MALE 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. Doctor Svedsen:

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Jimmy Ernst is the son of the famous surrealist Max Ernst and an accomplished painter in his own right. To interview him, I travelled to East Hampton, Long Island, a famous New York artist colony where Jimmy Ernst now lives and works. Jimmy, I understand from the [00:01:00] history books that you were christened Ulrich, or rather, Hans Ulrich, I thought you said.

JIMMY ERNST
Yeah, that's something I'm trying to hide.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Well, we don't need to go into it, but just out of curiosity, how did you get to be called Jimmy?

JIMMY ERNST
Well, that was during the British occupation of the Rhineland, and my father, apparently, felt that that was much too Germanic, and British occupation troops were nicknamed Jimmies in those days in the Rhineland. And he said, "Well, why don't we call him Jimmy?" And that's been that way ever since.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Even when you came to America and immigrated?

JIMMY ERNST
Yeah, well, when I got my citizenship papers I tried to change the name to Jimmy, and the judge said, "No, you can't use a diminutive, son." He changed it to James. James (overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
You're officially — legally you're James?

JIMMY ERNST
Legally yeah, but I never use it, never.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Well, now you're grown up. That being —

JIMMY ERNST
(overlapping dialogue; inaudible)

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

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Since you were the son of Max Ernst, the very famous [00:02:00] surrealist painter, and also your mother was a very well-known art historian and critic, I suppose that your very earliest memories must have been in an artist milieu and art historical milieu?

JIMMY ERNST

Well, my first memory is something that I have no memory of because my mother was still pregnant with me, but I attended the original Dada exhibition in Cologne in my seventh month where the little school girl read obscene poetry about dress and the communion dress, and people were hacking — there was an axe next to a piece of sculpture, and in order to get to that, it was in back of a restaurant, you had to go through the men's urinal to get to this little court where the exhibition was being held. So I have a prenatal —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

A prenatal premonition of what's going to happen to you.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

There was a rumor that (inaudible) changed your diapers, is that true?

JIMMY ERNST

So my mother told me. I believe it, yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

And (Arp?) also [00:03:00] fed you from a bottle?

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

But you don't really remember those? Only certain —

JIMMY ERNST

No, certainly not, no.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

— family legends, but you grew up as —

JIMMY ERNST

I think —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

— as a part of this?

JIMMY ERNST

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Yeah, yeah. I never knew anything else except painting, literature, and poetry, and things of that kind. As a result of which, it took me until I was about 18 or 19 before I decided I wanted to paint. I wanted nothing to do with that world.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
What did you want to be during this period, before the —

JIMMY ERNST
I've been trying to think back, what my ambitions were then, but I think my ambitions in those days were conditioned by the fact that I'd been chased out of Europe just about a week ahead of Crystal Night and constantly being on the run until I got here. And then when I got here my preoccupation was simply, we're trying to make a living.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Is that why you went to an arts and crafts school in Cologne?

JIMMY ERNST
No, that was [00:04:00] mandatory. I had decided that I was going to leave Germany. Mother had already left but was financially unable to take me along to France, and I stayed behind and had decided that before I left for the United States I better be able to do something with my hands, and through a friend of my mother's I got an apprenticeship in a big printing plant, north Germany. And as part of being an apprentice I had to attend arts and crafts school, but they didn't teach any arts and crafts there either. I mean, typesetting, stuff like that, but it was a —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
No painting, no drawing, no sculpture.

JIMMY ERNST
No, no.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Or even lettering?

JIMMY ERNST
A layout probably, I don't quite remember. Well, that was already under Hitler, and most schools had been converted into ideological training places. I don't really recall getting much manual training even then, except as an apprentice, [00:05:00] [setting type?].

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
In typography, yeah.

JIMMY ERNST
Yeah and typography, and —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
So that's what you hoped you might be able to do, I mean, when you came to this country?

JIMMY ERNST

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Well, I mean, I never did it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Did you have friends when you — in New York who'd meet you and look after you when you first came here?

JIMMY ERNST
Well, there was a son of the printing plant owner. He was publishing in the United States, and they were specialists in languages, all kinds, Oriental, Sanskrit, all kinds of languages, and I learned to set type —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
In Sanskrit?

JIMMY ERNST
In Sanskrit by visual identification. But the first Americans I really got to know where through Gladys Reichard, then professor of anthropology at Barnard, who was then doing field work in Ganado, which is a little village on the Navajo reservation. And she decided that the best way for me to learn about America was to live with the Indians.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Well, that was in one sense indigenous but on the other a little farfetched.

