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Oral history interview with Claire Zeisler,
1981 June

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Claire Zeisler on June 26, 1981. The interview was conducted at Claire Zeisler's home in Chicago by Dennis Barrie for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

CZ: CLAIRE ZEISLER

DB: DENNIS BARRIE

[Tape 1, side A]

DB: We're going to begin talking about Claire's life and career, and I thought how we might start off, Claire, is to talk a little bit about your family background—what sort of family you were born into, where you lived, what sort of lifestyle.

CZ: Well, I was born in Cincinnati, Ohio.

DB: _____.

CZ: Um hmm. In 1903.

DB: This is telling all!

CZ: Uh huh. (chuckles) Well, there's nothing I can do about it, so I might as well tell all. And I'm the youngest of two children; I have an older sister. And I come from a very conservative and sheltered background. My mother was seventeen years younger than my father, which really made quite a difference in the family because she was more of a sister or a child rather than a mother, and I resented that very much. And my father was hopelessly neurotic. So we were all sheltered. I loved. . . . At that time, though, when I grew up before I left my home, I was interested in going to museums, and I was interested in the little. . . . I loved to sew, but I was squelched about sewing because my father thought that that wasn't ambitious enough for one of his daughters. So he said to me, "You know, Claire, if you were as good with your head as you are with your hands, you'd be just marvelous." (laughter)

DB: Dads are like that, huh?

CZ: Oh! Impossible. And I can remember we went to Europe when eight and nine years old. And I think before that, but I only remember the eight- and nine-year-old period. And I just hated it, because we were dragged around not only to museums but through chateaus, and for a little kid eight and nine it was the biggest bore. And I also think it was extremely boring to do all that sightseeing because I don't think my parents cared either. They were doing it because it evidently was the thing to do.

DB: Was your family, did they have an artistic background at all?

CZ: No.

DB: Interest in the arts?

CZ: No, they're really not terribly educated people. They thought they were, but they weren't. And my father, I think if he'd have allowed himself, could have been very musical. He could sit down and play the piano just improvise. But he didn't allow himself to do that. You see, he was of the school where that wasn't manly. Painting wasn't manly. Because I think that he had a certain talent—I think; I'm not sure, but it looked that way. But if I got my talent from either one of them, it was my father.

DB: So were you. . . . You said you were interested in museums and interested in sewing. But they didn't really encourage any of these interests.

CZ: No, they didn't encourage any of them.

DB: What did they think you were going to do, or expect you to do?

CZ: Well, they expected me to marry a rich man and raise a family. And that's what I did! (laughs) But I married

that man out of Chicago—I mean, out of Cincinnati.

DB: Cincinnati.

CZ: Because I found that my background was absolutely smothering me.

DB: It was too conservative?

CZ: Much too conservative. Nothing ever went on there. There was never a piece of furniture moved in my house. As long as I can remember—I was nineteen when I moved away, and the house was full of Tiffany glass. The chandelier in the dining room was Tiffany. And the wall sconces all through the downstairs were Tiffany. And now you'd think today I'd like that Tiffany.

DB: Yes, I think so too.

CZ: I hate it! I hate Tiffany glass.

DB: You do?

CZ: Yeah. So that really tells you something about my background.

DB: I think it does, yeah. You say you were nineteen?

CZ: Um hmm.

DB: You moved away to get married?

CZ: Yeah.

DB: It wasn't to go to school, but to get married?

CZ: No, well, I went to Columbia College for a year.

DB: Before.

CZ: When I graduated from high school. And I went, I enrolled in the art department.

DB: Why?

CZ: Because I wanted to study art.

DB: So you were interested, say, in high school in art.

CZ: Right.

DB: Had you been doing anything in high school?

CZ: I don't think so. I don't think so. And there was somebody Dow, D-o-w, who was head of the art department at Columbia College, and he was supposed to be good. But I was only there a year because then I got married. And I don't recall whether I was ever that first year in the art department. I don't remember Mr. Dow; I don't remember anything about the art department. So I think maybe that was, you know, after you were there two years then you could decide what you wanted to major in.

DB: So you didn't, you were actually, you don't remember doing any artistic work in that department?

CZ: No. No. You will find, in this interview, that I have been a very late bloomer. . . .

DB: That's fine.

CZ: . . . when it comes to my artistic development.

DB: I thought maybe you were.

CZ: Um hmm.

DB: So you went to Columbia for a year, and then you got married to. . . .

CZ: Right. Harold Florsheim.

DB: Harold Florsheim?

CZ: Yeah. In Chicago.

DB: Right. Of the Florsheim. . . ?

CZ: Of the Florsheim shoes. He was one of the sons, the youngest son.

DB: And you moved with him to Chicago?

CZ: Right.

DB: And would you tell us a little bit about your lifestyle then, and particularly how it related to the development of your artistic areas?

CZ: Hm. Well, we moved to the suburbs, believe it or not. And I lived in the suburbs for eighteen years. I was married to him, I guess, for twenty years. Then I divorced him. And in the span of time we built a house in Ravinia.

DB: North of Chicago.

CZ: Yep, north of Chicago. And there I raised my family. I have three children. I have two boys and a girl. And. . . . Huh! You see, I was a young adult in the time of prohibition.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: And we were the lost generation. Or it was lost. . . . Yeah, generation. Because we just whooped it up for quite a few years until prohibition was over. It was a very strange young adulthood that I had.

DB: I would think so. You're right in the middle of that _____. Add it all up, you're right in the middle.

CZ: Right in the middle. And all of us were very rich, so that didn't help anything. I mean, we thought it did, but it didn't. That just. . . . Because the men worked. Their money came from fathers, you see, who developed all these marvelous businesses and the children, of course, were never what their fathers were. But their fathers made them work, if you call going to work every day working. Those poor guys used to get up at six in the morning to take a train in town after spending the night before partying.

DB: Oh, so they would party? So that was your lifestyle?

CZ: So that was my lifestyle. Plus decorating my house every five minutes. If I got tired of one room the way it was, then I just ripped it out and did something else. They were the most wasteful, extravagant and kind of marvelous years. I really had a good time. I couldn't repeat it again because it was so wasteful, but I guess I had to go through that. And within that eighteen-year period, I started collecting.

DB: What sort of things did you start collecting?

CZ: If I remember correctly, I think I started with Japanese prints. I was crazy about them. But I don't whatever happened to them, so I'm not a hundred percent sure.

DB: Did you start collecting with the eye of, for decorating purposes, or with the idea that you would enhance your. . . .

CZ: No, I think it was for decorating purposes. It wasn't a collection, you know. When I say "started to collect" I don't think it was ever quite to that, at that time. Then I also had antique furniture. It was way later that I enjoyed twentieth century furniture. And what I collected later went with the antique furniture, because they were paintings—English paintings on glass.

DB: Okay, I know them well.

CZ: Do you?

DB: Well, I know of them.

CZ: They were really kind of beautiful.

DB: Some of them are gorgeous.

CZ: But, you know, not exciting. Then, after that, I'm not quite sure whether there was something in between

those paintings on glass and the twentieth paintings that I got to later. My friend Katharine Kuh. . . .

DB: Oh, you were a friend? I didn't realize that.

CZ: Yeah. Yeah, we were very good friends . . . opened a gallery in Chicago, you know?

DB: Yes.

CZ: And she had that for about five years, and then the war broke out, Second World War, and so she closed it. So that was in the early thirties. And it was in that marvelous building that they tore down, the [Iana Court] Building.

DB: Um hmm, I'm aware of that, yeah.

CZ: Yeah. On Michigan Avenue.

DB: Right.

CZ: And I can still see her gallery on a little balcony facing the court.

DB: Was she a social friend, or did you meet her through the gallery?

CZ: No, I met her before she had her gallery. She used to give lectures on twentieth century painting, I guess, and sculpture, to all us poor little sadsacks. (both chuckle) Or anyone who wanted to come. And I was interested, so I went, and that was the start of our friendship. She was very good.

DB: I hear.

CZ: I mean she wasn't too erudite, you know, and I learned a hell of a lot from her. She was very enthusiastic and she embued me with her enthusiasm. And quite a few of the paintings that you see here in this room I purchased from her, or through her.

DB: During the time that she had the gallery there?

CZ: During the time that she had the gallery.

DB: Now, was it a real learning process. I mean, did you become aware of. . . . We don't have a video here at the moment, but of Picasso, and Klee, and so forth?

CZ: Yes. And I was so excited about them. And I really died over it. That's when I really came to life, in, you know, wanting things. I was so acquisitive when I found these marvelous people that I wanted them all. And my problem was that I had a husband who didn't give a damn, and it was his money I was spending. Same old story.

DB: Yes.

