

**Oral History Interview of
Toni Arnett**

**Interviewed by: Leslie Dutton
July 18, 2000
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Leslie Dutton Fine Arts Interview Series***

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Toni Arnett as she discusses her love for art and her paintings. In this interview, Arnett describes the teachers she had who inspired and shaped her art, then moves on to how her children and her divorce impacted her art. She explains her painting process and divulges some personal stories of traveling abroad for her art inspiration.

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Leslie Dutton (LD):

This interview is with Toni Arnett to Leslie Dutton on July 18, 2000. Toni is a wonderful painter. She is wonderful in the use of light and her work is very distinctive in the subject matter and in the color. Toni, thank you for meeting with us today.

Toni Arnett (TA):

I'm delighted.

LD:

And I'd like to start off by asking you early questions that have to do with your childhood.

TA:

Okay.

LD:

And when did you start painting?

TA:

I started painting and drawing—I cannot remember when I started because I was so young, you know. It goes back to my earliest memory. But I can remember knowing that I was four at a certain time and thinking at that time that I was an artist and that I could paint—I would someday be able to paint anything I wanted to paint. And it was just a knowing, you know I just somehow internally I had the sense of this, even though of course I couldn't paint or draw very well at four, I knew it was in there.

LD:

Do you have some of those early—

TA:

My mother is not a packrat. She throws everything away, so I have no mementos from my childhood and none of my art. And I really regret that.

LD:

And is there anyone—did your mother or father nurture your artistic skills along, or who really inspired you to continue?

TA:

Well I really didn't need inspiration. Nobody else—well my brother was, he was two years older than I was and he was really better than I was, I thought. So I really didn't need inspiration to go on because I enjoyed the process so much. You know, if I wanted to have a good time I just sat

down and drew something or painted something. So it was not a matter of discipline, and it still isn't, of making myself do it—it's something I need to do and want to do. So, most of the time it's not work, some of the time it is.

LD:

Yeah. But did your mom do anything to send you, let's say to art school or workshops or those kinds of things? Or your father?

TA:

No, she never did, and I begged her to.

LD:

Really?

TA:

Yeah, she gave my brother art lessons but I never—the second child you know sometimes doesn't get quite as much attention as the first. And you know I don't think that was a problem though, because I think children can really be handicapped by art lessons if they're not done right. I think they can lose a lot of their creativity and become very inhibited.

LD:

Did your brother come home and tell you what he had learned?

TA:

No, we were too little to even think about it in that manner, but the things he would bring home, I was just fascinated. Just fascinated.

LD:

Because I know my older brother, he's four years older and he would come home from judo lessons or whatever he was doing, maybe piano lessons and I would say, "Okay, what did you learn today?" You know, "Show me." And so he would end up teaching me all those things.

TA:

Well that's wonderful.

LD:

So I thought maybe the same thing had happened there. But you were just fascinated with those.

TA:

And I was lucky I guess to be the girl in the family because, you know my brother was better

than I was. He quit drawing at about probably seven or eight. He totally dropped it. And the reason that was, was a friend of the family, a man, was over at our house one day—Tom was drawing. And people were talking about how good it was and everything and this man got Tom over to the side and said, “You know, men don’t draw.” And he never picked up a pencil again, and it was such a tragedy, such a tragedy. The affect that adults can have on children.

LD:

Um-hm. That’s very true. So you just continued to do that. And it’s funny because major artists have been men in history.

TA:

Yes. In general, generally I think men have the potential to be better artists than women.

LD:

How come?

TA:

Well my theory is that it’s testosterone. [Laughter] And you know men are more aggressive and they’re bolder, and I think they take more chances, and I think that stronger work can come out of this. Actually my favorite painter in the world is Henriette Wyeth.

LD:

Really?

TA:

Truly. I think she was the artist of all times as far as I’m concerned. Which of course she was a woman, but you know many wonderful women artists—but I think as a whole, men have more ability to create better work.

LD:

Just in the way they think, the process or actually the physical strength?

TA:

No, I don’t think the physical strength has anything to do with it. You know, men are I think bolder and more aggressive than women, and more assertive. And I think I’m assertive in my art, and I think it is strong because of that and I don’t mean strong by good, I mean just—you may or may not like it but whether or not you like it is irrelevant in its strength. You know, I mean it will do something.

LD:

When was the first time that you had a significant—or someone recognized your work as being significant?

TA:

Oh, I was sort of an outcast in school because I moved—I was different you know if you're a child and you're different you're not accepted. We had lived in Dallas until I was ten and then my mother had—she was a woman before her time. She decided that she was going to become a rancher, so the family bought a farm and we moved to the country.

LD:

And where was this?

TA:

This was in Krum, Texas.

LD:

Krum.

TA:

Uh-huh. And so here I was from Dallas, that made me different, had a very different background. There were fifteen kids in my class—Krum was a very small town. And I was a tomboy and none of the other girls were. And I had ugly hair and buckteeth and wore glasses you know, and I wasn't very athletic. So I just didn't fit in but then I started drawing in the classroom. I wasn't a good student because I was so bored in school, I just could stand it, and I wanted to be out riding my horse or swimming in the creek. And so I would daydream and draw, and also I had dyslexia so reading was difficult. I could read but I didn't enjoy it, you know it was tedious. So then of course the class, the people, children in the class—the teacher would see my work. And they thought—they were impressed, they thought that it was good. And I ended up doing all the maps and all the drawing projects for the class, and all the posters, and I always misspelled something on the poster. [Laughter] But that was the beginning of my first acceptance because of my work.

LD:

Isn't that kind of ironic that other things weren't accepted but because of your art, then you were accepted.

TA:

Um-hm.

LD:

And probably worked out a lot of things through the art.

TA:

I got some self-esteem, which was not too good at that time.

LD:

And when did you have your first show?

TA:

I had my first show—Glenna Goodacre and Pat Krahn, at Halls Gallery and I will have to think the date was probably '69 or '70. And we had a wonderful time and a wonderful show, and it was very successful.

LD:

How old were you then?

TA:

I was thirty. Twenty-nine, or thirty. Glenna was my first teacher. We were very good friends, raised our children together, and so the way I got started, I quit all of my art when I went to college, when I got married and I started painting when I was—again when I was—'68. Which would have—I mean, yeah '68, which would have made me twenty-eight years old. And the way I got started was my friend Glenna was teaching a workshop at Glidden's Paint Store on 34th Street. And she said, "I'm teaching this oil painting class, why don't you come take it?" And I said, "Oh, well, that sounds like fun." So I did, and it was—I have not put a brush down since. It was so much fun.

LD:

Well, what was your major in college then?

TA:

Business.

LD:

Really?

TA:

Um-hm. Isn't that ridiculous?

LD:

And did you work in business?

TA:

No, I got married when I was a junior.

LD:

Um-hm. But you finished.

TA:

So I never have worked except at my art.

LD:

Okay, okay. And how many children do you have?

TA:

I have two daughters, and they're artistic.

LD:

And we looked at a painting earlier of your granddaughter.

TA:

Right.

LD:

And obviously she has a lot of that talent.

TA:

Yeah, she loves it.

