

When I first thought of working with the figure, I was in college when everyone was painting like de Kooning. And when I started with the figure it was in a sort of a West Coast way, until I went out to the West Coast and became very disenchanted with that whole approach. The thing that really started me was that I was doing some drawings of the Palace of Fine Arts, the exhibition building, from some fair that they'd had in San Francisco down on the Marina, designed by Maybeck. He was a Frank Lloyd Wright sort of guy, around the early part of the century. Anyway he had this incredible building that he had done, a sort of neo-classical pavilion made out of stucco and with urns at the entrance. I had been doing some drawings of these very ornamental-looking urns, and I was thinking that they were like women, they were in some way a kind of metaphor for the function of a woman, full or empty and so on. And so I started doing a series of paintings in which I simplified the woman and did women and urns together, and then started trying to add other objects which would support the female form and yet allow me to do a lot of pictorial things that maybe an urn wouldn't allow me to do like fruit, flowers, vegetable forms. Sometimes they're meant to be metaphors for the female, sometimes they're meant to be phallic. And then I had a concern with the problem that everyone else is concerned with; how to paint on a flat surface after Cezanne. For a long time I tried to paint these things like Cezanne — like Cezanne through Jasper Johns — you know how he'll handle the paint in that almost Cezannesque way. Of course

it was impossible, it was just a ridiculous way to paint. So about three years ago, I started doing this business of step up of values — step up, step down, either in intensity of colour or in light/dark, in value. All of a sudden I found a way to fit everything in. This is like you're decorating the top of a cake and you're placing all the almonds and glazed fruit. So all of a sudden it was very easy to place things around, which it hadn't been before. Before it was always seeing them in pictorial terms, and once I found a way to articulate the things and set them down, all the images I'd been working with for eight years or so, but couldn't really make anything out of, fell into place.

I started tracing everything, Michaelangelo, Botticelli and it was a great help because I began to understand the different ways things were distributed. You are taught to look at a painting in a pictorial way; you look at a painting and you analyse it as though it was a Poussin. If you look at a girl you could analyse her as though she was a Poussin. We have a certain way of looking at paintings, we're educated to look at them a certain way, so it's very hard as painters not to compose in the same way. And I wonder if you can compose that way any more?

Matisse is, I guess, the biggest influence on me. Matisse's way of putting things together is the thing that excites me so much. It's very hard to get everything so that it falls into place — like the almonds on the cake. They have to be pressed in or they'll just fall off the top of the cake or something. I think it's mostly a problem of value. But it's also a problem of intensity of colour

too. Now for instance it's very important in things like how narrow a coloured line, say magenta, can I use? and have it read as colour, and not a line, because the main function of this thing is to give colour to the whole thing, and to give a kind of movement. And yet I wanted it as narrow as I could get it, but any narrower than that and you began to read it as line. Any wider it takes over. So that you do have to decide on things like that. That's what I like about the step up business you know, you're really painting something flat.

I've been toying with the idea of doing my own silk screens for about four years, because the way I'm working lends itself so much to silk screen. When I thought of working on this flat-on-flat thing, I realised this is a way of composing which is just made for silk screens. But I knew that to really learn to do these things the way I wanted to do them would mean maybe a year's effort on my part and I'm so busy making things that I just don't have a year to spend learning how to do silk screening.

So I think it's very important for painters to be working with craftsmen and exploring the possibilities of a medium that you couldn't really do on your own, either financially or technically, without a great expenditure of time or money.

**Robert Gordy**

**from a discussion on the  
Golden Days portfolio with  
Joseph Mashek  
Studio International  
December 1969**

NEW ORLEANS'

# Les Beaux-Arts

DECEMBER 1983  
TWO DOLLARS



# Interview Spéciale

**"One reason I think the old work went sour on me was that I ceased to have an idea of how to make it better and I'm enough of an American to think that one has to get better. You know, if not better, at least a kind of a sense of change which is one of the things that's most vital about a lot of art in America. But, with the new work, I have a feeling that it will get better and richer. I also like having the feeling though, that I don't have the slightest idea where it's going to go."**

# Robert Gordy

■ BY FRANKLIN ADAMS

When Susan Richardson telephoned and asked that I interview Bob Gordy for *Les Beaux-Arts*, my initial reaction was something on the order of "Who, me?" Then, when she assured me that she had indeed dialed the right number and that yes, she did mean me, I warmed instantly to the idea. I warmed to it, I think, for two separate but perhaps connected reasons: Bob would make the interview an easy task on the one

hand and, on the other hand, he would make it an interesting one, pregnant with personal insights about his work, indeed about the making of art in general.

Bob Gordy is a gentleman. He is also in my opinion, a very good artist. When I say that Bob Gordy is a gentleman, what I mean has nothing to do with posturings of refinement. And to in any way imply that he is a 'gentleman artist' would be about as far off the mark as one could get. He is very much a full-time professional, even though his ease of manner might belie that fact to one unaware of his dedication. His gentlemanliness has to do with the fact that he possesses, built in, true courtesy and good humor, honesty and humility, that he is indeed 'well met.' I have known him—though not nearly so well as I would care to—for quite a few years. I've paid attention to his work, seen his shows, once (and only recently) visited his studio, and from time to time chatted with him about the pains and joys of making art.

Bob Gordy shares a giant old raised cottage just off Esplanade Avenue with his friend of eighteen years, Frank Kennett. They both work there too, Kennett teaching ballroom dancing in a giant double-parlor studio on the main floor, Gordy painting and drawing in a studio in what was once the house's attic. Kennett is a sensationally

good teacher with a waiting list of would-be students, a busy man. Even so, he has found time to assist Gordy in many ways, including at times pulling the editions of silk-screen prints on which the latter's reputation as an artist has rested, at least in part.

The shrilly-barking little dog that I know from a year and a half of dancing lessons with Frank Kennett is missing when I arrive. Instead, Bob Gordy greets me at the door and offers a beer. In a few minutes we're upstairs in the eyrie that is his studio. It is a serious place, generous in scale and apart from the world. At its far end, bright and shiny, looms the printing press that is Bob's proud new acquisition. It is placed, on the advice of a structural engineer, precisely over a load-bearing wall that carries its weight down to the old house's foundations. It's a good thing that it is because its weight and dimensions approximate those of a small automobile. So did its cost, and Bob Gordy is not so successful or blasé as not to wince when he announces the fact. How such a piece of machinery got up there, piece by heavy piece, is yet another story. Its capabilities, in terms of precision and scale, lie at the physical, if not the spiritual heart of the art that Bob is making these days.

What he makes with it is what are called monoprints, and they're very different from the hard-edged acrylic paintings and the hard-edged silkscreen prints for which he was for so long known. On big sheets of white Formica, about forty by sixty inches, he paints images (mostly the heads and faces that illustrate this interview) in oil etching ink. When they're done, he places the Formica "plate" on the press, lays a giant sheet of paper on it, runs it through the press and transfers the image to the paper in an edition of one. The sheer size of the press (the biggest such press made) allows for a scale of imagery that is breathtaking.

This place is a real no-nonsense workshop—practical and unromantic, but it is the essence of what an artist's studio ought to be, for me at least—and for a moment before we begin, I wander around the space once again, envious, loving it. I'm reminded of Willem de Kooning telling about visiting Arshile Gorky's studio at number thirty-six Union Square and I take a deep breath and we sit down together and I have a sip of beer and Bob Gordy one of bourbon. We smile at each other, shrug, I push the button, test the machine, and we're off.

**FRANKLIN ADAMS:** Can we start at the beginning? For me, it was my baby doctor who started it all when I was three and a half. He looked at my drawings and announced to my parents that I was going to be an artist. From that moment forward, it was unquestioned. How did it begin with you?

**ROBERT GORDY:** It started really, I guess, when I was about eleven years old and my older brother took me by a house in New Iberia of a friend of his who was an amateur artist; you know, a fairly serious amateur artist, and I saw he was working on a painting and it was the first time I had ever really thought that someone could do a painting. I had drawn in school, been one of the people in my class who drew best, but it was the first time that I realized that someone could be an artist.

**FA:** ... That someone could grow up to be an artist, as a profession...

**RG:** Right, and it impressed me enormously; you know, the person doing painting in a studio and doing large paintings. I guess you could say he was the kind every small town has. You know, kind of the...

**FA:** The town artist?

**RG:** Yeah, the town artist, so to speak. Someone who seems funny to everybody else. And I remember he used to make a living by decorating shop windows and doing coats of arms and that sort of stuff and living with Mama. But, you know, it was really very exciting for me to realize that someone could do paintings and it was shortly after that that I started taking art lessons with the New Iberia Art Association.

**FA:** I was lucky myself to have had parents who were very supportive, at least up to a point when, as an adult, I started making stuff that they thought was weird and then the support flagged, but I had it for as long as I needed it. As a teacher, I've had a lot of students who had parents who were sadly unsupportive of them. I wonder were your parents supportive?

**RG:** Really quite supportive, in high school. I think less supportive when they realized this was what I was going to do as a life's work. But, during high school, quite supportive, and I was really very lucky. We started out being taught every Monday night in this kind of amateur group by various professors from USL who would drive down to New Iberia and do a kind of a criticism class, and we would do a painting every week and then that sort of stopped and Weeks Hall from New Iberia took over this little class. He was friendly with a couple of the women who were in this amateur group.

**FA:** This is when you were in high school?

**RG:** Yeah, when I was a sophomore in high school and, so that by the time I started studying with Weeks, I was really painting practically every day, and I've painted practically every day ever since. It was a very exciting time for me. When I was a senior in high school I won a big award at this national scholastic art exhibition in Pittsburgh. It was very funny because on the entry blanks you had to put the name of your art teacher and I didn't have an art teacher in school, so I had to put the name of my French teacher, Yolande Melançon, was her name.

**FA:** I remember when I was little and when I'd play with other kids and they'd threaten to go home if I didn't play the way they wanted to play, I'd say, "Well, okay," because I always had drawing to fall back on. You know, I liked to play with other kids and did, but they could never tryannize me because I always had that. It sounds like you might have had the same kind of childhood. I wonder in what respect being an artist or being on the way to being an artist might have made your childhood different?

**RG:** Yeah, like a lot of artists I always felt quite different from other people. I knew I was different. You know I don't think anyone would ever have the drive to be an artist, particularly from my background which was exceedingly unartistic, kind of middle-class, small southern town. I don't think I would ever have had the drive to do something like that if I hadn't realized that I didn't fit in. If I hadn't realized that New Iberia was the place I wanted to leave.

**FA:** It was connected to that?

**RG:** Oh, yeah. I had pretty intense fantasies about getting away from New Iberia and, you know, living in a more artistic environment, in New York, or in Europe, or something.

**FA:** And it's become New Orleans?

**RG:** Well, I think New Orleans might be the right distance between the world and the womb. It turned out, after living in lots of different places, to be the place I felt most comfortable in.

**FA:** Where else did you live?

**RG:** I lived in Mexico City and in San Francisco. I lived in Florence, Italy, on Ibiza. I taught in Kansas and in Vermont.

**FA:** So when is it you came and settled in New Orleans then?

**RG:** After I lived on Ibiza, I thought I would go back to New York, and then my mother was alone in New Iberia and I had friends here in New Orleans and I thought, well, I'll give New Orleans a try. Having lived in no place more than two years for eighteen years, I said to myself that I would force myself to stay for three years whether I liked it or not and it worked out fine. I think part of the reason it worked out fine was that my work began to focus and crystallize in a way that it had never done before.

**FA:** And then, in that sense, it didn't make any difference where you were?

**RG:** As long as my work was going well, it really didn't make a difference. Also, I realized by that time that my work was so eccentric. I mean, so un-mainstream and that there was really not much point in my being in a place like New York.