CZ: I had a terrible time getting money out of him to pay for the paintings. (laughter) And he said he didn't want the paintings around because all of his friends would make fun of them.

DB: I've heard that. I mean, not about your particular husband, but it's a. . . .

CZ: But husbands.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And when I think now of what I paid for them—I mean, it's absurd! Those Klees on the wall I paid no more than \$1,200 apiece for them.

DB: That is absurd. Can you remember the first thing you bought from Katharine, maybe the first major thing?

CZ: No.

DB: But these all came roughly in the same years, in that short period?

CZ: Well, they came within that five-year period, because I used to go to New York quite often at that time. My husband evidently had business in New York, so I went with him. And it was so marvelous in New York in those days, you know, because the people who had galleries there, the gallery dealers, were in business because they loved what they were selling!

DB: I think you're right.

CZ: They knew that they'd never make a fortune, because things were so cheap then.

DB: Right. And there were fewer people, and so few people.

CZ: And there were fewer galleries, so that you could, you know, go to most of them in one day. And it was marvelous, marvelous! It was very exciting. And I find going to New York not very exciting at all.

DB: It's too business-like.

CZ: And I can remember that the first primitive piece I ever bought I bought from this gallery in New York. The name of it was [Valentine Houdensing]. Did you ever hear of it?

DB: I have heard of it.

CZ: You see the oceanic meathook over there [gestures—Ed.]?

DB: Yeah.

CZ: He had that sitting on his desk and I had never seen a primitive piece before, from Africa or Oceania. Never! And I asked him what it was. I said, "It's marvelous." He was trying to sell me a Picasso. I can still remember that day. This [_____—Ed.] was in back of me, that piece. And so he told me what it was, and so on and so forth, and I said, "You might as well put away all the Picassos because I'm not interested today. I want that piece." I said, "How much is it?" And he said, "Four hundred dollars."

DB: Oh. That's amazing.

CZ: So he wasn't really very happy with that, that I was looking at that and not. . . .

DB: That you weren't buying Picassos.

CZ: Well, the Picassos, maybe the Picassos were \$2,000.

DB: What period. . . ? We're still talking about pre-World War II. . . .

CZ: Pre-World War II.

DB: . . . that you started actually buying the Oceania?

CZ: Yeah.

DB: I didn't realize you started that early.

CZ: Well, I had this one. And then there was a long time before I got others because I didn't see them around. You see, the dealers I think didn't carry them. And I think that then I started going to museums and looking.

DB: There wasn't much at that time.

CZ: I don't know. There must have been quite a bit in the [Field Museum; field museum] because they didn't just. . . .

DB: That type of anthropological museum.

CZ: Yeah, and I think I started going. . . . I must have because I fell so in love then with primitive things. But as I say, the galleries didn't have them. And the next jump that I think I remember Allen Frumkin, in Chicago. . . .

DB: This would be like the fifties, late forties, early fifties.

CZ: Well, I think that he was around when Katharine was around.

DB: Oh, really? I'm not sure; I thought his gallery dated from a later period, but I'm not positive.

CZ: I'm not positive either. But at that time when he opened up here, he had also primitive pieces, so I bought a few primitive pieces from him over a period of time. And I think I collected my primitive pieces very slowly because they weren't available.

DB: But you went right on collecting during this whole era?

CZ: Katharine really started me, I think, collecting.

DB: Did she go around with you?

CZ: No.

DB: Never to that point.

CZ: No.

DB: After you dealt with Katharine did you start teaching yourself?

CZ: Yeah.

DB: I mean, you obviously know what you're doing.

CZ: Yeah, I bought every book under the sun. I didn't always read them, but I looked at pictures.

DB: Yes, that's the way most of us [do it].

CZ: Because I'm much more emotional than I am intellectual. And I remember looking at one book—I don't remember now who wrote it—I guess it was a book of sculpture. I saw Henry Moore, photographs of some of Henry Moore's work, and I fell in love with him. And my husband and I went to Europe one summer. We went to a gallery in London where I bought two Henry Moores and brought them home. And that I think was in the thirties. It had to be before World War II because Harold, my husband at that time, went to the wars; he was gone for three years, so it was before that. And I think I was the first to ever have any Henry Moores in the United States.

DB: What did you do with those?

CZ: I have one. It's in back of me. The marble there.

DB: Oh, yes, on the table there.

CZ: Right, and then I had a small wood piece of a female figure, but I finally got tired of it—it was, oh, maybe, two feet high—and I took it to Nerdler's in New York at one time. I paid \$125 for it. I'm bringing in price because I find it so interesting.

DB: Well, I do too. There's nothing wrong with ____ ____.

CZ: Right. I paid \$125 for this little thing, about two feet high. And when I took it to Nerdler's, I said to my husband then, Ernest Zeisler, "What the dickens should I ask for it?" And he said, "Oh, maybe \$7,000." So when I got there, I could only get \$6,000 out of my mouth. They took it too fast. I should have said \$10,000.

DB: (laughs) You should have.

CZ: Because it was for sale in one of the Nerdler galleries, I think in Europe or someplace, for \$15,000.

DB: Oh my. [How it ____.]

CZ: But I had pleasure out of it. I don't care, you know.

DB: Yeah, that's the important thing.

CZ: Yeah.

DB: When I was looking at some of your background, it stated in your retrospective catalog that you were in some way associated with the New Bauhaus here in Chicago. Is that true?

CZ: Um hmm.

DB: Could you talk a little bit about that, because that—we're talking about in the period of the thirties when [Miholi Nage; the Holy Najh] was here.

CZ: I wasn't, I was a student there.

DB: You were a student?

CZ: Yeah. But not when. . . . Miholi Nage had died by the time I got there. I was there I think in the early fifties, I think.

DB: I see.

CZ: And I went there for about I would say two-and-a-half years. I'm terrible on dates. I can't remember; I can't reconstruct them very well. And I was there when [Chermajov, Cher-my-off] was director, and I think he was one of the last. I adored it. Adored it. I was there when Eugene Dana was there. Eugene Dana—do you know him?

DB: Eugene Dana I don't know; I don't think I do.

CZ: He taught, oh, I guess you'd say graphic design. I was there when [Hugo Weber] was there. Do you know Hugo Weber?

DB: Yes.

CZ: You do know him? He was a sculptor, if I remember.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: And he taught sculpting there. But their courses, you see, were so general that it applied to a painter, a weaver, a photographer, what have you. This was the basic, the basic courses. And I've always felt that if I hadn't had those two-and-a-half years, I'd think that I would not have been disciplined enough within myself to have done the work that I did.

DB: Let's go back a minute, because I think this is kind of pivotal. Why did you decided to go to school?

CZ: To school? Well, my children were fairly grown, and I was sort of happy in my second marriage, and. . . .

DB: You got divorced after the war was over?

CZ: Yeah.

DB: After World War II.

CZ: Right. And I always wanted to go back to school. Every now and then I took a little piddling course, you know, at night, at the Art Institute, what have you, and I started at night, at the Institute of Design—that's what it was called then.

DB: Yes, right.

CZ: The New Bauhaus.

DB: Right.

CZ: And that was on Ontario Street. It was, you know, alone; it was before it was amalgamated, or whatever you call it, with IIT. It's no good anymore; it's nothing. And I remember I took night courses there. And I was crazy about it. So I said, "I'm going to enroll for the day courses." So that's, that simple.

DB: Well, did you have any goal in mind? Just your interest?

CZ: No, I had no idea that I was going to weave. I had nothing in mind, except I sort of wanted to be refreshed.

DB: What area did you emphasize? Just the sculpture, was it?

CZ: No. You see, the courses were not emphasized there. There was also woodworking. And all three of them were given the same importance. Oh, it's on [the tape recorder—Ed.]. I thought it was off; I didn't hear it.

DB: Yes.

CZ: They were given the same importance, but I think that in my head that I emphasized Eugene Dana's course, which was graphic design, two-dimensional design. And maybe I ended up emphasizing that because Eugene Dana said that I was one of the best students he ever had.

DB: Hmm, that's a very nice compliment.

CZ: Um hmm. And he kept most of my drawings from that course. He was going to write a book. I don't know if he ever did. And also wanted to show them, you know, to the incoming students—what could be done, and so

on.

DB: Very interesting.

CZ: I worked like a dog. I adored it.

DB: What was it like? I mean, in the sense of. . . ? You said that the structure was the same for just about everybody. If you were taking, emphasizing sculpture, or emphasizing graphic design, you were still exposed to all the other areas. Is that the key?

CZ: I don't think I quite understand.

DB: Well, I mean, did you get background in painting, did you get background in photography, did you get all of these things?

CZ: No.

DB: No.

