



**Artists Documentation Program  
Video Interview Transcript**

**LUCAS SAMARAS  
JANUARY 26, 2004**

**Interviewed by:  
Carol Mancusi-Ungaro, Founding Director, Artists Documentation Program  
and Associate Director for Conservation and Research,  
Whitney Museum of American Art**

**Video: Ronald Bronstein | Total Run Time: 01:38:43  
Location: Whitney Museum of American Art**

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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 Associate Director for Conservation and Research, Whitney Museum of American Art; Lucas Samaras, Artist]**

**[BEGIN RECORDING]**

**[00:00:48]**

CM-U: Today is January 26, 2004, and I am here with Lucas Samaras in his exhibit “Unrepentant Ego: The Self-Portraits of Lucas Samaras” [Whitney Museum of American Art, November 13, 2003-February 8, 2004]. I am Carol Mancusi-Ungaro. We are basically going to be talking about materials and techniques, the works of art, and share whatever information Lucas might want to about these works.

CM-U: This room is a good place to start...

Lucas Samaras: Yes.

CM-U: ...because in terms of materials and a lot of the things, what’s here...

Lucas Samaras: Has all the dangers.

CM-U: ...we see, all of the dangers are in here – Exactly. Are there ones you want to start with, or can I start with whatever?

Lucas Samaras: Well, we’ll move around [sounds like].

CM-U: Okay.

**[00:01:25]**

CM-U: I thought we’d start with these [*Large Drawing* series] because of the kind of very complicated technique and the colors. So could you sort of just talk about them?

Lucas Samaras: In terms of paper?

CM-U: Yeah. In terms of paper, and in terms of technique, and the kind of color. Like, it’s described as colored pencil and felt pen and graphite on the paper.

Lucas Samaras: Well, these particular [referring to *Large Drawing* #33, June 20, 1966, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; gift of Arnold and Milly Glimcher,

Lucas Samaras Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 01/26/2004

Video: adp2004a\_20040126\_004va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.2004a / TRT: 01:38:43

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1986] – these I did by having a hard pencil that doesn't leave a mark but has, but can make an indentation on the paper.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: So I made these marks. I think it was a pencil. I'm not definitely sure. And then later when I put sort of a block of – you call it graphite, or whatever – you go like that, and then you get the black, and the lines are white because it doesn't touch the back.

CM-U: So the lines were made on white paper?

Lucas Samaras: So everything is done on white paper.

CM-U: Got it.

Lucas Samaras: So it has that negative effect.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: And this is just colored pencil. Any kind of colored pencil.

CM-U: Colored pencil.

Lucas Samaras: You know, Prisma, or Caran d'Ache.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: One of those.

CM-U: Did you just get your supplies here at this point?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Yeah? Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Well, this was done in New York City, so...

CM-U: So you used the art supply stores here?

Lucas Samaras: This is from '65, I think.

CM-U: Um-hum.

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Lucas Samaras: So I was living in New York from '64 to '67 in one place, and then other places. Where these [referring to *Large Drawing #11*, May 25, 1966, Collection of the artist; courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York], the paper faded somewhat...

CM-U: Oh, how so?

Lucas Samaras: Well, I see a fading.

CM-U: Yeah. I thought that might have been – [referring to *Large Drawing #4*, May 9, 1966, Private collection] I see this kind of brownish color around the edge. I thought that might have been from another framing system that was on it.

Lucas Samaras: Maybe. Maybe. But even so, it shows the fading, right?

CM-U: Right. Right. Or staining. You see, it might be a staining from the wood, was what I was thinking.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, you think so?

CM-U: I think so. Or maybe even the glue, maybe, that...

Lucas Samaras: No glue. I don't think there's glue [sounds like].

CM-U: No glue? 'Cause it's just the one piece of paper?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. I used to have this in another frame [referring to *Large Drawing #11*, May 25, 1966, Collection of the artist; courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York]. I think they reframed it.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: I think maybe that's what shows.

CM-U: The frame may have just covered it a little.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. But I think somehow the paper somehow [sounds like] faded, even though I had it in a dark corridor.

CM-U: So if the paper – and because what is less intense? The colors, or the black?

Lucas Samaras: This part. The ink thing. The ink, I think, fades.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: Am I correct?

CM-U: It can. It can, definitely. Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Because even when I had colored inks like in those – those [referring to *Untitled*, October 2, 1962, and *Untitled*, January 15, 1963, both Collection of the artist; courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York] were covered in books so no light got to them.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: But others were exposed. You know, I see light. The colors have faded somewhat. And it's ink. And I didn't know that the ink fades.

CM-U: I – well, you wouldn't expect it.

Lucas Samaras: No.

CM-U: I mean, you see manuscripts that have spent their whole lives in books, and the colors are so extraordinary...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...and you see them, medieval, and you think, "Oh, it's gonna last."

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Well, even Polaroids. Polaroids that I kept in books haven't faded.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: So the same thing again's happened with ink.

CM-U: But there's nothing we can do about that?

Lucas Samaras: No. No.

CM-U: I mean, you just accept that as part of the life.

Lucas Samaras: As long as there's a picture taken at some point, so the color...

CM-U: So there's a record of the color.

Lucas Samaras: The color, yeah.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: So I don't – what do you want to know? You want to know anything about this [referring to *Large Drawing #11*, May 25, 1966, Collection of the artist; courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York]?

CM-U: Well, again, just the technique of, of doing...

Lucas Samaras: Just ink. And then, again, silver. Silver pencil and colored pencil.

CM-U: The pencil seems very soft. You said it was hard, but it really leaves hardly any, any record of its tracks.

Lucas Samaras: Where?

CM-U: In the silver, for example.

Lucas Samaras: It's just silver pencil.

CM-U: Yeah. Okay. Great.

[00:05:17]

CM-U: Now tell me about this one, and the configuration of that [referring to *Lucas is Crying*, 1962, Collection of Milly Glimcher].

Lucas Samaras: Now, if I'm not mistaken – I'm mistaken 'cause I don't really remember – I remember crumpling a couple things, but I don't know whether – or maybe I sprayed it with Krylon.

CM-U: Because I saw you that crumpled the one, *Lucas Loves*, in the film...

Lucas Samaras: In the book – in the film.

CM-U: Yeah. Right. And then I thought that was this one, but it isn't. This is *Lucas is Crying*.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. And at the same time, I did some things where I covered – like a bag, a paper bag – with epoxy that hardened, you know.

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: And I'm not sure that that's epoxy. It may be just spray, Krylon spray.

CM-U: But at any rate, the configuration is what you intended of this? I mean, it's crumpled just as you had wanted it crumpled?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. Yeah.

CM-U: Right. Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: It just looked good, and I wanted to preserve that thing. Whereas most of the others are flat, that I had kept, you know.

CM-U: Yeah. And the colors look pretty vivid to you, don't they, at this point?

Lucas Samaras: Well, this [referring to *Lucas Loves*], I think, is almost as bright as when I did it.

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Because it was under a – I have them in – you would buy those notebooks. There was a black piece of paper, and then you take out the black, and you just – I don't think they were acid-free, but it didn't – it couldn't have done anything.

CM-U: But it's good quality. Yeah. Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: And so these are all ink.

CM-U: Let's, let's go down to the other end of the wall. Unless there's something else you want to say about these.

Lucas Samaras: I would – I thought maybe it's an ink mark, but it isn't [referring to *Untitled*, September 11, 1962, Collection of the artist; courtesy The Pace Gallery, New York]. It's one of those ink nibs. They were those round things...

CM-U: Yes.

Lucas Samaras: ...for letterings and things.



- CM-U: Yes.
- Lucas Samaras: I think that's how these lines were done 'cause I just – for the moment, I forgot how.
- CM-U: You can see that they're soft and rounded.
- Lucas Samaras: But they were done with a round – you know, the round nib?
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Lucas Samaras: You know what I'm talking about.
- CM-U: Yes. I think I do. Is it – and you put it on the end of the pen? Or the pen actually comes that way?
- Lucas Samaras: No. You buy these nibs. There are all kinds of metal nibs with different shapes for calligraphy and things.
- CM-U: Uh-huh. Uh-huh.
- Lucas Samaras: And some have a point where it's a flat round of different widths...
- CM-U: Yes.
- Lucas Samaras: ...and it gives you, you know, different...
- CM-U: Yes, I do know.
- Lucas Samaras: ...different strokes. But that's not a big deal.
- CM-U: We'll come back to the boxes in just a minute. Let's go over to the skulls and the x-rays.
- Lucas Samaras: Okay. These drawings have the same thing [referring to *Large Drawing #44*, October 30, 1966, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; gift of Arnold and Milly Glimcher, 1986; *Large Drawing #39*, June 24, 1966, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 80.37.2]. Just pencil on paper. Colored pencil on paper.
- CM-U: Uh-huh.
- Lucas Samaras: And the lines, again, are – they show the real paper where the black is...

CM-U: Where you inscribed and then put the black over.

[00:08:00]

CM-U: And what about the x-rays?

Lucas Samaras: The x-rays [looking at *Skull and Milky Way*, 1966, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Howard and Jean Lipman 91.34.6]. I had x-rays of my skull taken, and so then I had the x-rays transferred into a paper. You know, positive.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: And then I cut them out, and I mounted them on nebula that I got from the Museum of Natural History, probably.

CM-U: And when you use...

Lucas Samaras: And the pins I've added later.

CM-U: So is the paper from the, the x-ray print, the radiographic print, it's glued onto...

Lucas Samaras: It's glued, yeah.

CM-U: It's glued first. So the pins aren't actually functioning...

Lucas Samaras: Holding it? No, no. No.

CM-U: Okay.

Lucas Samaras: They are more like defining rather than functioning.

CM-U: Yes. Well, they do...

Lucas Samaras: Defining the shape.

CM-U: ...and they give a sense of depth to it.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. They create that illusion.

CM-U: As we go through...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...there's going to be lots of conversation about the pins because, you know, you've changed pins. You use different pins. You paint pins. You paint the grid. I mean, there's all of that. And so various questions come to mind, and – I guess I'm feeling – I mean, this is in such remarkably good condition; and, thankfully, it's owned by the Whitney, so I'm thrilled about that. But in the future, should pins come loose or something like that, do we just pick them up and put them back in?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. That's not a problem.

CM-U: There's no particular...

Lucas Samaras: It's not a problem.

CM-U: No.

Lucas Samaras: But put in the same place. In the same hole.

CM-U: Right. And are they...

Lucas Samaras: But because – now the problem with pins is this. Most of the pins are steel pins, so if moisture gets to them, they rust. Others that I was able to get later on, smaller ones, are brass or something.

