

## TRESS Transcript

### **Interview with Arthur Tress**

**Narrator:** Arthur Tress [AT]

**Interviewer:** David Weisman [DW]

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**Location:** The home of Arthur Tress, San Francisco, CA

**Length:** Approximately 1 hour and 35 minutes. Interview begins at: 0:00:09.8

**Transcript Prepared By:** David Weisman, Steven Ruszczycky

0:00:09.8 David Weisman [DW: We're here this morning in San Francisco from... And on behalf of the Central Coast Queer Archive Project And, it's the 18th of November 2021. And we are very fortunate and pleased to have as our guest, speaking today, Mr. Arthur Tress, renowned photographer, and for those decades he lived in our area, a co-habitat of the Central Coast, and this is the Central Coast Queer Archive Project so we're very pleased to have you with us today sir, thank you. I know that your background and your artistic history may be familiar to many, but perhaps for some of the younger members of our audience and the younger members of the LGBTQ community, could you share a little bit about your own emergence into your own sense of who you were and orientation and how that dovetailed with the emergence of your artistic sensibility.

0:01:08.1 Arthur Tress [AT]: Okay, my parents divorced when I was about 12, and I moved with my mother to Brighton Beach, Coney Island, which was a kind of a wonderful section of Brooklyn, it was right on the ocean there, but coincidentally, it had an amazing high school called Abraham Lincoln High School. Which turned out to have the best art curriculum and art classes in any high school in New York City, and I was able to take classes in photography and graphic design and sculpture, and it kind of turned out that my strong point was photography, and I had a very supportive sister, Madeline tress. And so she gave me a small Rolleiflex camera, and I just began taking pictures of the kind of run down abandoned areas of Coney Island, etcetera, and they turned out I just had a gift for that at an early age. So I kind of stayed with that. At the same time, 14,15, my sexuality was beginning to manifest itself, and it turned out that I really enjoyed hanging out with other boys and trying to seduce them in a kind of teenage way, and... This was 1956. There

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was very little knowledge about being gay or homosexuality, or same-sex affections, so one was a little confused and insecure about it. And then my father lived in Manhattan and Riverside Drive Park, and I visit him on weekends, but I take the dog out to walk in the park at night, and I'd be picking up men, as much as I could, and so I was confused, but comfortable, but then I mentioned it to my father and he was very cool with that, he said It's okay, but...

0:04:07.3 [AT]: I wondered if there was some kind of therapy. He suggested I see a psychoanalyst, and he had read about in the newspaper. So I dutifully did that. And this is 1957, and the psychiatrist immediately said, you know, homosexuality is an illness, you should desist... It's unnatural. And you will get arrested, etcetera. And I had some girlfriends, they were just friends from the Art Department in school, and he said you should try steeping with girls, 'cause that's better. So I suddenly began feeling very guilty about being homosexual, there wasn't the word gay at that time, "queer," and so I began having sex with my teenage girlfriend, and was sort of confused about it, but... You see the, I think it's the American Medical Association had at that time put homosexuality in their list of mental illnesses, and it wasn't so much later that they finally changed it after a lot of pressure, so it sort of set up a conflict in me, but I sort of turned to my art work, my photography has kind of my place I could be alone and do my thing... Even apart from the gay issue, I was always kind of an outlier in high school, I wasn't interested in sports, I was kind of the odd kid, and so I've always had a sensitivity for groups like black people and poor people that are kind of on the edges of society. And that kind of fed into my photography. And later I did a lot of traveling, but even in college, I was still seeking out girlfriends, I was sort of pretend heterosexual, but kind of sneaking in gay experiences on the side.

0:07:14.8 [AT]: So you would say I was a bisexual, but basically, I was really gay, but still not

feeling comfortable with that. So I was traveling in Europe and I decided to stay in Sweden for about a year. And we're already now about 1966, and you have flower power, the great hippie revolution of marijuana and music and the Beatles, so people's attitudes toward sexuality began changing just in general, and I was living in Stockholm, working for a publisher of children's books, and I met a young man there who was an acting student named Tobjorn, Toby, and he had a girlfriend. And so literally the three of us would be in bed together sometimes... It was very Swedish? But then I just realized, Toby and I went off... And most gay experiences that I had encountered like in 42nd Street or in the park were very furtive, very... Just for a few minutes and very anonymous, but Toby was romantic, he allowed himself to be in love with another man, which was unusual for the time, and so he sort of became my first boyfriend when I was about 27, and there was no looking back afterwards, 'cause it was, I felt I had found my natural place and I went back to New York, but then Toby came to stay with me sometimes in New York.

0:09:29.3 [AT]: Well, we eventually separated, but real charming part of the story is, because we were... I was in New York and he was in Stockholm, we wrote each other a lot of letters, and I contacted him in about five years ago, and he had saved all my letters, he had kept them for 40 years, and they were a wonderful archive of what I was doing photographically during those years, also about, so that was kind of amazing.

0:10:17.3 [DW]: To... Speaking of Toby, would you say... 'cause this is another question, Looking at 20th century art photography, many great photographers, whether it was Tina Mondati or Edward Weston, they had it... Or Kurtz, Moholo-Nagy, and you see them in the photographs, there is a woman in their lives who becomes the muse character. During this particular period in your life, would you say that... Could you, in a male sense, characterized Toby as... A muse to your creative

work?

0:10:55.4 [AT]: I don't think so. Actually. I'm like 90% a photographer and 10% personal life. So my photographic work carries on independently a little bit, it seems, I think. That was mostly true most of my life, and I could say I did... When I finally did come to San Luis Obispo, I did get a very nice boyfriend, who did change the way I photographed, but we can get to that...

