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Interview with Mervin Jules

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INTERVIEW WITH MERVIN JULES
JUNE 6, 1988
INTERVIEWER: PATRICIA HILLS

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PH: PATRICIA HILLS
MJ: MERVIN JULES

[Side A begins mid-conversation.]

[Note: At the beginning of the recording, there is a low squeaking sound in the background as if the tape is "dragging" in the machine. It is not clear whether this is a problem with the tape itself or with the tape recorder. The squeaking sound stops within the first two minutes.]

MJ: [Inaudible] for a week. A friend of mine, former babysitter was getting married. I was going to combine the two when this operation came up and interfered.

PH: Yeah. Well, you look well.

MJ: I don't have the energy, and I'm supposed to do some exercises that tire me out terribly. Anyway, that's [inaudible].

PH: My mother had a bypass. Actually, she had an aortic valve inserted in her heart, and she then had a bypass as well. She has a —

MJ: At the same time?

PH: Yeah, at the same time. She has a pacemaker. It was put in about four years ago, and then about three years ago, she had the bypass plus the aortic valve. She had calcification [inaudible].

MJ: How long did it take for her to recover?

PH: Oh, I don't know. She's still — well, she's 80 years old, and she's very winded, you know. She gets very winded. And she has to take a whole lot of pills, you know.

MJ: I take a whole lot of pills, but [inaudible]. I'm going to call the doctor this afternoon. He has a time when you can reach him by phone, in his office. I may interrupt.

PH: Oh, OK. That's fine. Well, I'm trying to get back to my research on the 1930s. Let me just make sure this is working. [Tape stops, resumes.] All right. Mervin Jules. Today is June 6th, 1988. Pat Hills interview. Anyway, as I said, trying to get back to my work on the 1930s, there are a couple of publishers who are interested. And what I'm really aiming to do is a — well, focusing on some artists, but — is to do a political history of artists in the 1930s, and deal with artists who were involved with organizations and who were sort of politically involved with the left in the 1930s. And, you know, talk about, do it like a social political history; talk about the major events that occurred that were really rallying points for artists, and the positions that they took. I mean, they were involved with the Artists Union. They were involved with the — well, the beginning, in 1929, they were involved with the John Reed Club. And then of course the Depression came on. The Museum of Modern Art did a mural show, and there were a number of artists who contributed to the mural show. And there was a sort of a scandal in the mural show, because some of the artists submitted works that Lincoln Kirstein didn't like. And then there was the Diego Rivera mural, and that was another controversy. So, sort of going through, then on up to the demise of the John Reed Club, and then the American Artists Congress in February of '36, and then later, you know, then they had a second

Congress in December of 1937, and that was — it was that particular Congress in 1937 that they had a large exhibition. And that's why I called you up, because the exhibition was about artists against, you know, in aid of the Spanish Civil War. And there was a work that you had that there in that show called *The Ivory Tower*. And I found a reproduction in a magazine, showing —

MJ: Mm-hmm.

PH: Sort of like a tower with —

MJ: Yeah, I remember it. Yes.

PH: Figures kind of tumbling down. And do you know where any of these works are? I mean, you said that they were sold through the ACA Gallery?

MJ: The AC — well, '37?

PH: Yeah. Thirty-seven.

MJ: No.

PH: And also Hudson Walker.

MJ: The Hudson Walker Gallery. Hudson gave me my first show in '37. And I showed each year into '40 at the Hudson Walker. And one of the things that Hudson did when he folded the gallery was to try to place every one of the artists who were in the gallery. Phenomena which is unheard of, really. But he managed to [inaudible - sounds like "do saying." Does he mean "do so"?]. But I had shown at the ACA Gallery when it was on 8th Street, and earlier on, but since then it had moved to 57th Street, right across the street from the Hudson Walker Gallery. So, having had the contact with Herman Baron from the previous exhibition, why, I just walked across

the street with material. But that wasn't until after 1940. So it had to be sold by Hudson.

PH: So you don't know — there are some people, some artists have kept track of where their works go, but you really have sort of —

MJ: No, I never had any desire to do that; I don't know why. Yes, I've friends who were meticulous; photographed everything, filed everything, traced everything. [Richard] Florsheim did that. I was always amazed at how diligently he did that. But no, I didn't. As I remember, that particular thing having been reproduced somewhere, there was a painting in the first show, in the '37 show at Hudson, of a *Night Baseball*. Axel Horn and I used to go down into Pennsylvania, where the bootleg miners worked, and we sketched, and —

PH: Harry Gottlieb used to do that too.

MJ: Yes. Sternberg used to do that too.

PH: And Sternberg, and also Elizabeth Olds.

MJ: Yes. And I used to stay, you know, sometimes a week at a time, sometimes with these miners.

PH: What years were those, that you would usually go down there?

MJ: Well, I went down the early years. I had originally gone down in around '34 or '35.

PH: There were writers who went down there as well.

MJ: I didn't know them.

PH: Was there much interaction between artists and writers?

MJ: Not much. In the Artists Congress there were a number of writers peripherally around, but really not very much. And anyway, I did a painting of — after the miners would work during the day, and they dug surface, it was very, very dangerous. There were a lot of accidents at the time because they didn't have the equipment to go and tunnel. And they would work during the day. And from when the mines — this usually was all for the mines themselves, where they had worked when the mines were functioning — the shale, which is waste, was built up in flat areas with, sometimes it was hilled, but they would play baseball in the fading light. It was a fascinating —

PH: On top of all this shale.

MJ: On top of all that. And I did a painting of that, and in the first show at Hudson's, Stephen C. Clark bought that painting. It was reproduced in *Time*. In color.

PH: Oh, I see. OK. That's nice to know.

MJ: And he walked in and bought that painting. It may be in his — you know, he had a baseball museum [National Baseball Hall of Fame and Museum]. So it may be in there.

PH: Is that Stephen C. Clark the collector?

MJ: [Silent? Possibly says "Uh-huh" extremely quietly, or nods?]

PH: Why did, what motivated you to go to the mines? I mean, why did you and Axel Horn to go to these mines?

MJ: Well, we didn't only go to the mines. We were interested in the industrial aspect of America. We went to Pittsburgh to see the steel mills. We went to Akron to see the manufacture of tires. We were interested in that kind of thematic material.

