Gordon Wren: The date is December 1, 1994. I’m talking to Professor Jim Todd, professor of art at the University of Montana. Thank you, Professor Todd, for the interview. I would just like you to talk about your experiences here in Montana and teaching at the university.

James Todd: I was raised in the state. I wasn’t born here. I was born in Minneapolis, but my family moved from Seattle at the end of the Second World War. So I grew up in Great Falls. I received my undergraduate education partly at the college of Great Falls. Then I did my art training at the Chicago Art Institute. Then I did my graduate work here at this university in the early Sixties. I mention all that because it has something to do, I suppose, with my attitude towards the university now and working here. I didn’t ever think that I would be teaching here. It isn’t often that universities hire their own graduates. There’s not any particular law against that, but they avoid that so that there’s not kind of an interbreeding. So I never expected to be teaching here.

After I got my last degree in 1970, I went to Florida and worked there for a year. Then I was asked to come back, not by the department, but by the humanities program. I had a pretty broad liberal arts education as well as my art education. So I taught in the humanities program here for ten years. They wanted me to incorporate art in their humanities program. That’s what I did, although I mostly did it myself. Then I was asked in 1980 by the art department to come over and chair the department here, which I did for eight years. Since then I’ve just been working as a professor. I mention all that because it has a lot to do with my teaching here and my attitude towards the university and so forth.

I was very fortunate as an artist that I was able to develop myself academically as well as artistically. So the institution gave me the opportunity to do both things. I’m a professor of humanities and art. That means that I’m mostly an artist, but in addition to my art, I still continue to do academic work and write periodicals that are art-related. So I’ll let you ask questions after this. These are the primary things that come to my mind in terms of what I’ve done here.

GW: Just to get more specific about art and what type of art do you do?

JT: I don’t probably fall into a simple category because I vary my technique enough so I couldn’t simply be called one thing. I could be called several things. Sometimes I work very realistically and in that sense I would be called more of a naturalist. Sometimes I work in a way that you would call expressionistic, which is more emotionally charged and is kind of a cartoon sort of thing. Sometimes I worked almost surrealistically too. I haven’t so much the last few years. I
guess what I like to do is rather than say that I'm just one thing or the other, I like to leave those things open in terms of what the particular work I may be doing, call for a particular approach. I may for a long period of time work in a certain way until I get tired of it. So I would say right now, my work probably tends to be mostly realistic or somewhat expressionistic.

GW: Does it show a lot of Montana? Do you take Montana out of the state in your travels and talk to other people? Do they see that?

JT: Actually not so much in my artwork. There have been periods where that was true. Interestingly enough, it was most true when I didn’t live in Montana. I taught in Germany for three years in the 1960s. Then while I was away from Montana, homesickness and preoccupation with the home state and so forth made me work more with Montana themes. I did. They weren’t realistic exactly. They were kind of symbolic things. I did a lot of Native American things and cowboy-related things and so forth, then the Montana reference was very clear. Whenever I’ve come home, I’ve been less inclined to do that. Then it seems that I think about international issues more, things outside of the state.

There was a period, though, in the 1970s when I was doing quite a bit of landscape drawing, not so much painting, but drawing. I would go out into the mountains and a ghost town, things like this, and do drawings of those. I wasn’t doing them for anybody. I was just interested in them at the time. I haven’t done that for quite a long time either. Now, what I’ve carried outside of the state in reference to Montana has not been so much in my art, Montana in my art. A thing I did last year, this fall when I went to New York and presented this paper on Montana art, on what I thought was happening- that’s been more academic than artistic. I can imagine in the future that I could swing around Montana themes again. That isn’t what I’ve been working with lately.

GW: So you’ve stated earlier that you weren’t born in Montana. Do you consider yourself a Montanan and why do you do so?

JT: Yes I do, just for common-sensical reasons. I think that if one has grown up in a state- I mean if I had grown up in Ohio, I would say I was an Ohioan no matter what my attitude was towards Ohio. So it depends I guess what one identifies with. For instance, even though I had grown up here, if after high school I had gone away and never came back and spent the rest of my years up until now in Wisconsin or something and somebody asked me what I was, I might say that I was transient. That is what I would identify with. I do with Montana simply because, like I mentioned earlier, I didn’t know I was going to be back here living.

