



**Artists Documentation Program
Video Interview Transcript**

**JOHN CURRIN
FEBRUARY 21, 2004**

**Interviewed by:
Pia Gottschaller, Associate Conservator, Whitney Museum of American Art**

**Video: Ronald Bronstein | Total Run Time: 01:28:45
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This interview is part of the Artists Documentation Program, a collaboration of the Menil Collection, the Whitney Museum of American Art, and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums.

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About the Artists Documentation Program

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, artists have experimented with an unprecedented range of new materials and technologies. The conceptual concerns underlying much of contemporary art render its conservation more complex than simply arresting physical change. As such, the artist's voice is essential to future conservation and presentation of his or her work.

In 1990, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection for Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, then Chief Conservator, to establish the Artists Documentation Program (ADP). Since that time, the ADP has recorded artists speaking candidly with conservators in front of their works. These engaging and informative interviews capture artists' attitudes toward the aging of their art and those aspects of its preservation that are of paramount importance to them.

The ADP has recorded interviews with such important artists as Frank Stella, Jasper Johns, and Cy Twombly. Originally designed for use by conservators and scholars at the Menil, the ADP has begun to appeal to a broader audience outside the Menil, and the collection has grown to include interviews from two partner institutions: the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Center for the Technical Study of Modern Art, Harvard Art Museums. In 2009, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded a grant to the Menil Collection to establish the ADP Archive, formalizing the multi-institutional partnership and making ADP interviews more widely available to researchers.

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[Speakers (in order of appearance): Pia Gottschaller, Associate Conservator, Whitney Museum of American Art; John Currin, Artist; Rachel Feinstein, wife of the artist]

[BEGIN RECORDING]

[00:00:50]

P. Gottschaller: We are today at the Whitney Museum in New York City. I am very grateful for John Currin, who has agreed to interview with us. My name is Pia Gottschaller. I am the Associate Conservator, and we are here on the second floor, where John's retrospective ["John Currin," Whitney Museum of American Art, November 20, 2003-February 22, 2004] is still up.

[00:01:06]

P. Gottschaller: This one [*The Moved Over Lady*, 1991, Collection of Andrea Rosen], I thought, would be a good one to start with...

John Currin: Okay.

P. Gottschaller: ...a. because there is a specific question I have. But before we get to that, would you mind explaining to me how you went about making a painting like that in '91-'92.

John Currin: This one is – well, the idea came because I was thinking about that postman of van Gogh's. He is wearing a corduroy jacket...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...and it looks like a sort of mountain of melting stuff with a head on top. And I thought, "That's a..." I kind of picked her face out of an opera magazine or something like that. Gave her this arty haircut. And I thought – I made a drawing, I thought – and I didn't actually have the right canvas size for it.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: I only had these big canvases, and it occurred to me it would be really funny to put her kind of too small for the canvas, you know.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: Uh, moved over. So it was actually on another canvas. I had made a painting on that...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...and these paintings came about, I was making really like old, decrepit, like wrinkly old ladies that I kind of made up.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And that idea didn't turn out as well as I thought it would. So I used a painting I wasn't happy with...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...and painted over it.

P. Gottschaller: Did you scrape it down first, or did you just go over it?

John Currin: I don't think it was a very rough painting.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I may have taken some, like, 220 sandpaper maybe and roughened it up a bit.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

John Currin: But generally I would use sandpaper, not really a scraper.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: Occasionally you can see, um – in my paintings, gouged, like these kind of pits.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: Those are when I'm scraping something that's not quite dry.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

- John Currin: But anyway – and at this time, I really liked, actually, working on old paintings. That was the sort of most satisfying surface. I realize...
- P. Gottschaller: Because it had a history already, or what?
- John Currin: Yeah. And it just has an interesting surface, and...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...the fact that you have to cover up something else.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And then you get all kinds of lucky little textures and accidents and things...
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.
- John Currin: ...that can look very nice, and with an exposed edge or something like that.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: I know that that's probably not the best, from a conservation point of view.
- P. Gottschaller: But it looks very good. Very _____ [word inaudible].
- John Currin: Well, actually you can see the negative...
- P. Gottschaller: Yes, you can.
- John Currin: ...of the – that umber and white has stayed more opaque or something. Or perhaps it probably – if this were to be varnished...
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah.
- John Currin: ...that would maybe disappear. I don't know. It would kind of go back to being even.
- P. Gottschaller: Do you mind it being visible to this degree?
- John Currin: Uh, to this degree, I don't mind just because I get a kick out of seeing it. I would never – I would have probably have totally forgotten that I painted this over another painting.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: And now I remember the painting.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: How bad it was. And so, in a way, it's fitting that it come out as a kind of ghost. But...

P. Gottschaller: But does the title, *The Moved Over Lady*, have anything to do with that lady having been in the center, and the other one on the side [sounds like]?

John Currin: Yeah, I think so.

P. Gottschaller: All right.

John Currin: And it was also that I thought of it as a sort of smallest possible, uh, a gesture of disrespect.

(laughter)

John Currin: You know, like this sort of quantum amount of disrespect. But...

[00:04:28]

John Currin: ...Anyway, do you want to know what it's made out of?

P. Gottschaller: I would like to know that. Did you go and buy a stretcher and then start from scratch, pretty much?

John Currin: Yeah. These are pretty cheap stretchers. These are Utrecht, heavy-duty Utrecht stretchers with no cross brace.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Why...

John Currin: Which was a terrible habit I had. Because there is no really easy way to put a cross brace on...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...and I was too lazy, and – I don't know why.

P. Gottschaller: You know, it will have one good side effect, and I'll show you what happens when you do have a cross brace. You don't have any stretcher bar marks ...

John Currin: Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: ...and so that's a big thing [sounds like].

John Currin: Yeah. And on *Thanksgiving* [2003]. That's that a very...

P. Gottschaller: On the...

John Currin: Or on, uh...

P. Gottschaller: *The Old...*

John Currin: ...*The Old Fence...*

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

John Currin: ...that's a very prominent thing.

P. Gottschaller: _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: That was – well, yeah. I'll explain that. But I...

P. Gottschaller: It's not visible.

John Currin: That was because that's actually too thin for how big the painting is.

P. Gottschaller: Right.

John Currin: So – and my medium was always pretty dry...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...by this time. Was fairly – a lot of turpentine.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: And then, in these days, I think it was stand oil and...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...and Damar...

P. Gottschaller: Mixed with oil paints?

John Currin: In a bottle.

P. Gottschaller: Tube...

John Currin: Shaken up in a bottle.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: Probably ten parts turpentine, and probably, uh, to one or two parts of a resin/oil mixture.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

John Currin: And usually the oil – there is more oil than resin.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. And then you would add the pigment as well? Would you...

John Currin: It would just be in a little cup on my palette, and it's what I – if I dipped my brush in that...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...as a medium.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: But, you know, I basically, on the palette, if I modify the paint.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Do you ever use a _____ [word inaudible] knife to make it a perfect mixture? Or is it okay if it's a little lumpy sometimes?

John Currin: This I would have mixed up that umber and white there.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: That was mixed up with a palette knife.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

John Currin Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 02/21/2004

Video: adp2004b_currin_001va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2004b / TRT: 01:28:45

John Currin: And a whole – you know, like a mound of it. And then painted on. Actually there's probably two or three layers of it.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: Of a Winsor & Newton. I think I used mostly Winsor & Newton colors...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...especially earth tones.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: And Old Holland lead white, flake white.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Why do you prefer that to, say, Winsor & Newton's lead white?

John Currin: I just don't like theirs.

P. Gottschaller: No?

John Currin: It's waxy, and it – actually, since I painted this, Old Holland went way down in quality, and I stopped using it.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

John Currin: And I don't want to say what I use now, 'cause everybody would – no, but now – now I'm using – I found that Holbein actually makes a wonderful paint.

P. Gottschaller: Oh, good.

John Currin: But anyway...

P. Gottschaller: So you would buy the stretcher, buy the canvas...

[00:07:25]

John Currin: Yeah, the canvas is from Utrecht as well.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

John Currin: Actually they are like super saver, I think it was.

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- P. Gottschaller: This looks lovely [sounds like].
- John Currin: It turns out their cheapest linen was the nicest stuff they had.
- P. Gottschaller: Hmm. Interesting.
- John Currin: Or the stuff I preferred. I liked it.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. It's quite consistent, what you've been using, except for some that we'll get on later to [sounds like]. But you seem to prefer to put the staples in the back so you have a perfectly clean tacking edge [sounds like]?
- John Currin: Yeah. I stretch it with my hands.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And I staple it. I, long ago, found out that you staple four middle sections...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...and then I just do one whole side.
- P. Gottschaller: Oh, you do?
- John Currin: Then the other whole side. I found that worked way better than the sort of laborious going around it.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: It seemed to turn out nicer...
- P. Gottschaller: Huh. That's interesting.
- John Currin: ...and tighter. So...
- P. Gottschaller: Do you wet it after you've done that? Or does that make it very taut [sounds like]?
- John Currin: And I put two coats of rabbitskin glue on.
- P. Gottschaller: Hmm.

John Currin: And – just the kind you buy – powdered rabbitskin glue. Also from Utrecht.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: They make the best stuff.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

John Currin: And then it was primed – this was probably primed in lead.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: Frederick's used to make my primer in cans. This was done in probably with Frederick's lead primer.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Did that take a long time to dry?

John Currin: Not really. The Frederick's stuff didn't. It has a lot of marble dust, so it would probably take – to dry to the touch would take, you know, four or five days; and then I probably wouldn't paint on it for another month or two.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. So you tend to have several canvases going at the same time when you prepare them?

John Currin: Oh, yeah. I prepare a whole bunch of them.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: Because otherwise you remember how long – you know, you have to have sort of a lot in the pipeline. And then ideally they are a couple of years old when you use them. This, however, had another painting on it...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...and all that kind of stuff. So I – and I may have even, in those days, I might have even put a little bit of cobalt dryer in the primer.

P. Gottschaller: To speed it up?

John Currin: Yeah. Which was probably a very stupid thing to do, but...

P. Gottschaller: Only if you put excessive amounts in there.

John Currin: I probably put, you know...

P. Gottschaller: But you see that right away, because...

John Currin: I put four or five drops in – enough to do a whole thing. But I don't use that stuff anymore.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

[00:09:46]

John Currin: So, anyway, this is – so that's – the background is made out of umber, Winsor & Newton umber, which is a cold umber.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I use two umbers now. I use Old Holland umber and Winsor & Newton umber.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: Old Holland is a very warm umber, and this is a very cold one.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Do you put it on as a wash almost? Or do you put it on in sections almost like as underpainting?

John Currin: Uh...

P. Gottschaller: Not in this case maybe, but in some of your other works, I thought that I saw that, over the white ground, you seemed to put just down just a generally reddish-brownish wash. Is that...

John Currin: Yeah. I don't remember what this would have been. Probably raw umber. A stain of raw umber.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And just turpentine, probably, with a few drops of medium in it. You know, a little bit of medium in it to make it stick. But very, very thin.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And I paint it on, and then rub it off with a rag.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And that dries overnight. And the flesh is made out of – I remember, I had a formula. Things like burnt umber and white in the warm parts, with raw umber and white in the cold parts.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Because that brings up the undertones of the umbers very nicely, doesn't it? Because the raw umber...

