



A Conversation with Jim Dine

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A Conversation with Jim Dine

Susie Hennessy is a graduate student at the University of South Florida.

This interview took place in New York City on October 19, 1979.

SH: Oftentimes, publishers see themselves as editors. For example, Tatyana Grossman conceived of the idea of having Johns work with Beckett, though the project was ultimately carried out by Paul Cornwall-Jones, and of having Rauschenberg work with Robbe-Grillet. Do you find that the proofing and editioning of certain projects is affected by the various publishers and/or printers you have worked with, and how do they differ?

JD: I've been involved with certain publishers—with Tatyana Grossman, Paul Cornwall-Jones, Don Saff—and they have all had their opinions on editing and how to stimulate me, I think. Grossman was the first publisher I worked with, and I stopped working with her in 1975. It wasn't for me, finally, what she advocated. She put together Johns and Beckett, and Rauschenberg and Robbe-Grillet, both of which are extremely artificial collaborations, just famous people working with famous people, so it sells well. It was an interesting idea, I guess, but I didn't see any connection between the two things. The Rivers-O'Hara *Stones* project I thought was a good collaboration, although visually I don't think it is so good-looking. But that was a *real* collaboration. I collaborated with Oscar Wilde, as it were, with *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. I thought it was quite successful, but it was secondary; it came out of something natural, which was that I was designing the play. The play was not produced, so we salvaged something and made some prints out of the costume designs. That was done with Paul Cornwall-Jones.

Cornwall-Jones had very good, stimulating ideas about editing. He was a very good person to get involved with in Europe. He was a *real* European. He knew the

Continent, a guy who was a real expert on cities. We printed in Amsterdam and Paris, and it was always very amusing to be taught about living in those cities. With Don Saff, the collaboration was because we were friends and because he knows a lot about the history of prints, about art, about all the things we have in common. These things are always a pleasure and a plus in my printmaking life with these editors. It is stimulating to me because they are giving approval all the time, and I love all of that. My relationship with Aldo Crommelynck has been a little different in that he really teaches technique more than anyone else—although I am sure that Saff knows all of the techniques—but it is the training that Crommelynck had with Lecouriere and his experience in printing for Picasso that make him unique. He showed me how he made reproductions of Picasso paintings, for instance, which Picasso later signed. In that way, he taught himself etching technique, so he has a vast vocabulary of the *process*. He has these nineteenth-century presses that he rebuilt himself. They pull out of a plate more than anything I have ever seen, anywhere. For some reason, you can't get that off a Brand press. He also has a great printer working for him; that is incidental, almost, but it is very good. I sit with Crommelynck and the collaboration is where he teaches me technique.

In all of these cases, though, I couldn't sit with people if they weren't my friends. I stopped working with Cornwall-Jones after we fell out over business. I don't feel he behaved as a friend (although he probably doesn't think I did, either). To see Saff or Crommelynck is a pleasure always because there are other things involved. It's the

sociable life. On the other hand, the majority of my work in the last six years has been made by me, with my own printers, and by me stimulating myself. That has been equally interesting, if not more so, because I have nobody to sound off of, and therefore I've had to go on my own nerve, as they say. But my attitude towards collaboration has to do with interaction. It's the same thing in drawing from the model, too. I really consider it is *we*—the model and I—making the drawing. I don't draw anonymous people; I draw my family or friends very closely, and they talk all of the time while I am drawing them. That is always very interesting, very sociable, and very inspiring.

SH: *You can talk while you draw?*

JD: I always talk while I am drawing, because it's my hand that's doing it. I'm not drawing with my mouth. I do have one specific model I use in Vermont, and she's very helpful to me because she can sit very still for long periods of time—like an hour or so—without moving at all, and that is a collaboration that way. I'm very inspired by the way she looks. I'm interested in all of these ways of being more sociable as an artist, because it's quite lonesome to paint by yourself, although desirable most of the time.

SH: *I have read in the New York Times that you said, "Saff is the closest thing we have in America to Ambroise Vollard, and I am grateful to him every day for the inspiring pose he has assumed." Could you explain what you meant by that?*

JD: What I meant was that there are not really great publishers in America. I publish through Pace Editions, but that is just about distribution—that isn't doing a job that a great publisher like Vollard did, or

