

A'Dora Phillips & Brian Schumacher

The Vision & Art Project

An Oral History with Serge Hollerbach

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### **An Oral History with Serge Hollerbach**

*This oral history was compiled from two recorded conversations in the Manhattan studio of Serge Hollerbach with A'Dora Phillips and Brian Schumacher, respectively, in early 2014. Serge Hollerbach reviewed the transcript and made corrections in 2016. We originally posted this in January 2017 at the Vision & Art Project website.*

INTERVIEWER(S): How do you usually spend your days now? Do you paint regularly?

HOLLERBACH: I'm an artist, a writer, a cook, and a caretaker. My wife, who is 86, had two hip replacements and walks with difficulty. In the morning I go shopping and then she cannot, she has arthritic hands, she can't even peel potatoes, so I cook. In the afternoon, I usually do something, either typing or drawing or painting, or making telephone calls, and then my social life is still, I wouldn't say inactive. I'm honorary president of American Watercolor Society. On the 11<sup>th</sup> of April [2014] I'll be at their annual meeting at the Salmagundi Club. And then there will be dinner. I will receive a prize of \$500 for a small painting which shows the legs of a girl and a dog. It's called *Girl and Dog*. It was done early this year. I like to say that only in America, blind people can paint and receive prizes.

INTERVIEWER: I know you're legally blind, but what does that mean for you?

HOLLERBACH: Well, I see your face, but I have to come very close to you to, because I see you're a nice young lady, let's put it this way. But I couldn't do a portrait, I couldn't sketch you. I see everything in a blur. It's out of focus.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a dark spot in the center of your eye?

HOLLERBACH: Yes, the central vision is affected. But my peripheral vision is also not that good. I see color the way I used to see it. No change. I didn't lose the big shape. It's the details.

Well, I do what I can. I don't consider it a great tragedy. Of course some people say, "Oh Serge, for an artist to be blind." I'm happy to be here and to be alive.

INTERVIEWER: When did you start to realize your vision was changing?

HOLLERBACH: My macular degeneration started in late 1994, one eye, this eye. I had laser surgery, and it got a little worse, but it was stabilized. I was still teaching at the National Academy of Design, but I decided that a one-eyed instructor is not a very good idea, so I quit. But I still gave some workshops where I could, you know, demonstrate a little bit. The last one was done, I think, three or four years ago in Rockland, Maine. My gallery there is Harbor Square Gallery.

INTERVIEWER: How does your vision loss affect your work?

HOLLERBACH: Well, of course, it's obviously very frustrating losing the focus. It's almost like getting out of water, and I have water on my eyes. I see a blur, shapes. But I still retain the sense of color. And now, my vision is basically stabilized.

Getting a little worse, but it's age. In three weeks I'll be 91. So, my doctor said that the eye nerves are just aging. There was a period where these hemorrhages in the eye were active and so, for instance, the line went like a corkscrew. It would be a distorted line.

About five years ago an article about my work before and after macular degeneration appeared in *Watercolor Magic*. It was illustrated with an example of my early work, and then when I really started to lose my eyesight, and got sort of panicked and started to do kind of whites and reds. I can show you one of my paintings that I did over that period, without any realistic details.

INTERVIEWER: Is it still the case that lines appear wavy?

HOLLERBACH: No. It was when the macular degeneration was working. Now that it's stabilized, I see normal, except it's foggy. And I can see television, sitting close to a television set.

INTERVIEWER: With your vision, I would imagine it's very hard to see well enough to read and write.

HOLLERBACH: I type with two fingers. I have eyeglasses, I sit there and do this. So far, so good. My eyesight's stabilized. My right eye was the good eye, but I was told, don't have any laser surgery and so on, and all of a sudden this eye got worse. So my bad eye is my good eye; my good eye is my bad eye. They suggested I get some injections, but then my eye doctor says that if there is an infection, I will lose my eyesight. So, I don't do anything. Just eating green, leafy vegetables.

I also have this thing, it enlarges type 30 times so I can read. Reading a book is difficult because it's so tiring. You know, after several pages I have to sit down

and rest my eyes. But I can read an article and write checks or any kind of business correspondence. I still do some writing.

It's a very sad thing, but it is not a major catastrophe. It's not glaucoma. It's macular degeneration, age-related.

INTERVIEWER: I saw you have a *New York Times* over there. Do you read the news?

HOLLERBACH: My wife reads that and tells me what's interesting, like articles about all kinds of art scandals. You know, the Knoedler Gallery went out of business. They sold fake Jackson Pollacks and Rothkos.

INTERVIEWER: You once met William Thon, who also had macular degeneration.

SERGE HOLLERBACH: In Portland, yes. I met him. It was back in the early 1990s, I think. He walked on the side of the road because he, you know, didn't trust his vision. And he told me that, he has a black table, and his wife puts a white sheet of paper, he can see the edges. And then he just does watercolor and pen and ink. And his subject matter was rowboats or sailboats and pine trees, and he almost painted them with his eyes closed. He was a very nice man, very dignified. When I met him, I didn't yet have macular degeneration and felt sympathy for him. Later, he gave me hope. There is such a thing as instinct as a painter. He was working from instinct, and I realized I could, too.

And Milford Zornes [another artist who had macular degeneration], I was told that he taught practically to the end of his life. The first time I met him was in Springfield, Missouri, where we both served as jurors. When he learned that I had macular degeneration, he wrote me a very nice letter, expressing his sympathy.

Huge letters on the page. He was obviously very blind. But he lived to be 100 and painted practically up to the day he died.

INTERVIEWER: This is an interesting painting, somewhat abstracted.

HOLLERBACH: Yes, well, you know, there was an artist, Oscar Kokoschka, you've probably heard of him. After World War II, he opened an art school somewhere in Switzerland called the Three Eyes Art School. Two eyes in your head, and then the inner eye. I am cultivating my inner eye in that one.

INTERVIEWER: What is the third eye?

HOLLERBACH: I don't know what Kokoschka meant, but I believe the third eye is the inner eye—something that your spirit, or your mind, or your soul, sees. It's not physical seeing, it's the inner seeing. And it is actually trying to make sense of what you've seen, and composing it. It's a kind of a synthesis of what you have seen, and then you express it. By the way, I'm not, I was never interested in any ideology or philosophy, theosophy or anthroposophy, or whatever. It's not in me.

I'm a strictly visual person, and so this is what my inner eye is, especially now that I'm legally blind. I try to express what I find most important in life.

INTERVIEWER: When you're painting and working, is there some kind of physical memory you rely on to some degree?

HOLLERBACH: Yes, physical and also—an artist works, and the hand leads, or the brush leads the hand, you know, that kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: How has your process changed in working now?

HOLLERBACH: I cannot do realistic work. What I'm doing now, actually, is more me because when I started to teach at the National Academy here at 89<sup>th</sup> Street, you had to do the right thing. And I became more realistic.

INTERVIEWER: So would you say your most recent work is actually more in tune with who you are as a painter?