John Currin: I thought it looked like painted wood. Something like that.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Yeah. I understand what you are saying.

John Currin: And then the hair is a hot umber stain. See, probably what I did was, I sanded that woman there, and then rubbed on a, like burnt umber, or something like that, and just toned it all down.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And that's what you see through the hair is the stain underneath with probably ivory black, and white, and umber.

[00:11:28]

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. It sounds like you tend to add medium, especially when you use some of the darker pigments, because they can also absorb a lot more, and they tend to dry very matte. Is that something that you do consciously, or do you just...

John Currin: Well, this was – I varnished this at the end.

P. Gottschaller: Aha. That's very interesting.

John Currin: Yeah. I mean, the ivory black, no matter how much you add to it, it dries flat.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: And so the eyes, you know, the pupils, and that turtleneck are just straight ivory black.

- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: And the parts in the hair are umber with ivory black. And the jacket is yellow ochre and burnt umber, I think.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: Maybe with a little bit of burnt sienna in the shadows to warm it up. But probably not.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And I think I sketched the whole thing out. I made this painting very quickly, so I sketched the whole thing out with burnt umber in those days.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. Would you locally varnish, or would you, if _____ [phrase inaudible] varnish?
- John Currin: This, I varnished just the figure.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: These ones, I liked – I wanted the background to look like a – I had in my mind like a – a little bit like, say, a wax painting by Brice Marden or something like that.
- P. Gottschaller: Ohh. Yeah.
- John Currin: This kind of grays. I also was thinking about – I had just seen a whole film festival of Fassbinder, and I noticed he often had – he would – I think it was *The Merchant of Four Seasons* or something, he would often photograph people in front of, like these beige walls. I thought that looked really cool.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. So that's why you needed it to remain matte. Because I think that, in general, your backgrounds all tend to be matte. Not when you get to the 1990s years, 1980s, but especially in these first two rooms [sounds like]...
- John Currin: In these rooms, yeah, yeah.
- P. Gottschaller: ...they are all very matte.

John Currin: Yeah. 'Cause I didn't want it to be a picture. I wanted it to be like a sculpture in front of a monochrome painting.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: Kind of in that vein.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

[00:13:24]

P. Gottschaller: Great. Then I have one last question before we move on. The edges tend – always are, in your work, unpainted. There is no ground on them, and there is no paint there [sounds like]...

John Currin: Oh, on the sides, you mean?

P. Gottschaller: Yes. The tacking margins. Why is that so?

John Currin: There doesn't seem to be any reason for it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. They don't play a particularly important role in how you perceive the overall work itself?

John Currin: I think it looks nice, too.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. It does.

John Currin: I mean, but it also is – I mean, when I prime the canvas, they're primed with a palette knife, with a large knife...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...and then kind of scraped. I put it all on, scrape it all off, work it both directions, scrape it off completely, and then kind of flatten it out. Kind of iron it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And it just looks better. I like seeing some canvas on the side. And that's just – it would be actually work to prime the side. There would be no point in that.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: I don't like seeing white on the sides. When I've used pre-primed canvas, I hate the way that looks.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. You also have staples in those cases _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: Yeah. I just figure, like, if I'm going to do that, I don't care how ugly it is. I just think, like, well, you know, the whole point of using this is that it's quick and convenient, and I can – if I have an idea, and I have to do it right now, I can do it.

P. Gottschaller: I see.

John Currin: So I just – you know, I hope people frame them, basically.

P. Gottschaller: Right. Apropos, uh, frames and so on – 'cause I think that's another interesting issue with your work, it's – now we're in front of *Skinny Woman*, [1992] which is in the Whitney's collection, and I notice that it has a frame, a strip frame, or "L" frame that's quite different from the others in the exhibition.

John Currin: Uh-huh.

P. Gottschaller: Is that a frame that you put on there? Or is it...

John Currin: This one? No.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: No.

P. Gottschaller: What do you think of it?

John Currin: I don't like it, myself. I don't think it's terrible, but I wouldn't – I have never liked this kind of frame that has the little reveal around it...

P. Gottschaller: The lip? Right.

John Currin: I do like frames where it sits way out.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

- John Currin: But I don't know. I just don't like the color so much, you know, and it seems sort of so modest, that why frame it? I don't know.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: I like frames to be, you know, part of it. To really be visible.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah. Well, we'll come back to that subject when we look at some of the other works that have frames that I believe you've picked out, which are much more present also. They have a lot more...
- John Currin: I mean, I like that frame, for instance (gestures toward *Brown Lady*, 1991)
- P. Gottschaller: This one? The brown one? Yes. Is that one that you picked?
- John Currin: No, but someone – I liked – I did pick this idea of a round...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...of this kind of bubble sort of thing that goes around it.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: I sort of liked the way that looked. And that person decided to do it in black.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: But actually I think it looks pretty nice.
- P. Gottschaller: But it's done by the same frame maker, I think.
- John Currin: Yeah, probably.
- P. Gottschaller: _____ [phrase inaudible]
- John Currin: Well, they probably asked me give them a drawing of a molding, and I just said, "Okay, just do it like that and make it three inches."
- P. Gottschaller: Right. Okay.
- John Currin: You know why? Because there is a similar frame on [Picasso's] *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in white, which I always loved.

P. Gottschaller: Oh, really? Uh-huh. Okay.

John Currin: Actually, that one has a flat front, but it rounds to a flat front.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: And I always liked the way that looked.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Do you – basically, then, if there is a frame, you don't mind it being an actual part of the _____ [word inaudible] image...

John Currin: I like frames. Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: Yes. Right.

John Currin: I mean, I think paintings exist apart from their frame. I mean, certainly there's frames that damage – that can really mess up the way a painting looks.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: But in general I prefer it to no frame at all.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. That's also important to have a record.

[00:16:57]

John Currin: You know, I mean, I think – and I like, you know, as far as – I like gaudy frames, if they're nice.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: You know, and the person has some sensitivity about what looks good with a painting. But I like kind of over-the-top frames...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...sometimes.

P. Gottschaller: Make another statement in addition to the work.

John Currin: Plus, I think it's also part of, you know, owning. If somebody buys a painting and owns it, I kind of think it's a nice – I sort of enjoy seeing what they have done with it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: 'Cause I think the painting exists separately from the frame. I think frames are – with some exceptions. I mean, I think with *Moved Over Lady*, that would probably be best unframed, you know.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. I agree, yeah.

John Currin: But I think all these paintings are actually a little bit better unframed.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: This would probably be better unframed.

P. Gottschaller: Because it gives it a little bit more likeness [sounds like], doesn't it? I think that kind of boxes _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: Plus I really have this idea about the paintings being like Brice Marden's.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: I mean, I know they're not like Brice Marden's, and I apologize to Brice Marden if he was like, "If you think those look like my paintings, you're out of your mind!" You know. I mean, those are pretty, like, sorry-ass Brice Mardens. Which they are! But, you know, those would never be framed...

P. Gottschaller: No, they need a clean edge [sounds like].

John Currin: ...or they'd be in a reveal kind of box like this. Shadow box type thing.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: But generally, getting back to this, I don't much like the shadow box style.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. Well, I think you get a very different relationship between the surface of the painting and the wall if you have a frame or an edge in between. Because if there was nothing between the pink surface and the white wall, it would be much gentler. It wouldn't be so....

John Currin: I can see this in a basically a kind of modern frame. A modern gilded frame like a modern molding – with, you know – probably a gold would be nice. Or in – actually a warm tarnished silver. You know, silver leaf.

P. Gottschaller: Sort of what the two *Girls in Bed* are framed as – framed with?

John Currin: Yeah, I think that would probably – you know, in a museum, that’s one thing. On a museum wall, it looks like – you feel too much the taste of – the bourgeois taste of the collector, or something like that.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: But I find, in houses, it’s just better. I’m always pleased to see a frame.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Good.

John Currin: I very much like those frames, you know, for instance (gestures toward *Girl in Bed*, 1993).

P. Gottschaller: Right. They look great. Yeah.

John Currin: Even though I’ve had people tell me, like, “Oh, it’s too bad about those frames,” and everything. But I think, “Gosh, I love them.”

P. Gottschaller: (laughs) Did you specifically pick those?

John Currin: And I’ve seen the *Girl in Bed* [1993, Collection of Dianne Wallace] with a – I’ve seen that in Dianne Wallace’s house, and it looks wonderful there.

P. Gottschaller: Good.

John Currin: And it shows dark walls. It’s very nice.

P. Gottschaller: It pops out [sounds like].

John Currin: Yeah. It has a very kind of luxurious, somber effect.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

[00:19:51]

- P. Gottschaller: You mentioned before that occasionally you would, I think – gouge is not the word that you used, but...
- John Currin: Yeah, there's obviously another painting underneath this.
- P. Gottschaller: Is that what it is? Because I see a number of smaller details [sounds like].
- John Currin: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And I have no idea what that painting was. Wait a second. You know what?
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah? You remember?
- John Currin: No, no, not that one. I don't know what was under here. This might have been quite an old painting...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...underneath her. I remember I had some – I really enjoyed this.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah.
- John Currin: That's from underneath.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: And it was like a scraped, messed up, very stressed out surface that I had scraped and gouged and, you know, tried to get smooth.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And I really enjoyed, then, these things kind of persisting. These crusty things.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. I've read in one review that was written on this work, or the show, that the body is supposedly the body of a younger woman. And when I look at the work, I don't think so actually. I think you could read...
- John Currin: No, I just – I thought of it as – I mean, it's made up, I guess. I don't think so. I mean, I don't know. I mean, those look like kind of wonderful breasts on a – you know – good looking breasts on a woman who is, you know, I guess, as she was here, probably fifty years old.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: So – I don't know. I just thought – I just wanted them to be pleasant to look at and enjoyable. And that was part of the idea of making her naked.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: It would be like a pleasant experience. Not like an, "Oh, my..." You know, like a hideous – I don't know. People are so weird about breasts, though. I don't really know what...

P. Gottschaller: Particularly in America, there seems to be [sounds like]...

John Currin: Well, it's just sort of like, "They're sagging!" someone says – they don't look – you know, for large breasts, those are pretty damned good.

P. Gottschaller: That's what they naturally do yeah.

John Currin: Yeah. So, I mean, I don't – you know. So, anyway, you know...

P. Gottschaller: Coming back to where...

John Currin: This is supposed to be about materials, right?

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

[00:22:08]

P. Gottschaller: Okay, so what would be the basic pigment that you would use for these flesh tones? Would that...

John Currin: This, again, was burnt umber.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Winsor & Newton burnt umber, and white with some – with a little bit of – you know, cooling it off with raw umber and – some of the modeling like that, that inside, that cold side of the nose would have been burnt – would have been raw umber...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

- John Currin: Underneath the eyes and over the – that’s probably raw umber with a little bit of black in it.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.
- John Currin: This would be ivory black with bits of raw umber. Those were probably raw umber and white.
- P. Gottschaller: Do you use titanium white or lead white for mixing a piece? Admixtures [sounds like].
- John Currin: I don’t use titanium white. Generally.
- P. Gottschaller: At all?
- John Currin: I have – there’s a – I’ll show you where I have used it.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: But, no. And this was – I don’t really like titanium white. But...
- P. Gottschaller: It’s very bluish and cold. I think it’s hard to get it _____ [phrase inaudible]...
- John Currin: It’s cold. It’s gray, actually, and it kills the mid – it just sort of – it’s like flake white brings out kind of three aspects of a color. You know, kind of a transparent aspect, a tint aspect, and a straight aspect.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.
- John Currin: And like a warm, a cool, and a kind of body, and a kind of opaque one.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And titanium just seems to be – it looks like house paint to me. Titanium.
- P. Gottschaller: It’s very hard to work with, yeah.
- John Currin: And I don’t know. It’s fine for – basically, it’s fine for really crappy paintings. I mean, I looked at de Kooning’s paintings, his late paintings, those are obviously done with titanium. And I think he knows how to paint with

titanium really beautifully, and it becomes – the things that titanium does kind of become part of those paintings.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Plus, I think, with titanium, you really have to use cadmiums.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: You have to use these kind of chemical, bright colors.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: So, anyway, these are – I don't really – but I don't like cadmiums either.

