

An interview with George Wardlaw

The following interview is based on our December 29 studio visit with the artist and an in-person discussion two days later. Some points were expanded upon and clarified via follow-up email.

INTERVIEWER: It's mentioned in one of the essays in *Crossing Borders* that the Memphis Academy of Art, which you attended as an undergraduate from 1947 to 1951, encouraged experimentation. Can you say a little bit more about this?

WARDLAW: It was experimental in some ways, depending upon the faculty member. But I would not describe it as an experimental school. As a matter of fact, when I first arrived there, it was very academic. My first drawing experiences there were totally academic, and to my way of thinking, not very good. The first year was drawing pots, pans, and bottles; the second year, casts; third and fourth years, live models.

Bill DeHart, who taught me metal work, I'll never forget, I went to him and said, "Look, I melted this, I burned it. Shall I start over?" He said, "No, no. Lean to your mistakes, do something with it." I did, and I made something different. So that was experimental and he did encourage that kind of attitude. My painting teacher, Ben Bishop, from New York, certainly encouraged students to experiment.

INTERVIEWER: Also that essay said that you had been drawn to nonobjective painting as a student and an artist. Did you feel you had to make a choice between those two things, objective versus nonobjective and, if so, how did you make your choice?

WARDLAW: My second year at art school, I won a prize for objective painting and I won a prize for nonobjective painting. So I was doing both at the same time. It was the influence of my teacher, Ben Bishop, who encouraged us to do different kinds of painting. He was essentially a nonobjective painter, and he and I became very close friends. He lived way out of town and had to take a bus. He was really quite poor and his wife had just had a baby, and they were having a hard time because he didn't get paid much at that time. So I would drive him home every day and would always be invited to dinner. We became almost like brothers. He was a little older than me. It was more like he was my friend as opposed to my teacher. And so I decided that I wanted to do abstract work. Even when I was doing figurative work, it was very abstract, but when I did nonobjective work, it was directly related to my friend and teacher, and also to Kandinsky.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel you received the education you needed to become an artist?

WARDLAW: I do not think of myself as being a well-educated person because my education was one track. It was all art. We were required to take thirty hours of academic work, but I was so wrapped up in art I didn't really give a damn about the academic work. I did it because I was on a GI bill and had to pass certain classes in order to get my education paid for. I've learned enough now that I know what I don't know. And I also know how important making connections is and if you don't have a good education you may be handicapped and limited. From many years of working I have developed an extensive knowledge of art, both the process of making art and the history of art. This along with my own vocabulary of images that I have developed in my work is part of my internal library, and I wish I had the same in general education.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever consider being anything but an artist?

WARDLAW: Yes I did, and I was lucky it didn't turn out. When I was inducted into the Navy, I was intrigued by work of the doctors and corpsmen. One of them noticed and asked if I'd like to be in the Medical Corps. "That sounds terrific," I said, and he signed me up right off. Matter of fact, even in boot camp, I was in a different rank. I was an HA2c, hospital apprentice second class. When I told a friend of mine who was a doctor that I was going to be in the Medical Corps, he said, "When you're not working or in school, I want you to come up to my office and I'll teach you some things," which he did. So when I was inducted, I already had some direct experience. I went through Medical Corps school, took eighteen mini courses, and served as a hospital corpsman until I was discharged. But what I learned is that I didn't want to be a doctor. I didn't like being around hospitals. I didn't like sick people. So I went home to farm. As I said in a speech I gave this summer, my greatest contribution to society was that I decided not to be a doctor.

INTERVIEWER: Once you were out of art school, you applied yourself to becoming a silversmith and quickly gained an international reputation.

WARDLAW: I have done many, many pieces of silverware. And I have no earthly idea where most of them are. They've been sold. Everybody wanted a ring from me. Because my rings were rather unusual. They were like sculptures.

INTERVIEWER: How did you get started with silversmithing?

WARDLAW: When I was a student there, the Memphis Academy of Art brought in a jeweler, for one year. It changed my life. I got into the academic world not through painting, but through silversmithing. I was asked to establish a metals program at the University of Mississippi, and I did that while also becoming a student in the MFA program they were starting there, under the tutelage of David Smith and Jack Tworkov.

INTERVIEWER: When did you stop making jewelry?

WARDLAW: After the 1950s, I did not make any jewelry, aside from a few commissions I undertook when I was teaching at Tripp Lake camp in Maine and two rings I made for my wife, Judy Spivack Wardlaw, in 2003.

INTERVIEWER: From that point on, what did you focus on?

In 1964, after fourteen summers, I stopped teaching at Tripp Lake camp and began teaching in the art department at Yale, where the curriculum did not include crafts. At that point, I became completely immersed in painting. I resigned from Yale in 1968 and accepted a position teaching at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. In 1975 I turned to making sculpture, first in wood and then in aluminum.

INTERVIEWER: Sculpture, like jewelry-making, is also something you have given up. Why?

WARDLAW: I gave up sculpture in 1992. One of the main reasons I did so was it was so physical. I had developed a serious lower back problem and lifting was very difficult.

INTERVIEWER: And at that point you began to focus on painting again?

