



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Ruth Asawa and
Albert Lanier, 2002 June 21-July 5**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ruth Asawa on June 21, 2002 and July 5, 2002. The interview was conducted at Ruth Asawa's home and studio in San Francisco, California by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Albert Lanier and Mark Johnson are also present.

Interview

RA: RUTH ASAWA
AL: ALBERT LANIER
MJ: MARK JOHNSON
PK: PAUL KARLSTROM

SESSION ONE
TAPE 1, SIDE A

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A conversation with artist Ruth Asawa, her husband, architect Albert Lanier, joined by Mark Johnson, a friend and director of the art gallery at San Francisco State University. The interviewer is Paul Karlstrom for the Archives. It's June 21, 2002. And the interview is being conducted at Ruth and Albert's home in San Francisco on Castro at 28th & 23rd. I want to thank you for participating. This may be one of several interviews. But what I would like to do is pick up on this slippery topic of modernism. And when I arrived we started talking about it right away. I brought up the subject, Ruth, and you said, "Well, what is modernism anyway?" And, of course, I assumed that this is something that you would have very clear ideas about but maybe you don't. I would like to just bring up that question with you. You are viewed by many as a modernist. And yet you probably have your own feelings about where you fit in your relationship to modernism. And I'm sure Albert has thoughts on this as well. Partly just in terms of the Black Mountain experience that you shared. So why don't I start it that way.

RA: Well, it was in 1946 when I thought I was modern. But now it's 2002 and you can't be modern forever. Modern artist. It's a new group of people. And I don't know them very well.

PK: Well, what do you think Ruth, what do you think in 1946 made you modern? How would you define that?

RA: At that time I was experimenting before anything was called modern, at that time, just experimenting. But now it's not . . . new experimentations are going on. And I feel way behind as an artist, not knowing about machines and technology.

PK: Computers?

RA: Computers. I know nothing about that. But they are way beyond us now in what is happening in the arts now.

PK: So for you the key thing is the idea of experimentation?

RA: At that time, yes. At the time, doing the latest and trying things out. But I don't feel that I'm in touch with it now.

PK: So you think you were modern once but perhaps not so modern anymore?

RA: Right. And I feel like my mother used to think of herself, as an immigrant not knowing the English language and feeling isolated. I feel in a way isolated from that time, now.

PK: How did you feel at the time? And I would ask you this as well, Albert. Would you give the Black Mountain experience as a kind of a watershed for you? Did something happen there? Was there an environment in which you did feel that, "Ah, this is heady stuff. We're working with some new ideas, some new forms." Did you feel that way about it?

RA: It probably felt as though we were ahead of the administration in that time. At that time we felt we were so beyond them.

AL: You mean as students? We were ahead of the people doing the teaching?

RA: Yes.

AL: I didn't feel that. But go ahead.

RA: Well, we were encouraged to try out new things at that time.

AL: I think we felt that everything was possible. Everything was possible. Anything's possible.

RA: And maybe it was our youth that gave us that feeling at that time. But we thought we were given permission to try out new things in terms of the way that . . .

PK: Materials?

RA: Materials. The things that the administration was trying to do. They were experimenting and we were also experimenting at the time. And we were so poor that we were taking materials that were around us and using leaves and rocks and things that were natural rather than having good paper and good materials that we bought. We had to scrounge around with things that were around us. And I think that was very good for us.

PK: And then the instructors there didn't have that advantage, what you described as a kind of advantage. Since you didn't have, you had to be more imaginative about what you could use.

RA: Yes.

PK: What you could bring together in your expression and maybe less tied to tradition.

RA: Well, it was through the teachers that we had who encouraged us to use things around us.

PK: Did most of the other students respond well to that freedom that they were offered?

AL: Some did and some didn't. Some regarded [Josef] Albers as a Fascist, a dictator, because he didn't react to or condone your feelings, "I feel this and I feel that." He wasn't terribly concerned with what we felt. He was concerned with what we saw and that we learned to see. And he would say, "If you want to express yourself do that on your own time. Don't do it in my class." He taught design, the same course, year-in-and-year-out. And it wasn't Design 101, or Design 102, and Design 103. He taught the same course pretty much the same problems year-in-and-year-out. And we did the same things over and over again.

RA: The same problems had a deeper, deeper feeling, experience.

AL: This was continued with him, certainly all the time that he was at Black Mountain. And sitting here in this living room, he was about to be made head of the Design Department at Yale. But there it was about to be made a graduate school and he was very unhappy about that.

PK: Why?

AL: Because he said, "Design knows nothing about graduation. Art knows nothing about graduation." He wanted those farm boys direct from the farm. He didn't want them after they could spiel off all that they knew about art, which they might by the time they were in graduate school. He wanted them discovering it. That's what he wanted. He really wanted us while we were still discovering things. That's why I say that we had a feeling that everything was possible. And if you wanted to express yourself, and there were many that did, you either did it strictly on your own time or you dropped out of his classes because he did not go in for that.

PK: So he wasn't one on faculty who gave that kind of permission, I gather, that you were talking about earlier.

AL: No, you had definite problems. You had definite problems and each student's solution was discussed with the whole class. And very often you learned something from the comments of the rest of the class. They weren't huge classes. If you didn't bring something, you've got your problem, if you didn't come back with something, you weren't made very welcome. That's freeloading.

MJ: I was curious. How many courses did you actually, the two of you take with Albers?

RA: A design course, color course and a drawing course; drawing and painting. Those were the three, I think, we had with him. So we had essentially only three courses. But we went year after year and had the same course.

PK: How many years did you go?

RA: I went three years and two summers. The summers were very important because we had a faculty that was not the usual year-around faculty.

AL: They were called Summer Institute.

PK: Tell me the years again.

AL: She came in '46.

RA: '46.

PK: So '46 through '49.

RA: Through '49, yes.

PK: Now was, I should know this since I've written about Jacob Lawrence, were you there when he was there?

RA: Jake Lawrence was there, yes. He didn't teach. He didn't teach me. He might have had some students but he was just there visiting.

PK: An artist in residence?

RA: Yes.

PK: So did you have any interaction with the Lawrences," Jake and Gwen [Knight]?

RA: Well, we were like friends, but not a class with him. And [Willem] de Kooning was there too. He was there as an artist.

PK: So these were visitors?

RA: Yes. And Arthur [Merce] Cunningham taught there.

PK: Yes, and [Robert] Rauschenberg was there.

RA: Rauschenberg was a student with me at that time. And he was there for a year as a student. And then the summer he went to Europe, I think, that summer.

MJ: And you were in a class with Rauschenberg?

RA: Yes.

AL: They performed a dance together.

PK: Oh, go on. We have to hear about that.

AL: What was the dance, dear?

RA: It was a flaming with a torch. We ran down the hill and there was a field. It was Rites of Spring music.

AL: Oh, Stravinsky.

RA: Stravinsky's Rites of Spring and that's all I can remember.

AL: You're lucky you didn't burn yourself.

PK: So you were a torchbearer.

RA: Yes, and that's all I remember dancing together.

PK: And so you, this is really interesting, because you, obviously, thought that that was art.

RA: We were just having, yes, we were also having a lot of fun.

PK: Art can be fun, I guess. Although it doesn't sound like Mr. [Josef] Alber's was that much fun. It sounds like he was very serious and very focused and wanted the students to operate within sometimes narrow . . .

RA: Oh, he was really pretty nice.

AL: No, he was --

PK: Was he?

AL: And he got his kicks.

PK: But on his own time?

AL: Well, sometimes he got it right in class.

PK: That's why they call him a Fascist then.

RA: Then as a student I would come up early morning to see the fog come up. We had Mae West, we had a model that looked like Mae West.

PK: Let me guess why.

RA: And then he would photograph that. Because he was interested in photography. I never saw any of those, but they were photographs of the fog coming in. And it was clear in the very beginning, at 6:00, and then it would get very, very foggy, the fog would cover the mountain. And many, many times I just went to his house and knocked on his door. He woke up, went out to photograph, and then he went back to sleep.

