

# Judith E. Stein, Writer and Curator

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## The Adventures of Jo Baer

### Articles and Interviews

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Born Josephine Kleinberg in Seattle, Wash., in 1929, Jo Baer attended the University of Washington (1946-49), where she majored in biology. While there, she enrolled in a few art classes. Following a short first marriage and a six-month stint on an Israeli kibbutz, she relocated to New York City (1950-53). She resumed coursework in science at the New School for Social Research and its Graduate Faculty in Gestalt psychology and sat in on a drawing class. Returning to the West Coast in 1953, she settled in Los Angeles, marrying television writer Richard Baer. Three years after their son Josh was born in 1955, the couple divorced. In the late 1950s, she taught herself to paint, experimenting with a variety of approaches before electing a reductive, hard-edge style. In 1960, Jo Baer moved back to New York with her new husband, painter John Wesley.

She began the series Richard Bellamy subsequently titled the "Koreans" two years later. In 1964, Dan Flavin included her work in the landmark Minimalism show "Eleven Artists" at the Kaymar Gallery, and Dan Graham invited her to participate in the opening show of his Daniels Gallery. Her work then encompassed series of large squares, small squares and vertical rectangles with fully enclosing borders. In 1966, she painted flanking and stacked diptych and triptych groupings. "Stations of the Spectrum," six paintings with gray grounds, and the "Double Bar" series with gray backgrounds followed over the next two years.

She participated in such historic exhibitions as Lawrence Alloway's "Systemic Painting," Guggenheim Museum, N.Y., and "10," Dwan Gallery, N.Y., in 1966; and "Art in Series," Finch College Museum, N.Y., in 1967. New York's Fischbach Gallery mounted her first solo show in 1966. Two years later, she showed in Documenta IV. In 1969, the year she and Wesley divorced, she began experimenting with wraparound paintings with

*diagonal and curved forms, sometimes called the "Radiator" paintings because they are objectlike and mounted near the floor.*

Several months after the Whitney Museum organized a retrospective of her paintings in 1975, Baer moved to Ireland, relinquishing abstraction to work with images in a style she had begun in New York. In 1982 she relocated to London, and two years later she settled in Amsterdam. The Museum of Modern Art, Oxford, mounted a retrospective in 1977; as did the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, in 1999. The Paley Levy Gallery, Moore College, Philadelphia, presented her new work in 1993, and the Rijksmuseum Kröller-Müller, Otterloo, the Netherlands, showed both recent image work and Minimalist canvases that same year. She is represented by the Paul Andriessse Gallery, Amsterdam.

**Judith Stein:** Every artist has to make work and manage a career, which are two quite different things.

**Jo Baer:** Yes, apparently I have always been an artist's artist. When I had a retrospective at the Whitney Museum in 1975, Tom Armstrong told me that I broke all attendance records on free-admission night, when students and the really interested people come, but that nobody bought the catalogue. In other words, I have the best audience in the world, which is other artists, and I've always ranked very highly with them, but I don't do well in the market. It's a great compliment, in fact.

**JS:** Perhaps it's one of the privileges of being under-known that when someone does bring your work back to a wider audience, as the Dia Center has done now with an exhibition of your work from the 1960s and '70s, it conveys new meanings and confounds the forces that strive to simplify art history.

**JB:** Well, I'll disappear again—being female, especially—but I'll come back every 15 years, because my work lasts.

**JS:** Let's talk about disappearing. Your career was at its height when you left the U.S. to live abroad in 1975. What went into your decision to leave?

**JB:** I didn't like the pressures of New York. People want you to keep doing exactly what you've already done, because it makes money. Once you've got a trademark, you're recognizable, and they want you to stay that way. So I knew the best thing to do was to get out. I just assumed that, since I'd had a lot of exposure, my good dealers, Dick Bellamy and Klaus Kertess, would be able to sell my work. Well, Klaus sold a couple things, and Bellamy sold nothing. So within a few years, I was stuck with no money. This has been one of the problems—out of sight, and out of mind.

**JS:** So it was to take some of the pressure off that you moved abroad?

**JB:** I wanted to develop a new kind of work, with images, and I knew I could not do that here. Also, the people who were working with images at that time were dumbing down very fast. So I wanted to see what I really thought, from a distance. It wasn't meant to be career suicide, it just turned out that way. I started being left out of the big international shows.

**JS:** You were included in Documenta IV in 1968.

**JB:** And I've never been in a Documenta since. Initially Kaspar König was going to include a reprise of my 1966 debut at Fischbach in the big German survey "Westkunst" (Rheinhallen der Kölner Messe, Cologne) in 1981, but he changed his mind. I'm told he felt that I was "no longer committed to that work." The art community saw me as a turncoat.

**JS:** What about the U.S. political situation at the time? Did that play a part in your leaving?

**JB:** Yes, I left in 1975. Three years before, when Nixon was elected by a landslide, I remember saying to the woman next to me at the polling place, "I'd leave this country if I knew where to go." This was before Watergate, but you could tell that the situation was total nutter. And the woman said, "Well, in Ireland you don't have to pay taxes, if you're an artist." I thought, "What a good idea!" I came home and said, "I think I'll move to Ireland." It took me a couple of years to get it all together.

