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Oral history interview with Kiff
Slemmons, 2007 November 1-2

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Kiff Slemmons on November 1 and 2, 2007. The interview took place at the artist's home and studio in Chicago, Illinois, and was conducted by Mija Riedel 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.

Kiff Slemmons and Mija Riedel 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

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Kiff Slemmons on November 1, 2007, at the artist's home and studio in Chicago, Illinois, for the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number one.

Good morning.

KIFF SLEMMONS: Good morning, and it can't help but be significant that we're having this interview on Day of the Dead, something that has turned out to be closer to my heart, my life, than I ever would have imagined.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I'm sure that will come up in our further conversation.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. We were talking just a minute ago about how your whole participation in jewelry, and metal in particular, has been from the outside in, and from different angles. And I wonder if you want to just continue on with that thought for a moment before we jump back to the beginning.

MS. SLEMMONS: Okay, yes, we were - we were talking about how we might frame some of this discussion, or how I might think about talking about my work and my life in jewelry. And I guess what would probably be most distinguishing is the fact that I came to it a little bit from the outside, though certainly now I'm very much a part of the jewelry community. I do think that by being a bit on the outside, that was a determining factor in a lot of what I did. And it allowed me certain freedoms, and in other ways, it was very limiting. But I also have come to value limitations and where they might lead you. So that actually those - I mean - limitations can be a very valuable material in working.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. And coming in from the outside, you were able to approach things differently, in terms of technique, in terms of materials, and in terms of content and intent,

and all of that has just developed over the decades.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly, because I guess I didn't have any particular rules that I knew about that I had to follow. [Laughs.] And not that I don't think it's important to learn certain rules; you do need to do that. In order to communicate something, you do need to learn a form for doing that. But because I didn't go through a particularly academic approach to jewelry, or art even, though I did take some art classes towards the end of my college education and I actually ended up getting a degree both in art and French, but I was aimed towards languages and literature.

So being on the outside also allowed me to think about things in maybe a different way or to approach things that might not have even seemed that different to me, might have seemed logical to me, but not to other makers who had more formal training. But I made many interesting discoveries along the way, and I think, because I didn't really set out to be an artist or to make jewelry, when I realized that I did want to work in that way, I had really learned by experience. I'd learned from working. Even though I was making jewelry, it was the work itself that was my strongest teacher, what the work taught me.

And then finally, after maybe 10 years of making jewelry on my own in many different ways, I learned that I wanted to work more as an artist, that I wanted to work with ideas. That's what interested me the most. I wasn't interested in making simply a beautiful decorative object - though I value such things - but, for me personally, I wanted to be more involved intellectually in what I was doing.

MS. RIEDEL: And there was a point when you decided that that had to happen for you in the jewelry if you were going to continue to make it.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly. It was a very conscious moment. I think I enjoyed making jewelry and learning how to do things, and I made - I did a lot of commissions - wedding rings, things that people wanted made into something, some odd little object, and I enjoyed all of that, but it was almost that I was doing that till I figured out what I was going to do with my life. [Laughs.]

And finally I realized, I've been working for 10 years, so I did now have certain skills, and maybe it would be a good idea to make use of those skills instead of just doing something else entirely. But it meant, to me, changing completely my approach to making jewelry and that I wanted to find ways of exploring ideas or learning about things through jewelry, by actually making jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was the challenge, I think - when I think of your work, I think of the challenge, and the juxtaposition of inserting those big ideas in small places, which you've talked about for a long time as being one of the compelling arguments for you to continue making jewelry. Doing that enabled you to surprise people by discovering big ideas where they might not have expected to have found them.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, and that was a very definite attraction. You know, I think - I don't know where this came from, but I've always been interested in how people make assumptions about things; how does prejudice, how does intolerance develop? And I like even myself discovering something that I might have assumed is not a certain way. And I think that I - I like to be more open and to - to see, to prove, in a sense, that something could be going on, that something as small as jewelry, and in something as jewelry, might be talking about other cultural issues, and that people don't expect to see that kind of activity in a piece of jewelry, particularly in our culture. I mean, it's not true in other cultures.

And for me, early on, I was very attracted to ethnic jewelry - so-called ethnic jewelry - jewelry made in tribal cultures or non-industrial societies, and in that work, the form was expected to be socially or culturally relevant. And it stood for something, that the jewelry came with other than its actual self. There was something behind it, a language that people understood. And so it had a vitality in the culture. That doesn't mean that it was all very serious and deep, but it was layered, even on the level of celebratory. There was a vitality to that work that really interested me. And that was the kind of jewelry that I like looking at or thinking about. What jewelry stood for, for the most part, in our culture, I actually was not attracted to, and the kind of superficiality or the -

MS. RIEDEL: Ostentatious display of wealth.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly, those things were very off-putting to me, and in a way, I didn't imagine myself being part of that world, but obviously, I'm not a part of a tribal culture either. [They laugh.] So somehow it was negotiating a path through these various concerns and the importance that I attached to a part of jewelry - that I came to find a way of working that had a kind of integrity to me and maybe, you could say, a kind of authenticity of expression.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting that you've mentioned jewelry as a language that people in other cultures understood, and maybe that's a nice segue into your childhood and growing up. Your father was an editor and a publisher in a small-town newspaper. You were born in Iowa?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] [Laughs] No, I wasn't born in Iowa. I was born in North Carolina.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, in North Carolina.

MS. SLEMMONS: My father, as he so often liked to put things in a slightly exaggerated, but to his ears more poetic or dramatic form, that I was born in a tar paper shack, he liked to say - [they laugh] - on an air force base in North Carolina. I think it was just a modest little Quonset hut or something like that, but anyway -

MS. RIEDEL: I didn't know that, Kiff.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, but - so he - they were stationed there at the time, but then, soon after, I was in Iowa, and that's where they - my parents - lived and where I grew up.

MS. RIEDEL: What year were you born, 1944?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: And what were your parents' names?

MS. SLEMMONS: John Snyder and May Jean, was my mother's name.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And then you moved to Iowa when you were small.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes - I mean, I don't know - months old. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay. Okay.

MS. SLEMMONS: And so I grew up in a small town in Iowa.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the name?

MS. SLEMMONS: Adel.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SLEMMONS: I wished they would have kept the Indian name, which was Pinoche, which meant little - little valley, so therefore a dell. [They laugh.] But see, there you have it. I remember that - lamenting that as a kid; why didn't they keep the Indian name, but see, I like that - you know, that the word Adel, which was one word, came from that. Anyway -

MS. RIEDEL: Your mother was a pharmacist?

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, so my mother was a pharmacist, as was her father, who had a drugstore in the town, and she often worked there. And I loved hanging out in the back, where they filled the prescriptions. When I think of it now, it feels like I can't be that old, the way it was set up, because they still made ointments and mixed things up, and there were scales and jars of things. And I loved it back there just exploring the shelves with all these little bits and pieces and the tools for mixing things.

MS. RIEDEL: And measuring, yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And see, there was this kind of precision to it at the same time, and that they were dispensing healing agents. I remember that interested me,

too. [Laughs.] I'm sure that there's a connection. Sometimes, I would be responsible for putting things away, or rearranging the shelves, or straightening them up. So I was moving around lots of these little bits of things. And I remember having great satisfaction in doing that - [laughs] - because they were mysterious, though, too. They weren't things I really knew about, their materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Were they visually interesting, as well, or they -

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I mean, they were old jar - you know, old apothecary jars with glass stoppers, and labels that were in Latin, and things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting when I think about your worktable, not 20 feet from here.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Moving things around on tables.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: So, my mother was a pharmacist - I think she really would have preferred another profession. In fact, she said once that she really wanted to be a set designer, that that's what she thought she'd like to learn about, but her father would only send her to college if she studied pharmacy. And so I think she was the only woman in her class when she started out. And -

MS. RIEDEL: This was the 1940s or earlier - '30s?

MS. SLEMMONS: Earlier.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Then she went back to school after the war and finished her degree, but she had a determination to do that. And I think that influenced me, her drive - she is extremely intelligent and - and she was a very analytical thinker. And so she certainly took to science, or that kind of exploration, but she also had a very strong aesthetic sense about our house, how we grew up.

MS. RIEDEL: She made many of your clothes, you were saying last night.

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, she didn't make them, but someone did.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, someone made them, I see.