P. Gottschaller: No.

John Currin: That said, this background is cadmium yellow with a raw umber and white.

P. Gottschaller: Oh, that's interesting. Because you've got it to looking like a very warm cadmium, which is hard to do because they tend to be very flat, with pigments.

John Currin: Yeah. Not very much cadmium. I mean – but I would have – I remember I liked this color a lot 'cause it had this strange – I'd been in New Mexico, and there's this grass kind of – in the Petrified Forest, there's this kind of grassy area that you see in the distance...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...and the grass sort of glows this weird neon yellow. But a dull yellow. And that's kind of what I thought I was thinking about with that. And this, the tint on here would have been alizarin, and...

P. Gottschaller: Oh, right...

John Currin: ...and probably alizarin and burnt umber and white.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

[00:25:12]

- P. Gottschaller: Now since you finished those works, John, have you noticed any changes. For example, in her lips, has it – has the red faded a little?
- John Currin: This one looks exactly like when I made it.
- P. Gottschaller: Okay. Is that also something that you hope it will do in, say, fifty years time?
- John Currin: Yeah, I hope it stays the way I made it. That has gotten considerably warmer. That background.
- P. Gottschaller: That *Moved Over Lady*?
- John Currin: Yeah.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.
- John Currin: That's yellowed. So...
- P. Gottschaller: Does that bother you?
- John Currin: Yes, that bothers me tremendously.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And especially since it's avoidable. Because if they were – when they're – that one has yellowed only a little bit.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: If they are kept in darkness, then they yellow like crazy.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah.
- John Currin: Which is what irritates me. When I was doing this show, it's what irritated – when people say, like, “Oh, we gotta keep the light levels down.”
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: It was like, that can only help the painting.
- P. Gottschaller: Because it bleaches out [sounds like]...

- John Currin: It's darkness that hurts the painting, not light. Not light. At least with my colors. 'Cause I don't use fugitive colors.
- P. Gottschaller: Right.
- John Currin: So, you know, put the paintings in light. Not sunlight, you know. Not like direct sunlight.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah. But probably...
- John Currin: But I think you should treat paintings like people. And they seem to do best when they are in an environment that would be comfortable for you.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. That's very good advice.
- John Currin: You wouldn't want to live in a dim, fluorescent storage basement.
- P. Gottschaller: Right. _____ [word inaudible]. Yeah. All right. Maybe that's also something that we can keep in mind as we go on. Whenever you notice changes, that you point them out.
- John Currin: Yeah.
- P. Gottschaller: And say which ones you're...
- John Currin: Yeah. Well, speaking of which, I mean, there's this one that we've talked about.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah. Actually, I have a very particular question about the left *Girl in Bed*. I assume that that – whatever it is – happened very quickly after you painted this...
- John Currin: Yes.
- P. Gottschaller: There's a drying *craquelure*?
- John Currin: Yes. This happened...
- P. Gottschaller: Did you see that happening?
- John Currin: Yeah, that happened like – it was weird. That happened like right away. I mean, it happened, you know, a month after I painted it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: So...

P. Gottschaller: Do you have any idea why?

John Currin: It's progressed a little bit.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I don't know if that one was there. I do know that that was there, and that these ones were there.

P. Gottschaller: All right. Uh-huh.

John Currin: I don't know what it is. I think I painted it over – well, this painting was painted over a painting that I made of a building...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...in perspective. You can kind of still see the lines.

P. Gottschaller: Yes. Those in there.

John Currin: And I used ivory black, straight ivory black, in some parts of it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And I might have used alizarin, which I find alizarin is even worse to paint over than ivory black.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: I mean, you're not supposed to paint over ivory black.

P. Gottschaller: No. Because it never really dries and...

John Currin: Well, also it's a sort of soft...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And it has such a much higher oil content that it – and the pigment itself is just a sort of shifting sand to paint on.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: But I think that might have even been like alizarin and black mixed together, or something like that. Something awful.

P. Gottschaller: Right.

John Currin: So these parts that were made out of – anyway, this one did this. And there's a few little ones that I've noticed up here...

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. It's very discreet.

John Currin: I think there was like a window in the building, like right here.

P. Gottschaller: Ah, that's interesting.

John Currin: And so that's what's going on.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: But, you know, I actually kind of think it looks cool. But (laughs)...

[00:28:25]

P. Gottschaller: Okay. Because, you know, sometimes conservators get tempted and want to inpaint that. And I personally don't.

John Currin: They'd better get my goddamned permission before they do that. I don't want anybody inpainting.

P. Gottschaller: Good. All right.

John Currin: I really don't want that.

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

John Currin: That would piss me off.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 02/21/2004

Video: adp2004b_currin_001va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2004b / TRT: 01:28:45

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- John Currin: Because I know what they'd do. What they'd do is, they fill it with plaster, and then they'd use colored pencils on it. And I just hate the way it looks. You can see it. That's the way they do it, right?
- P. Gottschaller: I personally wouldn't use colored pencil. I would use actual, you know...
- John Currin: A water-based...
- P. Gottschaller: ...a synthetic...
- John Currin: ...a kind of water color.
- P. Gottschaller: ...resin. No, I would use something slightly resinous because it would have to get that sheen. But I wouldn't do it. I think – you know, when you look at these Malevichs, for example, that were up at the Guggenheim not very long ago [“Malevich: Suprematism” Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, Co-organized with The Menil Collection, May 13-September 14, 2003], you saw these extremely wide cracks, drying cracks, that you know were happening while Malevich was still looking at it.
- John Currin: Yeah.
- P. Gottschaller: And there are still people who feel that that should be inpainted, which I think is amazing because clearly, as in your case, he knew that they were there, and he didn't mind. He didn't paint over them.
- John Currin: Yeah. I just...
- P. Gottschaller: So it's important that [sounds like]...
- John Currin: The other thing is, they are going to keep cracking. I mean, if you inpaint, they are going to crack more. And then it's going to look worse.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And I just – I'm thinking about that famous painting of Ingres, where the Muse is holding, I think, a wreath out to – it's that guy who is going like this, and he's got like gray hair [Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *Luigi Cherubini and the Muse of Lyric Poetry*, 1842, Louvre, Paris].
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

- John Currin: And Ingres added the muse in the background layer, and he must have used ivory black and white. Her face is just alligatored to pieces.
- P. Gottschaller: Wow!
- John Currin: It's just completely cracked.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: And I just think like, "What if somebody inpainted it, you know?" Especially on a face.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah.
- John Currin: To me, every single atom on the face, I don't know, I just kind of think like...
- P. Gottschaller: Treat it with utmost respect [sounds like].
- John Currin: ...I would see it instantly that somebody else had touched it. I just think like, it's one thing if a big crack's in the background, and that's fine, you know.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.
- John Currin: Like the cracks that were inpainted on that bottom painting.
- P. Gottschaller: On the bottom? Yeah.
- John Currin: It's okay, and it looks – and they were pretty bad and everything. But I think on a face – so if it's on an ass, you can inpaint...
- P. Gottschaller: (laughing)
- John Currin: ...but on a face, I think...
- P. Gottschaller: So there's a hierarchy of _____ [phrase inaudible] anatomical parts. (laughs)
- John Currin: Yeah, there is a hierarchy. But I think, on a face, you shouldn't really inpaint. Unless it's something that's just really kind of, you know, you can't see – you just, you know. But on the other hand, I like the way it looks. I mean, I would rather the cracking wasn't there, but I wouldn't fix it.

P. Gottschaller: I think it adds something very interesting, especially to the nose.

John Currin: It adds to her personality. It just makes her, like, look a little – even sadder. I don't know. I've always enjoyed it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: You know. I would have fixed it if I really thought it – the stuff on the nose happened right away.

P. Gottschaller: Right.

John Currin: So, you know...

[00:31:03]

John Currin: ...I think I used – that has some funky colors in it, too. That probably has some fake Naples yellow.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And I don't know what I used. Probably burnt umber plus Naples yellow.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: But that's not really – Naples yellow is really just a zinc white and cadmium yellow, and, you know...

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: ...and yellow ochre and...

P. Gottschaller: It's a sort of fake mixture [sounds like]...

John Currin: It's a terrible material, actually.

P. Gottschaller: Hmm.

John Currin: And so...

P. Gottschaller: It has more tint [sounds like] _____ [word inaudible]...

- John Currin: Plus, zinc just is not – I don't think zinc is a good white.
- P. Gottschaller: Pigment? You don't like it? It can be very warm...
- John Currin: It just – I don't know, it just doesn't seem to do nice things for me.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.
- John Currin: And it's greasy. I don't know.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Which blue did you pick for that?
- John Currin: That would be Prussian blue.
- P. Gottschaller: Ah.
- John Currin: Which I know everybody says you're not supposed to use it, but it's like, it looks exactly like – well, that's a pretty old painting now. It's eleven years old, and it hasn't changed color at all.
- P. Gottschaller: Is that a Prussian blue that you bought, again, as a pigment? Or something you bought in a tube?
- John Currin: Tube.
- P. Gottschaller: Tube?
- John Currin: And I think it's real Prussian blue. I think...
- P. Gottschaller: It is. 'Cause I was going to ask, yeah.
- John Currin: I don't mean – it's not Thalo. It's like – it's, what do you call it? Copper...
- P. Gottschaller: It's an iron-based pigment, yeah.
- John Currin: Actually the pigment for Prussian blue is very similar sounding to phthalocyanine.
- P. Gottschaller: Um, it's a ferrocyanide [sounds like]?
- John Currin: Yeah. It's like copper ferrocyanate [sounds like] or cyanide or something like that.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

John Currin: There's one company, I think – Schminke makes a good Prussian blue.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And...

P. Gottschaller: John, how do you know so much about pigments? It that something you were just _____ [phrase inaudible]...

John Currin: Just interesting, yeah.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah? Do you...

John Currin: In the bathroom, I think, I have a pigment book, you know. Like it's just something I like to look at.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: I'm a real nerd with stuff like that, so I like to look at it, you know.

P. Gottschaller: That's great. That's very good for us.

John Currin: And it's also easy – for some weird reason; I don't know chemicals and all that stuff – for some weird reason, I find it very easy to recall the chemical names of pigments.

P. Gottschaller: Hmm. Uh-huh.

John Currin: Because they are – because, I don't know, there is like so much – like, you think of, like, vermilion is a mercuric sulfide, you know.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. (laughs)

John Currin: And lead antimonate is Naples yellow. And they just seem to sound like the color, almost more than the other name.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. There is a word in German which I don't think translates into English. It is *Lautmalerei* [literally “sound painting”], where you've got words that – the sound that the word itself makes...

