

BGC CRAFT, ART & DESIGN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Barbara Nessim

Artist

Conducted by Emily Banas on October 27, 2014 at Barbara Nessim's Studio, New York, New York

Barbara Nessim is an American artist, illustrator and educator. Born in 1939 in New York City, she received her BFA from the Pratt Institute in 1960 in Illustration and Fine Art, and continued to live and work in the city throughout her career. Nessim became one of the first female illustrators of her time, creating iconic works for publications such as *Rolling Stone* and *Time Magazine*, and advertising campaigns for corporations such as Levis and Ralph Lauren. Throughout her career, much of Nessim's work has focused on, and celebrated, women and their roles in society, a subject that she has explored in a vast array of materials, from pencil and paint, to fashion and computers.

Her ingenuity and creativity has drawn her to a wealth of design projects such as designing a line of blouses for Lady Van Heusen, as well as a line of shoes. It was also this tenacity that allowed her to become one of the pioneers of computer graphic art, which played an important role in her later work. Throughout her career as an artist, Nessim also worked as an educator, working part-time at schools such as the Pratt Institute, The School of Visual Arts, The Fashion Institute of Technology and Parsons School of Design for over 30 years.

This oral history transcript is the result of a digitally recorded interview. The interviewee has reviewed the transcript and made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

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Emily Banas (EB): This is Emily Banas interviewing Barbara Nessim at her studio in New York City. It's October 27th 2014 and this is for the Bard Graduate Center Craft, Art and Design Oral History Project. Barbara, thanks so much for being here today! I'd love it if we could just start at the beginning, if you could talk a bit about your experience growing up in New York City and how you became interested in art.

Barbara Nessim (BN): Thank you for interviewing me, Emily. Well I grew up in the Bronx, I was born in 1939, which makes me 75, and I was always interested in art from the very,

very, very beginning, I would say since I was eight. My mother was a clothing designer, a blouse designer, and so it always made me interested in doing something as a woman because in the building that we grew up in, with 88 apartments, three women worked: my mother who went downtown as a blouse designer, the dancing school teacher, Marjorie Marshall, who lived in the building and had her dance studio in the basement, and Wendy Lipkind's mother who was a real estate—I guess sold apartments of some sort, I don't know what she exactly did, with her husband. That was it. In 88 apartments, three women worked. That was in the 50's; I graduated college in 1960 and decided that I wasn't getting married; I was going to work as well. And that was very revolutionary, [laughs] I mean now it sounds ridiculous, but then it was very weird that, people in the building, if you grow up in the building and everybody is there and everyone knows everyone else, it's like a little family, so you have people wondering why I wasn't getting married. So, it was very questionable, what I was doing, and I didn't get a job where I worked in a place 9-5, I was working freelance, which was totally not understandable to most people. And then when I moved out in 1962, that was even more shocking because women didn't move from their apartments to their own apartment unless they got married, and what was I doing, and I moved in with my sister; that was my beginnings.

EB: I want to fast forward a little bit and talk about all of the different mediums that you've worked in, because you've worked in a lot from pencil and paint, to watercolor to computers and in fashion design. Did you always seek guidance and formal training in these areas?

BN: No! [laughs]

EB: Did you learn by trial and error?

BN: I would say by trial, not too much error, because I always figured that I could figure it out and I still do, have complete confidence seeing a new medium and knowing that I can do it, if I'm interested in it. Like welding is not something I'm interested in doing. But basically I started out doing these etchings, monotype etchings, while I was doing woodcuts, while I was doing watercolors, while I was doing oil painting, while I was doing gouache —blah, blah, blah. While I was doing many things the shoe design company called me up and asked if I'd like to design shoes in 1973 and I said why not, I've never done it and I'm glad to do it and I learned how to do that. As I did when, in 1965, designing blouses for Lady Van Heusen called 'Lady Van Tastic.'

EB: Along that line, can we talk about your trajectory in the use of these different materials? Did you start out by using one particular material and then move to another? Was there sort of a progression of your interest in the use of these different materials?

BN: So working with—

EB: The different materials, did you start out working in a few particular materials, like start out with pencil and then move to watercolor? Was there any sort of progression in your interest in working with these different materials?

