

ALTERNATIVE PROJECTIONS

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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INTERVIEW SUBJECT: Sky David (formerly Dennis Pies)

Biography:

Sky David (formerly known as Dennis Pies) was born in 1947 in Terre Haute, Indiana and his family moved to Texas in 1955. His father was an engineer for Texas Instruments and ran an auto shop, where, as a boy, Sky excelled at machine work, as well being a gifted illustrator. In 1965, he enrolled in Texas Tech but enlisted in the military and started basic training in 1966 at Fort Hood as an infantryman. He went to Vietnam and was in active battle as a sniper, an experience that has continued to inform his work as an artist. Returning from Vietnam, Sky became more involved with art making and drawing and enrolled in CalArts in 1971 and studied extensively with Jules Engel. His award-winning animated films have screened at the Festival of Abstract Film in Paris, France, Independent Filmmakers Exposition in New York, the World Festival of Animation in Zagreb, Croatia, Ann Arbor Film Festival, International Festival of Animated Film Stuttgart, Germany, The Black Maria Film Festival, among other venues. He has taught animation at Harvard University, the San Francisco Art Institute, California College of Arts and Crafts in Oakland, and the University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Sky currently provides lymphatic therapy for people with cancer using the HEMO-SONIC LYMPH-LIGHT that he invented.

Filmography:

THE EMBRYOLOGY OF LIGHT (2009)
CELL WATER (2008)
THE WOLF AND THE SNOW OWL (in progress)
"A PASSAGE . . . X . . ." (in progress)
THE HEARTBEAT: HONORING JOHN AND MYSELF (2005-2006)
FIELD OF GREEN: A SOLDIER'S ANIMATED SKETCHBOOK (2000-2007)
SUN-WOLF (1992 to 1999)
THE GREEN CHILD (1988 to 1992)
PAWNEE CREATION (WOLF) STORY (1989)
SKY HEART (1985 to 1988)
DISSOLVE IN LIGHT (1984)
ACE OF LIGHT (1981 to 1984)
CRYSTALIZATIONS (2000)
A HARD PASAGE (1980 – 1981)
SURFACE WORK (1979)
HAND PIECE (1977 to 1979)
SONOMA (1975 to 1977)
LUMA NOCTURNA (1974)
AURA CORONA (1973 to 1974)
MERKABA (1973)
NEBULA (1972)

Live Performances:

A HISTORY LESSON NOT TAUGHT IN OUR U.S. CLASSROOMS (2000-2006)
MEMORIAL (2003)
DARKNESS HAS ILLUMINATION (2003)
PEOPLE'S SOLDIER TRAN (2003)
THE SHAME (2003)
SELF PORTRAIT IN GREEN STILLNESS (2003)
NIGHT SOUNDS (2003)
THE 24 HOUR DRAWING (2003)
TERMINAL SELF FOR WAX SCREEN (originated 1980)
THE GREEN CHILD (performance version, originated 1980)
THE NARES CHAMBER (originated 1979)
VOICE PRESENCE FOR HAND HELD SCREEN (originated 1979)

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Cameraperson: Amy Halpern

Transcript Reviewer: Elizabeth Hesik

TAPE 1: SKY DAVID

00:05:59

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Go ahead and say your name now and then say what your name was previously.

00:06:03

SKY DAVID

[Ed note: Sky David was formerly known as Dennis Pies.] The nickname Sky was a code name from when I was doing reconnaissance for the 82nd Airborne in the late 1960s. And David's a middle name, and Przeszukiwanie is a phonetic of a hybrid of a Polish and Russian name, and I don't remember how to spell it.

00:06:38

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

You know, go ahead and spell Dennis Pies, and then Sky David.

00:06:51

SKY DAVID

So, the name Przeszukwanie was taken down to, P-I-E-S, by my paternal grandfather for the purposes that when he immigrated to the United States [Polish-Belorussia origins] he did not want to be known as a Pollock kyke. So there were other people with the same name that used, P-I-E-S—the letters are in there. One can't identify that name so it made that transition. So the last name P-I-E-S in the Polish pronunciation is pronounced Pies—the emphasis on the Pies. So I chose as a professional name to use my code name, SKY while serving with the 82nd Airborne Division of the Army as a LRRP [Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol], and I like my middle name, David.

00:08:00

SKY DAVID

I was born in Indiana and my family moved to Texas when I was very young, 1955. I was born in 1947. So I grew up first in a farming environment in Terre Haute, Indiana that did not even have running water. We made a water pump and stuff like that so it was like the family farm. And my father really wanted to break out of all of that kind of thing. My father was really a genius as an engineer and so he came to—we moved to Texas because he had a job offer there, actually at a place called Texas Instruments. And as things worked out he developed an auto shop on the side while maintaining work at Texas Instruments, one that did custom machining.

00:08:48

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So by the age of eight—this even started in Indiana I had a full instruction on how to have command of every machine at a machine shop, woodworking and electronics. So I always had this thing of working with my hands. That's the basis of everything I do. It's hands work. I worked for my father professionally between 12 and 18 after work and on weekends and had I been locked into that templated mode I might be now a manager of an a machine shop.

00:09:24

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And my father—it's kind of interesting the kind of cultural aspect because my father used to compensate for a feeling of inferiority culturally, intellectually and financially by making Cadillac jokes. And he cast off the entire range of art and culture as, “It's all snob appeal.” So that's where I grew up in. That says a lot of where I was at age 18. So growing up in Texas from the '50s my father was very stern but he never hit me. Up until the second grade teachers could physically abuse the students in the classroom. I think that kind of bonded the students together but at third grade that became illegal and then only the principal could do it. And I think it kind of broke up and students expressed their domestic abuse violence toward each other.

00:10:34

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

My father never really hit me but my mother could curse more than anybody in the military. I had to overcome a lot of issues about dominant women.

00:11:03

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

There is one significant thing when I entered the third grade during the week of school there were—I saw a group of boys on the playground throwing a purse and a little scared girl; I'll always remember her name, Barbara Aronoski. She had black hair with pigtails. And so I got in there and I captured the purse and I gave it right back to her. I had a friend and operated as a protector of some of the kids who were not popular. I got called a "kyke" and I didn't know what a kyke was. And I didn't dare tell anybody—my parents or anything. But what it did it allowed me to become more vigilant and aware. Actually, it was preparing me for “long range reconnaissance patrol”, LRRP, later on when I went into the service.

00:11:50

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So, it was mainly very benign kinds of things where people will try to trip me, rip off my books and things. I got, like, an exchange for this. And I did this with a several girls; the protector. I was very dyslexic. I had a terrible time reading and doing spelling and so as it turned out some of the girls were the teacher's pet—straight "A"'s. So they would sit in front of me and have a fountain pen and they'd raise their hand, "Dennis forgot to bring his pen today. May I loan him mine?" They were the teacher's pet and could get away with it. The pen would get passed to me and that they've unscrewed the back and there would be all these answers in teeny little letters in there and I'd do it when the teacher couldn't see it. So it helped me cheat [laugh] through elementary school kind of situation.

00:12:45

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And the only thing that happened when I was in the sixth grade which was a really dramatic event was that I went into the gym and on the blackboard it said "kykes, niggers and dogs" not allowed. And so I was, like, real careful. I could make myself disappear like a lot of Jewish people or any ethnic group, who don't want to be seen. And it was on a Friday and some guy got a hold of me and beat me into total unconsciousness and later on I was found and my mother was there. I was totally ashamed. I was in the bushes. And what's very interesting is this is Texas. And so I couldn't speak for myself. The "official" was that I had tripped and hit my head and fallen. And nobody wanted to deal with anything beyond that point. And I didn't dare say anything.

00:13:47

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

It's a little bit like the BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN film. Remember the "official" was the tire iron had popped off, hit him in the head and knocked him in a ditch. That's Texas. I believe it was 1960 or '61: The very first day of junior high school there was this guy named John in front of the school who was squeezing an orange rubber ball and I asked him what he was doing. He said he was exercising. We bonded right away and he had weights. And I went and worked out with his weights. The harassment ended that on the spot. Something about my own stance as I came into a more predatory mode and nobody touched me at that point. And I didn't have to hide out plus I had a person who became my.

00:14:42

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

In fact, when I went into the service we went in in a buddy program. I have a portrait of him in my studio in there. So that was that. And we had a car rehab business together my father helped us with. And my father, like, we would buy a car—an old car for, like, \$25. It was a wreck. The more of a wreck it was and we'd haul it into my father's place the more my father would light up. He'd say, “boys, we've got to break the axles out. We've got to pull this. We've got to pull the engine. We've got to pull the head off.” And he'd put in all these hours helping us out. So we would rehabilitate these cars and then resell them. So I learned everything about car mechanics as the technology was in the late '50s and early '60s at that point.

00:15:38

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I was totally tactile, everything was physical and I learned to have a sense of confidence with materials and machinery to make things. My father was one of these people that could fix anything. And I grew up with that sensibility so it allowed me later on when I became a student at Cal Arts when the Oxberry broke down I can fix it on my own and take anything apart and take care of it. I manage my own film equipment that way. That is the early background. I became 18 on May 21, 1965 and left for Lubbock, Texas. And the reason for Lubbock, Texas was that the tuition at Texas Tech was \$25 a semester. So there was a lot of people there.

00:16:36

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I started out there—I started failing during my first year of 1965. And I was classified 1-A with the universal mandatory draft. So me and my friend John just went and enlisted. This starts a new era and I was most fortunate that my parents did not attempt to hold onto me. I feel that was one of the most graceful things. They allowed me to move on and I never burdened them about my life or what I was doing.

00:17:33

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So that was for me a beautiful thing. I could cut loose without a family tie and find out more about who I was. I was still involved in a situation where the options were very limited. However, I did like to make drawings. And nobody paid any attention to it. And that was very good because it wasn't encouraged by the parent and it wasn't discouraged either. That was my private universe. I'll call drawing the golden thread throughout this whole thing. So I like to make drawings. And my drawings had enough something that when other kids would see them they'd ask me for them. And I certainly would give them away. So there was something there—an inherent talent but I had no concept or artist or art or anything. It just was a very physical act of a piece of paper and pencil and these little watercolor kits and just doing this as a kind of nondescript activity that didn't seem to have any bearing on anything else.

