

**IMPORTANT**

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NATIONAL LIFE STORY COLLECTION

ARTISTS' LIVES

Conroy Maddox

interviewed by Robin Dutt

F6321 Side A

*Interview with Conroy Maddox on March the 21<sup>st</sup> 1996 at his home in London.*

*Conroy, tell me, do you have an earliest memory?*

I have many early memories, it depends on which one you would like first.

*Which is the very earliest?*

Well, I suppose it goes back to when I was born.

*Which was when?*

In December the 27<sup>th</sup> 1912. And, my...of course this was sort of the beginning of the First world War in a way, you know, on the edge of it, and I think my father was in the Territorial Army, which meant he was free until he was called up, and his work was, he was a fruit farmer, and he had fields dotted around the area. Ledbury is a small market town in Herefordshire, we lived about half a mile away from the centre, in a very large house. But his other great obsession was collecting, collecting, which meant that he would go to these country sales around, and very often in his car, he had an old Buick, one of the first of the American cars around there, and he would come

back loaded up with stuff. The house, much to the horror of my mother I think, began to look like a museum, you know, there were suits of armour, there were assegais, there were pistols and pouches, everything like this, even pianolas would turn up, it was quite extraordinary. So I think really, in spite of his farming interests, collecting was his great obsession.

*And that's your earliest memory, being surrounded by things?*

Absolutely, yes.

*But, can we go back a little bit? Before that, that was your childhood but, you were brought up in a farming environment I suppose.*

Yes very much so.

*But what about your grandparents? Because now we're really going back to, shall we say the mid to late Victorian age really.*

Yes, they must, they were born in the last century of course. They lived at Pershore.

*Which, the maternal or the paternal?*

My mother's parents. My father's parents were in Ledbury itself.

*And what did they do, what did the grandparents do, on both sides?*

Well, on both sides. My grandfather in Pershore, which was my mother's father, he was something to do with income tax, he had...they had a house called Whitcroft[ph], which was just away from the centre of the town, another large house with fields and fruit farming and, you know, plums and apples and gooseberries and everything else. And he had attached to the house an extension as it were, which was an office for him, because he did income tax and things like that. We regularly, as we got a bit older, we would go over there for Christmas and various events and birthdays and so on. As for my father's side, my father had a seed merchants business in Ledbury,

which I believe now is Woolworths, next to the town hall, and he was a member of the, what do you call this organisation?

*Union, or...? No.*

No. It was...they have a symbol. Freemasons, he was involved with the Freemasons. A big man, who limped, ever since I can remember he limped from some wound or other. And his wife was just there, you know, I don't know what she did, if anything of course. I think wives in those days very much did all the cooking and running the kitchens, you know. But, my parents, it's interesting you know, my mother, who was a family of about eleven, she left Pershore and came to work in a business, a shop I believe, in Ledbury, and my father met her there, and they got married. And she was very small you know, she was very short.

*And when did they get married?*

Oh, well, since I was born in 1912 I imagine probably a year or two prior to that, I should think, because it was a favourite thing of having children pretty soon after you were married. Still is I believe. So I think it was probably in 1910, 1911, somewhere around that. A year later my sister was born, which was one year and two days later.

*Any other siblings?*

No, no others at all. And of course I remember distinctly when the war broke out, I was still young, I was only probably two or three or something like that, my father was called up and my mother was left looking after us.

*What was your sister's name?*

Her name is, well oddly enough her name is Joan, but, she was frightened of spiders, and I nicknamed her Muff, and Muff stuck for many many years, and I can still, when I speak to her I sometimes think, no I mustn't call her Muff any more, you know. But, and she's still around of course, she's living in Kenilworth at the moment, and I

know when I have my birthday, whether it's 80 like it was this, last year, 83, she's 82, plus two days.

*Tell me about your family life as far as, your perception of it as a young boy growing up in Ledbury. I mean, one would presume that at that time it was much more countrified than now, certainly, a slice of old England in a way.*

Mm, very much I think. A great cattle market there of course every Wednesday I believe, so that market area was full of people. They would have the usual yearly festival as it were with stalls and roundabouts turning up on the common land. And, apart from this aspect of my father who would, always had his fruit farming and things, he had horses of course, hay fields to feed the horses, in fact I have a scar on my cheek still from one of them throwing me. I went over the fence, the horse didn't, you know. But, otherwise I think...I think we both had a very, quite a happy life, you know, when we were young.

*So this was, once again, it was about 1912/13/14, something like this.*

That's right.

*What in particular can you remember about England of those pre-war years?*

Well politically, I was not conscious of things, except my mother was a staunch Conservative, and my father was a Liberal, and whenever there was an elections coming up they wouldn't speak to each other for weeks, it was quite extraordinary. And so there was a sort of thing going on in the house, but we just, it just flowed over the top of us, you know, we...

*But you were certainly aware of some tension?*

Of course, yes.

*Which is beyond a minor tiff?*

Absolutely.

*And they were so passionate, because they were really very politically aware, or simply that this was an issue and they took sides, just as if they might have taken sides over a taste of wallpaper or paint for the house, or...?*

Yes, I think it was a little more intense than that of course. Of course another thing my father had was, he was really a complete atheist you know, and I remember one occasion very well, and of course I was a bit older then you see, of, you know the local priest would always go round, always come round about tea time, hoping for a cup of tea and piece of cake, and he said to my mother once afterwards, she would talk to him at the door, he said, 'We don't want any more of these black beetles in the house, we've got enough as it is,' you know. And, this attitude was very common with him, and I think probably led to my sort of rejection of religion anyway. But, it was very amusing. The other thing of course he did in his collecting, it would expand, you know, and he bought on one occasion a cheese-making plant. Because of our house, we had various outhouses in the grounds and things, he installed this, and there was great activity turning out cheeses you see, great round cheeses, you know. No one ever bought them, but since he was a member of the bowling club he would give them as prizes you see. The other thing was that, in those days of course we had gas lighting, no electricity, and he had the idea, he had a brother of his who had some connection with electricity, you know, electrical supplies and things, and they got together and decided to wire the place up for electricity. And at the bottom of the garden there were masses of these glass cells, and a bulldog engine to drive and generate it, and all the wiring was done, every house was, you know, chaos for weeks. And it came the great day for switching it on, and in each light there was a glimmer, less powerful than a torch. It was a complete disaster. And he had great, grandiose ideas like this which never worked out quite, but he just brushed them aside, and this was very typical of his attitude. And of course, he had of course a fantastic collection in Ledbury. And then, I think this, we're jumping forward quite a bit of course here, I suppose around about 1928 or '29 there was quite a slump going on, and he sold most of it, except for his coin collection, he had a beautiful, superb collection of English silver, Georgian and such like, cases of it. So...can I jump forward here a bit?

*Or I'd like...in fact...but, jump forward if you like, but I'll bring you back.*

OK.

*I want to come back to your childhood, because, I feel we haven't explored that enough, and it provides so many clues.*

Right.

*So there you were, growing up in what was quite a house of differences.*

Mm, very much.

*And, you were saying that it registered on you the fights on political bases. What other differences did you notice, what other...? Because children are very aware aren't they.*

Yes, that's true. I don't know whether...there was never any conflict there, you know, I mean, I don't ever remember being smacked for instance. It was a very casual relationship you know, very give-and-take always.

*Yes, absolutely. Do you remember your school mates being chastised in that way?*

Ah, well, we went, both of us, my sister and myself, we went to a private school.

*Was this the norm, for people of your...?*

Yes, I think it was, yes. It was run by the two Miss Wades, it was a delightful school actually. The juniors, when I first went, were on the ground floor; as you developed you went to the classes above, which was an outside staircase to go up to the room above. And, the two Miss Wades, the one, the eldest one handled the younger children. And I always remember once, when I came back and the, well the teacher had said to me one day, 'Shift up a bit.' And I told my mother, you know, she was asking me about it, and she said, 'Shift? That isn't a word a teacher would have

used.' It was quite a logical word of course. She felt it was a little, you know, socially unacceptable. The nice thing was of course that the...the teachers decided that they needed perhaps a different kind of teacher for, as we got more advanced upstairs, in this room, and they brought in a man who used to gather us round about twice a week, sort of, almost like a circle round him, you know, while he extolled the virtues of Germany, and the emerging Nazism in a way you see, it was quite extraordinary.

*How could this have been allowed?*

Well, I don't think they were aware of what was going on. He wasn't German, there may have been a background of German, you know, something in history, but he did extol the virtues of Germany, which ultimately, you could see how it was leading to a kind of fascism you see, or Nazism. The thing is, I think he...he didn't last very long, he used to turn up with leather shorts, you know, and the right sort of Oppenstock wear you see. So he went. We had another man, another teacher there, who was...you know the teaching method was quite extraordinary in those days, because there was great memorising of everything, Worcester on the Severn, Hereford on the Wye, you know, you learnt it that way you see. And I still retain today the names of the Books of the Bible, Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Job, first and second Kings, first and... You see, and that's stuck in my memory.

*Do you think you were aware of being frightened into learning as a child, as is represented by certainly a lot of the late novels of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and early 20<sup>th</sup>, this sort of discipline, do you think there was unnecessary discipline or were you frightened of education and so on?*

No, I didn't find that at all, I didn't feel any pressure of any kind on one, no.

*You never thought of questioning, well why are we learning the names of rivers, and books?*

Well that I feel, that one seemed unnecessary, but...

*But did you feel that at the time?*

To the best of my knowledge I did, because I was... You know, one of the interesting things I started to do was, keep a book of words, from a dictionary, so that I could learn them, and I built up a vocabulary as it were of words that you wouldn't normally get in ordinary...like the word, if you look at it, it looks like com-promise, but it's compromise you see, cases like that. So you learnt to pronounce the words correctly.

*So whereas your father was accruing a collection of things, you were accruing, beginning to accrue in a schoolboy fashion, other things?*

That's right.

*And did you also collect, as several schoolboys do, bizarre things?*

No, I don't think I did, I don't recollect doing anything like that. I painted a lot, because like all those schools they have painting lessons, and at the end of a certain period they would give a prize, and I won a lot of prizes. They were books of course, not necessarily art books either of course. But, I remember once, it was... You see after I had left that school, after I had graduated from that school, there was a big secondary school that opened up at, towards Eastnor Park, in Ledbury, and I went there of course, and of course there was more art there, which I became interested in. But I remember the teacher there saying to me once, you know, 'I used to like J.M.W. Turner very much, until I discovered he was a drunk.' You know, art was defined by how you behaved, and your conduct. But I read a lot there as well.

*And you were of course painting sort of images which were not necessarily from your subconscious, that...?*

No, they were plaster models, or landscapes, or whatever else, or, whatever they put in front of you. Sometimes they would take you out in the grounds, which were quite extensive; there was even an island in a pond, and I assume the school's still there today. So one would go out and paint trees, and you know, whatever else you saw, or what they decided you should look at.

*What did they think was the value of that, of art, of painting?*

I don't know, I don't know whether they thought there was any value, it was just part of the curriculum. I mean the one thing that always I found the greatest difficulty was maths of course, that defeated me completely.

*Can I just take you back again to the war years? Because there you were, perhaps a toddler, a two-year-old boy, at the outbreak of the war.*

Yes.

*And by the time the war was over, you were about six or so.*

Mhm.

*Five or six.*

Yes. And of course, like all little towns they had the celebration when peace came.

*Yes.*

And there was an effigy of the Kaiser of course being burnt, and I was one of the few people who burst into tears, they were burning a real person.

*Do you remember why, the feelings?*

No, it worried me in some way, you know, and that was my feeling, and I just burst into tears.

*And you hadn't seen a Guy Fawkes bonfire before?*

No.

*At two years old you would be aware of very little, but by the end of the war perhaps you would have been aware a little bit of hardships or your mother's feelings, or the town's feelings. Do you remember as a young boy what the feeling was like of being caught in a wartime situation?*

Well the wartime situation, I remember my mother really, we moved upstairs to the house, because I think there was even the fear of Zeppelins coming over or something, and that room seemed to be the room in which one lived in, you know, at the top floor.

*It seems strange that you didn't move to the basement.*

Yes it's strange isn't it. Why the top floor? Actually there was no cellar there. But, we stayed in that top room throughout the war pretty well. Occasionally my father would come on leave, usually with a huge bag of sugar or something that he had got. But, no, a lot of that life was spent indoors really, I mean, we would go out in the prams or whatever it was I suppose, or even walking then, but most of the time it was spent in that room, it's extraordinary.

*And, it's impossible to say why your mother did that, why you decamped to the upstairs room.*

No idea at all, no. You would think, as you say, either the cellar or the ground floor would have been safer. But I suppose by barring everything down below it protected you from invasion by, you know, possible thieves or anything, although thieves were almost unknown in those days of course, or, they did exist but we didn't see them in country places like Ledbury.

*The community of Ledbury must have been extremely small at that time.*

Yes.

*Even though it was a town and so on. Was it a place where you did know your neighbour's business and...?*

Yes, it was...you know, John Masefield was born there you know, and, who was the woman who...there's a...she was a poet. No. Her father treated her very badly, she was always treated as an invalid.

*Elizabeth Barrett Browning?*

Browning, she was there for a time you see. And I've always had this idea, there was an incredible woman who lived in the country a little bit, who used to turn up in Ledbury in a coach, with a coachman and two horses, trawling through the place. And I've often spoken to my cousin who is still in Ledbury, Liam Merritt[ph], which was the, his mother was the sister of my father you see, and his father, but they're both...she married, and, they're both dead now, but Liam is still there. And, he can't remember it at all. But I had several cousins there as well you see.

*So although you had a small immediate family, it was quite a big extended one, in a way?*

Yes it was, mm. There were quite a few uncles of mine, you know, from my father's side you see, that were around.

*And were they, would you say, well would you...what class would you have put yourself in, in that time?*

I don't know. I've always thought of it *déclassé* rather than class, but, I don't know really.

*How do you think others would have classified you?*

Ah, oh, middle class I imagine, probably, that would be it, yes.

*So you would be among the emerging New Edwardians and...?*

Yes. Yes possibly, yes. Yes, I mean that's why, I mean, there was a council school, like there is in small towns, but we were not allowed to go to that, you know, you had to go to a private school. Because there was enough money to afford it I suppose; finance usually controls what, where you go and what you do.

*Did you make friends easily as a boy?*

Oh yes, I had many friends, mm, in the area.

*And how did you go about choosing them?*

Well, sometimes through the school, and of course some of the people at the Wade School were also the sons and the daughters of farmers, who, a little further away, you would go out to them and spend a day or two, and so on you see, so you had this mixture of farming and... And one of my uncles was mixed up in the bakery business, and, of course this would be after the war a little bit, but, Hereford was a great hop-picking area, and every year there was a great invasion from people in Birmingham and places like that who would pour down. They would paint the old pigsties out for them to live in, you know. And he would set up stalls where he could supply them with, you know, tea, sugar, a sandwich, everything you see, and did a very good business in this. Sometimes the pickers used to disappear without having paid him, but, nevertheless that was one of the risks you took. And we used to go out there sometimes and have a lot of fun there in the hop-picking area.

*Did you actually hop-pick yourself?*

Not at all, no. Well I knew the Pudges[ph] who had a very big farm there, and I used to go over there and, I've forgotten the girls' name now, she was one of the daughters, and she had one or two brothers, and they had horses and everything else, and I learnt to ride quite a lot there.

*At a young age as well?*

At a young age, yes. After the war of course. So that was, what was I? About eight, nine, ten. So, you know, one's life was pretty easy, you had enough pocket money, you know.

*Was there anything to spend it on?*

Very little, sweets of course.

*What sort of sweets were there around?*

And magazines. Magazines of course.

*What sort of sweets were you buying then? I mean, because now we all, we know the sort of sweets people buy, but what was on offer then?*

Oh, many kinds of things, you know. In winter there were the humbug sort of things, and there were chocolates, and so on. And very cheap of course. And there used to be a little shop there which used to sell those, they're not milkshakes but they're flavoured milk, not milk but flavoured drinks, and, we used to go in there and spend our money. And we got quite well known, a whole group of us, you know. At that time too at school I got quite interested in, especially when I went to the secondary school, in making fireworks, you know, and I got into an awful lot of trouble over that, because I made an elaborate rocket, which of course didn't go up but exploded, you know, and I was hauled over the coals over that.

*How did you manage to get the gunpowder for that?*

Well you go to a chemist and you get all the things you need for it you see. It's very easy. I found a glorious old book somewhere which gave you recipes for everything from hair, you know, ointment or whatever, and how to make gunpowder. Or a rocket, well, gunpowder really, mm, it's very simple. It's like on the Internet now you can make Ecstasy.

*So there you were, making fireworks, riding horses, eating sweets, and reading magazines.*

Of course.

*What sort of magazines?*

'Magnet' of course was the great one.

*'Magnet'?*

The 'Magnet', yes, with Billy Bunter and the school. And of course 'Chips' and whatever the other magazines were called.

*Was this the chief way people entertained themselves, children, young people?*

Yes, very much so. That and games of course. But, I didn't take to games too well, we played cricket there, and football of course. I don't think there was anything else. There was gym of course, you went out, you had to go out to do your gym business. It wasn't until later on when we moved from Ledbury to Chipping Norton, which happened to be in summer, we didn't play cricket, we played baseball.

*Why did you...well, OK, I must ask you, why did you move in the first place?*

Ah. Well I think the 1929, '28/29, the slump was hitting farming and everything else, and my father decided he would get out you see. And he bought a very large pub called, it's still there in Chipping Norton, The Blue Boar, and it's still a very big place; I know because Silvano has been to look at it. And, he bought that place, which was rather glorious because it had, it was an old coaching place of course, so it had stables at the back, the back entrance.

*I must just say, and you are referring to Silvano Levy, who is writing your authorised biography.*

Correct.

*Sorry to interrupt.*

No. So, we had great fun there of course. And, whoever had been in there in the past had left chests full of stuff, clothes and all sorts of things, so we had great fun. But, there was no, there was only the council school in Ledbury, they hadn't built any other school, so, the headmaster of the council school had a son whose name I've forgotten now, but we were quite friends, and he agreed with my father that he would educate us in his spare time, evenings and weekends you see, so we had private lessons, his son. Until they had finished the school, which was another big school, quite large, I forget where actually but quite near in Chipping Norton.

*So this didn't distress you in any way, the fact that you had to uproot yourself?*

No, I think the move was made when... We also had, my mother had relatives dotted all over the place, and there was, in Cirencester there was a sister of hers who had married, and he was a cutter at Hamper & Fry. Now Hamper & Fry were the big hunt people who made all the uniforms for the hunt and things, and he was the chief cutter there. And, we were shovelled off to there, my sister and myself, while the move was made you see. And it was only, we didn't even know why we were sent there, just for a little holiday you see. But someone in the town, who knew the woman we were staying with, my mother's sister, said to us one day, 'I see your father's in the newspaper, and you've moved.' So then we got a message, we were picked up and taken to Chipping Norton, to The Blue Boar, which was very nice, it's a delightful place. Do you know, Chipping Norton's a quite extraordinary town. They used to say the...the main street, it's on two levels, the main street was on a level with the church steeple in Broadway, because as I say, great [INAUDIBLE] now. I don't know where it was, but... the only thing was of course, the winters were hideous, I mean the snow would come then, and you couldn't tell the road from the hedgerow, it was covering straight across, quite extraordinary. And of course with the frost as well, the only thing that you could do was to put a screw.....

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*.....prevent yourself from slipping?*

Well the first thing to do was to put a screw into the heel of your shoe, which does prevent you slipping on icy surfaces.

*Now, you move, you make the move, and you are what sort of age by now, in Chipping Norton?*

In Chipping Norton. I suppose that was...when would it be?

*Would it have been early Twenties?*

Yes, we left Chipping Norton round about 1930; we were not there very long then. And went to Birmingham. Because my father then had got tired of this Blue Boar pub he was running, and joined forces with a firm that were importing wines and spirits, and he became quite an authority on wines, I don't know about spirits but on wines he was very good.

*What did your mother have to say about all this chopping and changing?*

I don't know, she seemed to go along with it very happily, you know. I mean, I think she was glad to get out of the house, which looked like a storage place for second-hand equipment, but, and everything else, you know, it was just a nice break. Also, Chipping Norton was probably even smaller than Ledbury of course.

*Your father seems to have been someone terribly inventive, someone who would turn a crisis into a success.*

Oh yes, just slipped off his back like a duck, you know, or whatever we say. I mean, it didn't phase him at all, he just accepted it and went on to do something else. He always had ideas about doing something.

*Were you impressed with your father as a child?*

I think I got on with him very well, I think both of us did.

*Your sister too?*

Yes.

*And what about your mother, did you...you were impressed with her?*

Yes, oh yes. There was a close link there as well. It wasn't excessive, you know, and they were very tolerant, they didn't interfere with one, which was exceptional, you know.

*Despite being the new middle class perhaps shall we say, your parents, were they also involved in middle-class interests, like for example suppers and lunches and, was it a very social household that you lived in?*

No, I don't think it was exceptionally social. I can't remember any dinners or anything. I mean they would go out with people and, usually relatives you know, there was a link there always, and odd people you met. But, I can't think it was a great social life, no. And of course, I think, what I discovered after one had left Ledbury, and also after one had left Chipping Norton, was, there was such little access to literature, the libraries were not really available, you know, in the way...it isn't till you get to Birmingham that you found that there was another world there which was all in a library you see.

*And of course, chemists like Boots used to be libraries too.*

Indeed, oh yes they probably were, but mostly novels you see. And I read an awful lot of course, of novels, in fact things that, you know, early things, whether it was Huxley and all these people.

*So very contemporary?*

Very contemporary stuff, yes. Yes I read all the Huxley, and lots of other people. Dornford Yates for instance, and, even that neo-fascist writer, what was his name? Bulldog Drummond and those sort of people. So I got a good grounding in that, you know. But, the other thing of course I had a come cross in Chipping Norton, through the schooling, were art books.

*Your tastes weren't at all influenced by your parents it seems.*

No, because, I think, mainly I think because, I got very interested in art, you know, and I was always drawing, always painting. But no direction.

*Can you actually trace the moment, or the moments, when this occurred to you, that art was exciting?*

Well, I think that began in Birmingham, in around about 1933, and it was through the library I came cross the books by W.H. Walenski[ph], modern French painting, modern European art, and so on. And it was in one of those, and I forget which one, I think there are five books altogether, and I believe Birmingham library has still got them, where he reproduced De Chirico and Max Ernst and people like that, and I thought then, this is the way art should go, you know. It's got something more than just the pleasures of the table, you know, the landscapes and the portraits and the still lifes and so on. So, that influenced me quite a lot. But the other interesting thing was, around about that time, I read the letters of Queen Victoria, and in the course of these letters, she's writing to a woman friend of hers, and she says to her, 'I am really wondering what to give dear Willie,' that was the Kaiser of course; this was about 1890, 'for his birthday.' And some pages, she goes on to talk about something else, and some pages further on she is writing again to the same woman, and she says, 'I have had a marvellous idea what to give dear Willie; I am going to give him the mountain, Kilimanjaro.' Which I thought was absolutely delightful, you know, because, I mean, it was a subject as it were, and that link with what I had read, that little bit in Walenski's[ph] book, which was very short, about Surrealism in France, this was a perfect image, you know; not only could you have the mountain, you could

have Queen Victoria, you could have the Kaiser, there was revolutionary activity on the periphery. And it became a subject for my first painting.

*And how old were you at this stage, your first painting?*

Well let me see, '33, what was I? Twelve...

*Twenty-one.*

Twenty-one? Right. And, it doesn't exist any more of course, but, that started. And then of course I, from Birmingham it was quite easy to get up to London, to Zwemmer's bookshop, which was a constant source of, because they had everything, you know, coming in there. And I used to come back loaded with the books I could afford.

*Did you feel that, you were saying that you had many friends as a child, you made friends easily; did you feel that in a way your obsession with art or your preoccupation with art was actually distancing you from others?*

Well, in Birmingham it was easier of course, because the first thing you do is to find out who's...I mean, most towns are impossible to live in, it's the people you know that makes them bearable. And I knew there must be someone around of a kindred soul, you know. So, it just happened that there was a travelling exhibition that arrived at Birmingham City Art Gallery, and I wrote a letter criticising it, because it had all the usual, you know, Sutherland at that time, and all those people. So, it brought a response, and several people wrote in, others attacked it of course, my letter. But, I had a letter from John Melville, who was a painter of course, and through John, who lived at Fiveways in Hagley Road, we met up, and he introduced me to his brother, Robert, who at that time was writing a book on the work of Picasso, based on a collection of a private collector named Hugh Willoughby[ph], who had quite a small but very select works of Picasso. And, John was painting, and very much influenced by Picasso too, especially the Big Women series. So, over the time we moved from, I forget where we were at first, but...oh yes I remember. I had a flat at Fiveways which was quite near John Melville, and then I met...let me see. Yes, this must be later, at

the beginning of the war, because they opened in Birmingham an international centre, which had a mixture of, say, forty per cent foreign visitors, people living...and sixty per cent English, and it became an international centre for gathering, you could have coffee, and they used to publish their own little magazine and things like that. So, I... I met Nan there, and we got a place together, which, I forget where at the moment, but we then moved to Speedwell Road, which was right opposite the park, Calthorpe Park, off, where would it be? I forget which area it was, but it wasn't far from the centre. And it was quite a big, it had eleven rooms, and I think we paid about thirty-five shillings a week for it, you know, it was that sort of rent you paid then. And, I thought, this is a nice idea, let's have a fortnightly gathering of people, so you got students and writers and painters gathering around.

*And you would have been at this time, how old?*

Well, how old again? Yes, that's a problem isn't it, calculating it. 1912.

*And this would have been about 19...?*

Make it 1910, you can add the two afterwards. So this would be...

*Would it have been the mid-Thirties?*

No, it would be later than that, yes. Well the Forties was the war wasn't it.

'38[sic].

'38[sic].

*Till '45.*

Yes, '45. Well, if we go back to that period, I worked for a firm, and I was designing exhibition stands, because you know, artists in those days had to make, had to earn your leisure, you know. As I always say, you know, you've got one, an artist's got one foot on a bar of soap and the other in the gutter, so you always had a precarious

existence, and if you sold nothing, especially the work I was doing. Anyway, I worked with this firm on exhibition designs, and of course all that work ceased, it just folded up, so I hadn't got anything, and I met the man who used to work for, an advertising firm, and he was in the same position, and he had managed to get in touch with a very big firm in Birmingham called Turner Brothers, who had about seven factories dotted around the area producing pressings and design work and so on, and, he said, 'You should go along, they'll be only too interested to grab you,' you know, 'rather than get you drafted into the Army.' Because I had thought, I don't really want to be in the Army, all this walking the troops that, you know, soldiers do. Flying I didn't believe in, you know, and as for the Navy, well you know, they still had that idea of women and children first. I wasn't in favour of any of these things. And I went along to this, and they said, 'What have you been doing?' And I said, 'Design.' 'Right, when can you start?' So I moved in there, and I moved into the drawing office. After about three months working there they said to me, 'We've got a big social club here (you had to entertain these people, you see, all these workers), we'd like you to join them as well and do stage sets and things,' you know, for productions they did, had ENSA concerts and everything else. So, I got a salary from the drawing office, a salary from the social club, and then a little bit later... You know Rank Film Studios always bought their stereopticons, their background projectors, from America, and Rank wanted to produce their own. And, there was a big firm in Rugby, I've forgotten their name now, but, they sent me over there to...because they were working on one, and of course, it was sound films you see, and they were getting bigger and bigger with water and cement, and everything to block out the sound from the machine you see, the projector. And they wanted me to modernise it and bring it down to a rational size. And I went over there to see them one day, and they took me round the place and explained what they were interested in, and they looked at an open space and said, 'Well, what about working there?' And a couple of days later I go, they built me a place, you know. I got another salary for that, and all the travelling expenses. So I lived on three salaries; I lived on one actually and banked the other two you see. And I think my contribution to the war was about as minimal as it could be.

*Tell me, I can't quite understand how you managed through your work to escape being drafted.*

Because you were reserved immediately. Once you got into industry you were reserved.

*Because, were you helping the war effort in some way?*

Of course, yes. I mean, the drawing office side was, they were doing the pressings for parts on aircraft, bits of it you see, but in between all that they would also do little parts for cigarette lighters, only part of it you see, because otherwise everyone would be assembling their own and having a cigarette lighter, so you did parts of it, the casing you see. So what you did was work out a design of what the part was, or which had already come to you from the Ministry you see, and that was drawn up to a scale, and that's where mathematics came in, trigonometry, of which I knew nothing, but there were always some bright ones who could help you on that you see. And I became very fast at drawing these things, so if they had a problem with someone waiting for a drawing, they would invariably pick on me you see, so I would have to rush off a drawing, a scale drawing. And, so I did that you see.

*Yes. And, how, do you remember how that was received by perfect strangers in the street, that if you were walking around, you weren't at war, it wasn't quite the presentation of a white feather, but how were you perceived?*

Ah, you don't have to worry about that, because there were so many people in reserved occupations, so you didn't have to worry about it. No one questioned you.

*And when questioned at a party or something about your views, were you honest about them?*

Oh yes, of course, yes. And I used to cause a lot of trouble. They said I used to spread alarm and despondency you know.

*Give me an example or two.*

Well, well you know, they would tell you awful stories in a way which really date I suppose from the First World War, that you know, babies were bound up and used as footballs, and I would cap it with something even more hideous, and they would get to a point where they would say, 'Oh no, that couldn't be possible,' you see.

*You can't remember what the more hideous thing was?*

Morbid stories you know. And it was just to burst that balloon of complacency that they had about it you know.

*Did you in some way, despite the fact that you didn't partake in the war, did you agree with it, a part of you?*

Oh the principle of it I think was, yes, what else could we do? We had probably helped to create it of course, but I think we were faced with a situation where it was a difficult to be a conscientious objector. Although many of my friends were conscientious objectors, and they would be allocated to farming or digging or something in the fields; after a few weeks they would disappear.

*Meaning?*

Well, they would give up their job and disappear into the crowds. We put up one or two at our place you know, all on the run, and of course it took the Government months to find them, then they'd put them back again, they'd go... It was absolutely farcical of course. I mean, a man who ultimately finished up at the Courtauld Institute was one of them. Very funny. And there were usually people like that, you know, they were university people who were absolutely against it. I always remember that lovely remark of Sassoon I think wasn't it, when he, he was against the war, and they pointed out to him at the conference, you know, where they questioned these people, 'What would you do if a Nazi was raping your sister?' And I think he said, 'Well I'd try to get between them.'

*What would you say the general feeling was at that time? Can you...you must...you were a young man, you must have remembered a lot about that time, a significant moment.*

Well, I suppose the significant moments were dodging the bombs as you fought. Henry Reed, the poet, was in Birmingham at that time, and lots of other people, and I remember being with him once, we were walking near Aston, and suddenly we heard bombs falling around, the alarm had already gone off, so we went down to a public lavatory. And of course women did as well, to get out of...it seemed a fairly safe place. But it was a bit embarrassing for the women, you know. But, we just sat on the books we had. And I always remember the book I had, which was Nicolas Calas's 'Confound the Wise', which is a glorious study of course, and I remember sitting on that on these cold slabs, you know, for hours on end until the alarm, the all-clear went off. Henry Reed and I once, a lot of people sheltered in the town hall under the arches, but we decided not to stay with the crowd but went up on the balcony and sat there. It wasn't until the light came that we realised it was a glass skylight, which wasn't very safe. But, no, I mean, the other thing of course was, you didn't know what was going to happen, I mean you just, you went to parties one night, you stayed up, or lounged around all night; you had to work the next morning, and you would go to another party the next night, you know.

*So it was possible to still have fun?*

Oh yes, very much so.

*And what sort of type of fun were you having as a young man?*

Oh, well, talk was one of the great guiding principles as it were of what you did. And lots of girls around of course. There was a local pub in Birmingham, a very well known one, and we met there in the evenings, and, we really took over that one particular room. And of course there were...we used to cause a lot of trouble, because other people used to come in, and you know, it was a very strange thing, when they played the anthem, 'God Save the King' on the radio, some of them would stand up you see, which is...and others would sit firmly down, which caused a little conflict at

times. But it was very amusing, those evenings. And, lots of us gathered. And then we would finish up, and I remember one lovely occasion, leaving there, I threw my overcoat over my shoulders you see, so my arms were inside it, and coming out of the pub, a man brushed against me, and he looked down and saw this loose sleeve, and he said, 'Oh I'm so sorry'. You know, implying that I had lost an arm. That was all right, I took no notice, you know. But we decided to go to the Queen's Hotel, near the railway station, for a coffee afterwards, which was always open late, and, I get in there, I take my coat off, and suddenly I realise he and his wife were coming in, so I put the coat back on and had to sit there with one arm like that. But, otherwise, no, one did lots of things, you know. And painting as well of course, as much as one could.

*And lots of dancing I am sure.*

Well, I didn't dance a lot, you know, but, there was, they had parties always. The awful thing was that, the only wine you could get was Algerian wine, which is absolutely undrinkable, but we had a friend who worked in the laboratory and he used to bring pure alcohol, so we would open the bottles and knock out about half a pint and fill it up with pure alcohol, which was quite potent, you know, you'd be talking to someone leaning against a wall and suddenly they would collapse in front of you.

*You are talking about a period which many people regard as, despite the war years, sparkling and effervescent and fun, Cole Porter and Gershwin and Noël Coward and all these characters who gave so much inspiration and fun, as I say. Were you aware that you were living through a special time, apart from being a deprived time?*

I think one was aware of being in a situation that was completely out of your control anyway. I drew up a beautiful map on one occasion of picking all the churches of Birmingham and putting gun emplacements in front of them, you know, for the day of the revolution. But, we did lots of things like that. And of course, another thing, we would gather with Henry Reed and the Melvilles, and people who were working for the Government in places where if you walked with them to their place of work you had to leave them, because they couldn't tell you where they were working you see, it was all kept very hush-hush. I forget the names of those people, they were...they

became very good writers and poets and people, having just come down from Oxford and things, you know.

*So, was Birmingham the last move in a way before London, or...?*

Yes.

*And so you had moved three times in your young life?*

That's right, yes. Ledbury, Chipping Norton, Birmingham, and then London.

*In...let's leave London aside for a minute. With that triangle in mind, were you able to adapt very easily to any situation? Because each one you've mentioned is very different.*

Yes, of course. Of course. Yes, you see, by 1933 I was producing works, '33/34 I was producing surrealist works, and I did get an opportunity through Roland Penrose of showing a bit in London. So when he met David Gascoyne in Paris in '35, they deplored the situation of art in England, decided they would organise with the collaboration of the French, an international Surrealist exhibition.

*What did they find so awful about English art, or British art?*

Well a little while ago, a few years ago, the Hayward Gallery put on a show of art of the Thirties, I don't know whether you saw it, but, one of the works that the V & A have was loaned to it, in fact it hung in Tilly Lotte's[ph] bathroom, which they reconstructed. And, you can see then the kind of art that was being turned out, it was quite extraordinary, you know, completely meaningless really, it had no purpose you know, it was just decoration I suppose.

