

Transcript of an oral history interview with Judith Godwin (born 1930), conducted by Sarah Eckhardt, Associate Curator of Modern and Contemporary Art, at Judith's home in New York, New York on May 20, 2012.

Godwin is a painter who is closely connected to Abstract Expressionism and the New York School. She began her career in New York in the 1950s and has been working and exhibiting ever since.

SE: Where in Virginia did you grow up?

JG: Suffolk, Virginia.

SE: How did you decide to go to art school in Richmond?

JG: After Mary Baldwin [University]. I went to Mary Baldwin first and then I decided I wanted to try to be a painter and I knew that RPI [Richmond Professional Institute] was the leading school probably at that point, in the country, for art and so I went there.

SE: So when you were at RPI did you work with Theresa Pollak?

JG: Yes. And I worked with Theresa for quite some time, and of course I had other people that I worked with. Maurice Bonds, of course, and [Wolfgang] Behl was the sculpture professor, and Jewett Campbell. I did a lot of fresco work with him and egg tempera. Let's see. And then of course we had to take jewelry making and pottery, lithograph, silkscreen, all of the arts. And we had to learn anatomy and for one of our exams we had to do a drawing of a human being with all of the muscles and ligaments and whatever. It was sort of interesting, but rather difficult to remember all that stuff.

SE: You had a...

JG: And we had to carry a lithograph stone up three flights of stairs!

SE: How often?

JG: Every time we had class.

SE: Really?

JG: Mm-hmm.

SE: You had another wonderful story about rules for women. One of them was about wearing a skirt in the cafeteria. Can you tell that story?

JG: I had a studio class in the morning and then I had lunch and directly after that period I had sculpture, which was across Franklin Street at the time, behind one of the houses in sort of a garage area. And, I never had time really to have lunch and so I would go to my dorm to the back door, Ritter-Hickok [House], I had the last room on the first floor so I was directly at the back door, and I would run in the back door, take off my jeans, have to put on a skirt, and run to the cafeteria, eat quickly, run back to my dorm at Ritter-Hickok, change back into my work jeans and dash across the street behind this building to the studio. And I thought this just didn't quite make sense! And I decided that I didn't think that was such a good idea.

So, I wore, straight from my class, jeans, and had a twenty minute lunch instead of a ten minute lunch. And there was a young lady in one of my classes and she would see me in the cafeteria and I don't think that she really thought I should be the one to do that. And so she went to the dean and reported me to the dean and I got a note from Margaret Johnson, who was the Dean [of Women], lovely woman, asking me to meet her in her office. So I went to the appointed time and she said, "Judith what have you done now?" [Laughter] And I said, "I have no idea! What have I done?" And she said, "I'm told you were wearing jeans in the cafeteria." And I said, "Yes! I did that. And I don't understand why the girls have to do that. Because they really don't have time to do it if they had class as quickly and as close to each other as I do." And I told her what my time was, and how, you know, how I had to work it, and she said, "Well I don't think that's right either." And I said, "So, are you telling me that I can keep doing it?" And she said, "Yes." And I said, "Well, would you please explain it to that young lady who reported me?" And she burst out laughing and she said, "I will be most happy to do that." So she considered her a little snitch I think at that point. And that changed the whole law for the school of the arts and women wearing blue jeans. That was my main, sort of, great gift I gave to RPI.

SE: And what year was that?

JG: Oh God, I don't know. '52? Something like that. '53, '52?

SE: That's a great story. And not terribly long ago, really. So when did you... First of all, tell me, you're in a photograph with [Richard] Dick Carlyon. You studied with him as well?

JG: Well, he was a student. He was in my classes with me.

SE: Right.

JG: We spent a lot of afternoons at Ritter-Hickok in the parlor, chatting, and you know, talking about everything. And he was a very close friend of mine, very close. One of my, I guess, my best friend at VCU [Virginia Commonwealth University]. At RPI.

SE: Talk a little bit about what it was like to study with Theresa Pollak.

