

KENNESAW STATE UNIVERSITY ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT F. SHERER

CONDUCTED BY THOMAS A. SCOTT AND DEDE YOW

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for the

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TS: Robert, we always begin with everybody just asking them where they were born, a little bit about their early schooling and that kind of thing.

RS: I was born in Jasper, Alabama. It's forty-three miles northwest of Birmingham. It now is almost like a suburb of Birmingham because Birmingham has grown so much.

TS: Almost in Tennessee if you go that far north.

RS: It's about the halfway mark to Tennessee. Yes, I was born there. My dad was an aircraft mechanic. He was in the Air Force, and his father became ill with black lung because he had worked his whole life in the coalmines—so my dad left the military and started working in the aircraft industry to be closer to home. His company had contracts with NASA, perhaps due to their proximity to the Redstone Arsenal in Huntsville, AL. So my dad's company contributed to the Saturn 5 Project that put people on the moon, which was, of course, very thrilling for a little kid.

TS: What's your father's name?

RS: My father's name is Franklin Delano Roosevelt Sherer.

TS: Oh, I wonder who he was named for [laughter]! I wonder what the family politics might have been!

RS: Yes. They were straight Democrats all the way, party affiliated.

TS: I guess working in those mines could do that to you. Of course, everybody was a Democrat back then, anyway.

RS: My grandfather was particularly interested in the Democratic Party because, you know, FDR's works programs put people to work, and saved the family. There were a lot of starving Appalachian families and FDR came to the rescue.

TS: What was your grandfather's name?

RS: Cecil Wise Sherer.

TS: You say Appalachian from Alabama or Appalachian from Tennessee?

RS: Alabama. We were all north Alabama, and they all pretty much still live there. But my mother was a housewife and an excellent cook who baked and sold cakes from our home kitchen. She also did some catering, so myself and my three siblings grew up in a world of great food.

TS: Did you have to do some of the catering?

RS: Oh yes, but mostly helping her in the kitchen. I loved having exotic foods at home. I thought it was a wonderful sort of thing. As a result of that, all four of the children are really good cooks. In fact, the joke in the family is that some of us, our very first words that we spoke were from spice names or whatever, from being in the kitchen. The baby of the family, my brother, Jeffrey, is a very accomplished chef. He was already a full-blown chef in his teens when he graduated from high school and moved to Atlanta. Upon his arrival here he enrolled in Georgia State University and became a chef at a chic cafe in Midtown. He now lives out in Albuquerque, and operates a restaurant there.

TS: All right. What's your mother's name?

RS: Nora Lane.

TS: You didn't say what year you were born.

RS: Oh, 1957.

TS: You're a young guy.

DY: He is very young.

TS: So you're coming up on fifty.

RS: I'll be fifty this next year, scared of that! Actually, I don't think I'm aware of age at all because when we're in the academic environment we're around the young people all the time. When I go to my high school reunion, for instance, it really becomes extremely obvious that you do stay young being around students because the people who are my age seem like they're my parents' age. It's very strange.

TS: Were you a product of public schools?

RS: All the way. In fact, I got a really interesting dose of that because I lived in the town of Jasper and went to the very best city schools. But my parents, when I was going into the eighth grade, moved us out to the country and I found myself

going to the classic American school on the hill sort of a thing. That was a complete culture shock to me because I'd been in the city school system where we had music lessons and art lessons, and this rural school had nothing like that.

TS: I was going to ask if you had art classes in school.

RS: During the early years in the public schools, but when we moved out into the country, there were no art classes of any kind.

TS: How did you get interested in art?

RS: My father wanted to be an artist, and when I was a child there was a portfolio of his drawings and paintings at the house. He had given it up, of course, because he was married and having children, but I saw those a lot and I would make my parents open up the drawer—it was a flat file sort of thing—and show it to me on a regular basis. My family says that it's a strange thing that I was born an artist. They said I already had the attitude, and even when I was young I referred to my work area, a corner of my bedroom, as my studio. They said they didn't know where I even came up with it and it's almost like some sort of strange past life being channeled through me. They said I had a real flair for it; that I even wanted to dress in the artist's smock and all that. But they encouraged me, which I think is really, really wonderful. They took me to the Birmingham Museum of Art. I guess as far as a pivotal moment in my artistic development is concerned it would have to be one afternoon when I was an adolescent my mother took me to the museum and they had an image of a Salvador Dali painting called the *Giraffe on Fire*. It's a tall giraffe and there are flames licking up its neck. I remember freezing in front of it and knowing that my life would never be the same again because I saw that surrealism existed—and that art wasn't just simply about depicting the visible world, but that it could actually depict the strange world of dreams where we basically spend one-third of our lives. I immediately started drawing weird pictures, lots of weird pictures. I fancied myself as quite a neo-surrealist as a teenager.

DY: So an epiphany in front of a Dali.

RS: No doubt about it.

DY: Wow, that's a good story right there.

TS: Were your weird pictures things that you had seen in a dream or a vision or something?

RS: Some of it was dreams, a lot of it was practicing automatism, self-hypnosis. You know, we drive automobiles automatically. You're not actually very conscious of the fact that you're even driving an automobile. I was the oldest son, and so I had

to mow the lawn a lot—and I found that when I was mowing the lawn I was doing it completely automatically, and I would just go off into some place.

DY: You're not in your body anymore.

RS: Right, it was a very transcendent sort of thing. But I began to be aware of the fact that I could doodle and go to the place, too. That's what I would do. I would just start doodling and pretty soon I would not be there, but the drawing would go ahead and draw itself, so to speak. It's very, very strange because I found out many years later when I actually did go off to college that that is an actual tried and true method that surrealists used to generate their imagery and they call it Automatism.

TS: You just hit on it.

RS: I was just attracted to it.

DY: I know about the automatic writing method and I know in the literary world that's not uncommon with poets and artists, but I had no idea. I mean it makes perfectly good sense.

RS: Yes, stream of consciousness. And people thought it was drugs because I was a weird little teenager. I was an offbeat kid.

TS: It's almost too early for the drug culture.

RS: Oh, no, that would have been in the late '60s, early '70s. I graduated in 1975 from high school.

TS: That's right. I've got my decades wrong.

RS: A lot of people who thought, oh, he's like some whacked out kid on drugs, and I really wasn't. I was whacked out on surrealism [laughter].

TS: Okay, so you go to Walker College, which is in your hometown, and that's a two-year college I presume, and got your associate degree. Is it public or private?

RS: It's public.

TS: So you got your two-year degree and then went to the Atlanta College of Art.

RS: One of the most important people in my life was at Walker College. I had an extremely eccentric first-ever art teacher/mentor. Her real name was London Bridges, and she was wildly eccentric. She dressed extravagantly, sometimes in

Chanel outfits and then in Katherine Hepburn-style men's suits, and she changed my life completely. She recognized some potential in me, I guess, and she reined me in. She was my first adult art teacher, and she got me involved in the theater and theatrical design. Even though they only taught one art course at the college, which was a combination art history/studio class, she made arrangements with the administration that I could take the class over and over again. She helped pump up my portfolio. I was studying botany because I love plants, and I built up a very impressive collection of plant drawings, like plant structures, that sort of stuff, and finally London came to me, and she said, "I think it's time for you to rebirth yourself, to leave your hometown and follow your destiny as an artist." As a result of her encouragement my parents took me to Atlanta for Careers in Arts Portfolio Day at Atlanta College of Art. It was in the old High Museum [of Art], which was in the Woodruff Arts Center at the time. I brought a portfolio of my surreal drawings and paintings and a bunch of plant drawings I had done for London and showed them to the portfolio evaluators and they gave me a Ford [Family] Foundation Scholarship to study art at Atlanta College of Art.

TS: All right!

DY: Yes!

RS: So I was able to leave the farm in a grand sort of way. I moved to Atlanta and fell in love with it.

DY: Where did you live when you first came here?

RS: At the High Museum. Yes, there used to be a six-story building behind it called Lombardi Plaza.

DY: My brother lived there for a while. I know it very well.

RS: I lived in Lombardi Plaza, and then I lived in the only free standing house on the old block of Pershing Point in Atlanta. You know, the entire block was comprised of big, beautiful hotels and grand apartment buildings, but there was only one house on the whole block and I lived in it for many years. I loved that house and hoped to one day buy it, but now it is gone. In fact, the whole block was demolished.

TS: So you went through, let's see, '79-'80, one year there at the College of Art. That didn't lead to a degree I guess, there.

RS: No, it didn't. You know, Atlanta College of Art no longer exists but at the time it had a highly regarded first-year experience called the Foundation Program. At the end of the Foundation Program, I decided not to go back to school because I was already beginning to show my art in the Atlanta scene and wanted to see what

it was like to live the life of an artist, and I thought I was ready to do that. But I needed to go back to school. It took me a couple of years to wise up and figure that out.

DY: Did you have another epiphany, or did somebody tell you, or what made you aware that you needed to make this transition?

RS: I've always loved school my whole life, and I just started missing being in school. I'm one of those people who is really not equipped for the real world at all. Academia is not the real world; it's a marvelous place to be. So I decided—I don't even remember what year it was, '83 or something like that, to go back to school.

TS: I believe '82.

RS: Eighty-two? So that wasn't too bad, there was only about a two-year stretch there.

TS: But it's Georgia State [University], so you're still in Atlanta.

RS: Yes, I decided to go to Georgia State because I actually wanted a liberal arts education. I did not want to go to a school that offered primarily art courses. When I was at the Atlanta College of Art, I had a huge problem with their curriculum because the kids who were graduating from there never had to take a real history course, a real English course, a real math course or anything like that. I thought it was horrible. I had already fallen in love with the idea of a liberal arts education by being at Walker College, so that's why I chose GSU.

TS: Were you thinking at one time of getting a botany degree?

RS: Yes, I was.

TS: And being a scientist?

RS: Yes. Well, I grew up around a lot of smart, scientific types. There was a family that I was close friends with two of their sons and I dated their daughter all the way through high school, and they were all very intelligent. Because we all liked the sciences I think we just assumed that we all were going to end up as scientists. I never even questioned it. But thank goodness London Bridges got a hold of me and yanked me out of the sciences [laughter].

DY: What a wonderfully symbolic name she has.

RS: I know, but I never thought about the idea of her being a bridge.

DY: She's a bridge for you.

RS: Oh, my goodness.

TS: But I gather you had some talent in math and a few other things.

RS: Actually, not at all. I think I have a pretty good scientific mind. Even now I've kept a lot of the methodologies and critical skills intact, but math was my dirty secret. When I was at Georgia State University, I did really well academically. I was on the dean's list. I was well regarded as one of the smart kids on campus, but I kept a dirty secret, that I was horrible in math. I took an aptitude test, and they determined that my math skills were so poor that I had to take remedial math for two whole semesters before I would be equipped to pass an Algebra I class. It was terrible for me because I had to sneak over to the remedial building for class and hope that none of my smart friends would see me go over there. I even lied one time. One of them caught me in the hallway of the building and asked me what I was doing over there and, actually I didn't lie but I just wasn't forthcoming with the truth. He asked, "What are you doing over here? Oh, I know, I know, I bet you're tutoring someone." I just let it be. I wasn't even going to come clean with my secret life [laughter].

