



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Robert Trotman,
2005 September 14

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 Robert Trotman on September 14, 2005. The interview took place at the artist's home and studio in Casar, North Carolina, and was conducted by Carla Hanzal 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.

Robert Trotman and Carla Hanzal have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

CARLA HANZAL: This Carla Hanzal interviewing Bob Trotman at Bob's studio in Rutherford County, North Carolina, on September 14, 2005, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

When you began back in the '70s, your work had a different relationship to what is called craft. Can you describe how that relationship has changed?

ROBERT TROTMAN: Well, when I started, I didn't come at this with any educational-my educational background was in philosophy and English, so I did this as a self-taught craftsman. And my first goal was to become a good craftsman. I think that was what was immediately before me. I wanted to learn how to work with wood well, how to put pieces of wood together. And this was mostly in relation to furniture in 1973 or '74, when I first began.

And then gradually, as I got some mastery of the technical stuff, I started paying more attention to the design. And actually, my father-in-law was a friend of a man named Ben Ruhe, who was associated with the Renwick [Gallery, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC] right when it began. And my father-in-law in 1972 gave me a copy of *Wooden Works* [*Wooden Works, Furniture Objects by Five Contemporary Craftsmen*, 1972] which was a show that-one of the first shows that the Renwick put out, that had the furniture of Sam Maloof, Wendell Castle, Art Carpenter, and Wharton Esherick, and George Nakashima. So I had seen that back when I was still trying to be a poet and living in Northern Virginia.

So I had some inkling of what was possible to, kind of, guide me along the way. But I was very much into the species of wood that was used and the type of joints that were-you know, dovetails, lap joints, and mortise and tenons, and all of that kind of stuff. That was what I was really concerned with right at first, which made sense because that was the kind of thing you have to get under your belt before you can go on to other things.

MS. HANZAL: Your intent was to learn the craftsmanship of creating furniture and working with wood?

MR. TROTMAN: Right. And that was actually before *Fine Woodworking Magazine* came out, too. I think that started in 1975. I met somebody at a craft fair who turned me on to that magazine. And so I became an enthusiastic subscriber to that. And once I had, kind of, made that connection, then I could learn where I could go to find out more. I also found out that Penland School [of Crafts, Penland, NC], which I had never heard of, was only an hour away. So that also opened up a lot of areas to have actual interactions with people.

And the first time I went there was in 1976. I studied with John Brooks. And then in 1977 Sam Maloof was there. So I got to have some personal access to both of them.

MS. HANZAL: In the mid-'70s you started going to Penland?

MR. TROTMAN: And that really helped.

Then gradually as my furniture and craftwork took me to New York in the early '80s, I began to see stuff in the galleries. My wife was an art history major, so I did have some awareness of the history of painting. But I hadn't really seen work that was not part of the canon, that hadn't gone through the museums. I hadn't seen artwork in galleries. And when I began to see that, that was very interesting. It took me a long time before I could digest it, but that got under my skin right away in 1981 or '82.

And as I say, it took-you know, it still-I'm still in a process of digestion. But what I saw was a more ambitious undertaking than design and furniture. And so I was interested. But I couldn't act on that interest right away. I mean, my inclination was not to give up furniture at that point, but to incorporate some of those things that didn't have anything to do with furniture into what I was able to make.

MS. HANZAL: Do you remember some of the particular shows that you went to or the particular galleries that

made an impression?

MR. TROTMAN: I remember-well, this was back when SoHo was the coming thing. So I do remember seeing stuff at Paula Cooper [Gallery, New York, NY]. And I don't know whether [Robert] Gober was showing there yet or not, but I remember the transition of going from Holly Solomon [Gallery, New York, NY], Paula Cooper-you know, all of the name-brand stuff, and then going to Heller Gallery [New York, NY] and seeing all of the shiny glass and hearing Vivaldi playing in the background. And it was like going from this art church to a kind of a shop.

I don't want to be too dismissive of it. But it was like these were very pretty polished things, but it was not-there wasn't as much at stake, it didn't seem like. These were certainly admirably made things, and I do care about craft. But I was just beginning to go from seeing it as an end in itself to seeing it as a means to an end, which is much more the way I see it now, and also seeing that there could be too much craft, and that things can be over-crafted to the point where the craft really does interfere with the expression, which is more what I care about now.

MS. HANZAL: You are concerned with the content instead of just the craftsmanship of the object?

MR. TROTMAN: Right, right.

MS. HANZAL: And perhaps that has something to do with accessibility, too. Like, perhaps some people immediately can identify with craftsmanship.

MR. TROTMAN: Well, it is more accessible. It is something that I think people-you know, if I talk about the, you know, "normal" world that most people live in, craft has much more to do with that than art does. It takes more of an imaginative leap to get to art than craft does, because craft things at least-they are either useful or they make some nod toward use value, which is something that anyone from any walk of life can relate to, things having a use value.

MS. HANZAL: Use-value implies a function of some kind?

MR. TROTMAN: Function of some kind or at least a metaphorical reference to function. I mean, there may be a bowl that you wouldn't actually put something in, but people understand that it's a bowl and they have a place to put that in their mind. Whereas art could have some reference to that but more than likely will have no reference to that sort of thing at all and is dealing with ideas or a critique of some sort or another, or to purely aesthetic, art-for-art's sake kind of issue-I mean, the history of painting or the history of sculpture, which is not something that people are very-

MS. HANZAL: Fine art ties into some sort of chronology.

MR. TROTMAN: Right. And people are not-that is not part of our education to be-you know, the guy on the street kind of thing, to be aware of that stuff. Or people dismiss it as being elitist.

So, yes, I think the world of craft, which in my thinking is the concern with materials and how they are manipulated, or that skillful manipulation of materials, is basically what it is about. This is from my own thought. It can get into expressive issues or conceptual issues, but I think that it can't go but-in order for us to consider it a craft, it has to still be tied into the material that the thing is made out of, and we can see the manipulation that has occurred. And that is part of the story that craft objects tell.

MS. HANZAL: Right, mastery.

MR. TROTMAN: Art-it may have that in it, but it also may not. Craft celebrates making itself.

MS. HANZAL: So craft in some respects is mastery of the material.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, I would say. Just-there are gray-there are certainly gray areas. The borderline between craft and art, in my way of thinking, is porous, but I still think it's important to make a distinction.

MS. HANZAL: Right, I agree.

MR. TROTMAN: It's not all the same thing.

MS. HANZAL: I agree, also. But it's hard to make that distinction sometimes.

MR. TROTMAN: It is, but just the fact that it is hard sometimes doesn't mean that it is not worth trying, because that is just part of thinking clearly, is to try to distinguish between things.

MS. HANZAL: Okay, well, that leads into the next question. In about in 1997 you stopped making furniture.

MR. TROTMAN: I did.

MS. HANZAL: So you can you talk about why you made that break?

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, well, it was a long time coming. As I said, the seeds were sown when I first started going to New York. I'm sorry I can't think of some epiphanal [*sic*] experience that I had in New York of names of people and stuff, but, yeah, I had wanted to take on the big stuff as much as I was able to. So the fact that I was making furniture-to me the furniture was always a stand-in for human beings-even though somebody else may have seen a table or a chest of drawers or a cabinet or something. To me, there was always-it was like this kind of personlike thing. Maybe it was just because I made it.

MS. HANZAL: Your furniture became an anthropomorphic sort of object.

MR. TROTMAN: To me it was. That was implicit or to some degree it was explicit, because I had begun to use figurative elements in my furniture. And I still called it furniture, but some people referred to it as a sculpture that had furniture elements in it. I always liked that, but then somebody would refer to it as, well, you know, a table or a chest of drawers and would bring me back to earth. And I would feel like, oh, is that all it is, because that wasn't all I intended.

And I had also been showing work that was pure sculpture, that didn't have any reference to furniture, which I had done in Atlanta in the early '90s. I had decided I was going to go some place that I hadn't shown my furniture and show work that was of a purely sculptural nature. It was kind of anthropomorphic, kind of Martin Puryear-esque kind of stuff.

And then in 1997, Martin Puryear, who was and is one of my heroes, actually came to Penland for a week, and part of the deal with his being there was that he would critique people's work if people in the area around brought him work to look at. He would have an interchange with you about your work.

So I was part of a group of people who did that, and I took a figure to him that I had carved. It was about three feet long. And I had wrapped it in a blanket for protection to get it there. And, of course, Martin Puryear is a very generous and encouraging person. So when I unwrapped my figure, he said, "Oh, you're a sculptor!" as though he were either delighted or surprised. I know he was also being nice and being encouraging. But I was surprised at his response and delighted at his reaction.

And after the interchange was over and I was thinking about it-I was also 50 at this time, and, boy, I had wanted to be a sculptor for a long time. And it was like I couldn't quite tell myself that I was. And so it was like I was waiting for some-I guess I was waiting for some nudge from out there, like I needed "God" to give me permission to be a sculptor. And I thought, well, this is probably about as close as I'm ever going to get to having God tell me it was okay to do it.

So I decided about two weeks after this had happened to say to myself, "Well, Martin Puryear said I was a sculptor. So I'm just going to take it like he had laid a sword on my shoulder and pronounced me a sculptor." So partly in retrospect I decided that I was transformed-from that moment forward I was going to give up furniture and be a sculptor.

MS. HANZAL: Your experience with Martin Puryear gave you permission and validation.

MR. TROTMAN: I had permission and validation. I know that really I gave myself permission, but I used Martin Puryear as an excuse to allow myself to do it. I don't think it was because I was so great or good or anything that he said what he did. He was just being a generous mentor. But part of being a good student is to learn how to get mentored.

MS. HANZAL: Exactly.

MR. TROTMAN: And it's important to find people out there whom you can use as guides to help you on the path that you want to go on-to give yourself permission through them to do what you want to do.

MS. HANZAL: Had you seen Puryear's show in Washington at the Hirshhorn [Museum and Sculpture Garden, Washington, DC]?

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, I had. And I had seen the piece at the North Carolina museum and seen lots of stuff in books.

MS. HANZAL: Right. So you always followed Puryear's career.

MR. TROTMAN: And one of my best friends, one of my best art buddies, was a student of Puryear's when he used to teach at Maryland, before he was famous.

MS. HANZAL: At College Park [University of Maryland, College Park].

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, yes. So I always had heard, like, from the '70s about-from my buddy-about Martin Puryear. He was one of the first sculptors that I was aware of.

MS. HANZAL: And he did study cabinetmaking and woodworking and all of that. And he also took a similar path of creating only fine art.

MR. TROTMAN: That is right. And the choice that I felt was in front of me was to hold onto the furniture to pay the bills and to make sculpture as what I loved to do. But in the Atlanta-my experience in Atlanta-I was afraid to tell people who saw me as a sculptor that made furniture, too. It felt really bad. It was like I wanted to have a pseudonym. If you were a writer, you could do that, because you don't have to show up at an opening. And there was no way to do that. But I felt myself trying to go down two roads at the same time. And it just felt real bad.

MS. HANZAL: It felt like writing pulp fiction to pay the bills but then working on your novel, the work that you do because you must.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, exactly, and I just didn't want to do that. It did feel like taking a huge chance. It was one of those leaps into the void. I think that was why that photograph [Yves Klein, *Leap into the Void*, 1960] appeals to me so much, that I was-and actually once I did it, it felt great, and there is no going back.

MS. HANZAL: Right, exactly.

MR. TROTMAN: But I felt like it was important to me to say, "This is what I want to do and I'm going to put all of my eggs in this basket." It didn't come out of nowhere. I had been thinking about it for a very long time. And I think that the work that I was doing did evolve to the point where in my own mind I needed to give up the reference to function and see if I could float on the purely-in purely sculptural terms.

MS. HANZAL: So the photograph you were referring to was Yves Klein's *Leap into the Void*?

MR. TROTMAN: Yes.

MS. HANZAL: Nineteen sixty. I guess with that photograph, it's like Klein was capturing a decisive moment where an individual is leaping off the edge of the building, or so it appears.

MR. TROTMAN: It does.

MS. HANZAL: That is a poignant image for you?

MR. TROTMAN: It is. And also with my background in philosophy, which the department where I studied at Washington and Lee [University, Lexington, VA] had a heavy emphasis on existentialism, which was a philosophy-it's not in vogue anymore, but kind of postwar, post-World War II. It was very big among the Beat generation. It emphasized the freedom of man and the responsibility to make choices, decisive choices for yourself, and also the absurdity of life. So that photograph I think came out of that context in a postwar France and always appealed to me a great deal.

MS. HANZAL: Right, so it's Kafka and Kierkegaard.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, the whole-

MS. HANZAL: People like that that you were-

MR. TROTMAN: [Jean-Paul] Sartre and [Martin] Heidegger and [Friedrich] Nietzsche and all of that-[Fyodor] Dostoevsky. So with the freedom comes anguish, because you don't put the responsibility for your life off on society or institutions. The existentialist outlook is that you are radically free and that you always have a choice. It is exhilarating, but it's also a source of anguish and vertigo.

MS. HANZAL: That you have to make that choice and you don't know what the outcome will be, so it does feel like the leap into the unknown.

MR. TROTMAN: That is right. And I guess-in our conversation I guess I can see that the other leap into the unknown is living in New York. And that is one that I have done short-term but not in any extended period. The passion of really taking a decisive action of belief in yourself and your art and your work is something that I just admire a great deal.

MS. HANZAL: It requires a lot of integrity to take that path.

MR. TROTMAN: It does. It does. You know, let the pieces fall where they will.

MS. HANZAL: Exactly. Well, what are you trying to do in your current work, and does that bear any relation to what you were trying to do before?

MR. TROTMAN: It does. I think the way that I have worked, being self-taught and having come from a literary, philosophy background, is that it has taken me a long time to get into my visual work. I feel like I started off in a very cerebral place with philosophy and literature. And then I went through a rebellious-you know, with the counterculture in the early '70s, kind of throwing all of that over.

And then I have, for these 30 years, come back to some of the things that were in books a long time ago, but I have found a way to actually-to live it in the flesh for myself. So what I'm dealing with now, since the show at the Hand Workshop in Richmond [VA], those figures had more of a '50s-retro feeling to them. And these busts that I have got here now are present-day.

I'm trying to use them as my characters-it's like I'm trying to make this kind of darkly comedic movie, in which people who-I'm using people from the business world as my actors-the figures-they are kind of cracking up because of the wood. They are falling down, they are stumbling, they are making mistakes-they are doing all of these very human things that they are not quite aware of. They can see-it's like the [Bob] Dylan song: "You can see something happening here, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr. Jones?" That kind of thing-I guess it's the foibles of the bourgeoisie.

