

INTERVIEWEE: ELAINE SCHMITT URBAIN
INTERVIEWER: MARY EMMA HARRIS
PARTICIPANT: MICHAEL URBAIN
DATE: January 21, 2001
LOCATION: Milford, Connecticut
INTERVIEW: 280
MEDIA: MiniDV Cassettes (2), Audiocassettes (2)
TRANSCRIPTION: Mary Emma Harris, May 2019

NOTE: Generally, I turn off the recording when setting up. In this case, I seem to have left it on more than once. The painting in the background, selected by Elaine, is of Larry Fox, a Black Mountain College student. It was painted long after they were at the college. Michael Urbain, Elaine's son was present to assist in organizing photographs, paintings and drawings. At the time of the interview Elaine was in assisted living. MEH

[BEGINNING OF DV CASSETTE 1 AND AUDIOCASSETTE 1]

[ORGANIZATIONAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MEH: Elaine, how did you year about Black Mountain College?

ESU From my dear sister Elizabeth Schmitt. Betty to me. She was so raving about this school that she, in fact, said that our house had too much stuff in it. She wanted to make it into a dance studio. And so she dragged out all the furniture in our living room, and that was my introduction to what Black Mountain could have been like. She just felt that I had some talents that my father didn't think I had. He said, "All she can draw is movie stars and Betty Boop." In fact, there's Betty Boop up there, that little tiny figure. So, she said she used to pound on my father's chest every night to try to convince him that I should go to Black Mountain. So, isn't that amazing?

MEH: What did your parents think about her moving all the furniture out of the living room?

ESU They listened to her. She was pretty savvy with everything she did, and she kind of directed a lot of what went on in our household. So, it's amazing to think that they weren't mad, but—

MEH: What did she say about Black Mountain that caused you to be interested?

ESU Well, that it was so interesting. You know, the different people there. Albers—this great teacher Albers. Even though I liked State Teachers where I was going in Milwaukee, I felt this had other things that were far greater—that I could aspire to things that I wouldn't have known about in Milwaukee.

MEH: You grew up in Milwaukee?

ESU Yes.

MEH: What was the name of the town—the area?

ESU Wauwatosa.

MEH: Had you gone to public schools as a kid?

ESU No, Catholic. Catholic schools. And certainly, going to Catholic schools, you were restricted on everything. You couldn't do it. It was a sin. And so, that's why when I first went to Black Mountain, there were episodes that I called "sinful" that happened and that were shocking to me as a good Catholic girl. And going to church every Sunday. My parents wanted me to quit the school because I wasn't going to church. I said, "Dear mother and father, I have never been so happy as I am here, meeting all these wonderful friends and teachers that you can't possibly take me from here just because I am not going to church." But I was going to church.

MEH: Was Betty going to church?

ESU No. [LAUGHS] She never went to church since she was, you know, at St. Jude's in Wauwatosa. But I was such a good Catholic girl that I went to church. And Cornelius [Cornelia], the wonderful black cook—or Negro as we used to call them—she used to say, “Now, Elaine, you're going to services today, aren't you?” Services. So—and I said, “Yes, you know I'm going.” And she used to watch out for me that I went, and I definitely was going to church on Sunday.

MEH: This was the Catholic church?

ESU Yes.

MEH: How did you get there? Were there other people going?

ESU No. Many times I trudged by myself in the rain and the snow—I can't believe I did this—to the church on Sunday. Some people made fun of me, you know, those intellectuals tried to get me out of going to church and convince me, what was I doing this for? And I was so strong in my beliefs of being a Catholic that no one could convince me at Black Mountain I shouldn't go to church. And so, I was very happy. And Albers, too. He said, “Now, Elaine, you must listen to your father and your mother. You must go to church.” And so, I listened to all these people, not ready to leave.

[INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: You did not go directly to Black Mountain from high school though.

ESU No.

MEH: What did you do?

ESU I went to State Teachers College—Milwaukee State Teachers College where I had a wonderful teacher—[Robert] von Neumann. He said he liked my “funny

people,” he called them. That was a great time there that I had. So, then on to Black Mountain, of course, was totally different experience. But I’m glad I had the State Teachers.

MEH: What did your family do in Milwaukee?

ESU Oooo! That I can brag about. My father and my grandfather made stained glass windows, so I feel I was always immersed in art, but I’m ashamed to say—someone told me in my house they saw a book *Women Artists*. To think my father had that book. So, he was a pretty sharp fellow. But it was fascinating. My brother Conrad was going to be a part of the business. But then, he didn’t feel that was for him, and my brother Rupert actually—oh, no, Conrad made a stained-glass window with Albers. Did you know that?

MEH: Yes, I think—we’ll look at the photo later on. I saw the photo over that. I think it’s the photo of that one.

ESU No, I have a beautiful shot of one of his pieces that he made with Albers. So that was a thrill to find out because they all went there. But I wasn’t even aware because I wasn’t there to know what they had done. So, what was that other—?

MEH: So, you went to Milwaukee to school to study art?

ESU No, no. I was—you mean?

MEH: When you went to Milwaukee State Teachers College, were you studying art there?

ESU Oh, yes. Oh, it was definitely art. Yes. I always loved it.

MEH: And that’s where you met Ruth [Asawa]. Right?

ESU Oh, yes. That's where I met Ruth, and we just became pals right away. And I didn't realize, of course, her background—that she was from the internment camps, but she always said she felt welcomed at our house, whereas she was unwelcomed in many places because of her Japanese. But we all loved her, and Rupert—they're still good friends.

MEH: And you didn't realize that she had been in the internment camp at that point?

ESU Well, you know, I was such a dumb kid. I really was. Now I'm so political, but at that time I didn't know what our government had done—this horrible thing—to put them in the camps. No, I wasn't. I just loved Ruth for what she was and didn't realize all she had been through and her family. And all this I have learned.

MEH: Did you—do you remember when you went to Black Mountain how you traveled there the first time? How you physically got there?

ESU The train. And that was such a big experience, going on that train. There were a lot of soldiers, and it was a great experience. [BEEPING SOUND.
COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED.]

MEH: So, you took the train to Black Mountain. Did you do this by yourself?

ESU Yes, all by myself, and I really thought this was great fun, you know. I met all these soldiers, and it was just very interesting. And I've written a lot of that in my letters.

MEH: Right. We'll look at the letters soon. That was the summer of 1945.

ESU Right. That's when I first went.

MEH: Did you have any particular expectations when you went?