MS. SLEMMONS: She designed them. Mm-hmm, yeah. And I rebelled against that - [laughs] - I would say. When I was in college, I became a good existentialist, and I needed to dress like an existentialist. I just wore black and turtlenecks and nothing to do with thinking about clothes or anything so frivolous as that. That changed, fortunately. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: And when you weren't in the pharmacy, you were often with your father at the newspaper plant, watching the linotype machine.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly. I think because I was an only child, I spent more time around adults, and maybe more time, sort of, out in the adult world, than if I would have had brothers and sisters. So I loved also being in the newspaper office, again, which was at that time done so completely differently. I mean, the linotype machine was one of my favorites to watch, the fact that hot metal turned into words and little - little strips of words that then got built into columns, and then those columns got built into a page, and then that page got printed. And it was a hand-fed press. It was a weekly newspaper, and sometimes if someone was sick or a piece of equipment broke down, my mother and I both would work there. I mean, it was the folding machine that was a real contraption that just seemed to be pretty -

MS. RIEDEL: Unreliable?

MS. RIEDEL: - temperamental. It had, sort of, a whole personality, that machine. I think it wasn't very well designed - [laughs] - but anyway, we often had to collate and fold the

papers to be - to get them out on time on Wednesday.

MS. RIEDEL: How many did you put out, do you remember?

MS. SLEMMONS: I don't remember, probably a couple of thousand. But I was fascinated with all of that. You know, I still, if I go somewhere and I smell ink, it makes me feel good. [They laugh.] It's my madeline. So - I mean, it sets off all these memories that are, that are good. And it was like producing something, making something.

MS. RIEDEL: It was conveying information - a very orderly dissemination of information in a very compact form, layers of information, with a real physicality to them.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right, uh-huh. [Affirmative.] I mean, of course, I think of that now. I can see real connections of how that might have influenced me. I mean, I sort of had no idea at the time. But I also - I remember when I was older (like 10 or 11) that if I came there and they needed proofreading, they just made a print of the column. It was that big, a strip of paper. And I felt very important and took that job really seriously - [they laugh] - but I also just loved the way it looked visually. I'd like to make an apron or a skirt or something out of that, because there were wide margins and then you had a little pencil that you were given so that you'd make the corrections or make the marks. And I remember learning those marks, and I liked that, too, these little gestural marks that were editorial marks that you made. So they were -

MS. RIEDEL: Symbols.

MS. SLEMMONS: - signs of what to do, or what it - it meant something.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember art from elementary school or junior high or high school? I remember you mentioning music, but did you have any art classes?

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, and see, that's interesting to think about too, because in grade school, there was a wonderful teacher. He was really quite fantastic. And I totally loved art. And I also - I mean, I thought that's what I was going to do, to be an artist, because I took to that immediately. Then there was also a feeling of respect for that and pride in that and -

MS. RIEDEL: For artists and being an artist?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: In your household?

MS. SLEMMONS: Being good at art, both in the household and even, amazingly, in the school. There was another guy, Jimmy Cook, who was good, too. [They laugh.] And he was always much more competitive or concerned about who was better. And I remember thinking about that, that that was an odd thing to feel. Because I liked what he did, too. But anyway, he was a very good teacher, and I think I was fifth grade when he got hired somewhere else and left. And that would have been then in the early '50s - and - or no, maybe more like mid-'50s - and they never hired another art teacher. And that was the end of it for the entire school, junior high and high school.

MS. RIEDEL: So it went up through your fifth grade?

MS. SLEMMONS: That was all. Uh-huh, fifth or sixth grade.

MS. RIEDEL: And then through junior high and high school, nothing.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-mm. [Negative.] And also as a kid, when I was like four or five, I wanted to play the piano. And I thought that that's what I would do, was be a concert pianist. I mean, where we come up with these things, I don't know what set that off. I loved recently when a friend was saying that she overheard her son and his friend talking about what they wanted to be when they grew up. And my friend's son said that he wanted to be a genius and an acrobat. [They laugh.] I thought that was pretty great. I'm wondering what he'll be.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, what he'll do.

MS. SLEMMONS: But anyway - so my parents did get a piano - a kind of spinet-type of piano, and I took lessons. But I asked to do that. It wasn't like I was set to take piano lessons that

they had to do that. They always made it that it would be available if I wanted to do it, but I would choose. And so I did take lessons all through high school. And I didn't like recitals, I remember then.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it the performance aspect of it?

MS. SLEMMONS: I was very shy in that sense. Though, you know, something happened at age six. I think I had a lot of confidence and assurance when I was five, and that's when I had my first recital. And the way it was set up - [laughs] - the beginning students were first, and then it worked up to the advanced. So I was the very first on the program. And I was very excited because I was going to play "Indian Wigwam" - [they laugh] - which was the last - the last piece in the book. And it had chords, so the more notes you could press down, the better. You know, I like that full sound rather than these simpler things.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SLEMMONS: So I was excited to be able to perform this, and I'm sure I played it with great gusto, which you could - [they laugh].

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure you did.

MS. SLEMMONS: - you could do. And everyone clapped. And I had seen on TV or something people do encores, so I figured that's what they wanted. [They laugh.] And I came back to the piano, and, of course, everyone was - well, the teacher and my parents were horrified. What was I doing? And what I used to do was just play the piano randomly and played these very moving, expressive things that were totally formless and didn't mean anything. And sometimes my grandmother would say, that's enough. [They laugh.] But I - and so I played one of those. And, you know, I had the sense not to go on too long, and I finished and everyone clapped. But it's taken many years before I could ever do that again. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: So you were swept up by the passion and the success and -

MS. SLEMMONS: And their enthusiasm.

MS. RIEDEL: And the desire to give them something else.

MS. SLEMMONS: It was to give something else.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: You know, I loved that moment, that, whoa, this was really cool. So anyway, somehow after that, I -

MS. RIEDEL: That's fabulous.

MS. SLEMMONS: - I was much more shy, and I really never got back to that.

MS. RIEDEL: Performance was over - at least if you had to be on stage.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right, but I did - I think now that I give talks occasionally and that I view them - these talks as a kind of performance. And I think that, for me, they have something to do with that early experience - [laughs]. But it was partly because I felt the response. I felt the connection with the other people. And I think it has a lot to do with why I do what I do, because I want to make some kind of connection in that way. And to move people in some way, as simple as that sounds, as I have been moved myself by other art, in particular, and that if I could do that, that would be a worthwhile way to make a living. And so -

MS. RIEDEL: It all started with "Indian Wigwam." I never knew. [They laugh.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, I'm just remembering it now.

MS. RIEDEL: For a while, your interest really shifted to literature, considerably after you were five, when you got into high school, did it not?

MS. SLEMMONS: That's a funny thing to think about, too, and this is very odd. I don't know why it is. I didn't have books as a kid, and I don't remember my parents reading to me or looking at books. It's true. I don't - maybe they were working and busy and - and because I

was sort of on my own, in a certain sense - I don't know. I do remember a couple of records and I think we've talked about that before, that we had a record of Peter and the Wolf -

MS. RIEDEL: Peter and the Wolf.

MS. SLEMMONS: - with Peter Ustinov, and I listened to that endlessly. And I think I can really see so much of the fact I was so attracted to that and what was in there. It was both scary and exciting at the same time. And - and that - you know, to get to the excitement, you had to go through the scary part, too. And it was sad and it was exhilarating. And it had - it was dark, and there were all those elements that - of course, what are in fairy tales, and not Disney fairy tales, but that's what they're all about.

So I mean, Peter Ustinov was reading that, and that's probably the closest I came to a book, although I do remember some Dr. Seuss books from the library. But I really didn't start reading until I was, maybe, in junior high. And there was a little public library, and I would - once I started reading, I couldn't stop. There was a librarian there who, again, I don't quite know what led her to recommend to me to read [Fyodor] Dostoevsky - [laughs] - but I did, and I got totally into Russian literature and read all of Dostoevsky. What I was understanding, I don't know, but I was very attracted to that. And so when I was going to go to college, it was literature - comparative literature - that I thought I would study.

MS. RIEDEL: And you started off at Scripps [College, Claremont, CA]?

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] That was - at that time - I don't know if it still is - a girls' school. And in high school, I had gone to a boarding school, a girls' school. And Scripps was really an excellent school, but by that time, after a very short time there, though I certainly respected what the education was going to be like there, I felt like I had to get out in the world. And I talked my parents into - I convinced them that I would get much more of an education if I went to Paris - [laughs] - and lived there for a while. Didn't even go to school, but just live there. And they went along with that and said they would pay the amount that would have been for that year of college. But after that, you know, if I was going to continue to live there, I'd have to figure that out on my own.

