your work a bit or you were just using it as another...?

Well, it was a stimulus in a way, you know, the, it, sometimes these things are a relief from the hard grind of large-scale oil painting. I mean, I find this these days in fact, and I have

been doing a lot of small-scale works on paper. And, you know, it's the sort of thing you can do in half an hour and tear up if they are not satisfactory. That I find is something of a, of a relaxation, shall we say. And it's a different approach, and it can, of course, the, the clarity of the colour that you can get on these screenprints are brilliant.

Did you, you were able to transfer your inks that you were painting with to the screenprint?

No, no. You use special screenprinting inks, which by that time I was able to, there were, there were, by this time I found there were shops I could find in High Wycombe I mean, there were places which sold screenprinting inks because there was a lot of commercial inks. I mean they were straightforward commercial inks, because there are screenprinting firms who would do you posters and all that jazz. You know, in any big town you will find a studio for screenprinting. You know, and I would buy inks, no problem. Nowadays it's probably highly specialised inks, but, you know, the basic inks are just the same really.

I think Gimpel showed also some of your screenprints didn't they, in '53, in April '53?

Yes, they probably did. Actually about then, there was this remarkable chap, the Honourable Robert Erskine who established a gallery, for prints, in Cork Street and he specialised in, well, in prints. He got all the artists of the time to do prints, and he even commissioned prints.

St. George's Gallery?

That's right. And...

Did he commission you?



Yes, to do a print. And the thing was, he would, he would pay for the operation or the printing and the paper and all that, and then he would take fifty percent of any sales or whatever, to cover his expenses.

What was the print?

A particular print I did was a kind of, called 'Barriers' or a title like that, I can't remember now. But the sad thing was of course that the business failed, chiefly because of a spot of fraud by his secretary.

Really?

That's right, yes.

Because his contribution was immense.

Oh, indeed.

Linking up with Paris...?

Oh, absolutely. And he, he organised big exhibitions in the Whitechapel Art Gallery for instance, you see.

'The Graven Image'.

That's right. And, but at the end of the day it was very sad that he, he was losing money on the thing, but it was due to fraud on the part of a secretary he had. So that was the end of that story I'm afraid, yes.

Before we perhaps move on from Paris, I think one painter that I have heard you talk about quite a lot is Nicolas de Staël.

Yes.

Could, when, I mean, who is obviously a very influential figure. When did you first encounter him, and how would you like to, in a sense describe his work?

Well, yes. I first, I first saw his work in Paris in, probably in the Salon des Realities Nouvelles, and it wasn't then, it wasn't until after I was settled back in London, or in England, that I saw one or two of his things. There was a particular collector, Artu who bought his.....

**END OF F4741 SIDE A**

## F4741 Side B

And there he was with all these works, and we spent the whole of the afternoon and evening together and we had dinner together and so on. Anyway, but I was very impressed with his work and I thought he was certainly the major figure in, in Paris, in French art, post-war. I mean, I still feel that he was probably the most important, most significant painter of that generation. He was roughly my age, actually, I suppose a year or so either way. Anyhow, the crazy thing was this, that he was already due to have an exhibition in London at the Matthiesen Gallery, this was to take place in 5th February, '52, I think, and so, he said to me that, he asked me, he said, 'Gear, you are familiar with the set up in London, perhaps you can advise me about prices?' And he produced this little, this little sheet of paper where he, he gave the sort of prices that he was proposing for his paintings. And you had this French system of points, you know, 'quinze figures, vingt paysages' and so on, and he would have a painting, say, measuring about twenty by thirty roughly priced at say £150, or something say, about thirty by forty, £220. And at the end of this I said, 'Look, I'm sorry, old boy, it's not you, it's not my problem, but I do feel, I will be honest, I think your prices are a bit high. You know, it is your first show in London, you are not terribly well known there, and I think you ought to cut your prices down.' I mean, so he cut his prices down, whereby a painting say, well, particularly say a painting measuring say twenty, twenty-four, which is a kind of small painting, was probably priced at £50. The very biggest one called 'Les Toits' which is now one of the treasures of the Musée d'Art Moderne in the Pompidou Centre, 'Les Toits' was on the wall there, priced at £250, a thing that was about seven feet by six, something like that, an enormous, beautiful, fantastic thing, one of the treasures of post-war art. That was on the wall at £250 to the gallery, I mean, he would have got possibly £180 for it. And I doubt if he sold more than two

items from the whole show. (laughs) And, anyhow, shortly after that, of course, he was, he was discovered by one or two of the big dealers in Paris and America, and given big contracts, and his fame grew immediately over the two or three years, 'til it killed him, more or less. I mean, fame and glory, money, family problems, disgust with the whole art thing, and his work was going off, and so on, he couldn't take it any more. And he was only, what, in his, hardly forty when he packed it in.

There is a famous quote which, you know, makes me very much think of some of the things that you have already talked about, 'I want my painting, my drawing to be like a tree, like a forest, one moves from a line, from a delicate stroke to a point, to a patch, just as one moves from a twig to a trunk.' I mean, de Staël...

Who, who's saying this?

That's, that's a quote from him.

From de Staël?

Yes, yes, and then he goes on, 'But everything must hold together, everything must be in place.'

Yes.

It's this whole linkage between man and nature...

Yes.

.....and...

Well, this...

.....between the act of painting, and, and...

Yes.

.....what you are seeing...

This was an, a aspect of de Staël's work which is really very vital, important, I mean. You know that his work is kind of chunky slabs of paint, say, in the early '50s. At times you would see these as objects, I mean, they could be pebbles, they could be fruit, or stones, or something, you see, and gradually he, he would as I have been saying earlier, he would say, 'Well, if not, why not?' And so he began to paint still life almost, I mean there are paintings which is not so far removed from the purely Abstract chunky things but, suddenly, they become apples, or pears, or bottles and so on. So there was this tension between the Purist Abstract thing and the almost Figurative element, you know, which was, I don't know, I mean I was never able to see him during that period or talk to him about it. But, obviously, there was this, a tortured thing going on that he didn't know where he was going any more and, of course, I think that the last paintings were really, they, they were inferior in effect to his great period, shall we say. He found himself painting seagulls out of the window and so on, well, they are very bad paintings, I mean. But there was this fascinating torture in a way between, well, as I was saying earlier, you, you paint a, a shape which, which can be a green apple, but purely it's a green form, it's not an apple. But you can't deny it the fact of my saying, 'Well, it's an apple, damn it all, you see.'

And so, why not make it an apple? And this longer form is a bottle and so on. There was this extraordinary thing, there is one in Edinburgh called 'Le Bateau' and it's a, it's a, alright, you can see it as a, as a boat, but if he didn't title 'Le Bateau' you would think, well, it's just a painting, roughly in the shape of a boat. So there is this sort of curious balance going on. Which is the problem of many artists in a way, you know. But I do think de Staël is one of the great figures in, the great tragedy of course of losing him so early, you know, it's like the same story with so many artists, I mean, Pollock the same, Atlan another, there is a score of them just, you know, dying out so young, you know.

.....I mean de Staël. (PRONOUNCED De Steel)

... de Staël, you say de Staël. (PRONOUNCED de Staël)

Yes, yes, de Staël. I mean this whole idea of the polarisation of abstract work and nature, if you like, and what you see presumably this was very much being debated and reassessed, by yourself, for example, that this division, in fact is, doesn't exist. It isn't there. But possibly some of the writers on abstract, on abstract work had pushed, moved to describe a...?

Well, I hope so. You know, it is up to them to be honest about it and look at that, what I am saying, as I say earlier on, the physiological, biological condition of the eye and the brain is cognition, cognition, no matter what, and of course you can interpret things in all different kinds of ways. I mean, I might look at a cloud and say it looks like a bear, you may say it looks like a man with a helmet, or it looks like a child, or it looks like nothing at all. But at least the eye is determined to, to make a form of it, you see. And you cannot deny that, as I say, it is a physiological thing, you can't deny the eye functioning or you are in deep trouble, as I say. You know, the eye is continually aware of

space and danger and footsteps and so on, and everything else. So, that's its function. And you can't put it separately and say, 'Well, now we're just going into a round shape, or a square shape,' or whatever. You are going to see something. Not, that I would say, you have to. But the fact that it is a condition, it's a human condition.

Another quote is, 'That when nature is not the starting point, the picture is inevitably bad.'

Well, this is what, what is nature? You see, this is the other thing. I mean, I say, well, you know, we have just been looking at something under a microscope, something you have never seen before, or, increasingly these days, we are seeing things done on these crazy computers, producing diagrams of extraordinary things, you see, but it is still nature in a way, I mean, you can't say nature is just trees and flowers and clouds and so on, that's not necess...it is only a tiny aspect. But nature goes right down to the sub-atomic nuclei as well as to the pretty roses, you see. So it's a very, very broad term and a lot of nature is abstract, you might say, too. If you like to see it that way. I mean, I remember as a, as a student, I had digs with medical students at times, I used to enjoy looking at their slides, through a microscope, and I might be looking at a case

of an inflamed liver or something, but it was quite beautiful under the microscope. (laughs)

You know, you saw forms there that, you know, they are beautiful in a way. Or I continually see these things. I mean, my eye is now conditioned to seeing

significant form. On the pavement outside my house there's some marvellous forms, a range of texture and shape and colour and tone even and so on. Every time I walk out I see this and I think, 'Well, I must paint that.' But, oh, no, I can take it in, I don't need to paint it, I can see it. I mean the best I could photograph it, but that is plenty. Leave it to the kids to sort out, you know, when they have a bright idea, you know. Or I could put a piece of, a piece of litter, there is usually a piece of litter, bright coloured litter, you know, on the grey, on the grey pavement, there is usually a Walker's crisp thing, or

something, there's always bits there you know. There's that little point of colour, you know, it makes all the difference doesn't it? Never mind.

How did de Staël in a sense, work towards a kind of simplifying, the minimalist kind of phase of his work...?

Yes.

I think he used the palette a lot...

Yes.

....and I wondered did you, you didn't see that work in Paris, that was, you had seen that...?

No, the, no, no. I didn't see anything of his really much until much later. He did show, of course he was taken up by the Tooth Gallery, in London, he showed a number of his things and, of course, we were shattered by his early death. But, you know, of course I saw several massive retrospectives, he did a big one in Paris, I remember now, also one in the Tate. Anyhow, I remember seeing at least a massive retrospective of his work. But I think his, his best period was from the late '40s to, to the '51, '52, and then it began to, I think he had this agonising problems, you know, all kinds, not just in his work, of course.

Of course, once one gets into the, if you like, the arguments around abstraction, I mean, you actually went down to St. Ives for a very brief period on return from Paris?



No, the, the thing, I had this exhibition, or was going to have this exhibition in Gimpels in July '48 and I came across to London, in May, bringing a lot of stuff with me for the exhibition. And I had a loan of a studio and, in London, and then I had a friend, Willy Barns-Graham who was a student with me in Edinburgh, she was already in St. Ives and she had suggested I would like to come down and visit St. Ives. And so I went down there, in June, for a couple of weeks.

'48?

In '48, yes.

What did you think about that, I mean what was going on in St. Ives then?

Well, I, I mean, I met, I met most of the guys who were there at the time, especially Lanyon and Bryan Wynter, John Wells, Willy took me to meet them, so I also met them, you know. But, bear in mind, I was a Parisian now, I was from Paris, and I mean it was pretty small beer to me, I mean, it was a small-time provincial thing. And, you know, they were active and busy enough and I didn't feel they were all that, you know, well, you know.

How would you describe the...?

Well, they were, you know, they were active, busy, painters and I think, I don't think I met Heron at the time actually, but in any case, they were all, still all figurative, first of all, the, you know, they were doing efficient, effective, I think Bryan Wynter was one that I admired most of them, of the lot of them, I can't remember now. But, you know, I didn't want to be involved with that lot. It was a nice...I did a number of

watercolours and a few oils at the time, chiefly in Willy's studio, or, in the case of watercolours, I would go and sit in the garden and do some watercolours, and so on.

Were you, was there the possibility that, if you had liked the place, you might have gone down there?

Well, unlikely. In fact, definitely not. Because later on, I mean, I saw already, and of course I was beginning to hear, you know, even in London, about the kind of, it was very much an artists' colony and there was kind of local rivalries, you never knew who was speaking to who, and there was that kind of complications I didn't want to know. I wouldn't have liked to have been dragged in on that and, so I never had any thoughts of moving there, though much later on, when we settled in England, I mean, it could have happened, but we had to go somewhere and I could have said, 'Well, let's go to St. Ives.' No, no, thank you. I went to Kent instead. (laughs)

In a sense, in St. Ives you had to kind of join in...?

Well, you couldn't avoid it, it's a tiny place and everybody knew everybody and, of course, it's so isolated, too. It's actually very isolated. I mean it was further, put it this way, it was further from London than Paris. I mean, physically further away than Paris, (laughs) you see. I mean you get to Paris quicker than you get to St. Ives by train even. So what the hell are you thinking about? (laughs) Anyhow, I didn't really like the idea of the artists' colony thing and, indeed, in a sense, leaving Paris, it wasn't necessarily the only reason, but it was a factor that Paris was too rich a diet, apart from anything else the other aspects, but if you were seeing exhibitions and seeing other artists all the time, then, you know, you reach a point where you knew what you wanted to do, and you wanted to get on with it, rather than all these distractions and so on. And, of course, it's a traditional thing, many of the great French

artists, they get the hell out of Paris, too. I mean, be it Van Gogh, or Matisse, or whoever, Gauguin or whoever, they got out of it. I mean, they couldn't take it too long, and they were wise to do so. And, you know, this was another thing, I never really wanted to, to be part of an arts colony thing, I mean, no, no. So, anyhow, as I say, we, I was always more or less a loner, even on my own, I never lived in London, for instance, never wanted to live in London. And, as I say, after a couple of years in Buckinghamshire, we then moved to Kent.

Do you think that's something to do with also being a Scots? Somehow that London, well, it certainly, it was never...?

Well, of course now, this is another aspect of things altogether, that I have always maintained that there was in effect an Edinburgh-Paris axis. Most of the Scottish painters, from even an earlier generation, gravitated to Paris, to France. I'm talking about the Scottish colourists, earlier on, say like Peploe, Cadell, Fergusson, Anton, or even Charles Rennie Mackintosh and so on. The, their scene was France or Paris. And, similarly, the next generation people like Gillies, McTaggart, Maxwell and so on, again to Paris. London was skipped by, you know, there was never really any asp...none of them aspired to settle and make a career in London, these guys. There was sufficient of ... support in Scotland, I suppose. Though of course what would happen is that sometimes the, a Scots-directed gallery in London, say Reid and Lefevre would, would contract or buy Peploe for instance, or someone, but there was never any desire, at the time anyhow, to settle and work in London. I certainly never had. I preferred the country, and it was better for me, I mean, there was two young children and much happier to be in the country anyway. We had a nice house in Kent actually, quite a big house, the garden and so on and a beautiful little village.

In the end, as you, you said, it's about being on your own and working...?

Well, I, I, as I say, I was doing things on my own which were quite revolutionary at the time, you know, either in my earlier style, or in a later style, this minimalist thing which is now being applauded, apparently, I mean not necessarily my things, but there's somebody being applauded for it. And I was developing utterly on my own, in a small village in Kent. You know, doing some, doing things that were unheard of anywhere else, and are now being, you know, now being repeated somewhere.

But you know, that was a possibility. But I doubt if you could do this happily in an art colony where people are dropping by every other hour or two, and having to go to the pub every night, and so on, I didn't want to know. I mean, I had, as I say, my, my, bearing in mind, I mean, I had been abroad for years before the War, I was abroad most of the War, I then spent three, three and a half years in Paris, I mean, St. Ives was just, imagine, it was nothing, I mean, it was just nothing to me at the time. And London wasn't all that much actually, either. There was nothing that I could rush up to London to see, particularly. You know, I had one or two colleagues or friends that I knew in London, notably someone like Merlyn Evans, whom I had known since earlier on.

He was in London?

He was in London at that time, I could see him. Or one or two people make a point of meeting me, like people like Roger Hilton, for instance, or Terry Frost, you know.

Because there was very much, still is, a London thing...?

Well, yes...

.....a circle, isn't there?

Obviously, the thing for anybody living in England, in the UK, you would hope, aspire, to be shown or taken up by galleries in London, naturally. And Gimpels was one of the few galleries which had done so.

Talking of, in a sense, a definition set by, if you like, cities and colonies, I have to ask you because I know that you have strong feelings on the Tate Gallery exhibition, 'Paris, Post War Art and Existentialism, 1945-55'.

Oh, yes.

That exhibition that was shown a few years ago.

Yes.

.....which I suppose set out to link this time with art, literature, the philosophy of that time, around Existentialism?

Yes.

Would you like to say something about that, because there were a lot of people that were not shown in that exhibition?

Well, I, I don't know the basis on which it was proposed, formulated and organised, quite honestly, but if the, if the exhibition at the Tate Gallery, which is an art gallery after all, if it was presented as post-war Paris, sub-titled 'Art and Existentialism' but to go there, you find an

exhibition of mainly minor characters, quite honestly, and excluding, I could, and even de Staël we were talking about wasn't even in the show, I mean, you can't talk about post-war Paris and exclude people like de Staël, Poliakoff, Riopelle, Mathieu, I mean I could name a dozen without digging out. But the whole proposal was, again, this French determination to re-establish themselves and, I presume, that...

It was a British curator, in fact that did it, the Tate Gallery.

Very possibly, yes, but how does, this came about obviously in collaboration with the French government or whoever, I mean, you can't just do it that way, and there would be a, a Tate involvement obviously. But, in effect, it came about that it was a, to do, I mean, put it this way, my thinking anyway, the one thing that the French did have post-war, the one thing they say they have, they didn't COBRA, for instance, they had a few painters and, damn it all, they should show them. But they mainly, they're not necessarily French, first of all, this is another aspect, you see. But Existentialism is a French thing, 'n'est pas?' and you, at least that's something we did have, and the show was presented as a great French cultural thing, you see. But if you then are dragging in what I call 'Les amis des Giacometti' or 'Les amis des Jean-Paul Sartre' and, of course, there were a number of artists who were in that, in that set up, and this is what you show. You add a Picasso, simply because you can't, you must have a Picasso, one rather dull Picasso, but then, really, to my mind, a second rate show. There were one or two people who would have been, if you are putting on a show post-war Paris, if you have, say, fifty artists and you could easily have fifty artists, you should have certain people like, say like Dubuffet or...

He was in the show.

That's right, yes, that's right. Or the German, Richier. But some of the others were really small beer, quite honestly. I won't mention names now. But it was a, to my mind, the worst aspect of it to my mind was that you can't now, suddenly, have an exhibition called 'Post-War Paris' because they can say, 'Well, you have already had one' so to speak, well, you haven't really, you see? There was an exhibition a few years previously called, what was it called 'Aftermath' or something like that, which was proper...more properly speaking post-war Paris. But for the Tate...that was not in, that was in the Barbican or some place, but for the Tate to do that, I think was, well, I can see why, but it wasn't, I mean, to the average gallery-goer or to the average person they would have to presume this was what happened in Paris after the War, in the field of painting and sculpture, but it's not by any means the whole story. And they're not going to be able to say, well, it's, it's the literary thing Existentialism with illustrations, when really that's how it came out, came about you see.

So, certainly you don't deny the, the place of Sartre and Camus at the time, but it's this linkage and, with the actual visuals...?

