Tuesday November 17th '87

Dear Leon,

Excuse delay. (Don't buy a Canon Typestar 7 electronic typewriter unless you desire a heart attack. It's got no "memory" so I couldn't, can't, correct as I go along)

Here's the rough draught, almost verbatim of our delightful chat. It's mile too long. But my editor in Milan will attack it ruthlessly to bring it into shape—about 2000 words. But he's very good. No fears. All I'd like is you to glance at the gist of it, any errors like Jasper Johns beer can, instead of 'Coca Cola' bottles just mark them. Don't worry about spelling, typos, etc that'll all be taken care of by the capable staff of "Flash Art", who I'm happy to say will soon be getting a 'fax' machine so I can give it them over the phone.

Alas they don't have one yet. So it hand courier leaving on Sunday. (But I have another long article to finish by then
as well, so be merciful Leon, and be as efficient as you were with language and Bob was with tea and I won't collapse from overwork.) Read it, mark the copy (I have others), and add or change (within reason) things that bother you but remember it's going to halved anyway. So be geometric minimal. My editor will trim my verbal excesses as well. What he likes is a strong combative, aggressive question and answer, that's the reason I'm there.

So read it. Check it out for sense, rather than grammar/structure etc and call me as soon as you can Tuesday afternoon after 4 pm (I'll be sleeping) or working on my other text; and I'll come briefly to your delightful 14th floor studio to talk in the evening—on the way to or from my health club.

Titles: I've got a few ideas (Still Looking After All These Years, On Top at 81, First Not Second—all run by your name, but again that's my editor's job. If you—or Bob—have any ideas I'll certainly include them with the text. No big deal!!

Also pictures to go with the text: choose the ones we talked about or you think appropriate. Marco says he can get anything I want in hours if he doesn't have it.

That's it. Bit wordy—and "eager" Leon but that's my style. Looking forward to hearing from you this afternoon.

Best

/ / / / /

James Collins

* I've included the snaps I took—and I'm sure they'll use one or some as well as your work we also the racoon one.
I wasn't talking about what it does. I was just mentioning it as one kind of technique. And when I was liberated, at the same time I discovered how to use the curvilinear form to express the equilibrium of the form in space where it could be interchangeable.

JC: The positive negative thing?

LPS: Yes the same thing. I was completely liberated from that little technicality which you speak of. As far as putting the paint on much freer, letting it flow on, get rid of it.

JC: Did that mean you did more paintings. Suddenly your production changed?

LPS: Oh yes. Of course!

JC: Like what?

LPS: How many I did? Let's say if through the '40s I did two dozen paintings a year, or less, after I started with curvilinear forms and using a different technique I could do many more than that.

JC: And you did?

LPS: Yes.

In terms of scale there's a kind of European feeling not timidity but a certain reference to Europe in the early work you've left behind in the later ones.

LPS: If you remember very few people were doing large paintings in the '40s, that came more in the '50s, and the '60s. Getting into the early '50s I too had the feeling, even in the late
JC: How does an L differ from a rightangle...?

LPS: Well an L contains a rightangle. But all rightangles you
don't call them L's... are not called L's.

JC: Forgive my poetic language. You live in a beautiful loft, 14 floors above Union Square, and I noticed the binoculars on your window ledge, for watching the specklike people below.

More importantly in this half loft, half studio, it's chockablock with work from very different periods of your life. Presently and elegantly displayed. Are your paintings in the sense you describe as similar to an author surrounded by his reference books. Books to dip into for reference or comfort or solace, or ideas. Is that how you view your paintings?

I should say yes.

LPS: I'm always changing them. I may take out a painting I haven't had up for a year or even longer.....

JC: You keep changing.......

LPS: I was just in the process of telling you, and finished off without it being correct. So if you wait until I finish a sentence, or whatever I'm speaking about, it will help a great deal!

