



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with William Underhill,
2002 June 8**

**Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman
Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.
Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a
grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National
Park Service.**

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with William Underhill on June 8, 2002. The interview took place in Wellsville, New York, and was conducted by Margaret Carney for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

William Underhill and Margaret Carney have reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Bill Underhill at the artist's studio in Wellsville, New York, on June 8, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Bill, I want to thank you very much for allowing me to come into your studio today on this beautiful day in Wellsville and interview you for the Archives. Thank you so much.

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I feel honored to be a member of this whole effort.

DR. CARNEY: That's great.

What I'd like to do is kind of follow the order of the questions, and then you're welcome to go off on any area that you want to elaborate on and anything-because I know you looked at the questions. You may have some things that you thought of that they didn't think to ask. Let's start with the basics about when and where you were born.

MR. UNDERHILL: Okay. I was born in Berkeley, California, in 1933. My parents also both grew up in Berkeley and were teachers in public schools in the area.

DR. CARNEY: Do you want to give your parents' names for the record?

MR. UNDERHILL: Sure. Alfred Underhill and Katharine Gibbs Underhill.

DR. CARNEY: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MR. UNDERHILL: I had an older brother and a younger sister.

DR. CARNEY: And even though I think this might come up later, did your parents have an art background as teachers?

MR. UNDERHILL: My mother did, very much, yes. She was an art teacher. She was an artist. She had gone to the California College of Arts and Crafts when it was really very much a pioneering art school in Berkeley. I guess it was around World War I, 1914, 1920, that area. And she also went to Paris and studied at the Academy Julienne in Paris. One of her older brothers had been a World War I veteran and stayed in France to work for the United States government, actually the Graves and Monuments Commission for World War I graveyards, battle cemeteries and things. So she had a connection in Paris, so she was there for a while.

It was part of the, sort of, Bay Area arts and crafts tradition, I think, that she grew up in. In Berkeley, one of the neighbors and friends was Bernard Maybeck, for instance, the architect who is probably THE eminent architect in terms of what's known as the Bay Area style, arts and crafts, sort of wood-shingle, rustic architecture.

DR. CARNEY: Is that the arts and crafts, the California bungalow kind of thing?

MR. UNDERHILL: That sort of thing, yes.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, that's one of my favorite housing styles.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right. I know. Green and Green have become so famous, and this man, I think, in ways was their equal, or he was more versatile.

DR. CARNEY: And how did they know your family?

MR. UNDERHILL: They were neighbors in the same part of Berkeley. That's where he lived and where many of his houses were built. And my grandfather on my father's side had not one, but two Maybeck houses built, both of which happened to burn down over the next 20 years. So I was very much connected with, sort of, the art tradition in the Bay Area as I grew up. And whenever I was asked as a child what was I going to be, I was going to be an artist of some kind.

DR. CARNEY: Really?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Well, architect, also. That was in there. In fact, I spent a while in architecture school.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. Will we be touching on that later when we talk about your education?

MR. UNDERHILL: Sure.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, that's very interesting. So were there other influences as a child, besides your mother and the architect friend and things, that made you think that art and architecture was a field that you were interested in?

MR. UNDERHILL: No, I think that was plenty of influence.

DR. CARNEY: That was plenty? Sounds like it.

MR. UNDERHILL: That was plenty of influence, just the whole, sort of, cultural environment growing up there, I think.

DR. CARNEY: And did you spend time as a child, then, visiting art museums and taking art classes?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yes.

DR. CARNEY: Did you take art classes in school? I mean, outside of school classes?

MR. UNDERHILL: I took summer sessions at-well, one or two at Arts and Crafts, actually, when I was in high school. It was considered, you know, a good thing to be doing in the summer, for me.

DR. CARNEY: You mean at the California College of Arts and Crafts?

MR. UNDERHILL: California College of Arts and Crafts, taking classes that were-one was for children, a Saturday class. I remember that. And then I took another summer session that was for college students when I was-must have been a sophomore. Yeah. So I continued and I was encouraged, definitely.

DR. CARNEY: And did you have a particular area, even as you were younger, that you were-

MR. UNDERHILL: No, there was no particular area then. There was more emphasis on drawing and painting and things like that, just because in high school the facilities for doing sculpture are so limited. I took ceramics in high school.

DR. CARNEY: Even that's unusual. Some places don't have any equipment.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yes. Berkeley had a good-

DR. CARNEY: Of course Berkeley would have good equipment.

MR. UNDERHILL: They had a good ceramics program.

DR. CARNEY: I have to ask you something that's probably putting the cart before the horse, but here if you grew up on the West Coast, I mean, there's always been this kind of-

MR. UNDERHILL: Migration.

DR. CARNEY: -East Coast, West Coast-what ideas came here and there. I mean, it must have made you incredibly well rounded that you ended up out here at Alfred [New York], but you had this kind of West Coast training.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: So can you tell me, did you have West Coast training? Where did you do your formal education?

MR. UNDERHILL: All the way through it was in California, in Berkeley. I went to the College of Arts and Crafts right out of high school for two years, and then I transferred to Berkeley, UC Berkeley, and entered the architecture school. So I had two years of art school and did very well. I had entered work in local juried shows and was accepted and even won a couple little prizes. I was, you know, doing very, very well. It was like architecture at that point was more of a challenge or it was just another interest that I had. You know, you're still experimenting and trying things out. And I loved architecture school in terms of the design ideas and the people that I met.

DR. CARNEY: So you did two years of art school and then you transferred to architecture.

MR. UNDERHILL: Transferred into architecture.

DR. CARNEY: Wow.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, and was in there for, oh, let's see, must have been three years, at least. But I struggled with all the math and all the engineering and all that stuff. I was a terrible student. When I wasn't interested in something, I would absolutely refuse to do it, you know. So after a couple of years, I realized I was just wasting my time.

DR. CARNEY: Well, you have to tell me some years now, like when you were born and --

MR. UNDERHILL: Okay. In 1933 I was born. I entered California College of Arts and Crafts in 1951. And I must have entered, then, the architecture school in 1953-or there may be a half-semester sort of off here.

The major event there, actually, was having Buckminster Fuller and the geodesic dome thing. He came as a visiting lecturer, just spent a couple of weeks, but I was one of the students that got so excited about all that, I volunteered to get a group of students together to build a dome for the City of Oakland Park Department. And we spent the summer of 1956 designing and then supervising the construction. It was a permanent dome. It's still there, actually. It had to be manufactured, had to be fabricated, the parts fabricated in real professional machine shops and fabricating shops.

DR. CARNEY: What was it made of? Or what is it made of?

MR. UNDERHILL: Aluminum. Aluminum. Yeah. With the material donated by Kaiser Aluminum. And that was kind of the high point of my architectural experience or involvement. And by then, actually, I had been transferring around from one school to another and so on, and there was still a draft going on. I was drafted. I ran out of student deferments, so I was drafted.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, my God. So what year was this that you got drafted?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, it was the following year, 1957, I was drafted.

Let me talk a little bit more about Arts and Crafts, though, some pretty important stuff that happened there, because the people I met and knew through my first two years at Arts and Crafts included Peter Voulkos, Manuel Neri, Robert Arneson, Robert Bechtel, who's a painter, Nathan Oliveira, a painter still out there. So there was a whole thing going on there, too, that was pretty important.

My acquaintance with Voulkos was very peripheral because he was a grad student and I was a freshman at that first year, 1951, and he was already probably a night person, I'm sure, because I never saw him on campus. And I was still in high school, sort of high school mode, where I went to school, went to class, and then I went home and did my homework, whereas, like any other art school, there was this whole nighttime activity that takes place after all the faculty leave, you know, and the grad students sort of take over. I'm sure that's when Voulkos was there.

But I did go with him and Neri one time to a-they were doing one of these ceramic demonstration things at an art fair in Oakland. That's really the only time I actually, I think, met him. But I was very good friends with Manuel Neri. We were in the same class. And Arneson was also an undergrad then. So there were these early connections with people who, you know, became very important in the West Coast crafts movement, ceramics, especially.

But then transferring over to the architecture school, I got involved with a whole other bunch of people who I just really also liked very much. In fact, I've remained friends-well, I'm still friends with Neri. I renewed acquaintance with him when I went out to the Voulkos memorial service this spring. It was very nice. In fact, that led to this thing of my going to work go out there. So that was nice.

DR. CARNEY: So where are you working this summer?

MR. UNDERHILL: At the Berkeley Art Foundry [Mussi Artworks Foundry, Berkeley]. I think that's what its name is, I think, actually. And I will be going there and just having work cast. And I've made contact with a fellow who also does bronze vessels. That's my main thing, I guess you understand.

DR. CARNEY: We'll come to that. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: Right. And I just hope to make some nice contacts and-

DR. CARNEY: How long will you be at the Foundry?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I hope to be there at least until the end of August. That will be three months, June, July, and August, basically. And the other nice thing about it, on a personal level, is this whole thing about my parents and being in Berkeley; we still own a house out there. My brother, sister, and I own a house that we rent, usually, but it's open right now, so I'm going to be able to stay at the house-

DR. CARNEY: Oh, wow!

MR. UNDERHILL: -which is very, very nice.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. That's kind of full circle in life.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, that's neat.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Actually, it also makes it possible. I mean, the problem of going out there was where could I stay, because, you know, rentals and whatever are hard to find and very expensive. So it's just like, you know, as you say, serendipity, full circle or something.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, that's wonderful.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Yeah. And so I'm just looking forward to it very much.

DR. CARNEY: You said there were people in the architecture program that you've maintained friendships with?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yes.

DR. CARNEY: Do you want to name any names there?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, there's Peter Dodge, who's now-the firm is Esherick, Homsey, Dodge, and Davis. They're a very major, big architecture firm. And the other fellow, also in that firm, is Charles Davis.

DR. CARNEY: And were those classmates of yours?

MR. UNDERHILL: They were ahead of me, but I just-we just became very close friends.