And I had gotten together a group of young artists who'd been at the League, and did some private teaching and took them on these little excursions. Pile them in a car and go down.

PH: So what year would this have been?

MJ: Well, this was — it was — if I had the show in '37, the first show at Hudson — I completed my study at the Art Students League at about '35 —

PH: And that's where you studied with Benton. You told me about that before.

MJ: I studied with Benton. The problem there was that I'd acquired the Benton mannerisms; a lot of the artists did. Pollock did, and Pollock's brother, everybody who worked there who worked hard subsequently acquired the mannerism. As a matter of fact, he once employed one of the students by the name of Bertram Goodman — Goodwin — and myself to work — he had a contract to do a show at the Farago [phonetic] Gallery. And his habit was, he did a lot of traveling around, and sketches, and doing sketches different places. And he had a bureau in his studio that had these studies, just paper sketches, chucked in, so if you opened the drawer, they'd pop out. Now, and when he had this contract for a show, he would select the drawings that he wanted to develop into paintings. And he'd hire some students to scale them up, and that's the thing that Goodwin and I did. To begin with, he —Axel and I manufactured gesso panels as a means of earning, to survive economically. These gesso panels, we had run across a medieval formula that Emil Ganso translated for us, which provided all the information we needed to manufacture gesso panels the way medieval artists did. And we did it that way, so that our panels never cracked.

PH: They held up.

MJ: They held up. They held up because it was a long, involved method, and when Benton saw our panels, he began to buy them from us, but all the other students began to buy them from us too. And so he was familiar with that aspect of my interest, and he was always having trouble with [inaudible]. He took shortcuts, he was —

PH: This was Benton.

MJ: Yeah. He wanted a fast way of producing panels, so instead of making seven coats they way we did, letting them dry between each coat and sanding, and putting seven coats on the back of the panel so as the warp would be counteracted.

PH: Oh, I see. Of course, 'cause otherwise, you would get, it would be different. So it has to be like an absolute sandwich.

MJ: That's right. Well, he —

PH: That never occurred to me, that that was necessary.

MJ: Well, that was part of the —

PH: That was part of the medieval, or the early Renaissance technique.

MJ: Yeah. And anyway, he tried to do it with three coats.

PH: Benton did.

MJ: Benton. And he was always having trouble. So when we produced them for very little, really, and that's how it began. And that's how I probably got this job. And we just mechanically scaled up. But when you scale up from a small sketch, and from a sketch, they're not very complete. So we would mechanically scale them up to the

size that he wanted, and then he would come back and complete the drawings, plus add in a lot of things that were not even present in the sketches.

PH: Oh, that's interesting. Now, when you scaled them up, would you square them off?

MJ: Yes.

PH: And would the gridlines be seen? Would be visible, or —

MJ: Well, they'd be covered up in the painting.

PH: I see. So you're scaling these up —

MJ: Mechanically.

PH: On these gesso panels.

MJ: On the gesso panels. But then after we scaled them up from the sketches, we didn't add anything to it. So he would take time to complete the sketches. Then he would give us, he would paint on transparent paper, the local color. And we could just paint the whole painting. It was always very flat, what we did, just the local color. In the meantime, he would make maquettes of the figures, which he would then paint in tone, black and white. And he used lights [inaudible]. There's some of those maquettes in the University of — not the University, in the Wisconsin Muse— the Milwaukee Museum [Milwaukee Art Museum], I think there are two of these still survive that I'm familiar with. And then he would control the light. He would paint them tonally, control the light, and then add the local color afterwards. So that the —

PH: Oh, so he'd do it black and white first, then add the color?

MJ:	He didn't add the color on the maquettes. He got his tonal organization. Plus the control of the lights by using those. But that was done at the same time we were doing the —

PH:	I see. So, he'd see the way the light fell on the maquette and then sort of do the shading that way.

MJ:	Yeah.

PH:	So he's not using studio models at all, he's just basing it all on sketches.

MJ:	Yeah.

PH:	Oh, that's interesting. But, so that you worked for him after you graduated from the Art Students League.

MJ:	No. I was a student, still.

PH:	Oh, you were still —

MJ:	Yeah. Still a student. But —

PH:	I know you had a break with him when he did the Whitney murals. You mentioned that to me before. That the, kind of, caricatures that he had done.

MJ:	Well, he was doing a figurative thing. Do you recall it?

PH:	Yeah.

MJ:	The episodes were divided with a very strange kind of painted separation. So that — and they flowed around, they were pretty arbitrarily [inaudible - "designed"?]. But that came from the *Police Gazette*, used to illustrate the —

PH:	Right. You mentioned that.

MJ:	And —

PH:	The divisions between the murals.

MJ: Yes.

PH: Well, that you see in the New School murals. Are you talking about the New School murals?

MJ: I think it's the New School murals.

PH: Those were earlier. The Whitney murals came a little later. And that was the kind of intellectual ballyhoo, and the, you know that one he that did that's sort of anti-Semitic, remember that?

MJ: No. I don't remember any of the — do you have any photograph?

PH: No, I don't.

MJ: I don't remember anything that I would interpret as anti-Semitic. The thing he — he did a lot of things which were workers doing different things, or people on subways, or things of that kind, and he was working on this thing of a black man. And that's the —

PH: For the Whitney murals, it was like *The Arts of the West* and *The Arts of the South*; they were a little different from the New School.

MJ: Yeah, I think it's the New School.

PH: Yeah.

MJ: It's the New School ones that are now owned.

PH: Yeah. Equitable.

MJ: It's that group.

PH: Right.

MJ: And that was where the argument arose, in his interpretation of the black man. And then finally, I said, well, he had the same attitude regardless of whether

it’s white people or black people, workers, et cetera, and that I didn’t feel that that was the way to create the symbolic quality that — and my basic attitude was that you capture the individuality of the person, and they subsequently become the symbolic projection of the totality of that type of worker, et cetera. But I left and went to Baltimore to get over the acquired mannerisms. When you work so closely, and especially with these things that we did in preparation for an exhibition, it was very easy, really; you pick up all these little things, and it looks like a Benton. And that was so in your work. So I went down to Baltimore, and stayed a year.

PH: Were you in school? The Institute [Maryland Institute]?

MJ: No, no. I’d already graduated.