Now I realize that I’ve lived here the majority of my life. In that respect, I consider myself a Montanan. It’s become more kind of a faddish sort of question lately because of the tourist attraction of the state. I’ve noticed that Montanan artists have started calling themselves first generation Montanans, second generation Montana or some sort of class hierarchy. I think that has to do- I’m not interested in that kind of stuff. It seems to me that it has to do more with the tourist business or something. The last thing I would say about that, I think people have the
right to call themselves what they want. I get a little bit irritated with overnight Montanans now that it’s popular, you become that overnight. Especially we find that in our field of artists that want to exploit the whole Montana thing or are suddenly Montanans. That bothers me a little bit because I’m not convinced of the sincerity of it.

GW: Here at the university, you are Vice President of finance?

JT: No, no. That’s James E. Todd. He and I have been having confusions about that for two years. It’s even further confused for a couple of other things, that is that he refers to himself as Jim Todd as I do too. So we use the same nickname. That makes it more confusing because when you hear somebody say, “Jim Todd said...” it could mean either of us on campus. The other thing that was very odd about that is- in fact, when he was first hired here, we hadn’t met one another for nearly a year. We were having all these confusions. He would get things in the mail asking for cartoons to send to Italy and I was getting requests to get table orders and stuff like this. What we found out was on top of it that the phone number that he was given, he had the same telephone number I did except for one digit off. He had the mathematician analyze the probability of that. It was like two million to one against that happening. He hasn’t changed it either.

Still once in a while, we’ll get phone calls that are mix ups, although most people now have gotten it straightened out. Still on this phone here, I’ll get on my answering machine something like, “Jim, we’ve got to get those BC orders fixed.” I know right away that they’re talking to me and not talking to me.

GW: I was one of them. I thought you were someone else also.

JT: My mother did. My mother picked up the Great Falls Tribune and thought I had been suddenly advanced to something or other.

GW: You talked about having a trip back in London a few years ago. Could you just tell me a little bit about that?

JT: Sure. That was a big honor for me. What it was, I was given a diploma. I was elected to be a member of what’s called the London Royal Society of Painters and Print Makers. It’s an organization that has probably about 150 people in it, I would guess. Although, most of them are English, they have started taking more international membership like when I went to London to receive my diploma, there was a Russian who was getting his. The Russian was a print maker and a woman from Sweden. The English tend to be kind of in-house about things. So it’s a kind of change for them to try and push out a little bit beyond their English membership to other people. I think there are three or four other Americans in the organization. I’m not to sure. Maybe I’ll stop at that to see if you have any specific questions. There’s more that I can say about it, but I don’t want to ramble either.

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GW: No that was good. I just wanted to maybe ask you the breadth of you not just being a professor here at the University of Montana, but there was more to a lot of the professors. A lot of the professors don’t tell their classes like you do their extracurricular activities other than teaching. It’s really interesting to find out about that.

JT: I don’t think I did it first either when I first taught. The teachers, I don’t think, mean anything by not doing that. It seems like it’s their professional life. In fact, to be honest, I think some of them feel uncomfortable about it because it would seem like boasting or something to their class. So they just leave it aside. I think that would have been the reason when I was younger, I probably would not have brought it up to a class either. It would seem sort of like showing-off yourself. I’ll tell you what made me start to decide to do that with my classes is the more I got involved in national stuff professionally, the more I would have to take trips for a couple of days. That’s at the expense of the class. The class loses their teacher during that time and has TAs and stuff like this. It’s a little awkward for classes sometimes.

They’ve got to adjust to a different person and they lose the person that they usually work with. So I thought, “You know, we should be able to explain to them why this is going to happen so they don’t think we’re taking a trip down the river.” Then as I got into it more, I realized that when I did do this in earlier years, that students were interested in it because it just gives them more information about what we’re doing and what their field is about, what we do when we go and give a paper, that kind of stuff. So after a while, it became not only a matter of accounting for my trips, but in a way continuing the education of students about what goes on in our profession. So I try to do that as much as circumstances permit, yes. I don’t know for sure because I’m not in other classes, but my impression is that often teachers don’t. That’s your impression too?

GW: Yes. I read your paper and there was some great information in it that I didn’t know. It was nice to have that insight.