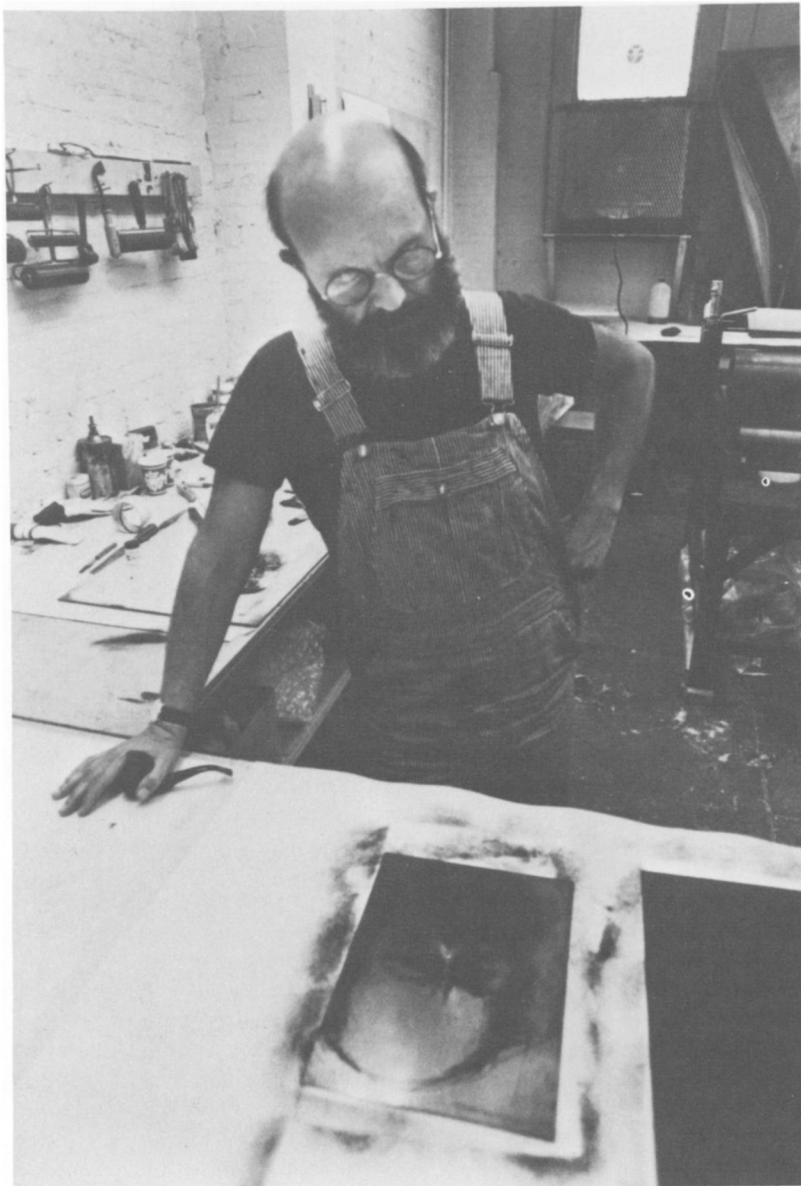


Fig. 1 Jim Dine. (photo: Pace Editions)

Fig. 1

even Cornwall-Jones in his day. Saff isn't in business anymore. It would be nice if he were.

SH: Do you think the fact that Saff is an artist himself has anything to do with your rapport?

JD: Well, of course. Cornwall-Jones is not an artist, he's an architect. That might have something to do with it, but I am not sure. I'm not sure that Crommelynck is an artist: I don't know whether he is or he isn't. I've never seen any original work of his. It's more about basic sensitivity.

SH: How do you compare working with these famous printer-publishers to working with the not-so-famous printers, like Mitchell Friedman, Jeremy Dine, or the printers you have recently worked with in Israel?

JD: That is more intimate, more like an extension of myself. They become like a tool for me. That has been the most comfortable, I think, over the long run for me: to have these guys that are not interested in being publishers or whatever, but just in

printing, and printing the way I like to have things printed. That is probably the most productive way for me.

SH: Are you more comfortable at this point with etching rather than lithography?

JD: In recent years I have been more excited by etching than I have by lithography, because I've felt that lithography was too straight a reproductive method and that etching was drawing with acid. The product is something so different from what I can get from drawing, whereas with lithography you can approximate drawing. Plus that to work with great lithographers in America is to work with great prima donnas and pains-in-the-ass, and I don't like it. I don't like working with those Tamarind people—those overly trained, highly technical people. It's not necessary. They are all just too well-trained. Who the hell cares about that? It's never improved the image at all. If the artist isn't any good, what's the difference? I worked in Jerusalem with a guy who is simply trained. He can do just a few things, and he doesn't lose much. He

knows the climate. He knows he can deal with the stones. And I don't really need any more than that. I was rather excited about working with lithography; it's quite free, I think. In Israel, I also combined it with etching. I printed an image in lithography first, and then an etching over it, so it gave it more dimension. There's something about lithography that is rather flat for me, compared with etching, which really is in relief.

SH: Do you feel that there is a historical context in which you are now working in terms of the figure? The recent portraits have as much psychological intensity as Munch and as much technical enthusiasm as Degas.

JD: Yes. I am quite pleased to have long links to the past. I come out of a tradition of European and northern European drawing and out of the American tradition of painting. By "American" I mean Abstract Expressionism—I believe Abstract Expressionism comes from Europe, so it is similar in attitude. Just like Giacometti, I have trained myself by looking a lot at northern European drawing: German, British, French, and Dutch drawing. I don't feel that I come from *nouhere*. I didn't just grow like Topsy. I am highly trained, mainly by myself. I am still training, all of the time.