It is certainly the world that I came from, that I grew up in, with my father as a banker. That was what the real grownups did: went out and went to their offices and made money and prospered materially. But my experience with it was that there was just this total emotional and spiritual darkness that went along with it. So I am revisiting that choice as an adult, and as somebody who has gone down a different road-I am revisiting that territory, looking at this self that I might have been, that my parents certainly would have liked for me to have been. Most people I knew from childhood have gone into the world of professions and business, became what we might call the normal, straight, work-a-day world.

MS. HANZAL: Apparently you didn't take the path that was set out before you.

MR. TROTMAN: I did not.

MS. HANZAL: You were supposed to go to the right school, get the right job.

MR. TROTMAN: I did go to the right school. I went to the right school as far as my mom was concerned. And I did begin down the path of being a teacher, which was a draft deferment in the late '60s, but as soon as I could get away from that, I did, and moved here.

But I do think it's a rich area for me in terms of the figures that I would like to use as the subjects of my sculpture, to go back to that path I didn't take and to use those people as characters in the world that I'm trying to create: these wooden figures, because they always did seem like wooden figures to me-Mr. So-and-So, Mrs. So-and-So at the country club. To me it was "wooden" in the sense-with quotation marks around it-because it just seemed like it was all about appearances, having nice things, and being a nice polite person, being very tidy and neat and driving a new shiny car and having a nice house in the right part of town.

So that is what I want to talk about in my work. That is what I want to address when the viewer sees my figurative sculpture. Those are the people that are in there. It's like Norman Rockwell on Kafka. Things are not quite working out the way they were supposed to. The people, they are not standing, pointing the way on top of a plinth saying, ah, yes, go this way, young man. Instead they are falling down, or they are on their back: they've tripped, or they've got cracks where there shouldn't be cracks. I want to present the people as real human beings. It's like they are more human than they know they are, but that they are still struggling to keep up middle-class appearances of being this person that they think they're supposed to be.

That is the kind of area that I want to deal with. And to me, that is something that involves a lot of humor. I think humor is important when you break through-when you break through some of these masks. Humor is a good way to do it. And I think it gives the audience permission to kind of let down their guard a little bit. The people in my sculptures are usually vulnerable or they are making fools out of themselves, just all of the stuff that we all do. It's not the kind of behavior that is looked on with approval in the workplace.

MS. HANZAL: The serious workplace is considered to be sort of a humorless environment.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, and I know that I'm dealing from a lot of prejudice that I carry myself, and a lot of stereotypes that I project onto that business and professional workplace, but you've got to start somewhere. And even though it's kind of broadly-I'm painting the picture in broad strokes-I still think there is-that still is kind

of my entry into it.

MS. HANZAL: Do you think that is a particularly American take on things, too, because you're investigating capitalism?

MR. TROTMAN: Yes. Yes.

MS. HANZAL: Because of your investigations of the corporate "persona," would that characterize you as having a particular American interest?

MR. TROTMAN: Yes. And I think that American, from what little I have seen from traveling around in the world, America is-this is where the Puritans came. America is much more uptight than Europe, and people are much stricter here and have much less humor and much less willing to laugh at themselves, even comparing us and the English.

We went to visit a friend in London over the summer, and I felt like people there much more enjoyed their beer and having a good time and having a joke. It was my first trip to England, and I was expecting everybody to be very stuffy, but not at all. It felt much, much looser and more relaxed. It did not have that kind of Calvinistic strictness that I feel here, especially in the Bible belt. In America it's reflected in how litigious we are: we always sue each other.

Somebody told me about a bachelorette party in Wales out in a pub somewhere. There were a bunch of women sitting at a table that had a big inflatable penis in the middle of the table. That was perfectly okay. I mean, it was racy; it was off-color. But here, you couldn't conceive of something like that happening. There would be lawsuits against the bar owner or the pub owner. We would never do that. And that just being a case in point of how strict and uptight America can be and generally is. It's something I want to poke fun at.

So, yeah, I do see this as being American. And also I think and hope that these figures have got some little tie-in to folk art and into popular art-I mean, wood is not-it's not really high art material. It was often used for ships, figureheads, religious sculpture, and show figurines for shops and carnivals. It's a humbler material than marble or bronze, and especially with these five busts that I have got here. The wood is cracked, and then it has been "repaired" with steel mending plates in a way that might be done on the farm with an old door.

I'm doing it humorously, but it's the way farmers around here would fix a piece of equipment that had broken, that things are broken and kind of put back together again. So I mean it metaphorically. Yeah, I hope this has got some relation to, like, cigar-store Indians, or chain saw art. I do work these with the chain saw at the beginning so it's-you know, all of my neighbors, they want to know if I can make them a civil war soldier or a deer or something like that. So there is some tie-in not only to America, but to rural America. Even though these are not rural people that I'm depicting, it still is the way that people-if I were just a guy living at the end of the road with my chain saw, this is probably what I would do if I wanted to make sculpture.

MS. HANZAL: Living where you do does have an impact on how you think about your work?

MR. TROTMAN: It does. It does. Even though we are-we do live apart. I have heard it referred to as living apart. And I just really-Jane and I both had a very strong feeling from our childhoods that that was the way we wanted to live. That we wanted to kind of go somewhere and have our little house and really not-have some friends, but basically to kind of have our life be separate from-you know, not do a lot of social stuff close by. So it is a sort of hermit existence. But then it's important to go out and do things, too, as well.

MS. HANZAL: Could you talk more about why you live in rural western North Carolina?

MR. TROTMAN: I came here-as I said, me and all of my friends from college, we were all philosophy majors, and we all got teaching jobs in 1969 if our lottery numbers put us at risk for getting sent to Vietnam. They did still give teaching deferments for teachers. My best friend in college got a teaching job at a little town not too far from here. I taught for three years once at Christ Church School for Boys in Urbana, Virginia, and then taught at Lake Forest Academy near Chicago. In 1972 they didn't get to my lottery number, so I was able to stop teaching, which was fine with me, and we moved to Northern Virginia to Marshall, which is near Warrenton, about an hour outside of Washington.

At that time, from teaching, I knew that I wanted to do something creative. And the thing that was closest at hand to me then was writing poetry, because I loved poetry and was an enthusiastic poetry teacher. I don't want to give you the impression that I hated teaching-it just required so much extroversion. I really-I had always made things and always enjoyed being by myself. And so the logical thing to me was to try to make things out of words, as a poet.

So I tried to do that full time for about six months in Marshall, and finally I was beaten. I saw that it wasn't going

to work-I don't know, I threw myself in the fire and saw it was too draining for me to do that and do nothing else. Jane was teaching then. So I was a gardener in a formal garden for a while, which was kind of fun for a few months. Then moved down here for my friend who had gotten a teaching job nearby. And that was the summer of 1973.

We sort of had a "hippie commune" for the summer. I say that with quotation marks around it. We felt like it was a hippie commune, and it was big fun. We lived in a barn, and my friend was fixing up an old farmhouse that he bought very cheaply. I kind of got cast as the woodworker. Different people had different jobs. And I loved it. It was great being outdoors and doing things. And if you didn't know how to do it, you just got a book and figured it out. It was, like, for the first time in my life I wasn't just reading about life. I was living, and it felt terrific.

And also, we were living among the poor rural people. That was the context that we were in-working-class, rural area. And I just found the people delightful. I'm sure I was idealizing, but growing up in Winston-Salem, those people were just like-you hear me say "those people"-they were, like, below the radar. It was, like, you've got the "nice people" and they go-and nice people with quotation marks-they go to the country club, they work at the bank, they have good jobs, they make money-those were the people that I was able to see as human beings, and then you've got everybody else; they were just this kind of subhuman form of life that I-

MS. HANZAL: As you said, they didn't even come across the radar necessarily.

MR. TROTMAN: They didn't. They didn't.

MS. HANZAL: They didn't interact with the particular situation of class that works at the bank and goes to the country club.

MR. TROTMAN: I remember going dove hunting with my father some. And we would go out to the country where there would be farmers, and they would let us hunt in their fields. The farmers were, like, these guys over here chewing tobacco on the porch, but they were over there, and then all of the people-Mr. So-and-So and Mr. So-and-So-we were all hunting doves in their field, with their permission. The farmers were not people that I would have had a human being interaction with.

And all of that changed very much when we came here. I think the scales fell away from my eyes. Part of the reason that it was attractive to me to be here was that there weren't any people like my parents or the country-club people, that they were all away somewhere else, and it felt like to me was that I was really free and nobody was watching me.

MS. HANZAL: You didn't have to keep up those appearances.

MR. TROTMAN: I didn't have to keep up appearances. And it was just a tremendously liberating feeling. And also to see that the people that were beneath the radar were real human beings that had their own problems-that they weren't just happy poor people.

MS. HANZAL: Who share their garden produce with you, or whatever.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, exactly. Who had simple lives and didn't have the worries that people like my parents had. They had always given me to believe that if you were poor, that you just got your paycheck and then you were happy and you went out and got drunk and then went back to work. It was a mythology that let the middle class off the hook for any kind of responsibility for anything they were doing. So I became a little bit more politically aware of the interactions between the classes.

And I think some of what was going on was that coming here and living the life I began to live in 1973 was that it felt real. My life up till that time only rested on what my parents had told me, but I couldn't touch the ground with my feet. It was like I was treading water in this imaginary world, but I had never touched the bottom. I don't mean the bottom socioeconomically exactly, but it did involve that.

It was good to feel reality and to feel like what it felt like without this-without those particular blinders on. It was tremendously empowering. But on the other hand, I'm sure that there is still some hypocrisy. I'm not one of them-I didn't grow up poor, I didn't grow up uneducated. I am relatively privileged compared to my neighbors and I'm very lucky. But I'm more aware of things than I was then, not to make such a long aside.

But, yeah, that is a lot of why I like living here and like feeling-I have got a tremendous amount of psychological freedom. And I really do feel like I can do things-I *never* could have become an artist if I hadn't done this. I really couldn't have.

MS. HANZAL: You were discouraged from becoming an artist.

MR. TROTMAN: I was. I was.

MS. HANZAL: Or pursuing any of your natural inclinations, because you said you started making objects from an early age-you started working with model airplanes.

MR. TROTMAN: Model airplanes. That was a big escape from the world that my parents had in mind for me, when I had my model airplane kit. I was off their road map-I was imaging being a pilot-you know, I was off "in the zone," in a daydream. And I just found that a much better place to live than the world that I think that they felt comfortable with.

My father's family did have a kind of artist-business person split going on among his siblings. There were five of them. My father and a sister of his were on the conservative side, and his three other siblings were all artists of one sort or another. I think in their growing up that there were some hard feelings back and forth between the two factions. I wasn't coming onto a level playing field. My parents didn't want me to become like Uncle Frank, my father's older brother. He had been a poet and a painter.

MS. HANZAL: Don't go to the dark side of the family.

MR. TROTMAN: Don't go to the dark side-[laughs]-right-and be a black sheep. My Uncle Frank had owned a bookstore in the '40s in Winston-Salem. He was a small-town bohemian with a pencil-thin mustache like Errol Flynn or Ernest Hemingway. He was good looking, a big womanizer, a big drinker, a loud mouth, and just did and said shocking things.

But he had this art gallery. I loved to draw and do stuff like that. So my parents let me go after school to his art gallery/frame shop when I was 10 or 12. I remember seeing him draw. I had never seen anybody draw before. And he could draw anything really fast. He just laid the lines down. It was incredible. I can remember just being amazed at that. He had all of this mat board and clean paper and pencils and a miter cutting machines. It was an atelier, and I loved it. And then I couldn't go anymore. I don't know what happened, but I didn't question it.

So I don't know what happened between my parents and him, but from what I found out about Frank since then, he was very antagonistic. I'm sure that my parents had good reasons for not letting me go back. I accepted what they said. I didn't rebel against them at that point. I went along with the program.

My other aunt and uncle were both in the theater and were what my parents referred to as prima donnas, egotistical-they wouldn't have used a big word like narcissistic, but I know what my parents wanted to keep me away from: their disreputable, flamboyant behavior. So, I was semi-aware of all that stuff, but I also wanted very much to please my parents and be a good student and win their love. So I took the straight and narrow path for a while.

MS. HANZAL: But you had all of these people. They ultimately had an influence on you in your decisions.

MR. TROTMAN: They did. I was definitely aware that there was something else besides my parent's world, even though it was kind of verboten.

MS. HANZAL: In one of the interviews that I read sometime back-you said that your mother had a lot of antiques.

MR. TROTMAN: She did.

MS. HANZAL: I am curious if all of the fine furnishings in your house helped you become aware of craftsmanship?

MR. TROTMAN: Well, I didn't know it at the time, but I think what it was-made me aware of was these class issues, because my mother-I think for her it was a real mark of gentry to own, to eat dinner on a Duncan Phyfe table, which-

[Audio break, tape change.]

-you know, she actually-we did. He was a famous furniture maker in Philadelphia. And she had the center section-somebody else in Winston-Salem bought the end sections, because this table would sit 22 people. The ends were rounded. They put them together and made a round table, and then we had the rectangular center section of it. So it was some pretty nice stuff.

The craftsmanship was so far beyond me that I didn't really aspire to carving all of these floral patterns. But it was exciting. It had three pieces of mahogany, and each piece of mahogany was, like, that wide [gesturing three feet wide with his hands]. There were a lot of dinners that I was sitting there staring at that expanse of grain, of wood. And that is a huge tree. Even as an adult, that is a pretty impressive-being a child and seeing that expanse as being, like, a landscape that you're sitting at, while you're doing your good manners and saying, yes, sir; no, sir; yes, ma'am; no, ma'am. It was all of that stuff-was kind of grained together.

And then there were other pieces-I think they were called presses, what you kept the linens in that had veneer

fronts. These were made in the 1700s, had veneer matched on all the drawers, and was bow-front Sheraton and Hepplewhite. She was very much into all this stuff. I remember the way the drawers smelled when you opened them up, that they just had this antique wood aroma. All of that stuff was very powerful to me: old money, refinement.

I think, bottom line, was that my mother valued that. I wanted my mother to love me. So if I made furniture, she would love me, or something like that. This is a good thing because she loves this. And it was something that was planted in me on a deep level. The message I got was not to be a banker so that I could buy this stuff; it was to be an artisan so I could make it. So somehow I put myself on a servant level. I didn't see myself as being of the same class that my parents were. I saw myself as being a servant to my parents. And several of my brothers and sisters did similar things. So it wasn't just me.