LD:

Well who else inspired you to go back and—Glenna Goodacre, is there any other teachers that you can recall?

TA:

I was very, very fortunate to have very, very wonderful teachers. And Glenna was one. She taught me the basics. And Frank Gervasi who was a national academician was my second teacher.

LD:

How do you spell his name?

TA:

Oh gosh. G-e-r-v-a-s-i I think. G-e-r—Ger, v-a-s-i, I think. Now you may need to check that.

LD:

Okay. And he was with what?

TA:

He was a national academician.

LD:

Okay.

TA:

Which is the top honor you can have as an artist in the United States.

LD:

And how did he get in there?

TA:

His work—he entered shows a lot, so his work was seen. And I would imagine he probably did this in New York.

LD:

Um-hm. Did he have, do you think, connections or—

TA:

I don't know. He didn't seem like a man that would have connections because—oh I could have told you earlier—he lost an arm, his right hand, he was right handed, in World War I. And he was Italian and didn't speak much English, and just came over here as an immigrant. So I'm sure he didn't have any political pull, at least in the beginning.

LD:

Oh yeah, yeah. And tell me what is the main thing you learned from him?

TA:

How to create light. When I took his class I didn't even know the names of the colors yet. You know, he would say squeeze out Elysian crimson, why I had no idea what Elysian crimson was.

But what he—the process he put us through just instilled in my brain what you have to do to paint light. And what he said was, “You have to paint dark to paint light.” You have to have that contrast to achieve a sense of light.

LD:

Can you describe that process he went through a little more?

TA:

Yes, it was a nightmare. [Laughter] He put a vase of daisies out in the middle of the room and everybody made a circle around that doing their paintings. And so there was no background, you know, it was just what was on the other side of the room was the background. Well you didn't necessarily want to put a person over there or a door, you didn't want to deal with all that extra subject matter, so you had to come up with a background out of your mind. And that, to me, is the number one hardest thing I do in painting because it controls what—the background totally sets the stage for what is going to ultimately happen in that way. And every time, if you were to do a painting and then change that background several times or a hundred thousand times every time you changed it the entire painting would be different. With the darker background the subject matter would seem lighter, or with a lighter background the subject matter would seem darker and maybe drab. So, and then the color, it was a cool background, the subject matter would be warmer. [Coughs] excuse me. And vice versa. So what he did with us, I would just start putting, sort of a light value back behind, which is darker light, back behind these flowers. And you know you'd have to pre tease [?] [00:14:09] painting background around all these petals and leaves and all this stuff. And he would come by and look at it, and he would say, he would get some paint on his brush and he would put a different color and value next to one of the white daisies, but actually the lightest daisy, which was the center of interest. And he says, “Now what do you see? What effect did that have on that daisy?” Well it made that daisy look a lot brighter. So he said, “Okay, do your background darker.” So I did it. We did this five times. Once a day we did this, took all day to do this.

LD:

How long did you have with him?

TA:

It was five days. And you know, it was tedious, I hated it. But in the end I learned probably the most valuable lesson I've ever learned in painting, and that's how to control values and their influence on the subject matter. He was a wonderful teacher.

LD:

And did he speak English when you—

TA:

Oh yes. And he had to paint with his left arm.

LD:

And we have a lot of musicians from that time, left handed concertos that come from some of the wars. A great pianist had his arm blown off in the war. And especially during World War I and World War II.

TA:

It really cut down on detail in his work.

LD:

Really?

TA:

Which is good. You know beginners, most people that really don't understand art or people that are beginning painters don't realize the detail that's probably the least important thing in the painting. It has almost nothing to do with whether or not that painting is a success. That all depends on design and color and the feeling the artist puts into it.

LD:

Okay. What other teachers?

TA:

Oh gosh. Millard Sheets

LD:

Oh yeah?

TA:

And I loved that man. He was one of the most loving human beings I've ever met. And he was a fabulous teacher, and he made my life really hard. [Laughter]

LD:

Now you must explain that.

TA:

Painting became a much harder, daunting process for me after taking his class. And he said it was only one sentence out of the whole class the whole week that just nailed my brain, you know, and I've never let go of it because I realized how important it was.

LD:

What is that?

TA:

And it was never paint the same color twice. Now this was a whole new concept to me.

LD:

Now, "Paint the same color." Does he mean within one painting?

TA:

No, well yeah, in one painting. See obviously that's impossible, that's an impossibility. But if you work toward that your paintings are much more interesting and hold attention much longer.

LD:

Okay.

TA:

I painted some ribbons one time and one set of ribbons I painted, I painted before I took his class. And there was, you know, a whole lot of the same colors going down those ribbons. And then after I took his class I decided to paint some more ribbons, and I started on the pink one.

And as I went along painting the length of this ribbon I would very so slightly change the color all the way down. It was still pink but it was changed. And you know, you could sit and look at that painting for a very long time and you would only glance at the first one I did.

LD:

How about that.

TA:

Yeah.

LD:

And so did you study with Sheets after—

TA:

Um-hm. Yeah, he was probably the last class I took.

LD:

Okay, so really just three teachers, is that it?

TA:

Oh no, there were many others, but those were the ones that really impacted my work and my approach to it. Then there were others that I think you could take a class that you have to listen to what the professor says and do it, and then decide whether that's for you or not. Because I remember early on I had teachers that said, you know in the last few years painting using thick paint has been sort of the accepted way to do things in oil painting. And so I was always having these teachers say, "Get some paint on there, make that paint thicker, we don't want to see any canvas through there." Well, as I studied art going through the years, I noticed there were a lot of paintings that had some very thin, transparent places in them and they really glowed and I thought—and I always wanted to do that but these teachers said don't do that so I was so hung up on what they said it was a very long time before I figured out that I need to do it the way I wanted to do it.

LD:

Um-hm. Oh, and I'm glad you do.

TA:

And it makes it, you can get so much more luminosity and light. I paint thick, very thickly on some and very thinly on—and a lot of times I let some of the canvas show through.

LD:

Um-hm. Yeah I did noticed that in some of the things that were upstairs. Toni, tell me—I know that early on that your drawing helped you to gain self-esteem in school and so that that was a very good, good thing for you. I know as a musician if I can play or I can compose then I can work through lots of things. Can you tell me if there's a time in your life that your art has helped you?

TA:

Yes, I think art has saved my life several times, literally.

LD:

Okay, can you explain?

TA:

When my children were little, they were not well a lot of the time. And so I was up with them at night a lot and I was very exhausted and I got depressed and I was kind of sinking down in a hole. And then Glenna's class came along and I started painting, and I had something else to focus on, something outside myself. There's something very healing apparently about getting outside yourself in your thinking. And then I got better, I felt better, my life is better.

LD:

Your relationships?

TA:

Yeah relationships, I had more purpose, I had a challenge. And it's been that way for me all along, ever since.

LD:

And we talked briefly about this self-portrait. And can you tell a little more about that? Because I would think of other times in your life of—this to me looks like you've really helped, the art has helped you come out of depression or other, just difficult times. And so would you tell me about this self-portrait?