HOLLERBACH: I think so, yes. I got more realistic than I probably would have been if I hadn't taught. When I studied in Munich, my teachers were actually German expressionists of the mild sort. The good ones. [LAUGHTER] Before they were killed or whatever. Actually, I didn't know that one of my favorite artists, who immigrated to the United States, Max Beckmann, that he was teaching in Brooklyn. He died in 1951. I came here in 1949. But whether he was a good teacher, I don't know. So, a grotesque exaggerated depiction of human body, that was what I was taught. But then, if you don't teach exaggeration to students, you can only suggest that you have to see the character. But this is pure pleasure for me now. I feel, in a strange way, that this partial blindness brought me a sense of liberation, though I know that this kind of work may find only a very limited appeal. So, I don't care whether somebody likes me or not.

INTERVIEWER: I'm curious about it and also sympathetic to your thought about coming into painting that feels more like you.

HOLLERBACH: Sometimes I just splash paint and see what it becomes. I do it for my own pleasure. While I'm doing it, I'm like a fish in water. I swim in it.

INTERVIEWER: But, were it not for your vision failing, just to be sort of blunt, you would not be doing this kind of work.

HOLLERBACH: No, not at all. In a way, my vision impairment gave me new direction. I wouldn't say it's a blessing. But it gave me a new venue. I think that my visual impairment led me back to what I could have been.

INTERVIEWER: Did it come easily, working this way?

HOLLERBACH: I have some here, although not completely abstract, but I also indulge in something like that. But I'm not an abstract painter. I tried to find abstractions in myself and I did not. Because doing an abstraction doesn't mean that you are an abstract painter.

INTERVIEWER: They certainly stand alone as paintings.

HOLLERBACH: I call them painted drawings, almost. That's an expression I invented, painted drawings.

INTERVIEWER: So, if you don't mind me asking, it's a very simple and a blunt question, but why do you keep painting?

HOLLERBACH: Well, I think that all creative activity is contact with the reality. You react to, you establish a kind of umbilical cord to reality. People who say that they don't know why they live, they don't love anybody enough, nobody loves them, they don't know what to do, they commit suicide. And that is the reason. It's establishing contact with reality, which nourishes us. Whether it's painting or music, dancing, writing, or for people who are not creative, collecting stamps or coins or working on their flower or vegetable garden, or having the bed to take

care of. Ladies have little dogs and cats because you need connection for living. Because being completely alone is a terrible thing. And I know people who are completely alone, and they're most miserable. They don't commit suicide, but they are, they don't know what to do with themselves. And by the way, it has been noticed that people who have well, some kind of simple job while they are working, they are okay. Then they retire, and if they don't find anything that they can do, they're miserable. And they argue with their wives because the wife was used to being alone when the husband was working. They're getting on each other's nerves.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you born?

HOLLERBACH: I was born in Pushkin, a suburb of Leningrad.

INTERVIEWER: Did you come from an artistic family?

HOLLERBACH: I came from a fairly intellectual family. My uncle was a well-known art literary critic and a poet in the 1920s.

His name was Eric Federovich Hollerbach, pronounced Gollerbach. Because on the paternal side, my great-grandfather was German, from Bavaria. He is quite well known in Russia now; his books have been published. He died during the Siege of Leningrad. His son, my cousin, died in Russia. I still have a nephew once-removed in St. Petersburg. When I go there, he comes home, because I need a guide, because I'm lost. Here in New York I can go to any store because it's a familiar neighborhood. But I can't read signs.

There are many other Hollerbachs in America. They came from the same village, I presume, though they're not my relatives. After the Napoleonic wars,



Germany was, of course, devastated, and they were all from the southern part of Germany, from what I know from my father. They were Catholics. Bavarians. And probably my great-grandfather was 18 when he emigrated in 1840 to St. Petersburg, because there was a German colony there. He was an apprentice to a baker. But other Hollerbachs emigrated to America, and they were in Pennsylvania. Some retained the name Hollerbachs, other changed to Holly or Holderbow. I would be Pennsylvania Dutch if my great-grandfather [had chosen differently]. Why he chose Russia, I don't know. But in those days, it was America and Russia, they were sort of underdeveloped countries where you could start a new life.

INTERVIEWER: What period of time would that have been?

HOLLERBACH: It was mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. My great grandfather emigrated in 1840, so he was born in 1822. He was 18.

INTERVIEWER: And your mother's side of the family?

HOLLERBACH: On my mother's side, I'm Slavic.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have siblings?

HOLLERBACH: No, I was the only child.

INTERVIEWER: What were your parents like?

HOLLERBACH: My father was an engineer. He loved chemistry. He wanted me to be interested in chemistry. No way. I was a disappointment. My father died in 1943 fighting the Nazis. This lady [pointing to a picture on a credenza], my aunt

Anna, was a ballerina in Diaghilev Ballet Russe. She was the first teacher of Rudolf Nureyev, if you know him.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, of course.

HOLLERBACH: I met Nureyev on tour, he gave us tickets, and he came to our apartment back in 1978, when he was here.

INTERVIEWER: There was a great deal of turmoil in Russia at the time when you were born (1923). How did your family fare?

HOLLERBACH: Of course, under Stalin's purges, my family suffered. We were in exile. I was 12 years old. My uncle, my mother's brother, got 10 years in the gulag, survived.

INTERVIEWER: Where were you in exile?

HOLLERBACH: In the city of Voronezh, which was a fairly mild exile. It was not Siberia. My father was engineer, so he and a group of engineers made projects for a factory that produced radio equipment and electronic equipment. And so, he got a job there, which was lucky. But we lived in very poor conditions. There was just electricity, no water, no bathroom facilities.

INTERVIEWER: What are your earliest memories of wanting to be an artist?

HOLLERBACH: Always as a kid I did all kinds of drawings. I showed some promise, and just before World War II, when I was around 17, I told my parents that I want to be an artist. In Russia, it was communist dictatorship, but artists were provided for by the government, as long as you painted in the social realist style. So to

become an artist in communist Russia was not that I starve to death, I just have to obey the government.

INTERVIEWER: How did your parents react?

HOLLERBACH: My parents didn't object, but they said I should show my drawings to a professional artist who would say whether I should study or not. Because in those days, we are young people who are all geniuses, young talents, and so on. And that old artist actually was an immigrant who came back to Russia in 1936, a well-known illustrator. So I showed him my drawings. He started to talk. He was stuttering, and he said, "Son, you have some abilities, but what will become of you, I don't know." I was shocked. I thought he would say, "Young man, you have talent, develop it." [LAUGHTER] But he was absolutely right.

And later on, some people say to me, "Mr. Hollerbach, can I show you the drawings of my son. Should they study? Do they have talent?" I told them this story. I said they may have talent, but it doesn't mean a thing. What you'll do with it, will you persevere, or change your mind, and so on. Nobody can say what is going to be with an artist who is starting a career. Artist, actor, singer. You never know.

INTERVIEWER: You started art school in Russia?

