

Interview with Deborah Remington by Carlos Villa
Via Telephone, San Francisco, Ca 08/10/05

People present in interview:

CV: Carlos Villa

DR: Deborah Remington

MB: Maria Bonn

CM: Charlie Marks

CV: Lets talk about the period of time from the cold war, to the civil rights march with Martin Luther King, all the way to the seventies, when women were being accepted and the door was open for them to come in and be actual participants in the art world.

DR: When we put together the Six Gallery, I was the only woman involved in that. I mean, I was the only one who was the original six. There were five guys and me. Jay DeFeo showed there as well as Joan Brown, Joanne Lowe, Miriam Hoffman, and Sonia Gechtoff. We had a lot of women showing there. It was a bit of an anomaly. We started that gallery in 1954 and it went until 1957 and during that period women were accepted certainly. I mean, I was winning prizes at the museums and so was Sonia. So, in a limited way women were being accepted.

CV: In terms of being accepted, what do you think the qualifications were? For instance, of the women that I had gone to school with—during my MFA and BFA—few were looking to go into the actual practice of painting or willing to go in as professionals. By professional, I mean to get funky day jobs so they could spend their quality time in their studios. And they did a lot of sacrifice for that. There were not that many women in the school that were willing to make those kinds of sacrifices. What do you think was the exception that you came out and you did what you did? You went against the norm here.

DR: I think it was just a part of the education of the art school at that time, which was a different understanding of what commitment was, and what it meant to be a painter. Women, man, whatever—that really wasn't dealt with when I was at school. Nobody made distinctions like that because the women's movement hadn't come along yet. We weren't really separated out from the men; you were just painters or sculptures or whatever you were. There wasn't that gender focus, which I think in many ways, when that came along, was very detrimental because it separated everybody out and it still has. Anyway, I think our understanding of the commitment was just different, historically, then what happened with the women who came along later.

CV: I see.

DR: I think we had a different understanding of it and therefore more willingness to live a kind of fractured life and not really have this idea of "I want it all" because I think we understood that you could not have it all. You either did this or you did that. We either made a commitment to having a life as an artist or having a life as a mother and wife and all that other stuff. Do you see what I am saying?

CV: Yes. I hear you loud and clear. I think that I look to you, to Bernice Bing, and to Jay DeFeo as you all had these funny little jobs that you would do to support yourselves. And especially you, you were the prototype. You were my model of what people should be doing.

DR: For one thing, we didn't have an idea of having a day job because we wanted to paint all day. So, we mostly had night jobs as waitresses or whatever you could do at night. If you had a day job, it was part time. For instance, I worked part time at a rental agency.

CV: Which rental agency?

DR: Oh, it is long gone. I don't even remember the name of it. It was downtown and I would answer phones. I think it was three times a week that I would answer phones.

CV: When I say artists have to pay dues, what does that mean to you?

DR: It means setting up our lives in the way we did, taking these funky jobs. Trying to work through those years when you had enough energy to work at those dopey jobs and still work full time in the studio and hope that you came out the other end in better shape than you went in,

which didn't always happen because once you get into that habit like that you still kind of maintain it. Meaning, instead of part time jobs like waitressing or working as a telephone answerer, you have adjunct part time teaching jobs. I think Jay—I know certainly I did—and Sonia and most women continued the part time job concept, but now we were teaching in universities.

CV: What do you remember about the time you were here? For instance, I know that you and the great painter, Hassel Smith, had a great relationship and he was one of your mentors. What was that like? Did he have any expectations of you?

DR: I think that a number of our professors at that time, including David Park, Elmer Bischoff, Hassel Smith, and people like James Bud Dickson. I'm probably leaving out a few that I don't recall right now. I think that because they were our teachers they were also, in a sense, our guides. They didn't think of themselves as our teachers, they thought of themselves more as our guides, maybe in the traditional Greek sense of teaching. Do you understand what I mean?

CV: Yes. I was a recipient of that kind of informing and teaching.

DR: In that regard, I think they all had high hopes for those of us they felt were high achievers.

MB: Did you have many female influences at that time?

DR: No—unheard of. We had one teacher who was a female, Dorr Bothwell, who taught design. Although she was a painter and a fine artist, she never taught painting. I had no female teachers in painting or in any classes that I took—drawing or anything.

