

VAN DOREN
WAXTER

Art in America

HEDDA STERNE

by Joan Simon | February 2007



HEDDA STERNE, UNTITLED, 1983. OIL AND PASTEL ON CANVAS

Like many others, I have been curious about Hedda Sterne, the lone woman in the hat standing in the last row of the formally staged photograph of 15 New York School artists who became known as "The Irascibles" when this image was published in Life magazine on Jan. 15, 1951. Now, a traveling exhibition, "Uninterrupted Flux: Hedda Sterne," organized for the Krannert Art Museum by Sarah L. Eckhardt, together with its accompanying catalogue, offers a detailed look at the artist's long and varied career. Initially identified with the Surrealists, then the Abstract Expressionists, Sterne followed her own imperatives, changing subjects and techniques and moving wherever her ideas and observations led her.

In the decade between arriving in the U.S. in 1941 until the photograph was taken, as Eckhardt writes:

Sterne actively engaged in the artistic dialogue in New York. Sterne's work had been featured in four solo exhibitions (each organized by Betty Parsons) and numerous important group shows, including five at Peggy Guggenheim's Art of This Century, one at Sidney Janis Gallery, two Whitney Annuals, and three Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Art Annuals. In the subsequent decade, Sterne had nine more solo shows and participated in more than forty group exhibitions At the

Betty Parsons Gallery and elsewhere, Sterne's art hung alongside that of Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning, Barnett Newman, Mark Rothko, and Theodore Stamos.

Sterne's abstractions were noted as examples of "advanced" or "radical" art by Clement Greenberg in a 1947 article in the Nation.

Hedda Sterne was born in Romania in 1910. As she notes, she was familiar with advanced art from childhood and "grew up with Surrealism." She credits her early experience of this work to a fellow Romanian and family friend, the artist Victor Brauner. After studying in Vienna and Bucharest, Sterne left in 1930 for Paris where she lived and exhibited her work. When she participated in the "Surindependents" exhibition of 1938, Arp saw her work and, through Brauner, arranged to have one of her collages sent to Peggy Guggenheim for exhibition in her Guggenheim Jeune gallery in London.

Escaping the Nazi onslaught, Sterne left Paris for the U.S. via Portugal in 1941. She has lived and worked in or near New York ever since. In New York she exhibited at Art of This Century Gallery until Guggenheim closed it, and then joined Betty Parsons's newly opened gallery, where she exhibited throughout its tenure. Since 1981 she has showed with Clara Sujo of CDS Gallery, New York.

The source of the Krannert exhibition's title is to be found in a 2004 statement by the artist published in the exhibition catalogue, where the fluidity of her practice as well as the down-to-earth poetics and metaphysics of her daily endeavor are evoked. She opens by saying:

Sometimes I react to immediate visible reality and sometimes I am prompted by ideas, but at all times I have been moved, to paraphrase [Irish poet] Seamus Heaney, by the music of the way things are... And through all this pervades my feeling that I am only one small speck (hardly an atom) in the uninterrupted flux of the world around me.

The exhibition is divided into thematic, roughly chronological (at times overlapping) groupings. These are designed, as Eckhardt writes, "to highlight a few key phrases in Sterne's career," 65 years of which are spanned in this retrospective. All but one of the works included in the exhibition were made in the U.S.

The exhibition's first grouping focuses on Sterne's Surrealist works of 1941-42. Two torn-paper works from that period were the first of Sterne's pieces to be exhibited publicly in the U.S., when they were included in "First Papers of Surrealism," 1942, and later in two exhibitions at Art of This Century. Using an automatic, chance-driven technique characteristic of Surrealist practice, Sterne let pieces of paper she had torn fall to the floor, and then amplified images she

perceived within their shapes with pencil drawing. Also included in this section are a number of collages.

Several paintings made between 1942 and 1945 present images of domestic life in Bucharest. Among these is a painting of young violinists in a salon that recalls Sterne's musician brother practicing at home. These are soon followed by observations of her new domestic surroundings in New York. An extended series of canvases and works on paper depicting agricultural machines begins in the late 40s and continues through the 50s.

In the 50s, many works were devoted to Sterne's adopted hometown, some of them monumental in scale. In these canvases, the structure, speed and motion of the city are invoked in abstractions often made by applying paint with a commercial spray gun. Sterne would also use a spray gun for a series of abstracted views of highways in which she is preoccupied with rendering the motion of cars.

"Vertical-Horizontals," made during the 60s, portray multiple horizons within tall vertical canvases, and they are among her most fully nonfigurative works, having a kinship with Minimalist abstraction. By contrast, a group of drawings made from mid 60s to the early 70s employs elaborately convoluted, leafy organic forms.

