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Oral history interview with Robert Noel Blair, 1994 November 30-1995 August 27

Blair, Robert N. (Robert Noel), 1912-2003
Painter, Printmaker, Educator

Overview

Collection Information

Size: 2 sound cassettes (2 hrs.), analog.; 66 Pages, Transcript

Format: Originally recorded 2 sound cassettes. Reformatted in 2010 as 8 digital wav files. Duration is 2 hr., 30 min.

Summary: An interview with Robert Blair conducted 1994 November 30-1995 August 27, by Robert Brown, for the Archives of American Art.

Blair talks about his father, a Vermonter, who went to Harvard Law School and became a corporation lawyer in Buffalo, and his mother, a Rochester, New York native, who went to Cornell and taught Greek and Latin in New York State schools before marriage; being an indifferent student until he went to the Albright Art School in Buffalo, although instruction there was perfunctory; attending the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (1931-1934), recalling especially his two British drawing teachers, Guthrie and Burns, and Frederick Allen who taught sculpture, and fellow student, Carl Johnson, summers with his family in Vermont and the pleasant primitive farm life; his first teaching job -- Saturday children's classes at the Buffalo Museum of Science and his first exhibitions in Buffalo and New York City, including a show at the Morton Gallery, New York (1940) from which the Metropolitan Museum purchased a large watercolor; his love of using unusual implements to paint with; his service in World War II, in which he was assigned to design training aids and to paint war scenes.

Blair continues discussion of his service as an airborne soldier and artist in Belgium and Germany during World War II; returning from the War to direct the Arts Institute of Buffalo and his long friendship with Charles Burchfield; Philip Elliott, painter and teacher at the rival Albright Art School in Buffalo; traveling throughout the US and Mexico, painting wherever he camped; his work and proficiency in watercolor; and the value of figure studies, which he does regularly with other artists.

Biographical/Historical Note

Robert Blair (1912-2003) is a painter, printmaker, and instructor of Buffalo, New York.

Provenance

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Language Note

English .

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Noel Blair on November 30, 1994 and August, 27 1995. The interview took place in the artist's home in Holland, New York, and was conducted by Robert F. Brown for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

ROBERT F. BROWN: —New York, and this is November 30, 1994, Robert Brown, the interviewer. Okay?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Okay.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Begin talking about, a bit about, your, uh, childhood and your family background.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now you—your father was not from around here, from Western New York, at all, was he?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He—he was born on our farm up in Vermont. And we had—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Where was that farm?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That was in Fletcher, and his ancestors came to northern Vermont in 1793 to settle this 200-acre farm. I think it was 250 acres at the beginning. I think they had sheep as well as cattle. And my dad had about 80 head of cattle, counting the young cattle, on the farm. But he was a lawyer in Buffalo. When he was probably about 14, he moved to, uh—his father got a farmer to keep the farm going, but he and his father moved to Morrisville.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Morrisville, Vermont?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And that was—that was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why did they move there, do you—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That was so David—so, Charles, Charles, my father's name, so he could go to high school. And so, he was brought up a lot of the time in Morrisville and when he—when he graduated from high school he went to, I think, the—first he went to the University of Vermont, where he graduated.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this—did his—your grandfather want him to go to college?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that's why he moved to Morrisville. He took—he started a shoe store in Morrisville to keep—keep things going. [00:02:01] And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So was this the first time that your father's family had come off the farm?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They were farmers until then.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did your father want to study at university?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I am not sure what he took, I imagine it was just general because he went—when he graduated there, he went to Harvard and graduated from Harvard Law School.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had—when did he decide to be a lawyer?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He probably decided, I imagine, after he'd gone to Harvard. Probably decided he wanted to be a lawyer then, I imagine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he ever talk about, um, being a lawyer and how—did he like being a lawyer?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I'm sure he liked it. I—I sometimes would be in his office when he was telling—giving free information to other lawyers on how to—how to handle the law—[laughs]. He was—one year, he was the head of the, uh—what's the head lawyer in Buffalo? There's a name for what that job was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he was an official, a legal official or something?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He was actually the—each year they had a different lawyer for it. It's a—uh—the job is one lawyer every year that has it, and he had it that year. I can't remember what year it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why did he, uh, come to Buffalo?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well when he, when he got through law school, he taught down in Canandaigua, New York, which is about 90 miles from here. And my mother was also—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He taught? He didn't go out and practice law?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: First—he taught and he read, or he, um, he taught. And then he met my mother there, who was teaching Latin and Greek. [00:04:02]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And where was her family from?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Rochester.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Rochester, New York?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And after they—

ROBERT F. BROWN: She had gone to, uh, college?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: She—she'd gone to Cornell, graduated from Cornell University. And when they met, they—when they decided to get married, they went on their honeymoon from there to Buffalo and stayed in Buffalo—[laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: So they then moved to Buffalo. About when was that, do you know?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That was, let's see. I was born in 1912. My sister was five years older than me, and I think she came about—came into the world about a year after they got here, I think, so that would be about 1907.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Nineteen seven, I think, '06 or '07.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Around then, yeah.

JEANETTE BLAIR: We have his father's biography up in the attic [laughs]?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, we do?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, there is? I see.

JEANETTE BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So your father came—did he come and join a firm in Buffalo, or a—

JEANETTE BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, Kenneth—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Kenefick [ph]—Kenefick, Kirk [ph], Miselin [ph]—Missile—[laughs]—and Detsch [ph], that's quite a—that's the way it sounds, but those last words I made up. Kenefick, Cooke—Kenefick, Cooke, Mitchell & Bass. That's the name of the—our firm—firm that he went first.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was it now?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Kenefic, Cook, Merchell—what a minute.

JEANETTE BLAIR: He went on to one, then he joined another one.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I'll get to that, another one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Anyway, once he—he was just a small fry in that outfit. And he very soon became a lawyer with Persons & Blair, and Persons was a—a lawyer in East Aurora.

ROBERT F. BROWN: East Aurora, which is just southwest, or east of Buffalo. [00:06:03]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A fairly large place.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did they—did he practice in East Aurora or in Buffalo?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, down in the White Building in Buffalo downtown. And when he, uh, when they—when Mr. Persons retired, why he had another lawyer that he was working—working with for a while.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your father specialize in any particular aspect of law?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, he was a corporation lawyer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was a very, very prosperous time in Buffalo, wasn't it, the early years of this century?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I imagine it was—it might have been.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What are—you were born in 1912 then, in Buffalo.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What are some of your early memories? Do you recall where you lived or the neighborhood or anything like that?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I don't remember it, but I came into the world feet first—[laughs]. Maybe we'd better leave that out. Delete that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That you were told and that was considered—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you don't remember the city that well.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I was born on 1245 Woodridge Avenue, Buffalo.

JEANETTE BLAIR: Well, he lived there till we got married, and he went in the army.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You lived in Woodbridge Avenue?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: On Woodbridge Avenue, which is—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were some of your early activities and interests—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, my—

ROBERT F. BROWN:—you remember as a child?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: My—let's see, I started sch—my mother didn't have us start school until we were about six years old. And they started, started me in, um, second grade. And, like, the teacher immediately tried to make me right-handed. And my mother—my mother taught me to read and write before I went to school. [00:08:02] And all the—the teacher making me right-handed, all it did was cause me to, uh—it really slowed up everything because of—one thing it made me do is I started to write backwards. And then instead of saying I was just writing backwards, which I could write—I could write forwards or backwards—[laughs]—it didn't matter which way. And if she'd just say I was writing backwards, I would've written in the other way. But instead she had spell down—I mean, when she had spelling class, she would give us the words, and I would spell them all correctly, uh, but she would make them all wrong. And why—why she'd do that, I couldn't figure it out, you know, that really threw me. And, uh, even then, when they had a spell—spell down, where they had the other kids get up and you spell the word standing up, and once you got it wrong, well, you'd have to sit down. And I—in that kind of a spell down, I was the second best in class. There was one girl who was better than me. But of course, I was always wrong—[laughs]—if I—cause I was writing backwards. And she never told me that I was writing backwards. I can't even remember how I found out, cause then I started to write frontwards again.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you upset that she kept saying you were wrong?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, the fact that—the fact that she was writing—she'd write the words correctly on the board, you know, and I would see mine, C-A-N, D-O-G. And hers would be C-A-N, D-O-G that way—[laughs]. And I couldn't figure out what the heck was the matter—[laughs]. [00:10:01] And so that set me back a whole year in school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Even before you went to school, you said you were interested in—you were making some drawings?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Playing with watercolors?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I was reading—I, uh, worked with sort of a—did you ever hear of the Rodin's [ph] test, where you'd make blots?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, this was—this was three or four years before he became famous, I was doing that kind of blot work with watercolors. And I was fascinated with that. And I could—you know, I was doing a lot of drawing, too, at the same time. I was kind of disgusted with some of my drawing; I didn't think I was good enough. But I loved to the Roardatz [ph], what it was later to be called, or—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Called Rorschach.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Rorschach, yeah. I was late—I was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who was encouraging you, your mother, your father?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: My sister. My sister was [inaudible]. She was five years older than I was and must've picked up a method in school. And then, well, I finally graduated at 14 from grammar school. Or maybe I was 13.

ROBERT F. BROWN: From grammar school. But had you, when you—(in your early years)—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Before—

ROBERT F. BROWN:—family take trips and all? Did you—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, we did. We did, we did that, too. I'd better come to that, yeah. Actually when I was in school, the job I liked the best, I would—they'd have me, during lunch hour, uh, and when kids were crossing the streets, I'd—down on Hurdle which had a streetcar track and a lot of traffic, I was a policeman out in the street, directing traffic during the lunch hour. [00:12:00] And I especially liked it cause I could be late [laughs]. I could be late to school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you didn't care for, I gather, the regular school activities very much.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Not too much, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did the family—did you go back to your father's place in Vermont?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, we—when we were six, when I was six years old, we started to go up there regular every summer.

