

INTERVIEW WITH JUDITH GODWIN

Q: When and how did your interest in painting first begin?

A: It didn't happen all at once, you know. I've always been interested in art as long as I can remember. I was always attracted towards what I considered beautiful objects--pebbles, rocks, pieces of wood. I would pick them up and polish them. I often found shells on the beach, and I made things out of twigs, pieces of wood, and stones. When I was a child I traveled with my mother and father to old homes in Virginia. I became interested in architecture through my father. My mother made magnificent, gigantic flower arrangements. At about twelve years of age, I was given a violin to play, and took lessons. I played the clarinet in school. So you see, I had enthusiasm for many art forms. At this time also, I began to draw every-day objects--flowers, people, animals, anything. Then I started to paint. I can't remember when it was. I had no lessons--I did it because I wanted to. I don't think I talked very much as a child--just looked and listened.

Q: At what point did you finally decide to become a professional painter?

A: It was a gradual realization that this was what I wanted to do in life. So I left Mary Baldwin, where I had been going to college, and went to RPI in Richmond--that's the Richmond Professional Institute of the College of William and Mary. It was the right decision. Of course, I went in the art department, where I had excellent teachers--especially Jewett Campbell, Theresa Pollock, and Maurice Bonds. I enjoyed the company of the other students--it was ^htrilling to be with like-minded people.

I felt the same about the drama students, especially as I thought that I might at some time like to do sets for stage productions. My deep interest in theatre and dance had begun at Mary Baldwin where I had seen Martha Graham dance. At a reception after her performance, we talked at some length. Although she knew I wanted to be a painter, she suggested I might like to study at her school in New York. I didn't study with her, but we continued our discussion in New York. It was the movement in dance that was the important thing to me, and I thought of it in relation to my painting. I still feel a bond between painting and the dance.

Q: Are you an Abstract Expressionist painter?

A: It's difficult to be precise about that. I began painting people and animals at the age of twelve with no formal lessons. Then at Mary Baldwin we drew from plaster casts, went out with sketching classes, and painted landscapes and street scenes. When I transferred to RPI, we studied anatomy, design, silkscreen, etching, sculpture, and so on. During this time my work was "semi-abstract." I got my BFA in 1953, and shortly after came to New York where I studied at the Art Students League with Will Barnet, Harry Sternberg, and Vaclav Vytlacil. The following summer I studied with Hans Hofmann in Provincetown. By this time I suppose I could best express my feelings about the world and myself by being completely abstract. I assimilated Abstract Expressionism--and it gave back to me. It became a part of me--an interaction. My painting became both ordered and chaotic--like the world around us in fact! Painting techniques and style nearly always change as one grows, and I want to and will remain open for growth in other artistic forms. I suppose I have a more romantic, lyrical feeling in my work now.

Q: Do you try to change your technique or style?

A: No, it is involuntary. Painting is the medium through which I think and feel, and I can express myself no other way. I need painting. I feel very unhappy for people who have not realized their medium of expression--for people who are not involved in an art, or who cannot receive from art. It is not necessary for everybody to be an artist, but it makes life much richer if one can respond to art. There are many people who miss so much.

Q: What happened in Provincetown?

A: I loved it. In those days it was wonderful for an artist. In the late afternoons, Hans Hofmann and I used to walk our dogs together on the beach and talk. He offered me one of his paintings for \$250, and I turned it down because I didn't have \$250!! Well, anyway, Hans Hofmann had a wonderful house--the floors were red and blue and green, and the walls white. The stair rises and treads were painted a bright color too. I got to know Miz, Hans Hofmann's wife, and she was very gracious to me. She found me an apartment and checked the gas stove so I wouldn't blow myself up! During that summer, Marisol and Myron Stout were there too, as well as all the perennial students. Hans Hofmann was probably the best teacher of Abstract Expressionism I had. He is to painting what Graham is to the dance. I liked him personally and enjoyed the company of him and his wife. After Provincetown, I came back to study with him again in New York ~~and~~ 8th Street in the Village.

Q: Do you like the Village?

A: Yes. I used to have a studio on Jane Street, and would often go to the Cedar ~~Street~~ Bar with friends. There I met and talked with Franz Kline,

Willem de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock. I was young and impressionable, and although I was fascinated to be in such company, I was also rather uncomfortable. On one occasion I drove Jackson Pollock home with another friend, because we were afraid he couldn't make it alone! I also used to go to the White Horse Tavern to sit and talk.

Q: In what way did Hans Hofmann influence your painting?

A: He made me feel freer, more expansive, more daring, and he certainly made me unafraid to use more color. His school was a good discipline. As every Hans Hofmann student knows, he would often take a drawing from a student's easel and tear it in half! He would then demonstrate how the work could be improved. As well as the influence Hans Hofmann's training had on my work, I think it is also possible perhaps to detect influences reminiscent of the work of Kenzo Okada in my painting. For example, a growing sense of order, often a landscape theme, a resemblance to his use of washes and paint.

Q: Are your paintings affected by your personal experiences?

A: Yes, of course. All my paintings are personal in the sense that I paint a feeling or an abstraction within a space that I myself define. Painting is extension of myself--a message from my subconscious, so to speak. If I can communicate with someone, all the better. I want to emphasize what is important to me by painting the image of my feelings on canvas--to accept my feelings honestly, and not falsify. It is a matter of conveying an emotional truth.

Q: What were your feelings about the trends in art of the 60's, such as Pop and Op and so on?