TA:

Yes this self-portrait is a biography of what I was feeling at the time. This painting has very little to do with what I look like, it's quite surrealistic. I think you can tell that it's me.

LD:

Oh yes.

TA:

And people see this portrait and they say, Oh, it's so ugly!

LD:

No, I don't think that at all.

TA:

That's what I hear all the time, and they say, You're much prettier than that. It is I think very powerful in both negative and positive emotions. And now I think you can see the pain in my face. I was painting how I felt. A lady was over here the other day and looked at it, and she said, "You must have been abandoned." And I was abandoned at that point in my life.

LD:

Do you feel like expounding on that?

TA:

Well my thirty year marriage ended, and I was devastated about that, and my father died, and my mother was very ill. My brother was ill and I lost my ability to sleep. So I just couldn't even function. And I was lost, and I felt totally alone, and I felt totally helpless. And at that time I moved to Kansas to get treatment for my insomnia and depression. And when I got there, you

know, it was like, I felt like at that time because I had lost so much that I must not have learned much about life or that would not have ever gotten to that point. So I started—my approach to life totally changed at that time. I opened my eyes. I started living my life with my eyes open and my ears open, trying to learn—what have I missed? You know, what don't I know? There are a lot of things I don't know. And when I was younger I always thought that everything my mother taught me was—she knew everything as far as I was concerned. Which was wrong.

LD:

But we often think that of our mothers.

TA:

So there wasn't anything in the world or in my life I didn't look at again many times in a different light. And I was in therapy there and working on understanding myself and what was going on. And I began to get a picture of myself, and what had caused these things to happen. Of course some of them were nature, and they were just going to happen, but not all of them. And as I began to get understanding in this portrait, I paint one of my eyes very open and the eye is very intense, it's almost like it sees through you. And it has knowledge and understanding in it.

LD:

And it's done with the use of light?

TA:

It's done with the use of light and color. And the other eye is flat and dead, and in shadow of my hair. And it's the eye that doesn't understand things yet. So part of me understood but not all of me. Now I still have so much to learn and I wanted that to be reflected in this painting. Like I said it's totally about feeling, every bit of it. None of it's about really reality. And I put my favorite—I had my favorite shirt on in the painting with flowers on it, I love flowers. And I have Kansas—a primitive surrealistic Kansas background, the countryside, which I loved. And there is a highway in the painting and there's a railroad track and a river, and in my mind those are all leading home. You know, I had many paths home. And home is back there behind those trees in the background. Texas is back there. So that's pretty much the story of this painting. I don't do portraits. The only other portrait I've ever done was of my little granddaughter. So people, you know, I don't have much expertise in people, so this was really an experiment as well.

LD:

Now Toni, to me, I mean and I don't mean to be critical or anything like that but it looks like it's unfinished. But is it a finished work?

TA:

Oh no. See the trees and the hills way back there.

LD:

Um-hm, yeah, I do.

TA:

Yeah, a whole lot more is going to happen in this painting.

LD:

Okay. But you started on this when you in Kansas, is that correct?

TA:

Um-hm. I've been there—probably '92 or '91 when I started on it. And I never could work out the background in my mind until just recently. So I'm finishing it now.

LD:

Okay. And is this the first thing that you did after that, or during that period in your life?

TA:

No, the first thing I did—I couldn't seem to paint until my divorce was final. Just could not pick up a brush. Could not. Wanted to, but could not.

LD:

And is that the only time that that had happened after you went back to painting is during that divorce?

TA:

Um-hm. That's the only time. The day of the divorce I pulled my easel out and I started painting, and I've been painting ever since. And the first painting I did was a purple iris, and it was huge—it was probably four feet by four and a half feet, and it had every color in the world in it and it was flowing and it was flipping and it looked like it was dancing, and joyous, you know. It was like I was reborn. So in my paintings, to me, have my history in them. Nobody else would ever know that by looking at that iris painting, that's true now, but I can look at my paintings and see my history, what was going on at that time. That's why it's so difficult for me to sell some of them.

LD:

Sure, sure. Now I want to go back to this—how long was this after your divorce? Or was this during it?

TA:

You know I can only guess. I would say it was about three years

LD:

The self-portrait to—

TA:

Two and a half.

LD:

Um-hm. And Toni, I know you told me before that you stayed in Kansas for six years to cure that insomnia. What finally brought you out of that?

TA:

Oh something told me when I got there what I had to do to get well. Here I was in a strange community where I knew no one, and I was so debilitated and devastated by my insomnia that I could just—it was just about all I could do was put one foot in front of the other. But I knew, I guess this was a God thing, I knew what I had to do to get well. And it was to try to achieve health again. And so I—health in every area: my social life, my relationship to the community, my spiritual life, my health, the health physiology issues and psychological issues. So I worked on all of those things. And this was a gift to me, this knowing. You know if I hadn't known what to do—nobody told me what to do. If I hadn't had this knowing about what I needed to do to get well I wouldn't be well today. I truly believe that.

LD:

Yeah, I think so.

TA:

And I had quite a lot of success in all areas except my spirituality. And that was still a problem. And then I came back—but I was willing to come back to Lubbock—so I came home and met some people, my priest at the—an Episcopal church helped me with that. And so that has been healed. And so it's almost like I've come full circle now.

LD:

Oh that's good, that's really good. Now where do your children fit in to all this, your daughters?

TA:

Well of course they were ever-present. And I used to use them—well the whole time they lived with me from the time, well Karen, my youngest, was four when I started and my other child was five. They're my art critics. And people do not realize this but children have an incredible art sense. And I'd be struggling, and struggling, and struggling and I'd get these little kids in there, and I would say, "Tell me what's wrong with this painting," and I mean they could nail it. They

could nail it almost every time. And as the years went along they didn't do art, I could not get them to do art.

LD:

I wonder why that was?

TA:

I think they were intimidated, you know, "I can't do as well as mommy" sort of thing, which I really regret. As the years went along they were not as good at this when they got older, like—

LD:

[Changing tape] Just a second. Okay.

TA:

By the time they reached high school, you know they could always do it and they can still do it. But they weren't as good at it as they were when they were little children.

LD:

A child's eye.

TA:

Yeah. And then I think my art got really tedious to them, you know, because it would take me away from some of their time that they would like to have had. I don't know how you get around that, there are only so many hours in a day. And they used to hate to go to mother's art shows, you know, "So boring!" But now they love it.

LD:

Yeah. Well and that leads me to a question I ask a lot of people, because I think we sacrifice a lot for our art. And for me it was being in the practice room five hours a day alone. And so I would suppose that you had that same sort of thing. So other than your children wanting time with you can you think of any other sacrifice that you made for art?

TA:

My art, I'm sure that I didn't paint when my husband was home, but I think that my attention some of the time was on my own art even when I wasn't painting. Really my children are the only thing that I really think suffered, and maybe I didn't search for meaning in life as much as I should have because of it—because it gave my life meaning. But we also need to get meaning from other things as well I think. And so I was kind of blinded about some things about life I needed to learn. But since then I have looked into those things very deeply.

LD:

That's wonderful.

TA:

For many years.

LD:

And do you have a wonderful social life with a lot of other artists and people in town.

TA:

Right, I do, right.