*So what did you feel that your work could contribute?*

Well, I associate myself with what was happening in Paris, because there was very little in England. If I can deal with the '36 show a little bit, I can explain that. You

see, there was only Penrose who had lived...I mean he was born in 1900, and so, in 1922 he spoke to Roger Fry about studying art, and Fry said to him, 'Of course you've got to go to Paris'. So he, it was 1922, so he was 22 years of age you see. And he went to Paris, and of course he quickly associated with many of the Surrealists, Ernst, Picasso particularly of course, and all the others, although he didn't produce a Surrealist work until around about 1927. Anyway, he came back of course with Gascoyne, and got together with Herbert Read and all those people, and except for John Banting, who had been producing Surrealist work I think in about 1933, there were no other English Surrealists, or who could be incorporated into a group to show in the international show. So, people like, not Penrose so much, Paul Nash, Read and those, went around making Surrealists overnight. They would go to Eileen and say, 'Eileen,' Eileen Agar, they had seen some of her work, 'we would like you in this show, you are a Surrealist.' And she would say, 'Am I?' And they did it with many other people you see. Trevelyan was another one, they didn't know they were Surrealists but they were suddenly collected to make a group. As a result they got 23 artists, and that made up the English section.

*Do you feel on reflection that, it wasn't quite fraudulent but it was a little bit laboured?*

It was indeed, yes, it was very suspect, as it proved of course, because I refused to show. I came up, when we had an invitation, John Melville and myself had an invitation to show, and I said to John and Robert at the time, Robert was a writer so he wasn't a painter, I said, 'Look, I'm going up to see Penrose and see what's going on, let's find out more about it.' So I came up, and he was living then in Hampstead of course, Downshire Hill. And I found out that this is what they were doing, making Surrealists on the spot. So, I went back and told them. So we wrote an open letter to them, which was sent, and of course it disappeared. But, Mesens had it, who had come over to this country to help to handle the Belgian side you see. And it only came to light later on of course, and he reproduced the letter in a piece he wrote about me for a gallery in Brussels, at the Farber Gallery. And what we did was criticise them in their day-to-day conduct and their habits and so on, they were anti-Surrealists and not Surrealists. So we didn't show.

*Tell me, were your parents alive at this stage?*

Oh yes.

*And what did they make of all this?*

Quite happy, they let me get on with what I was doing, you know.

*Did your parents ever closely scrutinise your work in front of them, did they have their word?*

No, they left me entirely alone. They liked what I did sometimes, but that may have been just politeness, who knows?

*It's very strange to think that they, with their presumably conservative upbringing, would not question something so earth-shattering and...*

Of course, yes.

*Why do you think that might have been?*

I don't know, I think it was part of their tolerance. Perhaps they didn't think it was terribly serious, you know. I wasn't mixed up in drugs or crime or anything, so I guess I was OK.

*Was there a lot of drug taking then?*

I don't know. Yes, there was of course. It was coming over from Paris quite a lot, I mean hash was a very common thing. People used to come over with a little matchbox with it in, you know.

*And were people, was absinthe outlawed then, or was it...?*

Well, I went, you see after the '36 exhibition I thought I would go to Paris and meet them there. I had met many of them in London, even Dali of course, after his diving suit venture, his lecture, which was delightful because... I mean it was inaudible in this... I went to all the talks, and they took...I went to dinner with them and everything else, and Mesens had great glee, mischievous glee in saying, 'He refused to show, you know,' and he told Dali, and Dali said, 'He's quite right, he's quite right'.

*Well, of course we'll talk about all these people later on.*

Yes of course, later on, mm.

*But, just to finish this particular part of the life, you obviously embraced this new element of your life with vigour, and a certain amount of mischief I would have thought.*

Of course, yes. I was exploring, particularly, what I was interested in in the early stages of course was something that the Surrealists had gone through in the early period of '24, '25 and so on, was automatism.

*Which is?*

Which is, in painting of, working without any conscious control. It was defined by Breton.

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*.....ism for you, Conroy, must have been a commitment of sorts. You were certainly committed to it before, and it seems to have grown.*

Yes it did. I think it becomes, or it did with me, quite an obsession, which began, as I've already pointed out, back in the mid-Thirties really, well '34/35. But, I was pursuing it constantly, I mean it was the way I thought and it was the people I associated with, and of course my contacts with Mesens, who came over from Brussels and ran the London gallery, was also very important, because you know, there was a constant flow of people who were associated with Surrealism in the gallery, and we met and had many discussions and so on. I suppose in the Seventies quite a lot of things happened, I had a lot of exhibitions and I was producing work pretty constantly. The Hammett Gallery in Cork Street, which was run by Dobber Dean[ph] and Stan Hardy[ph], Dobb's[ph] father was Sir Robert Dean[ph], who I think had some connections with the Mayor Gallery for a time, and a big collector. And, Stan Hardy[ph] rang me up one day and said, 'Look, we're thinking of putting on a Surrealist exhibition, we would like you to come along and have a talk with us and assist us in, you know, organising it.' So I went to see them, and we discussed it generally, and I thought of the idea of calling it 'Britain's Contribution to Surrealism', which was approved, and then I gave them a list of the painters they should collect, out of the 23 that had originally shown with the 1936 exhibition, although many had then left Surrealism. Anyway they got together and did produce an extraordinarily good collection of work, not all 23 artists involved, but the majority of them, of works they had done in the past and which had been in private collections and were borrowed and so on. And it happened that, I had done a lot of works which when I left Birmingham I left in the attic of my parents' place, and I went and fetched them, including a number of paintings as well, and they went into the show. As a result... They liked them very much anyway, and I designed the catalogue cover, and wrote the introduction to it of the early London gallery and its eventual collapse and so on and so forth, and the war coming. And the show was very successful, the Tate bought a number of works from that exhibition, including one of mine, and you know, other people that they hadn't got. It was remarkable, the Tate had so few English Surrealist works, and yet you know, for a time it was one of the most important movements in

this country. I remember that, some time later on the Royal Academy put on a show of movements of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and completely ignored it, but included painters, without specifying that they had any association with Surrealism, were put in just as painters.

*Was this, do you suppose, establishment choice and establishment fear?*

Oh yes, I think that always played a part, you know, even some of the Surrealists themselves, when they backed out of it, those who became official war artists, you know, who didn't want to be associated with a movement which had something of a revolutionary history, particularly in France. And I suppose a bit of it spilt over. So there was an attempt to deny it in that sense, you know.

*People were, do you think, generally frightened of Surrealism?*

Well, I always say, you know, there's nothing that unites the English like war, and nothing that divides it like Surrealism. And so there was always this feeling that, I think they probably thought it was a bit bizarre, a little strange, a little disturbing in many cases of course. So there was always an attempt to devalue it in a way. I mean the critics tended to do this.

*Were there any...sorry. Were there any favourable reviews by critics at the time?*

Yes, there were a few, and some of them oddly enough, the man who was head of the Courtauld.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Anthony Blunt for instance, head of the Courtauld, he was very critical of the movement, but years later revised his opinion entirely, and this was quite common. J.B. Priestley of course was very anti, and always persisted in that attitude of course, but then one didn't treat him very seriously anyway, Surrealists hate novels.

*There haven't been any Surrealist novels?*

None at all, they've never considered them to be a novel.

*Why is that?*

Well, they didn't feel that it had any...any social importance in a way. It was a, you know, a thing you read to...tired people read them.

*But whereas the poem was definitely an art form?*

Oh yes, very definitely, yes, always.

*So what do you think was the difference between a novel and a poem? A poem, some might say, is altogether a little bit more élite.*

Indeed, it probably is, but I think it's probably because the poems that the Surrealists admired were usually written by Surrealist poets, and there were very few exceptions of course. So if Aragon and Eluard, or Peret, who was probably one of the most important of the Surrealist poets, that was acceptable you see. It was an art form. And it had these close links...in fact it raises an interesting point. As you know, they initially condemned painting, because it was a too conscious effort, but you know, it's no more difficult to lift a brush than it is to lift a pen or a pencil to write a poem, as to pick up a brush and paint a picture. If you used automatism in your writings, which the Surrealists in France did of course with magnetic fields and works that Breton and Soupault produced, and which Breton much later on was still producing, hundreds of texts automatically, it was quite easy to produce very automatic paintings, even paintings where artists collaborated with each other you see. So, I never quite understood that sharp distinction they made. And ultimately of course they recognised the fact that this link with poetry and painting was quite valid.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*So Conroy, here you are, your remaining loyal to Surrealism, the decades are going past, people are falling by the wayside, and yet you remain loyal to Surrealism in the face of something such as Pop art, which became the art world's darling. Now why*

*was it that you did remain so doggedly loyal to Surrealism when so many friends I suppose had left it?*

That's true of course. But, I think the important thing was that, I don't...I didn't see for instance, you mentioned Pop art for instance, but Pop art was consumer art, it was drawn from the supermarkets, their imagery; that didn't particularly appeal to me. And I didn't see anything very revolutionary in it, not in the sense that it was really an attempt of exploration and discovery in the direction that Surrealism was going, which was one very good reason why I still held to Surrealism. I may have been a loner at a point, but that was the way I thought.

*Did you think that at that time it was a battle between the psyche and fashion shall we say?*

Well if you like, that's a very good description, yes I think so. Also of course, I suppose it's always possible looking back that, had there been a more revolutionary movement than Surrealism, I might easily have moved in that direction, but I saw no evidence of what was happening in America with the Pop artists, or Abstract Expressionism that came later, and so on. And, that might still be the case today, you know, when I look around myself.

*In retrospect, do you think that, despite the fact that Surrealism was a modern movement, do you think it was the last of the old movements in the art world?*

The last of the old movements. What the Surrealists did, and it was particularly in France of course, was, they rediscovered in a sense the work of painters that had been neglected for years, Bosch for instance, and early painters of the 17<sup>th</sup>, 14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> century. Like in literature, Lautréamont you see, they brought him to prominence, a great writer. Alfred Jarry, all these people were re-established if you like within the Surrealist universe. So, the contribution had a value in that sense of course, even the Marquis de Sade and the writings of the Marquis de Sade, which of course had been hidden away for years. Because they saw it in a very different light, you know. It wasn't because of Sadism, but because of his revolutionary writings you see. And I suppose the same of the quarrel or the struggle of Melder[ph] or of Lautréamont, of,

you know, man against God. So there was...maybe you might say there was an element of the shock tactics about this of course, but that was quite valid because one wanted to jerk the people out of their ordinariness, this confrontation with reality which is a bit elusive when you think of it, you know, what is reality? The Surrealists have always questioned it.

*Do you think that, you mention shock tactics, but do you think that the first shock tactician was Duchamp?*

In a way yes, of course. The only criticism I would have of Duchamp is that, here was a man who produced a work, and then would write pages of explanation of what he was doing. It was a custom that has suddenly become a very popular thing; you've only got to look at the people writing about their acquisitions to the Tate Gallery, writing two or three pages about a silly little bit of curved sculpture on the floor, and it gets pretty meaningless. And I think, unfortunately, Duchamp was to blame for it.

*Do you think that perhaps he was unsure of his own bravado, and he had to actually support it in words?*

Yes, certainly if he wasn't, the other sculptors of the Sixties and Seventies were certainly doing that. How do you justify a little bit of curved steel painted in two colours, without writing about it of course?

*And once you write about it, you give it an intellectual depth or a pseudo-intellectual depth.*

Exactly, yes.

*So, a lot of people with intellectual thoughts in mind might regard Surrealism as primarily an intellectual art form.*

Indeed.

*But you don't hold that to be totally true when it comes to, you were saying, causing revolutions and the ordinariness of things, letting people know that there is something more exciting and...?*

Yes. Of course it, when I say revolution, it's a revolution of the mind of course. Although there were in France very strong revolutionary, politically revolutionary, especially, because you have to remember in the Thirties and things there was the rising of fascism, and they resisted that, just as even the English attempted their way to do it when they, over the Munich thing when they all went around with masks of, who was the Prime Minister then, Chamberlain, made by MacWilliam[ph], when they marched around Trafalgar Square, protesting. But, they were not, it was not a general rule here, there was always conflict within the party, the Surrealist group in England, between those who were, you know, Fourth Internationalists of Trotsky against Stalinists on the other side.

*So, where are we now Conroy? We're at the end of the Sixties, we have passed a very exciting time shall we say in the art world, and you are still producing not just perhaps the usual output but you are really getting more and more into surrealism, your own surrealism.*

Yes, that is true, I was exploring, well the exploration side of autom...it's interesting you know, one talks about automatism as the initial start in Surrealism, which was very much what was being explored, but elements of automatism always exist in surrealist painting. The beginning of a painting can be a very automatic process, or a kind of a free association. So, it is difficult to say that one has dispensed with automatism, it's still there; it's how you control it, and it's that conscious control that plays a very important part in it. Yes, I was, by then I...the beginning of the Seventies, '71 and, one show after another followed then. For instance, in 19, after that show I did at the Hammett Gallery, in 1972 I had a one-man show there, and also I had, following that show I had one in Brussels at the Galerie Escalier[ph], and in Copenhagen as well.

*Can we just go back to the Hammett show? Because the Hammett was a rather well thought of gallery wasn't it, at the time.*

Very good. They did specialise in English painting, English art.

*Well, and in seemingly in your same self-effacing way, you are almost dismissing it, I had a show here, I had a show there, but wasn't this a really big thing, to have had a show in Cork Street at that time, with a good gallery like that?*

Yes I suppose it was, yes.

*Did you think you had reached some sort of pinnacle?*

I don't know. I suppose, like all artists I suppose, you shut yourself away and you work, and you know, Surrealism isn't pulling people's legs, because the artist couldn't care a damn about people's legs, but it's nice to be able to show what you've done, and if someone likes it, it's nicer still. So, it was very nice to show in the Hammett Gallery in Cork Street.

*And what sort of things were you showing?*

It was a mixture, I had, I was still doing gouaches, you know, you break away from oil painting and do gouaches and I used to do collages. And, so it was a mixture, mainly I think oils at that time, I think probably I still have the list of the works that were shown there.

*And how did the sales go, do you remember?*

They did very well actually, yes.

*And who were the buyers, if not...?*

Well, private people. You know at that time there were people who were running businesses, small businesses, and things were quite good at that time, so lots of people you wouldn't think were buying art, were buying it. The Raleigh Foundation, which is a big international banking thing, bought something like ten of my works you see.

*Just from that show?*

Just from that show. And then individuals who were around, and there were solicitors, and accountants and, you know, gallery people.

*British?*

British, yes, almost all British, yes.

*Yes. So was this a bit of a note of hope then?*

Well, it's always useful, you know, you always need enough money to buy canvas and paint and brushes, and live.

*No, I meant actually, was it a note of hope that maybe the British taste was changing, or...*

Yes, maybe it was. I don't think a lot of the work was coming up in the sale rooms or anything, and it's always a good idea that you get into these big auctions of course, because there you get better known. But people were...and of course what they were paying for them in those days was very little. I don't know whether I mentioned that, a little later on I had the show at Whitford & Hughes in Duke Street, St. James's, and David Hughes was a big collector, a big collector of Surrealism. And some time, it was a bit later on, I suppose it would have been in the Eighties, he decided to sell a number of works, and one of them was one of mine which I had sold to a professor in Cambridge for five guineas in the earlier days, in the Forties I think. He had it up in the showroom and it was used on the invitation card, and it was priced then at twelve-and-a-half thousand. And later on when I looked in again after the show, I slipped in for a cup of coffee with him, he said, 'Oh we've just sold it to a museum in Milan.' And I didn't bother to make any inquiries, but, Arturo Schwartz[ph] in Milan wrote to me a week or two later and said, 'I've just bought a painting of yours,' which I thought was rather nice, you know. I didn't tell him but I did tell David what I really

got for it, five guineas. But that sort of thing, you know, five guineas in 1940 was quite good, you could go to Paris by return twice.

*So, at the Hammett Gallery you were, you had almost a sell-out show perhaps, or...?*

No I didn't sell out of course, because I had quite a lot of works, and I've still got the catalogue.

*But certainly it was a good sale.*

Yes, it was quite a good start as if you like, because it was... I mean I had shown in other odd shows in London, but not as a one-man show like that.

*Bu the success of this didn't convince you that you ought to hop back to Paris, your beloved Paris?*

No. Not to live there, but I would visit it of course, because I knew many people over there, people like Edouard Jaguer, and George Gaufin[ph] and all those people mixed up and associated with Surrealism of course. So I slipped over as frequently as possible.

*That was still the magnet for you?*

Well, I always felt, I mean the French can be a little chauvinistic at times of course, but, I always felt that the source was there, you know, although it's declined very much, especially today. There are still groups there of course, around Portugal and Czechoslovakia and all over the place.

*What do you suppose made Paris so special as a Surrealist centre? Because very often people might point to London as being the home of eccentrics.*

Yes, that's true, I suppose we have a long history of eccentrics, yes, indeed. And of course Herbert Read always used to claim that we had this long history, you look at Lewis Carroll, Edward Lear, and other people who were almost pre-Surrealist in a

way, which the French were well aware of of course, I mean there are translations of Carroll and Lear. I don't know, I've never really come to grips with that, because, what you had in France was café life. I mean for many years I never visited anyone's home in Paris, you always met in a café. It was only when things got more expensive in the cafés that you went to their home for dinners, or gatherings, you know. But, I don't know, there's a certain spirit in the place, I don't know what created it. I mean I've been reading this American-Italian's book on André Breton, which is quite a nice fat volume, and it's a fascinating account. It's very detailed, which is excellent, I love detailed work; I hate simple things you know. And...and of course Breton comes out very badly in many cases, but he had to, otherwise he would never have formed the Surrealist Group. And he dismissed friends all over the place, because he set his sights in a particular direction and it meant, you know, throwing aside those who were not contributing in the direction that he was going. But he formed a very very firm group, without Breton it wouldn't have existed, as Surrealism.

*So, we are at the onset of the Seventies, you've had a show at the Hammett, you've had a show later at...?*

Well I had, it went on through the Seventies, apart from having another show at the Hammett Gallery and things, and in Brussels and Copenhagen, and then, it spread around a little bit to other shows, you know, and I really can't remember where they were, out of London a little bit. And then in the, well '75 and things, there was, J.P.L. Fine Art had an exhibition called 'Envelopes', which was, you incorporate in some way an envelope, or mail, you know, a mail, like, I mean I remember one work of sculpture called 'Black Mail' you see, it's quite a nice play on the word. And, I did one using a...Mesens for instance had an envelope, a letter, and he used the envelope and cut it in a certain way, and gave it to me to incorporate in a collage. Which was interesting, because, the man who ran the J.P.L. Gallery, Christian Neth[ph], said to me one day, it had been sold to the man who ran one of these magazines, 'Penthouse' in fact, 'Penthouse', I think his name was Guccione[ph]. And, Christian[ph] had to deliver it to him, and he said it was quite extraordinary because he was led into a room where it looked like a couple of gumpsels[ph] were stood either side of the door, and at the very end was a desk with Guccione[ph] sitting at, he felt he was entering the den of the Mafia, you know, and presented this work to him. So that's where that

work went. And that was the envelope show. And then, I don't know, there was quite a few... In the following year there was a big international Surrealist show in Chicago organised by the Chicago group there, and then I had the Fischer Fine Art exhibition, which was mainly gouaches, and there was a man named Kent Balenius[ph] who ran a gallery in Stockholm called the Belles Artes[ph] gallery, and he saw the show and instead of asking my phone number or where I lived, he came out of the gallery and went into a phone booth and looked my name up and rang me up and came over, and he took back with him about fifty unframed works, and put on a show there. And, about three weeks later he rang me up and said, 'I want some more, I've sold them all.' In one year I sold a hundred works in Stockholm alone. And quite extraordinary I suppose for a gallery, he sent me a photograph of each one he sold, with the name of the person who had bought it, which was not usually done, galleries, they don't usually tell you the name of the buyer. Perhaps it's...I don't know whether they assume that one's going to get in touch with the buyer to try and sell another one to him, without having to pay the gallery commission, but, anyway that was their custom. And then, and the next year or two I showed at the Galerij Gend[??], which I believe in Dutch means duck, in Amsterdam, and, I remember Desmond Morris was travelling, as he usually did, around the world on some of his projects, and he dropped off in Amsterdam and saw the show and rang me up when he got back to, he lived in Oxford, still does, saying, 'I've never seen so many red dots on paintings in all my life'. The whole of the exhibition had been sold at the Galerij Gend[ph] you see. Then... Then, oh yes, then from the gallery in Stockholm it went to Gutenberg[?]. So, Kent Balenius[ph] was really handling all my work in Scandinavia.

*So, this seems to be the busiest decade so far for you.*

I think it probably was, yes.

*And can you attribute that to anything?*

No, I don't know why. I did find of course, which was quite noticeable, that the interest in Surrealism was much stronger abroad than it is in England. I mean, mind you, I suppose even in, apart from the one retrospective I had in '63 at the Grabowski

Gallery, it isn't until '96, this year, that I've had a retrospective, which has travelled to three galleries of course, the City Gallery of Stoke, Wolverhampton, and Leeds.

*The exhibitions you are speaking of, and some of them were group shows, some of them were solos, some of them had very interesting themes; do you remember anything particular about the way private views and parties in the art world were given at that time?*

No. The J.P.L. Gallery with Christian Neth[ph] did have ideas, I remember that one I mentioned of envelopes he had. Then when he moved to Davies Street he decided to put on a show of playing cards. In other words we drew a card out of a hat, I think I had the Five of Spades, and someone else had the Queen of Hearts and King of Diamonds or whatever, you see. And, we worked to a specific size, you could do a collage, a drawing, oil painting, whatever you liked. And then, he put the exhibition on. A man went in and bought one of them, and then he got back home and thought, what have I just bought one for? He went and bought the lot. Each one was priced at what the artist wanted, Hockney and everybody else, there were fifty-two artists you see. And he bought the lot, and then had them reproduced at playing-card size, in other words a deck of cards. A quite unplayable one of course, it was very much a coffee table deck, because some people had played on terms, you know, if you had the Six of Spades or something, they would have six spades in the garden, you know, and things like this, so you had different images suggesting, some were quite near abstract, some were more figurative.

End of F6322 Side A

F6322 Side B

Where were we?

*We were talking about the deck of cards exhibition.*

Mm. Well after the show, and, each artist was given two packs of the deck of cards, the back had been designed by an abstract, a woman painter actually, an abstract painter.

*Do you remember her name?*

Yes I do.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Also there were posters, reproducing all the cards, and you had either two posters or two decks of cards as a gift. The interesting thing was that, every ten thousand he sold, each of the artist got £100, a sort of payment, and, some time later on, Andrew Jones, who had produced the deck of cards, came to me and said, 'Do you know, I never see them now, they're travelling all over the place, the original works'. And, he said, 'Did you do any sketches before you did your, you know, the one that became a card?' And I said, 'Yes, I did two.' So he said, 'Could I see them?' And he said, 'Well, I'd love to buy them.' So he bought the two sketches, and presumably he bought them off other artists if they did sketches. So he said, 'I can have some at my place to see,' he said, 'because at the moment I see nothing, it's travelling so frequently everywhere.'

*The lady's name you mentioned was Martin, the wife of Kenneth Martin.*

Yes.

*I just thought we had better clear that up. So, obviously this was a grand project, it was something that would appeal to you. Did you feel that it was a particularly surrealist idea?*

Not necessarily, no. I mean if the Surrealists had done it, it would have been confined to the Surrealists. It was never a very popular idea of exhibiting with any groups other than Surrealists, you know, there were very rigid rules laid down in the earlier days, they rather collapsed of course. I mean, but in England, many were kicked out of the movement because of their association with, say, showing work in abstract exhibitions and then in Surrealist shows, you know, you wonder where they are.

*The leaders wanted to keep it pure?*

Absolutely, mm.

*Just going back to the deck of cards, do you remember which was yours?*

Yes, it was the Five of Spades.

*And what did you do for that?*

I did a.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

In my case, I used a collage, a colour photograph of an eye, in which I put a spiral in the centre with the pupil, and then a hand holding five cards, one of them with the five and a spade showing, so you counted the coloured cards, which was yellow, white, blue, white, red.

*So, it was suitably intangible?*

Yes, of course, you couldn't play with them at all, it was very much the coffee table set.

*This was probably one of many thematic or exciting shows of the Seventies. Were you in...and you mentioned the envelope show, which sounded great fun. Can you remember any other thematic shows like that?*

No, I can't. There were very many proposals, I remember Robert Melville once suggested we should use the matchbox, England's Glory, as an object to evolve the thing, but it was turned down. I don't know why, because it would have lent itself to many interpretations. In fact I've recently suggested it to another gallery as a project, but whether they will take it up I don't know.

*But, the exhibitions in the Seventies, just to go back to the whole private view circuit, the party circuit, what was that like, the buzz of the Seventies?*

Oh, I suppose it was quite stimulating in a way. It lacked something of the initial group that used to meet at The Three Horseshoes and the Barcelona Restaurant of course, because you had a nice mix of people, you know, with Brunius and Mesens and people like that, who were...and also this contact with France you see, which was very close. So, I think it got very much dispersed. And of course as so many, as one expected, of the English group broke away, I think many of them just got involved just for the sake of showing in a big international show of '36, but after that, they broke up. And of course the war brought a big collapse, and only a few of us continued, you know, to work. The chances of showing were very remote of course.

*When you say few of you, do you...can you put a number on it?*

Well, I would say Banting, Edith Rimmington, Eileen Agar, Penrose.

*Would you have counted someone like Emmy at this time, Emmy Bridgwater?*

Emmy was around, yes, Emmy Bridgwater of course. It made up about fifteen I suppose, at that time.

*And originally there had been...?*

Twenty-three. But of course, that included Henry Moore, whom I never really considered a Surrealist, Paul Nash, certainly not a Surrealist, but they were influenced at the time, you know. So, there is work of theirs. If you include, if you want to

include what represented a Surrealist movement you have to include them, but it was, you know, it was diluting it a little bit.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*So you were having all these shows, these solo shows and group shows, but, inspired by the money that perhaps you were making, and the fame that you were making. Did you have any other plans, to take your work to America, say?*

I had one show in America, on the coast there between Hollywood and Los Angeles, at the Dunn Galleries[ph], and that was quite successful. But at the time then you see I was having shows in Munich, Stockholm, Amsterdam, and odd times like in Copenhagen and so on and so forth. So, about every two years I was having regular shows there you see.

*Did you think this was quite unusual, suddenly to come out of the blue like this, all these shows?*

Yes, I suppose I did, yes.

*But you managed to keep the work going?*

I managed to keep producing, that's right. In fact you know, artists, if you...you work harder than you do if you're doing a regular nine-to-five job.

*So was this your spur do you think, simply that you were being shown, or did you have another inspiration?*

I don't know. I enjoyed working anyway. Although, you know, it's always a mixture of pleasure and agony in a way, you start a work and you think this is a disaster, and you keep working at it, and you know, rather surprised at the end of it all, it just comes together in some way. Not always of course. Some people, you know, there are painters who destroy more than they finish up painting of course. But you know, there's a remark of Picasso's, one should paint every day, good or bad.

*And that's what you did?*

Yes. Of course, yes. And I still do, it annoys me at times you know. I think, what am I doing here, you know, why am I confining myself to a studio? But you... I don't know, I suppose, you know, it's interesting, because Eileen Agar, you know, towards the end, I mean she...she could no longer paint, and was just doing collages, and then slowly it faded away and she couldn't do any more. And many painters have been like that, you know. Robert Melville for instance, I mean he was very much associated with Surrealism, although he had to earn his leisure by writing art criticism and books on painters and so on. It was interesting because the Australian painter, the man who did the series of paintings of Leda and the Swan and Ned Kelly, Sidney Nolan. He said to Robert, some time in the Eighties, 'I would like you to write a book about me, and I would like you to go over to Australia, visit the places where I've lived and see the terrain generally, and put together.' And Robert went with a friend of his, with a tape recorder and a camera. He was away for about a month, and he came back, and produced nothing. Didn't even put pen to paper. But he had a lot of photographs, and he had seen a lot of places, but he didn't write a thing. And of course a few years later he died.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*So, would you say that the shows of the Seventies were among the most exciting that you've ever taken part in?*

I suppose one just accepted it, that the shows were taking place; I was producing work. But you know, you still have to think of the Forties, which were quite exciting, during the war even, although I was working and I had a commitment of course on the war effort, on design, and I was lecturing as well. So, no, I think there were periods in the Forties which were equally exciting. I know it's very easy to look back and say it's always better, you know. Even Thatcher was talking about the glory of the last century, forgetting all the child labour and the prostitution and everything else that was so awful at the time, but...

*But what for you then was wonderful about the Forties, in comparison to the Seventies then?*

Well, I think, maybe it was the pressure of the war in a way too, and just after the war of course. There was a sort of euphoria in a sense, it was quite stimulating, the people you met and things like that, I met Desmond Morris and I had gatherings in Birmingham and then in London you see. So... But you know, it's an interesting thing, when I was in Birmingham I had a letter from a nun who said, obviously she had heard I was a painter, and she was a working nun and they had their little convent place, a kind of educational place I think, and they had a great panel round one of the rooms, and she wondered if I would be interested in doing a mural. And no doubt she had the idea, it was probably going to be all the saints or something, but I had a lovely idea of putting Lenin and Stalin among them of course. Anyway I met her, and we became very very friendly; I always have this idea that we used to meet and go and visit the local churchyard and read the dirty mottoes on the tombstones or something like that you see. But, she told me her name was Sister Ethna, because as you know, nuns are allowed, or are expected, to take another name, and I asked her where she got it from, and she said it was based on an Irish legendary, of a Princess Ethna. So I checked it out afterwards, and I found there was a Princess Ethna, she belonged to a particular tribe in Ireland, and she was remarkable because she could out-run anyone else in the tribe. She was captured by a rival tribe on one occasion, and her reputation had spread of course, so they put her to race against their fastest horse, but in order to handicap her a little bit they made her pregnant first. She beat the horse, but collapsed and died. And of course, I had great joy in telling Sister Ethna the history of her name, which horrified her of course. But, the interesting thing was, I still have a letter today from her, where she used to send me jars of honey, made by Catholic bees no doubt of course from the convent. But, you know, those little things like that. And there were always things cropping up in this way. The firm I worked for during the war was in that part of Birmingham where there were lots of convents, and dormitories where the nuns lived you see. And one was always seeing things happening. I remember, I remember on one occasion following a nun, she was ahead of me, and she slipped in a doorway, and as I got up to it I saw a notice on it, 'Midland Gun Company', you know. And I remember seeing two of them quarrelling, pushing one or the other into the gutter. And you know, all this sort of

build up, you know, and I made notes of all these little occurrences, I've always planned to write a book. In the end I did a series of drawings called 'Nun but the Best', and they still exist. In fact a man quite recently was using some of them in a book he's publishing.

*I see.*

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*What was this fixation with the nuns? You seem to encounter them everywhere you go.*

Well, you see, this attitude towards religion and Surrealism is not uncommon I suppose, but one defines it as black humour, which is very different. My last show for instance in Stoke on Trent, my retrospective up there, two women came up to me during the opening after Desmond had given the opening talk and one of them said to me, 'Are you really anti-religious?' And I said, 'Why?' And she said, 'Well, some of your works, you've got one there of Christ in a taxi called "Short-cut to Calvary", and another one of, it's called,' she said, "'If You Go Down in the Woods Today", where you've got notices pinned on all the trees saying, "Wanted, Jesus Christ, for all the Reasons"' of intolerance, bigotry, and everything else. And I said, 'You have to look at this,' I said, 'as black humour.' But, yes, I said, in any case I am anti-religious of course, I see no value in it at all. I mean it's reactionary, it has never developed, it has no...I don't think it touches people today, in the way that it may have done in the past, or... I said to her, 'Or even perhaps you.' And they walked away and left me. But, no, I mean I've always, I treat it as a subject of course, and it's fascinating. I've just done a work now, I had a champagne bottle, and I had put inside it a cross. There's a friend of mine in Germany who sends me these holograms, some are A4 size, which is a portrait of Christ, but if you move your head slightly to the left or the right he winks at you, you see. Or there's one of Christ and you move slightly to the right and it becomes the Virgin Mary. But he also sent me about half a dozen little Christs with the arms outstretched, which are phosphorescent, and they glow in the dark you see. And I thought, what do I do with one of these? I've still got some left of course. So I

made the cross, put him on the cross, and put him in a champagne bottle, and then, he's in a cabinet you see.

*How did you manage to get him in?*

Well that's the tricky part of it, it's very interesting, but, I'll show it to you eventually. And that's going into a show. But, there's a number of these things that...it intrigues me actually, I mean...

*But all this mischief, Conroy, all this sort of anti-religious mischief and fun and ribaldry, is it not concealing something else?*

Are you suggesting that it's a hidden Catholicism within me or something like that?

*Quite possibly.*

[LAUGHING] No, really I have no reaction, I mean I don't react at all to it, I have no feeling for religion, I never have had.

*When you say religion, and in our last few minutes we've been talking about religion generally, but, or you have been concentrating on Christianity; is it that it's Christianity that you have an anti towards, or, if I mention to you Hinduism, would that be the same sort of...?*

Oh the same thing, yes, or Muslims, yes, exactly the same, yes.

*What is so wrong with religion then?*

I think it's people who need a crutch to go through life, instead of belief in themselves. I've never found a need for it, I don't react. I mean I react against it rather than for it. It doesn't touch me at all.

*So, you are cheerfully an atheist?*

Absolutely, yes. Not just absolute doubt but, you know, it's not just that I'm an atheist, but I want to destroy religion.

*So is it the word iconoclasm? I don't know.*

Yes.

*And has this been always the case, or...?*

As long as I can remember, yes. My father had an attitude that way you know, he referred to nuns as black beetles.

*So even you as a boy walking across a winter countryside with your packet of winter humbug sweeties, you would be thinking anti-religious thoughts?*

Not necessarily, not necessarily. The idea is rather nice, but I don't think that occurred to me. No, I mean, it crops up because occasions happen, you know, it's this element of accident and surprise that you encounter, and then one just uses it, you know.

*And religion, of course, for an artist is a theme anyway.*

Oh it has been, one of the great themes of course.

*Except you have been using it in a rather...*

The wrong way.

Yes.

Yes.

*Yes. Well not wrong, not wrong.*

Not wrong, no, as far as I'm concerned, but from the established point of view it's...

*Yes, unconventional shall we say.*

Unconventional is a good word, mm.

*You certainly like to have a joke though with religion as the butt of that joke.*

Of course, of course, yes. The black humour side of it.

*None of it's malicious; some people could read it as malicious but...*

I'm afraid they do, yes.

*But I think the way you've described it, and the way I'm picturing it, I think it's very amusing.*

Of course, yes. But people don't always see that. You know, when my show travelled to Leeds, there was a man who was a Salvation Army man working in the museum part, and he saw the hanging of 'Short-cut to Calvary' and he objected to it. Surprisingly enough the gallery took the painting down, and then debated as to what to do with it, and they rang me up and I said, 'Put it back on the wall of course'. Because someone had given all the news to the 'Yorkshire Evening Post' and it was all written up you see, which didn't do the gallery a lot of good. Eventually the gallery got back to me and said, 'We've made a decision, we're going to hang it in our permanent collection upstairs,' where they've already got one of mine. I don't know what the point of that was, but that's what they did.

*It seems to me, just hearing you talk and watching your expression when you're talking about this, that the spark of mischief has never faded, it's something which perhaps intrigued you about Surrealism, it spurred you on to be mischievous about religion, and something you've never lost.*

I think that's possibly true, yes. Yes, I'm sure, I shall still produce works when the occasion arises, and something sparks it off, yes of course.

*So there will be a sequel to 'Nun but the Best'?*

Oh I'm sure there will, yes. Apart from all the photographs of course that were done in the Forties, which have all been beautifully blown up and exhibited in a case, you know.

*Did you at all see your work as striking some sort of blow for freedom in a way?*

Yes, of course. But I always maintain that Surrealism contributes to that as well, that liberty is a great thing in Surrealism of course, liberty of the mind, of where you go, directions.