CZ: No. If I'd gone longer, I would have had to choose whether I wanted to go into photography. . . . And if I remember correctly, they didn't have a conventional painting class—ever. Because the school was geared more to commercial art than to fine arts. That's why you don't hear too much about the people who graduated from the Institute of Design. You know, like Claes Oldenburg who graduated from the Art Institute, and many well-known artists who graduated from the Art Institute, that's because theirs was geared to fine arts rather than to two-dimensional commercial.

DB: Hmm. Again, you said you didn't have any particular design, but did you think maybe about doing some kind of commercial art. . . .

CZ: No.

DB: . . . some kind of design or anything like that?

CZ: No. No. I don't know what I planned on doing with it, but very soon after I left there—or maybe it was at the same time. . . . You see, at that time they had weaving there.

DB: They did have weaving?

CZ: Yeah, [Marley Ermine] taught weaving. She was there for many years. She was supposed to be excellent. But it didn't interest me; I didn't take weaving there.

DB: What kind. . . . Was it weaving for rug design, or for ____?

CZ: Well, again she taught basic weaving, techniques of the loom. So that after you left the Bauhaus, or the Institute of Design, then you could take it in any direction that you wished to take it in. They idea of these courses being so basic that you could use it. . . .

DB: Foundations.

CZ: It was all foundation, which I found just marvelous. So I. . . . I don't know how I happened to go into weaving. I remember seeing a very small loom at Field's or someplace, and I thought, "Ah ha. That looks quite intriguing." So I bought it. And I read the instructions to how to dress the loom, and it was not as easy as I'd thought it might be, so I decided that I would go take instructions from somebody as to how to dress the loom. So that was the next step. And then I got caught.

DB: (chuckles) You get caught very easily. Collecting, going to school.

CZ: Right.

DB: Let me back up a minute, because I do want to talk about the weaving. But what did Archipenko. . . . Did you go to Archipenko to study?

CZ: Oh yes, I forgot about him.

DB: Let's throw him in and talk about him.

CZ: You see, I've lived so long, that I forget.

DB: I know! Centuries. [And now we have]. . . .

CZ: Right. Well, Archipenko was here for, oh, I'd say a period of two years in Chicago. And he was here the same time Katharine had her gallery. So it was in the thirties. And he taught at the Institute of Design and also had a private class. I don't mean private lessons, but a private class. And if I remember correctly, I enrolled in his class that was, you know, not attached through the Design. But I learned quite a bit from him, but not enough because I came out doing little Archipenkos.

DB: Hmm. So this would have been before you went to the Institute of Design?

CZ: Yeah, it was before. So that didn't suit me.

DB: What did you get from him? I mean, was there anything that you can recall that you. . . .

CZ: Yeah, I got the fact that I didn't think that I wanted to sculpt, that I really wasn't really ever, would ever be good enough to find myself in sculpture. But I had the wrong attitude in those days. Because I identified myself with "The Best:" with Henry Moore, with Klee, whom I adored. Because I used to paint a little also. But you can't, you know, paint and identify yourself with these giants; I mean, I was so unrealistic that I wasn't really ready to do any of my own work. That's why I said before I'm a late bloomer.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: Of course was my background too. You see, my background said, you know, "That's all right to do a little dilettante here and there, but you really are a wife and a mother and a social butterfly." [Hoey, Phooey, Hoy.]

DB: Yeah. So it cancelled out?

CZ: I did that very well. (chuckles)

DB: What? A wife-mother-social butterfly?

CZ: I wasn't a very good mother, but. . . .

DB: But a social butterfly. . . ?

CZ: But a social butterfly, I was very good. (laughs)

DB: Was Archipenko, the classes, were there other people like you in the class? Of that kind of people?

CZ: Yeah. Yeah, it was more or less, you know, all woman dilettantes. There were many in those days; I don't know whether there are so many today. I don't think people are brought up that way.

DB: I think the structure's changed a little bit. You know, maybe because of the proliferation of art schools, and whatever, it's a little harder. . . .

CZ: Also, I don't think there are as many people with money today.

DB: Yes.

CZ: Am I right?

DB: I think that's true. Well, I think there's money, but maybe not on that level.

CZ: Well, the structure has changed, or maybe they dilettante in another way. They want more prestige than that. They sit on boards.

DB: Um hmm, that might be ____.

CZ: Well, they did that in those days too, because I could have sat on every board in the city of Chicago.

DB: You're talking about now, also like the Art Institute and boards like that, boards of the art ____?

CZ: No, not necessarily the arts.

DB: Hospitals?

CZ: Hospitals, yeah. [But] I chose never to do that.

DB: Was Archipenko good to work with?

CZ: No.

DB: No.

CZ: Hm mm. He was extremely inarticulate. And he could only show you the way he did it. Now maybe that's all right, but he didn't indicate that there were variations on the way he did it, you see. And the base that he used was clay, and it's a very long process. And one piece may be—you know, maybe I went twice a week—so one piece would take forever to do, so it was old-fashioned way of teaching which was absolutely no good. He really said nothing about anybody's work. He wasn't really very interested; he only did it for the money. He was a strange character. He was really a peasant, I think.

DB: Hmm.

CZ: And here he was thrown into a certain sophisticated area, and I think he had no idea how to behave.

DB: It must have been a little frightening. I mean, he was only here, as you said, for a short time.

CZ: Yeah. He was a very unhappy man, I think.

DB: When you think back now, and think about your work that you've done, does anything linger in your work from his period at all?

CZ: I don't think so. I don't think that he was any influence on my work whatsoever.

DB: Now would you say that about the Institute of Design? Do you think there are influences from that period?

CZ: I don't think any tangible influences, but I think I mentioned before that I learnt a certain self-discipline, and I was never self-disciplined, and still not very well self-disciplined. But I learnt enough self-discipline there to start being serious about my work, where I understood directions and so on and so forth, understood what you had to learn in order to make something your own. That if I wanted to weave I had to learn the techniques of the loom. And those were all things that I had absolutely no idea about. I was. . . .

DB: Before you were playing.

CZ: I was playing. I was the most ignorant young woman you could possibly think of. (laughter)

DB: Well, let's get on then to the idea of the loom and what you had to learn and how you went about doing it, because it's obviously a critical moment.

CZ: Well, I'm really more of less of a self-taught person all the way through. I rather enjoy that. In fact, I enjoyed it tremendously. It gave me a feeling of marvelous power, the right kind of power, and security within myself. Because I really think. . . . What I did. . . . I went to this person—and I forget her name now; I was part of a class—and she taught me how to dress my loom. And then of course I bought a big loom. Till I learned how to dress the big loom got one of these silly little things. And I met with a friend of mine, Bea Schwartzchild. . . .

DB: Yes.

CZ: . . . who had been weaving for quite a few years. I mean, her end result was nothing, but she enjoyed the whole, the technical process and so on, so forth. I mean she wasn't artistic but she knew a hell of a lot about the loom. And she saw some samples, what have you, that I did on this loom where I was taking lessons—I can't think of that woman's name; they were responsible for building a loom that was fairly well known called the Norwood loom, so I bought a Norwood loom. And Bea said to me, "You know, Claire, if you knew something more about the technique of the loom, I think you could go places." And I said, "Well, where'll I learn that?" And she said, "I'd be very happy to instruct you." So I went to her for instructions for about a year, you know, maybe once a week.

DB: And these were technical?

CZ: All technical problems. You know, how to read a graph, how to make one, and really how to dress any loom, and that was about it. And I wove on the little [Randy] for, oh, eight years, or something like that. And I wove yardage and I despised it. But I wove it because it takes a little time to become proficient in the loom. The right number of threads to the inch for the size of your threads and so on and so forth, and the right weft to use so that there's a nice balance, so that your material doesn't come out sleazy and so on, so forth. It's highly technical. Well, I was never very good at it. Most of my materials came out a little sleazy. (both chuckle) And my second husband, he was the victim of it, because I used to make suiting material for him.

DB: You did [sometime].

CZ: Yeah.

DB: You made clothes?

CZ: I made clothes.

DB: And he had to wear these?

CZ: And he had to wear them. He wasn't a great model; he was a big tall guy, who didn't give a darn what he wore. That's why he was so patient with me. (laughter)

DB: That's great. [looking at tape recorder: It does have an ending alarm, but I want to make sure it's recording. You can hear all that, machine, I know you can.] So anyway, you made these materials for your husband?

CZ: The materials, and mostly sport jackets.

DB: Did you yourself cut them into. . . .

CZ: No.

DB: Oh, okay; I thought maybe you were. . . .