00:18:48

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

1966: I started in my basic training at Fort Hood in Killeen, Texas being trained as an infantryman. I had very keen eyesight and extremely well connected brain, eye, hand coordination. I had 16-16 eyesight. I could read license plates from a distance that would astound people. I was a gifted marksman. And I was being prepped for that. I was also a very naïve kid. I wasn't like a soldier-, warrior-type at all. I was really a gentle, quiet, introverted kid. But I could sure master the M-14 and the M-16 in terms of taking them apart and putting them together. I could do it faster than anybody else and I could put rounds within rounds at the "bull's eye". I was that accurate.

00:19:43

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I remember—this is like an epiphany point. My gunnery sergeant said, "That is all academic shooting." He says, "You don't hate enough." So he said, "You're going to have to learn to kill with a dead hand." And actually I've been paralyzed from here down. I have a very distorted right hand. So I don't know if that's any relationship to that. But I always remembered that because that was, like, kill. It's never been in me then or now to take the life of another human being. But that had never penetrated what I was becoming involved with until he said that. I always remembered that. I'm actually going to have to sight down on somebody and I'm going to have to observe through my sniper scope the back of their head blast open with their brains splattering behind there and I'm the one who did it.

00:20:46

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

The only way I could do it is with a dead hand. Don't feel anything, like, it's just business after a while. So, I feel like that set something which I have as an artist to purify through the creative work that actually brings life into this world after having done that kind of activity for a while while I was in the service. And so I spent one year as an infantryman with the 25th infantry division. The M-O-S was 11B which means infantry. We were based out of Cu Chi. And then we've consummated that at the Tet offensive of 1968. And the reason I mention that is that it's part of my film. I made a sketchbook-like diary during that time.

00:21:51

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

In fact, I remember once we used to get these boxes from—they were usually religious groups. I mean loaded up with Bibles and all kinds of religious bullshit and candy and cookies which were the favorite objects. And, of course, actually the only people who sent us what we really, really wanted were journalists—porn—gobs of porn [laugh]. So, anyway, but the religious groups wouldn't provide that, so they had the cookies and the candy. They sometimes would provide stuff for writing letters and there would be watercolor boxes and things. Nobody else was interested in that stuff. I grabbed all that stuff up and that became a way of maintaining that golden thread because I certainly didn't bring any art supplies over there.

00:22:36

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So, another kind of moment occurred when I had written a poem—not written. I don't have any written poems but they're verbalized is that in one of the operations one of the NVA, which means North Vietnamese Army. That was the other end and then our allies were the ARVN, Army of the Republic of Vietnam. One of the NVA men who had been killed by us; maybe it was one of my rounds that had killed him is lying there and we used to always riffle the corpses; going through their rucksacks and looking for all kinds of stuff.

00:23:11

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So I was riffling this guy's rucksack, I came up with a watercolor kit, artwork on every kind of paper you could think of. There were pencil drawings. There were watercolors. I say this because I saw myself there as that person and it was one of those moments where a man in war senses there's no difference. Who made up this difference that I'm required to go kill this person? Who am I doing this for? Who is directing this situation? We could have been friends if there wasn't this situation. So it's like a moment. Of course, the guy gets back on point with what's required because it's a moment to moment thing. There isn't time to actually reflect on too much. These kind of things happen. But I always remember—I always have that image of that. And so I actually kept the pieces that I could keep and I surrendered those to the--there's a museum in Chicago that has those now. But I have photographs of them. I used to keep it in here as an honoring of this person.

00:24:27

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So I made a poem that honored that person called “Memorial” so that it was about me realizing what's the difference between the corpse and the living guy. So that became an art piece 30 years later. So these kinds of events that occur there's this connection then that the most important thing is that when I did the sketchbook I did not think consciously I'm doing this. It just happened whenever there was free time. There was another event that always kind of stuck to me and that is it was during Operation Barking Sands which began on May 18, 1967—Operation Barking Sands was my initiation into manhood. Up until then it had been just war. I'd been over there in Vietnam but I hadn't really gotten into the grit of the whole thing.

00:25:37

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I became 20 on May 21 of '67 and noted this incident in diary form: There was a tent at Cu Chi and I just happened to wander in and there was an interrogation happening of a woman. And I'd never seen anything like this. First of all, it made it even more dramatic she had bamboo stuck under her fingernails and then they put—they had a radio set—48 volt batteries. So she had these alligator clips almost like big ones almost like jumper cables on her nipples and then they'd pop her. She'd fall back from the jolt and I'd never seen anything like this. I remember thinking oh, my God, you can't tell anybody this. What if this were some girl I knew at Texas Tech? What would—how would that be if this happened in the United States? It would be—they would be put in jail and, you know, it's a pervert or something.

00:26:57

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And I'm thinking this is happening here. They're like cracks in this idealistic reality of the soldier and what he's fighting for. And then there was quite a number of things happen during that and then on June 16 my friend, John, was captured with some other men and I was on the detail to find him. I was, desperate. He was my friend. He was practically like my lover or something. And then—and I found his head with the other two heads. I wrapped it up in my shirt. I never could find his body and so he is honored on panel 21E, line 116 of that memorial that's in Washington.

00:27:45

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So these are the kind of issues that later on lie buried for 30 years and then become an art project on down when one gets a distance from it—down the line. Operation Barking Sands ended towards the end of July, 1967 and I made an oral poem called “Self Portrait in Green Stillness” about that. It's a hard one to contact. It's about the witnessing of what might be interpreted as an atrocity, you know, and people don't see that—don't even want to hear about it. It's a hard one—it's the most vulgar of my poems. And it's kind of a contradiction because I had these descriptions of this grass and this stillness waving grass and in the middle of it you find these prisoners are having their brains blown out point blank.

00:28:47

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And I was in charge of turning these prisoners over to the ARVN and it was what was called a reprisal so when I turned them over and made the U.S. look very strange because they had holes in the back of their heads that big around without brain material left. And it was a reprisal because they captured some U.S. and cutting off their cocks and gagging them to death on their cocks so it's this back and forth extreme level where there's just unbridled cruelty and brutality. That's the kind of realm it is.

00:29:35

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

When I came back to the United States in early 1968, I chose to become a career Military guy. And I got a chance to go to Fort Bragg to be part of the 82nd Airborne and of being groomed as a category one scout sniper and I was chosen to be a LRRP “long range reconnaissance patrol”. One learns to forget missions because when briefed nobody else knew about it and then the debriefing, it's not about reintegration it's about forgetting because a lot of the operations were actually technically in a grey area of being legal.

00:30:12

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

In war nobody gives a flying fuck about Geneva Conferences or lines of demarcation, where we're supposed to go or whatever. It's all out under the belt, dirty everywhere around. It's always that way. And it always is now. The politicians like to clean it up and make themselves look good or responsible but it's always dirty. I had a chance so I became this career enlisted guy. I was actually going to get into this realm for a life time. I kept some written stuff, a diary. When my friend, John, was killed I wrote in my diary that—I remember the exact words, “I learned to fucking hate today. I'm going to get some serious payback.” I had line after line, “I'm getting payback. I'm getting payback. I can't wait to get this payback”.

00:31:19

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So I transformed and learned to take pleasure in killing. And actually in December of 1967 still when I was in the 25th Infantry, Bob Hope and Ann Margaret were in Saigon. Well, I didn't go with most of the guys. I stayed back and I formed a little patrol with some of the guys and we went out and we snagged—well, what happened was the NVA would do something called “probes” in the night and we snagged them like the way a spider snags. So it was interesting because when my platoon commander came back—the battalion commander—they would all come back. We had them all tied up like the way you do deer. They were bound up. Their necks were broken and I was proudly displaying no U.S. killed. I mean that's the level of where I was at and where the whole scene was; sucked into this realm at that point.

00:32:27

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And I had no perspective of how to function as a civilian at that point. I understand why when guys come back they're kind of—and tend to, like, take on a lot of alcohol to be able to handle the gaps—a big gap. We'll go to May of 1969. There was an operation where I had just entered right back into Vietnam for my third term of duty. And on May 10 of 1969 we were given the mission of retaking Ap Ding Bia, known as hill #936 coming out of the A Shau valley which is right up against practically the demilitarized zone—the DMZ.

00:33:22

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So I was there in charge with a number of men and we were to reclaim this hill. The operation lasted until May 20. My memory stopped at May 15 and I don't remember the rest of it. But that operation became famous in the media. It was called “Hamburger Hill” because it was kind of an ugly mess after that. And after that operation my memory on up to December 30 of 1969 is like remembering a dream. Did this really happen? I don't know and I don't have any written record and no drawings or anything of where that gap is.

00:34:06

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

On December 30 of '69 which I don't remember; I'm only relating to you from reports: I was ambushed. And I was involved in a process that's called close contact hand-to-hand. And the back of my skull was crushed in. That's why I have a big indentation. I was in a coma. And I woke up from that coma approximately five to six weeks later at the San Francisco V-A hospital as there was no available space in any Army hospital. At first I could not speak and they determined it was not neurological that it was my jaw hinge was off. So they removed a bunch of teeth and pinned my jaw back. I learned to speak and the significant aspect--here's a significant one from San Francisco V.A. hospital. There was a black nurse there from Barbados; Sheila Abrabahsi was her name. And she was one of these people who could give and give a gift that would last a lifetime. I mean she was an angel. And she was tough, too, as a nurse would have to be in a V-A hospital. And so she would find out what guys liked to do--kind of draw us out of the depression we were in and anger.

00:35:31

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I told her I liked to draw and so all of a sudden one day she gives me a pad--just writing paper and a bunch of pencils. And she gave me a set of colored pencils and she said, "When I get off work I want to see that you've done some mother fucking drawings for me because if you don't I'm going to fucking take your head off." You know she grabbed--she had to grab--you had to grab guys by the collar and, like, a nurse in that kind of hospital sets boundaries real clearly and will be physical if necessary because of these young messed up horny guys. So she was strong like that but was very good.

00:36:19

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Well, anyway, I got into it. I just fell into it and when she looked at the drawings she was, like, bowled over. So she started telling me about, you know, artists--becoming an artist and those kinds of things. So what happened was she encouraged something that opened something within myself that would happen for the rest of my life. Up until that moment I didn't take this seriously enough to even think of pursuing it. And I just draw everything: memory, whatever it was. I found that the act of this pencil on that piece of paper is a physical act that neurologically connected me back into this life.

