

INTERVIEWEE: Mark Fleming
INTERVIEWER: Michael Noble Kline
INTERVIEWER: Carrie Noble Kline
DATE: August 1, 1994

Michael Noble Kline: Why don't we start by saying, "my name is".

Mark Fleming: My name is Mark Fleming, curator, Stifel Fine Arts Center.

MNK: And today is.

MF: First of August.

MNK: And it's a kind of an over-cast, not oppressive day at all.

MNK: Mark, you started a while ago talking about being originally from another part of the state.

MF: Yeah, well it's what I was saying was um, as a boy I lived a time in Moundsville, from about 1960 to '66. And we'd moved there from the southern coal fields. And I was just saying that it was quite a shock to come from that cultural tradition, which is a, seemed to be predominantly Protestant, at least the one that I was familiar with.

MNK: Which was that?

MF: In the coal camps, small camps, fundamentalists, sort of oriented, and there's a solid.

MNK: Which ones?

MF: Coal camps, which coal camps? Mayberry, we lived in Mayberry in the surrounding area down there. And in the Bluefield area down there, McDowell County and Logan County I think were the places. But there's a different way of doing business. There's not a lot of verbal exchange. And one of the things that struck me as a kid here was the, and I always attributed it to the ethnic diversity here. It was in especially in the Italian-Slavic, very vocal, you know, kind of the ranting, raving between neighbors and what not. That in southern West Virginia it didn't seem to take place. Immediate fall-through was with some kind of violence. So that was, as a small child, was a little alarming to come from that environment into this environment. It was a...

(020) MNK: You said the streets were noisy.

MF: Noisy, yeah. The streets were real noisy, and uh, just thriving in a way that they didn't seem to be. You know, I think it had a lot to do maybe with, you know, thinking back on it, not having given it a lot of

thought, but the economic situation here would have been a lot more stable and prosperous than those coal camps. It's as I think probably the ethnic mix too had a lot to do with it. The English-German sort of puritanical approach to business didn't allow for a lot of noise. I remember as a kid too, the church. My father was a Methodist minister, and the churches we served were small-framed churches with, if they had stained glass in them at all it was considered a pretty radical departure from the norm. Because it was an expression of vanity and some cases music had to be occopello because if you had a musical instrument in the church that was also the wrong thing to do. And to come from that kind of, sort of austere oak alter with a cross and maybe a velvet curtain behind it, to the first time I walked into a Catholic church with all the ornamentation and the statuary, and everything, it was just unbelievable. I remember sneaking away after Sunday service as a boy down in Moundsville and hang around outside of the Catholic Church windows to listen to the mass and watch the nuns walk around. I assumed they floated underneath those things back then. Yeah, it was real different, real different then than what I was accustomed to from the southern part of the state.

(038) MNK:

And what years are we talking?

MF:

Oh, it would have been in the late '50's we moved up here. I think in about '50, we moved from southern coal fields into the Pittsburgh area about '58 -'59. And then from there we moved down to here shortly thereafter so.

MNK:

And your birthdate is?

MF:

'53.

MNK:

The date, the full date.

MF:

May 16, '53.

MNK:

So, but you do, you remember a lot of energy...

(042) MF:

Oh, yeah.

MNK:

On the streets.

MF:

Yeah, well, not so much Wheeling. I mean, as a kid in Moundsville, Wheeling was the place that we were, we were occasionally in Wheeling, but mostly it was downtown in Moundsville and running around there. The one of the things that I talked to my two kids about that they don't have the experience of is the opportunity to just understand. Well, like my friends' grandparents still only spoke Italian or only spoke Polish. And some of the signs in the store fronts were in English and in Polish and that's just nothing that you see anymore

around. And that was, I think, a really nice flavor to add to a childhood. Where you had that sense of the old world as part of your daily existence. And that's just not the way it is anymore. We've, the melting pot has blended enough to the point where my friends' children are like mine, they just don't have that opportunity. It's a different, it's a different world, a little more integrated than it was in those days.

(054) MNK: So you, you suddenly had a big flash at this church party, going into a Catholic Church.

MF: Yeah, never had seen it before. Didn't know it existed, other than through like flipping through books in my father's study, things in Rome, statuary and what not. But I never thought I would see it in anyplace, that I would have access to.

MNK: What other expressions of art and folk art did you see in the communities, in the neighborhoods at that time?

MF: Here in the Northern Panhandle, thinking back over it as a child, I can remember the, I don't know what you call them, the yard shrines, the statue of the Madonna. And, oh anything like old Clorox bottles that had been cut with candles inside of them, kind of folky, you know those folky shrines with flowers planted around them. There was a, those things I remember being startled by there, again because there was a statue in a yard with this obvious focus of attention around it. There really wasn't any opportunity to look at art work. I remember as a kid being interested enough even as a child in painting. There was no place to go to see it. The furniture stores, like the Value City kind of furniture places where you go and get a couch, had the normal reproductions that you'd see there. That was the closest thing to a museum as I could find as I was a kid was to go to a place like that. And there was...