TS: One of my favorite history professors was just absolutely brilliant in history, but couldn't pass the admissions requirement to college in math and in his case they let him take French instead.

RS: Wow, they wouldn't do that now, would they?

TS: No.

RS: Well, my being inept at math is actually not a bad thing. My students love it when I tell them that story—I think it makes me more human. I have noticed that a lot of artists are terrible at math. Oftentimes, when I tell that story to a class some of the students are taking those same remedial math classes. I think it comforts them to know that "Oh goodness, and he ended up being a professor."

DY: "And a fabulous artist. Look what awaits me!"

RS: It helps them a lot. They've even come into my office in tears before: "I failed my algebra class. I'm not going to be able to get my degree." And I tell them the story about how Robert was bad at it and it comforts them.

DY: Well, it's not a language everyone needs to know, mathematics. Tom is brilliant in math. He made as high a score in mathematics on his GRE as he did in verbal.

TS: I was much stronger in math than the verbal.



DY: Now, that I didn't know. That's depressing. Let's move on.

RS: I think one of the reasons I was bad at math is that when we moved into the country and I attended that classic Winslow Homeresque school they only taught the reading, writing and arithmetic, and the arithmetic was addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division. I didn't have any exposure to what they referred to back then as the new math.

TS: You were probably lucky that you weren't exposed to it.

RS: I don't know, it really scared me when I was in college because I was going to school with kids who knew what algebra was all about and I had no clue. So that did set me back a little.

TS: Well, you must have gotten through the algebra class.

RS: Yes, I did. I survived it. And in fact, not only did I survive it, but I kind of enjoyed it after awhile, to such an extent that I took a class at GSU called Physics for the Visual Artist.

DY: How interesting!

TS: That's great.

RS: Yes, and it was super challenging.

TS: But what a neat course though because, if you're drawing the body or whatever, knowledge of physics is important.

RS: Well, yes, especially the physics of light. They taught us all of that, and I loved it.

DY: Funny how we get someplace by a strange path.

RS: I feel as if my whole life I've trusted my instincts and just kind of been on automatic pilot, and it hasn't let me down once.

DY: Good for you.

TS: Well, you got through Georgia State in 1986.

DY: Took off out of the South.

TS: Well, yes, you did. How did that come about to go all the way up to Rhode

Island?

RS: I wanted to go to grad school, and I sent twenty of my paintings and drawings to Rhode Island School of Design. I received a phone call from one of the professors there, who was in the master's program, saying that he liked my work and he wanted me to be in the program. Would I be willing to go on ahead and yank up my roots and move up there? So I did.

TS: Was Savannah College of Art and Design even in existence at that time?

RS: Yes, it was. But I wanted to go to RISD [pronounced ris-dee]—that's what everybody calls Rhode Island School of Design, it's the affectionate name for the school. At the time it was regarded as the finest art school in the United States. I wanted those credentials. I wanted the New England education. I think that getting educated in New England is a wonderful thing, if you can afford it.

TS: Providence, Rhode Island. It's a great place to be.

RS: Yes, I loved it. I lived on a street where H. P. [Howard Phillips] Lovecraft had lived. Edgar Allan Poe lived on that street, Kurt Vonnegut.

TS: I thought Poe was in Maryland. I didn't know he was up in Rhode Island.

RS: He lived in Rhode Island for a while. He lived on Benefit Street; I believe that was the name of the street. To this day, the street is the classic New England cobblestone with gas street lamps and gorgeous, but creepy old houses. The Brown family from Brown University fame live on that street.

TS: There's a new book out on them.

RS: Oh really.

TS: Going back to their slave-holding days.

RS: Actually, while I was at RISD, a city crew doing some kind of work down in the Narragansett Bay area in the old harbor unearthed tunnels that the Brown family had made so that the slaves, when they left the slave ships, wouldn't even be on ground level, on the street level for people to see them. They were holding cells and the city crew unearthed them. It is rumored that the Brown family's descendants actually tried to make that discovery go away. They wanted the holes filled in and for no one to know about it, but it was too late. It hit the newspapers and it went wild.

DY: Must have been some strange energy to be around.

RS: Yes.

TS: I think Brown University has had some crises of conscience over the fact that they were funded by slave trade money.

RS: Yes. You know, they share the campus with RISD. They are together.

TS: Well, you did post-baccalaureate study there for, I guess a whole year, or a whole academic year, is that right?

RS: No, well . . . .

TS: In '87-'88?

RS: Yes, I was there one year, just one year, but I hated it. I hated it. It was my big dream to go to RISD and when I got up there I discovered that it really was just a playground for spoiled, rich kids. The aesthetic directive of the painting program was nothing more than “just express yourself. There was no guidance. There was hardly any structure. The teachers really didn't give us any structured assignments, and that is what I needed.

TS: Was the reputation based on what they once had been?

RS: Yes, very much. There had been two or three American artists who had become pretty famous who had been through their program twenty years before I was there, and I didn't know it. What had happened that ruined it for me is Yale University's painting program had become famous by the mid-'80s, and there was a distinct look to Yale's painters. You could go to New York galleries and you could say, that must be a Yale painter there, I know that look. And it angered RISD because they had always considered Yale to be standard liberal arts institution and they thought of themselves as the premiere art school in the United States, so they decided to create a distinct RISD style of painting. They began their mission while I was there. I dropped out because I couldn't stomach it any more. I didn't approve of the studio instructors dictating to me and the other students that there better be certain characteristics in our paintings. I remember that for a while we actually had a checklist of favorable qualities for our paintings. So I rebelled and dropped out, and I'm glad I did. In fact, while I was there, a very famous artist named Eric Fischl came to campus and did a slide lecture. He was on one of those Carnegie Mellon Grants, or whatever, and he was on campus for several days. One of his tasks was to tour the studios to see what the painters were doing. One evening he and one of the teachers who had been trying to force me into the new RISD style came into my studio. Fischl, who was famous for reintroducing the human figure into contemporary art, quietly studied my work for a few minutes and made some standard observations and suggestions. Suddenly, my teacher heard his phone ringing down the hall and

- excused himself from the room. The second he left, Fischl looked me in the eye and said, "Robert you must be terribly unhappy here." I said, "Yes, I am." He said, "I can see that you are wanting to be a figurative, realist painter, and I know that this department will never let you become that. Write down the names of these universities. These are the schools that are now championing the human figure." He was clearly opposed to the tyranny of the abstractionists and was leading the growing revolt against them. So I wrote down the five universities he suggested and immediately started applying to them.
- TS: What a fortunate phone call. It sounds almost providential.
- DY: I was going to say, it's an intervention of the spirit for you.
- RS: I know, I know, I can't believe it.
- TS: Providential in Providence [laughter].
- RS: But I applied to the schools.
- TS: So Edinboro University of Pennsylvania must have been one of them.
- RS: Yes, Edinboro was one of them. I stayed in Rhode Island for another two years earning money and preparing myself for another academic experience. I visited many campuses to learn as much about master's programs as was possible because I really wanted to make sure that I found the right one for me.
- TS: Earning money through your paintings or earning money by waiting tables?
- RS: A little bit of the sales of the paintings, but I also had a regular job as a purchasing agent/department manager for the RISD Store, definitely the most high-end retail student art supply store in the country. But, yes, I eventually leave for old Edinboro, and that's the best thing I ever did for myself as an artist.
- TS: This is in the, no it's Pennsylvania—I was thinking Cleveland area, but not in Pennsylvania.
- RS: It's two hours from Cleveland. In fact, Edinboro is . . . .
- TS: Erie, Pennsylvania?
- RS: Yes, seventeen miles south of Erie. It's approximately two hours from Pittsburgh, Cleveland and Buffalo, which is great because all three of those cities have terrific museums, and yet we weren't there in the hub of the big city. Edinboro is tucked away in this wonderful glacial valley.

TS: Glacial is a good term for it.

RS: Oh, yes, it's one of the coldest places in America.

TS: Oh yes. I was going to say it's two or three degrees colder than Alabama there.

RS: The think that shocked me is that the climate difference between Georgia and Rhode Island is almost that same as the climate difference from Rhode Island to Edinboro. It is in dead center of the Snow Belt and gets pounded by what they call the Lake Effect. International Falls, Minnesota and Erie, Pennsylvania, seem to compete with each other with a sick sort of humor as to who has the worst weather. They're actually proud of having the worst weather.

DY: You obviously don't have SAD [Seasonal Affective Disorder], or you wouldn't have made it.

RS: No, but I actually did . . . .

DY: Talk about sunlight deprivation that makes you depressed and go crazy.

RS: Oh, I've got to tell you something that relates to this. While I was at Edinboro, my second graduate assistantship was as a technical assistant to the painting department. I did things like repair easels and build partition walls for the students. One of my duties was to make sure that the florescent light bulbs that were in the grad studio were changed out on a regular basis. One day while perusing a catalog from a lightbulb company I noticed that they were advertising a sale on sun-balanced bulbs. I didn't really know much about the subject but I thought that the new bulbs couldn't possibly be worse than the florescent bulbs we were already using. None of your colors are right under florescent light.

TS: It's terrible for everybody I think.

RS: Yes. So I told my supervisor about the bulbs and he approved of the purchase because we had enough in the budget. I ordered 200 of the sun-balanced bulbs and replaced all of the old bulbs with the new ones. We noticed in only about a week or two that some people's dispositions began to change.

TS: For the worse or better?

RS: For the better. There were a lot of people who were suffering from that seasonal depression thing. No one really knew much about it back then.

TS: I see.

RS: There were about 200 of the sun-balanced bulbs in our vast open studio, so we were getting a strong dose of the sunlight during our oftentimes 12-14 hour studio sessions.

DY: It's like Palm Beach!

RS: I know. It was great!

TS: So having a good disposition, is that good for an artist or bad?

RS: Well, that is one of the big questions being raised in contemporary art galleries these days. There are some art dealers who have actual clauses in their gallery contracts stating that the artist must inform the gallery if they are going to be drastically changing their neural chemistry, such as a change in medications or perhaps seeing a therapist. An artist friend of mine who lives out west in the desert fell in love with a psychiatrist who helped her to get better. He placed her on medications and therapy. Her paintings changed, and her dealer who had invested hundreds of thousands of dollars promoting her career over about a twenty-year period suddenly couldn't sell any of her paintings because the wonderful, gloomy patina, that she was known for suddenly was gone [laughter]. So, yes, you know, it helps to have a little bit of a mental illness, if you want to call it that. Actually in our department, we've been told that we're not even supposed to use the term "mental illness" anymore. I think we are now supposed to say, "brain chemically challenged" [laughter]. I guess that's some of the new-speak of political correctness.

DY: It's interesting too, in that little anecdote that you related as to the commodification of the human being, the artist himself, but I guess that's absolutely nothing new since there were patrons.

RS: Yes, that's just something that we artists have to learn to deal with. I became aware that I was to some extent a commodity in my early twenties because I had already started to sell paintings. It doesn't necessarily have to be a problem, just as long as I'm aware of the fact that I am a commodity.

DY: And not exploited as such.

TS: Well, you won all kinds of awards at Edinboro University: Outstanding Graduate Student in Painting one year, and there was something at . . . .