SH: Within its traditional context, the print was employed as a reproductive medium. Many of your recent prints have been integrally related to drawings. What are among the considerations you make in the translation from drawing to print?

JD: If I make a print from a drawing, I usually reduce it slightly because I like it to be different to begin with. Then, as I have done in the past few years, I use the soft ground technique to transfer it onto the

Fig.2 Jim Dine,
Self-Portrait on JD Paper,
1978, etching with
drypoint. Mitchell
Friedman and Jeremy
Dine, printers. (courtesy
Pace Editions)

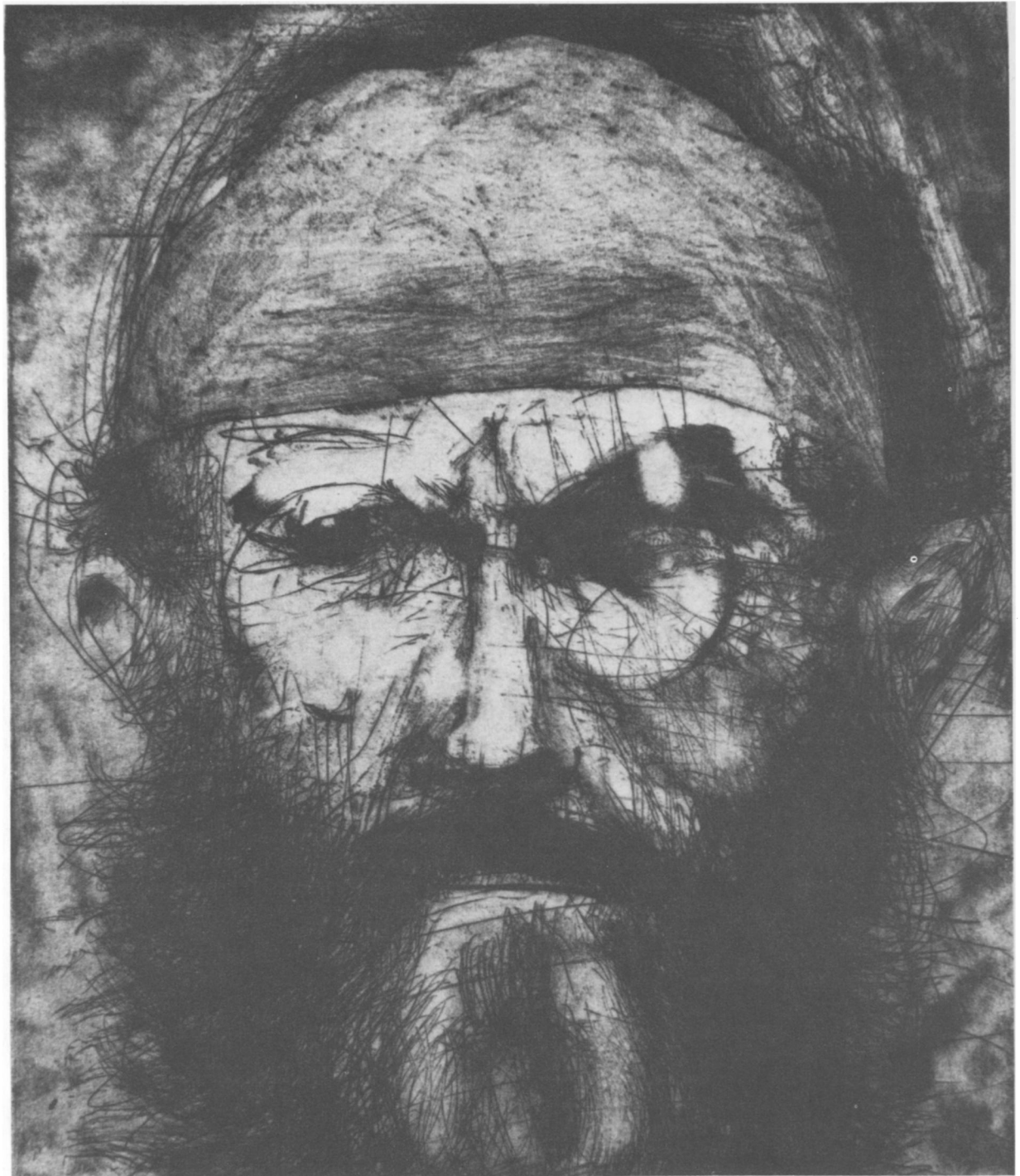


Fig.2

plate in the first stage. And then I use hard ground and spray paint for aquatinting.

SH: *In terms of the economics of the print, does it disturb you that there is an artificially applied limitation to the number of prints, so that the commercial value remains high and the work appeals to an obviously limited audience? Rembrandt didn't limit his editions but printed plates until they were worn out; therefore, the edition size was a product of what the plate would yield and not some arbitrary figure.*

JD: No. Sometimes it isn't artificial. The plate will wear out if you don't steel-face it. In Israel I had no facility for steel-facing, so the plate would wear out

a bit at times. It doesn't disturb me, but I wish it weren't so artificial. I'm in it for making money, too, so it's a commercial consideration not to continue.

