MARIA FRANK ABRAMS

Interviewed by Sally Swenson

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INTERVIEW WITH MARIA FRANK ABRAMS, March 20, 1974

Swenson: This afternoon we're interviewing Maria Frank Abrams, and I think a very good way to start would be to ask you when you first became interested in art.

Abrams: As a child I started painting and drawing when I was five or six years old, and I enjoyed doing illustrations to the children's stories that were read to me. I drew and painted all through my childhood – in school we had very poor art education in Hungary at the time I was growing up, and very limited experience. We were made to copy mainly Hungarian folk patterns on large sheets of white paper, and the colors were prescribed; they had to be the regular traditional colors of whatever the peasantry was using – but once in a while every three or four months we were allowed a period when we could draw or paint whatever we wanted to, and in these periods I didn't only paint my own paintings, but I painted a painting for every girl in the class. (laughter)

Swenson: Which artists influenced you most as a young artist?

Abrams: As a young artist, that should be here in the United States, because I didn't have any other formal art education except here. And the first great influence for me was when I learned to know the work of Paul Klee. He was a revelation – in every way – the spirit and the poetic quality of his work, his spiritual and psychological approach to his art – they're all a great influence. The second great influence was through Walter Isaacs – Cézanne, and the basic compositional methods that he used.

Swenson: When you came to this country, you first studied at the University of Washington?

Abrams: Yes, I came straight to the University here, and frankly, when I knew I was going to come here, I was rather worried, because as you might know, in Europe schools of art are not part of the academic community. As my scholarship was for the University of Washington, I was worried that I wouldn't be able to transfer to a regular art school, but when I arrived here it turned out that the University of Washington had a very vigorous and a very fine school of art. So I just went in there and was very happy and delighted, and had a wonderful time in the school.

Swenson: Were any of the teachers there an influence on you, some more than others?

Abrams: Well, I ended up studying only with a few teachers, because I was a painting major, and in this course at the time I went to school, you were taking the same course over and over again – it just had different numbers. We took composition and we took life drawing and portrait painting and

watercolor painting, and many of the same people taught these courses, so I studied with Mr. Isaacs, and there were two teachers here who since left and are in Berkeley, I believe, at the University of California – Ed Rossach and Katherine Westphal. And then of course I had a number of other teachers who taught at the University here – but mainly these three people were the ones who I worked with who were at the University.

Swenson: What would you say is your favorite medium? I know you work in several.

Abrams: I don't have a favorite medium among the ones that I use – they are all very much my own, and I work in practically everything. I work with oil paint, water-base paint, I use a lot of casein paint, I use pen and ink, I use chalk, pencil, just whatever you can get your hands on (laughter). I used to work a lot with wax crayon, though I don't do that much anymore. And I used to experiment with combining wax crayon with casein and oil paint – several things together – but lately I have been very satisfied just using oil on canvas.

Swenson: We were talking about different media – you are working now primarily in oil and casein?

Abrams: Yes, oil and casein, and also I do quite a lot of work with the crow quill pen.

Swenson: I understand that you have a great deal of trouble with your eyes and that they have been operated on 6 years ago, and that you didn't work for a while, but now you are back working again.

Abrams: Yes.

Swenson: I also understand that two years ago you went to visit Mark Tobey in Switzerland.

Abrams: Yes, I was in Europe in 1971, and my itinerary took me to Budapest where I still have some family and friends, and from Budapest I was to go to Paris. I realized that this was my chance to go to Basel and visit Tobey. So I wrote to him, and announced my intended visit. I didn't receive an answer – I didn't really expect one; I just wanted to warn him that I'm coming. You see, when he was in Seattle a year or two before, he invited me to come and visit him, and he gave me his address and he gave me his telephone number – so I didn't feel that this was an imposition or it was something that he really didn't want me to do. But still, knowing Tobey and having known him for a great many years, he's a very moody man; I really wasn't sure whether he will be in the mood to see me once I get to Basel. I planned to spend a couple days there, and the very first day I went to the gallery where he exhibits and saw his prints there, and there was a very interesting exhibition there of Ozenfant, which

