

Interview with LADDIE JOHN DILL

Artist

Interview by KAREN THOMAS

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Robert Rauschenberg Foundation Archives, New York.

LADDIE DILL: I went to Chinouard Art Institute, which was the cutting-edge art school of the time. I started in mid-1964, and graduated in 1968. Then I was offered a scholarship at Cal Arts to get a master's degree, and a job, and the whole nine yards. It was a perfect situation. But I decided that I didn't want to go to school anymore. I just didn't want to just -- and this was during the era that Jack Goldstein and all these guys -- [Ross] Bleckner -- I don't know if [Eric] Fischl went there. But there was a whole group of artists that came out of that particular master's program that did very, very well in New York in the '80s.

But I just opted out of it, and just wanted to get a studio. I was tired of two or three people looking at my work and going, "This is good," or "This is --." I even had a really good setup at Berkeley, and went up there for a week, and really just went, "I don't want to be a student anymore." So I came back down to L.A., and I got a great studio with this other artist, Charles Arnoldi. You should actually speak to him.

KAREN THOMAS: I'm going to see him this afternoon.

DILL: So Chuck and I were very close. We shared this studio. The way we paid the rent was that we had this framing company -- which we hated -- and I was terrible at making frames. Chuck had to make all the frames but I was really good at getting the business. [Laughter]

THOMAS: How did you get the business?

DILL: We would go to openings, or parties at the Grinsteins, and just say, "You know, we're framing," and all that kind of stuff. But we hated it so much that our hours finally got down to Sunday nights. We were open Sunday nights [Laughter], so the customers were ... [Laughs] -- (Off-mic interruption). So I had to find a job. I had a very good friend who had gone to Chinouard as well. Her name was Elsa Rady -- who passed away recently -- and she was really good friends with Sid Felsen. And Sid, actually, took classes at Chinouard in ceramics -- a little-known fact, because Sid is very self-effacing in a sense. Sid is a really good ceramicist, and also a really good photographer. That's a Sid Felsen, the photograph that I gave you. In fact, I hope he publishes a book sometimes.

So anyway, I went into Gemini, and applied for the job. I talked to Sid, and Ken Tyler, and I really had very little knowledge of lithography, except that where the grease went the water wouldn't go. That kind of thing. And, actually, that's what they wanted. They didn't want over-trained college students that they'd have to un-train. I had always been a huge admirer of Gemini, because it seems like, as crazy as Tyler was, he really raised the bar on lithography.

THOMAS: About what year is this, then?

DILL: Nineteen-sixty-seven.<sup>1</sup>

THOMAS: And Ken Tyler had been working already, doing lithography on his own.

DILL: Yes. Late 1960s.

THOMAS: Tamarind, and all that.

DILL: I'm not real familiar with Tyler's background, but all of a sudden I'm working for him. It was a nine to five job, or an eight to five job, and it was really fascinating. The first thing I worked on was as a sponger for one of the master printers -- Jim Webb. We did the [Jasper] Johns *Colored Numbers*, that famous series. [KT: Yes.] That was really amazing.

THOMAS: So you spent time with Jasper?

DILL: Yes. And, actually, then the next project was working with Claes Oldenburg on that *Dodge Car* -- which I *hated* -- and working with Roy Lichtenstein on the stone for *Peace Through Chemistry*, which at that point was the largest lithograph ever. I ground the stone. And Roy Lichtenstein was such a *sweetheart* -- just the sweetest guy in the world. He was one of these kinds of artists, just a really gentle guy.

Then I did some waxes. Tyler said, "Do these waxes from these drawings that Jasper Johns sent," so I made these waxes.

THOMAS: What do you mean by "waxes?"

DILL: Well, we were going to make lead reliefs, which we ended up doing. So Tyler gives me this impossible thing, where he gives me this Jasper Johns drawing -- in the shop, of course -- and he says, "Take this drawing and make a wax relief out of it, so we can cast it in stainless steel." We'd take sheets of lead, make a male and a female, and from these sheets of lead you'd have to work blindly, but you had to memorize the image. It would be like a blind person. In fact, hiring a blind person would have been an amazing idea -- but they'd have to see the image first. So it wouldn't work. But you would have to work blindly, and just feel each nuance of the shape, because you're putting the male on the female, with this sheet of lead in between. It was a press, a hydraulic press that came down. Gemini didn't have one, but Continental Graphics did. Continental Graphics was this huge printing operation that did a lot of government

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<sup>1</sup> According to Laddie Dill website biography, he received his BFA from Chinouard in 1968.

work, and very unionized. So I'd have to go there, set this whole thing up, get it all in place, but there was a union guy who sat on a bench, and he had to push the button. That's all he had to do. I remember him saying, "So how much you guys get for these wall plaques?" [Laughter] I said, "I have no idea. Probably a couple hundred." [Laughter]

Anyway, the point is that through my work with Johns and Rauschenberg, I did some projects with Bob. I got to be very friendly with all these guys. Then the Grinsteins, who were part owners, who owned half of it, or something like that, were super friendly. In fact, I told you about my daughter -- those are her godparents. I was in my early twenties when I started working for them. I didn't have any kids then.

So Stanley and Elyse used to throw these amazing parties.