My son Josh said, "You don't know anyone there. You can't do that." So I called up Clem Greenberg, because I knew he'd done some shows there, and I asked him to give me some names. I bought myself a ticket that included a car and hotel vouchers. I went and looked around the country, and I adored it. I think I was six months in Ireland in this castle all by myself before it dawned on me what a totally bizarre thing I had done.

**JS:** Let's talk about some of the work in the Dia show, in particular the painting called *Black Star* (1960-61), which has two red stars in it, and the small untitled collage on paper from 1960 that has a constellation on a black ground.

**JB:** To me, the star was a geometric form, like a square.

**JS:** But unlike a square, which is more abstract, the star has a figurative or symbolic potential.

**JB:** Yes, but I actually was not thinking of that. The painting has little red stars because it needed something red there.

**JS:** And the image of the constellation?

**JB:** I was thinking of star charts—the idea that if you draw a line connecting the stars, it becomes something. If you don't draw that line, they're just a bunch of dots. In other words, there's chaos, but if you see the constellation—in this case, Leo, which is my birth sign—there's order, too. I did another of those collages, of Sagittarius, for Jack [Wesley], but then I dropped it. It wouldn't turn into a painting, and I look for paintings in drawings.

**JS:** The Dia show also includes a group of graph-paper paintings, as well as drawings on the grid from 1962-63. It was interesting to me that you transferred the grid from the drawing onto the painting.

**JB:** I was doing Pop art; I was living at the time with a Pop artist. Jack was inventing Pop art, concurrent with Lichtenstein and other people. We didn't know Lichtenstein's work. Jack was working in the post office and painting his post office badge. He was painting images of George Washington and Paul Revere, so I decided to paint a drawing. Was it a drawing or a painting? That was the question I was addressing in it.

It just so happened that I had a pad of Laban notation paper at hand. Jack had read a *New Yorker* article about Rudolf von Laban's system of analyzing and recording dance movement and had signed up for a class in it. Like music notation, Laban uses a staff, albeit a vertical one. Besides, I liked the colors, the pale green grid color behind the several rows of blue-purple verticals.

I should also mention the impact Jasper Johns had on me about that time—his flags, his coat hangers, his bronze beer cans, the fact that flat things were painted flat.

I found that absolutely remarkable.

Anyway, those graph paintings and the drawings that went with them were shown three years after they were made, in my first show, in the back at Fischbach, in February 1966. I built a little shelf, lined it with black felt and put it next to the stairs. There were eight drawings and four paintings. I was doing this work at night, after the kid was in bed—painting these lines.

**JS:** That leads me to ask you about “facture” and the role of the hand in the creation of these paintings.

**JB:** I do believe in the hand. It's not that the hand is so great; it's that the hand gives you an unevenness that is much more alive than any mechanical thing. I'm not a purist.

**JS:** When I look closely, I can certainly see traces of your work process, especially in *Vertical Flanking Diptych—Green* (1966-74), where you have two identical panels. You have one boundary that may have been taped, but the other one is very much looser.

**JB:** Yes, I used a little brush for that. There are marks of tape there, but not for the reason that tape is normally used. Over time, white paint turns dark, if it's normal white paint. So I was using an acrylic medium that was compatible with oil, one I developed with the conservator at the Guggenheim Museum. We built it up in layers, and you could get about three of them. It bonded very quickly, so the more you had, the faster it dried. You couldn't get your brush strokes out, so I would do three coats and then varnish. And then three more, just to build up a really nice, dense white field. And in the process, if any of the white acrylic got on the black, it would leach the oil out, so there would be spots. Every time I used the tape, the paint built up as a ridge. Then I took a small paintbrush and went over that build-up by hand.

**JS:** It has a halolike effect.

**JB:** The painting needed that. The white, when it's lit, develops a glare, and it expands beyond its boundaries, like a bit of a halo, lending light to the next color.

At the same time, the color band is also next to black, and something different thing happens there. You get a contrast effect, which is called the “negative of the second derivative.” That means that the black side—this is retinal, not strictly physical—will be much blacker, and the light side will be much lighter. So you're getting light into this color line from the white and the black; the colors themselves, if you isolate them, are actually quite muddy and pale. But here they fluoresce, and in diverse ways depending on whether the painting is vertical or horizontal. I had to use different kinds of color for each of these kinds of situations. Also size makes a big difference. It's very subtle.

**JS:** What led you to some of your color choices?

**JB:** Sometimes I see it as a Northwest Indian palette—like the black, red, green and beige or sand color in *Black Star*. I used that combination long before I was an artist; I tried to decorate an apartment in it back when I lived in Seattle. I like the color of sand, that beige color, and then the dark green and bright red and the black: these are the Kwakiutl totem-pole colors that I grew up with.

**JS:** So is that the Seattle in you?

**JB:** Yes, I would say so.

**JS:** There are several of your sculptural, radiator-shaped paintings in the Dia show, works with names like *H. Arcuata* (1971). Where do these

names come from?

**JB:** I happened to find a book of botanical Latin, which is the language used to name plants when they are discovered. And there are all kinds of protocols. It isn't normal Latin, it's botanical Latin. And I had fun going through the adjectives, which describe the habits of a plant, for example, so I used that system to name paintings. For example, "V" stands for *verticalis*, vertical, and "H" for *horizontalis*, horizontal.

