Session #1

Interviewee: Aaronel deRoy Gruber June 23, 2003

Interviewer: Kim Lacy Rogers and Nancy Batty Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Rogers: This is an oral history interview with Aaronel deRoy Gruber on June 23, 2003, in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The interviewer is Kim Lacy Rogers.

Aaronel, do we have your permission to tape this interview?

Gruber: Yes.

Rogers: At the end of the interview, we will give you a consent form to sign so that we can put it in the archives at Dickinson College, where I work.

Gruber: Which college?

Rogers: Dickinson College in Carlisle, where I work, and with the Susquehanna Art Museum. Is that all right?

Gruber: Yes.

Rogers: If at any time you don't want to answer something, just let me know and we can move on to another subject.

Gruber: Okay.

Rogers: Okay. Aaronel, you grew up in Pittsburgh in the twenties and the 1930s. What kinds of sounds and images do you remember from your childhood?

Gruber: It was too long ago for me to recall.

Rogers: Let's just say when you were a ten-year-old to fifteen-year-old young person.

Gruber: Well, we lived a block away from Schenley Park. There were no sidewalks where we were, just paths. My father had built a house at the corner of Darlington and Murdock, and it was very pretty. It was built by a well-known architect, Eichlay. I used to play around the house with friends and family and take their pictures with my Brownie Box camera. I kept the negatives and still have them.

Rogers: Your family background sounded very interesting. How did your father meet your mother, who is this young woman from Greenville, Mississippi?

Gruber: My mother's mother took her to French Lick, which was a spa where they had the Baths, and that's where they met. My father was there to take "the Baths."

My grandfather was Dutch, and came from Amsterdam with his parents when he was four years old. The family grew up here and lived in Pittsburgh in the late 1800s.

Rogers: Did either side of your family, your mother's or your father's side, tell family stories? Did you hear family stories?

Gruber: They had plenty of funny stories about friends and family, but none that I can recall well enough to relate. They had a kind of family language of their own. They'd talk about things that only they would understand. I don't remember a lot of details about that period in my life. I do remember some of their stories – but I see no relationship with this interview and my show at the Susquehanna Museum.

Rogers: What kind of values were stressed in your family? I know your father was a dentist.

Gruber: The values of love, honesty, and hard work were stressed in my family. My father was a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania and had his medical degree from there in order to practice dentistry. He had his office at Fifth Avenue and Wood Street, and I used to go up there once in a while when I was very young.

Rogers: Okay. Did you ever visit Greenville, Mississippi, when you were young?

Gruber: Yes. But again I fail to see a connection. My mother used to take me down South. I remember visiting there when I was quite young, four to six years old. I became friendly with a girl named Grace whose father was the rabbi and some other young fellows. They were all about my age. We used to go to the playground and do the usual junk that kids do. I went to school there for a while because we were there for a few months. I had a teacher who was trying to teach me arithmetic, which I never liked. She had these little flashcards. Her name was Maddie. She helped

me a lot.

I remember one time there was a chicken running around in the yard and this black lady who worked for grandma and did laundry, she was chasing it all over the backyard, trying to catch the chicken and kill it, the poor thing, and she wanted to cook it.

I remember once we went out to a farm and the lady had a big dog and the dog kept trying to bite at me. He would jump up on me and snap. I had always loved dogs, but I hated that dog. Otherwise, I remember seeing the farmland and loving it.

Rogers: Did your family know the Percys of Greenville at all, do you know? The Percy family.

Gruber: Percy. Well, my family knew everybody that was important there, but I don't remember them in particular. I was very young then. Why do you ask about the Percy family?

Rogers: Well, because they were a very famous Delta family who, I think in 1922----

Gruber: I was four years old then. I was too young to be interested in such things.

Rogers: Yes. One of the patriarchs, LeRoy Percy, he ran the [Ku Klux] Klan out of town, because the Klan, in the 1920s, was very anti-black, as usual, but anti-immigrant, and anti-Jewish and Catholic. And William LeRoy Percy just said, "No, you're not going to be here," and just ran the Klan out. He was that powerful.