CZ: No, I had those professionally made because it's difficult enough because they'll pull out in the elbow (chuckles) and so on and so forth. And then I made myself some clothing. The material was really very pretty. But, you know, fashion's so fickle I didn't want to do any of that. Then I made doilies. I have 5,000 doilies. All this was the learning process, I didn't know for what. And my daughter was in one day, Joan, and I said, "You know, I'm so bored with this goddamn loom. I can't do any more yardage. I can't do any more damned doilies. And all of the little babies, the grandchildren, they don't need any blankets any more. (laughs)

DB: They've got 36 feet of [___stic].

CZ: Right. None of it was very pretty except some of his suits. I made him one suit that was really gorgeous. We buried him in it.

DB: That's kind of nice.

CZ: Yeah, because I figured, you know, nobody's going to wear it, so we'll just bury him in it. Well, anyhow, where was I?

DB: You were talking about you were bored, and you talked to your daughter about you can't do any more of this.

CZ: Oh yeah. Right. And my daughter said, "Mother, why don't you make small pieces, like wall hangings? And maybe you won't be so bored, because you do many different ones." So she started me.

DB: I see. Well, do you have, is the 1950s? Your first show was '62 I guess. This was sometime before that, obviously.

CZ: Yeah, I had a show at the Renaissance Society.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And that was about 1960, wasn't it?

DB: I think it's '62.

CZ: No, '62, was when I was part of a show, Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York. The public library?

DB: I've got down here that the public library and the Renaissance Society were in '62.

CZ: I think. . . . Where did you get that? Out of the catalog? I think that's. . . . Maybe it's right— I don't know, but I doubt it.

DB: But anyway we're talking about, you were talking about you worked doing this stuff for like eight years or so just kind of perfecting your. . . .

CZ: Right. Maybe for four years or I think maybe eight years, trying to perfect my weaving.

DB: Your abilities on the loom.

CZ: Yeah, and they were not very good because I wasn't very interested. Sitting there throwing the goddamn shuttle. (chuckles)

DB: But you obviously kept that. . . . I mean, that's a long time to [only] semi-interested.

CZ: I kept at it because I adored and always have adored threads.

DB: Hmm.

CZ: And you remember Dorothy Liebes? You know she was very important in really starting this whole twentieth century weaving movement. She did commercial work. And Jack Lenor Larson at that time, I think carried. . . . I don't know if he was in business then or not. I identify Jack Lenor Larson with Dorothy Liebes. I think he at one carried some of her work. And she used threads that I'd never seen before—for yardage, for upholstery, for hangings—that I thought were just absolutely gorgeous. And she really imbued many weavers with a whole different point of view: where the threads took over, rather than the pattern. Now that's a difference, you see, between, well, say, weaving before the twentieth century, where patterns were the important thing. Because the manufacturers didn't manufacture all these marvelous, you know, threads. Now I'm going to say experimental threads and synthetic threads had come in, or part synthetic, had come in at that time. And the range of color was not nearly as limited. And it's very interesting because I was somewhere, oh, maybe, three or four months ago, and I don't remember now where it was. . . .

DB: [Speaking of tape recorder: Did that flash? Yes.] Hold on one second. Don't lose that thought.

[Tape 1, side B]

DB: You were somewhere just recently.

CZ: . . . recently, several months ago, where there was a small display of Dorothy Liebes's material—I can only say "material," because maybe there were hangings, what have you—and I couldn't believe how dated they were. It so interesting. They were ugly.

DB: Dated. In what sense? Dated in the choice of thread?

CZ: Dated in the choice of color. . . .

DB: Color. Yeah, I would think that.

CZ: And also the choice of thread. It was an overabundance of both that made them look very awkward, heavy, unaesthetic. I found it very interesting.

DB: But at that time there was, things that woke you up, so to speak.

CZ: Well, I was just absolutely enchanted. And I had never I think heard at that time of [Onnie] [Albers], you know, who was the original Bauhaus; you know, she was Joseph Albers' wife. And I think that Onnie Albers was not influence on me, but she was an influence [in the field], I think.

DB: Yes.

CZ: No?

DB: Yes.

CZ: Tremendous influence.

DB: Let's talk about your early attempts at wall hangings. What were they like?

CZ: Did you see my, the retrospective at the Art Institute?

DB: I didn't see the show; I saw the catalog. But I. . . .

CZ: Because some of the those early weavings that I did, and they were the only group that I did, because they took much longer, we'll say, than the damn yardage that I did.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And maybe I did, maybe, I don't know, at the most twenty. I don't know what's happened to them all. And it was marvelous, because I wasn't doing them for anybody except myself. So as far as I was concerned, the sky was the limit. Except I put certain limitations on my own work. And I had a ball! I went to town, not knowing what the heck I was doing, except experimenting with what is called today double weave. Double weave is an ancient weave. It comes from the time when the Peruvians were really marvelous. The Peruvians were the greatest weavers of all time.

DB: Talking about, say, Incan cultures, that period?

CZ: Yeah, right, and before.

DB: And before?

CZ: And before. No one has ever surpassed them, nor have we ever. . . . In technique. They knew every technique that we know today.

DB: That's interesting.

CZ: No new technique has been created since the Peruvians. And I find that very interesting. So it was a natural that all of us weavers in the twentieth century went back to the Peruvians, and many took the double weave. That means that there's no right or wrong side.

DB: Okay.

CZ: It's reverse.

DB: Okay.

CZ: If something in a certain area on one side is white—and you usually use two colors—then on the reverse side, if it's white on one side, it will be red on the other, if I use white and red.

DB: Okay.

CZ: And it's a very flexible weave. So I set myself, when I started the wall hangings, to use that double weave in experiment until I was so tired of it that I couldn't stand it. Now that's the way I am on everything that I've done.

DB: You work out an idea [constant].

CZ: I find something that appeals to me—I did it when I did the yardage for my own clothing. I took a very simple pattern called [Moke's Belt, Monk's Belt] pattern, that looked like embroidery. And I took the simplest pattern because I said I wanted to do all the complications, to make it mine. Well, I did the same thing with the double weave. All of the samples that you saw from that catalog, they were all double weave—except one and that was triple weave.

DB: Triple weave.

CZ: It was one more difficult than double weave. (both chuckle) And I only had the patience to do one.

DB: One triple weave?

CZ: One triple weave.

DB: And were you looking at that time at Peruvian patterns and so forth?

CZ: No.

DB: No. Just the idea of. . . ?

CZ: The patterns didn't interest me.

DB: I see.

CZ: I was crazy about abstract painting, you see. And I wanted to make my weavings abstract. I think I wanted to do that anyhow because maybe. . . . I didn't know many weavers. I've always stayed away from weavers. They're very limited. And I really haven't wanted to see what the other guy does anyhow. But the tradition before the twentieth century was to take what you call cartoons from a painter and copy it in wool.

DB: In material.

CZ: In material. And, you see, the twentieth century weavers were trying to get away from that tradition. So that's why I was interested, we'll say color, or texture, or transparency and opaque. Because the triple weave piece that I did I set out—I always set out with an idea—even thick-witted I learnt that. I learnt that again from that marvelous Bauhaus here. But my project was to make part of it a lace stitch that is transparent, and the rest of it stuffed. Really opaque and relief, not yet three-dimensional, but relief. Because when I did these hangings I was interested either in transparency and opaqueness, or relief.

DB: Okay.

CZ: And then I think I realized that the loom was too confining for me, that I preferred three-dimensional work rather than just two-dimensional. And I think that's one of the reasons I left the loom and went into that goddamn knotting technique that I'm still doing. (both chuckle)

DB: That's one of the things I did want to talk about, as to why you left the loom. But I want to, before we do get off the loom, literally and figuratively. . . .

CZ: Yeah!

DB: I asked you before we even started talking for posterity here how you worked. And I said, "You know, do you do a sketch, or. . . ."

CZ: Oh.

DB: Take these wall hangings, how did they materialize, the pattern and so forth?

CZ: If I remember correctly—you see, because it was so long since I've done it—I think I made a sketch.

DB: You did make a sketch?

CZ: I think so. On some of them I just ad-libbed. It was very difficult to see because the wall hangings that are done today, I think if they're very large, they're done on a vertical loom. I had a horizontal loom.

DB: Oh, okay.

CZ: So it's almost impossible to see what it's going to look like. And your working area is very small so the pieces rolled and you have to keep unrolling it.

DB: Hmm, that's got to be very difficult.

CZ: Very difficult. So I spent, I think, most of my time really unraveling it. (both chuckle)

DB: That doesn't work, huh?

CZ: It's _____.

DB: Were you pretty satisfied with what was coming out? Other than the fact that it was confining, were you satisfied with the type of things you were producing?

CZ: I don't think particularly. I really didn't know! I had no way of judging my work, because I had never seen any twentieth century weaving. Now maybe you've heard of [Lenore Tawney].

