

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with James Brooks by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

FEMALE 1

The interviewer is Louise Averill Svendsen, who graduated from Wellesley College, and received her MA and PhD in history of art from Yale University. She's taught at Duke University, Goucher College, and the American University in Washington, DC, and has served on the staff of the Metropolitan Museum and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Since 1966, she's been curator of New York's Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum. Dr. Svendsen.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

James Brooks, a close friend of Jackson Pollock, Guston, de Kooning, and others of the world's best known abstract expressionists, holds a secure place in the annals of American art history. He has a vast studio, and a small house in a secluded woodland in Springs, Long Island, about [01:00] 100 miles from New York City. I interviewed him there. James Brooks, you belong to the school categorized in history books as abstract expressionism, but let's disregard those pigeonholes at the moment, and start back in your very earliest beginnings. You were born in 1906, as I remember, in St. Louis. But you didn't really grow up in St. Louis, did you?

JAMES BROOKS

No. My father was a traveling salesman for the [Combination?] Soda Fountain Company, when there were soda fountains in all the drug stores. And so, he got different territories at various times, and so, we lived through the Middle West.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You probably were most consciously settled for a length of period in Texas. Whereabouts?

JAMES BROOKS

Well, in Dallas. We went there when I was 9 or 11, I don't know which, 11, I believe. And so, I went to — finished grade school, went to high school, and then started [02:00] into Southern Methodist University, and went there just a year and a half, and then came to New York, yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Studied privately? Before you went to New York?

JAMES BROOKS

Yes. Well, I studied a little with Martha Simpkins, who lived near us in Dallas. Because she had studied with William Merritt Chase, and she painted in the real John Singer Sargent, or Chase tradition, quite nicely. Then, I don't know whether it was before that or after that, I went to the newly formed Dallas Art Institute, and studied there for about a year, I suppose, with [James A. Waddell?], who taught me drawing.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Then you went to the (inaudible) [Students?] (inaudible).

JAMES BROOKS

Tried to get into Bridgeman's class, and (inaudible) I couldn't. Didn't realize until later how lucky I'd been. You know, got into Nick [Lidey's?] class, which I liked pretty well.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

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But he was one of the great teachers (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

JAMES BROOKS

Very good, yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What did you do in New York when you went to the League? How did you support yourself?

JAMES BROOKS

I did lettering, I'd done lettering since I was about 14 or 15. I'd worked at Woolworth's after school in Dallas, and I did [03:00] [show?] cards. And I got to be a pretty good brush lettering [man?].

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

So you knew when you went to New York, you had a craft.

JAMES BROOKS

Yes, I got a job doing pen lettering, and — which was a lucrative profession, and by the time the Depression came, 1929, '30, and '31, and so forth, I was making good money.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

So you really hadn't done easel pictures much, up to that point.

JAMES BROOKS

That's all I had done, when I painted. But, I had been mostly in school at night at that time, and so I hadn't produced much painting yet.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

After you finished studying, and reached the end of the '20s, and into the '30s, when the Depression arrived, how did you support yourself?

JAMES BROOKS

Well, I was doing pretty well with the lettering, I started to take more time off, [ended by?] taking a half a year, each year, and driving across the country, and sketching. That was the time of regionalism in art, pretty much. And going back to the grassroots and so forth. So then, a friend of mine, Bert Goodman and I, rented a loft on 17th Street, and we started [04:00] — [Mike Derner's?] book on techniques had just come out, so we got it, and we started experimenting, because we both wanted to do mural work. There's a Mexican mural school, (inaudible) done well. And so, we did that for a while, there was a competition happening around that time for a big mural for the Hampstead post office in New York City. And so, I did sketches for that. And one of —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

This is WPA?

JAMES BROOKS

No, this wasn't WPA.

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LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Yet.

