

**Alfred's book, 6/21/00, Tape #12 Talks about family in England**

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

In your midst, even in those days, the glory days of the 50s, there were people amongst us who were older artists, and we kind of sheltered them and praised their work even though we knew that they weren't going to get anywhere.

Gracechurch, a church in Greenwich Village, an important Episcopal Church, I think the first that was set up on the Island [of Manhattan], preceding St. Patrick's on Fifth Avenue. This was when that part of town was "Uptown", and the elite would visit Gracechurch. And they do to this day. There seems to be a secret service Sunday mornings. People arrive in Rolls Royces and what have you and then they leave. But they are very gracious to artists. I think it is the church which is most commonly painted in America. Every painter has painted that church out of respect to it. To me, other than Sunday, and the glimpses of mysterious people like the Renssalleurs, and people from the first families in New York, the church seemed deserted on every other day. You have the Church and a little rectory beside it.

On my honeymoon we were travelling with a bulldog, and I wanted to show my wife, Patti, Gracechurch in Greenwich Village. We were walking by it with our bulldog, and a man came bounding out of the rectory—a large kind of vicar like you'd see in England, a large man, and he said, "That bulldog. My God, are you going to the bulldoggers at the Taft Hotel?"

And I said, "No, we're not."

He said, "Well, that looks like a handsome dog that you have and I'd like to put in for a puppy."

I was kind of shocked because this is the first time, from these darkened windows, this darkened house that this figure burst forth like an explosion.

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I said, "Alas, this dog was cared for by this Dr. Tshinkel at the University. And he let her run free and I can't guarantee that these will be bulldogs."

So the vicar screamed, "Oh my God! You have to register her as a lewd and lascivious bitch!"

I said, "We're not going to do that. We're not in the dog-breeding business. We love this dog and we don't know what we're going to do with the puppies. I was just showing my wife this church, and we're going home to Alaska." That was the only animated action I saw outside that church. A little anecdote.

Now in the course of criticism, there are people who if you take a painting to, if they are colleagues or comrades, they are invariably sympathetic to you. And your friends are not helpful. The only thing helpful is that you are comrades and you share resources and things like this, and you do influence one another and you try to transcend the influence of a veritable hoard of people. Then how do you get a criticism? Believe it or not, you'll take it to someone about whom they will say, "you take this painting to that guy and the guy will go bananas, and he'll vomit even, and you've got a great painting." There was a critic in Paris who wrote for Paris Soir, I forget his name it's so long ago, and I took a load of paintings on my honeymoon to show this guy.

Incidentally, when you go through Customs they place the paintings under seal. And here is France, a foreign country, I'm working in Alaska, there was official backing to my paintings, the Customs knew my name.

"I'm just an etudiant, a student, you're making a mistake."

"No there's no mistake, these paintings are under seal. And if you unseal them, then you owe us some monstrous sum of money."

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It was my intention to get a criticism from this guy, and people said to me, if he goes bananas, if he throws you out of the house, you have got something. So I was not able to see him. Here I am from Alaska going to see this man in the hope of getting my ass kicked out of his house. And if this would happen I would be absolutely delirious, I would be on my way.

The first time I saw the paintings of DeNiro I may have been hungover, but I'd not seen work done that way. I felt like vomiting, it was an embarrassment the way I felt. And then I realized that this is great painting and since this is a business of your eyes and senses and your nerve-endings and what-have-you, when you see something that seems so great, so lyrical, so naturally done, you feel an unworthy challenger. You feel total ignorance, and if you've eaten a hamburger or what have you, you feel like throwing up. You feel how can someone do something like this? How can someone, for instance, over heavy impasto, place a lyric line? How the hell did he do that? What paint does he use? Ah, he used household. But no, he did not. He used paint and its viscosity—we're talking not about miniature little paintings where you manifested control, but a lyric line traveling about 60 inches. It's just incredible was the work of DeNiro.

Within a movement that was changing art forever and really the formation of a school with people like Picasso, the critics who reviewed his work said, you know Picasso is finished. This man Pollock is a creature of chaos, but he has repositioned the stars in the sky and this is incredible. But within this movement there were Gandy (Gabriel) Brody, Robert DeNiro, and myself. We never dispensed with the figure. Yes, I did purely abstract paintings along with things that reflected what had happened in my life. I wanted to express them. The attitude of Nelson Rockefeller was that "this cannot harm us." I don't like someone saying that art cannot harm me. I'm a powerful man. I'll be more powerful because of this sort of dithering, what

appears to be dithering. The work of Siqueros or the Americans who would do these Social Realistic or make heroes of Sacco and Vanzetti. Ben Shahn. I admire the work of these people.

Which reminds me of an incident that involved Ben Shahn. I was involved with the wife of Franz Kline, rather more than Franz was. Emotionally, I thought my God here's the sister of my teacher in the old country and it's a great comfort when I see her. In those days I hated hospitals, and mental institutions especially. But somehow I learned to cope.