WARDLAW: I went totally back to painting. I did a series called *Doors*. How did doors get in? When my older son was around fifteen, he gave me a book for Christmas called *Doors*, and he said, “Dad I thought maybe you’d be able to use this in your work.” Oh, come on. But I said, well that’s a nice thought from a fifteen-year-old. Anyway, it stayed on the table for several months and I kept looking at it. I said, wow, doors. I can do something with that, and I did. I did a whole series of doors. They weren’t the doors like he showed me, but the idea of doors; that doors are an entrance, doors close life off, doors open life. All kinds of ideas.

INTERVIEWER: In many ways, your painting and your sculpture and even your early jewelry-making and silversmithing are all sort of synthetically combined in your career and emerging one from the other and retreating back into one another in interesting ways. I’m wondering if those things are not just synthesized but have been at odds with one another?

WARDLAW: Yes, they have at times been at odds with one another. Most people thought I had lost my marbles when I gave up jewelry and silversmithing, because I had developed an international reputation. People loved the work—I still love it—but I don’t think I was crazy to give it up. I went to art school partly by luck, but mainly because I felt that there was something I wanted to say and didn’t yet have a way to express it. Part of the feeling that I had something to say came from religion, I think, in that I felt very strongly about spirit and spirituality. I was a very accomplished jeweler, but jewelry-making didn’t give me the ability to say what I wanted to say. It afforded me the opportunity to use my aesthetic judgment but it was not capable, in my opinion, of being expressive like painting and sculpture, which was very important to me.

At one point, some of my jewelry was so popular that people would want me—almost like a printmaker—to make a series of the same thing. There was one thing in particular I had made, a fish shape, that everybody wanted. I made a second and a third of it, and then a fourth, which wasn't as good as the first one had been. And I said, "I don't want to do this anymore. I want to be a painter, not a maker of objects to sell."

INTERVIEWER: Has painting and spirituality been connected for you throughout your career?

WARDLAW: Off and on. After I completed the seven *Exodus* sculpture pieces in 1992, I made a hundred or more works on paper and Mylar, all spiritually related. My last really spiritually-related work, however, was the Maine series of paintings that I undertook when my wife was sick with multiple myeloma. My wife and I both referred to Maine as our spiritual home, a place we spent most summers and both loved. If, after I retired, we hadn't had family here, we probably would have gone to Maine to live. Her illness had an incredible impact on me, and doing spiritual work at the time, knowing that her time was limited, certainly made a lot of sense. After my wife died, I drifted away from that and the work gradually changed.

INTERVIEWER: When did your interest in art and spirituality begin?

WARDLAW: I wrote my thesis for an English course on Kandinsky's book, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*. And once Ben Bishop, the teacher I've spoken of before, approached me in class from the back. He looked at my painting and said, "Wow George, that's terrific. That belongs in a museum of nonobjective art in New York." And then he said, "I have a name for

that painting. It should be called *Spiritual Journey*. That encounter, along with Kandinsky, put me on the road to spiritualism in my work. Spirituality played a big role in my work over the years. It is not playing a particular role in, at least I think, in my current work. I think spirit is playing much more of a role.

INTERVIEWER: What is the difference between spirit and spirituality?

WARDLAW: Spirit and spiritualism, spirituality, have common grounds. But spirituality is more religious-based than, just say, spirit is. I think spirit is broader. And so I'm trying to make my paintings have spirit to them. An uplifting physical quality as opposed to a mental quality. Spiritualism is more directed toward the heart, I think. The so-called soul.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you convert to Judaism? I know from the essay by Ori Soltes, a leading authority on Jewish art, in *Crossing Borders* that that's been an important part of your art and your identity.

WARDLAW: I grew up in the Bible belt. My father was a Sunday school teacher, and I went to church every Sunday. I became a member of the church at one time. The minister was telling sad stories. I was crying and an old lady behind me said, "Go up and join the church, go up and convert." And so I did and I was baptized. Now, when I was able to really start thinking for myself about religion I gradually began to question it. Eventually I tried a lot of different churches and didn't find anything that really interested me.

Then, I met Ben Bishop my second year in art school, who was my teacher and happened to have been Jewish. He was such a major influence on me that I thought, "Well, there must be something about being Jewish." And then, I had Jack Tworkov as a teacher.

Jack Tworkov was Jewish. So many of the artists I admired, especially of the abstract expressionist group, were Jewish. I wondered why that was. But the most significant thing with me was that I was offered a job to head the arts and crafts program at a Jewish girls' summer camp in Maine. They had Friday evening services out under the trees overlooking the lake, and it was a beautiful, beautiful experience.

I met my wife to be when she was a student at State University of New York, New Paltz. We were married in 1957. We were different ages, different religions, etc. She wasn't religious. She happened to have been born Jewish. The first time my wife was actually in a synagogue was with me. It seemed like this was a perfect time for me to consider converting to Judaism. So I studied with a rabbi and converted. I thought at the time, having grown up in a formal religion, that I needed a formal connection with religion other than my own spirituality. Gradually I became more interested in the spiritual than in religion. Though, that being said, two of my major works are Jewish themed, *Exodus I* and *Exodus II*. Now, why did I do those? I did those two projects between 1987 and 1992, and I think I paid a debt to the fact that I was accepted into a religion very different from Southern Baptist.

