

Interview with Peter Heinemann

October 17, 2002

I started in Malibu. My father was an art director, and my mother wrote. We lived right on the sand. There was a ranch. There was a lot of availability to everything. Malibu is now 18,000 people but then it was 300. So the only thing I missed was more kids. My father lost his job, and this was kind of the cornerstone of my parents's divorce.

In a sense it killed him. He lived another thirteen years, but it killed his spirit. And he found someone else who he thought was going to be his mother and take care of him which my mother couldn't because she was too.... They got divorced, and how he did it was that he encouraged her, because she had gall bladder trouble, to recover in Hiram, Ohio, which was the town of her childhood. And he would sell the house, because they couldn't pay the mortgage anymore. So she went away, and he sent me and my dog to live there in Hiram. And he sold the house, and then he started his affair with his old family friend. So, at the end of the school year in Hiram, I hitchhiked to Virginia and then to Connecticut and then back across the country, which would be hard to do today, but this was the end of World War II. People were nicer and there were less crazy people. When I got there, he told me he was going to divorce my mother. And he said he call me Art; don't call me Pops. So he wanted to be my friend, rather than my father. Or what he really wanted to do – he didn't want to have the responsibility of being my father. And so I got a job at the

Malibu Inn but it was hard so eventually I spent the summer alone in a cabin in Topega Canyon that he had rented. It was very nice; it was a very beautiful esoteric time. I painted and read and wrote. I lived by myself, which was quite heady for a fourteen-year-old. And at the end of the summer, when my mother showed up, he said he was going to divorce her and marry this other woman. And what was going to happen to me? The other woman's – Zinzy's – son, had gone to Windsor Mountain, which was a prep school in Massachusetts. So one of the teachers was in California at the time. So my father talked to him and they managed to get me in for a third of the cost – it was \$1,500, but I could go for \$500. I went there for two years, but the \$500 was it. He didn't pay any more. So I went the second year for nothing. But I was smart, so they liked that. And I was big; I looked like an adult. So they liked that. And I could help out a little bit – it was a small school. And I didn't want to go to college; I had all A's but I didn't want to go to college. I wanted to go back to the west and make my father teach me how to be an artist. It was kind of a crazy construct – because I hadn't had enough of my father.

What I am getting to is that my father has a lot to do with me – because he was figurative, and he was a failed painter, and he was an art director with a lot of ability as a commercial artist. A lot the humanist strain from him came through in me. I went to Idaho where he and Cynthia had bought a quarter section in a small farmhouse. I spent a summer working in their house, I spent all the money that I had saved the year before working in the hotel and I fooled around with them and my stepbrother which came to blows and they

asked me to leave – probably a good thing; I might have killed them all – I was totally murderous and I might really have killed them all. But I hitchhiked across the country and went to my mother and her then-new husband, Lester Cohen, who was a writer. And he said when I got there, “I don’t like Heinemanns.” He felt that my father had abused my mother, and he felt that I had abused her too because I didn’t do what she had said. I had gone to live with my father and she didn’t want me to do that. So I went to New York and my father’s brother — who was really kind of a nervous wreck, but he lived in his apartment with his wife and two kids who were a couple years younger than me — he managed to get me a rented room in one of those big apartments on Riverside Drive. So I got this room for ten dollars a week and I got a job through the stepmother of a classmate from Windsor Mountain. She was a photographer herself, and she got me a job with a friend of hers – or an acquaintance of hers – he was not a friend of anyone’s – a totally stupid man. But he was a perfectly competent photographer. He said he would pay me \$25 a week, but he would take out taxes so of course it came to \$21, which was really not quite enough, because I had to pay ten dollars to rent, so it wasn’t quite enough to live on. And I was a very nervous sixteen-year-old. I was sixteen, and I was smart, but I was nervous, and I couldn’t do the things in the darkroom that he wanted me to do because I was too nervous. On the other hand, he was too stupid. He always insisted I call him Mr. Costa, and I did. But as he complained to me about how badly I was doing things, and I would say, “Yes, Mr. Costa,” and “No, Mr. Costa.” And he would say, “What is this with the

'Yes, Mr. Costa,' and 'No, Mr. Costa?' Why are you saying this, and I would say, "Yes Mr. Costa," "No Mr. Costa." So it was a draw. And I worked there for four weeks and when I visited the other photographer my kind of benefactor and friend Helen Merrill, and she told me he was about to fire me. So on Monday, I went and said, "I quit." And he said, "What, you can't quit. I was about to fire you. And I said, "No, I quit."

