

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

FEMALE 1

[00:00:00] 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

Although I, along with most artists decry labels, I must place Roy Lichtenstein among the half-dozen or so artists who created pop art. He has glorified a ball of twine, a composition book, a golf ball. [00:01:00] He has transformed comic strips into works of art, and he has dared to satirized Picasso and other modern masters. I had the pleasure of visiting his East Hampton, Long Island home and studio, where the interview you are about to hear was conducted. Well, Roy, let's start out with just a little bit with your biography. You were born in New York City, I think.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

That's right.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And you went to school here?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, I went to —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

That is, the lower grades and high school?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Mm-hmm. PS 9 and Franklin School.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Had you had any art training at all in school or in high school?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I think art was the one thing my high school didn't give. And I think that was probably one reason why I was interested in it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Had you always drawn since you were a child?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I drew as a child, they tell me. I can vaguely remember doing it. And then I drew again in the late years at high school. Then I went to the Art Students League —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

I take it you didn't have any vast parental [00:02:00] objection to your studying art as so many artists have.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

No, uh-uh. No. I don't think they were thrilled with the idea, but there was really no objection at all.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Were any of them interested in art themselves or gifted that way?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Not in any strong way.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You spent a year at the League?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

No, I only went to the League for the summer of 1940 and then took some other art classes here and there. Then I painted on my own. I had very little art training before Ohio State.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

How did you happen to go to Ohio State?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, there were very few colleges that gave a degree in studio art and were out of New York City. And I wanted to go out of New York for a change.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It was one of the few places that would give a BFA when you finished the course.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

That's right. Mm-hmm.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

But did you manage to go straight through, or were you interrupted?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, just by World War II, (laughs) but I went straight through. I was in the Army for three years, but I went back.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

In the Army, not the Air Force?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, I was in the Air Force for a while.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What were you doing? Were you a flyer, [00:03:00] or were you in camouflage?

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, I was about to go into pilot training when the Battle of the Bulge occurred. And they ushered us all to the infantry. I drew maps.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Oh, well, that's along with your artistic training.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

But I was in (laughs) — I was in about five different things.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And then you went back to Ohio?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Mm-hmm.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And you got your BFA. And then you went on for a master's degree.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah. Mm-hmm. I had a lot of credits from the Army. So I graduated rapidly when I got back. And then they asked me to teach, and I did. And I continued to get degrees. My master's while I was teaching. But I learned a lot. I thought art was a sort of romantic life, or I don't know what I thought art was like. But I learned practically everything I know from Ohio State. And I'm really glad I went.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What sort of paintings were you doing then when you were in Ohio?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I think every kind of painting.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What sort of subjects did you do? The literature mentions Western subjects.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

But that was after. I mean, that was after I graduated. But while I was in school, I did [00:04:00] everything from Mondrian to De Kooning, you know, whatever.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Then you went to Cleveland, so I understand it, after you finished school?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, I taught at Ohio State for five years, and then we went to Cleveland. I was there for seven years. And I didn't teach there. I painted, and I did odd things.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

To support yourself.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, mm-hmm. I worked in sheet metal design and window display, all sorts of things.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Designing and draftsmanship?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Mm-hmm.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And that's when you did these cowboy subjects?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

They weren't necessarily cowboys. Some of them were cowboys and Indians. But some of them were just early American painting-themed. It was a kind of a cubist variation on them.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, that's rather significant for your later development, isn't it?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah. Because I was interested in American art and also in the graphic material of other people. That always seems to be something that I've been interested in, except for a brief period from about 1957 [00:05:00] to 1959 or so when I did completely abstract painting.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Were you in Cleveland then, or had you come to New York?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I think I was in Oswego, New York, then.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And what did you do then? What type of painting?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I was teaching. It was expressionism.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Had you met many of the New York expressionists at that time? Or did you learn of them through exhibitions and reproductions?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

An awful lot through reproduction and art magazines. But I came to New York every month or so. And I knew many abstract expressionists. I didn't know the well known abstract expressionists well.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

Like De Kooning —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I went to the Cedar Bar, and I knew who they were. And I saw them and that sort of thing. But I

—

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You felt rather young and shy, perhaps?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Very shy. And (laughs) I'm sure they had no interest in me.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Why did you switch from abstract expressionism?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I don't know. But the abstract expressionism began to take on the subject matter of comic characters, which were very expressionist in my work. And I don't really know why I changed. [00:06:00] But there are many reasons. I mean, there were many things that were going on. I knew [Kaprow?] and people like that.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