John Currin: Yes, yes.

P. Gottschaller: ...is almost a description of what it really is.

John Currin: Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: And I think that's sort of the case with some of the pigments. You almost think you see the color when you just see hear name.

John Currin: Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: Because it's so descriptive. All right.

[00:33:45]

John Currin: And this background, incidentally, is – in case that starts to crack, and somebody has to mess with it...

P. Gottschaller: I think that it's quite – it's only a little – it seems that the medium was absorbed unevenly, so it may have got some errors which you see in the picture [sounds like]...

John Currin: Yeah. And as a matter of fact, I had a weird problem when I varnished this painting.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: It beaded up like crazy.

P. Gottschaller: Oh, is that the one?

John Currin: Remember, when I was varnishing *Thanksgiving*, [2003] I was terrified that would happen. And it didn't happen at all.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: But this, it was like – I mean, it was just like painting – it was as if I was painting water onto it. It was unbelievable.

P. Gottschaller: Wow!

John Currin: And I had to, like...

- P. Gottschaller: Was it like dissolving instantly, the second you put the brush on? Is that what was happening?
- John Currin: No, no, it would bead up. It would be very much like if you were painting water onto – onto an oil painting.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Okay.
- John Currin: It was just like, you know, it would turn into beads of...
- P. Gottschaller: Right.
- John Currin: You know, it was like, “How could that possibly be?”
- P. Gottschaller: That’s really strange.
- John Currin: And I don’t know how I fixed it.
- P. Gottschaller: Did you add some alcohol, maybe? Something to sort of...
- John Currin: I know that you can add, like naphtha, maybe. Or you can add – I didn’t know any of that stuff. I think probably what I did is, I just took turpentine, a little bit of turpentine, and rubbed it on it just to try to wet – as a wetting agent, and that seemed to work.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. What sponge did you use?
- John Currin: Since the painting wasn’t finished yet, that was probably incredibly injurious to the painting, but whatever. Who cares? So it looks okay now.
- P. Gottschaller: It looks very good.
- John Currin: It was up here was where I had the real problem.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Yeah, you can’t tell now. I think it worked out fine. What’s the actual varnish you put on?
- John Currin: It would have been Winsor & Newton Damar.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

- John Currin: _____ [word inaudible] that. Although this might have – well, no, no, no. It would have been Winsor & Newton.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: I used to make my own Damar, and it would be super ultra thick. And then I realized, you know what, I have no interest in really thick Damar.
- P. Gottschaller: Right.
- John Currin: So I just get the Winsor & Newton, which seems to be the nicest stuff.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Does it tend to dry matte, or glossy, or...
- John Currin: Oh, it's glossy.
- P. Gottschaller: Very glossy.
- John Currin: Very glossy. And then I cut it probably – it's probably sixty percent turpentine...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...forty. Theirs is a pretty light-bodied. So I take that stuff and...
- P. Gottschaller: It has some wax in it, too, I think. You see when it's cloudy [phrase inaudible]...
- John Currin: The wax settles at the bottom. So you try not to shake up the bottle.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: Although the wax might be in there to keep that from happening. (gestures toward painting)
- P. Gottschaller: It's a matting – yeah – and maybe it's a matting agent, because if you have absolutely nothing in it, it could be so super shiny.
- John Currin: I just find that if you spread it out thinly with a brush, that that...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

- John Currin: ...I don't know. Paintings ought to be shiny. I think they ought to be shiny.
- P. Gottschaller: Interesting. Uh-huh.
- John Currin: You know, I mean, I don't know. If you light them correctly, the shininess is no problem.
- P. Gottschaller: Yes.
- John Currin: It's only the Abstract Expressionists that guilted everybody into not varnishing their paintings.
- P. Gottschaller: Because they thought it was academic, you think?
- John Currin: They felt that – they had the Marxist reasons to say that it's a bourgeois thing, and it denies that this thing is a surface in the room.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: You know, it's a kind of materialist philosophy [sounds like]. Whatever. Anyway, it was like – I realized, you know, I have all these problems with colors not drying properly. You know, it was like, "Well, varnish it." You know, that's the simple solution.
- P. Gottschaller: Now, how much time do you tend to let elapse between finishing a painting and then varnishing it? Do you have a rule for that, or...
- John Currin: Well, the rule I always break. I've almost always varnished paintings too soon.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: But I haven't had real problems, because I think the varnish I put on is so thin that it's not really a problem.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: I've never seen it crack.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I mean, that's one thing I've noticed about this show. I've looked around to see if there has really been a problem with that. And, you know, in the old days, when they used to, like, put gigantically thick mastic varnish – you know, layers on...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...that would dry that day, and then that thing was like this piece of, you know – then those things would crack, especially if it's mobile underneath. But I don't – my varnish is so thin. I usually wait, you know, at least a month or two. And I also tend to favor fast-drying colors.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I mean, that's the nice thing about using flake white.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Oh, and as I was saying, that's probably chromium oxide green, and a little bit of warm raw umber, and white.

P. Gottschaller: Do you tend to paint your backgrounds last? Is that the last thing you put on _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: Yes. I mean, I may have painted that background and then gone back in, but that seems to be like, you work on the subject, and then you try to put the background around it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

[00:38:30]

P. Gottschaller: John, let's quickly talk about *The Neverending Story*, [1994, Collection of David Teiger,] I think it is.

John Currin: This is a case of pre-primed canvas.

P. Gottschaller: So in this case, you bought it as-is, with the staples, and then you just decided to leave them. This is maybe not the perfect example, but I notice...

John Currin: I didn't buy the stretcher. I bought the canvas.

P. Gottschaller: Oh, okay. So you...

John Currin: That's stretched by me.

P. Gottschaller: Oh, you did that?

John Currin: Yeah. But it's easier with the pliers and everything to put them in the side.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. You get a better tension. That's fine.

John Currin: Yeah. It just makes – this part of the painting ends up nicer. This part looks ugly.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: But, you know, it ought to be framed.

P. Gottschaller: Okay, so whenever you've got staples showing, you'd rather have it framed?

John Currin: Yeah. I hate seeing – I hate seeing the whole – on the other hand, what I hate even more is when people, like, tape the side of their painting, and it's all clean. I just think that's awful. So, you know, I would just – plus this is probably – pre-primed canvas is just not a nice thing to paint on, but if I – I needed this canvas like kind of right away.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And there seems to be, like, a bloom on here of some sort of fungus, or...

P. Gottschaller: Yes, something – blanching maybe, yeah.

John Currin: ...something going on. I don't know what it is.

P. Gottschaller: _____ [phrase inaudible] matte.

John Currin: But it's not from an old painting [sounds like]. This was painted right on the canvas, and there is no other – there's not an old painting underneath this. So I don't know what that is.

P. Gottschaller: So that's not something you remember seeing before? That's new, you think?

John Currin: No, that's new.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: That might be water that's gotten in under the varnish layer.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And just made a – and just, you know, it just –

P. Gottschaller: Just broken in [sounds like]?

John Currin: It's like a – yeah.

P. Gottschaller: You get little fractures underneath [sounds like]. So it will turn gray, and – all right. Uh, is there anything else that you would like to say about this work?

John Currin: You want to know what colors they are?

P. Gottschaller: The red, for example.

John Currin: Oh, yeah, that's Venetian red. And probably Venetian red with alizarin in it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And, uh – although, you know what? No, it's not. No, it's not. Because I can see right there, that's obviously vermilion.

P. Gottschaller: That's much brighter.

John Currin: So this is vermilion with Venetian red. I don't think I – I think I first got it, my first tube of vermilion, right around here.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: Which was a complete revelation.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Because it's like – this is like cadmium, but it doesn't do all the ugly things that cadmium does.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Unfortunately, it's a hundred and eighty dollars a tube.

P. Gottschaller: Is that the Blockx tube you talked about?

John Currin: Yeah. Yeah. And they've even discontinued that now.

P. Gottschaller: Hmm.

[00:41:08]

John Currin: The general trend is, if something's really nice, they'll discontinue it.

P. Gottschaller: (laughing)

John Currin: And some lawyer will say, "Oh, it's toxic if you eat the tube." So, you know.

P. Gottschaller: Right. So what are you going to do?

John Currin: I don't know.

P. Gottschaller: Will you hunt around?

John Currin: I'll tell you this. I mean, just as an aside.

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

John Currin: The environmentalist kind of lobby is going to completely kill any kind of quality oil paint.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Because they are doing it to the...

P. Gottschaller: Because of this extreme [sounds like]...

John Currin: The lead paint. This hysteria about lead paint, and about cadmium, about mercury, about all these things that, you know, basically, obviously, they are poisonous substances that, if you ate them...

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

- John Currin: Or actually more apropos, if you smoke cigarettes, and you get paint all over the cigarette, and then you smoke it, and it goes right in your lungs, yeah, that's bad.
- P. Gottschaller: Yes.
- John Currin: But that's just – you know, I just – I have to say it's a – I hope you have a lot of tape in your camera, because I can really get going on this subject. It just infuriates me how they've ruined lead white, which is the, you know...
- P. Gottschaller: It's a big problem for us, too. We can't get it, you know. Even most conservators [sounds like].
- John Currin: And, you know, in Europe, these idiots from 1968 in Europe have ruined the lead – have ruined something that was basically what oil painting is based on.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And they're ignorant. They don't – you know, they say, "Well, no lead paint."
- P. Gottschaller: Well, I think, unless you actually use it and know what the bad and the good stuff does, it's very hard for people to understand that the replacements are just replacements. They are just not as...
- John Currin: Yeah. But these people are religious, basically, about that.
- P. Gottschaller: You think it's ideological, this [sounds like]...
- John Currin: It's a religious idea that they've got to get rid of this stuff. And they've – I don't know. I am infuriated by it. And the quest for good lead white is something that's really driven me almost crazy.
- P. Gottschaller: Have you tried Kremer Pigments? You know, this guy who is...
- John Currin: Yeah, but the irony is, is all these idiots that have forced everybody to stop manufacturing lead white, are making artists have to make their own lead white, using powdered pigment...
- P. Gottschaller: Oh, that's really healthy...

- John Currin: ...in a crowded city like New York. And, you know, it's just crazy. It's crazy.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: But they don't care about that, you know. So anyway...
- P. Gottschaller: So what – how are you _____ [phrase inaudible]...
- John Currin: So anyway, they are going to get rid of cadmium, but that's – I don't mind that, because I don't like cadmium. But now you can't get vermilion anymore.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: I mean, it might also be for other reasons. That it's so expensive, and there's so little market that they don't want to take the trouble to manufacture a poisonous paint.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: But then I think about, you know, your average photo studio is pumping out silver – you know, just all kinds of crap into the sewer...
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah. I think it's sort of out of proportion, the worry that people have. Because the amounts that we are using are tiny in comparison to other areas [sounds like].
- John Currin: Yes. I know, and they're used ...
- P. Gottschaller: I mean, look at the lead windows.
- John Currin: And you're not – you know, it's just – and the stuff sticks to the canvas. It's not like ghetto children are going to eat paint chips from this painting. You know what I mean? And so – anyway, I'm – that's been a really harsh thing for me to deal with, because lead paint, lead white is the basis of oil painting.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And it's gone down in quality so radically from what it was in even the 1920s or '30s that, you know, it's just ruined. It's not opaque anymore.