PK: So you were like his alarm clock?

RA: Yes.

AL: I guess an alarm clock wouldn't disturb me anyhow.

RA: I don't know.

PK: You were quite an alarm clock.

RA: I got him up. And then I used to make butter for the college from the milk and the cream.

PK: Oh, you had jobs to do?

RA: We all had to work, yes. So it was my job to make the butter. And then I made the buttermilk. Europeans loved buttermilk. That made me very popular with him and with Mrs. [Anni] Albers and with the Europeans who drank buttermilk, which was not something I liked.

PK: Did you like it?

RA: No, I never drank it. I never drank it. But they liked soft butter. And they loved the buttermilk.

PK: You described a situation, this is exactly what I would have imagined, but you have all the rich color and detail of your own experience. You describe a group of people that to a person would be described as modernists. This is a modernist situation. And, obviously, you've had some kind of arrangement because you described Albers, from what you say, was operating pretty much as a formalist. Anybody who tries to remove emotion and feelings or expressionism, which is another part of modernism, from the work would be, I think, described as a formalist. And so these are two very important strains that were almost competing at the time. And I'm just wondering if this was something that you, was it a distinction that you would have made then or in retrospect would you make that kind of a distinction? The formalist as the counter, opposed to the expressionist? What was your thinking then about it? And then maybe how you would think about it now?

RA: Well, for me I liked the rigid and the things that I learned from him. I wasn't very much with

feeling because I had come from a culture that didn't think very much of one's feeling.

PK: This is something that you don't know just how to display.

RA: Right. You don't display it. Yes. And that's why it appealed to me. He appealed to me a lot. But formality, I don't know what it was.

PK: That's really interesting. [To Mark Johnson] Do you have any specific questions about that?

MJ: Well, one issue that's always been at the back of my mind, did you know Leo Amino then?

RA: Yes. He was different. He was very, very different. He was a very sensuous, his sculptures. And Albers did that on purpose. The things that he didn't have, I mean, that kind of feeling he invited people with that feeling. I thought he was more of a feeling person. Don't you think?

MJ: Yes. Were there other people of Japanese or Asian background?

AL: Not really.

RA: He invited Peter Grippe who was like Peter Voukos.

PK: What's his name?

RA: Peter Grippe, G-R-I-P-P-E. He was a sculptor who did things with plaster and wire.

PK: But abstract?

RA: Abstract. Yes. And so Albers invited people that were very different from him, I think. Which was the nice thing about Albers.

PK: That's really interesting, because you could hardly describe that as Fascistic. I realize that was a term you just used.

RA: No, that was . . .

AL: That was the opinions of students who felt that he wasn't giving them the freedom that they had earned.

RA: That they had come for.

PK: But he did bring in other artists who would fill in and give the opportunity for different expression.

RA: Right. And Scar Bablioni and people who were very, very, very, very free. And had a lot of freedom.

MJ: Ruth, was it Grippe's plaster and wire work that you saw it and liked?

RA: I liked it as long as it was without the plaster. And the minute he put the plaster on I didn't like it anymore because it became solid. I liked him and the framework that he was using.

PK: But do you consider him then some kind of influence in your thinking as you evolved?

RA: Well, it was both he and Albers together, because Albers was always talking about transparencies. That is a modern thing. And he was always talking about making things modern with a point at the bottom instead of having pyramids. He would say, "Make the point at the bottom." And it was Albers who taught us how to think modernly. And not in the old way, in old traditional way.

MJ: This is beautiful juxtaposition, Albers and Ruth.

PK: Oh, yes. This is in this book, Vital Forms [exhibition catalog].

AL: It started at the Brooklyn Museum.

PK: And this Albers' piece.

AL: It is done with leaves. It is on rice paper.

PK: And this work.

AL: Tulip tree.

PK: And what's Ruth's work called?

AL: The sculpture. It's seven feet tall.

RA: That's in wire and that's in leaves.

PK: And what's the work called?

AL: Nothing. It just has a number.

PK: This is for the benefit of the tape. So we know which one we're looking at.

AL: It just has a number.

PK: We'll make people look it up.

AL: It's a traveling exhibition.

MJ: And the catalog that we're talking about here, Vital Forms, is basically an exhibition now . . . [at Oakland Museum of California]

AL: [Vital Forms:] Forties to sixties.

MJ: And sort of Bio-morphic abstractions.

RA: Yes.

PK: Abrams [publisher] and the Brooklyn Museum.

MJ: I was always wondering if Ruth saw her work as biomorphic abstraction. I know there's a relationship to nature a lot in your work.

RA: Well, I don't know. I thought we were working on modern things at the time, but we're part of the Bio-morphic.

AL: About beams and . . .

RA: About beams.

PK: I realize I actually saw this show in Brooklyn. It was a very interesting show.

RA: Was it?

PK: Yes. Different kind of show.

RA: Yes, it was very, very, very much of a certain group of people.

AL: The only other local person represented in it, well, there are a couple, one's dead, Eddie Kent, is in there. As is Gordon Onslow Ford. He's still living and in his nineties.

MJ: Before we leave Black Mountain I just wanted to ask a couple of other questions. I know that famous ceramist, Shoji Hamada was there.

RA: Yes.

MJ: But that was after you were gone?

RA: That was after, but he came to San Francisco with [Soetsu] Yanagi, who was a folk art expert and Bernard Leach who was . . .

AL: And also Marguerite Wildenhaim.

RA: And Marguerite who lives here. And they all came together here.

MJ: When was that about?

RA: That was at Rudolph Schaeffer's.

AL: It was in the fifties.

RA: '52.

MJ: I was just asking, did you meet Hamada when he was here in '52?

RA: Yes, Rudolph Schaeffer hosted that meeting. And they said this was not a real piece. And they went through his collection. There were many that were not real.

PK: Like what?

RA: Pottery and things that he had collected over the years. And Yanagi was an expert at that time. And I think he had made two pieces at Black Mountain while he was there. But he had not signed his work until 1954 when he was told to begin to sign by Hamada.

MJ: And I know Voulkos studied with Hamada a little bit at Black Mountain when Hamada was there.

RA: Yes, he was there for three weeks, according to his book.

MJ: And when Hamada came to San Francisco did he also do workshop or was it just a kind of a

lecture?

RA: It was a lecture.

AL: Three person lecture. And Marguerite [Wildenhain] is the potter from Bauhaus group. And she was telling Heath. Is it Heath?

RA: No.

AL: The Englishman. [Bernard] Leach.

RA: Leach.

AL: She was telling Leach, "Your tragedy is that you weren't born Japanese."

RA: Yes. She was mean. Yes.

MJ: We know others over at Black Mountain that were mean too. But we won't go into that. Another question I had about just the Black Mountain scene was, that's when you met Buckminster Fuller?

RA: Yes, in 1948.

MJ: And was he a teacher also?

RA: He came as a teacher. He was a substitute, I think. But I never knew who the other person was. But he came in the summer to build a dome and that was the first time he had these models. He wanted to build a dome there, and that's when Albert was a student of his. And I became the barber for it [Black Mountain School]. And Buckey made a ring for me, a wedding ring.

PK: For you?

RA: Yes.

PK: Excuse me. I'm going to interrupt because we're about ready to change the tape.

SESSION 1, TAPE 1, SIDE B

PK: Continuing the interview, conversation in Ruth's and Albert's kitchen. Ruth, you were answering a question from Mark.

RA: Mark wanted to know about Buckey. The year that we met him was the summer of '48, and Buckey came to build his dome. He wanted to use the students at Black Mountain to build his dome. And his dome did not go up. Then the following summer he came and he had different solutions for building a dome.

AL: He spent that year away at the [Institute of] D[esign] in Chicago. And came back with a group of ID students.

RA: Institute of Design.

AL: And that was when the first dome went up.

MJ: And with all the people, it seems, from Black Mountain, you both had a long friendship and relationship with both Josef Albers and Buckminster Fuller.

