

Betty Collings.  
Interviewed by Michael Jones.  
Artist and Curator.  
Collings home/ studio.

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Somewhat modified by the artist/editor.

November 6, 2007

**Early years – *Kakatahi* – *Wellington* – *Ottawa***

M: So what I would like to with this is to look at where you began; you know, your early origins and then how you evolved through education and then as an artist. The layers.

B: How many weeks have you got Michael?

Both: Laughing

M: Some of these will be abbreviated answers. Say where you were born and raised and that circumstance.

B: I was born January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1934 in Wanganui a coastal city in New Zealand, to a single parent mother. She was the daughter of a fairly well educated family but being a single parent in 1934 was a disgraceful thing so we had absolutely no contact with our family, no contact with our family at all. She was a very independent woman. She said she wasn't smart that any smarts I had came from my father, whom of course I never knew. I heard of him when I was about 53. But she went - I don't what she did for the first two or three years after I was born. I think actually my sister was born after that. And there may have been some family influence but we went to a back- block farm where she was the housekeeper.

M: What is a back- block farm?

B: Well way in the back country. We were 36 miles from the nearest city, the roads were gravel. When we first went there the toilet was outside, there was no electricity. My mother wouldn't put up with that and so a flush toilet was installed on the front veranda. It was pretty civilized living. The manager of the farm's wife had died about 4 or 5 years previously in child birth. He had a daughter who lived with his sister in the city such as it was - Wanganui. He very rarely saw her and in a sense he was my surrogate father. He really loved me so I was very lucky. He was a very calm person. There was one thing that he did that I remember fondly which was to "cogitate." I used to call him Daddy Bert. I think that we were fortunate to live on this active and well kept sheep farm. I don't know how big it was. I don't know if it was 4,000 or 8,000 acres. It

was just a lot of land. I think that being on a farm makes for a good childhood. The only problem is that the schools that you go to are pitiful, really pitiful. We traveled for 4 miles every day on the bus and when we got there we were lucky if there were 12 kids there.

M: And that's all grades?

B: Yeah, all grades. Very quickly if you showed any talent in reading or arithmetic or anything else you became the teacher's helper. So that was my fate until I was about 12 - no 11 - when my mother realized I needed to go to secondary school. I don't know how she did it but I think she put an ad in the paper and she married a man outside of Wellington. We moved to Paekakariki which is on the coast North of Wellington so I was able to go to a big inner-city school which was fine except I wasn't prepared for it. It was hell, absolute hell as I had no idea half the time what was going on.

M: My God.

B: You know all of this background effects just about everything you do in your life when you begin to look back on it; your art, the way you go about whatever you happen to do, making things, situations. Anyway, my mother and the man who became my step-father, given that I didn't have a male name - William Hebden adopted me so my name went from being Betty Stent to being Betty Hebden. So that was my second name.

M: .....laughing

B: I got used to it. They thought it would be a good idea if I took a commercial course so I could do short-hand and typewriting and book-keeping and thus get a job. I got to be good at that, but throughout the third and fourth form I just had no idea what was going on. In the fifth form another girl and I in the class decided that we were going to pass School Certificate.

M: So the fifth form is equivalent to what in High School?

B: Oh, I don't know. It's the 3<sup>rd</sup> year of High School. I was young for my age. 12, 13, 14 most other kids were 15 by the end of the fifth form when you had to pass School Certificate to continue. I studied like crazy, Geography and English and the short-hand typing and book-keeping stuff that was part of it scraping through School certificate and got into the 6<sup>th</sup> form. This was an accomplishment in itself given no one expected either of us to be able to do this - but we did.

M: You and your sister both?

B: No, I didn't know my sister then. This was a girl with whom I was friends; her name was Josephine Gunter. We both got into the 6<sup>th</sup> form. I stayed for a year and being too young to leave school went back into the second year 6<sup>th</sup> form. Right about this time the school began to realize I had a brain (hey this girl is not so stupid after all!) so at the

end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> year 6<sup>th</sup> I was given a scholarship to go to the university. And the idea was that she's pretty smart. She knows all about all this stuff, she's really good at bookkeeping and accounting. She's already done the equivalent of Accounting I. She should become a Commercial teacher. Yuck! There was no way I was going to do that, absolutely no way.

M: A commercial teacher means what?

B: Teaching High School children typing, shorthand and bookkeeping. I was only 17 but I knew that that was enough for me so I said no thank you and gave as the reason the fact that if I went to Teachers' College I would be getting a stipend and would be able to help my mother with the costs. Of course all this is during the time that New Zealand was a Socialistic country and she was getting paid the amount of money that you got for having a child. I can't remember what the child allowance was – maybe twelve and sixpence a week. But it was enough to add to the money she was getting when her husband died which was pretty soon after we got to Paekakariki. She was a very independent lady. She was able to take a widow's pension but said that wasn't her she'd rather work for one and sixpence more a week. People thought that she was doing it for the extra money but it wasn't she just didn't like to sit around and take money from people so she worked. That background was a very good reason not to be educated in something you didn't want to be educated in anyway. So I went to teacher's college and did that for 2 years - boy that was a crock they didn't teach you anything. And then did 2 or 3 years teaching infant school. I soon realized that I had made a mistake that this wasn't for me either so I gave it up used my skills as a short hand typist and worked in an office for a while. By this time we'd been married for some time.

M: You were married to Ted?

B: Yes, when I was nineteen. I worked for somebody called the General Director or whatever - pompous ass - of the Railway Officers Institute. Which meant - I was kind of decorative in those days - I was decorating his office. He wasn't there very often and I was bored but as I was going to the university I used the time to type out my notes but I was still bored so gave that up and went onto the campus and worked as an administrative assistant for the geography and geology departments, which was fun. I enjoyed the people and did that right through to the time that our daughter was born when I quit. Six months after that Ted got a post doctorate appointment in Ottawa so we went to Canada.

M: Where in Canada?

B: Ottawa

M: So you met Ted when you were in college?

B: Yes, I met Ted when I was at Teachers College. My mother and I by this time had moved out of the awful accommodation that we lived in. You have to realize that in

the 40's in New Zealand as in the United States the housing situation was absolutely appalling.

M: Well there was a war on?

B: No, this was just after the war - the late 40's and after my step father died. He owned a gasoline and car repair business so we lived over the business. But when he died the business was sold and of course we could not stay in that apartment. Now he had another house in another town that would have been perfect for my mother and me but we couldn't get into it because there were just two of us and the family that was living in it was larger - four or five. So there was no way we could get them out of our house so we could live in it and at the same time there was no other housing for us to live in. We managed to find an army hut on somebody's property and rented it. It was probably no bigger than the kitchen. I mean this kitchen and breakfast room area here is probably bigger than it was. There were two beds and a little bit of room for a closet, a doorway, and a narrow kitchen. We did all our cooking outside and once a week we went up the hill to the house to bathe. The toilet was a long drop in the garden. We lived there for two or three maybe two years until we found a new apartment. This was also pretty tiny, but at least it had plumbing and a fireplace and such civilized things. Later my mother found a larger house with three bedrooms. By this time I was at Teacher's college and we had a boarder to help pay the bills. Grace Lindsay's father had been the manager of the Kapiti Island wild life reserve - that is the half that belonged to the government or the government looked over. The other half was Maori land. So she was interested in living in the village that we lived in which was about 35 miles out of Wellington. All the time I was at High School and College I traveled an hour's journey by train. It was a lovely trip, beautiful going along the coast at sun set and so on. I didn't realize of course that the sea view included the area of the South Island where some of my relatives were living. I had no idea my family history was in reach.

