

Interviewee: LORNA BLAINE HOWARD HALPER  
Interviewer: MARY EMMA HARRIS  
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**[BEGINNING OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1 ]**

**LBH:** People are blind. I'm blind as a bat about things. When he was killed, I was at Black Mountain, or I was just arriving. I was home when it happened. I came back to Black Mountain. My brother had had a bank account from which he left each of his siblings four thousand dollars. I don't know whether I told Ted Dreier, but Ted Dreier came up to me, and he said, "You know, Asawa can't come back to Black Mountain." It has to be a thousand dollars. So, I said, "Sure. My goodness, I've got a fortune!" I did. "I've got a fortune. Well, sure. Take it." So, you can imagine my parents, with my brother—it never dawned on me until just recently that what I had done was give money for a Japanese girl, and the Japanese had just killed my brother. I never put that together.

**MEH:** Did your parents, do you think?

**LBH:** I do. They were furious. They never called me. They never said, "Lorna, do you realize what you've done." And I did not.

**MEH:** Well, here again, she was a human being, not—

**LBH:** It didn't enter my head. It did not enter my head.

**MEH:** It's interesting, though. Did Ted realize that you had inherited these four thousand dollars?

**LBH:** Well, I told him. When he said, "Asawa can't come back," I said "Yeah, but I just got four thousand dollars. A fortune."

**MEH:** Money at that period of your life seemed endless.

**LBH:** Right, right. So that was just odd, but I'm so embarrassed that it's so recent that I discovered this—that I did that.

**MEH:** You were from New York? Where were you born? [LBH: Boston, Mass. 12/12/24]

**LBH:** We were reared on Long Island in the winter and in New Hampshire in the summer. It was beautiful country, gentleman's farm. Do you know that area? Mount Monadnock area?

**MEH:** Not at all.

**LBH:** Peterborough's there, where the McDowell Colony is. But it was very wild when we were up there. Now it's a tourist spot and everything else. That's what we loved. I hated Long Island. So, that was the farm.

**MEH:** Did you actually farm?

**LBH:** During the War we were farmerettes. We raised squash and potatoes and took it down to Faneuil Hall in Boston.

**MEH:** What did your father do?

**LBH:** He was a banker with the Bank of Manhattan, which merged with Chase Manhattan. He commuted from Long Island, which was from Hewlett, Long Island which now is all built up and very fancy, but then seemed liked a gravel pit. We went to a nice little private school there, but it was so unpopulated.

**MEH:** Was it a progressive school? I'm wondering how you heard about Black Mountain.

**LBH:** Oh, I heard about Black Mountain. After boarding school, I wanted to go to art schools. I was forbidden, although I had all the catalogues—Cranbrook (that was too expensive)—but everywhere. So, I was forced somehow to go to Barnard, because my family had moved from Long Island into the city and I was the only child home. My older sister was at nursing school and my younger sister was at boarding school. So, I bused up there. I did very well, except I discovered the art school across the street at Columbia, where we took art courses. And I defected. I used to go up at six in the morning and come home at midnight, and I was all the time—

**MEH:** So you really weren't keeping your parents company.

**LBH:** No. In January of that first freshman year, my mother got a—poor, dear mother—she got a telephone call from the freshman dean who said, "I hope Lorna is getting better and going to be able to come back to college." What had happened was they let me into all the courses at the art school, and so I stayed there. So, it was very nice. It was at Columbia there was a student named Jack Mills, who was in the Navy Reserve. He'd heard about Black Mountain. He was in the drawing class, and he used to talk on and on about Black Mountain. He'd never been there, but he'd heard of it. He wanted to go when he got out of the Navy. But he was having sort of a complicated time. So, we became close buddies, and he discovered he was homosexual but didn't know it at first. It was all that kind of thing. But

he was the one. Then I took that home to my parents, and they said, "It's a nudist colony."

**MEH:** So, they had heard about it.

**LBH:** They had heard bad things about it. No, I think they had found out about it, when I'd mentioned it. They didn't know of it, so they investigated it, and said, "That's no place for a daughter of ours to go." Then I kept after it. This was in 1942-43. Oh, excuse me. John Evarts is my cousin. That's who they—Then they found out more about John Evarts and that homosexuality is a very bad thing.