DR. CARNEY: And did you have teachers, either at the California College of Arts and Crafts or in the architecture program, that were particularly influential to you?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, the only person I think of-there was a man who taught sculpture and jewelry named Bob Winston, Robert Winston, who was very important to me. But they were all important. I just loved it all. I mean, I did well in everything. In fact, when they heard I was leaving to go to Berkeley, they offered me another scholarship so I'd stay. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs] So when did you actually graduate?

MR. UNDERHILL: I didn't graduate. Then I went into the army and got married, and by the time I was out of the army, I also had a little new baby daughter, and no degrees. And by then I knew-okay, this was 1959.

DR. CARNEY: And you're out of the army.

MR. UNDERHILL: Fifty-seven to '59 I was-'57 and '58 I was in the army, basically; got out, faced all these responsibilities. And I also realized-

DR. CARNEY: When did you get married?

MR. UNDERHILL: Just at-'57, just at about the same time I got drafted, in fact. It was one of these things.

DR. CARNEY: Very romantic.

MR. UNDERHILL: Romantic. Oh, my God, I'm going-

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: No, actually, my girlfriend-or fiancée, I guess it was-when I was assigned to Europe, we decided to get married and she could come with me.

DR. CARNEY: So who did you marry?

MR. UNDERHILL: Her name was Linn, L-I-N-N, Baldwin Underhill. We have three children. Well, let me pick up on that. Okay, that's who I married.

DR. CARNEY: Okay. And was she an artist also?

MR. UNDERHILL: She was an artist. I met her in architecture school, actually, and her mother was a professional photographer and she has gravitated into that over the years. I mean, when she married me, she had gone to architecture school; she had kind of done what I'd done, try this, try that. She had gone to Arts and Crafts-School of Fine Arts in San Francisco. But then we got married, children, and she became a wonderful mom for the next 15 or 20 years, you know, and supported me in everything I was doing and all that stuff. And, you know, then, of course, at the end of that time we realized it wasn't working for us, we divorced and so on.

But she's now a very active photographer. She teaches. She finished, finally-this is going way ahead of time, but she got her, I guess, B.F.A. at Alfred while we were still married. Then she went to a Visual Studies Workshop and spent the next maybe 10 years sort of part-time here and there, and she's now actually at Colgate and is a very active photographer, having shows and exhibiting and getting awards and prizes.

DR. CARNEY: That's great.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: I always think it's nice and it's interesting when two artists are-

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, but for years, really, she really was the support system and with the kids.

And we went through years of having very little money. This whole thing of moving east and, you know-

DR. CARNEY: So tell me when this happened, okay? I'm up to the point where you were married, you got drafted, and you did '57 and '58 in the army. What happened then?

MR. UNDERHILL: Then I got out of the army and was back in Berkeley with this little baby, you know, and what are you going to do?

DR. CARNEY: And no degrees.

MR. UNDERHILL: You know, you've got to support the child and this and that. And by then I realized that-

DR. CARNEY: Did they have a GI Bill kind of thing then?

MR. UNDERHILL: No. I was between times on that. I really kind of got a raw deal, because I was drafted. They still had a draft in effect, but they had just cancelled the GI Bill. So I was drafted, but I didn't get a GI Bill. And then a couple of years later when the Vietnam era started, they reinstated a GI Bill. They made it retroactive, so if I had still wanted to go to college by then, I could have applied for it, but I was all through by then anyway.

Well, two things. First of all, I realized by then I really felt so much more connected and comfortable in the art world. That the people I really regarded as role models had been the art-and especially the sculpture-instructors. By then I identified myself as a sculptor. I had been showing at exhibits I had been in; I had been showing sculpture, pretty much totally sculpture.

And I never felt comfortable in the professional thing in architecture. You go into an architect's office, and to me it was almost like a law office or something. You know, it was a business. And you had all the sort of accoutrements of business, and it's just a whole different kind of approach to things, and I just didn't feel comfortable with it.

And then on a practical sense, by then I'd been in college for so long, with all these-you know, from 1951 to '57, that's five years, and I had many more credits towards an art degree, so I decided, for these two factors, I would go for an art degree and I could teach art. That was my idea. My parents-my mother had been an art teacher; my father had been a high school teacher. So that was a positive thing. So I did that.

I entered Berkeley again, rather than Arts and Crafts, went back to Berkeley and entered the program and was there for two years and got first my bachelor's degree and then an accelerated master's in one year.

DR. CARNEY: So you got a B.A. or a B.F.A.?

MR. UNDERHILL: Actually I got a B.A. and an M.A.

DR. CARNEY: A B.A. in art and an M.A. in art?

MR. UNDERHILL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] At that time they were still giving those. So that means I had to have languages and science, and I had a whole B.A.-type degree, not a fine art degree.

DR. CARNEY: I've always been supportive of that idea.

MR. UNDERHILL: Oh, absolutely. In fact, I keep trying to make-

DR. CARNEY: I feel like art students kind of lose out.

MR. UNDERHILL: I keep trying to have my credentials say B.A., M.A., but they always say, "Oh, no, you must have a B.F.A.," so that's what's always in publications. Yeah, I think it's better.

DR. CARNEY: So what year did you get your B.A., and what year did you get your M.A.?

MR. UNDERHILL: Nineteen-sixty and 1961.

DR. CARNEY: Can I ask you, just going back just very little, did the army afford you-were you in Europe and did you actually spend any time making art? Did that have any art influence on you, or do you want to talk about that at all?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, again, I was kind of privileged, really, because I was at the headquarters, U.S. Army Europe, stationed in Heidelberg, and it was very, you know, easy duty. It wasn't driving around in tanks or anything; it was just an office job as a draftsman because of my background in architecture. So I had enough time; I kind of got a hunk of wood and carved on it.

And also I was a married enlisted man. As I was married, my wife and I lived in what's known as "on the economy." That is, I couldn't live in an army housing project because as a draftee, you're not eligible. You have to be a regular army-you know, a volunteer enlisted person, career army, basically. Draftees are just assumed they're in for two years and they're out, so they don't get any of those privileges. So, you know, we had to get her way paid over and back and rent a place. We were given a housing allowance, I guess, but we had to rent a place "on the economy," as it's called, on the German economy, which was nice, you know.

DR. CARNEY: But you did have some wood and you were working?

MR. UNDERHILL: I worked on a piece of sculpture in the cellar of that place, yeah. I don't know what ever happened to it. But that was really a pretty, kind of, brief gesture. Your time is pretty much taken up. And when we had free time, we'd travel, just to kind of get away from that place.

DR. CARNEY: And did that influence you at all?

MR. UNDERHILL: I don't think it was a great-

DR. CARNEY: I mean, Europe is supposed to be-you know, for artists, the thing to do is to travel in Europe.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, I'm sure it was. You know, we went to Italy, Rome, Florence, Venice, and with this connection of an uncle who lived in Paris, we went to Paris a couple times, and got a lot out of all that just visually and the experience of-you know, that was Europe, definitely the pre-McDonald's and Coca-Cola-ization of Europe. It was Europe, you know, in that way it's not anymore anywhere, you know, which was good, I think, looking back on it.

But it was no great revelation. I think the visual world for artists is so much from museums and books and, you know, the stuff you get, so that being there was good; it kind of put pieces together, made connections. You could see what Florence looked like and where the Duomo was and, you know, the squares. So that part was great and a great experience, but I don't think it was like a huge, blinding revelation or anything.

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs] Okay.

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs] So.

DR. CARNEY: When you were working on your B.A. and your M.A., as opposed to the B.F.A, M.F.A, when did you specialize? I mean, when did you know that you were going to be a sculptor?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, by then I was majoring in sculpture. As I said, even as an undergraduate, before I was making sculpture, I never had a one-man show or anything, but I would enter work in, like, the equivalent of the Finger Lakes show or the Albright-Knox, those juried shows. You had one piece. You know, those sort of things, but in the Bay Area.

But I was getting into shows, and it was always sculpture by then. By the time I was a freshman, I would say, even, I was identifying myself as a sculptor. And from then on, I didn't take any painting courses except as required. You know, I had to take a painting class, an etching or a printmaking class or something. You know, they were required. But I treated them as required courses.

So I entered back into the art school at Berkeley, and that coincided-that was the year that Peter Voulkos moved from Los Angeles to Berkeley and started teaching ceramics there, ceramic sculpture. And that was, no doubt, the big, huge experience for those two years, was working with him.

DR. CARNEY: So what year was that?

MR. UNDERHILL: Nineteen fifty-nine, '60, '61. And the first year was working in ceramic sculpture because, you know, that's what he was doing, and it was just an amazing, wonderful experience. Steve De Staebler was in my class; Jim Melchert was. And he [De Staebler] and I just fell into it. We had both started in the Fine Arts Department in Berkeley, and I remember my adviser saying, "Why don't you take this course with Peter Voulkos? He's new here this year and it should be good. It will be a great of your-" you know. Little did they know the impact. It was total. And Steve was the same way.

But Jim was there because he had met Voulkos in a summer class, maybe the year before or something, and he was there because Voulkos was there. He was his student assistant. You know, he fired the kilns, he swept the floors, and all that stuff that year. And it was Voulkos's first two years there, so he worked with us. He used the actual-we called it the "Pot Shop." He used that as his studio. We used it. He made, you know, no distinction between who was who and anything. But whatever his way of teaching was, that no one can quite decide or decipher or anything, you know, it was all right there. It was a great experience. We had a wonderful time.

And as I say, the first year was all ceramics. That's why he was there; that's why Jim Melchert was there; there were other people who were there just to study with Voulkos. Steve De Staebler and I were there, you know, initially just because it was another course to take that would be cool, and then that was the only place to be. You know, that was where it was happening, you know, in the school. [Laughs.] Everybody felt that way. And it really was, no question.

DR. CARNEY: Pretty amazing.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, it really was. And then-

DR. CARNEY: And it was also pretty amazing that you knew it at the time. It sounds like you knew you were experiencing something, that you were really lucky.

MR. UNDERHILL: Oh, yeah. Oh, it was just great. In fact, I hardly remembered that I met him before until I began to-then the memory began to come back. I said, oh, I had known him, you know, when I was a freshman, which by then it was almost six or eight years before, whenever it was, almost 10 years before. Anyway-

DR. CARNEY: So you were kind of an older student at this point.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, I was definitely a grad student age, yeah. Oh, yeah. I was 26 or 27 or something. And I had all this background, you know, of stuff. And then the second year was with another guy who no one ever talks about. His name was Don Haskin.

