

NATIONAL LIFE STORIES

ARTISTS' LIVES

Michael Rothenstein

Interviewed by Mel Gooding

C466/02

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Oral History
The British Library
96 Euston Road
London
NW1 2DB
020 7412 7404
oralhistory@bl.uk

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The British Library
Interview Summary Sheet

National Life Stories
Title Page

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Title: Mr

Interviewee's forename: Michael

Sex: Male

Occupation:

Date and place of birth: 1908

Mother's occupation:

Father's occupation:

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F814 Side A

This is Tape 1 of an interview with Michael Rothenstein, recorded at Stisted, in Essex, on Monday, 23rd July, 1990.

Michael, I'd like to begin by asking you to tell us something about your childhood. A remarkable childhood, I believe, in the Stroud Valley.

Well, it was such a wonderful, really, such an extraordinary childhood. Very isolated. I spent a lot of time with my two sisters, who were only a little older than I was. Not much with my brother, John, who was eight years older than I was. He was away at public school, Bedales, and later at Oxford, so it was much later I got to know John a bit. But my two sisters were intimate, so it gave one a strange sort of isolation. Socially insulated from other children, because, really, there weren't other children around. And socially insulated also, because my parents were so much older than I was, and my father seemed to live in a rather grand world, which encompassed his own very wide range of interests, literary as well as artistic. So one made one's own life. And it was really very intense. That Stroud Valley was most marvellous at that time. Our house was on a ridge of hill, overlooking the valley. And it was very wild, one could walk through the fields, almost deafened by the natural sounds, the birds, the sawing of the grasshoppers in the grass. It was a continual symphony of sound. Wonderful. Wonderful. The Cotswolds could be windy, and the combination of the, of the creature sounds, and the bird sounds, and the wind through the trees, was something so extraordinary. It's a world of sound which, of course, has vanished, because there are no grasshoppers now. I don't know whether there are any in Essex, in, in Gloucestershire, but there are none in Essex. The fields have lost their voice. And the butterflies. I think they must have influenced me greatly as a child, because, you see, wherever there were flowers, there were butterflies. And I used to visit a rather grand house, at Cirencester, where there were long flower borders, and in the summer, on a warm day, the air shivered with the cloud

of butterflies - red admirals, tortoiseshell, brimstone. It was glittering, you cannot imagine how beautiful it was. And that's a completely vanished world. Where I live now, in Essex, we're happy to see a single white butterfly come tumbling into the garden. I remember, for example, walking down the valley one morning, early, and there was a particular tree, and the tree was completely surrounded by green hairstreak butterflies. They made a second coating of brilliantly vibrating leaves. Those things were so marvellous, and they affected me greatly. There was a particular moth, a tiger moth, that had cream-coloured wings, with deep chocolate splotches, and a Chinese orange underwing. And I always wanted to get close to this moth, because I thought it so staggeringly marvellous, and one day, I went into the playroom, which was covered with coconut matting, and there was a tiger moth, on the matting. And I was so overcome with emotion, that all I could do was to lie down beside it. So those things affected me greatly, and shortly before Peter Fuller died, we were talking about these images of butterflies and birds, which I drew so often, as a kid, and which have reappeared in my work of the last five years. And he said, "Well, those butterflies and birds, of the new woodcuts, they have flown out of the Paradise of your infancy."

That's a very good phrase.

Another event that affected me very much, and I think, in a strange way, has affected my work, was Christmases. The first Christmas I remember was, where we lived, on the high ground of Hampstead, on Heath Street, and the whole business of Christmas was really quite highly ritualised. We always had our presents on Christmas Eve, and we always opened our stockings on Christmas morning. But Christmas Eve was the big event. And when I was maybe five years old, I remember being led into the large, high, Victorian sitting room of the house, and it was in darkness, apart from the tree. And the tree towered up to the ceiling, and there were the coloured lights, and there were the glass birds, silver and blue, and pink, shining among the little candles. And I was simply blinded with joy. It seemed to me so

beautiful, so perfectly fulfilling, an image of endless, endless happiness, and endless joy. And that idea, that concept of lights, gleaming in darkness, has really resonated through all my experience of the outside world. Lights at night, where, we have a little place in Chelsea, walking in the evening, looking in at windows, with all sorts of interesting and amusing things happening in the light beyond the street. Of fairgrounds, the idea of coloured lights, shining out of darkness, is related to a great deal that I found very very moving. Not only the first things you think of, the moon, or a cluster of stars, but there's something very touching about a beckoning light. A moment of human truthfulness, shining in the darkness, or human lies. But that focus of bright humanity, which always seems symbolised by lights at night.

Michael, could we talk for a bit, about those extraordinary drawings that you did as a child, and which your son, Julian, gathered together in a publication of, of his, with Redstone Press, three or four years ago. These are drawings made from your fourth year onwards. Perhaps you could tell us something about them? And about your first experience of drawing.

Yes, I'd love to. Those memories are very, very clear. I think it was my mother who used to buy me ld. drawing books, and then I was given colours and brushes, and along with those gifts, I was given these fat, long boxes, with sets of soldiers in the boxes, guardsmen, for example. Well, the moment of opening the box and revealing these wonderfully enamelled little chaps, standing on their green squares, these were lead soldiers, was a moment of great ecstasy and excitement. And after that, there was anti-climax, because these chaps had swords or guns. And they weren't fighting. Here were these fellows set up for combat, and all I could do was to set them along the table, in a line, so I would set to work and make them fight in my drawing book. And this must interest me because, you see, that act of attempting to make the subject of my drawing more exciting in some peculiar sense, through drawing it, through painting it, is, I think, something very fundamental to forming one's own kind of images. I wanted to make them more exciting than they appeared, standing in a line along

the table. So, they got to work in very bloody battles, in my own images, and whereas, as a child, I was a craven coward when it came to any kind of blood, or any kind of accident, nothing gave me greater pleasure than drawing the chaps with chopped off heads spouting, spouting blood! And as a result, the red can, cadmium red, or whatever, was always the first one to be used up in the box. But one had such an, such pleasure. These colours would start going fairly dry, and then you'd get them squelchy with water, and the feel of cobalt blue or cerulean, or black and orange, and pink, it was incredible how, how joyful it was to work along with these colours, to make them spring around on the paper. So I did create a fairly extensive world of my own, a very private world, in these books, in these ld. drawing books. Some of the things were things I saw round there. There's a drawing here of the farmyard where we were brought up in Gloucestershire, and it's fairly literal. They're making hay, there are cocks and hens and a goose, and a turkey, in the farmyard. But others were quite fantastic. They came from a kind of, I think, rather happy world of spontaneous invention. Very strange birds with strange wings, wings like shields, perhaps derived from the sets of armoured knights which I had in the toy cupboard. Anyway, one side of what I drew was directly observed. Lots of fishes, lots of insects. The fishes and insects were very directly derived from the wonderful old Thames and Severn Canal, which was then more or less landlocked, down in the valley. And between the locks, there were these deep pools, which were really quite untouched. Nobody fished there, except, I would try and fish, my sisters would try and fish. But they were untouched in the general sense, that they were draped in overhanging leaves from the beech woods, and the surface was draped with duckweed, Canadian pondweed, wonderful, wonderful. And one would look down into the water, and see this world of, sort of, deep greens, a sort of forest world of eternal summer, that looked very much the same in winter as in midsummer. It was magical. Magical.

Now, you've spoken about the lead soldiers and so on, and one of the things that I wondered about, was how far the War, which occurred during your late childhood, the Great War, how

far that impinged upon you, or touched this paradise world of your childhood, in the Stroud Valley, in the Cotswolds. Do you remember it having any effect on you?

Oh yes I do. That was voices from the other room, because my father was an official War Artist, and there would be talk, you know, of the Somme, of great battles going on, because they were very relevant to my father's work as an official War Artist. There would also be images in the newspapers, so that was a factor, very much. And, of course, a child relates things in a very free way, compared to a grown up. And you see, many of these drawings, would have Red Indians alongside of Tommies, would have bombs dropping on ships, derived from newspaper photographs, and maybe an image of the wigwam we had in the garden. This mix is there all the time in the drawings. The Red Indians that appear alongside of the Tommies, resulted from a Red Indian costume my father presented my older brother, John, so these figures with great plumes, head-dresses and all the rest of it, bows and arrows, there they are with the Tommies!

You've mentioned your father, could we say a bit about him. This is William Rothenstein. He was official War Artist during this period. You've mentioned that he had literary interests as well as artistic. He was, of course, the, I think, the Principal, wasn't he? Of the Royal College of Art.

Oh, years later.

Much later. What was he actually doing during these years?

The house I mentioned, at the top of the Cotswold ridge, overlooked a very extraordinary elm tree, an immense tree, a wych elm, and my father was very obsessed by this tree. I think it became, to him, I don't know, a metaphor for a very wide range of feelings about nature, and

he painted a number of paintings of the wych elm. For him, it was what the haystack was for Monet. And the most remarkable of his paintings was of the wych elm towering over our house, which was, in fact, quarter of a mile behind it from where he was sitting, his view, and it's a wonderful image, because it really touches one, it has such a feeling of reality, of this great tree.

Do you know where that painting is?

No.

You don't. Go on. I'm sorry to interrupt, you were talking about ...

So, my, my very early memories of my father include images of him walking off into the landscape with a heavy pack of his easel, canvas, and wooden paint box. But I don't really remember a great deal about my father. He was a mysterious figure. Though, in the evenings, we often had a rather rumbustious time. John Drinkwater, the poet, lived in a cottage quite near, and Max Beerbohm lived in a cottage, which we owned, which was the other side of the village, and often, in the evenings, we three kids, would be there, and you know, if there were games, or readings, anything like that, readings from John Drinkwater's latest play, from Shakespeare, or the American Fun Book - Brer Rabbit - then we were part of the audience. Those memories were very vivid, because my father and mother were extremely affectionate, and they loved to have the kids around at any sort of suitable moment.

Did your father have a studio in the house?

Yes. The house was an altered farmhouse, a rather gaunt building, on the ridge of hill. It stood up very high. And three floors. And then there was a yard. And my father converted

the barn, the original barn of the farmhouse, across this yard, into his studio. And again, it was rather severe, rather bare, and all the things my father liked, he was very much a collector, as well as an originator, and it was full of interesting things, the house, that is, that he'd collected - Indian miniatures, sculpture, drawings and paintings by friends, by people he'd met in Paris - so it was really packed with interesting things, but from my viewpoint, it was the Indian miniatures which affected me most strongly. And again, it was this element of violence, strange and dramatic happenings, in this tiny world of the miniature, and always in these very violent colours, black hills, gods and goddesses with purple and deep scarlet faces and arms, extraordinary birds flitting in and out of the branches of black trees, laden with orange fruit. It was an extraordinary world that these miniatures represented. And although the house was full of the most elegant examples, drawings by Augustus John, for example, beautiful, light, charming caricatures that Max Beerbohm had done of Father and his friends. It was these intense, violent images, that I remember, and it was those that have affected my work, really, ever since.

Yes, you've got an extraordinary intensity of colour in a great deal of your work, and the actual violence of the subject matter in a lot of your work, or the implicit violence in a lot of your work, the general, I think, intensity, of pictorial incident, all of this would be, could be traced back, I suppose, to your being so close to those, those Rajput miniatures. We're talking about, really, things that fed into, and affected, into your work, and affected your work as an artist, Michael, and your childhood, clearly, in your childhood a lot of things were laid down, a lot of things were set up within your consciousness that you've spent your whole life returning to, and working over, and re-working in various ways. Your father was an artist, and a distinguished artist, a famous artist. How far do you think the fact that he was a professional artist, and a man in the world of art, as it were, how far do you think, and how early do you think that affected you in terms of your consciousness of yourself, as perhaps, becoming an artist?

That, of course, is dependent on my age. When I was a child and we've been talking about childhood, say, up to the age of eight or nine, I accepted there was this interesting, well-known father, who did interesting and well-known portraits and paintings. But it was a static world. There it was, and I and my sisters were part of that world, we had our own very private lives, but against the much larger background of my father's life. Later on, in my teens, of course, that completely changed. Then I took a view of his work, what his work stood for, what his work stood for in relation to what I felt was the authentic voice of modern art. All those things arose later, and absolutely transformed my childhood, static attitude to this large painted background, to the intimacies of my own life.

Can we, I think we'll come back to your father, and to your beginnings, your beginnings as an artist proper. We'll do that in a moment. Could you perhaps talk a bit more about your sisters. They seem to have been terribly important to you.

They were. They were, because they were my companions. As I said, my brother was away, my father seemed to be "up there", on another plateau of existence, and my sisters were very important. My sister Rachael was the elder of the two, and my sister Betty. My sister Rachael was musical, and later on, went to the Royal College of Music. My sister Betty was artistically very talented, and later on, went to the Royal College of Art. She became close friends with Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth, and did some beautiful work. I still have a splendid piece of sculpture she carved at the College. So, yes, they were my dear companions, and very close we were.

Now, what about your mother?

Mother was a sort of tigress. In her temperament, she was magnificently primitive. She adored my father, and she had a sort of worship of him. And in that sense, she was wonderfully supportive. In other ways, she was not supportive at all, because she didn't understand so many of his tastes, and so many of his feelings. He was naturally an austere man, and my mother was naturally, naturally a luxury lover. The reason being the poverty of her childhood. She was the daughter of John Knewstubb, and he was extremely poor, and he was really mainly supported by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, and Rossetti gave him work, both as studio assistant, and as copyist. But disaster befell one day, I'm sure this story has been told before, but let me tell it in my own way, because it was certainly very important to one's childhood. One day he was walking, with Rossetti, along the Embankment, and a girl came towards them, and the moment she passed, Rossetti touched my father's sleeve, and said, "She's wonderful. We must follow her." So, they turned back and followed this girl, who turned up Tite Street or wherever, and into another street, and she disappeared into a little, a little terraced house. So they waited a few moments, and then Rossetti knocked at the door, and a moment later, this glorious creature opened the door, and Rossetti said, "My name is Dante Gabriel Rossetti, I would like you to pose for me." Well, I gather she was not really an educated girl, but she had heard of this famous neighbour, in Chelsea, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, so she agreed to come. And my father fell instantly, and quite, my grandfather fell instantly, and quite desperately in love with this beautiful creature, and he was so afraid that Rossetti would mess her around in some way, sensually, that he ran off with her, and consequently, he ruined his career.

End of F814 Side A

F814 Side B

... John Knewstubb. And you said that his career was ruined, effectively, by his elopement with this very beautiful model,

Yes,

That Rossetti had seen, walking along the Embankment. Would you like to continue now with that story?

Yes, surely. Well, Rossetti was furious because he lost his assistant, he lost his copyist, and he lost his model. So that made a rift with grandfather, John Knewstubb, though I think it was patched over. I think it was patched over some years later. He was really a ruined man, financially. My mother, the daughter of this grand lady we've been talking about, did something to support my grandfather. She was so pretty that she found some sort of work on the West End stage, and some sort of money came in, and she would spend it on her father's work, and she built up the image of a patron, and, of course, the patron was my mother, but she would say, you know, "John, you have this admirer who wants to buy another of your paintings." And one day, she was negotiating with her father over a painting, and he burst into tears, whether it was because he suspected there was no patron, or whether he was so deeply touched by Mary, my mother, doing so much to provide money in his pocket, anyway, he broke down, and he said, "Alice", Alice Mary was her name, "Alice, I've been a failure for so long, I can't be a success."

How sad.

I remember my father telling me, when he was engaged, and people did get engaged in those days, as you know, that my mother took him up to her father's house in Kentish Town, a tiny little house, wretched, wretched circumstances, and my grandfather simply sat in his chair glaring at my father, and my father was so embarrassed, he pulled down a book from the book-case, but that was no help, because a shower of pawn tickets fell on the floor! Well, that was that. But anyway, my mother's later love of luxury came out of a very deprived childhood.

Can I just go back for a moment, Michael, because that's a fascinating story. What happened to your grandmother? John Knewstubb ran off with, and subsequently married this very beautiful girl.

Yes.

And they then lived in reduced circumstances, as they would be called.

Yes.

It was your grandmother who then found work on the stage?

My mother.

Your mother? Their daughter?

Their daughter, yes.

And what happened to your grandmother? I mean, here you had this very beautiful, pre-Raphaelite model, and what happened to her after her marriage?

I don't know much about it. I've never really explored my family at all. But they produced three children, four children. One of them became a sort of art dealer, and he instigated the Chenil Gallery which still exists in the Kings Road. One of my mother's younger sisters married Willie Orpen, so William Orpen, the portraitist was a sort of uncle, was an uncle, and the other, Chris, I think the youngest daughter, though both sisters, I think, were older than my mother. The youngest of the two elder daughters married a distinguished doctor, or surgeon, and he worked at University College.

So the four children of this ill-starred marriage, all themselves made,

Made out pretty well.

Made out very well, and effected extremely good marriages, one might say.

Yes.

That's interesting to touch on Orpen, because this means that not only your father, but other people in the family had, and, of course, your grandfather, had these artistic connections, to the very sort of, at the highest level of the artistic world in London. Well, that's a fascinating story. Can we go back to your mother, because I'm still interested to know more about her.

The tigress!

Yes, the tigress.

Yes, she was a woman of such joy, and wished for such luxury that, of course, our money could never really satisfy. So she was a figure, really, of great extravagance in the context of our lives, and she insisted on my father buying a house in Airlie Gardens at the top of Campden Hill, which was a big house, and she opened an account at John Barker, the store at the bottom of Campden Hill, and used to run up enormous accounts for magnificent curtains and all sorts of things that she never even used, and when she finally died, there were store cupboards with gloriously luxurious textiles and all sorts of things that were left unused.

Yes, that's right. My father had an extremely austere side, particularly after his visit to India, his interest in Indian philosophy, and my mother continued on this joyful extravagant way, as she could.

That suggests interesting, an interesting, not conflict, but another interesting influence, if you like, upon your own development, because there is, undoubtedly, some part of you, which responds, isn't there, to luxurious, to luxury, visual luxury, and luxurious materials of one sort or another.

Very much.

You've a great love of physical materials, and of the colour and richness of certain sorts of material. And that also is something which comes out in the work. It comes out in the work also, doesn't it, in terms of, perhaps, of your love of texture for its own sake. I'm thinking ahead now, to the, to your print-making, your love of the textures of wood and cloth, and metal, and fine materials, and the surfaces of things.