PH: So what year was it you went to Baltimore?

MJ: Well, it was, it’s probably thirty- — I come from Baltimore.

PH: Yeah. Right.

MJ: Work backwards.

PH: You had your show in ’37.

MJ: I had my show in ’37. So I must have been in Baltimore end of ’35, ’36. And I did a lot of work mainly to get rid of these manneristic clichés.

PH: Also, you told me before that in Baltimore, you organized the Artists’ Union in Baltimore.

MJ: Yes.

PH: Right.

MJ: This was — I was active in the Artists’ Union when I was a student in New York. And as a matter of fact, we had convinced the board of the Artists’ Union to try

to organize the students, the art students at the League. Harry Sternberg taught at the League. And the two of us attempted to — because these were supposedly eventually to be professional artists, and the way of reaching them was at this time. And they were, some of them, they were very politically oriented as well. So that's what — I subsequently had a little school in the studio of about five students who came from the League. And this group of course was part of the group that went [inaudible - "down"? "back"?].

PH: Well, now, you went to Baltimore, you were there for about a year and then you came back to New York in about 1936?

MJ: Yes. I had a show in Baltimore, which got some — well, there was only one newspaper, the *Sun*, that had a critic. He was both music critic and the art critic. And I got a very good review, and nothing sold. And I can remember announcing to my father that I was going to go to New York, and he says, "Well, you could be a small fish in a small pond here — big fish in a small pond." And I said that would be fine if there was any pond at all, but there wasn't any pond. So I went to New York. Axel had a studio in a loft at 92 Fifth Avenue, and he had a lot of spare room. In addition to the loft, there was a one-room apartment above, where he lived, but there was a lot of space, and he suggested I stay there until I found a place. My intention was to find a place of my own. But for economic reasons, as well as mutual convenience, he suggested eventually that I stay there permanently. There was a room off of the loft on that floor, plus a bathroom and everything, so we split the rent.

PH: So you were sort of living back there in around 1936, ’37 when you were getting ready for your show in ’37, right? So in 1936, ’37, were you active in the New York Artists’ Union then?

MJ: No, then I was in Baltimore.

PH: Oh, you were in Baltimore. But then when you came back, were you —

MJ: Oh, I became active in the —

PH: Because for the American Artists Congress, you are listed in that as Baltimore, you know.

MJ: Yes. Well, I was there then.

PH: So you must have come back in the summer of ’36 or so?

MJ: I came back whenever there was a meeting that I felt I should attend.

PH: But come back to live. Did you come back to —

MJ: Oh, no, I didn’t come back to live until ’37.

PH: You came back and — so you more or less stayed in Baltimore for about two years?

MJ: No, about a year and a half.

PH: About a year and a half. OK. All right. Now, when you — were you active in the Artists’ Union in New York?

MJ: The action, the activity, in the Artists’ Union in New York, consisted primarily of trying to organize the students.

PH: Now, that’s what you did.

MJ: Yes.

PH: Right. Because I know, like, Philip Evergood was very, he was the president of the Artists' Union in 1937 and was involved with the affiliation with the CIO. You know, affiliating the Artists' Union with the CIO. So I think a lot of his energies went into that. But you were involved with organizing students.

MJ: Primarily.

PH: Were they easy to organize? Who were some of the students that you remember?

MJ: Well, my wife, Rita.

PH: What was her name?

MJ: Rita Albers.

PH: Rita?

MJ: Albers. A-L-B-E-R-S. There was only one young man, I'm trying to think of his name. Of all the group, he was the only one who became an artist, really, except my wife did a lot of graphics and reflected in her work the kind of industrial things the two of us found in these trips, et cetera. I'll think of his — he became very well known and very [inaudible - "good"?]. My memory, it's terrible not to be able to recall these [inaudible - "people"? "details"?].

PH: So, well, when you were in New York, do you remember these exhibitions? Well, the Spanish Civil War, I mentioned that to you before.

MJ: Yeah. Well, there was one, there was —

PH: There was this big ex— there were several exhibitions.

MJ: Yeah. There was one anti-lynching.

PH: Right. The anti-lynching.

MJ: Yes.

PH: And were you involved with the organization of that? That was at the ACA Gallery, I believe.

MJ: Probably. I remember the picture I painted for that exhibition. It was a prevented lynching.

PH: What was the picture? Can you describe your picture?

MJ: Yes, it was a group of workers, see, interrupting the attempt to lynch this black man. And I felt it was the only positive one in the whole thing. Most of them dealt with — you, know a lot of artists —

PH: A group of workers were interrupting the —

MJ: Were, you know, interfering with the attempt to lynch this black man.

PH: And so where was the black man? Was he outside?

MJ: No, this was an outside thing. And this was a contemptible mob, to lynch a black man. And another group of workers came up to interfere and to, you know, save this guy. There are a lot of artists who, in those days, because of their own political interests, like Max Weber and — well, Max Weber was the only one I distinctly remember — who supported these activities.

PH: There was an anti-lynching bill that was before Congress, and I think that the anti-lynching show obviously was part of that support.

MJ: Yeah. But there was another one on housing, on the subject of housing.

PH: Yeah, that was another exhibition that I came across, and do you remember about what year that was?

MJ: No, I don't.

PH: But you, did you say that you didn't keep any of these catalogues or pamphlets or any of these things that had to do with —

MJ: The only thing I kept was the one publication, the first publication of the American Artists Congress. Which I'm sure you have.

PH: And that's been reprinted, but I have a Xerox of the original one. So you're not a saver [laughs], you're not somebody who saves —

MJ: I'm not a saver.

PH: You didn't save any old publications of any kind, then.

MJ: No. Before I arrived in New York, I was trying to earn money so I would be able to live in New York [inaudible - "an objective"?]. I got a job with the National Maritime Union as an organizer, and was sent to a school, a union school.

PH: For organizers.

MJ: For organizers. And then I was placed in charge of a group in the union in Baltimore. I was a kid; I was a kid.

PH: How old were you?

MJ: God, I was — I probably could figure it out. I was born in 1912, and it was before I went to the League to study. So that — I could probably work it out. Because I spent four years at the Maryland Institute.

PH: At the Maryland Institute. That's where you went to school.

MJ: Yes.

