

A'Dora Phillips & Brian Schumacher

The Vision and Art Project

## An Oral History with Robert Andrew Parker

Conducted: August 2014 & July 2015

This interview was compiled from two recorded audio conversations with Robert Andrew Parker at his studio in West Cornwall, Connecticut. A'Dora Phillips and Brian Schumacher conducted the first interview in August 2014 and the second in July 2015.

### Growing Up

**A'Dora Phillips & Brian Schumacher:** What inspired you to become an artist?

**Robert Andrew Parker:** Well, when I was in bed [as a child with Tuberculosis] in New Mexico, that's what I did all day. The radio didn't work until after dark because of radio waves in those days. So I drew all day, and painted. Watercolors obviously because I was in bed.

In those days, the radio news would be about the Italian-Ethiopian war, and then the Sino-Japanese war. In my early sketch books, I did a lot of imaginary scenes of the wars going on. Luckily, my mother saved one of those sketchbooks from that era. Italians are always charging. Ethiopians are in robes with burnouses and everything, and the Japanese-Chinese ones are pretty rude too. But that was really the first things that I, that's how I entertained myself all day was either reading a book, because you had to stay, not completely immobile, but I had to stay in bed, so I drew and painted a lot.

At the same time the CCC program [Civilian Conservation Corps] was going in the U.S. Eleanor Roosevelt started one for women, and a woman came through our town in New Mexico in a wagon drawn by an old car. It was like a cottage on wheels. She came around and would show people how to paint, and lend them colors and stuff. My mother was an artist so we didn't actually need anything. But I remember her very well. Her name was Hathaway, Jane Hathaway. She directed me in several different ways once in a while. Then she moved on to some other site. She must have parked behind our place, I don't know, for a month maybe.

There are so many things I'd like to have asked my mother in her old age, but we'd get shunted off to some other direction. There were a lot of things I wanted to know about Jane Hathaway, how long she actually stayed, you know, stuff like that. Once I asked her, before my grandfather had a car, how did you move around? She said, "Well, we had horses." I said, "Yeah, but where were they?" Behind your house there wasn't room there, it was just room for chickens, a little garden and a little garage for when you didn't have a garden. "She said well, there'd be a town livery. We kept our horse there, and if you wanted him, you'd walk to the place, say, we'll need a horse and buggy by three o'clock or something." It must have been nice. Why am I talking about horses and buggies?



A page from Parker's childhood sketchbook (age 8-9)

**Phillips/Schumacher:** You mentioned earlier that your mom was an artist.

**Parker:** She was, yeah.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Was she a professional or—.

**Parker:** No, no. Her father, she had a brother, and her father and mother, I would say gave the brother more attention than my mother. He was very bright, very handsome. He had, I think, a big future in Indiana politics. He was a friend of Indiana's version of Huey Long. I can't think of

his name suddenly. But he died very young, tragically. Meanwhile my mother really had a talent. My grandparents insisted she go to a what do they call that kind of a, a school for schoolteachers. Normal. I think they call it Normal college. So, she taught for a little bit in Indianapolis and then during a dance, my father was in Indiana University, they went off and got married. The rest is history.



A painting done by Robert Andrew Parker's mother.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** What did your dad do?

**Parker:** He worked in the service as a dentist. I think he hated pulling teeth, but after 30 years he was done, so he spent the rest of his life flying. My parents moved to Arizona, so he could fly every day. He joined the Civil Air Patrol. That way he got to fly free.

During the Depression, because he had a government job, unlike most of the U.S., we lived very well. In fact, we had a woman who worked for us who lived with us so she could live there. She didn't even want a salary. It was room and board. Things were really tough then in the '30s. This would have been in St. Louis.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** You lived in several different places as a child. Were any of those places particularly important to you?

**Parker:** Well, places I really liked were New Mexico and Seattle I think. We spent some time in Chicago, where I went to school. But those other two, Seattle and New Mexico I liked especially,

as I was growing up then. They were fun places to be. Seattle for sailing, and New Mexico for horses and guns and cowboys and Indians. My brother and father were very interested in Archaeology and in those days, it was legal, and they investigated a lot of prehistoric Indian ruins near Fort Stanton where we lived in Lincoln County. It's part of the county in New Mexico that's almost empty now. Everyone is in Santa Fe or Albuquerque or Los, or where the atomic stuff was, Los Alamos.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** The way you describe New Mexico, it sounds almost like it was an isolated outpost. Did you have the sense of that when you were there?

**Parker:** Oh, yeah. Every couple weeks my mother and father, sometimes we went with them to go to Roswell and shop. There was a men's clothing store there. My father used to buy the odd necktie. My mother would buy candy and cookies. My brother and I, God it makes me sick to think of it, bought the first comic books there. I remember getting Famous Funnies, I think it's worth about 80,000 dollars or something, and the first Superman, all kinds of them we had. So, Roswell was always fun and the road was dirt all the way, from Ft. Stanton to Roswell and we'd see great herds of antelope then and often mountain lions at night, coming back. Bumpy ride. My brother would get carsick too, which is a drag. Some of the rides back weren't too pleasant.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Were your parents happy there?

