Mill Valley Oral History Program
A collaboration between the Mill Valley Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library

Robert Green

An Oral History Interview
Conducted by Abby Wasserman in 2019

TITLE: Oral History of Robert Green
INTERVIEWER: Abby Wasserman
DESCRIPTION: Transcript, 19 pages
INTERVIEW DATE: January 23rd, 2019

In this oral history, gallery owner Robert Green recounts his life in the art world. Born in 1941 in New Jersey, Robert grew up in the New York metropolitan area. He attended Dickinson College in Pennsylvania, after which he joined the U.S. Coast Guard. Robert worked in publishing and advertising before moving into the fine art sector. Robert recounts traveling the world for 22 years as an enterprising young art dealer before he settled in Mill Valley and opened his gallery, Robert Green Fine Arts, at 154 Throckmorton Ave. Robert discusses a number of the artists he has worked with over the decades, such as Sam Francis and Paul Jenkins, as well as the ins and outs of the art world, concluding with why Mill Valley is a wonderful place to live and operate an art gallery.

Oral History of Robert Green

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Editor's note: This transcript has been reviewed by Robert Green, who made minor corrections and clarifications to the original.

0:00:00 Abby Wasserman: This is Abby Wasserman, taking an oral history from Robert Green on January 23rd, 2019. Bob, tell me a little about your background, where you are from, and when you came to Mill Valley.

0:00:21 Robert Green: I was born in 1941 in Jersey City, New Jersey. My dad was a professional fighter, so we spent a lot of time in the New York area, moving from one apartment to another, wherever he was getting fights.

0:00:40 Abby Wasserman: Was he a fighter himself or was he a promoter?

0:00:43 Robert Green: Professional boxer. As a matter of fact, he never achieved the acclaim that other people figured he would achieve. What was his name? Jack Dempsey. After [Dempsey] retired, he had an athletic column for the *New York Post* and he picked my dad to be the next welterweight champ of the world. That never happened. He did have a shot at Tony Zale, who was indeed the welterweight champ of the world, but Zale beat him.

0:01:21: At any rate, I went to college on the East Coast, a small school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, Dickinson. Right after college my first job was in college textbook publishing, for Rand McNally. I was both the procurement editor and a salesperson for the few books that we did indeed have, working primarily in Texas and Oklahoma. In 1964, I joined the Coast Guard because my draft number was up and coming. And after getting demobilized, took the job for Rand McNally here in California and worked at U.C. Berkeley and Stanford primarily, trying to put together writing projects that would serve as college textbooks.

0:02:17 Abby Wasserman: So, were you interested in being a professional writer? Was that where you thought you were headed?

0:02:21 Robert Green: No, I had no idea what I was going to do. It was just a job that was offered to me, and it seemed like a heck of a lot of fun spending your days on a college campus. It was a good job. I met a lot of interesting people, but I never felt quite equipped, intellectually, to do it. The people I was talking with were very, very well-esteemed within their particular disciplines, and for the most part I didn't know what they were talking about [chuckles], but apparently I did okay. And then after four years with that, I took a job with Young & Rubicam, an advertising agency, and that was just wonderful, particularly so, since the powers that be in New York decided they were going to close the San Francisco office, because all production was being done in L.A. anyway, and move us all down there. But, as a young guy living in San Francisco, there was no way that I was gonna move to Los Angeles. So, for the last year I did everything: I was

account liaison, I did the creative stuff, wrote the copy, and did the storyboards. So that was a lot of fun. And then, one thing leads to another, by 1969 I needed a job, and I kept reading in the newspapers that the Japanese were going hither and yon to acquire Western European and American contemporary art. I figured, "What the hell, I'll pack a sack and go live in the Ginza for a while," and see if I could sell anything.[1]

0:04:04 Abby Wasserman: Now tell me, Bob, were you married by this time or were you a single man? Did you have a family?

0:04:09 Robert Green: Single guy, yeah. I got married in 1972. But anyway, that's how it started. And then, I was doing pretty well. I was paying what I thought was a lot of money for a studio apartment in San Francisco, $175 a month, and I found that I could buy a home in Marin County — figuring in the mortgage, the taxes and the insurance — and it would cost me $165. And I was buying a designer spec house in Mill Valley. So I think, "How can you beat that?" There was no real estate boom. The only people that were living in the place where older bohemians and younger hippies. Great town, it is still wonderfully bucolic.

0:04:56 Abby Wasserman: Tell me a little bit about life in Mill Valley when you first moved here. Where did you shop? What did you do for entertainment?

0:05:04 Robert Green: Well, if we back track a little bit, when I arrived at bootcamp, as we were driving onto the base, there, standing underneath the American flag, was this rather chubby guy in his underwear with a watch belt on and a sailor cap. It turned out that he was a member of the football team and that they caught him, instead of standing his watch properly attired, they caught him standing his watch in exactly the outfit he was wearing underneath the flag. So, he and I became friends, 'cause I played football as well. Ross turned up one night in Mill Valley when I first moved in, and he became my bat man. I was making enough money to afford a butler so he became my butler, he did all my shopping, all my cooking and all my cleaning.

0:06:06 Abby Wasserman: What was his name?

0:06:07 Robert Green: Ross Pullen. And he, eventually, right after working for me, he got a job as the chief chef for the Governor of Oregon.

0:06:16 Abby Wasserman: Oh Bob, that's such an improbable story.

0:06:19 Robert Green: Yeah, it's a silly story. I mean, I can go in deeper than that, but I'll not mention anything else.

0:06:27 Abby Wasserman: So this was in 1969.