So then I went around looking for a job. At sixteen it's really a dreadful thing. Probably at any age. But I finally went to an agency. And they had me go to W.T. Grant's – they were looking for a minion in their insurance department to work their posting department. I was already afraid I was going bald so I had shaved my head and Helen had given me an old army coat that came down to my ankles. I was six-foot tall then, so it really must have belonged to a very tall person. And I had this bald head – so I go for an interview bald with a giant army overcoat -- quite bizarre, you know. So I took their test, they had this test, and no one had ever scored quite like this on their test – they had to hire me, because they were intimidated. And it wasn't that I was good at school, but I was like a killer on tests. I would search and destroy on tests, figure out how to beat them. So I still had this kind of aggressive approach to tests and I killed this test – a terribly stupid test – and they must have given it to morons before anyway.

So they gave me this job. And I was very bad at it of course because my mind would be drifting – I would be writing plays and writing music and I was working this posting machine and at the end of the day I would be \$43,000 ahead or \$23,000 behind.

So that people would have to stay after work, overtime and fix these numbers. And so they had the department say, "Will you stay over and do this work," and I said, "No I can't stay over – I can barely do this." But they couldn't fire me – I had those great test scores.

My mother had relented enough so that she agreed to pay for me to go to the Art Students League – she paid \$13.00 a month. I went there at night after work – I would get a candy bar for dinner and go to the Art Students League. I got my first bit of good information from my teacher who I never saw – he came in twice a week and he was surrounded by a little gang of immigrant men and women who were taking the night course. He would go around and try to figure out what was wrong with their paintings. And he never got around to me until the very last day. And I said, "Mister, I can't get this foreshortening." And he said, "Oh, keep at it, keep at it." Which is very good advice. And the reason why I know it is because years later when he was in his 90's, he was having a show – and I went to the show, and he had kept at it. And the work was better – it was the best work he had ever done. Just very simple, kind of post-Cezanne-esque landscapes but they had lovely color.

At Windsor Mountain there had been a teacher - Jim Hall - who had gone to Black Mountain. And he said that it was a nice school. You had to have an interview to be accepted. And he had passed his interview by saying that he was writing a symphony in his head. His wife was named Franny Hall and she tried to be a writer and she had published a few stories in a magazine. But they ended up teaching at Windsor Mountain.

That's what they did from when I was there – 1947 to 1975 – almost until the year the school closed. Jim Hall died, but when I went to a reunion in 1996 she was still alive.

So I decided I would go for college boards so I needed to do some studying. So my mother said, if you can get them to let you stay over for a month at Windsor Mountain I will pay for it. And I went up – I hitchhiked up – and they said, “Well, you can stay here for a dollar a day.” So I stayed there for 40 days, and my mother paid 40 dollars. And I studied and studied but I didn't know what to study. But it was nice to be off and when I quit the WT Grant job the head of the department shook my hand - he was so pleased because he couldn't fire me; he was so happy I was quitting. But that's when Jim Hall told me about Black Mountain, so I thought I would apply.

My mother had lost a watch that she had insured. She got five hundred dollars. She said, “Well if you can go to college for five hundred dollars, I'll pay for it.” So I hitchhiked down to Black Mountain and I had an interview. I did okay: I liked them; they liked me. A nice place, reminded me of Windsor Mountain. Nice, informal, small, about the same size, a beautiful physical setting. It had been built as a resort, and had a manmade lake. The study building had been designed by Gropius and other Bauhaus people. So they said, is there anyway you can pay six hundred dollars? They were really scrambling. So my stepfather who didn't like Heinemanns said, well, they would let me stay there at their place if I would work on it. They had a beautiful place in Buck's County. And he was trying to renovate a barn for his son – my stepbrother – to use as a studio. He was trying

to seduce his son to come and stay with him – it was kind of the reverse story from what happened between my father and me. So I helped him. I did the garden, I painted on things, I worked on the barn and he would pay me 15 dollars a week – and that would add up to 150 dollars. So I would have fifty dollars over the six hundred dollars I needed. Actually, I had sixty dollars, and sixty dollars is what I lived on for everything, for paints and for beer, and for everything else. So, I went down, I hitchhiked. I hitchhiked everywhere; I hitchhiked across the country four times by the time I was sixteen. I also painted three people's portraits, and I sold them for ten dollars, so I had an additional thirty dollars.