**Parker:** I don't think so. I mean they bore with it, but they wanted bright lights and city, and that service, you had a whole

**Art training & early career, including The Art Institute of Chicago, Atelier 17, and his big break playing Van Gogh's hands in the film biopic, *Lust for Life***

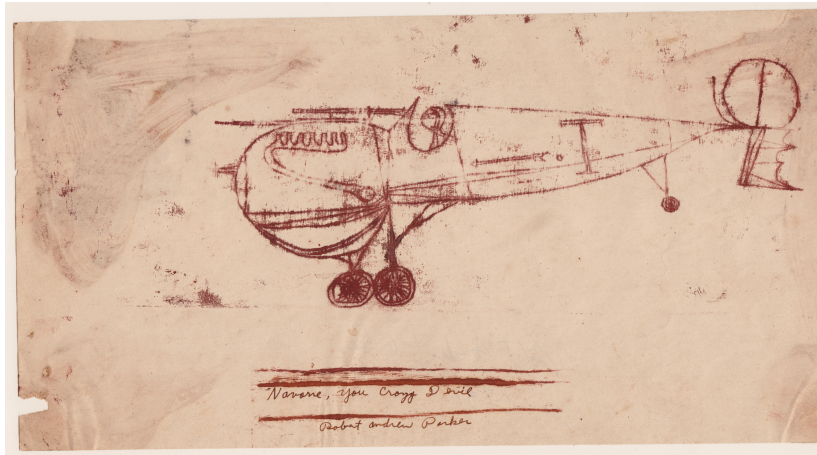
**Phillips/Schumacher:** Your background and training at the Art Institute of Chicago must have been deeply embedded in the figure, still, Right?

**Parker:** It was, yeah. In fact, there were no classes there or anything called advertising or design or, it was strictly, I guess they're old-timey kind of schools. There was a print shop. There was lithography and etching. And there was sculpture, and watercolor and oil painting. There was figure painting, still life painting. There was the range of it, along with art history. In the first year, I think there was some class where you had to draw from statuary, and that was sort of boring, but I loved it there. It was terrific. At last, after being expelled from high school and being a miserable student, I found something I liked doing. My parents couldn't believe it. I mean, they were long suffering, and I think they figured I'd last a week there or something.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** What were you thinking when you went through the Art Institute of Chicago? What did you imagine you were going to be doing when you left?

**Parker:** Well, actually, I have a Bachelors in Art Education, so I thought I'd have to teach. When I finished my studies at the Art Institute, I taught at the New York School for the Deaf for three years. It was the only job I could get at the time. I already had two children by then.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** That's a lot of pressure for somebody who wants to be an artist.



Work from Parker's art school days

**Parker:** I know. I had three jobs. I had the GI Bill for school, so I didn't have to worry about that. But yeah, I worked at a lot of different things after school. Post office, that was a drag. Though I liked part of it. At the Art Institute, we were off for a good long chunk of the mid-year. So, I delivered mail over the Christmas holiday, and I liked the walking part. Someone else did the hard part of sorting out the mail. He'd give me a bag, and I'd take off. And that part of

Chicago where we lived, I guess it would have been west of us, there were some tall buildings, you know, five or six story apartment buildings. And on Fridays, all the magazines just kind of, *Time*, *Life*, *National Geographic*, they weighed a ton. So, I would take them to the lobby and dump them all on the floor and ring all the buzzers, and then I'd split. [LAUGHTER] Let the people sort of out.

I did that from 1948 to 1952. But also, the job at the post office led to other things, because, to get a job there, you had to have an FBI check. From that I got jobs at polls at voting time. Then I worked at a place just north of the place we were living, called the Venus Brassiere Company, where I pushed a pushcart full of cloth from one room to the other. [LAUGHTER] It was a terrible, stupid job. One day Miss Venus herself was there, and she looked like she was made out of brass. I mean, she was really tough. And then they started saying, you're going to have to work Saturdays. I just couldn't do it. So, I quit that one after a while.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** You served in the military briefly, but you didn't actually have to participate in the World War II. Is that right?

**Parker:** Well, it ended about two weeks after I was in. So, I didn't bomb anyone. I was in the Army Air Corps. I mean, they kept us in anyway.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So were you a little bit older, then, when you went to art school?

**Parker:** Yeah, I was two years behind.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Did that give you a feeling of urgency?

**Parker:** No, because almost the whole school was on the GI Bill. There were only, seriously, I'd bet there weren't 20 women there. It was almost all men. And the few women that were there were ex-WACs or WAVs. It was almost all veterans. I mean, I can think of a couple of exceptions, but not many.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** After you graduated from the Art Institute, what did you do?

**Parker:** I was so lucky. I mean, there were three horrible, terrifying, disgusting years at the New York School for the Deaf, and then I got that *Lust for Life* break, and I never had a full-time job after that. [In 1955, Parker was hired by MGM to make the drawings and paintings on the set of the Van Gogh biopic, *Lust for Life*.]

