Interview of **SUSAN WEIL**

Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer

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New York, New York

INTERVIEWER: It is Wednesday, January 5th, and this is an oral history with Susan Weil.

You were born in New York?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I was born at home in New York, and my uncle was acting as my mother's obstetrician. And if you would like a story about that, my uncle said, "I think we should have some smelling salts," to my mother when she was in deep labor, and my mother said, "It's quite okay, Neil. I'm quite okay," and he said, "Not for you, for Leonard" ¬ that's my father. He was looking kind of green, I guess.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: This was in New York City.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And this was how many years ago?

SUSAN WEIL: I'm 80, so I would say 80 years ago. I was born in 1930.

INTERVIEWER: 1930, all right. You were born in New York City, but go back a couple generations and tell me when your family came to the United States.

SUSAN WEIL: I don't know so much about when my mother's family came to the United States, but my father's family came from Alsace-Lorraine, and my great-great-grandfather, Liepman Adler, was a rabbi. His wife died in childbirth delivering their son Dankmar Adler, the renowned architect, and so he was named Dankmar, which means "bitter thanks" because of the loss of his mother. When Liepman remarried, he and his wife moved to the States and eventually he became the rabbi in Chicago and a very renowned, very liberal, interesting rabbi. His son Dankmar Adler began the architectural firm that became Adler and Sullivan, and Frank Lloyd Wright worked for them.

My grandmother, Dankmar's daughter, had three kids. My father was the middle child, which is not a very likable position. His father was a stockbroker and he wanted my father to have a secure profession. But my father wanted to be a writer, and my grandfather thought that was a very poor idea, so he made him have a job first working in

a sausage factory. He hated that so much, so then he was allowed to become a writer. He went to the University of Chicago. After he graduated from there, he went on a trip to Europe, and there he met my mother. And they came back and they were -- of that era, they were "hippies" before that word originated, and they were very interesting, funny people. My mother, before she married, wrote poetry and did watercolors and all kinds of creative thing. They just wanted to live a creative life disconnected from the parents' ideas of how they should live.

INTERVIEWER: I guess they were in Europe in the 1920's...

SUSAN WEIL: Right. They met in Europe, and later married after their return to the states. And so, anyway, they bought this little island off of the coast of Connecticut, and it was part of a little archipelago, and it was the furthest island out. It was called Outer Island, and that's where I grew up during springs and summers. Other than that, we lived on a farm in New Jersey.

INTERVIEWER: On a farm? A working farm?

SUSAN WEIL: Sort of. It actually belonged to my mother's parents, but we were the squatters. So that's where it all began.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get into the [New York] City?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, at one point they -- let's see, I guess it just happened that they had a little place in the city in the year I was born, but that wasn't true for most of their lives. I don't know really anything about it. I know it was upstairs on 2nd Avenue and the "El" [elevated tram] went by and mother didn't like people peering in the window when she was giving birth, I know that. But I don't know how or why they were in New York at that time.

INTERVIEWER: When your dad was writing, he was writing as a novelist?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, he also went to Yale Drama School. He was interested in playwriting, and he wrote a number of plays, and short stories and poems and the whole lot.

INTERVIEWER: On a typewriter probably, not longhand.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes, yes, mostly. Well, he wrote longhand, too. He was an absolutely lovely person, and very sweet, gentle, and thoughtful.

INTERVIEWER: Had he studied English at the University of Chicago?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I don't know too much about his courses, but I know he did read everything that was ever written- every book he could get his hands on-I know that.

INTERVIEWER: I understand he read James Joyce ...?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes, yes. As a child, he read aloud to us from Gertrude Stein, James Joyce, *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*, all kinds of things. So listening to writing was in my head growing up, and it became a very big part of my life, and so I'm a word and image person.

INTERVIEWER: You said that your parents were hippies before we used that term "hippies." How did that manifest itself to you when you were growing up?

SUSAN WEIL: It was the life I had, so it was the life I knew. I didn't know other people thought differently. But when I was in school and I would visit other kids, I thought "that's funny, they live in little houses", it was like dollhouses or something, it wasn't what I was used to, having grown up on a farm.

INTERVIEWER: You weren't an only child ... No.

SUSAN WEIL: No. My brother, Danky, was older, he was a year and a half older. We were both in a fire when I was 11, and he was on the edge of 13, and he died in the hospital, and I'm still going, I'm still kicking.

INTERVIEWER: Was this in New York?

SUSAN WEIL: No. It was the boat to go to the [Outer] Island.

INTERVIEWER: How crushing.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, it was traumatic, I have to say. I spent a half a year in the hospital with many, many operations after. And, no, it's what we went through. And then when it was about a half a year later, my parents, who were unable to have more children because my mother was Rh-negative and because she had many, many miscarriages, so they first adopted my sister, Judy, and so I was 12 when she came into the family, and she was newborn. And then they adopted my brother Jim 2 years later. So that was my life from then on. I was the babysitter.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: The big sister.

SUSAN WEIL: Right.

INTERVIEWER: So you had this nice family of three kids.

SUSAN WEIL: At that point. So I've been every position. I've been a younger child, I've been an older child, I've been in all the different positions.

INTERVIEWER: What is Outer Island like?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, it's very beautiful. It's very raw and you feel your granite landscape and a lot of nice growing things, and it's way out from the mainland. So if you're at the back of the island, you can't see land.

INTERVIEWER: And when you were there, when you were kids, how did you entertain yourselves?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, through everything on the island. I mean, we were part of nature and we were in the water a lot, and life was very delightful when we were little.

INTERVIEWER: Who taught you how to make blueprints?

SUSAN WEIL: No one. You could buy ready-made blueprint paper squares to leave out in the sun. They were kids toys. But years later, Bob and I started making the large-scale blueprints. We would make little leaves and things like children do on little blueprint papers --

INTERVIEWER: Your brother [Danky] and you.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. But then when Bob was in my life, we decided it would be interesting to buy a big roll of blueprint paper and do full figures and big pieces. Then after we did those, they became part of the larger world because they were in *Life* magazine and they were exhibited at MoMA [*Abstraction in Photography* [[MoMA Exh. #476, May 1-July 4, 1951] and everything.

Sue, ca. 1950

My grandmother said that as a child she had gone to her father's architectural office and put a glass negative on the blueprint paper and made that image. I mean, it was right back like in the beginning of photography.

INTERVIEWER: You were unaware that she had been doing that until after you made blueprints yourself.
SUSAN WEIL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: That's fun. It was already in your genes. I was thinking that you and your brother had also messed around with that.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, Danky and I made exposures of shells and leaves, grasses, and all that kind of thing. But those were just little things. Nobody had done "blueprints" before Bob and I of that scale.

INTERVIEWER: Sure.

SUSAN WEIL: And now if you go to Google and search for “cyanotypes”, there are reams and reams and reams of people working in that medium. And the last number of years I've been working with José Betancourt doing collaborative blueprints. They just had their first exhibition in Portland, Oregon, and then they're going to D.C. They're traveling around.

INTERVIEWER: Where does the word “cyanotype" come from? I'd never heard it before.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, that's the chemical name of the salts and things that you put on the paper to make the blueprint paper.

INTERVIEWER: At what point did you think, I like this art idea for me? When you were a child, did your parents take you to museums? Did you go to galleries? Was it in the air and --

SUSAN WEIL: Yes, my parents were really interested in art, and I did go to galleries and museums with my parents. I know they were very curious about contemporary art, and so I was in that lovely position of not having them fighting my choice of what I wanted to do, which most parents do.

INTERVIEWER: I read a wonderful comment from you saying that looking at the Abstract Expressionists was like looking at dynamite.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. It was a very, very thrilling time when we came back to New York from Black Mountain in the early 1950's, and this ... Such a vibrant and amazing world was around us, and everything. When you look at art, well, forget it, and it can be anything, and it was really lovely.

INTERVIEWER: You went to Dalton, right?

SUSAN WEIL: Right.

INTERVIEWER: And you had, for you, important teachers.

SUSAN WEIL: Aaron Kurzen was my art teacher. It was his first year of teaching. Now, he's still there, do you believe? And he's still a friend, and I'm very close to Aaron. He was a great teacher. And he's the one who suggested Black Mountain to me. So that was very special.

INTERVIEWER: Even then you knew you wanted to be an artist.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Did they offer art classes at Dalton?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, yes, yes. Before I studied with Aaron and Vaclav Vytlacil, I studied at Dalton with Rufino Tamayo, and he was a terrible teacher, and so I decided it wasn't for me and left his class, and then when I found Aaron, it just opened all the doors.

INTERVIEWER: In what way?

SUSAN WEIL: Because I could feel that was what I wanted to do, I could feel that it met with my self-image and everything. My father thought I wrote very beautifully and wanted me to be a writer, and he was always encouraging me in that way. I always wrote, and still do. I write a poem paired with an image every day of my life, and I'm really a painter professionally but a writer also. But I was so much happier as a painter really. When I graduated from Dalton in 1948, I went for the summer to Paris, and I couldn't have missed Bob if I tried because he was living in my pension, we were going to the same schools, and we also went to French classes at the Alliance Francaise together. We were drawing at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière and painting at the Académie Julian. It was very, very thrilling. And then when I finished that summer in Paris, I was heading back to go to Black Mountain, and, strangely enough, Bob came about a month later to Black Mountain.

INTERVIEWER: He followed you.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: How was the Académie for you?

SUSAN WEIL: It was very old-fashioned. It wasn't very interesting. I mean, the models would pose for 2 weeks or 3 weeks in the same pose, and it was very boring. And the teachers weren't comfortable in English, so it did no good to try to talk.

INTERVIEWER: Sort of 19th century art, was it?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I mean, it was just school art, you know, but the experience of being there was fantastic, and then to go from there to Black Mountain, which was a whole other world. It was so thrilling there, and just all creative people, and in all different mediums and so on. And I always thought that the most important thing that Black Mountain had to offer was after classes, we'd sit in the dining hall and we'd talk with poets, with scientists, with every kind of people, and we'd share our experiences and our thoughts. So I think that was a big part of the direction that art went into because before that, you were either a poet or you were a painter or you were a scientist or a philosopher or whatever you were, but we just discovered that it was really nice to experience everything.

Now, I have one of the worst voices in the world, and I sang in the chorus at Black Mountain. Bernie [Kirschenbaum - Susan Weil's husband] can hardly believe this, we sang the "B Minor Mass" and the "St. Matthew Passion," and everything. We performed everywhere and I can't sing properly. My roommate, Delores Fullman, who was black, which was very difficult to be in North Carolina when it was segregated-it was very, very difficult-and she was a voice person, a singer, very beautiful voice, and I just could follow Delores, but the minute she quit singing with me or was trying to help some bass or somebody else, my voice was flying all around. And since that area was segregated, we couldn't go anywhere with her in public because we'd get in trouble, so we went to the Baptist Church with Delores, which was fascinating because people would sing and faint, and there were smelling salts everywhere. My mother's family was Episcopalian, and church was very stuffy, but Delores' church was very wild. She was the only one who didn't faint in the middle of the singing.

[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: It was quite unique. And we would sit in the balcony with the black people at movies and things like that. If I went to a department store in Asheville with Delores, we weren't allowed to be in the same place, you know, it was terribly wild for me, and for her, because she was from Chicago, which was not segregated, so she hadn't experienced that, and neither had I.

INTERVIEWER: How long did she stay at Black Mountain?

SUSAN WEIL: She was there when I came. I don't know if she was there much before, but she was there on a Rosenwald Scholarship, and I stayed in touch with her for many years, but I've lost track of her, and every time I go to Chicago, I look for her. I can't find her.

INTERVIEWER: Who was in charge of Black Mountain when you were there?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, it was several people. I have to think, you know, it was a few years ago. The Dreier's, the Dreier family, they were a big part of it.

INTERVIEWER: I know Charles Olson was in charge of it for a while, but I think that was later.

SUSAN WEIL: That was after Albers left. Yes, I studied with Olson for a little bit, but I found him difficult.

INTERVIEWER: He's a major [Herman] Melville man.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. But there were terrific poets at Black Mountain, there were very lively poets.

INTERVIEWER: Was Josef Albers important in the art -- the art department consisted of just one person, or how many people?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, the art department was basically Albers when I was there. Then it was other people.

INTERVIEWER: That was the big difference from France, that Albers had a whole different way of looking at art.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes, that's correct.

INTERVIEWER: When you went to Black Mountain, what kind of course of study did they offer to you?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, all the art courses were on the top of my list, and I did study with Olson, and I did take French with this Russian woman. I had been used to hearing Parisian French and suddenly it was something else, Russian French. It was a work-study school, so students helped with the school's farm. Bob and I were the garbage crew, we took the truck to go to the dump all the time.

INTERVIEWER: And you just took the truck and drove around between -- what was it, cabins that people lived in, or dormitories?

SUSAN WEIL: There were some large -- you could call them dormitories, and then there were other places, and faculties had houses.

INTERVIEWER: I read somewhere that it was helpful for you guys to do that or you volunteered to do that because you could collect things to make art with?

SUSAN WEIL: No. Bob and I would go to the dump and bring back as much as we took away, but that was not usual. No, I mean, we had different chores. Everybody had to work. We worked on the farm. I remember I had to make butter at one time, and I got paint into the butter because I had come from the studio, churning butter.

INTERVIEWER: Blue butter?

SUSAN WEIL: A little bit of streaks.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: Is this one of those lore things that we should clear up, that it was absolutely not true that you and Bob went around scavenging for pieces to put into art?

SUSAN WEIL: No, but since our job was to do the trash, we did come back with things sometimes.

[Laughter.]