It was a very nice year, a wonderful place, and I really enjoyed it. There was a big political explosion there. Ted Dreier, who had been one of the founders, along with [John Andrew Rice]. They were both professors at Rollins College, and they decided to start their own experimental college. He put a lot of his own money there, and he had lost a son there; his son had died in an automobile accident, and his other son was going to school there - Ted Dreier Jr. So he had invested a tremendous amount of his life into this place. But because the school was going down - and the way that it was structured, because there was no money to pay anyone, they gave instructors room and board, and fifty dollars a month, plus an equal ownership while they were there, in the school. Curious. So that they couldn't redeem it for money, but if it would dissolve, they would have the money from the sale. And they also had a voting share. So they all got together and they voted,

and Ted Dreier was the problem of why the school wasn't going well, and he would have to leave. Not only would he have to leave, but he'd have to leave now, today. So Josef Albers, who had been there for a dozen years, and who had been invited by Ted Dreier, he said, "Well, Ted Dreier is a wonderful man, and if Ted Dreier has to leave, I will have to leave." Because he was the only draw they had left. Well, they didn't care, they wanted Ted Dreier to leave, because he was at fault. So Albers left, and so although there had been ninety students the year before I came, and there were sixty students the year I was there, there were thirty students the following year. It just got smaller and smaller. So we were all saying goodbye to Albers, and he was shaking our hands, and saying a few words, and when it came to my turn, he said, "Yeah, Peter. Don't be stubborn." My second bit of great advice. So, I'm thinking about this. Here's a man that for thirty years of his life was painting a square within a square. So, "Don't be stubborn," - it must be an omen.

And it was the opposite of your previous bit of advice.

Actually, I think it was exactly the same advice. What it means is "Be stubborn." "Keep at it". So those were my two bits of advice.

What year exactly were you there?

It was 1948-49.

Was that the famous summer when John Cage was there?

That was the summer before I got there. Cage and Franz Kline, Bolotowsky had been there. The only person who later became famous, who wasn't quite famous when I was there was Charles Olson, the poet. He took the place of a guy named Dahlberg. Dahlberg was a writer who taught literature, and he would come once a week. He would come by bus or something, and he had a patch over his eye. He was kind of a renegade, pirate, writer. He didn't like it, because he couldn't pay the bus fare on fifty dollars a month.

Charles Olson came and took his place. Charles Olson was going every week to visit that Fascist poet who was incarcerated, who introduced T.S. Elliott to the world [Ezra Pound].

He was incarcerated in an insane asylum for the criminally insane. Of course, he wasn't insane - he was a Fascist, he didn't like Jews, he didn't like certain things. He chose the wrong side and the wrong issues, so they put him in jail. Olson thought he was a great poet, and he certainly was a great scholar, but I could never make any sense out of his poetry. But he had great taste in poetry. So Olson would visit Pound every week. Charles Olson was a man who was 6 foot 6 [inches] and weighed about 280 pounds, and at that time he had a wife who was about 5 feet tall, and weighed about 90 pounds. That was fascinating. He was a big gregarious spirit, and he loved to talk. His idol, besides Ezra

Pound, was Walt Whitman, and he wrote in that vein. He had many interesting ideas to expound about literature. I didn't take his course, but I would say I found him fun to talk to. I read a lot, and my stepfather and mother were both writers. But I hated his readings; they just gave me the creeps, when he read his own writing. And I still can't stand it to this day. He would weep at his own writing. But he kept coming in the years after I left, and he kept coming after everyone had left, until he became the owner of the place. He sold it to Billy Graham.

What kind of work were you doing while you were there?

Well, I was doing figurative work. I guess that's what Albers meant when he said, "Don't be stubborn," because I loved taking classes with him, but I was doing what I was doing. I had already decided what I was going to do, and I was doing it, as best I could. It was very primitive, but I did a lot of it - I did one hundred paintings. Since there were so few students in the study building - there were dormitories, and I slept in the dormitory for about a month, and I got really tired of that, so I would just sleep in the studio. You know, you're painting, and you just go to sleep. Then I took a room across the way to store my paintings. And they were probably just terrible paintings, but it was fun to do them. I really liked Albers - he didn't like me - he didn't dislike me; I did everything I could to follow what he was saying, but I wasn't on that track. I was on some other track. He

