Oral History Interview

with

Sonya Terpening

Interview Conducted by
Julie Pearson-Little Thunder
January 6, 2012

O-STATE Stories
Oral History Project

Special Collections & University Archives
Edmon Low Library ● Oklahoma State University

O-State Stories

An Oral History Project of the OSU Library

Interview History

Interviewer: Julie Pearson-Little Thunder
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The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

The purpose of O-STATE Stories Oral History Project is to gather and preserve memories revolving around Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College (OAMC) and Oklahoma State University (OSU).

This project was approved by the Oklahoma State University Institutional Review Board on October 5, 2006.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Sonya Terpening is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on January 6, 2012.

About Sonya Terpening…

While her father was in the service, Sonya Terpening's family moved about frequently, but her growing-up years were spent mostly in Oklahoma and Texas. She also made summer visits to her grandfather's farm in Kansas, where she rode her first horse and watched as he sketched pictures for her. Terpening took her own artistic talent for granted, but she did take private art lessons at her parents' urging. As an art major at Oklahoma State University, she put off watercolor classes to the last. Soon after, they became her specialty. Inspired partly by Donald Teague, she became the first woman to win a gold medal in watercolor at the Masters of the American West Show at the Autry National Center. She is invited regularly to the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum's Prix de West, and exhibits at the Gilcrease Museum, where she was Featured Artist in the 2006 Rendezvous show. Terpening's subjects range from Victorian houses to still life to turn-of-the-century depictions of pioneer women, children, and ranch hands. Her investment in stories of the west acquired a very personal dimension when she discovered her great-great-aunt's diary about homesteading on the Cherokee Strip. Since the late '90s, the artist has worked extensively in oils, producing among other works *Just One More Chapter*, a gift to her alma mater in 2011, on permanent display at the Edmon Low Library.

In addition to discussing her techniques, subject matter, and creative process, Terpening recounts her first trip to the Smithsonian Museum with her grandfather-in-law. She remembers how her student-teaching experience at OSU clinched her determination to make a living with her art. She describes traveling to weekend shows with her husband and camping overnight in their van. She also explains how she uses reenactors as models, and the friendships she has developed with them over the years.

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An Oral History Project of the OSU Library

Sonya Terpening

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Julie Pearson-Little Thunder
January 6, 2012
Stillwater, Oklahoma

Little Thunder *This is Julie Pearson-Little Thunder. Today is January 6, 2012. I'm at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater with Sonya Terpening. Sonya, you're an award-winning western painter. You've lived in Texas many years, but you have lots of Oklahoma connections, including attending OSU. You've brought in a piece that was commissioned for installation here at the Library, and you've got an upcoming show scheduled here in Stillwater on January 9. Welcome back to Stillwater.*

Terpening Thank you. Thank you very much.

Little Thunder *Where were you born, and where did you grow up?*

Terpening I was born in Frankfort, Michigan. My parents lived in a little town there. My dad was in the service at the time. Lived there a few months before we moved. From then on, I moved about every six months to a year until I was in the middle of, well, beginning of seventh grade, I think. I never finished the same year in the same school, ever. One year, I think we had three different schools, so traveled a lot, traveled a lot. (Laughs) When I was in seventh grade, we were in Texas, in the Dallas area, in Irving, Texas. We lived there until the middle of my junior year, when we moved to Oklahoma, and I graduated high school in Claremore, Oklahoma, well, actually Sequoyah, just outside Claremore.

Little Thunder *What did your mom and dad do for a living?*

Terpening Mom was a housewife. When we moved so much, he installed radars for GE on service bases. He was a military contractor. When we moved to Dallas, he worked with, I believe, Honeywell at that time, and he was in the computer department with that. He developed and maintained

computers.

Little Thunder *You were fairly close to your grandfather, or your grandparents. Did your grandfather have a ranch here in Oklahoma?*

Terpening No, actually, it was in Kansas. It was the original homestead that my great-great uncles got after serving the Civil War. They came down from Canada and stayed there, so that was where the ranch was. Just after the Depression, they put it into wheat, and a lot of the land was fallow. He didn't have a lot of cows at the time, didn't really work it as a ranch. My uncle took it over, and it became a dairy farm. We used to go every summer there to help with harvest and spend the summers on the ranch.

Little Thunder *Did he have a few horses?*

Terpening He had one old plug of a horse, an old farm horse that I thought was the most beautiful horse in the world, and I would ride for hours on end. I think it just walked around the pasture, but it was my dream of a horse. I wanted a horse my whole life, and Dad said that he would get me a horse when we finally moved somewhere where we could keep one. Of course, we moved every six months, every year, something like that, so I waited and waited. When I was a junior in high school we moved to Claremore, and Dad said, "I promised you your horse," and within two weeks of us moving there, he went out and we bought an Appaloosa mare that was my love. Then I went away to college. Came to OSU to college a year and a half later, and my sister got the advantage of having the horse. I think they bred her, and they ended up with four or five horses at the time.

Little Thunder *What's your first memory of seeing artwork?*

Terpening I remember a sculpture when I was about nine years old, and we went to New York City on a trip. Dad had to go there, and we were at the UN building. I remember that being the first monumental sculpture I ever saw. Probably my most impressive memory of seeing real art was when Mark's grandfather took me to the Smithsonian Museum in Washington, DC, to the art museum there. All of the art that I had studied in books and on slides here at OSU were suddenly right in front of me. He took me to the gallery in front of those paintings, and he just left me. He said, "You've got to experience this by yourself." That was very important.