BN: No, I don't prefer one over the other but I like portable, portable is good because then I can take it wherever I go, so now I use a kind of pen, felt-tipped pen with archival ink, of course, because I hate the classic felt-tipped pens but archival ink is good, now they've made them very good but I wouldn't use magic marker. That's the only thing I would never

use. Maybe they're good now but they weren't good then. And that's it, as long as I can take it with me and work in a sketchbook, sketchbook is great because it's portable and then I can color it in when I get to a table where I have water and watercolor. Whenever I travel, I always take a little studio with me. I take watercolor, my brushes, collage material, glue, my sketchbooks, scissor, razorblade that I have to hide...

EB & BN: [laughing]

BN: I know, it's not easy! I figured out a way they don't get my razorblade. But those are the things that, a single-edged razorblade, those are the things that I take with me when I go away and that's basically what I use here unless I'm doing something very specific. And working with computers you can scan the drawings in and make large prints, small or large prints, and that's been very freeing.

EB: Are there any mediums or materials that you haven't worked with yet that you'd like to? You mentioned no metalworking, but if there's something...

BN: Um, no, nothing that I can think of. I mean, I would say that I would love to be doing oil painting, I would love to be doing gouache, I mean that's so easy, but like working larger and doing different things, it's just a matter of time and a matter of, if I did work in oil again I would have to set up my whole studio in a very different way. But it's not something that I haven't thought about but also I think working with other people around, like Char and Eva, or any assistant that I have, I prefer to be alone working in those mediums. But when I'm working with pen and ink and watercolor I can be with others, so I think it's a matter of where I am in life right now, as to what mediums I work in.

EB: Yeah. Is there something that you've done, like maybe fashion design, that you'd like to go back to, like to try again?

BN: No, I couldn't care less about fashion now. It's funny when you're younger, it's much more interesting, fashion is, and that's why I did it, because I was interested in it and I always liked to make my own clothes, even in school and do different things, put different things together, but I have to say that—now, black. Black, black and more black. [Laughs] Scarves and black, and shoes, colored shoes or whatever and it's done. I don't really think about fashion now. I can't even remember the last time that I bought something at a store. This simple shirt that I have [pointing to shirt] I have two style shirts, this Johnny collar and the boat neck, sleeveless, and I have a million of these winter silk underwear, not underwear, but these silk things that I wear, and that's it. I don't even want to think about it. And then a jacket. Black pants and a jacket of, whatever...

EB: Simple.

BN: Yeah, simple. I just don't want to think about fashion, and it's different when you're younger, because you look very nice. **EB:** Aww, thank you! **BN:** With your belt and that great skirt and the boots and the nice blouse.

EB: [Laughing] I'm trying!

BN: Very well put together.

EB: Thank you. Can we transition to how you were talking about working freelance, and the types of companies and the people that you worked for when you were working freelance, and how those different experiences impacted your work, or maybe they didn't?

BN: Well, working for companies and working freelance, I never had a real, full-time job. And, I even think I was against it then because that meant that I had to report somewhere from 9-5, and when I worked for Lady Van Heusen, and they wanted me to work for them, I stipulated in my contract that I wasn't coming in 9-5. I had a little office and I was going to come in whenever I pleased to come in, but I would get all my work done. And I think that the way a work space was set up, a work day was set up for most people, if you had a job and you came in at 9 and left at 5 and went out for lunch for an hour or a half-hour or whatever at 12 or 1, and it was very regimented and that was not something that I thought that I could do. Not that I would want to do it now, but it doesn't even come into—I mean I'm sure people do that now, but it's just a much different way of working because now you have the internet and you can work at home. There are many more avenues that you could get a job in, and ways to get a job now. So, I'm not quite sure what I was getting at here but, what did you ask me?

EB: Just the different companies, the people that you had worked for—

BN: Oh, and working freelance. Yeah. And so wherever I worked, well, Lady Van Heusen was the only time I had a job and I wouldn't even call it a job, and working three days a week for a textile company was also a job, I went in at 9 and left at 5 and went out to lunch. But it was the two days a week that I had free that I could do my freelance work, and the weekends. So three days a week I worked and got \$25 a day, \$75 a week, paid my rent—my rent was only \$62.50 or something like that, it was very different then. So the equation of how much rent cost and how much it costs today is very, very different. You had the freedom of doing that. Now, the rents are like \$2,000 a month for an apartment, and you're not going to make, I don't know what you'd make a day, \$200 dollars a day or if you had a job now how it would work. Maybe \$100 a day. It's just a different economic balance. I remember thinking, I went to Europe in [19]64 and I was asking people how much they paid for rent and I was shocked how much money it was, for what they made, and I was thinking, boy, I said to myself, this is what America is going to be like 50 years from now. And I was not wrong. I was not wrong because it was a lot of money then in comparison to what people made and it's the same thing now. Like New York was very different in the 60's and 70's, and where it started changing, I think it was around mid to late 70's, when the things started ramping up and the economy started heating up, not for like, real estate economy.