probably knew that he had the right course for the next generation - Twombly also went there; he went after I did. And Chamberlain went there after I did, although they were older than I was. Rauschenberg went the year I did. And I think he and Sue Weil went back another summer later. They had Sue's family's money backing them, so they could pretty much go where they wanted. And when they came back to New York, they went to the Art Students League. I visited them a couple of times; I think Bob was doing his giraffes. His paintings were very sloppy; he was really never a painter, but he had great flair with fabric. He was from Louisiana. He and Sue had gone to Paris before they went to Black Mountain. So they weren't there for that summer session either - that great summer session, they went to Paris instead. When I went to Paris in 1984, I saw a great big fabric collage by Picasso, which I'm sure he must have seen - it must have been very influential. When he was at Black Mountain, someone got married, and he made her the most wonderful wedding dress. It came just below her breasts - her breasts were free, and she wore a garland of daisies. He and Sue also experimented with using light sensitive paper, and dropping things on it and letting the sun expose it. I saw one of those pieces in the Museum of Modern Art recently. It was the first time that Sue ever got an acknowledgment, while she's been a practicing artist all these years. What I was getting to is that at some point Bob said joyously to me, "We're getting married." And in my somber, Pete way, I said, "I don't know. How is that going to work?" So he never was friendly to me after that. But of course, they got married, and she got pregnant, and then he started

having his boyfriends over, while she was in the next room, which was kind of tortuous.

But they have a fifty-year old son somewhere.

...

I met my first wife when I was nineteen. She had studied painting with Tamayo, and she was a weaver in California.

I've had a problem with people throughout my life because I've been so egoistic, in the sense that I've always been sure of myself. Even in my lowest moments, I always knew who I was and what I was doing. It pisses people off, because they don't quite know that.

Where do you think you got that from?

I don't know, I must have pissed my father off. But it doesn't mean that you always become successful, because I haven't. But I'm still doing what I'm doing; It's okay, I don't want to trade with anyone, or paint like anyone else, or anymore. So I'm doing what I'm doing. It's a spirit of being. Several times in my life, when my ex-wife was mad at me, she'd tear up my paintings.

How did you react?

I didn't do anything. And she cheated on me with my best friend. But of course I did the

same thing to her years later when I was trying to get out of my marriage. She was very sexual, but she thought it was a game, and you scored points, and someone won and someone lost. But anyway, she ran away with my best friend. I was pretty shaken up. By this time, though, I had gotten a job. I'd been laid off, and so I got my first grant - which was unemployment insurance, which was really wonderful. But I remember I had to get a job because it only lasted six months. So I went through the paper and saw an ad. I had a meeting at Patterson Fabrics on Madison Avenue and 53rd Street. I met with Mr. Smith. He was only forty-six but he looked about sixty with white hair, going bald. Very distinguished. He became a mentor. He taught me how to design. He wanted someone who could draw well, and he wanted to train them. He taught me certain things about design, and in doing so, increased my preference for *flat*. I was with them for a year and a half, and in the middle, my wife ran away with my best friend. I remember I was at work and I burst into tears, and he said he was sorry and to take the day off. It was very sweet. I went to a shrink, I felt so bad. And I said to him, I can pay you ten dollars; and he said okay. I told him every vile, terrible, disgusting thing I could think of, that was in my head. And all he said, was "Well, your time is up. I'll see you next week." So I went a second and a third time, and the same thing happened. The fourth time there was a sign on the door that said, "The doctor is sick." The next week, there was a sign that said "The doctor is dead." So, I never paid him anything, and he was dead. And I felt great. Because I'd gotten all this stuff out of my system. Then later, my wife came crawling back to me. And

we were in bed, and she called out the name of my best friend. Not realizing I'd been given a sign that this wouldn't work too well - I was never so good at that - but the thing was, she was a very fascinating person. She had many qualities that were admirable. She was beautiful, and she was sexy, and she was smart, and she was talented. A lot of these things many people don't have.

...