That's a nice collection. But I think I should say, at this point, that there was this wide, rather cosmopolitan, really rather glorious family setting. But by the time I was 17, I reacted against

it all with great violence. The idea of the artist as a man who trafficked in highly cultural relationships, with highly cultured people, with letters, with books, all that was natural, it was so much a part of my father's life, his friendship with an author like Conrad. But, of course, I grew to absolutely hate it later on. It was a ready-made, on a splendid scale, and it seemed to me to absolutely contradict the sort of world that I wanted to make myself. So really, I built up a bit of a Berlin Wall, from the age or 16 onwards.

A sort of resistance?

Yes. An absolute resistance. Sad, really.

Did this affect your personal relationship with your father and your mother?

Yes it did. It did. It did.

I mean, is it possible to explore that a little bit? Was there an estrangement of any kind? A real estrangement, or was it just an unease?

Well, it was a very positive thing. I remember becoming friends with a very fascinating man, who's now largely forgotten, called Barnett Freedman.

Yes, the photographer?

That's right, yes. And I remember the first visit I made to Barnett's, Freedman's studio, which was off Tottenham Court Road, one of the side-turnings that used to be a slum, and, of course, now, is full of grand offices.

Is it Percy Street, or Goodge Street, one of those streets?

A bit higher up than that, I'm sure I'll think of the name in a minute. But that's where it was, exactly, north of that, three or four turnings. Anyway, Freedman invited me to his studio, or maybe took me to his studio, and it was so unbelievably what I liked. It was in a quarter, as I say, it was a sort of street where children made their own sort of merry-go-rounds, by tying ropes to the lamp post and swinging round it. And the entrance to his studio was right on the street, a few paces down a little corridor, and there was this room that was everything that really appealed to me. It's funny now, using words like "working class", but one of the reasons I reacted against my parents' lives was it represented something upper class, and I, like so many of my generation, wanted somehow, to bridge over and be part of the large sort of proletariat life. And Barnett, at that time, represented everything that I felt was real life with an enormous capital R.

Can you remember the date of this meeting with Barnett Freedman?

Now, I was born in 1908, and I would have been 16.

So we're talking about the early 20s.

The early 20s.

Now, I say that, because I'm anticipating that one of the things I wanted to talk to you about later, is your reaction to the events of the 30s, and the general movement of feeling and thought in the 30s, politically and socially speaking. I don't want to anticipate that, but I'm interested that you bring that up as early as that, as became part of your feeling.

Yes. The sort of life out there, among the people I saw in the streets, seemed so entirely different from the life that I saw in our sitting room, or the drawing rooms of friends. It was a sort of huge area of living that one was more or less cut off from, and reading, by that time, beginning to read about a man like van Gogh, for example, one was spellbound by the idea of this, I mean, what one would, what I would've called then, this "real life" out there, and, of course, my own life was equally real, my family's life was equally real, but I needed a deep draught of the sort of airs of that sort of outside, and Barnett Freedman represented everything that I found absolutely fascinating.

Did you think, you said that the world of his studio, and where it was placed, where it was, in this working class area of north London, an area, incidentally, associated with a lot of artists, and poor artists, it's the area of Rimbaud and Verlaine, but one of the things that may have struck you, and I'm just asking you whether this is the case, is that being a, a maker of prints, his studio would have that workaday feeling that a print studio has.

Absolutely.

Now, this is something very very different from the studio of the salon portraitist.

Yes. Very good point.

And that seems to me something that stayed with you, a love of actual working materials, and working tools, and the sort of paraphernalia, what Hopkins called the "Tackle and Trim", "Gear, Tackle and Trim of Trade", which is, printing is a sort of trade, isn't it. It has that sort of feeling to it.

Yes. That's a very good point, Mel. Barnett then, was taking an art course at the Working Men's College in Mornington Crescent, and his studio was full of things, bits of design he'd done for bits of architecture, tombstones. He played the violin, and he had an old violin hanging on the wall, and you're right, it, it resonated with the feeling of active, of active work, in terms of craft and money earning at a very low, very basic level. The other feature was, he had discovered Cezanne. Now, I like to think about this, because, you see, there was no question of seeing a Cezanne that Zwemmers had begun to publish some tiny books on Modern French Painting, and suddenly, we had this window opened on to this big fresh, Continental world, that included Cezanne, the Douanier Rousseau, Braque,

van Gogh?

van Gogh, Picasso, those mainly, and those little books became of immense importance, tiny as they were, they were very large in one's life, because they were the first flags that were waved from that distant and wonderful shore. And he had, somehow, acquired a big photograph of that marvellous sloping figure Cezanne painted of his mother. So there were the two things that meant everything to me. This strange excitement of what I could relate to as modern art, and the strange excitement of what I tried to relate to, of that big outside, working class life. Barnett himself was the son of an East End trader, I think his father had a fruit barrow in Brick Lane, or somewhere like that, and there was this wonderfully articulate, cheerful, beamingly ingratiating East Ender, talking about Cezanne. And then he began to show me the drawings he was doing at the Working Men's College. I wish I could see them again, because I think they were so extraordinary. They were so utterly different from any sort of drawing I'd seen coming out of the Slade, or where I was studying already at that time, the Central School of Art. They were very black. They were done anyhow, with spit, and rubbing anyhow. They were, perhaps they prefigured, in an odd sort of way, the sort of drawing that Auerbach was doing 20 or 30 years later, they were absolutely wonderful.

That's an interesting avenue really. One of the things that strikes me is that, of course, there's the Barnett Freedman coming from, being the son of an East End trader, comes from a working class Jewish family.

Yes.

Whereas, of course, you came from an extremely well-off Jewish family.

Yes.

So was that important in any sense? Was there a connection there or not?

I think there was some connection, because the sort of embracing warmth of certain Jewish people is something that I love very much, and I always contrast very much with the sort of English temperament. I mean, later on, several years later, during the War, when I came out to this area, and my neighbours were artists like Ravillious or Bawden, or Kenneth Rowntree, or John Nash, I saw them as being very English, you know, they were so very buttoned up, very reticent. And, of course, I love the flow, the deep flow of the Jewish, humour of Jewish good spirits, of Jewish humanity.

There's undoubtedly a tradition of a particular sort of vitality and draughtsmanship which, you know, is specifically Jewish, and can be seen in someone like Bomberg, can be seen surfacing in someone like Auerbach, it's present in a lot of artists, and there's a sort of vigour, of course, in all Barnett Freedman's work, a vigour of representation, of a boldness of representation. And that, I'm prompted to think about that in relation to what you said about Great Bardfield, which is also something of course, we will talk about later.

Yes.

But you knew, and were associated with Bawden, and Ravillious, and they are altogether different in feeling and style, in a sense, to the people we're talking about. Absolutely different.

Absolutely.

Much more decorous, and perhaps rather more decorative in some ways. Much less vital. Much more ordered, much more controlled.

Absolutely.

And much more English pastoral than, than urban and intensely urban in the way that Auerbach is, and Freedman was, in his own way. I wonder if it's possible to pursue that a bit further? The question of your Jewish background, of whether that affected you in any way. I mean, how far would you say the culture of your household, the culture of your family, a Jewish culture, and how far was it not? In many ways, clearly not.

It wasn't a conscious thing. You see, there was no Jewish religion existing in my family, and I think that my grandparents, on my father's side, I think they were Unitarians, I think they were not practising Jews, so the Jewish bit, it wasn't exactly denied by my parents' lives, but it was certainly in no way, especially recognised, specially recognised.

They were very much assimilated?

Absolutely.

And I don't want to labour that point at all, but when you reminded me of Freedman's background, I was struck by this.

Well, this theme was very much taken up when we could discuss, later, my visits to America, because my hosts and hostesses at the various American campuses that I visited, were 90% Jewish, and I formed a number of friends, friendships, that were very important to me, and most of them were friendships with Jews.

That's interesting isn't it. There's something one might say, I think, without being fanciful, the temperament of a great deal of your work, is in some ways, not an English temperament, just as your own temperament, if I may put it that way, is decidedly un-English. You lack English reserve, which is one of the more delightful aspects of your personality, that you do seem to be very warm, and unreserved, in many important ways.

Could we say a further word about Barnett, because he was so important to me at that time. The floor of his studio, a few paces from the street, seemed to be a continuation of this wonderful slummy London that I yearned for. And I remember Barnett saying something like, "Good old Ososvski (??)" - that was another Jewish artist friend - "Good old Ososky, he loves coming in here, because he feels he can spit on the floor." And I thought, "How civilised!" Anyway, he had a really fascinating studio, and he was a small, squat man, with a very large head, very white pock-marked skin, with hair like loose tobacco, and his whole presence was really very big, and to me, immensely attractive. And there were a whole group of friends, most of them are forgotten, but one of them certainly is remembered, Albert Houthuesen, he was a Dutchman, and Charles Mahoney was another member of this rather close-knit coterie of friends. He is still a little bit remembered. I was delighted to see a good

painting of his in the re-hung Tate last month. And Barnett was very much the leader. He was very dominant in this little group. I was quite a bit younger than any of them, so Barnett's dominance was something I was quite happy with.

What about Rutherston? Was he anything to do with this? I seem to feel that he had connections with Barnett Freedman, or am I completely wrong?

Not that I know of.

No, no. Because Rutherston, what was Rutherston's relationship to you?

Well, it's strange about brothers, but younger brothers remain brothers, and older brothers remain older brothers, however long the brothers live. And my Uncle Albert was a delightful man, he was one of my favourite relations. He always remained very much my father's younger brother.

So you had very little to do with him?

Well, Albert, that's the younger brother of my father, Albert Rutherston, they Anglicised their names during the First World War, he was so charming, and whenever I saw him, we became immediately close. He was such an appreciative, receptive, really delightful personality. My father could be forbidding, but Albert was always open and charming.

When you say your father, we're moving on a bit now, and when you say your father was forbidding, of course, I have memories of Ceri and Frances Richards, telling me about your father's presence at the Royal College, where he was a very formidable figure, who, whose comments, they were hardly tutorials, but his comments were famous for their acerbity and

tartness! And in fact, it was, I think something he said, that led to Paul Nash leaving the Royal College as a teacher. Nash, I think, had said something to a student, and it was your father, I think, who came and, as it were, countermanded this, with a, with a remark which so incensed Nash, that Nash left.

Isn't that interesting! I never heard it.

You didn't know that story?

No.

I must check it out for you. But I think that's actually so, and I think it happened while Ceri and Frances were there. But Nash left, and said that if this is what was going to happen when he was attempting to teach, he would go elsewhere. But, yes, by this time, your father had become the Principal, hadn't he, of the,

That's right.

Of the Royal College.

Yes. Yes.

We're talking now about the early 20s. Did you ever visit him at the Royal College?

Oh yes. Because in this big house on Campden Hill, I lived in, until I was, what? 20 or something like that. And he was already Head of the College, and Barnett Freedman, for example, he went on to become a student at College, and Houthuesen also became a student at

the College, and I used to go and see them at the College. There were two or three groups at College that were, that had a sort of distinct outline, and one was this group headed by Barnett Freedman and his friends, to which I adhered. One was rather led by Henry Moore, and included people like Hepworth, and Raymond Coxon, and they, I gather, didn't always like the sort of life drawing that went on at College, so they cleared off to Leon Underwood's studio in Hammersmith, to do life drawing at night. And the third, I think, was centred on the Australians - Boswell, and one of his great friends was non-Australian, James Fitton. But they were again, another, another sort of coterie at the College.

These became the three James' of the 30s, didn't they?

You're very well informed!

End of F814 Side B

F815 Side A

July 23rd, 1990

I'd like to turn now, Michael, to your formal education, such as it may have been, and to your art education, your training as an artist. Could you tell us something about that? Did you ever go to school?

I went for a very short time to Orme Square Preparatory School in Bayswater. I didn't like it much, and I'm sure I was a very bad pupil indeed, but I think I only stayed there a couple of years. And then my first experience of some kind of art and craft training was at the School of Art Woodcarving, in Chepstow Place, South Kensington. I suppose I stayed there about a year. And then I went on to Chelsea School of Art, or Chelsea Polytechnic, I think it was then called. And the chief feature of that was my brief friendship with Edward Burra. We used to work together, that's really what I remember. We both liked doing water colours, and we both liked doing water colours from our own, from our own heads, from our own imagination. And, for a time, he used to come home with me, home being the house in Airlie Gardens, which I mentioned earlier. And we would sit side by side at a big table, working away at these water colours. And I remember Edward's better than mine. He would work over the surface of the paper, really like an ant, inch by inch, and he'd create a fantastic landscape with little hillocks, and funny trees like tufts on tops of the hillocks, and a lot of the figures were also tufted, kind of funny fairies with tufted head-dresses. And he worked so minutely. He would draw out an area, quite carefully, with a hardish line, and then he'd fill it in with his water colour, with small brushes, and he always used white with his water colour, so the technique he later developed that was so remarkable, of a sort deep gouache technique, was already appearing, because he'd use a wonderful violet water colour, and then thin it out with water and white paint, so that he got these extraordinary intricate gradings in these little fields of colour. And that's a nice memory. Edward was already showing terrible ravages

from his early rheumatic fever, and his fingers were already getting crooked, and the joints were swelling. And I noticed whenever he did a tree, he had sort of knotted branches, with swollen joints, just like his own fingers.

Can you remember what year that was?

1924/25.

'24-'25, this was at Chelsea?

Yes.

And it was at Chelsea that you met him?

Yes.

Who taught at Chelsea in those years? Can you remember?

Well, I think there were some pretty good teachers, but I don't remember getting much teaching. I really don't. Things were very, very strange and different in art colleges then. And it was the same at the Central School later. Bernard Meninsky was the teacher that I remember most clearly. He was a sad man. He did wonderfully interesting demonstrations. He'd take your seat, as teachers used to do then, while you stood and watched. And he would do a brilliant drawing of the updrawn knees of a model that was lying down on the model throne, with immense quickness. And they were very interesting. They showed such grasp of what was there in front of him. And I was greatly impressed. But the other person I

remember particularly, at the Central School, I told you about in connection with his friendship with van Gogh, A.S. Hartrick.

Hartrick, yes. Hartrick, of course, is, is best remembered, if he's remembered at all, as a draughtsman, and as a person who wrote a book on drawing.

Did he?

Yes.

Oh, I didn't know that.

Oh, I have it at home, Hartrick's book on drawing.

I bet it's an interesting book.

I must look it out and show it to you. Tell us something about Hartrick, and do tell us the story about van Gogh.

Yes. So many of the teachers didn't seem to have much concern for the students. One of my own fairly close friends at the Central, was Morris Kestleman, and Morris, I think, got quite close to Meninsky, he speaks of him in, in quite glowing terms, as a teacher and a friend. But I don't remember Meninsky as a friend. He used to give these demonstrations, but we never got at all close, and Meninsky himself, was such a melancholy man, I think, I think, I would guess, he often thought about suicide. There was a broken down armchair in the corner of the life room, it had once been heavily upholstered, and now the upholstery was pouring out of the arms of the chair, and Meninsky would slump in that chair, generally

reading the gloomiest of Dostoievski's writings. And he seemed sunk in a black pool of bewitched sadness, and he'd occasionally get up, and as I say, do one of these rather wonderful little demonstrations in the corner of somebody's life drawing.

How old was he at this time?

Well, of course, everybody seemed old when you were 16.

Yes, but I suppose he,

I suppose thirties, forties, something like that.

Well, that's something we can check. Now, Hartrick.

Well, he was a delightful man. He seemed a very much a human being to me, and he liked talking about his past, and he loved talking about van Gogh. Apparently they were, for a time, quite friendly, and Hartrick, being a very sympathetic man, very human, he was with Hartrick in the early summer one year ...

With van Gogh?

I beg your pardon. Hartrick was in with van Gogh, in the early summer of one year when he was studying in Paris, and I think Hartrick had a bit of a private income. Anyway, he'd rented a room, and he didn't need it for the summer. He'd had it whitewashed and cleaned, and meeting van Gogh one evening, it occurred to him it would be useful to van Gogh, as it would be empty for August. So he said, "Would you like it?" And van Gogh was delighted. As I say, he'd had the walls whitewashed. The room was in one of those little streets on the

Left Bank, leading down to the river, and the window overlooking the street, was just the job for van Gogh, because he loved making notes of anything that excited him, you know, a woman carrying a bundle of faggots, or an old horse trotting down the street with sacks of coal, or whatever it was. But Hartrick said, "What was so interesting, was really this train of events." It started, really, I suppose, with his poverty. He really did have no money, and he wanted to use big, big things to draw with, so he'd get hold of candle ends, and he'd melt them down in a metal spoon, and he liked to use either red, scarlet, or blue powder, and that gave him a big chunk of wax crayon that he carried in his pocket. And Hartrick, I gather, used to sit with him quite often, in the evenings, over a drink or something, and if van Gogh saw something that excited him, the first thing that happened was, he'd hiss. And I was very interested to see this came out in the portrait, the other night, that excellent van Gogh film, that that talented lady had done. He'd begin to hiss, and then he'd feel in his pocket for one of these balls of chalk, and he would automatically start drawing, as if some automatic pilot had simply taken over the machinery of his life. So he would draw anything to hand, an evening paper left lying on the table, or a doily, anything, a scrap of paper, so he'd hiss away, and would be absolutely absorbed in trying to record something that excited him. Well, when he got this room, with these beautiful whitewashed walls, and saw these exciting things going on down there below, in the street, he, I'm sure without thinking, I'm sure it was not deliberate, that he would see an old horse, an old lady, a group of children, or whatever, and he'd immediately feel for his chinks, and begin to draw, so he started to fill up the spaces round the window, and as he filled them up, he begun to draw on the wider areas, away from the window. And when Hartrick got back in September, whenever it was, he came into the room, he opened the door, and there was this animated frieze, from window to wall, from walls to window, of things he'd seen at the street.

How extraordinary!

So this was Hartrick's visit to bid van Gogh goodbye, because he wanted the room back.