**Phillips/Schumacher:** How did you end up getting the *Lust for Life* job?

**Parker:** Well, that early luck at the Museum of Modern Art helped me in a lot of ways. John Rewald, an art historian who is very well thought of, he was hired by MGM to find someone who could do, if necessary, Van Gogh paintings. I mean, act as Van Gogh's hands in paintings. I just had a book with the Museum of Modern Art, a book of Marianne Moore's poems, and so when John Rewald asked Monroe Wheeler if he knew of anyone who could do that, he thought of me. So, I had my hands photographed and sent them somewhere. Then, I didn't hear from them. I had already quit the New York School for the Deaf, and I'd agreed to take a friend's job in Pleasantville High School while he was away that year. In any case, I didn't hear from MGM until around July. I had a call saying, "Can you go to Paris the day after tomorrow? Do you have a passport, and we'll need this and that, and you have to sign a contract?"

So, I went into New York, and I went to where MGM was, somewhere on Broadway in the 40's or 50's, I guess, and I got there and the guy said, "Where's your lawyer?" I said, "I don't have one, and he said, "Oh, Ok," and he wrote out a contract and he said. "Don't worry about it, we'll carry you like a baby." I'll always remember that line. So, I think I could have gotten more money out of them, but for me it was like a treasure, you know.

A few days later, I flew to Paris. In the same plane were Anthony Quinn and Kirk Douglas, and what's his name, the pianist. Liberace. We were all on the same airplane. In those days, you had to stop at Shannon. So, we landed at Shannon, and Liberace was wearing a, it was summer, but he was wearing a big white, it wasn't fur, some coat, and all these old Irish ladies were meeting him there to give him pieces of lace, and he hid behind a [LAUGHTER], a big trash bin which

had some tar on one side, poor guy, and he ruined his coat hiding from the women who wanted to give him lace. He was very touching. He'd never been anywhere before, I don't think. I mean, he'd been all over the States, but I don't think he'd ever been abroad maybe.

In any case, then from there, there were MGM quarters in Paris, and right away we went over there. We started that movie. I did "Crows over the Cornfield." You know, I'd do a bit and then Kirk would stab at it and I'd do a bit more. That was the first piece. Then, as days went on, my hands were really useless. I mean they weren't, but what I was hired for wasn't going to happen. Which was okay by then, because by then Vincent's brother's, in other words, Vincent's nephew, also called Vincent, so objected to the book, *Lust for Life*, he was preventing MGM from even photographing things. So, my actual job in that movie was making Van Gogh drawings and paintings. I did about a hundred I'd say. Some of them they wanted half-finished so he could crumple them up. But they also gave me a charge account at the, I can't say it in French, the Golden Palette, where Vincent himself bought paints, and I bought so much paint, I used them for at least 12 years. I came home with hundreds of pounds of paint. I didn't bother with paper or anything, but I had really nice quality oil paints. In any case, that job, I didn't even know it then, but after that I never, the family was pretty comfortable, yeah.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Was that for financial reasons?

**Parker:** It wasn't just the finances. I mean, I made more there in a few weeks than I made for a whole year of Deaf School. Nowadays it sounds like nothing. But it was a lot then. Plus per diem. I got an extra \$25 a day, but we always ate on location. So I never bought meals or anything. Yeah, when I came back, life became much better, much easier. By then I think we had three kids.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** What made it possible for you to get so much work done, while at the same time teaching and raising a family?

**Parker:** Well, the only job I got after the Art Institute was the New York School for the Deaf, and I did that for three years. Then I got the job on *Lust for Life* doing Van Gogh paintings,

which changed, but the only really hard part was we had quite a few children right away. We had five sons. But, just those early years were hard. Meals were very spare and rents were a big item. Schools didn't pay that much then. I think the New York School for the Deaf paid \$3,000 a year, and we had three kids already. I mean things were very much cheaper then, but still, it was tough. Then, after that movie job, I didn't know it then, but it really changed the way we lived. I was making more in a week for MGM, than I'd make in half a year for the School for the Deaf. After that I taught at the School of Visual Arts in Parsons, and various places, RISD, but that was just one or two days a week, and pleasant. I liked it. Kids and paint, they're always fun. I didn't mind it at all, and I learned sign language, which I'll never forget. Big help.



Robert Andrew Parker with four of his five sons, c. 1960

## Vision Loss

**Phillips/Schumacher:** When did you notice your sight—.

**Parker:** 2000. Judy was in China, and when she came back, my eyes had changed, really very suddenly. It was snowing. I can't think what month she was there, but there was snow on the ground, and I left the studio, and wham, suddenly it was all like a hail storm or something. When I got inside, my vision was changed.

I had a friend drive me to Yale. I went through like four different transitions with my eyes. I started at Yale, and then he sent me to a Dr. Chang, a New Yorker like me. The guy for macular. His partner is the one who invented laser eye stuff. And Dr. Chang in his office had the original. It looks like a torpedo tube. It's huge. Black tin and dials and switches. But before that, all those eye tests were, some of them were very painful. There's one, they inject you with a dye, and as it passes your eyes, your eyes are pressed up against a camera. As that dye passes your eyes, a light goes off, and it photographs. That one was nasty. They kept a waste basket near you, because a lot of people got sick when the dye passed their eyes. It really hit you. They don't do any of those tests anymore. All the tools are painless now. But some of them used to be really horrendous. But after that 2000, oh, my life changed, and it got a lot closer to home.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** That's when you stopped driving as much?