CM-U: I saw them. Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: And those don't rust.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: So, unfortunately, they didn't have that non-rust type that were large, and so on. So the main thing is to keep this away from moisture, you know.

CM-U: Right. And do you – did you fashion the pins in any way. They're not...

Lucas Samaras: Oh. So the other thing is, some of them I may have dipped it into Duco® [cement] and then put it – maybe I'll be reminded of when I did it. Others are simply hammered in. And then others are painted on the top to sort of accentuate that dot thing that's floating.

CM-U: You would just go to a fabric supply store to get the pins?

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Lucas Samaras: In the '30s, that's where you find all kinds of stuff for making clothes, whether it's buttons, or threads, or fabrics, and so on. And there used to be a store, owned by, do you know the OK Harris Gallery [New York]? Ivan Karp? And his wife, Marilyn?

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Marilyn's father was in the business of selling, you know, zippers and things. And I used to buy from him, you know, packs of pins.

CM-U: When you – Did you have a choice? Or did all of the straight pins look the same?

Lucas Samaras: Some were larger than others, so there's a difference. I may have bought before, from another place, before I knew that he was selling them. But I think through him I found out that there were brass ones, and I got those smaller ones – the gold ones. Gold and silver.

[00:11:13]

Lucas Samaras: Oh, so the pins. Essentially, they were used in two formats. One is when they were clumped together, and that was my first excitement with the pins, when I took a whole bunch of them, and you know, like a clump of pins, were so fabulously both dangerous and sparkly, you know, mysterious, and had all the complexity that you would want. And they were sculpture, and lines, and so on. So, then I began gluing those.

Lucas Samaras: And then the other one is where you use them individually, like this. You either create sort of a psychological state of danger, or else an optical kind of situation. You know, so there are two different ways.

CM-U: And I think that dual aspect that you talk about, kind of a psyche-loaded, you know, aspect of the materials is something that you exploit all through the work. I mean, you feel it...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...I feel it all through the work.

Lucas Samaras: And the nice things about the pins, for me...

CM-U: Now here are the pins as you were kind of describing them as kind of loaded almost [sounds like]...



Lucas Samaras: I have an interesting little aside, which is...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: ...perhaps less of interest to you, but it's interesting, you know, from another aspect. When I was growing up – sort of going to school and all that – in terms of Surrealism, the most fabulous thing was the fur cup [*Object*, 1936], you know, by Meret Oppenheim.

CM-U: Yes. Yes.

Lucas Samaras: So when I got those pins, and I put them in certain situations, it's almost as if I was referring to her. But I was referring both to her and to my background, which is fur, the fur business. And I hated the fur business. So if you see some of my constructions, it looks like fur, but it's not. It's pins, so that it's translating fur – which I hate – into something more dangerous, you know, which is that sensation. Am I making sense?

CM-U: Yes. You are making very good sense.

Lucas Samaras: Okay.

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

[00:13:20]

CM-U: And that helps explain the different use of them. I mean, in the early – if we go over to this, which I think is your earliest box in the show, there's – the pins are just just on the deck – they're just on the outside, kind of, in a more – covering the exterior of the box.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, you're talking about those?

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Yes, those...

CM-U: Those kind of things.

Lucas Samaras: Yes. Uh, this is almost like a faux craft situation, you know.

CM-U: You mean, like, uh, decorative – what, no, what do you mean? Like a...

Lucas Samaras: Well, it's almost like a non-art situation. It's like folk art or something, you know.

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: You could do prison art or something.

CM-U: I see that. Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: But – so I like that aspect, that it's – you know, the pins are – it's like soldiers, you know, instead of in turmoil, you know.

CM-U: And what about the wool? The decision to use the wool? And is it, just again, store bought in a craft shop, in an art shop?

Lucas Samaras: No. The wool – you see – we have a big tragedy that happened five years ago. That Woolworth went out of business. (laughs)

CM-U: I totally agree with you! I do. Because I loved their jewelry.

Lucas Samaras: Wonderful stores. (laughs)

CM-U: (laughs) It was wonderful. There's still one in Dusseldorf.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, really?

CM-U: It's the only place I know.

Lucas Samaras: So that's where I used to buy my colored wool. And I'm not sure when colored wool was invented, but I became aware of it in the early '60s, perhaps just before the, uh, you know, the hippies and all that. Just before that. You could see it in the stores, you know.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: So I used to buy it there.

**[00:15:15]**

Lucas Samaras: I liked it, because it was a line. You know, it was a line that changed hue and color and so on.

Lucas Samaras: Well, the big example was [Jackson] Pollock, who would take a tube and then, you know, sort of squeeze the tube. Even though [Hans] Hofmann may have done it too. So, instead of squeezing paint, you know, you just had thread, or you know, wool, you know, that had this effect. There are all kinds of transmutations of something before, you know...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: ...that kind of interested me, you know. Interestingly, at the same time, these were, in terms of sort of art aesthetics, they were kind of dangerous because they approached the realm of, you know, the dressmakers or the dress designers.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: But not a real art context. So they were dangerous in that sense.

CM-U: I see that.

Lucas Samaras: And that made it kind of exciting.

CM-U: Yeah, I can see that.

Lucas Samaras: And it still – you know, it can still sort of make people queasy, you know, that there are these things I used.

CM-U: Well, we all have such association with this kind of colored, brightly colored wool from the sixties, you know. We all were – that was being used in our clothes and all kinds of different things.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. Yeah.

CM-U: So the association is there, it's true.

Lucas Samaras: But that came, I think, maybe...

CM-U: After...

Lucas Samaras: ...like a year or so later...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: ...and it was...

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CM-U: Yeah. Later in the sixties. That's true.

Lucas Samaras: I think so. I mean, I'm not...

CM-U: So it was partly – I mean, the ability to take a strand and manipulate it in a way that you wanted. And then the color, of course, appealed to you because...

Lucas Samaras: Oh, totally.

CM-U: ...somewhere you said that you liked cheap color. And it has that kind of very vibrant color.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. Because my first sort of contact with color excitation was pastels.

CM-U: Hmm.

Lucas Samaras: And I think mostly – when you thought of pastels in the fifties, you thought of sort of subdued sensitivities. You know, the browns, and the grays, and the whatever. But for me, what I liked were the bright pastels. You know, the bright red, the bright green, bright blue. And in the pastels that I use, some of which may be here...

CM-U: We'll talk about them, yeah [sounds like].

Lucas Samaras: That created this sort of – it was like a scream, but it was a modulated scream. It was modulatable, you know. And it was almost like drowning in something, you know, like sweet things, you know, when you buy cookies or whatever. When you buy – when you eat Middle Eastern cooking of dessert types, so it's drowned in honey, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: So that you take a bite, and you say, "Oh, my God!" you know.

CM-U: You get all this flavor and goo.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. So – and usually sort of – people who are raised in, like French, or even more maybe Japanese, they may think it like it's too much. But at a certain point, too much is just right, you know. So that it has the same effect, but it's – again, you would see that. You would see that in cartoons, you know, like Disney cartoons in the forties and fifties, where you went, and you saw a film with something natural happening, and then you saw these



imaginary colors. And for some of us, it was like being in some treasure house, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Some of us who didn't have a lot of that. Like, I come from a small town, you know, subdued, wartime, and so on. So those things were – they were just unbelievable, you know. So, next.

[00:19:50]

CM-U: Did you wet the wool with adhesive first?

Lucas Samaras: No. Simple thing. Simple thing. Uh, wool and Duco Cement. You just apply Duco on the wood...

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: ...and then quickly, you know, press the wool around; and within a minute or so, it starts getting somewhat hard, so it doesn't shift.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: And then – but the main thing was to have a fan nearby because the exhaust fumes of Duco are quite dangerous...

CM-U: And you were doing this in your studio [sounds like]...

Lucas Samaras: ...and they smell pretty bad.

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: But I had a fan. I mean, I just hated the smell so much that, fortunately, I had a wind situation taking place so that I haven't died yet, you know. But...

CM-U: It seems to have worked okay so far.

Lucas Samaras: ...but maybe tomorrow.

(laughter)

Lucas Samaras: So it does – just simple. Just apply it, and then apply the...

CM-U: So you applied it on the wood, and then you laid it on [sounds like].

Lucas Samaras: And within a minute or so it hardens. And it takes a couple days, though, to really harden, you know.

CM-U: And that's it? You never put a preservative or anything else on top of that?

Lucas Samaras: No. On some of them I have sprayed Krylon Crystal Clear...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: ...but I don't remember on which ones. Sometimes if you touch it, you may feel – it's something like touching hair that's been sprayed with something.

CM-U: Yeah, yeah.

Lucas Samaras: It may have something, but most of them, no. Nothing.

CM-U: What really impresses me about this is that, uh, the Duco, which can kind of get cloudy and can age [sounds like]...

Lucas Samaras: Okay. You see...

CM-U: ...but it hasn't.

Lucas Samaras: ...Duco gets cloudy in – when it's a humid atmosphere.

CM-U: Oh.

Lucas Samaras: If it's not humid, it doesn't get cloudy.

CM-U: Even as it ages?

Lucas Samaras: No.

CM-U: 'Cause this is remarkable.

Lucas Samaras: It remains the same, you know.

CM-U: It's really remarkable. I mean, these boxes are '63.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, I'm surprised, too. Forty years, or something.

CM-U: Forty years?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Look at the color and the adhesive \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible].

Lucas Samaras: But people have to take care of it, you know, like you can't – some people had in the window. Obviously, the color's faded. Other had it in open, so the dust gets in it – you know, people who took care of the things, you know, really kept them...

CM-U: Do you feel okay with them being displayed in a box? A plexi box in a person's home?

Lucas Samaras: It's not a question of feeling okay or not. It's a question of, you either want to have it for a long time, or you want to have it destroyed in a certain number of years. So it's not a question anymore...

CM-U: In your mind. In your mind.

Lucas Samaras: ...you just have to do it.

CM-U: You have to do it to preserve it.

Lucas Samaras: I had two – there were maybe three or four collectors in the sixties, you know. Like, major ones. One collector had one of these boxes – pins or whatever. Had it there because – I'm not going to say who it was...

CM-U: Hmm. Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: ...because they thought, "Why would you want to interfere with, you know, the enjoyment of the box?"

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: Twenty years later, it was a mess, see.

CM-U: In what way?

Lucas Samaras: The dust. It couldn't be cleaned, and it fell apart. It just fell apart.

CM-U: Oh.

Lucas Samaras: The other one made a case. Even made a cover for it, you know, so that it...