JT: I’m glad you feel that way because it reinforces my own feelings about doing that. I’m sharing the information with the students and things like that. My criticism class, for example, because that’s what their studying is that kind of stuff, I went ahead and read the paper. I explained in my class what we did in New York and how we presented these papers and that kind of stuff. Then we read the paper to the class and asked them to do the same thing that they’d do in New York is to criticize it or to ask questions about it, things like that. Some teachers don’t do these things.

When I was back in New York there was some professor who brought his students out there with him to sit in on the thing and see how it went. That costs money so that’s not so simple to do that even if you want. So I don’t know whether the students paid their own way or whether the school gave some kind of coverage. Then if you’re back east, you’re closer. You don’t have to travel so far. For us, that would be financially almost prohibitive. It would cost so much to do it. Anyway, some teachers are conscious of doing that.

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GW: I was really surprised at how historical your paper was (unintelligible). I would like to submit that paper with this tape.

JT: Oh that’s fine. I’m pleased to have you do that. I’m pleased to get it archived. I haven’t tried to get it published. Sometimes this organization in New York publishes our papers so there’s a small chance that they may publish it. In fact, it is published there because they publish the minutes even if they don’t put it in the journal. I’m not so concerned with it out east. I’d like to get it published here so I have been thinking about submitting it to the Montana Historical Magazine. We have another magazine in the state called Montana Professor, which mostly professors that read it. I thought about submitting it to those magazines. So even if it is never accepted by them, I’d be pleased to have it archived.

GW: Yes I found the reading interesting. It doesn’t have the Ph.D. quality to it like I couldn’t understand what was going on. (unintelligible). Turning now to just the future, what do you think the school is headed for? What do you think you’re headed for? That’s just an open question.

JT: Yes, well maybe I’ll talk about myself first and then the university while I think about it. I’ve got roughly about five years before I retire. That’s still enough time to really concentrate on my work. I’m glad to be out of administrative stuff when I resigned from the chairmanship about five years ago. It’s made a really big difference. I’m still busy with stuff, but I can concentrate more on my work. I tend to be a really political type and so I’ve been involved in politics here on campus. I was really extensively involved in the 1970s. So I still have the same disposition, but I tend to do less of that now and concentrate more on my teaching and artwork, which I like a lot to do.

In my next years here before I retire, I want to continue doing what I’m doing. That is to concentrate heavily on teaching because all of us who are committed teachers, that’s why we’re here. That’s the main reason. All this other stuff is kind of secondary. So I want to continue concentrating on teaching. I hope that after I retire that they still have some opportunities that they have now. They have these one third teaching kinds of things and stuff like that where one could still teach a class occasionally and things like that. I would like to do something like that. At the same time, you’re free from all the other stuff. So I hope I can keep teaching a little bit. Then my artwork, I’ve been doing that since I was two years old. So if my health- and my health is okay now- doesn’t get in the way of that or something, I plan to continue doing my artwork until I can’t do it anymore physically so that means indefinitely.

I never seem to run out of ideas. So that hasn’t been a problem. So there are still a lot of things in my mind. I’ve had a little bit of success the last couple of years, not so much financial. I haven’t had a lot of financial success in the profession. I’ve had a professional success and some professional recognition. That’s okay. That’s given me a lot of opportunities. One of the things that I’m very grateful for in the profession and I hope I can continue this, and grateful to the

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institution for helping me with this over the years, is I’ve been able to do a lot of international stuff. I was involved heavily with the exchange with China ten years ago or so. I’ve traveled to Germany, Scandinavia in connection with art things and this English thing is more recent. I’ve been selected to go to Russia in the spring with three other Montana artists.

The institution has not paid for all of this, but they’ve often helped in travel expenses for these things. I don’t have so much money that I can just fly off to Tahiti when I feel like it. In fact, in some of those instances, I wouldn’t have been able to go without the help of the institutions. I’m very grateful for that. They’ve helped me a lot with that kind of thing. I may be able to do some of that after retirement, but you have less money. So I know that may come to an end or diminish more. In some ways, I don’t know whether this is very clear or not, one of the things I look forward to in retirement is in a way, kind of working without all of that professional stuff. Just kind of seeing what I would do when there’s nobody paying quite as much attention, does that make any sense?