JG: It was interesting. She was pleasant. And she would ask me to monitor when she had to go out for some reason or other. And she would always say, "Now Judith, you make them behave!"



And I would say, “I’ll give it a go!” So we were sort of friends. Jewett Campbell is one of the teachers who insisted that I go to Provincetown and he insisted that of course I go to New York and at that time my first teacher at the Art Students’ League was Will Barnet who became a very good friend, and the first man to take me out in New York City. I knew absolutely no one in New York when I came.

SE: And that was at the...

JG: I stayed at the Barbizon [Hotel for Women]. And I had invited Martha Graham through the Athletic Association at Mary Baldwin to come to Mary Baldwin and give a performance, she was on tour. And I thought she was just wonderful. And the girls up there had never seen modern dance and the President okay’d it and she was invited and she came and I was able to spend quite a lot of time with her and she made me promise that I would look her up when I came to New York. And I did. And I went to every one of her performances and always went back and said hello and we became good friends. And I adore modern dance.

SE: And you have a painting that’s titled for her, *Ode to Martha Graham*.

JG: Mm-hmm.

SE: 1956, I think.

JG: She was a wonderful woman, really fantastic woman.

SE: And when did you study with Hans Hofmann, then?

JG: I went from my time at the Art Students’ League, that summer, I went to Hofmann.

SE: Ok, and when was that? Did you say 195..?

JG: I don’t remember the year, really.

SE: That you went from the Art Students’ League to...

JG: It would have been in the 50’s, you know, mid 50’s probably.

SE: And so you have some good stories about....

JG: And then I came back to New York and studied with him on 8th Street in his studio on 8th Street. So I studied with him that summer and then that fall in New York.

SE: And how do you think... You still remember pretty clearly some of his lessons. Can you describe any of those?

JG: [Laughter] Everybody talks about the push/pull! And I never really... I mean I understood what it was all about, but it wasn’t, it wasn’t my main thing with him. I think the main thing with

Hofmann was that I felt completely free to do whatever I wanted to do. And not pay any attention to anything except just relax and do what I wanted to do. And I think that that was one of the main things that... I mean we did drawings. We had a drawing that we had to hang onto and work on for a week! One drawing, you kept erasing and doing it over and erasing and doing it over and he would come by and critique a bit, and he was an interesting man. He didn't talk very much, but I think that, and I think I've said this when I was on a lecture at the Metropolitan Museum, that without his wife Miz, I don't think the man could have accomplished as much as he did. And it's amazing because I don't think, maybe people now think about how their wives take care of them, but Miz did everything! She greeted every student that came, she wrote all the letters to them, she usually entertained them, she did all – I mean, what do women do? – all the laundry, all the grocery shopping, all the cooking, mostly. Everything. All the gardening, she did. They had a beautiful garden out front of the house, and she took care of the repairs. She did everything. And he was able to do nothing but work and paint. And that really is something extraordinary. Maybe it's different now with wives.

SE: Yes and no.

JG: Okay [Laughter]. You speak for yourself!

SE: I think it depends on the situation and the relationship.

JG: Yes. Anyway, she was such a great help, and when I said that at the panel discussion, the women all applauded and a couple of them stood up [Laughter] so some of those artists' wives in that auditorium knew what I was talking about.

SE: And you talk about also the idea that you should be able to frame different sections...

JG: Yes, he told me, he said, "Judith, you go to a painting and you take your hands and make a picture frame. And if you can do it in certain areas on the painting and that's a good, that is a separate painting – that area – if it holds up and works as a separate painting, the whole thing must be terrific." And I've done it so many times. And it sort of pleases you, if you come upon that in your own work, you know. I guess I showed you.

SE: Right, so that each piece can function on its own, each section, but it coheres.

JG: Yes, you can cut it and frame it and it would be a little painting.

SE: It's certainly true within your works, I've tested it. Do you have any other stories that would describe what it was like to be a female painter in New York in the 1950s?

