

*Transcript of an interview with Julia Boyd, conducted by Don Dale, Public Affairs Assistant Manager, at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts in Richmond, Virginia circa 1985/1986.*

*Boyd was the Gallery Coordinator and later Director of the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) from 1980-1984, before becoming the Assistant and then Associate Curator of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art from 1984-1992.*

JB: I don't mind talking to you for a minute.

DD: Okay.

JB: But what about?

DD: That's fine.

JB: Isn't it nice today?

DD: It is, it's a beautiful day. Okay, what this is about, is for Joe Blow out in Roanoke or, we've got them in Gate City and Rural Retreat, Virginia. We've got...

JB: These are your noontime things? [*Art on the Air*] No?

DD: These are. They play any time of the day. They're all over.

JB: They're just news releases?

DD: Audio, yeah, and what I'm doing is a little series talking to each of the curators about buying art in their field. You know, like Joe [Dye, Curator of Asiatic Art] about what a good deal it is now to buy Indian art. Fred [Brandt, Curator of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art] will be, you know...how expensive it is to collect big name contemporary art. Pinkney [Near, Chief Curator], about how, you know, you just can't afford to buy European art, masterpieces anymore. But you...you have one of the fields that is really collectable and if somebody wants to start collecting art, has never collected art before, what sort of things do they need to know before they start? What do they have to think about? You know, like where they're going to put it? What they like? How do you get started?

JB: Are we...

DD: Yeah...

JB: If you've never collected anything before, I would...and, and, you're going to do something in a somewhat serious way...in other words, you're going to commit a certain amount of money that perhaps you never considered committing, and it doesn't have to be a large amount of money, I would advise the person to look at a number of similar kinds of work first, just to start



to understand what makes something worth your attention. Why is this piece better than that piece? So I would, I would advise them to go to a number of exhibitions, go to a number of galleries, museums, that this type of work might be in, or, if they know an artist, go to see the artist, and, and see a larger body of work than just one painting, for example. Just so that you get a sense of why something is successful or why it's not successful.

DD: Is it successful because you like it? Is that the important thing?

JB: Well, I think everybody's eye and mind and sensibilities are drawn to certain kinds of things which are ingrained in them because of early experiences, or because of training, or because of intellectual makeup. But for whatever reasons, we're all drawn to certain kinds of things. Some people like more geometric things because they seem...they can understand them perhaps better than something that's more emotionally constructed, more sensuous, more abstract, shall we say. But I think, I think anybody who starts collecting, and becomes more and more interested in the subject of whatever it is they're collecting, becomes more interested in work that is more difficult, things that aren't so easily grasped in one look. And that is the thing that I'm getting at. In going and looking and becoming acquainted with the subject and then becoming immersed in the subject, you set up a set of criteria for yourself on which to judge the object, by which to judge the object.

DD: How, how expensive is it? And where? Where can you start?

JB: Well, of course, it depends on what you want to collect. There are prints that are relatively reasonable, and they used to be a lot more reasonable than they are now.

DD: Nothing is reasonable.

JB: Nothing is reasonable anymore. It used to be that you could collect wonderful craft objects that had just terrific presence and very interestingly made for a very reasonable amount of money. But even, even craft objects...which are no different than any art object, I mean, they are art just like anything else in the field, are not always so reasonable anymore. It depends on the level of expertise of the artist, depends on, in some cases, where you buy it.

DD: My theory when I was buying...

JB: ...it depends upon the medium. Paintings, for example, and sculpture are usually much more expensive than prints or drawings or craft objects.

DD: I always knew that I wanted something from the ICA, when I was buying from the ICA...when I would walk by it and then I would go away from it.

JB: It just would hit you.

DD: And then I would remember it.



JB: Right, that's usually a very good sign.

DD: So...

JB: Something that nags at the back of your mind. You turn your back on it, and the image still comes forward to you, and you remember very specific things about it. You know...you have... you remember in detail your experiencing of that object. That's usually a very good sign. Sometimes, a good sign is that it stays in your mind, but you hated it. [Laughter] And it keeps coming back and coming back, so you go back and you reconsider it, and all of a sudden, you realize why you were hating it, and it's nagging at you for reasons that were good reasons. It has some sort of content that is worth considering, some kind of content that makes you think, that challenges you.

DD: Is an educational background in art important?

JB: I think it helps. But the main thing is to be open to different kinds of experiences. People collect art for many reasons. Some people collect art to decorate their houses. Some people collect art because it's beautiful. Other people collect art, particularly a lot of different kinds of contemporary art, which aren't always so beautiful, because of the challenge that it brings to them. These are objects that come from their culture. They say something about their culture and their time. And they like to be connected to that. I would say that probably most people collect because they like to be connected to the past. But people who collect seriously, collect contemporary art, like being connected to the present.

DD: You've been all over the state twice now on "Un/Common Ground" exhibitions, so you're almost in a unique position, you and your co-workers, to know what's available out there. Are we lucky to be...if we find a collector, am I lucky to be in Virginia?

JB: There's an enormous reservoir of...of art in this state on many different levels, and there are a lot of serious artists living in places that aren't, you know, highly urbanized. And they're all out there in their studios producing work in a very disciplined, very impressive sort of way.