That’s what everybody fears with retirement. We all know that it means less attention, usually. That frightens me just as much as it does anybody else. It also interests me kind of. It’s a little bit like starting your art over again or something. There was a jazz musician. I think it was Sonny Rollins who would disappear every couple of years and not record anything just in order to kind of start over or see what he did outside of it. I always thought that would be hard to do and at the same time, very interesting. So in terms of my personal life, I guess those are the kinds of things I look forward to. Maybe I will write some more, I don’t know. In terms of the university, I worry quite a bit about it because there’s (unintelligible). Maybe I’ll get a little bit closer to this thing. Do you think that will interfere with this?

GW: (unintelligible). It’s pretty loud.

JT: We can kind of wait a minute too because it usually kind of dies down. You can shut it off if you want. I worry about the university, but it’s not just because of this university. It’s kind of happening all over the world to universities. The international debt, the money problems are so immense that what’s happening is the governments and the states are not able to support the school there. They don’t have the money they need to do that. At the same time, because the students are having a hard time getting work, there’s more flooding into the schools in order to get education and being able to get into the market. So we’re getting things that are really out of bounds. More and more students, we don’t have the adequate funds to take care of them.

So what they’re doing is charging the students more and more all of the time. They’re putting professors and creating adjunct professorships, which means that the professors don’t have the same kind of support systems that they used to have—pensions, health insurance, things like that. So all this is just very unhealthy. I don’t have any simple solutions to it either. It’s an unhealthy kind of development. It’s not just a money thing. The other thing that it starts doing is the institutions have to turn more and more toward private support away from state support.
as they get increasingly like commercial corporations. The academic institutions, which means our whole business, they’re very idealistic things traditionally.

They’re very committed to things that aren’t always practical, that people don’t care and aren’t going to spend their money on and so forth. That’s understood about. They’re not the same thing as selling tires or selling MTV or something. When they get more and more dependent on private support, there’s a tendency for them to get more that way especially the administrators start operating more like corporate management or something. Things start getting quantified and start counting the amount of credit hours that everybody has or counting where they have jobs and where they don’t. I think that’s an unhealthy development and it’s happened here a lot. This place isn’t isolated. It’s happening at the very large universities as well as here. I mean in specific ways also.

Let me just give you an example that doesn’t have anything to do with the classroom, although I think you can go on there too. Just think of the student union center for example. Ten years ago, the student union center, which is the same building today, was a place that was primarily a place where people met for academic reasons- the UC rooms upstairs and meetings. Then downstairs you had student services. You had all kinds of student services. The commercial-there were hardly any commercial things downstairs except for the bookstore. Even the bookstore tries to deal on a wholesale basis. Upstairs you had the cafeteria for the students and the other things. It’s been turned into a mall. Some of the student services, I’m thinking of the Women’s Center, literally moved out in order to put fast food joints into it.

That, to me, is quite a literal kind of commercialization of the atmosphere. One could say, “Well yes, but people like it.” Maybe they do, maybe they don’t. It seems to me that in a university that something like that develops a kind of non academic sort of atmosphere. There’s the little grocery store they have in there where you can buy coffee and so forth. They turn the music up full blast like you’re out at a beer joint or something like this. this starts creating a kind of nervous tension and pressure on people, not to speak of the students who have to work in there all day where it’s on full blast. Maybe they do it, but it seems to be kind of a commercial thing to do. That kind of stuff-the more of it you have, the more contrary it gets to an academic atmosphere. That’s just to speak of the trappings.

To get back into the classroom, for example, where it’s a problem is that the managers- that is administrators- start looking at things like how many students take a course? If no students take a course, maybe this thing isn’t consumer productive. So maybe we don’t need it. That makes sense if you’re talking about a business. It doesn’t make any sense if you’re talking about a traditional university. For example, if someone teaches cello, you’re probably never going to have 5,000 people knocking down the door to take cello lessons. What the university says is that, “We are a place where those five good cellists in the city will be educated.” That’s traditionally what it meant. There’s this other thing that’s beginning to take over. What I imagine sometimes is that I could die and then come back in the middle of the next century and

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the universities would be something more like commercialized vo-techs or something if that makes any sense.

The trend seems to go that way as long as there isn’t any public support. So in that respect, I worry about it. On the other hand on a more positive side, the universities have always somehow (this goes back to the Greeks) had their ups and downs, but they’ve never quite disappeared. People always seem to want to learn more about things or enough of a number of them do so that they kind of stay there. Not all change is bad either. Some of it is progressive. Some of it improves things. There is some stuff that probably does need to get cleaned up and thrown out, et cetera. So it’s not change that I’m criticizing, at least I hope not.

