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Oral history interview with Lenore Tawney,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Lenore Tawney on 1971 June 23. The interview was conducted by Paul Cummings for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose. This is a rough transcription that may include typographical errors.

Interview

PAUL CUMMINGS: It's the 23rd of June, 1971, Paul Cummings talking to Lenore Tawney. All I have is a year, no place.

LENORE TAWNEY: I was born in Ohio, in Lorain on Lake Erie, just outside of Cleveland.

MR. CUMMINGS: Is that a large town?

MS. TAWNEY: No, it was fifty thousand when I was there about, and it has a shipyard and a steel mill and that was it.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you go to school there and grow up and live there for a long time?

MS. TAWNEY: I left there when I was about twenty and went to Chicago. My brother was in Chicago and -

MR. CUMMINGS: But did you go to primary school and high school and everything there?

MS. TAWNEY: High school. I didn't go beyond high school and I worked.

MR. CUMMINGS: What kind of things did you do?

MS. TAWNEY: I worked in a factory.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh really, doing what?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, it was sewing. Just sewing something on men's suits, you know, nobody knows that. Then I went to Chicago and I just worked. I was a waitress and I took something at the Art Institute and -

MR. CUMMINGS: Were you involved with the University of Illinois at one point?

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, I got married and my husband died and I went down there because his family, his father was a professor of philosophy at the university there. He died and I went down there, of course he was buried there and then I went to the University of Illinois at that time for a year and a half. I studied what is that, that kind of therapy they use in hospitals where you teach -

MR. CUMMINGS: Occupational therapy?

MS. TAWNEY: Yes. It was the first course they had given there and I studied half medicine, you know, and all about the body and you had cadavers, and the other half painting and drawing and all that, all kinds of things. Then I came to the point where I had to go into the hospital and I went up to the hospital with this group, but I couldn't stand it because of the remembering of my husband. I had been with him two months while he was in the hospital. So I couldn't do that. So I went into the art side. First I went to Mexico for six months, in a way because my mother-in-law and father-in-law wanted - I was their child. So then I went back to Chicago and went to the Institute of Design, you know Moholy-Nagy was there.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you pick that?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, I had friends who wanted me to go to the Institute, who were teachers there and all. I was attracted by the Institute of Design, I suppose because of that feeling of something newer and more exciting, more vital. At that time Moholy was there and Archipenko. And I studied with Archipenko, drawing. He just taught drawing there and then he asked me and two others to go to Woodstock for the summer.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, yes, he had a place there.

MS. TAWNEY: So I studied with him that whole summer and that was a real turning point for me because,

working all day, you know, you really just thought about high points, when you're just completely with what you're doing. It's like almost ecstasy sometimes. And when I went back to Chicago, I wanted to do that. But I had bought a building, you know like this sort of, all run down, and I was fixing that. It seemed that I had to devote my whole self to sculpture, I couldn't do it half way, so I gave it up.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you were a year, two years at the Institute of Design?

MS. TAWNEY: One year. Oh maybe a few semesters after that but -

MR. CUMMINGS: Basically one. Did you study with Moholy?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, he came in and taught us one day. The drawing class really released me from the feeling I couldn't draw. He said, "You can all write your name, can't you?" And we said, "Yes." So, he had this big board. He said "Write your names," so we wrote them down of course. Then he said, "Next week I want you to draw your name as you've written it." And he showed us how to measure angles. This was a very freeing thing. Then he also held up a string and he dropped the string and we were all to do that and draw what happened. Well, he was quite marvelous.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what was school like, because there were lots of energetic people there?

MS. TAWNEY: That was when it was in its peak there. After he died. He died when I was there and [Serge] Chermayeff came in, it changed because it was Moholy's baby and [James] Prestini was there, Harry Callahan the photographer was there, all of those, Emerson Woelffer was my teacher, he's still a good friend of mine, went to California. All that, you know it was just going high speed.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's interesting. Roy Gussow was there at one point. Was he there when you were there?

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, in fact he was also invited to go that summer with Archipenko. And then he met Mary there, his wife. The other person was Dione Guffey who is the art editor at J. Walter Thompson.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's fantastic. I'll have to do a tape with Dione and then I'll have everybody, because I did one with Roy. Well, what was your decision about sculpture?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, of course it was a very personal thing. I couldn't give my whole self to it because I still needed to have a personal life and I felt I couldn't do both, you know. When you have a relationship with someone you do that, you can't do anything, at least that's how I was. So I gave it up and I began to, oh, I bought a secondhand loom and a friend taught me how to put on a warp and I began to do weaving.

MR. CUMMINGS: What led you to buying the loom?

MS. TAWNEY: I was interested in weaving and ceramics, always, you know a long time. But weaving especially, more than ceramics, although ceramics was closer to sculpture because we used clay that summer. Well, so I started weaving, but not much.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you study with anybody?

MS. TAWNEY: No. The first things I did got into the *Good Design* show [organized by the Museum of Modern Art for the Merchandise Mart, Chicago, 1950], the first one they had here. They were in New York in a window. And what else happened. After two years I went to - I was in Europe a year and a half, I lived there.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, let's go back for a second before we get into all that. Was your family interested in art, did you have art?

