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Oral history interview with Tom Eckert, 2007  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Tom Eckert on June 19, 2007. The interview took place at the artist's home and studio in Tempe, Arizona, and was conducted by Jo Lauria 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.

Tom Eckert and Jo Lauria 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

JO LAURIA: This is Jo Lauria interviewing Tom Eckert at his artist studio located at his home in Tempe, Arizona, on Tuesday, June 19 [, 2007].

Tom, for the record, could you pronounce your name?

TOM ECKERT: Eckert.

MS. LAURIA: And do you like to be called Tom?

MR. ECKERT: Tom, I usually go by Tom, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: Well, let's start out by the simplest of questions. Where and when were you born?

MR. ECKERT: I was born April 10, 1942, in Chicago, Illinois. A suburb of Chicago, actually, a place called Elmwood Park, and grew up in an old bungalow-type house with an attic and a basement, and just ran in a pack with the rest of the kids. It was kind of, really a nice, nice way to grow up in that neighborhood.

MS. LAURIA: And how did you come to your career as an artist and an educator?

MR. ECKERT: Oh, it's been kind of a wind-y road, I guess you could say. [Laughs.] But I guess I started at an early age with interest in making things, and I always loved drawing things and pencils and paper and, you know, my mom - you know, instead of toys like a lot of other kids, I would get, like, paint sets and watercolor sets and brushes. So that was sort of the root beginning, and then my relatives all kind of hopped on it, and at some point, one of my cousins gave me an oil paint set, and that was a big day in my life when I got that paint set.

But I suppose the real beginning started, aside from of all that, making things and the painting and the early drawing kind of things, when I was a Cub Scout. My den mother happened to be a painter, and I was so intrigued. During one of our meetings, I was looking at some of her work, and when I got home, I asked my mom, I said, gee, you know, it's just amazing that someone can do that; do you think she could teach me how to do that? And so my mother, God rest her and bless her, she said, well, I'll give her a call and see what she has to say about that. Her name was Mrs. Dergner, D-E-R-G-E-R, and so she called Mrs. Dergner, and Mrs. Dergner said, yeah, I'd be happy to do that, but it's going to cost; it's going to be a dollar a lesson. [They laugh.]

So I would go with my dollar every Saturday morning, and we would have an art lesson session, and she taught me about painting and she taught me - you know, I did a contest once; it was like an illustration for an ad, and I didn't win but had a good time making the piece for the contest. I did several paintings and I just really got into it. And that really was kind of the launch, even though I didn't know it at the time, and so then things kind of developed from there.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I guess it would be fair to say that you grew up in a very supportive environment of your artistic aptitude -

MR. ECKERT: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: And that you were encouraged.

MR. ECKERT: Yeah, up to a point. I think when I was a kid, very supportive, but then as I got older, things tended to change a little bit and there was more of an interest in - for my parents - in having me pursue more lucrative directions. They were worried about how I would support myself as an artist and all that. I had serious questions about the same.

It's like, well, what will you do for income doing such things? And so after I graduated high school, I decided that

college really wasn't for me. Actually, I'm the first in our family to go to college and the university, and so I decided really what I wanted to be was a cabinetmaker. And so my mother, again, she was very supportive of this.

So we went out and rented a whole bunch of equipment, and I set up what I called my fresh air workshop in the carport of their home, and I had this little rickety table saw with a rusty blade and just some basic equipment, and I started making stereo cabinets, and then I made a couple and decided that maybe I could make some income from this.

And so I went to some of the various audio shops - this was some time in the early '60s - and found that there was interest there, and so I started kind of a little custom furniture business there in the carport of my parents' house, and loved the wood and loved working with the wood.

In high school - my real educational background in woodworking actually started in high school with a six-week class in woodworking. It was part of a general shop class that they had in high school at the time, and with that I learned some basics about table saws and some basic things about general woodworking equipment, and that was enough to get me started with my own endeavors. So I made these cabinets and I had these clients coming to me, and then at some point, I figured out I was making 35 cents an hour and figured - [laughs] - that wasn't going to do. So -

MS. LAURIA: This is post-high school?

MR. ECKERT: This is right after high school. Yeah, I guess I -

MS. LAURIA: And which high school? Is this in Chicago?

MR. ECKERT: No, this was in, this was actually in Arizona. I moved as a kid to Arizona and went through grade school and so forth - Catholic grade school, parochial school. And then I went through a public high school, West Phoenix High School, in Phoenix. And so after graduating high school, this is what I thought I would rather do as opposed to - I had two choices. One was college, and the other was the military, and my dad was pushing hard for the military - [laughs] - which scared the heck out of me.

MS. LAURIA: And the basic shop course that you had in high school, did that teach you basic tooling, or did you have to learn that experience and how to use the equipment on your own?

MR. ECKERT: Oh, I had to learn the hands-on part. I mean, it was a survey class. We did six weeks of wood shop and six weeks of metal shop, and it was just this kind of a survey of all the different shop offerings they had. And that was the only training that I really had with the wood. It was really enlightening because I could really see some of the things available. I didn't know about a table saw and how one of those would work, and so I really had to teach myself the actual use of those things, the machines, and the skill; you can't learn the skill in just a very short time like that. It takes some time - it's sort of like driving a car, takes some practice to get skillful at it.

So anyway, back to the cabinet experience again. I started wondering, well, what is it that could make this more lucrative? I decided I was really trying to compete with modern production and assembly line kind of things and production shops and that there was no way I could really do that, and the only way I could really come close, in terms of an income, would be by coming up with something very special and very unique. And that got me to thinking about design and more creative parts of it. So then I decided to go to school, and so I registered at Arizona State University [Tempe, AZ], and totally blew my first semester. I just figured that I could make passing grades by sitting in the coffee shop and fooling around, and totally undisciplined and just totally blew it, and they gave me all Fs for the first semester. And then I left early; I didn't even bother to finish up a semester.

And so there I was, sort of like bouncing around, wondering what to do with my life, and decided that I really needed to get back into school and that it wasn't such a bad thing after all. So I decided to go to junior college instead of back to the university. So I went to Phoenix College [Phoenix, AZ], and that's where I met probably the most important person in my life, in terms of a career. It was a fellow by the name of William Dunning - William V. Dunning, in fact - and he was just an incredible teacher. He was so inspiring, and I guess he saw something in me that he thought was special and just really kind of put me on course for the rest of my education, and it's like he had real strong belief in me.

MS. LAURIA: What was he teaching?

MR. ECKERT: He was teaching painting and design, and he was only there for the time I was there, and I think - I'm not sure why he left, but it's really kind of strange, you know, that we would meet and just be there for the time. We're still in contact with each other, and he taught for many years at Central Washington. Central Washington University, in Ellensburg, Washington, and we're still in contact, and he was an extremely

accomplished painter but a wonderful professor, teacher, and I learned so much from him. He's authored a number of books that are really prominent. I think Stanford used one of his books as a text in painting. So he's probably the bright spot in my life in terms of developing a career.

MS. LAURIA: So he got you on track

MR. ECKERT: He got me on track -

MS. LAURIA: - to think about going to art school?

MR. ECKERT: - to major in it and to really pursue it as a lifelong career. I had a very strange notion about what an artist was supposed to be, and he showed me a different view. And it was really exciting, and it just made my whole life and really created that direction for me. So when I began, again, it's like painting and drawing - it's like the wood thing, I just figured cabinets weren't for me at this point again, and working with the wood, while I really enjoyed it, it wasn't particularly -

MS. LAURIA: Imaginative?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, I didn't have a strong need to go that way, and I really loved, again, the painting and drawing, so I went all the way through. I got my B.F.A. [Bachelor of Fine Arts] in painting and drawing, and then after I finished that, I decided I really wanted to stay in school and get a graduate degree. So I did the M.F.A. [Master's of Fine Arts] in sculpture.

MS. LAURIA: Still at Arizona State University?

MR. ECKERT: Still at Arizona State University, so -

MS. LAURIA: So you went all eight years?

MR. ECKERT: Yep.

MS. LAURIA: And in one of the articles that has been written about you, Tom, you said you see your still life as sculptures that are paintings, so three-dimensional paintings -

MR. ECKERT: Three-dimensional, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: - and that the evolution came for you when you were painting and started to do painting on curved canvases or canvases which were also dimensional, so that the step from -

MR. ECKERT: Yeah, yeah, it's not as though I woke up one morning and decided to be a sculptor between my B.F.A. and my M.F.A. There was an evolutionary part where the canvases actually - I was actually making objects and painting on the objects and dealing with Morie-screen kind of patterns and mechanisms - kinetic pieces and painted and constructed - and it was one of my professors, late in my senior year, who said, I don't think you're really a painter anymore - [they laugh] - it's good work, but it's not painting.

So it got me to thinking about, well, if that's where the excitement is, just go with it. And so that's what I did, and so when I started my graduate studies, it was in sculpture - I made a lot of objects, kind of a combination between painting and construction kind of things.

MS. LAURIA: But wood was always the material?

MR. ECKERT: And wood, and again, it's like, well, why wood? I guess it's just because it was there. I'm not - I don't really think I have a strong connection or I don't have a love affair with it in the way that maybe [James] Krenov would as he writes in his books and he expresses this sort of love affair with the material, and I don't think that really fits me. I think I've always viewed wood as more of an expressive medium. I like it; I mean, I really like it a lot, and you might even say it borders on love. I really don't look at, say, a piece of Cocobolo and just imagine what I could make out of that. It usually works the reverse of that; I come up with an idea and then wonder what I'm going to use to make that idea, so -

MS. LAURIA: But you're on the other side of the - well, it's more or less a dichotomy between you and what some wood turners like the late Bob Stocksdale would do. Stocksdale would pick up a piece of walnut, and look at that stump and say, I want this to be a beautiful bowl; I can see the graining pattern. And for you, the wood is not about the figural grains or about the color or the naturalness of the inclusions. It's more about how you can utilize that wood to realize the conception you have.

MR. ECKERT: Right. Yeah, it all has to do with the idea, I think, or the concept that I'm working from, and I think it's like, every material that you include in your art really puts out information; it says something, and it's like

steel: What do you think of immediately when you see a piece of steel? And it's very different kind of a feeling that you have for a piece of steel than you would for a piece of wood, you know. Wood has a certain warmth about it, and maybe you look at a piece of hardwood and you think furniture. Because the way we're indoctrinated on a visual level, I think, all these things kind of come into the responses, those visual responses.

MS. LAURIA: But you also knew how to work with wood, so it seemed like a natural path to take.

MR. ECKERT: A natural direction with it, yeah.

MS. LAURIA: Because you had the access to the materials at that point, and the equipment at ASU?

MR. ECKERT: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: Did you use their workshop, or you also -

MR. ECKERT: No, I had to build it. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: You mentioned that you built the program there.

MR. ECKERT: Yeah.

MS. LAURIA: Maybe you could talk about that evolution.

MR. ECKERT: Sure. Now, in terms of the teaching, when I first began teaching - and back in those days - I was hired in the early, very early '70s, and pretty much hired in the elevator, which they don't do any more. Now they do a national search and all that. But the way I was hired, I was headed up to the third floor on the elevator, literally, and the director said, well, how would you like to teach here next year? And I said, sounds good to me. [They laugh.] And that's pretty much how I began. Of course, that created all kinds of political problems, too, teaching with - alongside the people who taught you. It makes for not a very good situation. But that's another whole story.

