

Interview 5/31/00 #7 with Alfred and Sharon

Well, as I was saying, life goes on. I may very well have pursued things in a compulsive way. You really have to keep busy.

I remember visiting my brothers would set up a trailer and tent just outside of London. The idea was that we could escape the bombings. When the weather was right we'd go out there and live in this trailer in Rickmansworth. Then one day there was this huge attack on London and we thought, my God, we're lucky to get the hell out of there. And then all of a sudden a German plane appeared. I had never realized that an airplane can surrender. How does an airplane surrender? Do they hold a white flag out of the window? No. Typically the situation where a plane has been attacked and the captain killed, and a gunner is trying to control the aircraft, and he'd want to surrender. And the British would talk to him in German and order him to drop the undercarriage. An undercarriage lowered is a sign of surrender of an aircraft in battle or during the bombing.

So we are in this place of refuge out in Rickmansworth and we saw this low-flying German plane with smoke issuing out of it. It came in low and then dropped its bombs in our lake. Then there was another attack, and we had to go back to London on Monday, pursuing our different jobs, and returned the following weekend. The Germans loved to attack on the weekend if the weather conditions were right because this screws up the rest of the people; sort of a psychological edge to these attacks. And sure enough, another plane comes in. It's undercarriage is down and in this instance they were led to a lake by this Hurricane fighter and

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they dropped the goddam bombs in the lake. That was the surrender of the aircraft. The lake was a safe place to drop the bombs, and there was a nearby airstrip for these people to land. That was a strange experience.

I remember a school where the military visited and spoke to the senior boys—I'm now a senior boy. And they explained this business with these toys that the Germans were dropping. These were the butterfly bombs, and we should watch the younger children. But they had a serious complaint. They had tanks and artillery which were phony. It was done to fool the Germans. They inflated these very realistic looking tanks, and these boys would go out there and have a wonderful time jumping up and down on these things. And the military people explained that we shouldn't do that, because if a reconnaissance plane took a photo of us jumping up and down on the phony tank, it would destroy the whole effort. And furthermore they'd shoot any of us that pulled this because there were too many lives at involved. But we were welcome to come and stand guard on these things, and so on and so forth. So that ended a lot of fun when we played on what to us were giant toys. But then I think we realized that we couldn't mess about any more with these things. This was when I was in Banbury for just over a year—1938.

(Why return London then? Bombing still going on.)

I convinced my father, number one, that I should be bar-mitzvaed. This is really a trick to get back to London. And he came to Banbury and tried to dissuade me from this.

He said, "I discussed this with the Rabbi, and you can do this later."

I said, "No, I've got to do it now, Dad." **Came back to London from Banbury by saying he needed ti gave his bar-mitzvaed**

So he said, "Well, you'll have to learn something by rote, by heart, the lesson."

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So I did and I was allowed to come into London. The Synagogue was really an old building with a glass roof. Next to it was a Russian steambath, I remember, with a lot of trees under glass. In the morning this huge Turkish masseur would come to get the branches that he would flagellate people with.

Here I am in the adjoining building which is this old Synagogue, and you need a minion or a quorum—you have to have so many people, otherwise God doesn't hear you. So these old, old people were there, and I felt kind of bad about this, but I got on with it. And then bombs started dropping, and glass came down and dust. But these old geezers just stood up there. I was tempted to hit the floor. So after that I decided to remain in London. **The witnesses stayed throughout the ceremony even though there were bobs bringing down the ceiling.**

There was a kind of subterranean life, too; people lived in Tubes, there was entertainment in Tubes and food. And then I liked the crowd at Unity Theatre. And the crowd at the BBC. Then I joined Regents Polytechnic with kind of a boxing scholarship to study engineering. That was on Regents Street across from the BBC. And the BBC people had a wonderful restaurant. It was for their own staffers. The boxers from Regents Poly would go over there and eat and people would turn a blind eye to this.

I also went to East Ham Technical College which was an engineering college near the district where I lived. This was at the same time that I attended Toynbee Hall. I'd go there for art lessons and then I would draw some other things. Adjacent to the settlement house was the Oxford and St. George's Club. Now I'm living in Bow, which is kind of an upscale neighborhood with my parents, though I actually see very little of them. They were in bomb shelters, you know, so I had the run of the house. This was in Mile End Road. This was the main road, I believe it's called Roman Road. If you were interested in boxing you would have to

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travel to the East End, like a toreador would go into the hills to look at the new crop of bulls. I felt like a boxer, scientific in my approach, didn't accept punishment, but could hand it out.