One brother, who became a lawyer, eventually was an upholsterer for a while, and my sister was a cook-she still is. She went to the New England Culinary Institute and became a trained chef. So whatever the message was-

MS. HANZAL: You were part of the baby-boom generation-

MR. TROTMAN: We had the affluence, so that we could afford to thumb our nose at it because I don't think we thought we could better our parents. In my case I don't think there was any feeling that I was going to do-have a bigger house or make more money than they did. I'm sure that the truth of it is still not fully clear to me, but it's funny how you operate from agendas that you're not fully aware of.

MS. HANZAL: It's interesting to think about what sort of programming you have and how you might rebel against it, or reconsider and not even know it at the time.

MR. TROTMAN: That's right. That's right.

MS. HANZAL: Very interesting.

MR. TROTMAN: But furniture was a valued commodity in my family, at least with my mother. So I know that's why I was drawn to it.

MS. HANZAL: The other piece of furniture that I have heard you mention is your grandmother's curved cabinet.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, which contained a lot of wooden figures that she had gotten on trips to Europe. The figures were-most of them were four or five inches tall. I remember there were some busts-there was a Frenchman with a crooked Meerschaum pipe and one of those stocking caps. He looked like a character from a Balzac novel. A hundred of these wooden figures-and I really saw them as a microcosm, as though it were a whole society, all different walks of life.

I remember one figure playing an accordion, another woman milking a cow. But it just seemed like wood could be used to describe a whole world. I saw it as a medium in which I could do something like that if I wanted to. That is what I am working from now, that idea. But the world that I am describing is not the world that those figures, which was 19th-century European, but the world of the American middle class.

MS. HANZAL: Right. But you weren't ever allowed to play with those figures, were you?

MR. TROTMAN: No, I was not.

MS. HANZAL: They were always behind glass.

MR. TROTMAN: They were always behind glass. And again, when the cabinet would open, I think she would get them out. You know, we were pretty short, so we could look up at the figures. And she would open the cabinet, and it would exude this wonderful aroma: the wood, the paint, and the wax, which just put me in a dream state. It was like the drawers opening up of my mother's presses. It's something very old, precious, and rarified, but it was also this imaginative state of-I felt myself transported by this object into this-into a very receptive state, which is like where you go when you look at art.

MS. HANZAL: Yes, that is true. You could create narratives for those figures-it was almost like *Pinocchio*.

MR. TROTMAN: It was.

MS. HANZAL: You could almost imagine them coming to life.

MR. TROTMAN: It was. It was. And *Pinocchio* itself was a powerful-I mean, those Walt Disney movies, they were all really scary. Wait until Helena [Ms. Hanzal's daughter] gets old enough to go. You'll see then.

MS. HANZAL: I remembered being scared by Pinocchio.

MR. TROTMAN: Pinocchio was-the bad boys got after him and he got turned into a donkey, and he was a little wooden boy that-

MS. HANZAL: My sister would still use that threat to her son. Don't tell a lie. You're going to be like Pinocchio.

MR. TROTMAN: That is right. Your nose will grow.

So it's very much that territory to me, of seeing the woodenness of the figures-as seeing it as, like a kind of lapsed state-the way we use the word "wooden," like they used to use it about Al Gore, of somebody being stiff and formal, of acting as though they were made of wood, like they weren't quite alive. And that is very much the territory that I want to explore with the figures that I make, is that they are wooden, and that there is that wish that they can be fully alive. But they don't quite know it.

And I think I have spent enough time in that area, and definitely saw that if my life had taken another turn back a long time ago, that I might have very well persisted in that state of kind of either an academic-that is probably where I would have gone-and just kind of not living my life but of kind of seeing it behind glass, like those figures. [Laughs.] And so that is a very real danger to me. And I see people that to me seem-it seems to be that way for them.

A Kafka quote that I love is, "Art is an ax for the frozen sea within us." And I would like for my art to be that ax for people. I think the cracks in these figures frighten people. Some of the frightening part about it is that you see this face that is kind of "cracking up." To me, the cracks are like entries into the unconscious, into this other stuff under there-like that woman [points] or the *Cake Lady*, -the figures are not aware of the cracks themselves.

MS. HANZAL: Yes, they are meticulously dressed, their hair is just right, their makeup is perfectly applied, but yet-

MR. TROTMAN: But we see the cracks.

MS. HANZAL: Their flesh coming apart.

MR. TROTMAN: So it's that kind of area that I would like to continue to work in my art. I hope to work it even more explicitly-to continue to particularize it and make these wooden figures. It's coming from that same impulse I felt looking in my grandmother's cabinet-I saw those figures in my grandmother's cabinet as describing a society, like the *Human Comedy*. That was the name of a series of novels that [Honore de] Balzac wrote. I use my own friends as-and myself and my wife-as models, but to cast my people in the roles of professional business people. My models are all people that I know.

MS. HANZAL: I can see Jane.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, yeah, she is in that. And Tom Spleth and Stuart Kestenbaum and my friend from elementary school, John Winder. And only the woman-that woman is somebody that I got from a catalogue, from the J. Jill catalogue [women's retailer, Tilton, NH]. I have exaggerated their faces and kind of compressed them and elongated them.

[Audio break.]

MS. HANZAL: Okay, this is disc number two, of three. We talked a little bit about your family and some of the influences from your childhood, but what about contemporary influences? Do you look at the work of other contemporary artists?

MR. TROTMAN: I do as much as I can, which is not as much I would like to. I go to New York a few times a year, and I'm always looking there. It's easier to see a lot quickly there than it is here, because once you're there, there is a lot around, concentrated in a small area. From here, with gas prices getting the way they are, it always involves driving 60 or 100 miles to get to a museum or gallery.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: I don't know whether influence is the right way to put it. It's like I kind of look and think, well, what can I learn from this person; is there stuff here I can use or adapt to my own work? It's a feeling of being able to get stuff from other people that I can use, not in a plagiaristic way, but just that I feel other people are opening doors for me or giving me ideas that I can use for myself. And that is always the way it seems to me when I have a-when I get hooked on somebody. It isn't so much that I want to copy them or do what they are doing, but it's-there are, like, moves that I can adapt for my own purposes.

So needless to say, I am always interested in figurative art and always interested in what people do to take the tradition and make it fresh. And in that way Ron Mueck's work has been important to me. I'm not that attracted to hyperrealism, for myself. Still, it's perfectly appropriate for what he is doing. You feel like you're looking at an actual piece of reality, but the scale is wrong. I remember looking at that big mask piece that he did-the self-portrait piece. Have you seen that?

MS. HANZAL: Yes.

MR. TROTMAN: That was one of my favorite ones, because you can see the artifice so clearly. I like that in a way better than the figures, because the figures-the only clue you have got is the scale. But with this mask, when you walked around to the other side, you could see how it was made, because it's just kind of folded over.

Anyway, you look at that from a distance of 20 feet and then see regular-sized human beings looking at it. It just did not seem like it could possibly be that real-looking and yet be that big. And then when you walk around and see the back of it, you see the artifice. That is astonishing, too, because when you get close to it, you see that the whiskers are little pieces of nylon line. The amazing detail was very interesting to me.

Here's the trouble that I have with all kind of hyperrealist stuff. It feels like there is something missing from it: some emotional part. I'm not saying that as a criticism of Mueck. It's more something that would be missing if I wanted to do it. It has a wax-museum quality. Looking at art and comparing-it helps me to clarify my own vision, to say I wouldn't do this or I would do this or I could do this or I could do that. It is like a dialogue that begins to happen between me as a viewer and somebody else's work. I certainly admire anybody whose work I would spend time thinking about, so I don't want to sound negative. Maybe I'm just protecting myself.

There is somebody else that was influenced by Mueck, a guy named Evan Penny, whom I just learned about-I haven't seen his work in the flesh yet, but I just saw several ads in *Art Forum* and *Art in America*, and he has got a show up at Sperone Westwater [Gallery, New York, NY] right now that I plan to go see this fall. And he does anamorphoses of human faces, which I have been messing with, as you can see over there, about a year ago, and then to see Penny's stuff-the things are big. Some of them are eight-foot-tall, stretched-out, heads.

It certainly stimulates all of the departments that I like, that kind of skewed anxious view of the real world, of it being real but just having a funny slant on things.

John Currin, I saw his show at the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York, NY] and enjoyed that a great deal. A lot of what I like is to see artists taking reality-taking what would be classical or photographic reality-and then changing it; seeing how they change it is very interesting to me.

The real world but with this imaginative element worked into it that is what I like. I don't like just, like, a repetition of reality. It just seems flat. It's like, a plaster cast of a face is not interesting, but to alter it and, say, make the face too big for the head or to exaggerate in certain ways, then it starts getting interesting, because it's more like a living experience.

In good "realist" work, reality is changed. It is not just a one-for-one take on what we see that the-it has been processed through somebody's nervous system, and then it comes out in an enhanced form, even if it is still considered realistic. Michelangelo's figures, for example, are realistic, but they are not realistic at all; they are very, very altered from what anatomical reality would be like.

An artist can have a style where he can bring his own issues to bear in a metamorphosis that he passes things through. I admire that principally and would like to be able to do in some form. It's like reality that has been digested through somebody's psyche and then put back in the world again.

MS. HANZAL: So do you feel the distortion is a way of emphasizing the psychological content?

MR. TROTMAN: It is. I guess my gripe with certain distortions is that they are sometimes done in a mechanical way. That is the trouble with the anamorphosis, to me. It is thrilling to see [Robert] Lazzarini's *Phone Booth* at the Whitney. I mean, wow. But when I think about it and when I-I mean, it was an amazing feat, and to see the hammers-I saw those things in galleries, you know. It's like you can't believe that you're looking at something that has-existing in the three-dimensional world. It looks like a picture of something three-dimensional.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: But yet, for myself, I want there to be still something more than that, more than a special effect. Looking at those things, it's a stimulus. I mean, that is the way it works. It gets under my skin. It's the grain of sand getting in my oyster shell. I have got to take that input from those things that speak to me and make my own pearl.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: You ask whose work speaks to me and what gets under my skin. I would say Lazzarini does and Julie Heffernan, too-hers is very different but just the kind of send up of historical paintings that she does, in turning that all around so that there is the figure in the landscape and then these little scenes that are happening. And then when you start looking at the little scenes, they are really weird. And all of this dark stuff happening-there is a twin of her, and it spreads off into this mythological world, but it is also a play on the history of art, too, so that it's got that going on. And she elongates the body.

MS. HANZAL: Yes. It's almost a Mannerist approach to the figure.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, yeah, I guess. And in that interview that Lazzarini did with you on the radio last summer, I remember his talking about Mannerism. And I would say that is where I would put Currin, too, would be in that department. And I do find that very interesting and I do feel an affinity with that-of those sorts of changes and distortions. It is the distortion that's expressive. That is where the guts of it is. But it is still tied enough-it's tied into the real world enough that it seems to speak to our day-to-day reality, and yet it looks at it from a point of view that I find resonant.

And Marcel Dzama-you know-I saw a show of his in New York, and I have seen some of his album covers. He is kind of all over the place now for Beck and some other people. I like it that his works are mostly groups of people, so it's got a sociological feel to it. It reminds me of Henry Darger a little bit, too, like *The Vivian Girls* [properly *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, c. 1973].

I love seeing, though, how artists take things from art history-how everybody borrows from everybody else, so that there is this evolutionary dialogue with the past and with contemporaries. So not only have you got the world that the artists create, but it branches off into other people's worlds. And it's just so rich, like a labyrinth that you never want to get out of, because it's so wonderful being lost in there.

MS. HANZAL: And you said this summer you saw [Hans] Holbein's *The Ambassadors* [1533]?

MR. TROTMAN: I did. I did. I was surprised how big it was. And I was surprised-I always thought you'd look at the skull from below, but you do look at it from above. Are you familiar with it?

MS. HANZAL: Yes, I haven't seen it actually in person.

MR. TROTMAN: You know how the skull is stretched off a diagonal. You are able to get close enough to the picture that you can look down on it like that. I always imagined that you would look up. But the painting is probably as tall as this room and is maybe from me to you. It's quite large. And one of the things that I like about that is that the anamorphosis is not just a special effect. It's like this thing that is letting the steam out of the other part of the picture.

Here you have got these two guys, obviously prosperous, worldly people, and then this memento mori here that you don't-we all know what it is, but if you didn't know, it would really be shocking to see this thing that looks like a seashell, and then to look at it from a certain angle and see a skull. And I really thought that was a case of the anamorphosis really being put, not being in itself, but being a means to an end that I really admired.

A lot of the poses and images that I have been attracted to-I have been watching Alfred Hitchcock movies. There has been a lot of good writing by [Slavoj] Zizek about Alfred Hitchcock. And there is a great book that one of my kids gave me called *Everything You Wanted to Know About Lacan (But Were Afraid to Ask Alfred Hitchcock)* [Slavoj Zizek, ed. Verso Books: New York, NY, 1992]. And it's not just by Zizek, but it's a lot of people writing about Hitchcock movies and Lacanian analysis.

So I find all of the psychological stuff very, very interesting, maybe more interesting than the philosophical stuff. And that is not too much of a stretch for me, since I did have some education in "difficult reading." And it's more like looking at art. It's more the thoughts I get when I'm reading the stuff. It's not that I come away from the reading with these "truths," but it's a stimulus. I get ideas when I'm trying to plow through Zizek or [Jacques] Lacan. I may not be able to give you a very good synopsis of what I have just read, but I can do some good thinking on my own, about my own work, as a result of reading them. It's like having an interesting conversation with somebody.

Stephan Balkenhol-it has been heartening to see that his work has been so popular, and it's cracked wooden-painted wooden sculptures. I'm glad that people like it.

MS. HANZAL: And sometimes he doesn't even have control of where the cracks are going to take place.

MR. TROTMAN: That is right, exactly.

MS. HANZAL: Because he uses wood that isn't dried all the way, and it continues to distort as the sculpture ages.

MR. TROTMAN: Right. And he works really quickly, I understand, so that there is that very loose-

MS. HANZAL: So it's almost like a sketch.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah. Yeah. And when you look at them-I have also thought of the chips of wood being almost digital-looking, like the tension between a picture of the thing and the thing itself, like a real crude digital image that if I just looked at it from the right angle and I could see it in more detail.

Some of his stuff is a little too whimsical for my taste, but I like his guys that are just standing there. He knows what he is doing. And the gestures are very natural-they don't feel particularly "wooden." I have seen some shows by him at Barbara Gladstone [Gallery, New York, NY] that I enjoyed. I like his 2-D stuff less.

MS. HANZAL: The relief work.