MS. RIEDEL: So you went off to Paris at 17 or 18, 19, by yourself?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: It would have been '63 -

MS. SLEMMONS: Or '64, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SLEMMONS: I wasn't enrolled in school or going for any particular program or anything. I just wanted to be in Paris, go to the museums, live there.

MS. RIEDEL: What gave you this idea? What put the notion in your head, do you remember?

MS. SLEMMONS: I don't. Do you have that feeling at all like certain things that you know that you did when you were younger, and I think, well, how did I come up with that? Or how was I not shy in that regard to just set out? I think I wanted - I just wanted to get out in the world. Now, one thing, when I was 13 or 14, I did go to Europe with my parents. They had a friend who lived there, and we traveled for about two months, including living with her for a while. And I would say that really changed my life. I saw a bigger world, and I was just overwhelmed. And -

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Where did you go?

MS. SLEMMONS: We went to Spain. We were in Portugal and Spain and France and Germany and Italy. We drove through all those countries.

MS. RIEDEL: It's a wonderful age to experience all that.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] It profoundly affected me on so many different levels. Certainly seeing the art, but also just seeing the physical landscape, the buildings, also seeing the cemeteries from the war. I remember that, being overwhelmed to see that. That wasn't that long after the war, and yet I can remember people talking about the war and it

seemed very remote. So I can understand young people now, when we talk about the Vietnam War, that seems way back there to them and remote. But somehow, seeing those cemeteries, those vast cemeteries representing all the people who were killed, had a big effect on me.

So it was in high school - I had been learning French, and I liked French literature. There were people that I was reading that may have been why I decided to go there. I don't actually remember how it came up - came to be. Maybe that's where it seemed like you'd get the most saturated - [they laugh] - with knowledge and experience. And it was that I had the idea that a big gap in my education was experience, knowledge through experience, through travel, through meeting different people and different cultures. So that was, to me, was learning, was education. I wanted that kind of education for a while. I just was not ready to settle down to the other kind.

MS. RIEDEL: And what did you do there for a year?

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, I think I went everywhere, to museums. I also - there was a cinematheque which you could - you could see three movies a night for, like, 75 cents or something like that. [They laugh.] I mean, not that I liked three movies back to back, but you could certainly see movies very inexpensively, and they had series of movies. So - I saw I don't know how many Japanese movies through a series that they were doing at the time, which was, again, a whole new world to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: So I went to a lot of movies and a lot of hanging out in cafés, talking and - [laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: A lot of museum time, too?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh, yes, very definitely. And certain literature, American literature, I read then because that's - people valued it there. So that was interesting to learn about.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember anything that struck you particularly at that time?

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, I mean, Henry Miller was very much read at that time. And I hadn't a clue about him. And also the musicians, American musicians, jazz, that was so much more appreciated and revered in Paris. I was living on very little money, and that determined things I could do.

There was this weird little place that had a game that was sort of like bowling. [Laughs.] I mean, when I think of it now, I don't remember how - was it attached to a café or something? I don't know. But it was a thing that was, you know, waist high - it was like miniature bowling, and you rolled this little ball down and there were these pins. Well, Bud Powell, who was a jazz musician, was always there - [laughs] - doing that - playing that game, which I don't even remember. And several times, I was at the table where he was and people were talking.

So it was mostly listening in Paris, I would say, because I was just taking it all in. I saw Ray Charles there; he gave a concert, and that was astounding. That was - what - in '63 or '64, and he was wildly popular there. I can remember that evening vividly. And so, in a funny way, I was learning something about American culture by being in Paris that I didn't have access to or make access to, being in this country, at that time. So it was a rich experience. And then I did end up finding out about enrolling in some classes at the Sorbonne [University of Paris], and I really enjoyed that. And I thought that I might finish there. Then I was feeling like settling down a bit and - and studying, in that sense.

MS. RIEDEL: And what brought you back then to Iowa?

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, some difficult personal family circumstances, so I had to come back. And then I wasn't able to go back to Paris. So I ended up then going to school at the University of Iowa nearby, and I could get in there. And so that's where I finished.

MS. RIEDEL: And you had - during that year in Paris - decided to switch your major, to art and French?

MS. SLEMMONS: No, at Iowa I was going to study literature.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, still. Okay.

MS. SLEMMONS: So I took Russian and was learning Russian, so that I could read - [laughs] - Dostoevsky in Russian and - and French. So after - and I would kind of work intermittently, because I couldn't afford an entire year; so sometimes I would work a semester to gather enough money together to finish another semester. And so it turned out that I ended up with plenty of credits to officially have a degree in language, but I still had more credits to - to just finish school.

So - a friend - and a lot of my friends were in the art department - talked me into taking an art class, a studio class, which I felt, well, but I don't know anything. You know, I haven't had any art at all since fifth grade. But I went ahead, and then I did take quite a few classes with what I had left. So it was sort of like that. And I ended up having enough for a degree - a major in art also, but a lot of it was art history, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

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MS. RIEDEL: Were there any - you said that a lot of the classes you took in college were art history. Were there any significant studio classes?

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, I did take a lot of studio classes - a number of them, Beginning Painting, Beginning Printmaking - like that, and I felt rather - again, felt behind, that I was missing all these skills just to know how to work. Mostly, I was just reminded of my own inadequacy - [laughs] - but I do remember one - a painting teacher who said, you know, it takes nine years to be a plumber, so don't think you're going to be here for three years and become an artist. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: That's great. That's great.

MS. SLEMMONS: That I remember. It had a big effect on me. And I must have considered that reassuring; like, it's going to take me a little more time.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember the names of any of these teachers?

MS. SLEMMONS: His name was Fracasini, but I don't remember his first name. There was a very known printmaker. This was at the University of Iowa - I don't know if I said that. Mauricio Lazansky and a number of people who were my friends were printmakers, and I suppose I liked - I remember liking working on the metal, though I had trouble with engraving, and later I learned engraving in Japan and I took to that much more easily. Their technique is completely different. And that was much more - I felt that that was much more fluid for me in learning it the way they do it in Japan.

MS. RIEDEL: How do they do it?

MS. SLEMMONS: That way, it's hammering with chisels toward you. With the engraving tool, you hold it in your hand and you push away from you - I mean, in the simplest form. So I really didn't take anything but basic classes, but all of those I liked. I mean, here I was, my last year of school, and I had had the good fortune of getting a very good job, working for a Chinese parasitologist and his wife, who were both on the research medical faculty.

And a friend of mine had worked for Dr. Hsu. She was getting her Ph.D. in English, and she recommended me as her replacement. And Dr. Hsu said, oh, no. He didn't want anyone who didn't have a Ph.D. in English, because mainly he wanted the language help. I mean, it was being a secretary in one sense and writing letters, but also writing abstracts and that kind of thing. His English was very good - but anyway, I did end up getting the job, working for him, and we all became very close.

And - but that was a small fortune, \$2.15 an hour. And so at one point, when Rod [Slemmons] and I were together, we each had two jobs each and were going to school full time. And my first job started at eight in the morning, and his bartending ended at two [in the morning]. So those kinds of hours we kept - [laughs] - but the last -

MS. RIEDEL: Did you two meet at the University of Iowa?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], we did. Rod was in graduate school and - anyway, the last semester of college was all art classes and one algebra class. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Algebra?

MS. SLEMMONS: That was because I kept putting it off, that they would certainly be enlightened and change that requirement - [Riedel laughs] - that you had to have so many years of math. And the first few - first week of the class, I said, I'm not going to make it. It just makes no sense to me how you can multiply something, fractions, and end up with something smaller. It's just not logical. And Rod just rolled his eyes and said, don't ask those kinds of questions. [They laugh.] Anyway, I passed some little place there and I actually ended up loving the class, but that's what I was taking my last year, my last semester.

MS. RIEDEL: You had to figure out which questions to ask and which not to.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right, just to accept.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: And so I didn't take anything very complicated art-wise.

MS. RIEDEL: And then, in '68, you emerged with a degree.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, and I have to say, too, that I kind of fought getting the degree. I thought - you know, compared to Scripps and the kind of education I got there or the promise of the education, I mean, it wasn't very good on the undergraduate level. There were very good graduate schools, programs at Iowa, but not so much on the undergraduate level. And I wondered, what was I really getting from all of this and what would that really serve me? It was almost some kind of conditioning that you had to have a college education.

MS. RIEDEL: And Rod rolled his eyes again and said, just take it, and let's get out of here. [They laugh.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And my father didn't have a college degree, and though he - I don't feel he was particularly hung up about that. He was actually offered an art scholarship at the Art Institute [of Chicago] when he was a kid, but he had to work for people that his father didn't approve of him doing - so I mean, but his interest, apparently, was there. I didn't learn that till much later.