RS: No, those were honors. I graduated with Outstanding Student in Art History too.

TS: Let's see, there's an award for Artistic Excellence from a very unusual name.

RS: The Kemenyffy Prize.

- TS: The [Susan H.] Kemenyffy Award for Artistic Excellence. At any rate, you obviously did well there.
- RS: Yes, the Edinboro experience was the very best thing I did for myself in my whole life. I did it right. When I arrived there I had already been a part of the art world for quite some time. I had already been burned by one grad school experience and was determined that I was going to make the most of this second chance. I had also been a part of the New York art scene because my last year of living in Rhode Island I was actually living in New York City. I had an apartment in Providence, and my brother and his girlfriend lived there, and I had my bedroom there, but I was living in New York. I was very much a part of the Lower East Side art scene and just wallowing in it. So, yes, when I arrived in the Graduate Painting Program at Edinboro I was primed. I was so ready to be there [laughter]. I excelled there. I had terrific professors who let me know that it was okay to make mistakes; that it was far better to fall flat on my face while attempting something truly ambitious, than it was to not ever try something ambitious. So they really pushed me and I was able to blossom, especially studying under Benedict Gibson. He is a terrific American painter. He is one of the great influences on my life.
- TS: That's certainly one of the things that we've been asking everybody about is mentors.
- RS: I think mentoring is the most important thing in academia. You can go into a classroom setting and you can open up the top of their heads and pour a bunch of knowledge in and slam the lid or whatever, but mentoring is a completely different thing. You really take them under wing and you're not just teaching them the technical aspects of art making—you're teaching them how to be artists. That's something you can't truly teach in a classroom. You can't actually teach someone to be an artist in a classroom. That's why I spend a tremendous amount of time mentoring students. I started the Art Career Mentoring Service here on campus. I frequently spend my Fridays and Saturdays with the students in Atlanta introducing them to dealers, visiting artists in their studios, and other professional development activities.
- DY: Wonderful.
- RS: It was a necessity. When I came to KSU in 2001, I was teaching a painting class, and I mentioned the High Museum in class and one of the students said, "What's that?" I said, "Where are you originally from?" He said, "Cobb County." I said, "You have lived in Cobb County your entire life, and you don't know that the High Museum is the major museum for this area?" He said no he didn't. At that point I thought that something had to be done to rectify this situation. I began to question the students, "Why don't you go to Atlanta? Why don't you go see shows?" I discovered that a lot of our students come from not just the Atlanta suburbs but also from rural northwestern Georgia, and their families have warned

them repeatedly, "Don't go into Atlanta, it's dangerous," or "There are perverts there," or some other danger. So I now knew why most of my students were reluctant to go to Atlanta. At that point I said, "We're going to Atlanta on field trips frequently." I collected everyone's email addresses and I began organizing and leading tours of the Atlanta galleries. In the beginning we would meet on campus and form these large caravans and go from gallery to gallery. Now the listserve has grown to over 700 members!

DY: Good for you! Congratulations!

RS: We also leave the alumni on the list, and it gives them a sense of connectivity like we're a family, because once they graduate many are getting married and having kids. But occasionally they find that they have a Friday night open and they'll start missing Professor Robert, or simply want to reconnect with the alma mater, so they'll surprise us and show up at one of the shows we are attending.

TS: That's all right.

DY: And sometimes it's just a matter of being afraid to drive into Atlanta. I mean it's something that simple. Until once they go with somebody or follow somebody, and they say, "Hey, I believe I can go down this path."

RS: I did not think it would be as contagious as it has been. I took a core group of about twenty of them for that first semester, and by the end of the semester they said, "We've been having so much fun with this, do you think we could continue to do it with you even when school is not in session?" I said, "I hope so, let's do that." And I started telling them, "Invite some of your classmates or your friends, or whatever." That core group of students became very savvy with the local art scene. They began to pride themselves in knowing how to get from one gallery to the next and operating these caravans with cell phones. They're just great!

TS: That's wonderful. That's why in the research class like today, we take them to the archives, like the Atlanta History Center, just so once they've been there they feel much more comfortable about going back. The oral history class last spring, we did a project on the history of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. We got to go to a concert one night; for many of them it was the first time they'd been, and one student went back four more times before the semester was over.

RS: See, that's what it's all about right there. You know you have positively impacted someone's life. I love that.

TS: That's a great thing that you're doing.

RS: Back to Edinboro: When I graduated in '92, I was part of a core group of M.F.A. painters who were very close because we had had been snowed in with one



another for three whole years. We were an incredibly insular group. We had bonded to such an extent that we decided that we would all continue to be together after graduation. I was planning to move back to New York City, but several of my old friends there discouraged me because they were themselves souring on the place. I started thinking about how incredibly expensive New York was becoming and how if I were to measure friendships by my long distance phone call bills, then I realized that the people I loved the most were my friends back in Atlanta. After I moved back to Atlanta my grad school buddies one-by-one came down to visit, and within two years all five of them had moved to Atlanta.

DY: Were you all living in Midtown then?

RS: Yes. I had a huge, posh studio/loft warehouse. In fact my warehouse was almost as large as the KSU Visual Arts Building. It was a fantastic sort of place. But, yes, my colleagues moved to Atlanta and eventually married southern girls. One of them is Professor Donald Robson who is our latest hire in the department.

TS: That's all right! Well, before you got out of the northern part of Pennsylvania though, you started having your censorship cases. Why don't you talk about that because it looks like the first two of them happened while you were trying to graduate from Edinboro.

RS: Well, I think I'd been in the grad program for about a year and a half. It was probably right about the fifty-yard line of the M.F.A. I was invited to be in a figurative painting show in Painesville, Ohio, near Cleveland. The show, called Five Times Figure, was myself and four other figure painters from the Great Lakes region. The contract we signed stated that the artists would be responsible for the shipment of our work to and from the gallery and that the gallery would exhibit the work for the usual two-month run of an exhibition. We had a lovely opening night reception, and the event was very well attended. After the show had been on the walls for about two days I received a phone call from one of the artists. She said she had just visited the gallery with friends and that my paintings had been removed from the walls. Everyone else's paintings were still in place, and that maybe I should call the gallery and find out what that was all about.

TS: They weren't ever going to tell you that they'd been removed?

RS: I guess they thought that since I lived two hours away perhaps I really wouldn't find out. I'm not sure what they were thinking. But they had taken my paintings down and put them in a vault in the basement. After several of my phone messages weren't returned I took a road trip to find out what was the matter. They said, "Well, it's because some of your paintings have male nudity in them." First of all, the exhibition was being held on a college campus: Lake Erie College. You would think they would be sophisticated enough not to censor serious art work. The thing that angered me the most is that it was an invitational

exhibition whose theme was the human figure.

TS: They invited you to come.

RS: Yes, they had invited me to come. They had even seen the paintings ahead of time.

TS: And there were lots of nudes in there, I assume.

RS: Yes, the rest of the show. In fact, the other artists did female nudes, which I suppose were "okay" to exhibit, but not my male figures.

TS: The tape is not going to pick up that you had your quotation mark fingers around "okay" to exhibit [laughter].

RS: I guess so. But it angered me tremendously that the male nudes were such an issue, and most of them weren't even frontal nudity. The decision to censor my works and not the others clearly demonstrated a prejudice and a double standard.

TS: You were the only one that was painting male nudes?

RS: Yes, I was the only one that painted males, so mine were removed, and some of the paintings that they kept on the walls of women were pornographic in my mind. They were outrageous, and I just had the most . . .

DY: You mean they were sexually explicit?

RS: Yes, they were not tasteful academic nudes. They were action scenes, so to speak, and I took a great offense that my work was being censored and theirs not.

TS: Do you think there is a limit somewhere where it's appropriate for a museum to say, "We're not going to show this?" Like if they're pornographic, for instance?

RS: Yes, I believe there definitely have to be some standards for that. I don't believe that pornography should be put up on the wall and exalted to the level of high art.

TS: So you're insulted in large part because they're calling your work pornographic, when it's not. At least in the mind of the artist, your intent was not to produce pornographic art.

RS: Correct, I was not. I had no prurient interest, that's the legal term for it, with my works. In fact, the paintings I exhibited were works from my grad school thesis. My thesis involved taking famous sexist paintings of women and putting men in those same poses to see how the gender change affects us.

- DY: That is absolutely brilliant, by the way. I have looked on your website <http://www.robertsherer.com/> and seen those.
- RS: I think the average person can even look at them and see that there are classical references, that they are famous paintings.
- DY: Well, yes, if you have those referenced at all in your experience, you can see that.
- TS: So your thesis was what, that society couldn't take it if it was a male in a classical female pose?
- RS: No, actually, I didn't know that even at that point [laughter]. But I very quickly realized with this censorship controversy that some people, especially men, took great issue with it!
- TS: What was the thesis?
- RS: The thesis was called "Re-Presentations" and it was basically a study to see how people react to seeing gender flipped in traditional academic studio figure painting.
- TS: In other words you were giving a questionnaire to people who come into the gallery?
- RS: Oh yes, I did lots and lots of studies. I did videotape-studies where viewers did not know that they were being videotaped while they were walking through gallery spaces encountering the art works, so that I could register their reactions. I had one particular piece that I had done—you know like in pornography they'll put little black squares over the genitals or whatever—I had a painting that had little black squares over male and female body parts, but the little black squares were not painted, they were actually little black doors that you could open up. You could view the body part behind the door. I videotaped, I had hidden video cameras . . . .
- TS: To see who opened the doors?
- RS: Yes, and I did a lot of studies on that, on how the male viewers who came into the gallery would open up the female breasts, or whatever, but if there were other people in the room they wouldn't dare open up the male doors. But what you would see in the videotape is that the men would want to check out the male genitalia, and they would start looking over their shoulder to see if anyone was watching them. If they were sure that there was no one watching them they would then open up the male doors out of natural human curiosity. The point is that homophobia is so programmed into their psyches that they were actually terrified to open the male doors of the study.

TS: If somebody saw them.

RS: Yes, and I've done a lot of studies on the subject. I also did an interesting performance piece on the subject. I exhibited some of the censored paintings in one of the university's galleries and blitzed the campus for several days with an ad campaign/nudity disclaimer hinting that the viewer would see some "forbidden fruit." The purpose of the performance piece was to help the students to better understand the machinery of censorship and the dangers of paternalistic government with its goals of trying to protect people from themselves. The posters warned that the show contained images of male and female frontal nudity and that no one under 18 years of age would be admitted. I staged it where there were several large walls preventing anyone from seeing the works within the gallery. I employed several of my friends who were big, scary-looking guys to provide security at the front door. They wore the classic FBI/CIA agent outfit, the rigid business suits and mirrored sunglasses. When the students arrived at the gallery and were getting excited to enter, we forced them through this obnoxious gauntlet of bureaucratic processes. Since most of them lived in the dorms across the street we rejected their entry until they produced at least two forms of ID. We made them fill out paper work and sign incomprehensible release forms. We made the experience as intimidating as possible. When the students had finally followed all of the rules of the security gauntlet and thought they were clear to view the nude art they were then lead around the corner to be interviewed by more stern men—judgmental men in suits sitting at desks. The men asked them a lot of embarrassing questions about their interest in viewing nudity and they were then given a sensitivity-to-nudity test. So I subjected the students to this horrible process but it turned out to be a terrific learning experience for all of us.