Sterne has made portraits throughout her life. The earliest of these included in the show (a stylized likeness of Mrs. Massimo Campigli from 1938) is the only piece dating from her European years. Her portraits of friends and colleagues in New York, among them John Graham (1943), Barnett Newman and his wife Annalee (both 1952), Frederick Kiesler (1954) and Harold Rosenberg (1964), vary in size and format and are characterized by a sensitive use of line and extraordinarily keen observation.

In the late 60s, portraiture led her to an unusual, large-scale project titled "Everyone." It is an environment comprising a cluster of faces, each one different an ensemble of portrait heads. Though keyed to specific individualism the images are flattened, simplified, somewhat abstracted, and arranged in ranks on unstretched canvases, originally exhibited stapled to the walls of a room. The piece was first installed in her home in 1969 (where it was photographed by Duane Michals) and then exhibited at Betty Parsons in 1970. Her work triggers associations with the repetitions of Warhol's wallpaper, and his own serial, somewhat abstracted portraits. Though Sterne ranged between abstraction and figuration through her career, her "Everyone" environment was seen by some as traitorous to the modernist tradition. (It might be noted that in the same year Guston's return to figuration provoked even stronger public reaction, when his cartoon-based images were presented at Marlborough.)

Also encompassing in its scale was a 1976 work, Diary. For this piece Sterne

worked on a huge canvas placed on the floor of the large entry-level room in her home. It is a gridded drawing consisting entirely of text. For more than a year, she inscribed observations and excerpts taken from her extensive reading, the words tightly packed, each line of text touching the next. Seen from afar the work resembles a densely textured, gridded abstraction. The words in the blocks are oriented horizontally or vertically in alternation.

In following her own imperatives, Sterne almost intuitively was part of the zeitgeist. The diary project, a conceptual work drawing on systems and repetition, grid and "found" verbal content, is reminiscent of a range of ideas of the period, including Carl Andre's gridded floor plates, the diaristic writings of "narrative" and "story" artists, or Conceptualists' note cards. It shares with contemporaneous Pattern and Decoration artists a recognition of rugs and other textiles as imagery to be read, and echoes the patchwork forms reclaimed in many feminist works.

The grid functions differently in her next series, titled "Patterns of Thought." During the 80s, she found a serial form of intimate geometric abstraction, characterized by repetitive systems whose internal divisions, structured by an implicit grid, imply spatial depths. Their forms bring to mind Smithson's earlier interest in crystallization, as well as the geometric serial repetitions of a number of artists who often worked on architectural-scale public projects in the 70s and 80s, including Jackie Ferrara and Mary Miss.

Late in her career, Sterne embarked on an intense, eight-year period of free abstract drawing that ended when she suffered a stroke in 2004. The critical position of drawing in Sterne's oeuvre is recognized in the concluding essay of the exhibition catalogue, Lawrence Rinder's "Hedda Sterne: Life Drawing." The following interview was conducted in New York on June 3, 2006.

HEDDA STERNE: Do you have a good memory?

JOAN SIMON: Yes. Do you?

HS: Yes. For 96 years old.

JS: There are so many ways to begin an interview. We could begin with the past, we could

HS: I'm with you no matter what you want.

JS: All right then. Is there one thing you would like to say perhaps answer a question that no one has asked you before? Or something that you think about, or something about how you work or why you work? Something you would like others to know?

HS: Why I'm a painter altogether, I suppose. Because that's the most important part of my life. I never thought in terms of a career, but I worked with tremendous urgency. I have a feeling that in art the need to understand and the need to communicate are one.

JS: You've made your art in many ways. Why?

HS: I took it for granted that art is essentially an act of freedom. You react to the world totally freely. I met many artists in New York who believed progress is linear, from figure to abstract. In my work I never followed that idea. Now there's a retrospective of my work, and there's a catalogue made by a wonderful girl called Sarah Eckhardt. You may have read her essay.

JS: I did.

HS: She is taking her doctorate in art history, and I am her subject. She is astonishing as a researcher. She did a chronology with fantastic, fantastic care and accuracy. Unexpectedly, I had a survey of my work life. And she totally freed me of regrets. Because I saw why I did things, what prompted me, what moved me, and I saw that it was all right to live the way I have lived.

JS: Let's start by talking about the exhibition.