00:37:03

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I also had the grace of observing what Jack Daniels did because the orderlies would bring in on the weekends a lot of Jack Daniels and it was, hey, make the guys feel better. And I observed a pattern where I'd get made fun of because I didn't indulge in that. But I observed a pattern where first they're all brotherly and then they're in their own little planetary world and then they'd fall into pieces. And then when they come out of it they're putting their arms around me—because I'm the one stable one left. So I just observed something which I think was very important for me to observe. When I became well enough I did not take a medical discharge. I didn't know where to go. I went back to Fort Bragg. I could not go into combat. And I became one of the lead instructors of what's called “field craft” in the jungle school at Fort Bragg because I loved the Boy Scouts when I was growing up while camping. I love getting out and surviving.

00:38:12

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

When Veronica, my wife, and I got together after I proposed to her out in Santa Fe. I had her do a 140-foot sheer ascent with myself as guide. We climbed without ropes to a KIVA at the entrance to a cave in the cliff. One false move and splat. I had to show her this cave that was very sacred,

Rewind back to Ft. Bragg, Spring 1970 after recovery from the skull injury: I had a sense of doubt and I did something that it was almost like another person because there was a jump range there and, actually, I wasn't involved in active jumping at that time but I wanted to schedule a jump because I just wanted to—even though I used to pee in my pants every time on the approach to the “jump zone”.

00:39:10

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

But I actually took my chute and unseamed it in a whole lot of places and folded it back up. Obviously I'm here so I didn't carry that through. And I remember because I was an enlisted and I was—by going back to Bragg I jumped from E5, which is basic sergeant, all the way to E7, pay grade advancement. That was my “perk”, Sergeant First Class. I confessed to the Officer in command that I did this and I could be up for a reprimand. And he said well, we'll just turn this in as a defective one. And I asked him I said do you think we're going to win this war while we're doing all this. And he said “we've already lost it” —something a soldier can only say in secret.

00:40:05

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

This is 1970, a war drags on for so long and the morale starts to go straight to the bottom and there was a press conference that occurred at Ft. Bragg and I was in charge of part of the presentation. I thought we had command of what was going to happen but the press had an agenda. They actually wanted to talk to politicians not soldiers so they asked us stuff that we couldn't answer. It made us look stupid. They weren't interested in anything we had to say. We buffed Bragg up to the max for them. There were Special Forces there, Green Berets, and we were all mixed together to make a presentation for the press. There were some reporters who appeared to be hostile and they were nasty. These are people who can use words in a way that I hadn't quite experienced.

end of tape 1

TAPE 2: SKY DAVID

00:00:22

SKY DAVID

The night of that “very off” press conference that occurred. All I can say is that night I didn't sleep. I felt like I had fallen into a pit—of endlessly falling and falling and falling and falling. In fact, I saw something animated that was like Flip Johnson's film **THE ROAR FROM WITHIN** that has a character that's continually falling and he's hitting the sides. I think I was falling and falling and falling.

00:01:02

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And I had another friend that had been killed. We were going to do an art thing together; Jimmy Ray Pierce (honored on Panel 45 East, Line 14) from Picard, Alabama. As I was falling for what seemed like hours, Jimmy and John came to me and it was like they said “I'm at peace”. John and I had these plans and Jimmy and I had these plans. It was like no big thing. Just do what we had planned to do. And then suddenly it was like my energy reversed back out the other direction. It was like I had been falling and falling and by the morning about 4:00 A.M. or something like that I was in a state of elation. I mean absolute elation. And I knew that I had to go for my discharge at that point; that this whole scene of military life had begun to play itself out.

00:01:55

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And there was another issue—there were other issues creeping in. One of the men I had trained committed suicide and so it's like this starts to break apart one's reality—am I responsible for that? You know, you could put a whole chapter on the suicides and stuff but it's tragic. Anyway, though, so I knew that at that point I was to pursue something that this nurse had said—that Sheila told me about that I had this talent to draw. And I need to find a circumstance for it. And I went back to Lubbock, Texas because that's all I knew to do—back to Texas Tech.

00:02:42

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And they did not have an art department at the time but they had excellent art courses of a more academic type in their architecture department. And so I started to pursue doing this. And I pursued it with all of the energy of John and Jimmy because I got a chance and they didn't get a chance. And if I become a drunken person how I've dishonored them because I got a chance to make something happen. So I felt like I had this mission on my back because I got a chance and had to do it for them, to honor them. So I did a lot of work. Man, I was, like, pushing, working hard, a lot of energy.

00:03:33

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And at Texas Tech I met this woman, Susan Wilkinson from Midland, Texas. She graduated from Tech earlier. She graduated in textile and was actually head of the textile something or other in New York City. She had returned to West Texas for a visit. She knew Robert Corrigan who became the president of Cal Arts when it was first formed. She planted the seed idea of going to art school.

00:05:30

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

President Bush once said, “We've got to explain it in a way that even people in Lubbock can understand it.” It's a strange environment—West Texas is like that. It's in another era and it wasn't where I was going. So Susan and I bought a '46 Chevy school bus from a migrant farmer who had come to Lubbock from Ohio for \$400. I renovated the whole thing. And in March of 1971 we left with no particular destination. We left Lubbock and headed west.

00:06:19

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

We went to Arcosanti in Arizona. She was more cultured so she knew where to go. And we headed all the way up and got into Washington State and then we came back down and ended up in an arts community in the Santa Cruz Mountains called Big Basin Ranch. It bordered the Big Basin Park and the redwoods there. When that broke apart I got a job at Hartnell College in Salinas along with a lot of other community colleges got grants from the government to hire “disabled” vets. I don't like that label. I'm not disabled. But technically with a purple heart, I got hired as a technician in the art department because the chairman of the art department at Hartnell College had been a member of the Big Basin Ranch community .

00:07:18

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

When Susan and I first started together, it seemed like it was going good. We rented space in what had been an old bank in downtown Salinas to make a studio and living space. In late 1971 Susan assisted the whole application for me to get to Cal Arts in animation. She said you've got to go to school. Cal Arts was a new school. It was not V-A approved at the time. Susan is brilliant—she has two PhD's in special education gotten in New Mexico years later. She wanted to have a family.

00:08:14

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So she did this application—a special process to prove that the program was of advantage to me and, of course, you have to prove you're going to get employed with it, was unique and couldn't be found at UCLA or any other V-A approved school. So then I'm working at Hartnell College. It's August. I've been accepted at Cal Arts but nothing else so I'm assuming—all of a sudden right before the semester starts of Sept, 1972, I get the award from the V-A that works through the financial aid office of the institution. Cal Arts had come through with a two thirds scholarship because they needed this to get V-A approved and that the V-A had given the award for the rest of it with a lot of restrictions. I was limited to two years, had to live in the dorm with a roommate and a whole lot of other things.

00:09:13

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I did get production money every semester of \$600 a semester.

00:09:16

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Wow.

00:09:17

SKY DAVID

So that's how NEBULA, MERKABA, AURA CORONA, and LUMA NOCTURNA got made. If I didn't spend it all by the end of the semester I'd lose it. So I milked it to the max. I went to Cal Arts not knowing too much about film. Hartnell College had a Bolex and there was a bunch of Ektachrome film and I developed it myself. All I did was film my art work. It was very crude. But Jules [Engel] recognized something about my imagery that he liked. He just wanted me to be part of his animation program at CAL ARTS.

00:10:00

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Can you say his full name for the camera?

00:10:02

SKY DAVID

Jules Engel. Yes, Jules Engel was the main one who looked at my portfolio. He would accept anyone into that experimental—which there was only one program at the time which became known as experimental animation—it was just animation at the time. So suddenly there's this big shift that takes place. Well, by that time Susan and I had already divorced. What happened in May, 1972 prior to that is that I started becoming very abusive in the relationship for unknown—you know I was 24- or 25-year-old guy and I can remember distinct scenes of Susan being backed up in a corner in the kitchen with a knife in self-defense. Our relationship started to get an edge.

00:10:59

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And then one day in May—she mentioned something—it was Saturday. I'll never forget that Saturday. I went into the kitchen and I didn't say anything to her and I destroyed it. I even pulled the door off the refrigerator. I mean as if a mortar round had gone off in the kitchen. Of course, I had to fix everything back up but I got it all out. But we knew at that point we're going to separate. And she was wonderful and since she didn't want anything from me after that explosion we knew that we were to go different directions.

00:11:40

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So I mean there are just these points in a person's life where there's dramatic shifts taking place. It actually gave me the free attention to be able to go to Cal Arts and not be in a formal married relationship. So I could really devote myself to Cal Arts in September of 1972. And I was completely naïve about the whole situation but ready to work. I didn't know anything about paper punching or any animation technique. I went into the animation room about a week before formal classes would start and there was a man in there, Adam Beckett, and I just asked him and he says OK do this, this and this. Pile a bunch of stuff on one of those desks. Get your place claimed; do this, this, this and this. I did that—everything Adam said and by the time Jules came in it looked like I knew what the hell I was doing.

00:12:46

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Adam was cool. I liked him very much. He was very direct. And I met Kathy Rose and Joyce Borenstein who went on to become very successful in the field. I was a little self-conscious at first. CAL ARTS was fantastic. Every moment at Cal Arts for me was golden.

00:13:30

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Jules would sit down next to a person and make comments that weren't oriented towards steering a person—just remarks. During the first week he sat next to my drawing station and said “you have to leave the past behind”. And I knew what he meant. He meant that I've got to fully engage myself into this new creative process and just leave the war issues. Vietnam was a nonissue for me. I didn't tell anybody about it. I didn't even follow the news to know when the war ended. It just kind of receded because I put so much force into learning a new mode of experience.

00:14:22

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So what were the great influences here? One, Susan had a copy of Gene Youngblood's book, EXPANDED CINEMA. Basically the essence is that expanded cinema is not video phosphors or computers or anything like that. That it's a shifting consciousness—a relationship to the moving image. And that's the essence of it. And especially to see the work of Jordan Belson. There's something about it. So at Cal Arts, of course, I got to see that. And I got to see the work of James Whitney and Oskar Fischinger. A whole other realm of reality that I had no awareness even existed—opened up with the screenings that Jules would do with a kind of variety. I treasure all of that. And so I felt like this is what I choose to do with my mission.