THOMAS: At the house where they still live now?

DILL: Oh, yes. Yes. They have this amazing collection. So we would go, because we were at Gemini. It was such a cool scene. It was like you were a member of a family, and I got to know Bob pretty well. Bob would come down to the studio occasionally. I had a studio in downtown Los Angeles, and I was working with sand and light. Anyway -- long story short -- he asked me if I would do a collaboration with him, up on this hill in L.A. Of course, at that period of time, Bob was on the top of the pack, he and Johns, with [Jim] Rosenquist and all those guys. Of course, I said, "Yeah, man, I'll do it."

We each did separate pieces. Bob did this incredible piece where he took two klieg lights -- remember the old-fashioned lights [KT: Sure.] -- For premieres.

THOMAS: Right. "Hooray for Hollywood."

DILL: Huge lights. The candlepower was amazing. They took these two huge ones -- and they looked kind of like Martians in a way. They had a big round thing that could be a head, then these legs, which held them up. They had sort of a human-like form. He put them both together, about this far apart, facing each other, like two people having a conversation, then just turned them on, full-blast. There was so much light in between, that just came out in every direction from this point. It was just a really brilliant piece, brilliant, no pun intended. It was amazing.

And what I did was I dug five-foot-deep holes, mostly five feet, and dropped neon down into them, neon and argon, in different holes, and wired them all up so that when you looked at the surface of the earth, you'd see these lozenges of color. [KT: Fantastic.] You wouldn't see the tubes. It all ended up really successful, especially for me. [Laughter.] And I'm waiting for the next time. Bob says, finally -- he's a very sensitive guy, very sensitive. Even though he was always laughing, just an amazing character, you know. Super handsome -- he could have been a movie star -- [KT: Yes.] -- he says, "I know you want to do another installation." I said, "Yep! Yeah. I'd love to. Let's do it." He said, "I'll do you one better -- because it's not fair to you, because I'm enjoying the fruits of my career, where your name is just overshadowed." He was very realistic about things. You'd think he was just living this Life of Riley, and was unaware of all this stuff. So he said, "Andy Warhol's having a show at the Pasadena Art Museum, and a

gallery that I show with," which turned out to be Sonnabend Gallery, and Leo Castelli and all that, "are going to be in town, and I will bring them over to the studio, with Rosamund." And sure enough, they came over to the studio; they saw my work, and asked me a few questions. I had this huge sand piece, with all these lights, and I just had my bed in the corner and about six bucks in my pocket. So they said, "Oh, we'd like to show your work." I wasn't completely clear about who they were.

THOMAS: Ileana was there?

DILL: Yes. Ileana, and Michael, and Leo. I forget who else. Rosamund [Felsen], I think, was there.

THOMAS: And maybe Leo's wife. I can't remember her name.

DILL: I'm not sure. She was young.

Anyway, it was Ileana who was really interested in my work, so she said, "Okay. We want to show your work. Don't show it to anybody. Don't sell it to anybody. We'll just give you a stipend, and just work for us. Just do work, and we'll figure out a date for the show." It was like a Cinderella story.

So I called Sid and I said, "It looks like Ileana Sonnabend's offered me a show. She wants to do one in Paris" -- which I was very excited about -- "and also in New York." And Sid said, "That's incredible." Then he clued me in on how good it was. So I went back there [New York] and stayed with Al Ruppensberg, who was a good friend of mine, in some dump on Bleecker Street. Bleecker Street was not what it is now. Bleecker and Bowery were not a good place to be. [Laughter]

THOMAS: To prepare for the show...

DILL: I was very hip, and cool.

THOMAS: You went there to prepare for the show?

DILL: No. I went there -- they called me and said, "We'll send you a ticket. We want you to ship out some of the work. We want to see what it looks like." So I got out there, and they said they'd shipped it to a warehouse up on 108<sup>th</sup> and Amsterdam. Now this is in 1970. This is before the whole SoHo deal. They already were starting to get it together, but it was mostly uptown stuff.

So my box was delivered and all that. I'd made an appointment, and they said that they would be there at eleven o'clock. They wanted to see how the work held up in New York. And I did these light pieces, you know, and Al helped me put them up in wall. But on the walls were *Fool's House* by Jasper Johns; the *Upside-Down Chair* painting by Bob; *Scat* by Don Judd -- all these masterpieces of '60s art. I said, "So where do you want me to hang this stuff?" It was only

eight millimeters wide. And they just said, "Oh, I don't know -- in between these pieces right here." [Laughter] "Oh, Jesus. Thanks."

THOMAS: This is a great story.

DILL: Yeah. It was like the first kind of chic warehouse kind of situation, where there were paintings in racks and all that. But there were Corbu [Corbusier] chairs, of course, in the middle of this room, and then all these masterpieces around the room.

So I hung the pieces in between, and then, fortunately, they were wide pieces, so I could dim the lights [interference, unclear], and they all came in -- it was just a whole pack of people in cashmere overcoats, in the middle of winter. It was February. They all came in, marched in, looked around, and I was just speechless. I told Al, I said, "This could be my first and last show in New York." Then they said -- they just looked around real quick, and they said, "Great. Okay. We'll do it next year." And then they left. They said, "We'll start sending you money."