CM-U: You mean like a fabric cover?

Lucas Samaras: ...so that it wouldn't – even a fabric cover.

CM-U: Yeah. Like a print [sounds like]. Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: So that twenty years later, it's exactly like, you know – so it's not a question of whether they should have it not. They should have it, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum. Did you always feel that way?

Lucas Samaras: That's why I joined – that's why I joined the Pace Gallery, in a way, because they were considered like the, the Plexiglas gallery because they, you know...

(laughter)

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: It was a derogatory thing...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: ...but I loved that because, even a sculpture that I have where two leaning chairs – that is at the Walker Art Museum...

CM-U: Um-hum. I've seen pictures of it.

Lucas Samaras: ...one is pins, and one is wool, and they're leaning. Very nice.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: And Pace Gallery made a leaning case, you know. It was wonderful. Totally against, you know, the aesthetic of, you know, enjoying purely the art for itself.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: But who cares, you know. They should be able to make the translation, you know.

CM-U: That's interesting. It's in remarkable condition.

Lucas Samaras Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 01/26/2004

Video: adp2004a\_20040126\_004va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.2004a / TRT: 01:38:43

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Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Even the mirrors are in beautiful, beautiful condition.

**[00:24:08]**

CM-U: Okay, I want to ask you about this case over here, unless we're passing something that you'd like to talk about. 'Cause here we have the pins in a different configuration.

Lucas Samaras: Well, some of these are loose, so there's no problem. It's that they're just loose.

CM-U: Like what? Let's...

Lucas Samaras: Well, those, those little things inside there, those little things that jewelers used to glue to make a little, uh – you know, those blue things, that are blue, and – those are loose.

CM-U: I don't see what you mean.

Lucas Samaras: See...

CM-U: I'm lost here. Okay.

Lucas Samaras: ...that container – the, the green container...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: ...inside...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: ...has a whole slew of these little jewels, right?

CM-U: Oh, yeah. Right.

Lucas Samaras: They're loose.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: And these are loose, too.

CM-U: Right. And your – you intend for them to move around...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, right.

CM-U: ...especially with a brush. I mean, it's just you intend for them to...

Lucas Samaras: Well, sure. Yeah. Yeah. Right. Whereas the pins are glued, you know...

CM-U: Right. But the peel back is very intentional with the image, and the glue – the pins are glued to the fabric that then peels back in that case of that box back there?

Lucas Samaras: Uh, everything is glued, so, you know...

CM-U: Um-hum. And here you go into something very different. I mean, it's still the idea of the pins, but you've added screw eyes and different – So each person uses this as they see fit?

Lucas Samaras: It – there's only one person who owns this. Who has owned this since it was made. So...

CM-U: (laughs)

Lucas Samaras: ...I'm not sure if he does it – if he just does it once, and that was it. And...

CM-U: (laughs) Okay. Okay. It's beautiful and remarkable. And I'm very impressed by the physical state of the items that are in the box, even. I mean, again, considering how old it is.

Lucas Samaras: It all depends how you take care of it. It's not a...

CM-U: Yeah. Let's go to this case. There are several wonderful pieces in here that I wanted to ask you about.

**[00:26:00]**

Lucas Samaras: The head is made by taking tinfoil and pressing against my face...

CM-U: Um-hum.

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Lucas Samaras: ...and then applying jewels that have been dunked in Duco Cement.

CM-U: And did you buy Duco Cement just in the tubes and kind of squeeze it out, and then...

Lucas Samaras: In tubes, yes. Tubes by the gross, or whatever, you know.

CM-U: Sure. And then squeeze them out...

Lucas Samaras: You squeeze it, yeah.

CM-U: ...so you have like a pan with all this stuff in it...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, you have a little cup or something.

CM-U: A cup. Okay.

Lucas Samaras: Then you squeeze it there. And then you dump the jewels, swirl them around so they get all covered, and then apply them with like a spatula or something.

CM-U: Okay. And you get the jewels down in the garment district also?

Lucas Samaras: The jewels, yes. Yeah, I guess, in the thirties, 38 or 39<sup>th</sup> Street, you would buy them by the pound. They used to be maybe a couple dollars. And then every couple of years, it would go up. By the time I stopped going there, it was seventy-five dollars a pound, you know.

CM-U: Oh, my goodness!

(laughter)

Lucas Samaras: But by then I was into something else. It didn't matter. But – see again, in just going into this strange substance – and it had everything; it had the color, it had the feel of something solid. I mean, it was just something spectacular. And at the same time, you could produce somewhat horrifying effects nevertheless...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: ...even though the color – uh, you didn't have to paint it bloody. You know, you didn't have to put sort of organic liquids on it. Just how it is.

CM-U: It's haunting, in the work [sounds like]. It is.

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Lucas Samaras: I'm thinking of people like Ivan Albright, or even contemporary guys who use the more organic substances that come up from the body [sounds like] or something. Which is certainly interesting, but this is a different way.

CM-U: The jewels sparkle. That must be an important part of it to you in giving it a certain edge. Is it?

Lucas Samaras: Well, the sparkle is part of the existence, part of the fascination, the attraction, part of why I chose them, you know. In other words, the...

CM-U: The reason why I mention it is that over time, with aging, it's the one thing I could imagine as the glue may become aged, the sparkle may be minimized. Is that something that you could imagine conservators in the future going in to try to remove any kind of coating that might – or dirt, certainly dirt that gathers on it, to kind of reinvigorate that and add life to it?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, I wouldn't mind. I wouldn't mind that.

CM-U: Right. Right.

Lucas Samaras: I wouldn't mind it even if – if a jewel falls, you know, that they could put it back.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Or they find something like it. I mean, that's not a problem.

CM-U: Okay.

Lucas Samaras: When you have thousands of things, you know, if you add another one, it's not a problem.

CM-U: Okay.

Lucas Samaras: If you add another pin, who cares? You know what I mean?

CM-U: I know exactly what you mean. I was once restoring one of these figures that they sometimes colloquially call nail fetishes.

Lucas Samaras: Nail?

CM-U: Fetishes. You know, the figures that have (gestures to indicate spikes)...



Lucas Samaras: Oh, the African things? Yeah.

CM-U: Yes. Yes. And I – nails had fallen out, and Dominique de Menil said, “Would you, you know, put the nails back in?” And so I did. And then I was taking through the Ambassador from New Guinea, through The Menil Collection. And I was telling her what I did in front of this box...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...and she said, “Oh, you know, that’s very, very serious what you did.” You know, it has the connotation...

Lucas Samaras: Well, because they had the religious...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: These don’t have a religious contact like that.

CM-U: Okay. All right. All right.

Lucas Samaras: The religion is free [sounds like], you know.

**[00:29:57]**

CM-U: How about the mask? What is the mask? What...

Lucas Samaras: These I used to get at five and ten, because women used to put them, when they sprayed their hair...

CM-U: Oh, yeah?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Oh. I wish they still had those.

Lucas Samaras: I think that’s what the function was.

CM-U: Now they are all so ecologically inclined, we should get them again.

Lucas Samaras: Yes.

CM-U: So it was just a clear mask?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, right. And I guess I glued them...

CM-U: You glued it to the wood, and then added...

Lucas Samaras: It's not wood. I think it's a cardboard. Cardboard.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: With some plastic [sounds like].

CM-U: Now, again, something like this. I mean, in our experience with plastics so far, they tend to get cloudy and dark...

Lucas Samaras: Well, these fog [sounds like]

CM-U: Does it seem this is the right color to you? Does it seem as clear as it was originally, or does it seem slightly...

Lucas Samaras: Well, I didn't take good care of it, so it's kind of dusty, you know. Somebody could, with a brush, go and...

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: ...sort of clean the, the Plexiglas, or whatever it is.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: It's not a problem.

CM-U: Right. We can definitely do that now. Yeah.

**[00:30:49]**

CM-U: Okay. Now here we get into nails that are – that – these are the brass? Are these...

Lucas Samaras: No, no. These are the same nails as the others.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: But it's been exposed to humidity.

CM-U: Oh. So this is the look of the rusty nails?

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Lucas Samaras: So this is the look of the rusting, right. Even though...

CM-U: Now how do you feel about that?

Lucas Samaras: Well, I mean, I would preferred it to be shiny; but it's not a problem. This makes it more like an African situation rather than a Western situation.

CM-U: In what way?

Lucas Samaras: But it's still kind of spectacular looking, so I don't mind.

CM-U: Well, it's fabulous looking. Well, in what way do you say that?

Lucas Samaras: Which?

CM-U: African.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, by African. African have – the African sculpture has this brown, you know, these brown tones.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Brown earthy, you know, whether it's mud, or caked blood, or whatever, there's a – you know, there's a...

CM-U: Of the earth.

Lucas Samaras: ...yeah, of the earth. Whereas the – that silver is not of the earth, really. It's of something – I don't know if it's artificial, or out of the clouds, but it's not of the earth, you know. Unless some metallic situation that you were talking about.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: It's a different, you know...

CM-U: So it's more technological, or more manmade?

Lucas Samaras: No. [pause] Well, it's more like crystals versus earth, or versus – I don't know. I have to think about it some.

CM-U: Yeah. Okay. All right. Well, it's just very interesting that...

[00:32:33]

CM-U: Now I also notice that some of these pinheads are painted. Some are painted and some are not.

Lucas Samaras: No.

CM-U: No? I thought I saw that some that were white. Slightly white.

Lucas Samaras: Well, maybe they were added later.

CM-U: I don't know. That's what I was going to ask you, if there is a pattern in the whiting – of the white here...

Lucas Samaras: Not the...

CM-U: No?

Lucas Samaras: ...in this particular box, I don't remember doing them.

CM-U: Okay.

Lucas Samaras: But if I had painted them, I have forgotten.

CM-U: I just – I seem to see a little \_\_\_\_\_ [phrase inaudible].

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, I know it does that.

CM-U: Yeah. And the wonderful Menil box [*Box #27*, 1965, The Menil Collection, Houston; gift of Lucas Samaras], it's uh – this one has the pins coming the other way. Coming at us...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. Well, uh, my first box was in 1960, where I had a friend of mine build me a wooden box. Again, which was kind of a dangerous thing to do because you didn't build it yourself, somebody else built it, you know. You have to make some steps, you know, like a child, you take steps. And then a couple of years later, you know, you have to make another step where it sort of escapes from the tradition of, you know, the person making everything.

Lucas Samaras: Anyway, my friend made me a box kind of like this, and I put mirror on one side and plaster on the other. And in the mirror, I used tacks, and I – so the tacks, you know, were facing you because they were tacked – the back was



tacked to the mirror. So this is a similar situation, only it's pins instead of tacks.

