



**Artists Documentation Program
Video Interview Transcript**

**DAVID NOVROS
DECEMBER 2, 1997**

**Interviewed by:
Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director,
Artists Documentation Program,
and Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection**

**Video: Laurie McDonald | Total Run Time: 02:28:03 (Part 1: 01:19:41 / Part 2: 01:08:22)
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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): Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director, Artists Documentation Program and Chief Conservator, The Menil Collection; David Novros, Artist; Paul Winkler, Director, The Menil Collection; Laurie McDonald, Filmmaker]

[BEGIN RECORDING, PART 1 OF 2]

[00:00:43]

CM-U: Today is December 2, 1997. I am here with David Novros, who is an old friend of The Menil Collection and mine. We are very excited to be talking about three – four of his works that we have up today. They represent slightly different periods of his work, so we are going to start with the earliest one and see where we go from there.

CM-U: So, David, you're going to have to tell me about this one [6:30, 1966, The Menil Collection, Houston, purchased with funds from the George R. Bunker Living Trust]. What...

David Novros: This one.

[00:01:13]

CM-U: This is – we are going to move a little bit – this was started when? Just, can you tell us sort of what stage you were at, and where you were, and so on?

David Novros: Tell you exactly. 1966, the summer.

CM-U: Summer of 19--

David Novros: 1966.

CM-U: --66.

David Novros: I had been living in New York. And then I was going to have a show in the Dwan Gallery in Los Angeles. This was the first show I had. And I went back to Los Angeles to make the objects. Virginia had a kind of a studio she let artists use.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: And I worked there. But also, where these things were really made was in the driveway of a guy named Paul Mogensen, who's a really terrific painter, and an old friend of mine. And his family had this driveway, and his father was a spray painter. And his father taught me how to spray paint.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: So this was the beginning of my using a spray gun. I went out there. I tried to find a kind of a paint to paint on these things that would be really flexible and tough and durable. I'd been using this Murano material, which was this kind of pearlescent thing that changes color, prior to that, and I'd seen it on the outside of a can at a paint store. It would be used for cars and that sort of thing. So I built the stretchers – the panels, actually; they're not really stretchers; plywood panels – in Paul's garage in the back of the driveway, and stretched these things up.

CM-U: And were you always working on this kind of width of stretcher? It looks like it's about an inch and a half.

David Novros: At that time, yeah.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I'd only really been painting as an adult, you know, sort of what I consider an adult, for maybe two years when I painted this.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I'd moved to New York in '64, so I painted these in '66. It gives you an idea of how early they were in terms of what I was doing.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: And then I took them over to Virginia's studio.

CM-U: So you actually painted them there outside?

David Novros: And I painted – no, and I painted them inside at Virginia's studio. I set up a spray booth...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: ...and painted them there. Because obviously they were very hard to keep clean. I didn't have a very high tech studio, you know. It was just a plastic cover and a spray gun and a fan. And I found this paint in Compton, in Los Angeles, in a place that made paints for crazy houses.

CM-U: Okay. Now is Compton the name of a section of Los Angeles?

David Novros: Yeah. So that's South Central. It's called South Central now.

CM-U: Okay. Oh, I see.

David Novros: And they manufactured these paints, which – I don't know how I found this place, but they manufactured these paints that went in the inside of rooms where they kept really, really badly deranged people, so that if they hit the wall and stuff, they wouldn't damage themselves or the paint. Because it has a rubbery kind of consistency. It's a vinyl acrylic.

CM-U: Ah-huh.

David Novros: And I thought, "Well, that's great, you know. This will be flexible, and etc., etc. I didn't know much about it chemically. I just had seen samples of it. And they made it clear, and then they made this white. So I painted a white underpainting on it first, and then each of the...

[00:04:25]

CM-U: Right on raw canvas?

David Novros: Right. Yeah right on the raw canvas.

CM-U: And it was cotton?

David Novros: It was cotton.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: And it was a very low-grade cotton, with a lot of – what do you call the brown kind of spots that come up in it?

CM-U: Yeah. Kind of inclusions.

David Novros: Inclusions. Whatever. Which later oxidized, which is why I think the, you know. And you see that brown spot on the corner there?

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: That's probably from some of that oxidation.

CM-U: That's interesting because I've seen – I'm beginning to see it with other cotton – exposed cotton duck paintings.

David Novros: Um-hum.

CM-U: I didn't...

David Novros: It's true of the painting in the Modern [VI:XXXII, 1966 (repainted in 1990) Museum of Modern Art, New York, Gift of Charles Cowles].

CM-U: Did you see it right away?

David Novros: No. No, no, no. They were pristine. I didn't see it, in fact for, oh, a long time. Maybe ten years when the Modern took its painting out to look at it. And I put on lots and lots of coats of paint.

CM-U: But you didn't wash the – you wouldn't wash it. You just stretched it and used it.

David Novros: Just stretched it and used it. Frankly, it was partially out of ignorance, but also it just didn't seem to matter...

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: ...at that point.

CM-U: Right.

[00:05:25]

David Novros: So I painted it, at any rate. And then I painted these clear coats of the Murano, which is that powdered pigment.

CM-U: Okay. So the first layer was this rubberized material that...

David Novros: Rubbery white acrylic...

CM-U: Do you have a name? It was industrial.

David Novros: Vinyl lacquer.

CM-U: Vinyl lacquer, it was called?

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: And that went on in white?

David Novros: That went on in white.

CM-U: With a roller, did you say?

David Novros: No, no, I sprayed it.

CM-U: Sprayed it? Right.

David Novros: I, I sprayed it as heavily as I could so that – and I sanded between coats, so that eventually the weave of the canvas developed this kind of – well, you can see it under the trans–

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: Under the transparency, it developed this kind of pebbly surface that I liked.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: Because I wanted it to really react with the Murano, which was the next coat, which a clear...

CM-U: I see.

David Novros: And it had the same material, same vinyl lacquer, but in clear with the Murano in it. It used a solvent like acrylic lacquers use, the same kind of a solvent. And, uh, I built up lots of layers; and what would occur would be, you'd be painting on this thing, spraying it. I was spraying it flat.

CM-U: And that was _____ [word inaudible].

David Novros: And a hair would fall in it. Or – so I always used these tweezers, and I'd pull out stuff. Because I wanted it to be very pristine.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: Or what I thought of as pristine at the time. It took lots of coats to finally get it to be correct, you know. You couldn't sand the final coats.

CM-U: Five coats? More than five?

David Novros: Oh, there must be 20 coats of paint on this.

CM-U: Ahh (gasps).

David Novros: Each one, you know. Lots and lots. It's very labor intensive.

[00:06:54]

David Novros: And so what I really wanted to tell you was that I didn't really – I didn't have in mind – it's sounding as though I had in mind to make an *objet deluxe* here, you know. That is not what I had in mind.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: I wasn't spraying them that way, and doing all that stuff, in order to make a kind of elegant object of any sort. In fact it was just the opposite. I was doing that because I didn't want these things to be objects so much. I really wanted to paint murals, since I had come back from Europe; but I couldn't get commissions. I didn't have any way of getting the real estate to do it. And so I was trying to make these paintings, which would be like portable murals in some way. And the thickness of the canvas, the thickness of the object, was a real problem because I found that, in experimenting with other forms, that I couldn't get the object thin enough to disappear. The thinner I got it, coincidentally made it the more intensely object-like, oddly enough. This form. So I developed this thickness just as a way of projecting the light off the wall.

CM-U: Interesting.

David Novros: But at the same time, having it relate to this white – you know, the white wall most of the time. When I first made these, people said, "What if you hang

them on a rose colored wall or something?” I said, “Well, you know, if you do that, you’re not me.”

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: You know. So –

CM-U: Well, they do take on the texture of the wall. I mean –

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: In the multi-layering, as you described, you have hidden the fabric, and it does kind of take – it does take on that. Very interesting.

David Novros: I mean, it’s a long time since these were painted, and it’s hard for people to think that there was a problem about thinking of these as paintings. But when I painted them, they were called wall sculptures and all sorts of other stuff. There’s a lot of confusion about that. You know, I always intended them, obviously, as paintings, and obviously as wall painting, as mural. And just something that would move. And I felt that this Murano stuff was consistent with the kinesthetic experience with the painting. Because you never saw the painting the same way from any one place. It forced you to move along the painting in order to experience it, to see the way light was going to interact with the material.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And then the drawing of the painting related to the same kind of movement. So that’s pretty much the technical end of this thing.

[00:09:13]

CM-U: When these were installed, they were installed on a white wall?

David Novros: They were installed on a white wall. Beautiful gallery. She had a gallery in Westwood that was a Modernist gallery. It was – had a black floor. It had a domed kind of roof...

CM-U: Hmm

David Novros: ...formed. And I had the entire inside, which – the walls were about – I would say it was about a hundred feet long. Maybe 80 feet long. And they

were all these white paintings with different kinds of Murano. Some of them were quite big. Two of them were 24 feet. And then just one room in the back, which you would just see, I had one black painting.

CM-U: Wow!

David Novros: So this was consistent with my idea that I didn't want to make exhibitions. What I wanted to make was – I hate the word “site specific,” but since I couldn't make murals, I wanted to make something that would make something of the place. And the experience. So that was the first show I ever had.

CM-U: And the light was incandescent light? This kind of canister light that came down?

David Novros: Yeah. It was just like this.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: It was a beautiful, beautiful gallery.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:10:22]

David Novros: Virginia was incredibly supportive.

CM-U: And that was my next question. Just a little bit about her.

David Novros: Terrific patron. She was a really great patron. She *is* a great patron.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: She was better than any dealer kind of person you can imagine because she was interested in getting things made. So she would pay – she paid to have the stuff made, essentially. And she paid for the studio. And she put me up in her house, and Chamberlain was there. And it was a great, great summer for me. You know, what – I was –

CM-U: You were so young. You were –

David Novros: Twenty-three. Twenty-four, you know. It was an amazing break. It was very, very lucky. And I thought the show was beautiful. I thought it was one of the best shows I ever had.

CM-U: And that was your first?

David Novros: First. Yeah.

CM-U: How did you meet her, to begin with?

David Novros: Well, I met her through Park Place. I was in the Gallery in New York, a cooperative gallery which I was in – around '65, that was coalesced around Mark Di Suvero.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: And she was a great patron of Mark's at that time. And she as a result supported a lot of us who were also in the Gallery. It was a cooperative gallery. We would give her – I think it was two paintings a year, or two objects, if you were a sculptor, a year; and she in turn put money into the gallery along with Pat Lannan and Vera List and the Guibersons.

CM-U: Huh.

David Novros: And so we supported the gallery through our own work, and we weren't dependent on sales to keep it going and having a show. It lasted a couple of years. It had been in another state before I joined it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And she then sort of took some of the artists that were involved with that and showed them.

[00:12:07]

David Novros: And I showed with her in New York the next year as well, in her gallery in New York.

CM-U: So then what happened to this piece? This remained with her and then sold privately later, or...

David Novros: Actually this painting was the only painting that sold out of the show.

David Novros Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 12/02/1997

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CM-U: Sold out of the show? Okay.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: And who bought it?

David Novros: Some – Mrs. Gates Lloyd of Philadelphia.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: And therein lies a very kind of strange story. Because she was a really good collector. She had wonderful things. Rothko. Pollock. Really good stuff. And I always thought to myself, “Well, I love this painting; and at least it belongs to Mrs. Gates Lloyd, and someday she’ll give it to the museum, and I’m sure it’s going to be fine.” I never thought any more about it. And then she died, and I heard from the relatives. And they told me the painting was damaged, and would I restore it? So they brought it to my studio in New York, and I worked on it. And I put it back in my own storage. And I didn’t take it out again ’cause they never called me. I never heard anything more from them. And then about ten years later after that occurred, the husband, the father died. The husband of Mrs. Gates Lloyd. And the kids began figuring out what to do with the painting. And they sort of – well, I don’t say blackmailed me, but they sort of said, “Well, we – you have that painting, and we’re going to put it at auction.”

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: So, “You know, I’ve had it for a really long time, and you haven’t done much about it, you know. And I think you should really reconsider putting it at auction. It’s in these pieces. They’ll never get it hung correctly at auction. I don’t like having my things at auction. I mean, let’s try to find a place for it.” And at that point I began talking to Paul [Winkler]–

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: –about getting it here. And for a while it was in doubt, and then finally it ended up here. And that’s the history of how it got here.

CM-U: It’s great. I’m very glad we have it.

David Novros: I’m glad you have it, too.

[00:13:52]

CM-U: How do they look to you now, compared to the last time you saw them?

David Novros: They are a little more cracked. You mean technically?

CM-U: Yes.

David Novros: They are a little more cracked. The surface is _____ [word inaudible].

CM-U: What do you think the cracking is from?

David Novros: I think it's from contraction and expansion in my storage.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I had it stuck in a closet that was not heated or cooled or anything. I just think that too much back and forth over the ten-year period probably did it. Plus, it's so heavily painted.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: And you know the canvas would flex. And even with this very flexible paint that I used...

CM-U: Sure.

David Novros: Yeah, I don't think it is...

CM-U: Well, everything is moving all the time, and – but, you know, overall, they certainly still have that feeling that you're describing. I mean, it's true that they have, you know – you see the cracks. But in a way it kind of imparts a certain kind of aging. I mean, other than the one area where it's really become quite disfiguring.

David Novros: Yeah. Well...

CM-U: How does that strike you about the aging? How do you feel about that in your work?

David Novros: Well, I'm proud of the fact that the stretcher bars haven't warped at all. I built them myself...

CM-U: They're terrific!

David Novros: ...and they're really in great shape. I consider that – because, you know, wooden stretchers, over 30 years, are mostly gone.

CM-U: That's right.

David Novros: But these have held up. They have this nice plywood, and it all works.

CM-U: Let's look at the back of one. Can we just turn one around?

David Novros: Yeah, sure.

CM-U: I don't know any way to handle this without gloves. And here we are.

David Novros: That's okay. Here, see. (turns L-shaped segment of painting around to show verso)

CM-U: Oh.

David Novros: You can feel how heavy it is.

CM-U: Yeah. Now is this – is the fabric wrapped right around this plywood?

David Novros: No, there's a quarter round...

CM-U: Quarter round? Okay.

David Novros: ...on the side. It keeps it off.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: The other thing was, when I made these, if I had had the money, if I'd had the capacity to do it, I would have made them on aluminum panels.

CM-U: Why?

David Novros: Because I wanted that anonymity. I never liked these interior corners. Do you know, I always – for instance, in Stella's paintings of this time, which I was obviously familiar with, there was this quality of the surface projecting, and no interest in the edge.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: But for me that was unacceptable because the edge was where it met the wall.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: And I had to do something that would keep that believable for me, you know, as mural. So I tried. You know, I had these – I painted – I set canvas into these corners.

CM-U: Yeah, I see. It's beautiful.

David Novros: And I painted it very elaborately, and I sanded. I wanted that to be as smooth as possible. The point I wanted to make was, for all my intentions to make this thing sort of neutral, physically, they end up being – and I think this is true of a lot of the paintings of people of my generation, that were seen at the time to be unexpressive physically – was that really they look almost medieval to me now. They have a real funky – so when you asked about the cracks and all this stuff, I have to say, I don't really care.

CM-U: Well, I'm happy to hear you say that. Because I think...

David Novros: I'd like to make it again.

CM-U: Right. But I think there is something about natural aging, which is in fact what this is...

David Novros: Exactly.

CM-U: I mean, it's not that it's been damaged. It's just the natural – it's not related to technique. It's just the natural aging of a material. And it does take on a certain character from its aging.

[00:17:03]

David Novros: I mean, I could make them again. We've talked about this.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: And I would like to. But I would never make them with the same materials. For one thing, I could make these with a hard surface panel like aluminum or something of that sort; and I would only have to use four or five coats of

paint. I wouldn't have to develop this whole painted surface to seal off the canvas, and to get it all. It would be there.

David Novros: Now somebody might say, "Well, then you'll lose a lot of the quality of the handwork in it." But that's not true. I guarantee you that I could make one of these today, on panel, and it would be just as pearl-like and just as whatever as this is. It would be different, but I think it would be actually superior.

CM-U: Hmm. So have you thought about it? But you're not in that anymore, in terms of your own work.

David Novros: That's not true. I'm in it all the time.

CM-U: You're in it all the time! Good.

David Novros: I think about it often because a lot of my early work, especially the bigger things, and things that I liked very much, were damaged beyond repair and had to be destroyed. Really big paintings.

CM-U: Why?

David Novros: Poor storage.

CM-U: Um-hum. I mean, cracks, again?

David Novros: Poor transportation. No, no, no. They were much worse things, like boilers exploding next to them, and...

CM-U: Oh.

David Novros: ...really irreparable damage.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: And I would love to have those paintings back. Especially some of these white ones. And I would paint them again. I'd do it again. I just haven't found the time to do it.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: Yeah, for – but it's on my mind.

CM-U: That's interesting, that you're still – that's...

David Novros: There may be four paintings, five paintings – all of them really huge – that I would like to have back again.

[00:18:34]

CM-U: Well, you know, there's an aspect of looking at work like this and feeling that your original intent was that the surface be absolutely perfect, and you worked very hard to do that.