DR. CARNEY: How do you spell Don's last name?

MR. UNDERHILL: H-A-S-K-I-N, who was a metalworker kind of craftsman, from somewhere in the upper Midwest, who was teaching at Berkeley. And at that time the department that Voulkos was teaching in, and this guy, it was called the Decorative Arts Department.

DR. CARNEY: That's great. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: It was still called the Decorative Arts Department. It was wonderful. And he and Peter Voulkos started-well, we all got interested in bronze casting. You know, I guess they were going to do it anyway, and so it became the thing to do. You know, there was no program in it, so we just sort of started.

I modeled a head, a little portrait head of my little daughter, in this red-actually jewelry wax. And the very first time we did a casting, we made these plaster molds, the lost-wax process, burned the wax out in the ceramic kilns, and took these molds to an engineering lab on campus.

DR. CARNEY: I think we'll break for a tape here.

MR. UNDERHILL: Okay.

[Begin Tape 1, Side B.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Bill Underhill at the artist's studio in Wellsville, New York, on June 8, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is tape one, side B.

Thank you, Bill. You were just talking about your first bronze casting at Berkeley. MR. UNDERHILL: Right. Right. The very first time we all did it, we took the work to an engineering shop on campus. Part of the mechanical engineering department had a small foundry I guess, and the work was cast there and I'm sure that was my very first bronze casting, and I'm sure it was Peter Voulkos's very first bronze casting. And I had a head-as I said, a portrait head-and he had done some little abstract thing, and shortly, he, of course, did something unusual. I think he had the piece gold plated when it was done, which, you know, always did something to astound you; it would be cool at the same time.

But then, he and this Don Haskin, who I mentioned, rented a little tiny bit of space in an industrial foundry in the industrial part of Berkeley, and would make the sculptures in the Pot Shop, wax, and then make the molds there, burn them out, and then ship them by truck. And I happened at that time to own-to be driving a truck; I guess it was pre-VW Bus. It was maybe a pre-war truck. Anyway, one of these panel delivery trucks. So that was perfect for carrying all these molds. So I was the one

who was always assigned to get the molds down. And I just loved it. I just fell in love with the process.

And also, this is when I began making bronze bowls. I evolved for myself this system of throwing wet clay shapes, because there we were in the Pot Shop and people were throwing and making pots, and the whole aesthetic of pots, and part of my own background, too. And I realized that you could make a wet clay bowl and not worry at all about what the outside looked like, leave the walls thick, work on the inside, and then pour wax into that and let it cool for a while.

It was kind of like slip casting, that it cools in a shell first, then, because the clay is attached to a bat that's, you know, for throwing, you can pick the whole thing up and pour this wax out, and that leaves a shell, a perfect bowl with direct cast; whatever you've done into the surface of the clay inside, the wet clay, becomes then the outside relief decoration on the wax. And this just seemed like a natural, wonderful kind of connection, and it was my own discovery. Well, the idea of making bronze bowls, it was very much my own thing out of that environment.

DR. CARNEY: Do you still have those bowls?

MR. UNDERHILL: I have one from that era that I just shipped out to Berkeley, because I'm going to have a rubber mold made of it so I can duplicate it. But I have one left of that era.

But that just led to all the others from this idea of casting wax, then the modeling wax fabrication or using sheet wax, and all the way from real textured sort of things to very pure geometric shapes. And I've been doing it ever since. So that was a revelation to me, and that occurred pretty much in the second year of this two years.

At the end of 1961, I had graduated with my M.A., and by then I had already had one of my bowls in a show at the [American] Craft Museum in New York, some sort of West Coast crafts thing. And that's about the time I first heard about the American Crafts Council and the museum.

DR. CARNEY: Was it the American Craft Museum at that time or was it the-

MR. UNDERHILL: I think it was still the Museum of Contemporary Crafts or something. The magazine was called *Craft Horizons* in those days.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, yes, right.

MR. UNDERHILL: And they changed the name of that.

DR. CARNEY: So this was one of your first major exhibitions?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, certainly it was the first time I was anywhere away from the Bay Area. And it's still just one piece in a show. It's not a one-person show or anything. I mean, I was just delighted; it was so exciting just to be part of this whole thing.

DR. CARNEY: Did you travel to New York? I mean, had you traveled to the East Coast?

MR. UNDERHILL: I had not been to the East Coast except in my military capacity-[laughs]-traveling through.

DR. CARNEY: So it wasn't like you had to go to New York City to see what was happening in New York.

MR. UNDERHILL: No that happened later. That's why I'm here today, actually.

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs] Okay.

MR. UNDERHILL: You know, it was getting recognized for the vessel shapes. And, you know, another piece, an early piece, was bought by the Oakland Museum as a purchase prize, and I just kept making more. I got more ideas, and the feedback was great and all that stuff. And it was my thing.

DR. CARNEY: When did the Oakland Museum buy a piece?

MR. UNDERHILL: Must have been in the spring of 1962.

DR. CARNEY: And it was 1961 that you had a piece in the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York, approximately?

MR. UNDERHILL: It may have been the winter, '61-'62. I could look it up, but I don't know the exact date.

DR. CARNEY: Just roughly is good enough.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, yeah. It was early '60s. Then I graduated, and with tremendous pressure, like anybody would have, to get a job. And that was when, what turned out to be a fateful decision to leave the Bay Area, without realizing it at all, but I got a job in New Mexico at a small college, Highlands University in Las Vegas, New Mexico, which is about an hour east of Santa Fe. And I was there for a year.

And I was so into this bronze thing, I built a little foundry. I built a little foundry and worked with the students there, did casting, did more work, entered more work. A thing called the "Young Americans" at that time was a major show, and I entered work in that and got basically the first prize, or "Best of Show" award, "Young Americans," in 19-must have been '62.

DR. CARNEY: And is that when you were at Highlands University?

MR. UNDERHILL: I was in Highlands University. That was just for one year. In fact, I was so into this whole thing and so still full of the whole Voulkos, you know, Bay Area scene, that I did not do very well. [Laughs.] Maybe I was trying to emulate-as someone else, actually it was Richard Shaw, said, his first teaching experiences were really disastrous, as he tried to emulate Voulkos's teaching style, which you can't do, you know. It's just to have no style at all. [Laughs.] I was the same. I think I tried to be like Pete, which everyone was doing that. So I was asked to leave after the first year.

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs.] Which was a blow.

DR. CARNEY: We've all been through that, haven't we?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Yeah. It was a blow. And here I was, out in the middle of New Mexico with my-

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs] Sorry, I'm not laughing-I'm laughing with you.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, I know. With, by then, two children, a little boy born there in Las Vegas, New

Mexico. And the fateful decision there was, again, influence-was to move east. That through this first show I'd been in, I had met a woman who was opening a crafts gallery, and this was really a pioneering crafts gallery, in 1962. Her name was Josephine Blumenfeld. She had a gallery that lasted just one year. And she was, in turn, heavily influenced by her daughter and son-in-law, who were artists, and he's the one, I think, really who got all this together. Not that he persuaded her to do a gallery, but it was his involvement and influence about this exciting work that was being done.

DR. CARNEY: And where was the gallery?

MR. UNDERHILL: In New York City. Lexington Avenue. I don't remember the address. And so she had contacted me about being included in her gallery, and I had had this nice award in the "Young Americans" show. And the other thing was just the most casual sort of comments from one faculty member from Berkeley, who had grown up in New York, and who said, just in passing, "Why don't you go to New York?" So it was just sort of like choice, anyway, the decision was to go to New York.

And at that time, New York was the place to be, in a way. It had all the press. In retrospect, there was an awful lot going on in the Bay Area, too. But the other thing is that my wife and I were so connected, we were so much part of the kind of informal establishment in the Bay Area, that we didn't even think that there was an establishment. Or, you know, we were just so, both of us, two, three generations living there, just knowing people professionally and culturally and everything-we just kind of walked away from it without realizing what we were giving up, really, and coming east. But we had friends here, too, and were part of, as I say, this gallery connection.

DR. CARNEY: What year was it that you decided to move east?

MR. UNDERHILL: Sixty-two. Yeah, 1962. And moved not into New York City, which was just sort of incomprehensible, coming from us, with no connections whatever in the city, and the idea of living in New York City, we just couldn't deal with that. We did later. So we moved to suburbia there, actually in Greenwich, Connecticut, which, you know, has this cachet of being such an affluent community, but it has these little pockets of old, blue collar, you know, industrial little areas and working-class areas, and we were definitely in one of those places. We could afford to rent an apartment.

And I worked at a place called-I had my own studio. Excuse me. I had my own studio I shared with a guy. And I just talked to him over the phone and we made all these decisions very fast from New Mexico, to go there, share a studio next to a place called the Clay Art Center, which you may or may not have heard of, in Port Chester, New York, which was a cooperative ceramics shop. It varied from 10 to 15 people, maybe usually more like five or six active people really using the facilities, sharing facilities.

DR. CARNEY: So that was next door to the studio you rented, shared?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: Who did you share the studio with?

MR. UNDERHILL: His name was Jim Howard. He was a sculptor/potter who still lives in that area and is potting. He does pottery. And I built, again, a little foundry and a little melting facility for myself and used the kilns in the Clay Art Center for my burnout process, and for a while, you know, very unrealistically, thought I could somehow get by, by making work and selling it. And that, of course, turned out to be unrealistic. So within a year or so, I gravitated back to teaching and was teaching first part-time at a community adult art center, White Plains, New York.

DR. CARNEY: This was after that successful year of teaching-[laughing]-at the other place.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right. Right. Yeah. Anyway, I became part of the, sort of, part-time teacher kind of circuit there in New York City, but continued to do pretty well exhibiting. In fact, I think it was my most productive, creative time, really, those few years in Byram-well, in Greenwich, actually. It was a little district called Byram, and the Clay Art Center there. Because that's all I was doing, and there was, you know, work to be done and shows to be in, and I really was very productive, and still under all the, sort of, momentum from Berkeley and the Bay Area, sort of, system or experience.