But in terms of the program, then, and in terms of how I began, I was sort of like the jack-of-all-programs, and at one point I taught fibers and I taught drawing; I taught jewelry classes, metal classes, and we did - I had an intro to crafts program that I taught. It got so popular that I had six TAs - teaching assistants - as part of the program, and we had a syllabus that we worked from, and it was really dynamic. And then everything got specialized. We hired in a jeweler and a fiber person, so the natural direction for me was the wood, and when I began the program, I started with a sanding machine and a band saw up on the third floor of what is still the art building there. We had such -

MS. LAURIA: What years are we talking about?

MR. ECKERT: This is again in the '70s, you know, this is still before the '80s and it's - we had so much excitement, enthusiasm, and we put work benches down the hall and we made so much noise and so much dust that we - actually, we got thrown out. They had to build us a building or terminate the program, so they decided that there was so much enthusiasm about it that they would rather go with the building.

So they built this building, and it was supposed to be just a temporary - 10 years and then on to something bigger and better - but we've been there ever since. [Laughs.] We've grown to love it, and we've made it into a really nice - some people have said it's probably one of the nicest wood shops in the Southwest now. It's, like, state-of-the-art equipment; we've got lathes and wide belt sander and 20-inch band saws and a bench room and refrigerated, and it's just, it's a nice place. I think it's really a nice environment for students to work in.

MS. LAURIA: Is the woodworking under the aegis of the art department or under design? How is it structured?

MR. ECKERT: It's part of the School of Art, and it was a stand-alone program for years. Now we're connected to the sculpture program, but it's just a paper connection. But not really in terms of curriculum. We have all our own classes, from the beginning all the way through graduate. It's a separate space, separate budget.

MS. LAURIA: And do you head this program, Tom?

MR. ECKERT: Yeah, I do.

MS. LAURIA: So how many students go through the program, and do they get a degree in fine arts or do they get a degree in sculpture? How is it determined?

MR. ECKERT: Well, it's broken up. The undergraduate portion of it is pretty much just part of a B.F.A. program, and it's really not specific to wood in that sense. It would be more specific, I guess, to sculpture. If they had to

write a specialty, it would be sculpture with a wood emphasis. Then in terms of the graduate, it's just purely a wood degree, and I usually average four graduate students in the program, in the M.F.A. program, and graduated three M.F.A.s this last year. Two of them found jobs, which is nice. [They laugh.] I work hard to try to get them jobs, too, if I can, you know, so -

MS. LAURIA: In the teaching profession?

MR. ECKERT: In teaching, yeah. They usually like to teach. So it's - I have to say it's just been wonderful. The last years - it hasn't always been wonderful, you know. It's like, I've gone through lots of bumps and problems, but it's just been fantastic. Probably the last 10 years or so have just been incredible.

MS. LAURIA: And do you feel that teaching has also added to your own enlightenment about your material and your medium?

MR. ECKERT: Oh, absolutely. I get people coming in all the time with information that I didn't know about, and it's just a tremendous resource. I think we kind of view it as we're all in it together, and it's kind of a sharing, giving, very happy time, you know. The classes are really wonderful. Lots of enthusiasm and laughing and music. It's probably more like a party than a class. I hate to say it. We have a microwave, and it's like, we have a refrigerator full of cold soda that we keep stocked at 35 cents so they don't have to go over and put \$2 in the machine to get a cold soda.

MS. LAURIA: But that's probably because they spend a lot of time working in the studio.

MR. ECKERT: In the studio, yes. But it's just kind of a nice thing that we've got going. I have an assistant that I work closely with, and he keeps the machines up and running, and he also works with the students on more technical levels so I can talk more about the art part and ideas. We've just got a terrific team. He's just the perfect person for the job and I feel so happy to have him.

MS. LAURIA: And what's his name?

MR. ECKERT: Tony. Tony Perez. P-E-R-E-Z.

MS. LAURIA: And I guess it would be a foregone conclusion to say that you think that a university-trained artist is different than one who comes out[side] of academia. I know you probably wouldn't make a value judgment, but what are some of the differences, if you meet someone who is totally self-taught, not having gone through the university system, and someone who has?

MR. ECKERT: I think the university provides a package of things that you come out with as a student. And I think having to do with the core program, it's all those basic design kind of things and drawing, and I think drawing is so important. I think just maybe if you had to boil it all down, just down to some really important points, it's like a good excuse to focus on your art for the time you spend as a student and you don't have to make excuses to anybody, family or spouses, you know. Say, well, I'm a student studying art. You don't have to justify it beyond that point. I think the focus is really essential and really a strong part of the whole experience. Especially on the graduate level, where you just eat it and live it and breathe it for that three years that you're in the program, and you can just see the transformation happen because of that focus. And I think people come prepared to spend that time, you know.

Usually they have money saved or they're getting money from family. They don't have too many financial concerns. They have loans that they take out sometimes. But you know, you don't have to worry so much about where the rent money's coming from because, after all, you're a student and you're not supposed to have to worry about those things. So I think that's a very, very strong part of it, is just that focus that comes with a program, especially when you make a commitment to it. I think maybe stronger on the graduate level than the undergraduate level.

MS. LAURIA: And also I guess you could say that artists, having gone through a university system, have already in place a community, or at least a community they can take advantage of, or know their peers and how to go out and learn.

MR. ECKERT: There's a lot of camaraderie that happens, friendships that happen -

MS. LAURIA: You're not working in isolation.

MR. ECKERT: And even my two graduates who are graduating, they found future wives, and that's very important too. It's like, this kind of pairing off that happens I think at that age level. And it's really beautiful to see. I just feel so privileged to be part of that. But I can't say I've always felt this way.

MS. LAURIA: But you chose to go through the university system, obviously, rather than to continue on as a self-

made, self-taught artist. So you must have at some point realized that there were, perhaps, design issues or conceptual issues, that you get a broader sense of being in an academic setting.

MR. ECKERT: Well, not so much when I first began. I wasn't that idealistic at all. It was just sort of like, well, I've got a wife and a kid and how are we going to make ends meet; how am I going to pay the rent? And you know, it's like, what about the kid? What's going to happen to him? How am I going to educate him, and all those other concerns. So I have to say that when I first went into teaching, it was just a very practical judgment that I made, and it wasn't always easy. There were so many times when I wished I could have been somewhere in the studio working, and I threatened to quit so many times, you know, just focus on my art more and because of the time constraints, you know, that teaching imposes. And it was - it was a real balancing act.

The nice part about teaching at this particular university is it's a research school, and so what that means is publish or perish. So you have to have what they call research. And our research is really defined as creative activities. An exhibition record and a record of professional activities is really a mandate from the university, which is something - I don't really need that mandate because I got in it because of my art initially. But it does put a different spin on it, I think, as opposed to just doing your creative work as an option. And I'm really glad that that mandate is there, because it's the kind of place that I really like being connected with. It's been good.

MS. LAURIA: What would you cite, if you had to identify one of the most rewarding educational experiences in your career?

MR. ECKERT: One of the most rewarding educational experiences would probably, in looking over the whole thing, would be my time spent with Bill Dunning as my mentor and what he did for me. I mean, really changed my life. I just have to figure something really good to do for this man at some point. I feel like I owe him.

MS. LAURIA: So have you mentored anybody in your professional career?

MR. ECKERT: Oh, yes. The graduates, it's very much a one-on-one kind of teaching activity, and I get a number of independent study students from other parts of the School of Art from other areas, other disciplines - ceramics, the metals program, and even painting, painting and drawing. I work with these people. We have long talk sessions and try to give and share what we can and try to - try to help whenever I can, but it is a mentoring kind of process with those independent people.

MS. LAURIA: So they have the liberty of taking classes or independent study in other disciplines at ASU?

MR. ECKERT: Yes. It's a 500 level class and it's just like a -

MS. LAURIA: The graduate level.

MR. ECKERT: Yes. It's on the graduate level, so it would be an independent kind of experience for them. We arrange the time, and it usually means my going to their studio or them bringing work in, and we get these dialogues going. Not so much a critique as just talking about the work, just seeing what we can do to take it somewhere, you know. Hopefully to a higher level if we can.

MS. LAURIA: And do you teach in the program, do the students have the availability of the classes to learn all different facets of woodworking, from furniture to maybe nonobjective art objects?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, and because it's a solo area, I think what I would like to do at some point is start a furniture component to it, but I think it would require another faculty member. To make it as inclusive as possible, I've just come up with Wood, and that really encompasses a tremendous range of possibilities, anything from log constructions, you know, on a sculptural level to finely cut dovetails, and we pretty much work with the students, with all of that, anything they want to do.

I had a graduate student from Beijing one year and he set up - you know, we have this large A-frame kind of hoist in our work yard, and he was working from these giant logs, doing larger-than-life figures, female figures, almost as though you could imagine a nude female figure with - if you were to pour honey on the head and it would run down, you know, like what would that form be. And sort of -

MS. LAURIA: Something dripped.

MR. ECKERT: Dripping, you know, lack of detail. There's this wonderful form. Then he'd bleach them so they were just almost like - very ethereal, kind of almost ghostlike and they're just magnificent. He'd hog those out, rough them out with chain saws and then fine carve them, and sand and polish and eventually bleach. Just wonderful pieces.

MS. LAURIA: Were they shown in an exhibition at the school for his M.F.A. show?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, for his M.F.A. show.

MS. LAURIA: Speaking about schooling and some aspect of it, have you ever had any involvement with crafts centers, like for instance Penland School of Crafts [Penland, NC], or Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME], or Arrowmont [School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN], or even Pilchuk Glass School [Stanwood, WA]?

MR. ECKERT: Arrowmont, I was a consultant in building their wood shop at Arrowmont when Sandy Blain was there. I don't know if you know Sandy or not, but when Sandy Blain was there, she had me over to help design that woodshop that they've got now. In terms of the teaching at these various places, I've been invited to most of them, like Haystack and Penland. But I just have always felt the need to spend time in the studio in the summers.

MS. LAURIA: Right, because you're a full-time teacher.

MR. ECKERT: Yes, and I teach nine months out of the year and I just really, really look forward to the summer, when I can just come out here and whale on my own. It's so good.

MS. LAURIA: Without distraction.

MR. ECKERT: Without the distraction of the curriculum.

MS. LAURIA: Now do you find that any of your travels to different countries or different states have an impact on your life and/or your work?

MR. ECKERT: Travel to different states, no, not really. Sometimes - I think, in terms of the whole creative process, it takes a lot of work and that work can happen. I mean, you don't have to necessarily put yourself in a different environment for that to happen. It's just - it's more of a mental process, I think.

One experience that I had, it was Libby Cooper - Mobilia [Gallery, Cambridge, MA] - was having a book show and she wanted me to do a book piece, and I had the time to do it, so I thought, well, that could be interesting. And so I just tormented over it. I thought about it, and I got some books and looked at them and tried to think about what a book was about, and so I did some sketches and drawings, fighting with the books. I just felt tormented by the whole thing. This went on for maybe a week, this anxiety and this kind of mental torment, and just this kind of hard work, you know, really.

And then finally one night I was out and running. I try to run every now and then, get some exercise. I was out running and then after my run I was walking home and then all of a sudden the idea - an idea hit. It was like a bolt, and that's when I came up with this piece, Numinous Levitation [1999], with the books and the floating book kind of thing. I just got a mental image with all the detail, and I couldn't wait. I just ran all the way home to the studio here and I had to set that sucker up. I was afraid I was going to lose it.

But I think the point I'm trying to make is that I've never really had any luck just sitting in one spot. Usually when I go to other places, I get so wound up in the place that I, you know - little on a creative level comes out of it. It's like my process has to be more focused and I have to go through a certain amount of work, like that mental work or even physical work, to get it going. Sometimes it's just totally fruitless, and then at some point -

MS. LAURIA: It appears.