RA: Yes. Yes, Josef Albers had gone on sabbatical to Mexico. And I met him and Anni in Mexico the first summer in 1947. He had gone for a sabbatical.

MJ: And was it in Mexico in '47 when you first started the weaving?

RA: Yes. I went with the Quakers to a village.

PK: With the Quakers?

RA: Quakers, yes. They had gone for health and art, and I went for the art. Then they had the house group go, and I don't remember the names. But we went to a village outside Mexico City. And that's where I learned to knit and to knit with wire. And then I saw these transparencies and I went back to Black Mountain. And that was the year, 1947, '48, when I studied and worked with Albers that year. That year he came back to teach. And I had spent some time with the Albers in Mexico.

PK: So they were at the same place in Mexico?

RA: No, they were in Mexico City with [Clara] Clarita Porset who was in Cuba. And she and her husband escaped [Fulgencio] Batista. And she taught Mexican housing at the University when I went in '45 to Mexico City. And then they became good friends with Clarita who designed some chairs in leather. And Albers had designed some chairs in leather and wood in Mexico and then Black Mountain.

PK: It seems to me, I'm trying to wrap my mind around what it was like at Black Mountain. I know, of course, a little bit about this, and I know how many important modernists went there. But it seems to me there are sort of dueling impulses. Or maybe it was just so inclusive, but what I mean by that is there is this design focus. You even mentioned furniture design. This was actually in Mexico City where Albers was visiting.

RA: And he designed some at the Bauhaus before that. And then he went to Mexico City and then he met Clarita, who was from Cuba. Escaping Cuba, so she came to Mexico City. She taught design and architecture.

PK: Well again, looking at the ambiance, the creative environment at Black Mountain, as you're describing it. I don't call these competing influences, but there may be another way to say it, that there were these alternatives, these different expressions. The furniture design is one thing because of its practical applications. But by the same token, there are other things going on, especially with the students, that are hardly practical at all. And that would be the more imaginative ...

RA: It's totally impractical.

PK: And yet Black Mountain seemed to create an environment in which all of these were possible. I guess my question is, do they all fit then within, did they at the time, do they, in your looking back, fit within a concept of the modern thinking?

RA: There was no title to what we were trying to do. I mean, if you wanted that chair they'd say, "Go up there. There's a wood shop there. You can make your own chair." Or you could make a desk or table up there. They'd point to the wood shop and they'd say, "Make your own." And then you

would think what kind of desk would you make if you had the wood and there might not be any wood for you so they say, "Well . . . "

AL: There were lots of challenges. But there was always fighting at Black Mountain. There were all these cliques. The sociologists vs. the artists and blah, blah, blah. You know. And there was always strife. Musically there was strife.

RA: Yes, there was John Cage on this side and there was [Edwin] Bodky on this side.

AL: It was not all peaches and cream by any intent. But it was such a poor school economically, but we had this gorgeous 640 acres. We had a farm. There were cows that gave milk. We had a cook. We ate our three meals together.

PK: You had a barber.

AL: We ate three meals together, breakfast, lunch and dinner, faculty and students. That doesn't happen anymore.

MJ: And another thing that I've always been struck by, because I also was a student of Josef Albers', was that there was a relationship drawn, or existed between the study of design in a very practical way that related to any kind of study of art, as well as craft, so that people like Trude Guermonprez or Anni Albers, who were known for their work in textile, or Margarite who was known in ceramics, were considered fine artists.

AL: Sure they were.

RA: Art was at a high level. And living was very difficult for us. I mean, we lived in crude beds and crude desks and crude . . .

AL: Yes, that they'd hauled in. War surplus.

RA: I was in the war surplus building. I had nothing to do with it, but I did have a room of my own, which was, at that time, even now you don't have. You don't have that isolation or the room that belongs to you. In some ways it was in two worlds. You had a space that was your own and you could do with what you wanted. You could paint it any color you wanted. If you wanted it black you'd paint the room black.

AL: Which, I think, James Leon, the playwright did. He painted his space black.

PK: Would you describe then Black Mountain as a kind of creative utopia? Was that the idea behind it? A situation was created where all kinds of people were brought together, forward-looking presumably, imaginative and creative people. And they would bounce up against one another. And out of that -- maybe thesis, antithesis -- synthesis, you'd almost have a sense that things are learned and further progress is made. Does the idea of utopia, it doesn't sound like the living circumstances were utopian exactly but . . .

AL: Well, some people might regard them as utopian. They came from Florida, Rollins College. There was a split there at Bryer, Bryer and Reed.

RA: Rice.

AL: Rice came from Rollins. But I think the other really big factor, which happened to commence

about the same time that Black Mountain was founded, were the refugee scholars fleeing Hitler. And without that it never would have amounted to anything. And they would rather teach at a place like Black Mountain College for \$50 a month than not teach at all. So we benefited greatly, that they were here, benefited greatly from that. Otherwise those people would not have come. They would have stayed over there in Bavaria.

RA: Frankfurt.

AL: Frankfurt.

MJ: Ruth, with regard to what I was talking before about crafts, Anni and Trude.

RA: Printmaking.

MJ: Printmaking. At the Oakland Museum now when your exhibition is up it talks about one of the first shows you had here in San Francisco at the Museum of Modern Art. Then it says there was some discussion as to whether your work was sculpture because it didn't stand up by itself.

RA: Right.

MJ: And I was wondering if you felt that could be related in any way to the fact that you had been at a place that had these textile wall hangings, so that there was a tradition of things that didn't hang up by themselves? What do you think about that?

RA: Well, I think that Black Mountain gave you the right to do anything you wanted to do. And then you put a label on it afterwards. I think that's the nice thing about what Black Mountain did for its students. It was like they gave you permission to do anything you wanted to do. And then if it didn't fit they'd make a category for you. But I think Black Mountain helped make something with weaving and with printmaking, and it gave people the freedom to make something of each category, I think. And we don't have those divisions anymore.

MJ: Good. And one other thought I always wanted to ask. I was saying even to Paul on the telephone that when I visit that Kiakaniva Bookstore in the mall, at certain times of the year they have those hanging star festival, sort of sculptures, paper. You know the things that I mean?

RA: I think so.

MJ: Sort of suspended. And it's kind of like an oragami thing, but they're suspended. And I was wondering if you had ever thought about a relationship of your sculpture to those Tanabata star festival hangings or oragami?

RA: Well, if you go back, many of those things are before we even had them into. And I think that's why I think it's important that we, we're not so modern. We are but we aren't so, it goes back to an earlier time when we can relate to those. And I think it's important to have a relationship with the past and the present and not just be modern or old or modern, or anything like that. I think it's good to be part of everything than to have to be restricted to a certain . . . you know what I mean?

MJ: Yes.

PK: Well, actually that's a good ending point, because that's sort of where we started out. We came up with an answer after all. Thank you. And I hope this isn't the only time we do this. This is really interesting. So thanks to all of you.

SESSION TWO
TAPE 1, SIDE A

PK: Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. A second interview session with Ruth Asawa and Albert Lanier at their home in San Francisco. The interviewer for this second session is Paul Karlstrom. The date is July 5, 2002. And we'll move right on into it. Last time we talked about modernism. And we focused pretty much on that. And you talked a lot about Black Mountain, and your experience there, which was fascinating. I would like to start out by asking one question that I think I neglected to ask. It's an inevitable one. Ruth, you're Asian American, Japanese American. You were in an internment camp in Arkansas, I do believe, before, pretty much directly before the Black Mountain experience. And so this is like a reimmersion in the outside, let's say, the outside world, American society. But in our chatting a moment ago I came to see that it really wasn't precisely the situation and experience was not precisely American society in general. It was a very special experience. The question that I have has to do with race and to what extent race was a factor in your experience there at Black Mountain? Who were some of the other people? You suggested in an earlier response that there was terrific variety, and even among Asian Americans you mentioned the names of some of the others who were there. And would you remind me of who they were?