If I get back to where I left off, I may decide I don't want to see this painting anymore, take it down and put up something else. I'll go to the rack and look through, and see one I haven't looked at in eight years, or even two or three months. I want to look at that a while, so I take one down and put another one up. And with that sort of thing, there's always a change.... If I haven't seen a painting in a quite a while, I may see it in a different light.
Because our mind is always a little behind our subconscious or unconscious, our intuition. I'll give you an illustration.

I did a painting about 20 years ago and when I finished it, I put it on the wall and looked at it and said, "That's a complete failure! I won't save anything!" I'll stick it in the rack, I'll put another canvas up, and do another painting. About a year later, I went to my studio one morning, and thought I could use that stretcher frame now. I took that old painting off. I pulled it out, and hung it on the wall, next to another painting about the same size, and what happened? Something had happened to it during that year. And it was one of my masterpieces! I saw immediately! My intuition did a bigger hit beyond my conscious appreciation. It took a year for my conscious appreciation to catch up. Everyone who sees that paintings says that's one of your great paintings. A year earlier I was ready to destroy it.

You had a 20-year gap, you say?

LPS: No I said it was 20 years ago. It was only a one-year gap.

A painting I did 20 years ago, one year later I saw it was a good painting. A year earlier I was ready to destroy it.

JC: Talking about surfaces. I notice in the painting you talk about as important—the one you kept—there seems to be an arbitrary. The surface varies from each section of the painting. The white is a different kind of intensity (number of layers or whatever) from the black. And there is still quite an appreciable trace of the directional marks of the brush. And even in the later ones there quite a jump of surface reading.

LPS: Was that conscious?
JC: A jumpy rendering: a semigloss black, a medium matte white, and also streaks in the black. Things like that.

LPS: Age, I would say is the reason for that. I didn't paint it with a streaked black. Not my intention. And if it is changed it's weather it's temperature.

JC: A painting like 'BlackBlack' 1950 has an almost quirky Paul Kleelike quality. Although rectilinear the lines are not straight. Very Kleelike.

LPS: That was 1950. already I was getting away from the strict vertical/horizontal. And you're moving towards a curve and you've already acknowledged that they weren't straight lines any longer. Helped me to evolve into what I was searching for. The right cure linear form to express form-space equilibrium.

JC: Was Klee an influence?

LPS: I would say not. although in the 30's when I was a student I loved Klee. I studied every brush stroke; but what Klee offered I don't think I used in my work.

JC: Another question about influence. In 'Black White Repeat 19521953' the influences coming to mind. I'm not a particular specialist on dates. more on the crossrelations between artists. Vasarely?

LPS: I never heard of Vasarely when I did that painting...

JC: But Vasarely was active in 1952...

LPS: Not here...
Can you tell me names I'd know?

LPS: None of the artists was represented by a gallery, but they invited Mondrian for example. But it was nice for them because they could combine their resources and rent a gallery and have a big exhibiton once a year with one or two paintings in it by each artist. That was good for them. So they invited Mondrian one time. So they had Mondrian down as a member of the American Abstract Artists Group. Diller was pretty much the same way. Bourgeyue Diller that is...

JC Was he a friend Diller?

LPS: Yes he was. We both showed at the same gallery.....

JC What number gallery was that?

LPS: It was my 15th. In the late 60's. The gallery's still there. But they don't show anymore. It's not open to the public. They have a great collection of ......., and they handle the Arp estate. Mrs Challette sells Arps by appointment but they don't have any shows.

JC: Talking about Arp is an interesting point...

LPS: Although Diller and I were friends our work was never similar in any way. Diller was one of the few people who were influenced by Mondrian who developed his own style. You can't find in any of Diller's work that refers to mine. And you can't find anything in my work that refers to Diller's. Our work was very very different.
even further back.

JC: Jumping back from Diller to Arp. Arp's someone who used similar positive and negative in a strong curvilinear way, quite early in the 20's I believe. He was using the curved form in Europe. Was Arp and influence?