**Parker:** Oh, absolutely, yeah. And I miss reading, fishing, biking.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** As a visual artist, what did the diagnosis of macular degeneration mean for you?

**Parker:** Well, it didn't change the painting much, except I worked closer, but it changed everything else in my life. I used to be a voracious reader. Jesus, now to labor through the *New York Review of Books* takes me a day. And I've read, and I thought, do I really want to read the reviews of reviews? And I thought, I should have, if I was going to try that hard, I should have tried a novel or something, I guess. I don't know. I wonder, I guess there are all different levels. I think Lennart [Lennart Anderson] is, to see him at the Academy, he looks worse off than me. I mean, he's holding onto someone's hand. And well, I sometimes do that, too. I'm not very good at, there are a lot of things, stairs. You know, Grand Central is a killer for me. If someone's in the way to get to the banisters.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Can you describe what you see now?

**Parker:** Oh, yeah, I can see. I couldn't identify you from here. But I know you're there. You're there. You're in white and glasses, blue trousers. But I couldn't draw your face. Oh, that sign over there, for example. In Czech. I know it's there, but I couldn't make out any of the letters.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Are any parts of your vision obscured?

**Parker:** No. It's hazy and wavy.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** And have you ever considered using anything like a magnifier or anything?

**Parker:** I've certainly used magnifying glasses to examine something or other, but I can't work with one.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** It must be very different and interesting, I would think, to work in sculpture, then, where you're using your touch and your feel.

**Parker:** Well, that's true.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** There's a quality to that that's different than working strictly visually.

**Parker:** Yeah, and I never would have dreamed five or ten years ago that I'd have a room full of three dimensional things. [LAUGHTER] Not because of my eyes, though. It just never occurred to me until making pilots for those model airplanes. Talk about frivolous. Jesus.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So, it sounds like vision loss hasn't impacted your artwork so much.

**Parker:** If anything, it's made my drawing less precise. I mean, I don't know that I could so deftly have drawn something. I look at old sketchbooks and I thought could I could still do that line, sometimes I have to say no. But I don't know if that's age or eyes or both.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So, are there any skills from life or art that have helped you cope with vision loss?

**Parker:** I don't know. Part of it which is a drag is having someone wave at you and have no idea who it is. When I see someone across the room and I think am I waving at Adolph Hitler or Marcel Proust or whatever, that's always a drag. I have to get pretty close to recognize people, and I think that wasn't true before.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So, as you work today, how much of your inspiration is generated through your imagination or memory versus what you see?

**Parker:** Probably more of what I see. I have a little camera. I take a lot of pictures. Sometimes they're useful, sometimes not so useful. But I was at the Dunes State Park at Michigan City, Indiana with some friends a few years ago, and there was a stray dog on the beach and I found that picture that day, and I made a painting of it, it's over there somewhere, I'll show you later and it really brought back that day. You wouldn't know, I know it's a dog, but it could be a stump too. It's sort of a back view of a dog. This is a long, silly answer, isn't it? I'm sorry.

### Working habits and recent work

**Phillips/Schumacher:** You've worked in a lot of different mediums as a visual artist over the years.

**Parker:** Well, I've done many more watercolors than anything else. That's certain. I hate pastels. I've never done any of those. I don't use oil paints too much. I do etchings and monotypes, watercolors and if I have the occasion, sometimes Lithos. This winter, this lithographer brought a few stones here and I did some lithographs. I hadn't done any for quite a while. But, generally, I work in watercolor and etching. I have a press behind you. That whole cupboard over there is plates. There's hundreds and hundreds of them. In the olden days, I used to drop them through the floor when I was done with them, which is probably very bad for the soil, since there's ink in them and everything. For a while in Torrington, they had a scrap metal place. I used to sell them

too: zinc fetches very good money if you have a ton of it. I never etched much on copper. So, those are the two things I do mostly, watercolors and etching, and monotypes. Oh, and lately sculptures. I've been doing these little heads and stuff.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Is there one medium above others that you feel more a master of?

**Parker:** No. Technically I guess my etchings aren't very, they're just traditional methods. I guess the watercolors are, I think I was the most comfortable with those for many years, yeah. I like the fact that they're immediate and, I don't know, I just liked them. I guess the speed of them too, that they dry fast and go on to the next thing.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Whereas in etching—.

**Parker:** It's a lot of process. I mean it's a plate. The plate has to be ground. You have to, I mean each step is interesting. Then you draw on it and then you put it in nitric acid and then wash all that away and then print it. It's fun because you never know quite what you're getting.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Do you come to your studio every day?