RA: The first one was a veteran. And his name was Isaac Carter. And he was in the 442nd Infantry from Hawaii, which fought valiantly in Italy. The other one was Su Yung Lee, who was there because Chiang Kai-shek, who was thrown out of China and went to Taiwan, and me. I was just a farmer from Los Angeles. The three of us were treated very, very well at Black Mountain College, and as were the blacks. Mary Park and Jacob Lawrence and his wife, Gwen Knight. It was only good inside the college. When they went out in the community, they really realized that there was still racism amongst blacks. And there were so few of us Asians that we were treated in a very different way.

PK: So there was no real, in your experience, sort of a holdover from the attitudes of the war years and the internment experience?

RA: Only during the war when we went through the country. And my sister and I went to Mexico in a bus and we got to somewhere in Missouri and we didn't know whether we should use the colored toilet or white toilet. And so at that time we decide to use the colored toilet because we were colored. And we just remembered that as an experience of racial discrimination.

PK: That was before Black Mountain right?

RA: That was before Black Mountain.

PK: And before the camp or after?

RA: No, after camp, going from Milwaukee down to Mexico City.

PK: I didn't even know about that Mexico City trip. Can you tell a little bit about that?

RA: Well, there were two summers that I spent. One summer was before Black Mountain and one summer during Black Mountain that we went to Mexico City to study.

PK: Oh, I remember. We talked about that a bit last time. And you met, well, we don't need to go over the same ground, but was it Albers that . . . ?

RA: Albers spent his summer there. And we met him there. And he and Anni took us to Chapingo to see the murals, Diego Rivera's murals. And we -- I had studied Mexican housing with Clarita Porset, who was thrown out of Cuba by [Fulgencio] Batista.

PK: Yes, now I do remember we talked a bit about that. What I gathered from our earlier conversation on this subject is that you said there was this diverse group of people and that it was almost as if you were privileged, or viewed as special. Something, and I won't say admirable, because how can you be one or the other because of your race, but that there was even a certain pride within the group at Black Mountain to have this diverse group. And, Albert, you were saying something about the European presence.

AL: I think even the community outside the school because they were no threat. They were no threat to them. They weren't going to take over their farms. Whereas there was really a lot of feeling against the black people, that they were going to marry their daughters.

PK: That's why the Lawrence's would have had a different experience going away from campus, if you will, out to the town. What is the town, anyway?

RA: It's Asheville.

AL: It's Black Mountain. A little southern mill town.

RA: And in Asheville I met with a Cherokee Indian. And he came up to me and said, "You Indian? Indian?" And they thought I was part of their tribe at the time.

PK: What did you say?

RA: I don't remember but I said, "No, I was not Cherokee." Because she thought I was Cherokee at the time.

PK: Let me ask you about the whole notion of sort of Bauhaus-based, utopian attitude with then Black Mountain. And I'm thinking of it beyond just the progress of art and experimenting. We talked about that before. Trying the new things. But I get the sense that there's also a broader sort of social attitude about what art can do. That art can be a positive force in viewing the social issues. Was that the case?

AL: Well, it's that "more is less". That you can do more with smaller things. Or with less, less material. And it certainly was true with [Ludwig] Mies Van der Rohe who headed Bauhaus for awhile after [Walter] Gropius. Gropius, [Herbert] Bayer, Albers, he didn't need a great variety of shapes in his paintings. He just used the square, a rectangle. Because he wanted to concentrate on what color to do. Right?

RA: Yes. Black Mountain is a very poor school. We didn't have the latest in plastic or glass or anything. We had to go even further back and look at their leaves. We had to pick leaves. And we had to save that because we didn't have enough of the new things at that time. We had to go back to even, I remember Ray Johnson using the insect in the . . .

AL: Wings.

RA: And weaving of worms that took their branches from a tree, in the corner where the branches they rotted. And it was covered with the, what is it? The web of an insect. And we used that and it looked like the silkworm. And it looked more modern than the modern things of that time. And we

were forced to go back to natural things.

PK: Well, that sounds like that was the perfect experience for you, the way your art developed, it seems to me. And nature forms and . . . That, of course, well, I guess one could say esthetic or philosophical view of art and art practice, applications, sort of from the standpoint of formalist interests. But beyond that then you mentioned this sort of minimalist or inductive, making due, not making due with less, but there's virtue in less and reduction.

RA: It's the distance between effort and effect. And, the closer it gets, that was what our job was.

AL: I think the word you're looking for is "ratio". Between effort and effect. Ratio.

RA: Ratio. Yes.

PK: What about this? And that sounds pretty Bauhaus as I understand it. But there's another side that I think is also Bauhaus influenced or conditioned. And that is a social imagination, a social goal of how art can be put in the service of building a better society, benefiting people. And I have a couple of questions around this. It is interesting we can't get away from Bauhaus. The first is, do you feel the openness to diversity within the school itself? You've been mentioning this in terms of race or national origin. All these Europeans, they were kind of aliens as well, refugees and so forth. Did you, and, Albert, you might be able to better address this because you're a more typical American, the way people thought about white males on top of it. Nowadays that's a complete disadvantage. But at any rate, did you sense that this was also part of the experiment, and that there was virtue in these different people working together?

AL: Yes. There was virtue in these different people working together. However, once that's said and done, and this comes later, you need to realize everybody needs someone to look down on, someone beneath them. It could be looked down on the guy that lives in the public housing project, regardless of what his race. Look down on the farm worker because he doesn't have a home and he has to move every few months to miserable living conditions. We don't have a solution. We don't have a solution.

RA: You can relate that to today. We need to have somebody rich because you don't know how rich you are until you know how poor you are. He said that you always have to have somebody beneath you, but Black Mountain wanted everybody to be equal.

PK: Yes, and a social goal, as I understand it. I wanted to be clear on this, that that was either explicitly or implicitly a part of the overall program; to try to create this working community, creative community, but as part of it is a sense of equality, and like maybe a model, if you will, of how perhaps the broader society could one-day work. Is that true?

AL: Yes. But we were guilty of it even then.

PK: Okay. How about that?

AL: That would be that we had only one football game a year when the faculty played the student body. I was safe because we had more male students than we had teachers, but that was a way of making fun at education in America. So much of it was based on football. Later, much later we had a friend who went to a college in Southern California, and I asked her, "Why were so many students at that college?" And she said, "Parking. We chose your college for the parking."

PK: You mean they have lots of parking places?

AL: Yes. Not by the football team but by parking.

PK: Well, that's a new one to me. So which one was that?

AL: Chapman.

PK: Oh, yes? That's true. UCLA it's impossible to park. That is funny. Well, before we move back, and I would like to do this then with both of you, to lay in some of what you brought to this experience. We're not going to let the whole interview turn on Black Mountain, but it seems to be useful. But there is, it seems to me, from what I know about you two and your ideals and your values -- and I don't want to be too presumptuous here -- but Ruth, in what's been written about you, and even some of what you see in your current exhibition in Oakland, there is this extremely strong social sense, a social conscious that I don't see how it can be separated out from you and your work. And one of the forms it takes starts with your immediate family, which is pretty large. There's a wonderful photo of what seems like dozens of people who are all grandchildren and great grandchildren and so forth. So it's a large immediate family. Then I get the sense of an extended family, and beyond that a sense of community. This would take the form, I would think, in your working with school children at the Alvarado School.

RA: Alvarado.

PK: Anyway, that would seem to me -- and I don't want to be too simplistic about it -- but much of your work and the way you involve your family in art, that there's a whole part of that exhibition that illustrates your work with the schools. I'd love to hear more about that, maybe a little bit later -- but do you feel that that way of thinking to a degree was established at Black Mountain?

RA: I believe so. I think so. The way you hear so often today is how parents don't like their children and their children don't like their parents, and they do this and they do that. I think that and we never had that because we valued what our own children did.

AL: Or when they are estranged. They're estranged. The parents can't wait for them to get out of the house, and the kids can't wait to get out either. And I think it's because the kids have heard so much how much the parents have sacrificed.