MR. TROTMAN: And also the drawings. He has also got some just totally flat inlaid wood paintings. I mean, they are made out of wood, but they are not even relief-carved.

MS. HANZAL: Okay.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, I guess that is it-those are people that I have looked at-I mean, that have sent me some sparks lately. The thing about looking at work is that I don't want to get so wrapped up in admiring somebody else's work that I can't do my own. So I have got an approach-avoidance approach to things-I don't know whether other people feel that way or not.

MS. HANZAL: Some artists that I have spoken to refuse to even look at other people's work, because they don't want to have any influences. In a way, I feel like that is too egotistical, that one can always learn something by just being aware.

MR. TROTMAN: I think so, too. Since I am in such an isolated situation, I think it's important for me to make an effort to get out and to look and to see what is going on, and also to-I know in the case of whatever success I had with my furniture, that I was looking at a lot of Memphis stuff. This is 20-plus years ago. But I know I wouldn't have had my little moment in the limelight if I hadn't been paying a lot of attention to what was going on in Italy. Hopefully what happens is that that stuff sinks in and it goes down and you digest it and it percolates, and then you come up with something that is a flash of originality for you. But you build it out of that other stuff that you have taken in, metaphorically, out of that other visual material that has gotten in you, that you use that to form something. Things don't just happen in isolation most of the time. And so I've always found that good.

My difficulty is to not get so taken up with other people's stuff that I want to imitate it and that I can't-that I get myself paralyzed. That is why it's important for me to keep the critical distance of saying, yeah, I admire this, but I don't know about that. It is a push-pull kind of thing; I feel like I'm still being who I am, even though I certainly admire people's success and how good their work is. I do value looking at work and feel like I have a lot to learn.

MS. HANZAL: It occurs to me, looking at some of these sculptures around the studio, that there is an awareness of death or a vanitas, quality to them.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes.

MS. HANZAL: Is that notion of finality executed in your work?

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, yes, especially with the-yeah, actually I think the cracks in these pieces, that is absolutely what it's about. And it's like the cracks are, "yes, we're going to die," and the patches are, "no, no, I don't want to." Like Loretta Lynn said, "Everybody wants to get to heaven, but nobody wants to die." And, yeah, that is very much the feeling that I have. And that's-that came through a lot in my philosophy studies; it's a powerful strain in literature. "Death is the mother of beauty," as Wallace Stevens said. I always liked that. "Death is the mother of beauty."

MS. HANZAL: I guess even some Buddhist philosophies, that to live well you kind of have to keep death before you all of the time.

MR. TROTMAN: You do. You do. It all passes.

We were talking about the art and craft distinction. One of the things-I do want to say I do consider myself an

artist, whether anybody else does or not. But there is a lot of craft in what I do, and there is a lot of craft that I unapologetically hold onto it. One of the things is the importance to me of wood. I do think it's intrinsic to what I have to say as an artist.

MS. HANZAL: Right, the type of material that you have chosen.

MR. TROTMAN: And it's not that this just *happens* to be in wood. That is-I have got these other things that I have made out of other materials, but for me it is leading up to it being in wood. And one of the things that I do value about wood is those cracks. There is a point at which they can be too cracked, if it looks like it's starting to threaten the physical integrity of the object. People are more nervous about this than I am, because I know they are not going to fall apart.

But if that starts being the issue for an informed audience, then I think that's more than I want to-if curators are overly worried about it. Then that's kind of-you know, it's starting to get off into a problematic area. But as long as the cracks are of a certain extent, I have to-I guess what I'm saying is that they can be too raw. I have to kind of "cook" it more, tone the cracks down a little bit.

But I very much-it's part of what I feel like I have to say, to have those cracks be there and to have those flaws in the wood be there, and to have "skillful, fine, carving" juxtaposed to the crack in the wood or the knot or the split or these areas, maybe, where the wood has gotten a little pithy. With proper care, these things will be here for a long, long time. Obviously, if you leave it out in the rain, it will rot.

What I like is where you can see the physical stress working on the material, just as the artist is also working on the material. The wood wants to go back and be part of the soil that is going to make new trees, but the artist is taking that same material and making a human image out of it. So it tells a story of man in the world, which I think is very profound, and you get that for free, I think, if you pay attention to the material.

I would rather have the wood look like wood. It has taken me a while to get to that, because my wood used to look like it was ivory or marble or something when I first started making sculpture. I was going at it with furniture technology-highly finished, highly colored, no cracks-like furniture. And people would come up to me. I think this was veiled criticism, but they would say "is that wood?" Or, "that looks like cast resin." You know, I could either take that as a compliment that my skill was so impressive, but I knew it was wood, and if it wasn't coming across as wood, then I wasn't doing what I wanted to be doing. And I think some of those comments were meant to alert me to that.

MS. HANZAL: But now it seems like you're incorporating the limitations of wood.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes.

MS. HANZAL: You emphasize the intrinsic qualities of wood even more so-fabricating some of cracks that aren't necessarily there.

MR. TROTMAN: I have done that before. That was when-that was the transition from the furniture work. I did start carving the cracks in. And now there are plenty of cracks here. I am actually-I'm filling some of them. So I am going in the other direction. But it's all about balance and of having enough there that you see the cracks as having metaphorical value, but you don't want to feel like the sculpture is physically in danger of falling apart. That is too far-that is farther than I want to go.

MS. HANZAL: You are creating a balance-implying impermanence, yet also maintaining the structural integrity of the sculpture.

MR. TROTMAN: Also, in coloring them, the water-based paints don't mask the wood. That the grain shows through is helpful. That sculpture over there has got what is called spalting. And it's not that the wood is rotten, but those lines there in the face are more on the side. It's a fungus that grows in the wood when it has been exposed to air. It's something that is arrested and it's not going to continue, but there are stains that happen as the wood begins to decay. So there is that play between the natural processes and the artificial processes that act on the wood that is part of what I want to say. In the craft / arts continuum, that is a part of the craft stuff that I want to hold on to. But yet, if I didn't try to make a distinction between art and craft, I think I wouldn't be as clear on what I want as I am now.

I think the craft movement celebrates physical labor. And that is also something that I get a great deal of pleasure from. I have made myself work with other materials just so-to broaden my understanding of things. And I got no pleasure out of working with fiberglass, where I had to wear a respirator and protect myself against all of these toxic chemicals. But I wanted to do it to see what it was like. I have carved stone, I have had stuff cast in bronze, and always for me, it just didn't give me the pleasure that was a major attraction to craft work. I don't want to give that up. And I don't have any feeling of apology about that.

That, to me, is some of the good stuff that I want to hold on to. I just don't want to make the materials and my skill be what it is all about, that with a little bit of art thrown in on the side so I can raise my prices. I want it to be about the things that I think are important in being alive, and then use whatever skill or enjoyment of work I have to put that vision forward.

MS. HANZAL: There are many artists working with technology and with some of the new industrial equipment that is available. They are able to fabricate things very easily. Their work coming up with a concept, and the machinery really executes that concept.

MR. TROTMAN: Right. In the case of Sol LeWitt, where the art is a set of instructions. While I can admire that as an art-move or in the context of the thesis-antithesis-synthesis, the ebb and flow of art history, I don't have any desire to do that for myself, because I get this tremendous release from the physical work. It eases my anxiety. It gives me a way of being in the world, of being in a dreamy place-something I had as a child. It's my escape and my protection and my way of existing in the world that gives me a great deal of joy.

MS. HANZAL: You are fortunate. You have mentioned some of the other materials that you have worked with, but that was mostly to create the maquettes: terra-cotta and porcelain. Do you envision working with other sculptural materials besides wood?

MR. TROTMAN: Right. I could imagine, though-you know, as I'm getting older, I'm feeling these things are really heavy, and my back hurts a lot. If I had to stop giving up-if I had to stop working with wood, terra-cotta would be my next favorite choice.

MS. HANZAL: Is that because clay is a really seductive material that is of the earth, like trees are also?

MR. TROTMAN: Well, you know, it's more-I guess it is. I hadn't thought about it exactly that way. It has that kind of warmth that wood has. And I guess you're right. It has a modesty to it that is appealing to me. It's not like bronze or marble. It has a certain humility to it that I like. But it's a joy to make things out of it and to fire them and have it get really hard. In a lot of ways, it's much more indestructible than wood is. And it's-I enjoy the work and it's friendly and it's not toxic, unless you breathe the dust.

It's got that flesh connection for me that takes me to this really basic place of-I guess in a philosophical sense you would say it was erotic, not that it has exactly to do with sex, but it has to do with pleasure-like talking about the erotics of philosophical discourse.

And that to me-it's like I want to go to this place that I don't-that what I'm doing is so natural that I don't even have to think about it; it's just like second nature. Get my hands in there and work with it and make this other thing that starts to have a life of its own-that I feel this kind of mental life, at least when it's coming along, or when I still have it-that I really feel like it's a fellow being. Not that it can do anything, but it really does feel like it's an extension of myself that I can actually feel-this sounds corny, but I can actually love these things, not that I don't want them to go out in the world and be on their own, but I don't want to make something that may be a brilliant idea that I have a cold feeling about.

I guess I'm saying that it's an erotic kind of relationship. It's not sexual, but it's where sex comes from. It feels like your flesh and blood, something that you have suffered over. It feels like an extension of yourself.

MS. HANZAL: I have had this conversation with other artists. And Elizabeth Turk-I don't know if you saw her show at the Mint [Museum of Art, Charlotte, NC].

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, I did.

MS. HANZAL: Her carved marble sculptures require an intensive amount of physical labor and years to complete. She literally had to come up with a ritual to be able to release them, by putting them in the ocean and reminding herself that over a period of time maybe they will be gone. This ritual was her way of washing off all of the suffering and toil in connection to them, and then letting them go on to the next phase.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah.

MS. HANZAL: So I think it's common with a lot of people whose work is really labor-intensive, as yours is, that you have an intense connection and bond with it.

MR. TROTMAN: I do.

MS. HANZAL: And also an intuitive sense of knowing what to do. Turk works with the limitations of marble. There are some sugary areas of marble that are limitations, just like areas of wood that are difficult or impossible to carve.

MR. TROTMAN: The same thing in wood, yeah, where it's just crumbly.

MS. HANZAL: You have to work around and compensate for the limitations of the material.

[Audio break, tape change.]

It takes a certain amount of skill to fulfill your intent.

MR. TROTMAN: To me-that's the meat of it to me. The ideas are things that I certainly value. It's important to have good ideas. But in a way, ideas are sort of a dime a dozen to me. I mean, they come and they go, and I keep-I have little books full of things. But when it really starts to take flesh and it becomes-it goes beyond what I thought it was going to be and I have to do things that I didn't know-because I'm reacting to this actual physical thing that exists in the world. It becomes much more like having a relationship with a person in a way, so that it surprises me.

That brings it full circle to me. It's not just-not just the ideas. But ideas are damned important.

MS. HANZAL: Without a strong concept, then the work is pretty vacuous.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, then it's just manipulating materials, and that is sort of an idea, but it's not enough of an idea to me. And that's my gripe with [craft]-then it becomes kind of an egotistical thing of, like, look how well I can manipulate wood or silver or glass or whatever.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: Isn't this amazing? And I do want it to be amazing, but not for that reason.

MS. HANZAL: The word that keeps coming to mind is magic, but you know that it's used in the wrong context in so many ways-that it is trivialized. What I'm referring to is a type of magic in literature: magic realism.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes.

MS. HANZAL: I'm referring to literal animation of something.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, when you see somebody pull it off, it's humbling. Something Puryear said one day-I'm sure you know him. I mean, he's good. He knows how to be a guru. He has these little cryptic things that he says; he said something about things being a work of art only through an act of grace. You do the best you can do and then if it makes it into being art, it's like it's sort of beyond your control. You can throw it out there as well as you can and sometimes it makes it and sometimes it doesn't.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: That is where you feel like there's a-I don't know. It's just-it gets so hokey to get into territory where you feel like something else is there. I don't mean like God or something, it just gives you goose bumps to behold it.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: And it's very fleeting, I think, and sometimes things look that way at a certain point in history, and then they don't a few years later. Or they don't and then they do a hundred years later. It's funny how these kind of visitations of the spirit happen-but just to even be trying, to me, is enough to-I've wanted to dedicate myself to that.

MS. HANZAL: Excellent. We've danced around the issue a little bit, but do you think there is a sense of spirituality in your work?

MR. TROTMAN: Well, I do. Even atheists long for transcendence. And I am an atheist. But I do want that feeling of transcendence, that you are in the presence of something-no, I mean, I don't think it's something else-I don't think it's something external to our minds-but the kind of stuff [Carl] Jung talked about, you know, the collective unconscious, the sort of things that myths deal with, or-there are all kinds of way of getting at that, that, yeah, I do long for it. I mean, I'm addicted to it; I want it. That's what I thirst for, a visitation of meaning-that's definitely spiritual stuff.

In the present social context in which our country is now, that could be possibly misconstrued. It has nothing to do with Christianity-it's more basic. Maybe Christianity is trying for that same thing, too, that feeling of finding something that feeds people, or would feed me when I behold it.

I love seeing it in other people's art, when I feel that "something else" come into my life. Maybe it's the imagination. That's what William Blake thought it was. He thought the imagination was God. To feel that sense of kind of being lifted out of your life for just a second or two when you look at something or hear something or read something is-those are just wonderful moments that I would love to touch in some way or another.

And you do what you can do. Art redeems life. It has that possibility of taking what we have to go through as mortal animals and of lifting it to a higher level, even if it's only fleeting.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: I think that's one of the highest things that human beings can aspire to. Art is always good news, to me. I read political stuff, and it seems like it's always bad news. You know, one group of people doing bad things to each other or cheating each other or exercising their power over each other. And it's never like that with art. It's like a gift that is offered and sometimes the gift is something we can accept. Sometimes it speaks to us, sometimes it doesn't, but the artist is always putting it out there, you know, for his own reasons that are altruistic and selfish all mixed up together. But it's always good news. It never hurt anybody. How can I not want to do that? [Laughs.]

MS. HANZAL: Right. Exactly.

Do you think you're going to stay committed to working with the figure? We talked a little bit about the figure being the locus of our desires and thoughts.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, I definitely do. Yeah, that was some of why also I wanted to say, I'm not-I'm going to be a figurative sculptor; I'm not going to make furniture. It's hard when an artist changes tack, midcourse, and I definitely wanted to assure whatever audience I have that this is not a passing whim for me. I mean, you never know what life holds in store and you never know-but I don't foresee getting off of this; in a lot of ways I've just scratched the surface and I want to get much, much better at doing what I do.