No, but this is to, to try to sort of maintain that, that was the *crème de la crème* sort of thing, I can't think that, you know, the Existentialist thing was necessarily understood. I mean it was important to those who were philosophers or writers or whatever, but to painters, it was not really the only thing. I mean I didn't, I mean I, one knew these names in Paris, but I never read any of this Sartre stuff and I can't remember anybody running all around, talking about Jean-Paul Sartre or Existentialism. It was probably the, I mean, it was probably in retrospect those who decide how the history of philosophy goes, probably certainly decided that was a vital and important contribution. But it probably wasn't the only one. Who the hell knew about what might be happening in Germany, or Austria, or Italy, or Sweden, I mean, you know. But it happened in Paris and it was built up, shall we think, and I regret that this

should happen in this way. And, as I say, a glorious opportunity missed, because it could have been marvellous to have really put on a proper show of post-war Paris. And, what about the COBRA movement for instance, wasn't that something, if they wanted to drag it in, surely, I mean, there is something Existentialist about Appel or... (laughs)

Presumably, it also gives a kind of image, of a kind of separate grouping of people?

Well...

.....that mixed together and exchanged...?

Yes.

.....whereas...

But as I, you got, you got the impression that really was, apart from what I have been saying, you could probably nominate the, the artists who were shown were in fact 'Les Amis des Jean-Paul Sartre' who happened to sit at the Café Flore with them, I mean... (laughs)

That doesn't necessarily make them existentialist...

Well, it doesn't make them great artists either, you see, this is the thing.

(PAUSE)

This is the third session interviewing William Gear in George Road, Edgbaston. Bill, I think, can I ask you, you returned to England in 1950 and you went to live in Buckinghamshire.



Yes, well, I had a friend you, who, in London, who had a cottage in a hamlet in Buckinghamshire, this was halfway between High Wycombe and Princes Risborough and they lent us this cottage, it was a tiny affair. Anyhow, it was some place to go and we established ourselves there. Well, we lived there about six months, during the winter in fact of '50 to '51. It was a very tiny place, and of course we had a baby, it was a year old and my wife was pregnant with another one, and, well we managed, but it was pretty, pretty rough shall we say. Now then, it was about this time that the plans were afoot for this Festival of Britain, and I was invited to, to paint a big picture for the 60 Painters for '51. And the system was that you selected the size of the picture you wanted, and the nature of the canvas, and this was solemnly delivered to me at this cottage, in the middle of nowhere. The canvas was so big and the cottage was so small that I had to strip it down. I had to take it upstairs and re-fix it upstairs in this little room, a kind of bedroom place, and when it was finished I had to undo it and bring it down in the same way. (laughs) And then it was collected by the Arts Council and went into the exhibition and I was awarded a prize in due course.

Before, before we go further with that, obviously you were describing, you had a little studio space upstairs did you in the cottage?

Well, it was the, the cottage was really one down and one up, with a kind of scullery on the edge and an outside loo, there was no bathroom or anything like that, there was no heating, apart from a kind of stove, I mean, there was a kitchen range thing, and you ate on, I can't remember if there was gas or not, I think, I doubt if there was, probably just the electricity and maybe a ring, an electric ring, it was pretty primitive actually. But, anyhow, fortunately, about somewhere like April '51 or maybe March '51, a friend of ours mentioned that there was a place nearby, about a couple of miles away, a farmhouse, which was empty, rather, it was

available shall we say. And we went over to see the landlady, who was in fact a Lady called Ishbel Macdonald who was...

Which village was this?

What?

Which village were you talking about?

Well, this, the, it wasn't really even a village there again this was adjacent to a small village called Speen and she had, she had an Inn, a large pub, but a farm, a whole farm, with a farmhouse. Her husband had died a few months previously, and so this place was available to rent, furnished, and we went to see her, and she took us on, and we rented this farmhouse, which was a beautiful place actually, and quite large even, with plenty of space. But a real working farm, I mean, the cows, sheep and pigs and horses and every damn thing, chickens and so on. It was a real working farm, but we lived there for two years, and very happy. My second son was born in the farmhouse in fact.

So you were able to move from your, your first place was a small, as you described a small cottage...?

Yes.

.....moved into a larger...?

.....this was much better, a better...

Yes.

**END OF F4741 SIDE B**

**F4742 Side A**

The, the other, it was actually, probably, oh, maybe, late seventeenth-century, the building, I mean, it was half-timbered and built of brick and flint and so on, and beams and so on. But, since it had been, Ishbel Macdonald had had this place since the mid-thirties, or even early thirties, and there had come to the place, obviously, during the period of her father's, when her father was Prime Minister and had come lots of the, the Prime Minister himself and cabinet colleagues and so on, for the weekend.

Who are you talking about? Which Prime Minister?

Prime Minister Macdonald, her father, sure. And there was even quite an established library (laughs) and in a kind of cupboard above a, in the kitchen we found a whole lot of the sort of thing that happened to Prime Ministers, like presentation caskets and trophies and things from the Freedom of the City of Leicester or something, you know in a kind of scroll, there was a whole lot of them there, just in a cupboard, you see. But that was all very interesting, you know.

Actually, from Paris, were you very much looking to, to move into the country, to get away from the city?

Well, this, I think this is in a, well, it wasn't planned that way, I mean, these things are forced upon one to some extent. But, put it this way, that many, many artists of this School of Paris even, were, had, had enough of Paris and had emigrated, so to speak, to the country. I mean, or hired the premises out in the country away from Paris and...

Some of your friends?

Yes, indeed. And, but certainly, of course, you know, the greats, like Cezanne, Renoir, Bonnard, Braque, Picasso, they all had, and Matisse, they all had got out of Paris. They may, they may have retained a base to some extent but they needed to get away from the maelstrom which Paris was, I mean. When I was there, I mean, by the time I was leaving, I mean I knew so many people and you were continually going to exhibitions and mesages and meeting people and so on, and so on, and after a while you felt, well, I want to get out of this and do my own thing, I, you, I knew what I wanted to do. Paris was no longer, so to speak, valuable, in that sense. It is to a young artist who likes to see everything that's going on, and make his decisions, and select, and have preferences. But by say the mid-'50s, or 1950 I knew where I was going pretty well. So I was pleased in a sense to get out of it.

Were you also encouraged by the signs of a small group of artists turning towards abstraction in England?

Not really. I mean, the, there were very few, you know, of my ilk, in, in England at all really. Or, I didn't know them shall we say. Because I had been, I had no contacts really with England, I had been there, briefly, in 1948 where I went...

You met Lanyon...?

Oh, yes.

.....and Roger Hilton, did you know him?

Not then, no.

When did you first meet, meet him?

I think it was later when I more, when I settled in London, probably 1950 I should think, I'm not certain now. Of course all these things are a bit hazy. But certainly I went down to, to, St. Ives, I don't know if Lanyon was there, I mean, Hilton was there at the time even, certainly Lanyon. People like Bryan Wynter and John Wells, Willy Barns-Graham, and one or two of that ilk.

It was at Gimpels you must have seen certainly some abstract work coming through, they were giving shows to certain abstract work by British artists? It was slowly emerging?

It was slowly emerging but, I'm not again sure when, well, Lanyon, I think, he was probably beginning to show in Gimpels, but probably a little later, and then later on Hilton, in fact, showed in Gimpels. Gimpel was the main, the main avant garde gallery in London at the time really, I suppose.

I suppose, just asking, some people might find it strange that you came back to an England that was only slowly moving out of it's kind of provincialism?

Well, I, I think this is true. Put it, it's difficult, I mean, the thing is this that we're talking about the immediate post-war period, now then, first of all, it was difficult to go and live abroad. I mean, there was a great limitation on foreign currency for instance. When I went to live in Paris. I had to make all kinds of special arrangements even. You know, pleading that I was an artist and wanted to study in Paris and all that. But you were limited, I can't remember, but you were limited to a certain

amount of money, so there wasn't as much to-ing and fro-ing to Paris as there would be later on, or before the War, you see, first of all. And then there was, there was very few actual exhibitions or galleries, commercial galleries, showing work from Paris or wherever. So there was, or certainly nothing from America either, so that, I suppose, they were a bit cut off, in a sense, maybe some of these artists probably got across to Paris or they, and again there was very few magazines even, there was really rather little evidence of what was going on, as there is now you see.

And, presumably, the Festival of Britain, this commission, was really a kind of chink of light, you know, that was being presented to artists?

Well, in way this was at least a gesture on the part of the government if you like, the Arts Council. They selected about 120 artists, oh, yes, (laughs) and boiled it down to about 60. In the catalogue of the exhibition organised by James Hamilton he lists all the artists who were nominated to start with and then it was boiled down, and so on. The original intention was to be 60 artists for '51, I think, finally, there were 54 only.

And, of that 54, there was probably not more than three that you could say were remotely Abstract, these were Peter Lanyon, possibly Victor Pasmore and myself. This was the kind of general impression of the show. So that when I was awarded a prize there was an uproar in, even in the House of Commons, about this waste of taxpayers' money on this piece of rubbish or something, you know, the usual nonsense.

We are talking of the painting itself, it was called 'Autumn Landscape'...?

Yes, that's right.

.....which, in fact, I couldn't find a reproduction of, but could you describe it?

Well, it was, it's size was seventy by fifty, nearly six feet say, painted in this little cottage that I told you during the autumn, well, it was November, December '50 to '51 and it was a kind, I don't know, a hint of, you could hardly say tree forms but growing biological forms with a kind of general sweep of atmosphere. The colouring was autumnal, there was a hint of falling leaves and so on. All this is what a lay person would see but not me, I mean, I didn't put these damn trees and leaves and bushes in, but there is this equivalence, shall we say, of such things. Anyhow, it was a gr...it was well received by the judges presumably.

Was that one of the largest works you have done to date?

At the time, yes. Because this is the other thing that in those days you couldn't, you couldn't buy, you couldn't have large canvas... (laughs) it, they weren't avail...I mean you couldn't, I mean the things were rationed even. But the Arts Council made a special point that they wanted large paintings and they were going to supply, they supplied the canvases, you see. In my case, I told you, they solemnly brought this canvas from London to my cottage in Buckinghamshire and I presume much the same to any other artists who had specified what they, what they wanted and, they were very good in this. But the thing was that the, they realised that I think it, it was a mistake in some ways, because many of the artists, I think it was defined that the painting had to be a minimum of, say sixty inches by fifty or something like that, you know. But many of these artists were accustomed to doing fairly small still lifes or portraits or something. Really, it was quite beyond them in a way, and the results showed that they weren't working to their natural scale. My work was quite happy in its scale, for one thing, so that it seemed to be successful.

It's interesting that you mentioned scale thinking you, of your smaller work in Paris...?



Yes.

.....a lot of smaller work...

Yes.

.....though you had also already painted on canvas, oil on canvas...

Yes, yes.

.....and then making the transition or do you see it as a natural kind of move to that larger canvas?

Yes, it was at the time. Actually I did, I mean, what I did do, it was probably an idea, I additionally got two more, two more, canvases off my own bat. I mean, I bought two more stretchers the same size, and I got, by this time I was in contact with a, a linen manufacturers in Fife, in Kirkcaldy, and I got some canvas, raw canvas, from them, and primed it myself. But I actually did three paintings on this scale, you know, in a sense to say well I will pick the best of the three for the show. And the one that I did do was on the canvas they had supplied.

So you actually selected from that...?

Yes, I did, I had three, three paintings. I still have certainly one of them, here, now, of the three that I did at the time.

Was that a difficult choice, or how...?

Not really, no. I think the one, it was the final, it was 'the' one, so to speak, of the three. And the other one, well, the other two I think, I think the other two...

What are they called?

What?

What are they called?

I can't remember. I think one was called 'Interior Structure' or something, it was more of a sculpture thing in a way, you know, not another 'Autumn Landscape' anyhow, you know.

And would, did you know where these were going to hang, for example, did you know the site for the painting?

Well I didn't know, but I think the fact is the first, the first exhibition of the works were within the new Burlington Galleries in, in London. That was the first time I saw the exhibition, or, you know. In fact, what happened was, I also had a one-man show at the same time, in Gimpels, this was at the same time, the same month.

And was that the first time that the critics came, and what, what was the...?

Well, the, the, there was a lot of coverage of the shows, and I think the critics hummed and hawed, some of them, you know, appreciated this or said this is great, or, but the, the main public reaction was of course from the letters to the Editor and so on, and even questions in Parliament. And the amusing thing, of course, was that the, the, there was a press release, I

suppose by the Arts Council, and they issued photographs of the works which had been awarded prizes, and these were reproduced in the day's papers and, you know, you could imagine at the time, a tiny little black and white reproduction probably measuring about three inches by two, say, in the Daily Telegraph, and immediately got howls of protest and letters to the Editor and, and the, the (laughs) the exhibition hadn't yet been open! I mean, would you believe it, none of these people had seen the picture. (laughs) And so I was forced to write, forced to write a kind of defence in which I said that, well something like: 'The attacks on my picture 'Autumn Landscape' are somewhat premature since it has not yet been exhibited and, surely, to criticise a six foot painting which is rich in colour and texture from a tiny black and white is surely somewhat presumptuous?' Or words to that effect.

Was the Daily Telegraph leading the attack?

Yes, the reason, for some reason the Daily Telegraph was the main, the main paper of the time, well not the, not, but anyhow the most of the correspondence, and of course there was a number of people defending me, including some...someone like Edith Sitwell writing...

What did she say?

Well, that I was a very intelligent writer and that she felt that justice should be done and so on. She defended me anyhow, Edith Sitwell no less, you see. I mean, I didn't know her. And such people, there was so much interest in the whole thing at the time. It became a kind of national affair. (laughs)

How did it end up in the House of Commons?

Well, the, someone put a question to the Chancellor of Exchequer and how he should, actually, in Hansard you know, and I think I've got a copy of Hansard somewhere, but someone, some MP put a question to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, asking if he was satisfied with the expenditure of public money on a picture which had been described as trash, or words to that effect. And the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who was Hugh Gaitskill it so happened at the time, had to get up and defend the purchase.

More or less saying, well, the judgement had been made by a distinguished international jury and that this particular picture was one - only one - of five, which represented a fair cross-section of Brit... Words to that effect, you see. But it was actually defended, yes. And, meanwhile, there am I in a, in a little, in a farmhouse with my wife expecting a baby, (laughs) and no telephone of course, either. We didn't have a....

And the journalists flocked did they?

The what?

Did, did the journalists flock, and come and...?

Oh, yes. I had odd, oh, yes, I had odd journalist from the Daily Telegraph or even Picture Post even in those days, came to see me.

I mean, was it a useful kind of debate or not really? Was it quite superficial?

Well, it was, it was in the early stages it was really fabulous to me, I mean, there was I, an unknown young painter, receiving national attention. And, of course, it was within the tradition so to speak, I mean I, one knew that virtually any avant garde artist any where, any time, was, this is how you start off, you know, it's still happening today unfortunately. You

know, your work is attacked and that's, that's the first step on the ladder, you see. And, but, of course, after a while it got a bit tedious because it, you would think it had stopped, and then the exhibition was transferred somewhere else and the picture was hung upside down, and immediately you start up again, or, and, of course...

It wasn't illustrated upside down?

It was.

But it was hung upside down...?

It was illustrated upside down in, in one of the catalogues, yes, which I never even saw but...

For a touring exhibition?

Yes, yes. But (laughs) anyhow, as I say, the, of course, the, the exhibition was toured all round, I think even it came to Birmingham at that time, too, in fact.

Presumably the painting wasn't hung upside down?

Oh, no. On one occasion, I believe, yes. But they gradually sorted it out. (laughs) And it went all round the country for, oh, seven or eight months I presume, you know. It was shown in half a dozen different provincial cities, you see.

Presumably your painting...?

And I presume each time that it was shown that the local, the local, well, there weren't any art critics in the provinces, maybe the local, local small-time reporter would report on it and, you know, the usual thing.

Your painting was the one, the 'cause celebre'?

Oh, yes, they would reco...oh, yes, this is the famous 'Autumn Landscape', you know, and give their ideas of it. Anyhow, but, but meanwhile of course, as I say, I had this exhibition in Gimpels and, you know, the crowds came, and there was a lot of, and, indeed, a number of sales accrued from all this publicity because there were people, they said, 'Well, he mustn't be all that bad if he's awarded a prize by distinguished international jury,' and so on, and so on, well, anyhow. But it was useful publicity at the time and...

Were there kind of two camps emerging, certainly, the critics that were supporting young, modern artists, like yourself and...?

Yes, I think this is true, yes, in a way. Though, bearing in mind, that this was really the, the first manifestation of official Arts Council in effect, government, support for, you might call some aspects of Modern Art. You know, this was a big step forward, the, the whole of the Festival of Britain was in fact encouraging the best in art and design of course, too, and indeed in all aspects of British engineering and life and culture and so on, too. So that, you know, it was a good step forward after the War. The whole idea was to regenerate the life of this and the country after the War.

So it was an encouraging kind of time?

It was actually, it was a very, I mean, of course, you know, it, it, they were not, it, it wasn't only in London, I mean they had many, many festivals all over the country although a small scale, I mean it might just be a village fête or something, but, you know, the whole, the whole country was involved in a way, in some small way or other, you know. And in some cases, probably with exhibitions even, art exhibitions of some kind, you know.

I suppose, possibly, you could argue that, that the raising of the arguments were unfortunately not followed through subsequently? Perhaps that always happens that you get the debates go to a certain level and then perhaps...?

I think this does happen. And why not? I mean this is bound to be something else crops up, it may be another, I mean, for instance, I think maybe other things happening in the world, not only in the country. I mean the Korean War was still on as I remember about that time, too, and so on. Or there may have been some massive railway strike or something or, you know, or some crisis in the football world. But, you know, the press is, is always looking for the latest, the latest crisis or story.

And, in hindsight, do you see it as a, a, it was certainly a great help to you, though, I mean, could one also say that it also gave you a label that, that could be, have a negative effect?

Well, I think this is another thing that it sometimes sticks. You see, the, you know...

How do you feel about that?

Well, put it this way, that within a couple of years my work was beginning to change again, and move forward and so on, and then again, and be exhibited, and it was suddenly rather

different from the things I had been doing. And of course the press, the critics even, weren't quite sure, they didn't understand. I think there is one of these, the headline: 'Changing Gear' it said you know, (laughs) as if this were pejorative and, so you know, so that, you know, the, and that particular new thing I was doing was probably so far, so far removed from the image they already had that it was regarded as, I don't know, a massive change and a different approach altogether, you know.

Perhaps I could, here, we could just look at these, I have, these are two illustrations. One is of the, it is entitled 'Gay Landscape' I think it's '52...?

Yes.

.....it's in the Retrospective exhibition, at Gimpels...

Yes, yes.

.....the '61 exhibition...?

Yes.

.....and then there is this illustration of a work two years' later, which...

Yes.

.....is called 'Interior with Sculpture'...?

Yes.



.....in the exhibition 'William Gear and Alan Davie'...

Yes.

.....Edinburgh Festival exhibition. And you, you mentioned this change, I wondered perhaps you could talk us through perhaps with these two illustrations?

Well, this is a bit, a bit sudden, a jump from one to the other...

Yes.

.....but obviously there was a development through to this other piece the 'Interior Sculpture', but...

Could you talk a bit about 'Gay Landscape'?

Well, this is very typical. This is still, the, the kind of thing that I was doing with 'Autumn Landscape'. It was obviously, this was done in the, this, in this farmhouse I mentioned in Buckinghamshire about, what, maybe eighteen months or so after the 'Autumn Landscape' but it's still in effect a landscape, if you like, that is a hint of growing things, of trees and hedgerows and blossom and colour of, of clouds and so on, and a hint of the movement of light and clouds and so on. So it's all, still, in a kind of abstract landscape tradition in a way.

It's got this kind of soft, loose, kind of edge contours to...

Yes.

.....to the work.

Yes. It's more Impressionist, if you would like to use that word and, it was a very happy period. I did a number of things of, in this vein, about the time. This other one, in fact, here, is now, this one is rather similar...

At the bottom?

Yes, here.

.....'Summer Garden', 1951?

Yes, yes, it's about the same sort of approach as you see. But, already, there you see there's a hint of structure, of an armature so to speak, and, but this was something, even here, there is always this, this hidden what I call 'armature' or structure, to hold the thing together which is really, in a sense the, you might call the landscape tradition, that is, there are trees and hedges and poles, and telegraph poles and so on, but there is a kind of vertical structure holding the thing together. Now then, in due course, I presume, it moved towards sculpture, that is, taking the thing a stage further. My works became more and more structural so to speak. And, ending up, well, not ending up, but this is really, this big, this is really quite a big painting in the Hunterian Gallery in Glasgow now.