EB: Did you always think that you would do freelance work, or did you have some sort of idea when you graduated college of what kind of job you wanted to have?

BN: I thought that when I graduated college I would own an advertising agency. I was shocked that I ended up being a freelance illustrator. It wasn't what I signed up for. Even though I took illustration in school, I was sure that I was going to work at an advertising agency as an art director and eventually own an agency of my own. And I could have gone in that direction easily, but what happen was in my senior year, something changed. And I was never really that talented in terms of, I mean special, whatever, in terms of my work. My works was good, I did really, um, it wasn't unique—not that I copied anyone, I didn't, but it wasn't anything—and then one day, that changed. And my work became, I became-- my work became unique in one day. I know it sounds weird but it happened in my senior year of college. And it was—I felt it, and I felt the change and I knew it was life changing, of my idea

of what I was going to be doing. The thing is, I always think, and I've always thought, that this is a gift from the universe. That's how it affected me. And I thought, this is a gift from the universe and I have to use it, and now I must work for it. Not that I am the master of it, it is the master of me. And anything I thought of before is not what is going to happen now. I must service this, and I must work—and that's how I started my sketchbooks. I must work day after day, and drawing after drawing, and I have to develop this because this is my gift, and I have to give my gift out. I never really said it quite that way before, and I've never really talked about it in that one day, universe experience, but that's how it happened.

EB: That's a big responsibility to feel, when you realize it.

BN: It was definitely a responsibility of the gift. And it was definitely given to me, and it definitely made me know that, it's yours, and you have to do something with it. **EB:** Has that impacted your work a lot since then? Do you come back to that moment? **BN:** No, I never think about that moment. It's just what it is now, because, what happened was, servicing that gift, giving it out, again, then brought other things to me. And I'm not wishing for anything but, other things happened. I made myself open and then things entered to me, and it keeps entering the more I gave, and I'm happy with my life. I've been very fortunate with how my relationships have gone with people. That I'm, shockingly, I'm married. I'm surprised that I'm married; I wasn't intending to get married or even wanting to get married. In fact, before I met my husband, for five years I didn't go out with anyone cause I didn't even want a relationship, and it was just easier to be alone. And I always thought I was going to be alone and that was fine with me. And then I met my husband, which completely changed how I felt about things, but I didn't marry him until five years later. But he's the person for me. Period. If it wasn't for him I wouldn't be married.

EB: Life has a way of surprising you like that.

BN: Shocking me! [Laughing]

EB: Or shocking you! [Laughing]

BN: A lot of big surprises in life, but you have to be open to it, and you have to be saying yes instead of no.

EB: That's an important thing to remember. I wanted to ask about your work, commissioned work, verses work that you do for yourself. Have you ever felt a distinction between the way you approach those pieces or what the process is like?

BN: Yeah, when I get work for magazines, which I haven't done in a very long time, I go to my sketchbooks and I look at, I read the story or I understand what the issue is, or what the, I want to say problem but it's not problem—it's what I have to solve in order get the work done. It's problem solving, and whether it's an illustration for a magazine, a cover for a book or whatever is it, I go to my sketchbooks and I start looking at them and I start thinking, okay, this might work for that, and I'll put a tab in there and I'll look again and think, maybe this could work too [flipping through her personal sketchbooks]. And then I'll have like maybe, out of all my sketchbooks, I'll have fifteen or twenty drawings that I'll take to a Xerox machine then, when Xerox machines existed, and get a pile of drawings and then look at them and then take what I wanted from it to solve the problem of the illustration that I'm doing for the story. And then of course I'd add more things, but it always started from my sketchbooks.

The seed of the visual idea came from the sketchbook. And that's kind of how I approach work that is for hire, and when I say work for hire I mean people asking me to do work; I own my rights and I own the work. And work for hire is a whole other thing that came up in the early 60's where companies hire you to do work and they own everything. They own the copyright, they own the work, they own everything, and I do not do that. I do not work for hire in that way, but I will do work if somebody hires me to do a job I will do it, but I own all the rights to it. They own the right to reproduce it once, and if they don't want to do it that's fine with me.