I had two shows with the Roko Gallery. First it was on Greenwich Avenue and then it moved to Madison and 73rd Street. It eventually had to leave because the Christian Science [Foundation] bought the building. I left his gallery and he took a space in what's now the Ralph Lauren Polo Building. [Michael Freilich, the owner of the gallery] was a sweet man, but something about him bothered me. He would always say "Be sure to sign the good book." But he was really very nice to me; I guess I was just snotty. He showed someone else named Robert Andrew Parker who did watercolors and inks, profusely. They were wonderfully attractive and idiosyncratic. And they sold like hotcakes. Of course the prices were not high. Michael Freilich had stacks of these things on a bench. While your show was up, he'd have stacks of these things out. And of course he was trying to make money. He had a framer working in the back. There was a guy named Charlie, I can't remember his last name, and he ran a gallery named Landmark. He married a rich wife. Landmark was a co-op, and he was the money behind it. It went on for about fifteen years. I used to go

there when Johanna [Heinemann's daughter] was a little girl because you'd see a bunch of artists with little kids. It was a cheap outing. It was fun. Then Charlie got tired of that and he went to Maine with his wife.

Who were the other artists who you would meet there?

Well, my former colleague, Burt Hassen, had a show there. I can't remember who the other artists were there. None of them were very famous.

But what artists were you friendly with at the time?

I was friendly with Paul Georges, and Paul Resika, who I knew from the very early 1950's. After I started teaching at SVA [The School of Visual Arts], that also coincides with when I stopped showing, because I didn't need to show.

When did you start at SVA?

I got the job because Michael Freilich had recommended me to... Parker had been teaching there and he was getting commercial commissions. He got a big commission to go to Egypt, so they needed a replacement. They asked Michael, and he recommended me and a

couple other people. We went and had meetings with Silas Rose, who was the director. My interview went very well. We hit it off and spoke for about an hour and a half. So they hired me. I seem to have had a capacity for teaching. I was the new boy in town, so I subbed for everyone else. I made eight dollars an hour, which was an unheard amount of money! So, the year before, I happened to have had a show and only sold one painting. But the person who bought the painting offered to give me sixty dollars a week, just to paint. Don Gordon was his name. He was a commercial decorator. He was being supported by a richer gay man. But when I was doing this, I gave him a lot of work. He didn't ask for that, but I did. And then he ran out of money - he didn't do it for quite a year, it lasted about nine months. And then the next year I had this teaching job. I thought that at some point, I was trying to figure out what people wanted to buy. And I didn't want to do that. I wanted to figure out what I wanted to paint. So I told Michael I wasn't going to show there anymore. I had a couple of inquiries about showing somewhere else, but it never panned out. I didn't have what they wanted. So I finally just gave up. So for twenty years, I didn't show. And they were great years. Feeling free of that restraint, I felt that I could spend a year on a painting. And that was the *Carol* painting [1965]. The painting before the Carol painting was the *Cathy* painting. I also spent a year on that, or half a year. I painted in Maine, and I started to do the *Tree* painting [1966]. I had some apple trees. There was a "King" tree with a great maze of raspberry bushes down below it. I loved that tree. One year that my son Mark was there, he sat in the tree and half of it broke. I was

just flabbergasted. I cut half of it off, but the next year it was all grown back. Anyway, it was a wonderful painting. I started it there and I finished it here. It was really the only truly successful painting I did in Maine, in the years that I was up there. It was hard for me [painting in the landscape] because you took the easel out, and little canvases - I didn't like the scale of it.

You preferred painting on a larger scale?

Yes, I've always been attracted to large scale. Of course this tree wasn't large scale, but it was 72 x 54 inches, so it was a nice big painting. Harry Jackson bought the painting for \$2,500. That was really a lot of money then. It financed my drinking career! It gave me a certain freedom, too. I've always felt that I wanted to do what I wanted to do. To take as much time as it took, do it in a dream. Dream into it. Get drunk, do all this stuff. And not be career-oriented exactly.

Tell me about your large triptych paintings.

[The Three Graces]

I started with the idea of "The Three Graces." Not unlike Seurat's three models. In those

days, there were no shades on the windows. It was just a studio. I had my mother's furniture, because she had died, but it was much more open [as compared to at the time of this interview]. The room hadn't been painted in twenty years or more. It was also knarled. But the light would stream in blue on the orange floor. It was just amazing. It was like a dream-world. Painting the *Carol* painting was like a dream. It was like painting flesh in air. It was all about light, and flesh, and air. A pure experience. It had nothing to do with making a product. It was having an experience, painting that Carol painting. That led me to the idea of making the triptych. I only had canvases of slightly different sizes. The two on the sides were 8 1/2 feet tall and the one in the middle was smaller. I thought, that will be okay. I think it is - it's variable - kind of nice. Members of that first class I'd ever had, posed for it. And their roommate, Cecil, played the guitar. He was practicing with a metronome. It was sort of like a Zen experience. He posed with a black girl. I always thought of it as a kind of political statement, because it's still hard for white guys and black girls to get together these days. And in this case, she's the only woman who has clothes on. I had them all pose at separate times; you can't have them all at the same time. It's expensive. But I think I had four posings with each of them, maybe more with the main nude. I painted on it for four years. People might think it's raw, but I think it's very innocent and nude. These three guys [the three male figures in the painting] were students, and they were on drugs. That's what's happening here - they are radiating. And these three girls were standing here, and they were being consumed with light. No one else liked it.