LPS: I was aware of him. I was introduced to the work of Arp, Brancusi, and Mondrian at the same time about 1936. I was studying at Columbia University. He was a naturalist painter. I asked these are the most important artists in the world today.

--- hours talking with me... about them. A professor said to me who.

JC: And these were...?

LPS: Mondrian, Arp, and Brancusi...

JC: And the dates?

LPS: 1936.

JC: Nice story.

--- Throwing European names at you because as I said earlier in the cross fertilization between all movements. Special obsession. You talk a lot about activating space by the curve and gestalt psychology terms: positive and negative. An interest shared by Bridget Riley, by Albers, by many abstract artists.
LPS: No I don’t.

JC: Poliakoff in ’59 was doing painting almost identical to yours, in terms of positive/negative concerns, except his surfaces were gestural. Not flat, layered. But definitely positive negative.

LPS: Where did he live?

JC France. I think Poliakoff was very established artist. I was intrigued by the parallel... Many artists were influenced by my work at that time. I would have to see it before I would say its the "same curve". Also in the 60’s, a bit like the revival today were many people concerned with abstraction, flattening the picture plane in Europe and the States too. All over! I want to ask the classic cliche question for Leon Polk Smith: Aranson’s book, for example, on “The History of Modern Art”, Elsworth Kelly’s mentioned about eight times for every Leon Polk Smith mention. Yet I understand you’re dates are earlier than Elsworth Kelly’s by years, especially your plant drawings. How do you feel you were first yet he’s 

first: Mr Aranson had seen no more than a tiny piece, next: But to accept the praise with out honoring the source makes for an unethical thief. LPS: I don’t blame Elsworth Kelly for accepting all the publicity he got. I was with Galerie Chalette and they were intelligent people selling my work enough to support me quite well. When I moved to Long Island, seldom came into New York. Well, Galerie Chalette didn’t believe in advertising. Good doctors and good lawyers don’t advertise, but I said you need it. You’re not promoting my work! I didn’t know they disliked critics, and enjoyed telling me they just threw
out a critic that was in, and they didn't encourage critics to come there at all. So five or six years of my work wasn't written up.

JC: How do you feel about Elsworth Kelly now...

LPS: Could I arrive at that in my own way? I can't speak if I lose my train of thoughts, you're too damn futuristic... I was well advised. Leo Castelli is certainly a very fine promoter and publicist. And he promoted Kelly right out in front of me! He was a good dealer. But you see Kelly never once credited my influence. He always denied he was influenced by my work. The first time I heard the word Kelly was when he came from Europe and I had a telephone call. He says my name's Elsworth Kelly. You've never heard of me. I've been studying in Europe and I saw your paintings reproduced in *Art a Jour.* And was influenced by them as a number of other young artists were in Paris. Could I come to your studio? Well, I'd been teaching for 25 years. I was interested in students never private students, always taught in university and was interested in young people's work and I said "of course". And the first time he came with Bob Clarke, who later became Robert Indiana, and Jack Youngerman, and it seems another but I don't know who to frame...

JC: What date was that....?

LPS: When "I came back from Paris," I'm sure you can find out.

JC: Roughly?

LPS: Mid Fifties. So Kelly came to my studio with the three of them, he came to a number of little parties, but instead he'd sit in front of my paintings like this (holds head in hands) maybe for twenty minutes, ignoring the party and saying: "God, that's a great painting, let's make wish I'd done it," And then he said Betty Parson's had offered a show next spring. A month later he said Betty said she couldn't do my show up to fall, "Cos he had all my ideas there and he wanted to get them out as quickly as possible. Almost did a show right out of my studio! Based on ideas, colors, shapes of my studio...