EB: Being a New Yorker, can you talk a little bit about how the city has influenced your career and your work?

BN: I wouldn't know how it influenced me because I feel like I am the city! [Laughs] I've never lived anywhere else. I can't even imagine living in another place and I remember when I was about fourteen, praying to god and saying, thank you for making me be born in New York. I was fourteen, god only knows I didn't come from a religious family at all, but I always felt there was a universal thing out there that is bigger than me, and I am thankful and grateful for whatever it is that is given to me, and one of the things that was given to me was that I was born in New York. And I was thankful for that from the time I was fourteen, because I went to school in Manhattan and I really enjoyed the experience.

EB: Has it influenced your work at all? I mean, do you see inspiration in the city that translates into your work?

BN: No, my inspiration comes internally. I can't say that—I see many things that I love and, you know, like I love that boat in the ocean, in the river there [pointing towards the Hudson river] and I love the view on the other side, but I can't say that that inspires me in terms of my work because there's nothing in here [flipping through sketchbook] that relates to that, so my work is mostly internal. And it's my gift.

EB: Can you talk about some of the early days of your computer use? I remember hearing about it at your talk and reading a little bit about you pioneering the computer as a medium, and how that was.

BN: Well in 1980 I was invited to be an artist-in-residence at MIT [Massachusetts Institute of Technology] and to work with programmers, but MIT is in Boston and I live in New York, and 1980 was the year I got married and my husband's two daughters came to live with us, and there was no way I was going to Boston with two girls and my husband, or that they would say here and I would go away because I knew it was going to take my awhile to learn the computer. It wasn't something like drawing for a week; it would be much longer than a week. So I decided to find a computer in New York. I couldn't image that Boston had a computer and New York didn't—two years, two years! 1982 was when I found a computer in New York, at that was a secret little enclave called Time Life, under the umbrella of Time Inc., called Time Video Information Services. And they had a Teletext Telidon machine set up where they were doing some kind of, I don't know, verbal work, written and pictures, like newspaper kind of thing and it was a pilot program and they were sending it out to some other city via the computer, and the computer they were working with, but it was secret so I really don't know much about it but they allowed me to work there at night, and I taught myself how to use the computer. From five o'clock at night to nine in the morning, of course I didn't stay until nine in the morning, I went home at like twelve o'clock at night so I was there almost

eight hours, not every night, maybe a couple of nights a week for a couple of years, and I taught myself how to use the computer by reading the manual, and it was fascinating to me. I tried to get other people to come up, other artists to come up and learn it with me—forget it! Nobody wanted to come up with me. One person, Diana Bryan, she was the only person that was interested but she didn't come up with me very often, she sort of found her own way. And that was it.

EB: Surprising!

BN: I mean, like, shocking! And everybody thought computers were a fad. Even smart people, really smart people, thought they were a fad. And I said, trust me, it's not a fad. Trust me, you will be using computers one day and that's kind of how it worked. Now they say, you were right, it's not a fad!

EB & BN: [Laughing]

BN: I can't even image it. You were ahead of your time, thank you. I didn't want to be ahead of my time, I just wanted company.

EB: Do you still use the computer as a medium?

BN: Not that much. You have word processing, but it doesn't interest me that much with the kind of programs that they have that simulate that, I'd rather do it like this [point to sketchbook] and also you forget how to use the computer if you don't use it all the time. All the programs, and they change so rapidly, all the programs. When I got my job as chair of the illustration department at Parsons in 1991, I knew that was when my computer education halted, not exactly stopped, but halted, because I couldn't keep learning that and then do a job everyday with 200 students and 33 teachers. There was just no way that I could be sitting there doing my work, but I did my work this way [points to sketchbooks] and I still did my work with the computer, but in a very different way. And in the twelve years that I was chair I had three solo shows in galleries, so like third year I would have another show, or every fourth year, and it got done. Work got done, my books got done and don't ask me what I did though, but they got done.

EB: Do you remember the first computer you ever had?

BN: Yeah, that was when I worked at Norpak IPS2; I didn't own it. And the first computer I ever owned was Macintosh, a Commodore Amiga 2, which doesn't even exist anymore.

EB: Very different than today's computers.

BN: Then today's computers?

EB: Yeah.