TS: You talked about how the males reacted. How did the females react when they went in?

RS: They don't have a problem with opening up men or women.

TS: Really?

RS: No, I don't think that women in our society police one another in a homophobic way quite like the men do.

DY: That's not to say that there aren't homophobic women.

RS: Of course not, of course not. But I don't believe that women go around policing each other all of the time, or one another, quite like men do.

DY: I agree.

RS: Men have that animal pack mentality.

TS: Is there a greater tolerance do you think of lesbianism rather than gay?

RS: Oh, yes, there's no doubt about that.

DY: Well, yes, that's very marked.

TS: I would think so.

RS: During that time I also had another incident that informed my thesis beyond anything that I could have possibly imagined. A couple of the paintings had been accepted into the Three Rivers Arts Festival, which is Pittsburgh's big arts festival. The organizers of the exhibition realized that the work would be challenging and Pittsburgh is, even to this day, a blue collar, industrial kind of town, so they put up warning signs that these paintings are suggestive just as I had done for the performance piece.

TS: Look at this at your own risk [laughter]!

RS: That's good. They put up a lot of warning signs, and they placed the paintings in an exhibition hall where you couldn't even look through the windows to see what they looked like. All hell broke loose during the arts festival, in part due to the paintings' ability to create dialogue with the viewer. The first incident involved a group of tough-guys who came into the gallery and stood around provoking people. I was not there while this happened but it is my understanding that if a female came in and looked at my male nude paintings, when she was leaving they would call her bad names like, "whore" or "slut," with the suggestion being that women who want to view male nudes are sexually loose.

TS: Don't they have any security guards there that could break up something like that?

RS: The security guards were outside of the building, and I think they were understaffed at the time and had to police a large area of the festival.

TS: I see. Looks like she ought to be able to complain to somebody in an ideal world and ask them to leave.

RS: Exactly, but a guy came in and was looking at the paintings, and they started calling him "fag," and that sort of stuff, and they ended up beating him up.

TS: Inside?

RS: Inside the pavilion where my paintings were.

DY: Oh! Badly?

RS: Yes, and it was particularly bad because he was one of the organizers of the Three Rivers Arts Festival, and that hurt me. It hurt me badly to hear that someone was hurt and I was two hours away up in Erie.

TS: I would have worried about them trying to deface your paintings.

RS: Well, when that happened, when they did beat him up, they then did position guards on the exhibition. Even with the guards there was another incident. A husband and wife came in to the pavilion and were looking at the paintings. The husband grabbed the wife's arm and said, "Let's leave! I don't want to look at these male nudes!" She said, "Wait a minute here. You are not going to tell me that I cannot view these paintings. You are a hypocrite. You have a collection of *Penthouse* magazines in our bedroom at the house, and I tolerate those, and now you're trying to tell me that I can't view these nudes, and I'm going to." They ended up getting into a fistfight, a husband and wife. It's my understanding that she won [laughter]. That's what the guards said when they finally pulled them apart, that she was fed up.

DY: Well, you couldn't have staged this any better yourself.

RS: I know. At that point, I really began to realize that this body of work is intense. It pushes buttons.

DY: Double entendre body of work.

RS: Yes. I began to take my studies, my observations, and deliberately try to create paintings that if it was your inclination you could perceive as being completely innocent, or if you had a dirty mind you could interpret it that way. I went completely out of my way to make the paintings fifty-fifty to see where people's minds would go with it. I think I've done that with all of my art since then. Even now, with my non-figurative works, I try to create images that are sufficiently ambiguous so that the viewer's emotional baggage, which we all carry around with us, plays into their interpretation of the art.

DY: You know what this makes me think of immediately is that's what Nathaniel Hawthorne did with his fiction.

RS: I guess, yes.

DY: In many ways, it was sort of reader-response . . . what you've come to it with.

RS: But, yes, that was my first censorship controversy and the subsequent fallout. The second controversy was when I graduated.

- TS: The postcards.
- RS: Yes, when you are a student at Edinboro in the M.F.A. program, the university pays for the publication and mailing of your thesis exhibition invitation postcard. It is promised as part of each student's exit. It's a nice, glossy, colored invitation card. I chose the painting titled *Sweet Dreams* as the image for my card because it perfectly fit the 5" x 7" dimensions of the standard postcard. To this day, I've never created a single painting of two people touching each other, so it's hard for people to speak in terms of pornography about the works. They're really very tame.
- TS: That was my reaction when I looked at the ones that you have on your website. I guess that's the reason why.
- RS: Yes, I have always tried to keep them calm. I chose the *Sweet Dreams* painting because first of all, the size of the canvas fits the format of an exhibition card, so that was a practical, real world consideration. I then took the image to a printer, they printed the cards, the university paid for it, and everything seemed to be on course. Edinboro has, I believe, 800 people on their mailing list. They were going to mail them out.
- TS: How big a university is Edinboro?
- RS: I have no idea now. I'm sure it's on up into 25,000.
- TS: Bigger than us.
- RS: Oh, yes.
- TS: I was just wondering, I mean, I guess the art department is a small part of the total university.
- RS: Yes, it's a small part, but generally speaking if you were to ask academics what Edinboro University is known for, they'd say the art department. There had been some precedence, I have heard that Thomas Eakins, the famous American artist had briefly taught at Edinboro and was, I believe, if the history is correct, asked to not come back because he was teaching from the nude model. He was the first American artist to teach from the live, nude model. So he went back to Philadelphia and, of course, became famous there.
- TS: Well, I guess I was asking this because you could have a wonderful experience in the art department, but the other administration may be very unknowing.
- RS: Yes, I think that's exactly what was going on there. Somebody had seen one of the cards and had complained. The university immediately refused to mail any of

the cards. By this point in my career I had survived the first censorship battle in Ohio and I was not as naïve as before. I had the ACLU on my side during the first battle, so I immediately called them because I recognized that the situation was definitely another First Amendment issue. The ACLU stepped in, came to the rescue, and brokered a settlement deal with the university. The university still refused to mail the card out to the academics on campus, which I think is so bizarre because the academics were sophisticated enough to enjoy the work and would be able to understand it and deal with it.

TS: So they don't trust their own faculty.

RS: Right, that's how it seemed at the time. They did then have to still mail out 800 of the cards, and so they said, "Well, Robert, who do you want us to mail the 800 cards to?" So I gave them *Art in America* magazine [Brant Publications, New York, NY]. *Art in America* magazine puts out every September a listing of every art gallery in the United States. I said, "Send it to the top 800 galleries in the United States, to their addresses right here."

TS: What wonderful advertising.

RS: I know; it worked out really, really well for me. When I graduated there were 800 galleries in the United States, where I was on their radar screen. They had already written me and said, "We want to represent you."

TS: This is a censored exhibition.

RS: Yes. And they loved that. And, in fact, if you will recall from history, at that time censorship was a big issue because Robert Mapplethorpe had already been censored in Cincinnati. Robert Mapplethorpe, of course, died of AIDS before he could even see his censorship battle run its full course. I was the next American artist to be censored right after him, and it was in the state of Ohio again. Mine was in Cleveland, his was in Cincinnati, so suddenly I had the United States press contacting my grad school wanting to interview me. They had a writer come all the way from Chicago to Erie to interview me for the *New Art Examiner* [Chicago, Illinois], which at the time was one of the real smart art magazines in the country. That was really the beginning of my notoriety, of me becoming aware that Americans were taking this censorship thing very, very seriously—especially the press, because if the press don't stand up and support artists who have been censored, then the press themselves are going to soon find that they too will be censored.

TS: In some ways yours seems worse than Mapplethorpe because as I recall that was over funding from the federal government through the National Endowment for the Arts, and, I guess, the argument was if public money is involved, it ought to reflect the taste of the people that are paying the taxes.



RS: Community standards.

TS: But yours is a very different story because there isn't any federal money involved. Right?

RS: Right. Well, the first censorship case was on an American campus.

TS: Well, that's true.

RS: And the second one was also on an American campus.

TS: So there is federal money in that sense, or public money at any rate.

RS: And you know the cost of the production of those exhibition cards is a considerable amount of money.

DY: And a publicly funded institution.

RS: Yes.

TS: But the idea is that it's for people who have graduated.

RS: Yes, to help kick-start their careers. Upon graduation they have at least generated one piece of promotional material that they can then go hand out to or mail out to galleries. It will hopefully jettison them into the real art world. The thing that made me so angry about my exhibition card being censured was the fact that one of my colleagues who had graduated a year before me had an exhibition card with an image of a nude female lying on the ground, spread eagle, with three or four dogs licking her body, and they didn't censure his card. They censured mine, and mine was mild in comparison! In fact, mine was a sweet scene compared to his. To this day I don't understand the mentality that would think it's okay to mail an image that strongly suggests bestiality, and yet censor my image that was nothing more than standard, dry, academic male nudity.

DY: I was going to ask you to briefly describe *Sweet Dreams*. You said that was the name of the canvas, right?

RS: Yes. It's a large oil painting I created during my second year in grad school. I wanted it to be a tender domestic scene—one man is lying on a bed and has fallen asleep, and next to the bed his friend sits in a large chair with a book in his lap suggesting that he has been reading a bedtime story. The scene also suggests that the man in bed might be sick and the man in the chair is his caregiver. I wanted to create a scene of men caring for each other, simply that.

TS: So why the controversy?

RS: I don't know. I guess that homophobia is so ingrained in some people that they cannot even deal with seeing two men just sitting there.

DY: Right, homophobia again.

TS: But you really weren't expecting controversy on this.

RS: No, not at all. See, while in grad school, one of the things that I haven't yet explained is that part of my thesis research involved the use of Edinboro's slide library. Without exaggeration, I viewed tens of thousands of slides of the history of art and images from art history books, and began to record my findings. Of the male nude paintings historically, what are the standard poses and in what percentages. I discovered that virtually every male nude painting that has existed is of the figure standing erect, whereas most of the poses of nude women are lying down. It started me thinking that if aliens landed on this planet and the only evidence that had of human existence were these images from art history, what would they think of us? They would think that women were luxurious creatures that never did any work, and the men were always standing up and doing the work. Of course, that angered me a great deal because I am definitely a feminist, and I began to publish some of my studies, and that was really incendiary, especially to old school art historians. In the studio I began to apply my findings to paint by playing off of the idea of men lying down and women in positions of power.

TS: I was trying to think of those Roman—its Britannia that's conquered, isn't it? It's a woman figure. There is one of a dying Gaul, maybe, which would be a male down.

RS: But that's a Greek classical statue. The few examples that you find of men lying down, they're pretty much Greek statues. There is one socially acceptable pose for a male figure to lie down, and that is if he is dead. Male-dominated art history will allow a man to lie down in a painting or a statue if he is dying. There is only one image I know of in the entire history of Western art that depicts a kind gesture between men, and that is the story of the Good Samaritan from the Bible. There are so few paintings in the history of art that show a father lovingly holding his child that it isn't even funny. And yet, there are hundreds of thousands of Madonnas and the child.