*And yet Surrealism, however boundless it seems, does have bars around it, because things may not enter in, and if you want to be true you may not venture too far out. So it's its own prison in many ways, however huge that prison is.*

It's a good point you make, yes. I think it's true, but don't forget, I mean there are different kinds, I mean Surrealism has no style really, I mean you can have a lyrical Surrealism of a Matta and Masson and painters like that; you can have a very representational aspect of it, like Dalì is a good example of course; and somewhere in between you can have Eileen Agar's sort of rather decorative approach to it. They're all valid of course within Surrealism, and sometimes in fact it even overlaps; in the Phars[ph] Group in Paris, they very often include some of the Abstract Expressionists who have that leaning in that direction. That's valid enough of course. I prefer, I mean, you can set out to do an ordinary landscape, but things happen in it you see, and they're not conscious always. I mean the one at, it's now in Madrid, of Saint-Rambert, which was the painting of a railway station in the south of France. And, I did a painting of it, but somewhere, before it was finished a lion crept into the landscape you see. Oddly enough a friend of mine who had it first, and she was with me at the time, when I saw this station, she always said afterwards, 'I seem to remember that lion being there,' which was quite impossible of course. But, that's

how things creep in. So what is very ordinary, an ordinary representational subject, has taken on a certain quality all of its own, and a presence of something that you hadn't foreseen; certainly I had no intention of putting in at the time. But one's thinking in a way, whatever you're doing, if you're painting trees or, like I did with, you know, the trees with the posters on them of reward for Jesus Christ you see, and two portraits of him, full-face and profile like they do on the criminal record, it just happens you see, it's...you're looking at the tree and you suddenly have the idea of what they need. There's a little one, my granddaughter's got it now, of trees, and you know, you put things on a tree, you know how street names have those little plaques on saying, 'Lambolle Road' or 'Finchley Road', I put those on the trees, so it says all the roads around this area you see. So, you know, you get different interpretations of things.

*I mean the...the whole point I suppose of maybe what you're talking about is this abandonment really of shackles, would you say? And it's the chance to dare, the chance to be and the chance to dare. Would you say that was true?*

Yes, I...yes I think there is that element in it. It's not...I don't think it's so conscious as that of course, it just takes place. I mean that one down there, you see, of the pear, by repeating the image one looks at the pear differently, so the pear becomes planks of wood in a way you see, within the pear shape, and so on. So one's...it's just a matter of focusing in a slightly, off-centre a bit always, so these things just happen.

*Just coming back to religion a little bit, and before we go on, so, of course not having any belief in God, I presume you don't have any belief in an after world, of any sort.*

I don't know what that is.

*Would you not perhaps like to entertain the thought of meeting again people and...?*

You know Robin, one finishes up in a bag of vegemous[ph], you just join the dusty people, nothing else. Can you imagine meeting up with everyone who has died? It's going to be a pretty packed world isn't it. It's inconceivable of course. But then religion's based on that isn't it. Thomas Aquinas's six points in proof of the existence

of God starts with faith; the other five are meaningless once you've got the first one and accept that as faith. No, it's a very debatable thing. What is intriguing of course is, there's one of them, whether it was Aquinas or not I don't know, who spent a lot of time seeing how many angels he could get on a pin point. This is charming, I've often thought of how one might interpret that in a painting one day.

*I'm sure you will do it. So there's no...there's no even joy about perhaps coming back, there's nothing called rebirth for you either?*

I don't think so, no, I've got no belief in that at all.

*Although physically perhaps there is in one sense, because if you go into the ground you do come up as some sort of vegetation perhaps.*

Oh it's very possible, I'll probably help to feed some plant or some vegetable, a beetroot or whatever.

*Although the idea of having a beetroot in a cemetery might be rather bizarre.*

Yes it might.

*Very surreal perhaps.*

Absolutely, yes, yes.

*Though it's a fascinating subject, religion, because as we said before it inspires a lot of, of course religious art, but also anti-religious art too. So, do you think that you are keeping it as one of your inspirational cards to play again?*

It's always there of course, I've got no plans of plotting a series or anything, it's just things that crop up. I know my Will clearly states, I want to be cremated, no priests.

*Because, would you feel that was a bit of hypocrisy, to have someone like that officiating?*

Of course, yes.

*You'd rather have...*

Have you ever heard priests at a funeral? [INAUDIBLE] the jargon they pour out, the meaningless talk of Spirit of Heaven and... It's the old idea of course, you know, it's what they exploited so much in the Middle Ages. It doesn't matter how bad your life is, because there's the Kingdom of Heaven awaiting you. So you can be exploited and treated just like, you know, cattle.

*When you meet someone who is very religious, what's your first reaction? To try and convert, or to sympathise?*

No no, no I usually tell them a joke.

*But if I know Conroy, that means something rather, rather like a broadside.*

Yes, right.

*And does this sort of make them gravitate towards you, or...?*

Well you know, I know one man very well, he was brought up as a Jesuit, and he's extraordinarily tolerant of course, and if you tell him a joke he'll come back with an equally good one, so you know, there's no point in fighting these people, in fact I'm very friendly with him.

*But as far as the nuns you met, that's another matter.*

You know, a long long time ago there was a man from the Oratory who used to visit a friend of mine, and, I think he was Polish, he was within the church, you know, and his accent was quite incredible, you know, words like 'develop' would be 'double-up', you know. And, he used to come along with a bottle of wine, which he had taken of course from the service, and, we would sit round there drinking. It was quite

delightful you know, and I got along with him very well. But, that didn't convince me that this was something that I should ever think of embracing of course.

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F6323 Side A

*It goes back to what I was saying, Conroy, about art movements perhaps being like gentlemen's clubs in a way.*

Yes, I think that's very likely of course. I don't think it was quite...I mean, there was no banning of women there except on special occasions, like many clubs do, but, yes there is that feeling about it I suppose. But, it was the choice of the women who didn't get involved as much as some of us would have been, because we were interested in the theories and the ideas behind it, and the discoveries, which didn't seem to interest them. Because Surrealism is very much concerned with discovery you know, it's... I mean Breton's remark about Surrealism is a lamentable expedient in terms of a painting, because painting was never really accepted in the beginning you see, it was considered a much too conscious act. But if you think of it, it's no more difficult to pick up a pen than it is to pick up a paintbrush, but it was always thought to be a very conscious effort. Although Dali contradicts it you know, because he himself said once that the ideas that sparked off a painting could come from the shape of the paint on his palette, the ringing of a telephone, or anything like that. And in automatism there is a certain free association going on, images are linked to images. But, as I said I think before, it's very important, and Breton recognised it, of having a certain conscious control at a certain point in your completion of the work, otherwise it doesn't come together.

*And who did you find yourself siding with at this time in your views? There must have been rifts.*

Oh of course, yes. I mean you see there were a number of communists in, among the Surrealists, and there was a Stalinist leaning of course. And then, you see when Breton went to Mexico and met Rivera and Trotsky, they issued a statement, and I still have a copy of it, of, it was called the F.I.A.R.I., which was the International Federation of Revolutionary Art, and it's a very interesting article of course, there are several pages. And it finishes up with really saying, you know, you're for us or against us, it was quite clear. So there was that leaning towards Trotskyism. And, of course that, in England particularly and in France of course you had the same problem

of course, that there were those, those who were Stalinists stepped out, and of course there was an element of anarchism too, which really, you know, sympathetically one is rather for, constructive anarchism anyway.

*So, we're still in the Sixties, because I think it's a particularly potent time.*

Yes, quite a vibrant time really, yes.

*And you are picking up on lots of different feelings, and the media was exploding, new, different types of music, different types of fashion. Were you caught up in other elements of Sixties life?*

Not a lot, no. I know it was going on around one, you know, what did they call it? Something about something London?

*Swinging London.*

Swinging London.

*Swinging Sixties.*

Yes. And I did go to various gatherings and events and things like that, but...

*Can you remember any of them, any...?*

Well I used to go to parties of course, which, some were pretty outrageous, you know.

*For example, what sort of things?*

Well, you know, women would finish up by taking most of their clothes off of course, which was one of their favourite gestures, it was always charming. I remember once going to a party, John...no, Robert Melville was there, and, this was in Birmingham, and there were some fellows there, and girls, and two of the fellows went out to get more drink, and they came back with two girls they had picked up in the bar where

they bought the liquor, you know, and brought them back. And it got a little more exciting. And the owner of the place was a great collector of little pieces of pottery and things; he was so drunk, he collected all this stuff, put it on the floor, and they danced on top of them. The girls took all their clothes off and were dancing with their shoes on, on top of these pipes and things, you know. And afterwards I wondered what they thought of all this lovely collection of his which was getting smashed on the carpet. Unbelievable. But this was a very common thing.

*It seems to be, the way you describe it, quite a solidly heterosexual world. Was there no sort of deviation from that, in terms of the people who followed it?*

I don't know, that's a difficult question of course. I mean, one...I spent my time earning enough money, and painting, so I didn't really get involved very much in that Swinging Sixties thing in London. I don't think, it was many years later when it had changed that I ever went to Carnaby Street for instance.

*What were your impressions of Sixties Carnaby Street?*

Well I suppose, I don't know quite what it was then, but in the later Sixties, I suppose it hadn't changed much, they were still selling an awful lot of tat, you know, T-shirts and such like, so, it didn't impress me very much. And then I did some work for the, of all people, the Amalgamated Dental Company. Their literature was fascinating, because everything was published in two languages of course, Spanish and Italian, German, Dutch and so on and so forth, and all that had to be done by translators, and in your design work for them, whether you were doing prosthetics or dentistry, or for chairs or whatever, the idea was to find different approaches to it, and I've still got some of my literature that I designed. I even went to find out about the, what's the thing in the...the Milky Way, and of course I wanted to do it in colour, and they told me at this place I went to, they said, 'It's not in colour, it's black and white,' you see. But I had made it in colour. And things like that. But you used, you know, it was looking for different ideas of presenting it you see. And I've still got a chest upstairs full of these old leaflets and brochures I did, which was quite amusing of course. But, and it earned money of course.

*Mm. I mean, you seem to have been quite careful about that side of your life, that, you know, you weren't as cavalier as many artists perhaps would have been; you always had to have your money to buy your leisure time you say.*

Of course.

*But you see, you say of course, but a lot of artists wouldn't say that, they would just perhaps mortgage the dog and the cat and do everything, without working, and just lived a life of a bohemian artist. But...*

Oh indeed, yes, I rather envied some of those people. You know, in the Sixties, '66, Asgar Jorn, who was part of the Cobra Group, came over to this country, and he wanted accommodation here because he had an exhibition at Tooths Gallery. And he came with Guy Atkins, and Guy introduced me to him as Jan, not Asgar, and I recognised him of course but I didn't say anything, and eventually in the conversation I said, 'Well I've got two rooms upstairs you can have, one to paint in, one to sleep in,' which suited him very well. And, I said, 'Really, you're Asgar Jorn, aren't you?' And Guy said, 'Well you know, he wants to stay absolutely quiet in London, he doesn't want to be pestered. He's got this exhibition at Tooths to prepare for, he's doing work for an American exhibition.' So I said, 'Well I'm not going to say anything, in fact, you know, you're like the centre of a whirlpool, the quietest spot in the world as far as I'm concerned. I'm not going to tell anyone.' But Asgar of course had been here about a week and he was writing to everyone, his family in France, the big industrialists in Milan and so on and so forth, so there was a continual flux of people pouring in to see him. And he said to me, 'What have I done? What have I done?' But he was a delightful man, and we had a great month together. And we used to go upstairs, Guy and I used to go upstairs after he had finished working and give titles to his work, because he always got stuck with what to call them, because he was a great, you know, Abstract Expressionist of course. But, no, I quite liked Asgar. And then he had a very good show at the Danish Embassy, a reception rather, after his show at the Hayward Gallery. No, it wasn't the Hayward, it was the Barbican. And then of course, in the Seventies he died. But, he gave me three works, one I sold to David Hughes, who was then a dealer, hadn't joined up with Whitford & Hughes; another one I sold to a man who had a gallery in Brook Street, and I think it was

ultimately bought by a very well known gallery in Switzerland; and I still retain the last one. Unfortunately I had marked on the back of it, '66, just to remind, just painted '66 on the back of it, to remind me of when it was done, and it was shown in an exhibition, someone was very interested in buying it, but of course he wanted it authenticated, which was fair enough. So, a photograph was sent to Jors Andersen[ph] in Copenhagen who, and back comes the message, it's not genuine. And of course once they make that statement it's very difficult for them to reverse it, although I wrote and told him why the '66 was on the back and everything else. But it still, it's still being burnt in other words. And then I showed it to Edouard Jaguer in Paris and he said, 'Well I've had this problem before. I will write an authentication of it,' which he did, and that went to Jors Andersen[ph], but I don't know what happened, I didn't get any response at all. And now, James Rawling at Phillips, he's taken it and they're going to see what they can do. Because there's a possibility that Jors Anderson's[ph] getting rather old and maybe his memory isn't so good. Because I don't think it's a committee, I think it's a one-man committee you see. Guy Atkins unfortunately had died then, otherwise, he used to authenticate works for £50, and of course he knew it was done, you know, he was here. But unfortunately, yes. So that's the situation at the moment. But, no, Guy and I had quite an enjoyable time here. And upstairs, in the room upstairs, he had a diamond and he's done a drawing in the pane of glass. I've never had it taken out, I'm sure the glazier is going break it taking it out, you know, so there it stays.

*You were talking about the Sixties and the, you went to parties, it was exciting. There was a tangible feeling of something changing, was there?*

Oh yes, I think there was. As you know, the big dominant art was Abstract Expressionism which had come over from America, and of course in the light of England, English light, it looked much more brash than it would have done in America, because the duller light I suppose in some way. But, a lot of people cottoned on to it and it became quite a, in fact it's still cropping up now, it's sort of had another lease of life you know. I don't know whether it goes anywhere, because it's interesting you know, because it grew out of painters like Masson and Matta, but automatism for the Surrealists was a starting point, it was an aid to inspiration; the Abstract Expressionists make it an end in itself, it was a cul-de-sac ultimately.

*Did they think, the Surrealists, whether French or English or whatever, did they feel that really there could be no other art movement after them, they had done everything?*

I don't know. You know, I think if there had been a more revolutionary movement, it's quite possible one would have changed to it, because it had, you know, the obsession was limiting always in Surrealism.

*But for example someone like Dalì, could he ever have become a Pop phenomenon, could he have grown into a Pop phenomenon?*

Difficult to see that with his background. He tried experiments, like even shooting pellets from a gun on to the canvas.

*Very similar to William Burroughs.*

Absolutely, yes. And he tried all sorts of things. And of course that marvellous painting of his of 'Persistence of Memory' with the limp watches, he re-did it, and in a structural way it's almost geometrically drawn instead of that fluidity that he had in the original work. So he was moving in directions of exploring other avenues, mainly perhaps because, I mean he always claimed to be **the** Surrealist of them all.

*But of course he was the one who was rejected most.*

Exactly, yes. But, perhaps not so much for his painting but for his political views, his endorsement of fascism, and the interview with the Pope, you know, who said to him, 'I'm pleased to see you've changed your art,' but whether he meant heart or art is very debatable.

*But they didn't object to his commerce?*

Well yes, the commercial side yes, was...I mean when he was in America, when they were over there, they ignored him completely.

*They felt he had sold out.*

Absolutely, no question at all.

*I imagine that Dalí knew the power of PR. You can see people who came after him, like Warhol, or even later still we have several contemporary examples we can choose, they all understand the need to sell themselves. Is this something which you as a painter, with all your experience as a commercial draughtsman, did you understand the need to sell yourself?*

No, I didn't really. I probably stayed back from it all, you know, I was quite happy to just go on painting.

*If you could have the time again, would you have done it differently?*

That's a very difficult question. I don't know. Thinking about it now I probably wouldn't. Because I would have felt that one was compromising too much. After all, you know, the fact that I refused to show in the '36 exhibition, although I missed the opportunity of showing in a very big international exhibition, it's the only one I've ever missed of course, and I only joined the Surrealist movement in England in 1938 you see, when it had been re-formed; it didn't last very long of course. And then it was, and then that collapsed, and then it re-formed again for the 1947 show in Paris when many of them came back after the war to settle in France again. So, no, I don't think I would have changed, no. Because, of course, I was earning enough money, not necessarily through painting always, which was always very difficult, but...so I didn't see any need, I mean you know, I wasn't desperate enough financially to want to change, even if I had probably, even if I hadn't sold anything, I would have still gone on painting. But it's, it's an open question.

*Did you as a painter destroy a lot of your works?*

Oh yes, inevitably.

*A lot of artists say that that destruction is necessary for creation.*

Absolutely, yes.

*It's nothing to do with space-saving?*

That's right, nothing at all, no, no. No. No, I mean I...Silvano Levy[ph], who is writing this book, this biography of mine, he sees work, and I say no, you know, that's really finished, I'm destroying it, so I don't take it any further, put it on one side.

*Do you destroy work now?*

Oh yes, of course. In fact one painting he bought off me, and he's looked at it very carefully, he said, 'I think there's another painting underneath that.' And I said, it's quite possible of course, because you can always, in oil paint you can over-paint. Because he could see something showing through a little bit. But you see, aesthetics don't play any part in Surrealism really, no one sets out to produce aesthetics. You express what you want to do in your own way, and each artist has his own particular signature if you like.

*But wasn't there a dangerous, or isn't there a dangerous sensuality about Surrealism, a sort of seductive quality?*

Yes, I suppose there is, of course, yes. I don't know... You know, one has to accept... Malraux for instance always said art derives from art, which I think is very true, and things filter through, a kind of osmosis I suppose, that one picks up on things so that there can be... I mean interesting, I like de Chirico's work tremendously, with his great arcades, but what...arcades fascinate me, but I like to know what's happening in the arcade, whereas de Chirico always did the exteriors of the arcades and the things in the squares, a Ferrari or whatever he was painting. But it's things inside arcades that are equally fascinating. In fact a long time ago, it was a man over, an American over here working for 'World in Action', Gavin Nacladian[ph], and, I think he was always getting a bit of a problem with the 'World in Action' production people

because he would like to...I mean, I think in Holland for instance they wanted to cut a lot of the things he had been doing there. And in the end they decided to push him upstairs, in other words they gave him a chance of doing his own programme every so often. And he came to me and he said, 'What shall we do? Have you got any ideas?' And I said, you know, I'd been thinking about it actually some time before, I said, 'Don't you think it would be a very good idea to do a film, a programme, on arcades and what happens in arcades?' Every country in the world's got arcades, and things have happened in them, you know, there's been murders and all sorts of happenings there. And they're locked up at night. Also it's a fascinating thing about arcades I think, is that, because of the glass roof, and of course they wouldn't have existed before the wrought iron, the glass roof always makes you look like a fish under water, it gives that greeny sort of light. And, he thought this was a very good idea, but then, he went back to America and he was mixed up with film-making over there, and he comes over occasionally but he's no longer connected with 'World in Action' you see, which was a pity because it could have made a fascinating programme.

*Or maybe a fascinating series of paintings.*

Indeed, yes, well I've done many arcades of course, yes.

*Throughout this time, you saw your friends, you were meeting, discussing, lunching, dining, dancing, whatever.*

Not dancing.

*Never dancing? Why not?*

I don't know, it seemed...

*No talent for it?*

Well, no, no talent. Well I don't know, I suppose I could dance, and I have done a little bit, but it doesn't really interest me. As someone once said, it's a country walk

greatly impeded by a member of the opposite sex. Or as someone else once said, you can do this sort of thing much better lying down.

*Well, that's true. And in essence, here you were, sort of without let's say any other propulsive power than yourself, you had no agent.*

No.

*When was your first? Do you have an agent now?*

I do indeed.

*Oh, now you do. But when did you take on an agent?*

Oh, only within the last year.

*Oh right. So, for the last, well since your creative times, since '38 or...*

That's right.

*Around then, you have been agent-less?*

Absolutely. Except of course, when you show at the Hammett Gallery, I had probably four or five shows there.

*And this was in what period, at the Hammett?*

This was in the, the beginning of the Seventies.

*Right, so we'll come to that soon.*

'71 I think.

*Yes. We'll come to that soon.*

Yes.

*But generally, no agent for Mr Maddox?*

No.

*Is this a healthy artist's suspicion of what an agent can do?*

I don't know, I've had no experience of agents. I've heard of stories about what happens to artists who have got agents, and just as I've heard of suspicion of artists who have had exhibitions abroad and never managed to get the money out of them. But, although I've shown abroad a lot, Stockholm, Amsterdam, Munich, I've had no trouble whatsoever.

*What is your reception in countries like that?*

Very good, excellent. I've sold abroad better than I've sold anywhere. Stockholm I sold a hundred works in one year.

*And what do you attribute that to?*

I don't know. I suppose people have got...I don't know. Maybe they're more art-conscious. But I had a first show there, in fact I had a show at the, who was the man who left the Marlborough Gallery? Fischer Fine Art., I had a show there, and a man went in, saw it, but instead of asking where I lived he came out, as he told me, looked my name up in the telephone directory and rang me, it was a man named Kent Balenius[ph] who runs the Belles Artes[ph] Gallery.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

So he took about thirty works back with him, many of them were gouaches, and he had them framed over there of course. And in a month's time he came back over again and said, 'They've all gone, and I want some more.' And this went on, and

over a hundred works altogether, some oils, some gouaches. So... Then I had the show in Munich.

*When was this?*

This followed on afterwards, in the Seventies.

*Right.*

And I had three shows I think in Munich, you know, eighteen months or two years' interval.

*All organised by yourself, or...?*

Yes, or through the gallery itself getting in touch with me. And then Munich of course, Munich and then Amsterdam.

*And how do you suppose your fame was spreading at this time? Was it simply one review to another, one show to another?*

Well I suppose that a little bit. Yes, I think that's something to do with it, because many of these people do come to London anyway and they see shows. Also of course stuff was getting in to Sotheby's and Christie's and the auctioneers, which you know, is a very important thing in a way, where you've no idea what they're going to fetch, it's important that...you are made visible through this.

*And when do you think your first piece was in a major auction house, what year or...?*

Oh...

*What period of it, what decade?*

Well, I suppose again, it could be late Seventies, coming up into the Eighties.

*Right. So relatively recently?*

Yes, that's right. And up to now I mean, only last month there was one in Christie's, another one in Sotheby's. In fact I've just had an invitation here somewhere to see a preview of the stuff at Sotheby's.

*Does that give you a bit of a buzz, that you're in...?*

Well, I don't know. It's interesting isn't it. Sometimes, you know, sometimes you see...I don't put anything into, you don't put anything in, I never think of putting a work of mine into Sotheby's or anywhere. It's other people who have bought earlier, and they're fortunate enough, I mean, I sold one for about £1800 and you know, and nine months later it's in Christie's, it fetches £4,000 and things like this. But you get what you can at the time. So you don't know, it just depends. But then you see, people, I mean, Stow-on-the-Wold for instance, the Fosse Gallery there, many years ago Tom Stein[ph] came up to me and he said he'd like to show some work of mine, he took it, and ever since then he's...he sells all the time. I said to him one day, 'I think everyone in Stow-on-the-Wold's probably got one of my paintings.' And he said, 'No, it's London people who come down there.' Mainly because it's very much a visiting, tourist area I suppose.

*We're still in the Sixties believe it or not.*

Yes.

*Your inspirations, your ideas for developing your art, were they changing, were they developing, were they building? How were you creating at this stage?*

You know, I think, my attitude towards Surrealism has been that it is concerned with everydayness in a sense. In other words, what fascinates me is linking up actual situations as it were, or even subjects. For instance, the one that the Tate Gallery have got, the 'Passage a l'Opera', that was something I really thought I saw in Paris, although of course Houseman[ph] had already destroyed it when I was in Paris, long before 1937. So, I was drawing on something that I'd seen, although I didn't know

what and couldn't remember. It was many many years later that I saw a reproduction of the 'Passage' in, based on Aragon's 'Paysane de Paris'. But my recollection, I must have seen that photograph, or one of them, because it's very close to the thing that changes, even the lion of Belfort is in an entrance which of course was never there. But, it's drawing on things like that, places you see. I mean, Saint-Rambert, the railway station, I was just motoring through France, you see the station, you take a photograph of it, and years later it becomes a painting. So, I very much believe, I like the idea in fact, of being able to draw on everydayness if you like, as a subject.

*So the whole idea perhaps in your view, correct me if I'm wrong, is that Surrealism is actually very real.*

Mm, very much so, yes. Yes, I mean, the element of fantasy is different of course, it's what happens in the process. So you don't... I don't know how it happens really, sometimes, you know, I think most painters can find this, they look at a painting after they've done it and say to themselves, how did I do that? Because you haven't quite linked up with what did go through your mind at the time, and things creep in that you don't suspect even.

*How much did the race for the space age of the late Sixties affect Surrealism?*

The only man I can think of that was influenced a little bit by that would have been, and it would have been earlier of course, is Magritte. Those strange flying things in the, it's called 'The Black Flag' I believe, which is forecasting these things that are whizzing around up above us all the time, you know, from the American space stations and so on. But that is the only man that really looks as though there could have been. But I think it was even pre that, you know. It's a bit like, it's a bit like Mondrian when he had the exhibition in, his work in New York, there was a man going round the exhibition, a Dutchman, going round an exhibition with a friend of his, and the man was extolling the virtue of these great abstract works of Mondrian, and the Dutchman said, 'No, if you're in a plane, it's the tulip fields of Holland, laid out on that rigid form,' you see. So there's an association, you know, even the leather work of early tribes, with the decoration, there's.....

End of F6323 Side A

F6323 Side B

Every Saturday night there used to be a young girl who would come in selling the equivalent of the Salvation Army magazine, which was a, something like the 'War Cry', and the interesting thing was that as she walked up to sell it among the clients in the bar, the communists would start talking among themselves, and the process was undressing her. And the Surrealists would be undressing her, the communists would be putting her clothes back on again, much to her embarrassment of course, it was absolutely delightful. And they did it every Saturday night, and she always persisted in going to sell, because they bought the thing you see, threw them away afterwards.

*The whole thing sounds like a surreal play.*

Absolutely, yes. I remember going to a dinner once at the Closerie des Lilas, which was almost next door to the Dome, and the Surrealists gathered there, and, we would have a table upstairs with a tablecloth on, and order a dinner. And I forget who it was, it was the wife of one of the Surrealists, who would ask for a glass of water, but instead of drinking it, there was a vase in the middle with, you know, cacti and stuff in it, she would pour the water into the vase, and ask for another glass you see. And this would go on repeatedly. The result was of course, the bowl would start filling up and pouring down in rivulets down the tablecloth, so you kept... No one said anything of course, and you kept moving your seat a bit to allow the water to drip down onto the floor. And we had to have dinner on a soaking cloth. No one complained, not even the owners of the place. It was a very common sort of thing. It's a bit of a schoolboyish joke, but, that was the sort of things they loved to do, just to throw a little bit of disturbance into the, you know, the reality of life around them.

*Obviously Paris was such a magnet, you kept going back as you said before, it's a wonder you didn't live there forever.*

That's true, but of course my last visit was just before the war, and I could see the way they were putting sandbags round Saint-Sulpice, you know, the church, and Luxembourg Gardens, and I thought maybe I should get out of here, it was getting rather hairy, you know. And...

*So the Maddox sense of self-preservation.*

Preservation, yes.

*...was very keen.*

Well, being English, you know, and one didn't know quite what was going to happen, the place could either have been bombed or, as it did, become occupied, and I should certainly have finished up in a camp somewhere. So I caught a boat back, and I discovered afterwards the last but one, otherwise, and if I had left it later, you know, I probably wouldn't have got back. So I got back here, and then of course my...I joined for a time my firm again, which was, I've forgotten the name of the...the advertising firm I was with.

*But where you were doing draught...being a draughtsman?*

Yes, where I was, exhibition stands and that sort of work. They closed down of course, and started making practical things for, blackouts and you know, all this sort of stuff. So, I left, and I didn't know quite what I was going to do, because I was faced with either the Army, the Navy or the Air Force. I didn't really believe in flying in those days very much, with a, you know, thin bit of wood separating you from ten thousand feet. The Navy I was against, in any case, because they had done away with this idea of women, you know, this women and children first, which was not at all to my liking, and I didn't like the idea of this foot-slogging around. And I happened to meet a man who became a very well known cartoonist with 'Punch', Fred Emmett, and he had been with an advertising agency in Birmingham, and of course his side had collapsed pretty well, and he said, 'Oh, I've just joined a firm called Turner Brothers, in the drawing office, why don't you go and see them?' So I went to see them, and, they asked me a few questions, and they said, what was I doing. They said, 'OK, when can you start?' Because they were grabbing everyone they could, to be reserved for doing war work you see. So I joined the drawing office at the, well it was just about the beginning of the war you see. And, I spent quite a few years there.

*What was the general mood of London at that time?*

Birmingham.

*Sorry, Birmingham, yes.*

Well, there was a certain anxiety of course, because everywhere there were places being barricaded with sandbags, and everything else, and several false alarms of course, you know, the hooter things would go off and people would scurry into shelters, and nothing happened of course. And there was that, what they call that phoney war you know, for a time. But, otherwise one just behaved as, you know, as you would. Things like an international art centre – not an international art centre, but an international centre was set up, because there was always a sprinkling of people who had escaped from Germany, Jewish people as well, and this club was for fifty per cent, you know, foreigners who had arrived, and fifty per cent English. And I became a member of that, and I organised a number of things, like exhibitions, started a war magazine, you know, with people's comments and writings and whatever else they wanted to do, poems and such like. And we organised lectures as well. And a magazine called 'Opinion' was formed, which one wrote for, and I've still got copies of it today. Anyway... In fact I wrote a piece on, really it was an attack on Jung, I called it 'Neurosis for Old', which didn't go down very well with a lot of people, but...and there was a lot of correspondence, which helped to stimulate some interest in it. But, when I was with Turner Brothers, they had got me involved in doing a lot of social work, and I was actually painting stage scenery, with, I think they had about six or seven factories around the area, hundreds of workers of course. Not only you see was the drawing office producing the drawings which they could make the tools out of, and they were on war production, in other words they were doing parts of an aircraft, my daughter was saying they were doing parts of cigarette lighters as well, not all of it, because everyone would have stolen them, so they did parts of them you see. And, so, because of that side I got a separate salary. And then shortly afterwards, Rank Film Studios, after about a year Rank Film Studios wanted a stereopticon, that's a background projector which was used in films, you know when you see people in a taxi and they're moving, it's not moving at all, but the film behind

which is projected shows that the street's disappearing slowly as you're moving forward. And always, Rank had always acquired them from America, and they wanted their own stereopticon made in England. And it was being carried out at B.T.H. in Rugby. Well of course, the workers in Rugby were producing a machine which was silent, which it had to be of course, by[??] wood, water, sand, sawdust, everything else, it got larger and larger. And they said to me, 'Go over and have a talk to them, and see what you can do. We want it to be a practical size projector, not something this...' you know. So, I went over one day, they showed me round the place, and B.T.H. at Rugby is immense, you can spend a day going round it, and they pointed out a spot on the grounds there and said, 'We'll build you something there'. And the next day I go up, there's a shed there, centrally heated and everything, you know, it was quite extraordinary. So, officially I was there for three months; I think I spent a year and a half there, so I got a separate salary for that. I lived on one salary and banked the other two, which was marvellous of course. But my contribution to the war was pretty minimal I must say.

*And the banking of the money was perhaps to hope to go back to France again, eventually, or...?*

Well, the war was on then of course, so... The one thing it did allow me to do was to decide to leave Birmingham, and there was Nan who I was married to, and we had two children, Stefan and Lee, and when I told the firm this, they tried, they said, 'Look, stay here, we'll buy a house for you,' you know, 'you can pay us when you like,' sort of thing. But I was set on getting out of Birmingham.

*How did you meet your wife, and when and where and so on?*

Well, I met her at the International Centre. She had been married three months to a man named Burton, and somehow we hit it off very well, and it was a bit of a fraughtful time in away, you know, because she was obviously going to leave him.

*After three months?*

After three months. And of course, you know, it was a lot of sort of joking among some of my friends there. But, that's what happened. But, then we got a place in Birmingham, in Fiveways, it was above a business, quite a nice flat, we had that for some time, and then I had the chance of getting this other place in, near Calthorpe Park, right opposite, I think it was Speedwell Road. And that was the eleven-roomed house we had for thirty-five shillings a week. I think we paid a little bit to get it, you know how it is when people move out, they do a swap, and they leave a bit of curtain and a bit of a rag of a carpet and pay you key money for it or something. Anyway, we settled there for a long time, and that, it was interesting because, when I got to Birmingham, I didn't know a lot of people, so I did...I thought, there must be someone here worth, you know, like all cities, it isn't the city, it's the people you know that make it bearable, and I always thought Birmingham was riddled with cocoa-dusting Quakerism. So, I wrote a letter, which came out of an exhibition that was being shown at the City Gallery, with all the establishment artists you know, Sutherland and various painters. And, there were several replies, some were quite critical because, you know, what I was arguing about was not what they liked, but there was one from John Melville, and I met him, and through John I met Robert and that was how we got together.

*Can you tell me, if you will, a little bit about early family life. I mean, was your wife an artist, or involved in any way in the arts?*

My wife, interestingly enough, her father and her mother were mixed up with the spiritualists, particularly the grandmother who was up in Manchester, she was a great friend of Hannan Swaffer, who was also a spiritualist. And she had had a spiritualist christening. It was delightful, because her father worked in Birmingham, at the I.C.A. or one of those places in the official, you know, office area, accountancy or something, and he would visit us occasionally, and Nan would often say to him, 'How is Grandma?' Well I knew Grandma had been dead for about eight years, and he would say quite seriously, 'Well I haven't spoken to her recently,' and this kind of conversation used to leave me a little bit puzzled, you know. And we would get in on the subject. Not only that, not only was he mixed up with spiritualism, rather remotely I think, it was the grandmother who was the big influence, but also a communist. And the bus he caught to work every day became known as the Red Bus

because he converted most of the people on it to communism. He was a delightful man. So, no, Nan and I got on very well for a long time, and we had these two children. And I got a feeling that if we came to London it would change things a little bit, and I...

*In what way?*

Well, I don't know. I felt we, well I discovered afterwards of course that we did move apart, you know, and we separated.

*When was this?*

That would be around about 1960.

*And you were married in...?*

Well, we had two children before we were married. I think Stefan was born in 1945, and Lee was born in 1947, and so I probably, '47, '48 we were married. In fact I had a great friend who worked for the 'Birmingham Post', a man named Rubin Osborne[ph], who had written a book on Freud and Marx or something like that, it's interesting, and he wanted to write up the wedding of course, and I would have been delighted of course because we planned to take the two children with us, it was a registry wedding. But, I think Nan said, well you know, it might affect the friends of our parents and everything else, so we had to call it off.

*Because of course at that time, although it wouldn't have been unusual, it would certainly have been quite eyebrow raising.*

Exactly, yes, it would if it got into the papers, you know, and so, and photographs of us with the two children just getting married. Which delighted me of course, but, and Nan I think, but she just, we just had to call and we said, 'Rubin, forget it'.

*Why didn't you conventionally marry, in the normal way?*

In the beginning? I don't know, it seemed quite logical to... If you want to know someone you've got to live with them before you marry them. It's more difficult to get out of a marriage than it is to get into it you know. So we...I just didn't think that way, and I don't think Nan did, although she had married before you see. Although eventually we did marry. Unfortunately she picked St. Valentine's Day, and there was a queue there, and I said to her, 'I'm not going through this,' which rather infuriated her at the time, but eventually we did of course. So, that was our relationship in Birmingham. And of course once we came to London, it did break up within a year, and she went over with the children to, somewhere over the river, I forget the part, anyway, and the children went to school over there, and we... And I came to Hampstead, and I got a place up in Hampstead, and moved again, and eventually after three moves I think I came here.

