

RAUSCHENBERG ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

The Reminiscences of

Susan Weil

Columbia Center for Oral History

Columbia University

2014

PREFACE

The following oral history is the result of a recorded interview with Susan Weil conducted by Mary Marshall Clark on January 27, June 6, and September 10, 2014. This interview is part of the Rauschenberg Oral History Project. Sara Kirschenbaum, Weil's daughter, joined the interviews on January 27 and June 6; Christopher Rauschenberg, Weil's son, joined the interview on September 10.

The reader is asked to bear in mind that s/he is reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

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Transcriber: 3PM

Session #1 (audio)

Interviewee: Susan Weil

Location: New York, NY

Interviewers: Mary Marshall Clark (Q1)
Sara Kirschenbaum (Q2)

Date: January 27, 2014

Q1: This is Mary Marshall Clark, and I'm delighted to be here with you and your daughter today. And this interview is for the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation. And this is Sue Weil and her daughter, Sara Kirschenbaum.

WEIL: Well, first of all, I call myself Weil.

Q1: Weil, I'm so sorry.

WEIL: Like Simone Weil.

Q1: Oh, like Simone. No relation?

WEIL: No.

Q1: You were just talking, though, about how you sometimes read aloud. You read aloud to think about some of your images.

WEIL: Yes. Well, in studying [James] Joyce and drawing to all of Joyce's writing, I find it's clearer to me when I'm reading it out loud. That's interesting, because when I was a little child, my father read *Finnegans Wake* [1939] to us.

And to me, it was music. It wasn't understandable. But to him, it was the writing he really loved. And so now when I read it out loud, it reminds me of hearing my father read it out loud.

Q1: Yes. There's nothing like that. So welcome to the interview. [Clark speaking to Sara Kirschenbaum] And I have my mic close enough to you that you feel free to ask questions when you wish. I know that you're also an artist and also do recordings. So that's wonderful. So in the kitchen, where you kindly fed us, we were talking a little bit about how to start this interview. We were thinking about high school at Dalton [School, New York]. Could you describe some of your experiences there? I know some of the people you studied with. But just describe that for the tape and how you became an artist.

WEIL: Yes. Well, I was taking art classes before I was in high school. But I didn't feel like it was appreciated because people were doing things that looked like Barbie dolls and stuff. And I didn't feel my work was of that milieu. And so I didn't feel successful in art classes. And then in high school, I tried studying with Rufino Tamayo. And he was not a good teacher for me. So I quit again. And then when I was seventeen, this young artist came along, Aaron Kurzen.

And he was teaching. And I was completely thrilled with it. First of all, when I first came into the room, I drew this little drawing in the middle of a big sheet of paper of a little boy and a little girl. And so he went and he said, “Well, Susan, you have a big paper and a little image.” He said, “I want you to try something.”

Q1: Hold on one second. I’m just going to pause. So why don’t you just start that sentence over again?

WEIL: So Aaron Kurzen said to me, “The drawing is little and fuzzy and the paper is big, and I want you to think of the whole paper.” And he said, “I want you to close your eyes, feel the width and the height of the paper, and draw a rooster with your eyes closed.” And I did so with charcoal. And it was a wonderful feeling. I opened my eyes, and it was completely absurd-looking. And I was happy as a clam. And from then on, I still draw blind drawings all the time. I do them regularly as a mature artist, because it’s so freeing. And it’s the image you have in your mind and not necessarily what your hand can do. So Aaron was a wonderful teacher and a lively-minded person. And he’s still my friend. I’m eighty-three. He’s ninety-three. And he’s still my friend. We talk to each other all the time.

He suggested to me—I had this dilemma, because my father wanted me to go to college. He felt it was very important. And I only was in a hurry to be an artist. So I didn’t want to go to college. I wanted to go to art school. And he said, “Why don’t you think about going to a college that has a good art department?” And I looked at Bennington

[College, Vermont]. I looked at Bard [College, Annandale-on-Hudson, New York] and so on. And then Aaron Kurzen said to me, “There is this college—Black Mountain College at North Carolina, which is very lively in the arts.”

And so I flew to see it. And I just said, forget anything else, I’m going to school here. And so that was Aaron too. And when I talked to him last week, he was saying what a remarkable person I was and how everybody loved me. And I said, “Well, Aaron, you really helped me to find my way as an artist. And I am deeply grateful. And I really am so appreciative that you helped me find the artist that I turned out to be.” So that was a wonderful beginning. And that was at Dalton. And so here I was, eighteen—a very immature eighteen—and my parents were very lively-minded, creative people. And I had been handicapped, because I was in a very bad fire and very severely burned and had trouble walking.

But my parents really wanted me to try everything. First of all, they said to me that we’re thinking of adopting a child. And how did I feel about that, because it would be inconvenient in my life, and all. Because they had lost a son from the same fire—he died—and they were very destroyed by it. So they felt the need to bring another child into the world. They adopted my sister [Judith] Judy [Shea], who we were just talking about as a newborn baby. I saw her in the hospital when she was just born. And I was very happy with it. Mother and Father said to me, “Well, they will draw on your homework. They’ll bother you.” I said, “It’s fine with me. I love the idea.” So another year later, they wanted to adopt another child, and they adopted my brother [James Leonard] Jim [Weil]. And

Judy is twelve years younger than I am. And Jim was fourteen years younger than I am. So my teenage years were very involved with bringing up these children. And everybody else was all about dates and coming out parties and fancy this and that.

Q1: Oh, yes. At Dalton—it was kind of a fancy school, right?

WEIL: I was very, very happy to be the built-in babysitter for my brother and sister. And so that was unusual. But the reason I bring that up is because when I was eighteen, Mother and Father decided since I was bound and determined to be an artist, I should go to Paris. Because of their generation, they thought, artists have to go to Paris. So Mother arranged this. And there was a woman taking four or five teenagers to Paris and taking responsibility for them. And they arranged this all.

And about a week before my high school graduation, they put me on this remodeled troopship to go across the ocean to Paris. And I was so frightened. I really was so frightened. I thought, how will I manage? How will I manage? I had never really been away from my family before. I had had two years of high school French, but to go to France, it was very, very confusing. So I got on the boat. I kept saying to myself, “Well, in three months, I’ll be back. And it will be okay. Somehow I’ll manage.” And I got there, and we went from Le Havre to Paris. And I was already enrolled in the Académie Julian to study painting. And I moved into this *pension*. And in the same *pension*, Bob Rauschenberg who was there on the GI Bill [Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944], studying art at the Académie Julian. So I couldn’t have missed him if I tried. And he had

this great big laugh. You could hear him all over the *pension*, because he laughed so fully, like a musical instrument—a really amazing sound. So we ended up going to school every day.

The Académie Julian wasn't really the right place for me. First of all, I didn't understand the teacher. And they would have a model in the middle of the room. And the model would stand for a month in the same position. Well, I'd move around and draw and paint the model from here and there just to make it different. But I mean, it just seemed to me so boring. But since we really loved to work, both of us, we'd go after school to the Académie de la Grande Chaumière to draw. And there were models there. And you would draw from the models. The models would come and look at your work and say, "I don't like that one. It doesn't look like me." They would be involved with what you were doing. And I loved it there. It was very, very nice.

Q1: What did it look like?

WEIL: Well, it was an old-fashioned building, but really a studio building. It had a lot of skylights and everything. And it was wonderful, lively, fun, and we didn't have to answer to some quirky old professor. We just had to answer to the models.

[Laughter]

WEIL: And then recently, my daughter Sara went to Paris on a trip. And she went to the school, and she drew there and everything. I was so pleased, because this is how many years later—eighty years later or something. Not quite! And it's still going and still has the same feeling. Really lovely.

Anyway, so Bob was on the GI Bill and staying at the *pension*. And we became great friends. I mean, of course, because we were in the same school, and we were both zany painters. We both just needed to paint every minute. And I do have one story about that. At the *pension*, there was a kind of a visiting area or something, and on the floor of it was an old oriental rug. And Bob and I would paint there. We would set up easels and we would paint things. And if you spilled a little paint on the floor, a drop of paint, we would say, "Uh-oh, we will get in trouble." And we would do the same color on the other three quadrants of the rug. And so if anybody today had that rug, they'd pay millions for it, because it was a Rauschenberg-Weil collaboration. And so that was fun.

We also wanted to try painting outdoors; neither of us had ever done that. And we went to the railroad station [Saint Lazare, Paris], set up our easels, and we would paint outside. It felt kind of adventurous. But I was really a teenager. I didn't know who I was. I only knew that the center of my life was art. And Bob and I would cut school and go to museums. And we would get in trouble with the woman who was supposed to look after me.

[Laughter]

Q1: There was a woman who was supposed to look after you?

WEIL: The woman who my parents found, and she was kind of looking after us. So it was a very funny thing that we weren't supposed to see museums. We weren't supposed to go to the Louvre or the modern museum [Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris] or anything. We were just supposed to go to our class and work with these dopey models. So it was quite enjoyable.

Q2: Could I ask a question? What might your work have looked like, then, if we could peek at your and Bob's canvases? What might it look like?

WEIL: Well, I mean, they were bright. I mean, we were painting figures and models. At that time, I did a portrait of Bob, I remember. But I don't know where it disappeared to, but it did disappear. And we had done real objects, but with freer hand and brighter colors. It was like that. And anyway, I told Bob that I was going to go to Black Mountain. And he looked into it and he ended up there. So that's partly my doing, I have to say.

Q2: I think it's all your doing.

WEIL: Right.

Q1: Can I ask another question about the Paris period? That was just, as you said earlier, a few years after the war and during the [Senator Joseph] McCarthy period. Was there any impact on you in Paris with the McCarthy period?

WEIL: Oh, yes! Yes, very much so. I mean, McCarthy was such a destructive factor. A lot of people coming from the United States were homosexual. And McCarthy was so rough on homosexuals and so frightening. And we were very aware of it. We really were.

Q1: Did you have friends or colleagues who were affected by it?

WEIL: Well, yes. Anybody who was liberal or anything that wasn't right wing was in trouble with McCarthy. And my father was a writer, and a lot of people that he knew lost their work and everything. No, it was such a frightening time. And strange, because Roy Cohn was a gay man, and he was doing such destruction to gay people. It was amazing. It was really horrible and amazing. So that was a big factor. We did meet Raymond Duncan, who went around in togas and things. And they had a school named after Isadora [Duncan], Isadora's Beginnings. And Raymond had a sister, Elizabeth [Duncan], who used to take care of all the "Isadorables," the little kids who danced for Isadora.

[Laughter]

WEIL: They were completely curious people. Raymond had long white hair and his togas and everything. We went to the school and saw everything—explored what was possible.

Q2: I remember you telling about Bob going to the opera with another girl or woman.

WEIL: Yes. Well, Bob wanted to go to the opera. And he wanted to go with this lovely girl. And he wanted to make her a wonderful costume. And so he took green ribbon, and he made a long—what do you call it—shawl, that was just a trellis made of green satin ribbon. And he put leaves into it.

Q2: Ivy? Didn't you say ivy?

WEIL: Ivy. And he made her dress out of the curtains from the *pension*. And she looked extraordinary. And they went off to the opera. Well, of course I was very hurt, because I was left behind. So this other young man in the *pension* decided that he was worried about me. So he was going to take me out to dinner. And so I said, great. And we went to this restaurant. And I felt very grand. I hadn't done things like have a date or anything. Because of my teenage life, that hadn't been possible for me. So he was taking me out to dinner. I had a lovely time. And at the end of the dinner, he said, "Now run." He wasn't going to pay the bill.

[Laughter]

Q1: What did you do?

WEIL: I ran.

Q2: Were you out on a sidewalk cafe?

WEIL: I don't really remember, exactly. We must have been.

Q1: What were your feelings about yourself once you arrived in Paris? Were you enthralled with the world?

WEIL: I was frightened.

Q1: You were still frightened.

WEIL: You know, I was so young and unsure of myself. And I was frightened. But then, of course, as I was there a while—I remember I wanted to go out and buy a croissant or something. And I thought, how can I make myself understood? No, it was scary for me. I was a very immature eighteen.

Q2: What did Paris look like? Was there damage from the war at that time?

WEIL: Yes, there was some. And there was rationing still. And I remember the woman who ran the *pension* had a cat, and she gave her whole milk ration to the cat. And I had grown up—I would look at the cat's bowl and think, what about me?

[Laughter]

WEIL: But they still had rationing. It was a bit of a wreck.

Q2: What was your relationship with Bob like when you were there? Was it more of friendship or more a love relationship at that point?

WEIL: Well, I mean, I was very enthralled with him, but of course he wasn't. He regarded me as a very dear friend, because we had our art enthusiasm. We egged each other on and everything. It was like that. And then when I went to Black Mountain and he came over there, we continued to be very great friends. And [Josef] Albers called us the Bobbsey Twins. And so it was always like that. We were best friends.

Q2: Soul mates.

WEIL: Soul mates, yes. And encouraged each other so much with art: our thoughts just came forth. And so when Albers was asked to leave and left the school, then we left. And he went to Yale [University, New Haven, Connecticut] and was teaching there. We went to New York and we went to the Art Students League. And so all our growing up in art was in those years. We were really finding our way. And when we were at the Art Students League, our first exhibiting of our work was at the Nash Auto sales room.

Q2: The what?

WEIL: The Nash Auto sales room.

[Laughter]

Q1: That's wonderful. I read that somewhere.

WEIL: And the Art Students League was wonderful. But most of the people there were there on the GI Bill. And they were being kept track of. So they'd take the attendance and we would talk for anybody who didn't want to come in that day. They would say a name, and we would say, "Here." And he wasn't here. We were covering for each other. We studied with Morris Kantor and with Vaclav Vytlacil. And they were great classes. And we had many good friends from the school who became our New York friends. And it was very exciting.

Well, my mother was very intolerant of Bob, because I think she understood that she didn't want this to go anywhere else. But she didn't share her thoughts. So she was going to send me back to Paris to get me away from Bob. And so we talked about this, and we went to our local ice cream parlor, Kronk's, and we discussed this.

Q2: You and Bob discussed it?

WEIL: Yes, and my father too. And we decided: well, maybe we should get married, so Mother would leave us alone.



Rauschenberg and Susan Weil on their wedding day, Outer Island, Connecticut, June 21, 1950. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q1: Was your father in that conversation?

WEIL: Well, he was; but not in the beginning. We talked about it some. And a lot of people who were gay felt they had to be married just for—it was so hated at that time. They just had to do it for their own security. And I didn't understand anything about it, but now I look at it, and I say, well, that's the way it was. And I know Bob. And we had a great bond, a work bond. And I know that he felt responsible to me and that the marriage was very real in that sense. And so that was the way it was. And actually, during the year after our marriage, when we were living in New York, we had a little apartment on

Ninety-fifth Street on the West Side. And we had to share the bathroom and the kitchen with a neighbor. And he didn't like us, and it was very difficult.

I became pregnant with Christopher [“Chris” Rauschenberg] there. Then Bob had an opportunity to go back and do some teaching at Black Mountain. And he did so. When it was time for Christopher to be born, he came back to see him and everything. And he went back to Black Mountain. I was quite unhappy. So I decided I'd go with Chris to Black Mountain. And we did so. And Bob had another relationship, so it was uncomfortable. And I had this little newborn. I was such a kid myself I didn't know what I was doing. But I'm very good with children. Always have been, was there for my brother and sister and so on. So I wasn't uncomfortable with raising a baby. I was just uncomfortable with what was happening.

But that summer—this was a summer session. And we came back with Chris to the island [Outer Island, Connecticut] towards the end of the summer.

Q2: With Bob?

WEIL: With Bob.

Q2: This is 1951?

WEIL: Yes.



Susan Weil and Rauschenberg with their son, Christopher Rauschenberg, Outer Island, Connecticut, 1951. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q2: And Bob had a relationship, a partner?

WEIL: Yes. And of course, my mother was very unhappy with this.

Q2: Do you remember who that was?

WEIL: Yes.

Q2: Who was it?

WEIL: Cy Twombly.

Q1: I thought so.

WEIL: And after that summer, we had a separation. And that was not so good. But we remained forever friends. And he, of course, loved Christopher. And Christopher loved him and everything. But at that point, Bob was very involved with getting somewhere in the art world.

Q1: I wondered about that, when his ambition kicked in.

WEIL: Well, I think it was always there. But it wasn't noticeable to me so much in the years when we were figuring out who we were. But then when we were living together, he got his first show at the Egan Gallery [New York], I think. Or maybe the Betty Parsons Gallery [note: it was Betty Parsons Gallery, New York, *Paintings by Bob Rauschenberg*, May 14–June 2, 1951]. And I, of course, went to the opening and everything, and so on.

Q2: Could you talk about the blueprints a little bit?

WEIL: Oh, yes. That's a good idea. We did have this collaborative effort of making blueprints together. And I showed Bob about blueprints on the island, because I had been making little blueprints as a child and everything. And of course we went at it in a bigger way and bought a roll of blueprint paper. We were making outdoors. We were making big, figurative blueprints. And it was pretty exciting. And then we were invited to show them, one of them, I guess, at the Museum of Modern Art [MoMA, New York] in an

abstract photography show. [Rauschenberg and Weil, *Blueprint: Photogram for Mural Decoration* (now titled *Female Figure*), ca. 1950, exhibited in *Abstraction in Photography*, organized by Edward Steichen, Director of the Department of Photography, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1951.]

Q2: When did you show them? Was it at Saks [Fifth Avenue, New York] or Lord & Taylor [New York]?

WEIL: Bonwit Teller [New York]. We did all the windows at Bonwit Teller.

Q2: And what I like is the story about when *Life* magazine did that photo essay of you two. I think you were pregnant at the time, and you said that when *Life* magazine left, you guys didn't have any food and you had cereal for dinner. ["Speaking of Pictures: Blueprint Paper, Sun Lamp, a Nude Produce Some Vaporious Fantasies." *Life* (New York) 30, no. 15 (April 9, 1951), pp. 22–24.]



Rauschenberg and Susan Weil working on a blueprint in their West Ninety-fifth Street apartment, New York, spring 1951. Photo: Wallace Kirkland/Time & Life Pictures/Getty Images

WEIL: Yes.

Q1: Tell us that story.

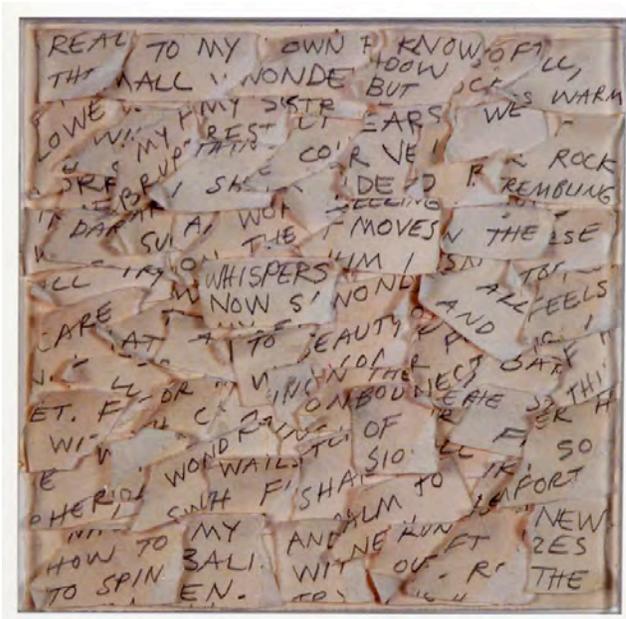
WEIL: Well, we felt very grand, because we were of course living very simply on the GI Bill, the three of us. And they came with all their equipment and everything and a model and everything. And we did the photo shoot. And then when they left, we didn't have anything to eat and no money to go out to dinner. So we had cereal for dinner. That's a funny dichotomy. But somehow I could never push for these things to happen for myself, but Bob could.

Q1: You said that somewhere in an interview. How did he make that happen? Do you know?

WEIL: I don't quite remember. But we did have an appointment with Edward Steichen at MoMA , and he was wonderful. And he was very appreciative of our blueprints. And that was amazing. But about Bonwit Teller, there was someone in charge of the windows that Bob knew. And so he more did that, and I maybe more did MoMA. But I was never any good at pushing myself. Also at that time, I was very involved with doing poem drawings.

Q1: I wanted to ask you about that.

WEIL: Yes. So I did a lot of poem images and words—word and image, word to image. And then when I was having trouble worrying about the future of our marriage, a lot of it had to do with deep feelings and everything. And there's a piece called *Secrets* [1949] that's in my books there. It's torn up words that I made at Black Mountain. And that's a poem torn up. And I've done a poem image every day of my life for twenty-five years.



Susan Weil
Secrets, 1949
Graphite, torn paper collage
10 x 10 inches (25.4 x 25.4 cm)

Q2: A poem and an image to go with the poem. More than twenty-five years, I think.

Getting closer to thirty, I think.

WEIL: Maybe. I don't know. But I have all of the books of them at home—several bookshelves full of notebooks of the poem images.

Q2: Can I ask you a question? Did the art world treat men and women differently back in those days?

WEIL: Yes.

Q1: That's just where I was going to go. Thank you.

WEIL: Yeah. It was a terrible time for women artists. They were not respected. And I belonged to two women artists groups.

Q1: Please tell me who was in them.

WEIL: Yes. Well, one was a great big group that probably had every woman artist alive at the time. But the other one was New York Professional Women Artists, and it was just maybe eight of us. And we went around and protested to galleries, and we did actions. And we did all kinds of stuff. And the galleries always said, "Well, of course we don't feel like that, but our collectors won't buy women artists," and everything. No, it was a terrible time for women. It really was.

Q1: Was Ida Applebroog in that group?

WEIL: In the bigger group, yes.

Q1: And Sylvia Sleigh? Did you know her?

WEIL: Yes. I think they were both in the larger group. But as I say, it's almost every woman artist working on—

Q2: Can you tell that story about picketing a gallery owned by a woman?

WEIL: Mary Boone [Gallery, New York].

Q2: And it was raining?

WEIL: Yes, we were picketing because she didn't have any women artists. And we were picketing out front with signs saying don't go in and everything. And it was raining. And Mary Boone came out and said, "Oh, come in. It's warm and nice in here. And please come in." And we said, "We feel very strongly that you don't have any women artists." And here is a woman dealer. But that was in the newspapers. That came in the newspapers.

Q1: So who were some of the women in the smaller group?

WEIL: Dorothy Gillespie. Joyce Boxer—Joyce Weinstein, she went by her maiden name.

Q1: Dorothea Rockburne? Would she have been part of it?

WEIL: I think she was part of the larger group but not that smaller one. But you know, we went and we sat on panels and talked about the problem to groups and schools and so on and so forth.

Q2: But that was later. That wasn't when you were with Bob, right?

WEIL: No.

Q2: How was the art world when you were with Bob? Did you feel a difference?

WEIL: The same thing, but it was not so—it was not so talked about or thought about. It happened later.

Q2: It was just the way it was.

WEIL: Yes.

Q1: So in terms of your relationship to other artists and his also, were you more part of the downtown scene, the Cedar bar [Cedar Tavern, New York] scene and all of that, or were you not part of that?

WEIL: Well, I'll tell you, both when I was married to Bob and later when I was married to [Bernard E.] Bernie [Kirschenbaum] I was raising children. I couldn't go around and sit in bars and stuff. Of course I've been to the Cedar Tavern and I've been to the [Artists' or Eighth Street] Club and everything. But I was a mother.

Q1: That makes perfect sense.

WEIL: Yes. And Bernie did participate in all these things, but not me.

Q1: Do you mind if we go back to the Black Mountain period a little bit?

WEIL: Happy to.

Q1: When I was reading something you had written about going from Paris to Black Mountain, you talked about how tremendously exciting it was and freeing it was to go. Could you just tell me as if I've never heard anything about it and tell me what you felt and what you saw?

WEIL: Well, first of all, the place was full of people, eyes wide, trying to understand everything about possibilities. I always thought that the most important thing at Black Mountain was not the classes you went to, but in the evening when you'd sit in the dining hall and you'd talk to poets and you'd talk to scientists and you'd talk to music students and so on. It was the bigger picture of our—than just the section of it. It involved you.

And I think that was just wonderful. I mean, we had, really, the wide experience of the creative life. And I just felt that was very, very important. I think what they called the first Happening wasn't the first Happening because of course at the Bauhaus and a lot of places, there had been this mixture.

Q1: In fact, Albers came out of that.

WEIL: Yes. And so I don't at all think that was the first Happening. But I think the situation at Black Mountain where you were aware of the larger creative world made that happen.

Q1: What was it like, just day to day? Did you have organized routines, or did you make your own routines?

WEIL: Well, we had our studies, and we did our work for our classes and stuff. But we had a working farm and students were all part of making the school run. You had to have your community assignments. And Bob and I were on a trash group.

Everybody got so jealous of us because we had such a good time. We'd go around to all the buildings and pick up what they were throwing out to take them to the dump. And then we were having such a good time, and we'd come back with wonderful things that we found. And everybody wanted to go with us to the trash because it was so delightful.

Q2: Didn't you tell me that the French teacher would leave you things to eat in her trash?

WEIL: Yes, little packages for us.

Q1: Oh, tell us that story.

WEIL: Well, it's just that people just thought we were funny and fun, so they would give us little gifts and stuff in the trash. And I thought the French teacher was very funny, because she wasn't of French origin. She was Russian. So I had just come from Paris, and she had this Russian accent. So it was funny to me. But anyway, there were a lot of Bauhaus people at the school, and it had this wonderful feeling of a lively school. It was just the way the school was. First of all, you made great friends because you were with people who were ready for anything, and so on.

I remember when [Richard] Buckminster ["Bucky"] Fuller came to the school. He was such a wild thing. And what was that dome?

Q1: Yes, the dome. I saw a picture of that.

WEIL: The *Supine Dome* [1948] or something like that. It just all fell down because it was made of Venetian blind slats or something.

Q1: Were you in that picture where they have everybody trying to pull it up?