David Novros: That's true.

CM-U: That's fair to say. But over time they've cracked and aged, and yet the overall feeling is still, however, there. And so one does wonder. I mean, you know, one can continue, I suppose, to resurface as long as you're alive; but how about when you are no longer alive?

David Novros: When I'm no longer alive...

CM-U: And I'm no longer alive. Sorry, I didn't mean to make it personal, David.

David Novros: We are going from technology to theology.

CM-U: No, not really. Yes, they are related in a way. I mean, when you are no longer able to do it, I guess, is my question. I mean, if I – you said to me, "Okay, Carol. I can resurface these. I don't really want to accept the aging right now. Let's talk about this..."

David Novros: No, no, no. My idea would be, leave this one. You know, get somebody to make a panel this size, you know, out of aluminum. And get somebody to spray it. That would be my solution.

CM-U: That's interesting.

David Novros: I don't think I have to do that.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I don't think there's a question of touch involved here. To me, there never was with these paintings. I would be quite happy to have it done...

- CM-U: So you'd be comfortable with someone else?
- David Novros: Be very happy to have someone – I'd love to give somebody, for instance, drawings of the paintings I described before.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- David Novros: Make them. Use this material. Spray them. That would be fine.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- David Novros: See, this painting, these paintings, to me, are dead when they are on the floor like this in pieces. Other paintings have more meaning. But especially these earlier wall paintings are very linear, and they are – unless you see them on the wall, using the wall, and working as they were intended to work, they don't exist. They're...
- CM-U: Maybe we should...
- David Novros: You can't put them in the closet and then take them out, and there they are again, you know.
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: So that's what I'm saying. Keep this one. This is fine like this.
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: But, you know, have this one – maybe have one that's clean to use for other purposes.
- CM-U: Interesting.
- David Novros: I don't know. I don't know what the answer is, but I wouldn't do anything to this one, is my response.
- CM-U: Good. I mean, I guess that's what we're all groping for right now because we don't have, as a culture, a professional consensus of acceptable aging for this type of work. We really don't. And so we don't know. If we say, "Okay, of course paintings crack. That's okay. We accept Rembrandts cracked, you know."

David Novros: Well, the Mondrian. It's the Mondrian issue, right?

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: I think Mondrian is the premier artist in this question. He is the first modernist to, you know, use these kind of clean surfaces that, you know, then cracked. And they are clearly painted, and clearly have a certain very specific intention in the way they were painted. And I can't see anybody lining them, or filling them, or painting them. I mean, it just seems obscene to me, you know. It's crazy.

CM-U: I think what impressed me so much in the Mondrian show, the one a few years ago, the retrospective, was how painterly indeed they are.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: I mean, it's incredible. This tiny little brush. And so we accept the cracks. You don't even see them, you know.

David Novros: I mean, there is Mondrian, and then there are all those other people, [Theo] van Doesburg. What's the difference, you know?

CM-U: Exactly.

David Novros: This guy—

CM-U: I guess I feel that way about these.

David Novros: He was a great painter, you know.

CM-U: But I feel that way about these, cracks and all. It doesn't matter.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: And now what you did in '66.

David Novros: No, I think if you – for instance, there's that brown stain in the corner.

CM-U: That kind of thing _____ [word inaudible].

David Novros: See, that bothers me because it alters the kind of intention in a way that I think, one, can be fixed easily.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: And, two, it breaks up the drawing too much. But I think if we hung this on the wall right now in its correct ordering, and stood away from it at any distance, there would be no problem.

CM-U: In fact, I think we should do that while you're here.

David Novros: Okay.

CM-U: I think we should put it on the wall, and light it, and let's take a look at it on the wall, lit, and see.

David Novros: Yeah. I mean, what do you think? Why is there this kind of interest in our culture in things remaining – not the same, isn't the word I want, but in some concept of cleanliness, almost. Is it the Puritanism? I don't know what it is. I don't understand it.

CM-U: It has to do with accepting aging in general. I think we were talking about this very central issue with regard to restoring and conserving this type of painting, which is sort of, "Why don't we accept?" Well, maybe it's not even a question of accepting; but why don't we feel comfortable with aging?

David Novros: Yeah. Well, the "we" is the question.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: Because it depends on who the people are that are doing the observing. Now first, let's say, there's the artist. There's me. And sometimes I see a painting of mine, and I think, "Well, I'd like to *restore* that." And sometimes I see a painting of mine and I say, "Well, I'd like to *work on* that some more." Two different things. Sometimes I lie and say I want to restore it just so that I can repaint it, in some instances.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: Not too often, though. And then there are the people who own the painting.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And they have this idea about value that's equated with the painting as an object that has a system of monetary value attached to it. And that system of

monetary value is very involved with having the thing *look* undamaged. Not damaged, you know. “Can I buy that car? It’s got a bumper that’s all smashed in.” You know, that kind of attitude. Well, that’s not the way I see painting, and it’s not the way – I mean, I’m not interested anyway that much in painting as objects. For me, painting, I prefer wall painting anyway; and that, for the most part, is about image. And if the image is sustained, then I don’t think anything should be done to the work. When the image is so badly defaced or ruined by some damage, then there’s nothing that can be done, especially after the artist is dead.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: So, I mean, there’s so many examples of restoration in our lifetime. We are living in this technological wonderland, you know. In a country like Italy, with all the great stuff in it. And then in the last ten, what, 20 years, all the restoration that’s been done on all those paintings have changed the way all of us have had to think about them. The Masaccios, you know. For me, I always thought of the exchange of the 30 pieces of silver [Masaccio, *The Tribute Money*, ca. 1427] as a really dark night picture, and it had a great poetic meaning for me. And then to see it cleaned and suddenly real bright and intense. I mean, these kinds of questions are really sociological.

CM-U: They are.

David Novros: And I’m not going to approach them, and I don’t want anybody to fool around with them in my paintings. The process of aging is going to be part of the painting. That eliminates certain potential dangers like the cleaning of the Chartres [Cathedral] windows, in which huge damage, irreparable damage was done to the things that didn’t need to have been done. I’m not saying don’t clean frescoes. I’m saying, clean them when you can clean them and there’s no damage possible to be done to them. But accept what you can’t change, and don’t try to affect it.

[00:25:45]

CM-U: So I guess what you’re saying is, it’s sort of – in a way, it’s always interpretive. I mean, any kind of restoration or cleaning is interpretive. And Masaccio probably wouldn’t like to have seen his colors that he chose to be bright – could have painted muddy but chose very bright – to be seen that way. On the other hand, even in a treatment, you can never remove all of the aging. You can never remove all the discoloration unless you really interfere with the original.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: So I guess what you're saying is, respect a certain patina, in quotes, that occurs...

David Novros: Yeah, that's what I'm saying. That's exactly what I'm saying. I mean, in the best of all possible worlds, everything could be new and bright; but I'm too much of a humanist to accept that view of any kind of reality. And I really dislike the objectification of art, and the commercialization of it, and turning it into an object which has value only because it can be bought or sold in some way. Now clearly the Masaccio doesn't fall into that field; but at the same time, the tourist industry of Italy has a big effect.

CM-U: Provides a pressure, right.

David Novros: Right.

[00:26:54]

David Novros: I would rather see a bunch of new frescoes be made. I'd like to see the resources be spent to encourage people to continue making art in public, on the walls, for people to see for free, than have the resources go to restore old work and then to buy new things which are kept in people's houses and bought and sold as chattel, you know.

CM-U: That's interesting. Let's go on to fresco.

David Novros: Sure.

CM-U: After you did these, in '66, then when was the first time you started painting – and you were doing *buon fresco*? Well, tell me...

David Novros: Yeah. No, the first fresco I made was in Don Judd's place on Spring Street in New York [*Untitled*, 1970, 101 Spring Street, New York, NY].

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And that came about because Don knew that I was interested in working that way. And he'd seen the oil paintings that I'd made just prior to that, like '68, '69, which were attempts at, again, to be making these kind of portable wall paintings. And he had bought the place on Spring Street, and he was turning it into a kind of expression, architectural, of his own interests as an artist. And

he had a Stella, a big Stella up there. And he had a Flavin. And then he asked me, would I come and paint a fresco on this wall that we decided was a good wall. And I said, “Ye-e-s,” and it’s like I’m dying to do it, of course, you know. “How much do I have to pay you to do it?” It was like that.

David Novros: So we went over there, and I hired a guy who was a plasterer’s assistant; but he was from the Islands. He was Caribbean. I don’t know if he was Jamaican. I’m not sure. I don’t remember. But he was trained in using hot lime and sand as a last coat. So I got him, and I’d read all the books. I’d never done it. I hadn’t even done a test. And we took the wall down right to the brick, and scoured it, as the books all said you should do. And then we wetted it down, as the books said you should do. And we did everything just exactly according to Hoyle, you know. Or Theosophus, depending on who you are talking about, right? (laughs)

David Novros: But how archaic. Here I am. I’m in the, like, late 1960s, and I’m reading these Medieval books to learn how to do something. Had I known, there were books published around the Mexican muralists that I could have read and gotten the same information from, but I didn’t know.

CM-U: Yeah, but you were sort of – at the time, when that had been hidden, you know, it was hard to get those books.

David Novros: Yeah. That’s right. One didn’t know. You weren’t even taught about Orozco, or Rivera, or Siqueiros. You know, they were considered corny, you know, like WPA-related stuff. Nobody knew. At any rate, I did it. And it was perfect. Two days. We did it in two days. It was technically absolutely perfect. It was heartbreaking, it was so good.

[00:29:46]

David Novros: And then about ten years later, this brown stain started to come up on the top edge because what we hadn’t thought about, and what we didn’t know, was that the building had contained machines. It had been a machine shop, and the oil from the machine shop was in the walls, and in the floorboards. And after a while it began coming down behind the fresco. Began coming to the surface.

CM-U: You mean from the walls? From the wall out?

David Novros: From the wall out. It was coming from the upper floors.

CM-U: Wow!

David Novros: So you can do everything you can do, and you can have the best intentions, and still have these kind of damages occur. So I was able to kind of seal off that part of the painting and repaint it with – I think it painted it with acrylic and flat medium and...

CM-U: Putting dry pigment in...

David Novros: Dry pigment, yeah. And I've done it now – I've had to do it two or three times.

CM-U: Is it still there?

David Novros: Oh, yeah. And it looks good. I mean, the painting looks good, and it's restored. But it never looked as good as it did when it was pure fresco. I think Don was not happy that we had to do it. I mean, he loved the look of the fresco. So did I. But it's better than having it – there's a case where the restoration had to occur, and I had to do it. But nonetheless I think that maybe if I had it to do again, I might not have done it.

[00:31:09]

CM-U: So the original one, the first one, was in just the one plaster, or the pigment right in the plaster?

David Novros: Buon fresco.

CM-U: Buon fresco...

David Novros: Right out of the book.

CM-U: And where did you get pigments?

David Novros: There was a place in Long Island City that was an enormous pigment supplier. Schwartz Chemical.

CM-U: Hmm. Schwartz Chemical?

David Novros: Yeah. They're not there anymore.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 12/02/1997

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David Novros: And I went out there. And in those days, you could buy five pounds of, let's say, cobalt blue for like \$25 dollars, \$30 dollars. The stuff was just really cheap. Now it's almost impossible to think about painting large areas in fresco unless you are very wealthy. You have a lot of money.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: You know what the cost of pigment is. It's just insane now, you know.

David Novros: But in those days – and I bought tons of it. I still have barrels of it in my studio, left over from that initial purchase, you know. I didn't really do it for Don because at that point my intention was to keep working in fresco.

CM-U: And you did.

David Novros: Yeah, I did; but not as much as I wanted or want to.

CM-U: Um-hum. How big a *giornate* would you put on?

David Novros: Well, that was – that first one, because of the circumstances – and we really wetted the wall. I knew I was going to have a pretty long time to paint on it, so I wasn't too worried about it, the wall drying out before it could accept the paint. I did – I think I might have painted it in two days.

CM-U: Wow.

David Novros: So the painting is ten by 13 feet.

CM-U: Wow! Hmm.

David Novros: And since then I paint – I normally paint in fresco somewhere in the range of ten square feet a day, like ten by ten, 100 square feet a day.

CM-U: Wow! And you work from drawings first?

David Novros: In Don's case, I'd done studies. In the early ones, I'd done studies because the work had clear delineations areas.

[00:32:59]

David Novros: The one in the Pennzoil Building [*Untitled (Pennzoil Fresco)*, 1975, Museum of Fine Arts, Houston], for instance, is the same way. I worked from

drawings on that. And then in about – and I always make studies for everything.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: But I stopped using the studies to look at while I was working in the mid-seventies, and I began working directly on the wall.

CM-U: So you'd make your drawings, and then snap lines on the wall or not?

David Novros: No. I measured with – very primeval kind of drawing technique. I didn't like the idea of snapping a line. I didn't like messing around with the plaster because a lot of my work involved leaving areas of plaster, and I didn't want any touch on that, and I wanted it to just be wall. So what I would do is draw it all in with a small brush. And if I had an assistant, I would use straight edges in those days; and the assistant would hold one end of the straight edge, and I would hold the other end; and I would just draw along the straight edge with a brush and then paint in. And then paint back up to the edge once I'd done it. It was a very much like a kind of Mondrian technique, of finding just where that edge should be physically. And it's true of these paintings as well.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: This is the technique I used for these, too.

[00:34:09]

CM-U: And what size brush were you using for that? A wide brush?

David Novros: Yeah. I'd found these Japanese Hake brushes, which were perfect because they were very soft. They didn't leave any mark on the plaster. I had been using them in the paintings as well. They could carry a pretty good load.

CM-U: About six inches? Four inches?

David Novros: Oh, bigger.

CM-U: Bigger?

David Novros: Yeah, I had one that was about like that. What is that? About eight inches.

CM-U: Um-hum.

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- David Novros: And I had four or five of those. You had to throw them away after a day or two because the lime would just eat them up. But they didn't lose their hair, and they were excellent. And they were inexpensive, and now, again, another instance – you know what those brushes cost now.
- CM-U: I know.
- David Novros: I couldn't afford to use them in a fresco.
- CM-U: Especially with good brushes, I know.
- David Novros: You know, they're like a hundred plus dollars apiece, and if you can use them for one (waves hand through air as if painting) and boom! throw them out, it's not – it doesn't work.
- CM-U: Oh. (sighs)
- David Novros: But they were – I don't know what I would use now. There aren't good brushes for what I do.
- CM-U: It's a problem actually.
- David Novros: But, you know, I'm not going to use brushes anymore in fresco in that way. I am trying to stop using brushes. I'm trying to stop the kind of activity of dipping the thing in. Just as I was spraying, you know. I've never been really – I've always thought there was a better way of doing what I wanted to do than the brush. Now I am doing some kind of paintings now for which that is necessary, but I've been working a lot with making these kind of objects which are actually brushes, among things. They are made out of all sorts of stuff. Bamboo, and cloth, and all kinds that can absorb paint. And the next time I do a big fresco, if it's not one of these rectilinear kind of forms, I would, you know, dip these – this thing. I'd plaster up the wall, dip this thing, and establish the drawing right away on the wall by just pressing this thing against the wall and then painting back into it. Those are some of the things I'm thinking about doing.
- CM-U: Interesting.
- David Novros: It's a way of drawing that's apart from this idea – and also, if you're working on a big scale in fresco, and you're on a scaffold especially – this is something I never understood about the Medieval painters whom I admire beyond admiration, was, how did they know what they were doing? How could they

see it? They were painting up like, you know, a foot away from the wall, in these great ceilings and scaffolding. They couldn't even go down and see it from the floor.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: How did they know how – and what's more, they were working on complex, compound surfaces. Arcs, curves...

CM-U: Look at the Sistine Ceiling, yeah.

David Novros: ...how did they know how that was going to read from a distance? Amazing. I think it's an ability that has been lost. It's like one of the kind of skills that have been completely lost. And the only way I can think to do it is to find a way of doing it quickly all at once, and establishing the points. You can always grid it off, but I never found that very satisfactory as a way of working.

CM-U: What you're saying is recalling an experience I had of being invited to see the cleaning of the Sistine Ceiling at the end of the treatment. Just after it had been completed. The scaffolding was still up. So I was at the very end of the ceiling.

David Novros: Hmm.

CM-U: And they cleaned the ceiling in the same order in which Michelangelo painted it. So I was at the end of his job. I mean, he was just finishing. And I was again, as you are describing, about six inches from the surface. And I was astonished by the way he was putting the paint on. I mean, it was these *broad* brush strokes. He was just quickly and confidently applying this color to the wall. I mean, I was astonished. And it was both from the experience of having been doing it already for at least four years, as I remember. But also just the confidence at this point of knowing the effect he was going to get. And it was quick.

David Novros: Amazing. Just amazing.

CM-U: It was amazing.

David Novros: Free painting on a big surface like that. And no one who hasn't been on a scaffold up really high, and up against – I'm not talking about billboard painting, or something where it's gridded off – I'm talking about free painting.