**FA:** When are we talking about?

**RG:** We're talking about twenty years ago. I moved here in late 1964, so nineteen years ago.

**FA:** I often remember the time when Dottie Gardner, who I think is our mutual friend, came out of a show of mine all aglow, and said to me that just being in there, as I think she put it, with my stuff, made her happy. Joyous, I think she said. And, I



Above: "Female Head," 24" x 18", monoprint

Right: Artist Robert Gordy at his studio in New Orleans. Photograph by Donn Young.

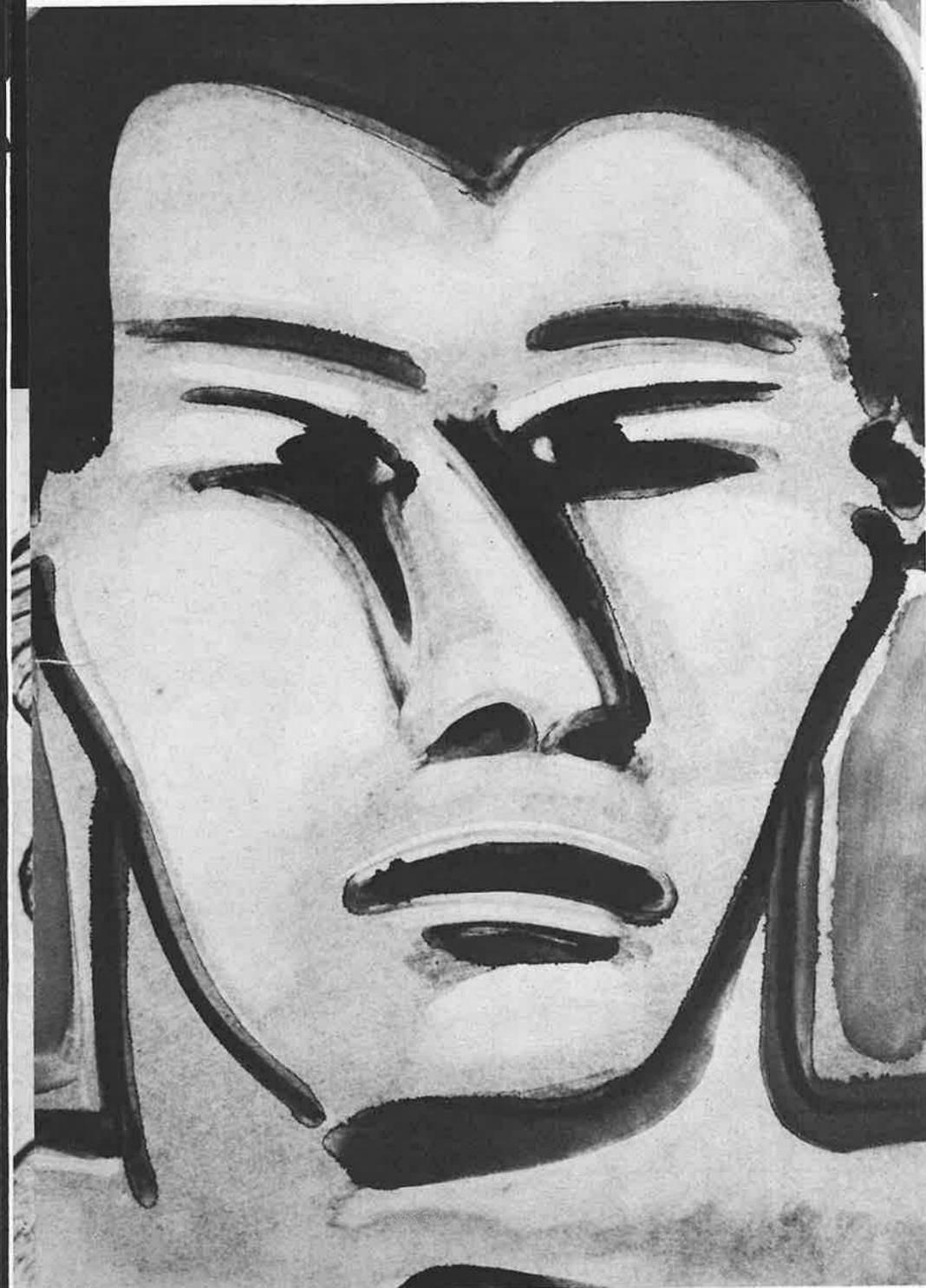


remember too when Rusty Collier wrote something about me that said that, in her view, I was an artist's artist. I wasn't quite sure what that meant, but I liked it. I was sure what making somebody joyous meant, and I liked doing that. Thinking about that on the way to coming to talk to you, I thought that's really two things that I think about Bob, too. I think there is a lot of joy in your work and, it certainly comes across that you are, whatever the Hell it means, an artist's artist, in the sense of a real continuing, ongoing commitment. All of this is in way of working up to saying, what does making art do for you?

**RG:** Well, the last two or three years have really changed my feelings about being an artist quite a lot. Now I feel even more that the real satisfaction is in the work itself, that the 'career', you know, really interests me less and less. Maybe because there have been a lot of things that didn't feel good when they happened or that left a bad taste in my mouth. I remember the first time I was in a Whitney Biennial I said, Oh, well, this is really a big thing for me; this is a big deal; and I bought a round-trip ticket to New York and I went up for the opening and everything and I thought it was an awful show and it left me really quite depressed. I mean, it was supposed to be something really nice happening to me and I didn't like it and I found that a lot of things like that that have happened to me have not been things that I really enjoyed very much. I guess I get the most pleasure out of knowing that other artists are interested in what I'm doing and that's the thing—the respect of my peers—that gives me the most satisfaction and pleasure.

**FA:** So it is the communication between you and that audience?

**RG:** Yeah, sometimes I feel that that audience is awfully small. I use a lot of what you might call inside jokes in my work and a lot of visual puns and the like I don't



think people get unless they're pretty educated about art and the main subject of my art. In that sense, it's kind of an esthete activity, I guess.

**FA:** Yet you sell your work, so your audience may be more broadly based than you assume it is, may it not?

**RG:** I've always felt that a lot of the people who buy my works don't really have much of an idea what they're about. I mean, I'm delighted that they buy them but I think it's very seldom that people buy works for reasons that I think are very genuine. For instance, when we were putting together the show at the museum, Gene Baro, who curated the show, and I went over to the Dallas-Fort Worth area to look. I have a lot of work in collections over there. It was very depressing to go into houses and see where the works were. You could see that this one had been bought because it matched a terribly expensive rug, or this one had been bought because the museum had one. You know, you just have the feeling that they have very seldom been bought for very good reasons and that they were not really understood.

**FA:** It sounds like the same kind of depression generated by the trip to the Whitney Annual, in a way.

**RG:** Yeah, it is difficult to know that what you do is usually not understood since what you are trying to do is communicate. The thing I guess I'm trying to communicate more than anything else is an almost romantic love of, you know, of making art. You know what I mean. I mean I really think there are only two things worth being and one is being a saint and the other is being an artist. I think those are the two real professions in the world.

**FA:** I like that. I was remembering that once I was on some panel in Thibodaux and Suzanne Fosberg was on it and some other people who I don't remember. I don't remember the subject of the panel either, but I remember the talk turned at one point to a sort of class-action paranoia about the artist in society and his lot in the world and what could be done to better that. I remember you were there, sitting in the back and, finally, at one point, you piped up and you said something to the effect—with a kind of benevolent disgust in your voice—that you felt you hardly had time to make the art itself and that you surely hadn't time to become an activist of the kind that was being proposed. I think I may have clapped, I was so happy to hear that said. I see you as somebody who has absolutely followed through on that kind of statement in terms of your own actions and, in the process of doing

so, you have done fairly well. You support yourself by making art. Not many people do that these days. You make it the way you want to and support yourself doing it. Probably a bunch of those people who were trying to figure out how to be more successful by some other route than just the making of the art are still not supporting themselves doing it so there's an interesting irony in that. I remember that afternoon very vividly.

**RG:** Well, it was the work in the studio that always seemed to me was the most important thing. I mean, my brief forays into any kind of activism, doing a bit of work with the CAC or whatever, were always done very grudgingly because I know that I do my best work when I'm kind of worked out, you know, and that that means working every day, long hours. I literally can't teach, because it just interferes too much. It has to be everyday work in the studio, day in and day out, and then things happen. Things kind of surface in the middle of a lot of crap, so to speak. You know, certain things begin to bubble to the surface and the only way I can get that to happen is to really work, long hours every day. I've never been a person who worked on 'inspiration'. I'm particularly interested right now in the way I relate to work in the studio. It's the thing that interests me most right now. I'm changing.

**FA:** When I was in graduate school I made the mistake of saying to my teacher, who was Carl Zerbe at the time, one day in way of making an excuse for not having done as much work that week as he thought I should, that I hadn't been inspired. The minute the words were out of my mouth, I wanted to take them back and he looked at me and he said, "Inspired?" He said, "You will know you are a professional artist, as distinct from a Sunday painter when you walk into the studio and work everyday, regardless of inspiration. Inspiration is something we make for ourselves," he said. It sounds just like what you're saying, and I absolutely understand what lies behind that.

**RG:** Talking about that, about my way of working before, my work had so much "knitting" in it, you know, kind of busy work, and it was very easy for me to work for ten or twelve hours if I was working on a large painting. You know, I was really using my brain at a very low level. When I went out to Albuquerque to do some screen-prints the summer before last, this artist asked me if I wanted to come up to Santa Fe and try my hand at monoprinting. So, I went up there. It was costing me two hundred dollars a day to work in this workshop with a printer and they were furnishing the paper and everything, but two hundred dollars a day! Well, the first day—it was an eight-hour day—I got nothing; it was just all crap. And I really sort of panicked. Two hundred dollars and I have nothing to show for it! I was going to be working up there for four days. I was investing eight hundred dollars into this experience. The second day I was really depressed when I drove up there. When I got there, and for the first couple of hours, I'm just getting nothing, and then, all of a sudden, things started to click, and the afternoon was wonderful; and there was something about getting past that fear of failure, you know, and knowing that you have to work eight hours because you're paying for it. I mean if I had been in my own studio I would have probably just stopped trying to monoprint and gone to another part of the studio and done something else, done some drawing or stretched a canvas, or said this isn't my day. But I found that even when I thought I couldn't do anything, if I just would keep pressing against it, sometimes I would end up with very good things. It turned out that by the time I left there I had done the best work, probably the best work I've ever done in my life, simply because I was so chintzy about the two hundred dollars a day and had to work. So it was a great learning experience for me, a very important thing for me to learn.

**FA:** It shows that sometimes the source of something can be much more external than one thinks. To go back to work though, the work for which over a long span of time you've been known before these recent things, there would be people who would say that those things were "decorative." I'm sure you've heard that. That's a word that vacillates over spans of time from being a dirty word to not-quite-so-dirty and back and forth again. What do you think about that work being referred to as "decorative"? What, for that matter, would Henri Matisse think about his work being called that? Because I don't think it's any different.

**RG:** Yeah, well, he seemed to think it was all right. He even made a statement that he wanted his paintings to be as comfortable as a nice overstuffed chair or something, which has always been a positive statement to me because his paintings are not comfortable in that sense, although they are certainly very satisfying. But they are certainly not exactly "comfortable." I mean, they are pretty demanding paintings. But I have no trouble with the word "decorative" because, for me, the decorative side of my paintings was always a way of making accessible what, to me, was really a psychologically intense kind of imagery. In other words, you kind of pull in the audience with the visual pleasures. It's like if you do a drawing of an apple and you put the little square on it, it makes it look nice and shiny and delicious, like in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, the poisoned apple looks so delicious. Well, you can say that the way the forms were articulated and so on was a little bit like a poisoned apple and sometimes that was meant in a humorous way. You know, you pull them in with exciting color and a sharp, clean technique, and then you give them some fairly ambiguous and sometimes even rather frightening information.