Franz got a teaching job at Black Mountain College. It was a college where students voted for the professors, they could continue or get thrown out. It was somewhat revolutionary. And the students also planted tobacco and brought forth these crops and made a little money. People like Buckminster Fuller would go there. All these experimental dreams. We would put together buildings in tape and things like this. But he was still developing his theory, and many of these splendidous dreams collapsed in the wind. I was there with Franz, but I didn't study there. I really had contempt for the whole situation, but not really. The people who were there were those I had shown with at the stable of the Poindexter Gallery, the young people, and I enjoyed that very much.

However, one day we were told that Ben Shahn was to visit and teach. Ben Shahn is really a hero to me. He was a person who could picture the atrocities and evil that men could do to men. On the day he was to arrive, there were two volunteers to pick him up: Cy Twombly and Robert Rauschenberg. No suspicion was attached to this. They could drive and were very handy. Like most city boys I couldn't drive. And they went down to the railroad station to pick up Ben Shahn. But no one returned to the school. We called the police and wondered if there was a car in a ditch. They said no.

And then a day later a bedraggled Ben Shahn arrived at the school with Robert Rauschenberg and Cy Twombly, and he told a story that was dismaying. It was really the convergence of two ways of looking at the picture of a nude in space. Of so-called plasticity, no aesthetic, letting it all hang out. And they captured Ben Shahn and took him to this cabin and they seated him on this stool. And Rauschenberg unrolled a painting that encompassed the entire area. It unrolled, he unrolled the goddam thing and it went all around Ben Shahn. I don't know what the subject matter was. It was probably something like Baur's painting when the Baroness—I don't want to get off course here. They said to Shahn, "This is what's happening. And you're finished. And you're all through. Take a look at this. Can you do this? Give it a try. But you're going to waste your time coming up here if you think you are going to teach us anything." And they brainwashed him, and this nightmare for this aging man went on all through the night. And finally they brought him up to the college. This was towards the end of that semester.

The students liked Franz Kline alright, and they had a gift for him. He wore tennis sneakers in which there were slits from which carbuncles or corns would appear. And the students—there was always an upper-middle class caste to any of these students. When you scratch a revolutionary there is the son of the CEO of a major company. It's like the time of Poindexter when we went down to Cuba so he could look for a retirement place. There was an acreage in Cuba, and two nice young people in a jeep picked us up at the airport and Poindexter would use me as a front to be investigated, and would appear to be in reality quite poor himself. Another guy, his controller of commodity brokers, and I did this. But anyway, the guys who met us were Raoul and Fidel Castro who wanted to sell. What they was 15,000 acres. They introduced themselves as salesmen, and we said no this is too much. Mr. Poindexter is retiring

and he's not going to handle 15,000 acres. And of course two years later, Mr. Castro would have seized the land. This was in the early 50s.

**(How did you get down there without a passport?)**

He smuggled me across borders.

**(How did you get down there without...?)**

Gaawwd only knows. People think that I did jobs for the Admiral Poindexter who took over the National Security Agency, but I did not. I had a seaman's paper and a British passport. And we were in a private plane, and we landed and met these very pleasant people, and we took off because it wasn't what George wanted. He went to Tortola, but I didn't want to go there because the issue of passports would come up. To legitimize my stay Poindexter was designing shows called "Five Americans". Now there was a show called "Five Americans." Or "Ten Americans".

**"Ten Americans" was a show held in 1955, so this must have been after that.**

No, this incident with Castro was before that.

**But Poindexter designing shows for you was after that?**

Yes, the show "Five Americans" was after that. I was in with five younger Americans because the new manager of Poindexter Gallery kind of displaced me and put me where I felt I didn't belong. Dan Rice and Froboluti and people like that; they're all right I suppose but they didn't compare to who I felt I should show with and who I had showed with, Franz Kline and Willem de Kooning.

We were talking about the imprisonment of Ben Shahn and I resented that very, very much. I really never spoke to Rauschenberg after that. And yet I was in a show with the Stable Gallery in New York, and the show was a Salon de Refuse. That is what the Metropolitan

Museum rejected and it wound up in the Stable Gallery. The Stable Gallery was kind of interesting because it was once a horse stable. And there were horse stables near Central Park and people would ride up and down the equivalent of Rotten Row.

Rauschenberg said, "You should be in this."

I said "No. Something very embarrassing happened. I had to go to this laboratory, and was kind of new in this sort of thing, where they had a rabbit test to find out if your girlfriend is pregnant. I was there and the lady that owns the Stable Gallery was there, and I didn't want to go anywhere near her. You understand?"

He said, "Yeah, I understand. Why don't you give me an 8½ x 11 painting and I'll put it behind a door and when they open the door on my painting, they'll see a Skondovitch. And you won't have to see the lady."