DB: Yes.

CZ: She lived here in Chicago. Now Lenore Tawney was a very important pioneer in the field. She was really, had reached her peak before I had. So I would say that she was, again after Dorothy Liebes, Lenore Tawney, in the United States, was a very, very important person in the field. Because she had discovered, in a long hard way, that she could shape her piece on the loom. Now the pieces by and large are never shaped on a loom because a loom doesn't allow for it. The loom is horizontal and vertical. But she, by manipulating the loom—and it's very complicated so I won't go into it—was able to do. And her work was, at that time, just marvelous.

DB: When you say "shaped a piece," exactly what are you saying?

CZ: That she took it off of the vertical and horizontal.

DB: Okay.

CZ: So that the sides maybe were bowed out, came in, let's say, bowed out again.

DB: Okay.

CZ: Where they weren't just straight vertical.

DB: So while you were doing your pieces, you weren't. . . . Were you conscious of her work at all?

CZ: Let's see.

DB: When she was in town?

CZ: I'm trying to think.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: I was conscious, maybe when I just started. She was doing very conventional weaving. And I was conscious of that, but I wasn't very crazy about it. Then she made some shawls. And there was the first sign of her personality in those shawls. They were gorgeous. She did bands of weaving and then left the raw thread, and then another band of weaving, left the raw thread, and the raw thread, because the thread moves, became sort of a swag. If you know what a swag is.

DB: Yeah, I think I do.

CZ: Well, it was a slight semicircle.

DB: Yeah, I think that. . . .

CZ: It formed a slight. . . . A straight band, a slight semicircle. Her colors were marvelous. Then she moved to New York. And I don't think I saw her work then. And I went on working and I thought, "You know, I've had fun." I think [Madge Freedman Altruwood], who's a weaver of yardage, she used to come over and dress my loom for me, because I hated to do that. After learning all that I thought I could learn, she loved doing it, so she came and did it. So she had an opportunity to see what I was doing, and she said, "Claire, they're terrific. I'm going to see if I can get you a show at the public library." Which she did. Lenore Tawney came to Chicago, went to the public library—she never had seen anything I had done. I don't even know if she knew I was working. I don't know—and she called me from the public library. And she said, "Claire, your work is the only work I've seen that I can identify with. It's marvelous." She said, "You know, I'm having a show at the Contemporary Craft Museum in New York in '62," and she said, "and you have to be in that show!"

DB: That's interesting.

CZ: She said, "Your work is terrific!" So she maneuvered it so that I was in that show. She had the whole first floor; it was, her part was [marvelous].

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And then there were four of us who showed on the second floor because Paul Smith, who was director then, and still director, wanted to show somebody who had arrived, like Lenore Tawney, and then wanted to show people who had a potential.

DB: And you were in the potential category.

CZ: And I was in the potential. Sheila Hicks was in the potential. Somebody by the name of Alice Adams—I don't know what's happened to her. And Dorian Sekai, and I don't know what's happened to her. So the two of us made it. (both chuckle)

DB: So that's what it was. You were the people who were possible [stars, start] of the. . . .

CZ: That's right, possible [stars, start]. That was a very important show.

DB: Yeah, what was the response to that show? I mean. . . .

CZ: I don't know really what the response was to us on the second floor, but the response to Lenore's show was fantastic. I mean, I don't know the commercial response, but the overall response was fantastic. She, her work was, it had sort of a religious quality to it. You wanted to speak in whispers when you went in to see that show. It was marvelous. That finished her.

DB: Hmm!

CZ: That show finished her.

DB: Why do you say that?

CZ: Because she's a very unstable person, anyhow. And I don't know what happened. Either. . . . She worked day and night on this show. She was compulsive. I don't know whether she said everything that she had to say then, or whether the burden of this was too much for her, because as I say she's not very stable, but she stopped after that, she stopped weaving for ten years. She did little boxes. Maybe you've seen some of her. . . .

DB: Um hmm, I think I have.

CZ: They're not nearly as interesting as her weavings. She's gone back to weavings now, but they're not very interesting.

DB: Let's take that moment, like in the early sixties, you think was a critical point for what eventually happened to work in fiber, say that show and. . . . Was that really the start of the excitement?

CZ: It was the start of the whole twentieth century movement in the United States. People, weavers had been doing work that was slightly avant garde in Europe a few years before that. And I had an opportunity to see their work later and they were huge, gigantic. I never have seen anything so large. Very interesting.

DB: Again, wall hangings?

CZ: Yeah.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: No, some of them were wall hangings; others were free hanging. But those who were working in the United States had color, and it was all much cleaner work. Entirely different, and we were freer.

DB: Than the Europeans?

CZ: Huh.

DB: Than the European tradition.

CZ: Yeah, because, you see, the Europeans had a tradition of weaving. And we had very little tradition of weaving, and I think that's what did it.

DB: And so you think at this point it started to really take off.

CZ: Yeah. And then, I think a year later, Lenore Tawney, and Sheila Hicks, and I were given a show at the. . . .

DB: In Zurich.

CZ: . . . Kunstgewerben Museum in Zurich.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And that was the first time that the Europeans had seen any work from the United States. And that was well received.

DB: Yeah, what was their reaction? I mean. . . .

CZ: Well, I think that they were delighted with it. You know, those were the days when nothing much was reported about the show, and so on and so forth, but I remember that we all sold about four pieces apiece. And that for, at that time, was fantastic.

DB: Sold them to individual collectors, sold them to institutions?

CZ: Yeah, individual collectors and the museum. The museum bought I think two pieces.

DB: Oh, so they were starting to collect.

CZ: Right. Then.

DB: But it wasn't the case here.

CZ: Oh no. We were frowned on terribly here.

DB: Yeah. I was going to say, what. . . . I'm sort of. . . . It was such an interesting period and how did, you know, what was the response to you, say, from the institutional community and from the critical community?

CZ: They didn't, they would bother.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: They wouldn't bother; nobody wrote up that little show at the public library that I had, but that I can understand. It wasn't a very large show. But then when it was taken to the Renaissance Society—somebody from the Renaissance board or something saw my pieces there and said that they would like to have a showing at the Renaissance Society with perhaps some of the things that I collected. So I showed, oh, you know, some masks and so on and so forth, and baskets, and what have you. The things that would go with woven material. It was a beautiful show. Not one person came out to review that show! It was as if it never had happened! And I can remember the time Harold [Haney]. . . .

DB: Yes.

CZ: He was connected with the Renaissance Society.

DB: Yes, very much so.

CZ: What was he? Do you remember?

DB: Uh, he may have been on the board, but he always had a kind of pseudo. . . .

CZ: He was [more the]. . . .

DB: Yeah. He may have been involved with selection and so forth, [publishing] maybe.

CZ: Or something.

DB: Yeah, I know he was for years with. . . .

CZ: Because it sticks in my mind that Harold Haney told. . . . There's one reviewer, I think of the Tribune, his last name was Holland or Hollander. Does it ring a bell?

DB: Not that one.

CZ: I forget his first name. [Harold Haney told "Holland"—Ed.] that maybe he shouldn't come out to see the show because it would be better not to see it than to say something bad about it.

DB: (chuckles)

CZ: Now I didn't make that up!

DB: Yes. (laughs) I believe it. Because I think it had to be difficult. I think it was a. . . . We were talking about this earlier in the kitchen, about the changes in attitudes toward design, the changes in attitudes toward anything that hasn't been painting and sculpting. And here was. . . .

CZ: You see, there was no frame of reference with these pieces. And of course, that's what I liked. That's what helped me in being free. Because I had absolutely no frame of reference, except the thread itself. Now don't you think that would be exciting?

DB: I'd think you could do anything you wanted to with it.

CZ: That's my point. It was marvelous, marvelous. And that's the way I was also when I started to do that whole mounting technique.

DB: Well, let's get into that.

CZ: Okay.

DB: Because you said—you've said here today, and you've said before—that you really felt constrained at the time by the loom.

CZ: Um hmm.

DB: And, what, because it was two-dimensional? You did do some attempts, with a pocket design, to do a little

three-dimensional _____ on the loom.

CZ: Yeah, but that was within the vertical and horizontal.

DB: Horizontal confines of the. . . .

CZ: Those little pockets and stuff, I called those reliefs. They're low reliefs.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: But it was after 1962, after that show in New York at the Contemporary Craft Museum. My whole life had changed then because, you see, I was married a second time, at that time, but my husband had died.

DB: That year?