**FA:** That reminds me a little bit of Wesley's squirrels, those innocent children's storybook illustrations and all of a sudden you realize the squirrels are screwing, but by then you've been pulled into it and it's too late.

**RG:** Yeah, a lot of the imagery in my work is obsessive and a lot of it is, although I really hate anyone using the word pornographic in relation to my work because I'm really not interested in pornography at all and it really bores me intensely, but the work is sexual, I hope.

**FA:** We can say erotic, certainly.

**RG:** You can certainly use the word erotic. I've worked primarily out of my sexuality. You know, I'm not a religious person or anything like that, so I work primarily out of my sexuality.

**FA:** The painting I know so well that has the tongues and nipples pointing at one another; it's in the hall downstairs. I've always thought it was very erotic and at the same time ironic and humorous, a kind of humorous eroticism in it.

**RG:** Yeah, that's a subject that I've worked with for about twenty-five years and it really started when I lived in Mexico. There was a mountain on the way down to Mexico City, off on one side of the road, by itself, in a very flat area, that looked like a reclining female. I did some drawings of a reclining female as a mountain, and then, later on, when I was living in New York, I used this reclining female image in some drawings which really had to do with my own insomnia and so, in a way, the image became autobiographical. And, quite often, in the paintings, I think of the female image as essentially an autobiographical image. You know, an image that somehow relates to someone whether they are male or female; it doesn't really make much difference.

**FA:** Somehow I think the only subject matter is autobiographical one way or the other, and as someone said to me the other day, speaking in that case of the only proper subject for conversation, it's the human condition. And I see that in your work and sometimes in very offhand and very funny ways. Yet, nonetheless, it is still there, you know.

**RG:** Humor in painting is for me an exceedingly precious thing, very difficult to deal with. Whenever I get any kind of visual humor into the painting—and I'm always very happy about that, because it is very hard to use anything like that and have it be self-sustaining—then that satisfies me.

**FA:** Would you say that you can't try to do it, that you just have to let it happen?

**RG:** The essential image you just have to let happen I think. Now, you can do a lot of funny things just in the way you make the painting. For instance, putting all the compositional incidents along the edges of the painting and leaving the middle of the painting a void could be a kind of humorous statement about how you make a painting.

**FA:** Exactly. Not about content, but about making a painting. Art as subject.

**RG:** Right. For instance, using the same form to express a lot of different things. I remember one of my dog paintings which dealt entirely with silhouette. You know, everything was done with the same pattern: Spots on the dog, clouds, the land, everything except the red penis was done with the same pattern, and all of that was meant to be very funny. You were supposed to pick up on a lot of amusing visual things that were happening, sometimes straining, using the same form for various and sundry elements in the painting. I've been doing a series of drawings lately, heads in which I've used nothing but a slightly curved line. You know, everything has to become a slightly curved line and...

**FA:** The deliberate limitation of language.

Above: "Male Head," 25" x 17¼", monoprint

**RG:** Yeah, and sometimes it's not funny. Sometimes you use it in the way you use the sonnet form or something and it strangles the work, but sometimes it's carried to such an extreme that it becomes amusing.

**FA:** I remember one time several years ago, you and I talked about a process that both of us used in our different ways but that was similar, that had to do with a certain kind of distancing of one's self from what was happening with the painting by virtue of all the busy-work involved. It's a thing that you were doing at that time, more than you're doing it now. It had to do with an image being arrived at initially in a very spontaneous, irrational way and then carried out quite meticulously, without a lot of editing, without a lot of censorship. One hoped, I think—at least this was my interpretation of it—to, by somewhat 'looking the other way' in the process, allow certain things to bubble into the painting out of the unconscious.

**RG:** Yeah, there was a lot of that. I've had kind of a change of heart now. Yeah, in that I became very annoyed with people saying to me 'I can always tell a Gordy when I see one'. I became annoyed with a lot of things like that. It was very important to me. I had the feeling that if I worked almost like knitting an ivory tower, you know, that in an almost mindless sort of way I would end up with a sweater or something. You know what I mean; all that busy work. Now, I feel very differently about it. Not that I didn't get good results from that, but working that way really began to bore me.

**FA:** Well, you've almost abandoned it, haven't you?

**RG:** Oh yeah, I really have.

**FA:** Now, the very nature of the technique speaks to immediacy. I know you said the one time that I was here not long ago, something which I found interesting: That working with the monoprint technique allowed you to not worry about wasting materials and not have that kind of anxiety because you could put an image down and erase it fifty times by wiping it off and only when you got what you wanted would you actually turn it into a thing that would last by pulling a print off it. I was fascinated by that, even quite envious in fact.

**RG:** Monoprinting is for me right now the most exciting medium I've ever used. First of all, it has enormous range. You can work very tight or work very loose. It's not just putting down marks or dabs of paint on a piece of paper. You can wipe away, you can scratch back to the surface of the plate. It has that kind of an additive and subtractive quality that working in clay or plaster would have for a sculptor.

**FA:** With a non-absorbent surface, it's totally forgiving, isn't it?

**RG:** Right. It's kind of like working on a blackboard and you can erase anything whenever you feel like it in a way that you just can't in a painting. I mean not in the same way. You can wipe out but...

**FA:** But you get some residue. Here you get no residue. You go right back to zero.

**RG:** Right. You can go right back to zero if you want to or you can wipe out part of it if you want. Well, that was wonderful. I'm such a tight painter generally. I have been for so many years that it gave me a kind of a liberation. When you work in the studio, you don't work on really lousy paper, so that even if you worked on a fairly inexpensive paper, you're talking about paper that would be fifty or sixty cents a sheet and, before I was doing monoprints, when I was trying to loosen up, I might get to the end of the morning with twenty dollars worth of paper down the drain. You know, I mean, sometimes just the false start of two lines on the paper and you know it isn't going to work and you decide to throw it aside so that by the end of the day you end up with all of this failed history sort of, really most of it having served no function at all. With monoprinting, I could have ten false starts. You know, I'm very interested in the way the day is set up. It's like if I come up to the studio in the morning, I might turn on some classical music and draw at the drawing table for half an hour just to see what I feel like, and then I'll come over and start monoprinting and maybe I'll have six or seven false starts in which I keep wiping off the image with kerosene until finally I get a few lines or a few areas of color down and somehow it goes farther than that. So it's an exceedingly open, creative process. Sometimes the image becomes very tight and controlled and I might work several hours on it. Sometimes it's very loose and fluid and I might finish it in twenty minutes. I want that kind of surprise. You know, that's the kind of surprise that I couldn't get in my work before, except when I was drawing at the drawing board. Those first little drawings, those little obsessive kind of doodles that I did which led to the big paintings, I got it there. But now I want that kind of thing happening everyday.

**FA:** It gets close to life that way, doesn't it? You pay your money and you take your chances...

**RG:** Oh, much closer! That's what I really like about it. Also, now I realize that a great deal of my old way of working and the style I developed was really based on faults in my character. A fear, I mean. I have always thought that I was a great moralist in the studio, but I realize now that I really wasn't.

**FA:** How do you mean, a great moralist in the studio?

**RG:** Well, I mean I was a more moral person in the studio than I was in my life. You know what I mean by that: In other words, I made the proper decisions in the studio. I didn't fool myself. I realize now that that style was based a lot on a fear of failure, and a real need to have one successful day after another. You know what I mean: In other words, I needed to know that at the end of the day I had really put in a good day's work and that I had something to show for it. Now, as a monoprinter, I don't really know that except in the sense that quite often the things that don't work out are the things that you get the most out of. Of course, I always knew that quite often your failures are more valuable than your successes. But I think with the new work, it is the first time I've really accepted that.

**FA:** That's really quite fascinating. It has changed so much. I mean, after your having said, "I don't want people to say 'I can always recognize a Gordy,'" I would still say, nevertheless, at the risk of a laugh from you, that as changed as they are, I still see you in them.

**RG:** Oh, I think you can recognize a Gordy but I hope the work has a lot more element of surprise. I mean, there are still certain mannerisms, there's still a way of putting things together, of composing. But I'm really surprised. The two things I threw out were patterning and my way of making the painting. You know, the style; the way you articulated the forms.

**FA:** Do you find those things sneaking back into the new work?

**RG:** Oh, yes, all the time. I have to be very vigilant.

**FA:** I can see haystacks there, for instance, in that bit of landscape behind that head.

**RG:** Oh, yeah, and I don't mind it up to a point. But the one thing I don't want now is a way to make things. I mean I don't mind having a way to make things for three or four things in succession, but I don't want to develop another 'style'. It seems to me that the greatest gift that Picasso gave us and the one that almost no one is taking him up on is the fact that he felt this kind of freedom to do exactly what he pleased whenever he wanted to.

**FA:** And he went back and forth.

**RG:** Back and forth, from doing very tight paintings and drawings to doing almost sloppy loose things. Working in all sorts of different genres and all sorts of different materials. Well, I don't think for a minute that I have the kind of imagination and creative energy that Picasso had. I'm not that kind of artist at all. But, I would like to feel like I could go in the studio every morning and do exactly what I felt like and, in a way that I haven't felt until this year, for a long time.

**FA:** You sound really happy.

**RG:** Oh, I'm very happy.

**FA:** That's really gratifying. It's especially gratifying because I know that you went through a real stoppage, I guess, back, what? A year and a half ago? It was something that climaxed in a traumatic illness, then gave birth to all these big monoprint heads all of a sudden. I don't know whether you would care to go into what that stoppage felt like. I know exactly what it is myself, in my own experience. But there was an absolute breakout from it somehow or other and I look now at these faces and I think: Are these faces the emblem of that trauma or they the emblem of an escape from that trauma? You know, it could be both; I don't know. But having had stoppages like that myself, I have a lot of empathy for that. I'd like you to talk about it a bit if you feel like doing it.

**RG:** Well, I remember I was working on a show for my gallery in New York and I was in the middle of a big painting, a very complicated and very involved painting, that I had to mix about 26 colors for, you know, sort of a big figurative landscape, a very typical 'Gordy'. All of a sudden, I said I just can't do this anymore. I said to myself I'm just not happy up here in the studio doing this and, besides, I really literally

said that I wasn't going to do it anymore. So for about six months, I really just kept busy; that was all. I worked on some screenprints and sort of finished up some images and some prints which is the way my prints usually develop, like the last stage of an idea. You know, when you make a print, it is so exhausting that you never want to use the image again, so you don't use it until you know you've kind of finished with it. At least that was the way I'd always thought about it. I wouldn't think about it that way now. Anyway, for several months I couldn't work, and then I started to think about what I had felt about work before I had developed my 'style'. I had kept a lot, hundreds really, of little drawings that I had done over the last thirty years, so I began to go back and look particularly at drawings that I had never been able to fit into my style. I'd held onto these drawings but something about the expressionistic quality or the way that they were done was such that they wouldn't fit in. And then, I started doing heads because the head was a simple figure-ground sort of thing that I could handle. It was also something which allowed me to deal with very direct response between me and the canvas or between the viewer and the canvas. In other words, almost like just bumping into a person or something. I had done heads all along, all the way through, and usually when one was successful for me was when it took on a personality. It was really just, you know, just very simple figure-ground relationships and trying to deal with different emotions as expressed in the head. A kind of 'suspicious' man, 'haughty' woman, 'evil character'. Sometimes it would be based, for instance, on the whole series of heads I did that came from the character of Quint in Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*. Another head that I've used over and over again in the last few months was based on a guy that I used to see in a bar that I would hang out in. Another was based on



some of Picasso's early cubist paintings and the kind of syntax that you get in those. Some of them were based on the kind of syntax you get in German expressionist painting, although German expressionist painting really doesn't interest me very much. But I wanted to deal with that.