So that was really the last business I had with him. When we were in Rome, we didn't succeed in seeing Cy Twombly, though I knocked on the door of the place where he lived. We saw Wolf Kahn in Rome. We saw John Hunter, but not Cy Twombly who had married an Italian princess and was really living the life of Riley.

But really that thing where they kidnapped Ben Shahn and gave him a lecture upon the future was too much.

Grateful students of Franz Kline gave him a pair of new tennis shoes. Which he hated. And refused to wear. And the bastards had thrown away his old sneakers. And the most work I ever did at Black Mountain was searching through the garbage dump for Franz Kline's treasured tennis shoes. Then we arrived back in New York. And then I had to explain to Elizabeth that he was not involved in any extracurricular affairs or extramarital affairs. I was the only one who could give her this assurance.

When I worked in the garment industry, central to that industry were two great stores: Gimbel's to the south and Macys to the north. And on the ground floor were franchised businesses like Nedicks and donut shops, something like that. And we'd meet there and then head over to New Jersey to see Elizabeth. And on one occasion after the Black Mountain episode, I was waiting for him and he turned up. But on an avenue the Veterans of Foreign Wars were parading. And the New Yorkers hated these bastards because they would have cattle prods and get up to all sorts of things. They would be drunk and raising hell.

Anyway, Franz turns up and we walk to the sidewalk now and we're heading for the subway to take the shuttle over to New Jersey. And people started shouting who were in the parade, "It's Franz! Franz!" They were from his hometown in Pennsylvania where he went to high school. And they had the hats and the jackets, and stuff like that.

And Franz says, "You go over there and see Elizabeth. These are people I'm going to march with." All this happens in a matter of 30 seconds. Men were marching in cadence and they recognized him—a whole phalanx of men said, "*Franz—yes, there he is!*" And he joined them and marched with them, and then became indistinguishable from them. I thought, where is he. I couldn't see him anymore. He'd returned to wherever the hell he came from, Altoona Pennsylvania. And then I went over to see Elizabeth.

### About Family in England

Well, art was really kind of a ragtag thing that was not approved of by my parents who were really involved in a struggle for survival. Immigrants who fled a revolution. They were people who never became citizens, they were stateless. I had two brothers who were stateless citizens. One brother, when he fought in France, the French government arrested him as a deserter. Governments take an interest in international bouts that involve their pugilists, and help

in every way they can (laughs). But if my brother was a deserter, he was all of three years of age when he left for England.

And art did not fit into this game of survival. My brothers did well in boxing and went into other things. They represented artists, entertainers, a publishing company grew up. There was tailoring company that prospered. The publishing company concerned itself with union people. My stepbrothers ran that, and with the death of my father they seized these assets. But to be a painter was not how you survived. **It was how you surrendered to the fates, and not the way to carry on.** But **I understood and I went to school and studied mechanical engineering and the little that I learned put bread and butter on the table in this house [in Fairbanks] where I lived and worked as a surveying engineer.** And even in the Village [in New York] apart from tailoring I was working a lathe and a milling machine in this guy's bathroom, for some rogue scientist working on atomic goddam thing. **But art, this is for the rich.**

**You felt that way? It was lurking in the background?**

Yeah, this is something for rich people.

**It wasn't just how your parents felt but it echoed in you too?**

**Yes, it echoed in me too. I thought that I was letting everyone down. Letting down my flesh and blood. It is difficult to describe England to you, and of course things have changed, as I've said.** The Jack Straw is now in power and the farmer whom the members of the family had called "Master John", "Master Richard", is gone; this is relentless and there is a certain charm about this. But it kind of puts you in a certain place and you had to seek the patronage of these people. I had Lady Ursula Bullard, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, and Lady Basil Henriques offered to help in this regard. So if I'd stayed there things would have brightened up for me. But all the time I felt, I'm someone who called John "Master John".

We went to England on our honeymoon and we visited the old farm. Master John had died. What a shock that was. And the young guy who said, “No, we don’t call people ‘Master’ anymore here.” And he said that he took over the farm when John died. So I went back in time to discover that a time had gone.

In the Village I felt that I was amongst people who—I actually put bread on their table, you see—and who were doing great things, with art. I thought “This country is different. I don’t need a royal patron in order to move up.” Such as the patronage of Lady Ursula Bullard, Lady Violet Bonham-Carter, and Lady Basil Henriques. This country was different and the playing field was level, you might say. Even though it was leveled so that people could take potshots at you and throw earth and fire and water, you accepted this punishment in good company, and saw things change the world in which you lived. Incredible. Incredible.

I did something that came naturally, and then I went to the Hofmann school and went a step beyond this. I felt that the work of de Niro was done naturally, and it was, and yet there was something else that he added to this. – really admires de Niro. Mentions him multiple times.