JC: I sympathise. A similar story happened with Sol Le Witt. Sol Le Witt was accused of plaguing from Francois Morellet's almost identical ideas. But promoting them with more energy, So fewer people know Morellet than LeWitt. Although if there's any justice I've been seeing a lot more Morellet's around recent-
Talking about prices a bit. I notice the price of your art
and my art is about as absurd a pricing system as any range
from about $20,000 to $150,000; and I'm not familiar with Els-
worth Kelly's prices, but I'm pretty sure they're quite abit
higher. The man who you say took his first important show direct
from your studio. My question is and it jumps back to the
beginning of our talk about how you can be seen as one of the
neglected grand father of today's younger abstract artists;

Halley, Jeff Koons, Philip Taffe, Haim Steinbach, Peter Schuff

I'm not so called neo geo edition. Do you know them....

LPS: I don't know of neo geo, I don't know any of the names.
But I've seen several shows...

JC: I'm neutral, I'm not enamoured of supporting them.
I'm just curious. The social phenomena. How do you feel
about a social phenomena? How do you feel about
form...

(Like some more tea James. Bob get some more tea interruption
while tea is drunk. "James is a big tea drinker." "Stronger"
Is it okay?"

Sorry I'm too eager.

It's my stance: eagerness. How do you feel these young artists—
they're only two years in the arena are you using the
ejargon, are pretty much up in your kind of

LPS: I have never enquired about their prices. Didn't even
know they were selling. There's a lot about the artworld I've
never been interested in, not concerned with.

JC: You're a practising artist with a great record of
shows and sales. Yes?

LPS: Could you

Give me the name of some young artist of the
Neo Geo who's paintings are selling near a hundred thousand...

JC: I could yes.

LPS: I'd like to have them...

JC: But I prefer not to now....
Perhaps not painting but sculpture. Jeff Koons for example.

a stainless steel replica of an American kitsch train with real liquor inside, went for $30 thousand dollars to Satchi. I think. Peter Halley is ....

LPS: But that was for a train.

But it's not your area, let me go to another.....

LPS: Hold on! Schnabel's another scene...

JC: Prices you want Leon. Prices: Helmut Federle. top price about 70 grand. Meier Vaisman - if I'm to believe the lady at the front desk at Leo Castelli all sold yesterday at from 35 to 50 thousand and he's thirty something. Peter Halley is thirty, forty, and boring Taffe is up there. too.

It's all a game. I'm just telling you what you've spawned - not directly of course...

LPS: Castelli has a very fine roster of clients. Not only that but it was said thirty years ago, maybe longer, that Castelli could sell anything. One of his artists said she.... I don't know whether it's the one who did the sculpture of a Coca Cola bottle. I think it was Jasper Johns and Castelli sold it immediately.

JC: But I don't really want to talk about other people. I prefer to talk about you....

LPS: I do too. I don't have too much to say about other people... only good artists!
But, some artists philosophically embrace the young as a way of reinventing themselves. Warhol was notorious for embracing young artists, often of different people. He was very excited to be young. Maybe you'd be disparaging about an artist like that.

I mentioned to someone I was going to talk to Leon Polk Smith: and they said you're going to talk with the original, not the "neo" nonsense. Not the simulation, not the copies, not the followers. We are in Baudrillard world turned topsy turvy where the original is deliberately played down.

LPS: Well, that doesn't bother me; I am happy all of my works are originals.

JC: Wouldn't Peter Halley claim he was original too Leon?

LPS: Has he even had any new ideas?

I can't think of a single one. I've been to several of these shows of Neo Geo. And I haven't seen one new idea.

JC: I think Peter Hally had maybe one new idea! (laughs)

LPS: I don't know, so I can't tell you.
JC: Halley's the one who does the texture paint, but instead of giving texture through struggle he puts it on with a roller....

LPS: They've been doing that for thirty years, putting it on with a roller and texture! That's no new idea. Not even a technical one...

JC: Who are you talking about...

LPS: Who...

