Oral history interview with Claire Falkenstein, 1995 Mar. 2-21

Interviewer: Paul Karlstrom, 1995 Mar. 2-21
Description

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Transcript

Preface

Preface to the Oral History transcript in the south of France recorded interviews with Claire Falkenstein on March 2 and 21, 1995. The interviews took place in Vence, CA, and were conducted by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Washington, D.C.

Interview

SAY 1, SIDE A

PAUL KARLSTROM: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, an interview with Claire Falkenstein in her home in Vence, France, March 2, 1995. This is the first session, and the interviewer from the Archives of American Art is Paul Karlstrom. Claire, I'm going to ask you to start by saying your full name.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think what I should do is my is someone has suggested that I should do a little introduction to myself, and I'm going to do it in the third person. My name is Claire Falkenstein. I was born in Sacramento, California, in 1908. I studied painting in Paris, sculpture and jewelry, and I lived in Paris for 15 years. I came back to the United States in 1939. I lived in New York, and the interviewer from the Smithsonian Institution, Paul Karlstrom, has asked me to start by saying my name, and I'm delighted to do so.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think what I should do is my is someone has suggested that I should do a little introduction to myself, and I'm going to do it in the third person. My name is Claire Falkenstein. I was born in Sacramento, California, in 1908. I studied painting in Paris, sculpture and jewelry, I lived in Paris for 15 years. I came back to the United States in 1939. I lived in New York, and the interviewer from the Smithsonian Institution, Paul Karlstrom, has asked me to start by saying my name, and I'm delighted to do so.

PAUL KARLSTROM: What year was that? Which year?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Nineteen-thirty. I finally stayed in Paris for thirteen years, and I was very, very, very,

CLARIS FIORETTI: People who were really pushing. I had to come before, and we did.

CLARIS FIORETTI: Well, Sparky.

CLARIS FIORETTI: Okay, Sparky was a massive nut-job, and I'm sure he's gone on to bigger and better things by now. But he's a minority of the opinion. Can remember some time I didn't participate in a group hug? Can't. Can't remember.

CLARIS FIORETTI: Yes.

CLARIS FIORETTI: Yes, especially the one person who influenced the school and the choice. Definitely, maybe even intentionally, maybe not. Definitely, I'm sure, I'm sure, I'm sure of that.

CLARIS FIORETTI: What do you mean? Not sound, you know the rule about?

CLARIS FIORETTI: I don't know if I'm consciously not sounding it out because I don't want to be a bad influence on the rest of the school, or I'm just being a bitch. Supposing it's bitchy in the school phrase, I know, whatever that was picked in the editing of one of my sentences. I'm just being a bitch.

CLARIS FIORETTI: Sure. Sure. Sure, sure, sure?

CLARIS FIORETTI: Well, it has to, it has to be a bitchy fortune. Cold-hearted, bitchy fortune. Because, I'm, I'm, I'm

PAUL KAGEYAMA: Sex, Bruce Willis.

CLARIS YAMASHITA: Well, you know, Bruce. Actually, wasn't she married to him or a boyfriend? But, you know, she's—I think has been married a couple times. But, anyway, she's—she's—she's—

considers important. And she devotes her time traveling to each one in turn and continuing the relationship of friendship and interpretation or whatever you want to call it. And she just got back from New York. And before that she was in Paris. She has a woman in Paris who is a photographer, a woman in New York who is a dancer, another woman who's just a woman that she thinks is important. And then she has me here. And the whole thing is a kind of way of maintaining something in her, I don't know what, of interest in life. That's like for me my art is, and for her, it's these four women. Isn't that strange? But I don't–I never heard her speak much about men, although men are very attracted to her. Have you met her?

PAUL KARLSROM: Didn't I just talk to her on the phone? She just called. I haven't met her.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah.

PAUL KARLSROM: How old is she?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I have no idea. I think she's about sixty.

PAUL KARLSROM: You said she's a teacher. What does she teach?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Humanities.

PAUL KARLSROM: Is she doing a study of all of you? Is she going to write about you?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I don't know.

PAUL KARLSROM: Maybe?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I enjoy her when I see her and I don't pay any attention. She doesn't intrude,
that's the one thing.

PAUL KARLSROM: Are there any friends, any of the artists in Venice or in Southern California with whom you've become friends?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'm trying to think. I've had artist friends from time to time, but usually it doesn't work out. I had a meeting here when I finished the fires. I had a gathering here. And I asked–I'm not going to say his name–a person that I've known for a long time, an artist. And he gave me no kind of indication of response to my work. So finally, I went up to him and said, "Well, what do you think?" And he said, "Well, I like it when you're abstract." And he didn't understand at all what I was doing. So, again, that's a kind of a cliché, this abstract stuff.

PAUL KARLSROM: Do you think it's important for the artist-friend to appreciate your work for you to have a friendship or a relationship? Do you think it's difficult?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I know one thing, when I get into these things, I'm completely engrossed. Now, if somebody comes in and says, "Well, you know–"

PAUL KARLSROM: Right.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: What the hell? Why bother with him? [laughs]

PAUL KARLSROM: That's a good point. If you had to describe yourself–

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Especially if you're serious about your work. If you give it your all. Are you married?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: How many years?

PAUL KARLSROM: Thirty.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Thirty years? Thirty?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Good for you.

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. We both have active careers and she lives in San Francisco and I work out here.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: How many children?

PAUL KARLSROM: One.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: One?