Little Thunder *Mark's grandfather, so you two had already met in high school?*

Terpening Mark and I met when I was about sixteen years old. He's a year and a half older than I am, year older than I am. We were just good buddies for a little while, at least in my opinion. He had other ideas. (Laughter) Our

first date was to an art show that I had artwork in. I had been taking private lessons with professional artists. This was in Irving, Texas, and I was having an art show, so he knew what he was getting into from day one. (Laughs)

Little Thunder *How exciting! Was that the first time you had shown your work in an art show?*

Terpening Yes, that was the first time, the first time I really took it seriously. I'd always had oil paints and easels and canvases from the time I was about nine years old, but that was the first time I took private lessons with a professional and knew that you could do this for a living. Of course, I was thinking more teaching than just painting for a living. I had wanted to be a hairdresser, and, like I said, I was about sixteen, seventeen. Mother said, "Take this art class first, and if you still want to go into hairdressing, you're old enough to go to hairdressing school and cosmetology school." So I took the first lesson, was terrified and hated it, went back for the second lesson, and I was sold. I enjoyed it after that.

Little Thunder *That's wonderful. Having those oil paints so early, obviously your folks encouraged your interest in art.*

Terpening My grandfather was very artistic. He carved, mainly, and built things, and he used to do sketches for me when I was a kid. My dad was very interested in art. It was just something I didn't realize I had an interest in or talent in as much as my parents knew because it was something I always did and always enjoyed doing, drawing and painting. I thought that was what everybody did, so I was very lucky they were observant enough to encourage that.

Little Thunder *By the time you came to OSU, though, you'd sort of had your first taste of—did you sell anything at your show? I should've asked that.*

Terpening Wow, I don't even remember. I must not have, or you think I would have remembered that. (Laughter) I don't think so. I think my mother has every piece I ever painted up until yesterday. (Laughter). No, she keeps and displays everything, even that first painting, but I don't remember that.

Little Thunder *But you had made up your mind by the time you got here that you wanted a degree in art education.*

Terpening I actually didn't. I wanted the art degree, the fine art degree, and I had a literature minor. Mark's dad passed away by the time we were in college. We got married a year into college, and his dad had passed away. His mother was very insistent that I have something that I could

fall back on in case anything happened because she was a very young widow. Here I am with a literature degree and a fine art degree, going, "Okay, you can't get a job there, so what are we going to do?" (Laughter) So I thought, "Okay, I'll pick up the education." She was a kindergarten teacher at this time, so she was very encouraging of that. I thought, "Okay, I'll get my art education degree." They waited to have our student teaching the last semester before you graduated, and I found out when I did my student teaching that teachers are saints, and I'm not one. (Laughter) I am not teacher material. I knew I was going to have to make it as an artist. I could not make it as a teacher.

Little Thunder *What were the strengths of the art program for you? What were the things that helped you?*

Terpening This was back in '74, '75, something like that, and it was mostly non-objective art at the time, abstract art, or more going into the pop art. I always wanted to paint and draw exactly what I saw. That's what I did coming up. I chose OSU over OU or another school mainly because their art was more grounded, I thought, a little more commercial, and it's smaller, the art department was, so I figured I could tweak it my way to get what I needed out of the degree.

Sometimes education is wasted on the young, I guess, because it took me a long time to realize that all this background that was so hard for me, this abstract color design, all this background, that's pure composition. If art can't hold itself on composition and color and movement and design, it can't hold itself up whether it's realistic or abstract, so I got an incredible background in color and design and composition, which I think gives me an added strength being a realist. But it was also very frustrating because I'm not real good at that. I'm much better at making things look realistic, and that wasn't really what was expected or wanted at the time.

Little Thunder *You did go to a show at what was then the Cowboy Hall of Fame, which was kind of a revelation for you.*

Terpening Yes. It was an incredible revelation, yes. I had actually graduated by then when a girlfriend of mine (we lived in Bartlesville) said, "Come with me to this show." She went every year. At that time it was called NAWA, National Academy of Western Artists. They would have a three-day seminar where the artists would demonstrate. They would be right there, and of course, then their artwork would be out.

It was the first time I had really been exposed to western art that much. Saw fabulous realism. Kind of the only place at that time that realism was being maintained and advanced was in the western art genre. To get

to meet the artists, to watch them paint, to see that you could make a living at it, they were so encouraging. It was an incredible art experience, incredible for me, educationally. I say I got my western art realism degree at the Cowboy Hall.

Little Thunder *Was there one artist in particular, or something that one of the artists said or did that just really…*

Terpening Donald Teague was a watercolor artist, and that's a whole other story. At the time, I was only doing watercolor and drawings. I wasn't doing oil painting at all. I stopped doing oil paintings—let me back up and preface this just a little bit. When I was here at OSU, I put off taking the watercolor class until my last two semesters, right before I did my student teaching, because I really didn't have any use for watercolor. It was that other medium that you gave your children. When I had to take it or they weren't going to let me out of school, I fell in love with it immediately. It was just, I made mud for six months! I don't know why I really liked it, but it was just a living, breathing medium. I mean, it dripped, and it ran, and it was just so challenging. Here again, you have to try everything. That's why a rounded education is so good for you because I fell in love with it. For twenty years, that's all I ever worked in.

Back to the Cowboy Hall, when I went there, of course I was interested in watercolor because that's what I was doing, and I met Donald Teague, who was an illustrator. He'd been an illustrator for years, western art illustrator. Did the most beautiful transparent watercolors, not opaque, transparent watercolors and was such a kind, kind gentleman. He's just a special person and always remembered me. I would go back to the Hall every year for a while to these seminars, and he always remembered me. I had actually cut pictures of his work out of magazines when I was younger, never knowing that I was going to meet him or that it was watercolor, even. He was very special.

Little Thunder *You had made a decision to become a professional artist, and you'd now taken a couple of workshops. Were you doing mall shows, small booth shows? How were you proceeding?*

Terpening Yes, yes. Actually, the very first show I ever did was on Main Street in Stillwater. I forget what they call it now, but they did a show where they blocked off Main Street, and artists set up their booths. I think we had a couple pieces of plywood or some kind of board that we hung paintings off of, hauled them down there. They were just matted watercolors with plastic over top of them. That was the very first show I ever did. We would travel and do the mall shows. I think there was probably four or five in this area, Tulsa, Oklahoma City, and all this area, sleeping in our

van. They were usually weekend shows. We would set up, put the work out, and sleep in our van, and take them down. It was quite a way to get started.