JC: Which artist has put texture paint on with roller in a geometric way the stuff you use for kitsch restaurants or whatever. I can't think of anyone Baumeister, Braque.

LPS: I'm afraid I can't discuss artist; I've never seen any of his work. Nothing I can say about it!

JC: The editor asked me to ask, so I'm asking you something different: work processes. The life of a working artist... You taught for 25 years; the usual complaint about teaching is you don't have enough time to do your own work. Was this true...

LPS: Always been quite a prolific painter. And when I was teaching full-time, I did more paintings than most artists painted in New York, who were painting full-time. I mean you 7 hours a week.

JC: You were... Not like a Hoffman who couldn't really paint until he was 78 because he had no time...
LPS: When I started teaching, I was the only artist I knew that had a master's degree, and many artists at that time hadn't gone to college. Sometimes they look down their nose at me, because I was always interested in knowledge - a curiosity about everything.

JC: Are you an avid reader?

LPS: Yes, I read a lot. Very interested in science, psychology; not too much philosophy. And practically no fiction.

JC: What kind of science for example...

I was particularly interested in geology as I came from Oklahoma. Also plant and animal life as it evolved. That's the basis of interest in that sort of science. De Jardin finally comes to one sentence - and any book worth remembering you're very fortunate - and he said perhaps mind has always been in matter. That answered so many questions for me. Levitated me.

Several sentences in my life have done that to me...

JC: As a sentence collector myself I sympathise.

One is fortunate if one great revealing sentence is found in reading a book.
LPS: I read 1. 1940.

JC: Hitting the fashion scene again?

Bear with me. The four works you have in the De Laurenti show, the last works, all '87 I believe, with monochrome panels, butting edge to edge, with a single fluorescent light on the floor. Is this a homage to Dan Flavin, plus say Peter Halley. Why the light on the floor? Never have I seen Leon Polk Smith's with lights on the floor, illuminating the painting from above. Except then in 1987. Where does this come from?

LPS: I've been using them ever since I moved here about 10 years. They're in my studio now. This particular lighting is not part of my art but only a special means of seeing it.

JC: You mean you've had lights on the floor to illuminate works since when?

LPS: Ten years.
By the Way

LPS: It takes a strong creative mind to keep working in an abstract manner. Very few have it. I suppose I've worked in an abstract manner much longer than anyone I know. What happens to people who paint abstractly? I used to talk to E. E. Cummings in the park, and he suggested to me abstract art was something you go through in one year. He was painting flowers still life.

JC: How do you feel the language of abstract art, in a sense, very clear and it needs a special reading to tell the difference between Pollock's way or a Mondrian way. Thousands of artists paint stripes for example?

E. E. Cummings complaint might be stripes are not as rich as the world of flowers?

LPS: I don't know. He complained but he went through it!

JC: Isn't the minutea of concrete so specialised it takes a very particular understanding...?

LPS: You can say that about anything. Say it about a diamond, an acorn, a termite.

JC: Not particularly about abstract painting.

How many ways can you paint a stripe?

LPS: How many ways can you paint a tree? A person? A sunset?

JC: A lot more ways than you can a stripe I suspect...

LPS: All stripes are not straight. Nor straight out.
LPS: People asked when I first started using the wooden pieces, in painting.

How did I get the idea? Well, for a month I said I wish I knew. I don't know where it came from. Then I was looking through some collages, and found that I'd translated a pencil line I'd been using for 20 years into the wooden piece. I know where it came from. In reference to your three-dimensional idea --- the painting is already on a three-dimensional stretcher.

LPS: Leon you haven't answered my question. I've translated a pencil line into a wooden line... is not necessarily a successful device or------

JC: Everything's a device of course. Some work, some don't.

with

LPS: The pencil line: unconscious, translated into the wooden piece, I didn't recognize its source.

: Okay, I'm not going to tell you it works.

