FEATURE INTERVIEW WITH FRAN HERNDON BY ELIZABETH ROBINSON

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**SAN FRAN RECONNAISSANCE: an Interview with Fran Herndon**

by Elizabeth Robinson

This interview took place at the artist Fran Herndon's home in the Richmond neighborhood of San Francisco. It springs from many previous conversations we have had and therefore presupposes some shared knowledge about Herndon's life. My initial interest was in learning more about Fran's relationships with principal actors in the San Francisco Renaissance: Robert Duncan, Jess, Jack Spicer and Robin Blaser. It was largely at Jack Spicer's insistence and instigation that Fran became an artist. However, as Fran disclosed more about her youth in rural North Carolina, what it was like to be a woman of color seeking work in the fifties, and her experiences in post-war Europe, I came to feel that we were opening onto other important elements of mid-century American history.

Elizabeth Robinson: When you came back from France—

Fran Herndon: That would have been after Jim [Herndon] and I were married, and I was expecting little Jay [the Herndons' older son], when we came back 1956-57. The reason we came back is because Jim had been a student at Cal [the University of California at Berkeley] and he was from Southern California, Santa Barbara.

ER: So Jim Herndon went to school with Robert Duncan?

FH: No, he didn't go to school with Duncan. [Jack] Spicer. Spicer went to Cal [University of California at Berkeley] when Jim was there. But, Spicer, I think they were roommates at one time. And Jack got Jim on KPFA [a radio station] in Berkeley and they sang all these folk songs. They sang those ancient folk songs on Berkeley Public Radio. And Spicer was the one that was egging them on, you know. Making it—at one point they were using words that they made up for the songs knowing that they would get cut off.

ER: Words that they made up?

FH: No, like “Skip to my Lou, you son of a bitch.” And then Jim went off to Europe. I don't know why. I met him in France, of course. That's when I had accepted a job with the U.S. government and I went to France, and eventually met him.

ER: Do you think it would be useful to say a few words about Jim so people know how he fits in with this group of poets?

FH: I think he went to Europe to improve his German, I don't know. We were like staff, Americans working in Europe after the war. I don't think he ever finished his degree because he left under rather questionable circumstances [laughs] and you know he had gone to Black Mountain, just to see what it was about. Later, when we came back, he finished his B.A. at San Francisco State and got a teaching credential. Jim wrote two books that were really bestsellers, because it was a time when the school system was failing and he and some others writing about this were really like stars. I really felt out of it because I didn't fit into that star persona. When he was doing publicity for the books, I would just go to museums.

ER: No, I didn't know that.

FH: I don't know if it was before or after Cal. And I had decided that it might be better to go to Europe in relation to racism and stuff. I was in Chicago working at the Institute for Psychoanalysis, and there were all these European doctors [who didn't demonstrate the racism of U.S. doctors] and I thought, “I can work with that.” So I applied to the foreign service and I thought I was going to Germany, but they sent us to France. Everything got changed, and I was in
Nancy. I was there about 10 months. I lived with a family in a home—a widower and her two daughters. And then I went to Paris. And that’s where I met Jim.

ER: To back up a little further still—do you want to explain why racism would be an issue for you?

FH: It’s a complicated situation. I was born into a group [considered to be Native American] in North Carolina. I don’t think that there is a clear sense of where they all came from. My conclusion is that it all happened after the Civil War. When I was in high school, people came to study us and try to figure out where we came from. A guy finally wrote a book—he sort of agrees with me that there was this turbulence—and that some of the groups were actually part of the, uh, what would I call it—the ruling class had servants and a lot of those were either Spanish or blacks or a mix. I think that’s more logical as to our origins than to say that we were an Indian tribe, and we like the lost tribe that has often been talked about, and it has never been proven that we are it. But now the government has recognized us as a tribe. And there is still [in the population] this mix of light skin and dark skin. My mother was very light, long hair, and my father was very dark. I can’t remember the guy from Cal who is the best source there is, gone to graves, checked names. He’s the one that I think is most reliable as who we are.

ER: Do you identify as an [American] Indian or as a person of color?

FH: A person of color. I have no idea as to what the best source is. I think the best sense of things is the chaos that happened after the Civil War when different ethnic groups mixed up.