LD:

Now I'm going to go back one more time to your time in Kansas. And when—did your children come and visit you?

TA:

They lived near there. They lived in Kansas City and I was in Topeka, so it was just fifty miles away.

LD:

Okay. And did they help during that time?

TA:

Oh yeah, they were very supportive. Yeah. And I needed them. And it was hard on them.

LD:

Yeah.

TA:

Very.

LD:

Now since then—and so that really that wasn't all that long ago for you.

TA:

No, I went up there Christmas of '88. Merry Christmas. [Laughter]

LD:

Yes, I seem to recall something like that with my mother. And I think we have another expletive in there. Now, so '88 through '94.

TA:

I came back in '95.

LD:

Ninety-five. Can you tell me about your paintings and how they changed when you came back to Lubbock?

TA:

You know I don't think they changed much when I came back to Lubbock but they changed enormously after my divorce.

LD:

How so?

TA:

They were much lighter and brighter, and I think more creative and more daring and more luminous.

LD:

What about subjects, subject matter?

TA:

I think I used things in more of a design mode.

LD:

Can you explain that a little more?

TA:

Artistic mode rather than duplicating reality. Even though my paintings are realistic they're also somewhat impressionistic. I see my paintings after the divorce becoming a little bit surrealistic. And I think I very much paint feelings even though the subject doesn't project that, but the total painting does.

LD:

Oh yeah.

TA:

And I try to let people or help people see things in a way they've never seen before. You know I may do a painting of a pumpkin or some flowers or some kind of animal, and I try to paint it in a way that goes beyond—

LD:

Reality?

TA:

On reality, even though the painting looks very realistic it goes beyond. And I try to put some actual life into something dead.

LD:

And how do you do that?

TA:

If you go pick a pumpkin, you know, it's no longer living.

LD:

Right, right.

TA:

But I try to make it look like it has a life of its own. And I do this I think with intensity.

LD:

Of color?

TA:

Intensity of color, intensity of—of course, not something as bright or dull. Contrasting light and dark, using colors that were not really there.

LD:

Oh yes.

TA:

I do that a lot. And even though I take thousands and thousands of slides for reference, it's mostly for drawing, because the color's never right on film, not even close. So I use my imagination for color. Sometimes I'll go buy something, like I might buy a pumpkin for a pumpkin painting and just for the color.

LD:

Okay. And since you mentioned slides, do you often paint from photos or slides?

TA:

Well I use these slides for reference for when I'm drawing the painting with pencil. And then after that I very rarely look at those slides while I'm painting it. I may some, you know so I can understand its construction better. But after the drawing on it's 90 percent imagination.

LD:

Is there any other way that your paintings have changed?

TA:

Well they tend to get bigger.

LD:

Bigger, uh-huh.

TA:

And bigger and bigger. The Diamond M. Museum in Snyder had a retrospective show for me one time. And they hung it in chronological order and it was so funny—the first painting was the smallest and the last one was the biggest. [Laughter] And this was over about a twenty year period. And I didn't really realize that until the show was hung, "Well that is so strange!" One of the last ones I did was—I can't remember exactly, I think it was about five and half by six feet.

LD:

Um-hm. And what was that?

TA:

It was a—I haven't showed that one to you, a garden scene. Out in the garden, and it's like you're standing in this jungle of vegetation. You know there's no—it's just a jungle of vegetation and flowers is all it is.

LD:

Okay. Because the last one that I saw that was so big was the irises.

TA:

Irises? Oh, the big vase.

LD:

Yes. And that was for someone, wasn't it?

TA:

No, I don't do commissions. The reason I don't do commissions is I can't do them. You know if I could do them I would. But I can't paint somebody else's idea. The feelings have to come from me and I don't have the right feelings for somebody else's object.

LD:

Sure, makes sense to me. Toni, even though divorce is very difficult, it sounds like it was actually a good thing in the long run for you.

TA:

I think it was, definitely, yeah. I became—well, my self-esteem got so much better. There were some problems in the marriage that were not too great for my self-esteem. And I think it's virtually impossible to be happy if you don't have good self-esteem. I mean, if you're running around all day thinking you're not too cool, you know, how can you be happy? And I'm not saying life is a bowl of cherries now, but it feels freer, and I feel firmer in what I am and who I am. And I enjoy time alone.

LD

I think that's very important.

TA:

And even though I adore time alone, you know I can have too much of it.

LD:

That's true, and need to be around people.

TA:

Right, because I love people equally as much, probably more. So I work real hard on having an interesting social life and good friends, close friends.

LD:

Um-hm. It sounds like you have a lot of balance now.

TA:

I try to. I think it's really important.

LD:

I'm going to ask you now specifically about not just one painting but your process, your overall process. And so can you describe how you start with those feelings, how do you put it on canvas, and how do you turn it into a finished work.

TA:

Oh my word, what a question! Okay the process starts of course with trying to come up with an inspiration. Sometimes they are very elusive. And I find—

LD:

What inspires you?

TA:

The strangest things inspire me.

LD:

Oh, tell me.

TA:

Well you'll be driving down the street and just see something out of the corner of your eye, and there's something about the design of the way it's arranged or the colors or some emotion that it brings up in me, and I find that—

LD:

Can you give me an example? Mostly flowers, or seems to me [00:42:42]

TA:

A lot of flowers, a lot of nature, a lot of vegetable plants, animals. I love nature, I've always loved nature. And I find that if I can't get inspired if I go walking there's something about walking, and I walk late in the evening, I can nearly always—boom, it just hits me out of the blue.

LD:

And do feel that you have to go paint it then?

TA:

If I don't get started on it fairly soon I lose that inspiration and then I can't do it. And I can't do something twice because of that. The second time around I have zero inspiration, I'm bored—it's boring doing it again. And that's why I don't do commissions, there's just no inspiration. And I'd never do a study. I find the study's great, the painting's horrible. Why not go straight to the painting and have it great, you know, skip the study. Because the inspiration leaves with the study. I've gotten it out of my system. So then after I have my inspiration I do the material gathering process.

LD:

And what is that?

TA:

And that is going and buying whatever I'm painting. Like I was out at the fair one day and I have always wanted to paint a rabbit and I saw this huge sign that said, "Rabbit Barn." And I thought, Oh, great! So I happened to have my camera in the car so I went in there—I was there, I bet I was there four hours. There were twenty-two hundred rabbits, and I saw every one of them. And I was going to pick out the rabbit to take home to paint, and they were for sale, which was fortunate.

LD:

And did you purchase a rabbit?

TA:

I bought a rabbit that day, a giant Flemish hare. [Laughter]

LD:

How long did you keep this rabbit?

