

MONICA SERRA ORAL HISTORY

Interviewer: Huffa Frobes-Cross	Interviewee: Monica Serra	Date of interview: June 7th, 2021
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HUFFA FROBES-CROSS: Okay, so I'm Huffa Frobess-Cross, the project manager for the Tom Wesselmann Catalogue Raisonné for the Wildenstein Plattner Institute, and as part of the Oral History Project of the Estate of Tom Wesselmann and the Wildenstein Plattner Institute, I'm here with Monica Serra at the Wesselmann studio. Also with Josie Naron, our oral historian, to talk about Monica's experience with Wesselmann and her life. So, I think the first thing I wanted to start with was just to kind of get a sense of how you first started working at the studio and what you were doing around that time. So like, if you could give me a sense of when this was and what you were doing in your life when you first got introduced to Tom and first got introduced to the studio.

MONICA SERRA: Okay, so I first got introduced to Tom because I moved to New York City to be in a band.

HFC: Mm-hm.

MS: And I was also an artist. And I lived on 35th Street. And I didn't -- I knew Tom Wesselmann and stuff like that, but I wasn't that familiar with him. And I had these neighbors, Allan Rubin and Candy Spilner, and Candy was working here. And I thought that was super cool. And so, I wanted to work for an artist too. [laughs] So, I like, was writing to de Kooning and stuff like that, I don't know. Nothing happened. Anyway, I knew them, and Candy, one time, she said to me, "You know, Tom is looking for a portrait model." I said, "Ah, what?" I said, "I'm not a Tom Wesselmann model." And she said, "No, no, no, a portrait." And I was like, "[exhales], okay." Like, whatever. And so, she said he's gonna have a show at Sidney Janis Gallery. And I said, "Okay, invite me." [laughter]

And so, I got invited, and I came to see that show. It was a *Standing Still Life* show, and -- I can't remember the last one he did. Anyway, it was in the early '80s. And I -- I don't know, I got off the elevator and I got introduced to Tom, and we sat down on the couch and we talked and talked. And we became friends, and I said, "Don't you need to like -- you know. [laughs] Visit these other people?" And he said I came a little late, you know, and he showed me all around. And he had a -- a very familiar accent. 'Cause he's from Cincinnati, and I was from Pittsburgh. And he said my name [phonetically] MO-NEE-CA, right, with the EE in the middle. And I said, Oh, I felt at home right away. I was like, Oh. He says my name right. [laughs] And that was my introduction to Tom.

And then, a few days later, he said to Candy, "Hey, what about your friend Monica? Would you -- do you think she would come and model for me?" She's like, hm-hm-hm, ha-ha-ha. And she said, "Oh, I'll ask." Great. And then, I came and modeled for a portrait. And that lasted for -- [exhales] a couple of years. It was right -- I don't remember the year, 'cause I had this -- it was the early '80s, and I had a record contract in 1982, with MCA. So, I -- it was right around that time.

HFC: Okay.

MS: And so, I was coming to sit for him, and we became friends, and he loved the fact that I sang. Because he was writing these country songs.

HFC: Right.

MS: And so, it was a perfect confluence, you know? He liked hanging out with me, he liked drawing, and he liked -- oh, we talked about music and -- we became friends.

HFC: And so -- okay, so there was -- a lot of things that I'm curious to ask about. But I want to go back, before we move on, to this first conversation. I'm really just interested in this scene. So you're like, first meeting him, you're at the gallery. And you talk for all this -- what did he -- was he talking, was he telling you about his work? What was it like --

MS: I don't remember this conversation. I can't believe I don't remember this conversation. I just remember, I was nervous to meet him. I was looking at his work. We were talking about, um [pauses] the work. And then, we were talking about music. That's what happened. Because he asked me what I was doing here, same as you are. [laughs] And I said, "I'm a singer/songwriter in a band." And he was very curious about that. So, I betcha that's what we were talking about.

HFC: Talking about the band, yeah. And what -- what band -- I mean, tell me a little bit about that.

MS: About this band.

HFC: About this band and all that, yeah.

MS: Yeah, so we came from Virginia. And we sort of all moved here together, [laughs] in like, 1980. And we -- we played all the clubs, you know, CBGB, Peppermint Lounge, Danceteria, all those places. And we got a record deal pretty fast on MCA with Roma Baran producing. She produced Laurie Anderson. It was a

little alternative stuff. And, um -- and that was -- we did that for a while. And that has a short history, because MCA quickly changed regimes right when our record came out. So, Irving Azoff came in and Joe Wizert was out. So, we had -- it was too bad. But also, I hated the music business. It was terrible. It was really brutal.

HFC: And --

MS: It was brutal.

HFC: Yeah.

MS: It was, yeah, they wanted stuff from you. They wanted you to do this, and I really -- all I really wanted was a little cult following, you know? I was like, pfft, I like little clubs. That's what we had. And then, to try to have this universal appeal was not in my blood, at all. So I was not unhappy when they didn't pick up the second option. But the boys were [laughs] pretty unhappy.

HFC: And you -- but you were the lead singer.

MS: Yeah.

HFC: Yeah. And what was the name of the band?

MS: The Lost Tropics.

HFC: The Lost Tropics, okay.

MS: We were the Tropix, with an X, during those days in Norfolk, Virginia. And so, when you move to New York, you know, pretty -- it's not Tropics at all. So, we became lost.

HFC: Oh, okay, got it.

MS: And it sort of -- got caught, and we just -- we played under many names.

HFC: Yeah.

MS: And that kind of stuck. You can get the record. [laughs]

HFC: Yeah, I'll have to check that -- but no, actually, I'm very curious. [laughter] But so, then -- but that's interesting, because when I think of Tom's -- what I know about Tom's taste in music, it's country, right?

MS: Yes.

HFC: And I -- from what I've heard, your description, it doesn't sound like your band had a lot to do with that at all.

MS: No, no, not one bit. No, Americana, no.

HFC: Yeah, yeah.

MS: But, uh [sighs] -- he didn't seem to care. It didn't matter. I mean, he was turning me on to all kinds of country music, which I really did not like, but I grew to really like it. It was very -- honest, I want to say. And so was our music; it was very honest. So, it had -- sympatico.

HFC: Right, that makes sense.

MS: In that way. You know? It was down to earth in a kind of a -- well, he didn't -- I mean, he listened to the songs. He wanted to hear a demo. There was one song that didn't make it to that record called "Gut Reaction" that he loved. [laughs] Way loved.

HFC: Really.

MS: And it was because he said, whenever he would make a work of art, he knew when it was good because he got it in his stomach. He got it -- he got a stomach thing. And I said, "Seriously?" And he said, "Yeah." And I said, "So, you had a gut reaction." "Yeah." And he said, "It has to be there," otherwise he knows it's not good.

HFC: And so, that -- yeah.

MS: So, I was like -- that was another thing of like, Oh, now he loves me even more because [laughs] we're having gut reactions together.

HFC: [laughs] Amazing. So, okay, so, yeah -- no, that gives me a really good sense. So, you're -- when you first meet him, you're still involved in the band and you bond over music. But from what I understand, you didn't -- you were aware of Wesselmann as an artist, but you weren't like, really --

MS: Infatuated or --

HFC: -- infatuated, no, yeah.

MS: No, because I'm also a painter, and my stuff was so raw compared to his sort of polished thing, I was never threatened. You know, never like, ugh. I was in awe of this celebrity of him; I mean, he was a big deal when I met him. And -- but I was very young and naïve, and I didn't, um -- it didn't [pauses] -- I wasn't intimidated by it. I could just talk to him. But that was because of him, too. He was very open, so I could just say, Hey, show me this, or, what's back there. He was just an open book, and I was naïve enough. So it worked. [laughter]

HFC: But did you kind of -- quickly or was it over a longer period of time that you gained more of an appreciation for his work? Or were there certain things that appealed to you early on, or certain things that you didn't know about that once you started kind of coming to the studio, you saw --

MS: Okay, so, when I went to that show, I was pretty impressed, because those big *Standing Still Lives* in that -- it was pretty fascinating.

HFC: Yeah.

MS: I think he kinda knew, maybe, got somewhere with me because he said, "Let me show you this," and he brought me to this back room with -- that was on the Bowery. And we opened a locker, and they were full of those *Portrait Collages* and all those little collages. I couldn't believe those. And I don't know why he knew I would like those, but that's when I was -- I was in. I mean, I was like [gasps] -- I'm starting to get this. And then, he said to me, "Do you know my poetry?" And I said, "Like what?" And he

said, "In everything I have, I have like, a curtain and -- here's Venetian blinds." He said, "I just have this kind of poetry." And I -- and he was showing me this kind of genesis in these smaller collage paintings.

HFC: Oh, whoa. So, when he said, "Do you know my poetry," he was saying, like, I have a specific visual language and you can recognize -- okay, I want to hear more about this, yeah.