MS. RIEDEL: And you said last night - actually now I remember - that he was a painter. He would make signs.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, he did that. I mean, he got his first full-time job at the age of 12. That's when he started his 40-hour workweek, at age 12.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm, 12.

MS. SLEMMONS: I mean, he graduated from high school, but he didn't - he didn't go to college and - but he had great respect for education and great respect for my mother. He was not intimidated by smart women.

MS. RIEDEL: He went on to be the editor of a paper, so clearly he was drawn to education, just not in traditional terms.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, he was very street-smart kind of smart.

And so anyway, I did get the degree; but when I was mentioning those jobs and being a little bit crazy working and trying to finish - I think it was the summer before the last year - I said, you know, we really should take a break and - how did I come up with that idea because I - I'm very practical in another sense and I - we could learn to live on very little and have a good life, it seemed to me, but somehow I felt part of that good life should be going somewhere and taking a break. [Laughs.]

But we had so little money that often at the end of the month, we would go to a neighboring farm, where they had eggs and milk. And if you couldn't pay for it, you just wrote the amount on the calendar that you owed. And we often did that. At the end of the month, we had a lot of scrambled eggs and milk or omelets, and then when we got paid, we'd pay up.

But somehow I thought we should - we should not get too closed in before we finished the last year. So Rod said, how do you propose that we do that? And they had these student art fairs fairly often, where the art students, but anyone, could make something and sell it. And it was mostly people buying from each other, but it was - there were good things there, interesting things.

So I tried to think of what I could make for that, and we had found this old glass-beaded curtain in an abandoned house near the old farmhouse we rented. And I thought, well, they were Venetian glass beads. I thought I could make earrings out of these and sell them. So I went to the hardware store and got some brass wire. And we had a couple of pairs of pliers and some wire cutters or tin snips. And I proceeded to make 150 pairs of earrings, many of them with these glass beads. And I did learn something early on, that I couldn't stand to make the same thing twice. I was not good at production, in that sense. To keep going, I had to invent another variation. And so I made these and -

MS. RIEDEL: Your first series?

MS. SLEMMONS: [Laughs] Yes. And they were \$2 apiece, and I sold them all and made \$300. So there was enough to go to Mexico.

MS. RIEDEL: That's pretty remarkable, a sold-out show.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, right. [They laugh.] And it was pretty great. Many years later, at a show at Traver/Sutton Gallery in Seattle, a woman who was an artist in Seattle came to the show, and she was a student, an art student at Iowa at that time, and she'd brought a pair of the earrings that she had gotten there. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Did she really?

MS. SLEMMONS: So that was pretty funny. She realized I'd come a long way since then. [Riedel laughs.] But we went to Mexico - I mean, we drove.

MS. RIEDEL: To Oaxaca?

MS. SLEMMONS: We got in our VW bug and drove - started south, and we kind of went - we had no destination in mind. We just wended our way down and had many interesting adventures, and then we finally ended up in Oaxaca, where we stopped for a few days because we liked it so much there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Do you remember what it was, Kiff, in particular that -

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, it's beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: It is beautiful.

MS. SLEMMONS: Do you remember the zócalo?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: I mean - and at that time, you could drive in the zócalo. Now, you can - it's not for cars.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: It was very different then, but it was absolutely beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. So this would have been '67 or '68, yes? Very present indigenous population -

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: And that - that also was different about Oaxaca. I mean, the -

MS. RIEDEL: Monte Alban?

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Monte Alban, we loved. Then you just drove up to it

and got out of the car. And - and in a little kind of funny museum was the jewelry from Tomb 7 at Monte Alban, that I saw on that trip. And it was quite amazing to see that work.

And when I think about it now, I'm sure that had a very deep effect on me in a way, too, because it was jewelry that was so varied in technique and material. I mean, there were gold things. There were silver things. There were cast things. There were fabricated things: shell, coral, bone, and representational, figurative, even narrative.

There is one very classic piece that I would like to - I intend to eventually do of the series of 10 greatest hits, and that was a piece that was a linked piece. That was a brooch, a large brooch that represented a narrative. And so there was everything there. It wasn't just one style or one material or one technique. It presented such a rich array of approach to making jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: And each of the materials must have had a symbolic significance, the jade versus the gold. I don't know what the silver might have - stones as well.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, and I don't know that I learned all of that then, but I remember it very vividly. And then we - we didn't go back to Oaxaca, though we went to Mexico many times. We didn't go back to Oaxaca till 25 years after that. And then we've been going every year ever since and seeing that Tomb 7 jewelry move around in different contexts, different museums, or different designs of the museum display, and I realize that that, you know, was very planted there for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Have you seen them revise their interpretation of the jewelry? Has it been put in another context over that period of time?

MS. SLEMMONS: No, not so much. That's fairly consistent, but the presentation of it has been quite different, which says something, too. I mean - objects tell you different things in museums, more than just themselves, how they are presented.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I guess that's another thing, thinking about jewelry, is how often you see jewelry in museums, ancient jewelry, and how that can be shown to represent a culture, or to represent a segment of history, partly because it's smaller and might survive more, or maybe didn't get melted down like the bigger things, if it was gold - or - and partly because of the sale and the portability, and maybe that that can still remain, and the value that that might have been more protected, or hidden in some cases. But it can often be the evidence of a culture and say a lot of things about the culture, like the Tut show ["Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs"], for instance, with the jewelry from that period. So again, that is so much what interests me about jewelry, is that connection to culture.

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking last night about jewelry's function - function in jewelry and in each culture.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: What it signifies, what it means, what role it plays.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And yet, I don't know what those things meant specifically in Tomb 7 to the culture they were made for, but there's still something there for me to appreciate, I feel. And -

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe the very fact that they did mean something was enough.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yeah, but also - in aesthetic terms, they're exciting visually. And it is a visual language, it turns out, that I came to be more interested in. I mean, in some ways, I think I - I would like to have been a writer or a poet, but because I didn't do that, that maybe I'm trying to do that in some way through the jewelry and through a visual language, or realizing that that's where I'm the most acute, is in visual matters.

The other thing I remember about Oaxaca that first time is one morning - we stayed in a hotel that was quite luxurious compared to the other ones we've been staying in; it was \$2 a night. It was very elegant. And that hotel still exists in the same spot, and it still feels just as good -

MS. RIEDEL: That's so wonderful.

MS. SLEMMONS: - to me. But we, one day, went to the zócalo to have our coffee and there was absolutely no one around. And it was very eerie and strange because, as you know, in Mexico and in towns like Oaxaca - I mean, you -

MS. RIEDEL: Bustling always.

MS. SLEMMONS: - you see all of life going on, all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: I mean, when we were just there this time, we were sitting having coffee in that zócalo, and Rod said, oh, there's a man entirely naked walking along the edge of the zócalo. And I looked up and there he was. And nobody was paying him too much mind. [They laugh.] And I don't know what the story was, but there was a kind of - you know, maybe he was a known - a little bit damaged or something, but no one was freaking out over this. But, anyway, that morning -

MS. RIEDEL: I've sat in the zócalo many times - [laughs] - and watched equally unusual things unfold, so I know exactly what you mean.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right, uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Again, when you think why we're so uptight about certain things in our culture, and in Mexico, it's - they've seen a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: So they know they can understand the context a lot better than we can sometimes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's true.

MS. SLEMMONS: So that morning, 40 years ago, we were sitting there and there was no one around, and we were feeling like - you know, maybe there'd been some kind of mass evacuation for some reason - [laughs] - but there was a waiter in the restaurant and he came out, and we said, well, where is everybody? And he said, oh, they're up in the stadium because - and I don't remember the name - a poet was in town who had been from Oaxaca and he had won several awards. And he was giving a reading. So they were, like, 8,000 people in the stadium.

MS. RIEDEL: Had gone to hear the poet read.

MS. SLEMMONS: Had gone to hear the poet. We thought, this is a good place that values that.

MS. RIEDEL: This was your very first trip?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Made an impression.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yeah, yeah. So we drove back with \$70 and some baskets and a few rugs, a little string of stone beads, and you know, had a great time and money to start the new school year. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And change, exactly. Leftover.

How did you get from finishing school to beginning to start making jewelry?

MS. SLEMMONS: So I guess after I made those earrings, I did have a good time making them; somebody wanted something similar and I made a few more things. And then I just started making more things.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you come up with 150 different designs? Were you looking at different styles of jewelry? Were you looking at photos or pictures, or you just invented as you went?

