Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Barbara Novak

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Barbara Novak
Date:	2013 October 8-17
Identifier:	AAA.novak13
Creator:	Novak, Barbara (Interviewee) McElhinney, James Lancel, 1952- (Interviewer)
Extent:	4 Items (Sound recording: 4 sound files (4 hr., 26 min.); digital) 89 Pages (Transcript)
Language:	English .
Digital Content:	Digital Content: Oral history interview with Barbara Novak, 2013 October 8-17, Transcript Audio: Oral history interview with Barbara Novak, 2013 October 8-17, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)

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.

Available Formats

Transcript available online.

Restrictions

Transcript available on the Archives of American Art website.

Biographical / Historical

Barbara Novak (1929-) is an art historian in New York, New York. James McElhinney (1952-) is a painter and educator in New York, New York.

Scope and Contents

An interview with Barbara Novak conducted 2013 October 8-17, by James McElhinney, for the Archvies of American Art, at Novak's home in Manhattan, New York.

Scope and Contents

Novak speaks of her early art training; learning to draw at the age of eight with help from her uncle William Kaufman and later taking art classes with Belle Icahn; Edward Melkoff; Joseph Presser; and classes at the Art Students League; becoming Expressionist in her painting; her year in Europe as a Fulbright student from Harvard University; the powerful lectures of Julius Held at Barnard College that launched her career; feeling that she devised a system by which works of art can be understood through looking closely at their physical properties and how she tries to develop the individual in her students; her time as a docent at the Brooklyn Museum in the American art collection; which led her to becoming an Americanist; her book, "Alice's Neck" and the inspiring Utah landscape; the importance of Fitz Henry Lane's work; the embodiment in American art of Pragmatism and Transcendentalism; and being led to Luminism; her books showing how to understand American culture through art, covering formal, contextual, and spiritual elements; hosting the first television show on art, "Vision of Art"; her husband Brian O'Doherty's background in art; the importance of nature for Cole and Durand; that common sense should be used in describing works of art, rather than assuming current events influenced the artist; her education at Harvard; Margaret Fuller and writing "The Margaret-Ghost"; Marcel Duchamp; Andrew Wyeth; Edward Hopper; Robert Rauschenberg; Mark Rothko; and Lee Krasner; and that the most exhilarating time intellectually for her was the 1960s with a group that included Robert Smithson, Sol LeWitt, Eva Hesse, Peter Hutchinson, Morton Feldman, Mel Bochner, and others. Barbara also recalls Mrs. Nevins, William Scharf, Paul Cormans [ph], Marion Lawrence, Marge Shapiro, Maxim Karolick, William Goetzmann, Ann McCoy, Ben Rowland, Bart Hayes, Ted Reff, Dan Aaron, Louis Bosa, Linda Ferber, Meredith Davis, Marissa Watts, and others.

General

Originally recorded as 4 sound files. Duration is 4 hr., 26 min.

Names and Subject Terms

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

Subjects:

Art -- Study and teaching
Art, American
Expressionism (Art)
Luminism (Art)
Pragmatism

Types of Materials:

Interviews
Sound recordings

Names:

Aaron, Dan
Art Students League (New York, N.Y.) -- Students
Barnard College -- Students
Bochner, Mel, 1940-
Bosa, Louis, 1905-
Brooklyn Museum
Coremans, Paul B., 1908-1965

Davis, Meredith (Meredith J)
Duchamp, Marcel, 1887-1968
Feldman, Morton, 1926-1987
Ferber, Linda S.
Goetzmann, William
Harvard University -- Students
Hayes, Bartlett H., 1904-1988
Held, Julius Samuel, 1905-
Hesse, Eva, 1936-1970
Hopper, Edward, 1882-1967
Hutchinson, Peter A., 1930-
Icahn, Belle
Karolik, Maxim
Kaufman, William
Krasner, Lee, 1908-1984
Lane, Fitz Henry, 1804-1865
Lawrence, Marion
LeWitt, Sol, 1928-2007
McCoy, Ann Wyeth
Melkoff, Edward
Nevins, Kate Lockwood
O'Doherty, Brian
Presser, Josef, 1909-1967
Rauschenberg, Robert, 1925-2008
Reff, Theodore
Rothko, Mark, 1903-1970
Rowland, Ben
Scharf, William, 1927-
Shapiro, Marge
Smithson, Robert
Watts, Marissa
Wyeth, Andrew, 1917-2009

Occupations:

Art historians -- New York (State) -- New York
Fulbright scholars

Places:

Europe -- description and travel
Utah -- Description and Travel