0:06:30 Robert Green: This was 1969, and Ross sort of lived and worked for me until 1971. At this point, I started a little company called the New Art where we were trying to

[1] Ginza is an upscale district in Tokyo, Japan.—Editor.

sort of push photography forward as a fine art form. There was only one photography gallery in the Bay Area, and that was called the Focus Gallery in San Francisco. But we attacked it from a different angle. With the advertising company, there was wonderful commercial photography crossing my desk every day, so I knew most of these photographers, and every one of them wanted to do what they would call "fine art photography." So we started to publish their work, but not photographically. We did it with offset lithography, and we sold it with point of purchase displays out of bookstores, department stores, and interior design shops. And crazily enough, we did beautifully with that.

0:07:40: So I made a fair whack-a-dough doing that. I didn't do it as well as my competitors; when they came on the scene, they did it much better. Hallmark did a program much better than us. There were other big card companies that already had access to the market and they did it much better. But at that stage of the game, I made a few dollars and thoroughly enjoyed myself, so I wasn't bothered. And then at the same time, I was taking fine art paintings, watercolors, and work on paper, original print, to Japan, and so I was getting started in a different direction.

0:08:19 Abby Wasserman: The artists whose watercolors and paintings you took to Japan, could you say a few of those names?

0:08:27 Robert Green: Yeah. I was starting out, having no idea really what people were interested in. I knew that it would be very difficult for me to find up-and-coming, emerging painters that the Japanese might be willing to buy. So, I had essentially name-brand work. I brought Picasso drawings, Picasso original etchings, Matisse drawings and original lithography. I did work with Sam Francis, so I was bringing work on paper, unique work on paper of his, and Paul Jenkins as well. But I wasn't getting it from them. I was getting it off the secondary market.

0:09:08 Abby Wasserman: Tell me about Sam Francis and Paul Jenkins. At that point, were they both California artists?

0:09:17 Robert Green: Yeah. Sam was born in San Mateo. He was pre-med at Berkeley. When the war broke out, he joined the fledgling Army Air Corps as a pilot, crashed his plane and spent two years literally on his stomach at Letterman Hospital. He used painting as a form of recuperative therapy. When he was finally able to walk again, although he struggled with those injuries all through his life, he went back to Cal, got a studio arts degree and, because of an intellectual bent, got a Master's in Fine Art History. Sam was the marrying kind, so he married his high school sweetheart, who looked after him whilst he was at —

0:10:13 Abby Wasserman: Letterman.

0:10:14 Robert Green: At Letterman. They were married for about four years. He met a gal named Muriel Goodwin, who was from Berkeley and a wonderful painter, and they went off to Paris and spent the decade of the '50s in Paris. I think her name was — his

first wife — was Vera Miller. She loved him all of her life, and he actually looked after her all of his life. And the same was true with Muriel Goodwin. Even though they divorced too, Sam met the heir to the Japanese Idemitsu banking fortune, married her, but looked after Muriel. Muriel ended her life with Alzheimer's, living in The Redwoods. I remember she used to come down to the different shows I would do with Francis, and she would talk about how strongly she still felt about him as a human being and as a painter. And I used to go up to The Redwoods and give little talks, sometimes about Francis, sometimes about the flow of contemporary art, and she would always be very thankful for that.

0:11:34: I remember the last time I did that I finally found two of Muriel Goodwin's paintings that she did whilst in Paris. Unfortunately, she didn't remember who Muriel Goodwin was at that point, nor did she ever remember that she was a painter. But the good thing was the audience knew.

0:11:55 Abby Wasserman: And that must have been very meaningful for them.

0:11:57 Robert Green: Yeah.

0:11:58 Abby Wasserman: How about Paul Jenkins?

0:12:00 Robert Green: Paul, that's another strange story. He was born the same year, the same month, two weeks apart from Sam, and they traveled the same path. They were young guys living in Paris, exchanging ideas, exchanging thoughts. And as a matter of fact, the very last Sam Francis print show I did, did not come from the Francis estate, which was totally sold out, but rather from Paul Jenkins' personal collection of Sam's prints. They exchanged work throughout their lifetime.

0:12:37 Abby Wasserman: And Paul Jenkins was originally from where?

0:12:40 Robert Green: From Kansas City.

0:12:41 Abby Wasserman: From Kansas City.

0:12:42 Robert Green: Yeah, he joined, I guess, the Merchant Marine during the war, and got demobilized somewhere on the East Coast, took advantage of the GI Bill and went to, I think, the Art Students League in New York City. It was very prominent in the day, and the rest is history. He was a painter and a successful painter all of his life. Those are the unusual things about both Sam and Paul. They never had to work a day job. They were painters all of their lives and each one was extraordinarily successful. Sam would have been a world-beater, but he died prematurely in 1994 at 70 years of age. Paul lived on till 89, and was remarkably successful.

0:13:37 Abby Wasserman: Let's talk more in a little while about the other people in your current gallery, stable, if stable is the right word.

0:13:45 Robert Green: Probably, yeah.

0:13:46 Abby Wasserman: It's kind of an old-fashioned word for the painters or artists that are carried by a gallery.

0:13:52 Robert Green: It almost seems like I was beating them or something.

0:13:54 Abby Wasserman: [laughs] I know it's a —

0:13:55 Robert Green: "Get back in the stable!" [laughs]

0:13:58 Abby Wasserman: But let's go back now to the 22 years that you spent selling overseas, traveling a great deal, I'm assuming after your marriage.

0:14:10 Robert Green: Yeah.

0:14:10 Abby Wasserman: And tell us also your wife's name, and then a little bit about those 22 years of adventure. You have described them as ridiculously lucrative and a hell of an adventure.