MS. SLEMMONS: No. And when I think of them, they were kind of curlicue things. I mean, it's

what you could do with wire. It was, like, maybe 20- and 18-gauge wire, and it was the material that sort of allowed what you can do. I didn't even hammer any of them or anything. So it was really like line drawings, you might say, making them in the wire. And - no, I wasn't looking at anything then. You know, it was just trying to figure out how I could make them slightly different and then feeling a little sense of triumph if I opened up some new avenue where there could be 10 variations on that particular little form.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SLEMMONS: And - anyway, I just started to make more things and - and then actually working with sheet and other forms of the metal, but to begin with, it was, like, brass and copper. And then I did get silver, and I can - and also there were people making things - making jewelry. And I would go to them and say, how do you this, or, can I see what you're doing - like that - or get a book - I mean, Oppi Untracht's *Metal Techniques for Craftsmen* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968] was sort of my guide. And, of course, in that book was so much else - I mean, all the photographs of all these different things.

And - so just little by little, I started to learn things and just enjoying. And we were moving then to the Northwest and it was more - Rod was looking for a job, and so that was more the matter at hand. But I almost immediately, when we got situated in Bellingham, when he started teaching at Western Washington University, set up a bench and started working. And that's where I made that piece I showed you, that fabricated piece. So I got a torch somewhere in there, because I realized some things I wanted to do, you had to stick together and that they'd work better that way.

And - but I also remember that one of the first things I did when I got a sheet of silver, that I was a little bit overwhelmed with this pristine and, at that time, seemed valuable, piece of metal. And I thought, well, what if I screw it up or - and I don't want to waste it. And so I took it outside and hammered it on the sidewalk, the whole thing. So I sort of pre-scratched it and dented it. Then I felt so much better. [Riedel laughs.] And, in a way, that's probably my only contribution to metal techniques, is street-textured silver. I've done many things like that, using that. And that there was the randomness to that; you could have that element in there.

And I also realized that I like things that you could handle and that you wouldn't mess up by handling. And - or that that was the particular kind of thing I wanted to make. I don't know how conscious these things were. I mean, it's like I didn't sit down and say that, but I now see that I was very clear about some things that in a way were - you know, aesthetic or ideological choices that I made.

When we were in Bellingham, it wasn't long after we were there that I met a woman named Ella Steffens, an Israeli woman, who actually had seen a necklace I made with silver and pre-Columbian spindle whorls.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you already showing your work at this point, Kiff, in different shops or galleries? Were you having shows on your own?

MS. SLEMMONS: In Bellingham, I sought out little galleries, which seemed so presumptuous of me at the time, but I also had done a couple of craft fair things, thinking I didn't like that at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Which ones had you done, do you remember?

MS. SLEMMONS: Oh, they were just local things.

MS. RIEDEL: Little local, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SLEMMONS: And I realized that was not a venue - and also that I didn't really want to do production things, or think - my mind just didn't work that way. I have immense respect for people who do work that way and - but I could see that wasn't going to be it for me. But I did - there were a couple of little galleries that I took things to. So it wasn't really having a show.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, but your work was out and was selling.

MS. SLEMMONS: And then when Ella got in touch with me, she was very interested in this particular piece and maybe my making some pieces for some beads that she had. And I had

been doing a bit of that, too, sort of commissions for people who would have something they'd like made into something else.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were using some found objects, some pre-Columbian beads, that sort of thing, in your own work.

MS. SLEMMONS: Beads -

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: - definitely. It was the beads first. I think about those - that little string of stone beads I got - of ancient stone beads I got in Mexico that I couldn't use because I thought, well, this has to be very, very just right before I use these. And it took me maybe 30 years before I finally used those beads, but I had - there were other beads, like the spindle whorls - a lot of the earliest things I did were with those.

And, in fact, I sent things down in Seattle. They had Lambda Rho, which was a scholarship society for the university that Ramona was always involved in, Ramona Solberg. And they had like a holiday show that was juried, that you could send work to and they would sell. And many of those pieces I sent there, submitted them. But you sent the actual pieces, as I remember, because some years later, when I met Ramona, she actually had photographs of those pieces that I didn't - I mean, I didn't photograph things - because she liked those pieces. And - and it was then that I sort of realized how many of them were with the spindle whorls and the silver. So those were some of the very early things that I made.

When I met Ella, then - she is Israeli and she had a wonderful collection of ethnic jewelry that she had collected most of her life. Jewelry that was originally from the Middle East, but now was from all over, really wonderful things. And she had lots of beads and lots of elements that she liked and wanted to have made into things or things that needed to be repaired or completed. And so I made a lot over several - you know, a couple of years, I guess - with Ella - for her. She also sold some of those pieces in San Francisco, where they had lived for a long time.

And - but anyway, it was - I loved seeing all these pieces from her collection. And I think that's where I really got to know more about ethnic jewelry and the kinds of things that were being made and also - they had such vitality and were so ingenious in some of the engineering and the designs. I feel like those things were my teachers in many ways. And I was also looking at books. It's not like I hadn't seen some of these things before, but - and I think I mentioned that I repaired some things, too.

And I remember pausing at that time, like, what could I - I couldn't possibly know how they meant it to be or make it. How could I presume to intervene in this piece? But then I felt I could put it back into use, in the sense of being worn again, and that it didn't take away from the integrity of the piece. And I see a real connection with the later, or the most recent, Re:Pair series.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Do you remember if you tried intentionally to blend the repair, or if you tried to make it deliberately distinct?

MS. SLEMMONS: Both.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SLEMMONS: And there was one - just a couple of years ago, when I was visiting Ella, there was an ivory cuff there, and I said, isn't that wonderful how they repaired that, because there are many ivory bracelets from Africa that have been repaired or they cracked or whatever. And she said, well, you did that. [They laugh.] And - I mean, I knew immediately it was a repair because it sort of didn't go with the original bracelet, but it did at the same time. It was an obvious someone else doing something to it. But that actually made me feel good. I mean, it was a very small detail, but I was glad to see that I had perceived it that way, because that was something that, to me, at the time, I respected those pieces so much. And then also, you know, I didn't know - there were no names attached to any of these pieces, but there was certainly the presence of a maker very much there. And maybe that, to me, is the most important presence, and that I hope that maybe someday, that something I made would have that same kind of presence, without having to have a name attached to it, just in the thing itself.

So I made more and more work and looked at more and more work of other jewelers, and I enjoyed all of that, but it didn't feel like it was enough.

MS. RIEDEL: At this time you were working with pebbles and found objects. When did you meet Ruth Pennington?

MS. SLEMMONS: Not till much later.

MS. RIEDEL: Later, okay.

MS. SLEMMONS: I would say found objects - no, it was really the beads. The pebbles were then, though, too, because of a beach we went to, we happened on, and they had the most marvelous rocks on this particular beach, little pebbles. They really set me off, and I thought, you know, this is way more beautiful. These little stones are way more beautiful than diamonds and emeralds to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: And so there was a little something there that happened, but - where was my thread?

MS. RIEDEL: Sorry, you had been looking in books, but you were making a decision that something else was going to have to happen.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, I was realizing that a lot of time had passed and I was really doing this jewelry while I figured out what I was going to do with my life kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Developing skills, techniques.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, practicing, many years of practice. And - but it - there were certainly people making good jewelry, well-made, designed jewelry, that were already - that already existed in the world. And I did want to do something to - to make my living that felt like it served a purpose, in some way. And I could make decorative jewelry and probably adequately designed jewelry, but that just wasn't enough.

And I didn't - in a sense, I wasn't interested in going that far in that direction to do that kind of thing. It wasn't involving other parts of me - my intellectual life that I valued or what art did. It had more to do with culture and - and making connections on other - in a more layered way. So I thought I either had to just start something else and get on with it, or completely change how I made jewelry, how I looked at working as a jeweler.

In that time - I mean, it wasn't like I was isolated in this activity. I actually taught at Western Washington a couple of classes for the woman who was teaching there at the time who went on sabbatical.

MS. RIEDEL: Metalsmithing?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I felt - I took that very seriously, but I also felt like if people said, what temperature is something supposed to be, I felt more like the cook when they ask how hot the oven is. He opens the oven door and puts your hand in and says, that hot. [Riedel laughs.] I couldn't provide the students with certain basic knowledge that I felt they needed, they deserved, you know, because I sort of learned a different way, and that wasn't going to work to say, when it gets this hot. You know, it had to be a little more specific.

