



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ralph Coburn

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Archives of American Art
750 9th Street, NW
Victor Building, Suite 2200
Washington, D.C. 20001
<https://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions>
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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Ralph Coburn
Identifier:	AAA.coburn95
Date:	1995 May 25-June 23
Extent:	48 Pages (Transcript)
Creator:	Coburn, Ralph, 1923- Brown, Robert F.
Language:	English

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

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.

Biographical / Historical

Ralph Coburn (1923-) is an architect, painter, and designer currently living in Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Ralph Coburn conducted 1995 May 25 and 1995 June 23, by Robert F. Brown, for the Archives of American Art, in Coburn's home, Gloucester, Massachusetts.

Scope and Contents

Coburn talks about his parents and his childhood in Miami Beach, Florida; his early schooling; and entering Massachusetts Institute of Technology, in 1941, in its 5-year architecture program. He recalls Walter Netsch, a classmate at MIT, who later became a partner at Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, who introduced Coburn to modern design and to avant-garde music. He also recalls the painter and head of painting at the Museum of Fine Arts School, Karl Zerbe, his teacher in the course of his work for advanced MIT architecture students. He talks about his return to Florida as a draftsman for an aircraft equipment company in Miami, outfitting planes for the African campaign, and his foreman, a son of Al Capone; then returning to Massachusetts to work with an electrical company making secret military components.

Scope and Contents

Coburn discusses returning to and dropping out of MIT; working at the Institute of Modern Art in Boston through Hyman Swetstoff; following Swetstoff to the Boris Mirski Gallery; studying at Mirski's art school with Esther Geller and John Wilson and friends made at the school, including Ellsworth Kelly, Arthur Polonsky, and Reed Kaye. He recalls Carl Nelson, one of his teachers. He talks about the change in atmosphere at the Institute with the replacement of Thomas Metcalf by James Plaut and Nathaniel Saltonstall who changed the Institute's name to Institute of Contemporary Art and the protest surrounding the name change.

General

Originally recorded on 2 sound cassettes as 4 digital wav files. Duration is 2 hr., 36 min.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

Architecture -- Study and teaching
Designers -- Massachusetts -- Gloucester -- Interviews
Painters -- Massachusetts -- Gloucester -- Interviews

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Sound recordings

Names:

Boris Mirski Gallery (Boston, Mass.)
Institute of Contemporary Art (Boston, Mass.)
Kelly, Ellsworth, 1923-
Massachusetts Institute of Technology -- Students
Nelson, Carl Gustaf, 1898-1988
Netsch, Walter
Plaut, James S. (James Sachs), 1912-1996
Polonsky, Arthur
Saltonstall, Nathaniel, 1903-1968
Swetstoff, Hyman Wulf, 1920-1968
Wilson, John, 1922-2015
Zerbe, Karl, 1903-1972

Occupations:

Architects -- Massachusetts