Little Thunder *On the weekends, I guess? (Laughter)*

Terpening Yes, it was on the weekends, absolutely. I think from there we kind of progressed to the outdoor festivals. They juried those shows, and that means you had to be pretty good, and that gave us credibility. Then we decided that the wind and watercolors and rain didn't work very well together, so we chose to start going to the museum shows. One of the first ones was the art museum in Oklahoma City. They used to have a salon show, and I remember going to ask about entering that show. The proprietor at the time of the museum said, "You can try, but it's really hard to get in here. It's just really hard to get in here." I was determined even more. I think that was the year they used my piece on the brochure for the museum show, so I was pretty tickled. It was very encouraging.

Little Thunder *What was the collector base for western art? Were people really interested in western art then?*

Terpening Western art was starting to really boom about the time I was just getting into it. I wasn't really doing what I call western art. I was doing more realism. I was doing architectural pieces, still life pieces. But because they were in watercolor and something different, the Cowboy Hall—I'm trying to think of some of the other museums that took me in. At that time because it was realism, I was kind of pushed backwards into the western art because I had realism, and they seemed to think it fit with what they were doing. Maybe they were trying to broaden the western scope at that point, but it was really when things were starting to just take off. I was at the bottom of that until I took that rise and backed into western art that way, I guess. As I got to know the western artists and go out with them to paint on different ranches and got to meet more people and study and travel more, then my work started getting progressively more western subject.

Little Thunder *When you say architectural, you were doing buildings or…*

Terpening Yes, yes, a lot of Victorian houses and barns, which was very, very popular at the time. In watercolor, to do white buildings or white anything is adding, because the white is the white of the paper, and you have to add color to make it appear white. That to me was just fascinating. I did a lot of Galveston Victorian houses or things around here, white lace tablecloths, white flowers, a lot of white on white. That was just things that I really enjoyed. Then eventually I started adding the people with the buildings, and that kind of led me into starting to do

more portraiture. I really started getting into that with the oils more when I picked that up.

Little Thunder *When did you pick up oils?*

Terpening Ten, fifteen years ago, now. Probably fifteen years ago. I'd been working exclusively in watercolor for twenty, twenty-three or four years. In the western art genre, pretty much there's paintings and then there's oil paintings. To me, it was all about the oil. Everything else is just kind of a lesser medium.

Little Thunder *There's a hierarchy.*

Terpening There is definitely a hierarchy, definitely. Donald Teague made that break, but there weren't many others. There were a couple people drawing, a couple doing acrylics and other medium, but for the most part it was all oil painting. I realized I could not make a living at this, doing watercolor exclusively, and that's all I wanted to do, was do this full time. I just couldn't think of doing anything else, and we knew I wasn't going to be a teacher.

Little Thunder *And you couldn't command those prices for a watercolor that you could for an oil.*

Terpening You can't. I do now, or pretty close to it. There's still that prejudice, but I figure it's harder to do a watercolor, and it takes more time. People are so much more educated about watercolors now, the skill it takes to really do one, and you can't correct them, which is the big one. I sometimes will do an oil painting, scrape off that face four times before I like it, and it's not going to change the painting any. That's really the only reason I got into doing oils is because I knew I needed to go ahead and make a living at it. Mark was only going to support me just so long. (Laughter) Then it was my turn.

Little Thunder *So the western art movement is taking off, and you're one of a handful of women, really, because the women are in the minority, and still are, in this predominantly male-dominated field of art. What was that like? What challenges did you encounter?*

Terpening Okay, how do we do this politically? (Laughs) In some ways it was an asset. In some ways it really was because I assume they knew they had to have x amount of women in the group. I'm going to talk a little more specifically about the Prix de West. It was Prix de West when I came in. In about a hundred artists, there would be ten, eleven women, so I think I got more recognition being a woman. I never applied to it. They asked me in (I'm very blessed to say that was a real asset) I think because I

was a woman and because I was working primarily in watercolor at the time, again, something they might need because it was the minority. I think both those things gave me recognition early on, so they were an asset.

There's so many great women artists out there, and I would like to see more of them in the larger shows. They've made groups of their own to support themselves, like the Cowboy Artists of America made their own group to support themselves. I consider myself an artist, not a woman artist. I'm just an artist. I just paint. I don't want to separate myself into one place or another. I would like to see a lot more comingling, somehow.

Little Thunder *Because it is by invitation.*

Terpening It is by invitation, yes.

Little Thunder *Is there a committee that sort of decides who is invited?*

Terpening Because I never went through that process, I'm not sure. I know that you can apply for it, and there is a committee that will select you. It's so much harder now than it was when I came through. I happened to come in the year that it changed from NAWA to Prix de West. There was a big turnover, and I think maybe it made it a little easier for me to get in.

Little Thunder *You do a lot of women and children in your work. How do you approach your depictions of women in the west, perhaps, differently from other painters?*

Terpening I say I paint the softer side of the west because the west was explored by the cowboys. It wasn't settled until the women and children came along. I think, being a woman, even though I haven't had children, you have that nurturing, maternal viewpoint, so I think I can understand that a little bit better. I got into doing the women and children more and more. I found them cute, and I liked it to begin with.

My great-great-aunt left a handwritten diary of when she settled the Cherokee Strip, and they lived in a dugout. Her life there was just incredible, all told from the woman's point of view, from losing her first child out there, just she and her husband by themselves, to funny things. She was dusting a cabinet, and she had china, and she set it on the gateleg table which fell and broke all of her china. She was sitting in the middle of all of this crying, and then it dawned on her how trivial this was, but it was the only beautiful thing she had. There were so many stories there, and that's what really got me into saying, "Okay, there's stories to be told." That lit background of mine—I'm a frustrated writer.

I tell my stories with paint.

Little Thunder *Have you drawn a fair number of paintings from that journal?*

Terpening I have done some. By talking about this to other people, or when they see my paintings, they tell me their stories, so it just blossomed. I'm taking bits and pieces. I'm hoping I'm telling everybody's story more.