MS. TAWNEY: No, never had any.

MR. CUMMINGS: Books or did you read a lot?

MS. TAWNEY: Nothing, never had any touch of art in Lorain, Ohio [laughs]. And my family isn't interested in art except as I have done it and become known, you see. They read articles and they're proud of me, that's about it, and they like some things.

MR. CUMMINGS: But it's all still -

MS. TAWNEY: They're very different. I have a brother who's an engineer and a sister who's a teacher and another brother who was a sportswriter, and he became general manager of the Chicago Cubs.

MR. CUMMINGS: What was his name?

MS. TAWNEY: Jimmy Gallagher, he's still in the baseball commissioner's office in New York, now.

MR. CUMMINGS: So they're all off in totally different worlds.

MS. TAWNEY: Very, very different.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, what brought you or sent you to Europe, how did that happen?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, that was a very personal thing. I had to get away from a person. I mean he was married and I didn't want to go on with it so I left and I just couldn't come back. I stayed a year and a half. I had an apartment in Paris and I traveled from there and went all over, I went to Africa on one trip. I went with Merry Renk on this trip, she's a jeweler in San Francisco. She was in Paris and I bought a little car, and I asked her to go so she went. So we had a wonderful trip down through France, Spain, Africa, oh, I've been all over the world.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you like traveling?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, I guess I do.

MR. CUMMINGS: Some people like to just go someplace but you like to move around.

MS. TAWNEY: I like to be for a certain period to get the feeling. I was in the Near East for two and a half months, in '56 that was, well, I had friends at the American University at Beirut and that's how that happened. So I was all around there in Damascus. I have some of the pots you saw downstairs, they're from Damascus.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you do any work when you were in Europe that time?

MS. TAWNEY: No, I didn't do any. When I came back I began again to weave. By then my house was all finished.

MR. CUMMINGS: This was what, about when?

MS. TAWNEY: '52. And I did some things and there was some big show in Chicago where all the weavers, Jack Larsen, Boris Kroll, everybody was showing at this place. So I took half a booth with some friends. That was the first time I met Jack Larsen and we went to parties and we had lots of fun. I got cards, people wanted me to send this and that and I just didn't do it. I decided Jack was doing it and Boris Kroll and I don't have to do this kind of thing. So I decided I had to do something more my own, that was in '54, that's when that happened. Well, then someone told me that this great Finnish weaver of tapestries was at Penland and I should go. So I went for two months, it was six weeks, I studied with her in the fall of '54, her name was Martta Taipale, she's dead now. Well, that was the beginning of my real career, I feel. Then I came back and I began to work.

MR. CUMMINGS: But you were then still in Chicago?

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, I was in Chicago. I came here the end of '57. But in the meantime I had gained some, I don't know, I became known. And I was asked to be on this thing, when they had that first conference of craftsmen [Textile Design Panel at the American Craftsmen's Council's First National Conference of Craftsmen, Asilomar, CA, 1957], because someone couldn't go, they asked me and I said, "Oh, I couldn't, you know, I can't speak." He said, "Well, just five minutes" - David Campbell. I said, "Well, if you only mean only five minutes I'll do it," and that was what I did. But it was very controversial, what I said and everybody got sore and angry and took sides and I just said that we had to follow our own inner being. Well, some people got confused, you know with their pure inner essence, with all this kind of neurotic things that are built up inside and they thought that's what I meant. Well, I couldn't handle that, so Jack Larsen rebutted some of that. I was, you see, I was too touched myself, I had—well, anyway, that was fun. I enjoyed that too, I did a wild dance around the pool one night, I do wild dances sometimes.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you got to know Jack Larsen very early, that was just sort of like when he got going.

MS. TAWNEY: That was when we both started beginning.

MR. CUMMINGS: Yeah. Well, did you work with him on projects ever?

MS. TAWNEY: No, I never worked with Jack.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you work with any of those?

MS. TAWNEY: No, I did it on my own. I didn't do anything. I never would teach. I just felt I had to go my way quietly. Actually it was like finding out myself.

MR. CUMMINGS: But you've never done any commercial designs or anything?

MS. TAWNEY: No. No, I never did. And of course my work has been controversial too, because I did those open things which [Dorothy] Liebes just couldn't stand, and a lot of people get scared when they see open things that they might fall apart, you know they're not strong and hard and like that. Well, by the time I was going on to this other work, which simply arrived, I didn't change my work, it just changed. Then there were people who wanted those open things, and I wasn't doing them and I couldn't do them anymore, I was on to something else.

MR. CUMMINGS: You can't go back.

MS. TAWNEY: You can't go back when you're in this. If you're working for the market and you have to work—I had this income, so I didn't have to do that. I was very fortunate from that point of view. I mean the point of view of going on to what is happening to one's self. Well, anyway they all changed and it all became this black and white and it became the forms and they went up. They were going to great heights and I thought they'll never be shown because they're too high. I worked about six months, oh, I worked just day and night, it was just flowing like a river. So they were fifteen feet and I went up to twenty-seven feet high. I did one that I finished in a hoist, which was three floors. I was still in the one down on the river.