CM-U: Um-hum. So these boxes were made for what you – they were not found boxes.

Lucas Samaras: Well, some are made. Some are found. You know. This was found. This was made, you know. This was found. These four were found.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Most of them were English, I think, 1800-something. Either cigar boxes or...

CM-U: I was thinking cigar.

Lucas Samaras: ...boxes that held things for sewing and things. And maybe jewelry, I don't know. But, you know, they were Nineteenth Century mostly.

CM-U: And where did you find the boxes?

Lucas Samaras: You find them in antique shops all around – lots of antique shops there used to be in the '60s, '50s and '60s.

Lucas Samaras: There was even an antique shop in West New York where I was growing up. It was near a bus station. And the guy used to live in that room, so that it's like you didn't know whether, you know, it was his house or a place. And I remember he had some boxes that were fascinating, and it was hard to sort of – 'cause there, you know, some of these guys are a little crazy, almost, you know, so approaching them, you know, "Can I buy this?" it was a big deal. So there was this human thing of how to get something, you know, that you were able to use. Which was quite fascinating...

CM-U: Sure.

Lucas Samaras: Other times you'd find something that was so extraordinarily expensive, you know...

CM-U: Hmm.

Lucas Samaras: ...you didn't know what to do, kind of, you know. But those are extra, you know, art situations. They were human situations of how to get the material, you know. Whether you were going to find enough jewels or what...

CM-U: So what did you do? This man...

Lucas Samaras: I...

CM-U: ...you didn't know if it was his house or his shop? If you could ask...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. Right. So...

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: ...and I think he did allow me to buy a wooden box. And then I think another time I went, but then he must have died, so there was nobody there. So...

CM-U: Would you buy just the box that you were working on at that time? Or would you just buy a box whenever you saw one, so you'd have actually a collection of them?

Lucas Samaras: Well, if it was a special one. Well, I didn't have that kind of money, so that, you know, I couldn't buy, you know, more than one at a time.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: And some of them were covered with cloth or something, and I have to rip out the cloth or somehow destroy the connection of their previous life, you know.

CM-U: So you had to sort of denude whatever was there...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, denude. That's what...

CM-U: ... to build it up again?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. On the other hand, you'd find a box that was so well crafted that you couldn't bear to do that, so you just didn't buy it, you know. You know what I mean?

CM-U: You respected it for what it was, yeah sure.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. You have to do something.

CM-U: Oh, I understand that. And they are always wooden boxes. You weren't tempted where metal – little suitcase boxes or something like that?

Lucas Samaras: No. Metal, I don't remember whether – I'm not – maybe a small thing, but I don't remember.

CM-U: It was the wooden that appealed to you?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

[00:37:07]

CM-U: Can I ask you one question about your first painting before we leave this room?

Lucas Samaras: Yes. Yeah.

CM-U: Okay. Somewhere in one of your interviews, you talked about paint as a material, and how different paint is regarded as a material than materials that you might use in your boxes. And, as I looked at this, I saw a lot of kind of brushwork and activity that seems below the actual image that one sees. So I have a feeling this was built up, in a way. Do you have any recollection...

Lucas Samaras: Well, this was done before any of the materials start coming in. Before the pins. Before the wool, you know. Fifty-eight, I wasn't doing any of that stuff. The only materials I may have been using were tinfoil, and then toilet paper, that kind of thing. So the thick paint – what's your question?

CM-U: I guess my question was, I am very interested in the kind of physical manipulation of the paint, even though, in terms of material, it's not as obvious as some of the – not – "obvious" isn't the right word. This isn't as physical as some of the others, and yet it's very physical in the way that you've actually used it on this painting. And I wanted to ask you about this area, actually.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, that just fell off, so...

CM-U: Is that something that we should just put back on? Would you prefer not to see the red underneath?

Lucas Samaras: Well, a restorer could, you know, put the same color as the other, you know.

CM-U: You mean, just touch it in with color?

Lucas Samaras: Oh, sure. Yeah.



CM-U: Yeah. And is that something you think should be done?

Lucas Samaras: Well, as it is now, you know how sometimes an accident looks like it's an accident. Other times, it adds something unusual into the situation. For me, it could be either. It could either be covered up, or just left. Because left like that, it's not a big deal. It's something unusual. And in the context of, you know, seeing a new person, something dangerous there, it's almost like flesh, you know. There's a – but that's like extra thing that happened later.

CM-U: I see that. I understand exactly what you're saying. Where it becomes problematic is that, as a conservator – now I'm wearing my conservator's hat – if you hadn't told me that, you know, that's a judgment that you just made.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: And I wouldn't justified to make that kind of judgment.

Lucas Samaras: Yes.

CM-U: So if this happened in the future, and you and I weren't around to discuss it...

Lucas Samaras: Well, I'll tell you. There was a dinner that I did. Some of the works are titled *Dinner* because there's a plate involved, and a cup or something. There was one that was bought somewhere in the Middle West, something. They rearranged some of the contents. *That* infuriates me. Because I saw it in a picture. I didn't see the real thing. But there was – there's a picture as it existed in the Kim Levin/Abrams book [*Lucas Samaras*, 1975]. It's exactly how I made it. If it doesn't look like that, I – you know, it should not be what it is, you know.

CM-U: Right. Okay.

Lucas Samaras: So, in that context, I wouldn't mind even if just the elements that appear in the photograph, the first photograph, are there, missing something; rather than putting something that some stupid...

CM-U: That's okay. You can say it.

Lucas Samaras: ...stupid...

(laughter)

Lucas Samaras: ...curator decides that it would be okay. That's not okay, you know.

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CM-U: So you are saying there are actually...

Lucas Samaras: So this is different, you know.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: If you were to cover this up, it's kind of okay. But to change – like a spoon for a fork, or a ball of thread for something, a sock. That, it's not okay.

CM-U: It's huge. No, I understand that, completely.

Lucas Samaras: So that, yeah.

CM-U: So, what you're saying. Yeah, I mean, that's – but that would change the piece. I mean, I – that's hard to even imagine how that happened.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. But then if you had never seen the first book...

CM-U: Right. They wouldn't know.

Lucas Samaras: ...they don't know what – they don't know what evil they have done, in other words, you know?

CM-U: No, I understand that.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Do you have extra parts? Do you have more pins? Do you have extra materials?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, that I haven't used, yes.

CM-U: That you haven't used?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: That you might have, or you might be willing to...

Lucas Samaras: Oh, to give to you? Yeah, sure.

CM-U: Yeah. Give people for restoration?

Lucas Samaras: Oh, yeah.

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CM-U: 'Cause I could imagine that being important. You can't just go put any pin in. It has to have the same configuration of what you had, should something happen.

Lucas Samaras: Well, the pins may be a problem because I don't know if I have the same type. But the jewels, I have.

CM-U: The jewels, you have? Okay. Is there anything else in this room that you would specifically like to talk to me about?

Lucas Samaras: Uh, from a conservator's point of view?

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: I don't think so.

CM-U: Have any of these been restored, that you know of?

Lucas Samaras: I don't think so.

CM-U: Okay. All right. Well, then, maybe as we go along...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

**[00:42:12]**

CM-U: Would you like to sit a little bit while we talk about pastels?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. In terms of – in conservation terms, the first types of paper that I used from '57 on were construction paper that you used to buy – maybe five and tens also, Woolworth's...

CM-U: I remember, yeah.

Lucas Samaras: ...unless it was an art store. I'm not sure. But it was not a special paper.

CM-U: It was like that colored construction – was it colored construction paper?

Lucas Samaras: Colored construction paper, right.

CM-U: Yeah. And "five and tens" being – I just have to explain this.

Lucas Samaras: Woolworth's.

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- CM-U: There were stores, kind of stores that sold all kinds of things.
- Lucas Samaras: Everything. Yeah.
- CM-U: Right.
- Lucas Samaras: Now some of the reason of using that, instead of going to an art store...
- CM-U: Yeah.
- Lucas Samaras: ...was that the texture was pretty nice. And also, there wasn't the pretense that you were making a work of art, you know, with handmade paper.
- CM-U: Right.
- Lucas Samaras: 'Cause you had friends, you know, who perhaps sort of went under those, uh, aesthetics; so that when you mentioned their work, they would even say, "Oh, this is Japanese paper, and this is, you know, German paper, whatever." So one just did it for one's own ease, you know. It wasn't a big deal. You just didn't want the – you didn't want that connection, you know. You just wanted to be free to rip it up when it's over. It's not a big deal, you know.
- Lucas Samaras: So, however, what turned out is that – okay, that was in the early, from '57 to maybe until '62 or thereabouts, '63. And then I began buying harder paper, you know. Maybe from an art store. But strangely, the quality changed. You know, the quality of the work, you know.
- CM-U: In what way?
- Lucas Samaras: There wasn't this limpid chalk softness, you know. There was a hardness that came to it.
- CM-U: Um-hum.
- Lucas Samaras: And even maybe my touch was harder. Not only the paper, the – you know. So that nose, for example, is from around, I think, '65. That has a totally different effect from this series here, which is from '60, '61, about. It feels differently.
- CM-U: Yes, it does. \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]
- Lucas Samaras: Unfortunately, the paper, you know, is more dangerous for long time...

CM-U: Yeah, but it's been – I mean, it looks wonderful. I mean, they've been preserved. When I was looking at them carefully, I was noticing the brightly colored papers...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...and how you were working from those colors. And I didn't realize it was construction paper. I should have because it – but it also means you were working from colored grounds. I mean...

Lucas Samaras: Oh, definitely.

CM-U: ...in an aesthetic sense.

Lucas Samaras: Yes. Yes.

CM-U: So you were always playing against...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...the color of the paper.

Lucas Samaras: So in a sense, by taking red, and then leaving some of the red, and then sort of putting more red in it, you zapped up the color that you were sort of provoked by.

CM-U: Yes. Yes. So you were always responding to the color? 'Cause all of these are on colored paper.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, but not all of them. Because I think the others, from '65, are black paper. You know, like that one, or – if I'm not mistaken, that's...

CM-U: Well, they are just non-white paper that we see...

Lucas Samaras: Oh, it's not white. None – no whites at all.

CM-U: Not at this point?

Lucas Samaras: Because white produced effects that I wasn't interested in.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: It had to be the black or other...

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CM-U: Color.

Lucas Samaras: ...saturated. Coming out of the black, rather than imposing it on a white instead of – it's a different situation. It's like, if it's white, it's almost as if you're wiping yourself. You're dirtying the white, you know.

CM-U: Yes.