Little Thunder *What other kinds of research do you do for painting?*

Terpening Oh, my. I say 50 percent of my job is looking. I like to go find something that's happening as opposed to setting it up. I like to steal a little bit of real life and hold it on canvas.

Little Thunder *Do you take photographs?*

Terpening I take photographs. The camera is with me all the time. It's in the car. I mean, it's with me all the time. The camera's always there. Like I said, if I can catch stories, that's where I'm happiest. I have a group of reenactors that work with me and models that work with me. We'll go out to ranches, and the hands, when they're not hamming it up, will let me shoot them while they're working and tell me stories, explain to me about different things that they're doing. The reenactors explain the history to me. They get pretty hammy, too. (Laughter)

Little Thunder *That's really interesting because they're people who are committed to exploring, as reenactors, the period, as well.*

Terpening I could do the research book-wise, but these people are fanatical, and they get it right. They are my best resource to making sure that everything I do is correct, and they love it. They're crazy, but it's that enthusiasm that, again, comes out in what I'm doing. So, to me, it makes even a period piece become alive because they play pretend, and there they are. I don't think it's pretend to them all the time. (Laughter) The same with the cowboys. They're really working and doing their job, but because I happen to be there and be interested in it, it brings it alive to them, too, and they enjoy telling me about it.

Little Thunder *Do you have to book them way in advance?*

Terpening Well, I know enough now that they'll tell me when they're going to work their cows or do branding. I love to go out and see the old-fashioned way of branding. Or if they're working their colts for a show or something, then they let me know. I've got one painting, which is one of my best stories, I think, is called *Still Beats Office Work.* It's cowboys out doing their job in downpour rain, with puddles, cold and gray. That

was supposed to be a beautiful sunny day. I was going to go out and watch them work colts. We got out there, and the weather changed. It was miserable, but they're still out there working. So there was a story I wasn't anticipating that came about.

Little Thunder *Do they get to come see the finished paintings? Do they go to the shows?*

Terpening

Oh, yes, and love it. We've had a couple of them show up at the Cowboy Hall when I had a painting or two down there that they were in, and they have to get their picture taken with it. One of them was saying something about he's trying to make me rich, but I make him famous. (Laughter)

Little Thunder

And the re-enactors, do they let you know? Are they also simultaneously there for another kind of event, or do you actually book them?

Terpening

We book them. A group of artists will get together and hire them to come and play (I call it playing) for us because they will stay in character and costume for three days at a time. I do it with a group down on the Brazos River. You'll have Indians doing something on horseback here, and you'll have pioneer women and children and cows being run across the river. We do a lot of this on the Brazos right by a highway bridge. You can hear the cars coming to a screeching stop on the bridge when they get a glimpse of what's going on down there. It's like, "Where am I? Twilight zone?" (Laughter) It's kind of neat.

Little Thunder

That is really neat. The paintings I've seen that are landscape paintings, some of them look like Texas, Oklahoma. Some of them look like New Mexico. What draws you to both those landscapes?

Terpening

Love of it? I don't know. It's an emotional appeal. We've had connections with all of that, family connections that draw me. Mark's grandparents lived out in Arizona and took us to a lot of the Indian reservations. Living here in Oklahoma, we did a lot of the powwows, so I've got a lot of that appeal that is important to me because it's such a culture, such a way of life that is just wonderful. I try to experience that. Texas, I ended up there not really expecting to go to Texas, but it has its own lore and history that is just fascinating. A lot of it, I suppose, comes from growing up with all the westerns that we grew up with on TV as kids, and the movies. Some of that is real, and some of it is what we wish was real, and that's probably what I'm looking for and trying to depict, too.

Little Thunder

Why do you think it's important for western art to continue on, for people to have access to it?

Terpening

Oh, our history, our history. This is unique to America. What we have here, a lot of it is because of the TV and movie lore, too, but this is so unique to us, and it's so known all across the United States. But it's going away so fast. The ranches are being divided up. People are going out and herding cows with trucks and four wheel drives and not on horseback anymore. Just the culture, Indian culture, we're losing so fast. I feel inadequate to capture it, but I want to. I just do. I feel like maybe that's part of the stories. My family was so involved in settling the west, too, and it's those stories I just want to keep telling so they're not gone completely.

Little Thunder

You won the first Smelser-Vallion award from the OSU Foundation. What is the purpose of it, and what will it allow you to do?

Terpening

The purpose of that was to send an artist out to Taos, New Mexico, when the students are out there for, I believe, two different two-week sessions, to send a professional artist out there to interact with them so that not only are they in this magical place of New Mexico with that light that's every bit as gorgeous as all the artists from eons-one said it was, but just to show them that you can make a living at this. I, growing up, thought I had to be a teacher, which is wonderful, but there's other aspects you can do with the arts. One of them is really to be a professional with them, answering questions, showing them what it's like to paint on location, get out of the studio and capture that moment-to-moment change in light, to be on your toes when you're doing plein air paintings. (Laughs)

Little Thunder

You were able in 2010 to spend a couple of weeks out at the Doel Reed Center.

Terpening

Yes, yes. That's such a magnificent, magnificent gift. My big goal when I was out there was to capture it in paint before it changed because I knew they had plans for it. Martha Reed was still living on the property at the time. The studio was just like he had walked out. The studio looked like Doel Reed had left two seconds ago. It was amazing. I wanted to capture it the way it was while Martha was still there. I painted on the property, painted all the buildings on the property, all the buildings together on the property. It was a great experience to be out there for that. And the gift, what they're going to do with this piece of property is going to be incredible for OSU. When I first heard about it, I kept saying, "Oh, if they had just had that when I was in school!" I can imagine what this is going to be, but to experience it at this point, too.

Little Thunder

Is it a little more difficult to convey character when you're painting a building or a structure as opposed to like a person or an animal?

Terpening

Interesting question because I would always say my architectural pieces are portraits without people. I don't think so. To me, there's so much character. People put such an imprint on buildings. I guess I'm not drawn to them if they don't have some kind of a characteristic or something unique and exciting about it. I see a personality in both.