So I worked all summer in L.A. -- Venice -- then I moved to New York. I decided to move to New York. I shipped the pieces out, got to New York, and I was with Jan Webb, Jim Webb's ex-wife, and Chuck Arnoldi. I feel like I'm talking about myself more than I am Bob.

THOMAS: It's just lovely.

DILL: Bob was really responsible for all this.

THOMAS: It's just lovely. One of my questions was where does Ileana fit in? Because I'd read that she had given you a show, and I thought, "You know, everything I hear is that Ileana had the best eye going."

DILL: This is what I hear.

THOMAS: Absolutely, the best eye.

DILL: Leo, when they were married, was sort of new to contemporary art, and Ileana had that avant-garde edge. [KT: Totally] Well, at the Biennale, they had a whole tribute to her, at the Guggenheim. ... So anyway, in the meantime, Mark Di Suvero came over and bought a light piece from me. I called the gallery and I said I was selling this piece to Mark Di Suvero, and they said great. So he was the first person to ever buy a piece from me. We're still very good friends, very close. So he said, "You know, if you need a place to stay in New York, you can stay at my place." And I said, "Great. I *do* need a place to stay in New York."

THOMAS: Di Suvero said that?

DILL: Yes, Di Suvero. So there was Jan, and Chuck, and I, and we get dropped off -- again, it's like a snowstorm. The only time I'd ever seen New York, in the two times I'd been there, it was like a blizzard.

So the way to get up to the living area of Mark's studio was to climb up this rope -- not a rope ladder, but a rope --

THOMAS: A rope? Hand-over-hand?

DILL: Hand-over-hand, up eight feet, and then through this hole. Then you were "in," and it was all filled with sculptures that he had made, that were too big for him to get them out. He just made them. I think eventually he got rich enough to buy the building, and tear the wall down! [Laughter]

Anyway, Jan goes, "I'm not stayin' here!" It was really wet, and -- I mean, if it was just me, I would have stayed. But Jan says, "I'm not stayin' here. Forget it!" So I said, "Well, I don't have any other alternatives." And then I started thinking. I said, "I wonder if Jasper could help us." So we called Jasper.

Now, you know, you only do this when you're like twenty-five years old, and kind of naïve. If you knew more, you wouldn't have the guts. So we figured, "What the hell?" So we called Jasper's, and his secretary -- I can't remember her name now. She was one of the sweetest people. We told her our situation, and she said, "Hold on. Jasper's out of town. I'll call him. I think I might have a solution for you." So we waited by the phone booth. They didn't have cell phones then.

THOMAS: Oh, right. We're talking 1970?

DILL: Yes. Nineteen-seventy. December 1970. She calls us back. We were waiting by the phone booth. She calls us back and says, "Jasper's out of town, so he said, 'Come by the office, pick up the key, and just stay at his place.'" So we went, "Okay. Cool." So we went over to the office, and we picked up the key. This is when he had this studio on the corner of Essex and Houston, and it was a bank, like a turn-of-the-century -- turn-of-the-*other*-century -- [KT: Beautiful.] -- bank building, built like solid. I remember Katz's Deli was right next-door. It was Essex, and then the Lower East Side. It was totally like a bank where all the teller things had been removed and everything, and there was this huge Dymaxian map that Jasper was working on. It was encaustic. I can't -- sometimes your memory expands things, but I think it was a good fifteen feet high and forty feet long. They showed it at the Montreal World's Fair -- [KT: Wonderful.]-- And he had it back, and he decided to rework it. He didn't like it. So he had it there, but he was gone. He had this amazing collection. The secretary showed us around, and also his friend [architect/designer] Bill Katz.

DILL: He was really a great guy. He was part of Jasper's circle. They called him "Jap," actually.

THOMAS: Yes. I always thought that was unique.

DILL: I couldn't call him "Jap." I couldn't bring myself to call him "Jap." It's kind of weird. I always called him Jasper.

THOMAS: And he gave you the thumbs-up because you had worked with him in the print shop.

DILL: Yes, he knew who I was and everything. So we stayed there for quite a while. I remember coming home one night, and there was Jasper sitting on the couch with Barbara Rose, and they were so friendly. I had my all drawings all over his ping-pong table. He used the ping-pong table as a drawing table. I said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Jasper," and he said, "No. Make yourself at home."

I had a guest room that had the double-white flag in it. I looked at it and went, "Seventeen million to me." [Laughter] No, it was this green room, and he had -- Jasper was a gourmet chef. I don't know if you know that.

THOMAS: No!

DILL: He made everything from scratch. So you'd open the refrigerator, and there was nothing that you could just eat. There wasn't even a jar of mayonnaise. Everything was made from scratch. On Wednesdays -- a little-known secret -- there was a restaurant down the street called Bellato's, and Mrs. Bellato lived up on 11<sup>th</sup> Street. Every Wednesday night, he would cook at Bellato's, for a few hours, or an hour or so, whatever he wanted. People would come who were in his circle, and five o'clock was cocktail hour. I mean these guys *did* drink. But his buddies would show up, and his buddies consisted of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Buckminster Fuller, Willem de Kooning. [KT: for dinner -- for drinks and dinner... But Bob would not show up at this time...?] Bob and Jasper were not really friendly. We would see Bob all the time; we just didn't mention his name to Jasper.