INTERVIEWER: The Exodus Series, Maine Series, Door Series—as an artist, you have often worked in series. Why is this?

WARDLAW: I would say that the notion of how you take one thing and develop it—kind of like thematic development—came from Jack Tworkov. In the beginning, he had freshman painters work on paper, lousy paper, with just ordinary house paint. He'd say, do ten. Then he would sit down with the individuals and they would talk about the ten. Which ones of

the ten do you like best? They'd separate them. Narrow it down to, let's say, one, and he would say then, now that's your subject matter for your next ten.

INTERVIEWER: You have referred a couple of times to race and the impact upon you of having come from a segregated South. Can you talk about some of your most striking memories from growing up?

WARDLAW: I grew up very, very poor because my father had a tubercular kidney, which he had to have removed. He spent two years in a TB sanatorium. Because he was so weak, working was difficult for him, but there was no choice other than farming. In a sense, growing up, I was segregated. I was segregated from the town nearby because, if you owned a plantation out in the country, that's one thing. But we were sharecroppers, and that's something else. Living right next to us was a black couple and, growing up as poor as I did, I related closely to them. My family would offer them leftovers and the use of our well for water, and they would offer us rides in their car—my family couldn't afford a car. I would go to their house and they would offer me food. If my parents had known, they probably would have said, "You're not supposed to eat there." My neighbor's nickname was "Candyboy" and he had a French harp, which he let me play. Again, that would have not been approved of. I would say I was never a racist but that some in the community were, in the sense that they followed the norms and rules of the day. I think my father was rather liberal in his thinking and attitudes. It's interesting that my father and mother grew up differently from each other. My mother grew up in a family whose father owned four hundred acres of land, and he had a lot of houses on the land and different people would either rent or share crop on his plantation. My father's family never owned land.

One of the reasons I left the south was because of the racial issues, and I felt guilty about that, because I thought, “Well, here I am a sympathetic person. I should stay here and work on this. But then I said, “I’m an artist. There are no opportunities here.” The opportunity to move to New Paltz, New York, and earn a living and be within two hours of the art center of the world, and to separate myself from the racial attitudes of the south—all these things combined caused me to leave. One of my mentors, Jack Tworokov, a visiting professor from New York City, was disturbed by the racial relationships in the south and said he would never come back to the South until it was integrated.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any especially important turning points for you as an artist?

WARDLAW: Everything in my life has to some degree been an accident, beginning with how I went to art school as a result of meeting a friend of mine on the street. My family didn’t plan anything for me. Over and over again, I was at the right place at the right time with an open mind, ready for opportunity

I’ve never applied for a job. I got my first teaching job at the University of Mississippi, because one of my former teachers saw an exhibition of my jewelry and offered me a job to start a metals program at the school. At Louisiana State University, I met the art department chair at a party at a conference, and he said to me, “What’s your name?” When I said George Wardlaw, he said, “Oh, I juried an exhibition in New Orleans recently and we gave you first prize. We really liked your work. Do you want a job at LSU?” When the chair at LSU went to SUNY New Paltz, he invited me to join him and start a silversmithing program there, which I did. When I left SUNY New Paltz to spend time in my studio painting, Tworokov got in touch with me and said, “How about coming to Yale?” A few years

later, one of the faculty members from UMass Amherst came to Yale and after I showed him around I was approached to take a job at UMass. That's the story of my life. My art has been very much like that. I guess I trust my luck.

INTERVIEWER: Ori Soltes discusses the notion of dispute and the subject of the miraculous in your work. This was in reference to your works that transform painting into sculpture and sculpture into architecture. Can you talk about this a bit? Is this an accurate assessment of your efforts?

WARDLAW: Well, miraculous is his word. I think he used the word miraculous in reference to the size of the piece he discussed, which was very large, 30 feet long, 12 feet wide, 20 feet tall, and, in a sense, it was miraculous for me to move from jewelry, that scale, to painting, a different scale, and then from sculpture to a scale that was almost architectural/monumental. *Interior Garden* was commissioned by the Johnson Wax Corporation. And the interesting thing about the piece is that it is architectural in itself, made of aluminum and painted with acrylic paint. The way it is painted is entirely different from the form. The scale of it is such that the architect who was renovating the building was a little upset when he saw the model for it. Sam and Karen Johnson, the owners of Johnson Wax, said, "No, we want it all." So it was a mix of painting, which was expressionist, impressionist, on a surface that was architectural. And it fit extremely well into the environment.

INTERVIEWER: Is that your largest finished work?

WARDLAW: Yes, that is the largest work I've ever completed.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have to rent a special space in order to work at such a large scale?

WARDLAW: I did it here in this studio. It was designed in four different sections. Because I didn't think the piece would be accepted in its entirety, I designed each unit as a complete thing unto itself, thinking they could choose what they would like, like a Chinese menu. It took me about a year and a half to complete.

INTERVIEWER: Also in the Soltes essay is a reference to your concern for creating works with an energized presence. What do you mean by this and why is that important?