JEANETTE BLAIR: You went to Nantucket, too.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that was before that when we went to Nantucket, right? That's right. That was when—

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you happen to go to Nantucket?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: My earliest memories are Nantucket and my mother used to have her, when they were children, I think they used to go to Nantucket. And we had a cottage in Siasconset, which is at the other end from the Town of Nantucket, the other end of the island. And I can remember—my first memories are of Nantucket Island. I can remember laying down on the beach with the waves going over us, and—and I can remember a little girl there that—how I connect her up with was a surrey with a fringe on top, but I must have seen this little girl who played with my sister, cause I had a very definite picture of her even in my mind now. I can probably even make a drawing of her. Though I haven't tried it. I heard one of the cats out there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had—you had some very—a very rich childhood, then, I mean, traveling and going to Nantucket.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Beginning at age six, you started going to your father's family farm in—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —Vermont. Would you spend most of the summer there, or—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, about—about three months. Or—wait a minute—I forgot about—yeah, it was I guess about 90 days. About 90 days, I think, in the summer.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. [00:14:00] And what—what did you like to do, uh, over there in Vermont?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I liked—I liked to do a lot of observation and occasionally later on I'd milk a cow, you know, or something [laughs]. But our cottage, which was up on the hill in back of the farm, was separate from that so I could do that or not do it. And back in those days they had, uh, dirt roads. They were building all the time. And we had big—the pasture was full of big boulders that were brought in by the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, by the glaciers?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Glacier. And one of them was shaped a lot like Mount Mansfield and we called that our mountain.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mount Mansfield was the big mountain nearby, right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's the—yeah, that's the biggest mountain in Vermont. And, uh, we built, sometimes made wooden trucks. There's a—in the town there was a—uh, what to call, a wheelwright shop where they make wagon wheels and repair them. And that also was a—a, um, it had a forge so they also shoed horses there. And Arthur Hooper was the—who ran that ford—that forge, and ran the—wheelwright shop, he would let my brother Charlie and me use the scrap wood that they had there and build our—build our trucks and build other buildings and so forth for our Mount Mansfield. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: For Mount Mansfield—you mean your own? [00:16:00]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: For our toy Mount Mansfield. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was your brother younger than you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, he was two years older. [Coughs.] Excuse me. Got a tickle.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you were, say, on Nantucket, or later at the farm in Vermont, were your parents, did they—were they around you a great deal, all the time? Did they try to give direction to your summers, or?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, we didn't—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or mostly back out here practicing law?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He was—he was—he would get up there during the hay fever season usually, because he had hay fever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It was a good place to escape it, was it?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, it really wasn't an escape but a—it—it might have been a—it helped to be able to get away probably because your eyes are running and you're sneezing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, it's hard to work.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: And he had asthma and all that kind of stuff, which I later got.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your mother maybe—did you do things with her during those summers in Vermont?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, sometimes. Sometimes we would—well, sometimes even my older sister would take us on hikes and so forth. When we got bigger, we'd go on our own more. We used to—every year we would climb Mount Mansfield and, uh, I—I got painting up there pretty early, too. I started to paint up there when I was 14.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you—had you been painting before you left school at age 14? Had you been painting pretty steadily by then?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: When I—I was drawing all the time wherever I was, yeah. [00:18:02]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that encouraged by your family?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Uh. Yeah, I would say it was encouraged by my family and a friend of my mothers who lived up the street and gave me a—when I was 14, she gave me a box of oil paints. And she—she was a lady that painted herself, she painted herself. And so that's the year I got started with oil painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did somebody teach you or did you just—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, I—

ROBERT F. BROWN:—trial and error.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR:—I just trial, trial and error is my method, yeah. I never wanted any—even later on, I never wanted any teacher for painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you like oil paints right away?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah. And I liked watercolor, too, because I was doing them at the same time.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you would've—you left regular school then at 14. At age 14?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Uh, no I—I went to high school, Bennett High School, which is—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Bennett High School?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, close to my place. And I—they had an art course there and I—I, uh, found out when they were—when I got in it that it was mostly lettering and that kind of thing, which I wasn't interested in. But I kept on it, kept on doing a lot with the—with drawing, and didn't pay much attention to what they—what they were interested in there. And happily, the—B.J. Rooney, who was the art teacher, just encour—encouraged me, thought I was pretty good at it I guess, and had me do covers for the, uh, I can't remember whether I did more than one, but he had me do cartoons and covers for the *Bennett Beacon*. [00:20:22] So sometimes I, uh, I still have some of those somewhere, somewhere in my stuff [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: His name is what, B.J. Rooney?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: B.J. Rooney, yeah. And there's no—no direct—I never knew of him up in Vermont, but he lived—he lived on a farm about five miles from us up in Vermont, this B.J. Rooney.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, really, but he was also in Buffalo, just as you were?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, he was a teacher. A teacher of drawing there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was quite a coincidence then.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There couldn't have been too many people from Vermont who moved to Buffalo.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right, yeah, it was a coincidence because this other little town that he's from, Fairfax, is five miles from us and a little bit bigger than the town of Fletcher [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: In high school did you—the courses were pretty dull, but this extra work that Rooney encouraged you to do you liked very much.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, and I got good marks, which was a help, because I was lousy with Latin and so forth, which I—my mother—my mother couldn't even teach me Latin and she was a Latin teacher [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was she just disappointed?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I don't know. She might've been but I was just stubborn. I didn't—I just didn't like Latin—[laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did your sister or your brother? Were they more academically inclined?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah, my sister, she—she got a fellowship from Cornell to go to Europe and study. And my brother—my brother was lousy in school at the beginning. [00:22:05] In the University of Vermont, the president wrote my father and told him that he was wasting his money having him come to, uh, the University of Vermont cause he didn't seem to be interested. And then there was something that happened. Oh, I guess they—they gave him an idea that he could maybe go in for flying later on, if—and he—anyway, after the first year, which he was such a lousy student, why the head of university of Vermont would start writing dad and say what a terrific student he was—[laughs]. And it was because of some impetus that he got from something. I just can't think at the moment what it was. So he wasn't—he wasn't dumb. He was really smart.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you went—you started taking, you said, life drawing lessons. Would that have been while you were still in high school?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I was drawing, I was drawing, doing figure drawing, all the time, long before I went to any—well, when we—when I was—in 1931, there was, in Buffalo, there was a—um—a small, there was small art school near, near the art gallery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would that the Albright Art School?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I think it was that, yeah. And once a week, I would take my—ride my bicycle about three miles over to there. And they had a model and we'd draw from the model. [00:24:00] And they—they never criticized my work because I was never—I had never tried to draw the way they—the way they did it, they spent a whole month making the drawing of the model with charcoal, and, uh, I thought it was—I mean, I never told them that, but I thought it was a fussy way to be working, because I like to make my drawings in two minutes. Or less [laughs]. And they never criticized them, I don't know, because I wasn't doing what I was supposed to be doing [laughs], so I guess that was the reason.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So the—the curriculum was very traditional, the way they taught?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, yeah. And I did make some charcoal drawings, but I never fooled around with them for a month.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you feel the Albright Art School at that time was pretty limited, at least as far as you knew?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You weren't too interested.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right. I had—the place I liked to draw most was the Buffalo Zoo.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd go out and draw on your own.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Who were some—do you recall at all who some of the teachers were back then? That would've been, what, 1930, '31?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Ah, '31, let's see, I'm trying to think who was there. I think Miss Green, who I've—I've seen her paintings lately and she was a good painter.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Green.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I never saw her paintings back then or never saw—uh, once in a while Mr. Wilcox would come around, but he never—never do anything, I mean as far in my group, why he would just look at us and walk out again [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he the head of the school?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you, by that same year, what about 1931, decided to go to the School of the Museum of the Fine Arts in Boston?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right. [00:26:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: How—how had you heard about that? Had you visited it during one of your trips to New England?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Um. I'm trying to think how I heard about it first. Anyway—what?

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you visited the school before you started out?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I'm trying to think whether I did visit it beforehand. I think I just went and what I took was—was, uh, figure drawing there, where they'd have a model, you know, not poses, such long stretches. And I'd—I remember at one point, one point the teachers, the teacher—or there two teachers, and they were both from England, and one was Guthrie and the other Burns, and they studied with Augustus John, who was a famous English artist. And, uh, they—I remember one of them saying to me one day that I made the best and the worst drawings—[laughs]—in school. So I must have been uneven sometimes they thought anyway.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did they—were they—did they supervise your drawing closely? Or what would they do, just comment on it?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, they'd come in casually at once—once a—once a week maybe or—and look at what you had done. And they, uh, they had encouraged me to start taking painting because they had a summer project where the ones, at least the ones that were in the painting classes, were—they told them to make this summer project and bring it in and they'd have a \$200 prize. [00:28:05] And I thought I might as well try that because there wouldn't have been anybody to supervise me [laughs]. So I made a—oil—big oil painting up in Vermont of a blind horse we had, with a kid, one of the farm boys riding on it. And I entered it in the competition and—and they seemed to like it. They said it reminded them of—reminded them of the Old Masters. And I still have that painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get a prize?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, I didn't get the prize. It went to a fellow by the name of Ture Bengtz. It was a—he became a—he's still probably a well-known artist in Boston.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, he became a teacher there at the school later.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Did he? Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So was he—he was there at the same time as you were.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was he like, do you recall? Did you know him at all, very well?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I knew him a little. He seemed like a nice guy. Uh, I think—I don't know, some of them, whether they—somebody thought he was a big Swede. I mean, he was Swedish [laughs]. But I—I thought he was a nice guy and I liked his drawings. He was a very good draftsman. And later on I saw paintings I liked of his.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have a teacher in painting at the Museum School?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, they told me—they asked me if I would join—join up, but I decided against it. I wanted to paint on the outside.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you weren't—you wouldn't have anything to do with their strict curriculum, huh [laughs]?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I liked their work but I—I just wanted to go my own way. [00:30:01] And I was—the second—my second year there, I took sculpture and that's partly—it was partly cause we had good sculpture models.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the teacher there was at that time?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: His name was Allen.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, Frederick?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Frederick Allen. Yeah, he was a good sculptor. And I liked the people. They were nice.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the approach there? Did you—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: We had a model and just—just worked from an armature. I—I, uh, one time they had a program where you bring in work and I stayed out of school for three weeks to do the work and brought it in and—and put it on exhibit. It was kind of—some things were quite wild. I know that—the critic from the newspaper came around and I know he didn't like what I was doing. It was kind of wild. It was kind of wild and had nothing to do with what life drawing would look like. It was kind of modern sculpture that I did. I know, I remember of them I worked on for 24 hours straight. But I did it back in my rooming house. And that was a wood carving.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A wood carving?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, a mother and child wood carving, which I think I have somewhere.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He didn't like that, huh, the critic? But was Frederick Allen very broad-minded?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, well, he had Frederick—Frederick liked my work. He, uh, he wasn't as narrow-minded as the other guy, as the critic.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you did your painting on your own mostly? [00:32:02]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And then, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you get to know a fair amount—number, of the other students?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I—I sort of was—let's see, there was one. There was one fellow that I knew in sculpture class that I liked pretty well. Yeah, he seemed like a nice guy, as I remember. Oh, then there was another one, yeah, that I got to like real well, Carl Johnson.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Carl Johnson?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, he lived in New Hampshire. And we, uh, really—his room was a flight downstairs from me but we, uh—he even came to Vermont some because he was quite easy to get over from New Hampshire. Uh. But that was—after those two years, I decided I was being a burden to my father because it became a Depression time. And I quit school, painted on my own.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But your parents were still supportive of the idea of your being an artist?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah. Yeah, I stayed at home and got my meals there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You returned to Buffalo for most of the year?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You would stay at home and—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Sometimes I'd go to Vermont. Sometimes I'd stay up there a lot longer than the family did. Because I—I kind of liked the way of life up there. [00:34:00] They had these—these dances called kitchen tunks.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And how do you spell tunk?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: T-U-N-K. And I liked to—I liked to go up and make drawings of that and make paintings of the dances, as well as farm paintings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well you, being in Buffalo, you mentioned here in a note that about that same, that time, you, uh, a neighbor of yours was a—quite a well-respected painter, Charles Burchfield.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, he's—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you got to meet him at that time.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, in 1933, one of his neighbors asked if I'd like to meet him and I told him I would. And, uh, I went over to his studio and he liked—he liked my work very much. And so we—