THOMAS: I wonder who started cooking first, Bob or Jasper?

DILL: I don't know. Anyway, Jasper was so -- what do you say? -- Accommodating, a fantastic guy. Because I'd always heard these rumors that he was really grumpy and all that kind of stuff, but I never saw that side of him.

THOMAS: Oh, isn't that nice?

DILL: So we would go to parties with him, and we met Louise Nevelson and -- just *everybody*. And we were still kids. We were still kids, Chuck, and Jan, and I. We were going, "God, this New York thing is great. Why didn't we do this sooner?"

Anyway, finally, we were having dinner with a bunch of people at Max's Kansas City, and I was saying to Jan, I said, "You know, we should really think about leaving Jasper's. I don't want to be the guest that stayed forever -- because he's been so amazing." And Rauschenberg overheard me, and he said -- Bob said, "You guys could do me a huge favor by moving into my place." Bob had that famous building, a five-story -- it used to be an orphanage.

THOMAS: Lafayette Street?

DILL: Yes, on Lafayette Street and Great Jones.

THOMAS: Right. Exactly. Still does.



DILL: Yes. Right. There's another photograph, if I could find it, of the three of us standing in front of the building, and it had the orphans painted on the side.



[INSERTED IMAGE: Photograph by Robert Rauschenberg.]

And upstairs on the roof he had a huge, full-size model of an airplane --

THOMAS: A maquette?



DILL: -- a Piper Cub, but huge, full-size.



[INSERTED IMAGE: Screen image from Oyvind Fahlstrom film.]



[INSERTED IMAGE: Screen image from Oyvind Fahlstrom film.]

Then, connected to the back, was a chapel, which was actually his working studio, which wasn't gigantic by today's standards. He was gone. He said, "I'm moving to Captiva Island, and you guys can do me a great favor by just staying." We got the keys, and lived there.

THOMAS: Did he say why he was going to Captiva?

DILL: Well, you know, he was from Port Arthur, Texas, which is near the Louisiana border. So he's always been attached to that Southern -- I mean Gulf -- situation. This was on the western side of Florida, in the Gulf. It was also a game preserve. He bought this piece of land, and then there were all these rental houses. Do you know this story?

THOMAS: I know he's big on land conservation. But tell me.

DILL: What he'd do -- he bought the houses from these absentee landlords, and I guess he just offered them something they couldn't refuse. There were all these old people living in there, and he said, "You can live here for the rest of your life, no rent." He just owned all these places and took care of them, but they never had to pay rent again.

THOMAS: Talk about putting your money where your mouth is. You believe in conservation, you figure the easiest way to do it is to make people comfortable.

DILL: Right. He was that way, that generous. I don't know -- when he was there, it was more fun.

THOMAS: When he was in New York?

DILL: Yes.

THOMAS: How so? He was cooking?

DILL: Oh, yes. He would have these parties where he would cook Louisiana style kind of stuff, or South Texas. He'd cook a huge vat of shrimp, just shelled -- no, he didn't shell it. Just raw shrimp. Cook it up, and then just dump it on the table, this huge mound. Stuff like that. And bread. That's when Bob had dinner parties.

THOMAS: That's wonderful.

DILL: Now we're into 1974 and I had my show at Ileana's, and it did really well. All these guys showed up for the opening. Everybody's going, "Who *is* this guy?"

THOMAS: [Laughter] What fun.

DILL: It all happened through Bob. We stayed there quite a long time, because he was never there.

THOMAS: Weeks or months?

DILL: Months. Then he started coming back more often, then we decided it was time to go.

THOMAS: Maybe go home. I wonder what he was working on then.

DILL: He was doing these transparent --

THOMAS: *Hoarfrosts* maybe.

DILL: Light pieces, and then also -- oh, I remember. *Cardbirds*. [KT: Oh right.] In fact, I helped him put one -- I got invited to the show in Minneapolis, which was the opening of the Walker. Bob, and Dan Flavin, and, obviously, Bob Rauschenberg, Richard Serra -- it was an amazing show to be in. It was called "New Works for New Spaces." Again, I didn't know very many of the people, so I just hung out with Bob.

THOMAS: He's a bit of a magnet, isn't he?

DILL: Yes, and just a great guy-- so we had to put this whole thing together, these cardboard pieces, only... he wanted them to look like they were just thrown together. But Bob was an amazing craftsman, so they *looked* like they were thrown together. But they were actually put together very precisely, and behind them was mahogany that held them together. And the cardboard -- it looked like cardboard that you'd pull out of a dumpster -- it was actually archival paper. So it was acid-free; it would never change color. All that kind of stuff.

THOMAS: That had been printed someplace?

DILL: Yes. Printed on acid-free cardboard.

THOMAS: He created the texture.

DILL: Yes -- like the tape marks, and all that kind of stuff. I helped him put it together. [KT: Cool.] My piece was done, so I just helped him glue it all together -- it was so much fun.

THOMAS: Would he talk much when he worked?

DILL: Oh, yes. Laughed! He had this amazing laughter. In fact, Ed Ruscha -- did you go to Bob's memorial at the Metropolitan?