JAMES BROOKS

The contest for this mural was the Section of Fine Arts in Washington. That existed at the same time as WPA, but was separate from, I believe. So, I won that, but because it was an important competition, they had expected it to be won by a well known painter, they were [frightened?]. So, they didn't give me the job. I felt very relieved, because I felt good about winning, but it was too much work for a man of my experience. [Yeah, as a compensation?], they later gave me a small job at Little Falls, New Jersey.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Then came the big [05:00] WPA assignment?

JAMES BROOKS

Yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

People, of course, of our generation, remember the federally funded WPA, or the Works Progress Administration, which rescued creative people during the Depression by setting up various programs. There were different divisions for the theater, music, and the visual arts. Both easel painting and mural projects. And those enrolled were given a fairly small but regular stipend, in exchange for their contribution directly to the public. Concerts, performances, paintings, and public buildings, and so on. And many artists, like you Mr. Brooks, were on the WPA during this period.

JAMES BROOKS

Yes, I worked on the La Guardia job for about four years, it was 235 feet by 12 feet, 3 inches, if I remember. Banded the whole lobby, the Marine building. And that was an enormous mural. And so, to make the sketches, and then, [06:00] cartoons were set up in a rough style from my sketches at a wharf, or pier they had. Then, I would redraw those, I had a model that would come every night, and I would paint during the day at the airport, and then weekends I would kind of sketch a little ahead. So I was very busy for almost four years.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Tremendous project.

JAMES BROOKS

And I couldn't get any assistants that really were very competent painters, and so I had to do the whole painting myself, so there I was, you know?

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Was this directly on the wall, or on canvas, affixed to the wall?

JAMES BROOKS

Directly on the wall, you see, they put linen on the wall with white linen, and [D'Amour?] I believe it was, or [Mastik?], and then [Jesso?] that, several coats of [Jesso?], and I painted on that with an emulsion, which the project made for me.

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LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What was the subject?

JAMES BROOKS

The subject was flight.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Social realist, or abstract?

JAMES BROOKS

Well it was — parts of it were abstract, I'd been very interested in abstract art before that, and like the rest of the artists, [07:00] we were very close to the School of Paris in our influences. I thought I'd be able to combine the Renaissance form, which I'd been studying pretty carefully, with the — what I was really interested in, which was more abstract form. There were parts of the mural where I could use diagrams and old flying machines are projected, unworkable flying machines that had existed since almost the beginning of man, we were trying to fly. So, I made abstract areas of those. And the other, more literal figures, you know, so —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Like Leonardo, and —

JAMES BROOKS

Yes. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

There was one section that had to do with him, and his visions of flight.

JAMES BROOKS

Yes. On the through Wright brothers later on, and so forth. Not a successful combination, I'd say, it wouldn't interest me much now to do a thing like that at all.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

That's true of so many of the WPA project murals, we find. When the war broke out, you went immediately into the Army, United States Army.

JAMES BROOKS

No, I was still working on the mural at La Guardia Airport when one of the [08:00] Pan-American men there said there was a thing that might interest me, which was to go into the training program, to be a flight trainer. I'd never gone —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

In the Air Corps?

JAMES BROOKS

Not in the Air Corps, but separate from that, we were almost civilians. Nevertheless, I took a test, and went into it. I thought it might be a good thing. First I went to Blairstown, New Jersey, and had flight training in a Piper Cub, I was a very poor flyer. And I was either bored, or

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frightened. I didn't like it at all. But nevertheless, I decided I would stick with it, went to secondary in the middle of winter, in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, flying a much better plane, a faster plane, I still remember the feeling of being way up over a snow-covered land, wondering where the airport was. (laughter) But anyway, I had had enough of that finally, and I just quit it, we could quit at anytime. In the Air Corps, I heard if you didn't want to fly, you didn't have to, they didn't want people [09:00] in there who were frightened or such, or — so I went back. Then I was called by the Air Corps for basic training in Atlantic City, which I went through. Then, transferred to the camouflage corps, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

— that, yes.