WARDLAW: When I did the *Exodus Project II*, I showed it at the University Museum of Contemporary Art at UMass Amherst in 1992. It occupied most of the space. I was asked to give a talk about it at the time, and what I said then is relevant to what you are asking now. I called my talk "A Conflict of Extremes." As a matter of fact, the piece for Johnson Wax Headquarters is a conflict of extremes—it is an extremely large structure, constructed of extruded architectural aluminum with a highly reflective surface with scumbled paint that energizes the surface, along with the huge geometric form which creates contrast and a commanding active presence. I'd like to read you an excerpt from a lecture I gave related to the exhibition at UMass.

My formal training occurred during the heyday of abstract expressionism, which was a major influence and at the same time also provided the model for my ongoing conflict. On the one hand, there were painters like Willem de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, who represented the action side of painting characterized by hyperactive, seething surfaces. And on the other hand there were painters like Mark Rothko,

Barnett Newman and Ad Reinhardt, who represented quietism and restraint. Both groups were pushing toward extremes. I found myself in great sympathy with both directions and, as a result, a conflict of extremes has followed me even to this day.

After I graduated from the Memphis Academy of Art, I studied—as I mentioned—with Jack Tworkov and David Smith at the University of Mississippi. They, Tworkov and Smith, were very different presences and yet both of these artists and their work influenced me tremendously. David Smith was a big boisterous man, outspoken, whereas Tworkov was a mild-mannered, almost meek individual. Tworkov was more of a formalist in his work and Smith later challenged the status quo with the burnished swirling surfaces of his sculpture. In a sense, I incorporated these seemingly opposing approaches, what I now refer to as a conflict of extremes, in my early work, and actually throughout the rest of my life. I'm still working with this tension today.

INTERVIEWER: Can you say more about what you mean by “energized” and why it is important?

WARDLAW: I think much good art is energized in one way or another. Certainly we understand how a work by Pollock or de Kooning is energized. It's physically energized. I think a work by someone like Rothko is spiritually energized. It's very powerful, but in a quiet, reserved way.

INTERVIEWER: What are you working on now?

WARDLAW: My current work involves going back to my previous work—or library, as I think of it—and picking up parts of it. I’m excited about the potential of bringing my past and present together, using my own unique visual vocabulary—mined from my previous works. I’ll go down to my studio with my camera and I’ll photograph my paintings from various angles. I’ll photograph the work from over here; I’ll photograph it from over there, low and high, to see it differently. Then I download the photographs to my computer—I never thought in my life that I would ever do this—and combine the images, and then I photograph those images from the computer screen. From the fifty or more images that I’ve developed, I decide on one and project it onto the canvas, knowing that I’m not going to copy what I’m projecting. Rather, I’m going to use it as a starting point. When I first set to work, I’m not too excited about it. At some point I say, “Oh wow that’s kind of exciting.” It’s then that the painting begins to develop. It is not in the photographing of it; that’s part of it. It’s not in the computer; that’s part of it. It is not in the projector; that’s part of it. It’s actually the painting process that is the exciting part.

INTERVIEW: Why are you going back to your previous work and juxtaposing images you did in different styles and at different points in your career in opposing pairs?

WARDLAW: Part of my reason for bringing these different works and vocabularies together is to contrast them. I am not yet sure myself where I’m going with this most recent body of paintings and am reluctant to nail it down at this point because I want the process, the evolution of the painting, to determine whether it is valid, whether it is as exciting as I think it will be. When I did that painting, *Connections*, I questioned whether or not I should do it in the first place, working with geometric forms on the left side of the painting and an

image of an apple tree on the right. I said to myself, "If I don't do it, I'll never know." When I started to do this particular group of works, which I am calling the Evolution-Spirit series, I wanted to do something that was exciting visually, that was exciting in terms of spirit. I was thinking that I wanted to make work that was equal in spirit to Matisse's late work [the paper cutouts]. That's a big undertaking.

In doing it, I have come to realize there is another subject matter in the work, that of differences in our culture, of people working together, living together, cooperating. I have yet to decide if there is a conflict between that and the spirit that I want the work to have. I will have to find the answer to that question in the process of working.

INTERVIEWER: In your current work you talk about working within and drawing material up from your life's experience and from your past work. As you're taking these earlier works and bringing them together and recombining them, are you also seeing your life and your feelings in a kind of retrospective way?

WARDLAW: I don't know for sure and I'm not ready to nail it down. When I am looking at my old work, I am trying to find out how I can use it. I'm not evaluating it, nor am I necessarily appreciating it.

INTERVIEWER: You mention the influence of Matisse. Can you talk more about that?

WARDLAW: The first time I saw Matisse's work, the cutouts, at the Museum of Modern Art in 1961, I thought they were hard edge, geometric paintings. I went to see them a few years later in Washington, and they were the same paintings but not the same paintings. I saw all the cut marks, I saw all the staples, I saw the working process and originally I had seen only

the color and the hard edges because of the kind of work I was planning at that time. I didn't see the work for what it was. Matisse is my hero and I would like to try to do something that is equivalent to the spirit of Matisse but is George Wardlaw.

INTERVIEWER: Have any other painters had a major influence on you and your work?