0:14:25 Robert Green: Yeah, I mean, lucrative from the point of view that I did not have to maintain a lease on a bricks and mortar gallery. I did not have to do any of those things. I could buy exactly what I wanted to buy, and the profits were all mine. It just turned out that no one had ever done anything like that. And to this day, no one's ever done anything like that. There were private dealers that would go back into the trade, to the galleries, and sell secondary-market work to them. But as far as going and knocking on doors, cold, of would-be collectors in strange parts of the world, nobody ever did that. And I guess it was because they figured people would be quite frightened. "Who is this person? What are they trying to put forth?" Just the opposite, everybody was — particularly in Australia — "Come on in, we'll throw another shrimp on the barbie. Come on in, we'll have another beer." It was before the internet, so where were you gonna get news and ideas and what was going on in the rest of the world, particularly in the United States, particularly when you talking about such a small field as fine art, or the dissemination of fine art? So yeah, it was just wonderful.

0:15:49: Here are one or two stories that really sort of clarified the success. There was a guy named Joe Henderson, a Jungian therapist. He was from here, but worked in New York, and then finally ended up working here on the West Coast, lived in Ross. And Sam Francis was really interested in Jungian psychiatric or psychological therapies, so they would talk after midnight. Sam and he never met physically, but they had many, many, many phone conversations. But stepping back a little bit, Joe was also the psychiatrist that introduced Jackson Pollock to his demons. Jackson Pollock was tutored by an American regionalist painter Thomas Hart Benton. He was painting essentially American regional landscape — excuse me, and people-scape — but when he went to see Henderson, he couldn't talk about his demons. So Joe said, "You should draw them." And that was the beginning of his break with realism. It was an introduction to Jackson

when he was viewing and drawing these demons of surrealism. But towards the end of these sessions, they started to abstract out. Henderson really had a significant impact on the flow of Pollock's art. It also got him into deep trouble, because in 19 — I think it was — 68, he did an exhibition of those drawings which was an affront to the Hippocratic Oath. He should not have been showing that stuff. He did it with Fred Maxwell in San Francisco.

0:17:46 Abby Wasserman: Maxwell Gallery.

0:17:49 Robert Green: Maxwell Galleries. They were very successful. There were 80 of these drawings, and they sold a big bunch of them, and I fortunately bought two without thinking about reselling them. But when I first turned up in Sydney, the government had allowed funds to be put forth to build the first Australia National Gallery in Canberra. They had yet to break ground, but the director James Mollison was already acquiring work and he bought Pollock's *Blue Poles* for the princely sum of $3 million in 1971, I think. This was the biggest scandal ever to hit Australia in those days. There they were in the middle of a recession, and here they are spending $3 million for all this slash and dash. I mean, this story was covered in every portion of the newspaper from the front page, to the business section, to the entertainment section, and on and on like that. Well, I turned up with my two Pollock drawings, and sure enough I sold both of them for princely rewards. So that was one thing.

0:19:11 Abby Wasserman: That's so interesting about Joe Henderson, because I believe he's still living.

0:19:15 Robert Green: No, he's gone now.

0:19:16 Abby Wasserman: Oh, is he gone?

0:19:17 Robert Green: He died at 104. I think it was probably 2005.

0:19:24 Abby Wasserman: Did you know him yourself, well?

0:19:25 Robert Green: Pretty well, yeah.

0:19:26 Abby Wasserman: I hear he was a wonderful therapist.

0:19:29 Robert Green: Yeah, he was quite a guy. He called me near the end of his life and he says, "I just got a package. I haven't opened it yet, but it's from this guy, Sam Francis. Sam had been dead for a while now, and he said, "Well, you should come on up to the house. We'll open it together, and I've got a bottle of Glenlivet." The few times I was up there, that's what we were doing, drinking Scotch. So, I went up there, we opened the package, and there was a work on canvas, one of Sam's works on canvas — a mandala, peering into the void, very Jungian. It came from Sam's estate. He bequeathed it as a thank you for all the conversations that he had with Joe.

0:20:29 Abby Wasserman: Wonderful story. Let's now segue into Mill Valley. You must have come home from time to time, or you wouldn't still be married —

0:20:43 Robert Green: I'm still married, yeah. [chuckles]

0:20:43 Abby Wasserman: What is your wife's name? She's from —

0:20:47 Robert Green: Britain.

0:20:47 Abby Wasserman: Great Britain.

0:20:49 Robert Green: Her name is Pauline Tomlinson. She flew for many years with Pan-American, so often times she'd be on the flights that I was taking down under. I was flying discount, and that made it rather inexpensive. And then — this is just a little bit of a sidebar — I had met so many people down there that I no longer had to stay in hotels, I always had a place to stay.

0:21:27 Abby Wasserman: Oh, beautiful, beautiful. So, with this very lucrative business going on, what made you decide that you wanted to open a gallery and be in one place?

0:21:40 Robert Green: Well, by then I knew what I felt the successful gallery scene was all about. You never ever showed anything that you truly didn't believe in. You started with people that you felt were thoroughly impassioned by the imagery they were making, and then you too had to be thoroughly impassioned about that. You never worried about the would-be acquisitor. They would find their way there if you were doing the first two edges of a triangle correctly. And then, if you talked it up enough, you'd find somebody that either was willing to listen or who had a similar sensibility as you did. That is sort of the way it has played out. I knew that I was dealing at this point primarily with work on canvas, which was no longer portable. I could not bring it with me like I did with work on paper. After 22 years of being on and off aircraft, I was fed up, and I was also very tired. In the early days in Australia, and even some of the places I went to in Latin America, it was all new to me, so I was having a great time looking around, as well as trying to deal fine art.

