Jill Magen Interview Marcia Marcus April 17 1982
Via Irving Sandler papers AAASI

MM Oh, well, just one thing. I mean, I never thought about it simply because it was never a question of thinking in terms of male / female, as far as I was concerned, simply because it never occurred to me, as I said, I didn't think about things like that . I just happened. Of course my relationship with most of the teachers that I had had to do with the quality of their teaching, and I don't think had anything to do with my being female.
Most certainly, there couldn't have been more wonderful teachers in Dickinson and sure, never for one second did it cross his mind that I was a better or worse student had anything to do with my being female . And it wasn't until I was at RISD actually, which is 77 to 8, and it was in 78 that it happened. The head of the Department changed senior students at the second half, I went into someone's studio for the first time and gave her a crit and as I was leaving. And she was a senior. Uh- Looked at me and said, you know that was the first time I had a criticism by a woman. And I was appalled, first of all, because, I mean, they always have women on the periphery, you know, printmaking, weaving, pottery, etchings, whatever.
But never in a male fields like painting or sculpture, because that's man's work. I tried to diffuse her reaction because a good teacher is a good teacher, and I would certainly not, you know, make a distinction in that direction. But I felt there was something so plaintive about it. I think because it never occurred to me, you know, the whole thing about role models or whatever. She may have been more aware simply because she was younger and, you know, and, and felt that way.
And so it was good. But I'm also sure it's because I said things to her that the basic faculty didn't, so that it was essentially a good teaching thing, but amplified by the fact that I was female, because I can think of a number of male teachers who would have been equally good with her. But it obviously meant something to her that I was female. and I-

You know, mostly rode through it. I haven't had too many male students who seemed to feel uncomfortable, and then I would just ride through it and eventually, you know, either they respected me as a teacher or they didn't. There was no point in arguing about it, it's their problem, not mine. I mean, I'm me and I am not going to teach differently because I'm female, and if I see it in the eyes, which only happened, I think twice in all the times I taught that I felt that that was a factor in someone's resistance. I just ignored it because what else to do about it.

Jill Right.

MM It is completely stupid. But I think, you know, the schools, are just making it worse for themselves because they're. They never hire or rarely hire at the bottom so that it perpetuates itself. And so and I mean this is exempting to a large extent the schools in the New York area, although not necessarily. There because there have been colleges that have always hired when not too.
Let's say a percentage comparable to the number of women who show or achieve some kind of recognition. But certainly that's the worst stronghold left over with prejudice.

Jill How about in Museums
MM Well, I really can't answer that because my experience, my only museum experience was really with the Whitney. You know, and John Baur obviously doesn't feel that way because he chose my work and even went to a lot of trouble because, he - The Delancey Street museum didn't have a telephone. And I was highly pregnant and no one ever came in during the week. So finally, I never went down there. When my show was up because I felt like I might be taken away at any moment and therefor wanted to get as much work done as possible. And he called me at home and said he wanted to come see my show, but he didn't know how to find it. Nobody was there. He couldn't fine a phone. I said; I'm only ten minutes away and I'll down there and let you in, which I did. And then I ended up in the show. And they bought a painting and they bought another one a couple of years later. And they certainly shown enough woman, you know, since then. Not to the extent that a lot of women would like,

and certainly not in proportion to the number of women who are painting at a high level.
So that is - I guess there is some, but I don't really have enough contacts to know how much that effects anything. because there are so many weird things that take place in the museums that I think sexism is only a part.

JIll I guess this is sort of more specifically in general in the 50s and 60s, specifically in the 60s. And, you know, once again, if you're, you know, if you weren't aware, that's fine. What role- not just for your work, but, what role did collectors play?

MM Well, I think from what I have heard, Both from artists and from dealers who I can talk to and other people. The collectors play a greater role now than they did before. I think at one point, I'm sure, for example, Hirshhorn came down to my studio because of the Young American show and obviously had asked at the museum who they thought was good and came, I, I don't, I had the feeling when he came down to my studio that it wasn't just on the basis of the work that he saw there, that he had spoken to someone and someone said, yes, she's good and you want some work.
And Nurburgher did too, but I have not ever appealed to the big time collectors.

For whatever reasons, whether it was blocked by dealers, whether it was their own personal choice, I think the dealers in the 60s had more to do with collecting than the collectors did, except the very personal ones who just loved art. And they make their collections on the basis of personal choice. I think now it seems to be, from what I've heard, almost like cornering the market on the latest thing and manipulating the market with the collectors in collusion with the dealers, so that it's a very, very different scene. And the dealers often determine who someone shows if they're powerful enough and if they're really into it as a kind of investment, whatever kind of situation. But this is, let's say, educated hearsay, and other people know more about the workings of it than I do. It’s dismaying. Something I don’t know.

JIll Yeah. I mean, once again, and, you know, this is a general question in, you know, it doesn't apply. Don't answer it.
MM Well I have never kept my opinions to myself, which is probably not a terrific idea.

Jill What effect did the growth of media have, especially TV on the art scene?

MM Oh, I don't think much. I really don't. I mean, in terms of mass media, I mean, I always find it amusing that, for example, on the Today show, they'll have real actors, and real playwrights and real musicians.
When it comes to the visual arts, they will have someone who paints with their toes or holds a brush in their mouth or something like that. They rarely have someone who doesn't have an angle. There have been films on channel 13, but that's a whole other bag that's a selective audience. In terms of mass media, very rarely does it deal with art.
Jill What do you feel what effect did you feel that, the acceptance of the New York School have on the Art scean and on the work?.
MM You mean on the Abstract Expresionisim?
Jill Yeah. Well, it , I think basically it was good simply because it made art respectable. You know, it was a kind of hidden thing, thing - as far as America was concerned, not just with painting. I remember an early boyfriend of mine who had worked for MGM in the late 40s and early 50s, saying to me when he went home to visit his mother, someone at a gathering saying, well, what do you do? And he said, “I'm a writer.” Yes, but what do you really do? Because it just simply wasn't anything that anyone had any real contact with. Or if you said you were a painter a little later than that, so was it. Oh, I have an aunt who works in, you know, blah high school of the country or something. It simply was not something that was respectable. I mean, my own mother, when I got married and started to have children thought I would give up this nonsense. And it wasn't until the Whitney show that this outside stamp of approval made it acceptable. And then she would go down to the Whitney every Sunday and call me up and tell you what you overheard people saying about my paintings.