SH: *Would you like to do more prints that have an illustrative connection, like The Picture of Dorian Gray?*

JD: No, I'm not interested in illustration, or much less than I was. I'm interested in the subject being art, rather than the subject becoming something specific.

SH: *Do you have any close association with literary people now?*

JD: No, not now. I do see some poets. But there was a time in the late '60s when they were very important to me. I wasn't painting very much then. Ten years ago I

was floundering about, looking around to see what it would be like to have a life in art. I wasn't confident of my powers as an artist as I am now. I live now a life in art.

SH: *Do you think that art affects people as literature does? For example, could a painting ever move people to the degree that Karl Marx or Flaubert have with their writings?*

JD: I think it affects certain people that way, but I don't think that generally art can reach people the way that literature does, because language is so much easier to understand. I think there are fewer people who trust their visual side of life.

SH: *Why is that?*

JD: I don't know why. Do you think that?

Fig. 3 Jim Dine and Don Saff at Hartford Art School, June 1979. (photo: Barbara Calogero)

SH: Yes, I think you're right. Literature is much more accessible and more palatable to more people.

JD: Yes, it is. It is more powerful, I think, but I don't know.

SH: In the process of reading you are set up: you can be guided, can be focused to come to a certain point, whereas visual art has to be immediately persuasive. And I think it takes a lot more work and most people don't want to do that.

JD: I know. And I don't understand why.

SH: What effect does geographic location have on you and your working habits?

JD: I am stimulated by certain places in the world, like Paris, London, Vermont, and now Jerusalem. But I'm most happy when I am sitting in one place working. I need that solitude and the security of the studio, although I can work almost anywhere, it seems. But I am affected by where I am.

SH: Is it distracting for you to move around?

JD: Yes. And it's more distracting now than it has been for a long time. That's why I enjoyed being in Jerusalem for three months. I sat, and just stayed there. I didn't move around.

SH: The still life paintings of last spring make direct reference to actual physical places. For example, two of the titles are *A Still Life, Remembering Oslo, Autumn, 6 p.m., 1973* and *The Night Forces Painterliness to Show Itself in a Clearer Way*. Could an analogy be made between your use of objects as a vocabulary for feelings and the metaphorical use of time and space as an explanation of self?

JD: I don't think I can use time and place as a metaphor—it's too fleeting. Time and place relate to the paintings just

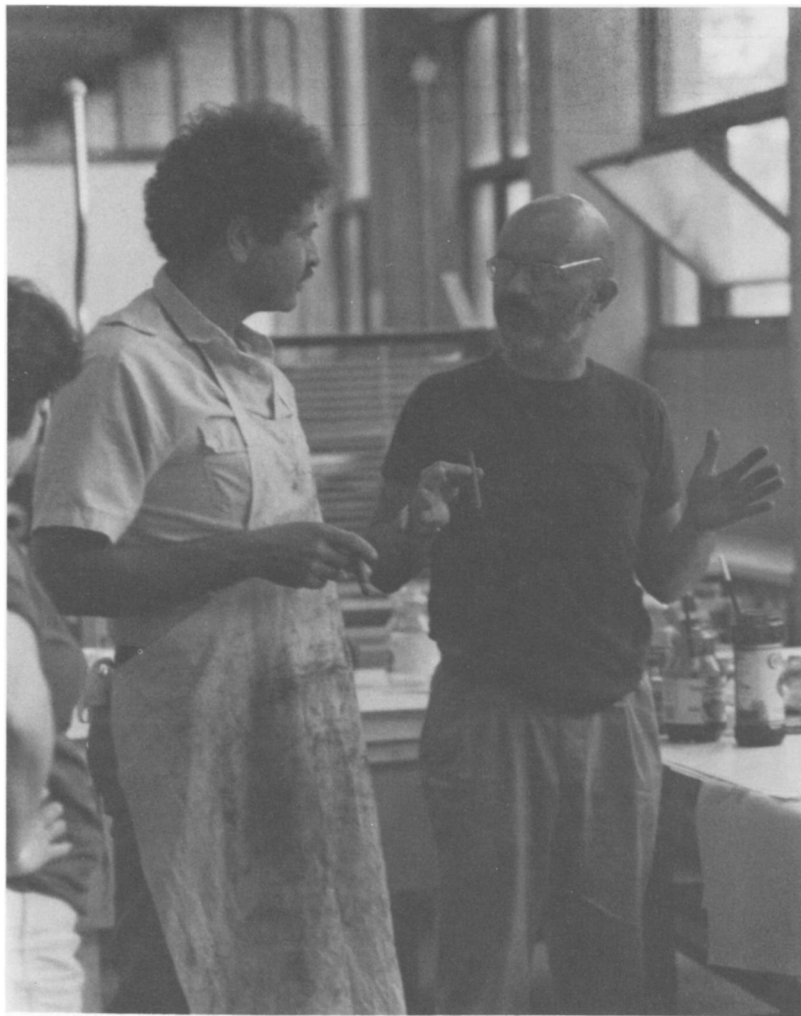


Fig. 3

as a way of remembering. Obviously, I titled them after I did them, so that I saw something in the paintings that reminded me of a way to title them, but I don't think specifically. The titles were given more out of a sense of poetry.