But I never really made any money at it. It was just totally unrealistic to think that you could make money, you know, just making and selling your work, especially when it's stuff that's so labor intensive and expensive to make in the first place. It's not like you're making ink drawings or something; you're making these really expensive, labor intensive bronze products. And I was a terrible businessman, terrible at that part of it, too. You know, I wasn't good at any of it. Not good at selling my work or selling my ideas or meeting people or any of that stuff.

DR. CARNEY: But at this time, the Josephine Blumenfeld gallery was gone?

MR. UNDERHILL: That lasted one year. But I did have a one-man show of bronze bowls in New York City in 1963, which probably is a first.

DR. CARNEY: And that was at her gallery?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yes, at the Blumenfeld Gallery. And then through that, I guess the next thing that happened, too, was Lee Nordness of the "Objects: USA," the Johnson Wax collection. And I think that this Blumenfeld Gallery-a little-known early historical fact is that he came to the Blumenfeld Gallery. He had been working with Karen Johnson Boyd, and they had made a collection of American paintings, I believe, or painting and sculpture, and he came and saw the work in the Blumenfeld Gallery and that's when he got the idea to start a collection of American crafts with Karen Johnson Boyd, I'm pretty sure. And at the same time, Josephine Blumenfeld Gallery closed. And he formed his collection [The Johnson Wax Collection], and then he had a gallery in New York and I was in that for a few years.

DR. CARNEY: And what was the gallery called?

MR. UNDERHILL: Lee Nordness Gallery, I believe.

DR. CARNEY: How do you spell Nordness?

MR. UNDERHILL: N-O-R-D-N-E-S-S. He published the book *Objects: USA* [New York: Viking Press, 1970].

DR. CARNEY: Yes, I remember that famous catalogue.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, very influential.

DR. CARNEY: Someone just waved it in my face the other day. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: Very influential at that time. That was a much more thorough documentation. I mean, they had the Johnson Wax money behind, and Karen Johnson, who, I guess, is a pretty enlightened sponsor of all that.

DR. CARNEY: She now owns Perimeter Gallery in Chicago.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right.

DR. CARNEY: And I visited her home in Racine [Wisconsin]. I mean, she's got an incredible collection. Plus she supports the Wustum [Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts, Racine, WI], and she supports our museum in Alfred a little bit. A down-to-earth person, very positive influence.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. I'd like to meet her too.

DR. CARNEY: She came out once, when we had the Jack Earl show.

MR. UNDERHILL: Oh, yeah?

DR. CARNEY: She came out for Jack because she loves Jack, and Perimeter pushes Jack's work, so she did come out to Alfred for that. It's the only time I've gotten her out here.

MR. UNDERHILL: Hmm. I've never met her, but I know she-

DR. CARNEY: She's a great person.

MR. UNDERHILL: -had some of my work from those days.

Anyway, let's see. So there's Nordness. But throughout it all, it's not enough money to live on, and I realized that everybody who's doing okay is either living on two salaries or somebody is working full time to support somebody else. And here we were with, by then, three children, and my wife still-partly because we were so broke all the time. We couldn't afford a baby-sitter, you know, for her to do anything, and she still, basically having dropped out of college, couldn't demand a big salary for anything anyway. You know, we were in that bind where she had dropped out of college to be a mom, and she was great doing all that. You know, through all this crazy time, she was totally supportive.

So, let's see. So there we were in Byram. Okay. A young guy that I'd met through all this persuaded me to go into business running an art foundry with him and another guy. It turned out to be a mistake because I just couldn't deal with it. But that got us down to Brooklyn. We moved to Brooklyn, and for a few months, maybe six months or so, I ran an art foundry. I had been doing castings for other people at my little foundry. You know, that is one way you make some money on the side. But to go into it kind of professionally-I found it had something about your self-image or something; I just couldn't do it. Anyway, it didn't work. We probably were way underfinanced. I was undermotivated. I was probably kind of passive-aggressive, you know. I'd say, "Yeah, let's do that," but at the same time, I didn't really want to do it.

DR. CARNEY: Who was your partner in that?

MR. UNDERHILL: His name was Ken Greene, Kenneth Greene, who was a native Manhattan guy who was kind of a man about the arts. He had gone to Music and Art High School. He was talented, but he wasn't quite sure what he wanted to do, went to Swarthmore for a while. And then, you know, we got to know each other, and this idea came up and it worked for a while, but it didn't work in the long run. It sort of fell apart.

The tragic and ironic thing is that when the thing broke up, his mother said she was so glad because the foundry was such a dangerous thing, you know, a foundry with all this hazardous stuff.

He went to work in an architect's office and died in a fire in the architect's office within a year or so after that. It was just awful.

DR. CARNEY: Can I digress for a moment and ask you-I don't even know if this is a question on the list, but you mentioned about the danger of working with the materials and the processes that you use. Have you had any catastrophes that way, or did you find that that did anything to your health, any of the materials?

MR. UNDERHILL: I've had a couple of times I had to be led into the emergency room because I had metal in my face and in my eyes. It was really pretty awful. I was just lucky there was no permanent damage, when I was just, stupidly, not wearing a safety mask, on two occasions.

DR. CARNEY: Okay. I was just curious.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: The world would want to know that, that you have to be careful with it.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, you have to be careful.

DR. CARNEY: I mean, now everybody is so-at least at the universities-are so conscious because of the liability and things.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Right. I just was not following basic safety precautions. I had gotten careless or maybe a little touch of, you know, bravado or something to be doing stuff. And there's also fear of the fumes and the dust and the toxic stuff involved.

DR. CARNEY: And that was my other question. I wondered, because I know the university, at least at Alfred, anyway, that's been a major obstacle.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right. Yeah. Well, you have to have good ventilation.

DR. CARNEY: But you've been careful about that kind of thing.

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I don't know, over the years. The last few years, I have been diagnosed with a slight case of asthma, but that-that might be due to years of breathing dust and stuff, but it might just be-it's not unusual, you know, to develop asthma later in life. But I don't know if I have any permanent damage or not. But, I don't know, I try to be safe, but there's times when you're just motivated to do something. They say the wax that we use is actually a petroleum product, and you breathe the smoke from that and it's like breathing smog or concentrated hydrocarbons, and it's really bad for you.

DR. CARNEY: But you didn't wear respiratory protection, whatever they call it?

MR. UNDERHILL: But it's kind of you can't. I try-I don't-I avoid it, but I'm sure that over the years I've breathed a lot of it.

DR. CARNEY: I didn't mean to make you detract from your story, but you reminded me that that's important.

MR. UNDERHILL: It is. It's part of that whole thing. It is dangerous, and in the long term, unhealthy. So all the good ventilation and respiratory thing, masks and safety goggles and safety shoes and all

that stuff should always be worn and used. You know, well-ventilated areas if possible. I mean, this foundry I had in Port Chester, for instance, was outdoors. I mean, you know, it was under a big shed roof.

DR. CARNEY: Is Brooklyn the same as Port Chester?

MR. UNDERHILL: No. Port Chester [location of Clay Art Center]-

DR. CARNEY: Okay. Port Chester was before Brooklyn.

MR. UNDERHILL: Port Chester is in Westchester County, up right next to Greenwich.

DR. CARNEY: Okay. But the Brooklyn Foundry was where you and Kenneth Greene-

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Right.

DR. CARNEY: So were you not teaching then?

MR. UNDERHILL: I also had started teaching, very part-time, at Pratt Institute.

DR. CARNEY: So what year did you set up that --

MR. UNDERHILL: That was 1965, I think, when we moved to Brooklyn.

DR. CARNEY: And when were you teaching at Pratt?

MR. UNDERHILL: The same time. But there again, I taught there for a year. It was another reason to move to Brooklyn, because commuting all the way from way out in Westchester into Brooklyn to teach a class twice a week or something was just insane. So anyway, we moved to Brooklyn with three kids, and that lasted for a few years. I taught at Pratt.

And again, I didn't get along with the boss. In this case, it was because he was one of these guys who expected all of the instructors or people he hired would also be working for him. And I really found I resented that, when it was just assumed that if he wanted a little casting done, I'd do it for him, you know? It's kind of like you're the apprentice or the assistant or something.

DR. CARNEY: Was that anybody famous you'd like to mention, or you'll just skip giving --

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs] I've blocked his name. Wait a minute. I'll think of it. It will come up. Gosh, I can't think of his name [Calvin Albert]. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: Well, that's good. We'll catch it later.

So you taught at Pratt.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, part-time.

DR. CARNEY: That was in 1965?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Then, disaster. The foundry business collapsed. Oh, I know what happened next. I fell into another good deal, though. Part of my bronze casting and showing at the Craft Museum, I'd gotten to know a man who, I guess maybe, was on the board of trustees of the crafts museum, and he was a very big-time industrial designer in one of the bigger firms in New York City.

And he'd been to my studio, and he had a son who was interested in sculpture and we'd worked together a little bit. One of these contacts you make. You know, the kind of thing you make anywhere, but certainly in New York.

And I had gone to him at this time with some ideas about some kind of industrial design manufactured little bowls, you know, in aluminum. And it turned out just by sheer coincidence that he was thinking about going in with his son and another older son, who was really a business major, into the business of making large-scale sculpture and selling it.

DR. CARNEY: Who was this person?

MR. UNDERHILL: Lippincott. I don't know if you've heard of-

DR. CARNEY: First name?

MR. UNDERHILL: J. Gordon Lippincott of the firm of Lippincott and Margulies, with clients such as the United States Steel Corporation, the Pan American Airlines. You know, big, major corporations. They were interested in not only industrial design but doing this thing of inventing-creating whole new corporate logos and corporate images, where they design the new trademark and do all the interiors for all the offices and the interiors for, like, you know, the airlines. They do all the fabrics on the seats and the painting on the outside of the airplane and everything. They do the whole thing.