Students working on Buckminster Fuller's *Supine Dome*, Black Mountain College, North Carolina, summer 1948. Photo: Beaumont Newhall © Beaumont and Nancy Newhall Estate

WEIL: No. But it was funny, because years later when I married Bernie, he had been working with Bucky and with a dome master. I met him because I wanted a dome for a studio. He had been associated with Bucky. And so that's all the tangles that happen in your life.

Q1: So who were some of the other people there that you were close to? Was [John] Cage there in '48, '49?

WEIL: Yes. Merce Cunningham, John Cage. And the poets, I tried to take the poetry class. [Edward] Dahlberg followed after—I can't think who was there. You know who I mean, though.

Q1: We can put it in. We'll pull out the book and put it in. I can't think of it either right now. That's okay.

Q2: I was fascinated because Mom had an African American as a roommate. So here she was in the South and living in an integrated roommate situation. And what was her name?

WEIL: Dolores Fullman. And when I was first at Black Mountain, I was put in a kind of a dormitory situation with maybe six or eight people. And I was very unhappy. One of the students was a kleptomaniac who kept taking my clothes and things and my art supplies. And I was unhappy with that situation. And I kept saying to Dolores—she had a room by herself—I kept saying, “Please, Dolores. Let me share a room with you. I don’t like this situation, and I’d love to be with you.”

Well, she said, “I had all these brothers and sisters, and I just love being in a room by myself.” And finally she gave in and we shared a room. But North Carolina was segregated, and it was very uncomfortable when you’d go into Asheville. You know, everything was segregated. And if I’d go in a store with Dolores, people would try to make us separate. And we couldn’t go to the movies. We couldn’t go to church. She liked to go to church. She was a music student. She loved to sing.

And so we went to the black church, and we went upstairs in the movies and everything. But it was very uncomfortable. My parents were coming to visit, and they wanted to take me on a trip during one of the vacations. And I said, “Oh, let’s have Dolores go with us.” We were going to drive somewhere, and my father said to me, “Susan, that’s not a good idea, because Dolores is from Chicago, which is not segregated. And if we’re traveling

together and we can't go in a restaurant together and we can't go in a hotel together, we can't do anything together, it's going to be miserable for all of us.”

And I certainly experienced the terrible situation in a segregated city. I did experience it very much, and particularly having a black roommate.

Q1: Tell me about what kind of classes you took.

WEIL: Well, of course I took all of Albers's classes.

Q1: And of course I want to hear about Albers. But first tell me what other kind of classes you took.

WEIL: Well, I took French—Russian French. And I took some writing classes. But my focus was mainly Albers's classes. I am a very unmusical person, but I joined the chorus at Black Mountain. Dolores was a great music student and so on, and I just tried to sit near her to keep my voice where it was supposed to be. And then she'd suddenly be singing alto to help the alto students, and then I'd be all lost. It was funny. But here I was, completely unmusical person. I was singing the [Johann Sebastian] Bach B minor Mass [*Mass in B Minor*, 1749], the *St. Matthew Passion* [1727], and everything. It was funny.

Q1: What was Albers like? We hear so many things about him.

WEIL: Well, he was intense. And it was like an academic approach but with a new academy. And you know, he had all these rules and everything, and you had to do everything his way. I was still a teenager, so I was not good at accepting being told what to do all the time, nor was Bob very good at it. But he wasn't a teenager anymore. But no, there were these rules about drawing. You had to draw with a stuttering line. You had to have the least line possible to express the most space. And erasers were completely out of the question. You could not use an eraser. It's the greatest thing now when I use an eraser, I always think of Albers.

We would have a model and we'd all be drawing. And then we'd put them on the floor for the critiques. And you hardly knew which drawing to pick up, because they looked so alike. It was pitiful.

And then he didn't want us to have any ego or sense of ourselves, so we were supposed to draw over our drawings. I have a couple of those still, where you're doing one thing and then you draw a figure over it and everything, because he was very severe about—"You are not an artist. You are a student. You have to do things the way I tell you." And so that was funny.

And then we're doing collages. And he wanted us to go out and find leaves that we really liked and make a collage with them. Well, Bob made a collage of the music teacher's dog. The dog was named Pepsi Bodki. And there was this leaf being this dog. And I

thought Albers was going to throw a fit because he wanted a more abstract—or something.

Q1: How did he respond?

WEIL: He never fought with Albers, but Albers fought with him.

Q1: What are some other examples of that?

WEIL: Well, it's just he was—first of all he was reactive to the thought that we'd come from Paris where we'd been studying. This went against his grain. And so he thought we thought we knew something. And that was not acceptable. And so he would pick on us because of that. He didn't accept any signs of ego at all.

Q1: Did you ever wonder why that was part of his method?

WEIL: Yes. I think he was trying to teach us by certain rigid things that he felt—like about color theory and all that. And he didn't want any variations on that. He wanted us to take in his information. I mean, naturally it was even more so in color class and all those things. But no, everybody always ran into heavy criticism from Albers at least once in the semester. And even the most able people got the hard words at least once in the semester.

The dietitian for the school decided to take a class. And she was from Friesland [Netherlands], and she couldn't follow too well what he was talking about. And so he was talking about negative space. And so she went home, and she cut out these drawings of people in a landscape. And then she'd put the landscape without the people and so on. And he just would throw a fit, because he didn't know it was her, because he would pick up work from the floor and say, "Now, this is so stupid." And this poor woman was about to be carried off with sorrow.

Q1: Well, you know, thinking about it, these were European intellectuals who came out of a certain kind of tradition who were encountering American students. And I remember Albers once said something about how he was entranced with their sense of freedom, but he couldn't keep their attention very long.

WEIL: [Laughs] Right. But we did very specific studies about color studies, to make colors vibrate.

Q1: I was going to ask you what that was.

WEIL: If you put complementary colors, and you put them in certain shapes and sizes, they really react to each other and so on. Well, a year with Albers got me all confused. But actually I learned a lot from him over the years. But you have to take it in and understand what it is. And you have to understand this man. He came from the Bauhaus, which was this experimental school—trying to take in things that were completely

against the grain. And you know, he wanted people to listen to his thoughts. And he thought if we were students, we should be content to do that.

Q2: It's interesting hearing you talk about being influenced by Albers, and right behind you is a piece that—these very bold colors.

WEIL: Right. Yes.

Q1: How did he and Bob get along?

WEIL: They didn't. Bob was always respectful. But he had a chip on his shoulder about Bob, because he thought he had ego, and ego was really not something he could contend with at all.

Q1: But Bob later said that he was the most influential teacher of his life. Albers was surprised by that. So he evidently, like you, took him in in some way.

WEIL: Yes. It was so interesting, because we were both very young in art, so naturally you're waiting to find things that can move you and influence you and so on. And certainly with Albers, I mean, he was so rigid in so many ways. But he had been part of the Bauhaus and the Bauhaus was like Black Mountain in the sense of trying to present another whole way of looking at things, in architecture and everything. And then you

come to this country, and we're having another kind of exploration—certainly by the young artists who were trying to find a new way.

Q1: Was he using mixed materials, Albers himself? Or what was he encouraging in terms of the materials you used in that sort of thing?

WEIL: Well, on doing things like the collages and so on, yes. But basically we were to learn about color and form and so on. I mean, he wanted us to learn the formalities of what he had learned.

Q1: Who were some of the other teachers that you and/or Bob enjoyed there, or benefited from? Or maybe it was just the collaboration with other artists. But could you talk about the influences on your work from Black Mountain as a community?

WEIL: Well, of course the music I've mentioned a little bit. There were people who were very brilliant in music. And dance moved me a lot. I took a dance class. And my friend Hazel Larsen [Archer] was a very great photographer—and later the photography teacher. She had had polio and she wears braces and everything and she and I were in the dance class. She did things with her arms and stuff and with her upper body. And it was fine for me.

And it was fine for Betty Jennerjohn, who was our dance teacher. And actually one of the thoughts I wrote down was on Saturday night— Sometimes we would have a dance party

and so we wanted Hazel to come to the dance party with us. And so Bob was making her something to wear and everything. And we made her oil-clothed shoes that went over her Oxfords, which were attached to her braces and so on, so she would have party shoes.



Rauschenberg and Susan Weil, Black Mountain College, North Carolina, ca. 1949. Photo: © Estate of Hazel Larsen Archer

Q1: That's a wonderful story.

WEIL: Yes. Well, that's the way it was. It was lively and nice. It is such an unusual community, because you are in this community, and everybody in it is kind of wide-eyed. And so it makes for a wonderful environment.

Q2: Do you think the experience of women was different than men in Black Mountain? I know in the Bauhaus, the women were doing the weaving and the textile arts. Were men and women treated differently at Black Mountain?

WEIL: Maybe, but I didn't focus on that. And even at the Bauhaus, that isn't so. Because there were people at the Bauhaus—women at the Bauhaus were fully functioning as artists.

Q2: So you didn't feel any difference in your experience from—

WEIL: No, I was a kid getting ready to grow up.

Q1: So was Black Mountain the right place for you to grow up?

WEIL: Oh, yes.

Q1: So tell me how you grew. This is funny, because Albers said his real goal as a teacher was that the students should experience the feeling of growth. And maybe you didn't in his class, but maybe you did.

WEIL: Well, first of all, you have to understand, this was my first time in the world as an adult. It's like Sara's daughter Annie [Dove Kirschenbaum], who is here and now trying to be on her own. And it was my first time—Paris and Black Mountain—operating not just as part of the family, but as an adult individual.

And to be in such a creative environment and to have responsibilities—I mean, I had to work on the farm. At one point I was making butter.

Q1: Churning butter?

WEIL: I don't really remember. But I wrote about it at the time that I would come from the studio and I'd clean up, but when I was making butter, there were these color streaks.

Q1: You painted the butter?

WEIL: I mean, it was just such a part of me. And I worked on the farm. And we were planting corn and everything, and I visualized having corn on the cob and everything. But then I found out it was for the pigs. No, I mean, I loved having those kinds of responsibilities. It was great.

Q1: And so Bob was five years older than you?

WEIL: Is that right?

Q1: Yes, I think he was born in '25. Maybe six years older. Anyway, how was it for him? Was it also a growth experience?

WEIL: Oh, he loved it. He loved it. He just was so joyful there. There were a lot of creative people. He got so involved with Cage and Cunningham. And also in the dance world and everything. I mean, he just couldn't believe it. Because having come from the

South from a very rigid, religious upbringing—I mean, his mother was from the Church of Christ and you weren't supposed to dance and you weren't supposed to play cards and you weren't supposed to do anything. And here he was in this wonderful, friendly environment.

Q1: Did he talk about his growing-up life with you?

WEIL: Well, a little bit, but not so very much. I mean, I certainly knew his parents, and I know now his sister. And so I'm aware.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q1: Sure. Great. We're back on.

Q2: So you once told me, Mom, that you brought back from the dumps at Black Mountain as much as you brought to the dump. What did you bring back?

WEIL: Oh, well, I don't so precisely remember. You have to think how many years ago that was. I mean, we would find things that might be elements in work or might be something that somebody else would want or whatever. But I can't really specifically remember. But you know, when you wander around in a dump, there are things that grab your attention.

Q1: Well, it's a great question, and thank you for that. And I was also just wondering if you could talk a little bit about the kind of work you actually produced that first fall and the spring. What were you producing? And do you remember a few of the pieces that you were doing and that Bob was doing?

WEIL: Well, it's funny. Most of the work we did was homework from Albers. But we did privately do some work in our studies. We did. I remember that I made some paintings and stuff. But you know, it was sneaky. You were not faking Albers homework.

Q1: And how about Bob? Same thing?

WEIL: Same thing. You know, it's just not very clear to me.

Q2: Did he make Combines then?

WEIL: No. Not yet, no. That's a load of years later.

Q2: I'm just visualizing the stuff from the dump and where that went.

WEIL: I don't know. I really don't know. It's a good question, but it doesn't have a good answer.

Q1: So another thing I read about Albers is he encouraged the idea of thrift, reusing materials—you said earlier sometimes drawing over another drawing. How do you think that impacted you? And how do you think it impacted Bob?

WEIL: Well, I think for us it was limiting because it was part of his lesson and that you can't consider yourself an artist. That didn't really sit too well with us.

Q1: So you knew my friend Vera [B.] Williams when you were there. Was that when you were there in '48, '49?

WEIL: Yes. I knew Vera and Paul [Williams]. One person we were quite close to was Ruth Asawa. And she was a great friend, and she had been in the [Japanese] internment camps during the war—she and her family. And I have other friends who were also in the camps. And one thing about Ruth is that really Albers let her get away with it, but she was her own person as an artist at that time. And she knew who she was and what she wanted to do.

Q1: What was she working on at the time?

WEIL: She was doing those wire-shaped sculptures. And also, she was so fine-tuned as a graphic artist; her drawings were so beautiful and everything. And it's astonishing because I think Albers let her get away with that because he had sympathy for her as a person who had been through this camp thing, and he had come from Germany where the

Nazis were breaking everything up. And so he let her get away with stuff that other people didn't get away with.

Q1: I was going to ask a little bit more about you and Bob—not particularly at Black Mountain but just in terms of your relationship—he being Southern and you being raised in New York City.

WEIL: Well, I mean, our bond was all about as artists and artists' minds and being visual people and so on. And he was with us on the island for a couple of summers. And it just moved him so much. He loved it so much, because it was, you know, the endless sea and the rocks of the island and the life in the sea. He just loved it. And it's interesting that he moved to Captiva [Florida] and had that kind of relationship with the sea again.

Q1: Did he talk about his father at all?

WEIL: Ernest [Rauschenberg]. Ernest was a very different sort of man. He was a hunter and all that. And he had all these hunting dogs and everything. And I remember when I was there, you open the refrigerator door and there'd be all these birds that he'd shot, all trussed up and stuff. And here was Bob who was the most peaceful man in the world. And Ernest, I think he really cared for Bob, but he couldn't understand him one bit—not one bit. And he was half Indian, Cherokee. And I found it hard to understand him when he spoke.

But his mother [Dora C. Rauschenberg] was another person entirely, because she was somewhat a visual person. She really was. And she did her sewing in a lovely way, and she cared about what she wore and what her house looked like. And I had this uproar with her once because I was visiting and Bob's sister at that time was maybe twenty or maybe less. And she was going out with a Catholic boy and she was going on about Catholics in this nasty way. And I said, "Dora, my father is Jewish and he's run into prejudice in his life, and so on. And it's very unfair. It feels very bad," and I talked about it as politely as I could, because she was my mother-in-law. And she said, "Oh Susan, those Jews are fine, but those Catholics—"

Q1: So you made a big impression.

WEIL: Yes, plainly.

Q1: I was just curious, partly being a Southerner, I'm curious about how he processed all that. You know, how he left that behind, came into your beautiful island, and let some of that go, and yet returned to Captiva in the South.

Q2: Can you describe your wedding?

Q1: Oh, that's a good idea, and I actually have pictures.

WEIL: My wedding pictures?

Q1: I have some pictures that I'd like to bring out—somewhere, hold on. But please, go ahead. Well, why don't you first describe how you—again, so where we left off the story before, you had decided to get married. And what happened after that?

WEIL: Well, for one thing, one thing that wasn't very mature or careful of me was we got married on my mother's fiftieth birthday. That wasn't too good an idea. And so we were going to get married on the island. And there we are. [Looking at pictures]

Q1: And I would love to know all the different people who are in that picture of you all coming down on a rock.

WEIL: This is me and Bob plainly. And that's my brother Jim, who is still a little kid. And this is Donald [Droll]. And this is Bob's sister, Janet [Begneaud].



Susan Weil and Rauschenberg on their wedding day with members of their wedding party: James Leonard Weil, Donald Droll, and Janet Begneaud. Outer Island, Connecticut, June 1950. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York

Q1: So tell us about the day.

WEIL: Well, it was very sweet. And one thing that was very crazy was that Bob had a woman who had a huge crush on him. Her name was Pat Pearman. And she cried all during our wedding.

Q1: Sobbing, crying?

WEIL: So anyway, that was funny.

Q2: It was on the island, wasn't it?

WEIL: It was on the island, and it was a justice of the peace. And of course, my mother had too much to drink, and she was upset anyway, because it was her ignored fiftieth birthday. And she was all dressed up. And she leaped into the ocean with her hat on and everything. And that was her statement. But it just went off fine.

Q2: Were Bob's parents there?

WEIL: They were there, and Janet. Janet was in that picture. Yes, they were there.

Q2: Did you throw the bouquet? Was it traditional like that?

WEIL: I might have. I don't remember.

Q1: So do you remember why you wore the dress you wore and how you picked it out and things like that? It's a beautiful dress. Did you make it, or was it bought?

WEIL: Oh, no. I didn't make it. Bob made me a ring, but it was woven silver. And of course it kept stretching and falling off and everything, because it was like a basket-weaved ring, and it wouldn't stay.

Q2: Did you have lobster for dinner?

WEIL: I don't remember, but my parents had gotten us a room in a fancy hotel in New York. And we went there, and we couldn't stand it. It was intimidating because it was so fakey—like the Plaza or something. And so first we decided to go to Bob's loft. Well, Bob's loft, at that time, it was on the Lower East Side, and had holes in the stairs and rats running around and stuff. And it was a little intimidating to be deflowered in this strange loft. It was amazing.

Q2: So you didn't even spend the night in the hotel?

WEIL: No. We left maybe half an hour after we got there because we didn't—either one of us—feel comfortable with that. But somebody came into his loft when we were there.

It was our wedding night, you know. And we didn't want to be there anymore. And so we went to where I was living before, which was the house on Eighty-seventh Street. And Blanche [Finley] was sharing my floor with me, and we went and stayed there.

Q2: God, you moved around a lot.

Q1: So who was Blanche?

WEIL: My mother's best friend from college. And then for our wedding breakfast, we went to Woolworth's. We had our wedding breakfast there. And the thing about Woolworth's is if you could pick—you tell it, I don't remember.

Q2: You pop a balloon to get the price of a sundae.

WEIL: Right, it was like a banana split or something. And so we popped a balloon and got a banana split.

Q1: So from the Plaza to Woolworth's. It sounds like a very exciting night.

WEIL: Well, it was a little startling. The mice on the stairs were a little too much for me.

Q1: And did you take a honeymoon?

WEIL: Yes, we went to Bermuda. I don't remember anything about that.



Rauschenberg during his honeymoon with Susan Weil, Bermuda, summer 1950. Robert Rauschenberg papers. Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York. Photo: Susan Weil

Q1: Where did you live after you got married?

WEIL: We lived on Ninety-fifth Street and Central Park, between Central Park West and the next one over.

Q1: I know that street very well. And how long did you live there?

WEIL: Well, we must have been there a year because I gave birth to Chris there.

Q1: And somewhere I read that you said that both of you wanted a child.

WEIL: Yeah, we wanted more than one. We wanted children—children. We only managed one.

Q2: But a good one.

WEIL: A very fine one.

Q1: Tell me a little bit about Christopher. You mentioned that you were raising him on your own. What was he like as a young child?

WEIL: Well, he was a fantastic kid—was and is. Bob went from Black Mountain to Europe with Cy. And so he didn't see Chris for a while. And Chris, fastened onto my father. He called him Papa.

And they were great buddies. And it was a very lovely father substitute for Christopher. It really was. They had a great friendship. They played chess by mail.

Q1: How do you do that?

WEIL: Little postcards with your move. And you can say—there's a place for comments, and you write, "Gotcha, Papa."

Q2: Will you tell about the company?

WEIL: Oh, CS Rauschenberg Company? Yes. Christopher formed a company to explain to people what children don't like.

Q2: About products.

WEIL: About products. And so we had a board of directors. And I was the vice president, and Bob was—I forget what Bob was.

Q2: Chris was the president, right?

WEIL: Chris was the president.

Q1: How old was he then?

WEIL: Six, seven. I don't know. Little. And he would have these ideas. And we'd write letters, "Dear Parker Brothers, this is what I feel about these games." You know, he would write all about it. He has all—I gave him all those books of the letters.

Q2: You never mailed them.

WEIL: I never mailed them. And I remember he wrote to Heinz, "Children do not like the lumps of fat in the baked beans."

Q1: That's amazing.

WEIL: Bob was on the board. Bernie was on the board. And we would meet regularly and talk about the CS Rauschenberg Company.

Q2: What was the S?

WEIL: Susan. Oh, he was a great kid. And we were spending summers on the island, and Chris did not want to learn to swim. He did not want to learn to swim. And everybody felt that wasn't safe, because you're surrounded by water, and this little kid— And so we were trying everything to help him to learn to swim. And then one day I said to him, "Christopher, I want you to try swimming. And when you can swim, I'm going to give you this game." I forget what it was. It was one of the boardgames. Well, by that evening, he was swimming.

Q1: There you go.

WEIL: And he made games, invented them, drew them up. And he had a newspaper that he made on a—

Q2: Mimeograph?

WEIL: No. I want to say it was called, like, a gelatin thing. I forget. And he put out this newspaper every week for the news in Stony Creek [Connecticut]. And it had jokes and pictures and everything. I have some of them.

Q1: Where was he in school?

WEIL: First he went to nursery school a block away from us. Sara went there too. It was a public high school that taught pre-nursing. And they had a model nursery. And it was only one block to that school.

And it had a nurse there for the children and their ailments and everything. And it was all-day school. And he was there from the time he was two and he eventually went to Dalton, because I was teaching at Dalton. So he went there free, because I was a teacher. And that was great.

And eventually he went to New Lincoln High School [New York]. But he was always—he's the most tolerant, even, loving person you could imagine. Creative, everything wonderful. I have only terrific children.

Q2: But you did say that before Chris had language that he—

WEIL: He would bang his head on the floor.

Q2: He would bang his head on the floor out of frustration. And then once he had language, that went away.

WEIL: Yes. And it's funny about language with Chris, because he would be in his crib, and I would hear him practicing words. But he wouldn't say them to anybody else until he had them right. Until he could say them right.

And Sara was the opposite. She would come out with streams of noises with words in the middle. But Christopher, only what he thought was correct would he say in front of anybody.

Q1: And was Bob able to see him from time to time?

WEIL: Yes. Particularly when he was in New York, that worked out. He would see him from time to time. But Christopher, he always—they'd try to do things together, and of course at that time, Bob was really into making his art life bigger and broader. So he'd often cancel meetings with Chris, because he would have a meeting with a museum person or something.

And so Bob was supposed to take Chris to the circus, and he said, "Well, Mom, he probably won't be able to come, because he'll have something more important." And I felt so terrible. And of course he did come, but Christopher had it all in his head that he was not at the top of the list.

Q1: Yes, it's hard. It's very hard. I wanted to, if you don't mind, if I go back to fill in a couple of things.

Q2: And I have something too. I once saw a little notebook of drawings that you and Bob did at the zoo, and I wonder if you could tell that story.

WEIL: Yes, well, that—we printed about that in my Skira book [*Susan Weil: Moving Pictures*, 2010]. We went to the zoo, and we had one **notebook**, and we were taking turns with it. And there are some lovely drawings in there.



Robert Rauschenberg
Untitled [Zoo Drawing—Lion], 1950
Graphite on paper
8 1/4 x 5 1/2 inches (21 x 14 cm)
Collection of Susan Weil

Q2: Did you say you had one notebook and two pencils?

WEIL: Yes.

Q1: So you were always doing something?

WEIL: Yes, yes. We were always making things, doing things.

Q2: Were there other collaborations besides the blueprints and the zoo drawings?

WEIL: Yes. Well, you know, the painting that has Jasper [Johns]'s flag and my little painting and so on. That was one, and he did that, because Stable Gallery [New York]— he was getting us sent to the gallery by putting us in his painting. [Note: For the 4th Annual Exhibition of Painting and Sculpture at Stable Gallery in 1955, Rauschenberg submitted *Short Circuit* (1955), in which he incorporated an encaustic flag painting by Johns and a small oil painting by Weil to protest their exclusion from the exhibition.]



Robert Rauschenberg

Short Circuit, 1955

Combine: 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
40 3/4 x 37 1/2 x 4 1/4 inches (103.5 x 95.3 x 10.8 cm)

Art Institute of Chicago

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Q1: We're so in sync, my co-interviewer and I, because I was just going to get back to the blueprints. And a little bit more about the Betty Parsons show—I don't know if you and Bob were broken up at that time. Maybe you were. It was '51.

WEIL: No.

Q1: Right. Yes, you were still together. So I have heard several people say or read that you had a profound influence on Bob.

WEIL: Well, I think we did on each other, of course, because we grew into the artists we were together.

Q1: I'm wondering about the blueprints themselves and what you were able to do. If you could just take me through how that collaboration developed.

WEIL: Right. Well, as a child, we had made little blueprints of feathers and stones and things. And so we went to a blueprint place and bought a roll of blueprint paper. And we were going to do big, full-scale blueprints. And the first victim of our attention was my brother, because he was still little. And he fit on the paper very nicely with things all around him. So that was the very first blueprint.

And then we made a lot of blueprints that summer. But when we went back to New York in the fall, then we really got into making a lot of blueprints. And at that time, you could use a sun lamp. Later you couldn't, because they outlawed using those. But we worked with a sunlamp, and the double Bob one [[Untitled \(double Rauschenberg\)](#), ca. 1950], I was doing the lamp. And Sue with the skirt [[Sue](#), ca. 1949], he was doing the lamp. But we worked together on the ideas of everything. And how we made them was one thing or another.

Q1: So which of the blueprints do you go back to as ones that you're proudest of from that period?

WEIL: Well, they were a group of work. I mean, for instance, the ones we did in Bonwit Teller's, they were all combinations of figures and flowers and things. And the two portrait ones, one of me with the skirt and the double one of Bob, those were very, very nice.

And we did some more abstract ones. I only owned one. The rest of them went to Bob. But since then, we've made many—José [Betancourt] and I, have made many more. At one point I asked Bob if we could do a collaboration with the blueprints, and he didn't have the time for it.



Left:
Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil
Sue, ca. 1949
Monoprint: exposed blueprint paper
69 3/4 x 41 5/8 inches (177.2 x 105.7
cm)
Private collection

Right:
Robert Rauschenberg and Susan Weil
Untitled [double Rauschenberg], ca.
1950
Monoprint: exposed blueprint paper
82 1/2 x 36 1/4 inches (209.6 x 92.1
cm)
Cy Twombly Foundation

Q2: That was just a few years before he died, you proposed that.