ESU No, I didn't think that far. I didn't think that far. I just—from what I'd heard from my sister Betty that it was a very unusual place, and I was thrilled that I was going. But when I got there—well, I've told this before—I was humiliated because she said to me, "What do you have on your legs?" And I felt, "Oooo, sister, why are you asking me this terrible question? Why this is leg makeup." What we wore—the middle-class ladies wore this on their legs because we had no stockings during the war. But she was horrified. At Black Mountain you went without any stockings.

MEH: Or leg makeup.

ESU Or what?

MEH: Or leg makeup.

ESU No. Oh, no. Horrified. So, I quickly got rid of that stuff.

[INTERRUPTION IN TAPING. TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED.]

MEH: That was the summer of 1944 which was a special summer session.

ESU No.

MEH: I mean summer of '45.

ESU '45.

MEH: And who was teaching that summer?

ESU Well—but first I want to mention my sister.

MEH: Okay.

ESU She was very well-known and has done a lot of terrific stuff, so I felt I was coming as a lonely—or an unknown who didn't know much. And she was the

star, having danced and done so many things. So, anyway, okay now, you said who—?

MEH: Okay. Let's go back. Did you feel uncomfortable among the students there, coming from this Catholic school?

ESU Well, I felt as if they were all brains, and I didn't know much. I felt my sister knew everything. And she was very critical of me, too. Sisters. Sisters. And so, I—it was difficult at first. She didn't think what I was doing was right. The way I decorated my studio. And, you know, "What are you doing that for?" You know. Ah! And now, of course, we're very close. We're very close. But she actually was very helpful to me in many ways.

MEH: You had your own study.

ESU Yeah.

MEH: How did you decorate it that she disapproved?

ESU I can't remember what did, but, you know, I was so involved in wonderful *matière*, and so I had leaves all over my room, and I just loved all that stuff, going into the woods and finding—because there was no money at the college to buy big supplies, so we just took nature, which was so wonderful. I just know that leaves covered the walls, the windows. I don't think she said too much about that. I really don't remember. What she was critical of, but going back, if I really had a camera, I could find many things, but I don't remember what they were.

MEH: That was the summer Feininger was teaching.

ESU Oh, Feininger. Ooooo! Feininger. He was so great. He was so marvelous, and that's what I would write in my letters. "I am now studying with the great Albers," I always said. "Great, great." Because I'd never met anybody like this. And he was a humble man [MEH: Refers here to Feininger] as I refer to him. Very shy. So I could relate to that because I felt—I was shy compared to the other students, before I began to meet a lot of interesting people. Then I gained more confidence. But he was so incredible. He used to bring his own work, sketches and watercolors. And then I have a wonderful letter he wrote to me. Do you know that letter?

MEH: Maybe this would be a good time—this is the letter Feininger wrote about your work.

ESU Well, I had written to him after he left, and he says, "Of course, I remember you." Do you want me to read it?

MEH: [POSITIVE]

ESU "We thank you very much for your sweet note with this good news of your approaching marriage. Thank you too for your [ELAINE CAN'T READ WORD] May you both be very happy is our sincere wish." Isn't that a beautiful thing to say? "We were sorry to miss seeing you East when you called. We always leave town in the spring, and go for the country for several months, and this time we only returned on November the 15th. I want to tell you how pleased I was to hear from you that I had been helpful to you in your work. I fear it was a little—very little that could happen in so short a time at Black Mountain College, but just you keep remembering that I found your drawings after life very good

and expressive and keep on drawing that way and leave out empty formalism or mannerisms. Then you cannot go amiss. You have the gift of intensive observation. Sincerely and affectionately, Julia and Lyonel Feininger.” Even John, Michael’s father, said that that phrase helped him to leave out “empty formalism” when he thinks he’s going to do something jazzy or something that wasn’t really true and sincere. So that’s—

MEH: That’s one letter. Did Feininger actually teach a class?

ESU No. He was too shy. And that’s what I loved about him. He just talked so quietly talked about his own work, what he was doing. It wasn’t a formal class.

MEH: Would he do this in his study, in his apartment? Would you go there?

ESU No, it was in my study. Private. Oh! I freaked out when he was in my studio.

MEH: Okay, let’s put the papers down when you’re just talking because they just rattle. Now, is there another letter—are there other letters from that summer right after you arrived?

ESU You know, I have so many letters, but I don’t have them.

MEH: Let me just sort of glance here. We can organize these chronologically later.

ESU Oh, here. I’m in Feininger’s class now.

[INTERRUPTION IN TAPING. COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED.]

ESU [READING FROM LETTER] “I go now to Mr. Feininger’s classes. I think I’ve been missing his wonderful classes all summer. I bring my sketches to him. He holds small informal classes for he is very shy and humble. He always brings some of his work which are usually sketches—watercolors and pen and ink paintings ranging in his entire career of about forty years. He began as a

cartoonist, and he said caricatures—and he did caricatures and said, ‘If one can do that, it’s very’—[DIFFICULTY READING] that he saw my drawings and thought you looked like caricatures of people. He calls these unconventional and expressive. When I bring some of my drawings home, you may say they were fixated by Lyonel Feininger. He actually took his little blower and blew with his famous wind the stuff on my drawings so they wouldn’t smear. Then he actually”—this is so crazy—“then he actually—” [DIFFICULTY IN FINDING NEXT PAGE]

MEH: Elaine, you took Feininger’s informal class. What about Motherwell? Was Motherwell there that summer?

ESU I just thought he was so handsome. But it wasn’t anything spiritual the way I got from Feininger. You know, he was just a flash of handsome. In fact, later I almost got to draw his portrait. And he said, “I liked the way you talked about me at Black Mountain.” So handsome, and the girls thought he was so cute. But it never happened.

MEH: Did you—you also took Albers’ classes.

ESU Oh, yes.

MEH: Why don’t we start with the design class? What do you remember about his design class?

ESU Well, the *matières*. I mean, that was so—that was just up my alley, to make a *matière* and just go wild. Pick up everything I saw around the kitchen. And my friendship with Cornelius [Cornelia] and George. I made one with the pig—the insides of the pig.

MEH: Describe it.

ESU It was so crazy that I thought of this, using the pig—the insides of the pig—and then mixing that with silk and ashes. I mean, it was just the most wild thing. And he pig's guts, you know. It was just crazy that I did this. Of course, I have it written in my letter exactly what I put on this *matière*. But it was so much fun. It was a thrill. So, when I brought this into class, Albers said, "This is fantastic, Schmitt, but throw it out." He just went wild over my *matières*. He thought they were so stupendous.