M: Arms reach.

B: Yes in arms reach. In retrospective that was quite interesting. Grace had a boyfriend who was doing a PhD in the physics department and we used to hitch hike up to his family's farm. They were characters in themselves. For instance, his mother when she wanted to have small little round potatoes would just put big potatoes in a home made whirly thing and grind them down. See she'd say "I have these lovely little round potatoes."

Both: Laughing

B: She was really funny. She made her own rugs out of old stockings and whatever was hanging around while his father dug his own wells. They were extremely independent people. But behind their farm was the Tararua Range where we used to go

trampling and there was this rather neat looking guy who came with us. That was Ted - there it was.

M: He was studying physics too?

B: Oh yeah, He didn't start on a PhD until I started needling, least that's what he says. I don't remember. Well all my life Michael I've been very good at getting other people to do things (laughing.)

Both: laughing

B: I won't get started on Ted. Yes, he must have had his Masters degree. He was an assistant professor at Victoria University. He must have begun his experiments because I can remember the night he proposed to me. We were on the floor of his laboratory and there were big neon things (laughing) flashing all around the room, it was quite fun. In those days if you had a yen for somebody you got married, nobody taught you about contraception or anything like that. That had been my mother's problem. So we agreed to get married but had to wait until we found someplace to live. I was nineteen.

M: Well I bring up Ted because he's a Research Physicist.

B: He's a Materials Scientist now.

M: But doing primary research and I think we want to revisit that as something that's maybe had an influence on you over the years or whatever.

B: I think that's true. In New Zealand last year people were talking about what one does in one's life and he, half in joke, said that he had to admit that he had never done anything useful in his whole life. I think people were talking doing things that were contributing to the community in various obvious ways. He said "Well I really haven't done that ever. I've always been concentrating on doing research and what I've found most interesting." I think that's an attitude that fits in very well with artists because artists really do have to follow possibilities. I know there has been a great deal of interest over the last ten to fifteen years in community stuff, collaboration and such. I respect people who do that but it doesn't work for me. I think that, in a world that is getting to be so full of people and requires collective community activity, over time it is important that there are those who take independent paths. It's the fact that they think or do in a different way or separately that's terribly important. To quote a cliché "thinking outside of the box". Fortunately it is still possible and contributes to our collective community. How did we get to that?

M: No that is where we need to go.

B: Oh okay

Both: laughing

M: So you got to Canada, where in Canada?

B: We were in Canada two years.

M: And where was this?

B: Ottawa. For me it was hell, it was hell to be a mother. Before Jane was born even when I was pregnant I was going to college full time. I think I was taking three courses or maybe I wasn't taking as many as that, but I was certainly busy. I was working as the Administrative Assistant to this Geography and Geology department and addition to that I was typing Ted's thesis. This was when you typed by hand and if you made a mistake you rubbed through all six copies. I did that. Then he got his PhD. At the time Jane was born there was absolutely no way to get household help. There was full employment in New Zealand so no one was interested in doing three or four hours in an afternoon maybe four days a week so it wasn't possible to continue taking course work. I was at home looking after the baby going mad with boredom. Mixing the formula and reading a book (laughing) I was not a good mom. This was before dryers. We lived on a hillside that had an absolutely fabulous view, but not as much sun as you might like. After washing the dirty diapers you put them out on the line, and then you brought them in not quite dry and aired them. Then after folding them you put them in the airing cupboard in the basement in time to put them on the baby's backside, after which you were back to the whole circle again. It was just awful.

Then we headed off to Canada. Ted was busy doing his research and there we were. In Wellington, N.Z., we lived fairly elegantly because we shared a house with Ted's mother at that point because she had been ill. We had both been earning so had saved up enough money to buy a decent house - it was really a gorgeous house - then suddenly we go to Canada on a post-doctorate fellowship which from N.Z. looked like a lot of money. At the time New Zealand would let you take only 200 dollars away with you. So we get to Canada and we found that the car that we could afford to buy with it was the absolute pits. There was no extra money. I sewed all Jane's and my clothes and as I'm good at managing money we survived two years of scrimping. We went skiing in the winter on the one fine day a week choosing the best one because as a post-doc Ted had that flexibility. That was great. In the summer we saw a lot of the North East U.S. and Eastern Canada by spending as little as possible on food and as much as possible on gas. We turned the back of our car into a sort of camp kitchen, took a tent and during the summer went to many places.

Then we got back to New Zealand with Ted going back to his job as a Professor at the university and intending to stay there forever. He brought back ideas about doing research in an economically stringent environment but after three months he found that the materials he had ordered to do his research hadn't been ordered. The order was sitting on the old professor's desk and Ted just freaked. For him it was "Oh God I can't do this." He was offered on a job in Philadelphia and another in Australia and as they were equally potentially good thought "Oh well they're paying so let's go the furthest distance" so we

went to Philadelphia. We took with us two children as soon after we arrived back in New Zealand I got pregnant with Chris. During the year we were in New Zealand Ted and a friend of ours and I went to a ceramics class. The wheels used were stand up ones that you kick and which had a large pan in front of you. This was fine for Ted and this lady whose name I've forgotten. They did fine, but my stomach kept getting in my way.

Both: Laughing

### **Art as a late bloomer**

*Ceramics – Swarthmore Co-operative Gallery.*

*BFA and MFA Art Department Ohio State University.*

B: So I didn't do very much, but I could see I liked it. It was good and Ted was really into it as ceramics has all this technical stuff associated with it. Thus when we left for the US we left with two children, a pram, several small trunks of the winter clothing we would need, and two huge wooden crates that Ted had made one of them for the pottery wheel he had made. A huge one with a big free wheel.

M: A treadle wheel?

B: No, no, a fly wheel.

M: It would stand up?

B: Well you could stand up or sit or whatever you'd like, it had a huge heavy fly wheel, weighed a ton. The other crate was for his tools - he's into making things too you understand. So we get to the US and get pregnant with another baby and the whole thing is a disaster, the baby dies within two days. So the money we had saved for the dryer because I wasn't going to do this diaper thing again we spent on a kiln. I would lock the kids in the play room with a babysitter, stay out in the laundry area where the pottery wheel was. The kiln was in the garage and I taught myself to throw and to glaze using Rhodes book and Ted's knowledge of chemistry. Within a year I was making stuff people seemed to like. After Peter (the baby) died I volunteered at brain damage clinic. It was obvious that had he lived he would have been brain damaged though nobody really knew what went wrong. I guess in these days they probably could and would have told us. I always blamed it on American medicine. Anyway I went to the Doman Delacoto Clinic where they were treating brain damaged people both young and old with an elaborate method called patternating. It was really awful as they would force physical activity which did get many adults back to normal relatively quickly, but the brain damaged children were just having a bad time. The knowledge that I had about teaching - New Zealand teaching methods were quite advanced in those days perhaps still are for the younger children - was put to good use with these children. At the same time I was also tutoring one of the children in my basement but realized that to go further with this needed further training and basically it was too depressing. So I decided to spend more

time on the ceramics and within a year had gotten a group of three or four people together. I think we had one of the first collectives.

M: Co-op

B: Co-op yeah, I had found a store window just off Swarthmore railroad station and put my pottery in the window with directions to my house. People would come and they would want three hours of philosophy and conversation for twenty five dollars worth of ceramics. This wasn't so much fun after a while so I got together with a silver maker, a weaver, and a group of women from Swarthmore College who were working under Paulus Berenson.

