

THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM
DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE,
CONTEMPORARY ART

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
LEON POLK SMITH

A TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH
LEON POLK SMITH

IN _____

12 & 21 JULY 1993

INTERVIEWER: BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

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LIST OF NAMES MENTIONED

Tape 1, side A (12 July 1993)

American Abstract Artists Group
Columbia University
Mondrian
Sydney [Janis, Jonas]
[_____]—Ed.] [VonWiegen, von Wiegen]
[_____]—Ed.] Glarner
[_____]—Ed.] [Balatowski, Bollatowski, Balatovski]
Burgoyne Diller
Bob [_____]—Ed.]
Klee
Chagall
Picasso
Matisse
Gallatin Collection
The Gallery of Living Art, NYU
Columbia [University]
Ryah Ludens
Arp
Brancusi
Leger
Theo von Doesburg
Lawrence Alloway
John Dooley
Jackson Pollock
Bill de Kooning
Charles [Eakin, Abraham, Eagan]
ACA Gallery
Humphrey [Wildman, Wideman] Dance Theater
Gorky

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LIST OF NAMES MENTIONED (cont.)

Tape 1, side B

Martha Graham
Florence Weinstein
[]—Ed.] (Florence Weinstein's sister)
[]—Ed.] Barr
Guggenheim
Rauschenberg
Reiman
Shyree Deans
George Cohen
[Brooklyn Museum?—Trans.]
[Bob, Boggs]
Agnes Martin
Robert Indiana
Kelly Cain
Jack Youngerman
young Japanese artist from California []—Ed.]

Tape 2, side A (21 July 1993)

Lawrence Alloway
Gallatin Collection
Mondrian
Jackson Pollock
de Kooning
Mark Rothko
Barnett Newman
[Monell Lakes] of Houston [is this a person's name?—Trans.]
Guggenheim [Museum]
Mondrian
[]—Ed.] Alloway
[]—Ed.] [Politofsy]
[Wallach] Museum
Ted [Cassel, Kassel]

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LIST OF NAMES MENTIONED (cont.)

Tom Maschep
Alloway
Bob []—Ed.]
[]—Ed.] Greenberg
New York University, Stonybrook
[]—Ed.] [Malevich, Mal-ay-vich]
Museum of Modern Art
[]—Ed.] [Donto]

Tape 2, side B

Guggenheim Museum
Museum of Modern Art
Whitney Biennial

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IN _____
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LPS: LEON POLK SMITH
BKR: BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

[Bob [_____]—Ed.] is also present, making an occasional contribution to the conversation—Trans.]

[There's unfortunately quite a bit of tape hiss on both tapes, obscuring a portion of LPS's utterances.—Trans.]

Tape 1, side A [60-minute tape sides]

BKR: I'm going to put this [the tape recorder—Ed.] here.

So in the 1930s, the American Abstract Artist's Group in New York maintained a geometric dialogue in their work, and they asked you to join the group and you had a lot of friends in the group, but you chose to be independent and not join, not become a member. Was there a reason?

LPS: Well, you know, that wasn't in the thirties. Because I was studying in the thirties, in the summers at Columbia, and I didn't know these people. But then when I came to New York in the forties to live, I knew all of them. And that's when I was [regularly] [openly] invited to become a member.

BKR: And why did you choose not to?

LPS: I don't know how to create as a group or with someone else. I only know how to do it by myself. And I have always felt that too many minds working on one pie would be terribly confusing to me. The fact is I didn't care too much about hearing what they

LEON POLK SMITH

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wanted to say about what they were doing. My feeling was that most of them believed one hundred percent in Mondrian's theology or philosophy or whatever you wanted to call it, and it had to be done Mondrian's way, and I never did feel that. I never did feel that I wanted to paint Mondrian's way any longer than to find out what he had been doing through my own work.

BKR: So they discussed his theory constantly?

LPS: They what?

BKR: They would discuss his theory?

LPS: Oh well, I know they'd say, "Well, you know, that's not Mondrian," or "Mondrian wouldn't. . . ." Not about my work, but about anybody's they were going to talk about. And the fact. . . . Sydney [Janis, Jonas] when he had a show—post Mondrian show—I believe, I'm quite sure that it was 1949, some of the main leaders in that, mainly, a woman. . . . What was her name?

BKR: American or. . . ?

LPS: No, she goes to. . . . Von. . . .

BKR: [_____]—Ed.] [VonWiegen, von Wiegen]?

LPS: VonWiegen. Especially VonWiegen and [_____]—Ed.] Glarner. Now they were both Europeans. They weren't Americans to being with, but they were very strong on what was Mondrian and what's not Mondrian. And in this show, they told Sydney that they were going to pull their paintings out, they were going to resign and not become a part of it, if he didn't eliminate three of the artists. And they wanted me to go with them to Sydney, and I said, "No. I will not. This is Sydney's show; this is not my show. And if it's a failure, it's Sydney's failure; it's not mine. And I trust Sydney enough to know what he wants to do." And they said, "Well, that is all against Mondrian. Mondrian wouldn't do that." I said, "That's not. . . . If they tell Sydney that they're influenced by Mondrian, and they think that they are, that's their problem

with Sydney and it's not mine." [They said—Ed.] "We'll work against you in the future if you don't work with us now." I said, "Do whatever you like. I'm going to stay with him." And I did. They didn't show with that show. And they did: Glarner and VonWiegen worked against me as long as they lived.

BKR: Worked against you in what?

LPS: Well, say, we had moved in the sixties to Long Island. We weren't here to take care of everything, and if someone say from Chicago came and working up a show from the west coast or wherenot of we'll say post-Mondrian work—they might have called it abstract or geometric or something else—they wouldn't say that Smith is here also. They'd say, "Oh, I don't know whether he's painting or not. He's not in New York any longer." That sort of thing.

BKR: Hmm!

LPS: And I never wanted to be a part of this sort of. . . . I didn't want to work creatively with people. Now for sawing logs or something else like that, there's a way of doing it and you all do it the same way, that's all right. But that's my feelings about. . . . And not only that, I never belonged to any other group—not even politically, and I'm strongly political minded, in politics, not in life.

BKR: But you were friends with [_____]—Ed.] [Balatowski, Bollatowski. . . . Weren't you friendly with Balatowski?

LPS: Yes.

BKR: And Burgoyne Diller?

LPS: No. I mean I was friendly with Balatowski. I never visited Balatowski, and I never asked Balatowski to come to my studio. [laughs] He asked me one time to be in a movie that he was making. So we went down somewhere—where he lived I guess—and I don't think I was ever in his studio or apartment. We were up on the roof and he said, "This is somewhat surreal, and I would like for you to go to the end,

walk to the end"—it was something like this—"the end of the roof, and there is this metal ladder like going up a fire escape that goes up the side of two buildings to the top of another building. You climb up that, walk across [at] that building, and the wall was [a very], [you could] see, walk across that and come down on the other side." And then he told me other things to do, but that's what the instructions were. There was no talking in it. I never did see it. But I never saw him afterward, whether in a group or just the two of us or whatnot, [that—Ed.] he didn't bring that up, "You were certainly a good actor in that. You really had the feeling for acting." I said, "Well, you might show it to me." He said, "I'm going to." I never did see it since. And that was mostly my. . . . I'm telling that, not for the story, but that was mostly my relationship with Balatowski.

And I liked his wife. He was a little bit. . . . I think he was quite a gentle man, but there was something about him that was so strange. Now his wife we liked, and nobody liked his wife, and she went to all the openings and she was always by herself, _____. Bob always went over and spoke with her and talked with her. And when we'd see her out walking her dogs, she would always call to Bob, speak to him. She said, "You've always been so good to me and nobody else has paid me any attention." She says, "I can never overlook you." That sort of thing. She's still living.

BKR: Um hmm. Interesting. Leon, when your work has been written about before, you say that Mondrian is your greatest, "is your great influence." And there's the famous quote that you haven't seen a painting since the forties, that's given you an idea about color or form.

LPS: I said. . . . Well, I might have said the forties. I could have said that easily enough, but I said that I haven't been influenced, and I was influenced by Klee and Chagall and

Picasso, Matisse, everybody, [that, when I] was a student sort of, you know. I said, "I haven't been influenced by anyone in composition nor color since Mondrian."

BKR: Okay. You first saw his work when you went to the Gallatin Collection. . . .

LPS: Yeah.

BKR: . . . The Gallery of Living Art at NYU in the late thirties.

LPS: '36. I wouldn't say it's late. I'd say mid-thirties.

BKR: Mid-thirties, right.

LPS: Because I finished my work at Columbia in '38. That's late thirties.

BKR: Okay.

LPS: I'd seen him the first summer I was in it.

BKR: Were there other artists in the Gallatin Collection—you just mentioned Picasso—who you reacted to and were inspired by?

LPS: I don't think he was in the Gallatin Collection.

BKR: I think so.

LPS: He might have been, but anyhow Ryah Ludens wasn't showing [the. . . , these.] She wanted to show [only, me] purely abstract art. And she knew that in history there—art history, the history of modern art—that I'd seen plenty of Picassos.

BKR: Okay. What about some of the other artists in the Gallatin Collection when you went—like Arp or Brancusi, Leger. Did they interest you then?

LPS: I always mention them with Mondrian. I always say Arp, Brancusi, and Mondrian. I was interested in Leger, yes, but for a different reason. He wasn't one of the purely abstract artists.

BKR: Well, can you take each one and. . . . What about Arp interested you—the color or. . . .

LPS: No. Of course, I'm concerned with color in art. What interested me about Arp was he was working without taking directly from nature, things about him. He was creating forms.

BKR: So while you credit Arp and Brancusi and Mondrian, everyone looks to your work and says that you come from Mondrian because it's an easier identification, I guess.

LPS: That's what they [want, wanted].

BKR: It's an easier link. It's a quicker link to. . . .

LPS: Well, but you see, I think creatively. . . . I was waiting for you to say "What about Brancusi?" I think my work and my way of creating has always been closer to Brancusi than to Mondrian.