WEIL: Maybe ten years before he died. It was before I started formally collaborating with José, because we had made some blueprints together, and I just wanted to know if he and I could—at first he thought maybe. But then he said he didn't have the time.

Q1: Do you have any particular memories about the Betty Parsons show and how people responded to it?

WEIL: Well, I know that Philip Johnson bought a piece out of the show. I know that. And a lot of those works were destroyed because they were stored in my parents' house on the island and the house burned down. Certainly ten or more of them survived because they're in the books. But certainly many, many were destroyed in the fire. And he did a piece that never had any public life at all. He did a glass tower.

Q1: I wanted to ask you about that.

WEIL: You knew about that?

Q1: Well, I read about it somewhere.

WEIL: He built—with a glass-cutter, he made strips and shards of glass, and he fit them together into a tower. And it never had any life because it burned down on the island.

Q1: Where I read about it, it said he got cut as he was making it, so it was very bloody.

WEIL: Yeah, that's true.

Q1: Did you cast any glass sculptures together at that time? No?

WEIL: No.

Q1: Do you remember the ceiling and the light bulb photograph that he did with just the light bulb and the ceiling [*Ceiling + Light Bulb*, 1950]? It was also in that period. I just wondered if you remembered that from 1950, I think.

WEIL: No. No. And of course, he was doing a lot of very marvelous photography then too.

Q1: That was another series of questions.

WEIL: Yes, because he studied photography with Hazel. And he did a beautiful series of the Quiet House [*Quiet House—Black Mountain*, 1949] and different pictures at Black Mountain. That was very wonderful. When you said that about the light bulb, I was thinking of this photograph.



Robert Rauschenberg
Ceiling + Light Bulb, 1950
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

Q2: And I'll add that part of what my mother did as a mother with both Chris and I was we'd go on photo walks. We'd take cameras and go for a walk around the city and take photographs. And I'm sure that made a big difference for both Chris and I.

WEIL: Yes. Chris made this little book when he was about seven or eight called "Abstract Photographs by Chris R." And he made copies for the grandparents and the parents, the three parents.

Q1: Three parents.

WEIL: Yes. You know, I had the situation when Bernie wanted to get married. And I said, "Well, only if it works for Chris." And so we went to Chris and said that Bernie thought he'd like to be a member of the family, and he would like to marry me. But we

have to know how it is for you, because that's very important. So Chris said, "Let me think about it." And the next day he said, "Mother, we will marry Bernie."

Q1: How old was he?

WEIL: Eight. Was he eight? Seven?

Q1: Married in '58, so—

WEIL: Seven.

Q1: Seven. Wow. Well, since we're speaking of Chris, here's a photograph of you in Central Park. Did Bob take this?



Robert Rauschenberg
Susan—Central Park N.Y.C. (III),
1951
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

WEIL: Yes.

Q1: Of you pregnant with Chris?

WEIL: Yes. And he made the dress for me. He made my maternity dresses.

Q2: And didn't he make a little outfit for Chris too, when he was born?

WEIL: Yes, it had whistles and things.

Q2: It had whistles?

WEIL: Yes, pockets with things in them for him. Yes.

Q1: So he was making costumes and things like that at Black Mountain for Merce? Or did he do that later?

WEIL: No, that was later. But he did make the unicorn costume for his sister for the Mardi Gras with the legs that walked.

Q2: I've seen those pictures.



Rauschenberg designing unicorn costume for his sister Janet, for a Mardi Gras celebration; modeled by fellow student Inga Lauterstein, Black Mountain College, North Carolina, 1949. Photo: Trude Guermonprez

WEIL: Yes. And of course he had made the dress with the ivy stole.

Q2: Tell me about these pictures of you. They're in Central Park. Did you guys go there specifically for a photo shoot?

WEIL: No. We went there, and then he made the photographs.

Q2: That was a pretty big, baggy dress for 1951.

WEIL: Well, you know, we did things our own way.

Q1: Who were your—as you moved back to New York, did you have time to socialize or have friends. Or was it just a more intimate family life?

WEIL: No, I had good friends. I'm a friendly soul.

Q1: I can see that. Did you have friends from Black Mountain in New York?

WEIL: Yes. We had some friends from Black Mountain. And when we went to the [Art Students] League, we had friends who were students at the League—Knox Martin and Stanley Boxer. And we had friends from Black Mountain. They would come and go. But Ray Johnson was a good friend.

Q2: How about Dorothea?

WEIL: Dorothea Rockburne was a very close friend. She was a single mother with a little girl, and they were—Chris and Christine were—about a year apart. And we'd support each other.

Q1: Was she at Black Mountain when you were there?

WEIL: No, but she was there the next year, when Bob was there quite a bit. And Bob said, "I have a friend that—I know you'd be good friends." And he introduced us. And then—with Bernie, she suggested—I wanted to build a studio. I needed a studio in Connecticut; then she suggested Bernie as an architect.

Q1: Did you all ever talk about Abstract Expressionism and the different movements that were going on at the time? Or were you just experimenting?

WEIL: Well, we were certainly enthusiastic about what was happening in art. I mean, it was very thrilling, when you'd go to see Barnett ["Barney"] Newman or [Willem "Bill"] de Kooning. Ah, de Kooning.

Q1: Tell me about de Kooning. I'm so curious.

WEIL: He was such a fantastic artist. And his work was so amazing to me. And we knew him. I knew his wife, Elaine [de Kooning], better than I knew Bill.

But we certainly knew Bill and [Jack] Tworkov and [Franz] Kline. I knew Kline pretty well. And [Ad] Reinhardt.

Q2: [Jean] Tinguely?

WEIL: Tinguely. I knew [Mark] Rothko.

Q1: Did he teach at Black Mountain, Rothko?

WEIL: I don't think so.

Q1: But was he there at some point? I think he was—no?

WEIL: I don't know. But I knew him from what was happening in New York the next years. But also his daughter Kate went to Dalton. I remember there was a meeting at my parents' house that he came to that had to do with the school, maybe the art department or something.

No, the city was so lively in '52, '53. Oh, man. It was so exciting. When I was still at Black Mountain, we were going to New York. And we took Albers's paintings to Egan Gallery.

And we walked in, and there was a Kline show, I think, on the walls. And man, it was so exciting. And because I became very friendly with the Egans, I got to know Joseph Cornell pretty well—very well.

Q1: He is fascinating.

WEIL: Very wonderful. Very complicated man. And I went to Utopia Parkway [Queens, New York] a couple times to visit him at his home.

Q1: Did he have an influence on your way of working or thinking? No?

WEIL: I don't think so.

Q1: He has been cited as having had an influence on Bob, but I don't know if it's true or not. Who knows?

WEIL: But when you think about Bob first going into the collage pieces and so on, it's so funny, because I once talked to Bob about [Kurt] Schwitters, because he's so like Schwitters. He's very like Schwitters. And at that time, he didn't even know Schwitters's work, when he was doing such similar work.

It's so funny because when we met in Paris, he had no sense of art history or other art, because he'd grown up with a family who—I mean, you've heard the stories about *Pinkie* and *Blue Boy* and all that. No? He had seen [Thomas Lawrence's *Sarah Barrett Moulton*:] *Pinkie* [1794] and [*The*] *Blue Boy* [ca. 1770] by [Thomas] Gainsborough on playing cards, and he didn't know what painting was, really. And then he saw them in a museum and he was so startled.

Q1: So everything was new.

WEIL: Everything was new to him. He didn't really know art. And that was interesting in Paris, because we did manage to get to the museums some, in spite of the person who was supposed to be responsible for me. But I did know—my father had always taken me to museums. And I had a sense of art history somewhat, which became much more

sophisticated later, because when I really threw myself heavily in that direction, I studied quite a bit, just between me and me, not formally.

Q2: Personally, I think you have a huge effect on Bob's creative life.

Q1: Well, thank you for resuscitating that question. So if you don't feel immodest, like your daughter, I'm really curious about that, your influence on him.

WEIL: Well it wasn't very straight. Not like his coming and staring at my work and going home and doing something. Or my working like him so much. I mean, there are a lot of places where our work crosses around. But he did talk to me once about the—is it the *Jammers* [1975–76] that are soft? He knew I was working with soft paintings, and he asked me if that upset me. I said, of course not.

Q2: Bernie really feels strongly about your influence on Bob. What would he say?

WEIL: I don't know. I think sharing that growing up in art influenced both of us and discussing ways to think. I mean, working in the same space, working in the classrooms at the League and everything together. You know, trying to find our way as artists.

Q1: Can you talk a little bit more about the League? Because we've touched on it, but we haven't gone into it in depth. You mentioned who you studied with, but just more about what you did when you were there, the kind of work you did.

WEIL: Well, the thing about the League was we had to be there every day. And I don't know if it was once a week or once a month or what. The teachers came in and gave crits and talked to you about your work. But mostly, there was always a model there. There was always a place for doing your independent work. And you just found your own way.

Q1: And were the really creative artists you were interested in mostly working there? You mentioned the GI Bill, and as we know, that brought a new element into the art world, so not just the fancy people.

WEIL: No. Talking about prejudice about men and women, particularly men, they were not going to send their boy child to art school. They had to have a profession and so on, so forth. And some women had it a little easier, because they thought, well, you'll get married and you don't have to earn a living.

So the GI Bill let male people wanting to be artists make their own choice. They could go wherever they wanted to go to school. Or not go to school.

Q2: This is a jump, but how do you think the war years affected Bob? Did he talk about the war at all?

WEIL: Well, not very much, but he did join the Navy. And he did say he wouldn't shoot anybody. He would not do that. And so he became a neuropsychiatric technician. And he

worked with people who were shell-shocked or so on and so forth. But he wouldn't go into active service. And I don't know how he got away with it, because a load of people felt like that, but nobody cared. But he got away with it.

Q2: Did he have any creative life in the war? Did he draw or do anything while he was in the war?

WEIL: I'm not so sure. I think he did draw, yes. But I don't know. But then after the war, when he could go to school, he went to Kansas City [Kansas City Art Institute, Missouri]. Well, first he had gone to school about pharmacy. But that didn't do anything.

And on the GI bill, he went to Kansas City to study art. And he went from there to Paris. And it was always on the GI Bill, he could manage that. And can you imagine? We lived on that. It was \$85 a month or something like that.



Robert Rauschenberg
Soulfull, 1945
Pencil on paper
9 1/2 x 8 1/2 inches (24.1 x 21.6 cm)
Robert Rauschenberg Foundation

Q1: Well, that leads me to the question of his generosity to others.

WEIL: The thing I love about that is he didn't ever say, "I did this and I did that." He just quietly did all these marvelous philanthropic things and gave to individuals and his organization that supported artists and—

Q2: Change [Inc.].

WEIL: Change. He was always—

Q2: Kind of behind the scenes.

WEIL: Yes, and [the] Lab School [of Washington] and all that. He had this enormous generosity. But he didn't want any credit for it. He didn't want it talked about.

Q2: What was the earliest that you saw that generosity?

WEIL: Well, not when I was married to him, because we had nothing. But I have observed it. I mean, we remained friends all those years. I certainly have observed it.

Q2: At the end of Bob's life, he would send Sue flowers on their anniversary.

Q1: Oh, tell me about that.

WEIL: Always. And Bernie was always kind of startled by it. But he always sent me flowers. But also, at all my openings, he would send plants and flowers.

Q2: And you have an orchid that still blossoms.

WEIL: Yes, from my last show, when he was actually in the hospital. But he had his staff send me that.

Q1: So you, if I may ask you, you did feel a strong connection with him through all those years?

WEIL: Always.

Q2: Still.

WEIL: Now, still, but always as—I mean, it's different than a lot of people, because art is really the center of my life in every way. And so he's my art partner—always was. He'd come to my shows.

He came up here on my—what birthday, seventieth or something, seventy-fifth or eightieth or something. He came up here. I was having a party, of course. But he came from Florida to see me and be a part of things.

Q1: Did you talk to each other about your work during those years?

WEIL: Somewhat. Somewhat, yes. I sent him work. And we did talk. We did.

Q1: Some people have called the time period and his influence the “Rauschenberg era.”

Do you agree with that? Do you think there is a Rauschenberg era of art?

WEIL: Well I think he certainly was a huge influence on many, many young people, the generation after he had started the Combines and all that. I think, of course, a lot of people did work that is reminiscent of his work.

Q1: What’s your favorite story or memory about him in all the years you had together?

WEIL: It’s hard to sort out one.

Q1: Did he have a great sense of humor?

WEIL: Yes. He had a good sense of humor and his astonishing laugh. Do you remember his laugh? Vincent [FitzGerald] always says to me, “Oh, that laugh.” Yeah, he was—his later years were made difficult by his trouble with drinking. It was a trial.

Q2: Did he drink when you were together?

WEIL: Never. We didn't even have wine. Nothing. On the GI Bill, you couldn't afford it.

Q1: That's the positive thing about the GI Bill, right?

WEIL: But he was such a dear person. He really was.

Q1: That's how almost everybody we've talked to talks about him.

WEIL: Yes.

Q2: He gave me two gifts that I remember. He gave me a mechanical cow that walked and mooed. And the batteries were inside the—you had to open the udders to get to the batteries. And he also spray-painted a little piano in dayglo colors and gave it to me.

Q1: That's lovely.

WEIL: Mooey. That was the name of your cow.

Q2: Mooey. And I had the udders for a lot longer than I had the whole cow.

WEIL: Mooey left her udders behind.

Q2: You tuckered out, Mom?

Q1: Do you want to take a break? Or should we pause for today and come back another time?

WEIL: Let's pause and have lunch together and see what we feel like after that.

Q1: That sounds great.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriber: Audio Transcription Center

Session #2 (audio)

Interviewee: Susan Weil

Location: Brooklyn, NY

Interviewers: Mary Marshall Clark (Q1)
Sara Kirschenbaum (Q2), Sara Sinclair (Q3)

Date: June 6, 2014

Q1: This is June 6th, 2014. This is the voice of Mary Marshall Clark.

Weil: Hi, I'm Susan Weil.

Q1: We're so delighted that you've allowed us to do session two with you. We have in the room today two additional Saras, Sara Kirschenbaum and Sara Sinclair. We're just remarking on your new work, and I thought maybe since your new work references old work, you could start by telling us what you're working on now.

Weil: I'm working on a show of all years I've done images to James Joyce, and I've done three books with Vincent FitzGerald, and it's been a deep preoccupation of mine. I decided to put it together as an exhibition.

Q1: Could you talk a little bit about some of the works that you had done earlier and how you're redoing them now?

Weil: Yes. I began actually making images to Joyce because I was going to work on a book with Vincent FitzGerald. Rare books. Limited edition books. We were working on *The Epiphanies* [1987; Joyce's writings under this heading date from 1898 to 1904].

Then I began a deep study. My first experience with Joyce was when I was a kid. My father was a writer. He read to us from *Finnegans Wake*, you believe? And I just thought it was like music. I didn't put together any attempt to understand, but I liked the sound of it, and I also felt his passion for Joyce. When Vincent suggested that I work on a book, and I was working with Marjorie Van Dyke, he asked us what author we'd like to make images to, and we both said James Joyce. So then began a year of study and notebooks. The notebooks have turned into many of these Plexi pieces, where I have image and words. In between all this other work has happened, I've certainly—many years of work, images to Joyce. It's a lovely collaboration. We don't bother each other at all.

Q1: Those are the best kind. I'd love to hear more about your father's influence on your life.

Weil: My father was a writer. Not a very commercially successful writer at all, but he had a deep passion for it. He shared with us his own writings. I remember him reading [Marcel] Proust also, and many things. We'd read children's books, too, but he'd read us what he was thinking about and working with. He was a lovely, gentle person, and a very important influence to me. For me, my father was like a mother, and my mother was like a father, because he was the more nurturing. I've been through a lot in my life, because I was burned in an accident when I was eleven. A boat explosion, which resulted in my brother's death. He lived for the summer, but he didn't survive it. That changed my life completely, because I was the kid sister, and suddenly I was the only child, and they adopted two more children and I was the oldest child. So I had been in every position

possible. Since we went through a lot in our lives, it was a very tight family. They were fantastic, because they didn't expect any the less from me because I was damaged. They expected me to be fully responsible, part of the family. I'm very grateful for that.

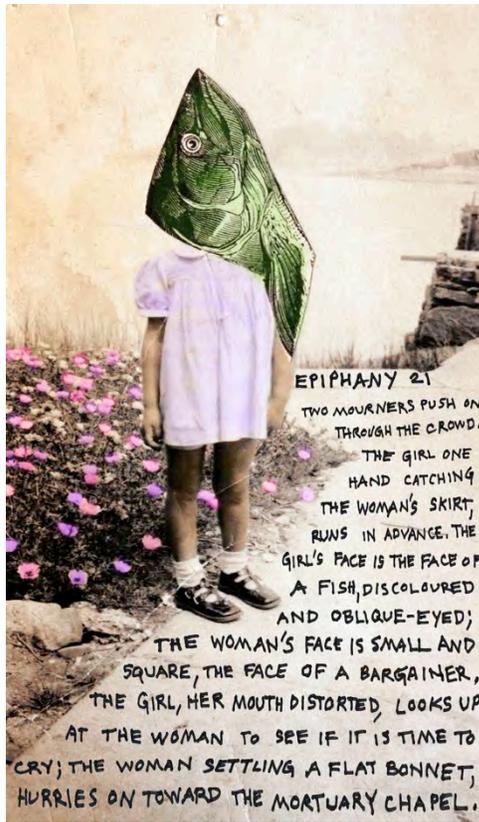
Q1: Were you also influenced—I think your mother did a little bit of art, right, or was she—

Weil: She did. Before she was married, she was writing a great deal. A poet and a writer. But she was also making watercolors. We can't help it. It's in our family. We just can't help it. She was a very creative person, and the way we were brought up was responsive to that. But as I say, my father was the more nurturing.

Q1: You said that life on Outer Island was very rigorous. What did you mean by that?

Weil: We had to learn to look after things. There was no grocery store around the corner. My mother was a licensed lobster-woman, and she would go out and pull the lobster pots, and I would go along to plug the lobsters. I also used to set and pull the fishnets for the lobster bait. I think one thing that was kind of really wild was my mother said to me, "If there's a shark in the net and it's bigger than you, you have to row in and get me. You can't deal with a shark that's bigger than you." So whenever there would be a shark, I'd be trying to figure out how big it was, because they're splashing around and it's hard to tell. [Laughs]

Q1: I'm looking at *Epiphany 21* [1987], where your head is a fish.



Susan Weil
Untitled (Epiphany 21), 1987
Digital image on Plexiglas
24 x 14 x 1/4 inches (61 x 35.6 x 0.6 cm)

Weil: Yes. [Laughs] Growing up on the island and pulling fishnets, it seems quite appropriate.

Q2: Can I ask you to tell one other story, of the day that your mother said that everybody in the family had to fend for themselves on the island?

Weil: Yes. I was little then. My brother was a year and a half older, so he had no trouble with that. He was out fishing and trying to get his lunch that way. I was wondering how I was going to take care of myself. I was fishing and couldn't catch anything, and I finally

caught this little fish that was the kind that you usually threw away. I had to cook it and take care of myself. She just wanted us to feel that we could do things. I think that was wonderful, but I was just a little young for it. [Laughs]

Q1: Right. When did you first recognize that you enjoyed the art-making process, or that you enjoyed art?

Weil: We always made things. We always did. My brother and I used to make collages out of the Sears catalogue and so on. My mother, she loved doing theater, and so she made this puppet group, and we put on [Richard] Wagner's *Ring* [*Cycle*, 1848–74], one at a time, and studied the music and worked the puppets, and made the puppets and so on. She just felt whatever you felt like you wanted to do, you have to figure out how to do it. So that was funny. We had put on *Das Rheingold* [1854] and we were taken into the Met [Metropolitan Opera, New York] to see the opera version of it. We were sitting, discussing different things going on, and this kind of fancy lady leaned over and said, “Are you regular subscribers?” We were sitting there with our peanut butter sandwiches and everything. [Laughs]

Q1: How did you relate to New York City?

Weil: When I was a kid, I wasn't here very much. We'd spend the school year in New Jersey, on a farm. We'd come into New York for this and that, and the summers, of course, on the island. It just fascinated me. It was like going to Disneyland. You know,

you go there. Mother always wanted to take us to a nice, interesting restaurant, and we only wanted to go to Horn & Hardart's and put quarters in the machine. It was a very lively, creative family.

Q1: Tell me about school on the farm in New Jersey.

Weil: I went to school as a child in Englewood. It was regular. Nothing crazy about that.

Q1: How did you come to go to Dalton?

Weil: Because after my brother died, and my little brother and sister were kids, little kids, my father used to commute into the city, but they decided to look for a house, and we should move to the city. I was a young teen. She wanted me to go to Dalton because of worrying about me in a public school situation. It was really terrific for me, because of the manageable sizes of classes, and it was taught in a way where you had to take responsibility for what you studied. You didn't study day-by-day. You'd do week-by-week. It was really great life lessons. Of course, the best part of that was I met Aaron Kurzen, who was my art teacher and my friend forever.

Q1: And whom you just saw on Wednesday. Tell us about what Wednesday was like.

Weil: Wednesday was amazing, because my husband is a hospice patient, and he's had ten heart attacks, do you believe? He has a twenty-four-hour-a-day IV with medication to

help his heart to beat. He's very frail, but he's been dying for five years, so we've got it into a routine of his care. He made the geodesic dome for us, and it was falling apart. We hadn't been there in many years. Out of reverence for him, I set about this project of renovating the dome. It's amazing, because it's like building the Taj Mahal. It's very expensive and complicated. But it is in the process of renovation. We decided to try to take Bernie up to see it. Sara and I plotted for about a month. Sara in Oregon and me here, and we figured out a place to rent a wheelchair van. Sara got in a day and a half before. She went to Queens and picked up the van and brought it back. We only told Bernie about it the day before, just in case anything wasn't going to be possible. We got him into the van, and all the medical people were scaring us, "What are you going to do if you need to take him to the hospital?" All this in front of him. It was so disillusioning. You take a social worker saying that in front of Bernie. That just seemed to me crazy.

Anyway, we got an aide and Bernie into the wheelchair van, and we had the two-hour drive up to Connecticut. We went to see Aaron's beautiful show, lifetime of work. He's now ninety-four. That was so moving. Then we went up to the dome. Right now, there's no floor on the dome. It's got walk boards and stuff. But they wheeled Bernie up the ramp, and he was in there talking about all the specific images, and they're bringing in drawings and talking about what hardware they're doing and how they're doing. He was just a part of it completely, and not even sleepy, not even "I need my urinal" or anything. There were no problems. Then we went down to a coffee shop and sat and had a dome meeting, and then drove back to New York. Two more hours of driving. He was just fine.

Nobody can believe it. The perfect day, where so many days have been far from perfect. Magical.

Q1: I'm so glad you had that experience.

Weil: Oh, it was wonderful.

Q1: Beautiful. After you discovered the pleasures of drawing, I don't know if you want to talk a little bit about your time at Dalton and what kind of work you were doing.

Weil: When I first took art in Dalton, Rufino Tamayo was the teacher, and it was impossible. He was not a good teacher for everybody. He had one student whose work he admired, and he paid no attention to anybody else. So the next year, I said, I think I'll try again. Then Aaron—it was his first year of teaching, and he was teaching under Vaclav Vytlacil. I went into the class, and there were these 22 by 30[-inch] papers. He gave a chalk, and I was drawing a little—not a chalk, a charcoal. I was drawing a little figure in the middle, and Aaron said, "Susan, I think you have to pay attention to the size of the paper you're working on. I want you to close your eyes and draw a rooster." I'm a little teenager, and I'm drawing very freely a big rooster. That day, I said, "I'm going to be a painter." I just loved it. The thing about Aaron was he was such a positive person for me.

My father had been wanting me to be a writer, and now I'm going to be a painter. Talking about it, my father said, "You have to go to college." I said, "I'll apply to the ones that

have a good art department.” It was Bard and Bennington and all that. But then Aaron told me about Black Mountain, and that Albers was teaching there, and he told me about the Bauhaus. I visited Black Mountain and I said, “Forget the rest of it. I’m going there.” That’s what happened. So he was really a part of my art life, always.

Before I went to Black Mountain, in the summer, I went to Paris on a converted troopship. It was wild. When I got there, I was moved into a *pension*, and Bob was in that *pension*. It was just that I had to meet him. He was going to the same art school. We were living in the same house. It just was necessary that we meet each other. The art school in Paris was very nothing. It was like a model would stand there for a week, and you’d just think, I can’t draw this for a week. You’d move around the room, draw it different ways. Then we’d go to the Louvre, we’d go see art, we’d go to the modern museum [Musée d’Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris] and everything. Then at night, we’d go draw at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière, which was drawing. Sara went there a year ago, drawing there. Anyway, when it was time for me to go home and go back to New York and then to Black Mountain—and about two months later, Bob went to Black Mountain. So I guess we cared about each other. I guess we did. [Laughs]

Q1: You’ve told us a little bit about Black Mountain. One of the pieces I wanted to ask you more about was *Secrets*.

Weil: What happened, when I went back to Black Mountain one Christmas, with an infant—I was having a hard time, because my marriage was falling apart. This infant who had—what do you call it?

Q2: Colic?

Weil: Colic. I was having sort of a tough time. Where was I? I lost my way.

Q2: About *Secrets*.