So I'm doing these things, but getting involved with the people at Unity Theatre. Of course that was a gaggle of actors, scene designers, costumers. All this was going on at the same time. There was this painter Earl Kerkham in New York at the old Pagano's Gallery, and Earl would turn up in your home for dinner and he would eat, and he would eat at the Hopkins's house, and the Hopkins discovered a notebook that he left. And in the notebook were all of the homes that he went to. Every day of the week there was a place where he would cadge a dinner. And my life was kind of like that. I had something going on every day. My son now reminds me of that. He has a kind of similar interest, enormous energy, and a photographic memory which I don't think I ever had.

A lot of my mates died in the war. Those who were a year ahead of me died fighting.

I think my experience with **Kokoshka**, the drawings where man goes about something were electrifying to me. I still see them. I've seen so much work by great painters, but I still see that man's work. **Though I was kind of resentful of him for another reason. It's England, and he had an almost immediate entree into society which I didn't have. He was accompanied by a Count who also fled Austria. The Count would see that he received commissions and stuff like that.**

So here's this newcomer driven to England, and yet he's on his feet. That kind of amazed me—the patronage that painters could become part of, just flows like a web over Western civilization. I thought then that this is so easy to do except when you have to articulate and defend what you have done. There are people in all walks of life who resent a new way of looking at something. They don't like it. You have people who were run out on a rail from

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New York who were illustrators. It was their job before the advent of the camera, before the advent of photojournalism. There were people who would draw battle scenes and if they turned out something that looked like a Kodak Brownie camera, they were in like Flynn and they were great illustrators. You had illustrators who had come here [to Alaska], like Macketanz and this other guy, Laurence, but they were illustrators and they could no longer find work. And they come up here and they are absolutely *welcomed* because the paintings don't resonate any problem or thought. Nothing. It's the kind of painting that's favored in autocracies or in dictatorships. You do anything else and there is opposition. **Resentment toward Alaska painters**

The Poindexter Gallery was a relatively new gallery, started on 38th street, and it was run originally by George Poindexter who had always had his office either above the gallery or below it. There was another floor, and he would rent this to some movie star. There was one, I remember, she was very nice but I can't think of her name. The gallery was informal.

To show early Abstract Expressionistic work you would have to have an informal tone, to say the least. Your visitors would be the madmen, the mad people of your nation. Certainly, people who were reasonable would come in and excoriate the work, in articles and so on. Also, because it wasn't an experienced gallery, there were things they permitted. For instance, in an art gallery the painter isn't allowed in there if he is exhibiting work, or for that matter, if he is not. They don't like them. So the painters keep away. But this wasn't true at the Poindexter Gallery. These sons-of-bitches aren't buying anything, so if you guys want to come in and drink coffee, be my guest.

Robert de Niro had a show and it was black and white drawings, he really worked with thick encrustations of paint, with a gorgeous sculptural lyric line. The man was a great painter,

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but as Meyer Schapiro said of him, “he has a wheel missing”, so having him in the gallery when his work was aloft was really a mistake of the first magnitude.

Anyway, the painters were permitted to gather and socialize. We’d have coffee and then we’d go a couple of blocks south to the Museum of Modern Art, or a couple of blocks north to see what shows were going on by the painters like Picasso or Braque. One night I was at the Cedar—the old Cedar Tavern, now there’s a new splendiferous Cedar Tavern—and on the corner there was a little lamppost. And if people had been to an opening and they’d had something to drink, and they were feeling gay, they would hold onto that lamppost and swing round it. And Gallagher and Sheen were out there, that would be Willem de Kooning and Franz Kline, and they were having a whale of a time, and they were both clasping this little lamppost, which had been worn smooth from artists who had done this sort of thing. I remember de Kooning spun away from the lamppost and said, “You know, those Braque’s are green, and yellow. They look like dollar bills, you know what I mean? They look like enlarged \$20 or \$50 dollar bills, they look like MONEY!” And back to the lamppost and he swings around it, this 45-year-old man acting like a child. Wonderful.

Robert de Niro, myself, and Gandy Brody, never abandoned the figure. There were other painters who never transcended and gave us all sorts of shit. They were a problem, you see, that we never abandoned the figure. Bob would have a sort of Biblical touch to his work, Lot and Sodom, this figure in salt staring. A kind of simple painting. But we always had the figure, though we would have abstract work, because this is what everyone is doing. We got a lot of criticism over this. But once again Bob was doing sketches in black and white. I saw them in the work process. I thought, “God, this is just great.” Enriched white, the kind of drawings where the white is incorporated as a color. Difficult. I mean it’s not as easy as it looks.