And I'm a bit making light, but I felt that - and I liked the teaching, but what I liked was seeing what set the students off. I liked seeing where they would use their imagination and figure out problems. And it was - and I felt that certainly there were others who would be much better at the teaching part and providing the technical skills that are really necessary. But I liked talking to them about the other part, like, what are the ideas involved? Why do this? Who cares? You know, what - those kinds of things were interesting to me, but I found that I couldn't very easily work and teach at the same time and that also I would have to make a choice there. So I made a choice for the work, that I felt that I might have more to give, in the sense that so much teaching is through the work. I could pass on a lot more information through the work.

MS. RIEDEL: Than through the teaching.

MS. SLEMMONS: Through the actual teaching, maybe. But there's certainly a didactic urge in me, and some of my work has pretty didactic aspects to it. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And you have gone on to teach workshops, which allow you to teach for a limited time and then go back to your work.

MS. SLEMMONS: I've never really done any workshops. I've been asked many times.

MS. RIEDEL: Residencies then.

MS. SLEMMONS: More like that, more like a visiting artist, and that means a lecture or two and meeting with students and critiques.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: That I feel like I have something to offer there, in that context. And the workshops, not so much, because I'm not really a technique-specific person.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I meant residencies.

MS. SLEMMONS: So I have proposed several times to do only an idea or a conceptual approach, but nobody's taken me up on it yet. And it's just as well. I have plenty to do. [Riedel laughs.] But anyway, again, there were many different clues to myself that my work had to be aimed more as an artist.

I mean, there are many ways to be a jeweler, so many ways, to be a designer or a production person without even - I mean, a designer without even really making - or through teaching, but working as an artist - involved more of the ways I like to work or be in the world.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And by that, you mean content?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Ideas are my most precious material. Those are my materials. And maybe because after 10 years of practicing, I got fairly good at certain basic skills; I would learn new little technical things to serve the idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I think I could see too many times there was a kind of seduction of technique and that if you use this technique, that automatically made it interesting or new or exciting. I used to always take the worst piece I've ever made to show students, because I made it for kind of dishonest reasons. I thought that I needed to be more complicated and more technically challenging and advanced. And it's just a dreadful piece. That was good to see that - [laughs] - that I at least noticed and stopped myself.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, before you went any further down that road.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: So you decided that the work had to become more idea focused. How did you then go about doing that?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right, well, in some ways, I probably didn't recognize that I already had been doing that in some pieces, but I didn't really see that. So sometimes - and I still do it now - if I'm trying to figure out something or solve a problem, I will just do it very literally, or I'll figure out a way to just address it head on.

To me, thinking about meaning in jewelry in other cultures and in tribal cultures, there would sometimes be a very personal meaning to an object and sometimes a very communal meaning. I was thinking, well, how would you do that now? How would you develop that kind of language?

Well, we still have locketts, or what would be like amulets would serve, and I was trying to discover where would I be most involved. It was to make something as a kind of protection, or a kind of celebration of a friend, of a person I knew, that would engage me to think about it and I'd have an urgency about making something for them. So I decided to approach it that way.

And I had already been doing exhibitions of work at Traver/Sutton in Seattle and other galleries, but this one, I decided to make almost as a kind of a portrait of the friend, or something related to someone very specific - very specific, but of course, it was obvious this would not be known to other people. Even people who knew that person wouldn't necessarily look at it and say, oh, that's so and so. It was just a way in for me, and that I didn't intend for it to be a portrait in that sense, but it was a way for me to try to inject meaning or associations with materials that had to do with that specific person. And it took many forms. And the work didn't look the same at all. [Laughs.]

All the pieces looked very different from each other, and in a way, it allowed me to do that without - because I had this other purpose, which was to serve the idea of this person - and maintain a kind of vitality to it. So it was just a handle, a device for opening me up from there. I realized that you can't just manufacture meaning for its own sake. And so that was a good start.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this the *In the Name of Friends*, friendship?

MS. SLEMMONS: *In the Name of Friends*. *In the Name of Friends*.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: I'm trying to think, there were maybe 20 pieces. And one piece was based on a dream that a friend told about. That was such a curious dream, but in a way, it fit him, too. So it was really depicting that dream, but it happened to take the form, in a way, of a giant locket. And so it was fun to just play with those ideas, both in scale and materials, all these different things I could explore that way.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were looking specifically for materials that had a charge to them, that would deliver something that related to that person, in juxtaposition to the other materials in the piece.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: Like that piece - this was a dream that he had when he was a kid, about his sisters being imprisoned by witches in a big house. And he would come to the gate of the house and say, but I want to see my sisters. And then finally, after many attempts, they said, you have to say the magic word - [laughs] - and the magic word was "sammy magmy." [They laugh.] I mean, like - that you'd remember that in a dream.

So it was a little house that I made. It was like a big locket, and the padlock said "sammy magmy" on it. And when you open the doors, what you saw inside was a black slate with two witches drawn on the blackboard. But Paul's [Berger] work, his early photographic work, had been photographing mathematical equations on blackboards. And so, you know, just those different kinds of - it allowed me to use that and make it - make it right for the context.

MS. RIEDEL: It allowed the layering to come in, as well as the narrative.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah, and again, that was more blatantly narrative. Though, often, I think my work, or the work of people who use imagery or the figurative, is called narrative, and I don't necessarily agree with that term. And I feel that much of my work that is called narrative, I would call poetic, if there's a language reference, more lyrical rather than a direct - specific narrative.

MS. RIEDEL: True.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] It's interesting how those - and maybe I'm more of a stickler about that because of my - what it means in a literary sense, or how I view language.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. Around this time, were you starting to do the pieces with eyes or did they come later? *Eye of the Beholder* [1985] and *Self-Portrait* [1985] and -

MS. SLEMMONS: I'm wondering how much longer that was. It was at Traver/Sutton, at that gallery, so I don't honestly remember - oh, maybe it was the eyes that came after that show. And so because I was thinking about perception and seeing and - how images work and what

they mean - visual language, almost in the medieval sense, where if you went into the church and you couldn't read and write, but you could read the imagery of the stories depicted there. And certain people were identified by certain attributes. And so you could recognize them. And I became interested in it and really thinking about that more specifically, but in a funny sense, too, I decided to just explore the image of the eye very literally in having a lot of these thoughts. So I did a whole show working with the image of the eye in different ways.

Again, it was also across several different materials, where it was the idea of the eye that took precedence, rather than the pieces looking to be a similar stylistically. That was, you might say, an early criticism of my work, that it - that I didn't have a recognizable style. [Laughs.] And that interested me because I felt like I was doing something that was very integrated, but it was integrated conceptually.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: And again, realizing that that interested me more than developing a particular style, though I think some of that gets in there after a certain amount of time. You do have basic ways of working, maybe, that show up.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, certain images, certainly of - that came early and surfaced over and over again, the hand, the eye, birds, and then always certain materials, the pebble and the silver at the start.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But here the pebbles show up in the eyes and then the eyes show up on a capital letter I, which was, again, a kind of play on words, and I called it *Self-Portrait*. And also there was some kind of questioning of titles. As though it was presumptuous to title a piece of jewelry, a little thing like that, a little bauble or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? That's interesting.

MS. SLEMMONS: And - I mean, I asked that question, too, but I realized that actually I liked, first of all, that you could identify and keep track of things that way, but also that sometimes the title could aim you in a certain direction of seeing something that you might not notice so easily otherwise.

MS. RIEDEL: Did the gallery object to that, or the clientele?

MS. SLEMMONS: No, it was - I remember gallery people and viewers questioning that.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Your earliest work - that I remember - all had titles. Nothing ever came as untitled.

MS. SLEMMONS: It pretty much did. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So like this - the capital I, with the little eyes pinned to it, called *Self-Portrait* - I mean, there is a play on words there, but also - a reference to the Milagros, in pinning the little images on pieces of wood in church. There is a connection there that I was referring to quite specifically.

And then in another eye that became the first hand that I made and there was again the play on words and the eye of the beholder. But the eye becomes the cuff of the hand, so that I could then have that hand holding the B. [laughs]. So from that series, I went on to do other body parts - [laughs] - I realized, until I did faces and whole figures.

MS. RIEDEL: What were your sources of inspiration at the time? There was a sense of humor and punning - we were talking earlier about Dada and Surrealism and -

MS. SLEMMONS: Very definitely. It was the Surrealists. And they've been there pretty much all along. In a way, I came to Surrealism more through literature and also just being intensely interested in that period of working in Europe, in art, in other areas. And Man Ray, his objects particularly -

MS. RIEDEL: And [René] Magritte -

MS. SLEMMONS: - I was very attracted -

MS. RIEDEL: - for - perhaps - mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SLEMMONS: And Magritte, who worked so much more thoroughly with imagery and what it stood for and how it worked juxtaposing disparate images and the collage work that was done then, the whole idea of the everyday, the common materials, the materials from everyday culture, the scraps. So much comes from there. I mean, also from a kind - from a sort of existentialism, of the idea of the absurd.