Right? And they were on the same page as she had seen at the Delancey Street museum. But it was different because now it was in a museum and it was you know, stamped Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval. You're okay.

Jill Yeah.

MM So I think that the publicity around the Abstract Expressionist and about the whole blossoming of the art world was positive, just because it made it okay to be a painter, it made it so okay that now it is just, you know, there are artists coming out of the woodwork all over the place. And it's just so enormous. But it's a whole other scean. It just is nowhere like before. You know, which may or may not be okay. I don't know. Makes it difficult because it's almost impossible to keep up with. I'm sure you can look up how many galleries there are how many artists there are. And it's just like a whole other thing. It just is not the same thing. It's a commodity.

Jill Yeah. I guess, what do you feel the changes have been since the 60s? Especially in the last few years.

MM Well, depends on what you're talking about, because sometimes it's horribly depressing to walk into Soho and see what kind of things. Well, you don't have to just go to SoHo. It's just easy for me to walk there, but and see the kind of things that are up on the wall iand the kind of fashionable approach to what's going now. And the idea of image in which, you know, I've had lots of people down in the last year. Not just looking for a gallery, but even private dealers or whatever. Often it's been liking the work, but it doesn't fit in, so that every gallery feels it has to have a certain image and promote a certain kind of art. And therefore, if you don't fit neatly into a box, you're nowhere. And I unfortunately, don't fit neatly into a box. And-It's just different. And it's-I don't know

Jill The whole sense of comodity or the way art is treated
MM Well I meanl, when you're obviously, you know, periods during which other things are taking place or, you know, certain kind of thing hits a lot of

people at the same time. I mean, this is nothing unusual in art or anything else, but. And a lot of it's very authentic. You know, I'm not, I mean, I went down to the Maryland Institute about a month ago and there was a girl whose work looked like a lot of the things that you see in the galleries. And I started to say something, and she practically burst into tears because everyone assumed, because if she was doing what she was doing, she looked at the art magazines and everything else. And then as I talked to her, it was obvious that she was doing what she was doing because she wanted to do what she was doing. And she arrived at this independently of other things that were going on right now. And it just happened to fit in. And it was extremely interesting work, and very bizarre and something that I couldn't really give a criticism to because she sort of knew what she was doing, and there was no point in just throwing a whole bunch of words at her. But it's more complicated than that. I mean, people talk about pluralism and I just get confused, you know, with all these labels. And I made a joke which I can't remember about, “Chaotic Pluralism” or something like that at the moment. I mean, I don't know what it is. I don’t know how. it's more than just “anything goes”. I mean, it's certainly lots of different kinds of things going on.
There are certain things that are in there is a far more concern about status. And whether you're in or you're out or whatever, which again, is a fashionable kind of thing. I've heard it from dealers, And it's just weird, you know, it's just like eventually one would hope that if it's good, it will prevail. But that is not necessarily true.

Jill Right.
MM And it just sometimes gets very depressing because you feel like there's no place for you because you see this stuff.
I have seen things in schools that I think are better than what I see on walls or in not commercial galleries that are as good as anything I've seen anyplace else. And I just, I think there's a lot of chaos and a lot of confusion . I mean we all know about the hype and the promotion and all that stuff. But and I think that came in with POP and the whole realization that this was not just art anymore. It was, you know, a thing, and just diffrent. That's it.

Jill Yeah, I think that's it. I would liketo look, you know, through your work.

MM Then why don't you look and see there there are any questions.

Jill Yeah. I mean, I'm sure there are I am sure.
Tape off

MM Well, it's basically what happens on a slide lecture. Because the last time I did one at Vasser, the first paintings I encouraged questions during the thing, because I don't like to talk about my work and therefore if people don't ask questions, it can be excruciatingly boring, because I'll be confined to saying when I did it, how big is it. And a couple of dumb things like that.

Jill This is a self-portrait
MM Yes

Jill When did you start - I mean introducing, I mean how- When did you start becoming or appearing in your paintings.

MM You mean in self-portrait?

Jill Yeah,

MM Well, I did self-portrait in 1951. because, you know, people make such a thing out of it that it gets me slightly hysterical because it's a standard thing to do.

Jill Oh Yeah.

MM I mean, there's landscape, if you're dealing with figurative art and still lives and self portraits or portraits of people. And for years I did portraits and I've done still lives and landscapes and I don't know why people if they've been to museums or if they know all the self-portraits that Rembrandt did and other artists have put in their paintings, why suddenly it becomes this big

issue . And when I was in the Women's Caucus show that was called Self Image or whatever it was called, I was asked to write something that I didn't want to write. I wrote it in about five minutes in a state of fury, and basically it was " Why not" it's as valid as anything else. And the only thing that concerns me is if a painting is strong and if it isn't then it doesn't matter what the subject is. So the subject to me is the least important part . And if I use a self-portrait I don't consider it any more peculiar than using anything else. You know, you don't ask abstract painters, why do you use this shape as opposed to that shape, right? It's just whatever impulse you get to do something, you do it. And that's really why you're painting. And the fact that it's a self-portrait as opposed to something else doesn't really matter. It's the painting that matters. Otherwise known as the painting is the subject

JIll Right. And this?

MM That is 1959

Jill How big is it?

MM I can't remember it. Maybe, on the back. Fairly big , this is smaller. They are mostly life size sometime a little over.

Jill And um you paint fairly thin.

MM Well , now. What happened at a certain point- Well, I used to build things up in lots of thin layers, and then at some point, I guess around 73 or 4, I started letting what used to take place in the early stages of a painting, come out. So for instance, this one, which is 74, is like the more immediate kind of a thing. So that the drawing is there and the paint is there, and I scrape a lot and I did I used to do that anyway, as a kind of underpainting, but then keep building up to a very flat thing. So the people always thought my paintings were very flat and photographers would have terrible times because they would come there. Having seen my work before, thinking it was flat and have a terrible time photographing it because it wasn't that flat. There was a build up

of a lot of things and I just wanted a more immediate impulse. So that I started scraping down so that even if I work over something, it looks fairly thin. Simply because I keep scraping it down. So it has a kind of luminosity that you can't get some other way. So you know, it is just, you know, it's just a developmental thing. Because you're looking at reasonably recent work. And. Well, I was very dissatisfied with what I was doing before it was becoming too stiff again. You know, it wasn't even that I didn't like what I was doing, but there was a point where I wanted to change, and I didn't know quite how. So it took a jolt in various directions before it became more immediate and more direct. Maybe me too. I don't know. That is about the same time. So is that. That is the one in the Whitney. I probably would not like it anymore.