MR. ECKERT: It happens, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Some artists will travel and get inspiration from the light, especially photographers. They'll say there's nothing like the light in Paris. Or artists who might get inspired by different kinds of patterns. I know a lot of artists who said they go to countries like Morocco, where there's this ornate patterning everywhere. Or the color palette. But your art is not necessarily one-and-one relationship to your environment, in the sense that it's not reflective of the landscape. It's much more cerebral space.

MR. ECKERT: It's more of a mental conception or mental processing of it, I guess, rather than physically putting myself in that environment. I think if I'm physically in that environment, I just get so wound up in the environment that somehow that experience just, sort of, would elude anything else that would come of it, probably. Unless I would use it up the road on a subconscious level, which is also possible. But it's amazing what happens, like I think a lot of the drapery kind of stuff that I do kind of has to do with the Catholic school - especially during Lent, when all the statutes and religious objects are covered. They're shrouded, and I think that's where some of this might come from. And I only say that because someone pointed that out to me and I said, well, yeah, that's probably it. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, also we talked a little bit about this off-tape, so we should mention it now - that the influence



of the still lifes and the luminosity and the detail harks back to Flemish painters. Do you want to talk about the influence of Flemish painting, or early American - not so early American, but, you know, the turn-of-the-century American realist painters and how that has affected your vision?

MR. ECKERT: Well, yes, and that would have to do with previous experience - and again, school experiences. I used to sleep through art history, and I'd kind of doze off. But when the Flemish painters went up and the Dutch painters went up, it just really did knock me off my chair. Even in slide form, that light and that warmth and that kind feeling that you get from that depicted light. It's just absolutely amazing, and it did come through for me. And I think, again, it wasn't so much on a conscious level. It was most of all subconscious. When you start picking palettes and colors and all that and you stand back, and, yeah, it's just kind of cold. And then on go the transparencies of more warmth, and I think that's where it all comes from.

MS. LAURIA: That sense, too, that the Flemish really had a delicious kind of way of doing detail that was very seductive and -

MR. ECKERT: Oh, absolutely.

MS. LAURIA: And that's something I think you strive for in your still life pieces.

MR. ECKERT: Yes. I'm very interested, too, and I don't know whether this is part of my heredity that seeped out, but again, it's like the German carvers. And I didn't put all this together until recently.

MS. LAURIA: Like Kirchmeyer?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, yes. And especially the - even during the Medieval period, it's like all the religious art in Germany and statuary, and it's all carved out of wood. Linden wood, the same wood I'm using. And that was not a conscious connection that I made. That was just - it just totally happened. It just seemed like the kind of wood that I needed to do what I was trying to do. Now why I'm trying to do it, I have no idea about that either, except the excitement in it, the challenge of it. I've always tried to just, kind of, go with the excitement of the work and, kind of, like, let the work go where it needs to go. Somebody else can label it. I don't even know what it is. I don't even care what it is. It's just work that I do.

MS. LAURIA: Well, people have labeled it, Tom, and I think the one description that comes up most often is "trompe l'oeil," which is the French word for deceiving the eye. And people feel that that is very much sort of a painter's concept, and in your case it would be a sculptor's concept. Can you talk about why you like to do this type of deception? Is it a need to bring people in to view and then sort of get them, you know, seduced in or sucked into your still life and then fool them?

MR. ECKERT: Well, not entirely. It's just - again, I think it has to do with, like, a combination of a lot of things. It's like when I painted - I also was interested in realism as a painter. So - so I mean, it's just kind of a natural direction that I would take, I guess, in working with this other material.

MS. LAURIA: But it is a form of trickery.

MR. ECKERT: It is. I did a talk a few years ago. I called it "30 Years of Deception," and I think, rather than trickery, I like the word deception better, because I think it is - it's more of a deception. And I think that deception becomes part of it. And I think a lot of it - you know, rather than working from that trompe l'oeil thing so much - I didn't even know what that meant until someone had to explain it to me after I was doing this kind of work. I thought it was just highly realistic and deceiving.

MS. LAURIA: But you deal with that -

MR. ECKERT: And working with illusions. The illusions get to be very important. But the illusion is the most important part of it. And I think, as I wrote in one of my statements at one point, it was like when I was a kid driving through the desert on a family vacation, I remember looking down the road and seeing what appeared to be water on the road, which, of course, was a mirage. And I couldn't be convinced until we drove and we drove and it kept staying there. The more we drove - and I thought, eventually we're going to come to water; I could swear we're going to have water on the road. Of course, there was never any water; and it just blew me away. And it really stuck with me. It just had an impact on me, and it's transferred over into some of these things, that idea, the concept of that, you know, that illusion, the mirage.

And I think a lot of what we're exposed to - we perceive it as one thing, but a lot of times it is something totally different. And that intrigues me. And I try to - I do exploit it.

MS. LAURIA: You exploit the illusion, too, by having objects rendered in your illusionistic manner that also represent illusion. For instance, the card in card tricks, or a levitation of a drapery, or a magic hat or a magic

wand. I think that already sets up the viewer to think about that there's a touch of magic here.

MR. ECKERT: Exactly. Exactly. And that just has to do with the idea that the structural qualities of wood as a material are very different than the structural qualities of fabric. And when you understand the differences between the two and then you can get tricky with it. And that excites me. I find excitement in that. I find all kinds of possibilities in it. I just feel like I'm sort of on the -I have hardly scratched the surface yet of what's possible with that in terms of suspending things and levitating things and all kinds of possibilities with that on a visual level.

MS. LAURIA: Did you ever see, or do you have a fancy for, sort of, the work that Wendell Castle was doing, the Ghost Clock [1985] that is at the Renwick Gallery [Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.], the clock that is covered by the cloth -

MR. ECKERT: Yes. I remember seeing that. But I was well into this myself, I think, before he ever started his. And again, it's like one of those things like Richard Shaw and his cards. I was, kind of, really surprised and shocked when I saw some of Richard's work after what I had been through. And I thought, well, gee, you know, somehow or another, did I assimilate some of this imagery somehow without even being conscious of it? But I don't think I did. I think it's one of those things where, you know, things happen all over the place and some things, they cross and connect.

Another experience I had with that is with Mike Cooper's. There was a point when I was -

MS. LAURIA: Michael Cooper, the woodworker, sculptor, and furniture maker?

MR. ECKERT: Exactly, yes. And I was doing guns and knives, and I was doing, kind of, a social commentary kind of image at that point, during the tank chair era, you know. And the time when I was at Cal State-Northridge [California State University, Northridge, CA], when I was at Cal State-Northridge with Tom [Tramel], and people said, oh, the work you do, you should really meet Mike Cooper. I said, who is Mike Cooper? And finally we connected, and sure enough, here is Mike doing very similar imagery. I had made what I called a bomb clock. It was like sticks of dynamite all made out of wood, but it was a fully functional clock, like a desk kind of clock. But just sort of like implied - and again, reflecting the violent culture that we're all part of, you know. It's like, every morning you open the newspaper and it's this shooting and that shooting and stabbings and war. And I think I was reflecting a lot of that in a negative sense, I guess. I think a lot of times you use imagery, use symbols in work, and sometimes it becomes ambiguous, and you could even take a look at a crucifix. And if you're an alien from space and you could say, why does this culture genuflect to that violence? And I mean, you have all sorts of questions that arise from that.

So I think as an artist, you have to be aware of that, and I wasn't. I wasn't until later.

MS. LAURIA: Do you feel your earlier work had more direct association with, let's say, a political commentary than it does now?

MR. ECKERT: Yes. Absolutely.

MS. LAURIA: I see the still lifes as being much more gentle in the sense that they're more abstract.

MR. ECKERT: Absolutely. You know, I was much more into, like, more of a social reflection, more social commentary than now.

MS. LAURIA: Such as your still life guns.

MR. ECKERT: See, there's more of a focus, I think. As you progress, you know, you kind of eliminate this and you eliminate that, and you try to get the focus as strong as you can make it. I think that's what I'm doing now. It's like I really don't want to take the time to explore those other areas now. It's just like the focus is so strong on illusions and the material.

The material's an important part of the work. I think as a wood artist, you have a couple of options with it as your expressive medium. You may have, as we were talking before, this love affair with it, as Krenov and Stocksdale, and you're actually drawn to it as - it's a compelling material. But then there's also another way to work with it, and it's sort of like the clay artist. I always like to think of my wood that I use as my clay. The wood is the vehicle for my expression rather than using it for its intrinsic beauty, as maybe Bob would. And it's not a matter of better-worse kind of judgment. It's a different approach. Different way to work with it.

MS. LAURIA: But it's interesting that you call it your plan. I mean, I understand metaphorically what you're saying, that the clay is an additive kind of art and wood is a subtractive kind of art. So you always have to keep things within something and carve away -

MR. ECKERT: Take it away.

MS. LAURIA: Take it away to actually get to the object.

MR. ECKERT: But you can do - the additive would be more of a construction, though, more of an assembly. Assemblage. But I really have to say, I love wood, though not so much for - again - its personality or intrinsic beauty - sometimes I get mad at it, because it's got knots and checks and that kind of thing - but because of what you can do with it. You know, it's like what -

MS. LAURIA: Highly manipulative?

MR. ECKERT: I think you can make anything out of it.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you can, because you have that skill level. But wood is not any easier a material to work with than anything else, I don't think.

MR. ECKERT: But I think potentially. There isn't anything I can think of that you can't make out of wood, if you really put your mind to it. You have to understand the qualities of it, the fact that it has a grain very strong in one direction and very weak in the other direction. It's like, if you have a long board and the grain's running the length of that board, you put two piers at either end, you can jump on it and it's a springboard. This thing's not going to break. But if the grain goes the other way, imagine what would happen, you know, in the same set-up. You jump on it and it just, you know, breaks.

And so it's a very, very simple kind of look at wood as a material, but it just becomes incredibly important when you're designing pieces and you need to utilize the strength of it, and so at times you're making plywood out of the wood you want to use because the grains cross each other and you don't want to have to concern yourself with grain weakness. So I think it's important. You have to understand it as a material.

[END MD01 TR01.]

MS. LAURIA: This is Jo Lauria interviewing Tom Eckert at Tom's home studio in Tempe, Arizona, on Tuesday, June 19, 2007.

So, Tom, to pick up a little bit where we left off about your focus - focusing in now. You've already eliminated social and - I should say overt social and political commentary. But the new piece that you have hanging in your studio, I notice, is comprised - it's a wall piece, a tableau of three pears. Two are paired together, and the third one is hanging, like it is levitating above the other two, with a shadow thrown behind it, cast behind it. So you already have different levels of perception and deception going on. But the thing that strikes me initially about the piece, that it functions as social commentary, because you're allowing and exploiting the idea of the pears' decay. Do you want to talk about that? Is it a conscious kind of social commentary?

MR. ECKERT: Well, not really. I guess it was just to give it more interest, I think, on a visual level. And again, it's to make it more real. It's less classical, I guess. I think a lot of what I'm inclined to make is almost classical because of the idealization that happens. I work so hard to, you know, to get the surfaces really smooth and perfect in forms, and I try to come up with these idealized forms, and I think in terms of the pears in those, like spots of aging and decay, they have more to do with less of an idealized view of it. More of a real view of it. It's like -

MS. LAURIA: View of the natural process that happens -

MR. ECKERT: Yes, that would happen, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Not like Caravaggio, who was a Mannerist painter from the post-Renaissance era; he used rotten fruit as the symbol of the rottenness and decay in society. That's not your intention.