**JS:** *V. Staminodious* (1974) is a very sensual image. When you look at the gray surface, there's a series of circles underneath the top layer of paint.

**JB:** Well, there something didn't work, and I painted over it. I never knew ahead of time what would happen with those paintings, because they have elements that continue around the corners of the stretchers, which is the real reason I was doing them. What happens if you extend the line around the corner? What happens is, there's a shadow there, so you can lighten the shadowed area and make it come back attached to the frontal plane so that it flows; in other words, it's sleight of hand. But meanwhile, the form is doing something else.

Corners are very tricky. I've said before that I don't think these "Radiator," wraparound paintings (1970-74) are my best work. But I'm pleased that I did them. At the time, Richard Serra asked me, after he saw them, "How does it feel to do revolutionary work?" Richard used to phone me up in the middle of the night and scream at me. We used to argue about philosophy. Richard was a Wittgenstein person, and I liked Alfred North Whitehead and his ideas of elegance and built-in esthetics.

**JS:** You often talk about the nature of perception, especially with regard to the edges of a painting. In your earliest work in the Dia show, the edge is a compositional factor on the front plane. But as you went on, your notion of the edge expanded and turned the corner to the side plane of the stretched canvas. What was your thinking process?

**JB:** There's the *Black Star* painting, which has red stars, then I took the colors into white, black and pale blue in *White Star* (1960-61). Like the format of the subsequent "Korean" paintings, *Black Star* was heavy at the top and had borders. I tricked it out with the little hanging stars in the corners. Later, as I was putting the Koreans together, I was thinking of them as portraits, but not of people. I had been reading Beckett's *The Unnamable*, where he talks about osmosis through membranes, and I suddenly decided to construct these paintings as if the blue line were a membrane or a slit back to the sky, between the black outside and the light inside.

I was trying to work with totally negative factors, like white, black and sky—all negative elements in a painting. I also wanted to stay away from landscape, so I wasn't using horizontal brushwork. Vertical strokes make a wall. I was composing in many dimensions. I tried to keep a flat surface that was still, where you could peek through a "slit." I had to play with the depth of the canvas, and at the same time keep it flat. Of course, the top of a painting is different than the bottom. The bottom is naturally weighted, as the eye reads it, so to equalize the surface you weight the top and throw away the bottom. De Kooning did that; every first-class abstract artist does this. Bad artists start at the bottom and build up, so that the top of the painting disappears into the distance. It's weakest at the top, especially the upper left. These are Western perceptual qualities.

I didn't see any reason to put anything in the middle; white would do. I understood this blank, white area as light. Later on, I used a darker light, a pale gray, tuned just to the point where it's still perceived as light, before it becomes gray, before it materializes. And the edges are boundaries. Each one affects the others, and the distances from side to side and from top to bottom will actually change their quality and function as you look at them. If you don't set it up right, that white space can go blank and fall apart on you, but I don't let it. It has to do with the colors I've used, the formats and so on. These are things you play with; if the color's wrong, or the proportions are wrong, you change them until the painting works.

In some of my early paintings, I had to change a lot. In the very first set of symmetrical abstract works there are three large panels (owned by the Museum of Modern Art) that I put together as a triptych, out of the 12 paintings in the series. Originally, the set had four different colors, red, blue, green and yellow, with three colors in each format (large and small squares, verticals and horizontals). And I actually had painted the outside, "framing" edges black, and it didn't work. What to do? The black caused the edges to dissolve, so that the paintings just turned into slabs, and so, to counteract this, I had to put white paint around the black outside edge. That did it, but I didn't know that from the outset, so the triptych in the Modern has black under there. It'll show through one of these days, even though I put on several coats of white.

That whole series of paintings has black around the edges. Mistake, mistake. I didn't know, but I found out as I was working. And I discovered that the white had to both creep around onto the front edge and also curve inwards on the inner corners. I have to use this entasis, because if you let the edges go straight, the frontal plane of the painting will shoot out at the corners. I was mostly interested in something that sat there, like phenomenology, a there-ness. I did work with Gestalt psychology, but I wasn't interested in the slightest in it. I was interested in something that's there. I mean, you're not going to argue with the monumentality of something.

**JS:** Like you.

**JB:** Yes, everything's a self-portrait—or not. Isn't that how all artists work?

**JS:** What about the gentle colors that you used in the experimental "Radiator" paintings? You've intimated to me that you borrowed some colors from Jack.

**JB:** Jack's a natural painter. Once in a while, he made a color that I liked and I just took some.

**JS:** Oh, you literally stole! I thought you were talking figuratively.

**JB:** Jack ended up using pink and blue, format colors. I have no problems with color, although most people can't use certain colors, or they hate certain colors, etc. I'm not like that. I can use any color any way I want, and I have some favorites.

**JS:** At what point did you start working figuratively?

**JB:** Let's call it "image work," because I think that "figurative" may imply narrative, which I don't want. I started my first image painting, *The Old Year*, in New York City but finished it in Ireland.

**JS:** Many of these paintings and drawings have highly charged sexual imagery.

**JB:** Yes, I was using images from cave painting; I could never make up anything like that. I looked at Paleolithic sculptures that are obviously vulvae—the maker just didn't bother with the rest of the body. These fertility objects interest me: they can be frogs or fish or penises. They're marvelous. I've also used the image of a beautiful little horse, over 20,000 years old. Sometimes I superimposed its back end with Paleolithic cunt sticks.