JAMES BROOKS

Right. Where I just want to relate a funny incident, I think. Where a number of us are [support?], and then a number of us artists got there, and they sent us into Rockefeller Center, a small auditorium. And in this auditorium, it was to be demonstrated how effective some new camouflage suits were to be for jungle fighters. So, we were to produce, against a backdrop, a painting of jungle trees and so forth, you know. And later, brambles and stuff were to be put up for them to crawl through. Anyway, the only people in the auditorium at the time were the captain, who was sitting in the back of the auditorium drinking, I guess. He was a man they called Bird Brain. (laughter) And anyway, we were [10:00] painting this elaborate jungle underbrush up there, and at one time, I drew, right across the whole sky, a big branch, you know, that it needed, I thought. And I stepped back to look at it, and the Bird Brain's voice came from the back of the auditorium, said, "Let's keep those brushes moving." (laughter) I was transferred, finally, to the art section. I should explain what was happening at this time. George Biddle has talked Congress into putting together an art program, not a reportorial thing at all, but to send artists abroad. And in each field, there would be two soldiers who they'd make tech sergeants, and two civilians. And they were to record whatever they could. If they couldn't feel like painting, they didn't have to paint. It was that liberal, you know? That's the way it was put together. Congress didn't like it finally, so they clamped down on it, and threw the artists, threw the soldiers back into the Army. [11:00] But Marshall, who was a very liberal man, seemed to me —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

That was General Marshall?

JAMES BROOKS

General Marshall, who at that time had been split up, and the civilians were taken over by *Life* magazine, but we were sent over as, I don't remember what we were called, but at any rate, we were given many supplies, cameras, and all the paints we could use, and paper, and so forth, and sent to various theaters. And there were two of us, [Jansen?] and I were sent to Egypt to travel throughout that area. And we'd switched from one group to another quite often, because we were on the loose, and whoever could use two tech sergeants could take us. And that was where, when finding a new commanding officer, we would hand him our orders, which said you are permitted to go to secret areas and photograph, sketch, any place you want to, to demand travel to any part of the area you'd like. And then it said, admonition to the artist, and I think this must have been written by Biddle, it said work with the [savagery?] of a Goya, with the romanticism

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of a Delacroix, [12:00] or best of all, follow your own inevitable star. (laughter) These commanding officers would look through this, and look up at us, and they wouldn't know what the hell it meant. Nor did we.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

(laughter) I'm sure they didn't.

JAMES BROOKS

Can you imagine that?

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What sort of results did you have in — with your sketches? Did you paint realistically, as so many — as a *Life* magazine artist (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)?

JAMES BROOKS

Pretty much, yes. Pretty much. I wouldn't have been able to paint the way I wanted to paint all the time anyway, I felt a little responsibility about reportage. Which at that time, we were in a strange position, because we were neither responsible to the head in Cairo, or anybody in Washington. We didn't know where we belonged, we just stacked our work up, and traveled, and did a lot of drawings, and people generally thought when we visited that we were undercover agents, you know, posing as artists. But finally, right at the last, we were transferred to Intelligence, where they could use two tech sergeants. And they were smart enough to find out that we weren't sending our work back home, and we weren't responsible to anybody in Cairo [13:00] for it. So they sent us immediately back.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Back to Washington?

JAMES BROOKS

The company sent me to Camp Dix, and I was to be sent to the Baker School there. Because they couldn't figure out —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What a fate.

JAMES BROOKS

— anything else to do for me. In the meantime, however, I'd gone to see friends who were — old friends from the project, by the way, Eric [Miller?] was in Washington, who was working for OSS then. And Barney, Toby, and Schneider, who were working for [*Yank?*] magazine, and so I had a chance finally to go to work for either one of them. So, I chose Washington as more a vacation, then going back to New York City, where I'd lived. And so, I worked for OSS there, in their art department for a while, where I met my wife. She worked for them, she at the time was in San Francisco, helping set up the United Nations that they did.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Was she at that time a painter, as she is now?