HS: I had two other retrospectives. One was at the Montclair Art Museum [1977], and it was nice. They gave me lots and lots of space, and that was good I have a large body of work. And the other was at the Queens Museum [1985]. They did a very, very nice job. But it didn't compare to the depth and thoroughness of analysis and research done by Sarah Eckhardt for this one. If you want to discuss various periods, there is a chronology in the catalogue where she divides the work in groups in ways that I think are very interesting.

JS: Surrealism is her first group.

HS: Yes. I grew up with Surrealism.



Hedda Sterne: Vertical-Horizontal I, 1963, oil on canvas, 96 by 70 inches.

Early Years:

HS: The very first art show I ever saw I was very young it was a Constructivist show. It was a show of a painter who eventually became a well-known Surrealist painter and good friend of mine, Victor Brauner. I started studying art at eight because I did very good likenesses and my parents were impressed, and let me do this instead of piano [laughs].

The very first art I heard about was the advance garde art. Then I was given art history books. I grew up without chronology in my mind. I thought that Picasso did what he did because he felt like it, and Leonardo did what he did because he felt like it [laughs]. I had no guidance. Much, much later I studied art history in college, but for years and years I had no idea of chronology, and I think that marked my work.

JS: Do you want to talk about Bucharest, and your family life?

HS: I was born in 1910, and I was a second child. I had an older brother who was a marvelous beauty and talent. He's dead now. My father was a teacher of languages in high school, and my mother was a housewife. There were no paintings on the wall. Life was tight. Teachers earned very, very little. What else do I remember? I was not a tomboy. All I wanted to do was stay home and draw and read. I taught myself to read and write when I was five. By the time I was six I read for pleasure. I had already read Dostoyevsky at eleven. I also read Proust. I stayed home for a month and read all of it.

JS: Was the family religious?

HS: No. Jews were assimilated and they had the illusion that if they didn't look at the problem, maybe it would go away. And to be quote assimilated was to be civilized. Everything associated with religion was backward. My father was a thinking agnostic, or atheist if you want, and my mother was totally uninterested and indifferent. So I was brought up without any kind of mention of religion at all. Well, there was a moment when I wanted to convert to Christianity [laughs]. I was about 11, and I read *The Imitation of Christ*. I read everything.

JS: What language or languages did the family speak at home?

HS: Romanian. During World War I, my father inherited from his brother, who died, a business, with the proviso that he should take care of his widow. We moved into this elegant house that belonged to this successful businessman's widow and her mother. Those years were very crucial in my life because there were paintings, and reproductions of paintings, on the wall. She was a singer and it was all Schubert and Schumann lieder singing. My brother was already studying the violin, and there were children coming and playing trios of Haydn. Those were very important, formative years. And three dogs. Fantastic dogs.

JS: What kind of school did you go to?

HS: Jewish children were generally tutored at home because the schools that they were accepted into were of a terrible, low level. I was tutored at home from six to 11. At 11 I went straight to the second year of high school. I graduated a year ahead. Everybody graduated at 18; I graduated at 17. After high school I wanted very much to do architecture, but I was miserable at mathematics. I was terrified.

JS: You had taken some art classes at Marcel Janco's studio in Bucharest in 1926.

HS: That was in my teens, for a short time. He was already a Surrealist at the

time. We were given easels, etc. but nobody looked, nobody advised us. I went to various places to work like that.

JS: You took summer classes in Vienna in 1927.

HS: I took ceramics. As a teenager I only drew and sculpted. I didn't paint. At 17 I discovered color. I went to London. I saw a flower show, at Chelsea. It was just unbelievable. I had such an epiphany. I was changed for life by that show. I went back and had the urge, finally, to paint. I had such respect for oil, I thought only masterful artists could do oil and I started at 17 to do color.

JS: Then, in 1928, you went to the university in Bucharest.

HS: I wanted to go to Paris and just do art. Because when I grew up, Romania was like a colony of France. Everything that was worthwhile was happening in Paris, and if you weren't in Paris you were in exile.

JS: How did you know what was happening in Paris?

HS: Reading. Magazines. There was a wonderful bookshop where I spent an enormous amount of time. There were French books. And then the Surrealist magazines. Cahiers d'art. All of that. Week after week I was there, looking, looking, looking. You know, in provincial places, people are really interested in what goes on culturally in the world. In New York, people think that everything is coming here, and they are not seriously interested in what goes on outside. It's a kind of reversed provincialism. But in Romania I knew what was written in Scandinavia, in Greece, in every country in Europe. Because everything was outside. When my parents traveled, they didn't say "we traveled abroad," they said "we traveled outside." It was like a prison of ignorance and limitations. So this bookshop was like a godsend for a growing child.
Paris, 1930-1941

JS: You began to study in Paris in 1930.