SH: In much of your work an environmental setting is absent. Do you feel that its presence would corrupt the integrity of the object or individual that is the primary subject?

JD: What do you mean by "environmental setting"? Do you mean for instance a landscape around it, or where things are?

SH: Yes, both of those things.

JD: Most of the things are isolated. Well, I'm mainly interested in the single figure. I think it's a very powerful image. My interest in art, in art history, is in the single figure—in the figure drawings, say, of Van Gogh. That interests me more than a landscape drawing does. I don't know how I came to that interest; I just like isolated things by themselves. I don't think a setting would corrupt, necessarily; it just isn't my interest to put a single object in an environment usually. Putting it in an environment makes it more illustrative and distracting, I think.

SH: Doesn't that have to do with what

we just discussed about the function of space?

JD: Maybe, but also I think it is more modern not to [place things in an environment]. I don't mean that in a self-conscious way, but I think I have learned the lesson from modern art that to put a thing in a room, and to depict the rest of the room, makes for a narrative kind of art that doesn't interest me. I'm interested in the thing itself. I'm really interested in the subject being art, more and more. That isn't always how I have felt.

SH: Consistent with a line of analysis that would consider, for instance, how Cézanne's eyes moved through a setting, or how Degas observed a given scene, how do you mark the paper—construct an image—as a result of how you "see"? How do you think that you "see" and make that translation to a two-dimensional surface?

JD: I have no idea.

SH: Do you ever think about it, even in retrospect?

JD: No, I never do. I think that I get better at what I do because I keep training my eye continually to see more clearly, but I certainly don't know how I do it.

SH: There is no reflective kind of insight that comes to you, that you be-

Fig. 4 Jim Dine,
Little Black-and-White
Self-Portrait, 1979,
etching. (courtesy Pace
Editions)



Fig. 4

come cognizant of, in a work by Cézanne, of his attempt to depict simultaneous experiences, seeing objects from multiple points of view at the same moment?

JD: No, there isn't. I can't talk about that. I really don't know how I make art. I start somewhere. (It's easier for me to talk about what I do when I draw than when I paint, because painting is more complicated.) When I start a drawing, I just look very hard and begin to make marks, and then erase the marks, and build up this history of marks.

SH: So, it seems to be more in the process or activity that you find poten-

cy. When people look at your work, they see those marks, but they also see how Jim Dine sees that figure. It's interesting when you look at your work.

JD: Is it? You mean it's there?

SH: Yes, definitely there.

JD: What's there?

SH: Well, it all has to do with isolating those objects or figures on a page. It is your feeling for them, and how it reads.

JD: That's the thing I couldn't talk about because it is something that I think I invented. I mean, it just comes naturally to me. That's part of the invention of making art. I do know that I never see a figure

totally; I always see just a part of it. I try to see how it is put together. But I just make marks. I like to sully the paper, to get into it and make a bit of a mess and get going.

SH: That is probably why there is such a lack of self-consciousness about your work, because you just don't see it in these reflective terms.

JD: Does it look like that in the work?

SH: Yes.

JD: Then you meant, why is the work unselfconscious?

SH: Exactly. You don't have that quality as a result. It's not your responsibility to do that.