JG: Well I'm sure everybody has heard...

[Pause in the recording]

SE: I asked you what it was like to be a woman artist in New York in the 1950s and 60s.



JG: Well, maybe some women had different experiences. I can't speak for everybody of course.

SE: Sure.

JG: But it was sort of unfortunate to a lot of women because if you didn't have money or you didn't have male connections that knew people who could introduce you to people, it wasn't so easy to break into, you know, the group, as it were. And they would just... as everyone knows who they were, the guys, and I would go to the Cedar Bar by myself at night because I knew that's where all the artists hung out and stand at the bar and order a beer or something and just hang around for a while and [Franz] Kline would often come in and he'd sit in a booth and a couple of times he would motion to me to come on over, and he was a very nice man, a very nice guy, very sweet. And I was fortunate enough with a friend to get his house when he passed away from his estate. So I was really happy about that because he was such a nice guy.

And [James] Jim Brooks was awfully nice to me, an extraordinary man. He and [his wife] Charlotte would have me for dinner, I don't know why. We just sort of started talking at an opening or something, and I think they knew I was alone and from the South somewhere and didn't know very much, so they would invite me over and gradually you start going to openings because the openings would be all on the same night along 57th Street. You'd go from one gallery to another gallery to another gallery and of course you got to see the same people all the time and you chatted and so you made friends that way. But for a woman to be taken seriously was a very difficult thing. You were maybe the wife of a well-known painter, but you weren't able necessarily, unless you really lucked out, to have some sort of career as a painter.

SE: Sure. And you mentioned earlier that it was Jim Brooks that invited you to participate in the Stable [Gallery Annual] show.

JG: Oh yes, that was a wonderful thing that he did. Because they were the top guys, and I don't know if I was the only woman but maybe one of the two women who might have been known were in it. And that was a really lovely thing he did for me.

SE: Was that the late '50s?

JG: Mm-hmm.

SE: Can you talk a little bit about Betty Parsons and Section 11?

JG: Betty asked me to join her gallery and that was because of an introduction to her from Kenzo Okada. Kenzo Okada was a well-known Japanese painter and he was in lots of well-known collections and he and his wife Kimi[ko] became good friends of mine. They lived nearby in the Village. And of course where I lived was in the meat market. And girls would not go out after a certain time at night, because it was really a pretty rough, you know, beyond 8th Avenue, you know, it was dangerous.



SE: And you still live in the same neighborhood.

JG: Yes. Too many people now, too many dress shops, too many designers, too many *actors*.

SE: So, Betty invited you to join her gallery about when she opened Section 11.

JG: Yes, about '58 I guess.

SE: I think it was '58 when she opened Section 11 which was her new gallery that focused on younger artists, right?

JG: Near hers, just a few doors down from hers.

SE: From the Betty Parsons Gallery.

JG: Mm-hmm. And the director was Ray Izbicki, and Ray and I became good friends. My first show with Betty, she opened it with...

SE: It was Agnes Martin...

JG: Cindy Wolfson and David Budd and I opened the gallery. And that night, that afternoon, rather, before the opening, Ray called me and I answered the phone, and he said, "Judith, what's wrong?" And I said, "Why do you think something's wrong?" And he said, "No, what's wrong, seriously?" And I said, "I can't breathe." [Laughter] And he said, "Judith you're having an anxiety attack. Sit down!" And I said, "Okay," so I sat down and he sort of just waited and I said, "I'm okay, Ray" and he said, "No you're not, you just stay where you are and I'll hang on." He was a very sweet guy. And so he sort of talked me through my anxiety before the opening.

SE: And what was his last name again?

JG: Izbicki.

SE: Izbicki. Ray Izbicki.

JG: Yes. He had a telephone, and he hooked up a field telephone that you crank in the Army. I mean you crank these things, and he ran the wire, I've forgotten now how he did it, he explained it to me, out the back window of the gallery, to Betty's gallery and so whenever we would want to talk to Betty he would [Laughter] crank the phone and we'd talk to her on a field telephone. Didn't have to pay the telephone company.