Gruber: He sounds impressive. I'm sure if my family were alive they would refresh my recollection, and I would recall them later discussing this.

Rogers: William LeRoy Percy.

Gruber: It's a little before I was old enough to know about civil rights.

Rogers: What do you remember about the depression years in Pittsburgh? You were a teenager, I think, in the depression, and beginning to be a young woman and going to the university.

Gruber: Well, I was just thirteen in 1929, and my father really was wiped out by the Depression, and so it wasn't a very happy time for us. He had a bad heart and he died before I was sixteen. I was only fifteen going on sixteen when he passed away.

Rogers: Do you think that some of the stress connected with the Depression might have worsened his heart condition?

Gruber: Yes. I'm sure it did. He had an angina, and it didn't help it, for sure. He was very concerned for us, and to have lost all his money was awful.

I remember one night my mother asked me to go upstairs and see why my father wasn't down for dinner. When I got up to the bedroom, he had a gun to his head. I screamed, and he said, "Let me alone, darling, because I'll be worth more to you dead than alive." I screamed and pulled at him and said, "Don't you do that." I mean, I was about fourteen then. So that's a very unhappy time for me. He was in sick bed a great deal. So we lost everything. My mother had to sell our beautiful house and we had to move into a rented duplex after he died.

I had a half-sister who had polio when she was a child and was eleven years older than me so a lot of my images were of my sister. Because of the problems she had, she had a governess taking

care of her, and they'd talk German and they didn't teach me to speak it. They didn't want me to know what they were talking about. Fräulein was just a very severe lady my mother had to tolerate, I guess. Because of my sister's condition, she needed constant care. Later, after Fräulein returned to Germany and died my sister went to work at Kauffman's Department Store. This was a better period, and Marien was able to be a little independent of Fräulein.

Rogers: The thirties were a period of labor turmoil and strikes and a lot of unemployment. Do you remember hearing about that or seeing that or any of those things in Pittsburgh?

Gruber: No, I was still too young to notice any of that. I was still in school and homework, dating, and boys were important to me, but the labor strikes didn't really affect me personally.

However, when we had the big flood in Pittsburgh, that hit me. A bunch of us went down town and helped during the flood and worked hard at cleaning up the mess it caused. The water was up to the middle of down town. Also, in Greenville, Mississippi the floods were devastating. The levee overflowed, and my aunt and uncle would send us pictures of what happened.

Rogers: Yes, that was the flood of 1927, the Mississippi River flood of 1927.

Gruber: Yes.

Rogers: What did you learn from your mother and father, growing up? What did they teach you?

Gruber: Well, my mother didn't want me to be an artist, but my father really did. He used to take us for rides in the car and out to the country. We used to go to Ligonier, because my sister had to swim

in only the purest water, so we had to go there, and it was freezing cold water. But anyway, it was beautiful country, and my father would tell me about how nature was so wonderful.

My mother wanted me to learn something that I could do later. In the quote in the *Pulp* magazine they said she was a dressmaker, which is not true. She sewed and she made my clothes and things like that, which was just wonderful and very artistic. I'd go downtown and see something I liked and come home and draw it for her and she'd try to make it. We'd go get patterns and she'd make things for me. She was very interested in being helpful and guiding me along those lines.

She had three other sisters, none of whom had children, and one wasn't married, so I was sort of like the darling of the family. When we got married, my aunt gave me some of my trosseau. They had a very nice women's clothing store in Greenville, and she'd give me a *peignoir* and nightgown and pretty clothes. Fanny Mae was kind of like my second mother. She was younger than my mother and treated me like her own child.

Then there was another sister, who went to Smith College with Lillian Hellman, Louise. Then there was Vera, who was a sweet lady. She was a sad person, unfortunately, because she fell in love with my uncle, Fannie Mae's husband, even before they were married. That was always so sad. She lived near them. My grandma and Vera lived together, and then moved to New York. In the summers they'd go and I'd see them there, and they were really wonderful.