P. Gottschaller: And you feel it is seriously impinging on what you can do in terms of painting?

John Currin: Yeah, sure.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: When you look at – if you look at, like, the rigging in a Canaletto painting...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...you couldn't do that now. You know, like he couldn't make those paintings now. They wouldn't look like that.

P. Gottschaller: That's very interesting.

John Currin: And you just wouldn't have – I mean, it helps to be Canaletto to make those things, too. But what I mean is, is that there's so many – I get very jealous of thinly painted yet opaque flourishes in older paintings. You can do that. You can imitate it with titanium white, but you won't – but the color will be dead.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: So that's the choice. I tried – in some other paintings I'll show you, I tried mixing in some titanium powder into my lead white to try to get some sort of medium. But I would find – and the irritating sort of fungal death vibe of titanium would work its way in.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

[00:45:19]

John Currin: This, I wanted it to be unpleasant. An unpleasant kind of ice cream color. And this is titanium.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: And – oh, wait a second. No, it's not. No, it's not titanium. But it is cadmium. It's cadmium red.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. That's...

- John Currin: And...
- P. Gottschaller: ...candy-like.
- John Currin: Yeah. I dislike cadmium a lot.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And that's why I used – I used these on purpose. I used cadmiums.
- P. Gottschaller: But then how did you get that extremely warm, transparent...
- John Currin: That is just...
- P. Gottschaller: ...hue. It's beautiful.
- John Currin: ...that's burnt umber and over – just transparently used. See, that's the thing is – most bright colors you can get by just using colors transparently.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.
- John Currin: And, you know, if you want it to be bright, just put something light underneath and use them transparently.
- P. Gottschaller: Right.
- John Currin: Then you don't have to use cadmiums.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: Most painting today is done with opaque – everything is pretty much equally opaque.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And so they mix things, basically, like house paint; and you have to use bright chemical colors to get them up. Which can be cool in some ways, but I just – it's not – part of the magic of painting is to have a sort of three dimensional analog, you know, a movement through a pigment...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

- John Currin: ...from the warm to the body to the cold. You know, the body color to the cold color.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And that's – I mean, things like burnt umber and burnt sienna, and, you know, they do that very well.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: So these incredibly hot parts are just from burnt umber being transparent.
- P. Gottschaller: John, two things I thought of, which I want to ask you about, is, number one, on that painting, for example, would you – the first thing you put down after the ground, would that be a uni-colored wash over the whole thing? Or how would you start working on the figure, for example?
- John Currin: These were all _____ [word inaudible].
- P. Gottschaller: Do you have underdrawing on that?
- John Currin: It looks like there was a burnt umber stain.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah, I think you actually see it on the sides a little bit. So that goes over the entire surface?
- John Currin: Yeah. This would have been primed in white...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...and then a stain of burnt umber.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. And after that, would you draw the figure in, say, lead white, or flake white, or how do you...
- John Currin: I would draw the figure in probably more burnt umber...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...or maybe in Venetian red. Some Venetian red. I might have used Venetian red.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And sometimes raw umber. I mean, depending on whether I want cold or hot. I mean, they would never be cold, because they'd be transparent, but this looks like it was – you know what. No, it – well, no, that might be from the old – that might be from another layer of that. I think I tried yellow first or something like that.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. There is something shining through. Yes. But it gives it very nice, bright undertones.

John Currin: Yeah. You get this nice red, yellow, blue kind of...

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

John Currin: ...sparkly stuff.

[00:48:03]

P. Gottschaller: Now that's a particularly textured canvas. Did you pick that on purpose?

John Currin: Yeah. I don't know where it's from. I might have bought that at New York Central Art Supply, which has nicer canvases than – that has a nicer range of canvas than Utrecht.

P. Gottschaller: Is that where you buy most of your stuff now?

John Currin: Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Do you ever go to Pearl?

John Currin: Pearl is a terrible art store. I don't mind saying that. The last time I went there to look for rabbit – I went there to get rabbitskin glue. They didn't have any rabbitskin glue, and I vowed never to walk in the place again.

P. Gottschaller: Is that the one on Canal?

John Currin: Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: I think they...

John Currin: It's sad. I used to go there when I was a teenager. I would drive into the city to get stuff, and it was a wonderful store.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And it's just – it's just awful.

P. Gottschaller: It's gone downhill. Uh-huh. Right.

John Currin: If you want little, like, magnets for your refrigerator, then that's the place to go.

P. Gottschaller: (laughing)

John Currin: But it's a tragedy what happened.

P. Gottschaller: It used to be good. Yeah.

John Currin: Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: This guy – I did some work on [Blinky] Palermo. He bought all his stuff there.

John Currin: Yeah, I know. It's a tragedy what's happened to that place.

P. Gottschaller: _____ [phrase inaudible]. Yeah.

John Currin: I mean, I still – I actually will set foot in there because I live – I mean, I live three blocks away, so it's like I'll go there. But it's just – it's really a sad place now.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: So I don't buy any basic – Utrecht's a great company, and proves that you can do this kind of mass stuff for the students and everything, and still be a wonderful company.

P. Gottschaller: Right.

John Currin: So, Utrecht, I love Utrecht.

P. Gottschaller: You're a fan. Very good.

John Currin Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 02/21/2004

Video: adp2004b_currin_001va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2004b / TRT: 01:28:45

- John Currin: But New York Central is the best art store in Manhattan, and it's the best – you know, kind of big art store in Manhattan. And they have lots of beautiful canvases. Linens.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Now while we're talking about supplies and all that, is there a particular manual that you would refer to sometimes, perchance?
- John Currin: Yes. I think – first of all, I would start out by saying, “Don't use the Mayer *Artist's Handbook [of Materials and Techniques]*, first published in 1940.”
- P. Gottschaller: Ralph Mayer. Um-hum. Um-hum.
- John Currin: I think it's so conservative that it's...
- P. Gottschaller: Not correct either, sometimes _____ [phrase inaudible].
- John Currin: I think it's wrong about a lot of things, and it's also so conservative that basically his attitude is, you know, the safest thing to do is not to paint a painting at all.
- P. Gottschaller: (laughing)
- John Currin: Then it will never crack.
- P. Gottschaller: No problems.
- John Currin: You know, if you just don't make a painting, then everything is okay.
- P. Gottschaller: Right.
- John Currin: And, you know, he's just sort of like – “It's a little bit dangerous to use this pigment.” You know, it's just absurd.
- P. Gottschaller: It's overly cautious [sounds like].
- John Currin: Although it has a wonderful pigment list...
- P. Gottschaller: It does?
- John Currin: ...in the beginning. And I think he's probably a pretty good chemist and all that. But, anyway, the one that's good is – I like it the best, because it tells you you can do the most – maybe he's wrong – is the German guy, Max

Doerner. [*The Materials of the Artist and Their Use in Painting*, first published in 1949].

P. Gottschaller: Doerner? Yeah. Not everything that he wrote is correct. _____ [phrase inaudible] with Rubens and stuff. But it's very lovely to read.

[00:50:53]

John Currin: Well, everybody's got the wrong idea about Rubens.

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

John Currin: But, I mean, I think Rubens just looks like it's like that. They actually look pretty simple. I don't think there's any, you know, Maroger [medium], or megilp or whatever. What is the...

P. Gottschaller: Yeah, the resin/oil mixture, the megilp _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: Yeah, that kind of wax, cooked wax, resin, and oil, or something. That's that – anyway, I don't think he used Maroger or something like that. They look pretty simple. They look like they are just made. Mostly, he draws so well that he doesn't ever really need to correct anything.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And he can paint on the fly so beautifully that – yeah, that's the secret of those things.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And maybe he didn't use any – I doubt – he probably didn't use any varnish, any resin at all.

P. Gottschaller: You don't think so, no?

John Currin: Probably not. And he gets everything one shot, so he doesn't worry about whether it dries or not.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: So he can just use a very fluid – except I'm starting to realize – is maybe this idea of a medium that stays wet...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...and allows all this stuff, but then lets you – it's like, no, those guys draw and paint so well that they almost never correct anything.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: So they never have this problem of it taking – it doesn't matter how long it takes to dry. They painted it in one day, and then they never looked back.

P. Gottschaller: Well, plus there were huge formats, so they could work on one side on one day, and then they would just move...

John Currin: Yes. And maybe – I don't know, maybe the weather was different. I don't know. I do wonder how the Venetians did those paintings. They must put resin, like a ton of resin in.

P. Gottschaller: Well, I thought – I _____ [phrase inaudible]

John Currin: Everybody swears that they didn't, but I think...

P. Gottschaller: I thought that even Rubens said that whenever he used the panels – which he did most of the time anyway – that the first, as a wash that he put down, which a lot of times still allows you to see the wood grain, that looks like it's got tons of resin in it. But just because it's got that transparency...

John Currin: I don't think that's even – I think that that's probably – I wouldn't be surprised if that was like egg or something like that.

P. Gottschaller: Hmm.

John Currin: Something kind of fast drying. Ah, who knows?

P. Gottschaller: To seal it off [sounds like]...

John Currin: Yeah. You know, it's just something that just seems – it seems – but it might be; it's hard to tell because those things are so old, you know.

P. Gottschaller: Let me do some reading on it. Because I think that conservators have done some studies, but I haven't read them, so I'll let you know what they think.

John Currin: But in my case...

P. Gottschaller: Yes. (laughing)

John Currin: ...to go from, like, Rubens to me, you know, I mean, it's a...

P. Gottschaller: Good job!

John Currin: ...sort of abrupt – like falling twelve stories, but you know. What I want is something that dries fast.

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

John Currin: That allows me to correct it. But I hate when things get sticky, so more and more – I mean, through this show, I basically am removing Damar from my mixtures.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Because it does tend to make it gloopy?

John Currin: It gets sticky. After two hours of painting, then you can't paint anymore. You can't move it anymore. It gets sticky. It pulls the hair off your brush. All that stuff.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: And it just – it looks ugly. I don't know. I don't like it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I do use sometimes a little bit of copal. I know you're not supposed to use that. I use it because Doerner said I could.

P. Gottschaller: All right. Well then. _____ [phrase inaudible]

John Currin: I don't use very much. I use very, very – I'll tell you the mixtures later on.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. Okay.

John Currin: So we should move.