was really a great show and very fine to see. And all that day I had a very hard time because his telephone did not answer, and it didn't answer until 5 o'clock in the afternoon. So I couldn't see him that day, but when I talked to him on the telephone, he arranged for me to come to visit him the next day to come to tea, and I was very excited and I bought some very beautiful dark orange roses, and I even took a cab (laughter) from my hotel to his house because I wanted to arrive in good shape. He lives in a very beautiful old house with his secretary, who is an old man, and they don't have any help to keep this house up. These two old men putter around in this large, lovely old house, and make it as livable for themselves as possible. Tobey has a studio on the main floor, and he also has a studio upstairs. I haven't seen the one upstairs; only the one on the main floor. He was very, very nice to me; very warm and friendly, and first when we started talking he told me that he didn't have any work in the house because he had a large exhibition in Germany – which was true, he did. But then later on he took me into his studio and he showed me all the things he was working on – some very small, some large pieces – they were just beautiful, they were fresh, and had a look of vigor and youth about them. Also he showed me his other paintings which he kept from previous years, and a lot of these paintings I hadn't seen before, although I knew most of his work here; because of my close association with the Seligman gallery, I was able to see practically everything that came to Seattle throughout all the years that Mr. Seligman had presented Mark Tobey. It was a *very* great experience for me to visit there, and I must say I perhaps overstayed because I didn't leave until after 8 o'clock in the evening. And that evening I was planning to go to the opera house. They had a Weber opera on, and I am told it is an excellent theater, but I was so completely exhausted after this visit with Tobey – not physically, but emotionally – that I just went back to my hotel, and went straight to bed. He was very fresh and alive in spirit, but rather frail physically, and I realized that he is an old man. Cannot be helped. He built a fire for us, and I asked him to let me help him, but he wouldn't. (laughter) And then during the afternoon his secretary brought tea and some drinks and very nice cakes; you know, those Swiss are very famous for their good pastry and we had very good pastry. I brought slides and reproductions of my paintings, and he spent quite a lot of time very patiently and seriously looking at them, and he made some very helpful remarks, for which I was very grateful. And also, I bought one of his prints, which he sold me very graciously for very little, and of course I cherish it. I wish I could have had one of his paintings, but at this stage of the game I'm afraid I'm not in that league (laughter), but you know – long, long ago when Tobey used to live in Seattle and I was a student, I used to go to John Uitti to have my things framed, and both my husband and I used to be very friendly with John Uitti, and in his framing shop you could always find many of Tobey's beautiful paintings of that period – and they were very inexpensive. You could buy one of them for $75 or $100, and my husband said, 'Let's get one!' And I said, 'But Sidney, how can we?' You see,

we lived on $170 a month – but now I realize that my husband was absolutely right, and I was very foolish, because it would have been much better not to eat for a couple months (laughter) and buy one of Tobey's paintings at that time. It's too late now.

Swenson: I understand he was the first patron you had.

Abrams: Yes, that was also through Uitti's framing shop. He saw a woodcut I had done, and actually this woodcut I did in school in the last months of my senior year. He liked it very much, and he bought it, and then later on when I learned to know him personally he asked about this print. And when he learned that I still had some left, he bought one and gave it as a gift to Eva Heinitz, who to this very day treasures it, and she makes a point to come to see all the exhibitions I have that she can possibly attend. She has been, because of this print, a friend. It's nice to have her for a friend.

Swenson: I know that a few years ago you did some work and some set designs and costumes for an opera – or I think there were two operas. Would you like to talk about that a little bit?

Abrams: Yes. Well, that was in 1962 when here the Jewish community center commissioned an opera. The composer who wrote the music was Michael White, a young man who was sent here on a Ford Foundation grant to compose music here in Seattle for the schools, and he was very, very active in musical circles and an extremely gifted young composer. He and George Blustone, who was a professor of English at the University of Washington, were asked to compose this opera and to write the libretto. And when it was being produced I was asked to do the costumes and the sets for it. Now, I have had some experience in costume design previously, but none in set design, and I was very reluctant to undertake it. But I was told I would have all the help I needed; the people who will be working on this are experts and they will be able to advise on all the things, and so on and so forth. Well, I am not sorry that I undertook the designing of these sets – it was a fantastic experience for me. The help that I was promised was not forthcoming (laughter) I must say, and I had to do most of the work on my own. Also, when it came to set construction, which of course I knew nothing about and I still don't know anything about, it turned out that I had to paint all the sets, and I had to make the decisions on the color. Now this is a tremendous problem with set design, because all the colors that are used painting the set will change once they are on the stage under different lighting designs and different lighting conditions. So I felt like working in the dark, and I used to have terrible nightmares about it, because this was the first time in my life when my work did not only affect me, but it affected hundreds of other people. Well in the long run, it turned out to be a most successful and most gratifying experience for me. I will never forget the first night, and I think that this is never really given to a