*Did you see much of the children when you...?*

Oh yes, regularly, every week, yes I would take them out. Oh yes, we had a quite friendly relationship. Someone once said to Nan, 'Why did you two separate?' Because we used to get on very well together you see. And she had the most marvellous answer, she said, 'We disagreed on Bernard Shaw's interpretation of "Joan of Ark".' Which was as stupid an answer as you could give, but ideal of course in a way.

*And they saw the funny side of it I suppose?*

Yes.

*So where are we now Conroy? We're about, we are in...*

Were we in London, or have we...?

*Well no we're not, we're...*

We're still in Birmingham.

*We're still in Birmingham.*

Yes.

*Yes, and you're saying that, in fact we are just about to go to London, because you are saying that Nan and you, things changed between you when you came to London.*

Yes, we broke up.

*So, yes, yes.*

And that's why she made that explanation to a friend.

*That's right. So we are in London. But is there something more of Birmingham we should say before we finally leave it?*

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

I think the important thing in Birmingham was that, since we had this house I decided, since I had already made contact with a number of poets, writers, Dennis Enright and people like that, and the Melvilles and sculptors, I decided that every fortnight I would have open house, and this was round about, I suppose, the end of the war, you know, '46, '47. And the conditions were that someone would always give a talk, so you had Robert and John Melville, you would have Dennis Enright, all sorts of people, students and writers and poets and so on, so it became quite a centre of activity, once a fortnight. And Desmond Morris, who had been painting prior to that, I suppose he was in the same position and feeling that you don't make much of a living out of painting, decided to study zoology at London University under Professor Zuckerman. And he joined us, and it's interesting, because he gave a talk which was called 'Neotic Man'. The idea was that the great ape was the highest point you could achieve, and human beings could never quite get there, so they compensated by becoming artists and composers and writers and so on you see, but always the ape was the peak. Which I think perhaps had something of the basis of what ultimately became 'The Naked Ape', the book that he wrote. And we saw a lot of Desmond in

those days, he would come round in between and we would have evenings discussing painting and everything else. He had shown, a bit later than that I think, he had shown at the Mayor Gallery in a shared show with Miró and some other painter. But he always claimed that our discussions led him more and more into Surrealism, in fact in his books, the one he wrote, 'A Secret Surrealist' and books like that, he mentions that repeatedly. So, we became long friends. The interesting thing was, when he went back to his home we would write to each other, and the interesting thing was, our letters got larger and larger, and the largest one is the one I have from him, which is beautifully illustrated, it's a kind of strange prose-poem. It's 60 inches by 40 inches, and as a matter of fact I am lending it to his show in Stoke-on-Trent, which opens in June '96. And when I had the show there a year or so ago he opened it for me, and now he's asked me to open it for him, which is rather incestuous perhaps but quite a nice idea. Anyway, we are planning to gather up in Stoke of course and get a sort of renewal again. But, no, Desmond was a great friend. And then of course he, his book 'The Naked Ape' came out, which was immensely successful, and he left the country and lived in Malta for some time, perhaps for tax reasons, and he used to be able to come back, I think under the law he could come back and spend a certain period in England without endangering his commitment to the income tax, and we used to meet up again there, because his place was at Oxford where he still lives.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*There you are Conroy, you're on the brink of leaving Birmingham, this wonderful eleven-bedroomed apartment, and you want to come to London, drawn perhaps by the bright lights.*

I suppose, yes I suppose Birmingham[sic] was rather a Mecca, you know. It had everything, and Birmingham had many shortcomings of course. I mean it had a tolerable library, but art-wise it was pretty negligible.

*Did you feel that you couldn't actually take your art any further there, had you come to an impasse?*

No, I hadn't actually, in fact I produced, apart from the automatism I was working on in '34, '35, and 6 and so on, and up to and during the war, I had at that time, prior to the war, produced my first oil painting, which was based on two things. One was that I had read R.H. Walenski's books on painting, and one was 'Modern French Painting', and he had referred to Surrealism there, which of course I knew of. But the other thing was that I had read, or had been reading, Queen Victoria's letters, and she was writing to a friend of hers in which she says in the course of the letter, 'I am wondering what to give dear Willie,' which of course was the Kaiser, 'for his birthday present.' This was round about 1890 I suppose. And some pages further on, she's writing to her same friend, and she says, 'I've had a marvellous idea, I am going to give him the mountain Kilimanjaro,' which I thought was a charming idea. I think we got it back in 1918. But the idea of giving a mountain to someone as a present, and my interest in Surrealism at the time, triggered off an idea for a painting. I don't know what's happened to it now, but it showed the mountain, Queen Victoria, and of course there was revolutionary activity on the periphery at the time in Germany, but, the painting's lost. But it was the first oil painting I did, it was a pity, I don't know where it is, probably got destroyed.

*But you obviously mention it, and you remember it as a significant piece.*

Yes, I think it was, because it's a key one in the sense of what I was doing; whether it was any good I don't know, I can't even think what it looks like now. But, the thing is, I think Birmingham, I'd seen everything I could in Birmingham and there was nothing else there, you know, it was...it was a desert suddenly.

*And by this stage, were your parents still around, or...?*

Yes, my parents were, yes my father, who had joined a wine and spirit firm in Birmingham; my mother, well, I don't know what she did really, not a lot you know, she was...she was being the housewife I suppose. And of course I separated from them, they were in Erdington at that time and I had moved over to Edgbaston.

*What did they think of being grandparents to two little boys whose parents weren't married?*

Well they were terribly tolerant about that, and you know that's the remarkable thing, my parents, they never criticised one, they let one go one's own way you know. And, I was never beaten or hit or anything.

*No, I seem to remember earlier on you were referring to when you brought home some paintings or showed them what you were doing, it was almost, 'Oh that's very nice dear,' and that was it.*

That's right. Thoroughly tolerant about everything, yes.

*As if, you could have shown them, you were painting a row of skulls with daggers through them or whatever, it would still be, 'Very nice dear'.*

Exactly, yes, very much that attitude, yes.

*Do you think your parents were quite surreal?*

I don't think so, there's no...my father had certain things, I think I mentioned it earlier, in Ledbury, of his collection, his little obsessions. And the, always everything was going to work out all right in the end, you know, so nothing worried him much.

*Like Mr Micawber.*

And I think I've taken over something of that, I never worry you see.

*Mm, like a Mr Micawber type, possibly.*

Absolutely, that's right, it'll be all right in the end. Yes, yes.

*So, we are now in London, having left Birmingham. Did you feel that that was it, you had kissed Birmingham goodbye, or was it just to try out London's charms?*

No, I was certain that I wasn't going back to Birmingham; I visited it since, I left lots of friends there of course. Robert had already left, he had joined...this was in 1947 I think, he had joined Mesens at the re-opened London Gallery in Brook Street. John still stayed there, rather resentful I think in a way that he couldn't break away. But, most of the other people I knew there stayed or moved elsewhere. So, I still had my link with Robert you see, and I saw a lot of him. But no, I was certainly settled in London.

*And London, the date being?*

Well, that would have been about 1960-something I think, '60 roughly, late Fifties, '60. And we took a place in London, not far from here, not far from Hampstead. I think we paid then for a flat, I think something like £6.50 a week, £6, yes, perhaps £6.50 a week, which was extraordinarily high, you know, considering that we had been getting a place so large for 35 shillings, but that's what you paid in London, even then. But, we stayed there until Nan and I separated, and I came to Hampstead and I got a place here, not far away, one of the roads quite near where I am. I had a nice top floor flat, and a man named Reg Kimber, whom I knew in Birmingham, had also come to London and he was living in the flat below with his girlfriend. And I stayed there for a time, and then I was tempted by a man who had a flat in Streatham Hill, a big house he had taken over actually, and he wanted help to cover the rent, and he said, 'Why don't you come over?' And I said it means crossing the river, and I don't like crossing the Thames, you know, you get rheumatism it seems to me or something like that. So, I rather put him off, but I came home one evening and found all my stuff had been taken, so I had to go. And, I stayed there for about a year. And I knew a woman who lived on the coast, and she was working in Birmingham, a Kenya Coffee place up in Knightsbridge, and she joined me, so we stayed there for about a year.

*And, when you said you stayed with her, was this your new lover, or...?*

Yes, yes we lived together. And, then I...I got tired of crossing the Thames every day, you know, so I looked around and found a place in Hampstead, which again was a three-room flat, so I took that. It was run by a woman named Gillette, Miss or Mrs,

I've never discovered. I believe she was connected to the Gillette razor people in America. But she had had in her earlier days a lobotomy.

End of F6323 Side B

F6324 Side A

She came up to me one evening, she lived in the basement of the house and she came up to me one evening and said, 'You haven't been down into my flat, have you?' And I said, 'No, why?' And she said, 'Well, someone's been down there and cut all the fingers off my gloves.' And another day she would come up and say, 'I used to have a jar of sixpences, and they've gone.' And I said, 'Miss Gillette, I don't go near your part, as you know, I mean I stay entirely in my place, it's your private part.' 'Oh,' she said, 'I don't know what's going on,' and wander away again you see, and this sort of thing went on. And eventually, oh I stayed there for quite a while.

*And this, just remind us of the date.*

This would be Sixties, late Sixties I should think, after I had left Streatham.

*So was this an enormously creative time for you?*

Yes, I was doing a lot of paintings. Oddly enough, not so very long ago a man from Phillips, the auctioneers, came to me with a painting, and he said, 'Do you know anything about this?' And I said, 'Yes. When I lived in Hampstead, in Miss Gillette's house, it's one I did there, and she liked it so much she bought it.' And he said, 'Well that's interesting, because, I don't know what happened but she sold the place, and some new tenants took it over and the painting was there, and they've sent it to Phillips, and since it's signed by you I thought you could give me what the title is you see, and anything about it.' So I told him, and, I gave a title to it, because it hadn't got a title, I think it was 'A Cabinet of Curiosities' or something I called it. So it went into the sale. Oddly enough, Jonathan Reilly[ph] who runs the school in Warwick bought it, and had had it cleaned, and it was in one of his exhibitions, so I saw it again, looking very different after the cleaning of course, it had been lying around for ages, gathering dust and whatever else. So, anyway after I left there, Tony Reihart[ph], who worked for the Marlborough Gallery, had moved into Belsize Park Gardens, and he had got his flat through the Church Commissioners, and he said, 'Why don't you get in touch with them, they own a lot of property around here,' which of course they do. And I approached them, and they offered me a place in

Manor Mansions but it's made up, it was on the ground floor, made up of lots of small rooms, and I turned it down, and I thought, I'm not going to get a chance again of getting a house with them, but shortly afterwards they rang me up again and said, 'We're just converting a place in Lambolle Road, would you like to go and have a look at it?' So I had a look at it, and I said, 'Yes, it's excellent.' So, and the rent was phenomenally low in those days, you know, about £500 a year you see. And I settled in here, and my daughter was looking for a place then.

*This was your daughter by...?*

Lee.

*Obviously not by Nan.*

Oh yes, yes Nan's the mother, yes.

*So you had three children?*

No, two. Lee and Stefan.

*Sorry.*

Right. She was living up in Hampstead, in a rented place, and I spoke to the Church Commissioners, and they said, 'Well as a matter of fact there is a place going in the next road to you, Lancaster Grove.' He said, 'It's in a terrible state,' he said, 'but let her go and have a look at it.' When she had a look at it, it was absolutely carpeted and in beautiful condition. Apparently the wife of a well-known actor had lived there and disappeared one night owing them an awful lot, the Church Commissioners, an awful lot of money. So they let it just as it was, you see. So she moved in, she's been there ever since. But eventually, in 1976 the Church Commissioners decided to sell a lot of property, including the place I was in and a number of other houses, two or three blocks of flats, which they had been offered by a firm, I think it was called Rushmore or something, who were offering, and going to buy it for a million pounds. Apparently, what had happened was, Rushmore had got mixed up with some

problems over the income tax, and the Church Commissioners, we had a chance of stepping in with 1.1 million and took it off them. So we set up a tenants' association, and so we formed this tenants' association, which of course worked very well, but over the years different committees had been formed, and board of directors and so on, and I was on the board for quite a while. And, then, only last year, there was talk of them giving us a new lease - we had a 99-year lease - giving us a lease of, oh, an incredible number of years, which made the value of the freehold utterly useless you see. So we were able, and it went through, finalised this year, and we got the freehold, which only cost us through the solicitors £150. It cost us a bit more in having a lease drawn up, because Alison Hawkes[ph], below me, and we are the exception on the estate, there's only two in the unit you see, so...so we've done that, so we've now got the freehold, which saves us a considerable amount of money of course, because you are paying for a staff full of word processors and everything else, you pay for audited accounts and board meetings, everything else. So the money in one year we save comes to less than what we had to pay for having it decorated outside you see.

*So this has been home, and I'm sure you're going to say a lot about the influence of this particular part of the world and this home later on, but if I can just take you back to the Sixties again. Often people who lived through that time describe it as being a very liberating and very revolutionary decade. Did you find it to be so?*

I know that it was Swinging London or whatever they called it, and Carnaby Street and all that, but apart from gatherings I used to go to, I really didn't get very much involved in it you know.

*How could you avoid it?*

Well, by just sitting tight I suppose and busying myself painting all the time.

*And while you were painting, was money an issue, and were you...?*

Ah, well, I got a job with a firm, which, I handled a lot of...it was commercial, agency, advertising agency, and they handled a lot of television programmes, but I did

the work that I could do quite well, which was visualising, having ideas. The finished art work and everything went to the proper studios to be worked up, but I would have ideas. I would plan, say, I handled Spanish oranges for instance, New Zealand lamb in those earlier days too, and big accounts like that. So...

*When you say handle, what do you mean?*

Well, what I meant was that I would plan how they would handle the advertising of it, the kind of imagery we would use in the television commercials, arrange the people who would take part in it, and so on and so forth you see.

*So really, I mean you can say that you share with people like Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons a sort of interest in, a basis in advertising.*

Mm.

*Which maybe affected your fine art?*

Oddly enough I don't think it did you know, because one's source in surrealism comes from a very different direction, so there was a complete cut-off as it were.

*Where would you say it does come from, that?*

What?

*Surrealism, the basis for...*

Oh, I think it, what it really confronts I suppose is the question of exploration and discovery, and confronting reality, you know, this conflict between... What is real anyway? We're not at all sure of it are we? So, I suppose, advertising was something else; you had to be precise, you had to be clear in what you were directing your work to for the market, you know, I mean, I used to do the big advertising for curtain walling, you know, these sheer buildings with all the glass down and things like that. And I could introduce then a certain surrealist element into it. I remember a friend of

mine had one of these marvellous old gramophones with a horn, an immense horn on it, you know, to project the sound, and I had borrowed that once and put a man sitting in front of it on Hampstead Heath you see, and linked it up with curtain walling and things like this.

*Do you think it came across to people, did they understand it?*

Well, the image, the idea is to strike an image of course, so it left one looking at it because of its strangeness I suppose, so one could do that sort of thing quite a bit.

*So you were obviously earning your money as an advertising man.*

Yes.

*And probably doing fairly well.*

Well, in the, before I...I had moved from there to several places, because every time you moved you got more money you know, and I joined a company, and they decided they were going to open a branch in St. Albans, and they asked me to go over there. Because there was a lot of businesses around there and they thought they could promote a lot of advertising from the companies round about you see. So I went over there and worked there for some time. It meant a daily trip by car up the motorway, but it was OK, because my hours were pretty flexible, you know, I could very often leave at three or four o'clock very often. Because you could work up things, ideas, at your home as well you know, and weekends you could do a bit you see. So, I was pretty free on that, and I didn't really get in until about ten o'clock in the mornings you see. And the salary they were paying me there was £8,000 a year.

*In the Sixties? Which was a lot.*

In the Sixties, and that was quite worthwhile. And, then, I already had a number of my own accounts, there was a big car company I did all their advertising for, second-hand cars and things, and new cars and so on. And, I said to them one day, 'I think I'm going to leave.' And they said, 'Why?' And I said, well, first of all I'd been

selling works, you know, and they had been in various exhibitions. And I said I wanted to devote more time to painting you see. So, it was agreed I left, but, since I had, I left the accounts I owned as it were with them, they paid me a cheque every month for handling those accounts which I had supplied them with, so, which was quite useful of course. And that went on for a few years. And then of course, the Hammett Gallery rang me up one day, and this was in the late Sixties, perhaps '69, '70, said would I help them on organising a Surrealist exhibition. So I went to see Stan Hardy[ph] there and Dobber Dean[ph], and, we put on that show.

*So you did work from a basis of being basically dissatisfied in one sense with the normal work life. Because you were painting profusely through the Sixties.*

That's right.

*I want to, before we mention the gallery, with the Surreal show, can we come back to the beginning of that decade, or even just perhaps a little bit before that, and find out when you first started exhibiting in a big way, or simply started exhibiting.*

Ah. Well, Robert was up in London then of course, and he was at the Hanover Gallery I think, initially, with Erica Browser[ph], who had separated from Arthur Jeffreys[ph], he had opened his own gallery in London, and he had got my work in several exhibitions.

*And when, or what, which period are we talking about?*

Oh in the Sixties.

*Early?*

Early Sixties, yes.

*And would you say that it was from this time that you started exhibiting a lot?*

Much more anyway, and I was also selling from my place as well you see, so it wasn't doing, I wasn't doing too badly. And I had saved a lot of money, because I wasn't living to the extent of £8,000 a year, you know. I'd probably spent it all by now but, that's how I survived.

*What...so you were certainly not a spendthrift young man, you were...?*

No, I think, I always felt if I had enough money I was OK, you know, I had no great wish to earn money like the Lottery or something like that.

*What were your indulgences then?*

Oh very simple I suppose. Most of the money was spent on canvas and stretchers and paints, and books of course, because I think I've acquired pretty well everything there is on Surrealism, you know, in America and France and England, I've got a huge library of stuff, and early stuff as well which I still hoard. I'm a great hoarder you see.

*Well, rather like your father.*

Exactly, yes, yes. Yes I think it must be a hangover from that. He loved collecting things. But, that's how one's life went along. No, I had no great indulgences of any kind really.

*So again the sixties with all its glitz and glamour passed you by?*

It did really, yes. It was there around you, you know. But then it's like, you know, it's like living, even in Hampstead, there's the Health over there; I rarely go on it, you know. I know it's there of course. Actually I believe it's quite dangerous to go on it today. There's people with dogs who pursue you, you know.

*Because they know you're a Surrealist.*

Maybe.

*So there you are, at the beginning of your exhibiting career if we can call it that, and Robert is organising shows. How did you convince people that they should show you?*

Well, very often I appeared in mixed exhibitions of course, and I think after the, some of the shows, and the Hammett Gallery you see, I became better known, you know. And there was Penrose of course and people who bought and things like that. So... But you see, you know, it's a very interesting thing I feel that, painters get better known if you go into graphics for instance, because they get a world distribution which I had always resisted, but the other way of course is through the auctioneers. If your work crops up in auctions repeatedly, then that's another very good way of getting known. But at that time I wasn't in any of the auctions at all, that was later on, that came, and now, you know, Sotheby's or Christie's or any of these, or Phillips, there's stuff of mine coming up repeatedly, not stuff I've put in of course, it's people who have bought off me are now selling again.

*How did your work in the Sixties compare with the other work that was contemporary to you?*

Well there was, during the Sixties I produced a lot of very free, rather, I've shown you a photograph of this man who has just written to me showing he has got one of them, so they were much looser in a way. But I would contrast that against more detailed work, you know, not detailed. Aesthetics don't come into Surrealism you know, it's something you almost consciously avoid, or subconsciously avoid perhaps is a better word. One doesn't want to produce that glossy super-realist look at all, but as long as you can get the idea over. Because there's no style in Surrealism really you know, you have a lyrical side of Surrealism, you have the sort of Dali high finish, hand-made photography look that he adds to his work, and things like this, but really, I like to steer a middle course between it, you know. Because I don't want to be an academic painter, you know. But Magritte's an academic painter, but, I mean the worst kind of Victorian academic painting in Magritte if you look at it, but the imagery overrides that, and that's...

*The imagination.*

Exactly. Each artist finds his own way of handling his subject, and Magritte chooses that one, but it's strong enough to bypass the awful sort of adverse view that he's an academic painter.

*Would it be correct, Conroy, to say that perhaps you have never suffered as much as a lot of artists have, financially or in other ways?*

Yes, I suppose that could be true, some of the artists I meet have a hell of a struggle you know.

*Do you think that you might have liked, in a perverse sort of sense, more struggle to create more work, or...?*

It's interesting. I know, there is sometimes a feeling that you have to go through everything before you, you know, the struggle gives you something. I don't know, I really don't know, not having experienced it, whether one would have been better or not. I don't know how good I am really, I just go on painting. If someone likes it, all to the good, but I don't paint to make anyone like it, I'm not pulling their leg; perhaps I couldn't care about their leg at all.

*So you paint because...?*

It's just that little obsession there, mm. And I try and have something to say; whether it's relevant or not, it's just relevant to me I suppose.

*What was your reception in the galleries you showed with in the Sixties, the group shows you showed?*

Oh, sometimes quite interesting, yes. They didn't always buy, but it aroused interest. That I think was the...that's all you can expect anyway. Even today you know, many of the people who go to galleries are young students and things, in Cork Street they will go in. They're incapable, they're not capable of buying, they haven't got the

money. Although even now some galleries say to me, I remember someone going in to a gallery and said, she said, 'Oh I do like that painting, but I couldn't afford it.' And the gallery said, 'Yes you can, you can pay us so much a month, or a week, and you can have it.' And they're doing that today. Not all, but some galleries will do that. But, I don't know, I haven't...I would do it if someone asked me, in fact there is a man now who is buying work off me, and every fortnight I get a cheque. I know him quite well, and, there's no reason why not. In fact I showed in Poland not so very long ago, they've got no money in Poland at all, and a professor at one of the universities saw my work there and wrote to me and said, you know, 'We have no money here, but would you do a swap with one of my works?' And I thought, well, why not? So he picked one, and the work he sent to Hanover, it's still there, I haven't picked it up yet, but I know someone who's going over the Hanover so maybe I shall see it; I have no idea what it looks like.

*So, were you surrounded by a group of artists, as you had been before in the Thirties, in the Sixties were you surrounded by that supportive group of friends and artists?*

No, I think when I left Birmingham one really broke with many of them. The only contact was Robert and John Melville still. Dennis Enright, the poet and writer, is another friend of mine of course from Birmingham. But, in Birmingham I did a lot of work with the extramural department at the university, Dennis used to, we used to have what they called the Circus there really. Dennis, we would do weekend trips to Malvern and places, organised by the university, where he would talk on modern poetry and I would talk on modern painting. And this was a very common thing that, you know, usually in the winter, it was dreadful at times, you know. But, otherwise, I did quite a lot of that. In fact I think I lived on Mogadons or something – not Mogadons but those things that keep you alive and awake, you know, but... No, Mogadons send you to sleep don't they, yes.

*But you didn't feel cut off or...?*

No, because immediately you make new friends, you know, and of course I met in the Thirties many people in London, all that little group around Mesens and Penrose, so,

you know, I had lots of friends up here. And Eileen, Edith Rimmington, Emmy Bridgwater who was up here a lot, and Trevelyan and so on and so forth.

*So you still continued to have your group meetings and suppers and lunches?*

Yes, we would... Well what happened in London of course was that, Mesens opened his gallery in Cork Street, which was the centre for Surrealist activity and with Penrose published the 'London Bulletin', which was exclusively, pretty exclusively Surrealist. And I showed in that exhibition, and wrote a bit for the magazine as well. And, came the war, we organised, in fact the very day the Germans charged into Belgium we opened at Zwemmer Gallery a 'Surrealism Today' exhibition, and John Banting and I did the window display, which, we littered the floor with dead leaves and things. Eileen Agar had come across a monstrous chair which had great claw arms to it, like a beast, you know, and legs and a monstrous old head on it. We put that in the window. And we got hold of a baby's cot, and we ruffled the clothes and thrust a dagger through it, much to Zwemmer's dismay of course, because, although he wasn't German, the name rather suggested German, and this was in Litchfield Street when he had the gallery there. And it only lasted one day, he had it out the next day. And, we had that show, and, we drew up a long list of the people we wouldn't admit to it of course.

*Such as?*

Well, people who were either dead, or academics that we disapproved of, some of the Government...

*The same thing perhaps.*

Everything. And also, I think someone had done a circular thing which said 'art' in a circle, which also spells 'tart' of course. It was a joke thing you know. But we had a glorious dinner afterwards. And then, of course the London Gallery closed, and Mesens joined the B.B.C. broadcasting to the Belgians, and Jacques Brunius joined the B.B.C. broadcasting to the French. The nice thing was that Mesens would never finish up saying 'God save the King', and got into a bit of trouble over that, but he

persisted, he would never sing 'God save the King'. So, then we decided that we, rather than disperse too much, we decided towards the end of the war to meet at the, at a pub called The Three Horseshoes, which is in Tottenham Court Road, it's now a restaurant, but it was next to the Dominion theatre, and every Wednesday evening we would meet there at six o'clock in the evening. So you would go along and there would always be someone there and it would build up. The interesting thing was, it was rather similar to the Paris situation with the communists and the Surrealists, Tambamuti[ph] and his group used to meet in the same pub, and they used to sit separate from us, and of course the more drinking that went on, the more aggressive it became between each of us, you know, so it was always a scene taking place. And I remember once coming, arriving to go along there, I came across in Charing Cross Road a pin-table saloon. They had a lot of blank walls and I said to the manager, 'Have you ever thought of hanging pictures up there?' And he said, 'Oh that's an idea, I'd like to see some.' So when I turned up at The Three Horseshoes I told them this, and I said, 'If some of us would like to go along with some work and show him, we could hang them up there.' And they thought it was a nice idea. So, apparently during the week, the intervening week between the meeting, some of them took paintings there, and the man took one look at them and said, 'Get out of here'. So, I'd get all this thrown back at me. And whenever I got a letter from them, it was always signed, 'Conroy Maddox,' and it said, 'T.C.R.P.T.S.', which meant, Tottenham Court Road Pin-Table Saloon, like a title after my name. I've still got some envelopes with that on.

*So obviously the proprietor was looking for Turneresque or...*

Of course, something very academic and not Surrealist work of Banting and people, and Mesens, a lot of Mesens is collages of course, and, Eileen Agar and so on.

*So who did want that sort of thing at the time?*

Well, not many people of course.

*Still not many?*

Oh still not many people, no.

*You can understand it in the Thirties, but thirty years after that...*

Still the same, yes, no one was buying. I've got catalogues showing you can buy a Max Ernst for twelve guineas; everything was guineas then.

*And this is the 1960s?*

Yes. Forties, Sixties, right through.

*What do you suppose people were most frightened of, or annoyed about Surrealism?*

I don't know. I suppose people were so used to putting up paintings, you know, which were pretty conventional, you put them up and forget them, they're not like, Surrealism offers a swinging door that goes on swinging after, you know, it hadn't anything more, it was just filling up a gap on the wall.

*And do you think it's just something that you encountered in Britain? Because of course in Europe it was a different matter.*

Oh very different, Paris was very different. You know, it's very interesting, I used to meet people in Paris who would take works to a gallery to show them. Now they may not be able to show them, but they would spend an hour discussing them with them, even the workmen would be interested. In England you didn't get that of course. No, very different.

*Which is strange, considering that England is the home of the eccentric.*

Exactly, a great history of eccentrics, yes.

*So you would have thought that England would have been one of the first nations to embrace Surrealism.*

Well, that would be the argument, we had our Edward Lear and Lewis Carroll, you know, and all this sort of thing, but, no. What you could get away with in writing was never quite what you could get in the visual sense. I mean, one thinks of poems that talk about a drawing-room at the bottom of a lake, but no one would ever think of painting it. Today they might, but then they wouldn't. Surrealism could easily handle a subject like that. But you had to be that way. And when you think of it of course, the few English painters at that time were very minimal, compared with what the art colleges turn out in their thousands. And that kind of academic work is really traceable back to Leonardo of course. There's only one thing I like about Leonardo, when he said, a painter works hardest when he's not painting, which is quite true.

End of F6324 Side A

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*So Conroy, you were telling me about where you used to frequent.*

Yes, The Three Horseshoes of course was our usual meeting place every fortnight, but every other week we would go the Barcelona Restaurant in Beak Street for dinner. The reason we went there was, because the owner of the place was a man named Capanelli[ph], who was an old Spanish Republican, and it seemed the ideal sort of environment, ambience, for our gatherings. And he was very tolerant, I mean we used to turn up probably ten or twelve or more of us, including Mesens, Penrose and many other people. In fact one interesting woman who used to go along there.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Whom I met many years later, a gallery rang me up and said she was in the gallery and would like to meet me. But he said, 'I should tell you, she has now become a nun,' up in Hammersmith somewhere I believe. Anyway, I couldn't go on that occasion and so I haven't really met her, but she was doing some quite interesting drawings and paintings at that time, and was shown amongst some of the Surrealist exhibitions. But there was quite a gathering there of course. Simon Watson-Taylor, who was acting as secretary to the Surrealist group, he was there, and, well, so many that I can't really remember their names any more, although I've probably got a list somewhere.

*But these meetings were obviously important to you?*

Well, I suppose it...there was a community of aims, that is I think the important thing.

*Did you feel isolated?*

No. Although of course I was spending a lot of time in Birmingham at that time; it wasn't until the late Sixties that I left. Well no, early Sixties really. But, of course at that time you see, since the war, the London Gallery had closed and re-opened again in Brook Street under Mesens and Penrose, and I think one of the contributors to the gallery was, Penrose no doubt, but the man who ran Horizon, Peter Watson, and Zwemmer from the bookshop. Mesens obviously had no money, but he had an

incredible collection of Magrittes, Ernst and you know, you name them, so... Even then of course it was very difficult to sell your work. I, in the reopened gallery in Brook Street I showed...I had acquired back in Birmingham, I had acquired some shop window models, and I had constructed around that model various additions to it, and it was shown at the London Gallery, at the reopened occasion.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Just as the gallery was planning to open, Mesens asked me if I would design the fascia, the lettering for the fascia on the gallery, and also the complimentary slips, which I did, but I think, the little committee they formed, they rather turned it down, although Mesens said to me afterwards, 'I wish we had used your lettering for the fascia, with the compliment slips, were printed'. Anyway of course, although the gallery set out to be Surrealist, and it did show a lot from Mesens' collection, nevertheless there were no sales of course, it was very rare. In a following show I sold one painting, I think for twenty guineas, it was always guineas in those days.

*And was that a fortune?*

It was quite a decent amount of money, yes. I think I had picked up twelve pounds out of the, or twelve guineas out of the sale with the commission and everything else.

*A pound and a shilling.*

Exactly. It was always guineas then. And, I think that's perhaps the only one I sold during that run of the London Gallery.

*Do you remember who you sold it to?*

No, I don't. You know galleries don't tell you who buys the work. But, many many years later – it was a portrait of my wife actually, it was in a strange environment – the man who, the man I discovered afterwards had bought it was a man who was head of one of the fashion houses, Dorval Fashion I believe. And many many years later it was borrowed from him for an exhibition I had at Grabowski's Gallery, and even years later someone rang me up, I've forgotten his name now but he was the son of this man who owned Dorval Fashion, and he said, 'If ever you want to borrow the

painting, I've now inherited it from my father, and just give me a ring'. But I haven't had occasion to borrow it, but...

*You were saying, Conroy, about the importance, or the enjoyment indeed, of meeting other like-minded people in these cafés, you mentioned one; were there others that you frequented?*

No, not really. The only interesting thing of course was that, George Melly used to turn up occasionally, and would always drink far too much, and he would start reciting some of his poems, and there's one glorious one which finishes up, 'It's raining knives and forks,' and he would inch his way to the cutlery counter and pour these knives and forks over me. And of course the restaurant had other people in it, and, Capanelli[ph] would lose his temper and say, 'Out!' So we would go somewhere else, but I can never remember which other one we went to, but always the next fortnight we'd be back, and since there were many of us I suppose he didn't really mind taking us on again, you know.

*So George Melly must have been what, in his mid-twenties?*

Oh yes, yes. Another thing he would do, see a very sedate couple, a man and a wife having dinner in a restaurant, it was always upstairs we went, and he would go up to the woman and say, 'Would you like to see a picture of my mother?' Inevitably she would say, 'Yes,' and he would show her a dirty French postcard. That was out again of course. But George was always getting us into trouble like that. But, Capanelli[ph] didn't mind.

*These characters that you mention, they certainly seem to bolster the surreal style of life.*

Oh very much, very much. You know, a bit earlier on you see, with the bombing in London, in one of the streets in Soho, a pub had been hit, and all you had left were the gents' urinals, facing the street.

*Very Duchamp.*

Very. And Mesens would always make us get into the Barcelona, make that slight detour, so that we could use them you see, and we would line up there with our backs to the people going up and down the road. But as Mesens said, 'But it is to be used.'

*Regardless of the fact that you were, of course a bit of theatre as well.*

Exactly, yes, yes. But, this went on all the time of course, little gestures, little attempts, you know, like fencing in the street, you know, which is rather what happened with me in Paris with Raymond Duncan you see.

*Did you feel that in these small ways, or when you were meeting, or when you were jousting, you were laying he foundations for something, or was it just fun at the time?*

I think it was fun, yes. Sometimes even childish fun.

*For example?*

Well, if I go back, I remember in Paris once with a whole of lot of us, we met at the Café La Coupole in Montparnasse, and we had dinner, there was about fifteen, twenty of us, and Penrose's wife then, whose name was.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Her name was Valentine, and she was over from England, and while we were sitting there waiting, having ordered, waiting for our dinner to arrive, she asked the waiter for a glass of water. Only instead of drinking it, there was a bowl in the middle of the table with things like cacti or whatever growing in it, or planted in it, and she would pour the water into the bowl, and then she would ask for another glass, and continued to do this. And of course the result was, the water flowed over the top, trickled down the tablecloth, and we had to move our seats. No one said anything of course, and you moved your seat to dodge the rivulets pouring down the side of you. And that's how it went on during dinner you see. But, it was childish but it was...

*And her point being...?*

None at all, nothing said. You ignore this sort of thing. It happened when I met Dali you see, years later.

*What happened then?*

Well, I arrived...I arrived at Port Lligat. Now Dali never put anyone up at his place, but most of the people who visited him seemed to arrive in a yacht, and they could always go back and sleep on their yacht, but I didn't so he booked me into this little hotel restaurant, and we had dinner. We ordered the wine, and Dali immediately got up and lay full length on the restaurant floor. And of course again there were other people there. And the waiters just wove their way round him, you know, and so on. No one took any notice, and I just sipped my wine and waited for him, and after four, three or four minutes he got up and joined me, nothing said. Because to comment on it would destroy it you see. And then we had our dinner. But this necessity to make a little exhibition you know.

*Do you see that is part of the clue of much about Surrealism, that if you don't comment on it, it actually has strength?*

I think it has, yes. Because the tendency, or one feels one should make some comment about it, but you don't, and, it would destroy the whole effect, that he wanted probably. And as far as you are concerned, it's what you wanted too. Because what can you say?

*So you are working certainly in a surrealist vein at this time.*

Mhm.

*Did you consider yourself a Surrealist?*

Oh yes, yes, from the very beginning really, from 1934/5, yes.