It is interesting, it is horizontal.

Yes, yes.

Rather than vertical, in this instance.

Yes, in that instance. And, but this is it. I say to people that I was perhaps hankering to do sculpture, many artists do, many painters turn to sculpture at times. And I was, it was in my mind, but what I was more interested in pa...in painting, as such, and colour and texture and so on, the sort of thing, but I end up painting and really this is, in a sense, a design for a sculpture. And, what I would have said was I give it to a young scul...my design, er, and say, 'Knock it up for me.' And say, 'Well, the white will be sheet steel painted white, or you've got orange,' and so on. But I couldn't really be bothered with the ironmongery or the, the carpentry, or doing the thing. And I did a lot of pieces, on and off, this sort of theme, of, of sculpture, generally speaking, sculpture prod...in fact there is one hanging in the Tate Gallery now.

Indeed, it's called 'The Sculptor'.

It's called 'The Sculpture'.

1953. Quite early?

That's right. In about the same, well, it's about the same time as this one is, you see, and...

Very dominant green in it.

Yes, it is, it is a, it is a, so to speak, a painting of a sculptor sculpting, if you see what I mean (laughs) and it's hanging in a rather special little niche of its own in the Tate Gallery at the moment.

I think that, the label in fact comments on the connection with the emerging group of British sculptors at that time. One thinks of Lynn Chadwick, Reg Butler..

Yes.

.....and Kenneth Armitage?

Yes.

Had you met these people, and were you influenced by some of the things they were doing?

Well, the, the one, what's his name? Gimpels certainly showed Lynn Chadwick and I think Kenneth Armitage at one time, too. What's his name, the other guy you mentioned?

Reg Butler.

I never met him, I never knew him at all actually. But I think it was something, it was in the air possibly, and the, the, mm.

Had you heard what was going on in Venice, or obviously it must have, people knew, I mean, they must have been talking about this, this new sculpture work...?

Yes, I think that the, it was in the air, I suppose, it is difficult to point out, but, you know, the, there were a number of younger sculptors, British sculptors, who were, you know, receiving attention shall we say? And...

For example, Herbert Read was a great supporter.

He would probably be. But the Arts Council and the British Council this is the point, too, you see. Though I can't think that I had any, so to speak, influence by any of these people in this, I mean, you may say that someone like Caro, ten years after this, was doing this very thing you see, it's the old story I might come to now and again. (laughs) But this could have been a Caro of, say ten years later, or even more. See what I'm saying to you? Anyhow, a month is passing (laughs) but...

So you were in a sense, sculpture was offering you a kind of source...?

Well...

.....for this structural work?

Well, a new, a new investigation. I mean, again, you can't go on, I could go on doing this for the rest of my life, like a Hitchens and be celebrated and famous for it, but I'm not going to work, do this for thirty or forty years surely, I mean you just get bored.

Did you find it in works like the 'Sculpture' or....?

You see, there's another, there's another thing there, you see, another piece of...

Yes, we'll be going on to...

There's this minimalist thing again, '53 already you see.

Indeed.

Yes.

I just want to ask you. Did, did, with this work, the sculptural work, did you, did you find in it a means to perhaps to discipline, in a sense, what you were doing at the moment, to find a kind of form of working in a, in a disciplined way? That perhaps was moving, you know, obviously moving away from your earlier work. This, this connection with sculpture was a means into that...?

I think this is true. In a way that if you are defining a form, put it this way, this is a design for a sculpture as I was saying, the, the, it's like an engineering design, it has to be pretty accurate or sharp, you know, you can't have a fuzzy line defining a piece of sheet steel. So that it has to be, by definition, something else rather more defined.

Were you actually quite serious that you would have liked some, a form such as this?

Well, look at...

.....to actually be made?

.....this, this picture is actually, I can't remember, I think it's about seventy by about, about six feet by...

'Interior Sculpture', yes, I think it's fifty by seventy?

Well, that's, you call it six feet.

Yes.

Put it this way that if I had done the sculpture it would be bigger than that, even bigger.

Where, where in a (laughs) small room somewhere, you know, this is what I am saying. I mean, at the time, that I would, if I was going to carry that out it would have to be, say, ten or twelve feet or more, there wouldn't be much point to it, but how and where and how long and much would it cost to do that? I have done the painting, it has been bought by an important provincial gallery - enough! Said! (laughs)

But, as I say, it could still happen that the Hunterian Gallery could say, 'Well, look, there's Gear's design, do a sculpture for it.' If they paid for it, paid some kid a, you know, two thousands pounds to do it, with what materials I don't, I don't know, why not? I wouldn't be bothered quite honestly at this time of day anyway.

So this time you must have thought, in a sense, that sculpture and painting were moving quite close together? There was...?

Not really. They are not separate obviously, but, well, any sculptor does paintings and painters do sculpture, or they have that intent now and again. But I don't, I don't separate them all that much, you know. I mean it's all part of the same activity really.

Do you regret, in a sense, not realising some of these ideas in 3-d form?

Not really, you know, it was sufficient and of course the other thing is, I mean, this is one picture, I mean, probab...I probably worked on this particular, it's only one of many of that time which are all over the place. There's another piece of this kind and colour apparently it's in...

**END OF F4742 Side A**



**F4742 Side B**

Well, some areas have to dry or you're, you're deriving something from the other thing that needs to be done here, you know, it's a, as I told you earlier, that working on 'Autumn Landscape' I had maybe three things going and it's useful working this way, I always have done, I have never, I don't just start one picture and finish it in the course of a fortnight or something, I usually have two or three going at the same time. Some, in part, from a technical reason, in that especially in oil painting, the thing is getting, it needs to dry out a bit or it needs to be changed, but the, the obvious thing is, I am doing something here, something is happening with this one which is what this area needs and, you know, this is how it works.

Obviously we haven't got the real thing in front of us...

No.

....but it seems that there are areas which are quite stro...about line and about the drawn line and form as opposed...

Yes.

.....to more blocked in, solid, areas which...

Well, you see, there's a variation going on here, I mean, there's the, as I say, the white, which could be plaster or could be sheet steel painted white and then there's the orange beams, or the yellow beams, and then this little, this white, these black marks which can be rods of steel, and so on. So there's a variation of, of elements in the thing which is, you know, what I would have wanted. But, you know, it would be a very

interesting sculpture as I see it, I should have got Caro to knock it up for me at the time you know, though I didn't know him.

Quite complex in its texture, is that right?

Yes, indeed. This is another thing that, even in the 'Sculptor' in the Tate, there's an elaboration of texture, a variation of texture which, in a sense, is imitating what a sculptor, sculpture would be in a sense...

Building up...

.....building up but, you know, the, the surface is so important in sculpture. It wouldn't be all smoothy, smoothy, but, you know, I would probably in, in many of these paintings I would include some sand, say, in among the paint, to give it a roughness. Imitating, if you like, stone or plaster or whatever.

Were you, I know that really, also at this time you were beginning to work with the palette knife as, as well. This came into...

Well...

.....certainly with your, perhaps your more minimalist work...?

This is not a palette knife so much as a broad scraper.

Oh, it's a scraper?

A scraper. A palette knife is a small thinny little thing, I would never use, but a great, a squeegee or a large, broad scraper, say a four or five inch scraper to, to put the paint on, or to, to... (PAUSE)

How did you begin to use that, that, do you recall at all how that came into your work?

Well, I think the influence there is probably De Staël who was doing this sort of thing.

We are looking at 'Grey and Ochre' which is...

Yes.

.....1953. Quite early then in, as a minimalist, so-called minimalist work?

Yes. This is '53 and...

I also have here 'September Structure' which is...

Yes.

.....1956.

Yes. There was a number between these. There might even be another one of '54. Is there one in there, or, or...?

I'm sure, I'm sure...

Yes.

.....there's a series...

.....there's an even more interesting one which is very like this, this fellow Scully, for instance.

At the moment?

That for instance.

More recently? Yes.

This is '55...

.....called 'Structure, Blue Vertical'.

Yes. But...

Would you like to talk about, in a sense, those two, and...?

(PAUSE) Well...

How do they relate? I am interested in how they relate to the sculptural, if you like, phase?

Well, it's still a sculptural thing in a way isn't it? I mean, this is much more involved obviously. But this, this again, could be made into a sculpture, you know. But, again...

'Structure, Blue Vertical'?

Yes. You know, one could make this quite easily but, the, the thing is this that, as a painting it is much more, much more indistinct shall we say. The colour, the tone, the texture, there's a variation of surface or texture ...it remains a painting, this is the thing, it remains a painting. It remains a scul...a structure, a minimalist sculpture, if you like, but it, as I say, can be enjoyed as a painting. Put it this way, if you made this thing, you know, you can have a, it could be made in chunks of wood or whatever, it would be less interesting to me, put it this way, to make it that, than to paint it this way, you see. And that is one of the best of, of that particular group, of, at that time. But as you see, this was coming on, say, this is one of the earlier ones when I swi...I didn't switch suddenly, but I...

How do you describe that then when people write about this, if you like, this development in your work. How, how do you see it yourself, this development? I mean, the critics, if they said, 'Changing Gear', I mean, this...

Yes, indeed, yes.

.....doesn't get us anywhere. How, how...?

Well, it's a very complicated business obviously. There can come a time when you are doing, doing a particular kind of, kind of work where it, there can happen a revulsion even, almost, that you, (laughs) it gets too easy, so to speak, or you're, you must be self-critical and be prepared to say, 'Alright, I've done this, I'm not going to churn it out,' which some painters can't do, especially if it's successful. And you know, you can take a suggestion even from the working on a canvas, or possibly sometimes from seeing some

fantastic painting somewhere else, it might be an Old Master even. But anyhow, you have to be aware of this possibility and this, this probably happened. Now I think in the case of one or two of these things, it was about the time that I had seen a major exhibition of de Staël and who, you know, really was 'the' most important painter anywhere at the time, I'm talking about '51, '52, '53 or thereabouts. And he was probably sufficient to divert one possibly even into something a bit tougher. And especially in the matter of matiere, matiere. Now then, bear in mind that matiere was expensive, shall we say. (laughs)

You're talking material, paint itself?

Yes, solid chunks of paint, I mean, he, I visited him in his studio in Paris about that time, or earlier, and I mean he, he worked, he had a great big two kilo tins of paint. You know, there was no question of little tubes as I (laughs) as most people in London were having, a little tube of, and being very cautious with, canny with, because paint was rare and expensive. But, anyhow, the very luscious, richness, of his work, probably, you know, was a delight and something of a revelation even, and I think there was a 'kicking off' there at that, from de Staël, I think I have to admit this. Not necessarily copying his things, I mean, they don't resemble it in any way but the sheer enjoyment or the natural evolve, evolution of pigment and matiere and the luscious element. Because this one is not in colour but it's actually grey and orange...ochre, you know, this particular one. But I was able in this was done in Canterbury...when I lived in, we moved actually to, to a, from Buckinghamshire, Buckinghamshire to a village in Kent and this would be...

To Littlebourne....?

Little...Littlebourne. But I, I found in the...

So that was in 1953...?

Yes.

.....so, in a sense, 'Grey and Ochre' that we are looking at, unfortunately in black and white, that was done in Littlebourne?

That's right, yes. Yes. But I, I found in the local hardware store in, in Canterbury, they had these tins of, of oil paint, large tins, it was commercial oil paint, but thick, now then, not just, just household paint, but thick pigment in oil. And of course the, I would buy in several tins of you might call the basic, basics, I mean a thing like an ochre, you can't go far wrong obviously with yellow ochre. And I think the, I remember the big area is in great big slabs of yellow ochre. And much of the rest of it is in white with black trimmings and so on. But, anyhow, this is how this thing came about, I presume, yes.

And the colours have, have changed? I mean, they're, they're simplified but they are also more neutral aren't they?

In that particular...

In that particular...

.....one, yes.

.....and even, even in, in 'Structure: Blue Vertical'. The tonality has changed hasn't it?

Yes, in a way, it's much more sensitive and less brash shall we say, and all the better for it perhaps, that one anyway. This one, as I say, is in a, in a German collection somewhere, it was shown in Frankfurt Art Fair, I think, anyway.

'Structure, Blue Vertical'?

Yes.

Yes. That's quite square isn't it, that...?

It is awfully square, I can't remember off hand, but it's very nearly square, yes.

I think you, talking of matiere, you've mentioned actually in relationship to, to another painting, downstairs, I think 'Sussex Landscape', this very strong use of application of paint...?

Yes.

.....texture, that you're working with...

Yes.

.....that you feel that you were, it was very much your own, you were evolving that approach, I mean, it is a recognisable feature, or it comes perhaps later in the '50s, this, this textural use, very strong gritty kind of...

Well, you see, take this one, for instance, I mean each of these...



'Structure: Blue Vertical', yes

.....each of these pieces has, have literally a different colour, a different tone and different texture. Now then, there are those minimalists who might just square up a canvas, you know, a rectangular feature, or a horizontal feature and just paint, paint one bit a flat grey and the other bit a flat pink or something, you see. But, as I say, that's not enough for me, I need, I need texture, I need tone, I need the thing to, I mean, a painting, which is a different thing from the conceptual idea of purist, minimalist, abstraction, you know, it doesn't really appeal to me, and I've always maintained that this remains a painting, it's not an illustration of a, or a...

Or about...

.....pedagogic insistence of a proportion and so on.

Yes, I think that, that says a lot. I know in '57, a little bit later, there was a very important exhibition at the Redfern: 'Metavisual, Tachiste, Abstract'.

Oh, yes, yes.

And I think you, you showed ten paintings in that exhibition?

Did I? (laughs)

I haven't got the catalogue as far as I know. (laughs)

Perhaps I can quote? Because it seems Dennis Sutton wrote the preface to that and I wondered what you might comment to his preface to that exhibition? Saying, this is what he said: 'What is the meaning of such painting, or is it, is there none? Is it that or hedonism or the dance macabre, action painting, vivid, dazzling, amusing, teasing, even, possesses one single and irresistible quality, that of life enhancement.' Do you recall that?

I don't actually but I would agree with him to a certain extent obviously and, of course, it, in a way, it, it's the kind of attribute you might give to the COBRA artists who were quite unknown of course in this context, you see. But life enhancement, liberty, freedom of expression, gaiety, joy, all these, all these other things. And it's nice of him to recognise that possibility. (laugh) What's, what's the photograph there?

That's actually, we're going to, that's of our painting at Birmingham.

Oh, I see, yes, yes, sorry, yes.

I mean that term, the word, 'Tachiste', do you like that?

Well, it was a, it was a French term, I mean, over the decades there's scores of little labels turn up. There was one 'Nu-agist'. Have you ever heard of the 'Les Nuagistes'? Have you ever heard of 'Les Musicalists'? I mean, I remember visiting a salon of 'Musicalists', I met the President of the 'Société...'

Where?

In Paris. I mean, there were 'Tachistes' and so on. But it, it was a term...

You're not too impressed by these...?

Well, no, I'm not all that impressed by these, often enough, these labels are dug out by some aspiring young, young art critic who hopes that the name will stick. Rather like someone, someone stuck the word 'Impressionists' or 'Impressionism' or 'Cubism' or something, 'Futurism' or something, but I was never very impressed by this, yet another, label.

And 'Metavisual'?

'Metavisual' what on earth does that mean? What does that mean? I ask you. I don't think it has even been used since this exhibition. (laughs) 'Metavisual', I say...

At the same time there was, I think you have mentioned briefly, the Pollock exhibition in London, I think it was '58.

Not Pollock, but the New York School or whatever it was called, I think, in the Tate was it?

Yes. I wonder, as someone who was there at the time, what, how do you recall the effect of that exhibition. Was it exciting?

Well, the, the main, the main impression of course was scale, as I said earlier, very few British artists could hope to work on that scale, certainly at the time it was being done. Because we were witnessing the works that had been done in New York, especially in the late '40s and early '50s, it wasn't, you know, up-to-date, so to speak. But we had, we had not the possibility except, as I say, the one off Festival of Britain thing. But

scale was most impressive and I think I could have been guarded enough to say, well, I knew what was happening in Paris, there were equivalent people in Paris doing similar things and not getting necessarily the same degree of applause. But I think this was, that was the main impression I had, the sheer scale of everything. But often enough, if you boil it down, you know you try, I could obviously boil it down, what, what would it look like on a scale.

(laughs) Or put it this way, if you take slides of all these things and project them in the same, in the same size on a screen, you know, how do they come out? But, of course, I think I was...

You are being quite critical.

Well, I, I am trying to be. Because I think another thing was that, as can happen frequently in that field, the amount of hyperbole as opposed to hype that went on, or the, the massive support by, of course this was the marvellous thing in the States that, there were literally hundreds of public galleries and universities and private collectors and institutions and so on who bought that kind of thing and they had the support, they had the patronage, first of all, of which one was very envious in this country.

You saw that? You went to New York in...

Later on, yes...

.....in '57?

.....for the first time.

That was your first visit?

Yes.

And how did that visit go? Were you impressed by what you saw?

Well, I didn't see a great deal quite honestly, I mean, I suppose the main, the main museums, one or two private views in the, I think I, no, that was a little later on, I didn't really see a great deal.

.....because already American Abstract Expression had been going for some time.

I met of course at the time, I met, what's his name? Robert Motherwell, and Helen Frankentahler and what's...Yves...Fred Kline, Kline, Kline?

Kline, yes.

Not Fred Kline.

Franz Kline.

Franz Kline. And one or two others of that, that ilk, you know.

Did you exchange with them, or did they...?

Well, I just chatted with them, you know, I suppose. I was at a kind of dinner with, a rather precious dinner with Robert Motherwell and Helen Frankentahler at the house of a patron

called Alan Emil who had, he had several of my paintings, he was a collector in, in New York, you know.

So your work was, was selling in America?

I had sold quite a few things in the States, through Gimpels originally, you know, and to Canada and such places, but...

Did you feel the relationship was uneven though, if you like, between the American boys and...?

Well, I, I you see, I, I always held, held Americans at bay, I don't know why, but that's, I was, I was already a European, steeped in Europe, I mean I had lived and worked in Paris, or lived and worked in Germany, I was, I had been associated with the COBRA people and so on. Now, as events have turned out, I now feel that I was right. Because I now know that the evidence is that the COBRA and associated groups in Europe at the time were very much more important, retrospectively, than were the Americans at the time.

Because you have never, in a sense, acknowledged much of the influence of America?

No. Not at all. Now then, who, who does Pollock influence, now, I ask you? Do you know any local Pollock, Pollocks?

Because I suppose Alan Davie for example, at that brief period in Venice...?

....of the brief, of a brief aspect, very brief aspect of Pollock. But the dribble thing was, you know, just lost, it never happened, you know.

And de Kooning, or any individually...?

Well, again, again, I mean who is, who do you see these days of the de Kooning thing? That is not necessarily a European thing, a COBRA thing even, you see. But so that, you know, it, I think I was right to keep the thing at bay, or, I mean, having known Soulages 'und so weiter', and comparing it with Kline, I mean, well, the, you can't say one, one is better than the other, but at least things like that were happening. Oblivious. This is the point, oblivious of what might be happening over there.

Did you come in contact with Rothko at all?

No.

Because he also came to St. Ives didn't he, he made a few visits?

I believe so, but I never met him. Well, this is the other aspect, I presume that, I don't know, I think William Scott or someone went over to the States early on, and Rothko came to Europe. I know that he came to Paris probably, too, at the same time, and visited St. Ives which was the, the active corner shall we say, where there was most of the, the interesting artists, with an American slant, including Lanyon, for instance.

Especially Lanyon even, whom, with who he would have liked to have made contact at the time.