TS: That's interesting. You would think there would be something of the prodigal son returning home, but there really isn't.

RS: I can't think of one.

DY: And it's the Madonna who's holding the dying Christ always. Where's poor old Joseph. He's not in the picture.

RS: Right.

TS: Were you aware of the *Share* [Art & Literary Magazine, KSU] controversy at Kennesaw back before you got here, when you came? Maybe you're not aware of it now. *Share* Magazine, the student literary magazine, they had a male frontal nudity—it's Betty [L.] Siegel era, was it late '80s or early '90s?

DY: Yes, I think so.

TS: At any rate, the joke in it all is that it was a close up of David, Michelangelo's David. They didn't tell anybody that, that's what it was, and people just saw this frontal nudity, and it created a furor on our campus.

RS: There's been quite a few furors around here, nudity in the theater or heavy language—*The Grapes of Wrath* [adapted by Frank Galati from the John Steinbeck novel].

DY: *The Grapes of Wrath* has male frontal nudity there. That was very interesting. Did you go to that?

RS: No, I didn't, but I just happened to watch Jay Leno [*The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, NBC Universal: Universal City, CA] when he delivered the famous KSU joke.

DY: What is it?

TS: I didn't know that.

RS: During his opening stand up monologue he said that Kennesaw State University is trying to censor *The Grapes of Wrath*. "That's the problem with them; they have entirely too much wrath and not enough grapes!" Gee, thanks! Thanks, Jay!

TS: That's just what we needed.

RS: Yes, another slap in the face. But, anyway, back to the study, I took all of my gender studies into the studio and began to really push buttons by questioning our art history. That's when the censorship stuff got completely out of control in the bigger arena of American art.

TS: So after this you come back to Georgia.

RS: I came back to Georgia.

TS: By the way, before we get onto that, I think I detect kind of a conservative impulse in some of the things that you're saying in terms of things that seem to offend you in art, for instance. I mean there's a balance in other words, it seems to me.

RS: Well, a lot of people, due to the notoriety and controversial nature of the work, make the automatic assumption that I am some kind of wild, radical maniac. It doesn't take very much contact with me to realize that I've also got my streak of conservatism. For instance, I don't believe that everything should be considered art. I believe that we have to raise the bar high, that we have to have some kind of standards on what we exalt as being our grand contribution to high culture—I believe that art should represent our highest expressions. So that puts me at odds with some people in the art world who think that art should be nothing more than a vehicle for their radical politics. One of the great insults to me is when I'm around people like that and they make the assumption that I deliberately went out of my way to create controversial, outrageous images. You've seen the paintings—they're not that outrageous at all. It insults my intelligence because I'm a very creative person. Believe me, if I wanted to be radical, I could come up with some things that would truly be blasphemous and outrageous. But that was never my intention. That's why I don't understand why I got into trouble so many times.

TS: I think what I'm hearing that your purpose is not to shock. It's maybe to force people to think.

RS: Very much. If anything I'm a provocateur. I will claim responsibility for wanting to create images that push people's buttons enough to get them to think and examine their own belief systems, and especially their own prejudices about the nature of the male and female bodies.

DY: Well, it's hard to get students—well, students are theoretically here to open and to learn—to look at sexuality, in particular, as a cultural construct.

RS: Oh, I know.

DY: So to get the public at large to see that this is a cultural construction and not an absolutist assumption is really difficult. That's what I see in the wonder and the real keen intelligence of your work is that you have that happen within the individual. You have them open, or at least there's the opportunity for them to open that door.

RS: Yes. Thank you, very eloquent [laughter].

TS: So you come back to Georgia.

RS: Yes, I came back to Georgia. I was missing the South.

DY: Yes, son of the South. What were you missing the most, do you mind saying?

TS: Other than warm weather.

RS: No, warm weather was not really what I was missing. I was missing that sweet southern voice—the way we talk, the way Dede earlier asked me if I wanted a Coca-Cola. When I was a purchasing agent at Rhode Island School of Design I once had to order a rocking chair for one of the university's vice presidents, and they gave me contact information for the furniture manufacturer down in Boone, North Carolina. I called down there, and I had not heard a wonderful, syrupy, sweet, southern woman's voice in a long, long time and the woman who answered the phone had a mellifluous voice, like a slow-moving river. I was hypnotized by it, and I asked her if she would get into trouble if she just talked for awhile. She said, "No, my bosses are gone right now." I said, "Well, tell me about your family." And, of course, you know what happens when you say that to a southerner . . . we talked for over an hour and ran up a large long distance bill. But, yes, I missed the South. I missed that voice. I missed that growing season, the array of vegetables we get to have that they don't. When I lived in the Edinboro, Pennsylvania for three years, our local grocery store only carried potatoes, cabbage, onions and carrots during the winter months. That was their produce. It dwindled down to that because you were basically snowed in for four months. There were times when, even with their emergency systems and snow plows, that you were just snowed in. So I missed my southern vegetables. I grew up with parents who each year maintained a large vegetable garden, a flower garden, a small vineyard and a fruit orchard. We also had our fair share of farm animals, all that classic rural stuff. I missed it.

TS: Collard greens and black-eyed peas.

RS: Yes. And what's funny is when I lived up North, I had more in common with the African-Americans than I did with the white people.

DY: Because they were the ethnic group.

RS: First of all, we spoke the same language, basically, and we shared the same culinary art, no doubt about it. When I lived in Rhode Island, I actually became friends with a Portuguese family in our neighborhood because they ate collard greens and black-eyed peas, so that was really terrific for me to get my southern fix.

TS: So you had to get back here for the food and the neighbors?

RS: Yes, I just missed it. I missed Atlanta. I missed my Atlanta friends whom I still adore. I have been very fortunate through the years to befriend some really terrific people in Atlanta, smart people, people in the arts, musicians. I've got a large and lively group of friends who, when we all get together, it's a hell of a party.

TS: So what did you do when you came back here before you came to work at Kennesaw, which is almost a decade?

RS: I came back to Atlanta, got a job working in an Italian restaurant as a waiter, and realized that I hated it. I wanted to get back into the arts because I promised myself when I was a teenager that I would always try to be in the arts, even if it meant just sweeping the floors in an art gallery or working in a frame shop or anything that afforded me the opportunity to be around visual arts culture. One fateful afternoon, I dropped off my resume at the Lowe Gallery which is generally considered one of the top galleries in the south. They looked at it on the spot and hired me instantly as an art handler, a person who installs and de-installs paintings and other art works.

I started working closely with Bill Lowe, and one day he asked me to bring in slides of my paintings. The next morning I brought him my slides and he asked me to sign a gallery representation contract with him. Later that day he sent a truck to my studio to retrieve the paintings, and he almost immediately began to sell them for prices beyond anything that I thought they were worth at the time. He really, really shocked me with that. I worked for the gallery as an art handler for about six months, and then Bill approached me with a new idea. He said, "You know a lot about the arts, and we don't believe that you should be an art handler anymore. So, they named me the director of the gallery, which is a very big deal. I went straight from being like the kid who swept the floors to being the boss, and as well as one of their big-selling artists.

TS: Worked your way up from the bottom.

RS: It was a crazy, fast track I suddenly found myself on. I was very ill prepared for it in some ways. I didn't even have a fashionable wardrobe. If you're going to be an art dealer you've got to have a fashionable wardrobe, so the owner of the gallery made sure he hooked me up with all kinds of terrific clothing like an Issey Miyake suits [Issey Miyake Inc., Tokyo, Japan].

TS: I don't even know what that means.

RS: Oh, it's high designer, snobby clothing.

TS: Did you say snobby clothing?

RS: Oh, yes, I had to make a dramatic transformation overnight, I really did. I had to begin to present the appearance of success because I was indeed a successful visual artist—very well known in the Atlanta scene, was on the national news a lot for my controversies. So I did a real move up, if you want to call it that. I went upscale. I began to rent one of the finest lofts in Atlanta, and almost no one had fashionable lofts in the early '90s. That was still an untapped market. I had a gorgeous one on Bishop Street with gigantic picture windows with a beautiful panorama of Midtown and downtown skyscrapers. I threw really fabulous parties with all my trendy friends. I enjoyed the '90s so much because I was on top of my game as a self-employed visual artist. I was showing all around the country and was continuing to be censured for showing all around the country. It finally got to the point that I just wouldn't even show the paintings any more. I said, "I can't put up with it." Everybody thinks it's so glamorous because they see you on the news or on the magazines or whatever, but they don't realize that you're in trouble. It's a legal hassle that you're going through. Your life is on hold. Be the time of my third censorship controversy, in Birmingham, a lot of people were saying, "Oh, it's so much fun that you are doing this, that you are getting into trouble all of the time." And, of course, I am thinking, "This definitely not fun, having to meet with lawyers and dealing with the court of public opinion that comes with being a censored artist."

TS: That was the infant AIDS charity thing [Studio 2030, Birmingham, Alabama; A Baby's Place].

RS: Yes. Just unheard of that anyone would think it was okay to censor male nude paintings hanging in a commercial gallery setting. Considering the fact that, especially at that time, the largest group that contributed money to AIDS charities were gay men. The men who came to that charity auction were deeply offended that someone thought it was okay to censor images of their lifestyle. In other words, they took it as a form of negation, that images of their bodies were being covered in black plastic—the method of censorship had a strangely funereal quality; it was a haunting thing to see. An entire art gallery hung with paintings all perfectly wrapped in shiny black plastic.

TS: But these are the people that you would think would be the most open-minded, enlightened people in Birmingham.

RS: Oh, yes, it was the charity organizers that did the censoring. It was a very bad thing. It was funny though in a sick sort of way considering that I am originally from there. If you look at my resume, you will see that that is the first time as a big, mature artist that I had to come back to my native state.

DY: To have gone home.

RS: Yes, gone home. And then to have my work censored there, it hurt a lot. Before the incident, I had convinced myself that my home state had gotten better through

the years, that they were more sophisticated and that maybe there would be a sense of embrace for the local guy come home again. So, this censorship controversy really struck deep within me. At that time, one of the worst aspects of being in the public arena was America's fascination with talk radio.

TS: At least the nuts in America.

RS: What they said about me and my artwork within listening distance of my family, to where they couldn't turn on a radio without hearing a bunch of ignorant homophobes spouting venom and hate toward one of their relatives. That really got me. But then there was also the embarrassing aspect that some of my family over there are not very sophisticated themselves. Some of my distant family are still very much hillbilly and redneck types. They started calling talk radio when they would hear somebody say something against me, because I am family nevertheless. You don't talk bad about family. Apparently, one of our relatives called a big Birmingham talk radio show and said, "That guy who just called my cousin a bunch of names, I'd like to find out who you are and whip your ass!" It was almost like the Beverly Hillbillies—you know that "don't make me get Grandpappy's shotgun out of the closet." It was so embarrassing.

DY: That's very touching though.

RS: Oh it is. It's very touching.

DY: To transcend some thing, some cultural construct to say I love this person, this is my kin, my family.