JIMMY ERNST
Yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
How was your English, but the way?

JIMMY ERNST
None, it didn't exist.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
You never had any English in [00:06:00] school?

JIMMY ERNST
No, so that within 10 days after arriving here I was herding sheep with the Navajo kids. And I think the first painting that ever excited me really, other than the Guernica, which I'd seen the year before, was that I was allowed to attend a sand painting ceremony in the Hogan, which is very rare. So I lived there for about three months, played my first game of baseball with the Hopis.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Did you know their language?

JIMMY ERNST
No, no, I think the word cigarette I learned. I've forgotten it since. But they couldn't speak English, the kids, or they didn't want to, and I couldn't, so we got along just fine.

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LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
I notice around your house and studio that you have a beautiful collection of Navajo rugs and Indian art.

JIMMY ERNST
Yeah, I like that. I like that very much.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
So that's always stayed with you?

JIMMY ERNST
Yeah, yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Do you think there's any influence on your work in sense of structure or color, perhaps?

JIMMY ERNST
Well, not deliberately, not recently, but until about a year ago there were some very strong [00:07:00] allusions to Indian imagery. I recognize the same thing with my painting when I go back to Europe, which I have been doing since the '60s, very strong allusions to stained glass, gothic architecture to — not architecture, structure, certain empathy you get when you walk into these cathedrals.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
I think it's very evident in all of your paintings, even from the earliest ones, that you had a very strong sense of structure underlying.

JIMMY ERNST
Yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
All the colors and the forms, however they may gradually develop over your stylistic life. But it would seem to me to be very natural for you, when you first start, to be somewhat under the influence of the surrealist style, which you —

JIMMY ERNST
Oh, certainly.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
— were familiar with.

JIMMY ERNST
Certainly, very much so. The whole process of creating a form had to do with a certain measure of automatism, you know, automatic procedure where you allow things to happen on canvas and then —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

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Work from there? [00:08:00]

JIMMY ERNST

— work from there. And like most young painters who did this, the early work is very biomorphic, having to do with one's insides.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

How did you live during this period, in order to paint?

JIMMY ERNST

Well, first job I had was, well, '38, when I came back from the Indians. I was an office boy at the Museum of Modern Art.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Well, that must have been —

JIMMY ERNST

No, no, I was an office boy with a publish house first.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

First, and then the Museum of Modern Art, how did you get that job?

JIMMY ERNST

Well, I used to hang around an art gallery in New York called Julien Levy Gallery —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

The famous surrealist gallery?

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, which showed my father, and I made it my second home, and I think Julien Levy got kind of annoyed. You know, "What the hell's this kid doing here?" So he used his influence to get me a job, and I was interviewed by Dick Abbott, who was then director of the film library. He said, "What can you do?" And I said, "Well, I write surrealist poetry, and I do this and that and the other thing." And he said, "Okay, you start $15 [00:09:00] a week" or $15 every two weeks, I forget. It was very low. "And you're an office boy."

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

You stayed very long at the Museum of Modern Art.

JIMMY ERNST

Alfred Bart kind of protected me, I guess. I didn't stay very long at the film library. Then when the new building opened I was transferred to the mail room. That's where I stayed until —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Museums have always had, it seems to me, a string of very famous — later famous mail boys.

JIMMY ERNST

There were some other people later who became well-known artists who —

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LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Well, I suppose it's natural for artists to migrate toward a center of contemporary art.

JIMMY ERNST
Or movie stars who used to be ushers, or actresses who used to check coats at the (inaudible) like Lauren Becall. I guess that happens.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
How did you drift out of New York to Hollywood?

JIMMY ERNST
I — no, not Hollywood. That was the home office.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Oh, I see, in New York.

JIMMY ERNST
In New York, the Warner Brothers thing, production man, which really consisted [00:10:00] of being an assistant to the art director, to see that all the artwork was properly executed for engraving and preparing the different pieces of the artwork for engraving purposes, and ordering for the stats and ordering type and, you know, that kind of thing.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
And from then — and you began to meet film actresses and actors and directors.

JIMMY ERNST
No, no. I met the talent scout for Warner Brothers, and I married her.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Well, that's your connection with the stage then and movies and all.

JIMMY ERNST
That's my connection to the stage, yeah, yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
When did you begin teaching?