Yes. (PAUSE) Well, perhaps we, we can, that one at this time also mention that, well in '58 in fact, you, you took up a post as curator?

Yes.

... at the Towner Art Gallery in Eastbourne. Why did you take up the post?

Well, it was simply that, put it this way that I had a wife and two children, I had been living as a painter all that time, since I left the army, and I'm talking, this is about '58, my work wasn't selling enough. I mean there were the odd ticking over, but I was having to work as a, as a ancillary postman, my wife was doing a bit of market research. We sold the car, any jewellery she had, all our books and records, etcetera and we were broke. I mean is that good enough expla...do you starve with a wife and children in Kent, or do you take a job? Well, I took this job, which, initially, was a very good job. I enjoyed it. And, the other thing was that the children were at the time, what, eight or, I forget now, well, David would be about eight and a bit and Robert six and a bit, and they had been at the local private, primary school, a village school, and it was a nice time for them, but it was time to move to a bigger town and Eastbourne was the right town. So everything went like that. I would, very nice quarters in, we sold, we had been buying this house on, on a mortgage which we couldn't meet any more.

This was a house in Eastbourne?

In Eas...no, no, in Littlebourne, yes.

You bought a house in...?



We bought a house in Littlebourne, yes, because we had to get out of Speen farm when it was sold up. But, well, there were simply pressures, but at least I had been painting and making some, and there were very few in the UK who were trying it even or doing it.

Littlebourne was much bigger it offered more space for you?

Well, Littlebourne was a village...

But I'm thinking of your house, sorry, in Littlebourne the house that you bought there.

Oh, yes. Well it was...

No you haven't described that...?

No, it was a nice big, biggish village house actually, it had several rooms and there was a big garage which I used as a studio, and a garden and so on. It was a very attractive Kentish village and, you know, it was the heart of the fruit growing. There was all around was orchards of apple and pear and cherry and hops and oast houses, had a stream running through the village, swans and so on. It was ideal in many ways.

Was it an old house that you lived in?

Well, I think early Victorian, probably, or mid-Victorian roughly, I don't know. It was called 'The Old Brewery House' so, I presume, there had been a brewery probably, you know, in olden times anyway.

So you got more space to paint in?

Yes. That side of it was OK, yes, yes. And I did a lot of work there but...

But the selling was difficult?

Well, I, as we were saying earlier, my work had changed and some of it was even more severe of the thing that you are looking at, I mean, it was... (PAUSE) Is that the...?

Indeed, no I think somebody outside. Yes, well.

Is it somebody whistling?

Yes.

I thought it was the...

No, I think it's somebody outside, in fact. In fact, here we have got 'Red Sculpture' that's '58, and 'Autumn Element' that's '56.

Yes.

Are you saying that in a sense, this, this minimalist work was, was difficult for a lot of people...

Yes.

.....the collectors, the buyers to accept?

Yes, yes. I can't remember selling any of that sort of thing at the time, quite honestly. I mean, I had the odd exhibition...

At Gimpels?

.....in Gimpels, with very little return if anything. And Gimpels were good in a way, they would buy the odd thing from me and help. But they couldn't go on doing this indefinitely.

So you stayed at Littlebourne just two, what two years or three...?

Oh, no, it was five...

Five years?

Five years, yes, fully five years in Littlebourne, yes.

So it must have been a difficult decision for you, well, like anything, to take on a full time job at Eastbourne?

Well, this is the, the, I mean, actually, I had, I had a friend who, who knew the set up and I applied for the job, I went on interview and was accepted. But the thing was, this gallery in Eastbourne, it was in a manor house with stacks of room and space. We actually lived in the manor house, and we even had a spare flat which we could rent out. You know, I had a work, I had a separate studio and a workshop. It was a beautiful place, gardens and trees, in the old town beside the Parish churchyard and so on. The children went to school and we, you know, it was a good life except that I tried to acquire works, modern paintings, and there was

immediately a battle royal with the local town council and the odd press. But, you know, it was a battle and I got a bit fed up with it you know. Really rather pointless. Having gone through all this already several times, you know. I do not want to know. But imagine having to defend

the works of Sir Matth...the late Sir Matthew Smith. I mean, when you have to sort of, and find a painting which you had recommended and arranged for a V&A grant or got a ten percent discount, a major Matthew Smith and having it turned down, you know. You began to say, well what's the bloody point of it all, I mean, it's ridiculous.

Have you got any advice for erstwhile curators...

Well...

.....pushing and supporting Modern Art?

Well, I know it still goes on. You cannot win. You cannot win, except to shame these people, or, the other thing is, it's difficult to shame them, but if you can show that the painting they turned down for three hundred pounds is now worth thirty-five thousand, 'Oh, that's interesting,' you know, but you don't get any sense of shame, or, point out that you wished you didn't, you didn't buy on the advice of your professional at the time, you don't have, you can say this to your gallery, or to the Barber or wherever, now you don't have the money to buy that thing, you had then, but you rejected the possibility. But you don't, I mean it's not worth the bother, it's not worth bothering about. I think the only answer is: get on with the job, or say, well, I just sold a painting, I just. By the way, this is interesting, I just heard yesterday evening, six o'clock, Redfern phoned me up, it sold two major paintings in New York, two major

COBRA paintings, two, in a New York gallery. Well, I mean, these were on show in the Redfern Gallery two years ago, but, you know, they weren't sold. They have been sold in America. Well, I'm only too happy that means some dollars coming this way to me, especially. But this is what happens you see.

I mean when you went to Eastbourne in '58, I mean, the climate then must have been very difficult because I believe you, you began to buy, I mean you actually bought a lot of British Abstract painting, you began to make...?

Well...

.....push the gallery?

.....they weren't necessarily abstract either though anything that wasn't Russell Flint in design was abstract to them, it was even Communist mind you to so some of them.

You were taking on a battle weren't you?

I was taking on a battle, but what's it, you know, I won the battle, I was a casualty if you like, but I won the battle. I was wounded, but I won the battle.

Did it help being an artist yourself in this dual role as a curator?

Well, I tried to keep it separate because, you know, I say I had a studio, I worked very well, I did a lot of very good paintings at the time, too, and exhibited in Gimpels and wherever at the same time. I mean, I actually worked very well there.

So how did you organise your time?

Well, as I say, everything was on the premises you see, there was a certain amount of corres...I had a secretary, and there was a certain amount of correspondence to do and a certain amount of, oh, and of course you were preparing an exhibition or hanging an exhibition or receiving a, you were busy for a couple of days or so, but much of the, the day time, the normal time, much of this time was my own. I was on the premises, I could work on the premises. If there was a problem, you know, I was on the phone even, so I could work, quite happily and in a funny kind of, and I had a lot of supporters too, the press were very good and then the local artists were all very good, you know, in my support, I didn't really need. But you know, the thing was at the end of the day, to have to be hauled up in front of the Town Clerk, who was a very formidable chap actually, he was the Town Clerk of Eastbourne at the time, to be hauled up, on the carpet virtually, because my wife had, at the end of a Committee meeting, when we were at the stage of tea and scones, had come in to the committee room, which was my main room, and just said 'hello' and, you know, just, anyhow, this woman, this Chairman, had complained to the Town Clerk that the curator's wife had looked in on a, and when I tried to say, well, I thought that it was a civilized thing to do for the Committee to meet the wife, the curator's wife. But, anyhow, a few instances like that you see, what am I doing living with such people? Or I would... END OF F4742 SIDE B

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Well, I mean, you know, I would come out in a rash on my, my arms and I would go to my doctor, who was obviously a friend of ours, and he would say, 'Oh, it seems as if the Committee is getting under your skin, Bill.' And this was what they would call a psychosomatic illness. Another, later on, I got the most frightful pains in my innards somewhere, I go to him, he sent me to, to the local hospital and I had Bismuth tests and so on and I was turned upside down with a view to checking whether or not this was a tumour or something, and it was a false thing as a result of the pressures and so on. Well, where do you go from there? At the end of the day it's not worth it you see. So...

But you touched, also strangely you, you were ...this was a good period for you...

Yes, I did a lot of...

.....as regards your work...

.....paintings at the time, including the one which is in the Art Gallery.

Indeed.

(laughs)

Which I would like to talk about in a moment.

Yes.

But you must have been very disa...you were very disciplined with your time? I mean, you are able to do this aren't you, you can do various things during your day, but you're very strict and disciplined with how you conduct your time. Is that right?

In a sense, I suppose, but you know it didn't worry me particularly, I just did things as time was available, you know, I, I would do my duty, shall we say, as a curator. I would probably do more than my duty in a sense. I mean, I could have just dropped the whole thing and just carried on, not bothering shall we say. Not bothering to get yet another Matthew Smith or an Edward Burra. Imagine getting an Edward Burra for three hundred quid...

Did you have to raise the money in those days, or...?

Well, there was, there was a, a basic, I think the budget for acquisitions was £350, annually, you see. However, I managed to buy one or two things using the V&A system whereby they would grant to, I think at the time it was a third of the value, and then, or, actually, appealing to the commercial gallery in London that I was buying for a public gallery and they would knock it down. Anyhow, I got several things of interest. And, about this time, the Gulbenkian Foundation had a, a policy, or they introduced a policy where they would grant well-meaning public galleries a sum...sums of money on the condition that they raised an equivalent sum of money. So, they awarded the Towner Gallery a thousand pounds providing that Eastbourne could raise a further thousand pounds. Now then, I put this to the Town Clerk and they went through the Committee, I think they were prepared to raise five hundred, that is 'give' from the, the, the City's funds but we had, we had to appeal, we had to have an appeal to raise the rest. And I virtually had to do the appeal, I mean, you know, writing around and applying here and writing so on, and we even had a kind of to, 'pour encourager les autres', we had a kind of display at the entrance listing anybody who contributed more than ten bob! (laughs) I'm not joking! I had a very charming old boy



who did formal writing, you see, and he would write the name, (laughs) and one way and the other we scratched and we scraped and we saw, and we finally got the money. But of course...

Was this a contemporary fund, or...?

Yes, indeed. It was to encourage contemporary art.

So what did you buy with that?

Well, anyhow. So, this is the thing that with that money which, most of which had been, you know, given by the Gulbenkian or raised by me, I was able to apply that money, and even then, get further funds from the V&A. Put it this way, that I think I bought an Edward Burra, now then, the other thing is this that the original policy of the Gallery, way back, had been to acquire pictures by Sussex artists or, but originally was pictures of Sussex, and it became pictures by Sussex artists, but they didn't have Edward Burra, Ivon Hitchens, Edward Wadsworth 'und so weiter' who had actually, I mean, the top, some of the top British artists living in Sussex, but they didn't have any you see. Oh, no, no. I thought we must get an Edward Burra and an Ivon Hitchens and an Edward Wadsworth and I went to London and, well, over the months, and I got an Edward Burra. I got a sparkling, major piece by the way, a really tremendous thing of his who lived in Rye of course, and was still alive and working in Rye. But I got this in the Lefevre Gallery, the price was, I think it was £350, I applied to the V&A who gave me two hundred or something, and I got it. But in effect, it cost Eastbourne the equivalent of about fifty quid or something, you see. I mean, their proportion of what they had contributed. The same applied to a very beautiful Edward Wadsworth which I got in the Redfern Gallery, the same sort of story you see. And,

then, I got other things like this, I got a marvellous, Ceri Richards, for instance, Merlyn Evans, Bryan Wynter, Roger Hilton 'und so wei...', you see, I mean, but then what happened was the Gulbenkian said, well, 'You have done so well,' or they sent down Philip James to see what I had got and I put on a show and Philip said, reports back, 'You have done so well, here's another five hundred provided you can...' (laughs) So I had to scratch round yet again and I got, again, more money but the net result was that I formed a very good collection for very little money and which is still there, and I got a Bill Hayter. Oh, and I went to Paris and I bought a, I also bought a lot of prints either from St. George's Gallery or from Bill Hayter in Paris, and so on. And then, so we built up a very good collection.

Would you even encourage artists, say for a short time, to, to possibly take up the curator role?

Well, the, no, the other thing is this, the funny thing is this actually, I never quite detected this, but, there were those in London who more or less said, 'Well, Gear's taken this job as a curator, he has given up, I mean, he's given up.' I didn't know what they meant, I mean, I had, I had been forced to take a job to earn a living and keep a family, there were others who would take a teaching job, that seemed to be alright, but to be a curator, they seemed to think, well, that's the end of the world, he's given up. But, on the contrary, I was really very busy and working and so on. But you know this applied, I think they probably thought, 'Well, curator of a gallery, well, that's the end of the world, but teaching, that's not too bad.' It's a funny idea wasn't it, you know? (laughs)

Absolutely, I mean, was Gimpels, I mean did you fear, did you encounter a slight hesitation from...

Well...

.....them on you doing this?

On the contrary, they knew the situation, they were very encouraging, but they couldn't, they, I mean, they helped a bit, they would buy the odd painting or sell the odd painting but they couldn't, they couldn't keep us indefinitely. I mean they had to turn over, too, after all and...

But it was the gossip, the art gossip that was...

Yes, yes, I suppose, I mean, not that I was aware, but I got this impression, you know that, I had given up, I mean, I just collapsed - it wasn't the case at all. (laughs) As you can see!  
But...

You mentioned prints. I think I did read somewhere that you actually set up a print room at the Gallery...

That's right.

.....with printing facilities and you printed there yourself?

Yes, yes.

Could you describe that a bit?

Screen, screenprinting, yes. Well, this is another thing that I, I thought, well, the Gallery had posters round the town for its exhibitions, you see, normal kind of posters, you see, which were pretty banal things and I thought, naïvely enough, I will do posters and so I had, I had in a separate little room downstairs I got my, I had a kind of technician framer chap to make a screenprinting frame, and I got some screenprinting colours and I actually did posters for the shows which were criticised, (laughs) they were too abstract. I mean, how you can do an abstract poster I don't know. You know 'Exhibition now on, Modern paintings at the Towner Art Gallery in the hours...' and so on, but I probably did a dribble thing, well, anyway. So I did one or two of these and I said well, look, so thereafter I found a, I found a screenprinting outfit, a commercial, in the town, and I got them to do it, thank you very much. But I did a number of prints of my own for myself, using the same thing.

In that...?

Yes.

In that print room space?

Yes.

Have you got some of those posters?

Yes.

And obviously the prints from that period?

Not the posters, but the prints, sure, they're my own prints that I did then, yes.

You mentioned Hayter, when did you first meet Stanley William Hayter?

Well, I knew, Bill, I knew, bear in mind he had been in Paris running this Atelier 17 before the War, through which had come virtually all the Ecole de Paris, I mean just everybody had done prints with Bill Hayter. Then he went to America.

You missed him then during...?

I didn't know him before the War, no. He went to America during the War, he came back to Paris in 1950, I think, anyhow, and I met him there and came to see me in my studio and so on. And I saw him quite frequently at the time in, around, in that period, you see.

Just before you left Paris?

Just before I left Paris yes, yes. But...

Did you go, did you make use of Atelier 17?

No, no, I never did, no.

How do you?

He, he took a little time, as I said. I don't know when he really got the thing going again, maybe, probably, into, I don't know, summer of 1950. I don't know, but probably about then I should think. But then I saw him again, I went, yes, I went once

or twice in Paris, but I went particularly to Paris, in '59 or '60 or thereabouts, to buy prints and buy a print, no, an oil painting by him, it was a very nice painting.

Because his, his painting isn't that well known.

No, it's true, it's very true, yes. He was essentially a printmaker and put all his energies and his time into that, but he did paint, too, and I got a very nice one for the Towner Art Gallery. And I didn't see him after that, except, I think the last occasion, I didn't see him, but the last occasion when I had a show in Paris in '87, '88, '88, he rang me from his room, from his house, his home. Now then, he was already, (laughs) he was already eighties, eighty-eight himself, I think he was born in 1900, or maybe he was '87 or something like that, anyhow. And he rang me from, I was in the gallery, he rang me from home to say that he regretted he wouldn't be able to come to the, to the vernissage that evening, that he was a bit tired after his day at the studio, I mean, he was still teaching, (laughs) still running this place. Oh, yes, and of course, and it was only a year or two before that, that I was told that he was still playing tennis, you know, he was a remarkable chap.

A great tennis player.

Yes.

Do, do you want to kind of pick out anything in particular that drew you together or kind of...?

Well, I don't know, he was sympathetic to the kind of thing I was doing, and he was, so to speak, British, and there was a certain camaraderie, I suppose between, between us and then, of course, oh, much later, oh, of course, when, when I was in Eastbourne there was this young woman, Jennifer Dickson, who was teaching, she had just more or less graduated in the, one of the coll...one of the cen...one of the colleges in central London, I'm not sure, Goldsmiths' or one of these, and got a job teaching at the local art school in Birmingham, in Eastbourne and we had, as I say, we had a spare flat, I mean there was acres of room, and a spare flat with its own bathroom and everything which we rented to her at a very modest rent, you see, and she was interested in printmaking and, I don't know how it came about but I suggested possibly to her that she might like to go and study with Bill Hayter. And I more or less, I wrote to Bill and said she was a very bright girl and pretty girl and what not, and so on, and Bill accepted, he, he was already, this must have been about, say, 1960 or thereabouts, yes. You know, he, he already had a full gather of young painters and especially Americans and so on studying with him, but he took her on and she did great stuff from there, you see, really made, and she lived, I think she lived in Paris for certainly, oh, maybe two years even, I'm not sure, but certainly for a considerable time, and then came back to England in due course, and then I think she taught at Brighton for a while and then she got married, and so on, and emigrated to Canada.

But you yourself were never, didn't want to kind of work with intaglio or...?

No, well not really, it could have happened but I didn't really want to as I say, the thing about screenprinting is that it is a one-man show, you don't need massive print, elaborate presses and acids and baths and all the rest, you know, with a, I mean,

I had done screenprinting in my little, in my farmhouse, making a little frame and a little bit of organdie and a couple of tubes of, a couple pots of paint, it was no problem, and you could put it in a corner. You could do it on the kitchen table so to speak. But with lithography or etching you really need quite an elaborate set up, which I didn't want, or couldn't afford, or wouldn't be bothered with and, of course, I was never really within striking distance, in those days, of the kind of thing that exists nowadays, the kind of print workshops, they're all over the place now, even in Birmingham. But, you know, that sort of thing wasn't readily available, perhaps in London but not in Littlebourne or Eastbourne even, or wherever. So as I say the, my main, any printing I was doing was screenprinting which is no problem.

I know a lot, a number of your prints have been shown with the Redfern.

Yes.

When did you, just, when did you first make contact with the Redfern in fact and Rex Nan Kivell.

Well, they, they had, the Redfern at the time they had frequent, well annually certainly, an exhibition of prints, and fairly frequent mixed shows, where they would invite any of the local bright chaps, like this 'Metavisual, Tachiste' thing, they would invite anybody of interest around for one or two. Or they had this print exhibition and I would be invited to show.

What that your first encounter? Do you remember when you first kind of made contact with the Redfern?



Well, we're talking about 1952 which is pretty early. And I remember taking up two or three of these screenprints that I had done, either in Buckinghamshire or in Littlebourne, but Rex Nan Kivell wasn't sure that it was, that screenprints were eligible as prints, in a print exhibition I mean, he thought, this is, well, screenprints are really for posters and cinema advertisements and this sort of thing, he wasn't quite sure if it was legitimate.

There wasn't enough hand-craft kind of element?

Well, this is what, anyhow, he did show a couple of my screenprints at the time and I think he even sold one or two. (laughs) But at first I, I must have been one of the first of the what you might call 'true blue' artists who did any screenprints in the UK. You know, I'm not sure, how can I say, but I think I was probably one of the first to use the idea. Chiefly, as I say because it was a one-man thing you could do it on a kitchen table and you didn't need all this elaborate equipment, and I did some in this farmhouse to start with.

Would you use the screenprint to, to, if you like, try out any of your ideas?