Lucas Samaras: Whereas, if it's a dark thing, you're, you are drawing it out. It's a less intrusive, less – less – a kind of an egotistical child, you know, that wants to dirty up all the walls in the house or something. You know, it's a different – it's a – hmm – it's not, it's a different kind of aggression.

CM-U: Well, I, I can under – I understand that. And I, I also, I also imagine...

Lucas Samaras: For the graffiti, you know.

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Graffitis are totally opposite...

CM-U: From drawing. From...

Lucas Samaras: ...from – yeah.

CM-U: ...within.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Working from a color, too. I mean, it's certainly in keeping with what you were doing with your yarn in the brightly colors. But also, it's a very different challenge, working from something that's already colored, as opposed to the white page which can be so, uh...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, but it's almost like music, then, where you have a certain tone that you respond to, and then you make modulations, you know, within that particular tone. Or that theme, you know, in the color theme.

CM-U: Yeah.

**[00:47:05]**

CM-U: They're wonderful. You talked about doing them on your lap?

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Lucas Samaras: Oh, yes.

CM-U: And that there'd be lots of chalk.

Lucas Samaras: Well, when I say on my lap, obviously you couldn't put paper in your lap, but it had to be a hard, you know...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: ...some cardboard or something. That's because, when I was living in a small – when I was working in a small bedroom, there was no room, you know. There was no table or anything. I could go into the kitchen, but then you interfere with other people. So it was easy. And at the same time there was this inwardness, as if, you know, there was you – it was more primal. It was more like giving birth to something, rather than, you know, ordering things around. You know, it was like giving birth. And it's sort of – it had a calming effect, you know. Instead of trying to dominate a space, you simply went into yourself almost, you know.

CM-U: Hmm. The proximity to the material, alone, must have had something.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, but of course, as I said before, I didn't like the dust. You know, the dust on the hands. So I used to put a piece of cloth or something so that – you know what I mean – I didn't...

CM-U: A cloth around your \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]. Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. It had to be clean, you know, like – I created this dust, but then I would wrap it up and, you know, there was no evidence. You know what I mean?

CM-U: I see. You wrapped the entire drawing in the cloth.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. I thought of it almost like a medical situation of, you know, an operation where you do all the mess, and then you clean it up, and...

CM-U: Right. Change sheets, and then go on. Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Right.

CM-U: Well, that also preserved them, too, I'm sure.

Lucas Samaras: So, concerning the preservation, because I kept them in wax paper, flat, in the early days I used to get just regular, you know, Saran Wrap or whatever, wax paper...

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: ...so then, after a couple of months, when you opened it up to show it to somebody, of course you had that image imprinted on the other side, the negative or whatever it was. Which kind of looked nice, too...

CM-U: In its own way...

Lucas Samaras: Nevertheless, it was half of the – not half, but maybe twenty percent of the pastel would go on the paper. Later on, you found papers that you could put them in and it didn't go on, yeah. But in the early days – however, nevertheless, just because you kept them – I kept them closed, so that there would be ten or twenty pastels, one on top of another. Pastel, which is a dust, you know, was kept, on contact, the paper. Whereas, if you have it hanging, you know, eventually some of those things fall. [William] Lieberman at the Met used to tell me that they devised a magnetic system that they put behind the frame...

CM-U: Right. The \_\_\_\_\_ [phrase inaudible].

Lucas Samaras: Which was amazing to me.

CM-U: Yeah. They had the pastels. And we do it when they travel.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. Right. Right. It's an amazing thing. So the fact that they were kept, you know, was nice. Was not bad.

CM-U: Did you ever fix them in any way? Spray them in any way?

Lucas Samaras: No. The problem with fixing is, as soon as you've sprayed them, they lost some of that magic, see. So the early ones, I tried not to do that. I may – you know, some of them may have been fixed over the years; but it was better if they weren't fixed.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Unfortunately, you know.

CM-U: No, I understand that, though. Let's just go back. You were using, I assume, kind of this Ritz, I think it was called, wax paper that just came out of a tube, and then you just tore it off and used it?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: You weren't actually using Saran that would attract the particles?

Lucas Samaras: I may have tried Saran, but it wasn't appropriate.

CM-U: You may have? Okay.

Lucas Samaras: So I was using, you know, that, uh, uh – it's opaque. What is it...

CM-U: I know what it is. Yeah. I know. It's wax paper. It's wax paper.

Lucas Samaras: It's wax paper. Right.

CM-U: You used to just buy it in the supermarket.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, exactly.

CM-U: Yeah. Okay. Let me just check my notes and see if there was something else I wanted to ask you about.

CM-U: You answered all my questions.

Lucas Samaras: Great.

CM-U: All right.

[00:51:52]

CM-U: Let's move on to the – on the *AutoPolaroids*.

Lucas Samaras: These [referring to a series of cut paper drawings, not *AutoPolaroids*], if somebody happens to finally get one, they really should be mounted so that there's a space between that and the background. So it should never be just flat against something.

CM-U: So, mounted the way they are here, or more space, less space...

Lucas Samaras: Here, it's just terrific.

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CM-U: This is...

Lucas Samaras: I mean, if it's more, fine. You know, no – who cares how much space? But as long as there's space so that you know that it's a piece that's floating, in a sense, you know.

CM-U: Here they are mounted between pieces of glass, I think? Or between – is that right, Ken?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, I think...

CM-U: Yeah, between pieces of glass...

Lucas Samaras: I think Ken knows because...

CM-U: Yeah. He said between...

Lucas Samaras: ...I had a screaming fight with (laughs)...

CM-U: No.

Lucas Samaras: ...'cause they didn't – they didn't know, so they had it flat against the, you know.

CM-U: Oh.

Lucas Samaras: So – and it was the day before the show opened, so it was...

CM-U: Because the shadow is important to you, yeah?

Lucas Samaras: Oh! I mean, what's the point of...

CM-U: That's it.

Lucas Samaras: ...spending hours cutting this, and nobody knows it's cut? They may have thought it was just printed, you know.

CM-U: What about the color of the background? How does – what's...

Lucas Samaras: Well, who cares, you know? It could be black. It could be green. Or it could be...

CM-U: Okay.

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Lucas Samaras: ...chartreuse. I'd rather it had – saw something subtle, but – anyway, it came out fine, you know.

CM-U: Yeah. No, it looks wonderful.

Lucas Samaras: So the screaming sometimes...

CM-U: Helps.

Lucas Samaras: ...produces the correct response.

CM-U: Yes.

Lucas Samaras: I think, though, the framer hates me now. But, you know, what can you do? You know?

CM-U: They look beautiful, and that's the goal of everyone, I'm sure.

Lucas Samaras: To be – to be hating somebody?

CM-U: No, to be looking just the way the artist wants it. Right.

(laughter)

CM-U: All right.

**[00:53:38]**

CM-U: All right. Let's talk about – if you – obviously, I want to ask you about technique. Let's talk about the Whitney ones, these two little ones over here.

Lucas Samaras: Okay. These are a series of works, we call them *AutoPolaroids*. These are the ones that are most sensitive to light, and the ones that have been, over the years, in exhibitions and things have faded quite a lot. The ones that I have in the book haven't faded nearly as much. However, even with the fading, you can still see – it's pretty – you can see what I did, anyway. So it's not a suicide situation, you know. It's going...

CM-U: Can you imagine – or let's talk...

Lucas Samaras: You can see the difference from the book. If you see the book that was printed with these images...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: ...the book was pretty close to what the color intensity was. And you can tell whether, you know. So, question?

CM-U: In the case where colors have changed – I mean, do you regard that as just part of the natural aging? Or can you imagine a point where the fading has become so evident that some – I can't imagine that there could be...

Lucas Samaras: No, what they would have to do is reshoot them, and then present sort of a version of...

CM-U: That's what I was going to ask you. But it would be a version of it. It wouldn't be your work.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, but all the monstrosities that have been done with the Italian frescoes, you know, whatever they did, it wouldn't be as bad as that, you know.

CM-U: That's true. I think that's true. I happen to agree with you on that point, actually. Although I do think the Sistine Ceiling was well done.

Lucas Samaras: Well, I haven't seen them. Just hearing about it.

**[00:55:14]**

CM-U: Let's talk about technique, sort of, with looking at these.

Lucas Samaras: Okay. Now this was the early Polaroid camera, and it wasn't as technically adept as what they finally came out, the SX-70. So, with these, you would take a picture, and then sometimes you have it either overexposed or underexposed. So, when you had it underexposed, you had sort of areas of light, you know, that didn't define anything. In which case I came in with colored ink; putting the dots almost sort of negated the idea of a mistake and created, again, sort of an optical thing, where you didn't know quite where the space was. It was, it's like you saved it with a little trickery. But still maintaining some kind of drama.

CM-U: How is the color applied?

Lucas Samaras: The color applied is either with – either with a pen, and, you know, the Mont Blanc. It's a famous name. It used to be famous, more famous in the Sixties.

CM-U: It's true. You're right. (laughs)

Lucas Samaras: But it also used to be cheaper.

CM-U: Exactly. But nonetheless, still good.

Lucas Samaras: But the main trick for me was to – you know, there's an orientation to the pen when you write. If you reverse it, you get a thinner line, see. So by reversing it, and then sort of stippling it, or whatever the name is, then you would have these small dots. And when the dots are larger, I used to perhaps put ink on the back of a pen, maybe attach the pen on a piece of wood so that you have it extended, and then going like that. I may have done it that way.

CM-U: So this was actual ink you bought in little bottles, like writing ink?

Lucas Samaras: This was either writing ink, or else you used to buy these little Higgins ink, you know, in different colors.

CM-U: Yes.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: They're wonderful.

Lucas Samaras: So obviously they have to be careful about the intensity of light that these are shown, you know, over the years, you know, it's – they should be treated almost like daguerreotypes where...

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: ...or, you know, that French stuff.

CM-U: Well, especially the color, the colored \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]...

Lucas Samaras: Well, even the black and whites 'cause the black and whites can change tone, you know.

CM-U: Uh-huh. Have you seen them become more subtle in tone?

Lucas Samaras: Well, these, to me, seem to be less black than they used to be.

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CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: But of course I'm wearing glasses. I don't know.

(laughter)

CM-U: Now these are the ones you were saying that are still in books, and so the colors...

Lucas Samaras: These are the...

CM-U: ...are stronger.

Lucas Samaras: ...little booklets that I used to keep them in, and I still do, in those, you know.

CM-U: And these booklets are something, too, that you just bought at a...

Lucas Samaras: You just bought them at the photography shop.

CM-U: Yeah. The color is very vivid in them, it's true, indeed.