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you—what did you show him?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I—I showed him things I'd been doing everywhere in Vermont. I did a lot of painting back then. And he liked my work. In fact, after he died, why Mrs. Burchfield moved out to—to Texas for a while. This is much later of course. And, uh, I took a motorcycle trip out to—in Texas where she was. I went beyond Texas, but I stopped to see her in—it's Amarillo, I guess, the name of the town. And, uh, when I left her there, the last thing she said to me as I went out the door that Charlie thought that, uh, Edward Hopper, he, and I were the three best artists. [Laughs.] I thought that was the best compliment I ever had.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's pretty wonderful. So you would—in the '30s you'd see him fairly regularly?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, we'd—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you sort of sit down and, uh, show each other your latest work?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. Yeah, he'd show me what he did throughout the whole year and I'd show him what I did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he—did he then talk—would you talk quite a lot with him, or would you [inaudible]?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: We talked about any subject that might come up.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Did he give advice to you, or?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no, he never gave—he wouldn't think of it, I guess, apparently—[laughs]. He, uh—we liked to look at each other's paintings but we didn't like—we didn't discuss anything, like what to do about painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you—you mentioned also that Burchfield suggested you might show in a local, with a local art dealer.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right, Bredemeier Gallery, which was down on—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Bredemeier.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's on, um, it was on Delaware Avenue, downtown.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So that Brede?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Meir, or something like that. It's close to it. Carl Bredemeier is the name of the man who ran it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you go in there and was he interested in showing you—showing your work?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I didn't go in until they told me that, uh, he was interested in giving me a show and he—then I took my work in. [00:38:09]

ROBERT F. BROWN: I believe that was about 1937 you had a—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN:—an exhibition there.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was your feeling about that? Did you have an opening in those days?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, yeah, there was an opening.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you feel, being on the spot, people coming in?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, it, uh, it didn't bother me any. I enjoyed it—[laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then you've also, I guess, gone to New York, New York City, in fact.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that just because most young artists wanted to go to New York and see what was going on? Was that the best place to go?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I didn't—I didn't think of it that way. I just, I wanted—I did want to have a gallery down there and I've—the first gallery, I think it was the first one I had; I might've had one before that, but I think the first one was the Macbeth Gallery. And, uh, Macbeth was handling Andy Wyeth, which was right about that time. And—and, uh, Andy was—Andy was 17 years old, but he was making a big hit. And so I, uh, I thought I'd better go somewhere else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Cause it looked like Andrew Wyeth was sweeping the boards there?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. And so I, uh, I took what little work I had there and started looking around. [00:40:01] And I went to—one gallery I went to was that of Frederic Newlin Price. He had the Ferargil Gallery. And he was interested in my work, but he—uh, didn't want to give me a show yet anyway. So I started looking around and I went to this gallery that was run by, uh—oh, I know her name perfectly well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There was a Mrs. Morton.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Morton, yeah, who she—she'd studied art with—she and Robert Henry were in the same class. So I guess she was a pretty good painter. Although I didn't see her work. But she wanted to give me a show and I—uh—I had three or four shows, I forget how many. But—I did real well with her as far as getting critic criticisms and the newspapers all seemed to like me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you began showing there about 1938, right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: In '38, I had my first show there, and I had one in '39. And one in '40, when—that's when they came from the Metropolitan Museum and took—took four paintings over.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was your—that was—you had a very early high point to your career, didn't you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the painting, *The Horses in the Rain* was then purchased for the Metropolitan—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —about 1940. But was Mrs. Morton, did she talk with you about how—what would sell or not sell, or things like that? [00:42:05]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did any of these dealers put pressure on you, say now if you could just do more of this?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They didn't?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: They never did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were very lucky.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. Yeah, I just did what I wanted to.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was Mrs. Morton like? What was her personality?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: She—she was a nice person. She, uh, was a warm-hearted person, I think you'd say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about Frederic Newlin Price?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, he, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: [Inaudible.]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: —he was, he was an interesting guy. And later on, I—I forget whether I had one or two shows at his gallery. He was almost across the street from—well, he was right on the corner, almost on the corner of 57th and Fifth Avenue. He had a good gallery there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And in Macbeth Gallery, who had you dealt with there? Was it Robert Macintyre?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, it was Macbeth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Macbeth was still there?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned that Wyeth sort of eclipsed things over there. I mean, he was so popular so quickly.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you amazed, or did you see—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I liked his work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You liked his work?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About this, these years also you began teaching. Teaching—you mentioned here about 1938 or so, you—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: In '38, I—I, uh, taught regular teaching at the—at the science museum on Saturdays. [00:44:09] There were children—young high school kids—that were coming there for my classes. And I had some very good students and I enjoyed that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you describe your approach to teaching? I mean, was there anybody to tell you how to teach [laughs]?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, nobody. Nobody told me how. I just went at it. And, uh, then I—I taught a little bit of life drawing at the Art Institute of Buffalo which was—oh, it was in fairly—fairly close walking distance from my house in Buffalo. It was in the neighborhood. And I liked their approach to art there. They were never very—very free and broadminded. And so the following year I began teaching sculpture, painting, and—I mean no, I didn't teach sculpture. I taught painting and—painting and figure drawing. And, um, took them on outdoor landscape and things like that. And till I went in the army I taught there. And then I taught there when I got out of the army, I guess, too, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You then—you taught then until, what, '40 or so, when you were drafted into the army. [00:46:05]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or did you volunteer? Were you—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, I—I was drafted. And I took my paints right along with me—[laughs]—in the army.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were in from about what, 1940 to 1945?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I was in for pretty near four years, yeah. And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you try to get into some part of the army where you could use your art, or?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's too hard to do, I mean camouflage—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well they had a—they had what you call basic training, and they were interested in nothing but making you a soldier. But I—I mean, there always was time to work on some drawing wherever I'd go and I was fast. [Laughs.] And, uh, one night they had a—yeah, it was in the evening, they had a—

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ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: —soldiers, you know, it was eight weeks training they had, then you ship out. But that was before the—before we shipped out they had this train—training—I mean this entertainment which the various soldiers would show their talent. And my—my skit was—I had an easel and a drawing board with paper on it, and, uh, I told them to turn all the lights out and I had a cigarette I was smoking and I'd light it—I drew on a cigarette while I would draw on the paper. And so, I made these drawings by cigarette lighting. And I

didn't think much of anything more of that night, but the next morning they called me up, called me up to the headquarters. And they took me off basic training and made me a corporal. And then—this is when the fort was kind of new, I guess they needed people for—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was where, at Fort Rucker?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, this was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Alabama?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Fort McClellan, Alabama.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Fort McClellan, Alabama.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: And they, you know, they were still getting cadre in, so they—about a week later, I was made a sergeant. So I was sergeant for most of my four years in the army. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And because they'd see you doing this, did they also—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, there was a lieutenant colonel in there that saw me doing this, and he told about it up at the headquarters.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And so he had in mind that you could be an artist?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that'd be there—training aide man [00:02:02]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, training aide.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I did all kinds of things, built bridges. Uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you developed, you drew—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I did a lot of drawing and painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You drew training aids for them to instruct?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Things for all kinds of stuff like that, yeah. But I also did, you know, like the fort needed construction and I was put in charge of some of the things like that. And then later on, the chaplain came in and wanted me to do a mural. And I did that 800 square foot mural for the church. And the church, a mural that big is usually done in a very complicated way, where they draw it out exact size on huge pieces of paper, and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, very cartoons, yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I just walked up to the wall and painted it right on the wall. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you ever done anything on that—that size before? Or anything like it?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You were pretty bold, were you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yup, yeah. It didn't bother me in the least to do it that way. There was one section that took me longer. Most of the things I—most of the panels I did one—just one whack and did it. There was one area that I fooled around with for maybe two or three weeks, getting it right. It all turned out. Did it with—I did it with gum temper, which is an Old Master medium, where you use gum arabic, glycerin, damar varnish, stand oil, and powder paint.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh. Where did you learn that? You taught that to yourself?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I just read it in a book on art—

ROBERT F. BROWN: It turned out.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: —on the mixture. I got—I got some paintings that were done with the same medium [00:04:05]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, what were you training to be otherwise in the army? Weren't—you were in an airborne division eventually, weren't you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, yeah. I was. That was when I went overseas, they uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Had you been trained as a paratrooper?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No. No, I hadn't been, but they put me in a paratroop outfit and I was in the glider section.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now when did you go overseas? Do you recall?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I went over in '43—or I guess it was, gotten to be '44.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You went to Europe?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And they, almost as soon as I got there—well—I had a little more—my training was getting a little rusty, so they gave—gave me a little more training out there, and then—then they, um, decided—well, they opened it up so that you could be taken—taken by, perhaps, any outfit that needed you. And they—they took me at the 17th Airborne Division. Later on I was in the 82nd Airborne.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What were you sent in by glider? Where to?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, the gliders—the gliders were operations that we just took when they wanted to drop you behind the lines in Germany. Or other places.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And how did—where were—what were you—were you dropped behind the lines? [00:06:02]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I was in one, not too long after I got in the outfit, I was, uh—I mean, most, most of these people they had, uh, a year and a half training for that before they even sent them overseas. But I was in charge of a glider with 12 guys, and we were to land in—take off from England and land in, um—the Netherlands. And I was in charge of those 12 guys and the glider. And I'd been in—I'd been in the outfit for a week or so. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this—were you going behind German lines?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And the British went in the day before. They didn't have enough gliders for us all to go in at once. And they went in gliders the day before—and the 82nd, I think it was, yeah, that went in the day before or maybe a little bit earlier. And they were fighting up there, but the British were—there were 8,000 of the best British paratroopers were captured or killed by the—by the Germans in the landing. And we went down to take off twice the next day and they—cancelled us from going in because of the German victory, which practically nobody heard of until after the war, because they didn't want to advertise it. [Laughs.] And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: When were you finally—[inaudible]?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I was—I mean, they—they cancelled it. When they cancelled that, they cancelled everything for—the next move which would be—which might come any time. And—[00:08:18]

ROBERT F. BROWN: The next moon, you mean the moonlight?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Next move, which would be the same kind of thing somewhere else.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you were finally put in—the Netherlands?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was cancelled.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That was cancelled, yeah. The—the next thing that we went into was the Battle of the Bulge, and that's where I got a good share of my painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you get there? Were you just brought across?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, we went in there by truck.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you didn't use gliders, nor were, did they use parachutes?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, they didn't use gliders or paratroopers.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, you've made many paintings of that.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. Yeah, that's, um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you considered by your—uh, this is the 17th Airborne this time, right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you considered sort of as a staff artist to some degree?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Or was that on your own good time?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It was—it was my own good time, but actually the chief of staff of the—who was a full colonel in the headquarters, he says, "Blair, take your paints anywhere." [Laughs.] On the gliders and so forth. So I had a go—[laughs]—of it then. There was some people that would've tried to stop me if he hadn't told me that, but I was all set then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have fear, or were mostly overtaken by curiosity? Did you try to go around and paint varieties of things? [00:10:00]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I did everything I could get—get my hands on. It was great. It was tremendous to have the—to be in a position like that, where you can do something about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What, your aim was to make a record?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was it a pretty horrible time, by and large?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, in a lot of ways it was horrible, yeah, but it was—oh, for instance, *Birch Fields* [ph], that was the best paintings I ever did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were in Europe, you were with the 82nd Airborne eventually in Germany, I think.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, we went to occupy Berlin, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you continued to make paintings and drawings?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right. In fact, I got a furlough over there and I had 12 days which I wandered all over the—Berlin and also into the—spent a lot of time in the Russian area.