My best friend in Greenville was the daughter of the Reform rabbi. I've seen her not too long ago. There was a riverboat that everybody in town used to go to, you know, to dance—that was the kind of stuff. There was this riverboat anchored at the levee. Later on, my kids always liked to go down to Greenville to see my aunt. Whenever we went we'd walk around town exploring. My aunt had a chauffer who was also a houseman, and he used to do almost everything. Tommy, when we'd drive down, would come with his work clothes. And Tommy always said, "Oh, Mr. Gruber, your suit is so beautiful."

And he'd say, "Well, what size are you, Tommy?"

He'd say, "Same size as you, Mr. Gruber."

So Irv said, "Here." He'd take the suit off and give it to him. [Laughs] We were always trying to make Tommy happy. It was funny.

Rogers: Did your family have any politics during the thirties, during that era? Did they ever talk about politics at home?

Gruber: Not a lot. They loved their help and treated them well, but I was not of an age when we paid too much attention to politics. I have no recollection of my mother and father discussing politics in front of me. I remember more about the Depression. I wasn't old enough to be into politics.

Rogers: Do you remember your family ever voting? Did they vote?

Gruber: Yes, of course. Yes, they used to vote. I remember Mother taking me along. I forget where the poll was. I think it was up on Darlington Road in a little garage.

Rogers: How aware were you in the thirties and a little bit later, what was happening to the Jews in Europe and in Germany? Did your family ever talk about that?

Gruber: Yes, some, I'm sure. I was just too young to be aware of anything until later on when the war started, and then, I got married when I was still in college before the war started. Newspapers and the politicians kept it quiet. The horrible things Hitler did weren't stressed in the papers much.

They surely kept that undercover then.

I saw that movie *Nowhere in Africa* the other night. Oh, my God, that's marvelous. Did you see that?

Rogers: No.

Gruber: Oh, it's wonderful. *Nowhere in Africa.* The filmmakers put it on. It's about this couple that- they left without visas because they were Jews, and how they were put into internment camps because they didn't have any papers to show, and so forth. His wife came over with their little child, and how she hated it and she expected everything to be just like it was in Germany, and they wanted everything the way it was in Germany. You know, those sort of things didn't really hit me until- because when I went to high school, and then to Carnegie Mellon, I didn't pay a whole lot of attention even then, I don't think, because this was when it was all brewing. I knew I hated Hitler, and I'd hear things.

Rogers: You were married right before World War II broke out.

Gruber: Yes.

Rogers: What do you remember about this city area during the war years? What do you remember from the forties? What was Pittsburgh like?

Gruber: We didn't live here very long because we moved to Youngstown from Pittsburgh, so through the war we were in Youngstown. I had this one child. I worked, before we moved, as a

fashion coordinator at Kauffman's Department Store, which I was more involved with. Even before that, I had gone to work at Rosenbaum's, and I was about fourteen, so I was not very conscious of a whole lot of these things.

Rogers: How about Youngstown? When you were living ther, what was it like being in the city during the war years? Do you have any memories of that?

Gruber: Irv worked in Sharon and we lived in Youngstown. The only reason we lived in Youngstown was because we couldn't find a house to rent and couldn't buy a house, so we moved into Youngstown where one of his cousins lived. So those years were worrying about our little kids. I mean, my son was just an infant and then I had a second child, Jamie.

The mills were all working. My husband was very involved with the war effort because he built a pipe mill and he could tell you more about those years than I could, because he was a little older than I am. They built a pipe mill and manufactured things for the war and it was very secretive. I was interested in taking the kids to swim whenever I could and walking the kids and getting them naps. Then my daughter was born three years- is three years younger than my son. So, yes, I was just too involved with children.

Rogers: Do you think that having lived in Pittsburgh and Youngstown, both of which would have been major industrial centers, major steel centers, maybe at their peak in the forties and fifties, do you think that affected your own sense of aesthetics?