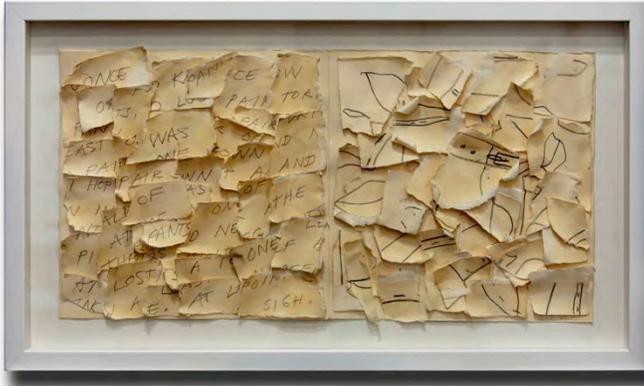
Weil: Oh, yeah. At that time, I wrote out my feelings. I used to always do poetry. I did, always, poems. I wrote out my mixed-up feelings about my own situation, and it was very private, so I tore it all up and put it together in a random array.

Q1: Did you present it there or later? Did you show it there at Black Mountain?

Weil: No. No, we were not allowed to think of ourselves as artists. Albers said, “You’re not artists. You’re students. You just have to listen to this preparation to be an artist when you’re ready to, and you can’t do any individual work. You have to learn about color and learn about this, that, and the other.” So that was not for public. That was for private.

Q2: You did two pieces like that, didn’t you?

Weil: Yes, I did one which was a torn-up image, torn-up writing. It's called *Pair of Pants* [1949].



Susan Weil
A Pair of Pants, 1949
Graphite, torn paper collage
10 1/4 x 19 3/4 inches (26 x
50.2 cm)

Q1: Looking back, what do you take from those Black Mountain years? How has it influenced you over time?

Weil: For one thing, the atmosphere of the place was absolutely wonderful. You had all these creative, interesting people in all different fields. We'd be in our classes in the day, and at lunch and at dinner, we'd sit and talk to each other. You would have a real dialogue with the poets, with the dancers, with all the different people in different aspects of art and science. It gave you this rich feeling of creative possibility. That was very meaningful to me. At Black Mountain, they had what they called the first Happening, which was not the first Happening at all, because of all the things that happened in the past. It was a function of putting together different areas of art into one thing.

Q1: Were you there for that event?

Weil: No, but Bob was there. No, I wasn't there then. It was the next year.

Q3: Question.

Q1: Sara Sinclair speaking now.

Q3: You said that Albers continually said that you were students, that you weren't artists.

Did you already feel like an artist?

Weil: You just felt the need to explore things. It wasn't a matter of giving yourself a title or a position, but it was an exploration.

Q1: In terms of the next chapter of your life, you came back to New York, and I remember that it was such an exciting time. You saw a Franz Kline exhibit that was very exciting to you. Can you tell us about that?

Weil: Because my parents were living in New York, we came back to the city. The art world was in an explosion of amazing things. We actually brought, in a car, Albers's work to this gallery. There was Franz Kline's show. Wherever we went, it was this kind of explosion of excitement over what was happening in painting, and painting changing and freeing itself. It was amazing.

Q1: You've referenced several times in the book, your admiration of de Kooning.

Weil: Oh, yes.

Q1: Could you talk about that a bit?

Weil: De Kooning, he was a deep and poetic person. He was his own person. Very intense about his work. I really admired him. I was good friends with his wife, Elaine. He was a role model, in a way, because he was, not to work like him, but in his intensity about being an artist.

Q1: I read somewhere that he said you all were all painting paintings for each other at that time. It was like a conversation.

Weil: Right, because there was no commercial viability then. We were each other's audience, the artists.

Q1: In terms of your own work and that period, were you still working on blueprints?

Weil: The blueprints were separate from Black Mountain. It was an extension of making blueprints when I was a kid, and I talked with Bob about it and we went and bought this big roll of blueprint paper in New Haven, and then spread it out and worked with sunlight. That was the beginning of it. My little brother was still a kid, so he fit on the

paper very well. We continued with this after the summer, working with a lamp, the kind of a lamp you now use for sun-tanning. It was just very lively and interesting. It's just like a photogram. It's working—photographic without camera. It was marvelous to be able to do that.

Q1: You said somewhere that your grandmother had a blueprint that she had made. Is that right?

Weil: Yes, my great-grandfather was Dankmar Adler, who was an architect, so there was a blueprint machine for the architectural drawing. When she was a little girl, she brought in a glass negative and made an image of herself. I have that. That was an inspiration, too. It wasn't the original source, because after we had done the blueprints, then she showed us this and said about her own experience, but it was adding to our own exploration.



Sara Adler
Self Portrait, ca.1870
Cyanotype

Q1: I was also intrigued by your work *Eden* from 1950.

Weil: I have to try to visualize it.

Q1: *Flower Figure* [1951], through the holes. You know what we can do? I can show you some of these images. This is *Eden*.



Susan Weil
Flower Figure, 1951
Cut canvas, tempera, crayon, and graphite
35 x 28 1/2 inches (88.9 x 72.4 cm)



Susan Weil
Eden, 1950
Oil on canvas
51 x 51 inches (129.5 x 129.5 cm)

Weil: Because I had worked very freely with Aaron Kurzen, I was ignoring the discipline of Albers and working kind of freed-up from that. It's a big painting. It's interesting.

When I did the painting with Kurzen, I was pregnant, and I'm reacting to turpentine and stuff. I was working with other materials, because it made me sick.

Q1: What were the materials here? It looks like paper. Or charcoal?

Weil: No, that's a canvas. I just couldn't use oil paint.

Q1: You have your hands over your stomach here.

Weil: Well, I had something in there.

Q1: [Laughs] Exactly. This flower figure is also very intriguing, because of the—

Weil: I just love the idea of the slip being transparent and seeing through the transparency. That's a blueprint from—

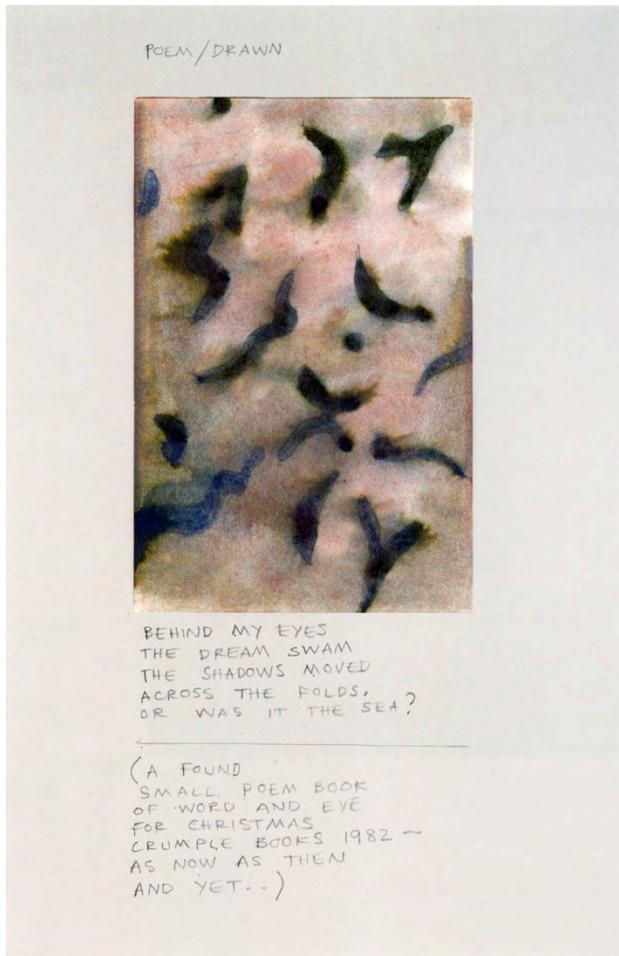
Q1: This is *Sue* [ca. 1950].

Weil: Yes, that's a blue—

Q1: This is a collaboration still. [Crosstalk]

Weil: Yes, all the blueprints from those years were collaboration. If Bob was the model, we worked it out together. If I was the model, we worked it out together. So we really were both a full part of the choice of the layout and so on and so forth.

Q1: This one, “Poem/Drawn. Behind my eyes. The dreams swim. The shadows moved across the folds, or was it the sea?” [*Untitled (Poemumble)*, ca. 1982]



Susan Weil
Untitled (Poemumble), ca. 1982
Watercolor and graphite collage on paper

Weil: Now, in the last twenty-five years, I’ve made a poem image every single day of my life. There have been a couple of books of them. Back in those early days, I didn’t have the discipline of doing one every day. It was my way of putting together word and image, which has been a big part of how I’ve worked, because ever since I’ve worked on the books, it’s been kind of central to how I think. That’s why I’m very interested in making

this show about Joyce, because I pulled together being involved with reading and drawing, and so on.

Q1: Could you describe what your work process is with the word/image paintings? How do you work? How does it come to you?

Weil: The poems? It's changed, because I used to only do drawing and watercolor and so on with words, and they were involved with whatever I was thinking about. Sometimes the image came from the words, and sometimes the words came from the image. But now I've been a contemporary woman. I'm working with images off the computer, collaging and so on and so forth.

Q1: Since we're here in the book, also, this is an extraordinary piece [*The Reed*, 1989].



Jalaluddin Muhammad Rumi's *The Reed* (ca. 13th century), translated by Zahra Partovi, line etchings and mezzotints by Susan Weil, published by Vincent FitzGerald & Co., 1989
Edition of 50 copies signed by the artist and translator
6 1/2 x 9 1/2 inches (16.5 x 24.1 cm)

Weil: [Jalaluddin Muhammad] Rumi. Do you know that's only this big?

Q1: It's called—how do you pronounce it? Olle Granath?

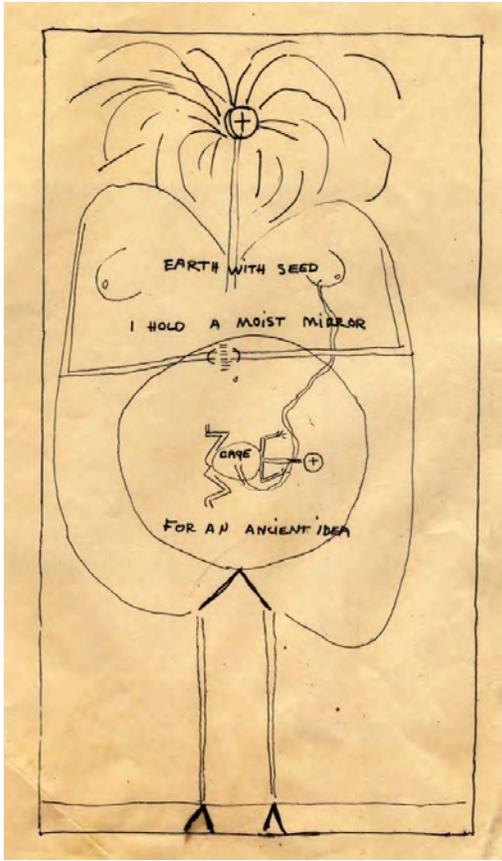
Weil: Olle Granath was the director of the modern museum [Moderna Museet, Stockholm] in Sweden. The painting is of Rumi.

Q1: Oh, yes.

Weil: That's a poem I made during the time I was married to Bob.

Q1: Do you want to just read it to us and then tell us about it?

Weil: I was pregnant, so I was drawing about that. It says, "Earth was seed. I hold a moist mirror. Cage for an ancient idea." It's just being aware of a little being inside of me.



Susan Weil
Untitled, ca. 1951
Ink on paper

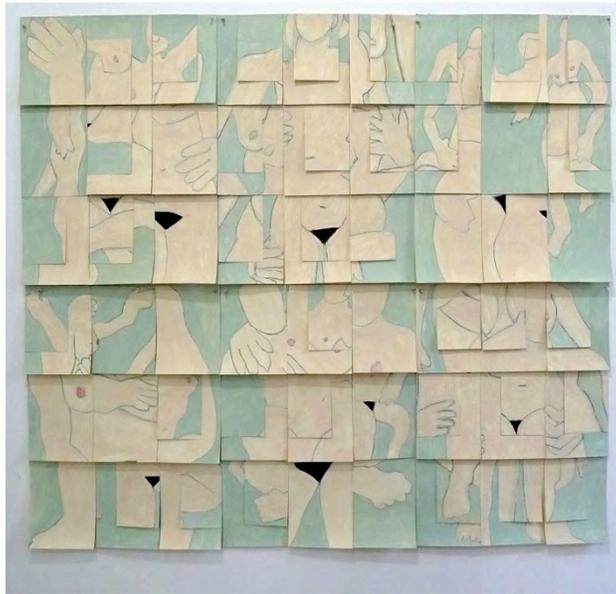
Q1: That's beautiful. How much of your work was collage-based in this period of the sixties, would you say?

Weil: Quite a lot of it in the sixties, I think. Quite a lot of it. I was using images in a collage way.

Q1: Some of your works are more—and we're looking now at Plexiglas figure [*Plexifigure*, 1967] and also *Color Configurations* [(*green*), 1998]. I was wondering, sometimes you work more structurally with patterns and shapes, and sometimes more boldly with color, and how you were thinking about that at that time.



Susan Weil
Plexifigure, 1967
Plexiglas and aluminum
44 x 25 inches (111.8 x 63.5 cm)



Susan Weil
Color Configurations (green), 1998
Charcoal and acrylic on paper
60 x 66 inches (152.4 x 167.6 cm)

Weil: Those were really two different times. The Plexi figures were—I was just interested in working in a sculptural way, and the negative space of the image not being there. It came out of my study of [Eadweard] Muybridge, the walking figure, because I was trying to express time through the steps and so on. It was very important to me.

Q1: Can you talk a little bit about Muybridge and his influence on you?

Weil: When I first discovered the works of Muybridge, I was very moved, because I liked that specific attention to the passage of time. Then I worked a great deal with that—walking figures and so on. To me, it was marvelous to have a sense of time that way. I've

done about—I had a fairly recent painting of birds flying in three positions [*Escape*, 2013]. It's sitting, and then flying, and then it leaves the canvas. That all comes out of an admiration for Muybridge and discovering that specific motion, and I did so many day-to-night images. Huge body of work about the passage of time through morning to night and so on, and also about the seasons. It was, to me, a very important thing. As a child on the island, the horizon was a big deal, and feeling the straightness expressing the curve of the earth, that fascinated me. All these things kind of came into the work here and there.



Susan Weil
Escape, 2013
Acrylic and archival inkjet print on canvas and Masonite
28 1/2 x 57 x 3 1/2 inches (72.4 x 144.8 x 8.9 cm)

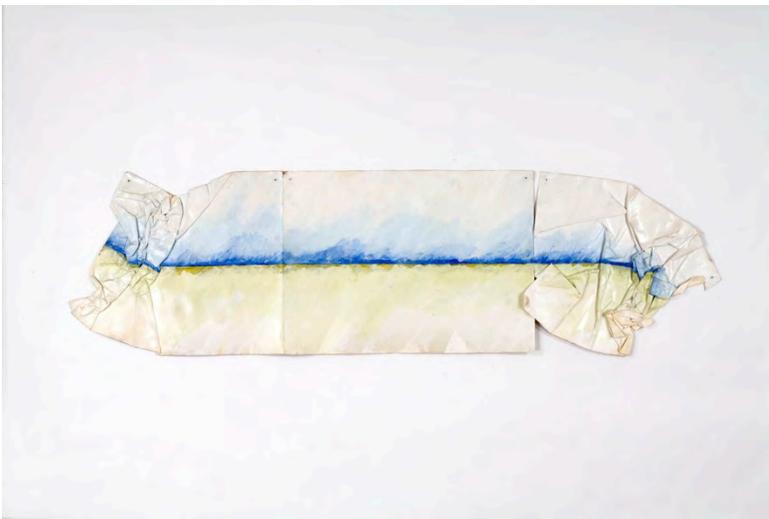
Q1: I really liked the different hands paintings that you did to show the passage of time.

Weil: Muybridge did a study of a hand drawing a circle. I thought it was so beautiful. I have a daughter who does a lot of images with hands.

Q1: You do. She happens to be here in the room. In the book here that we're referring to, there are different periods that are described [*Susan Weil: Moving Pictures*. Milan: Skira, 2010]. I wanted to ask you if this book is representative of how you describe your own periods of development and growth. How would you describe them for yourself?

Weil: I don't know. You just move through needs of the work changing. You don't have any boredom. You work from one group of work into the next. When I began this work with Joyce writings, it just thrilled me, because it goes way back in all different phases, and yet it's all new. Working this way with Plexiglas was exciting to me. You just build on everything you know and have felt and looked at.

Q1: I just was so moved. You've used horses several times in your images, and also the *Loon* [1974] was just an extraordinary piece. Could you talk about creating that?



Susan Weil
Loon, 1974
Acrylic on paper with
metal grommets
31 3/4 x 78 1/2 inches
(80.6 x 199.4 cm)

Weil: Actually, some of that is Muybridge, too, because he worked with the running horse. That was the big push, then, to understand the motions of the horse. He photographed that and said, “Yes, there is a period of time when the horse is entirely off the ground.” Nobody had known that before. I’ve done a little with horses. Not so very much, but it probably comes out of Muybridge.

Q1: There it is. There are the horses there, and your—

Weil: The cavalcade. Yes. There are horses there. With Joyce, it’s because he’s writing in that section of *Ulysses* [1922], which is wandering around. It’s the section where he’s going over the book. It’s describing the nineteen sections of the book. The cavalcade goes through Dublin here and there in the writing.

Q1: Beautiful. Also, under the section the book describes as influenced by Muybridge is *Tumble* [1978] and *Jumping Over Rope* [1981]. Same thing, seeing the images change.



Susan Weil
Tumble, 1978
Watercolor on paper
8 3/4 x 33 inches (22.2 x 83.8 cm)

Weil: That's directly responding to Joyce. This one, *Jumping Over Rope* [1981], that's full-size. That's a rope on the wall, and the different sections. The others are watercolors and so on. I did a few that were full-size.



Susan Weil
Jumping Over Rope, 1981
Acrylic on paper with rope
90 x 190 inches (228.6 x 482.6 cm)

Q2: Did you mean responding to Joyce, or did you mean responding to Muybridge?

Weil: Responding to Muybridge.

Q1: Also wanted to ask you about this one. I guess this is the *Peripheries II* [2004].

Q2: That's the *Peripheries II*. This is something else.

Weil: That's the *Phases of the Moon* [1980]. That, again, was an expression of time, going through the moon from sliver moon to full.



Susan Weil
Phases of the Moon,
1980
Acrylic on canvas
63 x 180 inches (160 x
457.2 cm)

Q1: It's clear how much you were influenced by the sea and the light, and also there was the Scandinavia period. Could you talk a little bit about that period of showing there and what that meant for you?

Weil: The thing is, Scandinavian reality, geographically, it's all islands and water, so it's a part of everybody's life, the effect of the sea, and so there was a very positive response to my images that relate to my growing up on the island and the horizon and so on.

People just felt it themselves from their lives. I had wonderful years about Scandinavia. My gallerist there was like my heart. He was just amazing. He had such a full response to my work. I never had such an expression of pleasure in what I did, and he ran shows all over Scandinavia, and some in Europe, because he really believed in my work and my thought process. Now every other professional relationship I have can't measure up to that. It just can't. Scandinavia has been very terrific for me. It's like a second home. For

Bernie, he was professor of sculpture in the academy [Kungliga Konsthögskolan, Royal Institute of Art, Stockholm], and very important to them, too, and he had his own gallery situation. Sculptures all over. He just recently sold a sculpture in south Sweden. It's been a second home for us, really.

Q2: How do you think being in Sweden affected your work?

Weil: Before that, I was pretty solitary with my work. There, I was so respectfully appreciated, and that changed my own feeling about myself as an artist. Because first of all, when I was married to Bob, he was getting a lot of attention and response pretty quickly. I was never jealous of him. I completely appreciated what he did and who he was, but I did have a feeling of my being an inward artist and his being more than that. The same thing happened with Bernie, because when I married him, he was an architect, and he had worked with Buckminster Fuller, and he built our dome. Suddenly, he was pulled into the sculpture world, and suddenly everybody was paying all kinds of attention to Bernie's work. He never had any trouble having a gallery or showing his work. Again, I was an inward artist, and he was an outward artist. I never really was jealous in the usual sense, but I did feel, in Sweden, that there was a response, which changed the way I looked at my work.

Q2: How much of that difference would you say is because you're a female?

Weil: Certainly the women's movement happened when I was here and I was a part of it. I belonged to two women artist groups, and galleries did not easily show women, and they were second-class, definitely. That was part of it. Then, also, when Bob was suddenly finding his way and so on, I was a mother with a big responsibility toward a little person, and I couldn't have that focus. That's the reality.

Q1: Certainly. This isn't my question. I'm going to take you back in time. In terms of that reality, what was it like at Black Mountain regarding gender? Did you all share the raising of children, or did they, there? Do you remember? At Black Mountain.

Weil: When I was a student at Black Mountain, I didn't have a child. But when I went back with this newborn with colic, it wasn't so easy.

Q1: Well, colic can ruin any communal effort. I guess, to follow up on Sara K.'s question, how would you say that your period in Scandinavia influenced your painting and your creative work?

Weil: Just in what I was talking about, the response to it. Having a sense of a more professional, less private, relationship to my work. I've always been very intense about my work. I work with full involvement with it, and never slowed down about that. But it is very different. When I have a show, you have the sense of you're sharing your work, and that's different. This isn't so much anything about sales. That's not anything like

that. It's the sense of, when my work goes out into the world, is it looking ready for that involvement?

Q2: I have a question about the role of men and women at Black Mountain. I know there's been some thought now about the Bauhaus, the way women sort of had a secondary role a little bit, and that the weaving and the fabric arts weren't as respected as the other arts. How was the gender division at Black Mountain?

Weil: I'm not quite sure, because we were just students. We weren't artists. We were students. [Laughs]

Q1: That was drilled into you, at least.

Q2: Did women do the same studies as the men?

Weil: Yes. Ruth Asawa, she just was her own artist, always. We were in Albers's class together, but nobody bothered her about the fact that she was making fully developed work. Hazel as a photographer, and then while I was there, she became a teacher and taught photography. She was very much respected. She wasn't an Albers student.

Q2: Did you feel there was any sexism at Black Mountain?

Weil: Not so much, no. It was like we were children. We weren't grown-ups.

Q1: It was applied to all genders, right, that you were children?

Weil: Right.

Q1: Vera B. Williams was there when you were there, too. Was she painting at that time?

Weil: She was a student.

Q1: Yes. I think I understand now.

[Laughter]

Q1: Moving right along to the next phase. The way the book periodizes this, 1999 to 1990, backwards, “Configurations, Soft Folds, Sculptures, Trees, Fields.” I’m really intrigued by your soft folds and structures. How did you become interested in those folds?

Weil: I’ve never been forced to stay within the framework of a rectangular structure, and that’s part of it. It just is rolling out into the room. [Laughs]

Q2: Had you seen anybody do that before?

Weil: Oh, I don't know. This piece here, which is—

Q1: *Timothy's Field* and *Danky's Field* [both 1990].



Susan Weil
Timothy's Field, 1990
Acrylic, watercolor, and graphite on paper
101 x 96 inches (256.5 x 243.8 cm)



Susan Weil
Danky's Field, 1990
Acrylic on paper
45 x 44 3/4 inches (114.3 x 113.7 cm)

Weil: The one where they're all over the place. I don't want to be disciplined into staying within the framework. They go shooting out all over.

Q1: This one, in contrast, *Danky's Field*, is pretty disciplined. How do you describe the differences?

Weil: If I want to [be disciplined], I can do it. [Laughs]

Q1: I think I understand. This one I also wanted to ask you about. *Feeling Feelings* [(*Danky*), 1991].

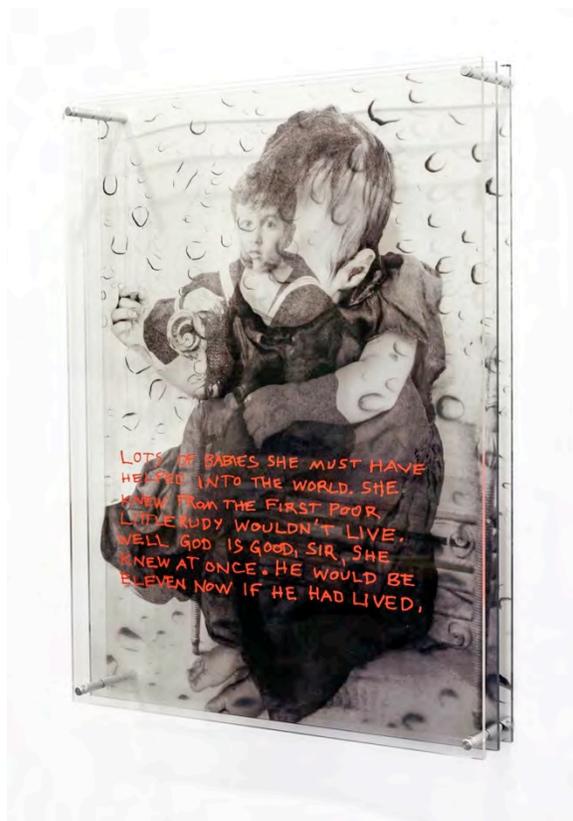


Susan Weil
Feeling Feelings (Danky), 1991
Acrylic on canvas, copper, and
nylon cord
64 x 17 3/4 inches (162.6 x 45.1 cm)

Weil: That's a Danky Day piece. Every year on my brother's birthday—my brother that died from the fire we were in—came a painting. It's a birthday present. That's one. But I also make three paintings, because two very dear friends of mine have children that—one had a brother who was murdered and one had a child who died. So I make three paintings, and the other two go to those other two. *Feeling Feelings* is about that. These three chairs over here are Danky Day pieces from last year. I always have to go outside of

what I'm working on and work on something else, for the boys, the boys who couldn't live.

Q1: There's a very touching piece right here that you're working on now about, "What if this child had been eleven?" Tell us about this piece [*Rudy*, 2014].



Susan Weil
Rudy, 2014
Digital image on triple layered
Plexiglas
24 x 18 x 3 3/4 inches (61 x 45.7 x 9.5
cm)

Weil: Bloom, the male character in *Ulysses*—Molly had a child that died shortly after birth and that's about that piece. It's about—he couldn't live. And if he had lived, now he would be eleven. The interesting thing about that is the baby in this piece is a photograph of Christopher.

