

DRIVING PASSION (1975)

Phyllis Krim

Larry Warshaw: A videotape documentary by Larry Warshaw of the artist Phyllis Krim and her paintings of classic cars. Driving Passion, paintings exhibited at the Ward-Nasse Gallery, in New York City. Phyllis Krim.

Phyllis Krim: I'm Phyllis Krim, and I've always had a driving passion to be an artist. And that driving passion has turned into a more defined vision of painting cars and motorcycles in the last few years. It's been very natural for me because I kind of grew up in a garage. My father has a bottling plant in Pennsylvania, and it was always a delight for me to watch the machines and hear the sounds. And he had 20 different flavors, all different colors. And the trucks were orange and yellow and had big juice drops on the side. And it was my favorite place. And when I grew older I worked on the trucks and with the truck drivers and helped out in the plant. And my father always brought me cars and trucks and airplanes to play with, so that was my background from as far back as I know.

And besides that, the house that we lived in looked out onto a racetrack, an old dirt track where they had beautiful races every Sunday. And my first lemonade stands were to serve the people who came to the car races. And the speed, the excitement, and all that color, became part of my life. I still love movement and speed and all the technical things that go along with cars and building cars. I once worked with a guy in a garage rebuilding from wrecks, making racing cars. And I was a navigator in some rallies. And that interest has just been going on my whole life. I love the beauty of the cars.

I studied in many different art schools. I went to the Museum College of Art in Philadelphia and studied advertising design. And I went to the Academy of Fine Arts and learned how to do painting like the old masters. I worked for many years in advertising and all the affiliated fields. Had my own interiors business and did display, built floats for parades, drew shoes for department stores. I kind of ran the gamut of all the design fields.

But then when I finally decided to paint, I was out in the middle of Kansas. I was doing drawings of tractors and farm equipment. And I went to the Graduate School at Kansas State University, and everybody there kind of thought I was a bit crazy because they were painting like Jackson Pollock and I was doing the machines that were outside of the painting room, that were part of the engineering department. I'd go out on a balcony by myself and draw the machines.

Unfortunately, my teacher said that he was gonna flunk me because you couldn't do that. So I quit, but not until I had taught myself abstraction and how to abstract a machine from the real machine. I didn't paint then for quite a few years. I did illustration and went into theater things, when I came to New York, ran shows at the Village Gate. And I had been discouraged by that

teacher. And then I realized that that was ridiculous and that of course I could paint machines and cars or whatever I wanted to.

Larry Warshaw: Was this a male teacher? Do you think that this was a case of tyranny against you as a woman? Basically, if you were a man do you think it would have been different?

Phyllis Krim: No, I think in that particular instance that teacher really wanted everybody to do what he was interested in, and he had no understanding of what I was doing and if I had been a man I think that he wouldn't have understood that man either. I think it was just unfortunate that I hit someone who didn't allow any differences.

Larry Warshaw: Do you think most art teachers are like that?

Phyllis Krim: I hope not, but I do think that there are stereotypes set up and that people kind of follow schools and they assume that if you choose their class, maybe, that you want to paint in their manner. Of course I had no choice, being in the middle of Kansas, that was the only painting teacher. It could have destroyed me completely, but I've finally gone back to continue where I dropped painting many years ago.

Larry Warshaw: Did Kansas have an influence on you or was it just like any other town?

Phyllis Krim: Well, it was not like any other town because it was Manhattan Kansas, where the university is. And that's a very cosmopolitan town for the middle of Kansas. It's an agricultural school, and people come there to study grain ag from Russia and from all over the world, from Israel, and so there are people walking in saris down this little main street with the grain silos. And it was quite an interesting town, but unfortunately the painting department was back there someplace.

Larry Warshaw: When you got to New York, did you study here at all?

Phyllis Krim: Yes, I studied at the Art Students' League when I decided to go back to painting and I studied with Will Barnet. I was interested in hard edge painting and in learning abstraction, or continuing again with the abstraction. He helped me and was interested in my work. I didn't stay there very long.

But I went up to Woodstock also, to the Art Students' League there. I was painting the models that were out there until my teacher started to pull up in an old Ford, a beautiful, beautiful old Ford. And I asked if I could paint that instead. So he would pull it up every day for me, and I painted my first car outside in Woodstock there. This was a delightful car. It had a vase of fresh flowers on the dashboard, and it had a picnic basket on the running board. And he used to ride me home in it after class. And nobody really thought too much about my being strange then.

Larry Warshaw: Strange in what way?

Phyllis Krim: Well, that I was – that everybody else was painting still lifes and models and I was painting the car. Nobody much said anything about it so I thought, well, it's OK, and that's what I decided I wanted to really do. And then I started to see really beautiful classic cars on the street in Woodstock. And I'd put signs up in people's windshields and ask if I could come into

their garages and make sketches and do some paintings. And people really were very nice about it. They liked the idea that I liked their cars. The lines were so beautiful.