Lucas Samaras: And these have been kept in that book, so these, I guess, are less faded than any of the others...

CM-U: Yes.

Lucas Samaras: ...if I'm not mistaken. But you'd have to see it with somebody without glasses.

CM-U: Is this the actual pen you were using?

Lucas Samaras: That's a pencil.

CM-U: Oh, yeah. I was trying to understand exactly what you meant by the Mont Blanc tip...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...that they turn it...

Lucas Samaras: Does anybody have a pen?

Man: Huh-uh.

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CM-U: Do you have a pen?

Lucas Samaras: Nobody has a pen. Uh, simply – suppose the pen, the pen is – yeah, not a ballpoint pen. A ballpoint pen is the same all around.

(laughter)

CM-U: Okay.

Lucas Samaras: See, suppose the pen – the ballpoint is oriented like that, right? So you are right. I am, right? But if you go like that...

CM-U: It's a fountain pen, right?

Lucas Samaras: It's a fountain pen.

CM-U: And the tip...

Lucas Samaras: The tip, on the other side, is thinner. It's thicker up here because, you know, you want to make a certain broad thing. But if you turn it, it's a finer – it's a tip...

CM-U: Yeah. That's what I understood, but...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...I appreciate your explaining it better. Okay.

**[00:59:39]**

CM-U: Let's take a look at these. Now we have the SX-70, advent of the SX-70...

Lucas Samaras: \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]. These are terrific in terms of longevity because I remember putting one on the window for a couple of years where the sun hit it, and it hardly faded. So – and of course – and then some of the batches varied because at a certain point, maybe for a couple of months, they had a batch where, after you took the pictures, there was a crackle. But it's only a specific period that it happened, and a specific type of works, you know, that have that crackle. I don't know if any of them are in this show, but, you know, there are a couple.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: But the others didn't. And that crackle may have appeared when the works were sent maybe overseas where the temperature...

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: ...or the pressure changed, and they – I think that's what I remember.

CM-U: So it's really more a condition problem, as opposed to something you intended?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. No. So in terms of like being an ancient painting, you know, the cracks...

CM-U: Yes.

Lucas Samaras: ...which was kind of cute, you know.

CM-U: Right.

(laughter)

CM-U: Now how much time did you have in manipulation? Talk to me a little bit about the technique.

Lucas Samaras: Okay. That was – in the beginning, after you took the picture, it takes a couple seconds. You take a picture. It was in a semi-viscous form behind the layers of plastic, where you could put pressure on it, and it would change the shapes that it depicted. If it depicted a nose or something, by pressure you could make the nose bigger or squish it \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]. Over the years, they began hardening because they didn't like what I was doing, you know. So by 1976, you couldn't do it anymore. You could do it, but it gave a gouging effect rather than the subtle changes that took place where the eye would melt into the nose, and the – you know what I mean? They were wonderful...

CM-U: And you literally did that by physical pressure with you finger?

Lucas Samaras: Physical pressure with a wooden...

CM-U: ...finger?

Lucas Samaras: Not a finger. There was a wooden thing. If you had a dowel, you know, and then you sort of shaved it to a point. Or a nail file.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Something that didn't damage the plastic, but would produce the pressure enough...

Lucas Samaras: Like a chopstick, you know...

CM-U: Chopstick.

Lucas Samaras: ...by simply putting it in a – what are those machines that sharpen your pencil, those...

CM-U: A pencil sharpener?

Lucas Samaras: ...pencil sharpener.

(laughter)

Lucas Samaras: Right.

CM-U: All right. And so you'd get a sharp point, and then you could...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. Right. Yeah.

CM-U: ...manipulate the emulsion there?

Lucas Samaras: But the story you said about your child dropping one of those things in the water and nothing happened to it reminds me that when we first – when I first got the SX-70, somebody said that people were doing things with it. Maybe technicians or something. So I – you would rip it, and then you would find some layers. It was like Latex, almost, you know. There was something – it's like water or something. It wasn't water, but maybe, maybe applied water to find out – you know, there was a period of a couple of hours before it finally descended into whatever it was doing, where you try this, try that, and somehow...

CM-U: So it was gel-like?

Lucas Samaras: Somehow it reminded me of...

CM-U: Yeah, that it was actually fluid.

Lucas Samaras: Maybe moving that top layer, which was a hard plastic...

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CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: ...there was a soft material. You know, it was something like Latex, you know? But it...

CM-U: What an amazing technology. Back then it was just so – I know. Absolutely fabulous. Now how about where you've actually superimposed something. It's not just manipulation. You were also...

Lucas Samaras: Well, here you can – it's not a preservation thing. It's just a technique of how to do it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: So that if something was sharp, if you focused it on your hand, obviously the face, like two feet away, would be not quite as sharp. So by simply manipulating the surface around, you sort of add to that, you know. So...

CM-U: I see. They're wonderful.

Lucas Samaras: And the other thing about that was, the SX-70 was made so that, uh, it depended on how much light you allowed to go into the camera. But you only had forty or twenty-second exposure time. So whatever you did had to take place within twenty seconds. Then you would snap, no matter what. Which gave usually the opportunity of trying to figure out how to get either multiple sort of imprints, you know, by flashing the different sequences but not using the Polaroid flash. Something else, you know?

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: But you only had twenty seconds and then that was it. So it's like you had your own darkroom in the machine. It wasn't – you couldn't do anything afterwards.

CM-U: It's interesting.

Lucas Samaras: That was the excitement of it.

CM-U: And then they came out with these auto focus ones, right? I mean – because yours, you are manipulating. You're saying you have twenty seconds to...

Lucas Samaras: Well, the original one was auto focus.

CM-U: Right. So where did you get...

Lucas Samaras: You couldn't focus – I'm not – where do I get my...

CM-U: Twenty seconds.

Lucas Samaras: Uh, concerning the light, uh, if you had a totally dark room, and you clicked the machine...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: ...it would stay open for twenty seconds, regardless.

CM-U: Ah, I got it.

Lucas Samaras: Because I would block out the sensor. So it would open for twenty seconds. Those twenty seconds, by using flashes from another instrument...

CM-U: I see.

Lucas Samaras: ...you could then flash it as many times as you wanted...

CM-U: I see what you're saying.

Lucas Samaras: ...with different colors and so on.

CM-U: I see what you're saying. Thank you for explaining that.

**[01:06:04]**

CM-U: Did you have just one SX-70? How many did you have over the time?

Lucas Samaras: Uh, I think they sent me one in the beginning, maybe two or three.

CM-U: "They" sent you?

Lucas Samaras: "They." The Polaroid.

CM-U: Oh, really? They knew about you were experimenting with this? How did that go?

Lucas Samaras: Well, the first one. Somebody called Holmes, John Holmes, I think was talking to a person at the Light Gallery – I forget his name. He then went to Texas, and he ran some other institution.

CM-U: Hmm.

Lucas Samaras: A famous person in photography. Uh, Light Gallery. Do you know the Light Gallery people, no. Anyway, he went to – John Holmes went to him and said, “You know, we have – we came up with this smart idea of giving this SX-70 to a number of people. They can experiment.” So they gave it to some photographers and some artists. And that light guy suggested they come to me, you know. They gave me one. They even gave it to a fashion photographer. Mmm, I forget his name.

Lucas Samaras: Anyway, so...

CM-U: They gave you film, too, I hope.

Lucas Samaras: They would give you film. But you would have to...

CM-U: Because it was expensive, as I remember.

Lucas Samaras: ...but you would have to hound them, you know. Eventually they would yield, but you really had to hound them for anything.

CM-U: I remember it was relatively expensive when it first came out.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, it's still, still kind of – yeah, it was expensive.

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: Yeah. But they do last. I mean, I remember early on, when we would just try to take a quick documentary photograph of something. Normally if you had a camera, and had black and white, fine.

Lucas Samaras: Yes.

CM-U: But if you didn't, and you were just grabbing something, those Polaroids are still pretty good.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

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CM-U: I mean, it's extraordinary how the system was made.

Lucas Samaras: Eelco Wolf was the bright guy there. His assistant, Barbara Hitchcock, who had the idea of – well, just like Land himself, you know, they were visionary people. And then when they die, everything collapses, you know. It happens with all companies

CM-U: Yeah, that's true.

Lucas Samaras: So he, you know, he had this sort of way of looking at things that were beyond just manufacture, beyond the business side, you know, into some other...

CM-U: Creative.

Lucas Samaras: ...into aesthetics, and so on and so. He was the mind to tap, you know, for material.

CM-U: And how do you store – and you store them in those little notebooks that we saw, basically?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: All right.

**[01:08:51]**

CM-U: I do want to ask you about the matrix drawings. About the graphite on black paper.

Lucas Samaras: This is not – it's silver pencil.

CM-U: It's silver pencil.

Lucas Samaras: Silver pencil.

CM-U: So it's not a black pencil?

Lucas Samaras: No, it's silver pencil.

CM-U: Oh.

Lucas Samaras: On black paper.



- CM-U: Well, I certainly see it there. I was looking at those first ones.
- Lucas Samaras: Silver or bronze. Silver or bronze.
- CM-U: Silver or...
- Lucas Samaras: The first one is – first one is – no, it's the – oh, this one [referring to *Matrix Drawing #2*, March 18, 1975] maybe just pencil.
- CM-U: Yeah. It has that look.
- Lucas Samaras: But the others are silver.
- CM-U: How – did you do these in the evening? With incandescent light? What kind of light were you working with when you made these?
- Lucas Samaras: Just normal light.
- CM-U: Daylight?
- Lucas Samaras: No, no. Night light.
- CM-U: A lightbulb?
- Lucas Samaras: Yeah, a bulb, yeah.
- CM-U: And the reflectance must have intrigued you as much as anything else, wouldn't it?
- Lucas Samaras: Oh, sure. Yes. Well, you know, there is this phony [sounds like] sort of a creative thing, of creating out of darkness and, you know. It's that situation. You know, you grow up with certain myths or, you know, that are imposed upon you. And then you sort of scrape yourself away from all those things. But they are still there, and they come up under new guises. They are not as stupid. You know, they are – but they're still magical in a way.
- CM-U: I think these are very – I mean, the whole, the black on black, the silver on black, or reflectance is \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]. But in terms of preservation, I think they are very stable. Perfect, yeah.
- Lucas Samaras: No, it's not a problem. Because the paper is art paper, so...
- CM-U: Yeah.

[01:10:49]

CM-U: Now here we've gotten into the grid. I know these are later boxes, and we'll talk about the eighties again, but here in – you know, you have the feeling of the painted pins almost in the sense of the dotted grid as well...