Incidentally down there I was with all these artists like Ellsworth Kelly, Indiana, Jack Youngerman – they were all in this—in fact in the same building I was with Youngerman and Agnes Martin and then next door was Indiana, his name then was Robert Clark, and Ellsworth Kelly was down the block and Rauschenberg and Johns were on Front Street, and Freddie Mitchell was there, all these people were right down there.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you know it's very interesting because you were one of the few weavers who's been very involved with painters.

MS. TAWNEY: Well, I was going around you know, I looked at all the art, art shows, a whole lot was happening then. It was just then Rauschenberg had his first show, shortly after I was in New York. All that was happening and there was a whole lot going on. So I was involved in that.

MR. CUMMINGS: Why did you want to leave Chicago, or did you just want to come to New York?

MS. TAWNEY: I felt in Chicago I was sort of held. You know when you're in a place a long time, your friends hold you into the sort of mold, they think you're this and you can't drag yourself out of it. I came here and I took a loft which was, oh, a terrible loft. It was in the building Youngerman was living in. But I took it and I left everything in Chicago. I just brought a couple things. I brought this and a refrigerator and my cat and my loom. And I didn't know whether I'd stay but I stayed. I immediately felt free. I just felt I had –

MR. CUMMINGS: I was going to ask you, what was it like living in Chicago that time?

MS. TAWNEY: There was a lot of activity with this Midwest Designer-Craftsmen, you see. I was in that and I was in a show at the Art Institute, but that was very limited you know.

MR. CUMMINGS: Even though it was a large city there was still not the ability to do what you wanted to do.

MS. TAWNEY: I didn't know what I wanted, it was a very vague and nebulous thing. I didn't know for a long time. I didn't have any real reason for leaving except it was an inner feeling that I wanted a higher goal, you know. My work is from that, the whole comes out through some kind of feeling.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, in making things on the loom, did you just work on the loom with the materials or did you pick out things ahead of time or in drawings or something like that?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, when I first started I had to make drawings because that's what I was doing, making what you call tapestries. It'd be like you make a drawing. It's actually just a sketch, on a big piece of wrapping paper with pencil, you pin it underneath and it's like a scale. I would put in my own colors as I went and that's how that was. Well, then when I began doing them more freely, without a cartoon and leaving things hanging off, it had to become three-dimensional. That's where my sculpture, sculptural sense came in and then these big woven forms became sculptural, very tall, and then I used the metal to hold some of the forms and one day I just went over there without the thought, I just touched it and I bent it so it was a rounded form. You know things just happen like that.

MR. CUMMINGS: So it's really a lot of intuition and then a sensibility of the materials and things too?

MS. TAWNEY: I don't know what it is. It's just what comes, like if you feel a cat, you know you touch a cat. It's just like that, I think. It's something between you and that piece of work, you know.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, it's interesting that you really only studied with someone for that short period of time.

MS. TAWNEY: It just seems to me this all was inside of me from all these years of not doing it and it just burst

out.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you feel bound by any of the normal traditions of weaving?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, that was because I didn't study and no one told me you can't do this. So I did those things and it was thrilling. You know the first time you do something that you think is just going to fall apart when you take it off the loom – that was the first open one. But I thought, well, I don't have to show it to anybody. That made me feel a little bit freer in working. You know this feeling that somebody's going to see it is binding, it holds you.

MR. CUMMINGS: There's always some kind of limitation.

MS. TAWNEY: At least I feel that. Don't you think that people feel that?

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you always feel that somebody's looking over your shoulder.

MS. TAWNEY: But you have to lose that completely and then you're free. Then you're in touch with that inner thing that wants its own way and this is the only way original work is done. I mean it comes if you let it and I think everyone has the possibility if they get down deep enough, to do what is their own. The trouble I feel with craftsmen, so many, is they look at other people's work instead of looking into themselves. So I'm not really interested in crafts because there's so much imitation and looking at other people's work so that it's very depressing. That's why I went to painting and sculpture.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's very interesting, I've never heard it expressed that way. But I've often wondered why the crafts are so sort of inbred and maybe that's the reason. Many of them just tend to look and look and it becomes a little circle.

MS. TAWNEY: I suppose the necessity to earn a living is part of that, and I know I'm more fortunate than many because I didn't have to think about making my living out of it.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you mentioned David Campbell, did you know him well?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, yes, I did. I was in the first show at this museum with a couple of my open works. I liked David very much, and he was there when I had my big show. In fact he died just after that show opened.

MR. CUMMINGS: That was the 1962 show? [*Woven Forms*, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, 1963.] I'm curious about what kind of a person he was. So many people have mentioned him but very piecemeal.

MS. TAWNEY: Well, I was not an intimate friend. But he was always very full of life and a very genial person, you know, and an architect. He was an architect who helped Mrs. Webb. He was her second, her right-hand man and he became known to all the craftsmen in the whole country. It was after his death, they went into that [inaudible] and he did a great—at first, you know they asked me to have a one-man show, and I had plenty of work for a one-man show, but they just decided they couldn't give a one-man show.