HS: The first time I went there I was 18 or 19. At the beginning I would go for three or four months at a time, when I was still living with my parents in Bucharest. I was studying philosophy and art history at the university, but in the end I dropped out.

JS: In Paris, you studied in the atelier of Léger. Could you describe that?

HS: Well, he wasn't there. I never met him until much later in New York, in the 40s. But at that time I never saw his face. He had a very good man who was a substitute. It was more than anything a place to work. Nobody tried to influence

me, I just worked.

JS: Where did you live when you were in Paris?

HS: Most of the time in Montparnasse. But through the years in every neighborhood, because I wanted to know all Parises. In the end I kept going back to Montparnasse, because it was the place of strangers, and I was a stranger.

JS: Which artists did you see in Paris when you settled there in 1930?

HS: I saw Victor Brauner, and he was very good to me, and introduced me to people.

JS: In 1932, two years after arriving in Paris, you married a childhood friend, Frederick Sterne, from Bucharest, and resettled there for a short time, before again moving between Paris and Bucharest.

HS: The first husband I married when I was 22. He was very, very supportive but with no idea about art. We had an excellent relationship but not a real marriage for a variety of reasons that are not of interest in the history of art [laughs]. But he was an extraordinary, true, loyal friend. He brought me here in 1941. And he encouraged me and helped me and kept me I never had economic problems because of him. He started out as a reader, an intellectual, then he went to study with a financier and learned how to deal with money and became very, very successful. He came here in '39. In '41 he brought me over, with tremendous efforts.

JS: I read that you barely escaped.

HS: unspeakable death. Yes. But I did, so I never enlarged on it.

JS: You left via Portugal.

HS: I stopped in Portugal for a while because the ship I was supposed to come in was sunk by submarines. And I had to wait and I came on another one. It was in October 1941, and America was very difficult about visas. It was quite a miracle that I came. In New York, at that time, there was a situation with expatriates and refugees a kind of solidarity so that you had immediate friendships. Very different from what you'd have now.

JS: Whom did you meet?

HS: Saint Ex [Antoine de Saint-Exupéry] was one. I was taken to him by a young Yugoslavian girl I had met on the boat. I was 30 and this girl was 19. She came

alone, brought by the Quakers, and so I told her, "If you are ever having troubles and need somebody" I gave her my address. She said, "You are using absolutely the same words of somebody you have to meet." It was Saint Ex, and we became instant friends.

When he wrote anything I lived alone he would call me up and read me a chapter or two, at 2 or 3 A.M. When he did *Le Petit Prince*, he was always doodling. He called me up to ask for the name of a good illustrator, and I said, you do it. He went to the publisher and they used his illustrations. And then he wrote me a thank-you note. That letter was very important to me, the idea that I participated, encouraged something that became so important it was extraordinary for me.

JS: Did you suggest the way the characters should be sketched?

HS: No, no, no. Only that he use his doodles. He was a wonderful, wonderful man, and a great talker. I've met a few great talkers in my life, and he was one of them.

JS: Who were the others?

HS: Duchamp. And Meyer Schapiro and as storytellers, Franz Kline and Bill de Kooning. Bill would go on a bender and come back with stories you wouldn't believe. And Franz Kline one evening talked about his cat for hours. And we sat there it was like Scheherazade. We were totally enthralled listening to him. He had us paralyzed with interest and awe, just talking about his cat. Fantastic. Only at one point he said something that really broke your heart. He had a wife ill in the insane asylum, and at one point he dropped that the cat looked like his wife. And that was deeply moving. You realized that he adored that cat because he identified the cat with her. That evening was totally unforgettable.

JS: And Duchamp. What kind of stories did he tell?

HS: Duchamp was just a conversationalist, you know, to keep it going, beautifully. Wonderful spirit, elegant mind. And Harold Rosenberg was a great debater. When he talked, brilliant, brilliant. Generous. He didn't just keep it for his writing, as so many do.

JS: I'd like to go back for a minute. In 1938 you were in an exhibition in Paris, the "Surindépendants" show.

HS: For that one you submitted the work yourself you didn't have to be elected. That's where Arp saw my work, and gave it to Peggy Guggenheim in London, where she had a gallery, and that's why, when I came to New York, Peggy became my first friend and I showed in her *Art of This Century* right away. Can you imagine? And never for a moment thought it was extraordinary. Everybody was here because of the war, and they gathered in her house. I didn't know any

ordinary person.

JS: What was Peggy Guggenheim like?