JAMES BROOKS

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Well she had studied painting, and she'd gone to the Yale School of Art, and she was doing artwork for them, but she wasn't painting [14:00] much.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

After you were demobilized, as it were, then you had to decide what to do and a way to go, and you decided New York City?

JAMES BROOKS

Well, that's where I'd lived before, and I knew it was where I wanted to be, of course, and that's where the painting was, and there was no question about that. I just went to Washington because of a — (inaudible) not hit reality too quickly, you know? And reality, of course, was painful, because it was hard to find a place to live, all the houses were full, and so I can stay around with friends and so forth. And also, through the very peculiar process the Army put you through, which is to try to, if possible, negate your individual personality, and individual intent. So that you're an obedient Army man. It does have an impress on you, it puts a veil over your light, it take a while for that to subside.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Readjust?

JAMES BROOKS

Sure. So, I needed a place to work, and met Wallace Harrison, who had classes [15:00] on Seventh Avenue, and offered me his studio if I wanted to use it, he knew I needed one. So, I went up there to paint. He was a very interesting man, on Cubism particularly, you know, which I had done, but not done well, and I had studied a good deal, but he had studied Picasso and Matisse very closely. And was a good painter, too. And so, I used him, and studied with him for a while there, although we were not much different in age, but I did need that kind of base to go back to. And at that time, the galleries had already formed, and things were going pretty well for men who hadn't gone in the Army. I had that time to pick up, because I couldn't start painting right away, I had to almost learn to paint again, as a matter of fact. So I was at a great disadvantage.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Our interview continues on the other side of this cassette. (pause) When you began to paint again, did you paint social realism? [16:00]

JAMES BROOKS

No, no, painted still life, Picasso and [Brockie?] still lives, and such, you know, from the School of Paris kind of thing, which I was primarily interested in. I had tried some social realism in a sense, on the project, you know, but it didn't fit me at all. I felt bound to express something about the social situation, if I could, but I couldn't do it, you know? And in my murals, I didn't do it, either.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

During this period, the first decade or so after the war, you were able to support yourself without taking jobs outside of art, that is, through teaching?

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JAMES BROOKS

Teaching, yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Drawing first at Columbia.

JAMES BROOKS

Yes, (inaudible) was at Columbia, invited me to come and teach drawing one night a week there, which I did. And that was a Godsend. Then, after that, I taught at Pratt Institute, I taught lettering there for a good many years. About twice a week, I guess it was, something like that. After that, [Albert?] invited me to Yale to be the advance [critic?] of [17:00] —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Painting, I hope.

JAMES BROOKS

Painting, yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Not lettering. (laughter)

JAMES BROOKS

That's right, yeah, not lettering. Although I liked lettering a lot, it was exhausting to teach it. But the drawing in lettering is just amazing, some of the most beautiful drawing, I think, in the world has been done. Nevertheless, that wasn't my main interest, of course.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Did you consider it as being helpful as far as discipline's concerned?

JAMES BROOKS

I didn't consider it one way or the other. I just liked it, and used it to make my living with, and I did by teaching it, as well as by doing it for a while. It was a way of getting along. But, I don't know whether it affected my painting particularly or not.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, critics looking at your work over a stretch of years, such as the time you were at Pratt, from '48 to '58, do point out calligraphic forms in your art, or symbols, which I don't think you like the word symbol. But, calligraphic signs which seemed to be letters like W, or E, or X.

JAMES BROOKS

Yes. Yes. I'd never known about that, (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It's not conscious on your part at all.

JAMES BROOKS

Oh no, not at all, no.

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LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It comes rather from the gestural aspects (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

JAMES BROOKS

It comes from a [18:00] gestural thing. My lettering didn't have the gestural thing, actually, if I'd have been a calligrapher, that could be said, I guess. But the lettering I did was closely worked out, and drawn with a fine pen, and outlined, and all that, without that gesture. The gesture came along as perhaps an imitation, some painting I'd seen when I first came back, there was some of it in Gorky, some of it in Pollock, but I don't know exactly where that came from. I'm not sure enough about the Pollock, we were very good friends later on, and when he started doing the drips and things, I did myself start working in about 1947, on very thin Bemis cloth. So that —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I'd like you to talk about your discovery of what some people believe is the invention of stain painting, as we know it today. How did that come about?