MR. ECKERT: No. No. Just to depict, again, a sense of reality.

MS. LAURIA: And the shadow?

MR. ECKERT: Or maybe the lack of idealization. The lack of idealization as opposed to the ideal pear, you know, which should be quite symmetrical and uniform in color and without blemishes. So consequently - suggest a pear but on a very idealized level. And I was not looking for an idealized form on that. I was looking for more of a - closer to reality. The shadow was just a device to intensify the levitation of it. To trick. And again, it's like a play on what I think life is about. There is a tremendous amount of deception that goes on. It's like every day. It's like, what we assume is one thing can be something totally different, maybe sometimes even the opposite of what we're perceiving it to be.

MS. LAURIA: Does the idea of function play a role in your art, and if so, what kind of function are you playing with?

MR. ECKERT: In terms of function, say, furniture, and it's like things that you would really call - say a vessel or piece of furniture, those with a function in a practical sense. And I like to use those objects. Sometimes this is the point of departure for my art. I've tried to replicate things, and then even in the earlier work - the bomb clock, that's actually a functional clock, but it does incorporate a functionality, even in a practical way, because of the clock. And even the Tank Chair [1979], it's practical. You want to stay with -

MS. LAURIA: No, no. I was going to say, let's talk about the Tank Chair because I think it functions on so many other levels

MR. ECKERT: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And it's now in the collection of the Arizona State University Art Museum, given to them by a collector who had purchased the chair. So if you want to just talk us through the evolution of that, because I think it's a wonderful example of how your mind is working, you know, three-dimensionally all the time, on so many different levels.

MR. ECKERT: Well, that piece, too, it actually grew out of a need to make art, and I think basically that's how my process works. It's like, this need to make something is really what it's all about. And then the question always is, well, what is it you're going to make? It's sort of like, as the artist approaches the blank canvas, it's like, what kind of marks are you going to make on that, or put on that empty void, the drawing, the blank sheet of paper, and you've got the charcoal in your hand, and what kind of marks will you make?

So I really didn't have wood; I didn't have an idea when I began that piece, but I knew I had to make something. And I got so anxious and so worked up about just coming up with an idea to make something and it just wasn't happening. And so here I was by myself, locked in this empty room, and I told myself that I couldn't leave until I had something going. And that's what began it. So then finally at some point I got the glimmer of an idea, and it started out to be a furniture piece, and a chair, and then evolved, and then the idea of the tank. And I don't know where that came from. It just almost came out of nowhere, and then I just got the idea of putting the tread to the idea of the chair, and then I started drawing. And I made a bunch of rough sketches, and the whole thing kind of evolved on paper through a whole series of thumbnail sketches.

Then what really got me excited was the idea of military wheelchair, you know, it's like a handicapped, war, bad, terrible. And then mixed in with all of that was the challenge of whether I would really be even able to make the thing, because it was a complicated piece. So I had to draft the whole thing out meticulously. I still have some drawings of it around, some of my drafting-type drawings. And so on just a piece of butcher paper, very simple kind of drawing instruments, a 39-cent compass and a piece of wood for a straight edge. I drafted this whole thing out and tried to make all the parts work and mesh. And actually the whole thing - theoretically you could roll around in it.

MS. LAURIA: You could.

MR. ECKERT: You could. But I locked it up, because I didn't want people playing too much in it. You know, I was afraid they'd damage it.

MS. LAURIA: Was the motivation to make the chair to be shown in an exhibition, or was it just a challenge to yourself?

MR. ECKERT: No, I rarely make work for exhibitions. I usually make work that satisfies my needs, I guess you could say. And then, hopefully, someone will want to show it somewhere. Or even better still, show it and buy it. That's not a bad thing either.

MS. LAURIA: I mean, that definitely worked in my case, because as chief curator of the "Craft in America" exhibition, I was in the storeroom at the Arizona State University Art Museum [Tempe, AZ], and I was looking at their collection to see if I could borrow some pieces. And I had known of your work through the Dr. Lipton Collection at the LA County Museum of Art [Los Angeles, CA] when I worked with Irving Lipton, and the piece that we had at the LA County Museum was a shelf piece, with a beautiful super-illusionistic bucket and drapery, like a linen napkin over the edge and a knife.

And so when I saw the Tank Chair sitting on the shelf at ASU Art Museum storeroom, I was absolutely entranced, fascinated that it looked like it was thousands of little interlocking pieces put together in a format that was actually a functional chair but alluded to so many different things. And I loved the dichotomy, the duality I should say, the fact that a chair, which is a source of comfort, but it also represents a tank, which is a weapon, a military weapon and a source of death, and that it also becomes a wheelchair, which is to help with a disability,

which could be caused by the war machine. So now it's on view in the traveling show "Craft in America." So I think those are all things that you may not have been thinking about, the ultimate display capacity or options. But in the end, once you do create an object that is seductively appealing to curators, they do end up in exhibitions.

Now is that the only large-scale piece of furniture you've made, Tom?

MR. ECKERT: I made another - actually, I did a series of bent-laminated tables. It actually was a large S-curve, appearing to be laminated wood but really hollow. An illusion in a sense, the fact that you would assume that it was solid wood, laminated up into this S-curve, but actually when you go to pick it up, you find that it's only, like, 20 pounds or lighter. And that was a piece that was just horrendously complicated to make on a technical level, to make it totally convincing that it's a solid lamination.

And I got intrigued - you know, the minimalism of it. Again, it's like pushing the material to somewhat of an extreme. It's like the laminations. And then I did turning for quite a while, to the point where I thought I really wanted to be a studio turner, kind of. And I had a lot of success. They were selling extremely well, and a lot of galleries were interested in them.

MS. LAURIA: Vessels?

MR. ECKERT: Yes. Vessels, bowls, like maple combined with silver and I was exhibiting those all over the country, and then I just burned out. One day I just came out here in the studio and I thought, gee, I just can't do it any more. They just go round and round and I just don't know where to go with it. I know that a lot has happened in turning since my experience, but I actually had to teach myself how to do it all. I had this little book - I can't remember the fellow's first name. Last name was Golf, G-O-L-F, I think, a British fellow. And it was just a little book, and I'd stand with the book in one hand and the tool in the other, and things would sail off the lathe, and I found that if I could catch them before the third bounce, a lot of times I could save them. [They laugh.] But that was another whole life. It was like my life as a turner, and I just decided that I really couldn't take it anywhere at some point.

MS. LAURIA: It wasn't flexible enough?

MR. ECKERT: It just wasn't, yes. And then in terms of the little parts phase I went through with, like, bomb clocks and tank chairs - and like the Tank Chair, there's 2,200 parts in the tank. I counted one day. And that took me the better part of a year. It just really kind of burned me out on that one. But -

MS. LAURIA: Well, Anne Gochenour, who's the curator of the Arkansas Arts Center [Little Rock, AR], also said that you've been invited to be in some of their exhibitions on toys made by artists. And there is a sense of toyness, of playfulness, and it may be related to the parts. Can you address that a little bit?

MR. ECKERT: Well, just the parts -

MS. LAURIA: Just the sense, is it playful for you, and do you communicate that to the viewer somehow?

MR. ECKERT: With the little parts? Just toys in general? I really don't think about toys so much in terms of - I mean, I haven't in the past. It's not really been an issue in a work, but I suppose it could be. It certainly could be.

MS. LAURIA: Well, there's a seriousness to these set still lifes. They're very determined, purposeful, look as if there's a lot of deliberation that goes into the staging of them. But in other ways, like you're mentioning the Bomb Clock or the Tank Chair, there is a playfulness of the way in which things interact, you know, and connect, regardless of what the materials are. Do you feel a part of your work, too, can be about that whimsical nature, or are you trying not to emphasize that now?

MR. ECKERT: Well, I think if it's an aspect of the work, I guess I just really haven't been aware of it, you know, at this point. But -

MS. LAURIA: You would get a chuckle if you were - if you had in hand a bomb clock, because you would think to yourself, well, now that's a time bomb. It's also a clock. And there's all these little parts that go into making it up, and what does that comprise - sticks of dynamite.

MR. ECKERT: Well, what inspired the Bomb Clock, though, really had nothing to do with a toy, though. What really inspired it was the fact that I was up for a promotion that I didn't get. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Someone was toying with your promotion.

MR. ECKERT: And I thought, well, I'll show them. And I made this - it was just totally a fantasy thing with the dynamite and the clock, and it even had the little toggles. I'll have to show pictures of it. Little toggle switch. And

then inside the lid is a Van Dyke print, which is like an early photography process, of Old Main, which is one of the original buildings on campus. So all of it kind of hooks together in that sense, and it's like - and there was a time when there were a lot of bombers running around, terrorist-type bombers, bombing airports and putting bombs in lockers. So this was sort of a reflection of that, I think, on that level.

So it really didn't have much to do - although I suppose it could be construed as toylike, and the fact - I mean, it really wasn't real. My intention certainly wasn't to blow up the campus or anything.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I guess "toy" maybe the wrong word, but I just know that you'd been invited to be in these toy exhibitions, and there's a sense of fun, I guess. Using your skill to have sort of a good time with the material. And I think that delights the public. So did you make specific pieces for those exhibitions, or did you speak about your work when they had an exhibition on toys?

MR. ECKERT: It was actually more of through the students, I guess. The students, we - as a group we did all kinds of things and -

MS. LAURIA: The students of - ?

MR. ECKERT: The students at the university, yes. And we actually received a couple of awards from them for best quality and best participation and that kind of thing, which was really good for them. And we got a check, and then that money was then folded back into the program. It was just a huge thrill for all of us and it was just a nice thing.

MS. LAURIA: But you also talk about the idea that maybe there is a sense of religiousness to the reflection in the work. Obviously someone has said that to you and then you begin to reflect upon it and maybe agree with it. But do you think your work has any direct or indirect relationship to your religious background, or is spiritual in any sense?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, I really do think that because - it's like my goal is always never to really focus so much on the material - and I'm always intrigued when I look at the pieces, how the work or the object transcends the material that it's made out of. And I think that gets to be a very, kind of, spiritual experience. Even my shop here, my studio space, I really view it as much more than just a work space or a wood shop. It's more like church.

MS. LAURIA: Having a reverence.

MR. ECKERT: Reverence and a respect, I think a deep respect for even the equipment. And I think it kind of all hooks into, sort of, a spirituality. I think making art and religion have strong parallels, and because of the kinds of things you deal with, it's the sense of feeling that you get and what the material actually takes on in the materials that you're using. You know, and a lot of it, I think, has to do with early indoctrinations, like the concept of holy water. It's more than just water. The idea of the bread and the wine becoming the real presence kind of thing. And I think a lot of that does plug into the work on some level. For me anyway. I don't know whether it does for the viewer.

MS. LAURIA: Religions ask for a sense of - or for agreement, a contract that you have faith in what it is that they are telling you. So your work is also asking for that same contract.

MR. ECKERT: Some faith. Um-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: To have faith in what you're looking at.

MR. ECKERT: Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: To move now on to a question about the marketplace: has the market for American craft changed in your lifetime, that you can perceive?

MR. ECKERT: Yes. You know, I think it really has. I think what's really opened up a great deal is the interest in the fine art aspect of craft. When I first began in the '60s, you had people who sort of dabbled in the art part. It's like early glass blowers and it's kind of like the boot-maker who makes a fine pair of boots for someone, but then he involves his interest in leather and working with all those process skills that pretty soon the whole thing evolves into something nobody could ever wear. And I've seen a lot of that happen. It's like basket makers and -

MS. LAURIA: Where the work moves away from the functional -

MR. ECKERT: The functionality of it into this other world. And I think you see the evolution in two different directions. One from the traditional-type craftsman, and also from the fine artist, the fine artist who becomes very interested in material, like what a dovetail can do for him, and what a mortise and tenon means. And so they - they study that craft, work to learn that craft. So coming from that point.