BN: The Commodore Amiga, surprisingly, was very advanced, and I think it was probably too advanced or I don't know what the issue was or why they didn't really stay in business, but Apple, I think, just took over. They were better than Apple in many ways but I just think it's—IBM actually took over, and Apple came in on its tail, and the Commodore I think didn't have the company, because when computers started to become accessible, IBM jumped in

and because they were IBM, companies, large companies trusted them for their machines, word processing machines in their offices. They didn't trust—first of all the art business was small anyway, and Commodore was mostly art and Macintosh came in as a design machine, as a design tool, but also it had word processing in a whole other way, whereas the Amiga was mostly an art tool. So when word processing really started catching on, that was it. And I remember when I was in school teaching, I mean chairing, I didn't teach when I was there—1995, color first happened. 1995, not that long ago. And that's when the changed happened. And then it was all over.

EB: Can you explain a little bit, about the change?

BN: Well once color entered the field then photography just took over. Cause then advertising could do whatever they wanted. People with money, companies with money then found a new way—publishing companies. Publishers didn't even have computers until the late 90's. They were the slowest to go on board, because it was expensive. And it was a revolution, I mean you didn't have to know computers, you didn't have to know computers, you didn't have to know computers—mean while computers are going on; you didn't have to know computers, and—all of a sudden, you didn't know computers and you were out!

EB: It caught up with people very quickly.

BN: If you didn't know computers, you were out of a job. And they didn't want to learn. Companies went under because they didn't want to change. It was that quick. It wasn't quick, it was there all the time, but it was resistance that made it so quick, seemingly quick. It's like the dam: the dam needs repair, the dam needs repair, the dam needs repair, it needs repair, well, we'll do it next year. And if you didn't repair it, you were flooded. It was that severe. With that force, there was no turning back. The dam was never going to be repaired.

EB: But you knew how to use a computer.

BN: That's what I mean. I knew, but so what? I just didn't get caught up in the flood. And I was lucky that I understood that this was important when nobody else did. But when I used to go to SIG Graph, Special Interest Group Graph, for computers. I started to go to the conferences in 1982 in Boston. There were very few women involved with computers, a lot of them in the art part, though, and they had just started having art shows, computer art shows that my friend Darcy Gerbarg who I met, she was the only one who lived in New York, everyone else lived in California because that's where the whole silicone valley computers happened, and I think in New Mexico too there were some, some computer stuff going on and some of the Los Alamos, government sponsored, scanning the skies, kind of thing—that's when computer graphics were being used. So that's it.

EB: I wanted to ask about your exhibition that opened at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London last year, which is now at the Bard Graduate Center, *An Artful Life*. Can you talk about what the experience has been like, like when the show was being put together, and after it opened in London?

BN: Well first of all it's shocking that I had a show at the Victoria and Albert Museum, because they don't do single artist shows, nor does the Bard [BGC Gallery] do single artist shows, so both, I'm very honored to be there. Douglas Dodds, who is the curator of *Word & Image*, the senior curator of *Word & Image* at the Victoria and Albert Museum, recognized

early that computers—and he started collecting early computer art for the museum, and they're the only museum worldwide that was collecting early computer art then, then meaning, when did I meet Douglas—he had a show with early computer art and he had one of my pieces in it, maybe it was the early 90's, and yeah I think it was the 1990's or maybe he started it in the early 80's, and Patric Prince, who was a friend of mine that was a curator of computer art, probably one of the only ones in America, and she donated her collection to the Victoria and Albert Museum, because they were the only ones that would take it. No museum in America would even talk to her, look at her, and somebody had said, you know I think maybe the Victoria and Albert Museum might be interested in it and they were. And Douglas Dodds, he was introduced to it by a guy named Brown, Paul Brown, and Paul was friends with Douglas and Paul also did early computer art, beautiful work, and he was instrumental, he comes from Australia and England and he was teaching in both places, and he was instrumental educating them, that's what I think is how that happened—in educating them into collecting early computer art, and so that's how I got into the Victoria and Albert Museum, through Patric Prince's collection. And when I realized it was in the museum I called up Douglas Dodds and said I'd love to come and see it, my husband was going to London, and I would like to meet him. And I went there and he had a huge table out with my work, because I didn't know what she [Patric Prince] had donated, and many other works of other computer artists, early computer artists, and I thought, oh my goodness, this is so great! And all this person works, and that person, Manfred Mohr and [Mark] Wilson, and there were just all of these computer artists that I knew that he [Douglas Dodds] didn't know that much about, but I knew more about it than him so he invited me back the next day to do a recording of what I knew about computer art, and early computer art, for their archives and that's the second thing I got in the museum. So we saw each other for two days, and you get to know somebody in two days and we become friends and he was helpful. I remember saying to him, we had lunch, and I said to him that I had gotten some funding to have a show of my work, whatever work I wanted to show, from a hedge fund person, and I said that I had some funding and did he know of anyone who would be interested in showing my work and he said, oh, I would love to show your work but we don't do single artist shows and I said well, I wasn't thinking about the Victoria and Albert Museum, but I was thinking that you might know some curators that might be interested that you could introduce me to. He said, I'll think about it, and I said, great! And then we left. About four months later he wrote to me and said, I know that we don't do single artist shows, but, if you were interested, if you would be amenable to donating your work to the Victoria and Albert Museum, then possibly we could have a single-artist show of your work because we own it, and it would no longer be a single-artist show; we would be showing our collection of one person. That made sense to me, and I said to myself, what don't I understand about this? I mean, without the show I would love for my work to be in the Victoria and Albert Museum. And that's how it started.