PK: So they feel guilty do you think a little bit?

AL: Yes.

PK: Or maybe they're just sick of hearing it.

AL: They're sick of hearing it.

PK: Well, you two, maybe this is a good point to talk about this, because one of the things, I know about you as a couple and your family is that there was a primacy to the family that if it wasn't there then it really wasn't anywhere. And this is a particular attitude that you as an architect, as creative people, an architect and an artist, have had to bring to your work, to your art, is this primacy of family. And I'm really interested in how that kind of evolved and how these ideas evolved.

RA: Well, it was not from a social issue that we were married, because of different races. We had a common interest in the arts, and that brought us together, not being different. And I think that's hard to explain to people. And our children, even Addie says, "Well, I'm not Asian." She's not Asian enough because she doesn't think of herself as Asian or Caucasian. She thinks of herself as a

person. And it's in the way I keep thinking that it's very dangerous to make Black Mountain as a reason for being unique or being a mixed couple as being unique. We don't think of that part as being unique. We think we're unique because of what we do.

PK: Right. And I didn't mean to suggest that you grew out of the ...

AL: Neither one of us went out looking for a Japanese girl or a white boy. In fact, we did with trepidation.

PK: Is that right? Did you have reservations about ...?

AL: Oh, sure. These were parents that all they ever wanted was some little Japanese grandchildren. And my parents, they wanted little blonde hair, blue-eyed kids. And fortunately they had other children. And in Ruth's family one was married to a Jew. One was married to an Indian from India. A brother was married to a Honkey. There was only one of the seven kids that married a Japanese. Terrible. My parents were more standard than their family.

PK: Georgians?

AL: Georgians, yes.

PK: Well, I think I do understand that. And I think that still to this day in many communities a mixed marriage is certainly far less than in those older days, but it still can be problematic. And intelligent people do consider what that might mean. Especially black/white. And I have no doubt that you guys didn't go looking for one another. Well, you went looking for one another as an individual, as a person, for another soul, a soul mate. And I think I can use that [term]. I think it would be fair to describe you guys that way. But I guess what I was really getting at, and not to give Black Mountain all the credit for this, but somehow coming from that experience, getting married and then settling here and beginning a family. You gave that family experience, this family unit a kind of priority, complete priority role in your life, but you're also practicing creative people, artists. And then it's how do you bring this together in a way that it's almost like a philosophy about life can be integrated with your work. Is that ...?

AL: It's probably easier if you are artists and art people. It's probably easier. It's very difficult to find couples who have much interests in common, very difficult.

RA: And now it matters more about money now. That this job is going to give you security. And we learned that security is only in the arts. It's not how we live. It's not like belonging to a union or health benefits, or whatever there is today. And because we come from Black Mountain where those things meant less than they do to normal couples. I think that was easier for us to learn that part of what was important to a relationship.

PK: Ruth, certainly in your career, and, again, this isn't something I discovered on my own, but in seeing the exhibition, in seeing the video that was done, and reading some of the material around it, I think in some ways you and Albert, and certainly you would be distinguished in this positive emphasis on family. And I don't want to say family, a man and a woman necessarily to make it kind of cosmic or universal, but for some reason you have brought art into family life and into community life in a way that suggests you believe that this is the best way to conduct yourself through life.

RA: I think so.

PK: How did you come to this, basically it seems to me it's a philosophy of creativity and of life. And

this thing is flashing, so, because I don't want to cut you off when you both answer it. You have a moment to think about it.

SESSION 2, TAPE 1, SIDE B

PK: This is Tape 1, Side B, continuing this discussion with Albert Lanier and Ruth Asawa. And I asked a question that is actually a pretty big one.

RA: Yes, it's a big one.

PK: It's a big one but I have a feeling that you have thought a lot about this and probably have things to say.

RA: I think it goes back to my parents. They knew how to work. They learned how to work. And they came to this country as immigrants and they had to work. And they taught us how to be good workers regardless of how we felt about anything. So we learned primarily to work. That's what was the thing at Black Mountain that helped me because I was a good worker and they needed workers, because most people were idea people, and I could scrub floors or I could do menial work. I think it was important to teach the children menial work. It's a different kind of life. I can't tell my friends how to live the hard life that we had. The children, our children had. But I think that's important.

AL: I think there's another factor though, which was that Albers was very opposed to you having children. That he didn't want her to, these paintings are your children, that was his attitude. And Ruth said, "I'm not going to forego that. I'm not going to forego not having children." Children are like plants. If you feed them and water them generally they'll grow. Art is a very "iffy" occupation. That is a factor. Wasn't it?

RA: Probably.

AL: He saw with me hanging around there that you [Ruth] would probably end up with some kids.

PK: Was it the look in your eye?

AL: I don't know what it was.

RA: No, he said something very good. He said, "You can have children if you want them. But make sure they were your children."

AL: He said that to you?

RA: He said that with flowers, you can paint flowers but make sure that they're Asawa flowers. And I think that's very good advice. And he told another friend not to have children. That paintings will be your children. And she never had children. And she never went anywhere either. But he said it was all right to have children, but make sure they're yours. And I think that that's an important piece of advice. "And with Buckey you can do anything . . ." he said, "You want to, but make sure that it was your idea." And so it was a basically more I guess to stand up for yourself, I think, that's what they were saying at the time.

PK: That's pretty good advice, I guess. Being advised, literally, not to have children because family life has its demands and it will interfere with the high calling of art is a pretty unattractive, for me, philosophy. And I like to hear that perhaps there was a little metaphorical, that perhaps the way they were saying this was a kind of integrity and a sense of . . .

AL: They never had children.

RA: And it was important that Albert came home from work, and we had dinner together as a family. And we always ate together. That was one thing we always did together.

AL: And we always had weekends together.

RA: And we took them places. Or we took our children with us. If we were invited and the children weren't invited we didn't go to things that they didn't invite the children.

PK: Well, it sounds to me like you really define yourself and your relationship very much in terms of family. I keep coming back to this. Shifting a little bit, Albert, how do you, thinking back, how do you recall, let's say, coming to the point where this was such an important aspect? Is this something that goes back to your own background?

AL: No, my parents, although they had six children, they were born over a 21 year period. Ours, we had six kids in the first nine years. And there were a few more than I had planned on. And it was tough.

PK: Especially on Ruth.

AL: Ruth took the attitude that once you had three you might as well have six. Which she did. And the older ones began to take care of the younger ones. Dinners were very often a kind of a free-for-all, but by and large it worked. And we did things that only people with money were supposed to do.

PK: Do you mean you back in Georgia or are you talking about you here?

AL: Right here in San Francisco.

PK: Right here. Okay. You two.

AL: We gave up necessities so we could afford luxuries.

PK: What were the luxuries?

AL: Art materials. Tools. We have right now our first new car, which was bought in 1989 before we had a new car. That's a necessity.

PK: What kind of a car?

AL: It's a Toyota. But we made it to Europe. We made it to Japan. We did things.

PK: You did that actually, but probably not right at the beginning did you travel, right?

AL: Across this country in an old station wagon.

PK: With six?

RA: Three.

AL: And we hadn't gotten far out of San Francisco -- this was in the early fifties -- when we discovered that it was a grave disappointment to the Americans out there that she wasn't a war bride. So after a few nights out she became a war bride.

PK: That was more romantic or something?

AL: Yes, conquer and marry the enemy. When we got to Georgia ladies came and brought their favorite pie to her. They'd bake their pie and send it over. Delicious pies.

PK: So that's interesting, because then in your experience as a couple, and presumably yours, Ruth, starting at some point in your life there is this exoticism of what they used to call Oriental. They say "the other" is the term. And "the other" supposes that there is a . . .

RA: Your people as [opposed] to my people.

PK: Right.