And I'm not going to tell you whether it doesn't work. What can I do about your appreciation? I have nothing to do with that. If you can't see it works then you can't see.

JC: Sorry Leon, the unhappiest hybrid for me is the painting and relief. (It's the old theatricality problem Michael Fried always talked about).

Let's not be too old fashioned! Begin to try these paintings
Curiosity prompted my question why after a lifetime of flat painting...

LPS: Listen dear man any painting is a relief in that sense. I don't want to talk to you about it, if you don't see it, you don't see it. Doesn't anger me you can't see it. They have been great historians, curators, and young people - all and they're crazy about all of these. But you don't understand. Now, come James!

JC: I'm sure I have gaps in my understanding.

LPS: Well, it's up to you to do something about it. If you're interested enough you'll find out for yourself (laughs)

JC: What makes a good painting for you then? What's a good Leon Polk Smith? Do you reject paintings? What criteria: do you have?

LPS: If I have strong feelings that it works well I keep it, if not I destroy it. And in my lifetime I think I have only destroyed fifteen or twenty paintings in my life. And in the last thirty or forty years I don't think I've destroyed any...

JC: What about the relationship between drawing and painting? Do you draw for paintings?

LPS: No! I have lots of drawings, lots of collages (my collages are not so well-known, first done in 1939, and have done collages every year since - and collages are a different world from painting, and I never did a painting from a collage) And I don't do paintings from drawings. Usually the drawing I do on the canvas is the original. Now after I do a painting, I may do variations on that in drawings but the drawings are more apt to follow the paintings.
JC: If I didn't like the black wood. I loved your new prints by the way. Marvelous!

LPS: Aren't they beautiful? I'm not talking about my work, I'm talking about the printer from Freiburg ............

JC: What about delegation? At the age of 81 - in remarkable condition I should say - I note the trampoline in your studio and your strong interest in nutrition - are you doing all your paintings yourself...?

LPS: Nobody in this world, nor out of this world, has done a painting for me! I've done all of them myself. Bob stretches the canvas, he does everything, but he doesn't do my painting...

JC: He makes a good pot of tea as well. But he doesn't actually apply the color or anything like that. Do you size the canvas yourself...

LPS: No I never sized a canvas in my life.

JC: You always painted in oils?

LPS: Where did you get this information?

JC: From your Five Decades show at De Laurenti. Am I wrong?

LPS: Yes, you're wrong.

JC: I'm sorry I assumed they were all oil. Most were...

LPS: There was a time when I stopped painting in oil. Well, in the late 60's I did a few painting in acrylics and I liked the results. In fact I use exactly the same technique. I could not tell the dates comparing them today. I can't tell them apart except by the can.
JC: I can. By the smell.

LPS: Anyhow I’m talking more about the eye than the nose (laughs) I’m talking about the look.

JC: You don’t agree with a contemporary artist Sandro Chia that he uses acrylic because it leaves no rich history of the mark underneath, whereas oil does?

LPS: My kind of painting has nothing to do with that! I don’t care about how other people think! I do care, but I don’t arrive at my richness in his manner...

JC: Mondrian surfaces were very rich weren’t they? Every block of color twitching with rich paint.

LPS: I’ve always used the very finest art materials; even when I didn’t know where the next meal was coming from. A loaf of bread, a bag of milk for a few days, but I’d save my money to buy good art materials. The best I can get! And to this day I’ve used pigment the way it comes from the tube or the jar. When I was using oils I used only Winsor and Newton. Today I still have maybe a thousand dollars worth of Winsor and Newton oils... which I don’t use.

JC: Does Bob mix them for you...

LPS: I told you I paint directly from the tube – or the jar. And now you ask me if I mix them or Bob mixes them. Nobody mixes them!

JC: I didn’t understand when said you.

LPS: I use purest pigment the way it comes from the tube or the jar! And I don’t mix them neither does anyone else mix them for me...