PH: I see. So, four years in the Maryland Institute, and then you came to New York, and then you went to the Art Students League.

MJ: For a year. [Phone rings.] Excuse me.

[Recording stops, resumes. Conversation resumes, perhaps regarding phone call.]

MJ: So I decided to set my estate in order, and I drew up a will, and I created a trust fund for my children. Over which I have no control. But I used to gamble in the market a lot, and that was the guide. Because I'd have to make an estimate of the capital gains. Last year, I was very lucky, so I had to pay an awful lot of taxes.

So he wanted to know whether I — he just sent it to my account, at my bank, to continue that. But now that the trust is — I'm not going to be responsible for that, but I still have to make the estimate, 'cause you have to make the estimate on the previous year.

PH: I see.

MJ: So I still have to pay it. I won't owe it. I'll get it all refunded. Then I'll be able to return it to the — unless we're lucky again. But it's a nondiscretionary trust, so I have nothing to do with it.

PH: Well, it's good to do those things.

MJ: Well. Didn't happen, but — [Pause, then loud banging sound.]

PH: You were talking about being in the National Maritime.

MJ: Yeah.

PH: Alice Neel painted a picture of Pat Whalen. Did you know him? He was a longshoreman.

MJ: No.

PH: I see.

MJ: But I was in Baltimore. She probably painted in New York.

PH: He was in New York. Well, he was involved with the action against, when the Bremen ship came in, tearing down the Nazi flags. There was a big —

MJ: No. My job was very different.

PH: Yeah. But he was involved with — he was in the Communist Party, and was involved with organizing longshoremen in New York. But I've thought that maybe you might have known about him.

MJ: No. When I went back to Baltimore, that's when I organized the union in Baltimore, on instruction from the New York union. I did, and Morris Louis was active in the union, and Herman Maril, and when I left after the year of organizing them, Morris Louis took over as president.

PH: Right. So anyway, you were back in New York and you contributed to these shows, like the anti-lynching show and the housing exhibition.

MJ: Those were all the activity of the American Artists Congress.

PH: Right. But you weren't involved with actually the organization of these particular —

MJ: No.

PH: Were they effective, these big exhibitions? What do you think they accomplished?

MJ: I think they were effective. They got a lot of press; not necessarily favorable press, because it was all seen as propaganda in certain people's eyes. But you had people like [Leon] Kroll, who certainly did not do anything in terms of his art, but was extremely supportive. And Max Weber of course attempted to do things that were related in his art, which was very different than what he had been normally

identified with as such. But I know I attended innumerable meetings, innumerable meetings.

PH: About the housing exhibition, and the anti-lynching —

MJ: About all of them. About all of them.

PH: Where were the meetings usually held?

MJ: Some of them were held in 92 Fifth Avenue, where I had my studio and Axel had his studio. At first it was convenient, because it was right close to Union Square, and a lot of artists who were involved also had their studios in Union Square.

PH: There were probably artists up in the Chelsea, you know, 23rd Street area as well.

MJ: Well, there were also artists next door, as it were. We were at 92, and at 96, I think Jack Levine had a studio there, and quite a few —

PH: Well, Jack was mostly up in Boston, I thought. But he must have been —

MJ: Eventually he came down.

PH: Yeah. Did you know Elizabeth McCausland?

MJ: Oh, yes. Yes.

PH: What did you think of her?

MJ: I don't know how you mean.

PH: Well —

MJ: She was a friend of Harry Gottlieb at the time.

PH: Elizabeth McCausland. Not Elizabeth Olds. The writer, Elizabeth McCausland.

MJ: Oh, I beg your pardon. Yes, I knew Elizabeth McCausland.

PH: She was a writer, and I'd like to get more information about her, you know. She seems to be an interesting person, and nobody has really published anything, any assessment of her career or her influence in the art world.

MJ: The reason I knew her, she came from Springfield [Massachusetts], she represented a paper in Springfield. But the reason I knew her was that Hudson had gotten a hold of the Alfred Maurer estate, and as part of his technique of publicizing the work, he did two things. He commissioned her to do a book on Alfred Maurer.

PH: Did she do that?

MJ: Yes. It's been published. I don't think I have a copy, but yes, she did it. And as a matter of fact, after she did it and Hudson had acquired Hartley as one of his artists, he commissioned her to do one of Hartley, which she did not do, but she —

PH: But she did write a long article on Hartley.

MJ: Well, she did a lot — but she taped a lot of interviews with Hartley, which are at the Archives. And I don't know if they're still there, because a strange thing happened. She died before she finished. And Hudson inherited all these tapes and all the notes. And he sent them to the Archives with the understanding that they not lend them without his approval. And he — I'm trying to think of the man's name — an art historian. This art historian wanted to do an article. He was a good friend of Hudson's. And he — you probably know about him, he became an alcoholic and died without having completed it. But those things from the Archives were made available for his research by Hudson. He did one of these big "Introduction to the History of Art" or something like that. And I guess he must have been connected with — I'm trying to think of the connection with Hudson. At one time, Hudson was

in the Army and was stationed, I think, in Italy, in order to see if they could accumulate, trace down, the things that the Nazis had pillaged and return them to their rightful owners. And this man was in that group. And I think he also came from [coughs] where Hudson came from in the Midwest. [Inaudible - "I'm sorry."?]

PH: Well, I can — anyway, about Elizabeth McCausland. Was she involved, or active in these things? I know she wrote a lot.

MJ: She wrote a lot.

PH: And she lived in Springfield, and then she loved to New York, and then she lived with Berenice Abbott. And I was just — what was she like, do you know?

MJ: She was obviously lesbian, and she was very masculine in many of her attitudes. She sometimes reminded me of what I thought Gertrude Stein was like, although I never knew Gertrude Stein. [Laughs.] But I would see her at Hudson's frequently, and I don't recall her being active in any of the organizations, but I think I saw her mostly when she was still in Springfield rather than in New York.

PH: Well, she wrote for the *Art Front*, you know, the Artists' Union journal, magazine. And she also wrote for *New Masses*. And she used the name Elizabeth Noble when she wrote for those publications. I was just wondering if she was, if you had seen her at the political meetings.