RA: But I had very good advice from a teacher in camp. And she said, "My people talking about Americans did something terrible to the Japanese in this country. But you must forego that and make the best of what you will get." And I think that was very good advice to me because I didn't feel that I was then a victim. I didn't want to be a victim of that, of being victimized. I wanted to be on top of it. So I think that attitude was very good for me to have. Even when they ejected me. Then I said, "Well, I'll go elsewhere."

PK: Was that when you were in Teacher's College?

RA: Yes.

PK: Is that in Milwaukee?

RA: Yes.

PK: And they said that you wouldn't qualify for a certificate?

RA: That they would never hire a Japanese to teach.

PK: When was that? Right after camp?

RA: That was during the camp. Yes, right after the camp.

PK: How did they get off saying that? Was that just that they were being realistic and saying it would be hard to get one?

RA: I think in some ways it was to protect me at the time. And also because no Japanese could get a job at that time. And so I went back home and I met all these extraordinary people, which I wouldn't have if everything were laid out for me.

PK: That's a good point. And you met Albert?

RA: Yes.

PK: The whole family then in San Francisco. Everything came from discrimination.

RA: And my investment is in that city. It's better for me to invest in San Francisco.

PK: Can you explain that? Because I think there's a lot to that statement. Could you explain what you mean by that?

RA: I mean that if you have place invest in it and you make it good, then it's better than being a little bit here and a little bit there, Chicago, New York. It's better to be in San Francisco and work on being effective in one place. I guess it's like being, how do you say, big pond and a small fish, or big fish in a small pond.

PK: San Francisco is kind of a small pond.

RA: It's pretty big. I mean, at that time it was a small town. But now it's gotten bigger and bigger and bigger.

PK: Yes, but you've grown with it. You've grown with it. Well, that's interesting. The basic philosophy that rather than concentrating on what was taken away from you and this whole idea of I am a victim and inequity and U.S. policy that was now agreed upon was entirely wrong, and anti-Americans, the way we now look at it. But rather than dwell on that you, it sounds to me, were ready, even to the extent of driving across the country and then saying, "What the heck. Okay. I'm a war bride." I think that that's actually very sophisticated. It shows – if I may say so – a kind of a sense of humor too. You say, "Look at these people. Why not?" I think that's really smart frankly. Nowadays others in our sort of identity politics era would be so insulted that they are being misrepresented this way and they would take great offense. Well, it becomes confrontational. I guess my observation is that -- I'm sure you had principles and feelings about all of this, but you weren't interested in always having to be confrontational over these unavoidable issues, like who we are and what race and so forth.

RA: Exactly.

PK: Now I'm beginning to get the story a bit. Now, Albert, let me ask you a little more about your background, because I think that your children are interested in that. One of them, your daughters was saying earlier, "Ask him about Georgia." Why are they so interested in that.

AL: Because they hear these little stories and there are very few. I'm working on something called "Where I Came From" because I don't think they know anything about my family, or they know very little, and they've heard some of these same stories over and over. Like Miss Ruby Waters. They used to be able to order from the butcher the meat, or in her case the chicken, and they would have it delivered to her. So she would phone in and say, "This is Ruby Waters and I need a chicken over here." And they said, "What kind of chicken do you want, Ruby?" And she said, "Well, I want a chicken with a bosom like Miss Turner, and a rump like some other matron, and drumsticks like another lady." They would do this every Saturday. Because they wanted to hear her describe the shape of women to the chicken. That was the funniest thing. I think it was pretty ingenious myself.

PK: Always the same women?

AL: Always the same women. She didn't change very often.

PK: How big was this town?

AL: At that time it was about 2,000 people.

PK: What was the name?

AL: Metter, M-E-T-T-E-R. And that's near Savannah. It's a pretty, little town with a fair number of retirees, returnees. And they just have a lovely thing there. They have a lot of churches, many churches. They go to church a lot. My father said with his second marriage, which happened to be

to a Baptist, that they were the meetingest people he had ever met. Two or three meetings a week. It's a different life. It's so far away.

PK: But I wonder, in some ways if it is all that different because you've described, admittedly, a community much smaller than San Francisco even when you arrived in '49. But what Ruth said earlier was that, as I understood it, that it's better to concentrate on one place, to have an identity within a particular place.

AL: I think that would be fine too, yes.

PK: And it seems to me that you guys found that in San Francisco. That there is clearly in Metter, Georgia, there you knew what other people were doing, there is a sense of a sort of rhythm. And you told this story, so I'm going to make something out of this story, I suppose. But that that was delightful and reassuring, not just because it was funny, but that it happened regularly,, and this brings a kind of order to life. If you forgive me for this, but this is the kind of leap then that I would take, because there are those who feel that art itself, very often, it can be about creating a sort of order, a kind of understanding of the material world and spiritual world.

RA: And I came from a small town, too. About 6,000. They were all farm land.

PK: In Norwalk?

RA: Yes, in Norwalk.

PK: Down in Southern California.

RA: It used to be farmland all over, walnuts and dairies. It's very different from after the war.

PK: Is it possible without trying to put words in your mouth, or ideas in your head, but even though, Albert you said that you were in a way were, I gather seeking to get away from this small town in Georgia, which you succeeded to do. And Ruth wasn't going to exactly have a choice about leaving that Norwalk community, because you [Ruth] went from there through Santa Anita. And then onto the camp in Georgia.

RA: To Arkansas.

PK: Excuse me. Arkansas.

RA: And then to Milwaukee. And then back to Black Mountain.

PK: But what you said earlier, and maybe you can clarify this, is that you came to San Francisco, you made that choice, you were married here. And what I understand from what at least you were saying, Ruth, is that it gave you an arena to create a place, to create a sense of community, involvement with the community. To have your family maybe in ways that weren't all that different from the smaller community. Do you think that's at all true?

AL: I think to some extent that is true. I think the tightness of the community at Black Mountain was somewhat oppressive. A little too tight a community. And you probably could have found it at other than a city as big as San Francisco. But this turned out to be the right size.

PK: So was it that San Francisco offered it both ways? You had a broader canvas, if you will, to operate on. But still . . .

RA: It was small enough.

PK: And perhaps a strong sense of identity?

AL: Yes.

PK: I guess what I really need to ask here, for whatever reason you came here – oh, Albert, tell again -- well, he had one story, maybe you [Ruth] have a different one -- of how, it had to do with the price you imagined you could, what you could get for a certain amount of money, in a meal with wine.

AL: Oh, I came because Peggy Tilt Watkins, who was at Black Mountain briefly, told us that at San Francisco you could get a four or a five course Italian dinner, in North Beach, of course, for I think it may have been 50 cents.

RA: 75 cents.

PK: 75 cents?

AL: And a small bottle of red wine. And, of course, it wasn't true.

PK: It was another trick. California promotion and booster.

AL: However, once you were this far you might as well stay.

PK: But there must have been more of a reason than that.

AL: Well, it was big enough, I wanted to work in the various building trades. And the city would seem to offer opportunities in that. It was big enough that it offered opportunities.

PK: I guess the post-War economy here was pretty good.

AL: Well, it was pretty good, but still was incredibly cheap. Because GIs bought boatings so they'd have a place to sleep on the weekend when they came to the city. It was that cheap. No one wanted to live here. It was too hazardous.

RA: The earthquake.

PK: Oh, earthquakes.

AL: Earthquakes and being bombed.

PK: Yes. Exposed. Pacific exposure.

AL: And so they'd buy a house. We bought flats. The first place that we owned was a pair of flats that we bought with friends. Paid \$11,300 for two good sized flats. Five and six room flats. Crazy. Our next house we bought for \$7500. Both a pretty choice today.

PK: What neighborhood or neighborhoods?

AL: Just beyond Market Street. Up from Market. Upper Market. Saturn Street and the other one was Alpine Terrace.

PK: Oh, that's nice. You mean Buena Vista?

AL: Yes.

RA: Just below that.

AL: And we bought this in 1960. What was that, 11 years? Three buildings in 11 years.

PK: So this is the town of opportunity. What about in terms of the . . .