0:11:47.9 [DW]: I Was just curious too, because the concept of the male muse is really lesser known in history, there doesn't seem to have been much analysis of it... And I will get to that part about how aesthetically it does a shift. One question people would ask, historically speaking was, and it's an issue that youth confront today, was there any impact... Was there the bullying phenomenon, as you think back on your youth that still somehow... Persists, how did that manifest?

0:12:20.9 [AT]: No, I was not out in high school, I had a little bit of having a reputation as the guy to go to if you wanted a blow job, but I would deny that, and it was kind of a Brighton Beach... Coney Island was kind of a liberal Jewish community, and I think they're kind of... All kinds of expression and sexuality had an early age more than a Christian Evangelicals, so there wasn't any kind of... I had never encountered that kind of bullying that I know that some people have to experience even today.

0:13:19.4 [DW]: Now you did of course, went to college and study this. Were there any particular mentors that stand out in your mind whose work or teachings influenced you in a particular way?

0:13:35.3 [AT]: Yeah, I went to Bard College, which was a small independent school, and they

didn't have any photography there, but I did study painting, and they had a special class called "cultural metamorphosis" that was run by Heydrich Blucher, who was the husband of Hannah Arendt. He was very interested in the collective unconsciousness and archetypes, and I think universal patterns, comparative religion. So I think all my work after that was certainly suffused by his attitudes. I later became an ethnographical photographer where... This was in the mid-60s where I did various tribal groups around the world, the Mayans, the Toda of people, the Sumba, the people, the Dogon people in Africa, and I became very interested in comparative religion, and then later finding similar rights and ceremonies in our 20th century life... And also the way maleness is defined in a lot of these tribal cultures and in our own culture, so that it kind of ties in to my interest in masculinity in general.

0:15:40.6 [DW]: Were there any particular revelations that struck you when you were visiting in lands outside of our own that, I'm not saying that rocked your world, but really any particular stand-out cultural traits? Sure.

0:16:00.4 [AT]: After Bard College, I went to Japan and studied for a few months at the Zen Study Center in Kyoto, part of that experience was a conscious or unconscious desire to participate in Japanese homo-social, homo-erotic culture. The Japanese, along with several other Asian cultures like Thailand, are much more fluid in defining sexuality. And Japan, there's not much discrimination between gay and straight, and there were hundreds of gay bars and a lot of Japanese cities, and so it was a very gender-fluid and sexuality fluid, and many westerns are attracted to that. So I think that was a kind of "the ease," you know, not all this is Judeo-Christian guilt about sexuality.

[DW] And not to delete from your international things, but was New York, still in your home base during this period of your life?

0:18:00.0 [AT] No, when I finished with my travels and when I decided to come back to New York City, which was around 1968, I had become a full blown photo journalist. My desire was to work for different magazines like Life and Look Magazine and do photo reportage, documentary photography, And just at that time, again, most gay experience... At that time, gay encounters, you might say, were through gay cruising in the parks or bath houses, and again, piers and docks, it was kind of a rough scene. I don't smoke or drink, so going to a gay bar was kind of...

0:19:08.6 [AT]: Not my thing... But about that... Again, I think people... Was called the "One Night Stand," people wouldn't relate to each other more than sexually, they were interested in you as an individual, or certainly not in a romantic... A romantic relationship. It was not on the table, for sure. But at that time, there was the first gay pride parade and gay organizations began forming, and gay baseball club and the gay hiking club, and gay going-to-the-theater-club, and in other words, gays were breaking away from that mold, of exile in a way, and trying to create their own social worlds outside of bars and bath houses. So that to me was a revelation to see at a gay pride parade, two men holding hands, kissing in public. This was 1968, right? It seems nothing special now, but at that time... And I photographed a lot of those. And an interesting thing that we've just discovered in my archive was... I lived at 72nd and Riverside, which was just a few blocks away from Central Park, and 72nd Street, where there was a section of the park called "The Ramble." It was kind of designed to be like a natural area full of rocks and bridges and a little stream, and they had let it get overgrown and it was a famous place for gay cruising and having sex, and I just went in there and began photographing and doing portraits of the gay men cruising, not having sex and um not a lot...

0:21:53.1 S2: Gay people were sometimes referred as the "twilight people" 'cause they would come out in a twilight, and that's when I would go and do my photography there, in the late afternoons. The whole point being is that these photographs have just been rediscovered and the Museum of Modern Art has just acquired some from my archive, everyone's very excited about these, 'cause no one else has ever made a record of this area.

0:22:26.6 [DW]: My question, as a very intimidated street photographer, I don't... I explore abandoned landscapes like the leftover and habitations of The Mojave desert or so forth, I'm good with buildings, less good with people, where did that sense of confidence come from? These are guys who remember, cruising could have been illegal at the time, and somehow you're gaining their trust and their confidence to allow them to be photographed.

0:22:57.3 [AT]: No, it wasn't easy. A lot of people didn't wanna be photographed, and but... You know, as a street photographer... One, I'm very sneaky, I'm very quiet and people don't realize it, by the way... But also, you kind of charm people, you're to help... I'm a photographer, can I take your picture? Or it's just... And then they agree people enjoyed it. But there's been a great deal of written recently about the piers, a little bit of a... Making them a little glamorous, there was a lot of cruising under piers downtown, but it was really kind of a brutal scene. People say, Oh, it was group sex, a lot of drugs, and actually crime, it was dangerous. And people see it was kind of a manifestation, another manifestation, the stage in gay liberation, But most of the portraits I did in The Ramble, the people look very paranoid and unhappy, it was not a pleasant... There was a lot of tension, a lot of rejection. It was not a place... Cruising was not really very good for most people's self-esteem. And I captured that in a certain extent, so it's a remarkable body of work.