Gruber: I don't know. I don't think I was really aware of a lot of this stuff until Irv came back to Pittsburgh after the war. When the war ended, he went to work for U. S. Steel and that was when

my interest in the steel industry began. Irv and another man, Bill Close, bought a small steel forging business called American Forge and Manufacturing. I used to go out to the mill, out to McKees Rock, were he had the plant, and from that point on I was interested in industry.

Rogers: What were you interested in when you went out to the plant at McKees Rock?

Gruber: Well, I started making sculptures out of the drop offs of the forgings, and learning to weld. The plant foreman and I used to lay out all the pieces of steel and arrange them together, welding them, and reshaping them sometimes.

The foreman was Lebanese, so he used to cook our lunch in the forge. He'd throw the lamb into the fire for about two seconds on a skewer, wrap it in pita bread with Lebanese salad and rice. Wow, what a lunch!

I was also painting with Sam Rosenburg at that time. He picked a group of artists who he thought were interested in more avant-garde things, and I was asked to join that group. So twice a week I used to leave my daughter to watch the baby, who was seven years younger than she was, and my kids and Irv babysat, and I'd go off to class at night. We also had a life drawing class. He didn't come, but he'd give us a model. So I did life drawing there, also.

Then in the classes of Sam Rosenburg's, we worked very freely on this large sheet of butcher paper with cheap paint and then at the end we'd criticize each other's work. There were about fifteen, twenty of us. That was my main interest at that point because I had to quit working as a fashion coordinator since I had to raise three kids. You didn't have nannies and things like people do today.

Rogers: Sounds like it was really a creative and productive period for you with your working with

sculptures, but also painting.

Gruber: Yes, it was.

Rogers: How did your sense of aesthetics come out of that?

Gruber: Well, at college I had a teacher by the name of Bob Leper. He was a very early person to work in Plexiglas, and he became a friend of mine, and he showed me a lot of techniques. He made a screen down at the Hilton early on and he'd take me down and show me some of the stuff he was working on and discuss it with me.

Then I had a teacher by the name of Wilfred Radio. Mr. Radio taught color theory, and he taught the Muncell system. I learned to look at colors and identify them. I could go and match a color fabric without a sample. My mother would send me downtown, and I'd forget the darn thread and she'd yell at me and I'd say, "I brought something that looks just like it, doesn't it?" So I said, "Well, you see, Mr. Radio taught me that."

My mother didn't want me to go to art school, because she wanted me to learn a trade so I did fashion art and illustrating. The head of the department, Miss Virginia Alexander, didn't know how to draw and she was stuck, so she'd ask me to teach part of the drawing class and help her with it. So for that she allowed me to go over to the art school, and so I would take art classes in the art school and there I had Roy Hilton, Mr. Radio, Bob Leper.

Then Roy Hilton was a pretty interesting person. He did very realistic painting, but I kind of admired his work. He did a lot of Pittsburgh scenes and things like that. So Roy Hilton and Bob Leper and Radio were probably the most influential in my thinking and learning.

Rogers: Did you have any questions for Aaronel in this area?

Batty: No. I was just curious if the- the only question that I have, were any of your teachers, were they Bauhaus-trained?

Rogers: That's a good question.

Gruber: Mr. Leper was of this mindset also. But they didn't have the money to go to Germany to study. Two of my friends went to the Bauhaus school in Chicago. I guess the person who was the most influential in teaching me about the Bauhaus and learning to love modern and the Bauhaus school was Irwin Wolf, Sr., who was vice president at Kauffman's. He was married to Edgar Kauffman's sister. Their house was very, very, very modern and art deco. When I was young, I used to date her son. I didn't like him much, but I used to like to go to their house and did so for a couple of years before I met Irv.

As a matter of fact, that house was so wonderful, and the Kauffman's Department Store, the man who did the decorating, he had those black Correra glass- they did the whole first floor of the store. He came from Germany. He was Bauhaus. His name was Latsie Gabor [phonetic]. Latsie used to go with us to where they were building Falling Water. We'd go swimming in the pools and go under the falls. Edgar Kauffman was very friendly with my uncle, Aaron deRoy. I always wished that I could have gone to Germany during this period, but naturally no one could be safe and go there at the same time.