And then you also have the other group, of course, evolving. It's like they understand what the dovetail is about; they understand mortise and tenon. But they want more than just a simple piece of furniture. They could go buy that. And so it evolves into something that is further away from just the common, ordinary into that other world of the fine arts. So I think you see a lot of - I've seen a lot of evolution towards the fine art end of everything. I think it's a really good, healthy thing, a healthy development. In my bias, anyway. Being university - it's like I really do come from a strong bias, and I understand that. But I do have tremendous admiration for those who are totally self-schooled and taught, self-taught and who has just evolved out of their own efforts and work.

MS. LAURIA: So you're not privileging one above the other.

MR. ECKERT: No. Not at all.

MS. LAURIA: But you see the market as perhaps having expanded to include both ends of the spectrum.

MR. ECKERT: Absolutely, and I think there's a - you know, collectors who really are supportive. It's like Nan - we were just talking about her the other day.

MS. LAURIA: Nan Laitman.

MR. ECKERT: Laitman, yes, and she's so supportive and she just has such an eye for some of these other things that are emerging, I think, in the area of craft. And there's a whole group of people out there, and I think it keeps the whole thing going, and it's just - I think it's fantastic.

MS. LAURIA: Do you think that such venues as the craft shows, like the one sponsored by the American Craft Council, or others, too, that might be associated with particular museums, do you think that those are good venues to show your kind of work or other artists' pieces that are made with craft materials and techniques?

MR. ECKERT: I think so. I don't have any problem with it. I just - sometimes I think we feel - I shouldn't speak for Carol [Eckert], but I think sometimes I feel a little isolated being here in Arizona and think sometimes there seems to be a lot of focus on what goes on east of the Mississippi River.

MS. LAURIA: In your area, or in all areas?

MR. ECKERT: I think, on the whole, in all of the areas. But I think we're kind of coming into our own light, though, with that, and I think that might have been more of a problem some years ago than it's been lately. I had a Furniture Society conference at ASU a couple of years ago that included some of their best-known people. And prior to that we had six turning conferences that the university sponsored, and all the big name people, David Ellsworth and John Jordan, everybody, was here. The furniture conference attracted Wendell Castle and all those people. It was just really wonderful. So I think a lot of it has to do, too, with the energy that we put into it. I think the more energy we put into it, the more we can help our own cause.

MS. LAURIA: Inspired self-interest?

MR. ECKERT: But I would like to be considered a little bit more when it comes to what happens east of the Mississippi. I think it would be nice. But I think those shows are excellent, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that kind of segues into my next question, which is, do you belong to professional organizations, and which ones are they, and do you find them to be very supportive and also maybe promotional in the sense of your own work?

MR. ECKERT: I think the Collectors of Wood Art is really doing a fine job, and I try to support them, definitely. Beyond that, with my studio endeavors and the university commitments, I don't have a lot of time to put into those things, and I think sometimes they require more time than I'm willing to give.

MS. LAURIA: But you do belong to the Furniture Society and to the Collectors of Wood Art. Those are both very specific to your field.

MR. ECKERT: To the field, yes.

MS. LAURIA: And what about publications? Do you read or subscribe to any of the major publications in the craft field, and -

MR. ECKERT: No, I don't really subscribe to much. I think Fine Woodworking magazine was a tremendous asset when I was learning so many new things, and I was so challenged to see what I could do to push the material to its extreme, and that publication was a tremendous resource for me at some point. But then after a while, I have to say I lost interest in it, and it wasn't as useful as it was in a prior time.

And then the other periodicals I just look at sporadically. I'm not an avid reader of any of it. I guess it has to do with the way my process works. It's like the work is just sort of a continuum and it's just this continual flow. And the periodicals are just more of a side interest. Sometimes almost a distraction, though. It's like a distraction I don't need.

MS. LAURIA: But have there been writers that have written features or articles on you that you feel were important in your development, or in your recognition as an artist working in the field? And if so, you might mention if any person or discussion or catalogue had a great impact on your development.

MR. ECKERT: Not that -

MS. LAURIA: Let me come back to that. Earlier you showed me the catalogue from the Albuquerque museum [Albuquerque Art Museum, Albuquerque, NM], which I think is a really important - was an important exhibition for you to be in, and maybe you want to talk a little bit about that and why. Because I think one of the big issues with a lot of artists who work in the craft field is that they get marginalized, that they're always - a woodworker is always put into a show with other woodworkers, and it's very insulated and insular, and this particular catalogue you showed me, the artworks were very broad-ranging and wonderful because they were interdisciplinary. So if you want to mention that and tell how that really brought you into a different arena.

MR. ECKERT: I think it goes back to this, Jo. It's the - I really view art as a visual experience and I think a lot of times it's very difficult to talk about it. And because it's hard to talk about, it's even more difficult to write about it. It's like, you hear a piece of music that really connects with you; you're really touched by it to the point of even maybe drawn to tears, you know. I think most people have that experience with audio - with music. And I think the same can be true of art, only on a visual level. Instead of hearing it, you're viewing it. You're drawn to it, and you can become so immersed in it, so intrigued and so captivated, but then to try to write up that feeling is almost impossible, because it's happening on another level and you're using other parts of your brain and your being in experiencing that.

I can't say that I'm very well read when it comes to art criticism. And I have to say that maybe I almost avoid. Maybe I'm missing out on something. I don't know. I could be.

MS. LAURIA: The idea that -

MR. ECKERT: Sometimes you read what is written about that particular piece and it has nothing whatever to do with the piece.

MS. LAURIA: Right. I guess what I was saying, that this exhibition - which is titled "Silent Things, Secret Things" [1999], and it was at the Albuquerque Art Museum - was it organized by them as well?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, it was.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. Your piece is put into this exhibition and catalogue - the subtitle is "Still Life from Rembrandt to the Millennium." Your piece is put into an exhibition that has, obviously, other painters, from the Netherlands and all the way through. And the piece that you have here is called Still Life with Sabatier, which is a knife, and it probably relates to a lot of the - well, the other still lifes that are here also, like William Harnett. And I think that, in a way, the curator of this exhibition was enlightened in the sense that she or he was doing a thematic show and saw your work as having an association with these other still lifes. I think that's an important way to look at your work. I mean, next to a Roy Lichtenstein, a painting, a still life, that obviously is done in his own benday dot way.

So I think, as an artist, you must feel that there are certain opportunities for people to perceive your work outside of the usual suspects, and that could be a great opportunity for you to -

MR. ECKERT: Oh, absolutely.

MS. LAURIA: - expand upon. So what was it about this exhibition that you liked so well? What did you think it did for your development?

MR. ECKERT: Well, I think you can't argue with the company.

MS. LAURIA: Validation by association.

MR. ECKERT: Validation by association. And I think -

MS. LAURIA: Which is very valid.

MR. ECKERT: Yes. But I have to really say that the written blurb about my piece has nothing whatever to do with



the piece, in terms of the accuracy.

MS. LAURIA: Well, what would you have them say? They're mostly talking in this excerpt about the fact that it is illusionistic, it's trompe l'oeil still life that's three-dimensional, and the paradox is doubled back on itself. Because they don't get into any of the concept behind it?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, maybe the concept behind it, and then I think when she describes the illusion of it, I think she really doesn't look at the object. I think she looked at the picture and assumed that there was some sort of strange perspective happening, and she talks about that. And that is not really accurate about the piece.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, but other than that, the idea that she's pointing out -

MR. ECKERT: Yes, I think that's all very legitimate.

MS. LAURIA: But maybe it's the viewer who has to get those other nuances. You're right about it's hard to write about art.

MR. ECKERT: It is. It's very difficult.

MS. LAURIA: And sometimes you have to leave certain things to the viewer because if you tell the viewer everything, then you're not allowing them to have any interaction with your pieces.

MR. ECKERT: Right.

MS. LAURIA: But I guess my point was, is that for artists there - how many ways 'til Sunday can you have exposure? Well, there's publication, either in major catalogues, books, periodicals. There's exhibitions in many layers of venues, the highest, obviously, in our society, our culture, being museums. And then, you know, galleries and other alternative venues. And then there's direct exposure through collectors and students. So in your development do you see - what part of that equation, or is it all parts of that equation that are important to you? The teaching, the exposure to the students, and the collectors and the exhibitions and the periodicals. I mean, do you think they've done something to -

MR. ECKERT: I think the most important thing is to make satisfying work for me. I think that is, like, top of the heap. And then second to that would be the fact that someone else would respond to it. I would find that - the first satisfaction has to come from my feeling good about the piece, and then secondly to get the endorsement from somebody else in terms of the fact that maybe I contributed something and that would be through showing the work.

So as I tell the students - and I thought a lot about this - their job is to make excellent work. And number two is to show that excellent work. It's no good under the bed; it's no good on the shelf; it's no good in the storeroom. It has to be seen and experienced. So that's number two. And number three, and this is something that nobody wants to talk about in the art world, and that's to sell it. And why that's important is because it's a matter of survival on some levels. You've got to pay the rent; you've got to put the gas in the car, and money has to come from somewhere. So it's those three items, in that priority.

And you know, it's like the sales don't go to the top and they don't become number two. I think, in that order, it's excellent work, showing it in excellent venues, and then third, selling it because you are the factory. You are the maker and it kind of flows from you and you should never be upset about parting with a piece, because there's a lot more where that came from, and it's just this ongoing kind of flow that you have going.

So I think in terms of galleries and museums and magazine periodicals, all that becomes vehicles of number two. But I think still the most important is number one, making that work and making work of the highest quality, to the highest standard. And then number two is what happens to that excellent work, like in terms of the visibility that it receives. And the more visibility the better. It's like, whatever you can do, on a technical level, museums, TV, anything, to get it out there because, I mean, that's your job. It's like your position in the world is to do this. Unless you show it to the world, no one's ever going to know it. And if nobody knows it, you're not doing your job.

MS. LAURIA: Well, in your estimation, how do you think your work has been received over time?

MR. ECKERT: I think I probably get more credit than I deserve.

MS. LAURIA: In what sense, Tom?

MR. ECKERT: Well, my volume isn't what it should be, but then, as an educator, it's hard to spend as many hours as I would like to. I wish I could do 60 hours a week in the studio and 60 hours a week at the school. But you know, that's impossible. So it ends up a balancing act. It's like -

MS. LAURIA: But you've become known in your field for doing a certain kind of work. And what do you think that perception is?

MR. ECKERT: I don't know. I'm not sure what that is.

MS. LAURIA: I'm sure that you've heard before that your skills are virtuosic. So you know that technically you've become recognized as being a master and accomplished in your field. And you've also been cited many times as doing work that is deceiving the eye, so you know that you're accomplishing one of your goals, which is illusion. And I think probably other writers, as well, have noted that there is a certain amount of, again, that duality of sensitive gentleness but also kind of ironic and, sort of, trickery that makes - it sets up a tension in the work that I think is interesting. So all of those things, wouldn't you say you've been recognized for?

MR. ECKERT: I think so.