ER: Okay. Here you are, after the 1950’s, and whether people could identify ethnicity or not, they simply discriminated.

FH: Yes. It was very hard to get a job in Chicago. After I finished high school and left North Carolina, I went to Chicago. Well, what I thought was that I had to get away. There was nothing there for me. I went two years to college in North Carolina, a two-year college. My father agreed to send me; it was in the mountains. I think he did that because my teachers came and said that I should go on to school. I was the only minority there. There was one other South American kid and he got caught in bed with the house mother and got sent home. Isn’t that a great story? I tried to get a job and they wouldn’t hire me because of my dark skin. So I lied to my parents and said that I had a friend in Richmond who said I could stay with her while I looked for a job and I took off for Chicago. I had a friend who lived in Chicago with her sister and they said I could stay with them for two months while I looked for a job, and it was just horrible. I finally got a job, but often I was the first minority they had ever hired. I went to an interview at the Institute of Psychoanalysis, and there was this Swedish girl interviewing too. Can you imagine the contrast? [laughs] And they hired me. She later married a doctor and did much better for herself than I ever did. [laughs]

ER: I doubt that.

FH: But the separation in the fifties was severe. I remember going out to dinner with a psychoanalyst (and he was just trying to sleep with me), and a black man looked into the window of the restaurant and saw me and the owner went up to him and told him the restaurant was closed. I will never forget that. Isn’t it interesting how you remember these things, that some things you will never forget?

ER: Yes.

FH: And I tested them all the time. I stood in line in restaurants. The psychoanalyst I worked for, his son arranged everything, and the analyst took me to lunch at a restaurant and there was no problem. We had our lunch and he took me back to the institute and it was the only time I went out with a white and there was no problem. The only time. I’m sure it was all arranged ahead of time.

ER: I had no idea that you went through all that.

FH: Oh God. Just getting a job was so hard. And of course, I had come from the south and had a slight accent, and that added—just confirmed to all those people [their prejudices]. So anyway, it was a miserable time. And I’m not just talking about the weather either.
FH: You have to, otherwise you go under…Or withdraw.

ER: You were just so brave, really—fearless.

FH: I don’t think I had a choice. When I think about it, if I was to do anything, I just had to go ahead. I couldn’t let that [discrimination] stop me. I couldn’t give in to that. If I did, I would never get anywhere. Also, there was that part of me that knew that it was so unfair, just totally outrageous the way people who didn’t know me who make assumptions about me because of the color of my skin. I had a lot of courage to do that. I know that now. As I talk about it, I get sort of emotional. I was just determined that they weren’t going to defeat me which is why I kept going and finding a place for myself.

ER: In Europe, was it indeed better?

FH: Oh yeah. They were fascinated by me because I was one of a kind. I was taking French lessons. And a family, through my teacher, had me come once a week because their daughter wanted to go to America. I got to go to my only French picnic, which is a very special thing.

We [the foreign services workers] were like a group of Americans and we traveled together. I didn’t have a boyfriend then. I met Jim in Paris.

ER: Do you want to talk about Jim, about why he was interesting to you?

FH: He was very good-looking and interesting—the way he talked, language usage. He was a bit of a mystery to me. We started going out. I had a little Quatre Chevaux and we used to drive around in it. I drove it all the way back to Nancy from Paris after 4-5 driving lessons. It was totally madness, but I made it back without incident. I think I sold it later, before I went back Paris. But I begged the foreign service people to send me to Paris and they finally gave in, so that’s where I met Jim.

ER: How long were you in Paris with him before you came back to the United States?

FH: A little over a year. Altogether I was there a little over 2 years. I think that was my contract.

ER: Did you get married there?

FH: Yes. We got married in Paris. Jim had been married before, which I didn’t know at the time, so we had to clear that up, and get the evidence that that had been ended. Jim was a guy who lied a lot. He would never have admitted that that was a flaw in his character. It was like his drinking. That it wasn’t as bad as it really was. And would never try to get any help for it. And he never did, as far as I can determine.

ER: Did the European response that you were one-of-a-kind bother you or make you feel that you were strange?