[Aaronel felt that the several paragraphs before this were not relevant to her career as an artist. For this reason, they have been deleted.]

Rogers: World War II and its aftermath, did these experiences affect your art in any way?

Gruber: Yes. I did a lot of painting during that period. My daughter has a couple of the paintings and some of them were sold and I don't know where they are. But one was about Czechoslovakia. I was upset over this, and that sort of thing really. I did a whole series of these. She has the paintings.

But when [Franklin D.] Roosevelt said that the war was over, and we all went out in the street and were just so happy over this whole thing. I liked Roosevelt. A lot of people didn't .

Then I remember once I was giving the kids a bath, and somebody came around with a petition for me to sign.

Rogers: Wendell Wilkie?

Gruber: Wendell Wilkie.

[Begin Tape 1, Side B]

Gruber: I guess the way I signed it, the *A* looked like a *P*, and it said, "Paronel Gruber is a ---." It was for Wendell Wilkie, and got me into all kinds of trouble later on. Some people thought that I was---for a while they had this Commie thing that they thought I was a Communist.

Rogers: Yes, because he was one world and all of that.

Gruber: Yes. Then when I was in college, I went to some of those seminars that were on politics.

That was when I was most interested in politics. I remember that one of the fellows I went with, Lester Hamburg, there's a building named after him on Forbes near CIT, he said he wouldn't let me ride in his car because I signed that petition. [Laughs.] And I said, "You go to hell." I'll never forget it.

But anyway, we did go together for a while. But I learned later on that I guess it wasn't so smart to be a Communist, and I didn't really have any firm convictions about it. I mean, I really never did any more than sign that petition and go to some of those lectures and listen to them. But I thought that there was an awful lot of----you know, with----what's that guy's name?

Rogers: [Joseph] McCarthy?

Gruber: McCarthyism was so abominable. My sister lived in California, and she and her husband, Lloyd Devlin, were very, very political, and when I'd go visit them with the kids, she'd tell me about some of her friends who had been----you know, all these terrible things that happened to them. So I was just horrified by all those things. In Pittsburgh there wasn't much going on like that. Nobody really seemed to----but out in L.A. it was terrible. I mean, she was eleven years older than I was, and so she was very, very political.

Rogers: I was just wondering if the war itself and the destruction of all those millions and millions of people, if a lot of people in this country on the Left and the /right responded to World War II just with great horror, and that's where some of these death-of-God theologians came to that sort of decision at that time. But you said in one interview that you wanted to create beautiful objects of art, or beautiful pieces of art.

Gruber: Like that Czechoslovakian period. Those weren't so beautiful.

Rogers: What were you responding to in Czechoslovakia?

Gruber: The whole war, the way they were taken off to death camps and all that sort of thing. They weren't pretty pictures. Like Andy Warhol, this was a very strange period to me, because I knew him and he didn't react, you know, in any way either. I mean the kids, Phil Pearlstein, all of us--well, they were a little bit younger than I was, and they were drawing and painting and doing these things, and they went to New York, too. Didn't seem to react.

But as I said, during that period when I started doing those—the men, there was a series of little men that I did. I did another series of---I went to Venice and I tore all the old posters off the wall and I'd pack them up, roll them up, and I took them to the concierge and had them ship them back to me. Then I did all the things that looked like festering going on. They were called the EIVE one, two---I don't know. The EIVE doesn't mean anything, except that those letters appeared and there were these festering things.

My studio at the time was in Squirrel Hill in somebody's garage, and the bathroom looked like this. The wallpaper—there wasn't any wallpaper, but it was a mess and everything looked like it was festering, and it always reminded me of what went on in Europe. So I did a lot of painting during that time, which was very much that way. It wasn't until I moved that I started doing---the Plexiglas and metal sculpture.

Rogers: You spent a lot of the war years and the 1950s also raising children, raising your kids. Can you tell us what it was like for you to balance being a mother and also doing art?