Little Thunder

You're about to open a solo show here on January 9. How many images will you have? Will they be a mix of oils and watercolors?

Terpening

I've got about fifteen paintings in the show, and they are a mix of oils and watercolor. Some of them, they're probably the last couple of years of paintings. I have some personal favorites of mine that we held back. There are some pretty good-sized ones, some thirty-by-forties, thirty-thirty-sixes in the oils. None of these are studies. These are all studio pieces, not like the paintings I did at the Doel Reed which were all plein air studies. When I was putting it together, it kind of runs from a southwestern architectural, some missions from New Mexico and Arizona, and a façade of a mission in Mexico, to a little vignette of flowers that were sitting in a window looking out, to some people. I've got a mother-daughter piece and sister piece that shows that interaction that I like to catch with my portraits.

Little Thunder

What are the important shows for you now?

Terpening

The biggest one would be the Prix de West in Oklahoma City at the National Cowboy and Western Heritage Museum. Let me get that all out! (Laughter) It's always going to be the Cowboy Hall to me. That's the biggest one that I do, the most prestigious, probably because I feel like that was where my education came from. That's very important to me. The Gilcrease Museum in Tulsa, that's an incredible museum. It's an incredible honor to be one of the Rendezvous artists. They choose those and honor just a few artists at a time with a special show, and that's very good. We're having a reunion Rendezvous coming up, which is going to be exciting for all the artists to come back, which will be great.

Little Thunder

Also, you've done the Autry.

Terpening

Yes, the Autry Museum in Los Angeles, California, which is a beautiful museum. It has a fabulous show. It's as great as the Cowboy Hall show. It's a beautiful, beautiful museum that it's in. That show, with my watercolor, I took first. I was the first woman artist to take the watercolor award there, or any other award, in that show. I'm trying to think of the name of the show.

M. Terpening

Masters of the American West.

Terpening

Masters of the American West, yes, okay.

Little Thunder

Watercolors are really your first love, and you've done a wonderful explanation that it's their aliveness that attracts you. I wonder if you could talk a bit about a statement that you work with a combination of wet and dry techniques.

Terpening

In the watercolor? Okay. Because I think of it as being this living, breathing medium, it's hard to think exactly like that, but I work in transparent layers of color. The watercolors I use are totally transparent. The white is only the white of the paper. I think of it like veils of color, like silk scarves, one put on top of another. I will start with the brightest color. Perhaps, to me, it's sunlight hitting an object, so it'll be a nice yellow, but then I'm starting to model.

I'm going to give you an example of a face. I'll put the yellow—you have to leave the white from the beginning. You have to know where the white's going to be, so you have to leave that. I'll put the veil of yellow on there, and while it's still wet, I'll drop in blues to set it back and reds to pull it forward. My next color on that when that's completely dry now—because there's a certain point where you can't touch watercolor again. You've got to leave it alone, or it's going to make marks. You have to know when to get in and when to get out of a watercolor. It's kind of treacherous. The next step would be, then, to model that color by adding another layer, perhaps a brownish layer if it's skin tones, or a more blue layer if it's in shadow.

Again, everything's going to show through, so the whole model of the face, that roundness, is always going to show through. I'll do that, even on the folds in cloth or on a tablecloth. Once you get that very first, where you're starting to sink it in and pull it forward, then that's always going to show through. Color is not just mixed. It's layered. Or if I'm working grays, gray areas, because I love to do so many white-on-white pieces—I love the white because it's made up of all color. To show that on white paper, I will use a combination of a red, yellow, and blue in various red, yellows, and blues, that if I stirred together would make gray. I'll drop them into a wet area of paint and let them melt together. They'll make your eyes read it as gray, but you'll still have the three colors individually.

Little Thunder

The paper itself, as you've mentioned, is so important. Is there a particular kind of weight of watercolor paper that you use?

Terpening

Oh, I'm so picky. I am so picky with my tools because, number one, I

think you need to know your tools. When I give a class, I'm like, "Know your tools. Know your tools." But, yes, I use an Arches 300-pound cold press paper, and I will use nothing else, (Laughter) unless I'm out working plein air with it, and then I work vertical. I work on a slight slant most of the time. When I'm out painting on location, plein air with the watercolors, I'll work vertical. I use, I think it's 140-weight cold press in a block so it doesn't warp. The tension on that, the sizing keeps that bead of water on the paper so that it doesn't just run off on my shoe. It stays there. I see it better if I work vertically.

Little Thunder

How much of your time do you spend doing on-site plein air as opposed to the studio?

Terpening

Not enough. Not enough. Not enough. I don't live out in the country anymore. Our little town in Texas has gotten kind of surrounded by the metroplex now, so it takes me an hour to get out of town, and I don't get out near enough. I try to take special trips every year to paint on location, but I would say probably less than 20 percent, 15 percent of my time is spent outside anymore. I'm sorry about that because I think you see, you train your eye so much better outside. You learn to match color so much better, and you learn how to paint faster out there. You don't get as lazy as you do in the studio.

Little Thunder

When you picked up oils, was that like a huge re-education process, in a way?

Terpening

Absolutely. Absolutely. I had worked in oils when I was younger and then I quit for this twenty-some years. My description of it, where watercolor was breathing and alive and this living medium, oil paints were gunky. They were just, they were messy, and they were thick. You would mix the color up, and you'd put it on the canvas, and it would just sit there. It didn't flow or bleed or blend. It was very frustrating. I did it only because I felt like I needed to, I really had to, and because I wanted a different effect. The watercolor paints from leaving white to the darkest color. Oil paint, you start with your darks and you go, and then you add the white at the last. I thought I was going to have to have a pseudonym. I really did. I thought, "Here's this gunky medium and this beautiful medium. Nobody's going to know it's the same person." When I would finish them to put them side by side, a style gets you (you don't get a style) because they looked like my work, both of them. (Laughter)

Little Thunder

What has been one of the special pleasures of working in oil?