Jill Why do you feel that way?

MM I don't know it has a certain stiffness to it that I don't like, it's very strange because I have, for various reasons, gotten to see earlier work, and some I still like and some I am just appalled by. Other people like it. So I keep my mouth shut for people who own the work.

Jill Right.

MM So I have to be quiet. As they're telling me how much they loved it for the last 20 years, I can't say, well, you know, I really hate it now. It wouldn't be very politic. You know. You know, but there are some things that I did a long time ago that I still like. It sometimes even surprised by, other things I think I will like, and go back and see again and really don't. And maybe it's because I'm so involved in what I'm doing now that I thought I did things so tight. Whatever.

Jill Do you feel that your own esthetic has changed a lot? Or It's hard to say. I mean, I guess?

MM Well, I was always involved with surface, a different kind of surface. This is a more, as I said well, I can't think of anything but "immediate" with a more direct approach. Not always- You know, so equally successful in all things. But

it's different. But I just let it happen because I, I don't see - I can't direct it. I don't want to direct it. I think there, there have been times when I made a definite effort to do something other- as a kind of break. Which has been successful. But in general, I just try to let it happen because I'd like to see what comes out of it, you know, because I don't think -I mean, you can force something in certain periods, just because you're so dissatisfied with what you're doing.
But I think in general, you have to let it just happen.

Jill Other things that. I mean, I mean, it's really hard to tell, especially when looking at your work in photographs .

MM Well, why don't we turn the thing off and I'll take you on the grand tour and then you can see what I've been doing recently. It might help

Jill Okay,

Tape off

MM Well, I just thought- is it recording now? It just occurred to me that I could tell you it without mentioning names. But someone with whom I was fairly friendly was a very good friend of someone who died. Said that he felt that he had to carry on the tradition of this artist who had died, and I thought. I mean, that is I think it's the difference between a bizarre kind of conceit and ego, because it was appalling to me that he thought you could continue the work of someone who had kicked the bucket and ended up doing what I consider pretty horrible paintings when he had been quite good as a third rate, which is not a bad level if you take the top as the top- of abstract expressionist paintings. And I thought that was really bizarre. And I don't doubt his honesty. I'm just horrified at the attitude. You know, I don't think that he was doing it because figurative art was in. As it is, every year and a half since then. It's like, you know, my haircut, which has gone in and out of style every five years or three years or two years. Starting with Ingrid Bergman,

which I guess I should be grateful for because I never really knew what to do with my hair before that. Because it wouldn't lie down.

Jill Right , I have the same kind of hair situation.

MM I used to get a set and it would last two days and it was just impossible. Like this cloud I carried around. It wouldn't do anything. But anyhow.

Jill Okay, how about Newman?

MM Well, I really, I have no reaction and still have very little reaction to his work. The only thing that I really loved was a wonderful movie, but I think Emil D'Antonio “Painters on Painting” and he interviewed Barnett Newman, and I think it was very funny also because the first part of the movie, which is the strongest dealt with abstract expressionist and or people around in the transitional phase and in the background, there was always the tinkling of ice so that, you know, they were the drinkers, right?

Jill Right. That’s great.

MM And, at the end of the interview with Newman the rest of which I don't remember because it's been really about ten years since I saw the film, at least. He. And one of the things I liked about the movie is that the filmmaker did not intrude into the artist space. He simply -obviously asked the question off sound. And the answer came back. And I guess it had to do with, like, what- Maybe why do you paint the way you do? And he said something wonderful, which is where it ended. Like he said “Do you ask the birds why they sing?”. I thought that was just terrific. But I really haven't looked at them and I, I can appreciate sometimes the organization of the canvas, but I really don't have a reaction.

Jill Right. I mean, you know, you know, they don't

MM Well You can’t force it. Either you like it or you don’t like it. I have said that to people who come here. You know, don't feel funny about- I'd rather have someone honestly say, I really hate your work than someone digging to try and find something nice to say when they don't really feel it. I mean, either you have a gut reaction to something or you don't. And there is no reason why everybody has to like everything.

Jill You can't.

MM I know, I mean, that absents your reaction, which is the most important thing and everyone reacts differently to other people. So that is something that is completely personal and doesn't require any delving into because either you do or you don't. You know, why do you choose your friends. You know, why do you fall in love with one person and not another one, you know, like it just has nothing to do with anything except your own personal preference.

Jill Okay, how about, Rothko?

MM Well, I like his work very much. What in the, well what I Well, again, the words smoky leaps into my head. Those really glowing paintings. I was not very fond of the earlier work, which I think I had seen before. While I was still a student because I went to NYU and therefore we were close to the Whitney. So we saw a lot of things we would go on there regularly, which is great. But those paintings I like very much. I felt there was a quality of color and suspension that was really terrific.
I was not happy when I went down to the Chapel because I thought the light was horrible. And because of obviously what he was trying to do with his paintings was just to have this incredible glowing color. The way they're placed in that chapel because of that cold gray light, you can see every brushstroke which is not meant to be seen and it just doesn't work. And I hate the building. And it was bizarre because when I saw it, someone had just gotten married in there. Which I thought was a strange place to get married in. Because it reeks of death. And I didn't like the place, I found it creepy and I was disappointed in the paintings. They look much better in reproduction

before I ever saw it. And, then when I went down there. and I just was not happy with it. But that's my personal opinion. I just feel it was a very unfortunate placement and unfortunate lighting because it just doesn't bring the work to the kind of absoluteness that it can have. But, I thought that it was, you know, when he's good, he is fantastic.

Jill how about Stella?