painter when I sat in the audience and the curtain went up on the second act, and the audience burst into a very spontaneous and enthusiastic applause, and I knew that they were applauding me – that is the sets and the costumes up there on the stage. I cried. (laughter) It really was very, very exciting; very gratifying. Then the second opera I designed came about because of the very good reviews that I have gotten on this first effort. The Seattle Symphony just started to produce operas; as a matter of fact, Seattle Opera just started. The Seattle Symphony produced an opera for the World's Fair – Aida – and they decided to go on, and they produced as their second opera La Traviata. After this opera Seattle Opera was established, and this is really how the whole thing started. Well, I was asked – this time I was hired – to do the sets for La Traviata, and I found this also most gratifying. I did two months' research of the period in the University library. This time we weren't able to do the costumes, because of time limitations, financial limitations, and it was a little more difficult for me because it couldn't be coordinated the same way that the Dybbuk was coordinated. Now the Dybbuk sets were quite abstract, and the costumes were also quite abstract in many ways, fitting in with the set. But La Traviata had to be designed a little more conservatively because we had no way of knowing what the costumes were going to be like. But in the long run it really turned out beautifully well, and I enjoyed doing La Traviata. I got very, very good reviews also on that.

Swenson: To get back to your own work and talking about your painting, do you work from sketches, or small paintings, and do you find the colors in the Northwest – the light – affect your work?

Abrams: Well first I will answer your second question. The Northwest affects my work very, very much. Most of my work is inspired by the landscape around me, and by the colors around me. My best times are usually the fall, the winter and early spring, and this is when I receive most of my inspiration and most of my ideas. Most of my paintings do come from the environment here, and I find the light and the color here very, very beautiful and inspiring. I don't work from sketches – I think this is a reaction to my very rigorous training at the University. Mr. Isaacs always insisted that we have sketches for our paintings – sometimes thumbnail compositions. And I really hated to do that. (laughter) So ever since I have been on my own I have never done sketched – sometimes I pay dearly for it, of course, because when you work on a large canvas and you make mistakes, it is much harder to correct them than if you make the very same mistakes in a small area. But I don't do sketches. The kind of drawings I do to try to retain certain inspirations are really not sketches – they are kind of short hand scrawls to try to keep in memory something that touched me very deeply. Usually the most natural way for me to paint is to see the same things over and over again until they really become a part of me, and they are so strong in my mind that I can work toward this image undisturbed and I don't really need sketches.

But sometimes I realize that something that strikes me very strongly and touches me very much I will not be able to have a repeat of, and this is when I try to make a little note of some kind. Often it doesn't work because I lose this original inspiration anyway, but sometimes these few little lines will revive the feeling that I have had at the time.

Swenson: Do you feel that it's important for artists to have academic training, like you had at the University – for example drawing, figure drawing, and making thumbnail sketches – to move on into abstract art, or do you feel that an artist could move into abstract art, conceptual art without the academic training?

Abrams: I am very reluctant to express some opinion on this, one way or the other. I can readily describe what I feel about my own progress and my own education – I think each individual has a different learning pattern, and to impose one's own opinion on what the learning pattern of another person should be is not only unfair but silly. But I can tell you definitely what my feeling about my art education is: as far as this is concerned, I am sorry that I did not have enough academic training. I wish I had much more of it in the way of materials. I am very much interested in traditional materials. I realize that today a tot of artists work with paints which are pre-prepared, and they do marvelous things with it, they do interesting things with it, but for me – I enjoy more the traditional way of painting with different grounds and layers and all kinds of complications, and I must say that I didn't have any training in this. I have a hard time, and it is hard to learn these things when you are on your own and when these materials aren't really so readily available. I know some artists who had their training in Europe, and I really envy them, because all of this is at their fingertips. It is just natural to them, and by the time they are in their early 20's it was something that they just knew – just as well as they could read and write. And I think this is very wonderful to have, and I didn't have much of it.

Swenson: I know that you recently have been working with rice paper a lot – casein paint and rice paper – how do you find that different in feeling, let's say from oils?