FH: No, I never felt that I was being discriminated against in France. They were interested. Maybe I was discriminated against, but I never felt that. Part of it was that it was not very long after the war and people still felt appreciative of [Americans] and grateful. Instead of tipping people in restaurants, for example, they would give us American cigarettes. That was a big deal.

ER: So you arrived in the U.S., in San Francisco in the late 50s—

FH: Um hm. It was early 1957 because Jay was born in 1957. I can’t remember Jim’s friend in whose apartment we stayed. He was a fruit tramp—traveling in California to pick fruit—and he was gone. So we stayed there until we could find a place of our own.

ER: What was your impression of the Bay Area?

FH: I was pregnant and it was one of those railroad flats in the Polk area. And there was a couple we got to know and they were trying to welcome us into the neighborhood. I think they would have considered themselves to be rather sophisticated and they were accepting of us [as a biracial couple]. And later, when [our first son] Jay got ill [with encephalitis], we would take him out in the alley and they wouldn’t make any big issue of it. That’s mainly where I would take Jay until he could walk again. [Herndon later had another son named Jack.]

That was a really traumatic experience, because Jay went south with Jim on a camping trip and then went into a coma. And that’s what I remember mostly, like a nightmare. It’s always there, and when I try to think about it I get overwhelmed. I just remember seeing him in the coma and thinking, “It will be all right.” And it’s not alright. I haven’t cried about it like this in a long time.

ER: Is he still doing art?

FH: Yes, he’s not going to Creativity Explored [a Bay Area arts program for people with disabilities] anymore, but he goes to another program on Monday when he gets up in time. There is something there, there’s no question. He’s very honest with his art. His art is very honest, I would say. I don’t think it ever occurs to him that he’s going to sit down and
make a certain thing. It just emerges, and I think that's why it's so arresting. But of course, he's seen a lot of paintings in the house, and that does help. And I can remember him on Jim's shoulders when we took him to museums when he was 2, 2-1/2.

ER: By comparison, how do you think you work as an artist?

FH: I think I'm more deliberate about it than Jay is. I am always searching for ideas to take me into a painting, rather than just doing it. I'm always looking for ideas to express. The majority of the time, I think I need to have an idea before I start.

The drawings I have no clue about. I don't know why I started doing that. But it has to come from someplace. My long-lost ancestors maybe. [laughs] But I think it is a gift and I just go ahead. Sometimes I get a little too self-conscious, and that's a barrier. You just have to let it come out.

ER: I think it's the same with poems.

FH: Sometimes I think my art looks too naïve. There's an innocence.

ER: I don't agree. I think your work is very various and sophisticated.

FH: I want it to be various. Very varied. Not repeat myself. Think about the new—what is new in my psyche? I'm surprised by what I do sometimes—where does it come from? Some of the images that I've used? There is a mystery about that, if one is honest and doesn't interfere too much. I think a lot of people want to prove something or paint in a certain way. It's hard to get past that. That's the thing I think is worth working against, and one has to guard against it.

ER: You mean that there starts to be norms, or a maybe a style? And then everyone rushes to do that?

FH: And particularly if it's accepted or praise is given. Yeah. One has to be careful of that. Because that's not really the point.

ER: You talk about mystery, or the mysteriousness of where art comes from? How do Duncan's or Spicer's views influence this idea of the mysteriousness of art?

FH: I was influenced by them for a time, but I don't think that applies anymore. They were like professionals—they had trained—that had been all their lives: (cont'd on p. 32)
(cont’d from p. 9) focused on education, in a sense, as poets, especially Duncan. They had gone to university and they were so well read in the arts. They were just miles ahead of me when I met them.

But also Spicer—Spicer had this wild quality about him. He was such a bad guy in many ways, always getting into trouble. [laughs] I’m not sure it wasn’t a cover, but he definitely seemed to be willing to try anything. Whereas I didn’t get that impression from Duncan. I think Duncan had a different approach to art. And Jack was more interesting to me in the end. Well, because he paid a lot of attention to my art. He was influential in that way, the friendship.

**ER:** But that idea of wildness could intersect in interesting ways with your own intention of being really various and adventurous in your own right—Was Spicer an exemplar or was he just a kindred spirit?