MR. CUMMINGS: Why was that, was it too difficult?

MS. TAWNEY: It just wasn't done then. You see it was too much of an honor or something. So then they asked other people and that's how it became five. But I had forty or more pieces and I had all the downstairs. It was quite a beautiful show, too bad you didn't see it. They were shown first at the World's Fair in Seattle, they asked me to show out there, and then they were shown in the Chicago Art Institute. In fact these works that I thought wouldn't be shown at all were immediately shown. I hardly had them finished when they went out there and then on the way back they were in Chicago and then they had this show here.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did they get to Seattle, who got you into that show?

MS. TAWNEY: Henry Gallery, who's the man there?

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh yeah.

MS. TAWNEY: You know. He asked me to be in this. They had a big show of craftsmen. They had Voukos and that other man, what's his name, John Mason, and they had this woman who does tessarae, she's at the Betty Parsons Gallery, she just had a show there of sculpture. Well they had a tremendous big show and they had taken down the old masters and put up this show. I went out to see that they got them hung. They hung this twenty-seven foot piece. I made it that height because that was the number—27 South Street—and they were putting me out, so that's why I made it twenty-seven feet high. I fought in the courts to stay there but they still put me out. That was before we were allowed to live in lofts. So that's how it was in Seattle.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you know one of the things that is interesting, some of the first things that I have seen photos of had kind of landscape feelings about them. Is that true? Was I seeing them in the right way?

MS. TAWNEY: They came out like that. They were done mainly – I began just to do them. You know, it's like it came out from the inside as I worked, I had to keep on with this until it was finished. You can't just start a thing and go away for six weeks and come back because then you're not in that. You have to just go with it till it's done. So there were landscapes in those first ones.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you work on many things, did you have a number of looms going?

MS. TAWNEY: No, I just had two. I usually worked on one loom.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did all the new materials and things get involved?

MS. TAWNEY: I never use new materials.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I mean the things people haven't used in weaving like the feathers and –

MS. TAWNEY: Well, birds have always been in my work, even in the first, you know. And I did birds in Chicago and I began to put feathers in some of these, just touches, because it's the essence too, you know birds and feathers, it's almost the same. So feathers started very early. In fact in the very first open piece I used feathers, that was the first time, way back in '55, I think that was. And this first piece it was two trees, a black and a white, see the black and white was there too, these things, it's very strange when you look back. These trees came like intertwined and on the branches were nests and birds and it was my family. The trees, the black and white, were mother and father and the birds in the nest were my brothers and sisters and there was a nest with eggs, you know, dead brother. That was the first time I used feathers.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's interesting, but is there always a meaning?

MS. TAWNEY: They become clear later. I never am clear about it, except I knew *that* was a family tree.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I mean subsequently.

MS. TAWNEY: Well, later I look at that and I see there's that black and white intertwined and in my woven forms I was going like this with black and white too, it's like the opposites, actually. One of my friends said this show—the black and white woven forms—that's yin and yang and you see I was trying to get it together. It's as if I'm trying to integrate my inner, you know make it one. This is what I see now, but then I –

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you are very interested in oriental thought and philosophy, aren't you?

MS. TAWNEY: Yeah.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did that start, I mean when did that happen?

MS. TAWNEY: After my husband died I went down to Urbana, and I lived in my father-in-law's home. He had a big library, being a professor of philosophy, and in that library I found two books of [Swami] Vivekananda from that time when he was in Chicago at the Congress of Religions and out of that came many volumes of his talks. And these were two volumes that I read and that was the first time. I was brought up Catholic, very devout and when I went to Chicago, after about a year of reading Schopenhauer one day the whole thing – it was as if I vomited it all and I was thrown into this sea with nothing to hold on to. It was a terrible loss and I felt as if I had nothing to hold to. I found nothing until I found that Vivekananda, that was some time later.

MR. CUMMINGS: What about him appealed to you, what was it?

MS. TAWNEY: What appealed to me was that they didn't say we're right and everybody's wrong. They said all religions are going to the same place, they're simply on a different path. This appealed to me, they weren't exclusive in their right to god or whatever they were going towards.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, that's a terrific spiritual change, isn't it?

MS. TAWNEY: Yeah. Well, I feel I had religious feelings of spirit but there was nothing to hold it to, to hold to until I found Vivekananda. I took those books and I stole them. He never looked at them. He later died, I know he never missed them, and the library was dispersed and I had those and I still have. Then in Chicago before I came here I used to read this book every night before I went to bed. And I would read it in the morning too. It was a way of going into myself. The lake also was a great inspiration to me. I would get up early and run out to the lake before I had breakfast in the winter and run up and down there. It was wonderful.

MR. CUMMINGS: Did you live by the lake then?

MS. TAWNEY: I was right there, about a half a block from the lake.

MR. CUMMINGS: Whereabouts?