And that is how the Medieval people painted. They had geometric reference points. For instance, you know, you set up these kind of references. Just as Michelangelo developed the architecture in the Sistine Chapel. So then he could relate an arm to a point in the architecture, and the architecture could be gridded. That gave him this kind of series of relationships that let him know where he was on the wall, pretty much. But it doesn't explain everything. In fact, it explains very little. I am more kind of amazed by painters like [Giovanni] Cimabue and before, Romanesque painters especially, who could do these amazing complex images. I think sometimes they must have had their copy books up there with them on the scaffold. Maybe they were gridded, but for the most part not. And, you know, all the great mosaics had painting under them.

CM-U: Hm.

David Novros: Did you know that?

CM-U: No, I didn't.

David Novros: Yeah. When they've cleaned – like [Basilica de] Santa Maria Maggiore...

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: ...when they take off _____ [word inaudible], they find that they had guys going up there and painting in every single place where the mosaics were going to go.

CM-U: Where color was to go?

David Novros: Yeah. It was done in sepia, or it was done in what, you know, red. But at the same time, it was done, and they had to still – because if you are going to do a mosaic, imagine trying to do the mosaic and figure out the drawing at the same time. Not possible. So this whole issue of transferring an image to an architectural surface, and not doing it mechanically like a billboard painter does now, this is really intriguing. It's a...

CM-U: It's the art.

[00:39:34]

David Novros: Yeah, it's a sense, you know. It's like sensing things. It's like any kind of painting thing. I am very worried that a lot of the things that go into painting

that I know about, or that I like in painting, are no longer relevant to people who either make painting or look at it. And I think that's a real problem. It's like losing part of your biological capacity. I mean, we can't – certainly we don't sense as well as we did – humans...

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: ...a long time ago. I mean, for instance, we can't sense the – I don't know how to say this without sounding like a New Ager, but we can't sense the properties in rocks, for instance, that the people who built Stonehenge could sense. You know, the electromagnetic forces. Things of that sort. And I think that painting is so much about being able to sense really infinite variations in light and surface that I can understand why it's not popular and not really understood very much anymore. I think that a lot of the biological capacity is lost.

CM-U: I think one aspect of my work that completely enamors me is that, because a conservator has the potential to change a surface of all kinds of materials, that we have to be true to the artist. We have to look so carefully at all those issues of reflectance and brushwork. We look much more closely than others need to. And we're the lucky ones. I mean...

David Novros: Well, I'm going to repeat this for the record now. Because I've said this to you privately, and I just want to say it now. And that's that your piece on the Rothko work [restoration of untitled paintings, Rothko Chapel, Houston] makes that point. And until recently, I don't think most restorers have had the slightest idea about that. You know, I am very encouraged, and you're great – and, you know, the work you did on the Rothkos makes it clear to everybody, or should make it clear to everybody, how important that is, and how really delicate the moment is between the surface of a painting and a person's eye. And how important that is. It's all there is. It's not about the canvas, or the wood, or the – it's that last skin, you know. It's all there is. The rest of it is all just prelude.

CM-U: That's true.

[00:41:47]

CM-U: Okay. So you were painting fresco at the same time – let's talk about this piece. It's called *Untitled (No. 9)*, 1972.

David Novros: Yeah. It's not called *Untitled*.

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CM-U: It's not called *Untitled*? That's good.

David Novros: It's just untitled.

CM-U: It's untitled? Okay. Good. Thank you for clarifying that.

David Novros: That's something museums always do. They always say, "Oh, the title of this is *Untitled*."

(laughter)

CM-U: You're right.

David Novros: You know, it's – gee, that's, "No, no, no. It's got *no* title. It should be called *No Title*."

CM-U: Where does the number—

David Novros: It shouldn't be called that.

CM-U: No. 9, though. Is that – that is associated?

David Novros: Well, it's because it was one of a group of – I usually work in groups of things. And this was one of a group that I did out of my experience in New Mexico, and it was a certain period of time.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: And so I gave it a number. Also, it makes it a lot easier, since it has no title, to say "that's No. 9." It's just a way of indicating it for practical purposes.

CM-U: Where did you paint it?

David Novros: I painted it in New York, on Wooster Street, in a studio I had on Wooster Street.

CM-U: And it looks like it's on cotton, again?

David Novros: Unprimed cotton.

CM-U: Unprimed. And the oil, oil paint? Just...

David Novros: Oil paint.

CM-U: ...painted right on it.

David Novros: Right on it.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: See, I want to say something about that.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: And I actually want to ask you about that.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: You know, I've seen a lot of old objects, Egyptian objects, things that were painted with oil-based material on unprimed surfaces. And the logic has always been, as I understood it, and I was taught as a kid, that you had to prime something because eventually the oil would go into it and eat the material up and destroy it. I'm not sure if that's true.

CM-U: Hm.

David Novros: I know it discolours it. I know it does what it's doing here, for instance – which I like. Which I wanted to have happen. But I don't think it really does any—. How can it do something bad to the canvas? All oil does is coat it and act as a protector?

CM-U: I suppose there's a fear – and this is especially true of the canvases that were used initially, these kind of – in Italy. Kind of loose-woven, hemp-type fabric, where the fear was that the oil would penetrate the fiber, which was already loosely wound itself, and that there would be separation of the fibers. And we've seen that. But I'm not sure that that would necessarily apply as widely to the kinds of fabrics that we use.

David Novros: Right.

CM-U: Machine-made fabrics that we use today.

David Novros: Machine-made cotton ducks. I don't think so.

CM-U: I'm just not sure. And yesterday we were looking at the backs of these paintings, and, true – I mean, as we expected, there is some bleed through. But as even one painter who works here was just saying, “You know, I was taught...” the same thing that you just said. He said, “But these paintings don't look like, you know, this fabric doesn't look like it's been–”

David Novros: I've never seen any damage to the weave. I've never seen – to me, it's a protector.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: You oil – it's just – all it is is linseed oil. There's nothing, you know. Once that's on there, it should act – you know, you put oil on a lettuce, and *then* you put the vinegar on, right? This is a protector.

CM-U: Yeah...

David Novros: So...

[00:44:50]

CM-U: The kind of staining the oil – you know, the kind of shape that I suppose that we see particularly in a panel like this. (points toward top of painting) And let's just talk about the one, you know, in here. Up there. That happened initially?

David Novros: Right away pretty much. You know, it's gotten a little darker in relationship to the duck, but it was on there pretty much in the beginning. I knew it was going to do that.

CM-U: And you like, yeah...

David Novros: It wasn't something. It didn't bother me. It was a kind of drawing that didn't bother me. I'll tell you a funny story about this.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: And it's related to this whole issue, and Pollock, right?

CM-U: Oh. Yeah.

David Novros: Okay. So, you know, all those Pollocks on cotton duck, and they have the bleed away from the paint when he painted them and all of that. And I went to a show in New York at Gagosian's, and they had all those black, late black drawings. Beautiful show. Fantastic stuff. And the owner of one of the paintings was doing this thing, you know, standing in front – you know how, you know, you go to an opening, and the person who owns the painting is always standing in front of their painting. That kind of thing, you know.

CM-U: (laughs)

David Novros: And I was sort of looking around. So this guy was standing there doing that. And I overheard him telling somebody, who was saying, "Oh, what about – you know, yours don't have any stains like the rest of them." And I knew that it had been inpainted. I knew they had done some work on it. And he says, "Ah, yeah, well, you know, this is the one that Pollock figured out how not to make the stains on. When all the other ones, you know, he didn't have this down." You know, it was this kind of thing. Back to the point about a thing not looking damaged in some way. And then I heard other people saying, "Oh, yeah, well, he intended that stain to do that."

David Novros: Well, neither one of those is true. It's just part of the process, and you accept it when you do the work, you know. And I think Pollock knew for sure that was what was gonna happen, but he didn't – I don't think he considered it a drawing element, and I didn't think he thought of it as something that was going to impair the image that he was making. And I don't think it's something that hurts the physical fabric of the painting. I don't see any deterioration in the cotton. So, I mean, I think there needs to be some kind of understanding about these things. Maybe if you see a painting you don't think is successful because it has this problem – for you, a problem – then that is something else.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: That's an aesthetic judgment. But, I mean, I've seen a lot of – for instance, a lot of the color-field paintings have a kind of a stain thing that seemed kind of irrelevant to me. But then again a lot of the painting looks irrelevant to me.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: So it's not easy to separate. If this bothers somebody, for instance, in the painting, then I just don't think they are really seeing the painting.

CM-U: They're not seeing the painting?

David Novros: Right.

CM-U: Right.

[00:47:28]

CM-U: It looks very the same. It doesn't look [like] it's changed much in the years that I've seen it. We purchased this in '74...

David Novros: Really?

CM-U: ...from Texas Gallery.

David Novros: Is that true?

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: God. I thought it was from '75. It shows you how my memory goes. I guess you're right. Seventy-four...

CM-U: It's dated '72. And, see, I was checking...

David Novros: Yeah, but I thought I had the show...

CM-U: ...our records, we bought it from Fredericka and Ian.

David Novros: Yeah, I thought I had the show in '75, but I guess you're right. It is '74.

CM-U: So they bought this before the show. So I guess...

David Novros: No, no, the show was in '74. It was bought out of the show from Fredericka and Ian.

CM-U: Oh, I'm sorry. The show with Frederick and Ian.

David Novros: Right. And I guess I did do it in – I think it's later, then. I think it's maybe '73.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: Because I came back to New York in about '73, and I made these paintings as a result. Came back from New Mexico. But what— you know, '73, '74.

CM-U: Right. And so this was shown at Texas Gallery...

David Novros: Um-hum.

CM-U: ...and you think Dominique and John [de Menil] bought it. Or Dominique bought it...

David Novros: Dominique bought it, right, immediately. Yeah.

[00:48:21]

David Novros: And, again, it's another attempt to make portable wall painting. You can see — I mean, I thought of the — I think of the canvas as a wall surface, and...

CM-U: Is there any priming at all on the canvas?

David Novros: None.

CM-U: Nothing at all?

David Novros: No.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: When I first started doing these, I used to put down a coat of glue.

CM-U: What kind of glue? Do you remember?

David Novros: Yeah. Rabbitskin glue.

CM-U: Rabbitskin...

David Novros: Straight.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: But I stopped doing it. I just didn't think it was necessary.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

- David Novros: I wasn't using a material, for instance, that was very thinly painted, so I wasn't worried about bleed into the canvas from that. I could control the drawing the way I wanted it to be. And I just couldn't understand why there was any reason to put the glue down. It didn't make any sense. For instance, the Rothkos, you know, they all have glue in them, right? Pretty much.
- CM-U: Glue. Yes.
- David Novros: I don't understand why. I mean...
- CM-U: Well, he put pigment – Rothko put color *in* it, so I don't think he...
- David Novros: No, I mean the first surfaces. The primer. He primed them with glue, right?
- CM-U: But with pigment already in it.
- David Novros: Oh, really?
- CM-U: So it was already like a colored surface.
- David Novros: That's interesting.
- CM-U: So I'm not sure. I...
- David Novros: Then that's something else. I take it back because that's already painting in it.
- CM-U: Yeah. I mean, I think he certainly appreciated the physical advantage of doing it, but I'm not sure that that was his complete motivation.
- David Novros: Hmm.
- CM-U: It was part of his motivation.
- David Novros: Well, I know that there's a lot of things you learn in school when you're – you learned in school, when I was young, that seemed to be, you know, good at the time. Good ideas. But I don't think that they're relevant, either technically or aesthetically, to the kind of painting I wanted to make. And that had to do with it...
- CM-U: As I look at these paintings – excuse me.

David Novros: No, no, it's okay. I experimented – just one thing – I experimented, too, with using an acrylic, a clear acrylic ground.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: But I didn't like it. It was too rubbery and sealed up the canvas too fast. 'Cause I build these things up from the most absorbent surface up to the hardest surface I can make, you know. And the gradation from one to the other was an important part of all my work.

[00:50:17]

CM-U: And at this point were you making your own strainers?

David Novros: No. I had stopped making my own stretcher bars at about, I think about '73.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I was making my own in New Mexico and up till then. But then when I began making these really large paintings, about this time I was selling work, and I was making money; and I was able to get my friend Jack Tomlin to make them. He's – I was telling you, he's the guy that made the bars for a lot of people, for Mike Heizer, myself, for Bob Mangold, and all kinds of people. And he did a good job, and he would do it for trade. He liked my work, and he has a bunch of my watercolors and things from this period, and he would make the stretcher bars for me. I love bartering, you know. I loved it.

CM-U: I do, too. It still works, too.

David Novros: The barter system.

[Break in video]

CM-U: Good. 'Cause I just wanted to know why this is happening.

David Novros: It seems...

CM-U: In your work it hasn't become a disfigurement...

David Novros: Well, I...

CM-U: ...but in other artists...

David Novros: ...I think it's something to do with the nature of the cotton. And you see it in – and it always occurs in places – do you know how cotton has little impurities, little spots in it, you know?

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: Then that's where the brown comes up, the oxidation seems to be occurring. I don't know why.

CM-U: No. Neither do I, which is why I was really happy that he was willing to answer the – to begin to try to answer...

David Novros: Yeah. Ask him if it seems – when you talk to him, ask him if there's anything about it that seems to relate to the material that goes on top, or if it's something intrinsic to the cotton itself.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: Would you be able, for instance, just to have a flat piece of cotton, and would that happen over 20 years...

CM-U: Just by its – well, that's the question on these unprimed canvases.

David Novros: ...by itself, you know? Right. Right.

CM-U: Are you ready for us to go? Okay.

[00:51:53]

CM-U: Let's look more carefully and talk a little bit more about this painting. It looks like you have no priming, but you've scored the forms before you painted them.

David Novros: In this painting I drew them with a pencil.

CM-U: Drew them in with pencil. Did you ever use tape to make a line?

David Novros: No.

CM-U: No? Okay.

- David Novros: I don't like tape. I used the tape on these larger, old – these paintings from the rooms...
- CM-U: Okay.
- David Novros: ...because, in some instances, because I wanted a really thick buildup of paint.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: And it was the only way I could get it that thick. But, again, it came from going from thin to thick, and I'd reached the point where I couldn't just keep painting it thick anymore with an edge. With a line, you know. It was just impossible.
- CM-U: And what's so – we were just beginning to talk about this, which is one of the aging aspects of these that I like so much, is that the brushwork is so apparent. And you do have this feeling of the wall. It's an incredible feeling that you've created, especially as it becomes more apparent over time.
- David Novros: Yeah. I – you know, it's not about making faux fresco or something. That's not exactly what I mean. The kind of way I'm drawing and painting at this time, and even today, is about the intention of trying to find where the image separates from the object. You know. And because it isn't the wall, you have to find that in a really hit and miss way. And that's why they are painted this way. I found that I could, you know, kind of modulate it. And also, I don't really like flat surfaces, you know?
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: This idea of flat surfaces is not what I'm about. My work has to breathe. I love the great painting that breathes, you know. Like Cezanne, and the Venetians, and, you know, etc. all the way back. The things that have a kind of internal life, a pulse, you know. Rothko. You know, where you feel this kind of light and dark movement all the time. So just to paint something flat never interested me at all.
- CM-U: It's so – I mean, as I look at this today in this light, I am so struck by the edge and the difference of the saturation of the color on the edge, where I suppose you are slowing down, or you are building up, or, you know.
- David Novros: Right.

CM-U: As opposed to the other parts of the form.

David Novros: Yeah. I mean, it's come up – almost always the things come up from the edge to a denser center, you know. But sometimes I change that around. It depends on the intention, on the content.

CM-U: So how do they look to you now, over 20 years later?

David Novros: (laughs)

CM-U: Go ahead. You knew you were going to get the hard questions!

David Novros: They look great.

CM-U: Yeah, they look great to me, too.

David Novros: I think they look really great.

[00:54:42]

CM-U: Are they intended – they are intended to be exhibited completely about, right? Right up against one another?

David Novros: Against one another.

CM-U: Um-hum. And, again, the stretchers are very much aligned. I mean, we are able to hang them that way.

David Novros: Right. Does this break? I don't think this breaks, does it?

CM-U: No. We never needed to. This has been on exhibition many times here, and for most of the time here, in fact, in our 20th Century Gallery. And we just took it down recently, and then just put it here for this interview. But it's been on exhibition a lot, so it's not even that it's been wrapped and been in storage. And it's in remarkably beautiful condition.

David Novros: I mean, I've been looking at this in reproduction recently because I was doing some other work with people that wanted to ask about some things. And I was looking at the reproductions they gave me. And this one, I looked at, and I was a little embarrassed about it when I looked at the reproduction. Well, the drawing looks a little bit arbitrary to me, you know. I don't know if maybe I shouldn't have been so involved with these little kind of interstices

between things and stuff. But, like all my work, I think – I really think my work is lousy in reproduction.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: But I think it looks good when you see it.

CM-U: Well, because of all the subtlety we're talking bout.

David Novros: Yeah. And I think that things like, you know, this thin edge, which – well, why did I do this? I was looking at it. Said, "Why did I do that, you know? I could have just brought it – it would have been okay." But now that I see it, I see that it was inevitable. I had to have done it, you know. So that's the kind of thing that's encouraging because oftentimes I've seen older work of mine and really hated it, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: But the work here that I'm seeing today, and the fresco we saw yesterday, I am content with. Yeah.