Lucas Samaras: Well, again, it's the optical thing that fascinated me just by a simple thing like adding a dot of color on the interstices – is that the correct word?

CM-U: Yes. Yes.

Lucas Samaras: You know, you created a space. You know, it's like, you know, a phony planetarium. That's kind of a...

CM-U: And just tell me about this ball, this kind of plastic ball.

Lucas Samaras: You used to buy these things in flea stores, antique shops, you know, sort of a – what do you call them? On Sundays, like on 26<sup>th</sup> Street, there were these...

CM-U: Like the flea markets?

Lucas Samaras: The flea markets.

CM-U: The flea markets. I still go.

Lucas Samaras: Well! So there you are.

CM-U: And they were – like when you turn them upside-down – the kind of things that snow would come in? Does the fluid move inside of them?

Lucas Samaras: No, this is – it's a solid. It's a semi-solid plastic that is embedded.

CM-U: Did you use them in several different boxes?

Lucas Samaras: My first thing was, I went to a medical store, and I bought a fish. You know, a skeleton of a fish. It was very nice, you know. And then I bought one that, you know, in a cube. It was the heart of a baby, but only the veins. They must have injected the veins, and then all the meat sort of disappeared.

CM-U: Hmm.

Lucas Samaras: So it was like a tree, you know.

CM-U: Hmm.

Lucas Samaras: Red. Kind of reddish, pinkish.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: So when you touched it, it was kind of not hard. There was something a little soft. So I thought, “Well, heat sort of has a tendency to bind things.” So I put it in the oven, and it started getting even more, more unstable. So then I just had to throw it out.

CM-U: That was the end of that.

Lucas Samaras: I couldn’t take it.

CM-U: Yeah. Well, I can understand that, yeah.

**[01:13:08]**

CM-U: Now here we definitely have painted heads on the nails, as we come through the boxes at this point.

Lucas Samaras: And this was a nice fabric that I found in one of the stores. What it is, it’s dripped plastic on cloth. On some kind of cloth. And it must have been done in the sixties.

CM-U: Oh, you’re talking about the black? The black.

Lucas Samaras: The black, yeah.

CM-U: Uh-huh. I see it now. Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: I mean, you know how sometimes like technicians or sort of commercial artists get hold of an art idea like Pollock or whatever, and, you know, they try something out. But this was so unusual, and it has a feel to it. There is a certain – I mean, I couldn’t believe that somebody created a machinery to drip these little things in sequence.

CM-U: I seem to remember these on handbags and different fabrics. It’s beautiful though. Really wonderful down there.

CM-U: You mentioned Pollock more than once today.



Lucas Samaras: Hum?

CM-U: You mentioned Pollock more than once today.

Lucas Samaras: Twice did I mention him?

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Hmm. Why did I do that?

CM-U: Maybe the manipulation of this material – the way he manipulated materials interested you? I'm getting into curatorial questions. Art history questions here. Which I don't mean to. But it – because I'm intrigued by it, too.

Lucas Samaras: Uh, I think we probably – well, I probably thought of him as one of the first ones who was able to use a technique that wasn't an art technique. You know, the dripping or the squeezing. Both those things then had been used before, but in a limited way, you know? But they were extra-art techniques that kind of – and they ended up producing just as good as, you know, any other. So I think I may have been attracted by that.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: The so-called transgression. But it ended up, though, into an area of beauty rather than just a transgression. The idea of beauty, something that you could drown in, and something that you could – something that you could wallow in, you know.

CM-U: \_\_\_\_\_ [phrase inaudible].

Lucas Samaras: It was essential, you know. So that it doesn't just stay there like a fact. You know, it's not just a fact. It's something that mesmerizes you, or jolts you, but also satisfies you, you know. Sort of it tickles you to death, sort of, you know. It's not just, "Oh, very nice." It's not just very nice, you know. I think maybe that's why.

CM-U: Yeah. Interesting. Interesting. Okay, we can move along. I think we've answered a lot of these technical questions – Stop me, Lucas, if there's something particular you see that you'd like to talk about.

**[01:17:18]**

Lucas Samaras: There are no technical problems here.

Lucas Samaras Interview Transcript, Artists Documentation Program, Whitney Museum of American Art, 01/26/2004

Video: adp2004a\_20040126\_004va.mp4 / Interview #: VI2000-020.2004a / TRT: 01:38:43

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- CM-U: Yeah, I think we – I think we head – head into the panoramas. Let's take a look at the one in the corner.
- Lucas Samaras: In the panoramas, I used a material – it's a tape you buy. It's a paper – hmmm, I've totally forgot what it's called. It's a conservation thing. It comes on a roll.
- CM-U: Mmhm.
- Lucas Samaras: And it has glue, either on one side or both sides. Each one is...
- CM-U: Double-sided tape?
- Lucas Samaras: Double-sided tape.
- CM-U: Uh huh.
- Lucas Samaras: Or single. This is single-sided tape. I forget what it's called. It's a famous maker. I'm sure they use it in...
- CM-U: Oh!
- Lucas Samaras: You know what I'm talking about?
- CM-U: Yeah, I'm beginning to think I know what you're talking about. Um, and the name is escaping me.
- Lucas Samaras: It's "S & W" or something, kind of...
- CM-U: Yeah. Anyway...
- Lucas Samaras: Okay.
- CM-U: All right. So in terms of process, the Polaroids are taken...
- Lucas Samaras: I would take – I would take ten, fifteen Polaroids, whatever. You know, sort of in sequence. And then cut them up into slices, and then intermix them, always interweave them so you sort of lose the idea of where one begins and one ends. And then...
- CM-U: You mean they're not just side-by-side?
- Lucas Samaras: No. Because if you had them side-by-side, you would be jolted, you know.

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CM-U: So they're interwoven...

Lucas Samaras: So I may have removed some, you know – I may have removed some because the – uh, what is it? It's not the optics. It's the lines, you know...

CM-U: The perspective?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, the perspective changes, so that there is some – let's see if we can find them...

CM-U: Oh, I see. I know what you're saying. You're saying that you – I understand what you're saying. You are cutting up the image, but these actual strips are side by side to one another.

Lucas Samaras: Well, see, look at this. This strip belongs with that strip, belongs with that strip.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: But they allow something else to come in between...

CM-U: I see.

Lucas Samaras: ...so that from a distance, there's an interweaving...

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: ...of one in another.

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: So...

CM-U: And so they're taped onto something else behind? They are taped onto a...

Lucas Samaras: That tape, you know. That tape...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: ...goes, you know, behind each – two stripes. Behind – you know, two stripes are joined together by that tape.

CM-U: \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible].

Lucas Samaras: And then there's maybe a cross one, too. But the whole thing can be folded. It's not mounted, you know.

CM-U: So wonderful. And do you work on them upright or flat when you are putting them together?

Lucas Samaras: Oh, flat. You can't – how can you put them? Because if you – to put them upright, you have to glue them first. Whereas, flat on the table, you don't have to glue them. You can, you know, just change one or the other.

CM-U: Have you ever had a surprise when you then put it upright?

Lucas Samaras: No, because – I mean, you, you can work on a table, and then put it on the floor so you are under some distance...

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: ...so you have the distance, all you want. You don't have to put them up. And then you would put them up. I would have a cardboard, and then attach them just so that over days you would see whether you really like it or not. That's a different deal, you know.

CM-U: That's a different method, yeah. Would you use a scalpel when you cut them, or just fine scissors?

Lucas Samaras: No, I'd use an X-acto knife.

CM-U: X-acto knife, okay.

**[01:21:01]**

CM-U: All right. Do you want to talk about these large ones?

Lucas Samaras: Uh, again, that company, Eelco [Wolf] must have hounded me to go to Boston. They had a room-sized camera. And it really was a room. There was one room where the camera was, and then there was a wall, and the wall was a lens – you know, a huge lens – maybe two feet wide – I don't know. And then, on the other side, you would pose. So, the hole was sort of in the middle of the wall, you know, a certain height. And they used to have a lift, to lift people up, so that they (laughs)...

CM-U: (laughs)

Lucas Samaras: ...because, you know, it had – because on the wall where the picture was taken – or on the other wall – the image had to be projected on a – you know, really the same size – life size. So it had to be in the middle somewhere. So then, when I saw the lift, I said okay, let's put that in too, like show the lift, because it was unusual. And that's all, it's a life-size – a direct – you know, no enlargement.

**[01:22:23]**

CM-U: All right. Now we're into – now we see ink on white paper.

Lucas Samaras: Ink on white paper, yeah.

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Now we get on expensive paper.

CM-U: Now we're into another period. Yeah. And it looks like the paper was wet?

Lucas Samaras: So this was wet. Yeah, and it created these wonderful effects. And I did a couple of those things with letters, you know. These are Greek letters which create the word *ego*, which means "I," or "ego," in American. That's – it's in small case, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

**[01:23:19]**

Lucas Samaras: The one you just left is a gold necklace...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: I did a gold show a couple of years ago where I used chicken wire. Chicken wire, which is small, you know, small square chicken wire. And I would paint it so that it would be sort of a little bit thicker in certain parts than other. Or I would put paint inside the rectangle, as you see there...

CM-U: \_\_\_\_\_ [word inaudible]

Lucas Samaras: ...and then I would have it cast in gold, you know.

CM-U: Was it all jewelry?



Lucas Samaras: It's all either necklaces, or bracelets, or rings. Out of that, you know, the chicken wire situation, you know, so it has that grid effect.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: And because some of it were injected solidly, it wasn't soldered afterwards, some of the bracelets particularly, they had to do it – they had to cast it over and over and over again because when they inject the gold under pressure when it's liquid, sometimes it wouldn't get to all the crevices, you know.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: So it was really a problem trying to do that simple thing, you know.

CM-U: It makes sense to me, though, in terms of technique and manipulation of material, to what has intrigued you all along.

Lucas Samaras: Oh, sure.

CM-U: All those issues, you know. The grid. The reflectance. All – you know, the malleability of the material.

Lucas Samaras: But I really made this for men to wear, rather than women.

CM-U: Hmm.

Lucas Samaras: Because the solid gold is very heavy, you know.

CM-U: Hmm.

Lucas Samaras: If you think of necklaces and stuff of gold, you think this light thing, you know, that's almost not there. But these are solid, so women, I think, you know, would find it kind of tiring. And men are still not used to wearing – unless they're rock stars, and then they, they buy different kinds of – so it just, it didn't work right, you know. Uh, my intention with those – my audience intentions did not work correctly.

CM-U: Who ended up being your audience? Women?