HOLLERBACH: I went to special high school for art that was part of the Academy of Fine Art in Leningrad. Unfortunately, I only studied from January 1941 until June, or late May, and then the war came. On June 22, 1941, Nazi Germany attacked Russia. The suburb of Leningrad where I lived was occupied and I was

sent as a laborer to work in a factory in Nazi Germany. The American Army liberated me in May 1945.

INTERVIEWER: What happened to you after the war?

HOLLERBACH: I got a job at the American Red Cross GI canteen in Munich. They hired me as a sketch artist. I worked there Saturdays and Sundays, and during the week I went to the Munich Academy of Fine Arts, from 1946 to 1949. I studied there for three and a half years. It was very funny. We used to laugh. We were given a sheet of paper and a soft pencil, 6B, and the model was sitting there for 40 hours. Can you imagine doing a drawing for 40 hours, the same sheet of paper? We shaded and were supposed to feel the structure.

I sat down and the professor came and I was shading. He said, “What are you doing? You are shading. You are trying to cover your inability to see. The drawing is line.” In the Russian High School of Art, we spend hours shading a drawing, but at the Munich Academy we were drilled in linear drawing and the expressionistic characterization of objects.

[INTERVIEWER: Who presided over the Munich Academy in the late 1940s when you were there?

HOLLERBACH: After the war, of course, some teachers were Nazis, so they were no longer allowed to teach. They brought back the mild expressionists who had been forbidden to teach—and maybe also to paint—under Hitler. So these are the people who taught me. It was very much Germany before World War I, beginning of German expressionism, or even before. In drawing one of the greatest examples was Egon Schiele.

And then of course Gustav Klimt. And very popular was the Swiss artist, Ferdinand Hodler. I was very much impressed by Max Beckman, whom I love, but I couldn't follow in his footsteps. I loved his use of black paint. And of course the French, Degas. I have a book, because I gave some of my books away, there was a marvelous Italian artist who unfortunately was a fascist too, Mario Cirone.

Being a Russian high school student, I didn't know much about Western art except what I saw at the Hermitage, and it seemed very distant, like people from a different planet—some of the old masters, some impressionism, cubism, maybe fauvism—a lot of red, blue, and yellow, which I didn't react to. But then of course in Munich there was a big exhibition of French impressionists and cubists. I got more thoroughly introduced to Western art there.

INTERVIEWER: Is there anything in particular from your years at the Munich Academy that has stayed with you?

HOLLERBACH: I still believe in accentuating the character of the model or landscape.

INTERVIEWER: How did you end up coming to the United States?

HOLLERBACH: My visa came up. I wanted to leave Europe. We were afraid that communists would take over Western Europe. And so I got a sponsor. You'll find the story of my sponsor very interesting. An old lady, Christian Scientist, who gave me an affidavit and warned me that New York is a city of sin. I assured her that I was going to withstand all the temptations. So here I studied at the Art Students' League. I went to sketch classes, and I gradually started to exhibit and became a member of different art societies.

The first one was the American Watercolor Society. I started painting actually watercolor in the casein. And oils I started to paint here, but then I abandoned it because oil painting is a very messy thing, and you need a really large studio. And actually, I like water media. Casein is a wonderful medium. Now I paint acrylic on canvas, which is just as good, on cardboard, acrylic and cardboard.

Finally I started to teach at the National Academy of Design. I started in 1975 and at the end of 1994 I finished. When I started to teach there, the National Academy was known as the kiss of death, because it was so conservative, so out of touch. Now of course it's very progressive. The latest member, if you know the artist, Marina Abramovic. You know of her?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, I do. At the Art Students League, did you seek out anyone in particular to study with?

HOLLERBACH: Yes, another movement which I enjoyed was the new objectivity, *neue sachlichkeit*, and there was of course Otto Dix and George Grosz teaching there. But I signed up with a teacher by the name of Ernest Fiene, who was a minor new objectivity man. He had some nice paintings, kind of realism with a macabre twist, which in those days I enjoyed. I didn't stay for too long there. I also studied with Gordon Samstag.

The big friends of mine studied with Yasuo Kuniyoshi, but I missed him. There was a very interesting incident, too. I showed my slides to a man whose name was Albert Peret. P-E-R-E-T. And he said, "Mr. Hollerbach, I can see that you studied in Germany, and your work reminds me a little bit of a German painter

whom I know, but he's also minor, Hans [Folfer]. Why don't you call up Leonard Hutton Gallery, because they exhibit German art and stuff."

So I called up Leonard Hutton, and the secretary says, "May I help you?" I said, "Well, I would like to meet Mr. Hutton." "Oh, he's in New York now. What can I, why do you want to see him?" I said, "I would like to show him my slides, because so and so said..." and you know. Then there was a pause, and she said, "Mr. Hollerbach, we only show dead artists." I said, "Well in that case, I don't qualify, goodbye."

INTERVIEWER: How did the League compare to the Munich Academy?

HOLLERBACH: I remember my first experience in the Art Students League, I just came in to look. There was a class, and there was a model standing. It was electric light, and according to every painter, you have to have natural light because electric light doesn't give you the difference between warm and cool light. Everything is warm. Now, of course, there are cool bulbs. And they're all doing a model in kind of flesh tone. It's a no-no. In the other class, which also had this model, people starting to do cubes, triangles, and wild exaggeration. They're interpreting the figure but with no reason, as far as I could see. There's no relationship to the figure. You should read the model correctly, her character. It's all angles with shapes. And in those days, it was hard to find nice young models for the academy, because models are paid very, very poorly. So, there were elderly ladies posing. And it was usually the model who would set the pose and the professor didn't set the pose. And the professor came twice a week, and the students said, Mr. Professor, this pose is not interesting. And the professor, what? You make it interesting. There is no such thing as uninteresting pose. True, true.

He was a disciplinarian. I visited him 20 years later. He had a heart attack, retired, and he said to me, I was hard on you, but you know, young people have an exaggerated ego, and I have to crush your ego. As we say here, if you live by critics, you die by critics. So, you have to develop a thick skin. If somebody doesn't like what you do, you don't go into depression if you didn't succeed. But that was typically German.

INTERVIEWER: So the 1950s, when you came to New York, was a vital time in New York in terms of art.

HOLLERBACH: Yes it was, because of the New York school of abstract expressionism.

INTERVIEWER: There was a realist movement, too.

HOLLERBACH: Well, I met them, but I was still very much an immigrant in those days.

I worked at a printer for two years, and then I became a jack of all trades for a commercial photographer in Queens Plaza. It's all described in *My Life in America*. I had to make a living. I was also dating girls, which took some time. And I didn't join any group, you know?

Actually, it's a funny thing, but I feel that if you ask me how I got stuck between kind of a bohemian lifestyle, which I never became bohemian because first of all I had this eight years of the war and refugee camps. I had to stand on my feet. That's why we came to America. I didn't want to live in a cellar and starve and paint and wait to be discovered. I mean, that was not an option. I was told, oh, you can become an art director, you know, have studios and make big



money. That I didn't want to do either. So I'm neither bohemian nor am I a good middle class. I'm sort of neither-nor. But then again, I am what I am. So you can say that I consider myself failed bohemian, failed middle class.