WARDLAW: Over the span of my career, Kandinsky was more of an influence. But mainly in painting.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think of your painting process as having a beginning, a middle, and an end?

WARDLAW: With my current work, once I project it onto the canvas, I draw on it, sometimes with charcoal, sometimes with pencil or a mixture of the two depending on the container that I'm working with. And then I start to paint and actually that is the most difficult part of the process, where you start. Often it is, "Well, I'll start with this color or I'll start with that color." It's not until the painting starts the conversation with me that I get excited about it and begin to know how to follow the painting. In the beginning, I don't know how and it's discovered in the process.

INTERVIEWER: I know this question is asked a lot, but how do you know when you're done?

WARDLAW: If my son were down here, he would say, he doesn't know. I'll come upstairs and I'll say, Well it's done, and Stephen will say, Are you sure? I think so. Well, let's wait until tomorrow. I'll come back tomorrow. Hmm. Maybe I could work on that a little more.

A painting very often is finished three or four times before it's finished. In a way a painting is never finished. You just stop working on that one and go to the next one and the next one. Hopefully, they're never finished. I said to Stephen the other day, I never hope to do my masterpiece because if I do maybe I will lose the drive. I think the most important thing that an artist can have is drive. You really want to find out what's on the other side and hope that you don't find it because if you find it, it may end the trail. That's kind of my attitude about finished work.

INTERVIEWER: When you sit down to work on a painting that is not finished, how do you commence to work?

WARDLAW: The key phrase is when I *sit down*, and I do sit down. Where I might start depends to some degree on how long I've been away from the painting. Usually, not more than one night will have passed. I am a deep believer in what I think is a fact, that although you are sleeping, your brain goes on working, including on the paintings (or whatever) you were doing the day before. So when you come in the morning and take a fresh look at your work, it has changed because the brain changed it overnight. The last thing I do before I go to bed at night is go to the studio and look at the work because I want that new image in my head. Often a painting that I thought was something rare like "eggs laid by a tiger"—that's a quote from Dylan Thomas—when I left, no longer appears so in the morning.

So I sit and look. This reminds me of Jack Tworkov. It was always said about him that he stared a painting to death, because he looked at it so much. He sat and looked and sat and looked. You sit and look and contemplate and you talk to yourself and the painting talks to you. It's a back and forth situation, and it's when the painting begins to take over

the conversation that it gets really exciting, that interaction between the painting and the painter. And you wait for the message. “Okay, you need to change that color or you need to change that shape or something.” And you do it and that sets the work in motion again. It renews the painting. If you thought it was finished, you realize it obviously wasn’t.

INTERVIEWER: Setting the painting in motion... Can you say more about that?

WARDLAW: The painter Lester Johnson, a colleague of mine at Yale and a close friend, used to say that when he got really stuck with a painting, he’d load up the brush, put it behind his back, walk over to the painting and turn his back to the painting, and then blindly paint on it. This would set the painting in motion again. Not by looking at the painting, but by just destroying something arbitrarily, the painting was set in motion again. Well, I don’t do that, but I do set my work in motion sometimes by arbitrarily changing something, maybe by smearing a line or painting over an image—anything to disrupt the finished appearance of the work when I’m not satisfied with it. At that point, any disruption is fair game.

INTERVIEWER: When you work, are you consciously looking for an opportunity to expand or are you looking for closure?

WARDLAW: I’m always looking for a means to expand because I am still learning. I learn something every day that I come to the studio, and if that were not true, I must be dead.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk about how you approach color in your paintings?

WARDLAW: I think color is very important. It is one of the most expressive things that one uses in one’s art. For me, color is greatly affected by place and environment. In 1955, when

I moved to Louisiana, bayou country, my paintings became a different color because place always affects my work. The same was true when I moved to New Paltz, New York, and bought a house on a hill that looked down into the valley and up into the mountains. There was a river down below, and the days were often foggy. Whereas in Louisiana, my paintings became more muted in color and less expressive, at first in New Paltz my work became gray. I was painting landscapes in my studio at the time, not from direct observation, but, still, I looked out the picture window all day long, and my paintings were influenced by the grayness outside. As a result of something that was said to me about my work at the time, my work changed. I became more aware of color and more intentional, more conscious in my use of it. The first series that showed that was my apple paintings, which eventually turned out to be containers for flat color.

When I think about my current interest in making paintings about spirit, I think color will be the primary force. Matisse's paper cutouts are an excellent example. I don't yet know for sure what container—shape and forms—the color's going to be in, but I know it's going to be about color because that is to my way of thinking the best means of dealing with exuberant spirit.

INTERVIEWER: What was said to you in New Paltz that caused you to change direction with color and start your apple series?

WARDLAW: It's interesting to me to notice how things that are said affect me and my work. The reason I left the gray paintings I was doing in New Paltz was because of something almost incidental that was said to me. The artist Paul Burlin, who was in his early eighties at the time, came to SUNY New Paltz to teach for a semester. He and I became close friends.