MJ: Oh, I may have seen her at political meetings. There were other meetings, not necessarily political in the sense that I can recall a symposium that Benton spoke at, with his, you know, nationalism as the main point of the address, and he infuriated some of the audience to such an extent that his students had to sort of march him

out. He wasn't a big guy, but he was a belligerent guy. To protect him at the stage where chairs were being thrown. That's all [inaudible - "part of the [inaudible]"?].

PH: Were you on the WPA yourself?

MJ: I couldn't get on the WPA for the simple reason, you had to get on relief. And my shows at Hudson were sold out to the extent that I couldn't qualify for relief; I was a failure. That's why I never was on it. Although I keep finding my name as having been on it. But no, I never was.

PH: And you were never involved with any of the mural projects or anything.

MJ: No.

PH: So you painted your pictures. Did you teach during this period of time, late '30s?

MJ: Well, no, I got my first teaching job in '40, and I was teaching at —

PH: You went up to Smith, I know.

MJ: No, no, no, that was '45. No, I taught at the Ethical Culture School in Riverdale. Victor D'Amico was our chairman there, and I got a job. As a matter of fact, I got the —

PH: He was later at the Museum of Modern Art.

MJ: That's when I moved to the Museum of Modern Art. I was the only one he took down with him.

PH: Oh, I see.

MJ: Yes, I worked there as well. And I also worked, they established the War Veterans' Art School. It was —

PH: Really? The Museum of Modern Art did?

MJ: Yes. It was not located in the so-called place where the other school that we were involved in, which was in the building right next door, next to, west of the Museum of Modern Art. But they rented some space on Fifth Avenue, on the east side of Fifth Avenue, between 53rd and 54th, and it was intended to provide opportunities, [inaudible - sounds like "acquiring"], you know, these people, these veterans who were coming back, to get an art education. And I was involved with that. That was all under D'Amico's administration.

PH: So that's right after the war.

MJ: Yeah. Right after the war.

PH: Since your work is not sort of gathered in one place, you did have a change of style. Didn't you have a change of style towards abstraction? No.

MJ: Never.

PH: No?

MJ: No.

PH: Well, I know what the work of the 1930s looks like. Didn't you change your style as you moved to the 1940s and '50s?

MJ: No. No, I didn't. I hoped, you see, it grew in depth and things of that nature. I may have changed the content. But I certainly didn't change the style.

PH: Do you have any pictures around at all of any of your work?

MJ: I have one picture, late. I'm talking about in the '70s. It's in the bedroom, if you want to take a look.

PH: Maybe I'll just go and look.

[Recording stops, resumes.]

MJ: And it got broken. It was still on a panel in three parts. So he bought the parts from the insurance company, and he says, "Can you touch up or repair the cracks?" and I said, "Yes I can, but I can't put it together, the panel together." So he had to put together [or "he had it put together"?], and I've been taking that for three years back and forth to the Cape with the intention of doing it, 'cause it has to be done in tempera and I haven't succeeded yet in doing it, and I have it here to take [inaudible, laughs].

PH: Who's the [inaudible], is that Phil Schiller?

MJ: No, no. I don't know.

PH: I think he has one of your works. Phil Schiller. Do you know him?

MJ: No.

PH: He buys works from the ACA Gallery.

MJ: Well, maybe.

PH: He lives in Chicago, outside of Chicago, one of those suburbs.

MJ: I don't know, and he may very easily be. I'm always astonished at what they sell for these days.

PH: Well, it's good. Except you don't get any —

MJ: I don't have it!

PH: You don't get any percentage, right?

MJ: I don't have any. I mean, if I could find some, if they showed up at auction, I'd buy them.

PH: Well, a few years ago when I came to visit you, you had about four of them. You must have sold them.

MJ: Oh, yes. The ACA hollers all the time, “Send me something.”

PH: And they’re usually tempera, you know, they have that nice surface. It’s kind of transparency, the thin wash [inaudible].

MJ: Yeah, but those were, all the early ones were done in tempera. I didn’t go into the — I did some, a few encaustic things, but then I began painting in oil. [Sound of tape recorder being adjusted.] My doctor says I can go to the Cape. He doesn’t care.

PH: Good. I was wondering. I had figured when I called you yesterday you might have already been gone, because it was after Memorial Day.

MJ: No. I have an appointment with him on the 27th.

PH: Of Jan— of June.

MJ: June.

PH: So you’ll go up after that?

MJ: I’ll go from the appointment.

PH: Where does he, where is his — oh, from the appointment.

MJ: He’s on 96th Street. I’ll go and see him, and he’ll give me a test, and bang me and stuff like that, and then I’ll leave from there to the Cape.

PH: Do your children live around, and they can look in on you?

MJ: No.

PH: Are those, they — in your bedroom, the pictures of — you have two daughters?

MJ: No, I have one daughter.

PH: One daughter.

MJ: That’s her.

PH: I see.

MJ: When she was six.

PH: She's beautiful. What a beautiful woman.

MJ: She's beautiful. She's really beautiful.

PH: She's the one who's just now going to —

MJ: [Inaudible - "The law"?] Oh, she's finished.

PH: She's becoming a lawyer now.

MJ: She's looking for a job. And then I have a son. There's one picture of him.

PH: I saw a young man. I didn't know —

MJ: That's the son. And the girl to the right is his wife. And he just came back. He won a competition for doing six modular houses, wooden houses. A company in Australia that is in the lumbering business ran the competition. And he won it by doing the drawings and making models. And they have since bought a piece of land in Milwaukee, and they want him to do the six variations and put 'em up there. And then these have — the wood that they own all of in Australia and New Zealand, all the forests, of jahara [phonetic] is the name of the wood — it is a fabulous wood. And up until recently when they became interested in doing housing, because it's waterproof and rot-proof and — the only thing it's been used for is things like, well, 10 years ago they built the boardwalk and all the piers in Atlantic City out of this wood. And this wood'll last forever. It doesn't have to be finished or anything. So they decided to move into the field of housing; that's why they had the competition. And he won it, and then they bought this land, and then they commissioned him to do —

[Tape runs out at end of Side A.]

[Side B begins mid-conversation.]

[Note: Like Side A, at the beginning of the recording, there is a low squeaking sound in the background as if the tape is "dragging" in the machine. It is not clear whether this is a problem with the tape itself or with the tape recorder. The squeaking sound stops within the first two minutes.]