Abrams: Well, first of all, the whole approach is different. When I use oil paint, this is a process which is slow and very deliberate, and therefore the whole spirit of the work is more static and more stable. I don't know whether this is the right word to use – I think perhaps static is a better word to use. Also, it is much slower – at least this is the way I work with oil. Now a lot of people work with oil paint very differently from me, but my way of working with oil paint is a very slow process. I build the textures slowly, one upon the other, and this requires drying time in between applications, which means that I look at my painting for a long time before I can continue on. Sometimes I'm extremely impatient,

and I lose some of the impact that I had because I have to wait for that certain layer to set – while working on rice paper with water base paint is very fast – very elusive in many ways. As you well know, there are many, many kinds of rice paper, and each and every one of them has to be learned and handled differently, and in the process of learning them I have revelations, while when I work with oil paint I work from previous knowledge, and I work with something I already know very well. Working on rice paper very often is a discovery – something bursts upon me that I didn't expect, and this is interesting. Very often I find that when I work on rice paper the rhythm of my work is very fast and very impulsive, while when I work on the canvas it is very deliberate.

Swenson: I know some time ago you had the large show at the Seattle museum, and that occasionally you put a piece in the annual. What did you think of this year's annual? Did you see it?

Abrams: Yes, unfortunately I went only once. I had good intentions – I meant to go back once again. You know you cannot really see things fast – it is not fair to run through something. I find that I can't spend more time than perhaps two hours at any exhibition, because after two hours I really don't see anything anymore. Now, this exhibition, I found it very interesting. I found that there were perhaps some 25 percent of the exhibited works that I really liked, and I think this is a very good percentage. I think the exhibition was more noted for its exclusions than inclusions, because I know that there were many, many artists who should have shown in this exhibition who did not show; who were rejected, and there were many, many pieces in the exhibition which really didn't need to be in an exhibition – period. (laughter) But, I have been on juries before, and I know it is very, very difficult. The time is limited, you work with other people whose opinions are different from yours. Very often one member of the jury who is a very aggressive personality will dominate the choices, and it is really very hard to say how a jury arrives to decisions. I am always very grateful for a regional exhibition like the Northwest Annual because even if I do not like a lot of the work, it is interesting for me to see what people are doing. Also, it is interesting to see what people are choosing to show in an exhibition. There were some particular pieces I liked very much in this exhibition; one was Michael Spafford's painting – very large double canvas. Another one was Neil Meitzler's large canvas – there were several other pieces. I made notes in my catalog of the ones that I liked when I didn't know the artist beforehand so that I will remember what they were. Some of the pieces which I didn't really like had interesting technique, which was intriguing. I was very sad to be rejected from it, but you know, you cannot help this, and I hope that perhaps another time I'll make it. I know that there was a discussion in the Seattle Art Museum, a panel discussion on the Northwest Annual. I had the best intentions of going and participating in it, but the very same night there was a concert. My good friend, Bela Siki, who is a

distinguished pianist had a concert that evening, and I just felt that I have to go to the concert, and so I missed this discussion on the Northwest Annual.

Swenson: Do you feel that the Northwest Annual was a good representation of the region, and do you feel that regional art is progressing or is it dying out?

Abrams: I don't think that the Northwest Annual was a good representation of the region, and as far as regional art is concerned, I really don't know. At the present time we have an exhibition at the Seattle Art Museum Pavilion, the Skagit Valley Artists, and a lot of these artists are showing work which is very much their own. A number of them are showing work which is imitative, but still I think that perhaps regional painting is still here with us – perhaps! I don't know. (laughter)

Swenson: Do you feel that the judges on the jury for the annual should be local museum directors and artists, or should they be outsiders, like say from New York?

Abrams: Well, we have had some very bitter experiences with juries who came from back east, and my original thought would be that it would be very refreshing to have a distinguished person from the Eastern establishment come out here and look at our work, but the way it has worked out has been really quite sad. It seems that these people who have come out here just jeered at us, and selected very poor shows. I know who they did not include, and perhaps instead of coming here and really looking at the work, they just came out here and looked down at it. And perhaps it was not a good idea to invite them. I say perhaps because I really don't have the answer, who the jury should be for an exhibition. But this year we had a jury where each region was represented with one member, and we didn't have a very good exhibition. I don't have an answer. I think the only thing is to experiment. But one thing – I think it would be nice if for an exhibition like the Northwest Annual which contains painting and sculpture we would have painters and sculptors on the jury. I think it would be very good to have painters.

Swenson: Have a different point of view.

Abrams: Yes.

Swenson: Would you say that Mark Tobey had influenced your paintings at all?

Abrams: I have learned a great deal from Tobey. I am sure that... what do you mean, influence?