CV: One of the great stories that I have of you is coming out of the California School of Fine Arts (CSFA) and then going out to the Far East and hitchhiking, which to me, to this day, is one of the most incredible things that I could ever imagine. I mean you did it. I thought that was the most amazing thing. Then you go into Tokyo and star in a movie for your tickets back to America. That is one of the greatest survival stories I could ever think of in any conversation. Could you talk about that?

DR: I think that if the need is there and the desire is there you are going to find a way to do it—and that basically is what I did. You kind of got it backwards; I was in Japan first for a few years. I taught a class in American slang to graduate students at Waseda University and I also taught English to a group of actors and actresses. That is how I got into the movies. At the time I was studying, I was living with a Japanese family so I was speaking Japanese. That wasn't the problem, but it was reading and writing. I was studying reading and writing—the calligraphy writing—so I could read Japanese. Therefore, when parts came up in B-movies that required a foreigner I could get the parts because I could read the scripts. There were a lot of other people, —a lot of white Russians at that point in Tokyo—and they were in movies and they could speak Japanese as well as I could and their accents were very good, but they couldn't read the script. They would have to be coached, and they would have to know their lines and recite them and then go back and get coached for the next one. But I could read the scripts and memorize the lines.

CV: How long were you there?

DR: Three years, and then I left. I always wanted to go to India. I traveled all through Southeast Asia because I wanted to go to Cambodia to see Onkar Tome and Onkar Wat, and I wanted to go to Thailand and see all that stuff. So, I wandered around all through there and through Burma and finally got to India where a mutual friend had made it possible for me to live with Indian families. So I got passed all over India to these various Indian families. And it was in India that I not only hitchhiked; I hitchhiked all through the south by car, but in the North I did something called, "ticket-less travel." How can I explain this? When the trains are not coming in the station, or the trains are not in the station, the gates to the station are open because all the shops are inside—the teashops and the little food shops and so forth. So, you can just walk in. So, I would just walk in and sit down and have some tea and wait for the train that I wanted to come in. Then they would close the gates and inspect you for your tickets. But, if you are already inside you would just get on the train and that is what I did. I went all over North India that way. I would just get on the

train with no ticket. In the railroad cars, in those days, you couldn't go from one car to the next while it was moving. In order to get from car A to car B to car C and so forth, you had to wait for the train to stop, get off of car A, and walk down the platform to car B. So when you were on a car, and there was no conductor on that car, you were perfectly safe for hours. They could not get on the car. Do you see what I mean?

CV: Yeah.

DR: So that is how I went all over North India. There were great signs in all those railroad stations that read, "Ticket-less travel is against the law, you will be arrested," but I would just do it anyway.

CV: Wow.

DR: Well I had no money; I mean what were they going to do with me? So arrest me, what are you going to do with me?

MB: In what way do you feel that all these travels and the experience that provided you influence your artwork?

DR: Well it gave the work, and I think it still does, the depth of experience. That is what goes into the work. When I graduated from art school I thought to myself "Well, I want to be a really important artist," but you can't do that if you have no life experience. I knew what I had to do was go out and get life experience. So while all my friends went to Europe and saw the Sistine Chapel and all this stuff you study in art history, I thought that is easy, I can do that at any point in my life, and I did. But I thought, while I am so young and I still have all the spunk that you need to be an adventurer—I really needed adventure. That is why I decided to go to the Far East. I have always had a great love and interest in Far Eastern cultures and Indian cultures and so on and I had read a lot about it and seen a lot of stuff and that is what I wanted to explore. Plus, these were cultures that were non-Western cultures. You know, we are brought up with a big background of European culture—that's how we grow up. I mean, that is what the American culture is based upon, not all these other cultures. I really wanted to live with families and immerse myself into other ways of thinking, other philosophies, other ways of life, other ways of looking at the world. I realized that would give me dimension that I could use in my work. So to go and accrue life experience and other perspectives on the human condition was all very important to me, to inform my work, to inform my painting. And that's why I did it.

CV: What do you think is left out of the art histories that we know and that we are familiar with?