MJ: Bob Gwathmey's son is — Ricky followed some of my doings. He subsequently became the chairman of the School of Architecture at the University of Wisconsin.

PH: Your son.

MJ: Yeah. He stayed there doing that for two years. And then his own business has increased, so he's set up the firm. He still teaches the graduate students. He's seemed more interested in his students winning prizes than Gwathmey's son. [Laughs.]

PH: Well, Gwathmey's son doesn't teach, does he?

MJ: No.

PH: No.

MJ: But Ricky got caught in that.

PH: So, as a teacher. Hmm. Well, anyway, getting back to the 1930s.

MJ: Yeah.

PH: What about the — well, I'm trying to also deal with the very sensitive issue of the Communist Party, and what kind of influence it had on artists in the 1930s. What do you feel was their influence?

MJ: Well, they obviously had groups who propagandized, I suspect. I was never involved in one, so I don't know how they actually functioned. But it seemed apparent to me that they were; whether they were responsible for setting the theme of some of these exhibitions or not, I couldn't say first hand, [inaudible] mention.

PH: Well, I was just wondering if there were any Party functionaries who were sort of around. Some of the names that you come across in terms of the artists were people like [Alexander?] Trachtenberg —

MJ: Some of 'em were lost, you know, in the Spanish —

PH: Trachtenberg, V.J. Jerome —

MJ: Some of 'em were lost in the Spanish Civil War.

PH: Uh-huh. Well, there was Lou Block, who was a sculptor. [Note: Should be Paul Block per Riva Helfond interview and Archives of American Art.]

MJ: Yeah.

PH: Was he a member of the Party, or he was involved with it?

MJ: [Inaudible - "Don't know"?]

PH: And Phil Bard?

MJ: Phil Bard. I suspect —

PH: Phil Bard. You mentioned that Phil Bard is living, did you say he was living up in New England, or —

MJ: [Inaudible - "Don't really know"?]

PH: I thought somebody told me that he was living —

MJ: Not I.

PH: Phil Bard. You know, sometimes I see it written down as B-A-R-T, but I think it's B-A-R-D.

MJ: Well, I remember it as B-A-R-D.

PH: Yeah. Yeah. But in one of the books I was reading about the Spanish Civil War, it's misspelled as B-A-R-T. But for sure it was the same person. Well, Phil Bard seems to have been primarily an organizer, you know, in terms of bringing people over to Spain. Then of course there were artists like Hugo Gellert.

MJ: Yes.

PH: Who were also organizers and seemed to have been closely connected or in the Party. But I was wondering of some of these other names, like V.J. Jerome. Do those people mean anything? Or Selson [phonetic], I think, was another? Or Trachtenberg you [or "who"?] were involved with? Or Mike Gold, who was the editor of *The Masses*? *The New Masses*?

MJ: Well, he was an editor, he was a writer.

PH: Yes.

MJ: Yes. Editor of *The New Masses*.

PH: William Gropper?

MJ: Yes, I knew Bill Gropper.

PH: But he wasn't an intellectual, Bill Gropper was.

MJ: No, I wouldn't say so.

PH: Who were you say were the intellectuals among the artists who were —

MJ: Well, I think Evergood is an intellectual. If you read his, the articles that he wrote for the Congress. That's an intellectual type of mind.

PH: Some people say that he was just emotional in his feeling. They tend to stress his emotional —

MJ: Well, you find the emotional quality comes out in his work. I've always — now, I think that the name "social realist" came into being amongst some American critics, intending it to link it with the social realists of Russia, as a philosophic stance in terms of what they did and the use to which their work was put. But when you look at the work of the Americans, it would be much more appropriate, I think, to say that Phil Evergood was a social expressionist.

PH: You've mentioned this to me before, and I have always given you credit whenever I talk about this, you know. I'll say, "Mervin Jules thinks the better expression is social expressionism." And I tend to agree with you, because there is a strong expressionist component certainly in your work, Philip Evergood's work, Jack Levine's work, and artists who are somebody like Raphael Soyer was in no way a social realist, really, you know. He was doing a kind of naturalism, you know. He was a kind of naturalist artist. There are some of the works by implication have a kind of social bite to them, but generally they don't. There are just a few he did with Walter Broe, you know. So I think I would agree with you there. But some of the other artists who sort of thought about — well, Davis, Stuart Davis, he must, he was, he did writing, and [inaudible] —

MJ: Well, I think he was more active in the American Artists Congress. I think he was the president at one point.

PH: Yeah. Executive secretary. He sort of ran the thing.

MJ: But he's certainly an intellectual, as it were. But he was working in a very abstract vein by then.

PH: What about Ben Shahn?

MJ: Ben Shahn obviously, it seemed to me —

PH: Very well-read man.

MJ: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. You're familiar with the lectures he did at Harvard. *The Shape of Form*.

PH: *Shape of Content*.

MJ: *Shape of Content*. Those are, I think those were brilliant.

PH: Sure. Did you know artists such as Walter Quirt and [Louis] Guglielmi?

MJ: Sure. Yeah. Well, I knew Quirt more, better, yes. Well, he was a kind of a surrealist in a sense, but he dealt with —

PH: Quirt was?

MJ: Quirt, yes. He went out and taught in the Middle West somewhere. Chet La More did too. Now, Chet was very active in the upper echelon, in [or "I'm"] talking about the organization area of the Union. And probably of the Communists as well.

PH: Well, the Union sort of, well, it affiliated with the CIO, so in a way it lost its identity. But it must have obviously —

MJ: Well, it lost its identity when the WPA dissolved, 'cause that was its purpose really, to structure and support the artists in the WPA. A purely economic thing. And I think it was at that time — there were problems that I occasionally suggested subsequent to them to try to deal with, but either the idea didn't — see, one of the major problems that I think artists face, or artists' heirs face, is what to do with this

quantity of material where the artist is not accepted. I mean, there's no problem with Milton Avery, but —

PH: There's no problem with your work.