(072) MNK: And you loved it.

MF: On yeah, you know, there was no question, always from the time I was young, that's where I was going. There weren't any outlets and my family wasn't opposed to it. They were kind about it, there was no opposition to my interest in the arts, but it was never taken seriously. 'It was a phase that he was passing through.' My brothers worked construction and I guess they assumed, 'he'd straighten up and get through this.' I think by the time I was about thirty-five they realized I wasn't going to shake it. So...

- (079) MNK: What other, what other expressions of local arts did you become aware of.
- MF: As a curator, as an adult?
- MNK: Yeah, there's a, well I tell you one of the things that I've noticed as a curator working with artists from outside of the region. A jury to artists, and juried exhibits that we have here at the Stifel and then down state where I've been is that part of the, to meet the criteria to receive West Virginia funding we have to involve out-of-state jurors. And they invariably will come here and seem disappointed by the work that they find in the exhibits because they come in expecting to find oak baskets and carved canes and folky glittery, rhinestones, carved kind of things. And there, there's some of that but there's an awful lot that's not that and like so much else in this country. In the last twenty or thirty years, we have television, access to Interstates, we can travel and do all the things that anyone else in the country can. And, stereotypes of the West Virginia artist being this folky, banjo-picking, barefooted fellow, is just not the case anymore. And, I think it's interesting too, because my generation now is the first in mass that has been college-educated. We're accustomed to traveling in a way that our parents went away for World War II and came home.
- (096) We're a different group and in some ways we're the transition because we have a foot in the traditional world where, I think an awful lot of us grew up and know about slaughtering livestock and hunting and all those things that are part of traditional life. And at the same time, we're going away to college and like to see other things and try. It's an interesting place to be to look at both sides of this issue. In a lot of ways I think that the artists that are creating work here partake of both of those, main stream American culture, and traditional Appalachian culture. A lot of what you see is real strong work that is not necessarily even focused. The subject matter isn't folky stuff, but there's a certain integrity, craftsmanship, those kind of issues that are brought to bear consistently in the artwork that I see being produced in the state. I find sometimes lacking outside of the area.
- (107) And another thing that has been fascinating for me to discover is that there was, for whatever reason, a group of artists from West Virginia, mostly from the Charleston and from Parkersburg area, that got involved with the abstract impressionist painters in the '40's and went to Provincetown to study with Hoffman. Side by side with Kline and DeKuning and Mothewell, the second generation that came along.

These artists consistently went back to the Cape every year and as they grew older, they created scholarship programs to allow one or two young artists if they were available to continue to study up there at Hoffman's school. And, of course, Hoffman died and a couple of his students, Victor Candel and Leo Monso, took over the school in the summer up there. It continued until 1976. I think was the last year. I was one of the artists that got to go up, me and another fellow. Ours, Victor died that year and they didn't do it again in '76 I think, after we were there.

(121) And Leo died here just I think about two years ago, he taught at NYU. It was a fascinating thing then to see this in a place like West Virginia where you wouldn't expect to see this very strong tradition of abstract expressionists painting just grow from the same source that it grew in New York. The artists that are working in the state, an awful lot of them now the Catherine Burnside, Hank Keeling, Grace Martin-Taylor, Blumberg (Blaumberg), are some of the names that come to mind immediately. Then there was a whole...

(128) MNK: Of these, of these...
MF: Of these older ones that studied with Hoffman. As a matter of fact, Grace Martin Taylor. When I got to know her, was talking to her about Hans and his wife. And she was dear friends with him. And went over and rummaged through a pile of newspapers on the top of her piano and whipped out a little Hoffman painting on a board and said, "oh, he gave this to me." I couldn't believe it was in the shuffle of newspapers and magazines, but it was that kind of familiarity. So, there's a real strong tradition of abstract impressionist painting that grew in West Virginia that said not as a secondary contact but as a primary contact with the source. That strength, I think, is still strong in the southern part of the state mostly. I think there's a lot of the younger artists, as I said, I'm forty and I was up there in the mid seventies and that was the last time that that took place. So, um...

(139) MNK: How did you get to be a part of the circle that ...
MF: It was just a young painter that was trying to make a living and was a janitor at an art center. And one of these people, a woman named Katherine Burnside, had seen some of my paintings. And I was working this kind of large, you know the angry young man phase of my career. You know, large splashy paintings. She asked me was I interested, and, of course, jumped at the chance. So, I went and got to have a big time on the beach among other things when I was up there.

But, yeah, there was a lot of that, there was a lot of that that went on. There was a whole generation of us my age who, you know, one at a time or two at a time or whatever had gone.