HS: A very, very interesting woman. Highly personal, original, independent, with a mind of her own. With the talent to detect quality in human beings as well as in art. She got for her gallery the best advice. She had Breton, Duchamp, Alfred Barr, Sweeney, Kiesler. They were all in the jury. And I was accepted by them, and I was in all the group shows from the beginning of the gallery to the end.

JS: You were also included in the "First Papers of Surrealism" show in 1942.

HS: At that time I was sympathetic with all the Surrealists.

JS: Your Surrealist works were mostly collage.

HS: That was very early. That was before '43 before my show at Betty [Parsons]. It took very little time until I discovered the United States, and I decided that the United States was more surrealist, more extraordinary, than anything imagined by the Surrealists. Look, the Surrealists compared to Americans were very stodgy. Here, an ordinary person on Long Island built a duck that sold ducks. He sold his ducks out of a duck! In California they sold you orange juice out of a glass of orange juice [laughs]. And I remember there was a play called Hellzapoppin. It was more wildly Surrealist than what the wildest Surrealists imagined.

And I discovered my immediate surroundings. So that's what I painted: first I came, and I got rid of memories of my past life. At the same time I got involved with things I saw every day my kitchen, my bathroom, which were utterly different from kitchens and bathrooms in Europe, and I made interesting paintings of those, because I thought they were wonderful interesting shapes.

JS: I read that you and Saul Steinberg, your second husband [they married in 1944], used to drive around and go sightseeing.

HS: In New York, we couldn't have enough.

JS: And especially looked at bridges.

HS: We looked at everything, everything. Every Sunday when there was no traffic, we went motoring through New York. I was crazy about New York. Then in '47, I went to the country and I discovered agricultural machines. I had a feeling that machines are unconscious self-portraits of people's psyches: the grasping, the wanting, the aggression that's in a machine. That's why I was interested to paint them. And I called them "anthropographs" maybe it was pretentious thinking [laughs].

When I took a trip through the U.S. by car, I got involved in painting highways [1951–57]. In order to show the feeling I had of cars moving at high speed and blurring, I used to spray paint, which is a speedy way of working. You know, there are certain subjects that suggest the technique to do them in. Those highway subjects suggested the spray, and those paintings are in perfect condition to this day. At the time, though, that commercial paint was thought to be no good. In any case, all along it was never imagination of self-expression. I always thought that art is not quote self-expression by communication. It is saying, hey, look! Of course, what you react to has to be transformed, without a doubt, or otherwise it is not art, but you do that whether you want it or not. The intention, the purpose, is not to show your talent but to show something. This is very important. Because I grew up and lived in a period of ego, ego, ego. And I was always anti-ego. Why do you laugh?

JS: Because your description is wonderful.

HS: It means you agree with me.

JS: I'm listening to you. I want to hear more.

HS: And I was always trying to reduce the ego. You know? I tried to think in a way that was accurate. Not subjective. Not agnostic. The Surrealists tried to be agonistic, bizarre. I wasn't like that. I didn't think I had the kind of mind and power of thinking to change the world. I had a very great urgency to show, to share. The cat brings you in things, you know it was that kind of thing. I discovered things and wanted to share them. It's a malentendu to consider me Abstract Expressionist. I was invited to participate in many things, but I never considered myself part of that group, or any group, and it shows in my work.

I did what I was interested in. Also, I didn't have the need and for that I'm not particularly proud, I was just lucky I didn't have the urgency to keep myself alive, because I was a kept woman, a married woman. I didn't have to make concessions to be liked. If they liked me, it was OK. I never looked for a gallery. When Peggy [Guggenheim] left, there was Betty [Parsons] here, who was a friend. We a group of friends asked her to open a gallery. And she did. She took all of us in because she had a theory if you take everybody in there will be good ones, too [laughs], And that's how she became one of the great galleries in the United States. Don't you think it's the most brilliant thinking?

I was with her from '43 when she was still working with the Wakefield Gallery, as an employee, until she died [in 1982]. And then I went to CDS, where I had already been invited for a guest show. Betty went to the opening. It was a friendly thing she did. Then when Betty died, I just stayed. Never did I try to sell myself

and my work. I would have been bad at it. There were times when I thought I had inhibitions about being professional, but in the end I'm glad I was like that.
The Irascibles

JS: You are one of "The Irascibles" in that famous 1951 photo by Nina Leen.

HS: Well, Irascibles, again, is a bit of a misunderstanding.

JS: The photo accompanied an article in Life magazine about an artists' protest. You were among the 18 painters who wrote a letter to the president of the Metropolitan Museum to express anger at the conservative jury the museum had chosen to organize a show of contemporary American art.