EB: Do you remember what year that was?

BN: I think 1991. You know, I don't remember exactly. I think it must have been after 1991. It must have been right around that time because my show was in 2013. It might have been late 2000, because it kind of happened sooner. It just seems like so long from the first show to the second show. I don't know, I'd have to look on my resume to see the dates, if you were interested in the dates, and in fact I'll give you a copy of my resume.

EB: Oh, that'd be great!

BN: Sixteen pages [laughs]. And you can look to see when all the dates of when the show

began at the Victoria and Albert Museum. I've had other shows, but I have to say that I think, I don't know what other computer artists have done, but the ones that I know of, really, really good computer artist like Manfred Mohr and David Em, they experiment and they do video and they do sculpture and prints, but I have experimented in different ways to get it out as well. And there was stereo-pair, making the books, those little books—you know which ones I'm talking about?

EB: Yep.

BN: The little books which are digital was well, from something that is analogue, you can't do this unless it's digital, so it's a different way to do it—I think I've experimented as much as they have, maybe even more, in getting the work out. I've done things with magnets, which I'm going to show you, I have paper steel—it was getting it out of the computer was where the art was for me, not doing the work. I mean, the art was the art, but how do you get it out of the computer once it's there and put it on a wall, or in a video? That's the challenge, and I did it many, many different ways to get it out. That hanging up there [points to work on the wall] you know, can you see it, the striped figure, that another way hand-colored. That's from a little Mac, and that's from [19]89. The Polaroids from the Commodore Amiga that was on the flags, that was another way. The large prints here. There are many, many ways that I've gotten them out of the computer and on to someplace else, or gotten them into the computer and then out, because that has to be scanned in, processed, cleaned up, optimized, and then printed out.

EB: How did you decide what work you were going to donate to the Victoria and Albert Museum? Did they have any preference?

BN: I had no idea. I just said, come on over and take a look at what I have. And he [Douglas Dodds] decided it was going to be a retrospective and I think that the fact that the book happened at the same time was a big plus, because they could sell the book in the bookstore and he used a lot of the images from the book that they own, and you could look at the book—you have a copy of the book don't you?

EB: Yeah.

BN: Did you read it?

EB: Yeah, I did.

BN: And if you look to see where the images come from, a lot of them say, courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum, because they own them. Happily, they own it. So the book and the museum show happened simultaneously and then it went to the Bard, but I had a hard time getting it any place else. The Brooklyn Museum—I went to almost every museum, the Jewish Museum—ones that would show something a little bit different. Not like the MET [Metropolitan Museum of Art] you know? Or MoMA [Museum of Modern Art] or the Whitney, but smaller museums that might show something a little bit avant-garde—no. Not interested. And I was thrilled that the Bard took it because it's a great show place. And then the Bard show was different than the one at the Victoria and Albert. There are about fifty pieces in the Bard show that are from the Victoria and Albert collection, but then he came over, Douglas Dodds, the senior curator of Word & Image from the Victoria and Albert came over and selected—he stayed here for two weeks, and curated that show and I had nothing to do with

it. We went out to my storage unit in Hoboken [New Jersey] and we selected work from there, and we selected work from here [Barbara's studio] and that's how the show was born, the one at the Bard now. And it's an amazing show because it really shows the width and breathe of the work, where the Victoria and Albert museum showed it a little bit but they didn't really have the space that they have here, and I'm really glad it's going to be up until January 11th [2015] and I really hope people really go and see it.