[laughs]

MS: Exactly. Exactly. Yeah, me neither. And it gave me a key, kind of, into what he was up to. And I realized, Oh, this is all seemingly literal, but it's also abstract. And I kinda -- it clicked for me, right, because of that. I was like, Oh, hm. And the language. He was teaching me. [laughs]

HFC: Right. And so, but when you saw the early work, though, it sounds like also that stood out. And maybe did it -- I may be projecting, but did it stand out in some way because you were talking about his work at the time was so clean, and that wasn't really where you were at as an artist, but obviously, the early work -- not so much. So, was that part of what made it easier to sort of understand?

MS: Yeah, I saw -- because I saw progression, you know. It wasn't just always -- clean, and just -- I don't know how you get there.

HFC: Right.

MS: But I saw [pauses] shorthand, how you got there. I mean, he was showing me something from years before. And then, then, I

mean, I didn't know -- I did know what was in between, I didn't know, but you could sense it. That he was evolving. And I thought he was super cool. He also said he knew what he was gonna do next year, and I thought that was insane. [laughs] Like, I don't know what I'm doing an hour from now, or tomorrow. He's like, I have this planned for a year.

HFC: And did he? I mean, you would find out --

MS: Yes, he did. Yes.

HFC: -- so he did. Yeah, yeah, wow. Huh. So was he already working on preparatory work at the time, or was it just conceptual? Or he just --

MS: No, he was working on preparatory work.

HFC: Yeah, yeah.

MS: Yeah.

HFC: So, I guess at that point -- yeah, 'cause I guess at that point, he had this whole schedule down of like, how he was gonna --

MS: Yes, oh boy. [laughter] He did have a schedule down.

HFC: Okay, so, before we -- I do want to talk a bit about like, working at the studio and everything, but also, obviously, your first experience was working as a model. So, you first worked as a portrait model. So what did that mean? What was he doing? Yeah.

MS: Yeah. I -- [sighs] what did that mean. Well, he would draw. He would take pictures. That was basically it. While we listened to country music, you know, I just sort of sat there. There was nothing ever successful -- I mean, he never really got through. There's like -- there are a bunch of little drawings, I should have brought one out, but maybe I could find it later. But nothing ever came of that. And then, I got this record deal. So, I was gone for a while, you know, I was touring and stuff. And when I came back, we were still friends. I didn't model for him anymore. I think I came and saw him a couple of times. But it wasn't until a few years later, many -- [exhales] I don't know, three or four years later -- where he decided, Oh, maybe you want to come and be a nude model now? And I was like, Hm. Well, I had been a nude model for like, art classes, and when I first moved to New York, I did that a little bit. And I was really afraid of my body. So, I started -- that's why I started doing it in the first place. I was like, get rid of that fear, I'm gonna just -- take my clothes off.

HFC: Oh, you actually did it to confront that fear. Interesting.

MS: Yeah.

HFC: And did it -- what was the result?

MS: Yeah, it was -- it made me comfortable. I was like, Oh, okay. No big deal. Right, I'm fine, and they're not really -- they're looking at me, but not me. Or I don't know, it took -- it took the, I don't know, the pain out of it or something, or the neurosis or whatever it is. And so, for Tom, I was really scared to do that. [laughs] And at that point, Candy and Allan

were still working here. And I had modeled for their group; they had like, a group of -- so I said, "Would you guys be there? Would that be alright?" So, the first time, they were there, and I was horribly self-conscious when they were there. I was like, No, I can't do this with you guys here. [laughter] I thought the opposite would happen. But then, so after that, it was just me and Tom.

HFC: Okay. And so, that was -- I mean, since we're just on audio, I'm gonna describe this very explicitly, but there is the table behind you, and that was when you started modeling, can --

MS: On the table.

HFC: Yeah, on that table. And can you just describe sort of like, how that worked, the physical set-up and the whole thing?

MS: Okay, I'll try. Okay, so, okay -- so Tom had a robe. We'll start from there. [laughs] He had this robe; it was a Chinese robe. You'll see *Monica in Chinese Robe*. And other models, too, but that's -- okay. And he gave me this robe, you know, go in the bathroom, get your clothes off, put your robe on, come out. And then, you'd climb up onto the -- he had a little ladder, and you'd climb up onto this table behind me. It's just a worktable during the day. [laughter] And then, from under the table would -- two little levers -- like, a little makeshift table would come out. And it would like, lean up against that table. And so, he was in smelling distance from me. [laughter] He was close.

HFC: Right, right.

MS: Except he was down here, and I was up there. So, that was interesting to me too, you know, that I was up and he was down. And that made it a little bit easier. I don't know why. I kind of had the lead, and I felt more comfortable up there. And that's -- that's the table.

HFC: Yeah. And then, so, but this is interesting. So, like, you were on the table. And were there like cushions and things? I assume there must have been cushions or something on there.

MS: Were there cushions? Yes, there were cushions, and we were up against the wall.

HFC: Oh, okay. So you could kind of rest.

MS: Yes. Yeah, you could be up against the wall. And there were cushions, and he would -- you know, he would ask me, "Lay down, do this, do that. Move your foot. Sit up." Or -- something. And then, we would talk. Like, he'd say, "Tell me a story," or you know, he'd say, "Hey, what are you doing now, what are you writing, or what are you working on." Or he would ask me -- he was so nice. And we would start talking or a song would come on and we'd analyze it. [laughs] Who is this now? You know, this is Ernest Tubb, what did he do? You know, and we would talk, and then time would go by, and I might fall asleep.

HFC: Really?

MS: And he would say, "Good night." And I would realize, Oh, yeah, I'm falling asleep. But it was okay; I knew when it was okay to do that. And we were always listening to this country music in the background. And then, he would -- I was

self-conscious for the first -- as soon as you take that robe off, it's terrifying. And then, you're not scared anymore, because work started. And then, you became -- it became important for you to make him a success at what he was gonna do. So, it made you -- it made -- it was a collaboration at that point.

HFC: And yeah, actually, I really want to hear about that aspect of it. So, would you kind of pose prior to a direction, and then he would respond to it? How did that -- is that how it would work?

MS: Yeah. Yeah. I'd just do something, and then he would say, "Oh, let's put your head over there," or -- yeah.

HFC: But so, the poses would sometimes be coming as much from you as from him. So, you would sort of do something and --

MS: They pretty much did come from me. And then, um -- yeah, then he might say, "Your hand is -- can you move your hand on your waist," or something. At one time, many years [laughs] after I stopped modeling, he said, "I never got you on all fours." [laughs] And I said, "Well, I wouldn't have done it." [laughter]

HFC: If I recall, I don't know if there is -- is there a Wesselmann that is in that pose?

MS: Yes, there's -- there's one.

HFC: Oh, okay.

MS: Basic -- there's -- I don't know if -- Helen, I think, maybe.

HFC: Oh, okay, yeah. But yeah, but he never asked you to do that.

MS: No, thank god. [laughter] No, he didn't really ask me to do too much. It was just, Let's sit down, or he might say, "Let's sit down today." "Can you sit today," or something like that.

HFC: And was there sort of other objects that he would bring? Because obviously, there's always -- or not always, but many times in works with you in them, there are also other objects, there are other things behind you. Was that stuff set up or did --

MS: Um -- no. Well, like, this one that you're seeing -- [gestures] *Monica with Mondrian* back here -- the Mondrian was back there.

HFC: Okay, so the Mondrian was already there.

MS: Yeah, you know, but there were copies that he made. And that was back there. And like, I think there's *Monica with Cézanne* is -- same thing. *Monica with Matisse*, same thing.

HFC: He would set it up behind, okay.

MS: Yeah, but no objects.

HFC: But no -- okay, no other --

MS: There was never like a telephone or flowers or -- there, no. I mean, the most -- I guess the biggest prop I had was a hat. He brought a hat and some beads to me one day, and I had a hat and beads and a robe and that was -- that was his stuff.

HFC: Oh, right, okay -- that was his stuff.

MS: Wasn't my idea. [laughter]

HFC: That was not what you --

MS: No, I was very simple. [laughs]

HFC: You never brought any -- anything to wear to any of them? Was there any other --

MS: No.

HFC: No, yeah. And was there any -- were there any -- are there any backgrounds that were your suggestions? Are there any like, extra things that were --

MS: No.

HFC: No, no. You would always go with what he suggested. Yeah. Okay, so, what was the first -- maybe you don't remember, but I'm just curious if you remember the first sort of finished or close to finished work that you had modeled for that he did. Do you --

MS: Yes, I do remember it. It's, um -- I think it's called -- it doesn't have my name in it. I think it's called *Seated Nude*,

or *Sitting Nude*. And I -- you can see I'm shy. I'm like, kind of -- my head is kind of down, and I'm kind of like this, and I -- I just remember, um [pauses] seeing it for the first time. Like, wow. Alright. You know, something came from this. Whereas his portraits, nothing came of it, so I was like, maybe nothing's gonna come of this. Maybe this is an exercise, you know. But the first one I saw, like, in a gallery of me is one that's over here. I can't remember the name of it. But it's -- I'm lying down with a robe on. Or with stockings, just stockings.