Larry Warshaw: What cars were you attracted to? What type of cars?

Phyllis Krim: Well, things like Bugattis and Rolls Royces, and things that are fantastic designs, and racing cars. Things that are built for moving and that are built strongly, and that have lasted through all the years.

Larry Warshaw: Do you like cars that – could you classify a car as masculine or feminine?

Phyllis Krim: Well, I think that the main thing really about cars and engines and motorcycles is their tremendous power and strength. And I think that you can't say that strength or power is masculine or feminine. It just is. And for those who can appreciate it, it's all around us and within us. And I think that the trouble with stereotyping men and women, and saying "women painters", is very bad. People try to find some kind of an image that women paint. Well, I think that that's really wrong because my image isn't like other women and it isn't necessarily like men either. I think that everybody paints whatever is in them, and whatever their background is. That's their influence. And I happen to have been lucky enough to have been born with all kinds of strength that I got, that my father taught me. All kinds of ideas of – just strong ideas. I used to do them physically, like join the boys' track team since there was no girls' track team at that time, and I used to like to really run.

Larry Warshaw: Did they think of you as a feminist at that time?

Phyllis Krim: Well, I don't think anybody thought much about it, they just thought I was weird. I mean, because I had different tastes. I didn't like to do the things that the girls liked to do. I learned how to shoot a gun, and I started to learn how to fly a plane. And I just – those were the things that my father taught me. And I thought they were exciting and fun. And I think that women today are learning the same things and doing the same things, but I did them many, many years ago.

And there are many strong women, but I think that a lot of people are – have been afraid to be different and they've let themselves fall into the stereotypes of women. I've been afraid and not afraid. If you're a kind of a person that makes a lot of noise and is seen in a crowd, is noticed, it scares a lot of people. Janis Joplin talked about it in her last movie – about kind of being laughed out of her home town. And it's really because if you're different or strong in some way, that you scare people. And they kind of want to try to hide you.

But I've just decided that you can't be kept down. It's not the time to be kept down, and it never is and it shouldn't be for anyone. That you should be whatever you are, and either people are going to accept it or they're not.

And a lot of people don't accept what I'm trying to do. They think – they say "well, now, why do you paint that? Why don't you paint something else? What a ridiculous thing to be painting. Do it some other way." I'm open to changing and to lots of variations. I do realistic work and I do abstract work. I'm not going to stereotype myself, or just stay in exactly the same kind of thing

that I'm doing. But I don't want to be told what to do. I just want to develop myself. And I want to kind of come out and be proud of what I'm doing rather than feel apologetic because it's something different.

It's a little bit difficult because as a woman painting cars and motorcycles, the men don't really accept me as one of their friends – the men who paint similar things. They probably don't take me seriously. I think that if I were a man I would be able to come up to their lofts and associate with them a lot more easily.

Larry Warshaw: Do you really feel a tyranny because you're a woman?

Phyllis Krim: No, it's not tyranny. I have never felt any prejudice against me as a woman, because I've never had trouble getting jobs. The school I went to was mostly men. There were very few women. Industrial design was one of the big subjects. And even in the advertising department there was just a handful of women and most of them never even continued after school. So I kind of was always used to working with men, and when I was a kid playing with boys. So I never felt that – I just felt that I would get along OK on my own work and what I was. I never felt any problem about being a woman. And I would get jobs with my portfolio, and it didn't really matter, if you could do the work, if you were a man or a woman. I would say probably I got paid less.

Right now, though, I think that things are really changing and that women are being accepted more and more as painters and in galleries and museums. I'm not in one of the top galleries yet, but I feel that I've got as good a chance as anybody else.

Larry Warshaw: Would you like us to see your slides now and then you can talk about them with us?

Phyllis Krim: This is the car series that I've done recently, and this is a Bentley, a really beautiful car. It's owned by some people in Pennsylvania, and it was originally done as a commission. And this also belongs to the same people, and was originally done as a commission. I've done variations of the same two cars. That was a Rolls Royce, it was a Silver Cloud. This is a Packard. I saw it in the Midwest. It's a beautiful old touring car.

I like the frontal view a lot. I use it quite often because I think it's the strongest view. And when I take the shots of the cars, when I do work from a photograph or a slide, I get kind of down underneath, because it's a much stronger image for me. And I like to play with the different reflections in the headlights and on the bumpers, and it's gotten into – the trip just keeps changing. This is an Alfa Romeo, and this is in the Brooklyn Museum now. This is a Hispano Suiza. And this is an old Mercer Raceabout. These cars, I just think they're loveable. Little kids come up and pat them.

Larry Warshaw: Where do you find them?