JIMMY ERNST
In '52, I think, '51 or '52, at Brooklyn.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
And that took away your financial worries then at that point?

JIMMY ERNST
Yes, yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
That's your chance then to go straight on into painting.

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JIMMY ERNST

Yes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

And develop your own style.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, prior to that I would, you know, the only time I had to, you know, to paint was in the evening or weekends, [00:11:00] and on my honeymoon.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Your wife didn’t object to that?

JIMMY ERNST

I had two weeks off. No, she didn’t object.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Well that — chronologically you had, in 1943, your first one man show. What sort of style were you painting then? Was it still surrealist?

JIMMY ERNST

They were fairly surrealist things in the — fluid, fluid —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Fantasy, lyrical.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, fantasy things.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Did you use a definite imagery, as so many of the surrealists have?

JIMMY ERNST

No, I had a — well, the image —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Or was it more abstract?

JIMMY ERNST

Well, it was really more abstract even then. All of my images in those days, as they still do but to a lesser extent now, came out the way in which I applied paint. The early paintings I — Museum of Modern Art has one called the Flying Dutchman — I would put very liquid paint on the canvas and blow on it to get very feathery, you know, make it spread in very feathery forms, out of which then I developed other images. So that [00:12:00] the procedure, or the application of paint, had a great deal to do with the image.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

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And that way you were very close to the methodology of what we later called abstract expressionists.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, except they left it more alone. They did even less. You know, once brush stroke was there, or once some kind of converging of color or accidental converging of color — that became the painting. I was never that free, and it never allowed that to be the end all.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Yeah, there had to be structure in all of your things.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, I — I wanted my hand in it. You know, I wanted my hand in it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

What about the relation of image to ground? Did you consciously keep them flat?

JIMMY ERNST

No.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Or did you want to float them in a sort of indeterminate space?

JIMMY ERNST

Whichever, whatever happened, that I left pretty much alone, but I've always had a feeling that I ought to have something against a back of some kind or against some kind of space, [00:13:00] even when the paintings get very flat. I always try to have that interplay between form and space.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

One time you began to do what we call rock paintings. When did this happen? Did that develop naturally out of the method?

JIMMY ERNST

Well, in the '50s I was artist in residence at the University of Colorado and spent a — two summers actually, in the Rocky mountain area and I saw a lot of cliffs and stones, and then later I lived in Arizona for about six months, and I tried to make some drawings of my surroundings, but as with other things, with other imagery that became, one day there, suddenly I was doing rock paintings. And they were reminiscent of what I'd seen or what I'd experienced.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Well, during this time in the '50s, beginning with '51, I think it was, you began to teach at Pratt, where you taught for numbers of [00:14:00] years.

JIMMY ERNST

I taught at Pratt just for, I think, one year and then went to Brooklyn College.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

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And now you have been teaching ever since.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Right up to now.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

When did you begin developing the black paintings?

JIMMY ERNST

The earliest one is ’47 or ’48, which made Ad Reinhardt very angry because he wanted to be the first one.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

But was he aware that you had been painting in black?

JIMMY ERNST

No, the painting had gone very sour, and I just covered it with flat black paint, which happened to be around the studio, and then I got angry or something, and I threw some other black paint on it. I actually dripped some black enamel on it and suddenly saw the difference between the two and then expanded on this idea. But that was in ’46 and ’47, and the first one that I ever really painted was, I think is the one that the Met owns, ’48.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

The one the Guggenheim owns is, I remember, is ’54.

JIMMY ERNST

I kept doing black on blacks not [00:15:00] consistently, but two or three or four a year, maybe, but, you know, there was just so much I could do with it, or that I wanted to do with it. And I recall one time in the ’60s or the late ’50s my dealer calling me from New York and saying, “Are you working on any black paintings?” And I said, well, yes and no. And she said, “Well, I have a waiting list.” And I said, no, I don’t want that. You know, I don’t want to be known for having painted black pictures. But I did some things after that, and I had a sort of retrospective. We put most of them together in the ’60s, I believe, in New York. They had a black on black show.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

I suppose the artist has to have a kind of resting period, and sort of taking notes on himself in a thoughtful period. What kind of abrupt change came about after this period of black painting?