**JS:** Let's talk about your early life in Seattle.

**JB:** My mother, Hortense Kalisher Kleinberg, was an artist who did drawings for *Vogue*. Her mother sold insurance and supported the family in the first decade of the 20th century. I come from a long line of liberated women.

**JS:** What was high school like for you in Seattle?

**JB:** I went to a public high school my first year and I hated it. I hadn't grown yet. Everybody had tits, and I was this little runty thing with a great big nose and big feet. I was very fast and very ugly and actually very well liked, because I was funny. I remember trying to get my mother to buy me a bra when I started developing breasts. She had me in undershirts still. And I wore little dresses with little felt appliqués. I started having migraines every day, so I got my mother to switch me to a girls' school, Helen Bush School for Girls. It was very chic. It had a uniform, and I was very happy with it. I skipped my senior year in high school in 1946 to enroll in the University of Washington, because all the boys were coming home from the war and going to college. I thought I'd go where the grownup boys were.

**JS:** Your family had deep roots in the West.

**JB:** My grandfather and great grandfather on my father's side were grain brokers and big land owners, ranchers over three states—Oregon, Washington and Idaho. My grandfather owned something like 30 farms. They were German Jews who had emigrated in the 1840s and had fought in the Civil War. My mother's people were from Chicago and then went to Oregon, and my father's people were from Washington state and Oregon. The grandmother who sold insurance was born in Eugene when it was part of the Oregon Territory.

**JS:** So you grew up in a fairly privileged situation.

**JB:** Very high society, so to speak, almost genteel high society. My girlfriends all belonged to tennis clubs, which I couldn't join—no Jews allowed. In the school clubs, I was vice-president of everything. Ever since fifth grade, I have always been voted vice-president of every organization I come near. And the reason, I finally figured out, is that it's an honorary office that keeps disruptive people like me in the group, instead of outside.

At the University of Washington, I was in a sorority. I really didn't like the way they treated me or anybody else. They were such snobs; they blackballed anyone they didn't like. I was horrified by this. I remember coming into the university library with my boyfriend, and the whole sorority house was picketing something to do with university sorority politics, and I was expected to join them. But I didn't. I walked through the picket line and then quit.

**JS:** What did you study in college?

**JB:** I took some art classes, but, when I was going to show my work, my mother got very upset. She was highly competitive and rivalrous and said, "I'm going to go talk to your professors. They have no business encouraging you, making you think you have talent." She wanted me to be a medical illustrator. She'd been in the fashion world in New York, and she knew what that was like. She did not want me doing anything like that. When I was about 11 or so, she enrolled me in an art school. But instead of getting to do landscapes and figures like the other students, I was put in another room and made to draw crabs or lobsters that she brought in for me to render. My mother had told them that I was going to be a medical illustrator, because there was a lot of money in it, and we were starting me early. In college I took various science courses, and I discovered that, except for chemistry, I was good at all of them. I dropped art when my mother attacked me, and I didn't pick it up again until I lived in New York years later.

**JS:** Tell me more about your mother.

**JB:** Well, you could talk her into anything. She was a great big woman, much bigger than me. She ran for Congress as a Republican and lost. [Laughs.] She picketed the waterfront, was called a Communist and thrown into jail because she disapproved of the Japanese buying scrap metal in the '30s. She kept fluoride out of the Washington State watery supply and religion out of the Washington State school system.

**JS:** So she was a free thinker.

**JB:** Yes, but not about me and art.

**JS:** So you majored in biology and graduated?

**JB:** No, I ran away in my junior year and got married.

**JS:** How old were you?

**JB:** Twenty. "I'm getting out of here," is what I thought, but then the marriage didn't work. My husband went to New York and began to work for a brokerage, and I ran away from home. I went out to the university, got a job as a waitress, found a room. I really would not stay with my family anymore.

**JS:** In 1950 you went to work on a kibbutz in Israel for six months and then moved to New York.

**JB:** Yes, and I again lived with my husband, even though we were divorced. He thought that away from the families, the marriage might work. But it didn't.

**JS:** And at this point, you resumed your education.

**JB:** Yes, at the New School graduate faculty, from 1950 to '53. They were letting me finish my last year of undergraduate studies, and I also was going on to graduate work. But I didn't finish that, either. I ran away again. I'm still six months short of a Master's degree—I'm missing a statistics credit. The class met on Saturday mornings; I mean, come on. I was working days in an interior design studio and going to school at night. The New School was great, extremely sophisticated, and I was hanging out with philosophers and cosmologists. My economics professor had been the minister of finance in the Weimar Republic, and he had me writing on Keynes deficit financing. I got an A-plus. I was a bluestocking.

I sat in on a New School art class taught by the well-known Ecuadorian painter Camilo Egas. I used to slip in and do life drawing when they had models.

**JS:** At that time, did you frequent the galleries on 10th Street?

**JB:** Not really. I was living on Ludlow Street on the Lower East Side. I remember going up to the Museum of Modern Art for lunch, but I really had nothing to do with the art world. My friends were mainly philosophers and literary people. I knew people like Norman Mailer and his mates Dan Wolf and Ed Fancher, who was a psychologist. The three of them were in the early stages of founding the *Village Voice*. I knew the Cedar Bar thing existed, I used to pass by there, but I didn't participate in it. Other friends were the philosopher Howard Bennett, who used to walk his Afghan hound around the neighborhood, and the mathematician Stefan van Beinem, who taught cosmology at Columbia University. His mother had been a member of the Communist Party and had known Rosa Luxemburg.