P. Gottschaller: That's – yeah.

[00:54:13]

- P. Gottschaller: I had a quick question about *The Cripple*, [1997, Collection of Susan and Michael Hort] and the...
- John Currin: Uh, this one's made weird. This is a weird situation, this one.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: I made an experiment of making a ground that would be gesso. The old gesso, you know, plaster, slaked plaster...
- P. Gottschaller: Calcium carbonate [sounds like]?
- John Currin: ...or whatever that stuff is.
- P. Gottschaller: Gypsum?
- John Currin: It's like slaked plaster. It's plaster that's...
- P. Gottschaller: Oh, it's slaked lime. Yes.
- John Currin: Slaked lime?
- P. Gottschaller: Yes. Uh-huh.
- John Currin: It's just – it's old-fashioned gesso, which is like rabbitskin glue and...
- P. Gottschaller: It could be either calcium carbonate or calcium sulfate _____ [phrase inaudible]...
- John Currin: Yeah. One of those.
- P. Gottschaller: ...if it's _____ [word inaudible].
- John Currin: I don't know. It was just something that came in a can, and it was...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And I made up, with rabbitskin – you know, one of those – the kind you put on the panel and all that.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

- John Currin: Dries very fast. And you heat it up.
- P. Gottschaller: Kind of chalky [sounds like].
- John Currin: And it has – I think it’s just rabbitskin glue and calcium carbonate.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And I heated it up, and then I added boiled linseed oil to it...
- P. Gottschaller: Hmm.
- John Currin: ...to make an emulsion.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah. That’s good.
- John Currin: And to make a fast-drying emulsion.
- P. Gottschaller: And it would make it more flexible, too, wouldn’t it?
- John Currin: Yeah. And I thought, “Well, that’s a way I can prime a canvas and have it ready to go the next day.”
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: And yet still be something lovely, rather than using plastic gesso.
- P. Gottschaller: Right.
- John Currin: And I did it. It was okay, but it just sucked everything out of the paint like you wouldn’t believe. It was like painting on – like...
- P. Gottschaller: Chalk.
- John Currin: Yeah. It was like painting on a piece of chalk. It just sucked the oil right out of it. So I don’t think I’m going to have a problem with that, because I did it so thinly, and I sanded it almost down to the – leaving a very thin layer.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: And actually – this is now getting to be a little bit old – I see no cracking at all.

- P. Gottschaller: No. But, you know, John, I think the simplest way for you to deal with the absorption problem would be to just put an isolating layer of Damar on it. You might not want to paint on that ground, but...
- John Currin: I found that that kept just persisting. I mean, I – yeah, I know. I probably should have done a...
- P. Gottschaller: Sort of an isolating layer.
- John Currin: Well, anyway, it – I found that I didn't like it, that the way the canvas came out...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...especially in the darks. I didn't like it. So – You can see that I tried a little bit of palette knife here, and you see that...
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah, that's apparent to me.
- John Currin: ...there was a different face that was sitting over here. She was originally going to be – I painted it at the same time there as a palette knife face.
- P. Gottschaller: Yes. I was going to ask you...
- John Currin: And then I thought, "No, these should be smooth women."
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: And so that's what that was.
- P. Gottschaller: All right.
- John Currin: And it's like a probably Venetian red within a – I guess – that's not a Prussian blue, but like a cobalt blue with a little something yellow in it maybe to make it kind of greenish-blue.

[Break in video]

[00:57:09]

- P. Gottschaller: And I read somewhere that you found that they describe different degrees of intimacy. I think that's the quote?

John Currin: Um-hum. Yes.

P. Gottschaller: Is there anything you can add to that? Does that also ring true for when you use...

John Currin: I like how, on a face, it was, the more you touch it, the more you damage it. Kind of. And I saw this movie where this guy's mother was in a coffin, and she was like lying in state. And he went to touch her face, and, like, this like skin – like the makeup came off, and the skin. I think it was Guy Maddin. That was a Guy Maddin movie, *Careful*. And I got the idea, “Oh, that would be like palette.” I liked that.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: So, I liked the idea that, like the more attention I show her, the more I damage her. Even though I'm trying not to. You know, so it seemed like a nice metaphor.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: And then the breasts would be these, like, sort of more perfectable, you know, solids, you know.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Uh-huh. But why would it then just be the face that you choose to paint with a palette knife and not the arms? Is it just because the face...

John Currin: Partly because I thought the – I liked that it was like a stylistic thing. That it wouldn't be like a Cézanne, you know.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Pictures of his uncle. Like, it's not like a – it's specific to the – it just makes the technique then mean something specific, rather than as a way of seeing. It's like a way of – it's not like a general way of seeing, or a general painting style.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: It's hard to put – if I were more articulate, I could – it just seemed like – partly, the way it messed up the painting to only do it on the face...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...the way it, like, didn't work, and it kind of messes up the painting, and it's like, "Well, is that a way..." 'Cause if I painted the whole painting that way, then it would be a sort of lovely, you know, sort of...

P. Gottschaller: It would become a style.

John Currin: ...Friedel Dzubas. You know, like – you know, it would be like – it would speak of my mood...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...and of my psyche, rather than of her face.

P. Gottschaller: Okay. Yeah. That makes sense, yeah.

[00:59:36]

P. Gottschaller: That's a glorious red. What did you use?

John Currin: Oh, that's Venetian red and alizarin.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Great.

John Currin: Which is very beautiful, I think, within this straight-out Venetian here – oxide, you know? I tried that a thousand times, and thank God, it hasn't cracked.

P. Gottschaller: No, it's _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: There's a lot of layers.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah, you can tell.

John Currin: These, I think, were a lot juicier paintings. As I remember, I thickened up my medium for these.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. So you think that that gloss has changed as well since you last – since they left your studio?

John Currin: No, no, but I just mean that their backgrounds, I had a lot of trouble with, and they are very thick.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

- John Currin: And I also worried about putting a thin layer over a thick layer. So I sort of had to – it's sort of like you're in a poker game, and it's like they – he saw my, like, two parts, you know, oil and resin, and then raised me, you know, and so I – by the end, I was painting with this, like, you know, maple syrup.
- P. Gottschaller: Very good.
- John Currin: But it hasn't cracked, and it looks fine to me.
- P. Gottschaller: Probably because you built it up so well. If you had put it on in more than one coat [sounds like]...
- John Currin: And I think there was, like, sturdier stuff underneath. That's on the lower part, so it's fine.
- P. Gottschaller: Now in this time, '97, were you still sometimes painting over old paintings, or is that something you pretty much stopped by then?
- John Currin: I think I pretty much stopped.
- P. Gottschaller: Right.
- John Currin: Yeah. These are all pretty fresh. Occasionally – that's over an old painting. I bet it's over an old painting. [Referring to *The Invalids*, 1997, Stefan T. Edlis and H. Gael Neeson Collection]
- P. Gottschaller: Yes. Uh-huh.
- John Currin: Kick – basically the way you can guess is that the stupider the idea, the more I would be less willing to commit a brand new surface to it.
- P. Gottschaller: Okay. All right. Maybe let's move on to – if that's all right with you...
- John Currin: This is over an old painting. [Again referring to *The Invalids*]
- P. Gottschaller: It is. Yeah. Is that something _____ [phrase inaudible].
- John Currin: That might have been part of this painting, but I know that this is over an old painting. I know, when you see that...
- P. Gottschaller: _____ [phrase inaudible; speaking at the same time as John Currin].

- John Currin: ...that stuff there, and all that. I have no idea what it was.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah. All right.
- John Currin: But see, things like that, I just love that, you know. I just love these kind of...
- P. Gottschaller: Interferences almost?
- John Currin: Yeah, where I didn't successfully cover the thing that was underneath. I like that, you know. The scraped wood [sounds like]. I like it.
- P. Gottschaller: But that's a sort of freedom that you seem to have given yourself over time, right? The early work doesn't seem – it seems like back in, say, '91 and '92, you wouldn't have been particularly happy with that, right?
- John Currin: Oh, no. They are just in smaller, tighter areas.
- P. Gottschaller: Okay. On a different scale, maybe.
- John Currin: Yeah. There's a little part on the lapel of the Moved Over Lady...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...I really enjoyed how the paint kind of – the background paint kind of went over the subject [sounds like].
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. Okay.
- John Currin: It's little secret things like that.
- P. Gottschaller: All right.
- [01:02:25]**
- P. Gottschaller: I was going to...
- John Currin: We should probably talk about these, right?
- P. Gottschaller: Yes. And in particular, about *The Pink Tree*, if you don't mind.
- John Currin: Okay, sure. Sure.

- P. Gottschaller: Because I have a very specific question.
- John Currin: What changed my technique with these ones...
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah.
- John Currin: ...these were done with – I also started having much higher quality stretchers built, even though...
- P. Gottschaller: See, that's – I was going to ask you because I...
- John Currin: I had them made too thin. I specified that I wanted it this thin...
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: ...and so, obviously when I was priming it, I bumped up against the things, and that's from the priming.
- P. Gottschaller: Right. Okay. So that was there from the beginning?
- John Currin: Yeah, it's there forever. It won't harm the painting, but it will just – that will always be there.
- P. Gottschaller: Why is it not happening up there? I guess there's another one up there? Or do you think it's not happening there?
- John Currin: Probably I just – I was more careful up there. I don't know.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. Would you consider maybe using cross members that are slightly narrower than the outer members? So that the...
- John Currin: No. The trick is to make it thick enough, so that it rides up. You know, so it rides a good inch above the cross braces.
- P. Gottschaller: So that it's thick enough? Um-hum.
- John Currin: These have a lip here that comes out, and then there's a cross brace behind. It's not a problem. I mean, visually it might be a problem, but it won't cause any cracking. All the layers are doing the same thing, so it won't crack.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Okay.

John Currin: This was done – I changed my technique. These are all made with underpaintings.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: In, I think in this case, probably Venetian – probably *terre verte* – green earth – and white. And some raw umber. And I would figure out the forms underneath, and then I would paint over those in a kind of semi-opaque way.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. So there is no *terre verte* in the uppermost layers?

John Currin: No.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: No. I found that – what I wanted to do was, instead of like modulating my tones with some impurity or some coldness, I would use really bright pure color and get this roundness by just painting thinner there.

P. Gottschaller: Oh, right.

John Currin: And then the nice pink. And put, you know, just – that would be a more – you know, there wouldn't be any dull color on the top layer.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. It would be purer [sounds like].

John Currin: And the roundness would kind of come from just a different way and – plus, I liked how you don't have to perform. You can figure out the form, and then you can do the colors, I guess, sort of separate.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: It made every stage much more enjoyable for me.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

[01:04:58]

P. Gottschaller: The backgrounds consistently have been called black. They are clearly not black, but green. Did you mind that people think they're black? Do you want them to look black?

John Currin: I think of them as black.

P. Gottschaller: As black?

John Currin: It's just – you know, it's black. I mean, it functions as black. Obviously, there's no black in it, but there's – but it's...

P. Gottschaller: Okay. It's meant to be.

John Currin: Yeah. It's a kind of black.

P. Gottschaller: I mean, I think it would be completely dead, a dead space, if it was ivory black, for example. _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: Sometimes, though, I think, now that I look back on this, I wanted this to be sort of transparent.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: I mean, I went to great lengths to paint it a little bit too light and all that stuff.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: I had a lot of trouble with the background on this one. And I'm still not quite actually happy with it, but it's something I don't like about this painting when I look up close to it. But...

P. Gottschaller: Can you say what it is?

John Currin: The transparency of the background – it didn't turn out quite the way I wanted it to, and it's – I shouldn't have painted around this. I should have painted that and painted that...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...all over it. I don't like that both of these are transparent. You know, that like this is transparent, that's transparent, that's transparent, and that's transparent. It looks watercolor-y over it. I don't know.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

John Currin: But I love the drawing in this. I like that circle there.

John Currin Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 02/21/2004

Video: adp2004b_currin_001va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2004b / TRT: 01:28:45

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P. Gottschaller: The kneecap? Yeah.

John Currin: I like – there’s a lot of things I like very much about this.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: Originally, I drew a figure over too far...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...so I transferred her over. That’s what these lines are, and...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. I think I saw a photo of you in your studio with that painting behind you, and you had almost finished it, but you weren’t quite finished with the pink tree. Is that right? Is that sort of the last bit that you did?

John Currin: Maybe. The tree was the last part.