MEH: What were *matières* about? What were you trying to do with the *matières*?

ESU Well, it was like changing things. He wanted it to not be what it looked like. And it was just a thrilling thing to do, to surprise people. Like he would have his scepter and he would go down to touch, and he'd go, "Ah! It is not what I thought it was!" you know. That was so much fun. "You fooled me, Schmitt. You fooled me!" And unfortunately, I see in your wonderful book pictures of *matières*, but nobody did one of mine, because they had to be thrown out. So, all my wonders that I created—not a trace of it. So, I felt kind of jipped.

MEH: How did he conduct his class?

ESU It was all exhibitions. You know, he would say—a work would be on the floor—and then he would say, "Well, now this is an example of this." And then he'd say, "Exhibition," and then we'd all look at that person's work. He would highlight it. So, I know I write in my letters that people thought it was too many exhibitions. I said, "No, I thought it's good to have all these exhibitions" because then you can see your work in comparison to other work. So, and his wonderful

scepter that he pointed to everything with. But, of course, Albers didn't think my stuff was all that great, but he was critical of me and of Joan Stack because we didn't know the Pythagorean Theory. And I just didn't get it. Finally, he drilled me in front of—it happened to be a day when there were lots of people, older people, as I put it, and they were there to observe. There I was humiliated because I didn't know this Pythagorean Theory. Finally, he drilled me and drilled me and I finally could answer the questions. Then I said, "I feel so relieved to go back to color, after having to be grilled about this theory." So, he was in a way cruel, but he made you learn it, you know. He was—but where he really—where I shined was at the—well, it wasn't really new drawings but women in their "briefies," as I called it, "briefies." And it was very funny, because he would get so excited about the flesh, you know, and touch, say, the stomach. "Oh, you had such a good breakfast, didn't you?" And then he'd take a pinch out of a nice fat part of the woman's body. In fact, I have a lot of those drawings still preserved, you know. It's amazing. But he really liked the pinching, you know, and I thought that was great, great fun. Today's world is different. You couldn't be pinching the girl's bottoms the way he did then. But then everything was innocent and nice, and you didn't worry about that.

MEH: Did you use models in the drawing class?

ESU We were all students who were the models.

MEH: Did you model in the nude?

ESU No. But you just had, your underpants on and a bra, and that was it. But then, of course, we all had beautiful bodies, and so he had a lot to rejoice in. And he loved these classes.

[END OF AUDIOCASSETTE 1, SIDE 1.]

So it was—no, we never had models which would have been stiff.

MEH: You took the color class. You took the *matière* class which wasn't just *matières*. You did other things in the design class.

ESU Yes. Right. Well, we did wonderful watercolors.

MEH: Was that in the design or in the painting class?

ESU You know, I'm not sure. I'm not sure.

MEH: It doesn't really matter.

ESU I think of all these wonderful Albers courses but—

[INTERRUPTION IN TAPING. BEGINNING OF AUDIOTAPE 1, SIDE 2.]

MEH: You also took his drawing class. You took his drawing class as well as his color and design classes. What was Albers like as a teacher?

ESU Well, I just loved him, of course, but I know some people like the great, famous Rauschenberg—he didn't like a lot of it, you know, so he and Albers had their differences, but he was interested in other things. I don't really know. But for me he was perfect. Perfect, perfect. Because I had drawn before but Albers presented different ideas which I just thought was great, you know. And he praised me a lot, and, of course, nothing helps you grow more than to be praised. And he praised me a lot. In fact, I think I got an "A." So, that was very nice, but it was just so wonderful the way he presented. See, I didn't do well in

all these structured things where my ex-husband John was so good at. My stuff really wasn't on a theoretical plane, you know. Mine was just feeling, and that's what I knew I was doing with him. So—but in watercolor—in my letters I write about that—that I was—he gave us a still life of peppers and grapefruit, and I loved it, you know, because I added different colors than those that were there. He said, "Elaine is our colorist, our colorist. She puts red where green was. She's a born abstract—" Of course, I'd never done anything really abstract, but it was—I mean, naturally—I shouldn't say "naturally," but I don't remember what he said about others. I remember what he said about my stuff, you know. But he said, "You get the reward of the grapefruit." And I got the grapefruit. Now, I thought that was so great because I had the courage to add the different colors that were not on the actual still life. I mean, this is so simple it's like a child, but, of course, that's what he wanted to do. To not make it so complicated. It was just simple.

MEH: What was I going to ask? Oh, Ray Johnson was at Black Mountain when you were there.

ESU Oh, yes. Well, he was a big part of my life there. I mean, he was always running into my studio with what he had just learned, what he had done. I mean, he was so much fun. And then I had on that drawing I did that's missing—but I think it's travelling actually in the South—but he was always doing—when I'd be writing my letters home, he'd say, "Boy, Mr. and Mrs. Schmitt, you're sure lucky to get these great letters from you daughter." Then he would write on the letter, you know. But he was just so much fun, and who

would have thought that he would turn out to be the prominent figure that he is today. But he always wanted me to go out with, and I really wasn't interested in that part with him. But he was so sweet, and he did these cartoons. Well, that's what I put on the drawing that I did of Ray. And his parents visited, and that was fun for me. What they had to say about Ray and going to a concert. And the father said, "You know, Ray, I'm not interested in things like that," you know. It was so touching—his parents. So I spent a lot of time with his parents. But Ray was just—we were just such good friends. And he came to Milwaukee, my home in Wauwatosa. He did lithographs in my sunroom. I mean, we just did a lot of things together. Art. And in Saugatuck, Michigan.

MEH: Let's go back. You knew Ray before you came to Black Mountain.

ESU Yeah. Right.

MEH: Where did you know him?

ESU Well, it was in Saugatuck, Michigan. And we did lithographs, you know. And I have some of this stuff. Who knows where this stuff is? But I had one of these tiptoeing before a candle. Gray. I don't even know where that is. If Michael knows, but it must be in my—

MEH: So, you met him. Saugatuck was like a summer school. Was it the summer school of the Art Institute of Chicago?

ESU No?

MEH: But it was a summer school.

ESU Yeah. And there's a picture I have of Ray and me at the summer school, and we're on a tandem bike. Things had gotten pulled together somehow when they

had this memorial service for Ray, and someone gave me a picture of me on the tandem with Ray. I'd never seen that before. It was very small, but I thought, "Oh, isn't this cute fun?" So, I have so much stuff on Ray. So many photographs. And then he visited me when I was married with John. And I made popovers, and he wrote me a letter, "Those popovers. I will never forget your popovers." It was so funny. He was full of jokes.