00:15:33

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

00:15:46

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Especially I'd love to hear a little bit more about the program, what kind of courses you were taking and who were your professors.

00:15:54

SKY DAVID

The thing I liked about Jules was he wasn't in a conventional sense like a professor. He simply was there nine to five, five days a week and he expected people to work there in the animation studio like a professional and then leave to go to various “classes.” I was 25 at the time. I don't need any more academic bullshit. So that was one thing I really liked. It was not an academic environment. It was pure production work, absolute filmmaking. I especially liked Pat O'Neill.

00:16:54

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I had been very interested in sciences. My first film was like an animated astronomy film. It was very film graphic in the sense there was a lot of stills. I filmed the original animation drawings in all kinds of ways and edited it more like a live action. I met a composer there, Carter Thomas who did a drone-like sound track. One thing Jules said that was very good he was “just get the fucking thing done”. Just don't put a rod up your rear end and start picking over the shit. Just get it into production, get the answer prints and work it out in the next film.

00:17:48

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I took that to heart. I made the animation art by airbrushing on black paper entitled NEBULA with this iridescent nacreous pigments. I was experimenting with all these various mediums and lighting. And lighting from above, a key light as if there was a light right where the lenses is and get reflections and things like that.

00:18:29

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I did optical experiments with cross dissolves using the luminous animation art: I'd fade in and fade out while the camera was going down. And then I'd rewind it three quarters of the way back and then start it again. This produced the visual effect of a seamless movement through a tunnel. The word “merkaba” comes from the Hebrew Profet Ezekiel. It's a vision or dream that Ezekiel had and it translates “vehicle of light”. Jules said when you put a title of a film on the screen it should be cinematic to look at [laugh]. I think that's important.

00:19:15

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

That was my first semester's production in animation (1972-73) NEBULA and MERKABA. I got a construction job in Salinas during the summer and actually Susan and I got along well enough she let me stay there at her house. She'd remarried a guy named Gary Schwartz and he was away [laugh]. When we parted it actually relieved our relationship and allowed us to actually be friends. I stayed there during that summer because I didn't have anywhere else to—and earned some extra money working a construction job crew of an Olympic swimming pool that was being built at Hartnell College.

00:20:01

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I started the next semester with a story board for a piece that would be about the evolution of life done during this summer in Salinas (1973). In September, at CalArts, I told Jules that I'll do the animation that starts with a white field and then it'll go into a black field. And Jules says that's two films. Make them real short. Don't make anything in here over five minutes—he used to tell everybody—if it's abstract don't make it over five minutes long because you want the audience to sit through the whole thing. So that film became AURA CORONA and the second semester became LUMA NOCTURNA done on the black paper.

00:20:44

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Some people might look at AURA CORONA as abstract but from my point of view it started with amorphous like forms that become more and more structured with a vertebrate form then the formation of a cranial form and then it goes into crystallized intelligence. When I presented the original idea to Jules, he said don't make it like some National Geographic explanatory film. He said be oriented toward movement and the feel of the movement and the choreography, visual music, that orientation.

00:21:21

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And that freed up a lot because I wasn't worried about whether anybody was going to get my concept. He said it doesn't matter if people are just involved in the vision and the movement and the choreography you've done the job. And he said if you touch five people it was worth it. This set the circumstance up for me to explore why CalArts was such a positive experience. I thought Jules was quite extraordinary. Eventually CalArts split animation and Jules became experimental animation and the character animation program because the school was funded Disney and they wanted to prep people to go work for Disney.

00:22:16

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I left CalArts in May of 1974 (graduation with an MFA in animation). I hide out with no phone in the redwoods in northern California for a while following graduation. I got a grant from the American Film Institute in 1975 to make a film called SONOMA. When the committee was meeting to choose who would be approved for the American Film Institute grants one of the people on the board was Chuck Jones. Now, you would think Chuck Jones would only want cartoons. And then I got the reports from the people and he wrote “this guy actually knows how to draw and animate”.

00:23:26

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

AURA CORONA was the submission film to the AFI for that grant. It's based on drawing of great skill of animated movement, so something clicked and I got the award. It also opened—when the committee was meeting it was part of the 10th Tournee of Animation, it opened in 1975. And it opened that week when they—and somebody named Charles Chapman from the Los Angeles Times wrote a beautiful review of AURA CORONA. There were a lot of coincidences and I got that grant to make the animated film SONOMA which was based on 12 images—moving images one per month acquired from the I Ching, on the 21st of each month. The film would starts off like a Chinese scroll scrolling as a pan shot on the screen. With all of my machining background I built a whole animation stand out of recycled aluminum. I bought an old World War II 35-millimeter movie camera a single frame motor from a man named Yako in Oakland that would single frame that big camera.

00:24:45

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I shot SONOMA on it and HAND PIECE and another piece called SURFACE WORK—all these various films that I worked on when I lived up there in the redwoods. In 1977 my friend, Larry Jordan, who was at the San Francisco Art Institute was taking a sabbatical and he asked me if I would like to fill in for him. And I said, “sure.” There was an opening at the California College of Arts and Craft in Oakland. These are just, you know, single class openings for animation at the time. So I told the department chairman yeah, I'd like to apply. The department chairman at both institutions said: “you're already hired”.

00:25:42

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

1977 started my teaching career part time and that opened up a new era. And I think the teaching opened up something because I started to begin getting involved with projection on my body and doing live performance with my voice. The first film-performance I made used a hand-held screen which I would bring out and it was just a Super-8 projector on the ground pointing up. And I'd hold a screen and I'd vocalize live with the silent projection and when I stepped back it would spread out behind me. And my hands—fingers would like wings coming behind there. So that was actually, the nicest of the film-performance pieces. I made one based on a section out of Herbert Reed's novel THE GREEN CHILD where I recited the verbal poetic part and was dressed up in front of the screen with a vertical slit down screen center with dolphins in a dance on the film projection as the piece is about the “mysteries of water and light”.

00:26:54

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

One of these film-performance pieces, THE NARES CHAMBER is performed by vocalizations that involve the nares chamber, the largest nasal cavity in the head where Buddhist monks make overtones and undertone sounds. TERMINAL SELF FOR WAX SCREEN uses an oval mirror held by myself during the projection so I could reflect the image back to the audience and then I put it in a pocket in the wax and translucent plastic screen from behind, then I would dissipate and the image of me projected on the screen would dissipate as I was being dissolved.

00:27:37

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I did live film-performances at the San Francisco Art Institute, The Exploratorium, the Portland Museum of Art and UCLA in 1979-80 And then I got to be one of the guests filmmakers at a festival of animation in Toronto in 1984. This retrospective was called “Dissolve in Light” and was the premiere of ACE OF LIGHT the final animation that I made while teaching at Harvard. I filmed certain elements like tunnel elements in full frame 35. And I had them pull the mask out of the projector and it was quite dramatic because the imagery went all over the huge theater, on the ceiling, the sides, over the back of the people with all the detail of full frame 35mm. There was a concept of enveloping the space in moving light. and having a chance to work in a theater with a 35 projector made it the highlight of my film-performance era.

00:29:03

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I got the job of heading the animation program at Harvard University’s Carpenter Center For The Visual Arts starting in September of 1980 and was there for 4 years. The performance show that I did in Toronto was after the culmination of that. I had an amazing assistant, Amy Kravitz, working with me. She’s a super amazing person. And she made some beautiful films: THE TRAP is an amazing, amazing animation. It’s like the vision of what it would have been like for someone who’s been loaded on a cattle car and they’re seeing these lights pass through these slots and stuff as they get taken to Auschwitz, based on this quotation: “I tried to imagine what it would have been like for my uncle when they took him away on the train”.

00:30:14

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Teaching at Harvard was a wonderful period and I produced A HARD PASSAGE and ACE OF LIGHT as the legacy of my independent animation to mark this time. I moved on to head up the animation program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, 1984 and 1992.

00:31:05

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

00:31:32

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

I might ask you to go back just a minute and fill in a couple of gaps.

00:31:44

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA (CONTINUED)

So I just wanted to talk to you a little bit more about some of the live performance pieces you were doing...

00:31:51

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

...in the late '70s and, if you could, also before talking a little bit more about things like THE NARES CHAMBER or HAND HELD SCREEN, SURFACE Work - was not live but any of those in the late '70s.

00:32:04

SKY DAVID

Yes.

00:32:04

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Could you talk about the move from animation to—and combine the live performance and what you were thinking...

00:32:11

SKY DAVID

All right.

00:32:10

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

...it just seems they're very—one being very performative and one being very deliberate and happening slowly frame by frame. These seem very distinct and I'm interested for you to talk about how those two came to be.

00:32:20

SKY DAVID

The move from working just in animation and being in this isolated space of drawing into performing and getting up in front of people exposing one self with a light projected I think it was the influence of the San Francisco Art Institute. It was very progressively oriented and it just brought that out. There was a man there, Carmen Vigil who directed the Cinematheque. He mentioned something like “you should get up and perform this” because I had a certain manner about myself and my teaching.

00:33:13

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And so I came up with the hand-held screen piece as the first one. And the first performance was done with Carmen Vigil's Cinematheque situation there at the Art Institute so I had inside group of people. I wasn't self-conscious when I got up in front of people. I just did it. And then there was a filmmaker from New York City that the Art Institute brought out along with Pat O'Neill, Yvonne Rainier from New York. I did this presentation and it was “cool” because well they're doing it, not conventional animation. She wanted to see film explored, taken in unexplored directions.

00:34:07

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

This gave me a reinforcement that, hey, that's a cool way to do film and it doesn't have to be slick. And some of those were just Super-8. I blew up some on up to 16 but the fact that I went into an unknown territory was what it was about than just continuing to do what I can do and knew I could do over and over again. I did a film called HAND PIECE where I used my hands and my voice as a tribute to my hands. I did another piece quickly called SURFACE WORK.

00:35:01

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I combined some live action with HAND PIECE. I inserted it optically in a via a projector underneath that animation stand and I had a hole in the paper with wax paper as the rear projection screen done directly on the animation drawing frame-by frame during the filming. The technique is called “arial image.” This film was done on the camera stand I had built, and it was all work I while I was teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute.