PAUL KARLSROM: At dinner I'll show you their pictures.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh, will you?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. Let me ask you another question. And I'd like you to think about it a bit. I know that you consider yourself independent. That's how you describe yourself. But nonetheless, you are viewed as being a participant in Twentieth Century modernism. What does that mean to you?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It means that you absorb your environment, but it doesn't mean that you are cogging somebody, it's impossible not to absorb the life that you're living with and in. I don't think you should–well, you have to make choices.

PAUL KARLSROM: Right.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: You could have– No matter who or how you are being affected by, you've still got to make choices.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, do you feel associated with any particular place or any particular, any individuals? Would you connect yourself in any way to a place, a time, a–

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, as I told you, I think there are two great innovators in the Twentieth Century, one for structure and one for space, and that's [Mark] Tobey and Clyfford Still. But I don't copy either one of them. But I consider them very important and I consider them, they're both dead now, but they were both terribly attached to me.

PAUL KARLSROM: So these were personal friends? Tobey as well?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Tobey and Still.

PAUL KARLSROM: And Tobey, did you go see him in Switzerland? Did you visit him there?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I visited him in Switzerland. I met him in Paris originally, and that's where I'd see him, in Paris and Switzerland.

PAUL KARLSROM: You didn't know–

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And Clyfford Still, I was a teacher in the school when he was. I got the idea of what he was when I taught there. But I was working out my own development at the same time. It didn't bother him that I wasn't at all like him and it didn't bother me, but we were great pals.

PAUL KARLSROM: You've been all over the place. I now know that you, of course, spent time in Paris. We all know that. So you've had a European experience. You had time in New York; you had a studio in New York; you've been in the Bay Area, and, of course, you have been here these many years.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: You know, of all the places, I had a studio in Rome for four years. I had a studio in New York for about five years. I had a studio in Milan. I had a studio– where else–Venice. And finally I got here and I like this the best.

PAUL KARLSROM: Really? So you obviously then have settled down. You're an internationalist. I mean, there's no question about that, but do you see yourself as more within an American or European tradition? Or do you see that there's any difference?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: A lot of it has to do with "freedom." New York was awful. I didn't like New York at all.

PAUL KARLSROM: Why is that?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And Rome was confining. When I came here and did that piece, the big fountain, and built all of this, this has been a great experience for me, this place.

PAUL KARLSROM: Why is that? Or how so?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I think I had more freedom, more chances of my own decisions of allowing myself the freedom of making my own decisions, of wonderful hospitality. I like the weather. I like the people. I just like it here.

PAUL KARLSROM: It hasn't interfered with your growth as an artist?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: It's all been very positive.

PAUL KARLSROM: It is said that if an artist chooses to work away from the great centers, and now, of course, that would mean Paris or New York, then you're handicapped. But you haven't found that true? This hasn't been a handicap?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'm looking within anyway, so what the hell?

PAUL KARLSROM: [laughs] I love that. Well, I think that's a good point to end. I don't see how you can top that. Do you want to call it an afternoon or is there something more you want to add?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I'm trying to think of achieving, of achievement and what it requires. It requires time, it requires health, it requires all of your sensibilities, it requires money. I mean, if you start thinking all the things, and if you don't look outside and expect somebody to give them to you, you get them for yourself. That's the important thing.

PAUL KARLSROM: Let me ask you one more question. Do you have any shows coming up, any
exhibitions that you're preparing for?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Any shows?

PAUL KARLSROM: Exhibitions?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Only about six.

PAUL KARLSROM: About six exhibitions?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That's terrible. I have been with galleries for many years. And this has always been–well, I'm not going to say few and far between as far as shows go, because I don't think you should have too many anyway. But, since I've been working for myself, which means I've been doing nothing except working, people have been coming to me and they just, for instance, now the show in Fresno has been decided. They're taking three sculptures and that painting for Fresno.

PAUL KARLSROM: When will that be?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: November.

PAUL KARLSROM: The Long Beach Museum is working on a retrospective. And Hal Nelson, who is the director, is just wonderful. He's doing a book on it.

PAUL KARLSROM: In conjunction with the exhibition?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I don't know. All I know is that's what he's doing. Then there's that Armand Hammer, whatever that is.

PAUL KARLSROM: Pacific Dreams?

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Yeah. First it's in New York, you say?

PAUL KARLSROM: Oakland. It's in Oakland now.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oakland. Then it's in Armand Hammer.
PAUL KARLSROM: And then I think it's going to go to Laguna, as well.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: And then there's something in New York. Still Working is still on. Don't you know about Still Working? That show?

PAUL KARLSROM: Oh yeah, yeah. Still Working. You're in that.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: That's still going. I'm trying to think of all the things. I think that's why I fell down. I was so exhausted thinking about all these things I had to do. Then I fell down. I'm out of everything, trying to get over my broken hip.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, you look great.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: I do?

PAUL KARLSROM: Yeah. You look great compared to last time when you had your walker, when
we did the last interview.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh yeah. How long ago was that? Two weeks?

PAUL KARLSROM: Three, I think.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Well, I've had the cane about a week.

PAUL KARLSROM: Well, anyway you're on the mend.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh yeah, I am.

PAUL KARLSROM: I think we've about wrapped this up today. The tape's almost over.

CLAIRE FALKENSTEIN: Oh, look it's blinking.

PAUL KARLSROM: It's blinking because it's telling us it's over. So I want to thank you for the interview.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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