MEH: Did you feel like you really knew Ray, or did you feel he was more distant?

ESU Oh, my god, we were very close. We were very close. He was in my studio. I would write, "Ray just blew in." Well, the big thing with Ray was when they had this sinful party—sinful party with Doctor Worth [Karl With] and I have a drawing I did with Dr. Worth [With] and he gave this party to celebrate his son Mingus birthday—one year old. And I said there were eighteen people that went, and I was not one of them. And Ray did not know if he was going to go. And then he decided he was going to go. And then it was a party of sinfulness. Everybody got drunk. I'm sure you've heard about that party. It's funny the way I write about it.

[INTERUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: This is Elaine Urbain reading from a letter she did at Black Mountain College.

[TECHNICAL COMMENT NOT TRANSCRIBED]

ESU What?

MEH: This is a letter that you wrote home in the summer of 1945. Would you like to read it?

ESU Yes. “Last night BMC was really sinful. Dr. Worth [With], the man who gives the art lectures threw a party to celebrate the birthday of his one-year son Minus [Mingus], wife and son. There were eighteen students, and I was not one of them. Alice Stieglitz always has parties almost every night in her room, and she asks With. So, now that select group went. People like John Reiss, Nancy S. or Nankie, to the social set there. Hazel Larsen and Ray at the last minute all went. Ray left early and said he was so disgusted and said this was the biggest lesson he ever learned. He had a few, and he was so ashamed. So, he made me stay up for hours last night while he talked and talked. He gave a dramatic speech and said if I wouldn’t [TURNS PAGE] First he told me all the horrible things people were doing and was I shocked. John, Nancy, Hazel all were dead drunk. They had to carry Hazel home. And Widget [Marilyn Bauer], the gal Betty liked didn’t—the girl who made the great weaving. Well, her weaving was really great last night, only not such pretty patterns. She— [STUMBLES OVER READING] Is that intelligent? Today everyone has hangovers, and some never got up. Later Ray and I walked by the Long House by the end of the road. Remember? And what a sight. People lying all over. And John. Remember my telling you of the sweet, shy girl in our attic. She’s pretty but she’s wide-eyed and thin and only had one boyfriend in the twenty-three years. And that girl talked and talked incessantly that night and revealed her whole life practically. She spoke so loud and was such a dynamic personality. Every other word was ‘Goddammit.’ And, of course, I [UNINTEL WORD]”—I don’t know if this should

be in—"the most"—well, I don't know if this should be in—" [INTERRUPTION IN TAPING] No, because I can't read it. If this was all typed, it would be easier.

MEH: Easier for you to read. Okay, let's stop it. Let's put the letter aside, and let's just talk. Okay? Give me both pages.

MU: Maybe it's too dark for her reading.

MEH; I think it's just—it's hard for her to read. Let me have both pages, Elaine. I don't think this is a good idea. This is not the way to read.

ESU Oh, here—that's all good.

MEH: Go ahead and read that.

ESU Right. I just beginning to see where to begin. This is really hard to read. Let me see, this part— [CANNOT READ]

MEH: Elaine, what did you do on the work program at Black Mountain?

ESU [LAUGHS] Well, I guess I'm laughing because it was so marvelous to think I'm shoveling coal. And, of course, John thought that was crazy why I would think that was fun because he had just been in the army, you know, four years. He didn't think it was fun at all to go barefoot. He just wanted to do his work and not have to shovel coal. I had never done anything like that, but it was just, you know, fun. And you're with these nice, handsome fellows doing this stuff. I mean, what could be more fun? So, I did that—shoveling coal. And then on the farm. I mean, I was driving a tractor. I mean, that was so great to be on this tractor. And I was weaving all over the farm. I wasn't really trained. I'd never driven a tractor before. I guess I was just there to do what I was supposed to do, but I didn't realize the significance of it because we were poor. We had to

work so we could make it at Black Mountain College. And then working in the silos for which I did those drawings. I don't know. It was just the work program. And then I was working, dealing out the clothes.

MEH: What do you mean by "dealing out the clothes"?

ESU Well, people would bring their shirts, and I was saying, "Why, the men are so fussy!" They wanted their shirts perfect and I mean, it was just a lot of fun. I would say, "You've got to pay for this." And people didn't want to pay a lot of times. They wanted to wait.

MEH: Do you mean like the ironing of the shirts? You were ironing for guys to make money?

ESU No. That was part of the program that we had people bring their clothes, and we had somebody clean them. But they gave me a hard time. They wanted their shirts perfectly, and it's just funny after people working in the coal—shoveling coal—and then they wanted their shirts perfectly. Anyway, it's just funny. I write about it. It's funny. I write about it. It's funnier when I actually read what I wrote.

MEH: That's okay. We'll just we'll do that another way, another time. You were there for the summer of '45, and then you stayed the next school year.

ESU Yeah.

MEH: And your parents were willing to go along with that.

ESU Yes, they said, "You may stay, my dear daughter." Yes. And I continued to go to church.

MEH: What was the summer session like compared to the winter session?

ESU Well, it was—I think in the summer we had these fantastic teachers, including Roland Hayes. He's really somebody I love so much because I got to know him, and it was the summer I know because I have a picture I took of him and his wife. Where that is I don't know. What a human being he was. A slave. His parents were slaves. Sharecroppers. And Roland Hayes was a great musician and a singer. And he sang at a concert at Black Mountain College. And when he sang, you could hear a pin drop. It was so moving—this man who was so dignified. He was sixty when he was at the college. And just the way he walked with so much dignity. I have some of the writing that I did about that, and I just never met a man of such character. You know, I didn't know what it was like to meet someone like this. And there he was—this black man. And then he wrote this book which a friend of man gave me—this book. And it just said how he was reared in this cabin built by his father. And he learned to sing through his father's love of music. And the birds. I mean, here this man a slave, and he taught Roland Hayes about music through his life on this—he was really a sharecropper. Because his senses were just tuned to the sounds of this farm and what he was learning from his father, I mean, just so beautiful. And so, when he's saying at Black Mountain—

[END OF DV CASSETE 1. BEGINNING OF DV CASSETTE 2.]

[END OF RECORDING ON AUDIOCASSETTE 1.

BEGINNING OF RECORDING ON AUDIO CASSETTE 2, SIDE 1.]

MEH: Elaine, when the tape gave out, you were talking about Roland Hayes. He gave a concert, and that's the one you were talking about when you could really hear

a pin drop. How comfortable was it to have African-Americans in the college at that time?