Gruber: I really don't remember what I thought, I just did it. My daughter was a big help. I mean, she'd play mother when I'd go out and work, and she was a very good kid. She has always been

supportive of my---they all were. I mean, Jon, my son, J-O-N, Jon, was always very supportive of my work. Jon went to MIT. I was happy to raise kids. Terry went to Vassar and Jamie stayed here at Carnegie Tech and then after one year went to New York. The older ones sort of all went off on their own, and then yet we stayed together always.

Rogers: Did being a mother affect your work or inspire your work in any ways?

Gruber: Yes, I guess so.

Batty: Aaronel, do you think you would have gone to New York with Warhol and Pearlstein had you been able to?

Gruber: Yes, definitely. I wanted to, but I couldn't because I didn't have the means to leave, and anyway I was married already. I mean, I was married before I finished college, and so therefore I really didn't have a choice. I never thought of it as a choice. I never thought of it as a choice, although I often would say, when I married Irv, "Why can't we move to New York?" Irv's business wasn't in New York. He had this steel forging business, you know, so he couldn't raise a family and be anywhere else. Unlike some kids today, they just up and go, but I never thought of that. I thought of it, but I wouldn't do it. I guess we have a—you know, you just feel like you do what you're put here to do.

Rogers: That's interesting, because I think that it says a lot. I mean, when I look at some of the things that you've done, it looks like there's so much of a kind of an urban industrial technological feel, particularly to your sculpture and your Plexiglas sculptures. In some ways it's a lovely kind---I

think your work and Pittsburgh's evolution are very complementary in a way, in terms of especially if you come full circle with your photographs of these kind of elegiac-looking steel mills.

Gruber: Well, I got very upset when they started tearing all them down and I just started running around trying to get as many photographs as I could.

[Brief interruption.]

Rogers: You got very upset, you said, when they started tearing these—

Gruber: You know, because I always—you know, I kind of thought they were always going to stay there, and then as more and more things started happening, Irv and I went out to his old plant—I mean, he knew it, but I didn't, but it was like everything was gone. Like there were just some of the remains of the buildings. As they were tearing down some of steel mills, I got there one day and they were pulling down the last of this one—it's in the book—the girl in charge came running over and said, "You're not allowed to be here." I said, "I'm sorry," and pressed my Widelux shutter, which has a moving lens, and that was the only picture I could take, because she chased me out of there.

Rogers: You said in one interview that you think that some of your images, your photographs of these steel mills and into the ruins that you took pictures of in the Middle East, they're kind of lonely images. It's like you're mourning them, is that---

Gruber: Yes, I guess. Like Syria now and some of the things. I mean, we were so lucky to get to Syria and Jordan then. We went with the museum, San Fransisco Museum of Art, my son and

daughter-in-law belong to. We went with a small group, and oh, seeing those marvelous things and then seeing later how terrible those Syrians are.

Rogers: In a way, do you miss that old industrial landscape?

Gruber: Yes. It had its good things and its bad things. I mean, look at when, in the early days, when Pittsburgh looked like black smoke all the time, and we didn't appreciate where it was coming from and how terrible it was for your lungs. But it was somehow good for the economy, and without it, we'd have a lot of missing things, like jobs and so on.

But now, Irv goes along Second Avenue and he's so thrilled with all the new buildings along Second Avenue. He said, "Now, look at all the technology things in there instead."

And I said, "Yes, but I like the steel mills better." [Laughs.] I love to look at the steel mills, and wondered why in the world they couldn't have done something to clean the air—if the companies had had the money to clean it up and make it a healthier community, but they didn't. They didn't have the money and they didn't have the means to do it.

Rogers: What did you love about looking at the steel mills?

Gruber: I don't know. The shapes of the smoke coming out. Economically it was great for us. A lot of the pictures that are in the book show where J&L used to be. Irv used to get me in to see some of the various steel mills and walk through them. I found it very inspiring—the excitement of steel being made was very important to me.

Rogers: Why?