MS. TAWNEY: I was on the near north side. I had a house in what they called the Gold Coast then, it was near the Drake Hotel, just north of that and off Lake Shore Drive. So I'd just run over to the Drive and go down. And sometimes when I was over there and the snow was falling it was like I was in a world of my own. You couldn't hear a sound, it was all white and there I saw the birds too. I saw many birds and then in the summer I saw three birds going as if they were on a ship, on this board. And I had a friend who had a sailboat and we were always out in the boat on weekends and sailed across the lake. He was a great cook and he'd make sandwiches, all different kinds and we'd have aquavit, champagne, everything. Oh, it was quite a thing there. And I left all that, I left him, I left Chicago, my house. I just thought I can't let this house burden me.

MR. CUMMINGS: But did you find similar things in New York because on South Street you said you could see over the bridge and into Brooklyn and things like that. Did that in a way have a feeling of Chicago-

MS. TAWNEY: Well, I wanted to be near the water, that was the first thing that I thought. Where do I want to be in New York, you know, New York is so big, so I thought I wanted to be near the water and that's how I happened to get down there. Someone said, "I know somebody who has this building right on the river." Well, I was in that building with Youngerman and Agnes Martin for only seven months and then I moved around because it was too noisy. And when I saw this enormous space in this loft, 25 feet by 80, 14 foot ceiling, skylights, three floors.

So there I was right on the river, looking at the river and the boats and the lights of Brooklyn. Behind me there was only this wall and there all these pigeons and birds with wings flapping and outside were the gulls on the river. So I had birds all the time, the birds in the back and they were on the windowsills and then the gulls and the boats. It was as if New York was at my back. Then in the winter you saw every change of the weather down there, you were more aware of it than when you're uptown because you'd see the ice and the wind and it would come through my skylights some of it. I had a stove for heat and sometimes when the wind was blowing hard, I couldn't get the fire going and it was very cold. But it was beautiful. I had the floors sanded and it was like a dance floor. There's a film of this.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, there is?

MS. TAWNEY: Not released yet, but this friend [Maryette] Charlton who made a film of Loren MacIver and of [Frederick] Kiesler, she made a film of my work at that time. But she's been working on it for ten years almost. She wants to put sound with it now, so that's what's delaying her.

MR. CUMMINGS: Who's that? I don't know her. What's her name?

MS. TAWNEY: Maryette Charlton. Her only released film is MacIver, which is in two parts and I think that she's doing another Keisler, since he died. She did one before his death, a short and now she's doing another. And she's doing another one of E. E. Cummings's wife Marion [Morehouse]. Well, she died too, so she's doing this film of her, and she did a film of a Japanese monastery which has just been shown. It's first showing. I didn't see it, but the Japanese Zen master was here and I know him, I met him in Kyoto. Now I'm a member of the Zen Study Society here. I go there a lot.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, how did you get involved with the Willard Gallery?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, I'll tell you, after this show at the Museum, I was thrown out of my loft. I bought a loft building and moved into that and I couldn't pay and two months later I moved out, I sold it and moved to Beekman. Then all this work was sent to, they wanted to show it in Europe, in Zurich, the weavings. So we had this show in Europe in '64 and I went, that was Sheila Hicks and Claire Ziesler, and myself. Big show, and we sold some and it made a terrific impression over there on Max Bill and some of the people who were connected with the old Bauhaus and when I came back that was when they had this First World Conference in New York, that summer [First World Congress of Craftsmen, 1964. Sponsored by American Craftsmen's]. Well, I didn't take part. They asked me. That was that same thing. I was the only woman who was invited, but I declined. So they had a Finnish woman. I don't like to talk. But I gave a party [inaudible] for the weavers of the world. I had a terrific party, down there and everybody came.

And that summer I went with these people to New Jersey to a factory that did labels with the Jacquard loom and I was so impressed by this and thrilled by this. The loom was as wide as this room almost and it did twenty labels at a time, each one with little spools and all these threads that went up, up and they were all going like this, it was terrific like music going. Well, I couldn't get over that, so I began to make drawings of this sort from this. At first I made drawings of the way this went and I went and studied it on my own at Cooper Union. I was looking at

some of the things they did and the patterns and I began to do my drawings. I'll show you some. I don't know if you've seen them. They're all the way the Jacquard works, that is sort of [inaudible].

Well, there I was, in the summer I was doing these drawings and in the fall when I came back I continued to do the drawings but I began to do them on—I then felt that I wanted to do them with paper. I was also doing things I'd send to my friends, you know, this is like throw aways. I began to make postcards with printed lettering on them. So I bought an old, very beautiful old book, Italian, with beautiful paper, a rare book, so I used those pages and made my drawings on these. That was the beginning of my collages. They just began in this kind of way. Then I began to cover boxes with this paper and put things in the boxes. And that's how everything started and I worked a couple of years just doing these. I had hundreds of them.

Well, then a dealer saw them out on Long Island, Benson, he just died, but there's the Benson Gallery and he wanted to give me a show, and so I said okay. So I began to frame some and then Katharine Kuh saw them and she thought they were marvelous and bought one and then she told Marian Willard. By then my show was all arranged with Benson for the summer of '67 and Marian came down and liked it, offered me a show. By then Benson wanted me for himself, he wanted to take me to Europe, I mean my work, and he wanted me to be exclusively his. So I had a couple of months of terrible worry, but I finally said I would have the show at Willard also. I had enough for two full shows with over a hundred things in each. And I showed weavings out there and weavings in town. And I sold quite a few. People bought.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, had people collected many things before of the weavings, were they collectible or were they difficult for individuals?