**FH:** Well, he was so much fun. He was such a scamp. He would write letters to people who wanted to ask him about his work and they were really nasty letters. We would send them off and I used to think it was so funny. We were like kids. It was like a child side of me. And George Stanley came in there, briefly, later.

**ER:** He was part of that mischief-making, art-making?

**FH:** Yeah. He didn’t play a big role, but he was there. I don’t know who else. A young poet who went off to New York—I can’t remember his name. He was very handsome.

**ER:** Larry Fagin?

**FH:** Yes, I think it was him. Very good poet.

**ER:** I saw him last week.

**FH:** Larry Fagin?

**ER:** Yes.

**FH:** I think he had something in *J Magazine* one time. It [the title of the magazine] was for Jay Herndon, I think that’s what Jack had in mind. We had about five or six editions, I think, because I had to go to this place I worked part time and they had a mimeograph machine and they let me type it up and run it off there. And then Spicer got bored with it is I think what happened.

**ER:** Probably. Duncan seemed to me, though worthy, very sure of his greatness, and very sure of his place in the world.

**FH:** Oh yes. There was never any doubt of [Duncan’s] greatness. I don’t ever remember him expressing any doubt, though there must have been times.

**ER:** So on one side: Spicer and a sense of great play. And on the other: Duncan and Jess and a sense of gravitas and erudition?

**FH:** Yes. They were serious. They really gave me good time. When I went over it was productive. With Jack, it was more playful. Not that he wasn’t going home and writing all those poems very seriously, but that was probably one a.m. after going to the bars. He came to MANY meals at our house.

**ER:** How do those poles of artistic practice come together in your work?

**FH:** I feel very gratified that I have options, that I can do that. Making art is not agony or anything like that. I look at it a lot when I am making work. I go back and try to improve couldn’t come anymore. One guy, it was black magic. They sprayed the steps after he left. They thought he had invaded the house. They were convinced, and probably were right. They didn’t want him in the house, but he came anyway, so they sprayed the steps. I think I would probably have been threatened by something like that also.

Duncan and Jess: They actually created a really stable and creative household, and I felt lucky that I was a part of it. And they were very nice to me. They wanted me to come. I mean, that one Christmas I made shirts for everyone—Jim and Jack and Duncan and Jess. They were just so touched by that. They were just so pleased. I had never known anyone like them. That was another part of it. I was constantly learning from them. And the fact that they looked at my work and bought some of it was so significant to me.
it. I like to see other people’s art, because I think you can always learn from what others are doing. It’s about growth, and about searching. You never know where a new idea is going to come from. It’s important to be open to that. You have to see a lot of art. You have to keep looking.

**ER:** When you were coming into being an artist, you were surrounded by people who were making their art with words. How did that impact you? I mean, you are still friends with a lot of poets.

**FH:** Well, poets are interested in other kinds of art. But they can be a little clannish.

**ER:** Oh, you think? [laughter] So there’s a model of just overall curiosity.

**FH:** Yes.

**ER:** But then the clannishness. How do you see that as working?

**FH:** You mean the way people navigate toward other people who are like themselves, or who navigate toward others who do work like themselves? I think it’s very isolating, making art. Very isolating. Because you have to spend all this time alone in a room, doing it. In order to get a break from this, or get refreshed, you have to find other people who are doing things—that’s in order to get fresh ideas or you are going to get dull yourself.

It’s very exciting to see someone’s work that you could never imagine that you could do, and to wonder how it could all come about. Who are these people and where did they get their ideas to do it this way?

Now I was just thinking about when I said a little while ago that I wasn’t interested in going to the open studio, and I don’t know why that is the case, but it really is not very interesting.

**ER:** I wonder if that’s because it’s kind of “hobby” art?

**FH:** Yes, I don’t think it’s full-time. Maybe some people are full time. It’s rare to find someone you zero in on. Because it’s often: been there, done that, seen that.

**ER:** Then what distinguishes hobby art from “real” art?

**FH:** The commitment. One of the things is the commitment. Willingness to put in the time to really work on your own art. And at the same time, to find out where other inspiration might come from. So you look at a lot of art. Not just paintings, but you read poetry or books or you take long walks. You see things that are interesting in different settings. For example, there’s just having George [Albon, the poet who lives on the third floor of Hernon’s house] in the house—someone who is really bright and looks at things and really reads and struggles with his work to get it to be what he wants. I don’t like the consumerist thing. It’s a lonely business to do your work, but you also have to go out there and get experiences from other art, etc. Looking at beautiful things.