HFC: Just stockings, yeah.

MS: And it's really pretty, because it's angular and it's -- it looks super cool and angular and modern. I just thought it was really beautiful, and it's still my favorite one.

HFC: It's still -- and so, okay, can you -- do you remember the moment when you saw it for the first time hanging in the gallery?

MS: Yeah. Yeah, I was happy. And he asked me, could he use my name.

HFC: Hm, interesting.

MS: Yeah, he said, "Do you mind if I use your name?" And I thought about it. [laughs] And I said, "Yeah, sure." You know, finally, I was like, Why is he asking me? And should I -- is there a choice? Do I get to say no, and why would I say no? Because I remember seeing the first one -- I think it was called *Seated Nude* -- and I was kinda sad that I wasn't identified.

HFC: Mm, interesting.

MS: So, I said yeah.

HFC: So, you actually wanted to be identified.

MS: I didn't know that I wanted to until he asked me. I wouldn't have cared if he didn't identify me, but it seemed important for him to identify me, you know, and I -- I thought that was pretty cool.

HFC: That is cool, yeah. And it leads me to another question that I had, which is sort of -- I mean, obviously this work is -- it's very much part of the whole, like, body of work that Tom had developed at that point. But you're also -- they're also very intimately tied to you, right? And to the work that you'd done with him. And as you said, like, posing and everything, there's collaboration. How did -- like, when you were seeing, say, this first work in the gallery or subsequent works, how connected did you feel with the final product? Did you -- did you look at it and see yourself in it?

MS: No.

HFC: No, yeah.

MS: That first one that had my name -- and my name, it wasn't that piece, [laughs] it was that my name was in a gallery somewhere, Monica. That sort of struck me. But after that, it was like, That's Tom Wesselmann's work. I didn't connect that much to it. Maybe I was proud of it, but I didn't have that

feeling. It was a job. [laughs] And I was happy he was successful at it. [laughter]

HFC: But yeah, because at a certain point, right, there's a certain moment where you're in a lot of his work.

MS: Yes.

HFC: Right, and so there would be shows where, you know, you're in a lot of the works in the show. Yeah.

MS: Yeah, um -- at that point, maybe I was slightly uncomfortable. Because I was like, showcased somehow. And I felt a little -- uncomfortable. I was like, with Claire -- I just felt, like, a little strange. [laughs] Center stage-ish. You know, mm. [pauses]

HFC: Did he ever describe to you, sort of -- because obviously, there were a lot of models that he used. But not that many, really, in the scheme of things. But there aren't very many people that he worked with as much as he worked with you. Did he ever sort of give you a sense of what it -- reasons that he continued to work with you, specifically? Like, what it was that he found out of that collaboration that worked for him?

MS: Uh, he never really verbalized or vocalized that. We just were good together, and we were -- it was easy, I think. I was comfortable, he was comfortable -- until we were uncomfortable, and then I stopped. [laughs] But it was just easy and he kind of couldn't get enough, you know. I mean, it was just, like, hundreds of these drawings were coming out, you know. And [sighs] he wanted to -- let's do this again, and I -- at first,

I think it was -- it was easy for him. [laughs] This is a funny little tidbit, but I have this haircut again, right, these bangs, right, and this haircut. And he loved that haircut. Because it was easy for him to kind of graphically draw that thing.

HFC: Interesting, yeah.

MS: So, I think that was the inroad, was, Oh wait, she's got that haircut, you know, that's easy. And on these metal pieces, he has to hook every single line together.

HFC: Right.

MS: So, he could always stick my, you know, hair in, and my lip. And it's just easy. And I think he just grew, like -- as much as he painted and drew Claire, I think he got to know my body so well that it became easy for him, and I think he could play around with -- not my body [laughter] -- but play around with that image. And I think it was fun for him. It wasn't like, Oh, now I've gotta get used to someone else, you know.

HFC: He was just really familiar with your form and so he could work with it.

MS: Yeah, with my form, and he -- he, one time, he said he wished he could be a photographer. He said, "I would rather -- you should have been a photographer's model." And he was sort of flattering in that way. And he said, "But I'm gonna try, you know, I'll try to do the best I can." Contrary to what most people think about Tom Wesselmann, he hated to draw. He found it really, um -- in fact, the first book he gave me said -- I think

the sign-- whatever that thing is in the front, he said to me, "To Monica, who's so nice and so beautiful to work with. Makes drawing less of a torture." Something like this. Just something funny like that. And I said, "You really hate to draw," and he said, "Ugh, you know, I just really hate it. And then, Claire comes home with flowers and then I have to draw those flowers." [laughs] He was good at it, but he -- everybody, he loved to draw, he loved to draw -- no. He hated it. [laughs]

HFC: And did he ever say why? Like, what was it --

MS: He thought it was torture. It was like, he had to like, figure out how to do it. It's hard to draw. [laughs]

HFC: Right, it -- right, obviously.

MS: It's hard to draw. [laughs] And he didn't have that kind of native talent that you're born with. He had a -- he taught himself how to do this stuff, you know, and I really love that kind of drawing. You know, where you're not just born, in seventh grade, suddenly you know how to draw perspective and you know how to draw -- no, it wasn't like that. He was like -- he had to figure it out.

HFC: Yeah, yeah, interesting. And so, it is interesting, then, also, that he turned to a process, like, for so long, where he was doing so much drawing. It was so based in drawing. He could have, for example -- I mean, he took a few photographs of you, right?

MS: Yeah.

HFC: But he -- but that clearly was not his main source. He was working from these drawings.

MS: Right, right.

HFC: And in fact, like, with works like *Monica with Mondrian*, which is right next to us, like, it is based on a drawing, right? It's actually --

MS: It's directly based on one drawing. [laughs]

HFC: Right. Right, it's actually captured and reproduced a drawing. So it's interesting that he got so focused on that process, given how painful it was.

MS: I know. I know. I mean, sometimes I wonder -- you know, when he -- I believed him when he said that and I'm sure he meant it, but he was compelled to do a lot of things. He was compelled. It wasn't always fun. I mean, that's true about all of art, isn't it though? You know. He just knew he should do it and he wanted to do it. He wanted to surprise himself. He wanted to surprise himself at the end of the day. And I think back to why he kept drawing me -- I think I was just so comfortable, honestly. I think I was just so chill that it made him just easily draw these things, you know, without feeling that energy of tension or something like this. It wasn't -- it was just like -- I was falling asleep, for goodness sakes. [laughs]

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

HFC: Okay, so you -- yeah, just to go back, because that was really the next kind of set of things I wanted to ask you about,

was like, when you stopped modeling, you continued working. And you transitioned to this new -- or was there a break?

MS: How did it work? Uh, okay, here's the way that worked. Okay, so, my modeling and assistantship overlapped. So, he called me in like, say, '87, I think it was. He was having some show in Paris. And he asked Allan and Candy -- he needed somebody to come and help with these -- to paint editions, because, right. He was like, needed help, and they said, What about Monica? And he was like, Oh, okay. So, he calls me, and I was working at an audio/visual [house?], and I was still a musician and artist -- I was just doing any kind of work. And I said sure. So, I came in and he said, "Why don't you quit your job," and -- I was freelance anyway. "And come and work for me." And I was like, "I don't know if you really mean that." [laughs] Like, do you -- so, I kept trying to balance both of these, and then one day, he said, "No, no, I'm gonna pay you well, and you're gonna have summer off, and you're only gonna have to work three days a week. And -- c'mon." And it was like -- ah, seriously? [laughs] Okay. So, I did. And so, I would come and work for him my three days a week, and then Friday or something, I would come and model. Occasionally.

HFC: Okay. Oh, so there was an overlap.

MS: Occasionally, occasionally. And then, one day, I was just -- it was just too much. And I said -- and [pauses] anyway. He said, "What do you want to do?" And I said, "I don't think I should model anymore for a while." And he said, "Okay." So, I decided -- then, he said, "Do you still want to work here?" And I said, "Yes, I still want to work here." [laughs] And he was like, okay. And we became -- then I just became the assistant.

And then, I made a couple of -- I came back out of retirement [laughs] from that a couple of times: one to do the *Drawing Show* movie.

HFC: Oh, wait, wait, wait, so -- just to clarify. When you say you came back out of retirement, that means there was a point in which you stopped being an assistant.

MS: No, I stopped being a model.

HFC: Oh, oh, I see. Okay, continue. Sorry, sorry, got it, got it.

MS: Came out of retirement from being a model. And I -- no, I was always -- I've been the assistant for --

HFC: Continuously.

MS: Yes. I never -- well, there was one brief moment I'll let you -- doesn't mean anything. But so, I came back to do the *Drawing Show* or *Drawing Center* movie, video -- do you know his video?

HFC: Yes, yeah, no, right. So, you came back for that.

MS: Yeah, is it the *Drawing Center*, is that the --

HFC: *Drawing Center*, I think, yeah. I think.