**Parker:** I do.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** And so these days you're working on?

**Parker:** Well, I've been inventing landscapes from a trip we [Parker and his wife Judy] made to the Midwest a few months ago [summer 2014]. I did a lot en route, but that whole trip was so depressing. There's one crop all the way. You get past Pennsylvania, and all you see is rape. And that stuff, they can use any kind of insect repellent they want, since humans aren't going to eat it. So that's wiped out insects, which means bird life is gone. Jesus, it's so depressing. And, instead of a farm and a silo, there's a town, and they have a silo for all the farmers. They bring their crop, turn it into oil or whatever it is, and that's the end of it. Fences aren't necessary. The landscape is depressing.



A watercolor landscape from Parker's summer 2014 trip to the Midwest

**Phillips/Schumacher:** What was your trip west for?

**Parker:** I went to see an old friend of mine. I'm glad I did, because he died last week. He was in a soldier's home in Quincy, Illinois, right on the Mississippi. Quincy is opposite Hannibal, Missouri. There's a bridge between the two. On the Quincy side, there's beautiful cliffs, and the Mississippi's really good looking there. Beautiful town. In ruins. I mean, nothing's crumbling, but everything is gone now, no work, no business, no stores, nothing. Except this beautiful old soldier's home, which was built about 1880, for the Civil War survivors, with a tailored park and lagoons and statuary and beautiful buildings. So, his last days were very nice. It wasn't a hospital. It was just a place to live. I'm glad we went out there. Judy likes to drive, and I like being a passenger. Cursing at the landscape.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Can you talk just to the idea of inventing landscapes. What is involved with that?

**Parker:** Just lately I found myself doing them.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Would you say you're doing them from memory?

**Parker:** From my memory.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So you're capturing the quality of the mood and the light, for sure.

**Parker:** Yeah. And, I don't know, with this one, for instance, I was just thinking about dogs running alongside of us. I sort of like that.



A landscape from memory with dog running from summer 2014.

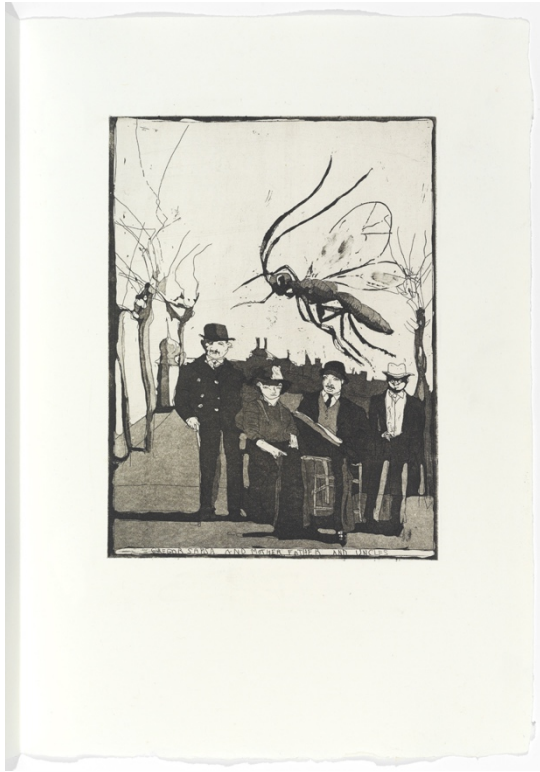
**Phillips/Schumacher:** So do you tend to start by blocking in a little bit, like a horizon line and some structure?

**Parker:** Yeah. I throw most of them away. I keep a few of them. They're sort of exercises or something.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** They're very nice. Would these, then, become other things, too? Like would you use something like this to develop an etching later?

**Parker:** Not usually. Etching I usually try to do something more, there isn't a more precise—. I did a suite of etchings about, based on Kafka's diaries. Did you ever see those?

**Phillips/Schumacher:** They were on display at the Century Association show, weren't they [Summer 2014]?



An etching from Parker's series based on Franz Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*

**Parker:** That's right. They were all done on that press. The dish was made in Prague, but the plates were made here. I work at whatever comes to mind, really. I used to like going to life classes and paying for the nude, but it's embarrassing to go to class and have to put your picture next to the model, and I thought, I can't do this anymore.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Was there a place here in town where you would go?

**Parker:** Kent used to have a little print shop, and they'd have the models on Thursday. And I thought, I can't do this. I can't see who it is. I remember the last time I went there, a guy, he came with baseball equipment, but nude. [LAUGHTER] And he'd say, batter up. And he would pose. He'd say, high-and-inside. [LAUGHTER] I don't know who the hell he was, because I couldn't see his face.

High-and-inside, batter up. God, what was he thinking? And then one night a lady brought her baby, and that was, I was wishing I could be close up to paint. It would have been interesting. Yeah, I sort of miss that.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** I'm wondering if you can talk a little bit about the memorial gardens, because it seems like you've been working on them for a while. What is the impetus behind them?



An example of one of the sculptures Parker calls "Memorial Gardens" that he was working on in 2013-2014.