ESU I never remember hearing anything derogatory. I mean, people accepted this. At the time there was such racism going on all over the land. Well, he was so dignified a man that you couldn't help but just think you were in the presence of someone great. I mean, just he visited the king and queen of England. I mean, he just knew so much. He travelled. He—and all from these humble beginnings. I mean, just incredible. I used to go up to him all of the time. See, I sensed this was my kind of a man, you know. And I spent many, many hours with him, and he welcomed me to talk to him. I wish now I had tapes of these conversations.

MEH: Did—there were African-American—you wouldn't have said black. You would have said Negro then—

ESU Right.

MEH: Who were some of the students?

ESU Well, Vesta was my good friend, and she wanted to be a concert singer. And she was a marvelous woman. In fact, I have a picture of her that I took somewhere in all these photos. But then—I don't know what happened to her, but she disappeared. Maybe you know more what happened to her. But it was sad—tried to ask what happened to Vesta. I don't really know, but I know we were up in the attic together, and I write home, "Oh, I'm so glad I'm with Vesta up in our attic," you know.

MEH: The attic was the dormitory.

ESU Yeah. We called it the attic, and we were just very good friends. Of course, I had always welcomed friends like, well, naturally Ruth Asawa. Just naturally accepted them as being my pals, you know. So, it was just a wonderful community, to be a part of this.

MEH: Did you every leave the college to go into the surrounding area—into Asheville or wherever?

ESU There were a few times. I know a lot of people did travel to Thomas Wolfe country, but I never really was into any of that.

MEH: Did you ever go in to shop or go to the doctor or anything like that?

ESU Yes, I remember writing, “Give me my number of my tooth.” My tooth fell out. But I have not a memory of that visit to the dentist.

MEH: You met John, your husband, at Black Mountain.

ESU Ooooooh! That was my big romance of my life. Yes. And in my letters I write, “I just met the most wonderful twenty-five-year-old man, and he is so much an artist.” And I’m raving about him. But it was more that he liked my work and liked me to criticize him—his art work. I was thrilled. I was thrilled. So, that’s the man I married, and it was very exciting. He was wonderful, wonderful. And I write that, you know, one night we had this big party. We went to the party, and I borrowed a dress, a Chinese dress, and oh! And I think [Jean] Varda was at this party. And Varda had been pursuing me for a while there, too. Anyway, what a place! What a place with these romantic—but it was John that I was very interested in. Yep. From there, he asked me to marry him. No, when we

had left the college. Then we went off to France to live. Oh, what could have been more divine!

MEH: And so, you left the college when Albers took a sabbatical in the fall of '46.

ESU Yes.

MEH: Was that why you left?

ESU No. Well, I realized that I was going to try to get work in New York. I tried, and Albers said, "Now you be good girls there." I went with Joan Stack. "And you don't get mixed up with any bad people now." It was just very cute that he led us to the train station. Albers, like a father. And gave me addresses to visit, you know. But I just didn't have any kind of luck. But it was a marvelous time.

[DISCUSSION OF PHOTOGRAPHS AND TECHNICAL SETUP NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MEH: [DISCUSSION OF PHOTO] Elaine, can you remember the wheel there? It was outside of the Studies Building? I mean, outside of the dining hall.



ESU I'm sorry. I don't really know this.

[AUDIO RECORDING ONLY AS ELAINE LOOKS AT PHOTOGRAPH]

MEH: Okay. Let's go to the next one then. What about this one?

ESU: Oh, well, that's Jalo and Ray.



MEH: No, that's not Jalo. Oh, Jalo in the background. Is that Karl With, the guy who had the party? This would be a good one for you to tell your story about Jalo.

ESU: I always thought this was Jalo.

MEH: That's Jalo back there with the cigarette in his mouth. That much I'm sure of.

ESU: He smoked. Oh.

MEH: Is there anything else here as you're looking that you remember? That's Ray and Jalo and that's a summer person. I think that may be the guy who had the party, but I'm not sure. Okay. Let's put it up and see what she remembers and she can tell me about Jalo.

[TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

[VIDEO RECORDING RESUMES]

MEH: Okay, Elaine you said this is Ray on the left-hand side and then Jalowetz
[BEHIND RAY]. What do you remember about Jalo?



ESU Well, I always was impressed by the fact that he and his wife were so much in love. I mean, they treated me just with such respect and love—each of them praised the other to the sky, always. I mean, then I was very bad. I wrote to my parents, “Now why can’t you be like that?” Gee, they were so good to me, and I’m expecting them to be like Jalowetz. Well, anyway, they were wonderful, the Jalowetzes. I was in the choir, and I was thrilled to be in his choir because he treated us so beautifully. And he was just a great human being. And when he died, it was such a shock to everybody because people just loved him.

MEH: Were you there when he died?

ESU Yeah.

MEH: What do you remember about that?

ESU No, nothing really except that everybody was in such a shock. It was terrible.

[AUDIO ONLY] Judd, Eddie Woldin, he left because of him.

MU: You mean after he died.

ESU Yeah, because he was there really to study with the great Jalowetz.

MEH: Do you know who this is holding *The Little Prince*.

MU: So, you're going to tell the story why you like *The Little Prince*.



MEH: Yeah, what were you doing reading *The Little Prince* at Black Mountain.

ESU: [TO MICHAELS] Your dad gave me that.

MEH: [IDENTIFICATION GIVEN AGAIN. WHY?] [VIDEO RESUMES] This is Elaine Schmitt, later Urbain, with *The Little Prince*. Do you remember anything about the book?

ESU Well, it was just kind of a romantic symbol of our getting to know each other.

MEH: You and John.

ESU Yeah. So, *The Little Prince* was a big attraction. But more details on it I don't remember unfortunately.

MEH: You look like such a kid.

ESU Yeah, I know. I was certainly a kid wallowing in all this glorious stuff that was going on at Black Mountain. [VIDEO PAUSED]

MU: You do look young there.

ESU Unfortunately, we can't stay like that.

MEH: Does this trigger any memories?



ESU: Well, the dining hall where we conducted so much of our business.

[TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MEH: [VIDEO RESUMES] Okay. What memories does this bring back?

ESU See, unfortunately my eyes—I really don't know who that—

MEH: What's happening here?

ESU Well, all of the discussions, they weren't must minor talk. They were really carrying on of the classes. People loved to talk about what they did that day. It was pretty exciting just to sit there and listen to what everyone was talking about. And the teachers would join us. You know, the teachers were saying stimulating things. It was just so remarkable. At other schools you just don't see your teachers.