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The person he had chosen for this one-man show was the actress Greta Garbo. And no one had come to see the show. I think Franz Kline had come up there.

(What do you mean, “person he had chosen”?)

As a figure. Maybe he derived this from the memory of movies; he would see her movies compulsively. There was always a movie of Greta Garbo in New York, the downtown Apollo and on 42nd Street on the West Side. They’d pop up all over the place. There’d be festivals, and during the festival he would drink in the image and then paint it.

Anyway, here was this splendid room of works of Greta Garbo by Robert de Niro. And nothing was happening. There was barely an opening for this affair because the main gallery had the main show. I think the painter’s name was Sam Francis. Anyway we had the ante chamber of de Niro’s work. For that matter, whoever was in the main gallery, there wasn’t much business there either.

So once again, the painters would gather and sit down and drink coffee and bring in hamburgers. This is on 5th Street now, and finding hot dogs or hamburgers is a neat trick. You’d have to go over to Central Park which would commence where the Plaza [Hotel] is. So you’d have to walk and shuttle about four city blocks. Anyway, we’d be eating hotdogs and stuff like that, and the little gallery of Poindexter’s at that time had a bow window. You could stand in it and look up 57th Street one way and look down it the other way. And the other gallery, the Sagittarius above us, had a bow window too. There was a circular staircase and also a little three-man elevator that would go up and down. And I thought, poor Bob, he’s having a rough day. It’s not a good idea, not for anyone, to come to the gallery. There was a good review, however, in the Art News and that was encouraging. This was before the Village Voice, so there was no help there. And I’m looking out the bow window and I couldn’t believe it.

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There was Greta Garbo, walking from 5th Avenue down. We were just a block over from Tiffany's.

I looked and I thought, "My God, that's Greta Garbo. She's heard about the show. She's coming to see Bob's work." And I ran back, and I said, "Bob, you won't believe this, but Greta Garbo is coming!" And I dragged him to the bow window, and we looked out, and I said, "There! There she is!" And she's walking along the sidewalk in those huge glasses, and she walked into the building. She disappeared. And I said, "She's in the building!" And we could hear the elevator going up. But the elevator kept going. It was just a little three-story building, and we were on the second floor. So we ran down into the street. We thought maybe she'd entered on the first floor. And I said, "Well, I don't know where the hell she went. Maybe she'll turn up in a little while."

Then nothing happened. I said, "Dammit, I think she's upstairs. I can't believe this. Maybe she made a mistake and went to the wrong gallery." Bob was really in bad shape over this. But I said, "Don't worry, I'll bring her here. She made a mistake."

So I go upstairs, and there was this show of nothing paintings by some fashionable painter I'd never heard of. His name was Manolo, and he was talking to Greta Garbo and exhorting her around the gallery. They come back, and I jump into the elevator with this lady, and here I am in close proximity to her. I told her about Robert's show, and meanwhile we'd already passed the second floor. And then I started shouting at her, with just a few swear words I learned when I served in the Danish merchant marine. I said, "I don't know how you can do this, look at the paintings of some pimp like that. It's disgusting." Anyway she hurried off, and I went back to the gallery. We'd just acquired a manager—that was Budd Hopkins—and I said, "Man I can't believe this. Here are these paintings and that son-of-a-bitch was up there looking

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at this fucking guy's work! I mean who is this? I mean it's *nothing work*." So then we went up there and beard the lion in his den. And here was this fellow Manolo, and he was just this porcine figure, and he had stationed himself in his bow window up above us. One pictured that was where he would be alone and you'd have no reason to stand beside him. And we looked at this fellow from head to foot, who was just immaculate. We had the usual patina that comes from wondering where your next meal is coming from, and I had a temptation to clean my shoes on the other side of my pants. I really felt inferior to this guy. I know I once saw Clark Gable in a restaurant, and felt inferior to Clark Gable, but this is a normal thing. Of course, this handsome man. But here was this fellow with coifed hair, every hair exact, and his clothing. The Aga Kahn it seemed was making a resort out of a part of Sardinia, and these were cottages of peasants in Sardinia. So this was the fashion, this was the place to be, before it became popular, in this spread of things by the Aga Kahn's son or successor.