M: Paul Berenson?

B: Paul was running the pottery studio

M: In Swarthmore?

B: In Swarthmore. So his collective of people and me and Ruth Hogan and Ursula Browne started this store which did amazingly well. Of course then someone pinched Ted's contracts, he was out of a job so looked and found one in Ohio.

M: When was this?

B: 1966-67 something like that. We came to the states in 62, we were in Swarthmore four years so that would be 66, 67 when we arrived. Ted had rented a house in Upper Arlington because it was near Battelle Institute and because it had a big basement that I could use for ceramics. We had parties, invited people for dinner. I must have thrown a million pounds of food over this dining room table. People hardly ever or never invited us back. I don't know what I did wrong or whether there was something else. I had no idea but thought to the hell with this I'm not trying to fit in. In Swarthmore it was completely different people were friendly - oh God we were out at parties every weekend - and fun. People were smart and funny it was great, we just loved it. So I thought I'm not going to do this and somebody told me - well I knew about Louis Mendez who had been in Philadelphia and was now teaching at Ohio State. Somebody told me about Ohio's continuing education program so I became a continuing education student and worked in the ceramics department. They had big gas kilns for reduction firing, something I didn't know anything about that so that's why I got into it. I worked as a continuing education student for awhile until the person who was advising the students said to me you know Betty you keep getting closed out of classes you want to go to why don't you enroll as a student so I did. The rest is history.

M: So you then did a degree in ceramics?

B: I did an undergraduate degree in ceramics then wanted to switch for an M.F.A. to sculpture because by that time I was working with Bill Ramage in the life sculpture area.



M: You had too many credits in ceramics or something?

B: No, it was just too complicated. You had to start all over again, so I stayed in ceramics. The only problem was when I came to do my thesis show two years later I had hardly any ceramics. I had a studio in the ceramics department all that time so I invented some figurative things that I could cast that became part of it. Most of that 2 years or so I did figurative sculpture. Ramage was one of the most influential teachers that one could have. Not because he told you a lot but because he made you think a lot. Do it for yourself, figure it out for yourself, this is important. But after several years of doing figurative work it just seemed to me that this wasn't going anywhere one was just making a figure. One day after lugging some bronze - he taught us how to do bronze casting - although by this time I was doing big, cumbersome experience pieces - I looked out onto the oval (laughing) where the architecture students had a huge polyethylene construction - black polyethylene. It was immense, probably a hundred feet by sixty feet blown up by a vacuum cleaner. It was ugly and it was big and I thought God it must only weigh about twenty pounds. That's for me.

Both: Laughing

### **Inflatable Sculpture.**

B: So I started experimenting with inflatables. I had been making experience pieces like the egg piece which one gets inside to relive, perhaps, the experience of the foetus. Anyone into working with wood and such would have made it in no time but it must have taken me a year and a half to make this damn thing. It was perfect and it was great. For, of course in those days everything had to be perfect. But that was another thing about inflatables. Nobody had any ideas of how they ought to be so you didn't have all the stuff about shining it and polishing it and all that crap that went on in the 60's and early 70's. I did my thesis show which was called Experience with Form. I've always had trouble with weight. I look at a piece of cake and it is on my hips I don't even have to eat it, I just have to look at it. I made three pieces that you stood up in; columns like tree trunks with beg cellular shapes at the top so you climbed up into one and stood with your head sticking out while it blew up around you giving you a sense of what it would be like to be really fat.

M: Did your arms stick out?

B: No, no just your head. It was a great success there was three of them and there were different heights for different people. Then there was the egg that you got into and closed the lid so that it was completely black. You sat there in a foetal position.

M: You were totally inside it?

B: You were totally inside it. You were sitting inside it. I tell you this thing took eighteen months to make it took two years.

M: And it's black inside?

B: Absolutely I had a little air coming through a tube. Some people would sit in it for half an hour which was bothersome as, especially in those days you didn't want to upset anyone's experience. But I was afraid they might be dead in there. (Laughing)

M: So this was a sensory deprivation chamber except that you have the sensation of gravity.

B: I thought of it in terms in a womb and then there was this big sphere to experience from the inside. That was successful also.

M: That was another one you get in?

B: Yes, you get in that one too. In those days that was pretty far out. These days there are many similar things that people can experience. But the one that was really successful consisted of two cell shapes blown up but some distance apart. They were connected together with an extended stethoscope. So you couldn't see me and I couldn't see you but we could hear each other's heartbeat; communicating via the heartbeat. People loved it, I'd see a couple of kids standing there and I would match up this girl and this boy and they would do it and go off. (Laughing) You'd see them weeks later still together.

Both: Laughing

B: It was really great.

M: So was the title of that piece match maker?

B: No, no it was called Hearts. The show was supposed to be on for two days - no I had the gallery for a week - looked after by the gallery assistant and me. From nine to five all the time zipping people in and out of these things.

M: What year is this?

B: Oh 1973 I think. Somehow a local radio station got on it and elected one day a Betty Collings day on the radio station. People were bringing their children in and of course I wanted the adults to try this as well. After I got them into the sphere they would try other things. There was one other one I called Eleanor Rigsby after the Beatles song. It was a series of tall rectangular columns that again one got inside. To see out one peered through a small hole. You could have about 16 or 17 people in the gallery and think nobody was there.

M: Cause they're all zipped up inside things (laughing)

B: Columbus came, students came and the only people who didn't come were the art faculty who stood at the door and peered in (laughing)

M: Except Hebner, he probably came?

B: Oh yes! Hebner came.

M: The expanding arts program was cooking.

B: Oh yes and there was someone else. There was a guy in the sculpture department; I forget what his name was.

M: This was a graduate degree right?

B: This was a graduate degree.

M: Your MFA?

B: Yeah, right. There were a few things, a bronze piece or two and there were a few ceramic things in there because this was a ceramic degree. I graduated in ceramics believe it or not (laughing). At that time it was really important, not in terms of me but probably in terms of Ohio State's programming, that in the painting department there was a guy called Bert Katz. Did you ever meet Bert?

M: I never met him, but I heard a lot about him.

B: In fact I saw him a couple of days ago in New York because he wanted to know something and we got together. He organized a symposium that was about the relationship between University curriculum and Contemporary Art. Contemporary art was beginning to be very experiential and very performance oriented as compared with traditional academia. It so happened that I finished my graduate degree work and my thesis show but I hadn't handed my thesis in. The reason that I hadn't done that was because we went skiing with my son and he blew up both of his knees. I really had to pay attention to being a mom. Then while I was writing my thesis Bert was working up his conference which sounded really interesting so I offered to give him a hand with it. I spent probably six months to a year helping Bert with his conference and of course when people came it was enormously good fun. I got to be friends with Robert Smithson whose work I thought at the time to be terrific. He was helpful actually. He introduced me to people in New York but although this seemed promising it didn't go anywhere in the end because my work was really too far out for those days. Bert brought in all these really interesting people and charged everybody up and I thought this is what we needed. I had been an energetic student there for years but towards the end of the time I came to realize that it wasn't inspiring enough. I was remembering how it was like when I was an elementary school kid. Probably there was more going on at OSU than I could see nevertheless we needed more of this stuff. Annette Michaelson was there, Robert

Smithson, Robert Wilson. Early in his days Robert Wilson was fabulous. That was when the dance department was still in Phys Ed.

M: This was after Einstein on the Beach?