INTERVIEWER: Did you eventually join a community of artists, or do you feel you've been more of a loner as an artist?

HOLLERBACH: Well, I had some artist friends. Some of them are Russian immigrants. And some are Americans. In a sense I was drifting, and yet I was always working, always sketching, and I think I retained my sort of, whatever you can call my personality. I never sold out to anything. But at a price. Maybe I should have gone more to the bohemia, but I couldn't after the war years, you know. You know, immigrants have that interesting psychology. America is the last stop.

I met a lot of Russian artists who came here in the early 1980s or late 1970s, many of them. And they felt that America is the land where you have to succeed. If you don't succeed in America, you are nothing. I mean, there's nowhere else to go. And for many of them, there was a great deal of shock.

I still remember one man came to me and said, "Mr. Hollerbach, you see, I can paint realistically, this is my fork, and this is my abstraction. Now, which is better for America?" I said, "You know what? What do you like best?" "It doesn't matter. I mean, what do I do?" And I said, "Well, do what you like best. There is no such recipe how to succeed." They all thought that I had a secret that I wasn't going to tell them, you know, I'm hiding it. And this guy annoyed me so much that one day he called me up and said, "Mr. Hollerbach, what is the best size of the canvas to sell a painting?" I said, "36 by 24." He said, "Now Mr. Hollerbach, you

finally gave me a straight answer. Thank you so much.” He never called me again.  
[LAUGHTER] But it’s a good size.

INTERVIEWER: So, you started teaching only in the late 1970s.

HOLLERBACH: 1975 to 1995.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do before 1975?

HOLLERBACH: I was doing commercial designing. I was doing workshops and demos. But I did quite a bit of commercial design because there was nothing else I could do. I tried to become a book illustrator, but it didn’t work out.

INTERVIEWER: Did you try submitting drawings to get publisher?

HOLLERBACH: Yes, well, I had a friend who was a German, a very well-known German artist who fled Hitler. He taught at, I think, Rhode Island School of Design, Fritz Eichenberg. He was a great engraver. Worked for Random House.

INTERVIEWER: Eichenberg.

HOLLERBACH: Eichenberg. Fritz Eichenberg. And he said, “Serge, nobody will give you Shakespeare to illustrate. You can start as a children’s book illustrator.” I said no. “Well, juvenile books,” he said. “Take a book by someone, a juvenile book, and do your own version of illustrations.” So I bought a book, I forgot what the name of it was. There’s a family, a mother, a boy and girl, and the dog named Fluff. So I did my own version. I worked very hard because you have to develop character. The boy had freckles and ears standing up. And I went to an agent. I still remember her, Nettie King. That was back in the ‘60s.

She was an old-timer, and she greeted me. I think it was 10:30. She was still in a housecoat and she had a drink, I think, a hoarse voice like that, was puffing a cigarette. She looked at my drawings and said, “You know what, Mr. Hollerbach, the people you sketch are not nice people. And the children are not nice looking, and your dog bites. No, that wouldn’t do. Why don’t you try science fiction?” I said, “Well, thank you very much.’

But I did two books still, and I gave these books to the New York Public Library. When my eyes started to go bad, I think I got a little panicky, and started to get rid of some of my things, and many books I thought I’d let them be safe somewhere else. I think it’s for publishing house, Jovanovich. I forgot, well, it’s a juvenile book. But it was a bit low. I dropped it because it was not me. I didn’t enjoy it. It was too limiting. And then I did the commercial designing.

INTERVIEWER: Did you always work in this studio?

HOLLERBACH: No, I used to live in Washington Heights

INTERVIEWER: You were always a realist?

HOLLERBACH: I was at one time more modern, but then I sort of reconciled myself with realism as being the basis of our observation. I had all kinds of advice from an abstract artist by the name Ilya Bolotowsky, who was in New York, a follower of Mondrian. He said, “Serge, the future is abstract painting. I know a man who can help you.” I said, “Who is that?” “Hans Hofmann.” I didn’t know who Hans Hofmann was. I went to MoMA to see his work. There was a huge bright green painting with an orange Day-Glo square on the upper right corner. I hated the painting. But you know, Wolf Kahn studied with him, Paul Resika

studied with him, and they said he was a wonderful man. He didn't ask you to paint the way he painted. He was a good teacher.

If I had known and joined the studio even for a short while, many doors of good galleries would have opened for me. But I was young, stubborn, and opinionated, and I thought, "I can do it myself." Now it's too late, but I still don't like [the work of] Hans Hofmann. He may be a very nice man, but I prefer others. I love actually Arshile Gorky and, you know, so many others. Willem de Kooning, all from the beginning to the end. Not so much Jackson Pollock. I like Rothko; he teaches an artist to see big, to see color field against color field. I don't like Barnett Newman, because it's too mechanical for me. But this is personal taste, you know? You don't argue about taste.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like you're able to appreciate a lot of different modes of working.

HOLLERBACH: Yes, when I paint my abilities are obviously limited. I work within my abilities. I tried to do some abstract paintings, and it just didn't work out. I'm not an abstractionist.

INTERVIEWER: So you were attracted to working realistically, but with a kind of expressionistic twist.

HOLLERBACH: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think drew you to realism?

HOLLERBACH: I studied three and a half years in the academy, whereas the full year would be five full courses, five years and then still another year post

graduate. I think I didn't fully explore my ability to depict reality. And when I had a chance to teach, I again became a student in a sense. By the way, I often painted with my students. I came twice a week, but then would come an extra day and tell my students, "Look, don't ask me, just watch me. I'll paint among you. You can look at what I'm doing and learn whatever you want, but don't ask me." But if I had studied a full five years, and then done some post-graduate work, I probably would have explored the less realistic venues because I had a full dose of realism. But I was still undernourished as far as realism went.

INTERVIEWER: Would you exhibit your work?

HOLLERBACH: Well, I had a number of galleries. One gallery, the first one, was called Ground Floor Art Gallery on 52<sup>nd</sup> Street. It was an old store that turned into a gallery. It was 1966. And one day, this is my story, one day I came to the gallery and the owner said, "Serge, you know who stood in front of your painting and looked at it?" I said, "Who?" "Greta Garbo." She looked and then walked away. I knew that she lived there.

I saw her a number of times, she was a recluse and so on. And then I met a Russian, that was in the 80s, a Russian dress designer, Valentin, who did dresses for Greta Garbo, Grace Kelly, Gloria Vanderbilt. I even saw Gloria Vanderbilt once at a party. So there's a long story. But this has nothing to do with me. Then I had a gallery on 67<sup>th</sup> Street. It was called Eileen Kuhlik Gallery. She was a niece of Raphael Soyer.

And then I went to David Findlay, because they opened. My last show there was in 1981.