And the next morning, van Gogh turned up with half a dozen canvases, and he put them along the wall, beside each other and said, "You have been so kind to me, I want you to take one of my paintings. Well, among the things he had popped up was "The Sunflowers". That had commanded this weird and awful price at Sotheby's wherever it was, I don't know. Anyway, Hartrick said to me, "You know, I couldn't stand his work. It would have been agony to me, to have to walk away, or hang up one of them, or to live with it." I said, "Look, Vincent, I can't accept one of your paintings. You need to sell them. Take them to your brother, Theo, and see what he can do with them."

And there, at that moment ...

So van Gogh went away with them. I'm sure he was very disappointed that,

That Hartrick wouldn't accept one. Yes. And no doubt, I dare say, sensed why? That's an extraordinary story, but the image of the room of this, this frieze, of this three-dimensional ...

And Hartrick saying, you know, "You mustn't give them away, you must give them to your brother.

So that was Hartrick, who taught you, at Central.

Yes, not much. It was more he befriended me, and I appreciated that very much.

You went to Central after Chelsea.

Yes.

So we are now in the mid-twenties aren't we, and you are 18?

Yes, 18.

About 1926, we're talking.

Yes.

At this time, Michael, I think you suffered the onset of that debilitating disease, which afflicted you for the next,

Several years.

Sixteen years, perhaps.

Yes.

This is myxoedema.

Myxoedema, yes.

Could you tell us something about that period? Because, obviously, there's a great deal about that period you don't remember, but, I think it had such an extraordinary consequence really, upon you, as an artist, that I think it's worth recording something about it.

It was awful. I was filled with fear. I was filled with so much fear that if I went near a precipice, or near an open window that was several floors up, or near a railway train, always, I wanted to fling myself out of the window in front of the train, but it was fear. It was fear of fear. It wasn't fear of dying, it was just the most excruciating horror, a dozen times a day, almost wherever I was, it simply was a black hole in my life. It was hell. And I don't think it showed. I mean, I think I became very quiet and withdrawn, as people do when they suffer deep neuroses, but apparently I was not in pain, apparently I was not suffering, and that was one of the worst things because it was so awful, yet the context of my life had a ghastly sort of normality. One of the worst of the side-effects was, I began to get double vision, so when I drew, my left and right eye, which are normally uncoordinated, that is to say, the right eye is the one I use, it's the master eye, but under these conditions, I would get a faint shadow of my left eye, there was confusion in the nervous messages between the eyes and the brain. And you can imagine what agony that was, whenever I tried to draw, I'd get this second shadow of what I was looking at. I couldn't shake it off.

This condition lasted for a long time. Where did you live, and how did you live during those years?

Well, it started when I was still living at home. And then I moved to a studio down the hill, the bottom of Holland Park Avenue and Addison Avenue. I had a studio at the back of a house in Addison Avenue. I mean, at times I was pretty okay, and I shared the studio with a young artist who has since become a rather good stained glass artist, called Edward Paine. And I was always rather social, so often there were people, people there, who used to box, and fool about in the studio, but that was the stage after leaving home.

And what were you doing? How were you living in terms of making a living?

Well, my father gave me a tiny allowance, and I was earning bits of money here and there, selling a water colour, managing, but really living like a, somebody without any money, you know. I mean, to spend a shilling on lunch was quite an event in those days.

Did your family still have the house in the Stroud Valley?

Yes they did, yes.

Did you return there at all?

Occasionally, yes.

Was that, did that offer you any sort of release from this condition?

No. No. But I did see a psychiatrist, and he explained to me that I wasn't going mad, and from 48 hours after that, I was in a kind of ecstasy of happiness, "I'm not going mad. I'm not going mad."

But the basis of this disease is a chemical imbalance, or disorder?

Yes, I think it was something to do with an imbalance between the pituitary and the thyroid gland.

And this really took you, this lasted for 16 years?

Yes. Of course, it wasn't so intense all the time, but there were the most terrible, terrible phases, and it gave me these awful usual fears, of the neurotic fears of travelling, fears of heights, fears of every sort of thing.

And also, I think you've told me before, you were also afflicted by an acute melancholia a great deal of the time.

Yes, but it was chiefly this raging fear. I mean, you cannot imagine how it persisted. If I was left, when I was in bad shape, if I was left in a room, with a carving knife, I would be completely obsessed by it, either to cut my own throat, or the throat of anybody else in the room. It was so terrible.

How did your family react to this?

I don't think they really knew. I really don't think they knew.

How did you come out of it? What happened that brought about ...

Well, that excellent analyst, called Reynel, who told me that I wasn't going mad, was the first step. And the next step was some years later, I had the luck to be treated by a Dr. Rau - R A U. Dr. Rau had been a Head of the Berlin Institute of Glandular Research, or something of the sort. Anyway, he spotted, after many tests, that I had some glandular imbalance, of a very unusual kind. And he experimented with all sorts of things over a period, and he came to the conclusion that what I needed was a regular dose of thyroid, so I took regular doses of thyroid, and over a period, I inched back to human life. Inch by inch, over months.

Now, this, of course, took you through your early manhood, through to your, roundabout your thirtieth year.

It really did, yes.

So there's a sense in which your twenties were almost lost years?

Completely. Completely.

And a period in which you produced very little work that survived, or has any great significance.

Very little, yes. Very little work.

When you began to emerge from this sort of tunnel of sickness and fear, you began to make drawings again,

Yes.

And you had an exhibition at the Matteson Gallery in 1938. What did you show there? Can you remember?

Yes, to pick up the story, as I got a bit better, I was married to my first wife, Duffy Fitzgerald, and we, I remember very well, we went, one summer, we went back to Gloucestershire, and I started drawing the landscape, and my eyes were good enough to draw the landscape, and it was wonderful. And I worked along that Chelford Valley, that I mentioned in my earlier life, in my childhood, because there were some ruined factories along

the Chelford Valley. When water was running, they had built factories, there was an old piano factory there, and other factories, and these were in ruins, and I did a series of drawings along the valley. And then my parents had a cottage, they had sold Iles, Iles Farm, the original house, and they'd built on to a cottage, at the end of the village, it was next to the little cottage that Max Beerbohm used to live in when he stayed with us years before, and I would go back there, I mean, for one thing, it was a money thing, you know, it was so useful to be able to stay in this nice little house, in this cottage, and my brother, John, would come, and my sisters were there, and John brought his present wife, Elizabeth, and her sisters, and I remember, we had a wonderful summer with these handsome, beautiful American girls, of course, I was falling in love with all of them! But I began to do some interesting work then, drawings, not paintings, pen drawings. I think they were quite inventive.

We'll go on to that, but let's just have a parenthesis here about John, because this is the first time, almost, that he's entered the story. And, of course, he was, at this time, Keeper of Art at Leeds, wasn't he?

No. He was Professor of Art at Kentucky University, in the United States.

This was after he had been Keeper at Leeds?

No, before.

Before. That was his first job.

So we're talking about 1936, '37? I'm just wondering, because I noted somewhere that John was Director at the Tate very very early,

Yes.

And stayed for a very long time, and I thought that he went to the Tate as Director, from Leeds, in 1938.

Or was it Sheffield?

It was certainly at Leeds that, he was very important at Leeds, because he helped to build up the very good Modern English, or Modern British collection there.

Yes.

He succeeded, I think, Rutter, Frank Rutter.

You know much more than I do, Mel!

Anyway, John was, at this time, Professor at the University of Kentucky?

Yes, at this earliest time.

And so when he came over, the summer you remember is the summer ...

A particular summer, he'd become engaged to Elizabeth. And her sisters were given an opportunity to come to England, to come to the Cotswolds to stay, you know, with a distinguished English family, and I remember that as being a wonderful summer.

And you were, yourself, newly married?

No, no. No, no, this was years before.

This is before you were married?

Oh yes.

This is when you were doing what you remember as interesting drawings? And we're now leading up from this, to, if you remember, the Mattieson Gallery exhibition.

Yes.

Which was in '38?

Yes. And there were quite a large group of landscape drawings. I've seen some of them since, and they are very lively, and some of them, I think, very musical. But the paintings were very rudimentary. I did have some paintings there, but I'm glad to have forgotten all about them.

And these were the ones you showed, these were the works you showed at the Mattieson in '38?

Yes.

They were. You mentioned that you got married at some point, when was that? What year was that?

Well, there again, I'm so hopeless at dates, but I married at the age of 27.

Well, that would make it '35, 1935.

Yes. So subtract 8 from '35, and you get 28 or something like that. That's when I married.

You married at 28.

Yes.

Well, if you married when you were 28, it would have been in 1935.

Yes.

That's right, isn't it.

Yes, that fits.

I think we'll have to, at some point, we won't do it on tape, but I think at some point, we will try and sort out some of these dates, just for the historical record, I think they're quite interesting. And you're famously vague when it comes to dates, Michael!

Well, I'm innumerate, as you know!

Well, you're vague about things that don't really matter most of the time. You're extremely precise, and your memories are very vivid about the things that do matter. So, the Mattieson Gallery, at '38, can I ask you, since we're now in that period, what, what sort of attitudes you

had, politically, at that time. I ask, because everybody had a position in the thirties, and you've already mentioned that part of your reaction to your, to your friendship with Freedman, and part of your reaction to your upbringing, was a particular feeling of commitment to the idea of working, and to the life of the artisan, and the working man. How far did that survive into the thirties? And did you have, or do you have memories of any particular feelings or affiliations?

End of F815 Side A

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We can now move on to the question again, of political affiliations or feelings, during the period of the thirties.

The years before, when I thought so much about myself, when I seemed to be completely encapsulated in my own fears and feelings, had made me horribly selfish. The result was that I was very little aware of what was happening out there in the big world. Of course, I had friends who told me war was coming and all the rest of it. Of course, I had friends who spoke against Chamberlain and all the rest of it. But really, I'm appalled, looking back today, of how little I was aware of the nature of the politics of the time.

We're now going on, then, you had, how successful was the show at the Mattieson? Did you sell?

The landscapes sold out, and I think I sold a couple of the paintings.

So that would have been quite important to you?

Yes. It was a help.

And this was the first exhibition, one-man exhibition, was it?

One of the first. The old Leicester Galleries were always a help. They used to take my drawings and water colours, and sell them fairly regularly.

Can we move on, then, to a bit later. That is, around about 1940, you were engaged on the project of recording Britain, weren't you, by the Pilgrim Trust?

Yes.

Can you say a little bit about how that came about? I know this has been documented elsewhere, but not in relation to your own contribution.

I think I got a letter from the Secretary of the Pilgrim Trust, an excellent man called Arnold Palmer, asking me to go and visit him. He had an office in the National Gallery. And he told me about the scheme, that it would give me a chance of getting away to a county, possibly a county of my choice, and drawing buildings that I found interesting, and that might, at some time, be damaged or demolished by the occurrences of the War.

And where did you go?

Well, I went to several counties - Northampton, Yorkshire, back in Essex, Gloucestershire.

And you, therefore, did rather a lot of drawings?

Yes, I did. And, of course, the scheme itself was a bit of a life raft. As you've gathered, I wasn't in very great shape physically. I was graded C3, and I was never called up. And I didn't really do very much during the War. I'm ashamed now, to think how little I did. When I was back in Great Bardfield, where I'd bought a little house, I would be part of the Home Guard, and when I was on the Pilgrim Trust, I was working for the Pilgrim Trust, so it was really a very lean sort of war service of any sort.

Those drawings are very different from the drawings you were making for yourself during that period. They are documentary, they are extremely able, I think, drawings of the kind.

They are, they do the job they set out to do, admirably. But the other work you were doing, is altogether more personal.

Yes.

And begins, it's there one can begin to see the themes, and preoccupations of your mature work as an artist.

Just little sprouts, little sprouts.

You had moved, in 1940, to Great Bardfield. There was something of an artists community there already, wasn't there?

Yes.

Kenneth Rowntree was living there, was he?

He was living nearby.

Nearby. Bawden had already moved to Great Bardfield.

Yes. He already had quite a big house in the High Street.

And Eric Ravillious was living there?

He lived nearby at Shelford.

And anybody else that you can think of?

John Nash was over near Colchester. And John Aldridge also lived in the village, and, because of our presence there, others came and joined us. Walter Hoyle came to a house nearby, Blue Bridge House, and later George Chapman, who became a great friend of mine, took a house outside the village, and then a house in the village. So after a few years, there was quite a community, and we had these funny house shows, that were very, very successful in their funny sort of way.

Did you go to Great Bardfield deliberately to be part of that community, to be close to people like Bawden and Ravillious?

Yes, that was certainly part of it. It was mainly through Kenneth Rowntree. We'd become friends. He was a Conscientious Objector, being a Quaker, and he'd moved to this nice place, outside the village, and I liked the sound of it. I didn't want to stick in London. So I came to Great Bardfield, and there was a small house in the street, which I was able to buy for £900, so there I was.

There you were. And you've mentioned that Rowntree was a Conscientious Objector. Your own lack of participation in the War, as a, in any way, as a combatant, or being called up, was simply the outcome of your illness? It wasn't a matter of principle, or was it?

No, I'm afraid it wasn't, no.

Were others in that particular community there, there because, as it were, they were objecting to the War, Conscientious Objectors?

Well, there was John Aldridge, he was called up a few years after I arrived in the village. Bawden, with whom I formed a sort of friendship, largely through letters, because he was away as an Official War Artist. Ravillious was also attached to the Air Force as a War Artist, so there was a coming and going. But there always seemed to be some sort of community. I don't know about the situation of George Chapman, or Walter Hoyle, in relation to the Army, to National Service, I don't know.

Obviously, during the actual period of the War, when Bawden was away quite a lot, wasn't he, he went to North Africa, and the Middle East. Ravillious, as we know, of course went, and was killed in the War. Did you know Ravillious well?

Well, it's a funny thing to say, but I know that I could've known him well, because the few times we met, before he went to Iceland and was killed, I felt a great sympathy with him, and I hope he felt some sympathy with me. I liked him a lot. He had a beautiful gentleness. There was something very poetic about his temperament, something one sees in his water colours, and often, if you were sitting with him in a room, sitting with people in a room, he would go and stand in front of the window, look out at the landscape, so, although he was so friendly, there was always a strange, poetic detachment, I think, in his friendships, and when he heard about Iceland, we were together, and he told me how excited he was, because he'd had both dreams and fantasies, of these hot volcanoes in Iceland. And as you know, as a landscape artist, he loved things like conical features, like formal swellings of the earth, those Wicklow Mountains, no, what is that place near Cambridge, he loved to draw. Anyway, Iceland excited him. So off he went. And he was killed within two days. And Tirzau his wife, told me, that he arrived at the station, in Iceland, and there was somebody there he started talking to, one of the pilots, and they got along. I think they had some drinks together. And that was the first contact he made in Iceland. And I think it was the next night, this particular pilot came into their common room, where the bar was, and turned to

Ravillious and said, "A fellow's down in the drink. Would you like to come along and help me find him?" And the aeroplane never came back.

So ... I suppose, then, you saw quite a lot of Ken Rowntree during those War years, and he was in the village.

Yes I did. He had a very nice cottage. His wife, Diana, was an architect, and they made it quite exceptionally attractive, with the colours they used, and the things they had. And Kenneth, I saw somebody much more sophisticated than I was. That was my attitude, anyway. He seemed much more a man of the world. But I liked him, and I liked his work. He was a man of real talent, with such a natural sense of colour value, and whatever he painted, he made wonderfully accessible to one's feelings about colour, about formal relationships. And one job, we didn't exactly do together, but we were both asked to do a school print, and I remember we were rather interested in what each was doing. He did a school print of a tractor. I did a school print of tree-felling. But that was a time when we saw a certain amount of each other.

Yes. That, of course, was after the War?

That was after the War.

When Brenda Rawnsley organised School Prints, and I think both of you contributed to her first set of a dozen, in 1946. Yes, you did one called "Timber Felling in Essex."

That's it.

It's an interesting image, because, of course, it has the section across the tree, and the tools, and the working people. And the idea of the saw, and the tree, which is an idea which recurs again and again later on in your work ...

Yes, absolutely, absolutely.

Just as it also picks up on the, the fact that a tree cut in a section is a circle, and therefore has other sorts of implications. Yes, I know that print very well.

And the tree felling, incidentally, took place, in that park that Lady somebody or other owned, and where H.G. Wells used to live.

Really!

Yes. There was a whole coterie, Kingsley Martin, a coterie of very active Socialists.

There was the other Essex village, of course, wasn't there, which has gone out of my mind for a moment, where there was the famous "Red Vicar", who had a red flag instead of the...

Yes.

From the church tower.

That's right.

There were several interesting sorts of village experiments going on in Essex at that time.

Yes, that's right, yes. And Harold Lasky lived at Little Bardfield, I used to see something of him.

Oh really.

Yes.

Since you've brought up School Prints, and I was going to ask you about that, can you remember much more about, about that particular episode? Can you remember Brenda Rawnsley, for example?

Yes. Yes.

She was a very remarkable and vivacious lady, wasn't she, at that time?

Yes. A feature of that job that made a great impression on me, was the fact that working at, I think it was the Baynard Press, our presence was strongly objected to by the resident workforce, because we weren't members of a Union, that all the men who serviced the plates and carried out the lithography, were members of a Union, and they thought it was quite wrong that these outsiders came in, and did a job that the Unionised man normally did.

Really? How did you get round that?

Well, we did it, and I think there was a lot of grumbling, and a certain amount of ill-feeling, but it never came to a head.

The master printer there was a man called Griffiths. Did you ever encounter Griffiths?

Yes, yes, I remember that name.

Because, of course, he's something of a figure.

I'm amazed how well-informed you are!

On the history of British lithography!

Anything, that you don't know much more about than I do! He wrote a book, didn't he.

Yes. He did. I know he actually worked on the plate for several of the School Prints, and that

Yes, we had to be helped along, none of us knew much about it. And I think that was the Baynard Press, wasn't it?

That's right, down in the City. Now, I wondered about Griffiths, because he is such a sort of figure, he actually crossed the world between the working lithographers, and the artist lithographer, at that time.

A.W. Griffiths, was it?

I can't remember, I think his name was Thomas or John Griffiths, but I can't remember. I'll look it up. Now, where were we about that? The reason I think that's interesting, is that that would have been your very first lithograph.

Yes it was.

Does it mean it was also your very first graphic work? Your very first print?

Yes, print, edition print, the very first, yes.

You didn't do any etching before that?

No.