00:35:39

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

But it seemed like my going into performance was something necessary because I have to get up in front, expose myself to the light. The animator from Cal Arts, Kathy Rose started to do the same thing as she had been a professional dancer. She needed to move out—the same thing. And she continued with that. It was a whole scene. I had a show at the Animator's Gallery in New York City in June of 1981. And Kathy came and Sarah Petty came. All these people came and I did a performance there as part of the opening night. Whenever I've had a show opening, I always do a live performance. So she came and just gave me so much reinforcement. And that was when I was just getting started teaching at Harvard.

00:38:06

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)THE

The Sinking Creek Film Festival, in Nashville, had awarded me a grant to make HAND PIECE and they had me come out to present it in 1981. There was a full theater. It was well received. I did all my performance pieces—the whole repertoire. I had stage drops that came down as screens and even the wax screens—this laminated wax paper sewn into plastic and then a pocket for this oval shaped mirror. It took a full day to set up for the show.

00:38:48

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

There was a woman involved in animation from Canada who saw this show and that's how I got invited to do the show in Toronto. Bill Moritz was at my show in Toronto. I really have a lot of respect for him—the late Bill Moritz. He had a lot of respect for my work. I have a lot of respect for him because he had an understanding of abstract film that went to a depth in history that very few people ever have. Anyway, this is sort of the mix that was involved with the performance and there was no moment when I stopped doing performance. It basically—things changed in my life and I had—when I got to Santa Fe really had to focus on how I was going to make a living with my alternative physical therapy practice and I was trained in lymphatic therapy—a way to bring down inflammation without the use of a catabolic anti-inflammatory.

00:39:53

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

The thesis statement for my masters in physical therapy was “post-injury tissue regeneration as opposed to post-surgery rehabilitation”. So this tissue regeneration thing was a big issue. So it was what I knew at that time (1992 just after leaving Philadelphia) that I had to offer as a physical therapist. I became trained in the Vodder method of manual lymph drainage and was able to offer that—get people off of Ibuprofen and other things all the way up to Cortisone so they could get a more regenerative mode.

00:40:30

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And I began to work intensively with a couple of doctors there in Santa Fe and in oncology recovery and became very specialized in the area of post-chemotherapy recovery for women who have had breast cancer. That was a big issue. I know what the drugs smell like because they would come out their auxiliary lymph nodes in the treatment room. So I worked with women that had radiation. There's something very good about health care as opposed to just art because when a person is just art as one serves the fragile mortality of others. It is all about service, not about self-involvement.

00:41:21

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So in being involved in health care I needed a balance. A world—that's why I knew I could never fit into the film industry in Hollywood. I could never suck the shit buckets all the kind of bullshit that goes on there behind the scenes. There is something very genuine about serving people especially in their health.

end of tape 2

TAPE 3: SKY DAVID

00:00:12

SKY DAVID

The upper back of my skull is crushed in from Dec. 30, 1969. I've already gotten from V-A in Albuquerque where I used to get head scans. The Doctor said in a low voice "put your affairs in order" in late 2000. So I had to be—and I've been paralyzed on the right. Arm in a sling. That was after I turned 60. So I'm real conscious about keeping this body functional because I have a lot more mission to do and I have to transcend certain things. That's why I do that. It's where I'm at.

00:01:02

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Okay.

00:01:40

SKY DAVID

It's not releasing. You especially don't want to bring up those demons. And then I had a friend—a black guy who fought in Vietnam and got mixed up with bad people, Mannie was his name. It was kind of like a sport to get a Vietnam Vet. who'd been in combat on LSD and watch them freak and go do stuff. Well, anyway at one of these parties in San Francisco a girl died, whether he killed her or not, but he was the only black guy present so he gets the rap.

00:02:20

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And he had a court assigned lawyer who was really a bigot. Mannie got the chair eventually. He never remembered doing it. He was in San Quentin.

00:03:00

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I had the gift from Sheila Abrabashie from my hospital time upon coming out of the coma to awaken my mission which would eventually become an artist so I didn't need any form of drug. I didn't need to get released from it—anything. I could just simply immerse myself into my creative work. So that was a super gift.

00:03:20

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Yeah. Especially that you didn't come out of—so many people came out of Vietnam straight out of these addictions that they...

00:03:25

SKY DAVID

That's right.

00:03:26

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

...saved them for a lifetime.

00:03:28

SKY DAVID

That's exactly it. You know, heroin's highly available. There was no such thing in a lot of Asian countries about anything being illegal as far as that. You can get it anywhere. So a lot of guys just check it out. They didn't realize that once you get on the heroin that one is an addict. It mimics an endorphin molecule for molecule. It's made in our brain, in the pituitary gland as a natural pain suppressant and once you take it externally the body through a negative feedback loop causing the pituitary to stop making the pain suppressing endorphin. So every time the person gets off of it they feel enormous pain in the body. And the only way they can relieve the pain—and it's not just physical, it's psychological, emotional pain—is to get a hit and get another hit. That's the root of addiction when I take something outside of myself that's identical to what is already made in my body.

00:05:44

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

I wanted to just ask you a little bit about the teaching that you were doing in the late '70s when you were at the San Francisco Art Institute. Just talk about what you were teaching...

00:05:56

SKY DAVID

My teaching and animation—I had a very specific philosophical premise, which had to do with the kinesthetics. I felt that the kinesthetics and awareness of the body influenced what happened in the animation even if it's character animation. The level of movement had to do with body awareness. And there's a person whom I highly respect and I've seen him work—he's no longer living—Moshé Feldenkrais and when Feldenkrais was in the United States in San Francisco I had a number of friends who were studying under him and I got to watch him work. He was an absolute genius.

00:06:35

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

There was a book out that he did called AWARENESS THROUGH MOVEMENT another one, THE CASE OF NORA, and all about movement in the body. So I designed a series of exercises for animators that dealt with direct physical kinesthetic awareness. And the first one was actually where they placed their hands physically on the paper. They had to put, like, a powder or something so there was a physical impression on the paper. There weren't elaborate light boards at the San Francisco Art Institute so I devised another method. And that's to work on a tracing paper pad and start on the last sheet and just flip the paper down.

00:07:25

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And what was really beautiful is that all of the wrinkles on the paper surface—and then we filmed it on a modified Bolex animation stand and had to wait for the film to come back and get the print and lay it on the flatbed to see the finished animation, each students work one after the next. The beautiful thing was even the surface of the paper with these wrinkles added something to the awareness. So it moved from pure surface and then it moved into more like moving. And then I had one exercise—I had seven exercises. The sixth exercise was they made a little window—a crosshair and they would hold it up and draw rudimentary line work to describe the space. It would deal with parallax.

00:08:07

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Parallax is the visual phenomena that when I move through space I sense that movement by watching the nonmoving objects move in relationship to each other and as I get in closer proximity it accelerates. So they were just simply observing this kind of movement. Like a trucking shot in live action film. It's very much like this phenomena that happened in James Gore film DREAM OF THE SPHINX. This was a guy back at Cal Arts. He was a good friend of Adam Beckett's. We saw Jim Gore's film many times there. Jules thought it was brilliant.

00:08:54

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

But they had this brilliant sense of just, like, movement through the space and then he drew these cats jumping and all this stuff was going on while you're moving through the space so I had that as the sixth exercise and the seventh exercise we had a live model in the room and I had the students in a circle around the model with their tracing paper pads and had them locate the model as if the model was a stick figure to locate the center of gravity, the pivots of the joints and to notice that. And then those were drawings where there were a hundred poses taken so very little time to draw each so that the set of original animation drawings became key drawings and then they could reanimate it.

00:09:31

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Students had an introduction into transforming movement on a completely individual basis by determining how the key drawings were to be—the in-betweens were to be played out with a basic key drawing and because I had the students in a circle everybody had a slightly different view of the figure. There wasn't one idealized stance or view. So I taught that way for years all the way through going to Philadelphia or whatever in the beginning animation situation and then students went off a little more of an independent vision after that kind of thing.

00:10:18

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

During the second semester of their first year we would make a group film—everyone would work on the sound together. The objective was to go all the way through—and actually we carried them to answer print-- there was money for making answer prints-- so we filmed all this stuff and made an answer print out to give the student the complete understanding of film production. And the students really enjoyed doing soundtracks—learning this and I showed them how to A-B roll. They actually did their own A-B rolling and it allowed their pulling all that stuff together.

00:11:06

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

The San Francisco Art Institute animation classes had print makers and all kinds of people in the class who were just there to explore.

00:11:57

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

But in Philadelphia there was a lot of pressure from the administration to sell the program and what sells the program—students get jobs. And how the orientation has to be that and I really wasn't skilled in that aspect of it.

00:12:38

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I found there was less and less interest in independent exploratory vision in film on the part of the institution and on the part of the students who were prospective students. And so I knew there was a point when there needed to be a shift in my life. I never felt at home on the east coast either. Actually I feel like New Mexico is really my home. That's really my spirit home or whatever and I had a 3400 square foot studio there for \$1500 a month that I lived in. I installed two Oxberry animation stands, one direct link to computer for single frame capture and one set up for 35mm motion picture frame-by-frame film.

00:13:30

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

It was very nice for what I had. And then I rented a place with an acupuncturist. We shared a waiting room for me to do my physical therapy practice. We'd share people and it worked out. And I worked with this doctor May Ting, M.D. and an oncologist and worked with people that developed a whole new area of exploration because I had a minor in molecular biology so I had an understanding of how processes work in the body could lead to tissue regeneration.

00:14:08

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

During 1993 I went to work as an in-field trainer for a company, ELF, with their electro medical equipment used in lymphatic therapy and traveled and did trainings and developed a reputation in the field of lymphatic therapies. It was almost stellar actually. People had me come and—people would come and visit me. I worked on Margaret Sanders, Colonel Sanders daughter. I worked on the late John Denver.

00:15:06 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

I worked on the late John Powers and his wife, Kimiko. John Powers was an art collector. He had Rauschenbergs. I worked on the Baron Hakim who's married to one of the princesses of the Saudi Arabia family. So how to work on a Muslim, you know, you don't stand on their left side. There are all kinds of ways that you approach this. So I was all prepped on that before I worked on them because the company I was working for was looking to get Arab backing for the company.