(146) Isabelle Umpelbee was another one who was formerly the curator down at Sunrise Museum. I've lost touch with her. I don't really know where she is right now, I think she's out of the state actually. But, she might be, I know that she and I had talked about doing an exhibit of these artists and sharing them when I was with Parkersburg Art Center and she was at Sunrise. But it never did come to fruit. So, she might know more about the younger arts. I think maybe, it might be Paul Clendenin, too, who's another West Virginia artist I think may or may not have been involved in that program.

(153) MNK: Were these native sons and daughters so to speak who had relocated.

MF: All of them, mostly all of us were from, as I recall it, you know as I say it was some years ago, but I think we were mostly from the area. Born and bread, you know, in the state or in the region. And then that was part of the interest in this group was to, it was just one of those wonderful quirky opportunities that some people thought was important and made happen for a period of years. We all got a chance to go up there.

(160) I remember an evening in Robert Motherwell's studio. I just couldn't believe I was actually sitting there in the room and talking to Woen DeKeuning on the telephone. And it, I just couldn't believe that I was a part of that. Even at that awe struck goofy kid distance that I was. It was still an interesting thing to be around and to taste a little bit of. The rest of the people that were there at the workshop were almost all from up east, you know. They were from NYU or from Delaware the surrounding area. So, it was a real interesting mix for us, not only to be a part of that tradition but to be exposed to our peers that were working in a similar tradition.

(167) We, I, we all felt pretty good, we stacked pretty well. I think its the story about the first U.S. Olympic team didn't know what a shot put was. They just practiced with this cannon ball. And they threw this thing and they kept looking and trying to reach these distances and they were, they were just barely competitive. And when they got overseas to the first games, the shot was, you know, like a quarter of that size. These guys practically threw it out of the stadium. And, I think that a lot of West Virginia artists have that same feeling of 'we work so hard because of the generations of being somehow

Appalachian and less that when we arrive in a competitive arena' but we're doing real well.

- (176) The craft artists in the state too, there's a non-sartoriusian artist from Parkersburg right now who is in the national craft exhibits all across the country. The ones in D.C. and the Westcoast. And, I've been to see his work and the artists, there again, it may just is my prejudices, but the Appalachian artists are all thriving in this context. And, I think it's some of that working a little harder because you're not quite sure what the competition is going to be.
- (182) MNK: Tell me about how this flavor of folk art is persistent among this generation.
- MF: Well, I don't know, for instance, with Norm's work I just mentioned. He got interested in wood carving and the Keltic tradition, you know, and the heritage in the mountains was of interest to him. And, he got interested in their Keltic, I think they're called marriage spoons, which are exchanged. I'm not sure exactly how it works, but I believe either the man gives his wife or they both exchange these hand carved spoons. Well, from that tradition, Norm now that's all he wants to do is just carve spoons. And, of course, his has taken on a whole different flavor. They're not sort of artifactual, they're elegant and new and innovative, but that's all he wants to do is spoons. Well, it grew from that primary interest in his, in the Keltic traditions. That's one, that's one way it may manifest itself. I think another way is that the subject matter. They say it's not necessarily folky, but the world that is immediately around us, one of my little paintings over there leaning against the wall is just of the interior of my old apartment in Parkersburg. And, it's not that that's necessarily such a folk image as it is from that tradition of the familiar and it has something to do with what's at hand.
- (200) Those, and I think even in the abstract, I think the artists that I've seen work in the abstract. When you talk to them about their work. it often times is that same, it's not, 'we're not really concerned about the rain forest or AIDS necessarily, unless it touches us personally'. And, I think that's maybe the way I'd see it manifest itself. You know, it has to have some personal significance and not that those are not real issues, but in my day-to-day encounters, I rarely run into anyone that's HIV positive. I see my own force being cut around here, I don't need to worry about the ones in the Amazon, 'this is my concern, here, not what's happening down there.' I think that's maybe where the greatest

strength comes from. It's more from the root and not so much from the manifestation of that.

MNK: Probably for every one of you who got to be a part of this program there were many others who were trying to get their, their understanding of art through matchbook programs.

(209) MF: Oh yeah, oh yeah, yeah I've run into some of those and as a curator, especially over a stretch of years. I've seen a lot of, as a teacher also, artists that were real serious that had the normal thing happen to them, life's swept them away. They got married young, didn't finish college or never went. Wanted to paint but were trying to raise children, children are getting a little older or out of the house and they'd like to do something and they come to be taught and they have this incredible hunger. And a lot of them have native talent but they still don't have the time, and at this point in their lives, don't have the energy to do what it is they might have done had they made different decisions in their life. But I think that's probably the case in most places in the country. Life bends and twists us and we start someplace and maybe don't end up there.

(224) Just even as a college student, from under graduate school I think of the, oh I don't know, I think there was probably a core group of twenty or thirty committed students at that time that I was involved with in the studio environment. And I think there are two of us left that are still practicing artists that I'm aware of. And, it's not that the others don't want too, but they're teaching school or raising a family or have given up altogether work instruction. One guy was one of the better painters actually now does Civil War costumes and makes his living selling these things to the reenactment groups. You know, I mean, you never know what's going to happen to you when you get out of school. So, I think it's a normal attrition.