Finally, in 1983 I showed in group show with Newman Saunders. And then I stayed. It's now 31 years practically.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a preferred medium?

HOLLERBACH: I like acrylics. In Munich, when I studied after the war, because there were no paints, we painted in casein. And we got paint in powder.

INTERVIEWER: Pigment.

HOLLERBACH: Pigment, yes. And powder. A German chemist sold us some kind of a mixture, which was a casein based on milk. And we mixed our paints ourselves. So that was fun. On broken pieces of marble from the demolished buildings that were destroyed during the war. I painted in casein for quite a while. Then, it was Shiva casein. And then, for some reason, Grumbacher made caseins. Then acrylic came around. I hated acrylics first, but I got used to it. It dries fast, and I can experiment, and some of these canvasses, there was a painting before that I didn't like, and so, I'm not going to save it. So, I just covered it with background and paint on top of it.

INTERVIEWER: How is casein different from oil and acrylics?

HOLLERBACH: It has a velvety quality. It's more like a gouache. But it's a very fine medium.

INTERVIEWER: Does it dry quickly or slowly?

HOLLERBACH: It dries fairly quickly. And it has a very nice aroma. Whereas acrylics stink.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find the drawing once you start? Like the figures here [looking together at one of his recent paintings in his studio] have a very clear gesture.

HOLLERBACH: I never make preliminary drawings in painting, never, not even in watercolor. In fact, when I taught watercolor, I said watercolor is a continuous medium. Watercolor is not drawing with color. You have to have this brushstroke. And now with photorealism being in fashion, a lot of people just render, which is not watercolor. Watercolor is an American medium, coming from England, from Turner and some others. But I think in America, really, the watercolor blossomed to full strength, thanks to Sargent mostly.

INTERVIEWER: What would be the advantage of watercolor?

HOLLERBACH: It's a difficult medium. Some people think that it is easy. But actually, what you put it down, there it is, you cannot change it. Where in oil, you can work over. I have a friend, an artist, Joan Rudman, who was monitor for Ed Whitney. If you've heard of that name. He taught until he was 95, and he was a great wit, and he said in watercolor, if you put something and it looks right, it's wrong. It dries lighter. But I enjoyed watercolor, and I usually did watercolors when I traveled in Europe. Because that's easy. I had a little Newman watercolor paint box that held a six by nine pad and a folding chair. You put it on your lap and you paint. I did quite a few paintings. But I have none left now.

INTERVIEWER: Sketching was a habit, obviously, that you cultivated.

HOLLERBACH: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Were you working with a quill pen, or what kind of pen did you have?

HOLLERBACH: I think I had a fountain pen.

INTERVIEWER: You were incredibly prolific, I have to say.

HOLLERBACH: Well, I had fairly good, and still have a good visual memory.

INTERVIEWER: I see subjects like homeless people in your work. Does that stem from social and political concerns you may have?

HOLLERBACH: No, it's not that. I did a series of homeless people, and I stress that the subject has what I call the aesthetics of poverty and decay. Artists always love ruins, dilapidated houses. They have character, you know? Life has given them an imprint, and that attracts artists. Van Gogh painted his old shoes. I understand that. And one of my favorite artists, a great realist, he died recently, Lucian Freud. His is a kind of realism that I understand.

A brand-new house doesn't have that quality. It may be beautiful, but beautiful in another sense, just like well-dressed gentlemen in suits and velvet and armor and so on.

I took my students to an exhibit of Lucian Freud's work at Aquavella, and some ladies, since I taught upper 5<sup>th</sup> Avenue, they were very upper-class. They said, "Mr. Hollerbach, they're so ugly." I said, "You know, we are heir to two traditions. One is Greek or Roman tradition of the beauty of the body. And the other is the Judeo-Christian tradition of beauty of the spirit." Whereas the body is sinful, it is decaying, and so on and so on. Christianity actually is a branch of



Judaism, you know, it's just an offshoot. Lucian Freud understood that. He understood that the body is mortal, but there is something behind it. I think he was a great artist.

INTERVIEWER: Are there any other artists you particularly admire?

HOLLERBACH: Balthus. He had, of course, kind of a Lolita complex. But still, he was a marvelous artist.

I would say that for me, genre painting is more to my liking than religious painting or allegorical or mythological or historical painting. I think genre painting, done in the proper way, it's not anecdotal, it's not, you know, people drinking beer and having fun. You know, although that can be also done properly. But it's the condition of humanity. And one of the greatest painters, in my opinion, is Hans Vermeer, who portrayed a girl reading a letter. You don't know what the letter is, but it's not just the art, not just surrounding, it's not just 17<sup>th</sup>-century Holland, but it's something more. It's the essence of time. And also some Georges de La Tour paintings.

One painting I especially like, it's at the Louvre, is called *Femme à la Puce*. A woman with a flea. It's a painting depicting, of course George de La Tour, as you know, is always the candle. But he has that woman sitting in a long gown; she's probably a widow or a lonely woman. And before going to bed, she crushes a flea between her breasts. You see a little bit of the breast. And I said to my students, you know, to kill a flea, you have to do it with two thumbs, and you have to hear the way the flea cracks. "Mr. Hollerbach, did you kill a flea?" "Yes, I kill fleas." "Were there fleas in Russia?" I said, "Oh yes, there were." And it's true, because it's a very tough parasite.

This is a ridiculous subject, and yet the painting is full of kind of serenity, loneliness, and acceptance, it's a whole range of very deep and good emotions that surrounds that ridiculous subject. By the way, I heard from one collector that a book is published, fleas as a subject matter in painting.

INTERVIEWER: A timeless subject.

HOLLERBACH: Yes. Just as dogs and cats were painted, so were fleas. So genre painting, I find, when done properly, which elevates it from the anecdotal, from the silly happenings and funny happenings to the condition of human beings at that time. So to fix it in time and space, that is perhaps the greatest painting. Of course, Rembrandt was the greatest example, Vermeer. Also Velasquez and Zurbaran of course painted among some. I think Spanish still lifes, not so much Dutch, of course Dutch were great, too. But Dutch did all kind of fancy still lifes with, you know, flowers and a glass of wine, and the flea is sitting there.

There is a painter, a Spanish painter of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, Luis Melendez. I saw his work in the Louvre. It's a jug covered with a piece of cloth, tied up with string so flies don't go in there, and there is a piece of bread, cheese, and a knife. That's all. This is one, two, three, four—a certain serenity, a certain greatness. That's our life. Nothing else. So there, I like still lifes too. And another painter that I like very much, it's Morandi, Giorgio Morandi who, again, it's not vases, it's more than that. It's architecture, it's figures, anything. But I'm not Morandi, of course. My art is much smaller and humbler. I do what I can.

INTERVIEWER: Teaching eventually became an important part of your career.

HOLLERBACH: Yes. And my class was considered liberal because I did not impose my style. And I tried to, you know, to actually teach my students what I was taught at the Munich academy, which is you should not copy nature as is. And should not interpret it wildly, and doing all kinds of crazy things, that you should read, quote unquote, the human body to understand its character. And so on and so on. I write about it a little bit.