CM-U: Do you have a preference for how high off the floor a work like this hangs?

David Novros: Yeah, I do.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: I really do.

CM-U: What is that?

David Novros: Well, my preference is that it – this one – each one's different. All right. I have different preferences for each painting.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: But this painting, I like the idea that this big yellow mass should (stands in front of painting) – it should be high enough so that this mass feels like you could be in it. In other words, it shouldn't be too high off the ground.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: I think maybe a foot off the ground.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: Depending how tall. I mean, I'm giving a general...

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: ...idea about that, you know. I think about a foot off the ground. But then again it depends on the physical space that it's gonna be hung in. I always liked seeing it here. I thought it looked very good in this space. The light's beautiful on it. And it always looked okay to me. But generally I think people tend to hang big paintings much too high.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: You know, they are worried about – whatever.

CM-U: Did you paint these in daylight or in incandescent light? Do you remember?

David Novros: Incandescent.

CM-U: Um-hum. But, in terms of exhibition...

David Novros: I'd much rather have it seen in natural light.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: But I painted it in incandescent light. All of these paintings, the oil paintings, were – this one I painted in natural light.

CM-U: Natural light? Yeah.

[00:57:42]

CM-U: Fortunately, we've never had to deal with this with one of your paintings, but I do need to ask you this in the event that in the future a conservator is faced with this in any museum that has your work. Supposing there were a damage in the middle, or, I mean you know, a central interruption of this...

David Novros: Yeah, sure.

- CM-U: ...of this form in here. I mean, is that something that you would feel should be definitely attended to? I mean, so that the serenity, or the completeness of this form is preserved?
- David Novros: Who's the restorer?
- CM-U: Ah. Huh. That's always the case. Yeah.
- David Novros: You know, it just depends how sensitive the person is to the intention, and it depends on the damage. It's the kind of generalization I can't...
- CM-U: Yeah, that you can't really answer. I understand that.
- David Novros: You know, I can't – generally speaking – let's say it was you...
- CM-U: Has it happened? I mean, has it happened in other examples of your work?
- David Novros: Okay. Well, I don't know how to say this, but I don't think my work has been valued enough for it to come up as a problem. I know my work has been damaged in museums, but unless I hear about it and make a stink about it, nobody ever does anything.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- David Novros: So...
- CM-U: Well, time is a long time, as you know.
- David Novros: Yeah. So let's talk...
- CM-U: So that's the story of it, yeah.
- David Novros: So let's say we're talking hypothetically.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- CM-U: And somebody came in here and slashed this, this area, like right here, you know?
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: And it was only about that big a slash.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And you were here. I would love it if you would, you know, fix it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: Yeah. I think it would have to be fixed. If somebody came and put a thumbprint on it, we're not even worried about that because it is so easily fixed.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: So we are really talking about some kind of radical damage. There is nothing intrinsic in the painting that is going to damage the painting. I can't imagine anything. What could happen, you know? It's not going to explode suddenly.

CM-U: Right. No, and if...

David Novros: It's, you know...

CM-U: Did you paint them stretched? Or on—

David Novros: I painted them stretched.

CM-U: Stretched? Okay.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: Great. I would love to start talking about the rooms now.

David Novros: Sure.

CM-U: But that's going to require turning around.

[Break in video]

[00:59:44]

CM-U: Okay. Now according to — tell me about these. Were these commissioned? When did you paint these?

David Novros: Made them on spec.

David Novros Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 12/02/1997

Video: adp1997b_19971202_005va.mp4 & adp1997b_19971202_006va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.1997b / TRT: 02:28:03

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CM-U: Made them on spec! Okay. Here?

David Novros: I made them in New York.

CM-U: You made them in New York? Okay, so explain that.

David Novros: All right. About 1975, I wasn't getting anymore fresco commissions. The whole scene had kind of fallen apart for me. I was really depressed about it. I didn't – the reason for wanting to do it in the first place was to make these things in public, and all I was seeing were these options of doing, like, corporate – you know, like the one down here at Pennzoil [*Untitled (Pennzoil Fresco)*, 1975, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston]. I did these after the Pennzoil painting.

CM-U: Oh, you did these *after* the Pennzoil painting?

David Novros: Yeah. And I was just really fed up with working in that context. So I decided I was going to make – really put my money where my mouth was, and make rooms. And I was going to make them out of canvas and wood like this, and make them portable so I could show them in a – reassemble them in a gallery of some sort. But yet at the same time they would have this integrity about them as architectural places.

David Novros: About – as I was beginning this, my friend Harris Rosenstein, who is here in Houston, and I were talking. We were talking about the importance of paintings which identified with specific places, and our mutual admiration for Rothko and all of the various things we talked about. Endless. I said, "I think it would be really great to do a show of paintings which were made specifically..." – since I was already doing it, you know – "...it would be nice to see them maybe in another context." And he thought it was a good idea, too. And I talked to my friend Brice Marden about it, and he thought it was a good idea. So, since you had these Rothkos that were the extra ones, and you had my stuff that was going on, Harris thought it would be a wonderful idea to do an exhibition. That's how we ended up with the Rothko/Marden/Novros exhibition that was here. But I hadn't made these things specifically for the exhibition. It was coincidental.

CM-U: OK so – all right. So the [Rothko] chapel opened in '71. You came down and saw it soon after it opened.

David Novros: That's right.

- CM-U: And you're in New York, painting. But you knew Harris [Rosenstein].
- David Novros: I knew Harris.
- CM-U: You knew Harris. You've known Harris.
- David Novros: Yes.
- CM-U: Was Harris involved in your painting the fresco at Pennzoil? No.
- David Novros: No.
- CM-U: That was totally separate? Okay.
- David Novros: Separate.
- CM-U: So you'd already done some work here, onsite, in Houston.
- David Novros: Yeah. I'd been showing at the Texas Gallery.
- CM-U: And you'd been showing at the Texas Gallery? Okay.
- David Novros: But I knew Harris from New York, from the very earliest days when he was a write at *ARTnews*.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- David Novros: And he wrote the best thing that anybody had written about this early work. He saw something that nobody else was really involved with in my work, and Brice's work, and in Paul Mogensen's work. And he wrote a piece called, I think, "Complex Color," or something of that sort...[Harris Rosenstein, "Total and Complex Color: Three Young Colorists." *ARTnews* 66, no. 5 (May 1967).]
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: ...in which he really, and on a very high level, approached our work. And so I knew that Harris was capable of dealing with things that were a little out of the ordinary in the way of an exhibition. Then Paul [Winkler] came back to Houston at about that time. So Paul was here, and...
- CM-U: Paul Winkler.

- David Novros: Paul Winkler, who is, you know, a fantastic overseer and expeditor of these kinds of projects. So it was very easy to do the show here, in a way. And then also Ian Glennie at the Texas Gallery, who was trained as an architect, was an enormous help, you know. A very big help. The drawings, the whole thing, you know. So it was really perfect. I had shown these things – for instance, I showed one of the rooms – or, no, no, two of the rooms at Bykert...
- CM-U: Previous to the Rice show?
- David Novros: ...Bykert Gallery, prior to the show. Yeah. And I showed one of the rooms at Sperone Westwater as well. So in some sense I'd been making these things – and I made them in a really relatively short time. I worked on them, I don't know, just a few months almost. You know, I made them in the studio in New York.
- CM-U: Okay. But when you say "them," you mean Room 1, 2, and 3.
- David Novros: 1, 2, and 3.
- CM-U: Okay. In our records, we have for dates of this one, '73–75. Is that right?
- David Novros: That's not right.
- CM-U: I didn't think it sounded right.
- David Novros: That's wrong. They were really made in about '75. When was the show here?
- CM-U: The Rice show was from April to June of '75.
- David Novros: Yeah, they were made just at that point, '75. I guess they must have gone back to New York then after the show.
- CM-U: We purchased them in January of '75. So we purchased them four months before the show.
- David Novros: Then I did make them before...
- CM-U: You made them in '74?
- David Novros: Four. Yeah.

CM-U: In New York?

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: In the summer.

CM-U: So then Dominique or Harris must have seen them. You brought them in January...

David Novros: I don't think that Dominique saw them then. I don't think that they saw them until the show.

CM-U: Until the show? Okay. And the show happened in April and June?

David Novros: Right.

CM-U: Okay. So these...

David Novros: That's right.

CM-U: ...these were already painted then?

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: So they were not actually commissioned for the show?

David Novros: No, that's the point I was making.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: That I'd been working on them, on spec, because I just had to do them.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: They had to be made. I knew I could get them seen in New York through the galleries somehow, even though it was an unsatisfactory way of showing them. And then all this happened here coincidentally.

[01:04:59]

- CM-U: Now the installation...
- David Novros: It was very unplotted.
- CM-U: Yeah. Okay. The installation, the actual – they were always shown that way, though? I mean, they were conceived in that way.
- David Novros: Yeah. I want to make this point...
- CM-U: Yeah. Good. Do.
- David Novros: ...now, for the record.
- CM-U: Yes, do.
- David Novros: Which is, that I don't think of these as separate paintings. I don't even think of them as Room 1, 2, and 3. That's something that was added on like *Titled, Untitled*, as a way of being able to refer to them. I really think of it as "a painting."
- CM-U: All three?
- David Novros: Yeah. A painted place. And in the configuration that we had them here at Rice. That's my optimum expectation for the way they ought to be seen. Now because one is now at [Modern Art Museum of] Fort Worth through an oversight on my part, it's going to be difficult to put it back again in place; but I think that's the way it should be seen. And that's a much more important restoration issue to me than whether it's cracked or not cracked.
- CM-U: Yes. I understand that. So...
- CM-U: Just like I'd like to see the [Paolo] Uccellos [*The Battle of San Romano*, c. 1438] all back in the same room.
- CM-U: We were deprived of that privilege, weren't we? Our generation.
- David Novros: Yes.
- CM-U: So do I understand that to mean, then, you always feel they should be shown together? We shouldn't just see Room 3 exhibited...

David Novros: Well, I don't think I'm going to have much to say about it, to be honest with you; but, yes, my preference is not only – I don't think they should be exhibited anymore. I think they should be put somewhere and left in the original way they were meant to be seen.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And this idea – if they are only going to show one room, fine; that's better than nothing. But I would rather see them installed somewhere simple. Left there. Not dealt with.

CM-U: When you did the show at Rice – which I didn't see; I didn't get here until after that – the relationship of the rooms to each other, was that very clear in that _____ [word inaudible]...

David Novros: Oh, it was...

CM-U: ...that was it?

David Novros: I mean, if you'd understand the organization of the paintings. I don't like to talk about my work this way, but I'm going to say it this one time because it is my intention. If you understand the organization of the painting, it goes from grisaille to the most intensely colored, and it penetrates the walls that separate them. So you have the memory of a color transition. It's one of the important parts of the conception of the painting. It is a very important aspect of the drawing and the idea. And I don't think, you know, people quite understand that. I didn't have them in separate rooms to keep them separate. I had them in separate rooms to create a spatial circumstance that was complex and, to me, interesting. But the idea that you would go from one where you'd start in Room 1, for instance, and it was this kind of green expanse; and then it came to a very dark wall on the right; and you would come to the grisaille panel, which is this one that Mrs. de Menil bought, and you would pick it up through the wall on the other side with a grisaille panel, and it came around and ended with the most intense color, which is in the other room.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: That's the logic of the painting. Just like most of my paintings have been about this transition from dark to light, and from intense color to gray. Consistent in all my work, you know. And if anybody understands that, then they'll see what the logic of the painting is. But they won't see it if it's just seen as separate rooms.

- CM-U: I'm glad you clarified that because I didn't see that installation, and I can understand now, looking at the works, what you're talking about.
- David Novros: Right.
- CM-U: How beautiful, really.
- David Novros: Right.
- CM-U: I'd also like to make a point, since we are talking – this is on film. These are not installed in this space.
- David Novros: Right.
- CM-U: We just lined them up on the walls. And this is not the way they are intended to be.
- David Novros: But the way we arranged the views of each room, Ian and I, the doorways through, anywhere you stood, you could see parts of the thing.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: The whole. So it wasn't like we were blocking off the view of one room by putting a wall in. We were just using it as a kind of ceremonial separation of sorts. Given the space that we had to do it in. But that's my ambition for the rooms, is that that be – they be reinstalled so that point can be made clear to people.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: And then they can experience the painting that way.
- CM-U: This must have been an exciting moment for you, to sort of set these things up. Was the exhibition satisfactory and...
- David Novros: Do you know that Tarkovsky movie, *Andrei Rublev*? Do you know that one?
- CM-U: No.
- David Novros: It's a really great movie. There's a scene in the movie where this guy is a – and this goes for all the public art stuff, and the fresco, and all the stuff I've done – where this guy is the son of a bellmaker. And there's a commission

for making this bell. And his father wins the commission, but in the course of proceedings, the father dies. And the son is a kind of intuitive person, not really involved with the bellmaking. Knows nothing about it. But the committee comes to tell the father that he has won the commission. Instead, they see the son, and he pretends to be the father, and he takes the commission, but he's never made a bell. So how is he going to do it, you know? So he goes out, and he finds this mud flat to get the clay. And it's all lightning strike [sounds like], whatever. Eventually he gets it made after enormous problems, and bullying all the people who work for him, and everything. Just like all people who do commissions do. And he finally gets the thing built. And the last moment comes when they are going to set it up and see if it's going to ring. But he doesn't know whether it's going to ring, or is going to crack into a million pieces. And it rings, and he's become the bellmaker. So that's the way these things get done, you know. You just have to do them.

CM-U: You just have them.

David Novros: Yeah. You have to – you know, like, to do this, to set this thing up here in its full total totality. I never had it set up. I wasn't sure whether everything would fit or anything. But Paul told you we were, you know, hammering on it with a hammer, and getting it to work, and putting it together. And it worked. You know, it came together.

CM-U: So you told me you had already exhibited this.

David Novros: Yeah, but I had never exhibited in toto.

CM-U: In toto?

David Novros: Yeah. Just one room at a time.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: Mostly 'cause I wanted to see it out of my studio, where it was very hard to see.

[01:11:02]

CM-U: As I look at the surface of these – are we able to go close and kind of look at some of the surface? – it's really quite different from the painting No. 9.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: Same oil paint?

David Novros: Big change. Yeah, I was at this – let's see; seventy – these were the first ones. Because I wanted to make big rooms, now, I didn't have to show the canvas. I didn't have to show the – I didn't have to suggest a wall surface because these were the walls. And I wanted to paint it in a way that was more solid. But I didn't want it to be flat. So I began playing around with changing the surface using Damar varnish.

CM-U: Added to...

David Novros: Added to the oil paint.

CM-U: ...the oil paint.

David Novros: And the linseed oil. And it's a very traditional kind of material. And I was putting on the paint now with both a knife and a brush, instead of just brushing it, which I had been doing before. Almost troweling it on, and then brushing it down, and troweling it again, and seeing when it started to become wall-like. Physical, like that. And that's why these surfaces look the way they do. You can see they are really in some way kind of close to the Pennzoil painting.

CM-U: Um-hum. They are. Except that there's a different...

David Novros: Well, fresco is fresco.

CM-U: Yeah. The surface.

David Novros: So, you know. But, I mean, the drawing in it you can see is similar.

CM-U: Did you paint these upright?

David Novros: I painted them in – yeah, I painted them one room at a time. I had the whole room assembled in my studio.

CM-U: You had it all assembled?

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: You had the canvases hung on the wall...

David Novros: That's right.

CM-U: ...as they would be?

David Novros: Yeah. Um-hum.

CM-U: And then you were on ladders and whatever you needed to do?

David Novros: Yeah. Um-hum.

CM-U: Interesting. Yeah.

David Novros: They took up the whole space. And, you know, for instance, the big black area, I would paint on that. It was very hot. It was the summertime. There was so much black paint in that area that the temperature would be about 20 degrees cooler. It was really physical. It was a very physical kind of painting experience. It was a lot like painting in fresco, only over a long period of time.

[01:13:05]

CM-U: And the edges are not painted, is that right?

David Novros: No, they're not painted.

CM-U: They're not painted. Okay.

David Novros: I painted the edges on paintings that had – especially I painted them on these kind of linear paintings because I wanted to control where it met the wall. But in these cases, they *were* the wall, so it didn't matter.

CM-U: Right. One aspect of them that's very nice is, again, the stretchers are so stable. I mean, they line up so beautifully. I mean, that's the only thing I could see in the future if for some reason the stretching became – and I can't even imagine it because they are in such – after 20 years, they are in such beautiful plane.

David Novros: Yeah, it's pretty amazing.