MEH: This is on the porch of the dining hall.

ESU In the summer, no doubt. And, of course, the food. People would criticize.

MEH: You said, "And, of course, the food."

ESU Well, I mean, I was yearning for—Once I said, “Oh, I’m yearning for a carrot.”
Yearning for a carrot!

MEH: A farm and you didn’t have carrots.

ESU I know. I don’t know how I could have said that when there was a farm. But I think I wanted more vegetables, as always. Here I want more vegetables.

MEH: What were meals like?

ESU I mean, Albers—I mean, Motherwell went crazy. He didn’t like it at all. He wanted this sophisticated New York food. No, I thought it was good. It was a lot of Southern stuff. But I loved Cornelius [Cornelia] and George. I mean, they were just so much fun always, so whatever they did was okay by me. [VIDEO ENDS]

MU: Do you know how many other people have photographs?

MEH: Lots.

MU: You mean, each one’s a little different.

ESU But how can you get into all eras.

MEH: Well, that’s just what I do.

MU: What do you mean by—

MEH: All periods.

MU: Yeah.

MEH: Well, you know, I’m just dealing with the whole history of the college from beginning to end. But it’s difficult, you know, because it covers a lot of people and a lot of territory. Now, does this trigger any memories? [TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MU: What were the years of Black Mountain being open?

MEH: It opened in '33 and closed in '57. Twenty-four years. Twenty-three-and-a-half.

MU: So, Mom was there sort of in the middle. I mean, was that like a peak period.

ESU It was peak with Albers.

MU: The mid-forties.

MEH: It was the period when the GI's were there, the mid-forties. Every period was different. I don't really judge which period—

ESU: Well, I do it because Albers was such a great figure. [TECHNICAL
COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED.]

MEH: [VIDEO RESUMES] What thoughts does this picture bring up? Is that Ati
[Gropius] sitting down in the corner there?



ESU There?

MEH: And you sitting opposite her.

ESU No, that's Mary Phelan.

MEH: That's Mary Phelan. Okay.

ESU Yeah, we were pals. But this one—see, I can't really see the faces. If I had my magnifying glass, maybe I could see the faces.

MEH You see in the background there, is that a lodge that you slept in?

ESU I don't know. Where's that magnifying glass?

MU: I don't know. You have three of them. [TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED.]

MEH: That's Mary Phelan in the lower left-hand [RIGHT-HAND?]corner.

ESU Yeah.

MEH: PHOTOGRAPH Okay. Let's go to the next one. This one definitely will trigger memories. [TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED.]

ESU Well, this is Ruth Asawa, who was my friend before Black Mountain. And we were pals at my college.



MEH: What was Ruth like at Black Mountain?

ESU Well, we were always called the threesome, with Joan Stack, me and Ruth. People wondered what were we always talking about. I know Ruth said we

were just talking nonsense. People thought, “Oh, what great thoughts are those three girls having?” It was just funny stuff. We weren’t talking about anything important. But we had so many memories going back, you know, to my house. She knew my brother, so she had big connections with the Schmitt family. But then when she went to Black Mountain, of course, she was moving then in other circles with people who were quite, well, important. She was always wonderful, and she used to get up in the morning because we slept in the same attic. She used to jump up. Boop! She was off the bed right away. And I was always amazed at that—how she could jump up right away. Marvelous, marvelous friend. [TECHNICAL COMMENTS AND COMMENTS ON GLASSES NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MEH: Okay. Who is this?



ESU There is Joan Stack, my good friend. She and Ruth and I, we were pals

[END OF RECORDING ON AUDIOCASSETTE 2, SIDE 1.

AUDIO RECORDING ENDS]

forever, you know, when we were there. And I write a lot about her in my letters. About her. I always felt she was a terrific artist, and Albers thought she was, but she never continued. I never figured that one out.

MEH: Elaine and John. Okay.



ESU This is me and my husband John in New York working on a mural that we did for Nieman Marcus, which was then transported to Texas. It was an Indian theme, plaster. That was a great time we had. And then Nieman Marcus bought also a small boy of mine in little chips. So this was a great period of my life before we had children, and we were working on this mural. We did a lot of murals together too.

MEH: In Manhattan?

ESU Yes. I have a whole portfolio with the work. I used to go out to the architect's offices and try to drum up business.



ESU This is wonderful stained glass that my brother Conrad made with Albers and that's why people were surprised to find that out. That when he was at Black Mountain, he studied stained glass with Albers. And this was wonderful Christ that he did.

MEH: Does he still have this?

ESU Yes. I think he did. So, he gave me this photo. I was glad to have it.

MEH: PHOTOGRAPH There are two of them. [TO MICHAEL] Ask you uncle. He did this one also at Black Mountain?



ESU Yeah.

MEH: Conrad did.

ESU Yeah. I'm thrilled that he got pictures of it. He was very proud of this. "I worked with Albers."

MEH: This is also stained glass.

ESU Yeah.

END OF PHOTOS

[TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED. HENCEFORTH ONLY VIDEO
RECORDED.]

MEH: Elaine, what—do you have any questions Michael. [MICHAEL COMMENTS IN BACKGROUND UNINTELLIGIBLE] [TO ELAINE] Do you have any other particular memories of the college? Anecdotes. Things that happened. Anything like that.

ESU Well, I have Dr. Cole. Do you remember Dr. Cole?

MEH: Dr. Cole. What did he teach?

ESU Well, he was—it as a time—Fritz Goro. Have you heard of him?

MEH: Yes. Cole came from Harvard, right? To do the books. He was like an auditor. Is that the person you are thinking of? A distinguished man.

ESU I have a whole thing written about him and the day that we were and the day that we were working with Anni Albers and making designs of spools. We were up—but it was so fascinating. See, I was close friends with Fritz Goro, and he was very taken with me. That was a wonderful, wonderful time with Fritz Goro. And he was then working on the atomic bomb [as a photographer]. But there was something going on—what was the place where people used to lie out. But we were working with Anni's ideas for jewelry, and it was thrilling really, you

know. And *Harper's Bazaar* was very interested in our production. And Albers said, "Now remember, this is not because of *Harper's Bazaar*. We are learning." He was so cute. Oh!

MEH: Were you really aware of Albers' painting? Did he let people go to his studio and see what he was doing at the time?