Terpening

Every time I sit down, I think I'm going to be Monet, but that hasn't worked yet. (Laughter) I think the reworkability of it. In watercolor, you might finish a painting, and if you mess up on this little section, you're

going to tear it up and start the whole thing over. Then you're hoping you get that same fresh spontaneity back that you had the first time. With oil paints, if that little look is not right, when I'm doing a child or a cowboy, that little sparkle or that little uniqueness that I want, if it's not there, you can scrape it off and keep working at it until you finally get it right. Now, the downfall is that watercolor dries, and it's done. Oil paintings, you could do three or four paintings on top of each other. There's no way to quit. You have to know, "It stops now."

Little Thunder

Your husband and I happened to be talking about that. I understand that sometimes when you get to a place in a work where you feel you're too close to it, you'll put it in the closet. (Laughter) Tell us the gremlin story.

Terpening

Yes, yes, I think every artist has this. I have little gremlins I keep in the closet. I don't feed them. I'm kind of mean to them. When you finish a painting, you're looking either at the part that gave you the worst trouble, or you're just seeing the brush strokes. You no longer can see the overall—you have an idea in your mind. It may not be what came out, exactly. It doesn't mean it's wrong, but you're not content with it because it wasn't completely what was in your mind, so I stick them away in the closet for a while. Usually, I paint them upside down for a little bit. If you turn them upside down, you look at them differently. You look at them in a mirror because it reverses the image. If I'm getting too tight, I really do work them upside down and then stick them in the closet. Those little gremlins are probably the most talented little animals I know because sometimes they fix it. They either fix it and I go, "Not so bad," when I pull it out a week later, or they mess it up really good, and then I tear it up, burn it. (Laughter)

Little Thunder

Do you do a lot of preparatory sketching before you start a piece, or is it different with watercolors and oils?

Terpening

Hmm, I don't know. I hadn't thought about different ways between the two mediums. I do a lot of mental preparation. Everything I do is about a story. Once I get the story and the pieces together for the story, whether I've put my models together or I found a piece, like a bike leaning against a wall with the sun on it just right and I want to paint that, once I get the story that I want to tell and find the pieces, then most of my prep work is in my mind. It's like I'll sit there and stare at it and think about it and analyze it. If I'm pulling pieces together from photographs, then I do a lot more preliminary sketches in work. If I'm doing something that I've been on location, then of course I've got the plein air piece that gives me the true colors.

For the most part, I'll sit down and start working on a piece, which

sometimes gets me in trouble, but I'll want all of my excitement that I've got to go ahead on that piece. Now, if it's a commission piece, then I will do studies, like the library piece. If you look at a study, and then you look at the final large painting, you'll find quite a bit of difference, really, when you start looking at it. The idea is the same, but I got tired

M. Terpening and changed this or that or was more excited about it.

This is Mark talking. Whenever she does start a piece, though, she

Terpening always starts with a very detailed drawing.

Oh, on the paper, yes, yes. That's, to me, part of the final piece, not a prep work. I almost say it's like paint by number. I mean, I draw shapes. I don't draw line because, to me, a colored area or light or dark are shapes. The line doesn't tell me anything. A shape does, and it is very, very detailed. Then I'm absolutely free not to follow in the lines. It's there for me to fall back onto if I get lost, but I'm not worried about making it tight and detailed. In fact, it's just kind of there. Whether it shows up in the watercolor, the pencil drawings, or not doesn't bother me in the least because, to me, that's part of the whole idea of transparent medium. The pencil, I don't care. I'm a little more concerned in the oil painting, but it's a lot easier to lose those lines in an oil

Little Thunder painting, too.

Terpening *What is your creative process, starting with the time you get an idea?*

I think getting the idea, about as much as anything as far as the creative process, is finding a story, deciding on a story. I can't say deciding on a story. It's finding a story. What is it that intrigued me to get that emotion, that excitement that I want to paint? Then it's holding that feeling while you're working because you don't want to get tied up in the technical ability, or you're going to lose that spark and that life. I think that's what is the difference between maybe a flat piece of art and one that reaches out and hopefully grabs the viewer in. I think that's not as much the color of the paint as the color you felt when you were

Little Thunder putting the paint on.

In the process of trying to hold onto that feeling, you're making so many specific decisions. Can you talk about how painting is really such a

Terpening *problem-solving process?*

It is. Somebody once told me that an artist will make more decisions in an hour than executives do because you're thinking, always. Color value, push and pull. Is it working? What does it relate to the other parts? Am I getting the integrity there? Did the head get too big? Is the horse's tack correct? There's so many decisions and so many aspects from technical to artistic. Emotion, when it happens, when it falls out of

the brushes and it's starting to work, you can't help but be in awe of what's happening because it's beyond you. It's in some other dimension.

When you have the bad days and nothing is falling under those brushes just right, that's hard to keep the emotion happy. That's hard to keep working. Well, you keep working because you just know you're going to get it right in a minute, whether that's a good thing or not. That's probably when you should put it up and give it to the gremlins. Mark often says that he never knows who he's going to come home to. Is it going to be the good witch or the bad witch? (Laughter) It kind of

Little Thunder depends on how the paint went.

What is your creative routine? Do you prefer painting during the day, at

Terpening *night, every day?*

It was real hard when I first started to paint full time to be very disciplined at it. I decided it's got to be a job, and I've got to look at this like a job. So when Mark would go to work, I would start painting. Like I said, 50 percent of my job is seeing, so sometimes my artwork is going out to find a story, going out to find inspiration. I'll travel, drive around the country, travel up and down cute little towns, see Victorian houses. That's all part of it, but I do it disciplined as much as I can, nine to five. Actually, I do business in the mornings, so it's more like ten to six.