Q2: And it's by?

Weil: It's by Aaron Siskind. The other figure, a child about eleven, is my father when he was a little boy. It responds to the words, and then it puts it into my family.

Q1: I'm struck in reading the book and also seeing your work—and there's a piece called "Family Ties" [*Family Once*, 1993]—about the length of relationships that you have, that you stick with people, and that the family seems to be a frame for a lot of your work.

Weil: It's your personal center and then you have yourself in that center.

Q1: You wrote something saying, "Susan stands at the center." Do you remember that?

Q3: "The Susan spot."

Q1: "Susan spot," yes. You wrote about yourself. You stand on Susan's spot, you said, and then you watch the world around you.

Weil: That's everybody's reality. People can mean so much to you, and things can mean so much to you, but it's always from your own point of view. It's interesting, because I take my family with me. That's my family.

Q1: *Family Once*, 1993.



Susan Weil
Family Once, 1993
Graphite on Foamcore
24 x 16 inches (61 x 40.6 cm)

Weil: That's my mother, my father, my brother who died, and myself as the baby. My family was very important to me when I was bringing up Christopher, because at first, when I separated from Bob, he went off to Europe. My mother and father were part of our lives. We didn't live with them, but they were people [we] could turn to and they cared about [us]. Bob was always part of our lives, because I loved Bob forever. I still love him very much. We never had an argument. Now that Bernie is center to me and I have to care for him, really, it's always like there's the world and there's your world. My kids grew up and out. My grandkids are growing up and out. That's the way it is. You have your immediate geography and then your expanded geography.

Q1: We haven't really talked about your marriage to Bernie. How you met. Haven't talked about Sara K.

Q2: Careful. Careful.

[Laughter]

Q1: Better to do it in your presence than your absence.

Weil: I needed a studio in the country.

Q2: Tell about the studio you had in the country.

Weil: Yes, I had been using the second floor of the marching hall [Stony Creek Fife and Drum Corps, Connecticut] as a studio, and the rent was zero, but I gave a contribution end of every summer.

Q2: To the marching band.

Weil: Then I wanted a studio that was mine. At the time, I was very close to Dorothea Rockburne, and she said, "I know an architect and you could talk to him about making a studio." Bernie came to visit, and he had worked with Buckminster Fuller and was a

dome person, and was one of the group that made the DEW [Distant Early Warning] Line domes across the top of the earth. As he keeps saying now, “Because we were so afraid of the Russians.” [Laughs] They were radar domes. I talked to him about building a studio and he was into it. But of course, there never has been a painting in the dome. He designed a house and designed himself into it. That’s the way it is.

Q2: Chris’s bedroom had to be cut in half so I would have a bedroom.

Weil: For you. We were very into working on the dome, and he asked me to marry him. I said I’d have to talk this over with Christopher, because it would change his life. We got together with Chris, who was seven. I said, “Chris, Bernie would like to get married, but I need to know what that would be like for you and if that would work for you.” He said, “Let me think about it.” We left him alone to think about it. The next day, he said, “Mother, we can marry Bernie.” Which was great, because whatever difficulties we had, and we had plenty of difficulties, Christopher always had to remind himself that he had agreed to his marriage. [Laughs]

Q1: Did he walk down the aisle with you?

Weil: No aisle. We were on the island. But he was right there, yes.

Q2: How do you think being married to Bernie has affected your artwork? Because he’s coming from a more geometric and precise way of thinking.

Weil: He was fully an architect when I married him, and wearing Brooks Brothers suits, working in Skidmore, Owings and Merrill and everything, and I said, “Okay, now this is sensible.” A year and a half later, he was a sculptor with no job. [Laughs]

Q1: You converted him.

Weil: No. That appealed to him. So that was funny.

Q2: But how did it affect your work? I’m looking at that piece over in the corner there, that Plexi piece. What is it? The dancing one that you have a mock-up for. It’s a brand new piece.

Q1: This one over here.

Weil: Oh, yes. Oh, yes.

Q1: We’ll take a picture of that afterwards.

Weil: That’s just a working study for another Plexi piece that’s going to happen.

Q2: But I think I see geometry in your work quite a bit.

Q1: I'm not sure the mic heard that. You said you think you see geometry in your work.

Weil: Always all things. All things that interest you. A lot of my work that was about the sky and the sea and the horizon had geometric—now, look at that.

Q1: This is *Collaboration: Wandering Chairs* [1998].



Susan Weil and Christopher Rauschenberg
Collaboration: Wandering Chairs, 1998
Eighteen gelatin silver prints
48 x 96 inches (121.9 x 243.8 cm)

Weil: With Christopher.

Q1: With Christopher, okay. That's very geometric.

Weil: I don't think that's because of Bernie. It's just the way it is. It was complicated years to plow into my own work, because Bernie was working on the dome, and you were a toddler. It was harder to fully focus. But I've always kept a paintbrush in hand.

Q1: You've always kept what?

Weil: Paintbrush in hand. But I didn't have much time for professional life at all.

Q2: But you always had a studio, and you always worked, as I recall.

Weil: Yes. That is the poem that became the poem that's out in the—the Plexi poem that's out in the other room [*Painting Is as Dying*, 2013].



Susan Weil
Painting Is as Dying, 2013
Digital print on Plexiglas
24 x 22 x 1 1/4 inches (61 x 55.9 x 3.2
cm)

Q1: So, “Painting is as dying. Self separated from body.” How did that come about?

Weil: That’s what painting is like. It’s you, but not in your—

Q1: Do you feel that painting is as dying?

Weil: In the sense of—it’s rarefied. It’s past the living. It takes place in the mind.

Q1: You have been described as an artist who really has the mind’s eye. Works from the mind’s eye.

Weil: It’s complicated, of course. See, that’s a Muybridge piece, definitely.

Q1: More recent?

Weil: No, it’s not more recent. It’s an old piece, but it’s a Muybridge piece. It’s full-scale.

Q1: Oh, Muybridge, yes. *High Jump* [2000].



Susan Weil
High Jump, 2000
Acrylic on Foamcore
75 x 120 inches (190.5
x 304.8 cm)

Weil: Those are all pieces of time, time movement.

Q1: *Jumping Rope* [2000] and *Diver* [2001]. I love the bicycle pieces.

Weil: Thank you.

Q1: They're just fun.

Weil: That's a day-to-night piece. This one.

Q1: *Memoremem*, 2005.

Weil: *Memoremem*. Day to night.

Q1: I love this one especially. *Year of the Tree* [IV, 2005].

Weil: Thank you.

Q1: Those are the seasons, obviously.

Weil: Yes. That's more broadly across time. A description of a year, the life of a tree.

Q1: I was also curious about—let's see. This one. I'm looking for the name of it, because this is the one that is about the earth's edge, I guess it is. *Earth Edge* [1977]. Does this represent what you were trying to figure out as a child, how the earth was round?

Weil: Yes. It's also moving across time. It has all those elements of all those things.

Q2: Those are found paintings. These are paintings that were found, like in thrift stores, and then she painted over most of it.

Weil: That is, too, with the face.

Q1: *Memory* [2008].

Weil: The one on the left. There's your horses that you—

Q1: *Flicker* [2008]. I interviewed Kate Millett once. She found out I was from North Carolina and she said, “You shouldn’t be in New York. You’re going to get back on a horse and ride out of New York City.”

[Laughter]

Q1: She said, “Maybe you’ll come upstate.” Did you ever know her, Kate Millett?

Weil: No.

Q2: See, now that’s pretty geometric, I think.

Weil: *Revolution* [2009].

Q2: I think I gave you those canvases.

Weil: You want me to give you credit there?

Q2: No.

Weil: I think you gave me one of them. I got the others.

Q2: This may be the one where she talked about the spot, the Susan spot.

Q1: *Hector* [2009]?



Susan Weil
Hector, 2009
Acrylic on canvas
100 1/4 x 80 inches (254.6 x 203.2 cm)

Weil: Oh, that's *Hector* because Hector was the husband of a friend of mine and he gave me this big compass. He made it for me. I use it a lot. It's a blueprint.

Q1: It's one of the first images in the book. I was wondering did you participate in the layout of this book and why you started with that image.

Weil: Partly, but mostly it was done through the gallery and so on.

Q1: This is wonderful. "Long once I drew in Paris, watching the rolling forms. My pencil danced, a celebration sixty years ago. Still dancing."

Weil: That's my poems every day.

Q1: Oh, here's the hands piece. *Movement of the Hand, Drawing a Circle* [1981]. Talk to us a little bit about moving into multimedia and what that's been like for you.

Weil: I don't know. It's just exploring, always exploring. You build on that. Years ago, I did the Plexi figures, and now I'm working very fully on Plexi. It's just opening up possibilities.

Q1: I guess you said, your most wonderful collaboration with Bob was Christopher. I thought maybe you'd spend a little time talking about Christopher and Sara, and raising them and how you thought, as an artist and a mother, about doing that.

Weil: I have the two most wonderful children in the world. Christopher, he's so special because he's always a happy person. He's very even. Nothing throws him. He's very generous. He's very kind. He thinks about everybody else, and nothing gets in his way. He is not materialistic in any way. He doesn't want things. He wants to be kind to everybody. He's just a very special young man. When he was in high school, he went on a trip to Greece with his class. He went to say goodbye to Bob, and Bob gave him \$100 or something to spend on his trip. When he came back, he went over to Bob and gave him back \$60 or \$70 and thanked him. Bob said, in his life, nobody ever did that. [Laughs] They'd take. That's Christopher.

Q1: Before we move to Sara, I do have a follow-up question about something you said earlier on about how you always stayed involved with Bob. Maybe you could tell us a little bit what that meant and how that related to Christopher.

Weil: Sara, when she was a kid, was jealous because he had three sets of grandparents and all that, and he had two fathers. She felt very second-class because she only had one father and two sets of grandparents. Christopher, he accepted everything that came along.

Q1: How about Sara as a child?

Weil: Sara as a child was a grown-up. She was always a grown-up.

Q1: What do you mean by that?

Weil: She was so mature. She could think of what she needed and wanted and what she wanted to do, what she needed in her life, and let it be known. She was very capable and self-sufficient. She loved being with other kids. She was a very creative kid, always. She was an editor of *Kids Magazine* and worked there, and was actually on television because the different children that worked for *Kids Magazine*, they were interviewed on the television. Sara drew on *Kids Magazine* all the time and edited what came in. She was always very, very capable. She'd come and work in my studio. Here, she's getting embarrassed.

Q1: You can speak up if you want to.

Q2: This is actually a really painful memory of mine.

Weil: An art person of great intent was coming to the studio, and all she could do was pay attention to the things Sara had made, and she bought a piece of Sara's and ignored everything—

Q1: Why is that painful?

Weil: —I did.

Q2: My mother had so much hope every time a dealer or gallery owner would come to her studio. My mother would be anxious about it a week ahead of time, and clean the studio, and put work up, and this—do you remember who it was?

Weil: Yes. She was from Chicago. I can't think of her name right this minute, but it's okay.

Q2: My mom was so excited. My mom showed this work, and then I was twelve or ten. I was doing this work imitating her work, like a little kid would. She focused on the little imitative pieces that I had done, and then she bought one of mine for ten or fifteen

dollars, and I thought it was so insulting to my mother, to dismiss her work and buy my imitative work for so little money. I just thought it was very rude of this person.

Weil: Well, yes, but what I'm saying is that you always felt like you had ideas about everything, did everything. Bernie was an architect at the time, and you were making drawings of rooms and filling them up with—

Q2: Floor plans.

Weil: Floor plans. Everything. You thought there wasn't anything you couldn't do, and skip it that you were seven or eight. That didn't matter. Couldn't I have a show in the—

Q2: Community room.

Weil: —community room of our building and all this. Sara always felt she could do anything. I thought it was terrific.

Q1: Do you want to talk a little bit more about your work now and with this particular exhibit, and where it's going to show and all of that? [Note: refers to Weil's self-published book, *Shut Your Eyes and See—A Joyce / Weil Collaboration, 1985–2014*, 2014, which she plans to develop into an exhibition]

Weil: First of all, I began making these Joyce-related images. Then I thought to myself, I've worked. I've done three books with Vincent, and I have worked with Joyce for many, many years, and studied and so on, and I've had several Joyce exhibitions. But at this point, I was working on this body of work, on Plexi, and I said, well, it is a real deep commitment that's unusual, and I thought it would be interesting to try to show them, like in libraries of universities and maybe public spaces. I don't know where it will end up going, but we're making lists, this book that will go around, of work available and everything. It just excited me to be able to pull together this body of work from a long period of time. Of course, I would love it to go to Dublin.

Q1: That's a great idea.

Weil: Actually, right now, there's a blueprint show in North Carolina at the Asheville museum [Black Mountain College Museum and Art Center], a big one. That one includes Vincent's books. That sort of put it into my head. I always like to involve people that I respect and care about, so to pull his books into it is exciting. That just seemed a wonderful thing.

Q1: This is great. Sara, do you have any questions before—

Weil: You came prepared with questions. What are they?

Q3: Putting me on the spot.

Q1: I printed them out for you so you would have them.

Q3: There are a few things. I was wondering if you revisit the poem images that you've made over the last twenty-five years—if you return to them.

Weil: I'm working every day on poems.

Q3: Do you go back to the ones that you've made five, ten, fifteen years ago?

Weil: I have, because I began Weil Books, which I publish four or five books a year of people that it's fun to work with. I did a book of my poem images, so then I had to go back through hundreds of poems and pick out fifty or something. So yes, I climb back into those.

Q3: Are there specific memories that were surprising when you returned to them?

Weil: They're everything. They're not all the personal moments of my life. They're about everything. It's fun to climb back into them, but it's a real job. I have a room full of notebooks of poems.

Q1: You say some of those have been published in books, but how do you archive those? How do you make sure they stay organized and all that?

Weil: I have notebooks. They usually cover about three months, each notebook, and I just have hundreds of notebooks of poems.

Q1: When we do the video, would it be possible for you to bring one of those notebooks with you here, and we'll come here and do the shoot?

Weil: In Asheville, at the Black Mountain College gallery, I'm going to show poems. Because when I did the Weil Books of the poems that the museum proposed—so it will happen within a year.

Q1: Do you have any other questions? Okay. Do you have any other questions? Is there anything else you want to talk about today?

Weil: I don't know.

Q1: I guess we forgot to talk about *Straight as Round* [1978], which I also loved. Oh, I also wanted to ask you about the self-portraits. Have you done that a lot?

Weil: I've done a few.

[END OF SESSION]

Transcriber: Audio Transcription Center Session #3 (video)
Interviewee: Susan Weil Location: Brooklyn, NY
Interviewer: Mary Marshall Clark Date: September 10, 2014

Q: This is September 10th, 2014. It's a beautiful day in the studio of Sue Weil. And I'm so grateful to you for your time. And this is for the Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Oral History Project.

Weil: Great!

Q: Good morning!

Weil: Good morning.

Q: So, I want, as usual, to have you start by talking about your early life. Tell me a little about your parents and where you went to school, and how you became interested in art.

Weil: Well, my parents were wonderfully inventive and creative people. My father was a writer and a very gifted person for kindness and generosity. He was of a Jewish family, and my mother was of an Episcopalian family. And my mother's parents were horrified that—they said, well, they liked Leonard, and so it would be okay to get married, but not to have any children, because that would be too confusing. And plainly, they didn't listen.

[Laughter]

Q: So, what are some of your earliest memories, in terms of working with art?

Weil: Well, my father was very interested in art, and talked about it a great deal. But he was a real writer kind of person, and read to us all, all the time, from [Geoffrey] Chaucer to Joyce to everything. And he was a very inventive person. He would tell us invented bedtime stories, and so on. And my mother was, before she was married, she was writing poems, and so on. She had this feeling, you shouldn't compete with your husband in his field. So, she took that attitude, and put her creative life into many forms. I had trouble with this, as I became an adult, because I was married to another painter and I heard her lesson that you don't compete with your husband. It didn't sit well with me. As a matter of fact, when I married my second husband, I had to have some therapy to get over that.

Q: Yes. It sounds very hard.

Weil: It's complicated.

Q: Complicated.

Weil: Yes.

Q: I'd like to hear a little bit more about your father reading to you. I understand that he read you a lot of Joyce, *Finnegans Wake*, and others?

Weil: Yes. Well, when I was quite little, he read from *Finnegans Wake*. And I loved it. To me, it was like music. I couldn't take it in and put the words into some kind of order, but that was okay with me. I liked it. And so, when I got back to Joyce as an adult, and put meaning to it, besides just the music in the front of it, I was so happy. That was a gift to me, because I worked for thirty years with images to the works of Joyce.

Q: As a child, what kinds of things did you like to do? I know that you had a home on Outer Island. Tell me a little bit about your relationship to the sea.

Weil: Well, summers, when we weren't in school, we were on the island. And we were several miles out from the town, and water was all around us. And so, we had to invent our play. And my mother was a licensed lobster-woman, so I went lobstering with her a great deal. As a matter of fact, we set fishnets for the bait for the lobsters. I had to pull in the nets and sort out the fish, into food fish, and lobster bait fish, and things you threw back. And my mother had this thing for me, because we caught sand sharks all the time. They get caught in the net, and she'd say, "If it's bigger than you are, you have to drop the net over and come in and get me. If it's your size or smaller, you can pull it in." So these sharks would be splashing around, and I would be trying to figure out how big they were! [Laughs] So that was funny.

Q: Wow! What kind of things did you do for fun as a child?

Weil: For fun?

Q: Yes.

Weil: We invented things over time. My brother and I had a super club, and we were super heroes. We would, during the year, the regular school year, we would climb up the bookcases in my mother and father's bedroom and jump down on the beds with our capes flying! We all had capes. That was a lot of fun. And to make some money, we would have these fairs and invent games, and so on and so forth. My mother's parents, who were very proper, they'd come to our fairs, and they were kind of horrified because we'd have cardboard boxes made into machines, and so on. But we'd raise the money, and we could buy our comic books.

Q: Yes. What were the comic books that you loved?

Weil: Well, of course, being a female, I liked Wonder Woman a great deal.

Q: I was wondering who your super hero model was.

Weil: Well, as a super club member, I was the flag, and my cape was a flag.

Q: That's just marvelous! Tell me a little bit about your education as you were growing up.

Weil: Well, I went to a private school, because our farm I lived on in the school year was not near a school. And it was in Englewood, New Jersey. My brother was in a boys' school, which was next door. Then we had this accident, a boat fire when I was eleven. It was very severe, and I lived in a hospital for six months, and was very badly burned. And my brother didn't survive it. After I got out of the hospital, we had to move into my stern grandmother's house because she had an elevator, because I couldn't do the stairs. And that wasn't so easy on my parents or me, but we did that until I learned to walk a little bit.

Q: Yes. And you told me after that your parents adopted two children?

Weil: My brother and sister. My brother, Jim, died this year. And my sister, Judy, she's an artist, too. And she's making work and showing work in Connecticut where she lives. Once a year she has shows. And she's a complete delight, and real wild, she is! My brother was sort of the odd man out.

Q: Did you and she make art together when you were growing up?

Weil: Oh, we all made art at one time.

Q: What kinds of art did you enjoy making?

Weil: Well, I remember my brother, Jim, made these big canvas paintings of squares and things, I have them, still. They're very lovely. And we make collages, and in my younger life, I made collages with my brother who died. We used to cut up the Sears catalog and take the women in girdles and put them in our collages! [Laughs] It was a very jolly life.

Q: Yes. I wanted to ask you how you came to go to Dalton, and some of the formal art that you encountered there.

Weil: Well, after I got out of the hospital, my father had to teach me for a year, because I wasn't so mobile. Then I went to public school, and then the school burned down! So, then my parents moved to New York, and Mother felt that I should go to Dalton because of the smaller classes, and my being a little damaged. So, I went to Dalton, where the classes were maybe fifteen or twenty people, and it was a terrific school then. And I took art classes with Aaron Kurzen. First I took them with Rufino Tamayo, and that was not so good for me, because he was very enraptured with one of the students who was lovely, and didn't pay any attention to the rest of us. And so I quit that, and went back the next year. And Aaron Kurzen was working with Vaclav Vytlacil, and he was fantastic!

My first day—I've told this story many times—I went in and I did a very timid drawing of my brother and myself in the middle of the paper, and he came and he said, "Susan, I want you to feel the size of the paper. What you put on it has to relate to that. I want you to take a fresh piece of paper and take a charcoal, and draw a rooster with your eyes

closed, and fill that paper.” So I did that. And then I painted the rooster, and from that moment, I knew I was going to be an artist. I loved it so. And he was the one who was responsible for my finding Black Mountain, because he told me about Albers teaching there, and suggested that I look at it.

So, he was a great source of information to me at the art world. He is still painting and working. He is now ninety-four. And he had an exhibition in Connecticut this summer, and I got to it. We actually—my husband, Bernie, is a hospice patient. He has been very ill with a very bad heart for many years. He’s had ten heart attacks. We rented a wheelchair and we went up to Connecticut to Aaron’s opening and to see the dome Bernie built for me in Connecticut. It was very, very moving. That’s the last time we went outside the city with Bernie.

Q: Yes. Since we’re on the subject with Bernie, let’s depart from chronology for a moment to talk about your recent wedding.

Weil: Oh, yes. Well, a few weeks ago, Bernie said to me, he wanted to get married. And I said, “Well, Bernie, we got married fifty-five or fifty-six years ago.” And he said, “I know. But I want to get married now.” So, we made a most wonderful wedding. Because Bernie has an IV straight to his heart, we had capes, and the capes were—his was his dome—no, not his dome, a pattern that he had created many years ago. And mine was the moon. And Chris, my son, Chris, married us. He had a shawl of his photographs on silk, and my daughter had a big flower photograph that she had made. And we went to the

local playground, where all the kids were swinging and sliding and stuff, and Christopher married us, and Bernie was completely a happy camper!

Q: Who made the costumes?

Weil: We made them here. We have a plotter, and we were able to get silk which was temporarily backed to go through the plotter, and so we made them here.

Q: Congratulations!

Weil: Thank you! It was very exciting. And my sister made my hat and veil.

Q: [Laughs] Oh, that's just terrific!

Weil: Yes.

Q: So, I wanted to get back in time, then, back to the period of time you were in Dalton and drawing. Were you aware of what was going on in the art world at the time? Did you go to museums? Who was important to you?

Weil: Yes, I did go to museums. My father always kept up with art. And I studied a bit about the early American artists, and of course we talked about the Renaissance and

everything. We lived not too far from the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York], so we saw that work a lot. So art was always a part of our lives.

Q: What did you think you would do at the end of your time at Dalton? Did you have any ideas about what to do next?

Weil: Well, I knew I was going to be a painter. My parents thought I should go to Paris, because that's the way people used to think. If you were going to be an artist, you had to go to Paris. So, I went to Paris for the summer, and went to the Académie Julian. And at night, we drew in the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. It was something, because I was staying in a *pension*, and Bob Rauschenberg was staying in the same *pension*, he was there on the GI Bill and going to the same art school that I did, so I couldn't have missed him, if I tried. And so, we met, of course, right away, and went to school together, and went drawing together at the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. And we both were workers at painting! We both loved to paint all the time. So we had a great dialogue.

Q: I remember the last time we spoke, you said you were pretty scared about going off to Paris and you told a story of being on the ship. Could you start with that story, and then we're going to tell a lot of stories about Paris.

Weil: Yes, well, to go to Paris, I had a chaperone, and it was a group of about four people who were in Paris about several different things. We went on a renovated troopship. Not so renovated, either! That was funny. It took a pretty long time to get to France. I had

great sea legs, growing up on the island, and lobstering and fishing. So, I had no trouble with seasickness. But the ship was very deep, and all of our movies and events were at the bottom, and everybody would immediately get seasick and rush upstairs, so I'd be down there by myself. That was funny.

But, you know, we slept in bunks. They were just like the sailors had them, they weren't too renovated for us.

Q: What was Paris like at that time?

Weil: Well, it was very soon after World War II, so they were still on rationing and still kind of finding their way back. I remember the woman who ran the *pension* had a cat, and she'd have her full ration of milk that she'd give to the cat. And I'd look at her, because I was a teenager, and of course, I didn't have any milk, and I was so jealous of that cat!

Q: You didn't have enough food and milk? Tell me about that. What was it like for you, economically?

Weil: Oh, it was okay. I mean, we'd have dinner in the *pension*, breakfast in the *pension*. No, I never minded those hardships. It was fine. But it was just, Paris was very different then, because they were in recovery mode.

Q: Can you recall the first time you met Bob, and what he was like at that time?

Weil: Well, one thing that was very noticeable about Bob is, he had a huge laugh! So, he'd be in the dining room having coffee or something, and I would hear this enormous laugh! It was very funny. And so many people still remember his laugh being enormous. Of course, I saw him in the school too. So right away we knew each other pretty well.

Q: And you said, previously, that the school was a little too rigid for you.

Weil: Oh, yes.

Q: Can you tell me about the school?

Weil: Well, it was very formal, and of course the teachers were French, and they just didn't want to deal with us. They'd have these models, and the poses would be for a week or something, you know? So, in order to keep doing drawings, you would move around, so you could see different aspects of the same person. People would work on a painting, you know, for a month, for a model. And we didn't have too much communication with the master, because of language. But we loved to go drawing at night in the Académie de la Grande Chaumière. The models there would rush over and talk to you about your drawings of them. "This doesn't look like me," and, "This one's good." You know? That was much more fun.

Q: I think you also told me that you and Bob painted in your *pension*?

Weil: Yes. Yes, because we never stopped painting! We were always painting. So, we would—I did a portrait of Bob, and you know, we did these different paintings. We set it up in the rest area in the *pension*, and there was an oriental carpet there. We'd paint, and there'd be a little spot of color, it would go on the carpet. So we'd look at that, and we'd paint the equivalent spots on the other three positions of carpet. You didn't notice it, you know, as long as it was symmetrical.

Q: It sounds like you and Bob hit it off pretty quickly?