He would come to my house and have dinner every Monday night and, along with watching boxing matches on TV, he would look at my paintings. After looking at my gray paintings , he asked, “What are you trying to do?” And wow, that hit me mighty hard. What are you trying to do? I took that to mean he didn’t know. And I didn’t have an answer for him. I thought about it and talked to myself, “Well, okay, I *don’t* really know. As a result of that discussion, I stopped painting for six months, until one day when I was riding in the back seat of a car and was kind of nodding off to sleep. All of a sudden, I woke up and said, “Now I know what I want to paint. I want to paint an apple.” That started what was to become my *Apple* series, which I worked on for thirteen years.

Over these past few years, my son would often talk to me about my work, but he has gradually stopped doing so. I haven’t asked him why, because I think I know why—he doesn’t want to lead me. He knows that I might take something he says about the work too seriously, and possibly modify the work.

INTERVIEWER: Over the years of painting, you’ve been inventing yourself out of yourself and working in many different mediums, in a lot of different ways. Have you noticed any consistencies in either your working methods or in your work itself?

WARDLAW: There is a consistency in my work and an inconsistency in my work. The way I work, that is going to happen, and sometimes, as I’ve said before, I get on the wrong track. But sometimes when I get on the wrong track and I keep it. I get back on track and it becomes part of another series.

I periodically do paintings that are misfits. They aren’t “bad” paintings, but failures in terms of consistent development. I personally have a fear of being too consistent. I feel

some artists are too damn consistent. When my mother was alive, I used to tell her I had to go to the studio and work. She would say, “George, you have a studio full of work. You don’t need any more.” She never understood what made me tick. She was always proud of me and my accomplishments, but had no understanding about the drive creative people have to continue evolving.

INTERVIEWER: How important do you think having a sense of art history is to appreciating or understanding your paintings, and I would say by extension appreciating and understanding most paintings? Do you expect that people who come to your work, and to art in general, will have a background and knowledge in art?

WARDLAW: I’d like to start off by focusing on the word “understanding.” Sometimes to talk of “understanding” a work makes sense, but sometimes it doesn’t. I think, for example in my *Cycles: Time-Light-Life* series, from 2000, “understanding” is applicable because I can literally explain the timing mechanism, how it tells time. I can literally speak about how color affects the time and so forth. And that is one way of understanding. It’s not the only way of understanding that work, but it is one way.

I think understanding art with one’s soul, one’s inner self, is another way of understanding it—in a kind of spiritual way. I think that is a way one can understand and experience my series of sculptures, *Exodus I* and *II*. That is how Ori Soltes wrote about them, because he clearly understood and experienced what I was doing. But in a lot of my work to use the word “understand” is a misapplication or misuse of the term, because I would rather people respond to it than understand it. Like, for example, people respond to Rothko. You *experience* Rothko. You don’t understand Rothko. At least that’s my thinking. If

I project a 10-foot square of red, one might look at it and say, “Wow, that’s really something else,” but not understand it. There is nothing to understand. It’s something to experience.

INTERVIEWER: You’ve said you want to be seen as making intelligent work. What does this mean?

WARDLAW: I want the work to be strong, to have power. That power and that strength comes from many different sources. I want the work to be well done, and when I say well done, I don’t necessarily mean craft-wise, but well done globally, that everything collectively holds together with a thread of tension.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a bit about mark making—what does this mean to you?

WARDLAW: When I came here to the UMass Amherst, and became the director of the graduate program in art, I insisted on having group critiques at least two times a semester, much to the unhappiness of some of the faculty. I brought the students and faculty together so they could communicate. This one faculty member would look at the work and say, “Those are nothing but art marks.” Now what are art marks? They are nice aesthetic superficial marks that have been learned from other artists. Marks are a part of the material like texture woven into the fabric of the work. Tworkov always said that texture and surface should be the result of the painting process, not superficially applied.

I think the same thing is true with line. It’s very important how you use it. I start all my paintings with line. The first thing I do when I start painting is actually destroy the drawing. Painting to me is a process of building and destroying, building and destroying. If something is too precious, I consider destroying it before it misleads the whole painting.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a division in your process then between drawing and painting? It sounds like there isn't.

WARDLAW: I don't think there should be. I think that painting is a process of drawing, that they're not separate from each other, they are integrated into each other. And both are important. I think that you can do paintings that have no visible drawing in them. However, for example, if you are painting a geometric form it's impossible to do it without drawing. Even if you use tape to create an edge, it creates a line that defines the geometric shape.

INTERVIEWER: Do you look at paintings you have done and assess them based on certain criteria?

WARDLAW: I don't use a checklist. By checklist I mean that you look at a painting you've done and go down through the list: "the color, the line, etc..." It's about the totality—how the various elements are working together... how all of these elements are talking to each other, how they're communicating with each other. Some people might say I'm trying to assess if the painting "works," but I've always thought that a strange word to use as regards a painting, does it *work*? How does it *work*? I'm looking for the painting to almost fall apart, but doesn't—as if unseen glue holds it all together.

Now, full of conflict. After I've said that, let's say I decide that there's a problem of color. In a way then I do use a checklist, in the sense that I go around and I look at my recent paintings. Or I look at someone else's work or at a color chart and try to decide what color to replace another color with. So there's no overall checklist, but there's a checklist for individual elements.