0:24:50.1 [DW]: To forward to seeing when that's released and.

0:24:54.0 [AT]: I made a little book. It, a little blurb book.

0:25:01.2 [DW]: Well, now we've been talking about your life in New York City, and you're quite an inveterate New Yorker, and I understand and sympathize with that. How is it then that you, like so many others, end up 3000 miles away on a different shore with sunshine and the Golden State?

0:25:27.9 [AT]: I love New York because of its nitty-gritty quality and also the competitiveness, the realness of the art world there, the toughness of it. But at some point, maybe around the early 1990s, the city, Manhattan particularly began to change. It became gentrified, became expensive. Became overbuilt. It's still happening today. Too many people. And so I began spending more time in the country, I would try to rent a little house in Upstate New York for the summer, etcetera. And by the way, since the early 60s, I had an older sister, Madeline Tress, who turned out to be a very important gay activist, when she was younger, had moved to San Francisco to be gay, to be a lesbian in the 1960s. And she had found a partner named Jan, who was a school teacher, both of them are deceased now. And she was always very supportive of my work. So I'd come and visit her every summer, a couple of times a year. And in the 1964... I spent the summer here, I was 24, and I stayed at a place called The Bachelor's Quarters on Grand Street, they had lots of single room occupancy hotels, and those photographs have just been re-discovered for a book called San Francisco 1964.

0:27:45.7 [AT]: When I was cleaning out my sister's house, I found a box of old photos, the

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reason... That's my sister and her girlfriend, Jan. And at that time, San Francisco had become an early mecca for homosexuals, it was one of the few cities in the states where people would not be arrested, where bars wouldn't be raided, etcetera. So my sister and her girlfriend had a very comfortable life here, and when my sister passed away, she left me this house... Which is an interesting part of my journey. Any rate, I had an older brother named David, he's... And he lived in Los Angeles, he was an actor and also a poet, and so he had moved... He was doing Shakespearian acting in New York, which has very limited possibilities, so he moved with his family to Los Angeles around 1980. So I would visit my sister here in San Francisco and drive down to Los Angeles, and the pit stop was San Luis Obispo, as it is for everyone. And I said, Oh, this is fabulous area and so in the summer of 1990, I rented a house, I had a summer rental and Cambria. Do you know in late August, you get all those thousands of birds...

0:29:55.3 [AT]: There's something, I think they're eating sardines or something, and they just do these amazing gyres, and I said, I said, Well, if that's happening, that's where I wanna be. There must be something special about this place. It's extraordinary phenomenon. I'm a bit of a bird watcher... Well, I'm renting this house and it turned out be kind of a wonderful house from the 1950s with a hot tub for eight people, and about 4000 square feet overlooking the ocean with giant floor-to-ceiling windows everywhere and garden, and it was less to rent than my apartment in New York. So I said, why am I riding the subways and dealing with the snow and the pollution, and then I just asked the owner of the house if I could rent the... This wonderful house full-time, and she let me keep renting it at a low rent for 25 years. In 2015, she decided to sell it, and that's why I moved into my sister's house. But it was a little courageous to give up my New York apartment, etcetera. And so I just moved to Cambria, and in New York, I had never been really successful in attaching myself to a boyfriend or lover, it's just not in the nature of New Yorkers maybe to couple up easily,

or maybe I was just unconsciously protecting my own independence, which is always a problem in my relationships, but...

0:32:19.0 [AT]: So to work as a creative artist, which really demands a lot of time, so I moved to Cambria and unbelievably... It was cold, wet and foggy there a lot of the time, which as the years went on, and because we didn't know it then because of climate change, it did all change. But... So Cambria at that time, said it was kind of a community of artists and craftsmen, but really wasn't true, it had already changed its nature, like Sausalito, a lot of these places, and it's a town of 3000, I was thrilled. 'cause it was in the middle of a pine forest, it looked like a Japanese village, so I was kind of enacting that Zen fantasy of kind of being this... Having a hermitage. So being a Zen poet monk, and I loved it, I adored it. But also I bought a telescope at a yard sale because the sky is so clear there. So also you had 15 miles of Hearst Ranch, which at that time was private, but you could sort of... Legally... Illegally, have access to 15 miles of wilderness beach, just north of Cambria. And it was... You could just go to any of these vast rocky beaches and be entirely by yourself with nature and...

0:34:18.4 [AT]: I bought a wetsuit, I could swim in the ocean. But it was a little lonely. Cambria is mostly conservative, retired military kind of people, older people, not very interesting, and then one day... So there were no gay people still up today that live in Cambria, very much... I don't know why, but so one day, in the New Times, there was a little announcement, it said gay, lesbian student club, Cal Poly Thursday night, 7 o'clock in a certain room. So I said, Well, I'm a little old. I was... How old was I then? 60. But we'll see... We'll go anyway. So I show up, I am the oldest person in the room, but I'm a young looking 60, and everyone was very friendly. There were about 12 male students and one female... We never got the lesbians, but who knows, I think Cal Poly was mostly

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male anyway, at that time, it was an agricultural school, and they were just beginning the club, and they had a little charter... We wrote the charter for the club, that had a student advisor who was the astronomy professor, he had a gay boyfriend, a student boyfriend. And they were very accepting of me. And gradually as news of this club grew more people of different ages came...