B: Oh no, much earlier. He had this 12 year old boy who was autistic who twirled. I can remember this all in the dance department area, which was down it in a gym. We were all busy twirling around doing Robert Wilson's stuff. Annette Michaelson had been asked to give an introductory lecture pertinent to the conference topic but instead gave a totally boring lecture of some interest to her, but unrelated to our conference. We had a hell of a big party here - somebody had to have a party and we seemed to have the biggest house. We had a big party here that included that performance lunatic from Vienna, Otto Muhl. He was part of the Viennese movement [Viennese Actionism] in which people were supposed to have cut their cocks off and other truly grotty stuff. I can remember him (laughing) bailing up Bert in the kitchen, trying to get more money for his performances. The house was full of all these people.

M: The less you are the more money you need if you're lopping things off?

Both: Laughing

B: When we were in Vienna a couple of years ago I made a point to go to the Neue Gallery and found that all this work was documented. I thought these people are just lunatics, just absolute lunatics. This guy was messing around and cutting chickens heads off and there was one performance that couldn't be done at the university and was done off site. It was a bit grotesque I think.

M: A lot of that had in common was going inside the skin?

B: Yes

M: Whether it's your pieces or that.

B: And it was all about feeling

M: Perhaps a new way to think about figurative sculpture.

B: Oh definitely.

M: Figurative sculpture had historically stopped.....

B: Right

M: ..at the skin and this was diving in.

B: Right, right. I certainly thought you needed to get right inside this thing just looking at it wasn't what it was all about. The point that I wanted to make was I thought Bert did

Ohio State University a huge favor by going to all this trouble and getting this grant and bringing it in and opening the students eyes up. So okay he does it and they go away and everything calms down and its back to Hebner's Expanded Arts being the only group doing anything that was enormously good fun. I loved Hebner's work and he was always trying to get me to be a part of it but I knew I couldn't do that.

**Ohio State University Gallery of Fine Art.  
Art of the 70's Collection.**

So I wrote my thesis which turned out to be literate and the faculty was terribly surprised (laughing) that a student could write more than three pages that could be read. John Freeman was on my committee and the gallery director had just been fired so they thought that well here she is, she seems to be available so they offered me the job of running the gallery from February to the end of that quarter. That would had been June or something. I thought about it and thought it would be something fun to do. Being at home and being an artist at home I could see had its disadvantages. I don't think I'd found my studio by that time. I diddled around and diddled around until I said, "Well you know if you're going to offer me the job than I need it for a year and a quarter. I don't want it for a quarter because of the end of this quarter I would have to be beholden to the people who were going to appoint me for the next year so why don't you give it to me for a year and a quarter." So they gave it to me for a year and a quarter and the year and the quarter things started to move along a lot. In that respect the gallery got more interesting and I figured out that by using my own personal vehicle we could go into New York and gather up some shows and bring out work from New York. We concentrated on New York not cause we thought it was better than the Mid West or anything else. It was cheaper to go to New York and gather three or four artists and chuck all the stuff in the back of my van and bring them out and show them. We showed Agnes Denes, we showed Jim Reineking, I can't remember who else, but we did quite a nice showing that year. You know they appointed me again. Bob Arnold was running the art education departments criticism program so he and I would get together and we would have critics come out and look at the students and faculty work as well as set up lectures. This went on for several years and as a result of having that additional very interesting program we were able to get more interesting artists. The whole thing fed on itself for five or six years and became pretty lively. In fact a too busy program. We were really pumping it out for, as you know we had one, two about six spaces, turning them all over in three week chunks. The students thought it was inspiring and exciting. The art department was getting better and better graduate students. When the students came they were amazed that the gallery situation was as small as it was, but they were still stimulated by it and why did I think of doing all of that? Because over the years, checking back to the beginning of this interview, I could see that for inspiration you need excitement to keep the adrenalin flowing and also I was having an awesome amount of fun.

M: When you get the opportunity you get your hands a space and, for a moment, someone lets the rings go slack you can grab the bit in your teeth and find out how much you are actually capable of doing.

B: The whole situation was just fortuitous. It wouldn't happen again and one of things that is a joke about it is my shorthand typing experience was most useful because the secretary for the gallery was the department secretary. If you gave her a letter to type it would take two weeks for her to get it back to you. What the hell I would go upstairs and type it myself and send it off. Which meant it didn't get vetted so the whole thing was running very efficiently (laughing). It was great. We had an enormously good time and I can say I was certainly over worked, but I was certainly having a very good time.

M: Just for the record so that people know Betty. Not only did this program attract a lot of students, but it put Ohio State on the map. There was entree into New York for the gallery for a long time. You started the collection of contemporary art [Art of the 70's] and all of that essentially made it kind of implicit that there needed to be a museum. There had been talk of a museum on campus since the 50s, but nobody had gotten it together and there wasn't a palpable mandate just a vague desire in the history department. But then this program and it's the critical mass and its overall ambition and momentum made it happen.

B: It wasn't just me you can't say it's just me. Arnold and his program were extremely important, but even more important than that something that had happened about a year before. That was that the big ten universities had a traveling exhibition of work from their collections and Ohio State didn't have anything of any substance except a Moran which belonged to the Geology Department. The Geology Department still probably has it.

M: John Marin?

B: Moran. Big landscape.

M: Thomas Moran?

B: Yes! Did I say John Moran? I just said Moran? I was being careful. This was an embarrassment the provost at the time was Ed Kuhn and Ed Moulton was the money man. They were both interested in art. Kuhn's wife was eventually a student at CCAD and Moulton was very interested in the arts. They supported me whole heartedly, not obviously, but whole heartedly. For instance after awhile we started to bring things out, especially when I took over the space at Sullivan Hall that had been acquired due to the efforts of the art historians who didn't know how to run it or didn't have the facilities or anything else. It was handed to me at the last minute do something! We needed a bit of transportation so suddenly the university buys a very suitable truck for transporting art. It was for general university transportation but the people were instructed to keep the thing clean and the gallery was to have it whenever they needed it. We were driving a truck backwards and forwards to where ever we wanted to take things. The guy who was doing the insurance understood that all I had to do was to send him the list of stuff so all the insurance was covered. With all those problems solved from a curatorial point of view (laughing) it was a dream of a job. After Robert Pincus-Witten started coming out and we - I don't remember how - got started on the collection, the NEA contributed to this tremendously by making grants to institutions who would buy contemporary American

artists. My thoughts were “I’m an artist, I’m not an historian.” It was ridiculous that I was doing any of this. I don’t know anything! I pick it up as I go along always flying on the seat of my pants and so I obviously needed some consultation on this. For some reason I was reading Roberts stuff and I thought he was pretty funny and I thought he was interesting and knew a lot about contemporary art. I phoned him up one day and asked if he would come and lecture to us on Bob’s program and he and I got along very well. I asked him if he would be the advisor to this collection and we came up with a list I think \$4,000 worth of conceptual art - little things and we got it! Oh God I got to match it. I told the administration that I had \$4,000 and the matching money was there instantly. The next time we applied for the maximum the matching money was there instantly again. That was when I realized that Ned [Moulton] and Kuhn were really behind this thing. Not only did we get matching money, but we got extra money. The university has this huge development fund and they have money that people donate without strings. There was plenty of money to match these grants. In the end, the last biggest purchase was the Puerto Rican Blue Pigeon and it hadn’t been on our list.