HS: When I was young, if there was a protest letter, I always signed it [laughs]. The only thing I really had in common with the others in the photograph is that half of them were in the same gallery and we all were considered avant-garde artists. I was part of them in that way, you know. A critic called Emily Genauer wrote about our protest, and she branded us "The Irascibles," but kind of trying to make fun. It had to do with the anger shown in the letter. It had nothing to do with the work of any of us.

JS: How was that picture taken?

HS: The photographer organized the architecture of the photo. When we arrived, each chair had a name on it. But there was no chair for me. It wasn't deliberate, though, and they found something for me to stand on, in the back.

JS: So the photographer made the composition with the chairs, and then told all the artists to sit in them?

HS: We sat, and it took about ten minutes. It was not the whole group behind the letter. Many months later, we spent three days discussing problems in a larger group. There is also a photograph [actually, two photos, see below] of the meeting that caused the letter to be written. There are 17 painters, plus me, who signed the letter. At least half of them were with Betty Parsons. [In addition to the painters, 10 sympathetic sculptors also appended their names.]

JS: It's a curious pair of photos of that meeting, one right side up, one upside down, so as to show the whole table.

HS: That's me, with the beret. And there's Reinhardt. Oh, he was an interesting guy. He was an abstract artist in the '30s before everybody else. He was a very good political cartoonist, and a very interesting man. With backbone. I liked him very much.

JS: And the others you felt sympathy with?

HS: Baziots he was a lovely talker, a storyteller. And a lovely painter.

JS: Pollock's position is so central in the Life photograph.

HS: But actually, nobody's center, and everybody is important. Nobody is neglected. She did the photograph with great intelligence. Everybody has equal attention. People think, "Look, you are on top of it all." But I could say I'm behind them all.

JS: There were two other pictures of you in Life within a short period of time. In one article, you and Saul Steinberg are each seen with your works, one on each page of a spread, and then there's an article devoted to you alone. There is something interesting about seeing two artists in relation to each other. When you married for a second time, it was again to a fellow Romanian. Did you know Saul Steinberg or his family in Romania?

HS: No, we met here, in 1943. He came here from Italy. He is a doctor in architecture. He was.

JS: Your approaches to art are so different.

HS: But not to life. One of the things that pleased me in our life is you know how people immediately look for influences. We were married together 16 years, but then our names were linked for the rest of our lives, and never did anybody link our work. That is for me a great tribute to both of us. One of those things I can't stand is that every time people talk about you they immediately want to place you in a box influenced by so and so. But you don't derive directly from anyone. Anyhow, the great influences in my life did not necessarily have to do with painting.

JS: What were some of those influences?

HS: Very often music music has had a tremendous part of my life. All types, including jazz. Some of the things would sound maybe funny to you. I heard once about a Yiddish poet who lived in utter poverty and misery, a teenager, who never had seen anything beautiful in his life, and he made splendid poems about vegetables jumping into the soup pot. My idea being that for the sublime and the beautiful and the interesting, you don't have to look far away. You have to know how to see. One of the things I believe in very much is the total presence of the participator. That's how I guaranteed myself. The only guarantee I had was my intensity, my authenticity, my urgency. Your head betrays you.

JS: And what cannot betray you?

HS: Your feelings. When thinking and feelings overlap, that is really the answer. You have to be convinced intellectually, but also with your heart and your entire being. Your taste, your smell you know? You don't doubt. I mean, emotionally you don't doubt. In between, you may doubt, and think, but when you act, you have to act with total passion and conviction. And then you cannot be far wrong. Or even if you are wrong in terms of the world, it is your truth. Do you agree?

JS: Yes. It's very clear.

HS: Good. I don't want to be obscure.

More Subjects of the Artist

JS: There are some groups of work we haven't talked about yet. About the very larger "Vertical-Horizontal" paintings [1963], you once said, "I get enormous pleasure out of very small contrasts."

HS: Yes, white and off-white really delicate, but intense contrasts. There are knife-edge contrasts in those pieces. In the meantime, I was involved in all kinds of other things. In the 60s I was also involved with the "Lettuces," which were all done rapidly on the floor, in acrylic. They were a very special, interesting period. The "Lettuces" were huge, and I also did them in drawings. They were an interlude, like the heads. I was involved twice in doing tondos. In 1952 I did the movable paintings with machine images that were placed on a lazy Susan structure which you could turn, or stop them where you wanted. I had a show of them. And then later on in the 70s, I did a group of round scapes again. If there was a possibility to move them, very, very slowly, it would have been ideal, but they were very large. They could have been ceiling paintings, because they had no up and down. I always turned my paintings. They were worked from all sides. And that's why I got to finally have them round for a while.