JC: What I meant was mix medium with them and some artist use electrical paint mixer to expedite the process.
LPS: I don't paint with a sponge or roller. I don't need that. Sponges, rollers - or feet - I don't care to use them.

JC: I'm only asking (laughing)

LPS: And I'm telling you don't like my answer?

JC: You're hammering me with these aggressive responses.

LPS: These are aggressive questions. Like begets like.

JC: I'm fascinated by every aspect of the artworld. You, your life, your philosophy, the way you paint. I'm prodding you to reveal a bit more.

LPS: You don't like what I'm saying...

Yes.

JC: I love what you're saying...

LPS: Then what are you complaining about?

JC: I'm not complaining. I'm just finding it a bit hard going Leon. To continue the joust. Do you care where your paintings go?

LPS: Anyone who said it doesn't matter would be a liar. And I'd never say it doesn't matter. Every artist would like his work to be where the greatest number who appreciate that work would see it. Not in a particular museum and still proportionately. I'd say there are more people in Germany who followed my work over the last 20 years than the late 60's.
JC: Couple more questions and finito. Being in Manhattan, in a new Yuppy world of the wealthy and the reactionary? Are you threatened?

LPS: Affects me not at all. I've been in New York since 1936, and loved New York immediately. I felt at home here! As I did in Oklahoma. I feel at home wherever I go, so far as I know New York City's is the only city I can live in - or in the country. It's either New York or in the country. I love nature!

JC: ... What do you mean "nature"?

LPS: Animals, birds, insects, trees, flowers, and shrubs. Everything you find in the country.

JC: One final question, a little indiscrete but forgive me, I have to ask! Last one! You live with a man, who is your assistant - the charming Bob, tea-maker extraordinaire - working for you. Do you think members of minorities - and we are all members of a very different minorities have any more particular sensitivity than those who are not? Do you think this helps prolong over a life-time the kind of sensitivity you have. What about the alternative nursing of the family children for example? (You can ignore this question if you want)

LPS: Well. I have nothing against that question whatsoever. Everyone is in a minority. I'm trying to think how I feel about family. I grew up in a large family, nine children. Father and mother made eleven. I never felt I needed family after that. And I know of very few creative people who are good family
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JC: What do you mean "nature"?

LPS: All the animals, birds, insects, trees, flowers, and shrubs. Everything you find in the country.

JC: One final question, a little indiscrete, but forgive me, I have to ask? Last one! You live with a companion, the charming Bob, tea-maker extraordinaire - working for you. Do you think the members of minorities - and we are all members of a very different minorities have any more particular sensitivity than those who are not? Do you think this helps prolong over a life-time the kind of sensitivity you have. What about the alternative nature of the family, children for example? (you can ignore this question if you want)

LPS: Well, I have nothing against that question whatsoever. Everyone is in a minority. I'm trying to think how I feel about family. I grew up in a large family, nine children. Father and mother made eleven. I never felt I needed family after that. And I know of very few creative people who are good family
of all the artist family people I know, I can count the successful ones on very few fingers. Milton Avery was one. He and his wife Sally were both painters, and they had one child and she was a painter. At one time we were very close friends, and all three of them would be painting, each at an easel. And the Avery family was a very successful family...

JC: You've chosen then to live alone - or familyless - I guess your work or your family? In?

LPS: I didn't want another family. I'd grown out of one and I never felt the need for another. I felt another family would keep me from doing what I wanted to do creatively in life.

JC: Very touching. And a really last question about age. You're 81 - and I don't believe it - and a man who is a living example of mental processes not deteriorating with age - and I am capable of cogent, nay brilliant, aggressive discourse at an advanced age. How do you feel as an artist at 81 about the present, and the future?

LPS: I feel the same as 31, 41, 51, 61, 71! And about the brain and the body. If you stop using your brain, it starts deteriorating - and much the same with the body. And that's about all I want to say.

Interview by James Collins with Leon Polk Smith
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