MM Well, I didn't really like it very much when I first saw it. And it was interesting because I was in a show, which is, I think the first show he was probably in, at the National, Gramercy Arts Center or someplace like that. And the younger group apparently had gotten tired of looking at flowers and vases and sailboats in the sunset. And they had asked 12 fairly well-known artists to recommend 2 or 3 people each. And that was in 1959, and I was a recommendation of Milton Avery's and he I think he had been recommended by, Ad Reinhardt
And that was the first Stella I ever saw, which was one of the black and white ones. And I looked at it and I. I certainly can't say I disliked it, I liked it in the sense I felt it was. Well cool I guess would be the closest I could come to how I felt about it. I've liked other things better since. But he was never.
I mean, I've been impressed more than I really liked it. You know, I think I like the ones that are based on whatever that thing is, but I can't remember the name of it. Oh, it's not a stencil, but it's like that, you know, the curved ones. Which I also felt were sort of designy in a sense. But I like the impact of them. I guess he is an impact painter basically. Like it's the impact first and it's something else afterwards, maybe. But I've never been that enthralled with it. So it's more impressive then something that appeals to me.

Jill Right. Ok How about POP art, or a more specific, Andy.

MM Well, I think there the reaction was pretty much the same, that it was interesting and strong, to some extent. I think in the case of Warhol, like he does far out things, and he often makes them work. But they don't necessarily appeal to me.

Jill I just wonder if you feel that, well, to a certain extent, that they are more intellectual.

MM Well, I think the whole thing, I mean, just physically, I remember coming back from I think it was when I had a Fulbright France, I'm not sure, but I remember meeting. Lichtenstein. Possibly Rosenquist and one other person, I can't remember who it was all at the same time and taking a step backward, because just physically, they were so different. They were so much cooler. All I remember is a series of bright blue eyes they were so completely different then the impact of the people that I knew around the Cedar bar and all that. So it was a physical thing as well, and I'm sure I don't know that they would consider their work particularly intellectual or whatever. I have no idea because I tend not to read about them.

Jill Right.

MM Not about them specifically, but I tend not to read things, art magazines anyway. Whether they considered it intellectual or not. It was certainly a cooler atmosphere.
It was something different. The person that I always felt closest to and enjoyed the most was Oldenburgh. Although I liked the soft sculpture much better than I do the other pieces, because I feel a lot of life has gone out of them when he starts using steel and other things and it dismays me simply because I have- I love his drawings and I love a lot of the soft sculpture, and I find them amusing and I find him terrific to listen to. And I just saw a film on a piece that he did for the Des Moines about a week ago, and I happened, during the time I was teaching in Iowa to go to Des Moines and see that piece and really not liking it very much. Because I felt it was hard. And it was it was bizarre because in the film, he has such a wild imagination and such an ability to pick things up and manipulate them into something else, that to have the end product be some sort of cold and forbidding when it comes out of such a bizarre and wild and wonderful sensibility that it upsets me.
Because I want to like it.

Jill Right I understand.

MM And I couldn't. And so that upsets me, because I think that he's quite terrific otherwise. And I just was upset. Yeah, because I want to like it and I didn't. And it was just unfortunate, you know, because at the same day that I saw that, I also saw a Ronnie Bladen that was in front of an office building, and the person who told me, who was the director of the Des Moines Art center said, well, I should go see these things and told me how to get there. And, you know, also had said, the Ronnie Bladen sculpture was close to the building and was difficult to see. And he pointed out something. There was some, I wouldn't say mistake, but some imperfection in the thing which he felt spoiled it, but I'm not that fussy. I did feel it was too close to the building, but it didn't bother me because I like Ronnie Bladens work very much, because there's that sense of balance that I love, and I felt that it was extraordinarily strong. And if there was an imperfection I didn't see it and I didn't care. Because it just was there and the Oldenburg was just distressing because I didn't like it.

Jill How about Morris, Judd and Morris?

MM Well, they're not all the same. I have known Robert Morris's work from, I guess, the early 60s, I was a little confused, by it I think the first time I saw one, which was essentially, I think boxes, at the Green gallery. Well, not boxes, but. Um Big mostly square sculptures. I can't remember precisely you know, I found them interesting. I found them much more weighted at best. If that is a good word. For someone likeJudd, who I find essentially boring. I mean, I don't understand why people like it. Really. You know, I found Morris fascinating simply because I think he takes chances and he does things. And I don't always like what he does. And sometimes he overdoes. But I feel that there's a a stronger sensibility somehow. That it's just more gutsy. So maybe that still comes from a sense of the abstract expressionist thing. You know, I don't want to push that too much, but I just, you know, as the thing one should aim for. But if you don't get somebody in the first impact, you know, I don't want to stand there cooly and say; Oh, well, isn't that well done?

Jill Right. Yeah.

MM You know, I just, I want to have the impact and feel the impulse that made somebody do something. So it's, it's again , a personal choice thing. You know, sometimes I've been impressed, but, in general, I'm not crazy about it.

Jill Okay. This is a good one.

MM Yes

Jill How would you characterize the sensibility of the Fifties.

MM Unless you forced me to, I wouldn't. I never thought in those terms. I'm not sure that many people did. I think it was more of a searching time because it was so contained. I mean, it was very private in the sense that nobody cared that much, like it wasn't big business, yet. And therefore there was a sense of search, whether it was someone who was a year or two older than me or someone ten years older or 20 years older whatever it was, there was a feeling of trying to find something. And. In the 60s, it was more like razzmatazz, which was a lot of fun. I mean, I went to some terrific parties and it was a very exciting time because there were a lot of things going on, not just the happenings, but a lot of terrific dance programs at Judson and things like that. So that one could be out practically every night of the week. And I was very often. And just enjoy what was going on. It was it was just a very exciting fermenting kind of time. And then when it settled into a kind of pop minimal thing. It was, it became like a fashionable experience. It's like, you know, this year we've got POP then about three years later we've got minimal or OP or whatever came first. And then lyrical abstraction and a few other little odds and ends.So that it was really something else. And my oldest daughter, who was friendly with the daughter of, well, two painters who have since taken to sculpture. Would visit their house quite often, and she came home one day saying that we're talking about something. And the wife says she was in the art store and overheard these two people saying, well, “what are we supposed to do now? When abstraction is out.” And that must've been around 66 or 7 or 8

or something. And I just thought, well that's a perfect example of people trying to be what is supposed to be in, which was a faster version of people working in the vocabulary, if that's a good word of abstract expressionism and needing that kind of cover, not being influenced by it in order to find your own way of doing something, but thinking this is the way to do it.