BKR: And why?

LPS: Why? I suppose because Brancusi wasn't using geometric form. All the time certainly. [laughs] And I've never said this before, but, you see, we [are, were] together, and in this [instance], say for the first time, and I think it's natural that I might say things differently from what I would have said them yesterday or ten years ago or with somebody else an hour or so [ago—Ed.]. But what comes to my mind—I like to say what comes to my mind rather than thinking up things. . . . What in the hell was it I was going to say.

BKR: About Brancusi?

LPS: Yeah. I think that in my estimation, he's possibly the greatest of the three. Did Brancusi write about art a lot or not?

BKR: I don't know.

LPS: I don't know of anything that he wrote. And that's another reason I admire him.

BKR: That you do admire him?

LPS: Yeah. I don't like artists who are always talking about their art and giving reasons for it, and these pictures about it, and this religious quality or the philosophic quality or its political quality or whatnot.

BKR: The proof is in the pudding?

LPS: Sorry?

BKR: The proof is in the pudding?

LPS: I think so, yes. [chuckling] Or in the eating. [I guess, that comes out of the pudding, too. Or??: [Because that sort of comes out of the pudding, too.]

BKR: So theoretical writing, like neo-plastic theory and all that, doesn't interest you.

LPS: Waste of time.

BKR: Did you read it. Early on.

LPS: His? Mondrian's and. . . . Who's the fellow who wrote with him for so long? Of course, I read all of it, but I didn't like it. I couldn't go along with it and I didn't want it to be a part of me. And I didn't want it to be a part of my acceptance of Mondrian.

BKR: Bob, I think we need a window open more.

Bob: Okay, is it getting warm?

BKR: Yeah.

Bob: Hold on, hold on.

LPS: Well, Bob, you know what I think we should do is bring that fan in and hook it up here and close the windows and it'll be quiet.

Bob: We can try it. I'll try it, yeah.

LPS: You can take care of the windows and I'll get it.

Bob: Oh, that's okay. [I'll see to it.]

BKR: Stop?

LPS: Oh, you can turn the. . . .

[Interruption in taping]

BKR: So you read all the neo-plastic theory, and in a sense it may have been an early stepping off point in only to react against, or you had just read it and that was it?

LPS: Oh, I read it with great enthusiasm to see what he would say. But then that was it. I didn't go off to take it off with me for discussions. I just didn't want to have that, to be a part of that, part of it.

LPS: Are you getting enough. . . . [speaking of cooling from the fan]

BKR: A little bit, yeah.

LPS: If I turned it that way just a little bit more.

BKR: Then you won't get any.

LPS: No, yes I will. I'm getting the full brunt of it. Yeah, I still get enough of it.

BKR: Great.

Bob: I'm going to open this so it'll be quiet. It'll be quiet air.

LPS: Well, you see, but this is giving us the stir of air. We don't need anything else.

Bob: We don't need anything else.

LPS: Likely the air is warmer outside than it is in here anyway.

BKR: True. Early on did you look at people, members of the [Style Group, style group] like Theo von Doesburg?

LPS: von Doesburg I was trying to think of when I _____. He was a writer. He published with Mondrian. I guess I liked von Doesburg's work, and I liked his writing better than Mondrian's books. He's more open.

BKR: He's more. . . .

LPS: Open. He liked. . . . I don't think he used diagonals nor curves, but I don't think he hated them.

BKR: It's interesting though because you are aligned frequently with Mondrian but there's a lot more that came into your early years.

LPS: Yes. The fact is that writers have made too much out of Mondrian with me, and I've resented that. Because he's the only one that's ever mentioned, and it's almost as if he laid an egg and I hatched out of it, and, no, I don't like that. And of course they were right from hearsay, without asking me anything about it. Many people have written, writers have written about my connection with Mondrian and maybe I've never met them, never interviewed me.

BKR: In your very earliest paintings, there are identifiable things—people or animals—very early on in the mid and late thirties. Have you ever since returned to the figure or to anything identifiable, ever in drawings or in paintings?

LPS: Did we ever show you the Georgia Chain Gang?

BKR: Yes.

LPS: You saw that?

BKR: Yes.

LPS: No. I haven't done any work from the figure since the thirties.

BKR: And you don't have an urge in drawing occasionally to sketch or to draw.

LPS: [shakes head no?]

BKR: No.

LPS: I always knew from the time I started studying art that when I had trained myself to draw a horse and pig and a person and a tree, that I was going to be through with drawing from nature. [laughs quietly]

BKR: What year was the first tondo or round painting?

LPS: Must be '45, let's say, approximately. Might have been a little earlier.

BKR: And what attracted you to make a circle canvas?

LPS: I likely found a circular piece of wood. And I didn't know not to do a painting on it. If it had been square, I would have used a square, which I did. I have some small paintings that were say lids on the compartments in a trunk. I found an old trunk and I used those lids in the various compartments, thin pieces of wood. I painted on them back in the thirties as a student. And I found a circular piece of wood and [I said], "Oh, that would be good to do a painting on." And I didn't find it any more challenging than to do one on a square or a rectangle or a triangle. And I had no prejudices about one or the other. I liked painting on all shapes.

BKR: So no hierarchy for you?

LPS: No.

BKR: In terms of titles of your works, besides those that have titles that are numbers or colors, you often have descriptive names perhaps, or Jubilee, or. . . . You titled some of your works. Can you talk about that a little bit. Do you title a picture after it's made?

LPS: I had been conscious of titles of paintings in other people's work, and I was always disturbed and confused when I found someone had done a painting in America and had given it a Greek title. And the title, well, it could be in English but it was from the Greek. And for myself I disliked that very much and was never inclined to do that sort of thing. So. . . . Well, when I was doing representational work I gave titles like, in the thirties, like the Georgia Chain Gang, or Chore Time on the Ranch, or Doing the Chores, a natural title, to [identify the work, [identify with the work]]. And then through the forties it was more or less an abstract title or a number. Or no, not always; there's Diagonal Passage and so on and so forth. I do know most of my paintings in the fifties were Indian names that the general public wouldn't know the meaning of, so that there's an abstract title to identify the painting. That's all it was used for. I didn't want it to have any influence on the person's mind when they looked at it. That's the

reason I wanted an abstract title. And then in the sixties and seventies and on through then, it changed from that, of course, and I would sort of use a title, the first thing that came into my mind when I finished a painting. And it might have nothing to do with the painting. In a sense. Like I'd have finished a painting and I looked out the window in the afternoon, I saw the little new moon that was in August, so I named the painting New Moon for August. Or Sun Rising. It's not the rising sun. My titles are a little bit like frames. I didn't like frames on painting, and I care too much about titles but one has to use titles for convenience. I would certainly never attempt to use a title to help explain my painting.

BKR: Although in series that you've done, like the Correspondences or the Constellations, doesn't that refer more closely to the work?

LPS: Well, if one says that it does, I couldn't say that it doesn't. But that was not my intention because when you say "constellation," that's an abstract word. It can be, usually used as with stars, but it could be a constellation of anything, a grouping of anything. And they were always groupings, the Constellations.

BKR: Right.

LPS: So I could have said "groupings" but "constellations" seemed to be a little more direct and more traditional in a sense. To understand a group of paintings as "constellations" seems to make a little clearer sense—or makes the least amount of sense than "grouping." As we say, a group of horses or a group of people are out there. We associate all these things with group. While "constellation" doesn't have much association with it except stars.

BKR: But Correspondences. . . .

LPS: Well, correspondences are two colors there. There they are, and they do correspond. But I didn't use that to say, "See them correspond?" "Hear them corresponding?" I did it because they were different from the Constellations. They were different from

the Geometrics. They were different from others and. . . . I didn't do it to group them, but that does group them. Without any reasons why. [pauses] What's that strange noise?

Bob: Working.

BKR: Upstairs.

LPS: We can close our, close the window here that's making it.

BKR: I'm all right, so. . . .

LPS: Okay.

BKR: Now for many of your paintings, you have no preordained rule how things are supposed to hang—upside down, downside up.

LPS: That is not all together, but it's mostly the Constellations. But some of the other paintings also, especially the circular paintings.

BKR: Okay. How. . . .

LPS: But I don't think they're any [rectangular, rectangle] or squares. Certainly no rectangular that comes to my mind right off that you can change.

BKR: Okay. With the Constellations or some of the circular paintings, you wait until it's going to be hung before you decide. In other words, the space where you're hanging it dictates the placement of the piece?

LPS: It does for me, yes. Although I have "top" printed on the back of it. That's for people who don't know about that.

BKR: Right.

LPS: Who don't have the feeling for doing that, or maybe they don't feel they have the privilege to. . . . The fun of doing it myself. I may change it every time I hang it if the walls are changed. The environment has changed the [wall].

BKR: In 1968, you switched from oil paint to acrylic—'67 or '68—but right in 1968, I read a quote, that said that you liked oil paint because you could build it up like a wall.

LPS: No, you see, Lawrence Alloway. . . . Now, I read that again sometimes within the past year too, and I thought he was talking about the acrylic. Or he was talking about. . . . And I remember saying to him, "I like for a color to look solid. I don't want it to look as if you can see through it in places and other places you can't see through it." I want it to look as solid as a wall. And he wrote about that.

BKR: Right.

LPS: I would have wanted it to be the same whether it's oil or acrylic. But it seems to me that when I said this I was already using acrylic, but if at the time I was saying it about acrylic, I could have said it as easily about both acrylic and oil.

BKR: Okay. So you don't find a virtue. . . . Do you now find a virtue over painting in acrylic? It's your chosen. . . .

LPS: Oh, I prefer it so much to oil.

BKR: Because. . . .

LPS: For many reasons. It's not as messy. It dries very quickly. Before you lose the spirit of the work itself, you can put on three, four coats, and you don't have to wait several days or a week if the humidity's not right for it to dry. How you can keep in that same spirit? I don't really mean to ask that as a question to be answered, because people worked only with oil for hundreds of years and would go for weeks or a year working on it, but it didn't suit my temperament.