I can also look back on what I've done up to this point and see the progression of it leading to this, and seeing-like I was talking to you about the figures in my grandmother's cabinet and my feeling of the pieces of furniture I made-seeing a table with four legs. Well, that was creature to me, standing there. The function part of it was what would bring me down-oh, it's-you know, it's just a table. I imagined it was this being.

So with sculpture, I don't have to deal with the downside of that mundane functionality. It can be all be good, expressive stuff. On the bad side, though, I don't have that function to fall back on. If this doesn't work aesthetically, it doesn't have any use-value as back-up. So I'm working without that safety net that I had before. But I definitely-I was 50 when I made the decision to drop furniture. It was a long enough time in coming, and, you know, I don't have that much time left, so-I mean, you know, time is limited.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: And I want to do what I can to be as good as I can get it.

MS. HANZAL: But yet I still see some things in your work that continue to borrow from furniture.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes.

MS. HANZAL: These works in the studio that have the interchangeable mouth and eyes, for example.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes. William Butler Yeats had this metaphor of the gyre, that you go around in a circle-that history repeats-you go around in a circle and you come back to where you were, but you were at a different level. A gyre is like a spiral that gets wider as it goes up-funnel-shaped spiral.

MS. HANZAL: Yes.

MR. TROTMAN: So, for me, having these interchangeable pieces, that once would have been a drawer, and there are some things that I did 10 years ago where that was a drawer, as I was getting away from furniture. But now it does revisit a place that I was before, but as I'll show you in a minute-if I get up, it will undo the tape-there are other expressions.

There is another set of eyes on the other side of that block, and if I take it out and turn it around, there is an alternative expression there. So that as you look at these things, you know that you can't see everything that this could be. You know there's more there than you can see at any one time. And also, a certain part of the face has been highlighted by having that line "drawn" around it, the line of the space, which focuses you in on the person's gaze, on what they might be thinking or what they might say, if it's around a mouth. There are more possibilities for this that I plan to explore as I go on.

It takes the thing back from being a pure hands-off sculpture to something like a piece of furniture that you can manipulate, that you can change, that you can have an interaction with, that can be more than one way, that I like-that I like about dolls and puppets and things that are sort of-they're sort of art, but they're sort of not, too, and it's that territory of being a little more humble than the bronze or marble statue on a plinth. It's not that kind of heroic, antiquated, staleness. It's taking the idea of sculpture and throwing it a little bit of a curve.

So I do look back at what I've done in the past and think of how are there ways of weaving a thread of that back into what I'm doing now. It doesn't go all the way back to the furniture place but still kind of flirts around some of the things that I did before. Once I would have had to ask myself, well, what can you use this thing for? Well, it better have a drawer there or something. Now I don't need to say that anymore. I can say, this could have another-an alternative version of itself-as opposed to having something that could be any which way, I like having two alternatives. It can be seen this way or that way. That way I get to decide all the variations, whereas if I'd made a doll, you could pose it any way you wanted to, and that has too many possibilities for me.

This way, I can say what the changes can be, and there can be ironies that can be built into those possibilities.

MS. HANZAL: Right. The work preceding this was more concerned with gesture and the figures-a full figure being kind of off kilter, tumbling, falling, but these new sculptures just focus on the face and bust and expression, so it's like you're narrowing your focus. Instead of working with a large gesture, you're working with a glance or an expression.

MR. TROTMAN: That's right.

MS. HANZAL: And I'm sure that was a conscious decision, but it seems like you're narrowing your boundaries.

MR. TROTMAN: I know. I go to see George Adams [George Adams Gallery, New York, NY] regularly, and I've gotten some good advice from him. The last time I went, he encouraged me not to make generalized people but to use family and friends as models, to really make it specific and to really focus down on what it was, to, like, force myself to be specific. I've lived with his advice for several years and put it into action.

In a funny way you're less universal when you try to be general, and you're more universal when you try to be specific. It's funny; it seems like it would be the other way around, but of course our experience is very specific and particular, and to make something that would be a powerful experience for the viewer, it's important to go to a specific place as an artist and to use as a model somebody I was best friends with in the second grade. That's the figure to the left on the desk over here. Nobody else would see it, but I know that guy. I know his history; I knew his father. He had more of a father-from-hell than I did, and he bore some of the scars from that relationship just like I have with mine. John's was a different story.

But there is just no end to where I can go in making that very specific for myself. If I present it to somebody who knows nothing of that, I think that some of that feeling would come through. Even if it doesn't come through, it was still a lot more fun to me to revisit my own childhood and also my adult relationship with that person than to just make a general businessman and have it be about the ethics of the corporation.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: And the same for all of these sculptures, and for the expressions and the specifics of them, to really try to make it specific. But I will continue to make full figures, and I do have a commission to make one now. So I think part of the growth thing is to like-when you make some advances, or what feels like advances in one area, and then to be able to turn that back-I hope that I can bring more to the figure when I go back to it, soon, than was there before I got on this.

MS. HANZAL: Interesting.

Could you talk a little bit about your commissions, and what are your significant commissions to date?

MR. TROTMAN: Well, the people that-this commission is for some people in Arlington, Virginia, who have been my most significant patrons. I made that big figure-*Herman* [2003]-I think was what I had up when you came before. That was for them, and this piece that I'm going to make is going to be for them.

Just the dynamics of commissions-it's got its own-some problem areas.

[Audio break.]

MS. HANZAL: Okay, disc number three. We were talking about commissions.

MR. TROTMAN: Generally, commissions have a way of kind of pulling you backwards because people-at least in my experience-people know what they've seen me do in the past. It's not the time to experiment with something

new, unless somebody is really willing to take a wild chance on you.

I want people to know what they're going to get. I want to be able to tell them what they're going to get and to deliver the goods. So often things are based on things in the past that people can actually look at and see-well, I like that; I would like something sort of like that-and the time to move forward, for me, the time to move forward in my work is when I can afford to be experimental and, you know, when I'm making a show for speculation. A commission for me is not-so far-is not a good time to do that.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: It's been more like to take something that I've done, and I know I can do, that I've got some idea around, and then maybe make the scale a lot bigger, like I did in the case of *Herman*. There is a trap that artists can fall into of having the client tell them what they want and having it be too determined by the client. People have approached me about commissions before where they would say, I want it to be a little girl holding a basket of flowers, or I want it to be a this or that, and treat you as though you were a servant who was going to make a sculpture of their idea. That's fine, but it isn't what I want to do.

So what I'm looking for is for someone to allow me to do my own work, but to just do a piece of it for them. I'm happy to talk to them, to go look at somebody's space and to come up with an idea for their space. But I need to generate the ideas, and so people can tell me their thoughts, and I always talk with people about what they have in mind, and we try to have an interchange. I try to acquaint them-and hopefully they've seen-I mean, a commission that's going to happen, the people do know what I do, so they know what I might do for them and they like that. It would be unlikely for somebody-for me to be talking about a commission with somebody who is unfamiliar with my work, because it would be hard for us to get on the same wavelength.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: But I try as much as I can to get people on my wavelength. And I go to their homes, look at the space or spaces, think about ways that I might do what I'm going to do, and then I make a detailed proposal, which involves sketches and dimensions and prices and-you know, very specific. Sometimes people will say, well, I don't know. In the case of the current commission that I'm doing, this is not the first idea that I presented to them.

So if that is the case, then we talk about it some more and I make another proposal, and so on until either they get tired of looking at the proposals or I get tired of making them, but the point being is that it has to come from me; it has to still be my work, and it shouldn't be that I've got, like, my commission work over here and then I've got my real work over there. I don't want to get into one of those "This is what I do for sure money and this is what I do for art shows." I definitely want to feel good enough about any commission that I did, that I would be proud to show it in a museum if the person were willing to lend it. So I want it to stand up to the same scrutiny and the same audience that all the other work does. I want it all to be of a piece.

And I always explain it to people, that I think it's in their interest to go with that, even if it takes them a little while to get used to my idea or even if it's more radical than what they had in mind or even if it's disturbing. I want them to step up to the plate, too, instead of my to tone it down to fit with their idea.

I usually feel if people do have certain physical parameters-and sculpture, it's not a painting. I mean, this takes up physical three-dimensional space, so there I'm sympathetic. If you're giving up floor space for something, that's a big deal to people.

MS. HANZAL: Yeah, you can't switch out the painting on the-

MR. TROTMAN: No, no, you can't. You can't. And this thing has to be taken care of; it's taking up space. I'm willing to have a dialogue with people, and I think a lot of times I can go beyond what I would have done, had I been totally doing it on spec. I mean, with a good client you can have a valuable interchange that everybody wins from.

So that is sort of where I am with commissions. I've been trying to space out my commissions so that I'm not doing all commissions back to back-I would feel drained. I would feel like I was working for the man that way. But I can certainly do it sometimes, and it's the only security I've got to be able to get paid up front, or paid as I go along. And then I can do speculative work at the same time or in between commissions with the money that I've saved from the commission. So I think there is a good balance.

And I like, in a way, having a job to do. I mean, there is a certain part of me that-freedom is great but it can-you know, I like to temper it a little bit sometimes. I just don't want to have to do it every day all the time.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: But to have a good client and to have somebody that believes in me-and that's the other thing that I've learned, is that the commissions, for the most part, they grow out of social relationships, and even though those social relationships may come from the fact that the person is interested in a commission, it isn't just about the object; it's about my interchange with that person. I mean, they like what I do, but if they don't like me, they're not going to commission-

MS. HANZAL: It helps if the person commissioning the work personally likes you.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah. So it's a lot-and that goes both ways, too. A lot of people that commission stuff are people that I enjoy getting to know and are people that I wouldn't have ever gotten to know without this, so that there really is a kind of reciprocity that happens that I hope is enriching for everybody.

But I used to not understand that, and I used to think they would buy the art as an object. And I know that people would do that in the case of really famous artists that have a big name, that you almost buy the name as a valuable commodity-my Cy Twombly or my [Joan] Miro, or something like that. And I realize that it isn't going to be like that for me; it's going to be more that I know people and they know I'm an artist and there is a play that happens back and forth, and then a commission becomes part of the possibility, and then that might actually become a reality. And then it might become a reality again, so that I feel like I've got some people that are supporting me, in a way. I mean, there's an element of that.

It's not charity, but there's a tinge of that: they are patrons, and they have this wealth which they can disperse in my direction if they're so minded. And I can live with that. It's all class stuff and power and all that, but I get to do what I want to do, basically, and I get to buy a lot of freedom that way, and it's-yeah, I've got to go smile and be nice and behave myself, but okay, I can do that. And it's a relatively small price-

MS. HANZAL: Being on your best behavior is a small price-

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, it's a very small price to pay to have funding to do what I really, in my heart, really want to do, and to have people that will give me some backing to do that and will buy into my activity as an artist, partially maybe-partially to support me, partially to have an object themselves, partially to have that ongoing relationship that they feel like they can come visit when they want to. I hope that they get something out of it themselves, that they get a sense of possibility in their life or sense of cultural validation for their wealth. You know, we all have our things that we get out of the interaction, and it can be very positive for everybody involved, and fun.

MS. HANZAL: Right. How have you met some of your clients, or patrons?

MR. TROTMAN: Some of them I've met by being on boards. Some of them I met-the person that I'm doing the next commission from was actually a college friend, who was a philosophy major at Washington and Lee who is now the head of a huge law firm in Washington. So this connection was something that went back to when we were teenagers. He's gotten back in touch with me, but he remembers all the philosophy we read. He lives more than I do in the good old days of college, so I think in a way it's a way of reaching back to that. He's a very traditional person, and the stuff that I am giving him is stuff that I'm amazed that he will put into his house, to tell you the truth, but delighted, believe me. I think he enjoys it; I think he gets a kick out of it, to have people do double-takes when they see this guy that's throwing himself out into space over his doorway when he comes in. You've got to turn around and look.

MS. HANZAL: Yes, that's *Herman*. That was a big commission.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, that's *Herman*. And this other piece that I'm going to do is also going to be in an up space that will I think be pleasantly shocking.

Other people I've met like on boards that were businesspeople, a doctor in Memphis, an oncologist and a very delightful art collector and very smart obviously. People that have approached me and let me get to know them a little bit and maybe let their guard down a little bit, because I'm an artist, you know, not one of them; I'm not a suit. And maybe it's given them a little bit of release in a way.

Other people-obviously it's a-you know, people that have got enough money to even think about this kind of thing. It's the kind of the people, in some ways, that I was trying to escape from, but I'm meeting them again, not as friends of my parents or somebody that I should kowtow to, but people that are approaching me on a respectful level. And it's a way to get to be an adult and have an interchange with people-some pretty interesting people. Sometimes commissions come from making presentations to groups or kind of showing up as an artist.

MS. HANZAL: Right. So you're not really reliant on the gallery system?

MR. TROTMAN: Less and less so. You know, it's not easy to sell these things, and it does happen, but it seems more to happen to people that I come across in my life as an artist, in what little travels I make out into the world, and also it doesn't take many commissions-you know, I can live for a long time on a little bit of financial action, so it's slow work and I try to keep my overhead at an absolute minimum here.

MS. HANZAL: That's another advantage to living out in the country?

MR. TROTMAN: That is a definitely the advantage of not being in the city. But I guess I'll always do a sigh over that. That's the ultimate leap into the void, though, to go out there and sink or swim. Even if you sank, at least you have done it, given it a shot. But to spend as much in rent for one month-just incredible amounts of money just flying out-would be tough. And I've been in Manhattan for months at a stretch. We did a summer sublet one time, and I do know what it feels like to be there after the wow wears off, and to just be a little creature living in your little tiny box, your little space. It's a hard life and it really takes it out of you, especially in the summertime. It's filthy dirty.

MS. HANZAL: And very hot.

MS. HANZAL: And hot and loud and stinky. And people are not as-they're not exactly open either. Everybody is very competitive, and people guard their secrets and guard their ideas. It's not like there is much open interchange going on; it's more like stealing stuff.

But to have that New York cachet, to get the second look because you live there, all of those things-that is the plus side, and to be able to show up at things over and over again and to not be regarded as a total outsider-you know, I think there is something about being in Manhattan or Brooklyn or the area is that you can leave your past behind, in a way. When you show up and you're Carla Hanzal and you live in New York and-it just doesn't matter where you came from or what you did before. And you can't have that out in the regions, and that-I guess it's that chance to reinvent yourself and with the cachet and the badge of honor that you have the balls to get yourself there and to say, here I am; I'm throwing my lots in the game and we'll see what happens. You know, that is to me the ultimate mark of commitment and courage, and I admire the hell out of it, and I don't know whether I'll ever do it more than I have or not, or whether I'll just think about it and sign, every time it comes up.