Weil: Oh, yes! I just loved knowing somebody who was that passionate about painting. And he was so much fun. And you know, I was a teenager, and he had been in the Navy and everything, so he was a lot older than me. So, I thought he was pretty grand. And he was. He was very lively-minded, and very much fun, and a very positive person.

Q: Do you recall some other things, work that you did together during that period?

Weil: Well, I don't too much recall in Paris. But of course, at Black Mountain, that was different.

Q: You did tell me a story about Bob making a trellis out of the curtains. Could you tell that story?

Weil: Oh, yes. Well, Bob had a theatrical side. There was a lovely looking young woman in the *pension*, and he invited her to go to the opera. So he took down the curtains and made her a dress. Then we went to the store and bought yards of green satin ribbon, and he made a trellis for her, like Christopher's robe at our wedding. Made a trellis, and put ivy into it. And they went off to the opera. So I felt bad because I was left behind, and they were off for a night at the opera. And so, this other person at the *pension* felt sorry for me, so he said, "Let me take you out to dinner." Well, I thought that was very grand! So I got dressed up and went out to dinner with him. And we went to a café, and we had dinner. And at the end of the dinner, he said, "Now, run," because he had no intention of paying for it! So that was a little eccentric!

Q: [Laughs] Did you go to any museums or shows?

Weil: Oh, yes.

Q: Could you tell me about that?

Weil: Yes. Well, of course we went to the Louvre, and we went to the modern museum [Musée d'Art Moderne de la Ville de Paris] and so on and so forth. But the person who I had to answer to was very annoyed if we weren't in school every day. I thought, well, this is silly, I'm here to learn to be an artist, and I should see the museums and the paintings. So we did go, but we'd get in trouble with that woman. Also, we decided on painting

outdoors. We had these easel arrangements. We'd set them up at one of the railroad stations, I think it was the Gare de Lyon. That just felt very crazy, you know, to be painting outdoors on an easel.

Q: Did you meet other writers and artists while you were there? I know people were beginning to be touched by the McCarthy period.

Weil: Oh, the McCarthy period was so horrible! It was a big worry to everybody. But the one person—Bob and I went to the July 14th event at the American Embassy. And there, we met the Duke of Windsor and his companion. That was not so interesting. But Edward G. Robinson was there, and we went to talk to him, and he was so relieved because he was so tired of people talking to him about his movies! But we talked to him about his being an art collector and he got all vibrant and interested. It was very sweet. And of course, there were fireworks, and everything. But you know, we'd met Raymond Duncan, Isadora Duncan's brother. And he was always wearing togas and things. He invited us to come to the dance center at school, and we did. And he was so funny! His sister, Elizabeth Duncan, was the one who had to take care of all the little girls, you know, the "Isadorables," they were called. So, he was very funny. And we enjoyed that very much.

Q: Tell me about how your relationship with Bob was developing at that time.

Weil: Well, we were the best buddies, because we cared passionately about art, and we were Americans trying to take in Paris. It was very lovely. Then he and I went to French class, and that was very funny, because it was taught by nuns and they treated us like little kids, you know? They would shout at you and shake the ruler at you, you know? It was very funny.

Q: Did you accomplish learning to speak French?

Weil: Well, at the time, I spoke bad French. And then when I went back to Black Mountain, I studied French, and our teacher was Russian. So, having just come from Paris, her accent seemed very funny to us. Madame Galdowski.

Q: You talked to us about how you encouraged Bob to look at Black Mountain for himself.

Weil: Well, yes. I mean, he knew I was going to Black Mountain. I told him what I knew about it, and I had been there and seen it and I was signing up for it. So, when he finished that period of work, he decided to come to Black Mountain, and I was very happy for that.



Susan Weil and Rauschenberg, Black Mountain College, North Carolina, 1949. Photo: Trude Guermonprez

Q: Yes. So, let's shift now to Black Mountain, and for those who don't know what it was, perhaps you could tell us what it was like when you first went?

Weil: Well, it was very interesting, because it was a very small school, there were almost as many faculty as students. And it was a work-study thing, you had to take care of the school, as well as your classes. But it was so lively, and the very loveliest part of it was, when you had finished your classes, and you went to the dining hall in the evening to have dinner, then you'd sit around and talk with all the other creative people about their day, and you learned so much of the poets, the Black Mountain poets were fantastic. You know, all the different areas, the music people, and so on. And we'd share our experiences. Actually, a lot of times, people would take other classes. I did study a bit in poetry. It was interesting to learn to put together the different creative areas. Of course, this happened at the Bauhaus too. The main reason I went to Black Mountain was

because Albers was teaching there and he had been a teacher at the Bauhaus. So, a lot of those traditions also took place at Black Mountain.

Q: I'm glad you mentioned that, because I was wondering about that, and what some of those traditions were.

Weil: Well, mixing theater and dance, and art, painting—all the different areas. It was very lively. They used to say that the first Happening happened at Black Mountain, but of course there were theatrical happenings all over history, you know. Not only at the Bauhaus, but in Europe in general. The Commedia dell'arte, and so on. So it didn't really begin in Black Mountain, but it sort of made people aware.

Q: Before we get to Albers and his stories, can you remember who some of the people were that you had those conversations with in the evening that influenced you? Who was there when you were there?

Weil: Well, at the time, I was taking dance classes. Hazel Larsen and I were in the dance classes, and both of us were disabled people. Hazel couldn't walk, or anything. But, you know, we were taking the dance classes. Also, I was in the chorus, and I have a terrible voice! And I was singing the B minor Mass and the *St. Matthew Passion*, and everything, and I was just having a great old time, you know, studying poetry and everything. I mean, it was wonderful, because you could keep track of what everybody was doing.

Q: Were Merce Cunningham and John Cage there when you were there?

Weil: They visited there. They weren't teaching there when I was there. But they visited there, and I did know them, and meet them, and so on. They were dear friends for all of their lives. We did know each other, always.

Q: So, now let's turn to Albers, and I'd like to hear, first of all, your impressions of him, and how he taught.

Weil: It was like a modern academy, because he had a way about having us understand about color, and form, and so on. It was pretty rigid. He would say, "You are not an artist, you are a student." Modesty was very important to him, so therefore, he had run-ins with Bob all the time, because he recognized that Bob had an ego, which was a great thing!
[Laughs]

Q: How did you all respond to the training? Individually and together, with your collaborations?

Weil: Well, we did what we were told, but we had trouble with it, you know. I had trouble not being teenager-ish. But we learned an awful lot. We did learn an awful lot.

Q: What did you learn?

Weil: We learned a lot about color and composition and form. We would do these nature studies, where you'd bring in leaves, or something or other, and make collages out of them and so on. I mean, it was a lot of formality to it, but it was sensitive formality.

Q: Interesting! What were some of your jobs at Black Mountain, and how did that come into your work?

Weil: Well, I worked on the farm, and I made butter for the school. And our favorite job was, we were trash collectors. We had the truck, we'd go around all over the school and pick up people's trash. And Madam Galdowski, my French teacher, she would always make us little presents in her garbage. People got so jealous, because we had such a good time! We'd go to the dump, and it was like playtime! I mean, Bob was that way in the rest of his life, you know, having so much happiness in the dump! So people would ask, "Can't we do the garbage with you? Wouldn't you let us ride the truck?" It was part of, everything you do, you would put something into it.

Q: Did you begin to do some collaborative work there, at Black Mountain?

Weil: Well, we collaborated more in our thoughts. But in the summer we'd leave, and Bob came to my parents' island and there we did collaborative work, yes.

Q: Yes. And we'll get to that next. You also mentioned Ruth Asawa as being a person that was already quite clearly talented and producing?

Weil: Oh, yes. She was already a mature artist, which was amazing. Ruth was very individual. She had had a hard time, because she was put in the internment camps. So, she had a hard time during the war. But she did find her way to Black Mountain, and she was already grown up and an artist. And Albers recognized that; he recognized that she was the most developed artist, really.

Q: Who were some of the other teachers there that had an influence on you and Bob?

Weil: Hazel Larsen.

Q: Yes?

Weil: Hazel was a photographer, she taught photography. She'd teach you all the details of the darkroom work and so on, so forth. She was a handicapped person also, so she was in a wheelchair. She had polio as a child. Bob studied the photography, I didn't. But he did, and she was a great friend. On weekend nights we'd go to the dining hall for fun, music and so on and so forth. We'd dress up Hazel. We made her oilcloth shoes over her braces and so on. You know, we were all into having fun!

Q: Yes. Sounds like it! So, you weren't at the first Happening.

Weil: No.

Q: But do you remember Bob talking about being at the first Happening?

Weil: Yes. He was a part of it. And it was—a funny thing about that Happening. Everybody reports it differently. Everybody saw it differently, everybody described it differently. It's very funny.

Q: How did he describe it?

Weil: Well, as simultaneous events going on at the same time. So it depended on your point of view, what you were paying attention to. But I don't really know so much about the Happening, but—

Q: Looking at your own life as an artist, how do you think Black Mountain influenced you?

Weil: Well, first of all, when I left Black Mountain, we went to the Art Students League after that because Bob, as a veteran, had to be in a school in order to have the money to live on. So, we went to the Art Students League. I also wanted to be in art school, too. That was a very wonderful moment in art, because the Abstract Expressionists were coming and developing, and the art world was very amazing! I mean, art was something that nobody had ever described art to be. And we'd go to the openings and meet the artists. The art world was a smaller thing, then. So, we all knew one another. I remember

Jack Tworkov. We met him at the Club, and we talked to him about his work. He invited us to his exhibition at Charles Egan, and we went there, and he said, “Well, if you like my work, I want to see your work.” That was so generous, because we were young students, you know? And he came and saw our work and we became fast friends. And de Kooning we knew, we met de Kooning, and Rothko’s work was so exciting, and Barney Newman. Everybody knew everybody. It was a wild world. The artists were this happy community that nobody else cared about, but it changed after that!

Q: But on the other hand, that movement of that time really addressed the whole world, and helped change the world. Did you all feel that as you were working and being together that you were doing something to change the world?

Weil: Well, not really. I mean, we admired the Abstract Expressionists, and their big change in the visual world. At the time, we were not working too severely ourselves. But to us, it was completely inspiring. Also, at the Art Students League, we studied with Vytlačil and Morris Kantor. They were very good artists, and very lively people. They would come once a week. We would work there every day; they’d come in once a week and look at your work, and give you criticism, and so on. It was very free and easy, after Albers being very severe. [Laughs]

Q: What kind of work were you doing? And were you doing collaborations at that point?

Weil: Not really. Not really, I wasn't doing collaborations. I was working out of the work I had begun with Aaron Kurzen, doing kind of primitive work, almost. But freely, sophisticatedly, primitive work. [Laughs]

Q: And in what mediums?

Weil: It was oil painting then. And watercolor and everything. Drawing.

Q: Were you doing your poem paintings then, also?

Weil: Yes. I was not doing a poem every day like I do now, but I was doing poem images at that time, yes.

Q: How did you and Bob decide to get married? Just tell me the story of that process.

Weil: Well, mother and father were upset that we were so tight. And so, she said, "I think I ought to send you back to Europe, because I think you ought to meet other people," because she had a feeling that we shouldn't get married, because of, first of all, Bob's homosexuality. She understood it, and nobody explained it to me, and she couldn't explain it to me, but she didn't want it for me. So, she was trying to separate us. So, we went to have coffee with my father in the local sit-down place, Kronk's, and so we talked about it. So we said, "Well, maybe we should get married." Father said, "Uh-oh! We'd better go tell Grace [Fisher Weil; Weil's mother] that."

We went back to the house, and we told my mother that we were going to get married. I was completely happy about it. It was so wonderful for me. I thought we were really soul mates, and we were. We really were. Even my second husband, he says that, “They were soul mates.” So, we did get married. And then, we invented this person over here, Christopher, my son. So that was really lovely. But after Chris was born, I went back to Black Mountain with Bob, and he was involved with somebody else, and it was difficult for me, also with the new baby, at that time. I mean, nobody has been more pleasant and wonderful than Chris, but he had colic, and he wasn’t so pleasant, then. But I adored him, anyway.

So after trying to juggle that situation for a while, I went back to my parents with Chris. After that, he was a very loving father, and a very loving friend. And we never had any unhappinesses. I don’t think I ever had a fight of any sort with Bob. We always cared about each other, and were good to each other.

Q: And this morning, you saw some of the letters you had written him.

Weil: Yes, I read a little bit, but—

Q: Yes. But the tone of the letters were always so enthusiastic; that you were going to get to see him again soon, or you wanted to fill him in.

Weil: Right. And when I'd have shows, he'd come up from Captiva and see them. He was a very dear friend. He really was. And also, during the time when Chris was a little boy, he was—his career was developing so fast in the public sense. And so, that was very complicated for him. But he was always a loving father. He always said my second husband was Christopher's other father. He said that. And you know, we didn't have any real problems over it. It just was better for him to be on his own at that time.

Q: May I take you back to your wedding day, and how do you describe it?

Weil: My present wedding day? My last wedding day?

Q: The first one. With Bob.

Weil: With Bob.

Q: Yes. The first one, with Bob.

Weil: Well, we were married on Outer Island. It was on the rocks, and it was very lovely. Donald Droll, who was an art dealer at that time, he was our best man. It was very sweet. My little brother and sister were running around. Maybe there were ten people there, you know, relatives and stuff. It was very, very sweet. And then my mother got her feelings hurt, because it happened to be her fiftieth birthday, and nobody was paying attention to

her birthday, because we were getting married. So, she jumped into the sea, in her wedding fancy dress and hat, and she went swimming.

After a while, we were going back to the shore on the boat, and then we were going to take a car into the city—New York. My parents had gotten us rooms in a hotel. We went there, and we thought, no way, this is not for us! Then we went down to Bob's loft, which was on the Lower East Side. There were rats in the stairway, and it was a little difficult. And I, being an untouched young girl, I didn't know kind of what to do with myself. Then, we didn't like being in the loft. It was not so good. So we went up to the apartment where I stayed when I was in the city, and my mother's best friend was in that apartment. So, you know, it was too strange. The next day, we went to our wedding breakfast at Woolworth's. We had our wedding breakfast there, and proceeded with our lives.

Q: Wow! What a story! I saw beautiful images of you when you were pregnant with Chris, and you said that Bob made those clothes. Could you talk about that?



Robert Rauschenberg
Susan—Central Park N.Y.C. (II), 1951
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

Weil: Yes, well, once I didn't fit into my clothes, he made me these wonderful, generous dresses. I mean, it was like the Renaissance, you know, they flowed. He took those pictures of me in Central Park. It was very sweet. It really was. I like those a lot.

Q: Yes. Thank you! Let's talk about the blueprints, a little.

Weil: Right. Well, that was summer from Black Mountain. We just had to be making things every minute, and it's that way for us for the rest of his life, and it's still that way for me. So, as a child, I made little blueprints, little squares of shells, and this and that. But we didn't do things that way. We went into town and got a roll of blueprint paper. The first blueprint—the idea of it is, you're using the sun, that's the medium, and the unexposed blueprint paper. We laid it out and put my little brother on it, because he was a kid and fit on it. We surrounded him with flowers and leaves and seashells, and stuff. So, my little brother was the first blueprint. And then we loved it, you know?

Then we began making blueprints when we were in our house in New York. It was just so magical. Really, it was magical. At that point, we had a kind of a—what do you call it? It's a light-sensitive—I can't think what you call it but they don't make those anymore for you to use. We were using those lights to expose the paper, and you could draw with them, because, you know, where you aimed it is where the paper got the whitest. It was an exciting thing. And then they got so kind of beautiful and interesting that Bob took

those images up to *Life* magazine, and they decided to run pictures of us making blueprints in *Life* magazine. So then, we said, “Oh, I guess now we’re serious.”

So, anyway, we did that. Then we went to the Museum of Modern Art and Edward Steichen was the head of the photography at that time. We showed him some blueprints, and he just loved them and talked about a camera-less photography. We just had a great old time. He showed a blueprint in the museum—a contemporary photography show. So that was very exciting for us. I mean, I was, like, twenty or something. So—

Q: And have you continued to work with blueprints?

Weil: Oh, yes. I have another collaborator I work with, José Betancourt, who’s a photography teacher and photographer, a good photographer. He and I have collaborated for many years. We have a traveling blueprint show, that’s just back at this moment. So yes, I love blueprint. It’s a very exciting way to work!

Q: And you also had success with—were they in Bonwit Teller’s windows?

Weil: Yes. Yes.

Q: Could you talk about that phase, because you’re on video?

Weil: Yes, well, Bonwit Teller liked to do unusual windows. So, they had us make blueprints for all the windows of the store, and of course they're standing there with mannequins with clothing and stuff. But it was quite crazy for us to look at our work in the windows of Bonwit Teller. I loved it!

Q: Yes.

Weil: And when people talk about Bob in a very extravagant way, I like to remind them that our first painting exhibition was in a Nash Auto sales room! [Laughs]

Q: I wanted to ask you about that! What did you exhibit there?

Weil: We each had a painting.

Q: Do you remember what they were?

Weil: No.

Q: Oh, okay.

Weil: You're talking about the Dark Ages. I can only remember so much.

Q: Yes. That period of time was pretty amazing for you, after that being, for a while, a solo parent. I remember talking about the painting, *Secrets*, when you went back to Black Mountain, and how important that was for the rest of your work. Could you talk about that painting?

Weil: Well, that piece is stories about my feelings, that I tore up in little pieces and put back together into a collage. So you can't read it, but in parts. The thing is, that was when our relationship was about to dissolve formally. So, it was emotional.

Q: Yes.

Weil: That collage, now, is in the books that they've done about me, and so on.

Q: Yes. Back to your life as a parent, you told me once that you and Bob really wanted to have children together, that that was one motivating reason to get married. So, can you talk a little bit about Chris as a young child, and what it was like to be a mom?



Robert Rauschenberg
'*Topher*, 1952
Gelatin silver print
15 x 15 inches (38.1 x 38.1 cm)

Weil: Well, I adored it. I don't know, I survived becoming a single person, really, because of Chris's help, because I just loved being a mother, and he was a great little kid. We had such a dialogue, and we played together a lot! [Laughs] It was very, very great for me. It really was.

Q: You talked about making things with him.

Weil: Yes. Yes. Well, we always made things and invented things. Christopher used to make his own games, you know, boardgames, and so on. He had this club. Maybe we could sit in here a minute, he could tell about it.

Q: Sure! Let's take a little break. I think it's a good time. Get a glass of water, or something. Do you mind coming into the picture?

[Christopher Rauschenberg enters]

Rauschenberg: No.

Q: You have a great, beautiful shirt!

Rauschenberg: [Laughs]

Q: You add to the color composition.

Weil: Shall I introduce Christopher?

Q: Sure.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: This is part two of the interview, and we're delighted to have Chris today. He was welcomed into the frame of the interview by his mother.

Weil: Yes, I'm so happy you're here with me!

Rauschenberg: It's my pleasure!

Weil: [Laughs]

Q: We brought you in, because we were actually talking about you, and what you were like as a kid. So I guess one of the fun things I get to ask you is, what was she like as a mom?

Rauschenberg: Oh, great! The best! All my school friends were always trying to trade moms with me!

Weil: [Laughs]

Rauschenberg: It wasn't a very tempting offer, though.

Q: Yes. So, do you have early memories of making art, and doing things, and doing games with her? Just talk a little bit about it.

Rauschenberg: Yes, well, we actually started a company, the CS Rauschenberg Company. I was the president, I guess, and mom was the secretary. I would dictate these letters to her and the different companies, explaining that children do not like pieces of pork in their beans. And why do they put pork in these beans? Are they crazy? And if they take my suggestion, maybe they would like to give me five hundred cans of beans with no pork! We wrote these letters to all these different companies, explaining to them

what children like. I was kind of ahead of the whole audience-testing phenomenon that now drives every decision in the commercial world!

Weil: Bob was an officer in that company.

Rauschenberg: Oh, yes, I think he was the vice president.

Weil: Right. Yes, Bernie and Bob were both officers in that company. As an adult, Christopher—it's one of the few times that he got irritated with me, that I didn't send the letters!

Rauschenberg: Yes! We wrote all these letters, and she never sent them, which is why I never got eight hundred boxes of macaroni and cheese, or whatever!

Weil: [Laughs]

Q: So, for that period of your childhood, you thought she was sending out the letters?

Rauschenberg: Of course! We were a company. We were doing business!

[Laughter]

Q: And how old were you, when you became president?

Rauschenberg: Oh, I don't know, how old was I?

Weil: Seven.

Q: Yes. Sounds like a lot of fun! What other kinds of memories do you have of art making, and such?

Rauschenberg: Well, you know, it was great. We had all kinds of sort of handmade, and art stuff all over. Mom would make something out of oilcloth, as you were saying, in Black Mountain, you did, too. But she would make an oven, we did the oven door open, all made out of oilcloth, making all these kinds of crazy things around the house. And it was wonderful, a wonderful place to—

Weil: You should tell about art, your photography studio.

Rauschenberg: Oh, yes. When I was a little kid, I tried to use mom's camera, which was this Rolleiflex, it weighed about as much as I did. Of course, I took pictures with it, but they were completely blurry. So she got me my own little, these big, like, cube Brownie box cameras. We would walk around together and take pictures. Would take kind of similar pictures to what I take now. And she taught me how to make prints in the darkroom. Of course, I made sort of terrible prints, but nonetheless, it was really interesting. We lived in a railroad flat, which means it's just one long string of rooms and

I had the middle room, which meant I was farthest from the windows. There were only windows in the front and the back.

And we had the—sort of like a Murphy bed—we had a Murphy darkroom in my room. So this thing would flap down, we'd pull the enlarger out and set up trays on it, and that was a little Murphy darkroom. Every now and then, when I was a kid, I would see these gallon brown glass jars appear in the bathroom, and I would know, oh! This is a photography night. So, I would kind of read under the covers and stuff, and wait until my mom was sure I was asleep. And she'd get all set up, and I'd say, "Can I make pictures, too?"

Q: And there you have the beginning of your career!

Rauschenberg: That's right!

Weil: When he was a very little boy, he did make a book. It was called—

Rauschenberg: "Abstract Photography," which, of course, is an oxymoron.

Weil: "Abstract Photography by C. Rauschenberg" or something. He made books of them, and he mounted them, and he put them together with those rings, what do you call those rings? And gave them to his grandparents and his father, and all of us for Christmas. They're really wonderful. I just—they're very beautiful photographs.

Rauschenberg: I had the best prints. I print better than that now. [Laughs]

Weil: But also, I mean, I taught Christopher my primitive kind of darkroom work, but it was amazing that his pictures always came out much better than mine.

Rauschenberg: [Laughs] I don't know about that!

Q: Well, I think it's amazing to give a child a real camera, that works, and you have a vision as a child, you know, that's very unique.

Weil: We used to walk around the city, around our neighborhood, and Chris taking pictures. It was really nice!

Q: That's great! And so the two of you were the family.

Rauschenberg: Yes, for a number of years. Yes. Until I was seven.

Q: And then you met Bernie, and then you discussed this with Chris. Could you tell that story?

Weil: Yes. Well, what happened was, in Connecticut, where we would spend summers, I needed a studio. I talked to Dorothea Rockburne about it, and she said, "Well, I know an

architect. Maybe he'd make you a studio." So, Bernie came into our lives. And he had worked with Buckminster Fuller, and he was a dome guy. He spent some time working on domes. Then he decided that he liked me a lot, and asked me to marry him. And I said, "Well, I could only marry you if it's okay with Chris, because it would change his life. So we'd better discuss this with Chris." And so, we went with Chris, and we explained, and I said, "Bernie would like to marry me, but we have to know if it would work for you. So we're asking your permission." And he said, "Well, let me think about it." So he went away, and the next day, he said, "Mother, we can marry Bernie!" [Laughs]

Q: Do you remember this, Chris?

Rauschenberg: Yes. Yes. And I remember I got a *Mad* magazine, too, when they were talking to me about this. So I came out ahead of the deal. So, when these guys just got married again, my sister gave me a *Mad* magazine. Keep that tradition going!

Q: [Laughs] And so, do you remember much about what kind of wedding your first wedding was? We've heard about your second.

Weil: Well, the first, Bernie and my first wedding was supposed to be at the dome site, where the structure for the dome had gone up, and it was like beams going out in a star-like pattern. We were going to get married there. But, it was a rainy day, so we decided we had to go to the island. And we went to the island, and we were married there. So, I was married twice on Outer Island.

Q: And do you remember much about those early years, with a third person in the family? What it was like for you?

Rauschenberg: Yes. It was good. I mean, you know, I had a very happy childhood. You know, I found living in New York City to be wonderful. My parents were always taking me to art openings and stuff, and I would go to the Hayden Planetarium every week, they had a different show in the planetarium, and look at all these stuffed animals in the museum, and that stuffed guy, who I was a little nervous about! [Laughs] And, you know, there was just all kinds of stuff. There were three movie theaters on Eighty-sixth Street, and we lived on Eighty-seventh Street. Maybe there weren't three, maybe there were five movie theaters, actually, now that I think about it.

So I was going to the movies all the time, which I still do. I go to about a hundred to a hundred-and-twenty movies a year. And there was a used comic book store within a block of the house, and it was just great! Then we would go to the country, to where the dome was and everything, and all the kids were growing up there. I mean, this is before the internet, this is before videos, this is before anything. And they basically, what they would do for fun was, like, sniff glue and break windows. And I was, like, what are you—you people need to live in New York, you know? What's the matter with you? So, I thought I was very lucky.

Q: Yes.

Rauschenberg: I think there is actually a serious possibility that I am actually the luckiest person in the world. I haven't met anybody that comes out ahead of me.

Weil: And you live up to it. You're—

Rauschenberg: I continue to be lucky. [Laughs]

Weil: You're a very great person, you really are! And I think we could mention that your time in New York had lots of other aspects. I mean, you played chess by mail with my father. You just had a million things you liked to do. You invented games, you drew them up and played the games. You were a very inventive, sweet boy.

Rauschenberg: Yes, I didn't like to go play outside with the other kids. I liked to be in my room. And I'd play the four sides of the Monopoly board against each other, and stuff like this.