- CM-U: You know, that might be a problem if they didn't quite line up, but they just really do beautifully.
- David Novros: Well, I have other stretchers that are completely warped, and made by the same person, and much smaller paintings.
- CM-U: Hmm.
- David Novros: I don't know why. These have been lucky.
- CM-U: Maybe it has to do with the storage.
- David Novros: Maybe the storage. Maybe the wood was less, you know, green.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: You know, at this point, when I made these, the lumberyards were changing...
- CM-U: Why don't you stand over here?
- David Novros: At this point, when I made these, lumberyards were changing from places where you could go and select your wood, and you'd always get really good dry wood, to a point where they just dump a big pile in your studio, and you had to take what you could get. And Jack [Tomlin] had really good lumber.
- CM-U: Jack Tomlin?
- David Novros: Jack Tomlin had excellent, really dry wood. It was the thing that he did. It was the best. And, plus he'd come up with a stretcher bar that had stress-related things built in. In other words, he had the vertical and the horizontal so all the weight coming across wasn't going to warp it out.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: Most stretcher bars at that point were just mostly flat, and then they had a little ridge. But his were really built in as one thing. And then when the plywood plates were put in, they really stabilized it in the inside. The only problem with the stretcher bars then, as you know – this kind of stretcher bar – is that the paintings were vulnerable from the back; and I think if I were to do it again now, I'd always have them have cardboard or something in the back of them because most of the damage occurs from the back.

- David Novros: The other thing is that you can see here, this is where the stretcher bar breaks. Right? There's a little bump there.
- CM-U: Right. You mean for folding?
- David Novros: Yeah, for folding. And this is pretty good because, you know, a lot of times that's quite obvious. It's a problem. Now on this panel it's good. What I was talking to you about before, that I'm concerned about is, if these ever have to be broken, or my other paintings are broken, and then they have to be restretched, and if you want to realign this edge with where it is, you have to stretch it pretty hard. And when that occurs, you sometimes get this crazing thing that goes like that.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: And I want to make sure that doesn't happen.
- CM-U: I think folding is one of the most dangerous things we do. We – fortunately, in this museum, we rarely – we don't need to do it because we can get things in and out. But it's people that live in apartments who have...
- David Novros: Or artists in studios.
- CM-U: Artists in studios.
- David Novros: It's really hard to make work that is of any scale, and to get it in and out of your studio. That's why I made things in modules originally, you know, just because I couldn't get a big thing in and out of my studio.
- CM-U: So the fact that these are – does that apply to these pieces?
- David Novros: No.
- CM-U: No? Okay.
- David Novros: But I had been talking about the earlier work. No, these are this size because they had to be this size.
- CM-U: A part of their conception?
- David Novros: The drawing, yes.

CM-U: The drawing. The only other comment I want to make about these is, I see kind of areas up here. I don't know if the camera will get this where it looks – perhaps you went – we have no record of them being treated or gone back into, but I see sort of areas where it's possible they may have been repainted. Or it just may be the saturation...

David Novros: No. These were never repainted.

CM-U: Okay. So it's just the uneven saturation...

David Novros: That's the way it's painted.

CM-U: It's beautiful. Okay.

[01:16:45]

David Novros: This painting, I've never even, you know, seen it since the show.

CM-U: Yeah?

David Novros: 'Cause it was here, and then it was in – I never showed this one in New York.

CM-U: No.

David Novros: I showed the other two rooms.

CM-U: I see.

David Novros: But since this was a single wall painting, there was no actual place in the galleries that I showed that was long enough to show this particular painting. Because it's quite long. I don't know...

CM-U: This one did not go to Los Angeles [for "The First Show: Paintings and Sculpture from Eight Collections 1940-1980," The Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA), Los Angeles, November 20, 1983-February 10, 1984]. I think it was just Room 3, right?

David Novros: Just Room 3.

CM-U: Is that right? That's right.

David Novros: Yeah, that's right.

- CM-U: Okay. Well, we're ready to go in, and – let me just see if there's anything else I wanted to ask you about these. Otherwise we are really ready to talk about what you and I did. Oh, yes, I wanted to ask you again about installation. Is your same feeling about, you know, distance off the floor?
- David Novros: Um-hum.
- CM-U: About a foot?
- David Novros: Again – no, but with these paintings, it's – that thing that I said before is particularly relevant, that it depends on the space it is in.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- David Novros: For instance, if this were in a big shell of a room, like the [Rice Museum] barn was...
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: I can play with the height up and down. But then it has to be lit. And I hated the intrusion of the lights into the space of the painting. Ideally, there wouldn't be any light on them at all. They'd just be in, like, a room like at the Twombly [Cy Twombly Gallery, The Menil Collection], with the scrim and no light...
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: ...and that would be it, you know. But because you have to have some electricity to see them, that determines how high or how low it can be. If, in fact, you even have that choice. Oftentimes you are not even, you're not even given that choice.
- CM-U: But you never felt they should be right on the floor? There was always a sense of them (raises hand into the air) _____ [word inaudible]...
- David Novros: No. No, they had to be up. I believe – how were they in the _____ photo? They are up about this high, right? Off the ground?
- CM-U: Yeah, I think that's about right.
- David Novros: I think about knee high.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: Um-hum. But I can understand what you mean. It has to do with the proportion of the space, the height of the wall...

David Novros: Right. Plus, you don't want people to come and kick them, and, you know, that kind of thing, which occurs. It is uncomfortable to see them. But now that I look in the other room and I see that painting on the floor, leaning against the wall, it looks pretty good at that height, to me.

CM-U: Let's move into the other room.

[END RECORDING, PART 1 of 2]

[BEGIN RECORDING, PART 2 of 2]**[00:00:43]**

David Novros: ...it's the only way it could have been done.

CM-U: Because it wasn't there before. I would have made a note of it. We worked – in fact, we didn't even work over here though, unless you – maybe you worked over there...

PW: No, I don't think we did.

CM-U: I have that we worked up in here somewhere.

David Novros: No, I think we worked on this area (points toward white area of painting). I think it was wet. Because you couldn't work over in just one area. Remember you had to make a – I had to make a gesture here. We taped it. And I bet this was hanging up there, you know, and somebody made like that (holds palm of hand flat up against painting) while it was wet.

CM-U: I have no record of that. And that would be in our transparencies.

David Novros: Sure. It would show up. But now that we're talking about it, we see it.

CM-U: Well, let's wait, okay?

David Novros: But I mean I'm saying – okay, well, we'll talk about, what would you do about that?

CM-U: Yeah, what would you do with that? Right.

David Novros: Okay. Well, I would never have noticed it unless the lights were turned on this way.

PW: Here's a little crack (faces red area of painting).

CM-U: We worked on the red. We worked. (looks at paper in hand) Uh, hairline cracks...

David Novros: It's a little more.

CM-U: ...infused with rabbitskin glue.

David Novros Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 12/02/1997

Video: adp1997b_19971202_005va.mp4 & adp1997b_19971202_006va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.1997b / TRT: 02:28:03

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PW: I'll bet that's the one.

[all voices speaking at the same time; cannot distinguish the words]

David Novros: No, you know something? That's from behind.

CM-U: And that's not where we worked.

David Novros: Yeah, that's – somebody banged this from behind at that point.

CM-U: We worked in here.

David Novros: Right. Yeah. But doesn't this look to you like it's something from behind? There's no paint surface cracked, you know. (points toward red area of painting)

CM-U: Well, that's not a problem.

David Novros: It's really not.

CM-U: That can be definitely taken care of. And we worked the cerulean blue. Let's see, what else did we work? Upper...

David Novros: Down here we worked. No, no. This, this way.

CM-U: We worked up there.

PW: Yeah.

David Novros: We worked up there.

CM-U: And we worked...

David Novros: Worked on here.

(both DN and CM-U point at various areas of painting)

CM-U: ...uh, okay. E and F. We worked here. In here somewhere. The blue edge. Just inpainted small losses. You can't even see that.

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible]

CM-U: Diagonal cracks in gray area.

David Novros: Just because of the installation, there's always bound to be some paint loss along these. See, here's one of those restretched areas that you couldn't quite get over all the way, you know.

CM-U: I find these foldings – I see this all the time.

David Novros: Yeah, sure. It doesn't bother me.

CM-U: No, it's not...

David Novros: And especially if the thing's assembled...

CM-U: Exactly.

David Novros: ...you're not going to see the edge. Right.

CM-U: And the way it's lit. It all has to do with the way it's lit. It all has to do with the way it's lit, too.

David Novros: Yeah. Yeah.

CM-U: Then I have here that you intended to...

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible] these stretchers?

David Novros: Yeah. Uh-huh.

PW: Have they ever been off?

David Novros: No. Remember, you guys sent up those enormous electronics trucks?

PW: Yeah.

David Novros: So we could *not* fold them, and put them in like this, yeah.

PW: 'Cause there was talk about doing that.

David Novros: Right.

PW: Well, actually I saw some of your paintings once folded like that.

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David Novros: Yeah. Unfortunately that's true.

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible].

David Novros: I know. I don't do that anymore. But I don't even remember how we got this...

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible] that I remember.

David Novros: We must have folded these to get them out of my studio. Because I know the stretcher breaks...

PW: Yeah. The place here.

David Novros: Yeah, they had to. And then we reassembled them on the street and put them in the truck.

CM-U: Tell us when you're ready, Laurie.

LMcD: I've been rolling.

CM-U: Oh, you've been rolling? Oh. Okay. Well, let's just – stay in this, Paul, if you'd like.

David Novros: Come on, Paul.

PW: _____ [word inaudible]

David Novros: You were here.

[00:03:39]

CM-U: What David and I are reviewing. It was in July of 1983. There was an exhibition ["The First Show: Paintings and Sculpture from Eight Collections 1940-1980," November 20, 1983-February 10, 1984] at the Museum of Contemporary – the Temporary Contemporary Museum...

David Novros: Temporary Contemporary.

CM-U: ...in Los Angeles.

David Novros: Yeah.

- CM-U: It was the very – it was called “The First Show.”
- David Novros: Right.
- CM-U: It was called “The First Show: Painting and Sculpture from Eight Collections, 1940–1980.”
- David Novros: Um-hum.
- CM-U: And the show ran from November ’83 to February ’84. And I think you and I met there sometime in the late summer of ’83. No, I guess it must have been November. It was California, but it must have been November because the paintings had been shipped.
- David Novros: The painting was up. In fact, it was on the wall.
- CM-U: We – they were being installed, right?
- David Novros: Yeah. They were installed completely, which gets to, you know...
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: ...why this occurred, probably.
- PW: Were all three rooms shown?
- David Novros: No.
- CM-U: No.
- David Novros: Just this room.
- CM-U: Just 3. Just Room 3.
- PW: Pontus [Hultén, MOCA Founding Director] did that show.
- CM-U: Pontus Hultén, yes.
- David Novros: Did he really? I thought it was [Richard] Koshalek [MOCA Director].
- CM-U: Koshalek was already there, but I think Pontus Hultén had arranged it, because I remember the request for the loan came from Pontus Hultén.

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible]

David Novros: Yeah. But I would bet it came through Richard's doing because he really liked these rooms. He is the one who got the one for Fort Worth.

CM-U: Uh-huh. Was he at Fort Worth?

David Novros: Uh-huh.

CM-U: Ahh. Right.

David Novros: Yeah. Yeah.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: And he bought that painting immediately after they were seen here.

CM-U: All right. Well, anyway, again, these panels are not installed as they are intended to be seen, but rather in a way that David and I can look at them today.

David Novros: Can I say something about that now while we're here?

CM-U: Yes.

David Novros: Okay. The point I want to make is that this (points toward painting) is the left wall, facing towards the painting. This is the center wall. And this is the right wall, these parts. And to get back to what we were talking about in the other room, about the correct way to see the painting...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: ...this wall is a continuation of Room 2, which is the grisaille. So you saw this gray through the walls. Then you come to this, which is an end wall, and then you come to the most intense color, which is this wall. So that's what I was talking about before when we were talking about the ordering and the logic of the drawing of the piece.

CM-U: And, again, you had this wall completely assembled before you started painting?

David Novros: Yes.

CM-U: So you had all of these bare canvases stretched on the wall?

David Novros: That's right.

[00:06:00]

CM-U: Well, there are several interesting issues for us to talk about; but one of them that I just think that we should point out is how, in this particular light, the brushwork is so apparent.

David Novros: Yeah. Paul [Winkler] said something which is very perceptive and true, which I was going to tell you about anyway. Which was that this third room was purposely painted much, much thicker than any of the other rooms. And the reason for it to be this much more physical was that I saw it as a kind of a culmination of the entire experience, and I wanted to have a real physical force as – a frontality that the other ones don't quite have.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: They have another kind of space and more almost landscape-oriented space. These have a much more frontal kind of space. I think, anyway.

CM-U: And as you built up the layers, that necessarily affected the gloss as well. Did you use Damar on these also?

David Novros: I used Damar. And it wasn't just the layering, but I was – I would add a lot more Damar when I wanted a lot more shine.

CM-U: So you were also looking for sheen?

David Novros: Yeah. Um-hum. Um-hum.

CM-U: In this third room.

PW: Which makes it very different from this piece, I think.

David Novros: That's right.

CM-U: So even though the color...

PW: Even though the color _____ [word inaudible] relationship here, there's a closer relationship painting-wise.

David Novros: Yeah. That's how I could get it to make the...

PW: Transition.

David Novros: ...transition.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: Yeah. And you can see, for instance, that the ochres in this end wall are painted flat. And then these rectangles that are in front are painted really quite intensely, and a lot of activity, and they are more reflective and everything, to create a spatial passage behind them to go around the room. I became very interested in this change in texture and surface in the same painting at about this time, and I continued with that, using Damar and making paintings for the next – well, even to now. Especially now, in fact. Of using gloss, and flat, and variations in between in order to express different things in the painting.

CM-U: But you always stayed with oil paint?

David Novros: I always stayed with oil paint.

CM-U: You weren't tempted by...

David Novros: I am trying not to. I'm trying to give it up. It's like smoking, right? Because I recognize how terrible it is for me, and my family, and etc., etc. But I have to stay with it just till I finish this next set of paintings. Then I'm not going to use it anymore. Then I'm gonna use dynamite, and glass, and all kinds of other things that aren't so...

CM-U: Safer for your family.

David Novros: ...aren't so harmful.

CM-U: Not so harmful. Exactly. Okay.

PW: What about your decisions on brushstrokes on these? Because some of those segments are horizontal and some vertical.

David Novros: Yeah. The drawing – I think of it as drawing, and...

CM-U: You mean the orientation of the brushstrokes?

PW: Yes. Some of the light panels run...

David Novros: Yeah, it's a horizontal gesture.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible].

David Novros: It's a drawing. It was a drawing decision. It just was the way the light would be functioning.

PW: You don't really read that when you're looking at the overall, in a sense but – except when you go up to the painting.

David Novros: Well, I think when the light is correct on the painting, you would see that. It's just that it's – we're working with this kind of circumstance.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: But I think you ought to be able to see that in the painting. So I think it should be the case. Let's say that this was natural light, and it was from above.

PW: _____ [word inaudible]

David Novros: You would see it.

PW: Right.

David Novros: Yeah.

[00:09:22]

PW: And what about the sense of mural here? I know this was before you moved into fresco.

David Novros: No, no. This is – I had already made a bunch of frescoes.

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible]. I was trying to remember.

David Novros: This is a way of making frescoes. As I was telling Carol, this is a way of making frescoes when I no longer could make them for political and economic reasons. Luckily, this was the high point of my career. Quote, unquote. So I

had enough money to be able to patronize myself. And, you know, it costs a lot to make these, you know. But I felt that it was important to do them, rather than waiting for somebody to come along and say, "Here's this office building. You want to do another mural?" 'Cause I just didn't want to do that anymore.

PW: Well, I remember, during the show, you stressed numerous times it was a true relationship of painting to specific space...

David Novros: That's right.

PW: ...to wall.

David Novros: Yeah. It was built in. It is built into the circumstance. Let's say that, you know, best of all possible worlds, what would happen to these paintings? Just what we always talk about. I would have them installed permanently in the order they are meant to be seen, in a place that has the lighting conditions and architectural context that would be consistent with the paintings. They don't need a gallery. They don't need anything. They are what they are, you know. Build the walls around them, and that's all you have to do. And that's how I would like them best to be seen. Failing that, it would be nice to see them reassembled somewhere, you know, temporarily. But, no, this is the most ambitious of my portable mural paintings.

[00:11:00]

CM-U: I've been wanting to ask you this question throughout today as we've been talking about it. It has to do with your moving back and forth between fresco, wall fresco, this very kind of dry, absorbed surface, to painting in oil.

David Novros: Um-hum.

CM-U: Where we saw on the '72 painting, they weren't as built up as this one. These. This one. But still it was a really *very* different surface. And yet you seem to be doing them at the same time.

David Novros: I still am.

CM-U: And you still are?

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: You weren't tempted to try – I'm glad you didn't, for technical reasons, but you weren't tempted to do these in casein or egg tempera...

David Novros: No.

CM-U: ...or something matte? More matte?

David Novros: No. Never thought of it even.

CM-U: So you always thought of the surfaces quite differently when they were on canvas?