Gruber: Because it was the economy, and then it all was lost. However, it was kind of fun to see what Mr. Frank Kass did, coming from Columbus, an entrepreneur, to Homestead and making it into a huge success for the economy. He left smoke stacks behind from the mills. That was the only thing they left, long before we knew he was going to do anything. This was in part still on the land and he bought it and he was so thrilled to find these photographs I had done. I was so excited that he made something out of Homestead that was great, and so you have to think about progress. And he did a hell of a lot. I wish he'd called it something other than "The Waterfront," because it's confusing to people. I think he should have called it "The Stacks," but who am I to say.

Rogers: One of the books that I teach when I teach U.S. since 1877 is novel about Pittsburgh called *Out of This Furnace*. Do you know that?

Gruber: No.

Rogers: I'll send you a copy of it.

Gruber: Oh, I'd love to see that.

Rogers: It's three generations of a Slovak family. The patriarch comes here from Austria/Hungary in, I think it's 1882, to work in the mills. It sort of goes all the way through what this family experiences working in the mills, children going to work early, and then the grandson becomes a union organizer in the 1940s. But a lot of it is about becoming Americans.

Gruber: Well, that was Andy Warhol's uncle, who worked for Irv in his plant. Actually, Warhola

was their name, and he worked for Irv and he used to talk to me about that a lot. He thought Andy was crazy. [Laughs.] But he said that he was one of those people who just came and worked, and he was very proud of what he did. He did precision machining. But those people coming from—that whole element from Poland, Czecheslovakia, f it hadn't been for the—well, of course, the Irish came first, but it gave them a life. I mean, where would they be? Where would they have been? That's why, I guess, I was very upset when we went to Germany and I saw where Hitler had ruined a country and it was barren there.

Rogers: In Nuremburg?

Gruber: Yes. Oh, it was terrible. I hated it. I hated going. Well, I mean, I'm glad we went, but it gave you a strange feeling. But the world was crazy.

Rogers: Yes.

Gruber: It's not so much better now.

Rogers: So did you feel that living in an industrial area and being around—I mean, your husband in industry, affected the choices that you made when you were painting or doing the steel, the metal sculptures, and then the Plexiglas? I mean, the fact that you were surrounded by this industrial---

Gruber: Well, the steel sculptures which are outside certainly had an effect. I really never sat around and thought about that sort of thing. I had to somebody who could help me. I did and I had a man who worked for me for several years who worked at U.S. Steel. He was a troubleshooter,

Henry. He was a typical steel worker. He was very funny. But he was very ingenious and he could figure out how to do things. He worked for me part-time after work and then after he retired, full-time. He could figure things out for me.

For example, I wanted to make the Plexiglas bubbles for the sculptures. I wanted to find a way to cut slices from the bubble, so he made me a machine to do this. It's a very rough thing, but he made this piece of machinery that we could cut them out. I mean, there wasn't anything like that on the market. He did stuff like that for me.

But he used to tell me about t6her mills and how his son worked in the mills, too, but they all lived in Homestead, you know. He'd read a lot, and it was amazing. I mean, he'd learn stuff form reading. He didn't learn anything from college. I admired this man. I mean, he was just fabulous, until he got Alzheimer's and he had to quit.

Rogers: What drives you as an artist? What pushes you to create things?

Gruber: I like to—I just have all this—I have materials that are sitting there not being used, and it makes me mad that I don't have that many years left to be working, and I should be doing this and that. So in the meantime I keep on photographing and playing with photographs. But what drives me is that I want to—I feel that I have something to say. I guess I'm a workaholic. My husband says I am, anyway.

Rogers: What kind of pleasure do you get from working?

Gruber: Well, I guess the pleasure is in seeing other people like it and buy it, it's wanted for

museum shows and their permanent collections. Like the fact that I was one of the first Pittsburghers to be shown at the Frick Museum. Dick MacIntosh liked my work, and when I showed it to him, he was so excited about it. Then he decided to leave, I thought, oh, that's the end. Then Tom Smart came in and took over, and called me and said, "I want to come and see what you have done." So it's just been a great pleasure to work with somebody like this. He's so dear. That's what happens when you work with people like Pat Murray. I mean, all of a sudden Pat Murray calls up to start a show. When I had the show in Harrisburg, it was a retrospective, and it was very early for me to be having a retrospective. Why they wanted me to have a retrospective I'll never know. I don't think it sold very much, if I sold---I sold a few things. But, I think, you know, it's just nice to have people admire what you do. That was back in 1976.