**FA:** It's more inclusive and less exclusive; liberating...

**RG:** Yeah, much more inclusive. For me, when the things work is when they are strongest and when they are most direct, most immediate. I would like to expand it so that I am dealing with whole figures and maybe even groups of figures, kind of slowly expand the images but always keep that kind of sense of directness and immediacy, that sense of confrontation. Like opening a door on something. You know, like opening the wrong hotel door and somebody's standing there. Maybe nude, or maybe doing something. You know, that kind of...

**FA:** You've chosen a medium that certainly allows you a vast latitude. I mean, it absolutely fascinates me as a medium, the idea of working on these big sheets of Formica and being able to wipe it off, that it's almost like a perfect medium—some kind of magic.

**RG:** Yeah, I think I was just very lucky, found the right medium at the right time.

**FA:** And how different it is.

**RG:** It's very different from my old way of working, and it's been so satisfying for me that I haven't really been able to paint. I try every once in a while. You know, painting is not a very happy, satisfying medium for me right now. I mean, it disappoints me.

**FA:** It's interesting that you put it that way because I'm sure that, between us, we know some rather purist printmakers who would get up in arms about the whole idea of monoprint. It's not multiples and it doesn't satisfy all the mystique of that kind of idea. Yet you say, you speak of these pieces not as paintings but as prints. To me, they are more 'paintings' than they are...

**RG:** No, I agree with you. I think that they are paintings. They are only prints in the sense that what you end up with is an impression.

**FA:** And it reverses.

**RG:** And it reverses, which I like fine because it makes it fresh when I peel it off the plate. I don't mind it being reversed. If I think it's going to make some sort of difference to the composition, I'll make sure that I work on it the wrong way. I mean, for instance, like sometimes if you have like a three-quarter face or something like

Above: "Dogworship #1," 1973, 79" x 47½"

that, sometimes you tend to read things from left to right, so sometimes, if you want it to be more aggressive, you would make it so when it was reversed, it would look out at you to the left, rather than looking to the right. Because if it looks to the right, there's something less immediate about the way you respond to it. I mean, you are looking left to right and it's looking to the right too, so that it's kind of more removed in a way. Sometimes you would want it, you know, to be removed like that.

**FA:** I had a note here that I wanted to ask you about color, *per se*, about your attitude towards color. Certainly, the older things involved, you said, mixing such as twenty six colors. The older things involved some very subtle and very closely manipulated modulations of color and of value steps. Obviously, the new things have got color, too. But the new things seem sometimes less centered on color. So, I wonder if working in a way that really comes across as being very graphic—and I think that connects you to Picasso because I've always felt he is a better 'drawer' than he is a painter—

**RG:** Yeah, he's a very graphic artist.

**FA:** What does color mean to you? Is it as secondary to you as I see it? I mean, I think the color is marvelous in your paintings but the new work seems so particularly graphic. Truth to tell, I'm not sure exactly what the Hell I'm asking, but it has to do with that graphic/colorist dichotomy. Pierre Bonnard couldn't draw—or *didn't* draw—worth a damn, but oh...!

**RG:** Well, in the old work, I was working pretty much with the relationship between value and hue. You know, the way those two things sort of meshed and, you know, supported the image. In the old work, quite often I was interested in, say, the way colors harmonized or were discordant; kind of tricky color, you might say. That allowed me to set a mood. This is like sometimes you'd have kind of obvious color combinations. Sometimes, I would try to go all the way around the spectrum and the only way I could do that would be to gray all of the colors enough so that they worked together. Lots of problematic sort of uses of color. I've been trying now to work much more directly with color. Color just to support the image. You know: If it's a sour image, I use sour color.

**FA:** But less thought-out?

**RG:** Oh, much less thought out. In fact, I've purposefully tried not to become problematic in the use of color. For instance, I've almost abandoned using white, which has meant that I seem to be using more yellow because it's the lightest color. I've had to make the faces quite often yellow instead of flesh color because if I were mixing a flesh color, I would have a lot of white in it. It would be pasty color...

**FA:** White is too opaque for this type of work, then?

**RG:** Yeah, I mean, the paper is so gorgeous, and the luminosity of the paper coming through the transparent etching ink, you know, is so satisfying.

**FA:** Just like in a watercolor.

**RG:** Yes, the paper is your white. And somehow it muddies it if you put white in the colors. So, as much as possible, I've tried not to use any white in the colors. I mean, you know, I can't completely achieve that. For instance, I find it very difficult to use a blue because the blues are so transparent that they just don't have any strength unless you put a bit of white in them and make them more opaque.

**FA:** Well, the felt pens were certainly transparent, but all the paintings were very much hard-edge opaque. Then you go into working with a fundamentally transparent medium...

**RG:** Yes; flat, opaque, meant to be totally un-transparent...

**FA:** So, along with this shift, this new technique and this new imagery, everything else, I wonder where they were coming from, all these marvelous images that were in the things before? You've really answered that in saying that they come out of your own erotic fantasies and so on...

**RG:** And out of art. You know, there are images that are really pretty much the classic images of western European painting. You know: The reclining female in the landscape and so forth. There are images that come out of Matisse and Cezanne and Poussin, Claude, that sort of thing. The images are very secular in the sense that I don't have any beliefs to back me up, so to speak. Except in art, except a real total belief in the power of art, in the sense that it is in a way, even when it's at its most as an egocentric occupation, it's still in a way a selfless kind of calling.

**FA:** Does that mean for you that you feel you should somewhat step aside with your ego and allow it to happen? I'm projecting, I suppose. I certainly have come to that feeling about my own work, that I want to get out of it a little and allow it to occur.

**RG:** Yeah, I feel very much that way right now. The work has been enough my own that I don't really feel like I have to try self-consciously to make it unique. In other words, I would like not to think about that kind of thing. I would like not to worry about it being a 'Gordy'. I mean it's still a Gordy but I don't push towards making it something different or something special in the way I might have twenty years ago when 'Gordy' didn't 'exist', you know? You know, before I had found a way to do things. Now, I would like get away from a 'way of doing things', to pull as much stuff into it as I can. I've always been conscious of a lot of weaknesses not only in the old work but in the new too, sometimes a kind of a coldness in the work that I've always found disturbing. You could say the same thing about Stravinsky though, I guess; a lot of his music is, kind of cold, you know. I think the biggest weakness formerly in my work was that I didn't have many compositional ideas. I'm not a very inventive composer of paintings. That's one of the things I'm hoping my new way of working will help. I had a very limited way of putting things together in the old paintings. Really only about four ways of composing the paintings, and even then, they were all very related. I would like to open them up enough so that compositional accidents can happen in a way that wasn't possible before and maybe get like the kind of compositional inventiveness that you get in Matisse or, say, Courbet.

**FA:** A composition that seems less conscious, less forced?

**RG:** Yeah, exactly.

**FA:** It strikes me as interesting that rather than a whole inventory of subject components that would crop up before in various combinations, and to marvelous effect, that the old paintings were in a way synthesized puzzles, with some of the same parts out of a 'kit of parts'. Now, unless there are things that I haven't seen, you are, for the most part, focused on one subject. I think there is an irony in it, because it would seem to be a stultifying thing and yet, I think that, for you, it's working instead as a liberating thing.

**RG:** Well, I'm perfectly willing to handle more than one thing. It's just that I can't, that generally I can't bring it off. I can almost not even handle the whole figure. You know, without looking stale. I'm in no great rush to expand the subject. Say the intensity of that head over there: I would like to be able to carry it into a whole figure, I would like to do the chest and the whole body, and the arms and the way everything goes together. I would like to get the same kind of almost cross-eyed intensity of that face, into a body too. But there are a lot of reasons I seem to be having trouble doing that. For instance, it's very much like being a cartoonist. It's very easy to express feeling and emotion in the face. I mean, you can make it smile, you can make it frown, you can, just by making it look up or down, make it look like a drug addict or a very angry person. You know what I mean.

**FA:** Well, that's where we look for those signals in life, mostly in the face.

**RG:** So, you look for the signals. I mean, you look at the face most in trying to understand what the person is feeling. I would like to carry that same kind of immediate knowledge that you get from looking at a face into the way the body is set up.

**FA:** Like body language, right? Body language, if you pay attention, tells a lot. Maybe more than faces that can lie.

**RG:** Yeah, and it might be simply that I really haven't drawn the body enough. I want to start drawing the human figure again on a regular basis. I was just talking to Frank a couple of days ago about that. But, you know, I can't imagine the body with the same kind of richness that I can imagine the face. Maybe it's that I really don't see the body as often as I see faces, you know, but I just can't get that kind of variation, get into dealing with a larger composition. But essentially what I'd really like to do is to build, to go from the head to figure compositions with more than one figure too. I've done some two-figure studies, even some bigger ones that have been based on those little drawings you're looking at. But, it's still all very tentative.

**FA:** Whereas the heads are more or less like portraits, people who aren't really doing anything but sort of posing for you, the figure studies are all of people *doing* something.

**RG:** Yeah, somehow acting, responding to each other. Holding hands, beating each other, having an argument. You know, I think there might be eventually a sense of tableau, in the way that they respond to each other, like the sort of thing that you might get in eighteenth century. You know, the curtain rises and there is this tableau with Lady Hamilton playing the muse and Lord Nelson playing the Roman general. A sense of tableau in that in tableaus, you were meant to be able to read something, read the meaning of something without having any real knowledge...

**FA:** Without spoken lines?

**RG:** Yeah, without spoken lines, I mean it wasn't a play, it wasn't an opera, so you've got the meaning only through visual 'set-up'. I am not really interested in painting from a narrative standpoint because I've tried to deal with that, very unsuccessfully, several times. So I've sort of given up trying to be a narrative painter.

**FA:** Well, I guess the reason I said the thing I did about the heads, the almost exclusive attachment to one piece of subject matter as being a liberated thing, it's maybe evidenced right there, for instance, in those two drawings that happened because there is no decision to make about subject matter. There, you allow yourself to go kind of on cruise control, allow things to happen automatically, so we see two different form languages. We see your almost-straight line in one. In the other one, we see a much more curved line.

**RG:** Yeah, in those two drawings, the thing that they had in common was that they both tied into the format of the composition up in the left-hand corner and they both have the same sense of scale and they both were drawn in the same way. It's just trying to see, to let it go where it wanted to go. For me, the one on the right is a much more interesting head than the one on the left. The one on the left becomes too mannered and too easy somehow. The one on the right, the way that line comes down from the ear down to the bottom of the paper and the way the drawing comes out from it, it's just more dynamic for me. But I might do six or seven of those drawings and end up with one that would be exhibitable or that would interest me enough to exhibit. It's not really so much 'exhibitable'. I guess both of these drawings are exhibitable, but only one of them *interests* me, you know?

**FA:** In terms of carrying forward to anything else?

**RG:** In terms of meeting two people. One of them interests me and one of them doesn't.

**FA:** They *are* people, then, those two guys.

**RG:** Yeah, in a way, in a funny kind of way one of them is just more interesting, you know. Why don't we turn this off and get another beer?

**FA:** Well, I was going to ask you one more question; then we can get another beer or whatever, because I think we'll get to our time in a minute here.

**RG:** Okay...

**FA:** Where do you think, in way of second-guessing yourself, it might go? It's been through this great big shift, a really joyous shift I think, and it's still obviously bearing fruit and looks like it can continue to bear fruit, but what sort of fantasies do you have? I mean, I have fantasies about things that I want to do that are very different from what I'm doing now but what I'm doing now, I still want to play it out before I do those other things. I've sort of shelved those fantasies but they're still there. I'm curious what ones you might have.