And he had this older son who was a businessman, business major, and his younger son, who was still, I think, at Cooper Union as a student. They got the idea that they'd make large-scale sculpture with aiming at these, sort of, corporate clients that he knew. And this was the heyday of big primary sculpture, in the '60s, when every corporate headquarters had to have a geometric sculpture in front of it.

DR. CARNEY: I do remember.

MR. UNDERHILL: Remember that? Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: They did.

MR. UNDERHILL: And he said, "How'd you like to make some big steel sculptures instead of these little aluminum bowls?" I said, "Wow, that would be cool." So I did, and it was just a wonderful windfall for me. He paid me a salary. Of course, I didn't realize that that meant that he owned all the work I did during the time. I didn't think about it. At the time, I thought, "What the heck?"

DR. CARNEY: Were these one-of-a-kind pieces?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. And they were big. The family, they had bought some industrial land in New Haven. There was a big old shed, industrial steel building on it, and we worked there. I commuted up during the week. My family stayed in Brooklyn. I went up there to New Haven. And we built two big steel sculptures over a period of a few months. The whole thing lasted maybe six months. I spent some time first designing.

DR. CARNEY: So this was mid-'60s?

MR. UNDERHILL: Nineteen sixty-six it was, yeah. And Lippincott, they went on and they were a major fabricator of large sculpture from then on until recently.

[Begin Tape 2, Side A.]

DR. CARNEY: This is Margaret Carney interviewing Bill Underhill at the artist's studio in Wellsville, New York, June 8, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is tape two, side one.

And thank you, Bill. We're continuing talking about when you were commuting to New Haven from Brooklyn.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right. So it was a great experience to, you know, make geometric-it was all geometric shapes. It was welded-steel pieces. And to have a crew to work. You know, there was Don Lippincott, kind of the business manager guy who took care of all that sort of stuff, two full-time workmen who were wonderful, young, just construction-worker guys, who were doing the welding, and I was the artist in charge, and I did these two sculptures.

DR. CARNEY: Where did the sculpture end up?

MR. UNDERHILL: The bigger one was purchased by the Bradley family in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. The Bradleys are a wealthy family. I don't know where the wealth comes from, but one wing of a museum in Milwaukee is the Bradley Wing, you know, that sort of place, a big collection. And they had what was their, maybe, country place, or maybe they lived there, not far out of Milwaukee, but what had obviously been a big, maybe, farm originally, and then it became landscaped and a pond built. And in the '60s they bought a whole collection of big sculpture, and not all welded-steel stuff. I mean, there's Henry Moore and there's Barbara Hepworth and there's Clement Meadmore and there's Noguchi. But it's mostly this, sort of, 1960 abstract steel stuff, that era, you know, primary forms or minimalist stuff.

And so this big piece of mine is there, and it's really big. We made it 50 feet long and 25 feet high. The smaller piece, the [Lippincott] family kept. They did not ever find a buyer for it, I guess. And they had a connection with Swarthmore, too, so they lent it to Swarthmore College for quite a while, I don't know how long, in the '60s and '70s. It was there, and I don't think it's there anymore. They have it somewhere.

And the big piece, I guess both pieces-it turns out that this welded steel, it was this stuff that was supposed to magically not rust, a type of steel that's used architecturally. I mean, it's not like stainless; it rusts and turns brown, but then it's supposed to expose, sort of, the nickel and various other alloys in the steel and stop rusting. Actually, what happens is it simply slows down, rusts very, very, very slowly. But still, enough of it has to rust away, up to an eighth of an inch, they say, of steel has to actually oxidize and turn till this other stuff is exposed. But we didn't know any of that.

And you have to allow for ventilation. It's like a house when you build something that big. It's like a house. It had to have ventilation. You know how houses have to have ventilation in the attic and you have to allow for drainage and water to run off of roofs and stuff? You can't have water collecting. It was all the same with this sculpture, this huge sculpture of mine, sitting out there in Wisconsin.

And it began to rust so badly that actually they wanted to replace it. It must have been about 1995. They contacted me, and they were planning to actually replace it. This was 30 years after it was built, pretty much. It had rusted so much it was starting to be dangerous and unsightly. It was getting just too, you know, like an old rusty whatever. And so I spent a while out there as a visiting person for a while, and they had hired an engineer to kind of redraw the piece geometrically, and I

helped with all that. In fact, I have models. I made models of it. See on the top shelf there under the plastic? That's the piece.

And I was really impressed. I don't know what it would cost, two, three hundred thousand dollars or something, to rebuild this piece. I haven't heard back from. I think they decided it would be way too expensive. I don't know. But it was nice that they really felt strongly enough about it. And they want to preserve this collection, the place, what's now the children of the husband and wife who formed the collection. They wished to preserve it the way it was, including replacing.

DR. CARNEY: It's like preserving an era or something.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Yeah. So they may still do it. But it was a wonderful opportunity. At that time it was great. I had a picture of the piece and a detail of it was on the cover of one of the major architecture magazines.

DR. CARNEY: Did the piece have a name?

MR. UNDERHILL: I called it *Ursa Major*, the big one. It's still there, rusting away.

DR. CARNEY: So at this point, you weren't teaching?

MR. UNDERHILL: No, I was doing that full-time. And I was advised by Mr. Lippincott to get something lined up for the fall when this was all done, and I didn't. I just was so involved with it and just not planning ahead, and it really caught me up. Again, kind of wishful thinking or unrealistic thinking, I went and tried to find other commissions based on this. I went to architects' offices and showed the work and thought I could generate another-some kind of commission based on this experience and having the real thing, you know, but it didn't work. You can't expect someone will immediately come up with the money for even the commission. I got close on a couple of things, actually, but nothing panned out. And I was all of a sudden just-the bottom fell out. There was no money. I had no backup, no fallback.

DR. CARNEY: When was this that you found yourself without a commission?

MR. UNDERHILL: That was the fall of 1966.

DR. CARNEY: Is that when you came to Alfred?

MR. UNDERHILL: Not quite. No, not quite. So for maybe six months, I worked as a draftsman in an architect's office, just to pay the rent and buy groceries. You know, we were really just absolutely broke. It was, you know, an experience. You know, living in Brooklyn, commuting by subway with everybody else in the morning, going to the job, you know, a few blocks from Grand Central Station. [Laughs.]

But by then, you know, I was still connected with the art world and was offered to teach a summer session at Columbia's Teachers College through a person I had met who brought his class down to a foundry in Brooklyn to watch a pour, and knew my work and so on. So he invited me to teach a summer session, which I did, and I never went back to the architect's office. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: Okay. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: Because through the Teacher's College connection, I was offered a job just that very fall at NYU [New York University] and that was full time instructor.

DR. CARNEY: What year is this?

MR. UNDERHILL: 1967. And I was there for two years. But that was a struggle. In fact, I was doing a thing of teaching full-time at NYU and still teaching an evening class at the Teachers College one semester or another just to get-I mean, an instructor's salary was kind of at the poverty level, you know. And we were living in Brooklyn with three children, and just had a feeling I wasn't getting anywhere there. At that time also, the children growing up in the city, I guess-although I had grown up in an urban area-but New York City-

DR. CARNEY: I was going to say, you didn't suffer for that.

MR. UNDERHILL: I felt I wanted to really get into full-time teaching.

DR. CARNEY: You mean a living-wage kind of full-time teaching?

MR. UNDERHILL: A living wage with benefits and that kind of thing, because instructors were, you know, nothing. And I was finally beginning to realize all those things were important. I mean, looking back on it, when I was running my foundry when I had it at the Clay Arts Center, '62, '63, all the way through, and the foundry we had in Brooklyn, I never thought about insurance. Oh, wait a minute, we must have had insurance in Brooklyn. But, you know-

DR. CARNEY: Do you mean health insurance?

MR. UNDERHILL: Health insurance, liability insurance, stuff like that. I never dreamed of it, you know, never thought of it.

DR. CARNEY: Were you kind of a hippie? Were you a hippie-era kind of person, or were you a little older, or younger?

MR. UNDERHILL: We weren't really too old, but we were certainly, you know, pre-hippie, I guess. We were beatniks. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: Oh, beatniks. Okay. I remember beatniks. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs] Much more the-

DR. CARNEY: Bohemian?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Yeah. But no, I mean, on the other hand, we were solid middle-class people, you know. We were all sons and daughters and brothers and sisters of professionals. We had a certain expected, certain kind of standard of living and so on. But on the other hand, we were totally naive about stuff like insurance and retirement benefits and bank accounts and all this, whatever. So all those things had become important.

And by then, actually, I had been invited to come to Alfred when we were still living in Byram. It must have been, maybe, 1963; I got a call from a guy named Bill Parry and he said he'd like me to come and do a workshop at Alfred. I'd heard of Alfred. Of course, Alfred-and it was partly just kidding around, but there was always a certain tone of derision through the West Coast about Alfred. You know, hotbed of conservatism and all that stuff. Anyway, so I had come up here and done a workshop.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, you had?

MR. UNDERHILL: I'd done a workshop up here about 1963 and I enjoyed it a lot. It was what now is the "old guard." It was Dan Rhodes, John Wood, Bill Parry, Robert Turner, and Ted Randall-I think it was McKenzie or something was the woodshop guy. I was just here for maybe a week or a few days. But I had enjoyed it. And of course it was people I did know by reputation and so on.

And then I was teaching at NYU maybe five years later, yeah, 1969, and one of my grad students said he was going to go to the College Art Association. And I said, "What's that?" [Laughs.] He said, "Well, that's a professional meeting." I said, "Okay, I'll go too." I'd never been. I'd never even heard of it.

DR. CARNEY: That was in New York, right?

MR. UNDERHILL: It was being held in Boston.

DR. CARNEY: Oh, in Boston?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. I had a friend there I could stay with. And I was thinking, well, I'll see what it's like, because I really had never heard of it. That's how naive I was in ways, or pampered, perhaps. I was able to get all jobs-

DR. CARNEY: That's pretty amazing.

MR. UNDERHILL: -without any of that stuff, through associations and connections rather than-I really didn't know-anyway. So I went, and who should I run into but Bill Parry and John Wood, and they were interviewing for a job in sculpture. And so I said, "Yeah, you know, I'd be interested," and they talked to me and so on, and knew me by reputation, again both from having been there five years before in a workshop or something and continuing to exhibit and da-da-da. And so one thing led to another, and I think it was Ted Randall phoned some time later, and they had been talking about it. And they said, "Are you still interested? Do you want to come up?" And I said yes.