THOMAS: I did. I'm surprised I didn't see you there.

DILL: I was there.

THOMAS: Ed Ruscha ... --

DILL: Ed Ruscha got up -- they had one in L.A. Ed wasn't at the one at the Met. Ed went for Bob in L.A. Ed just got up and said, "I'm just going to do Bob's laugh." He must have worked on it for over a month, but he had Bob's laugh.

What was another thing that I --? Oh. This is a real good one.

I got invited to be in this show at the Walker [Art Museum]. They had this *huge* opening, and the entire art world was there. It was at the Dayton's [Judy and Kenneth], who were huge collectors, and they lived in a Philip Johnson house. They collected gigantic versions of everybody's stuff -- huge Stellas, big Rauschenbergs and all that. They had sliding walls, so it

didn't look like they had everything they owned on the walls. But it was kind of an uptight scene. Like the lawn -- which was as big as a football field that went down to a lake -- was like a carpet. Everything was just perfect, and it was the Midwest. I don't know -- are you from the Midwest?

THOMAS: Well, I'm also from the South -- so it's fine.

DILL: So you understand. [Laughter]

We sat -- there was Jim Rosenquist, and Linda Benglis, and myself, and Tom Terbell, who was running the Pasadena Art Museum at the time, and his wife, Melinda, and Rauschenberg and myself were sitting around this glass table having drinks. And, you know, people were at different tables, all over the house. [REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

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[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

THOMAS: Bob always seemed to me to have a certain sense of decorum about how you treat people. I remember I was shooting in Captiva, in the darkroom, watching Bob work -- eight million safe lights -- and we were shooting film.

DILL: When was this?

THOMAS: Mid-nineties. [DILL: Okay.] Mid-nineties. And my cinematographer ran out of the room to reload, and in walking out of the room, he turned the light on. And in a darkroom, that's not a really good idea.

DILL: Yes. In a *darkroom*?

THOMAS: In a darkroom. And my cameraman's response was "Why didn't somebody tape the light down?" And he went out to get more film.

DILL: Why did he turn the light *on*?

THOMAS: What a good question.

DILL: So it just exposed all these negatives--

THOMAS: -- everything. Yes. Everything. Bob comes up to me, that far from my nose, and he says, "I don't understand somebody who would say, "Why didn't somebody tape the light down, and not just say, 'I'm *sorry*.'" He had -- it seems to me -- this sense of the way you treat people. |

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

THOMAS: When were you at Gemini?

DILL: Early sixty-eight to seventy. Two years.

THOMAS: Sixty-eight to seventy.

DILL: Just two years.

THOMAS: Were you there when they were making *Booster*? Or that had already happened.

DILL: No, that had happened. They had made *Booster*.

THOMAS: And then they made *Reels (B&C)*, which was sort of a Bonnie and Clyde --

DILL: No. Bonnie and Clyde was before me. They were printing on silk, they were making *Cardbirds*, and the silk was transparent.

THOMAS: Like the *Hoarfrosts*.

DILL: *Hoarfrosts*. Exactly. Then Bob had gone to China, and made a piece that I still have.

THOMAS: From China? One of those seven --

DILL: Yes. One of those handmade paper-silk --

THOMAS: Yes. Beautiful.

DILL: My daughter owns it actually. I don't own it.

THOMAS: Well, that's very generous of you.

DILL: Well, she's my kid.

THOMAS: [Laughter] Bob enjoyed being around you guys here in Los Angeles, right?

DILL: Yes. He really did -- he really loved California, and he rented this place out on Malibu Road, and that was fun. He'd always say, "You've got to come out," it was like [you were] ordered. I grew up on Malibu Road, so I loved it out there. We used to have these great days -- barbecues out on .... He loved the beach. I remember a comment he made. Somebody wanted to show him the desert -- because everybody was so into the desert. We went out there, got out of the car, he looked around, and he goes, "Is this *it*?" He definitely was a jungle guy. [Laughter]

THOMAS: That's funny.

DILL: Ocean and jungle.

THOMAS: He met Bob Petersen, I think, at Gemini.

DILL: Yes. Bob was a good friend of mine.

THOMAS: He's a very nice fellow.

DILL: A great guy. I haven't seen him in years, but I imagine he's the same. Mellow. Even. In fact, Bob had really great taste in guys. I mean, he really liked even, mellow guys.

THOMAS: Was Jasper that way? Mellow? I've only met him once.

DILL: Jasper was mellow around me. Jasper would talk in riddles. It always seems like he would answer a question with a question. He also was an avid collector of -- what's his name?



The painter from Brussels, very famous, super famous, a household word, with the bowler hat in the paintings, from the mid-'20s? You know.

THOMAS: I think I know who you're talking about, but I can't --

DILL: Almost like a Surrealist painter.

THOMAS: I know who you're talking about.

DILL: I don't know why I've forgotten his name.

THOMAS: Well, I have, too. And I like his work a lot.

DILL: And he had some things from Duchamp on the wall. He liked the idea of the anomaly -- art being an anomaly. He was also into the irony of art and the flip side of it. Why am I not remembering this artist's name?

THOMAS: Magritte.