But a lot of it was lore, yes. But it's true that we had fun going to the dump. People would beg us to take them with us because we'd have so much fun.
INTERVIEWER: Is that because the two of you were fun or because there were things there that were fun, or both?

SUSAN WEIL: A little of each.

INTERVIEWER: To go back to Paris, you said there was no way to avoid getting to know Bob Rauschenberg, but you all became good buddies touring around Paris, right? Did you spend a lot of time hanging around Paris together?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, yes, because we were in art school together, and French classes and everything. We were just thrown together. Living in the same pension, I mean, Bob had this most amazing laugh, and you could hear him all over Paris when he was laughing.

INTERVIEWER: Engaging from the get-go?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, yes, oh, yes, very inventive, engaging.

INTERVIEWER: I suspect he probably said the same thing about you.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, it depends when you ask.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: I think it would be really fun to have a soul-mate in a town, in a school, and to be able to see that world together.

SUSAN WEIL: Right. We grew up as artists together, that's for sure. I mean, when Bob came to Black Mountain, he hardly knew what a painting was, you know. I mean, he had been to school in Kansas City, and he knew a little bit then, but he was very naive about art, and I wasn't because of my family, and so we shared thoughts and perceptions

and so on.

INTERVIEWER: I'm not an artist, so I don't really know how this works, but at that point, were you both doing different kinds of things or the same kinds of things and talking about -- you saying, "Mmm, that's not working for me," and vice versa? Is that the way it works?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, at Black Mountain, we had to work to Albers' thinking of what students should do, so that was not a time for individualism. Albers always said when you think you're an artist, if you're in school, you're not, you're a student, and everything we did had to be to his -- it was like a new kind of academy, you know. He came from the Bauhaus with these certain explorations in art, and you go on those explorations with him. And then when we left Black Mountain and we went to the Art Students League, and we had very fine teachers there, Morris Kantor and Vytlacil, and then you began to really find your own voice. And we had very different voices, one from the other, but it was great exploration in any case.

So then at that time Bob was going to school on the G.I. Bill because of his time in the Navy, and more than half of the students there were there on the G.I. Bill and --
INTERVIEWER: In Paris or in Black Mountain?

SUSAN WEIL: In the Art Students League.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, okay.

SUSAN WEIL: A lot of people at Black Mountain also were there on the G.I. Bill, but more in the Art Students League. And it was so interesting because before there was the G.I. Bill, kids couldn't find their own way, they were influenced by their parents very much, and their parents wouldn't support them going into a field that wasn't their vision. And nobody's vision was to be an artist; that was like saying, "I want to be a thief," or something, you know.

But because of the G.I. Bill, these young adults who had been through the experience of the war could make their own way, and if they wanted to be artists, they could damn well be artists and their parents didn't have a voice in it, and it changed the art world a lot because before that, the only men who went into the arts were independently wealthy or had family background or support for it. But other than that, middle class and less never could go into the arts; they weren't supported by their families and they couldn't manage it. So it changed the face of the art world. A lot of children of blue-collar people went into this rarified field, and it was because they were adults and they were allowed to. So that was very curious. A lot of our friends were in that position. Our friends from the Art Students League were in that category.

INTERVIEWER: Did anybody take advantage of the 52-20 Club in that group? Do you remember the 52-20 Club part of the G.I. Bill? I should have interviewed you for my show on the G.I. Bill because what you just said is so beautiful, and it's so true, about the

import of that bill, but one of the things that you could get on the G.I. Bill was what they called the 52-20 Club, and you could get 20 bucks a week for 52 weeks, sort of as an unemployment payment. Not very many people took it.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. No, it's funny because when I was first married to Bob, we lived on the G.I. Bill, which was very little money, and it was tough, but we could do it, and that's why he went to school as long as he did, because he needed the G.I. Bill.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, so the G.I. Bill for someone like Bob would pay for Académie Julian and for Black Mountain and then also for the Art Students League.

SUSAN WEIL: With an allowance beside that.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, with an allowance. That was terrific.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes, and it did change the nature of art, it did. And so when we decided to get married, it was because my mother wanted to send me away because she didn't want me hanging around full-time with Bob. She thought I should have some other experiences of life, and she and Bob were cool with each other, and so we thought, "Okay, we'll get married, we can be who we want to be," so we got married.

INTERVIEWER: I heard that he made a wedding ring for you?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. Where did you hear that?

INTERVIEWER: Lawrence [Voytek].

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. It was woven of wire, and of course it wasn't at all practical, it stretched, and was noisy, "tk-tk," you know, it was not a very usable thing, but he did it.

INTERVIEWER: According to Lawrence, he would talk about it.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, yes?

INTERVIEWER: Bob would talk about it, that he had made you a wedding ring ... So how long did it last? Longer than the marriage or not?

SUSAN WEIL: No. But it lasted through the wedding.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: That's really quite sweet. Did he get down on one knee and pop the question, or did you all having coffee say, "Well, let's do this"?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, it was sort of like plotting out the next chapter in our lives, and we just decided it, and then we had to face mother, who was not crazy about this

relationship, but my father was very empathic with Bob and very sweet.

[Pause.]

INTERVIEWER: Alfred Kazin said the students at Black Mountain College were "highly charged" and "over-responsive."

SUSAN WEIL: Well, we were very full of life, I'll put it that way.

INTERVIEWER: When you were talking about Albers- did he give you "tools"? I mean, is that what he wanted to do, give you tools coming away from Black Mountain College?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I mean, he taught a color class and he taught a drawing class and others, and we had to do all these exercises of vibration studies, putting complementary colors with each other, and all this stuff we had to do, all kinds of special -- we studied a lot about color in every kind of a way, and drawing was interesting with Albers because you had to draw with as little line as possible-and no eraser was allowed in your drawing, none, and you'd have a stuttering line, you have air expressing the continuation of the line, and so on. That was the thing. And he really made us look and draw. My roommate, Delores, at one time was the model we were going to draw, and she was very rotund, and Albers said, "Look at this girl, think of mountains and valleys," -- she never wanted to pose again, I'll tell you.
[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: But, I mean, we drew everything. We drew teacups, we had to draw the school's Jeep, which I found very difficult, and we drew all kinds of things. And in another way, he would make you be very modest, that you weren't an artist, you were a student, and we'd make drawings and then a drawing right over that. Yes, he was very severe.

INTERVIEWER: So if you were to describe what your style was at that time and even earlier, how would you describe it?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, at that time we weren't allowed to think of our own style, so we didn't; we were students. And earlier, working with Aaron Kurzen, I had great freedom in how I worked. He was a terrific teacher. He really made you loosen up and explore painting and think about what it's made of and all this. He was absolutely wonderful, and remains wonderful. And I just gave it all up when studying with Albers because we weren't allowed to think of ourselves that way.

INTERVIEWER: When did you get back to thinking about how you wanted to express yourself? At Art Students League?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I mean, at Art Students League we had models and we could do this and that and the other, and the teachers would come in and give you a critique, and

about once a week they would come and critique your work, but we were much more on our own, and we could use the models or not use them, we could - whatever. But I was in school with Stanley Boxer, who was a fairly well-known artist, and Morris Kantor came up and went to draw on his work, and Stanley threw a fit, and he threw the canvas over the lockers and stuff and said, "Never touch my work."

INTERVIEWER: Well, he was right, he shouldn't have touched his work.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, but teachers, they do.

INTERVIEWER: They say you can improve it by making this line or seeing what happens?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, some teachers do that.

INTERVIEWER: When did you feel like you were beginning to develop a style?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, it wasn't so much a style as a perception, you know, things that got my attention. If you think about my work, a lot of it was influenced by growing up on the island, where I was studying the horizons. I mean, they were part of my vision, part of my eyes. I remember as a little kid being out in rowboat with my father, and I said to him that I wanted to understand about the horizon and being a piece of the edge of the curved earth. And many many works came out of that perception, and the question had come to me as a child. I don't know . . . First of all, because Abstract Expressionism was born when I was a young painter, and the great energy and the great exploration of those artists gave you this sense of "everything is a possibility", and then because Bob and I were married at that time, bounced ideas off each other. We never worked alike really, but we shared a vision.

INTERVIEWER: Did you all have a studio together? Where did you paint?

SUSAN WEIL: We didn't have a studio.

INTERVIEWER: Not at all.

SUSAN WEIL: When I was at the Art Students League, we painted at school, and that was another reason for going to school besides the check you got once a month, was because it was a place to paint, and nobody had studios then. I mean, of course, the mature artists did, but the young students didn't.

INTERVIEWER: Right. Couldn't afford it.

SUSAN WEIL: I mean the idea's such a wild thing.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: I can go down to MoMA now and there's this huge exhibit of Abstract Expressionists, but that wasn't how you were seeing the work, was it?

SUSAN WEIL: No, because when you saw the first show of Mark Rothko, you know, you felt like you were hit in the belly. It was such a "wow", you know, it was so fantastic, and the same thing with Kline. Kline was such a dear person and very generous about his work, but you just felt "painting can be whatever I want it to be," you know, it was another matter --

INTERVIEWER: That must have been huge.

SUSAN WEIL: It was huge. It was very, very exciting. And now when you go back and see a Pollock or you see a de Kooning or you see a Kline, you've seen everything since, so it doesn't strike you in that way. But then it was just heady, it was so amazing.

INTERVIEWER: I would imagine that it's a pretty heady thing to be in Paris in the 1940's, and presumably art is back in Louvre and you can see all of these "great masters," and then you come to New York and you're seeing Pollock's and Kline's and --

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. But I had been living in New York as a teenager and through high school years and so on and was in and out of the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] all the time, so it wasn't so surprising to me to see the old masters and everything, but it was a very heady moment. And then another big influence was the "Happenings" because then you were putting together the different mediums. I mean, you were making a soufflé out of music and visual art and theatre and everything.

INTERVIEWER: Which is really the extension of what you were talking about at Black Mountain.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I feel that was a very important part of Black Mountain.

INTERVIEWER: What was the first "Happening" that you saw, do you remember?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, we saw everything that was happening. We saw [Robert] Whitman and [Claes] Oldenburg and all of them. And also the Judson dance people.

INTERVIEWER: All those guys ...

SUSAN WEIL: That was another extension of stirring the pot of the different ways of thinking.

INTERVIEWER: When you were at the Art Students League, was there a little group of people that hung together that were your social group ... ? Chuck Close said to me that he got his inspiration from fellow artists who were as much or more influential than going to a museum or a teacher or something like that, and I know that in the Club and the Cedar Bar there was that milieu and those people who spoke the same language, as it

were, but I'm wondering when you guys were at the Art Students League, and later, was that kind of environment available to you?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes, yes. I mean, from the League, we had a few friends which were our friends outside of school, Knox Martin and Stanley Boxer and a few people, but we were experiencing all of what was happening in New York at that time, so we had ... our social life was all of that, but less so for me than Bob because this little person [Christopher, b. 1951] came along and then I wasn't free to go wandering about and seeing things and doing things.

INTERVIEWER: I saw some really charming drawings -- I only saw half of them because I only saw the Bob half and not the Sue half, but these wonderful "Day at the Zoo" drawings?

SUSAN WEIL: I have the book here.

INTERVIEWER: It's really charming. I wondered if going to the zoo and making those charming pictures was when you and Bob decided that you wanted to make a baby.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, when we got married, we were really high on the idea of having children, and so it wasn't just then, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Those pictures, they do tell a wonderful story, so I do hope you're going to turn that, your notebook, into a storybook.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, with the help of David White, that was all photographed, and I'm now into a point in my life that my responsibilities are to being a painter.

INTERVIEWER: Yes. As I said, it was really quite charming. So when Chris comes along, big change. How does one be an artist and be a mother at the same time?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, in my whole life, my self-image is as an artist, and I've always made work, no matter what else, but I didn't take care of being a part of the art world, I couldn't do that, that was past what I could do. It was interesting, when Chris was two, I lived on 87th Street, and on 89th Street was a big public school, and it was a pre-nursing vocational public school, and they had a nursery for children two, three, and four, and I thought, well, if I can have Chris go to the nursery between 9:00 and 3:00, I can be an artist, and then after that I'm a full-time mother. So that's what I did. But, of course, little boys don't get toilet-trained so fast, and so that summer I said, "Chris, we're going to master this, so you can go to school in September," and he did, with a lot of extra underpants.

[Laughter.]

INTERVIEWER: That's a great story.

SUSAN WEIL: No, it was a great school because there was a high school girl assigned to each child. There was a nurse overlooking everything, and they had to study child psychology and all this and that, and everything was very model, and it cost nothing, and it was two blocks away from where I lived. So when Christopher went from there for kindergarten and so on, he was very used to being in school. And he was very happy there, he was happy with other kids, and at 3:00 Mama picked him up and it was his time. And so when I married Bernie and I had Sara, she went to that same school.

INTERVIEWER: And at that time, were you working in your house?

SUSAN WEIL: In the beginning I was working at home on 87th street, but as he got a little older, I had a very cheap outside studio, very unsatisfactory, in a cellar of a building with a coal furnace, so it was very difficult, but it was my painting space. And after that, I always found a studio.

INTERVIEWER: Now, I'm thinking at this point, that I don't know how your art is developing at that point, so I think I need to do homework.

SUSAN WEIL: Okay, well, if we take a little break, we can look at the Skira book, and you can see about the early years.

INTERVIEWER: Great.

[End of Interview]

Interview with **SUSAN WEIL**

Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer New York, New York

January 21, 2011[1]

Interviews with Rauschenberg Friends and Associates. RRFA 08.
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

KAREN THOMAS: Today is the 21st of January, and I am talking with Susan Weil. As I said, what I wanted to do was to circle back to Outer Island and to start there.