*With a capital S, shall we say?*

Absolutely, if you like, yes, although I tend to use a lower case s now.

*And why is that?*

Well, I think it's...it's a word now, and you would only use it in the title of an exhibition perhaps or something like that, but otherwise I think the lower case s is...it's dictionary, you know. After all, Breton's definition of surrealism was formed in terms of a dictionary, of pure psychic automatism, you see.

*Do you think almost the meaning has been devalued?*

That's difficult to say. I mean, people left the movement, but it's a very interesting thing you know, and particularly it's noticeable in France, well it was also in England of course, they were never as good once they left the movement. Aragon's were, Eluard's; many of the others, they ceased to have that something that they got from that community of aims, and it always faded away a little bit. But, and I think in England, well we know that of course, because I think their heart was much closer to a kind of puritan approach of abstraction, which goes through life uncommitted to anything, you know, things are happening all round it and it takes this straight course right through.

*Now in terms of art history, the great movements shall we say prior to Surrealism were perhaps, would you agree, Cubism and Vorticism?*

Yes, of course. Vorticism in England, and Cubism in France, yes.

*Now, and then it was later followed by Surrealism generally. But, here you are, in the Sixties, pursuing a surreal track, when of course the dernier cri of the decade was in fact Pop art or Op art. So, wasn't Surrealism already becoming outmoded?*

Yes, it possibly was. But you know, there is something to be said, I mean, I'm not over-fond of Mondrian, but the path he followed and pursued showed that tremendous consistency right through. Klee also you see. They didn't deviate from that one aim they had, and I think that applies in Surrealism too. I mean they attempt... I mean,

Russell, the English critic, he wrote a book on Max Ernst; he hardly mentions the word 'Surrealism' in it, but you can't divorce Ernst from Surrealism, even if he said, and he was kicked out of the movement, he's still a Surrealist. The only thing you can say, that his much later work did show, well, he lost that certain quality that he had in the early works, but nevertheless he was still a Surrealist. And of course, I suppose the result of the Sixties, especially Abstract Expressionism in America, did lead to a certain adulteration as it were, when you find that there was an attempt to incorporate some of the abstraction painters, the American ones, into the Surrealist exhibitions.

*Did you think that was a bit peculiar?*

Yes, I've always felt it was this...it was...I don't know what. I think you know, it's something to do with Breton in a way, he was always looking for new ways of exploring and, you know, extending Surrealism.

*Was that also partly fear, that it could die without extra input?*

Yes, I think it's possibly so. Because you know, in the early days he did explore very much other aspects of it, you know, the period of the, when they were having seances and things like that, to explore the subconscious and find another direction if you like, or one of many, which would take it in... I don't know what, what it was. But of course, I've been reading this Italian-American, this book on Breton, it's quite a big volume, and it shows very clearly how Breton is, you know, almost contradicting himself in some ways. But, that was Breton.

*The Sixties we know in retrospect to be the birth of so many things. The most notable fact I suppose was that commercialism, in all fields, fashion, style, Pop art, Op art, new businesses, these were all elements of the consumer world, the commercial world. Now, was Surrealism ever able to be commercial, at any point, did you feel?*

Well, I suppose the one very good example of that would be Dali's work of course. I mean when, during the war for instance, many of them had gone to America, they published a magazine called 'View' and 'Triple V', there were two, and some of

them, they produced an advertisement for silk stockings by Dalí on the back cover, because he was completely out of favour then, but he was producing advertisements. The trouble was of course, he was debasing his own imagery. He would use the crutches there to hang the stockings over, and all the images from his paintings were being reconstituted to serve a different purpose. But then Dalí was very much concerned with money.

*And was that, do you think, ultimately his guiding principle?*

Well, there is a story you know that, there was a taxi coming from Spain into France, and it was stopped at the Customs, and they found hundreds of sheets, blank sheets of paper, signed by Dalí; who put the illustrations on them was anybody's business of course, but, it was money.

*But, what did he do with the money, do you know?*

I've no idea, I've no idea. Because his guardian as it were was Gala of course. I mean Dalí could be very generous, if someone had done some service for them, he would give them a little painting, but the next day Gala would go along and take it back from them. But what he did with the money, I've no idea. I mean later on of course, when he was very ill, he was robbed considerably by the people around him of course.

*And apparently there was some, a feeling that perhaps his death was hastened by others.*

That's possible, yes. I don't really know enough about that. I know he seemed to have set fire to himself in the bed, and suffered from, oh various things I suppose. I remember, just, when it was almost being announced that he was dying, the B.B.C. came to me, did a, asked me to do a news item for the One O'clock News, and we, as usual of course, you do about a three-quarters of an hour programme which is going to reduce it to half a minute probably. But, that was going out, and then of course he hadn't died. So, a few days later they rang me up and said, 'We want...' I said, 'I've just done a programme.' 'Oh no, we can't find it,' they say. So an entirely different

team came along and we go through the same motions again, with a man with a motorbike and a helmet waiting outside to rush the tape to the B.B.C. That time he did die, so it went out. But, lots of nonsense like this goes on.

*So, we're still in the Sixties, we're still talking about you getting more and more of a foothold in terms of showing your own work. Meeting different artists, meeting different personalities. Did you feel at that time that perhaps a change of course, career, call it what you will, might be on the cards for you?*

No, it didn't occur to me at all that I could do anything else. I had to earn my leisure of course.

*But you had a number of salaries coming in.*

Yes indeed, but that was earlier of course. But I did some work on television, and a certain amount of commercial work of course, but at least it paid for the material you had to buy to paint. But then of course I was making lots of contacts, and I was very friendly with Mesens of course, who eventually of course settled in England. And George Melly was around a lot then, Eileen Agar, Edith Rimmington, all these people.

*Tell me, one thing has always fascinated me. In many artistic circles, or artistic movements, women seem to have traditionally played a secondary role. What was it like in the British Surreal movement for the women?*

Yes, I think, you know, it was very much like the French in a way, they got on with their work but they didn't attend so many of the meetings, or the political discussions, or anything like that. In fact I think at one meeting I remember at the London Gallery, when we were discussing something like this, I think it was someone like Edith Rimmington who said, 'I don't know what we're bothering with all this, let's get on with our painting,' you see. Whereas of course you know, like the French I suppose the English like to discuss things all round the periphery of painting. Because you don't paint, well you, like the French you don't paint in the evenings so much, you talk.

*But there was no obvious discrimination as such?*

Oh none whatsoever, no, no. No, and I mean they were always welcome there who attended. Some of them used to attend The Three Horseshoes, the Barcelona. And of course it would bring in other people, the Welsh poet...

*Dylan Thomas?*

Dylan Thomas. Henry Moore would come along, and all sorts of people. And of course some of the people who were associated with Surrealism would always bring their girlfriends. I think the girlfriends were more interested in the men than what was being discussed, but, nevertheless it did make a lively crowd.

*Could one describe this as a lively middle-class crowd?*

Yes, I think that was absolutely essentially, yes.

*Did you feel you could welcome others from other classes, or it just never occurred?*

Well I came across some very interesting correspondence, it's in an American university now, in which, it's Brunius writing to Mesens and attacking him for being just a little bit too liberal with bringing in people that he shouldn't have brought in. And in fact Brunius is very critical of people like Simon Watson-Taylor, and several others. He felt they were disruptive, and they were not really, as he said, you know, you hadn't vetted these people properly, and the letters which are in the archives of this university in America are quite fascinating.

*But he meant something else by it?*

I think so, yes. He probably didn't say everything he thought, but, in the letters which have been preserved it's quite fascinating.

*So ultimately Conroy, in your view, are art movements simply clubs then?*

I suppose they could be, yes. You see, I don't know whether there's many art movements in this country, I suppose the Cubists used to gather together, and in fact even live in the same little houses, you know, together. But it didn't happen in this country. And you see there's no café life in England; in France it's a very important aspect.

*But in the fifties and Sixties London there were certainly many opportunities to meet.*

In the Sixties certainly, yes there were. But, they were not compatible with oneself, so you tended to stay within your own group, although you met other people of course. And, perhaps one did a bit of proselytising as well, I don't know.

*You never felt at this time that, you were having small exhibitions here and there, but ultimately it wasn't going anywhere, and you weren't actually getting the big shows you wanted.*

You had the satisfaction of doing the work. You know, the interesting thing is, you know, the feeling that you are producing surrealist work, you are pulling someone's leg; actually you couldn't care a damn about people's leg, you were just doing what you want to do. If someone likes it and buys it, that's very nice, but otherwise, you just go on working. And as long as, I always said you know, you have one foot on a bar of soap and the other in the gutter most of the time, but it's OK, you know, you do it. It gets obsessional of course, that's what it amounts to.

*This was also certainly the decade of characters in the art world that we all know, such as Robert Fraser, Leslie Waddington, Nicholas Logsdale and so on. What do you think these great names of the Sixties, and certainly the latter two still now in the art world, what do you think their response to Surrealism was at that time? Did they even consider it?*

No, I don't think they did, no. I mean Waddingtons would show Picasso of course, and even Ernst probably, if they could get hold of them, but it wasn't on their schedule; in a mixed show you might find them. But there were a number of them.

You know there was one fascinating man, he did these sets and costumes for 'The Red Shoes', the film by Powell, he lived at that place in the country, it was an arts centre, somewhere in Devon I think, quite well known. And he had his first show at Jack Bilbo's[ph] gallery in London, and it really was very much influenced by Surrealism, and in fact I know Jane England today, at her gallery, has got one of them and she's looking quite hard to find where the others are, because he produced quite a lot of work. But there were people like that. And there's many, you know, again this is the whole problem in Surrealism of course, of confusing the imagery with the philosophy. So, and the French were very rigid on this, that it's so easy to look at a work and say it's Surrealist, you know, the word's banded around now in the press about things which are nothing to do with Surrealism, but the word, because it's a little strange, a little bizarre, it's Surrealist. And it's not of course, because it hasn't come out of that movement. And there is a philosophy to Surrealism. So, that makes, it does lend itself to a lot of confusion.

*Because a lot of people can see Surrealism as one very small idea with multiple applications.*

Yes.

*And I suppose that would be the wrong and the pejorative view of Surrealism.*

Yes, I think it would, yes, because, you know, Surrealism can exist on so many different levels, you know, a psychological, a philosophical, the visual side, the... And of course Surrealism made no distinction between poetry and painting, it was part of Surrealism, so that you have these multiple ways of looking at it.

*Do you think for example the characters in history, even pre the 20<sup>th</sup> century, have had surrealist elements without knowing it?*

Yes of course. Yes, they had I suppose what would have been called fantasy or something like that.

*Or indeed perhaps knowing it, like perhaps William Blake, who might have had a little brush with his version of Surrealism.*

Mm, certainly, no reason why not.

*And what about coming again to the 20<sup>th</sup> century, someone like Jean Cocteau?*

Yes, interesting you mention Cocteau, because they really hated Cocteau in Paris, I mean they went out of their way to...

*The establishment?*

Well the Surrealists, always, they...

*Why was that?*

Well, I think it was something to do with the popularisation of what he was doing, but they were very much against him. In fact they did some very unpleasant things, I mean one night they went and pinned a note on his door saying, 'Pederast', which was really unforgivable. But then you see their attitude towards women, although one knows of the Suffragettes in the past, and they must have known something of it, yet they still had this attitude. There is, you know, in '29 the Surrealists, over a period of several years, had discussions on sex, investigating sex, and the documents have been kept of the dialogue, and they used to gather there, and on one occasion Aragon said, 'Don't you think it would be a good idea, since we are discovering sex, that we should have a woman among us?' They hadn't thought to invite a woman to be involved. Well eventually they did, and they have now been translated and published in this country, and it's quite fascinating.

End of F6324 Side B

F6325 Side A

*.....looking at Surrealism historically, but what about now, does Surrealism have a place for you?*

Well for me it certainly does of course, because I can't think of any movement that has more of, of carrying out exploration and discovery that Surrealism is concerned with. And I think also that it has a revolutionary connotation in a sense; it's exploring areas which have never been explored before, except in Surrealism of course, and the question is, can you extend it? I look at it myself, you know I think Surrealism is really linked to everydayness if you like, it's things that are happening around one, which is very opposite, say, to abstraction, which still plays a dominant part as you know, where it's so pure that it goes straight through and ignores everything, you know, and just, I mean you mustn't have a horizontal line because it suggests an horizon, you know, it's cutting, isolating itself from anything in nature. Surrealism explores this all the time. I mean Ernst is a superb example of a painter who has so many styles, he was always known as the complete Surrealist because of it. And, there's no reason why one can't still explore things. I'm quite fascinated with the everydayness that crops up, I mean like, and I may even have mentioned it before, that I found from the objects left on the tube stations, you know, week after week, they supplied me with a list of the things, and it's unbelievable, you know, that about once a month there's a crutch left. Now, why? A person who has gone in with a crutch can walk out without one. My only explanation was that Sister Wendy Beckett was wandering the tubes every day making instant cures. What other explanation could there be? And you know, the items left are quite unbelievable.

*Yes, I think if you probably amass them and put them in a museum, that would certainly be **the** central Surreal museum.*

Absolutely, I think it would be glorious.

*In fact maybe London Transport Lost Property Office **is** the secret Surrealist museum.*

Is the secret...exactly, yes, yes, I quite agree.

*You'll have to go and curate a show there.*

Yes it would be delightful wouldn't it, yes, to assemble all that stuff. Yes.

*But, we're going through the decades, and you are celebrating what year now in your life, this year?*

Well, I suppose the Eighties and the Nineties really, we could look at.

*Yes, absolutely, but what...how old are you now, at this point?*

At this point...

*You're coming up to a birthday, or...?*

I shall have a birthday on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, and I shall be, I discovered, 85. I don't always believe this.

*No, no.*

Because I always feel I'm on the way back anyway you see.

*OK, it's not quite the rebound, but...*

No, just...I'm going to pass people on the way up you know.

*But, do you tend to...I suppose the natural human tendency is to look at one's life in decade chunks. Do you?*

Yes, but of course I think the decades get mixed up a little bit, you know, you flash back to something and you explore something that you had explored thirty years ago, or it might crop up in some obscure way.

*Cyclic really.*

Yes, cyclic, yes exactly.

*And maybe really the true meaning of revolution, because of course revolution is something new but at the same time it's also circular, it comes back.*

Of course, yes of course, yes. I mean I think the politics and surrealism have sort of passed by. I mean the great revolutionary period was before the war, the Second World War, and I think that is rather passed by. You know it's interesting, because what is left? I mean there's been tremendous writing on Surrealism, in France, not so much in England but other countries, and many countries have, you know, in the big shows, they are represented by fourteen different countries very often, but there is a sense that... Switch it off for a minute.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

Right. There is this feeling that it's the visual side of Surrealism that's survived, although the writing is fascinating of course, and there have been many works produced now of doing a bibliography of Surrealism, and there's a friend of mine, he is doing the up-to-date, though it can never be definitive of course, of all the literature that's been written about Surrealism. But, it's always the painting that stays in the mind, it's the visual image always. And I think a lot of the strength of that has been that it has drawn from living.

*Isn't that also partly because, as a species we are largely visual, wouldn't that apply to anything?*

Of course. It's just the way you look at it of course. I think it's an interesting thing you know, I mean I could paint in a quite natural way, and that is a purely representational way, I can resort to doing... I wouldn't do portraits but one could do landscapes and still lifes, but always something happens.

*What happens exactly?*

Well, I remember some time ago doing a street scene which happened to be south-east London, it was quite a fascinating, with an arcade thing and a street scene and so on, and a railway line going up. And, I couldn't resist bringing in a little girl standing in the street with a figure at a window, and a bear coming up behind her you see. And I don't know why. And I've done that before, I remember in the south of France on one occasion stopping at a little place, mainly because I was with, I think I was with Pauline then, and she said, 'I'd love a cup of coffee,' and we had the facility to make coffee. So I turned into a turning which happened to be the railway station at Saint-Rambert. And the station was so fascinating that I took a photograph of it. About a year later I saw the film, you know, the photograph, and thought this would make an interesting painting. But, I'd put a lion in the foreground. And the interesting thing was, she has the painting, I gave her the painting eventually, but she said, 'I always remember that lion there,' you see. Which is very intriguing isn't it, because there could be no possible lion in such a civilised part.

*Well it's quite interesting, something you say makes me want to ask you the next question, and in fact before I ask you that question, to see whether you agree with another thing that I'm going to ask you. A lot of people might think of Surrealism as being very immediate, these images seem to be haphazardly gained from somewhere and thrown on a canvas, whereas what you've just said suggests that ideas almost mature like wine, they take a long long time, and then suddenly they come to their final realisation. So Surrealism is certainly not like imagism, not like the imagist poets and artists, would you say?*

Yes, it's quite true I think. It's very difficult to pinpoint where images come from, you know. I mean, even of Dali, he himself said that he would start very often a canvas in the top left-hand corner, and the ringing of a telephone, or someone ringing the doorbell, or something like that, would influence the form which appeared in the paintings. A good example of course was his limp watches, because living in Paris at that time, and they were...with...his wife...

*Gala.*

Gala. She went out to do some shopping, and she came back with some camembert cheese, and of course in the heat, they were in an attic you know, in mid-summer, the camembert melted, and some of it slipped over the edge of the plate it was on, which gave Dali the idea for the watch, the limp watches you see. And he used to wear one in his top pocket of his jacket you know, especially constructed of course. So, you've no idea where an image comes from, it just comes out of thoughts, something you see, something you hear.

*If you had to say, if you had to say what was your motif, if there is a motif; we know that Magritte has his bowler-hatted men, as you say Dalì has his watches, Picasso, maybe he has his hysterical weeping shattered cubistic creatures; what about Conroy Maddox, what would you say might be your familiar motif?*

I don't know, I don't paint many paintings the same. I've done a series, I mean the Salpêtrière ones, of the big hospital in Paris you know; in fact when I was there years ago I got permission to go in and have a look at the place, you know, because Charcot did such fascinating work in dealing with hysteria of course. And it was interesting, because when the Surrealists got hold of the archives, round about 1925, of the hysterical women which were photographed in the hospital at the time, because Charcot had wards with these women in, it was interesting to note that not one of the Surrealists celebrated it in 1925, of the passionate attitudes among the hysterics. But no painter picked it up. I think probably the explanation could be that most of the Surrealists at that time were poets.

*Well, it reminds me also that, something that Jean Cocteau says, going back to Jean Cocteau again, he described everything he did as poetry, whether it happened to be a play or a drawing, or indeed a poem, everything was an element of poetry, just like you were saying that everything was an element maybe of painting, the visual sense.*

Mm. Yes. Yes I think that's quite true. I was never a, I mean, I like some of Cocteau's films very much, I think he was quite an interesting and exploratory filmmaker. I mean, 'La Belle et la Bête' for instance is a superb play on all sorts of sexual imagery which creeps up, the breaking of the glass for instance, the windows and things like this.

*Like, it reminds one maybe of the scene in 'Wuthering Heights' with the broken glass.*

Exactly, yes, yes. It's there you see. And one can pick up on these things. And so it...it has no time, it has no date in history or any particular time, it's things you can... it's very difficult to pinpoint how you do create images, or where they come from.

*Despite the fact that of course Surrealism really dominated much of 20<sup>th</sup> century art, it has really been rejected in the current age I would say. Would you agree?*

Yes I would, yes it's quite true. Going back to sources, I didn't, I wasn't aware of it of course, but Silvano Levy[ph], who is doing my biography, sends me little bits at times which he's written, and he pinpoints that, my father, you know, was a great collector, I mean everything he would collect, from pianolas to swords, suits of armour, you name it, coins, everything, and he thinks that that stayed with me because of the objects I put into my paintings. They're not the same of course but that obsession.

*The very act of collecting, of accumulating.*

Well I'm a hoarder you see, look at the documents I've kept. I mean the Tate Gallery have put them in their archives now, all the letters, correspondence that I've held on to since the Thirties you see.

*And who are the characters one might be likely to find in your correspondence?*

Oh, well there are letters from, you know, Penrose and all the English Surrealists. I've got cards from Magritte, Man Ray, whom I knew very well, in fact I was asked quite recently to draw up a list of the people I knew, and it's quite extraordinary, many of them were friends you know. I must say many of them have joined the dusty people too, and are no longer with us, and I met only a few weeks ago, I think it's Ballard, the writer, I think he wrote the script or the book for, which is now the film called 'Crash', and, I was introduced to him, and he immediately said, 'Oh yes, you are the last of the Surrealists aren't you, of the original group.' And I said, 'Yes, I

suppose I am, although Gascoyne is a poet, but he's still alive, and Emmy Bridgwater is still alive but not painting.

*Not painting, no.*

And Gascoyne isn't doing very much now. But as a painter I am the last of that group.

*You manage a painting a week, I think.*

Oh yes, very often, yes. And some incomplete, some I don't complete for a long time, you know, because I think about... You know, it's the Leonardo remark, you know, a painter works hardest when he's not painting, which is absolutely true. Painting's easy.

*Let's just go back a little bit to this point I was making about the decades. If we do look at your life in decades, do you feel that, you were saying a little while ago you were a little bit too old for the Sixties, so you didn't quite enjoy it in the way that perhaps the world understood it; the Seventies maybe, I don't know, tell me about the Seventies. Were you...you seem to be slightly out of sync with the century.*

Yes, probably a little bit, yes, yes.

*And so, with that in mind, perhaps quite happy to take a back seat and not join the rat race and be very much Conroy Maddox as a gentleman of pleasure really.*

Well, in a way, but...

*And pleasure for you is painting.*

Yes. I think probably it's a lot to do with being the observer rather than the participant.

*Have you always been an observer?*

I think so, yes. People have accused me of being an observer when I've been in gatherings where they've enjoyed everything going on and I've sat back and listened.

*What is so special about observing rather than being part of something?*

I don't know. I suppose you store it up in some way. Maybe I, I always hope maybe something will come out of it. I must say I didn't get anything out of the Sixties much; I went to one or two parties and got rather bored.

*Despite all the free love and free drugs and...?*

Well exactly, that was going on as well of course, but I'd been through that during the war of course as well.

*And was it more exciting first time round?*

Oh very much, yes, because you were on the edge, you know, you... A bomb could hit you any moment sort of thing you know. So perhaps there was a certain desperation in it all.

*Sort of last chance saloon.*

Exactly, exactly, yes. I mean you would go to parties, you would stay up most of the night, you would go and do some work, because I had to work during the war, and you would do another party the next night, and you began to wonder how you managed to survive, you know. But drinking and talking and things, time just flits by. You know it's interesting, I can...you can get tired at night but I never go to bed much before one o'clock, sometimes later.

*Even now?*

Even now. And I get up early, I get up at eight o'clock in the morning.

*And what do you do on these nights, these late nights you have? I'm sure you're not glued to the television.*

Oh no, no, I read quite a lot, I mean, I'm buying books all the time. I mean the Richardson, you know, I waited five years, Des gave me the last, the second volume of his four volumes on Picasso, I've got that. I've got 'Revolution of the Mind', the Italian-American who has written this book on Breton, which is magnificent. So I've always got a lot to read as well. And I'm always fascinated with biographies you see. I don't read novels.

*Why is that?*

I don't know. Maybe if I go on holiday I might take the fattest novel I could find, you know, two inches thick, that delights me of course, and I'll finish it. But...but I buy books with the idea that they are documents that I can go back to, you know, it's rather like reading all volumes of Proust, and I've read most of them, but a man who can spend half a book on describing a ballroom I think is fascinating.

*If a little bit obsessive perhaps.*

Of course it is, yes, that's right.

*Would you describe yourself as an obsessive character?*

Not particularly, no, I don't have many obsessions, except, I suppose painting occupies a lot of my thoughts you know, and I do innumerable drawings and things, and exploring things like, I'm fascinated with the use of decalcomania, you know, this...

*The painting without brushes.*

Without brushes, yes, of creating these effects. And sometimes they come off magnificently, because it's purely accidental you see.

*Of course. How do you manage, how do you do your version of it?*

Well, I always, in the earlier days I used to... There's a way of putting the paint on, it's very important, especially if you are working in oil, or gouache. I used to press it with newspaper, but when I met Max Ernst in Paris we were talking about that, because he had a show, I think it was at Point Cardinelle[??], in the, probably the Fifties, Sixties, we were talking about it, and he said, 'How do you do yours?' And I said, 'Newspaper usually.' And he said, 'No, use a sheet of glass, because it's smooth and you get even stronger effect from it,' which was quite right. And he also said, of course you can clean the glass and you don't have to throw that away. But, I've used that but paper still works very well, I mean that one I've just shown you for instance is paper, not glass, so sometimes, it depends on the surface.

*And the one you're talking about now is the image you submitted for the 'Death' show.*

The 'Death' show at Angela Flowers, yes.

*At Angela Flowers, and that was this year.*

This year, yes.

*Yes.*

But I go way back to the Forties when I was doing it as well you see. But, I haven't got many of those early ones left, but they were mainly gouache, which is quite a good medium. But, there's a way of putting it on, you must never put it on thick. The paint you put on is very liquid, and it's only then that you can get the effect that is really what you want, or you hope you wanted, because you interfere with it afterwards. I mean, automatism is interesting, but it always needs a certain point of control, a point of control, to bring it to completion, and that's very important.

*Just going back to what we were saying just a little while ago about Surrealism being negated very much in our time, and in fact in its own time it wasn't very popular.*

Never, no.

*In fact when has it been popular, is a question I could ask you first. Has it ever been popular? I suppose the Seventies maybe.*

The Seventies there was a resurgence, yes, that's quite true, and galleries were... But you know even this year, earlier this year there were three galleries in London showing Surrealism, and in Paris now they have a magazine that comes out every month called 'Infosur', which is Surrealist information, and I feed them with material of anything that might relate to Surrealism, some not always Surrealist, but painters who are of interest to the Surrealists. And I feed this information to them, and they write up what I've written in this... It covers you see, it covers all the literature, the world-wide really, literature, painting, books, everything else you see. Even plays. And obituaries too, which... And, there they headed it 'Surrealism takes over England', you know, because I sent three notices about exhibitions, there was one at the Mayor Gallery, there was one at the Piccadilly Gallery, and Faginato[ph] was showing one as well, all within that, in that month, you know.

*But it seems very much of a niche audience.*

Of course, always has been. When they published publications in France, the *tirage* 'Tirage'[ph] was never more than three hundred.

*Do you think people are frightened and therefore suspicious of it, or suspicious and therefore frightened of it?*

Yes, I think there has been that, they've steered clear of it. Of course now there are great icons, I mean Magritte fetches huge prices, Max Ernst does and people like that.

*But that's what time does to you.*

That's what time does of course, yes.

*Only, here we are in late 1997 and there are articles coming out about what, who one might say to be the king of the Surrealists, Dalì, as the worst painter in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

Yes, yes of course. Yes.

*Which is unfair.*

Yes of course it's unfair. I think there was a period, when he went to America he really debased a lot of his imagery, he was using it to sell silk stockings, you know. But the Surrealists didn't ignore that of course, very often on the back of 'View' and magazines like that they reproduce one of his advertisements, but never mention him you see. No, Dalì was a case, a particular case I think, but I think his importance always has been, or, Surrealism was rather committed to automatism, and Dalì was the man who I think tended to destroy automatism. Although he used automatism very much, he was able to give it a visual reality as it were in his work. He changed the direction of Surrealism.

*And perhaps because of who he was, and indeed who Gala was, they needed money, and so they commercialised it.*

Exactly.

*And the Surrealists couldn't forgive him for that.*

No. That is quite true of course. I think the trouble too was that Surrealism at that time when Dalì sort of went to Paris and then went back to Spain, I think the problem was that, they were very much at that time committed to a political, you know, orientation as it were, and when Dalì starts showing.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*So you're saying, when Dalì started using images of Stalin, or Lenin...*

Lenin, Lenin.

*Lenin, sorry, Lenin.*

Yes. He was showing Lenin's portrait with one of his buttocks extended outwards, held up by a crutch, or putting a row of Lenin portraits on the keyboard of a piano, this was not really very acceptable at the time when the Surrealists were very much committed to, for a short period anyway, to communism. In fact Aragon attended the big conference in Kharkov.

*Surrealism seems very much a group, a banding together of idealists, would you agree?*

Yes, I think that was true, especially in France. You see it spread to England but it was very late when it came to England.

*And isn't that strange. We mustn't go too far away, because I want to bring you back to the Seventies, but, it's so strange to think that England is in its...its island state, an ideal place for a sort of eccentricity, indeed you have English eccentrics; why do you think Surrealism didn't flourish here, which seems its natural home?*

Yes. Herbert Read's argument of course was that, but he, I think I may have mentioned this earlier of course, that I think Read was responsible for much of the destruction of the group in this country, because he saw Surrealism as an extension of the English romantic tradition, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and the poets like that. Well, they were established artists, writers, poets. In France they had their heritage as well, but they were Rimbaud, Lautréamont and Beaudelaire, revolutionaries. And there is the difference. Read saw it in a very narrow sense you see. And of course his defence was eventually that, well, the English were very much concerned with a rather uninspired approach to Surrealism, they didn't see it as revolutionary in way, it was, again I think they felt it was, you know, putting a bit of fantasy onto some abstractions, which did exist for a long time.

*And perhaps a little bit too much like fun, which of course is a sin in the art world.*

Absolutely, yes, yes. It's like saying Decorative, a pejorative word if ever there was one, in art.

*Now, just, we're coming up to the Seventies. Now you're in, you've had several exhibitions, you're...would it be correct to say you are a name on the scene, by now?*

Well, you know, in the Seventies and Eighties I showed, I always show in the big international shows.

*For example?*

Well, Le Havre, Milan, where was the other? Marseilles of course. And the last one was in Australia. But, in Milan they gave me a room to myself, of my work. And so I was more represented in these shows always. And of course I always go over. Finland was the other place I had a very...and the English section there was the largest in the whole of the exhibition, and they had work from everywhere, America and the rest of Europe. And, oddly enough it was that time, I think it was the sort of late Seventies, that they sent me two tickets to fly over there. It was the first time I had flown, I'd never really believed this idea of flying, you know, too much. But I felt I had to go, so, and I went, and oddly enough in that year I flew nine times, which was rather confusing, because I feel it should have been an even number if I came back. What had happened was, when we went to Finland they said, you might like to see a little bit of Finland, so we've booked you on a train out to, which was three hundred kilometres north of Helsinki.

*Up to Lapland?*

Nearly, not quite to Lapland, fortunately, because the Chernobyl thing was happening there you see and no one ate the reindeer meat. But you had marvellous salmon there of course. And, I gave an opening talk there at the exhibition. And then, a month later they rang me up again and said, 'There's two more tickets for you, we would like you to come and give another talk,' you see. So I went over then, and I took my

daughter that time, Pauline came the first time but she was caught up with her Ph.D., she couldn't go. But, that was quite delightful.

End of F6325 Side A

F6325 Side B

*.....dawned upon you, did it, with pleasure, was it entering a new age?*

No, it was just a continuation of what had been going before, you know. It's very difficult to separate these decades or these years, separation. I was still painting, doing something different probably, and... But now you see, well no, won't come up quite that immediately, but...

*No. But still, still based here at Lambolle Road.*

Yes, I've been here since the Sixties you see.

*Yes, mm. Just looking around, I don't know whether we've commented on this before, but it doesn't matter. I mean just looking around this flat, you wouldn't necessarily guess that it was owned by a Surrealist.*

Probably not, no.

*Have you always kept your everyday sort of personal appearance and lifestyle apart from what goes on in your mind?*

Well, I don't really favour bohemianism you know.

*And that's precisely what I thought you would.*

Really? No, the Surrealists never did. You know, when you meet, they dressed like, almost like something out of the 'Tatler', you know.

*That's true.*

They're always well dressed. They don't wear trousers which have been put under a toaster, you know, and got ten creases all round them. I mean they're always very smart, Breton always very smart, Ernst and all those. No, because, they always felt,

in fact I think they always felt, that by dressing more like the bourgeoisie it was a bigger insult to produce works that was offending the very class they represented, or claiming to be.

*And indeed may have even come from.*

Yes of course, exactly, most of them came from the bourgeois or even richer families you see.

*And there's nothing quite like biting the hand that feeds it.*

Exactly, exactly. Yes I always thought that was a charming idea.

*But, you've never felt the desire to, I mean obviously there are works here, there are paintings, books, every single book is about Surrealism, there are wonderful sculptures in the hall, incredible installation type pieces here and there, but generally speaking, you come in and there's a sofa and two settees, two chairs, and some dried flowers and so on, and it's very very simple in a way. You've had no desire to live, not necessarily bohemian, but a curious lifestyle?*

It's not necessarily intentional in that way. You know, my place is chaotic really, I mean my room upstairs where I've got a lot of paintings, it's unbelievable. My studio, you fight your way in almost, and the only person I can think of who was like that was Bacon of course, who had to move every so often because he made such chaos around him.

*So this sitting-room really presents the only place of normality really?*

Absolutely.

*If we venture out, we might never come back.*

That's right, yes, it's a little island in itself you know, yes. But, it's not necessarily intentional. I always, you know, I had so much stuff in the room, this room above,

which is now my bedroom, at least quite tidy, so much mess that I rang up Camden Council and said, 'Would you like to move it for me?' And he said, 'What have you got?' And I gave him a list. And he said, 'I think I'd better come and have a look at this.' And he came and they charged me £40 to move it. I thought they would move it for nothing. But there was so much. So it just went, and of course the moment it's gone you realise you've thrown something away that you really wanted, you know, or, Paul Conran came along and bought a whole lot of books off me, magazines which are going way back, you know, that I just wanted to get rid of. And still I've got them there, there's stacks of them. And it's upstairs, it's unbelievable, I've got a cabinet upstairs, a glass-fronted cabinet, full of, and they are the very best, even first editions, of many things, even like 'Opium' by...

*De Quincey?*

No.

*No. Oh...*

The poet, the one we talked about earlier.

*Oh, yes. I know who you mean, yes.*

Of course, yes.

*Sorry, I thought you meant 'Confessions of an Opium-eater', sorry.*

No. No I haven't got that oddly enough.

*I was going to say, the first edition of that would be...*

Well, no, no it's...it's the first edition of 'Opium' by...

*Cocteau.*

Cocteau, yes, yes, which is marvellous, with his drawings in as well, under the influence. And I've got a lot of first editions like that. The archive stuff is with the Tate Gallery, what they wanted of all the early Surrealist things.

*Now, just, we were just going back to the Seventies as an age. If the Sixties were typified as a decade of brilliant optimism, which is I think how Robert Fraser described it once, innocence and coca-cola and crisps, and that feeling that you could do anything, what was the Seventies to you? You say you just kind of leapt from one decade to another and you didn't feel anything.*

That's right.

*And it was just like another Christmas party perhaps, it just happened to be a new decade.*

Yes. Well, I don't know, you see, being in Hampstead, it's a very convenient spot, that's why I'm always loath to leave it, because people coming from abroad will find me very easily, because it's very near the centre of town, I mean it's only five stations to Charing Cross on the Jubilee Line, and I've got the same distance is the tube the other side you see. So that makes it very easy. I'm often tempted to move of course, because you know, I paid £7,000 for this place in '76, it was so cheap; it's now valued at £350,000, and the temptation to move is...then you realise that for a place which, I could even do with an extra room, I've only got five, it would cost me much more than what I sold this one for, because the prices are zooming. There's people moved next door to us, they bought a flat, a ground-floor, and the garden level is another level, you know, you've got two floors, and they've spent pretty well £100,000 converting it, and I said to the new owner of it, I said, 'Why did you pick Lambolle Road?' And he said, 'There's a reputation about Lambolle Road, it's the best road to be in in Hampstead.'