0:36:20.9 [AT]: We also elected the young woman to be of first president, and we had a dance. And so it was quite interesting, and I made a good friend there named Darren Sullivan, who was very... He was the most socially gregarious of all the people, and we're still friends today, and he... Later on, so gay life, really... I remember the New Times had some kind of, in the back of the New Times, they had a classified for these little ads for meeting men liking men, women, not too many, that... And you could have some kind of phone number, but it didn't seem to work out, but then I discovered Pirates Cove, right? Which was... I was young enough to climb down the ladder--the rope. And again, it was a little bit of a cruising scene, it was a little bit of a... People were... I think... The problem with the Central Coast, although it's not red-neck, but there's an air of being conservative a little bit, and so there were probably hundreds, if not thousands of men there who would like to be gay, who are married or with kids or divorced, but they just... Had no way of coming out and being comfortable on these artists and craftsmen and some very attractive guys were there, but you could just say that their sexuality was sort of put in a back pocket somehow, and it's something they don't really wanna deal with.

0:39:09.2 [AT]: So I wasn't really having a very fulfilled gay life until I would have dates... I'm trying to think what other... And I gave a talk one evening at the Phoenix bookstore, which was everybody, which was my savior for being in San Luis Obispo. I'm a big book collector, and that's an amazing place. It's still being run by the owner's son... Part of what you could ask is, What did I

find to photograph in SLO County after being in New York.

0:40:12.4 [DW]: That was indeed... That was my next question. How did this change of landscape affect the aesthetic of your work?

0:40:20.8 [AT]: It was a little bit, but I was at the age where I needed to do some new things and began photographing nature, dried kelp, driftwood, wonderful things. I did a book called "Hand," which is 100 photographs of my hand. But then I gave a little talk, a little slide show at Phoenix Bookstore, and my friend Darren Sullivan... Had little chairs arranged, and Darren Sullivan was there, and he was sitting next to a very attractive young man, usually I kind of date people within my own age group or little bit younger. And I talked to Dan and I assumed that was his friend who was gay also, and I introduced myself to him, and it turned out that he was a photographer. His name was Vince, he was 28 years old. And so I said, Let's go out photographing some time, and then he became my boyfriend for about three years. And it was kind of a mentor relationship, but then he was younger and had a very looser type, way of shooting. I would set things up, but he would just go and take lots, you know, be very loose and have a model running jumping, and so his photographic style affected my own, and he was almost a world class surfer as well as a photographer.

0:42:18.6 [AT]: So we went to Hawaii, Fiji, Bali, surf camps, which was kind of strange, but it was okay. And then he eventually wanted to get a graduate degree and moved to San Francisco, but we're still in touch, but he was an important romance in my life, this was from around 1998 to 1990... To around 2000. No, actually a little earlier. And then the evolution of gay life in San Luis Obispo was beginning to broaden... An important thing, and I perhaps I can find you some of the

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participants, there was a men's group, a gay men's group that would meet once a month in a different person's house, about 20 guys, mostly kind of middle aged, we would discuss gay problems, living as a gay man in San Luis Obispo, and it would be people who bring food and... And so I met some interesting people through that. Nothing sexually, but it broadened my area of gay friends, some very interesting guys turned up from that: People who were just coming out, and this is apart from the student club. It kind of dissipated after, I think people got talked to hosting these dinners, but it got actually 20-40 people actually at some point.

0:44:28.4 [AT]: I think GALA... When was that established?

0.44.33.0 [DW] Various incarnations, there was an 80s version that he faded, but ultimately there was a 90s reincarnation of the second.

0.44.41.0 [AT] And I think that's when people didn't really need the men's group, even though GALA kind of failed in that they never did have a men's group discussing things, I had they had like a movie night or silly things. So I had attended, and it was amazing that they got that community center going. And that's been very important. I'd still be living in San Luis Obispo if my house in Cambria hadn't been sold. So I did decide that at that point to move into my sister's house in 2015, and...

0.45.38.0 [DW] When you were in San Luis Obispo, GALA also sponsored... They began having Pride in the Plaza, they begin having more visible presence, did you photograph or participate in any of the San Luis GALA type events.

0.45.50.0 [AT] I photographed it from the periphery a little bit, but I think by the time that got going, I was 70, and it was mostly on all these young people, and I think they kind of saw me as a kind of non-entity with a camera, but I photographed some things, but not particularly, I was on to other things.

0:46:16.2 [AT]: An interesting thing though, around... I had been... My early photography, that I had met a wonderful... Around 1970, I met a wonderful gay photographer named Duane Michaels. Right, he came... He's eight years older than I am. He was kind of my mentor. He didn't really do any gay photography, but he did do the male nude early on in some of his sequences, and he felt that you should photograph what is inside your own mind, psychologically that you photograph spiritual things, what is death? What is love? You just didn't have to take pictures on the subway of other people, and that was kind of... It was the era of staged photography. So he was saying something quite radical at that time, and so that influenced me quite a bit. And so my first project was called "Dream Collector," which was a book of children's dreams where I got people and kids to act out dreams, flying, falling, etcetera. And then I began to do a book of adult fantasies, adult psychological dramas, and at some point, that was called "Theater Of The Mind." I segued into doing gay fantasies, this was around 1997, gay psychological fantasies. And I said, Why not? You know, it's when I'm in the midst of...

0:48:19.9 [AT]: Anyway, that became a very amazing book, and.

0.48.29.0 [DW] So it took place while you were living in San Luis?