ESU Do you know, that is not something that I did. I did not understand what he was doing. No, I never—but I know I cleaned his studio as part of my working crew. And he said I was the best cleaner. See, I had such different relations. Instead of knowing what his painting was like, I cleaned his house and he said what a good *hausfrau* I was. And that's what I remember. Not about what he was doing, but he just loved the way I cleaned. I really got around all that muck around the faucets. I mean—and then I painted the doorway in the—he said, "Now, Elaine really ought to paint the doors." I mean, it was really funny. And he said, "Blue is the color of virgins." Yes, and so I painted those blue doors. I mean, those are such interesting little things about Albers. I found out not about his great art but that I could clean his faucets.

MEH: What do you remember about M.C. Richards?

ESU What?

MEH: M.C. Richards.

ESU Oh, I had—my brother Rupert. He was enthralled with her, studied with her and was more a writer than I was. So, all I know is I was the critical student who knew everything, you know, and didn't like that she didn't shave her legs and that her daughter was not well taken care of. I mean, I felt—I was too critical.

MEH: You feel now that you were too critical.

ESU Of course, but you know, there I was looking on—the know it all. Not speaking it to anyone, but I would write it in letters to my family. Yeah, I'm sure there were a lot of things people felt that was going on there. But she was an interesting woman.

MEH: What about Max Dehn?

ESU Ooooooh! Max Dehn. Oh, I loved Max Dehn so much. He was going to teach a group of us Geometry for Artists. You heard about that?

MEH: Did you take that class?

ESU Yes. But he said, "You're hopeless, all of you. Let us go to the mountains and learn about wildflowers." But he was so wonderful. Can you imagine another school—being able to get away with that.

[INTERRUPTION IN TAPING]

MEH: Can you tell me about the drawing?



ESU Well, I just loved Max Dehn. I mean, he was so wonderful. And I drew many drawings of him. And he used to laugh and laugh and laugh. I did one in a sketchbook, and I wrote in my letters, "Please can't you find that drawing of

Dehn?” Lost in a little sketchbook that he loved so much. I talked about that sketchbook. He always laughed at my drawings of him. So, you can imagine how much I loved Dehn. He just—

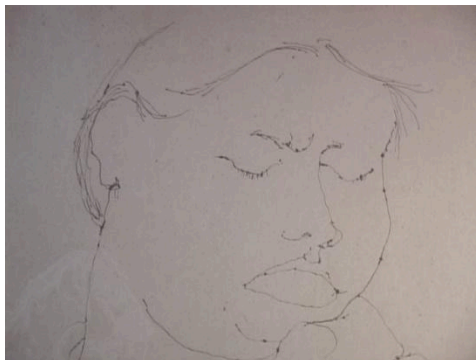
MEH: Is this typical of the drawing that you did in Albers class? How would you describe that in terms of style and technique?

ESU Well, it’s pen and ink. And it’s a drawing that you do without filling in every detail. I mean, he liked that you leave some spaces. It’s not all filled in.

[TECHNICAL COMMENTS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MEH: DRAWING OF RUTH. This drawing of Ruth. Who is this drawing of?

ESU This is Lucy Swift, who is now a doctor.



And she came to one reunion at my house, but have not been able to reach her since. But I have some nice drawings of her. And these were drawings done also without looking.

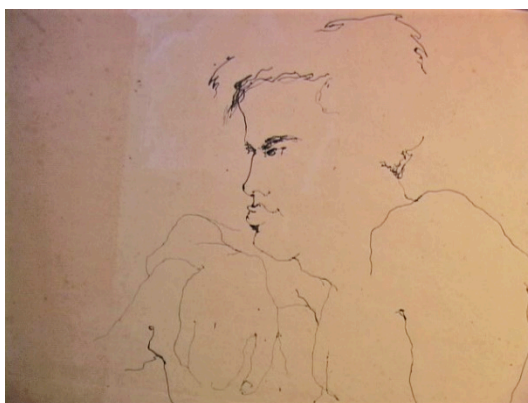
MEH: Without looking. Explain to me what you mean by “without looking.”

ESU Well, I mean, now I am teaching here at Laurel Gardens, and this is the thing I have started them being aware of. When you don’t look every minute, you’re getting more feeling into your drawing than if you are stiffly copying every line and you keep your head up, and you look just, say, at your hand.

MEH: So when you say “don’t look,” you’re saying “Don’t look at the paper. Look at what you are drawing.”

ESU Right. Yes. So, I’m drawing my hand and I’m using my other hand to draw, but I don’t look at my paper. It’s very hard for people to grasp at first, but I mean, that’s what Albers—we did with Albers and that’s with you forever—those principles.

MEH: Okay, what do we have here? You aren’t sure who this is.



ESU I think it’s Jimmie Tite. Did you do any work of Jimmie Tite?

MEH: I had an address and now I’ve lost touch. I’m not sure what’s going on. But you think this was Jimmie Tite.

ESU Yes.

MEH: Now, would this have been done in class or was it—

ESU Yes, yes. In class. And so, that was just one of his marvelous classes in drawing.

ESU Many talks on Black Mountain.

MEH: So you signed these later when you signed these later.

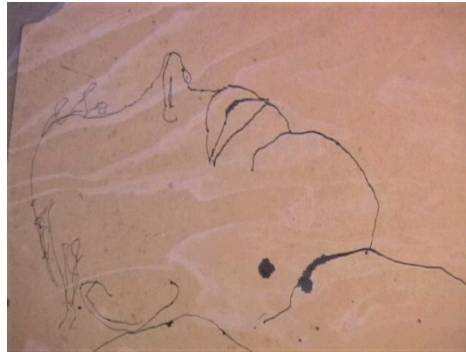
ESU Yes, when I showed the drawings.

MEH: Right.

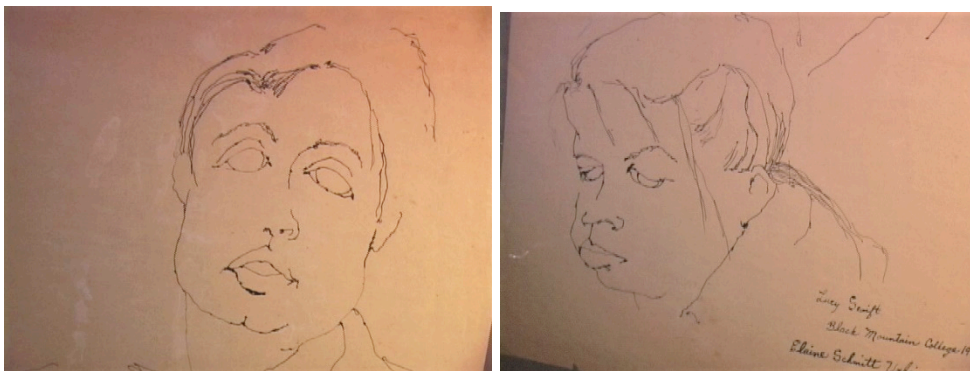
ESU Yeah. In fact, Michael, I think you made a movie of it when I was describing.