MS. TAWNEY: Well yes, I sold quite a number. I didn't sell a terrific lot of them because I wasn't really in that market, but people did buy them. Right from the start people bought. Certain people, you know you touch something in other people and that's what my collages do. Some people don't like them at all because they take a certain amount of looking at, and you have to look at it a while and if you just want to take a glance then this isn't for those people.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you know, it's interesting, because I remember there's one out there with the round, little line drawings, the lines -

MS. TAWNEY: That was one of those first.

MR. CUMMINGS: There are a lot of them that have lines on them, aren't there?

MS. TAWNEY: Very many, yes, lines. Well, they're like the threads, I feel there, in fact I did some of these drawings that look so much like threads that people think they are threads.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh really, that's wonderful.

MS. TAWNEY: But I didn't do them with that in mind, I was just doing these and some of these drawings I have to be so concentrated in order to keep within my outline. I make an outline and then I do my drawing to go past the line, I have to be with this line, like this, it's like meditation, you have to be with the line all the time, you can't be thinking of anything because if you think you'll go right on outside your line. It was very wonderful these things. I'd spend the whole day doing one of these drawings. Sometimes it would take more than a day but you could go on, very fine.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, were you doing weaving at the same time, or were you just doing the collages or did they blend with each other?

MS. TAWNEY: They did blend but I didn't do as much weaving. I did some, but it did slow my weaving down quite a lot and then for a while I wasn't weaving at all.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you see any relationship between the two?

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, I think their whole thing is all one thing.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's all part of one.

MS. TAWNEY: And then these little things I put in which I collect on the beaches in the summer. I use stones that are so small you can hardly see them to pick them up on the beach. Of course you can see them when I put them in a circle. Well, when I'm picking up stones on the beach, you know I'm down on my hands and knees and you can't imagine how many people come over and they look and they can't see and they say, "What is it?" They think I'm picking up something valuable and finding very marvelous things, which I am, but - And sometimes little children will help me when I'm picking up feathers and a whole crowd of kids a couple of times, they'll have picked up feathers, they look like delinquent kids, you know, they pick up feathers and they bring

me all these. I really want to pick my own, you know but I take everything people give me because it's very nice.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you go to Provincetown, don't you, in the summers?

MS. TAWNEY: Truro, it's next to Provincetown.

MR. CUMMINGS: Have you been going there a long time?

MS. TAWNEY: Five or six years. I bought a little house there.

MR. CUMMINGS: How did you pick that as a place to go?

MS. TAWNEY: Because I have friends in Provincetown and I went there because they asked me. It's my psychoanalyst and a friend and she asked me to come, and I have other friends there so I went. I just had a room, I hired a room by mail and when I got there I hated this room. I got there in the evening and by six in the morning I was all packed ready to leave, going back to New York. So I waited till eight to call my friend and I said I'm leaving on the first bus at nine o'clock. "Oh," she said, "wait, we'll come over and get you." So they picked me up and she insisted that I stay. We went to Hertz and I hired a car and then we went looking for a place. So I took a motel room, it was twenty dollars a day or something. It was just at that point where this *Life* article had come out with big pages in *Life*. I had about five or six pages in color. And I didn't have the money after I had paid Hertz to pay for this room for a week and I said, "Well, will you take a check?" and she said, "No." I said, "Well, if my picture is in *Life* magazine will you take my check?" and she said, "Yes." So she took it! I thought, well, it's worth something. So I stayed there for two weeks and then I found a little house and I rented the house for two weeks and then I had to move out of there and I found a tiny shack.

In the meantime this house I heard was for sale and I went to look at it and somebody was coming in the afternoon and I thought well, maybe I want it, so I made him an offer. I didn't know whether I wanted it or not. So three days later he found me and he said, you can have it. I didn't sign up, but I did eventually. So I bought this little house, three and a half acres, surrounded by a National Park. It's a 1790 house and it had the wooden sink and no heat, no hot water, nothing. But it was adorable. But I kept trying to sell it the next summer because it was so hard to be there, you know with a [inaudible] stove in the kitchen and I had to do some work. But now I love it, it's just all white floors, white everywhere and tiny, and I have hot water, kitchen, no heat. So that's how I happened to be there.

MR. CUMMINGS: You have lots of houses don't you?

MS. TAWNEY: I seem to. I don't have the one in Chicago, I sold that and lost all the money and I'm broke and living on borrowed money now for a year. I'm in a terrible position.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, this house must be a tremendous amount of work, and expensive.

MS. TAWNEY: Oh I know it's incredible, I'm still spending.

MR. CUMMINGS: Something always.