0:23:02: But after a while I'd get to Australia, I'd hit the runway running, calling people, and the three or four weeks that I stayed there, I was seeing two or three people a day, so I was thoroughly exhausted. I knew I needed to stay home. Now, I get jet lag if I go to San Rafael. I don't travel anywhere, certainly not by plane. We did go down to Australia last February with the Queen Elizabeth, but that's the way I travel now.

0:23:32 Abby Wasserman: Bob, who owns the building where your gallery is?

0:23:37 Robert Green: A fella named George Bennett, he was the pharmacist at Lockwood's Pharmacy, and his family has been buying — I guess started buying — property in Marin County in the 1930s. George has been a wonderful landlord to me.

0:23:53 Abby Wasserman: If I may ask, what was the rent you were paying when you first opened the gallery? And has it gone up very much?

0:24:01 Robert Green: No, he's been pretty good about that. I think probably — guessing again — about $1,500 or $1,600, 28 years ago.

0:24:09 Abby Wasserman: What is the square footage of your gallery?

0:24:11 Robert Green: 900.

0:24:12 Abby Wasserman: 900 square feet.

0:24:13 Robert Green: I guess if you count the bathroom, maybe 1000.

0:24:15 Abby Wasserman: And the address of the gallery is 154 Throckmorton, correct?

0:24:20 Robert Green: Yes.

0:24:20 Abby Wasserman: And that's the only gallery you've been in?

0:24:22 Robert Green: Yes, and that was an interesting thing. When I decided to do a gallery, Donna Seager was working for me. She's always been a good buddy, and she was terrific, helping me do that thing on Saturday. But we were talking, and she did not want to commute into the city. She had two little young ones that she had to see to. I didn't know what to do. Do you start in the city because that's where the action is or do you stay home and avoid the commute? And the truth is, that was the smartest decision I ever made [choosing Mill Valley], because people do indeed find you. So, what was the question? [chuckles]

0:25:04 Abby Wasserman: Well, I was delighted that you brought up Donna, because I was going to ask. I know it was your 50th anniversary party the other day, and you mentioned a special thank you to Donna, so I was going to ask you about that relationship. She was also living in Mill Valley at that time?

0:25:24 Robert Green: She was, yeah.

0:25:24 Abby Wasserman: I see. Tell me about how she was as your assistant.

0:25:33 Robert Green: She was working for one of the galleries on Fisherman's Wharf, Hanson Gallery. She just got out here, I guess, and her marriage had fallen apart, so she needed a job. So she was working there, but she didn't enjoy all that heavy commercial situation. And one of my painters, Mark Erickson — a strange story about Mark, or a funny story. He came to the gallery — not to the gallery, but to my home when I was working privately — and he said, "What can I do to help earn my tuition at

the Art Institute?" So, he made my frames. He became a good friend, and by the late '80s I started selling his work. And he and Donna were boyfriend and girlfriend, so that's how I met Donna, and we just became fast friends. She was always so industrious, so good with people. But I could see that whenever somebody is the boss, particularly in a business where it's defined as art dealing, they always wanna deal with the owner because they wanna be sure they're getting the very best deal.

0:26:50: So even though Donna was more than capable, probably more capable than me, she needed to do her own thing. I always encouraged her to get out on your own. She went back into the city for a while and worked for a few galleries on Bush Street. It was inevitable that she'd be doing her own thing, and she does it so wonderfully well. Plus, she's got a brilliant partner in Suzanne Gray. Suzanne helped me a lot as well.

0:27:22 Abby Wasserman: You have a good relationship, I think, with artistic women. I believe you have two women — would be Charlotte and Naoko? — in your gallery at this point?

0:27:36 Robert Green: Well, Charlotte's back after a 10 year stay. She was with me for 10 years, but then she had a baby and was being a mama. I've always encouraged her to be a painter; she's a hell of a painter. As a matter of fact, the first show we did with her we sold out the first weekend, and that's been true of every show.

0:28:00 Abby Wasserman: And her last name is Bernström?

0:28:01 Robert Green: Bernström, yeah. The kid's now in school, and she always enjoyed the dealing part of it, so she's back for one day a week now, which is literally one-third of my week 'cause I'm only open three days. And then Naoko is just somebody about whom I got a call from a New York critic, and he said, "You've got to look at this Japanese woman's art. I think you'll really enjoy it." He had written several articles about her. And I figured, "Why are you calling me and why are you suggesting that I go over to Oakland, where the woman is now living, to look at this stuff?" I did, and I couldn't come to grips with it, but I have still kept it. And when there's empty wall space, I hang it — not for the public, but just so I can live with it.

0:28:52: She's a really, really nice person. The biggest problem she has is her free flow of pigment like in the Pollock style, so people always see that. And that's such a misfortune, because it's a visual language — I think I mentioned this the other day — there are only so many visual words in that vocabulary. If you can get feeling across by doing that, I'll never deny that. And plus, at that point, I wasn't thinking of the next 50 [years], and now I am. So, maybe I'd consider doing something on an individual basis with Naoko.

0:29:33 Abby Wasserman: You said to me before this interview that you had considered closing the gallery after 50 years, but you decided not to close the gallery and to go for the next 50 after all. Tell me a little bit of that decision.