MS. LAURIA: And people collect your work. Do you have collectors in the field who collect in depth, or institutions that have more than one piece of your work?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, it's scattered all over the place, you know. It's like collectors and collections. It's like MAD - Museum of Art and Design [New York, NY] - has a couple of pieces. I'm going to be part of a show at MFA Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston [MA]. It's part of the Wornick Collection [The Ron and Anita Wornick Collection, San Francisco, CA]. And it's an interesting show. I can't remember the first part of the title of the show, but the second is dealing with what they call conceptual crafts, which is kind of a nice way to put it. Conceptual crafts. And I haven't heard that a lot. I think it's really intriguing. That opens the 10th of September, I think, at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

MS. LAURIA: And I know I asked Carol these two questions, and she wanted to think about them a little bit and go back to those today. But it won't be so hard for you to answer the first one because you've answered it in a different article. One of the artists that you feel very connected with, you mentioned, is Rene Magritte.

MR. ECKERT: Magritte, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Do you want to talk about how you feel personally aligned with him - is it his imagery; is it his thought process?

MR. ECKERT: I guess frozen poetry, again. It's like the frozen poetry of what he does, and it's just - I think he is a magician at creating these visual images. He's just a magician. I just am so intrigued. Periodically I just have to thumb through some of his work and just - I mean, if I'm really influenced by anyone, I think, in a very direct way, it would have to be him.

MS. LAURIA: And what about in your exhibition - history of seeing shows - has there been any standout exhibition that you came home from, maybe as a young man, a young adult or -

MR. ECKERT: "Objects USA." Totally blew me away.

MS. LAURIA: How did that experience blow you away?

MR. ECKERT: Because it was just something that I was just totally unaware of, and it happened just around the time I was in graduate school, I think, and in coming out of a painting background and headed into sculpture, and then all of a sudden I see these - you know, it was a very difficult kind of work to place neatly into a category. And I think the idea that people were making these wonderful creative, highly creative things using those traditional skills, I think is what really blew me away. I think that really had an impact on my whole life and career, too. I think that single exhibition was really a powerful, powerful thing.

MS. LAURIA: And that was in the 1970s, early 1970s?

MR. ECKERT: Yes. I think it was the early '70s.

MS. LAURIA: Well, it first started in 1969, but it toured for 10 years.

MR. ECKERT: Yes. I think it was probably in the early, very, very early '70s, maybe late '60s, that I saw that.

MS. LAURIA: So for you it was an introduction to what the possibilities, the expressiveness of art objects.

MR. ECKERT: The potential of it. And the coming together of those - it's even impacted my teaching, because I explain to the students that on the one hand you've got the technical process, and on the other you've got the concept and the ideas. And you take the two and you put them together and you get flash and fire. And that's been my approach. And in so many ways it's so much more inclusive than some of the other areas. It's so

inclusive, you know, because it means you've got the creative part, you've got the technical part. There's all that technical stuff you have to learn and understand so you can get a command of the material, command of the medium. And then you have to plug in ideas. And it's just empty work without the ideas. You have to have ideas. And it hits with them and you see it in the work that they make.

MS. LAURIA: Where do you think, Tom, that American woodworking fits into the international picture? Do you think that American work is more important, or are there other developments going on internationally that affect Americans?

MR. ECKERT: You know, Jo, I really don't know because -

MS. LAURIA: Do you see any difference at all?

MR. ECKERT: I guess I haven't been out of Dodge enough to know.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you have students from other countries.

MR. ECKERT: Other countries, and I think there is a lot going on in America, and I keep hearing a lot of things regarding woodworking coming from Australia. They seem to have a tremendous development there. And I know Mike Cooper went over and he was raving about all the good things happening in Australia with wood. And I've had some Australians come through that have said some things that I found very impressive. But beyond that I really couldn't say. It's like -

MS. LAURIA: Do you think there's a globalization that's going on where, as you may know, one of the fears of the worldwide web and the internet was that we were all going to become homogenized. Do you see that happening?

MR. ECKERT: It could happen, but I would greet that as a good thing, because it really implies sharing, you know, and I think sharing has always been a good thing, not a bad thing.

MS. LAURIA: I guess I meant the fear is that everybody's work is going to be devoid of ethnic references or regionality or any kind of unique, cultural nuances, because we are exposed to so much. But you don't see that happening?

MR. ECKERT: I don't really think it happens, because I think your ethnicity and those other qualities that make you human will always come through in the work, no matter how hard you try to stamp them out. It's been my experience watching students. I had a person from Brazil, and the use of color was just so strong. I mean, she just picked colors just in this casual, intuitive way, and it was so Brazilian. She was totally oblivious to what she was doing. It almost becomes an intrinsic quality that some people have, and I don't really think there's risk in that. Myself personally, I don't know; I don't really see it as a problem.

MS. LAURIA: What would you describe as your ethnicity in your work? What would be those connections?

MR. ECKERT: Christian white guy.

MS. LAURIA: Because the work is very parochial, disciplined?

MR. ECKERT: Yes. You just are what you are. You kind of go with that. I mean, wishing to be black isn't going to do me any good.

MS. LAURIA: It's an interesting point that you mention. You cannot beat, sort of, the ethnicity out of your work, so I would not know by looking at your work who was the maker, although I've been pre-conditioned to probably think it was a male because of the terrific woodworking skills - although that is completely changing.

MR. ECKERT: You know, I have so many women, you wouldn't believe it, Jo. I mean, it's just changed over the years. You wouldn't believe how it's changed.

MS. LAURIA: And you think they put gender into their work somehow?

MR. ECKERT: Sometimes, absolutely. I think in a deliberate sense, though. And I think almost as a means of commentary. It's like you get the pink and the lace, but almost as a parody and not so much as naïve, just happening of those things. It's just like this matter of making a statement about the condition or the state as perceived by the person making it.

MS. LAURIA: Do you think your work has gender elements in it, maleness in it?

MR. ECKERT: I've never really thought about it, but it probably does, because as I said, I think those qualities just

kind of seep out into the work, and I think no matter how hard you try to portray reality, still a piece of you as a human being ends up in the work. No matter how hard you try to stamp it out of there, it does show up. It's, like, to the point where you can look at a piece at 100 yards and say, yes, I know who made that. It's a development of style, and that just happens. It's not a contrived, conscious effort.

MS. LAURIA: Now you work in series, Tom? When you say development of style, has your style changed?

MR. ECKERT: I ended up with kind of a style in a series, but only because it's like I'm pulling on the thread. It's just focused, kind of, a tunnel that I'm going down at this point, and so I get this interrelationship with stuff that's happening. But it's not, again, on the conscious level. It's just like I'm sort of like moving what I think is in logical steps, going from this piece to this piece to this piece. And it's just sort of headed down that line. And then you can look back and you can say, yes, I can see where it came from.

When you see my entire portfolio from 1970 through 2007, you can really see that this piece couldn't have happened without that one, and it's like this piece I'm working on right now never would have happened without my painting career. And I show my portfolio to the students, not because I have a captive audience and expect applause, but because I think they can learn from it and they can kind of see the trail of where I've been. And then I like to explain to them that learning is never in vain. Every time you learn something, it's going to show up somewhere, and it's never for naught. And so don't ever think that doing the math homework doesn't go somewhere.

MS. LAURIA: I can see the evolution on a technical - sort of following a linear path and, obviously, your skills are building upon other skills that you learned. But what about conceptually? What is your evolution on the conceptual side? You said at one point you've become more minimal.

MR. ECKERT: Yes, I think more minimal, but it's really odd because in terms of the ideas, I work hard at coming up with things, but then in the end they just kind of happen almost. It's like - another good example, it's like with these rocks. And what happened, what kicked off some of this is I was just headed out to the studio one day through the path [river rocks] here and I looked down and I just focused on this rock, and I just had this - this need to pick it up and hold it in my hand. I picked it up and I looked at it and I held it in my hand and I thought, if this rock could only talk, you know, like a recording, and say where it's been and what it's experienced and how long it's been around. And I just had this, like, feeling from it.

I thought, my gosh, it's been here a lot longer than I've been here and it's going to be around after I'm long gone. And it's just like all these feelings that kind of connected. And so I just had to start doing some things with rocks because of that experience I had with the one that I held in my hand.

MS. LAURIA: But the rocks you're utilizing in the same sense of the levitation -

MR. ECKERT: The levitation and the drapery, and then the idea that it's heavy and solid, and then this defies the gravity, you know, the cloth, and so -

MS. LAURIA: Because again, you're dealing with people's perception of the material, because we look at a rock and we intrinsically know, we perceive it to be a mass.

MR. ECKERT: Yes. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: A solid mass.

MR. ECKERT: Of weight. And it's of, you know, that ballast. It's fun. It's really fun.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that's one of the questions, is there an element of play in your process or finished work of art?

MR. ECKERT: It is. It's all fun. I mean, it's not all fun, but it involves what some people, I think, would call fun. And it's satisfying. I try to work hard in the studio. I come out and I spend hours, and then at the end of the day I like to feel like - I like to try to mentally review what I've done and, kind of, where I've been, and the progress that I've made. It's a long process. These things take a long time to make. It's like the carving is the chip by chip, and it comes from a tradition - in my case, the European tradition, just mallet and gouge.

MS. LAURIA: You collect antique tools, as well, and you like to do hand carving.

MR. ECKERT: On a basic level, I like hand carving, hand tools, and before I turn on a machine, I'd rather, if I can, do it by hand instead of machine.

MS. LAURIA: And you find that satisfying?

MR. ECKERT: Well, not just satisfying, but even on a practical level, it's like when you figure - like different ways

to take wood off, because it's a subtractive process. You can make these beautiful curls with a very sharp gouge, or you can grind it off with a grinder and make a lot of dust and noise. It's like, you can't hear the music with all that noise. And it's so much more satisfying for me to do it with hand tools if I can. But then sometimes you have to use a machine because there's no other way to do it.

I just use anything that will do the job. I have a certain kind of mission that I have to take care of related to the process. The end result of the piece, and then the question is, how am I going to get to that point? How am I going to get it there? What tools am I going to use? And I like to have some choices. It might be a hand tool. It could be a -

MS. LAURIA: Let's conclude there. When we go to disc three, we'll talk about process.

[END MD02 TR01.]

MS. LAURIA: This is Jo Lauria interviewing Tom Eckert at his home studio in Tempe, Arizona, on June 19, Tuesday, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Tom, could you discuss your views on the importance of wood as a means for expression? And although I know you've mentioned a few of the strengths and limitations of that material, maybe you could expound upon that.

MR. ECKERT: The wood that I use mainly is basswood, or it also goes by the name of linden wood or limewood, depending on what part of the world you're in. But basswood is most commonly used around here. It's my wood of choice because of the way it yields to edge tools. It carves beautifully and also accepts paint extremely well. It's a very paintable kind of material. That's how I use it. So it makes just the ideal kind of wood, I think. And then the weight, other concerns, it's light in weight, the stability and the acceptance of paint, and then the weight of it.

Traditionally it was used as core material for drafting boards because of the stability of it. It's an extremely stable wood. It doesn't move a lot, it doesn't cup, it doesn't check as readily as some other woods may. For the kind of work, the application, it's an ideal wood.

MS. LAURIA: And you have mentioned earlier that you thought that anything you could conceive of, you felt that the wood was a limitless way; it had no limits for being able to execute your conceptions.

MR. ECKERT: Exactly. I think the wood poses very few limitations for almost anything one could imagine they would want to make. Not just that particular wood but I think wood in general. I did some commission pieces for Apple Computer, and I used maple wood and I made all the little keys and the computer screen, curly cord for the keyboard cord, and it was challenging, but it's amazing what you can do with wood. There are just very few limitations with it as an art medium.

MS. LAURIA: And you mentioned commissioned work. Can you talk further about some of the more important commissions you've gotten, and how did they come to you?