When we spoke before, you talked about how you had gone out there, ...you and your brother, you basically you didn't take toys, and that you were very involved in the natural aspects of it, but I hadn't realized at that time the extent to which that imagery became such an important part of your work.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes, yes. I did so much work about the horizon because as a child it just fascinated me. I'd set the fishnets on the island, and I would look at the horizon, straightness of straight, and know that it was part of the curved earth. Even as a kid, it was very interesting to me, and I did a bunch of pieces called "Straight Is Round."

I talked to my father about it, I remember that. And growing up, spending spring/summer on the island, it was so much part of my head and my vision and so on, and also, there, there were stars, which I no longer am able to see, but it was a powerful impact there, and these images go into my work. I've done a lot of images using stars.

THOMAS: You slept outside on cots?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. We would do that in August when the falling stars and all that, shooting stars, they're not really stars. But it was very amazing. My parents, my brother, and I would be on Army cots out on the rocks. It was amazing.

THOMAS: What's the topography of Outer Island?

SUSAN WEIL: It's not very high. It's a low island, and it's granite, which I used to like to visualize … what it was like under the sea, you know, coming up, being part of the ground. So it was rosy granite, and it was trees and plants and things on the top of it like hair on our head.

[1] An additional conversation was recorded with Susan Weil on April 13, 2011 and is appended to the end of this document.

THOMAS: And you used a lot of the foliage in your work.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. Trees, I had so many paintings about trees and so on. But those came out of the horizon images. And it was so interesting because when Bob invited me to do the lithographs at Untitled Press, that was really very early in my printmaking career, it wasn't the beginning, but it was early, and I had never done lithographs before, and that was about the earth and the sky, and that was about natural colors and so on, but that was a very early on "crumpling" because those images were … here's the way the stone is, here it is flat, and here is the way it is altered, and pressed in the press, and I was very excited about that, and out of that came a bunch of larger works.

THOMAS: Did the press crumple the materials?

SUSAN WEIL: No. I put it into a form and put it in the press and then it was scrunched. And so each one is different, but of course it's an edition, and we could probably show them to you, couldn't we?

THOMAS: We will put that on the list. People talk about influences in art, and I was thinking that in terms of primal art sources, Outer Island is that for you.

SUSAN WEIL: Right. Because I was first there when I was a newborn, so it was really until I was grown up.

THOMAS: It never left you.

SUSAN WEIL: No. And I married Bob on the island, and I married Bernie [Kirschenbaum] on the island. [Laughter.] So there you go.

THOMAS: Those early "Blueprints" that you made, you made with Danky …. Was he as artistic as you?

SUSAN WEIL: He was such an interesting person because he was very brilliant, and he was brilliant about mathematics, and he and my father used to have a lot of mathematics sharing and so on, and we made things all the time. We made fairs and we made games, and he was part of the puppet shows and all, so .. Of course, it was a family of making things and being visual that way, but he was different in that, he was like a scientific mind.

THOMAS: And I read that you cut things out of magazines and made collages?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah.

THOMAS: Was it collages --

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah.

THOMAS: -- or was it paper-dollish play things?

SUSAN WEIL: No, no, it was like collages. I remember we had a very good time with a Sears Roebuck catalog, and we liked the girdles and the kitchens and all this as part of the stuff.

Did I show you the wall of work we did on the island, Bob, me, my little sister, and my little brother?

THOMAS: No.

SUSAN WEIL: Because they wanted to do a performance, so we made an audience, and the four of us all on newspaper tacked up on the wall, we all painted and drew an audience, and then they performed it in that space, and, I have, very fortunately, I have a photograph of that, yeah. I think it's kind of marvelous to share this big newspaper wall with the little kids, you know.

THOMAS: You said that for you cutting was like drawing with scissors?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, that's true, and still is.

THOMAS: It's a fantastic image. I wanted to make sure that the genesis for that was really Outer Island and what you were doing as a kid.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, because as children we felt very free to be making things and doing things, and we didn't put any big exclamation point, we just liked doing that, and we had a little kid printing press and we put the rubber letters on the thing and we would make newspapers and stuff. I think kids still draw and make things. My granddaughter, who is now 16, she loves to make things, and she makes all kinds of visual things. I remember they came here, we were working in the studio, and they decided to do a group big collage, and then Annie got very aggressive about it, and she wouldn't let us do this and she wouldn't let us do that because she was doing it, and it was so funny. I mean, she was really gung-ho. And my grandson now is taking a drawing class in college. So kids still make things.

THOMAS: And it may be in your genes as much as anything.

SUSAN WEIL: Right. But I think other kids do, too.

THOMAS: I do, too, but that's a really special history.

SUSAN WEIL: Molly, bring me… Molly. I used to go up to visit my sister, and the minute I would walk in the door, Molly would go for my suitcase to look for my watercolors and stuff, and that's Molly painting.

THOMAS: You?

MOLLY SHEA: Yes.
THOMAS: How fantastic.

SUSAN WEIL: So, you know, it's a joyful thing. Kids love to draw and make things.

THOMAS: I wanted to explore a little bit … I can't remember if we talked about it before or not, but your father read you "Ulysses"? He read you "The Odyssey"?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, he did, Gertrude Stein, everything. I just knew as a child that he loved it. You know, when he would read from "Finnegans Wake," I loved the sound of it, and, of course, I couldn't make any sense out of it, but to me it was like music, and also because it was important to him, I absorbed that, too, and I just adored it. So then as a grownup, I read it, understanding what I was hearing in those days.

THOMAS: You had said that your dad had expected you to become a writer, but that when you went to Dalton, you took an art class with Mr. Kurzen and that you made a tiny little picture?

SUSAN WEIL: I made a little picture of a little boy and girl, a balloon and stuff, and Aaron came over and he said, "You have to pay attention to the size of your paper," and he had me close my eyes and draw. The first one was a rooster, and with my eyes closed, he said, "I first want you to feel the width and the height and now what you're drawing on," and from that moment I decided I was a painter, and I just loved it, and I still draw with my eyes closed all the time, I love to. I have reams of work of drawings with my eyes closed, and even also watercolors and collages and things, because it really frees you to feel what you're drawing, and then when you open your eyes it's a surprise because it's coo-coo.

THOMAS: I hope you don't cut with your eyes closed.

SUSAN WEIL: I could.

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: That must have been a "eureka" moment for you…[SW: Yes] …to decide that you were going to be an artist.

SUSAN WEIL: Right. I had 2 years studying with Aaron that just convinced me, and he's the one that turned me on to Black Mountain and to study with Albers. He told me about Black Mountain, and that's why I ended up there.

THOMAS: Am I right in thinking that you actually went on a visit in advance of going to Black Mountain to check it out?

SUSAN WEIL: Right. And I dropped all the other possibilities. I said to my father, "I will go to college, but it must have a good art program," and I was applying to Bard and

Bennington and different places, and the minute I saw Black Mountain, I said, "Forget the rest, I'm coming here."

MOLLY SHEA: I've got the picture of the audience on the computer.

[Pause to change batteries.]

THOMAS: When you went to Black Mountain on your "recce," was it in session? Did you talk to Josef Albers?

SUSAN WEIL: No, but I talked to people there, and I felt the character of the place and met students and some of the teachers. I just loved it.

THOMAS: I spent a little time last night with Darryl Pottorf, who told me that Bob had said to him that Josef Albers was smitten with you.

SUSAN WEIL: I never heard that. He liked women.

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: At that time, when you're 17 years old, [and] you know you want to be an artist, are there painters who are working at that time who are of interest to you? We've already got Outer Island, and that's going to be fermenting for a while. In 1947, is there anybody who's coming to your mind that sort of goes, hmm, I respond to that work? Or is it too soon?

SUSAN WEIL: No. I mean, my parents, my father in particular, would take me to shows and the museum and so on. I remember the artists that were in his timeframe were like Marsden Hartley and different ones of that period, and we particularly would go to those shows. I was always very moved by Matisse; I just felt his drawing and his way of working and sense of color and everything was something I deeply admired and still do. And I once went to the Met and saw a Cézanne watercolor show, and I just suddenly saw it the way it was then, and I was so moved by it. I had the good fortune to have an association with art as a teenager, and my father used to try to teach me a bit about art history, and I was a very fortunate person -- in my pick of parents. [Laughter.]

THOMAS: And so they send you to Paris, and you go to the Académie -- this is my filling in some holes -- the Académie during the day.., Julian during the day, and Grande Chaumière during the evening to draw, correct?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, yeah.

THOMAS: Did you get anything out of those classes?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, sure. Not the Académie. It was so annoying to me that an artist would pose for a week, you know, and I would make a drawing and then I would want

something else entirely, and it wouldn't happen, you know. I'd move around the room so that it was different. At that point my French wasn't good enough to talk to whoever was teaching the class, so I don't even remember or know. So I didn't get anything out of his presence, but at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, I loved drawing, and it was so interesting because the models would come and look at what you drew and make comments, and it was delightful.

THOMAS: You would skip class during the day?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, we would a bit, but not much. I mean, we'd get to the museums and stuff, and we did some painting outdoors. I remember we went to one of the railroad stations -- maybe it was Saint Gare -- and painted there.

THOMAS: In the station.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. So anyway, we did that, and also we painted in the pension where we were staying. And there's an anecdote that's been written about, but it was absolutely true, that when you spilled paint on this oriental rug, what we would do is put that color on the other three segments so that it stayed symmetrical, and then nobody noticed. So that was true, we did that.

THOMAS: So you messed it up!

SUSAN WEIL: No, we made it brighter!

THOMAS: What other stories come to mind, or do they, of when you [and Bob] were in Paris?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I don't really have much to offer about that.

THOMAS: Okay.

SUSAN WEIL: It was during the McCarthy years, and that worried me a great deal because it was so hard on people, and particularly people who were homosexual because it was such a terrible thing, the prejudice about sexuality then, and McCarthy was so scary, and I remember talking about that with those people.

THOMAS: … That was information that you knew when you were going over in '49, right? '47?

SUSAN WEIL: '48.

THOMAS: And for those several months were you hearing about it in Paris also?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. Very, very frightening thing.

THOMAS: There's an exhibit in Washington now called "Hide/Seek," and the curators

come down pretty hard on -- and it's about hidden coded messages in paintings, and the curators come down pretty hard on these artists for not coming out in the 1950s, ...

SUSAN WEIL: You couldn't. You couldn't. You absolutely couldn't.

THOMAS: I think understanding the McCarthy era is -- thank you for saying that. I don't think anybody thinks about that very much.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, such a frightening time.

THOMAS: I wanted to -- here were just some of the holes that I had about Black Mountain. … the lore about Josef Albers is that he was a pretty tough teacher.

SUSAN WEIL: It was a contemporary academy, you had to do things his way; his way was the only way. And we were not allowed to think of ourselves as artists, we had to be students, and we were not allowed to think of our work as of any value because we were just learning to be artists, and that was so startling to me because it wasn't like that you were ambitious in the art world, but I had made up my mind I was going to be an artist, and I knew I was on a journey to get there, but he didn't even allow you to think that way.

THOMAS: When the school day was over, did everybody go back to a studio and say, "Okay, now I actually am going to be an artist and I'm going to do things on the side.."

SUSAN WEIL: Not very much, not very much.

THOMAS: He was very German, wasn't he?

[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I mean, the Bauhaus, he had created a way of teaching at the Bauhaus, and he was importing that to the States, and it was out of the emotionality about contemporary art, and, you know, like you have to take it seriously because there's a method. No, it was a very funny thing for me because working with Aaron Kurzen, it was all just letting yourself find your own expression, and Albers wasn't that way at all.

THOMAS: How did he influence what you did later, Albers.

SUSAN WEIL: I got a lot of information from the way he taught color, and also drawing. I mean, a lot of people who thought they couldn't draw really could draw under Albers' teaching. I mean, they didn't do any individual drawing because you put them all on the floor for critiques and you couldn't tell one from another, you hardly knew which one to pick up, you know, of your own. [Laughter.] And also, in order that you shouldn't have ego, you were supposed to draw another drawing on top of your drawing --

THOMAS: Erase it and then draw it again?

SUSAN WEIL: No, we were not allowed erasers ever. I think I have drawings that have drawings under them from [that time] --

THOMAS: I was talking to Lawrence Voytek, the fabricator down in Captiva, and he told me a story that made me think about Josef Albers and his long-term impact because Lawrence said that an artist came into the studio, and Bob was having a problem -- maybe that's not the right word -- but Bob was working on an interrupted line, and the man said, "Bob, it's really simple, you get a ruler and you just stop and start, and you stop and -- you know, you just make that line, and then you erase what you don't want," and apparently Bob just said, "Oh, no, you can't do it that way."

SUSAN WEIL: Right.

THOMAS: And I thought, my gosh, that sounded like something Josef Albers might have said to him.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I mean, we weren't allowed to use erasers. We were supposed to express the form with as little line as possible, and that was partly about being a student and not an artist, too. You had to stand up for what you drew. I wonder if he ever used erasers. [Laughter.] That was a strict rule, no erasers.

THOMAS: Something else that's sort of in that lore department is that Albers didn't think Bob was a very talented person?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, Albers felt that because we had been studying in Paris, we might have highfalutin ideas about ourselves, and he was reactive to that, and so he particularly took that out on Bob, you know, and also because Bob was not as educated about other artists. He objected to Bob's -- he felt his ego and he objected to it.