But I liked it, and I still like it. I think it's kind of amazing.

[Diane and David]

How that came to be was in school, in the hall, I met a very young woman who asked, "Do you know anyone who needs a couple to pose?" And I said, "Yes, come and pose." And the same day, this guy, Marty, who had been a student of mine, came up to me and said he wanted to be in a painting. So he came and he invited his other two buddies. They all came. And they were high on drugs. The same day, this girl came up to me and asked, "Do you know any artists that need a slave?," meaning a studio assistant. I said, "I don't need a slave. But how would you like to pose for a painting?" She said okay. I told her to ask her friends April and Elaine too. They all came and posed.

So this time they all posed together?

These two posed together [referring to the central couple] and then they came separately. The guys posed together, a couple of times, and the girls came together maybe three times. That was it. Now, when I was working separately with Diane, she started talking about her life. She was sixteen, and she was the mother of two children. But she'd been raped by her stepfather. She had one child who had died. The other one - she had been raped when she was eight. The child had died at the age of five. The child was taken care of by her mother. She has, as you can see [in the painting] a kind of baby fat. But when you looked at her

face, her face was about a thousand years old. But she was a very, very up, positive person, compared to David, who was very beautiful but extremely dissident, crushed in some way. To me, they were Genesis figures. And these people - the three guys, and three girls seem to be acolytes. So it seemed to me that I was working in a kind of auto-suggestion. Things were kind of coming to me as omens.

I saw a small model that I had used in class, on Second Avenue, in a diner, talking to another small woman. And they were very intensely involved in conversation. And I thought, "Would you two like to pose together?" So they came, and I had a big high-backed red leather chair. They looked very small in it. The other small woman was named Alanne, and she was to be the first wife of Sam Shepherd. He was in the diner one day; he was writing copiously in a tiny little script, so intense. He was a very beautiful looking 23-year-old guy then. And he looked up at me, and said "So, you're painting Alanne. Why would anyone want to paint two nude women?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I think you'll have to figure that one out yourself." Which I'm sure by now, that he's three wives ahead of the game, he's figured it out.

Then Marie [Marie Savitierre, Heinemann's wife] came to live here, so it seemed like it was really hard to have models here. I thought to paint a double portrait of us. But although Marie had posed for many artists in New Jersey, when she was a teenager, she found it very difficult to pose for me, without my paying her. And she would faint after a few

minutes. So I then decided to paint a portrait of myself - a standing full-length nude self-portrait. That painting took a year as well. It was 1970-71. I think it is a terrific painting. I'm not shy about what I think. I think it's a masterpiece. I can't think of any other self-portrait that compares to it, actually. What I did in that was that was that at some point I felt very discouraged with it, and I gave it a turpentine bath. And that gave it tremendous patina, which I could paint on top of. And that's why it has this terrific glow, this terrific painterly glow. But I've never used that as a technique; I never did it again. I'm not a technical painter. I'm an intuitive painter. I've had just a few little reactions to my painting. It hasn't been exposed to that, and at that time I wasn't showing. But I did exhibit that at the American Institute of Arts and Letters. Some people didn't like it; some people didn't care. Which is my usual reaction.

The Dancers ("The Ten-Year Painting")

My mother, when I was little boy, would say, "You have to draw from your imagination." But as an adult, the only thing I could do was draw and paint from life. It was the only thing that released the poetry. But obviously I still felt that it would be interesting, because I still couldn't have models, to paint a painting from my head. That's how I started doing the "Ten-Year Painting" - "The Dancers." It was the most amazing experience of my life, more than getting married, and having children, although I loved my wife. The Ten-Year Painting was the most amazing experience. I guess what I'm saying is that life is about

yourself. The main chapter in your life is you. So every day, I'd get up on the days that I was painting, and I'd go in there and go into the painting. This went on for years. A few friends of mine and I decided to have a show together in an alternative space, because none of us could get a gallery. But actually I had gotten a gallery; I had gotten a gallery on Lafayette Street, and had my first show of the *Heads*.