TA:

I had never heard of a giant Flemish hare up until time. So he was brown, he was the one. He was the one I wanted to save, that rabbit. His back feet I guess were probably eight inches long, nine inches long, huge back feet. So I brought it home and I had two dogs at home. And they became totally obsessed with eating my rabbit. So I had to keep the rabbit on the inside and the dogs on the outside, or the dogs on the inside and the rabbit on the outside. And all this time, Bussy was not chill [?] [00:45:01]—I named him Bussy Arnett. And all this time Bussy was wild, and I was chasing this wild rabbit around trying to get the photos I needed for my painting. On the fifth or sixth day Bussy got friendly, so I was finally able to get him. But we had one terrible, terrible incident during this week. It was at night and I thought my dogs were back in my bedroom, so I put Bussy outside, and then I heard this horrible screaming—a rabbit when it's wounded or hurt or afraid it screams like a woman, and as loud as a woman. It's just this horrible nightmare scream. And I thought, The dogs are on the outside, and they're eating Bussy, they're tearing him to shreds. But I couldn't see him because they had gone around to the back of the house in the dark. So I thought I've just got to let them finish it, you know, I can't just let him live and suffer. They've probably ripped his skin off—rabbits, dogs rip skin off rabbits. So the screaming went on and on, and it went on and on and on, and I thought I cannot listen to this, I've got to go out there and do something. I went out there with a flashlight—those dogs had not touched that rabbit. They had him in a corner, and he must've been kicking at them with those giant feet, I don't know, but they kill rabbits weekly down at the ranch, they know how to kill a

rabbit. So anyway, to have a good ending, thank heavens. So about two days after that I separated them again. My husband came home and said, "What is this!" You can't potty-train a rabbit, there are little pills around places. So anyway, and I knew we had to get rid of him—we couldn't do that dog thing again. So we gave him to Lubbock Village, a retirement home here, and they had a huge courtyard that the building was built around it and they put Bugsy out there and built him this huge elaborate rabbit house and the residents there fell in love with Bugsy and they would take him to their rooms to spend the night, and to visit him during the day. I mean he became the biggest deal out there. So Bugsy had happy life in the end.

LD:

That's good.

TA:

And I got several good paintings out of him. But artists will go to any lengths, any lengths to get their subject matter. I remember one time Glenn and I were in Spain and we were photographing the countryside and the buildings and the people. And we saw these cane cutters out there across this field, about ten or twelve men with these huge machetes and they were chopping down this sugar cane, and so I thought, This is the painting of all time. So we go running over toward them with our cameras, and we're looking through our viewfinders and we realize these men are charging us with their machetes raised, and screaming at us. So I mean we turn around and we run as hard as we can back to the car. We jump in the car—they're getting closer and the road is a dead end. So we have to turn around, and it's too small to turn around but we finally get it turned around and get away before they reach us. So, you know I could just go on for hours about the experiences like that.

LD:

I love this. I mean—

TA:

One time I fell in a canal in Venice. I was leaning down some steps out over the water taking a picture and I stepped on some moss, and in I went.

LD:

Camera and all?

TA:

Camera over my head the whole time, and out of the water.

LD:

So you like to travel as well?

TA:

Love to travel. And I broke a rib when I fell in.

LD:

Oh no.

TA:

And we had two more weeks of the trip, but anyway it was fine.

LD:

So what other great stories do you have of gathering materials?

TA:

Well one of my favorites was we were in Spain another time, and we come across this large field just on the edge of town in this wonderful historic town. And it is a horse fair, and people bring horses, cows, chickens goats, pigs, dogs, kittens, whatever they have are things they've made to sell in this huge fair. And the Gypsies are there, they come to these events and they cook and sell their food. So you know the subject matter was so varied and so rich and so inspiring, well Glenna Goodacre is not a shy person. She probably may have only one shy bone in her body but we drove up there and I said, "Oh, yay, this is the most wonderful thing I've ever seen. Come on!" She said, "I am not going up there." I said, "We came three thousand miles to do this. We are not missing it." So I finally talked her into getting out. Every one of the Gypsies were in black, every single person was in black.

LD:

Oh yeah, that's the color of Spain.

TA:

Of Spain, and the gypsies were in bright colors and then I had my yellow hair and my pink raincoat on and Glenna had her pink hair and her yellow raincoat on and we looked like—I don't know what we looked like, we did not look like we should be there, that's for sure, we did not fit in. But anyway, we got some great pictures, we had a wonderful time at that fair.

LD:

That's great. And—any others that come to mind?

TA:

Oh there are thousands. I loved one thing—I'm not a sculptor but I decided I was going to take this sculpture class from—I hate it when I forget people's name. It will come to me. Wonderful sculptor—Lincoln Fox. And it was in Las Cruces, New Mexico, a friend of mine and I decided to

do this, Janet Byble. So we get to class the first day and we have all of our supplies and we're so excited like the first day of school for a first grader because we had not—we had little experience in this. So we get there and I start it, "When's the model going to get here? When's the model going to set up?" I was ready to go. So anyway the model finally came and he was this very muscular, very young Indian man. Slender. And so I said, "When are we going to start? When is he going to set up?" And Lincoln said, "This project is imaginary." He said, "He's not going to set up and pose. If you need him for reference on how to do a hand or a head or just his body, he can come sit for you for a few minutes, but this is going to be imaginary." Which was—I'd never had that experience before with a teacher, it was so exciting. And I thought, I've been let out of a cage, and I didn't even know I was in a cage. It's not going to be this tedious boring thing of trying to copy something that's dead still, you know. So I decided to do a very fat, very pregnant Black woman with dreadlocks. And you know it was like probably the most liberating, freeing experience of my life to just go back and be a child in your imagination again, you know. And the piece turned out great I think. But it was kind of funny—this man would come by from time to time and say, "Do I look like that?"

LD:

"Actually yes you do. In my mind."

TA:

And one of the most exciting things in the class was we had two blind people. And I had always thought, If I ever go blind—blindness runs in my family—I'm going to be a sculptor. And lo and behold these people did great. They turned out some of the best stuff. And that was very encouraging to me and inspiring.

LD:

Oh wow, that's fantastic.

TA:

And Lincoln was a wonderful teacher.

LD:

Lincoln Fox.

TA:

And a wonderful person.

LD:

That's great. Toni, after you gather those materials—because I think those are the best stories, I think we can go on forever with those—what do you do next?

TA:

After I gather the material? Well then I decide how I'm going to design it on the canvas. And I draw everything in pretty good detail before I start because I was taught by many teachers, you know, Use your paintbrush, thin it with turpentine, thin your paint with turpentine, and block it in. Well, I found when I did that I lost of the luminosity. I would get opaque in areas I didn't want to be opaque in. And once you get opaque on a canvas you've lost any of the best luminosity that you had at your disposal, because even if you wipe it off, that white is gone so the luminosity you have is never as powerful. So to preserve this luminosity I draw things in detail. And then I get thick where I want to get thick and then I'm able to stay thin where I want to stay thin, because I don't have to constantly be correcting. Even though I do make a lot of changes as I go on I don't have to make nearly as many.

LD:

That makes sense.

TA:

And the painting, I may plan the painting in my mind, which I always do, but it always takes another course. It always tell me what to do. The biggest problem is it always tells me two things to do, and they're always contradictory. Always.

LD:

Can you give me a good example?