RS: That's how the Sherer side of the family have always been, that's how they are even to this day. It didn't just come about due to my censorship woes. My family in general has got this notion that, "We don't care if you are a big old perv"—in fact they might word it that way; they might actually say something like that. "We love you anyhow because you're a Sherer," and that just makes it all right. I think they are that way to some extent because the Sherers from Jasper, Alabama are a colorful bunch of people. The saying in my hometown is "The Sherers are one of the first families of Jasper"—because there are Sherer graves going all the way back into the 1700s—but they'll say, "The Sherers are one of the first families—they've had their hands in just about every aspect of the town, they've been mayors, doctors, sheriffs and lawyers but [pause]....never preachers." [laughter] To the best of my knowledge there's never been a Sherer preacher in the whole two hundred year history of them in Jasper, but they've been everything else. Even the civic auditorium is Sherer Civic Auditorium, and everything is Sherer this and Sherer that. There are more of them in the phone book than just about any other name. But they're an unconventional bunch. They're wild and interesting, and I'm not the only Sherer who has been an artist through the years. There's been quite a bit of precedence for gay people and artists in my family. They were early trailblazers.



TS: Did your parents understand your art, do you think?

RS: Oh, yes. I think that they get me. I think they are very, very proud. They are very proud of the fact that I stuck to my guns, that I stuck to my vision through the years, and that I forged my path headstrong.

TS: It makes it a lot easier for you to have that kind of family support, I would think.

RS: Oh, yes. No, they are a terrific bunch of people. I was trying to think in my mind if I could come up with any negativity, any negative thing to say, like any time that they ever weren't supportive of my lifestyle or my art, and I can't recall. I don't believe that it's possible to come up with anything like that.

DY: That is wonderful!

RS: Oh, yes, they are very, very accepting people and surprisingly sophisticated to come from a small southern town. Of course, I shouldn't say that because I believe that the most sophisticated people I've ever known came from small southern towns.

DY: That's right, that's right. Yes, don't accept that other definition of sophisticated.

RS: Right.

TS: Maybe we ought to make a transition to, how did you get to Kennesaw State University?

RS: Okay, wow. How did I get here? In about 1999 or 2000, somewhere around there, I received a phone call from Larry Anderson, who is a professor at Atlanta College of Art, asking me if I would like to teach a human anatomy class. I said, "Larry, I wouldn't want to do that. I've got a fabulous art career. I don't have the time for that." He said, "Well, I'll tell you what . . ." He's my mentor, I guess you could say, in the Atlanta art scene. He's an artist who had been here long before I was, and he's been really, really helpful through the years with me in my career. But he said, "I'm not even going to accept your 'no' right now; I want to give you a couple of days to think about it and get back to me." I think he knows me too well. I thought about it and talked myself into teaching. I swore I wasn't going to teach because I did have a prosperous art career and I think I was probably a victim of that notion of "those who can . . . teach . . ." or whatever, I don't even know, what's the saying?

DY: Those who can, do.

TS: Those who can't, teach.

RS: Right, so I think I probably believed that silly notion at that time.

DY: Maybe you were tired of those suits.

RS: I think I was tired of my own fabulousness to be honest. I was tired of being the controversial artist. I was tired of an unstructured life of excess. So I called Larry and said, "Yes, I think I'd like to try it." He promised it would be low impact, that I would still be able to squeeze in my studio hours, no problem. So I taught my first class and absolutely fell in love with teaching. I walked into that classroom, and I was nervous for maybe twenty minutes max. Then all of a sudden that southern gift of gab kicked in and my head opened up and I realized, my goodness, I do have a ton of knowledge that people have given me through the years. This feels good to give it back, to get it out of me, to pass it on to others. I was hooked from that point on. I was hooked on teaching. I called Larry up, and said, "You all can book me up with any classes you want from now on. I love this." And it has been great for me because it has afforded me with a gentle transition over several years, a transition from being solely a gallery artist into being a gallery artist and an educator. So I had been teaching at Atlanta College of Art for about a year when I received a call from Dr. Carol [D.] Edwards, who was the chair of the Visual Arts department in 2000. She said, "You don't know me, but I know you, and I'm quite fond of your art work. We have a position open for an adjunct professor in painting and drawing. Would you like to come out here and give us a try?" I immediately accepted her offer because I wanted to be a professor at a liberal arts institution. And, considering what happened to Atlanta College of Art, being bought out by SCAD [Savannah College of Art and Design] and no longer being a university. I guess I did make the right decision.

TS: We did an interview with Carol Edwards, by the way, a couple of years ago, right before she went out to Washington.

RS: She was really instrumental in getting me to come here. I taught one class here during Summer, and it was a crazy time in my life because I was teaching three classes at Atlanta College of Art and one here. Then the next semester they invited me back out here, and I was teaching two or three out here and two or three down there; it was nuts. I was up and down I-75 constantly. I did that for a whole year.

TS: Is this 2000-2001?

RS: Yes.

TS: Is 2001 when you became full-time here?

RS: Yes. In 2001 they told me they were going to do a national search for a full-time tenure-track painting and drawing professor and asked me if I would like to put in

my application. I, of course, jumped at the chance. I really didn't think I stood a chance of getting it because I had not had quite the amount of teaching experience that they probably were looking for, but I got it. I've been happy as a lark ever since. I am crazy about teaching at Kennesaw. The quality of the students we have here—they are superior to the students I had at Atlanta College of Art, vastly superior. The kids at ACA believed that as long as you dyed your hair blue, acted rebellious and atrocious art, you are being an artist. The kids at KSU, I think, probably because they come from the suburbs or from rural Georgia have got it in their minds that they are at a disadvantage and they've got to work harder on the art career than the inner city kids.

TS: Culturally deprived because they hadn't been part of the art scene.

RS: Yes, yes, exactly.

DY: It's that old inferiority complex of the rural and particularly the rural South.

TS: But they're the ones with the backgrounds more like yours growing up in Alabama.

RS: Yes, and they respond to that. When they hear my voice they know, "He's one of us."

TS: Right.

RS: And it's a perfect marriage. It clicked right off the bat. It was such a strange sense of destiny. The semester that Carol Edwards lured me out here to teach my first class, I had to break up a knife fight in my class at Atlanta College of Art. Two of the students who had big, bad behavioral problems—they were like street kid types—got into a fight and pulled out their Exacto razor blades.

DY: Not their pallet knives?

RS: No, those dangerous little Exacto knives and started trying to jab each other. I had to step in and break it up. I was a nervous wreck.

DY: Well, yes!

RS: Immediately after I broke up the fight I had to drive out here to teach my KSU students, who are gentle, and who just light up when you walk in the room! For me, that incident and the contrasting students just wrote it in stone. I wanted to teach at KSU; I wanted to come out here, even if I had to drive in that terrible traffic each day from Midtown. I will do it. So you can see where my heart is . . . out here.

- TS: That's how you got here. One of the questions we often ask is about the students, but we also ask about the intellectual life of the campus in general, the faculty, students, you know, the kind of campus culture intellectually. How do you perceive it? You haven't seen a change much because you've only been here five years, I guess—or maybe you have seen change, I don't know—but how do you perceive the intellectual life that you see on our campus?
- RS: Wow. I guess I'm going to really have to think about that one. Well, I think the way that I've always looked at KSU is that it is very much in the process of birthing itself or rebirthing itself. When I say these things, I do not want anyone to assume that my comments are drawing any kind of historic timeline like "before Christ" or "after Christ" or "before or after Dr. Siegel," or anything like that because I don't believe Dr. Siegel's retirement is, in any way, a hard line, that things suddenly are different in this or that way. So I just want to make sure that people understood that I am in no way suggesting anything like that. But I do get the feeling at KSU that there is still very much the old system in place insofar as when you think in terms of our tenure and promotion. Teaching is still the centerpiece and we're just now beginning to recognize what we mean by scholarship on this campus. I think we're just now beginning to see that. I do believe that KSU will eventually become a research school.
- TS: You do?
- RS: I do. I don't know if it will happen in my lifetime, but I think that it is evolving in that direction.
- TS: Do you see that as a good thing or a bad thing?
- RS: I'm torn on that. I wish I could give you an easy answer to that because I happen to love the fact that we produce a significant amount of the state's teachers. I love the fact that KSU does not have a big football team and that they do not pattern themselves after UGA. But instead we just sit up here in the pines and produce quality students who go out into the community and make a major impact on education in the state of Georgia. I think that is terrific.
- TS: I was thinking with all that mentoring you're doing with taking students to the art galleries in Atlanta and so on, you have to love teaching, at least broadly defined in terms of relationships with students and helping them grow.
- RS: Oh, yes. I want the full thing. I love the teaching, mentoring and supervision and understand the distinctions between the three. But, yes, within the Department of Visual Arts, because our numbers are completely out the roof and our reputation in the local art scene is impressive, we have in the last few years been afforded with, I believe, five new hires and they have been truly impressive candidates. We definitely have some visionary leadership and hiring committees within our

- college and department. They wanted to stack the deck. We knew we needed to bring in some heavy-duty artist and scholars. We needed to bring in some people who were simply the best that we could possibly find nationwide, as opposed to looking solely at their resumes. We chose people who really are original thinkers and who publish.
- TS: I guess that's kind of a question the visual arts and music and so on have always dealt with: Is scholarship defined in terms of publications or is it more in terms of creative works like your paintings?
- RS: Ideally, I think to be a good scholar in the visual arts, you better have an equal dose of both. You better have lots of exhibitions every year. You need to show us that you believe in your own work enough to go out there and get it published. Art doesn't do a bit of good if it just sits over in the corner of your studio. If you truly believe in your art work, and one assumes that you must spend such long hours working on the creation of it, then publication is extremely important. I think we need to have a faculty that shows all of the time, and we need to be role models for our students. They need to know that exhibitions are mandatory for visual artists. We don't just make it; we make it because we have something to say, and we are confident enough to put it forth and create a dialogue with the community at large.
- TS: Does the movement toward scholars in art mean we're going to bring in more people with a doctorate?
- RS: Well, there is no such thing as a Ph.D. in studio art; there is only the Ph.D. in art history.
- DY: And art education Ed.D.
- RS: Yes. So everybody has the terminal degree within the department, which is the M.F.A., and I don't know if you've ever heard the horror stories, but an M.F.A., believe me, is on the level of a Ph.D. It is a very hard-core experience. If you have survived an M.F.A. program, then I suppose you deserve the respect of being in the same room with people who have their doctorates. The least amount of time you can effectively pass a M.F.A. program is three years. Some people take five or six years.
- TS: Why don't they just call it a doctorate?
- RS: I don't know. I don't have any idea. They should; it's painful.
- TS: I guess in several of the professional fields you can get a master of divinity degree in three years' time, and you've probably done as much work as a lot of people have done on their doctorates.