The happenings.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

The happening people, Oldenburg and Dine. And there was an emphasis on American work, the gas station culture, merchandise. All of that sort of idea was in the happenings. A collection of tires by Kaprow and bacon and eggs by —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Oldenburg.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

— Oldenburg. And —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Beer cans by Jasper Johns?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Beer cans by Jasper Johns. And Coke bottles by Rauschenberg. There were just enough things. I was vaguely aware of this idea. The fact that I was also doing comic characters, which were not at all pop, really. Well, I suppose in retrospect a pop element in an abstract expressionist setting. And they're completely unsuccessful paintings.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

The earliest I think I've seen in reproduction are the Mickey Mouse ones you did.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

Yeah, 1961. That's the earliest that I did them. I mean, there were those other earlier, more abstract ones which nobody's seen.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

This was sort of going back to what you'd been earlier in Cleveland. [00:07:00]

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

But bringing it up to date into twentieth century —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

It may have — to use the actual vocabulary of commercial art rather than to convert it into an artistic expression, which is what I was doing then. I was making cubist variations, maybe, of early paintings.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

But you're not interested in these objects, comic book art or subjects and popular themes, like golf balls, and stoves, and so on, as symbols, were you?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I don't really know. But they stand for a kind of art or a kind of culture.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

A kind of culture, but not a thing in itself? They don't stand for woman, or —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

No.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

— an erotic symbol, or —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

The golf ball, for instance, would be something that I could see a kind of abstraction going on in it that, as I guess I've said, reminded me of plus and minus, something like that. Also the fact that it's so unlike a golf ball. The kind of characterization that's used in the newspaper is so unrealistic to depict a realistic object. And when you blow it up, it becomes even more apparent. [00:08:00] So I suppose that's symbolic of something, but my real interest is to put this together into a form to use these shapes to create a work of unity of some kind. I also realize it has these other meanings attached to it, but without the organization the meanings would be irrelevant to art.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Were you more interested then in the development of these as forms and shapes —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, mm-hmm.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

— rather than in their symbolic content at first?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, except the general absurdity of doing something like that, which is not just form. The content of the painting, I suppose.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What other sorts of subject did you choose for your composition?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, at the beginning I tried a big variety of things, because there was so many areas of commercial art used in this way that I had a lot of choice. I had all kinds of products, and then I had different situations from the comic book stories that if lifted out of context would be humorous. But certain things that I picked like composition book would be picked because they had the possibility of being made into an [00:09:00] abstraction that was also a thing, an object. And I was probably more interested in the object character at that time than I'm interested in those things right now. Because a painting as an object was a departure from abstract expressionism. It's very hard to know why I picked something. I picked it because it caught my eye. Because I thought it would have some use, all of which is to say — it just seemed that it would make a strong statement of some kind.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Were these more usually actual objects or photographs of objects?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

They were always newspaper reproductions. Or some sort of badly printed thing, like the way you print on a cardboard box or something. The printing can't be fine and delicate. It has to be very simple and completely symbolic, but very easily read and printed in a very blunt way. Those are the kinds of images I like rather than airbrushed or finished commercial —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Sort of things you might find in a telephone directory?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

The telephone [00:10:00] directory —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Yellow pages?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

— is another big source of work for me. Because the drawing in it is stylized by generation after generation of commercial artists. Quite divorced from reality, but they're easily read and very powerful as communication, which isn't the reason I'm using it. But it meant that. It also became a kind of classical style in itself in that there's a way to draw a pretty girl. There's a way to draw this or that, whatever it is. A handsome man, a frankfurter, whatever it is. It became a method of drawing. And that was a method understood. But this drawing for communication's

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

sake, which is almost drafting in a certain way, engineering drawing, is so anti-art in its purposes that it would be interesting to use, I thought.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, this type of drawing, too, is it not influenced considerably by the actual technique of reproduction?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Color process printing, of course, can duplicate almost anything. But the color separations were actually made by the artists, because the paper was very rugged that it was printed on. Newsprint, or [00:11:00] telephone books, or cardboard boxes. The printing had to be very blunt and rugged. And it made the drawing have to be blunt to be printable. And that made its own stylization. And that interested me a lot, stylization. It grew out of the mechanical methods necessary.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, there are two things, of course, which seem so — even to the amateur, so characteristic of your work. One, the dots. And the other, the simplification of color. Could you explain what a Ben-Day dot is, and how it's used in printing, and how you came to use it in your art?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