Jill Right.

MM This is the way art should look, and it just goes against my whatever

Jill just right. No,

MM I thought it was appalling.

Jill What do you think of the art criticism of the Times? I can ask specifics.

MM Well, of course, Canaday when he came on the scene was a joke. And would drive people to frenzies, which I always found amusing because I don't know if I ever got really angry, I possibly did.
I don't remember anymore, but I just always had this image of someone holding his coat very close to himself as he walked into galleries, so you shouldn't be contaminated by something that he felt was not right. I'm not sure that I ever saw him, so I don't know if that was true, but I do know that a lot of people got into big hassles about him. I just thought it was basically absurd as far as the art magazines were concerned. I could read the things in Art News, I guess in Arts, which are relatively straight Art Forum was somethingthat made me feel somehow that my brain wasn't functioning properly until I discovered years later that nobody could read it. People who- and I would keep magazines around for months and even years, and then I would force myself to read it, thinking, there's got to be a way that I can understand this. There must be something wrong with me. And I really make an effort. And after a paragraph I find my mind wandering. And I put it away again for another year and I could never read it. It was like a vehicle through

which the art reviewer, who was, you know, getting his own sensibility across and using the pain of sculpture as a vehicle for it.
And it had virtually nothing to do with it. Whereas Art News, by and large, was, factual. Although I must say, my first review was pretty hilarious, and that was in Art News in 1957. And I remember when I found it again, which I forgotten about, when I first put a bibliography together. I was rolling on the floor because it was hilarious and, but I remember that at the time I was infuriated by it.
It was so dumb and we naturally read your own views. And, you know, I got some very good ones. But I found, you know, Art Forum was always the outpost of a super- I don't know what to call it because it was, to me, totally unreadable. And I was very relieved when I discovered that other people couldn't get through it either, so that it wasn't just me being, you know, very cut and dry.
Trying to hit it right between the eyes.

Jill How about specifically Rosenberg and Greenberg.

MM I hate to admit this, but I didn't really read that much.

Jill Okay. That's fine.

MM I just don't - It was unfortunate. I just tended not to read about art because I thought, you know, I'm sure that there were things that were said that were very interesting and maybe I could go back and read them now and be interested in them because I'm distanced from it.
I don't remember reading anything at the time, just for whatever reasons.

Jill What role do, did art dealers play? were you aware of that going on or what role I mean, you had a dealer you

MM Starting when?
Jill Starting in the 50's and working through the 60's.

MM Well, in the 50s, you could count the dealers on a hand and a half. Because there was, like, Egan, Janis and Bertha Schaefer, Poindexter and probably leaving somebody out. But the people that I knew, regardless to some extent of age, show in co-op galleries and there weren't that many commercial galleries, and I don't think it was until Castelli hit the scene that it became really big business. But I think that also had to do a lot with a whole change in attitude towards art, because before that it was really a kind of weird outpost of things. I mean, it was a a freewheeling, constant party moveable feast kind of thing with a few galleries that existed. I mean, everybody knew everybody. You went to the openings, and then you either went to Chinatown or to Cedar bar. You find where the parties were, and you did the whole number. I mean, it was like a continuous kind of thing. And I don't think anyone really expected big things, from it. I mean, to start with, in the 50s, you didn't expect, as a young painter, to have a downtown gallery. And I remember in my young and innocent and stupid whatever. Somewhere in the mid to late 50s, taking work around to a few dealers. And it was interesting. And I because I didn't know what to say and I realized which I don't think is essentially different now, that most dealers do not know what they're looking at, unless someone tells them what they're looking at in advance. I realized after two experiences, most sort of late mid-fifties, that. It was ridiculous for me to be going around. The reception was relatively polite in one instance, you know, “It will be interesting to see how your work develops” or something like that, which is not terrible. To my feeling that this person knew absolutely nothing of what she's looking at and to in the late 50s, very rude. And I realized years later, because I'm not too smart about certain things, that when I took work around in the late 50s, I was highly pregnant. I guess pregnant ladies are not supposed to be carrying paintings around to show the dealers. And so I sort of got some revenge because I had a show at the Delancey Street Museum, that Red Grooms ran. And had contacted, because someone at the Tanager had told me that a Young American show was coming up at the Whitney, and I contacted John Bauer, and he came down to the Delancey street Museum, and I ended up being in that show and that really started the whole thing going. Along time. And that was terrific, like, all the paintings got sold. It was like winning a monopoly game . It was really quite interesting. Yeah. And certainly for me, very nice, because I got

revenge on several people who wouldn't even look at my work before that. So it was, it was interesting.

Jill Well, I mean, just as long as you're bringing it up. And I was just sort of curious, I mean, how you felt. I mean, how you felt about being a woman in the art world,

MM I didn't . I mean, I didn't think about it. And I was on a panel actually, a few years ago called Women Artist of the 50s, which I laughingly translated to "the survivors" or something.
And it was interesting being on the panel, because I realized that the people who were married or t attached, more or less permanently to somebody, had a far different view of the scene than I did and granted that I didn't think about anything that I was doing, particularly. But the only people who's on the panel who seemed to have a good time were Marisol and me, because basically freewheeling, went to the parties and had a good time and, and didn't think about the fact of being women, I mean, I was a serious painter. And so I had every right to be for instance at the Cedar Bar or any place else. And I remember and I'm, you know, I'm sort of glad for my stupidity because if I felt there was something outside of me that was saying, you can't do this, I may have gone home pulled the covers over my head and gone into a deep depression, or I could have gotten so angry maybe I would have gotten further than I am. But I remember someone coming up to me in the Cedar bar and saying, don't you think the Art world is very chauvinistic? And I drew myself up and said; Certainly not. Because I was totally idealistic and totally stupid. Of course it was, because I think a lot of things that didn't happen. Didn't happen, you know, in retrospect.

Jill Right? No. I realize.