David Novros: Absolutely. I have no interest at all in creating false fresco. Faux fresco. That's a totally wrong – a lot of people said, "Why don't you make some little frescoes on panels for galleries and stuff?" That's not why I make fresco. I don't make it because I like some kind – I have some decorative idea about the way this stuff looks. I like it because it's architectural. It's correct for how to paint on walls. When you can't paint on walls, you have to find another material. I thought oil paint – and I do think oil paint is a good material for these kinds of paintings. It's very flexible if you use it with linseed and Damar the way I've used it. It can take a lot of abuse. And you can create these nuances of drawing with it, which is what I was interested in doing at the time.

CM-U: That really reflects a very strong respect for the material in you. I mean, what you are saying is, the material has its personality, and its place.

David Novros: That's right.

CM-U: And you're not, as an artist, going to transfer it...

David Novros: I'm not the least bit interested in it. That's about decoration, you know, from my point of view. I'm interested in using what seems to be the right material for the content of the painting.

CM-U: Um-hum. It's a beautiful result.

David Novros: Well, thanks.

[00:12:54]

- CM-U: We were – when David and I worked on these in Los Angeles, we were just doing localized repair, mitigation of cracks, and some inpainting. And you did some overpainting of certain sections. But what we're noticing today that we hadn't seen before – and this lighting, this kind of specular light, really helps – this is kind of – it looks like handprint in the paint (detail of white area of painting with handprint), I guess while it was still damp. Still wet.
- David Novros: Well, this is the first time that we've seen this. And what I think happened was, I think we restored this area. I know that this wasn't like this when it left my studio; and since it wasn't painted on any time after it left my studio, other than when it went to MOCA, then what must have happened was that after we did the restoration, while it was still wet, somebody put their fingers through it. Or something. It looks like fingers to me.
- CM-U: That's what it looks like to me, too.
- David Novros: But it could only have been done while it's wet...
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: ...because you can see it. And that's the way it happened. Now what are you going to do about it? (laughs)
- CM-U: What are we going to do about it? Right. How does it strike you?
- David Novros: It really bothers me.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: Because the rest of the painting is in such great shape. And this is so – this is, to me, this is a kind of an intrusion into the physical nature of the drawing, the thing we were just talking about. Okay, now I'm going to contradict myself, but that's okay. What I would do is, I would sand it. Since this surface is really hard, and all paint, you don't have to worry about identifying it again with another surface. What I would do is, I would sand this down pretty flat, so you get rid of the ridges and all the stuff that developed here. And I would let *you*...
- CM-U: (laughs) This is where the compromise comes in.
- David Novros: ...because in the old days – in the old days, what I would have done, you know, like even five or six years ago, I would have sanded this down, taped it

off, mixed a color that looked right to me. Shooo! Put a big swash of it across there. I don't think I want to do that anymore.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I think you can do a thing of sanding it down so that you don't see this thing, and filling it...

CM-U: So it's the interference of the topography of the work that's most bothersome to you?

David Novros: Yeah, that really bothers me.

PW: It changes the feel of the plane.

David Novros: Yeah. It kills the plane. And if it happened, say – let's say that happened down here somewhere...

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: ...nah, I don't think I would do anything to it. But it's so important that these things be hard and frontal to the meaning of the painting, that I would do that. You know? What do you think? Do you think you can do it?

CM-U: Uh, well, I'm always interested to talk with artists, and especially you, about something like this because you suggest something that's completely an anathema to conservation, which is sanding down. I mean, we would never do something like that because it would seem to interfere with what we would say is the artist's original brushwork. But, in this case, one could say the damage itself has interfered with the original surface so...

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: ...so much that it would be appropriate. And I certainly understand where you're coming from on this, and...

David Novros: See, you couldn't – here's the point. This is something I talked to [Conservator George] Bisacca about. And he's right about this. He says you can't just always inpaint things because by inpainting them you change the surface of it. So before you inpaint them, you have to do a little bit more work...

CM-U: To the texture. Um-hum.

David Novros: ...you know, like, you fill a tooth, you've got to keep going a little further down so you make the space. And that's – I think in this instance here, as I say, if I were going to do it, I would sand it just so that the next gesture I made would be consistent with the rest of the gestures.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: But since I don't expect that you'd be making a big gesture with a palette knife...

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: ...you have to sand it down so you can bring it all up to a surface that's the same.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And then I think it's – I know you can do it. I'm not worried about that.

CM-U: Well, it's the kind of thing that I think is appropriate, and it's exactly as I said earlier, the kind of thing that we are discussing now with monochromatic painting.

David Novros: Right.

CM-U: What do we do? We have painting for the first time where surface is so critical because the color is a flat tone...

David Novros: Right.

CM-U: ...that we have to come up with new ways of treating it. I understand that. It's sort of what we're talking about with Newman.

David Novros: I mean, if you had a problem with that, then I'd wait till this was going to be exhibited the next time, and I'd come and do it.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: Because that, to me, is something – there's another thing about this thing. It's not a damage that occurs from something in the painting.

CM-U: Right. Not natural.

David Novros: It's a kind of a nasty...

CM-U: It's a vandalism.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: No, I understand. I agree with you.

David Novros: And it puts an onus on the painting that I don't like.

CM-U: I understand that.

David Novros: You know, it was somebody going, "Nyah, nyah, nyah," you know. Into the wet stuff.

CM-U: And I just – no, I think it is a challenge for me, and I think it is the right way to go. 'Cause you can even look at it now with the lights flowing, at how it completely interrupts the reflectance.

David Novros: Yeah.

PW: And it's the physical quality of the movement.

David Novros: Yeah. It's got to maintain the horizontal...

CM-U: Yeah. No, I understand that.

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible].

CM-U: Well, I'm sorry we had something so particular to talk about, but it's very revealing for us.

David Novros: Look at – compared to my expectations for seeing things I haven't seen in – how many years? 20 years? – this is nothing!

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: I thought I'd come in and stuff would be on the floor. (laughs) That's really nothing.

CM-U: No, it really does look wonderful. And the areas in which they were – the repainting or the restoration was done in '83, look fine.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: They look...

David Novros: Really held up.

CM-U: They look very fine.

[00:18:09]

David Novros: What do you think about this little craquelure here?

CM-U: Well, I think it is something that should be minimized. I think it's – again, it's a question of lifting – breaking the plane.

David Novros: There's another one here.

CM-U: Right. I don't think it's – I'm more accepting of this (gestures toward area of crackle)...

David Novros: Yes.

CM-U: ...because I think it's kind of part of the life of the picture.

David Novros: Yeah, I feel the same way. I also – but I also feel that something like this is something that falls into the realm of the restorable...

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: ...in the sense that this is something people know about...

CM-U: That's exactly right...

David Novros: If it were a traditional painting, it wouldn't be a hard thing to do. But if you look at this painting, this panel, closely, you see that there is a cold blue with a warm blue over it. Can you see that? Come over here in this light, and you can see. See how here it's cold?

CM-U: Oh, yeah.

David Novros: And then it gets warm? That's a function of both the – that's painted that way because the latter coat with the Damar in it was a warmer red.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: Okay. So when you would do this, you'd try to find out which was the, you know, the cold, cold, warm, warm.

CM-U: Well, that will help...

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: ...because that helps hide something when...

David Novros: Exactly.

CM-U: ...you have that variation.

David Novros: That's exactly the point I'm making. In a funny way, this would have been a lot easier, you know, if – this'd be a lot easier because it has the texture. If this were like a Newman or something, and it was really flat, then it would be problematic, you know. But because, I think, you can hide the, the inpainting with the gesture if you are consistent with the direction of the paint, you know.

CM-U: I think that's right. I agree with you.

David Novros: Somebody said the other day, "God, you know, the real problem is that nobody paints figuratively anymore. In the old days, you could really hide that stuff, you know." Put it in with a face, you know. That kind of thing. When...

CM-U: It's here.

David Novros: It's here. Right.

CM-U: It's here.

[00:19:51]

PW: You know, I was trying to remember, David, when you're looking through notebooks that you probably looked through, almost everything is in black and white usually.

David Novros: Yeah.

PW: Did you do color sketches for these paintings also?

David Novros: I did. Don't you have the watercolors? Some watercolors? Did I give you ever any of those?

PW: I don't think we do.

David Novros: I made a full suite. I had a notebook with a full color – I don't know where it is. I'll have to go look for it.

PW: I mean, how true do you stick to those when you go to the big work?

David Novros: It differs, but I'll tell you, in these paintings, it's pretty close. These paintings – because I had a very specific poetic ambition with these paintings, that each one of the rooms meant something to me, coloristically, referred to something that I was really clear about. And I can remember each one very specifically about what – when I had the moment, what happened, you know. And I have these watercolors, which I'll probably give you, you know. Which you should have. That were – in those days, when I did these, I would make a lot of watercolor studies for the frescoes because it was very much an easily transferred kind of technique. The watercolor was like fresco, except in fresco you had the ability to work over and over and over, and it wouldn't bring up what was underneath. Which is what I liked about it. But I have a whole bunch of watercolors that were done as studies for this. And I didn't vary terribly from them, but I never looked at them when I was working on it. I didn't have to, because I had the content in my mind by that time. I do the...

[00:21:23]

PW: _____ [word inaudible] change in color when you come into this room, and it goes to its most extreme _____ [word inaudible].

David Novros: Yeah, I know.

PW: Can you talk about color a little bit?

- David Novros: Well, I just wanted to – I never had painted a painting in this color range before. At any of the – or areas, even, in my other paintings. But it had to be this color in order to resolve the quality I wanted for the total experience. You know, I couldn't paint it – and it couldn't paint it as glazes so that it wouldn't be – in other words, I couldn't depend on a transparency to give it light. It had to just be with the balance of the color. And it was risky because I was worried this thing was going to turn pastel, you know, and become just pretty, you know, or kind of look weird. But I think it's successful. It's strange. I don't know of any paintings that are quite like it in color. But in the context of the room, it's kind of, you know – it had to be that way.
- PW: Do you recall – do your eyes see it all on the same plane, or do you see it receding or coming forward?
- David Novros: No, I definitely see spatial activity.
- PW: Um-hum.
- David Novros: Yeah. I intended spatial activity in it, you know. It's the way I give it content. This one has – when you can see it assembled, for instance, doesn't this fit on top of that?
- CM-U: Yes.
- David Novros: Okay. So...
- PW: Well, I remember _____ [phrase inaudible]. Sorry.
- David Novros: Well, I was just going to make this point that I was playing around. You know, there aren't any really – there aren't any obvious right angle images in this group of paintings, right? Except in the one that – is it Fort Worth? But I was doing these kind of playing games, spatial games, on that. I wasn't painting them, but I was including them in – for instance, this edge is the same width as that blue that's on top there. But it's a different color of blue. But it's blue. So if you see it and read up, it makes a right angle, you know. You read it through. And I was thinking about that in terms of all sorts of stuff. You know, blueness, oceanness, skyness, openness. Because most of these things are so closed, and the other room, Room 1, is very open.
- PW: Room 1 is the closest – I don't want to use the word "landscape," but it's the closest...

David Novros: Yeah. I'd said that before. Right. That's exactly what it is, you know. And this one is a kind of coda to the landscape.

PW: But the right – the ending panel – to me, it's almost totally balanced. There's not a lot of spatial pull in it.

David Novros: There's none. There's none.

PW: That's the way I read it, too.

David Novros: Yeah. It's the end.

PW: Which is fabulous.

David Novros: Yeah. This is like seeing body parts. (laughs)

PW: Now that's true.

David Novros: You know. You really want to see the whole thing. This is very frustrating.

CM-U: Yeah. It's really...

[00:24:05]

PW: I was trying to remember the relationship of the floor to the bottom of the painting...

David Novros: Yeah, I remember it. We were talking about...

PW: ...in that space. So if we could ever build rooms for these, we should stick to that same ceiling.

David Novros: Yeah. Yeah. Knee high was about what it was. Another thing I was saying to Carol was that it always bothers me to see lighting elements...

PW: Sure.

David Novros: ...especially with these rooms. 'Cause we had to hang the things at a certain height because the lights came down to a certain height, and it would control the light. But, for instance...

David Novros: ...if you could install these – my preference would be to install them exactly the way you have the Twombly things set up with the scrim pretty much down at the painting level, and have no lights at all.

PW: Well, you know...

David Novros: That would be the ultimate...

[00:24:46]

PW: ..._____ [phrase inaudible] looking at painting with natural light, and I hate artificial light on things.

CM-U: Um-hum.

PW: You know, Carol and I disagree on one thing. She thinks certain of Cy's work looked much better under – I don't know if much better is the right...

CM-U: Better. Very different.

PW: ...under artificial light than...

CM-U: The sense of space, for me, is completely different under artificial light. We took an exhibition that we had here of Cy's works to Des Moines, Iowa, where they didn't have natural light in the gallery. And I knew the works. We'd installed them here. And it looked so very different spatially to me. So I was very struck by that. But if you ask Cy about what kind of light you paint do you paint in, you know, he'll say he paints in incandescent light, but he loves seeing them...

David Novros: Yes.

CM-U: As what you're saying. You know, you paint them in incandescent...

David Novros: Pretty much the same.

CM-U: ...but you love...

David Novros: I prefer to paint them in natural light...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: ...and I prefer to see them in natural light. But you can't – as opposed to – this, we were talking about it before. That Rothko that you've got out there, which I think looks – I personally think it's better in incandescent light.

PW: We looked at it last night.

David Novros: And it looked just – it's just so rich because – but then you know he painted those things in that kind of cave that he was painting in...

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: ...and it was really dark. And he cared a lot. And you know when he was painting the things for the [Rothko] chapel, I'm fascinated by the activity. So much energy and thought went into positioning the things in relationship to this lighted space that he created. That's the most specific he ever got, for sure, about what kind of light was going to be on his paintings. And he really cared a lot about what kind of light was on his paintings. So I think it works on that one because he probably meant it to be seen in those kind of lights, rather than in the light...

PW: Those paintings, remember, almost in pitch darkness...

David Novros: Almost, yeah.

[00:26:23]

David Novros: And when you saw them at first at the Tate [Modern, London], when they were over there, the Seagrams paintings, that room was really dark, and brown, and kinda – I remember it being really obscure, you know.

CM-U: Is it still brown?

PW: I couldn't remember the color. I've seen an image of it.

David Novros: It was some kind of an off-tan...

PW: It's not a white.

David Novros: Not a white. Nuh-uh.

PW: _____ [word inaudible] tan or brown.

David Novros: Yeah. And this is something else I just wanted to – this is kind of off the subject, but it's interesting to me. And it's that – you know how much I love Rothko's work, right? And I've been seeing a lot of it lately. I've been really moved by it and seen it. But at the same time, there's been something that has been really disturbing me about it, and I've been really getting disturbed about what happens when the painting comes up to the wall. It bothers me. Why didn't he do something? Why? How? You know, why did he want to end the infinite so mechanically? I've never been able to understand that, you know. I just assume it came from the conditions under which he had to paint. He had to make exhibitionable paintings and all that. But, to me, those paintings ought to just go out into the wall itself somehow, you know. But that's my own reading of it.

PW: Were you talking about the edge condition, or are you – the side _____ [phrase inaudible]?

David Novros: No. You know how he painted around the edges? He did all kinds of stuff about the edge, but it doesn't matter because, at the end, the infinite has to stop. (laughs) So why does it stop that way?

PW: Right. It's an interesting question.

David Novros: You know, why isn't there another resolution to that kind of idea? I think it has to with the sociology of the circumstances he worked in, you know.

PW: That's one of the brilliant things at the chapel, too, if you really can see the chapel as one work...

David Novros: That's right.

PW: ...then, it is... _____ [word inaudible]

CM-U: That was his opportunity.

[all voices speaking at the same time; cannot distinguish between them]

David Novros: That's what I'm saying.

CM-U: That was his opportunity to do that.

[00:28:13]

David Novros: There's so many things in the chapel that are resolved, that suggest, you know, what would you do if you could do anything you want? You know?

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: Artists are always being asked...

CM-U: Just, that's alright. Just do it. (speaking to someone off-camera)

David Novros: You know, artists are never asked that question. How would *you* do it if – you know. Rather than saying, “Okay, you do it, and then we’ll figure out how it’s gonna be put up, and how it’s gonna be used, and stuff.” But that limits artists in a way, and they self-censor themselves. They stop imagining new ways of making things, and they get to start doing just things out of convention, because they know that there’s not going to ever be a possibility to supersede that. And it’s very hard to be tough enough to say, “Oh, screw the money. Screw the look from other people. All of that. I’m gonna make it the way I did this.” You know, like Don’s [Donald Judd] thing is really, really good. He was a perfect exemplar of a tough-minded person who really wasn’t gonna back down from – at the same time, he covered himself by making all the stuff that could be exhibited.

CM-U: Um-hum. And sold.

David Novros: And sold. (laughs)

[Break in video]

[00:29:19]

CM-U: Can we just go back to one comment you made earlier about these paintings?

David Novros: Sure.

CM-U: You said something about the tape. So you used tape on this.

David Novros: I used tape on this...

CM-U: On this, on Room 3?

David Novros: As the paint got thicker and thicker and thicker, and I wanted to keep the frontal plane, I had to keep building the paint up to match the surface of the

area next to it in some way. In some cases I wanted it to come forward above it. Like I talked about the ochre with the white?