And certainly no lino cuts, because we know you turned to lino cuts much later. So one of the things that Brenda Rawnsley did, one of the many remarkable things that she did, was to, to get you started as a maker of prints. You know that she still, I spoke to her on the phone the other day.

Did you? Did you?

Yes. I wrote a little article on the School Prints, in which I mentioned "Timber Felling in Essex", oh, about ten years. Anyway, that was that.

It was a man called Bonham-Carter, who used to come and see me about the scheme.

Yes, he was an assessor.

He was very much on to the educational side.

That's right. Because she set up a committee with Tomlinson from the, from the LCC, and Herbert Read. And she then went on, of course, to make a series with Picasso, Leger, Dufy, Henry Moore, Braque and Matisse, which bombed, she couldn't sell them! Anyway, that's as it may be.

Well, they were probably too expensive at £4!

Well, the first series, she sold three, one each term, one each term, for £1, so they were 6/8d each! Anyway, in 1947, you published Looking at Paintings, for Routledge.

Yes.

Can you tell us how you came to get that? At certain points, you seem always to have been given something to do, or had a commission of some kind that was interesting or useful.

Yes, that's right. Whether I wrote to Herbert Read or met him. But it was Herbert Read who encouraged me to do that little book, and it was Herbert Read I used to meet at Routledge, Kegan Paul, and who rather oversaw the operation, you know, I'd bring him the illustrations, and show him bits of text. And he was a man I admired greatly. I had a wholehearted respect for Herbert Read. He was so quiet, so intelligent, and seemed to have such insight.

I think that might be interesting to pursue for a moment, because, of course, people tend, many people tend to have rather ambivalent feelings ...

Yes, they do.

About Read. Partly because he seemed to like everything that was modern, and to be somewhat promiscuous in his affiliations, you know, a chap into surrealists, and also at the same time, of the abstractionists during the thirties, and, you know, a man of a number of contradictions, the anarchist who accepted a Knighthood, and who became something of the grand panjandrum really, of the English art world, at the same time as he was writing Left-wing Socialist and anarchist tracts, and so on. So there was, and he was also a man who was very very busy. He had his finger into many things, for example, School Prints, he was one of the advisers. Did you meet him very often?

Well, I met him, I think, quite a number of times, through that little book. And the other place one met him, was at the old Institute of Contemporary Arts, in Dover Street. I think it was 40 Dover Street.

Yes. Which he started with Roland Penrose, in about 1947, '48?

That was very much a feature of London art life. I can remember really excellent evenings, you know, he'd invite Ben Shahn to talk, and Ben Shahn would tell some wonderful story about Jackson Pollock throwing paint cans around, because he'd got such a temper. One convocation day at the faculty where he was working, that he didn't want to walk in the crocodile, so he punctured a lot of cans of paint and just threw them around, and then he liked the results of these punctured cans of paint that he'd thrown around. He thought there was something there. So it was full of interest, and you know, he was on to somebody like Eduardo Paolozzi, and all sorts of things.

Now, going back from that to Great Bardfield, one of the things about the artists who settled and lived and worked in Great Bardfield, was that they were committed, generally speaking, to what you might call a fairly low-key English representational art.

Absolutely.

Mostly landscape, townscape, an art that may be said to celebrate the English countryside, and the English way of life.

Absolutely.

And there's a marvellous book of lithographs by Bawden, the little King Penguin, you may remember, called Life in an English Village.

No.

Well, it was brought out by King Penguin, and was based on Great Bardfield. Have you not seen that?

No.

With the shop, and the smithy, and the church, and so on, are all featured in very charming lithographed illustrations.

He was brilliant.

Yes. And people like Rowntree, and Ravillious contributed to those books that came out during the War, about aspects of British life.

And there were the County Books, weren't there?

The County Books, and things like that.

Shell County Guides.

In other words, we're talking about a group of artists, who have a loose association, who have come to live, quite deliberately, in an English village, and who are not concerning themselves with the great issues of modernism, surrealism, abstraction, and so on, are things that don't seem to concern them at all.

Well, I suppose I was an exception. Because I'd begun to be very deeply concerned. Graham Sutherland showed these Welsh landscapes, and I found them immensely exciting. He seemed to have some way of uniting what was outside, out there, and what was inside, inside his own head, with the shapes he used. And I found that wonderful. And through Sutherland, I think one looked more closely at what was then available in Continental painting, Picasso particularly, but some of those drawings that the Redfern Gallery has had, many of them, I suppose, have been sold, were very much concerned with, I think, aspects of what we still call "modernism".

That's really why I brought the subject up, because you were, as I said, associating with this particular group of artists, and their work was very much, even the more sort of violent representations of the natural world, that we associate with the term "neo-romantic", were things that didn't particularly interest them, Rowntrees are very beautiful paintings and drawings, but they're very much, there's nothing of the pathetic fallacy in them, there's no sort of symbolism or, no angst, and a Bawden, of course, the same can be said of Bawden, that Bawden was possessed of an enormous decorative gift, and a linear gift, and an ability to see the pattern in things. But there again, there's precious little anxiety in the work.

Yes. I think the best things Bawden ever did with those war drawings of North Africa, weren't they? I think some of them are remarkable.

Yes, they were the best things. Incidentally, it occurs to me that you did have some association with the War Artists Committee yourself. What was your involvement?

Only that I did some drawings for the Ministry of Transport.

Of what?

Railway sidings. Railways, and more railway sidings!

At home?

No, no. No, no, I travelled around to big shunting yards.

But at home in England?

Yes, in England, yes, yes.

I was reminded of that when you spoke of Sutherland and of his Welsh drawings, because, of course, the other thing, you probably would have seen, during that period of the, the Wartime period, were Sutherland's drawings of ruined streets,

Oh absolutely, absolutely.

Moore's underground.

They were a big feature for me.

And, of course, John Piper also did some of his very best work of shattered streets, and also those very powerful drawings he did during that period of Welsh mountains and so on.

Wonderful. Wonderful.

I think they're certainly among the best things that Piper ever did.

Yes. I was very much centred on that group of artists, mainly through Sutherland's Welsh landscapes, and some of those extraordinary war artist works he did, in the factories, and London, the fires of London, with those burning buildings, burning coils of paper and all the rest of it. They, they were very central to me, in regard to any art that was being shown in London.

Did you see any of the issues of Poetry London, at that time, do you remember?

Tambimuttu's magazine.

Oh yes, of course. Oh yes. One saw it all.

Because there, of course, in certain issues of Poetry London, Tambimuttu published lithographs by Sutherland.

Absolutely.

Accompanying poems by David Gascoyne. No, that's not right. His poem actually, accompanies a poem I think, by Quarles. But Ceri Richards also did drawings and his very first lithographs were done,

Were they?

At the request of Tambimuttu for that particular issue of Poetry London.

Good for him.

And he did "The force that through the green fuse drives the flower", with a sort of skull.

A splendid, splendid image.

A wild imagery. Gerald Wilde did some rather sort of, passionately sort of expressionist sort of lithographs as well. They would also have been things that you'd have picked up on.

You would have seen those things.

They would have, I was very interested in all of that. Yes.

Did you have any connection at that time, with Minton ...

Yes.

Or with the two Roberts?

I knew Minton, not well, but we had various contacts, and always got on like anything. He was such a lively, attractive fellow, and through a set-up called the Gray Walls Press, I was putting together a book of those artists whose work I liked, and that brought me into contact with Minton. And through Minton ...

End of F815 Side B

F816 Side A

July 24th, 1990

We were talking, yesterday, about your relations with artists in the War period, in the 40s, and just after, and you had begun to speak about John Minton, and others of that particular set. You were speaking of an association you had with Minton, through the Gray Walls Press.

That's right. And at that time, Minton appeared to be very close to Keith Vaughan, and Minton lent me the hand-written manuscript of the first parts of Keith Vaughan's journals. And I read them, and was greatly impressed. I didn't get on too well with Vaughan himself, but I found the drawings he was doing at that time, very remarkable, and the journal impressed me greatly. Yes, I did work, putting together some writings and work of artists I found interesting, for the Gray Walls Press, but the project collapsed, unluckily, because there was some remarkable stuff, including a very fine statement Vaughan made about his own paintings, but that was used in last month's Modern Painters, [Vol. 3, No. 2, 1990] so that has been preserved. So that has been preserved. There were also some wonderful descriptions of Welsh landscape, mountain landscapes, that Piper had written at the time he did his fine drawings of the Welsh mountains. And that, I still have, and has not yet been published. In my own work, there's a point here that I must make. I've spoken of the bad times I had been through in the years before the period that I'm talking of, and I found a drawing of mine, of a figure climbing out of a grave, escaping from a tomb, and I wouldn't have realised it at the time, but it was a metaphor of escape, slow escape from a fairly black period that I'd had for, really, for quite a long time, several years. Then ...

Do you know where that drawing is?

No. No.

It's lost?

I don't know.

It's not one that I think I've ever seen. Incidentally, your drawing of the expulsion from Eden might be taken as, how can we put it? As symbolic, perhaps, of the end of your childhood period of pleasure ...

Yes, yes, yes.

And intense joy, because it was made just before ...

At that time.

You actually went into the illness. That's by the by, but it's worth remarking.

So, in a way, climbing out of the grave meant finding a new world, and there was a particular key, which, looking back, I find rather interesting. The farmyards, which surrounded the village, were very black and white, that is to say, that the wooden parts of the barns and sheds were generally tarred black, and other parts were painted white. And this wonderful geometry of black and white, generally in rectangles or squares, seemed to suggest to me, a very natural development, which joined one to the strange strong feelings about an abstract view of landscape. Certainly, it was very important to me, to discover those black/white, somewhat geometric relationships in the farmyards, surrounding the village. And I did a whole series of drawings and water colours, and that geometry, that found geometry, of the barns and sheds, and chicken coops, was a very, a very important element for me.

May I ask you about something else about that particular series of drawings done in the 40s? A lot of them involve the depiction of farm implements and tractors, ploughs, farmyard machinery, and I remarked, in a piece I wrote about your work, that there is, here, prefigured, another of the later themes of a great deal of your work, which is this sort of violent encounter of the mechanical with the organic.

Absolutely. Absolutely. Again, I think it was partly to do with the fact that my first intimacy, rather deep intimacy with the country in the Cotswolds, there was very little machinery then, apart from old-fashioned ploughs, but there was none of the hint of the power of technology that was entering the landscape during the War period and after, and I did feel that very intensely, that the, these enormous ploughs that had a whole series of shears, cutting the earth, seemed to represent, not exactly a threat, but a way of farming that was utterly different from the farming that I remember as a child. So this opposition between the metal elements, the powerful metal elements of tractors, ploughs and, and motor drawn rigs, and the whole panoply of sort of modern industrial farming, did seem to me, a very dramatic opposition between machinery and nature. And you're absolutely right, Mel, I did do a whole series of drawings, which take that opposition as a central theme.

The other thing that occurs in those drawings, is the image of the farmyard cockerel, and it has a particular force for you, I know, that image, and it's an image to which you've returned again and again, it's almost the quintessential Rothenstein trademark, the image of the cockerel. Would you like to say something about that at this point?

I find it, myself, rather difficult to understand. I know, again referring to childhood, that cockerels always impressed me very much, first of all, by their, the extraordinary drama of their appearance, the tail of a cockerel in sunlight, was a sort of sheeny blue, sheeny blue and

black, and the wattles and comb of the cockerel were sort of scarlet crown, something so extraordinary added to their head, it made a great impression on me. Also, the cockerels were the violent inhabitants of the farmyard, they were always fighting. And, of course, the other creatures were more or less peaceful. I think the cockerel became, for me, an image of drama, an image of violence, and I know that if they'd have been larger than they were, that I would have been very frightened of them, as I was ready to be frightened by all the large animals, peaceful as they were. So the cockerel took on an odd sort of significance. It was also connected in my mind, with the idea of the fighting, of the fighter, because some of the lead soldiers that had been given me, German cast-lead soldiers, of armoured knights, also carried plumes on their heads, and the embossments of their shields also carried a wonderful brilliance of colour, and beyond that, there was the connection with the violent Indian miniatures that I loved so much, and I do think that some of those elements seems to meet in the image of the cockerel.

It's also an image, isn't it, of sexual splendour. And I think that's a very important theme in your work.

Of?

Of sexual splendour.

Yes. That's, that's true. I did draw a lot of cockerels, Mel, as you know, and there were often cockerels in hutches, in coops, in little hen-houses, and the idea of these little creatures living in these funny, funny primitive houses, also excited me very much.

So we have, really, I mean, we were talking yesterday of the way in which your work differed, really, quite radically, I think, from that of the other English artists of what might

very roughly be called a documentary tradition, living in Great Bardfield, and that this had something to do with your consciousness, your overt consciousness of aspects of modernism in painting. The abstract quality of the farmhouses, and farm buildings, and remarked how that reminded you of aspects of abstraction in modern painting.

Yes. It gave one a connection, looking at, say, Juan Gris, whose work I particularly liked at that time. One found a relationship there and that was important. I worked away at drawings and water colours, and a few paintings, but it was really my first visits to Hayter's studio after the War, that engaged me with the excitement and images that I've really built on from that time. I paid three short visits to Hayter's studio, only a few weeks each, but Hayter was such a remarkable fellow. I never liked his work very much, apart from his early engravings. But the man was another matter. I found him amazing. It wasn't just Hayter himself who so enlarged everything he touched, in his ideas and in his work, in his relationships, but it was that all that was going on against the immense backdrop of what was happening in Paris at that time, the work of Dubuffet, Picasso, Miro, Matisse. Those seemed to be great fires that were burning there, the other side of the Channel, and in England, so many artists seemed to be raking over the dead ashes of the past. So that was wonderful. He was an extraordinary inspirer, Hayter. I've never, myself, come across print-making, I'd never done any print-making, and Hayter had this remarkable studio where a group of artists worked, many of them from far away, in the East, Japan, Latin America, and so on, and happening, at that time, in Paris, the thing was so marvellously fresh. It was as if Hayter had thrown open immense double doors onto a landscape that was wonderfully exciting, wonderfully new, and the one thing I wanted to do after those visits, was to walk through those doors, and that I did. For one thing, it meant that a lot of the dreadfulness connected with the immediately earlier years, of course, dropped away, because, with print-making, one could make an absolutely fresh start. I'd never tried anything of the kind, and it was just like

being born again. When I got back to England, I raised what money I could, and built some sort of studio where I could have a press and do prints.

Was this in Great Bardfield?

That was in Great Bardfield. And it really became a very obsessive thing. And although, to some extent, one drew, because drawing is so absolutely basic to an artist's activities, the greater part of my time was spent doing images from the metal plate. For two years I worked at etching, but I abandoned it, partly because I couldn't find printers to carry out the real scope of my ideas. There really weren't any printers in London, in England, who could carry out coloured images on any scale, and discussing this with Edward Bawden one day, he said, "Have a go at lino. All you need is a pen-knife and a square of linoleum." And I did have a go at lino. And immediately I touched the kind of line that produced channelling through a resistant material, with its strange physicality, its sculptural quality. I was caught. It did something to my nerves, something to my feelings, which was so utterly different to the freedom of the drawn line.

Can you put a date to this, Michael? When did you first go to see Hayter, and work with Hayter?

It was about 1954.

1954. And when you returned, you, naturally, given that Hayter was, it was an etching studio, you took up etching. I can't recall seeing etchings from that period. Did you preserve any of them?

Yes, I have some.

We didn't put any of them into the Retrospective Exhibition, did we?

No. No.

But I'd like to see those. But you gave up etching in any case, after, after a matter of what, two years? A matter of months, really, or years?

I should think about 18 months. I had the luck to be in touch already, with Cecil Collins, and he'd been working at Dartington, and he knew that the press that Mark Toby had worked on at Dartington was up for sale, Dartington no longer wanted it, and I bought that excellent press, I think, for 15 pounds, and the work in etching which I did for the subsequent 18 months, was really based on the old Dartington Hall press.

Do you still have that press?

No. No.

And then, when you, you found that you couldn't really get the effects that you wanted, or the scale, or the colour with etching, it's then that you turned to lino cut, and that's really when the real adventure of your own career as a print-maker began, isn't it?

Yes. With lino, I had wonderful freedom. As I say, it wasn't possible to carry out coloured etching in England, because there weren't the studios, there weren't the printers, but, of course, lino you could print yourself, and although it was laborious, I could always get student help, because I was teaching at Camberwell, part of the week, and there were various ways in which I could get excellent student help. One of the things that fascinated me so

much, something that was very full of meaning, was the idea that the surface could be developed in all sorts of ways, to get the beginnings of what I felt to be a sort of trace, a trace of reality. I would attach surfaces I found exciting to the lino, build it up in various ways. And I began to see that printing from surface in this way, applying colour to the image, from a surface in this way, had a sort of wonderful authority. It had a wonderful strength. It had a wonderful substance that was, of course, completely different from, say, the wash of colour, if one was doing a water colour drawing, or a layer of pigment applied with a brush, if one was painting. Why those things excite a particular artist, is something of a mystery. I don't think anybody really understands why, say, an example like Odilon Redon always seemed such a sure-footed and wonderful artist when he was using pastel, and was less sure-footed with oil paint. Whatever the reasons, I know that I came alive in a, in a new sort of way, in working with surface, but the big step for me, was a picnic with my family, sitting beside a river in Essex, where I found, we'd gone there to have a picnic, we unwrapped the sandwiches, and when the sandwiches were unwrapped, I looked around, and I found that at our backs, was a wall of extraordinary sections of timber. It was a lumber yard, surrounded with huge offcuts of elm wood. It was like a cliff. A cliff of living material that bore the extraordinary marks of growth, a graph of energy. But it was so wonderful. And I thought, "Why do we always have to work on the white sky of a sheet of paper? Why do we always have to work on the blackness of the lithographic stone? Why can't we, from the inception of our image, co-operate with something so marvellous as the movement, the amazing movement of that wall of elm wood?" So I went to the lumber yard, and found I could get whole sections of this remarkable timber, and I, I bought a truck load, and stacked them around the studio. This, for me, was a step, a step into quite new territory of print-making, because, although artists such as Gauguin and Munch had made the most wonderful use of the movement of wood in enhancing the drama of the mass and lines of their images, I'd begun to find some of these wooden chunks were so extraordinary, that I really based the image, to a far greater extent than the earlier artists, on the character of this extraordinary material. For

example, if I got a cut through an elm tree, the silhouette of the tree itself would form the edge of my image. It was a free shape. It wasn't trapped within the rectangle of the block or the plate, and, for the first time, one used these extraordinary shapes, and their own character, their own contours, were the shape of the image.