DILL: Right. He would have a painting of a pipe, and it was called something else. That kind of thing. And when he repainted the Dymaxion map, I had the *honor* -- now that I look back on it -- of just sitting on the couch and watching Jasper paint. He had his little cart, and a hot plate that you could buy at any hardware store, and a pan, and the paraffin wax. Then he'd take the oil paint and mix the color in the pan, and then just make a brush stroke. It would dry almost immediately to where it would stay, then, another brush stroke. It was really slow. What he did was he started changing the names of everything; like all of a sudden there was China where Texas was -- just renaming parts of the geography and different places.

THOMAS: Was he talking while he was doing that, or was he totally --?

DILL: He had music on, but he wouldn't talk.

THOMAS: A different work style than Bob.

DILL: Yes. Bob had *TV* on.

THOMAS: Right. And would communicate with whomever was in the room.

DILL: Yes. The TV was part of it. Everything was input, input, input, input. When he saw this piece I was going to do at Sonnabend's, I remember I said, "God, I'm really afraid that if something -- if I don't get it up there, it might get scratched, or it might get broken." And he says, "It doesn't matter. It doesn't matter. It's the energy of the whole thing."

And both these guys were always into the immediacy of things. Also, I'd say, "How would you choose your adhesives? I asked all these kinds of technical questions, of Jasper, especially. And he said, "Anything that will stick in my lifetime. After that, they can figure it out." [Laughter]

THOMAS: I was going to ask you if, knowing these guys, you could call them up and say, "I've got this problem. How do I solve it?" Were they open in that way?

DILL: Yes. They were open that way.

I did this very elaborate neon piece once, in the studio. Bob saw it and he said, "Why don't you use flashlights?" [Laughs] Now that I think about it, it would have been amazing -- flashlights. But that was Bob's idea, not mine, so I couldn't do it.

THOMAS: Because it was his idea, you would have resisted it? You would have felt like --?

DILL: And Jasper always felt, and Bob did, too -- [Interruption] -- where were we?

THOMAS: Bob and Jasper always felt, in terms of work -- we were talking about flashlights.

DILL: Oh, yes. Both these guys felt that if they were getting close to another artist's genre or aesthetic, that they would move away from it.

THOMAS: Really.

DILL: Yes. They really were instilled in, somehow instilled themselves -- and it might have been from going to Black Mountain, who knows, but originality was super important.

THOMAS: Do you suppose, looking back at the work each of them produced in the 1950s, and their relationship that they would -- "That's yours, that's mine" -- or is it your sense that the way they worked was so completely different --?

DILL: I think they worked totally differently. Both of them were highly intelligent people but approached things in a completely different way. Bob's thing was always about the juxtaposition of the energy of the street into almost a vacuous environment, and the strength and impact that that would have. So it was always from the street. Whereas Jasper would get it from -- I'd like to say almost from an intellectual level, without giving you the impression that Jasper was more intelligent than Bob. Bob was more "out there." And this whole thing -- obviously -- because when he did that thing about all the art around the world --

THOMAS: Right. The ROCI [Rauschenberg Overseas Culture Interchange] Project.

DILL: All that kind of thing. Jasper really kind of frowned on all that kind of stuff. He felt much more insular. I think he felt that art was not for everybody. Bob felt it was for everybody.

THOMAS: Democrat, big "D." I think that's what was exciting about printmaking. What was accomplished at Gemini was that people who couldn't have afforded to have art in their homes, otherwise, could buy prints.

DILL: Well, yes. But these guys -- this is important. What I realized, when working with these guys a little bit was that when they were doing the prints, they were not doing affordable

reproductions of their work. They were actually using the print medium as part of a process in itself. Jasper's prints and Bob's prints were about *printing*, about the phenomenon of *printing*, meaning something that goes through a tremendous amount of pressure, and then can be lightly tapped. [taps on table] That kind of thing. You look at any of their prints -- And this is why I think their prints are very important in their work, and it wasn't because they were multiples, but because they were about the *process* of printing, and they both made that -- Bob made it actually more accessible to people than Jasper did. Jasper's prints were extremely difficult to do -- like the split font, the rainbow font. Jim Webb -- I was sponging right across from him when he was doing that rainbow's font. He's the only guy I ever saw who could pull it off. He was a master at it.

THOMAS: I'm going to see him on Thursday, I hope.

DILL: Jim? Great.

THOMAS: I don't know if it's the same thing you're talking about, but I was looking at these washes on Jasper's prints, and I thought, "I don't know how those kinds of things happen."

DILL: The way that's done, well he'll tell you -- you lay gum arabic down on the stone, then you spritz it with a material that will break that up. Then you sponge it down, you wash it down, and it just leaves a ghost of that. Then it's a matter of choosing color, and something that may look like it's way, far in the distance could be just the lightest color, printed on there. The imagery actually comes from removing part of that gum arabic, so that the ink can get into the stone.

THOMAS: The other thing I was thinking -- when Jasper said to you, "I'm using an adhesive that will last as long as I'm around...." There's the challenge of the technology for you all, as painters, as artists, working in unique pieces, I would imagine that printmaking -- "Can we do this? Can we do that? How do we do the other?" It's also engaging?