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: In some cases I wanted it all to be up there. And when that occurred, then I had to really put tape on it 'cause I just couldn't paint it. There was no way of painting paint that thickly with a palette knife up to an edge. I just couldn't do it.

CM-U: So you were using a palette knife, too? That's what we see on here?

David Novros: Yeah. Um-hum. See, what I would do is, I first put the paint on in thicker areas with a palette knife. And I brushed into it.

CM-U: Ah.

David Novros: In some cases I would scrape it off if I didn't want it to be quite as thick as it was.

CM-U: So that really was a technique that you've been using from the earliest pieces?

David Novros: That's right, yeah. I put it on with *really* big palette knives.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: Really like plastering. You know, I didn't care what it looked like with the first application. It didn't matter. It was like putting on a brown coat because you knew you were going to come back over it with a trowel and smooth it down later. But I knew that I was going to draw into it later. I just wanted to get as much material on there as I could right away, fast, and then get into it and work it, you know. And that's how the paint went down. In some ways it's a little bit like the way Brice was working with a palette knife at about the same time. But, you know, I wasn't making an object, and I wasn't working on an object, and I wasn't gonna leave it that way.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: I was going to change it radically. It was just a way of getting material on.

[00:31:02]

PW: Well, I think it's interesting you use the term "drawing."

CM-U: Yes, I do, too.

David Novros: Yeah. I think most people don't understand what drawing is. They think drawing is a line with a black object on a white thing. For me, drawing is everything. Drawing is the way the thing *is*, related to the wall. Drawing with color, to me, is, you know – drawing with color is such a kind of profound idea, and it can be so many kinds of things. It can be anything that a person does. I hate the idea of – like the Drawing Center in New York, you know, the _____ [word inaudible]. So academic. There's an academic idea of what drawing is. But, for me, drawing is a thought process.

PW: The other thing is the importance of the hand in your work because, you know, when these were produced, they are very flat. You have no sense of the drawing.

David Novros: Yeah. That's what I was saying before.

PW: But I would think it's important.

David Novros: Yeah. When I stopped spraying, when I decided that I needed more outlets for the drawing, more ways of expressing myself, and that this spraying just wasn't going to be enough anymore, then I just sort of really threw myself into a much more open experience. And I did all kinds of stuff. This whole changing, playing with surfaces as a drawing technique from my point of view; having multiple kinds of surfaces in a painting; having multiple kinds of color experiences throughout the whole thing; multiple relationships to place. It just no longer – I couldn't do it mechanically anymore. It just wasn't getting it.

David Novros: But that was about the time, you know – that's like – Don [Donald Judd] and I were pals, and I did this thing over there. I did the fresco for him. And it was really active physically, you know. Like these. Really active. Even more active, and really raw. And he really liked that, and it surprised me because he was so involved with his aesthetic. It was a little out of – but then when I continued using that, even expanding on this sort of idea of touch and things in the paintings, then that's when he couldn't get that anymore, you know. It was like it got away too much from the rule of rectilinearity and all of that. But the reason I got out of the rule of rectilinearity – but I haven't; I still do them, you know that – is that I couldn't do as many of these kinds of things that I wanted to do within that context.

[00:33:32]

PW: I remember visiting that set of paintings in your studio a number of times, and that was very apparent.

David Novros: Yeah.

PW: But did you ever resolve those?

David Novros: Some of them. I'm hoping to go home and finish them before the springtime. Before planting season.

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible].

David Novros: Well, I'd love to have you all come, you know.

PW: Have you seen those pictures?

CM-U: No.

David Novros: But, you know, I've made a lot of other work. You know, there is getting to be this myth about me working on those paintings. No, no, no, I just want to make this point. There's been this myth about me working on – and I have worked on them for a long time. And, you know, you do a fresco, and it's a kind of a psychopathic behavior pattern. You do this fresco in two days, and you spend ten years working on an oil painting. But they are different things, you know. There are different issues about – there's so much more potential in the big oil painting to get very involved with minute, breathy questions of the surface breathing.

CM-U: Oh, I love that.

David Novros: Do you know?

CM-U: That idea of breathing.

David Novros: So, you know, I love being able to stretch out with it. I don't see any reason why I have to finish it fast. You know what I'm saying? I want to really learn from it and be able to become a better painter by making these things. And meanwhile I've done a lot of really quick projects. I did the windows in two weeks. I've been making all these ceramic and copper things that I make very fast. And other paintings. But I think what most people are saying is, "Hey,

you haven't been making anything that you can exhibit for a long time." And that's true. That's really true.

PW: _____ [phrase inaudible]

CM-U: Well, you're just living in a time when exhibiting is different from Medieval painters when exhibiting meant doing a church.

David Novros: Yeah, as a job.

CM-U: Yeah. And it was exhibited.

David Novros: Right. Exactly.

CM-U: A major work. A wall work.

David Novros: Yeah. I mean, the worst thing of all is thinking of your work as an example of something, and having it exhibited. Just the words are appalling, you know. They are terrible. It's like specimens.

[00:35:35]

PW: Okay. In the windows – I haven't seen them; I've only seen the photographs...

David Novros: Umm.

PW: ...it's all the same type of glass?

David Novros: Oh, man. It's the cheapest, crummiest glass. On the big windows, it's an eighth-inch thick. Over a – but over a big expanse. That they even are still in existence is just a miracle of some sort. That nobody has shot in them, or thrown a rock through them, or something. They don't even have any protection on the front or anything. I expect they won't last very much longer, you know. That's why I'm interested in having them documented in some way. But then the little windows that I made are made with some wire glass I had around my place from, from the thirties. It was in the studio. And they are in very good shape, and they are very interesting because the little diamond shapes within the wire act as a facet, so it almost looks like mosaic, and it changes the light in a very interesting way.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: Something I'd like to play around with some more, using different kinds of glass. But I don't think any of this really is beautiful as true stained glass. But that's just completely out of my range of expense and ability to use. But, having said that, the next glass stuff I am going to do isn't going to be painted like that. But I'm going to play around with this alchemy, the same kind of thing I'm talking about with the copper and glass and explosives; and I am going to find out about – I've already found out something about it – the coefficient of expansion of glass and lead. I am going to try to make the leading in the glass all at the same time in these big drawn windows, and then be able to insert that whole thing in an architectural context. Instead of having mullions and having to relate to the mullion, you know. I think it's freeing up the whole process of colored glass, to be able to really paint with it intrigues the hell out of me, I think, which is beautiful.

PW: But you didn't move to that – like when Don was always – Don Judd always talked about, you know, trying to get the integrity of color and material...

David Novros: Uh-huh.

PW: ...to be bonded into one thing. That's not the same reason you are necessarily into painting glass?

David Novros: No, no.

PW: It's about something totally different?

David Novros: You know, it's funny because Don was painting some stuff on glass. This was somewhat after I'd already done the stained glass thing in L.A. _____ [phrase inaudible]. And when I was looking at it, I thought they were really more like wall paintings. You know, I don't think he was really interested in that idea of the light coming through the glass. He was blocking the light from coming through the glass, which is more like his work, which is really about altering the transfer – the movement of light, I think, through things. He is really like a three-dimensional painter in some ways, you know. Planar painter, you know. Making these planes to change the light. And then sometimes he's an architectural sculptor. There are two different elements, I think, of his work. No, I, I really don't have that attitude. I think, you know, the idea is, you should use whatever you want. But I think you have to feel yourself a painter. I really feel myself a painter, and I think that that means you are allowed to use any material you want to alter light in any context you want. It doesn't matter. And that's the only rule that I know about. And glass is a really good way of altering, because it's so profound as an idea that,

instead of having this reflected experience, you have this direct experience with light. I love that idea.

[Break in video]

[00:39:04]

CM-U: I just wanted to announce that today we are meeting for a second time, and today is December 3, 1997. David is with me again, and we are going to look at this early piece that was made in Los Angeles. We talked a little bit about it yesterday, right?

David Novros: Um-hum.

CM-U: Okay. Let's just review where you made it, and what your circumstances were.

David Novros: I made it in two places. I made the stretcher bar panels in Southgate, in the driveway of my friend Paul Mogensen.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And I stretched it there. And then I took it...

CM-U: Cotton...

David Novros: Cotton duck.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: And then I took it to Venice to a studio that I was using that was provided by Virginia Dwan for me. And that's where I sprayed them. I spray-painted them. I bought the paint, which was a vinyl lacquer used on cloth surfaces primarily in madhouses, where people were having heavy abuse of the walls and that sort of thing.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: And painted it, as I say, in Venice with that as a white base. And then a clear coat with something called Murano, which at that time was a lead platelet paint. It was put on transparently and would give you a single color, plus its complement, depending on the relationship to the light.

David Novros Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 12/02/1997

Video: adp1997b_19971202_005va.mp4 & adp1997b_19971202_006va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.1997b / TRT: 02:28:03

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CM-U: So the white paint underneath was not Murano?

David Novros: The white paint on – not on...

CM-U: The first layers of paint.

David Novros: No. No. Just white. Flat white.

CM-U: Okay. Acrylic flat white.

David Novros: Vinyl lacquer.

CM-U: Vinyl lacquer. Okay. I see. And then the Murano.

[00:40:44]

CM-U: It was just the metallic, or the kind of opalescent Murano on top.

David Novros: Yeah, it's a glaze. Put on as a glaze. If it were acrylic lacquer, it would be a lot more brittle than it even is now. This stuff was very flexible.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: So I assumed it was going to be able to breathe, which it hasn't.

CM-U: And so it is.

David Novros: Yeah, right.

CM-U: And so it goes. All right. So that was when?

David Novros: That was in 1966. Summer.

CM-U: So, even though on the back of the paintings it says 1963...

David Novros: Incorrect. I was in the Army in 1963.

CM-U: Okay. So, the date of this work is 1966?

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: Okay. So then it was first installed at the Virginia Dwan Gallery.

David Novros Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, The Menil Collection, 12/02/1997

Video: adp1997b_19971202_005va.mp4 & adp1997b_19971202_006va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.1997b / TRT: 02:28:03

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- David Novros: In Los Angeles. That was where it was first shown.
- CM-U: In Los Angeles. And I guess this is November 1st to 26th. Does that sound right? Nineteen six. '96 [sounds like]?
- David Novros: Yeah That's exactly right.
- CM-U: And this is a photo of it. (image of gallery installation) So it looks like you had at least four, five, six pieces?
- David Novros: This is a partial photograph. There was another painting that was on this side of the wall that was equally large as this painting.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- David Novros: Two 24-foot paintings on one wall.
- CM-U: Wow!
- David Novros: They were – in all, they were one, two, three, four – six paintings in all.
- David Novros: And then I showed them later in New York, with her, with her New York gallery.
- CM-U: So she had a gallery in New York and in L.A. at that time?
- David Novros: That's right.
- CM-U: Okay.
- David Novros: The painting had been sold, but the people who bought it were willing to let us have it in New York for the exhibition.
- CM-U: Okay. And that's the Gate...
- David Novros: Gates Lloyd.
- CM-U: ...Gates Lloyd family. Okay. And this is a photo in New York? (image of gallery installation)
- David Novros: That's the New York gallery.

- CM-U: Okay. And was that show right after, or was it a year after?
- David Novros: Does it have a date on the back of the photo?
- CM-U: Oh. "David Novros installation. April 1967." So that can't be right. Oh, I suppose that's possible. Yeah, April 1967. Because we're saying that it was in L.A....
- David Novros: It was in L.A. in the fall of '66.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- David Novros: That's exactly right.
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: Yeah.
- CM-U: Okay. All right. So I remember you saying yesterday that these were many layers of spraying? I mean, many layers of Murano and...
- David Novros: Many. Many layers, and sanded in between.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.
- CM-U: Okay. Well, let's go on to issues of aging, and sort of what you see. And then we'll – no, let's continue the history. Okay. So it got sold to Gates Lloyd...
- David Novros: Um-hum.
- CM-U: ...and they took – it was shipped to them after the show in New York?
- David Novros: Right. After the show in New York, it was shipped to them. It remained in their collection, much to my joy, because I assumed that, due to the high quality of their collection, that eventually it would end up in a public collection somewhere, and everything would be fine. What happened, in fact, was that, first, Mrs. Lloyd died, and eventually her husband. In the interim, I had done a restoration on it. I had the painting in my studio.
- CM-U: How did that occur? That you had it in the studio?

David Novros: I was contacted by the family after the first death. After she died. Because he wasn't really involved with the painting.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: I had the painting. And they were just disinterested in reclaiming it. They just, you know...

CM-U: And when they gave it to you...

David Novros: ...left it with me.

CM-U: They left it with you for restoration?

David Novros: Yeah, but...

CM-U: It had cracks _____ [phrase inaudible]?

David Novros: Yeah. Exactly what's on it now.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: So I had sanded it down, and filled it back up with material, and repainted it, essentially, in the same way I'd done the first time.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: It looked okay to me. I let it dry, put on the paper that you see here, the glassine...

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: ...and plastic. And I stored it in a uncontrolled environment which was a kind of a shaft I have in my studio that doesn't have heat or cooling in it. So there's a lot of back and forth in temperature. And I assume that's what caused the damage to the painting.

CM-U: And then when did you look at them again?

David Novros: The next time I looked at them was here.

CM-U: Okay. Was when they were being shipped down here?

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David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: So, how much time was in between, would you say?

David Novros: Well, then he died. The point is, he died; and then they had to do something with it.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: So then they thought they'd put it at auction. And I didn't want that to occur, for the reasons I mentioned yesterday. I won't go through it again. And I tried to get somebody else interested in getting it so it would go to a public institution. I really wanted it here at The Menil because of my relationship, and Paul [Winkler], and all of it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And that finally happened, and I looked at it just before I sent it.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: I rewrapped it in the same kind of glassine and plastic and sent it off.

CM-U: So this wrapping is relatively recent?

David Novros: Not that recent. How long has it been here? It's been here a couple of years, hasn't it?

CM-U: Yes. Right. Okay.

David Novros: Right.

[00:45:32]

CM-U: What – I guess what we see primarily – we see three things. Primarily we see the cracks, right? And that's what initially...

David Novros: That was the real concern.

CM-U: ...concerned the collector? Right.

David Novros: That was the concern. And me, too.

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- CM-U: Right. And the cracks. When you saw them the first time, before you did the repainting, they were in the – this same kind of corner crack? Same kind of thing?
- David Novros: I honestly don't remember.
- CM-U: Okay. And then the other thing we're seeing...
- David Novros: I know that there was always cracks in this interior corner.
- CM-U: And you said the stretchers are wood? Plywood, and then quarter round on the top?
- David Novros: That's right. Yeah.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- David Novros: And quite heavy. The plywood, I think, is quarter inch.
- CM-U: Um-hum. It's funny, isn't it, that it's done that.
- David Novros: And as I said, the stretcher bars have stayed in plane.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: And in really good shape. And the canvas looks in good shape. But just the paint has reacted strangely and is now in very bad shape.
- CM-U: Um-hum. What we noticed on the glassine paper was this kind of exudation, or off-gassing, or more than that because it's actually tacky.
- David Novros: And a discoloration as well.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- David Novros: This browning.
- CM-U: And this pattern can actually be seen on the work. So it seems like where the paper came in contact with the surface, there was a transference of this tacky exudation onto the paper.
- David Novros: It looks that way, yeah.

- CM-U: And that's the way...
- CM-U: ...in raking light of the work, that's the way it looks as well.
- David Novros: You know, the only time I've ever seen anything like this in my work was with the stuff I made in fiberglass. And when the resin wasn't fully cured, there would sometimes be this kind of tackiness that would last for a long time.
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: I don't know if they're related, but it's the only thing in my experience that has this quality.
- CM-U: I'll have to figure that out. And you said toluene was the solvent you used?
- David Novros: Toluene. Yeah.
- CM-U: And you sprayed it with toluene as a solvent?
- David Novros: I sprayed it with toluene as a solvent.
- CM-U: All right.
- David Novros: Very – what's more, I didn't wear a mask a lot of the time.
- CM-U: Were you inside? You were inside.
- David Novros: Ate sandwiches while I was working, and everything, you know. Terrible.
- CM-U: And toluene is one of those bad things now.
- David Novros: Oh, really bad.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- David Novros: Well, let's make it clear that – let's make it clear that this material is conservation quality material. This is the stuff that's used. It isn't as though this stuff is bad.
- CM-U: No.

- David Novros: You know, this is what you're supposed to use.
- CM-U: Perfectly acceptable glassine paper. It's just – it seems that where it came in contact with the surface, it just absorbed the exudation that's on the surface that we're seeing.
- David Novros: Yes. Yeah. Greenhouse effect.
- LMcD: Carol, do you see that a lot?
- CM-U: Do I see that a lot? I do. What – we don't see – we rarely see it in glassine paper, but we get imprint with even something like bubble wrap, where you have, you know...
- David Novros: Oh, yeah. I've had that happen.
- CM-U: ...just plastic against...
- David Novros: I've had that happen oftentimes.
- CM-U: Where it leaves the little dots on the painting...
- David Novros: Bubble wrap is terrible. And what's more, if there's any heat with bubble wrap, and you have a surface that has a solvent in the material, it just bonds. It's just plastic to plastic. Boom! You know, and then you've lost it.
- CM-U: Fortunately I haven't seen that. But I have seen this pattern of kind of matte spots where these dots were.
- David Novros: Yeah.
- CM-U: And it's hard. Especially if you see it on flat surfaces like Blinky Palermo, for example, that kind of very flat color.
- David Novros: Yeah, I've had a little bit of that, but I've had total loss on two occasions where I completely – there is nothing you could do with the painting except sand it down and start over again. That was the fiberglass paintings.
- CM-U: Yeah.
- David Novros: And they just got bonded, you know. It was a mess. Ooof.