BKR: Since then, you've only used acrylic.

LPS: _____ [in] collage. And I've always used collage since 1939.

BKR: In some of the paintings, your gesture is visible. How do you feel about us being able to detect your hand?

LPS: What is this?

BKR: _____ r paintings we can see your gesture.

_____ mean the brush stroke?

BKR: The brush stroke and your line.

LPS: Oh, in the line drawing, yes. But not so much in brush strokes.

BKR: No.

LPS: If any, not since the forties.

BKR: Right.

LPS: Not much of the brush stroke in the forties. Oh, yes, in the drawing of course. It's all there.

BKR: And in some of the paintings, too, sometimes. The curve. . . .

LPS: Well, I had to do a drawing for the painting. The drawing came before the paint.

BKR: Right, yeah.

LPS: And I tried to leave the line just as I had drawn it, when I paint.

BKR: On the canvas?

LPS: Yes. [Partly]. [chuckles]

BKR: Why? Why don't you try to get rid of that?

LPS: [chuckles] It sounds like asking why do I do the painting.

BKR: Some people don't want any of that revealed, any of that process.

LPS: Well, so much of what I'm saying is in that line. At least half of what I'm trying to say is there. And if it's freehand, it's certainly spontaneous. And it's quite spontaneous even if in some instances I use a ruler or a compass.

BKR: I know that when people go up to the works they look at that, and that's often mesmerizing to people to see your mind, the process, in the work.

LPS: What does it do to them?

BKR: I think it's mesmerizing.

LPS: Is that good or bad?

BKR: That's good.

LPS: [laughs]

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LPS: What is this?

BKR: In your paintings we can see your gesture.

LPS: You mean the brush stroke?

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LPS: Is that good or bad?

BKR: That's good.

LPS: [laughs]

BKR: Not to worry. How about the issue of content in the paintings.

LPS: What do you mean by content?

BKR: If a person comes up to. . . . First I'll talk about the viewers perception. If a person comes up to one of your works and says, "That looks like a. . . . blank." How do you feel about that?

LPS: I'm not going to contradict. [laughs]

BKR: What?

LPS: I'm not going to contradict them. If that's what they see, that's what they see. I'm not going to call them a liar or try to change their minds. It's the _____ [and human] _____ [choice.] I might say, "You enjoy seeing that," yes. Well, that's the point of view that they are at at this time. It may change. If they're interested in educating their mind and going farther with the art, they will change. It depends on the person with who one is speaking, you know, when they say that. Of course, a sophisticated person would not need to say it. So the question itself shows that it's an unsophisticated person. And you deal with them with all the sympathy you can—and encouragement and interest in them, and let them know that you're interested in their being interested in the art world. It's not something that they shouldn't be looking at because they would never understand it. I never take that point of view, because I think my work can be understood on many levels. [Saying the] same thing as. . . . We all understand different things on different levels. We all understand whatever we're talking about or looking at somewhat uniquely or quite differently from the way other people are thinking about it. But then I think that is the uniqueness of human beings.

BKR: But in a sense, you know, that openness or willingness to listen to a viewer's perceptions of your work comes from your interest in teaching [then, them] from your earlier days.

LPS: Well, absolutely true, absolutely true. I'm a teacher. I can't deny that. And John Dooley, you know, he was the great philosopher at Columbia University. He retired in the thirties. He said, "Let people. . . ." Usually about children, or people. "Let the people learn by doing, not by lecturing, and they'll learn more in thirty minutes by doing than with lecturing for hours." And that's a little bit _____, but people have the privilege of looking at things from their point of view and from their station and mind, thinking, in life at that particular moment, and it's up to them whether or not they go farther. But I don't think it's the place to start lecturing, when someone asks a question like that. Might scare them away. I'm just as happy if someone, a nonsophisticated person, a naive person, asks a very naive question, "Can I see this?" or "Is it all right if I see this?" Well, they are enjoying it. You can see that. You don't have to ask them.

BKR: Right. No.

LPS: And why ruin that by telling them, "No, you can't look at it that way." [chuckling] "You've got to study art and learn all of these different philosophies," and so on and so forth. Of course, the more we know about anything, the more we can appreciate it but we don't have to impose that on everyone immediately.

BKR: I want to talk a little bit, if you will, about your Native American background.

LPS: About what?

BKR: Your Indian background, your Native American background. In your childhood in Oklahoma, would you see Native American craft and artifacts? Or did you visit any museums with Native American objects in it? And do you think that this color or any of that came into your work?

LPS: Well, when my folks went to the Indian Territory, there weren't so many white people there. There were many more Indians than there were whites. And I'd had maybe four or five brothers and sisters who were born before I, and I was the last one who

was born in the Indian territory that then became Oklahoma. So we had more Indian neighbors than we had white neighbors. And of course when it became a state, the government put in schools and everybody went to the schools, but to usually the same schools. Of course, on the reservations they had just Indian schools, because there were no whites living on the reservations. But the Indians with whom I grew up, the Chickasaws and Choctaw, they weren't given a reservation; they were given individual tracts of land. And a family may have several children, and this one they had chosen when it was born was 350 acres here or 150, depending on the tribe and a lot of other things. And the next one might be a hundred miles away or this way or this way. And so one family, they'd have quite a lot of land scattered in several-hundred-acre pieces over a large area. And the schools and all, that they would only live. . . . I think the father and mother of the Indians, they were. . . . Yes, they were given [big, good] tracts of land and then each child that was born was given maybe a less number.

My folks didn't do that. They weren't. . . . I don't know that I ever tried to say this before. They weren't. . . . There's a word for it, but I may have to substitute and say they weren't registered Indians. But there's another word. They weren't on the books but they were already in the archives, because I know an Indian sister-in-law of mine, a younger brother, she did a lot of research on the Smiths, and she found that they were Indians. But some reason or other, I think my father and mother, they may have. . . . I can't believe that they wouldn't have tried or have investigated. I think they investigating [means investigated—Trans.] having their children receive grants of land, but they didn't have the papers for it and they didn't make the trip back to Tennessee to do all of this work. Well, it's too complicated to talk about, and it's just as well to leave it unmentioned, I suppose. But we maybe. . . .

BKR: Tennessee is where they were from?

LPS: Sorry?

BKR: Tennessee is where they. . . .?

LPS: East Tennessee, yes. That's where the. . . . East Tennessee and Florida is where the Cherokees were, and of course all the way up the East Coast into Virginia. And they were both part Cherokee.

Oh, I know, and [I suppose] I could tell you this, now it comes to me. One reason they didn't have the papers. . . . Most people were very prejudiced against Indians and still are. And I think they wrote back and asked some of their folks to send them papers, the proof that they could show the Indian Affairs Department about their, that would prove that we. . . . They said, "Oh, no, we're not going to sign papers like that. We'd just as soon sign papers that we're niggers, part niggers." Or something like, something equivalent to that.

BKR: Yeah. Did any of the Indian traditions though, or crafts, did you see any?

LPS: Oh, that. Yes, of course. Yes, they all had crafts. And they all sewed and made things. They made moccasins, and they did beadwork and some jewelry—and paintings.

BKR: And do you find any of that coming into your work in the early years in any way?

LPS: Yes, I remember I used to aware of that, and also people looking at it could see the influence.

BKR: In what particular way? Or which works?

LPS: Well, without going through the works, that's not an easy question to answer, but let's say in 1937, when. . . . At that time I had done my most abstract painting. It was called A Walk Into the Forest, and I think that was very much influenced by Indian art—the simplicity of it and the directness of it, and not putting in anything that wasn't needed. Nothing there but these vertical tree trunks.

BKR: Right.

LPS: But I think the way they used color, their freedom of color. I never had any inhibitions about color. I was never afraid of color. And I think that came out of my relationship with the Indians.

BKR: Is that something you were conscious of, or not really?

LPS: What?

BKR: The freedom of color or the. . . . When you talk about a stroll in the forest being spare and not having. . . .

LPS: There was something more than that that's not visual. And that is. . . . I think their philosophy, their thinking and the way they talked or told stories, so much detail was left out, that was more abstract than the way most white people were thinking and expressing themselves. And I think I felt that, and I felt it in the way they lived and the way they celebrated, and their dances and their singing. Many things that spoke of itself was _____.

BKR: Did you attend any programs or events on the reservations, that stick in your mind?

LPS: Not on the reservation, but in the community. Someone in the Indian family's house, over, say, a half mile this way, they were sick. We could hear that they were going to have a pow wow there Wednesday night. What does that mean? That means that they would sing and dance for the person to get well. And we were always free, or invited, to attend. And maybe some of their children were some of my closest friends and [we] wouldn't think of not attending. Wanted to be together. Many of those things I experienced. Or it [could, would] be a celebration of wedding or someone's return from a trip or something. They had their own ways of celebrating these events.

BKR: So it was much a part of the fabric or your life?

LPS: Very much so.

BKR: We talked about the late 1930s and the 1940s, beginnings of the 1940s, but I'm curious about other American art movements that have taken place as you've been an

artist—for example, with abstract expressionism coming as a dominant art form. Aside from the scale of that work, which was large, was there anything in it that you either reacted towards or reacted against?

LPS: Oh. I think it's easy to tell that some of it was better than others. Some artists were better than other artists. I knew that. I looked at it almost as if they were working the way I was working and [since, sense, hence] my acceptance of it. Some of it's good; some of it is bad. I think I liked Jackson Pollock from [The Bird, the third, III, from the _____] [but I mean] very, very much. [That Thought he] was a great artist. I thought he was a much greater artist than de Kooning. But I'm not getting into what you're asking [kindly, finally, quite].

BKR: Well, was it the freedom in Pollock that you liked? Freedom of scale and of composition.

LPS: Oh, of course, I liked the freedom, yes, because I've got a kinship in that respect.

BKR: Sure

LPS: He was free in one way and I was. . . . I expressed my freedom differently, but just as freely.