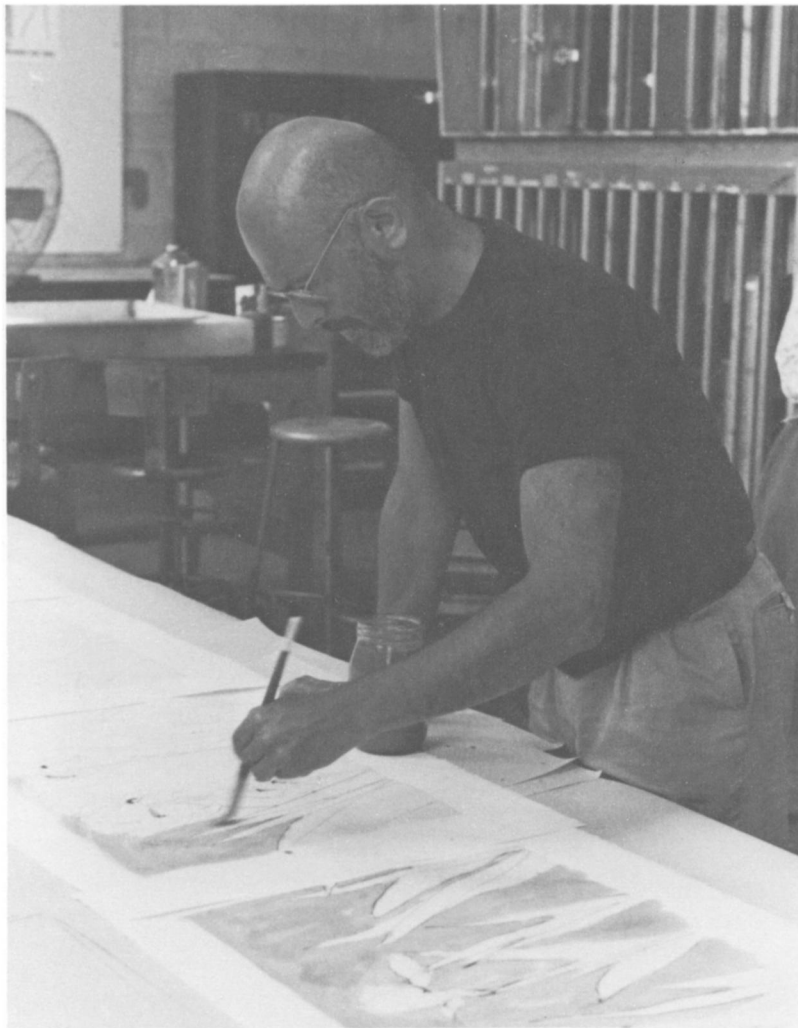


Fig. 5

Fig. 5 Jim Dine at Hartford Art School, June 1979. (photo: Barbara Calogero)

Fig. 6 Jim Dine and Aldo Crommelynck. (photo: Piero Crommelynck)



Fig. 6

JD: Right. I'm glad you said that.

SH: *Certainly I don't suggest that you think about it before you do the work, or as you are doing it, but what about afterwards?*

JD: No, I know you don't. You're talking about afterwards. I don't know why I do it.

SH: *But it is consistent.*

JD: It is consistent, you think? I can't say.

SH: *You have also made references at other times to your interest in "interiors," in an introspective sense. Would depicting objects or figures as you do be indicative of how you understand "interior" as a spatial term?*

JD: I'm interested in the life of the

interior self, and that's what I meant.

SH: *Wouldn't that have a bearing on these isolated figures?*

JD: Well, it might have a bearing if you interpreted it that way or read literary references into it, or something like that, but not as far as I am conscious of.

SH: *Does the construction of an image hold literary implications for you? Is there a correlation for you between the autonomy of a word and of an object, between a group of words and an arrangement of objects? For example, in poetry, the focus might be on the power of one word in isolation, or on words in crucial relationship to one another.*

JD: Very interesting. I don't know. Do you mean the power of one word as opposed to the power of a mark?

SH: *No, analogous to the power of one object.*

JD: I guess so. I don't know. Listen, words to me are not the same.

SH: *OK. I don't want to labor the point. How, then, do you see yourself dealing with the issue of space? Continuing a course begun by Cézanne, the Russian Constructivists and Abstract Expressionists overthrew and redefined the Renaissance use of three-dimensional space.*

JD: I have never understood those terms in relationship to me or in relationship to other people's art. I am aware, I think, of the way people use space in a certain way to depict an object, an object coming forwards or going backwards. I've never been able to think about space, and people are always talking about it. I'm not being obtuse or difficult when I tell you that I don't understand when they talk about De Kooning's space or Pollock's or Cézanne's

Fig. 7 Jim Dine,
Dark Blue Self-Portrait
with White Crayon,
1976, etching. (courtesy
Pace Editions)

or whomever's. Someone wrote me once and said, "I'm not quite sure about the space in your still lifes—your use of space." Well, neither am I; I don't know what they're talking about, I really don't. I never think about it, never, ever. When I see a landscape, I see it as different parts, but never as anything necessarily far away or near. Obviously, I see close-up and far away, but it doesn't bother me or interest me. It's all of the same importance.

SH: *When I was speaking about the isolated nature of what you depict, the focus of the questions had more to do with how you see yourself in relation to your own work. In viewing other people's work, one can readily see how their work is like them, and how qualities of their personalities are pervasive throughout their art.*

JD: My work is like me, I think. Definitely, it is me. I am it. I am the work. There is no question about that. I probably am as closely linked to my work as any artist I know. That is, if you know me, you know my work. I'm not closed off in that way.

SH: *Could you say, if one knows your work, one knows you?*

JD: I don't know. That I don't know.