0.48.31.0 [AT] Yes, just all kinds of... It's my critique in some ways, this is while I'm living in

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Manhattan, and there were lots of abandoned buildings in Manhattan... And no one had really done work like this before. I mean, there had been male nudes, but none you might say as terrifying as my own work. So after I had been doing this for a number of years, I felt that I was repeating myself a little bit and I needed to move on, so I began working with still life, just doing portraits or nature, I wanted to sort of broaden my photographic approach. But around 1995 I was working with a curator named Richard Lorentz, and who's gay, he lived with his partner in Oakland, and he said to me, Arthur, you really should go back to doing the male nudes. I thought, I've already been there, I've done that. I'm living in Cambria, there's nothing but sand dunes here. And what can I do? He said, Just do it. You're really good at it. And so I followed his suggestion and I began doing a book of homoerotic fantasy, but set in SLO County or Santa Barbara or some of them in San Francisco, and I did manage to find extraordinary places in SLO county like there was...

0:50:42.5 [AT]: In Guadalupe, there was an abandoned sugar refinery, all this mechanical stuff, and there were lots of other... There was an abandoned sewer plant above Cal Poly with these great tanks and whatever. Just Cal Poly itself had all interesting green houses and so it became a book. There were gardens. They're not as dark. They have a slightly more romantic mood, than my earlier, in New York series... This is on Morro Strand, this was... I began photographing a lot of the gay couples, this was a fellow who liked older men and lived... So it turned out... Cal Poly, this is the old shower room for the wrestling club or whatever, the wrestling department, and that's an old painting of a wrestler, so you can find in SLO County... And I'd find the models. Maybe I'd find them at some of these men's groups, and I was fine photographing older men since that's what we kind of had, and I also photographed quite a bit my... That's Vince, my surfer, boyfriend.

0:53:24.4 [DW]: And where were these particular photographs taken?



0:53:33.8 [AT]: This is in Hawaii, but then I met... I did... This is Vince when his parents came to visit us. And.

0:54:06.9 [AT]: And then the art... We could look at all these as...

0:54:27.0 [DW] There Was that one of a nude model on that railroad bridge at Stenner Glen...

0:54:24.7 [AT: Oh, and this is Vince and I when we were breaking up, when he moved to San Francisco.

0:54:35.4 [DW]: There was the one I mentioned of the... Was like, That's a tricky look. How does one climb up and do that picture?

0:54:48.0 [DW]: I did an exhibit. Oh, one of my best friends in Cambria was a woman named Laylon, who ran the Vault Gallery. I'd visit her almost every afternoon, and so she decided to do an exhibit that got written up in the New York... In the New Times called "One Night Stand," 'cause she was only gonna put up my male nudes for one day in her gallery, and then this Cal Poly student named Kevin turned up and he said, "Well, I'd like to model for you," and he turned out to be... He was kind of the gymnast, but he was also an art student, so he would... That's Kevin there. So he would get into these amazing poses, this is... They're always having fires. So I take my models to... I also use older men who, I forget his name.

0:55:50.0 [DW] And that looks like a view of from, say the top of Highway 41 looking south.

0:55:53.0 [AT] Yes, I'm looking for the one of Kevin. Well, my technique is just to wander around with the model, so we find some interesting location... And...

0:56:22.4 [DW]: Where was that?

0:56:23.7 [AT]: Oh, this is actually in Santa Barbara up in the Hills there. So it was a good period for me to get back into photographing people again... Here's Darren in a forest fire. So each of these photos happen... This is my friend Elliot in a hot tub, a hot tub! So Kevin became... He's straight. And he's married now, I went to his wedding. But he would make all kinds of art. And props for me. This is Kevin in an irrigation ditch...

0:57:34.0 [DW] Maybe South County?

0:57:37.5 [AT]: Yes, exactly.

0:57:42.0 [DW] So in some ways, you are in the way, I don't know, re-queering in San Luis landscape through your own lens...

0:57:49.5 [AT]: Absolutely. And actually, if it sounds a little, but I don't know if it's in this book, but I did several nudes with elephant seals now... Okay, this is funny. There's something in Paso Robles called Ramada Road off the highway, 'cause there used to be a giant Ramada Inn. And it was abandoned, there were 200 rooms, I think it's a senior citizen and assisted living, they remodeled it, the Ramada Inn, they had about 200 rooms, and they were all abandoned and broken.

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But we found one that a transvestite had used as a sort of... Their own private room. So it was filled with all kinds of dildos and stocks and things. And so Kevin kind of really got into putting all that stuff on. So it was kind of a... So as I said, is a lot of interesting places. Where it is, yeah. Well, actually, it isn't difficult to access because the railroad attaches to land and then goes across the highway.

0:59:28.9 [DW]: And who was that model?

0:59:29.9 [AT]: That's Kevin again...

0:59:33.9 [AT]: Yes. He was very athletic. It was fun.

0:59:37.0 [DW] Was anyone not afraid that a train could...

0:59:39.7 [AT]: I don't think they come along... And to deal with the men in the sand dune problem, I would bring props to the sand dunes. So that's kind of interesting. So I'm dealing with different themes.

1:00:06.1 [DW]: Okay. While we're on it, there were some other things you showed me earlier with the skate boards, for example, where you make use of San Luis Obispo locales?