So that summer, summer of 1969, we now moved to Alfred.

DR. CARNEY: Were you hired as, like, an assistant professor or that level?

MR. UNDERHILL: I think again I was hired as an instructor, I think. Yeah. Probably, if I had realized it, I could have-see, again, I wasn't up on negotiating. I did negotiate a fairly high salary for those days, because of my experience and whatever, but not any rank other than instructor.

So then we moved to Alfred.

DR. CARNEY: It wasn't a shock, because you had seen Alfred before.

MR. UNDERHILL: Before, yeah, but still, what a big change. But we also-

DR. CARNEY: There probably wasn't even a stoplight then in Alfred. We always joke when I'm talking to people, "Oh, we only have one stoplight in Alfred," and everybody's shocked. Well, here you were and they didn't even have that. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: There was no stoplight. No.

DR. CARNEY: So you were teaching with Dan Rhodes and John Wood and Ted Randall?

MR. UNDERHILL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] And Glenn Zwegardt was also hired that same year, and

Harland Snodgrass. We were the three new instructors that year. And the following year was the beginning of the new foundation program, which, you know, I was involved with, but certainly the idea of coming up with a whole new program was not in any way my doing; I just went along with it. It seemed to me it was John Wood's idea.

DR. CARNEY: Well, was Ted the head administrator then?

MR. UNDERHILL: Ted was chairman, yeah. He was sort of permanent, as far as I know, permanent chairman. And Bob Turner and Rhodes and Val Cushing.

But I think the big influence then was the whole, sort of, hippie thing happening. Well, 1969 was Woodstock. It was the first walk on the moon. The following spring was the Kent State massacre. And there was this whole kind of, you know, "back to the land," antiestablishment thing going. And we walked into that without, you know, intending to move out to the country and live on a farm, but it was the hip thing to be doing. There was all, you know, this whole thing about-

DR. CARNEY: I must have been thinking about the hippie before. I was anticipating. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I guess it's growing up in Berkeley.

DR. CARNEY: Yeah. You couldn't avoid it, I don't think.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. We kind of bought into that, and I look back on it and I really was still young enough or I had a hard time relating to what I thought of as the older faculty. That's not unusual with new, younger faculty. You really connect more with the students than the faculty, I think.

DR. CARNEY: And who were the older faculty?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, the old faculty were Randall and Bob Turner and even Val. But anyway, I just connected with the students and got, I must admit, very involved. You know, I was smoking dope and I wanted to be one of them, sort of; I wanted to be hip. And so that was a kind of crazy time. And it was a big adjustment.

And from then on, my work-actually, as I said before, I had a really productive time in the early '60s, then I ran into all these financial problems, moving from one school to another, moving from one place to another. And finally moving to Alfred, my production went way down because I was involved in all these other things, buying an old farmhouse in Alfred. I spent the next eight years, practically, to keep it from falling down, let alone-[laughs]. So I let my career slide; I really did. And I would show enough, and usually at the Craft Museum. By then I was, kind of, a regular exhibitor at the Craft Museum. And I was doing okay, but I certainly wasn't pushing it.

DR. CARNEY: Do you think part of that was-I mean, this is related to the questions they'd like us to be following, but do you think that the fact was that you had a secure job and benefits, even though you weren't financially-you had the liability of the studio and all that kind of thing-but did that make you kind of complacent, in a way-

MR. UNDERHILL: No.

DR. CARNEY: -or did you just get distracted by the students and the whole-

MR. UNDERHILL: I think I was just-yeah. I just took all that for granted. The security part of it could be taken for granted. I was distracted by the lifestyle thing, the counter-culture thing, being hip. I

was one of those-I was faculty-I didn't want to grow up. Maybe I was being Peter Pan, I don't know.

DR. CARNEY: Well, also, if you were teaching full time, you really had to balance your personal studio time.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: Now, maybe things have changed. I mean, now people teach three days out of the week and get a lot of studio time if they want it. Was it like that earlier?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I think the time you spent was about the same, but it was whether you focused on your profession, your career, or whether you focused on being hip with the students and going to their parties and doing that stuff. Plus this thing of having, kind of, work-I did keep myself working on this old house. My architectural instincts-I mean, everybody has some sort of thing-just took over.

And again, part of my temperament is I had to do it all myself, because, again, that was part of what everyone was doing, and involved in all these, kind of, you know, taking on building projects and things about house building that I knew nothing about, you know. But it was kind of like, oh, yeah, sure, I'll build this-you know, do the sheetrock or do the wiring or something like that. I didn't know anything about it. And you'd just sort of launch into it because you think that's what you're supposed to be-somehow it's cool to do it.

What really struck me was when Wayne Higby arrived a few years later and he was going to build a studio or have a studio, he had someone do it for him. You know? Of course, I was in there hacking away at this old barn I owned. You know, the idea that you build a studio in your barn. And he had his priorities straight, you know? He was going to work on his career and have someone else do the studio. And I bought the whole idea that you do all this stuff yourself, and "back to the land," and "small planet" and whatever all that stuff. [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs] I like that idea.

MR. UNDERHILL: Well.

DR. CARNEY: It was a different philosophy, a different frame of reference.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, I bought it all.

DR. CARNEY: Good for you. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, anyway, yeah, it worked out okay.

DR. CARNEY: So when did your career take off again? [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: I don't know that it has yet. That's why I'm so excited about going to Berkeley. I'm hoping this is the end.

DR. CARNEY: Can you tell me a little bit about, since you were teaching full-time, can you tell me about some students that you had, perhaps? Now I know who you were working with and that Wayne came in and all that. Did you have students that you're particularly happy-how many years did you teach at Alfred? I know you're retired now.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. I taught 27 years.

DR. CARNEY: And what year did you retire?

MR. UNDERHILL: Nineteen ninety-seven. Or 28 years. It was '69 to '97.

DR. CARNEY: Were there students-I mean, was this a satisfying change for you to be primarily a teacher and leader in the field as opposed to-

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, it was a mixed thing, I think. In ways, I enjoyed it, and I think I had the usual complaints about the amount of time you spend with committees and the politics involved and so on.

DR. CARNEY: The students loved you. Now, I can't tell you how many people, including Bill Walker, who said you were the best teacher he ever had-

MR. UNDERHILL: Really?

DR. CARNEY: -and you were the major influence on him. I mean, I keep running into people, since this is Alfred's Alumni Weekend, that are just really-when I say I'm going to interview Bill Underhill, they're like, "Oh, I love him! He was wonderful!" and, you know.

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: And these are all people that are still active.

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, that's nice. That's great. I'm glad to hear it.

DR. CARNEY: I mean, I just think it must be very rewarding for you.

MR. UNDERHILL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative].

DR. CARNEY: And do you have students that you'd like to mention that you're particularly pleased with what they did, whether or not they went on or not, but anybody you want to go on record?

MR. UNDERHILL: [Long pause.] Well, actually-

DR. CARNEY: Or we can come back to that question if you don't.

MR. UNDERHILL: One person I liked very much, who really was actually a child of another faculty member, and that's Andrew Jevremovic. He was a great student of mine. But in terms of-I guess maybe I was-it's nice to know people appreciated me as a teacher. I did not develop a following, you know, in terms of my work or people who pursued that. Andy was one of the few who did, actually. And whether that was my own doing of-you know, this was very much my own thing, this whole bronze vessel thing. I didn't consciously discourage anybody, but I didn't-you know, somehow you can kind of signal things? I don't know.

DR. CARNEY: So you weren't looking for people to mimic your work.

MR. UNDERHILL: No, I wasn't.

DR. CARNEY: I mean, some students leave here, I know, that are very attached to whoever they've worked with, to the extent that their work looks like that person's work. It isn't just that they learned

the techniques and esthetic sensibility.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right.

DR. CARNEY: But did that affect your work, working with the students? Did that add a flavor?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I think, in a way, I was always-I don't know if I was distant, exactly. I was always teaching things that were, kind of, not exactly my own thing, which was maybe good, in a way, that I was not influencing them directly that way. I don't know.

DR. CARNEY: Well, give me an example of that. What were you teaching that was something that wasn't-

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, figure sculpture, for instance.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. Okay.

MR. UNDERHILL: You know, which-

DR. CARNEY: And people enjoyed it. That's one of the things that people talked to me about.

MR. UNDERHILL: I know. It was great. And I enjoyed figure sculpture, too, and I did, you know, the *King Alfred* and a whole series-well, those heads that Bill [Walker] was so influenced by. That's nice to know. Another thing is, people never come up and tell me that, you know, I was important to them or something. People don't do that. I think it always seems to have to go second hand.

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs] Or doing bronze casting. People were always doing something else and there wasn't this involvement with the vessel. So there was never a following in that way. And it's good, because that means-you know, I feel it is very much my own thing, but on the other hand, I've always suffered from being kind of isolated, you know. It's not ceramics. And metalworking generally, you think of hollowware, hammering shapes and jewelry and fabrication and so on; and lost-wax casting is almost always considered in terms of sculpture. So what I'm doing, I think it's very much on my own.

DR. CARNEY: Did you do those [tea pots] wax?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yes.

DR. CARNEY: Those are very sculptural, and they're absolutely breathtaking. Those are fabulous.

MR. UNDERHILL: Oh, I've explored metal, cast-metal vessels of all kinds, including these teapots, and the cast-iron pieces.

DR. CARNEY: Now, are these one of a kind?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yes.

DR. CARNEY: Or did you go into production on any?

MR. UNDERHILL: No.

DR. CARNEY: Did you ever get into doing multiples of vessels and functional pieces?

MR. UNDERHILL: In terms of real mass production, you mean?

DR. CARNEY: Yeah, where somebody said, "Oh, I want that design, let's-"

MR. UNDERHILL: No. I should. It's one of the things I should do.