0:29:47 Robert Green: I'm gonna do that too. [laughs] I'll be 127. Yeah, well, the decision was thrust upon me. I was doing a Paul Jenkins show because Suzanne Jenkins called me one day from Paris and said she was selling their Parisian home, and in the home were 12 paintings that she was not even aware of that dated back to the 1970s. And the imagery was atypical of Paul. They were geometric, and Paul is known for the free-flowing medium canvas. At any rate, she says, "Do you wanna show them?" So I said, "Sure." This was in January of 2017. I had nine of those paintings, and I sold seven immediately, and still had two up on the wall. And then George Bennett walks in — he's my landlord — and he says, "Bob, there's a bit of a problem. There is some question about the structural integrity of the foundation of the building and I'm gonna have an engineer come in and look at it. But they'll be in and out. No problem. You'll be up and running within two weeks." Well, it turned out there was significant wood rot and termite damage, so I was closed for nine months. Not closed, but everything was plasticized, the entire joint was just one gigantic plastic tunnel.

0:31:13: And I'm wondering what the hell am I doing? Should I continue paying? Well, he wasn't charging me, but I'm still paying for insurance and everything else. I realized that I didn't know what to do with myself. I was playing tennis. I was going to movie matinees. My wife and I would take the occasional drive in the countryside, but it wasn't enough. And I figured I can continue working, and I want to continue working, but I'm not gonna do it on a full-time basis anymore. Can you do it in three days a week? I discovered you can.

0:31:49 Abby Wasserman: How do you do it in three days a week? Some new techniques that you've developed or —

0:31:57 Robert Green: Well, the only new technique is enabling people to look without preconceptions. When somebody comes in and they ask me a question about a painter, that means they're at least looking. Now I encourage them to look for a while, and to look at that work in a very humble manner. Maybe it gives you a little tingle. You'd be surprised the number of people that would normally come in through the door, make the round about, and they were gone. They had already made a decision that, "My kid could do this." But in truth, you give them the opportunity to look a little bit, and you introduce them to the fact that this is indeed a communicative language, and this is the truest form, the most courageous form, of making an image, because you feel the color you choose, you allow your arm to move freely the way it wants to go. And these are about all the little mini emotions that are going on in your life without any thought about a marketplace or anything else. It's just truth and courage. I try to make people aware of that, and they tend to tell other people, so we're still doing pretty good.

0:33:16 Abby Wasserman: I love what you've said about the process, how intuitive it is, and how individual it is. Tell me does a gallery owner have to limit the number of artists that he or she represents? And how do you make those limits? Do you have a number, for example, that you know you can represent truly well? How do you do it?

0:33:44 Robert Green: I think there are too many galleries — if you look on the internet, there are too many galleries with 30, 40, 50 painters. How can you possibly advance their careers? How often can you give them a show? If a show lasts a month, the next show is gonna be four or five years down the road. That doesn't work. What I try to do is make each exhibition at least two months, preferably three months. Because let's face it, people don't come in the gallery every month, they don't come in the gallery every three months. So, for the people that are coming, this is a brand-new exhibition. And to do it to where you're being fully responsible to each one of your painters, you've got to give them an exhibition at least every 18 months.

0:34:37 Abby Wasserman: And so that means approximately how many artists?

0:34:40 Robert Green: Six, seven or eight. Now it isn't such a big deal, because as you probably noticed, everybody on the wall is dead.

0:34:49 Abby Wasserman: I have noticed that, except Charlotte.

0:34:51 Robert Green: Except Charlotte and Mark.

0:34:54 Abby Wasserman: And Mark. Is Mark a Mill Valley artist, or did he —

0:34:58 Robert Green: Mark is now — I'm gonna make some noise here in a little bit. He lived and works in Oakland, but now he lives and works and Venice, as well. His father was an airplane designer for Lockheed Martin, and early on they bought properties — with an -*s* — in Venice on the canals. So, he had those, and that's some of the most desirable real estate in California, and they had a pretty rich portfolio of investments, so at age 64 or 65, whatever it was, he became a multi-millionaire overnight.

0:35:39: And I guess, several years ago, he gets this email from a young woman in the Alps, in the Swiss Alps, who's the painter or starting to be a painter, and she said, "I love your work. I'm coming to California. Could I possibly visit your studio and see it live and in person?" He says, "Sure," and sure enough they hit it off and they get married. But the funny thing is she's 22 and he's 64. [chuckles] But I absolutely love it, because I love the direction that his painting is going. All of a sudden, he's gone to a different level, different level stylistically, a different level image content. So, I'm as pleased as punch, and she's just a nice girl.

0:36:30 Abby Wasserman: You know, Bob, some gallery owners I've talked with in the past, they seem to be very conservative. They don't really want their artists to change, they want them to keep on doing what was most commercially successful.

0:36:42 Robert Green: Yeah.

0:36:42 Abby Wasserman: How do you deal with this?

0:36:44 Robert Green: I encourage them to go in whatever direction they feel they want to go and need to go. But I tell them that it may not be for me. John McCormick, who Elins Eagles-Smith now show, started to do tonal turn-of-the-century landscapes. Prior to that, he did really rich abstraction of a tonal nature, and I loved that stuff. I appreciated what he was doing with the tonal landscapes, but it wasn't for me. Jim Shay, another guy, do you remember Jim? He would be on the wall periodically at the gallery. Wonderful architect, he quit his day job and became a full-time painter. He did these wonderful rhythmic landscapes of West Marin. They were almost abstracted, but he continued to do them and he would constantly tell me how much he hated doing them. And I said, "Well then you gotta do something different." I got tired of hearing that. I encourage them to do something different, but I always let them know that we may not carry on, 'cause I've gotta believe, like I said earlier, in exactly what you're doing.