INTERVIEWER: You were clearly a consummate craftsman in working with silver in three-dimensional form. What do you consider to be good craftsmanship in painting?

WARDLAW: Craftsmanship in painting varies greatly depending on what you're painting, how you're painting. If you are doing geometric abstraction, craftsmanship is one thing. Depending on what you want it to look like and why, sculpting or painting in a "sloppy" way is sometimes good craftsmanship if that gets the life into it that you want. But that is opposed to the normal thinking of craft, right, as a kind of precision and polish and perfection?

One of the big questions I have with my current work is whether it is too clean, too finished. And yet when I am working on it, I do keep refining it and refining it. But craft can kill a painting. Craft can kill any work. So, basically the craft of painting is different from the craft, let's say, of jewelry and maybe that's the difference, and maybe that's the reason it's called craft. I never thought about messing a piece of jewelry up because it was too finished. My wife also made jewelry and, over the years, she became as good as I was, maybe better. I sometimes criticized her work, because it was too perfect. If there was a scratch, that had to come out; if there were the slightest bit of fire scale on it, it had to come out; every file mark had to come out. I would say to her, "You're taking some of the life out of it. You're taking some of the process out of it."

Speaking of that takes me back to when I was doing the geometric sculpture. My craftsmanship in those pieces was impeccable. After I finished the Johnson Wax project, I came home and said, "Now I'm finished with that and I'm not going to allow myself to get trapped by that perfection again. So I took a grinder to aluminum, which costs a lot, and I

defaced it, I put it in a condition that meant it could never be perfect again. And that liberated me to approach the material and the shape and so forth with an open, free mind and paint it like I was painting it almost like as an expressionist.

INTERVIEWER: Is there any difference between the craft you bring to painting and the craft you bring to sculpture?

WARDLAW: The major difference is in the material used. Each material requires a different process, and the craft is pretty unique to each material. Forming and finishing greatly depends on the material, but also on the nature of the image. Since there is such a wide variety, making meaningful comparisons is difficult if not impossible.

INTERVIEWER: The work you have done throughout your life seems to have been titled in very intentional ways. Can you talk about the role of titles in your work—and in visual art more generally?

WARDLAW: Many, many people tell me that in looking at my work or looking at the book, they're fascinated by the titles of my work, especially literary people. I think titles are important for communication purposes in general. They are also important because they can offer a clue as to the thinking that went into the work. And they better identify a work generally than let's say a number.

Titling paintings is not easy for me. It's a slow process. I titled my most recent series of paintings the other day and spent nearly the whole day on it. In titling these paintings, I realized that they are about several things. Though I started out to make them about spirit, forcing myself to title them made me aware that they *are* visually about spirit but they're

also about something else. That is the dilemma I find myself in, and that is something I will have to address in future work.

[But] Let's say I go to an exhibition in New York—and I go to a lot of exhibitions—and I come back to Amherst and discover that a friend of mine visited the same exhibition at so and so gallery. When we talk about the paintings, we probably won't cite them by title because we haven't really paid much attention to titles. What we would say to each other might be, "The big painting, the big red painting or the big yellow painting or the one with stripes going all the way across horizontally"—that is, we identify them in a visual way.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel when your work is bought by someone and leaves the studio?

WARDLAW: When the work leaves the studio, it changes or alters what the work is about. The work becomes about the experience of the viewer. About the experience of the critic, perhaps. The paintings and artwork that leave the studio are almost like children, when they leave your home: you don't always know how they have changed or what they are "thinking" because they are relating to a different world. I'm interested and excited when I do have the opportunity to learn what other people, with their unique eyes and experiences, see in my work. I am very often surprised by what someone else has noticed that I didn't even think about.

INTERVIEWER: Given the intuitive way you have always worked, it must be wonderful at eighty-eight, after sixty plus years of working, to not know or be entirely sure where you

are heading with a painting, since that implies that you're still learning and discovering things.

WARDLAW: Yes, in a way, I can't wait to see my next painting because I don't know what it will be until I do it. I mean, I may have general ideas about it, but I don't really know until I have really called it finished. And as I said, it's never finished—it continues in the next and future works. Which makes me happy because it's something to look forward to, a Mount Everest climb.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any regrets about your career?

WARDLAW: Tworkov—I cite Tworkov a lot, don't I? Tworkov was a big, big influence on me. Tworkov used to say he had never yet met an artist who thought they had received their fair dues, that they had been adequately recognized. That might also be my only professional regret, but we're still working on that.

No, I have no regrets, yet on the other hand, I have one regret. Professionally I have no regrets, but personally I do.

It's story time. When I was approached about joining the art department at UMass, my wife did not want to leave Yale and New Haven. She did not want to move to this area. I sold her on the move—and I think I was being honest at the time—by saying that it would allow me to earn more and spend my time just teaching and being an artist. At Yale, I was an administrative assistant to Jack Tworkov, who was chair at the time. He was on campus two or two-and-a-half days a week and spent most of his time teaching, which was good. Meanwhile, I took care of the day-to-day operations, which was a big theft of time.