DR: Well, there are various eccentric art histories. A lot of it just has to do with people who write art histories often looking at what is popular at the time they are writing it, which has a lot to do with what gallery is promoting what artist. They will also get very involved in schools of art, meaning maybe it is Abstract Expressionism or Minimalism or this "ism" or that "ism," because it is more or less easy to write about; you can do it in a linear fashion. You can say "Minimalism starts here" and then Robert Rauschenberg and you got this guy and that guy and so on and so on. It seems to me that it is easier than if you try to factor in all of the mavericks who don't work within the confines or the definition of a school of thought, like pattern and decoration. Well, what happens if someone works outside of that or has his or her own view or vocabulary? Then those people are difficult to deal with and take time and energy. A lot of art historians just don't want to do that. They don't want to deal with it. It's too much trouble, or they have a book deal and they have only so much money to write this book on whatever, and that's it. So, a lot of stuff is left out.

CV: Your work was always very unique to me, and I am just thinking about your word "maverick." Do you consider yourself a maverick?

DR: Oh, definitely, because I do not work in any school. I work very much outside of that, and that is part of what my work is based upon. Or, the image evolved because I didn't want my work to look like anyone else's or be a part of any school. I wanted to establish a very individual position, which I did.

CV: So a lot of what you do always requires a lot of dredging and there is always a lot of

decisions to make as to what to keep and what to throw out—you are constantly doing that. I'm wondering if that is the same process that you are into now?

DR: Yes, definitely, it is constant editing. I work intuitively and then edit what comes out. So that relates to the abstract expressionist roots, how we worked intuitively and then a lot of people never edited it. They would just do these things and there they were, and some are good and some are not very good. For me, I wanted to work differently. I really wanted to work intuitively, but with a structure. Then the structure would be there, imposed, after a lot of the intuitive part was done. Then I would go back, edit it, and structure it. I think that is basically the way a novelist works.

CV: Yeah. So, do you have a studio over there in Pennsylvania?

DR: Yeah.

CV: Are you working on a lot of big things?

DR: Right now I am working on a large graphite drawing that is six feet by forty-two inches. I have done these large drawings ever since I got out of art school, since the late fifties, on and off through the years. I don't do them consistently. They are very labor intensive. In the late nineties, I started a group called the *Beinen Series* and it is based on bones. I broke a few bones and it focused me on bones. It's true. I broke an ankle and a wrist in a fall. And I thought "oh lord, bones, it's what holds us together, it's what holds us up." It's true; I mean we take them for granted. I started doing these drawings; well I've done four major huge drawings about bones. I mean they are literally based on bones. My work is non-representational but you can still get the feelings of bones in this work. And I'm doing another one now.

CV: That's great. Is there anything else you would like to add? I mean, if you were to talk with an imaginary cousin or niece that wanted to be an artist or that are young artists, what would you say to them?

DR: I think I would talk about conviction and commitment. I think you have to figure out where you stand in relation to that early on, which is difficult for people to do because they are really not developed enough as evolved human beings. I mean, some people are more evolved than others at various points in time in their lives. It is very hard to ask a young person that is twenty-two years old: "What kind of a commitment do you want to make to this? How much does this mean to your life? Is this what you want to do with your whole life? Is it an adjunct part of your life or do you want to focus on something else? Or do you want to focus on this and something else?" I think you have to get those priorities straight, right at the beginning. If you do not do that it becomes very difficult. If you do that and you stick to it you have an easier way, an easier path of getting what you want out of this commitment, whatever it is. But, you have to figure that out first, rather than just blow in the wind. You know, if the wind blows a little bit to the left then you go there and if it blows you back to the right a whole lot then you sort of drift back there. You find that all of a sudden, you wake up and you are thirty and you have drifted.

MB: So, stay on track? Pick a route and just drive full force with it?

DR: Yes, exactly. That is another way to put it. It is the same in any of the arts. Whatever it is, you really have to figure out the role that it plays in your life, or that you want it to play in your life. Whether it is the all-pervasive looming thing that you are after, that you really want to involve yourself in—it has to do with your passion. And then again, it depends on what your passion is. If it is an all-pervasive passion and an overriding passion of everything else then maybe it is a little easier and you can understand where you stand in life a little bit better. But, if it is a kind of lukewarm passion then it is a little more difficult.

CV: Right on. I think we have a really great interview. We have a lot of great information and it is always soulful whenever we have a conversation. I am just glad to have these times with you.