0:37:56: One little sidebar: There was a painter, post-World War II painter, by the name of Edward Corbett. He was a Renaissance man, he was a poet, he was an author, he was a painter, he was a sculptor, he was everything. Brilliant work. I sold a few of his paintings and I had a number of collectors wanting more. There was no estate, there was no family, but he lived and died in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Back in those early days, painters like Sam and Paul Jenkins they would swap work, so I ran an ad in the *Provincetown Times* saying I'm gonna be in town for a week and if there was anybody with Ed Corbett paintings, I'd be very intrigued, I'd be willing to buy them. And sure enough, I got a bunch of old painters turning up with Corbett paintings, and indeed I did buy them.

0:38:55: And one of them, one of the old guys, a British guy by the name of Tony Devers, said, "Let me tell you a story, Bob. I was a good buddy withy Ed and I was a good buddy with Mark Rothko, and Rothko and Corbett were the best of friends. And one particular weekend Mark Rothko comes up to Provincetown and the three of us are in Ed's studio drinking copious amounts of red wine. I couldn't keep up with those two guys, so I was gone. Then later on the next week, I read in the newspaper, I heard on the radio, that Mark Rothko committed suicide. And one of the topics they were talking about was how pissed off they were. How angry they were with the way the trade was dealing with their work. And Frank Lloyd at Marlborough Gallery, who was Rothko's dealer — Rothko was fed up with doing those melting cubes of color. He wanted to go in a different direction, but Frank Lloyd wouldn't let him do that. 'Mark, we're selling your work, we need you to paint more.'" Well, according to Tony, and I never proved any of this, [Rothko] committed suicide and then [Tony] realized that he hadn't heard from Ed in a long time, so he goes running up there and he finds Ed's body. It was almost like they had a suicide pact. I don't know if any of that's true, but that was a way of answering your question.

0:40:30 Abby Wasserman: Well, you know, there was the painter that you were carrying, Dennis Hare.

0:40:35 Robert Green: Yes.

0:40:36 Abby Wasserman: And we had a party for him over at my place in 2003. I believe that Dennis, his work, went into another direction that you were not able to, or you did not want to, carry. Was that true?

0:40:50 Robert Green: No, not quite. What was true was that Dennis was always a good figurative painter — a very, very athletic figurative painter, and as a matter of fact, a wonderful athlete. But Dennis was somebody for whom there were so many other things in his life that took precedence over his responsibilities. I say responsibilities because I would schedule a show, and I would give him eight months to a year to begin and do the show, but he wouldn't start until six weeks before the exhibition and then he would start putting forth a super effort. But the work was never as good as it could be. He was painting with oil, and oil in that little place was lethal. 12 months of the year, if the doors are closed and you've got fresh oil paint on the wall, you get dizzy.

0:41:49 Abby Wasserman: This is in Redlands, where he had his studio. Was it in Redlands?

0:41:54 Robert Green: Down around Redlands. I'm not sure, the little town close by. He never moved from there, he was born in this little town, and spent his entire life there. Now he's still a painter, but he's struggling. He's got Parkinson's, and he's got significant heart issues.

0:42:11 Abby Wasserman: And you think that may have something to do with the atmosphere in which he was painting in all those years?

0:42:14 Robert Green: I would think so, yeah. I don't know that for sure, but that's very, very strong possibility.

0:43:23 Abby Wasserman: Well, one thing I'm very moved by is the way that you're speaking about the give and take that goes on between the dealer and the artist when they have a close relationship. Has this fed you in your own feeling of relationship and connection?

0:42:46 Robert Green: I think what it does is it enhances empathy. Because I needed to know what it felt like, what it is like, to be a painter. I tried my hand at it. It was an incredible struggle because I was doing something that I didn't essentially need to do or want to do, I just wanted to feel what they felt. So I did a little bit of that. Another little side story: When we went to Washington D.C. for the Christmas holidays, I was walking through the mud room in my daughter's house, and there are two pieces on the wall. I said, "Man, I had never seen these before. These are terrific. Who did them?" And my daughter, Blake, said, "Come on, Dad, you know who did them, you did those." [laughs] I didn't even remember, but it was the truth. I didn't remember.

0:43:48 I guess it introduces you to empathy, and that follows you in every walk of life. I think I mentioned this to you before, too, it's a real struggle to make original print. I went out of my way with George Page, who was Sam's master printer for planography,

original lithography. I spent time with him, making lithograph. I spent time with Pam Paulson, who was with Crown Point, doing intaglio work. You need to know what it's like. It's just not the way that I see an art dealer's job. An art dealer's job is to give people as much freedom to create and be able to understand the pressures and the efforts that they have to put forth to succeed.

0:44:47 Abby Wasserman: How have visitors to your gallery changed over time, if there has been a change?

0:44:52 Robert Green: The biggest question you've asked. They've changed a lot. Just recently we had somebody come in and look at a really, I think, a masterpiece of Jenkins, a piece from 1968, a really large canvas. And they said they're very interested in buying it and asked me: "What do you want for it?" I gave them a price, and we brought it over to the house and they said, "Man, that looks lovely. Well, just give us a couple of days." Well, of course what they do is immediately go on the computer and see what the work has sold for at auction — Sotheby's, Christie's, Heritage, all the major houses. So you're always under the gun; you've always gotta be within the parameters.

0:45:40: They don't understand what the auction world is all about. The auction world used to be the bailiwick of institutions, museums, corporations and the trade, that's where they would replenish inventory. Maybe there were 10 percent of those people that were very, very astute collectors. Now, the way it all changed was a man named Alfred Taubman, who was a Detroit real estate developer, built shopping centers all over the globe, and right after he purchased the A&W Root Beer chain, he bought the failing Sotheby Parke-Bernet from the British.