CM-U: I mean, even though this may have had some extreme heat. I mean, you could have had some really hot days, but it wasn't...

David Novros: No

CM-U: It's humidity. It's all kinds of things.

David Novros: It's very – my studio is incredibly hot in the summer. And incredibly humid. Intolerable.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: And in the wintertime it's just regular. So it's the heat and the humidity that create the biggest shift, you know.

CM-U: Yeah.

[00:49:34]

CM-U: Yeah. I gather from what you were saying before that it is disturbing enough to your eye, though, to see this coating disturbed. Is that enough reason to recoat them? Or only if you are going in to deal with the cracks?

David Novros: I think there is no reason to recoat these at all.

CM-U: Um-hum. All right. Accept these?

David Novros: Yeah. You know, I would try to affect the discoloration a little bit if it's possible without any problem. But I don't think that's the answer. I think the answer is to keep what is, as is, and create an alternative that's closer maybe to my initial ambition. That way you don't have to worry about trying to make this good. You make something that's acceptable.

CM-U: But you also said earlier that...

David Novros: And you don't destroy this.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: You keep this as something...

CM-U: You keep this, but you don't display this.

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David Novros: Only if there is some kind of pedagogical result that you want to achieve. Otherwise there is no point to it. You'd have something which, if you held it up against this, would look just like this without the cracks. So what's the point of showing them with the cracks? But if you can't make the one that looks just like this without the cracks...

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: ...then you're fired!

(laughter)

CM-U: That's not a fair answer. Then you have to think about...

David Novros: No, then you have to think again.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: Yeah. But first you have to do the test and put it up. And certainly if you can do one, you can do the whole thing.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And if it gets to the point where, you know, you are in the midst of it, and you have any questions, or you want – especially about the spraying or anything – I can always, you know, correspond with you, or come down and deal with it.

CM-U: Okay. That's good to know.

[Break in video]

CM-U: Okay, let's talk about – before we go into options – well, no, let's talk about options of conservation because that's sort of one of the things. At one point we had thought about your coming down and repainting them again for a third time, or maybe reconstructing them in some way.

David Novros: Yeah, we've discussed a lot of different possibilities there. I mean, do you think it's important to separate the theology of the question from the practical part, you know?

CM-U: Yeah. Let's discuss both.

- David Novros: I mean, there's two issues here. There are more than two, really. And I think that Paul's suggestion today, that he made to me today – Paul Winkler's suggestion that he made today – was a very good one, and it seems to me like a really Solomonic solution to how to go about dealing with this thing. And in fact, all these kinds of problems, when they occur in a situation where there's a large flat area, or large area of one color on an easily distinguishable unit like this panel, or like a big area of color or something – and his idea was that you would take, say, this panel, and you'd reproduce it.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: Physically. And then you'd attempt to repaint it. And then you could compare what happened with that reproduction to this one, and you could see whether there could be an acceptable transference or not. Not even with the idea of actually using that one in its place, necessarily...
- CM-U: Right.
- David Novros: ...but first to have something to be able to compare with, instead of going ahead and beginning to restore this one, or not restoring it without knowing. You'd at least have visual evidence to compare with. And I think it's an excellent idea.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. So there's some sense of what the original surface – what the feel was like when it was fresh.
- David Novros: More than that, I think you could actually test whether or not you couldn't absolutely reproduce the look of it.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: Which, if you could, both solves the problem and creates new ones.
- CM-U: Right. So, ideally, if these cracks could be eliminated with a repainting, you would think that was all right? Or not?
- David Novros: Well, I think that if you could make a reproduction of this that was satisfactorily like what's here without the cracks, then it should be done. This one should be kept, and the other one should be shown.
- CM-U: Um-hum. Now there's a real variation of the color of each piece as I look at it.

David Novros: That's only – I just want to – I knew you would think that, but it's not really true.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

David Novros: If you look, it's the conditions and the lighting.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: The pieces are actually very evenly painted. Look how different this looks, right?

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: But now if it's just angled slightly different, see – if this were more at that angle, it would be as pink as that is because when you come down here and look at it, you can see they are identical almost.

CM-U: Well, there's a point at which I stand where they do look identical.

David Novros: Right.

CM-U: Like right here.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: When I stand over there, they are completely different.

David Novros: Sure. And so, when you're over here, this looks flat, right?

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: And when you walk over here, it's glossy.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: This pink – that was the idea of the painting. The idea was that it would force you to examine the nature of the experience of the light. You couldn't take it for granted that it was just one thing on these objects that went across the wall. It was this shift, you know.

[00:54:35]

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- CM-U: Did you light them in a particular way? How was it lit? I mean, you said – so you like a lot of light, direct light? No?
- David Novros: No. What I really liked, you know, my major preference – and you could really achieve this with natural light, I found the best – was to have the most intense light to create the greatest shift on the color range. And also, that had to do with the angle because this is all about the angle of incidence for the refraction.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: So if you have a light at this height, it's going to do one thing. If you have a light down at this height, it's going to do another thing. If you don't have direct light, it's best because then it does it all over the place.
- CM-U: Um-hum. Hmm. And as you walk by it, you get different...
- David Novros: Yeah.
- CM-U: Yeah. But it's interesting because, in some ways, the cracks are more – on some panels, the cracks are more apparent than on others. Maybe, again, it's the way the light is falling on the surfaces.
- David Novros: Even a difference of a sixteenth of an inch out of plane – and I don't mean out of a perfect plane; one against the other – is gonna give you a different experience.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: So there isn't any kind of absolute – you can never get anything absolutely flat unless it's a single unit, and even then you can't really.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- David Novros: So there's always going to be shifts like this shift that you see from a certain angle here, pink, just because they are in a different plane; but when you come to a different place, it reverses.
- CM-U: Right. Yesterday you were leaning toward thinking that the cracks were acceptable but the brown staining in the upper right of this piece – part – was more disturbing.

David Novros: I thought they were acceptable in deference to trying to restore this unit.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I don't think that they are acceptable in deference to making one altogether new which is exactly like this but without the cracks.

CM-U: Um-hum.

[00:56:29]

CM-U: Were you to do that again today, would you consider doing it on a solid panel behind the canvas?

David Novros: I would absolutely do it on aluminum.

CM-U: So, apply the canvas to the aluminum, or just do them on aluminum?

David Novros: No, I'd make a honeycomb – honeycomb panels. No breathing. No problems.

CM-U: Just make them on a – just paint them on a...

David Novros: Just make them and paint them. It takes the paint better. I wouldn't have to spend all that time sanding down the canvas to get this kind of, you know, look.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I just wanted a really flat surface to paint the things on because the flatter – you know, I'm not that interested in the weave of the canvas. I am not trying to show the weave of the canvas. I could have probably made them on Masonite or something, but I felt that it wasn't strong enough. I thought canvas was tougher than a panel I could make at that time.

CM-U: If you made these on – just hypothetically – if you made these on aluminum panel, and the natural width of the panel was less than this, would you think it was important to duplicate the depth of this stretcher?

David Novros: Well, there's two issues there. It isn't just the depth. It's that – you know, honeycomb has that exposed side.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: I don't like it. I don't like looking at it. It is – you know, I don't want to make *Art Informel* kind of thing out of things. I'm not interested in that. I've tried to resolve it so that it went back to the wall pretty much the way this does. That means making an insert for the side.

CM-U: Right. I've seen those wooden inserts.

David Novros: Some kind of a solid insert.

CM-U: But would you try to retain – I guess what I'm getting at...

David Novros: I like the depth.

CM-U: You like the depth that it is.

David Novros: Yeah, I like the depth.

CM-U: It wasn't just a question that this was the stock of wood...

David Novros: No.

CM-U: This was your choice?

David Novros: No. No, no. This was the choice. 'Cause you could change it infinitely because, you know, the quarter round goes everything from an eighth to, you know, an inch.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: But I picked this size quarter round on purpose.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: It's the – I found it was the ultimate – you know, at this scale, this size of a painting – and that includes the other ones, too – that this was the correct way of projecting the plane out from the surface.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: It got it just where I wanted it.

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CM-U: Well, one feels it for sure. _____ [word inaudible].

[00:58:31]

CM-U: Now what happened to the other pieces in the exhibition?

David Novros: Two of them, the two largest, were destroyed in an accident in storage in the Park Place [Gallery] storage...

CM-U: Oh.

David Novros: ...in New York. Unfortunately, completely wiped out. I made a half-scale version of one of them, which is now at MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles].

CM-U: In Los Angeles.

David Novros: And I made that recently. I made that about five years ago.

CM-U: Can you point out which one it is?

David Novros: Yeah, sure. In fact, I'll use this to describe what happened to all of them. (unfolds black and white photograph)

CM-U: Good.

David Novros: This is the painting – this is 24 feet long in the original. It was white with a – instead of a green to red shift, it had a yellow to blue shift.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: Or gold to blue. And I remade it in Los Angeles on also the same kind of panels in 19... – I think it was '94.

CM-U: So you mean the same canvas and stretchers?

David Novros: Yeah. But it was exactly half-scale.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: And instead of spraying it, I brushed it. And what I used was – I used gesso underneath, acrylic gesso.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: And the overpaint, I used clear acrylic with the Murano material in it, brushed. It's not as glossy as this, but you don't see the brush strokes, and the activity of the material is the same. And, as I said, that painting is at MOCA. I would – there was another painting that was over in this part of the gallery, (points at photograph) as long as this, which was a kind of a much more complicated version of this painting. It had many more facets, and edges, and drawing. It was quite different. And that painting, as I said, was destroyed also. Now I would like very much to remake this one and that one exactly as they were. Those are two of the paintings I was talking about yesterday that I'd really like to have again in their real scale.

David Novros: This painting, I'm not sure where it is. I have to look in my records. There was a long time when it was thought to have been burned in a fire, and then it appeared miraculously out of nowhere. And I can't remember where it is now, but I'll find out.

David Novros: This one, I believe, is in kind of a damaged condition in my brother's closet in Los Angeles.

CM-U: The black one.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: Is it black?

David Novros: Yeah. It's a deep purple, actually.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: This one [VI:XXXII, 1966, repainted in 1990] is in the collection of the Museum of Modern Art...

CM-U: In New York?

David Novros: Yeah. Given by Charles Cowles. He then – before he gave it, he sent it out on an enormous tour to various colleges. Everywhere you can imagine. It came back *really* bad.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: Bad, badly damaged. And that's when I went and restored it with Jim Coddington [Chief Conservator, Museum of Modern Art, New York].

CM-U: I didn't know that.

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: And it was in good shape when I finished restoring it, and it was in good shape when I saw it recently exhibited.

CM-U: So how did you go about re – did you just repaint it there?

David Novros: I repainted it at the Modern entirely.

CM-U: Sanded it down and repainted it?

David Novros: Yeah. There was a lot of concern. Jim was very conscientious, and there was a lot of concern that I was changing the surface. But I was very conscientious about keeping it the same. And it did look the same. I think everybody agrees to that, that it's pretty much the same deal.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: And this is your painting here.

CM-U: Good.

David Novros: Um-hum.

CM-U: Is there anything else?

[01:01:56]

CM-U: What about installation? We were not sensitive to issues of installation because this was such a temporary...

David Novros: This is exactly the height I like to see the painting hung at. (points at painting installed on wall)

CM-U: Uh-huh.

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David Novros: It's perfect.

CM-U: Good.

David Novros: It's exactly the height...

CM-U: I wish I had measured that, actually. I think I saw a tape around here.

David Novros: And it looks fine to me.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: I mean, it looks very good. If it weren't for the cracks, I'd be very content with it. It was – one thing, this was the first of a whole cycle of paintings I made that involved ascending and descending order of right angles. Before this, I had made...

CM-U: Oh, thank you. (speaks to off-camera person, who hands her a tape measure)

David Novros: ...a very large double right angle painting [2:16, 1965] that had been in the "Systemic Painting" show [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, September-November, 1966]. And then I began making these smaller, more complex arrangements. That's about it.

CM-U: And Murano paints came in many colors?

David Novros: Yeah.

CM-U: And you just chose these. But I heard you say one was yellow and blue, so you could choose your...

David Novros: Yeah. Murano, you could get the Murano at that time in different compounds. One of them went red-green. One of them went yellow-blue. It was the color plus its complement.

CM-U: I see.

David Novros: One of them went – one of them was violet-green.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: One of – or rather, violet to orange. There's an orange to green, etc. They had quite a range at the time. It has since been reduced a lot because they are no longer using a lead platelet. They are using mica platelets.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: That makes a less intense range.

CM-U: So you noticed that when you were repainting the Modern's? Yeah.

David Novros: Oh, yeah. Yeah. It took a lot more paint. The other thing is, you can't blast this stuff on in one coat.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: It doesn't have any quality of depth. It just looks kind of milk chalky, you know. You have to build it up really patiently with lots and lots of very thin applications of color. The more the better.

CM-U: And at the time...

David Novros: So that the platelets align correctly, you know.

CM-U: And at the top, did you say that there's a clear coat? Or it's just the top layer on...

David Novros: No. Just the top layer.

CM-U: ...on that? Okay.

David Novros: I probably should have put a clear coat on it. Had I been thinking, I would have put a clear coat on it as a protection.

CM-U: No, not necessarily.

David Novros: Well, it just didn't occur to me.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: One thing I want to say about this.

CM-U: Yeah.

David Novros: There is a painting I want to refer to that's in – I think it's in Des Moines now, that Virginia Dwan gave them, which was one of her paintings. It's a green painting from the same show that this painting was in. And it was given to me to do whatever I wanted to when it was going to go to Des Moines because it was damaged. I consciously made the decision not to paint it as it had been in the past, and I painted it in a very free way with the Murano. So, just for the record, that painting is one that I didn't really restore, I repainted. So that if anybody sees this, they say, "Wait a minute. What happened to this one? It's not this..."

CM-U: But it wasn't [word inaudible]...

David Novros: "It's not what he's talking about."

CM-U: Right. Good, I'm glad you clarified that.

David Novros: You know. I want it to be understood that it was purposeful, and it's not that way.

CM-U: Okay. But it was one – was it originally shown at...

David Novros: It was in that same show at Dwan [Gallery,] New York, yeah.

CM-U: It was in that same show. Okay. Let me just measure this while we're just discussing it, since it seems to suit you. It's about 18 inches.

David Novros: Yeah, I like that very much. That's about the way it was at Dwan.

CM-U: Yeah. That's our standard. Yeah. Okay.

[01:05:26]

CM-U: I assume you just – you prefer a very white wall? Any comment about the color of the wall that it's on?

David Novros: You know, the color doesn't matter to me.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I don't care. It could be anything. I just – it should just be reasonable. I don't care – I would like to see it on Portland cement.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: I've always had that feeling. I had it before I knew, for instance, that Rothko was interested in that surface.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: I like – I think that paintings look great on untreated surfaces, you know, instead of the kind of purity of white walls.

CM-U: So, almost rough surfaces? So the light is kind of absorbed?

David Novros: Yeah. Stone.

CM-U: Uh-huh. Hmm.

David Novros: Cement. Mortar. Something so that you're not competing with the nothing space of the white wall. I wasn't really doing a play with these white paintings about the white wall and the white canv– that wasn't what I was interested in.

CM-U: Um-hum.

David Novros: It wasn't about the shadow line.

CM-U: Good. Well, good, because I always wondered about that.

David Novros: Yeah. I have no preference really.

CM-U: Uh-huh. Well, this looks great. We are really happy to have it, and...

David Novros: Me, too. I'm looking forward to seeing this comparative test. I think it's finally a logical way of approaching the thing instead of all these kinds of essentially doctrinaire approaches that most people apply. Nobody has thought to do this. It's such an obvious way of approaching it, you know.

CM-U: But even that test, you think we should do with aluminum panel?

David Novros: No.

CM-U: Oh. Just really try to duplicate this?

David Novros: No, I think you should really do it with this.

CM-U: Okay.

David Novros: If I were going to remake this painting for my own purposes...

CM-U: I see.

David Novros: ...I would use aluminum panels.

CM-U: Okay. Great.

David Novros: Yeah. And then when I remake the other ones, if I ever could remake them, I would prefer to do them on panels.

CM-U: Hmm.

David Novros: But I doubt if I'll be able to. They'll probably have to be canvas as well.

CM-U: Right.

David Novros: Is there anything more?

CM-U: Nothing. That does it for me. Is that okay?

David Novros: That's it.

CM-U: Thank you. I'm glad we did it.

David Novros: Okay.

CM-U: Good.

[END RECORDING, PART 2 OF 2]