BKR: Right, yeah.

LPS: de Kooning, I thought was always too complicated—put in too much, a lot that was not needed. And he had a hard time with abstracting. Finally, he did fine. I think I've told you this part of it before, of my going to de Kooning's place one time.

BKR: No.

LPS: Well, we had both had a show with Charles [Eagan, Eakin, Abraham]. Do you know that name at all?

BKR: Oh, yeah.

LPS: Charles Eagan, he called me, I think it was around 1944, and he said, "I'm Charles Eagan. You don't know me, but I've known your work for a long while and I've

opened a gallery of my own. I used to be with the ACA Gallery," I think that was the name of it. It's still in existence. And he said, "I arranged a big exhibition for that gallery one time, and it was more than they could show, and it was shown at the Metropolitan Museum. Well, I wasn't in New York so I didn't see it." And I said, "When did you want to have the show?" And he said, "Well, de Kooning's [about, not] going to come down in a couple of weeks." I said, "Well, why don't you come down and we'll talk." So he came to my studio. I was at [108-110] West Sixteenth Street and Humphrey [Wildman, Wideman] Dance Theater, in that building. And his show of mine, that first show anyhow, was mostly work from the thirties. He says, "The new work you're doing, the abstract," he says, "I think it's right for you. You're right for it, but people don't like it."

BKR: What year was this?

LPS: I think '44. I'm not sure. Approximately then. And so we became quite well acquainted, and he said, "Why don't you talk with Bill de Kooning about his work? He doesn't know how to finish a painting. He doesn't know when it's finished." I said, "Well, I didn't know anything about his problems and he's never asked me to visit his studio." Well, I suppose Charles talked with de Kooning about it, because de Kooning invited me to come to his studio. I went to his studio, and he was showing me painting after painting after painting but he kept saying, "It's not finished yet. But it's not finished yet." I didn't know his work at all. I didn't see the show he had with Charles Eagans. I said, "Can you show me something that is finished?" I think he had three or four paintings he called finished, and they looked almost like Gorky. And then I looked at him and said to him, the others, looking at those, the unfinished one, I said, "This is finished." He says, "But it's not what I want." I said, "Do you know what you want?" He said, "I want ____." I said, "Well, you know, that looks so much like Gorky's, I would have been. . . ."

Tape 1, side B

LPS: But when he [de Kooning—Ed.] became known and then when he had got a gallery, what were they showing [but his, that was] unfinished things! But he wasn't ready to listen to my reason. And he never talked with me about that later. We did talk some later, but he never wanted to mention that, it seems.

BKR: I understand that when I said "abstract expressionism," you rightly so [prefer, preferred] to consider individual artists rather than just lumping everybody together, and that makes complete sense. What was that like for you in that time when organic imagery was so dominant? Did that interest you ever to try that sort of work?

LPS: You mean the abstract [expressionism, expression]?

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: [laughs] Well, to me abstract expressionism is very naturalistic in its content. All of the movements are natural movements, and they are all alike. I don't mean all that one person does, but all of them, they're using these same movements practically. And now they finally end up by having some individuality. And if nothing else, the color would be individualistic. And if two people are doing this, no two of them do it exactly the same way. There are little things, differences, but they're all natural movements in abstract expressionism. And that kept it from being interesting to me, because I had had this great determination to get away from the natural—from direct natural influences in my work. And they were doing it on a much stronger scale than the naturalistic painters were doing it, because they exaggerated everything and it became more naturalistic than the naturalistic painting. [stage whispers:] And everybody could do it. Every little old retired man and woman, they started doing it. And within a few weeks, they were just as good as anybody else. It's like a lot about the dancing is natural, you know. A lot we can be taught about it, in refining it and

making it more interesting, but so much of dancing is natural, and that is doing a dance. Abstract Expressionism is doing a dance with a brush and paint. And to me it wasn't even a terribly interesting dance because Martha Graham has already gone far beyond that, and I had seen her work.

BKR: Although you do, while you say that everybody could do it, a lot of people did it better than others.

LPS: Well, some were certainly more serious about it. Some of them did it as more or less a hobby. Some did it for socializing. It depended on their seriousness. But basically they're very much alike. Now there was. . . . There were two sisters—I think they were teachers—and they decided that they would like to start painting. It made everybody want to paint. And I think that was the thing about that made everybody interested in art. Everyone felt that "I can do it, too," and that's not a bad thing. I think it's a very healthy attitude. Everyone is supposed to be able to create—that's why we were put here.

BKR: Create or procreate?

LPS: Both. Pro and con. [laughs]

BKR: So who were the two sisters?

LPS: Sorry?

BKR: Who were the two sisters?

LPS: Oh, Florence Weinstein and her sister [_____]—Ed.]. And I used to. . . . There are the Tenth Street studios, five or six of them over there on East Tenth Street, and most all of them are expressionist galleries. Some were still working from nature, from the figure, and I was in one of them. They didn't have gallery directors. Most of them had what they called "sitters" to sit in the gallery. And one of the fellows—one of the sitters I knew—and he told me that Barr, "Oh, [_____]—Ed.] Barr was down today," he said, "earlier in the afternoon, and he liked Florence Weinstein's paintings

very, very much, and I have the feeling that within the year she'll be a famous artist."

I think he left that impression, Barr, that he was going to really do something about it. But when he got back after the museum, there were already people there who had their favorites, you know, and they'd say, "Oh no, not that, not that, not that," so take something else and never heard of Florence Weinstein again.

BKR: So the point of that story as you're talking, is that there were people discovered, and not place for the others once kind of the cannon was established of that group.

LPS: Sorry.

BKR: The point of that story about Florence Weinstein is that once the cannon was established of that group, there was no room for others?

LPS: You are saying that once they selected six or eight, there was no room. Exactly. Exactly!

BKR: So that fame could only come to that many.

LPS: And, who knows, if Florence Weinstein had had the encouragement. . . . But some of the others, she might have turned out to be even better, because a little encouragement goes a long way.

BKR: Sure.

LPS: And once they are ignored it kills the spirit for a lot of people, especially if they have some feeling. And I think most artists have a feeling of wanting to be famous along with their contribution. Now for that sort of person, they certainly must have encouragement and some praise and recognition. There are some artists who don't paint for fame at all nor for money. But I would say most artists paint for fame—and wealth, too. I'm not against [the idea].

BKR: Do you think that it was. . . . I didn't think that it used to be like that. I didn't think it was anticipated that you would be able to make a living being an artist, really. You would make your living teaching.

LPS: I think it was like that. Used to be like that.

BKR: Things have changed more recently.

LPS: Yes, right. And it might have been the expressionists who for the first time you could say that fame and wealth was predominant because they were able to make a living immediately with it.

BKR: Right, yeah. How do you respond to the term "minimalism"?

LPS: What does it mean?

BKR: What does it mean? What does abstract expressionism mean? I guess it's the. . . .

LPS: Abstract expressionism is expressing the personal emotions directly.

BKR: Well, I think that minimalism would probably be the opposite of that. Or so some would, so is the argument for it—that the artist. . . . Anything personal [that] the human or the artist has removed from the work.

LPS: Well, I think any creation that is predominantly emotional is bad art.

BKR: Is bad art?

LPS: Yeah. I think good art—whether it's opera, music or the dance, poetry—has a, have a lot of the intellect in it, and intuition, and the whole person, or to live and to really be interesting. Minimalism, I never did use the term and I never did think that my work. . . . Although I think I was one of the first who started painting in what later was called minimalism, I [thought, felt] that it was so very full that it wasn't minimal. I thought of it sort of the opposite of minimal. But I think I understood what they understood minimal to be. But it never interested me to use that term. Certainly not for myself. If someone called himself a minimalist, then I'd speak of him as one of the minimalists.

BKR: So those artists who were called minimalists—or that period in some of their work called minimalist—you were doing similar, you were doing. . . .

LPS: Well, right here is something that I did in the very early fifties, '54.

BKR: Right, much earlier.

LPS: So I don't think anything was done much more minimal than that, unless they just put up an empty sheet of paper. And some did, painting white all over, or black. But then that is trying to prove something, I don't know what it is. Sometimes, maybe early in the season, Bob and I went to the downtown Guggenheim place.

BKR: Yes.

LPS: Beautiful little gallery.

BKR: It is.

LPS: And there was a big room in there. All white paintings by Rauschenberg. Did you see that?

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: What'd you think about that?

BKR: Reiman or Rauschenberg?

LPS: Rauschenberg.

BKR: The early Rauschenbergs?

LPS: Yeah. They were done. . . . I think the date on them was in the early fifties.

BKR: Yeah. I liked them. They had a lot of texture in them.

LPS: But. . . . I knew Rauschenberg at that time and I never did see any of those paintings. I was absolutely stunned when I went into that room and saw the dates on those, and figured, well. . . . First, I had no idea whose they could be. So I looked at the dates, I saw some of the dates, and they didn't have his name there anywhere, and I had to ask somebody, and they said, "It's Rauschenberg." I said, "I never did see anything of Rauschenberg like this." I don't know when they were done. And there were so many of them. Think there's a _____. . . .

BKR: No, when we think of his early paintings, we think of the combines.

LPS: Think of what?

BKR: The combines. Rauschenberg's early paintings.

LPS: Yeah. As they say, bring an old hen out and stick her under the [painter, painting], or hang his mattress up with it, and all that was original. But that doesn't seem like the mind that the same time, or before, had done these all-white paintings. And, of course. . . . She will never get credit for it, but did you know the artist Shyree Deans?

BKR: No.

LPS: You haven't heard of her?

BKR: No.

LPS: She died this season in her nineties or something like that. But she fed Rauschenberg on all of that. She was already doing that. She had a studio up on 57 Street, the Carnegie Studios and it was full of these things. And her work was like that. She never got any recognition but Rauschenberg went there and fed on it all the time. She did it [in] small things, of course. The studio was about the size of this, but it was full of stuff. And he would go there, and he had a big studio, and he'd get these little ideas, blow them up, and maybe she gave him the old hen. She'd give him things like that. And then they don't wonder, "Where did you get this idea?" and really bring a little humanity into history. But, no, they gave him the credit for the whole thing.