M: This is from Frank Stella

B: Yeah, that cost us out \$20,000. That year we had a whole series of things that we wanted and of course after a while we achieved a reputation so if we said we wanted a piece the galleries were able to sell it so somebody else faster for a lot more money than they had promised to us. When the grant came in I would go in and say I want this and they would say I’m sorry Betty it’s no longer available and on this particular occasion I had \$20,000 to spend. When I saw the Puerto Rican Blue Pigeon I realized this would quickly get approval from the selection committee. Everyone knows Stella and we bought it. That was a big chunk of money, the biggest chunk of money that I spent.

M: I recall you said that that show was not selling.

B: No, no it wasn’t. Mine was the first. It was an institutional purchase. Frank Stella doesn’t know me, but that was really important for him.

M: He’s done a lot of that sculptural painting since; but that one is still it’s an incredible gem.

B: It’s one of the best ones. I go and look at his shows whenever I can as I really do admire him. I admire him because he keeps pushing it and he’s got thousands of millions of dollars now to work on. You can envy him that he’s able to get it done, but the fact that he’s not being a Lichtenstein or these people who kept repeating themselves. He’s moving along, he’s moved into the architectural field, but hasn’t gotten the commission yet, but it doesn’t seem to worry him. He’s just working on the ideas. That thrills me; I think that’s great that’s fine by me.

M: You did all of that you also did some critical writing and then I’m curious how all of that activity influenced your studio work.

B: Well the critical writing.

M: Or were they separate enterprises?

B: Well the critical writing was after they canned me from Ohio State and that was a whole other story of politics that I rarely care repeating. We were doing so incredibly well that the university decided that they were to go for this huge amount of money and would make art the focus of it. Unfortunately the board president at that time had a collection that he had wanted the university collection to have that wasn't a contemporary collection. He did not like what we were doing and was furious. His name is well known. They recognized - this is my understanding of it -, that there wasn't a hope in hell of the university focusing on the art collection for this big thing if I was still there. I just got annoyed with it all and told the new Provost on one particular occasion that if she didn't want to listen to me I didn't want to listen to her. After that they told me my job was finished (laughing.) Actually it was a good thing as I had had enough. I knew I'd had enough so it was fine.

M: Anyone who hasn't done gallery work should know that it's a lot of work. It's a huge amount of work and you ran a program that was dense, intelligent and very fast paced.

B: It was!

M: And also running a house hold. (Laughing)

B: People didn't think it was a tragedy for me that I was leaving the university. It was assumed that I would go off and be a museum director somewhere else. What they didn't understand and I had never made it clear was that I had a family; two teenaged kids and a husband that was writing a series of books. You can't say alright guys I'm going to be a museum director somewhere else that didn't work at all. At the end of that year I went to the museum management course that Getty runs in California. For the first time I knew what it really meant to be a career museum director and thought hey - if we can think back to when I was 17 - I don't want to have anything to do with this. Too many no-no's. For instance if the students came in and wanted a recommendation I would give them a recommendation. No you didn't write anything like that. It was so ghastly, nothing like the free wheeling fun things that as naïve curators we turned into something really useful. (Laughing.) You had to raise money for God's sake - I've never been good at raising money.

M: My experience was that there was something about the nimbleness of a university gallery.

B: Yes

M: And the mandate that it was a laboratory for looking at ideas and new things and it didn't have to be polished and it didn't have to please the eye necessarily. So it was very



liberating. I was a graduate student when you were running the program and I did a lot of assistantship with the gallery. I think I got a sense of certainly of how much of a sense the pace made to the ambience and after I got a position I understood something about how really attractive it was to have a certain mandate and quite a bit of autonomy.

B: Certainly

M: Who did you have to answer to? In a fundamental way you didn't answer to donors or the board you answered to the field.

B: That's right! Yeah you did and that's why it was successful you were immersed in the field. I would go into New York three or four times a year and I knew all the artists and dealers in the galleries and that was terrific. I think now it would be completely different. It would be very much better I believe it could be very much better and I hate how all the museums all over the world concentrate on what they see as the scene and overlook the smaller areas. Areas like Ohio and so on because I think there is wonderful art going on and it just doesn't get looked at because many curators are concerned about their careers that are furthered by following the work chosen by the gallery dealers who show the first one or two or the very hip spaces that have money - like Massachusetts MOMA. When I first started at the gallery Ted sent over a couple of his Russian colleagues who looked at a Jim Reineking show and stated that this wasn't American art but International art. We became great friends because of our differences. My point was that it may be International art, but he's an American and American art these days is essentially dictating International art. I don't think America is necessarily dictating international art, but there is international art scene out there and that's where the energy is. Everything else seems to get dropped off and probably the more interesting stuff gets dropped off. It's possible that the most interesting stuff gets dropped off.

M: We've left the gallery

B: Yes, thank goodness (laughing)

**Independent artist, writer and curator**

*New York, Art and Mathematics*

M: This is 1980 - 81 something like that.

B: Yeah 1981- 82 somewhere in there. Some of my problems with the faculty began in 1979 when I did my first New York show which was reviewed in New York Arts Magazine. It takes a while for a review to come out, but once the review came out the shit hit the fan because there was much jealousy. Bertha Urdang asked me if I wanted to be a part of her gallery it was really a miss- match which I didn't expect. She didn't show much sculpture and her priorities really had nothing to do with what I was doing. But who else was going to ask me other than the time that Robert Smithson had introduced me to a woman who was running a school on the east side [Elaine Varian] who was very interested in the little booklet I made up for my thesis show. I know that there was a buzz about it over in New York over two or three days... But in the end they decided at that time it was too far out. Probably they couldn't deal with all these inflatable things and who would such and such. Somebody - I was foolish about this - somebody from the Metropolitan education department asked me if I would like to take the things to the education department and said I didn't want to do that it was more serious than something for children. But it was stupid of me I should have had accepted that. But other than those times when you're running a gallery as you very well know you don't really put yourself forward as an artist at least I didn't. I found that it wasn't a good idea, you had to be interested in other artists although, let's face it, you were interested in artists because you had an insight into what they did. This is another good reason not to continue after awhile because the scene changes. For instance I didn't have any sympathy for the guy who was throwing plates around [Julian Schnabel] and all of that stuff. I couldn't put energy into exhibiting that; I just couldn't.

M: You mean Julian Schnabel?

B: Yeah. I couldn't have done that. I just couldn't! You do have an insight to what the other artists are doing, but you better be very careful to downplay your own ideas at least that's how I felt about it and that's what I did... All the time I was doing that gallery I was working as an artist and I do think that being part of New York was important for me personally. It was important having Robert come out every three months or so and I always took him to my studio to see what was going on. Sometimes the artists would say what do you do so I would bring them over. I remember bringing forgot what his name was [Acconci]. Several of the artists would say what do you do? I would say well okay I'll take you to my studio if you like and the only reason Bertha Urdang got to see what I was doing was that she got snowed in. She came to Columbus when the weather was really bad and she was here for three or four days and she was really bored. She said why don't you show me your studio? (Laughing) so I thought well okay and I did otherwise I

would have not done it. She was really taken with the work I was doing at the time. I felt sorry for her because it was the very minimal clear plastic things that she liked - hardly there. That wasn't really me that was just the phase I was going through at the time. When I finally got exhibiting with Bertha on a regular (laughing) basis gallery it was a riot of color and noise and everything else. I admired her for her ability to keep up with it. Of course we became really good friends.