It's a form of collaboration, isn't it, with natural materials and with found objects, it's, as opposed to the, the artist who works with, you know, what you call "the white sky of the paper", the tabula rasa, and then imposes marks and forms. In a sense, what you were more interested in doing, was taking the impress of already existing dynamic forms and marks ...

A true stencil of reality.

A true stencil of reality, yes. Would you like to say something now about the way in which you used this, these materials, and the wood and so on, and combined it into actual, into images?

Yes I would. So many things mattered at that point. I'd become more and more engaged with the idea of abstraction, and this way of work offered a non-figurative image of form, of movement, of colour and all the rest, but didn't have a particular subject. It's true, I never escaped subject, that with these wooden forms, with these found chunks of natural material, I, I needed to introduce some kind of subject. I used tools with the wood, for example. But it was such a wonderful approach to abstraction, because it included such a powerful element of nature, and I really didn't go for the sort of hard edge abstraction that, of course, many artists had used very splendidly. It was a working along with the ecology of my landscape, and being able to produce images of power, which had no particular subject, as such.

It wasn't a matter of depiction.

Exactly. Exactly.

It was much more a matter of finding, in a sense, discovering shape, form, texture.

That's right. And the wood thing became absolutely obsessional, that I would collect wood from every source, and find out how the surface looked if you treated it as a block.

End of F816 Side A

F816 Side B

... about your discovery of wood and of sections through wood, as the basis for print-making, and as the basis for the image itself in print-making. I'd like you to say a bit more about that now, but we're looking, at the moment, at a reproduction of a very significant print, for you. It's "Black and Red", and it was made in 1961. It's illustrated in your own book, *Frontiers of Print-Making* which was published in 1966. Could you say something about "Black and Red", and about the particular significance of this print for you?

Yes. It was a large fragment of wood I picked up while I was staying at Holland, at Walcheren, one of the Northern islands, and I found it under the high dykes. It was remarkable, because it not only had a tremendous landscape that had been worn into its face, but it had been so tossed around in the sea, ground by the sand, bleached by the sun, that the whole silhouette of this fine fragment had been worn into dramatic contour, in sympathy with the face of the wood. It was a wonderful thing. Of course, it was soaking wet when I found it on the beach, but I dragged it out, and luckily, we had the car with us, so I brought it back to the studio. It was such an image where one felt the forces of ecology meeting, the sort of energies that had ground away the surface, the whole drama of this bit of wood being tossed around on the shore, probably for years. It was such a wonderful object to work with, and later, I made very simple images, sort of sun and moon images, carved in lino, that were superimposed into simple black print on the wonderful surface of the wood. But the real subject was this extraordinary single fragment of wood that I'd found on the Dutch coast.

Bearing the history of it's, of it's, as it were, sufferings in the water and on the beach.

Exactly. Exactly.

Abraded and marked, and the outline is one of rough shaping. Now, this puts me in mind of an aspect of surrealism, and this is something we've not talked about. It puts me in mind of those objects trouve, the found object, the surrealist objects that Paul Nash, for example, made, utilising precisely the same sort of natural history embodied in a found object. When I say "natural history", I mean the history of the object in it's natural state. And that's embodied in the object, and then incorporated into a work of art. Now, many surrealists used this particular technique of the found object. Paul Nash, particularly, in some very evocative pieces that he made in the 30s, and also in photographs, interestingly enough, of found, of found objects, especially wooden objects, and stone objects, that had a strange presence. What you've done is something that extends that, and incorporates this in the form of a printed image. And I think that is probably something quite new. Was that ...

Yes, it does relate.

It does relate, of course, also, in a way, back to Max Ernst's use of frottage. Perhaps you'd like to say something about the surrealist possibilities of this, or did that interest you at all?

Well, you used the word "Nash incorporating" such objects in his landscape images. I think what was different about a print like "Black and Red", that this was my landscape. It wasn't incorporating anything. It was, it was my way of representing landscape, the extraordinary graph trace, this marvellous stencil of growth and energy that the wood itself represented. So it was a kind of entirety. It wasn't incorporating anything. It was simply itself. And to that self, creative additions were forced on to me by the contemplation of this beautiful and extraordinary object. Yes. Surrealism has also interested me very much. I think we should talk about that later, when I'd begun to use photography with the strange conjunction of images, such as the print called "Sport", and later on, of course, in "The Boxes", you got these strange placements and displacements.

Yes. I think that's good. Coming back, then, to "Black and Red", and a whole series of other prints that you made with found pieces of wood, and so on. What you're really saying is that you found, in the wood, certain correspondences with, with other natural objects, so that within the wood, you found the landscape.

Yes, yes.

Just as at other times, you might have found in the wood, configurations that suggested parts of the human body, perhaps.

Yes.

Or other aspects of landscape or of, even, later on, the way in which a city grows outwards, in a series of rings, rather as a tree might grow in a series of rings.

Exactly.

Or as a river might run through a city, just so, a particular line may run through a block of wood, and that these correspondences have deep significances which you are able to actually point to, and trace, in the print-making process.

Yes, absolutely, Mel. You always show such acute understanding of these questions. You bring so much imagination to bear. But, starting with the involvement with wood, it was a sort of "forever and ever" situation, because, beginning to find out how these objects appeared, if one treated them as a block, as one treated them as a woodblock, I became absolutely ravenous to find out more, and it took one on and on, and there was hardly a

situation, driving the car, where we'd stop if there was some kind of dump. And, walking in the street, if one found all sorts of metal, or whatever, old newspapers, stamped on, pressed into the pavement, all these could render this, what I call, "trace of reality", and because it was new country for me, and I think it was new country in print-making, it was immensely exciting. I felt, "I'm moving along a frontier, and this must be explored. Taken to the end."

One of the things that clearly interests you, is the way in which things are worn, abraded, stained, in some ways, ruined by usage and abuse.

Taken back into the environment.

Yes.

Yes.

What do you think is the basis of that fascination?

Oh, it's one's wonder at how things live, and how things die, isn't it. You're absolutely right. Seeing wood as a graph of ageing, or even of decay, because I've used bits of wood that were decayed in various ways, through worm, through damp, and all the rest of it. It's, it's the feeling one has that things belong, belong to the current of life, or in a Blakeian sense, to the river of life. And that, yes, I like that very much.

Now, that provides an extraordinarily rich textural basis, and formal basis, doesn't it, for the imposition of other sorts of imagery. And what you did in those revolutionary prints that you made through the 60s, was to take that as a given, and then to develop it with other sorts of

imagery. Would you say something about the other sorts of images that in those 60s prints, particularly, you added to ...

Yes, I would, very much, Mel. Before we get onto that, I'd like to mention that this way of work, brought along with it, really, quite a new technology, because one had to completely abandon the traditional methods of woodcut printing. I found that it was only by introducing a whole range of different tools that one could cope with this very free and varied material. So, instead of just using the old knives and gouges, I was using industrial tools, wire brushes to clean these objects, which were often, of course, covered with dirt. I had to sweep away the decayed fibres of these old bits of wood, with metal brushes, and it brought along with it, really, a very radically new approach to the whole job of woodcutting. It was a wonderful feeling. It was also very exciting, and so very fresh. And one of the scores of developments that's taken place in modern tools, I mean, you have these acrylics that can be used as glue bases for built up blocks, and for constructions. And all this was so wonderfully refreshing. It seemed to get so far away from the smell of, of oil paint in the life class, in the College, the whole feeling of these rather, rather static conditions of the art.

I want to get on to that in a bit, because what you're really beginning to talk about is the philosophy of print-making, and what distinguishes that from drawing, and oil painting, and other more traditional forms of art. And, indeed, other traditional forms of print-making anyway. But can we just go back to this point about the, the particular sorts of symbolism which you introduced into your mixed medium, woodcut prints, of that period, of the 60s. Often these motifs were introduced by way of, superimposed upon the woodcut, by way of lino cut additions, is that right?

Could be.

And I mean, you mentioned earlier, a sort of rudimentary sun and moon in "Red and Black" print, 1962. There are a whole range of prints at that period, in which the circle, images of the sun, perhaps of the moon, rudimentary figures, crosses, circles.

Diamonds, diagonals.

Diamonds, diagonals. These are recurrent and ancient emblems, aren't they, and I think they're very important to you.

Yes. Immensely important. I, I'd like to take two instances. At the moment, I'm doing an assemblage in the form of a box, and through a window, is seen the gleaming height of a Manhattan skyscraper. And this side of the window is a decayed little interior with an old chest of drawers, and certain words. Three words - "Shit", "E woz here", and " L loves M" with a heart. Now this, of course, like, when you mentioned the machinery in the landscape, the modern plough in the old ploughed field, is about, it's a metaphor for, if you like, poverty and riches. When I was in Africa, in Nigeria, one would see a gleaming modern block of flats. And at the foot of the flats would be a dirty pool of water with poor Nigerians washing or just sitting by the water, or sitting in the water. So I attempt a metaphor, the skyscraper, and the poor little student-like interior. And on it I've written three signs, that I've noticed again and again, in abandoned places, "E, F," whatever, "woz here", and "X loves R", and so on. So

And the obscenities also and other, the obscenity.

Yes, yes, yes, exactly. Exactly. Now, when you talk about these emblems, that's a different kind of a formal metaphor, which is wonderfully, visually accessible. It's also memorable.

If one thinks of a flag, with a, the Russian flag, with an anvil, and the French flag with three colours - white, blue, scarlet - yes, I love those things very much.

They're very ancient, of course.

They're very ancient, they're very powerful, they're very basic flags. And the whole idea of a flag, a signal where the troops mustered in days before wireless communication, telephonic communication. The raised sign, where the people go, yes, those things, I do find very, very exciting. I suppose it's their power and simplicity.

They are different in kind, aren't they, from, say, the cockerel, which is a symbolic image, embodying all sorts of ideas. These are, I've called them emblems. They're much simpler. They're more like signs than symbols. They simply repeat, if you like, a particular motif, with a multiplicity of possible references - sun, moon, womb, and so on.

Yes. Another feature of that sort which turns up, I think, through the years in my work, is some kind of system, where there are two circles, or two ovals. I did a recent print of figures in the Underground, and there are two Underground signs on either side of the figures, and I realised, of course, that the double circle has a, a permanent, a stable meaning, either in consciousness or below consciousness, that paired circles are always either eyes or breasts, to the, to a man's consciousness. And as I say, that's, I've used again and again, because it forces itself upon me, often, that I envisage a set of shapes, or a set of colours.

Can we move on, Michael, to the next major shift, really, in your technical and artistic progress, which was the incorporation of the photographic image, and your discovery of a whole host of possibilities, using the photographic image, through screen-printing processes.

Yes, that's right. Again, that feeling, that impulse, to use photography, had, had rather ancient origins in my own case, because I'd always been fascinated by magazines, by newspapers, which were full of images, and in many cases, I found them so deeply arresting, from the age of about 12, maybe a bit later, 16, I started amassing them in a sort of photographic archive. Of course, I never dreamt that years later I'd be able to avail myself, maybe, of something from that archive. It was just I found it so extraordinary to see these images of arrested movement, say, in the Spanish Civil War, of people escaping from Franco, or whatever it was, trudging down the street with their possessions on their backs, I mean, the idea of seeing such realities entrapped in a photographic image, I didn't analyse it, I just cut them out and kept them, because I liked them so much. And, of course, years later, when I became aware of what was happening in America, I told you that story about my discovery of the Black Rauschenbergs in Paris, and, of course, I saw other things. So, suddenly, there was this connection with this ancient excitement about news photographs. So it wasn't difficult to make the leap between the photograph and the sort of images that I was treating in my prints. The trouble was that I had no way of doing it. I'd never learnt anything about screening, and I realised that in order to move into that country, I had to abandon everything. And, of course, by that time, I had some very substantial success with prints. The firm of Alecto was buying nearly all of my work, and another American firm, nearly all of it was crossing the Atlantic, and was the source of my income. But, with this shock of realising the potential through screen printing, of envisaging this world of the other man's camera, I had to be prepared to start again, and, for two years, I tried, I messed around with seeing how I could use the photographic image. But I had luck, and luck is always necessary, because I had an assistant, at that time, who was a very bright fellow, called Shelley Rose, and he had a natural technical aptitude for things like photography, and he knew about it as little as I did, but through the art colleges, I was teaching at the Hornsey College at that time, I had connections also with Goldsmiths', I was helped, through students, through teachers, and above all, through Shelley Rose, so slowly we set up an effective dark room, and, in about two years, we begun to move

with some comfort, with some naturalness, into this extraordinary world that I always describe as "the other man's camera."

What is particularly potent for you about the newspaper photograph?

Yes, we were saying, yesterday, Mel, how, in some cases, I based an image, using material from a news photograph, and that I would send to the International Press Exchange or somewhere, or go to one of these photographic libraries, and find the original on which the news photograph was based, but in all cases, it was the news photograph I wanted, not the highly detailed, high definition glossy photograph. It didn't excite me. It was that glossy photograph, only in its simplified and degenerated form, printed on bad news stock, in dot form, that gave me the peculiar emotion that made me want to use it.

To what do you attribute this? I'm very intrigued by this, because there's clearly something in common between that rough quality of a news photograph, on news print, and the rough and unpredictable quality of woodcut.

Absolutely right. Well, I do find it very odd. So, what are the characteristics of the news image against the original photograph? Well, first of all, it's very flattened out. There's a very narrow range of contrast in the greys, so it's walking to meet the graphic image already, because it's flatter, and because it's simpler. Then, in the actual hazards of the process, there are interesting strangenesses, there are interesting simplifications, and because of this, and because, through my work, and through my books, I was getting many invitations to go to America, I built up a series of slides which would illustrate these exciting oddities and simplifications, and crudities of the news photograph, as against the glossy. And I agree with you entirely, that there is a primitive woodcut look in certain news photographs.

Especially if you manipulate them, and blow them up a bit.

Exactly. Exactly.

So that the actual texture of the photograph begins to take on greater force.

That's right. A gritty simplicity. And, of course, by the way you develop the lith, or whatever, you can increase and simplify the blacks, say.

It actually moves to abstraction the more you magnify.

It can. It can, absolutely.

This is something you've used, isn't it.

Yes, very much.

In many of your prints.

Very much.

One of the things that photography did for you, in a new way, in a way that was different from that of the mixed media woodcut, lino cut, prints of the 60s, one of the things it did for you, was to enable you to juxtapose images, and set up new sorts of opposition, and one of the things that occurs to me, Michael, about your work, is that it has always turned upon oppositions, upon contradictions, sometimes violent oppositions, between one thing and another. And this is reflected both in technical terms, in the way in which different sorts of

technical process can be opposed to each other, and that that can emphasise a thematic opposition that interests you, as between, we've said, the mechanical and the organic, for example, between the extraordinary wealth and finish of certain objects, and places, and the rough human poverty that, that also co-exists in those places. This sort of thing, clearly, is a tremendous motor, isn't it, in your work.

That's right, Mel. And I'd like to take the instance of that image called "Sport", and how it came about.

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We're looking at your print, Michael, called "Sport", it was made roundabout 1973, it's catalogue 45, in the Retrospective Catalogue, and it's reproduced there, in colour, on page 13.

The image is of three photographs, of three layers of photograph - the top is of a very, a sixties girl, stretched on a sofa, with a sort of open skirt that hangs down below her, the second layer below that, is a three, of a photograph repeated three times, I think this is of

The winning shot,

A winning shot, being applauded by boys in a football crowd. And then, at the bottom, is a photograph of a goal, being scored, taken from behind the net, the ball rising into the net, in the top right-hand corner. The three layers of photographic imagery are framed to the left and to the right, by a, a grained, a grained woodcut panel. The colour of the panel is a sort of ochrish yellow, of those two woodcut panels, is ochrish yellow, and the actual photographic images are reproduced very much in the sort of rough way of, of newsprint, with a slight, a slight colouration of a sort of, a what colour would you call that?

A sort of bone colour.

A sort of bone colour, yes.

Well, I found that photograph of this starlet, it was a found object for me, of a very arresting kind. This girl is in an astonishing sort of art nouveau skirt, in black and white jagjazz arrangement, and she's lying on one of these dreadful sort of luxury suite type sofas, with a minute jiggly black and white pattern, and she, herself, apart from the skirt, is more or less two black triangles, with her legs running across the skirt. Certain photographs haunt me, and this funny image haunted me. I had a sort of compulsion about it. Now, the repeated

image of a cheering group below, takes one down to the bottom image of a winning shot.

Now, I was quite unaware, when I brought these images together, that it is a kind of metaphor of sexual satisfaction. The boys applauding, and the goal shot, and at the top, the girl on the sofa. It was chance that brought them together, and the connections which I discovered later, must, I suppose, have been implicit in my original choice. But this surreal element there, I think, is very present, isn't it?

Absolutely, yes.

Because although there is a congruity, in terms of a metaphor for sex, yet the three images are really a very strange combination. In the final version, the applauding figures were replaced by an immense crowd at an American football game, and instead of the black image of the goal shot, with the shadowy figures, and the netting and the ball showing white against the black, I have an image of one of those extraordinary leaps the goalie does, in trying to arrest the ball going into the net. So the final arrangement was quite different. And, of course, there is still the woodcut with the two framing sections of an old battered crate.

In the second one, of which we don't have a reproduction to refer to, the goalkeeper's leap, in a curious sort of way, repeats the reclining

Exactly,

Posture of the girl. He's leaping sideways, almost horizontal, to reach the ball, leaping sideways, in almost horizontal pose to reach the ball, and his arms outstretched, and as I said, you have this extraordinary dual image of an outstretched figure. In one, a case of a female reposed, and the other, an image of male dynamism, action.

That's a good point.

And in the middle, the clear, triple image of the boys cheering, in the football crowd, which is, incidentally, in the original, has the newspaper caption on it, "In the clutch." Here, it's replaced in a central image, in a central panel, by, as you said, an American football crowd, taken from a greater distance, so that it becomes almost abstract, an image of a sort of plasm, or flux. Now, this sort of use of oppositions, of unexpected juxtapositions, we know, has a classic surrealist antecedent, doesn't it. And I suppose it's at this stage, with the introduction of photography, that you were able, particularly, to exploit these sorts of opposition and these sorts of contradiction.