00:16:11 **STEPHANIE SAPIENZA**

When did you get your masters in physical therapy?

00:16:14 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

In 1976.

00:16:16 **STEPHANIE SAPIENZA**

So between the time when you got a degree at Cal Arts and when you started making films...

00:16:20 **SKY DAVID**

I just went back to school and rammed that degree through quickly at USC. They had a fantastic program—high profile program at the time. And that was physical therapy practice was rather young at the time. It was actually called rehabilitative therapy.

00:16:45 **STEPHANIE SAPIENZA**

Can you talk also a little bit just—a little bit more about Harvard, did you teach more about the kinetic movement for animation at all?

00:16:56 **SKY DAVID**

Yes, I did. I taught the same series of exercises at Harvard. Harvard was also not oriented toward prepping people for film industry. So it was freer in that sense. It was well funded in the sense that we could buy all this film and students could shoot all these exercises and it was wonderful with Amy Kravtiz's service to the students. And students explored their own visions without having to worry about making a "film festival" like film. It was open exploration.

00:17:52 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

The East coast is too rigid for me. I could never ultimately survive it even in Philadelphia. I don't know how else to describe it but it's too tight for me to survive in a long term there. The animation instructing position was a visited position but I got the chance to see how people vie for tenure and their teaching survival tactics.

00:19:13 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

I was in a visiting professorship at Harvard and wasn't involved in that.

00:21:48

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

So you never saw the future—after 1992 you didn't see future academia for you.

00:21:53

SKY DAVID

In '92, yeah. No, I didn't. I needed to move on.

00:21:57

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Okay.

00:21:58

SKY DAVID

I felt like the field of animation as it was occurring in schools had to do with training for a job market to which I was not skilled. And I wasn't going to fake it. I wasn't going to be like an old professor who so dissociated from the students that I hire a bunch of part time people to actually teach a—you know, like, today would be Maya or Flash. And somehow I'm heading this program and I'm not associated with what's real there. I know I was not associating with what was real. It was time to go; time to get out.

00:23:17

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

I know.

00:23:29

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Yeah.

00:23:30

SKY DAVID

So that's how it works.

00:23:35

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

I want to go back a little bit and talk about the '80s.

00:23:38

SKY DAVID

Yes.

00:23:39

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Your films from roughly '81 to '92ish.

00:23:50

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Because I'm interested in hearing about especially ACE OF LIGHT, DISSOLVE IN LIGHT, SKY HEART that period.

00:23:56

SKY DAVID

Right. At Harvard the first animation that I made was called **HARD PASSAGE**. And it was an exploration of language based on Herman Hesse's short story of the very same name. It was completed in 1981. This film animates dancing letters and it was one of the most brilliant soundtracks for any of my animations made by a scat singer, Bob Stolloff, who could play all these instruments. We went in the studio and recorded on Ampex tape one-inch at thirty inches per second and did the final mix for **A HARD PASSAGE** after the animation drawings were filmed. I worked with Bob on the soundtrack for **ACE OF LIGHT** before the animation started. **ACE OF LIGHT** happened as a concept during the Christmas break of 1981-82.

00:24:56

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I recorded the verbal narrative like a stream of consciousness. I transcribed that and that became the verbal script. There was no other conception other than whatever came out. And I also had the concept that I'd like to animate directly in light. So we did the soundtrack and I did the sound reading of the soundtrack and I conceived of doing it all in the negative and through what's called aerial image projector by projecting the negative printer element into a tank of water where I could put animation cells down that could block out part of the light being polarized through the water.

00:25:46

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

It was excessive doing 24 drawings for every second so it had a different look to it—piles of cells with these bird image that blocks the light so the bird looks like a black hole on the screen. That took three years. That was my final Harvard film. And I finished it right before leaving Harvard in 1984.

00:26:35

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

The animation art is all done in the complementary color. If I have orange reflected and radiated through that aquarium there is blue on the paper and line work then it was filmed in 35mm negative print stock. Its projection would radiate the image out in this water tank by polarizing it. It ended in this tunnel sequence in deep blues. I had done tunnel sequences for the feature film **DREAMSCAPE** in the summer of 1983 and I used that tank of water then but for **ACE OF LIGHT** I actually made this multi-plane that is 30 by 40 inches.

ACE OF LIGHT ends with this blue tunnel while there's this poetic narrative from my voice on the sound track.

00:28:50

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

When I went to Philadelphia in 1984 I started animation on a piece called SKY HEART. The idea of SKY HEART was based on a thunderstorm and I was working with a lot of female-type imagery. So it was like an image of a Goddess-type imagery. There's movement into openings. It's a very short film and it only has a soundtrack of a thunderstorm.

00:29:36

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And then the next film I worked on until I left Philadelphia in 1992 was based on a section from Herbert Reed's novel A GREEN CHILD. That I had done earlier as a performance but now I made it into pure dance of line and movement. It's about the mysteries of water and light. The animation flows like water. It did pretty well at film festivals. The THE GREEN CHILD completed my work on the East coast.

00:31:23

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I started doing a lot of still drawing at the time and I was very much involved in developing my career as a physical therapist with a specialty in lymphatic therapy. I was working for that company and then I went to work for another company and then I started doing my own inventive work in 1994.

00:32:12

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I created a number of inventions from 1994 until today.

00:32:19

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

What kinds of inventions were they?

00:32:20

SKY DAVID

One is to assist in lymphatic therapy.

00:32:22

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Oh, so they were..

00:32:24

SKY DAVID

It's called the Hemo-Sonic Lymph and Tissue-Light. It works with the blood and the lymph—it works with the full biological characteristics of the living tissue. It's the lymphatic system's own drainage mechanism. The lymphatic therapy became sort of known in the United States after the operation the radical mastectomy was being done where the axillary lymph nodes are removed and then the arm swells because these lymph nodes drain excess fluid from the arm. The lymph system maintains fluid equilibrium in the body and is structural matrix of the immune system. When the lymph system is mechanically impaired it's automatic immune suppression. Lymphocytes are the same as T-cells and B-cells, white blood cells are all lymphocytes.

00:33:18

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Lymphocytes reside in lymph nodes and throughout the lymphatic communication system. It turned out to be of great service because there were not a lot of people doing effective lymphatic therapy. I was working in ways of getting beyond the limitations of previously accepted forms of therapy. The other aspect of what I make is a piece called the ATP Inductor which the first version started in 1994. It's been through many versions. It operates by mimicking the full biological characteristics of all of the enzyme functions of the human mitochondria in production of the nucleoside adenosine triphosphate known as ATP, which is necessary for tissue regeneration.

00:34:08

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

If I look at the constituents of a cell it's like a school of fish. ATP is like the concert master. It polarizes the elements with the cell into meaning functions at cell level and below cell level. There are enzymes that manage the electron donation process which allows the constant production of ATP. ATP is what maintains our energetic life force.

00:36:35

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

...but it would be the science stuff isn't so pertinent to the project so—but it might be a good—these last four minutes to talk a little bit about how you see your career in medical—in the medical industry kind of and your experience with biology tying into your work because you did do some work..

00:36:53

SKY DAVID

After I moved from New Mexico to California in 2006, I got a contract with a company called Life Medicine Research to do research, invention and the making of devices to use in photo biological research. And also to film—make films of the light itself. And that was highly funded for Doctor Joseph Breslin And so that allowed me to use all of my filmmaking equipment. We were doing it digitally so there wasn't any actual film in the sense of optical film.

00:37:29

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And it opened up a whole lot of doors for me both scientifically and in the work with light. The imagery is exquisite with the self-propagation of light from these lenses that I designed and machined. It's being used by him to structure vaccines. I don't want to go all technical thing but that's what is being done is working with stage four cancer.

00:38:20

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

But more generally do you feel that there's a connection between biology and your art or do you see...

00:38:25

SKY DAVID

Absolutely.

00:38:29

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Do you think you could talk about that a little bit?

00:38:30

SKY DAVID

Absolutely. I talked about that in AURA CORONA. And I have a very nice microscope and made a crystallization film in 35mm with it. I've always felt that many of my animated films are very informed by what is seen under a microscope.

00:39:29

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

THE EMBRYOLOGY OF LIGHT combines hand drawing that is transformed via a 3-D computer modeling program. It is like a cinematic journey into the womb that takes the viewer beyond ultra-sound imaging. This animation was completed in 2009.

end of tape 3

TAPE 4: SKY DAVID

00:00:26

SKY DAVID

Rewind to 1984: DISSOLVE IN LIGHT was actually the name of my whole show. The introduction piece was made using a pinscreen that had been built by Alexander Alexeieff during the occupation of Paris, when he and his wife, Claire Parker, came to the United States and lived in Cambridge, MA.

00:00:59

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Prescott Wright of the International Tournee of Animation, dedicated the 18th Tournee to them and he hired me to do the intro titles for to lead in to NIGHT ON BALD MOUNTAIN, Alexeieff's most well know animation on the pin-screen. This gave me access to us one of Alexeieff's original pin-screens.

00:01:15

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And after I finished that animation for the Tournee, I used the pinscreen to go from its surface into the real deep space multi-plane tunnel, so it dissolved from surface into deep space. That was the introductory piece for DISSOLVE IN LIGHT.

00:01:54

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

The entire show, DISSOLVE IN LIGHT ends with the film ACE OF LIGHT, because it is about dissolving the individuated ego in light.

00:02:34

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Okay. Can you say more about using a concept like that, that on the one hand is artistic and on the other hand is designed to enlighten and improve someone's health and sanity, which that piece...it sounds like it's designed to do, that relative to doing a one-on-one healing session with an individual?

00:02:53

SKY DAVID

It's hard to verbalize that, but for me it's all one kind of situation. And one thing that certainly comes out in the pieces that I invented and made, they're all gorgeous pieces to look at. They're all aesthetic, they're very conscious, so the connection has to do with conscious attention to detail and whatever physical object is manifested, whether it's a film or a drawing or...or a piece that's technologically-- that's oriented to serve someone through their health process with light.

00:03:56 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

There was, for me, a definite connection, because I can bring something to that at a more fundamental level of healing. It gives me a distance from the distress in the body that a person brings when they're...they are feeling the mortality of the disease process and they're grasping for help. Somehow that light and that vision gives me enough distance from it that I wasn't sucked into the drama of the gross plane of self survival.