**JS:** What brought you back to the West Coast?

**JB:** I had stopped school and was on unemployment insurance. Living in New York was getting to me. I didn't know any "grownups"—you know, bourgeois property-owners. Someone offered me a ride to L.A. I had a rich aunt and uncle there, with a ranch in the San Fernando Valley, next to Gene Autry's, I think, complete with Angus cattle and horses. But my uncle wanted me to get a job at a brokerage and to tell no one that I was divorced. I lasted about two weeks. My parents sent me a plane ticket home to Seattle.

And I lasted there about two weeks. My parents made me go out with boys I used to know when I was in university, those who hadn't married and were really the leftovers. I just couldn't stand it. So they gave me my youngest brother's little Chevy coupe, and a credit card for one month's gasoline, and I took off once more for Los Angeles to live on my own.

I started looking for jobs in the movies, because I thought I'd be an editor or a director. And Hollywood was everything they say it is. You'd go for an interview, and the guy would unzip his fly and say, "On your knees" before you could say, "Hello, my name is." These are true things. I had about six months of hanging out at Schwab's Pharmacy before I met my second husband, Dick Baer, who was the nephew of television mogul General David Sarnoff. He was working as an assistant director for a television series starring William Bendix called "The Life of Riley." Dick took to me instantly and fed me steak and shrimp cocktails. We were married in the Beverly Hills Hotel. Tony Bennett sang at my wedding. I used to go backstage and meet such people as Frank Sinatra, and I had a Japanese house boy.

**JS:** So you were a Beverly Hills matron.

**JB:** Yes, I was, and I took to being very perverse about it. I'd go to Elizabeth Arden with unshaved legs or armpits, for facials and haircuts and

what not, being very bad. Hat, gloves, naked legs and everything unshaved. I really couldn't stand being in Beverly Hills.

**JS:** During your short marriage, you bought two paintings by Jan Müller from the Hansa Gallery in 1956, when you went back to New York to show off your infant son Josh to your in-laws.

**JB:** Yes, yes. After Dick and I divorced, a few years later, I sold the big Müller through the art dealer Paul Kantor. I was with Paul then, and we had the same divorce attorney. Paul had me take the money and invest it in Occidental Petroleum—a very good choice. Later, I sold that stock to move to New York with Jack Wesley.

**JS:** And how did you meet Jack?

**JB:** In Venice, most likely, or maybe at an opening at the Ferus Gallery.

**JS:** You weren't tied into the art world during those early days in New York, but were you involved with the art scene in L.A.?

**JB:** Yes, I got to know the dealers, because I lived with Paul. I went to all these openings with him, which did not endear me to the other artists. I was just beginning to work in the studio. Edward Kienholz built me a studio out of a garage and put in a skylight for me in a duplex house that I rented. He taught me to make stretcher bars.

**JS:** He was supporting himself by doing construction at that time?

**JB:** Yes. In fact, he and I went into business together, because I had alimony money.

**JS:** What was the nature of the business?

**JB:** He would call me up and say, "I need a hundred dollars or two hundred dollars," and he would buy something. Then he would sell it and give me my money back, plus 50 percent or whatever. This business thing of ours went on for quite a while, until I left L.A. in 1960.

**JS:** What might he buy?

**JB:** Cars, stoves, pianos—you name it. He was hustling, and I was his money. He also became partners with my mother, who used to go into all kinds of businesses. She would go to Salvation Army sales and auctions, and she would buy these old Mission oak tables and take the turned legs and have them drilled to make giant, expensive lamps, which she sold to doctors' offices and places like that. So she and Edward would buy tables; he took the tops, and she took the legs.

**JS:** Who else did you know in L.A.?

**JB:** Chico [Walter] Hopps from the Ferus Gallery. I didn't show there, though; I wasn't showable.

**JS:** You had been turned off by Abstract Expressionism when you were in New York in the early '50s, but back in L.A., you decided to try it.

**JB:** There was a traveling show of all the Abstract Expressionists. I sat in front of a Gorky and copied it. I adored Motherwell, but I didn't like Guston or Joan Mitchell. I found Kline kind of nice. I liked the more formal things. And Rothko, of course; he was an influence to me. Essentially, when I first started to paint, I saw that he had figured out a format way of working, and I liked the idea of a format. Newman, I never could see, although later on I saw some of the early zips that I liked. The minute they got big, though, I found them grandiose.

**JS:** What was your work like then?

**JB:** I tried everything. I did my own Rothkos, my own de Koonings, my own Motherwells. I was imitating the different styles, one after another, painting with house brooms. Before that, I had been playing with figuration, trying different approaches, learning to paint at the age of 29, having been a scientist and an intellectual prior to that. So I learned very fast, within a year.

**JS:** And then you made another transition from the West Coast to the East Coast, coming back to New York with Jack.

**JB:** Yes, but by then I understood the art world. I knew what dealers were. I knew what critics were.

**JS:** You'd had your apprenticeship.

**JB:** Yes, in L.A., which was a good place to have it.

**JS:** You arrived in New York with a group of abstract paintings. On the strength of that work, you got yourself a few appointments with galleries. But you've showed me a photo of yourself on the telephone, in the process of canceling those appointments. Why did you do that?