BKR: You know, another artist who was doing work like that in Chicago early on was a guy named George Cohen, who's in his late seventies or eighties now. Very interesting man, who I talked to. Did those things early on, and that would be something interesting to study as well in the context of all of this [white] _____. Would you have welcomed younger artists into your studio in the fifties? Were other artists. . . . Was there a dialogue going on?

LPS: I always had the artists coming into my studio.

BKR: And you would visit theirs?

LPS: Not always.

BKR: No, uh huh.

LPS: No, because. . . . Maybe if they were having a show, I would go to see their show. But I couldn't visit every artist's studio who came to my studio. And, besides, usually. . . . I was teaching, and my students always wanted to come to my studio, and two or three of my students from the fifties were at the opening in Brooklyn [at the Brooklyn Museum?—Trans.], and I've got letters and calls from them since.

BKR: That's nice.

LPS: And they talk about that: "Well, you know," in a letter, "so and so and so and so, three or four other girls"—I had them when they were girls—"we got together, and I was telling them about seeing you, and we had a long talk about things you used to tell us in class, your philosophy." I told you. . . . You remember my telling you this once before?

BKR: Well, the postcard you got, I think that was one of your students.

LPS: Yes.

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: And she's called me since then, and she's a professor at NYU in English.

BKR: Interesting. So, for the record. . . . You know, this book [_____—Ed.] is important as a historical record of all of this over your lifetime. Which of the young artists would have come here and you would have had a kind of dialogue with? I know that in [Bob's, Boggs'] essay, he wrote that, "Agnes Martin and Robert Indiana and Kelly Cain."

LPS: Jack Youngerman.

BKR: Jack Youngerman, uh huh.

LPS: Well, and there were many artists who were not known today who came. A man and his wife who here they're still painting but you never hear their names, never see their work. We saw them at some show recently.

BKR: And, Leon, in a sense those visits here were another extension of your teaching to younger artists.

LPS: Well now, in the early fifties, a young Japanese artist came to me from California [_____—Ed.], and he says, "I know your work and I would like to study with you." And I said, "I never take private students, but you start painting the way you want to paint and when you get some paintings done, you call me and I'll come over and talk with you about them, and I'll do this anytime you want me to come and I'll never charge anything for it." And that's the way I worked with artists outside of the school, outside of an institution. Because I never wanted an artist to pay me something for the knowledge I'd give him. But with students in the university or college, they weren't paying for that, and I felt entirely different in working with them than with a private artist. I never charged a single artist in my life one penny, nothing.

BKR: Just a couple more questions for today. Can you talk about the relationship between the drawings and the paintings? I know that you don't make the drawings as sketches for the paintings, but is there any interaction between them?

LPS: When I do a drawing on the canvas and then it's to be painted, usually there are no changes made in the drawing. Sometimes the line might be pushed over just a tiny bit farther—the brush seems to move or the brush moves around it—but basically I don't make changes in drawings on the canvas. I had, however. . . . You want to turn it off a moment?

BKR: Um hmm.

[Interruption in taping]

BKR: I guess I should clarify. I meant to talk about your works on paper versus your paintings.

LPS: In my work on paper, my work on canvas. I used to think that my work on paper—that is, the collages—was something completely different from my paintings. And through the years, I think that I was right. They were different. They are different, and I've had the feeling that I couldn't do paintings like the collages. But now in the last five years I have been doing paintings from collages as early as the early sixties. So what the problem was. . . . And I didn't know that there was a problem. I just thought that I was doing two different kinds of creative work, quite different in their approach, and that they had to remain that way. I couldn't do paintings from the collages. I couldn't do collages from my paintings, but now then I can.

BKR: So it's interesting that you're going back now to work that you did thirty years ago, and it still is as fresh.

LPS: It's fresher because I had to transpose it.

BKR: To the canvas?

LPS: Yes. I couldn't do it just like it was done as a collage. I had to simplify it. And although the collages were purely abstract, I had to do a lot of abstracting [in, and] transposing them over to the canvas. Sounds contradictory. You'd have to see the collages and the paintings to know exactly what I'm talking about.

BKR: But as far as you're concerned there's not a hierarchy between the works on paper and the paintings?

LPS: No, basically not, but of course, a large painting certainly has more power, in most all instances, than a small collage on paper. So I think the only hierarchy is in the size.

BKR: Okay. Good enough for today.

THE BROOKLYN MUSEUM
DEPARTMENT OF PAINTING AND SCULPTURE,
CONTEMPORARY ART

BROOKLYN, NEW YORK
LEON POLK SMITH

TAPE-RECORDED INTERVIEW WITH LEON POLK SMITH
IN _____
21 JULY 1993
INTERVIEWER: BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

LPS: LEON POLK SMITH
BKR: BROOKE KAMIN RAPAPORT

Tape 2, side A

BKR: We discussed your Native American childhood in our last meeting, and there's a quote in one of Lawrence Alloway's articles on your work, that you said, "I grew up in the Southwest, where the colors in nature were pure and rampant, and where my Indian neighbors and relatives used color to vibrate and shock." Can you tell me, or discern for me, some Native American influence in your specific works, in specific works?

LPS: No.

BKR: No.

LPS: No, but, you see, every time we'd go to an Indian affair—an Indian dance or a powwow, or something that the medicine man would call for the sick, or someone [moves] away, or a celebration or whatnot—they were very colorful. But I think they wore more colors then, and that's likely what I was referring to in that.

BKR: But you wouldn't ascribe direct links?

LPS: My [pet] [with it, would have]?

BKR: Yes.

LPS: [shakes head no]

BKR: No.

LEON POLK SMITH

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LPS: It's just if they used. . . . I think I said it there. They used color freely, and that's the way I [use, used] color is freely, so that's as close as I could get to it.

BKR: Leon, you saw geometric abstraction at the Gallatin Collection in 1936. Would you say that OK Territory and Get Along Little Dogies marked the point where we can, where your work begins on the road to where it is today? In other words, where would you say that these pieces aren't that those two works aren't really yet your own, that they're inspired by. . . .

LPS: Well, they might not be fully. . . . "Fully my own," was the word.

BKR: Uh huh.

LPS: But I think that they are quite my own—in color and general layout and proportions and everything. I'm willing to say that it started there with that. . . . I thought. . . . It was a rather daring thing to, but began somewhere to paint in the manner of Mondrian, when I'd just had classroom instructions in figure drawing, you know, and, well, I say, in drawing, more or less in naturalistic painting or representative paintings. And then to find a way to get out of that into Mondrian was a very daring thing. And so there's some paintings—I think you had seen at least some of them, all of them, no—in the late thirties where it shows an attempt to get out and over.

BKR: Which? the Stroll in the Forest is that. . . .

LPS: Sorry?

BKR: Which ones of the late thirties?

LPS: Oh. . . .

BKR: The Stroll in the Forest, is that. . . . That's [very inter], maybe.

LPS: It's not as much so, although it was the most abstract. It was all vertical; it had no horizontal [notes].

BKR: Right.

LPS: But I think that the others where I did consciously use vertical, horizontals, criss-cross, and rectangular backgrounds. It might have been in [The White Woman, The Black Woman], or those other big forms, like [a champagne glass, A Champagne Glass], or something like that, too. In all of those. . . . I was feeling my way, trying. But not enough that they should _____ be mentioned _____. As far as that's concerned, I often thought of destroying them. They were ones that not [too].

BKR: Destroying the early ones.

LPS: Yeah, the thirties, yeah.

BKR: Right. I'm glad you didn't.

LPS: Well, I'm not ashamed of them, but I just think that they weren't important enough to. . . .

BKR: But historically they're. . . .

LPS: That's what they say. [chuckles]

BKR: You also painted a few works that were called Homage to Victory Boogie-Woogie, which is Mondrian, obviously. One is a circle, one is a rectangle, one I believe is a diamond-shaped.

LPS: Yes.

BKR: Can you comment on those paintings a little bit and their link to Mondrian? Would you say it was stylistically or in the titles or. . . .

LPS: Well, I wanted to do a painting. . . . Maybe there's three times I've wanted to do a painting—two or three of them—that were inspired by the particular painting of Mondrian's. And of course whether this part of it was quite conscious or not, but it was right there, on top in the unconscious, to make it as much my own as possible. But I wanted it to show that it was inspired by Victory Boogie-Woogie.

BKR: Why that work of Mondrian's?

LPS: What?

BKR: Why that work of Mondrian's? Was that the quintessential. . . .

LPS: Well, I think that was. . . . I don't know whether that was his last painting, or one of the last. . . .

BKR: I don't know if it was his last or not, but I think it's considered a quintessential Mondrian.

LPS: One of them I think was even unfinished.

BKR: Ah hah.

LPS: So I suppose that I wanted to try to take up exactly where he left off. Now I'm sort of making this up, because I don't know what I thought at the time, but it seems that that would be what I thought. And I think that I did believe that that was his latest thing, and that that would be a place to take off from, take ____.

BKR: And the different formats were part of your experimentation with that?

LPS: It was a part of my way of reaching out.

BKR: What do you mean?

LPS: Well, you call it experimentation, and I call it reaching out.

BKR: Okay.

LPS: It's like, in a sense, reaching out in the dark. You don't know how far you're going to reach or exactly what you'll find. And I don't I ever thought, "I'm going to experiment with this and see if I can do it." I always felt that I was going to do what I wanted to do at that time. And I don't believe that I ever consciously felt that I [experimented, was experimenting]. Was discovering.

BKR: Better word?

LPS: Yeah.

BKR: Last time as well we spoke about Jackson Pollock and de Kooning, but I didn't ask you about Mark Rothko and Barnett Newman. Obviously their sensibility is much darker

than yours, and your work is nonreferential and theirs probably is referential. Did you know those two artists?