00:05:21 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

And I observed something about people who have a strong clear mission in life.

00:07:06 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

I got into doing a restoration of AURA CORONA via the original drawings during the paralysis of my right arm as a way to neurologically reconnect myself to patterns that were—go back to when I was 25. It was part of my rehabilitation process. So there's this constant, there's no separation into one thing here and another thing here for me. It's all part of the same dance.

.

00:09:39 **AMY HALPERN**

May I ask you a question about an earlier revolutionary thing you did with a body image about the ghillie suit? Could you first say what a ghillie suit is?

00:09:46 **SKY DAVID**

Yes, the ghillie suit.

00:09:47 **STEPHANIE SAPIENZA**

Say it again?

00:09:49 **SKY DAVID**

The ghillie suit, yes. Ghillie is a Scottish name. So when I was a LRRP in the jungle in the late 1960's, we learned how to do the ultimate in camouflage and the ghillie...The ghillies were these persons in Scotland, who lived on the periphery of the castle wall and protected it and they learned how to do camouflage by making themselves part of the environment.

00:10:22 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

The Ghillie becomes whatever was in the environment was. They looked like a bush. They could move, they could hunt, they could observe poachers and all kinds of things. This is the ultimate expression of “field craft”.

00:10:44 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

I started doing figurative drawings in 2003. I did some very elaborate drawings with the ghillie suit

00:11:19

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I worked on the animated film **FIELD OF GREEN: A SOLDIER'S ANIMATED SKETCHBOOK** for seven years, 2000 to 2007.

00:12:14

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Okay. Actually I'd like you to talk about **FIELD OF GREEN**, if you would like.

00:12:17

SKY DAVID

Yes. Until the end of 1999, all of my war experience was so far buried in unconsciousness that it wasn't even an issue, even when I was at **CAL ARTS** I never told anybody.

00:12:49

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

1999 marked a strange manifestation, where every time a car would go by outside I thought a mortar round had go off. I became hyper vigilant. And I didn't know what was going on. I really didn't. I just thought, this is strange. I didn't connect it with anything to do with the war at all.

00:13:16

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Then I went to see a Chinese movie that had some real aggressive...it was made in China, it's called **THE FIRST EMPEROR** or something like that. It had a lot of graphic fighting, the way Asians fight, very realistic. And I started to--it actually brought up a whole lot of stuff.

00:13:35

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And so I had a need to talk to someone. And the lady I was living with at the time, her name was Aloa. I began to talk to her in the third person, which was a bit of a mystery to her because she thought I needed to talk about someone else.

00:13:52

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And I told her, because there was an incident in that movie that involved a little girl, and I told her about there was this man and he was in a combat situation and came across a group of people. And I told her..., and they were in a cave like or in an alcove or something like that and that he was required to, along with men, because they were suspected of being collaborators with the **NVA** or **VC**, to toss a bunch of grenades in there.

00:14:30

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And I said...and then this man was at the edge and he saw this girl, maybe about 11 or 12, and he jumped down in there and grabbed her and had her in his arms. And then he had this little girl. But then he participated in the obliteration of, probably her family.

00:14:50

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

But then he had this little girl to deal with. And so...

00:14:55 **STEPHANIE SAPIENZA**

And this was all in the movie that you watched?

00:14:57 **SKY DAVID**

No. This was my own memory that the movie sparked.

00:14:59 **STEPHANIE SAPIENZA**

[overlapping] [unintelligible]

00:15:00 **SKY DAVID**

...but I couldn't associate with it. I described this to her as if I knew this person who told me about this. I'm sure she was probably thinking, "why is he telling me all this stuff?" Then he took care of the girl for a few days and then he was able to find an orphanage. And I said, and he's always been worried that she was never abused and wondered whatever happened to her.

00:15:30 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

And then Aloa says, "was that guy you?" And then I started to cry. Something broke at that point. And then I realized, I think I'm going to need some professional help, because I started to feel like a piece of fabric becoming pulled apart. I became actually, as a physical therapist, dysfunctional. I couldn't function as an artist or anything.

00:15:56 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

Here I thought I'd never need professional help. I found an advanced Rolfer in Santa Fe, who had been in Vietnam as a Medic and had worked with a man named Peter Levine, was the body worker. Levine had worked a lot with various people. And he was very good. And then he suggested that I get back into doing drawings related to this circumstance in my life.

00:16:28 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

I did that and all of a sudden it awakened this passion. And I started to reconnect to the sketches that I had done during combat. At that point, the project was entirely private. I had intended to destroy everything and never show any of it to anybody.

00:17:06 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

—I acquired 17 hours of documentary film related to Vietnam.

00:17:27 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

I couldn't really read, I needed to see film, I needed to see all this film stuff, because there were film crews all over the place. It was unrestricted filming. Anybody, you could've, during that war, gone over there with this equipment very easily and just run around. You would've been at your own risk. A lot of them got shot. But there was no... they didn't have any control over the press and photographers and a lot of people doing all kinds of filming and photographs-- a huge archive that was developed about that war.

00:18:01 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

I amassed a piece with the animation and documentary that was an hour and 25 minutes long, but wasn't like a finished film. It was a series of me narrating through, actually the handheld screen, but I put different screens in behind it and I used it like the talking screen, like a talking stick the Navajos used.

00:18:30 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

So I would prep the narrations that would take place before a documentary piece. So it was a series of fragments of documentary and animation. And at that time, in May of 2003, 3 years in production, I had rarely shown it.

00:19:37 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

My friend, Steina Vasulka in Santa Fe organized for me to do a presentation in my studio in May of '03. And I showed AURA CORONA, LUMA NOCTURNA, the best films my animation past. And I mentioned that I had this piece about my war experience, and Gene Youngblood was there, and I said, well, if you really want to see it I'll show you some sequences. And Gene said, show the whole thing.

00:20:06 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

People sat through this hour and 25 minute ordeal and I was amazed. I mean, they sat there and somebody said, I can't believe it's that long. This is the best thing I've ever seen on Vietnam. It was because it was a mixture of animation, it had this tunnel sequence in there and so it didn't just come off like a Walter Cronkite documentary with me in there narrating.

00:20:32 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

And I brought my own personal anecdote, which made it much more potent, rather than a distancing of a documentary person. I could relate. There is one scene about torture and I related it to and my diary. An entry written during basic training at Ft. Hood about using the battery of our radio to fry the balls of "Charlie" and to seeing this being done to a woman at Chu Chi in 1967.

00:21:08 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

So when I saw that the Abu Ghraib trials were going to happen at Fort Hood, I thought, what a fucking joke. What an absolute joke. You know [laugh] that's the origin of [laugh] illegal torture methods. But that's the way that system works. It's kind of a joke, actually, a tragic, terrible joke.

00:21:38

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

My piece has a documentary clip of a woman talking about how she'd been interrogated how she did not break, I'll tell you, those Asians, they're strong. They don't break. They don't break. They're amazing. They're much to be admired. They have quite a warrior spirit and the NVA had no problem with women and no problem with age. And there was a woman NVA platoon commander who, in her 80s, had such Earth energy that everybody was afraid of her because somebody said if she looks at you your balls will shrink.

00:22:17

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And there were...I can tell you about women NVA warriors that were exactly like in that film, *CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON*, who had that. There were like these five women, we called them the "bar-team" and we never saw them. It was like seeing a fox in the jungle. You know how they had those little sandals? They had their crude weapons. But boy, when they would come, they would do a hit and we could never make a reprisal because all of our weapons would jam and lock up.

00:22:52

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

Now that is...something was going on. Nobody wanted to mess with it. And then there was one platoon-- woman platoon commander, she was called "The Apache". We were always saying, you've got to get her, man, she's doing terrible things. It was like nobody wanted to mess with her, because I'll tell you, she owned the jungle psychically. It's their property and the women have some kind of Earth energy and the NVA recognized that the actual top warriors would be the women.

00:23:25

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So they had women platoon commanders that were fierce and ruthless. They didn't hold back one bit. They were protecting what they felt was their property and they felt we were invading their property. And their kind of instinctive mother energy to protect the nest would come out, just the way a mother, you know, a female wolf will absolutely tear any threat to pieces that's coming near the wolf pups. So it was like that.

00:23:58

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So I learned and observed all of that. There are so many guys in such denial of that level. I call it like the psychic effect, because after they come back-- in fact, I had this theory about post-traumatic is that-- because it's not a problem in that world, but when somebody comes back and they're expected to function like a conventional householder in this society and they can't fit. And that's when a lot of this post-traumatic stuff comes up.

00:24:32

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I remember this one extraordinary kind of, I felt, experience. I was with a guy in a jeep, Tim Oreger. He was driving. And it appeared that a big piece of black fabric had gotten stuck on the front and was flapping over the windshield. He couldn't see so we stopped.

00:24:55

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

We couldn't find the fabric. We thought it had blown off, because we were riding along, it was in a very safe area, low threat situation. And the black fabric is back again. But then we stopped and it's not there. And then it happens a third time, we stop, we can't find it. We go take a pee and when we're taking a pee, that jeep blows to hell. It had been booby trapped. It knocked us on our faces in our own piss. Luckily we were far enough away, because it went up in a fireball.

00:25:23

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And so, these are the weird-- I mean, how do you explain that? So that, from an artist's point of view, that's more interesting than the Walter Cronkite end of it at all. Steina said, you should pick out a few of these sequences and do interactive media presentations and get discussions.

00:25:52

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So I went to these high schools with the interactive presentation "The History Lessons Not Taught in Our U.S. Classrooms." The first presentation was organized by a woman named Felicia Trujillo and we had an emphasis on women. We had all subject matter to deal with women. And the place was filled with people and it was hot discussion.

00:26:18

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

It 25 minutes actual of film, yet the discussion went on, the whole thing went on for three hours, because it brought up gobs of stuff from people, all kinds of issues, about how the United States blocked the outcome of the Geneva Convention of 1954, which had guaranteed countrywide elections in Vietnam in 1955.

00:26:42

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

In other words, the United States blocked a true democratic process in another country. People went, how can we do that? Point out a few things that went on as in Chile with Allende and how the process gets repeated, where U.S. corporate interests become above everything else.