**JB:** I didn't think the paintings were good enough. I had about 10 6-foot paintings, all in different kinds of colors, and the two star paintings, which I did after the others. They were painterly hard-edged, which was just coming into style then, before Minimalism, so I was on time. I had thrown out Abstract Expressionism, because I thought there was nothing left to do in it; the second and third generations were already picking over the

bones. Even so, I found painting the hard-edged stuff not much fun to do—"idiot work," we called it. I ended up doing it on sawhorses, much of it, rather than on the wall, just knowing what I needed and getting it done. But I didn't think they were good enough to show.

**JS:** Your next body of work, begun in 1962, was the "Koreans," as Dick Bellamy called them several years later, when he was your dealer.

**JB:** Yes, Dick called them that because, in his poetic reasoning, they were unknown paintings, and no one knew about Korean art either. I did 16 of them originally. I was meeting all these people and trying to show them work. Ivan Karp [at the Castelli Gallery] told me that it was the most aggressive work he'd ever seen; he couldn't imagine anyone buying it.

**JS:** That was a gender-directed remark.

**JB:** I never even thought of it that way. I just thought the work was too original.

**JS:** In 1964, you had your New York debut when Dan Flavin invited you to participate in the pivotal "Eleven Artists" show at the Kaymar Gallery. How did that come about?

**JB:** I knew the Judds through Mario Irisarry, a Filipino artist who lived next door to them on 19th Street. Jack and I were still on Park Avenue South, although we soon moved a couple buildings over from the Judds.

I had met Mario in Washington Square Park in 1962. You know, you take the kid to the park, and he plays; you sit there on the bench, you know how mothers do. I think Mario picked me up and said he had this crazy friend who did only red boxes or red paintings. This was Judd. So Mario and his wife Helen invited me and Jack to dinner and took us to the building next door to introduce us to Judd and his work. Later, through Judd, we met Flavin and went out to Brooklyn to see him and his wife. Dan liked my work very much and gave me some of his pieces and drawings.

**JS:** Within two years of the Kaymar show, you had your first solo show at Fischbach, early in 1966. What led up to that?

**JB:** Although Barbara Rose hadn't mentioned me in her influential "ABC Art" article about Minimalism [see *A.I.A.*, Oct.-Nov. '65], she did include a photograph of one of my paintings. Donald Droll of the Fischbach Gallery saw it and called up to say he found it very interesting. That's how I got the show there.

**JS:** Were museums acquiring your work at that time?

**JB:** Bill Agee liked me and liked the work, and when he was at MOMA he bought a painting for them out of Lawrence Alloway's "Systemic Painting" show at the Guggenheim. Diane Waldman acquired one of my paintings for the Guggenheim out of Virginia Dwan's "10" show. At that time, my paintings were selling for \$500 or \$700. "Systemic Painting," "Serial Art" [at Finch College]—I was in these shows, but the titles didn't apply to my work.

**JS:** As Minimalism quickened as a critical concept, three-dimensional objects were increasingly more highly valued than painting. You, Stella and Mangold were the painters associated with Minimalism. But it wasn't the painters who were getting the attention; it was the object-makers.

**JB:** Yes, but as I often pointed out, eventually in print, the ideas behind Minimalism came originally from the painters. And many Minimalist sculptors were failed painters, as I also pointed out, quite rudely, of course. But I'd seen the early Judds and early LeWitts—the paintings—and, judging on that basis, I thought that these guys were probably better off being sculptors. That's how I saw it.

**JS:** Speaking of being rude. . . .

**JB:** It's the only way to be, if you're female. You don't get anywhere otherwise.

**JS:** You decided to speak up, and you wrote that letter to *Artforum* ["Letters," *Artforum*, Sept. '67, pp. 5-6].

**JB:** I got sick of being told that I wasn't radical when I knew very well that the ideas behind Minimalism had been worked out by Stella and by people like me. And these "object-makers" were Johnny-come-latelys. Just because you can bump into sculpture doesn't make it that much better; actually, I think it makes it that much worse. An object takes up space, and the idea is no longer clear. So sculpture is a brute force—big fucking deal. I really began to get angry, especially after I was left out of such shows as Kynaston McShine's "Primary Structures" (1966) and "Cool Art—1967" at the Aldrich Museum of Contemporary Art in Connecticut. No painters were in these shows, because we weren't considered radical enough.

My breakup with Judd and Flavin came about because of a review that Judd wrote about Kenneth Noland's target paintings. He said that Noland was the best painter working today, but, since Noland's work wasn't that good, it proved that painting was dead. Not long after I read this, Flavin and Sonja and Judd and Julie were at my house one day throwing a football around. For some reason, this subject of the death of painting came up, and I said to Judd something like "Your logic is crap. You can't say Noland is the best painter, but he's not very good, so painting is finished. That's ridiculous, Mr. *Falsum Propositum*." I knew the right words to say at the time. And he said, "You don't know what you're talking about. You have no right to speak to me this way, blah blah blah. I'm leaving." He got very angry with me, because I was laughing at him. And as he was



leaving, he turned around and said, “Flavin, are you coming?” And Flavin was standing there with the football and looking at Jack and me, and he just put the football down. “Sorry,” he said to me, and he and Sonja went. Out the door, that was that.