DR. CARNEY: I was going to say, I'm sitting here looking at those, and I'd buy them. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Good. Well, I need a good, sort of, manufacturer's rep or something, someone. I have a really nice cast-iron pot that I think would look awfully good at the Museum of Modern Art shop.

DR. CARNEY: [Laugh.] We'll have to look into that.

Now, I have a question about whether or not, as you were teaching at Alfred, did you have gallery representation?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: And who was representing you? And who still represents you?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, at the moment I don't have anybody. And that's the other thing I'm trying to get back together, speaking of Perimeter. I was with Nordness for as long as his gallery lasted, which wasn't all that long. And then in-

[End Tape 2, Side A.]

[Begin Tape 2, Side B.]

DR. CARNEY: [In progress]-New York on June 8, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is tape two, side two.

And Bill, we were talking about your gallery representation, that you had been with Nordness for a few years.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right. That was back in the '60s. And then I had no real formal representation for quite a while. Again, I just showed individual pieces in group shows at the Craft Museum, other museums pretty much around the country. And then in the '80s, I don't know exactly when, maybe early '80s, I got connected with the Perimeter Gallery and with Helen Drutt and with a gallery in New York City, Twining, Twining Gallery. I don't know if they're still there or not.

DR. CARNEY: Was that Helen's gallery in New York or the one in Philadelphia?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I never actually had a show with her. I think I had work in her gallery. But she was arranging shows in regional museums, and I was in those shows. I never had a show with her. And I had work with Perimeter in the gallery, but again, never a show.

And then I got involved with Garth Clark in '89, I think, when he very briefly tried to branch out into showing other than ceramics. He had John McQueen, for instance, a basket maker. And he had a small gallery, separate little gallery really for jewelry very briefly, my work and some other people, glass and metal. And I did have a show in his gallery at that time, in Los Angeles and New York. But

when I did that, I dropped out with the other people. I dropped out of Perimeter and Helen and the other New York gallery. And then when it didn't work with Garth Clark, you know-after the two shows there were no sales; it just was obvious it was the wrong place to be. And I just kind of said to heck with it at that point.

DR. CARNEY: Did Garth ask you to not be represented? I mean, many dealers don't want to have you be dually represented or to show in different places.

MR. UNDERHILL: He had said-yes, he had said, "If you're going to be with me, you're going to have to drop out of everybody else." And I went along with that without even questioning it. I think I can understand not at another gallery in New York, but I know a lot of people who show with him show at other galleries in other cities. There again, it was kind of my lack of business sense or just figuring out how important this was to really get it straight and get, you know, the best possible representation. I just said, "Okay, I'll show with you," and I told all the rest of the people I had to leave their gallery.

DR. CARNEY: I mean, and all of those were the best galleries that you were involved with, including Garth, of course.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: That's a very interesting part. So do you feel that the whole gallery/museum world met your expectations, or if you had it to do over again, or what you're doing now, are you going to work on that aspect?

MR. UNDERHILL: I'm definitely going to work on that aspect of it, yeah. Well, I always went along with-I was always very positive and excited and everything whenever I was having a show, being represented and so on, and that was all good. On the other hand, I think because they're bronzes and they cost so much to produce and the idea that, you know, you share a percentage with the dealers-and I guess it's 50-50; it depends, I don't know-but with bronzes, often the understanding is that the dealer and the artist pay for whatever it costs to cast the piece, and that's taken care of first, and then they split the remainder. And I could never get-I've never tried that, and I'm going to try it. I hate to sound like I'm concerned about the money involved, but if you don't do-

DR. CARNEY: Well, it's an important issue.

MR. UNDERHILL: It's a very important issue, because if you don't do that, it means if the gallery takes 50 percent and you-the artist is paying for the foundry costs-no matter how much you increase-you know, it just seems like the economics of it get worse.

DR. CARNEY: Do you have a foundry here in your studio?

MR. UNDERHILL: No, I don't.

DR. CARNEY: Where do you do that now?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, that's another thing that's really slowed me down. When I first retired, I thought I would go back and continue using the school facilities, and it turned out I just didn't want to go back. [Laughs.] You try to go back, and you realize you've got to figure out, well, sophomores are scheduled this week, and, you know, check with Diane Cox about this or that or whatever, and, you know, I didn't want to do that anymore. When you're there every day and you kind of work through it, you know, you know when the space is available to do a casting or something.

And this studio, nice though it is, is up here on the second floor with a wooden floor, and I couldn't do it here. So I've been without a facility. I'm also at the age or stage where I think I really ought to start having it done. So right now I've been having work done at a former student of mine-another name I should mention is Dave Poulin, David Poulin, who was a grad student in the mid-'80s, I guess. And he's the one who took over the job of actually doing most of the mold working and casting of the *King Alfred* statue.

DR. CARNEY: What year did you do *King Alfred*? I remember when it was unveiled and all the hoopla.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, '81-no, it was '91.

DR. CARNEY: I arrived at Alfred in January of '91, and it was sometime not too long after that.

MR. UNDERHILL: I think it was the fall of '91. Yeah. It was finished in summer of '91 and dedicated right after start of the fall semester.

DR. CARNEY: And did Alfred University reward you handsomely for that fine piece? [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: I hope.

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I broke even on the actual casting. I was, again, very, you know, naive about what it would all cost. Plus, I had made the original proposal years before, and then when it finally came through, I didn't really increase my price very much, and prices have gone up and so on. But I did finally make money, because there was an interesting little twist on that. It turned out that I had the copyright.

DR. CARNEY: Great. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: No one had realized that. I hadn't either. I hadn't even thought about it till it was all up, and it was obvious that President Coll [Edward G. Coll, Jr., former president of Alfred University] and his staff had great plans about using the image for this and that. And initially it was just because I was kind of hurt because I wasn't included. He didn't ask me what my ideas were, what do I think of this image, should we do this or that.

DR. CARNEY: He was never big on that. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: No. I said, "Don't I have some kind of right to this?" And I at first consulted a local lawyer, who didn't know. This was Judy Samber [lawyer]. She had a connection, a referral to New York. There was a real copyright lawyer whose specialties were theater and, you know, real creative work. He said, "Oh, yeah, that's your copyright." So we had to negotiate, and that's when I made money.

DR. CARNEY: Did you sell the right to it?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, I sold it. Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: Good for you. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs.]

DR. CARNEY: That's a great story.

I have to ask you a question. Are all of your bronzes signed?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yes.

DR. CARNEY: And how do you sign your work?

MR. UNDERHILL: Actually, I have a little stamp that I made. It's my signature that I use. I sign it "Underhill." And we have a little-

DR. CARNEY: For posterity, if they're looking for fakes?

MR. UNDERHILL: Unfortunately, I guess the stamp would be easier to imitate.

DR. CARNEY: You know, that's true of people that make pottery that use stamps, because like Rabino and stuff, that actually there are people that have those stamps or that have copied them.

MR. UNDERHILL: Here's my stamp.

DR. CARNEY: Oh. That's beautiful. And you date all the pieces.

MR. UNDERHILL: Date them, and a little foundry mark, which is just my own invention. It's not registered or anything. But it looks cool.

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs] That's the important thing.

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughing.] I [should sign them]. Each one is just an original signature. I do that, too.

DR. CARNEY: Can you talk about any other major influences on your work as you matured and after you came to Alfred? Were there other things, or through your lifetime were there any things such as religion or the region you lived in or other people that you met, or did you maintain kind of a solitary thread of your own work?

MR. UNDERHILL: I think, I mean, it's both.

DR. CARNEY: Early on I hear that you were influenced by Voulkos and the whole ambience.

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, the whole West Coast environment, which was both the tradition that came up through, I think, the arts and crafts movement. And the West Coast in the '50s and '60s, and probably because of the crafts tradition, was much more accepting of the crafts, I think, as a serious part of the whole arts scene, as opposed to if you'd come to New York at that time, there was painting and sculpture, and crafts was looked down upon as, you know, pretty secondary, it seems to me. I don't know. Anyway, it seems to me that there was more interest and acceptance of the craft activity on the West Coast. But I don't know if there's any-I just think all the influences of your life go into your work, and that you can't say this was some sort of main thread.

DR. CARNEY: What about the fact that you're a man and you're a bronze caster, as opposed to women. You mentioned Diane Cox, who is on the faculty at Alfred. But do you think there are any issues to do with gender issues, that the majority of the sculptors that work in bronze are men?

MR. UNDERHILL: They are. They're not-

DR. CARNEY: Did that influence the fact that you wanted to work in bronze as opposed to ceramic or some other material as a sculptor, like wood?

MR. UNDERHILL: Not as a sort of stance in terms of gender, but it was certainly just a natural attraction to me. I think I'm a fire person.

DR. CARNEY: Because I always thought Diane Cox liked to work in it because it was a macho kind-[laughs]-of material or something; that big guys do it and she's this little woman.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: But you were never attracted to woodworking. I mean, I know clay you did early.

MR. UNDERHILL: I did clay.

DR. CARNEY: You did wood a little bit in the army. [Laughs.] But you never really did a whole lot of other.

MR. UNDERHILL: No, I was really open. Early influences were the traditional things. I did wood carving, stone carving, and I did welding, learned to weld, and-[inaudible]-those. Henry Moore was a big influence in the 1950s. He was preeminent. And then David Smith and that sort of early American, postwar welded-steel work. And so there was carving, welding, which is kind of fabrication, I guess, and clay throughout.

I mean, I had clay, you know, throughout my childhood, too. My mother-we had the good artist's professional-quality plasticene always to play with when we were kids, and I was always making figures. And I still love to use it. And I worked with clay, you know, just typical grammar school projects, making tiles and so on, all the way through high school, working with real clay, ceramics, glazing them and all that stuff. I mean, it was just a kind of continuum to me.

DR. CARNEY: Do you make maquettes out of clay or something else when you have an idea for something, or do you work with the immediacy of the material?

MR. UNDERHILL: I do it all. I make clay shapes sometimes and then make plaster molds of those and then cast wax.

DR. CARNEY: But that's part of your whole process.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yes.