EB: What has the experience been like having the show in New York City versus having it in London?

BN: They're both great! They're both pretty spectacular, I mean I feel extremely grateful and lucky to have a show at the age of 75 that I'm still living to see it. Because I know, when I'm no longer here, my work will be more accepted, and people will really want it. But it's a gift to me that I'm here, and I can enjoy seeing it myself.

EB: Is the Victoria and Albert museum the first institution to collect your work?

BN: No, my work is collected in other museums, and that's on my resume.

EB: How do you feel about your work being in one type of public space, such as in magazines and illustrations, moving to a different public space, in the museum and in the gallery? Do you see any sort of juxtaposition of those two spaces?

BN: Well that's where I'm unique to most artists, and that's why the Victoria and Albert museum I think was interested in my work, because not only is the Victoria and Albert museum, it's the museum of art and design. It's not only art, and its not only design, like the Cooper Hewitt, or art like the Metropolitan, or MoMA, or Whitney. They are an art and design museum, so I'm perfect for their mandate. And the Bard also is decorative—not that the work is decorative because the word decorative is like a belittling word to art, but I don't see it like that, and I don't mean it that way, but they're the museum of decorative arts and art as well, the Bard is, so it's perfect for that too.

EB: And do you see any sort of juxtaposition with those spaces as opposed to the magazines and advertisements in the public space? Sort of going from one sphere to the other?

BN: Well that's one of the things that I meant to say before, because I forgot that I did magazine illustration—not that I forgot, but we weren't talking about it. I think I'm the only artist that has done so much in the public domain as far as magazine illustration and art, because my work is not that commercial in magazines. It's my work, but it is illustration, which it does voice, it does reflect, the story that it's illustrating, which is a combination of word and image and that's an important thing as well, because you give visual voice to a written voice, where in a museum you do work for yourself, or my sketchbooks, I'm giving voice to my own visual experience—it doesn't have to do with words, but certainly you could write words about it if you wanted to, but it [the image] comes first, not the words. Where as in the illustration the words come first and then the illustration comes after, the art comes after. So the difference between having it in the museum or in publication, those are the differences. Usually museums look for work that is not part of words, even though everything has so many words in it now, and written form, it's all being mashable now because if you look at early works, besides [Roy] Lichtenstein and people of that nature, pop art, very few

works had words in them. And then there was the written word and the visual language—does that make sense? Did I answer the question?

EB: Yeah, yeah it does. It's interesting to hear how you talk about them. You mentioned education—have you ever taught?

BN: Yes, I loved teaching. I started teaching in 1967 at SVA and I was the second woman hired there, much to the dismay of the man who owned the school, Silas Rhodes. You hired her? She looks so young! Look at her! Look at her skirts, they're so short, they won't know she's a teacher! I like her work but they won't—look at her! And the guy, Bob Garaldi, who directed Michael Jackson's first music video *Beat It*, that hired me said, well Silas she's going to be a very good teacher, and if you don't want her to teach then I'm not chairing your department anymore. He said, okay, she can teach here. And that's how I got my first job. And I taught at SVA and my classes the second year I got two classes, third year I got three classes because everyone wanted to be in my class because it was interesting, not because I was a woman, but it was interesting. I brought money into the discussion, like, you're going to be doing illustration for magazines, this is what you've got to know. You're going to be doing graphic design, this is what you have to know. Not only the graphic design, but I brought practical things into the mix. I talked about money—oh my god, don't talk about money! No! You have to talk about money. If you don't talk about money, how are you going to know what to do? And I kind of, in a way, silently, with very large vocal chords, changed the whole culture. I started a class on art and business, I mean, the business of illustration—not then, but when I had chaired my own department at Parsons. So I taught the longest period of time at SVA [School of Visual Arts] from 1967 to 1991. During that time FIT [Fashion Institute of Technology] asked me to teach in 1974 where I taught for 18 years until 1991 when I was hired at Parsons to be the Chairperson of the Illustration Department. I also taught at Pratt for 10 year from 1974 to 1984.

I taught at SVA for the longest period of time in many different departments. I was first teaching in the regular school, and then I moved into the Illustration Department, because they started an Illustration Department, and then I moved into the Computer Arts Department, in [19]86 when they started the Computer Arts Department, and then I left all teaching when I moved Parsons, which is now called Parsons The New School For Design. I loved teaching. During all my teaching and chairing time, I still managed to do my personal work, I'd work for publication and still have shows, so teaching was not a job because I needed to make money, but the money was good, it was a steady income. Freelancing you got 'hits' of money — you could get a lot or you could get a little, but this was steady income. It was nice—it was good.

