

**6-14-2000 Alfred Skondovitch.**

**Interviewed by Sharon Hollensbe in Alfred's kitchen in Fairbanks AK**

We walked into the house and I saw something that was the most electrifying sight. You never really forget a painting.

We recently went to this puppy class and the people there said, "Alright. Your name is Skondovitch. We'll remember the name of your dog. All the people here will remember the name of your dog." And it's quite true. And it's the same with paintings. When you look at paintings they seem to hover in your consciousness, particularly if it's done in a particular way. When I think of the signature brush, I think of this fellow.

And here on the wall to the bedroom was a triptych, and it was of an eagle, and I thought, that's *him!* Then I was asked to get a coffee mug and I opened up the cabinet of the grandma, and inside the doors there was a painting once again of a distended cut up eagle. And it had this brush stroke. So then I thought, this is in the collection of Nelson Rockefeller. God damn! America! I'm going to rich! Then I thought, you'd better be cool now and denigrate the paintings, and admire other things in the house. I avoided talking about the paintings in chatting with this grandma.

Then she took me aside and she said, "Ah don't cayuh what Jim does, but you be sure that he don't become a frycook. If he becomes a frycook, I'll kill the son-of-a-bitch."

I said, "Ma'am, grandma, I'll see that he doesn't do that. He was in business management at Claremont. He won't be a frycook, I assure you." He was about 26 then, just out of college, beginning his career. There were another bunch of guys who weren't beginning their careers and were sniffing around foundation money.

So I gained the confidence of grandma.

“Who painted these little things? They’re so delightful,” I said.

“My grandpaw did that, that was Grandpa Vail. He was an artist here.”

I thought, now we approach the mother-lode. “Is this all he did, just in the house? I guess he didn’t really take it seriously.”

She said, “No, we had ‘em in the family barn. Yeah, that was a big structure.”

I thought, man I’m rich, rich! And I said, “I don’t see his signature.”

“Well, he was kinda weird about that, but if you pick up a mirror and look back at the painting, you see where those little flowers are? You’ll see his name.”

Sure enough, Vail popped out of the goddamned bushes. I thought, man alive, America! I controlled myself, but I felt like screaming, shouting. God, a triumph! I’ve discovered a painter in a premier collection.

And I said, “I wonder if I could visit the barn. I enjoy the environment of artists, even with they’re just hobbyists.”

She said, “Well, I’m afraid—well, Jimmy-boy will take you up there, but there was that Cooley fire.”

“Fire?”

“Well, the Cooley family had a reunion of the whole family. They came from the East, they came from the South into California. Of course, the most famous Cooley was the one who had a western band.” Anyway, the Southern Cooleys and the Northern Cooleys and Cooleys who came across the Great Divide all got in a fight. Believe it or not, the Cooleys who came across the Divide were imprisoned and enslaved by the Mormons, and they didn’t like the treatment that they received. They never forget it.”

Digression: On another trip with J. R. Cooley when we wrote a play and were going to go out to East Hampton where I had spent a summer and knew some playwrights who would listen to it, we stopped by Salt Lake City with his new bride, Beatrice, and walked into the Mormon Tabernacle to Temple. I thought, God, how magnificent. Cooley actually started shouting, screaming, throwing cushions and we had to take him out. The police came. Believe it or not.

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So I said, “Jim, I’m kind of interested in looking at the barn, maybe there is something left.” It seems that 3000 Cooleys arrived on this 40-acre spread, and there was fighting and a riot and the barn was set afire, very willfully. The barn was also a place with an adjunct building in which people lived.

I insisted on going up there. I said, “I really want to see where your great grandpa worked.” So we went. Here’s this desolate place, ashes and fireweed had popped out in places. All I could find was a burnt stretcher with just the glimmer of a canvas on it, but showing nothing, no longer than my hand, and charred. That’s all we could find. I thought, well, let’s go on to Texas.

Did I call the Museum of Modern Art and tell them that if they approached the painting they had with a hand mirror they would find the name of the unknown artist? I said, no. Screw you Rockefeller, it will cost you a million bucks and you won’t get that information from me unless you come up with that kind of money.

So we went to Houston, Texas.

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Ursula was very much a creature of the Nazi regime and a member of the Nazi Youth, brainwashing by all of this. She was attracted to the American soldiers. Ferguson worked as an non-commissioned officer in intelligence in Heidelberg, which is really a soft station for these people. He had an affair with Ursula, and then he left to marry his high school sweetheart. Family pressure was used in all of this. But Ursula was a wild one anyway and he was glad to get out of that. He arrives in New York City and visits Elliot Budd Hopkins and me, we were sharing a studio. The Ursula turns up and Ferguson departs.