A Ben-Day dot is a printing process that gives you a halftone. The artist specifies what he wants, and the printer does it. But I think what I actually do is not a Ben-Day dot, but something like [R type?] or some of those things where the commercial artist cuts out a section of transparent plastic with dots that has a kind of [00:12:00] waxy background that he presses onto the artwork itself. He burnishes it on. And so I think what I really do isn't actually a Ben-Day dot, although everybody refers to it in that way.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It's a sort of signature of yours, isn't it?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

(laughs) Well, you know, I mean, it doesn't really make any difference whether it is or it isn't a Ben-Day dot exactly so long as it has that appearance. But the idea is to use this symbol of reproduced art, and to make a value of a color by making dots, which give you part white, part red, or part blue, whatever the color is. And I used it as a texture in the same way that another painter might use thick or thin paint. I used either flat color areas or dots.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Most of your early work is outlined in black. Is that, again, to refer to the simplicity of advertising or a reproduced object?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, I think because the images were always drawn in black and white and the color was then [00:13:00] applied in some way, the black line around things prevented the different colors from overlapping, because they weren't printed that accurately in the newspapers. In the early comic period, the lips I know would always wind up around the nose somewhere. I think the black was

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

to contain those colors as they met. I like the idea of the dots symbolizing 50 percent red or 50 percent blue or whatever the dots are. And also the use of just very few colors, as Mondrian did and many other people.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, you use almost those pure colors that Mondrian used now, even in your late compositions, don't you? Red, blue —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, but I've added a number of different ones now, a whole group of light colors and dark colors. Very few medium range colors. Just light blues, light greens, dark browns. Dark blues —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You use the violets much now?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I've never used violet. I don't know —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, it's a blue, almost a —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

A blue and a red dot would make a violet, which I used to do. But I haven't done that.
[00:14:00]

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What about green, that anti-Mondrian color?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

There's green in all the paintings I've done. I've done green all the way through. It was an exception to being primary, I guess. Wasn't so much that it had to be primary. The colors just had to be simple. I've just added some now because I need the interest myself. I repeated the combinations too many times.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

The red, yellow, blue —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Blue, black, white, and green.

F1:

Our interview continues on the other side of this cassette.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Now, the dots seem to me to have grown from your earlier style of the early '60s to what you're doing now. The dots have gotten steadily larger. Am I correct in that?

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, but the last few years I've been using stripes instead of dots.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It's been said that the dots establish a plane and a kind of two-dimensional relationship with the form itself, the object [00:15:00] itself.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

It makes it look like a work surface or something. But I think that the actual phenomenological plane that one winds up with is not caused by any device. And that's another way of thinking. I mean, that has to do with the unity of the art. But I think that the dots make a two-dimensional appearance. There's no question about that.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And it obviates it from any kind of atmospheric effect or illusionistic effect.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, that's part of the lack of modulation that I have in color and line and all of that. To get rid of atmospheric effects so that it seems to be the thing itself, instead of a picture of a comic book or a billboard that you see from a distance. I like to remove any kind of distance, so they have no quality that you can identify with space or your distance from the thing itself.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

In other words, your whole development has been toward greater and greater abstraction. At the same time, keeping the immediacy of the reality of the object.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. Yeah. [00:16:00]

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

One thing, of course, everyone is curious about is this business of putting the balloons and the message into those subjects which deal with comic books. Of Brad series and so on.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Maybe — the fact that there's certain completely unreal appearance to them. But people take comics for reality. I mean, I did when I was a child. But to have it talk gives it more reality. It actually says something. It's a naive animation of the symbols.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And these are all grand themes, aren't they? War, and love, and tragedy.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, they all have the great emotional themes in one direction or another. Themes too big for the painting itself, like pyramid or Temple of Apollo, that sort of thing, where the subject matter is blown all out of proportion to what I do with it. And it is something that interests me. Where the subject matter seems fraught with meaning, because the idea of using subject matter was anathema to abstract expressionist painting to begin with, but particularly subject matter that

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

really [00:17:00] meant something, that was important, and also said something. It's not unusual to have writing in paintings, but it's unusual to have it in that form.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It's more been poetry and things of that sort, isn't it?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

It's just because it looks like a comic strip it looks strange. There's always been classical writing on things. It's quite different, I realize.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

One thing I've observed is your own particular choice of the remark or the sentence which the subject is saying in the balloon — it's almost as if you were eavesdropping on some really vital moment in these characters' lives, which I suppose heightens the reality of the whole situation. About this time that you burst on the scene with these comic book scenes and this other type of subject matter you've just described, the word pop came up to describe your art and the art of Johns, and Oldenburg, and the others. Did you resent this term, and do you still resent it now after so many years have passed? [00:18:00]

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

You can't stop anyone from calling it pop by now. And I refer to it that way myself, because it's easier. So the word doesn't really bother me at all.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Do you think you now are doing what you would call pop art?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I don't know. I think there are pop aspects to it. I guess it doesn't make any difference to me whether it's pop or it isn't, or whether it can be defined that way. But if I have to answer it, I suppose it's less pop than it was. The entablatures that I've done I think are less pop, say, than —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And the brush strokes, of course.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, mm-hmm, that's true. Than, say, the still lifes or something.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And the explosion and the suns. The explosions, particularly, become very abstract.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You've done a whole series of works based on the paintings of other artists like Mondrian, Picasso, and Monet. What kind of meaning to those have for you?