And, in a way, I think of - in a kind of deeper, philosophical way - that working as an artist is certainly fulfilling the absurd, but that we do it nonetheless, and that in some ways, you have to continually convince yourself that it matters to do this, or that the illusion of something matters. And so there was so much within Surrealism that I was affected by, and also language. The human thinking of the exquisite corpse idea, that activity could certainly relate to the Re:Pair and Imperfection project that I did very recently.

[Marcel] Duchamp is still, to me, one of the artists who affected me the most, maybe, philosophically. It's not that his actual work is as exciting to me as what goes into the work. And the whole notion of concept and that once you know a certain thing about a piece, about a work, the concept for it - it never leaves. It becomes a part of the piece, but it's totally invisible. The only way you can know it is to know it from having it written down somewhere or saying it. Because that's another thing I've thought a lot about, that some of the best pieces I've ever made, I've never made. I've simply described. And it's interesting that what things need to get - go further and be made. I think now the word "conceptual" is so - used so loosely, it's lost to me what it really was about.

I think of an example of the work of Cornelia Hesse-Honegger, a painter - she does exquisite watercolors of insects. She has a painting of the 23 backs of flies. And you see them and they are luminous and beautiful. And then you learn that they are - she has painted these insects that live around Three Mile Island [Nuclear Generating Station, Harrisburg, PA] or Chernobyl [Nuclear Power Plant, Pripyat, Ukraine], and they have been affected by the radiation, and they're deformed or something is askew. So she's painting them exactly as they are - she's documenting them and with some - once you know that - that that's what it is - that never leaves the painting, the piece. And it is - it's also very beautiful, and in that case, beauty is arguing for something. It's alerting us. It's an alarm for something that's happened.

So I'm interested in that way of using the concept, the idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And also the unusual aspect of having beauty, in this case, as a warning.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

MS. RIEDEL: So there's a surprise and an unexpectedness to that.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I like that jewelry can be about something. And it can be about an indicator of something. It can be about all kinds of things - but people don't expect to see it there. I mean, it's changed enormously. Now, there's so much exciting work in jewelry, and there isn't the same prejudice in scale, but it's still there. I mean, it's there with - when I started working with paper in Oaxaca and some galleries would wonder when I was going to get over that, you know, and not spend time doing that. And not everything is on this scale of seriousness either, and I know my reaction to the paper complaint was to make squirt rings out of metal. [Riedel laughs.]

[END MD 01 TR 03.]

MS. SLEMMONS: That was just to say - the main point was that -

MS. RIEDEL: There's a back and forth between the paper work and silver work that each informs the other.

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, maybe the main point is a certain assumption that people make; so why paper? That's nothing. Instead of saying, I wonder why Kiff is working with paper? There must be something there. So people still do this all the time. They have such assumptions that they make about materials or about a certain way of working, instead of thinking, well,

it might be on the way to something else or maybe there's a good reason for that to - but on another level, I meant that not everything I make is totally complex and layered, and there are all different moments that require making, but it was funny that my - a kind of reaction in a way, I guess, to the complaints about - to the disregard for the paper was for me to make out of metal, squirt rings, so that I just didn't take myself too seriously either.

MS. RIEDEL: And that has been a thread throughout your work from the start - referring back to the Surrealists - that sense of humor is almost a disarming device. Sometimes I think of it as a bait-and-switch device - you lure someone in, and then one finds more than one would have imagined.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. And I do find on occasion if you're asked to make something for a specific context or to fit into a particular investigation, that if I'm having to - if it feels too forced to make something fit or to make something work in a certain way, I just back way up and try to approach it through humor. I much prefer that than to saying something weakly - [laughs] - that's serious. The squirt rings, of course, pretty soon ended up into a set of dueling squirt rings that sat in a little box made out of a cigar box and elaborated to the point of absurdity and to also maybe say something about guns in the culture.

MS. RIEDEL: Not to mention water.

[They laugh.]

[END MD 01 TR 03.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Really. Just to finish up the thought of the concept being invisible but integral to a piece. Once having this knowledge of something, then when you see it, it goes with it from then on, that that ingredient is in there, but sometimes it may be required to question, I guess. It's like, if you don't know that, then what's the use? And I don't think that making it known necessarily diminishes the piece. There are people who would disagree with that, that it should all be in, within the piece, that no verbal connection should be necessary, but I see both ways, of course. I have spoken about certain things very directly, but I don't feel that that kind of clarity takes away - necessarily means it diffuses the piece.

So also talking about work which I have chosen to do on occasion, I've crafted it so that it can also work to inform you about something, about work or transform you or transcend a certain place it might be in with this knowledge that is available sometimes. But even I have talked about the fact that clarity and mystery can coexist, and I do like what's mysterious. I like ambiguity, and I like spaces left open so that you can enter into or that it can take you somewhere in your own perception or imagination to some kind of thought or conclusion or question, whatever.

I don't like if something is totally closed, and I don't mean to close off something by talking about it, but I think when - so even in titling or putting words with the piece, it's more to open things up rather than close them down or set something as one way. I never feel that the work has to be decoded in a specific way like there's a specific meaning for all people, but there are certain ways of perceiving and thinking that are shared, and so it's possible to work with that, too.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think very much of the Japanese aesthetic sense of leaving something partially incomplete - not jammed full, but partially open - leaving the viewer to complete the piece. Did that idea come to you during your travels in Japan or while studying wabi-sabi, or do you think this far precedes that?

MS. SLEMMONS: I don't think I was aware of what wabi-sabi and that idea of imperfection or incompleteness meant. I think that's pretty complicated. I think I was very attracted to it. I had some knowledge of this that was intuitive, but I didn't have another kind of knowledge of it that was from understanding it.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it goes back to something you were saying earlier about a visual language and your visual inclination. I think of those brooches you did so long ago about the torii gates framing something beautiful and huge but also sort of empty. Even if you weren't thinking about it consciously, there was very much an unconscious attraction to that kind of aesthetic.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. That's so interesting to look at that and look back on your own work,

kind of like an anthropologist, because then you're farther from it and I think, oh, my God, that's a very good example of - I was very aware of framing things and sort of memorializing things by framing them, found objects or little bits and pieces that were made by someone else, or leftovers. But then there was the idea part that I wanted more access to or wanted to explore, and the fact that I made those little gates framing virtually nothing, I think, could have been framing the invisible and that that kind of - that's important to know, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I think of the brooch framing the little piece of red coral, and that, I know, is a sacred material in certain cultures, but not in the Japanese culture -

MS. SLEMMONS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: - and so it was the mixing, as well, of your cultural experience - what had meaning in different places - put together with a whole new concept of value and framing and -

MS. SLEMMONS: And emphasis and context. At the same time, on the toriii gates, people would throw pebbles up, and if they landed on there, then that was good, but it was the pebble and the stones.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly. It's a whole new way of looking at pebbles.

MS. SLEMMONS: And then in Jewish tradition, putting pebbles on the graves. I mean, when you start to look at some of these things across many cultures, they're so similar. They are signs of our humanity and human impulses that are very similar, even though maybe in different literal materials, but the commemoration, the gesture is very similar.

[END MD 01 TR 04.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Kiff Slemmons at the artist's home and studio in Chicago, Illinois, November 1, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, and this is disc number two.

We're going to focus now on a 10-year period of work, '87 to '97, starting with your largest series to date, one of the most significant to be sure, the Hands of Heroes. How did that idea come about? How did you first get started on the whole series?

MS. SLEMMONS: I think the series involved a coming together of many different things I was thinking about over the previous years. And one was about symbolic language, how images work, what they can stand for, signs, symbols and that can I still find a kind of visual language that will work for a wider audience, to say something, to look at an idea through visual means. And with the eyes, with the faces, with the figure, I was also looking at what we recognize, what's familiar, that represents something, so immediately people are able to understand that.

And there's a certain universality to some of those images. I've always been attracted to the image of the hand - not only as a form, but what it can stand for. There sometimes seems to be an urgency, in students or people starting out, to be original, to be different, to come up with something new. Often, that took the form of a technique. The technique was something new, so that somehow meant you were doing something new and fresh. And that was true to a point, but I think that I felt that you could use something that had been done forever, and if you did it your way, or from your angle of view, it would mean something different or presented the possibility of seeing something differently.