LPS: Yes.

BKR: Yes. And any comments on their work?

LPS: On their behavior? You asked me if I knew them. [said with a smile]

BKR: I asked you if you knew them, and you said yes, and then any comments on. . . .

LPS: On their work or on them.

BKR: . . . on their work, the angst that they were conveying, which clearly you weren't interested in.

LPS: I wasn't.

BKR: [looks puzzled]

LPS: Did you say I wasn't interested in it?

BKR: Well, we've talked before about uplifting aspect of your paintings, and I think that that's a different sensibility.

LPS: Well, I think that the early Rothkos, when he was using bright colors, were very uplifting. I like them very much, and I thought he had made a great contribution. And then I think the first time he left those colors and started using very dark colors were paintings that he did for the ^{the} [Monell Lakes] of Houston.

BKR: Yeah, which he ____.

LPS: And I was in Houston, the temple or whatever it's called. It was closed because they were doing repair work. I never saw them there, but they were exhibited at the Guggenheim, and I saw them there. And I said. . . . And we had been at times in our relationship rather close. We could talk with each other, and I said. . . . What was his first name? Mark?

BKR: Um hmm.

LPS: I said, "Mark, why'd you stop using all those beautiful happy colors, and go into these dark, gloomy colors?" Well, he said once, "I'm not a very happy person."

BKR: Hmm, interesting.

LPS: Which is a very good answer. It's exactly what [it, he] was.

BKR: Yeah, right. [pauses] And you used much brighter and happier colors.

LPS: I did, yes. I was then and continue to.

BKR: In that time, the late 1940s, you began the Diagonal Passage series?

LPS: Well, I don't know that that was the late 1940s, or the mid-forties, or '43 or '4.

Because I didn't do, say, the Diagonal Passage, the Columns, one series at a time. I was doing all of them. And they all were contributing to the same cause. I was only working on one thing, and each of these different ways contributed to what I was searching for, wanting to discover.

BKR: Okay. Can you talk a little bit about the concept and the title of the Diagonal Passage series?

LPS: The title? I think it's self-explanatory.

BKR: Um hmm, and what about the concept behind it?

LPS: The concept of the diagonal?

BKR: Of the Diagonal Passage series. In other words, this was a group of works that you would change formats, but continue a similar exploration.

LPS: So.

BKR: So. Okay. Good answer if you like. . . .

LPS: But then I said that Diagonal Passage. . . . Well, that was one thing that I was determined to get in, even before I started using it, the diagonal, you know. I'm going to get the diagonal in here. I still felt a little self-conscious of breaking the rules, but I really wanted to break all kinds of rules. But most artists wouldn't break any of those rules that Mondrian and that group had laid down, you know. And I wanted to, but I

wanted to know that I was doing something that was, to replace it. So I started out by feeling my way through the Diagonal Passage. And visually the passage was there. There was no diagonal line. So it was the passage that was diagonal. That's the reason I called them Diagonal Passage. And they're easy to pick out, from that title.

BKR: But as much as you were breaking the rules, it was probably very liberating to do that, for you.

LPS: Oh, of course. Of course. To break a rule successfully was like tearing another bar off the door. Just getting me out of the fixtures that I had been placed in—that we were all placed in, some sort of fixtures that was _____, that's our prison to break out of. That it becomes our prison to break out of.

BKR: Can we talk a bit about the time in the mid-1950s—I think it was '54—when you discovered a catalog with a lot of baseballs and sporting equipment—baseballs, basketballs, tennis balls? That's been written about as opening, kind of being a very important moment for you. Can you talk about that a bit?

LPS: [reply is obscured by fire truck or police sirens] [That was my, What was I] searching for through the forties: a way to express Mondrian's findings with curvilinear forms as well as straight-line forms, which he had [ultimately, all-_____] used. I don't know whether it's enlightening, to even talk about this, but it's the truth. It's exactly where I found it. It was a, these line drawings _____ the catalog, but it was catalog of athletic equipment, and there were no photographic illustrations in it. They were all line drawings. And, well, and the tennis ball has one sort of pattern on it. It's close to the pattern of the baseball. They both. . . . [gesturing:] There's a form here, and a form here, and they come in like this. And the moment I saw those, I was captivated by it, because I wasn't interested in athletic equipment, and I became a little upset by myself that I kept that catalog on my desk, and would go back to it every day or so. I

thought, "What the. . . ." At the time I said, "What in the hell am I doing with this thing?"

BKR: Because it is so literal, in a sense.

LPS: Yes, and also what did I get from something that I wasn't interested in. I don't mean that I'm not interested in athletics. I wasn't interested in the catalog selling athletic equipment. So when I put that question to myself, a little voice inside, "Because that's what you [are, were] looking for." I understood immediately. I rushed into my studio and started drawing circles and ovals and ellipse. First of all I used these shapes that I found on baseball, tennis ball, football and so forth, and then as I. . . . But this is, "I'm only getting a feeling for this. I've got to find my own shapes. What am I going to do?"

BKR: So that was a departure point?

LPS: Yeah. There was between this. . . . That was a complete departure. Sort of leading up to that and making somewhat of a contribution, there were a few paintings in there that I call transitional, like Black-White Repeat, that series. And I did those from 1950 to '53. [Maybe, Make it] '55, '53.

BKR: Once—as you describe it, "the little voice in your head"—once you realized why this was so compelling to you, it didn't matter that it was from mass-produced objects.

LPS: Oh, it didn't bother me whether there were millions of them or that illustration was the only one that was ever drawn. I got my idea, then I got what I needed there. You may have run across it. Alloway was talking about this one time, and he says, "It just shows that with a creative it never knows where it's going to find the answer to what it's seeking."

BKR: Um hmm, yeah. And it was completely unexpected.

LPS: And so completely unexpected, yes.

BKR: That's what's so interesting, that you hadn't planned for that at all; it just came across, came to you in the mail and. . .

LPS: But you see I had tried, through the late forties, to work a curved line into the work, but it always [looked, looks] stuck on. It never became a really one-hundred-percent integral part of the work.

BKR: Stuck-on? You mean artificial, in a sense?

LPS: Yes, as if the [master called art, master thought ____] [artist] consciously trying to use it, which is exactly what it was. But a few artists had, [that] a few things, curves, things that were. . . I think [____—Ed.] [Politofsy] did. But it really didn't become strong enough that it would lead them into that field, into a field where they would only use curvilinear forms, if they wanted to. And their work always looked as if it were just a slight element brought into it. Almost without any reason.

BKR: Right. But this became integral to the composition.

LPS: In my work?

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: It was from the very first one I did.

BKR: Huh.

LPS: And was the dominant thing, from the very first one. And there's a painting called First One. And there, with just painting, to make that big jump, over completely into [painting, a painting] with curved line and no straight line used.

BKR: Um hmm. Now which other of the works of your paintings, after First One, which others were, took off from there?

LPS: There's a [similar] history. There are so many.

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: And I haven't ever. . . That's a good question, but I have never counted those.

BKR: Now, then you would have used the curvilinear aspect in circle paintings as well, correct?

LPS: [nods?]

BKR: Which in a sense was closer to the source, to that first source.

LPS: Yeah.

BKR: [Stone wall, Stone Wall] and. . .

LPS: Yes, for [stone wall, Stone Wall], ____ ____.

BKR: ____ ____.

LPS: And there are others there, too.

BKR: I want to talk about the issue of overall composition in the works, that in your canvases every inch is taken up with a negative or a positive space, with paint or with color. What does this cause. . . What's the play with the wall, then? In other words, does the wall become an extended part of the composition, do you feel? Can you speak on that a bit?

LPS: I think in those early paintings in the fifties and maybe—I would say up until '68—that in a sense the wall was not becoming a part of it. Now we might find individual paintings that, where I would here, it is, that. . . But most of those—or might be all of them that only had one line with two forms in them—I don't think they were depending on the wall for anything. It was really when I got into the Constellations that I began to use the wall as a part of the painting.

BKR: And again that was something very conscious, or you began those works and then once one was complete you saw that relationship beginning.

LPS: Grow and develop and go farther, yes. So that the painting became a. . . Maybe you would say a nucleus for a much larger area, because it was reaching out every direction, from some of the very complex Constellations.

BKR: And after the Constellations, would you say you continued that dialog with the wall?

LPS: Yes.

BKR: For example, in the pieces that are edged in wood, that seems very important there.

LPS: Oh, yes, I think so. Yes, [with] they take the circle, part of the circle is cut out.

BKR: Right.

LPS: I feel that the wall is in back of that cut-out area of the circle. It's as much a part of the painting as the canvas is. It functions _____ positively. It doesn't function as space—or as form, in that sense—any more than the paint that's on the canvas functions as all space or all form.

BKR: So you're saying that it's function is relating to the canvas?

LPS: Yes. Oh, yes. [pauses] Completes the canvas, too.

BKR: Um hmm, that's interesting. Which is why the walls are always white?

LPS: [chuckles] It's more or less coincidental, you know. I haven't painted anywhere where the walls are any other color. The first time I'm going to have a chance to experience that is up at the [Wallach] Museum.

BKR: That's right, yeah.

LPS: With those brownish brocade walls. [laughs]

BKR: Right. [chuckles]

LPS: I'm crazy but _____ get it. I think that it is a _____. But I'm looking forward to the experience. [said tongue in cheek?]

BKR: Yeah. I think the bright colors will look well on that _____.

LPS: It's a little bit. . . . You know, I feel that it's very closely related to my attitude toward photographing paintings over at the [storage, Storge], and we had no walls to put them on to photograph, just those old beaten up walls that were dirty, that were scarred. And to put those beautiful paintings, exquisite condition, on there, and they looked just as great as then on a white wall. The wall wasn't strong enough. . . . The

defects in the wall were not strong enough to affect the paintings. And I think those people looked at those catalogs as photographs. They don't even notice that wall.

BKR: Probably, yeah.