1:00:29.6 [AT]: Around... As I said, I always felt my style was a little static. You know, I've been doing it for 60 years now, photography, so I need to change what I'm doing, keep it fresh and not become formulas. So just walking one day in Cayucos I noticed the skate park, and I said, it's

beautiful, it was homemade, made of plywood, curved plywood, I would... And well, this is beautiful, with the way the light hits the wood and they put these little stickers on it and all that. And so I just began photographing, the skate parks as sculptural forms, and most of the towns in San Luis Obispo have skateparks. And then I ventured further afield and I began investigating who are the people making these skate parks, and they're designers, but then eventually I became part of skatepark culture, there's a wonderful one in Los Osos that was done by a professional designer, and I photographed them building it, and I wanted to show the transition between the building and then finished product and the skaters is using it. That was my original thing. So I began incorporating skaters and in the books he... Truthfully, I'm not really attracted to these little teenagers or anything, but they're wonderful to watch, it's an amazing thing what kids are doing and a little dangerous actually, 'cause I think I was about 70 when I was doing these photos, and you're in the bottom of the pit and these kids are wandering or the state boards of flying over your head...

1:02:45.9 [AT]: But I got someone to do this book and to make it a little bit more commercial, but again, just the skate park is pure form... A pure sculptural form. This is Templeton.

1.03.09.0 [DW] I was gonna say the oak trees are north county.

1.03.17.0 [AT] This is... Not that I remember. Paso Robles, I think or maybe... I was doing them up to... I went from Petaluma to Santa Monica. And then I began... I began spinning the camera, so this is a very loose style and try... And the book ends in the lonely skater. But what I felt... Again, it's kind of an interest in what I called rites of passage... Skate culture, they're all watching each other, who's the best guy, learning things from each other, it's like a strange little interesting world without adults, essentially. And so it went back, but also... And I did the sequel to this book when I was at

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The Petaluma skatepark, which was covered with graffiti, with the ones of the graffiti were the best. There was a little sign that said "paintball." And I said, What is paintball? And there was a huge... It became also another book. I visited about 50 paintball places, different types of kids are interested in it, and a little bit right-wing militia too type people who have...

1:05:25.4 [AT]: So an interesting crowd, and I kind of mingled with the troops, I would just put on the helmet by that time I was 75, so it's interesting, so it does keep you interested in the work...

1:05:41.2 [DW]: Was the skate park show put up as a show in San Luis County... And what was the response?

1:05:47.6 [AT]: Yes. You can look it up online maybe, or I can send you the reviews. Okay. So what is my relationship? I'm in New York, I'm showing in museums, important museums around the world, Paris, Tokyo... I come to San Luis Obispo, and there's the Vault Gallery. I had a wonderful relationship, and she'd put my photographs up and she had made me maybe \$20-30,000 a year selling my work out of this little gallery, and you know, San Luis Obispo, Taco Temple you can still eat for \$5 there, maybe I don't know anymore, but you know... It was enough to get by on. But also I love the little San Luis Obispo Art Center before it became the museum. And I'd show them my work. Over the years that had different curators, and so I did three shows there, and it would get written up, I do interviews for the Cambrian, for the New Times. We do a nice press release, it was sufficient, I don't know, I had... For me, but I did a show of all my experimental work there, and then we did a show called Skatepark, which was... I had made a collection of broken skateboards is a problem, and I had photographed the bottoms of them in color where they're warm, they're almost like abstract paintings.

1:07:52.9 [AT]: I made a little book out of them, and so we put those sculptures, the broken skateboards out when we put the photographs up, and I don't think any skateboarder ever went to see the show, of course, but... It was a beautiful installation. And before I left, we did a little show called 100 views of Morro Rock. Around 2010 to 2015, I did 25000 photographs of Morro Rock, and I just loved photographing. A little bit, it sort of tied into my Japanese Zne thing, but it was just such a wonderful project totally circumambulate three times a week, Morro Rock, it was always changing in and out of the fog and from different people's houses, and fishermen, tourists, it's just an amazing project and I hope to publish that as a book. A couple of years ago, I sold my archive to Stanford University for two and a half million dollars, which I now have in the bank, more or less, a little bit to my surprise, and they promise to do this Morro Rock book, but they haven't done it yet, so I may have to self-publish it.

1:09:32.6 [DW]: Well, as the former Chairman of the Morro Bay Tourism and Promotion committee.

1.09.35.0 ] AT] Oh, you're kidding me...

1.09.37.0. [DW] I spent four years doing that work on our Thursday morning meetings, we'll welcome... It will happily stage a reception for you in Morro Bay.

1:09:47.2 S2: But you know, are you responsible for those little brochures with the bright colors?

1:09:53.7 [DW]: Well, for some I left in 2010. Our brochure, my credit, it was a trade marking the

city motto "Morro Bay, discover your better nature" is... That was my work...

1.10.04 [AT] Oh I see, Morro Bay, Bird City, Tree City.

1.10.13.0 [DW] And mentioned what you mentioned about the birds, I was taking a hike because I need to... I agree with you, there's that stretched north of Cayucos, before the Harmony Headlands, and there's a fig tree and a rock and a turn out... And what I like about that spots, you drive up there on a weekday, let's say I have to get away from the politics of my day job, and you can park at three in the afternoon and walk down to the coastal bluffs and you can look left and you can look right and not find another soul for miles and miles, I was... Even though the city Morro Bay is just five miles that way, and Cambria is just five miles that way, and have the entire beach.

1.10.53.0 [AT] Oh yes, Morro strand.

1.10.55.0 [DW] to yourself and I've yet to go there with a camera, I've gone there with a camera-- not with a camera and a model... Did you find that when you're working with models in a place, it's semi-public, I mean, Highway One is driving by up the hill in a way, there was a self-consciousness...