**RG:** Well, one reason I think the old work went sour on me was that I ceased to have an idea of how to make it better and I'm enough of an American to think that one has to get better. You know, if not better, at least a kind of a sense of change which is one of the things that's most vital about a lot of art in America. But, with the new work, I have a feeling that it will get better and richer. I also like having the feeling though, that I don't have the slightest idea where it's going to go.

**FA:** That's as good a plan as one could have. *À la fortune du pot...*

**RG:** Yeah, it's just that, and I'm really very excited about it. It's like being on the road. That's part of the way that I'm working now, you know: Coming up here and not knowing where it's going to go. For instance, the other day I was reading a new biography of Robert Graves, who is a very interesting poet and also, in some ways, a very foolish man, you know, and I came up here and I was working and all of a sudden I had this image of this old poet with a pair of donkey ears on his head. It's something I've never done. It sort of made references to Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and also the face looked a little like Dante. It had sort of a long pushed-down nose, kind of overhanging the line of the mouth and then I had stuck on this pair of donkey ears. It was the kind of thing that just happened on the spur of the moment, a thing connected to my life, to my reading just the night before. It was the kind of whimsy, you might say, that I would like to feel open to, which I couldn't feel open to in my old work.

**FA:** It was too excluding, that way of working?

**RG:** Yes, it was too excluding. You know, it was so excluding that it was like not being able to write a poem unless you wrote it in the sonnet form or in heroic couplets.

**FA:** I knew a friend who got on the elevator coming down from one of those second-floor galleries on 57th Street, in New York. This was maybe 15 years ago, and on the elevator with him was Marc Chagall and this friend is maybe six foot two and Marc Chagall must be four foot two and as they went down the elevator Chagall looked up at him, didn't introduce himself, just said, "Are you a painter?" My friend said yes, he was, and Chagall said, "Me, too. It's fun, isn't it?"

**RG:** (Laughter)

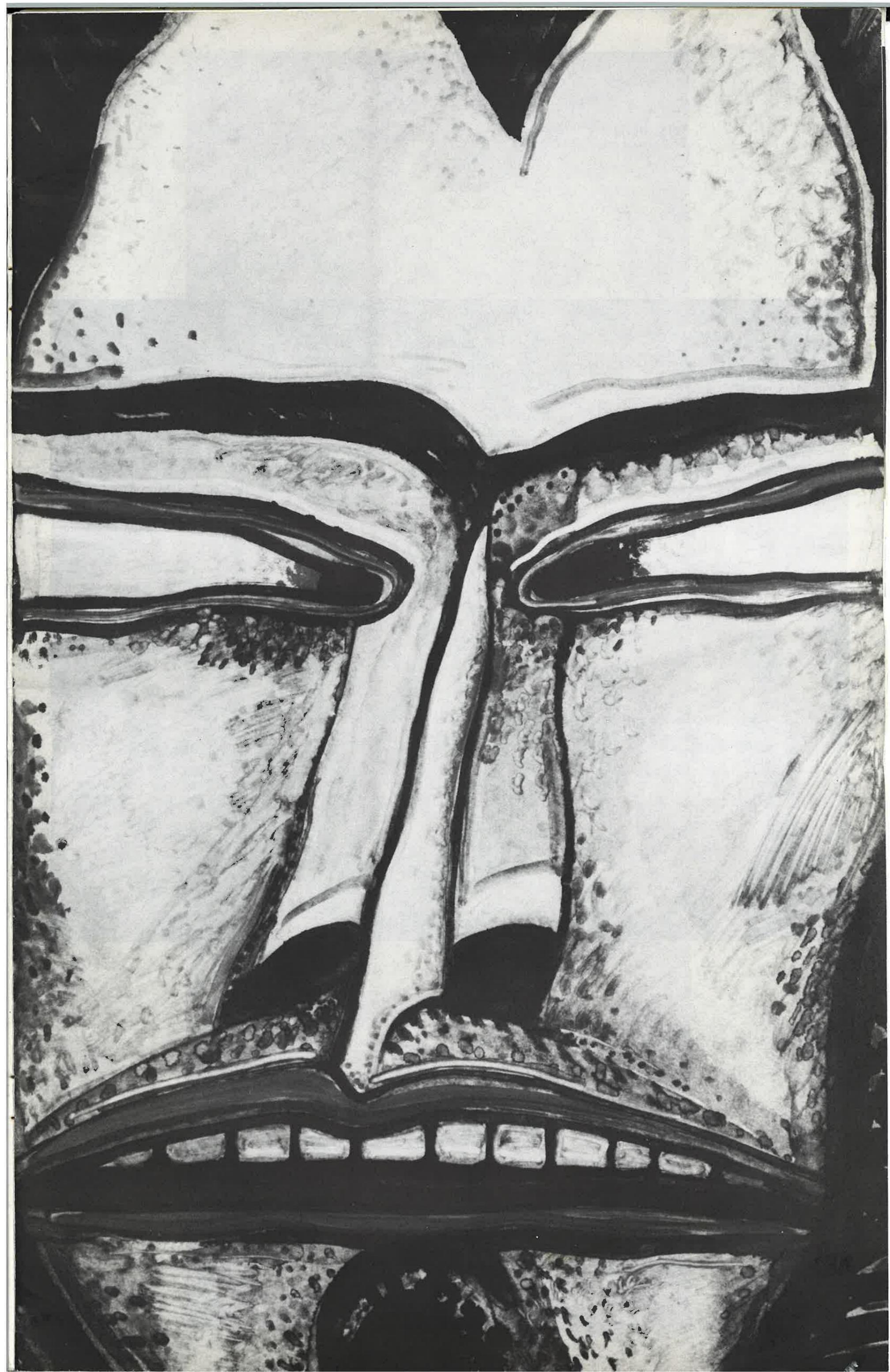
**FA:** It sounds like you're having that kind of fun.

**RG:** I'm having more fun right now than I've ever had in my life, more fun than I've had at anything, and that's a really nice way to feel. I keep thinking it's going to stop. But I have been having enormous fun.

Franklin Adams is a painter/sculptor/designer. From 1958 to 1978 he taught painting and drawing at the Art Department of Newcomb College at Tulane University. Since 1978 he has taught in Tulane's School of Architecture.

Right: "Study for Quint," 25" x 17 1/4", monoprint

Above: "Eve #1," 43 1/2" x 27 3/4", acrylic on canvas



An Interview with Robert Gordy

Mitchell Kahan

KAHAN: In 1981, you made a tremendous shift in your work, moving from predominantly painting to working almost exclusively with monoprints, from using allover repeated patterns to individual images, and from using hardedged outlines to an expressionistic, casual method of rendering. What provoked that change?

GORDY: My retrospective that the New Orleans Museum of Art put together had a lot to do with that. When I saw all my work, I realized that the best work from the last sixteen years really lay in the middle of that time and after about 1976 my work started to dry up on me. I tried several maneuvers to keep from throwing the baby out with the bath water but finally I was supposed to have a show with Phyllis Kind in New York and my show was scheduled and I was working on a big painting and suddenly felt "I just cannot work this way anymore." I just didn't want to work in that tight controlled manner anymore.

KAHAN: I have heard you use the phrase that you would go up to your studio and you felt as if you were knitting.

GORDY: Yes, the creative level of what I was doing was so controlled and preplanned and parcelled out that I could literally work for 13 or 14 hours sometimes if I was on a really big painting.

KAHAN: So the monoprint represented the opposite.

GORDY: Yes, the absolute opposite. When I stopped working--for six months I really didn't do any creative work--I decided to take some of the ideas that I had been working with and do some screen prints. I was working with a couple of printers out of Albuquerque, and a lithographer who is a friend of mine--Robert Arbor--invited me to do some monotypes with him on his lithographic press. I was so taken with it as a medium; it seemed to solve a lot of the psychological problems that I was having with my work.

KAHAN: Thinking back to your work from around 1961, it seems to me that the looseness of handling and the concentration on the individual figure was picked up again in 1981.

GORDY: Yeah! After about six months of not knowing what I was going to do I really did begin to look at the early work (of which I still had a fair amount...and a lot of it was very tentative) and there were lots of drawings and so on and so forth. I began to look at that work and to pick up on some things that hadn't loaned themselves to my style. In other words, every foot had to be fit in...like fitting a foot into a shoe; if it didn't fit, if it was too large or too small it just didn't get in. And also, I wanted to work with some feelings that I had that I couldn't work with in such a decorative style.

KAHAN: What then were the attractions of the monotype over the screen prints that you had been doing? The fact that you didn't preplan and the fact that you had some kind of time element?

GORDY: Yeah...there were several things which suited me very well, for instance the fact that I only have at the most six or seven

hours to get it done before the ink begins to dry too much to take an impression.

KAHAN: In a sense that was a new kind of restriction, instead of the old restriction of pattern.

GORDY: Also, I couldn't fuss with it, as I had tried twenty years ago to work with more expression. I couldn't fuss with it that way. I had to get it down, and it either worked or it didn't work. If it worked well enough to take an impression, then I have the impression for reference purposes, and occasionally I would get an impression back that I would show.

KAHAN: With the monoprint you were surprising yourself?

GORDY: That's the thing that was the biggest requirement: a feeling of surprise in myself and occasionally having a small miracle. Something happens on the plate that seems to be way outside of you, through accident, through various things that you don't really have that much control over.

KAHAN: Do you experiment with the image and with making different kinds of surface effects while you're painting it?

GORDY: Right, I try to get as wide a range of effects, given that I use a very simple monotype technique. I try to use any kind of line that I can think of--a strong, bold line, a tentative line--I try in the heads to get as many as different kinds of expression as I can from timid

to aggressive to manic or whatever.

KAHAN: You have a forty by seventy inch press and you actually paint on formica panels.

GORDY: Yes, I use formica panels because its easier for me to tell what I am doing with the color. The ink is oil based etching ink and my medium is turpentine.

KAHAN: What other inks or paints did you exclude from consideration?

GORDY: I find that the regular oil paints that some people use don't have enough pigment and then the <sup>?, mk</sup> drives don't give it enough drying time. I,ve had them two weeks...so I don't use those. I sometimes supplement the etching inks with lithographic inks. But I haven't been able to get as good results with the lithographic inks so I don't use them very much.

KAHAN: You spoke the other night about the paper surface being so important to you in trying to achieve a transparency by which the white of the paper becomes as integral as the color.

GORDY: Yeah. You depend on the color of the paper for the light in the print. It is very interesting to me that since I am not using any white at all I get the light, the luminosity, by wiping into the paint that is on the panel.

KAHAN: Do you think that makes the monotypes more ethereal, more immaterial, than the former screen prints and the paintings, which were so hard and flat? Not only do these have a depth to them, but they have an almost hallucinatory quality. Or is that going too far?

GORDY: Well, I guess that's not for me to say. I am very interested, and I was in my old work too, in the sense of obsession, that business of doing the same thing over and over again until it takes on an obsessive kind of thing. I think all good art has that kind of real feeling of obsession. For instance, Cézanne has it. His whole way of working was very obsessive.

KAHAN: The concentration on the face that has characterized so many of the monotypes is an obsession that I find very exciting because it allows me to, in a sense, be a voyeur and really study these faces and study these various people in a way that I cannot study a live human person because it is too embarrassing to look at one like that.

GORDY: Right. That kind of encounter between the viewer and the image is really important to me. I want that to be as direct as possible. It's really kind of difficult now to know how to make art in the sense that art really at its best level exists in a relationship with the person who owns it. In other words, you buy the painting, you put it on your wall and you live with it over a period of time, and it reveals itself to you. That's the first job of art, I think. At the same time, you deal with an exhibition...you show it in a museum and you're lucky to have one one look at the thing for ten seconds. So, how can I really deal with the person who wants to own the thing and give him a lot of

subtle information and at the same time deal with people on the level of seeing in a museum where you're lucky if they look at it for ten seconds.