MS: And then, that was the last time I modeled until like, '96. But I stayed on as the assistant forever. So, I said yes, and then I just kept working. And it was good. [laughs]

HFC: And that became your full-time job.

MS: Yes.

HFC: So, the promise turned out to be true. [laughs]

MS: It turned out to be true, [laughs] right, it did.

HFC: And okay, so -- was it indeed three days a week?

MS: Yes.

HFC: It was actually three days a week. And you did get the summers off.

MS: Yes.

HFC: Yeah. But from what I understand, so I'm actually -- this is one thing I'm curious, is kind of like -- I also asked Jeffrey this question, Jeffrey Sturges. But like, what's like, a day in the life of the studio?

MS: Depending on what he was making, it was -- we did a lot of -- okay, well, there were a few people who were mixing colors. So, that was me. Like, when Jeff was working for Tom back in the '80s, there were like -- he had hired a bunch of little -- Jeff and Cindy Tower and Kevin Kelly. They were basically painting editions; that was their full-time job. And I didn't do that. You know. I -- I don't know what. I wasn't doing that. I was just assisting Tom. Did he need this, did he know -- paint, can I help him do that, can I hang that, can I mix that color, can I

-- whatever, cut that down, can I talk to him about this stuff.
You know, assistant. [laughs]

HFC: Just like, whatever he needed on a given day. So, you didn't -- so unlike when, yeah, Jeff was talking about it, it was like, there was a very specific thing he was hired to do. And you were much more sort of --

MS: I was a roamer. Yeah, I mean, in fact, I -- okay, so, I don't know how it became like this. It's so funny that Jeff and I have flip-flopped here. But back then, Tom made me come in on Friday, when those guys were coming in, especially, to paint. He said, "Somebody has to watch out for them. Somebody has to look -- and I don't wanna do it, so will you come in and --"

HFC: Oh, so you were the supervisor.

MS: Yeah. [laughs] I was like, "You guys workin'?" You know. But I really didn't do anything, of course. I was just -- I was still helping Tom.

HFC: But ostensibly, you were supervising their --

MS: Supposed to be.

HFC: Supervising their -- supervising the workshop. So, like, yeah, but just -- I mean, I'm just curious, what things did he generally need done? Like, what was -- why did he need an assistant?

MS: Well, we could paint first coats on stuff. You know, we did a lot of that. Um, that's -- that was a lot of work. We made

those big steel things, you know. But we never -- I mean, he always finished them, but we had to -- we could like, prep the whole thing. It was a lot of work. And it was also a lot -- it was a lot of boring down time, too. What was interesting with Tom; we weren't ever allowed to sit down. We never sat down. It was weird.

HFC: So, tell me about this, because I've heard this story before.

MS: It was just weird. No, he said, "We're workaholics here, Monica," whenever I started working there. And I said, "Okay, me too." Or like, what does that mean? And he said, "We just are, we just work, work, work." And -- but work, work, work [sighs] sometimes meant just walking around [laughs] waiting for the next thing. But I mean, we did -- it seemed like we worked a lot in, like, you know, crates, or -- write on all those crates. Write on the back of these things. And I got weird jobs, like becoming the person who wrote stuff down in his books because he only liked my handwriting, right, and I was the one who wrote on the backs of all these things because -- my handwriting, again. He liked it. And -- there was a mess of color-making. You know, you were always like, What else do you need? Well, can you make eraser blue -- I mean, eraser pink. Can you make this color? Like, right, that color [points] down there --

HFC: Right.

MS: That's pink pearl, eraser color.

HFC: Right, right, that does look like a pencil eraser.

MS: It is, and you know, we had to make that kind of stuff. And he was really cute about his colors, you know. "Can you make me a roach of --" like, I don't know, orange. I don't know, he would just have these ideas and you would have to --

HFC: Oh, so he would actually-- you wouldn't be working from like, a --

MS: We mostly worked from other colors. Mostly always worked --

HFC: Okay, mostly worked from other colors. Okay.

MS: Yes. Almost always. But --

HFC: Sometimes.

MS: -- he would switch it up. And then you kinda had to know what he was talking about, and we spoke that language. Again, he had his own language, you know. [laughs]

HFC: And you would learn it. That was kind of part of -- yeah.

MS: Oh yeah. Ooh, yeah. [laughs]

HFC: That's really interesting. So like, at a certain point, if he said, "I want eraser pink," you were like, Oh, I know exactly what this is.

MS: Yeah, yeah. Go make me a pink pearl. Like, mm, okay.

HFC: I do -- because I mean, obviously, working on a catalogue raisonné, this is something that I've spent a lot time looking

at, so I'm quite curious about this. I want to go back to this thing about you writing on things. So, on the versos of a lot of works, the -- what was it that you would write? Like, what kind of -- what were the things that you would write on them?

MS: It was the hanging instructions.

HFC: The hanging instructions. Okay, this is totally almost entirely of interest to me, but I have transcribed so many of those. And I had no -- so I'm transcribing -- that's your handwriting there.

MS: Mostly.

HFC: You do have good handwriting, it's true.

MS: Thank you. [laughs]

HFC: It's very easy to read. But so, there's like, incredibly --

MS: Occasionally, Allan would write on the back. Occasionally, other people would write on the back, but I was the major person, because of -- yeah. He liked my printing. [laughs]

HFC: And so, those -- just because a lot of people will not have seen these -- on the back, especially on some of these steel works, it's, you know, three or four hundred words --

MS: Oh, I know.

HFC: -- worth of hanging instructions. So, you would -- he would kind of lay those out to you, give you --

MS: Yeah, I mean, we all did it. I mean, don't get me wrong. But I was majorly doing it. But it was just a piece of paper, and we just transcribed.

HFC: Right, on the back.

MS: I mean, we wrote everything except for his name. Well, we wrote his name, too, but then he did the signature. But, you know, we wrote the title, the medium, the year, and then the hanging instructions. You know, hang flush, clean white wall, [laughs] you know, and he had those little carrot deals. I mean, come on. [laughter]

HFC: The very specific varnish and cleaning instructions.

MS: Oh, yeah. No, the varnish and all that stuff, Tom wrote.

HFC: Oh, he wrote that.

MS: That stuff on those earlier -- that was Tom's writing. These -- this sort of rote thing that went on the back of the metal pieces, that was us, me, us, yeah.

HFC: And so, when you say you wrote the date, like, a lot of the time, there would be a signature, and then it's followed by a date. But I assume he would write that?

MS: Yeah, he would write that. I mean, you might see that date twice, because -- right.

HFC: You might see the date twice. Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah. Got it. Interesting. Okay, yeah. But then, so you would write these things and mix colors. I think the other -- the other thing I wanted to ask you about was -- a couple of other things that happened at the studio. So, one of the things that -- a few of you have mentioned to me that I think is really fascinating is that he would hold crits for his studio assistants? Like, of their artwork. You could bring your artwork in sometimes and he would --

MS: He did.

HFC: Did you ever participate in that?

MS: Uh, yeah. I did. He was -- yeah, he said I was a poet. He said, "You're a poet, you know." I thought that was kind of -- that was my thing. "You're ephemeral, you're a poet, it's just like you," he would say. That would be the crit.

HFC: That would be the crit? That's all he would say. Well, I mean, it's --

MS: But Candy and Allan -- he would give them many crits, because they were Cooper Union people. They worked in similar ways. They had a language. And they were upstate where he was. They were very close, in this way. And at one point, he said he didn't want to go to their studios anymore, because he was afraid he was gonna steal stuff, right. And so, he said, "If you're showing it in a public space, I will go, because then I could steal it if I wanted to."

HFC: Right, because it's public.

MS: But if I'm going to your studio and nobody knows that you're doing this and then I come out and do it -- he was really, you know, ethical.

HFC: That's interesting, yeah.

MS: Yeah, it was -- it made Candy feel bad, because she said, "Aw, come on, I loved it when you came to my studio." Did he ever come to my studio, I don't think -- and would bring stuff in, no. Actually, he did go to their studio, so he did some visiting.

HFC: But you didn't really -- you only --

MS: No, I didn't do it so much. I would bring songs in occasionally. In the early days, I brought a lot of songs in. But it was his time. I didn't wanna -- I felt weird.

HFC: Yeah, yeah. And did you -- I mean, that just reminds me, I was thinking about this. Like, you were making your own work this whole time. Did you ever feel like there was any impact from Tom's work on the work that you did?

MS: No, I never felt that, but his discipline rubbed off on me. His work ethic rubbed off on me. I'm in almost every image I make of my --

HFC: Oh, interesting.

MS: Yeah. So, I sort of -- I took back my own image, and I was always wondering, "Why am I always painting my own image?" And

that's -- I think it's because I was recapturing it for myself. I don't know. It's not just me out there, that's -- [laughs]

HFC: So, that's really -- so, did you -- were making images of yourself prior to modeling for --

MS: Not really.

HFC: No. So, that was something you started doing after --

MS: Yeah, I didn't even know. It was unconscious. It was totally unconscious. I just woke up to it one day and I went, Oh well. [laughs]

HFC: And if you had to compare the way you appear in your work with the way you appear in his work, how are they different?