1:11:10.4 [DW]: How did that work? As experience.

1:11:12.7 [AT]: Oh well, I did... Also, you have the problem is that the... For gay people... Is that the police force is kind of conservative, Morro Bay, etcetera. And at least in the 70... Early 90s, maybe they've changed, but I did get arrested for working with my model, Kevin in Cal Poly

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Canyon, and we did actually... I hired a good lawyer 'cause they wanted to make the charge lewd behavior, lewd behavior, which can be on your record, you know, it's not a good thing, so... Do you ever hear of a lawyer Funke-Bilu? It was kind of the... You know, and it cost me 1000, but I was doing a nude of Kenyon, Kevin in Cal Poly Canyon, even though it was closed at that time, I mean it was a place where students job would take walks, but they were putting in the big water sewer project... There around 1995. So it was all closed, I thought we were home-free, that there was no one there. So I was photographing Kevin with some of the machinery and things left over from this big construction project, but... So the district attorney was gonna make a big deal out of it, and I was kind of surprised, but then we got it changed to trespass.

1:13:11.2 [AT]: But that's the only time I'm pretty discrete and using things... Or pretty quick at doing it.

1.13.25.0 [DW] The GALA Center has had dealings with the current district, the GALA Center sign was stolen and vandalized...

1.13.31.0 [AT] Oh that I remember.

1.13.36.0 [DW] And there's been no attempt to prosecute or to search for the person, so I think sadly, the conservatism you experienced decades ago still persists in San Luis Obispo.

1:13:48.8 [AT]: I'll try to find a picture of Kevin, but it turned out... The picture I did in Cal Poly Canyon turned out to be one of my best-selling pictures. Also doing the male nude, it helped my income to be true and nothing sells as well in the art world or photography world as erotica... Can



do all the pictures of elephant seals you want. So this is it, the sugar refinery in Guadalupe.

1:14:41.5 [DW]: And was that any security guards or was totally abandoned?

1:14:56.9 [AT]: It was totally abandoned... This is a photograph of my friend Tobin, this is Watsonville, and he raises Arabian horses. So Laylon had this in her gallery and she sold a lot of it actually to women who like horses, you know... And when you look for something.

1:15:27.4 [DW]: No, please take your time on the story, so intriguing it will be worth seeing the photograph, by the way, that Chrysler building is made out of cardboard. I put one of those together as a senior in high school, it's still in my parents house on my old dresser to this date, I would have never thought to use it as imaginatively as you have... Well, thank you, but there's no doubt that viewed... Alternatively, the Chrysler Building is extremely phallic its architectural... As is the new Salesforce building here in downtown San Francisco. As is Jeff Bezos's rocketship.

1:16:06.5 [AT]: Where is that picture? Maybe. But then when I finished doing this, I did a book and I... I should show it to... It's called colony. A lot of... All my books have blurb books, so they're online, so you just go to Arthur Tress and you could see colony... Not gay exactly, but this is a... Rather out... These are two Cal Poly students. This is Darren and his boyfriend, and then this is Darren and his boyfriend, so it was kind of... You might say, This is from 1996 by doing these photographs and San Luis Obispo, this kind of serious work, was kind of an outing and then having it published was kind of an outing of SLO County and student life. I mean, they were college students.

1:17:33.0 [DW]: But as we know, Cal Poly is itself a very conservative agricultural campus, as you've mentioned...

1.17.36.0 [AT] Is it still now?

1.17.38.0. [DW] Yes they've had several charges of racism of fraternities. Yes, there's a "Bro" culture there that's declared toxic and unhealthy, there in fact was recently state-of-campus rapes just in the last few months.

1:17:58.1 [AT]: But I love this one of Darren and his boyfriend in bed together. So I'm promulgating a kind of romantic possibilities to... People sometimes look at my photographs and think I should be wearing a leather jacket and have a beard, but I'm really just kind of into holding hands and things like that.

1:18:24.4 [DW]: Well, some of your earlier work would be concurrent with the Mapplethorpe period as well, I'm imagining some critics may inevitably...

1:18:35.2 [AT]: This is fun to... Again, Kevin, the wonderful model. So this is the one that was done in Cal Poly Canyon with the tracks from these giant tractors and things, so my work, the best of it, always has a kind of surreal dream-like feeling, 'cause I kind of discovered... Which I think that connection to surreality and dream and trance. I think it's almost in the gay DNA, the world of fantasy--for some, artistically... And this is Kevin. With the elephant seals, I did a lot of nudes, you couldn't do it today 'cause it's against the law, but at that time, the elephant seals had just become arriving around... Around 1995, they were only 40, and they became 400 and then they became

4000. But when they were first began arriving, so again, I think someone blending into nature, I mean, I often like to lie on the beach and in these empty beaches in the sun, but there's a kind of violence to this... I mean, he could be dead, he could be run over, so that edge that I think is particularly that fear of death, and also that kind of return to the...

1:20:24.9 [AT]: Primordial thing that's a little bit gay than most men at allow themselves to experience.

1.20.32.1 [DW] The question about the art direction in those two, was it Kevin or the model's decision or your direction, the streaking and the smearing of the body with the mud and dir... Did you direct that?