**MEH:** So, he wasn't a close cousin, because they didn't know that—

**LBH:** No, they knew John. But he was—

**MEH:** Oh, but that added to their suspicions.

**LBH:** Right. He was the one that you don't—Right. So everything was wrong.

**MEH:** You were quickly falling into the wrong groups all the way around.

**LBH:** Everything. But then up in New Hampshire, on an adjacent property, born and raised—although she was back and forth to the city—and who was an art teacher when I was four or five, six or seven years old, and very well known, a pretty well-known painter, Fannie Hillsmith. We grew up with her, and Albers asked her to come teach. When I heard that, I said, "Well, hey, come on. Here's a chaperone. Here's everything."

**MEH:** That's right. She's not going to a nudist colony.

**LBH:** Right. So, I was allowed down that summer. I fell in love with the place. Fannie liked it so-so. But she's not a real teacher, really. She said the

students, I remember, were so undisciplined, you didn't know whether they were going to turn up or not. She said, "How're you going to teach a class?" But anyway—Then I stayed on, except I was taken out one term from Black Mountain on account of the War, because my older brother was shipped out to the West Coast, his wife had an infant, and so who's going to help her? Me. So that's why I have letters, if you want, from Asawa and Bimbus and—

**MEH:** Oh! They wrote to you that semester you were out.

**LBH:** Because they wrote me. We wrote back and forth. (OVERTALK) I haven't really reread them. Most stuff from Black Mountain got thrown out, on two counts. Tasker got angry and got rid of Black Mountain stuff, and Albert [Halper] had a [UNINTELLI WORD "bit" ?] or something and said, "Don't keep all that stuff in New Hampshire, and don't keep those letters from Natasha," because Natasha wrote while she was still at Black Mountain before she married Renner, wrote voluminous letters.

**MEH:** They would be a valuable treasure.

**LBH:** Yes, but I haven't got them. But I'm cleaning out my file. In fact, I've sold the file. Everything's on the floor in the studio, and there's one surviving plastic bag that things were thrown in, which nobody saw, and that's what these are.

**MEH:** Oh good. The Asawa ones and—

**LBH:** And also, which has interested me and I'd forgotten they were there. My mother saved my letters from Black Mountain, and I found I was saying

exactly the same thing to friends up at this reunion. I haven't read them all, but I opened a couple of them, and it's says exactly the same thing.

**MEH:** Like—?

**LBH:** Like real painting isn't being done here, but the education in design and color is fabulous. And that kind of thing.

**MEH:** With whom did you study?

**LBH:** Albers. Bolotowsky. I knew Feininger more as a friend. I always adored his work. I have—Where is that? Oh, well, it's not up. The reason these are up, because when we had to take the exhibition, the retrospective down in a minute, and so I just plastered them all over the walls.

**MEH:** This is your own retrospective that you had to take down?

**LBH:** Mmm. (AFFIRMATIVE). That was all done so fast that—Nothing is planned in this house (LAUGHTER).

**MEH:** Had you had any of that sort of teaching before? At Columbia? Was the sort of thing Albers taught being taught?

**LBH:** No. No, it was very different. But I was formed really—I think people are formed so early. These are wonderful influences, but I was—I came across a letter from me to my mother. I had a show at Black Mountain. Students put it up. Jalowetz and—I've forgotten who else, I read that so fast—said, "Your personal work is far more interesting than your college work." Like that thing that we had up at the reunion? The big painting?

**MEH:** I don't think I saw that.

**LBH:** Behind the Black Mountain sign?

**MEH:** I saw the sign. Was this one of your paintings?

**LBH:** Well, it could be anybody. Anybody from Black Mountain could have done it. Absolutely anybody. Completely anonymous. And very nice, color and balance and everything like that.

**MEH:** The exercises tended, I think, to encourage students. You were all working with the same problem, with the same materials. The one person that seems to have broken out of that at the end is Ruth.

**LBH:** She's broken out a bit, but she hasn't gone beyond design.

**MEH:** Oh, no, no. I think of her studies. No, her work now is really an extension of Albers' teaching.

**[SOUNDS OF FOOTSTEPS, LEAVING MICROPHONE]**

**MEH:** [OFFMIKE] Oh, is this from the reunion?

**LBH:** [OFFMIKE] Here's the reunion.

**MEH:** Let me just cut this off for the moment.

**[BREAK IN RECORDING]**

**MEH:** I think you're right. One question I have in my mind about Albers's teaching is how students can make a transition from doing design studies to doing really their own art.

