

**Edward Biberman, interviewed by Emily Corey, Los Angeles Art Community, Group Portrait, Oral History Program, UCLA Art Library, 1977.**

Full text of Edward Biberman Oral History Transcript:

[http://archive.org/stream/edwardbibermanor00bibe/edwardbibermanor00bibe\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/edwardbibermanor00bibe/edwardbibermanor00bibe_djvu.txt)

*Note: The following consists of excerpts from a 234 page interview. Line breaks indicate text that has been removed.*

COREY: Now, beyond that entire period, you began a series of paintings concerned with buildings. There's The Carpenter, The Plasterers -- city scapes, I guess you call them. Why that change? Actually it wasn't so much of a change, but a recurrence?

BIBERMAN: No, it wasn't a real change. If one were to go back to the work that I did while I was living in New York, for example, it would be apparent that I was always fascinated by the look of cities and particularly by the structural qualities of buildings with both an architectural and an engineering personality. When I lived in New York, I painted the George Washington Bridge. I considered it to be an absolutely beautiful structure. I was talking to someone about this just a couple of nights ago, as a matter of fact, and I said there was a painter who deserves to be much better known, the American painter Charles Demuth. [He] painted a canvas that I saw when I was quite young. It was a painting of two great wheat silos, probably someplace in Kansas, and he titled that painting *My Egypt*. Now, I knew exactly what he meant by that. When I say I've always been fascinated by cities, engineering, [and] structural forms, I speak of something that has, emotionally, touched me very deeply. This interest has always been present in my work when I am not impelled, let us say, to paint things with an overtly social quality. You see, I think of myself as a very lyric painter. I love the look of nature, and I also love the look of many of the things that men build. I find both of these very wonderful, stirring, lyrical experiences. When I turned again to painting structural forms and the workmen constructing these forms, as in the plasterer series and the carpenter series, two things were combined. First of all, I've always liked to work with my hands. In addition to being a painter, I've always liked to work with tools, and for an amateur I'm a pretty fair carpenter. When I studied fresco painting, I had to learn how to plaster, so I became a fair plasterer. These things touch me, move me, deeply. I've always had the feeling that had I been functioning as a painter in a period of political calm or social well-being, I probably would have found almost my entire output very lyric in quality. I would have painted people; I would have painted landscapes; I would have painted the structures that men build — all of which, as I say, have a strong emotional impact on me. So turning to the matter of the cityscapes, I was not suddenly "discovering" a new art territory for myself. Los Angeles has its full share, both of stirring structural forms and engineering forms. It also has, for me, some very fascinating, tacky forms, to use that term. The old, beat-up parts of Hollywood, with the tall, spindly palm trees and the

old stucco houses, and the look of other decaying parts of the city fascinated me as a kind of a social document. As someone who's interested in urban life, this has been a very fertile field for me. I find the city replete with material that I'm anxious to record. It's not something that I suddenly came to as a release or an escape or a substitute for something that I was really more interested in.

COREY: Do you feel at all that the cityscapes were possibly the easiest transition from the more horrible social themes that you had been painting--that a cityscape was safe?

BIBERMAN: Well, I don't know that I'd use the term "easier." You see, on many occasions I've found myself trying to explain the diverse channels into which my work has fallen over the years. I've already indicated the fact that the lyricism of nature and structural forms has always interested me, so that I don't think that the term "easier" is exact. It's a matter of turning to another facet of my interests. A show of mine was once hung in four completely compartmentalized sections — one section only portraits, one section only landscapes, one section only social paintings, one section only structural forms. If all of Gaul was divided into three parts, maybe all of Edward Biberman is divided into four parts. I've constantly plumbed these four areas. The greater emphasis, at certain times, has gone into one area as against another. I didn't find it easier to paint the cityscape than to paint a social painting or a landscape. Circumstances probably dictated where the flow was directed. If, for whatever the reasons, a channel was either blocked or purposely shut off in one area, the flow then very naturally went into another area without my undergoing any great traumatic experience. Even in the period when the bulk of my work was topical in quality, I would turn very frequently to a landscape or to a portrait. My own feeling, in terms of my own work, is that this represents my totality, and I would find it very difficult to isolate any one or any two elements and say, "Well, that is really what I've always wanted to do."

COREY: Do you feel that many artists get caught up in that?

BIBERMAN: That kind of a division?

COREY: No, not the division so much, but falling into being one-sided. "This is what I've really always wanted to do; therefore I'm going to do it."

BIBERMAN: Well, I don't know. You know, there are painters who have been known as landscape painters, and there are painters who have been known as portrait painters, and there are painters who have been known as still-life painters. Maybe they're very lucky. Maybe they don't have their interests or their energies diluted. Maybe it would be nice to feel that there is only one thing that one wants to do and to plumb that continuously. I've never felt that. A friend of mine, the very fine black painter Charles White, in an interview that I once had with him on television, made a statement that I've always thought of with great envy. He said — I think I'm quoting him exactly--"All of my

life, I've only been painting one picture." Well, I know what he means. He was only painting one picture because all of his life, really, he painted nothing except his relation to the black experience which he is a part of. Maybe Charles White is lucky. Maybe he's very fortunate. I've never found myself satisfied with any one single area. As I've already said, there are many areas that I've wished to examine, and the emphasis has varied, depending on the circumstances.

COREY: Do you think being an artist, living in California, you've been able to do that more easily than if you had stayed in New York--or in Europe, for that matter?

BIBERMAN: That's always speculative, but let me say this: I think that at one point in our discussion, I said that one of the things that I liked when I first came to California was the fact that few people here were really interested in art. You could sort of settle down and paint and solve your own problems without the frenzy of a very frenetic art scene. I don't know what would have happened, obviously, had I stayed in New York. I don't know, obviously, what would have happened had I stayed in Europe. I can only speculate. Since I am very unhappy about much that has happened in American art--let's say, from the period of the Second World War on— I think that it would have probably been more difficult for me to have pursued my own interests in the face of the more bitter art scene which existed in New York. However, this is speculative. One can never know. So far as Europe is concerned, I obviously could not have stayed there, because by the end of the thirties, the Second World War broke out. I would either have been thrown into a concentration camp, as a Jew, or I would have hightailed it back to the States, so that I think one would have to eliminate your question in terms of Europe. In terms of California, the art scene here has, in a sense, always reflected the eastern scene. A great many of the fashions, trends, and a great many of the schools follow the fashions and trends of schools of art in the East. They have never been quite as sharp here as they were in New York. I think it probably would have been more difficult for me to have stayed with my point of view in New York than it was here. However, this too is kind of an iffy answer to an iffy question. These things have to be guessed at. I can only hazard an opinion.