TA:

Well like I could—this part of the painting as I paint it may become very subtle and soft, and then over here I accidentally—my best painting, the best things in my painting are always my accidents, always. And either you go with those—you've got to take advantage of them and don't paint over them you know, don't think I'm going to do it better because you're not. So I'm drawn to that part of the painting and I'm drawn to the subtle part of the painting and I have to say, You've got to make up your mind. You've got to commit to one or the other. And when I'm not able to totally commit to one or the other the painting doesn't work out. And it's such a struggle because you have to give up something you really love to get something else that you love. You know and the giving up is so difficult but it's totally necessary. So I struggle through that and I hope that I make a decision to commit to one or the other, sometimes I don't. And then I keep having these accidents along on the painting, and I look at them and something that was going to be very unimportant may become a very important thing in the painting because of this accident. And then so I start keying my painting, the development of my painting around these accidents. And people say, "They're not accidents."

LD:

They're on purposes.

TA:

No, but they are accidents. I wouldn't be able to do those accidents though if I haven't had this experience. But without these accidents I wouldn't have the success I have. And this is why I firmly believe that the most important thing in doing the painting is being at least fifty feet from it. I spend more time sitting in my chair in my study looking through two rooms, fifty feet to this painting, that's where I do my painting. And that's where I make my decisions about the courses I need to take in these paintings. You know, you could paint something absolutely stupendous, and if you're right there a foot and a half from it you don't know how good it is. And if you keep sitting there you're probably going to work on it and lose the wonderfulness of it. So I literally walk back sometimes after every stroke fifty feet. Sometimes I'll sit and paint a little while, but it's sitting in that chair and study where I achieve art. I don't achieve it from the paint.

LD

Well that's good to think about. Toni, many artists talk about composition on the canvas and where things are placed and how to balance it out. Do you think about that at all or do you just have this picture in your mind and you go with it?

TA:

I seem to have a total built-in map of where things need to go for it to be a good design. And I listen to that, and it's right. And it will tell you when you're right and it will tell you when you're wrong, but it will not tell you how to fix it if it's wrong. [Laughter]

LD:

Do you think that artists, I mean true artists just naturally have this, or do you think that that can be taught?

TA:

I think some of it can be taught, but I think you've got to have some talent. I truly believe that. But people that don't even have very much talent can learn that. But you've got to have some talent. And it's so funny and it's frightening to me how a small thing can so impact a painting like this—you saw the sunflower painting I'm working on. I think that painting is a success but two days ago I added a bud over close to the edge on the left side of that painting, and a stem going to it. And it was small and it was in shadow, and it didn't show up very much, but it ruined that painting, that one small thing. That one small thing ruined that painting. I erased it and then the painting was okay again.

LD:

You just painted over it.

TA:

But this is something—this is an inner sense. And you have to be fifty feet away to know it, I would never have known it.

LD:

Standing close.

TA:

Right. And then I did another painting one time, an iris painting, and it was good. It was mediocre to good. But it wasn't great, you know. And there was one iris I had not painted, and they were all purple, and one pink. And so I started in on it and I just happened to put a touch of blue on it that was nowhere else in the painting and it made the painting a great painting, and it was a small, tiny—the spot was no bigger than a square inch. And it was a big, very big painting, and it made the painting. And that's frightening, to have that—to know this.

LD:

That one thing can change it. Now how do you finish these and achieve this glossiness?

TA:

That's varnish.

LD:

Okay.

TA:

And I believe that if you don't varnish a painting after a while the colors get dead, because you paint paintings in layers so areas have layers of paint, and others have a very thin wash. But if you do an area that has layers of paint, when those dry, those areas will be dead and flat and lose their color, so you have to varnish it to bring it back to its original color. And I like glossy.

LD:

I do to. Now I have one other thing that I want to ask you about. We do experiments, some in psychology with children, of them listening to music. And then you paint your emotion, so it's an emotional response through color and shape to music. Have you ever done experiments like that?

TA:

Yeah, that to me is one of the very most amazing things about my painting is that—first you have to understand this would not be amazing unless you realized that I'm probably the most unmusically gifted person in existence. And it is so bad that—I mean my ability to understand and appreciate it is so bad—I never had music in my home because my parents didn't like it either. To me it was just noise—that I almost literally cannot paint unless I'm listening to classical music. A lot of which I adore, a lot of it I cannot stand, even the classical music—

LD:

[Changes tape]

TA:

Are we going too long here?

LD:

Unh-uh. Oh, no. Just let me run this one up. Okay.

TA:

Even the classical music that I do not care for, it helps me paint enormously. It's like somebody flips a switch in my head, and they say this is—the music's making my right brain kick in. And you can't paint unless you're in your right brain, I mean you might as well go to the grocery store. You just cannot paint unless you're—you can't paint anything good unless you're in your right brain. I can turn that music on and boom—I start painting well. Whereas before I'd just been picking at it. I had my teacher tell me this one time, he said, "You have to listen to good music. It has to be good music for this to do this." I did not believe this man. Well, I went home and I tried it, and he was right.

LD:

What things do you listen to? I mean do you listen to Mozart, do you listen to Beethoven, classical ones, do you listen to Bach of the—

TA:

I listen to all those.

LD:

Baroque period. Anything that's your favorite?

TA:

Beethoven. I just love his music.

LD:

That's just very strong. Do you ever listen to Wagner?

TA:

Some.

LD:

The prelude of *Tristan and Isolde*?

TA:

I don't know. I don't know their names.

LD:

Okay.

TA:

I listen to KOHM, and they have classical going most of the time. And then I have some tapes and some CDs.

LD:

I'd be interested to see what sort of painting you would do with *Tristan and Isolde*.

TA:

What's that music like?

LD:

It's dramatic, very dramatic. And it's—I just think it's wonderful. Many musicians refer to it as a gigantic orgasm, musical orgasm, because it just goes on and on and on.

TA:

Do you have the tape?

LD:

Um-hm, I do.

TA:

Gosh, I'd love to borrow it.

LD:

Okay.

TA:

See what happens.

LD:

Because that's one of my favorite things to play and it's one of the things I use to teach half diminished seventh chords to theory classes. Because you can hear that right away, but it's so powerful, it just evokes emotion.

TA:

And you know I'll finish a painting, I always turn that radio off. I always turn the music off. I don't ever sit and listen to music. I've had a car that I bought three years ago—I've never had the radio on.

LD:

Really?

TA:

But it so impacts my art, it does more for than my art than anything I do. Besides getting back fifty paces—those are the two mains.

LD:

Now Toni, what are your favorite colors?

TA:

Red. [Laughter]

LD:

Red.

TA:

Red.

LD:

Red.

TA:

Red.

LD:

That's your favorite.

TA:

Bright, bright, bright red.

LD:

Now that's—

TA:

Now green's second.

LD:

Okay.

TA:

I'm not too big on orange.

LD:

So do you like the red that has a lot of blue under it?

TA:

Uhn-uh.

LD:

Or orange under it?

TA:

Orange.

LD:

Me too. [Laughter]

TA:

Is this your favorite color?

LD:

It really is.

TA:

Isn't that funny.

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LD:

But my second one is yellow. Bright, bright yellow.

TA:

See I'm not crazy about yellow. When I use yellow—see that portrait has more yellow in it than anything I've ever done besides those sunflowers. And see the cat painting on the quilt up there?

LD:

Yes.