MS. TAWNEY: Well, it is. I'm trying right now to get John Lennon and Yoko Ono to rent it, but this friend of my doctor called up and said, Earl Wilson said John Lennon will stay in New York if he gets a loft on the Bowery, implying that I should let him have this, you know. So I managed to get in touch with Earl Wilson and told him, I sent him a telegram and I just described the house the way it is, but it sounds very extravagant so finally Earl Wilson himself called me and John Lennon called, but unfortunately I was out that day in New Jersey buying a car for the summer and they had it planned to come that night and I said, "No, I want to be there." So we made an appointment for last Saturday and they were too busy and they're still too busy and they're supposed to come any time but I don't know if they will.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's a busy life.

MS. TAWNEY: So I moved in and I'm moving out.

MR. CUMMINGS: You had mentioned Agnes Martin and the whole group of artists you knew when you first came. Do you know lots of other artists or -

MS. TAWNEY: Well, I know but I don't keep up with too many people. I have been quite solitary. I throw big parties now and then and have marvelous parties but I want to be by myself most of the time and I have just a few friends that I see. Oh, I know lots of people, but I don't keep up contacts with anybody actually. Indiana's right down, well, I keep thinking I'm still on Spring, I moved from Spring to here, to this house. He's on Spring too, but I don't see him, you know we live different lives.

MR. CUMMINGS: That's true and they change every time you move.

MS. TAWNEY: Yeah, and Agnes Martin has gone. She gave up painting.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh really, I didn't know that.

MS. TAWNEY: She quit painting about four years ago and went out to New Mexico. I saw her once after that, I was with her for twelve days in her camper traveling around but now I don't see her, I don't write, I don't have any contact at all.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you write anything, I mean like notebooks or do you write letters to people?

MS. TAWNEY: Oh, once in a while I write letters, yeah, I do keep up with correspondence and mostly I send my postcards which I decorate, I make small collage postcards and send them. And people have framed them, and they collect them. They're fun to do, you know because you don't have any critics on that. I think the biggest problem is thinking about an audience, that's the one thing you have to lose.

MR. CUMMINGS: Just have to maintain a relationship with the work and yourself and -

MS. TAWNEY: That's difficult.

[END OF TAPE SIDE ONE]

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, one thing that interests me is the relationship of the circle images and even the other, you can't really call them geometric, the lines also appear in the collages in ways, don't they?

MS. TAWNEY: Yes.

MR. CUMMINGS: You know like this circle drawing.

MS. TAWNEY: And then, wait a second, *Circle of Stones* and another one, that's a book of geometry from Japan.

MR. CUMMINGS: You like all those different texts, different languages, different texts, and things.

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, they have some meaning -

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, do you use them as lines of type or really just as kind of color or imagery?

MS. TAWNEY: I just use it as a part of the thing.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, because that one is written on a page of Italian text and I notice there's Russian text on some things -

MS. TAWNEY: I have Greek. I have a terrific collection of rare books. I'm sorry to say I tear pages out of them which bibliophiles wouldn't [inaudible]....

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh dear.

MS. TAWNEY: I don't tell them that when I buy these books. All this had to do with water too, these lines, see there's, oh where are some, they're all packed up and gone. But I did a series from a quotation I read like "from his footsteps flowed a river," and I just, maybe there are a few here, all flowing lines like water. And they're also like threads, the lines, they're very like threads.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you see all these images going back and forth from the collages to the drawings and the -

MS. TAWNEY: And the weaving. Yes they're all the same to me. Now, look at these and this, my cat, she died, that's her picture. And this is called *Fountain*, and I did one called *River* and I've done streams and rivers and all that.

MR. CUMMINGS: So it's a lot of nature in the ideas.

MS. TAWNEY: I don't think of it as nature as much as water has other - you know water is fertilizing and water is dissolving and water is cleansing and water is life giving.

MR. CUMMINGS: All its properties.

MS. TAWNEY: And you know a spring, clear spring. I've climbed up a wall in places when I'm traveling and I would have a drink of the water that's coming out of the rocks, seems as if it should be pure.

MR. CUMMINGS: Like springs and –

MS. TAWNEY: And waterfalls. Water is so thrilling. I grew up on Lake Erie, really we were in the water all the time.

MR. CUMMINGS: And then Lake Michigan.

MS. TAWNEY: And New York, I'm on water all the time.

MR. CUMMINGS: And you live on an island.

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, I live on an island. And that South Street loft was an island, really, with the water always there and those boats. At night the boats were like Venetian glass, you know they'd be all lighted up and going along on this water and they would be coming at different speeds and going different directions at different speeds and different sizes. And then the Brooklyn lights behind.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, I –

MS. TAWNEY: I met the Japanese master who came and saw the film that he was in of his temple, a sixteenth century temple.

MR. CUMMINGS: Kobori? [Kobori Nanrei Sohaku]

MS. TAWNEY: Kobori. He's head of all education at Daitoku-ji Temple in Kyoto, which is one of the big Zen temples.

MR. CUMMINGS: Have you been to Japan?

MS. TAWNEY: I've been there, only I was there just six days on my way back from India where I had been two months. But I met Kobori through this friend—Soen Roshi did that, who is the abbot of this uptown society I belong to now. This one I call *Far Sound*, it's something about wings going, you know in the distance – I like this very much.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you know I'm curious about what the titles mean. Do the titles mean something in relationship to the particular object or are they just for reference?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, it depends. Sometimes it is what I am at the moment you see. If I'm reading some poetry, or there's certain phrases that I have in my mind and it just seems to fit that at the moment, so I call it *Far Sound*.