M: Right, right

B: That was something else, but when I think about my work stuff like A and B. There was what I thought I was doing and what I was really doing and what I thought I was doing was related to the issues at the time, the kind of art going on was what I was interested in. When I was writing my thesis I was busily reading Art Forum, about Process Art and all of these things. I thought it was really exciting. It certainly influenced me, and there's no doubt that Systems etc made me see that what I was doing was fitting into something like that. But when it was all over there was another take on it, for what I did when I was making stuff was just follow my nose. In the end some people thought it was a formula, but it wasn't. After the experience pieces I started being interested - because of Robert Smithson - I was interested in spirals. We went to Casco Bay in Maine and one morning I got up really early while Ted and the kids were still sleeping I drove out to Popham Beach where there is a vast expanse of sand at low tide. I thought I'd draw a spiral with a stick on this smooth surface but didn't have the faintest idea of what the hell I was doing. How do you draw a spiral? Right - I drew what was essentially an Archimedes spiral - I have a photograph of it. I came back and realized that within the art world we were always talking about spirals but basically no body knows what they're really talking about. So I started experimenting making spirals at the same time that I was starting into the inflating thing.

M: Just because of Smithson, because he'd done the Spiral Jetty.

B: Well the drawing was because of Smithson. I was thinking about Bob and thinking about what he did and thought "Well I'll draw a spiral" It was like five am in the morning with the sun rising. I'll draw a spiral (laughing) it was nothing more.

M: Then you realized how little you know.

B: (Laughing) I knew nothing. This was about 1973 or 1974 I realized I think at the time I did my thesis show that a lot of the things I had made were circular discs. Round discs 54 inches in diameter was the basic size due to the width of the vinyl. I also noticed that I was interested in the wholeness, that one, the whole thing. So right from the very beginning there was the notion that the spiral was cut from the circle.

M: What do you mean? There is this notion that the spiral is cut from the circle?

B: Well of course it is. If you want to make an Archimedean spiral you cut from the center and bring it out and at the end you have used up the circle. I did a number of things

that were based on an Archimedean spiral - it's the easiest one. I was still involved with this notion of experiencing things. So I made equiangular spirals that you can get into but never bothered to exhibit them because they were just too damn clumsy. Then I realized that you could start playing with these by cutting supporting spacers and then assembling the four pieces which enabled me to make huge pieces. I started to make really really huge pieces. Talk about the seat of your pants; I had no idea where they would go. Ted was working at Battelle and at the time they had empty space down in the basement where I would go and blow them up - pieces ten feet high and twenty or thirty feet long. The first lot barely stood up (laughing) the second lot wouldn't stay up at all so I had to cut them in half. I got better and better at it and then I sort of reached the point where I really liked these things Michael I like them because they're alive like The Queen that's out there right now. The blower is a darn nuisance because its noisy but it's moving.

M: Yes, yes that's right!

B: It's moving all the time so you think this kind of sculpture has some energy to it. I love the bronzes, but.....

M: They're static?

B: They're static you have to walk around them to get a sense of their wholeness. In regard to the inflatables people ask why I don't you show them blowing up? That was not my interest; my interest was in this thing that has this life sense to it. So I tried all variations that I could on the spiral. I had one that looked sort of like DNA and so on and then I came to a dead end -, an absolute dead end! One day I was sitting over in the Circle restaurant, which was my greasy spoon next door - it's no longer there -. I drew a Ying-Yang. Normally I would have cut a hole in the circle and worked a spiral from there but I drew this Ying-Yang shape and thought well, maybe I can get a couple of forms out of that. That just exploded for the way in which I was working could theoretically generate an infinite number of closely related shapes. Very quickly I learned I had to control it by having certain points that could be matched up, working again from the seat of my pants I mucked around and kept making these things.....

M: So just so people understand in one case you might cut two copies of a spiral...

B: Yes.

M: .. the simplest one would then be to put them directly on top of each other seal the edges then blow it up.

B: Yeah, then you have a flat shape on the floor that could be the shape of a spiral. But fortunately no, no you can never do that. You always screw it up, there's always a displacement. It's the displacement that makes it move.

M : But you skew these two identical things in varying degrees which creates a whole series of formations?

B: No, no!

M: Well unexpected...

B: No, no what happens is it projects the spiral into space.

M: Ah okay

B: It's exactly the same as what happens with colliding elementary particles something which I showed as part of an exhibition in Kiev, Ukraine. Ted's friend, Steve St Laurent was in charge of the Bubble Chamber at Stanford where they were colliding atoms the result of which was revealed in photographs. As atoms collide a particle comes off and goes spiraling off. The spiral which occurs is dependent on the way the collision occurs. That's certainly what happens in my sculpture. To make the pieces stand I insert a spacer but that doesn't radically affect the geometry just makes them so you can stand them up. I worked a lot with large spiraling forms, but I really didn't get all that far with them, I didn't get to the point where I understood I was making a kind of universe. I just made these big things and got possibilities so show them downtown [Columbus Art Festival 1974] and so on. Then I started on these Ying-Yang derived shapes, which turned out to have, well in the end there were sixty distinct shapes. I learned an enormous amount from this series I learned a great deal about geometry I learned about symmetry I learned about structure because in the end it was a whole field of things. It took over. After a while it wasn't me doing it; it was telling me what to do. You got to try this you got to try this you got to try that. I was doing that when I was running that gallery. It was very exciting, but at the same time there was a great deal of mechanical stuff that was associated with it. You did this and thought well maybe I should do it like that and so you could be thinking of something else at the same time, which was one of my problems. Eventually I exhibited them at Marjorie Tallalay's New Gallery and when it came time to hang them I realized I didn't know which way to put them up. In my studio I could group them coherently in several different ways and it was hard to choose for this exhibition. After the exhibition I contacted Phil Huneke, a Professor of Mathematics at OSU interested in Topology and he got really excited by them because it was relevant to some of the things he was thinking about. He worked with me and between the two of us we sorted these out and he did a paper on "Tessellations of a Sphere" for a mathematics conference in Seattle. I proceeded to work through and sort them out in ways that satisfied me and satisfied him. What was interesting about that the collaboration - if that's what you could call it - is that we weren't thinking of the same things. One day when we were in the gallery I said that we had to be sure we were talking about the same thing. So he put his cards on my pieces. The fact is that we were speaking in our different languages mine the physical his mathematical. This exercise satisfied us that we were at least talking about the same things. On this day the sun was shining in the in the studio and they looked absolutely beautiful! We got into the elevator and I said "Just look at that, how beautiful these forms are, so clear you can hardly see them". He said something like "Ah yeah, I suppose so." (Laughing) It was really funny, it was really really funny! I mean he thought it was beautiful, but the beautiful was in his head. But I managed in the

end to sort these out in such a way that you could hang all these sixty different pieces so that they related to each other in every direction. Sometime - it's probably not going to be me - somebody could put them up into a Universe of forms. What it taught me was how forms changed and how they're related. I could see families of forms in fact called them my family. I could just see how biology worked I can't do it in the language of biology but I sure can certainly do it in the language of sculpture. I could see how evolution happens.