(234) It's like fish in a pond, you have a spawn of five hundred and they mostly get snarfed by the bigger fish, you know you have the few of them make it to go on. I think that's kind of what's going on here.

(237) MNK: Well, uh, does people, especially in the folk arts, we wanted to share some of this.

MF: Yeah, I'd love to see what you guys have got.

CNK: Could I just ask before you show that. Can you distinguish for us, can you define folk art, if that's a term you use as distinguished from other art that's on your walls.

- MF: It used to be simple, used to be untrained, and it used to be that it was done for some reason in particular. The crafts, for instance, a lot of the basketry that was made was to collect potatoes in or to hand gladiola bulbs in the root cellar. Whatever you did with them, but you needed that basket, so you made the basket. That was one of the thing now that's been, they still make the same, the egg basket, the butt baskets they call them. They don't collect eggs like that anymore, but those things are hot selling items. Even the art work, the more formal, the more "hang on the wall" work was usually done for some reason generally religious was the work that I remember seeing growing up. Anything that was done had a religious significance about it.
- (253) And then the easy distinction was that if you went away to school or if you studied with someone in an apprentice situation, and you began to make work that was in some way trained, then it was no longer folk art. But, there's now this interesting third group that they call them "the outsider artist" or whatever, and I have some friends that are involved in that. They're college-educated and they're trained in the western tradition of painting or sculpting or whatever but they've chosen to step away from it and they've found in that formality a certain deadening of their creativity or their thinking. And so, they've abandoned a lot of that to a more simplistic way of solving their creative problems.
- (265) A lot of that, for instance, one guy I know that uses a lot of his skills that he employs as a carpenter, studding and framing and uses routers like a carving tool on plywood, and then he ends up with these big images that look like the wood-block print that he's inked with different colors. He's routed out things and left other things in, and then he'll cut holes out of them and put little shrine boxes in them because he saw some things in Florida with the Cuban population down there that fascinated him. And then, he take and go to the junk yard and collect reflectors off of the tail lights of cars and smash them up because of that red plastic really shines nice and glue that down with roofing tar and cut tin cans. But this guy could also could carve stone or make a human form like the classics. And he's chosen this alternative, so that group complicates the issue in my thinking about what's folk and what's not, and in my encounters in the literatures is considered "outsider artist" or some such thing as that.
- (280) MNK: Meaning that they're operating not only outside of the tradition that they were taught formally but also possibly outside of the...

MF: The aesthetic that's part of that ...

MNK: In which they were raised.

MF: Right. So, that'd be the way to go. I don't know. How about you guys, do you have any solutions to that or any working definition?

(286) MNK: Yeah it's just so hard now because things are changing.

MF: Well, my wife, for instance, is a farm girl from central West Virginia. And her grandmother quilted her whole life for the family. They did it for the reasons they needed to do it. And, Susie learned, learned how to do it from her grandmother. So, she done some work and it's there stacked on the back of the couch in the living room in the winter to wrap around us and they're on the kids beds and our bed. Well, they're not heirloom items that are brought out and shown and are put away, they're to keep us warm. So, I would assume that she is still a folk artist whether she doesn't think of herself as that. But, probably, in the larger definition, she is.

(296) And they may also be part of it. Is the people that are legitimately folk artists that we would call that from the business never crossed their minds that they're involved in the arts. They're doing what they have to do to survive.

(300) MNK: Well, here's a perfect example.

MF: Let's see, yeah, let's see. It's snowing, well, what do you guys know about this guy? He looks trained in some fashion to me.

MNK: Well, he's been to matchbook school.

MF: Has he.

CNK: He took a cartoon, fine artist cartooning class, dreamed of doing cartoons, that was through his matchbook, one program. He's just, he's been drawing all his life, used to draw the movies when he was an usher in there, come home and draw them.

(309) MF: Well, do you have any of, are any of those around, any of his old drawings?

CNK: Good question.

MF: That would be, those would be the one I think that would really be telling, before he got involved. Was that before the matchbox school?

CNK: Oh yeah.

MNK: Yeah those are...

CNK: I don't think that's changed his style very much at all from the way he talks about it.

MF: Really.