**ER:** How do feel about this emergent marketing of art and self?

**FH:** People who take that approach—they think it’s easy [making the art itself]. Somehow they are convinced that it can be done by anybody. That there is nothing special about it. There’s this commonality about it. When I think being an artist is this terribly difficult thing to do.

**ER:** This interests me in relation to Jack Spicer’s growing fame. He was such an obscure poet, and now there’s what I would almost call a Spicer boom. How do you feel about that?

**FH:** I think more to the point is: How would he feel about that? He didn’t really want to be published, in some sense, or he was afraid that he would screw it up. Maybe there was a fear that he would be famous. I think he’s—I think he would have been appalled, probably, at what has happened to his work. But I don’t know. He did go up to Vancouver and read his work there. He needed that at that time. He needed somebody to almost take care of him. That may be too strong a way of describing him then, but I don’t think so. He died shortly afterward.

But writing poetry was not that public for Jack. All these big events—I don’t think that’s how he actually envisioned the outcome. But I think everybody else thinks they are doing the right thing.

**ER:** I think so too. And I’ve certainly—I’ve really valued that work.

**FH:** What I value from Jack is that he supported my painting up to a point, but then he wasn’t going to support it anymore after I did a portrait of him. It got too realistic for him. He was interested in what I was pouring out as I learned. He would really just laugh.
when I would bring things to show him; it was just pleasure. But when I brought the portrait of him, he was appalled. It was heroic. It was just huge and he was walking on feathers. I don’t know why I put the feathers on there, but there they are forever.

I don’t think he would have liked being read and published and reviewed in the New York Times.

God, he would never have thought that would happen to him and his work. And Kevin [Killian] went to New York and read from the book on Spicer and the collected poems and it was announced in the New York Times. I did find that rather remarkable that it was in the Times. I think it tells you that Kevin has good connections and also that it was time, that Spicer was a brilliant person.

ER: I felt that there was this kind of magic in the San Francisco Renaissance, and that it occurred because of the engrossedness in the conversation and who was here.

FH: Yes. It happened because of who was here, and it just happened spontaneously. It couldn’t have occurred that way with other people.

ER: When you were in the thick of it, you felt the excitement, and you were thinking, “Oh something’s happening here.”

FH: Oh yeah. I felt that something powerful was happening. I thought these people were really intelligent. Especially Jack and Duncan. Jess was more inward, and I never felt as close to him. They were really attentive to my work. Duncan would look at it and express how he felt about it, and Jack would say he liked it or didn’t like it. “It appalls me.” That was something that he said. You had to take it very seriously and not to let it pass: you paid attention, of course, but he wasn’t meaning it to be harsh. That’s a good way of putting it, actually: Pay Attention. You’re on the wrong track.

Somebody asked him for a copy of something, and he wrote back and said, “You can find a copy of that and stuff it up your ass. It’s stapled.” We would just write that down. I think I wrote that down! Now why would I remember that?

ER: How could you not remember that?

FH: That’s true!

ER: He did have this reputation of being brutal, but you felt that was always in the service of the art?

FH: Yes, he couldn’t stand it if people didn’t get it. He might be having a little fun, and I’m sure he hurt people’s feelings. But he was just appalled if people made bad art.
He was just one of these really brilliant people, and he had a facility for seeing deeply.

ER: That has its hazards.

FH: Yeah. Yeah. It cost him a lot, I think, in the end. But also, it pisses people off, if you make these kinds of comments about what they think is their life’s work. He didn’t want to be in the wider world somehow, I think. I don’t know if I’m right about that, but my feeling is that he wanted a smaller group. He just knew that you don’t have that many poets. A few really great poets. Or great artists in general.

ER: Did you have contact with Helen Adam or Madeleine Gleason?

FH: Helen was around and I would go to her readings. She was very strange and read these wonderful, magical things. With this accent. She was Scottish. She went out to San Francisco State University where they [Duncan et al.] met her and was part of this group.

ER: The Maidens?