**LBH:** Well, there's nothing like art school to wreck it, if somebody wants to be a painter. That's been known for centuries. I mean, you shouldn't be there. Albers said in class—I don't know when it was, '41 (?)—but at the end of a group, he said, "Now I want to say one thing to all you people." He said, "You know, if you really were artists, you wouldn't be here."

**MEH:** He said that.

**LBH:** He said—

**MEH:** Albers went to school many years himself.

**LBH:** Sure. He never was a real painter, in my opinion. He said, "Ninety-nine percent of you will be in real estate," or some such. "Because if you really want to be painters—"

**MEH:** You wouldn't be here. That's interesting.

**LBH:** There was a hush! (LAUGHTER)

**MEH:** The whole class! But actually if you—

**LBH:** He was preparing us, too. I mean, to go out in the world for the big shock of "Hey, put me in the Met immediately. I'm 25 years old and feeling old."

**MEH:** Right. Do you remember Leo Krikorian?

**LBH:** I didn't know him well.

**MEH:** He's living in Paris now, and I just heard from him. He sent me a catalogue of his work. There are a large number of Black Mountain students, Albers' students, working in geometric abstraction. It would be interesting to do a show of their work, and to see exactly how distinctive it is.

**LBH:** It would be fascinating. That would be fascinating. I'd love to see that myself.

**MEH:** I'm finding more and more people working in that same sort of vein.

**LBH:** I think that would be a wonderful show. I love it. I would love to be able to just say to myself that I'm just going to stick in that vein.

**MEH:** And you might actually see that there are more differences.



**LBH:** There are more differences than the public see.

**MEH:** Than you realize.

**LBH:** Oh, sure there are differences. There have to be. We're all so different.  
We were every leaf on a tree.

**MEH:** Of course, he was as much, he was a Bolotowsky student, and  
Bolotowsky's art was in the same vein too.

**LBH:** Yes, he certainly came to that.

**MEH:** Looking back, what do you think the influence of Black Mountain has been  
on your work? How might your work have been different had you not gone  
to Black Mountain? Or your lifestyle, so far as that goes?

**LBH:** That's a tough one.

**MEH:** Well, obviously, marrying Tasker, marrying a Black Mountain student,  
gave a certain direction to your life.

**LBH:** He was in economics, which I never did understand. I read the Taft  
Hartley Act five hundred times, and I said "I still can't understand this  
thing." He was very good on all the politics and stuff, and I'm not. No, it's  
like they say—your life is a bowl of peas. Your hand is presented with a  
bowl of peas, and it's just choice after choice after choice. You have to  
pick a pea, and go your way.

**MEH:** Did Black Mountain make any difference in the choices you made?

**LBH:** Oh, I think so.

**MEH:** Obviously Black Mountain was a choice.

**LBH:** Yes, sure. Black Mountain was a choice. I think that discipline-wise, it was excellent.

**MEH:** What about in terms of values? Did it make any difference?

**LBH:** Like what?

**MEH:** In terms of lifestyle?

**LBH:** It's hard to say. Yes, I think it freed one. And then it narrowed one, too, to a certain degree. But I also chose that. I narrowed. I mean, I had very little to do—heard very few concerts and things like that, and they were right there, available.

**MEH:** It seems like that had already started when you went to Barnard but actually went across the street to study art. You already had made that choice.

**LBH:** Mm-hm (AFFIRMATIVE). You have to grow up somewhere. That was a wonderful place to grow up, although when I returned to the city, my father would walk on the other side of the street (LAUGHS) because we were free and easy clothes-wise and everything like that.

**MEH:** But your mother was converted, at least somewhat.

**LBH:** Oh, mother, yes. But now she was a Suffragette and a lot of things like that. She was a lot brighter than my father in some ways, and if she had chosen different ways, she would have been far—

**MEH:** What does your mother—Your father's name was Graham Blaine? What was your mother's first name.

**LBH:** Katharine Tweed.

**MEH:** When I mentioned her in the book, I didn't realize she was your mother, and I only had the reference to Mrs. Graham Blaine, so I couldn't mention her by, use her real name. [CONFIRMS SPELLING OF Katharine]

**LBH:** I have a letter that she drafted to Ray Trayer when she threw up her hands with the whole kind of help with financial and reorganization at Black Mountain. Yes, well, her father collected. He was a lawyer, and he collected Impressionists. And painters. He never liked family life and he'd spend his time in Paris. He picked up a Renoir, a Manet, Degas, all these things. So some of these were in the house. Though the one thing that influenced me was this little fellow up there.