- (313) CNK: He said, he never had to redo a drawing. He said they would tell you if you were supposed to do them again and he didn't have a lot to tell him I guess.
- MNK: They didn't have a lot of critiquing. He's fifty-four years old, he's never been away from Wheeling, he never went to the war, he works as a janitor, and can't work there full time and so paints to help pay the light bill, so to speak.
- CNK: Understanding landlord, he says.
- MF: Boy, it sounds like it.
- MNK: He says this scene is, this scene is 1939, and you can tell that from the films that are showing.
- MF: Why, why then. Why not what he saw in his life? Any idea?
- (326) MNK: This group of, the other ones are of his own life time and his work was...
- CNK: He said why all other than this they're mostly the fifties, why the fifties. He said, "well I know I should get to the future, but I feel like I just have to deal with the past before I can get on to the present and to talk about the future." And I think it's really a campaign to try to bring the arts back down town. It's really a cry to get one of these places to open up and to have theater and...
- MF: Well, there's nostalgia for the lost world. I mean, in Parkersburg there's a lot of that too. When the downtown was a thriving place and there was still the Rexall Fountain you could go in and get a cherry Coke and all that's stuff is gone. It's just, in Parkersburg they took a lot of that down, urban renewal came in and they ripped it all out and a mall was built and that was the end of the downtown business community essentially.
- (342) CNK: And there's no culture in Wheeling, for him, that he can get to, he doesn't drive, can take the bus out to the Stifel once in a while.
- MF: The Cornerstone Project, can you guys talk to them yet? I haven't been down there, but some of their board members are around here doing things. They seem like a pretty good group, but I don't know how serious they are or what's going on down there.
- (347) CNK: Well, that's just his words that there's no available culture and he wants it to come back. ---needs to know.
- MF: Yeah, that's what I was thinking about. Does this guy have, does he work from old photographs or what's he have around as resource material?

- MNK: Sometimes he'll use a photograph of to recall particular details. But, he says this is all from his memory. And the photographs don't have the people in, he puts the people and the traffic in.
- CNK: That's what I was telling you about --- that's the real, talks about how various being significant, --- he calls them, ---. But, he said, "it's kind of lonely in the hospers (?) paintings. I like to have people and life, it's how he remembers his home town.
- (367) MF: There's all, there's a lot of problems in a, strictly from a formal point of view. I could pick him apart on the quality of light and his drawing's a little awkward, and what's happening, the ellipse here and how's it resting on the book, and there's all those kind of things. But, that's pretty typical, even of artists that have studied some like in a class like Stifel would offer an eight-week course, and this would be the, if he came into one of my classes with this piece and and said, "I'd like to paint with you." I'd think, "wow, I've got a hot one. This guys got some innate talent. I'd question is this a composition of his own doing or is this something he's seen in a book somewhere and done one of these how to do a still life books. That would be a big question. If this is his own. If he set this up or even out of his head invented this, then I would be really interested in knowing more about what he's thinking. But, yeah, and that's the really is the big issue. Is this an original or not. But, these kind of challenges, the reflection in the knife and in the fruit, in this probably this is some kind of shiny metal tray or whatever. Yeah, I'd really like to know more about him. I say, if this was his work or not. Some awkwardness in, is he using, tempera?
- (391) MNK: I don't know.
- MF: It looks like tempera paint. Especially the way that it tends to want to crust up here. Tempera's not an easy medium. It's real cheap, but it not easy. So, he's got some command of the material. Then again, without knowing more about it, I'd, but just at a glance that seems like, that's just a real striking image.
- (401) CNK: He went to the, he was an alter boy at the Cathedral.
- MF: Anything else in there? This is the gravy part of my day, to look at some artwork.
- CNK: We didn't bring the non-Wheeling ones. There's a "Robin hood" and a I guess that's not Wheeling.
- MF: Has anyone told you, the story that I heard, and I had it a couple different times I encountered it, but I don't know if it's just gossip or

not that Wheeling was a bastardization of an Algonkwian or Iraquaian word that meant “heads on polls.” Have you guys heard that one? Is that the truth, is that the case?

- (411) MNK: Delaware.
MF: Delaware.
MNF: Delaware word.
CNK: That it means heads, we’ve heard and it’s because the heads were on the polls.
MF: Right, that’s what I heard that it was something like “we lie ing” or some such thing, yeah. As I said, that’s from years ago. It’s not, it’s like a “girlie” picture, but there’s still, the treatment of water in here is pretty neat, he’s done some neat things there.
CNK: Some pretty difficult ---
- (424) MF: An attention to detail too is another thing that seems to be real common in folk work I’ve seen. You probably encountered that too. Drive you crazy with it.
CNK: Some people tell us that there never was grass at the water front.
MF: I wouldn’t know, but I’m not surprised.
CNK: Well, it’s just, I like, the thing is, --- trusting some of the stuff is so detail and then the bits are so realistic and some are, I don’t know if we’ve shown you any of the purple skies we have here.
MF: I don’t think I’ve seen any purple skies.
MNK: Skies, ---
MF: Yeah, one of those pink and rider.
CNK: Valley Voyager. What do you see?
- (440) MF: It just it’s like a psychotic episode or something. They have that sort of startling impact on you, with all the color there and then this.
CNK: You wonder why.
MF: Yeah, what’s going on.
MNK: All these, tranquil couples.
CNK: Wheeling Island has become some kind of involved annex. There’s a little bit of..
MF: You know what this is? Or what that is?
CNK: Do you?
MF: No, I don’t have a clue, I mean, there again, it may be a landmark anyone would recognize.
- (449) MNK: It’s I think it’s a big building up at Warwood, or I think.
MF: Really.
CNK: Warwood?