INTERVIEWER: What did you have students do in your class?

HOLLERBACH: I taught still life, and I taught nude model, and costume model. I was quite literal as a teacher. I felt that I cannot impose my vision on my students. Because it's basic, you know, value and color. And something that is not very well known but it was very important in Munich, it's warm light and cool light. Old artists prefer cool light, which is cool light and warm shadows. In the sun, it's the reverse. It's warm light and cold shadows. And of course the color red is basically warm, but it can be cool red, it can be warm red. It could be cool yellow, it could be warm yellow. And so on, green, blue, and so on. That was a very difficult thing to teach.

INTERVIEWER: When you were teaching, did you find the students changing over time?

HOLLERBACH: The majority of my students were ladies who had talent. As young girls, they got married and raised a family. Then, they went back to study art when their children left for college. Usually, they were the wives of lawyers, doctors, and businessmen, so money was a not a problem. Some of them were

quite gifted. Most were older adults, so I didn't have to adjust myself to a kind of teenage psychology or character.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any specific memories of starting to teach?

HOLLERBACH: My first lesson that I taught was in drawing. I didn't know who the students are and when I came into class—that was back in 1975—there were some older men. There were young girls. And for some reason, and I always think it's wrong, they start with a nude model. And this is the worst thing to do. It's very complicated. In the old days, people would draw ornaments, plaster ornaments and plaster casts, and then they will be allowed, in the old academy, to a life class. You don't start with a nude model, obviously. But anyway, that was the National Academy, and I had to abide by the rules. So, I said, "Listen, gentlemen, I don't know who you are, I mean how advanced you are, so what I suggest. You see there's a model standing. So, do whatever you can. I'll come to everyone and I make my suggestions. So, go ahead."

Some [students] started to draw, and I saw a girl who's sitting there doing nothing. I said, "Why don't you sketch?" "Mr. Hollerbach, I thought you will teach anatomy first, so I know what I'm drawing." I said, "That comes later, but why don't you just draw what you see? What is the model? Is she tall? Is she heavy set? Is she thin? Do the best you can. Don't be afraid." "No, I can't." And she left. Then the other guy, I'll never forget. He took a ruler, made a vertical line with calipers set to measure seven and a half. [LAUGHTER] "Mr. Hollerbach, the head is seven and a half times." I said, "Yes, you're absolutely right, but they're people. Tall people with small hands and long legs, and then the proportion is different. Or short person with big head, short legs. You have to see them." "No, you see, I

can't. I'm an engineer in retirement. So it has to be exact." This is a great line. [LAUGHTER] "It has to be exact." And it was actually very difficult. There were some people who were taught by instructors and some, what was his name? I think either O'Reilly or Riley.

INTERVIEWER: There was a Frank Reilly.

HOLLERBACH: Yes, who would put dots. He'd put dots and then you connect them with feverish motion. What we were taught at the academy in Munich is that you don't start with the head and then go down. The teachers said the human being is a body crowned with a head, not the head with the body dangling down. The weird thing is that if you start with a big head, and there is no room on the pad for the feet. It's terrible. They'd be very angry with us. So we started actually making a point at the navel, and then you build a torso, legs down. And then, go up up, and then the head's less time.

INTERVIEWER: What would you encourage your students to do?

HOLLERBACH: Well, first I thought just do what you see and the question is you think the arms on that model, are they thin arms or are they thick arms? And the legs are thin or thick. You have to respond to width and height. That's the first thing. And I think I'm speaking with, in this book of mine, what makes a person draw is the ability to see length and angles. Forehead, one angle, the nose is still another angle. This is a short distance here. The neck, is it on the same line with the nose, or is it receding? I also made a comparison with detectives. Detective, the true detective or private investigator, he goes up the stairs, but he's counting the stairs. He knows it's 39 steps. And the ability to see distances, to guess. That's

what many people have, not just artists, but you can develop these, the abilities to react to distance, weight. You weigh something and that's a pound. Some people can tell whether it's a pound or half a pound. So, these abilities make a person able to draw and to get character. Caricaturists, who never study anatomy, but they look at you, they immediately see that this person has a long nose and big ears and curly hair, and without knowing anything of the anatomy, without doing any proportions. You do a caricature and people say oh, that's him or her. The ability to see the most characteristic thing.

INTERVIEWER: I think I saw, flipping by in some of your writing, a mention of likeness.

HOLLERBACH: Yeah, likeness is the relationship of distances and angles.

INTERVIEWER: And those could be exaggerated.

HOLLERBACH: Exaggerated, but not against the character. You can make a big nose bigger, and still, that person. If you make it smaller than it is in reality, then you are against the character. My teacher used to say that there are two cardinal sins in depicting reality. It's copying it like it is, because you don't show any reaction, your personal reaction. It's just a copy of what you see. Or exaggerating with no reason at all.

INTERVIEWER: In what ways did teaching influence your own artmaking?

HOLLERBACH: I don't regret teaching at all because it made me more realistic. Now I'm back to what I originally was, I guess. Also, I think I benefited from seeing so many people, different people, just in my thinking, trying to, learning to

express my thoughts in such a way that people understand what I'm talking about, not to over-intellectualize, but giving them the how-to in simple terms, because this is actually the very basis of art. And one thing I learned, and that was culture shock for me, my teacher at the Munich Academy said that form predetermines the content. He hated all realistic painting, calling it illustrative and literary.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a divide, to your mind, between the Russian tradition in painting, and the European and American?

HOLLERBACH: What Russian artists usually did, they thought some good idea, some national hero defined. With this idea, the artist would try to find models that would fit the character he wants to portray. So, the artist would travel across the country doing portraits, sketches. And then he would compose it. So, first is the idea or content, and then the idea looks for form. In the West, roughly speaking—because actually, it's no such great divide between them—you have the form and that form suggests the content. I developed that idea, tried to explain that to my students. It's very interesting that starting with prehistoric times, how did our ancestor respond to, for instance, height? All tall mountains were sacred mountains. Mount Fuji or Olympus, gods lived there. Height, the very concept of height is something superior, and low is something inferior. Why? This is physical perception of form. A mountain has also form, obviously some rocks or some gigantic tree is a holy tree. In Mexico, by the way, in Oaxaca, there's an old tree that's 300 years old, and that's a sacred tree. Why? Because again, the size, the volume, and the character makes it sacred. And that is, I think a natural process.

INTERVIEWER: That's interesting. I've never heard it spoken about that way.

HOLLERBACH: I remember reading that Michelangelo was shown a tall chunk of marble and he thought, "Well, that could be a figure of a young man, David." And that's what he did. And there was a Russian artist, Vasily Surikov, he's not known here. He wanted to portray a woman who was—there was a schism between old believers and new believers—exiled to Siberia back in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. And he could not find how to depict that figure. And once he saw a crow on white snow, and the crow, black, and said "Ah, she should be black." So, that shape of that crow and white snow gave him the idea of her figure in black in the painting he did of her [*Boyarynya Morozova*]. So, it works both ways. There's nothing wrong with having an idea and then finding a form.