THOMAS: We talked last time about the "entertainments" [at Black Mountain], and you were saying that it was like a soufflé, that you had all these different people from all of these different areas who were coming together... Do you, in retrospect, do you see that as really the initiative for the "Happenings" …

SUSAN WEIL: Absolutely, absolutely. But the "Happenings" had their history, too, in the Bauhaus, and in the [Kurt] Schwitters, Schwitters' performances, and in other countries and other periods, there were always these explorations. I thought it was very strange to think the "Happenings" were the beginning of anything, they were just having their moment in the States. The concept wasn't new; it took place in a lot of cultures. But I think it did help those people to feel that the arts were not limited to one discipline, you know, that we all could learn from each other and bring a lot more to it in terms of it being theatre and music and everything and everything.

THOMAS: Was John Cage there when you were there?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. I knew him then, but when he was there to stay, it was actually the summer of the year I left, but I knew John my whole adult life, and even my not quite so adult life. [Laughter.]

THOMAS: There seems to be this John Cage overlay on an awful lot of people. [SW:Yeah] Would you count yourself amongst those....?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I mean, Bob changed John, and John changed Bob, there's no question of that.

THOMAS: Talk about that…

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I mean, because of his eastern interest and because of his sense of what is music and everything. I mean, Bob questioning everything really, that was a big thing to Bob, and I think Bob brought him a lot, too, in terms of his explorations. But maybe not me as much, I don't think so.

THOMAS: But you did that nice picture "4'33".

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. No, I so admired him, but I don't think he changed my work a lot, no. And Merce I knew just as long.

THOMAS: They really were giants of that world.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, absolutely. It's different to know those people before they had any acceptance in the world because now you know they're figures that everybody knows about and everything, but you know them before they were those kind of people, and Bob, too. I knew him when he was a kid trying to find his way, you know, and after the world makes a fuss about these people, it's different.

THOMAS: It changes you.

SUSAN WEIL: It does, and nobody -- I'm not in that category yet, so I don't have to worry about it. [KT: Well…] It does change you.

THOMAS: But it doesn't change everything, does it?

SUSAN WEIL: No, no, no, but you have a certain armor about your place, you know. I think that's one reason Bob left New York, was that he couldn't cope with all the constant attention.

THOMAS: I wondered about that. It seems that that whole world was, not becoming, but there were pieces of it that were more about their celebrity than about artistically what they were doing.

SUSAN WEIL: Right. I mean, and so for all those guys that were in that place, and they had their different ways to escape it, you know. [KT: Sure.] Jasper did, and Chuck Close did, and everybody who was kind of an art hero, like movie stars, you know, they had to protect themselves.

THOMAS: And most of them did it by having someplace else to go to?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, they did it one way or another. I mean, Jasper, it was always interior, he was never really a public person.

THOMAS: He wore that armor.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, he was that way before he was well-known, too. Laughter.] I mean, he was an internal, interior person.

THOMAS: Isn't that interesting. I only met him one time. Bob introduced me to him at a ULAE Print Show at the Corcoran, and I remember walking across the room because Bob was … "Oh, there's Jasper," and we walked over, and there was Mr. Johns, and he had his arm sort of across his chest, and he looked like he was protecting himself from the world.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, he did that. He always did that. I mean, even when nobody was bothering him, when he was a young man, he was not open to things, you know, he was interior.

THOMAS: I don't know if you have a view of this … this is on my list of things to check because I've heard two different stories, and so I wonder whether or not you have a view or know something different. I read an oral history with Leo [Castelli] where he talks about going to see Bob, Bob wants to show him some paintings, and Bob says, "There are some of these paintings that are really behind here on the wall, and I need some help to move them, and my friend Jasper is downstairs and he'll come up at some point and help us move them and then you can see them," and that's when Leo said, "Can I see his work?" The other story that I hear is that Bob and Leo are upstairs and Jasper comes up with a container of ice so that they can have a drink, and Leo says, "Oh, can I see your work?" to Jasper. Do you have a sense of which one of those is true?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, they all shifted a little, but I think the one of his bringing the ice is more true.

THOMAS: Is it?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. I mean, I wasn't there, but I remember that it was a real problem that he took his focus off of Bob's work, shifted it to Jasper and gave him a show before he gave Bob a show.

THOMAS: From what I've read, and heard, is that there was always some unease about

that.

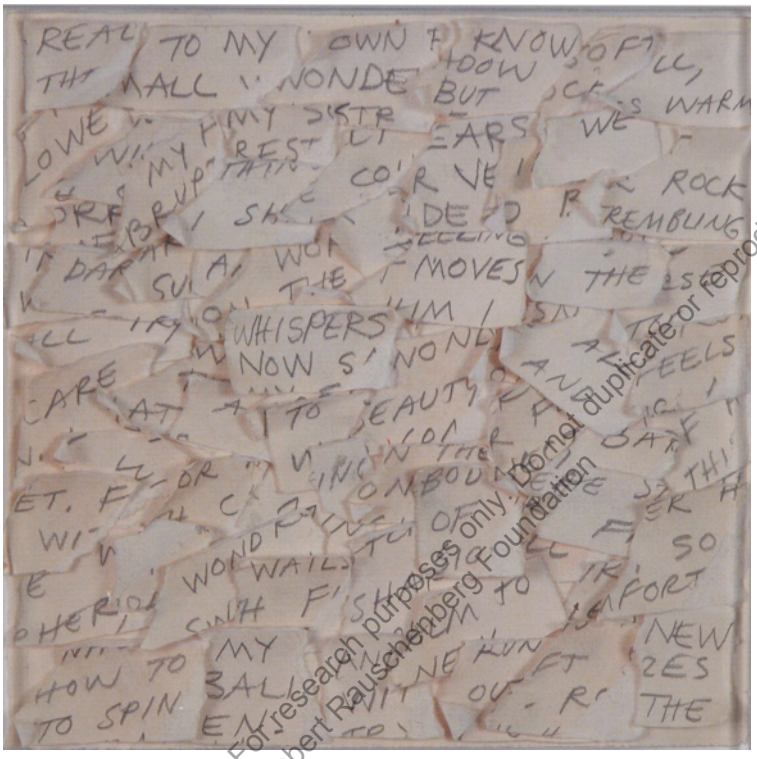
SUSAN WEIL: Yes.

THOMAS: Not a cool move on Mr. Castelli's part.

SUSAN WEIL: No. We can't tell him that anymore.

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: So *Secrets*. You did make *Secrets* at Black Mountain.



[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*Secrets, 1949, 10" x 10", pencil, torn paper, collage*]

SUSAN WEIL: Yes.

THOMAS: How did you do that without Mr. Albers knowing about it?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I didn't hide it from him, but that was an expression of talking to myself, you know. I brought all the stuff out and then I tore it up and put it together. I was talking to myself. I had issues, and it was like just my thoughts I didn't want to share, so that's the way I did it, I cut them all up, or I tore them all up, and put them back together as a texture with words, you know.

THOMAS: The first time you combined the two, words as art?

SUSAN WEIL: I don't know if it was the first. No, at that time I had done poem drawings. [KT: You had?] Yeah, I had.

THOMAS: So those started really early.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, but it wasn't like a commitment to doing one every day, which sometimes I regret, I have to say.

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: I must say when I woke up at 7:00 this morning, I thought, "Mmm, I wonder if Sue has been up for an hour already."

SUSAN WEIL: No, I have no poem so far today.

THOMAS: When did you start doing those?

SUSAN WEIL: As an exercise every day?

THOMAS: Yes.

SUSAN WEIL: Molly, where's the poem book, the Swedish one? That says. I have no sense of time, I don't know when anything was. Where's my glasses?

THOMAS: Are these? These are sunglasses.

[REVIEW BOOK]

SUSAN WEIL: They're not here. Does this have Anders' writing?

THOMAS: Yes. Oh, look at those!

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. Well, you can have this.

THOMAS: Can I page through it?

SUSAN WEIL: Sure.

[Off the record.]

THOMAS: This is Cuppa-Cuppa.".

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, that's the first one. So what's the date on that?

THOMAS: 1984, May 11th.

SUSAN WEIL: That's when I started.

THOMAS: You get up every morning --

SUSAN WEIL: Now I don't discipline myself to do it in the morning, I just have to do it within the day. [KT: Yes.] But I have over 100 poem books now with the – (KT: They're beautiful.)

SUSAN WEIL: Thank you. In the Skira book, they have one for each decade.

THOMAS: The Skira book is going to be a catalogue raisonné?

SUSAN WEIL: No, it's -- well, where is it?

THOMAS: Sue, these are fantastic.

SUSAN WEIL: Thank you. [KT: Fantastic.] Yeah, I'm a crazy person.

THOMAS: No.

SUSAN WEIL: That's little Sue.

THOMAS: Well, they're beautiful, absolutely beautiful.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, here it is, the Skira book. [KT: How beautiful.]

THOMAS: …This is the "Moving Pictures."

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. That's the book. I have an advanced copy, I have some advanced copies.

THOMAS: I'm going to put this aside because I want to talk about this later.

SUSAN WEIL: Right.

THOMAS: Okay? Otherwise, I'll really get all those historians [wondering], "Why couldn't she stay on track?"

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: So you made *Secrets* and the only piece of work that I have seen other than

a photograph that Bob did in that year. He did photography there, which didn't interest you.

SUSAN WEIL: He took a class with Hazel Larsen, who was a wonderful photographer,

[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*Quiet House, 1949, 20" x 16", gelatin silver print*]

and I didn't do that, but he took the "Quiet House" photographs, wonderful, wonderful photographs, and I was just focused on the art and poetry. I did study poetry at Black Mountain.

THOMAS: What made me think about asking you about this picture was something I read ….you said you would come up with all these titles, and here was one that I thought maybe you came up with, "This Is the First Half of a Print Designed to Exist in Passing Time"? Do you remember that?

SUSAN WEIL: But it's how I think.

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: It's a series of wood cuts that Bob had done, … I didn't know if that was like a collaboration[i] that he was saying (SW: No.) "I've got this," and you said, "Well, I've got a title for it"?

SUSAN WEIL: No. I mean, I titled a bunch of the *Blueprints* but basically Bob also was so verbally adventurous, and he wasn't really a reader because of his dyslexia, but he was very verbally adventurous, and, I mean, you know from his naming of things and the way he thinks about things, so, no, I think that's him. [Laughter.]

THOMAS: Here's something that Darryl said last night. He said that if it wasn't for you, that Bob would have been nowhere, that you opened up the art world for him. Do you ever think of yourself that way?

SUSAN WEIL: Not really, but that's very generous of Darryl. I think I helped him find his way because even though I was 5 years younger, the art world was opened to me, and it had been denied him, and he was trying to find his way out of an area that was hostile to his upbringing, and he was terrific about inventing himself, I mean, he really was terrific. And maybe I helped him on that journey -- I think I did -- but then he was off on that journey and

remained there.

THOMAS: It was a heartfelt observation.

SUSAN WEIL: Very sweet. I'm happy to hear that.

THOMAS: Here's my next question. Moving to New York now… We've talked about the impact that Abstract Expressionists had on you when you returned from Black Mountain, but we didn't talk about how that happened. You said that when you returned from Black Mountain, "well, everything you knew about art, just forget it," and I was wondering when that moment happened for you, the "just forget it." I know that you drove some pictures for Albers up to the --

SUSAN WEIL: Egan Gallery. (KT: Yes. Was that…) Yeah, that was very strong because at that time he had a Kline show up, and we were bringing Albers' paintings for him as a favor, and I was knocked out by the Kline paintings, and then once you've kind of come through that, you find all the other kind of exciting stuff happening, and also some of those artists, after I left, had come to Black Mountain, Bill and Elaine de Kooning were there, and Motherwell was there, and so on. So you don't have to be a detective to find them, you know, that was the excitement of the moment.

THOMAS: …probably like your father seeing Marsden Hartley.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, yeah.

THOMAS: That's nice. I wanted to talk more about the "Blueprint" pictures because I'm really curious how they happened. But once you had done those, …and I think you said last time you guys were living on your G.I. Bill funds, and so that was tough, and …you made some money with those pictures being in Bonwit Teller windows? (SW: Yeah) How did you make that happen? Do you remember?

SUSAN WEIL: No. Bob figured them out.

THOMAS: He did that one?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. Gene Moore was the person at Bonwit Teller's, and somehow or other he took on the *Blueprints.*

THOMAS: And ditto with the Life Magazine, Bob made that happen. (SW: Yeah.) That must have been fun, though, to see them in the --

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, it was so exciting, it was so crazy, because we were such young things, and this was, you know, like our first exhibition together. When we went to the League was at the Nash Auto Sales room, we had our paintings there, so we did not have a big place in the world, and so then we didn't have huge expectations, but we were excited about the

Blueprints and Edward Steichen encouraged us, and we had the piece at MoMA, and he was so sweet, he really was.

THOMAS: Mr. Steichen?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. He was excited and interested and said he'd done sensitized images themselves as cloth and stuff, and it was kind of amazing to -- at that time, I mean, you could never do that now, walk into MoMA and be in a show, I mean, it's no way, but in those days everything was more -- people were excited about things and you didn't have to have credentials, you know.

THOMAS: Where are you looking in the mirror and saying, "Susan, wow, you're an artist, think of yourself as an artist."

SUSAN WEIL: I always did.

THOMAS: You always did.

SUSAN WEIL: Since after Black Mountain, yeah. (KT: Always did.) Yeah. But I didn't do anything much about my work during the years I was raising Chris and stuff. I always worked, but I couldn't do that other move, I didn't have the space for it.

THOMAS: Sure.

SUSAN WEIL: So I just made work, and I did that all along really until -- I mean, I showed my work some, I showed at Parsons-Dreyfuss and I showed here and there, but when Anders Tornberg took my work seriously, then I had to think a little differently.

THOMAS: Right. 1977. How did you meet him? I'm going to just jump forward.