ROBERT F. BROWN: As you mentioned, you got to meet a Russian military leader.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Russian artist, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you recall his name?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Cenani [ph].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Cenani?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It begins with as C. I wished I knew more about what happened to him, because he was terrific. He'd been in the Russian army for five years and had these tremendous paintings. [00:12:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were his paintings anything like yours?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Somewhat like mine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you continue—we'll talk about it somewhat later, but you continued to work very quickly and mainly in watercolors, didn't you, in your European painting?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, mainly in watercolors, uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very quickly and spontaneous, yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He worked—somewhat in the same direction. I would've liked to try to kept track of what he was doing, but I thought if I—back then I thought I might get him in trouble if his—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because even then, you—American soldiers were aware of the—aware of the pressures, the political pressures, on the Russians?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, although actually I—when I'd go over to see him, I could—I could get into the fort better than some of the Russian officers [laughs]. I told them I was a *khudozhnik*, which means artist. "Ah, khudozhnik," and they'd let me in. [Laughs.] They knew I was the one to see him, I know. That was the reason.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you ever think of staying on in Europe and traveling? Or did you—you probably didn't have a choice, I guess. You had to return with—

JEANETTE BLAIR: I was here with our—with a baby, waiting for him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, he was married already?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When did you marry?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: When I was in the army.

JEANETTE BLAIR: Down at Fort McClellan.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you'd met your wife when you were teaching?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At the Art Institute of Buffalo.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Art Institute, right.

JEANETTE BLAIR: He'd better come home. [They laugh.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you did come home in '45.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. [00:14:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You came home to continue to teach?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. Then I became the director of the school and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you find it difficult coming back readjusting to the civilian life?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Not especially. I—in fact, that was one of my jobs at the Art Institute was readjusting veterans.

JEANETTE BLAIR: And he got a Guggenheim, right away.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, I'll ask about that.

JEANETTE BLAIR: Almost right away.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you got a Guggenheim fellowship in 1946.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that allowed you to travel. Where did you choose to travel?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, um, Vermont [laughs], one place.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you didn't have to go abroad or anything like that on a Guggenheim?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, you'd go wherever you want.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That was a very prestigious fellowship, wasn't it?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Guggenheim.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, yeah. Then I got another one later.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, you got one also in the early '50s I believe.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it allowed you to stay more in Vermont, or longer, or buy more supplies, that sort of stuff?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah. Yeah, right, things like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you began going—did you begin going fairly soon after the war to the southwest, did you do that somewhat later?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Let's see, that was—well, the first trip to the southwest was in 1964 on the motorcycle. And I took several trips out there, sometimes by cycle and sometimes by car. I went quite a lot to Canada to paint.

JEANETTE BLAIR: Maine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You went to Maine—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Maine, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —and various places.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: A lot of time in Maine, quite a lot of time. And then also to Mexico later. [00:16:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Why did you decide to go on some of these very long trips by motorcycle?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I was mad about riding a motorcycle, for one thing. And then mad about painting, too, so it worked out good [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: I think you devised a means of painting or sketching while you were going quite fast on the motorcycle, right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I did, uh, of course a lot of it was memorizing, too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Did you develop here mostly in Buffalo, I suppose, but—special friends among artists, younger, say, than Burchfield? Did you know, or did you know, for example, another older artist, Edwin Dickinson?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I knew him and liked his work very much. Uh, I—don't know too much what he thought about my work, although he liked—that painting there he liked.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is a painting of?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is one that he liked.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About 1940 or so?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Forty-one, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Forty-one.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: And another—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you have met—where would you have met him, out here?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, he taught for a while at the art school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which, the Albright Art School?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, the—well, he may have taught there, I don't think so, though. He taught at the Art Institute when I was—when I was working there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, he later became a very dignified and kind of opinionated man. What was he like then, do you recall?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Ah, well, he was very nice to talk to, but I thought him a great painter, which I think he's one of the great American painters. [00:18:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You've mentioned a few other names here. David Pratt is someone you—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, he lives up on the hill over here. I knew him since my first show at the Bredemeier Gallery in Buffalo. He's a very good painter. Very good.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But he has sort of stayed into himself?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh back then he was uh—of course he has a very individual way of painting what he does, and he's always stuck more or less with that method although he develops a lot of new things in it all the time. Very creative artist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mentioned a Walter Prochownik as another one [inaudible].

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah. Yeah, he was one of the first students I had at the, uh, Art Institute when I was running it. One of the interesting things about is that he, um, he was born in the United States, but his family were from Poland. And his father was a—was a—his father was a druggist and he went back to Poland to have his drug store, I guess. This is when Walter was about two and a half years old, or something like that. And 1939, when Hitler went through Poland, why, he was—for some reason or another, he was separated from his family and walked a thousand miles to a—and finally got a boat to the [laughs] United States where he'd left when he was about two and a half. [00:20:01] And they immediately drafted him in the army when he got back—[laughs]—and he went back to Europe. And he was captured by the Germans down in Southern France, and spent his time—time in one of those really bad prisons. But when he came back, he was on the GI Bill of Rights and came to the Art Institute. That's how I met him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Could you compare the GI Bill students you had with others? Were they—they were, of course, a little bit older than the norm—regular art students, weren't they?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, they could've been, although some of the regular art—I mean, some of the, uh, some of the soldiers were fairly young, too. I think he was probably about 20 when he came to the Art Institute.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. But some of the GIs would have been older after—they'd been delayed five years, hadn't they? Were they good students? Were they very eager to learn?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, some were very good and some were medium and some were lousy. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think you were a fairly severe teacher?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Not necessarily. I felt that I was re-habiting some of them. And I think I was, I guess. I guess I was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Some of them would have come back, sort of lost, where they—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —pretty messed up, I guess.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. I got one fellow that slit his wrist and said—tried to jump out the window of the upstairs.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, these years since then, you've settled into continuing to travel a lot, still spend a lot of time in Vermont.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Uh-huh [affirmative].

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that's still what, back at the old family place, right? [00:22:01]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's an old house that—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, the house—I was—when my sister, who owned the house at the end, she told me I could have the house or I could have the cottage on the hill where we stayed when we were kids, and I took the cottage on the hill. And, uh, then there's 16 acres of—of a pasture up there that was—that was my favorite place to paint was that pasture, although now it's—it's getting kind of grown up with trees. Like to have some sheep or something in there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How late did you continue to teach?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I taught until around 19—let's see—

JEANETTE BLAIR: Until recently.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Fairly recently?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Fairly recently, yeah.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: We're continuing tapes with Robert Blair at his home in Holland, New York. And this is August 28 or 27, rather, 1995. Robert Brown, the interviewer. We ended our last session talking about your being assigned to paint scenes of—during the Second World War in Europe. And I think you had special permission or encouragement of your commanding officer in the airborne division in which you served.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was the purpose of this, to make a record for the military? Did they want to have a record of what they had done?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, it's quite possible that they'd be interested in that. [00:24:06] Actually I always had my paints no matter what I was doing, or almost always had the paints with me. And so a lot of the time I was on my own as far as what I was doing with the painting. Up to my own judgement—I was a buck sergeant and up to my own judgment of whether I should be painting or not. [Laughs.] And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were these paintings to be given to the military, or you could keep them, or?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: They—there wasn't any, uh, definite plan of what, how to use them, I don't think, although I might think of some after a while, a definite plan that—it was pretty much touch and go when the shells were flying around what I should do sometimes besides painting, so I'd paint when I got a chance. And, uh, the fact that we were practically surrounded by the German army, why, made it a little more exciting. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure. Did the other soldiers watch you doing this? Were they fairly interested in it, or was this just there was so much going on?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Once in a while there was somebody, but usually I was, uh, pretty much by myself when I was doing that work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were in the area of the Battle of the Bulge then?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I was right in the middle. [00:26:00] There was a corridor made by Patton up to Bastogne, and we were in that corridor which was practically surrounded by the German—German army, but holding it back in different directions.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then after that, after the Germans fell back, did you—you went into Germany?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Let's see how soon—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You eventually went to Berlin.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that was—Berlin was quite a bit later. We—after the battle, we went back to France for a while. And, uh, there was an engagement near, near Cologne—was the next battle that my division was in. And then after that, we went to Berlin. But the war ended before we got to Berlin.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh. Well, you showed me, you have a drawing there of the Reichstag in Berlin, and did you then make a painting from that?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yes, I made a painting, a larger painting of it. And I have that somewhere out in my studio.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So did you do the painting once you got back to the United States?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Uh, some of them I did there. I'm trying to think about—I've got one out in the studio that I did in a railroad station in Berlin, and I did that over there. And I think I did one of the Reichstag over there, but I'd have to think a while though for sure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did it—were you—were there any exhibitions of this material while you were still in Europe? [00:28:02]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, there was one show of my work before I got back from Europe.

ROBERT F. BROWN: They had it in Europe?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: In Buffalo here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, they sent the material—you sent things home?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And, uh, then after—after I got home—this was long after I got home in—in the Burchfield Center they had a show of about 150 of them, which now—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's in recent years, yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, they belong to the Burchfield Center.

ROBERT F. BROWN: After you—when did you come back, did you come back to a—were you mustered out of the army in Europe or when you got back here?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: When I got back here is when we actually got out of the army. The various things we had to do to sign out was in the—see, we landed down there in Newport News and then I guess we went up to—we got all the way up around New York City, I think it was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then you came back here. Did you resume—you had a teaching job here in Buffalo, right, at the Art Institute of Buffalo?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Previous to going in the army, I was at—I had a teaching job. And after the army, the Art Institute was pretty much kaput from, you know, everybody going off to war.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, there weren't many students, huh?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And so I started building up a—building up classes. And we also got, uh—for—we got on the GI Bill of Rights so that we could have students from anywhere come to the Art Institute and study painting. [00:30:10] And it got to be—and at that stage, it got to be a big art school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were those students pretty good students?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, some were very good, yeah. There were some—some that were harder to work with, that had needed maybe some psychological help with—I think I was pretty good at helping them, having been in the army myself [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you mean, they'd get too excitable, or—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, they—one even tried to—he tried to slit his wrists and jump out the window, but that was just one man. Most of them, most of them were in much better shape than him. [Laughs.] But, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, there must have been a lot more women students by then, too, weren't there?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: There were some more, yeah. But we were mainly—for a while there, we were mainly World War II students, students who were in the army. And then came on the GI Bill of Rights.