JIMMY ERNST

I don’t think they brought up any abrupt changes with me. The development [00:16:00] is fairly slow. I find that after five years, suddenly the paintings have imperceptibly changed to a point

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where they're completely different. There was a short period in the early '70s, or thereabouts, where I did some very strong, almost hard-edged things that still have very many linear things in it. I'd been in Spain on a visit, and somehow that affected me, and the color and intensity, but that was a hiatus, almost like the black paintings, except the black paintings kept going all the way through. This was a short period of about two years, three years, where I limited — there was practically no, what you might call in graphics half-tone values. Everything was either blue or red or —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
And flatter.

JIMMY ERNST
Very flat, yes.

M1:
Our interview continues on the other side of this cassette. [00:17:00]

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Do you feel that there is a particular imagery in your use of these very fine web-like structures which pervade and control the canvas?

JIMMY ERNST
Not that I know of, I mean, certainly not a deliberate image. I like working with linear things. I like the structured forms. I like to allow forms to emerge out of the intersection or the combination of linear elements. I find it fascinating. It's never left me. And I keep coming back to it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
They always seem so precise, as if you'd planned them, pre-planned them.

JIMMY ERNST
Oh no, not at all.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
But that's not the way you work.

JIMMY ERNST
No, not at all.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
How do you achieve those refined lines?

JIMMY ERNST
Oh, there's a brush. Bill de Kooning uses it but in a different way. It's called a Japanese sword striper. They used it, I understand, in the automobile plants in the early days to paint the stripes, you know, the thin line around the —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

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Along the fenders and across the doors?

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, and that's where it was [00:18:00] first used, and I found a couple of those brushes in a paint store and played around with them and used them calligraphically so that the first structure out — most of the paintings are calligraphic ones where I just almost write on the canvas, in black usually.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

The idea of gesture, in other words.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, but then make them more precise or more descriptive by adding a white line in the middle of the black lines, so that gives it an extra dimension.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

You never use tape like they had (inaudible)?

JIMMY ERNST

No, no. No, I can do it just as easily without that.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

How long does it take to do a painting once you start with it?

JIMMY ERNST

Well, I work on several things —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Many at once?

JIMMY ERNST

Some paintings have been in work here for four, five years. But I would say on average I spend an aggregate of about two or three months on a painting. Sometimes, I'll [00:19:00] say, much longer.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

And your paintings aren't particularly large compared to some of the younger generation now.

JIMMY ERNST

No.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

I mean, they're not 20, 30 feet long.

JIMMY ERNST

No.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

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Your average size is what, 50 by 80, something like that?

JIMMY ERNST

Well, I go bigger than 50 by 60, but that is my average large size.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

And there were some that you could stand in front of, within one gesture, a sweep of your arms, you can cover most of the canvas without moving.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

What kind of paints do you use? I suppose in the beginning, of course, you used oils. Have you stuck with oils very long?

JIMMY ERNST

Oh yes, yeah, I —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

You don’t use acrylics?

JIMMY ERNST

No, but I find acrylics a little bit too flat and direct. They have kind of aggressive paints, and also they dry too quickly.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

You always seem to have — so many of them are kind of an enamel-like texture to them.

JIMMY ERNST

It’s oil with medium, you know, treating the color transparently. I do gouaches and stuff, but I mean, [00:20:00] the paintings are —

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Pure oil.

JIMMY ERNST

— pure oil, yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

The old fashioned way. Except for this paint striper.

JIMMY ERNST

That paint striper, yeah. Well, even that’s not really an automatic tool, you know, you really have to know how to manipulate it. I know people have used rollers and so on, but then it’s no longer an extensive of the hand because the movement, the hand is missing, you know.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

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To turn to another part of your experience, you say that you've been naturally evolving out of certain theories of surrealism from an unconscious gesture or form which you put on the canvas, and then it develops from that.

JIMMY ERNST

Well, I have a fixed image of what it should look like, and I think the most mysterious part of my anatomy is the gap between my hand and my brain. I don't know what happens in between.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Well, isn't that called the creative process, after all?

JIMMY ERNST

I don't know what the creative process is. [00:21:00] I'll leave that to semanticists. I don't know.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Many people who are not artists believe that an artist has a vision, and that he simply sits down and expresses that vision in paint and in various colors and hues.

JIMMY ERNST

Well, there are painters who do that and do it admirably. I mean, very great painters, and it's very deliberate, and they have complete control over what they're doing, and in their case the magic has to be in how much of themselves they can put in there. Basically it's really no different than what I do except that I use a different avenue.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

What's the magic for you?