Then I had an involvement with her. We were dating, living together, and I felt that Elliot was really rude and nasty to her. I could sympathize with her situation even though we were kind of enemies, you know. She loved this guy and he left her. So we became involved. But she was always getting involved with all sorts of people. Her attitude toward me—she loved me very much, but when I didn't want to see her anymore, she was just furious. She was possessive, no matter how many men she was having relationships with, none of the them could be released or go anywhere.

But mine was a special case, because she was brought up to regard Jews as sub-human, and to be rounded up and killed, you see. And here she says she's in love with me, the Jew, in defiance of the political regime she came from. And there was no way that I could tell her to get lost. It was impossible. She'd made this enormous sacrifice, climbed across a chasm, and to be treated this way by an untermensch, or sub-human, that she wishes to elevate. That's all I want to say about it. We were both creatures of the goddamn war.

**(And she turned out to be quite destructive—would act on her impulses?)**

She would, and so would I. I thought, my God, we are like souls.

**(But you weren't trying to harm her, whereas she was definitely trying to harm you, right?)**

Yeah. She suffered from peritonitis. Just as my cat has diabetes, I've become an expert on it. I remember not being able to drive. When you live in the city you don't learn to drive. I remember at that time a fellow was acquitted as being an accessory in a bank robbery because the prosecutor accused him of driving the car. He said, "I was born in New York City on Mott Street, and I tell ya, I never drove a car in my life." And he got off.

One night she had one of these attacks and I had to take her to the hospital. There was this old car which was reminiscent of the old movies, with these checkerboard panels and I had to drive her out to some goddamn place where there was a hospital where she had already compiled a record of x-rays with the internist there. And I had never driven in my life, and also this horrible vehicle you couldn't get into second gear. Here we are on the freeway, the first time I've ever driven and blessedly the police came along. Which is a risky matter for me. Although I thought, this is America and they don't ask you silly things about where you are from and identify yourself. The documentation seems to be voluntary.

I said to the policeman, "I've got a woman her who is sick, take a look at her. And I can't drive and this isn't my vehicle. And I've got to get her to a hospital. Please have someone..."

He says, "No, you drive the car and we'll have an escort for you. I'll be behind you and another officer will precede you coming off the ramp."

Ramp, I don't what fucking ramp is or anything.

So he says, "You do the best you can. And you should drive this in third gear."

"I can't get it out of second."

Meanwhile, Ursula comes to life, believe it or not, has the boys pull up the hood, and bangs the gear knuckle with a hammer that she had in her handbag, and says, “Now it will go into third gear.” She gets back in the car and collapses, and I have this nightmare drive.

And the copy says, “You did very well, but we don’t want to catch you driving this car again.”

There were all sorts of peritoneal attacks that I remember of that poor lady. She would be near death.

I thought, here she is from a foreign country and this guy turns his back on her. I had great sympathy for her. And then when Ferguson’s friend, Hopkins, was kind of kicking her around, I didn’t like that either. It’s strange that I really embraced this German girl, primarily because of these things. It’s also convenient when someone arrives at your house, and she’s there, and all the wooing all the courting and stuff, baguettes of bread and flowers and wine. What the hell. This was a bit of all right for me. But we never had a relationship where she doffed her clothing, and... it never reached that point. She was always too nervous and uptight and out the window and the fire escape.

I can get emotions out of a model, but I never got a successful painting out of Ursula. But it wasn’t all bad. It was certainly very interesting for me. But that’s really all there is to that woman.

Now, I want to go to the house of Marcel Duchamp because it ends with Ursula. Marcel Duchamp lived on 14<sup>th</sup> street in a little building. I call it a brownstone but it wasn’t really. Brownstone had a dignified staircase and a balustrade where the neighbors would sit and spit pumpkin seeds out on the sidewalk. No, this was in an area that was really coded for commerce. There was Union Square with its shops—I forget the names of them but they were quite famous

for bargains. There was a little tavern and eating place, primarily, that was Russian. It was called The Bear Inn. There was a doorman, rare in that part of New York, and he was a Russian Cossack in full regalia in uniform and hat. A very frightening aspect. I never went into The Bear Inn. People would turn up in Rolls Royces and their chauffeurs would come back for them. No place to park. Of course, 14<sup>th</sup> Street did have a famous restaurant. That would be Luchons which goes back to the turn of the last century when once upon a time 14<sup>th</sup> Street would be like 42<sup>nd</sup> Street now.