ROBERT F. BROWN: About that same time, apparently you had a Guggenheim fellowship?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's right, I had a—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Nineteen forty-six I think, '46-'47.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: In '46, and then I had another one later.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you do with—on that first Guggenheim, did you go back to Europe?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no. I worked around this area and Vermont.

JEANETTE BLAIR: We were in Maine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Maine?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: In Maine, yeah, I went up to Maine. And then I had another Guggenheim later. I'm trying to think of the date of the later one.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You've told me it was 1951, 1952.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That might've been it, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you—so you didn't—with the Guggenheim, this allowed you to take time off from teaching? [00:32:04]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, although I think I did a little bit of teaching, but I did take a lot of time off.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So there was—including World War II, there's never really been a break in your painting. You've just been busy as can be.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Just kept going, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, during—after the war, then you continued with—at the Art Institute of Buffalo and you became director.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I was director from the time I got back until, uh, sometime in the 1950s I guess.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was is—what was its affiliation with? Was it affiliated with a museum or a university?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no connection there. We were independent of that. In 1949, I took the family to Vermont, and we were up there quite a while.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you always go to Vermont pretty regularly? By then you had small children, you were married.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you married another artist, right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: What?

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd married a fellow artist, hadn't you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, I was married to Jeanette always.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, but I mean—that's what I mean. [They laugh.] You married Jeanette who was also—who had been a student at the Art Institute.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah, before the war, I sort of—she even did a little teaching there, too. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you began your—or you'd always gone back to your family place up in Cambridge, Vermont, right, up in northern Vermont?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Up near Cambridge, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Up near Cambridge, Vermont.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: The town is called Fletcher.

JEANETTE BLAIR: And some summers we went to Maine. [00:34:01]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: My family—my family moved to Fletcher in 1793. They were down in Bennington before that. But the man I was named after fought in the Battle of Bennington at Powder Horn—in here that came that he captured from a Britisher in the battle. And they're underneath that apparatus.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you travelled. You would be based here in the Buffalo area. Did you live in Buffalo at that time, or did you live out here in the country?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, we're—we were in Buffalo part of the time, but we moved—first we moved to, in 1946, we moved to a house in the woods back in South Wales.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Which is—South Wales is just north of here.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. And soon as, uh, spring came, why we started looking for a house and we saw a for sale sign out in front here. And the place belonged to those next door, I guess, if I remember right. We bought it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't want to be in the city.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No? You prefer being out where, near the woods?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you were mostly painting nature, is that right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you continued with the Art Institute then into the what—into the 1950s?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Somewhat I did, although a lot of—I broke away from it quite a bit.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Otherwise you continued to teach on your own.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I also did some teaching at University—UB.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The University of Buffalo.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And some at the Albright.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The Albright—it's all an arts school.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, it was. While it was—I guess it was connected with that art school, yeah. [00:36:02]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were the students pretty—could you tell any difference from when you first taught, say in the 1950s, were they more highly motivated or less so, or what would you—if you can generalize?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I wouldn't be able to say. It would be up to the individual. Some of them were real serious and some of them were less serious, I thought.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: There were more—there were more women in the classes I had at the Albright.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hmm. Why do you suppose that was?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I—I think I was just working under a different set up in each different place, you know. At the University of Buffalo, they had both men and women. And there was one class I had at the Albright which was all women.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You must have had various colleagues you can remember that you—people either you taught with or other artists in this Buffalo area. Maybe you could talk a bit about some of them?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I know I gather you were a good friend of Charles Burchfield.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yup, that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you talk a bit about like what was he like? How would you—you first knew him way back.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I first met Charlie Burchfield in 1943, and we used to—every year we would get together and show what we had done during the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean 1933 don't you? Or '43? Because '43, you were still in the army, weren't you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Wait a minute—yeah. Nineteen thirty—'33 or '32. Might have been '34. But anyway, it was about that time. And each—each year we would get together and show each other our work—our various things we'd been doing for the year, which I thought was a great—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yeah. [00:38:02]

ROBERT BLAIR: —thing to be able to do, for me anyway.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did he talk a bit about his work? Was he—and criticize yours or—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no. We mostly just looked at each other's things and I would say "Ah!" [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you—did you really like his work?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. Later, later on, this is much later on, I met Mrs. Burchfield after Charlie died, and I've met her out in Texas. And the last thing she said to me that—that Charlie thought that Edward Hopper, he, and I were the three best artists. That was the last thing she said to me when I left.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? Why do you suppose that he would've thought so?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I always knew that he liked my work. But he—that was a—I guess she told that to Bruce also, she said.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There is—there is a spontaneity about your work, isn't there?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It is spontaneous my work, very.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because you're famous for getting out in all conditions, painting even at night.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right, right. By flashlight.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you're very well known for just directly going to nature. There is something about it, I guess, in Burchfield, something of it, isn't there? Although he—he introduces elements that are sort of a mystery and the like, too, doesn't he?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, well actually when I first knew him, he was doing more straight what you might call realism, but it was still a very Burchfield realism. And then he, uh, later on, added his—his—ways of working a fantasy that were—he added that to the more realistic painting and did some of his greater, large paintings in that direction. [00:40:11] Previous to that, a lot of the 1917 ones were done in smaller scale.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The early ones, yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you—you would see him pretty steadily, right up to the time he died, would you get together?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, whenever we could. Yeah. We made a trade and we traded paintings after a while.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you socialize now and then, or was he the sort of guy—would you have, uh, parties now and then?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, I can't remember have—I don't think—having parties.

JEANETTE BLAIR: They came here to dinner once. We went to their house one time.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: When I was—when I was at—still working with the Art Institute, he taught for a little while in the Art Institute. Came—came here to teach.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How was he as a teacher, do you think?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, he was good.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was his approach?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I, uh, I wasn't, I guess, officially in his classes, so I—he—sometimes I'd go along to help out when he was teaching a group. But I, uh, didn't get a—I didn't get any chance that I can think of—I might have at one time been at a place where he was criticizing various people's work, but I usually was off painting by myself while he was teaching. [00:42:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, what was your own approach? Were you—did you actively go around and comment on the students' work, or would you sort of let them—let them go and—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Both. Both ways, when I was teaching.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think you were pretty strict as a teacher?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Sometimes, and sometimes I was pretty easy on them too. And I had certain ones I would allow to go off by themselves, more even than the GI Bill of Rights, to—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean during that time?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I had permission from New York, from the lady down in New York who was in charge.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What of the GI Bill?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: The GI Bill, yeah, and I could—she said I was all right if I sent them with someone when I would go, I guess would go off to Canada and places like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Of course, most of them, many of them were older than the regular student, weren't they?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, they were—came back from the army.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you give a basic lecture or demonstrations in the very beginning?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I sometimes gave talks to them, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did they have to spend some time studying, drawing say, from—doing studies of, uh, light and shadow, or did they ever draw from plaster?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, we had—we had a couple teachers that taught—taught, uh—one's Louise Jamison and one other person that taught that kind of thing, which they had before they came into—sometimes they did early in that studying, they got plaster casts before they came into my—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But you didn't teach that, no?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The reason I ask is because when you studied at the Museum School in Boston, they still would have had—you would have still had to go through a rather strict curriculum, wouldn't you? [00:44:02] Learning—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: The only—the only thing I did there was, uh, life drawings from the model. And they were just—just drawing. I just went into drawing class. I didn't do any—take any painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You didn't go through the whole curriculum?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I didn't take—I didn't take painting, no. I never took painting with anybody, really.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you did—that's right, you pretty much learned on your own.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Other colleagues, or other artists you might have known around here, you've talked a little bit about Burchfield. Who were some of the others, say in the 1940s and '50s?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Another one was David Pratt.

ROBERT F. BROWN: David Pratt, now what was his work?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: His is very, very interesting work and he lives up on the hill near here. Um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is he a painter?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, he's a very good painter, one of the best. I have one of his very early paintings out in my studio. William Rowe was very often, before the war, was very influential in the Art Institute.

JEANETTE BLAIR: He kept it going during the war.

ROBERT F. BROWN: William Rowe, is that R-O-W-E?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: R-O-W-E, right. Louise Jamison was teaching.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now was she a painter, too?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: She was a painter.

JEANETTE BLAIR: Jean Henrich.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Jean Henrich was in the sculpture department mainly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Henrich, H-E-N-R-I-C-H?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right. She ran the sculpture department.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were these—were these people all pretty compatible? I mean, did they get along?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There weren't—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: There weren't real tensions among you or anything to speak of?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Usually there weren't, no.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were, as director of the school, you'd have to—you had to administer the whole place, too, right? [00:46:03] Was that fairly difficult or was that fairly simple? Did you have a good office?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, it—sometimes we had, uh, sometimes we got along better with the office than other times. We did have a person working the office that was quite a businesswoman and she thought—she took maybe a dim view of some of our plans—[laughs]—for the art school.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Can you remember any?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I'm not sure as I could pin it down, but she was getting her words in edgewise.

JEANETTE BLAIR: But she was important.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What was her name? Do you remember her name?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Mrs. Carr [ph].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mrs. Carr.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Dorothy Carr? Wait a minute.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you've also mentioned Walter Prochownik as someone—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, he was a big help not only—he was—came as one of the first students and he'd um—Walter was born in the United States.

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ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: —and he was about two years old, he went back to Poland with his family. And then he lived in Poland till—till the war started. And then he walked a couple thousand miles to the sea coast and got back to the United States. And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So he's someone you first knew as a young student?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, he was one of the first students and very helpful with running the place, too. Well anyway, he got back to the United States and as soon as he got back, he was the age for the army and so they sent him back to Europe—[laughs]—in the army. And he was captured by the Germans and in a German prison camp for quite a while. He was in there without much food, you know, stomach pain. And then when the war ended, he came back to the United States where he was a citizen. And—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because he'd been born here.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He'd been born here, and he had been in the army.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did he come back and set forth being an artist right away?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He—he was one of our first people to come to—on the GI Bill of Rights.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, so—but you'd known him before the war, too, is that right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no. I hadn't known him before.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was he a pretty—did he stand out as a gifted student?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. Yeah, very gifted. And he's one of the better known artists around this area still.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about Philip Elliott, who came in to teach? Was that at the Albright School?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, he was—

ROBERT F. BROWN: He came in the 1940s. Did you know him pretty well?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I didn't know him very well, no. [00:02:00] We might have said hello to each other once in a while [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, but you really didn't know him? The community, the art community in Buffalo wasn't that tightly knit, is that right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right, right.

JEANETTE BLAIR: The Albright Art School and the Art Institute were sort of in competition with each other. That was kind of interesting.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I did—I think I did teach one of his classes when he was—he was away for some reason or another and I think one of the classes I taught at the Albright was one of his.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you have chances for exhibitions in Buffalo very regularly? Did the Albright Art Gallery show local painters—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: They gave me—they gave me one show during the war, the Albright Art Gallery.