P. Gottschaller: _____ [phrase inaudible]

John Currin: The background and the tree were the last part. Although I changed her face a lot. I think maybe the last thing I did was I changed her face.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. All right. Did you put an extra coat of varnish on everything or just on the background?

John Currin: No, I varnished the whole thing.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: By this time I’m not really using much Damar at all, and it’s sun-thickened linseed oil.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: But don’t tell anybody that.

(laughter)

John Currin: I don’t want them to...

P. Gottschaller: If it works for you, it’s good for me.

- John Currin: ...from Holbein. They're the only ones that really make the good stuff. But hopefully no painters will see this and go buy it up.
- P. Gottschaller: I don't know – I think it is better than not thickened. And it's low cost [sounds like] _____ [phrase inaudible].
- John Currin: And speaking of Pearl, Pearl's the only place I can get that. So I will go back to Pearl...
- P. Gottschaller: Okay. Interesting. Mm-hm. All right. So they are good for something.
- John Currin: And the flesh tone is probably vermilion and white.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: Actually, it's not. This is Venetian red and white.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. So you _____ [phrase inaudible]...
- John Currin: But that one probably is vermilion and white on the right-hand figure, and Venetian red and just maybe a little bit of ochre and white. [Referring to *The Cuddler*, 2000, and *The Big Bow*, 2000]
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. So that's...
- John Currin: Oh, and Naples yellow.
- P. Gottschaller: I was going to say, there's no yellow in it? Okay.
- John Currin: Yeah, there is. There is. There is in these.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: Probably much less than these. Those have a blue/black underpainting, and this has a green underpainting, so I figured I didn't need yellow in this one.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: But...
- P. Gottschaller: Why did you change the color of them?

John Currin: I don't know. Just to see what would happen.

P. Gottschaller: _____ [word inaudible] things.

John Currin: That has a blue/black [referring to *Sno-bo*, 1999]. Oh, wait. No, that has a green underpainting.

P. Gottschaller: I particularly love that painting, yeah.

John Currin: And I also got some real lead Naples yellow, which was...

P. Gottschaller: Real stuff? Wow!

John Currin: Yeah. Which was a complete mind blower. It's such a beautiful paint.

P. Gottschaller: Okay. Could we come back to that when we talk about this Stamford painting?

John Currin: Oh, you want to see that?

[01:08:35]

P. Gottschaller: Did you use it in there? I think...

John Currin: Oh, no, no. If you want a super bright yellow like that...

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: ...that, all you've got to use the yellow ochre. Yellow ochre makes the brightest...

P. Gottschaller: That's yellow ochre?

John Currin: Yeah. Over white. Over white.

P. Gottschaller: I'm surprised. Uh-huh.

John Currin: White. This had Venetian red, and then a white, a kind of warm – a white with a little bit of yellow, and then a stain of yellow ochre.

P. Gottschaller: Ahh. Because that, to my eyes, looks almost like a lead tin yellow. Like an old master lead tin yellow.

John Currin: It's just...

P. Gottschaller: That's amazing. And would that have – is that a mixture...

John Currin: Latin yellow. Well, lead tin yellow – where would that be? I have some lead tin yellow.

P. Gottschaller: It would be a little bit like that if you – it could be. Because there are different – there are three types, you know.

John Currin: I mean, I like to use it in flesh a lot. And it's...

P. Gottschaller: In the next room, maybe?

John Currin: ...but the really bright yellows, the brightest yellows, are just from yellow ochre, glazed over – transparently over something. That's [referring to *Two Guys*, 2002, Collection of Alan Hergott and Curt Shepard, Beverly Hills] a yellow ochre over a warm raw umber, and the yellowness of that comes from a clear layer of yellow ochre over a kind of dull yellow.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Okay.

John Currin: And there's titanium, actually, in that white shirt. Titanium and flake mixed, probably.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

[01:10:01]

P. Gottschaller: Did you at one point think a lot about depth? Stretcher depths? *Minerva*, [2000, Collection David Teiger] for example, has a really narrow stretcher, in comparison to all the other _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: I like those cheap Fredrix stretchers.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I've always liked them.

P. Gottschaller: It's a Fredrix. Um-hum.

John Currin: And all my small paintings are on those.

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Video: adp2004b_currin_001va.mp4 / Interview #: V12000-020.2004b / TRT: 01:28:45

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P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: And I just – it's what I like. I don't know. Small paintings, I think they should be like the things you – I don't know. I've never...

P. Gottschaller: Just pick them up and...

John Currin: ...I don't like – I hate small paintings that are thick.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: Ideally, I wish all my paintings were that thin.

P. Gottschaller: Oh, really?

John Currin: Yeah. I would love them to be really, really, really thin.

P. Gottschaller: Hmm.

John Currin: But they'd warp, and they wouldn't be right. But I love the way it looks.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: I hate the way...

P. Gottschaller: Do you think it is more elegant, or...

John Currin: Yeah. I don't know. I've never seen – look at Gerhard Richter, and they are these beautifully thin stretchers, even though they are large paintings.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I just think it looks lovely.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. The *Thanksgiving*, [2003] I think, is your deepest stretcher. It's almost two inches, it seems.

John Currin: That's probably an inch and three quarters.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: 'Cause I didn't want to happen what happened on that one, with the thing. Do you want to look at that one?

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Yes. Please. Yes.

John Currin: Oh, this has an interesting bit of stuff.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: This is an underpainting [Referring to *Minerva*, 2000]. I was trying this. And also the same is true with the *Park City Grill*, [2000, Collection of Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Justin Smith Purchase Fund, 2000].

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: It has egg yolk and...

P. Gottschaller: Ahh.

John Currin: ...white. And Damar emulsion.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: And, you know, that dries in like fifteen minutes.

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

John Currin: And I just did a kind of umber and egg yolk, white on red, a bright red, on a bright Indian red. You know, oxide red.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. It's beautiful.

John Currin: I did her face, and then I did it transparent just to see what it would look like.

P. Gottschaller: Right.

John Currin: This is not [Referring to blouse]. But – this looks like it would be, but this, it's the flesh that's done in egg yolk.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: And the whole composition was done in egg yolk on the *Park City Grill*.

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P. Gottschaller: *Park City Grill?* Really?

John Currin: Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: Were you feeling confined by the quickness that you had to use in order to paint it? Because you had to...

John Currin: No. That's what I wanted.

P. Gottschaller: You loved that? Yes.

John Currin: I was thinking about how to – I was thinking about Tintoretto, you know, how you can see that he paints the whole thing out in white on red.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah.

John Currin: And, I thought, it must be fast drying, so I'll try to use some emulsion that dries real fast.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

John Currin: Of course it doesn't turn out as nice as his, but...

P. Gottschaller: Well, I think it would turn out extremely beautiful over there, but I wouldn't have been able to tell that. It's _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: What I would try now, if I did this over again, I would try to do it with – I would actually do it with titanium pigment and egg yolk.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: 'Cause then you would have real white...

P. Gottschaller: Super dry [sounds like].

John Currin: Yeah. And it would be underneath, and it wouldn't really matter.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And you wouldn't have the problem of how much oil that titanium absorbs. And actually, now that I'm talking about it, it makes me want to try it.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: But their lead white was so opaque that you could really do these kind of sketchy things, and it would really persist in front. Now it's this kind of filmy kind of thing, so it doesn't really work.

P. Gottschaller: Yes. So did you quit using eggs at this point then?

John Currin: Yeah, it just seemed – I just thought I was feeling too much like a nerd.

(laughter)

John Currin: I just thought, "This is getting weird," you know.

P. Gottschaller: See, I thought, when I looked at *The Pink Tree*, I thought that you used your oil paint very much like a, you know a _____ [phrase inaudible] like that. Except _____ [phrase inaudible]...

John Currin: That's what I don't like about it, actually, is that it looks too tempera-y, and it's too...

P. Gottschaller: Yeah, it does look...

John Currin: ...it looks too transparent.

P. Gottschaller: I like that. I think...

John Currin: I like opaque paint done in this – actually, I think that *The Old Fence*, [1999, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh; A. W. Mellon Acquisition Endowment Fund (2000.4.1)] is a much superior, in terms of the way the paint sits on the painting.

[01:13:24]

P. Gottschaller: Rachel [Feinstein, wife and model of Currin], it would be very nice to have you in there right next to it – to you on the wall.

(laughter)

John Currin: We've got to get Rachel in front of the – and, actually, she's a technical part of this painting.

P. Gottschaller: You want to come along?

R. Feinstein: _____ [phrase inaudible]. You mean the *Thanksgiving* [2003]?

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. I think that – ah, that’s so great.

John Currin: And this – you know, you’ll notice in a lot of my paintings, there’s a lot of palette knife in all these.

P. Gottschaller: Yes. Yes.

John Currin: And most of them have bright red grounds. Everything past the nudes is underpainted.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: The flesh is always underpainted.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Can I ask you why?

John Currin: Because I like that it has an existence that is not my performance as a painter.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: It gives them a kind of spiritual – I mean, if I were, like, writing one of the really bad reviews of this show, I’d say, “Well, it gives them a fake Old Master patina.” But really, to me, it separates flesh as a sort of privileged material...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...as a not quite physical – you know, it has a spiritual – it has a soul.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I just thought – like fabric, for instance, wrinkly fabric, I have underpainted it, but it seems like it’s a lot to do for fabric. Fabric should be directly painted...

P. Gottschaller: Not that _____ [phrase inaudible]...

John Currin: ...and flesh should be underpainted. Should be – should it have a sort of ambiguous existence on the surface.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Now I'm starting to think I want to directly paint flesh again.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: But that was the thinking behind these things.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum!

[01:14:58]

P. Gottschaller: Question about the *Bent Lady* [2003, Private Collection, London; courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London]. The background looks – and maybe the entire painting looks – like you put a black layer down first, and then put the blue over it. Is that misleading [sounds like]?

John Currin: No. Well, it looks black, but it's – these are on canvases that are primed gray. I started putting raw umber in the primer, just to make it dry faster.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And I put marble dust in it. I was having trouble with the primer being too oily. And actually it made a marvelous, lovely thing to paint on. I love it. And so I'm going to paint on gray now.

P. Gottschaller: Using _____ [word inaudible] still.

John Currin: It's still pale, and it looks like – but I didn't stain this canvas.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum.

John Currin: So I was painting – I generally started working on a much lighter ground. And I think you can tell. I mean, I think, when I go through this show, it's like...

P. Gottschaller: It's a bit deeper [sounds like]

John Currin: ...these paintings seem to light up a little bit more, and just much...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Yes.

John Currin: And so – this was under – I did this by underpainting it in raw umber, in a *grisaille*, in burnt umber. Then mixing three tones of – actually, straight Prussian blue.

P. Gottschaller: It is?

John Currin: Uh-huh. And then – I did that, and then I highlighted them with just white on – when that was dry, just, you know, the next day.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: Like – whenever I say, “When that was dry,” it’s almost I – you know, the old master, waiting patiently and everything. It dries overnight, and especially Prussian blue. So that’s how that blue was done.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: This is – to do the leaves, I did a kind of wallpaper pattern – I’ve thought, with leaves, it’s hard to get the inside of the bush...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...like, how do you do that? And so I painted – I got the idea of painting a kind of wallpaper of schematic leaves. Just flat, with no depth at all.

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

John Currin: I painted the whole thing that way. And it’s basically – I don’t know; it was with Prussian blue and probably burnt umber to make the green.