Phyllis Krim: Well, I go all around the country, taking pictures and finding cars in museums, car museums, and car shows, auto meets. This one was one I saw up in Woodstock and sketched in a garage, it's a custom car. This is another variation of the Rolls.

Larry Warshaw: Do you have various people call you up just to have their car painted?

Phyllis Krim: Yeah, I do sometimes work on commission, if a person wants a portrait of their car. A lot of people think that's a weird idea, they'll have portraits of their kids and portraits of their dogs, even, but a lot of them haven't gotten around to this idea. But I have done quite a few. This was the car I was talking about, the old Ford that my teacher pulled up in Woodstock. And it's kind of primitive. I hadn't quite figured out how I was working at that time. It was done quite a few years ago. But I kind of liked it, and it's just a prototype.

These were also done up in Woodstock and my technique had certainly changed by this

time. **Larry Warshaw:** How many cars have you painted?

Phyllis Krim: Oh, dozens, and I also have gotten to engines and motorcycles, and actually was originally interested in the machines and engines which will be coming up. This was another version of the Woodstock racing car, the custom car. These slides are a little bit faded, some of them. This was an early lithograph that I did of that same car, and I was working up on Mount Tremper in a workshop for the summer in Woodstock. And this was a more advanced lithograph that I did of a Rolls Silver Ghost. That bright white spot is not part of it, that was a reflection in taking the photograph. I really got into the different techniques of lithography. I did that on a stone, and I pulled the prints myself. These have been in quite a few museums and galleries. They're up on Madison Avenue in some of the better galleries, and I will be continuing doing lithographs. This is a drawing, and this drawing won an award at the Sullivan County Museum. Allan D'Arcangelo was the judge, and he certainly is into roads and car things, and he appreciated this one.

This is the original engineering department that I painted when I first decided that I wanted to be a painter many years ago back in Kansas. This was what I saw when I went out on that balcony, and tried to get away from painting like Jackson Pollock, which was not my thing at all. I thought that these patterns and shapes of the machines were really just like a stage set, like so fantastic. And I've done paintings of different isolated machines within that which I'm not showing right now. But this was one of the machines that was right in my classroom – or it's three machines, really. One is a scale, and I don't know what they all are exactly, but I started painting realistically. Now, I taught myself how to abstract. This was the abstraction from that machine.

And then I continued teaching myself abstraction by studying watch parts. And this was taken directly from a watch. And the second version of it is more abstract

Larry Warshaw: What kind of colors are those?

Phyllis Krim: This is done in oils. I was originally using oils.

Larry Warshaw: How large is it?

Phyllis Krim: Well, these are not too large, they're about 26 x 30, something like that. The car

paintings that I've been doing more recently are 40 x 40, and the motorcycle that will be coming up is 48 in diameter.

This was a method of teaching myself how to synthesize, how to get down to the basic elements. It was something that I will return to. By the time you get to the end of that series, which is this painting, which is in a private collection, it's practically not recognizable as the watch parts, but is a thing of itself, with the strength, I feel though, of the original machinery.

From that, I went into engines. This is a motorcycle engine, a fuel injector. And people have said that it's erotic. I haven't gone into erotic shows and jumped on that bandwagon particularly, because I want my work to stand on its own strength, and people can interpret it however they like. I do find motorcycles a turn-on and I think that it does come through. This is just a sketch, in oil. It was really an underpainting, but I left it as it was because I kind of dug it.

This is another version, an even more abstracted version of the fuel injector. And this has been shown in the Phoenix Art Museum in the first International Motorcycle Show, and this and the following piece, called Earth Mother, was also shown in a museum down south, in the American Motorcycle Design Show, just recently. This also won a painting prize in a New York show, an annual painting and design show.

These were some shots from a recent show several months ago at a college. And from this particular show, I was invited to the Antique Automobile Club of America, to their national meet, to show there. And that was an experience because I'm now a member of that organization, and I'm trying to relate to that. As a woman, it's a little difficult because there are practically no women, maybe none, who own these cars or who belong to this organization, except as wives. With me coming there to Hershey, Pennsylvania, to show, and stand by my cars so to speak, was really an experience because I felt as if they also thought I was weird even though they loved the cars. But I'm just going to have to continue and not worry about what the men or the women think.

This was also from one of the shows.

A lot of these slides I took all over the country, traveling around to car museums, and I think these were from Bar Harbor, Maine, where a man has a fantastic collection. This is a Bugatti. Mercedes. These were taken out in the Midwest, in an old barn. Beautiful cars. Some of them I take just because they're beautiful, and some of them I take to work from. I think that the design of these old cars is so fantastic. It was dark in that old barn, it's a little hard to see.

I wanted you to see the kinds of cars that I thought were beautiful, the kind of lines that I think are classic, a little bit about the vision that I have. It's not just nostalgia. It's not got much to do with that. It's the energy that I'm interested in. The energy in these machines.