MS: Mine's psychological, emotional, and this is a -- [pauses] the outer self, or something like that. And mine -- the other stuff is the inner self.

HFC: Okay, yeah, that makes sense. And are --

MS: They're almost never nude. I'm almost always clothed. [laughter]

HFC: And you paint your face?

MS: Yes, a lot. [laughs]

HFC: And expressions?

MS: Yes. And they're in psychological situations. I mean, they're situations. It's a more narrative -- yeah.

HFC: Interesting. And so, yeah, but -- so, you were doing that work, and then only retroactively realized, Oh, perhaps this was impacted by --

MS: Yeah. [sighs] I was like, Oh shit. [laughter]

HFC: But it is interesting, though, because it is also -- I mean, I like the way you're describing this about like, reclaiming your image. Because in a way, your image does now exist in a kind of -- in art history, right? And --

MS: And if it didn't have my name on it, it might be something else. But it does. I mean, my name is there. And what's interesting to me is, not too many people ask, Who is that Monica character? They don't. You wonder why, like, when's the day gonna come when they're like, Who is she, you know? So it's -- I always find that fascinating, because if I was looking at this body of work and I saw how many Monicas there are, [laughs] I would wonder who she was.

HFC: Right. And so, have you had experiences, for example, like people coming, you know, to see work here, whatever, and there are a bunch of Monicas around and you're there and they don't make the connection between the work and you?

MS: Oh, yeah. That has happened, and somebody will point it out, and then -- you know. I'll go back into the office.
[laughter]

HFC: That's very funny, yeah. But that -- but anyway. But so, it is interesting though, then, that there is this other body of work that you've created that is now existing in the public, you know, that is a kind of counter to -- yeah.

MS: Yeah.

HFC: This work that -- that Tom made. The other -- okay so, this is -- I'm changing subjects a bit, but I don't want to forget about this, because the other thing you were mentioning about writing, and you writing things down. You also had some involvement in keeping the records at certain points as well, right?

MS: Yes. Um, that's again the handwriting business. [laughs] He's like, "Nobody else can write in the ledger books but Monica." So, so for some reason I got stuck -- I liked doing that, but I got stuck labeling all the slides. I'm not the best at this, because I go through these slides often and go, Oh my god, it's mislabeled. It's me. I'm sorry, but -- most of the time, those mistakes come from me. I wasn't the best at that. It was just too tedious. I'm not good at any kind of tedium in -- I can't make myself do otherwise. But, you know, I was careful, very careful about that ledger book. [laughs] Yeah, that was -- you know --

HFC: But you --

MS: -- sacred.

HFC: But you've written in that. Some of that is --

MS: Oh, yeah. A lot of that stuff is -- a lot of that stuff in the -- from 19, say, 90. Or 1985, maybe.

HFC: Right. And were you kind of working on -- I remember, I mean, sort of early on in my own research, right, you sent me that document that has all the descriptions of the registration series and everything?

MS: Oh, yeah.

HFC: And this might just be a coincidence, but were you in any way involved in sort of developing --

MS: No.

HFC: -- oh, this is going to be this, this is gonna be -- no.

MS: I didn't care. No, we all just figured that stuff out and -- I was not in charge of that.

HFC: You didn't decide like, Oh, this should be "VE" or this should be -- yeah.

MS: No. [laughs] No, no, not at all, but I, you know, you quickly learn that thing. But uh, well, Tom -- Tom had started it, basically. You know, he started the "Ns," you know, the "N" for nude. So, he -- they were pretty much in place. That was pretty much Tom.

HFC: It was pretty much in place. Yeah. And I've heard that Allan and Candy had some involvement in developing that, too.

MS: Oh yeah, they did -- they probably started a lot of that, too. Like, but -- but things like the early *Still Lives* from the '60s and '70s and stuff with a "C" in front of it, the *Canvas Still Life* -- that came later, and I don't know who developed that. That could have been Allan. That could have been Jeff. I think it was probably Allan.

HFC: Right, because that seems like the only reason that exists, for example -- this is getting very in the weeds, but the only reason that exists is because there's the later "SLs," right. So you have to have --

MS: And those -- and that was Tom. And that "SL" was Tom. So, if you look on the back of any of these, they say "SL." So, we had to keep -- we had to keep in place whatever Tom had really established, and then fill in the blanks. You know, to clarify the little things like *Canvas Still Life*. Even though -- they're not always canvas. [laughs]

HFC: Right, right. [laughs]

MS: Jeez. [laughs]

HFC: Yeah, they're really not always canvas.

MS: No, mostly not. [laughs]

HFC: That is -- a very deceptive name. And a couple last questions. So one is, can you just talk a bit about what you do at the Estate now? Like, what your role at the Estate is now? Yeah.

MS: Can I go back one -- one step?

HFC: For sure.

MS: Just for -- back into the studio. Because there's one thing that -- [pauses] the abstract things, the abstract pieces. Okay, so -- and I was thinking, what did I do there? Oftentimes, what we would -- mostly I would do -- is put a piece of acetate over some of the normal nudes or still lifes or landscapes or any of those, right? And paint with acrylic, [quick?] brushstroke, you know, to color it in so Tom would look at it and go like, "Okay, now match all that." Right?

HFC: Oh, okay. So would you choose the colors, or --

MS: No, I would choose the colors from his drawing, and make sure they're right. But he -- he wanted us to -- he wanted to see it big, right, because I think some -- maybe Matisse said everything looks different when you blow it up, right. So, he did this, and -- that was so much fun, because it was just -- you'd slip around, and the paint was just slippy, la-la-la, and you'd have so much fun. And then, when he started making the -- so, I would cut these things up to throw them away. So the image wouldn't get out there somewhere. And one day, it fell onto a Matisse book. And I said, "Tom," I said, "Check this out." And uh, he was like, he said, "Glue that down." And I did glue it down, and that was the beginning of the abstract pieces.

HFC: Really?

MS: Yes. That was the beginning. And he was like -- really, he was working at his table. He had a separate table over here; he

worked on small things all day long. And I just remember -- my eyes just went like, Whoa. [laughs] Because he was trying to find his way out of -- because he was like, getting shit for being like, a womanizer and da-da-da. So, he was making landscapes. He was trying to figure out what's going on, right. And I don't know, it was just a great big leap. And it was so cool. And now we still have the very first one, this little maquette that he made. It never turned into a big one. And then, I started -- when we would cut them up, he started pasting them together, and thus you have the abstracts.

HFC: Wow. Okay, so -- just for, you know, anyone who's not totally familiar with the process, just to kind of walk through how this happens. So, he would be working on, uh -- the steel works, right?

MS: Okay, so, when these steel drawings came from the fabricator, they're white, like a waffle or something, you know, they're white. And you hang them up. And then Tom would have to delineate everything and paint it. But sometimes, he wanted to see what it's going to look like, so we would put a big piece of plastic, acetate, Mylar, whatever you want to call it, covering it like a dropcloth, say. But it's, you know, clear. Then you mix acrylic paint -- Liquitex, in his case -- and you paint the whole thing. And then he looks at it, and yeah, that's good. Then you can mix all the colors with oil paint or whatever we were using at the time, and then you have a big sheet with that image on it. And then, you've gotta get rid of that. So, we like, would cut it up. And I loved that, again, since I loved doing anything like [gestures] cutting these things up, I'm having fun. And I would always make stuff, but the one day it fell onto the Matisse book was the -- it was sitting right

beside him, and I just kinda showed him, and he said, you know, "Tape that down." And that was it.

HFC: And you don't, by any chance, remember what Matisse work --

MS: Yeah, I do. It was the book -- it was, um -- it looked like a Diebenkorn, I don't remember the name of it. It was a flat, it was a -- I'll show it to you when we're done here. It wasn't so -- it was blue. And it was just -- it was abstract itself. And it was just -- blew both our minds, right. And that was -- we were getting ready to leave for the summer, I remember. And then he took a whole pile of all of those cutouts upstate with him, and then he came back with the abstract stuff. I mean, I didn't think he was [laughs] gonna make them out of metal. I didn't think.

HFC: [laughs] Really?

MS: No. I thought, Oh, there'll be a transition out of metal now, maybe.

HFC: You'd think he would do them on canvas.

MS: I thought he would do something -- plastic? I don't know; I thought he would invent something else, you know, something -- because he was such an inventor. But no, then he sort of blew my mind. Like, oh, wait, you're making it out of metal? What's that gonna look like? But he actually tried to imitate the brushstroke. And then I got kinda happy about that, because it was my brushstroke, right. [laughter]

HFC: Oh, right. Because you were the one who had painted the things --

MS: [laughs] Yeah, I kinda got happy about that.

HFC: That is pretty cool.

MS: But then, I mean, he evolved out of it.

HFC: He evolved out of it. But the early ones.

MS: Yeah, *The Lake*, I think, was the first one. Dark and kind of more gloomy. But I mean, it was very different for him. I think I told you this at lunch, he was gonna change his name.