RA: Not us because we didn't have the money at the time. But did it anyway.

PK: Yes, but you could do it. You found a way.

RA: And we, and the thing to do a job you didn't necessarily get paid for it but you did it anyways because you wanted to do it. And that's what we learned at Black Mountain. We don't think about what it's going to cost and what you can get for it. You do it because you want to do it.

PK: So certainly that's the case, that attitude lies, I would think, behind your art and the impetus to make art and the way you've involved your family, that would seem to me. Albert, what about you as an architect? Is there a point where you two share a kind of philosophy about work and about creative activity?

AL: Well, she really didn't participate too much in my work. And she told me to butt out of her work very often too.

PK: Is that right?

RA: I don't remember that.

AL: I gave her some ideas and I didn't charge her for it. She bounced things off of me is what she did. And I tried to help, creating . . .

RA: Painting.

AL: Painting. She's very, very prolific. We're still struggling with it.

PK: That's a good thing. Don't you think?

RA: I guess so – hope so.

PK: What about, I'm not suggesting that you collaborated or necessarily talked back and forth about your work, but on the other hand, you came from a similar background in terms of Black Mountain. That's among the last times we'll have to refer to that. And you came here to San Francisco. And I'm trying to get a sense of whether there are some points where there's intersection, even in ways you think about the purpose of your creative activity other than eventually making a living and so forth, selling and then building. Any creative philosophy point of contact do you think?

RA: He made a livelihood as an architect and I made a livelihood as an artist. And I decided that I would make my living as an artist for a long time.

AL: We both were precarious. We lived pretty much by our wits. And I had one job that lasted eight years. That's when we were having all those kids. Marvelous architect I worked for. And Ruth periodically sold sculpture or a drawing or a painting. But primarily sculpture.

PK: In the fifties?

AL: Fifties, yes. And had some disappointments. Had some shows. We lived pretty poor. We lived pretty poor and pretty hard. And we didn't, we refused, basically we refused to acknowledge that we were poor. And that's very important. If you start acknowledging it then pretty soon you are.

PK: Sort of like victimhood.

AL: That's right.

SESSION 2, TAPE 2, SIDE A

PK: Here we are continuing with this Session Two interview with Albert Lanier and Ruth Asawa. Paul Karlstrom interviewing. This is tape 2, side A. And we've gotten into some I think very interesting, promising, for me anyway, lines of conversation and discussion. And what I was trying to do -- and, again, I don't want to sort of artificially suggest or construct something -- but obviously one is interested, others will be interested in knowing to what extent, I'll ask it again, there's some overlap in broader, I guess creative philosophy, that which you bring to your work as an architect, creating homes, creating structures, and how to do it and what that means and what personally you can bring into it. A way of looking at the world or forming the world. I was saying earlier the idea of controlling or forming, clarifying. And then, Ruth, the same concerns for you if there's some way that you see that you're on a shared path creatively. Is that something that you can address?

RA: Well, I think you should talk again about Buckey and he, this is for young people in a way, because they have the sixties and have been spent on . . . what do you call it? On the free speech movement and the fighting in the streets. And when that happened to Buckminster Fuller, a young Japanese who was protesting the airplane or airport in Japan. And he told this young man not to waste his time protesting. The protest should be himself working on something that was useful. And I think that kind of philosophy is, rather than protesting for nothing, for going out in the street with banners, that one, a young person with an idea should be working on that idea instead of fighting what he doesn't believe in. And I think that kind of, what would you say . . .

PK: Activism?

RA: Activism is wasteful. And it's better to be working on an idea. And building on that than to breaking down and protesting something that exists.

PK: Do you feel that way, Albert?

AL: Pretty much, yes.

PK: So that might be then a point of connection between both of your separate activities? You as an architect, you as an artist? Is that . . .?

RA: Yes, I think that describes it the best for us. And we don't have children who protest.

AL: They've thought about it though.

RA: What?

AL: They've thought about it and they protested some things with us.

PK: Well, that's natural isn't it?

AL: I guess.

PK: I'm very interested in getting behind the forms of art themselves, or of artifact, of a product, of what is created, whoever happens to create it. To some fundamental attitudes towards the world and life that are there. And if I may, just, I was reading through some material, maybe it was the Oakland Museum Magazine there was a little article. And Aiko, your daughter whom I just met, Cunio?

RA: Cunio.

PK: She's your eldest?

RA: Yes.

PK: She was quoted as saying, "She (meaning Ruth) doesn't think art should be an intellectual exercise. It should be approachable. I think that's why people like it so much." That's what she said. And I thought that was very interesting because it suggests, again, attitudes about the purpose of art, and therefore your own goals.

RA: Well, I don't look at it as a perfection thing. I look at it as what a person is at the time. But being able to give the best at that time. And it's not necessarily the finest thing. So if a child is 10 years old you know that that's not the end of his career. But it's at a point where he can do his very best and give that to the world. And I think that's important for what one can do at the time. And it can be a 10 year old or it can be a 30 year old. Or it could be a 40 year old. You could be any age. But you do the best that you can.

PK: But, Ruth, what do you think about the part of your daughter's statement that says, she's speaking for you saying that you, Ruth, don't think art should be an intellectual exercise? And yet you just said earlier how important it is to have an idea and work on and manifest that idea.

RA: Right.

PK: And how do you make this distinction? What did she mean by intellectual exercise?

RA: I'm not very interested in art right now. We have a lot of people who have not found art, but conceptual art.

PK: Conceptual art, okay.

RA: And I don't think that says anything, to me.

PK: Even though it's supposedly idea-based?

RA: Idea-based and they should take it somewhere beyond a concept. I have always made conceptual ideas, but I want to take them and work on them to finally become something, not just the concept but the idea behind it.

PK: So does this include then the idea of work that finally there is a process that there is work involved that will then create something that expresses that idea? Or has something to say but that without going through even the craft of it, it's not the same.

RA: I think the craft is important to a concept. I think to conceive that one works in dough and then that is made into bronze. There are many steps between the concept and the project. And I think that one should experience that. I think that that's important.

PK: You said that you have some friends, people you know, artists who are really probably younger working in a conceptual mode. Do you tell them, do you have talks and tell them sometimes that that's what you think?

RA: No, they're entitled to that.

PK: I know. But do you express your view?

RA: No. I'm expressing it right now. I'm just saying that the young people have, I mean, through technology there's a lot of new ideas that are way beyond my abilities to do it. And I hope that may be conceptual, but if they take it somewhere beyond my abilities then that's fine.

PK: But the idea alone for you is not alone. Because some conceptual art is simply stating the idea. And it doesn't go any further. And then the point is that that somehow provokes the viewers and the readers to think. And then they basically are doing the process. That's the work of the conceptual art, is how it's then carried further in the mind of the viewer.

RA: But if the viewer doesn't do anything beyond in his mind, and he doesn't do it beyond the concept, then what good is it.

PK: That's the point. What do you think about that, Albert? You were talking about sort of academic art magazines and so forth earlier.

AL: I don't know. I think some of it is fun to look at. And I guess if it's photographed you can look at it a second time. I'm so grateful that she didn't go into that kind of thing that we don't have to store that stuff.

PK: Sometimes it's smaller.

AL: Well.

RA: Powdered dirt, for example. Or brick. That does not appeal to me. Just I learn from my parents. If I plant a tomato seed I will get a tomato plant out of it. Then I will get tomatoes from that. I like that. I like the steps that one gets from merely planting a seed, or planting a plant. I like what happens, because you know that you get an eggplant every time you plant an eggplant seed. Or you know you're going to get a melon. I like that. I like getting a cucumber. Or what if I've got a cucumber and a mixture, a hybrid. I like that too because I'll get something new. And I like that.

PK: It seems to me that what we're talking about is something that we touched on a little bit earlier. And that is the reassuring aspect of natural processes. Of nature itself. And then the familiarity. And not predictability in a bad sense. But that there's some order to . . .