SH: *You have expressed a great deal of interest in the work of your contemporaries, such as Balibus, Beuys, and Lucien Freud. In relation to where your work is now, has any emphasis changed?*

JD: They aren't my contemporaries; I don't consider them so. They are older men. I have no contemporaries who are particularly important to me. I like the paintings of John Walker—an English painter no one knows about—it isn't particularly important to talk about. I am in-

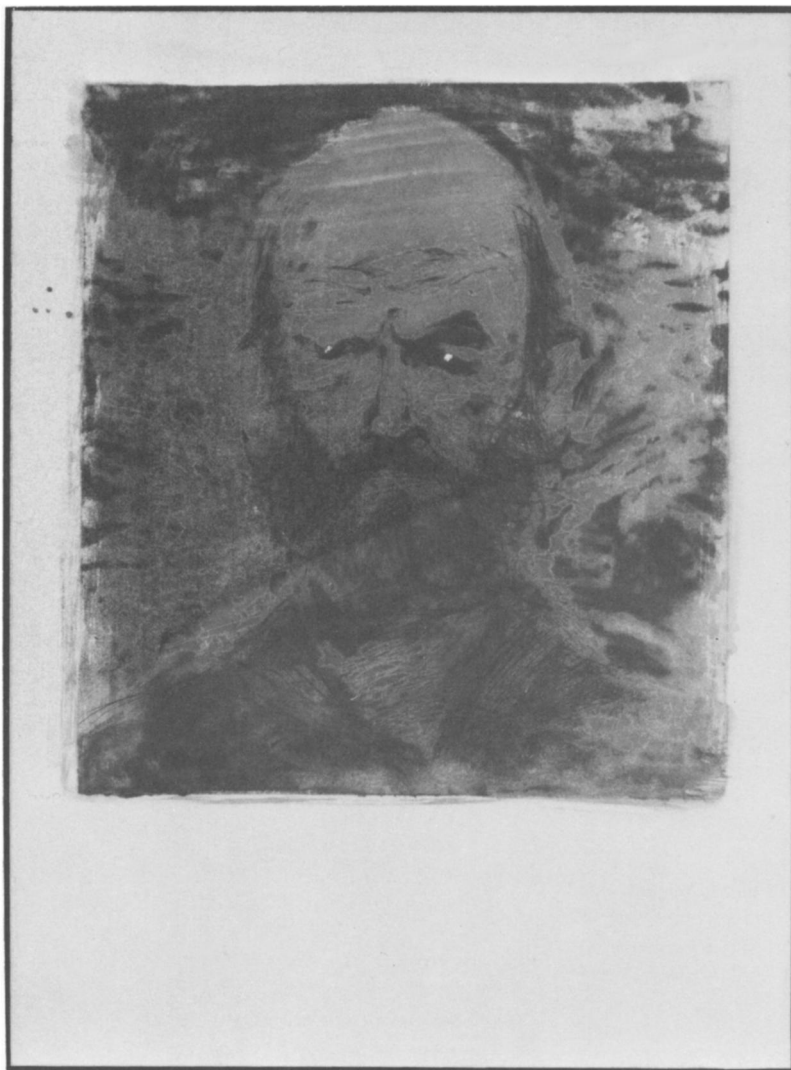


Fig. 7

spired by his paintings. I don't feel that I am under the influence of anyone. Nothing that I see really inspires me. I am more interested in myself and in my own work. I want to try and make some healthy paintings.

SH: *Does it bother you that you are not seeing inspiring things?*

JD: Do you mean, would I like to be inspired? Well, one would always hope for that—it's like being in love or something. But it's not necessarily important to me right now. I have enough on my hands with my own work.

SH: *Your works in the past—say, beginning with the black bathroom paintings and continuing through the tool and bathrobe images—have seemingly used autobiographical references in a metaphorical sense. Your recent work has become less and less metaphorical, and the new figurative drawings are straightforward portraits. Do you see the Eight Sheets as transitional? Even though the figures were portraits of specific people, their identities were protected by the overall concept of the character novel, whereas the recent portraits—especially the self-portraits—are probing, direct explorations of the*

human figure and specific personalities.

JD: Right. No, I don't feel that the *Eight Sheets* are transitional; it's just that I was hiding behind them. I wasn't able to make just a regular figure drawing. There are other things you could say, too: that my work before it became specifically figurative was also realistic in that sense. It was what it was. People aren't the same as metaphorical things, OK, but it was what it was, too. It was just the tool.

SH: *Do you attribute this change in part to the development of skills or to a personal change of attitude?*

JD: Yes, a much different attitude. I like my work much better, and I am much more confident in myself. I think my work is much more consistently good than it once was. I think that I am at the height of my powers as an artist, that I have much more control over what I do. I think that what I make is for the most part more profound than it once was, because I think that I am more profound as a person than I once was.

SH: *How would this correlate?*

JD: The figure is more important to me because it is a more difficult and complex thing to handle, and therefore it gives

more back. It would seem to me obvious that a hammer is less important than a human figure. The figure is more loaded. A hammer is an inanimate object that you could charge with certain power and is a metaphor for other things, but why do *that* when you can spend your time probing the human figure, which has so many layers already built in, in this person whom you are drawing? Since we are sure of that species, it brings with it so much already known, that one can receive so many responses—*real* responses. How much can you get out of a hammer? Quite a bit, I guess, but not compared with a full-blown portrait.