HFC: You did, yeah.

MS: Yeah, it was gonna be Rock something. I can't remember. [laughter] I wish I could remember the name. But it was Rock.

HFC: It was Rock something. Rock was the first name.

MS: Rock was the first name. Okay, so that's it. I just wanted to get that in there, because, you know -- nobody ever really touches on the abstracts.

HFC: No, I didn't even know to ask. I had no idea that that's how that had started. I mean, it does actually lead me to one thing that we've sort of talked about but you brought it up more explicitly. Interesting -- of course, one of the big kind of critical reactions to Wesselmann for decades has been criticism of him for his depiction of women, right.

MS: Yeah.

HFC: And obviously, that's something that's directly related to your work with him. So, you know, I wonder -- how you've seen that criticism?

MS: You know, that's an important question. That's a really important question. Because -- it couldn't be more opposite. You know? He was enamored with -- I think he -- [pauses] I mean, I think women, to him, were so enigmatic. So mysterious. And maybe even not real. Magic. Magic. And he called me magical more than once, you know? And it was something he wanted to possess, somehow, or something he wanted to embody, or something. It was -- I was -- I never met another person like this, so I don't know what that was, but I sat there watching him watching me, often, you know. And I realized he was trying to draw, and he was trying to make lines, and he was trying to get it right. But he was trying to like, breathe it in.

So, it was like the true word of inspiration, somehow. It was, you know, he was breathing it in. And I think -- so, whenever I'm sitting there, maybe talking, maybe falling asleep, there's also some sort of sacred space that is coming right there that was -- you didn't want to break that bond. There was something -- I don't know, charged. You know, that was -- it wasn't sexual and it wasn't romantic and it wasn't friendship. I don't know what that was, but it was definitely intense, real. And his -- his heightened sense of woman was obvious, you know. You weren't an object. You were something way beyond that, you know. I mean, almost just as unreal as an object, but you weren't just a woman.

HFC: But it was very specific to women, for him, to have, yeah.

MS: I think so, yeah. I mean, I -- I can just speak for myself, but as a model, sitting on that table, I mean, I never felt objectified. I mean, I thought -- that's just ludicrous. You know, it just doesn't make any sense to me. Because [sighs] -- as I said, he just wanted to breathe it in. He just wanted to try and capture something that was bigger than him. You know? And that was called woman. And I think he had it with Claire; I know he had it with me; I don't know about the other models. But I just wanted to make sure, like, for the record, that that whole feeling of, Oh, I'm taking my clothes off, I'm here -- you're objectifying me -- I don't understand it.

HFC: And so --

MS: I get it, intellectually, but that's not the way it is.
[laughs]

HFC: And when you see the final work, do you get that same --

MS: A little bit. A little bit. I -- somewhat -- I don't get the sexualized thing, for sure. So, that was good. I know there's something, but because it's my image, I don't know if it has that sacred feeling, or whatever that thing I'm trying to express. I don't know if it has it or not, because it's my image. So, it's not like -- Athena, you know. [laughs] But maybe to somebody else, it might be.

HFC: Right. But I mean, we have other works, right, around us, that aren't you. I mean, in any other --

MS: Do I feel them?

HFC: Yeah.

MS: No, I feel something else. Yeah, no, maybe it was just me, I don't know. I feel something else. I think that like, uh -- like for this *Great American Nude* over here, she -- I mean, that's just pleasure. But that doesn't seem like sex pleasure, or objectified pleasure. It just seems like joy. You know what I mean? There's like, joy. Now, the *Smoker* over here; everybody thinks that that's like, glamorized. Well, he hated smoking so much. That, to me, is a little demonic. You know what I mean? So, it's not what they think is really maybe what I'm trying to say. It's not just a pat dry, you know, pin-ups, or whatever people say about him. I just don't know how to tell you that it couldn't be more wrong. [laughs]

HFC: Mm-hm. And what's interesting is that, I mean, one thing that you can speak to very specifically is actually the process of creating the work and how different that is from that description. But then also, you're saying that even the work that people who aren't familiar with that process see is also not accurately -- you're saying is also not accurately captured.

MS: I think it's a projection of them, you know. I just don't -- they're seeing -- it just doesn't seem like they're going very deep. They're just seeing something they think is uncool, or womanizing, or degrading. But I think -- I think it's them. [laughs]

HFC: I mean, interpretation is often, in many ways --

MS: Projection. Yeah.

HFC: But that is really interesting. And I think that is *Great American Nude #53*, just to get in the record.

MS: Oh, it is, it is *Great American Nude #53*.

HFC: And I don't remember which number the *Smoker* is, do you?

MS: #27?

HFC: #27, that sounds right to me. I think it's #27. Yeah. But just -- I know this is an aside -- this thing about how much Wesselmann hated smoking is just fascinating, right.

MS: Yeah. [laughs]

HFC: So, he did, right? Really --

MS: He really hated it.

HFC: Yeah. Despite dedicating a -- huge chunk of his career to depicting it. [laughs] Did you ever ask him about that? Did you --

MS: Well, he said, "They always have yellow teeth."

HFC: In the -- really?

MS: Yeah, he said, "They're never white; they have yellow teeth." But he said also that it was just fascinating when -- I

guess it was Peggy, the model, took a smoke break -- and he saw the smoke. I think he liked the smoke, the way it looked. But the idea of smoking, he didn't like. But also, he's making those *Smokers* back in the day. But he did come back around to it again.

HFC: He did.

MS: Yeah, he did. Hm. Anomaly, I don't know. [laughs] I don't really know what to say about that.

HFC: Yeah. I mean, it's just fascinating that it was something he disliked so much and --

MS: Totally.

HFC: I mean, obviously, there's one aspect of it which is just -- he loved the form, and that makes sense. But also, it's not like that content -- this is not an abstract work, right? It's still very identifiably somebody smoking a cigarette.

MS: And it's the mouth, it's that fascination with the mouth.

HFC: Right. Which carries over between something like *GAN #53* and --

MS: All of them, I mean --

HFC: -- all of them, yeah. It's the one part of the face that usually doesn't disappear.

MS: Exactly. Maybe sometimes.

HFC: Maybe sometimes. But usually. Yeah, very rarely.

MS: But almost -- did it ever?

HFC: Basically almost never, yeah. Yeah, very rarely.

MS: Okay, so you asked me what do I do here.

HFC: Yes, yes, so, yeah -- what do you do here now?

MS: I help you. [laughter]

HFC: Yeah, that's true, a lot. [laughs]

MS: I hope so. [laughs] [sighs] I don't know, I do a lot of -- I do whatever -- [laughs] I really don't know what I do. I do whatever anybody asks me to do, basically. But I mean, I kind of am like a fairy godmother around here. Like, I make sure everything's -- everybody's okay. Make sure everything's running okay, make sure we're all on the same page. Basically, what I do. And I mean, I do archiving stuff. I don't -- I often wonder nowadays, like, what's there to do? It's a lot of technical stuff. A lot of Artbase stuff. It's a whole other world. When I first -- when Tom first died, you know, I did a lot of helping with -- I pretty much ran the show a little bit, you know, because I knew the galleries and I knew everybody and -- Allan and Candy were gone the same time Tom left, so I was here on my own with these new guys, right. Jeff came in and Brian came in--

HFC: Because Jeff came in, just like, the day -- sorry, not the day -- the year before he died, right?

MS: He came in months before he died.

HFC: Months before, yeah.

MS: He came in September and Tom died in December. And then, Brian also came around the same time.

HFC: Right around the same time, okay.

MS: Because Allan -- Tom was replacing Allan and Candy. And then, Kate was here already. And Greg was here already. But I was the mother, you know. I was just like, what are we gonna do? And so, I sort of taught Claire the ropes and kind of taught Jeff the ropes and then -- I sort of let it sail, you know.
[laughter]

HFC: So, yeah, in those early days, like, right after he died, you were the one really kind of establishing the practices that would really continue on.

MS: Yeah. And I knew -- I mean, in a way, I knew that I didn't want to -- I mean, when Tom was -- right when Tom was leaving to go to the hospital, I said, "Don't worry, I'll take care of business here. It's gonna be okay." And he was like, "Okay, you know, I trust you to do that." And [exhales] -- he said, "I'm so scared to leave this all to Claire. You'll help her, right?" And I said, "Yeah." And he said, "You and Jeanie --" -- it was Jeanie from Carroll, because she was helping --

HFC: Right, right.

MS: And I said --

HFC: Jeanie from Carroll Janis, just -- yeah.

MS: Jeanie from Carroll Janis. Jeanie Deans from Carroll Janis. And -- so we were like, you know, scared. Because we were all like -- what, come back. You know. And then, the transition came and -- it was hard for me. Hard, hard, hard, hard, hard. Because there was no Tom telling me everything's okay, and there was no Tom telling me -- I mean, we were easy. I mean, I was so loose with him. Now everything was like [clicks jaw] -- it started getting tight, like, had to be legalized and it had to be documented and it had to be -- these constraints. And I was like, Ugh, you know.