P. Gottschaller: Oh. Um-hum.

John Currin: And a little bit of yellow ochre to make the – you know. So I did it, and it looked really weird and flat. And then I painted – then I decided what shape I wanted the bush to be, and I painted on ultramarine blue, and white, in the shape that I wanted it. And then kind of scraped it.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. With what?

John Currin: Just a knife.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I like to do that. And it also brought out this kind of blackness that you see, which is actually the green of these things coming through.

P. Gottschaller: Interesting. Uh-huh. It has a very Poussin quality, I think.

John Currin: Yeah. And it just makes it less substantial than the stuff in front. Then I painted – then I bought a whole bunch of roses, like, over and over and over and over again, like two dozen roses every day, and painted realistic roses over my schematic.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: Uh, realistic leaves over – from life – over my schematic leaves.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And then did – stuck a few little bits of sky in the side, and it looked very real. But you can see those are my schematic leaves...

P. Gottschaller: Right.

John Currin: ...a few of them, like, still there. And these ones. And – but it got this idea of the inside of the bush. And then I painted the roses from life. And she came out of a catalog, out of a Sears catalog.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

[01:18:27]

P. Gottschaller: Do you use the end of your brush to kind of put these incised lines in there, or is that just looking at them? Do you know what I mean by that?

John Currin: Yeah, that's nice. I don't know how I did that. Either with a knife, or with a brush.

P. Gottschaller: _____ [phrase inaudible]

John Currin: Maybe with a knife. Probably with a knife. Probably like *sink sink*, like that.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. All right.

John Currin: And this is a glaze. This is glazed. The red knuckles of psoriasis _____ [word inaudible], like _____ [word inaudible] glaze.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: I thought this would turn out really beautiful.

P. Gottschaller: Actually, I think that the hand in *The Fence* is probably the most beautiful hand I've ever seen. The one that sort of goes like this.

John Currin: Oh, the one on the back?

P. Gottschaller: Ah! It's fabulous. It's very, very...

John Currin: I ripped off that figure from – I feel guilty about – I love that painting, but I – a lot of that painting is ripped off from Hans Baldung.

(laughter)

P. Gottschaller: Oh, _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: That's my hand from life, but that pose...

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. It's very, very good...

John Currin: ...the pose is Hans Baldung.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Good. He was good.

John Currin: Sorry. This is over an old painting. [Referring to *The Lobster*, 2001, Collection of Dianne Wallace, New York]

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: So that's where a lot of this crazy picture comes in.

[01:19:32]

John Currin: Let's talk about this. [*Thanksgiving*, 2003]

- P. Gottschaller: Yes. Okay. That's, I think, probably the best one. Now I remember you saying that you did quite a bit of work on the woman in the center. Do you remember what you had there before it?
- John Currin: Yeah. If this starts cracking in twenty years, it's going to be that dress that cracks.
- P. Gottschaller: Oh, yes.
- John Currin: Because I think I did a lot of maybe ill-advised things on that. There's some layers that may have a problem.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: Like very – I tried to keep putting black on it...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: ...so that I wouldn't put something fast-drying over something slow-drying, but I don't know...
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. So far, it is holding up really well. Now how did you paint the grapes? I remember we talked about that before, and...
- John Currin: Oh, they're wonderful. It was just ivory black and white.
- P. Gottschaller: And then bring...
- John Currin: And a little bit of blue. And it looks very grape-y. It's really strange. Oh, ivory black and alizarin, in the shadow. And a little bit of either cobalt or ultramarine. Probably cobalt 'cause I probably wanted it to dry faster.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: And then I used one of those long, those rigger brushes. I'd just discovered it in this painting.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: Those ones with the big long piece of sable.
- P. Gottschaller: Oh, right.

John Currin: And you can make the most lovely lines, very – that have that kind of Canaletto feeling of a – just the transparent yet opaque. I don't know. And I used that a lot. You could see that a lot up in here. These strokes are made with that rigger.

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

John Currin: I love that rigger brush. And...

P. Gottschaller: But you use it very specifically for a certain effect that you want to create? It's not something you would use over here, for example?

John Currin: It lets you draw a long line without running out of juice.

P. Gottschaller: Ahh.

John Currin: It just – 'cause the long hairs hold a lot of paint.

P. Gottschaller: Right.

John Currin: So you can just go like – I could make a line, an unbroken line, all the way across the painting...

P. Gottschaller: Okay. That's _____ [phrase inaudible]

John Currin: ...without having – you know, when you use a short, small brush, you run out of stuff after a few inches.

P. Gottschaller: It gets thinner and smaller. Yeah.

John Currin: So you get these lovely loaded lines. This is painted in – most of this painting was – these are underpainted, but they are underpainted in raw umber and white.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: This [the turkey] was underpainted in raw umber plus a little bit of ultramarine...

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.

John Currin: ...to make this kind of silver.

P. Gottschaller: The sort of bluish?

John Currin: Yeah. And then with warm shadows. And then I just – it was just real quick, and then these purples and pinks and stuff over it when that was dry.

P. Gottschaller: Is that, again, the yellow ochre that you told me about?

John Currin: I painted it first kind of dull in raw umber and white, with a little yellow ochre. And then I heightened up – you know, just strengthened the lights with white...

P. Gottschaller: Some highlighting...

John Currin: ...with a very stiff lead white, and yellow ochre, and umber.

P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Would you...

John Currin: It held very – sometimes I hold the paint, you know, just skitter [sounds like] so it catches a lot of light and all that stuff.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

[01:22:50]

P. Gottschaller: We should definitely talk about the varnishing. Is your ideal vision for this painting that it will have an even gloss all over, or do you not mind it's...

John Currin: Yeah. It's a dark painting. It should [sounds like].

P. Gottschaller: All right. Yeah.

John Currin: And the – yeah. I was interested in making a dark painting with this one.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. And we can use the Winsor & Newton Damar varnish on this one.

John Currin: It was Winsor & Newton Damar and, I think, cut in half. Maybe...

P. Gottschaller: I think you did cut it in half...

John Currin: No, I think it was cut a little bit – maybe a little – probably sixty percent varnish and forty percent turpentine.

- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.
- John Currin: Because I was worried about it beading up like it did, like, years ago on that other one.
- P. Gottschaller: Yes. Which it didn't, which is good.
- John Currin: This varnished beautifully. And I used about an inch and a half wide either badger or sable – uh, mongoose or sable hair brush.
- P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Um-hum. Can you say one more thing, John, about that? Because I remember you mentioning that you discovered this effect by chance almost. That you were...
- John Currin: I was unhappy with that mirror. And it was too prominent, and it was like, "I don't know what to do about it." And I just glazed it with Prussian blue. It turned out nice.
- P. Gottschaller: Yeah. Very...
- John Currin: Prussian blue, and maybe a little bit of umber in it. I was trying to get a feeling of all these different blacks and grays. This was a lot of work. This has Prussian blue over it, too, in a glaze. There is Prussian blue even over the wood parts.
- P. Gottschaller: That's surprising.
- John Currin: And Prussian blue over this.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh. Would you put that on afterwards? You would have a highlight here and then _____ [phrase inaudible] glaze it?
- John Currin: I put these highlights on here.
- P. Gottschaller: Uh-huh.
- John Currin: I don't remember what color. They are probably just white. And I just kind of made up – this was a very realistic dress before, and then I decided, no, it should just be...
- P. Gottschaller: Fluid, it looks like.

John Currin: Yeah. And I just kind of made up these things. They were very prominent. They dried, and then I painted an almost opaque layer of black/blue...

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: ...Prussian blue plus ivory black. And then just rubbed it very slightly to get those things to come out again.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum. Wonderful. All right.

John Currin: And then to cap the thing off, that's probably the exact same mixture as the *Moved Over Lady's*...

P. Gottschaller: Oh right. Yes. Yeah.

John Currin: It might even be the same sweater.

(laughter)

R. Feinstein: _____ [phrase inaudible]

John Currin: Okay, darling [sounds like].

P. Gottschaller: I think this would be an okay _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: Rachel, we've got to get you standing in front of this, for the document, though.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah, could you please...

R. Feinstein: _____ [phrase inaudible].

[laughter]

R. Feinstein: _____ [phrase inaudible].

John Currin: So, as you can see, Rachel...

[several voices speaking at the same time]

John Currin: ...Rachel was the model.

R. Feinstein: And Francis...

John Currin: Yeah, Francis is the turkey. Model for the turkey, and...

R. Feinstein: Exactly, because I was pregnant with Francis in there. Yeah.

(laughter)

P. Gottschaller: Is that the last painting you did, actually? John, isn't that...

R. Feinstein: Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: Yeah?

R. Feinstein: Yeah, that was the last one you did before...

John Currin: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

R. Feinstein: Yeah. He hasn't painted in six months.

John Currin: Yeah. I finished this in end of August.

R. Feinstein: _____ [word inaudible]. Yeah.

P. Gottschaller: Is that because you've been so busy moving and doing other things?

R. Feinstein: Uh, well, we are waiting to move. He doesn't have a studio because we're all there right now.

P. Gottschaller: Oh.

R. Feinstein: So that's the problem right now.

John Currin: Yeah. This is the last painting I painted in that studio. So...

P. Gottschaller: Okay.

R. Feinstein: We're going to get in trouble from Yvonne.

P. Gottschaller: Yes.

R. Feinstein: It's Yvonne _____ [word inaudible]'s husband. She's a really good friend of mine. So...

P. Gottschaller: Yeah. No, _____ [phrase inaudible]

John Currin: Is that – did you have any other really important preservation questions?

P. Gottschaller: No, I think we are coming – let me just have a quick look at my cheat sheets.

[01:26:25]

John Currin: One last thing is on *The Producer*, [2002, Collection of Beth Swofford, Los Angeles]. That's a very thin layer of titanium white, actually film, on the background, over...

P. Gottschaller: Over the colors?

John Currin: Over a burnt umber stain. It's a titanium and black thing, painted on and then rubbed off.

P. Gottschaller: All right.

John Currin: So if you are a conservator, don't try to fix any cracks in the background.

P. Gottschaller: No, I won't...

John Currin: You will never get it right.

P. Gottschaller: Actually, the gesture – the position that the hands are in, I thought I recognized another Richard Avedon photograph that was in *The New Yorker* after your article appeared.

John Currin: Oh, I didn't see.

P. Gottschaller: He took – he photographed this singer..

John Currin: Oh, oh, Savion Glover. The guy that – the jazz dancer. The tap dancer.

P. Gottschaller: No. No, different guy. A singer. Laura Hutton, something. And she held her hands exactly like that.

John Currin: Oh, great. I thought about just a Venus. You know, a shamed Venus.

John Currin Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 02/21/2004

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P. Gottschaller: Right.

John Currin: You know, put on a man.

P. Gottschaller: Anyway. Go ahead. Thank you so much.

John Currin: The background on that is blue and, uh, is ultramarine blue and burnt umber.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: And a little bit of white.

P. Gottschaller: Um-hum.

John Currin: In case you have to fix that, that's a hard color to get.

(laughter)

P. Gottschaller: What, the _____ [phrase inaudible]

John Currin: That navy blue. A good way to make the navy blue is ultramarine, burnt umber, and a little bit of white.

P. Gottschaller: Okay. I'll keep it in mind. Thank you so much.

[END RECORDING]