SH: *Alexander Calder said he never wanted to teach because he always wanted to reserve the right to change his mind. In view of your involvement with Cooper Union, what are your pedagogical attitudes?*

JD: I never feel constrained by that. I always change my mind anyway. I like to teach because it keeps *me* sharp. It makes me have to explain things to myself, so that they're clear to others; plus, I like to see other people's work. I teach rather strictly, in the sense that I have a specific thing that I have the students draw every week. Last year it was a still life, this year it's the figure: same pose, four hours, once a week, every week. And they have to erase it every time they are through. In the first place, it's a way of showing them how to build up this historical thing you make with these marks, these tracks. Also, it gives them confidence that they can do it again. If they can do it once, they can do it again. Erasing it, too, takes away the importance of the product. That is important for an art student. It sharpens their eyes, and it keeps *me* sharp because I am looking through everyone else's eyes. It's as if I'm drawing there also. I'm constantly correcting with my eyes. It's spending an afternoon looking at the human figure. It's almost as good as drawing, and I learn from the students all of the time.

SH: *Given the interest and opportunity, how would you shape an overall curriculum of an art school?*

JD: I advocate nothing fancy, only that people learn how to draw and to paint, so that when they get out of school, they are free enough to pursue their ideas without having to worry about technique. I don't mean just pure technique with the hand, but I mean hand-eye things. (This is really anti-Bauhaus.) I think you have to learn to draw the figure and how to use paint in a certain way. I see no reason to go to school to learn to be a Conceptual artist; that seems to me stupid. Art education, it seems to me, is not so complicated; you just learn to draw and paint, and that's it. Maybe it should be done in two years

rather than four.

SH: *So you emphasize technical skill rather than content?*

JD: I don't see how you can teach content. You can tell people to go look at paintings or anything else, and if they are interested enough, they will anyway. It doesn't matter whom you tell that to—you're not looking through anyone's eyes. You can start someone and say: go look at this painting or that painting. In that way, you can share your life as an artist. But then, of course, some teachers are not very good artists or not even practicing artists, really. You should be sharing your life as an adult with students. You can teach them how to look more closely at something, or how to scrutinize an object or model, but there isn't much else you can teach. You can teach graphic techniques, like how to etch, and you can teach drawing—I mean rendering, direct realistic figure drawing—as simply and as devoid of artifice as you can; but that shouldn't take four years.

SH: *Do you find yourself commenting on content in student work?*

JD: No. But if content is there, I am so happy, because it means they are rather deep and mature at that point, or that something is coming through. If it isn't there, then it's too bad. I don't expect to get a winner all of the time.

SH: *Recently you have worked with large Polaroids at M.I.T. Do you find the process able to accommodate your insight with a flexibility equal to that of drawing, prints, or other mediums?*

JD: No, But then, I don't think photography is particularly interesting.

SH: *But do you not have an extensive photograph collection?*

JD: I do, but it has not been sustaining for me over the years. I don't know why. I used to be much more interested in photography than I am now. Much more.

SH: *Do you find that you don't look at photographs anymore?*

JD: Not much. I like it quite a bit; it interests me sort of, but I'm very happy to have it in book form. I don't need the photograph anymore—the real object.

SH: *What do you think of the excessive interest in exotic papers, photographic devices, and other esoteric or technically complex processes? In some cases, the techniques are completely beyond the scope of the artist's skills, requiring artisans to take an active role in physically completing the image. For example, in Frank Stella's first cast-paper project with Ken Tyler (who worked in collaboration with John Kobler), Stella did very little to directly manipulate the placement of color pulp on the paper mold. What do you think of this working methodology?*

JD: That's their business. I'm not inter-

ested in it. I look at it, I guess, but it doesn't bother me one way or another. It just isn't my interest when it gets that technical. That way of working takes it out of my hands, and that's never interested me.

SH: *In reference to the eleven-foot-long, hand-painted iris prints: have you titled them?*

JD: I'm not sure; I think I did, but I have forgotten.

SH: *Is there an autobiographical reference in the image of the iris that functions in a similar way to the bathrobe or tool images?*

JD: Yes. It reminded me of my Grandma's irises. They are *my* irises, and I drew them from life on the plates directly. It was the first time I have ever done drypoint like that: I drew them with Magic Marker on the plate, then cut into the Magic Marker. I have done a lot of drypoint like that recently.

SH: *What are your thoughts about the excessive size and unusual process of printing-painting-reprinting, and how does this function in relation to how you view the success of the print?*

JD: I have no thought about it. In terms of the unusual size, I'm rather offended by it. It's too big and unwieldy. But I did it because I had an opportunity to do that, and I wanted something like a long frieze. In terms of the painting, that is a technique that I developed by printing it, then painting it, then reprinting it. In Jerusalem, I've painted up to five or six times in between. You can build up something that's much less a multiple object, much more a single thing. **End**