JAMES BROOKS

Well, merely that the paint was thin, and the unsized cloth was there, which I worked on, it was cheaper, and a number of us artists who were using it came from the Bemis Bag Company in St. Louis. And we used it [19:00] to put [a meal?], I suppose, [and stuff in?]. And so, I was looking for a way of painting that would make suggestions to me, that I could follow, but were far from cliché. So, I would put down a number of splashes and strokes, and mostly pourings. And then I found that I could work from the back, because some of it came through, and some didn't, and it was a rather broken, formal situation, that I can vent. In other words, it excited me into inventing (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

In other words, it goes back, I suppose, ultimately to the Surrealist theory of the accidental.

JAMES BROOKS

The way I'd put it, I did put it, have put it, and I really believe it, is to create a separate personality facing you, and then to confront that stranger, and gradually talk them into being something else, you know, or talk them into your way of thinking more, but using stimulation of the difference of a person, you know?

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You think of it as a dialogue with one part of yourself?

JAMES BROOKS

I think — I think always, yes. I think that that's very important. At least to my way of thinking, there has to be [20:00] the consideration of the realness of the canvas. And not just a thing that you put yourself down on, but to make discoveries on it, and see what is there, trying to come out? Which I think it's, you're letting it happen, it's important.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

How do you start working, when you're starting a new canvas? To achieve this?

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JAMES BROOKS

Well I start with liquid paints, pretty much. I've been working on black grounds recently, and I'll just a thing acrylic on unsized duck, which does size it at the same time. And then, I like to work over that with thin whites, and then going to color from then on. I would say it's closer to the Venetian technique than anything else, where I had a dark brown, theirs was dark red, of course, and then I scumbled over with white, and then worked over that. That suits my speed of work, which isn't that fast, but I like a lot of unpredictable things, having happened that way to start.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You create your own accidents?

JAMES BROOKS

Yes. [21:00] Yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I noticed on some of your (overlapping dialogue; inaudible) your canvases that maybe drips, in other cases you seem to have scumbled over an area —

JAMES BROOKS

Yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

— or scrubbed an area, do you use tools for that?

JAMES BROOKS

I blot with newspaper, or sometimes when you rub over an area that is still kind of wet with your fingernails, or your hand, it creates lines that way, which is kind of interesting. However, those textures have to be watched pretty closely, so they don't take over. I don't like that at all, I would like the form, kind of speaking in kind of a neutral or a dull way if possible. Because a lot of the generative forces, the accidents, which start your action, have to be taken out. And most of the pretty things in the painting do, most of the interesting things have to be taken out, I think, you know, because anything that's interesting in itself, you don't think they should exist in a painting (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well I see a fundamental structure in all of your canvases. Are you conscious of that?

JAMES BROOKS

I'm conscious, finally, that that's what I want, yes. And I work for that. And yeah, if I work too consciously for it, I can kill it, you know?

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

How do you feel about space? [22:00] There's a very definite spatial feeling in your canvases. It's not, as so many painters do, a flat background, and then flat layers, or planes, built up with that. It seems to be free floating, and yet tied. But limited, but limitless, in a way. How do you feel about it personally? Are you conscious of space as such, or only the forms?

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JAMES BROOKS

No, I'm very interested in what the forms do to space, and the shallow space, or the surface and shallow space, whatever you want to call it. I think that it should exist at the same time. In other words, it's a paradoxical, impossible situation. But that's what makes the density of a painting, I think. The only thing that makes it interesting to me.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

People have called you a lyrical painter. And I think that's my reaction when I look at your work. Do you feel that?

JAMES BROOKS

I don't really know what it means, that there is much conflict, or much —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Oh, I think there's a lot of conflict.