DILL: Well, that's where Tyler came -- because Tyler would push the envelope. That's one thing. Not an easy guy to work for. But, he would push it so far, until he knew he couldn't. I'm trying to think of a good example.

Oh. Okay. Frank Stella would work there. I used to work with this guy named Goldoni, I think Jim Goldoni, or something like that. He had a really amazing eye for color. Stella would make a mock-up with paint, and then Goldoni could mix the color. He'd know what made the color. See, when you first start out, you go, "Oh, well, I can make any color." [Laughter] And you'd end up with this pile of bubble gum. After a while you get pretty good at it. But he was *really* good at it. So Tyler told me once, he said, "You know, Frank is working in fluorescent color, in Day-Glo color." They were fresh. I started working with them when they were doing the *Protractor* series -- and he said, "The only evidence in a hundred years that Frank ever worked," and it's true. If you look at, even now, the *Protractors* and that whole series where he used fluorescent paint -- it's all kind of dulled down to like an orange, or a red. But if you look at the prints, they look like they were printed yesterday, because the inks they used were the best inks

available, and the fluorescent color was mixed into the ink so well. Actually, most prints are protected from ultra-violet, where a painting is not. Even fluorescent light will kill a painting.

THOMAS: So that was Tyler pushing that -- making that --

DILL: -- making that work. He'd push it until -- he'd make you do it.

THOMAS: Just the little I know about him, he sounds like a genius -- although it also sounds like he was a little cantankerous.

DILL: A little? Ask Stanley and Sid about that.

THOMAS: [Laughs] Well, I had never met Stanley before, and I spent some time with him last Friday. He's such a gentleman.

DILL: Oh, yes.

THOMAS: He's such a gentleman. I said something about "Well, with you and Sidney and Ken, and he sort of bristled, and he said, "I just have to say, you know -- it's not always very comfortable for me to talk about the three of us. We had a couple of lawsuits, and it was just not very nice." [DILL: No it was ugly.] But he never trashed him. Just so gracious, absolutely so gracious.

DILL: Stanley?

THOMAS: Yes.

DILL: How was he? I haven't seen him in a couple weeks? Was he good?

THOMAS: He was terrific.

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

THOMAS: That's really lovely.

I'm wondering if there's anything else you want to say. And I know how I can find you, in case I have any other questions.

DILL: I can get your card and call you.

THOMAS: Absolutely. I'll tell you my view in the approach to this project. I'm a big fan of Calvin Tomkins, and I think the writing he does is just terrific. And part of the reason I think it's so terrific is that he infuses what he writes with texture about the time, and the people -- it's all that detail that gives -- colors what --

DILL: Picture of what they --

THOMAS: Yes, it's really beautiful. I've been thinking that thirty years from now, somebody is going to want to write about Bob, and they'll have access to this Archive, and it's my responsibility to give them the stories and the color. Because I am not an art historian, I'm not about to try to analyze any of the work that Bob has done. I think he would like it that way.

I've spoken to the guy who's at MoCA, the guy who's the chief curator there, a very nice fellow -

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DILL: You mean Schimmel -- Paul.

THOMAS: Yes. A very nice fellow.

DILL: Yes. He's funny, too.

THOMAS: I'm always astonished at the degree to which people go to try to analyze, interpret, read everyone's work, and --

DILL: Over-analyze it.

THOMAS: I think so. When I read what Bob says about that, [he says] it's pretty much -- I would like to create a conversation with the viewer.

DILL: You know, you have to understand that -- I'm sure you already know this -- you know, these guys came out of Pop culture, rich artistically, but Stella would say -- I remember he had a show at the Museum of Modern Art, and he would say, "My pieces should not be looked at for more than thirty seconds. Then you can come back and look at them again. So the way to go to see my show is to just stand in front of it for thirty seconds, and move on." They were made for immediacy. Ken Noland was like that, too. And I think, to a certain extent, so were Bob and Jasper. They weren't meant for three hours of contemplation.

THOMAS: Right.

DILL: It was more or less go back to it, and then go back to it. That kind of thing. First impression. First impression.

THOMAS: I think it's really interesting, because the piece that Paul interprets so strongly is the *Untitled Man (White Shoes)* piece, and for a lay person who knows nothing about Bob's autobiography -- unless the picture itself comes with a map that says, "That is his wife, pregnant, in Central Park; that is his son; that is his mother; that is a letter about his sister, who was about to be the XYZ queen --," how am I, the viewer, to actually take anything away from it except an appreciation of how it's put together, and the way it makes me feel? And the ideas that it suggests to me -- not so much about who these people are and how they relate to him, but this conjunction of humanity that he puts together.

DILL: I asked him once about titling, and I said, "I have the hardest time with titles in my own work. What is your secret to titling?" and he said, "What I try to do is make the title almost non-sequitur in relationship to the piece."

THOMAS: Non sequitur?

DILL: Yes. So that here's the piece over here, okay? You're looking at the art. Then you have the title over here. So it introduces a literal element to the pieces. But, in a non-sequitur sense, you have to bridge the gap between the word, or the title, and what you're looking at. And they may not be connected. But it makes the piece seem more universal.

THOMAS: And it gives you a bit of a journey. You mean, I have to go look up [the word] *Rebus*, and see what it means?