- DY: Same thing with a J.D.
- RS: Well, see we have the M.A., Master of Arts.
- DY: Right. But that is not the M.F.A. I understand that, that's a whole different . . .
- RS: The M.F.A. is a whole other animal, and people don't really understand that until they experience it.
- DY: Well, people in the academic world and the university should understand that.
- TS: But what you're saying is that in visual arts you're going toward more and more emphasis on publications for tenure and promotion decisions.
- RS: If I understand correctly from the dictates of administration on campus, the whole university is heading in that direction, or should be heading in that direction. We have done it in our department. We have a new art historian, and she has published countless scholarly articles and is working on at least one or two big books right now.
- TS: Well, you've just won the Distinguished Scholarship Award on campus, and I guess my understanding is it's primarily for *Blood Works*—your paintings. Was it also for publications, do you think?
- RS: I would imagine so. I probably have one of the most outrageous resumes I've ever seen of a visual artist. I'm in fifteen to twenty different exhibitions a year. Most artists are in maybe two or three. There's a dirty little put-down amongst my friends that I must be some sort of a media whore. I do love to be out there. I love to show my work and receive the critical feedback and the praise, so I show all the time. I show all over the world. I'm just crazy about exhibition opportunities. Yes, undoubtedly, part of it is probably ego, but not a lot.
- TS: I understand that, but are you writing about what you're showing?
- RS: Yes. There's quite a bit of writing that accompanies my career. I write every day about something art related. I've been published a pretty good bit, mostly articles on subjects dealing with social criticism and art criticism. I was one of the primary arts writers for the *RISD Voice*, the student newspaper at Rhode Island School of Design.
- TS: Is there a professional journal in the visual arts?
- RS: No, we really don't have those sorts of venues. Some of our publications deal with the conceptual aspects of art and some focus primarily on the technical aspects. Most of our publications are industry driven, publications geared toward

- selling art. But there are a few smart magazines. *Art Papers* magazine in Atlanta is an excellent one of them. Occasionally, I'll throw something together that I just want to say and get it out there. It is rarer these days because I am so busy. But, apparently I'm a rare bird.
- TS: To do that?
- RS: Right. In general, most artists, even university faculty members, are primarily practitioners of art. They make art, but seldom do you find them intellectually engaged with their craft. It is a rare bird to find an artist who makes art, writes about art, and publishes.
- TS: I guess what I'm driving at is that what you do seems to fit far more with our mission than what you would think of as pure scholarship maybe. I guess you would call this applied scholarship when you show at fifteen or twenty different exhibits. Betty Siegel always touted the Ernest [L.] Boyer model of Scholarship Reconsidered, and Dan [Daniel S.] Papp has said we're not going to be Research I, but put a heavy emphasis on applied research. It seems to me if that's our mission and, apparently, it is, then what you're doing fits exactly with what our mission is.
- RS: Cool!
- DY: Right!
- RS: Maybe they'll keep me around for twenty years or so. It would be nice to think that I'm doing it right. I don't know. To be honest, like I said to you earlier, I'm just on automatic pilot most of the time.
- TS: You're going to do it regardless of what our mission is.
- RS: Yes, yes. I have never once done a single thing with the notion of, "Gee, this will look good for my tenure and promotion."
- DY: Good for you!
- RS: I don't play to that system. First of all, I was raised to believe that it was tacky and embarrassing for a person to brag about themselves; and the way that we have to put those binders about ourselves is very much bragging to me.
- TS: I agree. It's the Muhammad Ali, "I'm the greatest" philosophy.
- RS: Right. And I don't like to do that. I just want to do good things for the students.

- TS: Good for you. And I appreciate what you were saying that it didn't matter whether it was Betty Siegel or Dan Papp. I think what's come out of these interviews that we've done is that most of us do the creative things and the scholarly things that we do for reasons that have absolutely nothing to do with what our mission is as a university or what the president is saying. It's just because they're the things that we're driven to do.
- DY: Right. Yes. Those of us who are happy doing it—"Follow your bliss," as [Joseph] Campbell says.
- RS: If I ever did a good thing, with it in mind that, "I'm only doing this good thing because it'll look good," then I wouldn't even do it. There's no sense in doing it.
- DY: Well, it always comes back to bite you on the butt too.
- RS: That's true! You're absolutely right.
- TS: Talk about *Blood Works* a little bit. That's the thing, I guess, that you've moved into in recent years, the last several years or so. How long a history does it have? There's something about you cutting your leg or something, that got you started.
- RS: Actually, it pretty much runs parallel with my transition from being a gallery artist into a professor. As I stated before, I had a really wonderful career as a gallery artist and I continue to have one now. But when I was producing large numbers of those giant, figurative, neo-classical oil paintings, I burned out severely as an artist. At one point, seven contemporary art galleries represented me nationwide. That is ridiculous; nobody needs to have that many galleries. It was purely a matter of ego. What was I thinking? In essence I had seven bosses. I had seven people who could call me up and tell me, "Where are my pictures?" Or, "paint more of these; these are selling well." It's bad enough to wake up every morning of your life and realize that you are a commodity, but it really hurts when you are aware that you have become a self-parodying commodity. I've even had some of my art dealers reject certain paintings and say, "That doesn't look very 'Shereresque.' Sherer wouldn't paint that way," and things similar to that. That is really bad because what they're trying to do is to lock you into one particular style and one particular approach, and you become nothing more than a factory belching out mediocre paintings.
- TS: Which would provide a good income.
- RS: Yes, and the money is fabulous, but life has got to be more than just manufacturing. The manufacturing process of art is weird to me. Around the time when I fell in love with teaching and knew that I wanted to transition into it full-time, several interesting things happened to me. One is that I was just sick of painting. I was suffering from mid-career burnout. Yet, I loved image making, so



I began to create drawings and refused to create another large oil painting. I even terminated my contracts with several of the big deal galleries. My friends were saying, "Are you an idiot? You just called up old so-and-so, who's one of the famous art dealers, and told him you don't want to be represented by the gallery any more." Many artists think such career moves are insane because we artists dream of having the security of a gallery representation. So, I became very focused on my drawing and I experimented with many different kinds of drawings. But what happened with *Blood Works* was a pure accident. One evening, with a few drinks under my belt, let's put it that way, I was in the studio working on some drawings sitting at my giant architect's table. I noticed that my Exacto blade was dull, so I removed the safety cap to replace the blade but it slipped from my hands and stuck straight up in my thigh.

TS: It must have been sharp.

RS: It's very sharp. It's a razor blade that comes to a point. Anyway, it was just like in the movies. It even did the "boing," the back and forth motion. I remember just sitting there for one second and staring at it, saying, "Wow, Robert, you've really done it this time." And when I pulled it out, I guess that the blade had hit a major artery in my leg because blood began to spurt everywhere. It was airborne, spurting blood, and it was ruining my drawings. I threw the pencils out of a nearby jar and capped it over my [leg], so that it would at least stop ruining the room. It was ruining everything. I was alone in the warehouse at the time, and I was afraid they would find me dead the next day. There was that much blood coming out of me. So I finally found some duct tape, I'm serious [laughter]! And pinched the wound together and taped off my leg so that it would stop and the blood would coagulate. Well, I had a jar of blood then sitting there all of a sudden, and I thought, "Well, gee, what can I do with this?"

TS: Oh, let me go paint!

RS: Well, that's right. Any self-respecting artist probably would have done the same thing. They would have said, "Wow, I've gotta try this as a medium."

TS: You didn't go to the emergency room?

RS: No, I didn't go to the emergency room. Well, it had stopped bleeding. I was afraid I was going to pass out because I was feeling light-headed. I'm not even sure that two glasses of wine could have done me in like that. I think it was the blood loss.

TS: How much blood did you lose?

RS: I don't know. What's that canning jar, you know, like the Ball canning jars? It was the one that is about this big.

DY: A Mason jar full!

TS: So at least a pint of blood.

RS: Yes. So I put a cap on it and put it in the refrigerator. I awoke the next day to my roommates asking, "Oh my God, what happened here? There's blood all over your studio, and there's a jar of blood in the refrigerator!" I told them the story and immediately began to experiment with it and draw with it, but I quickly became frustrated because it would coagulate too quickly on a quill pen—I love to draw with a quill pen—and it would also coagulate if I put it on a brush so I . . .

TS: Are you left-handed?

RS: I'm ambidextrous.

TS: Okay.

RS: I do primarily draw with my right hand, and through the years I've trained myself to where I can—but I can do with both if I have to. But at any rate, I had the jar of blood and began to experiment with these new drawings and ran into all these technical problems. I was just about ready to throw away the jar of blood because it wasn't working well as a medium at all; it was a mess. I talked to my dermatologist about the problem, and she said, "Well, honey, all you need is some blood thinner. Let me give you some." So she gave me a vial of anti-coagulant.

TS: That's another thing about being in the South, "Honey, all you need . . ." [laughter].

RS: Yes. So she gave me this chemical, and I poured it in with the blood, and it was really like water coloring. It thinned it nicely; I was able to get beautiful washes with it. It never clotted on the brush or the pen any more. So I began to do these drawings with my blood. They weren't even like heavy-duty concept drawings. I wasn't really trying to make any big statement about AIDS. In fact, I didn't even make the connection with addressing AIDS issues and my newfound medium. I was simply drawing little florals and plant studies, you know, standard botanical illustrations.

TS: So your botany was still coming through.

RS: Yes, I was just playing with it and enjoying it, but I also had the added problem of the blood turning brown when it oxidizes. When it comes off the pen or brush it's a beautiful bright red; and it'll begin to turn brown in about ten hours, but within about twenty-four hours it'll turn completely to black.

TS: So how did you stop that?

RS: Well, at that point I began to create all kinds of swatches of trying different methods. I realized that the blood was turning brown because it was being oxidized; it was coming in contact with oxygen. So I knew that I had to find a way to seal the drawings hermetically, so that oxygen couldn't get to it. Shellac will do it, any clear varnish will do, acrylic gel mediums will do it, so I've got a wide range of possible things that I can put on it to make it to where it never browns up. Then I began to do these drawings and time it in such a way that I would let the blood get to be just the right brown-red that I liked, so that it looked like a beautiful classical sepia-toned drawing. Then I would seal it. So I was able to control that. But, yes, for the first six months of me creating what is now called the *Blood Works Series*, I had not made any AIDS connections whatsoever. I was just enjoying creating florals because I was definitely making the connections between blood and the human heart and romance. They were mostly little drawings about the complications of romance and heartbreak. Love poetry is full of blood metaphors, so I was playing around with that. Then, one evening, I created a drawing of a theoretical rose bush. In other words, it's not a rose bush that actually exists. In many ways it is the opposite of a rose because the tiniest element is the flower and the thorns are gigantic and brutal. There is even blood dripping from the tips of the thorns, blood from the victims, so to speak. This is an image of the confirmed bachelor. He is the kind of person who has every possible defense mechanism in full force, to where it is not worth the trouble and pain to get to experience the tiny little bit of beauty that he has to offer. When I completed the drawing and I looked at it, all of a sudden I realized, "Oh, AIDS could perhaps be addressed with this medium. This is it, I see it now. I see how I can take flowers, which I'm already connecting with romance, and flowers are after all the genitals of plants, and so all these connections began to be made.

TS: Maybe you should tell the Christian coalition that, and maybe they'll ban flowers forever [laughter]!