**Parker:** They are related to my fascination with the work of Richard Dadd [an English painter of the Victorian era]. There's a famous picture of Dadd's, "The Fairy Feller's Mighty Blow." I saw it in *Time Magazine* in the '40s when I was in high school and never forgot it. Dadd was incarcerated in Bedlam because he had murdered his, I don't think his whole family, his father, I think. But he was rich, and I think he had nice rooms at Bedlam, and art supplies, or whatever you wanted. I guess that's the way it was there. You know, you would either live in horrible filth, or else live—. In any case, he painted very, very strange pictures. And I've always been fascinated by him. So, I was thinking about him, and if you'd worked three-dimensionally and

stuff like that, I guess. I did a lot of monotypes based on Richard Dadd's sort of vision, which I gave to Roy [Roy Davis, who represented Parker's work at Davis and Langdale Company] about a year ago. We were going to do a show about Dadd. And from that I guess I started making these things that are deliberately, what should I say, upsetting or strange.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** And when did you start working on them, then? Was it just the past year or so?

**Parker:** Yeah, well, these flat ones, I mean, those are before that. You see those model airplanes [hanging from the ceiling of his studio]? They needed pilots for them to stick in the holes I drilled into the fuselage, so I cast the things in plasticine and plaster, and then these kits. And then one day, I had one leftover, and I stuck one on this guy. See, it's a poet leaning against a mantelpiece, boring people. Then after that, I began to make bigger ones, but it started as personnel for these airplanes. I actually, oddly enough, I still like that poet. I never put it up for sale. I would miss that. He looks so arrogant, doesn't he? [LAUGHTER]



Parker's mixed-media work, "The Poet"

**Phillips/Schumacher:** It seems like experimentation has been a large part of your work.

**Parker:** Or luck. I mean, a direction that became interesting to me. But when I was printing those Richard Dadd inspired monotypes—Roy has them, so I can't even show them to you—it was winter, and I was inking up dead branches and stuff. And then, oh hell, I made some sort of figure shapes out of stiff paper.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So it sounds like the Memorial Gardens went from that image of the poet, which was sort of the genesis of the sculptures, to—.

**Parker:** Bigger things.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** And then you started making like little altars.

**Parker:** That's right. That's what they are. Well, because, meanwhile, I had a bunch of spindles and stuff around here, and I used those up. And then I saw Nick [his son] moved into a house in Reinbeck with a barn near it. And the guy's hobby was turning spindles on his lathe. So he made the spindles and gave me big bundles of more. And I said, "Enough Nicholas, I've got enough spindles now." But they're all found objects.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Are they still something you have interest in working on, the Memorial Gardens?

**Parker:** Yeah, I did some just a couple of weeks ago. I keep the plaster underneath the stairs, and when the weather's warm, you can put the plasticine out in the yard. It makes it soft enough to work with. In the winter, it's tough. Plasticine is just made of plaster shavings and linseed oil.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Why do you call them "Memorial Gardens?"

**Parker:** I don't know. I don't know. At my age, I certainly think about mortality a lot. My phone book has gone from that to this [a gesture to show its diminishing thickness]. I lost three major friends just in the last month or so. Tom Berger died last week. We were great friends. And my friend, Bill Gallagher, the one in Quincy. And an old friend in Ireland died. It's all, so I don't

know, I don't think they're a memorial to me, but I do think about that stuff, I guess. But I think about Dadd a lot, too.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Between when you first saw that image of Dadd's and more recently when you began working more consciously with him in mind, would you sometimes think about Dadd's work?

**Parker:** Yeah, I always would look for his name. If I was in England or something, I'd see what galleries might have him, and I saw a few [of his paintings], I guess, I don't know, at the Tate, maybe, or the British Museum, I forget. But I mean, I was interested in a lot of artists. I would go lengths to see William Nicholson. There is also Henry Tonks, a surgeon who was a painter and member of the Royal Academy. During World War I, The Royal Medical Corps had him paint faces of wounded soldiers, and they're beautiful. I just did an homage to him. It is extraordinary to see; he could make something so beautiful out of a wounded face. Because he wanted to get the skin color right and the veins right and the back of the eyeball right.

In school days, I think all of us in Chicago then were more interested by Germans than anyone else—Max Beckmann and George Grosz, Otto Dix, Paul Klee.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Do you still think about Paul Klee?

**Parker:** I do, always. I love his line. When I was in school, in one of my sketchbooks I made what Paul Klee used to call transfer drawings. I don't know how he got his line.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So are the Memorial Gardens the first time that you sculpted, basically, worked in three dimensions? Or have you done that before?

**Parker:** No, occasionally I did it before. Not that you would notice. I did small things like, when I was teaching at the Deaf School, one day I had my students make plaster casts of their faces, breathing through a tube, and a lot of them didn't like doing it. I didn't mind it, but a lot of the kids didn't like it.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** They didn't like the feeling of the plaster against their faces, you mean?

**Parker:** Yeah, it does get hot, plaster.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Your subject matter is sometimes disturbing. In an online magazine, your hand-colored etchings *German Humor*, are in fact described as "deeply disturbing." Do you ever try to provoke controversy or provide commentary in your work?

**Parker:** No, in fact oddly enough, that started out as a suite of monotypes. They were much bigger, about this big. Someone bought them, and I borrowed them back and did etchings based on them. The same images, except I added a few to this set.