Lucas Samaras: A couple. But it just didn't – I don't think – it didn't work in terms of other people seeing it, you know. I see it, you know. But it didn't – you know, you could see the Pope wearing it, right?

CM-U: Right. That's where my mind was going. I was going, "It's more liturgical, almost."

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, but there are no popes in America, you know. So it's...

CM-U: No, well (laughs) – yeah.

**[01:26:26]**

CM-U: These are wonderful. And the boxes. This is a very different type of pin to my eye, than what we had before.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, these are the small pins. They're actually brass, so that they don't change – they don't rust. Same thing as that one. They either come in this silver thing, or in a gold thing.

CM-U: Now the one piece that we saw where you said that the pins had rusted – is that one of the very few you can think of? Or are there several boxes where the – older boxes where the pins have rusted?

Lucas Samaras: Well, in this show, I think it's the only one.

CM-U: Yeah, a very different feel about the pins.

Lucas Samaras: Now this one is a different system. Because when I moved into a different apartment, I didn't have the wind situation that I had in my previous apartment, so I didn't want to use Duco anymore.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: And here I just used acrylic paint, but it's not gesso. It's the other one. It's the...

CM-U: Like a gel medium?

Lucas Samaras: It's a gel medium.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: And this one left a kind of a film on it, so it's...

CM-U: I was going to ask you about this one, yeah.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. That's, that's...

CM-U: Because it looks different.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, that's what it had. And I hope it doesn't get any more, but if it stays like that, it's okay. I mean, that's what it is, you know. But that's why it's different.

CM-U: It's a lot cloudier. Uh-huh. So this is – then you went back to using – what did you do then after that?

Lucas Samaras: No, then I didn't make any more. That was like toward the end.

CM-U: So this was the last one? It was toward the end?

Lucas Samaras: It was not necessarily the last one, but toward the end.

CM-U: Right. Uh-huh. And up to this point, you continued to use the Duco?

Lucas Samaras: Well, the others, I think, were all – yeah.

CM-U: Something like Elmer's Glue didn't hold them well enough?

Lucas Samaras: Elmer's – I'm not sure that Elmer's Glue dries clear.

CM-U: Oh.

Lucas Samaras: I'm not – does it?

CM-U: Well, it does darken. No, it does darken.

Lucas Samaras: \_\_\_\_\_ [phrase inaudible]

CM-U: It darkens. So you were thinking of those issues?

Lucas Samaras: Oh, sure. I mean, I didn't want something to look totally different, like a year from when I made it.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: So, fortunately, although I did ask people over the years about Duco, fortunately Duco surprised me, you know, in a positive way...

CM-U: Yeah. It is. Yeah. Well, it was an early one that – but it was a good adhesive. Have you seen any damages – I think you alluded to one – which was a curatorial issue...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...but have you seen any damages or repairs to your boxes, or other works, that have really been offensive to you, that have...

Lucas Samaras: No.

CM-U: No?

Lucas Samaras: Because, I think mostly boxes have been kept where they were bought and haven't moved around too much, so I'm not aware of...

CM-U: Have you had to restore any of them – of your own?

Lucas Samaras: Well, I may have had to give somebody like three or four jewels to glue back.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Other than that, no. Or maybe sometimes if a collector is generous and has a group of people coming to see their collection, sometimes people would steal, you know, something.

CM-U: I have heard this.

Lucas Samaras: Right?

CM-U: Yes, I'm familiar with it.

Lucas Samaras: So that happened a couple of times, you know. Maybe pencils, stupid things, you know? In the mirror room, I have crystal balls, or maybe plastic balls...

CM-U: Let's go. Let's go to the mirror room.

Lucas Samaras: ...and even from the first room in 1966, people would steal those things. Of what use is that ball to them? Whereas, for the piece, you know, it would make it look peculiar if it's lacking, you know? It's just crazy – crazy people.

**[01:30:23]**



Lucas Samaras: These are – the last thing that Polaroid did, I think, was creating the TPX film used for medical purposes where they take a picture, and it's a positive negative. You don't have to translate it. So that's what...

CM-U: Right.

Lucas Samaras: But you have to see it under light, because otherwise it's like a...

CM-U: I got mixed up when I saw someone had written "radiographic," and I didn't understand – I guess...

Lucas Samaras: Well, I don't know what "radiographic" is, but this, this is what it is. It's a positive/negative...

CM-U: This is what it is. It's a positive/negative. They're beautiful. They're really wonderful.

Lucas Samaras: And obviously I use a different camera for these. A large, you know, eight by ten. Not a Polaroid.

CM-U: Um-hum.

**[01:31:16]**

Lucas Samaras: This is a new work that I'm doing now.

CM-U: Yeah, these are really wonderful. Can you talk a little bit about them?

Lucas Samaras: Well, I am enthralled with the Mac and the Leica. I have a Leica digital that came out last year, and I have a Mac, which is a fantastic, you know – it's such a beautiful...

CM-U: Macintosh computer?

Lucas Samaras: Macintosh. It's such a fabulous machine. The graphics, I mean the way they designed everything is so – it's such a joy, you know.

CM-U: I agree.

Lucas Samaras: And then I discovered Central Park, so I started going to the park and photographing different situations. And sometimes I would impose myself later on in the studio. Uh, so what would you like to know?

CM-U: Uh, I think technically, I think they are pretty straightforward, and I'm intrigued by your use of images of yourself when you were young [sounds like] – you just – your transposing of images.

Lucas Samaras: Well this is a summation, sort of, you know? And since it happens whenever I'm a certain age [sounds like] beyond the French word of *un certain* – whatever it is...

CM-U: Yeah.

Lucas Samaras: ...beyond that. Um, you know, it's hard to keep interest in yourself, you know? Nevertheless, sometimes you're given a gift from the outside, just in terms of mechanical – a mechanical thing. And then you say, "Oh! That's not that bad," you know?

CM-U: Right! Exactly. It's not.

Lucas Samaras: So it allows you then, to express certain things you hadn't before, you know.

CM-U: But it's also related to your respect for the materiality and the interest in doing the manipulation.

Lucas Samaras: Well, but see again – As I said before, briefly – which is a serious topic with Pollock – it has to be beautiful, you know. Not cute, but beautiful, beyond just the fact of being strange or – it just has to have that. If it doesn't have that, it's of no interest to me.

CM-U: Another dimension.

**[01:33:24]**

CM-U: Okay, let's just look at the mirror works. I have a few questions I want to ask you about that. I think these are the knobs you were talking about.

Lucas Samaras: Yeah. The first one had larger knobs, and people would steal them, you know, either in the galleries or in museums. And what else? Upon occasion, some extremely heavy person would step and then crack the mirror because of the heavy – I mean...

CM-U: What is your feeling about replacing them [sounds like]?

Lucas Samaras: Oh, no problem with – you know, if they want to replace it, it's not a problem.

CM-U: Um-hum.

Lucas Samaras: Suppose everything was destroyed, they could still rebuild it because it's mirror, you know. I don't have any stake on this specific type of mirror. You know, as long as it's clear, any type of – you know, of course I wouldn't want a pink mirror, or, you know.

CM-U: And you like the thickness, though? I mean, because we did have to replace some parts of this for the exhibition...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...and we were very careful to get the same kind of thickness and cut and...

Lucas Samaras: Well, the reason we used the thickness is so that somebody can step on it and not crack it.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: It wasn't – the decision wasn't made that it should be a quarter inch or half an inch or whatever. You just make it sort of thick enough to sustain a certain amount of weight. Because the weight of the mirror is not that important, even from here, you know. You see a little on the side, but that's not the major thing. The major thing is the effect – the mirror effect. So anything could be replaced. The whole thing could be rebuilt, as long as it's in these proportions.

CM-U: We went to great length and bought several of these little knobs...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.

CM-U: ...should they need to be replaced at any point...

Lucas Samaras: Well, I hope to have...

CM-U: We have a stockpile.

Lucas Samaras: ...a couple bags more, because...

CM-U: Oh, we have a stockpile now for anyone who ever does one of your [sounds like]...

Lucas Samaras: Yeah.



- CM-U: Did you only use the knobs on this work, or are there other works?
- Lucas Samaras: No. I think all of them had knobs.
- CM-U: Had knobs? Well, they should know the Whitney is a source for these knobs, wshould the need ever arise.
- Lucas Samaras: Only the first mirror room had larger knobs, because they were available then, and then we went to a smaller one. There was, in the beginning, with the first one, I found out that these knobs almost function the way the pins function when I paint the head of a pin. They – especially – well, inside the room, there's a kind of progression of little jolts of light, you know, that kind of fascinates you, and sort of leads you on into – like a journey. Same as in the pins. So I could easily not have had those things, you know; but since it worked so well, you know, I kept that idea.
- CM-U: Yeah, it works very well.
- Lucas Samaras: And that's the story.
- CM-U: And that's it, huh?
- Lucas Samaras: (laughs)
- CM-U: That's it. I have one quick question. I'm not going to let you go yet. What happens if there's some kind of damage to the mirror? Like that little piece, where the silver on the back...
- Lucas Samaras: Well, this is a model that somebody else built – it's...
- CM-U: Do we need to, I mean, you – what's your thought about...
- Lucas Samaras: This is a model. It's not – It's not my work.
- CM-U: Right. But if it happened on the work – I mean, if the silver on the back of the mirror...
- Lucas Samaras: Well then it would be replaced.
- CM-U: It would be replaced, so in terms of aging, you want this to look pretty much the way it is?
- Lucas Samaras: Yeah, it...



CM-U: So the mirror itself isn't sacrosanct – this particular mirror?

Lucas Samaras: No.

CM-U: It's this "look" that you want?

Lucas Samaras: Yeah, it has to have – I mean – obviously, you cannot put a different tone mirror panel on – you know what I mean? It should be the same.

CM-U: Uh-huh.

Lucas Samaras: So if the whole thing is rebuilt, as I said, it doesn't matter, as long as...

CM-U: Okay.

Lucas Samaras: We shouldn't create problems where there are no problems.

CM-U: I totally agree. I can assure you of that. No, I totally agree. Is there anything else that you can think of that you would like to talk about?

Lucas Samaras: No.

CM-U: No? Well, thank you.

Lucas Samaras: Okay.

CM-U: This is really a super, very helpful...

Lucas Samaras: Okay.

CM-U: Thank you very much.

Lucas Samaras: Good.

CM-U: We will look after your work as best we can [sounds like]...

Lucas Samaras: I'll see you, but not, not under technical conditions, right? (laughs)

CM-U: No. Okay. Thank you.

**[END RECORDING]**