JS: The exhibition and catalogue next move to the "Portraits" [1940-67], and also the 1970 "faces" installation, "Everyone."

HS: After I had shown quote abstract art for a number of years, I suddenly, in 1970, had a show of portraits and faces. I had a set of ideas that prompted me to do it. And at the time, it harmed me very, very much. I took faces and organized them as abstract shapes, but this fact practically went unnoticed because people were so involved in the fact that they were faces. The paintings would turn around the wall because they were soft, without frames. It was a beautiful show. Unfortunately, at the time they didn't do videos documenting shows. I should have had a video.

JS: Whose faces were they?

HS: People from the drugstore, in my life, that I saw all the time. And also people in the movies or the theater, people in the news. All real portraits, which I didn't stress, because I didn't want people to get involved in who is who. I wanted them to see what it was. But many people thought I was a traitor. They were scandalized by my doing something like that, instead of "speaking abstract." Others thought I didn't have to be tied down to the same thing all my life I could do whatever intrigued me. I always painted ideas, I have to say. It was always some set of ideas that set me going.

JS: You said you've painted portraits your whole life.

HS: I've done portraits of all my friends from childhood on. No matter what else I did, I also did portraits. But only for myself. Then I had one or two portrait shows in the 60s [1965, 1966]. Faces interest me.

JS: I read that one of the first exhibitions you saw in Paris that moved you was a group of portraits of the actress and Montparnasse artist's model Maria Lani.

HS: I saw the Maria Lani show when I was about 20, and that was an extraordinary show as learning. What was incredible was that Maria Lani was portrayed by all the greatest artists of the time she was very famous, evidently. When you went to the show it was like a different face on each painting, but you could also see that they all looked like her. It was so interesting to see how many views there can be of one person.

JS: Who were some of the artists who painted her?

HS: Everybody. All the great painters of the time. Anybody you can think of. You cannot go wrong [laughs].

JS: I'll have to search for a list of who they were [Bonnard, Braque, Chagall, de Chirico, Cocteau, Delaunay, Foujita, Matisse, Man Ray, Marval, Pascin, Picabia, Poiret, Rouault, Soutine, Valadon, Van Donge, Zadkine et al.].

JS: Next comes the "Diaries" [1976].

HS: That was interesting. What was it called a book where you keep notes of all the things, quotes, you found in books. It has a special name. Well, the word escapes me now. Auden had one that I enjoyed enormously.

JS: I think it's called a commonplace book.

HS: Yes, I started doing one on my floor. I had a large canvas, and I divided it into days and months, and each day I put in one quote I was particularly fond of that I found in a book. And that was the diary. I did it for a year and a half, and then twice for two and a half months. The one for a year and a half is an enormous affair. I rolled it up because I can't clean it without erasing everything. So now I don't put it on the floor anymore. It was very good looking.

JS: Tell me more about the "Diaries." Did you show them?

HS: I showed them in Queens. And I showed the big one, I think, in Montclair, because the cover of the Montclair retrospective was a reproduction of it. Very nice cover.

JS: Do you still collect these kinds of quotes?

HS: Much, much less, because I don't see anymore.

JS: Do people read to you?

HS: I have a friend who comes once a week, and she is splendid. Aah, it's so good. And I have a machine to help me read. It's like a television screen, magnified. But I can't read more than 15, 20 minutes at a time. Then I have to rest. And afterwards for half an hour I'm totally blind. So I read at great sacrifice.

JS: Because the more you read, the worse the vision is?

HS: I don't know. The doctors say you cannot wear your eyes out. What wears them out are other things. Not the use.

JS: Maybe we should talk a bit about the works called "Patterns of Thought" [1982-83].

HS: In the 80s, I got involved in structure these are the "Patterns of Thought." For instance, this large one [pointing to the long work on the wall in the room where we are sitting]: Pascal says we are built in a symmetrical way two eyes, two ears, etc., etc., and that's why we see things in terms of symmetry, and that's why there is only horizontal symmetry; he said there is no vertical symmetry. And the I said, excuse me, Mr. Pascal, this is wrong. There is vertical symmetry in mirrored imagery. You see? Then I made this painting, which is all reflections, refractions, mirror images. I could go on making miles of a painting like that, repeating the same rhythm.

Art as Idea

JS: Why did you stop this painting? Was it the limit of the wall?

HS: Exclusively. I wished I had had an enormous studio or a sky! I used to dream of doing sky paintings with airplanes. I would have liked that very much. You know? Skywriting. Just imagining, it's already good.