[BREAK IN RECORDING - TELEPHONE]

*So Conroy, let me just drag you kicking and screaming back into the Seventies.*

Right.

*The Seventies to me was very much one of rebellion, of the punk movement. Did that touch you at all?*

No, not appreciably, no. I don't think that... I met many more people then of course, Roger Cardinal, Robert Short, people like that, and, purely I got in touch with them through their book on, that little book they wrote together called 'Surrealism, Permanent Revelation', which was quite a fascinating study, and we became very close friends, and I've lectured up at Norwich, and Roger Cardinal comes here very frequently, and Robert Short did as well. And also Robert short rented accommodation in Paris from an American woman who went back to the States for a considerable time, and to save himself paying the rent for it, he used to let us, let me have it for a week or a fortnight at a time for a nominal amount, you know, £10 or something like that, so, I used to go over there frequently of course. So I was meeting lots of the French people around then.

*In the Seventies?*

In the Seventies, yes.

Yes.

And, you know, caught up with Man Ray, who, we remained friends right until the time Penrose organised his last exhibition at the I.C.A., when he was still alive, and he was in a chair then. And he gave me a copy of his autobiography, and did a portrait of me, which is really two circles of my glasses, and sand[??], it was rather delightful.

*Did you feel at all that something tangibly was going on in your work? Were you changing direction, or...?*

Well I think that that time I did at least four or five paintings on Salpêtrière, which I've already mentioned.

*And what was the inspiration for that, why did you do that?*

Mainly because I came across the work of Charcot at Salpêtrière, at the big hospital there, and it seemed a fascinating subject, which had never been touched on, as I said, because the Surrealists were all poets and there was no painter drawing on... Ernst – not Ernst, I'm sorry, Dalí created hysteria in his work, in many cases, but it didn't come from that source; whereas I used the Salpêtrière itself, you know, as an image, and Charcot, and produced a whole lot paintings on that subject. I've even, in the last few years I've done one or two more, because it's an ongoing subject, I was just looking at it again from a different perspective, you know.

*And, the tragic events of the last few months involving Diana, Princess of Wales at Salpêtrière, did that produce some sort of...?*

Nothing, nothing, no.

*It wasn't an inspiration to do another body of work?*

No, no it didn't strike me. It seemed to be rather, becoming rather like the newspapers, you know, making an issue of it. I did see a certain hysteria happening in this country, it's very strange, when people were speaking about her as though they had been living with her, it was very peculiar. It was fascinating. And then of course, it reminded me very much, as it ultimately did, of the Kennedy situation, you know, they're finding all sorts of interesting things and wanting her killed, and there is a certain logic perhaps. I mean, Fayed would become a British citizen, has been struggling for years to become one; she might have become a Muslim, in fact the Muslims are claiming she was one you see. So all these ramifications, all these twists and turns are fascinating, but they're not a subject that would interest me. It's perhaps too immediate in a way, I don't know. But I've never had any desire to do Diana in a particular Surrealist setting as it were.

*No no no, I... No no, I just wondered, because of the connection with Salpêtrière, that...*

I see, yes, well, yes but... I can't link it up, because I think Salpêtrière belongs to a period in history, of the last century really of course, and the hysterics that Charcot was doing, well he put a normal person in the ward with them, in a few week's time that person became just as hysterical as his patients you see. And he had his Tuesday afternoons, you know, where he would demonstrate to the rest of the doctors how he treated these hysterics, and it was fascinating of course.

*I mean if the Sixties, as we were saying, almost passed you by, by...I suppose, that meant that the Seventies did as well.*

Yes I think so, yes, I think so.

*And, you were quite pleased to exist in a little, your own time warp in a way.*

Yes, I think so, yes I think so, yes. I just go on painting, you know. But, one is aware of the, the changes of course, but they haven't impinged yet. Maybe if I live long enough, maybe something will creep in later, but I don't know, I've no idea.

*But, the Seventies, let's go back to the work again. You were still obviously creating surreal works, but, did you take anything from the inspiration of the time, political leaders or anything that went into the work, or was it just Conroy Maddox's own thing?*

No, the only time that happened was back in the Sixties oddly, when I did one or two paintings, and Silvano Levy's[ph] got them, which were bringing in the man who was the American President at that time.

*In the Seventies?*

Sixties, Seventies, yes.

*Nixon?*

Nixon.

*Was it Nixon?*

No, it wasn't Nixon, Who was the one before Nixon?

*I can't remember either.*

I can't.

*Yes, anyway, whoever it was.*

Yes, whoever it was, yes, right. And I used one or two... Che Guevara appeared in one of that period too. But I think in the Seventies nothing, I just went on, you know, ploughing an area which I was interested in at the time, and I can only recollect it if I see the works I did then.

*Yes, mm. But what about, socially you were seeing lots of different people, and...*

Oh yes, always, yes, yes, I was making contact with various people. I mean, Silvano, no, Michel Remy[ph] was over recently in England, because his work will be out next year, which is really the history of the English Surrealist movement, it's being published by Scholar Press[ph] in Aldershot, and I think it will be quite an important work he's done, and we first met 25 years ago, he reminded me when he was here only last week, and we've been friends ever since. And I mentioned his name to Edouard Jaguer, and Jaguer wrote to me – who was behind the Phars[ph] movement in Paris – and afterwards Jaguer wrote to me and said, 'Thank you very much, we get on marvellously together,' so it linked up Michel with Jaguer and the Phars[ph] Group and everything else, which was really very much directed towards Surrealism. And I've shown in several of their shows, in Le Havre for instance, they had a big one.

*But of course in this period you didn't go back to your advertising work or, you were just simply painting?*

Nothing at all, I don't touch it at all, no, no. No, as I said before, it's a complete cut-off. When I was working in that, it was something I dropped the moment I left the office, and did my painting.

*It was simply a means to an end?*

Absolutely, yes. Yes. It's a way of earning one's leisure.

*A good way to put it. So although it may not have been a particularly important time for you, were there maybe unconnected things which you remember of that period which somehow come back into the work today?*

Well, one interesting thing I suppose was that, it was in, around about that, in the Seventies, that I had a letter from Des, she had been to a lecture by Simon Wilson at the Tate Gallery on Surrealism, and she was interested enough to speak to Simon afterwards and say, 'Where can I find out more about Surrealism?' And of course, I know what Simon does, he said, 'You've got to go and see Conroy,' you see. So, he gave her my address and telephone number, and I had a letter from her. Well it always takes me a month or so to reply to a letter, so I got another letter with a stamped addressed envelope in it to reply. So I replied. And she came over, and, that was nearly twenty years ago, and she's still here. Weird isn't it.

*Very strange, very strange. But, so the Seventies was remarkable for that if nothing else.*

It was indeed, yes. Yes, she's marvellous, yes, we get on very well.

*How would you describe Des to you, I mean what is your relationship?*

I've done a painting of her, but it's not recognisable of course. It's an apple.

[LAUGHING]

*I see. Oh right.*

It's a drawing, I've always intended to do a painting of it, but it's an apple.

*Right. And it's called 'Des'.*

It's called 'Des', but it looks, nothing like her but it's become her face as well you see.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*Conroy, you are about, I think, to tell me about your relationship with Des. How would you describe it? You've described the painting, but what would you describe your relationship with Des as?*

It is rather difficult I suppose. We seemed to hit it off very well, you know, and though she is much younger than I am of course. And I did encourage her. She was working in a library at the time, at Chingford. Now that's extraordinary because I could never remember the name Chingford, and I used what is called, used to be called Pelmanism, in other words you think of an association word, and all I could think of was Chu Ching Chow[ph], and whenever I've said Chu Ching, it was Chingford, so I knew it. But there, this time I just managed to say it, it's extraordinary. But, I realised that she was very interested in archaeology, and the Romans, and of course, she has a certain amount of Welsh blood in her, because the name is Mogg, and, it was interesting because Maddox is also a Welsh name you see, although there's three spellings of it, M-A-D-O-C, M-A-D-D-O-C-K-S, and M-A-D-D-O-X, which is mine. But also my first name is Irish you see, Conroy, although it happens to be a surname in America. And, so, not that that interfered with any relationship of course, it was just rather interesting that it happened that way. And, I encouraged her very much to do something in the field of archaeology, and she did, she got a position at Cardiff University, dealing with the Celts, and her subject, I can't remember the actual term she's given to it in her Ph.D.; she worked for a B.A., which she got, M.A. with honours, and then she went for the Ph.D., which she has been working on for four years, it's finished now. And, I suppose if you describe it in sort of normal terms you would say she was dealing with the influence of paganism before and after the Romans left England. It's a fascinating subject, so fascinating I think

that even the university were a little puzzled by what she was doing. And, they eventually decided, because she has to send her essays for reading to a member in the religious department, which I thought was fascinating, he would know paganism than anyone else, better than anyone else of course. Anyway it's all finished, and I think it's quite imposing. She's done about 100,000 words, with illustrations and everything else, and it's going through, and this month for instance, I think on December the 19<sup>th</sup> she has to go down to Cardiff for her...visa?

*Viva voce.*

Yes, *viva voce*, yes, exactly. So she is getting geared for that. Then, I think she will probably plan to try and get in a university, doing her own research.

*Did you feel, Conroy, that, because you had been married obviously as we know.*

Oh yes.

*And you had had children, and you'd had a different life as such.*

Yes.

*Did...you obviously, or did you obviously, feel that this was a new stage in your life, and did your work change as a result of Des?*

Well, I suppose my work changes all the time. You know, I know painters who follow a path very rigidly, and their work is... I mean Miró is a good example I suppose, you know, he never lost that kind of pure automatism that's in his early work and it's in the later work, before his death. The one man I admired very much was Max Ernst, because he was always called the complete Surrealist.

*And why was that?*

Because his style changes, with influences creeping in, and he developed all sorts of techniques which are very different to what was being used among the Surrealists. I

mean just looking at an exhibition of his, you can see different stages in his development, of his use of collage in a particular way, and then the painting and then the use of decalcomania, which is a semi-automatic process. And so on. And that I think is interesting, because, I think Surrealism, I always feel anyway, I think the most powerful aspect of Surrealism is the use of the image, and I think that image comes from everyday living, it's around one.

*Do you think also that, I suppose artists, there are two conceptions possibly, one that they are very sociable, they need to be sociable, and the other, the complete opposite, that they actually have to be great isolationists. But I've always thought that Surrealists in particular were quite, if not selfish then quite self-obsessed in a way, would you say that's right?*

Yes, I suppose so. I suppose, a lot of painters get slightly obsessed with their subject matter. It doesn't mean that one, well I don't think so, I don't think one excludes oneself from the life around one, you know, you draw your source of imagery from all sorts of channels.

*For sure, but you also say by your own admission that the Sixties and Seventies seemed to pass you by, which for many people was the start of so much, and for you it was just like another decade, it was just like another passage of time. Almost like, you had, you were beating your own drum in a way and you didn't care what happened to the decades.*

Well I think the Sixties where there was tremendous influence of the Americans and Abstract Expressionism, didn't touch me at all. I mean I saw the works, I visited the exhibitions when they were showing, but there was nothing in it that... I mean, it's interesting you see, because one of the strong influences on Jackson Pollock for instance was the work of some of the Surrealists, but the difference is really that what interested Pollock was the experimental stages of Surrealism, the automatism if you like. Now, automatism in Surrealism, apart from the very early days when they were exploring it, as Ernst said, and Breton ultimately, that it always at some point needed a certain conscious control to bring it to realisation. Pollock just grabbed that part which was the inspirational moment you see, and used it. So, he extended really the

aspect of automatism in his own particular way, which was the very early Surrealist works where they just relied on just sitting down and being inspired by just shapes and colours and so on. That didn't touch me at all.

*And you weren't touched by the, that sense of, I think Robert Fraser, we might have discussed this before, but Robert Fraser discussing the Sixties as a period of brilliant optimism, all coke and crisps, you know, he...he was obviously someone who responded very much as a gallerist and as a dealer and so on to that brilliant optimism, innocence, bisexuality, asexuality, whatever it was, of the Sixties and Seventies. And for you somehow, it's almost as if you had seen it before somehow, or, you weren't interested in these, oh yes, these children, you know, let them play, let them play at being wild. Is that a bit harsh?*

No, probably not. I think also, I feel, I mean, you're looking back at Dada in a way you see. Now what I noticed about, what you do notice about the Dadaists of course was, there was wit, there was a humour in it of a kind. And this playing around and going to extremes, which I think is happening today as well of course, for a different reason, I mean everybody's, you know, Goldsmith's turning out artists for the benefit of Saatchi to buy, so you have to be as extreme as possible. And, Fraser did put on shows of environmental events, you know, in their art and building, sort of channels in the gallery so that you move from object to object and so on. No, that didn't stir me at all, but I saw it always, but I didn't get anything from it you know, it didn't inspire anything. I was still back working in my own direction. OK, you might say, quite easily I suppose, that oh well, you know, people are saying, oh Surrealism's dead, it's been dead for years, you see. But it's interesting, because there's groups, in many many countries still, very active; there's big international shows cropping up all the time, I mean, even as far as Australia with the great Canberra show you see.

*And do you think part of this reason why it's still around is that the very mention of the word Surrealism is almost, is almost accompanied by another word, mischief?*

Mischief?

Yes.

Yes, I suppose there is that side to it. But you know, that's, I mean Picasso was never a Surrealist, although there was a period in about 1933 when he did, and was influenced by a number of Surrealists, and there's a lot of his drawings of that period which have that quality in them, because there's a lot of humour in Picasso's work, you know, 'Woman with a Lollipop' and things like that.

*Well, they were Pop images in a way.*

Well exactly, yes, that's right, and which were latched on to by the Pop group and so on. Hamilton of course was one. He was always credited with inventing Pop art, but, it's a bit of a myth really of course. He used the word Pop in one of his paintings I think.

*Well come to that, if you look at what was real Pop art, perhaps we have to go back to someone like Toulouse-Lautrec.*

Well indeed, very much. It's quite true. And a great painter too. Yes.

*We were just talking about the Sixties and Seventies, the fact that it didn't touch you, the agenda about the Sixties and Seventies, then you touched on a little bit about the agenda of today. I know we're leaping forward into the Nineties, but let's do that anyway. What do you feel is the agenda now? I mean, you were saying something for Saatchi to buy up, but don't you think people see through that particular violent strain of art now, and they can say, well, oh the Turner Prize, it's so predictable, or Saatchi Gallery, yes, we know what their agenda is. Do you think that people know now that it's shock, outrage, aggression, that is what's going to sell?*

I don't know whether it sells so much, but people are attracted to it of course, like the...

*Sell ideologically I mean.*

Yes. They'll gather round a car accident.

*Which Warhol knew of course.*

Exactly, and used. Or an execution, you know. There's that lovely remark made by one of the French writers, or a poet, or was he a musician? He said, 'You know, if Christ had been alive today he wouldn't have been crucified, he would have been electrocuted.'

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*So, the quote again was what Conroy?*

It was a French singer actually who said that if Christ had been alive today, he wouldn't have been crucified, he would have been electrocuted. And the idea is rather attractive, to think that instead of wearing round their neck a little cross, they would have been wearing a miniature electric chair. Which, you know, is quite a, has a certain appeal in a way you know, of transforming the image.

[PAUSE]

*I mean, obviously a violent appeal.*

Of course, yes.

*And can we explain what's happening in terms... Do you think that today's art is the new Surrealism?*

I don't know whether, I don't know whether Surrealism touches them and there are elements of it of course that creep in. In fact very often being debased too, rather like the later Dalis of course was debasing Surrealism very much, and especially when he was in America. But, it's difficult to put your finger on these things of course.

*Well it's ultimately a subjective viewpoint, but, it's interesting when one asks an artist, especially one who has lived the century as you have practically, and seen so many different art forms come and go, and the agenda behind each one.*

Mm.

*I mean, arguably you could see the agenda in 1936, of what was going on, at that first exhibition. The reason why art movements start, it's not, it's never, it never can be said to be as natural as the springing of a spring flower or something; there is someone behind it making money somewhere.*

Of course, of course. And that's perhaps guiding a lot of people today of course, how do you make money, how do you make a reputation? That's OK, I mean, good luck to them, you know.

*Let's just, because I want to come back obviously to the Nineties later on, but can we just go back to where we left off with the Seventies, you were in that period. You are saying that it obviously, it didn't touch you as much as it perhaps did other artists and so on, but what about, let's say the tangible feeling. Every decade presumably has a sort of tangible feeling; did you feel that this decade was one of maybe economic privation, or, do you remember anything particular about the Seventies which marked it out as a decade, not artistically anyway?*

Well, let's start with the artistic side. I think there was a re-emergence of Surrealism in the Seventies, the Hammett Gallery for instance put on many shows, including, I think I've had two in that period, or even three, at the Hammett Gallery, and other painters also, other Surrealist works. You know, and it still goes on, if I can jump forward a little bit, even this, in the Nineties for instance, there were three Surrealist shows in London at three different galleries, Fajinato[ph] Fine Art, the Piccadilly Gallery, and the Mayor Gallery. There's even one on today, of Surrealism, to link up with the George Melly book on E.L.T. Mesens you see.

*And where is that, do you know?*

At the Mayor Gallery.

*Oh at the Mayor.*

Yes it's on now, it's on till January. You didn't perhaps go to the launch of the book?

*I couldn't, no.*

George's book's quite fascinating, quite amusing. More George really perhaps than Mesens, but typically George, you know. Oddly enough it's full of odd errors, it's

quite interesting. You know, he talks about when Brunius was down in Exeter in the '68 exhibition, and he died in Exeter, well, near Exeter where he was staying, and we all gathered at Exeter, his girlfriend, we told her to come on up, you know, and she was in tears of course. And the first thing Mesens said, there was a sort of group of us there, Penrose and people, the first thing Mesens says to her, 'Did you do through his pockets? You don't trust these hotel managers.' And then, he turned round to us all and said, 'What shall we do with dear Jacques, shall we incinerate him?' George quotes this, but he says, instead of incinerate, which of course is the ideal word, he said, 'burn him'. So he got it wrong. He also quotes me, Mesens always had names for people, you know, and he used to talk about me, about, 'Carry on,' you know, 'the convoys,' and Conroy, the link you see. So it was a sort of, he used to say, 'Carry on Convoy.' Whereas George says, quotes it as, 'the office boy', because he misunderstood, or didn't register the word properly, so he says, 'Conroy the office boy', which is not true of course, it was Convoy. And there's odd little things like that which are mistakes in his work, but otherwise it's quite a fascinating study.

*We were just talking about the, yes, we discussed a little bit about the art of the Seventies, but, what about, the Seventies seemed to have been a period also of great technological advancement as well, things were really gearing up to produce what we have today in the Eighties and Nineties, the computer technology, the revolution, the speed of information and so on. Did all these technological developments change the perception of art to you?*

Not particularly. I know people talked about computer art, you know, and there was a programme I remember with Hockney and people like that involved, where they were all working on a panel which was then projecting the image on to the screen. Very unsuccessful and very mechanical you know, and it just didn't come off. But of course I got a computer, because it's much easier than a typewriter, and I've still got one now, a much more elaborate one, you know, because I write quite a bit you see. But otherwise, no, I don't think so. I just went on painting, you know, and looking at my own, what was going on in me, you know, which is usually a very personal and private thing. But...

*And what is there...I know you're saying it's personal and private, but can you say, if you are able to say, what it's based on, that personal and private thing? Is it lust, fear? What's the kind of tangible thing that makes you create a painting?*

What indeed.

*It's a compulsion.*

It's a compulsion, of course it is, yes.

*I remember you saying that you must, or not must but you do, a painting a week, you manage to do something a week, some...*

Yes. I do something, whether they're good or not.

*Not some major...no.*

Or they're not even finished perhaps if I do start them, I've got many upstairs that have never been finished, because I've never been able to put it together. And I've already quoted I think Leonardo's remark that, you know, you work hardest when you're not painting, thinking and developing the idea, and then perhaps discarding it because it doesn't take you any further. I mean, recently I've been doing some collages, which have grown out of ideas, you know, nothing else, just playing with images, and then, it's a break from painting really, and I like collage, you know, and I find they're quite fascinating, what you can do with shapes. But always an image there, you know, they're always identifiable with something, they're not just putting coloured patterns on to a piece of card or a board. But, how, what tempts one to do it, I don't know.

*Have you ever known what has tempted you to do it?*

Yes, of course. It's when a subject comes into one's mind. It's more difficult with a collage of course, but a painting, it's something that you think of. I mean, the poltergeist idea fascinated me, which is the influence of... I knew a priest in

Birmingham who was always being called to exorcise a house, you know, because there was a young girl in puberty who was creating this phenomena, which was generally thought to be the cause of it, you know, and causing uproar in the house you see. Things flying around, the temperature dropping, light, matches suddenly flaming up. And it's a fascinating subject you know.

*Do you believe in that sort of thing, that it can happen?*

I don't have to believe in it, no. It's just, that's the interesting thing. I think there is possibility, from the evidence anyway, that what I've discovered, there was evidence that this can... It's a kind of sexual thing you see in a way, and...

*Which manifests as a tangible energy?*

That's right, and it projects. I mean there are cases where the girl's hair stood up on end you see. There was another case of a family living in a converted school with a great bell on top, you know, and at night they used to hear this bell coming unhooked, crash through the roof, through the floors, until it hit the bottom of the house with a thunderous crash. In the morning it was still up there. And this sort of thing is recorded you know, and it's fascinating and that. So, one can't dismiss it completely, but I have...I'm sceptical about it.

*Because I know that you, we discussed very very early on your, well your non-religious status as it were. It seems to me that it is logical for you to believe in, or not believe in but to accept this much more than to accept established religion.*

Yes, I suppose so. But of course there is that side in Surrealism which is black humour.

*Dark.*

It's the black humour. I mean, an exhibition in Leeds last year, two women came up to me and said, 'Why are you so anti-religious?' Because they were looking at a

painting where I'd put Christ in a taxi going to Calvary. And I said, 'You're not looking at it in the right way; it's black humour.'

*Talking of Christ at this point, it just reminds me of that work where a crucifix is suspended in urine. Have you seen that image?*

No I haven't.

*At Saatchi. Now, I just wondered what your view on that is.*

Well, all I can say is, I put a crucifix of Christ on the cross in a bottle. I've got one in Angela Flowers' exhibition at the moment, what is called 'Small Is Beautiful'. The subject this year was death; last it was sex. And I was in that, and I'm in this one. And, I've used a decalcomania background, and there were some sticks sticking up. And there's a friend of mine in Germany who very often sends me these images, whether he buys them from the holy shop or not I don't know, but it's Christ just like that, without any cross at all.

*With arms outstretched?*

With arms outstretched. And it's phosphorescent. So, I put him there, within this strange sort of decalcomania background all round him, which looks a bit like Hell, or could be. And I've called it 'Say Hello and Wave Goodbye' you see. But, that's the title, but on the back I've put 'Expose to the light and view in the dark', because if you put him in the light and take him into a dark room the Christ image glows like a lamp almost, it's very effective. But then, again it's black humour you see.

*Yes, but so therefore you think that all religious imagery is fair game as artists' materials?*

It's subject matter, yes, yes of course.

*Any religious...?*

Any religious, yes, yes of course. Yes, I've done quite a number of those, but it's...it's a little tongue-in-cheek probably.

*I think also surely in Mr Maddox's mind that it's calculated to upset people a little bit.*

Well I suppose it does upset people, yes, those people. I mean, there was uproar...

*Mischief Maddox.*

Well there was uproar at Leeds you see, they happened to have a man working in the gallery, in the main part of the gallery, saw them hanging one of my paintings, and he complained, and they rang me and said, 'What do we do?' And I said, 'Put it back, what are you taking it away for?' And, they said, 'Well we've got to have a talk about this.' So the committee gathered I guess, and he rang me back afterwards and said, 'Well, we're going to hang it upstairs among the permanent collection with your other one,' you see, which I thought was ridiculous. Anyway, it got into the local paper up there, and it was written up of course, much to the annoyance of the gallery, but I think they behaved very stupidly, to listen to one man, who happened to be a Salvation man. But this happens you know. But otherwise, you know, I mean, many I sold you see.

*So you would be very surprised if, when the time comes for you to leave the planet and go on, or whatever, you do actually meet all these creatures in Heaven?*

I feel I shall probably finish up in a bag of Vegemous[ph] for the garden. It's very debatable whether one is going to meet anybody, I don't think Dante's Hell is going to come into this at all. I don't know really, I mean who knows? There's no evidence to my knowledge that any of these people existed, you know.

*Any of...?*

Well, Christ. I mean, can you trust them anyway? Here's one man, Moses, leading his tribe to safety and spends forty years in a desert, lost? It's rather extraordinary isn't it.

*Worse than the M25.*

Much worse. No, I mean there's a lot of amusing things one can talk about in this field.

*But as you say, they are subject matter, and...*

They are subject matter of course, yes.

*An ideal matter.*

It's just one subject of many, you know.

*Mm.*

Things cross your mind, you see things that happened, you know. One might even see something on the television, or you read something.

*Well this is why I meant, as we come into the Seventies, Eighties, the information technology, the reception of facts from all over the world through the Internet, through computers, through...you know, it must have quickened the pace of art.*

I think it probably did, and of course especially these graphics they are using now, you know. I mean look at what they're using in films, I mean it's not reality at all.

*No, well actually that's another interesting thing I want to talk to you about, perfection. Because Surrealism to me, even in the earliest days, was actually about achieving a purity, a sort of iconic purity almost.*

*Mhm.*

*If you look at paintings by Magritte or Dalì or whoever you choose to mention, there was a sort of manic attention to detail, isolating the object, in its utter perfection almost, sometimes.*

Mm.

*But you often do that yourself.*

Of course.

*Where your objects are almost like secret codes, but they're visually represented, but perfectly so, they're delineated almost with a razor, not even a pen.*

True, true, yes.

*So, what was this association with perfection that surrealism had?*

Well, I suppose the thing in Surrealism is, there's no real style, everybody works in their own particular way, you know.

*Juxtaposition then is the whole thing, is it?*

Yes, but there's a philosophy behind it, you know, and, I mean there's lots of works that are called surrealist today, but they're not really Surrealist, they confuse the imagery with the philosophy, or vice versa. In other words they're drawn, something without... You know, it was interesting, most of the English Surrealists who showed in the 1936 exhibition were not Surrealists.

*What was their agenda then, do you think? To simply cause mischief?*

Not even that. I think it was just that they had something about their work that the people who organised the exhibition thought was possible. I mean, the very common case of course was Eileen Agar, when they go to her and say, 'Eileen, we want you in

this exhibition, you are Surrealist,' and Eileen says, 'Am I?' And most of them had never read anything about Surrealism. They had seen work of course from the French, which had stirred up something, but most of them were really committed abstract painters in Hampstead, quite a group of them, really under the influence of Mondrian of course who lived here for a time, in a white room with a white chair, a white cloth, a white vase and a white flower, you know, it was some kind of...

*It sounds very Nineties minimalism.*

Absolutely, yes. But he had a tremendous influence on them. What they did I think was graft a little bit of fantasy on to their work, in order to show in a very important exhibition, I may have discussed that before but, that is something that still happens a little bit. But...

*Also... No, I was just going to say, there's something quite seductive about being a part of a large group, almost that you are torch-bearers and you know the future, and everyone else is wrong, rather like we see today with the exhibition running at the Royal Academy show at the moment, 'Sensation', you have a group which is being pilloried, but they are very strong about what they are doing, their intent, they know exactly what they are doing, and so on.*

Mm.

*Can we make a link do you think?*

Well I suppose, I'm wondering about the motive behind their commitment. I think they're just looking desperately to be as outrageous as they can, because it creates publicity, it helps their work in the sense it gets attention, it gets bought possibly, among certain collectors, here and abroad. So it's a very conscious, deliberate attempt I think. Because you know, how far can they go now, you see? It's almost like an engineered thing isn't it, as though they have been brought together, through Goldsmith's of course, that man there running it who is either encouraging it or not, I don't know. But, there is this feeling that they can't be left behind, they've got to produce something that goes a little bit further. I mean there's paintings[sic] in that

where there's penises on tops of people's head, you know. And they still don't know where to go, because, how far can you go beyond that? But it does attract publicity. And I think art's more than just, you know, it should be concerned with... I think the problem in art, or from an artist's point of view, should be that he wants to perhaps unearth something more, he wants to dig a little deeper than the superficiality of effects only.

*But do you also think that one other purpose of art is to be quite open to people, rather than open to only a few? It's really about attracting a vast arena of opinion, rather than saying, well, if you don't get this then you're obviously not...not cynical, you know, it's kind of a warm approach rather than a cynical approach, which, I think today's society is quite cynical and they freeze out a lot of people, whereas perhaps before there was much more a sense of inclusion, or of wanting to include more, would you say?*

Yes I think that's possibly true. I mean the Surrealists always had this idea of a community of aims, working together, which acts as a stimulus of course, but each going their own way, and it allowed a lot of sort of artists who worked very automatic and very free, others who were very rigid and controlled, like Dalí, Magritte for instance, who was I think almost referred to as sort of object lessons in painting. Otherwise, I'm not sure really how you can define this thing, it's a tricky business. No, I don't really know. I only know the way I work, up to a point, but I can be quite a surprise by the time I've finished a painting, and didn't realise quite how I'd got there, so you can't do it again. You could copy it, but what's the point of that? But I'm not sure that one is aware of how you arrived at the finished phenomena as it were, it's a phenomena you see.

*And how do you feel about your work, when you've created a painting, is it something which you feel quite precious about, or proud about, or is it, oh, that was awful, I'll have to do another one? It's almost like, one feeds the next.*

I suppose so.

*You almost have to hate it, so that the inspiration for the next...*

Yes, that's right. Well it's a mixture isn't it, you enjoy doing it but there's a certain anxiety about doing it, you know, because, is it going right? And very often it isn't in the beginning, but suddenly it changes and you get it to what you think. And you can therefore say stop. I've known painters who never finish their work, they'll look back at it and add bits and scrape bits out, and so on. But that's their way of working, you know. So never satisfied with it. One's never completely satisfied with a work I suppose.

*Do you have a system of, not a system, sorry, do you have a method of knowing when a painting or work is finished? Does it just say to you, Conroy, I'm finished now?*

Yes of course you do. I don't know why, but you feel, that's it, you've said what you wanted to say, or what, the best you can say, and so it's finished, goes on the wall. I couldn't take them any further. I could redo it in a different way and make it different, but, there's nothing else I could add to it that would say anything more worthwhile.

*But...*

And even that may not be worthwhile for all I know.

*But within that statement, pointing my attention to that, it seems that either people, or maybe you somewhere, think that maybe more could be done.*

Of course, of course, yes. But they're not going to get it. It's just got little touches in it you see. In that little panel in the box on the right, that lower panel, is really a reproduction of the whole of the painting, or a section of it.

*Tell me, since we're in the Eighties now, Seventies and Eighties, you went to lots of galleries I'm sure, went to the private views in Cork Street.*

Mhm.

*And what were these places like, at that time? Were they exciting, were they happening?*

Well, some galleries were...they've always had, or very often had, an interesting work in them of course, but I always used to make for the early Mayor Gallery when Freddie Mayor ran it of course, because he would always have some Surrealism there.

*Which is James Mayor's father.*

That's right, yes. And in fact I was with George Melly once when he saw a little, a small work of Ernst in the window, it was quite a small work, and I think that it was priced at about £10 or 10 guineas in those days, you know, and George wanted it, and he did a deal with Freddie Mayor, he paid half a crown a week to get it. Now the Mayor Gallery will still do that if you... Andrew Murray told me, a woman came in, was very fascinated with a painter, one of, a Surrealist who was mixed up with it, I've forgotten his name now, and she said how much she would like it. And he pointed out to her that she could buy it on instalments.

*It's quite rare today.*

Very rare, mm. But it's a very sensible way, because you know, she probably couldn't possibly afford the price of it, which would probably be three or four thousand. Whether she did or not, I don't know, but, it is possible to buy a painting that way.

*Were there favourite galleries? I mean now for example in the Nineties we immediately think of Saatchi, that's one of the major galleries that we talk about, or Waddington's perhaps, as was in the Eighties, and still in the Nineties. What about in the Sixties, Seventies, that sort of period, where were the hot spots that you would go to?*

Oh, the man who first showed Hockney for instance, had a place in Bond Street, a gallery in Bond Street. He's still around. He used to be the assistant to the man who had that little gallery. Oh...stop it a minute.

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*OK, we'll try and think about who this gentleman was, at some stage.*

Yes, that's right, yes.

*Mm, it may come to you Conroy.*

Outsider Art, he was mixed in that a lot. Then he went abroad and he made some films, rather charming actually.

*Ah, Victor...*

Victor Musgrove.

*Musgrove, that's it.*

Great, that's right, Victor Musgrove.

*That's it.*

That's the man, mm.

*Ha-ha!*

Yes. And the man who was his assistant, working for him, was the man who opened a gallery in Bond Street and showed Hockney for the first time, and several other exhibitions of Hockney.

*And what about the, we hear a lot today about the arguments about public galleries paying for entrance and so on. And what about in the...all...the whole period of your life that you've been painting and so on, I don't expect many places charged, or did they?*

No, no, no. I think probably you paid for private, big shows.

*Like now at the Saatchi, yes.*

Yes, like today you do. Unless you become a Friend of the Tate and you...

*Do you think that admission charges spoil galleries?*

Well I think the danger is, there are people who drift in to the gallery, perhaps three or four times a week, you know, to look at paintings and things. If you're going to pay, you're going to lose that attention.

End of F6326 Side A

F6326 Side B

*So Conroy, we're somewhere in the Eighties, this decade which is perhaps describable as the non-decade. You were choosing some of your favourite, or the most interesting galleries, like the Mayor. Would you say that the Eighties was a decade which had promise which died, in the art world; it started off with promise, but then it didn't live up to its promise?*

Yes I think that's pretty true. I think mainly that was caused by a certain recession, because the Sixties were quite flourishing for it, you know, people were buying works, galleries were opening, and then suddenly everything stopped. But I think it was mainly a financial situation in the country generally, you know, people who were buying, solicitors and people were buying works. It just ceased.

*Were people buying from you?*

I didn't do too badly during that period. The Seventies particularly was quite good. In the Eighties it was, but I moved abroad then, you know, I started showing in Stockholm, Amsterdam, Munich and places like that. And I remember in the Eighties I said there was fifty odd works in Stratas[ph] Gallery in Amsterdam, everything was sold, nothing came back, which was very rare of course, even abroad. But, and also Ritz Moser's[ph] – not Ritz Moser[ph], I'm sorry, Kent Balenius's[ph] gallery in Stockholm, the Belles Artes[ph], he took a lot of works and a couple of weeks later he came back for more. And Iceland[??] sold exceptionally well there you see, so...

*And can you actually say why your work might have appealed at that, at this stage? Because don't forget, the Eighties, Seventies/Eighties was a time which wasn't necessarily kind to Surrealism.*

That is true. But I think that was peculiar to England. I found abroad it was accepted, with, you know, a certain interest which the English didn't have, or at least there was no evidence of it. But you know, Surrealism is one of the longest lasting movements, and it comes up and it goes down a little bit and then it comes up again.

*Can you think of an equivalent in another type?*

I can't. Of course, the other one is of course, there's always, there's always a market for the fairly traditional, conventional still life, portrait, landscape, that goes on forever, you know.

*Would you say polite pictures?*

Yes, very polite, yes, very respectable. What I call chocolate-box paintings. But there's a market there of course.