Yes. That's quite true. And referring to an earlier source we mentioned, the way the image is laid out is really like a flag, isn't it. There are three rectangular sections, framed with two strips. The other feature is the zig-zag which, of course, is one of the, one of the constructs which has been used throughout the whole history of imagery, of the zig-zag, and it's the aisles of the crowd, and as you rightly say, the repeated angle of girl and goalie, which complete the zig-zag.

The zig-zag is, of course, an abstract image of intense dynamism. It's the image for lightning, and the image for rapid movement, isn't it. So there is, behind this set of images, an abstract pattern, an ancient abstract device, which perfectly matches the thematic possibilities of the juxtaposed photographs.

Well, I'm told you feel it, Mel. I see it there, and, of course, it was absolutely part of the idea.

Now, the thing about photography, why, of course, it enriched your visual vocabulary to such an extraordinary extent, is that there are photographs of everything. There is nothing that, hardly anything in the world, that hasn't been photographed.

Exactly.

So this enormous activity of photography since its invention, has been, all by something, analogous to your idea of wanting to print the world, the world has been continuously photographed, and we have these continual impression, light impressions, impressions in light, of actualities, of every kind. And this, of course, gave you access, photography gave you access to all these actualities. And I think that word "actuality" is helpful, isn't it, in trying to understand what your work, at its centre, is always about?

I think so. And I think I mentioned to you, that because of this early archive of photographs, and because of one's knowledge of what was happening in America, with the use of the photograph, it came almost as a shock.

Excuse me, Michael. Your knowledge there, you're referring to your discovery of Rauschenberg's use of the photograph.

Particularly Rauschenberg, yes.

Especially, in those combine paintings that he made at the end of the 50s, and the early 60s.

Yes. Exactly. Exactly.

You've described your encounter, your first encounter with those works of Rauschenberg, and that's actually, your description is to be found in the introduction to the Retrospective Catalogue. I think that's worth remarking on. Please go on.

Well, it seems such an immense world out there, the moment the camera intervened. And because of my rather ancient excitement about photography, and my collection of old photos and all the rest of it, it had an effect on me, which was really very strange.

You were talking, Michael, about the effect, the powerful effect that photography, and the discovery that you could use photography, of ways in which you could use photography in print-making, had upon you, at the beginning of the 60s, and we paused just as you had referred to the insight that had been given you by seeing the Rauschenberg black, combine paintings, which used photographic images, screen printed directly onto the canvas.

Exactly. The photographic bit was very exciting to me, because, of course, one realised immediately, how large an area is shown us through photography in various forms. And when I realised that this imagery could be harnessed to use in the studio, it was a little bit as if I'd been panning for gold, and someone had come up to me and said, "Look, over the hill, there's Klondike", it was that sort of feeling, a sort of immensity of riches that was there to hand. And as you rightly say, the photo became another sort of found object. And all the uses I've made of wood and metal and all sorts of things, was added, this chance of using in some way, the, the endless source of the photographic record.

Can we go back, just a moment, because I think, obviously, there's a great deal more to be said about photography, and about the way in which it can be combined with other elements in an assembled image. But I want just to track back, briefly, to the work you were doing with metal, wood, found objects, at the end of the 50s and the beginning of the 60s, that, that

you combined into the more abstract images of the woodcut, lino cut, and sometimes screen printed prints that you made at that time. One should say, that, of course, one of the things you did that was innovatory, was to combine all these things together in one finished print, and I don't think it had ever been done on the scale that you did it, at that time.

No. Traditionally print-making had been played on a single instrument, and I, I felt strongly that the instrument needn't always be played alone, that by using several techniques, one could create a different sort of concord or feel, of emotion, of music, if you like, so that this single instrument could be, as I say, combined with others to produce a different range of feelings. A different range of forms.

Now, it occurs to me that this came at very much the same time as Caro, especially, was shifting from a more traditional sort of figurative sculpture, to a constructed sculpture, using found industrial objects, and materials, and combining them into abstract configurations, that nevertheless, always, seemed to remind us of other things - industrial things, obviously, but also natural things. And some of his titles, one, "Prairie", for example, "One Fine Day", those sorts of titles are intended to invoke our experience of the natural world, in relation to these extraordinary, at the time, astonishingly new abstract configurations. Were you aware of Caro? Did you have any sense that you were doing something similar in print-making?

Yes I did. I did. Because he eliminated the block of stone, and created sculpture from found pieces of various sort. And in my own studio, I'd eliminated the block, and was making images from various found pieces. I was very aware of it. An area of work that I was very heavily engaged in, along with the later stage of woodcut, was using metal stampings, and metal bits of various kinds, which you could find in city dumps, or on the garage floor. These shapes were hard, very active, often very angular, and a print, like "The Love Machine", that appears on the cover of Pat's famous little book, *The Mechanised Image*, was

of an eye, and in the pupil of the eye, a camera and cameraman is reflected, which, of course, represented what was then a rather new world for me, the world of the other man's camera, but that image is small, in a big framework of these found metal stampings.

The Pat you referred to is Pat Gilmour isn't it. Go on, I was just wondering, I mean, how far, what was the response to this, this new set of possibilities that you were exploring, in print-making? Caro, of course, Caro's work was received with enormous excitement and sort of critical *éclat* during the early 60s. Did anything similar happen as far as print-making was concerned?

Well, it couldn't. And I've always found this sad, because, on the whole, print-making is accorded second place. And apart from a group of friends, and the critic, the best critic of that time, of prints, Pat Gilmour, the effect was minimal. Pat realised something very interesting was going on, and she was a great supporter.

Have you been disappointed generally, if we just take that line for a moment, at the way in which print-making is regarded by, well, regarded critically speaking, generally, as a secondary activity, a sort of spin-off of other more important and central artistic activities?

Yes. It's been a continual frustration, and I think must be for a very committed artist who spends a lot of time doing prints. It's at art school, where print-making is very rarely given the importance of work in the other studios, and I think it has all sorts of causes. I think that many people think of repetition, of the edition as being an important aspect of print-making, and, of course, it's the least important aspect. The only thing that's interesting and important about prints is when a good image, an exciting image appears. The fact it can be repeated may be a financial necessity for the artist, and may be helpful for the dealer, but it's nothing whatever to do with the creative process that engendered the print. I think that's part of it.

Another part of it is the situation where we get very few important print-makers as such. If one thinks of Munacarta in the East, say, or earlier on, of Mirion in the West, they're really rather unique figures. I mean, later on, we had Hayter, and it wasn't so much that he was a great print-maker, a great image maker, that he was a great man, and I do think that the world of print is occupied by very few giant figures, and I think that's part of the fact, that it tends to be the prints that are produced by people extremely well-known as painters, or sculptors, like Picasso, or Moore, for example, that do get most of the critical attention.

It has to be said, I think, especially, not so much of Moore, but certainly of Picasso, that if there were a great predecessor, of your own effort, to try to make print-making a centrally creative activity, Picasso would be that person, because, one feels with a great deal of his print effort, that it actually is as important to him as the sculpture and the painting, that he doesn't seem to me, to have seen it as a secondary activity. It was something which occupied a great deal of his time, and to which he gave a great deal of absolute, absolute creative attention, wasn't it.

Yes, directly effective etching techniques appeared. You had this situation, I mean, look at Rembrandt. Ideas were generated in etchings that were fed into, if you like, the man's system of his painting. I think that's absolutely true, Mel.

I'm thinking, especially, here, I suppose, of Picasso's lino cuts, where you have genuine innovation, and extraordinarily creative use of a generally unregarded medium.

Yes. I think on a rather minor scale, it's true of Richard Hamilton. I think of all his work, his prints are among the most remarkable things he did. And certainly, again, it was another instance of the print feeding into other areas, a lot of his most interesting ideas.

So you register a certain disappointment at the way in which your own efforts as a print-maker, for whom the making of prints was an essential creative activity, were received.

I do. Absolutely.

Yes. And it certainly, as I said, was in contrast to the way in which, for example, the innovations of Caro, in sculpture, were being received at that particular time, although there were interesting parallels.

I must see that.

Yes. Do you feel that that's changed, Michael, in recent years? Do you feel that perhaps there is now a more open, critically open reception of print-making and its possibilities?

A little more, Mel. I mean, the Museum of Modern Art, in New York, has been a bit of a leader, because they've tended to show both prints and photographs along with paintings and the other work, and they're always a very important example, aren't they, to museums, what happens there.

I suppose it's a disappointment that the Tate, for example, continues to regard the prints as a sort of archive, and very rarely actually shows them, or sees them as a visual resource that people ought to have access to.

Yes. They have been a bit slow!

Michael, let's go back now, to the main track, which was, we were talking about the way in which photography excited you, and entered the work in a very dynamic way, in the early

60s, when you discovered the possibilities of screen printing and photographic screen printing, and we have discussed a particular print which is representative of a lot of the work you were doing at that time, involving the found image. And it occurred to me, while we were talking about "Sport", the title of which, I now come to see, is a very comical title, that, we were talking about screen printing and the use of various sorts of imagery, and various sorts of printing technique, on the same plane, as a form of assemblage. And I look back over the work, and it seems to me that from very early on, in the post-War period, from the very beginnings of your use of lino cut, and woodcut, that one of the things that printing provided for you, was the opportunity to assemble images, to assemble objects and textures, and this is, again, relates to something very, I think, very much at the heart of your enterprise as an artist, that you're not, you haven't been so much concerned with the, the making or the creating of an image, as something that you determine and dictate, but as yourself as an artist as being a receiver of images, a mediator of imagery. And, of course, assemblage is another way in which this can be done. And it's at this time, it seems to be quite logically, that you began to make constructions. First of all, rather abstract constructions, that were formally allied to the woodcut, lino cut prints that you were making at that time, often involving two ovals, or those familiar emblematic shapes - the sunburst, the oval, and so on. But, and about this, round this time, towards the end of the 60s, after a period of making screen prints, which involved multiple images, multiple surfaces, multiple textures, you began to make actual assemblages, didn't you, with real objects, and you began to make assemblages, and sometimes to box these assemblages.

That's absolutely right. I'd like to discuss with you, the boxes. But before we leave the photographic image, there are a couple of things I'd like to say. That if you base an image, or part of an image on a photograph, there are very great difficulties in using the photograph. For one thing, if you admire the photograph, it's such a complete statement in its own right, and it's often very difficult to put it in a context which re-creates its meaning. This, at certain

points, was a great problem for me, and one of the attacks that I, myself, made on that problem, was to introduce the element of chance. I got my son, for example, my son, Julian, who was teaching at an East End school in London, for deprived boys, to give the boys news photographs to deface. And some of these defacements, I

found, deeply exciting, and two or three prints, "Fathers", for example, were based on those defacements.

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Michael, you were going to say something about the particular difficulties of using the photographic image, could you continue?

Yes. That's right. The photograph can be such a complete thing in itself. I think I was mentioning one way of introducing elements of chance, which would give it a new character, a different character, and my son was teaching for a school for deprived boys, in the East End of London, and I got him to give news photographs to the boys during their art session, for them to deface. And deface them they did, with some absolutely remarkable results. I did a print called "Fathers", and another print called "Letters Home", of photo images, these boys had defaced in certain ways, and turned into something different. And for me, very exciting, in their new defaced form.

"Fathers", for example, is a photographic image of Eisenhower talking to Macmillan isn't it?

That's right.

And on that image, the child had drawn very very black spectacles and strange beards,

And horns, and that sort of thing.

And horns, and turned these two figures into monstrous, monstrous sort of,

Yes, I thought, with marvellous results.

Oedipal figures of a quite different kind from those intended.

Exactly, and we're looking now at an image of the Price sisters. The Price sisters were two wretched girls who were caught up by the IRA and became bombers, and landed up in Holloway Jail, and in the upper image, the mother is holding up a portrait of one of the sisters, in protest at her being in the jail, and in the lower image, we see the two girls as they were before they got involved in the IRA, happily waiting on a street corner, probably for boyfriends. So I wanted to use these images, and how did I begin? I began by taking a pack of old newspapers, which I defaced. And I defaced them by throwing pigment or ink, or whatever, and letting it spill over the newspapers, so I was invoking a situation which produced a whole series of quite hazardous chances. These papers then became a resource, and I found that by relating the poor girls, whose lives had been smashed and defaced, with these old bits of newspaper, which had been defaced in various ways, gave them a new, I think, quite active meaning. Gave them a strangeness and a drama, which was the outcome of the way I'd mistreated these odd sheets of newspaper. So one had to find a stratagem. To place the photographs in a way that recreated them.

Yes, Michael, the "Price Sisters" print, what we have is the two images that you described earlier, and they're laid, aren't they, on a sort of, on the ground of the newspaper, which is defaced by ink, running away, sideways, as it might be like blood, or whatever. But the newspaper itself, of course, is a poignant object, because it is the record of one day, rather in the way that a photograph is a record of one moment. A newspaper is always fixed in time in that way, and, so therefore, we have the aspect of time, the element of violence, which are suggested by these devices, and then, into that matrix of time and, and violent signification, are the images, these rather poignant and sad images of these sisters.

Yes. I found this activity of throwing paint at newspaper had its own kind of reality. It was a bit Jackson Pollock, it was a bit violent, and these tracks of the pigment, as it splashed or ran on the surface, for me, were always wonderfully alive. They were the sort of marks I could

never have created out of any kind of deliberation, out of any kind of conscious thought. I really loved them very much. And in this case, I think as you were saying, Mel, they were, I think, a very apt, rather interesting metaphor for the destruction of the lives of the girls themselves.

The actual, the configuration of the ink on the paper is explosive, isn't it, itself, of course, and that sense of explosion, or shattering, is absolutely, again, appropriate to the theme of the print, and the, the message, if you like, that comes across from these images, sad images. So, yes, the found object has to be, the found object, the found image, has to be transformed by the process. I think this might be a moment when we might turn to what is a persistent theme in your work, we've touched upon it before, and I'd like to explore it a bit further, Michael. We live in a violent century, we live also in a century in which the violence that is done, is an ever-present reality for us, through the actuality of the photograph.

Good point.

Now this, I think, is something which has haunted you, and haunts the work. Would you like to say anything about that?

Yes. I find it easiest to take a particular work, and I'd like to take a series of works, which are known as "Jags". "Jags" begun, when I was working in America, with a group of students, in an old yard where they kept junk. And I picked up a wooden crate that had been run over by a truck, and had simply split open in a very extraordinary way. I was engaged, back in London, on a show in the main galleries at the ICA, under the title of "Violence". And this smashed crate seemed a wonderfully eloquent example of a smashed object. So, I brought it back to my studio, and did various things with it. First of all, I printed it in positive, that is to say, in black on white, and next, I printed it in white on black, to give a

negative, and the smashed wood was really, for me, a magnificent graph of this accident to the surface of the timber. I then combined it with a photograph of one of these huge car trailers, and that was partly because, while in America, I felt the damage, even the destruction, that the presence of the motor car was doing to the American countryside, and, of course, also, I was much struck by these great piles of discarded automobiles, which you'd come across from time to time, travelling around America. So the combination of the smashed fragments, with the photographs of the car trailer, with a number of cars on it, was a sort of combine, which again, was a metaphor for destruction and violence. Finally, I used the actual wood fragments in an assemblage, and I mounted them in a box, and on the back of the box, I screened the image of the car trailer. The wood itself was more or less blackened and the image of the cars was also printed in black, but it was printed against a shadow image, in rather sunsettish sort of colours, so again, it suggested some final, sunset disaster.

It's an apocalyptic image, of course, isn't it.

I think it is a bit.

And as I said, that is very much, that is a very dramatic example of a work which, both in terms of it's, of the objects that make the work, or are used in the printing process, and in terms of the image, and finally in terms of the object, when it became a box assemblage, combines violence done to the wood, violence that is done to the material, the sort of defacement and abrading that we've talked about before, with the thematic violence that, of the image and of the ideas behind the image. I said that this was the moment to talk about that, I don't know if there's any more you want to say about it. A lot of the images in the 60s and 70s, well, especially in the 70s, I think, and to some extent in the 80s, but more in the 70s, were images that dealt with urban violence, sexual violence, and so on, and used the resources of the screen print, which gave you the possibilities of juxtaposition, of suggestive

concatenations of image and object and surface, and material and so on. But as I said, at that time, you also turned to making these boxes, and many of the boxes you made, not all of them, by any means, but many of the boxes have to do with that theme of violence, don't they. And use the broken wood, and images, photographic images of violence in a particular way. Particularly direct way.

I made a series of five separate boxes. In each box there's the same image of a car crash, quite a modest sort of usual car crash you could see anywhere, travelling around on the roads. But below this image, in each case, there is a different object, which also has been violently treated, in it's own terms, has been crashed and spoilt, twisted metal, splintered wood, and so on, and this was about a feeling one has, of the two levels of life, that we're constantly experiencing, largely through photographic imagery. Typically, one would open the newspaper in the morning, and see some sad tragic image of hungry people, of a figure that had been beaten up in some kind of riot, some kind of city incident, but you turn from your newspaper, and pour out another cup of coffee. You take another spoonful of muesli or toast and marmalade, and for a moment, you've been taken away from the breakfast table into this sad incident in Africa, or wherever, and a moment later, you're back at the breakfast table. I feel this very much. And, of course, media like television, apart from the old practice of going out to films, I think, brings it closer to us. These different levels on which we live. The huge, almost boundless shadow world, offered by the camera, and the enclosed, very real world we're coping with, in the routine of our daily life. So these boxes were, for me, again, metaphors of something much felt.

Now, the interesting thing to me there, is that, whereas the use of the photographic image in printing is one thing, because, as I said, we live in violent times, we're constantly confronted by violent images, but the very medium of newsprint reduces them all to a sort of uniformity.

It's black and white. And on the same page, you may have a picture of the Queen attending a garden party, or something like this, which is reproduced in exactly the same mode.

Good point.

There's a sort of way in which the photographic image, the use of photography, can somehow apply the same surface to all sorts of different incident, all sorts of different actuality. Now, I think, maybe, it was your rendition of that that, as it were, compelled you to move in the direction of incorporating real objects, and breaking up that surface, striving in the boxes for a different sort of, more directly felt, reality. Would that be fair?