EB: Do you ever think about teaching again?

BN: No.

EB: Not even one class?

BN: When I left school in 2004 at Parsons, I realized that I wear hearing aids, I don't hear that well, I don't see that well, and I think that it would be a challenge to teach and really, at 75, in 10 years I'm going to be 85, and I'd like to spend my time doing other things than teaching. Even when I stopped teaching at 65, or 66, whenever it was, to 75, I didn't miss it at all. Too many things to do, but I loved teaching. I taught for more than 40 years, but never

full-time except when I had my job, but even when I had my job at Parsons as chair, they said that I could come in three days a week because I didn't think that I had time to do that job. Five days a week I was there, because I didn't see how you could do the job, and I did more work than I've ever did with my five days a week there for myself. I had three shows, I still did my books— it didn't matter how much work I had, it didn't matter how long I was there. Teaching would have—if I had taught a class, it would have stopped me. Even in coming in five days a week, but somehow the five days a week kind of just blended. Either I went to my studio or I went there. I mean, it didn't matter where I was physically; I still got whatever work I needed to do done.

EB: How has your perception of your work, and yourself as an artist, changed over the course of your career?

BN: How has my perception of my work as an artist—not very much. Maybe other people perceive me differently, but I always knew what I was—what I am, not was, I'm still here. I always knew who I was, and it's just other people who have to perceive me and understand who I am, because I'm not like anybody else. Not that anybody else is like anybody else, but I'm really not like anybody else, and my path has always been unique. I never followed a path, a trajectory, that people could pinpoint and that's been hard for me because people really don't know what to do with me. My perception hasn't changed, it's other people's perceptions that have to change and understand who I am, and they still haven't. I don't think people get me at all, especially museums and that kind of recognition. Cause I'm not pigeon-hole-able.

EB: Well along those lines—do you consider yourself an artist, a designer, a craftsperson?

BN: An artist that does a lot of different things, including all those other things. I'm an artist who has done illustration, because I'm not doing it now. I'm an artist who has done clothing design; I'm not doing that now. I'm an artist who has done shoe design. I have done many different things but I'm an artist, and I consider myself an artist. Unique—and every artist is unique, but unique in a different way.

EB: What types of art are you working on currently?

BN: [Gestures around studio]

EB: Everything that's around?

BN: Everything here. The large prints, mining my sketchbooks because my sketchbooks, even though they're sketchbooks, they're finished works of art.

EB: Yeah, they're amazing.

BN: [Flipping through sketchbook] And that's something that people are amazed at when they look at it, I mean that, blown up, is a finished work of art. Any of these are finished works of art. So, I can't say what I'm—now I'm just going through the work that I did all these years and making large prints from them and I don't know where that'll lead. My daughter, who's a photographer, she lives next door, and my other daughter lives over there, she designed my book—so we have a little art community here, which is nice. She printed, my daughter who lives next door, who's a photographer, printed these for me [gesturing to works

along the wall] and she did a great job. I love them. And she has a big printer in her studio and she's working on prints of her own work but she said, oh I'd love to do big prints of yours.

EB: Have you done any collaborative work with them?

BN: No, well, the book with Annie [Anne Demchick]? I mean, just in this way, but not work on pieces. They have their own things. Annie [Anna Demchick] did my—she does all my design like, you know, the card for the Bard Graduate Center.

EB: Oh, she did that?

BN: Oh yeah!

EB: It was great! Really beautiful.

BN: She did that one. I didn't like what they did—not that I didn't like what they did but they have Visualizing New York and my work, and my show. Like, my show is this big [gesturing] and Visualizing New York is this big—they had it exactly the same. No, I'm sorry, that does not work for me. I'm designing my own, just mine, and they said fine. And I sent out 1,200 invites, they sent out 1,200 invites of theirs, but not to my list. But if I didn't do mine, I didn't want that to go out to my people. I wanted only my show to go out to my people.

EB: Well, is there anything that we haven't touched on that you would like to share?

BN: No, I think we covered a lot, and I think you asked good questions and I think we covered a lot and that's good.

EB: Well thank you so much for being here and for sharing your stories with me.

BN: You're very welcome. Thank you for asking good questions.

[end of the interview]