*But still, you found you had a market.*

I had a market, yes.,

*Who was buying your work?*

Well I mentioned solicitors and people like that, it's extraordinary. Just people would sort of appear you know. Even the Hammett Gallery, which was in the Seventies of course, running into I think a part of the Eighties, they were getting people buying that they hadn't seen before. Bankers for instance, there was one bank, a European bank, that bought about six or eight of my works; I don't know where they are, they're dotted around the rooms in some offices and places in the bank you see.

*Is it too simplistic to suggest that the people who bought your work lived the very opposite of what you were showing? They weren't surreal, so, they wanted something crazy.*

Yes, probably, yes I think that's probably one of the reasons that interested them. You know, it's interesting now isn't it, that, the big celebrations in Belgium, in Brussels particularly, over Magritte; now I mean, the Belgians hated Magritte's work, he had no success whatsoever. Now, it's a hundred years or something since his birth, what are they doing? His house that he worked in has now become a shrine. There's

tours organised taking people to the restaurants he went to, to the brothels he went to, and anything else you see, grand tours around the city.

*You knew him fairly well.*

I used to always...I knew him without knowing him, you know what I mean? I knew his work very well of course. But he always sent me his catalogues of exhibitions.

*How do you think he would have regarded this flurry of interest?*

I don't think he would have liked it at all, because you know, he never liked being called a painter. He was an inventor as it were, you know, of work, not a painter. And his studio of course was the sitting-room of his house, with a tablecloth on the table, everything was very neat. There was never a spot of paint that came from his palette or his brush or anything, just immaculate.

*But the works almost seem to suggest that, don't they.*

It does indeed, yes.

*The pristine quality.*

Yes, very much so, yes. And of course, if you take away the imagery of Magritte, what you have is probably the worst kind of 19<sup>th</sup> century academic painting. But the imagery overrides the technique. I mean his technique was purely engineered to portraying what he wanted to say.

*Would you say that he was your biggest influence?*

No, I don't think so. The one man I always looked to was Max Ernst really; among the Surrealists he was always called...he was everything, you know, he represented all aspects of Surrealism, in his collage, his painting, his technique, I mean he was using decalomania, frottage, and all these things you see.

*So is it, would you say, ignorance on behalf of some viewers who might see a too obvious link with your paintings and Magritte's?*

Oh yes of course; they also see Dali. But you know, if you look at a Magritte painting, it tends, most of his work seems to have a central image; there are a few that do not but there's always a dominant central image, which I think makes that difference. But people do confuse these things; anything that looks pictorial fits into that group of Surrealists, like Dali, Magritte, possibly Brauner a little bit, but Magritte and Dali are the most common ones of course, because that is Surrealism to them. Whereas today we would pretty well deny Dali as being a Surrealist. I mean his contribution was immense of course, because he took Surrealism from the automatism into this pictorial, which is highly skilled of course, painting. So, he really re-established Surrealism along a particular line didn't he, of creating identifiable images.

*But Surrealism is not necessarily just what is presented, but a state of mind as well.*

Of course, yes, exactly. Very much so. And you know, I think if you are working in Surrealism for a long time, images crop up that follow a particular, it's not a pattern, it's a state of mind that operates, almost irrelevant things creep in which have a link. I remember once motoring towards the south of France, and I was with, I think I was with Pauline at the time, and she said, 'Oh I'd love a cup of coffee,' and I always had a thing for making coffee, and I came up to an opening which was Saint-Rambert, it's a railway station. And it was quite fascinating, so, after I had made the coffee I looked at it and I took a photograph of it, and it stayed in the camera, you know, and I didn't...and I didn't have the film processed for probably half a year you see. And then I looked at it again and I thought, this is interesting, so I did a painting of it. But in the course of the painting I put a lion in the foreground, which seemed quite logical, you know. Pauline liked it so much. I sold it actually, to a man named Crossley[ph] who is now in Madrid working for Reuters, and Pauline liked it so much I did another version of it, a little different but the lion's there, and she said to me, 'You know, I always remember that lion,' you know, which was quite an illogical statement but she was committed to that lion do you see. So, things would creep in

like that. Magritte does this all the time, he creates an irrelevant relationship doesn't he.

*As a way of making you think?*

I think so, but there's something behind his thoughts that make it possible to do it. I mean, there are several, I think, one of the exciting paintings of his is the one where the houses in the street are night, the street lamps are lit, but the sky is day. And it always reminds me, and someone once said to me, something about day and night, and I said, 'What do you prefer, the day or the night?' And they said, 'Well what do you prefer?' And I said the night, because you need the light to, you need some light as it were in the night, whereas in the day you don't need the sun at all, because it's light anyway you see, which is complete contradiction of course. But it's Magritte's idea too in a way, that you get this beautiful relationship of what is...how is it that the streets are lit and it's dark, and yet the sky is daylight? So, many things like that, I mean, of course I suppose the classic example of Magritte's is the painting of a pipe, which is not a pipe, and people say, why not? Can you smoke it? No. And so this game is played in Surrealism. It's not a game, it's part of the way one thinks, you know, you get caught up in that pattern I think.

*So, we were talking about this period of the Eighties just before. How did you feel you fitted in? We know you sold quite well through the Seventies and some of the Eighties. How did you feel you fitted in to this new art of people such as the Basquiat, urban paintings, De Rosa[ph] brothers, shown by Robert Fraser, also Keith Herring[ph] the graffiti artist, and Kenny Sharf[ph], all these people who were heralding a new look, indeed the Gillian Schnabel school as well. How did you feel you fitted in? Did you feel marginalised by this?*

There were one or two that interests me. I suppose one of the most interesting I thought was Kitaj. Now, Kitaj said some paintings are books and some books are paintings, and you know, ever since, from the day I began painting really and got involved in Surrealism, I was always attracted to the literary mind. It isn't painters you want to meet, it's literary people. When I was in Birmingham, two of the people I first really met and we became great friends was John Melville, who was a painter,

producing at that time rather Picasso nude type of work, quite voluptuous, but very Picasso. The other one was his brother John Melville, who was thoroughly literary-minded and it was always more stimulating, I always think it's more stimulating to a painter to be with a person who is interested in literature.

*It's a complement?*

It's a complement. And, it's an inspiration too, you feed off it; you don't feed off painters, they shut up. I mean, they're not going to talk about their painting when you relax in the evening over a drink or something, they're much, you know, they keep it very separate from that part of their life, and they don't discuss it. And if they do they've got nothing to discuss very often, because they're not attracted to the other painter who is doing something different to him probably.

*But, so you liked Kitaj and you liked maybe other people, but how did you fit in?*

Well, I didn't. I mean I knew many of them of course, and one talked and one had conversation, but, one didn't really get down to raising questions about it, you know, or discussing painting with them. I didn't know Kitaj, I only met him once or twice.

*Did you feel that was a loss?*

That was...well...

*Did you feel...you didn't feel marginalised or alone?*

No. No. You see Kitaj is a painter, but he has a literary mind, he has a bookish mind. Many of his titles, most of his subject comes from reading, American literature and so on, so you see the titles alone tell you a lot of where he was, the direction he was always interested in. Except the very later works that he had at the recent Tate show you see, where he got rather strongly criticised by the critics over it, because he had got that free period. But in the Seventies and into the Eighties a bit he was doing some very interesting work I thought.

*But what about you, did you not feel isolated in what you were doing?*

Well yes of course, you do, but you just shut yourself away and get on painting. You're not going to change your colour suddenly, you know, for the benefit of Mr Saatchi or whoever else might be wanting to buy the work, so I just went working along in my own direction. Where it led I don't know, because when I first started and got, long before I got even involved in Surrealism I was painting. The only movement I really knew in those early days, what I caught up with was Cubism, and I...

*Were you tracing old ground, or...?*

Yes of course. And I did a number of Cubist paintings, but looking back now I don't think they were of any importance at all. Before that of course I was doing, falling into the trap of the landscape and the still life and so on, but it didn't tell you where you were going you see, you were, as you say, covering an old ground and it had, it didn't respond to what... When I discovered Surrealism in the Thirties, '35, '34/35, that, that was an inspiration, you know, that was a revelation really, because this was opening up a swinging door, and that's where I really...I've stayed with it always, you know, probably always will, however much longer I've got to hang around doing it.

*And it suited your, again this mindset, it suited your way of thinking.*

I think so, yes. You see I don't think, apart from everything else I don't think there has been a more revolutionary art form than Surrealism.

*Pop art?*

Well, it is in a way isn't it, but Pop art is drawing on the commodities of a commercialised society, you know, the can of beans or the... Almost all the Pop art is drawing from the things you see in shops, or stores or on television and so on.

*Or things you have in your cupboard.*

Exactly, very much so, yes, yes. So, it was not quite a revolution. It was, I mean, Warhol and people like that were exploring these sort of things, but, did it make it, was it a great contribution to make a can of beans four times larger than an actual can? It occupied a space in a room probably, or a gallery, but it didn't stir me very much. Some things I like. I saw one or two silly instances, there's a man in England, I think his name was Barker, you know Magritte's, 'The Red Model', it's a pair of boots which become the toes in flesh coloured too; he did it in aluminium, so it's all shiny. What's the point of it? He's lost the whole poetry of Magritte's painting you see.

*Perhaps the point is, a sort of commercialism, something very commercially attainable, that was what Pop was about perhaps.*

Yes, indeed.

*Buyable.*

Yes, buyable, yes, quite.

*I remember a cover of a magazine with Andy Warhol's picture on it, and it said, the strap line was, 'I Am Art, Buy Me'.*

Yes.

*That was the soul really of Pop art, that.*

Yes it was, yes.

*What was the soul of Surrealism, or what is the soul?*

Ah, what a serious question. What indeed is the soul. I don't know. I don't really believe in a soul.

*It's not just mischief is it?*

No, of course not, no.

*And it's not just lucky juxtaposition.*

No. And it's not deliberately setting out to insult people, or society. It's not...it's not a deliberate attempt to shock either, unlike some of the painters today. It comes out, it's a revolutionary art in that sense you know, and it's also concerned with liberty of course, of opening up the interior model if you like rather than the exterior one which is used in the ordinary accepted art world. So, what shock effect it had in its day, and of course I suppose some of that shock was destroyed with the war, the Second World War, I mean, they could look at certain Surrealist works and say the horrors of that are already, we're living it, you know, during the war. It's a false analogy of course, but, it is done like that. No, I don't know about the soul of Surrealism, I mean I never think you have a soul anyway, as long as you've got a mind it's pretty redundant isn't it.

*So, we're still sort of trying to get to the heart of the Eighties, and where you were. I mean you had shows didn't you in the Eighties.*

I did, yes, yes.

*A number of memorable ones too.*

That I can't remember. I don't know, I mean, galleries asked me to show, and the work either went abroad or in various galleries, and, sometimes they came back, some didn't come back, and it was the pattern you lived by.

*Did you ever meet the characters such as, I'm sure you did, Robert Fraser or Nicola Jacobs[ph] or Odette Gilbert[ph], all these characters of the Eighties? What do you think the character of the Eighties dealer was, as opposed to the dealers you had dealt with before?*

I, well, it is a fact, I mean if you're thinking...I mean you can go to galleries, and painters sometimes, there's a man now living in Hampstead and I met him at an opening quite recently, and he said, 'You show abroad, don't you?' And I said, 'Yes.' And he said, 'Have you got any addresses you could give me?' And I said, 'I could give you a lot of addresses, but, your work wouldn't fit that.' Because you only show in galleries that are going to cover Surrealism. The Mayor Gallery is always a possibility, Fajinato's[ph] Fine Art, you know, in Albemarle Street, and certain galleries like that, but they're limited, in this country they're always limited. Abroad there's many more. So, but I think sometimes, you see sometimes you get a resurgence of Surrealism, and it crops up and then wanes a bit and... So a gallery that previously was showing stuff that was Pop or whatever else, will switch a little bit towards surrealism. So it happens. It just happens, you know, you don't...you can't control it, it's just interest.

*You didn't feel that there was any more or less cynicism in the art world, during this period?*

Oh there could have been. I mean, Fraser for instance, I used to go to his shows always, I think it was Duke Street, off...yes.

*Well Duke Street and then Cork Street.*

Yes, and Cork Street, that's right, yes. But he used to rearrange the gallery so you went through a tunnel almost to see the objects scattered on the wall and lying around on the floor. And then of course he got into a lot of trouble with showing certain works that... But then he was mixed up a little bit with the drug scene and everything else.

*Well, there's a famous image of him being handcuffed with the Stones I think.*

[INAUDIBLE] in a taxi cab.

*Yes.*

Yes, I remember it well. Yes.

*Which was of course one of the Pop art classics.*

Oh yes, a great icon wasn't it.

Yes.

Yes, I mean I don't object to that of course, it's a gesture of a kind. Fair enough. I suppose you can always say, there's room for everybody, you know, all kinds of art I suppose, obviously you...

*Even chocolate-box?*

Even chocolate boxes, yes, very popular, or Christmas cards.

*So, of course we're calling the Eighties this non-event really, this non-decade, and boom was...boom was so naturally followed by slump. Did the slump in the art world affect you very much?*

I suppose it did a little bit you know. Maybe you didn't have quite so many shows in a year that you would have a previous year. But when you think of it you know, you can't have too many shows in a year anyway, you haven't got enough work, and you don't show in an exhibition, in a gallery twice, I mean, once but it's two years before you have another show there, and that very often depended on how successful it was for the gallery of course.

*But this was a very unique decade in many ways, because, if you take the Portobello area of London, in the early to mid Eighties there were thirteen galleries there; now there are less than four.*

Yes. Yes of course you see. Though some of them, you see some of them may have gone up-market a bit and left Portobello and got places in, near the West End or, you know... I don't know how many did, but there are still a few there. But I don't think I

would attempt to go there to have a show, because they've got their own stable, and, it's no point in wasting your time, not that I go, I mean, I have an agent who handles that.

*Most artists I think it's fair to say have a desperation to show their work in a public arena; would you say that you were or were not typical of that type of artist?*

Yes, I think one...I like to show, I've nothing against it. I mean, the one thing I always enjoy, the big international Surrealist shows, in Milan, Marseilles, Le Havre, Paris, and so on you see, they're exciting. I go to those always, and spend a week there. The only one I didn't go to was Canberra.

*And why was that?*

Well they rang me up and said, 'Of course you're coming,' and I said, 'Of course I'm not.' And he said, 'Why not?' I said, 'Twenty-three hours on a plane, and another three hours from Sydney to Canberra, it's just too much.' And he said, 'Well, all right.' Next day he rang up and said, 'Look, you can come executive class.' I said, 'It isn't how I get there, it's the time, and the 23 hours on a plane, being fed every ten minutes,' it seems to me on these long-distance flights, 'I can't make it.' And he said, 'Come on, of course you can. Andrew Murrow's[ph] coming from the Mayor Gallery,' and so on and so forth. And I said, 'Yes, I know.' I said, 'I'll tell you why. It's too long for a tranquilliser and too short for a lobotomy.' So he said, 'OK.' A few days later he rings me up again from Canberra and he said, 'Look, we realise you're not coming. We're sending a television team over to interview you from Melbourne.' Which they did, about a week later they all turned up here and we spent a glorious day filming and talking and things. And then they went to Paris, and interestingly, they did send me the video of it, but the people they spoke to in Paris was remarkable, they didn't seem to have a clue what Surrealism was, they were old professors from some university. It was very amusing. And they used that film...

*Surreal almost.*

Yes, absolutely. And they used that film as a prelude to the opening of the exhibition. So they hadn't got much to show you see, in fact they photographed some of my stuff here, which wasn't even in the show.

*Would you say there was a...we were talking in earlier conversations about the tangible quality of certain decades, like there was a feeling of the Sixties, I think Robert Fraser described it as one of brilliant optimism, of coke and crisps, it was a sort of sexy innocence really. That was the Sixties. And the Seventies had its own type. What about the Eighties for you, can you typify it? A lot of people say, oh big shoulder pads and people in the City, but, would you typify it in a way?*

Well I would typify it this way. It wasn't until, I think it was about the Eighties, that I hadn't flown up to then. I didn't really believe these things, with a bit of plywood underneath, would stay up there long enough. So, it wasn't until the big show was fixed in Finland that I had two tickets sent to me by Finnair to go there, to open the exhibition.

*At which gallery?*

It was a special gallery in about, three hundred kilometres from Helsinki. And, it was a special site, the man's name was Pekker[ph], he had created quite an extraordinary situation. There was a huge rock there, immense, and instead of having it removed they burrowed into it, to such an extent that inside it opened into an immense theatre, the London Philharmonic used to go and play there, waters were always dripping from the rocks, and it was laid out for dinners, which would seat probably four or five hundred people, quite extraordinary. The rest of it were, there was another cave part which was part of the gallery, and then dotted around the landscape were buildings which housed an immense Surrealist exhibition. Which was fascinating, you moved from one place to another. And the people who poured in for the opening, it was like Gandhi's funeral all over again, you know, it was extraordinary. They came from even Israel, it was quite extraordinary. And so it was a great event. And when, before I went they said to me, 'Look, you might like to see a little bit of Finland, so we've booked you on the train to Punkaharju.' Right. And, oh we had dinner, or

lunch in Helsinki itself and then we caught the train. So you went right along the border where Russia had taken over that part, you know, it didn't look much.....

End of F6326 Side B

F6327 Side A

Which had previously belonged to Finland. But it's interesting you know, there might have been, you would have thought, a certain resentment about Russia because of that, yet there were a number of Russian restaurants in Helsinki, which are very popular and in fact we had our dinner at one of them, and the hotel afterwards, we caught the train, went to Punkaharju and spent a week there. They gave us a chalet in the grounds, which had a sauna there. The other danger of course was, there are many many lakes in, around Helsinki, with the pine trees, and mosquitoes of course in the summer. The glorious thing too I think was that, it was that time of the year when, we would be up till two or three o'clock, and the sun was up of course, you could read a newspaper in the middle of the night. And, there was dinners every, every evening, all laid on. The great... Of course they had...they had reindeer meat, but no one touched it, because, you remember the Russian atomic explosion there that spread all across Lapland? So the reindeer meat was avoided at all costs, but the salmon was superb of course, it was from Finland. And, after the week, Des and I we...they got a plane for us, so we flew back, and then from Finland back to England. Now, at the end of that year, the Eighties, I added up once, and I thought, that's very strange, I flew nine times and yet I'm back in England. I had to puzzle that out. And of course the one reason was the railway journey that made it, would have made the tenth time. So I flew a lot that time, Marseilles and places like that. One interesting thing while I was in Finland, quite near where the gallery was, was a...they took us to see a church, it's the largest wooden church in the world, very very Russian in its structure. Never used in the winter of course, because it meant lighting the lamps, and it was wood, you know, it would have gone up in flames very easily one felt. Also the village around to which it was in the centre of only had a population of about three hundred people, so they built a smaller church behind for them to have their services and things. The interesting thing was, Andrew Murray and somebody, they took photographs of us by the front door of the church, and I've got them now; we're dwarfs, it's immense. But what happened was apparently, that the plans drawn up were mis-read by the construction people, and what were probably feet became yards, so that they just made the place completely out of scale. It was a lovely image though. But I quite liked Finland, it's very expensive to live there. The marvellous thing is of course that everyone speaks English, perhaps because no one's going to

learn their language, it's impossible of course. But, then, having got back, about three weeks later I got another phone call, they wanted me to go again to give another talk, so I went again, Des couldn't come, they had two tickets again from Finnair, so my daughter came with me. We had a glorious time there. Another chalet of course, with sauna if you wanted it.

*Did you feel, Conroy, that you had been discovering...you discovered all these things quite late on in life really, all this travel and rushing about; do you feel that it was all, it came too late?*

Yes, probably it did. It's always too late isn't it. The older you get it's always too late of course.

*Did you ever regret the fact that you hadn't had much more success at an early age?*

It's difficult isn't it. I mean in my early days you know, if anyone achieved any success before they were 40, it was a bit of a phenomena, no one did. Writers, painters, everyone else. It's only in the later period of this century that callow youths at Goldsmith's are hailed as masters, you know, and they're still students.

*How does that make you feel now?*

Ah, it doesn't worry me a lot at all, no. You reconcile yourself to these things. I don't think it even crosses your mind, or mine anyway. No, it doesn't, it doesn't. I do what I want to do, you know, and I paint what I want to paint. I have no commitment to a gallery, you know, they're... Painters have told me, quite well known painters too, in fact one's been knighted, saying that, 'I would love to change my style but my gallery won't permit it.' Because he sells, and to change it would lose his signature, and that's what sells.

*But this has always been so much part of the Maddox hallmark, that you have been such an individualist, almost a campaigner for individualism.*

Well, I don't know that. I know they tend to say this, the last living Surrealist of the movement, you know, and, I mean Gascoyne's still alive but he is a surrealist poet, or was, although poor man, I remember writing an introduction to a catalogue at the Hammett Gallery, I picked him out as it were from the Surrealist movement for religious reasons. Henry Moore for a similar reason for doing a Madonna and Child in Northampton or wherever it was, for a church; unforgivable you see. I must say, David, when he heard about that, said to me, 'I was never a Catholic, I was never involved in the Church.' But it took on a certain flavour in his work which...

*Do you think he had, in a sense, sold out?*

I don't know, what makes people suddenly embrace religion. I remember a period in the war, you know, just before, people were joining the Catholic Church, one felt in droves you know. For what, for why? They suddenly had the power of believing what they know to be untrue I suppose.

*And you've never in your life felt the need to have some sort of faith?*

None at all.

*As a child, when you were forced maybe to go to church?*

My father was completely against it, he used to call priests a hoard of, what did he call them? Black beetles. A hoard of black beetles, he would say. And there's no evidence, I've never gone through the church thing of being, what do you call it? Baptised. Nothing like that. There was no occasion when my parents ever went to church or took us to church or anything. So I grew up in a very good atmosphere I feel.

*Tell me, two questions. How you work now, and why you work now. I don't mean physically how, but...*

No, why, yes, what's in the mind of how you work. I still like to explore things, you know, I still like a certain discovery and revelation if you like to call it that. So one

explores things, it's an exploration really that one sets up, and it's fascinating in a way. It's also tortuous as well of course.

*You don't feel that you've absolutely done it all, and you can only repeat now?*

No, there's always a risk of that, but I still think I...I don't repeat much. OK, I might use collage, I might spend a little time doing decalcomania. At the moment I'm doing small works, about 11 by 7, which I'm having boxes of about 2 inches deep, so they're set inside it, and some have got glass over the front. And, I'm using a combination of decalcomania. Now you know it's interesting, Angela Flowers every year puts on an exhibition called 'Small Is Beautiful' at Christmas, and always she writes to me and says, 'I hope you'll show'. Last year's, not last Christmas, the Christmas before, the subject was sex, and I used one of these little boxes, and I painted a shoe, they're all in oil paint, a shoe, and I put a nun inside the shoe, which is an oblique way but it has a sexual significance. But I...and she's got glasses, it's really Sister Wendy Beckett of course. Now this year... And a critic for 'The Independent' ...

*Andrew Graham-Dickson[ph]?*

No.

*No. Tim Hilton?*

Tim Hilton, yes. He mentioned it, he liked it. And this year he also mentioned the one I put in, because the subject was death. Well I did a certain...it hasn't come back yet, because Angela hasn't returned it, it's got a decalcomania foliage coming up, and there's some bars in it. And there's a friend of mine in Germany who very often sends me things that intrigue him and he knows that it will intrigue me, and these are nuns – I'm sorry, they're Christ, without the cross, just spread eagle, but they're phosphorescent. So, inevitably I glue one of those onto these posts with this sort of foliage all around, it looks as though it might be Hell for all you know, it can't be Heaven. And I like...I always give a title to whatever I do you see, so I just called it, 'Say Hello and Wave Goodbye', and that was on the back, and it was on the label of

course. But underneath at the bottom I said, 'Expose to the light and view in the dark', because if you leave it in the light and then put it into darkness it glows there gloriously on this multiple kind of cross thing you see. And Angela said, 'I love it, I love it.' No one buys them of course, but...

*I don't want to make a meal of the religious stuff...*

No, quite.

*But, there seems to be an almost active mischief about how proud you are not to be at all interested in religion. It's not that you are saying to me, no, no, I really don't like it; it's...you're taking a great joy in being anti it actually. Would you agree?*

Yes of course. But it's black humour in Surrealism you see. Silvano, you know, he saw the one of, one of the paintings I did of 'Short-cut to Calvary' with Christ in a taxi cab, and the other one with notices on all the trees in a forest, of 'Wanted, Jesus Christ, for all the reasons'. So when he saw another painting of mine, he suggested a religious title, and I said. 'Silvano, you're a Catholic, that's the trouble.' And he does go to Mass interestingly enough, because his mother's Italian, his father's Jewish, I think he was born in Egypt or somewhere, anyway they're very nice people. But, you see he thinks that way straight away, which is quite wrong, and I had to point out to him, there's a thing in Surrealism called black humour, and that's what one's using. So, it's a fun game if you like, it's not serious of course, not in the way that people think it is.

*There isn't, do you think, in you the fact that you're so far the other side of the alphabet that you could actually be right next to it, if you see what I mean?*

Yes, I see what you mean, yes, quite right, yes.

*So, you know, could we next, next week be seeing you in a dog collar?*

Well...

*And black beetled out.*

I always tend to think that if priests wore their trousers the way they wore their dog collars there would be less waifs and strays in the world.

*Tell me Conroy, you manage still to paint, or to do something, one, you were telling me last time, could be more now, but one thing a week you try to aim to do.*

Yes, something.

*To complete one thing.*

Yes, but it may be a gouache, it may be a tempora or a drawing.

*Do you think in many ways that this is your octane now, this is your fuel, the fact that you must do one?*

No, I'm not committed that deeply, no. I mean there are weeks go by. Because, it's Leonardo's remark that sticks in one's mind, a painter works hardest when he's not painting, because you are thinking. And your thoughts come, trigger off from all sorts of sources. I mean, I don't know whether I mentioned it earlier, but I got a list from the Lost Property Office of London Transport, which is absolutely glorious, of things left on tube trains every day.

*I think you did mention it, yes.*

And there is a source in a way of imagery which... Also, another important thing, my father was a great collector, in Ledbury. I mean the house became full of suits of armour, blunderbusses, assegais, powder pouches, pianola, anything you like. Harps, anything, he was obsessive. His great collection was English coins, especially George III silver coins, a beautiful collection, in tiers, you know. That he held on to, even when we left Ledbury, and a lot of other things, but we had fencing foils, we used to have great times as kids. My mother used to be in despair about the place littering everywhere, books, paintings. The most magnificent collection of Hogarth etchings,

or prints, of a series like 'Marriage à la Mode', 'Gin Street' and so on, you know, something like 2 to 3 foot plates, he used to put them in a great folder.

*In one sense you were brought up in a museum of curiosities.*

Exactly.

*Which is what Surrealism might be described as.*

Yes, I think you're right, yes. And also it does account sometimes for the images I put in the paintings without being conscious of it, you know. Then you stop to think and you think, yes.

*Do you actually find even now, Conroy, that certain images you put in actually, you repeat from even the Thirties?*

Could be. I've got press cuttings... Not press cuttings. I've got cuttings from magazines going back that far. I've even got odd bits from the 1936 newspaper, which sometimes creep into a collage. So, you know, you are using, there's not a time limit on your imagery. So, I mean, like that one behind you for instance, is made up of bits from magazines you see. So, one's using this up all the time, and it's not, it hasn't got a date really.

*And collage is certainly not a recent discovery, but you seem to be doing more collage than painting.*

Sometimes. I have a session when I get interested in collage, and then it dies and I move on to something else you see.

*I remember interviewing Eileen Agar just a few months before her death.*

I know.

*And she was very keen on her collage at that time, but I think she was doing collage because she couldn't paint.*

That's right, yes. It is a sign that you're easing up in some way.

*But you're doing both, so...*

Well, at the moment yes. I don't know how...of course she was older than I am.

*Oh yes.*

She was 90-something wasn't she?

*No, I think she died at 94.*

Yes.

*Something like that.*

Pretty good, yes. No I liked Eileen. She bought one of my paintings from a show when she was about 93 probably, and there was one lovely remark made by a friend of mine, he said, 'She's bought it for an investment'. This was rather sweet when she was 93.

*What do you think of Eileen as a painter?*

I can best sum it up, when I went... She used to show at that, was it Vision Gallery in Knightsbridge? Do you remember it? No. There was a gallery there she showed quite regularly at, it's near the Knightsbridge tube station, Sloane Street, off there, right. And, there was an opening, and I went along, and she was there, and I was looking round, and she came up to me and said, 'What do you think of them, Conroy? Do you find them a bit decorative?' And I said, 'Eileen, you're always decorative.' And they were, she had that decorative quality, which was very successful, but I couldn't paint that way, no. Of course it goes back to the time when they were

collecting artists for the 1936 exhibition you know, Eileen was one of them, I know this has been told many times, but, Herbert Read and Paul Nash would go to her and say, 'Eileen, we want you in this international Surrealist show, in the English section. You're a Surrealist.' And she said, 'Am I?' Because she hadn't, wasn't aware of it you see. But they decided, but, the reason was very simple, there was only Banting and Penrose who were at that time completely committed Surrealists, Banting from '33, Penrose from about 1927. But they had to make an English section, so they went around making them overnight. You are a Surrealist, yes you'll do, you'll do. Even prowling around the gentle nest of artists who hung around in Hampstead, you know. It's a wonder they didn't include Ben Nicholson and some of the other people you see. Some they did, and grafted a bit of fantasy on their work, showed, and the moment the show was over, went back to doing their abstractions.

*Does Surrealism in your view have to be always something to do with subject, or can it sometimes be technique?*

It shouldn't be technique; technique in Surrealism is immaterial really. That's why they have very often been accused of having no technique, you know, of throwing it away, because that brings in the aesthetic quality, and surrealism is not guided by that. It's the force of what you have to say in your imagery. So, it's only used as a means really, like Dali used it as a means, Magritte of course, using that particular technique, but it was useful, important for his work.

*But do you think that it's fair if some critic of Surrealism would say, well, the rules about Surrealism are that there are no rules?*

Mm, there are no rules.

*So therefore there's no discipline?*

There's no style either. Look at the variety you get within the works you see, of, in different painters.

*So consequently, is that why perhaps it has had a hard time as a, to be accepted, especially in Britain?*

Yes, of course, I think that's very likely, because, I mean painters like Paul Nash you see had tinkered a bit with Surrealism, but you could always see the Englishness of Paul Nash. I think that's probably one of the big problems with Surrealism in England, it's English Surrealism, very distinct from French.

*But of course if you look at the history of England, socially or even artistically, there has been a very healthy eccentric quality in terms of fashion even, or just lifestyle, so surely this country, this little island, should have embraced Surrealism. Or maybe are we too close to it deep down, that we're...*

Could be. I mean if you look at Lewis Carroll and Edward Lear, we have a kind of heritage you know, these are our ancestors as it were. But, and...

*Or characters like Blake, who lived a very surreal life.*

Yes. But you see, Herbert Read's idea was that, Surrealism in his eyes, our ancestors were Wordsworth, Blake, and the poets, mainly, was an extension of the English romantic tradition. OK, that's his interpretation. He even wanted to change the word 'surrealism' to 'super-realism', to anglicise it. Now if you look at the ancestors of the French, what have you got? Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Baudelaire, revolutionaries. Blake might have been a revolutionary in his way, but the subject matter makes it more conventional, because of his obsession with religion, but the rest of them were traditionalists of course. So those are the difference. And I think it's interesting that there's two introductions written in the catalogue of the Surrealist show in '36, one's by Breton, the other is by Herbert Read, and they are as far apart as you can get. That's probably why it didn't catch on in England for a long long time, and just now, in odd times you know, it has spates of it, and it does well.

[BREAK IN RECORDING – TELEPHONE]

*So, Conroy, Surrealism in England is a bit of a, a sort of anachronism I suppose, but what about the relevance of it on a world-wide stage?*

I think its influence has been tremendous, in many forms I mean, it's moved into advertising, not that the Surrealists endorse that of course, but it's left its mark in so many different ways, in the theatre, in film, and you know, many other aspects of living, it's there.

*Has it changed its essence, or if one of the earliest stars of Surrealism could come back, would they say, oh yes, that's the same heart?*

Yes I think probably so. Oddly enough you know, when you really see a Surrealist exhibition you want to see those people again. I mean the big international shows I've been to, I mean, Canberra, OK, they had a few Surrealists there, four or five, one didn't know anything about them much, only one who was in England for a short time and he did come over just after the exhibition in Canberra. But otherwise, it's there and it was flourishing you know, in its own quiet little way. In Vancouver, another group you see. Australia, another one.

*Certainly the original Surrealists were very, not only their work was creative but they themselves were interesting characters, they were dramatic personalities. One thinks of Dalí making that speech in the famous diving suit. By the same token would you say that someone like Damien Hirst is a surrealist, of sorts?*

I...it's difficult. I don't think he would consider himself a surrealist. What he probably draws on is something of the Dada spirit, which after all, Surrealism grew out of Dada. The only reason it changed I think was because Dada became so fashionable, was in all the official, you know, traditional magazines.....

[BREAK IN RECORDING]

*Yes, so, we were talking about Dada, sorry, something went wrong with the machine.*

Mm. Yes I think it's because, certainly Dada had a big influence at the time, but like all these more revolutionary forms of expression or art or...it became popular. The rich people were endorsing it, they were going to the soirees, and that wasn't how Breton who was after all mixed up with the Surrealists, like many of the other poets around him, felt that they wanted to break with that. In other words, the destructive aspect of Dada they felt needed to be put on a constructive footing, and out of that developed Surrealism. So, I don't know. Of course, so I don't think even people like Hirst or people like that, take into account much of Surrealism, because from their point of view it's a little tame, whereas Dada had a very revolutionary feeling about it, you know, even in Germany they were climbing into the pulpit of the cathedrals and proclaiming Dada as the living thing you see. And, look at the scenes that used to take place in Paris you see, when some of them moved there. It's interesting you know, there's always been confusion over, some of the Dadaists said, oh yes, we just stuck a pin in a name in the dictionary and the word 'Dada' was there, so we used it. But, there were a lot of Romanians also mixed up with those, that group, in Zurich, and they were always saying, their Romanian word for 'yes' is 'da', and they were always saying, 'da da, da da'. So that's probably the explanation really. So there's a confusion. But, no, I think it's come out of a Dada spirit.

*The difference being perhaps that, some people might say that the Dada spirit was one of, let's say mischief, optimism, a kind of desire to push the boundaries. What would you say the Nineties art, where we are at the moment, the fashionable art, the smart art, is about?*

Well that is the link I think. They just try to take it a step further.

*Have they though?*

Well, that's the question. They think they have. After all they haven't come up...I mean there were exhibitions organised through a public lavatory, and every visitor was given a little axe to destroy what they didn't like. Now I can't see any of them doing that, although some of the things, the objects they present today could be quite suitably destroyed I feel. You know, not necessarily on aesthetic grounds but the

puerility of it, sometimes. But, yes, I think there is that reappearance of it in a way, I suppose the exhibition at the Royal Academy...

*'Sensation'.*

'Sensation', set that going a little bit.

*And does it make sense to you in a sense, that more or less 75 or so years apart there should be a resurfacing?*

It's...I suppose that could be justified, if they're taking it a step further. But then you stop and think, yes but Surrealism took it that step further, on a different plane if you like, but far greater work came out of Surrealism than it did out of Dada.

*Do you think looking at it, trying to be as objective as possible, we all know art movements come and go; do you think somehow that Surrealism is beyond an art movement?*

Well it was always, I think Breton himself described it as a, what did he say? That it was a lamentable expedient, because it was only part of what Surrealism was concerned with. It never lived up to.....