And damn, I always thought about that—here was someone totally oblivious to what we were doing, and she left the building. I would have pursued her, but then she's Greta Garbo and there are police and they would have hustled me away or what have you. But it was a terrible day for de Niro. But he never ceased to love that lady and her acting.

Jacqueline Bouvier, when she was Jacqueline Bouvier, came to the Hofmann School. And then when she became first lady, would leave the Kennedy Compound in Hyannis and go up the road and attend critiques. Sometimes she would bring her own work for private criticism by Hans Hofmann. So she understood, you see.

But fashion, too, kind of blinds people. But what a disaster that was for Bob. Just terrible. What the hell could we do? It's like the story I told you about Kokoshka and Kafka.

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How does one explain that disparity? The fellow who has a literary vision would not tolerate that in a painting.

(Do you feel the passion today about painting that you did?)

Yeah. When I paint I feel as impassioned. Except I'm much older. At one time I did choreographic paintings, never abandoning the figure. They were choreographic in that they were swiftly done. I wonder where the hell they all went. There was one painting, the Yellow Duck. I don't know where the hell it is. The best painting I ever did.

(Do you feel like you have created your masterpiece?)

I think the way—to me a masterpiece is “Hanging Clown”. It's at the University Museum up here. It's a small painting. I'll be doing a print edition. It's a war painting. What's it about? The death camps that were established by the Germans. If a prisoner tried to escape, they'd go into these minefields. Sometimes they'd get injured in the minefields, a leg would be blown away. But they'd take them back to the camp and dress them as clowns and hang them at a morning assembly. And there's this little luminous painting. To me that's the best thing I've done. I did it about five years ago. It just happened naturally. I think I put the whole thing to rest with that because there were other things where I tried to catch the soul, a departing soul. How do you do that? Well, I tried and I love it.

Oddly enough, when people are around I do good work. It seems difficult for me to be alone, like in my studio. I feel the mind appears to young in this respect and it's as if I never thought that—like the experience of color is such that it all comes about there. I don't know how that happens. Whenever I start something I think “I don't know what I'm doing”. It's as if I start all over again, but that can't be true. But it is as if I'm starting again. And then I'm kind of amazed at the colors and forms.

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(Do you ever do commissioned work?)

No, I've not really pursued that, but I'd be happy to do that. Yeah, I did a commission to do a monoprint of Pikes [restaurant] for the owner who was leaving—Chuck Tercels. And I went out there and did some sketches and he came by here. It's in Sitka now. He's had it splendiferously framed. Yeah, that was a commission I did.

When I came here a fellow approached me—this goes back almost 40 years. He said, “Did you know that Jackson Pollock?” Meanwhile Jackson Pollock was rolling around the media. Everyone had heard of him. And he said, “You see this?” It was Time magazine with a full page of a Jackson Pollock painting. He said, “Can you do that?” I said, “Yeah. It's quite easy.” He said, “No, I can't do it. Dr. Beckley wants a copy of this.” So I did that, and got about fifty dollars for it. The bastard who had me do this claimed that he did it, but I was very grateful for the fifty bucks. That was the only major commission. I remember having it on the floor in this bachelor's nest begging people not to walk over it. Man, that was a beautiful replication of a work. I thought, my God this is something. Only I could do this...

(Do you feel like you're painting much now?)

Yeah. I just want to do it every day. I'm not doing it every day but I'm going to get around it. I think I need the sketch group. I think at the University they want me to work, do some monoprinting there, and I think I'll take him up on that. Strange, once upon a time I would work alone, but now it's difficult. I was watching this movie, Ronald Reagan, who reached the age of 73 and was already going. I thought, “My God. Can this be happening to me?” I hope not.

I'm lucky that I feel this way: like “My God what do I do now?” It's as if I'm confronting the problem for the first time. If however I arrive at some sort of a plot and

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commence work, I think “nothing good will happen.” And something happens that’s facile. I know how to counter that. If the work becomes facile, I paint with my right hand. My brain obviously is not controlling the brush. I’ve become a creature of habit. But if I switch the brush to the left hand, that’s awkward alright, but the brain takes control. And things happen. What was facile goes out the window. That’s what you do if your a painter and become facile. Just change hands and see what happens. You now have a problem with control, but that’s a blessing because accidents happen. And that’s great. So when I feel strange, I see a light at the end of the tunnel. But it’s strange really, you’re now 73 years of age and you don’t know how to begin here? You’re looking around and other people as though their work will save you. But I get into it and the damndest thing. Where are these colors coming from? It can’t be entirely accidental because there’s a consistency.