ROBERT F. BROWN: While you were away?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And then I had shows at the Art Institute. We had a gallery room there that was worked out well for quite a while. Let's see, I had shows—at some point I think I had shows at Utica Museum at the Munson Williams Proctor [Arts] Institute. And I know I—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Quite early.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: They—they have one of my best paintings of 1950.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you had quite a few shows in the 1930s and '40s.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right. And then in the 1950s, did you begin teaching on your own? Did you have private students, or how did you make a living so to speak? Because didn't you gradually drift away from the Art Institute?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. Uh, let's see, how did we make our living. [Laughs.]

JEANETTE BLAIR: Selling paintings mostly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Selling paintings.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, selling paintings, I guess, yeah. [00:04:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had a pretty steady sale.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

JEANETTE BLAIR: Not always.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Not always, right. Sometimes it was pretty skimpy.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And did your wife, Jeanette—

JEANETTE BLAIR: We had some shows in New York, too.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I had—that's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You had earlier ones, I know, at the Morton Gallery and at the Ferargil Gallery.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. When I was—when I was 27 years—let's see, I was 20—20—anyway, the Metropolitan Museum bought one right before I went in the army, a little while before.

JEANETTE BLAIR: New Masters Gallery—that was after the war.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, yeah, there's quite an extensive list of various things you've done. Um, you also did various, I guess, commissions from time to time, murals.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you did those, you had to work a much bigger scale, I guess. Did you—were you excited to do them, or was this a rather daunting challenge?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, let's see, did I ever—I did one 800 square foot mural for the army in a chapel in Alabama. That's before I went overseas. And that's my most ambitious mural I have, although I did some others for the army.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Then you did one at a Bethlehem Steel plant in 1951.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I could do some of these things—right. I could do some of these things faster than mural painters, like the 800-square foot one I did for the army, I just went directly to the wall and drew it on instead of making—you know, the squaring it off business.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Marking cartoons and all that.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I just avoided that. It was much faster. [Laughs.] [00:06:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: And it worked out quite well.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It worked out quite well.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now for the Bethlehem Steel plant mural was that—did the company approach you? Or was there a competition?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, they approached me and they gave me this commission and, uh, after years and years later, I went back and they—it was after they had closed. And the wall wasn't—the painting wasn't there anymore. And I'm wondering if they—I think that one of the directors possibly took it. It was down in Pennsylvania in another steel plant that was still operating. And I was thinking that maybe he took it down there. But I—I never found out.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was a plant right here in Buffalo?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, it was and I painted the open hearth. I spent two weeks in the open hearth drawing there and then painted it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this a fresco, or would you paint it on canvas?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It was an oil tempura. And it was 12 by nine feet, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was that done on canvas? Or was it on plaster?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I think it was, it was on canvas, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It wasn't a true fresca.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's why I think they might have taken it off and put it in the other plant.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You, in your work in recent years, has it changed much? Has your pattern—you've traveled a great deal and you used to like to go off on long journeys by motorcycle.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is this sort of expressive of your interest in painting alone and sort of getting into out-of-the-way places?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Partly but also the west is entirely different in some ways as a subject matter.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you did go out west quite a bit, didn't you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I went out to, yeah, Wyoming,—well, let's see now—Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, and—and Arizona. [00:08:09] The first trip was in 1964 to Arizona. I mean, to New Mexico that was.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you go out there, did you have a plan? Or was part of the fun just getting out there and seeing where you—where your interests might lead you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, there was one—the first—on the first trip I did also a—um, oh, I showed my work at an art school. And, um—

ROBERT F. BROWN: While you were on the trip?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, while I was on the trip.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean you brought things with you, or just as you made them, fresh?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It might be that I made them fresh. I can't even think at the moment which it was. But anyway, I—I gave them sort of instruction to a group in this art school too. And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you bring your family along or did they stay back here?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: The fellow—the fellow that ran the art school was in the army with me. On the motorcycle, I went alone.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You told me you developed a way of sketching while you were still on the motorcycle [laughing].

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, and moving. I had—I also worked that approach in driving cars, staying out the—with a sort of the action of the cars making a kaleidoscopic way of seeing that was also used by—by Constable when he did it, did it from a wagon.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you mean you would—when you would draw, you'd very quickly sketch one thing while you were driving?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, as I was—a lot of it I was memorizing it, too, while I was driving. [00:10:00] But I drew—drew also a lot in various moving—I even had a rig where I could draw, for a while I could draw, a little—occasionally on the motorcycle itself with a—the stuff fastened to the gas tank, taped to the gas tank so it wouldn't blow off. [Laughs.] On the first trip out west with the cycle, I brought back in the winter weather and I never was so cold in my life. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: When you're riding, zero is like 60 below.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You mean it wasn't cold when you were out there, but when you came back here, it was very, very bad.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: On the way back, on the way back. About halfway back is where it got the coldest. The first thousand miles I got, I knew there was cold weather coming and I got a long distance, the first thousand miles. And then—then I ran into this bitter cold which I was sleeping in the woods one night and it was really rugged [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: How would you keep your paint, paintings and all on these trips? Did you roll them up and did you have a little container?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: A lot of time I had large areas of where I could pile up stuff on the back of the cycle. One, um, one trip I made out there was just before the trip for—just I forget whether it was a couple months before the trip, why, a man ran into me trying to commit suicide.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? You mean he drove his car into you, or his—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. We—that night I was driving in a car and we hit head on in South Wales, or just before I got to South Wales. [00:12:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was not—this was when you were right near home?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And, um, I was in the hospital and recovering from that for about five months. And then as soon as I recovered enough to—enough to drive a motorcycle, I took my cycle out west. And I met my son David out there and we—I know we went over one mountain that had practically no trail, it had a real beat up trail. And I took two spills on the cycle going down that mountain. I—this was my way of curing myself [laughs] of that accident.

ROBERT F. BROWN: From being fearful, I suppose.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. That was probably it. It was a neat trip, anyway.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Gees, well how did all this work out? I mean, would you plan these things months in advance, and—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Some. That one I just did spontan—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Spur of the moment?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Spur of the moment, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So your—your family life, I mean, you all were very loose about this, were you? I mean, you might be off for several weeks, and then you'd come back.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That could happen, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then I know you still, you're just back from Vermont. You go over there to the old family place—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —at least once or twice a year, don't you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Try to, try to anyway a couple times a year. I also had a recent trip to Canada which I've painted some—one of the first trips was Algonquin Park, a 50-mile canoe trip in Algonquin Park. But then later on was a man I know in East Aurora that runs a—

ROBERT F. BROWN: In East Aurora, near here.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: —he runs a shop there. He took—I go up with him occasionally to, to, um, Lake Nipissing, which is way up in Canada. [14:06] And I've painted up there quite a lot.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you canoe up there or do you just camp?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Just—the first trip out, I canoed. That was separate from the man I go with now. I, uh, went on a canoe trip over a series, a series of lakes in Canada that trip. Painted them.

JEANETTE BLAIR: There was one with the Boy Scouts?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that was with the scouts.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you were with a group?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I was. I was one of the older one with a bunch of young people, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you find your, um, interests as still as broad as they ever were? I mean, you seem to still work practically wherever you are.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And they're mostly country scenes or nature and rather—and do you mostly work in watercolors now, in recent years?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I could show you—I can show you—I can show you a bunch of oils out in the studio.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you work in oils as well?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I do a lot in oil.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about when acrylics came along? Did you work with them?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I was one of the first people to use acrylics before. I don't know if they even had a name back then.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you did? You mean what, even in the '40s or early '50s?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, in the '40s, I think. I can't think of the exact date I started.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you like them? I mean, did you find they were—expanded what you—[inaudible.]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I like—I liked them very much for certain things. I feel that there's certain things you can do in oil that maybe it's better to do in oil and others to do in watercolor, and sometimes I combined egg tempera, oil, and all the different kinds of mixtures like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How'd that work out, pretty well?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Sometimes, yeah. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sometimes they were not too compatible, huh? [00:16:00]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: They—well, they—they usually worked out. I'd studied a lot on the techniques of the Old Masters, how they built up their paintings and glazes and studied that from way back.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you study that, just by reading or talking to people?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: And actually working with the materials they worked with, and, uh, I lost a lot of my oils in a fire. A small boy in East Aurora set our building on fire and my top floor was a—the top floor of this big building was my studio, and I lost hundreds of paintings, and a lot of oil paintings, too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This was when, not too many years ago?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, it wasn't very many years.

JEANETTE BLAIR: It was about 1980. Wasn't it?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I think it might have been about 1980. I'm not sure.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it was a case of arson, was it?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, he was—he, um, he set the building on fire next door which had cars in it, cause he had a grudge on the person next door, or whoever it was that parked the cars next door. And the fire came—was close to that place where the cars were and then it went up our elevator in the building. And the flames went up the elevator and set the top floor afire. The whole top floor's burned off now.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So this was where you had your principal studio was in East Aurora?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: At that particular time, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It gave you a lot of room and—yeah?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: How did you feel? That must've been pretty—pretty awful to lose so many of your paintings.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, it was pretty rough. It was bad. A lot of them—a lot of them Jeanette and some other people rescued, so I do have some of—some of the best that are still—[00:18:06]

JEANETTE BLAIR: And we rescued them from the water because the firemen had gotten them all wet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

JEANETTE BLAIR: And they let us at the Rycroft [ph], at the agriculture place, they let us spread them out on the floor. We spent days spreading them out on the floor to dry out.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. I was in the hospital at the time when all this was happening.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, dear.

JEANETTE BLAIR: He happened to be in the hospital when it happened.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It was sort of a second recovery from the auto accident.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Hm. Well now do you do most of your work here? When you're home, you work right here? Do you work out back in your studio in the barn?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, or out, or out in the country.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you do many things—or ever, have you ever done anything much from early sketches or photographs, or do you usually—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Not from photographs, but I—I work from—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'll sketch—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR:—early drawings occasionally. I even have a second version of that, um, the one of the capital of Berlin.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, the Reichstag you mean?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A second drawing?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I—I did a second one fairly recently, yeah, from that drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you find sometimes you go back to old drawings from years ago and—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN:—work 'em up? Well, you said in the, uh, beginning of our interviews, we talked a bit about why do you think you became an artist. And do you feel you're still—it's been a pretty consistent path for you, I mean—?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. I had decided to be an artist when I was 14, and I was—that was definite. And ever since then I even start—start with something I did back then to carry it through now. [00:20:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, you do? You'll look at something way—that you did way back when you were a youth?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is there anything else you want to go over, or we want to talk about? That we can record here?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, this—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is there any work that we haven't talked about?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, this is—I get—this is something that I'd like to talk about.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Sure.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: The, uh—this is paint that I got from, in powder form, from the Boston—what do you call it?