Okay I do those and another series called Con(jug)ates when I suddenly realized these darn things were all spirals (laughing) it never occurred to me before, but these were all spirals so I backed back into spirals. But I also realized that they were closed sets. Especially the Con(jug)ates which developed from two same shaped pieces that revolved around each other until you came to the beginning again and repeated. You could adjust using symmetrical or asymmetrical matches but all were essentially a closed set. I thought okay that's fine and then for some reason or other I decided to start just sewing annuli together. I took annuli from the fifty four inch diameter disc and put them together so that they were congruent i.e. both going in the same direction and I started sewing. This thing got bigger and bigger and bigger and bigger. I could envisage it going down the elevator out of the building (laughing) and down the river. It was just so exciting it was so simply done, but really exciting. I realized I had an open surface like an open universe just going and going and going. Where do you go from there? Well it was an asymptotic shape and when it got down to the shape that was the diameter of the original annuli it began to frill. I thought "yeah a universe could do this and it could do this and finally it would dissipate" So I called it "Open Universe." Then I thought "Well what if I make mirror matches of these things and just shift them a little bit in the way that the bigger pieces were shifted?" "And so I did that and found this marvelous situation whereby you can mirror match annuli that are barely different in diameter so that they start to spin into a helix... As you continue the displacement enlarges so that you end up with another open surface. Great. Then as I'd always been messing around with symmetrical matches wondered what happens if you make them asymmetrical? The same thing happens although somewhat more varied so you start off with a helix which segues into an undulating surface. You keep going, but eventually .....

M: Explode?

B: Yeah, like an explosion! God it was really good. I did a whole series and showed them at Berthas in an exhibition entitled Eccentric Progressions. Then "Okay done that can't think of anything else to do".

M: When was this?

B: Ah, 1980s I think I showed the Eccentric Progressions in 1982 or 83 it was after I had left the university. She was very nice to me she gave me several exhibitions one year after another just to keep me occupied I think. I was planning to do an exhibition out on Long Island.

M: At Islip?

B: At Islip, yes. At that time I had gone back to the Anolatabulata because I could see many of those shapes had anthropomorphic overtones. Some of them looked like penises some of them looked like body parts I thought well I should play with this a little bit. I did a whole series of things called God's Games. I got fish out of them, insects, birds and such. I was really interested in this anthropomorphic thing but soon realized that the system was too clumsy for the differentiation that I wanted. You could do your Ying-Yang and then you could switch it over so it was displaced. You could add little wiggles to it all still within this concept, but it was really too clumsy. It just got out of hand I suppose I could have used fabric which would have been easier to manage but the whole thing pretty much came to an end.

### **Matriarchal Series.**

The other problem is that no-one seems to like inflatables; they think they're gorgeous, but they're afraid of them which is stupid. Some of the big pieces could be bought by corporations to put up in their lobbies for short periods of time for after 3 months everyone stops looking at art work. After three months roll it up, stick it in a Christmas storage box and leave it there bringing it out a year later for everybody to love again. You know what arts like - these things on the walls - you stop looking at them after about three months but folks don't seem to get it that way. So I thought maybe I should get back to this bronze thing, I'll make some things that are permanent. I'll make some bronzes, so I started with an inflatable and then covered them. For Islip I had covered them with resin. It was not long after I had left the university, not long after I found that I was not the only child. In fact my mother had had four children and that I had a sister etc so I was feeling pretty fragile and subconsciously made these forms that were very very fragile; just a thin covering of resin over the inflated form. As most of those got broken I thought I'd make others out of bronze and did. While I was putting plaster on the shapes, some of my newly found family history occupied my mind - whalers - Bishops of London - sisters and so on - the whole a really interesting story all in itself - I looked at the pieces I had and said that one is my great grandmother, Emma Royal, and there's my grandmother, Annie and there's my mother, Flo, so this ones my daughter, Jane. . Previously I had made a resin one that was me. I then finished the series by making my grand daughter, Emma, so I have six or seven that have become the "Matriarchal Series."

M: Laughing

B: I realized that the whole of the Anolatabulata set had been about making a family and once I found out I had a family I wasn't (laughing) that interested in it anymore. It was (laughing) not of much use once you got the gist of it and of course in a sense this applied to the universe work as well. But I still use this work to interpret what's going on in the scientific world. Invitations to Art and Science conferences were really because they really like the geometric aspect not the Life Force concept. I only went to two conferences, as most of the presentations bored me, I just don't find computer work

interesting. I'm a hands on artist not one of those people. I would be introduced as this person with this essentially very interesting geometric work but I would insist that in the field of mathematics I should be classed as a primitive, comparing myself to primitive artists. If somebody says  $A + B = \text{something}$  I just freeze, my stomach goes cold. If you mention anything to do with algebra just forget it (laughing); don't know anything about it; I'm an absolute primitive. My notion of geometry is entirely physical. I learned a lot I made some notes I don't know if I can tell you anything else

Now what I do in the New Zealand is make ceramics and draw. In making these pieces I use ideas that have developed over time. Certainly what I thought I was doing throughout the 70's and 80's and beyond was introducing to sculpture a new way of looking at and making shapes, but nobody noticed that. I was always out of phase. (Laughing) when I was doing this very organic stuff nobody was doing that now they're doing all this work with organic reference but its all totally primitive as compared to mine even though my ideas are a part of it.. I think and I thought that my approach was an interesting way to look at sculpture and it was an interesting way of analyzing sculpture. Certainly helped me when I started writing about art the fact that had I learned how to look at it this way. That's all I know!

M: When you talk about families the thing that came to mind is that scientists organize things into families?

B: Yes! Of course everybody does it's to create structures, mental or otherwise.

M: You've always been really good at looking - for instance while you were curating - looking at the underlying activity. Going into somebody's exhibition and saying so this person takes this premise and working with these two materials in this way this is what flows from it. Once one comes to that conclusion then there's potentially not any reason to do that anymore. It could be why a lot of artists aren't critical because if they understood what they were doing they might stop doing art. (Laughing)

B: Well I think that was Duchamp's problem. He was smart, knew exactly what he was doing and he had to stop. How could you keep on doing it? That was absolutely his problem as one of the artists at his time who really understood the physics of the time. When physics was just blowing its mind and he understood it. What's that piece of his? [Tu m' 1918] It's a piece that clearly shows that he was able to see what was going on and having worked it out he'd simply illustrate. Part of the trouble with my work is this. See that piece out there? I was interested in this whole idea whereby if you take the same elements and you combine them differently or you take different elements and combine them you can end up with the same shape. This is one of the problems that interest biologists. But biologists beat me to it. They got their answer and I was till messing around with that (laughing) because it was a clumsy method... When you begin to see it that way you probably don't want to do it. Now my problem now is that what I always wanted to be was an abstract expressionist - to just stick it out there. So what I try to do in the studio is not to have any preconceptions but simply go down there just do something. It doesn't always work out that way somehow your experience always gets in



the way (laughing.)

## **Color and Space**

M: For the long while you have been painting on clear vinyl inflatable structures.

B: Back in 1983

M: In 83 so that's twenty years and if you consider the ideas of painting on a non- planar surface there's a large handful of artists looking now at this zone that exists between painting and sculpture.

B: That's right

M: Whether it's Stella who is projecting painting into space....

B: Oh he's moved on

M: ..or sculptors who are taking a three dimensional surface and painting on it. In that general arena what do you think you're doing that no one else is doing?