MR. ECKERT: The commissions have come to me mainly through galleries and working with galleries, and it's where people have become familiar with my work and then decide that they want something more specific and then - which is hard because I really don't want to act as the vehicle for the client's expression. I want it to remain my own creativity, own creative work. So some of the more successful commissions I've done - I did a series of what I call portrait pieces, where I would actually interview the person interested in the commission. I would interview them and then make notes about their life. In one case it was a woman who was a gardener, so I included a lot of gardening things that I think would say things about her - the objects, the gardening objects as sort of metaphor about her life.

And I did one commission piece for Martyle Reinsdorf. Martyle and Jerry own the Chicago White Sox and the Bulls ball teams. And so it turns out they have a home here in Arizona, and so Martyle was the one interested in a portrait piece. So it turned out that she is interested in poodle dogs and coffee, so there was a coffee cup and then a hat to symbolize the White Sox ball club. I can't remember what all was in - oh, a purse, a handbag because Martyle collects designer handbags. So it was just sort of this accumulation of objects that were placed then on this table piece to serve as metaphor, good visual metaphor about Martyle and her life. I find those to be very challenging and interesting to do. I had a lot of fun with those.

Another thing about commission work, I used to kind of run from them at one point, but I think they can be very challenging and, kind of, force you to do things that you normally wouldn't do, and so come up with some growth out of it.

MS. LAURIA: And there was one you talked about for McDonald's, a fast food themed artwork. Was that a tableau of their different kinds of happy meals?

MR. ECKERT: Well, it was a pretty open commission and they said pretty much, do whatever you want. So actually what I did is I pick up on some of the more traditional - or the early McDonald's images. And working with them - there is actually a McDonald's museum in Oak Brook, Illinois.

MS. LAURIA: Who would have known?

MR. ECKERT: They sent me a lot of memorabilia and even provided me with the dimensions of the early French fries, the sizes, and so I could pick up on that, and they came up with some of the packaging and logos, and I incorporated all that into the composition. So that piece, I think, is still in the president's office in Oak Brook. It was a lot of fun to make, too.

MS. LAURIA: That might end up in a museum.

MR. ECKERT: And then I included an apple in the whole composition and the president said, that's probably the healthiest part of the whole meal. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: And then you mentioned that you get these commissions through your dealers. Can you describe some of your more fruitful relationships with dealers, and what does it mean to be represented by a dealer?

MR. ECKERT: Well, I'm really very supportive of the whole gallery system that we have, and I think a good gallery really does earn its money. I know some artists balk at the 50 percent commission, but I don't really have a problem with that. I think when you look at the overhead the gallery has, the staff they have to hire, the space they have to rent, the help they have to hire, you know, the staffing and installation of shows and ads they run and the shipping that they do for you and the representation part of it and the list of collectors that they're in touch with, I think it's well worth the money. Working with a quality gallery is really worth the commission price, I think.

I don't have any problem with it and I think it's always been a harmonious, kind of, symbiotic kind of relationship that I've had with galleries. I think that one of the temptations you have is this temptation to just sell out the back door, as they put it - but I think when you make a commitment to the gallery, I think even if you get a private collector in your studio and it's kind of one-on-one, if there's a sale involved, it really should go through your gallery. It shouldn't just, as I say, go out the back door. That's sort of abusing the trust that you have to have between yourself and the dealer.

MS. LAURIA: And which galleries have you had a relationship with here in the United States?

MR. ECKERT: Well, formerly, when it was called The Hand and the Spirit, Scottsdale [AZ] - then it changed to Gallery Materia, and I worked with them. Then it changed again. Now it's Cervini Haas, and I still work with them. And Thirteen Moons in Santa Fe, and Mobilia, and Cambridge. And then -

MS. LAURIA: Was the Materia -

MR. ECKERT: Michael Himovitz in Sacramento, California.

MS. LAURIA: Was the original Hand and the Spirit, was that owned by Joanne Rapp?

MR. ECKERT: Joanne Rapp, yes.

MS. LAURIA: And she was very instrumental, I think, in this area for identifying talented artists and providing a venue for them.

MR. ECKERT: Yes, she did a wonderful job building that gallery. But it's sort of - as all things, good things have to come to an end sooner or later, and I think after so many years it was just kind of a natural way that that ended, with Joanne and Jim Rapp. But it was really very good when they had it. Excellent.

MS. LAURIA: And it got you recognition that was not only national but sometimes international.

MR. ECKERT: Absolutely, yes.

MS. LAURIA: And I notice that you showed me the announcement card of a show you were in in Amsterdam at Galerie Hemel?

MR. ECKERT: Hemel. Lieve.

MS. LAURIA: Lieve Hemel. L-I-E-V-E, and then H-E-M-E-L. And how did this dealer find you and your work?

MR. ECKERT: It was actually through a connection at the university, and someone said, hey, you should really get

in touch with them because I think you would really fit their gallery. So I just sent off an e-mail along with some images of my work, and things clicked. And so it's interesting. It's my first direct dealings with a European gallery, so I'm really kind of excited by it. We'll see what happens.

MS. LAURIA: Do you think the internet is a great tool for artists to have at their disposal to be able to post up your images, to connect with people globally? Has it helped in the development of your career?

MR. ECKERT: I think to some capacity. I think it probably hasn't been around long enough yet that people are using it. I hate to say that, but I think it's, you know, in terms of various web sites, I think, as a research tool, it's just invaluable. And I think in terms of - if people really use it, I think it's just a miracle. But then I guess the only reservation I have, I'm not quite sure that people really use it the way they could. I don't think a day goes by when I'm not at the computer for something and on the internet. But in terms of, like, getting commissions and sales and that kind of thing through the internet, I mean, that really hasn't happened a great deal.

One - a few years ago I had an e-mail from the lady who is an editor at Atlantic Monthly magazine and she wanted to commission a piece, and actually came to Arizona to meet with me. And I thought that was an interesting connection, just purely through the internet. Those things have been pretty rare, actually. So in terms of a marketing tool, I don't think it's really served as that. As a research tool, it's just unbeatable for me personally.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that brings me to my next question, which is, what are the sources of inspiration for your work? I know you've mentioned some painters, art history, seeing - when you woke up in class - seeing the [Johannes] Vermeers and other Netherlandish paintings, but also you mentioned the internet. How do you get your source of inspiration? And also walking down your stone path here - that you can be inspired by objects in your own backyard.

MR. ECKERT: I mean, it just comes from anywhere and everywhere. It's just that - I just really can't say. I heard it once said that art is about life, and art you make is about your life, and I think that's really true. I think so much of the inspiration really comes from within rather than the outside, and what causes that, I don't know. It's just something that happens and it's just - it's not easy to even talk about. I suppose, as I said earlier, a lot of it has to do with just this want or need to make something, and then this, sort of, process, sometimes agonizing process, of trying to figure it out. And then at some point the lightning strikes. In that order.

MS. LAURIA: I know that you say that the first initiation of any work is the torment, and that is the part where you're trying to find your way with an idea. But could you describe your working process after you -

MR. ECKERT: After the idea?

MS. LAURIA: Yes, after you get the idea. What's your working environment like -

MR. ECKERT: Well, okay. The environment, it's like my studio space here, which I try to keep organized and neat and try to really control the space as best I can. Everything has a place and it's just totally organized as best as I can get it. And that's the facility that I use. And then the next stage of the process would be a set-up or a model. In the case of this commission I'm working on now would be something along these lines. It's actual fabric and actual cards and dice. I'd use an actual piece of fruit except it would spoil before I got the piece finished. And so it's a set-up then, the set-up that I always refer to as the model that I work from.

Then the next step would be digital photography. Now, I don't always follow this pattern. In this case I got the idea for this piece, so I just went and set it up using the actual materials. If I'm at a loss for a beginning, then I usually work with my sketchbook and I make some kind - just little idea sketches, think-with-the-pencil kind of things. And then from that, then I go to the set-up. Then from the set-up, once I get to the stage of the actual three-dimensional model to work from, then I do digital photography with a digital camera. Then make a life-size print. You can see that this photograph, this image is the actual size of the set-up. And then from that photography, I can then make patterns to make the actual piece, so it's done to transform it from the idea. It's like, to take the idea, and to get it into some form of reality, and then to try to make - to solidify - the whole thing. It's like, from the abstraction of what's in my mind to the reality of the piece. So you can walk around and touch it and whatever.

And I find that really exciting in itself, you know, the idea of bringing the abstraction to fruition in the form of a real piece that was nothing more than a thought.

MS. LAURIA: So once you have it set up, then you'll take your tools, either machine or hand tools, and actually cut out and carve the object.

MR. ECKERT: Um-hmm. [Affirmative.] And then the objects, yes, working very carefully from the model and trying to capture a high degree of reality so it's as convincing as I can make it, and even then it's like - it never

really is an exact replica from the model. There's always something different about it.

MS. LAURIA: But once you have the object as wood pieces, then you take them over to your painting table.

MR. ECKERT: And then the paint, the paint comes next. The paint I'm using is something that I did pioneer myself. It's a water-borne lacquer that is much safer to use, and I find that I can do as much with it, with this water-borne lacquer, as I could with the solvent-based material. And sometimes even more. It's more versatile, and you don't need the big carbon filter mask, and you don't need to worry about fire hazards in the same way. It's just environmentally friendly. You don't have to worry about messing up the environment with it or health risks.

MS. LAURIA: So you can either apply the paint by paintbrush, air brush, or -

MR. ECKERT: I use a variety - I have lots of different brushes that I use, like hundreds of different brushes. Brushes here.

MS. LAURIA: Right, which are standard paintbrushes, art brushes for oil painting or -

MR. ECKERT: Yes, they're just artists' brushes. And then I use a variety of different spray equipment and everything from these spray guns and air brushes. I have lots of different air brushes that do different things. This is just a big air brush here. It looks like a spray gun, but it's really an air brush.

MS. LAURIA: Do you mix your own colors, Tom?

MR. ECKERT: I mix my own colors from pigments, Japan pigment, that I add to the base emulsion. And with the set of pigments I have, you know, I can mix any color. Any color is a possibility. It's just infinite choices when it comes to the palette.

MS. LAURIA: And when the piece is blocked out and sanded in the wood, do you then draw on - for instance, when you have a card, an ace of diamonds, let's say, do you draw that ace of diamonds first onto that little sliver of a card, that piece of wood, and then fill in your drawing?

MR. ECKERT: No, on the - a lot of the graphics stuff, I use a transfer on those. And those are done on the computer. It's a digital process for making the transfer. I used to paint everything, but I found that the computer does it faster and better. And in terms of the digital photography that I do now, I used to draw everything and now I find that the photography works better for me. And again, it saves me a great deal of time and I can make more work faster with these time-savers.

MS. LAURIA: But your clock, let's say that you're trying to get the illusion of a cotton or linen napkin that's draped over the side of a shelf. That's just from wood, right, directly; the paint that you pioneered goes right on that. So you've already included the folds or the wrinkles into that piece of wood -

MR. ECKERT: It's all carved that way, um-hmm [affirmative].

MS. LAURIA: And that you're trying to get the sense of luminosity and light as silk would reflect.

MR. ECKERT: Right. So I add - it's called a pearlescence - to the paint. It's an ingredient. I think it's made from shells. Or mica. Might even be a mica material, but I think the early pearls were made from seashells that they grind up and pulverize, and you could add that to the paint. But I think most recently it's gone to a mica material.

MS. LAURIA: It reflects the light.

MR. ECKERT: It does. It gives it, like, an iridescence and gives it a kind of a satin, silky kind of look.