ROBERT F. BROWN: From an art supply house?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: The one we were just talking about earlier.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, Hatfield's.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Hatfield's Color Shop, yeah. And this I did in—this painting in 1938 from powdered paint that I got there, which would react—behaved different from any of the powders paints made today, probably because it was more coarsely ground. But it was also the way I used it. This one I painted right on the—right out on the field while he was mowing in front of me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is a scene, a Vermont scene, men with horses.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right, right. And you could pour the paint onto the canvas. I'd use a cooking spatula, you know.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What'd you use as your medium, just oil?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I'd use oil. Sometimes I'd use oil varnish. But this, this was usually straight oil. But it would behave different from any paint that you had—you can buy today. It would run on and, uh, it would trickle on in a way that you could get effects somewhat like the Old Masters got, only it was more freedom usually. [00:22:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: It sounds a little bit like watercolor, too.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, the fact that it—you had these thick globs, it was different than the watercolor. It was, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the way it ran around, or ran off.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: The way it ran around was very exciting to work with. And soon—soon after I did the 1938 paintings, why they stopped selling—they stopped selling the—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That pigment, or that—those ground colors?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. So there's no place you can buy it and—

ROBERT F. BROWN: So, what did you turn to then? Did you just have to go back to what you'd been doing?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I worked with—worked with more mediums to get some of those effects. But there's never been a paint that would work like this that I've seen anywhere, before or after [laughs].

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you feel that that painting was one of the more successful ones you've ever done?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, of—in certain directions is it, I think, one of my more successful ones. And I did some others that I have—don't have the reproductions of in here. That are quite different, but using those methods was a very exciting way of painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Are there any other points you wanted to make about, that you have examples of here?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Uh.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's one. That was an interesting point about that particular kind of medium and how it affected your work.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I, uh, I have quite a few things out in the studio that I could probably get—get some more information but we wouldn't have—well, there is a place of hitching that up out there, but I don't know as you have the time to do it.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: We're resuming our taping in Bob Blair's studio behind his house and barn in Holland, New York. [00:24:06] This is still August 27, 1995. We're looking at various examples of his work, and this first one is 1941 and Bob says it is—reflects the direction he was going in at the time. What do you call this, and what is it painted with?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's painted with oil and it's probably—they call it expressionism. And it was, uh, one of my pre-war directions.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And by that you mean it's very loose. It's not particularly representational at all, is it? I mean, it—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's a house. I think it's over in Canada, with a picket fence but you have to look for it a while before you see what it is, I guess.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What did you paint that with? What—what tools did you use?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I used a real wide tool, probably about a foot wide, to scrape the paint on. And, uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Huh, about a foot wide?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Like what, something you'd made, or?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, something I very often used wide tools like that. Here's a watercolor that's somewhat later. This is '47, but this—this was probably quite likely done with a wide tool also.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And why did you do that? You thought you could paint more quickly, or?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: You get a different effect and it's spontaneous.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Uh-huh [affirmative]. So like this painting here, let's talk about this house prop—or building in Canada, I guess. That was done—would you do that pretty quickly?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Uh, I threw the paint on out of—I squeezed it right out of the tube onto the paper and pushed it around with this wide tool.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now it's on paper?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's on watercolor paper, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Most of—most of your things are on paper, is that right, rather than canvas?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I have a lot of canvases, too, but not necessarily right where we can look at them. [00:26:02] But paper is sometimes—for instance, Constable, a lot of his most perfectly preserved paintings were done on paper. And of course it's rag paper, which has more—maybe even more rag in it than the cloth, or can—it's a lot thicker than the canvases they use a lot.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So it was, uh, a type—a medium and a material of choice that these were.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you do the, uh, squeezing right out of the tubes onto the paper, and used the foot-wide tool, were you taking a chance? Did you—you weren't sure what the result would be?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, there's a certain amount of intuition there, but I—I definitely wanted to get what shows here [laughs]. It wasn't accidental.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And it's quite heavy impasto here, quite a lot of buildup in some places.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's right, yeah, that's right. I had one painting that I built up, I think it had about—it had several pounds of paint on it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Really? Let me just pull this out. Excuse me. And what did, for example, Burchfield think of these paintings? Did he see these?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I think I showed him this one here and—he, uh, sometimes commented whether he liked them or didn't but he usually—we just looked at them and, each other's work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Well, he was a pretty gentle man, wasn't he? He didn't—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: He wouldn't give any harsh criticisms ever.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He uh—I never saw him give a harsh criticism once.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Use of this broad tool, have you continued that, or is that something that you did mainly in the—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I still use, use that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You do?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Quite often, yeah. [00:28:00]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now we want to look and see what we might want to look at next.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Okay, now we're looking at a truer, what is this, watercolor and ink?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: [Mic noises.] This is watercolor and—it's just straight watercolor. And it's done of a—done in a—it was railroad station in Berlin, Germany. It's a—this—this place people—I actually have another painting with this old lady in the outdoors, but this is inside the station.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the whole thing is a scene of near turmoil, right? It looks like there's an American soldier or so in there.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No. No, these are all German—

ROBERT F. BROWN: All German civilians.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR:—or other people in there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Other people.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Other Europeans. So we were going up a stairway over on this side.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Would you just plan—did you do this watercolor right there?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I think I did it right on the spot. I don't think I did it from a drawing. I think I did it right on the spot. I could work under—with a lot of confusion around me. [Laughs.]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, and you did. There's also then next to a very brilliantly colored one of the—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Brandenburg Gate.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Brandenburg Gate.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: At sundown, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is really quite—quite a monumental painting in effect.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is this one you did also right on the spot?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, this one I think I did a drawing and did this after I got home.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is down in Mexico on a more recent—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, much more recently.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This was a creek with a man on a torch going up and the fisherman following the catch—so to attract the fish and then he would catch them in his net. [00:30:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, but now this is this—these later, more recent ones, some of them are very vivid colors, aren't they, almost raw, particularly the paintings you've done in Mexico or in the Southwest.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's pretty intense. That was a night scene, of course, middle of the night.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And you've always now and then done night scenes, haven't you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What is there about night scenes, do you think, that attracts you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, I guess it's partly the mystery, I guess.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yup.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: There's something in that order, too.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now we have here this rather general forms of hills, and then in the near ground, the forms are outlined in black or near black.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well actually there's a lot of blue and red in the black. It's pur—

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this is something done considerably later. Is this fairly recent as well?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is somewhat later, but I can't remember the exact date.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you think when you were doing the foliage in this, it has sort of a like waves, it almost doesn't seem natural. It seems almost like it's got a spirit of its own. Do you think, in that, again, it's somewhat reminiscent of Burchfield? Is that—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This one?

ROBERT F. BROWN:—safe to say, at least in the foliage, in the front?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, uh, I—I actually don't—I think it's working more square and blocky than Burchfield-y. Yeah. If I remember correctly.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is another. This one's down in—in Texas, but sort of in this—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now about when would you have done this?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This one here I think I did in, uh, let's see—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is also a watercolor. This looks like it might be spring, because the hills are—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's—it's, um, fairly early in the—in the summer. And those are—those goats are in a field of some kind of flower they just feed on in the springtime down in Mexi—down in—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Texas? [00:32:00]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: —Texas.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative]. Now are you showing me these cause these illustrate different aspects of your work, would you say?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, this one, this one is sort of a texture-y kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative], well some of these are certainly done with smaller tools than one foot tools.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, yeah. Some of these, like this one, I started out with a bigger tool and worked down to smaller ones.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you use brushes too, usually? Or?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I use brushes a lot, yeah. But I do a lot with just scraping. This one's done in a similar way but much earlier. This is around here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: A rural scene with lots of storm clouds.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I—I do a lot with storm clouds.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Here's another one.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: There's one up here.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you say you scrape. Do you very often, you'll scrape off the pigment?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I had one here I was looking at before. This—this here is scraped. This is a big painting.

ROBERT F. BROWN: We're looking at a reproduction.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that's in my safe out back. But this is, um, this is all done with my fingernails, all this work. And it's a big, big painting about so.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you lay on the pigment. In this case it suggests—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: And scrape into it while it's wet.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —it suggests what, fall—trees?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Actually, these are thorn apple trees, yeah, which look very much like fingernail scrapings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Rather a ghostly effect.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right, right. This one, this was in a show I had in New York before the war.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What's this? Oh, this is a circus.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: A circus, yeah. And I saw the circus down in the New York City, and, uh, an art news magazine gave me a write-up and compared me with Turner in some of my paintings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did they? Saying what, that the color and the—? [034:00]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, they didn't say that, they just said Turner, Turner-esque. This is a painting that has, I think it has several pounds of paint on it. This is oil.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now when would this have been done? Fairly early?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This was done about 1939, I believe.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is a scene that looks like it could be in Vermont possibly.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's Vermont and this is Mount Mansfield back there, with the cloud on it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the stone walls and the—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —the wagon in the field with horses.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: See the walls.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you laid the paint on very thickly.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that's about several pounds of paint.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is a watercolor that's at night of an apple orchard in Vermont.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now this is much later, 1975.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that's how much later.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now this is—consists almost entirely of, uh—I don't know if they're scraped away, but of lines and—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's again fingernail.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yup. Whereas this one of the thorn apples, is that much earlier?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's 1940. Wait a minute, 1940 or '41.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But 35 years before the other one.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you've—there's—you've been consistent in your bold technique, right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I go back and forth on this—my broad stuff and the linear stuff. This was done with big smudges.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, this is simply an abstract one.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, that one had—had no—no design, no—

ROBERT F. BROWN: About when did you do this?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I'd say 1940-'49.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is an abstraction such as this with these horizontal smudges, is this the exception or did you do quite a few completely abstract things?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, well I did—I did some of the things that were completely abstract back in 19—1928. I started doing that about 1928, some of—some of those. [00:36:00] This one's 1941 and this is done with ink blots.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, this is ink blots, 1941.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Was this just done—did you manipulate them or did you just—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, I just threw them into those positions.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, I see. And just let them—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Let them stand.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Let them lie. Were these shown, these complete—these ink blot type things? Did you have an exhibition showing them?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I think I probably did but I'm not sure if this particular one I showed or not.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, when after World War II the, gradually those abstract painters in New York became so famous, did you—you sort of paralleled what they were doing, right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Actually, I was showing when they were learning how to do this kind of stuff. I was showing them down in New York a little. People didn't necessarily—there weren't any critics necessarily uh—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Picking up the connection?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Picking up. They didn't—the other guys hadn't been doing it yet. And, uh, then I went in the army right after that, so I—so I didn't exhibit as much of that kind of thing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Did you ever make connections with painters in New York City? Did you have friends there now and then?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Can't think of any offhand. I was pretty much—I was pretty much a loner. And, uh—I'm trying to think. There's something I was going to say.

ROBERT F. BROWN: We're now looking at a Xerox of one of your watercolors from the Battle of the Bulge.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right, this I—I did a smaller version of this, painted it right on the spot, while they were moving the gun into place. It was one of our foxholes on the Bulge.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you also in combat? I mean, did you do combat as well? [00:38:00]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: We were—we were all in combat.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You know, but I mean you sometimes you were a fighting soldier, and then sometimes you'd stop and do a watercolor.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, but even—even when—I mean, these guys were waiting for the Germans to come up on them, you know, and I was doing sketchings.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But when the Germans did come, would you put your sketch down and start—and would take your gun?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I had my gun ready, right with me, yeah. I carried it around with me while I was painting and drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is 1935, and this is our farm up in Vermont in the evening.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, yes, the mist is rising.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: The mist.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, now, this is a very, uh, careful, rather precise kind of painting compared with—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's sort of handled like a Chinese or Japanese handling of washes.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Was that something that influenced you at that time, do you think, or that you were interested in?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It may have influenced me even earlier, like back in 1930. When I painted it, I just didn't think necessarily of it, anything but the landscape and the brushing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Were you familiar with earlier 20th century American work, for example, like the backgrounds even of Maxfield Parrish, for example, are a little bit like this.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, he worked much—he didn't work as free as that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: No, no. No.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I—I wasn't thinking of anything except my landscape in front of me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: By the time you did it, yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Here we have what, an ink?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is wash, black and white wash, and this is inside the Reichstag in Berlin.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In Berlin, in 1945.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. I have a toe off a sculpture that I found when I was in there. That's in the house.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you have a lot of sketches here. Maybe want us to bring the book home?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is sketch—sketched right on glider as we look down onto a wrecked airplane—[00:40:04]

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is form a glider, looking down.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: At the wreckage of an airplane.