0:46:23: And then looking at the business model, he realized that that's what was happening, exactly what I said. 70 percent of the sales went back into the trade, 20 percent went back into museums and corporate institutions, 10 percent sold to collectors (but avid ardent collectors). At the same time this was happening, there were huge bonuses and commissions being paid for leverage buyouts on Wall Street in the mid to late '80s. "Man, why don't we go after those guys?" So all of a sudden he was running up the media flagpole every time there was a significant sale at auction. He was telling people, "I realize you're very busy, you have no time to go to museums or galleries, you're working 24/7, but if you come to my auction rooms, all you need to do is grab a paddle and you win a painting. And you gotta remember that after you bought your house in Greenwich, after you bought your second home in the Hamptons, after you bought your yacht, after you bought your nose candy, the last rung on the ladder of affluence is fine art." And then, there were all kinds of collusions. As a matter of fact, Traubman, the CEO of Christie's, and the second-in-command, all went to jail.

0:47:52 Abby Wasserman: Wow.

0:47:53 Robert Green: They were colluding with a set of dealers like Leo Castelli, like Mary Boone. They would introduce these painters, people like David Salle, Eric Fischl, Jean-Michel Basquiat, and Julian Schnabel. They came on the market, not as

emerging or beginning painters, not even mid-career painters, but rather people that were selling for five figures. Boone would sell this work, Castelli would sell this work, and then they would also, at the same time, tell them, "If you ever need to sell it, you can sell it at auction."

0:48:30: All of a sudden, the auction houses would put increased or high estimates on everything, just to make certain that if it did sell well below estimate, it would still be higher than the retail prices. The whole damn thing was collusion of a Donald Trump terms. And if you, when you look at a work of art, you gotta realize that an artist is like a human being in any kind of life or profession. Like with a baseball player, if he gets three hits out of every 10 at bats, the other seven are outs but that's a 300 batting average, and he's an all-star. If a painter makes three really good works of art out of every 10 attempts, those three, that's fine art. The other seven, that's just work. And through the course of their creative life, there's always a period when they're doing that special magic. You know, with that Jenkins painting, the 1960s were Paul's best years. He was most magic during those years.

0:49:47: And if you look at auction, if you look at every piece that sold for the last 15 years, you'll see, comparatively speaking, what I'm showing to this client is the very, very best, far better than any of that. So, you simply can't go just by pricing. You've gotta go by strength, quality of image; and when the prices really start going up for Jenkins, then the great work will come out. I won't need to sell it to you, I'll throw it on the lap of Sotheby's and they'll bring in twice as much. You know, Paul was considered the equal with Rothko, Pollock, and de Kooning, and you wonder why they sell for millions and he sells for maybe $100,000 to $200,000 like that? Simply because he lived on and was so super successful that people became extraordinary jealous of him. And so he suffered for that.

0:50:51 Abby Wasserman: So is jealousy a big —

0:50:52 Robert Green: Big time big thing.

0:50:53 Abby Wasserman: It's a big thing in the art world.

0:50:56 Robert Green: Yeah. With painters, with dealers.

0:50:56 Abby Wasserman: 'Cause it's tremendously competitive.

0:50:58 Robert Green: Tremendously competitive.

0:51:00 Abby Wasserman: Because there are only a few slots for the superstars. It's kind of like a crazy, selective process that a few dealers do.

0:51:11 Robert Green: Yeah. It happened with Joan Mitchell back in the late '80s. You can go with a shopping cart, and pick up all the work you ever wanted for little or nothing. Finally, they needed fresh blood and Mitchell got what she deserved — never

while she was alive, but the prices became really big time. Now, they're untouchable. With Sam, he died early. He died during a recession. From '91 through probably '96 or '97, there was a huge recession. He died in '94, and the work sort of stopped appreciating. But now a good Francis painting is gonna bring at auction $7 to $8 million.

0:51:55: He lived longer than a lot of those guy; he lived till he was 70. He did a lot of work that was nothing more than Sam Francis loosening his wrist — it should never have seen the light of day. Sam never signed it. If it was work on paper; it simply sat in the print cabinets. And if indeed it was eventually sold, it was to cover death duties. There was an estate stamp put on the back. But it should never have been sold, so it impacted his market for a long time. But now, he finally is getting his fair due. Same with Jenkins. I'm not saying this because I wanna make a barrel of money out of it. I'm saying that this is the way the market works.

0:52:45 Abby Wasserman: So, I did want to ask you about a couple of other Mill Valley people. And I want to be sure to ask you about your interest in music, and love of music, and the musicians you know here. But let me first ask about Susan Cummins. Did you know Susan well?

0:53:03 Robert Green: I didn't. We'd have little interactions. I'd go by and look at her work; she would occasionally look at mine. I don't know that she liked me, actually. [chuckles] She came in one day and said, "What are you gonna do here?" I had no idea what she meant, and she says, "You know, you have no problem. You've got a little tiny gallery, you can stick anything up." So it was never a nice conversation. I respected what she did; hopefully, she respected what I eventually did.

0:53:29 Abby Wasserman: You were certainly doing different things.

0:53:32 Robert Green: Yeah. She was much more psychological in her choice of imagery.

0:53:34 Abby Wasserman: And also more toward fine studio craft.

0:53:38 Robert Green: Indeed. And the jewelry. I think she told me one time that 50 percent of her business was with jewelry.

0:53:44 Abby Wasserman: I see.

0:53:45 Robert Green: Yeah.

0:53:45 Abby Wasserman: Well, then, on to music.

0:53:48 Robert Green: I'm not terribly interested in super-contemporaneous work, but I'm a stage-door Johnny. Wherever there's cabaret, I'm out there waiting at the back door, seeing if I could get an autograph. [chuckles] Or I go around and I hire a lot of people to perform at my home.