End of F6327 Side A

F6327 Side B

*So you're saying, Breton said that it never lived up to...?*

The...the essential aim that Surrealism was conceived of, as to what it should achieve. But it did achieve something else, and that was the greatness of the art that came out of it. The ideal of course was this revolutionary feeling, of changing society you see, which it didn't do. I mean they even played a bit with communism you see, Aragon was represented at the Kharkov conference in Russia. So, but, no, it was hopeless as...that was...it was a nice dream probably, but it didn't get anywhere.

*In a sense, we talk about Surrealism in advertising and so on, and the very accessible imagery that Surrealism has offered.*

Mhm.

*You only have to think of Benson & Hedges adverts, or Silk Cut adverts, you know, to realise there is some element of surrealism there. Do you feel that Surrealism as a movement, as an ethos, is redundant today?*

Well there was thoughts of that back in the Eighties of course, Mesens and myself, we both had letters from Paris after Breton's death, so, it was a bit before, but really saying, let's change the name of Surrealism, let's not use it any more. Of course there was such a cry generally, and how can you talk about that when you've got painters producing work that was in the tradition of what they had been painting before as Surrealists, to suddenly say, Surrealism doesn't exist, you know, you can't use the word any more? It was nonsense. So they soon dropped that of course, but Mesens and I wrote a joint letter to them pointing this out, you know. So, it goes on, of course it will go on. I can't think of a better word actually. Although, to say above realism is always...it's strange in itself isn't it. No, I think it was quite a good word. It was taken from Apollinaire of course, subtitle to one of his plays.

*It has a sort of revolutionary sound about it, it's very attractive.*

Mm.

*Somehow you almost feel there ought to be a club.*

Yes. Well, you see, now, I get now from Paris every month 'Infosur'[ph], which is the magazine that gives all the Surrealist activity in the world, all the exhibitions, the reviews, books, films, and obituaries as well of course, which crop up frequently, like poor old Philip West in Zaragoza died you see, some months ago, and Marianne, his wife, and I wrote to Michel, I either wrote or I spoke to him on the phone, and I said, 'Michel, why not let's get...let's write something to, you deal with the French, I'll deal with those in England, and some in Germany, to get them to, a memorial thing, to submit a poem, a painting, a collage, or a drawing, as a memento you see, and give them to his wife, Marianne, who is in Zaragoza.' And he thought this was a good idea. And then I wrote to... You see, I'd been in touch, or they'd been in touch with me, at the Grenelle[ph] Foundation in the Santiago de Compostela, for a show, I should have it probably at the end of this year. It's about 150 works, and they produced beautiful catalogues and things. And Natalia Cigarra[ph], who runs it, is the curator there, she, we write to each other quite a lot, we're on quite friendly terms, so, she, I told her about it and she said, 'Excellent idea,' she said, 'I'm getting a whole lot together, even my father's done work for it.' And, she is holding on to them, and she'll let me have them when she's got enough you see, and then we'll box them and then we'll send them to Marianne. It's exactly what they did when, for my birthday, you know my 80<sup>th</sup> birthday you see. But, as I said to her in a recent letter, of course it's happening, as usual, it takes months for artists to get round to doing any work, it was six months before I got the stuff, they got the stuff, all secretly, I didn't know about it of course, they got all the stuff together and boxed it, and I was presented it at a gallery. But, and we shall probably be like that, or maybe even a year before she will get it, but it'll come.

*What aspects of contemporary life influence your work now, if any?*

If any, yes. Well, it can happen can't it, just, almost instantaneously. Something said, you see something, you read something, and it triggers off a thought. How relevant it is to the immediate contemporary life, I don't know. Places fascinate me quite a lot.

*For example?*

Well, streets for instance, or things that happen. I thought about arcades, and some time ago you know there was a friend of mine who worked for, he's an American, he worked for 'World in Action', and, I think he used to get a bit of trouble with them, you know, he was filming in Amsterdam doing all the drug centres and things, and they wanted to cut it and he didn't. So they sent him upstairs, in other words they had cut down on the number of 'World in Action' programmes he produced, and he was given the chance of doing his own, say an hour-long programme. So he came to me and, I had known him for quite a while, came to me and said, 'Have you got any ideas of what we might do?' And we talked about it a bit. And I said, 'Do you know, one of the fascinating things that always fascinates me are arcades. Every country has got them. And there's always things that happen in them.' I mean, think of the great arcade in Milan, it's called 'the drawing room of Milan', because during...it's open day and night you see, and there's different things, different people take over. Legal people, you know, prostitutes, all sorts of people take, during the day and night, it becomes an open house for different activities. Fascinating. Well rather like the *passages* of course in Paris you see, which had its cafés and its...Vacerta[ph] where all the Dadaists used to meet and then the Surrealists did. And there was a theatre there and everything else. So, it's those sort of things that do get fascinating. I mean there's been murders in arcades, fantastic events taken place. And I...I knew that the Germans had produced a very big volume of all the arcades, and I saw it in the architectural library in Portland Place, but it was all in German of course. Then I discovered, some months later, that M.I.T. in America had produced an English version of it, which I've got up there, it's just arcades, and they're fascinating, because they give you all the plans, its history and everything else. So, we were going to do a programme on that. Unfortunately, this friend of mine was called to Hollywood by one of the directors there, they wanted him to do some research and things, so he disappeared for a while, and, he wrote back to me and said, 'I've got to go into one of the European countries to do research on a film,' he said, 'but if you would like to come over, here's my place in Hollywood,' the address. He said, 'There's a car in the garage,' he said, 'and there's a pistol in the drawer in the desk.' I wrote back and said, no thanks. I don't know whether he was serious or not, but it's

quite possible he was. Gavin MacFaddyen[ph] was his name, yes. A black belt at karate man. A glorious character.

*So, perhaps today's society, or today's lifestyle, influences in a hidden way, or is there a suggestion, though not necessarily a direct influence?*

Yes, kind of osmosis.

*Yes, yes, I suppose if you're alive you do live by osmosis as well.*

Yes, yes that's right, mm.

*But, you seem, even in the latest works, to be very loyal to your roots.*

Yes I suppose so, yes, yes. Yes if you like. But I like... The aspect, I mean, Miró is a decorative painter in my eyes. Some of his early work is very good, but when he starts filling the canvas with these little blobs of colour, I'm not so interested.

*Well just while we're on this, what is a decorative painter as against any other sort of painter? What's your definition? Is it lesser?*

It had its...it's had its roots in this use of automatism, and I think what was done at that time was a breakthrough, but after that I think it ceased to have, to me anyway, any great significance. I still find that there are painters I like in the Surrealist movement who haven't strayed too far away from their link with living in nature, and everydayness if you like. That's why Brauner is interesting, Tong[ph] is interesting, although somewhat abstract, nevertheless there is something about those images in his landscapes.

*What did you think of someone like Yves Klein then, who was a sort of, I would have thought, active Surrealist, a dramatic Surrealist in a way?*

What, of pressing people down onto...?

*Or leaping off buildings, or...*

Buildings and jumping off steps.

*Or is again, is this again Dadaism?*

Yes. Well, I don't know, again the image is not there; it is but it's not... I've tried it, you know, because when...

*What, jumping off buildings?*

No.

*No.*

No no. I've tried that, when James Birch[ph] ran the gallery up in King's Road...

*I was there.*

You were, on the closing? Well I painted these two women with body paint, and then, in front of the gallery window was a platform, a shelf, and I sprayed them again with a spray to keep the paint still, not setting too much, laid out big sheets of paper and pressed them down on, first body-wise and then turn them over and pressed them on another sheet, and these sheets are hanging on the wall. They were all sold interestingly enough.

*I remember actually, it was sold by auction I think.*

I think it was, yes, that's right, yes. I've got the photographs of them still, of the best ones I did you see. Now, that was OK, but you just got parts of them where it touched, as you know, just sort of skeleton kind of things. But, the best ones was, a friend of mine, they were both of them at the Courtauld, and every term, half year anyway, they have a party, and there's a subject set, and the subject was to go as a painting. And they said to me, what can we do? And I said, 'Well, go and buy two

body-stockings, I said, you know, one each, and then, go back to your place and I'll be there.' And I decided to paint Guernica on them, front and back you know, right round, and the face and everything. And there was a man, now is, he was the boyfriend of one of the girls, he had his camera and took all these photographs. And of course, with this body paint, it's very cold you know, and you're painting them all over you see, and these white body-stockings. So I created, because after all Guernica is only black, white and grey, so I went all over them like this. And I said, 'Now, wait,' it took all day pretty well, 'wait until it dries properly, then take them off and go and have a shower, then put them back on again,' you see. Which they did. And then there were more photographs taken outside. And, they decided not to dress up or anything, they just went as they were, walking up, you know, to Gordon Square to get a taxi you see. On the way a policeman was passing by and he said to me, 'What are they advertising?' I forget what I said. And then there was a couple, an American man and his wife, and he saw them coming towards him, and he said, 'Would you mind if I could be photographed with my wife with them?' So his wife took a photograph and then reverse roles and she took the photograph of him among these two girls. Very funny. Anyway they went to the Chelsea Arts – not the Chelsea Arts, the Courtauld gathering, and won first prize. So they came back with a great bottle of champagne for me, and a book by a writer who has written, which I've got a copy of it there, I forget, he used painting in the text of what he was writing, I forget what it's called now, it's quite interesting, but also slightly obscure. But... So, that was something different, you know, it was quite fun to do. But what with the Binney[ph] sisters and the other, the other exhibition where we pressed them down, and these two, that's really all I've done like that. Although the Binney[ph] sisters said to me afterwards, 'Could you come and do us another time, paint us some time?' And I said, 'Yes, some time,' but I haven't followed anything up of course. But then they had a dreadful incident of taking their clothes off at the slightest provocation, very amusing.

*Conroy, you, setting modesty aside, what would you say your appeal is today, as a painter?*

I don't know.

*What do you feel it is?*

Some people like it, some people don't.

*All right, what's your contribution then, to the 20<sup>th</sup>, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century?*

My contribution, just go on painting I guess. I don't know how it will change or where it will go, but, because I don't even know where a painting's going half the time.

*All right, what about the works that exist in this room for example.*

Yes.

*What do you think they say about this moment that you're living in?*

I've no idea, I've no idea at all. There's no date or timing on them you see, there's no feeling of where you could locate it, in a particular century or a year or anything.

*Well they have to be 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

They have to be 20<sup>th</sup> century of course, that's true. But, where is it? I mean that if anything...

*In here?*

...is in there, because that's Salpêtrière, the great hospital in Paris, which always fascinated me, where Charcot worked in with the hysterics you see. And, I mean a thing like that, which is the ice flow up there, it's just an idea that occurs to one, you know. And that one again is like a courtyard which has got various things in it.

*But although all different, these three canvases you're pointing to, they all have a different, completely different look, there seems to be a similarity in the spatial organisation of your objects or your characters, indeed the actual layout of the planes*

*and angles, so that they almost seem to be, again surreally perhaps, part of a mansion somewhere, maybe the mansion is your mind, I don't know.*

Yes, maybe. But don't forget, as I was saying a bit earlier, about Ernst, Ernst is the complete Surrealist, because his movement is, you can't track it, it changes all the time, and he explored so many different avenues, and I find that fascinating. I know, I've seen painters' works where they look all the same in the gallery, one theme running through it.

*Well a lot of people today would say that breeds confidence in the collector.*

Yes. Should it? I don't know. I think it's a bit...it's OK, but, you only want one of his works, not two, or three or four.

*No, but for a lot of people perhaps you are a bit of a firecracker, because you have your own mind, you have your own way of doing things, and you don't care.*

Shouldn't that always be painters' ... People say you're pulling my leg, but I'm not interested in their leg, are you, really? Why should you be?

*But you see what I mean? I mean you're a mischievous creature.*

I don't know. If some people like it, that's OK, you know. And maybe they'll buy it.

*What happened if no one liked your work?*

OK, I'd still go on painting. You can't stop that. That's a disease, we suffer from it.

*And, to achieve these works, we were talking about drugs earlier on, and the fact that you hadn't really experimented, or you had twice some marihuana, but, you've never...you like alcohol, but not...*

Not excessively, no.

*No, but nothing necessarily external is the cause for your painting, or you don't need anything to deviate, a stimulant.*

No, no stimulants, outside stimulus, no, none at all, no. It all comes out of the pointed top of one's head, or whatever. I don't know where it comes from. You can spend days sometimes dreaming around something, you know, but not quite getting to it. There's always that feeling that, it's never going to go right, but you pursue it until you suddenly, you suddenly realise it's what you wanted to say.

*You've talked about earlier, sort of jokingly, about being the last Surrealist, or people referring to you as the last Surrealist, but in many ways it is true. So I'm going to ask you, how does it feel to, if not be the last, to be certainly at the end of a legacy of a very important art movement.*

Well, yes, but of course there are others coming...

*You were there at the beginning you see.*

Yes but there are others coming up you know. Unfortunately you don't see much of it in Paris today, which was the centre of course, the quietest spot in the world is the whirlpool, and that was it, you know.

*There may be others coming up, Conroy, but there you are, I'm sitting in front of someone who was part of a whole, or refused to be part of the '36 scheme.*

Mhm.

*Who knew the artists who are stratospheric names.*

Join the dusty people, I say.

*Yes, yes well fine, but you see there may be others coming up, indeed someone like Desmond Morris is someone who is your junior but certainly mature as well. But*

*again I ask the same question, how does it feel to actually, because tangibly you are the last link. There are others, but they're new links.*

Yes of course they are, yes.

*They didn't know Ernst, they didn't know Dali, they didn't know any of these people.*

No. I regularly read the obituaries in the papers of course, I save some of them too, great friends of mine all disappearing, yes. Well, what can you do? No doubt I shall reach that point myself some day.

*That I have a feeling has no terror for you.*

None at all, no. I've met younger people, much younger people than I am, in their forties or even late thirties, are quite worried about dying. It's interesting isn't it.

*What would you say your reason for not being frightened is?*

Accepting the inevitable I suppose.

*Some people would think that is a terror in itself.*

Yes it probably is, but it doesn't worry me that much, you just say, what can you do? Why of course, it's because as you get older you reconcile yourself to the situation.

*But as you say, like so many other people who reach a certain age, who have been maybe agnostic or even atheist all their lives, people like T.S. Eliot for example, they suddenly run, especially into the arms of the Catholic Church it seems, and here you are completely sort of happy without any sort of security blanket.*

I can't think of any security in embracing any religion. It's a great myth.

*No I don't wish you would do but...*

No of course not.

*No, all I'm saying is that, you seem to have intact from day one this very strong idea of who and what you would do and what you would be.*

Mm.

*And I just wondered how true that is, if you were so set, your feet were so set on the path, that nothing and no one could deter you, which is very unique you see.*

It happened to me, you know, it just happened to me. And once I discovered the, what I wanted to do, I saw no reason to deviate. One hoped one had extended it of course, but even looking back at some of my very early paintings, and I think I've probably mentioned it earlier on in the tapes, of the, of reading Queen Victoria's letters, and seeing one or two Surrealist reproductions in a book by Walenski[ph], set me off on to Surrealism, and I thought this is the way painting should be; if I'm going to be a painter, and I wanted to be, there's no other direction. It was a straight line through. OK, in the Sixties I did a few attempts at more, things like, how many soldiers died in the Franco-Prussian war, which is a symbol thing, you know, which is a little leaning towards a kind of Pop-ish thing, but... And then, one or two of the generals in the First World War. Because my father was in that, and he was in Gallipoli as well. But, that was Sixties; it took a long time before I get round to it you see.

*Do you, like we all are caught up with the whole idea of the Millennium and poised on this brink, the Fin de Siècle, I have this peculiar feeling, I don't wish to prejudge, but I have this peculiar feeling that it's just another year for you.*

That's right. The Millennium, you know, yes, here they are, these madmen going over to Paris to visit Disneyland, to know what to put into this stupid dome they're creating on land that is probably not at all safe. Now they've removed the surface they found it's toxic, you know, and they're going to have to re-cover it all. The, what do you call these people of the earth?

*Friends of the Earth?*

Friends of the Earth. They tested that and found it very very polluted. So people are going to be stamping around that presumably for the benefit of looking at some Disney-esque nonsense inside a dome. It's comic.

*But don't you think every century forces some sort of psychological and actual change in people?*

I suppose it might, yes.

*But not in Conroy Maddox.*

No. I doubt if I'll go near the Dome. What are they going to give it, what's it going to give me?

*All right, if not the Dome, and forget everything else, what about this whole feeling that you are looking over a precipice, and in a sense, are you at 1999, will you raise your glass of champagne, and going to just wake up in 2000 and just maybe do another collage or a painting?*

Quite possibly, hopefully, yes. I don't know what the first...

*There'll be no significance.*

.....previous century was, and what they did then, it's impossible to...you could read about it probably. But, all you can see in what is happening now, look at the computer age we live in, even I am reduced to a computer.

*Is there some sort of, not at all any pride or a pat on the back for being, to all intents and purposes, a centurian?*

That would be nice wouldn't it, but I need...it would have to be 2008[sic].

Yes.

To become a centurian.

*But in...yes, in the sense of the word, of a warrior as well, I meant, because you were fighting. I see you as quite a fighter.*

Well you know, it's interesting but, when I first met Des she was 17, and over the years, we've been together for twenty years. When she was 25 and I was 75 I said to her, you know, we're going to get a letter from the Queen for this. But, you know, it's just a nice idea which was pure fantasy of course.

*But you see, that's quite a surreal relationship isn't it.*

Absolutely, yes.

*Not maybe...not just in terms of age, but just the whole thing really.*

Mm, mm. She came to me, it's interesting, she came to me because she had been to a lecture on Surrealism at the Tate Gallery by Simon Wilson, who had been a friend of mine for many years, and she was so interested she went up to him after the meeting, after his talk, said, 'Where can I find out more about Surrealism?'

*I remember you saying.*

He said, 'Get in touch with Conroy.' Gave her my address. So she wrote to me, and of course when I get letters they sit there for weeks and weeks, you know. So I got another rather urgent letter with a stamped addressed envelope. So in the end I decided I would write to her and invite her over. She has never left.

*So, would you say in part that Des could be a reason for your vitality?*

Well I know it's a good reason given very often, that you know, you put younger people with older ones and it...yes, I don't know, maybe it is.

*It could be the formula.*

We get on very well, we have both a nice sense of humour, and...

*Do you find people being quite intolerant though, even in these broadminded times?*

We haven't come across it. Dear Des is a pagan, she goes to pagan meetings, and I've been to several, I've given a talk on Surrealism, I've given a talk on Christianity there, and no doubt I shall be giving some more. I'm giving one to the Psychoanalytical Association shortly, I've got another one coming up at the Courtauld, I go up to Leeds where this exhibition at the Mayor Gallery has transferred.

*The Mednikoff, yes.*

The Mednikoff and Pailthorpe. I knew them. In the whole of the audience in the gallery, in City Gallery, I was the only person who knew them.

*But you see this is going back to my earlier point, Conroy, that you are such a last link in all of this art history and culture and mischief, this sort of cultural mischief of our 20<sup>th</sup> century. You must somehow perhaps, or maybe not, maybe you don't, but somehow I would feel, my gosh, yes, I am the last one. Not only the missing link, you know, that you are the only link.*

What does that mean?

*Well, it accords a certain status in a way, a certain importance. You're an ambassador of time.*

Nigel Walsh, who has curated that exhibition with the other man, I've forgotten his name, rang me up the day before the opening at Leeds and said, would I come and open it. So I thought, why not? Because I knew lots of people who would be going up, James Birch[ph], Paul Conran. So we met at the station, and there were seven others there as well, friends, a couple of girlfriends of theirs. So we occupied eight

seats you know, two this side with...on each side of the carriage, and had a glorious session going up to Leeds, it was very funny, very amusing, and lots of coffee drinking and so on, that's all you could get I think, I'm not sure. Anyway, they stayed with different hotels they had booked into. Geoffrey Sherwin[ph], who is a very big collector of Surrealism, a doctor up there, he said, 'Of course you're staying with us.' He's got a beautiful house just outside, full of paintings, full of Surrealist paintings, incredible works. And, I was going to go, catch the train back the next day, but there was a phone call from the gallery, the newspaper, the 'Yorkshire Post' or whatever it is, wanted to interview me. So we had an interview there, because Geoffrey[ph] said, 'Your opening speech was the best we've had.'

End of F6327 Side B

F6328 Side A

*Right, so Conroy, we're talking...yes, we're talking about Des's contribution to your life, and how surreal or not that might be. Did you imagine that you might be in a situation like this after your marriage and so on, did you want to be in a relationship again?*

Oh I see, yes. Well I haven't married again of course, I mean, once OK, but a second time is just careless. But, no, we got on very well. And it's very interesting you know, she lived quite a way away, and I encouraged her to come over this side, because she was working on her degrees and things and the last year, the last three years she's been on a Ph.D. with Cardiff University, but of course with a Ph.D., apart from spending six months in Cardiff you work on your Ph.D. at home. And so she had that place, but came back here, backwards and forwards. And, I got her a very big room in Belsize Park Gardens. Interestingly enough, a few years previously my ex-wife also lived above her, to be near...I had got her that place as well, to be near her sister – her daughter, my...

*Step-daughter, or...?*

What is she? My daughter, yes, our daughter, yes. Confusing isn't it.

*No, it is.*

So, it was that... And Des became very friendly with her, they were quite friendly, she lived in the flat above you see. And, unfortunately she died late last year, suddenly, had a little stroke, you know, and went. And she wasn't...I forget how old she was, she was younger than I am anyway, about twelve, fifteen years younger. The reason we bust up of course was, well, we met in Birmingham when I was there, and then we came to London, and, I don't know, we got separated and so it went on. I remember a friend of hers saying to her once, 'Why did you two bust up, because you got on so very well together?' And she said, 'It's because we disagreed with Bernard Shaw's interpretation of Joan of Arc,' which I thought was a delightful answer to a silly question anyway. But, where am I now? Des, you raised the question of...?

*Yes, we were just talking about how being with a younger woman actually has changed your life, if it has at all, or contributed in any way, if it has at all. How do you see that relationship, which is very unusual; forget you're an artist, it's quite an unusual relationship.*

Yes I suppose it is, yes. No, I think it's been enriched in many ways of course, because we get on so beautifully well you know. I mean I do crazy things of course, and she always points them out. I mean, only the other day I was ringing someone and he gave a mobile phone number, but underneath he put, 'Home' and wrote a number, which was 0171 794 5543. So I rang it, it was engaged. So, I left it, I went back to it again and pressed the re-dial, engaged again, and I thought, he must have been on the phone for a hell of a long time. And I came in here and I said, 'Do you know, I don't know, I tried that number.' She said, 'What is it?' And I told her. She said, 'That's your number.' And I can do things like that very often. It's like, you know, if I go in the morning to buy the newspaper or something, to England's Lane which is quite a little shopping area, I pass so many people and they say, 'Hello Conroy,' and I say, 'Hello,' and haven't a clue who they are. I know them, but I don't know their name you see.

*But that's as it almost should be isn't it.*

Yes of course.

*People would know you.*

Yes. But...and they say, '[INAUDIBLE] haven't changed.' And I say, 'You've changed, I don't know, you...' [LAUGHING] But, no, that happens all the time. But there's always crazy things like that happening, you know. It's because my long-term memory is quite good, short-term things... And I experiment with Pelmanism, you know. I mean, she is now leaving there and she is going to buy this, get this flat up in...now you see I...

*Barnet. Barnet?*

Barnet. Do you think I can remember Barnet? No. For ages I couldn't remember Barnet. So I try a little Pelmanism. Barnet, Bearnet[ph] you see, I think of Bearnet[ph]. So if I think of Bearnet[ph] I should think of Barnet, but I don't, I think of lots of other things but not Barnet.

*And this could be the surreal mind in action.*

Absolutely, so it doesn't work you see. But, you live with that.

*Yes. We've established already that you're not fearful of death, or you're not fearful of getting older, as we all are. Of course you have attendant sort of problems I'm sure, sort of physical problems.*

Well, sometimes, yes. I've spent three sessions in hospital.

*Yes, and that wasn't a frightening experience as such?*

No, really, I just accept these things you know. I mean I remember, I had a twisted intestine, you know, and the doctor comes up to me and says, 'Well, we don't know what it is; if it was appendicitis we'd know, but, the only thing is, we're going inside'. And he said, 'I'm very careful, I don't cut more than I should, about eight inches.' And I said, 'What, down the stomach? And he said, 'Yes.' So I said, 'How thick is it?' He said, 'Oh about this thick,' you know, two inches or something. So I said, 'Oh go ahead,' you know, go ahead. And it's OK. But of course, you're paralysed when you come out of this. But you know, it's intriguing in these places because you meet so many weird people. They put me in one floor, in one ward, where there's perhaps only two or three people, and there used to be one morning when there was a Hassidic Jew was laid up in hospital with a leg injury, and in the morning the place used to darken with these various Jews and all their black, coming in and, not talking to him but picking up the paper and reading that and ignoring the poor devil they had come to see, which was terribly amusing. Another man who used to speak eight languages, he assured everyone in this bedroom that he spoke eight languages. I think he was half Russian or something. But every night he fell out of bed, and there was

uproar, you know, nurses rushing in to lift this huge man back onto this bed, you know. Things like this you see, so...

*Well hospitals in a way are sort of also museums of the absurd as well.*

They're weird aren't they. Yes. Very strange. And, the end of that, you know, the surgeon, a man named Hamilton, came up to me and said, 'I suppose you would like to get out of here, wouldn't you?' And I said, 'Yes, when? Now?' And he said, 'Well, yes, you can get out probably later this afternoon.' And then he said, 'By the way...' Previous to that I was on television, over the Max Ernst exhibition which was about 1991 or something, at the Tate Gallery, and I had given a talk which was broadcast, and he had seen it you see. And the nurses used to come to me in the morning and say, 'We saw you on television.' I said, 'Forget it.' I wasn't feeling up to going to look at it, let alone anything else. And, he said to me, the surgeon said to me, he said, 'You know, we've got a lot of blank spaces in this place.' I said, 'What do you want, a mural?' And he said, 'No, but a painting would be very nice.' So I said, 'OK, once you get me out of here, give me a little while, I'll do a painting.' And I did, quite a big one. I forget what it was called, but it's a sort of, an anatomical weird thing, you know. And, I phoned them when it was finished, and they said, 'Come along.' There was a photographer there, they publish a magazine you see, and Hamilton and the sister of the ward, all photographed you see. A little report then, because they asked me questions, which was in the...and the photographs in the magazine. And now it hangs there, on the ninth floor I think, with a plaque under it. And, when I go in again, because I had a lump on my neck and my doctor said, 'Well I think it's OK but you'd better go and let them have a look at it,' you know, and the surgeon I saw there said – well they took a biopsy at once, you know, it's very painful of course. Hospitals you know, they hurt you more before they do the operation; the operation is simple, you don't feel a thing, but before they...very unpleasant. So, and coming out of that I was wandering along on the floor, and I was on the very floor, you know, when you come out of the operating theatre you don't come straight to a ward, you go into a special room, it's very interesting. I don't know whether you've ever seen a film called, oh I've forgotten it now. 'Coma', 'Coma'. No. It's about a hospital that are really killing people, and then transporting the body so that they could sell the parts, and they're all suspended from links, so the bodies are stretched

out on this thing, like swings almost, rows of them you know. Terrific film. And I passed a door which was half open, and I looked inside, and covered in red blankets were rows of these people on beds, on these trolley things, you know. And I thought, my God! it's just out of 'Coma' this. And that's where I had been of course before you get into your ward. And so you get lovely images of these sort of pictures. And so it went on. But...

*So that sounds like a very surreal...*

It was indeed, yes.

*...inspiration.*

Yes. So you know, little ideas like that sort of stick in your mind you know. And there is a painting of mine in an arcade of a figure on one of these stretchers, I forget what it's called. But those were my experiences of hospital. Now, I have a habit each year of taking them a couple of bottles of wine to the different wards where I've been in. It's rather lovely. The last time, not this year but the year before I was walking up the road with the two bottles in a bag, and I trod on a plank which happened to have a nail sticking up, right into my foot. So before I delivered the wine I had to go and have anti-tet... And he said to me, 'It's all right now, you needn't worry, for ten years you're OK.'

*Tell me Conroy, you...we've established that you are not frightened or worried about age or death.*

I wish I could knock off a few years of course, I always think, well maybe I'll do a deal like...

*Faust.*

Faust did, yes. Just for fifteen years, say.

*But what plans if any have you made for after you die? For example, you have a huge collection of paintings, of yours and others. You have probably one of the best Surreal libraries in the world.*

Which is pretty good, yes, I agree.

*You have cuttings and you have important newspaper documenta and so on.*

Mhm, mhm.

*Have you made plans for all these things?*

Well, my daughter of course will inherit this place, which you know I bought in '76 off the Church Commissioners of all people, [LAUGHING] this flat, for £7,000, and it's two floors, three bedrooms. And the paintings, I've left particular notes, you know, what to do with the work and where to dispose of them. Because I say, you know, you don't have to keep them for sentimental reasons. And I don't want any priests. So it will be a cremation, you know. And then Des, you know, I shall see she gets something. But you see, my daughter will inherit something like £250,000 to £300,000 for this place, that's what it's worth today you see. It could even be £400,000.

*No, one doesn't want to be morbid about talking, talking about death, but, what I meant was, are you remotely interested in what happens, in your legacy? I would have thought you wouldn't be interested, from everything you said.*

No, I don't think so. I mean, it's up to Lee, and the paintings that Des will have, what she does with them. If you're desperate enough to sell them, sell them; if not, keep what you want. I mean I hang on to...I mean things like these two exquisite corpses of Gordon Onslow-Ford and Roberto Matta, Esteban Francés, they're quite unique you see. One was given to me by Gordon in 1940 when he came back from France, and the other one I picked up many years later, and they are companions you know.

*Would you say generally, Conroy, that you had a very laissez-faire attitude to everything?*

Yes, I think I probably have, yes.

*Doesn't that...what matters most then in your life, or what has mattered most?*

Oh, so that I can go on painting I suppose. As long as I've got enough money to buy paint, canvas, frames.

*What about people and children and relationships?*

Oh, yes, I mean I've got my sister, she's a year younger than I am, a year and two days younger than I am, and she's living in Kenilworth, and she's got two children, they're both married and they've got children, you know, and so it goes on. My daughter's got, well, there was Stefan, who died when he was 25, he had a carcinoma of the brain, very unfortunate. I didn't see a lot of him because he worked in Germany, and used to come back here about twice a year. But my sister, she lives only in the next road behind me, which I managed to get for her, again through the Church commissioners, and she's been there ever since.

*You seem something of a property mover and shaker.*

Yes that's right, I found a place for Des, I found a place for my ex-wife, yes, extraordinary.

*Maybe I'll have to apply as well.*

Yes. They just happened to come up at that time. Now it's almost impossible to get anywhere of course, but...

*Is it too late to set up Maddox and Company?*

Yes, should do, shouldn't it, yes, why not? Yes.

*You say you would like some, you would like a few, to knock a few years off; the typical question has been asked to everyone I'm sure, would you like your life over again?*

Of course, if one knew what one knows now, yes of course. But to go back to where you were, no, it would be like going back to...to barbarism, you know. No, I think, I wouldn't like that, but I'd like to know that I'd, you know, something you could take back with you if you could do it. Quite impossible.

*How do you think people regard your contribution to art and the 20<sup>th</sup> century?*

I don't know, I've no idea. I can't tell. Some people like the work, some people still buy it, I can survive.

*OK. What about you then, what do you think your contribution has been?*

I don't know. I don't really know. I can't assess it you know. You have to wait until you're dead before you know this, and then it's too late to know it.

*What about feeling, rather than knowing, what do you feel you've contributed?*

I think I've been part of that great community of aims, in some way. But whether it goes beyond that, I don't know.

*Does it matter to you?*

No, not really, no.

*Would it have mattered to you if you had...*

I've done what I wanted to do always you see.

*Would it have mattered to you if you hadn't been an artist?*

Ah, what else would I have been?

*An advertising man, a PR man. You were good at all those sort of things.*

No. I did it for a while, yes. Exhibition stand design, I was very good at that.

*Well, you see, maybe had you stuck at it we would have been talking about Maddox & Maddox rather than Saatchi & Saatchi.*

Yes, probably. But, also, don't forget, I would have retired by now, long ago, twenty, thirty years ago I would have had to have retired. As a painter you don't retire you see, not until your hand is no longer strong enough to hold a brush. So... So I don't think there's...no, I don't think it's any good really thinking along those lines, one, you know, you just... I think anyone reaching a certain age gets to that feeling about life, you know. It's been OK. It's up and down always, you know. But, I think I've enjoyed most of it, so, I just go on painting. It's part of the meaning of being isn't it, it's... Otherwise you see, I sometimes think of people, you know, they go through life, they retire, you know, I've had relatives like that and they've just gone into a kind of comatose state you know, a vegetable almost. Whereas artists don't I don't think. Writers don't either. Which I think is the best bet. It may be tough in some cases, but it's...it's OK.

*Conroy, someone once said that old age is a museum of regret.*

Mhm, mhm.

*What is your view on that?*

What's the regret for? I mean, what are you regretting? Getting older of course, it's always, it gets in the way of things. Because you slower up in some ways, I mean I never run but then I'm not a great runner, I'm not a great sportsman. To catch me jogging, even when I was younger, was absolutely ridiculous, you know. I remember at hospital, my birthday is on the 27<sup>th</sup> of December, and she said to me – they were

doing a scan, you know, of the brain, when I had that done – and she said, ‘I think they made a mistake over your birth date.’ And I said, ‘They have, they keep putting the 29<sup>th</sup>, and I keep telling them it’s the 27<sup>th</sup>, but that’s only on one computer, on the master computer it’s still wrong and they haven’t altered it.’ And she said, ‘No no, I mean the year you were born.’ I said, ‘No, that’s right.’ And she said, ‘How do you do it?’ I said, ‘It’s quite simple doctor,’ I said, ‘I don’t walk if I can ride, I don’t jog, I don’t play any sport. In fact,’ I said, ‘and I drink a little, I smoke a little.’ And she said, ‘Is that true?’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ She said, ‘Well, keep it up, keep it up,’ she said. Which I thought was an adequate answer, you know, because I was keeping it up. So, I mean, I’m even, if I go down the street, there’s a woman opposite, her husband is the, used to run a school in Holland Park, a very good school, he was the headmaster and he’s retired now, and his wife and he lives just down this road here. I passed the house several times, and she’s driving, getting out of the car or something and she says, ‘You know, you astonish me every time.’ I said, ‘Why?’ She said, ‘So briskly you are walking.’ And I said, ‘Why not?’ She said, ‘At your age.’ And I said, ‘Yes.’ You know, and I get these silly questions, or answers rather. Weird.

*So, your museum of regrets has few if any exhibits?*

I think, no. I regret things, of course you do, everyone does, it can happen in a day and you forget them the next, but, yes, I would like a few more years of course. What I do with them, I don’t know, I go on painting of course, but what would happen, I don’t know. If you think of Picasso’s last works, which they condemned, and now of course they’re as important as some of his earlier works. But a man who has produced at least 14,000 paintings, and heaven knows what else, pottery, etchings, drawings, you know. I suppose he felt at the end that he would try anything, you know, in that great burst of these later paintings, which were interesting but not as great as his earlier work, but people do find them, now, they find them very interesting. But, *c’est la vie*.

End of F6328 Side A

End of Interview