When did you begin making the Heads [self-portraits that Heinemann still does]?

I began making the *Heads* along with the ten-year painting, in about 1976. The Ten-Year painting was from 1971-79. I worked on it exclusively for five years and non-exclusively for another five years.

Where did the imagery come from in the Ten-Year painting, if it was coming from your imagination?

It was meant to be a political statement. What I felt was that in 1971, the worst problems that our society had were racism and sexism. And these were the things that drove our culture to madness. But I was trying to take the politics, and I was also trying to make a giant figurative water-lily painting [i.e. Monet], and I was also trying to answer Matisse's *Dancers*, which I considered a nice painting, but very, very genteel and 19th Century, even

though it was done in the 20th Century. I was going to fill this painting with people of color, and I was going to endow it with tremendous sexual angst. The sexism was that so many gay people were being hit on and still are. My idea about sex is that it's not anything unless you're having it with the person. How would you know? It's an individual thing. It's not about making decisions and attitudes about other people's sexual preferences. It's saddening to me, I just can't understand it. I can't believe it. And the same thing about race, I can't understand any of that stuff. It doesn't make any sense. So I was going to put all that stuff into this painting. But I did. I worked on that painting for ten years. So finally those few other guys and I were making this show. And they didn't want me to put this painting in it. They wanted me to put another painting in, but I wanted to put this painting in, because it was my ten-year painting. And so finally they agreed I could put this painting in. We cleaned up a vacant store-front on Lispenard Street, that had originally been Phil's Shoes. And we called it the "Phil's Shoes Show." We spent a week cleaning it up, because the place was a wreck. I took out 1800 nails and tacks from the floor, and painted it, so we could have it for a month. We didn't even have it for a month, we had it for 2 1/2 weeks. Because no one wanted to sit it. I sat it quite a bit. And they had gotten Angus Chamberlain, who was John Chamberlain's son [to sit the gallery]. One of the people who was showing was Gregory Botts; he was the one who didn't want me to show the ten-year painting.

Who else was in the show?

Victor Capel, and Roy Fowler. They showed the painting, and my painting was so heavy, we couldn't even hang it. We just had it on the floor. We had a big opening. We were all beer drinkers and we had a lot of beer, and a lot of food. A lot of people came, and they all made nice to the other three painters. Oooh, and aaah, but no one said a word about my painting. Not one word. Except at the very end. A guy came in with a big leather jacket, high-heeled sneakers, a mohawk, dyed blond. He took a look and said "Hey man," he said, "Great feet." The interesting thing about that - besides the fact that that was the only thing anyone said about the painting - was that, two of the things that influenced me the most were two pieces of writing. One was *The Horse's Mouth* [by Joyce Cary]. The other was *The Hidden Masterpiece* by Balzac. Of course I was trying to emulate Gulley Jimson [the protagonist of *The Horse's Mouth*] by doing a big painting. The painting was the thing, rather than whether you were going to make a big profit on it. *The Horse's Mouth* is about a young artist and an old artist. The young artist had everything - he had brains, and ambition, but he didn't have a spark of life. They go on and on about his composition, he's very well-received, but he doesn't have the spark of life. He's introduced to this strange older artist, who has a spark of life. He says he will give the younger artist the spark of life, but in exchange he has to let his beautiful lover pose for him. He's in a quandary. He wants to have the spark of life so much that he's willing to betray his lover to let her be

portrayed by this older artist. He goes to the studio, and a big painting is all covered up. He pulls away the drop, and it's the huge painting and everything has been overpainted and demolished, and scraped off, except in the lower right corner, there is a foot. The spark of life. "Great feet." I had become both of my things. I had become Gulley Jimson and I had become the guy with great feet.

So I had that *Heads* show. What I had decided was that after twenty years of not showing, I had shown that I could survive without showing. It took a couple years of walking around - I would take slides, and I would also take three little *Heads*. I couldn't get anyone uptown to go for it. Then I went to see Harry Zwirling, who was an acquaintance of mine, and I asked him how he would like to have a show. And he said, "Oh yes," he would like to have a show. So he had a show, I think he showed 26 heads, and I think I sold 7 of them. We were going to have another show but he was pushed out of his lease. He also had trouble making a living. So he decided to go back to school and he became a lawyer. He got a total scholarship, after not having been in school in ten years. But he was a painter, quite a nice painter.