CZ: Yeah, he died in '62. And so I knew I wasn't going to sit home with that goddamn loom, that's for sure. And be isolated like that. So I decided. . . . I didn't decide; I decided that I'd have to change or quit, because that was not very exciting. And when I was in New York for the opening of that show, there was a weaver in New York. And I thought maybe I'd like to take lessons. I needed something fresh. And her name is Lilly [Blumena]. She was well known at that time. And she had a little [patient assistant] who had some knotting techniques up on the wall. And I asked who did it, and she said, "He did." And I said, "He's the one I want to see."

DB: Hmm.

CZ: And I would like to take lessons from him, to learn the knotting technique.

DB: What attracted you to the knotting technique?

CZ: I like the looks of it. But I also evidently knew enough about it to know that you weren't confined to anything. That all you needed was yourself and tension. Like I put the material on a nail for that tension, or even a doorknob.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: So that if I wanted to make my life less sedentary, and travel, I could take a little work along with me. That's what I did.

DB: So there are other motives.

CZ: Huh?

DB: There were other motives.

CZ: Motives.

DB: Motives of mobility.

CZ: Right.

DB: Yeah, not just getting off the loom.

CZ: But I knew that I could do a lot more, you see, with the knotting technique.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: I knew for some reason that it would be, that I could make it become three-dimensional.

DB: Yeah. Well, let's talk about the fact. . . . Was the knotting technique widely used at that point?

CZ: No.

DB: In a sense, for let's say fine art weaving?

CZ: No.

DB: Not at all.

CZ: No.

DB: What was The Haitian doing? That, it's a traditional thing.

CZ: It's traditional in Haiti.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And it's traditional for making belts. It's traditional in a lot of those, you know, peasant countries, or whatever you want to call. It's not a primitive, but. . . . In all peasant society, they used the knotting technique for something, for something decorative: a belt or a purse, or what have you. They all knew it, I think, but nobody in the United States particularly knew it, except the sailors, and they used to do a lot of knotting in their spare time, besides the scrimshaws.

DB: I see. For decorative things.

CZ: For decorative things.

DB: Ah hah.

CZ: And then, you know, the whole bit came in on the macrame here.

DB: Yes.

CZ: Oh! It flooded the market.

DB: Yes.

CZ: But I started before that. But I remember getting a book after I had learned how to do the knots from the Haitian, and I experimented a long time before I made anything. I made some jewelry that was really kind of beautiful. And then I had a show at the Art Institute. And that's where I showed some of these very early mounted pieces of the jewelry, what have you. That made quite a hit. Everybody was just crazy about them—can't really call them jewelry, we'll call them personal adornment. Where again, it was all experimental.

DB: Yeah, because those pieces were—again, you say jewelry, well, they're much smaller in scale—and was that because you were experimenting with mounting _____?

CZ: Yeah, that's because I was experimenting with mounting, and if I did anything large, I'd never finish. And I wanted to finish so I could go on to the next piece, you see. Because I never have really done anything large myself, because I'd never finish. The slave labor connected with it is fantastic. Now there's slave labor connected with any kind of handwork. But I think that it's worse with thread.

DB: Right. With thread?

CZ: Yeah, I think.

DB: Why, because of just the size, the dimensions, and the constant. . . .

CZ: Right.

DB: You need so many pieces to form a surface.

CZ: That's right, yeah.

DB: Those small pieces [catalog p. _____—Ed.], you incorporated. . . . Did you incorporate bits of shell and things like that?

CZ: Um hmm.

DB: Why was that the case?

CZ: Well, they're entirely different. The whole method is different. All of those things are done with a buttonhole stitch.

DB: Oh, these are not knotted?

CZ: No.

DB: Okay.

CZ: No, they're buttonhole stitch. And I started again for myself. I don't know why. I'm a beachcomber; I adore it. And I used to go places and pick up things that I liked on the beach. And for some reason or other, I felt like—in particular when I started covering stones. I picked up stones the shape of which I liked. And if they were too pretty I didn't feel like covering them, you see, so it had to be any old stone. So I started covering stones, and as I say, I don't know why. Maybe it was to learn more what I could do with this buttonhole stitch. Because I track all these things down. And with the knotting technique, I experimented for years. Now unfortunately I don't do too much experimenting anymore; I think I should. With the buttonhole stitch, I'm still experimenting with it. I love using, finding one technique that will, can say many, many different things, that has great variation. I find that fascinating.

DB: I would think so.

CZ: Yeah. I adore that end of it.

DB: Well, let's go back with knotting. You did some of the small pieces so you could experiment more. When did you start suddenly dealing with large pieces.

CZ: Large pieces. Well, I think I experimented from 19, let's say, '62 or '3 until about 1965. I just experiment, doing, you know, personal adornment with all small pieces. And then my friend Sheila Hicks moved to Paris, and I went over there one summer, and she had just opened a workshop, because she was working with an architect who said he didn't know anyone who could do a piece, a wall, a whole wall for him for the Ford Foundation. Have you ever seen her two walls in the Ford Foundation?

DB: No, ____ ____.

CZ: And Sheila said, "I'll do it." And she'd never had an experience with a workshop before, but she set up a workshop and did these two gigantic wall—walls! They're walls; not pieces, walls.

DB: Right.

CZ: And I was there, I think, in Paris for a couple of months. So I observed what she did and how she went about it. Not, her technique was, this was an embroidery. And we've never been in competition, anyhow. I mean, you know. And I came home and I started a workshop.

DB: You started employing other people.

CZ: And I started, and I did it slowly. I have a workshop, you know, connected with my apartment where we are now.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: And I had a couple people in there, first. And I didn't like that idea; it was too personal, my place. So finally, I rented a place and employed more people.

DB: What's it like to go from something that was so much yours—I mean, you did everything, except for maybe some of the initial stages, as dressing the loom ____ly—but to go from something that's so personal and then to have to direct others how to do it.

CZ: Yeah, in the beginning it was very difficult, because, again, I wasn't that well disciplined. I told you that when I made the wall hangings sometimes I did more ripping than weaving, because I ad-libbed. And to tell you the truth, I think ad-libbing is for amateurs. That's what I learned. If you're a pro, you do very little ad-libbing. I don't even do too much ad-libbing when I work on those very small pieces. I have to know more or less what I'm going to do before I start doing it. I mean, there are variations, and the variations lead to the next thing. I forget where I was.

DB: Oh, we were talking about the difficulty of suddenly working with. . . .

CZ: Oh yes! And here, I had to figure out the number of threads—of course, I have to do that anyhow—the length of the threads. . . . I had to figure out the whole piece from the very start to the very end and change very little in between the start and the finish. Hardly ever changed anything. If there was some technical problem, we worked that out before we would do the piece, just that technical problem. Because I don't believe in making maquettes. And I think that also came from this marvelous Japanese girl that I was working with for all fourteen years off and on. She says, "Why do a maquette? We do it big piece right away." (both chuckle)

DB: But isn't art. . . . You know, again, we got back to how you work. You're going to do a big piece, how does the design come about?

CZ: It's in my head, and I have to have a very strong image before I dare do a piece. Then sometimes I would sketch it for them.

DB: Okay, because you've got to tell them.

CZ: Oh, I have to tell them.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: Now remember, it was very simple.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: Because it has to be simple so that they understand. And I believe in simplicity anyhow; the longer I work the more I go towards greater simplicity. And it's very difficult. Much more difficult to do a simple piece than it is a complicated piece. I don't know why. Well, I show them a sketch, and not all of them. [Missai], my Japanese girl who is the lead, I'd show it to her. Then we decide whether part of it had to be grafted. Some of the walls that came out, that were at right angles with the base, would have to be grafted. So they all had to learn how to read a graft. And it was that simple, that was it. And then we worked like a factory.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: I used to like four people working for me. Because all of the vertical pieces were all made horizontally.

DB: Oh they were?

CZ: Yeah. It was the quickest way to work. And it was a way where four people could work on a piece at one time. And that was very optimistic because then it, people didn't feel bogged down by that one piece; it didn't seem forever and ever when four people were working. They could communicate while they working. And four goes four times and fast as one.

DB: Right. So you'd have the piece stretched out on the table?

CZ: We had a board, yeah, a hanging board.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: A board that was hung by a couple of ropes, and we'd just start the piece on that board and work on either side.

DB: And maybe repeating the same patterns?

CZ: And repeating the same pattern on both sides. And whatever was necessary. And then they had to change their position, because one person's knotting isn't quite the same as the next, to keep it all flowing correctly.

DB: So you can tell the difference in the pattern?

CZ: No, you [can, can't]. Because it all had to come out the same width, you see, or the same length. It's very meticulous work. So that after every couple of inches they measured.

DB: To see if it was all right. You compensated or you. . . .

CZ: Maybe made it looser or tighter. But after a while we had very little trouble.

DB: With four people working on, say, one of your big vertical pieces. . . .