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, I think different ones have different kinds of meaning. But I'm trying to do them in the simplest possible way, the way one would think of Picasso [00:19:00] without really looking at him. Maybe it's a painting made out of triangles or however you might conceive of Picasso. And to make my own painting out of those clichés of Picasso. Also to make a fake Picasso, because everyone wants a Picasso. The dots and that kind of reproduced image gives you an ersatz Picasso or Mondrian. So that is interesting to me. Also there's some similarity between his style and cartooning. Not much of a similarity, but I'm bringing it all the way over to a cartoon of a Picasso.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

This brings us to a rather elusive subject, your humor or your irony. Do you do these with sort of tongue in cheek?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

There's almost always humor in the things I do. The more you talk about it, the less humorous it becomes.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, I think that's one of the things we all enjoy in your work, that there is humor in it and a certain irony.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

When I think of doing something, there's always the humorous aspect or I probably wouldn't get the idea of [00:20:00] doing it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, this is the exact opposite of the seriousness of abstract expressionism, which, to a degree, comes out of the soul with a gesture and the whole psychology of the personality.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I don't put that down, of course, because I think that they were serious. I don't think that my art isn't serious. I think the subjects are not serious or my treatments of the subjects are not serious. But then I'm also putting down subject, because like the abstract expressionists, I don't think the subject is important.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I think that's one of the things one enjoys about your series with the brush strokes. Again, the brush stroke is the thing you identify with the abstract expressionists. And here you've isolated it and made it into a total abstraction of its own, quite unrelated to —

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, a completely different kind of work, yeah. I think the humor is really — the fact that I take a completely romantic subject and do a very tight, classical painting with it.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Could you tell us a little how you work when you first start in? You start with a drawing [00:21:00] or a reproduction?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I usually start with a drawing. And I generally project it in an opaque projector on the canvas, draw it off on the canvas. I redraw it a lot. I mean, I just — because my projection is very crude. It's a very small drawing I'm starting with. And I start painting as much as I can paint. And then I collage on the painting and have sheets of color and sheets of stripes or dots. Everything that I need, pretty much. Black tape for the black line. Whatever it is that I have to collage on, I do. And then if I think I have it right, I paint. And then I collage some more and so forth. That's usually the way I work.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

How do you determine scale?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I think about scale before I start. How big should this thing be?

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Some are very conventional, and some are huge.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah. I'm a little afraid of blowing up something unnecessarily. I know people think that what I do is big. Because a picture of a girl's head will be larger than life size. But it isn't really [00:22:00] a large painting as paintings go.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I'm thinking in terms of large canvases, which are really murals, like *Preparedness*, for example

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, that's a big theme.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It's a big theme.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

And it's supposed to be a sort of post-office mural size thing.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Preparedness has to do with the meaning of war and relationships of war in our society today.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

It's pseudo-patriotic.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Again, a certain irony in the presentation.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yes. (laughs)

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

And the other big one that I remember, *Peace Through Chemistry*, which is a wonderful title.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, I know. It's so unlikely. But it's very much the same idea. It reminds me of murals done in the '30s.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

WPA?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, mm-hmm. Except they never went that far. They tend to be patriotic, but these have more art deco style in them than most post office murals did.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Tell me, how did you get interested in the art deco style, which I think you see very much in your later things and also in your sculpture?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I think it's a logical pop [00:23:00] theme. But I guess because it's a perversion of cubism — it's like cubism for the home or cubism for industry. Or an alliance between industry and the arts and all sorts of improbable ideas. And I like art periods that have a very important purpose in the eyes of the people doing it. And particularly when they didn't work out too well, like futurism or purism. Perversions of cubism, which I think really had important meaning at the time.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Or identified with architecture as a kind of constructivist.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah. It was such a view of the world where machinery and man would provide the needs for all. And everything didn't seem to work out. Again, the theme comes into it. I mean, only drawing a few half circles and triangles and so forth. But beneath all of that is a purpose that's so enormous. That contradiction between the important purpose and the sort of meager art is something that's interesting to work with.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I've always been admiring [00:24:00] of the economy with which you get this idea of art deco. The repetition of one, two, and three.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Three. They're always getting bigger or smaller or —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Yeah, and then the half-circle, which is interrupted, say, with a frame. Or the interruption with another set of circles or half-circles or triangles.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