MJ: There's no problem — that's for a different reason. But, well, it was a problem with Philip Evergood's work, for instance. And she didn't know what to do with it. And I thought that one of these art organizations, which had a sort of financial orientation [inaudible], would extend it to try to develop a machinery for assisting, see, the heirs of some of these artists as to how to handle the estates. I was very friendly with Florsheim, and he dies, he leaves a bulk of material, his wife attempts to deal with it, she's very ill now, what's gonna happen to it? And it seemed to me that there's a niche area there, that one of these big organizations, with the aid of a couple of lawyers, should be able to resolve. Now, it's dealt with by individuals, but when — well, there are artists in Provincetown who I knew that have since died, who —

PH: Well, [Karl] Knaths. You were involved with some of the Knaths work, weren't you?

MJ: Well, that's only because I knew him. You see, when I was in Baltimore, the great place to study art, the Maryland Institute, didn't teach you anything. It was headed by Hans Schuler, and he kept bring people from the Munich Academy over, and that was the fundamental aspect of teaching. Now, any student who knew a thing recognized somewhere along the line, but they held out a carrot. They had a traveling scholarship, which they gave to the "best student," quote unquote, who

graduated. And they had models and stuff like that. So those of us who were interested, the names that I've — Charlie Shucker, do you know his work?

PH: Mm-mm.

MJ: Well, he was at that time at the Maryland Institute. He's up here now, he's an abstract artist, lives in New York. Morris Louis and a couple of the others, we used to go to museums together. We would talk about art, we'd get our education that way. I remember discussions about what Cézanne was concerned with, and things like that. On my own, I loved the Phillips Gallery. You could go there — nobody ever was there — and you could sit there and look at the things. I even met Duncan Phillips, by a fluke, on the second floor where they have the big picture gallery. He frequently had pictures on the floor, and I was looking at them. There was a Matisse and a Braque on the floor. And this tall, thin, red-haired man walked in, and I had seen him before. And he sat down beside me; I was looking at him [or "them"?] too. And he said, "Trying to make up my mind as to whether I should swap one of these for one of my Daumiers." And that's when I knew who he was. Well, he had the best collection of Daumiers you could see in this country, in the East. And I love Daumier, and I was furious with the idea he would even dream of that, so we had a heated discussion. [PH laughs.] But he subsequently didn't swap the Daumiers. And he subsequently bought those two paintings. But with his wealth — I discovered this from Hudson — he had a budget which he could spend every year. And he was buying in years ahead on his budget. And the dealers knew that, and they cooperated with him. But he always insisted that it come down, the thing he was considering to buy, and he'd see it in the museum. And those were the ones that

were sitting on the floors all the time. Well, he had a school in the building that now is part of the museum; right next door, very modern building. Karl Knaths taught there.

PH: I see. That's how you knew him.

MJ: That's how I got to meet him. And we were very, very good friends. As a matter of fact, when he decided to give up teaching, and he was teaching in — oh, it's a very progressive school in New England —

PH: A college?

MJ: College, yeah.

PH: Bennington?

MJ: Bennington. [MJ coughs.] He suggested me for Bennington. And I went up and I was interviewed by, I think that the man's name was Jones who was the president at that time. And that was the same year that there was an opening. Mrs. Morgan, who was an alumni at Smith, whose husband was the ambassador to Mexico, and she became interested in Mexican art, and she decided to set up at Smith College an artist-in-resident for a year. And the first one was a Mexican artist. And I was the second one. But the chairman, when I was to be interviewed, was ill; Abbott, Jerry Abbott, do you know who he is?

PH: Mm-mm.

MJ: Jerry Abbott was a friend of Barr.

PH: Alfred Barr.

MJ: Alfred Barr. And when they decided to get a museum director for the museum at Smith, they approached Barr. But he was that time in the early

organizational stages of the Museum of Modern Art. And he suggested Jerry Abbott, who was a friend of his, as a substitute, because he felt that he would be involved in this Museum of Modern Art for a year, and then he 'd be interested in taking it over. Well, he never took over, of course. And Jerry Abbott became the director of the museum. And also became, as the museum and the school, the art department, were very close, became the chairman of the art department. Well, he was supposed to interview me, and he was ill. And Oliver Larkin was having a sabbatical in New York, getting material for his book, *Art and Life in America*. So he interviewed me at the ACA Gallery. And I was offered a job at both places. The job at Smith was for one year as an artist-in-resident. And the job was for three years, with the possibility of tenure, at Bennington. And I elected Oliver Larkin. [Inaudible] the school —if Oliver Larkin had come down from Bennington, I would have gone to Bennington.

PH: Well, he was a major figure, and has been, is still a very good scholar. His book is a very good book, *Art and Life in America*. There hasn't really been a book since then that's quite comparable.

MJ: Have you read his book on Daumier?

PH: No, I didn't. I have it at home. I haven't. And I've looked at passages. I haven't read the thing all the way through.

MJ: Well, I drove a car all this time. Larkin never learned to drive a car. So wherever he went that he needed a car, I would drive him. So we got to know each other very, very well. You know, he was an artist.

PH: I didn't know that.

MJ: Oh, yes. He came —

PH: I know that he was from Smith, and had taught there.

MJ: No, before that, he was at Harvard. And when Smith was looking —

PH: Actually, McCausland was at Smith too, I think. She was teaching.

MJ: Not during my tenure there, and I was there a long time, 23 years.

PH: Well, I think she was there earlier.

MJ: It would have to be.

PH: Before she became a newspaper correspondent.

MJ: Oh. Well, anyway —

PH: But I'm not sure. I want to know more about Elizabeth McCausland.

MJ: Well, I don't know that much more. But Pete was an artist.

PH: He's Oliver Larkin.

MJ: Oliver Larkin.

PH: Called him Pete?

MJ: But his friends call him Pete. His son, you know, designs stage, is a stage designer in New York. And he was brought from Harvard because he was teaching the fundamental course, and they wanted him to establish a kind of fundamental course in studio art, along with the, these studio artists were in a minority; there were a faculty of 18, of which six were studio artists. No studio artist ever was elected to be a full professor except myself.

PH: Oh, really?

MJ: I was the first one.

PH: What about Leonard Baskin?

MJ: I hired Leonard Baskin.

PH: Oh, you hired Leonard Baskin. I see.