Mark knows enough to warn me when he comes home. He calls, and he goes, "On my way," and I try to stop. I'll try to take the weekends off, too. That rarely happens, but at least we are good about trying to take Sundays off, anyway, because I think you do need some rest time. As the business has grown, all of a sudden you have shows to go to, things to attend, giclees to get out, business, framing. There's this whole other concept that's part of the job, too. That takes up more time than I would

Little Thunder like it to. I'd like to just be production staff. (Laughter)

We mentioned that art is really a two-person job. Can you talk a bit

Terpening *about what Mark has contributed to the art business?*

I couldn't do it without him. I really couldn't. He's been there from the beginning, and he has probably more faith in me than I even do. He just, he has an eye. He has a great artistic eye, but more than that, he's got a layman's eye, as well. He can look at it where I'm stuck in the brush strokes. He can look at what I'm doing from the finished piece as a person off the street would see it, which is who I'm painting for, just people to love it. He also knows when I'm not doing my best because he knows my potential, and he won't let that go, either.

He's very, very honest, and you have to have that honesty. You just have

to have that honesty. He says that sometimes he's more honest than others, not that I'm a temperamental person, but… (Laughter) He's probably my best PR, too, because I would rather be alone with paints than anywhere else, and Mark loves people. He's great at meeting people and explaining what I do. People come up to me so often and say, "He really is proud of you and your art." That's such a neat thing to

Little Thunder hear.

Terpening *Looking back on your career so far, what is a particularly memorable honor or award that you've received?*

I think being invited into some of these museum shows like the Prix de West and the Autry and the Gilcrease Rendezvous, I think that's an award in itself, where they've chosen you and asked you to be a part of this exclusive group because they can only hold so many. I think that's probably a huge award, particularly the Prix de West. The Autry award, the one that I got for watercolor, to me, was extremely important because it was a watercolor award, number one. People have a tendency to think of watercolors and paintings, "I'll buy paintings. Watercolor is this little thing off on its own." It has a little bit of prejudice against it, even though I think most people really understand it is a harder medium. I think getting that, and because I was the only woman who has won an award there so far at the Autry Museum, that was very prestigious and

Little Thunder important to my heart.

Terpening *It's kind of amusing because you mentioned you found out quickly you weren't a teacher, but there's obviously a lot of enthusiasm in your voice when you talk about the possibility of teaching a class and when you've taught at this point in your life. When you teach at this point in your life, what does that bring to your artwork?*

That's interesting because teaching, now, I find incredibly enjoyable. Usually I'm teaching adults or older students that have a love for art and they want to learn. That's so exciting to be able to give them this and to watch them, just like sponges, sucking this up. That's terribly exciting. It's amazing how much I learn from it. In that, the art changes, too. When you have to verbalize things that you do almost automatically, because I've done them for so long, that cues you in a little bit about, "Oh, and you're doing it because why?" and "Maybe if you try this…" I think it does advance the art. Also, I learn from the students as much, too, by their questions or maybe a technique that they're experimenting

Little Thunder with, and I'm going, "I like that." It's very much a two-way street.

Terpening *Looking back on your career, what was a turning point in the road for you where you maybe could've gone one way but you made this choice to go a different way?*

M. Terpening My student teaching. That was a big one when I decided I had to do that. (Laughter) I'm thinking.

Terpening I would think that your decision to start working in oil, as well, has been a big change, and how you did it when you first introduced them.

That's true. That's true because that was something I felt at the time I was kind of forced to do. Have learned to love the oils as much as the watercolor. There's still that little bit of pivotalness there when I realize, because they paint so differently, if I would stay in one medium only, then maybe I could push the envelope harder and faster than going back and forth. And yet, there's things I want to say in both. The story tells me which medium it wants to be set in.

Little Thunder I think if I had stayed in the watercolor exclusively, I couldn't have risen to the top because I would have had to balance the watercolor with either another job or different things that the oils opened the door for. At the same time, the watercolors, being a little bit more limited medium, opened the doors for the oils, as well. I'm trying to think of something negative that happened because I know there were plenty. (Laughs)

Terpening *I do have a question about a low point in your career.*

M. Terpening Yes, this is what I was trying to think about. "What is the low point?" There were a few. Help me with this one a little bit.

Terpening The watercolor AWS award that you didn't get.

Oh, this was kind of interesting. I don't know if it's the same one that Mark was talking about. There are certain watercolor organizations that are real prestigious, the signature organizations, and one of them was American Watercolor Society. The first year I applied to that—I still do not have my AWS signature. I have National Watercolor, but not AWS. The first year I decided to apply for it, I was pretty new into watercolor, actually. A fine artist that I cannot think whose name it is right now. Hopefully, I can get this in a little bit. Anyway, that artist, they had been a judge of AWS and also had a signature status. When I got my rejection notice, he came over, and I was telling him about it. He says, "I want you to go out, and I want you to buy yourself something wonderful, just wonderful! Go buy something that you're going to love. And next year, when you get your rejection notice, go buy something else wonderful. Do that until one day you'll be in, and you won't be buying yourself anything wonderful anymore. It will be your reward for this and make it not so bad!" (Laughter)

So I did. I went out and I bought a little fancy, limited edition teddy bear that I had my eye on. I named him Alliwishis because all I wish is that I was in that show really bad. I still look at that teddy bear going, "Uh, not
Little Thunder so much." (Laughter)

Terpening *What's been one of the high points? We might have touched on them.*

The high points, probably, like I said, I think getting into the Prix de West because it was kind of my education. That was a high point, getting the award at Autry. The Gilcrease, being invited into the Gilcrease. They're just an amazing museum. Since I grew up in Oklahoma, my early adulthood, these were the museums that I would go to, to see art. That was my incredible education, to have such wonderful
Little Thunder museums in this state, just wonderful museums. The Philbrook, also.

What's it like now to think here you are at OSU, you came to the Edmon
Terpening *Low Library, I'm sure, numerous times as a student…*

Little Thunder Oh, I practically lived here, yes.