SE: That's a good story. And what do you remember about Betty?

JG: She was very serious but she could have fun, no question about it. But she was serious about the business and we had good times together. She would come down for dinner and we would go with the Okadas – she liked Kenzo and Kimi very much. And we would go out for Japanese picnics over to New Jersey and we'd stop the car – I had a beat up old Plymouth – we'd stop the

car on the road... this was a long time ago, so one could do this kind of thing then, in the 50's. We'd stop the car and go in a farm or something and have a picnic and Kimi would be very good about that. All Japanese food. And she would bring tablecloths and blankets and whatever and everything, sake, the whole thing. And then we would go on to Nakashima, George Nakashima, the very wonderful wood furniture maker, to his place and visit with him. And then drive back. And of course I'd take my dogs, so it was fun. Couldn't possibly do that now.

SE: And what about... what made Betty's gallery different? Do you think she played a different role in the art world, as far as a dealer?

JG: Yes, she was the first really serious woman about abstract painting, I think. And that's what her gallery showed.

SE: And just as far as the number of other women artists she was showing as well, right?

JG: Yes. I was probably the youngest woman she had, but she had some very good artists. Ethel Schwabacher, and lots of, but not a whole lot... I mean she didn't have a big stable like a lot of galleries do now. And Sidney Janis was across the hall in his gallery and he took a couple paintings from Betty which she was upset about.

SE: Yes, that relationship went south after a while, right?

JG: Mm-hmm.

SE: Or got complex, maybe I should say.

JG: Yes.

SE: What drew you to abstraction, would you say, as far as the style you chose to work in?

JG: I don't think I chose anything, I think it just happened. At Mary Baldwin we had to paint plaster casts and things. And when you got, when I got to RPI, I mean we had live models and some of them nude, I remember one model we had. I still have the painting I did of her. And I'd never seen a live model before, so, and I suppose I worked on certain things, and at Hofmann we made planes out of figures, some of those paintings you've seen, abstract, I think it's called "The Man and The Woman," the big planes, and I just started sort of doing that before I even went to Hofmann because you can see the body as planes. And it just evolved. I don't think that I decided I was going to be an abstract painter.

I have a painting that I did when I was twelve, and it's a little vase of flowers, and I love that little thing. It's so child-like, you know. And I did some watercolors of scenes and houses and whatever and streets and trees, so it was just something that happened. And I didn't know it was happening until it just started happening. And that's when Jewett Campbell said that I really should study with Hofmann. When I first came up here, to New York, I studied at the Art Students' League, I told you that. And with Vaclav Vytlacil and he was sort of in the same sort

of territory that Hofmann was in. Not as well-known as Hofmann, and he was very good. I have one of his little drawings. And from the Art Students' League, I went to Hofmann that summer.

SE: And you've been remarkably consistent throughout your career, in using this expressive gesture. Can you speak at all about...

JG: I'm hampered a little bit with arthritis now...

SE: Yes, that's true, it's probably harder to get the tops of the canvases! But you've been very persistent with that. Is there any way you could, I mean obviously the visual is the best way, given that they're paintings, but do you have any words to describe what it feels like or why you've continued to work... what that abstract vocabulary means to you?

JG: I don't know if it's... what do you mean by vocabulary, specifically?

SE: Almost like a set, like a language, you have a particular visual language that you use that you really push and you say new things with it.

JG: I'm not thinking I'm doing it, if that's what you... no, I'm not thinking I'm doing it. I just have something maybe in the back of my mind, and usually they are, sort of, not explosive things, movements, but movements. I think it has a lot to do with the dance. I love ballet, I love contemporary dance, I love all dance. And I think I could never be a dancer, I was much too shy. Martha Graham wanted me to come and study with her, and I said, "Martha, I'll faint if you move me or do anything. I'm gonna just collapse. I'm so in awe of what you do." And I think that I really am in love with dance. And I think that that probably is what the movement is. I don't know. I really don't know why I do it. I don't know.