MR. CUMMINGS: Do you read a lot of poetry, various kinds?

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, my last show I had all titles from Theodore Roethke, I think mostly. Beautiful poems. Oh here are some of them. That's called *The Dark Meadow of Atti* and that's out of the book, that's a hummingbird, in Mexico, I got in the market, they have them in the witch market.

MR. CUMMINGS: We had mentioned Ray Johnson, and you said you had known him since you came here?

MS. TAWNEY: Yeah, off and on, you know I didn't see him very much. He used to bring people down to my loft and he began coming at very odd hours, like three in the morning and so I wouldn't let him in. I told him to stop that. Then another time he got some work from someone who does knitted sculptures of wire, she's in California, she does forms within forms. They're beautiful and he gave it to May Wilson, who sat on it, destroying it and then pasted it to something and simply destroyed this person's work. When he told me that I got very angry with him and I thought he didn't have the right to do that without telling the artist what was going on. So I didn't see him for a long time. But now, I'll see him now and then and he brings me his announcements.

MR. CUMMINGS: From his correspondence school.

MS. TAWNEY: Well, he was in the Willard Gallery for a while.

MR. CUMMINGS: I know, yeah.

MS. TAWNEY: And I liked his work but I don't care so much about it now, it's like of the moment.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's gotten very fashionable, it's changed I think because of that. In his last show at Feigen everything was so up-towney. It had a different feeling about it. Well, the kind of communication involved in with these – you know one can read so many things into them and I just wonder if that's agreeable to you or if you really have –

MS. TAWNEY: You can read into it whatever you want. I feel that when I put them out in a show then they have their own life and they take their chances with what's going to happen. But I don't feel people will buy this unless they have a feeling, some kind of feeling.

MR. CUMMINGS: But I'm trying to find out if there's, you know, say one of these will develop as you make it, do you develop a particular idea that you want it to express or feeling or notion?

MS. TAWNEY: No, it's all still sort of nebulous. You first have to be in touch with yourself inside very deeply in order to do something. And then you have all this material. I'm not working here now, but my desk is usually a mess of everything, papers and all this and I just reach out and I get whatever is necessary and it's always within reach.

MR. CUMMINGS: You seem to like marvelous paper.

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, this is beautiful paper. I got some in Japan and some in India and some in Cranbrook, where they used to make their own paper when they made engravings. They gave it up and it was the most wonderful thing they had there and now they've given it up.

MR. CUMMINGS: I'll ask you another sort of question about the idea of communication, or getting things across. What's your feeling about that?

MS. TAWNEY: I feel that is a very deep, deep part of this work. I'm communicating. Even as I speak it touches me so deeply. So that's why I send these postcards.

MR. CUMMINGS: As a way of continuing the -

MS. TAWNEY: I mean, I'm communicating something but I'm not sure what it is and neither is the recipient. But they all like my postcards. I have one here I was going to send to Alice Parrott, I'm just sending this it's her picture, but it had this kind of thing, well this isn't anything special but I use this good paper on them. All my drawers, I have sent them away because they're for the summer. There's this box, it's not finished, I don't know - there's one.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, I see, right.

MS. TAWNEY: And these are poems all over here and some are turned out the other way so you can't read them, but still it has an effect on this just the same. This actually stuck to there and it's like a reflection, I cut it, tore it off there. It's quite nice. I did a whole series of things like this but they're packed.

MR. CUMMINGS: Well, you had mentioned that you had books, do you -

MS. TAWNEY: Oh yes. Here look.

MR. CUMMINGS: Oh, I see. You have lots of science books.

MS. TAWNEY: I have science and the heavens. Where's the heavens? And then I have these big ones right here. I spend a fortune on books. These are Japanese, no, Indian, that's their sutra, their holy books. And I'm starting to do some things like this where I have a number of things in one place. It has a place for twelve different collages....There I got a couple in, well, that's the second.

MR. CUMMINGS: It's fascinating birds and circles and the images just keep going round and round and round, don't they?

MS. TAWNEY: Well, I guess they do. I put that, but I still have to do all of these then you can carry your art around with you in a little box. I think we were going very well downstairs but I think we sort of lost our - lost track.

MR. CUMMINGS: Moving around with all of these different things.

MS. TAWNEY: It's too much going on.

MR. CUMMINGS: Is that a screen up there or a sieve or something?

MS. TAWNEY: It's actually a sieve from Colombia, Zarica [ph] I thought - I might use it in some other way. This is from Egypt. I was there in '56 and these are tea -

MR. CUMMINGS: So the traveling brings, makes itself apparent in things and the objects and the work and -

MS. TAWNEY: Yes, this is a little – that's from Peru, it's on top of Voulkos. This is an alabaster fountain that I thought I might use downstairs and that's another little one, from Damascus. I think that's all. We were going all right downstairs, but I think that we started to lose track of this.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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