RA: I like to be surprised by a nectarine that is no longer a nectarine. I'm surprised. I like nectarine, apricot being put together. But I guess I want something at the end.

PK: Well something that maybe grows naturally, even with some intervention of human thinking and handling. But that grows naturally in a way that suggests perhaps really the operation of nature itself, which allows for changes and allows for creating hybrids and so forth. And I'm thinking also of

your work. What maybe lies behind the work itself. But it does seem to be nature-based. You yourself say that everything springs from nature in your work. And I'm beginning to get, I think, a little more of an idea of what you really mean using the analogy that you did of the planting the seed and then what comes out of that. And this is, I guess, is this a conscious way of looking at the world through your art for you?

RA: I don't know if it is. But I'm curious to know where it will take me. The next step it will take me. And it may be something very different from anything you ever imagined.

PK: But there is, it seems to me, this sense of a natural process, even in this creative act of yours.

RA: Well, if you take material you like and you know how far you can take it from what is traditional to do. Like a piece of paper, you like to take it another step. And if it teaches you some geometry and not just for writing something and you find that you can go from two dimension to three dimension, that interests me. And it can be any material. It doesn't have to be wire. It just has to be able to do that. I think that that's an important thing.

PK: What about, let me ask you if you know this artist – and if you don't we won't be able to go too far with it. Andy Goldsworthy?

RA: We have his book and his show [movie] at the Roxy [Theater, 16th St., San Francisco]. Did you see it?

PK: Yes, I thought it was wonderful. Did you see it?

RA: No.

PK: Well, it stops soon. But it occurs to me as we've been talking that there are some similarities.

RA: I like that kind of object conceptual work. I like what he did.

PK: Because it isn't sculpture. It's sculpture but it is conceptual. But what is there that isn't in some other conceptual work is an art. There's an art and even an artifact where he looks at nature, and I'm just going to suggest that there may be some connection between you two, looks at nature. He says he talks with, to him it's a conversation with nature and the land and landscape and growing things. And that he gets ideas from the nature, from the natural forms, and then actually introduces his own artistic rendition. As you know, you've seen the work. And for some reason this strikes me as the same kind of impulse maybe that lies between . . .

RA: Right. It may not last forever. He does it with snow or he does it with... it melts.

PK: Right. He weaves with icicles.

RA: Then I like the idea of it lasting. So when I cast a face I know I'm just capturing a minute of a person. Or if I cast a foot of a baby I know that baby's foot will grow and grow and grow. But at the moment I like that. That moment that I caught in a way is what I like about casting faces. I don't care about making that a technique. But I like the idea of stopping the moment of a time. And it's going to disappear. I know it's going to go away but I like that, I like that moment.

PK: So you freeze the moment.

RA: Freeze the moment. And then it's gone.

PK: Like a snapshot.

RA: Yes, it's like a snapshot probably. But I'm not interested in photography.

PK: You have how many masks?

RA: I have many masks.

PK: Where are they?

RA: They're outside.

AL: Did you ever come in through this door?

PK: No, I always come in this way.

AL: Well, you should go out that way. But that's only part of them.

PK: Well, there's some at the museum.

RA: Yes.

AL: There's also some on the sun porch. There's some all over the house.

PK: How many are there?

AL: We don't know.

PK: Hundreds.

AL: At least.

RA: Yes.

PK: Yes. And they're portraits. They're life masks.

RA: They're life masks.

PK: They're basically portraits.

AL: We have the negatives of most of them stored next door in the basement. But even that we don't know how many we have stored. We were hoping the Smithsonian would like to take them.

PK: Well, they might. Who knows? It would be rather spectacular. Is there anything to the idea that these are usually, I guess the tradition of these kinds of castings were often with death mask in many cultures.

RA: Yes, when they were dead, yes.

PK: And when you make life masks is that any kind of a comment on what they typically had been death masks. But here you had your living subjects and their true portraits? Is there a connection?

RA: Yes, well, I'm not usually creating death masks as much as I'm interested in people who go on after this. And that's why I have Paul, our Paul, when he was six years old. Now he's 43 years old.

And I haven't done them in sequence, but I have him when he was in his twenties. And then I would, it would be interesting to do that with a foot. I wanted the foot but we didn't get it together with this show.

PK: Now you do, in terms of castings, in the show I believe there's a full body.

RA: Yes.

AL: That's another son at 18.

PK: At 18. And what led you, I don't know that there are very many of those kinds . . .

AL: She likes boys' bodies.

PK: Oh, well, that's a good subject. But that's unusual, isn't it? I mean, you do all of these masks, many, many, many. But of the full scale, I mean, full figure scale . . .

RA: Full bodies.

AL: Number one, she hasn't afforded to. And number two, there aren't many guys who will let you do it to them.

PK: No.

RA: Yes.

PK: It takes too long.

RA: No, it doesn't take as long as sculpting.

PK: Right. Well, you know, the artist like Duane Hanson and John De Andrea are famous for their castings. Or Segal is another one. And yet it seems to go in a different direction with Hanson and De Andrea it's, to make these sculpture groups that are cast, that are, I believe that's how they were produced. But they're spooky because they look so real. And so it is to create through art the illusion of the reality. And they put hair on them.

RA: Yes. I'm not into that. I'm into just stopping.

PK: Yes. Because with [George] Segal there can be whole stories, like the Holocaust thing. And that's obviously a different use of the . . .

RA: They wanted me to make a Holocaust thing.

PK: They did?

RA: San Jose. They wanted it to be terrible. And I said, "Oh, our life as immigrants was much harder than the internment."

PK: Really?

RA: Yes. Just surviving was much more intense.

PK: So they wanted a dramatic statement about internment?

RA: Yes.

PK: To make it equivalent to the concentration camp, the death camps.

AL: The Washington Monument is a crane entangled in barbed wire. Ruth doesn't want to do that.

PK: Yes, well, it's interesting. Because then I guess you ask yourself, what makes ultimately a positive statement, acknowledging the reality of the history, but that then can still somehow from that make a positive statement looking forward.

RA: Because everyone suffers being a slave. Everyone suffers. I mean, every culture suffers. That's not a very interesting thing to me for making art.

PK: Yes, well. It's a big philosophical question. But I did gather that from what I read and what I've seen. You've done these commissions. And the recent one at [San Francisco] State, the subject of that is . . .

RA: Rocks and of the internment. The resin next to each rock plays the day when it happened, where it happened. I didn't want it to happen. And this piece, I wanted it to be a statement all in one place. And so I need the bronze with this. Everything was just a document that I didn't want to put myself in.

PK: I see. Just like the Archives.

RA: Just like that. I wanted to be that. So the men made rocks and I made rocks.

PK: Let me ask you just one more question and then we'll wrap up. It occurs to me that there's this theme of work, of the importance, of the value of work, of doing something and the practice of making. And I look at your work and for the most part I see that it seems to be very strongly craft-based. Based in the crafts. You're not a craftsman per se. You're a sculptor, among other things. But your use of materials and your interest in the materials, especially the weaving, for instance, is very directly related. Do you feel that kind of a relationship in your work? To crafts? To the basic crafts including ceramics?

RA: It doesn't bother me. Whether it's a craft or whether it's art. That is a definition that people put on things. And what I like is the material is irrelevant. It's just that that happens to be material that I use. And I think that is important. That you take an ordinary material like wire and you make it, you give it a new definition. That's all.

AL: The only thing she could make them out of.

RA: I take paper and I just, I'm interested in what it can do by itself. And that's what excites me, not the latest material. Not the latest this. Not the latest new material. I'm interested in the material and what you can do with it.

PK: So it's back to that Bauhaus experience of exploration?

RA: Yes.

PK: Experimentation. So it's all stayed the same.

RA: It's all still, you can't change an old horse, can you.

PK: Well, it sounds like something good to hang on to. Anyway, you two have been great and very patient. And we're wrapping up this side. And I want to thank you. I'm hoping I might be able to impose one more time in a few weeks but we'll just see how that goes.

END OF INTERVIEW