There are very few symbols in art deco [sometimes?]. When I got interested in it, I started to get as much material as I could on it. And everything just seems to be a variation of something else. It seems to be three or four motifs, and they're used in different ways. But there's almost nothing else. Parallel lines and —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

The wavy line, which is repeated.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Wavy line repeated. Everything is repeated three times or five times.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

It's very highly stylized.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Mm-hmm.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I suppose the landmark we all think of is the top of the Chrysler Building or the front of Rockefeller Center as far as the decorative aspects of it are concerned. But you see this very much in your explosions, for example. Or the woman with vase, [00:25:00] which ought to remind you of [Leger?], but doesn't. I suppose everyone asks you if you were influenced by Leger.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, I don't think so. I think that it just happens to look alike, because he was interested in man and industry and —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Machines.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Machines. I realized that Europeans think I'm very much like Leger. I don't think I am. I never really liked his work until fairly recently.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

I noticed you have one on your wall, which is very handsome.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

In my mind, he was overshadowed by Picasso and Matisse. My interest in Leger was not strong. But I realized that he's sort of fun-loving, let's say, in his work. Much less grave than I thought he was.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Of course, there's one basic difference in his work and yours. Yours is flat, where his is tubular in so many of his works. But you use tubular forms in your sculpture.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

A little bit. But most of the sculpture is pretty flat, too.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Well, it's either flat — a combination of flat or tubes.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I've been doing some things that you could characterize as tubular. I think that that's just a value modulation [00:26:00] from left to right. (laughs)

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Do you like to do sculpture?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I don't do it very much. I haven't done it for a long time. I do like to do it, to answer you question. But it has to fit in with what I'm working on. And there's only been a few periods where sculpture seemed to work out for me. The cups and saucers and things like that. Ceramic and the art deco. Actually, I was pretty unaware of the fact that there really was sculpture that looked like that. Because so much art deco has been put in the attic or taken away. It's only come out recently. And I was really using railings and —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Velvet ropes?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Things like that —

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Mirrors?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

— that I saw in movie theaters that were not actually sculpture. But since so much art deco sculpture has come to be seen, I realize they really did the same thing.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

You worked in many, many techniques. Of course, one particular popular technique was the use of banners, which to some degree art pop articles in themselves. And you've also worked in prints.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, mm-hmm. [00:27:00]

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Are you working in them now?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Yeah, mm-hmm. Doing a series of entablature prints now with Ken Tyler. And I'm doing some things for tapestries, too. What I do is a collage. And what they do is a tapestry from it. And I'm not taking credit for doing the banners as such or the tapestries.

Guggenheim Museum Archives Reel-to-Reel collection
Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen, 1975

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

Then you're not really so much interested in the technique of the particular media.

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

I have to know what it'll look like. But I'm not personally involved in the technique.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

We referred earlier, I think, to the fact that pop art — if you can describe it as a movement — was a reaction against abstract expressionism. Now, how do you feel as to the future of pop art? Has it disappeared? Will it disappear? Will it go onto something different and more meaningful?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

First, let me say that I don't think that it was meant to be a reaction to abstract expressionism. I think that it had entirely different viewpoint and looks entirely different. But I mean, I don't think the people involved were [00:28:00] anti-abstract expressionism. As for its future, I think it's like most movements. It has a high point, which is usually the very beginning of it. And it tends to become less intense. I think that as a movement it becomes less and less possible certainly for other people to join it. I don't have any reason to perpetuate it or anything. I mean, I'm doing what I'm doing, and I don't care whether it's pop or it isn't pop. And there's no way for me to see the power of my own work or something. So I don't know whether it's going up or down, if that interests anybody.

LOUISE AVERILL SVENDSEN

What would you like to convey with your art in the next few years? What direction are you aiming for?

ROY LICHTENSTEIN

Well, I think very much the same thing. Whatever feeling I have about things I see, I try to — it's pop in general. But in specifics, it's a different thing for each thing I do.

END OF AUDIO FILE

9009088_01_edited-Interview-with-Roy-Lichtenstein-by-Louise-Averill-Svendsen.mp3

Interview with Roy Lichtenstein by Louise Averill Svendsen. 1975/8/21. Reel-to-Reel collection. A0004. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum Archives, New York