SUSAN WEIL: I had this artist friend, Jan Hafstrom, and actually we went to an evening at Bob and Sylvia Whitman's house, and Jan was there with his wife and kid, and he was real interested about PS1, and I was at PS1 at that time, I had a studio there, and he came out to visit me there, and he really loved the place, and wanted it, and he sublet a studio there from someone who was going away for a couple months or something, and so then we really paid attention to each other's work during that time, and Anders was his art dealer then, so he told Anders about my work, and also Anders had seen some things. And so one day I got a phone call, and he said, "My name is Anders Tornberg, and I love you." And then he came to the studio and immediately offered me a show, and the show was in '78, that was in '77. And then he had an intense interest in it and made me a lot of shows elsewhere in Scandinavia and Europe, and he made what they call an ombay [ph], it's like incorporated of me and Jan, and he was going to push artwork, and he gave us each our own show at the art fair in Basel. (KT: In Basel?) Yeah.

THOMAS: And when you say "each," you and --

SUSAN WEIL: Jan Hafstrom. And so then he was just a big part of our lives. He would come to New York and stay with us, and he was really a huge part of our lives, and we had the most dear relationship because I could argue with him, I could speak my mind, and he could, too, and he did so much for me in terms of my respecting myself as an artist in the world, and also -- I mean, I always respected my work, but he made me respect myself. And he died about 10 years ago. And actually when he was pretty ill, he was coming up on his 60th birthday, and Bernie and I went to Sweden to be there for his birthday, and I contacted all the artists he was interested in and asked them to make him a birthday present, and I went over with a big collection of collages, paintings, drawings, whatever, photographs, whatever it was, and came to his 60th birthday, and he was so ill, and I have pictures of him coming in his bathrobe from bed, and this birthday cake with 60 candles and 60 presents and everything. And we stayed there and stayed with Anders and Ir [ph], and then he was sent to the hospital, and we visited him in the hospital, and then he was sent to a hospice, and we visited him there. And he wasn't very alert, of course, because he was so sick, and then I told him about a painting thought I had, and his eyes opened wide, and he was ready to talk about that, and then he died within a few days of our trip, and --

THOMAS: What a nice gift to give him.

SUSAN WEIL: He was really a huge part of our lives. I mean, I had other important relationships with characters in the art world, but that was kind of unique. And Sundaram Tagore is so special, too.

THOMAS: But it sounds like what Anders said was, "Woman, get to work."

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. Well, no, he just was right there for everything that I did and we talked about, and he did the poem book.

THOMAS: You did several projects. He was involved in shows, organizing shows, and you had several in Sweden …

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, I don't even know how many. (KT: Yes) And he made me a museum show in Finland, and came there, and I had two floors of a museum, and all kinds of other things, you know.

THOMAS: How does it work? When he says, "We've got a museum show," or, "This gallery would like to show your work," do you say, "Okay, well, here's what I've been working on, and take a look at this," … Can you talk a little bit about how for you those shows come about?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, many shows are an accumulation of work I've already done, but sometimes they -- Anders gave me a poem show where I took the poem images and made studio works with them, and the poems were on the wall, and sometimes I had a show of the artist books, and that's another one that comes in that category of beloved friends, is Vincent

FitzGerald – (KT: Yes) And I had a book show at the museum in Stockholm, the --

THOMAS: National?

SUSAN WEIL: The National, which is like our Met, it's all times of work, and that was about the books, and we did so much work on that, and Vincent came over for that, and we did everything about the show together, and I asked Olle Granath who was the head of that museum at that time, I said to him, "Well, who else is having a show at that time?" and he said, "Well, Cézanne," and I said, "Okay, I'm in."

[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: And Olle Granath also wrote in the Skira book about my work in Sweden. And, no, I've had a very joyful life in that my working relationships have often been so personal, not just a business deal, but so personal, like Vincent and Anders and Sundaram. Sundaram has now got such a big cast of characters that he's got three galleries -- one in Asia, one in the West Coast, and one in New York -- and so he's very full of stuff that he has to do, but when I was in his first gallery, he was like them, I mean, you know, really available; now he's always traveling with one hundred things to do.

THOMAS: How did you hook up, you and Sundaram?

SUSAN WEIL: Bob and Darryl. Darryl was showing. Darryl had the first show at Sundaram's first new gallery there, and I said to Bob, "Well, should I send him some photographs?" He said, "No way, he'll come to the studio," so he did.

THOMAS: That's nice serendipity, because you've had several shows with him now.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, yeah. I've had in Hong Kong and L.A. and New York, I've had many, many. (KT: That's very nice.) And he shows artwork in art fairs and stuff, too.

THOMAS: Yeah, that's very nice.

SUSAN WEIL: It's terrific. He's a wonderful man, he really is.

THOMAS: So you've been to Hong Kong…. (SW: No.) No? Your art has.

SUSAN WEIL: My art has. No, I am not able to travel much. I went to L.A. for my show there.

[off the record]

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, my painting babies have been to Hong Kong.

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: That's how you went. (SW: Right.)

THOMAS: Back in the '50s, you did make a picture about Chris.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, yeah, there's a lot of watercolors and drawings and a big painting and everything about Chris, yes.

THOMAS: There's one that you made that I saw when you were pregnant with Chris, and it looks like a 3-dimensional trapunto of a baby in the womb? (SW: Uh-huh.)
Did you make pictures about him or of him or for him when he was growing up?

SUSAN WEIL: Sure. Yeah, yeah. We did.

THOMAS: In the "Chris grows up" department, as you said, you continued your work, but it sounds like from what you just said you did that when you could as opposed to getting up at 6:00 in the morning and having --

SUSAN WEIL: No, I worked every day.

THOMAS: Did he spend a lot of time with his dad?

SUSAN WEIL: He spent some time with his dad, but at that point Bob was traveling a lot and his life was pretty complicated, and so when he was in New York, they would see each other, yes, and so on. And then oftentimes I remember Chris was really afraid that his father would be too busy to see him, but, of course, they had a dialogue all those years, and Chris used to go to his house with his friends, you know, and Chris was in the "Happenings." He always felt very much about his father, and as an adult, they were enormously close. It's very fine.

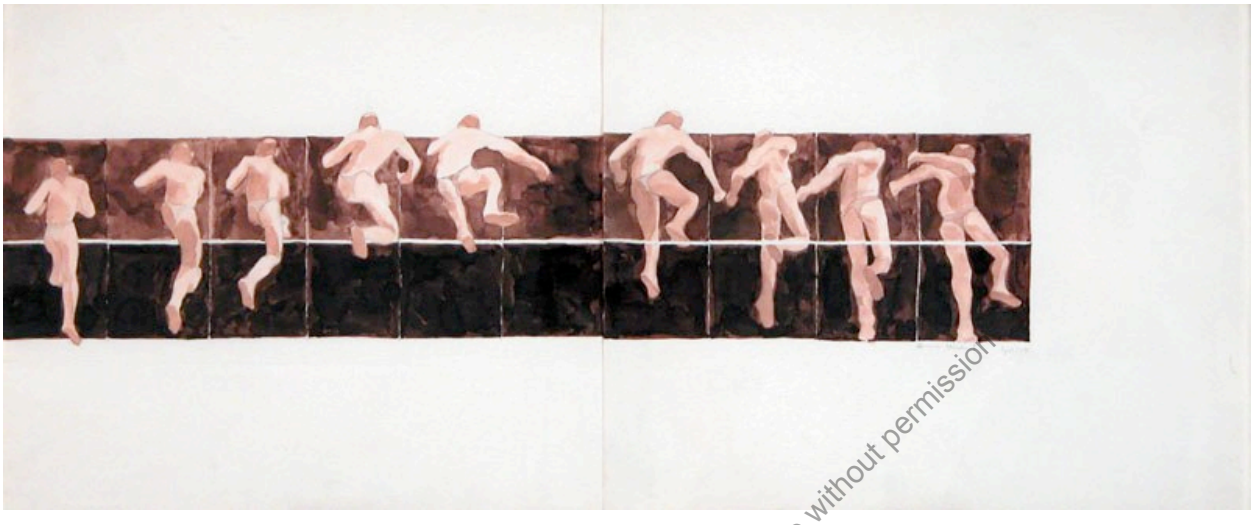
THOMAS: Do you think that that was the time that they -- what do you call it, values transmission? … Remember when you and I were talking about the lab school and I was saying how Chris was so wonderful to say to the teachers that whatever anybody calls art is art, and that you couldn't be judgmental about it, and you said that sounds like Chris, but that also sounds like his father.

SUSAN WEIL: Right, right. Well, I mean, having three artist parents, you have quite a growing up.

THOMAS: I'm going to jump back to Mr. Muybridge. You and I share an affection for all of the work that came out at that time, me because of the effect it has on filmmaking, and for you, motion studies. (SW: Right.) How did you get turned on to his work?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, when I first saw anything of it, it was very important to me because it did express time segments, and very early on I knew of the work and made tons of drawings from it and so on. No, it's been very important to me, but I told you, I'm timeless, I

cannot tell you when I first knew of Muybridge.



[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH: *Jumper, 1987,26."5 X 11", watercolor on paper]*

THOMAS: I know that "time" is important to your work. Always has been?

SUSAN WEIL: All my adult life, yeah.

THOMAS: I was wondering if in the 1960s, the Judson group, seeing those performances, which I assume you did – (SW: Yeah.) -- played into that at all.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, just in the same sense that Black Mountain provided these extensions of how you think about work. But I don't know, I mean, I knew a lot of those people and responded and respected their energy and their direction, but, you know, how that directly went into my work, I couldn't tell you, yeah.

THOMAS: How was the Judson group?

SUSAN WEIL: It was great. It was great. It was exciting. I was friends with Dorothea Rockburne, and we went together to see how people would have a concept to do a performance, and then they would borrow from each other, and, "You can be in my piece," and, "You can be in my piece," and they had a place to do it, and it was just so generous and so wonderful to watch the forming of the choreography, it really was.

THOMAS: Did you watch as a process or did you see all that come together in the performance?

SUSAN WEIL: No, I saw the process, too, yeah. I watched these pieces develop, yeah.

THOMAS: It does sound like a little community of art folks.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, but it was not a closed community. I mean, it was not like, "We're a little group, and you're not welcome," it wasn't like that at all.

THOMAS: You had said last time when we talked about the zoo pictures and ….that you and Bob had both wanted to have a large family, and you got one, two kids, Bernie, you had an extended family. It seemed to me that he didn't get that, but that those dancers and that sort of community --

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, well, I mean, when we were talking about getting married, he made it clear that he wanted children, but he did have an extended family in the sense of people who helped him with his work, you know, like Brice Marden and Dorothea and so on. So, you know, you have several kinds of families, like Molly is now part of my family, and she was of my original family, too, but I mean it's like your working family, and David, too. And I think Bob had a really huge extended family.

THOMAS: … as I looked at his world, really prompted by what you had said, I thought, I can see how that happened.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. Well, also many years when Sashkia was part of his life, his son Hummingbird was like a kid in Bob's house, too. I mean, if you're being realistic about family, Bob was part of Hummingbird's growing up. And he had Chris, too. (KT: Lucky fellow.) Absolutely.

THOMAS: Are you okay? Do you want some water? Do you want to take a break?

SUSAN WEIL: I wouldn't mind taking a break.

MOLLY SHEA: Hummingbird. I love it. Somebody named their child Hummingbird?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah.

[Pause.]

THOMAS: I wanted to go back was to the Betty Parsons? I read a story that you and Bob had been wandering around and walked into her gallery and started talking to her about work. Is that correct? Do you remember that?

SUSAN WEIL: No. No. It's interesting because -- is that where Bob's first show was?

THOMAS: Yeah, that was his first show.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. No, I don't know how he connected with her really in the

beginning. But she was a terrific person and artist and really lovely to work with.

THOMAS: I see some of these stories and I see a couple of versions of them. One version says Sue Weil and Bob Rauschenberg were walking around and they walked into that gallery, and then there's another story that says Bob took a bunch of paintings over there to that gallery, and I have a certain responsibility or opportunity here to see if I can help sift that out…

SUSAN WEIL: Uh-huh.

THOMAS: Do you remember the show at all?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, yeah, I do, and it's interesting because after the show, whatever paintings came back, we stored at the island, and that house burned down and most of those paintings went with it.

THOMAS: Really? Nothing was left.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, there are things that are left. There are still paintings that were in that show, but I don't know why they weren't with the group at the island, but a lot of my work and that batch of Bob's work and other -- my father's writing. (KT: Wow.)

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah.

THOMAS: … I read somewhere that Bob had helped himself to one of your pictures and overpainted it? Is that familiar?

SUSAN WEIL: No. I know that one of his paintings went to John Cage, and John was away, and Bob, as a favor to him, painted over his own painting and John was --

[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: That's true, but he didn't paint over one of my paintings.

THOMAS: "I can make it better"?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. I think that was when he was doing black paintings, and I think he -- I'm not positive about that, but I think he made it into one of his black paintings.

THOMAS: When I went to the Gagosian Gallery show I saw a painting that I'd never seen before called *Short Circuit* and it had one of your works in it and one of Jasper's works in it, so I thought there had to be a story there.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, what happened was Bob was the handyman at the Gallery, and they were having an annual or something like that, and they didn't want a painting of mine and they didn't want a painting of Jasper's, so Bob put them on his painting as a generosity, and it's

funny because I'm not very fond of the painting of mine that's in there, but I love the whole thing and I love the concept. But the painting you saw didn't have a real Jasper because that was stolen out of the painting, and then Elaine Sturtevant, who was one of these people who would make replicas of people's work, she made a Jasper for the piece, and then Bob didn't want to show it anymore after that because that wasn't Jasper's piece. But for the Gagosian show, all the work came out of his own storage and they showed that.