0:54:11 Abby Wasserman: Oh, you have house concerts?

0:54:12 Robert Green: Yeah.

0:54:13 Abby Wasserman: For example, who has done a house concert?

0:54:17 Robert Green: Noah Griffin, he's done a number [of performances] at the house. Certainly, Kimrea. Kimrea is a wonderful musician. Now mind you, nobody can hear her singing in the back of the room there, but she's just a good writer, a good composer, a good entrepreneurial musician. She brings a different show, literally, every month for the 142 [Throckmorton Theatre], so I try to encourage her. There's different acapella groups that I bring by to the house. We had one that covered all of Patsy Cline's music. For years and years, I'd do it four, five, six times a year. Now with my wife, this cancer situation, we haven't been able to do very much. But we'll get back into it.

0:55:15 Abby Wasserman: Noah Griffin.

0:55:116 Robert Green: Noah Griffin, yeah. Noah was a good friend. I mean, he and I played a lot of tennis together, and stuff like that.

0:55:27 Abby Wasserman: What advice would you give someone who wanted to open a gallery?

0:55:34 Robert Green: Boy, like I said, it's not like the old days. But I think if you're going to bother to really, really thoroughly believe in the people you're showing, I would strongly suggest you do it the old-fashioned way. You should not rely on virtual galleries; you should not rely on the computer whatsoever. You need to get yourself out into the community and talk as much as you possibly can, call as many would-be collectors and beg a few minutes of their time. You have to build it up in the same old-fashioned way. Now, brick-and-mortar galleries are going by the boards; they're going by the boards very rapidly in Chelsea. Only the really large galleries like Pace, like Gagosian, like Michael Werner, they're gonna remain forever because they've got huge amounts of money. And to go see the superstars, that's where you're going to go. But the brick-and-mortar places, they're trying to show the up-and-coming talented people. It's a real struggle. But I think you could save yourself a lot of money if you just show people you truly believe in, try to do one show a month, and try to choose your location as best as possible.

0:56:57: I think Mill Valley is a terrific town for that. This is a special place. You've got the Marin Theatre Company. You've got 142 [Throckmorton Theatre]. You've got the Film Festival. You got the home of the San Francisco sound, Sweetwater. You've got some very, very good galleries. You've got Image Flow, you've got Donna, you got O'Hanlon. Pretty special. This is a place where people are still very, very interested. You just gotta get them to change their lifestyle. Don't look at their cell phone at your website, come down to your gallery and look at the work on the wall and engage. But it's not as

easy as it once would have been. If you would have followed what I've said 30 years ago, you'd be a multi-millionaire.

0:57:46 Abby Wasserman: I was going to ask you, finally, how has Mill Valley changed in your years here?

0:57:54 Robert Green: When I bought my first house for $34,000 — a designer spec house — sold it for just enough to cover real estate commissions [chuckles] two or three years later. The real estate boom didn't happen till the mid, maybe even late '70s. All of a sudden you had to really stretch your budget to buy a home here and live a lifestyle here. There are so, so many cars on the street. There are so, so many Italian restaurants. There are just many, many dress shops. It wasn't like that. There used to be two pharmacies; there used to be a five-and-dime; there was what, Sonapa Farms, or whatever it was called, and La Ginestra; that was pretty much the sum total when I first moved here. Then I guess El Paseo moved in. I mean, life was simple. It ain't simple anymore. But it hasn't really changed much. I can moan, but I still love living here.

0:59:03 Abby Wasserman: Now, you sold your first house. Where did you buy? Where did you move?

0:59:08 Robert Green: I moved probably about one mile. I sold the first house, which is on Erica Road, going out towards Stinson. Then I bought one closer, once again, still in the county. And then, finally, the third house I bought — we had just come back from a stomach crawl across France, through the Loire Valley, spending a lot of time drinking and eating, and I fell in love with French architecture. And as we're driving into Tam Junction, I look up on the hill and there's this ersatz French chateau. The next day, my daughter and I try to find it, but we can't find it. We're going in the area where it should be. It turned out it was on the backend of a fire road, and a guy who was a 747 pilot for American Airlines, who was a frustrated architect, he had built his own house, was building this place.

1:00:12: It was right during, I guess, the beginning of Ronald Reagan's presidency, when the interest rates were through the roof, 16 to 17 percent, or something like that, and this guy wanted $450,000 in 1980 for the damn place. But I figured, what the hell. I love that house, so I bought it. And I was struggling every month to make the mortgage payments. I think that's the way people are tending to live now who are newcomers here — both husband and wife are working, they might have a little one, so they've gotta make provisions for childcare. It's a struggle; they work hard.

1:00:53 Abby Wasserman: What is the address of the house you live in now?

1:00:56 Robert Green: 288 Green Street.

1:00:57 Abby Wasserman: Oh, you got it? They named the street after you?

1:01:01 Robert Green: Well, there was no street sign on there, and I had to build the road, so I figured what the hell.

1:01:08 Abby Wasserman: Bob, do you have the one daughter, or do you have other kids?

1:01:11 Robert Green: Just one daughter.

1:01:12 Abby Wasserman: And her name is Blake.

1:01:13 Robert Green: Her name is Blake, and I got two granddaughters.

1:01:15 Abby Wasserman: Two granddaughters.

1:01:16 Robert Green: And two 12-week puppies now.

1:01:19 Abby Wasserman: [chuckles] Well, thank you so much, Bob. This has been very, very interesting. I appreciate your time.

1:01:24 Robert Green: Thank you very much, Abby, for letting me blab.