Yeah, people enjoyed that. Yeah, I did that up in Peekskill.

MEH: I think at home I have identification for who this is. I'm not sure. I can look and see, but they're both—



MEH: This is Lucy "Lukie" Swift?



ESU Lukie. Right, Lukie.

MEH: Now, these were done in class.

ESU Yeah. Oh, yeah.

MEH: Would you have been using a pen for these?

ESU Yes. And we also used "crowquill" You know, we used to use these little quills that we got in the woods.

MEH: That you made.

ESU Yeah. It was all the simplest tools we had. She's be fun to interview, wondering what she remembers from art, because now she's in medical field.

MEH: Okay. Who is this?



ESU This is Joan Stack, a very good friend of mine at Black Mountain. And I talk about her romance with a man named José. Now, who that José was I wish I knew. But she was a very good artist, and she decided the artist's life was not for her, and she worked at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. And her whole retirement has been travel. And she has had a wonderful life. A wonderful life.

MEH: Stack.

ESU Yeah. She was so sensitive and an incredibly interesting person.

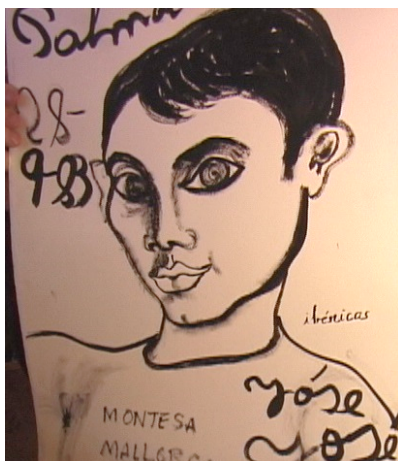
MEH: You were saying this drawing is from Majorca.



ESU Yeah. And that is the chef at the restaurant next to where I lived. And that was to me very interesting. And I got to know him and his kitchen and a very working-class little restaurant. But there are others that I like more than him.

[TECHNICAL COMMENTS, TELEPHONE CALL WITH CATHERINE URBAIN, HER DAUGHTER, AND BACKGROUND MENTION OF EROTIC DRAWINGS, AND SELECTION OF PHOTOS TO BE FILMED AND DINNER PLANS NOT TRANSCRIBED]

MEH: Why don't you tell me about this particular drawing?



ESU [UNINTEL] José. Ten years old. Well, I just saw him on the street, and I thought, “By golly, that looks just like Picasso drawing when he was changing over from more representational work—Ibéricas—“By golly, this looks like

Picasso.” And I was so taken with him. And I said, “I draw you.” And he said, “Sure, you can draw me.” And then I said to write your name on it. And so he wrote this. I said, ‘Mui grandé. Mui grande.’” And so, I wanted to do that very big. Ten years old. And then he said, “How much money am I going to get from this?” And I said, I usually just draw people and don’t charge them. He wanted money, and so, I don’t know what we arranged but he was a marvelous face. If I could find it in one of Picasso’s books, it would be nice to have to share. Okay, so—

ESU --a pig’s skin over the top of a clay pot, and you move your hand up and down and it makes [IMITATES SOUND]



MEH: Do you know what it’s called?

MU [SOUNDS LIKE: boomba]

ESU Boomba! And this was—she was young with her husband and then she got a medal from the king and queen for her wonderful singing of the old songs that are now disappearing. But her name was—let’s see where she wrote her name. By the way, the name José—he wrote that himself. And she did too.

MEH: Is that Antonia--

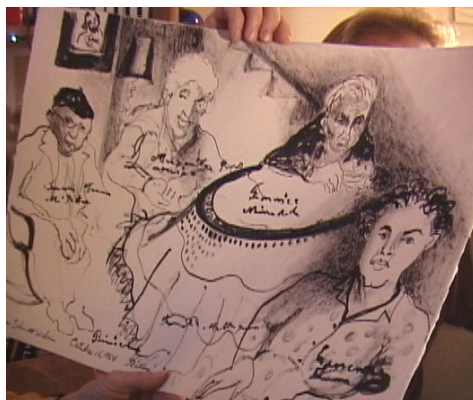
ESU Braddas?? And we went into her house. It was freezing. It was so cold. And she said, “Oh, this is fine. And she was in her eighties. And such a fascinating woman. And I was so lucky to get her, to go in her house. And all this is, of course, Spanish. I can’t get into that now, but—

ESU Dionesia? Her name is Greek. Dionesia. And she was nearing ninety.



I made her big because I felt she was so important. Bar Sport. Tapas. She wrote poetry. Oh, I had so many drawings of her. But her poetry.

ESU These people are dead how. Yeah. I saw them sitting around this table, and I said, “Can I come in?” and they said, “Sure, come in.” Just like that. Entering someone’s living room. And, of course, that’s what I loved to do.



MEH: You were telling me about these people.

ESU Yeah. It has a fire. Like a little fire that they heated up and put coals in to keep themselves warm in the October cold. And some people called it a “minerete” that—it was like a husband’s feet, you know, to keep them warm. But each one was interesting. Anyway, I loved that scene. And she wrote her name in her frail handwriting.

ESU This is—I lived right around the corner from this, and I saw this wonderful—it was like a cathedral. Ibiza. Santa Cruz. The same people I would see. So, I asked them if I could draw them.



And this massive church. Anyway, I just loved it. Antonia and her children. It looks like he’s got a little angel wings on this one.

I was drawing all day. Talking to people. Getting their stories. I’ve got sketch books up to here. To me my sketchbooks are very important. I wish all my sketchbooks could be displayed because I had my sketchbook with me all the time. It was just a glorious time. I was just able to—Michael was living in his house with his wife and guarding the house so I was able to be in Majorca.

MEH: [LAVALIER MIKES WERE NOT ATTACHED AND MOST OF MY QUESTIONS ARE INAUDIBLE.]

ESU No, no. Nobody would do that. There they were just so open and free. That's what I loved about it. Here you just walk. You never talk to people. And there I just talked to all these interesting fascinating people. And I met boyfriends there. It was just unbelievable. Yep. But then I realized I should be getting back home.

[END OF INTERVIEW. END OF TRANSCRIPT.]