KAHAN: There is no doubt that a three-foot tall head has a kind of iconic power that draws you right to it.

GORDY: And you almost have to look at it...you almost have to relate to it.

KAHAN: Do you think of these faces as having more to do with real people or imaginary people conjured out of your own mind?

GORDY: Well, they work for me when they become real, in the sense that a character in a good novel is real. They seem to work best when you start to make up stories about them in your head, like...she looks like a waitress in a roadside cafe in east Texas...or...this man looks like he is from Morocco. Sometimes you place them geographically; sometimes you place them emotionally.

KAHAN: For example, you talked about the series of works you did and called The Moroccan as the result of seeing someone in Morocco when you were there. Is that the genesis for most of the faces?

GORDY: No, I almost never really start with a fixed image in my mind. More and more often, I literally start cold on the plate in the morning. I don't know whether it's going to be a figure; I don't know whether it's going to be a head. I might start developing an image, and then I'll wipe it out because it doesn't seem to be giving me any

surprises, and sometimes I will even wipe it out after working on it two or three hours. I keep trying to get something...doodling into the inks on the plate and spattering and doing anything to keep the surface lively...drawing into the surface and painting into the surface...until I get something.

KAHAN: Drawing with what?

GORDY: I can usually draw with a brush or I can draw with a Q-tip, something that takes away the paint.

KAHAN: What kind of spatters and speckles do you use? How do you do that?

GORDY: I take a bristled brush or something and usually a lot of transparent base in the color and spatter across the surface. If you spatter it right after you put something down you get lots of action from the spatter...kind of like big drops of rain or something. If you let it dry out for awhile (like go down and get a cup of coffee and come back in an hour or something), the spattering is much more subtle. It looks much more subtle when you print it because of course you're printing it in reverse in the sense that what is laid under and what is closer to the surface of the plate is what is going to be on top. So the spatters don't look that obvious. But you are able through the spattering to really change colors very subtly from one area to another...to spatter some Indian red into your ochre or into your greys as an accent so that everything takes on a kind of close relationship.

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KAHAN: In looking at the faces that you have been working on for the past few years, so often they have the appearance of being masks rather than real flesh and blood. I realize that this probably relates in part to your interest in African art over the years.

GORDY: Yes, in fact there are several pieces that I own that have had a really strong influence on the heads.

KAHAN: Do you think of these faces as a sort of mask hiding some other inner feelings or as the masks that actually express the inner feelings?

GORDY: Quite often, I want to say something about the face as mask, as the persona that we all present to the world. I also quite often want to give a feeling of what's behind the mask, so that they can exist on different levels.

KAHAN: It surprised me how vulnerable some of these figures seem, given the intensity with which they project their power, or anger, or whatever. Often even with the most aggressive figures, there is something soft and vulnerable behind them.

GORDY: I like your seeing that. Back to the idea of the images as existing in a museum or existing in a home: when they exist in a home they have to have that. There has to be that more complicated, more subtle sort of thing. If it isn't there, you're going to get pretty much bored living with such an aggressive image.

KAHAN: In looking at the faces and the recent full figure nudes it seems that there is a wonderful balance in many of them, between the real personality or physical body and then this other thing...which is art.

GORDY: Yeah. I would say that they have much more to do with art than they do with nature. But my work has always been like that. A lot of the more interesting ideas that I have really come from my love of art; I just love art. I have recently been taking a course in which I have to do a fair amount of reading in philosophy and that sort of stuff. I realize that unless something can be given to me in art, it is very hard for me to deal with it. In other words, I much prefer reading a novel by Jean-Paul Sartre than reading a philosophical paper. I like for it to speak to me through art.

KAHAN: In the creative way rather than the more disciplined essay. Before the break in your work in the early '80s it seemed that the traditional idea of the female nude was so much more important to you as both an important image in the history of art and also in dealing with the theme of sexuality. I remember when first seeing some of those works, it didn't occur to me that these female nudes were doing anything in particular, whereas some women friends were shocked that these women were masturbating.

GORDY: I have never thought of them as masturbating.

KAHAN: The crouching women with their hands in their crotches?

GORDY: If you are doing a reclining figure (a typical image), the fact that one of the hands might cover that area is the way you look at an image. I never thought of them as masturbating. It's very strange.

KAHAN: I guess it's because when your women are reclining they really often are not that calm. There is a little bit of tension or nervousness there which you associate perhaps, not with rest, but with an activity. There was that painting I remember, La Toilette, No. 2, that specifically dealt with menstruation.

GORDY: Yes, that did in the sense of female ritual and that mysterious quality of being a woman.

KAHAN: There was that forest of red corpuscles flying up and down the left-hand side of the painting, and then wasn't one woman putting these little triangular Kotex-like things between the other's legs?

GORDY: No, not exactly, the triangular forms were off to the side. I am afraid that you read more into that. It was done in 1968 when you know I first got my style going and was able to get some big things. The crouching women are in a position that reminds me of a cat basking in the sun. The main standing figure doesn't have a head on. It's headless and also armless and footless in the sense of Greek or Roman sculpture.

KAHAN: Even when you have a head in so many of your early works there are no faces. It's more like it's the idea of the body, but there is no personality.

GORDY: No, there is no personality. Here, a couple of figures seem to be doing something to the headless figure, as though they are preparing a toilette. You know the toilette is a repeated subject in Western painting. The background red things like arteries or veins, and these little triangles and banana shapes, come mainly from a book that someone gave me years ago called Flowering Shrubs of the Caribbean. It was those kinds of colors that interested me, you know, brilliant reds and scarlets and greens and banana yellows of the various plants that grow in the Caribbean. The background is broken up in a way that for me has a feeling of a sail on a boat or something. In that respect, it is kind of positive, as though it is billowing out.

KAHAN: In the recent female nudes you seem to be poking fun at the female nude, with the breasts either very, very saggy or else sticking out pointed. Do you think of them as satire?

GORDY: No, I don't, but I don't mind there being some humor there. I haven't worked very much with the female nude recently. I have mostly been working with the male nude, which I think of as very autobiographical.

KAHAN: This represents a change from the early works, where it was predominantly the female nude that you were working with.

GORDY: Right.

KAHAN: But I'd say your male nudes poke fun a little bit too--maybe not as much as the women--but especially in the way their penises poke up or hang down or seem aggressive or weak. I find that particularly amusing.

GORDY: I am interested when I am working on the male figure. I mean I notice that I am usually including the penis in the work because it just seems important to the figure.

KAHAN: It is an emblem of the maleness in the way that the saggy breasts were of your females.

GORDY: Yeah.

KAHAN: Are these from memory or do you actually have someone come pose in your studio?

GORDY: Just recently, I have started having someone pose. I used to work a fair amount from the model just as a foil to my other work. Then, for about 10 years I didn't work with models very much, but I have found that with the nudes, unlike the heads, I really did need to work from the figure. So I have started doing monotypes from the figure, actually from life. Sometimes I'll get someone to pose and start about three or four plates and then after they leave I will work on them some more. I don't know the figure as well as I do the head. It is very hard for me to find fresh ways of showing the figure.

KAHAN: The distended shoulders I noticed in a couple of the male nudes were wonderful, as if these bodies were different from yours or mine.

GORDY: Yeah, that worked very well. It was almost like an accident. That kind of distortion makes you look at the figure in a very

different way. It is really when I get surprised by something like that happening to the figure that it really means something to me.

KAHAN: In looking at both the early work and the recent work it seemed that in the early work the theme of the pastorate was so important and the idea of the nude figure, usually female, was very important to that. The sensual then was equated with the decorative because you used those all-over patterns. Do you now feel that the sensual, and really the sexual, element of your work is now more divorced from decorative considerations, or do you still find that the decorative is still pretty much important to you even though you're not using patterns?

GORDY: I am perfectly willing to be decorative in one thing and be very undecorative in something else. I don't want those kind of limitations. I want the new work to be as broad as I can possibly make it. I want the technique to be able to change.

KAHAN: In other words, you use tight forms and you use loose, expressionist forms.

GORDY: Right, I'll use tight forms and do a very aggressive one and then do a very kind of passive, subtle image. It's really what I get that counts, not the direction I am going in. I would like to get into compositions with three and four figures. I would love to do some landscapes; I would just like to pull anything into the new work that I possibly could...eventually.

KAHAN: Is the new work also involved with humor as much as some of the older pieces?

GORDY: Yes, but I don't feel as much humor as I did--the visual puns and everything that you quite often got in the old work. The humor is not as obvious.

KAHAN: Sometimes you feel like these people are making faces at you.

GORDY: Yes. Sometimes the ugly ones are meant to be mock horrible, like an entrance to a fun house or something like that...a kind of mouth kind of staring at you very frontally. They are meant to have that sense of confronting you. Sometimes I do another head which is very subtle and deals with very complicated emotions. You see I am not consciously trying to do one or the other. It just happens.

KAHAN: You have always dealt with the sexual in your work in some way. But, do you draw a distinction between dealing with sexuality and dealing with pornography? Do you ever feel that the pornographic image of women was something you were addressing?

GORDY: No, in fact I get very irritated with people asking me if it is meant to be pornographic, or when it is taken as pornographic. I don't intend that at all. I just want the kind of vitality that comes from using imagery that has a sexual starting point.

KAHAN: Especially in the recent work, sexuality has more to do with a sense of life.

GORDY: I am not trying to titillate anybody in any of my things. That does not interest me at all, and in fact I am not even interested

in pornography.

KAHAN: It's the difference between enjoyment and arousal. The sexual is for pleasure but does not take that next step toward arousal.

GORDY: Yes. The sexual imagery in the work is really there because...unlike say if you were doing religious paintings...the sexuality in the paintings really allows you to relate to the painting. Something we all have in common are our libidos.

KAHAN: When you were in your twenties you lived all over the world, and then you settled back in New Orleans in the late sixties. Do you feel that you then made a sacrifice in not moving back to New York where you had earlier lived?

GORDY: No. I moved back to New Orleans really for family reasons. I had lived in New York and had found my work getting more and more self-conscious and kind of wanting to fit in up there somehow, so, when I finally did leave New York (which I had enjoyed and gotten a lot out of), it was partly because I realized that my work was going in a very kind of private, obsessive direction and I wanted to deal with all of that and it just didn't seem important to be in New York except for financial reasons. I still go to New York three or four times a year. But, the main reason is that it just suited me to live in New Orleans. It's not even that I like New Orleans that much; I was just comfortable there. I worked well there.

KAHAN: It seems to me that in the past five years especially, beginning in the late '70s, that New Orleans has really become a rather active place, a mecca for Southern artists.

GORDY: It is quite lively. It's hard to see all the things that are happening there...to get to all the openings. There are lots of very talented younger artists in New Orleans who have a real chance to do pretty interesting things.

KAHAN: It seems that more than many artists you have been such an avid student, a devotee, of the history of art as well as literature. How has literature played a role in the genesis of your images?

GORDY: I think both the novel and movies have played an important part, in the sense that they have taught me that there is a certain kind of thing they deal with best. The novel deals very well with social and philosophical issues and the way society is structured; and movies deal very well with visual material. It is quite often easy to compare a play or novel to the movie that is made from it. Because they really are very different things. And also, painting...for me...has certain things that it does better than the novel or music or whatever.

KAHAN: And yet the novel and film generally tend to be narrative, while your painting seems to stop just this side of being that.

GORDY: Yes. I've decided that real narrative quality is not what I am interested in doing in painting. And I don't think it is done very well generally by painting.

KAHAN: You're more interested in the image that does not tell you what's happening?