ROBERT F. BROWN: These are all from your World War II sketchbooks.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is the Battle of the Bulge. Dead horse outside our place. I don't have—I don't have the painting I did here of him, but I'm—I think I'm the only person that ever did a painting of Marshal Zhukov, captured in Berlin. This is him, a picture of him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you did a portrait of him?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: He posed, he posed for me, yeah. Almost by accident. I was—I was told he was going to have dinner with my general and, and he—one of the other officers took me up there. And when he came in, he came in ahead of my general, so he posed for me for a while.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And where is that?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's in the Burchfield Center, the one I did of him.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The portrait is? Is this the one here?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: No, no, this is—

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is a photo.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I have a picture of it somewhere here, but that's not it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What—what did he seem like when you were with him?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, he seemed like—of course none of us talked Ger—he didn't talk English and nobody talked Russian.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Russian.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: And so he stood at attention just like I was his boss. [Laughs.] He, you know, he was just being polite. And then when my general came in, why I quit on my drawing.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Wow.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Going up into the Bulge, there was castle in Luxembourg.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So you have a great many that you did then.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But I think—yes. This is—what are we looking at here? [00:42:01]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is Colorado in the moonlight, a moonlight night and I was at 11,000 feet up in a mountain, all by myself, in the middle of the night.

ROBERT F. BROWN: This is a snow-covered—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's a snow-covered mountainside.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. Now is this something done since World War II?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I did this—yeah, this was done since World War II, and I did it on the top of the mountain, an 11,000-foot mountain, out there in the middle of the night.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now you've got here a photograph here of a figure, a sculptured figure by you. Is this—when did you start doing sculpture?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I started way back in the 1920s, but this one was about 1957. And it's done with metal on the inside, steel. And then I built up various mixed mediums to finish it off, over the top of the metal.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What kind of mediums you mean?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, some that behave like plaster, but they weren't. They were tough, much tougher than that. In fact, this I should have showed you, it's in our living room.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well now, figural work like this, did you do quite a bit of this?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, I'd done—

ROBERT F. BROWN: At that time do you particularly do a lot in—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I didn't do a lot. I got one out here that is probably the—it's covered up with bushes right now, but it's a—let's see, it's nine and a half feet high. I think it's the largest clay-fired sculpture in the world maybe. And it's right under those bushes there right now.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Why—why would you undertake figural sculpture now and then, do you think? Just for variety or you—?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I always was interested in sculpture right from the beginning. Of course, I've done less of that. [00:44:01] Those two dogs up there, a couple that I did in 1943 while I was in the army. And there's—there was one I had sitting there before.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, figures. But also, did you always keep up figure study from time to time? Here's a drawing.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, this is one I did in about 19—1934, I think.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Something like that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you still do it? Do you still now and then do studies from a figure?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh yeah, a great deal. In fact, we even have models every—every week right now in a studio. We get together. This is a model in action here. I did a lot of action work.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What do you find the value to you, as a very experienced artist is, of going back to figure study now and then, or once a week in your ca—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Figure study can be just as—can be just as great now as it was for Michelangelo.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you find for yourself, is it also a way of, uh, intensifying something? Or is it—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. I—I worked, um, my first model is model older sister, actually. I started out very young working with models. And she used to pose for me, which was great. And later on I had—[inaudible]—of course. Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: We're going to look at, just briefly, at four last examples of work of the last 35 or so years. The first we're looking at is a beach scene of about 1956, 1957. What is the medium here? It's on paper?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's what you call gum tempura, which behaves somewhat like oil. And I worked quite a lot of with the back of my fingernails to get some of the—[00:46:01]

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oh, the effect of seagulls and the like?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: And the highlights and the people and so forth.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What about the colors? Did you choose these from—you were doing this on the spot, or you were doing this from a sketch?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I did it from memory.

ROBERT F. BROWN: From memory?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I don't think I had a sketch either.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And the essence of it is what these women in bathing suits?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yes, it's a beach and on the coast of—you know, off of Massachusetts, someplace, probably Maine.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You would go to Maine, would you, fairly often?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Quite a lot, yeah. I still do.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mainly to the coast?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What is it about the sea? Is there something about the sea that you like?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, ever since I was a kid, I liked the ocean. We used to go even to Nantucket when I was four—two years old and four years old.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Ah, and was there something you liked about its size or how rough it is, because we've seen—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's probably the surf is—

ROBERT F. BROWN: The surf.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: —one of the most interesting things about it.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah.

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ROBERT F. BROWN: —twenty or thirty years ago, of a large herd of deer, near here.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's right. They were down the road, and, uh, they were eating in the corn and I counted them, counted 45 deer in the corn. And then I walked closer and they all went over the fence together.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you've caught the attitudes of all—was this done sort of on the spot? You obviously couldn't paint so fast.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I did a pen and ink drawing right on the spot for this. I detailed them.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And you were able to, partly from memory but partly just right directly draw these many different postures they have—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's right, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN:—as they bolt. Were you trained, or did you train yourself—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I trained myself.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —very young to memory, so that you could fix in your memory?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Very young, yeah. Quite young.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Cause the most unusual way you do is you've mentioned is when you're on a motorcycle or car and you can remember something you've seen and then you can —

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's true, and then I have also drawn, drawn under those conditions.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Right there, while you're still driving.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: On the motorcycle.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Now this is much more—painted much more traditional watercolor manner, isn't it?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's closer to the way other people work, yeah.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well this still—this continues to amaze because the tremendous range of your handling of, and the various different media you use—here's one what, maybe 20 years ago. This is Vermont.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: In winter?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: In the wintertime.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is this a direct, on the spot of—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I can't remember whether I used a sketch or on the spot, but I did that very shortly after seeing it. And here the paper was semi-wet. I do a lot of paintings—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's on the left showing snow drifts, yes.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's more—more choppy, dry and wet combined there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: The painting of the deer, yes. [00:02:02]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: This is done practically all with the paper damp. And it gets a blending—some little effect from that.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because yes, this is in the bright sun on snow, and to get that kind of shimmering effect, you used—you dampened your paper so—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —the paint would—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: First dampen the back and then the front.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You'd dampen the back, why? To give a—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: So it will stretch evenly, so it has to have—it gets bigger when you wet it, so you have to get both sides so it'll stay flat.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And what do you do—how do you do that when it's, say, extremely cold and you're out there painting directly?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Sometimes you just leave the frozen effect, just let it show the freezing part.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But where it sort of crystallizes.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I remember this one I did indoors afterwards.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You did afterwards. And then you also then added highlights on the tree on the right.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, some of these were just painting around, that's the weight of the paper.

ROBERT F. BROWN: But the dark lines, the blues and so forth, you would flick on with a dryer, or after it had dried a bit.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, it was after it was dried a bit, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And then this last one we want to look at now you say is really quite recent and it is very, very heavily impasto.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: It's on paper I guess.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's on heavy watercolor paper.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Very heavy watercolor paper, and what is the medium? It's—?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's oil.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Oil.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Straight oil.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And this, however, by no means a straightforward representation, but it suggests what, a building, a stream?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, it's a—it's a building in back of a river, or a stream, probably a creek.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And was this done from sketches or from memory?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I think I memorized it. I can't remember exactly. I had it my head, whatever.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Is this a direction that you've been going toward fairly recently? [00:04:00]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well, it's one I did early as well as recently.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, we saw one, yes, very much like it.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: There's one—that that's not—that's not oil though, that's acrylic.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yup, but you showed me one of a building done about 1940—

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: —expressionistic, done with that broad implement.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, this one. This one here—

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's right.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR:—is in the same direction.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah. And it's a direction you've, uh, continued to pursue now and then.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Right.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you today mainly work in this broad technique?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Uh, a lot of the time I do it in the broad technique and I very often use a good share of them are done with a brush at least this wide.

ROBERT F. BROWN: At least what, three or four inches wide?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, but a lot of them, sometimes I do them with something wider. I don't always use a brush even at all.

ROBERT F. BROWN: When you're doing this, a painting like this one here, are you—do you work close and step back? Do you go back and forth a lot?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Some of the time, yeah. I can't remember on this whether I did.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Because what are you trying to achieve here?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Well this was, of course, the flat areas are done with a broad painting knife. And I—I—I get a richness of color with a flat knife sometimes better than any—with a brush. You get an intensity of color and a—a certain quality to the paint that intrigues me.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. At the same time, even today you might occasionally do a more delicate watercolor?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Oh, sure. I do that a lot, yeah. Still.

ROBERT F. BROWN: What is your painting routine now, or is there any routine? You work almost every day?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I work probably more than most painters do, towards every day, but not necessarily every day.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And do you—what about showing them? [00:06:03] Do you send things down to a dealer someplace now and then?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Sometimes I do and sometimes I just sell them off by myself.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do people come here to look at things, or do you mainly take things to a gallery?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: More often to a gallery, but I occasionally take somebody here, show things.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you have plans for much travel in the near future?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: That's a good question.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Well, you are going to Arizona shortly, is that right?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, we're going to Arizona pretty soon.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And do you suppose you'll be painting when you're down there?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Probably.

ROBERT F. BROWN: I would think so.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. And I expect to go back to Vermont this fall, too. There's a lot of color there.

ROBERT F. BROWN: Do you go down, in extremes of weather now, will you go when it's very cold or very hot?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: I very often do it, I mean, when I go to Vermont this next trip, it'll probably be, some of it, bitter cold at night.

ROBERT F. BROWN: And that doesn't bother you; you've always done that, haven't you?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah. I'm getting pretty ancient now. I don't know if I'll stand it as well as sometimes, but.

ROBERT F. BROWN: You insist on certain creature comforts now, I guess.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: A little bit more than in the old days, yeah.

[Audio Break.]

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Something like 20,000 paintings, I honestly—

ROBERT F. BROWN: You feel that you and Turner are the most prolific painters?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: It's possible. But some of—he might have done more, but smaller.

ROBERT F. BROWN: So many of yours are—what are these? What's the average size?

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Thirty by 22 average.

ROBERT F. BROWN: That's a big—and mostly in—much of it in watercolor.

ROBERT NOEL BLAIR: Yeah, right. I think this one's about '45, and this was up in Maine, I know that definitely has—

ROBERT F. BROWN: Yeah, yeah.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]


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