**JS:** So this was before you wrote to *Artforum*. Can you fill me in on what else led up to that letter?

**JB:** Two articles in the summer 1967 issue of *Artforum* stoked my fire. One was a critique of Minimalism by Michael Fried in which he misread Judd. For all my differences with Judd, I found his objects original. Fried also didn’t understand how a painter could use shape and size as crucial factors with no illusionary spatial reference, as I did.

I sent Fried a personal letter on these points, not for publication; I wanted to enter into a dialogue. He wrote back immediately saying that he ought to write a real response but didn’t have time at the moment. That was the last I heard from him.

The other article was Robert Morris’s “Notes on Sculpture,” in which he refers to the “antique” art of painting. That sent me into rant mode. So I wrote Bob a letter describing my work—we knew each other vaguely through Dick Bellamy—and he never answered. But I began to get very clear about what I thought, and what I was doing, and what was going on.

**JS:** The very act of writing clarified your thinking.

**JB:** Yes. When I didn’t get an answer from either Fried or Morris, I decided to write to the “Letters” section of *Artforum*. Not an article, because I didn’t believe in being paid for it. But I wanted to rebut Morris’s designation of painting as “antique,” as well as Judd’s earlier arguments to that effect from his 1965 “Specific Objects” essay. So I wrote my letter, and Philip Leider printed it. Apparently he got a lot of shit from Leo Castelli and other people for running it. Even Bellamy said to me, “Who the hell do you think you are, attacking Robert Morris?”

At time, I was friendly with Dan Graham; I was teaching him a lot about perception. He had been interested in doing an article on my work for *Artforum*, but when he went to Leider, for whom he had written other things, and said he wanted to publish a piece on me, Leider said, “No. She’s not going to be in this magazine. No more. Not reviewed. Nothing.” Dan came out of that meeting and called me from a public phone, hysterical. He couldn’t believe that somebody would do such a thing. *Artforum*’s editorial policy had just been explicitly set up against me and his article. I said, “Hang on,” and I called Clem Greenberg and told him what had just happened. Greenberg told me he’d get back to me; Leider and he played poker together. When Greenberg called me back, he said, “Oh, there’s been a mistake. Somebody has mis-worded things.” “Oh,” I said, “I’m so glad that it was just a misunderstanding.”

**JS:** Did Graham ever get to publish that piece?

**JB:** Dan was so shocked that he dropped it. But in 1972 he asked me to do the cover and write a long related article on perception for *Aspen Magazine*.

**JS:** When did you get to know Greenberg?

**JB:** He phoned me up after I wrote the *Artforum* letter. Suddenly I had all these laid-back painters telling me how pleased they were that somebody had finally spoken up. But I also lost friends. After the letter came out, I remember being at a party at the Smithsons’. Everybody in the place was totally hostile to me, so I picked up an unloaded derringer, a little collector’s item, and played around with it, pointing it at people and saying, “Bang. Bang.” Mel Bochner came over to my place and returned books and magazines he had borrowed saying, “I can’t speak with you anymore.” These things really happened! It was absolutely incredible. But there I was, off with Greenberg and his gang—but not for long, and not happily.

**JS:** You were ambivalent about Greenberg’s embrace. You mentioned earlier that you saw the work he’d been championing as too European; you didn’t put yourself in that camp.

**JB:** Exactly. Also, I really didn’t like having to give him work as “presents.” His artists were always very grateful to him, so they gave him work. I thought it was totally corrupt. Greenberg was a brilliant writer, a brilliant critic and slimy as hell. I remember a conversation he and I had about color. Clem said, “Jo, you know this is all very well,” by which he meant that he couldn’t promote my work if it was all white and gray. Too stark. “Why don’t you use pink or some other color?” he said. And I said, “Because Ken Noland already does that. You don’t need me doing it.” By which I meant that he had misunderstood what I was doing anyway. I wasn’t a Color Field painter. I was working with degrees of light, and he wasn’t paying attention to that. My telling tales got back to him. I was supposed to apologize, but I didn’t.

**JS:** You must have been marginalized, or felt that way.

**JB:** No, I didn’t feel that way. I was marginalized, and I didn’t even notice. I didn’t care. I just wanted to pay the rent. I’ve never been jealous of these big-name male artists who compete with each other over who has the biggest Cadillac. I felt I had a shot at being a major artist, and there were very few women in that position, so I felt I had to be very responsible. Reputations, how much money you get and all that shit, just did not interest me. I knew that I was asking for trouble by not keeping quiet, but I felt that speaking out was the correct thing to do. And of course I paid for it. I’ve never been bitter about it, though. I did what I felt was right.

**JS:** Did you know—some of the women artists who had a presence in the '60s—Agnes Martin, Eva Hesse, Lee Bontecou, Helen Frankenthaler, Ann Truitt?

**JB:** I knew Eva and had met Agnes, but I didn't know any of the other women; we were in different worlds. Joan Mitchell lived in Paris, and Grace Hartigan had just disappeared as far as I knew. I did meet Chryssa. And Marisol, who was rich and spooky, and Judy Chicago, who participated in the "Primary Structures" show under the name of Judy Gerowitz. The Smithsons brought her and her husband Lloyd [Hamrol] over once. I did not take to either of them.