THOMAS: All of that work at the Gagosian, none of it had been in private hands …

SUSAN WEIL: I think it was in Bob's storage. I mean, David could confirm that, but that's my impression.

THOMAS: As I said before when we were talking, it seemed to me that you and Bob had an enviable divorce – (SW: Correct.) -- how did you do that?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, the thing is that when our marriage came apart, it was because someone else came into Bob's life, and it wasn't my doing, and I continued to love and care for Bob, and love and care for Chris, and so I never had any personal angry feelings towards him. I didn't like his choice, to switch partners, but I couldn't control that.

And so we always had a very amicable relationship, and I have never in my life said a bad word about Bob in all the years Chris was growing up, I don't believe in that. I mean, I could have been hurt, he didn't have room for me anymore, but that was less important to our having shared our growing up in art. I think that's such a gift, and I continue to love the man, I love him now, and he really was appreciative of what we were to each other, and so in his own way he loved me, too, and so there was no problem there.

THOMAS: The "Blueprint" picture that y'all made together of you [*Sue]*, there's such tenderness in that picture. ,It's really beautiful, and in fact when you were looking at Molly a little bit ago, I thought, it's exactly the same.

SUSAN WEIL: There's Susan.

THOMAS: Yeah.

SUSAN WEIL: But, you know, the photographs he took of me in Central Park, I think those are just amazing, beautiful.

THOMAS: And you shared some of the same friends, Dorothea, Tricia, Jasper, John Cage.

SUSAN WEIL: Uh-huh. Yeah, we had the same friends. You know, it was just a life choice at that moment, and it was about 7 years before I married Bernie, so all of those years it was just me and Chris.

THOMAS: You told me last time I was here how you met Bernie, so I wanted to ask

you if you would tell that story for the microphone ….

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, well, I was spending summers in Stony Creek, where our island was, and I wanted a studio. So Dorothea, Dorothea Rockburne, who was my good friend, said, "I have an architect friend, and he works after Bucky Fuller," and so I said, "Well, let me talk to him." And he came and we spent quite a long time developing my dome. He had left the Cambridge office and come to New York, and he was working at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and he was very interested in doing a dome for me, and so we began on it, and his concept was of a mass-produced house, and it was a prototype for a mass-produced house, and during the time of working towards the dome, he seemed to design himself into it.

[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: And I always said, too, that one reason he wanted to get married was that he loved Christopher so much and he wanted Christopher in his life. I mean, I'm sure he appreciated my being there, too --[Laughter.] -- but that was an influence. He designed himself into the dome and there was Christopher.

THOMAS: Did it take longer than usual for him to design that dome? It seems to me that he might well have sort of decided early on that he wanted to extend the process.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, it was a very long process, and actually the structure of the dome was not one that had ever been done in domes before, it had these parallels that let the base of the dome be flat, and these parallel lines running through it and everything, and that was his own geometry, so it was very special, and all the systems for doing it and everything were very wonderful and special, but, of course, in the process he gave up on the idea of it being a studio, it was our home. [Laughter.]

THOMAS: That sounds like a great project.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. Right now it's being renovated and the -- what's your father?

MOLLY SHEA: Contractor?

SUSAN WEIL: The contractor is Molly's dad, and the architect for the renovation is a very dear friend who I've known since he was six, and so it's a very, very dear and loving renovation.

THOMAS: How did Bernie decide to leave architecture and become an artist? I'm sure you had an influence on that.

SUSAN WEIL: No. To tease Bernie, I always say I was married to an artist, now I'm trying something else. Bernie wore Brooks Brothers suits and went to work every day at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, and I tease him about it because then a couple of years of our being married he was a sculptor and never out of his jeans, so I tease him about that. But what

happened was he went to Park Place Gallery, and there he met Forrest Myers and other of the sculptors there, and they were very interested in doing a dome show, and did so. So Bernie was involved with all these sculptors and so on, and of course he'd always been interested in art, too, and he always says, "Well, I made sculptures back in college and all," but he never professionally was a sculptor before, they invited him to be in a group show there, so that was his first professional sculpture, and then he just sort of shifted gears and went full blast into being a sculptor and did amazing work, really amazing.

THOMAS: Did he go to Sweden because you had been there and had already --

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I told you about how I got to Sweden. (KT: Yes.) And we went there a bunch about my work, and in the process, we met a lot of artists and so on, and so a gallerist there was very interested in Bernie's work, it was Claes Nordenhake -- And he had a gallery at Malmo, Sweden, and now has a gallery in Stockholm and in Germany, in Berlin. So he wanted to show Bernie's work. And then he really took Bernie on and respected his work and so on, and meanwhile, he was with Paula Cooper Gallery and then with Max Hutchinson. And then they had a professor at the art university there, art school, the state school, and he was asked to substitute for this guy for a period of time when he was outside of Sweden, and then they petitioned that Bernie should be a professor, and so he was for 9 years.

THOMAS: I think you told me before that you would go back and forth.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I was very involved with the bookwork and also had commitments here, so I would go over like for 3 months at a time, and then he'd come back in the summer, and stuff like that. So we were ocean commuting.

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: Did you ever do that, take the boat over?

SUSAN WEIL: No. I did when I first went to Paris, I went on a troop ship to Paris when I went there when I was a teenager.

THOMAS: Were there any troops on the ship?

SUSAN WEIL: No, it was a converted troop ship after World War II.

THOMAS: … I was going to ask you about whether or not the topography of Sweden, where I've never been, was anything like Outer Island.

SUSAN WEIL: It was attractive to me in that way, and my work was attractive to Swedish people in that way. Yes, because there are these archipelagos of islands off of Sweden that are amazing, and many, many, many Swedish families live on them and have summer homes on them, and in Finland the same thing, there's a huge archipelago of islands, and when you take a boat from Stockholm to Helsinki, you go through islands all the time, and when they stop for a

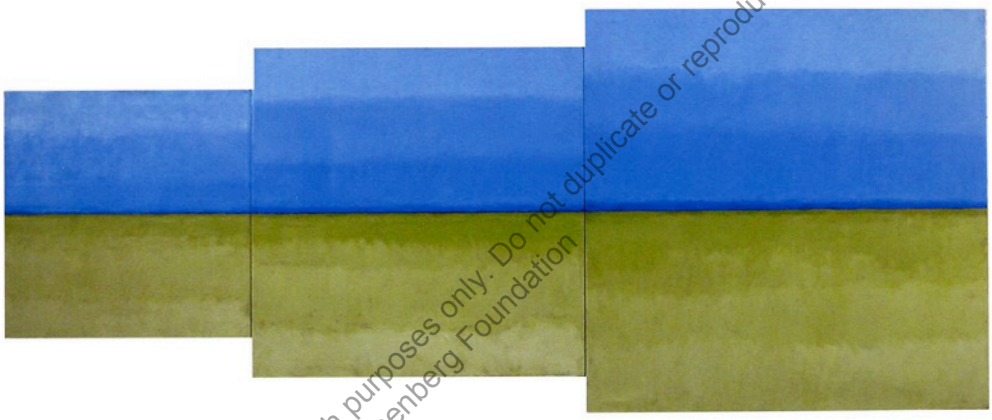
little while, there's more islands. (KT: More islands.) Yeah. Yeah, I love that.

THOMAS: As I think about it, when you started doing the horizon pictures, that was before any of this, right? 1972? …

SUSAN WEIL: Around there.

THOMAS: Yes. It was 1972. Tell me how those, if you would, came about, the fabric and …

SUSAN WEIL: It was my fascination with the horizon, looking so straight, being a curve at the edge of the earth, that was a very primal thing for me, and I worked with the horizon in that way. And as we said before, living on the island, it was in front of my eyes all the time, and I was fascinated with that, and when I did soft folds, I'd keep the horizon straight, and that was very tricky, but I did, and that work just became a part -- for years I did images about the horizon.



[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*Perspect, 1972, acrylic on canvas*]

THOMAS: How did you come to the choice of fabric for that?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I mean, mostly I was working on canvas, and a lot of the soft-folds fabric were canvas, which, of course, folds very differently than thin cloth. And, no, I mean, it was material that I was using in my painting anyway, so that was a natural jump.

THOMAS: As I told you, I wanted to ask you about the connection between them and *Jammers,* Bob's *Jammers.*

SUSAN WEIL: Right. Well, Bob spoke to me about that and he asked me if I felt okay about his working with soft fabrics, and I said absolutely. And, of course, everybody does rip-

offs of Bob in one way or another, and one year Chris was in a book, some kind of a book, and Bob said to him, "Everybody here is a junior Rauschenberg except you, Chris, you did your own." So that was funny.[Laughter.]

THOMAS: I looked at that picture for a very long time, and I couldn't understand how you could have made it with that line. Which came first, figuring out the line and what would happen if you picked up the edges or --

SUSAN WEIL: Well, it depends on the painting. I did some where the horizon got stuttered off, but, mostly, if it was a straight horizon on a soft cloth, mostly it was the horizon was painted after. (KT: They are really beautiful.) Thank you.

THOMAS: I wonder if this is a good time to talk about cross-pollination. Quite a number of your techniques seem to have influenced artists in your circle, Bob especially. I think about the *Blueprints* and the collage work you did and the horizons, and I wanted to ask you if you thought that was a fair observation.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I mean, if it was people that I had a real dialogue with, it was a mutual sharing. If it came from outside, that wouldn't be so.

THOMAS: One thinks of artists as working so solitarily when in fact there's always dialogue.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, and if it's not dialogue with other artists, it's dialogue with other work.

THOMAS: Oh, tell me.

SUSAN WEIL: I mean, you can be influenced by what somebody does and it changes what you do. That's not a dialogue with artists, that's appreciation of another kind of work and how it re-digests in your own.

THOMAS: I was thinking you were going to talk about writing.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I'm happy to talk about writing. [Laughter.]

THOMAS: That that was a part of the dialogue. But that's different.

SUSAN WEIL: That's different.

THOMAS: You said that you had a printing press when you were growing up…, that was the first time you worked as a printmaker?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I wouldn't call it that. That's a little tin toy, you know, where you put in rubber letters, that's not any serious printing press, but it's just making things is always such a joy and it was part of making things when I was a kid.

THOMAS: How did the Captiva Untitled Press experience come about?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, Bob was having guest artists there regularly, and he invited me, and it was just like that. He invited me, and I had never done lithographs before, so I didn't know quite what I was going to do, but once I got there and I got kind of walked through the process, understood what it was, then I could think in terms of using that, using the press as pressing the folds, the crumples and folds, which had already come into my work at that time, and it was just very exciting and very joyful.

THOMAS: How long does it take to do one of those pieces?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, the individual pieces don't take so very long after you've got your image on the stone, but then you're doing an edition, let's say you're doing an edition of 20, then it's 20 times, you know.

THOMAS: And those lithographs, are they the lithographs that are in "Two Notebooks," or was that a separate enterprise---

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, they're in "Two Notebooks." I did an edition of black-and-white lithographs, and then I did an edition in color, which was three parts. The one in color was as it was on the stone, and then it was crumpled, and then it was straightened out again. The crumples pulled apart, and I was very happy with thinking with the new medium and using it, really using it.

THOMAS: Did you like Captiva?

SUSAN WEIL: I love Captiva. I love Captiva. It's very marvelous, and how Bob made it his environment is very wonderful, and it's generous and fine, and very beautiful in terms of the plants and trees and things. It's all quite different from anything that was around me growing up, and I just loved that.

THOMAS: It's not Outer Island.

SUSAN WEIL: No, no, it's quite another environment.

THOMAS: Was that ["Two Notebooks"] your first book?

SUSAN WEIL: No, it wasn't my first book, but actually it was curious because I had this project with a couple of other artists about our work notebooks, and originally there were four of us, and we couldn't kind of work out how to make it into an actuality, and then Bob said he was interested in two of us, and not the other two. So then it became what it is, with Sylvia Whitman and myself, and it wasn't my first bookwork, but it was early on, yeah.

THOMAS: There was an image that you've created and then a "balance" for it that's a photograph …

SUSAN WEIL: Right, well, that's the form of the book, yeah.

THOMAS: I was wondering what was going on in your head … how that idea came about….

SUSAN WEIL: Well, I've always kind of worked with words to whatever I do, and it just seemed lovely in notebook form to have images about my work and images about other things and the words to them, that's what developed into my poems, really.

THOMAS: You had a very affecting story, image, piece, about Danky in that book. When did you start doing your homages? Always?

SUSAN WEIL: No, not always. It's been maybe going on for maybe 10, 15 years, on Danky's birthday, I make works to him, but also Vincent's brother Michael was murdered, and Sylvia's son Bernardo, committed suicide as a young teen, so I include them, it's for the boys who couldn't grow up. So every year on my brother's birthday, I have to have completed these three pieces: one for Vincent, one for Sylvia, and one for me. And actually Bernardo, Sylvia's son, died on Danky's birthday, and that's why he climbed right into this -- I was in my studio working on Danky's piece when Bob Whitman called me and said that Bernardo had killed himself, and so he just climbed into my group, his choice of Danky. So to me I always feel particularly about Danky's piece. I mean, he's very much in my mind when I'm making it, and I feel like he's making it in a way.

[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*Danky's Loss/Memory, 2007, 26.5 x 19.5", mixed media*]

THOMAS: Some time to be together.

SUSAN WEIL: It's slow. And it's never related to my work at that current moment, it's always separate from that. I always start fresh with those pieces, and then they become part of later work.

THOMAS: I was wondering whether or not you see a connection between a piece that you did for Danky, and then some months, years, down the road you revisit that.