Duchamp lived in this plain house. It was a very quiet house. I had relationships with some foreign painters who came to New York, because they were born over there and they wanted to go back. I was born over there but I didn't want to go back. There was this discourse of visas, special passports, people in trouble, where people can live quietly, because of experiences some people had in Europe in a concentration camp.

Marcel Duchamp, who showed *Nude Descending a Staircase* in New York at the 1913 Armory Show, had elected to live in New York. He played chess constantly. And I can't play chess. I can play checkers, but he just scoffed at the idea of playing checkers. The house had a museum-like quality, except museums had, in those days, a something dead about them, a mausoleum quality.

Now we have museum directors who claim that they are as creative as artists, that the success of the show is their taste and all this stuff. The Metropolitan Museum guys who spurned our work come forth with people like that: we are more important than the artists when we bring these assemblies together. Then the sparks fly, blah blah blah.

Everything was altered in the home of Duchamp. He would change things. Everything would fascinate him. He would sit in contemplation. The act of playing chess where there's an

occasional move in a game that might take hours occupied him. A thread coming out of the sleeve of his shirt was fascination to him—how this could be incorporated into art. The artist Joseph Cornell went there and he began these construction things, assemblages. These were inspired by Duchamp. A visit by Cornell to his house was what changed his life. Interesting people would turn up. I would come with messages from Stanley William Hayter who wanted to know when he was going to go back, because he was going to go back to Paris.

**(Is that house where you met Duchamp? With the messages?)**

Yeah. “When are you going back. You can stay at my place in Paris.” Conversations like that. And also the studio was not vandalized in any way by Germans, said Stanley William Hayter. And Duchamp’s answer t this would be long games of chess. Then he’ come by and they’d play. A strange man who was cheerful, but kind of like an older, trusted bank clerk. Not the CEO or Vice President, but a trusty fellow. And there were exhibits in his house. Things were changed into exhibits.

Sometimes I’d run an errand and if I was with a friend, I’d say, “Go tell him that I’ve got something for him.” And I’d go up the fire escape and dangle my legs off the roof, which is a risky business, because there were police in Union Square, but they never bothered me. And he wondered why did I do that. And I said, “Because it’s very Chagall-esque. There’s the Russian Bear restaurant and here I am up there. Don’t you see it that way?”

He thought I should dance up there. I said, “Nope. I won’t do that.”

But one day there was a guy there, a young fellow, and he seemed bored with the whole ball of wax. He was younger than me, by a couple of years. His mother was—I can’t think of her name—she had the nickname of Squeaky or Bubbles, because she was a very optimistic lady. And she was the wife of the brother of Henri Matisse. And the brother, I think his name was

Pierre. And Pierre opened a gallery in New York, the family had taken control of the paintings, and it was his joy to walk around 57<sup>th</sup> Street, head for the Oak Room at the Plaza. Pierre, Sr., would dress like his legendary brother in an artist's smock. In New York. In the 50s. And this was his son Pierre Matisse and Bubbles or Squeaky, decided that she really like Marcel. And that Pierre was a real bore, and embarrassment wandering around that way. It never embarrassed him because it just authenticated the work and the prices. So she would be there with little Peter and she would laugh and sing and good times were had by al when she was there.

Anyway, the young fellow said, "Who are you?"

I said, "I'm Alfred Skondovitch. I'm a painter from England" I didn't want to burden him with the Hofmann School and all this tommyrot.

He said, "Why don't you come with me to Los Angeles, tonight? We'll be there in the morning."

"You have an airplane?"

"No!" He had some fast vehicle, and it seems that he and another bunch of rich young dudes would speed across the country, reaching Los Angeles within 24 hours. In the glove compartment, Peter Matisse explained to me, they had hundred dollar bills. They went on a prescribed, route, they alerted the cops to let them through, but if a policeman did stop them, they'd give him a hundred dollars. And away they'd go. They'd be floating along on Dexedrine and things like that.