MJ: And before Lenny Baskin ever had a show. His wife was studying at Clark University, and they were living in Worcester. And we needed somebody to teach graphics. I'd never seen a piece of sculpture of his until I went to interview him in Worcester, and I saw the thing that the Museum of Modern Art now owns, the man with the bird. He was working on that when I visited him. And I was going through with my wife, and I was going to Boston for something. When I got to Boston, I called the president and I said, "I found the guy for us." He said to me, he says, "He's going to be your assistant, isn't he?" And I says, "Yes." He says, "Then hire him!" [MJ has smile in his voice.] That's how you did things at Smith College. You didn't go through the —

PH: The search committees and stuff like that. [Laughs.]

MJ: Well, I don't know what they do now.

PH: That's what they do now. Long search committees.

MJ: Well, anyway. I went there for a year as an artist-in-resident. And who was the Mexican artist who was the year before? But it was only a year appointment. And about halfway through the year, Larkin asked whether I thought the students were prepared to do the kind of individual work that I was asking of them. And they certainly weren't. Their preliminary work was just nothing, really. So I was spending most of my time — I considered, you know, an artist-in-resident dealing with the —

PH: More advanced students.

MJ: The advanced student, and then having projects, and then we would discuss it in my studio; they gave you a studio, et cetera. And I said no, they were just so ill-

prepared, I was spending all my time giving them background. So he asked me if I would draw up a background for the course. And by then he had become a historian. He moved out of being an artist. He continued to perform as an artist. He did work all the time on his own, but he didn't teach any studio courses. But he had an assistant. Those studio courses were very popular, there were big sections. Van der Pool [phonetic], her name was. And she was a graduate and an alumni, and had a Master's degree from Smith College. And she was terrible, unbelievably terrible. So I wrote this long appraisal of the preparation, you know, the introductory course and the intermediate course, et cetera, et cetera, and I said that following this [inaudible - "continued"?], there's no point in having an artist-in-resident. Because you're supposed to deal with students who have enough background that can be independent, begin, you know, doing their own thing. And I don't know who saw it other than Pete, but shortly after that I was offered a three-year appointment, not to continue doing what I was, but to run the introductory class.

PH: I see.

MJ: So I took that over from her.

PH: So what happened to her?

MJ: Oh, she stayed on. She had tenure by then. But she stayed on because what happened — she was dying to teach the history of modern art. But that was taught by Jerry Abbott. Jerry Abbott was an alcoholic. And by the time I became the chairman, I began hearing the complaints of the students. He would — and he taught the history of modern art as a combination museum director. And he'd sometimes go in three days in succession and give the same lecture on a period. Or he wouldn't

show up. Wouldn't show up. Now, if you had a course of over 75 students, and his courses always had over 75 students, you were allowed a monitor who would attend the course and would grade the papers or [inaudible over sound of traffic]. And he had picked up some alumni, some woman who didn't know from nothin', and she was the monitor. And when I was the chairman, this student came in with a paper she had prepared on subject matter, and she asked me to read it, and I read it, and she said she doesn't understand why she got an F. And I said, "I think it's certainly worth a B+; maybe you'd get an A, depending." But I didn't feel I was a historian, I mean, was qualified. So I asked Larkin and one other person to read it, and they couldn't understand that. So I called Jerry, and I said, "I think you ought to read this." And he says he has absolute faith in this woman. And he refused to read it, therefore. And the gal became a big issue.

PH: Ugly situation.

MJ: It was an ugly situation, but — there's a system at Smith College where the dean of the college is usually somebody picked from a department, and has a five-year stint as the dean, then gets back to the department. They select their deans that way, the president selects the dean. And the gal who was the classicist, [inaudible] remember her name, an art history classicist, was the dean. So I took it up with her. And she says she'll speak to Jerry. So she spoke to Jerry. And Jerry was adamant. Just refused to even read the paper. So she decided to give him a leave of absence. And the paper was sent back for a committee of the art historians to evaluate, and the gal got, I guess, A or A-, something like that. And the fact that he was given this — oh, he was given a leave of absence with the suggestion that he get some psychiatric

assistance. And he was [inaudible] furious by that. And he had a group of colleagues, you know, there were clichés [might he mean "cliques"?], et cetera, et cetera, and he tried to make a great big issue out of it. I thought if he didn't, you know, accept the dean's recommendation, that we should have to take some action that was more. So I suggested that he be given a leave of absence for a year, subject to his getting — you know, with pay — subject to his getting this help. And he refused. So I said, "You're getting a leave of absence with pay anyway." And during that leave, he resigned.

PH: Was he close to retirement?

MJ: No. No. Not at all.

PH: I wouldn't think so. This is what, in the 40s, right?

MJ: Yeah. And his family owned some kind of a paper mill in New England. And he became the — he went up there to live and became the treasurer of the company, as such. But there were a few things I had to deal with; one of them is Priscilla van der Pool who decided, when he left, she would take over the history course. She was aiming for that, [speaks louder over sound of traffic] because it was apparent to everybody, unless you became a historian, you never got promoted. And I once had to make an issue about that. I almost didn't get tenure, as a matter of fact, because some of the historians didn't appreciate what I was doing, I suppose [inaudible]. And Clarence Kennedy came in, and he was the major classical historian. And then told me he was going to, not gonna vote for me. And I argued the fact that I thought the department was big enough to have more than one point of view. And the day before the vote, he came in and told me he changed his mind, and I don't know what

the hell happened. I couldn't imagine. But I finally got tenure. Finally got my promotion with tenure, which was [inaudible over sound of traffic]. Lenny I found to be a teacher. I found some good teachers.

PH: Lucy Lippard went to Smith. Did you know her at all?

MJ: I may, if I saw her I'd probably. Do you know a man by the name of [inaudible - "Oberhuber"?]?

PH: Well, there's Konrad, who's the curator. Well, he left. He went to Vienna.

MJ: Yes, but —

PH: To the Albertina.

MJ: I hired him.

PH: Oh, really?

MJ: As a visiting scholar. I thought he had a great mind. Really a great mind.

PH: Well, he's a great loss to Boston.

MJ: Oh, I'm sure of that. I'm sure of that. He would be. Well, between the time he left Smith College, he produced five children, so he was busy doing something.

PH: Yeah. No, he went back to his native land —

MJ: Well, he worked there —

PH: As the director of a major museum.

MJ: Well, he deserved it, he really was — I had some luck in picking some people.

PH: So, do you have any prints, or anything like that, of your work? You said that you didn't have any.

MJ: Yes, I do.

[Recording stops. Side B continues, blank.]