I think that's a very interesting thought, Mel, and what you said about the collision of images on a spread of newspaper, strikes me always to be quite extraordinary, because it's a kind of madness isn't it, a newspaper, because of the way it's set up, because of the conditions of journalism and the production of the, of the paper, is a total confusion of misappropriated meanings, isn't it. You get, I remember, I did a print of the shooting of George Wallace, and it was taken from a newspaper, American newspaper, and underneath, there was an advertisement for one of these long-distance radios, and underneath was written on the, the ad for the radio communication, "The longest reach", which, of course, immediately suggested a cowboy shooting. And, I mean, newspapers are a kind of madness, aren't they, because the confusion, not only between the various articles, the various treatments of the subjects, but particularly between the editorial and the advertising, you know, a woman's bra, and a figure starving in Africa, and so on, and so on, and so on.

Yes. Two quite different universes being brought into juxtaposition.

Yes. Absolutely. Is it the world of sort of neo-Dada? Is it something like that?

It is, as you say, certainly, a sort of madness, and it induces a sort of madness, the madness of indifference to these distinctions, because that is a madness, isn't it. Because indifference to these distinctions is, in fact, to be indifferent to these distinctions, is to behave inappropriately to stimulus, and that's what madness is, inappropriate behaviour.

Good point. Good point.

As I said, I think this is something which has fascinated you in the screen prints, but then, one of the ways of overcoming this indifference, one of the ways of forcing the spectator again, into a direct and sane, critical relationship to these awful things, these terrifying events, is, of course, actually, to incorporate in the art object, real things - the jagged piece of wood is no longer reduced to an image of a jagged piece of wood, it is a jagged piece of wood. The bits of rag that, you know, that are dirty, and stained, are bits of rag. The clock, in the image of that poor Italian

Succioni.

Succioni, Italian noblewoman, who was murdered by her husband, after having an affair with a beach boy. The clock, in that construction, of that assemblage of yours, is a real clock. There's no way you can get round those things, and real objects have a very strange, don't they, effect, a very strange poignancy, in the true sense of that word. They actually pierce us.

I think that's a very good point. The use of the clock in that assemblage of Anna Succioni, came out of the fact that I remember a nurse telling me, a nurse or a household help, years ago, in my childhood, she said, "You know, a stopped clock means someone has just died." And then I found this broken alarm clock, and it, you know, it was so strange and arresting,

that I screwed it on the top of the box, and, of course, that's where it had started, a nurse telling me, years and years and years ago, that the stopped clock was a sign of death.

It's a real object, signifying the real stopping of,

Of time.

Of time, at that particular moment for that particular clock, and therefore, the beat, or the tick tock of that clock, and it's sudden cessation is an actual, visual representation, re-presenting to us, of the stopping heart of Succioni, isn't it.

Exactly. Exactly. Another feature of that box was that I've repeated the image of Succioni. It's a double image. And again, that's an ancient German thing, isn't it, that when you meet yourself, you die. And Rossetti did a marvellous drawing, didn't he, of lovers meeting themselves.

So we're on now, really, we're talking now about this very remarkable body of work, which has continued, which has been, until the retrospective that I selected the year before last, most of these works had not been seen, and had been little regarded, I think. But they do constitute, I think, a remarkable body of work that you made, during the 70s, and continued into the 80s, and which did seem to me, to be, to follow logically, from the screen printing process, because they take the logic of screen printing, which is assemblage, into the real world of objects, and, and they also, of course, have this, I think, they are the outcome, as I said, of a sort of compulsion, really, perhaps to move beyond the second-hand, necessarily second-hand impress of the world in print, to the actuality of the object that exists in the world, actually, really.

Well, I can't help feeling, and I bet you share this feeling, Mel, that on the one hand, we lead our own life with it's very definite restrictions, with it's own kind of scale, and on the other hand, we move out, through, particularly, I think, television, into this immense world without boundaries, but it's a shadow world, and we move, as I see it, between these shadows of this inimitable space, inimitable variety of action, people, scenes, landscapes, constantly shuffling between this immensity of the shadow world, back into the tinyness of our own private world, don't you feel that very much?

Certainly. And as an artist, of course, in your particular contribution to act as a very sensitive recorder, if you like, a very sensitive plate upon which these things are impressed, and re-formed in terms of imagery and object. One of the things, I think, that is remarkable about your work as an artist, is this particular range, that you spoke of the, of the, of your memory of the peculiar intensity of your emotional life as a child, and of your response to the natural world. And I don't think, I think one of the things that was the outcome, almost, I think the onset of myxoedemia in your late teens, and that loss of your 20s, a period of great intensity, of course, in, in people's lives. The loss of certain, of, of those years, in a sense, meant that there was almost a blessing in disguise, in that when you recovered, you recovered with a particular sort of greed for experience, didn't you. And you've kept that. And what I was going to say is that one of the qualities of the work is, that that is open to the awful and terrifying things, as well as to these wonderful, natural things, that your work celebrates, but it doesn't avoid those things that aren't to be celebrated, but to be, that should properly horrify us, or terrify us. Well, let's look at some of the other boxes, you see, we've emphasised the boxes as a presentation of raw actuality. There are also a number of constructions and assemblages which celebrate the studio itself, and the process of making art - brushes, and swabs, and bits of rag and so on. Have you anything to say about those ones?

Well, working most of one's life in the studio, they're, they're so close to one, aren't they. Just as many artists have chosen a still life in the next room, I've often chosen the brush, or palette, or whatever it is, in this room, in my studio. I think the impress of the most deeply familiar, is, is interesting. The other thing I feel, if I pick up a brush, that out of that brush, through time, through talented men and women, has poured this marvellous imagery we inherit, so I feel that the brush itself is such a symbol of the world of the, of the creative imagination. And you know, if one squeezes out a red or a blue, from the tube, the idea that these colours have been the matrix, do you call it? The matrix of the marvellous things that people have created in decoration, in glass, in tapestry, and carpets, as well as painting. It's just a wonderful sort of intensity of the feeling that there, out of that blue, out of that red, so many wonderful things have been done, and so many wonderful things have been made.

One of the features of your work is that it doesn't particularly look like anybody else's. And, indeed, another feature is that there are whole passages of your work that don't look at all like other passages of your work. In this you are, you follow a particular aspect of modernism, really, which is a lack of concern for personal style, and that goes back, doesn't it, to this whole business of not particularly wanting to impose an image, but to find an image. To be the means by which an image is registered, rather than to be

You express it so well!

Now, that means, it's singularly unhelpful to talk about your work in terms of influence and affinities, but which other artists have you felt particular feelings for, and which other artists would you say, although your work doesn't resemble theirs, necessarily, which other artists have been particularly helpful to you, in terms of enabling you to see what you might do as an artist?

Well, that's always an interesting question. The first thing I feel about that is that one changes so much. I mean, I was making some boxes, and I went to America, and I saw some boxes by Cornell, I'd never seen, which I found very exciting.

Joseph Cornell?

Joseph Cornell, and we've already mentioned that at the beginning of the period, when I made my own sort of discovery of photo screen printing, I found the very early work of Rauschenberg immensely affecting. I found some of the work of Oldenburg, wonderfully imaginative. The things he did with ordinary objects, bending them in very extraordinary directions. The scope of his imagination in manipulating his surroundings, I found absolutely stunning.

End of F817 Side B

F818 Side A

July 24th, 1990

Michael, we were talking about the artists with whom you felt affinity, or who seemed, to you, to have been important in some way to you, as artists. You spoke of Rauschenberg and Oldenburg, I daresay one could add Jasper Johns to that group? Looking back, it seems to me that Johns did a number of things that are, are quite similar to the work of your constructions, especially the ones relating to the studio process, with brushes and the paint itself.

Yes, that's right.

And then you were going to say something about Gaston. Do you agree about Johns, to begin with? Jasper Johns.

Yes I do. I do. He did several things I found immensely exciting at one time.

And then you were going to talk about Gaston.

Yes. His show at the Whitechapel made a really powerful impact, but he's a very difficult artist to talk about, but the extraordinary use he made of drawing, I so hate most forms of academic drawing, and the way he would state the sole of a shoe, or a candle, or a hand, was, for me truly creative drawing. It was creative in exactly the way that Picasso talked of when he said he wished he could re-learn to draw, and draw as a child.

Is that something, is that statement of Picasso's, I think he said, "When I was six, I could draw like Raphael",

Yes. "And it's taken the rest of my life to unlearn it!"

Yes. Is your own graphic style, your own drawing style, deliberately child-like in that way?

Oh no, not in any way. I find it a tremendous effort to make a shape, and I'm entirely concentrated on attempting to make the shape I want to make. And the kind of rather chunky drawing that I use, is very much as a result of the process whereby the line is ploughed through heavy material instead of moving lightly over the surface of paper, or whatever.

You're talking here about the woodcuts.

Specifically as a drawing of the woodcuts.

Can we just speak, for a moment, about the drawing as drawing, drawing on paper, and water colour drawing, that you've done in recent years?

Yes. At times I do a lot of drawing, and at times I do a lot of notes, working in the street, or anywhere, when I see things that are interesting. I find that the drawings that I do, that I like, are really very strange. I haven't followed the line with my eye in a regular way at all, but I've somehow injected into the lines and the shapes, some sort of feeling, which, as I see it, is expressive and volatile.

And expressive and volatile, seems to me, to be an admirable description of your colour, in the later drawings.

Well, I hope so.

There's a tendency to use very strong colour, I mean, that's always been a tendency, I suppose, but it's, it's particularly marked, isn't it, in the work of the 80s.

The later work, yes, that's right.

Can we perhaps turn now, then, to some of this later work, to the woodcuts of the 80s.

These deal often with urban subjects, often with nocturnal urban subjects - the Underground, city cafes, pubs, streets - are populated by lovers, drug addicts, manic personalities, punks.

There's a tendency in these woodcuts of the 80s, to a certain sort of violence of imagery, I always feel, as if, sort of, not that the subject matter is necessarily violent, but that the treatment of the urban life, of the cosmopolitan life, more particularly, and of cosmopolitan life at the edge, rather than at the civilised centre, if you know what I mean. A lot of the figures in these drawings and prints, are outsiders, or near outsiders, and a lot of them are young, and as I said, a lot of them are lovers. Could you, perhaps, say something about your attraction to that sort of imagery, and the violence of your actual treatment of it? Violence may not be the right word, but I think you know what I mean.

I do find figures at night particularly exciting. When I was very young, in my late teens, I used to haunt London, around Piccadilly, because I was so fascinated by these extraordinary girls, the girls of the street, they looked so dramatic. I never went with them, but I was very haunted by them, and I think some of the figures I do now, we're looking at a print of mine, called "Subway", of a group of three figures in the Underground. I think that girl, the main figure, with the great head of springing blonde hair, has that sort of look of the exaggerated, the unusual, the attention gaining figure of a woman. But what particularly interested me about figures in an Underground setting, is the surroundings. The Underground is full of images of both fear and joy. It's full of images of men with guns, of burning skyscrapers, of

car crashes, of disasters, and it's also full of images which are more or less joyful in intent, advertisements for holidays abroad in, white beaches, bright blue seas, advertisements of extremely beautiful girls and women for Vogue or Harpers Bazaar, or whatever, so you could say it's a scene which is divided between hope and fear, and these themes are illustrated, on the walls, and there are the figures. But aren't we, in a sense, all divided between hope and fear? Aren't the images on the walls, in fact, some kind of projection of the division of our own thoughts into hope and fear? So, to me, it's a kind of theatre. And I think of the figures as projecting themselves, these ideas of hope and fear, so the figures have this, for me, this dramatic identity between the wall and the figure.

Yes. The one we're looking at, "Subway", has this, the central figure is a sort of punk girl ...

Yes, that's right.

With spiky blonde, and a sort of explosion of spiky blonde hair, and she's flanked by two male figures, isn't she. She is sitting, and one of them is standing, and one of them is sitting beside her. Behind them is, indeed, an image of a woman on a beach, a sunburst image, which is one of your favourite images, and which is, again, one of these very ancient images, and one of the things about the image theatre of the Underground, is that one has all, in addition to the actual, these projections that you've talked about, of hope and fear, and pleasure and pain, you also have constantly, these emblematic signs, the Underground sign itself, of course, which is a divided circle, and the sunburst, and flags and all sorts of other of these very old signs.

That's right. The Underground image, the Underground sign, is really wonderfully strong and basic. The coloured circle, red, with the lateral shape running through it, like a sort of square-ended arrow, I love these very definite, these very powerful, these very basic shapes,

so, having those two Underground signs on either side of the image, was something I particularly liked. The general plan of the image is, is rather square, it's divided in the centre, making two sort of extended shapes, square-ended, and squarish. Then you have these circular Underground shapes, making, I think, a remarkable contrast to the severity of the angles. The group of figures itself, of course, makes a single triangle, right across the space of the design, and the angles of that triangle are taken up by the images behind the figures.

So, this is a crowded image, but in fact, it's, it's very, as with most of your images, when we look at it carefully, we find that it's very strictly controlled, in an abstract sense, there are elements of abstract composition which give tension, and control to the overall image.

Yes. Looking back, I don't like looking back, but in this particular sense, looking back, I do realise that my period of non-figuration, gave me a certain freedom in thinking about shapes. I hate a word like "facility", I prefer "grasp", grasp in thinking about shapes, which, I think, enabled me to articulate spaces, without thinking about them, just going ahead with the rush of creative feeling, and letting these often rather geometric shapes take their own place as I worked, without really analysing the composition in any sense that I might have done, when I was a young student.

It's become part of your, it's become second nature, really, hasn't, this sort of

I think so, yes.

This grasp of things. One of the other things to be said about these late images of the City and of figures in the City, is that they have a certain crude vitality that is rather like that of some folk art, and of what you might call "low art", the art of someone like Posada, in Mexico. The art of the popular woodcut. The sort of circus art, which loves these signs.

Well, I'm glad you say that, Mel, I have a tremendous sympathy for things like that, the things you've mentioned.

Fairground art, of course, is what I meant, circus and fairground art.

Fairground art. I love that rather direct, it's not crude drawing, it's powerful sort of drawing, it's simplified drawing. I really love it very much.

I imagine you must also like the somewhat garish, but very vital sorts of designs that you find on slot machines and pin tables.

Yes I do. I go into sports arcades quite often to look at the video games. I think they're extraordinarily interesting.

There are items in this, in this print, and in many others, which are drawn, it seems to me, directly from those very often, very brilliant abstract designs on the sides of slot machines.

Yes. I've made a lot of notes of those, I have.

Of course, that is part of the visual texture of the, of the cosmopolitan, of the inner city, of the urban city, of the urban scene at night, especially, I think. And so it's entirely appropriate that you should have taken this range of images and integrated it into these extremely sort of, extremely expressive pictures, almost tableau, of nocturnal city life. Another thing that has recurred in the later work, in the work of the 80s, has, of course, been the natural imagery of birds, butterflies, trees and so on, so that opposition in your work has continued, hasn't it, in

that sense as well, that you alternate between these urban images and the images of a sort of paradise, a sort of paradise of birds and butterflies and trees.

Yes, those paradise things, they do seem to be released from some sort of inner world. I really don't know how they come about. I think we were saying earlier, that Peter Fuller had suggested, as you're suggesting, that it might be to do with my extraordinary childhood, where birds and butterflies, and marvellous trees, and all the rest of it were just round me, surrounded by those things. Certainly, at times, my head is full of, is full of these strange birds, and I don't know, I feel interested to release them in some way.

Birds and animals, cockerels, cows, various beasts, peacocks, the other thing about that, that aspect of your later work, is that, again, the mode of working, makes each image, it seems to me, intensely enclosed.

That's an interesting thing.

Very tightly framed, either as if one were looking through a very very small window at this thing, or as if you were inside, as it were, a very intense enclosure.

Well, I often use borders, don't I?

Yes.

And I found borders important. I remember my delight of finding that Seurat often painted his frames in a sort of narrow border. Again, I don't quite know where that border comes from. I have looked a great deal at ecclesiastical architecture, Romanesque, sort of pre-Gothic, and so often you get this wonderful sense of the figure having a place, and the border

has something to do with giving the figure a place, and I feel very much about certain designs, that they need somewhere to be, and by giving them some kind of frame, perhaps a hard, quite strong frame, it seems to give them a setting which I like, and it gives them a very hard cut-off between their own space and the surrounding spaces.

Of course, the boxes have something of that feeling as well, don't they.

Exactly.

It's a way of enclosing an experience, of cutting it off from the world, so however real the things are, by putting them in a box, you are separating them from our own world. In some of them, there's a rather disconcerting aspect, in that there are things attached to the box, outside the box, as, for example, the alarm clock in the Succioni print that we were talking about, box, that we were talking about earlier. And that has a peculiarly disconcerting effect, because it breaks, precisely, this enclosure, this sense of distance, that the box gives things.

I think it might be good at this point, Mel, as we've often discussed it, to come to the question of disjointed style. I remember your saying, at one time, that you had a certain feeling for artists who had no set style, and I have very strong feelings about that. I think the idea of an artist working, say, at a college, say, in England, say at a place like the Royal College, at the Slade, and then developing, however he developed, on the basis of his work at the college or at the Slade, so that his work becomes a development, a continuation, if you like, an arc, with one end firmly based on the groundwork laid down while he was in college. I feel that very strongly, because I had older relations who were artists, and to some extent, that was the story of their own development, the early work, that is, forming a basis for work of later years, perhaps many many later years, but I know that I belong to the first generation where that kind of continuity, that lineal development has been destroyed and disrupted by the sheer

strength of the tensions to which we have been subject. For example, when I first got the full impact, say, of the work of a man like Picasso, in a funny way, it changed you, or it changed part of you, or it bent you, or it distorted you. It altered you in some way. And certainly, where prints are concerned, the discovery of a material like wood, and the use of the tools and processes that went with the working of wood, it also altered my feeling about drawing. Later on, what we have already discussed about this extraordinary development of the use of photographs, particularly as applied to screen printing, again, it was something I felt I had to cope with. I couldn't leave it on the side as if such a development didn't exist, as if it hadn't happened. For me, it had to happen. And I turned my back, as I was telling you, on a great deal that I'd done, to find out how to cope with it, and that meant, again, a change, a metamorphosis of the form of my life in the studio, and that goes on and on. So I do believe that with my generation, we got the first group of artists who were prepared to think again, always prepared to think again.