DILL: He considered that a trick. He said, "Well, here's a trick that I do." That kind of thing. There were other artists that worked in the same genre as Rauschenberg and Johns, but really never were as universal as they were. Remember the Living Theatre? This was a group of people that were run by a guy named Julian Beck.

THOMAS: Not in Washington.

DILL: He became an actor, too. Anyway, he did things that were similar to Rauschenberg's. This was in the really early days, even in the late '40s, except that they were very sexually explicit, which really narrowed the field, whereas Bob's stuff was always universal, like the early stuff, with the *Mona Lisa*, or a Caravaggio painting, and then brush strokes, and that kind of thing. It was much more universal. I think that was basically the initial appeal of Bob's work. He was obviously really good at putting things together, but it was also his choice of subject matter, where things were juxtaposed, and *you* would have to make the connections. And then, the title. Like, *Fools' House* -- I think that might have been Jasper's -- with the broom and paint, the paintbrush stroke. I think it was Jasper's *Fools House*. They both employed that kind of non-sequitur thing early on. I'm talking about work that predates the '60s.

THOMAS: Right. Everybody assumes that he's not an educated -- they're not quite sure where to put the intellect.

DILL: He never read.

THOMAS: He never read... But you know, you look at all these paintings, and there are Rembrandts, and all these associations he's asking you to put together. And Nan Rosenthal, at the memorial service, comparing Bob to either Rembrandt or Michelangelo. I don't think he got that kind of education in Paris or at Black Mountain, but he had this amazing curiosity, I think, to go and check out what other people had done.

Antonio Honen said something so interesting. He told me about how he and Ileana were in Florence with Bob, and they wanted to go see a picture that was north of town. They didn't want to leave Bob alone in Florence, so they said, "Bob, we're going to see this Pontormo picture. We think you ought to come with us." And he was like, "Oh, really?" And they said, "Yes, we really want you to come with us." And he said, "Well, how long?" And they said, "Well, we might be there for thirty minutes." Something like that. They go up. He sits in the car for a little while, then he goes and finds them. He sits in front of this Pontormo, with these beautiful colors -- gorgeous colors -- and they're walking back to the car, and he says, "Well, where do we see more of this guy?" And they go to a chapel, again, on the other side of town, I guess, and Antonio said, "The next thing I know I'm looking at Bob's works, and the palette is reflective of the kinds of things that we saw in Italy, in those chapels, etc., etc." He said, "He never 'takes', but he takes like a little piece, and then makes it his own."

I suppose every artist does that.

DILL: If they feel that need.

THOMAS: But Antonio had this sense of what sounded like a really great Ph.D. thesis for somebody, making those kinds of connections, particularly in Bob's work.

DILL: That would be interesting. Well, I mean it's obvious in a lot of stuff like the China series, just taking objects that were from China, and juxtaposing --

THOMAS: -- appropriating them, owning them in a certain way.



DILL: Yes.

THOMAS: Well, thank you very much.

DILL: No, no, my pleasure.

THOMAS: Thank you very much.

DILL: One thing I forgot to mention was that Bob had dogs. He was totally into dogs, just mutts. His place in New York -- the furniture was completely torn up by the dogs, but he had this maid who would come and clean the furniture. Like these chairs that were totally ripped up by the dogs. But then she would clean them perfectly. Wherever he went, he had dogs. He gave me a dog once, and he gave a couple of dogs to the Grinsteins -- which started a whole generation of dogs that came from Bob. This dog that I had was a little mutt. I named it Olive. I was in New Mexico -- I used to go up to Taos, New Mexico occasionally, and I was up there with some other artists. I was going through an area that I shouldn't have been in, in the Penasco Valley -- I don't know if you know that area. It's in northern New Mexico, near Taos. It's called Truchas, New Mexico -- and I was just walking through there. I had gotten into a fight with a friend who had driven us up there, so I was going to hitchhike back to Albuquerque, and I had Olive with me. There was this storm going on -- black clouds and everything -- and no one around, which was really a strange situation, anyway.

We made it to the road, and Olive was hit by a low-rider car. Her back leg was just hanging by a thread. And up in New Mexico, it's hard to find a vet that will treat dogs. They just look at dogs differently there. So I went back to my friend's place, and I was just covered in blood, and we took Olive -- we had to drive all the way back to Santa Fe, which was quite far --

THOMAS: It's far.

DILL: -- because we were in Taos -- Truces -- and the dog had to have the leg amputated, still a young dog and became a three-legged dog. Because he was young -- or *she* was young -- the leg slowly moved over to the center, and she was like a tripod. She would go out, she loved the ocean, she would go out into these huge waves, after a ball or something, and people would go, "Look at that little dog, out in those giant waves!" Then she'd come out of the water with three legs, and it would really blow their minds.

Then I had a lot of traveling to do, so I ended up giving the dog to Rosamund Felsen, who was living up at Malibu at the time, and Olive ended up having a couple of litters. So the Rauschenberg dog legacy lives on. [Laughter] The way it happened -- you don't go, "This is Bob Rauschenberg's dog -- she was definitely *my* dog, but a character. Just a little side story.

THOMAS: Yes. Thank you very much. That's great.

[End of Interview]