SUSAN WEIL: Right. I had this very fun experience. One "Danky Day" that was fairly recent, a few years ago, in which I hadn't been able to go out much at all because of my problems walking and everything, and I hadn't been at the stores much or anything, but I was trying to put a form to the upcoming "Danky Day," and David [Susan Weil assistant] and I went to --

MOLLY SHEA: Home Depot.

SUSAN WEIL: -- Home Depot, and I had such a good time, I said it was like going to a museum. I was getting all these crazy parts for the pieces, and it was very exciting for me. And so that was a very interesting three that came to, one was called "Ohm" -- O-h-m -- "Deep O." [Laughter.] "Ohm Deep O."

THOMAS: So now let's talk about Mr. FitzGerald.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, one of my favorite people in the world. He's an amazing man. First he was involved in painting, and then he decided that that wasn't his life's work, and he eventually got around to "Livres d'Artiste" and began working between word and image, and the artists he worked with always had to work to a piece of writing -- now, he's done a couple of books that aren't that way.

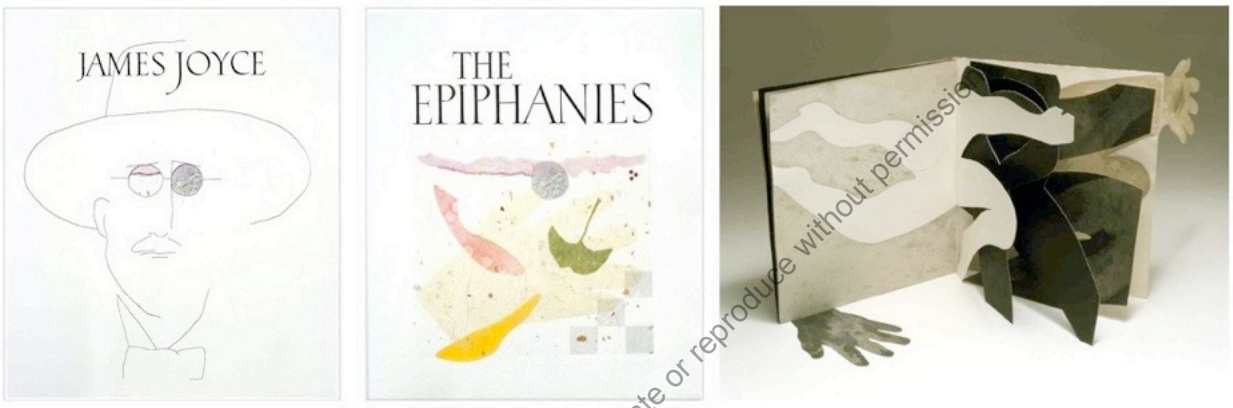
Oh, there's "Ohm Deep O."

[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: He will talk to an artist about a writer or either he'll present an artist with a writer, one or the other, and then he does these most extraordinary books, are just every kind of medium and craft and everything, and his editions go anywhere from 10 to 50, and they're just really beautiful artworks, and I have done 11 works with Vincent, that's not small. (KT: No.) And I'm very, very happy to work with him, and it's a very lovely dialogue we have about things. When I first knew Vincent, I was working in the printmaking workshop and he was working on a book there, so he was following what I was doing, and I was following what he was doing, and one day he said to me -- I was working with a printmaker, Marjorie Van Dyke, who was also an artist, and he said, "Would you and Marjorie do a book with me?" and he said, "And what writer means the most to you?" and simultaneously we both said James Joyce.

THOMAS: Really?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. And that was our first book together, "The Epiphanies," and the lovely thing about "The Epiphanies" is that it had never been published as a separate body of work, and Joyce carried them around with him all the time, and he would put seeds of them into his future writing, and it was just thrilling to work with them. And so Vincent got flabbergasted because we just plowed into it so fast, and he was working on two other books, so he said, "Well, I want you to sit on this for a while and to re-read Joyce and to think about it, and then eventually he said, "I want you to work with the Epiphanies, and why don't you each keep images for each of the Epiphanies?" So we did, we made images for all of the Epiphanies.



[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH – *The Epiphanies, 1987, by Jams Joyce. Interpreted by Susan Weil and Marjorie van Dyke, 15 1/8" x 12 ¾"]*

And then I was in Sweden for a time, and Marjorie came to Sweden to work with me on it, and it was just very thrilling to work on these notebooks of images for "The Epiphanies", and eventually we came back, and poor Vincent, there were heaps of drawings, and he said, "Well, let's think through how you can divide these images," so we made these different sections -- "Games," "Death," you know. Anyway, there were four different categories, so two of them he gave to Marjorie -- one was "Dreams" -- one he gave to Marjorie and two he gave to me, two to her, two to me. And we went through the images we had, and we made some more, and then we sat down with him and then we were figuring out how to proceed, how to actually make this book, and so we picked out a bunch of images and worked out etchings for them with a ton of handwork, a ton of handwork, and he came up with this really beautiful book, every detail of it so fine-tuned, and that was during the couple of years where we worked on that book I had read and reread all of Joyce, including "Finnegans Wake" twice through, and had drawings to everything. So it was such a learning time for me, it was so great. And after that, we really loved working together, so Vincent and I did two more Joyce books, and then we did other things, he kept feeding me things to do. So it was very thrilling.

THOMAS: And "Cuppa-Cuppa" is not Vincent.

SUSAN WEIL: No, that was made in Sweden. "Cuppa-Cuppa" was made -- that poem book was made in Sweden, and it sold out. Not bad.

THOMAS: Not bad at all. I can't remember if we spoke for the tape recorder about your "poemumbles".

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, well --

THOMAS: I'm just going to ask you again to tell me how you put them all together so I can make sure that I have it.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. Well, I had always done poem images, and, of course, that was reinforced by working with Vincent on words and images, and I had just started -- it was part of a communication with Anders [Tornberg] really. I had just started on a concept of doing one every day, and at that point they were mostly watercolors, drawings, and things like that. Now they're a lot images off the computer and photographic and everything, but in the early days, the early years, they were mostly drawn and watercolored, and whatever, whatever collage, and so on. And because I was in New York and Anders, who I had such a work dialogue with, was in Sweden, it was like a communication with him and a sharing of thoughts because I'd send one to him every day.

THOMAS: Two different ones every day?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, but now I do three a day. You know, they were the same, the words were the same, and the images were just slight differences. But now one goes to Vincent and one goes to another friend and one for home. So I do three every day.

THOMAS: Well, as you know, I think they're really quite beautiful.

SUSAN WEIL: Thank you.

THOMAS: Back to Mr. FitzGerald. He got you doing decor for dancers?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. I did the sets for this dancer who has a company called Jazzdance, he's Danny Buraczeski, and Vincent had worked with him before, and one of his artists had worked with Danny before, and so he suggested I do decor and costumes for -- the first one was called "Soulo" -- S-o-u-l-o.

[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: And there was a musician who played the --

MOLLY SHEA: Trumpet?
SUSAN WEIL: No.

MOLLY SHEA: French horn. Willie Ruff?

SUSAN WEIL: Willie Ruff, French horn. And so the set was a sky and there was a moon that moved across, it was a sphere, and so I painted it half silver and half black, so as it moved across, you went through the phases of the moon, and it slowly, slowly went across the stage, and Willie played, and Danny danced, it was two people on stage, and it was just very fun, I just loved it. And then he asked me to do another one, the last one was the banners –

MOLLY SHEA: "Among These Cares"?

SUSAN WEIL: That's the last one, "Among These Cares," and the second one was --

MOLLY SHEA: Jazzdance?

SUSAN WEIL: No, that's the company.

MOLLY SHEA: "Four Seasons"?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. Show it again, Molly.

[At the computer, Molly Shea locates images from the three dances for which Susan Weil created the decor and costumes: “Among These Cares”, “Four Seasons,” and “Soulu.”]

THOMAS: Oh!

SUSAN WEIL: That's "Among These Cares."

MOLLY SHEA: That's a screen shot from a videotape.

THOMAS: Wow!

MOLLY SHEA: This is "Four Seasons." And those are [inaudible].

THOMAS: How beautiful.

SUSAN WEIL: Thank you. That's the moon going across.

MOLLY SHEA: "Soulo."

SUSAN WEIL: Right. And you see in the background there are all those birds, birds and stars?

THOMAS: Yes.
SUSAN WEIL: So those were the three sets I did.

THOMAS: And you did the costumes as well?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. You see there Willie is wearing -- it's like a sandwich board except it's soft and it's got a moon on it.

THOMAS: How does that work between you and the choreographer -- "I've got this dance and I would like for you to do the decor for it" Do you say, "What's it about?" or do you just say, "Sounds good."

SUSAN WEIL: Well, it depends. Sometimes he has a bunch of music. In this piece, "Among These Cares," which is with the banners, he talked about that quite a bit. It was homey images, you know, familiar things, and so I did these big banners that had like stoves and pots and pans and birds and chairs -- everything in these squares, and at first the dancers are dancing and the banners are not there, and then gradually they come down one at a time. And it really relates to the Muybridge because you have these serial images, they're not really related, but they have that sense also descending like that, and so it was very joyful to do, it really was.

THOMAS: I'm always curious about how the dialogue is because it's one of those situations where it's two equals coming together as opposed to somebody who is on staff creating a background ...

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, but that's like we talked about at Black Mountain where you go between the mediums. And a lot of contemporary dancers do have artists doing sets. I mean, certainly Merce always did, and --

THOMAS: Tricia, I guess.

SUSAN WEIL: Tricia does. And Martha Graham, she worked with Noguchi. You know, it's not unknown. Also Chagall did sets -- was that in Russia?

MOLLY SHEA: And then there's a lot actually of Chagall doing sets with [inaudible].

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, and it's been done also in history. You know, it was such a joy for me to have that opportunity, and that was through Vincent.

THOMAS: Is he still with us?

SUSAN WEIL: Yes. He's very with us.

THOMAS: Do you all plot about what your next book project would be?

SUSAN WEIL: We haven't done that recently because due to the economy, he's not able to do three things at once, but now he's working on two books, and we work together a lot of ways, but not with books recently.

THOMAS: We talked a little bit about the Tagore Gallery. You did the "Now and

Then" retrospective in 2006. How does one go about choosing work for a retrospective?

SUSAN WEIL: Well, we went through everything, and a lot of that was Sundaram's picks, certain things that he wanted, and then I put in my 2 cents, and I would veto some of his, and he would veto some of mine, but eventually we ended up with a show that spoke, but I think it's very hard to do a retrospective in a gallery because you really need a lot of space, and it's a generous gallery, but for a retrospective, when you've worked -- at that point I don't think I had worked 60 years yet, but I had --

MOLLY SHEA: I'm sorry, well, in my mind, since you were on the island, but almost, almost 60 years.

SUSAN WEIL: So there's so much work, and you want to work together and stuff. But between the two of us, we sorted things out.

THOMAS: Did you have any of your chair series in that show?

SUSAN WEIL: I think I did. Didn't I have the steel chairs? Yeah.

THOMAS: You were telling me a story about how that series began. Maybe you would tell me again about going out to see Chris?

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, Chris and I eventually did the big collaboration with the photographs of chairs, me sitting in them and not, and I think I had done chairs before that, but that kind of just fascinated me. And so my latest chairs are the mirror ones I have in the room in there. So, you know, these things just hang on.

THOMAS: But you don't typically -- or do you? -- work in series?

SUSAN WEIL: I sometimes will do six, seven, eight that relate to each other and then bend off some which way, and then playing a rip-off of something that I've done in the past. I don't know, it's just when you get restless, to bring in new thoughts, you do.

THOMAS: You don't get stuck.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, between -- you know, when you've had a fertile period, the betweens are a little difficult, but that's the time for climbing into yourself and figuring out where to go, and I'm sort of in a time like that. I mean, I've done these very recent mirror pieces and different things, but I feel very much like life situations have made me not actively working right now, and that tortures me, but it's also a time for thinking through what to work on.

THOMAS: Somewhere I read that you had said that oftentimes when you're working on a particular project, you can get inspiration for the next thing that you're going to do.

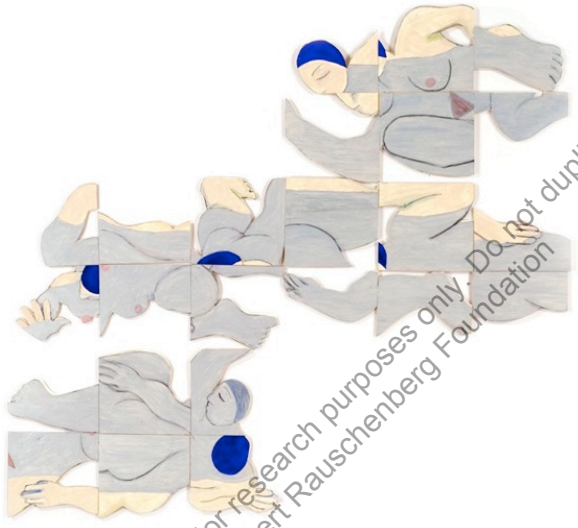
SUSAN WEIL: That's right, that's right. And when you're finished with a group of work, you don't have that. It's not like the next sentence in a story, you know, it's new thoughts.

And when José and I were working on the "Blueprints" recently, what, a couple years ago, the bicycles and umbrellas? You know, with "Blueprints," you'd think about what kind of an imprint it would make with just light, and we climbed into the bicycles and the parasols because the forms are so compelling, and so that was -- I did a whole heap of work about swimmers and under the water and so on. I did a lot of bicycle works in my painting, too, and so on, and just like in "Secrets," they are fractured and re-put-together. You know, that's just a thing with me, it's a thing with me.