No, not really, because it's a technique all of its own and you are using a different material, different methods, for instance, the first ones I did I were, I was making a, a kind of design with torn paper or a cut paper or something, I mean, it's a different thing from painting altogether. And you can experiment, you can play around, I dribbled some tusche on the thing and let it dry, you can do that. You know, you can play around with it, this is the other thing that I, of course, in more recent times, I did some screenprints in Edinburgh with an assistant, or rather with a technician, and it was a disaster.

When was that?

Oh, about three years ago I should think. And it really was a disaster because I, I you know, they had the most elaborate modern equipment, great things - vacuum presses and all this jazz, I mean, and of course, you know, I couldn't just chop it and change it, you know, somehow or other it's inhibiting it really is inhibiting when you have a technician beside you, looking at this, you know. (laughs) 'It's not how I would do it.' So it was a disaster, really, I must admit. But, no I haven't done any since then actually.

Does that imply that in your painting you are doing a lot of, you uses the phrase 'chopping and changing' as well, or, I mean, your paintings seem very finalised obviously when they are completed, but how much...

Yes.

.....do you explore...?

Well...

.....during the making of it?

.....this, this happens you see in painting in oils, you know, the, your aim is perfection of a kind, perfection doesn't mean a kind of immaculate finish necessarily but it has to be right for your eye, and balance and texture and all the rest of it, a hundred and one things. And this is, this is my problem in recent times really, in a way, that I got to be so critical and so fastidious that you, you know, you come to a full stop virtually, you say, well, the thing becomes dead, dull and uninspired so this is why in the last year or so I have been doing mainly works on paper, oils on a smaller scale with an oil

stick and coloured inks, where I can plan and, where I can plot and plan and play and initiate and chop and change, and mess about and tear it up if I want to. But...

So, you're describing a kind of time when you felt you were being over critical to yourself?

Well, I think this, this happens, you know. Now then, it has happened in earlier years, when you reach that point you have a revulsion in a sense, this is the only way to describe it, to revolt and rebel, get out...do something else, you know, in order to refresh yourself sometimes, you know, and when I restart painting in oils it will probably be cert...certainly different in some ways from what I was previously doing. It has to, this has to happen. In part, as I was saying, with this thing here, in part it can be a chop, a change of technique, a change of material, or a change of brushes or a way of doing things, I mean, just, just to, get out of a pattern which has become stale you know.

Am I right in saying, we are now kind of thinking of the 1960, early 1960s period, that you, at that time you were not for example doing gouaches, that you were concentrating on oil on canvases at that time. I always associate your gouache, your works on paper period, so much with the '40s and early '50s. Am I right in saying that then, they did not have the same importance later on into the early '60s, for example, at the time of 'Landscape Image No. 1'?

No, I don't think I did many gouaches at that time, mainly oil painting probably...

Do you think, why...

.....and prints probably...

.....why was that?

I don't know, I can't, perhaps, again, I would have a number of things going on at about the same time, oil paintings on canvas, and I didn't need, I mean, put it this way that...

You didn't feel you were being, it's this problem of hierarchy that we still have...

Not necessarily no, because in some senses artists, painters, do gouaches as preliminary studies.

But you've never done that.

I've never done that really, not really, no.

Your gouaches stand on their own.

That's right. That's right. And the other thing is this, the question of the medium, too, I mean there's a watercolour up there (St. Ives watercolour), I mean that's essentially a watercolour, but there would be no point in doing that in oils on a large canvas. (laughs)

That's essentially, it's a question of the medium too, and a gouache or a watercolour is a, is a fluid medium as opposed to my kind of oil painting. I mean there are painters who do what I call 'turpentine' colours as opposed to watercolours, I mean, like Sam Francis sort of people, you know they stain, or Frankentahler, it's merely staining on canvas which is really akin to watercolour, I mean, only they are doing it in using turpentine as opposed to water. (laughs) But, as I say, I never, I hard, I never really did preliminary studies on paper in using gouache or watercolour for subsequent oil paintings, I, I didn't need

to, I didn't need to because, in fact, often enough the initial working on a canvas would be thin oil paint and washed down, you know, working into it this way and developing the thing from initial washes, but again, these...

Building up?

Building up, but these washes wouldn't necessarily be finalised, final either, they would just be towards the final solution but never dictating it, put it this way, I would never draw out the shapes on the canvas and then sort of fill it in, that never happens, never happens, it has to be developed on the canvas.

But you might begin working in quite a translucent way and your first, initially...

Yes, yes, and allowing almost anything to happen, I mean, so that the, it is not predestined as to say how it will elaborately finish.

Because your, your, am I right in thinking that your, your kind of, more your surface layers, they are much more solid and kind of...

In the long run.

.....much more textured, yes, in the long run.

In the long run. Sure, yes.

What the eye sees in a sense.

Exactly, yes, yes. And of course even at the later stages there would be quite a lot of chopping and changing and this is my other problem that I might look at quite a large canvas and, I judge a form to be an eighth of an inch or less either side, and have to change it. (laughs) And when your eye becomes that delicate and suspicious then you are in deep trouble. But it really has the balance, I mean, sometimes I say who would know, who would know that this little band was a little bit too broad or too heavy or needed some, you know, who would know, I say? Well, at the end of the day you say well leave it. There are artists who, who say well leave it, you know, but one has a kind of conscience about these things I suppose, in a way. This is why, as I am saying earlier, that you know, you, the joy of doing something where you have little or no control really with, with watercolour or oil sticks and inks or so on, well put it this way, the intention is to avoid, avoid finish and detail, alright, because in terms of watercolour the things becomes, it loses its freshness, it loses the essential essence of being a watercolour.

I suppose that's the task in, in hand is to retain that freshness with such a medium as oil?

Well, yes. Well, as I say this is the other thing that in oil, I mean, the use of ink, is that you can take it as far as it will go, and if you really want to. Or you can dip back the other way and approach the quality and nature of a gouache or a watercolour, but they are two separate things really, to me.

I mean, looking at this photograph of the 'Landscape Image No. 1' which is at Birmingham Museums which I think is 1961, obviously having looked at, if you like, some of your minimalist oils on canvas from the late '50s and then looking at that, looking at this large 'Landscape Image No. 1', we're looking at something that has become, again, quite complex and with this very strong, quite sharp use of line and solid form that is now re-entering at this time...

Well, you can see it. You see the gradual...

Emerging of...

You see there were, there were, I had reached a point with this minimalist thing where it became entirely minimalist. I was, the canvas was covered with yellow paint or black paint or grey paint but just one surface, or there might be the hint of a form within the 'matiere' but, you know, at the end of the day where do you go from there? I can't go on just slapping on black paint or yellow paint for the rest of my, so that you see then you're coming back to a kind of sculptural thing, there's a sculptural form, that again could be made into a sculptural form, this is already going into six...'56 and then again, a little later you see...

It's called 'Dark Structure'.

.....'59 you see. Well, this is coming back to a kind of, (laughs) and then here we are, this is really back almost to square one that is, so to speak, coming back to an earlier period, this is already '59 and so on. And there's another one. But, you see, you are coming back into something nearer my earlier period. In a sense, it's the same story, you know, I was working on this minimalist thing before the term was invented, I don't know when the term was first invented, 'minimalism'...

I'm not sure.

.....I don't know, but it's certainly not a term I ever knew or used, but you know, as I say, you, you come to a point, not of revulsion, but of following to, following on and, anyhow, at this

stage getting more and more involved, animating, what I said, animating the canvas once more. It wasn't enough merely to have a pretty splash of yellow paint or black paint or something. So that I came back really in a sense to an earlier preoccupation which was my, my own, very own thing. And doing it all the better having gone through the discipline of this minimalist thing perhaps.

So you almost need that reaction?

I think you do. I think it's there, yes, absolutely, yes.

I think, there's an interview you've given where you talk about, if you like, the side tracks of being, that can be, one needs to go down the road...

Yes.

.....but there is a main road.

This is exactly it. This is, and this you have to discover for yourself and there are interesting side roads and one, one might be diverted in a way by something one has seen or maybe a domestic affair in life, or some, anything at all, but, you know, there are side tracks, but at the end of the day you, you have to just defend and describe and identify your very own inner thing. And I think I found that in some of these paintings. Again, the thing may vary and change and so on, but I think this...

**END OF F4743 SIDE A**



**F4743 Side B**

A slightly glib association with, if you like, the harder edged period that, that the '60s is known for, though it's probably that came slightly later, '62, '63, but they see certain associations with a kind of '60s period entering into your work at this early '60s. It is this harder edged kind of feel to them?

Well, there is very little, very little difference. This is, this is probably the one of '61 is probably a little more, so to speak, Impressionist or with softer aspects to it, but this, this is more the structural thing, it's really in a sense a combination of the...

'Yellow Chevron'.

Yes, of the landscape idea and the structural idea, you know, there's, there's, and of course, as always, even in there you see there is a contrast between your sharp, sharply defined forms and your looser forms. This one I suppose is between the two, so to speak. But this is a couple of years later I suppose. This was coming back to a, another period. The other point is this is smaller than one or two...

Do you know what the size of that 'Yellow Chevron' is?

It's 48 by 32 or 40 by 40, something like that.

How important is size to you in realising your ideas, I mean how, how is that decision arrived at for example? Size or scale, this, this. I mean that whole process for an artist, the choosing of scale is interesting.

Well, I think to some extent, as I say, I would probably be working on several paintings about, about this time. Oh, very much of a, on a theme. There would certainly be a number, I think there may even be one...

Because 'Landscape Image' is number one, so how many would that be...?

Because there was two. There was a 'Landscape Image No. 2'.

Yes.

That's as simple as that. You see there is another sculptural thing there.

Does that imply that you were working on those at the same time probably?

Yes. And they are very similar in fact. The other one is upstairs now. But...

What do you mean 'similar'? How, how...

Well, they are very similar! I mean (laughs) they are similar paintings.

But my idea of 'similar' might be different to your idea.

Well, they are very alike shall we say?

Yes.

How would you call it?

We can go and have a look...

Sure.

.....at the painting itself.

But I simply, that they were so, so much, they were twins in a sense, not twins but, not identical by any means, but they were sufficiently similar that I would differentiate them by giving them a similar title, you know. But there's, this is '61 too, you see, this is very similar to the other one. This is a smaller one of course, this is only 40 by 28.

The one in Birmingham has a very distinct kind of sky blue and there is cloud.

Yes, yes, as if it were in a landscape, forms in a landscape, be it trees, branches, blossom, cloud, sky and so on. These are the, I suppose...

And again, that cloud white is very dominating...

This here?

.... in this work here which is called 'Landscape with Orange'...

Yes.

.....isn't it?

Yes. Again, this is just chiefly a title to identify the piece you know. This is rather sharper maybe, as is this. Now then this is...

Indeed, well that's into considerably later.

That's right.

Yes.

But...

'Cold Spring'.

It's sharper, that's what you might call romantic shall we say. (laughs) I don't know how, yes, this is another one.

Do you see this as a kind of, in such an image as 'Landscape Image No. 1' as a kind of working towards, the harmonising between these elements, these sharp elements and these more romantic areas of colour. Is it a reconciling kind of arrangement there or is that not how you would describe it?

I think the paintings like this, they depend so much on ones, what one has been doing previously, one's mood at the time, what one has been seeing or, you know, you can't really explain how these things come about. It reaches a point where you are happiest doing this, working this way. Then you may feel on retrospect that you want to tighten it up or loosen it up or re-arrange the colour and so on, but this is how these things work. As I say, in great measure it's, I wouldn't say repeating a formula, but with this particular painting being so

happy about it and regarding it as a masterpiece, working on another one very similar, and then saying, well, how would it be if this was introduced blocks of orange or blocks of pink, or changing the scale, or, but this is how a painter works. It's not, it's not a question of 'knocking them off' so to speak. One has to adapt and investigate and allow for other suggestions or possibilities to come through.

Do you work quite quickly on something like this or does it, you can't generalise, it varies?

Not quickly, you know I, again, a painting this like it would probably be on the stocks, together with three, four or five others, you know, it would be on the stocks as I say at the same time, in different stages of development. Now then, there's, apart from everything else, there is a technical aspect to it, I mean, this is in oil paint and one thing about my paintings is that technically they are very sound. I mean this painting is thirty-odd years ago, but it's tight and sound apart from the odd, the odd bash it might get in, travelling around, but, and it's not...

Is it very important to you always?

It is very important to me indeed. But one, one thing that, that one must be aware of and not every painter that I know is aware of it, is that you shouldn't paint over wet paint. (laughs) Oh, this happens and you will find cracking in due course, but I am very careful about this. Anyhow, this is just a minor technical aspect you see, or again...

Time has shown that because your paintings, the condition of them is excellent.

Yes, yes, it always amazes me. We were digging some out the other day, from the '50s or earlier and, you know, they were spot on, even now.

So, almost we're saying it, it, you allow time and patience to come into...

Well, this is the question of standard, efficient practice and, you know, being sensible about it and, as I say, if I do a painting and someone is going to pay up, pay at the time a thousand pounds for it, the hope is that it will last for a few years or more. This isn't always the case with some artists you may know. But anyhow, this is a technical aspect, so that...

This is all the way through? From the priming right the way through?

Yes, yes, indeed, yes. And, of course, in virtually any, in all cases, I used to buy the raw canvas from a firm in Kirkcaldy, buy the stretchers separately, stretch it up and prime it with first of all with a coat of glue of some kind and then two or three coats of basic white and, you know, so there was a solid base. Better in effect than bought canvas, in effect, much better than bought canvas.

So you, could have, they were already on the market were they, bought canvas?

Oh, yes. But I'm talking about the '60s.

The '60s they were, you could have, you could...

Oh, yes, you could buy raw can...you could buy canvases by then, or even raw canvas by the meter, by the yard, but my, my canvas is much better, what I end up with is much better, tougher, stronger, and more reliable than bought canvas, often enough it's

rubbish, quite honestly rubbish, you know, I mean the cheaper, the cheaper brands of it can be, you know, but anyhow, so as I say I am very proud of my...

Have you always, you have chosen a particularly kind of strong sort of...

Yes.

.....canvas...

Yes, yes.

.....with a rough texture, or an open weave?

No, a fairly, not rough but you know, traditional standard texture, you know, but as I say it works very well and the net result is that they're spot on even now, after all these years.

Because the temptation I suppose is to take shortcuts with your...?

Well, I suppose...

You want to get your ideas down...

Well this is it, but I mean I have, there are artists who, you know, they are knocking it up: splash, splash, bang, bang, you know, take it away and, of course, within months sometimes you get a system of two different layers of paint drying out at different, different times or different temperatures and so you get a struggle, strain, and something's got to give and you

get cracking. And it's very difficult sometimes to repair even or to restore, or it shouldn't be necessary quite honestly.

And of course you were never tempted at this, during the '60s to, to work with acrylic?

You've never worked with acrylic?

Well this is the other sad story in a way that this was when, I think it was Reeves who were trying to bring out acrylic paints and they wrote to me asking, commissioning me to do a painting using their acrylic paints, for which they would offer me a hundred guineas or something, this is, oh, in early '60s. Anyhow, they sent me a whole stock of these acrylic paints in transparent tubes! I mean of all the stupid ideas that anybody ever had, you know, some of our, some of our chem...industrial chemists deserve hanging, really hanging, the amount of this, cost this nation in their cheap nonsenses. But anyhow, some bright character said, 'We'll do acrylic paints and we will put them in transparent plastic tubes,' so you can see it, 'Oh, you can see it, it's all red and it's all yellow,' they sent me over ... and asked me to do a painting, which I did, but I had the most hellish job of, of using these paints. First of all, if you mix, I mean, I tried to mix two colours together and they went suddenly grey or something, or you squeezed some out on a palette and by the time of using it, it can gone hard and dry. Anyhow, one way and another I produced this painting, I sent it up and they...

Do you remember what it was called? Did you give it a title?

I probably called it 'Abstract Landscape' or some silly title, I forget, it wasn't a very large thing. But anyhow, and of course and I stuck all these, I left these, all these paints that were just, and I left on the thing, and within a few months they were hard as rocks. Inside the tube!



What they hadn't realised is that light penetrates and affects this plastic, it just goes solid (laughs) and I mean, and of course that whole thing was dry. How many shall we say hundreds of thousands of pounds are wasted on this whole thing? They even had, amazingly enough, they had a chap come up to the Art School, by invitation from me...

To Birmingham?

They wrote, yes, they wrote around asking if their demonstrator could demonstrate these in the Art School, and they came up and their chap demonstrated them and said, 'Look, you can see, you can even see the colour inside.' Such a waste of time and money. So, anyhow, I never used acrylic on canvas, ever after that, but I used them occasionally as a gouache. It's okay as a gouache, like .. treated like gouache, thin...

Watered down?

Watered down, thin on paper. But never, because, of course the pay off you could see, because sometimes if I am using them as a gouache I squeeze, squeeze some out on a plate say or a palette of some kind at the end of the day, to clean the palette you just pick it up with your fingers, it just peels away the whole thing. You can't do that with oil paint.

It has a solidity to it? It kind of...?

Oh, it's solid, it's gone solid.

Yes, but it's also removable, it just peels off.

Oh, yes, you can peel it off, as I say you can't do that with oil paint, and the same thing applies to my doors, I'm quite sure I can paint doors. (laughs) Anyhow, I mean, this is true. And you can see it all round the City where, you know, there's railings up there which are painted with this cheap paint and it just drops off, its all rotten and rubbish, all round the City. The, the cities of this country have been using this for the last five years. Everywhere you go, you paint railings, you paint this, and you can peel it off with your fingers. This is the famous acrylic paint.

And acrylic colour wouldn't have appealed to you in particular, does it?

Well, the colour is no problem. I mean it is much the same as oil colour really, using or you should be using the same pigments, really, I mean the same chemicals, but it's simply this damn stupid nonsense of Shell Oil or whoever promoting this acrylic - it's made from oil of course. But linseed oil is too expensive. (laughs)

Have you thought about how you like to use, if you like, very much the pure kind of strength of the colours to put on?

Yes, of course yes.

And, and presumably that's how you, you worked with 'Landscape Image No. 1'?

There may not be much you may say pure colour there, I'm not sure now without seeing it, but the chances are there's a fair amount of grey or broken blue or broken yellow or something here and there, but I, I like to use pure colour where it's, where it's right for the occasion, you know.

Again, I mean, critics have, those who have written about your work, have, I mean, you never, I mean, the idea of becoming too decorative was never something that interested you? It could have easily kind of occurred in, in such a scheme as 'Landscape Image No. 1' but you have always drawn back?

Well, I can't, I can't think of any of my things which are purely decorative or could be dismissed as...

Is this a problem, yes?

It isn't a problem with me. I mean I am not a decorative sort of chap, my, my instincts are always a bit more solemn and Presbyterian shall we say, but I have never really been worried about this aspect of things, being described as 'decorative' or 'merely decorative'.

Perhaps that's the writers that are...?

I can't, I've never, I've never come across anyone saying so quite honestly, I don't know of any critic who's mentioned my things as 'decorative'.

No, I think they've actually said that you haven't fallen into that area of work.

Oh, I see, oh, yes.

Yes.

No quite.

Though there has been one suggestion...

No, never, never a danger to my, my mind, you know.

Though there has been one suggestion that someone should have offered you a commission for stained glass.

Well, this is true. You know, there was a time when some of my work was, was equivalent in a way to stained glass if I was using a kind of black grid of some kind and, but, you know, I...

You didn't pursue that?

I didn't pursue it, or put it this way, no-one ever offered me, or wanted me to do that, but the, it might have been interesting. There was a number of artists, certainly in France, who, who did stained glass efficiently and enjoyed it. I mean, the sheer brilliance of colour that one can get with stained glass and this element of pockets of colour held together by lead, or whatever. No, I mean...

Chagall of course...

.....it would have been interesting.

.....one thinks about Chagall...

Yes, quite, yes.

And you haven't also worked with, with tapestry have you at all? I was...

No, one thing I have done of course is I designed textiles.

Could you say a bit about that?