Q: Great! Fantastic!

Weil: One time, I got pretty sick. And Christopher was real little. He came into the room where I was in bed, and he had a glass of water and a piece of bread. He wanted to bring me breakfast, but that was what he could manage!

Q: So incredibly sweet! Where were you in school, Chris? Mostly?

Rauschenberg: I went to Dalton, and then I switched to New Lincoln.

Weil: I was teaching at Dalton at that time, and so he was on full scholarship.

Q: And were you working in art as you were going to Dalton? Or, were you—?

[Crosstalk]

Rauschenberg: I was the sort of black sheep of the family. I was a math and science kid.

And then I ended up in the family business, but I went to college as a physics major.

Q: Wow! That's impressive! And you say you're the luckiest person in the world, and your luck got even better when Sara came along.

Rauschenberg: That's right, yes.

Q: Could you talk about being a big brother, and how old were you when she was born?

Rauschenberg: Well, I was eight when she was born. So we're half a generation apart. I mean, it's a funny asymmetry, because I basically, for much of my childhood, I was an only child. But she always had a big brother. So we have a sort of a—it's like you were saying with the Happenings, everybody looks at the same event and sees something

different, which I think is true generally, of everything in the world. [Laughs] But it's particularly true of our childhood. Sara was great. And by the time she was ten years old, I was off to college. So we didn't really do too much together. She was half a generation younger than me. But a very interesting, lively person!

Weil: When Sara was starting first grade, Christopher was starting high school. So, that tells you something. But also, at that point, we moved to Chinatown. That was a big move. And very interesting!

Q: Why was it interesting?

Weil: Well, we had lived, as Chris was saying, we had lived in a railroad flat. One reason we were looking to live somewhere else was that everybody had to go through his room, because it was a railroad flat. And when you have a little sister going through your room, you can't have any privacy. And so, we wanted—

Rauschenberg: She had to go through your room, too! [Laughs]

Weil: I know.

Q: She gave up her privacy a long time ago!

Weil: Yes, but we were looking to move, and I was looking at brownstones and stuff, and we weren't doing too well. And then Bernie went downtown to see friends downtown, and he came back and he said, "Oh, I saw the most beautiful building, I have to show it to you." And he described it, and I said, "I would never live in an apartment building, never!" And so, about a year later, we were going down through Chinatown, and I saw the building. I said, "Look at that, Bernie!" He said, "I told you!"

[Laughter]

Weil: And at the time, when he saw it, it was just starting to be built. And then when I saw it, they were signing people up for it. So we moved in there, and it was great for Chris, because he had his own room with a door that closed, and everything. So, we lived in Chinatown. I'm there, still.

Q: Yes.

Rauschenberg: They wanted to get a fire station to live in and to have a studio in, you could hose down your studio and all that, but didn't manage to find one.

Q: Oh, there's a great fire station in Chinatown, the DCTV, Downtown Community Television Center, has that studio, I mean, that fire station now.

Weil: Yes, well, we looked at one that was available, but we couldn't be zoned for living, so Bernie was afraid to do it. He didn't want to do something illegal.

Rauschenberg: Although what percentage of artists were living in illegal places? It's probably eighty-five percent, at least!

Q: [Laughs]

Weil: Yes, former synagogues. They were big on former synagogues.

Q: Well, since we have the whole family together at this point, could you talk a little bit about your relationship with Bob when you were a kid?

Rauschenberg: Oh, it was great! I mean, as is sort of typical, he was sort of a weekend dad, I would see him not too much more often than that, but he was great. And once I was old enough, when I was going to school on my own on the subway and everything, I would often stop off at his place on the way home and just hang out. And it was always very free and nice and friendly. It was a very good relationship. He was tremendously sweet and loving and always took good care of me. There was always lively stuff going on.

Weil: Yes, Christopher was in several Happenings, including the big—what was it called?

Rauschenberg: *Open Score*, 9 Evenings[: Theatre & Engineering, 1966]. I was one of the ball boys in 9 Evenings. And Dorothea Rockburne starred. Christine Williams [Rockburne's daughter] was the other ball boy. Ball girl. [Laughs]

Weil: He was in a number of Happenings, so that was fun for him.

Rauschenberg: My best was one of the ones, I'd rolled out those old-fashioned laundry carts that had a metal thing and a wooden lid, and then it was this sort of big canvas container, which was full of turtles that had flashlights taped to their backs, which I'd put out onto the floor, and that was the lighting for the piece, was these turtles crawling around, shining flashlights wherever they wanted. That was my favorite thing that I did.
[Note: refers to *Spring Training*, 1965]

Weil: And that's how Rocky ended up with Bob.

Rauschenberg: Yes, Bob then kept one of those turtles, Rocky.

Q: Right.

Rauschenberg: I also got on that one, I did part of the sound. I had a phonebook and a microphone, and I would tear the pages of the phonebook into the microphone.

Q: Wow! Sounds like so much fun!

Rauschenberg: Yes!

Weil: Yes!

Rauschenberg: All three people in the audience enjoyed it!

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: No, I'm exaggerating a little, but—

Q: Yes. So, do you have any other memories of Bob and his, the kind of things you would do together? Specific memories?

Rauschenberg: Yes. I mean, I learned to rollerskate in his loft on Broadway. He had this great big loft, and he had these roller skates. Probably leftover from *Pelican* [1963]. And so, I learned to rollerskate there. He taught me and I taught myself, in probably equal measure. Not that I ever was a great rollerskater, but it was fun to just live someplace where somebody could learn to rollerskate in!

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: It was entertaining!

Q: Yes.

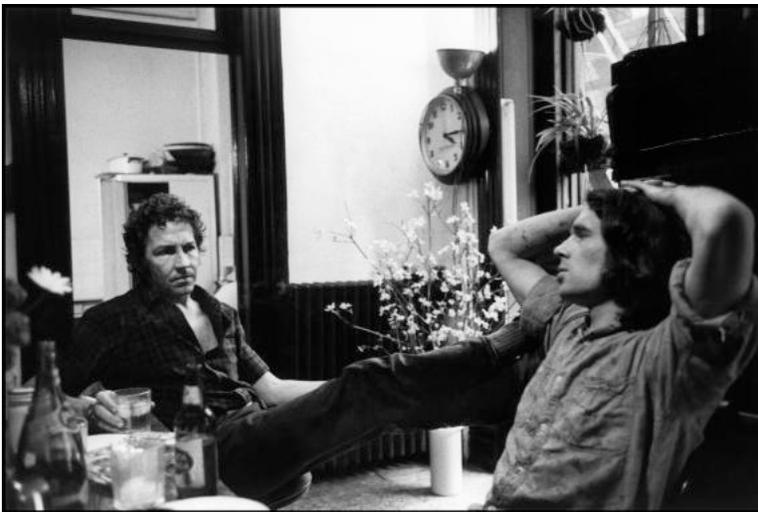
Rauschenberg: Yes, I mean, one of the times that I stopped by when I was in high school, one of the times I stopped by, he said, “Oh, you should stay for dinner. [Henri] Cartier-Bresson’s coming over for dinner.” And at the time, I wasn’t yet a photographer. Or, I was in between being a photographer, after being a kid photographer. And I said, “Oh, I can’t stay, I have homework to do.” And of course, now, it’s, like, the moral of the story is, never do your homework!

[Laughter]

Rauschenberg: But it was nice, actually, because Cartier-Bresson photographed my dad a bunch, and my dad would always, after that, complained, and said, “He said he was going to send me some prints, and he never did,” and all that stuff.

So, maybe ten years before my dad died, Magnum [Photos] actually put up a website where you could login as a professional and look through the pictures. We have a photo gallery and so I’m a professional! So, I logged in and looked up the Cartier-Bresson pictures of my dad, and picked one out and gave it to him as a present. And that was very satisfying to sort of say, “Now you can’t complain about Cartier-Bresson not giving you prints anymore!” But yes, I loved it. And I loved being taken to the shows. I mean,

Tinguely was my favorite, and I have to say Marisol [born Maria Sol Escobar] was one of my favorites, too. You know, it was great being a kid and getting to—I still have a drawing made with one of Tinguely’s drawing machines. You put a coin in and there’s these big old-fashioned magic markers that stunk to heaven, you put it in there, and it would kind of wiggle all around and it would make a drawing. I have a nice all yellow one, that I still have from there.



Rauschenberg with artist and studio assistant Brice Marden in the kitchen of Rauschenberg’s Lafayette Street studio, New York, 1968.
Photo: Henri Cartier-Bresson/Magnum Photos

Q: Oh.

Rauschenberg: [Laughs]

Q: And did you know Marisol?

Rauschenberg: I didn’t, but I think maybe you guys did.

Weil: Yes, well, we met when—were you not in New York when he did the machine that destroyed itself? [Note: Jean Tinguely, *Homage to New York*, 1960, staged in the sculpture garden, Museum of Modern Art]

Rauschenberg: I was in New York, but you didn't take me. You thought it would be too boring for me, so you left me home with a babysitter.

Weil: Could it be? I'm sorry!

Q: [Laughs]

Rauschenberg: No, it's funny. Actually I had an interview with a local weekly newspaper in Portland, *Willamette Week*. And I mentioned to the interviewer that one of my great disappointments in life is my parents didn't take me to this thing. And mom read the interview, and she said, "Oh, I'm so sorry! I'm so sorry!"

[Laughter]

Weil: I am.

Rauschenberg: I was a big Tinguely fan, though. And still am a big Tinguely fan. But you don't get to see them very much, because everybody's afraid to run the machines. You see them, but they're not plugged in, you know?

Q: Oh!

Rauschenberg: The new style is to plug it in for a minute and make a video, and then show the object and then show a video of what it's like when it's hurtling itself around!
[Laughs] Clanking and creaking!

Weil: I really apologize!

Rauschenberg: Oh, that's okay. Maybe I would have been bored, I don't know.

Weil: I don't think so.

Rauschenberg: But I wanted to be bored.

Q: Every parent's allowed a few mistakes, I hope!

[Laughter]

Q: I've certainly made them!

Rauschenberg: Our best friends, when their son was little, and we were going to the movies and he wanted to go to the movies with us. His mom explained to him, "No, this

is a boring grown-up movie.” And he said, “Someday, I’m going to go to boring grown-up movies!”

[Laughter]

Q: So, did your love of movies start, did you all go to a lot of movies when Chris was a kid?

Weil: Well, when Chris was little, first I took him to the movie theater, and it was a 3D movie, and they had the red and green glasses. So then, he’d wear them in every movie, his red and green glasses, even if it wasn’t a 3D movie. Also, there was one movie theater that had, in the bathroom, it had little toilets, and Christopher didn’t care which movie it was, but he wanted to go the theater that had the little toilets.

Rauschenberg: Little toilets are pretty fascinating. They had little toilets at my nursery school. I liked those quite a bit. But also, the theaters, they had a sort of a children’s section and a matron, who was somebody wearing a white, nurse kind of outfit, who had to shine a flashlight at you if you were making too much noise. And my mom would drop me off, and they would have, like, two hours of cartoons, and then whatever the regular movie was, which was not necessarily appropriate for children. But nonetheless—I actually went to the movies a lot. And sometimes, you went with me, and I remember you were very disgruntled that I made you go to *Old Yeller*, which was so sad. It was too sad for you.

Weil: [Laughs]

Rauschenberg: I often just went and sat in the kids' thing. I loved it. I still do.

Weil: You certainly did.

Rauschenberg: It's a powerful medium.

Weil: You certainly did. Well, also, when you were in Evergreen [State] College, [Olympia, Washington] you were trying to make movies.

Rauschenberg: Yes.

Weil: You did make movies.

Rauschenberg: Yes. I gave up on it, though, and did still photography, because it was so expensive to make movies. I mean, this was when video quality was completely terrible in the early seventies, and film was so expensive. I mean, I had cheap rent, but a three-minute roll of film, buying the film, getting it processed and getting a print made, because you didn't want to put your original negative in a projector, it was, like, the equivalent of a month's rent, every three minutes. I mean, it was just crazy! So I said, well, all my friends who were—because I had a class that was photography and film—and all my

friends who were doing film, people would say, “Oh, what are you doing?— Oh, I’m a filmmaker— Oh, I want to see your films— Well, I haven’t actually made any films!”

That’s not for me. I come from parents who make a lot of work. [Laughs]

Weil: We’re doers, yes.

Rauschenberg: Yes. So, I said, “Well, I can do photography, and I can just do it, and it doesn’t cost very much money, and I take pictures every day.” [Laughs] So I went in that direction. But I think, you know, had the technology been more advanced, I very well might have done film.

Weil: But also, you inherited from me and from your father this urge to just work work work—a real focus on work. Christopher is part of a very important photo gallery in Portland, and they’re going to be celebrated by the museum, there. And for that occasion, Christopher is making forty books of photographs of people, who’ve shown at Blue Sky Gallery [Portland, Oregon].

Q: Wow!

Rauschenberg: Yes, we’re publishing forty books at once.

Weil: So, he’s a doer like me, and like his father.

Q: Yes. I really want to ask you, how you came to choose Evergreen. Such a unique place!

Rauschenberg: Well, I was going to Reed [College, Portland, Oregon], as a physics major, I was going to Reed, and when Evergreen started up, I realized right away that even though physics was my best subject, I didn't really want to do physics. It was like, who am I going to work for? Am I going to make stickier napalm? And what am I going to be doing? You know, and I read *Cat's Cradle* by Kurt Vonnegut, and it's, like, oh, yes, I don't like where this field is going! And at Reed, they really didn't have any art program, art was considered the lowest of the low in the academic hierarchy. So I switched over to being a psych major, because they had a very lively, interesting psych department. I think, at one point, that when I switched to being a psych major, I think thirty-something percent of the students were suddenly psych majors, because that was the most lively department! [Laughs]

My best professor, Professor [Allen] Neuringer, who would often come to school with a monkey on his shoulder, he said, "You should look into Evergreen," and would say all this stuff about it. And I looked into it, and it was very lively, and it had sort of a—Bob described it as being sort of Black Mountain-y. But it was the idea that students and faculty were sort of co-learners, and the faculty were teaching outside their subject areas, and the idea was not that you had classes organized by subject, but you had classes organized by a project, a task. And a task that was multi-disciplinary. And everybody

would figure out what you needed to know to complete your task, as opposed to memorizing facts which you might need sometime later in your life.

I mean, when I graduated, it was still twenty-something years before internet searches, Alta Vista, and then Google and all of that. But they were anticipating it. And they were, like, “You just don’t need to memorize facts, you need to figure out how to get things done.” It was great, and I was part of a giant exodus from Reed up to Evergreen, when I had my transcripts sent up there at the registrar’s office, they said, “Oh, you’re the 200th transcript we sent up to Evergreen.” Then the faculty went up there, and my humanities professor at Reed was my photography professor at Evergreen. You know, it was a lively, exciting place, and that’s why we went there.

Q: What years were you there?

Rauschenberg: ’71 to ’73. Then I went back down to Portland. We started our photo gallery in ’75.

Weil: It’s been going a while!

Rauschenberg: Yes, been going a while.

Q: You must be very proud that your son is an artist, has followed your lead.

Weil: I'm very proud of my son, not only that he's an artist, but that he's a good, generous person. He really is. He wants to make the world a better place, and actually, his work on the [Robert Rauschenberg] Foundation is dedicated to that a great deal. I mean, they're really trying to make good things happen, not only in the arts, but altogether. And he's pushing art at it, which, of course, his father did, too, but very quietly.

Q: Yes.

Rauschenberg: Yes. No, I mean, I think my dad had some reluctance to have me be involved in the Foundation, because he didn't want to sort of take over my life and have me cleaning up after his party, or something. [Laughs] But I've lived my life in the non-profit sector, and I've been on the boards of multiple non-profits, including the art gallery, but lots of other ones, too. And, it's just, like, no, I want to be part of this!

Q: Right! And I so admire the desire to really help use the funds to fund people, creative people, who are trying to change the world. If you could just talk about that a little bit in relation to also funding artists, how you see the two coming together.

Rauschenberg: Well, we actually, in the philanthropy committee of the Foundation, we had a bit of a disagreement about how much—we don't have that much money, yet, because what we have is a lot of paintings, but you can't sell them very fast, because you flood the market. So we don't have a huge amount of money for philanthropy. And some of the people on the committee felt like, well, we should just stay inside the art world,

because the amount of money we have is a lot of money in the art world, but it's not a lot of money to try to solve the world's problems. And I, and some other people on the committee, felt like, well, but Bob didn't want to stay in the art world. He also wanted to try to solve the world's problems. So, our compromise was, well, how about if half of the things that we do are about the art world, and half the things are about solving the world's problems? And half of everything we do encapsulates both? [Laughs] So, it's, like, twenty-five percent save the world only, fifty percent art and save the world, and the last twenty-five percent just—

Weil: You know, it's such a great thing that all the people on the Foundation really feel at one with that concept, because so many of the past artists' foundations have not been generous. I feel so proud of Chris that he's such a fine man, he's going to make the world a better place.

Q: I think there's nothing more to be prouder of than that.

Rauschenberg: One of the things in the Foundation that we really embrace is that Bob was dyslexic. And when you have learning disabilities like that, basically, the way things are being taught doesn't work for you. So, you're always having to invent a new way to understand what everybody else is being taught in this direction. You have to come around on the side and climb over three fences and crawl in through a basement window to get into that building. And we, so we have sort of taken that as one of the principles of the Foundation, is that we don't—we sort of embrace creative dyslexia, you know, it's,

like, okay, what are we trying to do? Here's the normal path there, but never mind that. What's the most direct path?

My dad, the first print that he made, it's called *Smart Weed* [1966]. He was at ULAE [Universal Limited Art Editions, West Islip, New York], and they were explaining to him how lithography works, and that oil and water don't mix, and therefore, you put ink here, and then blah blah blah blah. And he said, wait a minute, oil? You mean, like vegetable oil? They said, well, we don't use vegetable oil, but yes, that's the idea. And he went out and picked leaves off the trees and laid them on the stone, and said, okay, they'll squeeze the oil out. So, it's really this direct thinking that he always did.

[Note: The first lithograph Rauschenberg completed was *Abbey's Bird*, 1962, at ULAE.]

Q: Yes.

Rauschenberg: Wasn't there an Albers assignment to paint a leaf? And Bob got a leaf and painted it?

Weil: Yes, and also, in a collage, he made a leaf image of the dog of the music professor. And Albers was really fed up with him about that.

Q: [Laughs]

Weil: But I have to say that the program in Captiva is so amazing, because there are a lot of people using this world that Bob built up, to just jump off and do everything they ever dreamed of. And it's so exciting! I can't wait until the website is really functioning, which is any minute—

Rauschenberg: No, it's up and running, as of this week. Yes.

Q: Yes.

Rauschenberg: Yes, we have—my dad started Untitled Press with the idea that he would use his print shop garage down in Captiva to publish works by other artists, and Bob was one of the artists that came down and did stuff there, one of the first ones. Now, of course, Bob wanted, when he was gone, he wanted to have his property in Captiva be an artist residency program. So, we have an artist residency program that has ten artists there at a time, all different media. We're trying to make it as sort of Black Mountain-ish as possible, where there's a lot of cross-fertilization between artists of different disciplines, and we hope some collaboration. But certainly a lot of cross-fertilization.

Weil: Absolutely amazing. It's just like—

Q: It's hard to ask a big question like this, but I'd really love to hear from each of you about how you saw his influence build over time, and what, exactly, it is; like, he

obviously gave others permission to explore freely in the way you're talking about at Captiva. Could you talk about how you judge his influence?

Weil: Well, I know one day, Christopher brought a book to show Bob that had a lot of different people's work, and had a photograph of Chris's. And he said, the only one that isn't fake Rauschenberg is Rauschenberg himself!

[Laughter]

Weil: But no, he was—he just had this remarkable open mind, and exploring everything. When we were really a pair, I had some knowledge and sophistication of the history of art, and so on, and he was a complete, naïve person. So, we shared—he gave me some of his freedom, although I had plenty of my own.

Rauschenberg: [Laughs]

Weil: And I gave him some of the long story of art. I think it was amazing, because we loved to give whatever we had of ourselves to each other. And that's part of his generosity, his generosity in every way.

Q: Yes.

Weil: I'll tell you a funny story that tells something about the relationship of Chris and his dad. When Chris was in, I forget what grade, he was going to Greece with a school group. So, he stopped by Bob's, and Bob gave him some money, maybe a hundred dollars or something, for his travel money. Well, when Chris came back, he went to Bob's house, and he said, "Well, Bob, thank you. I spent thirty dollars," or something, "and here's the rest back!" And Bob was just so astonished that this person ever did this, because everybody else, you know, was grabby, and Chris was not.

Q: Well, the relationship was more important than the money.

Rauschenberg: Well, it's interesting, because, I mean, you described him as generous, which is certainly—I can understand why you do that. But for me, my interpretation of it was always that he saw himself as part of a team, and to share stuff wasn't being generous. I mean, if you're the quarterback and you pass the ball to another player, you're not being generous. You're doing what the team needs, you know? And for me, that was what it was about for him. It was really about, how do we all function as a team and make things better? And he started a non-profit called Change, that was about emergency money for artists. And, you know, whenever he got money for anything other than selling a painting, it went into Change. And it was really sort of about, what do we need for us to work together? What do we all need to make things happen?

And my understanding of how things happen is that way. I mean, the museums tend to present the art world as though, you know, "Once in a generation, there's a genius, and

they make one great artwork, and we have it.” You know. And it’s just not at all how things actually work. Artists are constantly sharing ideas and doing things, and I remember Bob, at one point, talking about, “Yes, that Jasper piece, that was my idea. I gave him that idea. But he gave me this idea for this one, so we’re kind of even on that.” You know. There was this sense of kind of co-exploring. And people understand that in science, you know, as a scientist, you’re constantly reading everybody else’s research, and this guy does something, and that gives you an idea for an experiment, which then gives somebody else an idea for an experiment. That’s how it works in art, too, and it’s not about the individual drop of water; it’s about the tide, and where the river is going, you know. [Laughs]

Weil: And you live like that in photography, because of the gallery, and all your—you could explain how you go to these sessions—

Rauschenberg: Portfolio—

Weil: Portfolio sessions all over the world, all the time. And help people to—

[INTERRUPTION]

Weil: —that’s some of the generosity, too, is that all this information goes to art teachers who are part of this, and take it back. And also, they make connections there with other

art teachers, and share that kind of thing. I mean, that's what I call a great generosity of spirit.

Rauschenberg: Yes, the Lab School. Sally [L.] Smith started the Lab School because she had a son who had extreme learning disabilities, and there was no school she could send him to. She was an education person. So, she started a school. And it's based on learning everything using art and role-playing, so you don't study history, you're assigned a role. I mean, when they studied the Renaissance, it's, like, the teacher is Lorenzo de Medici, and each of the students is a different artist. And they sort of, they learn how to do all this stuff, and they learn how it all fits together.

And, you know, nobody had red dye, but you made red dye out of cochineal, out of these little bugs, but nobody knew it was little bugs, except Spain. And it wasn't until they had hand lenses that people could look closer, and say, hey, there's little leg parts in here, it must be bugs, you know? So, I mean, it's sort of, how does everything fit together? It's not just art, it's science, it's everything fitting together. And when Sally awarded Bob this dyslexic of the year award, he came and he looked at the place, and he went, "Why wasn't there a school like this for me?" [Note: Outstanding Achievers with Learning Disabilities Award, the Lab School, Washington, D.C., 1985] You know? And proceeded to do this Power of Art workshop that's been going on for more than twenty years now, bringing in different teachers from all around the country, and doing a workshop. You know, it is exciting.

One of the things that we're trying to figure out in the Foundation is, how do we try to spread this gospel of teaching everything using the engine of art, and using the creativity permission that you have in art school; I mean, particularly for a kid who, all your other teachers are telling you you're doing that wrong, and you go in and the art teacher says, "That's great! I love the way you did it! Nobody ever did it that way before." You know? And nobody ever did it that way before is something that's valuable in modern society, and it's something that business leaders say they're looking for. They're looking for that kind of creativity. And all the school systems that we have don't teach it. We're trying to get to a place to figure out how to try to move that giant boulder, and to try to get that used more.

Weil: It's interesting, the magazine section of the [*New York Times*] this weekend was about looking at education differently.

Q: "Big History," the [William Henry] Bill Gates [III] big history idea.

Rauschenberg: Yes. Which has to do with, how do things fit together? I mean, this is one thing, when you teach history by role-playing, you understand more how things fit together. And if you just teach separate facts, you don't get it. I mean, the women's suffrage movement. Did they have cars? Did they have telephones? How do you—you don't have any picture of it, because you never tried to live it. How do you organize people?

Q: Bill Gates couldn't live in the roles of Harvard [University, Cambridge, Massachusetts]. He was bored, so he's trying to create a different way for children to engage directly in learning, by doing and thinking, and solving problems. He's been able to give ten million dollars to it.

Rauschenberg: Out of his pocket change in his sofa. [Laughs]

Weil: Well, I think, you know, I think this is, in our extended family, this is a wonderful way to live. And my daughter lives this way, too. And I'm just so happy to be, in my history, a part of this generosity of spirit and concern about everybody.

Q: It's the best way to live. Could you talk about Sara a little bit, since we're on the family?

Weil: Oh, yes. Well, Sara, when Sara was born, she was part of this crazy family, and jealous of Chris because he was in the Happenings, and everything. But she was a great creative spirit, and she didn't see any reason why she couldn't be fully functioning as an artist, when she was a little kid. She said she was going to talk to our building about making a show in the community room, and so on and so forth. And she is a doer, but she's a very caring person, also. Her big push is the anti-nuclear position, and working, she wrote a hundred letters to [President Barack] Obama, which were made into a book. She just feels for the safety of the world, in the aggressive things. And she's a great person, and a beloved part of our family.

Rauschenberg: When she was a kid, she was one of the editors of a kids' magazine.

Weil: Right. Yes, she was an editor, and she got to a kids' magazine, it was a magazine of images and stories and writings of kids. There were a group of about eight kids who were actually a staff, and she was a staff member. She was on the television talking about kids' magazines.