INTERVIEWER: What are some of the other characteristics of Russian art, to your mind?

HOLLERBACH: Russian art is very much, because of the very system, the czars, the oppression and then rebellion against that oppression, Russian art was also very socially conscious. Actually, the Russians accused the Western world of painting art for art's sake. For Russians, there was the social and the religious. This was done in Russian art and Russian literature, too, to a great degree. Whereas in the West, it was a perception of form. Something beautiful goes from ancient Greece to ancient Rome, and then the Renaissance.



INTERVIEWER: So, what would it be then in Russia, looking for, trying to understand how to depict an idea of nobility of the Russian soldier, for example? What sort of language would they be drawing from?

HOLLERBACH: Well, in communist Russia, it was very muscular, also in Hitler's Germany, very muscular men and women portraying the beauty of their race. The heroes defending the country. There was a very interesting exhibition in Moscow back in the late 1990s. On one side of a huge exhibition hall was German art from 1900 to 1945. And the other side was Russian art also from 1900 to 1945. So, the Germans started with, if you know, Franz Marc, August Marc, and then there was the German Expressionism. Then came Hitler, and they all became heroic, and so on and so on. And in Russia, the same thing, there was Russian avant-garde, Russian abstractionists, and cubists, and futurists, and then came socialist realism. And then, the heroic Russian workers, soldiers, women. Similar totalitarian ideology produced the same results.

It was funny, at the end on the German line was Hitler in knight's armor on a white horse with a spear, and a swastika. On the Russian side, there was Stalin and Voroshilov walking in the Kremlin. After, it was just raining, the rain stopped, and there were reflections in the puddle, and the two great leaders were walking. So, that's the way they do.

As I mentioned, I have no education in philosophy, but I read somewhere that St. Thomas of Aquinas, a saint and also a philosopher, recognized three stages of perception of things. Before we see the thing, while we see the thing, and after.

INTERVIEWER: I'm curious actually, because I've studied them a bit, how you, as a Russian, feel about Repin and Kramskoi.

HOLLERBACH: Yes, they were very Russian. They are artists, and I love them. But my understanding of them changed when I started to look down on them at one point. Now, I sort of go back and understand a little more about the Russian psyche. I guess for the whole history of Russian art—as I mentioned, Russia, a country that never had democracy, Western democracy—it was either the czar or Lenin. So, there was always kind of rebellious element that looked, opposing the oppression. So, the social element, the looking for truth and for justice was very, very much part of Russian liberalism. And of course, the Russian artists were [part of this], most artists were, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the revolutionary movement start to emerge, and Repin, of course, his famous painting is a man pulling a barge. What's the English word for that?

INTERVIEWER: In English, the painting is known as *The Barge Haulers of the Volga*.

HOLLERBACH: Yes, well, they're pulling the barge up the river. So that is the suffering of Russian people. Now, then, of course, he did many other paintings and one of them is Ivan the Terrible and his dying son, who hit him, stabbed him, bloody face, the son. Repin did a sketch of a Russian writer that is in the Metropolitan Museum, in the section, I forgot what it's called, there is kind of mixed section, not where Impressionists are, but lesser known 19th-century painters. Then, of course, Repin did all kinds of other things. He was a fairly good portrait painter, very realistic. Kramskoi was, I think, more heavy-handed. There's a famous painting by Kramskoi, *Inconsolable Grief*. There's a woman, her eyes are red. She lost her husband. So, this is dotting the *i*. Yeah, that woman is suffering.

But he was a very able painter. They're all good practitioners, and actually, they were not inferior to many Western painters.

However, Western art historians consider Russian realistic painting to be derivative. And it's true, because prior to [the Western artistic influence], Russian painting actually was icon-painting folk art. And then, in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, under the Romanov dynasty, Russians started to go to study in Italy. Some Russians who studied in Italy became Italian painters. There was one called Sylvester Feodosiyevich Shchedrin. He's buried in Naples. [LAUGHTER] Then, academic painting came. The French academy influenced the Russian academy very much. But it was a big thing for all Russians to study in Italy. Because there's the American academy in Rome, the Russian academy in Rome, the French academy in Rome. Everybody went to Rome. And then came the itinerants who started to depict the suffering of the Russian people. And of course, both Repin and Kramskoi were representative of that movement.

INTERVIEWER: Would you say you're working from the inheritance of Russian art?

HOLLERBACH: Up to a point. Not completely. I start actually with the formal elements. As every painter, and you obviously know that if you do something, you create a shape that suggests something. And you turn it into whatever. Its accidental brushstroke will suggest something else. Every painter knows that. So, the form determines the content. You start with something and then all of a sudden, it becomes something else.

INTERVIEWER: But the formal elements that you're considering, is that something that's conscious, or are you working in an unconscious way?

HOLLERBACH: Well, I think that you balance, you need a dark shape, so I decided to make it a dark jacket, and then she should have red slacks. So, red, black, it's kind of a balance. And in this book, *Composing in Acrylics*, I'm speaking about the principle, it's a balance. If you have a dark figure here, you have to balance it with something.

You know, I think I have a diagram, a scale, and there is a dark weight. On the other side of the scale, you have a huge white shape. It's a bag of feathers, but it can weigh, even though it's feathers, it can weigh a quarter of a pound, right, or half a pound. So, translate into painting, you can do a small, dark figure, but then you have to have a lot of empty space like a bag of feathers to balance it. If I didn't have that figure of a woman, it's unfinished. Then, the other thing I also speak about is what I call it diagonal energies: you cannot have objects all going in one direction. You have to prop it up, like cards, a house of cards. You have to have opposing energies. Otherwise, everything sort of goes out of the painting. That's my invention, but again, then the rules can be bent, but basically, it's weight and direction. Balance and direction.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that's learned, that sensibility for that?

HOLLERBACH: No, I think it's intuition. It's like riding a bike.

INTERVIEWER: I've always assumed, I feel like I see in my students and in myself, that in working from life, that becomes a habit of thinking and a habit of seeing, in a way, that working, that reality as we know it has those relationships. Or the world we live in has a relationship of balance.

HOLLERBACH: Yes, absolutely. Now, considering the present situation in the world, again, I said to a friend of mine that the whole history of the human race are the attempts to find balance between law and order on one side, and freedom on the other. If it's too much law and order, it's suppression, dictatorship. If it's too much freedom, it's chaos and everything goes and so on, and we go up and down. And excesses, both in dictatorship and freedom are actually all the same. The dictator is a free man do whatever he wants, and a free man is dictator because he doesn't care about anybody else, and he imposes his will on other people. Because he's so free, he's free to do whatever he wants. So, this is again, the question of balance.