MS. LAURIA: And then once all of these components - for instance, on this piece that you're working on, it has dice and a stack of cards, and a linen cloth, and a pear on top. Once you have these all carved out and sanded and painted, then what happens to them? How do they get affixed to your shelf?

MR. ECKERT: Oh, they all get bolted on. There's, like, a little brass insert that goes into the wood, and it's recessed into the wood. Then there's a machine screw, and all these holes are drilled, and there's a brass machine screw then that goes through and holds that in place. And the advantage in working this way is that they can all be taken apart. If anything ever gets damaged, it's all very repairable. It's just taking screws out and the whole thing disassembles.

MS. LAURIA: Well, and also for museum installations, I know that I had to call you when we wanted to put up your shelf piece at the museum, because I wanted to make sure, you know - having a vitrine over them is very



much an intrusion. It makes it look like it's an insect underneath a glass plate. And -

MR. ECKERT: It's definitely a barrier, yes.

MS. LAURIA: It is a barrier. It looks so much more immediate, so I wanted to know: what if somebody tried to take one of the pieces from the shelf? And you told me, no, that they were screwed down.

MR. ECKERT: Yes, they're all bolted down. Like this one, there will be a large bolt that goes clear through this, and then the pear goes in the center. But then on the pear, you see, this has a large brass insert. And that -

MS. LAURIA: So you are referring to a pear going on a cloth, and the cloth would go on the shelf, draped over, so each one of those is bolted separately. And then bolted together.

MR. ECKERT: Yes. So the whole thing, you know, would stay together.

MS. LAURIA: I know you've done some freestanding sculptures as well as these pieces, shelf pieces that are affixed to the wall. Was there a reason why you wanted to change direction not to always be forced into being attached to a wall? Did you want to be liberated from that?

MR. ECKERT: Well, no, not really. It just has to do more with the idea, I think, than the environment that it goes into. Unless - like on this piece, the client said it would have to be a wall piece. So that pretty much decided it. So on other pieces, it just depends on what the idea is, where it's coming from. And I really don't favor freestanding over wall. It just depends on what it is I'm doing. I wouldn't care if it hung from the ceiling, wherever.

MS. LAURIA: As long as it executed your idea.

MR. ECKERT: As long as it gets the idea out there.

MS. LAURIA: The interesting thing, though, is the table, where you can walk around it on all sides. When people think of still lifes, too, they generally think of objects placed onto something and that the objects are the most interesting focal point. But in your case, you're also making the table. So the table becomes part of the illusion.

MR. ECKERT: The sculpture, yes. Yes. Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: And do you ever manipulate the perspective of the table to make that seem like kind of a form of deception? Or is that a straightforward table?

MR. ECKERT: Not in this most current work. But there was a point where I did a series of furniturelike pieces working from one-point perspective drawings. And then I would either include a tile floor and a chair and a table. You know, the whole thickness of the piece might be two or three inches, but then create the illusion of, you know, like several feet.

MS. LAURIA: Right. You're manipulating the depth perception.

MR. ECKERT: And then in that case, the panel would be leaned up against the wall and rest on the floor, and sometimes what will happen is because of the illusion, you stand straight in front of it, it would almost tend to punch a hole through the wall and create space that really didn't exist. Which was kind of an interesting thing.

And I made several pieces along those lines. And then I kind of moved away from it. It's just like I got tired of it, bored or whatever, and on to something else.

MS. LAURIA: I know that you've answered different questions about technology and hand tools versus motorized tools and the computer as a great technological advantage for you. But would you summarize what the impact of technology has had on your work?

MR. ECKERT: The biggest influence, I think, would be the computer as a research tool, in terms of finding images and information, and it just opens up the whole world. It's just you have your - essentially you have the whole world at your fingertips, and it's just like, there isn't much that you can't find online, that you may want to know about in terms of - in terms of, like, finding images for something you're working on.

I was doing a piece several months ago where I needed pictures of the moon, and I found many more images than I could possibly use. It was just amazing, this resource. And it turned out I really didn't use the ones online but I ended up going out and photographing the moon myself. But it's an interesting research tool.

And then in terms of manipulating images and software programs like Photoshop and photographing my set-ups, you know, to create my full-scale prints to work from. These are all just really invaluable resources. On a very

practical level, ordering supplies and tools that I can get from any part of the world. I recently bought a plane from Britain that's just a marvel and it's been out of production. This particular plane's been out of production now since, I think, 1940, and I was able to find one just in really mint condition. So it's just an incredible resource.

And then for the university, we're in the midst of purchasing a laser engraver that will open up another dimension for the classes, especially the advanced classes in terms of being able to do a shallow relief and some piercing and all kinds of things. It's just going to be really an amazing tool.

MS. LAURIA: But basically the woodworking, the kind that you do, the equipment itself has stayed the same over a long period of time, and some even theorize that the lathe comes from Egypt. And the hand tools are the same hand tools that might have been used by carvers maybe a century ago, especially the Japanese.

MR. ECKERT: In fact, I have a set of Addis gouges, carving tools that are close to 200 years old.

MS. LAURIA: But technology for you has meant that it's more about - more expediency, more able to do things that save you time so that you can devote your energies to the more creative processes.

MR. ECKERT: Exactly. Exactly.

MS. LAURIA: But have you found that you're not drawing as much as you used to, and maybe you'd like to get back to that? Or maybe even do a set of drawings with a piece and have them go in tandem for an exhibition - here's the drawing, or the sketches, and here's the finished piece?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, I think I miss all that drawing I used to do, and you know, when I consider the time it saves me, it's been a worthwhile trade. I keep thinking that I need to revert back to that a little more, just to maintain the skill of it if nothing else. And so that is a concern. I think it's a concern that I do have.

I think all in all, though, what I've got going seems to work well. I think even in the carving and in producing the components for the sculptures there is a tremendous amount of drawing involved, so it's not like I'm really abandoning that whole area. It's just like, when you carve these pieces, you really have to continually draw because what happens, as you develop a form, you're always coming off the drawing, you know. It's a subtractive process. You draw on the blank, on the lamination. You draw over it and you chip away, and pretty soon your map is gone. So you have to re-draw. So it's continually drawing back into it.

But I think that is a good point. I feel like I'm missing the drawing, like some of the more on-paper kind of planning things, more of those initial planning stages, I'd like to move back to that.

MS. LAURIA: Have you ever shown in an exhibition format the drawings along with your pieces?

MR. ECKERT: Oh, yes. In fact, the Tank Chair that's in the exhibition, I have a detailed drawing of that that was - when I initially showed that piece, I did have the drawing along with it.

MS. LAURIA: And Tom, what's the future of your work? Do you see any major shifts that might happen? Is there some environment that you've been hankering to create, such as I always remember that wonderful late Renaissance room in the Metropolitan Museum [of Art, New York, NY] of the Italian painter and architect Andrea Pozzo; the whole room is illusionistic. The bookcases, the cabinets, the floor. Do you have anything brewing like that, or a big-scale piece that you might want to do in the future, that you're working towards?

MR. ECKERT: I'd like to - you know, that's a curious question because I've always wondered, if I had a larger space to work in, would my scale increase in size. And it's something I really don't know. I've always had this kind of dream, this fantasy of making something in really large scale, but I think for the size of my space and working with my - I mean, you have to think about what you can really do on a realistic level with what you've got. I think the scale I'm working in now seems to fit the space. It is a life scale, life-size scale. And so I don't really know.

In terms of my process, it's kind of like one step after the other, so it's really hard to look up the road because - and it's really hard to get an overview of it. I just have to go where the excitement carries me, and I really trust that there will always be excitement, because there always has been in the past. So I really don't worry about what's up the road. I just kind of work more on a day-to-day, step-at-a-time way. But I do have that dream of the giant piece, you know, like the large scale.

MS. LAURIA: Well, Martin Puryear does large-scale pieces out of all materials, wood especially. Very good at wood. And [Claes] Oldenburg certainly shows us that gigantism has a certain place in our culture. I mean, we all respond to it, so it's just a natural question to ask an artist.

Have you ever collaborated with anyone, or would you like to collaborate with somebody?

MR. ECKERT: I never have, and it really hasn't been an interest of mine, and I think it really has to do with the whole issue of control over what you're doing. I really enjoy just having the control over the outcome of whatever it is that I'm working on. I've tried to have people help me from time to time, and it's never really worked out. It's like, people sand for me and they always round over the edges a little more than I'd like, or they can't do it fast enough. I would be just a nightmare to have to collaborate with.

MS. LAURIA: In the sense that it could be like an architectural collaboration, where an architectural developer who brings in certain types of work, you know, they ask you to be part of a larger project. I know when they were doing the public library in Los Angeles, they brought in several artists, and the artists made proposals for certain spaces. Peter Shire did the lamps, the metal lamps and floor lamps and ceiling lamps, and -

MR. ECKERT: I could see that, yes. As long as it wouldn't turn into a group effort, then I think I'd be fine with that, sure, absolutely.

MS. LAURIA: Because your piece could be part of a larger scheme.

MR. ECKERT: Larger thing.

MS. LAURIA: I know you like to work alone and you like to control your environment and you like to control the end product, and most people who feel that way don't like to work with others because there's - you give up that sense of control.

MR. ECKERT: Yes, you do.

MS. LAURIA: And also usually those people are terribly disappointed. It's just the way it seems to work. And there are other people who are great collaborators because they're more open to it. Do you give your students a collaboration project?

MR. ECKERT: No, but some of them just do collaborate. They just take it upon themselves and they will do that, just within a group. And I don't have any problem with it. I think there's one thing an artist needs to be is free. It's like the freedom to be able to make your own choices and decisions and go your own way. And again, it's all pursuit of that excitement that, you know, you have going. It's, like, to nourish the glow of it. And so -

MS. LAURIA: And how you get there sometimes is not as important as getting there.

MR. ECKERT: Just getting there, yes. Just doing it. And it's an individual thing; everybody's different.

MS. LAURIA: Well, as my last question I thought I'd ask something fun, since there is a sense of fun and play in your work. If you had to do a portrait about yourself, objects being symbolic of attributes, as you did for Martyl [Reinsdorf], what would be the type of objects you would have on your shelf, or on your table, that would symbolize who you are as an artist?

MR. ECKERT: [Laughs] That's a very good question. Oh, tools, probably tools -

MS. LAURIA: Carving tools?

MR. ECKERT: Yes, carving tools, and maybe electronics. Really early in my career I was involved with some kinetic things. I actually made a piece that was remote controlled. It had a radius of two and a half miles, and it was a kinetic piece, only no one knew it was kinetic, and I had it accepted into a show and then when it was on exhibit, every now and then I would beep it so it would go into action, and no one could understand what was going on.

MS. LAURIA: That might have come from your youth as building model airplanes?

MR. ECKERT: Probably - yes. Yes.

MS. LAURIA: So you might have something like that on your shelf.

MR. ECKERT: Oh, absolutely. And models. Oh, gee.

MS. LAURIA: How about a panic button?

MR. ECKERT: Oh, that, too, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Something you can hit when you can't come up with an idea.

MR. ECKERT: Can't come up with anything else. Oh, gee. But no, it's - I just feel like life has been good to me, I

think, and I just feel very privileged to go teach in the university, the wonderful people, then come to my studio and have the freedom to do whatever I like.

MS. LAURIA: So you might have a diploma on your shelf.

MR. ECKERT: Could have that, you know.

MS. LAURIA: Or stack of books.

MR. ECKERT: Stack of books, yes.

MS. LAURIA: And a bowl of cherries.

MR. ECKERT: Some running shoes.

MS. LAURIA: And a very long path that never ends, a long and winding path.

Thank you, Tom.

MR. ECKERT: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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