When you get old enough that you can think about the arc of your life, you know, you regret what you didn't ever do, and I think the thing is not to have regrets and to kind of try everything. I don't think the failures weigh on you like the things that you didn't ever try, you know, and you can forgive yourself for failing. Those things are usually ambiguous, too, and I'm very good at not seeing things as failures. Failure of nerve is a lot worse than the failure of effort.

How did I get on that? But that still is something that-I didn't know about it when I was young. I just didn't know what that was-New York was just a total abstraction to me. I went there once with my parents in the '60s and I was terrified, and then I didn't go back as an adult until the early '80s, and then I got it. I could see why people wanted to be there and how it was. I mean, it was the center of the beehive. It was all those bees coming from all over the place doing the bee dance, and rubbing antennas and culture happened, and to be in the middle of something like that and to bring what you have to bring to the table, to that melting pot or furnace, or whatever it is, and get melted and destroyed by it and then rise up from the ashes and really do something.

In the movie *Basquiat* [1996], they use a surfing metaphor, you know, like riding that wave, but you can only catch the waves in New York, L.A.-you know, the waves that count. To go someplace like that and catch a wave, it really gives a boost to your work-you can't get something like that totally on your own.

Yet I do think that there is a place for artists out in the regions, and I do think that there is a little something that we regional folks have to offer that is different from that, from New York. Maybe we're not going to be part of art history, but a more humble and modest part of life as it's lived every day, more ordinary-it may not be riding some great cultural crest.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: But I do think that there is something that is humbler, and it's more constant, and it's about being a human being, and it's accessible to people in little places like Casar [NC, where the artist lives and works]. And I think that art does have value to other human beings, and it's still a very worthwhile effort, I think, to make art from this place, and that people like me do have a place in the world and it does have a value. And, you know, all it takes to me is to have one person love that one thing, say, or that these things would go to a home somewhere where they would be valued by somebody. That's not a small thing. I could sure imagine being rich and famous, but I do feel okay about that. And that does happen, so I'm not complaining.

MS. HANZAL: Right, so that's actually a pretty good place to be, to feel somewhat content.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah.

MS. HANZAL: What about teaching? You talked about some of your mentors. Have you taught or-

MR. TROTMAN: I have-I have not taught in a college situation. The teaching I've done has been workshops. I guess the longest one I've done was six weeks at Penland. Usually they're two weeks, and sometimes even shorter than that. I've gotten a lot out of it, I would say. I'm not very enthusiastic about doing it right now, but I think it's been very good for me; I've learned a lot from my students, and I thank them for being such good teachers. I've gotten a lot of technical information and I've learned a lot about how people make their way with their art by seeing them grapple with things.

I have a little bit of trouble stepping into the role of being a leader or an authoritative person of any kind, just because of my personal stuff. I feel uncomfortable in that kind of situation. When I do teach, especially when people have come a great distance and spent a lot of money to take my class, it's hard not to feel a lot of pressure. I want to give people their money's worth, and you can often see that people come to these things with a lot of expectations, and I'm not confident enough that I totally feel good about saying, well, I've got what I've got and you're just going to have to deal with it. If people seem disappointed, it gets under my skin. It bothers me and I feel like I've let them down. I always feel like I'm giving a party and I want everybody to have a good time. And that's not a good place to be in when you're a teacher-

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: -because it makes it very stressful for me, very anxious. And so I often wind up feeling like I'm an inadequate host or that I'm a baby-sitter. So I get a lot of old people who are doing recreational-you know, it's like their hobby or something. They want some shop tips. And I'm-you know, I was raised to be a polite, well-mannered person, and so I'll always try to do what I can, but that gets old. I find that draining. A lot of times, though-I mean, for the most part people are really good and it's just fine and I'm happy to be there for them as I would-as I do want people whom I respect and who do know more than I do to help me. And I feel like what goes around comes around, so I try to do right by people.

But of late, it's just so draining. I guess also the money is important too, to be able to say, well, I'm going to get a certain amount of money for a number of weeks, also getting to go physically to another place and interact with a lot of other people. It's socially stimulating, and that basically is good for me, because it's not good to just hole up. We are social animals, even introverts like me. But the balance is a little bit on the negative side right now for me, so I'm not looking for teaching gigs. I just-I don't know whether I would actually turn one down if one came my way. I might. I wouldn't want to not ever get asked again, but I'm also okay about kind of taking a little bit of a break from it right now. I feel like it takes more out of me than I get back from it.

MS. HANZAL: Right. That's understandable.

MR. TROTMAN: So really, I kind of would rather put my energy into work, because you've got all that time getting ready for the workshop, and then you come back and there is a big readjustment period, too. And I don't do a lot of residencies. I have gone to the Virginia Center for Creative Arts [Amherst, VA] before. That was interesting, but it was 10 years ago, and I don't-

MS. HANZAL: How long were you there? For a month or a couple weeks?

[Audio break, tape change.]

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, something like that, three weeks. You make connections with people, but I sort of, in that case, I felt like people made connections with me more than I did with them. But there is a lot of that networking kind of stuff that goes on.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: And I don't know, you see a lot of mediocrity, too, which is kind of disheartening, because you are brought face to face with your own mediocrity as far as in my case I was. And I also saw how many people were wealthy and could do their art without having to think about selling it, which is-you know, that's fine. I'm not saying that there's anything wrong with that, but the demographic was different from the craft demographic. That does go on in the crafts, but it was much-this was a different bunch-different kind of class of people-

MS. HANZAL: At the Virginia Center?

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah. Sometimes opportunities happen that way. And nothing happens in the abstract. Commissions don't happen from people that don't like you. You know, all of these things. It's all tied into the

whole range of human feeling and emotion and power and stuff. So it has got the usual messiness that human stuff has got with it. But I don't feel hungry for all of that stuff right now at this point in my life. Unfortunately, though, it seems like the professional opportunities don't come unless you get into that mix with people.

MS. HANZAL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] We have talked a little bit about the zone of discomfort.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes, and that is the zone of-

MS. HANZAL: When you're putting yourself out there like that, having to be an extrovert.

MR. TROTMAN: That is. That is. I usually feel more anxious about it beforehand and feel a lot more confident once it's over. It's like, well, you know, people like me okay. You know, I have done all right. I shouldn't have been so apprehensive about it. But that is definitely one of the discomfort zones. And I still think that a certain amount of that is important, just like a certain amount of traveling is important. I don't do it because I love it, but I have gotten a lot out of the trip we took this summer.

It wasn't that I had such a great time when I was doing it. But it made me think some things that I wouldn't have thought if I hadn't been uncomfortable. And the thing about discomfort is that you only learn when you're uncomfortable. It is cognitive dissonance. Jung said something like that there was no growth in consciousness without pain. So what are you going to do?

It's just, I think being able to distinguish the pain that is useful from what isn't, and also trying to keep the amount of that that you have in your life in a certain amount of balance, and that comes with experience.

MS. HANZAL: Right, to not identify too much with the pain that you get wrapped up in it and become paralyzed.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah.

MS. HANZAL: Being a wounded person, but that you can move from it.

MR. TROTMAN: That is right. And it's not that the pain itself is necessarily good, but often, when you do grow, it may hurt or it may be uncomfortable. So it isn't like I'm going to go put myself in an uncomfortable situation because it's always good to be uncomfortable. It's like, if you want to broaden your world a little bit, it may make you uncomfortable, and you have to be willing to do that.

MS. HANZAL: So where are some of the places that you have traveled that have influenced you? You were in England this summer.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah. Fortunately, we had friends to visit in England and in London and in Oxford-the same guy-and in Berlin, some different people. So as part of that we went to Wales, where Jane's ancestors are from. And she still has some relatives there. So we went and met them for the first time and took Nat [Trotman, the artist's son and also a curatorial assistant at the Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY] and Bart [Trotman, the artist's other son]. And Nat was able to meet with his colleague at the Tate Modern, who is also working on the David Smith show.

And then we went to Berlin and stayed with some friends that we knew in college who are running a small university there. And then we went to Prague from there for just a couple of nights. And since I'm I big Kafka guy, I wanted to go to Prague to see where he came from and see if I can see any Kafka sites. But they are well hidden. I was not terribly disappointed but a little disappointed that it's-it's very touristy, which I had heard, which was okay.

It was kind of festive, kind of Central Europe, but kind of New Orleansy. A lot of street musicians and people playing glasses and a lot of people out on the street, you know, shoulder-to-shoulder people. But I did some-a little bit of Kafka stuff. And got to see that Franz Kafka sign over there from Kafka Square. I mean, they were selling those in a tourist shop. It did mean something to me to go physically, be in spaces that he was in and see, really, how small that world was that he spent most of his life in.

Or to-say in Wales, to go to Dylan Thomas's boathouse where he wrote and see that, and see physically where he was, and to see how the British regard the Welsh. And it's pretty much like we think of West Virginia or something. It's not a classy place to be from. But it's very picturesque. So, you know, I like Thomas. You know, so I was trying to kind of do literary artistic things if we're going places. I try to see what people that I admired were from this or that place. So that gave me a little something.

But like I was telling you before about how puritanical the U.S. is, that is the kind of unexpected insight that I would get. We went with our friend at Oxford, we went punting on the Thames. Do you know what punting is?

MS. HANZAL: Mm-hmm. [Negative response.]

MR. TROTMAN: It's those pole boats that-

MS. HANZAL: Oh, okay.

MR. TROTMAN: They are little shallow boats that are-they are not like canoes, but it's not hard to turn them over. And a lot of people, they were just-you know, this is Oxford, and it was where all the dons from the university would go punt, and people would fall in the water and they would just laugh. It was so funny. And I was like, well, they wouldn't-in America, it wouldn't be like that. We would be more upset or be ready to sue somebody, or worry that our clothes-people could see things that they weren't supposed to see-I don't know. Just a reflection of how prudish and uptight we are as Americans.

I probably am idealizing their thing. I'm sure it would be different if I had to live with the British class system, where you're pegged by your accent. Still, it does offer an insight, though, back to the things that we take for granted here to see-to look back on America from that perspective, or to see *Death of a Salesman*, which Andre got us theater tickets for free. So to see Willy Loman and to see *The Producers*, which is a Mel Brooks thing-light theater.

To see those American productions on the British stage, you see something different than you would see if you saw them in New York. You really do, because the context is-you know, seeing Hitler jokes when you have gone through the Blitz in London; it is different from us over here in "fortress America." That was long ago and far away. And it's not for them.

I don't know that traveling has really influenced my work. I have looked at all of the art that I can look at when I have been out and about, and it certainly is wonderful to be able to actually see the Sistine ceiling or to see a Michelangelo pietà, where you can walk around in the room and see the back side of it that he didn't finish, and see the first makings that he made-just scratched into the stone, which is just totally, totally crude.

I got over ever feeling embarrassed about anything I did-of the way things look when you carve stuff. It looks pretty awful when you first start off. And this looks so unpromising to see the backside of-I can't remember which pietà it was. It was one of the late ones though. And to just see the scratch marks. I think that was in Florence near the Duomo. It was a little place that I don't even remember the name of it. And the whole thing only had this one sculpture in it.

To go to Michelangelo's house or Raphael's house, that makes it real in a way that brings it into your everyday life. Also to see how much-how culture is much more in everybody's life in Europe. A taxi driver is going to know where all the art is. I know they are in the tourist business, but Michelangelo is not a stretch for them-you know, people would know the name, but it permeates their culture much more than it does ours. So, again, that tells me something about where I am that I wouldn't know if I hadn't been out in the world.

MS. HANZAL: Right, right. And also our culture is so young.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes.

MS. HANZAL: In comparison.

MR. TROTMAN: It is. And it's-so much of our culture has been kind of in survival mode of, like, fighting Indians or doing that kind of activity of not having enough old money that would really support culture that it-

MS. HANZAL: Thomas Jefferson's intention was to work hard so his offspring would then be able to have time to just read poetry and literature and have time for cultural pursuits.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. HANZAL: So I guess we're not necessarily at that point yet. Or it depends. We have great prosperity, but cultural pursuits aren't necessarily embraced.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, we do, but our priorities don't quite seem to be that, you know, which is-that gets back to that kind of puritanical-puritanism or Protestantism and capitalism go hand in hand. Max Weber wrote about that actually, that capitalism flourished much more in protestant countries than it did in Catholic countries. And there is something about that work-ethic thing-why waste your time on art? What are you going to use that for? It's just frou-frou. It's just cluttering up your space having all of these things around. You know, you can't use it for anything-that kind of attitude.

And that seems natural to us. To find somebody who doesn't feel that way is unusual, relatively speaking for us. Whereas I think more people that have lived with culture for thousands of years, it doesn't seem that way nearly so much.

MS. HANZAL: Right, right. I'm just curious-concerning your family and your parents, you were talking about going around the spiral. Did they ever come around to seeing what you did and being able to at least understand it or have some inkling of appreciation for it?

MR. TROTMAN: Well, my mother died about 15 years ago. And my father and I are not on the best of terms. I mean, we're just real different people and it's a lot of toxic material has gone into the well, so I don't know. I think he would tell you that he was proud of me. He can see that I have been successful enough-I mean, in his terms. I haven't "done well." If you "do well"-this is Southern stuff. "Oh, so-and-so, he did well." That means you made a lot of money. On the bourgeois scale of things so-and-so has "done well." No, I haven't "done well."

But I think that he would see that I have tried hard and that I'm serious about what I do, and that I have had enough positive response from the world that I don't think he would be ashamed of me. I don't think he would think I'm a wild bohemian like his brother Frank. And so it doesn't heal the wound that is in there. And maybe I have hung onto that a lot longer than I needed to. But you know how it is, the child-it stays alive inside us, even when we get old. So I still feel like we are at odds with each other.

MS. HANZAL: Did anybody in your family kind of go the route that he had directed?

MR. TROTMAN: Well, my brother who is a lawyer most did. He lives in Wilmington. My other brother-who lives in Asheville, who runs a mental health center, which is-that is more-he is running something. So in that regard-he has employees. So that is something that my father can understand. The mental health part is something that my father would not acknowledge the reality of it all. I mean, what is that, mental health? Don't tell me about that.

So it's okay. I guess what has happened to me is that I'm sort of estranged from my family, from my birth family. They are just sort of at a distance. I wouldn't-I'm still a little tender about that, but I don't think-you know, that is just the way it is. It's okay; it's okay. We're not on bad terms, but we just don't-we kind of keep our distance from each other.

MS. HANZAL: And you sort of have to have the distance to lead the life that you want to lead.