Q: [Laughs] I like that you—

Rauschenberg: She was disgusted she was the only one in the family that didn't have her own personal last name.

Q: Tell me more.

Weil: [Laughs]

Rauschenberg: Well, I was Rauschenberg, there's Weil, Kirschenbaum, and then she also had to be Kirschenbaum. That name was taken! For a while, she called herself "Sara Cherry Tree," which of course is a literal translation of Kirschenbaum.

Q: Yes.

Weil: And now her daughter has changed her name.

Rauschenberg: Yes.

Weil: Sara has two kids, and her daughter decided her name was Annie Dove Kirschenbaum, and she decided that she would call herself Flint. It's so confusing, because, of course, with Bernie's illness, he gathers his mind together very well but this person coming in to see him, his grandchild, she'd have a different color hair, and a different name. And he was trying to—

Rauschenberg: Now, which one are you?

[Laughter]

Weil: Trying to keep track of it all.

Q: Yes. And Sara was part of the first interview we had together.

Weil: Yes.

Q: So, I'm glad that Chris was part of the third interview we're having together.

Weil: Yes. I know.

Rauschenberg: I can't help but feel I'm derailing you off of your—

Q: No, this is just wonderful! You know, I think you feel more comfortable with your children with you.

Weil: Yes. Yes.

Q: And why not, you know?

Weil: Yes, and we're talking about my relationship with Bob, and here's an example of my relationship with Bob.

Rauschenberg: Early collaborative work.

Q: Your best collaboration.

Weil: My best collaboration.

Q: Well, it's just lovely.

[INTERRUPTION]

Q: Okay. This is Mary Marshall Clark, and this is the third part of our interview today, with Sue Weil, and this one is focused on your work, Sue. So, thank you for persevering with us.

Weil: Oh, thanks again. I talked to the staff in the building where we live, and they just can't believe that I go to work, age eighty-four. But I do. And it's very joyful for me to do so. What I think we were planning on talking about was my involvement with James Joyce, and my work around James Joyce. First of all, at the head of that comes my father, who read Joyce to me, as we've already talked about. He loved James Joyce, and simultaneously, when Joyce was writing, he was following the old—what was it called, the magazines that came out with the original work, regularly? My father had all those, because he was an enthusiast, and now those are all mine, so I'm very happy.

And the other part of my Joyce journey is, when I was working in a print workshop, on a book project with my Swedish art dealer, Anders Tornberg [Gallery, Lund, Sweden]. I was doing a book for him, and Vincent FitzGerald was doing another book. And we would see each other every day, because we were both working at the workshop. After spending maybe a year in the same environment, he said, I'd be interested in you and Marjorie Van Dyke, who was the printer I was working with, doing a book with me. He does limited edition books. And what writer would you like to be tied to? And we both said James Joyce.

The first Joyce book that I did with Vincent was *The Epiphanies* [1987] which, as far as we knew, had never been published as a whole, separate from writing about Joyce material, with that actual book dedicated to that work. *The Epiphanies* were his bits of writings I'd overheard, that he kept notes of to put in future books. And they're quite wonderful. And so, Marjorie and I, we went to work on this book, and of course Vincent was working on three other books with three other people, and said, "Now, you just go study Joyce and leave me alone until you're ready."



James Joyce's *The Epiphanies* (1898–1904), interpreted by Susan Weil and Marjorie Van Dyke, published by Vincent FitzGerald & Co., 1987
Edition of 50 copies signed by the artists
15 1/8 x 12 3/4 inches (38.4 x 32.4 cm)

So, we both kept these notebooks, which are going to be included in my future exhibition—us reading and drawing all the works of Joyce, so that we could understand it with the visual component. When we eventually made *The Epiphanies*, it was really so

exciting; it was a very splendid book. And we're both very thrilled about it. But then Vincent wanted to go ahead and do some other works with Joyce. So, we did *Giacomo Joyce* [1989], which was a joy to work with. And then I did a chapter from *Finnegans Wake* called *Brideship and Gulls* [1991], and that was very amazing to work on those images. Well, in all the years since, I've done images to Joyce in every kind of material. I have worked on canvas, I worked on Plexi, I've worked on paper. You can see over on that wall there's a coat, which is *Macintosh* [1989], referring to a character from *Ulysses*. It's just very abstract, very complicated, very funny, and I loved, I really loved working with it and working with Vincent.



Susan Weil
Macintosh, 1989
Raincoat, linen, and acrylic paint collage
41 x 33 x 5 inches (104.1 x 83.8 x 12.7 cm)

So, that got me into a third year study of Joyce, and making imagery to all of it. And you know, since I'm doing all kinds of things at once, I've never really sat down and put

together a show that's just about Joyce work. And that's what we're doing now. We're building a show which is for libraries and universities and so on. Images and words to all different writings of Joyce. So in order to do that, we're making a book explaining the journey, showing a lot of the images, which we'll send around to places that might pick up on it. So, it's just so exciting, and dragging me back into this long period of study. We're, right now, ready to begin to get the book ready for print, then we're going with it. I'm so excited!

Q: That's just fantastic! Could you think back to think about particular pieces of Joyce's writings that really meant the most to you?

Weil: Well, I do love *Finnegans Wake*. It's the most complex and most abstract. It's funny, sequentially, the books become more and more difficult. *Ulysses* is a little complicated, but nothing like the *Wake*. And the earlier books are very easy to read and very pleasant. I don't so much love his poetry, but you know, it's interesting to study it. And it's just like I'm beginning a new journey with this aspect of my work, because in a way, people who know some of the fine-tuning of art know what I've been up to, otherwise, but they don't really know the Joyce work. So that's one of the things I'm working on at the moment.

The other thing is, that for twenty-five years, I think, I've done poem imagery every day of my life. And sometimes it is quite impossible, but it happens. The Black Mountain College is going to make an exhibition of my poems, including, you know, all the way

back to the beginning. So we're working on that very much. And it's exciting. I mean, I don't love delving into the past, and not being of the moment; but in terms of the Joyce work, maybe ten or twelve of these are very new.

Q: Could you pick out a few of them to talk about, and we'll get images later.

Weil: Yes. This is *Wandering Rocks* [2003]. And that is *Wandering Rocks* [2014]. [Note: refers to artwork hanging in the studio] That's the center of the work. You have the chapters before, the chapters after, and this is notation of everything that happens in the book. I've done maybe six of these. But this is brand new, the Plexi one. And that's an older one. It's just very thrilling for me to take the words and find their visual counterpart. It's very, very thrilling.



Susan Weil
Wandering Rocks, 2003
Acrylic on canvas and
paper with wooden cane
56 x 71 x 4 inches (142.2
x 180.3 x 10.2 cm)

Q: And historically, over time as you were doing them, are there particular pieces that stand out to you that you enjoy doing the most?

Weil: Of the Joyce work, or—?

Q: The Joyce work.

Weil: Well, *Ulysses* and the *Wake*, I think. You know? I've had a few exhibitions of Joyce's work. And at one of them, in Sundaram Tagore Gallery [New York] that used to be in SoHo, they had a meeting of the Joyce Society, and my exhibition. That was so thrilling for me, because everybody could walk around that knew exactly what the paintings were about. I just loved that. So, this book we're building to explain the show is that way. It's got images of words, and it explains the journey. And it makes me feel very happy. It's going to be out in public within six months.

Q: That's so exciting!

Weil: Yes. So, I'm working backwards now, into the bones and into the Joyce work.

Q: Yes.

Weil: But all the time, I work forwards, too.

Q: As you say, you're timeless.

Weil: And you were asking me about the Muybridge pieces. There's a lot of Muybridge pieces, and the thing that grabbed me about Muybridge was the expression of time's motion. I just love that. It's inspired me. I work directly up to the images. I've also worked on a concept date on my images. So, that's been very important to me.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about your exhibits and Scandinavia, and the Scandinavian influence on your work?

Weil: Yes. Well, the reason I got involved with Scandinavia in the first place is, I was living in Manhattan and working at PS1 [MoMA PS1, Long Island City, New York], in their guest artists' program, and I had a studio there, and so on. Well, I happened to meet this Swedish artist, Jan Håfström. And he sublet one of the studios to work in during the time he was in New York, and we were both there and sharing thoughts and sharing work. And he wrote to his gallery about my work. I didn't even know he did that, but his gallery was Anders Tornberg. And he became an enormous part of our life. One day, I picked up the phone, and he said, "My name is Anders Tornberg, and I love you!" Now, you can't resist things like that.

Anyway, he was in the city, and he came to PS1, and we talked and talked about this work. And he completely understood it, and grabbed it and loved it, and immediately offered me a show in Sweden. He was in Lund, Sweden. He was a very important

Swedish gallery. And I, within a year of that, I was in Sweden, having my first show, and I had something like eleven shows with him. He showed my work in art fairs, and he showed my work every which way, in other galleries, in other countries. He became a part of our family. And that was, you know, extremely marvelous. Then my husband got involved, Bernard Kirschenbaum, got involved. And another Swedish gallery picked up his work.

Then, he was taking a teaching job offered by a Norwegian artist, Bård Breivik, who needed some time off and asked that Bernie work for him in the art college in Stockholm. Well, Bernie decided to do that, and then he did that. Then his students came and said, we want you to take this job, we want you to be our professor of sculpture. So he did. And it was many years he was teaching there. And it just changed everything for him, because Sweden, at the time, I mean, one of the things about the cultural life in Sweden is, you're not supposed to think well of yourself. You're supposed to be everyman. They were afraid to push it. And Bernie came in, a New Yorker, ready to make them be outrageous, and they did so, and they adored him, and they did their best work, and became leading artists in Sweden, and he was very much loved. So, that was interesting, because he was so active in Sweden, and I was so active in Sweden. So, that was very special.

Q: Yes. Could you talk about some of the work that you did living in Sweden?

Weil: Well, usually I arranged to have a studio, and I worked there, and it was a continuation of these paintings, and different parts that went together outrageously. And

it was also, some of them were about time, and so on. And that was great. But one year, I went, and I didn't have a studio. So, I went out to the park, and I did portraits of blades of grass.

Q: Wow.

Weil: I did all the series about grass. So, I came back, and showed Vincent FitzGerald, my lead *artiste* person, these images, and he said, "Oh, you have to do a book to the poet Rumi, because it just suits that." So, I worked very hard, and it made a nice book, very cut and handmade in every which way, called *The Reed*, which was the name of Rumi's writing. And so, in the end, I've done all these books with Vincent because we work very well, we think very well, and he's been involved in working on the book that we're making for the Joyce show, too. Now, it's been a great generosity, Anders and Vincent have been a big part of my work life, thinking with me and talking with me, fantastic dialogue.

Q: Wonderful! Before you get too far into your career, could you talk a little bit about some of the artists who influenced you, whose work you looked at, and interested you?

Weil: Well, when we left Black Mountain, we just couldn't believe what was happening in New York in the art world, that Abstract Expressionists were all finding themselves, and doing just amazing work. It was just so startling, you know? It was new descriptions of what painting could be. And powerful, very powerful. So, that was exciting. It isn't

that you looked at, say, a Tworokov painting and went home and did a Tworokov painting. Not like that. It's that the energy of the work pushes you to find your own way. And the long story of art, [Henri] Matisse is a big influence. And Giotto [di Bondone] is a big influence.

You know, it's just amazing, all the things you see that go into your heart, and just become part of you. It isn't that you ever work like any one person, it's that their vision and energy goes into you.

Q: And of course, as you mentioned before, there was Bob's influence. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Weil: Yes, well, that was my growing up, and art was growing up. With Bob, who was finding his way, and I finding my way, we were both just crazy about working and painting, and thinking together. That was a very big influence, and it meant a lot to me. We shared work thoughts always, and all the years after about artists that moved me a lot, I can't say it directly, like I'm working—my work looks like this artist.

It all comes in and becomes part of the stew.

Q: Yes. So, de Kooning was part of that stew.

Weil: Yes. Yes.

Q: And in terms of your second period in Europe, when you were in Scandinavia, it was a different time, people were probably talking about the war, and the Nazi past. I wondered if the art that was concerned with that had any influence on you?

Weil: Well, I mean, it was complicated in Sweden, because in the war, they were kind of helpful to the Germans.

Q: I know. That's why I'm asking.

Weil: They didn't participate in any aspect of the war, but they were very affected by it. And some of the other Scandinavian countries helped people during the wartime. But it's just—Sweden is funny, because it's really separate from Europe and they have their own identity. They're Vikings, you know, but that's the way it is. But, I mean, when I did the shows at Munich, I said to myself, I'm half Jewish, and I very much was aware of things going on during World War II. And how can I feel to go over there and make a big museum show in this country?

I thought about it a lot, and then I said to myself, well, it would make [Adolf] Hitler turn over in his grave to think this American Jewish girl coming over and hanging up her work in his museum! So then I went over there, and of course it was very lovely, because the art community is the art community; separate from politics, separate from anything. And these people were so warm and friendly and everything. It was just fine. I was there

a month, because I had to go live in Munich, because they were making a catalog for that show.

Q: Looking back, what do you think? Do you look upon those years in Scandinavia as some of the best years in terms of reception of your work? Or, how do you think about that?

Weil: Yes, I mean, when I was so involved in Sweden, I wasn't that much appreciated in my own country. I just wasn't. And partly, it was because of how difficult it was for women, but partly it was because the whole while, I had two kids I raised. I never gave up a moment of making work, but I gave up a moment, a lot, of not doing much about it. So, I did show some but it was never that important to people who were looking at art. Anders's situation is much better for women. It isn't perfect, it's far from it; but now people are more open to this. I was very involved with the show that went on of Scandinavian art in the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum, New York] and the director of it, from Sweden, I said to him, how come there are all these artists, from all these different countries, and there isn't a woman artist? And he said, "Well, of course it's just because the work didn't strike us." But I have to speak up, I have to.

Q: Yes. Were you part of any women's groups, women artists' groups, coalition groups, during these periods?

Weil: Yes, I was with Women in the Arts and I was in New York Professional Women Artists. We spoke and we went to the universities and we went after galleries. And Mary Boone, I went after her. She was having an opening, and we were picketing it, and it was raining or something, and she came out, and she said, “Why don’t you come in and have a nice cup of tea, and get out of the rain.” I said, “No, way!”

Q: Not crossing the picket line.

Weil: I mean, for a woman gallerist to have no women artists, it was just no good. So anyway, it is better about women. But not perfect.

Q: No. Could you talk about the poem paintings? I’m particularly interested in how they came about, and also, I know that you do one each year, on the birthday of your brother?

Weil: My brother died, he was not quite thirteen, or maybe he was just thirteen, in the fire I was in. And so, I felt I took him into myself, and every year on his birthday, I made him a painting. It was always separate from whatever other work I was doing. I’ve done that for so many years. But one day, I was working on Danky’s birthday painting, and my phone rang, and it was [Robert] Bob Whitman saying that his wife’s son had just jumped to his death. And it was on my brother’s birthday. So, I immediately had to include Bernardo. So he got a painting every year on that day. And my dear friend, Vincent FitzGerald, who does the books, his brother was murdered when he was in high school.

So, there are three, the three boys get works every—and these three, with the geometric shapes, those are this year's three.

Q: Hmm. Could you talk more about the poem paintings in general? And why you did them, and why you find them so satisfying?

Weil: Well, my father was a writer and I always loved writing and reading. But, you know, I had dedicated my life to the visual arts. But I used to, even back in the fifties when I was married to Bob, I would make drawings and words. It wasn't a commitment every day, like it is now, but I would do it, and it was a way of expressing my thoughts and my moment. And I began to do them every day, and it was a commitment. At that point, it was mostly drawings and watercolors, and things like that. But as the years went on, and the computer became my friend, I would get images from the computers, or from photographs. And so, now I have twenty-five years' worth of poem images.

As I said before, the museum for the Black Mountain community is going to be showing them for a number of months. They came and talked about them, well, these are on 8 1/2 by 11 [inches], and I thought, well, it's a little awkward. So, when the curator of the show came, I said to him, let's put a square table in the middle of the room with four chairs and four notebooks, with not the original poems, but with pictures of them. On the wall it's all the original poems, and then you can sit down—so, we're making four books of twenty-four poems each, for people to sit and look at quietly, so they can have that one-on-one experience with them.

Q: How did you choose which ones to go into the show?

Weil: We're working on it.

Q: Are you?

Weil: I think we've made all our final choices now. Rachael [Inch] is trying to print the four copies of each poem.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about the influence of the sea on your art?

Weil: Well, yes. Growing up on an island, on clear days, I could see Long Island [New York] like a little thread. But otherwise, it was just the sea meeting the sky. And it's funny, I would think about that horizon line, and I would think about it as being so fantastic, that that straight line was really the curve of the earth. And I did a lot of paintings about that. I remember talking to my father about it. Anyway, to be on the water, first of all, the sound of the water is constantly in your ears, constantly, when I would be in the summer on the island, and then I would go back for the school year, and I would so miss that sound. And also, the isolation of just being near family in this little world, it was amazing. It was just amazing!



Susan Weil
Untitled (Straight as Round),
1978
Ink on paper
41 x 168 inches (104.1 x 168
cm)

Q: So, *Straight as Round* came out of that? Yes. And what were some of the other influences in terms of the kind of soft folds that you created? Did that come from the Renaissance period?

Weil: Yes.

Q: Could you talk about that a little bit?

Weil: Yes. Well, in Renaissance paintings, the folds are so beautiful. And for a long while, I was working with actual folds of cloth; I would have painted canisters, one in the kitchen, where you hang up folds of cloth of lots of colors. It's a reference to the Renaissance. And some large paintings I have are very abstract-looking, but they're also related to that concept.

Q: So, the history of art is sort of like your palette—

Weil: Exactly.

Q: —that you draw from.

Weil: Exactly.

Q: And during this period, and as you were really establishing yourself as an artist, did you continue to go to a lot of galleries and a lot of museums consciously to try to—I know that the poem paintings were a genre with [Frank] O’Hara and the rest. Could you talk about that a little bit?

Weil: Well, at the time, we’d go to openings. We had loads of friends in the art world that would gather at the Club—they had different gathering places. So you’d have a lot of talk about painting. And then weekends, we’d go around to galleries. During a lot of that time, it was partly Fifty-seventh Street and partly uptown, partly downtown, so it was lots of travel. Then there’d be shows in SoHo, and then after that in Chelsea. So, it was a way of keeping up with everything that everybody was doing, which is very nice. And, of course, I have a lot of artist friends, too. We would talk—

Q: Who were some of those friends who have meant something to you?

Weil: Gene Hedge, who was a wonderful artist. And Dorothea Rockburne and I were very close for a long time. Bernie was involved in Park Place Gallery [New York], and then Paula Cooper Gallery [New York], and through that we had a lot of friends who

were involved in those galleries, too. We'd both, at one time, showed in the Green Gallery [New York].

Q: Yes. Were you and Dorothea at Black Mountain at the same time?

Weil: No. I left a year before her. But we met after.

Q: Would you say your work influenced each other in the same way that Chris was talking about how Bob influenced artists, and were you a part of that, meaning, did you take from other artists? Were you inspired by other artists? Fellow artists, living artists?

Weil: Well, I'm moved by what they do, and more inspired by the thinking and the energy behind that work than—I don't go about doing work like somebody else. But I take from their mind explorations.

Q: Could you describe to me, maybe in literary terms, how you think about objects?

Weil: How I think about objects?

Q: Yes. Why objects are an important—everyday objects—were an important part of Bob's work, they're an important part of your work.

Weil: Well, it is just part of what comes in your eyes all the time, that you have feelings about. I mean, certainly that's the way with art that's related to nature. And then, it's also the way with other art—I mean, a lot of my work is so abstract, you don't find any of that in it. But, I mean periodically, things, you know, I did a whole lot of images of chairs, and so on.

Q: That's what I was thinking about.

Weil: It's metaphoric. It stands for what's part of your everyday, and your interpretation of it.

Q: So, if you could talk a little bit about why movement is important to you, moving images are important to you?

Weil: Well, I mean, it's the passage of time. And it's the passage of time made more miniscule. We all go from birth to death, and this is just an increment, an increment. And it just seems to me that's just central to how we live, and who we are.

Q: You wrote one time that, "My life as an artist has been deeply satisfying. I stand on a Susan spot, the world and the art world shift and change around me." What did you mean by that?

Weil: I mean the art moment, in my view of things, is doing its dance, and I'm doing my dance as a piece of it.

Q: Yes. And I would also like to hear you talk about color a bit. I'm thinking of the color wheel, for example.

Weil: Well, it's funny, because instinctively, I really like lots of color, explosions of color. But Albers pushed for really understanding colors spatially. You know, what's forward, what's back, you know, the complementary colors. The blue and orange are complementary, yellow and purple are complementary, red and green are complementary. And that if you take the complementary colors, say, do some kind of influence on each other, where they even seem to move, so when you study with Albers, also, it's the proportions. You can take a little green square and put it in the corner of a big red square, and it just changes that red square. You know, there's much to understand about it. But you don't always have to think about it intellectually; you can just think, oh, this wants to be a little bright blue, here.

Q: That's wonderful! I guess I would like to ask you a question about your work as meditative, and I'm thinking of *Ginkgo*, in 1990, the graphic design of the moon and the ginkgo leaves. Would you describe your own work as meditative? Or, a phase of your work as meditative?



Susan Weil
Ginkgo, 1992
Etching on paper
22 4/5 x 19 4/5 inches (57.9 x
50.3 cm)

Weil: Yes, well, for some years, I was doing some teaching, because that's how we have to support ourselves. And I've taught children, I've taught adults, I've taught high school, I've taught individuals. But I don't want to be teaching, because I mean, particularly with adults, you go and you have to open your mind to what they're thinking. And then you have to think about what it's made of, and where it should go, and what's wrong with it and so on. And it becomes too—it's not instinctive, it's not, when you're in the studio and you're working, you don't have to get so analytical. You can just do what you feel has to be done.

Q: I did have a question about that, which is that, going back in time, if you had not had that color theory that you had to learn, do you think you would have been able to operate instinctively as well as you have?

Weil: Probably. I mean, I like knowing it, but it isn't really right with me all the time I'm working.

Q: Yes. What is your work process? What time do you get here, and what time do you leave?

Weil: Well, right now, we're in a difficult time, because my husband is in the hospice, and very ill. And also, because I'm eighty-four. So, I have a schedule of being here three days a week from ten until four, and then I have to go home. And that's both in terms of home needs, also in terms of my energy needs. I can't work every day now. Even though at home I work on poems, I work on this, that, and the other, I do work. But it's not the same as being at the studio.

Q: Yes. I won't keep you too much longer, but if you could talk a little bit about how digital technology has enhanced your work, I would like to hear you talk about that.

Weil: Well, I mean, it's amazing what the computer has done to our culture, completely. I mean, being able to research anything without going to the library, without chasing history down. You can find out everything that you need to know, and that's just amazing. And being able to find images from art history, being able to see everything, it's wonderful. I love that aspect of it. But I think you have to be careful, because I'm a dinosaur, and I can't really live in this moment the way a twenty-year-old would. I can't. But I love to use the technology as best I can. It helps me in my work with the poems

[Poem Drawings], it helps me a very great deal in my studio work. Because, for instance, this piece, which is *Wandering Rocks* [1996] from Joyce—we work it all out, find all the images, and then it has to go to a fabricator and be screened onto the Plexiglas, not here, because we have the capacity to do things that can go through the roller. But it has to go on a—it has to go on a flatbed press. So, you know, I have to collaborate with technology. And I'm trying to do that.

[INTERRUPTION]

Weil: I'm going to talk to you about five pieces. The first one that I picked out from the book is called *Peripheries Perspect* [2007]. And it's in three parts, and that's very dimensional. It's paint, they're deep canvases, and the figure is painted on the sides. You see hands and feet on the front. It goes through three steps, they're walking along. And that's Muybridge-related, of course, walking through time. So, to me, this piece is very powerful because it's quite abstract; on the other hand, it's a figurative painting. And it's very specific about stepping through time, and that's very important to me. So that's one.



Susan Weil
Peripheries Perspect, 2007
Acrylic on panels
60 x 128 inches (152.4 x 325.1 cm)

The next is a bird painting I did in Munich [*Seagull*, 1999]. This is an individual painting. At the Munich exhibition, I had groups and groups of birds flying in all random shapes and stuff, but this image is a circle, where one of them is put in sideways. It's about seagulls, and it's just a nice feel. You feel the motion of the flying bird, and of the standing bird. And it's both quite abstract, and not. So, that's number two.

Oh, I picked this very baroque piece. It's metallic copper pigment, and it's called *Gold Moon* [1988]. And the images are phases of the moon, and then it's the deep folds that Renaissance paintings had, and it gives a sense of passage of time, too, the big folds like that. I think that's a powerful visual piece.



Susan Weil
Gold Moon, 1988
Acrylic on canvas
34 x 32 inches (86.4 x 81.3 cm)

And now, here's a horizon piece. It's called *Wind's Havoc* [1974]. And it's gridded, but the grids are crumpled. So, that's like the passage of time and the power of the wind. So, you have a straight line expressing the horizon, but the pieces are crumpled, and that's *Wind's Havoc*. So you have the sea gray and the sky blue.



Susan Weil
Wind's Havoc, 1974
Acrylic on paper
72 x 89 3/4 inches (182.9 x 228 cm)

And then, I have here *Secrets*, which we talked about earlier, which I did at Black Mountain, which was the torn up images of my feelings at a crucial time, and the disappearance of our marriage. So, it's a strong piece. It's quite abstract. You know there are words there, but you can't read them. It's just like looking at a Chinese newspaper; you know it's telling the news, but you can't read it. And this is telling you about my worries and sorrows, but it's not to be shared, so it's called *Secrets*.

So, those are five paintings from my body of work, which is a lifetime. And the pictures will come to be included, beside what I have to say about them. I've enjoyed very much being with you, and talking about my long, complicated life. Thank you all, and that's the end of the interview.

Q: We're in your great gratitude.

[END OF INTERVIEW]