JAMES BROOKS

I don't know what lyrical means, I don't object to the word, but I don't know — can you tell me what you think they mean?

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well it's like [23:00] music, in that it brings, as music does, through the progression of notes, a melody, and this, I think in your painting, through the combination of colors, spaces, shapes, and forms, and say a long curvilinear line which connects, seemingly meandering, but it makes, as a glissando of notes makes the total melody.

JAMES BROOKS

Yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Within that [conversation?]. Do you go along with that?
(laughter)

JAMES BROOKS

I go along with it, certainly. It sounds good. And I don't quite get that either, but I know what you mean, yes. Yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Would you say that you're a decorative painter, as some critics have said you are?

JAMES BROOKS

Oh, I really don't believe I'm a decorative painter, at least I don't like decorative painting. What I think decorative painting is, decorative painting means to me, it's mainly a repeated form, that something's already happened, and can be taken easily for that reason. It doesn't have the shock of newness, or of strangeness about it, which is the frightening, and the important part of good art, I think. So, [24:00] I hope I'm not decorative anyway, that's all. But I feel sufficiently frightened by it myself that I can't see how it could be completely decorative work.

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LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I don't think it is, myself.

JAMES BROOKS

Because I think going into the newness of a form, which we're all trying to do, all the time, trying to create something that is, I put it once, a rendezvous of what you know and what has never happened before. Like Ortega said, the clearest ideas come from shipwrecked people. And I think that the artist is shipwrecked most of the time. He courts disaster, he doesn't know where he is. And to find his way, and it's the unknown, of course, you know, the artist stays, it's where he lives.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Each new canvas then is a new adventure, a new discovery for you.

JAMES BROOKS

Completely new to me, yes. And of course if it dies, it means that it's something I've seen before. And then I abandon it, or put it aside, and repaint it later, perhaps.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You work on more than one canvas at a time, sometimes?

JAMES BROOKS

I do now, yes. [25:00] I didn't used to be able to, I would get stuck on one, and get tied into it, and it wouldn't let me go. But I find that lately, I have been able to do it, which I'm very glad of, because a painting is something that you really have to trick. You have to hit it unawares, and if you have several canvases, you can work on one, then suddenly switch to another, and you can catch things in it that are fresh to you, that it doesn't want to reveal. And you can do things to it, work with it. But otherwise, if you stick with it, I'm afraid it has you in its grasp, and —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It's a protagonist in some ways.

JAMES BROOKS

I think it is, yes. Very much.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

But it's a protagonist within yourself.

JAMES BROOKS

It has to be, of course, but it has to be also considered as a very real protagonist. It has to be taken seriously.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

This is perhaps off the subject, but it's a fascination to me. Again, the critics have so often said that the abstract expressionists developed this type of art, first of all, as a sort of autobiography. And also because they were great egotists. [26:00]

JAMES BROOKS

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Interview with James Brooks by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

I would say it's just the opposite. The ego was shifted to the canvas quite often, and the artist feels very humble about it, or in a sense, very inadequate. But I get in trouble about the word ego, because I don't use it technically right.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I'm afraid most of these people think of it in a more or less derogatory sense, it's the sort of show-offness.

JAMES BROOKS

Well there are times when the work really comes off, and of course the artist really feels good about it. But at that time, the artist doesn't take credit for it. Because it's a little past him, he feels that he doesn't do it all himself, you see. So I think in that sense, it's wrong, I don't think that — I think that show-off (inaudible) was completely wrong, but I can understand why people would say it. And why people would object to it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

How do you feel about minimal pop [art edge?], and that sort of thing? Does that interest you at all?

JAMES BROOKS

Some of the hard edge [course?] interests me. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible).

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You do use juxtapositions of edges in many of your paintings.