When I was first doing some swimmer paintings, I called up Sara and said, "I don't know what to do, these pieces look so good to me, I don't want to cut them up," and she said, "Okay, Mother, put them aside as they are and make a new group." So I did. And that worked just fine.

THOMAS: Are you talking about the three divers?

SUSAN WEIL: No, that was separate. The swimmers, I have a whole bunch of swimmers paintings, and I'm just fascinated with the distortions you get under water.



[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*SWIMMER, 2000, 60 x 63", acrylic on paper pasted on foamcore*]

THOMAS: I saw images of three (SW: divers) divers, and I'm glad you didn't cut them up either.

SUSAN WEIL: No, no. That was a Muybridge time thing where you're seeing --

THOMAS: Yes.

SUSAN WEIL: -- above water, half in, more in.

THOMAS: There was at the Corcoran a couple years ago, maybe just a year ago, a Muybridge show. Did it come here?

SUSAN WEIL: No.

THOMAS: It was really interesting, his biography, of the 18 different ways -- I'm elaborating just slightly -- that he spelled his last name.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. "Muggeridge" to "Muybridge."

THOMAS: Reinventing himself... It was a very interesting show.

SUSAN WEIL: Oh, I wish I had seen that.

THOMAS: "Susan Weil Motion Pictures," that's again at Tagore, but it's also a publication. Tell me about what's in the book.

SUSAN WEIL: Well, the new book is really work through all the 60 years of my artwork, my professional artwork, and so it's about everything, but it's not a catalog raisonnée or anything, it just covers each decade, and I'm very happy with it. I think it's wonderful. It also covers the bookwork and it covers the Joyce work, and there are writings about the Joyce work and writing about the bookwork and two other, Dore Ashton writing, and it's just beautifully done. It was a long time coming, but it's beautifully done.

THOMAS: Dore Ashton, I read that she described you as a phoenix rising from the ashes.

SUSAN WEIL: Right, and that's because when I was 11, I was seriously burned, and after that my brother died. So I was reborn. So that's too literal.

[Laughter.]

THOMAS: ...I'm not sure I agree because that creativity started --

SUSAN WEIL: All the way back. (KT: All the way back.) But, I mean, I think she was specifically referring to my actual trial by fire.

THOMAS: The last part of this that I wanted to talk about before I ask you what we haven't talked about is your collaboration with José because you said that it's been a hugely fruitful experience for the both of you.

SUSAN WEIL: Yes, absolutely, and José is multitalented, he's a very fine photographer and professor of photography, but when we began working together, he was working on his master's and he was being my studio assistant, I think it was just once a week, but we really could think together, and I brought a lot to him, and he brought a lot to me because he had

explored all the early ways of photography and he knew about "Blueprint" through its historical reference and had done "Blueprints" and so on, and we just loved working together. And when he moved to Tennessee -- he got married and his wife wanted to be in Tennessee, where she came from and with a job that was important to her there, and I thought, well, how will we work? And the two of us, when he first came to tell me he would have to move to Tennessee, we sat here as if we were at a funeral, you know, "What'll we do? What'll we do?" because we had been so important to each other. And he made that movie on my website about painting, making one of those figure paintings. So we decided to collaborate long distance, and fortunately we had done a number of "Blueprints" before that together, but we decided we would start this "Blueprint" collaboration.

And it's interesting because years before that I had asked Bob -- already I was working with José, who really understood "Blueprints," and I asked Bob if he would consider collaboration with me, and he decided he wouldn't, but first he had to think about it, and I said, "Well, David could mix the chemicals and take all the physical part of it, and all you'd have to do is come up with images," and he decided he wouldn't do it. But that had started me off thinking about collaboration, and we decided to do this project, and it's amazing because we have a Sunday phone appointment, every Sunday we talk to each other at least a half an hour, and we share ideas back and forth, I e-mail otherwise, and he comes up to New York two or three times a year, and we do physical work, and he does a lot of the actual exposures there because he's in a school which has the equipment for the big exposing of the "Blueprints," and so we get six ideas going and we discuss back and forth how to do them, and the details, and then he makes the parts, and then he comes up here and we put them together. And so it's a true collaboration, even between Tennessee and New York, and he's a young man and I'm not quite young anymore in most ways. So it's very nice to have a cross-generational collaboration.

THOMAS: And it's a great commitment.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, yeah.

THOMAS: Part of your character is this amazing discipline that you have about your work and how you spend your time… it's interesting in terms of thinking about the rising from the ashes - that you disciplined yourself to say, "Okay, I'm moving on from here and giving myself structure." That's strong, not so many people do that.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. No, it's a very nice thing to give yourself the opportunity to learn new things. I've had a hard year in terms of enough time for my work because of Bernie's being sick and also because when you go into your eighties you don't feel full energy, I've noticed. And so I've kind of refigured myself. So I'm able to work as much as I am because of Molly and David really. I couldn't do it by myself. I know it's amazing. I did it by myself for many, many years, but now I can't do it by myself. And also Molly is putting my work together in a way that I never would have been able to if I was 20, if I was 30, because she's got this overview and these skills, and I'm just so grateful, I really am.

THOMAS: Well, Molly, what do you think we haven't spoken of that you would like to

hear about?

MOLLY SHEA: I was thinking you were going to ask me that. Let's see, you've got the choreography and how it relates to the larger [inaudible] projects? Because when I think of Susan....There are so many things we could talk about. I'd be really interested to hear more at some point about your daily life with Bob and what that was just like, and also I don't know if this is in the scope of this project, but what it was like being an artist, that you knew you were, and having a son that you were raising and being an artist during that time in the '50s, while your then ex-husband was getting this notoriety and how you were going to find your identity in that environment as a woman artist, as a mother, too, in the '50s. I just find that amazing, and how did you cope while someone you were also really spiritually and artistically connected to was kind of getting this attention? I would find that very interesting.

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah. No, I mostly never thought about that in relation to like being envious or anything, I just didn't. I was very happy for Bob that he got the attention that he got and that people appreciated his work. And my life, in those years it was very much between me and me, so I didn't expect it and I didn't work for it, but I worked for finding my own way. And the time I was with Bob, I mean, starting in Paris and ending up after Chris's birth was -- you asked me about the daily life, well, our daily life was a lot about working. We lived on 95th Street, we were both working all the time, we just were, and paintings all over the place. And when people look at that Life Magazine thing and they see that funny painting in the corner,

[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*Life Magazine Eden (upper left corner of photograph)*

and they assume it's Bob's, and it's mine, you know, but both of us were just working all the time and loving it, and a lot of that time we were at the League and working there.

And so we did some other stuff. I mean, for instance, when we were at the League, we did our first etchings, and my friend Aaron, who I've talked about before, has two that Bob gave him, and he's trying to find a new home for them because of his own needs at the moment because he's 90 and has some heavy needs. And I asked David [White] about it because they're written for Aaron and they're signed by Bob, and they're 1950, and so I don't know what will happen about that, but at that time I did a couple of etchings, too, and it's interesting because it was so long before I actually got into printmaking, which I did pretty heavily. But we just

mostly were being two painters when Bob and I were together.

MOLLY SHEA: Would you collaborate or would you have separate spaces and then at the end of the day say, "So, what did you make today?" and look at it?

SUSAN WEIL: No, we didn't have separate spaces. I mean, for one thing, the time we were at the League, much of our painting happened at the League, and one reason to go there was to have a place to work because we had an apartment, the whole thing was the size of this room, and we shared the bathroom and kitchen, so we just didn't have any real work room there. And that was the way it was. I mean, we always had a nice dialogue and shared enthusiasm and interest in different things and everything. There was no fights, no angry time, nothing like that. We were just a couple of pals.

THOMAS: And you wonder where Chris gets his even-tempered nature.

[Laughter.]

SUSAN WEIL: One thing that has never been mentioned anywhere, anywhere, is that in the summers we were on the island, Bob started this project of making a sculpture of glass, and it was on some kind of a thing which started out higher, and it was slivers of glass, and of course all the time he walked around bloody and so on from cutting the glass and everything being rough, but it was all slivers of glass and a great big tower, and nobody ever saw it because it went with fire, too.

THOMAS: It was an abstraction as opposed to a figurative piece?

SUSAN WEIL: Yeah, it was just slivers of glass like a sculpture chandelier.

THOMAS: It must have been lovely in the light... .

SUSAN WEIL: Right. No, I mean, he never tried anything like that again, and nobody knows that ever happened, I never mentioned it to anybody, and I don't know whether he did.

THOMAS: And no picture, obviously.

SUSAN WEIL: Obviously.

THOMAS: What else haven't we talked about that you would like to offer?

SUSAN WEIL: Hmm. I don't know. I don't know. I mean, it was interesting that for much of our separate lives, he had a little uneasiness that he worried that he hadn't been fair to me, and Christopher told me about that, it bothered him. But in the last years of his life, I made it very clear to him that I had only joyfulness over our time together and that there was nothing I was upset about or nothing that rubbed me the wrong way, and he came to understand that, and then he was much more happy with me because he had this feeling he hadn't hurt me, and I let him know that I was only glad for whatever we had had.

THOMAS: He could be at peace with himself.

SUSAN WEIL: And then our relationship got really loving.

THOMAS: Thank you.

SUSAN WEIL: Thank you.

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Interview of **SUSAN WEIL**

For the Robert Rauschenberg Oral History Project

Conducted by **KAREN THOMAS**, Interviewer

New York, New York

April 13, 2011

THOMAS: [Let's] talk about the collaboration with Chris, on the chairs. How did that mother-son [collaboration] come about?

WEIL: Well, I was in Portland visiting Chris and Janet, and Sara of course, and I had been doing chair images. We talked about it together, that it would be fun to get all kinds of funny chairs, and make an actual photographic, here and there, piece. It was terrific. He photographed each of the chairs, and then we did me sitting in some of them, and we just worked it out, and put them together. Each different section of it is a big photograph.

[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*Collaboration: Wandering Chairs, 1998, 48" x 96" eighteen silver gelatin prints*]

THOMAS: Did you do that here, or did you do that when you were out there?

WEIL: Out there. Out there.

THOMAS:. In a collaboration, is somebody the driver?

WEIL: I don't know. We talked it over. It was mutual ideas. In so many of my paintings, when I'd have figure and chair, I would split them around and all. So we built on an idea. It's also about time -- playing musical chairs.

THOMAS: That's a nice thought. (SW: Yes.) Is that how it started?

WEIL: It started as an homage to the chair pieces. But it was really great to work with Chris. He has worked with me in other situations. This dance that I did for Danny Buraczeski "Jazz Dance." He made some pieces for that, and so on. He's always so cooperative and helpful.

THOMAS: And that was décor/set pieces?

WEIL: That was set and costumes, yes. I did three different dance pieces for Danny.

THOMAS: [Can you] tell me about the umbrellas and the bicycles [in your work]?

WEIL: Well, when Jose [Betancourt] and I were working together -- Molly [Shea] do you have a blueprint book there? (MS: Sure.)

WEIL: When we were working together, we were thinking about motion, and we were thinking about beautiful forms for their shadows and stuff. There are a few of them -- the blueprints and of the umbrellas

WEIL: We borrowed bicycles, and [laid] them on the floor.

THOMAS: You did them on the floor -- same process. The technique hasn't changed much?

WEIL: No. No. It hasn't changed a lot. When I work with Jose we use those plate-making machines to get a very intense, clear image, a great deal. But you can't really put a bicycle on a plate-making machine. You could do it outside in the sun.

THOMAS: Yes. Is that how you did these?

WEIL: Parts of them, yes.

THOMAS: And then you would decide when it was done, and then you would bring them in and apply fixer?

WEIL: Yes. When the blue gets a certain amount of intense -- it gets darker when you put the chemical on it, but when it gets looking done, like when you test a pie in the oven – (chuckles)

THOMAS: And for you the image of the bicycle, I guess, I assume, is not like the image of the chair; that what interests you is the form, and the -- transparency is not the right word -- but it suggests another dimension.

[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH – *InnuEndo, 2009, 52.5 x 87.5"cyanotype on canvas*]
WEIL: Yes. Also, round shapes have a certain motion to them, particularly if they're bicycles.

THOMAS: When did you start moving into taking the blueprint, and then adding other elements to it? That's really interesting.

WEIL: Well, when we were putting together the bicycles, this one didn't get into any of those pieces. So I thought, well, I'll use it like a collage element.

THOMAS: Yes. There's a great balance.

WEIL: One way that Jose and I collaborate together is that every Sunday at noon we have a phone call. It's a work call. And we discuss blueprints together, and we share thoughts. He comes up to New York two or three times a year, and that's when we actually put works together and stuff. But we're always sharing work thoughts.

THOMAS: About what you want to do next.

WEIL: Yes. And a lot of times email, but a lot of times just the Sunday phone calls.

THOMAS: Don't you find that sometimes email gets a little less efficient?

WEIL: Well, the thing about the phone is that you're both putting your ideas into it [at the same time], which is a great part of collaboration.

THOMAS: I did have one stray question. The picture at the Gagosian Gallery -- *Short Circuit* -- that had your picture in it. How did that happen?

[INSERTED PHOTOGRAPH—*Short Circuit, 1955, with doors open, 41 ½" x 38 ¼" x 4 ½", oil, fabric and paper on wood supports and cabinet with two hinged doors containing a painting by Susan Weil and a reproduction of a Jasper Johns Flag painting by Elaine Sturtevant*]

WEIL: Well, Bob was working as a maintenance man at the Stable Gallery, and there was a group show and he wanted them to have me in it, and he wanted them to have Jasper in it -- and somebody else. I can't remember who the other one was. That didn't work, so he made the painting with our works in it. So it was just a very sweet generosity.

[Laughter.]

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