MNK: I think so.

CNK: Oh, so that's not Island.

MNK: Yeah, so that would be the West Virginia side coming down stream. That's interesting. Anything else in there? This is the York, I guess. Yeah.

(458) MF: Has he talked to you about this painting?

MNK: No he hasn't talked very much about that one.

CNK: No, we didn't interview him specifically about the different worlds.

MF: I'd be curious to know why this one.

CNK: Why Times Square.

MF: Yeah.

CNK: Has he ever been there?

MF: Yeah. Has he ever been there, why this painting, does he feel some need to participate in that world to legitimize his own work, that kind of subject matter or something like that.

CNK: As an artist.

MF: Yeah, as an artist.

MNK: That's a good question.

(468) CNK: That is a good question. Yeah, we're real interested in the questions that you would pose, because I would like to go back and interview him and go into some of these.

MF: With, some of these, what was his source. Does he, does he use photographs, is it, they don't a lot of them don't look like on sight drawings, they look like they've had a photographic source and then he's filled them with the people, he's stuck them in there. And, like the still life, did he set this up? Was this from a book? Maybe a little of both, it's hard to say, but I'd be curious to know about that. And if he made alterations in the original, why? I've had students, for instance, that might, there might have been some really complicated, something or other going on back here, suggests that maybe something else was here by the way you see this here and then this is all dark. And, just looked at it and thought, "I don't want to even challenge that." So they blank it out. Those kind of things, it makes the composition kind of strong and interesting. Especially this shift, the dark area from this blue to this sort of earth black. But, why, if it was altered, why?

(492) MF: Fishing reflections. Boy that one's neat.

CNK: Here's something I couldn't identify.

MNK: Not sure, looks like the Civic Center, behind the Civic Center.

CNK: That bridge.

MNK: I haven't been to, looks like a railroad bridge too, the ties here. The way this kids walking.

CNK: You're right. I noticed that.

MNK: That's it.

CNK: That's all we brought, we didn't bring the...

MNK: The rest are still being photographed.

CNK: The paints he used and...

(506) MNK: The detail and creative use color.

MF: And then the sort of the narrative quality which also seems to be pretty common in a lot of the folk work I've seen like in, I noticed in one of these I noticed there was a guy. Oh, like this guy's waving at some guy that's waving over here and someone looks like they're asking "what time is it?", a woman's putting on makeup.

CNK: What did you call it? A "narrative."

MF: Yeah. There's a narrative in these. They're not, one of the things that I think that the western tradition kind of teaches us that it's the image for the sake of the image. It doesn't have to be anything other than a street scene. It seems like the folk artist that I've encountered seem like that's not enough, there has to be some human exchange in process, there's some story being told. I'd be curious about the river boat and if there's some kind of romance. Well, like this, the picnic, the family picnic. It's the waterfront, but there's something happening there.

(529) What do you guys think of them? It was the same there, throngs of people, in old photographs I've seen of the, well even when I moved there in the late sixties I remember the Saturday afternoons you went downtown. It was crowded, there was no place to park, parent's kind of dropped you off and left you there and picked you up at five in front of some place. But there was just people everywhere. Little diners and restaurants, mom and pop shops everywhere, Greek, a lot of Greek restaurants it seemed like the little ones here and there. I think it just all died away. That's something else that's just real different. The same, the kids still go, but they go to the mall now. There isn't this sense of a downtown.

(543) MNK: Well, there's no movie theaters left in Wheeling anywhere. Not a one.

MF: Is there not?

CNK: No.

MF: It's all at the mall then.

CNK: It's all in Ohio for six dollars a head.

MF: Well, they have, down in Moundsville, the old Strand theater that I went to as a child is still open and my kids have been to it. I haven't been into it since, but they came home saying, "oh boy, the place is going to fall in. And it's this really old place. And when the people opened the door to come in the screen moves and the top of the guys head was cut off when we were watching the movie." It's still running, but it sounds like it's kind of in a rough shape. There is something that they're missing. They don't have that. I remember the Flash Gordon serials we'd see there in Moundsville as a kid. You'd pay thirty-five cents and you could sit there all day if you wanted.

(560) CNK: Someone, someone looked at his work, not an art critic and he said, "don't, don't study art." Is there any kind of a virtue or a value in the work that a fairly untrained artist produces?

MF: I think there is. Yeah, and I've made the same recommendation to students I've had in the past. There's a type, a kind of an honesty and a directness that an untrained artist will have. It's sort of like that, the innocence in the garden almost. They know why they want to make these images in a real direct way, they don't have to justify him from an art historical perspective. There's none of that. They want to make a painting of something for some personal reason and they just do it and if it's good or not, it's almost like "who cares" as far as they're concerned it's what, they're done and then they're on to the next one. And as soon as they begin to be formally trained, all the technical problems, it's like the demons descend upon you.