00:27:11 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

I continued working on the animation sequences and had all these fragments of animation, each based on the original drawings that I had done in combat. And at the end of 2007, I put them together and sent this DVD out to a few friends. I sent it to Peter Rose. Peter Rose showed it to John Columbus. And John Columbus He is the director of a film festival called the Black Maria Film Festival.

00:27:44 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

And he had it with him at the time that the jury was meeting . He thought there was some meat in this.

00:28:19 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

So John popped it on and then they gave it the award as the best animation. So it lived and toured for a year and I got to communicate, I said, yeah, John, you can give out my email. I got communications from a lot of women who had lived during that era because it affected a lot of life.

00:28:48 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

So I felt like the film lived because it provided a forum for people to consider war situation. And that's really its context. It also went through a process when I started it and started doing figurative work. I did the first animation based on the Tet Offensive of Feb, 1968.

00:29:12 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

And they're watercolor, but I hadn't gotten command of definitive, figurative identity. And that was my goal, I wanted to get absolute, true figurative identity, so I started taking drawing courses at the Watts Atelier of the Arts in Encinitas, in very conventional portraiture, until I could get identity of myself and of other people.

00:29:41 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

So the scenes that occur later, like there's one scene, it's the ambush sequences, December 30, 1969. The animation drawing process took a three year span of working on it. It's a figure that does not have my identity. And then I didn't work on it for maybe a year or more. And then it transitions to a figurative identity of myself.

00:30:08 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

And there are some sequences of animation that are not in the version that was in the Black Maria.

00:30:24 **STEPHANIE SAPIENZA**

Yeah, why did you take those out? I'm curious. It was about John. One of them was about John.

00:30:28

SKY DAVID

Right. I didn't choose to put that in... It's too personal. The sequence is called THE HEARTBEAT, HONORING JOHN AND MYSELF and is about my buddy John honored on Panel 21 East, Line 116 of the Memorial.

00:30:52

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

But it's a hot subject, watching two men, nude men touching each other and kissing each other... It rubs people the wrong way more than the war material. It rubs people, they don't know what to-- when people would look at that, they wouldn't say anything to me.

00:31:12

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

That's interesting, because I thought it was quite beautiful, actually.

00:31:13

SKY DAVID

I feel like it's an exquisite, poetic piece. It's a very private piece. So it was in programs like, I had a show at the Klaudia Marr Gallery, in their space called the Shack Obscura in the fall of 2003, where I did the installation MEMORIAL and the poem that I had made was the sound in the space. The installation had video projection and projected down on a screen that I made of silk. That body was actually the projection screen placed on that plank of black granite.

00:31:57

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

At the opening night of the show, I did the performance and I put in some of the political things and I did the poems live. And of course, in that context it was full bore, the animation piece honoring John was in there. And I have some other sequences that are purely abstract, way abstract.

00:32:18

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

And you took those out as well?

00:32:20

SKY DAVID

Yeah, they weren't in the version that Peter Rose and the others got. I cut it. It works nice the way it is, because it's cut without being indulgent.

00:32:33

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

And that's the one hour 25 minute version that was cut down?

00:32:36

SKY DAVID

Well, it's...the version I sent to Peter is seven and a half minutes of tight editing, that is how it won the award.

00:32:41

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Oh, I see.

00:32:42

SKY DAVID

David Stout had me do the show at the College of Santa Fe when I was leaving Santa Fe in the Spring of 2006. The show was called “Hand Drawn” in a little gallery at the College with large narrative drawings, a projection on a wall and I presented “The History Lesson Not Taught in our U.S. Classrooms” in a documentary class.

00:33:19

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I had this sort of full bore slate of what I was doing with that particular piece. I had a lot of self-portraits in there. That was the final show I ever had on anything, April of '06 at the College of Santa Fe.

00:34:28

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

I got a chance to really do a lot of sound work for FIELD OF GREEN, because all of the sound is from live documentary, There's a lot of subtlety in there.

00:35:02

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And then it ends with a shot of me at age 18 at Fort Hood, about a week after basic. You see this naive kid. People looked at that and said, you look like you're about 15 years old. [laugh]

00:35:19

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

Do you have any more?

00:35:20

AMY HALPERN

I do. I have a question about before you were 18.

00:35:24

SKY DAVID

Yes.

00:35:25

AMY HALPERN

It has to do with-- you clearly had compassion and a sense of otherness your whole life, partly as a gift of birth. But also I have to remark on the fact that your eyes are two different colors.

00:35:40

SKY DAVID

Yeah, well, that's interesting. I was born right on the Taurus-Gemini cusp, a few minutes on the Taurus side. And it's true, I have two different colored eyes. And when you come to the house, you'll see one of my self-portraits down in our sort of family room, it's called “Self-Portrait of a Man Split Apart.”

00:36:01 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

There is inherently, built into this system, a constant conflict. It's just there. And so it's not problematic from the point of view of this body, because it's already there. It's sometimes hard for a person I have a relationship with to handle, but it's not a problem here. There's an edge and there's always a contradiction here. So it's almost like there's two people. And that's just what's in front of you.

00:36:42 **AMY HALPERN**

And the other question has to do with your parents. It sounds like your dad was an artist.

00:36:48 **SKY DAVID**

He was in his own limited engineering way. And in his later life, he became interested in what he could perceive that was, after he retired, into like psychic phenomenon, flying saucers, things like that. And I think he even had a psychic sense, because when he got dementia, he got the good kind where they're happy, humorous, instead of being grumpy.

00:37:13 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

And he said-- and I wouldn't be there in Dallas, in fact, there's periods where I wouldn't even see my parents for three years straight. But one time when I was visiting him after-- before he died and he was talking about, there's these psychic babies being born in Santa Barbara and they have demodulators and they can communicate directly with each other through their demodulators, and you know, and he's talking about this and everybody's kind of like, you know, humoring him, you know, around it. But no, whatever he was picking up, I don't know. Where he ever got that, I don't have the slightest idea where he gets that.

00:37:49 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

But he got more and more out there and I thought it was great. And when he got-- I listened to him talk about his experience in World War II and the farm. He grew up in Terre Haute and it was kind of like going back there. And I had this communication with him by listening to him that was so profound that I told him I loved him and hugged him and I know that he received it.

00:38:16 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

So it was like a father and son communication and a lot of times it doesn't happen in a person's life. There's some difficulty they can't bridge. He had to have dementia to tear enough of the barriers in order for him to receive that and for him to contact something beyond just the basics.

00:38:47 **AMY HALPERN**

That was so beautiful. I have nothing further to ask.

00:38:50

SKY DAVID

All right.

00:38:53

STEPHANIE SAPIENZA

I think that was a pretty perfect arch.

00:38:54

SKY DAVID

Yeah. I do believe so.

END OF TAPE 4

TAPE 5: SKY DAVID

00:39:08

SKY DAVID

—Rewind to 1968, in combat, I would get a chance to go out by myself & I'd occasionally just do these drawings on paper. This person who was much younger than me, who was fairly new, his name was Jimmy Ray Pierce from Picard, Alabama. He came from a situation where he knew he would not be able to go to college. His grades were terrible and there was no way to be afforded.

00:39:41

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So it was in the same kind of situation that I was in the 82nd Airborne, just a younger guy. And he saw me drawing and I don't quite remember exactly, but he said, "I like to draw too". And he showed me work and man, this guy was god-gifted talent that was out of sight. He could draw realistic-type work with minimal means.

00:40:09

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

And I'd compare his work, just in terms of the impact, with minimal means to one of my favorite artists, which is Kathe Kollwitz, the German artist who worked in the late 1800s and all the way into the middle of 1945.

00:40:29

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

So we became really good friends to the point of being almost like lovers. And we had plans that-- I told him, Texas Tech, man, you got a GI bill coming, it's only 25 dollars a semester and you've got drawings. So we had all these plans, naive plans that we had set.

00:40:52

SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)

In March, 1968, KIA honored on a panel 45 east, line 14.... But anyway, we were hunkered down and I was more protective of him, because I didn't want him to end up KIA like John. And then he took a round through his trapezius here, and so he started...couldn't..., he was having a hard time breathing. And there was no way to get to a medic or anything. We were under fire.

00:41:38 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

And so, I turned him over face up and started to do mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, because I could, and I felt like the life, went out of him at that point. But the most amazing thing, he never groaned. His eyes were bright and open. And then I was looking at his eyes close up, doing his mouth-to-mouth and I saw his pupils go from normal, and they just spread out like [makes noise].

00:42:08 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

That's usually the moment of what it-- when there's a disengagement. So that was the end of that one. It's hard to talk about. But it...it...I didn't have any more relationships like that, in an intimate level with anybody past that.

00:42:34 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

There were certain people I liked. I liked a jump master from Puerto Rico, who had been in all of the jumps that the 82nd did in Korea. He was an older guy, a seasoned trainer at Fort Bragg. It seems to be-- I can't quite verbalize all of this, but I felt like-- here's the point of this, I felt like that the education that Jimmy did not get was now my responsibility to get and to develop myself as an artist.

00:43:07 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

So when I was at CalArts, I felt like I was working for Jimmy also, to honor him not getting a chance. And I felt like these two men kind of entered me and empowered me in a certain way to bring forth what gifts they had, because I was still in the body that had been associated with them.

00:43:34 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

So I did somewhere, the first drawing that I did, where I was beginning to get my own identity was a drawing of me doing-- I have several of them, actually, of me doing, like resuscitation. And I have one that worked out real nice and, see how they're all piled up back there? It is called "No DEROS, So Close to Life."

00:44:08 **SKY DAVID (CONTINUED)**

Deros is a military phrase that means "date of expected return from overseas service". So I had a whole series of figurative drawings that started off "No Deros." There's one called "No Deros: The Petrified Heart".

00:44:40 **AMY HALPERN**

Deros is a wonderful word. It sounds like it's a real word in Greek that one doesn't know.

00:44:46 **SKY DAVID**

Right.

00:44:47

AMY HALPERN

Are there other cool words that you've used, like military words for...besides the ghillie suit, that you've used in titling.

00:44:51

SKY DAVID

I think it was the main ones that I can think of.

00:44:55

AMY HALPERN

I like that kind of repurposing.

00:44:58

SKY DAVID

And that's what art can do, bring one to another level that is much more expanded.

end of tape 5