JS: You are now a conceptual artist.

HS: Well, now I do that all the time. I do my best work now.

JS: By imagining.

HS: Only in my imagination [laughs].

JS: Starting in the 60s, you lived in Long Island.

HS: I spent between the beginning of May to the middle of October in a little place where I worked. I was not really a recluse, but I saw others not much.

JS: The reason?

HS: To keep my energy for my work, and to do what I liked to do in my first life: to draw and to read, my great pleasures in life. Chatting at parties with a drink I don't have that kind of gregariousness.

JS: Would you like to tell me about your studio?

HS: Well, it's my bedroom, which is where I did my last drawings. December 1, 2004: that drawing on the easel is the drawing I did that day, of the stroke in the evening. It's a reminder. That's where I worked the last days of my working life.

JS: There are many works by other artists in the room where we are sitting. Tell me how you first got to know the work of Mary Miss.

HS: We became friends about 16 years ago. I met her through a friend. I immediately became interested in Mary because when she had a show, she took the first money she ever made and went trekking in the Himalayas. Walking. And I was very intrigued by her, a very interesting and very beautiful woman, and a good artist.

JS: What is it about her work that interests you?

HS: Technique. And the fact that it's not sold by dealers. That she is in touch the way one was in touch. People wanted a portrait, they went to the artist. You know that dealership is only about a hundred years old. And the way she does it is so

vital, and so authentic. People who need her work come to her. She is a public artist, you know?

JS: Tell me about the Marcia Hafif drawing. When did you first see her work?

HS: I met her in Mary's studio.

JS: That one on the wall is by John Graham, and another is by Richard Lindner. What are these? With all the signatures?

HS: These are the diplomas that Saul made. Fake diplomas. This one over the stove is my cooking diploma. And that one over the sink is my dishwashing diploma.

JS: Were you friends with Ray Johnson?

HS: I knew him slightly. Johnson was an interesting artist. When we met he came to the gallery I didn't know him then and he told me he had founded a Hedda Sterne fan club. He came and invited me, but I thought that it was a kind of putdown, so I didn't respond at all. And now I'm very sorry, because I know that that was his art.

JS: I'd like to ask you about Alexander Calder, who lived in Paris between 1926 and 1933. I'm wondering if you might have seen him perform his Circus when you were in Paris.

HS: No. I met him here, soon after I came in '41. I went to the Museum of Modern Art and I saw a mobile hanging. I thought, I'm in paradise. You can't realize the kind of art they were doing in Romania. Did you ever see the silver Russian revolution sculpture where a little girl is playing a violin made of silver? I mean the art was of a level of corniness beyond any description. And to see here a place where grownups, real people, took an art like Calder's seriously, I was absolutely ecstatic.

JS: What particular aspects of his work interested you?

HS: The mobiles. They were fantastic. Nobody did this kind of thing. It was authentically and completely new.

JS: He accomplished what many of the Constructivists imagined.

HS: He really did, to a great extent, three-dimensional Miró. Because if you did see his shapes, they are out of Miró. But it doesn't matter. They are still fantastic.

Recent Drawings and Looking Back

JS: Do you draw at all now?

HS: For 10 or 12 years I couldn't see color and then in the late 90s I began to only draw, until two years ago when I had the stroke. That's why I'm in a wheelchair. The stroke also affected my eyes I already had the macular degeneration so I see less and less. But for five or six years or more, I drew 12 hours a day. I was in a state of euphoria and exhilaration. I loved it.

JS: Are you tempted ever to work with other materials now, clay, or?

HS: No. I'm not. I enjoyed drawing so much. The best moments of my working life have been these last years. I worked breathlessly, you know. I had no time to worry, to wonder if it was good or not good, you know, the way I did when I was young. I just had to do it, and did it, and did a lot. Couldn't have enough. I got up in the morning impatient to work.

JS: How do you spend your days?

HS: Now that I am so old and incapacitated, I don't do anything with great enthusiasm. You know, thinking, dreaming, musing, become essential occupations. I am watching my life. As if I'm not quite in it, I watch it from the outside. Because after so many years of working unceasingly, and enthusiastically, being idle is a tremendous effort of concentration and adjustment.

The luck is that there is less energy. That's a compensation. It makes it easier. Just sitting. I saw peasants in Romania, you know, on Sunday, when they get up all summer at 4 and work incessantly until noon, let's say. And Sunday they just sit, and their resting is so active like an activity, resting. It's a beauty to behold, you know. It's not just doing nothing. It's being and existing in a certain way. In a way old age is a little bit like that. It has its beauties.