DD: And making national names for themselves?

JB: Not necessarily.

DD: But some of them are.

JB: But seriously involved in what they're doing. They're not Sunday painters, for example. And some, yes, some, well I don't know...national name implied to me a huge exposure. And very few people have that opportunity anymore, the way the art market is. You know, the art market concentrates on a relatively small number of names and gives them all sorts of accolades. And it's becoming increasingly harder to get into some sort of...to get attention in large places like New York.



DD: What kind of mistakes do beginning collectors make?

JB: They buy things that are...that they outgrow intellectually.

DD: I know that feeling.

JB: They buy things for the wrong reasons. And then, they grow because they've watched and looked and learned. And they realize that the thing that attracted them early on, has lost its charm. It was...it was an easy take, as it were, and it has exhausted what it had to say.

DD: Do you...do you...does that happen to you?

JB: It has happened to me.

DD: It's nothing to be ashamed of.

JB: I think it's perfectly normal. It's just a learning process.

DD: What did you do, then? Sell it? Throw it away? [Laughter]

JB: Throw it away?

DD: Go buy something else?

JB: Go buy something else and learn from that. And hopefully, it wasn't an expensive lesson to learn.

DD: Should collectors try to start with a theme or...

JB: No, I think that would be a mistake because you don't always know what you're going to find out there. Your tastes and your abilities to make judgments change all the time. It's...it's like any intellectual activity, you know. Your...your curiosity about the subject deepens as you get more and more involved with it. You have no idea how your mind is going to turn down a path one day. So I would think it would be very limiting to say, well, I've got a little expendable income now, let's collect fish themes or something like that. You might have a wonderful collection but think of all the things you've missed along the way.

DD: Because it didn't have a fish in it.

JB: That's right. So, I would never advise that. And I think, you know, if you find one day that you want to make a change, there are always friends who would love to receive that painting that you bought that you don't like anymore. And it's a perfectly decent sort of thing to do, or you can, I suppose, depending on what the object is, you can always resell it through a gallery. But you ought not to buy things because you think you're going...going to resell them. Unless you're in the...

[Phone rings]

JB: ...high rolling ...

DD: Go ahead...collect with the idea of reselling or the beginning collector shouldn't...

JB: I don't think that's a realistic way to collect art. I think you ought to collect it just because it satisfies something in you. And very few people can resell art, realistically...can resell art with any sort of financial gain, unless they're dealing with really top grade, blue chip work.

DD: What are the joys, I'm talking about personally, now, about yourself...what are the joys of collecting? What does it add to your life?

JB: Well, I don't collect.

DD: Not at all?

JB: No...

DD: You work with a lot of people that collect. What are the joys... lean back over here so we can connect...what are the joys for the collector? What does it bring to his life?

JB: Well, I think...I think our lives are...are based so much on experiences mediated by other people or mediated by television, newspapers, whatever, that whatever we can do to...to have some sort of a genuine emotional response, preferably to human beings, but, equally interestingly with objects that have some sort of meaning, some sort of content, some sort of connection not only to ourselves but to others who have made them or live in the culture with them, or to the culture within which it was made, can enrich our lives. Now, not all of us can afford to buy an African mask, which would be an easy example of that. But you can easily and affordably buy a drawing or buy a beautifully crafted bowl, buy a painting, and have a sense that what you have is...is an object that is not like any other object. It's not the same as looking at, at an offset lithograph of an image in another medium, or it's not like looking at a stack of eighty-five dishes that are all the same...although sometimes dishes produced like that become very collectable and expensive. It's looking at an object that is not only unique but has visual features unlike any other.

DD: Is your field expensive?

JB: It can be terribly expensive.

DD: Your field can also be one of the cheaper ones, too.

JB: Well, it again, it depends on what kind of object it is, and it depends on who made it. I mean, Jasper Johns' paintings are going for millions of dollars now. A drawing, a Jasper Johns'



drawing sells for a million dollars. A drawing!! So you can imagine what his prints are selling for now, especially older ones.

DD: And yet, somebody new, who's just getting started, is inexpensive by comparison.

JB: Oh, yes, well, you can get a very nice painting by an artist who has some regional reputation for...depending on how much reputation, of course, and how...what quality the work is, from as little as, say, three hundred dollars to as much as six or seven thousand dollars for...for a fairly established artist. And those prices, of course, are going up just like everything else is.

DD: But you would say to the beginning collector, go for it?

JB: Jump in! But buyer beware. I mean, if you're dealing with a seven thousand dollar painting, I would not advise starting at that level until you feel fairly confident. And if you don't feel confident but you really want to have those kinds of objects that are just not like anything else, not like anybody else's, there are people who can advise you. Find a gallery that...that you feel comfortable in, whose work you think is...is of superior quality. Find someone in the gallery that you trust. Talk to artists. Get to know artists. Find out what they're thinking about. Why they're making work the way they are. Go to openings. Hear what other people say. Talk to other collectors. Maybe identify somebody who is a few steps ahead of you, but in an area that you are interested in and see what they've done, and that will get you started.