Swenson: Well, that his painting has influenced your painting – something like that, rather than, I

know that he has helped you.

Abrams: His painting means a great deal to me, and the way he looks at things means a great deal to me. I have learned from this – yes, definitely.

Swenson: Has the sadness of your early life – I know that you were in a concentration camp during the second World War – has it affected your life and your art work?

Abrams: Well, it affected my life very much.

Swenson: That's probably a dumb question (laughter) – I meant your art work.

Abrams: Well, my life is my work now. I was deported from my home and taken to Auschwitz when I was 19 years old. At that time I was not a painter; I was not an artist; I did not know at that time what I was going to be. You see, we lived in Europe during the second World War kind of in limbo. We waited, we waited for “it” to end, so we can see what we can do with our lives. So, all through my growing up I never planned to be anything, because I didn't know whether I could be anything. Well, the time came when the Germans invaded Hungary, and with the help of the Hungarians they deported the Jewish community, and most of the people – most of the Hungarian Jews were murdered that summer in 1944. I survived through a number of very strange coincidences. My family did not. When I first learned surely that my parents were killed I was in concentration camp – I was in Bergen-Belsen. And at that time this was a deep shock, this realization. I really didn't want to live. There was a woman in the same barrack where I was who was much my senior, and who was deported from Paris to Auschwitz and then later to Bergen-Belsen. And her interest and her friendship were very soothing; she was an artist; she talked about her work, about her life in Paris, about her past. It was throughout this period when I felt that I wanted to live after all, and that if I lived I wanted to paint. Later on I was taken from Bergen-Belsen to another concentration camp – this was also a work camp. We worked in a factory, and in this factory it was possible for me to get paper and pencil. And I used to draw, and the women came to me and said, 'Oh, you can draw. Well, would you draw the clothes I used to have in such-and-such a time at such-and-such a place?' 'Well, how did it look?' 'It looked such-and-such.' And then I would draw a figure in this kind of clothes, and they loved it! And I loved it. It was very strange. It was a great consolation; I guess, it was a reaching for some reality from this completely mad, unreal tortured world that we lived in. Anyway, I did live through it, and I ended up being able to come to the United States, and by that time I was very strong in my desire and my quest for becoming a painter, and eventually perhaps an artist, and I was very fortunate to be able to do that. With all the experiences I

have had, perhaps I would never have become an artist, but it made me survive – this desire to become a painter helped me live, and it still does, it still does; being a painter is living – it is my life. As far as my experiences affecting my work – I think my work stems from a stage much before my concentration camp experiences. Erich Fromm says in his essay *The Art of Loving* that a mother's first duty to her child is to teach her child to love life; and I think that my mother was such a woman. She taught me to love life, and she did this when I was very young, of course, and this gave me great strength, and I love life in spite of all. In spite of what I know what life is really like – I still love life, and I think it is this force, this strength that shows in my work, and it is a positive force, and it is a happy force. I don't like to use the word 'happy'; it is overused, but if we think of it as a very basic word – this is the way I want to use it. It is all the positive things about life – all the things about life which make it worthwhile for people to live – that makes me paint, that comes out in my work.

Swenson: Are there any other points that you would like to bring up about your work?

Abrams: You know it's so nice to be asked questions. (laughter) I don't know really what other point I could bring up on my own; I am sure that I could talk about my work endlessly. I live my work. I work, but if I do not work, I think about my work. And if I don't work for a longer period of time, I am very unhappy. Somehow it seems that I am not doing the right thing. The right thing is for me to paint. The right thing is for me to plan my work. That's what I should be doing. And, the process of painting is really a very difficult process. People might think that I get up in the morning and I can hardly wait to go into my studio. It is far from the truth. In my studio there are at least four or five big question marks awaiting me. Some question marks seem so strong that it seems to me I will never answer them. Very, very hard – and sometimes I have a difficult time starting to try to solve these problems that are awaiting me in my studio. One of the things that I do, and I used to do this with a sense of guilt, but now I do it with some justification – I play solitaire before I work. I play solitaire, and after having read a short story by John Updike where he describes what solitaire does, I understand now why I play solitaire. I play solitaire in order to clear my mind of anything extraneous. I concentrate on this, and it is so impersonal and it is so far removed from everything in my life, that finally after a few very serious bouts of solitaire, my mind is completely clear of the world, and I can be free to face my problems in the studio.

Swenson: Thank you very much for this interview – we appreciate it a great deal.

Abrams: I thank you.