**MEH:** On the [INAUDIBLE WORD. SOUNDS LIKE "farm"]

**LBH:** Yeah, which was a Sorolla, which from a distance you see people dancing, in the waves, nude. You get close to it, and there's nothing there but ploppo. Nothin'. Can you imagine? You're four years old, you're looking at this, and you look at it and you say (INAUDIBLE).

**MEH:** You come back and there they are.

**LBH:** It's a fabulous little thing. He's really not I think a first rate painter.

**MEH:** But he is a (UNINTELL).

**LBH:** Spanish. But he was greatly in demand, made a very good living. The Hispanic Museum has the biggest collection in the city of Sorolla.

**MEH:** So you studied with Albers at Black Mountain. Did you study with Anni Albers?

**LBH:** No. She scared me. (LAUGHTER)

**MEH:** A lot of people.

**LBH:** No, I shouldn't say that, because she was very, very sweet, in the real little times (?). But I spent a lot of time up in the woods. I'd take two weeks and sleep up there and eat up there.

**MEH:** Alone? With friends?

**LBH:** Alone. Asawa, I think, spent one night, because I've always—

**MEH:** It's amazing to have a school where you can do that sort of thing.

**LBH:** That's it. I think—Oh, Molly was my advisor, and I would tell her I was going to go away for two weeks. She'd say, "Okay." (INAUDIBLE).

**[BREAK IN RECORDING]**

**MEH:** Something that Albers would say to students is "If you're going to be an artist, you have to do that. We all have to make choices."

**LBH:** A composer friend, Avery Claflin, in Brooklyn Heights—in the next generation, my parents' generation—I ran into him on the street. He said, "Lorna, if you want to do something"—I was about twenty-eight, I was married to Tasker—he said, "If you want to do something, don't wait too long." He was in his sixties, and he's right. Because there are all these other things to take you away.

**MEH:** So you were married to Tasker while you were at Black Mountain?

**LBH:** Yeah, we met and—

**MEH:** He was teaching economics?

**LBH:** He was teaching economics. We met, and, of course, that was the end of—As Albers said, "Well, you're not coming to my design class anymore!" (LAUGHTER) "Where are you?" I said "I'm very busy!"

**LBH:** You left Black Mountain when he left?

**LBH:** Yes. I felt terrible, because I thought we were there for another five or six years, and we went back to New York City, the last place I wanted to go.

**MEH:** Why did he leave? Did he not like teaching? Do you remember?

**LBH:** Well, he was ill.

**MEH:** I knew he had been ill.

**LBH:** He had Hodgkin's disease, and he'd been ill as a child. He was really just in remission when we met. They were the healthiest years of his life. My parents knew the whole history of it all. I tell you, I've got a terrible blind area, because to me here he was, perfectly fine, I said, "Well (UNINTELL) crazy," you know. "He's fine." Of course, he wasn't. Ted Dreier warned us and everything. But we had a great time, but only for a couple of years.

**MEH:** When he came back to New York, did he teach? Was he (OVERTALK)

**LBH:** He had part-time work with the National Labor Relations Board.

**MEH:** His father had been an educator.

**LBH:** No, his father was a doctor in Brooklyn Heights.

**MEH:** There was another Tasker Howard—

**LBH:** Oh, there's a music—that's a cousin.

**MEH:** Was he named for this cousin?

**LBH:** John Tasker Howard. Right. They're an old family. So they're all naming each other after each other.

**MEH:** So his father was a physician, a doctor.

**LBH:** He was head of Long Island College Hospital for a while.

**MEH:** So you came back up to New York.

**LBH:** We came to the city, right. We lived on Tompkins Square, 7th Street, between A and B.

**MEH:** Today that would be—

**LBH:** It was like living in Paris. It was the cutest little park, at that time. The building's no longer there. It was over the Tompkins Square Tavern, where we were. Then we moved to Brooklyn Heights because he became so ill. We had to be connected with doctors, and his father oversaw a lot of that. That's where he died.