So I guess what I feel that’s positive- and I hope this doesn’t sound phony because I’m being interviewed by a student- but the students. What’s really nice if you’re a teacher is that every time when you start with a beginning class, those students are not contaminated with your cynicism and my own disillusions. There are still people looking forward to things. There’s a receptivity to information and learning things that means that no matter what the other problems are, there’s always that vitality of human beings that—

[End of Side A]
JT: I have quite a bit of belief that it’s important. I know that as a teacher, it certainly revised me. If it weren’t for the students and I was just paying attention to myself and my other academic colleagues, the managers, the employees, the administrative I probably would have become a drunk or something. I still like teaching and see a lot of vitality in that. I don’t know if that really answers your question. Those were two things that came to my head. I have some more of these about what’s happening because of the international market. I still have quite a bit of belief in human beings wanting to get educated and to get a fairly decent education.

GW: Do you feel the positives of the college education still outweigh the negatives as far as a lot of the work force now seems to be coming from the vo-techs?

JT: I’m a real idealist about this stuff because I never got an education in order to guarantee to get myself a job. It wasn’t because I came from a money background. I came from a poor background in Montana. My parents were business people, but for a number of reasons the family didn’t have much money. So I went and got my undergraduate education, I had to pay for it myself. I had to work nearly full time while I got it. I also knew that in art, if you were after money and power, wasn’t the profession to get in to. So I knew that from the start. I was a post-second World War generation type. Our parents, for example, had not been able to go to college at all. My mother went to a business college.

My father had not been able to get beyond high school, which in the Thirties wasn’t that bad. My father was a very intellectual person. He was very smart. I knew that a formal education would have been really important for him if he could have gotten it. He missed that deeply in his life. So when I had the opportunity to get that, I was just excited about learning stuff. So I minored in about three or four things before I was done. I didn’t finish them all because I was so excited about the information. I minored in psychology for years. Then I minored in something else and kept doing that until I finally minored in history, what I did finish with. I was just really excited. I was broke, but I was just excited about walking around and learning things. It didn’t really occur to me very much about whether I knew I couldn’t apply my studies at COT every day life.

I understood that. I understood that (unintelligible) make conversations with people about that as far as that went. I just really liked studying. So I still have the same attitude towards it. We have to do something so you can get a job or you’re going to starve to death. I knew that. That’s why I eventually got into teaching. The other side of it was that I wanted to learn as much as I could. I still feel the same way about it. I see a different kind of attitude among some students, not all of them. It comes from this commercial management thing. The managers have the same attitude. That is if they can’t quantify it in a market place, or show its practicality, then it doesn’t count as anything. That seems to be a whole new different kind of interpretation of what getting educated is.

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I think if you carried the logic of that out far enough, you might be able to throw about 85 percent of your university out the window. You might be able to get your practical education if it takes you four to eight years depending on where you go to graduate school and maybe in a whipped up, fast education in a year. Once just after that, then that’s probably what they should do. If you’re after a full education, which means being educated even in addition to having practical education to hold down a job and so forth, well that never stops. There’s no time limit to that one. Even after the eight years, it goes on until you die. So I’m still kind of a traditional idealist about what education is.

GW: Yes there’s a lot of that. Just in my family, they’re real practical. (unintelligible). It is really hard (unintelligible). It does cause a lot of stress (unintelligible).

JT: Especially now that the students have to pay more and more for their education. The difference when I went was I didn’t have any money and I had to pay for my own. It was still coming out of the post Second World War period where public education was fairly reasonable. If you had a job, you didn’t go into debt. You could kind of pay year to year and you could be free from debt. This is not true anymore. I think as the state removed themselves from educational support, naturally the burden falls more and more on the student or the parents because they have to be paying for it now as I’m having to do with my youngest boy. They in turn get more concerned with getting it done. So then I have to pay for it forever. So the money will just increase this attitude on the part of everybody- students, parents, everybody. Now as we know the administration has these new ideas of running everybody through for four years or making the institution pay them if they don’t get done in four years. All of that is like a kind of fast food sort of mentality.

GW: All right, well (unintelligible).

JT: Yes we have to go to class. Thanks for giving me the interview. Thanks also for offering to archive that paper with this. I appreciate that. In fact, I’ll give you a copy of it when we’re done here.

[End of Interview]