MR. TROTMAN: I do. And even though I'm only two hours from where I grew up, this is another world here-believe me. This has nothing to do with that. I mean, if you had been raised in that situation and thought that the whole world was like that. And I know you know-the kind of preppie, Republican take on things. So this is very different, even though it's still the South and still North Carolina, this just feels totally, totally different. So I feel-I'm free enough from that that I have got lots of elbow room here.

MS. HANZAL: Right. Space enough to create.

MR. TROTMAN: To be myself.

MS. HANZAL: Yes, exactly. It's not always easy.

MR. TROTMAN: No, it's not. And I think some of us are better at it than others. But I just-I think I'm just overly sensitive to if I feel like somebody is looking at me or judging me-I can't function. I have just got to be alone for a lot of the time to do what I need to do, you know. But at least I was able to do that, so-

MS. HANZAL: Right, exactly.

MR. TROTMAN: And then I can do my work here in solitude. I mean, I couldn't have somebody work with me either or-that is another thing I find hard about being in groups.

MS. HANZAL: You wouldn't want to have a studio assistant?

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, or, in those teaching situations there are always studio assistants. And I can do it, but it is a strain. I mean, It just takes it out of me because I'm so self-conscious. And here to be able to do what I want to do and try anything I want to try, and then when I'm ready, I can take it out into the world and I can-I can be confident and be the way I need to be, but I have got to have this sanctuary to go back into.

MS. HANZAL: Right, I think a lot of artists are that way. That is why they are artists who communicate visually.

MR. TROTMAN: Right. [Laughs.]

MS. HANZAL: Artists have the ability to commune with that internal part of themselves that is an observer, and delve into things that a lot of people are uncomfortable with looking at or exploring.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, well, that was another good thing that Martin Puryear said. He said-I think he was

repeating-I'm totally grateful. I got more from him, like, in 24 hours than I have gotten from a lot of other people knowing them for a whole life. But one of the things he said was, "What else I can be but an artist? What else can I do?" And I thought, damn. It's like I would have been a homeless person if I hadn't been an artist. I don't know that it's a good thing to be an artist, but what else could I have done with myself? It was like, yeah, I know what you're talking about.

MS. HANZAL: So it was just so very clear about what you should do next.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. HANZAL: Would you say that Martin has been the most influential person in your life?

MR. TROTMAN: I say one single person-but James Surls was in that department for a while. I had a three-week workshop with him at the Atlantic Center for the Arts in 1985. And he is a character. People work on their persona. You know, I'm not kidding myself that I had a personal relationship with Martin Puryear or James Surls or Robert Morris, or Judith Shea, or anything. But they personalize it for the people that are around them. And it is a gift. And it was generously given and gratefully received, because Surls and Martin-Surls is flamboyant and does his character thing, and he can be loud and funny.

MS. HANZAL: He behaves like a cowboy sometimes.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, yeah. Talking about his daddy, "my daddy this, my daddy that," doing his Texas thing, which is great. And he says he took art because it was the first thing in the college catalogue. He was a P.E. [physical education] major and then he switched to art because it came first in the catalogue. Okay. [Laughs.] But I would say I have gotten more from Martin Puryear than I have from anybody else. But I did get a lot from James Surls, and at the time I had gotten more from James than I had from anybody else.

And it really is a boost to have somebody that you admire put themselves in a mentoring position, because what it does is it, like, tells your superego to give you a break. The part of my brain where my father is reversed. It's like instead of there being somebody who says, "What are you doing that for?" There is somebody that says, "Why not? Come on. Go ahead."

And it's like-it just turns all of that energy, which normally in me is turned against myself-it turns it the other way, so that I can be a sculptor and I can be-I remember something James Surls said about getting a stack of 50 pages of Arches paper, which may cost a \$1.50 a sheet, and that stack costs you \$75, and just working your way through it. Don't think about what it costs. Just get the materials, pay the money for the materials, think about it then, and then just have them in your studio, and then just start drawing. You won't think about-you won't feel about the materials that way. Well, it never occurred to me to do that. You know, things like that, that people can tell you that are little bits from their life that they share with you.

Or Judith Shea talking to me about the shine on my surfaces when I was still making kind of varnished figures. I thought we were going to talk about feminism or gender identification or something, and that was what she talked about for her criticism. And it was just coming out of a place that I never would have thought of, but she was exactly right, that I had put so much furniture-like-I mean, I was still making furniture, even though it was a figure-there was just a shift. It is just hard to get that special-without a one-on-one or without being in the same physical space with somebody and having an exchange with them.

But Martin was-he was just extraordinarily generous, as he would have been to anyone who was there. It wasn't because it was me that he was generous. But I was there and I was hanging on his every word. One of the things-we had dinner at somebody's house at Penland, and that person whose house it was had a maquette of something that I had used that had a figure of a black man in it. And of course Martin Puryear went right to that and picked it up and said, oh, this is your work.

And I was just-I was really embarrassed, because what business do I have talking about African-American issues? It had to do with slavery and white guilt. He said, "This is your work." And I said, "It's only a maquette; it's not the work itself. It's nothing." And he just looked at me and said, "But it's your work. How can it be nothing if it's your work? Or if it's nothing-why are you making nothing when it's your work?"

I can't exactly unload all of the implications-there was a lot crammed into his question. It's like you're a fool if you're making nothing-I mean, if you're doing stuff that you don't have any regard for, and you're making it out of your freedom and your work time, it should be something to you. But we were kind of talking at cross-purposes. But the moral of what he said was really impressive and it stayed with me. So after exchanges like that, I go back and write down verbatim as much as I can in my diary, everything that was said, so that I can go back and read it 10 years later when I'm a different person than I was when he said that to me.

George Adams said some good stuff, too. It's just off the cuff to him, but he is coming from such a refined and-

just his world is art all the time. Well, my world is art all the time, too, in a way, but it's just *my* art. But anyway, things that he may say that may be very casual to him, I take them like they are oracles. And I like approaching people when I go for criticism or exchanges with people that I respect. I regard it as though I had gone to Delphi and the oracle was making pronouncements. So I take those things very seriously and try to grow from them.

Martin Puryear came to one of my openings in New York, too, which really got me, because I think-I'm not sure, but I think drove all the way into the city for me.

MS. HANZAL: Wonderful.

MR. TROTMAN: Because he said he was going-I know his brother, too, Michael. And he said he was going over to Michael's and Michael didn't know he was coming, that he had gotten delayed in traffic. So I'm not sure, but, anyway, whether he did or not, it was a real-again, I don't think he did it because I'm so wonderful, but just the fact that he would do it and the fact that it was generously given and that I received it gratefully, it felt like power coming from him to me, but not in an egotistical way, but it was like he was saying-

MS. HANZAL: He was acknowledging you as an artist.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, yeah, and it gave me strength.

MS. HANZAL: That is excellent.

MR. TROTMAN: So I certainly want to do that when I have the opportunity to do it for people that come to me in that way. So that is part of the thing about teaching that I feel like it's a big responsibility, and I do my best to be the best I can with people. I mean, I'm not stingy and I do give them as much as I can.

MS. HANZAL: It is a big responsibility.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, it is.

MS. HANZAL: You never know what impact you might have on somebody.

MR. TROTMAN: No, you don't. You sure don't. Even people that are resistant at the time that you have your interchange, sometimes it can make a huge difference to them.

MS. HANZAL: Yes, it's very true.

How has your work been received over time? Or has there been any criticism, written criticism, positive or negative?

MR. TROTMAN: Well, I'll go first to the negative. The only stuff that I perceived that was gently negative was when I was still making furniture on the one hand and making sculpture on the other, trying to do both. This was late '80s, early '90s. And I wanted very much to see what it was like to make a body of work that was sculptural and to show it and to go there as a sculptor, not as a furniture maker who was dabbling in sculpture.

So I did that in Atlanta; I had shown furniture there much earlier, but nobody knew anything about it, nobody remembered. And during that time, I did-I was making work that was vaguely Puryear-esque-biomorphic, abstract sorts of things, a lot of stuff with crumpled newspaper, and they were big things. And I did receive some criticism that was not-it wasn't just a slam, but it did refer to "clumsy forms" and to "fuzzy thinking" on my part, which I think-both of which were probably true, and I wasn't devastated by that. And again, I don't know that I totally agreed with what the critic was saying. This was in *Art Papers* and in the Winston-Salem newspaper [*The Winston-Salem Journal*]. Tom-he used to write in Charlotte, too-Tom-I can't remember his last name.

MS. HANZAL: Patterson.

MR. TROTMAN: Patterson. Thank you. I think I was not-I think in retrospect I can see what he was talking about more than I was able to say, yeah, oh, yeah, he's right. I felt a little combative.

But most of the negativity that I have perceived in criticism was stuff that was sort of around the edges. Sometimes people write descriptive reviews and they don't say anything good or bad. They don't make any kind of evaluation. They just say this is what was in the gallery. You could see that as being lukewarm, but they did review the work. And Janet Koplos's review in *Art in America* was like that. It didn't say good or bad. I have read many other people's reviews, and generally they are like that. I mean, there is a kind of format that-it's mostly descriptive.

MS. HANZAL: Right, it's a little formulaic. It may be just deadline driven.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, and there is just one little sentence at the end that gives you a little lift. It's not exactly a word of praise, but it kind of expands a little bit at the end. And she talked about-said something about the cracks in the figures that were "apparently meant to be symbolic." So you could read that as, like, maybe it was-maybe I succeeded in making them symbolic. Maybe I didn't. I don't know.

So I have a-then there are the other kinds of reviews that are very praising sometimes. And sometimes people that you know write those and sometimes-you know. So I don't know what to think about that. Sometimes if there is too much praise, I tend not to believe it or feel like I fooled somebody or something. [Laughs.]

So I haven't had a-I guess-reading the criticism of my own work has not had a big effect on me. It's something that makes me feel very uncomfortable to read about myself. And it's like, I'm really glad that there was a review, and I'm really glad that they spelled my name right, and then I kind of read through it to see if there are any bombshells in there, and if it's not, that's it.

MS. HANZAL: Put it in the file.

MR. TROTMAN: I never look at it again. Put it in the file and send it if I need to send it somewhere, but don't take it too seriously in terms of the content of what is said.

It seems to be sort of different from the kind of one-on-one criticism that I have gotten from people when I have taken work to somebody and asked them for a critique. That was-especially coming from somebody that I respected. That meant more to me and had more of an effect on me.

MS. HANZAL: Right. What about art criticism in general? Do you read art criticism?

MR. TROTMAN: I do. I don't read a lot about it. Like, in *Art Forum* and *Art in America*, I might read some reviews of shows, but I don't usually read big articles unless it's somebody that I'm really interested in, like if Currin, if there was an article on Currin, or if there was an essay in the catalogue that I got, I would read that.

You know, I like Peter Schjeldahl a lot. Nat, my son, says that he-he always talks about how conservative he is, and that doesn't bother me so much. I think that Schjeldahl doesn't care for conceptual art particularly, but he writes beautifully. And I find even if he is writing about somebody that I don't care about or some art historical figure, that doesn't matter too much, that just the clarity of his thinking and the way he will talk about things, that I learn a lot that I can use.

You know, when I say that I learn something, it's always stuff that I can use. I mean, that is what I am looking for, is what can I get from this review that is going to make my art better? It isn't like I want to be a scholar or a [Alberto] Giacometti or [Peter Paul] Rubens or Michelangelo or something. It isn't that so much; it's like, what can I get that is going to make me better as an artist? And I do get stuff from Schjeldahl's writing in *The New Yorker*. And it's not written-it's written for a general audience, too-Calvin Tomkins, Adam Gopnik, they write well about art.

I have read some stuff by Dave Hickey that I thought was really good. He is kind of a-he sounds like he is kind of a provocateur and a showman, so he sometimes will do things that I think are bullshit. But he is so off-the-wall, and his analogies are so-sometimes-or his metaphors are so good, like people in slide juries looking at five slides at a time and that being like a poker hand. I love that. It's like laying your cards down on the table and what five are you going to put up there. Or, like, talking about a museum making a-are you going to make the museum look good, or is it going to make you look good? Which way is the cultural capital flowing? That has been helpful to me.

You know what I mean? Like, an artist from New York is going to make a regional museum look a lot better than I probably am going to because I'm not from New York, even if you could say the art was equal, that there is that cachet that flows from New York to your town that you're not going to get from another-from a regional artist, all other things being equal. You know, just those kinds of things which I might encounter in art criticism teach me more about how things work, because it has seemed kind of mysterious to me that I can see that there is a structure out there, but I can't quite figure it out.

Another person that I have read-this is not art criticism, but it's Pierre Bourdieu, who is a sociologist, or was, a book called *The Field of Cultural Production* [New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1993], which is a hard-going-it's not an easy read. But he dealt with the sociology of all-I think "cultural capital" was his phrase. Cultural capital and economic capital, and how-they are very similar, and they can be exchanged for each other. For instance, if you made-or, like [Andrew] Carnegie or [Nelson] Rockefeller, who had a lot of economic capital, and by buying art, they exchanged it for cultural capital, and it made you forget that Rockefeller had had a whole bunch of people machine-gunned in Colorado in 1920 that were breaking the strike, that kind of thing.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: So that is not art review, though; that is more kind of sociology theory. But I do get a lot from reading. Susan Sontag is another person whose writing, especially *Against Interpretation* [1966] and *Notes on Camp* [1964]-there was one on style. It had more to do with Jasper Johns and [Robert] Rauschenburg and Merce Cunningham, but, you could still-the type of thinking, the clarity of thought, the memorable aphorisms, as well as the content of what she said are very important to me.

MS. HANZAL: Is there a journal of any kind that you always keep up with, an art journal?

MR. TROTMAN: Oh, an art journal. I thought you were referencing my own journal. Yeah, I always keep up with that. This year I have gotten *Art Forum* and *Art in America*, and I thought-I know-I had the impression that *ArtForum* was more highly regarded, but maybe it's just my own pedestrianism, but I think I like *Art in America* better-[laughs]-because there is-*Art Forum* seems a lot cooler and more kind of chic.

But I just sort of want to know what is going on, who is showing in New York, what is in the galleries, look at the ads-I mean, you get a lot from the ads, just seeing images and seeing who is where, and being able to look at the directory that *Art in America* publishes. And when you encounter-when I encounter somebody, you know, to see-to be able to look and see where they have shown or kind of see who is doing what with whom-those kinds of things I find helpful. But I don't pore through the issues and read every word.

I used to save them all, but I don't anymore. I used to get *Art Papers*. Back in my Atlanta days, I was friends with-

MS. HANZAL: Glenn Harper?