**MEH:** You told me before, it's in the book—the year of his death.

**LBH:** '52.

**MEH:** '52. So that wasn't that long after you were at Black Mountain.

**LBH:** No. We got married in '47. He died in '52. The last couple years we were together, I was working at America House as a gallery director of their crafts. I was working for Mrs. Vanderbilt Webb, Aileen Webb, who was, you know—

**MEH:** An extraordinary lady.

**LBH:** She was an extraordinary lady and she was a shy little girl, at the same time.

**MEH:** Oh really?

**LBH:** Oh, she was adorable. Yes. She really was, but look what she put over.  
The whole American Crafts Council.

**MEH:** Yes. Incredible. You weren't there during, say, the period '52 to '54, do you remember, when Karen Karnes and David Weinrib were exhibited there?

**LBH:** Oh, sure, I knew them. I know David Weinrib—

**MEH:** So, that was the period when you were—

**LBH:** That's when I first knew them. That's right. In fact, that's Karen's. That's one of her early pieces.

**MEH:** I wondered if that was hers. Is that from Black Mountain? It has a very Black Mountain look. Was that (OVERTALK)

**LBH:** No, I got that at America House.

**MEH:** They were exhibiting at America House when they were at Black Mountain.

**LBH:** Right. David Weinrib's mother would come in every day. "My David! My David!" (LAUGHTER). She was a riot. A wonderful Jewish mother.

**MEH:** That very possibly is a Black Mountain piece, if you got it at America House.

**LBH:** It may be.

**MEH:** That's where they were selling their stuff.

**LBH:** Unfortunately, I used it. There's a little crack in the top.

**MEH:** It's beautiful.

**LBH:** Her work is beautiful. I always loved it. Trude Guermonprez, she showed there.

**MEH:** Are there other Black Mountain people you can remember?

**LBH:** Oh, God, I'm poor about that place, really.

**MEH:** Did Anni Albers exhibit there?

**LBH:** Oh, sure. I think she had something there. Because they had general weaving exhibitions once in a while.

**MEH:** America House at that time was a commercial gallery, wasn't it?

**LBH:** Well, no. There was America House, the store on East 52nd Street in the CBS Building. Then upstairs was a gallery, and they sold things but it was primarily like a little museum.

**MEH:** They gave exhibitions up there.

**LBH:** They'd have competitions: the Young Americans, Crafts, and stuff like that. They published Craft Horizons.

**MEH:** So, that was an exciting place to work.

**LBH:** Yes. But I wasn't in very condition, because Tasker was dying and—

**MEH:** So, you must not have been able to do much of your own work during that period.

**LBH:** No. That was a dreadful period. I just made messes after messes. You'd be all set to work and then something would happen.

**MEH:** Yes. He really never had much of a chance to practice his profession.

**LBH:** No. That was all done before I even knew him, because he did work in Washington and in Puerto Rico for National Labor.



**MEH:** Through the war years?

**LBH:** Yeah.

**MEH:** National Labor—

**LBH:** National Labor Relations Board. That was government, so you worked yourself up to all those numbers and whatever.

**MEH:** Why did he come to Black Mountain? Did he want to try teaching? Do you know?

**LBH:** He was a student at Rollins, and so he was with the original group that came over to start Black Mountain. What happened? He got ill or something, and he left the National Labor Relations Board. Oh, no. I know what it was. I mean this is from his family. It's too silly. He was looking to get married. He had left the NLRB or something like that, and then this job he heard about at Black Mountain. His family all said, "Hey, you'll meet somebody. You can meet a wonderful wife down there. Go on down and try it out." So down this guy came.

**MEH:** And he did!

**LBH:** And he did.

**MEH:** Probably much to their surprise.

**LBH:** So that's the way that worked. That's how he got there. It was nice that he returned to Ted Dreier, people that he liked.

**MEH:** So after he died, you were still in New York?

**LBH:** Right. I was on Remsen Street. Didn't know the Katzes were there. Didn't know the Katzes at that time, actually.

**MEH:** Of course, you would have been entirely different periods.

**LBH:** Although John Evarts—But I hadn't met John Evarts yet. I never met John Evarts until later on.

**MEH:** That's right. You really have as friends all these earlier people.

**LBH:** I really met John Evarts at something to do with Marshall Best, Viking Press, who was Al's editor—at the Leslie and Jane's.

**[END OF SIDE 1, TAPE 1; NO RECORDING ON SIDE 2]**

**[END OF TRANSCRIPT]**