There was a girl who knew Ursula, to whom I'd explained that I wanted to get away from her, that I loved her by my God, I think she's going to kill everybody. Her name was Susan Davis. The others had nicknamed her U.C., and I thought this is a fine woman with an hones face, a plain face, and not only that, she's poor because she has a little car. I remember this one

young lady at the Hofmann School, Phyllis Yompouslky, who I thought was dreadfully rich and decadent because she was driving a huge Plymouth. That's how naïve I was and of course the little car which was driving by U.S., which stood for Union Carbide, was a Porsche. And she would engage in these races. So as a result of going to Duchamp's house, I'm in one of these headlong flights across the country, traveling at dawn at 120 mph for hours, which was very exciting.

**(How far did you get? To L.A.?)**

Yeah, of course. But not to just L.A., but to the beach at Santa Monica. The beach named for the film comedian who came up here [to Alaska] and died—Will Rogers. We all wound up at Will Rogers Beach. Young people would arrive on that beach. We'd arrive all within 30 minutes, the last contestant would come in, in this insane race. Sometimes someone would get killed, and this was an excuse to drink champagne all night long, no matter who got killed.

I met a young guy who said I'm interested in art, one of the children from the land of Beulah is interested in art.

I said, "Oh, really?"

He said, "You know what a Monticelli looks like?"

"Yes, I do."

"Could you recognize one without getting close to it? Could you look at it through your peripheral vision and say, 'that's a Monticelli'?"

"I think I could. If the light was right."

He said, "All right. Come with me tomorrow."

We went to this house up in the hills where J. R. Cooley later brought the fire engine red Cadillac. We're in the house of a movie actress who had expired, and the estate was put to auction.

"Just walk in there," he said, "the Monticelli is on the right, and I'll meet you in the kitchen."

One of the race drivers takes me up there, and I walk through the living room, not breaking my pace, walking slowly. I thought, my God, that's a Monticelli. Unbelievable. The rest of the paintings are like shit. Some interior decorator had put this together in this flaky way. So he took me back to the beach and bought me an ice cream soda at a little stand, and he disappear.

He says, "I bought it for \$500. Now what do I do with it?"

I says, "Well, a Monticelli you can enjoy for the rest of your life."

And I said, "I know someone who'd be very interested in that. He'll give you fifty grand for it."

"Who is that?"

I said, "It's Knoedler in Zurich. You call him and they'll jack you into wherever he is. Just tell them you have a Monticelli."

Beside the place where you could buy sodas by the sidewalk, there was an open telephone booth. If you looked North you could see the beaches of Malibu and the bluffs where Charlie Chaplin and all those people played around with Getty in the Getty Mansion which is now a museum down a ways. And we're in this open phone booth, and I called the gallery.

They said, "You have a Monticelli?" They connected us through to this voice in Switzerland, the guru of art dealers.

“What size is it?” he asks.

I said, “It appears to be 20 x 25.”

He says, “Is it on wood?”

I said, “Yes, it’s on wood.”

“I’ll have a man dere in 20 minuten.”

“But we’re in Santa Monica.”

He said, “I know where you are, you’re near the bluffs where some people to run from the police after the Charlie Chaplin party. I’ll have a man dere in 20 minuten with a check for you. And he don’t know anything about paintings, so don’t take the painting out of the paper bag.”

So a guy comes along and he takes the bag, glimpses in there, and says there’s a painting in there. I say, “It’s a Monticelli.” And he gives this guy a check for fifty grand and that was the beginning of the art career o Fagan—Fagan Gallery. He was a stockbroker. Noguchi designed his gallery in New York which I never went to. He had water that would cascade around the gallery. His hometown was Chicago and he built a gallery there.

Like 5000 other people, I’m sure he read a book on Emil Nolde, by an outfit called Abrams Publications. They would do these short, concise books, 8-1/2 x 11 with good reproductions and good text. And the Abrams book on Nolde concerned paintings and letters that he wrote to his dealer. There’s a sensitivity in the paintings of Nolde, but he was regarded as degenerate and ordered into exile by Hitler. And Nolde would constantly write to the fuehrer saying I am an honest German. I struck a Jew over the head when I was 16 and threw rocks in the Jewish drugstore. So how can you do this to me, one of your faithful Nazis. But the fuehrer ordered him into exile someplace on the Baltic Sea. When you look at the letters in Abrams’

book, and thousands of people did, there is one where Nolde decries the conditions under which he lived, and that no money is coming to him and would his dealer somehow get him into a good light with the fuehrer. Yesterday it rained right into my living room. Rain came through the roof. But the next letter doesn't refer to this. He says it's raining, but nothing about rain coming in through the roof. Fagan flew to the Baltic to Nolde's house, climbed up onto the roof and found *Head of Christ*. Nolde had stopped the leak with this friggin' painting. I called Fagan a bastard—he paid me with an ice cream soda—but he salvaged that great painting. He brought that back and started an exploration of German Expressionists, getting in on the bow wave of excitement that we [Abstract Expressionists] had caused. But these were painters who were famous.