B: Well I have a problem and that is that I have become allergic to the vinyl which gives off nasty vapors. When I first started painting on clear vinyl it was to make a mark that would tell me what had been going on - a way of analyzing it when it was finished. I used a circle that was divided into red, orange, yellow, green, blue, violet areas. Within those areas I would break it up again. So you could see how far you had moved one side in relation to the other. Color became a measurement system which I used throughout most of the colored sculpture. But what got me really excited in the end was hanging the color. I would love to just hang color in the air -like throwing the paint up in the air and the clear vinyl was the closest I ever got to that; light as color. The self portrait I did about two or three years ago was a bit like that; the color was just there. I have a lot of paintings stored done several years ago. I can still paint on the flat vinyl; it doesn't kill me because I'm not handling it much. I can roll it out, air it out, paint on it and hang it up and that's not bad for me. But I don't like it very much because it's flat. Although you can hang several surfaces one after the other and so get three dimensions that's not the same thing as sculpture. But painting on the vinyl is just so seductive as it's possible to paint on both sides of the vinyl after which you can see the spaces in between the paint. You're essentially hanging the painting the air. Really fundamentally it's all about light! Our lives are infused by light there's nothing if there's not light. Now I'm just painting on an opaque surface and inflating it. Frankly Michael I have no idea where that's going, I have no idea so maybe that's a good thing because every time I have done something that's really interesting I haven't known where it's going. All in all I'm doing three things: I'm doing ceramics, I'm doing just ordinary drawing, I love to draw rocks and craggy landscape using pastel. The method is to just get out there and do it!

M: Right, right

B: I'm getting better at putting paint onto opaque sculptural surfaces. The best one I ever did was when I inflated it and then painted it but that's not easy to do. When it's inflated it's not solid. I suppose you could spray but that's not for me. I'm very physical

M: Right, right

B: You have to do them flat. That one we can see in the gallery was painted on the table before it was inflated. As I said I don't know where it's going I really don't know where it's going but at least is kind of fun and I can whack the paint around (laugh.) It's color. You know I think sometimes as artists the field expects us to keep moving and keep doing new things, but I think it's likely that as individuals we're embedded in an attitude - in a time. Perhaps my best work was the Anolatabulata and the Con(jug)ates and the Universe work. That is so far, but I have another twenty years yet.

M: Well I think the thing that's interesting is you can potentially compare your work to things that are coming out of other people's studios, but it's pretty clear to me that you don't feel that you are repeating something that someone else has done. That's there something that is new, something that is uncharted, even though it's still evolving.

B: Yeah that's true! When I go and look at other people's work I'm less and less interested because I don't find too much formal invention. I like formal invention - perhaps there's not much to invent anymore but I doubt that. It's important that what I was doing, among other things, was inventing new shapes and a new way to make shapes, something no-one else was doing.

M: Right, right

B: I found it exciting, I didn't know where it was going and didn't care whether it fit into anyone else's systems. I think having grown up on this farm all these years ago I learned to develop my own methods of thinking. I think I'm an independent thinker because I grew up that way!

M: Right, right - right

B: Often I'd say to myself I'll just give up on this art stuff. I'm not going to do it anymore (laughing) and I don't do as much as I did. I'm 74 next birthday I'm energetic, but I don't have as much energy so don't do as much. There are other responsibilities, a family, two houses, a garden all those things.

M: Hanging color in the air suspending color in the air. There are ways that people have done that for instance projecting color into a smoky situation. Or high powered lasers that are visible because of the contaminants in the air. But those are monochromatic generally.

B: Yeah it's all very technical too.

M: It's overly technical. So in a way the closest relative to this is maybe the stained glass from the Middle Ages.

B: Yeah!

M: Except that for those though color is hanging in space, it's in a plane. But here you're actually putting color into a sculptural space.

B: Yes, it's interesting! There's a piece up there now that's acrylic on clear vinyl – thick with acrylic paint. That piece works. But right back in the beginning I was painting just a little bit on some of the forms and that didn't work. You have to have a lot of color, you can't just space it like flowers in a garden placed every six inches or so. You really have to put a lot of color out there. It could be said that if you have to do that you might as well do it on a white surface - that's fine. However when you do it on a clear surface light comes in from both directions when you carefully apply the color. Of course the ideal thing on the vinyl would be to paint with vinyl paint but that almost killed me in the 80s as my liver packed up in such a way that physician was quite sure I was an alcoholic. It was in fact due to cleaning up the vinyl paint with lacquer thinner. But vinyl paint on clear vinyl is quite beautiful because the light shines right through it – it is quite fabulous. However what I'm doing now is not too bad, if you're careful. I'm learning; I didn't train as a painter so I suppose that's partly why I'm doing it as part of the challenge is figuring out a way to do it!

M: Right, right. Somehow we're all influenced by this collective awareness that we have that solid things aren't solid, they're solid but there's more space empty space in a wall than there's actual stuff.

B: And neutrinos are zapping through us the whole time.

M: Right and so in a way an opaque surface is kind of a ruse. It's opaque but on another level it's not opaque. A century and a half ago there was no such awareness. It's not as though one is trying - you're not trying to do art that illustrates that - it's just that that's a body of thought that's sort of in the air right now We are aware that's there is an electromagnetic spectrum only part of which we can see. There's this whole series of related forces that are holding things together in the form of a house lets say. Underneath maybe this hanging color in the air is in a way or simultaneously acknowledging that awareness.

B: Could be I don't know

M: Without trying to illustrate you know?

B: No, no I know what you mean. One of the things that always bothered me when I was curating and bothered me when people looked at my own art was that - I think this changed recently, but until about ten or fifteen years ago critics seemed totally unaware

of the world around them in terms of biology and physics and chemistry. This is not to say I know much either but I do read the paper everyday and I have my husband explain some things to me.

It used to make me sick I put things out there and people wouldn't see it area of relevance not that I ever do anything that illustrates I'm not interested in that. I'm not at all interested in that!

M: Right

B: I could see the work I was doing had a relevance to the contemporary milieu in which we lived though by and large professional people couldn't. However I think it's improving I don't know if it's education - what kids are learning at school. I was talking to Gary Schwindler just a few days ago. He said that a PhD is being re-introduced into the Visual Arts. He didn't give a because but the idea is that the students should actually get a degree in something else before they came into art. Maybe that has something to do with the fact that there's so much vacuous art out there right now. The field beginning to realize that we have to train people or get something in their heads that they can work with. Maybe, I don't really know.

M: As you've been talking we just have in our gallery a number of Buckminster Fuller projects. Fuller and his ideas have been on my mind for thirty years or more. He's said a few things that kind of relate this idea of not illustrating and he talked about for him the first thing is that the universe is a continuing mystery. Probably because it's so large that we can't really fathom the whole.

B: Yeah there's probably more than one of them too

M: More than one mystery and related to the notion of this PhD in art. He talked about somebody who is a generalist at a certain point taking on an omni directional halo.

B: Laughing

M: As one might see as being necessary to be an artist. You were talking earlier about Duchamp really understanding the physics of his time. I wonder if he really understood it or he had a feeling for it.

B: Probably a feeling for it

M: A feeling for it?

B: Yeah, yeah

M: Which, I think brings me back to this idea that there's so much in the air right now, much discussion about the nature of matter

B: Yes.

M: And all that you have a feeling for that so you find yourself interested in hanging color in the air. And perhaps to do a dance with the larger dialogue that's happening.

B: I don't know about that I know that ...

M: You don't think so?

B: .... I don't know. I really don't know. I think, as I said right in the beginning, I sort of follow my nose

M: Laughing.

B: I do something and after a while I find oh this looks as it might relate to this or it might relate to this. I do my best to live in the world to a certain extent, but I don't live in the art world as such.

M: Right right

B: I go to see shows but I don't hang out a lot. We really do have a busy life and the fact that we live for four months in New Zealand now makes it so that we live two busy lives. I can do what I can do (laughing) I can't do any more than that.  
I think we're done.