CZ: Um hmm.

DB: . . . what time are we talking about? How much time do something like that?

CZ: I would say a month's time.

DB: A month's time.

CZ: Yeah. Now that is working every day. But now I only work three days a week. So I don't think my pieces, though, today are as large as they were then. But it seems to me when I—yes—I worked for two years for that show at the Art Institute, and I think we only worked three days a week.

DB: For the retrospective?

CZ: Yeah.

DB: What about. . . . In all the things I've read, they keep referring back to "this critical moment of making things three-dimensional." Okay, but not just for you but for the whole working with fiber, fiber forms. And one of your shows was called Sculpture, Statement, Sculpture? Sculpture!, which I loved.

CZ: Yeah.

DB: That was a great title. Because it had to be, that had to be a difficult moment again for this art public. And I'd like you just to talk about that a little bit. I mean, why did you. . . . You decided to go three-dimensional. Why?

CZ: Well, at that time, I, and all the others—and the others I find so interesting because I had very little communication with them—but you know, it was in the air. I think people with the same development at a certain time in history always. . . . We wanted to get away, you see, from the conventional wall piece. So this was all part of experimenting. I think everybody, and again including me, nothing was on the wall. That was a no-no. So, not having a wall, what do you do? You do a three-dimensional piece or you do, we'll say a free-hanging piece, and then the three-dimensional. . . . Now I'm giving you details. It's really free-hanging, free-standing, something on the floor, or something lying on a pedestal. Anything except the wall piece. I mean, it's that simple.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: And I, a lot of, we'll say fiber artists today have gone back to the two-dimensional wall piece for certain reasons. They're more saleable. That's I think the main reason. But there are people who didn't go through this pioneering period, so he chose something different to do—a very beautiful abstract wall piece, we'll say. I mean, it's all changed now.

DB: Yeah, it's ____ revert back.

CZ: Um hmm.

DB: Were you interested in the, you know, [fiberesque] sculpture? Did that kind of. . . .

CZ: I was then. My goal was really to make a free-standing piece that could support itself without a foreign armature in it. And what I mean by a foreign armature is the metal piece. . . .

DB: Um hmm, wood.

CZ: . . . or wood, or what have you. And I made quite a few around 1967. You know, I had a very important show in 1968 at the [Feigen, Figen] Gallery in Chicago. And that was the first time that anybody in the fiber field had ever passed to a fine arts gallery.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And there I had, oh, about I think three or four free-standing pieces that were really beautiful. But I found in the interim that they do not stand up very well. There's one now at Rosary College that Bob Mayer and Buddy Mayer bought in '68, and I understand it has flopped.

DB: Aah.

CZ: And I've been going out there to look at it now for a year. I can't face it. I haven't gone. Because I'm going to have to put a metal piece, and I don't have any more of the thread that's there. If we can take that thread off and use it again. . . . It's a problem. I don't know if I could ever have made them really to stand over a long period of time. Now they all stood maybe for a year or two, but, you see, thread gets a little tired and it moves. But I think those are the most interesting pieces that I have ever done.

DB: Because the structure was it's right structure.

CZ: Yeah.

DB: It had to be made what you call a wall. . . .

CZ: And, you see, the reason I wanted to do it was I was interested, and I still am, in making a form that was really unique to fiber. I almost forgot to say that in that. . . .

DB: I think that's a very important statement.

CZ: It's about the most important thing that was in my head.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: What couldn't be done or reproduced in any other material.

DB: In any other material. Now, if I'd used a foreign armature in the very beginning, I would have gotten a very different shape, and it wouldn't have been unique to fiber. Now I don't really know whether I succeeded in making a shape that was unique to fiber; I have no idea. I have a feeling I did a little bit. And I've always said that I want to go back to that, to see if I could really do it.

CZ: That's such an important point.

DB: Let me get you some more [food].

CZ: Yeah, let's take a break, but I want to talk about. . . .

[Tape 2, side A]

DB: We were talking about. . . . Oh, gosh, we need to identify this second tape. Again, with Claire Zeisler, and we were discussing her free-standing, three-dimensional pieces, in which the key element at that time was the fact that these pieces reflected their material and the armature for it was made out fabric, out of fiber. And I think that is a very important point.

CZ: I also wanted to see how far I could stretch the fiber and still have it say fiber.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: I don't think I'm expressing that quite correctly.

DB: No, I think you're ____ enough.

CZ: Is that clear?

DB: That it's really not some other, looking like some other material.

CZ: . . . material. Right. And not spoil the nature of the fiber.

DB: And you really feel that that was one of your most successful periods?

CZ: Yes. And I feel that really all my creativity was there. Because that was also a time when I discovered that fall that is my trademark. You know, the [three fall, free fall].

DB: Um hmm, right.

CZ: Because I think that happened because of my love for materials. I like the raw material. I like it before man's done too much to it. And I conceive my pieces, I think, differently than most. Because what I really tried to do is to give a shape to the raw threads. So I started with all these threads, and the means is also the end.

DB: Um hmm, okay.

CZ: Do you understand that?

DB: Well, because they have a certain texture and quality, is that what you're saying.

CZ: No, because some people will be concerned about the end. What should they do with the ends? Should they cut the ends off, or what? That's only part of the piece. Where my threads, my raw threads, are the piece. I try not to do anything to them except give the raw threads a shape. I still don't think I'm making much sense.

DB: I think you're. . . . Yeah, I think we're getting there. (chuckles) But. . . .

CZ: The threads are not just a means to the end; they're also the end. Because I allow all the raw threads to show. Many times you don't see the construction [for, or] the piece.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And a lot of people, or some people, would criticize that, where you have to see what these threads are coming from.

DB: You're talking about seeing like the actual [mount] or whatever?

CZ: Yes. But I don't like that. I use my knotting as construction. Macrame is a decorative knot. It's the same knot; it's a square knot.

DB: Right, it's ____.

CZ: But the square knot is so flexible, again, it's almost as flexible as the buttonhole stitch that I was talking to you about.

DB: But your concerned. . . . Again, you say all of that is hidden.

CZ: Most of it.

DB: Most of it's hidden.

CZ: Um hmm, I don't mind a little showing, but it becomes too mechanical, you see, if too much of the knotting shows, I think.

DB: Let's take your [forms, though; Form Show]. This is a question I was going to ask you later, but maybe it's appropriate now. Think of some of those falling forms and so forth, it simply comes out of the nature of the material? I wondered where you got your imagery. You know, where does this pop out of? What do you feel? I mean, does it just feed off of just the material, or what?

CZ: You mean, how is it constructed, or. . . ?

DB: Well, I mean just the actual. . . . How do you arrive at a particular shape?

CZ: Well, let's go back and talk about the free-standing ones. I think I can explain it with that better. I had to do certain things to make the piece stand. I had to make, let's say, the bottom of it three-dimensional, so that it would stand. In order to do that I had to do something to the base wall. The base wall is made up of many knots, depending on the width of the piece. Now as we worked. . . . You see, it's all done at one time, and that's what I'm so crazy about too. There's nothing added.

DB: Um hmm, okay.

CZ: The threads that you see that remain free, that are free-falling, each thread that you see is knotted right into the base. As we make them up, we insert a thread or two threads or three threads, depending what effect we wish. In order to make these pieces stand, we had to build walls of knotting that were at right angles with the base.

DB: Okay.

CZ: We did that as we were knotting. Those were the pieces that had to be put on graph paper, because it's the same principle. Each knot for the wall had a thread inserted in it as we were working. When we finished the base, we picked out those threads for the wall and started knotting those walls.

DB: Okay. The whole process is right then and there.

CZ: And the whole process is all one.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: So that's how you arrive at, we'll say, that's how I arrived at the shape, because the piece had to be three-dimensional at the bottom. So it had to take what I call those flanges. And to make those flanges stiff, permanent, then all of the threads that came out of the top of those flanges were all wrapped very tight, with the same material as the base—or we chose maybe some wool, what have you, whatever. Does that answer your question?

DB: It does, it does answer to a great degree. You said you worked on the three-dimensional pieces for two or three years. Have you given them up?

CZ: Yeah.

DB: Why? That was. . . .

CZ: Well, I think. . . . I did it then. They were more timely then. Everything today—because, you know, you're influenced by what's going on—in this field, in the fiber field, I think it's making a complete circle. And much of it's gone back to walls, flat wall pieces. Because it's very difficult to sell fiber pieces to a collector; they don't want them, particularly. Although I have sold them. But by and large they're not very crazy about them. They say something different than painting, except the pieces that I have around look very well with painting. But anyhow, they're difficult to sell. The fiber artist has—the one's who are good—have made rather a nice living in doing commissions.