He came back to America and amazingly became an expert on Nolde. He learned that there were paintings of Nolde in the Museum in (I think) Providence, RI. He went up there and saw a painting by Nolde, and it said “in the collection of the artist.”

So he went to the Curator and said, “How can this be in the collection of the artist when the artist is dead? I collect these paintings, I'd like to buy it.”

The curator told him that Nolde's wife was still alive and living in America. So Fagan went to see her, an old lady. He bought that painting off of her for about \$7500. It was on a religious theme.

**(What did he do with the painting he found in Nolde's roof?)**

He kept it.

**(How did you hear about all this?)**

I don't know. Just scuttlebutt. I'm sure that happened, it's something he'd do. The guy was a great broker. He was tops. He would look into things. I think he's kind of pissed at me

for all that I did for him and what he didn't do for me. I feel to hell with it. Those were really happy days.

**(So when would this have happened? When you rode across country. Was that before you moved out there?)**

Yeah, we'd be there and then go on back.

**(Did you do it more than once?)**

I did it twice and that was enough for me. Nothing is as elegant as a little Porsche chugging along. But nothing is as inelegant as a Porsche that has sideswiped a concrete pillar and looks like bloody hell with all your limbs exposed. And I tell you in those early Porsche's even with the canvas awning up, you never got shelter from the storm. You'd be soaked from the waist up or the waist down. A strange vehicle that I never grew to love.

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Now we're in Paris with Giacometti. This was 1959 when I received my green card and my British passport from the British consulate in New York. I thought I'd go home and see my family and then see what's going on in Paris. I enrolled at the Grande Charmant in the Montparnasse District in Paris. I had a letter of introduction to Samuel Beckett from Ed Danielle of the French National Theatre, the cultural mission in New York. If you go to the museum in Pittsburgh you see art in a gallery room with Giacometti, Duchamp, Pollock, Dubuffet, and de Kooning. You feel as though Alfred's work belongs there amongst these other great works. You look at De Koonings "WomenVI" and based of the color schemes and action within the painting it would appear and feel that Skondovitch's work belonged there. You could see how they could have worked together for years.

I've always admired the work of Giacometti. There's a quality about them kind of a metaphysical quality that comes through in his sculpture. And I just wanted to see where a guy like this works. At the Grande Charmant there was a guy who came up from Lyon who said, "I know him and I'll take you to see him."

He says, "He drinks at the \_\_\_ café."

We're sitting in my usual coffee shop, and he leads me across the street to the chagrin of my waiter, who stood in the middle of this broad avenue with his hands on his hips as though this is betrayal.

When you go in a coffee shop in Paris, if you go once or twice and you're in and out of there, but if you go there say, a half dozen times, you'll come under the command of a waiter. He recognizes you, wants to know all about you, and makes it clear that your life is now in his hands. You tell him your true age, what your sexual orientation is, what you do and so on. He will solve all of your problems, where to do laundry and so on. They invest in you. And your coffee there seems very expensive, but it's really a rental on a table. So you remember that this is not Starbucks where you drink and get the hell out of there. And the coffee shops are immediately recognizable because of the paintings of Manet and other artists, Charbonneau, Meissonnier. You sit down in this environment and it seems totally familiar because of these paintings which you see, waiting for dental work. You've been inundated by them since you were a child. But this is true about the waiters being so possessive.

We waited for Giacometti and he arrived. He was this fidgety, craggy-skinned man, and he kept fiddling with his fingers with what appeared to be peanuts, but were actually little bits of clay. And he would discard some of these peanuts and put them in the ashtray. Like an idiot I

didn't pick them up. Because these would be the heads of the wire sculptures he was working on at that time.

We decided that we'd walk from the Café Select au Rotond to the corner where there was a newsstand, and go up this angled street. And there we'd be in a row of what were stables, and a cobbled street. There were businesses in Paris that still used horses. Not the way you think. Christian Dior delivered things in an elegant little black van pulled by a horse, a white Arabian. And florists sometimes used horses, a very expensive proposition. It had just rained and the sun had come out, and the effect of the light rain and sun was that you were drenched in the aroma of horse piss. I remembered this from the farm.