MR. TROTMAN: Well, I knew him. I knew Elizabeth Lide, who was their art director. I knew her pretty well, and Zenia Zed. I can't remember; there was a bunch of other people that were friends of hers that I kind of knew to speak to. So I followed that pretty closely. And there was another-there was something called the *Arts Journal* that was published in Asheville back a long time ago, back in the '70s and early '80s, that was not a real sophisticated thing, but it was-you know, back when I was a craftsman, it was-

MS. HANZAL: It was called the what?

MR. TROTMAN: It was called *Arts Journal*. And it was-like I say, it was not real sophisticated. But I used to read all of that. And now I think it's more just kind of a cursory look at *Art Forum* and *Art in America*. If I'm at a newsstand, I might pick up some of the other ones and look at them.

MS. HANZAL: Okay. But you mentioned your own journal. Do you keep a journal?

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah.

MS. HANZAL: Have you always kept a journal?

MR. TROTMAN: I have since the early '70s.

MS. HANZAL: Do you write in it daily?

MR. TROTMAN: I do. You know, I don't make a point of writing in it daily, but actually I have lots of them around, so they are all over the place. And in my old age I've found that is the way to not lose things, is to have a lot of them, so that wherever I am, there is a tape measure or a pencil or a journal. So I do just record everything in there that seems to be of interest. It might be ideas for things I might make.

I take them with me when I go to museums and draw, and drawings are in there. I love doing that. That is one of my favorite things to do, because I really look at whatever it is I'm looking at. I mean, I wouldn't look at something for an hour if I weren't drawing it. But I have made friends with that Chinese ceramics funeral object that I happened-you know, it was in the Guggenheim when I was there in such-and-such a day, and I spent half an hour drawing it. And I know that in a way that I would never have known if I just was walking past. So I love to do that.

Then I have got my journals that are interspersed with these little pictures. There is writing and then there will be a drawing. It's such a-if nothing else, it's a souvenir of that trip and the date-the Guggenheim, and I can remember that moment of being there. And then there will be some thoughts-usually my own thoughts are not very interesting to me later. And sometimes I copy quotes out of books, so that if I have got my journal in my city bag and I have got to wait for the subway, I can take it out and just read what Peter Schjeldahl said about somebody in some review that I copied out, or read what Giacometti said about making sculpture. And those are nice, too.

Also when you come back to things five years later, you're not the same person that you were when you wrote

them down. So a lot of times I see different stuff in them than what I saw the first time around. And then there were nice little objects-the little books, that I hope may-you know, maybe for grandchildren or great-grandchildren or something-they may be something that they would value some day.

MS. HANZAL: A journal provides a little slice of what was going on in your life at that particular juncture.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, exactly.

MS. HANZAL: Exactly. Could you talk a bit about good advice that you have received?

MR. TROTMAN: I need to refresh my memory. Well, just about everything that Martin Puryear said. [Laughs.]

MS. HANZAL: What about, "Make it new," by way of Ezra Pound.

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, that was Ezra Pound who said that first. But when Martin was looking at the figure that I had, he said, make it new. And so I remember. And that is one of the things about art-is that it does have to constantly renew itself. Time is rolling on. It's a different world every minute. And for art to have any kind of entry into the world, I think it's got to be-enter it as contemporary art that reflects the world-the only doors are through the present time. And then it can come in and be part of a canon or be valued hundreds of years later. But most of the time it has to enter it. At least, even if it doesn't, even if it isn't accepted by other people at the time that it's done, at least the artist-say [Vincent] van Gogh, whose work was not accepted during his lifetime, but he was paying attention to what was going on. So he was making his work new. And it spoke to what was going on in the art world at the time. So that I thought was good advice.

What George Adams told me was that when he saw something that was a generality, that he just started losing interest in it. That put it in a way that-I don't know that that is my sensibility, but I could see that that was far more advanced than where I was. That is a sensibility that I would like to cultivate in myself. So I took that as good advice. And he's right. It's a lot more interesting. I mean, the world that we-the world that we experience is not a generalized world. Even though there are maybe McDonald's here and a McDonald's there, it's still-you know, everything is much more particularized-

[Audio break, tape change.]

MS. HANZAL: Okay, disc number four. We were talking about advice and influences.

MR. TROTMAN: Yes. Well, as I was saying, just about everything that Martin Puryear has said, I have taken as being oracular. One of the other things that he said that I liked was that you can't count on getting your energy either-he said from a gallery, but I think by extension, a museum or any kind of show circumstances. You've got to-you have got to provide the energy yourself, however you can, to make the work and have it to present to people, and you can't expect the circumstances to give it-the circumstances of an exhibition.

MS. HANZAL: A deadline?

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, either a deadline or the great glory of having a show at blah blah place or some other place. I had found myself falling into that trap of if I could only get a show at such and such, or if only I could have this or that dealer, you know, take an interest in me.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: So, again, that just-that throws the responsibility back on me to come up with the good work to show the dealer or curator instead of trying to think that I was going to be lifted up by somebody else. Nobody is interested in doing that.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: They've got lots and lots of people approaching them all the time, and so I have to be an adult about it and not parentalize other people that are going to either give me permission or provide the energy for me to work.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: So that was a good thing to hear.

And this isn't exactly advice, because I read it, but Goethe was a great aphorist and he had one that was in German. It was, *Ohne hast, aber ohne rast*-which means, never hurry, but also never rest. And I liked that because especially what I do just takes so much time, so not a good idea to get in a rush over it. I mean, sometimes deadlines do help you get stuff done, but always to-always be working on it. So to me it's like I'm

always sort of on vacation or it's always sort of the weekend, because I get to do stuff I love, but I also work every day when I'm on vacation and when it's the weekend. So it's kind of the state of being relaxed, which is a good state of mind to be in-for me to be into work, but also to always keep working because of that time, you just-you need all of those-all those hours to make it happen.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: But if you love the work, that's not a curse; that's a blessing.

MS. HANZAL: Definitely.

MR. TROTMAN: So one of my favorite things to do when we go-sometimes my wife-I'm not the instigator of vacations-will rent a house at the beach or something, and I always take work with me. And I'm just in a much better mood if I can go, when I get antsy, to go do some work or have a little something going on at a table out on the deck-you know, go jump in the ocean and have the family doing family things around me, but to still not be cut off from my work, because I need to work to stay balanced in the world. I have a psychological need to do it, so I've found that helpful.

And the other thing was a Kafka quote-and I may not have it exactly right here, but the point was that he compared working at one's art to praying. And I don't think he meant it in the sense of, like, asking God for something, but that your work that you did, you really-you have to do it because it gives you something, because it feels good in some way to do it, not because it brings you any rewards. That was what I took it to mean. Of course, the best advice is always stuff that's ambiguous, that's always kind of oracular, because then you adapt it to your-

MS. HANZAL: To your specific situation?

MR. TROTMAN: -yeah, your circumstances. But what I took it to mean was, number one, that working is holy or sacrosanct, and that it was not-that you did it for its own reasons, because it was what you did when you were quiet and with yourself and-I suppose a prayer, I guess literally, does mean asking for something, and I guess I would say that in my work I'm asking for something. I don't necessarily expect to get what I'm asking for, and I'm not exactly sure what I'm asking for, but I guess it's to create meaning or to make some kind of meaning out of my own experience in the world, and I guess-it's been a long time since I have done any religious praying. I have before, but it's been quite a while. But just that place that you go when you-when you're really down, only do the things that are really, really important to you. And I think that's where-for me, where the art ought to come from, that it ought to be about the things that are ultimately important to the artist.

So those were things-I love advice and I value advice and always look for advice. Sometimes I take advice from places where people don't mean it as advice, but I take it that way, which does kind of bring us-if I can bring the segue back to the people that have been important to me, the mentors which I have mentioned before, who have basically been Sam Maloof-he was the first one-James Surls, Martin Puryear, Judith Shea, and-some other people, though, that have been important to me are friends and especially Jane, my wife, who is my best friend, who is patient beyond belief with listening to everything that I think. When I need to tell somebody, she will listen to me. And I know it must get very tedious for her, but she's a very good sport about listening, and in articulating it to her I get to say it to myself, and that helps me to think through things.

So she knows all the ups and downs, and if I see somebody-you know, *Art in America* or *Art Forum*, and I see something in an ad that sends me into a plunge of despair because so and so got my idea, or it's so much better than anything I did, you know, she's always there for me and always listens and always talks me through it, all my ups and downs, and that kind of support-you know, I do it for her, too, so it's part of being married. But I don't take it for granted, and it far outweighs what I've gotten from any other one person.

And then also, on a critical level, I place a lot of value-since Jane does hear all of the things that I'm thinking about-I mean, she knows what's important to me art-wise, and we-a lot of the art experiences that I've had, she's been-we've been together, and we go to museums together and go to New York together a lot. But what I was going to say was that I think that Jane has got an intuitive intelligence-it's not a book intelligence so much but really an intuitive sense of what works and what doesn't work. And she's very honest in her response to what she considers to be bullshit and not bullshit. And a lot of times she'll come-a week or 10 days is a long time for me to go without her coming to the studio for a visit, and a lot of times when she does come, what I do is I watch her face when she sees what's here. I don't look at the work; I look at her and try to see how she responds to it. And I think-I know sometimes, especially if she knows that I need an emotional lift, that she will tell me things to give me the lift.

But I think I can see in her face whether she has a gut-level positive or negative response to what she's seeing. And I don't know-I haven't said to her that I look at her face, because I don't want her to know that that's what I'm watching, but I really am looking intently as she's looking. And we don't always agree about things, and I

think that I am more cerebral in what I do, just in my way of being in the world than she is, but I never take her reaction lightly, and if she doesn't respond to something, I may still go ahead and do it, but I take note that she didn't respond, and I bear that in mind and I give it several more questions in my own mind if she's not with me, because I think she's got a pretty genuine sense of what works and what doesn't.

And I'd say also for Nat, too-I value his eye. He's got a-and this has been a recent development, though, since he's been at the Guggenheim and everything. But he doesn't-when he comes to visit, he'll usually kind of swing through, and it's very light and casual, and then I'll corner him and get him to talk to me about stuff. But I've noticed especially in looking at art in New York with him-and he sees a lot more than I do, so anything that he tells me, I pay attention to and I value that. It's a different kind of response than Jane's response. I think Jane, I'm looking for her-a deep-level connection or not connection, and Nat is more-his is more cerebral, but he's developing a really, really good eye, much better than mine.

And then there would be one other person-who is a friend from a long time ago-named Jan Detter, who lives in Winston-Salem, and I first got to know her when she was director of the Piedmont Crafts Council, which I was a member of a long, long time ago. And Jan is a-you don't by any chance know her?

MS. HANZAL: I don't.

MR. TROTMAN: She'll just-[laughs]-sometimes I don't want to hear from Jan and she'll talk to me anyway, and when she decides I need a lecture, she will give me a lecture and she'll call me on the phone and let me have it, whether I want it or not. But I do know enough to know that even though she can overwhelm me, it is good to pay attention and to listen. For instance, one thing that she did-she'll kind of jerk me by the collar and tell me about myself, whether I want to hear it or not. She can make me really mad, and I think I probably could make her mad, too.

But still, you know, looking over my life thus far, the people that have been an influence, she has definitely been one, and she told-at one point-our relationship kind of goes through periods of being on and then subsiding for years, and then being on again, but she told me to definitely get out there and socialize with people more and to quit being such a hermit and just get my ass out there and mix it up and not do a reverse snob thing against people that are wealthy, which I'm totally guilty of. She said that they're no different from anybody else. A lot of them are asses and a lot of them are very nice, very interesting people, and not to write people off, you know, just kind of a stereotypical thing. That was one thing she told me.

Another thing she told me-this was earlier in my figurative sculpture, but she knew me from furniture days-was that I needed to make it sexy. And what she meant by that-it was like the erotics thing I was talking about-I needed to have a good time with what I was doing and to look like I was having a good time and to take joy in the work that I was doing. I was trying so hard to get it right. I tried to get the proportions right, and, I don't know, get the carving right.

And she took me to antique store in Greensboro [NC] called Faison's Antiques that had some really nice folk art and some Italian stuff, some from the 18th and 19th century, saints, some darkie art, some folk art-some pretty refined, some not, and a great mix of things. It was made by people that were totally anonymous that I thought was just way better than anything than I've ever done, and I just felt very humbled by-you know, these were not-I guess some of that stuff could have gone into a museum context, but it was still being sold as an antique. It's a decorative item to put in your house-maybe some hands that probably came from a sculpture in Italy somewhere that had-you know, the church that had clothing on it and the hands were just-but they were much better than any of the hands I carve.

And Jan wasn't giving a lecture. She just took me to look, and it was in that connection with "make it sexy," let it show that you're enjoying what you're doing, you know? And I must say that that was-I didn't like it; it didn't feel good to have somebody take me out and tell me that. But she was right, and I'm glad that I listened. She's like a coach, sort of, whether I want her to be or not. Sometimes it really does piss me off, like, why are you telling me this? But she has just decided that-you know, like I'm her student-it's kind of parental, too, but she has just decided that it's her role in life to tell me these things, and who else is going to tell me? And so that's been important too.

So I would say that of the people department, that those have been very important people. And that was all that I have to say about that.

MS. HANZAL: Okay.

MR. TROTMAN: As far as the market, which was one of the questions, I have no sense of what the world is doing out there in terms of-I know for me it was-first it was about selling the object. I feel more like now it's about selling myself first and then the object-you know, as people say that.

MS. HANZAL: Right.

MR. TROTMAN: It's the personal contact first and then the-whatever money changes hands is later but an outgrowth of that. It's not about somebody walking up and seeing something and saying, I want that, which it used to be when I was more doing craft stuff at craft fairs.

MS. HANZAL: Right. Is there any advice that you would like to leave at this juncture?

MR. TROTMAN: Yeah, I mean, it's the advice that I guess I've been given in another Ezra Pound quote: "What thou lovest well remains. The rest is dross." And dross is the word-in the metallurgy, in the refining process, the slag is the dross. It's the waste that rises to the top as you refine the metal out of the ore. The dross is a waste product. So basically it's what you love that's important to you, and yet it is so hard, number one, to figure out what that is, and it's so hard to have the courage to go for that when you can understand what it is. It's not that that's an easy process, but as I make my way along, that's what it is.

MS. HANZAL: You were fine.

MR. TROTMAN: Thank you. [Laughs.] But, yeah, really that's all you've got-that's all you've got is what you love.

MS. HANZAL: Great advice. Thanks very much.

MR. TROTMAN: Thanks. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...July 18, 2006