Well, that whole era [World War II] makes me angry just thinking about it. That's why the last page of that is a view of Dachau, and chimneys and what not. I tried to show in that how, I don't know, how awful it all was, you know. Starting out with sort of garish and high living and jolly, waltzes and polkas and all that, and then ending in death camps. But that's a position that probably everyone takes, you know. It's not special by any means. My wife and I spent some time in Auschwitz, touring it one day and I thought, it's, it's a cliché to say it's unbelievable, but it really was, how they could do that to people. Extraordinary. I still think it's beyond comprehension, you know?

### Writing, music, and illustration

**Phillips/Schumacher:** In addition to your visual arts, you've written quite a bit. Do you still write?

**Parker:** Well, I only write, I guess I write when I need to do something. I have to write a piece about a friend of mine who died lately and I've been working on that lately. My wife was an editor at the *New Yorker*, so she's very useful in terms of my grammar, and ideas too often. But I've, for years I kept a journal of my dreams under my bed. I'd wake up in the morning while

they were still fresh and write them. Sometimes, if they were especially good, I'd stay awake at night and write them. But as I get older, the dreams get more and more boring, and I don't even think of doing it. They're always about travel. There's no more sex in them or crime or excitement, it's just "Gee, what an odd looking place. Isn't that alabaster sign nice in the sun?" They're pleasant, but they're not worth writing down and illustrating. So, I have many books of my dreams. The dream would be there plus the pictures that went with it. But, other than that, I don't write much.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** And you're a jazz musician. You play—.

**Parker:** Drums. Four of my sons are drummers too. One of them is not. Yeah, I do, I play, for the last 20 years we played every Saturday at the same place here, Interlaken. It's an inn near Hotchkiss. And then I have a quintet called Jive by Five, and we don't have as many jobs as we used to have. Every year we play a local venue called Music Mountain, and on those occasions, it's Jive by Five, but I usually bring my four sons too, so there's five drummers on stage and four horns. It really makes an impression if you can stand it. Yeah, music is important here and I like playing. That's the one thing I don't like about travel, not being able to play while [I'm traveling].

**Phillips/Schumacher:** When did music enter your life?

**Parker:** Early. My father was a great jazz fan. In fact, he was a schoolmate of Hoagy Carmichael and so we always, at home my mother had a few so-called classics and my father had a lot of jazz records. 78's they were then and that's what we grew up on. Duke Ellington, well his work I especially remember, Chick Webb. Those were things we heard most often in our house, those two guys, and what's his name, Fats Waller. Very Big, and records that Bix had been on, my father collected those. Later I knew young Hoagy Carmichael. I still know young Hoagy Carmichael. One day we were out fishing in Canada and I said, "Our fathers were schoolmates, you know," and he said, "If everyone who ever said that to me were standing here, they'd reach all the way to Asia." I think everyone knew Hoagy. Anyway, that's what we grew up with.

For a long time, I played clarinet, just fooled around with drums. I took that with me in the army, and that turned out to be handy. It got us out of KP and latrine duty, a lot of stuff. It was worth having a horn with me. I was never a good clarinetist by any means.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Were you ever torn between art and music?

**Parker:** I was, for a while, yeah, certainly. But I always liked painting and drawing.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Does the nature of improv play into your work as a visual artist, too?

**Parker:** I don't know. Maybe, I'm not sure. If that means inventing subjects and things, probably not. Almost everything I do has some subject. There's something in it that's recognizable. All music is sort of abstract, isn't it, unless it's the sounds of crickets and whatnot? But I don't know, I never thought of it that way. Just two different things. My mother used to mock me. I was visiting them when they were living in Phoenix, and she said you probably have to get home for a gig. She'd always put that twist to it, a gig. She hated that word. She didn't mind if I had to go home and paint, but you've got to go home and gig. Funny how it annoyed her. She lived to be 101 and she was annoyed to the very last day with some aspects of my life.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** In addition to the work, the art work that you've done for yourself, you've been commissioned to do a lot of illustrations. Is there a difference between illustration and art?

**Parker:** Well, I was very lucky. I had a show in New York in 1954, I think it was. Yeah, I finished school in '52. In any case, I was very lucky that the Modern bought something from that first show, and Blanche Rockefeller. All sorts of people bought things. Very lucky, but also, the same show, someone came by, saw the show, and said, "Would you mind doing illustration?" I said, "You bet." I was teaching at the New York School for the Deaf then, and I hated it. So, my work for myself and what I did for magazines and books is not all that different, you know. The only difference is they would often suggest a subject and certainly the timing of it and stuff.

It was a great chance to travel. *Fortune* sent me to West Africa, North Africa, Central America, everywhere. They were great then. *Sports Illustrated* sent me to Ireland and South Dakota for a shooting. They were all things I couldn't afford on my own, but doing them for a magazine was no chore at all, you know? I did a lot of kids' books, about 100 of them in fact. I think every one of them, except maybe one, is out of print. They don't last that long, kids' books, it seems. Then later I did some trips for the Air Force. I went to Rwanda for the Air Force and Panama.