**What?**

If one has a natural attribute you’re involved in a form of primitivity but he kind of transcended that. The paintings had a universal appeal. This was painted in a language you knew would be understood throughout the world. There is a language that you are speaking with this thing called a paintbrush. It was once a symbol of your eccentricity, but it’s something that reaches out to the world, and that was the quality of de Niro. To me he was quite heroic. He believed in art for art’s sake, and believing in art for art’s sake you chose a very incorrect path with that attitude.

**What do you mean by that?**

He believed that you shouldn't politic in art. Like Pollock believed that you should never talk about art. Never lecture about art. Never cooperate with art historians; keep your mouth shut and just do this thing.

**And de Niro?**

And de Niro felt the same way about this. And he had a coda of struggle, of starving if necessary, sacrifice.

But I had a number of agendas that I was carrying. I was teaching people boxing at the New York Athletic Club. You had to be fit for this; you had to eat, or be punished, literally. Sometimes I would find myself in de Niro's studio, and I would feel hungry. My body would tell me that I would have to perform that evening, and I needed food. And I checked the refrigerator and nothing there except sardines which you suspected were old.

And I'd say, "Jesus *Christ*. There's no fucking food here."

And he'd say, "Don't worry. This is America, and we will be fed." And then almost on the money, on the dot, a young lady would appear and invite us out to dinner. And he'd look at me as if to say, "You see what I mean? This is America, we don't starve."

I said, "Bob, I can't depend upon this. I really have to eat. I have to take care of myself." I had to work to survive, though I wasn't exactly just surviving. I was supporting a whole bunch of people from Franz Kline to Robert de Niro. I mean that I fell into a job where I got a union salary in the garment industry. And the beauty of it was that I worked during winter on coats and suits, and then the season would end in late spring and I'd go off to summer school in Provincetown.

**You were helping financially people like Franz Kline and Robert de Niro? How did you do that, would you buy them food, or pay their rent or what?**

I'd buy them food, buy dinner, or just give them money.

**This sounds to me like something similar to your experience of being bombed, and thinking about survival, how to survive, and that would always be a basic issue for you—that art would be something—**

--where the bombing continued. There was at one time an organization amongst the artists. They called themselves The Black Hand. This was also a name for the Mafia. These artists came together, in New York, in the late 40s and early 50s. And if they didn't like a criticism of their work by someone out of Bryn Mawr or the New York Times, they'd find the man and beat the shit out of him. Really.

A latter day painter was Norman Bluhm. And Norman kind of replicated, did Norman Bluhm (don't mix him up with the other guy named Bloome from 15<sup>th</sup> street who did social realistic work). He did small abstracts. Whereas you had the heroic and the choreography of Jackson Pollock, this guy would take a paintbrush and go whfipp! It was miniaturization of that kind of work. But Norman got the most wonderful reviews simply because Norman would call up some reviewer and beat the living shit out of him. You beat up one and all the others get the message. He was a continuation of the old Black Hand when they would beat up reviewers. But then he was rendered obsolescent by history when millions of dollars were thrown at these people.

**I am curious about how you thought about things, like when you could paint, because you were working at jobs, which would decide some things for you, as to your priorities.**

I have this gift and I really can't live without it. I might forget about it or not do it. But it's the only thing that makes me whole.

**But on the other hand, you're taking care of other people, so that must have been something you felt you had to do.**

I had no option. That's what you had to do. This was what we were like. People helped one another. I had a job and that's what you were expected to do. The others had jobs like framing or matting paintings. They had jobs like painting houses, which de Kooning did for years, what Franz Kline did for years, or doing murals in cafes and restaurants in New Jersey.

**But you didn't do that sort of thing?**

No, I just did tailoring or boxing, and then built orgone boxes, did lathe and milling work on a potentiometer.

**So your work, in some ways, took you away from art, from painting.**

Yeah. I couldn't make the sacrifice that these people would make. I don't like the idea of starving. When these were "wonderful days, blah, blah, blah," but there were people who went mad. There were people who committed suicide. It's a stressful thing to change the way people see things.

I mean that when people look at paintings, they are really looking at dead things. Here [in Fairbanks] the beloved art is a cabin, and moose turds, and stuff like that. You grasp it at once and thereafter it becomes a dead thing on the wall. It doesn't seem to live or breathe. It doesn't have something infinite about it. This is what people like. Something that's dead, that's non-controversial, that they don't have to think about. They like that sort of thing. You piss around with that and—the Academy is dead, long live the Academy. Even I am called old-fashioned by people. What is that all about? I turn on my heel and do something new. But there are people who don't like it. There are nations who have dead things on the wall.

The Academy that we fought in New York was fair enough. It was Picasso and Matisse and Duchamp who joined our ranks and played chess for 30 or 40 years.