…and now you have this painting commissioned to hang in the library,
Terpening *an original oil.*

In a way, I'm probably more timid about it than a lot of the other places because it's going to be here. I'm going to have to look at it every time I come. We lived off campus when we were in school, Mark and I, and the library, particularly the third floor, was like second home to me. I'd come in between classes, and there was a carrel in one corner that I think I slept on most of the time. This was my go-to place, which is the big reason I wanted this painting to come here, because it's like bringing a painting home, and I wanted to hang a painting in my house. That's probably one of my biggest honors is to have it here. I expected it was going to be in an office somewhere, and to see where they're going to
Little Thunder hang it was breathtaking. It really was. It's just exciting.

We're going to look at a preparatory painting for the painting that's going to be officially unveiled January 26. This is the preparatory painting for the oil painting that's going to be hanging here in the library that we've commissioned from you. It's called Just One More
Terpening Chapter. *Can you talk a bit about how you got the idea for this piece?*

Well, the only stipulation I had, other than size because it had a particular place it was going to fit, was the library really wanted a cowboy reading. That left everything open to me, so I was thinking chuck wagon, cook reading. No, that wasn't quite right. Cowboy by the fire, in the evening by the campfire, and I thought that kind of insinuated

that he put reading off until the last minute, and that's not exactly the way I always was. I always said, "Let me have one more chapter, Mom, one more chapter," every time I was reading at night. I wanted it to be this cowboy who is a working cowboy. He's on a ranch; his horse is a cow pony. He's out there, but he's taking a break in the middle of the day, and he's reading, absorbed in this book in a whole other place, another world. The horse is obviously ready to go back to work, and he's

Little Thunder saying, "Just one more chapter, just one more chapter."

Terpening *I think that's great because the popular idea of you're either a man of action or you're a man who reads...*

Yes, absolutely, and none of the cowboys that I talked to on the ranches ever downplayed books or stories. This is also important to them. A lot of them are poets. One of the cowboys, we were out on a ranch, and we were taking a break to get something, and he pulls a book of poetry out

Little Thunder of his pocket and starts reading. I wanted to show that, as well, in this.

Terpening *Did you use a working cowboy as a model?*

Yes, I did. Yes, I did. This young man, that's what he does for a living. That's all he ever wanted to do. He grew up on a ranch and works there

Little Thunder now. And that is his horse, and he trained it.

Terpening *Wearing his own outfit.*

Little Thunder Wearing his own clothes, yes.

Terpening *What are some of the differences between this and the painting that we'll hopefully be capturing on video later?*

When I did this study, trying to get my first-impression ideas and also to show what the larger piece is going to be like, to see if it was going to be something that they wanted that would work with them, I had the constraints of this size, which I think was in proportion. But when I started blowing it up—you can only do a figure so large and still be comfortable, and I wanted him to be overpowered with the tree. In proportion, I think the figure is a little bit smaller to the tree in the real painting. I opened up the landscape so that it was obviously the plains, Oklahoma, as opposed to anywhere else.

I think that's probably the biggest difference is the changes there. There was a linear tangent (a little technical here) where I've got a branch that's coming kind of close to the horse's head. In the small study, it was a directional object that I thought would work, and in the large painting it just didn't. It was just too awkward, and we decided to take that out. I

say “we” because Mark had a lot to do with that, too, as he walked in with his fresh eyes and said, “No, no.” (Laughter) We brought the colors up a lot more, too, because when you start enlarging things, you’ve got more color play to work with.

Little Thunder

The color on the blanket of the horse is definitely much brighter in the bigger painting.

Terpening

And, actually, the clouds have a little more color in them and brighter, too.

Little Thunder

I think it’s a nice choice of an orange book…

Terpening

Thank you, very good. (Laughter)

Little Thunder

…and the sycamore tree. What are some of the, like lovegrass, some of the things that you associate with Oklahoma landscape?

Terpening

The grasses, I’m not going to say I got technical about this, but I know about bluestem and tall, some of the grasses, like you were saying, the sweet grasses and some of these things that I wanted in there. I wanted to show that this isn’t a groomed pasture. This is the way it was, or is today, still. And the sycamore tree, the sycamores have always been my favorite tree. They’re just big and mighty, and this one was just exactly the way it is in the painting. We saw it, propped up there, and it was like, “Okay, story told.”

Little Thunder

Your title, I think, is very clever. Do you spend a lot of time thinking about your titles?

Terpening

My titles will either come immediately when I’m in the process of doing a piece or when I get the story. I mean, it’s there from the first paint stroke on. That’s the way it was with this one. I knew exactly—well, no. I had one or two titles. As soon as I put the horse in there, I knew exactly what it was going to be because the horse is so ready to leave, and he isn’t. That one came about midstream. If a title doesn’t come immediately, it’s like pulling teeth. Sometimes we get everybody we know, and we sit down in front of the painting and go, “Okay, this one’s got to be titled. Let’s have another glass of wine and figure it out.” (Laughter)

Little Thunder

For me, your paintings often of these normal everyday things, they’re sort of like that moment that’s a special opportunity. It’s a routine moment, but there’s an opportunity for a door to open there in that moment.

Terpening

M. Terpening Thank you. Thank you. I feel like I'm grabbing a moment in time and trying to hold onto it forever, and you caught it. If you could read that from it, I appreciate that because that's what I'm trying to do. It's your story I'm telling, and I'm just stealing it and trying to put it down on canvas.

Terpening I think a lot of her stories, to your point, she said earlier, some of the landscapes or some of the architecturals are portraits but without the people. The people, you expect something to happen. You know something is going to happen. She captures, sometimes, a particular moment in time that you can tell what's happening. I like that you said it is the everyday, but her paintings help you see the uniqueness in our everyday lives that we sometimes may overlook.

Little Thunder Making the ordinary extraordinary.

Terpening *Great. Well, anything else you'd like to add?*

M. Terpening I don't think so.

Terpening What an honor it is to…

Little Thunder It is an honor. It is an honor to be doing this. I was kind of taken aback when you said, "Do an oral history," so this was exciting. (Laughs)

Terpening *Well, we are looking forward to the ribbon cutting on January 26. Thank you both.*

Thanks, thank you. I'm very, very honored and excited.

------- *End of interview* **-------**