(583) The longer I paint, for instance, the more I understand the old adage. But it's the truth, the more you work, the more you realize you don't know. Everything from just technical problems with oil and varnishes and what percentages of what will cause what effect. I discovered at some point in time that yellow and black oil paint side by side have such radically different drying times that they tend to pull apart on a canvas. Those are things that now just crowd my thinking and then there's the whole metaphysical arena of "why am I doing this work and is this some sort of personal metaphysical exploration" when I was into working in the abstract and conceptual and environmental. And then now I'm doing these kind of intimate interiors and landscapes which is where I started twenty some years ago and is this regressive or have I come around and have a greater under... I mean, those kind of issues just never impact someone who's untrained. They do a real

direct, honest thing. That's such a precious commodity anymore, that someone is managed to survive and not be caught up in the whirlwind that you want to leave them alone. It's a rare creature in the woods, you don't run into them very often.

(610) CNK: Is there a way in which these kind of untrained works can touch a person. Aside from, I know you said, it's important that they do them and then go on to the next whether it did or not.

MF: Well, we have, for instance, an experience here when we opened, our, it's a small space gallery here in the place, a couple months ago, an artist named Paul White, who's from over in Barnesville, Ohio. Eighty-seven, he's been painting now for three years, I think, and he's written poetry his whole life, but his wife did water color, dabbled with it. And, Pauls' work was about real things, recollections of his childhood. There was a tunnel, train tunnel through a mountain near here, I think up near Bethany, West Virginia, that the local kids would stand at each end of and if you'd pay him a nickel, they would tell you if there was a train coming from the other side, and if you didn't you'd have to ride through and hope that a train didn't come around the bend and nail you in the tunnel. Well, you weren't supposed to be on that track anyway but it was the quickest route. So, these kids had a racket, they were for, they would stand there all day direct traffic through the tunnel and stop it if a train was coming and for a nickel, it was worth your while.

(638) So, he did a painting about that. That sort of thing, that sort of normal, daily, occurrences in someone's life that have that sort of peculiar anecdotal quality. There again, back to that narrative issue. He did one that my wife and I purchased of he and his girlfriend, was a blind woman and they were about to be married and she died suddenly and she was in her late eighties like he was. So, I've got this portrait of the two of them sitting on the couch together and big grins on their face. But, it's a real, "folky" kind of thing and then on the matte of it there's a little poem he wrote about having late in life found this new love and how wonderful it was and then how it had been taken away from him. That's not the sort of thing that most artists won't share that honestly with you or think to include or to scotch tape a poem on the matte of their painting. In that way, they are more direct in communicating. So, yeah, you might find that.

(662) There again, the other side is it is the artist who has studied and trained himself for twenty, thirty, whatever years and has learned to paint and

to deliver the package has, doesn't have the innocence but they've brought a lifetime's worth of skill and experience and sensitivity to that single project and have hopefully executed it in such a way that the experience won't be as direct possibly, but will have, will be a lot richer and will have a lot more staying power. The best art seems to do that. That it, doesn't have that "punch out" quality when you look at it like a piece of folk art might, but it will linger and you can come back to the work again and again and it's always there. I've got pieces, over the years, I've picked up, and after a few years around the house, I've lost interest in. Other paintings I know I never will, better paintings.

- (685) CNK: Wheeling, then this might be an urban ---. Is there an, what makes a folk artist really...
- MF: Marketable, or ...
- CNK: Yes, marketable or ...
- MF: Would people, there again, I think, my honest reaction is that he's trained enough to have taken the edge off of that uniqueness. But, he's still naive enough to be interesting.
- (696) MNK: Look at the treatment of the cars, for example.
- MF: Yeah.
- MNK: He's never owned a car, doesn't drive a car.
- CNK: You can tell.
- MNK: Cars are not, he's got the right number of light bulbs in there. But, cars are just a, they look a little bit Mercedes like, almost European.

END OF SIDE A

SIDE B

MF: A state juried exhibit. The Stifel Mission Statement is to foster and to promote local and regional arts and artists of quality to support community access of and availability to the arts to function as a contemporary gallery, to serve as an intermediary for two partners, artist and viewer. That's the parting line and then what we do annually, for instance, this year, the last two or three years, the former curator here was a real good guy and did a lot of innovative things, real cutting edge sort of work. But, in the process, there was no integrated educational system, so he unfortunately offended a lot of our normal foot traffic. Michael's sort of attitude was "well, if you don't like it and if you don't get it, then you're stupid, so leave me alone." And that, of course, didn't help things. So, what I've done with this coming season is I've backed off of that innovative work to work that shares in both worlds, has an abstract quality as well as a representational quality. And we're going to use that as sort of a "stepping off" point to discuss our education program in workshops and slide lectures with the artists, those two qualities. And then next year, we'll make the exhibit schedule a little more challenging. And then allow more people to get into a hot bathtub easy instead of tossing them into boiling water.