**JS:** Did you respond to her work in the '60s? It was very different from her subsequent, feminist work.

**JB:** I didn't think it was any better than Smithson's at that time. It was nice that there was a woman doing it, and from California at that. Later on, Smithson got more interesting. He used to drop by, and we'd argue about mirrors. He'd say, "Mirror images are identical," and I'd say, "Mirror images are not identical; the scale is only half, the light goes there and comes back." I didn't know his wife Nancy Holt very well.

**JS:** Who were your women friends?

**JB:** The dancers—Yvonne Rainer, Lucinda Childs, Judy Dunn, Meredith Monk.

**JS:** How did you meet them?

**JB:** I used to go to dance class, both Yvonne's and Lucinda's. Lucinda would make you sit still for 45 minutes. It drove me crazy. I cannot sit still for two minutes; everything starts to hurt. Once, Lucinda and Yvonne got together and made me perform on stage in one of Yvonne's "The Mind is a Muscle" pieces at the Lincoln Center library.

**JS:** When was this?

**JB:** Just before I left for Ireland. This was to make me get over my stage fright, because I had to do seminars and things like that. I really have difficulty being in public, exposed, exhibiting myself, as opposed to my work. So they engineered this event where I was part of the troupe. Yvonne's an overwhelming stage presence. When she walks on stage you can't take your eyes off her. I also knew Trisha Brown then. Meredith Monk was just a comer at the time; I went out to drinks with her once. She scared the hell out of me. She rang the buzzer and, when I opened the door, there she was at the bottom of the stairs, singing.

**JS:** At what point did you become enamored of orchids?

**JB:** I remember saying something like, "I wish I knew Greek," and then I picked up the phone and tracked down a Greek tutor. This is what I did in Los Angeles when Josh was a baby, study Greek, so I had two years of that. Then I remember looking at an orchid and thinking, "Gee, I like those. I want some." So I started doing research. I bought a book and joined the orchid society. It's the only time I've ever collected anything. I had to build a room for all of them. Then Robert Lobe and I built a glass house, where I spent five hours every Sunday watering the fucking plants. I had a big gardenia tree and would bring a box of blossoms in to my students at the School of Visual Arts. Orchids are exotic, and of course I like exotic things, being one myself.

**JS:** What are you working on right now?

**JB:** I have one painting going, and another one that I've laid out. I seem to work in twos or threes. In this case, I'm doing paired paintings, and I may keep it that way and use different kinds of color, the same kind of color three times, and another kind of color three times, so I get pale stuff and then very strong, bright color contrasts, darks and lights, depending on the subject matter.

**JS:** What are the subjects of your current works?

**JB:** I'm working on two self-portraits. In one, I'm including my image at different stages in my life—my teenage face; a reclining nude of myself at a middle, nubile age; and my present face, looking in a blank mirror, I think. I've adapted a newspaper photo I found showing an exquisite profile of a horse and trainer. The guy's face looks something like mine when I was about 18. Using the computer, I've replaced his face with a teenage photo of my own and framed the pair of them, horse and figure. This will doubtless reinforce the annoying "horse painter" stereotype I am sometimes burdened with, but I've used a veritable zoo of creatures in my image work. Besides, girls and horses are an inevitable pairing. That said, I like the composite image so well that I'm going to have it silk-screened on a canvas and then do the rest of the painting, with the other-aged figures, around it. It won't be exact.

The other self-portrait I'm planning will be derived from a photograph of me standing naked that Jack used once for a painting; you may have seen it reproduced in my Stedelijk retrospective catalogue. For years, Harry Abrams had it hanging in his office lobby. There are five images of me in line-up format bounded by a curved "tea-tray" frame. I've gone back to the original photo and am stealing one of the five figures, which I want to fit into the shape of a coffin. I don't know how I'll proceed with that one, though; it's for the future.

**JS:** Is the computer a recent tool for you?

**JB:** I've used it to work out the last several paintings, yes. As I begin to work, I play with images on the computer. Then I print them out in black and white. I've been coloring the printouts with pencils and even Crayolas to help me figure out where I want to go with an idea.

**JS:** Did your experience of being a Westerner shape you as an artist?

**JB:** Some of the best American artists came from around where I did: Rothko from Portland, Pollock from Wyoming, Kienholtz and John Cage from Spokane, Motherwell and Trisha Brown from Aberdeen, Wash., Richard Serra and Yvonne Rainer from the Bay Area, Chuck Close from Monroe, near Seattle. I think people who come from the Pacific Northwest area tend to be very independent. We're used to taking care of ourselves, making our own decisions and getting on with it.

**JS:** Also, you were a first-born child. And your strength arises from two generations of women who were used to functioning as men.

**JB:** Since I was a child it was taken for granted that I must have a career. And so I had all of this working for me, plus good genes for athletic activities and for a long and healthy life, plus a beautiful education and an IQ high enough to handle it, plus some talent. All this was handed to me. So I was very lucky. I did the best I could with these things. I'm not saying that I'm not responsible for any of it, but I certainly had a very good start. I'm a throwback to my grandparents, who left Europe behind and settled a new part of the world. My brothers became professionals, but I was the real tough farmer type. I consider myself very elegant as well as very vulgar.