Then, also there is something that I was talking about that is very difficult for my students to grasp. It's the warm and cool colors. Of course, we know that red, yellow, and orange are warm, and blue and green is cool. But there is a cool red and there's a warm green, as you know. Many students of mine just couldn't get it. And you can see only if you have a studio with a north light, because north light gives you cool light and warm shadows. Whereas sunlight is the opposite. By the way, Russian painters love sunny days and the trees throw blue shadows. Cool shadows. Warm light, the snow is warm, almost with pink and yellowish, and blue shadows that are cold.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have anything to do with Russian art communities, either here or abroad?

HOLLERBACH: I'm quite active in the émigré community, but also, I have kind of a double life. My professional life as an artist. But when I turned 90, in Moscow,

there's a foundation that gave me a one-man show, and this poster is in Russian, which they gave me.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a retrospective of your paintings?

HOLLERBACH: Yes, paintings and drawings. There is a foundation created by the money of late Alexander Solzhenitsyn, the author of *The Gulag Archipelago*, who was against the Soviet regime. And he became a Nobel Prize laureate and lived in Vermont for quite a while. And then, communism collapsed, he went back to Russia, and left the money for this foundation to gather whatever immigrants who had found new homes in other countries, still retaining kind of a Russian cultural identity in what they did. And of course, I'm a Russian American. I'm an American born in Russia, I'm a Russian living in America. Both, I guess, are true. But of course, I'm more Western than truly Russian, and my connection with Russia is mostly art and literature, the good things, not the reality of everyday life.

INTERVIEWER: What was that like?

HOLLERBACH: Well, I went back in 1993, as soon as the Communist regime fell apart. I have friends. I have a nephew there. My wife has relatives there. So, we've been going to Russia quite often, almost every year. France and Russia. Those are the countries that we visit. But now, my wife is ailing and also, I'm getting up in years, and I'm not going anywhere. But that was a trip that I flew business elite because that's a long trip. And it was a Russian airline. The Russian airline in those days tried to outdo the West in airlines, so I had lamb chops for dinner. "Mr. Hollerbach, would you like whiskey?" Well, I paid \$4,000 for a ticket. But I thought, "Look, it's my last trip." And the pilot shook my hand. When I

landed in Moscow, my nephew met me. I traveled in a wheelchair. And then, of course, I needed a guide, a seeing eye. That's my nephew.

INTERVIEWER: Do you hold to a particular philosophy, when it comes to artmaking? Or anything you are painting against?

HOLLERBACH: I'm very much against over-intellectualizing art and trying to depict some kind of spiritual values, which you don't know what that is. You know what spiritual values are in your personal life, your conscience and so on, but in art that would be illustration. And the worst kind of painting, I think, is a kind of ideological painting, whether it's communist or whatever, fascist or whatever kind of ideology, but also, religious paintings. But then again, it's a very complex thing, religious painting, because they are obviously a depiction of nativity and annunciation and crucifixion and so on and so on. And yet, the Renaissance painters, they still derived so much from ancient Greece and ancient Rome. So, depicting the Virgin Mary was choosing a beautiful woman, never mind that she may have been a lover, Botticelli painted all madonnas, his girlfriends, but still, there was a connection to form. So, I think that saved religious painting, the best of religious paintings from being sort of corny, I guess. In Russia, however, they are great icons, which are sort of semi-abstract, but there are plenty of religious paintings. A girl with a candle going to... it's Easter, and with a sweet smile. Now, that is not religious painting. That's terrible. Well, just as in this country, who did this blond Jesus Christ, blue eyes. I think it was of Swedish origin. Not the same guy who did the Santa Claus, but this was another one.

INTERVIEWER: From the 1940s?

HOLLERBACH: Yes, 1940s or 1930s, a blond Christ praying. And I think the Mormons used that image very often. And then came the Santa Claus. So that doesn't have spiritual value to me. However, one painting, that I have that I always admire is a *Dead Christ* by Mantegna, where you see the head, the feet of Christ, he's lying on a slab. There's a horrible painting, and yet, it depicts a combination of physicality and the religious matter and the horror of death and everything. It has no sentimentality and no prettiness. But there is also, speaking about religious painting, there is also in the Catholic religion, this tendency to depict physical suffering to a point that is almost sadistic. St. Sebastian with arrows sticking and he's smiling. Or by a famous German artist, Matthias Grunewald, his crucifixion of the body of Christ. So, there are many interesting influences between the spiritual world and physical world. Suffering, depicting of suffering. Glorifying suffering, or making suffering kind of cheap.

My mother lived in Kiev, which is the center of the Ukraine now, but it was a Russian city. She was a little girl, and she told me the following story. My grandmother was very religious, so on Sundays—my mother was six, seven years old—she had to go to church, St. Sofia Cathedral in Kiev, and stand all day, long mass, and my mother didn't like that. But she told me that around the church, there were stands selling religious books and crosses, small icons. And there was a stand that sold rusty nails from the cross. Then the tears of the Virgin Mary in a little jar, and also an Egyptian darkness in the dark jar. And I think that these were conceptual artists. It's amazing. People bought that, Egyptian darkness. People need, this again, my homespun philosophy, people need to not only to visualize that, but to create images of what they believe. Actually, images that are seen that they can have in their hands. Religious sculpture and frescoes and



everything. And again, it's part of creative process. People who are not artists, I think they still need concrete images.

INTERVIEWER: What do you mean by concrete?

HOLLERBACH: Well, something that has texture, weight, and form. A rusty nail from the cross. Of course, any nail found in the garage. But a believer wants to believe that this is really the nail from the cross.

INTERVIEWER: And so, they suspend whatever disbelief they have about the credibility of that.

HOLLERBACH: Yes, yes. There was a joke that I read. A doctor opens his office, a young doctor, who put that horseshoe over the door. The horseshoe's supposed to bring luck, as you know. So, the older doctor says, "Do you believe in that nonsense?" "No, of course, I don't, but they say it helps even those who don't believe in it." [LAUGHTER] This is the kind of thing for the rusty nail from the holy cross, or the tears of the Virgin Mary. And again, why is Mount Fuji a holy mountain? Why is Olympus the mountain where gods live? Again, form becomes content. And also, it is one of my fears. I even wrote a little article about it, but in Russian. Lucifer is obviously the rebellious angel who brought enlightenment to human beings, but he was a rebel. Of course, the church condemns him. But people had all kinds of beliefs, belief in God and so on, but also superstitions. For instance, mermaids and kings of the sea—Neptune, Poseidon—and then all kinds of leprechauns, and swamp spirits and the witches who live in the forest and so on. These were artistic images. For instance, when there's thunder and lightning, the gods are angry and when you hear thunder, it's the prophet Elijah rolling in

his chariot. Now we have weather forecasts. The artistic images are gone. So, in many ways, education kills artistic images. Superstition, as bad as it is—and I'm not saying we should go back to it—had an artistic side to it. Mermaids and Neptunes and leprechauns, house spirits. Leprechauns is Irish, right? And in German, there's the *heinzelmännchen* and dwarves.

We need that. People who believe in nothing—no dwarves, no leprechauns, no spirits, no mermaids—that's artistic impoverishment.