GORDY: Years ago when I started working, I was using a lot of imagery from Greek mythology...like Ulysses washed up on the shore and Nausicaa discovers him, or something like that, things that I had in mythology in college. I realized more and more that the subject, the narrative part of the thing, was not the important thing. The important thing was the relationship between the reclining male on the beach and the woman kind of peering at him.

GORDY: The energy of what you are looking at really doesn't come from the story, except in the sense that if you have a really popular subject like Susanna and the Elders or something, it is interesting to see how you handle it and how some other artist would have handled it.

KAHAN: I remember the painting you did called Rimbaud's Dream. Was the relationship to Rimbaud more the idea of fantasy and the incongruity of imagery in that painting or did it really relate to specific things that you had read in Rimbaud?

GORDY: It was done remembering some things about Rimbaud's biography: the fact that he abandoned poetry and went to Africa to seek his fortune. And it is really a dream of treasure, a dream of wordly goods.

KAHAN: So all those little shapes floating around the figure have to do with things....

GORDY: Yes, are meant to be kind of jewel-like, the things you might find if you open the door of a dark tomb, you know, King Tut sort of stuff. That's Rimbaud's dream. His dream of being a poet was pretty well abandoned.

KAHAN: You have also read a lot of Paul Bowles, reminding me that you also did a number of tropical fantasy figures.

GORDY: Right. Sometimes they have literary connections. Also, they connect with a part of modernism: in the 19th century in France, where there was a lot of interest in the exotic, the fascination with the Oriental thing or Gauguin going to Tahiti. My series called Tortola Stomp really has to do with making some sort of comment on that kind of subject that you get from someone like Gauguin.

KAHAN: It's amazing how wide-ranging some of the references are in your work to older art, but there does seem to be a special interest in early French modernism: Matisse, Picasso, and then your African art interest also reflects their interest as well.

GORDY: Right. There are certain things in art that seem particularly important: early cubism, "primitive" art, surrealism--the surreal-dada thing is very important. Those really seem in a funny kind of way to be the three things that have given me the most meat for my own work.

KAHAN: In terms of Matisse and Picasso's early work in cubism, I see those actual forms reflected in your work. But I don't see the connection with Dada and surrealism. Is that more subtle?

GORDY: Well, the obsessive imagery. Using the same imagery over and over again. Now, the fact that I'm working out of action so much, I think it has a lot to do with some people like Henri Michaux and so on.

KAHAN: The people who bridged surrealism and abstract expressionism?

GORDY: I am very interested in my own psyche--what turns me off and what turns me on and all that. It seems very important to work for me, and of course surrealism is a particularly self-conscious kind of art. A lot of bad art came out of surrealism, but some of the most exciting imagery in 20th century art did come out of that. I think Duchamp is terribly important to everyone who has worked in the past 20 or 30 years.

KAHAN: I remember looking at some of your very early works and it seems to me that you had been at that time interested in DeKooning. Is that true?

GORDY: At one time, in the early 60's. I guess he was the artist (the women paintings and everything) that influenced me a lot and made me realize that I wanted to deal with the figure. (I did very little abstract painting though, just a little bit in college). That was the image that had the real power for me.

KAHAN: Well, it is funny though. In the early 60's and 70's, people might assume that dealing with the figure has to do with human relationships. It seems really that for you the figure was mostly a convention more than a real thing.

GORDY: It was the animation of the figure as much as anything that attracted me.

KAHAN: Whereas now, the figure seems much more of a psychological interest, with a human dimension.

GORDY: You might say that the central image in my work is that kind of figure that stares out at you. And that is what I had in my work all along--a kind of figure that confronts the viewer. A lot of time that figure isn't in the paintings because they were more interested in the field.

KAHAN: Also, in the earlier work it was rare that you would actually have a face.

GORDY: Not that rare. For instance, The Red Room or the dog paintings....

KAHAN: But in so many of them it is just an oval or round shape for an eye.

GORDY: Yes, sometimes I can't put in feet or hands or features because they just don't fit the rhythm of the painting. Those parts of the anatomy break the rhythm of the painting.

KAHAN: I think it is funny when looking at those images where the heads and hands and feet have been cut off, the viewer automatically thinks of them as being amputated, whereas you think of them more in

terms of antique statuary, classical forms.

GORDY: Yeah. I mean they just had to be lopped off because they broke the rhythm of what I was doing.

KAHAN: Would you say it is a conflict between the structure and the composition and the formal element?

GORDY: Yeah. It seems to me, like in German expressionism, the real weakness is that they are not interesting enough on a formal level, compared to Picasso. The French, I think, were right. You need a lot of structure. You need a real scaffolding to hang all this information on.,

KAHAN: Would you go so far as to say that there is almost a conscious tension in these recent works between the figure's expressive potential and the formal qualities, which in a sense try to restrain the expressive potential and psychological element?

GORDY: Well, I am not sure. I'm not really sure that the formal elements really restrain it. I think that they support it, even though you feel a kind of conflict. Take a painting like a head by Picasso from the 1930's--you know that wonderful picture of Dora Maar. That has some things in it that you just do not get in German art. It is much more invented and in a curious kind of way, it is a lot richer.

KAHAN: Whereas German expressionism is more like a distortion or rearrangement of reality, the French way and your way is more like a set of conventions which then relate to a real situation.

GORDY: Right.

KAHAN: Observation, then, has played a fairly small role in your work?

GORDY: I never thought of myself as a particularly observant person. I could go into a room and probably not describe it very much better than an average person. I'm not very interested in that.

KAHAN: You are more interested in constructing a set of conventions and manipulating them.

GORDY: That allows me to deal with some pretty heavy visual information or pretty subtle visual information; I can go anywhere that the image takes me. There is a lot of editing you know -- things that don't get printed; a lot of things that get printed that don't get signed and go into a drawer--so that really only a fifth of the work really ever is released.

KAHAN: You talked about the early work using pattern as a mechanism, even as a crutch, to order the space.

GORDY: That's how it started. I needed control, and one of the easiest ways to bridge the painting from one side to the other was to deal with pattern as a way to do this.

KAHAN: But even in the '60s, did you also think of the pattern as relating to the decorative tradition of art?

GORDY: Oh yes. Some of that came after the fact. In other words, whenever one of my paintings really works well, it speaks to me. Whatever happens when I am using pattern, or if I am using a kind of obsessive image of some sort, that image is speaking to me. It is teaching me. Quite often when you are doing something you don't really know what you're doing. The painting of an image or whatever really talks to you or continues to carry on a dialogue with you.

KAHAN: I want to ask some other questions. Did you ever think of the crouching women or of any of these women in your earlier work, especially the women in The Red Room, as prostitutes? Is The Red Room a bordello?

GORDY: No. I think of it more as a nursery, if I can say that and not have it taken as facetious. I don't want it taken as putting down women. But the female images always have been for me an image that stands alone. In other words, the female seems like a complete figure.

KAHAN: It is rare that you have put men and women together.

GORDY: I find it very difficult. Even with an Adam and Eve image I had to make them androgynous enough so that they'd seem like they are part of the same thing.

KAHAN: Your males and females tend to inhabit separate worlds.

GORDY: Yes, and sometimes the female is very phallic--there are a lot of penis-shaped heads, and so on.

KAHAN: Another thing that seems to carry over from the early work to the recent work is that there are two psychological strains--one being celebratory, and the other anxious and nervous. Sometimes you see both those qualities in one image, but often there are works which are much more tense, nervous, or frightened and others which are more lyrical. It is interesting to see those two dimensions.

GORDY: Right. That is one reason I have enjoyed doing the monotypes so much. Whatever I am doing is tailored to the mood of the moment. If I get up one morning and I am kind of depressed and in a bad mood, I don't have to try to do something very calm and collected. I can work out of my mood at the moment. When I am in a very calm and collected mood, I can work out of it.

KAHAN: But it is also much more than autobiographical; it is like the classical versus the dionysian.

GORDY: Yes. That is the big subject of western art and it always has been, even in a lot of religious early painting where you think the work just has to do with man's relationship with God; that really isn't the case. That is really what the Renaissance is all about. It's the Apollonian and the Dionysian. Look at someone like Piero della Francesca in The Flagellation of Christ. You feel both of those things in the work.

KAHAN: Did we talk about whether or not you viewed the paintings as moving more toward artificial and symbolic modes or toward the real and the personal?

GORDY: I don't make any distinctions. It is all in me hopefully. I really don't mind art about art. It seems to me that is one of the interesting things about art.

KAHAN: When you were doing prints in the 1970's, you were doing fairly large additions of screen prints, generally about 75, because you wanted them to be accessible and you thought if you were going to do a print, why pretend it is a very limited, exclusive item. But now with the monotypes, they really are technically a print, but they function more like a painting as a unique object. Are you thinking that you (might) want to do more works in editions now?

GORDY: No. Only occasionally do I get an image that I think would make a good multiple. I am trying to do prints more like when I do monotypes in working more directly--going and working with a printer and not knowing what I am going to do. That is very hard because the printer's time is very valuable, so you don't have the luxury of screwing up. For instance, right now I am setting up some tiny experimental etchings simply because when I eventually do work with another printer, I want to feel more at home in the process.

KAHAN: Do the etchings really suffer if you do more than an edition of fifty?

GORDY: Oh, I probably wouldn't do that with many etchings. Of the etchings that I have done recently, the biggest editions have been like 35. I have run an edition of 16. It just depends on how I feel or whether the image is reproductive.

KAHAN: A couple of years ago, we were on a panel with Lucy Lippard, and after your talk, Lucy and I had comments about your images of woman, and you seemed reluctant to agree that they were a statement about women's roles, about women's position in society. You really wanted to see them more exclusively in the realm of the woman as the subject of art.

GORDY: The funny thing to me was that when I showed the slides, (and she was not at all familiar with my work), she sort of attacked it in a women's lib sort of stance, and I said "Why is it alright for Matisse to deal with the female figure this way, but it is not alright for me?" She told me that I should know better--that Matisse was bourgeois. After the talk I said to her that I am homosexual and I don't think any of this means anything in that way. I paint what I feel strongly about. I can be celebrative--I can show a virgin--I can do anything I want in dealing with that image.

KAHAN: But I tend to agree with Lucy. I see somehow those earlier images of women as not about real women and relationships; they take woman out of the real world and put her into this art world as a subject, as a device that can be manipulated, and there is something disturbing about this to me.

GORDY: I see what you mean--that it is too objective--that the subject is dealt with too objectively as an object. But there is another way to look at that. There is also the fact that they are more at home in their environment. In a funny kind of way, they don't need a male. And women, I do think, are much more self-sufficient than men. They are much more at home with their bodies. A lot of it is just biology I suppose.

KAHAN: Do you think there is a difference in the way that you have used the female images in the earlier paintings compared to the way you are now using the male nudes in the monotypes? For example, do the male nudes display themselves in the same way as objects for visual possession, or are they more active than the female or more passive than the females?

GORDY: I don't think of it in that way. I have never really thought about it very much. I am just willing to take anything that happens at this point as long as it is interesting. I do think that there is an autobiographical element--that the males images are more specific than the females were in the old work.

KAHAN: Are they more often doing things; are they more active?

GORDY: As active as I can make them. They try to walk. The male image is Werther-like, a wanderer, that sort of thing.

KAHAN: More errant, where the woman has the place and occupies it and the man is still kind of searching.

GORDY: Yeah.

KAHAN: It is interesting too that I think maybe the penis and breast are created similarly in this strange way.

GORDY: Well, it is certainly the easiest way to tell someone that this is male and that is female.

KAHAN: But it is also like the breast and penis have these personalities. It is almost like in the early 20th century, moving from Baudelaire's correspondances to Burchfields ideas of color. They are active, they are passive, they are soft, they are erect. The breast and penis are barometers of some emotion or psychological dimension. Is that relevant?