SE: Well that helps describe the process, though, a little bit. Where do you begin? Where does an idea come from?

JG: Different things, everything.

SE: And then it's sort of an act of translation would you say?

JG: Probably, something like that.

SE: And what about, could you talk a little bit about the drip? You've done some remarkable things with drips in your paintings from the beginning of the '50s throughout your entire career, it's just amazing how you... they're spontaneous and yet you're very deliberate in the way you use them.

JG: I just like the way they go, and the way they look, and they look different, I mean they just look different from if I made a line, and I like that sort of flowing. That might have something to do with movement too, in a way.

SE: Well it seems like it, because it looks, you can correct me if I'm wrong, as if you turn the canvas...

JG: Yes, I do.

SE: ...in some of these that a drip line begins and then you turn the canvas to change the direction.

JG: Yes.

SE: And you must then...

JG: Think I need it to go that way.

SE: Yes. And you must play with the consistency of the paint to make it a little bit looser on some of these, so that they flow a bit more.

JG: Oh sure. Yes, I put a little bit more on that spot and then are able to drip it.

SE: And what about...

JG: And then I do throw paint. And paint with my fingers. [Laughter]

SE: So its brush, throw, splatter...

JG: All that stuff.

SE: Can you speak a little bit about palette? It seems as if you maybe were a little bit brighter at the beginning of the '50s and then a little more subdued and then maybe in the '70s and '80s, it sort of, more color came back in.

JG: It's probably my personal life somehow but I have no idea what it was.

SE: And do you...

JG: Maybe I wasn't as depressed at one point, I don't know. And after a few anti-depressants, I felt much better and felt like orange and yellow and red.

SE: And what about titles? Do the titles come to you at the end or do they reflect what inspired the work?

JG: Both ways.

SE: So, for example, the ode to Martha Graham...

JG: Was deliberate, yes. And usually some movement that she made or a dance that I had seen, one of her things that I had seen.

SE: And what about Kenzo Okada, what were you thinking about?

JG: I was thinking about Kenzo!

SE: What about, you have a very particular palette in that painting. Was there anything?

JG: Well, I felt sort of... the colors I had seen in Japan when I was there. I had a show in Japan, and I had traveled there and he and Kimi had been very nice and taken me around and introduced me to people, and all of that. And so I guess I solved some of the liking of some of the color and I felt that was oriental, probably, something like that.

SE: Sure.

JG: Nothing weird, or fascinating.

SE: So maybe to close, I should ask would you have any advice to young...

JG: Oh my God! I can't advise anybody about anything! I act like I can but I know I can't!
[Laughter]

SE: Is there anything else you'd want a Virginia audience in particular to know?

JG: It was hard for a young girl from Virginia to come to New York not knowing a soul, and try to do something that wasn't easy for women to do. But I think they should all give it a go.

SE: Can you talk a little bit about Dorothy [Canning] Miller?

JG: She was extraordinary. Very attractive woman, very knowledgeable woman, very much in love with what she did. And was highly regarded. And she became a friend of mine later on. I was much too shy to go up and say, "Hello, I'm so and so, you know, let's talk," or anything like that. And I missed out on quite a bit I think, because I was so shy. And only now, since I'm ancient, I don't mind doing anything anymore. But she became a good friend and she would often come down to my place and when I would come back from home I would bring ham biscuits, you know, I'd bring Smithfield ham and homemade biscuits and I'd call her and I'd say, "Dorothy, I came back with ham and biscuits." "I'll be right over Judith!" [Laughter] So I got to know her quite well and it was because I really liked her. Because at that point she had resigned from the Museum [of Modern Art], and so I couldn't be, you know, thought of as having tried to work something out with her in the Museum, but she was lovely and I really thoroughly enjoyed knowing her.

I can't think of anything else to talk about, except now it's time to go have a drink.