A: When Pop Art came, and all the others, I had had many shows, and in New York had shown at the Stable Gallery and Betty Parsons Section Eleven Gallery, and felt I was getting into my stride. I was very unhappy about the rapid changes in art trends, and felt people subscribed to these changes in order to keep up with each other--partly because they liked it (it was something new), and partly because "new" meant more business. Many artists I know who had worked so hard and so long stopped going to galleries and openings. At this time, too, I saw several of my friends actually frightened by the new trends and, whether deliberately or not, begin in their painting to show tendencies toward whatever the new trend was. Often it didn't work, and they would go back to what they knew how to do best. I believe firmly that one must be true to one's own art, which is one's self.

Like many others, I had been working for years. When I saw how the art scene was changing, I became very disenchanted, and I could not force a change in myself by yielding to the sudden swing to other tastes. In this state of disillusionment I felt the real need to leave the scene. I found a studio in Connecticut with lots of trees and a brook, and began working hard. I moved rocks, built stone walls and gardens. I discovered for the first time both the pleasure and the excruciating pain of my encounter with physical weight. I actually pulled rocks and heavy stones with chains and a small tractor, and used a 6-ft. iron crowbar. I rebuilt part of the studio, which had been a barn, and moved heavy timbers.

Q: Wasn't all this too hard for you?

A: Yes! I've had back trouble ever since. But, not only that, I was also apprenticed to a plasterer, a carpenter, and a mason! I believe that craftsmanship is an important part of painting. When I first started painting, I sized and primed my own canvas and made my own stretchers. I have a great rapport with men who work with their hands, because theirs is also a part of the craft that is associated with painting. I felt very complimented to be included and accepted by them. That is the way I learned my craft--from the beginning--as many others did.

Q: How did these experiences relate to your painting?

A: Well, these experiences, often involving a good deal of physical strength, seemed a fulfilment of my childhood interest in the "weight" of nature--a graduation from twigs and stones to timber and rocks! A natural interest had returned. My paintings today have a certain relationship to structural things, and often have a weight to them that perhaps they would not have, had I not actually been involved in physical effort. In a recent painting there is a pronounced structural and architectural quality. I often feel as I stand before a canvas what I felt when I put my arms round a tree a long time ago and felt its great strength--the feeling of exerting force without moving. Painting is often a great physical force.

Q: Do you always have this feeling for strength when you paint?

A: No, but I am an Action painter. I move around quite a bit. I don't sit down and paint. The main gesture, the main thrust, that begins the painting is often made quickly, and sometimes brutally. I guess it is

impulsive, but I like the way of the gesture. However, I usually have a direction which I have thought about beforehand.

Q: Then you usually have a pretty clear idea of what you are going to do?

A: Quite often I do. If I have been thinking of something in particular, or have images that have been flitting back and forth, I recall those images and begin to paint them. However, I frequently change the painted images because, after beginning to work, I find that I know something I did not originally have in mind. For instance, I recall not only something I may have seen or felt, but also something I have touched. The sense of the feel of things is an important one for me. Occasionally I make preliminary sketches beforehand, and experiment with color, and then I transfer, or combine, or eliminate.

Q: What about color?

A: My color is changing. My early paintings--early 50's--were much warmer in color than those of the late 50's and 60's which were predominantly black, blue, brown, and white. I felt that black should be the color of the bold stroke. My pronouncements were bold and my strokes were black. I seem to have reached the age where I am more open about things--religion, my affection for people, the protection of animals and our environment, and I am not hesitant to express these sentiments any more. Without realizing it, my palette has changed as I have changed. I use warmer colors--more subtle colors.

Q: Were there any other influences during your period away from New York?

A: Yes, I traveled. I refreshed myself by seeing all the old masters--in France, in Italy, in Spain, and all round the world. I was particularly

excited to see the original El Greco's and Goya's. At this time too, I was and still am a very close friend of Kenzo Okada, and knew and admired the work of James Brooks and Clyfford Still. In the late 50's and 60's, everybody seemed to be talking about painting. I think one reason I enjoyed being with the Okadas was because we didn't talk so much--we mostly just felt.....of course, this may have been due to the fact that Kenzo and Kimi Okada spoke very little English!

Q: When did you return to New York?

A: I actually returned from the country in 1974. I began to feel ready for another show. I have my same studio in a house that once belonged to Franz Kline.

Q: You said earlier that your work is evolving in style. Do you feel you belong to a specific movement or trend in art?

A: No, not really. I don't like categories in anything--they tie you down and inhibit growth by fencing you in. An old friend of mine, Ward Jackson, said something the other day when he was asked to describe my painting; he said my work employed free form gestural symbols of a romantic expressionism.

Q: What are the present tendencies in your work toward a different style?

A: I can't say. But I do know that there are two elements appearing in my painting now that are more pronounced than before--one is spiritual and the other is architectural. Perhaps my paintings are more ordered than before. Anyway, that is the feeling in my life right now, and it seems to manifest itself in my work.

Q: What do you think makes a good painting?

A: Quality, integrity, discipline. As far as my own work is concerned other things like gesture, weight, strength are also important--and a passion for painting. I remember from my schooldays a quotation from Meister Eckhart which answers the question completely: "If you seek the kernel, then you must break the shell. And if you would know the nature of reality, you must destroy the appearance, and the further you go beyond appearance, the nearer you will be to the essence."

Interviewed by: Joyce E. Davis