MM At the time I just felt like I had every right to be there. And I did, because I was serious. And certainly there were male artists. That, I mean, there wasn't male chauvinist pig in those days. We didn't have a handy title, but there were guys around who certainly would fit that description. But on a professional

level, the worst one that I could think of was the person who came up to me and asked me to be a charter member of a co-op that he was forming. So that on a professional level, it didn't operate that way. You know, if they knew your work, they wanted the best they could do. And certainly in terms of showing you didn't get into a show unless you were recommended by someone, usually male, almost exclusively male, who would recommend you to be, in for instance the Stable Annual or whatever. And it certainly wasn't just wives and girlfriends who were in those shows, you know, it was younger artists who. Okay, now go. Okay, first of all, I don't want anything I say to be held against me.

Jill Okay. Well, how did you, when did you start painting?

MM Oh, I guess primarily it was, it was before I was in college. I bought a couple of little canvas boards and did two horrible little still lives when I was 14 and then when I went to college, I did a whole drawing, because before that I used to do sketches all the time since I was a baby.Around age five. And then I found out what a real drawing was. And then my mother was sorry she sent me to school. Because I decided to be a painter. Before that, she wanted me to be a teacher, which I eventually ended up being, but on the basis of being a painter and not the way she wanted me to be. That's about it. But all during the 50s, I was trying to be a painter. I guess it wasn't until probably about 55 or 56 that if someone asked me what I was, what I did. I said, I want to be a painter. And then around, must have been around 56. And I said, “I am a painter” because in 57 and my first solo show, I assume I must have decided that I really could claim being a painter, somehow.

Jill So how did your art change? I mean, was there any change for you between the 50s and 60s?

MM Well, I don't really think of it that way. It's just, it was all moving in a line. It would seem very accidental in stumbling around doing things, but in retrospect, it was all leading into one direction, which was to become my own kind of painter.

Jill Right.

MM But consciously influenced, I guess, around 53, 54 by what was happening with the Abstract Expressionism, because the work that I did before that was very tight and probably in some bizarre relationship to some kind of American version of Cubism, that I didn't know what it was, but I did it, and I don't know why, I can't remember, but it was in an effort to make the work more alive and less tight.
because someone I met who sort of sent me to look at de Koonings, which I know already seen, but had been rather startled by, and I kind of worked my way around the edges because that was the woman paintings, and they were rather startling. And it took a long time, at least a year before I could deal with the central image. But I started working around the edges and I started working, or trying to be like that kind of painter to see what would happen and how it felt, you know, if the paint would work and things like that, and eventually ended up where you see me now. Surrounded by something that doesn't look like it came out of it. But it really did, only the people that knew me then knew.

Jill Can see

MM Well, not just see but know that there was an influence and it ended up in something else.

Jill What? Well, but I mean, well, what, what were your other influences or how did you sort of begin to paint the way your painting now. Which you have been doing.

MM It's kind of hard to pinpoint, but at some point, which was actually after I well no it wasn't after- the first show, it was around 56 when I moved into a loft that I remember standing in my studio, even though I'd been using an image that one certainly couldn't call Abstract Expressionism. I was working very loosely, and then at some point, I remember standing in my studio and

thinking, well, I'll never be de Kooning, so I better figure out who I am. and then one day I did a painting, and by some bizarre coincidence, de Kooning stopped by and he and I, are the only was I ever saw that painting because I chickened out. I mean I started in the upper left hand corner, working my way to the lower right hand corner, and felt as if I was creating a tapestry in a way. And it was very flat, and it was of a figure, I think, without a face, but I can't remember. And then I chickened out, possibly it was two figures, and I overlaid it with all the way I'd been working before that.
But I guess the next one must have been more like what eventually led to the style that one could call my own. Right. But it was kind of the realization that I had played around with a kind of way of painting long enough, and now I better figure out what I did. But it wasn't. It was conscious to that extent, but I really didn't know what was going to happen.

It was basically a question of working my way through this and like, that photograph, for example, was 58, and when I do slide lectures and things like that, I usually start with that one because it's the most obviously mine. And besides it, well, I do have slides from before that, but it's not as obvious that it's mine. And I only put the earlier ones in occasionally when I give slide lectures, for example, at the Studio School where there's a very heavy influence of Abstract Expressionism to show what I did say, in 55 and 56 then finally work into that. But normally I start with that one because it is more . Final.

Jill Yeah.

MM I mean, it seemed like a long time, at the time, but now that I go around teaching, I see people in graduate school. I realize that I wasn't as retarded as I thought I was. You know, because and I often say that the Cedar Bar was my graduate school. Because I never did go to graduate school. And it was really the best way of finding out anything, because I would sit at a table, for example, with someone very well known and somebody who would appeared, possibly a little bit more advanced than myself, a few hangers on or whatever. And finally, you know, everyone was concerned about it because no one had

been really successful despite having shown. Right. You know, de Kooning was just as concerned about painting as anybody else who was, because even though he had gained a certain amount of- at that point, notoriety because it wasn't famous, he really didn't have any money either. So we're all, as they all used to say, in the same boat, which was the operative phrase back then.

JIll Okay. Well, okay. How, this is a good one.

MM Yeah I read them I just don't -
Jill I mean, I have other questions

MM SO why don't you ask them?
Jill Well, why don't we cover some of these and I can go back. Well, I mean, this one seems like the answer is probably no, but did you, did you sense that other artists were venturing in related directions?

MM I didn't think about it. it was a question of everything being around, because it was a much more concise art world, sort of answers one of the last questions. And therefore, you were aware of what other people were doing and the fact that everyone was, I don't know if worried is too strong a word or concern is too mild a word. But somewhere in the middle there was a great anxiety about what was going to happen. You know, among the younger painters, there were just a lot of different directions, you know, so it was just around. It was like a whole atmosphere. So, that at the same time that one went to galleries, there was a lot of conversation about it at the club. I remember once for a year and a half we discussed- Has the situation changed? WHich I found highly amusing. As a matter of fact yesterday I went to see the Dickinson, show at Graham and looked at the catalog and there was a piece on the front which quoted something that Dickinson said as he left a club meeting and said, "I think it's very nice that artists are talking about art, but I don't have to listen" and he left. Which is really basically my feeling, and I had studied in the 54 briefly, but very intensively. And that was , I think, a kind of turning point because I finally learned how to draw. In quotes because I'm not

sure that I really did. But, he really took me more seriously than I took myself. And that kind of forced me to confront what I was doing a little bit more intensively. Possibly. I mean, I think I worked fairly hard, but I think it was just a different level because he was a fantastic person, and a fantastic teacher, and he really brought everyone up to his level. And anytime I tried to chicken out, either in terms of modesty or toe scuffing, which is sort of the same thing because you're, you know, you're brought up to receive compliments with kind of a little embarrassment. I finally, you know, had to take myself seriously because he was knocking himself out trying to teach me. So it's really a very crucial situation psychologically as well as just technically. So I certainly am glad about that.