JIMMY ERNST

Gee, I — when it's done.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

At some point or another you know that it is done, that you have completed what you really want?

JIMMY ERNST

Why, yes, yeah. Sometimes a painting gets ahead of me, and then I'm in trouble, when a painting is finished with me before I'm finished with it. But I pretty much know the last [00:22:00] three or four days of a painting that, okay, I've got it now, and it just needs something here or there, and I can turn away from it with a certain degree of ease, in other words, and it doesn't demand any more.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

You're talking about your early hardships in this country, coming almost alone and friendless without a word of language, and then suddenly we were talking about your painting being bought by the Metropolitan and one being bought by the Guggenheim Museum. What does it feel like when you've arrived at that stage?

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JIMMY ERNST

When you get the news that a Museum has bought you? Oh, it's marvelous. It's great excitement, great satisfaction. Larry Campbell said somewhere in a publication recently that I have more paintings in more museums than any other American artist, and I can't believe that. That is something I'll never get blasé about. When an important institution owns my work it gives me great satisfaction, even if I have to, as I did with the Guggenheim in the '50s [00:23:00] have to hijack my own painting back in order to restore it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

That's a marvelous story. And a true one. I remember. That's when I first met you.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah, there was a black on black painting, and Jim Sweeney was director at the time, and there was an exhibition of younger Americans, I think it was called, and somebody scratched the black surface, and I was asked to come back and repair it. And somehow, since it was in a flat area, I wasn't doing very well in the restoring room at the Guggenheim, and I asked permission to take the painting back, which they hadn't bought yet at the time, but they had a bad experience with another (inaudible) who had done the same thing and repainted the whole thing. It was a completely different painting from the one that was originally selected. So anyway, I asked for permission to take the painting to my studio and do it there, and there was a strong veto from Mr. Sweeney. He didn't want any paintings to leave the premises anymore. And so I asked [00:24:00] the staff, including Louise Swenson at the time, to stay upstairs with a cup of coffee while I was doing something downstairs. And they knew what I meant, and I stole my own painting. It was on a Friday or Saturday because Sweeney wasn't there. He was in Virginia, I remember that. And I took it home, worked on it feverishly over the weekend, sweating bullets. Why I was so scared of Sweeney I'll never know. And I returned it on Monday morning. I was there at 8:30, parked the car. It was the old building, snuck the painting back in, and as I walked down the stairs, there's Sweeney sitting in his office roaring laughing like hell. He knew all about it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

It was a very good painting before and after. Your father must have given you lessons or sent you to a private teacher to learn?

JIMMY ERNST

Oh no. No, no, I was very bad in school in art, maybe I didn't want to be any good. [00:25:00]

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Did you ever study art?

JIMMY ERNST

I never studied painting or anything. I can't say I don't remember painting badly, but I never had any problems with the techniques of painting at all, but it could have been that I sort of grew up in this environment and maybe didn't observe how it was done, but when I was confronted with the materials and tools, the process seemed so logical that that has never given me any problems at all.

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LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

You didn't, when you were in New York go to the student's league?

JIMMY ERNST

No, no.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Or sketch form the model as most young artists do?

JIMMY ERNST

No, not at all. No, my father once visited me when I still lived in Connecticut, and we went in the studio there, which had two floors at the time, and he stood in front of a painting, and he said, "How do you get that effect?" And I told him, "You won't tell me how you get yours. I won't tell you how I get mine." And — which is true. I once asked him, "How do you do that?" And he said, "I won't tell you." And [00:26:00] then I went upstairs with Dorothea Tanning to look at some drawings, and as I came down, the old man was standing there touching it with his finger. He wanted to know how it was done, which I thought was a great compliment. But he — no, he never — I mean, I don't think he ever deliberately not let me in on anything he was doing. In fact, I was there when he first did his drip paintings in New York where he would punch a hole in the paint can and let it swing over the canvas, or use a funnel and with a pliar narrow the end of it and then put paint in and let it swing around, or other things. When he worked in New York I was in the studio quite a bit. I saw how he made decalcomania. I thought, you know, this effect of fungi, feathery kind of — or, I saw him once making a frottage, an oil frottage, in fact. But I wouldn't say I'm self-taught because I was immersed in that world so much that it was almost as if I'd been doing it all my life.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

I think it's very [00:27:00] unusual. I think, in fact, you're probably the only case that I can think of in the whole history of art, where you and a very famous father had pursued the same career and been — emerged with totally different styles.