LPS: And now, you see, I presented this idea to the museum people, I think that when I first said that they were a little shocked. But then one of them said, they said, "Well, I suppose he's the artist." I know when we were unpacking the paintings in the museum in Germany the woman who had charge maybe of. . . . What would she be called? The restorer or something?

BKR: The conservator?

LPS: Conservator, yes. She didn't want me to help with the unpacking. And so finally the curator said to her, "Well, after all, they're his paintings. What are you going to do about it?" She _____ [wince] and say another word. [chuckles]

BKR: I think sometimes the rules bog people down a little bit.

LPS: Sorry?

BKR: The rules bog people down.

LPS: Oh, of course, of course. That's what rules are for, to break them. Gives one something to do, if nothing else.

BKR: In many of your paintings, there is [the, an] absence of what is mass-produced—as minimalists might call it—and there's clear evidence of your hand in the work. So while your work is nonreferential there's a clear human element in your paintings, relating to you, their creator or their maker, the human scale that's in a lot of them, and the visibility of your hand in the paintings themselves. Can you comment on that?

LPS: Oh, wouldn't that that is the. . . . What was the word you used that. . . . Non. . . .

BKR: Nonreferential?

LPS: Yes. Would you say that's self-referential?

BKR: No, not self-referential.

LPS: Well, it's self-referential to me.

BKR: Referring to yourself?

LPS: I thought it was referring to the painting itself.

BKR: Oh, you mean. . . . Oh.

LPS: [chuckles]

BKR: I think it depends on how it's used, in a sense.

LPS: I suppose so, _____ [thing, things] to do. [chuckles] Oh, I know that Ted [Cassel, Kassel] had done [fortunately, unfortunately] he signed that, but he said to me, "You do. . . ." I don't know who was really the head editor or writer of those Art. . . . Whatever the magazine was. But Ted [Cassel, Kassel] told me that he. . . . Said. . . . Do you remember that curator's name, Bob? Ted [Cassel, Kassel] said, "He placed every word in that article." And then. . . . I might come to his name. He wrote an article another time about the way the cross had been used in modern art, and he referred to my cross[road]. . . .

Bob: Maschek.

LPS: Huh?

Bob: Maschek.

LPS: Yeah. What was his first name?

BKR: Who?

Bob: Maschek.

LPS: Maschek.

BKR: Oh, Tom?

Bob: Tom Maschek.

LPS: Oh, no, you're thinking of the director of the Guggenheim Museum.

BKR: No, no, not [Messing], but Maschek.

LPS: That's fine. We'll see how it's spelled.

BKR: M-a-s-c-h-e-k?

Bob: Yeah.

BKR: Maschek.

LPS: And you know he's very good. He's. . . .

BKR: Yeah.

Bob: John?

BKR: Tom.

Bob: Tom.

LPS: So after. . . . Because I had read Ted Cassel's manuscript, and I just loved it. It was in the beginning, but he told me when it came out that this other fellow placed every word in that. Not only did he place them, but he put many words in also. And that said that they were completely self-referential.

BKR: Ah hah.

LPS: And from the way it was used there, I thought it meant that the painting referred to itself.

BKR: Oh, I see.

LPS: I know someone asked me at that time, "Do you think it was fair for him to say that they were self-referential?" Now I might not have understood what the person really meant by that question, and he might not have understood what I meant by my answer, because I said, "Well, I think all good paintings are self-referential."

BKR: Meaning referring, the work is referring to itself?

LPS: It might extend farther than that. Referring to itself and referring to the artist, perhaps, too. I haven't given that too much thought. But first of all it came to me that it meant referring to itself. But then what is "itself"? The self is so, usually in a great work of art, is so completely a part of the creator, person that created it.

BKR: Um hmm.

LPS: Let's say self-referential could mean both.

BKR: Right.

LPS: But in another place Alloway said every one of my paintings had my signature in it.

BKR: Hmm.

LPS: And what does that mean?

BKR: He's talking. . . . Is he talking stylistically?

LPS: I see that, well. . . .

BKR: In other words, your signature style?

LPS: I think it's more. Either a lot more or a lot less than the word "style" suggests.

BKR: Uh huh.

LPS: It's something else other than style. Because someone else could be working in the same style, and have a signature that would be different from my paintings. I think it's the way the style, everything that goes into making it a style—if that is the right word—would be the signature. And it is so profoundly a part, in integral part of the work, that you see it immediately. It's the same thing. . . . And I think this is true of all of us. But Bob astounds me with going to a museum or to a gallery, and he'll start seeing paintings—and maybe a lot of paintings he's never seen before—but he'll pick out the artist.

BKR: Um hmm.

LPS: Well, of course that's the signature that we're thinking of.

BKR: Right, yeah. But you think what Alloway was talking about had a much richer. . . .

LPS: I think it's more than the style.

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: And I think it's more than style in what Bob sees, too, because often it might be a new work that has somewhat of a different style from what he's well known for. But still this signature is still there.

BKR: Yeah, almost a imprint, in a loose sense. Not literally.

LPS: Almost a what was the word?

BKR: Imprint. Although that's too literal a word. But that's one of the. . . . Anyway, so that's interesting.

LPS: It doesn't come to me. [pause] I don't think this explains anything either, but it came to my mind. It's an unconscious insertion into the painting.

BKR: Um hmm.

LPS: Of course that doesn't mean anything.

BKR: Well, it's an identifiable something.

LPS: Yeah. I think that perhaps what came into my mind, what I said then, I shouldn't have worried about whether it had any meaning or not. Because writing about art is just as creative. . . . This [Art News, Art ____], of course you know I never did like the fellow, the critic for the abstract expressionists. . . .

BKR: [____—Ed.] Greenberg?

LPS: Greenberg. But he said things that I liked. He said he thought that the critic or writer had to be just as daring or not daring as the artist. And I thought that was very insightful.

BKR: Although the critic is not the originator of the work.

LPS: No, but he originates ideas. . . .

BKR: Well, that's true.

LPS: . . . and they may be new ideas, and everyone might not understand them, and maybe no two people will understand it exactly the same way. But as I read. . . . And I always get these art critic things from the New York University Stonybrook [____—Ed.]. Do you have access to those?

BKR: Yes, sometimes. Yeah, I've seen them.

LPS: Well, they're absolutely crazy, you know.

BKR: [laughs]

LPS: But I read them. I enjoy reading them. And they are a creative. . . .

BKR: Like what have you read recently that comes to mind?

LPS: Well, I _____ could not tell you anything that I have read in any of them, because I But usually I read them. . . . [searching through papers] Many things. . . . [If I didn't throw, I may have thrown] that out _____. I don't see a single one of those. I think when we do serious reading it's to be discussed almost immediately by somebody else, with someone else. And if don't, we will retain a lot of the essences that we'll recognize, that'll come into our minds and with certain other experiences, but in isolation we can't recall any of them.

BKR: Right, yeah. I think you're right.

LPS: But the more we talk about them. . . . It's like dreams. We don't remember dreams unless we're in the habit of telling them. And if we're not in the habit of telling them, wouldn't you say [I'd brain] _____ but you don't have any idea if it's in my experience.

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: But you have no idea of what it was.

BKR: Right.

LPS: And it's the same way I think with studying with, searching for knowledge or the truth, that's something that we need to talk about, discuss.

BKR: No, the dialog is very important, the critical dialog.

LPS: I think so.

BKR: Yeah.

Bob: Joseph Maschep.

BKR: Joseph! Joseph, right.

LPS: He won't give up. [referring to Bob]

BKR: Leon, we talked a bit a few minutes ago about the interaction of the wall with the paintings. That seems very critical to the Form Space series.

LPS: [cocks head for clarification]

BKR: The interaction of the wall.

LPS: The intraction?

BKR: The interaction of the wall.

LPS: Oh, the interaction of the wall with the painting, yeah.

BKR: That seems very critical in Form Space series.

LPS: What do you mean, "it seems very critical"?

BKR: That that dialog that you can place the works in the Form Space in any number of. . . .

LPS: Oh, by critical you mean that it's the same to me as it's evident?

BKR: Yes, right.

LPS: Yeah. Because critical I didn't know whether you meant criticizing it.

BKR: Right, okay.

LPS: But I know that there's this other use, the way you're using it, I understand that now. If it means. . . . What was the word I said?

BKR: Evident.

LPS: If it's evident, yes. Oh, of course. That's the reason you can play with [it, them]. And it would be interesting to see if one can place them, or do something with them that won't work. I guess we've played with them such a little amount, with three, four, five different ways of hanging them, but what if one becomes quite radical and does very, very unexpectedly different things with them, will they still work?

BKR: What do think?

LPS: I think they will. I think when we put _____ over here and then turn it in a way that's never been turned, the other one be put on the ceiling, or if there's only the two of them in the room, could be on any of the other three walls. But I think the way that

they are placed on the wall would be very important, so that you'd know that they are a part of each other. I think that they could be placed in a manner which would indicate that they're a part of each other.

BKR: That wouldn't indicate?

LPS: I think it would have to be placed sensitively so that you know they belong together. It goes back to there has to be a certain amount of correspondence between them.

BKR: They're sympathetic to one another; they're the parts of. . . .

LPS: Yes.

BKR: In a sense a lot of your work could be called Form Space, because that's what the crucial elements are in these.

LPS: Yes, most all of them.

BKR: What?

LPS: Most all of it, strictly speaking.

BKR: Yeah, right. The paintings that have a wood element or appendage to them, what caused you to go into that direction? It was quite radical from what you were doing before.

LPS: Well, a lot of [my] artist friends asked me that when they first saw them. "Where'd you get the idea to do that?" I said, "I wish I knew so that I could tell you. [I don't know] myself." I did not know. It came to me to do that. But then, I guess the next day or the next week, soon after that, I was looking through the [old, whole] collages, and I saw that I had been using this pencil line along the edge of a color, or to extend the edge of a color, for twenty, twenty-five years. And then I knew where it came from. The wood came from those pencil lines that I had been using on paper.