(016) I think by the end of two or three years, we will have loosened things up enough that people are going to be a little easier. And then in other places that I've had the same problem is working. And you still have the same people that grumble and my attitude is "well, wait, next month there'll be a different show here, you might like that one more." But, I think that's what our goal for this coming season is to ease off a little bit and really focus on education and to try to mend some fences. And then, then next year, we'll expand and that I already have a group from Pittsburgh and a group from Cincinnati that have a real variety of work. And included in their proposal, the guy I told you about with the busted tail lights, is one of them. There's the occasional penis, it's going to be those kind of problems. But that's, but it's those kind of things that hopefully by the time we arrive, when the work hits the building that it's not going to be an outcry and the Board will have to come down and they'll be votes of censorship and all that.

(026) Which, I guess, was the case right before I arrived, there was a bronze penis in a case back here in some sort of humor. I think it was a woman artist called a trophy case and she had various insundry things,

but one of these was a bronze penis. And it was a major ordeal for the institute and the Board issue and people coming down here and signs on the walls. I supposed you went blind if you looked too hard. I don't know what the deal was.

MNK: Got warts on you.

MF: Yeah, you did. But we sorted that one out, I think.

CNK: So you really stood there and took quite a quagmire ---

(033) MF: It's the same, it's the same everywhere though, I think, really. It doesn't seem, there are, every place that I've ever been is just had, it's like "well, we're glad you're here because it'll be different than that guy." And then other people will say, "well gee, with you coming in, the place has gone to hell, so I won't come back." Then you just build new alliances and mend fences where you can and cut bait on the ones that are wasting your energy.

MNK: Has it always been thus with the arts?

MF: Seems like it to me. I think there's a huge change going on in the administration of the arts right now. I was just talking to an artist this morning about it and he seemed to concur and I've had similar conversations with administrators in other places. When the NEA was created, thirty some years ago, and I got in about ten years later, involved in this, it was the people that managed these programs and created them were all artists of one sort or another and were trying to make a living. So, the programming was created with a distinctive event and a sympathy toward the artist and his needs. And now, thirty some years later with all of the problems we've had in Washington, with the threat to funding as recently as last, it was last Tuesday, Senator Byrd had introduced a bill to cut forty percent of the national endowments budget. It was voted on, I think, at the tune of five percent. And the Helms amendment that was attached to it were all eliminated, fortunately, but that's the kind of threat that's just been ongoing now since the Maple Thorpe fiasco a few years ago.

(050) But, there part of the reason for the attention is that it's a big chunk of change and the system now, from government sponsored, as well as, private ownership, galleries and what not, has become a multi-million dollar business. And, when that happens, it attracts business people because they see a profit to be made. The arts community has never operated on a profit margin, we've always operated on a break-even or in the red with subsidies from corporations or government. Our goal was the enrichment, the spiritual enlightenment or whatever our

thinking was about. We put the work out there and we hoped that people came through and it touched them in some way and it made them understand that's there's more to life than eating and screwing and various assundry bodily functions. But that's not the case now, the transition is taken place with the amount of dollars that's involved in the system. I'm one of the dinosaurs in the system now, I'm an artist that my degree work is in painting, studio work, and I've learned this administrative business as a mater of survival, not because I went to school for it but I more and more do business with the young administrators who have degrees in arts administration or business and their interest is different than mine.

(066) The system that they're in the process of creating behind my generation is one that in a lot of ways clashes with what it is that we've always thought it was. I think it's inevitable, in ten years if I'm still in the business, it'll be "when is that old fart going to get out of here so we can do the job right."

MNK: It's swung back the other way.

MF: What I expect that will happen is that there will be an alternate art community like there was originally. The store front for, a guy will give it to you for a buck a year because it's his building and he doesn't know what to do with it and there'll be some activity and maybe he can rent it out from under you a year later, kind of thing, paint the ceiling black and give the walls a coat of paint and run orange extension cords around and clamp lights and pipe labels and paste them on the wall and have damn nice parties every month, for openings. Once in a while teach a class, but they become, it was the system that this grew out of and I think that that will come back to life because the money is going to sweep away into this other one.

(077) And the people that are involved in the arts will still take advantage of it when they can. But, I think the administries will be a different creature in a few years, it's inevitable, it's breathing in, breathing out. It's over in the, I think we're breathing out right now. We're headed that way, it's been this way always. My experience with it has been probably like any business though, if you've got good people involved that are committed to the mission, then they will make things happen and they will be hangers on and will be people that will explore the system. I just got a call from the former secretary of the Parkersburg arts center that resigned and they've run through four curators there in

the last year and they're finally going to bring the director, she not aware of, this is on tape and if Pat hears this.. (end of tape)