I mean, when Richard Armstrong came to Pittsburgh, before I met him, he was asked to be a juror for the Associated Artists, and I entered those two pieces right over there. I was so excited when he gave them the Best of Show in photography. So that's the kind of thing, you know, that makes it gratifying.

I should quit entering things. But like the Westmoreland Arts and Heritage, this lady who ran it before was marvelous and very sweet, and every time I'd tell her I wasn't going to enter, she'd say, "Ah, please enter," and so I'd enter. Now she's not there anymore, but I entered and I won the Photograph of the Year award again this year and to me it was great. It's like winning a Pulitzer Prize for somebody else. So that's how these things happen.

I was chosen for a program where you'd apply and be juried in. You're allowed to come and work on your chosen medium. It's a very nice program. I did a lot of painting there.

Rogers: What year is this, Aaronel? This painting again, what period, roughly?

Gruber: Look up when the Virginia Center of Creative Arts took place.

[Rogers views the paintings.]

Rogers: I think that's absolutely gorgeous.

Gruber: Well, I did quite a few of that period. I have a very large painting that my son took. He has it in Arizona, so I don't have it here. But I did a lot of painting. Anyway, Liz will tell you. I forget when it was. In the eighties, I think.

Rogers: Aaronel, you'd been working, painting, making sculpture, doing photography. You've had a courageously long and productive career. I mean, how do you think maturing has affected your work?

Gruber: I don't know. I think the thing that affected my career the most mostly was an accumulation of things. There are certain things that I can't do now because of the help that I would need to continue. I've done like one. At my studio I have a couple of sculptures that I have done recently, but in order to do them, the cost has gotten so expensive that I haven't bothered to do many of them. So that kind of thing I've cut back on. Now I do things digitally that I couldn't do before. You know, you can stitch photos. I just find it a technical thing that is helpful.

Rogers: I was wondering, though, if maturing—I mean, there are so many of those very dramatic painters from the fifties and the sixties, you know, didn't live all that long. I mean, [Jackson]

Pollock was killed in a car crash. And who was it--

Batty: [Mark] Rothko.

Gruber: Yes, Rothko.

Rogers: Rothko committed suicide. I mean, so many of them seemed to be very, you know, like a short fuse, and you've sort of had this remarkable productivity. Do you think that age and maturity have added to your perspective?

Gruber: Probably.

Rogers: Or that's changed your perspective in any way?

Gruber: I just think you want to complete as much as you can before your time is up. Like who knows when it's gone? As I said, my kids have always been very, very supportive, and my husband, and they kind of keep me going. I mean, Irv yesterday said to me, "Do you want to do something?" When he came home he said, "Would you like to go out and take some pictures?"

I said, "No, I don't feel like it." Then I said, "Well, let's just take a ride." So I said, "Let's go down to Phipps Conservatory," because I have been taking things around there and in there. I knew I had this new toy, a new camera. So I wanted to see what it would come out like. It takes a 120 roll, so I'm anxious to try it out, so I tried that. Then I did a few pictures around there with my digital. I find the infrared is my main interest now. I think that the more time I have, the more I like to be busy doing things that will be productive---because otherwise the time is here and then it's

gone.

Batty: Aaronel, if I might just ask, what about the infrared appeals to you?

Gruber: Well, one, it's hard to do, and it gives everything a sort of an eerie quality, it's an ethereal sort of fairylike quality that a straight color photograph doesn't have. It's kind of black and white with a special aura.

Rogers: Aaronel, I think we'll be wrapping this up right now. We'll be back tomorrow afternoon, if that's okay with you.

Gruber: Yes.

Rogers: Thank you very much.

Gruber: You're very welcome.

Batty: Very, very interesting.

[End of interview]