Well, again, this is, this is first of all in '53 there was this firm called Edinburgh Weavers who commissioned artists to do designs for tapestry, for textiles, fabrics. And I designed quite a few for them, and this was when I was in Littlebourne.

And I was delighted when they bought, they bought three designs and paid well for them, and I was... (laughs) (COUGHS) Excuse me. And then there was another firm, who, who, I forget the name now even, anyhow, I did two or three designs like that at the time. And then there was a firm, oh yes, this is really rather funny. This meant that my name got on the Design Council's list of textile designers for some reason, and of course they were all trying to encourage the use of artists by commercial firms you see, and at one time I got an invitation from a firm in Nottingham to go up to, to meet them. This had come through the Design Council, I suppose, you see. So I went to Nottingham and there was this incredible ancient factory who really, lace manufacturers, they did some woven textiles, and I was shown around the, the works, which I would think were really quite Victorian, the whole place was Victorian, even the machinery was Victorian (laughs). I mean, there was this kind of chief engineer chap taking me around and asked me to, to estimate how, how old this machine was. It was an old Jacquard loom, and I said, 'Well, it's certainly pre-war,' this was by the way in 1953 or thereabouts. 'So it's certainly pre-war,' he said, 'What, which war do you mean?' I said, it was dated from about 1910 you see and they were still using it. (laughs) Anyhow, I was then shown to, into the Boardroom and there was the most extraordinary collection of, I mean it was like a TV thing of modern times, you

know the ancient characters who, who run the show, and I felt I had, you know, they invited me to comment on what I had found. Oh, yes, the great, the great thing was woven, woven textiles, this was what, and...

We're talking about what, mid '50s.

'53. I said, 'Well, one thing that I think could be looked at was the business of colour, I'm sure that in modern times the younger people, younger people are more excited about colour and perhaps...!' And then the, I can still remember this Chairman of the Board saying, 'Well, we have four colours,' and of course he didn't mention say yellow, red and, it was: rust, gold, silver and claret, I think these were the... (laughs) And you couldn't, it had four colours, I think, there may even have been a fifth one called silver. But any, so that was about as far as I could go. But anyhow they did commission me, would I care to do a design. And I did a design for them, which was really a rather nice design. I had a sort of, kind of floating figures rather like the, the Matisse, Matisse figures, you know, but figures sort of dancing in a kind of way and it was made up, I mean, they made this in the four colours and sent me samples you know. (laughs) And I, oh yes, and after that they said they would like me to do a design on Egyptian themes. (laughs) Fancy, but bear in mind, I mean anything could buy a crust of bread at the time, I mean I was overjoyed to have something. But, anyhow...

What was it like, the result? Was it okay?

It was not bad actually. I mean, I even, I even, I think they even sent me a length of it, but as I say it was...

Was it sold commercially?

Oh, yes, oh, certainly, yes, these people had, I mean, sold it all over the world probably.

As a piece of cloth or...?

No, no, as curtain fabrics.

As a curtain fabric?

These would be curtain fabrics, oh yes.

The, the Edinburgh project that was realised, that, that was for tapestries?

No, no, no. This again was for curtain fabric. I've got one there which I will show you still, yes.

I'd like to see that.

I'll dig it out. But anyhow...

Were you pleased with that one as well?

Oh, yes. They did, did three, three different designs, they knocked them up and I presume sold well, even.

Did you have much say in that? Or they sent you proofs did they to, to okay and then you, or did you go up to Edinburgh to see it?

No, of course, all this wasn't happening in Edinburgh, that was their name, but the, the works were in a place called Rawtenstall, or something, Lancashire somewhere you know, but...

Sorry, I was thinking of the Edinburgh Weavers.

That's their name, but their factory was, their offices were in London and their factory's up in Lancashire. But they produced, they produced these three different sets in three different sizes, as I remember, in three different colour ranges, you know, and they sent me samples, I don't know what has happened since then. But, anyhow, and of course, oh by the time I went to Eastbourne I was commissioned to do some wallpapers, wallpaper designs by the Wallpaper Manufacturers or something and I did several designs for them which they produced. You know, but these were things I quite enjoyed doing in a funny kind of way.

Do you remember their name? Recall who commissioned you, the wallpapers, designs in Eastbourne? Was that a London firm?

It was a London firm, yes, I think it was the Wallpaper Manufacturers Company or something.

But quite successful?

Oh, yes, and they were sold, in fact, amusingly enough, one of them, oh yes, one of the designs was called 'Palette' for some reason, you have to give them a title of course. And it



was even advertised in the Furnishing Trade magazine sort of thing, you know, 'Reproduction of 'Palette' by William Gear.' But anyhow, I actually saw it, saw them in use in one or two places I went to. I think there was a place in London, I think, kind of, one of university offices or something, you know, one in the Lake District and that, so. (laughs) They were actually sold, I mean, they quite successful, commercially I mean, sure. I was just paid for the design. But, you know, there was no question of any Royalties or anything like that, but it was interesting at the time and it was a little something coming in you see.

Important income?

Well, it was useful shall we say at the time, you know. And of course it is a perfectly legitimate thing for any artist to do, in fact, it was only too delighted that such commercial firms were contemplating using artists as opposed to traditional designers.

There was quite some interesting work I think in the '50s and 60s.

Oh, indeed, yes. I think Edinburgh Weavers was one of the pioneers in this field, you know, and other firms too. But that was another aspect of work.

I know, Bill, was the decision to go to Edinburgh as Head of Fine Art...?

To Birmingham.

.....Birmingham College of Art, was that a difficult decision?

Not at all. The thing was as I say I had been in, in Eastbourne for five years say, and I was, I was really .... although I was quite happy there. I should have been. Anyway my wife and the children were quite happy, in a way, because it's a nice town to live in. We had good accommodation, you know, we were by the sea and Sussex is a delightful, all kinds of delightful small towns all around, and Brighton was handy. So it could have been a good life. The salary was miserable, well, it was, it wasn't even, it was just passable and though over the five years I managed to squeeze another thirty pounds a year or something out of them, but it was, anyhow, all these pressures, and as I say, affecting my health even. But anyhow, out of the blue, I get a letter from the Principal of Birmingham College of Art explaining the new concept of art education in the UK, in England that they were going to introduce a thing called the Diploma in Art and Design, there had been all kinds of committees and government agencies and so on, working on this for years, as to how to enlarge and change and bring to modern times art education in England. And how, one aspect of it was they were going to appoint Heads of Faculties, this was the term they used, of Fine Art, and he described it in such a way enquiring as to whether I might know of anybody whom I could recommend. Well, obviously, this was a kite flying. (laughs) And, as I say, I spoke to Charlotte of course, and of course they mentioned the salary which was twice what I was getting in Eastbourne, and of course academic terms were, I mean, I think there were maybe something like thirty-four weeks in the year, or less you know, and a three or four day week and so on. So I jumped at the, at the possibility and said, 'Well, I wouldn't mind coming, applying for the job myself.' And I came up and was interviewed with two other guys and I was given the job. And was happy to, to leave Eastbourne. You know, because as I say it had been just enough, enough.

Had you done quite a bit of teaching then?

Well, you see teaching didn't enter into it at all. It wasn't a teaching job.

In Birmingham?

In Birmingham. I had done stacks of lecturing in Eastbourne or wherever.

What, to colleges?

Lecturing.

Yes, lecturing?

Too .. I mean, in the gallery I used lecture, or I used to, I used to be asked to give a, do a day's teaching, or not, going round, say Brighton or in Oxford and other places.

But not with the colleges, you hadn't joined that kind of circuit?

Oh, I wasn't, no, no. In colleges? Yes, this was...

In Colleges of Art.

Visiting Colleges of Art.

Day visits?

As a day visitor. But, you know, this thing in Birmingham it wasn't a question of day to day teaching, though that was no problem I mean, there was no ...there was no question of

standing in front of a class, but I would go around, as when I first went there, I go round with students and chat to them about their work, you know, but that was not a question of day to day teaching.

Which you wouldn't have done necessarily...you had a different brief, the brief as Head of Fine Art.

Well, yes, as Head of the, the, which included the Schools of, the School of Painting and the School of Sculpture and Printmaking I suppose, but that was under my, my command so to speak. There was separately a Head of Painting and a Head of Sculpture and so on.

That you worked with, alongside, yes?

Well, they were my, they were my juniors so to speak. I mean, I was nominally Head of the, Head of the Faculty as it was called at the time.

And, and you've mentioned this was a time of great change in art college education.

Well ... it was incredible, a really massive change, it was really quite crazy that I had no idea of course at the time, it was quite different from anything that had happened in Scotland where I had been at the Art School, but I had no idea of how things were run in England, and when I got here, of course the tail end of what was, used to be called the NDD, the National Diploma in Design, was still operating, there were still students coming through that system. And I was astonished to find the, the kind of system there was. For instance in painting they had, you would have an exam and it was specified for instance that you do a painting, a composition, to a set subject, I mean, they set a topic, a subject. It might be 'summer holidays' or so, I mean, some title of some kind and the painting had to

include no less than five figures, I mean, and a certain size. They, they had a life drawing thing. Now, they solemnly had special sheets of paper with, with printed on, you know, the Associated Design and so on, with a number and a name and there was even invigilations, you wouldn't believe it. There was an old man sat in the corner invigilating this, and it's, this is comical. In sculpture was even funnier because they had to do a one third life size sculpture, in clay, which was cast into plaster and my first experience of that was the judging. Now all these, there was probably about fifteen or so, all these were lined up in a row, (laughs) on a stand, and we had to go around with the Principal allocating marks to each one, you see. And long discussions as to whether this was worth 60 or maybe 60...

**END OF F4743 SIDE B**

### F4744 Side A

That we had given marks, all these sculptures were packed up into special crates which they held for the occasion and sent up to London. I'm not joking. And there they would be received with another thousand or so of these from all over the country, and un-packed(?), as to whether the marks were and then, I don't know, I presume they must have been destroyed after, they couldn't ... imagine sending them all back. But imagine this process which is really, I mean, utterly, I mean, comical.

This is what you inherited? This is...

Well, no, this is the point, I didn't really inherit this, but it was part still, it came under me in a kind of funny way, but this was, this was going away, it was passing out. I think that was pretty well the last year, but the new intake, the new intake were embarked on the new system in Diploma in Art and Design which was much freer, we didn't have all this nonsense about one third size whatnot and so on, but it was much freer, it was certainly opened up, certainly.

In what way?

Well, it certainly became Modern Art in a funny kind of way. We were allowed a great deal of freedom, there was no specifications from London as to what you what would do, what you didn't do and so on. Though we tried, we did maintain a certain amount of attention to drawing and working and so on, but there was greater freedom in every sense and, of course, on a matter of scale, because by, I'm talking about 1964, '65, already the influence of the Americans was coming in and we could, we could then buy meters or yards of cotton duck and so on and the kids like the idea of painting large scale things but, anyhow, the whole thing changed out of all recognition. In sculpture too, and it was a great advance. They also had to study History of Art seriously

and this was incorporated into the, into the scheme. They did I think ten percent or fifteen percent History of Art as well, towards their eventual qualifications.

So this was a national change that Birmingham was part of?

Yes. All the, all the, well of course the, put it this way, that these, all these colleges who wanted to go in for this had to be assessed and adjudicated as to whether they were worthy of running these courses and I mean initially there may have been fifteen to twenty of what you might call the senior colleges in the country, ran this Dip AD course. Some had, I mean there was, you know, there was special conditions you had to, you had to have appropriate accommodation and staffing and resources and money and whatnot, you know, in order to be allowed to run these courses and it could be quite tough. I mean some places just simply didn't acquire this possibility until they put their house in order you see.

What did you yourself feel about the opening up of various kinds of disciplines in that '60s period for example?

Well, I, I was, I mean, I hadn't been, I hadn't suffered shall we say under this crazy sort of pre-war system and, you know, so that I didn't really realise the difference, but I was delighted at the freedom that one had and one could go ahead. The other thing of course was that we, this again was controlled by London, there was a, a National Committee in London which controlled this whole thing, the NCDAD it was called, National Council for Diplomas in Art and Design. And they, they would decide too whether you were allowed to run these courses and they might say, and I was on these visits later on, they might say, 'Well, you need more part-time staff or we expect you to have more money for materials,' or 'You want such and such,' and it also said how

many students you could take in. I think in Birmingham we were allowed to take in something like thirty-three students into Fine Art each year.

Was that a big expansion?

Not really, on the contrary, well, it probably was, but you might have of course the, the students had to have done a pre...pre-diploma course before applying even.

Foundation.

A Foundation Course. And you always got more people applying, this system of applying, rather like the universities, first choice, second choice and all that. And we always had many more people than you could take. And you would solemnly interview them and select them and offer places to the key people that you wanted.

You are hinting, I mean, now of course, because of political reasons, I mean, the numbers are so vast now that...

Well...

.....you are hinting that actually you had a kind of, you are talking about a kind of quality input from students.

Well, it, it ought to have been. I mean if, you know, if, of course in the selection process we would normally have the key man, my key staff in on the selection board and we would have each individual student with his or her portfolio of work and so



on, and you had a fair idea of what they were up to or how decent and good they were. And, well, obviously there was usually a dozen or so obvious characters you really must have and a dozen who were reasonable or possibles, and there was always a dozen kind of border-line cases and it went like that. And, of course, these, these people we hadn't, whom we hadn't taken would go on to their second choice or their third choice and so on. But one hoped to take the best people that offered themselves for Birmingham.

It sounds a very exciting time in many respects that for Art College education at that time from the mid '60s.

Well it was I suppose...

Or are you critical of it as well, was it, how would you, how, if you were writing about this, or giving your own talk?

Well, it was a great success in every way. I mean certainly the work changed out of all recognition. I think it was both among the staff and the students themselves, there was a sudden relaxation in liberty and freedom and it generated a kind of mood of, you know, of exhilaration and progress in every way, for the first two or three years until in due course, you know, the, you got the element of politics and student rebellion coming from France or Germany or wherever which destroyed things in many ways actually.

Did Birmingham suffer from that?

Birmingham was involved, yes. I mean, I mean the whatever, however these things happened, it, this was in 1968 where there was a kind of revolution in Paris, for very good

reasons probably, because first of all in France, few students got any real government support, as we were. Put it this way, my, my students, virtually all of them had their fees paid, all of them virtually had useful maintenance grants, we were, we had a budget for materials, and we supplied lots of canvas and timber and plaster and so on, and so on, they were in a marvellous. However, you got the political. It only requires two or three politicals bringing in the great news from Ghent to London, to the Central or the Slade or wherever, to say, 'Well, we're revolting,' and we didn't know about what or wherever, you know, it's great to be young and happy in this twentieth-century, or words to that effect. And then their aim was to spread around

the country and to get a little delegation of three or four converts, as if they were stopping exporting calves or something, they all came up, and you'd get all the students together in the Common Room, we wipe them up and say, you know, I think, I think one of the problems, one of the issues that they said, well, you know the, of course the staff had a little room of their own, their own canteen where they had their lunch and so on, you see, and how terrible it was that the staff had their own, you can imagine how...

So you were involved in all this negotiation were you?

Not, to a great extent. I got on with my painting. I got on with my, I really did, I said, 'You can sort yourselves out in due course,' but I said, well, of course, you never got much chance to speak to any of these people because they were anti, you could, anti-staff, anti-anything, anti-the government, anti-the, they used to parade around Margaret Street and shout and swear, I don't know, whatever and then they would sit in, you know the famous, all the traditional nonsenses. And I used to say to some of them whom I knew, I said, 'Look, at the end of the day you will go out and you will be a painter or a teacher or something, when people ask what you did in '68 they're not going to give you any marks, or give you a showing

in a West End Gallery for saying, 'Well, I sat in, I sat in, in Birmingham for a whole week, and we sat in, you know.' Thank you very much, however, bear in mind that I no longer want to know you, I might have helped you, but I, I can't think of anybody whom I would support if they were that, you know, if they behaved that way. You know, you behave in a certain way all right there are bound to be a certain reaction among the staff or other students, you know. However, you know, it passed, it passed. But, as I say, from that point, and of course additionally you always got the odd character on the staff who was a Communist, or some damn stupid thing, who, who was only too happy that something might be damaged, the point of the thing, he talked about the Art Schools being elitist or some silly expression. (laughs) Or he said, 'Everybody should be able to study art,' I said, 'All right, we have evening classes, evening classes, anybody can come and they have to pay maybe five pounds a term or something like that.' You know, 'What are you talking about?' Well, anyhow. That, from that point onwards I was less interested, let's face it. Because of course the next thing that happened was, as a result of thing going on, the, the authorities said, 'Well we must have an academic...we'll have an academic board and the students will be able to elect two members of the student body onto the academic board and also one member of staff from each department,' or something like, you know. So you have a meeting, I mean in the headquarters in Gosta Green and they suddenly find it's all rather boring, I mean, what is there, there was no electrifying changing the government. (laughs) And, so, the next meeting, nobody turned up. But meanwhile, I had had to prepare elections of my staff and students for them to sit on this board which isn't bother...and then something would happen, which would happen at a board meeting, which is fairly serious, perhaps to do with two A'Levels or something come back, they didn't know about this. I said, 'Well, you weren't at the bloody meeting, what are you talking about, it's your problem!' And so on, and so on. So you get this mixture it was nothing to do with painting or art at all at the end of the day, so, as soon as I could, economically, pack it in, I did, I got out of it. Because...

Going back to your appointment. I mean, Birmingham in one respect has quite a conservative, it comes from quite a conservative Arts and Crafts tradition, the college...

Well, indeed, yes.

....and I would, some people might think, 'Ah, the appointment of William Gear is quite a radical appointment as a modernist, as an Abstract Painter.' How did you find that relationship?

Well, it didn't come into my view, bear in mind of course there was also a...

You get these factions, don't you, within the...?

Well, but there was also separately a Faculty of Design, or Industrial Design, three-dimensional design, so that, which involved jewellery and silversmithing, separately, of course. I mean, I wasn't involved with jewellery, silversmithing or ceramics or glass or embroidery. There was all these other things going on elsewhere within the Art School, my concern was ostensibly Fine Art, you see.

What I, I suppose I am asking is that, do you see your time there, were you kind of concerned to open up doors as a, as a, in a sense, but also work with traditional practices? How did you, how did you kind of work that into the system?

Well, again, that's my basic, my basic philosophy. When I would, say, talk to students, you know, who were of course, some of them, not all of them, but some of them would go down,

go down to the library and find the latest thing that might be happening in Japan or in America from the very small regions and so on, and come and do it. But I used to say to students, 'Look, while you are here, for God's sake learn your trade. Bearing in mind that what you might be seeing in the library now, in six months, or certainly by the time you leave here, will be 'passé' old hat, you see. While you are here, it might be useful to learn your trade, skill, get skilled in drawing or painting and know about technique, how to stretch a canvas, or prime a canvas, how to cast something, how to do a lithograph, an etching or screenprint. Learn to do these things, because the chances are that, in due course, it will be useful to be able to do these things or know how they are done. But at the moment it is not sufficient...' I mean those stupid girls especially, they seem to be taken by, what's her name? Helen Frankentahler? And they would get this...

The American artist?

Yes. American artist, American woman artist, who did, who stained her things, you see. But they, these kids would think well, 'All I need to do is get a very large canvas or a piece of cotton duck, cotton duck, and mix up some paint, very thin, and pour it on.' And you know, that was it, yes, this is Frankentahler, you see, which is a disaster anyway. But I would say to them, 'Your work is very interesting, of course you have been with my old friend...?' I was able to say, 'My old friend, Helen.' 'Did you, did you actually know her? Oh, really, what was she like?' I said, 'Oh, well, she's a very pretty girl, oh, yes, nice girl.' I didn't think much of her, you know, but anyhow. I said, 'As a matter of interest, you know, there is down in Gosta Green there is a Department of Printed Textiles and I'm sure, I don't know, but I'm sure that there is, before you apply colour to fabric, I think you will have to sort of prepare the thing in some way or insist that the dye will remain.' You see, I would talk to them in this way. They never thought of

that you see. (laughs) But you know, how, where is this going to take anybody? Pouring.