JAMES BROOKS

Oh yes. (overlapping dialogue; inaudible). The — everything that goes on affects my work, I know that. Because I'm living. But, pop didn't interest me at all. [27:00] It was kind of funny sometimes, and the [op?] didn't really interest me at all. I realized the skill in some of those things, and the humor in some of them. But art has to bypass a good many things that are funny and interesting, and anecdotal, because those things aren't that interesting. It's what happens to the whole — I'm not antagonistic to them really at all, because I admit, I don't know whether they're going the right way, or the wrong way, all I know is what I'm interested in.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well you're like the poet that thinks he feels where he should be going, and must go on to find it.

JAMES BROOKS

Well I would say more that he can't help doing it, you know? I think that the strength of an artist is his ineptitude, his Cézanne. If he were really a skillful man, he could have done Renaissance paintings, he tried to, but he was just too dumb, you know, too dull. Too inept. And he had to do what he could do.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It forced him into a totally different direction.

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Sure. And I think the artist isn't incorruptible, I think he tries to corrupt himself by imitating other people [28:00] who are either very successful, or influential, or making money from their art. Or work he even likes. And he tries it, and if he's a good enough artist, he can't do it, it just turns back on itself, and turns into his own work. Now that's another reason I think an artist can't take that kind of credit. He does what he can do, and sometimes it isn't much, and sometimes it's a good deal. But he can't do what he wants to do, necessarily. I was very surprised about my work, when I started doing rather ornate calligraphic work in '49 and '48, '50, that I had always been interested only in rock-like, or very simple work. Work with great gravity affected me a lot. And it was a real revelation that when I did these other things, well that's me. That's the way it is, that's the kind of person I am, I guess. Then I realized after that, that whatever quality my work had, it was a struggle, showing that struggle between what I [29:00] really admired and loved, and the older painting, particularly with that clear architectural quality, and structure, and simplicity, is (inaudible) I really am, you know? And so, there's a peculiar fight going on all the time.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You were saying that as Cézanne started with certain artistic handicaps, which inadvertently threw him in the right path of expressing himself.

JAMES BROOKS

Yes, yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Would you say he was a clumsy painter to start with?

JAMES BROOKS

I think he did look clumsy in his earlier work, yes, to me, his later work doesn't look clumsy. But I can imagine, at that time, it must have looked a little bit strange. (inaudible) [emissions?] particularly, he didn't know where his groove was until he failed in other ways.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Created something new out of himself, in spite of himself, more or less.

JAMES BROOKS

Yeah. Yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

But for the contemporary painter like you, you don't start out with a preconceived notion of what you want to do. You start with ideas and work with those, within yourself, you arrive [30:00] at something which is completely new and fresh.

JAMES BROOKS

And you say that I wasn't Cézanne-ish in the sense that I produced more highly technical work, or more skilled work than he did, as was a younger man.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

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As I see your work, your style has developed naturally, gradually, over a long period of time. And it's in that sense, logical. Do you think you could ever break with that style entirely, as some artists have done?

JAMES BROOKS

I don't know, but I don't think so. It would have to be sort of, some outside reason that I changed my form, and I don't think I could accept that at all, no.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Unless you, yourself, psychologically changed, right?

JAMES BROOKS

Unless it happened to me.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Yeah.

JAMES BROOKS

Unless I made it happen to my art, I don't think I could do that, no. Art is just a continual — a way to me of just staying alive, that's all it is, really, of staying interested. And if my art doesn't keep me interested, I guess nothing would. But I look for that kind of shock, or surprise, or agony, or whatever it is, in my art, you know, on living. And unless I just [31:00] needed one of those qualities so badly that it would change naturally —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I think the work that you've been doing in the last oh, five years or so, has become much more monumental than your earlier work.

JAMES BROOKS

I think it's gone more towards what I would like to have done originally, in larger forms, in the simple touching, and relating of forms, the contrast of great weight with the thin surface of a canvas, which to me, is marvelous. Because you take [Jato?], where — this enormous weight of the objects, and you know it's just a thin film of something, that's all it is, you know, but there it is. It's hard to imagine.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It's the most exciting thing in the world.

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