TA:

Not much orange. And purple is not my favorite color, but it makes probably the best background there is.

LD:

Oh yeah.

TA:

Because it can be very neutral.

LD:

Oh I didn't think about that, but yeah, that's true. And what are your favorite brushes?

TA:

Oh, I guess I don't have a favorite. I like bristle and sable.

LD:

Okay.

TA:

You can do different things with different ones. And they're hardly expensive. Oil paints are horribly expensive.

LD:

Yes. And I suppose, because I've never seen anything else that you've done that's not in oil.

TA:

I've done a few pastels but I don't have any experience with that. And I would like to say one more thing about my art. I know the current vogue is to not paint beautiful art, to not do a beautiful painting. I mean that is looked down on by the universities. I don't think so much in art

schools but the universities really look down on that. And to me beauty is the joy of art. And I'd rather paint joy than misery. So many current works you see especially in the universities, you know they're gory, they are depressing, they evoke a tremendous amount of emotion. But they don't draw you in and make you want to look at them. You don't enjoy them.

LD:

Instead you turn away.

TA:

You don't enjoy them. And I want people to enjoy my art and I want to enjoy doing it. And I think beautiful art is much more difficult to paint than something that evokes trauma and feelings of—negative feelings of fear, anxiety or, you know just about anybody can do that. You can put something really disturbing on a canvas and not be very talented but not very many people can put something beautiful and stirring and stirring and powerful on canvas. And I think it's a shame that we are directing our young people away from that.

LD:

Instead of finding the beauty in life.

TA:

Well, and I don't think beauty is the only road. You know I think there's plenty of room for the things I just talked about, and we need it.

LD:

Oh sure, yes.

TA:

But I don't think that people should be directed away from doing it. I don't think they should be taught that it's not a good option, and as valid as the more distressing, emotion-evoking pieces.

LD:

I'm going to go on to something else, Toni, because that really gets your philosophy of art down. And what upcoming projects do you have? We know you're working on this self-portrait and so what else do you have in mind?

TA:

Well I'm at one of those crossroads. You hit a crossroad every time you finish a painting, you know. It is like—you've got to have another baby. [Laughter]

LD:

That's good.

TA:

The other baby's already here, you know, it's taken care of. You've got to have another one. So you always have to come up with an inspiration, and that's very difficult. And I am just—I've had this tremendous creative surge in the last two weeks. I've not been able to paint for four months because my house is being remodeled and I couldn't get in my studio. Finally got in about a week ago and I had this huge creative surge and I was able to finish paintings that I never could get to work, so you know, I mean, that's a wonderful feeling. If you spend a month or six weeks on something and can't get it to work, what a waste of time, you know so if you can pull it off, that's wonderful. So now's the time—I've finished those, you know, now's the time to start again. I guess I'm going to have to go walking to get inspiration.

LD:

And how long does it usually take you to finish a painting, like from start to finish?

TA:

Oh good. See that small painting up there? That took me four months. It's not that complicated—it probably looks complicated to somebody that doesn't paint but—

LD:

Yeah, it does.

TA:

Even though it has a quilt and an animal in it that was not complicated. But I couldn't get the colors to work. So I struggled with it for four months, so I put it away for six months. And then I brought it out the other day.

LD:

And you finished it.

TA:

And I finished it. I could tell what I needed to do. I've forgotten what your question was.

LD:

That was it. How long does it usually take?

TA:

Okay. And then I might do a really big elaborate one, difficult-appearing painting in a month. Huge.

LD:

Okay so just different lengths of time.

TA:

Oh yeah. The size has very little to do with it. Some of them fall off your brush and some of them fight you all the way. [Laughter]

LD:

Yeah. And something else, I know that your paintings are displayed many places. Can you tell me about some of those places?

TA:

I guess my two favorite places my paintings were ever displayed were in China, Beijing.

LD:

Really?

TA:

Yes, I was invited to display my work with some painters from the Southwest. This was not Southwest art, this was painters from the Southwest—you know, there's a difference. And so this group of artists and collectors and writers were taken—and gallery owners, were taken to Beijing, there were eight-two of us. And we had a very large show, very wonderful art. And I loved it because a lot of the Chinese people speak English very, very, very well, I say about a third at that time, and they'd come through and they were so curious. And they were so in love, they were so in love with art, it was like—I wondered, Do they have a chance to see art, these people?

LD:

They're hungry for it.

TA:

Because I mean they came in there and just sucked it up like I'd never seen. And such curiosity, and the question that was asked me, and I've never understood this question, I've never understood the purpose of this question, was, "Why did you paint that?" I don't know whether they were asking that because they thought the subject matter was unusual or why did I paint it instead of going to mow the lawn, you know.

LD:

Right.

TA:

And it's bothered me that I have not understood that question but it was repeated over and over and over.

LD:

Why do you paint in general?

TA:

Because I'd be dead if I didn't. I have to paint.

LD:

Yeah, and that's I think something that you get, and that's the answer from true artists of why do you practice? Why do you sing? Why do you compose? One of my other friends, composer friends, gets deathly ill if he doesn't write that composition out. And he can't do anything else. And with this showing in Beijing did you get to go over there?

TA:

Um-hm.

LD:

I mean so obviously you did, you get the people asking you questions. How long did you get to stay?

TA:

We were there three weeks.

LD:

Wow.

TA:

And we toured around China, and it was the experience of a lifetime. You know, it was not luxurious, the food even became nauseating from time to time. We had chicken soup one day—all the chicken had been taken out of the chicken. All that they left was the head, the comb the beak, the eyes, the skin, the legs, the feet. And this thing was floating in our chicken soup. And we had a lot of meals like that.

LD:

Yeah, but those people, they don't waste anything, they're like the early American farmers who used every part of what they killed.

TA:

And they're creative.

LD:

Yes.

TA:

So the good food wasn't an attraction. The living quarters were grim. We were even in one hotel, there were bats circling in the ceiling. There were rats, bats and cockroaches in these hotels. The bed was like—this was way before they started making tourist places, places for people—tourists to stay in. And the bed was lumpy and saggy and dirty, and the Chinese go to the bathroom and that's the last time anybody does anything to that bathroom besides make it dirtier. And Glenna Goodacre and I were roommates, and I dropped her—there's a drain in the middle of the room in the bathroom, and I dropped her comb in the drain. And I pulled it out and washed it off and never told her. [Laughter]

LD:

When did you go?

TA:

This was in '81. This was before any change whatever over there. Everybody wore black, brown or navy. We were on the street one day, we were walking down the sidewalk, and the sidewalks were full. Everywhere you go.

LD:

Right. Vendors.

TA:

No, I don't mean vendors, people.

LD:

Oh yeah.