FH: Yes. I remember going to her readings, that was later in her life, and then she went off to New York and that was a mistake, and she didn’t survive. There wasn’t enough money and they didn’t recognize her there for who she was. But she was so interesting and it was so wonderful to hear her read with that wonderful voice. I didn’t have a friendship with her. She was nothing like me, really. She was so out there. But I did love to hear her read and I thought she was quite wonderful and special, mysterious in a way.

ER: Was it hard to be a woman amid all these guys?

FH: I never thought of it as hard. Well, I had my family. That was another thing. We would have them around the table. I cooked a lot, because I had lived in France and knew good food. We had poets over a lot. And Jack was always there. I don’t think Helen Adam was ever there.

ER: I think of cooking as one of your arts too, because you are such an excellent cook. But that is also a very domestic, female role.

FH: Well, it was one way of getting people together. Sometimes I felt it was a little overwhelming when Jim would surprise me, when I didn’t have enough time. Generally, though, he would listen. He liked that kind of—people in the house and that kind of stimulation. And I didn’t mind doing it at the time. I had to be home.
with the kids and a lot of the time I was home. While they napped, I could prepare dinner. Definitely it was a female role, and at that time my work was second. I only did it while the kids were napping or Jim took them out.

ER: Did you know Ebbe Borregaard? He was supposed to be rather intimidating, but very active in the scene for awhile. I love his work.

FH: I remember him. He was very good at building things. Last time I saw him he was this imposing figure, standing in the middle of the room. I remember seeing him in a room—the last image I have of him is of this big guy, going up to the ceiling in my memory, and “Hello Fran,” in this deep voice, but I don’t remember anything else about where we were and what the occasion was. I think it was San Francisco someplace, at a show. For something he would come in for—had to be something very special.

ER: We haven’t talked about Robin Blaser, but I love the story of your friendship.

FH: He was really immediately close to me. I can’t explain it. He wanted to be, he wanted to be my friend right away. It was immediate that he was someone special in my life, and I wanted it that way. There was never a time when I felt differently. The only time I wished that he hadn’t lived here for two weeks was when I wasn’t sure I had the energy to do all the hosting and cooking.

ER: Can you pinpoint why he was so special?

FH: He was very close to his mother. I am convinced that was why he was close to me. He talked about her. She was the one who wanted him to be educated, learn a lot of languages. His father was a tough person who wanted him to be in business. But he was close to his mother and she was the one who wanted him to be refined, to study French and Latin. So I think it was just easy, then, for him to be friends with me. And we remained close. There was never any question about it.

ER: Certainly, whenever I saw him and wanted to get into his good graces, I had only to say your name.

FH: We were close. When I heard that he had that brain tumor, it was devastating. I had to call him almost every day, and then I had to stop doing it.

ER: But what a great thing to do.

FH: But he needed to be bathed and cared for. It was very hard. So it’s really still a loss. There’s no question about it. A great loss. The last time he was here, he bought one last in a series of paintings. It was the last one, and then they [Blaser and his partner] sent back a photo of it in their house. It looked great. It was the last painting they bought of mine, and the last time I saw them. And the painting fit perfectly in their suitecase. It was magical. I didn’t even have to wrap it.

ER: Robin could be really sensitive to who you were.

FH: Yes, from the very beginning. He could really see that. Jack is the one who said, “Fran, make art.” Yes, he said, “You don’t want to be a full-time mother.” He had taught at the Art Institute, so he suggested that I go there and take some classes.

ER: Had you done art before that?

FH: No, I was terrible in school. I never had my work up on the board, that kind of classroom stuff you do. The reason he suggested that was because he had taught there, but he thought I might find something of interest. That’s when I did the Mythos series, and he was very excited about that. I was just turning them out.

Jack [Spicer] is the one who said, “Fran, make art.”
ER: That, in a way, is an outrageous thing to proclaim: “You should be an artist.” Were you kind of terrified or nervous at the prospect?

FH: Yes, when I got there I was really nervous because I had never done anything like that. And then the first work that I did, a woman bought a painting and I thought, “Would she really want this?” And I was so nervous that I couldn’t even deliver it. Jim had to take it over to her. Now why would I remember that? That was after my first class at the Art Institute.