DR. CARNEY: It's not like you do a little model because you have an idea and you want to see a form. Maybe I'm not describing what I'm thinking. But you do it more because it's a process. You already know what you're going to do.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Yeah. But sometimes you don't really know what it's going to look like until it's all done. You know, you have an idea. I do make sketches and so on, but usually one idea leads to another. As I'm looking at this piece here, this cast-iron piece, I'm realizing I would like to make another one where-and this just occurred to me this morning. I was sitting here waiting for you to show up, and looking at that. Now, what if I were to-

DR. CARNEY: I wasn't late, by the way. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: [Laughs] No, but I was early. You know, I was anticipating you.

You know, so here's a piece I did probably 15 years ago or something. I'm looking at that and saying I'd like to try that again and do a piece where instead of coming down flat, straight down, that angle, make it slightly curved. You know, a whole different feeling. So I'd make that shape just based on something like that. And usually I work on a piece and it makes me think of a lot of variations.

DR. CARNEY: And do you normally work in a series?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. I like to. That's another reason for trying to work with a foundry, actually, because doing one piece is so labor intensive that by the time you've done it all and cast it, you know, it takes so much time that you don't consider doing the other three or four variations you've thought about, you only do the one. By the time you've done it, and fired and cast and blah blah blah, you've thought of something totally different anyway. So it may be that with-if it works.

You know, this whole culture of the art foundry is that you have the artist, the maestro, and it's the old, you know, system, and then you have various experts who in the old days would have been apprentices and whatever and journeymen working under the master who would have helped get the piece through. And they'd take over different stages of it so that the maestro has-you know, more ideas can get done. And that's the system, instead of doing it all yourself.

DR. CARNEY: Let me ask a rather naive question related to that. Usually when the public thinks about artwork or an artist, they're thinking about someone making a one-of-a-kind piece, where they've dug the clay and they put it in the pug mill, where they've done all the processes themselves. Now, this isn't necessarily true.

MR. UNDERHILL: No.

DR. CARNEY: But in your case, how much of the process-you're saying now that with the foundries, they can assist with various things. Generally through your career, have you done most of the processes?

MR. UNDERHILL: I've done it all. All. Mixed up my own mold material-fired the kiln, melted the metal.

DR. CARNEY: And is that common, or is that something you just liked, doing all that?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, it's become common in, sort of, the academic sculpture world, and people get all involved in that. It's sort of the crafting process of doing that work. And you do it all yourself and you can do your own work at your own pace, and that's what I've always done. But then again, so much of the work is noncreative, repetitive, and very demanding. I compare it to-in ceramics, for instance, you've produced, say, a kiln-load of work, and you load the kiln up and you fire it, and then you do another load, and you had to build the kiln one time. But with bronzes and such, you have to build the kiln every time to do the next load. It's all of that stuff to do over.

DR. CARNEY: As we're talking, you seem like you don't have any hang-ups with using the word "craft" in a respectable way.

MR. UNDERHILL: Absolutely not. Oh, no.

DR. CARNEY: Unlike a lot of people, contemporary artists that are hung up on that.

MR. UNDERHILL: No, no, no.

DR. CARNEY: That's very refreshing. I like that.

MR. UNDERHILL: No, as I say, I think I grew up with the idea that it was as dignified, meaningful, profound as anything. I mean, look at Chinese bronzes. My God, those things are just amazing. And the same with whatever, tapestries, weaving.

DR. CARNEY: Hence the great Bronze Age. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: Right. Right.

DR. CARNEY: It was very respectable.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: Some of your work is abstract and not necessarily functional. Do you have a leaning? As a sculptor, I mean, like I said, your teapots over there are sculptural and they're beautiful. They wouldn't have to be functional. But do you have a leaning one way or the other, or do you just like exploring the whole realm?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, again with craft, I think my definition of craft is also that it retains some reference back to the function.

DR. CARNEY: And do you want people to use what you make, as opposed to have it sitting in a museum or on someone's shelf?

MR. UNDERHILL: I want both, obviously. [Laughs.] But the bronzes can't function in terms of eating, serving anything, because of the metal and the patinas and stuff, but they could hold other things. So I like them to be used. I'd like to see the bowl with some nice rocks or whatever, some food or nuts or something-dried twigs, who knows. And on the other hand, they could be nice objects, too, to me.

DR. CARNEY: Does American Craft Museum have your work in some of the collections?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, several pieces.

DR. CARNEY: And who else has your work? Any of the Smithsonian branches?

MR. UNDERHILL: No, they don't. They should. Wait a minute. Wait a minute. I think-

DR. CARNEY: Cooper-Hewitt?

MR. UNDERHILL: I think Cooper-Hewitt. That's one of the things that Garth Clark did. He gave a piece, I know, to the Carnegie Museum in Pittsburgh. I just communicated with them about that piece. And I think he gave one to Cooper-Hewitt, too.

DR. CARNEY: The Carnegie-

MR. UNDERHILL: It's now probably Carnegie Museum of Fine-of Art. In fact, I tried to get a number asking for the Carnegie Institute, which is what it used to be called, I think, and that's now-

DR. CARNEY: The Carnegie Museum of Art.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. I have work in the San Francisco Museum, Oakland Museum.

DR. CARNEY: In the Museum of Fine Art, or Contemporary?

MR. UNDERHILL: The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, I think.

DR. CARNEY: And what was the one after that?

MR. UNDERHILL: Oakland. Oakland Museum. Various other places.

DR. CARNEY: Eventually this will end up on the Internet, and then people can go visit your work.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right.

DR. CARNEY: And have you done any of the sojourns to, like, Penland or Haystack or Pilchuck or Arrowmont or Archie Bray? I mean, not that all those would have had bronze casting, but are there those kinds of opportunities, other than your going to Berkeley which is-[laughs].

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I've taught at Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME] and the Anderson Ranch [Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, CO], and also at this wonderful place out in-the Mendocino Art Center up in California, up the coast from San Francisco.

DR. CARNEY: Were those summers-

MR. UNDERHILL: Summer.

DR. CARNEY: -while you were at Alfred and you went off and did those in the summer?

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. Pretty much. They all dated from the 1980s, I think.

DR. CARNEY: Can you talk a little bit about how you think the market for American craft work has changed in your lifetime?

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, I do know that, well, the whole thing exploded. I mean, if you look at what was called *Craft Horizons*, the old magazine from the early '60s, there were no ads whatever from galleries, almost none. There were announcements of shows, and most of those were the college art museums and stuff like that. And today there's just pages and pages and pages of that stuff, and lots and lots of galleries, I guess.

DR. CARNEY: That might have suffered a little bit in the last couple of years.

MR. UNDERHILL: Oh, yeah, sure. I'm sure it has to do with that and the stock market and so on.

DR. CARNEY: And are there galleries that particularly, I'll say, exploit, that promote bronze work, metalwork?

MR. UNDERHILL: I don't think there are any that do it exclusively the way there are certain glass galleries or ceramic galleries. I don't think there are any. Helen Drutt, in a way, has maybe the most affinity for it because of her interest in jewelry and metal crafts. She came from that direction.

DR. CARNEY: And she still, I believe, owns that-[inaudible]-gallery.

MR. UNDERHILL: Right. That's her thing.

DR. CARNEY: And is there anything else you want to mention about-there are thousands of

questions here. But I know you've remarried, and is your current wife an artist?

MR. UNDERHILL: She's a writer. She's working at writing.

DR. CARNEY: What is your current wife's name?

MR. UNDERHILL: Linda.

DR. CARNEY: And have you been active with any of the major art associations? Besides getting a job through College Art Association that day, did you join after that and pay your dues, whatever?

MR. UNDERHILL: No.

DR. CARNEY: Are there metalworking associations or some kind of group that --

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah, I guess there are, but I've never been a joiner. I think I'm a member of-I subscribe to American Craft Museum-or Council. I'm a member of that. But I've never been a member of any of the other groups.

DR. CARNEY: Have any of them helped you, one way or the other?

MR. UNDERHILL: No. There's a really nice group, especially with iron casting, actually, more than in the bronze casting, because that's really much more of a specialty, and there's a bunch of-talk about casting-people who really just love to melt the metal pretty much.

DR. CARNEY: [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: And they get together and have a conference, kind of like the NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts] thing. Maybe there's one for bronze, too, but the iron one, I've gone to a couple of those, and that's fun. I've gotten to know the people. I've also worked at one of the foundries, the art foundry called the Johnson Atelier down in New Jersey. That's where I learned to do iron casting.

DR. CARNEY: And do you think that all the journals that are devoted to craft, the craft world, the metalworking and all those, have those influenced you in any way or have been an asset to your career? Have they done articles about you and your work?

MR. UNDERHILL: I've had one article that was in-actually in *Metalsmith* magazine, which is really a jewelry magazine. The editor was here sometime in the '80s. I got to know her; it's a husband and wife, kind of a pair, who were the editors of that. Through that connection, I had an article. One thing I want to do if I get a new body of work from this thing at Berkeley is approach the American-the crafts magazine-that. I'm sure they'd want to have me-

DR. CARNEY: That's good. I think you're ready to have that new gallery representation. [Laughs.]

MR. UNDERHILL: I think so, yeah.

DR. CARNEY: I'm looking around here, and I think, wow.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah. I really-

DR. CARNEY: Have you had a retrospective? Because you absolutely ought to.

MR. UNDERHILL: I know. Well, that's another thing I want to do, is contact Diane; I think she's still chair of the 3-D Department, and have her set a date. I'd like to have a retrospective-

DR. CARNEY: At Alfred?

MR. UNDERHILL: -at Alfred, yeah. And I think she should be the person to set it up. You know, I'm sure it would be at least two or three years from now-I'm sure they're scheduled-which would be good. I'd like to do it.

DR. CARNEY: Have a date with her when you have that new body of work after you come back from Berkeley.

MR. UNDERHILL: Yeah.

DR. CARNEY: Are there other things that you'd like to talk about? Today we've talked for several hours.

MR. UNDERHILL: Well, this is the time when you'd like to think back over it, I guess. I think this has been good.

DR. CARNEY: Then I'll take this opportunity to thank you very much for letting me interview you for the Archives-[tape runs out]. [END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated... *February 17, 2006*