Jill Okay. another question, who were your friends in the 60s and 50s.

MM Well, my best friends whom I still have, were Bob Beachamp and Lenart Anderson, and I knew most of the other people who were around at that time. But I don't think our relationship was as close as it was with the two of them. And, especially I guess with Bob, at one point we even collaborated on a painting, which we never did again because that was a hopeless situation, but it was amusing, and I still have a piece of it left because I've cut off a piece to use in on the shelf in my old loft. I discovered, part of it as I was going to get my boots the day of the big blizzard, having put them away. Because I hope to never use them again- And I realized that a piece of that painting was still in existence.

Jill And, did their art change in the late 50s and early 60s.

MM Well, change is a very peculiar word. I would say it developed, I think. Maybe not. Certainly in the case of Lenart, in what I consider a relatively strong, direct line, even though he argued that point just a few months ago when he had a show, he didn't think so. I think that it did, because from the time he was very young and I saw paintings that he had done in Detroit, I mean that was a long time ago in the mid 50s, and it seemed to me that he more than anyone, I think I have known, sort of has gone from a certain thing

and kept going in that direct line with some variations, but in a more or less direct line. But with Bob, there were more jumps, maybe, from one thing to another, but basically it's still a very strong expressionist feeling. I don't know if you've seen his work .

Jill I have not but I will look at it. You sort of answered this, but, what were the issues that concerned you? I mean,

MM Trying to find how to be a painter, I don't know.

Jill -That's all right, that's fine. I mean-

MM No, because I wasn't really thinking intellectually, I have never- I try not to think about what I'm doing. I realize I'm not quite as non-intellectual about it as I would like to think that I am, or have said that I am. Or at least people have accused me of not being quite as stupid as I tried to make out, but I think I really didn't think about it so much because I felt that it was something that had to happen, and it just is there. And to a large extent, it still operates that way because I trust my instinct. When I start a painting, for example, you know, I can sort of moused around for at least half a week with a vague idea of what I want to do, and then finally zeroed in on the elements that would constitute the painting. Set it in the sense of, I hate to use a word like composition, but in terms of the arrangement of the elements I wanted to use, some of which sort of came up by chance. But I don't believe that this is accidental as you know? Supposedly it is, because you are still in control and you choose the things. Other things could have been there if I had, you know, if circumstances were different, but it it just worked out that way. And so it's a question of choosing, what you decide to use.
And I really separate myself , to some extent, from some figurative artists or people who fall into that basic category, because I feel that it's not essentially different then a non-objective painter- deciding what elements to use in a painting. Because you're still dealing with something.

Jill: Right, you are still.

MM Yeah. I mean, even if Klein painted a whole blue painting, that was still an idea. Like to deal with the subject of blue. So the that subject is not essentially different in terms of the impulse that makes you want to paint something, then deciding to use the figure or whatever other elements you put into a painting, so that I think there's a strong underlying abstract quality, because if there isn't, then you don't have a painting, you have some kind of other, what I call clunk realism. A house, a tree, a cloud, a room, a rug, a telephone pole.

Jill Really familiar with this discussion- all the time

MM Really. People do talk about this?

Jill Oh yeah

MM Well, I never talk about it unless I am forced to.

Jill: Well, I mean, just not all the time, but often enough. You know where representational work is as abstract as

MM Yeah, because otherwise it doesn't exist. I mean, it simply isn't anything that -I mean, there's no strength or there's no anything. You have to create something interesting to paint, otherwise it would be boring and you'd be some other kind of commercial artist or illustrator or something like that, you know? So it's not as cut and dried as it would appear to be. If that made any sense.

Jill No, to me it does.

MM Well, that's nice

Jill Whether or not on replay it'll make any sense. Also, what were I mean, what other kinds of art was affecting your work. Were you thinking about- as far as literature?

MM Well, of course, in the 60s or the late 50s, all the Happenings started taking place mostly around 1959 60 I think. And I don't know that it was particularly an influence, certainly on me. I enjoyed it, and I went to most of them. I don't know that it influenced me terribly in my work, but I believe in instincts on unconscious influences and things like that. And I there's no way of really knowing. I know that that some something comes out and it may come from something that you saw. Sometimes it was amusing and infuriating that I would see a show, for example, and suddenly something - I'm talking about, something I didn't like on someone's work that I did not like. And suddenly my painting looked like that, and I was furious because I hadn't liked it. And why was I doing this? And I, you know, it's just a question of working through it. So you don't really know where these things come from. And it's it's still a question of using something that happens. Whatever. I guess it just occurred to me, that somewhere in the mid 50s, I started reading Robert Graves, or maybe it started before that. I'm not sure, but I did a whole bunch of mythological paintings. for about a year. That had to do with the myths. I mean, I've been accused of doing that- more recently, but they weren't really myths. They were simply using Greek elements that had nothing to do with the mythological properties necessarily. Sometimes on the secondary level they did, but I usually found that out afterwards, which I prefer, than to think I was aiming in that direction. So it's really, you know, I just let it happen if I can. And if I do become aware of some significance, I try to ignore it. So that it comes out, let's say, in a more pure way, because it's strictly a factual situation, the fact, of this, as opposed to that- and all these different objects which relate in visual terms, and then if it has some other meaning, okay. And I usually don't talk about it because I don't want to get into a situation where somebody "AHA" that's what that painting is about, because that's not what it's about. It's about painting. And if it happens to have a secondary meaning, okay. And that's amusing to me and interesting to other people, and usually I avoid it if I can because I think that's like the least important part of what you're doing.