(laughs) Anyhow, I don't think it lasted very long. But this is the kind of way I could talk to these kids, you see. 'Oh, you mean you actually...you actually...?' it's rather like saying, 'You knew Christ?' or something, 'You knew the, you knew Mary?' Oh, brother, I don't know.

And of course a lot of them were like this. I mean, you had to write it off as enthusiasm and so on, but at the same time, steady up, look 'comme même', look, I think it's wise to, you know, to be able to do it properly. Or if you are going to stay in something see that it sticks there, because the chances are if you do this indefinitely it is going to fall away, or it'll just disappear

or... (laughs) Oh, never mind.

In fact, one of your colleagues, Roy Abell, has written a fine piece for our exhibition in Birmingham later this year, but he has mentioned, for example, some of the ideas you introduced on visits to London and abroad...

Yes, yes.

.....that this was, he sees it as, you were a great patron of that, and this was a new idea that has now become established, that you certainly supported with these, that students should visit and...

Well, of course, you know.

.....and, but in a sense, pre-war or just after the War in the '50s, that hadn't been going on.

No, well it couldn't to some extent, obviously.

How did you set up, you set up a system?

Well, yes, I encouraged it shall we say and you know the, sometimes these visits would happen with members of the staff, younger members of the staff. We had, for instance, a kind of, you wouldn't call it a hostel, but a house, in St. David's in Pembrokeshire right and a batch of students would go down there each summer for a fortnight or so, painting down there, that sort of thing, you know, or it would be on an exchange visit or so on. But certainly trips to London, that was all routine virtually in a while, you know, but, to be encouraged shall we say, anyhow, you know.

So you were certainly drawing on your own experience, during your college days?

Well, it was so vital that, that students should see or meet even, meet other artists, you know, where this was possible, you know.

This is the positive side of that period isn't it?

Well, yes, I think this is the sort of thing one, one would expect to happen under these conditions you know. Because this was always the danger in, in England, the, the, you might call parochial, provincial thing, this was one of the major, the major aspects of this Diploma in Art and Design. As I say I got, they put me on this Council and I went on various visits...

The National Council?

The National Council, but this is one of the things we used to specify, that you, apart from your full-time staff, you should have part-time staff and these, hopefully, would be brighter, younger artists from, say, London, coming up say one day, two days a week and their fees

paid and travel paid, additionally occasional special visits from distinguished artists who might come up for the day, but the very, the very fact of, for instance I had Lynn, people like Lynn Chadwick coming or Merlyn Evans or Ceri Richards or whoever coming up for the day, just to walk round and chat to the students. But they were, you know, excited to meet or see someone whom they knew by name, you know, but this was the kind of thing that, that was encouraged by the National Council for instance but, unfortunately, in more recent times, these budgets have been so cut that this can hardly happen. But you could imagine the, the impact of people of that calibre going, coming up to say small colleges up in the North say, you

know, where they never saw anybody, so to speak. But this was really very valuable.

Unfortunately, I think, this is not happening to this day. The other thing about it all of course was, as I say, there were, by the time I was in full cry, there was something like forty colleges in England running the DAD courses or, later on, what were known as the CNAAs courses, the title was changed the Council for National Academic Awards. But I think of this that, in the field of Fine Art alone, apart from other fields, as I say, each of these colleges was expected to have one or two or three part-timers or special visitors, each of whom was paid, you know, at the time maybe twenty quid a day

or something. But it was a massive form of patronage. Just think of that, you know, we're talking about a lot of painters in the one way gainfully employed and helping, in a sense, the students too, in their work, too. But this has died out unfortunately.

In the last few years it has virtually...

Well, indeed.

.....been wiped out.



As I say, there was a lot of younger pain...I employed over the, I mean sometimes had even six or eight people, painters and sculptors, coming to, to, during the course of each week, coming to Margaret Street and...

Was there a demand, say for the younger generation of the '60s crowd in London from the Pop scene?

Many of them could live well on this, you see.

Do you recall anybody in particular that might be visiting or...?

Well, I think of Alan Miller, for instance, was one. Of course sometimes, sometimes the, the better of them, if there was a vacancy, you would give them, get them a full-time job. As I mentioned, Lynn Chadwick or so on. A number of these people who'd come up for the day or two or three, Dennis Bowen was another one, I remember offhand, Tony Underhill was another one, you know. And so on. There was a number of these people, Ivor Rich...not Richards, anyhow a number of these sort of people.

Hitchens? Not Ivon Hitchens?

No, no, no. I forget their names now. This is all, you know...

Ivor Abrahams, Abrahams.

Abrahams, that's right. You know. (laugh)

And I think one of your students, or certainly you met him perhaps just afterwards, was John Walker.

He, he actually had graduated before I came, he graduated at Birmingham and then went to this, the Royal Academy Schools or, and then he came back and was on the staff for two or three years, latterly part-time, I think he was, I can't remember, maybe for...but anyhow, he was on the staff for the first couple of years that I was there and then he decided, wisely, to pack it up and go and live in London and paint. I hope that he had some money. But, anyhow, he was already getting a bit of recognition from the Arts Council and, or the British Council and so on. So he made it. And then emigrated to America.

(laughs)

But throughout that period, I think it was '64 to when you retired in '75...?

Yes.

.....was it a three or four day week?

Well, I, at the College it was a five day week, I mean the students had a five days...

Yes, but I am thinking of yourself...

I normally did four days a week, normally, and, indeed, sometimes when there was the whole business of interviewing students applying for the job and so on, I used to have to come in an extra day...I mean, I, but my normal, my normal timing was four days a week.

Because that, that three days must have been very precious to you back here in George Road?

Well, it was, but this, this is what began, and of course there was vacations, too. But, you know, there would be times when there were problems, I mean this, the capering of students or individual members of staff or worries about something that you come back. It's difficult to come back on a Friday morning and go up to studio and forget everything that has happened you see. Or, of course, what would happen inevitably was I'm busy painting and the phone would go downstairs, and I would have to rush down and, in the meanwhile my secretary would say, 'Oh, Mr. Gear there's a, there's a letter here for you,' or some stupid nonsense, you see. And it became this sort of thing, was really rather, but anyhow one survived you know.

When you moved to George Road did you immediately establish your studio at the top of the house?

Yes, yes.

Yes. Because it's one space isn't it? But then you have these other rooms adjacent...

Well.

.....for storage.

The whole of the top floor is my area for storage and for my painting area, yes. And of course it was the obvious thing to do, I mean, the other, the other floor is bedrooms and bathroom and so on, you know.

So that's, that's what worked.

This was, [COUGH] this was a very fortunately thing actually that when, when we were moving up here, I naïvely wrote to the Housing Manager of Birmingham announcing that I had been appointed to an important job in the Department of Education and so on, and so on, and did they have any house...housing to rent or buy or whatever, knowing full well that in Eastbourne the Housing Manager down there would keep premises available for what you might call key appointments, I mean, if you get a new Director of Education or a senior chap, they would have places where they could fit them in, so to speak. So he said, 'Well, there's two or three places available if you would like to come up.' And Charlotte and I came up and he showed us a place, or rather he just gave us the keys and the address and it was a place in Greenfield Crescent which is rather horrible and another place in Lordswood Road which is just a kind of semi-detached bungalow type thing, and we came back and said, 'Well, have you anything else?' And he said, 'Well, there's always that place in...' He spoke to his pal, 'There's that place in George Road, it's been empty for a year or two but you might have to have a look at it.' And this was this premises here. And, apparently it had been used as a headquarters for three midwives. (laughs) But a year before, before they had moved these midwives out into the suburbs where they were more useful. And so this place was empty and so we, we got it right away and they, of course, they did it up a bit and so on. But it was ideal in that it's spacious, I have space for a studio and it's very handy for all the shops and everything and so it was ideal. And it was a very modest rent even at the time, too. So we simply moved in and we're still here.

At this time, '65 onwards, it, it was a difficult time in a sense for you, again, selling your work in this country in particular. Is that correct?

Yes, I think it was really.

Because Gimpels you were kind of not showing there...

Well, my last show there was '67, '67, which didn't do at all well, I think they sold a couple of things. But things weren't selling I must say, and people weren't buying, it was just as simple as that. Oh, yes, I had had a good exhibition in Gimpels in '61, first of all, which sold well, including the Tate bought two things from that show and so on.

That was the retrospective they called it?

That's right, that's right and, but by '67 plus I wasn't selling at all well, the odd thing, but nothing, not enough certainly to live on.

Did you see this as, as a time when you must have been looking at London and seeing that, that Pop explosion if you like, so called?

Well, this is, this is the other, what, what always happens. There are fashions obviously and there was the Pop explosion and there might have been a hard-edged explosion or some other explosion, there is always, which the critics and the petty journalists jump on, or it may reflect what has been happening in America or they try to whip it up as an English thing or a British thing and say, 'It's so important, vital,' and so on. And of course it passes very quickly, but also it means that the, what you might call by then, the traditional painters were out on a limb so to speak, they might come back, and they did of course, but...

Did you feel you were slightly out on a limb at that time?

It didn't bother me. I didn't think in those terms, but I didn't think very highly of the Pop thing either. I mean, small beer really, and, you know, all right, it was activity that some people played on and encouraged I suppose. But in retrospect I think it was a very small affair really quite honestly, not lasting, except, you know, there were those artists and those critics who made a meal of it and, I mean you don't see it at all anywhere now, I mean are there any galleries showing Pop, except in the kind of curiosity sort of way, you know.

So...

And this is always the story you know.

....a lot of your exhibitions were, they were in a sense outside London, into the 1970s and also, and also abroad as well, perhaps with the British Council shows?

Yes, yes, this would happen, yes. The British Council were very good all this time, I always seemed to have something in circulation all over the world, be it Latin America or Central Africa or Australia, New Zealand, I don't know, or Scandinavia, there was always something touring somewhere, and at least they paid, the British Council paid a hiring fee usually. And, I mean, for years it seemed to, there was always a little cheque came in from the British Council. And at least one was exhibited all over the world really, and occasionally [CLEARS THROAT], excuse me, the odd thing would be bought. In fact I have a major painting, a six feet painting, in the Institute of Contemporary Art in Lima.

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**F4744 Side B**

(PAUSE)

Now it's important that the work was for sale in these British Council shows.

Oh, yes. Yes of course, they would make a point of it, I think, well I did anyway, I had plenty of my own work available. I suppose in some instances they would borrow work from collectors, but unlikely because these, as I, these works when they went in a, in a trip like that they were sometimes away for years, they really were. I mean that particular exhibition was shown round Central America in half a dozen different places and I think the same exhibition went to Central Africa, shown in Rhodesia and other such places, you know. So that I mean it was probably away for the best part of two years even, you see.

Do you think if you are being kind of, quite tough looking at this period that it, it had an effect on your own work? Do you think it was a difficult, one of the more difficult times?

I think it was actually. I, I you know, put it this way, if I have to compare life and work in Eastbourne with life and work during my period at the College of Art here, I would think I was happier and doing better work even in Eastbourne than I was here.

It's difficult to say how or why but, I think, for instance, the climate in Birmingham, I mean at least in Eastbourne it was within the London area in a way, I was much more in contact with London and of Brighton at the time, or I had to go up to London on business frequently, you know, I mean it was just an hour up on the train, something like that, and I knew quite a lot of people and I went round the galleries and I was must more in contact, and I was working more happily. But I think in, in

Birmingham the sheer, the sheer frustration of a way, not, not about art at all, this is what I was saying earlier, we got down to meetings and functions and money and politics and all these things which are nothing to do with painting at all. And or the general climate. I think the fact was that there was, there was so little of contemporary activity in Birmingham, bearing in mind that the Barber Institute, I come up and I go to the Barber and I find, I had known about this before, that they didn't have anything post-1900, you see.

Because you were on their various committees, weren't you, sometime, did they involve you in the purchases?

Who?

The Barber Institute?

No, no, no, never.

But you would discuss obviously...?

Well, I mean, I was aware, I knew, I knew an earlier assistant at the Barber, Andrew McClaren Young, for instance, and I knew the set up, but the, the simple fact that there was a major gallery in Birmingham on a university campus, with nothing post-1900, or in the civic Art Gallery they had very little of the twentieth century either of interest, you see. So there was so little and there was no commercial galleries either you see. So that the, the City itself, you know, it wasn't really an active hive of actual painting and art, you see, nor were there, let's face it, particularly any, or rather many, artists of distinction or interest in the City either, working, that I was aware of.



I mean, you can dig up one or two maybe but not, you know, there wasn't a kind of hive of activity shall we say. This is all part of the, part of the general set up that one had to live among you know.

So your friends, your, were not necessarily in the City, in the City, your close art friends?

Well there were one or two, one or two people on the staff whom I got on with or worked with, but you know, there was none of them really that I could regard as major artists shall we say, you know.

Did you keep up quite a close friendship with, with Roger Hilton?

I hardly ever knew Hilton in those days, I mean he, bear in mind, was living, I mean I might bump into him shall we say, but he was living in St. Ives, or near St. Ives all that time, I can't, I mean, he, he exhibited, oh, yes, I think I saw him once during that period. We went down on holiday to, to St. Ives and I met him there where he was obnoxious! And I you know, I don't want to go into detail, but I found him an obnoxious character, you know, and I didn't want to know anything about him or his art quite honestly. I am entitled to say so quite honestly, well. But I can't be bothered with such people, bearing in mind my previous living in, in wherever, you know. I didn't want to know about the English Bohemian, if there is such an expression.

I think just quite interesting to pick up, I think, one writer has kind of, whether this has any kind of truth to it, has said that he has linked you with Hilton and Davie saying that the three of you, your work was described as a process of 'pathogeneses' as opposed to the 'metamorphic' approach of Scott and Lanyon. I don't know if that makes any kind of sense to you? How they are trying to distinguish...?

Well, if I really, if I try to understand what they are saying, I suppose it would make some sense, but it's some - who was writing this?

That, I think that was in a cat...in a work actually on Roger Hilton...

Yes.

.....that I have come across. But the, there's obviously, I wondered if you felt there was some sort of association?

You can apply either of these terms to any five of us quite honestly. Simple as that, at times, or at different times, you see, 'parthenogenesis'. I think I know what he means but...

What do you think he...?

Well, it's born, born of its kind, and born within itself or, or self-defeating or something. But, what was the other word?

Metamorphic.

Metamor...well, it's the same thing really, it's the same thing really, in a way, isn't it?

Depending on how you interpret it.

Because you have known William Scott a long time?

Well, again, William I, I would see more frequently. I first met William in Brittany actually, come to think of it, in 1950. He came to find me. We were on holiday in Brittany and William Scott and Mary and the two boys turned up out of the blue, I think, they found us and we spent a day together in this little fishing village called Doelan and there he was. This was the first time I met him, this was 1950. And then I bump...I met him in London on several occasions at openings or at gallery, in the gallery or whatever, in fact. I think I stayed in his house in London once, too. Oh, and we also went, we stayed, we went and we stayed with him in the country, he had this beautiful premises in the country. So, he was a painter I admired actually, I must say I think.

Because again he has had a kind of relationship with Ireland and with Scotland.

Yes, this is true, yes. Part Scots, part Irish ...I suppose, Merlyn Evans of course, too, he was part Scots, part Welsh in a sense, he had this, you might call this, Celtic element I suppose.

I mean you're a Scot, through and through, but you have spent your life living abroad and in England. How do you see that relationship, is it...

Well,

.....with your own, the country that you were born in?

Put it this way, I, I was toasted and honoured in Edinburgh last week at, by the Scottish Arts Club and it was hinted to me that I might explain why I had lived abroad and I more or less told them briefly this story: I said, 'Well, I was called up into the

army in 1940 and I haven't been back since, but simply that I spent, what the best part of seven or six years in the army abroad in the Middle East, in Italy, Germany wherever, my inclination was to go straight back to Paris which is where everything was happening. Paris became three and a half or four years in Paris, and back to London, or to England, where I was exhibiting. And then a job, and a job and so on. So that, you know, it just happens. I didn't consciously emigrate to anywhere else. However, I said, well, I passed virtually daily a statue in Birmingham of the three wise men, this Matthew Boulton, James Watt and William Murdoch and I said, what would have happened to the world if James Watt hadn't emigrated you see.' And, additionally, I was able to say that, 'There is in Birmingham a Society of Graduates of Edinburgh University and they invite me along to their annual dinner and there the dinner, held in a staff house of about thirty or forty graduates of Edinburgh University and how I find myself sitting next to a very sweet lady, and eventually we chat as to, 'What do you do?' 'What do I do?' And she announced that she was a plastic surgeon! I felt very humble, but there she had graduated at Edin...she said, 'I'm a plastic surgeon,' no, no, not as bad as that, 'A plastic surgeon.' Anyhow, she asked me what, 'Oh, I said, I'm an artist.' 'Oh, an artist, aye, ha!' As if there is something unique, you know. And what, and of course as I predict, the next question is, 'Do you work in oils or in watercolours?' You know, trying to make out ... I said, 'Well, look, I'll tell you what I am. I paint abstract pictures. I'm a modernist.' 'Oh, one of those.' You see? Well, anyhow, this is the kind of predicable, predictable conversation, I've had scores of times. Especially with academics. (laughs) Because the equivalent thing in Switzerland 'Oh, you're William Gear? I know your work very well, there's a friend of mine...' You know? Or in France or in Germany and so on. But not in Birmingham and not in Edinburgh - the same thing! The academics simply don't know about art or they seem to find it something suspicious. You know, anyhow, but that's another story, you know.

But you have never chosen to go and live in Scotland, have you?

Well, what would be the point? Damn it all, as I say, I married an American girl, we have two sons who were born in France or England. We had no roots. I mean, I had been out of the country for twenty years or so, what would be the point?

But your roots have remained very strong.

Well, I mean, as I say, I go up there, maybe, at least once a year for a few days, I still have a few cronies shall we call them, in Edinburgh. I still am, I always seem to have something on exhibition. I have a mini exhibition now. I always have a mini exhibition or something. So I go up for the occasion.

And the roots in your work have remained.

Well, that's something I can't deny. I mean, as I say, I mean I relate, if you like, in some of these paintings to the Scottish Colourists. I was last week in an exhib...in a gallery, in Perth, of the work of J. D. Fergusson for instance, another Scot, who spent most of his, Scots artists spent most of their working life in France, including Peploe and Fergusson and Cadell and Charles Rennie MacKintosh and whoever. I mean, it's not a unique thing. And, or they spend a lot of their work, their time working in France or in Paris or wherever. But that's the normal thing and it has to be and it's just as well I say, just as well that this was the case.

I mean do you get annoyed at, I was looking the other day at that Royal Academy exhibition of English Art in the Twentieth Century and there was a big exhibition of one of the Survey shows that they have been doing. And, for example, I was thinking you weren't in that exhibition, but I wonder if this is the kind of, the categorisations that selectors and curators.

Was it, was it English art or British art?

It was English art.

Was the title of it, was it English or British?

So, the point is, that you might not be included in that.

Because I was Scots. (laughs)

What do you think?

I'm not sure. I wouldn't know quite honestly who selected this show, but...

I think it was Richard Cork.

Well, it maybe that he was flogging his book on what's his name? Bomberg. And he happened to select about twenty Bombergs, most of which are rather inferior Bombergs, because he was about to publish a bit fat book on Bomberg. Well, at that point I say, well, thank you very much, goodbye. But I don't know, I don't...

You must have come up against this quite often, this idea of categorising you as a British, or English or Scottish?

Oh, I can't, I don't know. What if, the fact is...

How would you like to be seen...?

About the same time, you see, there was a big exhibition in the Barbican of Scottish art, of twentieth century Scottish art in the Barbican. (laughs) So how do you define it? I mean, I don't mind.

How would you define it, your work?