GORDY: Not really. For me the main reason I would use a penis quite often when I would be doing male figures is because I want to give the information that it is a male.

KAHAN: Then these parts of the body that have been so highly eroticized in our culture really to you are more equal to other parts of the body. They don't take on this special kind of status but are more like signs for male and female.

GORDY: Yeah. But I don't want to pretend that is not an important part of it. I really don't think about it very much.

KAHAN: So where are you moving now toward?

GORDY: More toward the entire figure. Fewer heads, more complicated figure compositions--two or three figures--kind of working together

in some kind of tableau.

KAHAN: But still using the monotype?

GORDY: Using the monotype. Hopefully getting into some big paintings. Doing the paintings have been hard simply because I have been so satisfied with monotyping that I haven't felt a need to paint, but I am trying to get back into painting. I've also been playing around with a little plaster of paris--doing a little sculpture--seeing if something happens. I have been through this about four times in my career--feeling like I want to do something in sculpture and everytime I really don't get anywhere. And I'm also doing some linoleum block prints, woodcuts--things I can do completely on my own, without a printer. A lot of things that I am really interested in dealing with I may not do, cause we don't know how long I'll be here. The new painting seems to be expanding, whereas the world of the old paintings kind of froze up on me and got dryer. I am trying to keep it as open as possible, doing something very mannered and doing something unmannered.

KAHAN: And yet it seems it would be hard for you to do something unmannered....

GORDY: I mean unmannered for me. You know what I mean?

KAHAN: Yes, because you are so aware of all the precedents in the history of your own art and the history of art in general.

GORDY: Yes, but not to be afraid of going in any direction. I am essentially a very conservative artist, with a lot of inhibitions and it is very hard to break those down. They were rules that I made for myself that have a great deal of meaning. I needed those rules.

KAHAN: It is ironic that ten or fifteen years ago we would have used that word that you just used, conservative, to characterize your interest in the history of art and thinking of yourself as part of that continuing tradition. But now it is called "postmodern" and is in some circles avant-garde.

GORDY: Yes, and I've missed this boat as well! [Laughs]. It was the same thing with the patterned work.

I was admittedly not doing it for the same reason that the people in New York were doing it, like those at Holly Solomon. The pattern stuff really comes out of a lot of things that were happening in the contemporary art scene having to do with seriality. They were made to have a sense of inventory--similar things that were all brought together.

KAHAN: It is interesting because that idea of the serial image went so many different routes: to a purified state in minimalism and to the more social orientation of pop-art serialism, and then you taking it back to a more traditional sense of pattern. We forget how important that idea of repetition was.

GORDY: It is really important to a lot of things that have happened.

GORDY: I am a terribly romantic person in a funny sort of way.

KAHAN: In that sense New Orleans is a perfect place.

GORDY: It is a good place in the sense that it's where strange, unexpected things could happen, in a way that some of the other cities may not have.

KAHAN: It's a place where revelry and celebration are an integral part of the culture, and I think there is that element of celebration --even though somewhat fraught with tension--in your work.

GORDY: After I got out of college, I lived in a lot of different places and wandered around for about 12 years in Europe and Mexico, and so on. I was always trying to solve my problems by having a geographic change in my life, and when I moved back to New Orleans I thought I needed to settle down and New Orleans turned out to be the right distance between the world and the womb. I was just very comfortable there. I don't particularly like New Orleans; I don't particularly use it well or get the most out of it, but there is a sense that I belong there. Of all the places I lived, its the one that finally became home. I felt that I had my own home--that I had gotten away from my parents. I felt much more strongly that that had happened when I moved back then during all those years of wandering around.

KAHAN: New Orleans has so many different strains that can be picked up on. The rich Black culture has not been of special interest to you, but it has to other artists there; instead, you perhaps picked up on the kinship with the French in New Orleans.

GORDY: The French stuff was all there before I moved to New Orleans.

KAHAN: But, you had that interest in French paintings when you were a teenager and then moved to the most obviously French city in America.

GORDY: Yeah. And I don't even like the French. Remember - I went over on that Beaubourg fellowship [and came back early.] They are the most arrogant, nasty people around. I don't like the French, but you can't ignore French painting! I mean it is at the very center. You can go out in different directions from it, but for me it has always been at the very center of what painting is all about. A perfect example of that would be people like Braque and Derain. Derain has really been a very big influence on me--those Derains that nobody really likes from the 20's and 30's when modernism kind of looked back. Those decisions that were made by some of the French painters seem an interesting way to go; some of the pieces themselves are not that interesting, but I see what they were trying to do. The French are always so good at keeping their feet on the ground.

KAHAN: It was interesting that you were talking last night about being interested in those kind of second-tier painters like Balthus and Derain.

GORDY: A lot of English painters, too. For instance, Stanley Spencer has really been an important painter to me, and minor people like Paul Nash and a lot of other English painters.

KAHAN: Are these people that have been concerned with the formal devices of making a painting?

GORDY: Well, not for me. They were really much more concerned in working in their own little garden--their own little pea patch. I have a real weakness for painters like that. And there are so many good painters that you don't hear anything about, like Jack Yeats in Ireland. He did some marvelous paintings. I haven't seen a Yeats since I was last in Ireland.

KAHAN: The Birmingham Museum had a little show of his paintings--mostly portraits--loosely painted, somewhere between impressionism and expressionism.

GORDY: Almost Kokoschka-like, but none of the Slavic stuff.

KAHAN: I didn't get excited about it.

GORDY: A lot of people don't get excited about Stanley Spencer either. Spencer started out doing religious paintings and then in the first world war he was in the Crimea and that whole thing died on him, in the sense that he didn't believe anymore. But it was still his subject, and slowly over the years he takes on a religious-sexual dialogue which was very strange and very interesting. He is a unique painter.

KAHAN: You mentioned also having been interested in artists like Morandi and Redon and Hartley, but I guess what surprised me is that you seem to look so carefully at contemporary abstract painters such as Jake Berthot, Brice Marden, and Elizabeth Murray, who were people you have mentioned.

GORDY: Right. And some of Susan Rothenberg's paintings. There are a lot of good women painters around.

KAHAN: Do you then see this kind of distinction between abstraction and figuration that is so prevalent in our culture as really artificial?

GORDY: I don't think it make a bit of difference whether you are an abstract painter or whether you're working with images or anything like that. I don't even think you have very much control over it. Your head just going to take you hopefully in the direction that you can deal with. I mean I don't think I could be an abstract painter, but it can certainly influence my painting. Abstract painters are dealing with a lot of formal ideas, and those are the things that you can get from other painters. There is nothing I can get from Rembrandt. He is a very expressive painter--I love Rembrandt, but I am not going to get anything from him, whereas...

KAHAN: Whereas an abstract painter might have a certain kind of composition or coloristic device that might be meaningful?

GORDY: Yeah.

KAHAN: But the abstract painter can't deal with the figure which is so important to you. I guess that would be an enormous difference that one deals precisely with the human image and the other--abstract painting--doesn't. But you don't see that as being such an enormous difference?

GORDY: No. Some of the things that really interest me mostly about Matisse would be the exciting way he puts pictures together--that he deals with imagery.

KAHAN: In the same way as in your work, when I look at a Matisse, I often am unsure whether the figure is a convention that happens to be in the painting or whether the painting is about Matisse's reaction to the figure. It is an ambivalence, in a way, where maybe the figure isn't important and maybe it is. They are abstract in that way.

GORDY: They are not really expressive. He doesn't really deal with emotions. The only painting that I can think of by Matisse where you get that kind of a sense is in a nymph and satyr.

KAHAN: When you say "emotions" you mean individual, psychological emotions. He just deals with the grand thing, like lyricism or joy--abstract emotions.

GORDY: You would think that somewhere along the line he would have done at least some drawings that are relationships between people. He doesn't really deal with that. Unless you accept that in Matisse it is very hard to get much out of him. He is very specific about what he will deal with in his work, much more so than in my work. There are certain things that Matisse wouldn't allow to happen, which in a funny kind of way is very French. There are only certain things that will happen in a Braque. Unless you accept the beauty of those limitations it can be difficult to even understand their work.

KAHAN: What does it mean to you to be a painter now in 1986?

GORDY: I have really changed a lot of my ideas about what I want my paintings to do and be. I realize that art paraphrases life in a funny kind of way, and I think that the act of every day going into the studio and doing your work is essentially a moral act.

KAHAN: Whereas some people would read that as an escapist act.

GORDY: No, I mean this is where the action happens and this is where you make decisions that are like a paraphrase of your own life. You can fool yourself in life and you can fool yourself in art too. I know for a long time, when I was younger, I thought, "Well, I might screw up in my life, but I completely have a handle on what I am doing in the studio." But the fact is, life and art are very interconnected and quite often what you do as an artist deals with weakness. I mean, the fact that I needed so much control over my work was really that I needed not to fail. I feel much more comfortable with failure now than I did, because the things that don't work teach you more about what you're doing than the things that do.

KAHAN: You talked about male nudes being more autobiographical. In what sense? Enjoying the male image?

GORDY: No, in fact sometimes I thought of female images as being very autobiographical. When the image, and this again has to do with narrative, when the figure looks as though its making a choice or it looks as though it is going some place or it looks

as though it is relating to another figure--all of these things are metaphors for the choices of life, the need to deal with life romantically.

KAHAN: Do you mean autobiographical in the sense that they deal with human feelings rather than your own personal biography?

GORDY: Oh yeah. It doesn't make any difference where I was born and that sort of stuff to the work I am doing.

KAHAN: Is autobiographical then the wrong word?

GORDY: No. In a curious kind of way, all painting is autobiographical because when it is so-called "not autobiographical" it means you don't want to discuss certain things. Matisse chooses not to deal with a lot of things that must have been a part of his life. You choose not to do things as well as choose to do them. I don't want to exclude very much these days. I want to deal with as many things as I can in my work.

KAHAN: I guess recently you have done more different types of people than ever before: old people, young people, dessicated figures. I remember there was one man whose body seemed like it was made of putty. It seems dealing with more kinds of human types and feelings than you did previously.

GORDY: I want it all. [Chuckles] I'm not going to get it, but anyway I want as many things that can happen in the work as an old fussy kind

of person can do.

KAHAN: Yet, you still want to avoid a certain kind of specificity; the people are engaged in some kind of activity, but you don't specify what it is. They don't even have backgrounds. This figure's not in New Orleans and that one isn't in New York.

GORDY: I like to keep it much more open, more ambiguous than that.

KAHAN: The images still exist on a metaphorical level.

GORDY: Right. The most important thing about whatever it is I am doing is the surface--the fact that the surface is not violated, which is true about the old work, too.

KAHAN: And yet, because of the method of the inks that you are using on the white paper there is also a sense of volume and transparency...

GORDY: ...and an interest in texture which I didn't have before. Also the fact that you are constantly reminded when you do the monotypes that you really essentially are dealing with a trompe l'oeil situation in that what you are painting on the plate is quite thin, almost like a stain, yet at the same time you are dealing with things that seem to have a texture. It is really a trompe l'oeil situation, which is funny because trompe l'oeil painting is almost unremittingly minor. There is not any such thing as great trompe l'oeil painting. When you do the monotypes it adds another element.

It looks like it has a texture and doesn't really have it at all.

KAHAN: Because so much of the paper shows through, you are more aware of the surface than in the paintings.

GORDY: I found it a wonderful release not to paint with white. White is so deadening. In the monotypes, the light comes from the paper itself. It is very different from mixing white with your colors. The light has to be kind of naturally felt in paintings, and white is a deadening thing. Black is not.

KAHAN: But you've used black in the monotypes less than in your former painting.

GORDY: Yes. I rarely use it as a color any more in the sense that Matisse used black as a color.

KAHAN: In the screen prints there was a great deal of black.

GORDY: Yeah.

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