Jill Can you be sort of specific? I have sense what you mean, but when you say that; it's about painting or,

MM Be specific about “It's about painting”.

Jill Yeah.

MM Well, I guess the first thing- we will do this, by association or whatever, the first thing that lept into my mind was -surface. I mean, there were certain kinds of surfaces that appealed to me, a certain flatness in the beginning, or a certain kind of color or whatever it was. You know, I don't want to separate all those elements. When I teach, I try to avoid using words like composition and color or all those things, because a painting is all of those things, and one part should not be separated from another. The thing that makes it work is that all those things are just there. And I think in the 50s, that was my deepest reaction to anything or my aim was to have a painting just be there so that you didn't know where it started, where it ended. It was like, you know, seeing a finished performance and you don't want to be aware of how hard it is. For example, for ballet dancers to leap from one end of the stage to the other, you just want to see what happens after, you know, you don't want to know about those hours of practice and, you know, falling down and hitting the floor and making horrible noises. You want to see what's the absolute end product. And it's just there. And where it starts and ends is the artist business, and then anything else is, which is not too popular with art historians. But, oh well.

Jill Okay. Well, why don't we go through this one at a time - But, what was your response to de Kooning, POP art or we can go through this one at a time.

MM Well of the big three or what I considered the big three, which were de Kooning, Kline and Pollock. I felt that de Kooning had the most to offer me, for example, because I felt he was basically a mainstream artist, even though all of the abstract expressionism or the people -Expressionists were people who were lumped in that, always gave Pollock the credit for having broken through. I think that as a young painter slash student, I felt that he was the one who really developed out of a classical background into a modern element with

more clarity, and therefore was of the most use to me. And also, we kind of painting that he did just technically, I mean, the way the strokes on the canvas and all that kind of thing was more influential than anybody else's. I felt that Klein was a very personal painter in the sense that you could enjoy it. which I certainly did, but I didn't feel that I personally could learn that much from it. It took me a little longer to really appreciate Pollock. I think, and I have, I'm not too crazy about the earlier ones. I think there's an extraordinary classicism in the drip ones, the pole, paintings, you know, because there's such an incredible balance. So that possibly even though I wasn't looking for an influence in him, there was an element that appealed to me very much like that kind of calm, classical thing, regardless of what went into it, I guess would be a good example of what I mean. But it's just there, like in an enormous amount of torture and work might have gone into making it controlled and making it come to a point where it was just there, more so than with the others, were it stayed in a kind of tortured state . But, I, you know, it's hard to know what was the conscious influence. With de Kooning I tried to paint like that just to see what it felt like and to loosen up what I've been doing before, because my paintings were very tight. before that, like in the early to mid 50's. Mostly early, I guess. It started changing around 53 and 54 when I started making the scene and seeing what was going on and finding the center of what was then the art world. But it's hard to know. You know . I had shows that were considered, you know, really my own work, and then people would compare it to all kinds of things that I hadn't really been looking at, which I found very interesting. I mean, I never saw. Well, I guess I looked at a lot of books somewhere towards like, maybe between 56 and 58, like Bonicelli . Whatever. Because that was the kind of thing that appealed to me. **Piero della Francesca**. But I didn't go to Italy until after that, and the influence was not as conscious. I appreciated it, I liked it, but I'm not sure that I thought about it as I was doing the paintings that were compared to that because I didn't know them.

I guess I just wasn't a question of not even being aware that they existed. It was not a conscious influence and it wasn't something I was aiming for. It. I was just trying to learn how to draw -to start with. Which is why I went to

Dickinson . And, then finally, you just sort of it was like working my way through to what I could do.

And it took what appeared at that time to be a long time, maybe wasn't it? Well, I was very young. And you think anyone who's a year older. Oh!

Jill Right.

MM So it's a different now.

Jill Okay. how about Guston?

MM Well, I, always have. I wouldn't say a problem. I sort of- there were some things that I liked. I was never terribly crazy about it.
I mean, I get an image of the painting that he was known for at that time, which basically had a red center and a white surrounding area and a certain kind of brushstroke. And some of them I liked and some were interesting. And I remember when he had a big show at the Guggenheim, which I guess was early 60s, I went to see it and he was there, and I found that interesting. And he looked slightly embarrassed to see someone seeing him looking at his paintings. Although now I can understand very well, you know, if I have a show, I want to see how it looks. Other than in the studio and how it relates to something. So it's - and I think even at that point, I didn't think it particularly strange that he should be there looking at his own work because you do that all the time . You do it when you're working on something. And certainly it was a major show like that, there was no reason why you shouldn't be. To sort of put it in perspective, I was starteled when he more recently started doing the feet and Heads, and it was kind of funny and cartoony, and it really wasn't for years that I realized, just because I read it someplace, that a painting that I had seen while I was still in school was one that had won a Pepsi-Cola contest or something. And it was very much out of the WPA kind of thing. And that kind of figurative thing was rather startling. And then I remembered having seen it, but I hadn't remembered it during that period. You know, there was no connection because of course, the work was totally good. So, you know, he's

somebody who, maybe had trouble. I hate to say this. I may be wrong, you know, like finding himself in a sense. Because certainly what he reverted to more recently was not what he had done before, but a kind of freewheeling, almost cartoonish kind of thing that maybe he was closer to himself. And maybe the things that he did in the 50s were influenced by what was around him. You know, you may not have had as strong of personal, sense of himself as some of the others did you know, which is a maybe a harsh thing to say, but if there is such an enormous difference between what he did then and what he ended up doing then, I have to come to that conclusion just because it certainly is peculiar to say the least.

Jill You have to question it.

MM Yeah. And, you know, I don't consider it as appalling as I did some good, say, third or fourth rate abstract expressionists who when the influence was waning around the end of the 50s and beginning of the 60s, certainly suddenly did a complete flip flop and started doing figurative work, which was usually horrendous and not nearly as good as the work they had done when they were strongly under the influence of Abstract Expressionism. And my feeling at the time when it was happening was that they were people who needed to work in the school of-, rather than thinking in terms of what do I do? What am I about?

Jill Right.
End Tape