Well, I, I, put it this way, I'm a British painter and when I'm exhibiting, mainly abroad as I do these days, I am listed as born in Scotland. I'm not, I'm not presented as a Scottish artist. I'm a British artist, sometimes even in confusing, you know how it can happen in translation, 'Ein Englischer Mahler,' or '... .. Anglais', 'Pittore Englese' They confuse British with English, with Scots. You're just English. And, so I just leave it to them, I mean, it doesn't really matter. But you know, as you are aware, I mean there are frequently exhibitions of Scottish art or British art or English art or Avant Garde Art or no art at all. You know, these categories don't, they shouldn't need to exist. It's a bit like in Scandinavia, you know, you don't have necessarily Norwegian Art, Swedish Art, Danish Art, Finnish Art and so on, we call it Scandinavian. However, at the moment there is a big exhibition of Danish Art in Edinburgh, Danish art, including a lot of COBRA, the COBRA boys, in the City Art Centre which is rather a revelation to them. Asger Jorn, Pedersen, Mancoba 'und so weiter.' (laughs) Well, never mind. These things don't worry me at all quite honestly, because it's all one big happy family, like COBRA. I mean, you've got thirty COBRA artists, you know, you're not distinguished as a German artist, a Danish artist a French artist or something, you're, you're part of the, the international experimental group. But if you're not careful it will become a game.

Well this is true. I mean it is handy for some people when they're writing a book, you have to limit the thing. I mean, I've got several books downstairs of Scottish Art in the Twentieth-Century, Scottish Art... (laughs) There's a lot of books on Scottish Art (laughs) Oh, yes. But there is this, I have never been a nationalist for instance, I think that Scottish nationalism is a humbug quite honestly, or Welsh nationalism or Irish nationalism or any damn thing.

You stay clear of that?

I stay clear of it, it's not that I stay clear, I am, I have anti...antipathy to this whole bloody nationalist nonsense. I really don't want to know. I think it's damning and dangerous and uneconomic and diminishing the whole thing and, of course, if it ends up with the business of your, I mean I've had this of course in the past from Scottish critics, you know, declaiming me for being an absentee, I've got cuttings about this even. You know.

What's been your reply?

Well, I mean, I say, 'Don't be so bloody parochial. Get out of it, emigrate or do something,' you know, 'Post yourself to go to America or California, I don't know what.' But when they start talking about, you know, you're about a couple of hours in the train from... (laughs) you know.

So, you're a bit cautious of, I'm thinking of the 1980s, that whole kind of Scottish School that was, received a lot of critical acclaim but is now kind of...



Well, this is...

.....rather left by the wayside.

....Well, absolutely. This is bound to happen, it happens anyway. But you know, again, what is this Scottish art? Of course you've got the Glasgow School and Edinburgh School.

Was that valid in the '80s to give a definition to that painting...?

I think it, well I, it was up to them. I mean this is it that you are always going to get some parochial delight if something happens of interest. It's a bit like saying if Aston Villa win the, win the cup, then great. But, you know, if you suddenly find that you have got two or three painters emerging from Glasgow, that's great, but this is the Glasgow boys all over again, as opposed to Scottish, they're Glasgow you see, I suppose. (laughs) But as I remarked in, I wrote a few lines for the, this recent book on John Bellany I, I was asked to say a few words on a book by John McEwen about Bellany. I said how that he was wise or he reacted to the cosy somewhat inbred School of Edinburgh and espoused a different and richer vein in the German Expressionists, notably Beckman - or words to that effect, which is absolutely true, and it still goes on. I mean, I was seeing these, not so little galleries in Edinburgh with the traditional, the sort of the Gillies, Maxwell, Redpath tradition and their off-spring you know.

There's a sense that they would have liked to have appropriated you?

This is, this would have happened you see. I mean if I say immediately after the War, had I, when demobbing, gone back to Scotland it would have been to Edinburgh say, and found some kind of studio, then I would have probably have descended into

teaching, I could have probably have lived for a year or two anyway on my gratuity. But you then aspire, the only possibilities at the time were to exhibit in the RSA or in the SSA or, at best, get a job teaching in the Arts, College of Art, now all these things were controlled by a, a small clique, even to a point of nepotism. And so that, you know, the thing is this that anybody hoping to progress had to be within that orbit, you know you couldn't fly away the one or two galleries say at the time, Aitken and Dott Scottish gallery where, again, tied to that particular vein, you know, you couldn't, so it meant that people like Turnbull, Paolozzi, Alan Davie and myself and others, you know, you got out of it. Not necessarily emigrating or rejecting that, but you went where you were happiest. And Paris certainly was the place to be in those days, you know, it was a marvellous place still, it hadn't been destroyed by the War in any sense, it was a nicer place to be than say London, you know, and of course things were happening there and there was more activity, so that was the place to be.

In 1982 there was this very big COBRA exhibition...

Oh yes. In Paris, yes.

.....at the Musée d'Art Moderne, and really, since that, you have been exhibiting abroad, but regularly...

Yes, sure.

.....in some major exhibitions...

Yes.

....and in a sense things have come full circle, I mean, you are now experiencing a wonderful kind of recognition, possibly not in the UK is perhaps a different thing, but it's a wonderful time for you, this...

Well, this is the, this is what I am saying earlier. I mean, I think that first of all this exhibition in '82 is very interesting, this is in the Musée d'Art Moderne de Paris and I was invited to exhibit, and to come to the opening and so on, so I...

I wonder why it happened when it did, that exhibition? It's interesting.

Why, why...?

Why did it happen when it did?

Well, I'll tell you exactly why it happened. The French Cultural Agencies were anxious to put themselves on the map and claim COBRA. Now then, COBRA was never a French thing. It was northern European but, essentially, as the name implies, Copenhagen, Brussels and Amsterdam, there was a certain amount of activity in Paris, certainly the chaps met there and they functioned there, exhibited a bit there, but there, there was not really a group of French artists in the thing. There was Atlan who was really from Algeria originally, (?) he was French, Ecole de Paris, and a chap called Doucet but that was about it. However, the French put on this exhibition and they did it in, they give it the works, it was opened by Monsieur Jacques Chirac no less, who at the time was the Mayor of Paris in the company of Monsieur Jacques Lange who was the Minister for Culture, various ambassadors and, you know, all the boys.

And it fully recognised you and Stephen Gilbert?

Oh, yes, yes. We were in the show, yes.

How, how many works did you?

Just one.

Yes.

Just one, which I sent across for the show. I mean bearing in mind there was maybe thirty-odd artists, each with several things, some of them anyway. Anyhow, that was a great show, a fat catalogue, posters in the Metro, the works, on television and so on I presume.

But that show gave birth to a ...

Well, it was the, the first major re-manifestation of COBRA and I think, you know, there was an element of politics goes on there, too, cultural politics. The French were in on it and said, well, rather like Exist...Existentialism 'c'est nous', COBRA 'c'est nous', but it bloody well wasn't you see. Anyhow, that was fair enough that happened. But...

I mean, your work in Germany for example, since that, now you have had major exhibitions in Germany.

Well, this is, this is in part coming from the interest. Of course in Europe, generally, especially in Holland, Germany, in part France and the Scandinavian countries, and even in America, COBRA is 'the' thing, the 'in thing' because, apart from its historical value, it's the new thing with the current range of Modern, of Contemporary painters, I mean the new

Germans are neo-COBRA, you know, Baselitz for instance is pure COBRA and some of the others. But I have, you know, I have stacks of catalogues even showing, the New Germans for instance or the New Dutch, it's neo-COBRA and but thinking that, after all, they're looking back. COBRA was being active before most of these guys were born, let's face it, we're talking about forty, forty-five years ago. We're approaching, there are, there are plans afoot at the moment, right now in Amsterdam, to celebrate the fiftieth anniversary, I repeat, in 1998. They had the fortieth anniversary in 1988. They're planning the fiftieth anniversary! Now, we're not talking about something that happened a couple of years ago, and surely that is history enough? (laughs) And it will shortly be opened in Amstelveen a COBRA Museum which will house five or six hundred COBRA works. Well, I mean, it's not as if it's a kind of small-scale affair, and involve maybe thirty-five or forty artists at the time.

That will be a COBRA Museum?

That a COBRA Museum, yes, and I will be going to the opening. This is in November.

This year?

Yes, shortly, yes. So that it was sort of rediscovered so to speak in the '80s and there followed on numerous large-scale shows and I went to most of them, well, well the, I think the next big one that I remember was in, in Malmo in Sweden, then there was one in Stockholm, then of course in Amsterdam and Liege and of course it has been shown all around the world, you know, everywhere from Chile to Valparaiso (San Paolo) to Buenos Aires to Taipei, wherever you know, it's all over the world, but never in the UK, oh, no, not in the UK. We don't want to know here, we don't want to know, we'll stick with our Francis Bacons 'und so weiter'. Eh? Well, that's their problem.

Bill, perhaps, can I ask you perhaps, finally, Terry Frost has written a lovely piece, I haven't shown it to you, again for our exhibition...

Yes.

.....in October in Birmingham, and he uses this wonderful expression of the UK having 'constipated reticence' about your work!

(laughs) This was the case shall we say, I suppose?

Do you feel this has been the case and perhaps this continues to be the case, slightly?

Not so much now, I mean, this may have been, you know, up, you know, but as I say, you know, I have had, you have seen those exhibitions at Redfern over the last five years or more, they have been very successful. And, as I told you earlier, through the Redfern they have just sold two major COBRA period paintings to New York collectors in New York, now then, that seems to me somewhat significant that they're collecting in New York, I have sold a lot of other things of course, in America, but put it this way, I can't think that, you know, there's all that, I'm all that well represented in the public galleries in this country, oh, I know there are problems of finances, but you know, there should have been more, private or public collectors in this country.

And there haven't been?

There haven't been, I haven't been accorded the, the degree of patronage that I ought to have received. In fact, did I have to, put it this way, had I, had it been the case that I didn't have to

spend, what the best part of seventeen years, working for a living so to speak, running a gallery or running an Art School, you know, what more might I have done? Alright, I'm not unique, there are plenty...most artists, most artists in this country have had to earn some kind of living, be it teaching or something, but you know I can now and again say, well, when I'm looking through my work, 'What was I doing in 1970, '73 or so on?' You know, I'm quite sure it would have been different shall I say? It would have been better even, had I did, did I not have to earn a living on these miserable jobs. So, you know, that comes back to patronage and selling work or, I mean, as I say, I can't complain, that was my situation, but there was very few artists, certainly with families and so on, who could manage without. I mean, Terry Frost, you mentioned, he was teaching most of his active life, too, most of them were. They may have had cushier jobs than I had, but this was the case. But when I was in Paris for instance, you didn't know people, people weren't, artists weren't teaching, I mean, where are you teaching? It never occurred to any of these people, you know, somehow they managed, I don't know how, but they did. They managed, they might have died young (laugh) and they did die young some of them, or threw themselves out the window or something, like de Staël, I'm not joking, like de Staël or Atlan who died young, simply from, from tumours and God knows what, this is from his privations earlier on, but anyhow this was the pattern shall we say.

Bill, thank you very much indeed for your time.

Thanks to you.

**END OF F4744 SIDE B**

**END OF INTERVIEW**

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Control no.»

Accession no.»C466/33/1-8

Playback no.»F4737-4744

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Accession source»NLSC

Accession date»1995.8.24

---

Collection/Series title»Artists' Lives

---

Speaker's name/date of birth»Gear, William b.2 Aug 1915

Sex»m

Interviewer's name»Sidey, Tessa

---

Date(s) of recording»1995.7.12, 1995.8.8, 1995.8.18

Place of recording»Edgbaston, Birmingham

---

Recordist»Sidey, Tessa

Type of recorder»marantz

Noise reduction»

---

Type of carrier»tape

No. of items»8 x C60

Speed»-

Mono or stereo»stereo

---

Additional material»Exhibition catalogue: William Gear: Past and Present Friends 1995, plus two photographs of exhibition

Summary and transcript

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Copyright ownership»NSA

Access restrictions»None



### F4737 Side A

Interview 12.7.95

Mining history of family in Methil, Fife. Mother in service in East Weymss. One sister - another died in infancy when WG was 3. Parents living with mother's mother when WG was born in Methil. Moved to East Weymss, where attended primary school. Travelled by tram to Buckhaven.

Home - one large room with 2 beds, partitioned, parlour (for special occasions), scullery, lavatory. Father involved in Great Strike of 1926. Mother - church-going Free Church of Scotland (unlike father).

Introduced to books through local library. Interest in practical science and mechanics. First interest in art when asked, around 10, to draw still-life of a handbag. Influential teacher at High School, Robert Morris, with contacts in Edinburgh and the Scottish arts scene.

### F4737 Side B

First pictures seen on visits to Kirkaldy Art Gallery. Peploe the first painter really aware of. By the age of 15/16 visiting galleries/exhibitions in Edinburgh. Describes Edinburgh College of Art and staff - liberal and adventurous. In digs with landlady 2 miles from Art School. Staff: Adam Bruce-Thompson, William Gillies and John Maxwell, all in painting; David Alison - Head of School.

First exhibitions. Post-graduate scholarship, took History of Art classes with Prof Talbot-Rice. Travelling scholarship - Paris, Venice, Yugoslavia, Greece, Turkey.

1937 - in Paris and contact with Ferdinand Léger's studio. Describes his attraction to Léger and his approach to students and teaching method. Profound influence.

### F4738 Side A

The links of his earliest work with 'observable nature'. Aware of the elements of trees, structures, blossom, light - not to deny nature as well as the psychological nature of what one is interpreting. Need to be open in one's influences. Attraction to Klee and Kandinsky. Sketching during travels. Teacher training course at Murray House Training College. First job in 1939 - teaching art at Dumfries.

Feb 1940 - began training for Royal Corps of Signals at Whitby and then in Aldershot to be a signal officer.

### F4738 Side B

Posted to Jerusalem, acquired a studio room in north district. Describes signal duties. 10 months in Jerusalem. Group exhibition in a private gallery. British council also asked him to contribute to some 'cultural' shows. Girlfriends. Unhappy posting to Cyprus and then Italy. Meeting up with artists in Rome and Sienna. Producing water-colour landscapes at this time. Exhibits at galleria Michaelangelo in Florence. Appointed Signals Officer for an Italian Division. Meets Merlyn Evans in Italy. War period a kind of relief from his artwork.

### F4739 Side A

Posted to Celle, near Hamburg, as part of the Monuments, Fine Arts and Archives Section of Control Commission. Lived at Schloss Celle, a kind of repository for art material, particularly from Berlin.

Organises exhibitions. One man exhibition in Hamburg.

Friendship and discovery of the work of Karl Otto Götz, who he later introduces to COBRA group. Describes offset printing process, which he first sees demonstrated by Jankel Adler in London. Used by Klee to provide a broken black line. Götz also used varnish as a form of relief printing. Götz also used varnish as a form of relief printing. Götz - fluid abstraction akin in spirit to Gear at this time.

End of Commission and move to Paris.

#### F4739 Side B

Interview on 8.8.1995

Acquires studio in Paris at 13 Quai des Grands Augustins, Vlme - a description.

Job with French radio. First sales and theory of post-War courting of his work. Freedom of activity associated with 'lyrical abstractionism'.

The artistic groupings in Paris and first contact with the COBRA group through Stephen Gilbert. Importance of the original German Expressionists to the COBRA group as well as the Northern European tradition.

#### F4740 Side A

Scarcity of materials - how these were acquired. A limiting factor with 4 feet square the biggest size at this time.

Winter Phantom - Feb 1949 (Birmingham Museums and Art gallery) - painted on card with intense printers ink thinned down and gouache and blanc gelatineux.

Format of black, white and colour and the influence of Léger. At this time black and white and possibly three strong colours straight from the tube. Looking for powerful contrasts. Idea of unit in its own right, only later taken to the edges. Baroque in style, no straight/cubic lines. Titles.

First one-man shows in Paris and London in 1948.

#### F4740 Side B

COBRA and 'nature deformed towards abstraction'. Anathema of pure abstraction. Works within nature 'retaining link with observable world'. COBRA exhibition at Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam - 1949. Hostile reaction.

Leaves Paris 1950.

Meeting and subsequent marriage with Charlotte Chertok.

#### F4741 Side A

The Pollock connection and Betty Parson's visit to studio in May 1949. Gear's use of the 'dribble'.

Showing gouaches on paper on 1948 - works on card are slightly later and closer to the oils on canvas.

First encounter with American Abstract Expressionism. Contact with Alan Davie. Monotypes. Lithographs printed by Jean Pons. Limitations of Lithography; preference for screenprinting and first encounter with the process. Later produced screenprint for St George's Gallery, London.

#### F4741 Side B

Influence of Nicholas de Staël, meeting, asking WG for advice on pricing. Shared dialogue around painting - the painting of a natural form like an apple is equally about the concerns of an abstract shape. Nature on sub-atomic level. Visit to St Ives in June 1948. After Paris need to be alone and not part of an artists' colony. Critique of Post-war Paris: Art and Existentialism exhibition at the Tate Gallery.

Interview 18.8.1995

Return to England, to live in Buckinghamshire from the winter of 1950 through to spring 1951. March 1951 moved to a nearby farmhouse in Speen owned by Ishbel Macdonald.

#### F4742 Side A

Regular exhibitions at Gimpel Fils, London. Festival of Britain/Arts Council Commission Autumn Landscape painted Nov/Dec 1951 - one of his largest canvases to date. Bought two other stretchers at the same time. Account of the public reaction that followed. Positive critical response in early stages but later work changed, which critics found hard to accept.

Account of two particular works of this early 1950's period through to minimalism of the mid 1950s. The armature structure. Move towards sculptural concerns.

#### F4742 Side B

Elaboration of texture and inclusion of sand to achieve roughness. Use of scraper; influence of De Staël. Repulsion from previous work and need for self-criticism. Reacted against a pedagogical insistence on form. Impact of American Abstract Expressionism in London. Held Americans at bay.

Purchases house in Littlebourne, Kent. Few sales of minimalist work.

Appointed Curator, Towner Art gallery, Eastbourne. Difficulties with Local Council and dual/separate role of curator and painter.

#### F4743 Side A

Health suffers. Policy for purchasing in Eastbourne. London response to curatorial job.

Busy, good period for painting. Friendship with Stanley William Hayter and subsequent introduction of Jennifer Dickson to Atelier 17.

Approach to screenprinting and its relationship to painting/working with gouache. Concentration on oils on canvas in early 1960. Rarely preliminary studies. Process of painting. Description of Landscape Image No 1 1961 (Birmingham Museums and Art Gallery).

#### F4743 Side B

Yellow Chevron and commentary on the structural /landscape idea. Scale of work and working to series - series of similar works. Soundness of technique. Rare use of acrylic. Absence of stained glass work but designs for textiles for Edinburgh Weavers and later for Nottingham firm. Wallpaper designs during Eastbourne period.

Decision to move to Birmingham College of Art as head of the fine Art \Department. Time of great change. Anecdotes of the old teaching/marking system.

#### F4744 Side A

Greater freedom of the new National System which in 1964/5 becomes the Dip AD Course. Very positive for the first 2 or 3 years then in 1968, politics; became less interested.

Ethos of the Birmingham College of Art with house in Pembrokeshire. Visiting lecturers and special guests. John Walker on staff. Teaches 4 days a week. Studio in 46 George Road, Edgbaston at the top of the house. Difficult time for selling.

#### F4744 Side B

Life and work in Birmingham in many respects less successful than in Eastbourne. Lack of artistic climate. Relationship to Scotland and living away from native country. Clarification on labels British/Scottish artist. Antipathy to Scottish Nationalism and Edinburgh cosiness. International recognition of COBRA in Paris in 1982. Subsequent important exhibitions in Germany and Scandinavia. 50th COBRA anniversary planned for 1998 in Amsterdam. New COBRA Museum opening in Amstelveen in Nov 1995.

'Constipated reticence' in UK for William Gear's work?

End of interview