JIMMY ERNST

Well, yes, I think that's true. As I say, there are certain procedural similarities, even to this day, in the way we work, but I don't know whether that really has to do with the relationship or where we come from or the cultural background or whatever.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

But no one would ever mistake a Jimmy Ernst for a Max Ernst.

JIMMY ERNST

No.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

Never.

JIMMY ERNST

No, no, but I think what helped there a great deal also was lack of social pressure in America. I developed by myself in America on my own, in other words, in a completely different

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environment even artistically than that of my father. So I was familiar with that environment too. Ernst himself was quite pleased that I [00:28:00] didn't become a junior addition of him, even superficially, that is.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Well in sum, I think you think of your art a continuing process.

JIMMY ERNST
Well, I hope so, because I think that's the only way that, in my case, with my temperament, my outlook, whatever it may be, this is the way I'd like to discover myself and have, in fact, conversations with myself, because that's what I really think of painting, having a conversation with this surface, and at a certain point it begins to talk back. It's never completely separate from me, but it does begin to assert itself, and therefore it makes new demands, and I find that the most interesting thing, and it would be deadly for me to get hung up in obvious gesture in the sense that each painting now, you know, is only different from the other in its proportions or [00:29:00] in the — the parts or the forms are merely differently arranged. I think this must have been the problem for several American painters of the so-called New York School, that they were almost condemning themselves of painting the same painting over and over again with subtle nuances, differently, but the overall appearance was unmistakable. And what may have been the reason for that is that they stripped themselves completely of any superficial things and wanted to get down to their rock image. Well, once they discovered their rock image, they had nowhere to go. A lot of them led, and I'm talking about some who are no longer with us, led rather tragic lives.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
They'd express their autobiographical feelings, as it were, because there was no longer any dialogue?

JIMMY ERNST
Well, I don't know. It sounds negative. I'm not saying that there wasn't any dialogue, but I [00:30:00] think there was also then a social and, if I may say so, commercial or business pressure to produce in that manner. It must have been hell for some of these painters.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN
Do you blame some of that on dealer pressure?

JIMMY ERNST
In a minor way, yes, but I know that a lot of painters tried to break out of it, and in his last years Klein did in deed use color again, but prior to that Franz Kline used to go to the Cape with a suitcase full of colors and came back with black and white paintings. Now, I'm not saying that he was manufacturing for anyone, on the contrary, this is what he needed to do. But he also needed to break out of it, there was no doubt about it. Now the man who has pretty successfully broken that is de Kooning. But he still worries about it. He worries about it to this day.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

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In other words, this being trapped in [00:31:00] a mold, which seemed to have no end but at the same time achieved commercial success, wasn't this a very grave temptation when you were painting the black paintings?

JIMMY ERNST

Why yes, certainly, and that — I think that is an artist's concept of hell, of being forced by oneself to do the same thing over and over again. I think that has become a problem now, even more severe problem for young painters who are — and there is now some commercial pressure larger than it was in the case of my generation. On the other hand, it must be very difficult for younger painters nowadays to do anything that hasn't been done before because so many things have been done in the last 75 or 90 or 100 years that inevitably they will do certain things that somebody will say, well, so-and-so did that already. And it's natural for [00:32:00] anyone not to want to do that.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

But that's true, Jimmy, if you think back to your own beginnings. You didn't contemplate when you first began to paint the type of painting that you would be painting now.

JIMMY ERNST

Well, I've been fortunate. I think my generation generally has been fortunate because the pressure wasn't there. I was allowed to do that over a period of, what, 30 years, almost.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

But the person who allowed you was you yourself.

JIMMY ERNST

Yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVEDSEN

And if a young artist has that same impetus, that same desire to express what is always the unknown for an artist, he can do it too.

JIMMY ERNST

Well, he'd have a very rough time during a time when others are getting away with it. I mean, it's a very weird kind of situation. When I said I was allowed, yes, I allowed myself to do it because that's the only way I could think. I think poets still do that. Poets still write knowing they're not going to get published. That's why on the whole, I think, right [00:33:00] now American poetry is better than American painting, because there is this certainty that — look, I've got to do something that is worthwhile, that has some profundity in it for me rather than to sit in you senior year in an art department of a university and say, "Well, I'm going to go to New York and get a place in SoHo, and I'm going to start hunting around for a one-man show," which is a perfectly normal desire.

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