I think you've partly put your finger on it when you've talked, when you've spoken of the, the sheer plethora of visual material available to the modern artist, which has largely been the consequence of photography and reproduction, of course.

All part of it.

Also, I think, perhaps, and this would be true of your work as well, the sudden availability at the beginning of this century, again, partly through photography, and partly through the opening of collections of ethnographic work and so on ...

Absolutely.

Of primitive work, of tribal work, of a whole range of imagery, towards which, artists developed a different attitude, one not any longer of condescension, or of it being primitive in a condescending way, but much more of it being a marvellous range of human images ...

Its that psychic mobility, psychic mobility at every point.

A range of images that could be used, and, of course, Picasso is a key figure, as in almost everything else in this, but he is by no means the only figure, but I mean, the idea of the mask and of the fetish, all these are important. The receptiveness of surrealism to these things is also an important aspect, isn't it. Your boxes have a very strong fetishistic feel, or some of them do, and some of the assemblages turn the paint brush into a sort of fetish, a sort of little idol of painting.

Very good. Very good. But, you see, you used the term, "plethora of images", and, of course, that's exactly right. You open your newspaper, and you're assailed by all sorts of images. You walk down the street, you pass a six sheet poster, it takes you probably ten seconds to pass such a large image. And later in the day, you may look at a bit of television, and again, you'll suffer a bombardment of varied images, that's very much part of it. What you mentioned about the books, you see, when I was a student, really, art books weren't all that well illustrated, and certainly in regard to what we still call "modern art", there was very little record of what the most interesting artists were doing on the Continent. But the moment you got the sort of full blast of excellent reproduction, big scale reproduction, and reproduction that was fairly instant, in terms of work being done, it created many many effects. One of them was that you live now, because when I was a student, there was so much, you know, about Rembrandt, or Raphael, painting that was done years and years ago. And, of course, one of the effects of more instant recording of images, or anything else, is it insists that you are living now, and I find, for example, that I still have an absolutely

passionate love, say, of visiting the National Gallery, that it's a passion that I daren't exercise very often. I'm nearly always absorbed in regard to the work of the other man, in work that has been done in my period, and sometimes I go to a museum, last month I went to the Wallace Collection, which I hadn't been to for, I should think, 25 or 30 years, it wasn't the shock of the new, it was the shock of the old, because, you see, we tend to live with things that are very immediate now, and again, that's completely different, you know, if one thinks of older artists with their feelings about Rembrandt, or whoever it was, how much they lived in the past.

And, of course, they were trained in a way that hardly changed since the studios of the Renaissance.

Exactly. They started with Roman casts, that sort of thing.

One of the exciting things about Malevich, working on a recent publication on Malevich, I found, was Malevich's own violent renunciation of all that, that past culture, in order to make it new.

Yes.

And that is very much a part of the culture within which you've worked.

It's been particularly difficult for me, because I had so much of it when I was young, and I have so much to throw away, to "unlive".

When you say "so much of it", Michael, are you referring back to your family and your father, and that sort of world, or are you referring back to,

Yes, when I became a student, you know, and I, among my close friends, were men like Houthuesen, and Albert Houthuesen, you know, he would practically only talk about Rembrandt and about older Dutch painting, about Germans like Altdorfer, about these very ancient, very wonderful things, but not things that were being done at that time.

We're coming close to the end of this particular tape, I'm just wondering whether there's anything else you want to say, Michael, before we turn it, about the work of the 80s. One of the things that occurred to me was that these images of the City, that we've been talking about, the punks and drug addicts, and bright girls on the Underground and so on, and rather rough young men, they contain their own oppositions, the images of a sort of paradise, the images of the sunburst, and the holiday and so on, and the hopes as well as the fears, but generally speaking, I find many of them purgatorial images. These people look as if they are waiting, not just for a train, but for another sort of destination. Are these images opposed, in that sense, to your paradise images? Would you say that the country and the town are versions, in your imagination, of heaven and hell?

Not at one time. The Underground images, the City images, I suppose fitted into a span, whatever it was, probably three or four years, and I was constantly making notes in the street, constantly thinking about these images, and about the people, the people, and suddenly, I did some kind of a bird image, and my imagination seemed to enter another phase, and I became very obsessed with the way that trees might look, with these birds ...

End of F818 Side A

F818 Side B

Michael, I'd like to talk with you now, about your career, that aspect of your career as a teacher, and a communicator. You've written a number of books which are very practical, very practical in their emphasis on technique, upon possibilities of expression, and which are characteristically free of any sort of direction as to what subject matter people might choose, or any sort of didacticism as to how things should be done. You've been a great facilitator of, of freedom, it seems to me, in teaching, and I imagine this goes beyond the teaching of printing, into the teaching of art as a whole, and I'd like you to talk a little about that.

Well, that aspect of life has really quite a big place. The more adventurous areas of teaching came out of the two books I wrote about prints, the book called Relief Printing was published in New York, and circulated, I think, quite widely in America, in the schools and universities, and it brought me continual invitations to go to America and talk to students. This was the 70s, and it was a wonderful time to talk to students, particularly American students, because, in the university, they tended to have a regular staff, not a very large staff, so that students who were, who were really interested, who were really committed to art, had a rather, a rather limited diet in the way of teaching, so that an artist of articulacy, coming from England, whom they might have felt was doing interesting work, was really enormously welcome. They were a wonderful audience, if one was talking to them, and wonderfully receptive if one was attempting to help them with their work. There was one particular place I visited several times, a summer school called Haystack Mountain, it was built by Barnes, a beautiful wooden building, along the North Atlantic coast, and the place itself, gave one a wonderful sense of freedom, and they had very poor facilities, and often that turns out to be a very good thing, because it throws both the student, and the teacher, very much on their own resources. So, if they were felling trees in the woods at the back of the campus, we'd go out with ink, and ink slabs, and rollers and paper, and all the rest of it, and print the amputated stumps of the trees they were felling, or we'd wrap paper round interesting things, like old columns, and

take images from the, the circumference of the column, or we'd, in some cases, take furniture to pieces, and print every surface. I remember, we did this with a desk, a child's desk. We'd print every surface of each bit of wood, each shape was a woodblock, and having got a set of prints from each component of the desk, we would then stick them back in their appropriate positions, and reassemble the desk, so, in one case, we had an object, I really love, which was a printed desk, so appropriate to the idea of a desk, and so wonderfully interesting to look at, you know, the fact that these different black images, of the different parts of the desk, seen in different dimensions, and in different shadows, different lights, it was really a wonderful time to work with students, to help them as one could. As regards London, I was not always so happy, because print-making in London schools, doesn't really carry the punch of painting and sculpture, so that one sometimes felt, entering the print room, one was entering a second class carriage, and that was, naturally, a feeling I hated very much. But again, I taught a good deal in the 70s, so one was dealing with some marvellously lively and inventive students. At Hornsey, as it was then called, now Middlesex Poly, they had a very open system of tutorials and teaching, and each teacher, from whatever department, would share out the students between the different departments, so that I might be talking to sculptors and painters, just as much as the students who were doing prints. And from what I've said, it was obvious that I liked that very much. A good system.

Clearly, I think you take the job of teaching, the idea of teaching, very seriously. It has been, certainly perhaps more so in the later part of your life, as an artist, that's been a very crucial part of it.

And still is.

It still is. You still have people visiting you here, don't you. And you still talk a great deal, you still give talks about your own work, and your own methods, a great deal, don't you. Did

you have any particular attitude towards teaching, in terms of the way that you did it? The methods of teaching you employed?

Oh yes, I did. I felt very passionately that the teacher should always be down on the floor with the student. I was always happy when students were quick to call me by my Christian name, because I always felt that I was on the same job as the student, there was this overlap of interest and excitement, and I'm talking, obviously, about gifted students, who care about their work, so I really loved their equal dialogue, and where I could, I would get the students to see my own work, talk about my own work, so that it was a two-way operation, with no holds barred.

How far was it a matter of instruction for you, and how far was it a matter of inspiring them to, to make their own discoveries? There was, as you know, there has been something of a, an argument in art education, between those two sort of poles, between the artist, the indication of the artist is really a situation in which the student is free to discover all sorts of things for themselves, of the situation in which the student is taught specific techniques, by experts, and masters.

Yes, yes. Well, you've already hit it, haven't you, a sort of two-tier idea of teaching, that is to say, when it comes to stretching a canvas, an artist who's stretched many canvases knows more about stretching a canvas than a student who has never stretched a canvas. When it comes to process, I believe in very positive instruction. When it comes to dealing with the important things which stand above process, I feel one moves into a different world altogether, and I think, I think it's very dangerous to make positive criticism. I think, for criticism to become positive, it has to be some kind of poised assessment, poised assessment between the student's view and your view. I think you're walking a delicately stretched tightrope, and I think you have to, to progress along that line, with the very greatest care. My

basic feeling was that helpful teaching comes out of a concern for the student, and not only as a worker, but also as a friend. I think the instinct to help, is a very deep instinct, and I think it's there when you cross a road, to help somebody who has fallen off their bicycle, I think it's something as basic as that, that you want to offer, where you can, some help, and when it comes to ideas, when it comes to points of view, when it comes to concepts, when it comes to very personal things, like the student's personal range of colour, or whatever, I think you have to go so carefully. And it's very much the opposite of instruction in process, which I always believe should be very clear, and very positive.

I'd like to turn now, Michael, to some of the more general questions that seem to me, to emerge out of what we've just been talking about. The first is to ask you if you have any ideas about the place of art in education generally. I'm here not talking about art education, but art in education, the sort of thing that Herbert Read was writing about in *Art and Education*.

Well, I've dealt with art students, mainly. Really, my chief concern there is a friendship I have with Rod Taylor, Head of Drumcroon, because, reading some of his writings, knowing him very well, and knowing what he's doing with students in schools, I am aware of a very remarkable process going forward.

And with art and education, Michael, necessarily, it's a way really of talking about the significance of art in society as a whole. What art really means, perhaps, not in society, but within the lives of men and women. Now, you've been an artist for so long, you've been so intensely involved with that process for so long, this must have been something that you've thought about. You must have asked yourself, sometimes, what is it all about? Why am I doing this? And have you ever come up with an answer?

Well, I suppose you come up with all sorts of answers, Mel, don't you, if you live with it. I, I hate obscurity in the sense of art being totally engaged with itself, and with its own values. I think art, the art I like, is about things that concern people, that concern human life, that may not always be readily readable, but that that is their concern, and ultimately, of course, one must feel the weight of that importance. If, on the one hand, one thinks of a world without music, without art, without architecture, it seems to me a terrible world, and what the artist adds, what the musician, the poet adds, is something so important. In the end, it seems to me that art is of supreme importance. Without the vision offered by great artists, or the music offered by great composers, it seems to me that the world would be, really, a terrible place, because however awful the things that go on, however frightful Pol Pot may go on in Vietnam or Cambodia, I think the moment one can think of a marvellous building, or something like that, there's a process of retrieval, without which, I think, life would be a nightmare. As regards one's own role, as far as one can see it, I like to do things which mean something to people of sense and sensitivity. A lot of these images we've discussed, I think, are not in any sense, popular, but I do judge by the relationships that I have with other people, with other artists, with students, with friends, that in their own terms, they have a sort of articulacy, so as I said a moment earlier, I really hate movements in art, which are concerned with art as a closed room. I only like art that has windows and doors open.

Necessarily, of course, art develops its own terms of reference, and so that there's a sense, isn't there, in which all artists are in dialogue with all other art, and one of the things we've been saying today, is that that, the possibilities of that dialogue, across the cultural boundaries and historical boundaries, has increased enormously in this century, and that when we look at a print like "Subway", or a water colour, a recent water colour, the 1988 water colour of animals and birds, or when we look at the recent prints of butterflies and birds, or if we go back through your production to the images of violence, of the assemblages and boxes, back through those to the more abstract images of the 60s, with their emblems and signs, and their

imprinting of the surfaces of objects from the natural world and so on, one is aware in your work, of an enormous range of possible things with which your art has made contact. Of a dialogue going on with nature and with past art, with primitive art, and with the most sophisticated modern art. I, it's, it's a very remarkable career we're surveying, isn't it, here, in terms of that breadth of concern, and range of technique.

I, I don't like these sort of grand sweeping statements, but if I had to, to make a sort of short statement to a stranger, I would say something like, "I think that art comes out of life, and I think it has to go back into life."

That's an eloquent, but somewhat gnomic utterance, Michael! And at the risk of seeming a little bit banal, I'm going to ask you to give me some instances of what you mean by coming out of life, and going back into life.

I think something that is difficult, often, thinking of people who are not professionally involved with art, is the fact that many forms of art appear to be strange, and unfamiliar. To take an instance of a man I knew, Henry Moore, he told me that as a child, since his father had a job in a mine, that he was always being frightened by hearing about mine disasters, men caught inside the mine, unable to escape, and the idea of being trapped in a hole, had terrified him, and what made it worse, he told me, was that in the autumn, his mother saved the apples, because his father liked baked apples for Sunday lunch, so he dreaded Sunday mornings, for the reason that his mother would say, "Harry, fetch the apples." And he had to go under the stairs to a tiny cellar-like room, where she kept the apples, and he said, "I was always terrified. Anyway, all this was part of the fact that when I begun to model, when I had a lump of clay in my hand, if I created a hole, I had this feeling I had to find a way out, so that everything the critics have said about any formal devices uniting the interior and exterior of

my sculpture, really originated in this feel that if there was a cavern or hole in the sculpture, I just instinctively wanted to get out, and find a way out."

That's a very instructive tale. Are there other stories relating to particular artists that would illustrate this? I mean, that's a perfect example of the way in which an emotional or a psychic pressure leads to a particular formal invention.

Exactly.

Can we take another artist that I know was a friend of yours, and that's Stanley Spencer. Spencer seems to me very much an artist who took things from life, into art, and then returned them, as it were.

Yes, exactly. Yes.

Obviously with the whole imagery of Cookham, and so on, and the way in which he, in a sense, domesticated the stories, the Bible stories.

Yes, yes, absolutely.

Is there any, could you tell us anything about Spencer as an artist?

Well, yes. I got to know him fairly well, because we went away for a summer holiday together. We went alone. The Charltons, he was very fond of Daphne Charlton, and I was very fond of my wife, my first wife, so the group of us spent a holiday, and he was an extraordinary man.

May I ask when this was? Before the War?

The same time as my Pilgrim Trust. It must have been during the War.

Just at the beginning of the War.

Well, I'm not sure, during the War, anyway. Because at one moment he could be so remarkable in his description of his inner life, and so absolutely awful and unremarkable in his behaviour in his outer life. He joined us with a small paper bag, that was all his luggage, and it contained some paints, some brushes, and his palette, and he didn't carry any money, so he got the Tooth Gallery to send him some, a weekly allowance, so he managed very simply. He was very uncontrolled. The extraordinary control of his imagery was not matched by the control of his behaviour, of his life, and if he got into an argument, and he very easily got into arguments, with one of the company at breakfast, he'd be inclined to go on, on, on and on, and it was so strange, you know, you'd think, because he worked very hard, but he was so easily side-tracked by this sort of passionate, unbridled temperament. One evening, I remember, he started talking about the Resurrection, and he talked about some of his ideas that he'd carried out at Burghclere, of the Resurrection, of the dead soldiers, and it was quite amazing, the way he talked. It was like something out of a book of the prophets. The voice, everything became different. It was quite, quite wonderfully visionary. But it was a personality that struck me as being so self-encased. It touched the outside world of art at so few points, I don't know if he was interested in Picasso, if he was interested in anybody else. I know he was passionately interested in early art, particularly early Italian art, but on the whole, he went his own way, and on the whole, in the end, one felt a smallness within the greatness of his talent, because of this dreadful sort of isolation.

Do you think that compromised his art in the end? Or do you think his art somehow

I don't know whether I like to use the word "compromise" because I think the best of his paintings is really magnificent, don't you? Like that double portrait that we had at the Royal Academy, in the show of English Painting, or like those children playing around on a bed, that very early painting. I think that they're unique, and marvellous. But yes, in the end, much of his later painting is overloaded and repetitive. He didn't change. And it has the sadness of an overbaked pudding, or something, his figures, and the way he treated objects at the end of his life.

We were talking, Michael, about your statement, about art having to come out of life and having to go back into it, having to make, having to be drawn, in some sense, from reality, and having to then return to it. You've spoken about Moore, and about Spencer. Which other artists could you instance for me as, in a very direct way, exemplifying that quality?

Well, I think, I think for many people, an artist like Mondrian, is somewhat difficult. But his work absolutely resonates with the feeling of light in space, and I think I've heard that he actually painted some of his own rooms, the rooms that he lived in, in a way that would remind you of his paintings. Whatever it was, it was something he needed so desperately, and it so provoked him to these wonderful statements about light, about colour, about divided space, but I think, if one knows his work, and knows something about his life, you will see it not as an abstract device, but as a psychic necessity by which he lived.

And how do you think, clearly, the interesting thing about Mondrian is that final, well, not the final, but that great simplification of that, that period of work, of late abstract work, has somehow or other managed to resonate, hasn't it.

Yes, absolutely.

Anyone would think they would find it absolutely simple, and having very little to do with the world as they know it. What is it that makes those paintings so much more than exercises in design?

I think one reads the mark, I think that the passionate commitment to what he felt about those colours, about those spaces, is read by the receptive mind. I do. If I could take an instance from my own life. When I was using a found material, a wonderful cut through a tree, or something like that, I must say that there was a sort of religious element. If I drew the tree myself, how could I be proud? Because it seemed to me, my drawing was never equal to my emotions about the tree. But if I had some sort of privilege in actually working with a section of that tree, one felt a kind of pleasurable humility, a pleasurable reverence in co-operating with an object that was in fact torn from the very heart of nature.

And, I suppose, one might say, in conclusion, here, that that demands a sort of absolute commitment, and that the artist's work is the manifestation of a sort of special commitment.

Surely, surely, surely and so we'll finish there shall we?

Well, thank you very much, Michael, for this conversation.

End of F818 Side B

End of Interview