And I felt like I was doing everything wrong. Because I learned from Tom; we were very casual with all of the acquaintances, all of the galleries, ca-su-al. And when -- I got nervous about that. You know -- what do I do? And I saw Jeff keep picking it up; he was just picking it up and picking it up and I was like -- he was ambitious enough to pick it up. So, I thought, Okay, let him pick it up. And I will -- what can I do? What do I do? And I was a little bit nervous about that; very nervous, actually, about that.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

It all was very difficult. But, you know, we're making it here now and this is -- I do whatever I have to do. Like, I can help prepare shows, or I'm helping -- I make sure I know what the inventory is here. [laughs] You know, and I just make sure it runs kind of smoothly from an overseeing type of place. Not the

-- not everyday, like, I'm always looking. [joking tone] Don't screw us over. [laughs]

HFC: Well, and you mentioned Claire though, and early on, Claire was in --

MS: She was the leader, yeah. She came in and she was the face.

HFC: She was the face, okay, yeah. In those first, like -- so those first exhibitions, those first things --

MS: Yeah, all the way up until like, 2013.

HFC: Okay. Oh, wow. I didn't realize, yeah.

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

MS: You know, you had to do the right thing. And I thought stepping down a little bit and stepping back a little bit was the right thing and it is the right thing. And Claire was -- she stepped up, man. She did it. She -- yeah. She worked to figure it out, you know, and to know what was going on, all that stuff. And she was also, um -- she's really smart. She [laughs] had a real sense of what Tom wanted. Which was good, and then, as time goes by, though, what would Tom want? You know, we can't keep knowing what he wanted. Doesn't he get to grow?

HFC: Oh, yeah.

MS: You know? Wouldn't he change his mind, maybe?

[BREAK IN AUDIO]

HFC: That's a really complicated thing to deal with, with an estate, right? Because the person -- I mean, people change, but the --

MS: The person who's gone had a way, and that way is the only way you know. But one thing I do know about Tom is he said no all the time. Right before he said yes. Always. He'd say, "Hey, can you -- no." And then, wait a little while. And then, he's like, "Well, what are we doing?" [laughs]

HFC: I've even seen that in his correspondence. There's like -- it's a -- the first letter is no, and then the second letter is sometimes yes.

MS: Exactly. Oh, okay, so it's documented. [laughs]

HFC: Yeah, it's documented. There's a documented [laughs] approach there.

MS: So funny.

HFC: Yeah, yeah. No, that's -- one, sorry, there is one last thing that that just reminds me of. Which is, when -- can you tell me just a little bit about Claire? Like, when the first time you met her was and all that, because you actually knew her for quite a long time.

MS: Yeah, uh, the first time I met Claire was at OK Harris, actually. And it was when I saw that piece of art that I said it was my favorite one. I met her there. I remember her. She was so pretty -- gosh, like a French movie star. And she -- I met her.

I didn't meet her at that Janis Gallery -- he never introduced me to her. But I met her there, and I just remember asking her [laughs] if he listened to country music at home. That's the only question I remember.

HFC: That's amazing. [laughter]

MS: Just -- that what you listen to at home? And she said, "No, he likes all kinds of music," and I was like, "Okay." That's all I -- that's the only conversation I remember. And I know -- after that, we had -- I didn't see her very much. She wasn't -- she didn't come to the studio ever. She didn't have a key. I mean, she wasn't part of the studio -- they were very separate lives. I mean, we were studio family, and then there was a family. And we saw them at shows, openings, and I would go upstate once in the summer to see him, and I would see the family. But aside from that, the family was separate. [laughs]

HFC: I did not realize that.

MS: Oh, yeah. We were the kids. I mean, I was the youngest. I mean, it was just -- it reestablished the whole situation. He had Jenny, Lane, and Kate. Then he had Candy, Allan, and me. In that order. [laughter] In that order.

HFC: [laughs] You were his other -- his studio family, yeah.

MS: We were the studio family.

HFC: Interesting. And so, yeah -- I mean, that was actually something I was wondering. So, Claire just didn't come by very often to the studio.

MS: I don't ever -- she, at the very end. He brought her in, like -- I think maybe the last two years, she would come in when we weren't here. We had a big, big, big battle with prints, you probably know about that, and she was part of that. So, we saw a little more of her, I guess, at the end of the '90s a little bit. A little bit. But -- no.

HFC: Yeah, interesting.

MS: He wanted her to be home, I guess, I don't know. I mean, she was a studio assistant, the first one. That was -- you know, he loved having her here, and you probably read that in the correspondence, too. [laughter]

HFC: And I've seen the photos of her as a studio assistant, yeah.

MS: And seen the photos, yeah. They were like glue, and then, at one point, she didn't want to come anymore, and then he had a normal assistant. And I can't remember that guy's name; I didn't know him. [Dimler, Richard Dimler?], was I think one of his first studio assistants. I think he lives in Florida. Then Candy was here forever, then Allan came, and then -- [laughs] yep.

HFC: And then you. No, so --

MS: Claire was always very sweet, though. She was sweet. But to work with her, it was -- it was like oil and water. Because she was very organized and -- well, she was just -- legal. She had a legal stuff, and I was like, [groans]. I don't -- I'm afraid of it. You know, I could do stuff really wrong. And with Tom, you

couldn't do anything wrong. You couldn't. I mean, I'd make big mistakes. And he'd say, "Well, just call them." And I would just call, and they'd be like, Okay. With Claire, it'd be -- I did it wrong before I started, often, you know. Because she was worried. I mean, this was a big deal for her. A huge legacy she was taking care of. And I knew I couldn't -- I wasn't gonna be able to fit that bill. I didn't -- you wouldn't want to.

HFC: It honestly stresses me out just thinking about it, yes, so I totally understand, yeah. Yeah. So, the last thing I wanted to ask you about, on a much lighter topic, but the one thing we haven't talked about that much is Tom's music. And I know that you had -- I mean, you've written about this a bit, so I know you've written about it. But you were involved in it.

MS: Oh my god, was I ever. [laughter] Yeah, no, that was interesting, because at first -- okay, that was our first of the -- when I -- ah! Maybe the first time I modeled for him? He played a song for me. And it was called "Pictures on the Wall of Your Heart." And that was pretty interesting; I thought, Oh, okay. And then, I said, "Was that -- you?" And he said, "No, it's about Claire." She was picturing all the men in her life, and now, was I gonna live up. God, I thought, Oh my god, he's so sweet.

And then, after that, he would come in and he would play music for me. And I would say, like, "Well, let me see." He would have these big notes, like, just all circles. And I'd be trying to sightread it. Like, he'd say, "Can you sing this?" And I'd be like, How's it go? You know. And then, I got some guy in here that I knew -- his name is [Larry Scripp?] -- to be -- to teach him. He said -- [laughs] my favorite line. "I wish I knew about

time." He said, "I wish I knew about time." I was like, "Okay, I'll bring somebody in." So Larry came in, and he taught him. He said, "I learned it in a day." Next thing you know, he has quarter notes, half notes -- on a staff. And I could read it. And so, every Friday, I would sing and we would record. Every Friday, when we had the old Bowery studio. And Billy -- whew, Heller -- would be the engineer. He had a -- kind of guy that was just sort of ripped him off -- anyway, Billy Heller would come in and record us. I would learn three songs a week. He could write -- can you imagine? He's doing all this work, and he's writing --

HFC: He's writing all these songs. [laughs]

MS: -- writing all these songs. I'd learn three songs a week, and then we would record them on Friday. And that was my job. And it was great, yeah. I mean, it was hard, because you couldn't deviate. I mean, that was where he was strict. Like, he was as strict as he was with these colors and stuff, like, everything had to be just, just so. So, if you had like -- [pauses] I can't even -- I don't know, I'm not gonna sing it. But --

HFC: Oh, well, I would -- if you can sing one, I --

MS: Oh, no, no, I don't think I can. I was thinking, like -- what can I sing? "Have You Just Come Back to Torture Me," that's the one that -- I mean, he had funny songs, right. They were like, some of the songs -- "When My Tears Hit the Fan, Everyone Got Wet." [laughter] I can't remember. But you couldn't sing one note out. Like, you couldn't embellish at all. You couldn't go like [singing] ah, it was [singing] ah. You couldn't go

[singing] ah-i-ah. Anything, nothing, nothing. He was like, "No, stop the show." And sometimes he would be painting when you'd be singing it, and -- "Nope. That note was wrong." [laughs] And I was like, "Okay, okay, okay, okay. But it should be this, Tom." "No."

HFC: Really? Like there was just a -- he had it, yeah. And -- but you also sang while he was working sometimes, right? He did also --

MS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, he was painting. And they would be recording. At first not. At first, he would sit there, you know, with his legs crossed, watching, you know, are you gonna do it right? And then, be happy when you did. Okay. And then, later, he would be, like -- when we moved here, he would be painting and just kind of look over. Again, just like modeling, I got used to it, I got comfortable. But then he brought in some real country singers. And then, I kinda -- it was me and Tom singing for a long time. 'Cause he would sing them, too.