I was at UMass-Amherst for two weeks, when I went to a party at the house of the then chairman of the art department. He pulled me aside and said, "You know, we started an MFA program about two years ago. Your experience at Yale should make you a great graduate director. How about becoming the director of the graduate program and giving that place down south, Yale, some competition?" So we went home, and I said to Judy, "The chairman wants me to be the director of the graduate program. What do you think?" She said, "Are you interested?" I said I was. She said, "George, it's your life. If you think you want to do it, go ahead, do it." I said, "I think this is a great challenge for me."

So I became the director of the graduate program, and the chair said, "It's your baby, you're in charge, run it the way you want to. I'm an art historian, you're the artist." I made a lot of changes almost immediately. Then the chair of the department wanted to step down. We did a national search and at some point some of the faculty said, "You need to be the chair." I had three young children at the time. So I went home and said to Judy, "Now they want me to be head of the art department. What do you think?" "It's your life." She wasn't particularly happy about it, because it took me away more. Now, one of my regrets is that art and administration took me away from my family a lot. The administration position and financial rewards allowed me to support my family, but in another way, it was a theft.

INTERVIEWER: We came to be in touch with you because you were recently diagnosed with macular degeneration. How does being a mature artist put pressure on you to work in certain kinds of ways that you didn't work before? In asking this, we're not expecting or thinking that it's all about limitations and things becoming more diminished as you get

older. What we're interested in talking about, rather, is the way the body is involved in art and the body has, creates, certain possibilities as a result of that.

WARDLAW: That's definitely true.

INTERVIEWER: When were you diagnosed with macular degeneration?

WARDLAW: I was diagnosed about two years ago and when I was told what my problem was, I didn't really know what macular degeneration was. I think I'm doing as much as I can about it at this point. I use a lot of eye drops. I use a good bit of ointment, particularly in my left eye. I take vitamins regularly. I see the doctor regularly. And how it affects me is I'd say more in close up. It affects me in reading. My eyes get very tired. I don't read as much as I used to. My use of the computer and painting doesn't bother me as much as reading does. The last exam that I had, the doctor said, it hasn't changed since the last one before.

INTERVIEWER: Are you making any plans or do you have any anxieties as you think ahead to what might happen if the vision does worsen?

WARDLAW: Naturally I think about it. I am such an optimist. I generally look on the positive side of everything and don't think about it too much, except when my eyes get tired. I know they're not going to improve. I'm aware they're going to get worse. But it's slow developing. Hopefully I'll get through and will not be affected. That's my optimism.

INTERVIEWER: What are the advantages and disadvantages of being a mature painter?

WARDLAW: Speaking for myself, I have a better vocabulary now. I have more to draw on. I think that is the reason that older artists, if they continue to work, do their best work when

they're older. I think of the fact that Matisse came up with some of his best work after his illness [intestinal cancer], when he had to find a new means to develop his work. I was recently reading about Ellsworth Kelly, who in his later years said he couldn't paint as big anymore.

INTERVIEWER: Our work with the Vision in Art Projects aims to look at the subject of sight and what it means to see. This is a vast subject, as you know. What does "seeing well" mean to you?

WARDLAW: Sight to the optometrist is different from what sight is to an artist. Sight to the eye doctor is about the physical part of seeing. It's about measuring, about seeing if everything is working together to give you 20/20 vision. But there is a difference between the physiological process of sight and *seeing* in the way an artist—and many other people—see. It's good to have 20/20 vision, but you really see with the brain. In fact, I would say that it is the brain that gives sight, and life experiences that give vision.

INTERVIEWER: If you had any advice to give to younger artists, what would it be?

WARDLAW: Let me answer this by saying that when I was teaching at Yale, one of the students asked me if he should be an artist. I said "no," and he asked me, "How can you be so damn sure?" I said, "Because you had to ask me." If you have to ask somebody if you should be an artist, if you don't already know yourself, if you don't have something to say, the answer is no. I said, "If you had asked me if I think you have the talent to be an artist, my answer would have been different. I would have said, 'from what I see, yes, you

probably do have the talent,' but *should* you be an artist, ask that question, the answer is no."

What is crucial in education and art, or maybe in anything, is learning to make connections between things, learning how to bring things together. One of the most difficult problems of sculpture or jewelry-making, is how to connect two things, three things, four things, or maybe even more. That's a physical kind of connection. Then there are mental connections. How do you learn to make these connections?

In hindsight, I've come to feel that the most important thing anyone can do to prepare them for life—and art—is to obtain a good liberal education—which I didn't have. In my opinion, a liberal arts education gives you a broader connection to the world in which you live, and the ability to make connections between things. I've always regretted that I didn't have a chance to go to Amherst College. First of all, I couldn't have gotten in. They may not even have let me on the campus. I tell my grandchildren, look, you may learn to be a drummer but there's a lot to know in order to make the kind of connections you really need to make. You can learn the techniques of drumming and playing, but you also need something in your head to play.

While art involves technique and craftsmanship, by far the greater part of art is thinking—the ability to formulate, make connections, bring things together. Craftsmanship plays a role in how you say what you want to say. One of the most important things that a student can learn is—I use this as an analogy—how to use the "public" library, how to use your "*personal*" library. Getting an education is just the beginning. One of the most important things is how you use it—how you go about learning what you don't know.