I think it illustrates very well how much I use, or what a proportion of my work—not all of it certainly, but a lot of it—comes out unconscious, subconscious.

Don't know where one thing stops and the other ends—the unconscious and the subconscious. Or the superconscious.

BKR: Up there?

LPS: I would allow that, although I wouldn't have said it myself. Because you know I'm very—what's the word—queasy about this "up there" thing.

BKR: Oh, really? That makes sense. You're firmly down here.

LPS: That doesn't mean that I'm not up there, also.

BKR: Right, but there are different ways to be up there.

LPS: Yes, yes. You could be up there and not down here. ____ [close the wall] means it's [hidden] in the clouds and [his feet], but don't come half way down to the ground. I always like to feel that my feet are on the ground. I don't care how high my head hits into the clouds then, as long as my feet stay on the ground.

BKR: Right. Did you consider with those wood pieces the three-dimensional aspects then, of those works?

LPS: I don't think I was interested in the three-dimensional. I was interested in their accent, and they are pointing the way—or going home beyond the edge of the color, out onto the wall, ____ to this [form, far].

BKR: Right.

LPS: And I thought of them as some ____ as accents rather than three-dimensional.

BKR: Not sculptural.

LPS: They are somewhat like the ____ method. They're a little bit like wall reliefs.

BKR: Yes.

LPS: The paintings all through the years have been, have had the elements of wall reliefs, or three-dimensional—or other-dimensional. I never think of any of my work as being three-dimensional. I think of it as being other-dimensional, other than the two dimensions. Other dimensions than first, second, third, and fourth, fifth, sixth. And

from after third, I just say other dimensions. And I suppose scientists must have written something about this, about other dimensions, or [I think I know] how they would do it. Well, of course, I don't know their language.

BKR: I think they're talking about. . . . Do you know what artificial reality is? This whole new. . . .

LPS: This what?

BKR: This whole new. . . . Sort of a video where you put on glasses and you. . . .

LPS: Oh! Oh, yes.

BKR: That that might be the next. . . .

LPS: No, that is. . . . I haven't seen all of those, and I haven't seen any of them for a number of years, but I felt that it was still in the third dimension, three dimensions.

BKR: Right.

LPS: [____—Ed.] [Malevich, Mal-ay-vich] spoke something about other dimensions, and when the big show—the Malevich show at the Museum of Modern Art—I read a number of reviews from that, and one was of [____—Ed.] [Donto's], and he was the only one who mentioned [a, the] spiritual quality.

BKR: Which is so key to that work.

LPS: Sorry?

BKR: So key to that work.

LPS: Well, I think so, yes. And I said to him. . . . Fact is, I wrote him a letter. I said, "I read many reviews of that show. You were the only one that mentioned its having a spiritual quality. And it seems that people are afraid to use the word 'spiritual' today." He said, "Yes, and if you don't that quality in it what do you have except cute placements of things?" Regardless of how well they're placed, if you don't feel that there's a very strange quality in that that can only be called a spiritual quality, then, as

he said, he thought that they were missing practically the whole thing and were following a fad.

BKR: But that's also. . . . So much of it is the receptivity of the viewer to that work.

LPS: [sotto voce:] That's _____ all together.

BKR: Yes.

LPS: Depends on the viewer, yes. I think that [a pointed, one] reason that word, we stopped using "spiritual" was it had only been used with religion. And that's practically enough to kill anything. [laughs] Because I think the spiritual stands on its own; it doesn't have to have any mythical philosophy wound around it.

BKR: Yeah, I agree. Another word like that is "sacred."

LPS: Yes, exactly.

BKR: That we can't get to it.

LPS: Yeah.

BKR: I gave a talk a few weeks ago about the sacred aspects of some art, and it was interesting. I think that I'm much more comfortable using the word now because I didn't use it in a religious way.

LPS: Ah, yes. Well, I think people who are critical of those words, they only think of them in a religious manner, and they [owe, know] any other [feeling] for it.

BKR: Right.

LPS: No, I agree with you. It's exactly the same thing. "Sacred" has been misused. I remember many years ago. . . . [Many years?] [That's right.] Around 1940 or the early forties I had my first university job, and there was a professor there, a woman. We were very close, kindred spirits in a sense. She was talking about she had either gone to a wedding or to a funeral or something like that. Or maybe she hadn't. But some religious song came. . . . Well, let's not call it a religious song. Let's say a song, a beautiful song, about nature. And the title of it is, I think, "Let Us Gather at

the River." It's used in many churches, you know, as a religious song, and they sing it at funerals and weddings and all of these things—let us gather. . . . And that has ruined that song for me. When she mentioned it, I said, "I can't stand it." She said, "What are you talking about?" And she said, "Where have you heard it?" And then I told her and I said, "Mostly at funerals and [places] like that. [I'd, They'd] go to weddings and [I don't sleep through them]. But she said, "Isn't it too bad that it was misused?"

BKR: Because that's your immediate association when you hear it.

LPS: What?

BKR: Your immediate association is funerals and weddings instead of just the purity of the song.

LPS: Yes, yes, rather than the beauty of it. She says, "Well, it was misused, and you shouldn't let someone else's misuse of a thing influence your own thinking." I appreciated her saying that very much.

BKR: Yeah, right.

LPS: It's so true.

BKR: Right.

LPS: So I could back and enjoy hearing that song. "Let Us Gather at the River," it's. . . . It may have—I suppose it does—a great element of sentimentality to it, but it might not be sentimental [with all of the time] [probably]. There's a sentimentality and sentiment. They're almost opposite in meaning.

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: Sentimentality can be [almost] without sentiment. It's based on some fictitious feeling about something [else]. You get a religious feeling about it.

BKR: It's like "Amazing Grace."

LPS: Yeah.

BKR: Same thing, same kind of song.

LPS: Yes, yes. Oh, yes. And to hear some of the blacks talk about "Amazing Grace," you know, it's very enlightening.

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: Of course they can talk about it almost abstractly, so that it loses all of that sweetness or religious quality in it.

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: I [had, heard] news the other day. . . .

Tape 2, side A

[Apparently some conversation was lost when the tape was being turned over.—Trans.]

BKR: Uh huh.

LPS: Very fine.

BKR: Yeah.

LPS: And she was telling about she liked cooking. You know, says, [do like], you know, she enjoyed handling food and preparing it and so forth—vegetables and [greens] and everything, and she says, "Well, do you really enjoy handling it and preparing this animal flesh?" And the _____ said, "Isn't it all God's bounty to man?" And she said it in a way that clarified everything, you know. Nothing was impure any longer. It purified everything, the way she said it.

BKR: Yeah, that's nice.

LPS: I think of it as God's bountiful gift to man. [laughs]

BKR: That's great.

Going back again, with the wood works, which you did a certain number of, and then you eventually went into works of the nineties, like you're doing now. Would you say that those most recent paintings relate to the wood pieces. . . .

LPS: Yes.

BKR: . . . that there was a progression towards that in a sense?

LPS: Yes. Because, you see, in these paintings I haven't used much of the solid color. Some of them I did use _____ color there in a painting. But most of those that are linear that represented the line drawing from the graphite or pencil [and, in] the collage, and so the wood represented that also. And this is still very [close _____ written]. The lines in these new paintings are related to the wood, purpose of the wood. And I could still be doing those paintings with the wood on the edge. I didn't finish that _____ at all.

BKR: Oh, really.

LPS: I had so many ideas and I wanted to express something of all of them. If I'd had helpers like most artists do, [I might have]. _____ necessarily opposed to it. I'm opposed to the way it's used by many of the artists. They get to where they think that their helpers are better than they and sort of turn it over to them. And it shows. And, well, I may do more of those [yeah], [that's right]. Many things that I wanted to do with that wood. Say that it's unfinished.

BKR: So you used that wood almost as an element of drawing.

LPS: Partly.

BKR: Is that why it's always a black piece of wood, painted black?

LPS: [nods? shakes head no?] But I had told you that I had used it for accent. I didn't say that I used it almost like a drawing, well, yes. But I had first said that I used it as an accent, and that is the main reason for it, I should say. And then in paintings that have

come since then, I think that you're referring to, it may be used as both accent and drawing. It's functional.

BKR: Now that we're talking about your most recent work, I'm curious if you visit [Soho, SoHo] galleries or 57th Street galleries, see what is going on, and the New York scene?

LPS: What was the question?

BKR: Do you visit Soho or 57th Street galleries?

LPS: I'm trying to think of the last time I've been to a gallery. As someone said yesterday, "Well, you know the Guggenheim has a new show, six or eight artists, and you're represented in that, from [their, the] collection." They said, "Have you seen that?" I said, "No." "Did you know that it was on?" and I said, "No, I didn't know anything about it." He said, "They don't notify you?" I said, "No, they don't notify me. Even if I know about it, I usually don't go to see it." If I were down there I would stop in and see it, but I _____ make a trip down. Of course the Black and White, someone also told me, is up at the Museum of Modern Art.

BKR: Yes, it is.

LPS: I was trying to see if it's possible for me to make a comment upon art today, but I don't think I see enough of it.

What they write about so much is not completely unrelated to the bi-annual [sic] at the Whitney.

BKR: Exactly.

LPS: So. . . . What should one say about that? I'm not going to come out and say that it doesn't have content.

BKR: In fact it's probably overloaded with content.

LPS: I think that's a good statement. [How the hell did you know? Do you have a white sheet of paper, or a canvas? Or??: How the hell do you know: Do you have a white

sheet of paper or a canvas?] A fly lights on that, and it flies away and he leaves his little black calling card. Well, that sheet of paper already has content. [laughter]

BKR: Is that a comment on the Whitney Biennial?

LPS: If the shoe fits.

BKR: Fly it. [laughter] Okay, I get it. Those were my questions for today.

LPS: Oh, very good. I liked it.

Leon Polk Smith: American Painter [9/29/1995-11/7/1996]
[ZZ] Artists' interview

Pas/E

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