The services still send artists out and they're nice to work for because they never make any demands: "Would you mind doing this or that?" You come back with what you've done. They usually hated what I'd done; it was painting, and it was things I'd seen in Panama or Rwanda. In fact, when I was in Rwanda, they, I actually sold some of the etchings I did to the *New Yorker*. Which didn't thrill the Air Force I don't think because I showed one of them asleep. He complained to me, a nice guy, Major, and I said should, "So I have shown you with a sword in one hand and a revolver in the other? You were asleep." He said, "Well, in the office they blew it up and made a big poster of me asleep." [LAUGHTER]



One of the many illustrations Parker has done in his career, this for the children's book, *Pop Corn & Ma Goodness*

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Why does the armed forces send artists to—.

**Parker:** Well, they always have. In fact, I guess they still do. I quit doing it some years ago. Not for political reasons, especially, but I sort of, I don't know, I got tired of parts of it. I would have gone if it had been somewhere I wanted to go to. With budgets like they have, what do they care, you know?

## Parker's studio

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Can you tell us about this studio? When did you move here?

**Parker:** 1983, I think. This was a barn, and, against that wall, there used to be a sliding door. The car was parked here. And the guy worked upstairs. He was an artist, as well. There used to be a wood stove over in that corner until just a couple of months ago. We got rid of it. When I bought the place, I took this floor out. Before I took the floor out, I should have washed the skylight, because now I'll never get at it. So, he worked up there, and his car was down here. It was all artificial light.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Is this a press that you've been carrying around with you for a while?

**Parker:** Yeah, a friend of mind, a Swiss guy, his sister was a printer, and she was going back to Switzerland. And he said, you want her press? I said, you betcha. It's better than the one I used to have. The tag on it fell off. I forget who made it. It's Swiss in origin, anyway.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** And what is this over here?

**Parker:** It's for heating the plates before you ink them up. And that's English. So I had to have a special plug put in for that kind of outlet.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Does heating the plates make the ink a little more viscous?

**Parker:** Exactly. It makes it easier to ink them up. If you're a really good printer, you don't even have to use that. But I'm never very good. I mean, I can do it, but mine will often have thumbprints on them and what not. [LAUGHTER] Yeah, it's a useful tool.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** What kind of plate do you work on?

**Parker:** Zinc.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Have you ever worked on copper?

**Parker:** Occasionally. But all my acids that are underneath the stairs there are for zinc. In fact, somebody just gave me a big load of acid. It's hard to get rid of that stuff if you don't want it. This is acid for copper. And a bunch of other really deadly liquids, which I introduced to the ground back here, or I think sort of would absorb it, I hope. Or the river, it would have. But getting to the river, you don't want to do that. And I've had the odd accident with acids, as everyone has. You know.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** What happened?

**Parker:** Well, I was printing with a friend of mine, and one of the trays had straight nitric in it, and he put the plate in through it, because I hadn't thinned it with water yet, and a big orange cloud. It's really deadly stuff.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Is the gas caustic? Does it burn?

**Parker:** It would. In fact, if you leave a tray of nitric out for a night or two, everything that's metal here would have rust on it the next day. Nails and everything. It's powerful stuff. It's what they used to call vitriol. Did you know that?

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So are you still making etchings?

**Parker:** Yeah, a lot. I try and do it seasonally. I do these things in hot weather, these plaster things. In the winter I like to print, and I paint most of the time anyway. If I've got to print, I try to do it in cold weather, because that thing gets hot.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** The objects in the glass case—are these things you've collected over time?

**Parker:** Yeah, I used to collect toy soldiers, and these are remnants of my former collection.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** I see the Capitan cigarettes there.

**Parker:** Yeah, where are they?

**Phillips/Schumacher:** They're up here in this case.

**Parker:** Oh, yeah, those are rough.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Where did you come upon those?

**Parker:** Yugoslavia, maybe? I don't know.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Did you get those in your travels?

**Parker:** Yeah. But there's no clue where. Oh, made in Poland. I bet those are good.

[LAUGHTER]

**Phillips/Schumacher:** Do the fish skeleton and the rat have any significance?

**Parker:** No, the fish was from a friend. A friend of mine sent it to me from one of the Great Lakes. I can't remember which one she said, even. And the rat I found in, it's a squirrel, actually, I found it in a barn near here, poor thing, petrified. A friend of mine was working in the barn, and he said, "You probably want that. Right? He also gave me this one, too. It's a little mouse. Yeah. Look, he's still functioning. I've painted him. Poor thing.

**Phillips/Schumacher:** So, you're just still so driven to work, and I'm wondering what is it that makes you get up in the morning and come over here every day?

**Parker:** I don't know what else to do. I have breakfast with three or five other old types, and I'm lucky. One of them is a writer, he keeps writing. But some of them just, I don't know, do one thing or another. Some of them go out to breakfast, then lunch and then dinner and talk to their buddies. Talk about the war or movies or whatever. But the people that I meet on Thursday mornings at the local restaurant, they all do something, which is nice.

I'm lucky to have something that engrosses me. That's what Judy always says, anyway. You're lucky that you're committed to something. That keeps you going. She's probably right. I don't know what I'd do if I didn't paint. I wouldn't want to just read all day, or look at movies all day, or mow the grass all day [LAUGHTER].

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