And then I went to Europe. Oh, and I taught for a year at the [New York] Studio School in 1983-84. One year was quite enough. It was a nice experience though. I had six or seven students. I tried to encourage them to make big pieces and small pieces. That's what I did - big pieces and small pieces. I wasn't Mercedes Matter. I didn't set up a still-life. I set up still-lives for first-year students, but it was graduate students I was dealing

with there. They hadn't even been encouraged to go out and see art in galleries. I told them, "You've got to go out and see what's happening there. You can't just pretend you're in 1880. It's not going to work." I told them to have a major thing, and then do small things, like self-portraits, or something else of their choice. But the interesting thing was that they did very interesting work, but they refused to show it to the review committee. They were embarrassed, because it didn't look like Mercedes Matter. It was really weird. There was some kind of brainwashing going on. I think since Graham [Nickson] has taken over, it's gotten more adventuresome. He's put more energy into it. The work in the halls looks more vigorous. But it's still pretty traditional.

Who did you think at that time was doing adventuresome work?

There's always [Paul] Georges. He was always on his own tack. I thought that Georges was wonderful as an individual, and some of his paintings were wonderful. A lot of them were shitty, and he didn't know the difference between the shitty ones and the wonderful ones. But that was okay, because he did so many, that there were many wonderful ones. But there was something about the subject of his paintings, sometimes they seemed to lack weight. It was fantasy like out of science fiction. Sometimes he got it right though. What I felt was that he was secretly a male chauvinist, racist, and I would see that in his work, and it would piss me off. On the other hand, there were many things I admired. Though we

had been adversaries, and come to blows several times. The last ten years, he was much softer, more approachable, and I really had affection for him. He had so much energy, so much life force. And nothing that I would say for or against him would begin to come to the value of the man he was. He was an amazing person, the most amazing artist I know.

There were three other triptychs. One was called the *Children's Crusade for Sex and Violence* [1981]. That was sort of like magic writing. I had thought about writing. The other one that followed shortly thereafter was called *Apocalypse Head*. That was 1982. And then in 1983-84 I painted the last one that I had painted, which was called *The Great White Horse*. The *Children's Crusade* is supposed to be a comment on the way that society is sinking under the water, as it were. It's certainly more true now. It reads left to right. It starts off with a pretty young black woman sitting in the middle of a trellis that has babies going under it. It's followed by a young man, who's jumping over the top of the painting, doing a back flip. On the right there's a fight between two guys. The guy slices the other guy's head and hand off with one blow. *The Apocalypse Head* was where all these heads go when they sink below the surface of the water. They go sinking to the bottom, and in the meantime, they are attacked by water lizards, and alligators and crabs and things. At the bottom there are these huge worms. Just after I painted this painting, they discovered these water worms at the bottom of the ocean! A lot of these paintings are prophetic. A few years, someone said, "You've gotten some age on you. You're beginning to look like those paintings you did of yourself." The paintings always tend to look about

five or ten years older than I am, and then I get to look like that. But at the very bottom there's a very big huge head like a Sequoia Tree. It's fallen down on top of them. The severed heads of antiquity, the sculpted heads. I spent some time thinking about all these heads.

The Great White Horse is a take-off on the Great White Hope, and it's supposed to be another critical comment about the way society's going. There's a big white horse in the center and there's a small picture of the space shuttle that went up and exploded. There's an image of Three-Mile Island. And in the right corner there's shiny muscle guys. There's Mickey Mouse heads. There's a guy pretending to be Frank Sinatra singing, but he just has a top - he doesn't have a bottom, he doesn't have any pants on.

Then there were some *Heads* shows, at Steve's [Gallery Schlesinger] in the 1980's and 90's. The third show, we sold everything, but Steve thought that was an accident, and he didn't give me a show for another three years. Then there was another show, that had a lot of the paintings that Henry [Justin] ended up buying. I got some bad, really cruel remarks from friends about these paintings. I had been abusing myself with drink and food, and I had a massive high blood pressure attack. And then, surviving that, as it were, I tried painting more *Heads*, but I couldn't do it. So I started painting geometric paintings, and I did that for ten years - I had four shows of them. And then recently I had another show of *Heads*. Those may be the last paintings I ever do. [Heinemann is now being treated for cancer, and hadn't been painting recently, at the time of this interview]. I don't

know. I thought I might do a show about how I stopped painting. I try to paint, but I'm just waiting now.

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PAGE 1

PAGE 25