ER: Did they have a show at the end of the term?

FH: I think we just put our work on the floor at the end of the class. Everyone put their work out. It was just lined up on the floor. That was my first class, you know, and we were sort of talking about it, and, you know, how you critique. She was this woman in a wheelchair in the class, and she asked if she could buy the painting. She lived somewhere in San Francisco, in the hills, and Jim delivered it.

ER: That must have been confidence-building!

FH: I felt uneasy about it, like, “Now I have to do something.”

I had just started. I felt, “How could she do that? Could she really be serious?”

It was doubt that I felt. Doubt. But I’ve done that, just seen work and it was so meaningful.

ER: It’s like a form of recognition: POW.

FH: Yeah. Then we had shows in people’s houses. I can’t remember his name—he later moved to Mill Valley. He had a big flat with walls and he would have shows and I showed there. And I remember one person who went to Japan, Gary Snyder, and he brought two people and I still remember still hearing their feet on the floor as they came. And some movie star, he was gay, and he became very famous and he was brought to the show—who was it?

ER: James Dean?

FH: Maybe. I can’t remember. But he came to one of those shows. I don’t think he bought anything. Why was he here?

ER: Did you go to the famous reading at the Six Gallery?

FH: I did go to the second one, a second reading. I remember it being an upstairs place.

ER: Did Ginsberg read then?

FH: Yeah, he would have read, but I don’t remember the details. It was a big place. There were a lot of people.

ER: Were they in your consciousness, the Beats?

FH: They weren’t people who came to our house. They were there, Jim and I went to events, but they weren’t in our inner circle. We weren’t close to them.

ER: Michael McClure?

FH: Oh my god, we went to his house, I think. And he had a garden. But that was in the early days. He had several wives. And I seem to remember looking down on the yard from a balcony, I would have gone there for a reading. That’s why I would have been there. I don’t remember Jim being there.

ER: That’s a lot of poetry that you’ve heard.

FH: A lot. And I wanted to go to hear it. I must have seen early that it had a connection to my work.

ER: Can you articulate that?

FH: I think it must be about imagery.

I think it must be about imagery. That I would have seen that, or realized that it’s there in the work, in the poetry as well as me, creating art.

ER: That’s interesting about imagery because some of your work is abstract.

FH: Not the early work, but later.

ER: It’s a matter of pattern then.

FH: Yes.

ER: What should I have asked you that I didn’t?

FH: I don’t know. Where I am now maybe. And I feel really a little lost at this point as to where I’m going now.

ER: Why do you think that is?

FH: I don’t feel—I feel there is a concern for fresh ideas. Of where to take the painting. Where the painting is apt to go. And I didn’t have these kind of questions before, so worrisome as I feel them to be now. Because I just did the work. Now I’m sort of winding
down in a way, about where to go. I've done a lot of work. There's a kind of insecurity now about what I can do, that it can be interesting to me as well as other people. There's a certain kind of fear that I don't have any fresh ideas.

**ER:** I think that happens to a lot of people.

**FH:** Yes. George's answer to that is to look at some pictures. So, oh yeah, like here are some photos, and I'll take a look at those. It's just how to tap into what's available and where the inspiration is. But it isn't just going to come and tap me on the shoulder.

**ER:** Well, it might, and isn't that the greatest pleasure?

**FH:** Yes. But it's not always going to happen that way. Well, there's a lot happening too. Robin died. That's a big thing in my life.

**ER:** Since I talked to you in October, things have been happening in your life as an artist—

**FH:** Kevin Killian showed Claudia Altman-Siegel some of the sports collages I made, I understand, and he suggested that she come and see me. And she came. It's been sort of a mixed feeling for me. I don't think they know I'm 82, and it's sort of off-putting to me because there's a limit to how much longer I can be making art, and there's a limit to what I can produce. Because she's interested in my earlier work and I've moved on. I'm finding it hard to work. But I've signed off on it now and it's a given that I'm going to be with her gallery. And she'll have an opening soon and send out invitations. I don't think my work is going to sell at the prices they are asking. I think that's a little negative and I should be thinking a little more positively. But now that she's been putting the work in the gallery, I am feeling like I'm ready to get back to work.

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by Dale Smith

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