1:20:45.2 [AT]: Yes, part of it is because I wanted him to blend in a little bit, but also that sense of marking... That he was run over by a tractor. So I think from my experience from teenager... No, it's a cliché now, but feeling very marginalized, there's always a threat of being exposed to shame, being hurt and escaping in some way. So I think a lot of these photos deal with issues within my own psyche. I think particularly in the 60s and the 50s, you were always very afraid of being exposed as a homosexual even in high school and college and etcetera, so you carry that with you and it could lead to a kind of self-violence. Okay, so I finished with the male nudes and around 2005, I began experimenting with different shaped photographs. I began doing round photographs and then I settled into a diamond shape photograph, just turning the camera 45 degrees. And then talking specifically again about SLO... I began, as you going down Highway One, you start seeing, you see all these little side roads that say "not a through road." Who ever goes up those roads? They go for miles up into the hills, they are wonderful.

1:22:51.1 [AT]: And so I just began going up those roads, and it's like you've entered a different world. They're ranches and barns, going back really to the 19th century, and I'd climb over the fences that my shadow... But there were these wonderful abstract... I love architecture. Barns and a lot of homemade things. And then at cows and it's a whole... I don't know, I think it's mostly been transformed because of the wineries, and I don't think having cattle and cows is very profitable anymore, so it was just very fascinating to... And I began going to the rodeos, in Creston and Parkfield that has a rodeo once a year, and I'm trying to find those... But going to, there are many layers of San Luis Obispo a gay person would find fascinating... I'm just trying to find... There's a certain... Because then... Oh, it's a bowling ball. Set on a pole. I don't know, I didn't put it up there. It was just... And the pumpkin patches. And the abalone farm, which is run by a gay man and his partner... I don't know that... Yeah, I don't know. If he still runs it. It's a little north of Morro Bay. Yeah, it's Brad that runs the abalone farm.

1:25:36.2 [AT]: Okay, any more questions in that?

1:25:39.8 [DW]: No, I think you really covered it. One thing I'd like to know is, and I saw it in in your email. So you're now living in San Francisco since 2015... Decade has passed. What's your current relationship spiritual, physical or otherwise to your former home on the Central Coast?

1:26:01.9 [AT]: It's interesting, I did. I began a series of photos during Covid, a project called "In Recess: Closed schools of Northern California," and I rented a house in Cambria, a very luxurious house for a month and re-visited almost all the schools and photographed them that were closed. Pismo High School, San Luis Obispo High School, elementary schools in Morro Bay, Cambria

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Elementary School. To photograph just the buildings, the closed buildings, they were kind of surreal and empty, but also quite often had very interesting architecture. They've been just published in Art Forum Magazine, and I'm working on a book about it. But it's funny, so I would try to visit those same beaches and places, you could say that those were the place that I returned to the book, come find myself again. But to be honest, I'm away from that person I was when I lived there, I've changed a little bit. I'm not so connected to natural things now, I'm much more interested in cities again, so I've been doing some projects on Silicon Valley and San Francisco, but I do go back there because to do more Morro Rock photos plus, just to relax. It's such a neat place.

1:28:20.9 [AT]: Well, I certainly would love to have you. You're welcome to come and visit. I have a view of the rock from my front porch, and pretty decent North from North Morro Bay... You know the Taco Temple in North Morro Bay? I live half a mile south, so we know where it is, and for all the time, I spend in Morro Bay, but you must be quickly discreet, because if you were visiting so many times, I know as a photographer, I, I recognized the guy with a Hasselblad out there...

1:28:49.8 [AT]: And a big lens! That's funny... No, I was just there. No, I think they're probably... Actually, there are interesting writers and people living in SLO County, but they have really no way of connecting with each other in some way. I would have liked to have found another interesting, intellectual, active, New Yorker!

1:29:12.0 [DW]: I wish I had known at the time, 'cause I've been here for 20 years. I was there in the first decade and a half that you were there, and I think I first saw your work at the Vault, the Vault was... Because I would always put the pole because of... There was that other fellow who did

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a cartoon... Oh c'mon now 'm blanking on his name now, and he's since passed away he was one of the other, and it was a very colorful... It'll come to me, but I would tell people, It's the only gallery to go to, I'm just tired of water colors of Morro Rock, I want to see something contemporary and The Vault... And I've heard they've gone out of business... Closed since Covid...

1:29:52.5 [AT]: No, no, she was... She did, against my advice, she's kept it open and is doing very well...

1.29.58.0. [DW] Maybe it was a different one that I heard... But.

1:30:00.1 [DW]: But if Laylon is who I think it is... Laylon was involved with GALA... No? Was a different Laylon then. It certainly addresses, it put in perspective our looking for a perspective on aesthetics, art culture and how it inter-merged with LGBTQ affairs on the Central Coast, and I don't know if you've shared that in the other interviews as in depth.

1:30:28.3 [AT]: No, this is the first time anyone to ask me about it, I did actually to talk about, I can... After Vince left, it was kind of a quiet period for me romantically, but I actually at a GALA meeting before they had their building, they met in the vets Hall off of Los Osos Valley Road in some kind of little meeting rooms there.

1.33.00.0 [DW]: Oh, that was the question I had. Were you aware of Breezes or any of the gay bars?

1:33:46.3 [AT]: Oh yes, this is important Actually. Well, Breezes opened. And so economically, it

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was sometimes a little slow for them there, but on weekends, also, I think a lot of students would like it, but it was hard because they had to be over 21 to drink, but they had a nice dance floor. And again, I was about 70, but Darren Sullivan would always dance with me, which was sweet of him, and there were a lot of lesbians there, so it was a very broad spectrum of the community and... So I never met anyone that I could take home, but it was some fun place and certainly for a lot of people, it was important to have that.

1:34:46.3 [DW]: Well, unless there's anything else you would like to add that you think we forgot.

[AT]. No.

[DW] I think that's great.