TA:

Well because we had no idea how many people are over there. So we were out on the sidewalk one day, which was very wide to accommodate all their people, and all of a sudden we began to

be squashed. And I realized that these people were pressing in on us because we were so strange looking, they wanted to see us, and we had our—she had her red hair and I had my yellow hair, and I think we still had our pink and yellow raincoats. And they were all in black and brown. They were just so curious. So beginning to meet the people, and we loved our tour guide, and he was real with us, he told us what he thought about things. And he came on the bus one day laughing, and we said, “What are you laughing about?” and he said, “I was talking to the people out there—” who were Chinese, and he said, “You know what they said?” We said, “No, what?” And he said, “We all look alike.” [Laughter] He thought—and you know they always say Orientals all look alike. They thought we all looked alike. We thought that was amusing. And then—you weren’t supposed to do this then, you weren’t supposed to away from your group, and you weren’t supposed to go out on your own, but we were a group of artists that will do anything for art. So we rented a little van and got a driver to take us out to the countryside. So here we hit these villages with our cameras in hand you know. And it was almost like they hadn’t even discovered the wheel the way they were living and how primitive it was. And this one man came out and greeted us, and he was so gracious, and he said, “Please, come in and have tea with me.” So you know, that to me is what a real trip is. That’s a real trip.

LD

Definitely.

TA:

And that’s what I want to see and experience when I go on a trip, you know. You can have all those fine hotels in the world, all I want’s a bed and a bathroom. So a lot of people didn’t enjoy it quite that much, but I think the artists all did. The collectors and the museum people were a little turned off by this. But that was life, you know, I want to experience life.

LD:

That’s true. Toni, where else?

TA:

Well this was I guess one of the biggest shocks of my life. I had just moved into my little house in Topeka, I had been there a couple of years I guess. And it was so old that it had gas pipes in the ceiling for gas lights. And quaint, in this quaint Victorian neighborhood. You know just living around that that architecture was just inspiring to me, just awesome. Well anyway I get this phone call one morning, and they said “This is the State Department, could we speak to Toni Arnett?” I said, “The State Department of what?” [Laughter] I mean why would the State Department be calling me, you know. And they said, “The United States. I’m calling from Washington D.C.” I thought, What have I done? Did I cheat that much on my taxes? I didn’t think I’d cheated any. So they said they were familiar with my work, and they wanted to know if they could borrow my work to put in American embassies around the world. Well you know this

is an artist's dream—who ever expects that phone call? So I did, I participated in a program that's called the Art in Embassies Program. And they borrow art from collectors and museums and artists and place them around the world. And I had three that were sent to Bogota, Colombia for three years. That was a great honor. And those were the two really highlights.

LD:

Did you get to go through there?

TA:

I didn't go, no. I wish I had.

LD:

And were you paid by the State Department?

TA:

Oh no, but they paid all the expenses, which were enormous.

LD:

Oh, yeah.

TA:

It's like probably shipping my work to Washington was six hundred dollars. And then they had to ship it down, ship it back.

LD:

Um-hm. And when you went to China and your work was displayed over there did you have to pay to have that shipped?

TA:

Unh-uh.

LD:

So they did that?

TA:

Uh-huh.

LD:

Oh that's good. And how did they ship your works?

TA:

I think some—I'm sure they were in crates, I'm sure they were in wooden crates. The ones that went to Colombia were in crates.

LD:

Toni, this is incredible.

TA:

Well thank you. It's been a good side effect of doing something you love, you know. Sometimes when you do something you love the side effect may not be too great, like you might gain a lot of weight or something. [Laughter]

LD:

And when did the State Department call you? Do you remember what year?

TA:

I was in Kansas, so it was probably around '94, '95. I'm not sure about those days.

LD:

Okay. Wow. Not only have you done incredible work, but you've had an incredible life as well.

TA:

Well I really have because of it.

LD:

And I think that artists who actually get to practice what they know and love are very fortunate, because I see people go to work every day and they hate what they're doing.

TA:

I know it. And mine makes me feel good, like I needed to paint for the last four months and I just started painting last week, and instantly life felt better, more comfortable, like I was back in my own skin.

LD:

Oh yeah.

TA:

It's sort of like taking a drug, but you don't have to get sick, you know, the side effects are good.

LD:

Now, Connie Martin also says that.

TA:

Does she? Huh. But a strange thing about it—I may be working on a painting all day or most of the day, and it may be the best painting I've ever done, may be just great, you know I may totally be pleased. But after I get through I don't feel good the rest of the day. It's like, and if I'm around people the rest of the day I don't have any personality—it's gone.

LD:

And drained, do you feel drained.

TA:

I don't know that I feel drained, I just feel like I'm not there. That "me" has taken a little vacation for the rest of the day. [Laughter]

LD:

I know after performances—

TA:

Are you like that?

LD:

Then I could just go off and I really need to be alone, I need to rest. I feel like someone has sucked my blood out—

TA:

Right, and I—

LD:

And there's just nothing left.

TA:

And I don't have the ability—I feel like I don't have the ability to think or contribute, that's the main thing. I feel like I don't have anything to contribute. And I think I have a pretty good sense of humor but it's gone for the rest of that day.

LD:

And that's all those people, they want to come and talk to you after those performances, and I'm just thinking, Call me tomorrow.

TA:

[Laughs] Well do you have a sense of your personality leaving?

LD:

I have a sense of everything leaving—my energy, personality, everything.

TA:

Yeah. Isn't that strange.

LD:

Yeah, but—

TA:

Because while I'm working on the painting it doesn't feel difficult.

LD:

Yeah, you're under this inspiration and you just have all this energy and it's just there that—

TA:

I don't feel like—no I don't feel like I'm being drained at the time, but I guess I am. Janet Byble also says that. If the two of us ever got tighter to do something after a day of painting, we'd be the two most boring—we'd have a horrible time. [Laughter]

LD:

Well you might have a horrible time but I can't say that you two would be the most boring.

TA:

We would to ourselves.

LD:

Yeah. Well Toni this is just incredible, and if you can think of other things that we should know maybe you could give me a call.

TA:

Okay, I'll be glad to do that.

LD:

Because this has been fantastic.

TA:

Well thank you, truly it is my life's blood.

LD:

Um-hm.

TA:

I've talked about this to other artists, and we have agreed on many occasions that if we had to give up everything in our life this would be the one thing we'd all want to—other than you know you're not going to give up your children and family members but of all the other things, this would be the last thing I give up.

LD:

Um-hm. Well I know I've often said I'd rather sing than eat. And of course, there has been that time. So that's fantastic Toni, I'm glad you love what you do and it shows through your work.

TA:

Of course there are really struggles too. Like my favorite painting I've ever did, I don't know if you've seen it, I'll show it to you when you get through here—is of a cross, a twig cross covered in flowers. It's six feet tall—have you seen that?

LD:

Um-hm.

TA:

I started that—I was so inspired with that painting—I started that on a very large canvas, but it wasn't big enough. I had it drawn on, I had all those flowers drawn on and it was intricate and it was major and it was complex. And I had painted about the top fourth of it, and it looked great, it looked wonderful. But the canvas wasn't big enough, it didn't have enough room around it. And I thought Oh no, I have to paint this painting. That means I'm going to have to start over, because I'm going to have to do the best job of it I can.

LD:

Um-hm.

TA:

So I threw that in the alley.

LD:

Oh no.

TA:

You know, I had to start over. I made it almost twice as big, and it, you know, it saved the painting, it made the painting work. But artists have to do things like that, you know they suffer too.

LD:

Yes, that's true. Suffer for your art.

End of Recording