HFC: Oh, he was? Okay.

MS: Yeah, he would -- yeah. But he [laughs] -- he would make a girl and a boy version. [laughter]

HFC: You mean of the lyrics? [laughs]

MS: Yeah.

HFC: That's amazing.

MS: Yeah, yeah. So, he would sing the boy version, and I would sing the girl version, no kidding. And that was pretty funny. Then he got -- Kevin Traynor came in and Deirdre Wilson came in, and they were real country singers. You know, with the hats and everything. And then, there was a Duane [Zaloudek] -- it starts with a Z, I can't get his last name. But they -- then they sang for a while. And then again, occasionally, I would come back. And he made Claire sing one song once, and that was torture for her. Torture. [laughs]

HFC: Can she -- but she sings?

MS: Well, he said, "She sings in church all the time!" She was a -- she went to Grace Church and she was in a -- I felt so bad. But she did it.

HFC: But she did it.

MS: She did it. He wrote sad songs at the end. About dying and stuff like that. He was in -- yeah, he was sad, and I don't know, he wanted her to sing one. It was a beautiful love song, I can't remember the name of that, but -- yeah.

HFC: How do you think he understood the music that he was making? I mean, how do you think it -- why was it important to him? What --

MS: Why was it so important to him? I think it was part of his -- you know, we were talking earlier about what a homebody he was. I think his fantasy life was gigantic. And he had us all in it, and you know, the country music thing -- Tom said he was as honest as his blue work shirt. And that was like, what his songs

were kinda like? Like, so simple. The way I think he understood it was this was all sophisticated, and the country music was down home. So, it was a big balance to him. You know, it kept him grounded, and it didn't have any kind of cerebral sophistication, art-speak, how are we gonna talk about this. It was just a song. And I think that's how he understood it. But he loved it so much. The other thing he loved about country musicians were they didn't emote. He loved that. [laughs] He said, "They're just gonna stand there and sing a song." And he said, "It's -- the emotion is all in the words and all in what they were saying, but they weren't going to emote." However, occasionally, he would play opera. And because --

HFC: [laughs] Just like, the total opposite.

MS: Crazy stuff. I know. I was like, Tom, but how does that fit in? So, as soon as you have him pegged, something comes up. [laughs]

HFC: Yeah, because it is really interesting, like, obviously, there's a lot of effort, a lot of time dedicated to this. And so, it's a really interesting way of looking at it, that it was kind of the antipode of what he was doing in his artwork.

MS: I think -- I mean, that's the way I think I understand it. I don't know -- I mean, I'm speaking for him, in a way. But that's -- to me, it makes sense.

HFC: Yeah. So you really don't remember any of the songs that you could sing? You could sing a verse from one of the songs?

MS: Um. [pauses] [singing] "Oh, we've got a baby on board. Bless the --" [laughs], I can't remember how it goes, though. A baby on board. I can't remember. You know, it's funny that you asked me this, 'cause when he was dying, the last day I got to see him, nobody would let me see him because he was in intensive care. And I went anyway, and they said, Okay, you can go in. And I sang songs to him. I sang his songs. And I couldn't remember except for little snips and I was like, Ah shit, I can't -- ah. Wait, let me see. [singing] "Pretending on the phone again, saying [something?] we know we'll never speak." Something. [singing] "Talking on and on for hours on end, pretending we might love again." Sorry, I can't remember. [laughs]

HFC: That's actually a nice song.

MS: Yeah, I mean, they're sad, some of them are sad, and some of them are fun. I wish I could remember the funny ones. Like, "Truckers Can Be Pretty, Too." [laughter] And -- yeah, I mean, some of the titles were just hilarious. And there were so many. So, so, so, so many. I mean, I'd almost throw up when he'd come in like, a whole pile of them. I'd go, My god, how many do I have to learn? [laughter] And I had to learn them fast. Chop chop.

HFC: Right, I mean, three songs a week. Yeah.

MS: I know. And I got the morning to learn 'em, and then we would record them in the afternoon.

HFC: You were like a working session musician.

MS: Yes, I was. It was like, [groans] and not a note wrong!
[laughs]

HFC: Wow, yeah. Fantastic. Well, thank you, so much. This is amazing. I'm so glad we did this.

MS: It was fun. And it was kinda like a little trip down -- up and down the Bowery, in a way, right? From the old studio to the new studio.

HFC: Right, yeah, absolutely. And then -- what was that year, that the -- I'm just trying to remember, from Bowery to here?

MS: '95, we moved in here.

HFC: '95, '95, okay. Yeah. So, this has been the space since '95.

MS: I was just thinking, we're here longer than Tom was here.

HFC: Wow.

MS: I know. I know. Because Tom got to be here for 10 years, and we're here now -- now I'm here for like, 25 years.

HFC: Right.

MS: It's crazy.

HFC: That is crazy. And we were just talking earlier about how much of this stuff was actually -- has actually been here since, you know, before 2004.

MS: Yeah, we're sentimental about him, you know. So, we have -- his painting palette table is still set up as it was. And we even painted the floor and left a little space where his drips in the front -- in front of *Still Life #35*.

HFC: Oh, that was intentional? I've noticed that that's there. I didn't realize that was like, a monument.

MS: Yeah, when we painted the floor, I was like, No!

HFC: [laughs] That's amazing. I did not realize that. Huh. Yeah, and this table, obviously, that we're sitting at.

MS: And this table, yeah, another little palette table that he'd roll around. Yeah, I guess it's all kind of the same. Yeah, I mean, talking to you right now, I could cry. I miss him. [laughs] Yeah, I do. I wish you guys would've met him. He's a -- remarkable. He's just such a nice guy. You know, so funny and humble, really. You would never know he was anybody famous. He'd make jokes about that, though. He was like, "Somebody noticed me on the street, ha ha." [laughter]

HFC: Really? [laughs]

MS: Yeah. [laughs]

HFC: I mean, he is very recognizable, I guess. I mean --

MS: If you know who he is.

HFC: If you know who he is. If you know his look. He's --

MS: Yeah, and -- that hat. Right, he always wore a cowboy-type hat. Sort of.

HFC: Was it a fedora for a while?

MS: You know what he said once? He said he knew he became a man when he took the cap off and he put on a hat.

HFC: Really?

MS: Yeah. I thought that was so funny.

HFC: That is really funny.

MS: Yeah, I know. [laughs]

HFC: What cap?

MS: I don't know! He must have worn a baseball cap.

HFC: He did?

MS: I don't know. I never saw it, because I guess I only knew him when he was a man. [laughter]

HFC: I mean, I don't even remember photos of him in a baseball cap.

MS: Me neither, ever.

HFC: Even like, the really old ones, you know, the ones where he's looking really awkward, with like --

MS: There's one hat that's not a baseball cap, but it's like a -- just a cap, cap?

HFC: Yes. Yes, I've seen that. Maybe that's what it was.

MS: Maybe that's what it was. Was that early early?

HFC: That's pretty early, I think, yeah.

MS: Okay, maybe. I never knew what that meant, but I always remembered it.

HFC: But there's the fedora. There's the classic -- it's even in a --

MS: What's a fedora.

HFC: How do you -- I mean -- [laughter] --

JOSIE NARON: What, with the -- it's like a small brim.

HFC: It's like a smaller brim, and --

JN: Like, with the -- sometimes like a ribbon.

HFC: Yeah, and it goes -- it's sort of ovoid.

MS: Oh, that's what he wore. That's a fedora. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

HFC: There's the painting of him, like, standing, you know.

MS: Yes. Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. Definitely a fedora.

HFC: But yeah, okay. Yeah. No, I mean, I think he -- I think I would recognize him if I saw him on the street at this point. But yeah, I mean, it is an interesting thing to -- I mean, for me, right, I feel like I've gotten to know him in this odd way.

MS: Yeah, I know. How nice, yeah. You probably do know him.

HFC: All secondhand, you know, obviously.

MS: Yeah, I know, it's like he's still around, really, kind of. In the documents, in all of us, in his work, and -- jeez. I mean, he didn't really go anywhere, just physically. [laughs]

HFC: Yeah. I mean, he's very present.

MS: Very. I know. He very much so is, jeez.

HFC: Yeah.

MS: There's no disappearance of Tom Wesselmann. [laughter]
Thank goodness.

HFC: Thank goodness. Yeah, exactly.

MS: Well, thank you guys, too. For making it easy.

HFC: No, yeah, this was so great. Yeah. This was -- really appreciate it. And I mean, this is -- with each one of these

interviews, you know, it's like insights that only you can offer, you know? Otherwise, just -- no one else can sort of bring this --

MS: No, I totally appreciate that. I mean, I -- as much as it's scary and you might want to get everything right, it's definitely, you know, before something happens, it's just a good idea.

HFC: Everything we can sort of find and dig up, yeah. Reconstruct.

[END OF AUDIO FILE]