RS: Yes, so the thorns began to represent defense mechanisms, how we humans even in the best situations hurt each other. I began to explore the relationships between the AIDS virus and the toll that it has taken on our society and on the individual, and I try to use flower symbols to address the issues. I was very fortunate because both of my grandmothers loved flowers and had magnificent flower gardens, and they instilled the love of plants in myself and my mother and father. We had some wonderful gardens. So I knew some of the folklore of plants. I had been raised hearing the stories and was able to tie those in with my bigger concerns of addressing issues of AIDS. Like for instance, the piece *Sweet William* came to me because I was at my grandmother's house, and she said she wanted me to go cut some Sweet Williams to put in a bouquet centerpiece. I took the scissors and was starting to cut them, and, you know, they have multiple little flowers on the flower head; they're like little tiny bouquets. She came up to me, and said, "Oh, no, no, no, don't cut that one down; only cut down the prettiest

ones" . . . and since AIDS is spread by sexual attraction, AIDS does the same thing; it cuts down the pretty ones. So all of a sudden my mind was flooded with the incredible connections that I could make. I made the *Blood Works* probably for another whole year before one of my friends, who is HIV positive, said, "Well, Robert, why don't you take some of my blood and make one of the drawings. People finding out that it's made of HIV positive blood might add an even deeper impact to the already heavy duty subject." When I did that, things went crazy in the art world—the shock on people's faces.

TS: Did you have any nervousness about using HIV positive blood?

RS: Oh, yes, oh, yes. I had tremendous reservations about it, and as a result of my great fear of it, I keep it under some of the tightest. . . .

TS: The blood?

RS: Yes. I have only a small vial of it, but believe me, it is incredibly well marked and put away from everything else, and I use it very, very sparingly.

TS: Can you paint with plastic gloves on?

RS: Oh, yes, you can do all that. But actually the HIV is dead in it. HIV dies when it leaves the body, so the virus is not even alive. It is in the blood, but it is a dead virus.

TS: So it can't . . . .

RS: No, you can't infect anybody with it. But I'm still not going to take any chances because I'm absolutely terrified of it. I'm very much happy to be HIV negative, considering how crazy I've been with my life and that I'm crazy enough to go and experiment with this unconventional medium. But it's also killed by the chemical it is suspended in. So it is a completely dead virus. But just the fact of knowing that some of the paintings are made with the HIV blood changes the meaning.

TS: So you said it really shook things up in the art world?

RS: Oh, yes, it shocked a lot of people. I premiered the *Blood Works* at the Nexus Contemporary Art Center, which is now called the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center, back in 2000 or 2001. I made gigantic, ornate, classical frames, and they held these beautiful little flower drawings. Perhaps the funniest thing about the images was watching people's reactions to the works. I remember some of my collectors, an older couple were visiting me in the studio. I'll never forget, the woman had wandered away from the large oil paintings I was trying to show them, and I heard her say, "Oh, Henry, come look! Robert's doing florals!" I remember them standing in front of a bunch of the *Blood Works* drawings, and

then they looked over at the hypodermic needles, band-aids, bottles of alcohol and test tubes of chemicals. They even saw a test tube labeled "HIV-Positive Solution." I will never forget the look of total shock on their faces. That happened about a week before I was to premier the works at Nexus. So I knew at that point that it was going to catch some people off guard. When I premiered them, the gallery wallpapered the walls red velvet to accentuate the gaudy, ornate, cocoa-like frames with little blood drawings in them. People would walk up to them and say, "Oh, wow, these are beautiful! Look, flowers!" And then you would see them read the wall tag. When the wall tag said, "HIV positive blood," you would watch them begin to step backward, sometimes five or six feet away from the paintings, as if the HIV was going to jump through the glass—because they have sheets of glass in front of them—jump through the glass and get them. At that point I knew that the *Blood Works* were going to make their mark, let's put it that way. And they indeed did because the year after I premiered them, I was invited to represent the United States in the Triennale de Paris in Paris, and that was the entry, the blood drawings.

TS: How did it go over in Paris?

RS: Oh, they're so fabulous. They're so sophisticated first of all. They got it. They liked it. One of the funny things that happened about *Blood Works* being in Paris is that the art people were there appreciating it, but the "Goth" kids, the kids who like to dress up in black clothing and be kind of gothic, they discovered the *Blood Works* were there somehow. I don't know if one of them saw it and told all of their friends, or what, but there were Goth kids by the masses that came into the Triennale to see the blood drawings. So that was kind of cool to have a vampire group of fans. I've never really explored the vampire slant on the *Blood Works*. That's a whole other aspect that I could probably flesh out, no pun intended. But yes, *Blood Works* has just, you know, done it for me. It has legs—that's what we say in the art world—this exhibition's got legs. If I wanted to I could just never even sell any of them, just make them to where they're not for sale—just show them all over the country all the time because people love to tie it in with AIDS research or charity drives in their community. When I have a *Blood Works* show, there's a real wide range of events somehow that surrounds it. The educational groups love to come in and discuss the issues, because it's a way, I think, to language, especially to young people, warning them about HIV by showing them that these little drawings are love stories where something has gone wrong.

TS: Now that you're living in Cobb County, do you think your work will ever be displayed at the Marietta Museum of Art? I understand they kind of prefer nineteenth century stuff.

RS: I doubt that it would show here; I really doubt it. I mean, maybe one of these days, but I don't think they're ready for it yet. I think if it did show there it might become yet another censorship battle. I think there could be some forces within the community who want art to be only a decorative, pretty thing, and they don't

- want art that actually does address serious issues. I think they would want it to go away very quickly, and they might try to do something about it. It would be an interesting thing to attempt just to see if it would float.
- TS: Have you had any problems at all on campus?
- RS: Interesting question. Let's see.
- TS: Do the students like it?
- RS: You know, it's funny because I get asked that a lot—not out here, but I get asked that a lot in Atlanta. A lot of my . . . .
- TS: Well, they've got stereotypical views about us.
- RS: Yes, they do. A lot of my smug, sophisticated Atlanta friends make the assumption that I've had a rough go out at Kennesaw because they really don't know what Kennesaw is all about. They assume that I suffer from homophobia and all manner of prejudices, or whatever, that my artwork is not understood. I'm happy to report that I've never had a single problem at Kennesaw State University from anyone.
- TS: That's great.
- RS: I mean, not from the students, administrators or any—I've never heard a single thing except acceptance. My students love the fact that they have a professor who is perceived in the art world as being controversial. They love the fact that they have a professor who is an out gay man and is not ashamed of it. I think it gives them a sense of—I want to say like bragging rights or it gives them some kind of sense of social cache. I have even overheard them bragging to their friends that they have a gay teacher. I even had one tell me, "I am so glad that you're gay because it would have been just horrible to have gone off to college and majored in art and not to have gotten to meet a gay person." They think it's the sort of essential experience. You must meet a gay person if you're getting an art degree. You know, it's just hilarious, of course. But, no, I've never had a single problem out here. Cobb County is changing; there's no doubt about that.
- TS: Unfortunately, the sophisticates in Atlanta and other places oftentimes know us for the controversies we've had in the past.
- RS: Well, and we may get a chance to see how all of this floats. There is a great deal of talk on campus right now about Kennesaw State University officially hosting the *Blood Works* show. It's up north right now, and it will be back down here next year.

- TS: When we get the new art gallery?
- RS: Yes, they're talking about making a big splash with it and maybe even opening it up to other aspects of the campus, other departments, so they can have guest speakers and turning it into symposiums and all that sort of stuff.
- TS: Sounds great.
- RS: Yes. I think it's a done deal. I think it's going to happen. If it does, we'll see what the public's reaction to it will be. I'm sure that there will be a few people who are a little bit offended or freaked out, but for the most part I believe that the people on campus, the students, faculty, and administration, are sophisticated enough to where they totally get it. Especially considering it won the Distinguished Scholarship Award, they'll . . . .
- TS: I was going to say you should probably be very affirmed that you received the award.
- RS: Right, and that means that there is a great deal of support of the body of work. It's one of those things that people imagine is going to be really, really outrageous. Then when they see it they see that it's genuinely felt, deeply felt, sincere . . . and I hope that they can see that my heart's in the right place. I hope that they see that. I genuinely do care for people and there's an air of sadness in the work because I certainly lost a lot of friends to AIDS. In fact, when I moved to Atlanta in the early '80s, of the gay men who were artists—and we all pretty much knew each other because there weren't a tremendous amount of us and we all seemed to live in Midtown—of that group I'm one of the very few survivors. Because for such a long time no one even knew that the disease was out there, it spread like wildfire.
- TS: Was it 1980 that it's identified?
- RS: I think it was '82 that we started to hear of the first cases.
- TS: Well, that's I guess my reaction too, that there's a certain sadness that something so beautiful can be so deadly.
- RS: Yes, yes. I guess that the actual strength of *Blood Works* is that it does function on so many different levels. There's the beauty component. I try to wallow in beauty like [Pierre Joseph] Redouté, a famous French botanical illustrator from the 1800s. I try to load them up with as much classical rendering as is possible. I get very "Leonardoesque" with all the flourishes. There's the beauty but then there's also the terrifying aspect of the works being made with blood, so that throws you off. You're attracted and repulsed simultaneously; there's that tug-of-war going on. You know that they're about romance, and so there's that sweet,

tender, touching quality to them. But then there's also the sadness of the death, not just dying from AIDS, but also the death of relationships, of romance. So it functions on a bunch of different levels. I ought to sit down sometime and write that out. I usually never write about my stuff. I have to write about my work for artist's exhibition statements all the time, but I've never really forced myself into studying the conceptual mechanics of the *Blood Works* series. That might be an interesting path for me to take.

TS: When you've done a painting do you still think of it as this is my painting, or is this something out in the public and it's behind you? How do you react to it?

RS: It's kind of no longer mine. I don't possess my paintings. I think I learned a long time ago that I have to divest myself of that almost parental love for the artworks. It took me a long time—for the first several years of my art career I refused to sell anything because I loved it all. I wanted to keep it all, and I finally made myself begin to sell, bit by bit. And now I prefer that they just go ahead and leave. Go on out into the world and, like a child, go out into the world, do your magic and get back with me.

TS: You say you still direct an art gallery in Atlanta?

RS: Oh, yes.

TS: It's still yours, you own an art gallery?

RS: No, I don't own an art gallery.

TS: But you're still directing it?

RS: Not really. But what I do is I facilitate getting Kennesaw State University artists into galleries. I work with art dealers to secure serious, professional opportunities for the students. I'm the curator of a gallery space in Atlanta called Pangaea. It's like a chic, little café, and they've got a giant exhibition wall, and so I . . . .

TS: Curator is the word I needed, I guess, instead of director.

RS: Yes, I curate shows there. I've been doing it for about two and half years now. I show some of Atlanta's best artists in that space, but I also sneak in KSU artists, so it creates the appearance that Kennesaw State University artists are on the equal playing field as the big deal Atlanta artists. As a result of that it has definitely given some of our students boosts to their careers. We have got probably four or five students who have come out of the Visual Arts department in the past five years, who are well on their way to becoming respectable emerging American artists. We've got one who recently graduated, William Cash. His father is a math professor here, and William is already making a



substantial income from the sale of his art. He's got the full blown, real deal American art career.

TS: All right. Well, I think I'm just about out of questions.

RS: Yes, I think I've gabbed enough. My partner Morgan Eubanks, whom I should probably thank for tolerating my gift of gab, will probably be relieved when I come home and talk less this evening.

TS: You've done a great job, and I really appreciate the interview. Thank you very much. I really enjoyed it.

RS: Yes, I'm really glad to do this.

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