DB: Right. That's what [I always think of; I was thinking]. ____ ____.

CZ: Right. And in order to do commissions, you have to do wall pieces, because they're out of the way of the public; they're not going to be destroyed. None of the commercial buildings will take a three-dimensional piece because they'd be destroyed. I mean, people'd walk around them and pull at them, and so on and so forth, and they take a certain care.

DB: Unless they just can't get them.

CZ: Huh?

DB: They just simply can't get in that setting.

CZ: No. They'd look very well but it's not practical.

DB: What was the reaction? Again, I go back to critical reactions. What was the reaction to these three-dimensional, free-standing pieces?

CZ: I can only say that at that time when I had that show at the Feigen Gallery in '68, people were so surprised that the reaction was marvelous. Feigen Gallery—[Nottig Goo-beer] was the directress of the gallery at that time. I don't think she has ever had a bigger attendance than she did that month that my pieces were there. Three-quarters of the pieces were sold out of that show! I fainted dead away!

DB: (laughs)

CZ: I can remember if it hadn't been for my daughter I don't think I ever could have gone to the opening I was so nervous. Because nobody had seen this work before. I had no idea whether it was good, bad, or indifferent. I mean, that's how little confidence I had in myself. And I still don't have too much. I [died] over the Art Institute show too, the retrospective.

DB: Yes, the retrospective?

CZ: Yeah.

DB: Did that. . . .

CZ: And I got marvelous reviews.

DB: I was going to ask you what kind.

CZ: And it wasn't because I was a citizen here. I don't mean a citizen, I mean a. . . . You know.

DB: I know.

CZ: Because I lived here.

DB: Right.

CZ: Because they didn't have to write it at all. And [Bob, Brad] Schiltz gave me a terrific review. Now Katharine Kuh had written something about me in the Saturday Review before the show, and I think that helped. She wrote about me and Lenore Tawney, saying that the two of us had really passed from a craft to the fine arts field. So on and so forth. So that was national publicity.

DB: And that it should be treated a little more seriously.

CZ: Right.

DB: Do you think people had a hard time, even at this point, treating it seriously?

CZ: Yeah. It's a little better, only a little. Today, if you have the backing of a prestigious institution, it's easier.

Because the retrospective I had at the Art Institute, it got fantastic reviews. I fainted dead away over that. People adored it. She never has had a bigger attendance than she did for that show. And almost everything that was for sale out of that show has been sold. I think I have two large pieces left. Two or three large pieces.

DB: Did you, did your. . . .

CZ: But I'm. . . . Excuse me.

DB: Yeah, go ahead. I'm sorry.

CZ: But what I'm trying to say was if that show had been someplace else—in the gallery, not at the Art Institute, with the prestige of the Art Institute, I think that I would not have sold what I sold. Now maybe the reviews would have been almost that good. I don't know, but they wouldn't have been that good. And unfortunately, people in my field have to have the prestige of someplace, but I think everybody does.

DB: Oh, I think that's true, but I think. . . .

CZ: Yeah. More true.

DB: . . . more so, yeah, more so in your field.

CZ: Right.

DB: When I was reading [Thurman's] article on you, she said that she thought that the—her words—1970 exhibition sculpture in fiber, fiber sculpture and fiber works, she thought that period in there was like a turning point in the field, generally.

CZ: In the seventies?

DB: Yeah. She was talking about all these shows, I guess, took place, and this is shortly after your Feigen show, couple of years after. And you were involved in some of those shows. And there a number of people doing sculpture at that point.

CZ: Yeah. Many.

DB: Yeah. But you were obviously one of the first.

CZ: I was one of the first. Yeah.

DB: Yeah. And that was a wave, you say, that now you think was sort of short-lived, but has sort of subsided? There's not so much sculptural form being done?

CZ: No. I'm still doing it somewhat, and I think that I'm [falling, flowing] slightly against the stream. I'm [falling, flowing] upstream a little bit rather than downstream.

DB: (chuckles)

CZ: Because as I say all these people have to make a living, you see. Fortunately or unfortunately I don't have to make a living by it. And I think not having to make a living by it allowed me to experiment more than most people. So from that point of view it's fortunate. From the point of view that I don't have to make a living again, I'm not very crazy about doing commissions, so I don't do them. I do very few.

DB: But you have done commissions?

CZ: I have done a few. Because, you see, I love to experiment. When you're doing a commission, you have to do what you know.

DB: Um hmm, that's what they want. It's what they [buy].

CZ: Well, that's what. . . . I could only do it that way. That's what they want. They want something that they've already seen. But I wouldn't dare try to experiment with a commission. I mean, it might not hold up.

DB: Have you done three-dimensional commissions?

CZ: No.

DB: Haven't.

CZ: No, the three-dimensional things are very difficult to sell. Usually they're too big for a home. And I think that the collector doesn't want them. I don't think anybody wants them except me. (laughter)

DB: Hold them _____. Let's talk briefly about some of the other influences. Now, in doing all this, we failed to mention that you have a rather amazing collection of primitive materials here, if you want to call them primitive. But of [shelves, shells], and of course your basket collection. And I'd like to talk about how you got involved in that and what influence that's had on your work, if indeed it's had an influence on it.

CZ: You know, it's strange, but I don't know how I came about collecting. . . . I'm not very articulate about it. Because I told you before how I happened on that oceanic meathook.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: That started me. And after that I don't too well remember. I did a lot of shopping around, I mean, going to different places and so on. I don't honestly know. But I don't know. . . . I mean, all these things—the baskets and the primitive things—must influence my work, but I don't know how. I have no idea. I mean, there has to be a thread running through it all. But I don't see the thread. Do you?

DB: Well, I'm not sure. I was trying to think, you know, are there patterns? I mean, I'm talking about actual patterns that maybe you use in your work. You know, the baskets _____ [beautiful] patterns, _____ _____?

CZ: No, I try not to be in competition with the baskets and so on, because I can't. The Indians did it all so well. . . .

DB: So well, yeah.

CZ: . . . yeah, that I want to do something else. I think maybe that the only, well, the only way I can see a connection is that they have reverence for their material. And I have the same reverence. But I don't know if that answers it.

DB: No, I think that's certainly part of it, because we haven't stressed this in the interview. . . .

CZ: You see, we're talking about the primitive things that I've collected. Now, I think of my work as sort of sophisticated primitive. I don't know if those are the right adjectives for it. How does it come across to you?

DB: Sophisticated primitive? Well, when you say that, then I think of the fact that you're, somewhere you're drawing on primitive shapes, primitive forms, primitive ideas, and, you know, but using your knowledge of, your learning and knowledge and experimentation to take it a step further. And I see in some of your forms—and I don't want to sound like a critic on this tape—but I do see a sort of a primitive quality, almost like a totem [at, of the] times, or something. I don't know if people have said that to you or not?

CZ: Well, they've said, you know, they're totemic.

DB: Yeah.

CZ: And maybe they're personages.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: But I think the nature of the material does that. I mean, identify it with the materials that are used in primitive. . . . I don't know. I'm not very articulate about it. Because, you know, I have no way of judging my work. I don't know if that's true of every artist. Is it? I've absolutely no way of judging.

DB: I don't know if I. . . . I can't say.

CZ: I know when something clicks, for me, that I do that something if it clicks. But I have no way of judging a finished product. That's why I like to sometimes show, you know, in group shows. Because you see your work in a very different perspective, except that if the whole body of the group show is not very good, which it often is, it pulls your piece down.

DB: Pulls your piece down. [Do wonders.] I don't know. We've got to stop. One thing. Just tell me. Where do you get the titles for your work?

CZ: I don't know.

DB: There's such a range of them.

CZ: I pull them out of my head. It so happens that that particular day, you know, something appeals to me. I don't think they really add too much reference to the pieces.

DB: I was just curious if they did.

CZ: I really do it to identify the pieces; it's much easier.

DB: Yeah. So you don't say Wall Hanging Number One, or Free Standing Number Six.

CZ: That's right, yeah, that's right.

DB: It's ____ ____ ____.

CZ: I wasn't very good at titling the things for that Art Institute show, because that show made me so nervous that I wasn't relaxed enough to find, you know, some good names.

DB: (laughs) So that people would think about them years from now: What did she mean by that?

CZ: Mean, yeah. Because, as you know, some I . . . One I call Black Tuesday.

DB: Um hmm.

CZ: Well, we either started it on a Tuesday, or ended it.

DB: Tuesday.

CZ: And one was Red Wednesday, for the same reason.

DB: Um hmm. Simple answers. We'll end, as we're running out of time. We may do some more in the future. But I think we did a really nice interview. Thank you.

CZ: Well, it was very easy.

DB: Very easy.

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