MS. RIEDEL: While carrying all those wonderful layers and metaphors that had preceded it.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: The loaded image of, for example, the hand.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. So along with previous working with found material, I don't know that I've talked about that so much yet, but I did use - I began to be attracted to found objects or found material and recontextualizing them. Certainly, I should have mentioned that in relation to the Surrealists, because they did that, too, and also the juxtaposition of materials or images set up in unexpected ways can, again, torque your own perception into thinking about something in a fresh way.

MS. RIEDEL: And when you take loaded materials, like a ruler or a pencil, which come with all sorts of connotations of their own, the possibilities become all the more rich and varied.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly. And so when I had long wanted to do something with the hand, and I guess I referred to working with other body parts like the eye and the face and the torso as I had done in other pieces, but I couldn't quite find a way in to how to use the hand. And certainly, I like the fact that it has been done from almost the beginning - the first gesture of putting your hand in charcoal and then putting it against the cave wall to leave your print. And the hand is such a loaded image and has both a private, intimate connection and also a very public or communal connection. It has so many different layers to the image itself, and I think that I also related to the hand to a certain perspective I had on jewelry.

In a sense, I became more interested in making something that could be read in the hand, that fit in your hand, or that was seen at that distance, holding it in your hand and looking at it. Yes, it was jewelry to be worn, but I would say the body part it fit most closely was being in the hand. I also cared about it being handled, passed around, and that it would maintain its identity with that kind of use or wear. If it got worn down from being handled, all the better that it would still hold up in the hand, and then of course, hand in hand is reading distance. So that was, in a way, a certain distance that I viewed many things, so there was that reference to the hand as well.

I suppose in some ways, using the hand as an image to make a portrait of someone or to portray someone, there is a connection with the Friends series, In the Name of Friends; there is a similar involvement to thinking about people in that way. In a sheet of questions from Robert Lee Morris, as I remember, there was one question that interested me the most, was "Who were your childhood heroes?"

And I remember thinking, oh, well now, that's a good question when I get to that. And then when I did get to that question - and I think implied in the question was that the answer would be related to what you now did as an artist. But when I got right down to it, I couldn't actually think of any heroes that I had as a child. And I began to wonder why that was, and I started to ask other people that question.

Many people of my generation actually had difficulty, the same kind of difficulty, naming someone. The next generation older came up with answers sooner, and I began to think also that maybe the whole notion of "hero" had been replaced in contemporary culture with the notion of celebrity. And maybe it would be harder to be a hero, because everything would be known about you. Often, just as people readily make anything heroic, they're ready to undo any hero into something less.

Also I was thinking that in other cultures, perhaps, people have mythological heroes that they readily agree on, and in American culture, we don't have much of a mythological past to rely on. So at some point, I put the two together, that I could look at this notion of hero and explore that through the image of the hand. These would be almost like hagiographies of the saints, where the saints were depicted with certain attributes; so, for example, if you saw two eyes on a tray, you knew that was Saint Lucy. There were different images that told you immediately who someone was, so in a certain way, I wondered how I might depict different people within the image of the hand.

I probably did 200 drawings of a hand image to come up with one that would be the same throughout. It was important that the decision was made in the beginning, and the other decisions all had to do with how that was treated, the same template, so to speak. Again, it gave me an opportunity to use materials also in the metaphoric sense, so that sometimes the choice of material would relate very specifically to the person portrayed.

MS. RIEDEL: You also set up very specific limitations for yourself - things you could and couldn't do - a specific size and shape hand and a certain egalitarian spirit for the entire series.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. That's because these, the people that I chose, or who were depicted, weren't all necessarily my heroes. Many of mine were writers (which maybe some people wouldn't consider heroic in that sense, but writers also stood for artists, too, in my way of thinking), whereas for some people it would be more obvious physical prowess - of an athlete, for instance - or someone who had done something physically outstanding, or it could be fictional or mythological, like Don Quixote's hand. That was from a fictional realm,

where the hero was a character in a novel. I also particularly liked doing that hand, because I wanted to do a hand like the armor that he wore. And this choice would make a reference to previous metalwork and how much amazing metalwork has taken place in the realm of arms and armor.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: So that was an aspect of metal that was somewhat unsettling, when you think of coming from such a tradition - that so much energy and refinement and skill could be made into weapons and then what they were used for, of course. So anyway, that particular hand presented those layers in my way of thinking.

For the first exhibition, I think there were 12 or 15 hands. And essentially, that was one piece, but it was made up of these 15 parts - what it was about was that there were these different notions of a hero, maybe some unexpected, maybe some funny. One of those original ones, I remember, was Annie Oakley. Several people mentioned cowboys or Western figures as heroes, and one person did say Annie Oakley. She's the one I chose to depict. And I liked that she was a woman excelling at a skill more associated with men, and I liked the way I could make her hand be like a glove, like a leather glove with fringe.

MS. RIEDEL: Fringe. I remember that. Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: And it had a mirror in it. She used the mirror to shoot behind her, and one of the fingers has a little bullet as a nail. So there are many different ways of depicting.

And another one of those original ones was Roald Amundsen, who was the first to reach the South Pole. In that one, I used acrylic, clear acrylic. Sometimes using acrylic wasn't considered good because it scratches so easily, and so again, I just scratched it all to begin with. And I had done this before in some other pieces to suggest ice, and so this certainly worked for the Amundsen hand. So they all had different materials, but they all were the same, started from the same size -

MS. RIEDEL: And they were all brooches.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. They were all brooches, and they were, I guess, about three-quarters the size of my hand. So I showed them first in a couple of exhibitions, where I wanted them to be shown as a group before I would sell them individually, even though that's how they ended up being sold.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was in the mid-'80s - '87, '88 - and do you remember where you first showed them, Kiff?

MS. SLEMMONS: I showed them in Seattle at MIA Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: You showed some at Garth Clark, too, in New York.

MS. SLEMMONS: I remember that someone who seemed truly to fit the notion of hero was Nelson Mandela. And he was still in prison at that time, and I wondered about doing that, doing a hand for him, because I didn't want to trivialize that in any way. And I suppose this also reflects a kind of approach I have had all along. I think after I did 10 or 11 of them and worked on them for this certain amount of time, I came to understand what it was I was really doing, so I did make one for him that was in that original show. And then I don't know if it was, like, in another year, I also showed them at Garth Clark in New York. By that time, I made a second Mandela hand that - because he was then no longer in prison; I'm not sure of those dates, but that would certainly date that hand.

MS. RIEDEL: They were also scientists, spiritual leaders, besides who we've mentioned so far?

MS. SLEMMONS: Jacques Cousteau I remember doing. He was someone who brought us the news of other worlds that we probably would never see, but that are right here, and I remember being very fascinated with those programs on TV.

MS. RIEDEL: That hand had all those wonderful little elements from under the sea. I remember a tiny Coke bottle in it, too.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. Because that was another thing he - that was an early alarm for

pollution, because that's what they saw, as well, and that seems now so long ago, and people just weren't saying that kind of thing that much, but that gave me an opportunity to put that layer into it, too.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it's an interesting example of the way that you layer the work - all those different elements coming in to play. And as an example of the unexpected, that Coke bottle.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And at first it's like, oh, it's kind of funny and it gets your attention; you see it, and because it's tiny, then it's cute or whatever, but then it is like, what's that doing there, and maybe this is about something else. And I think also I hoped that they worked together, that when you saw them together, all of the hands, you went back and forth and then you might make a connection in one hand that would also set up connections with others, and maybe you'd question what all it was about.

[Harry] Houdini's hand was another one of the first ones, and that one, I enjoyed actually making the chains and the locks. I remembered that image of Houdini being completely wrapped up and realized that being a master of escape was a very important skill. [Riedel laughs.]

So I think people did respond to these pieces, in that again, there was something very recognizable, a way in, and then there was more available for the looking if you cared to look farther. And I liked the fact that they were shown together, because it was also the whole series that mattered. In the first show, I had them in a line at eye level, so that it was like reading palms, or reading them, though I tried to stay away from certain clichéd depiction of the hands, which I very definitely thought about. If I did use something like fingernails, it was in a funnier context, as I did with *Colette* [1987].

So that, actually, I worked on those hands for several years. I probably could have worked on them for the rest of my life - [laughs] - in that people wanted other hands or me to do a certain hand. I certainly enjoyed doing them and expanding the idea, but I also knew that I couldn't keep doing them forever and keep them fresh, keep the idea fresh.

MS. RIEDEL: They received an incredibly positive response every place you showed them, and that was by far the largest success at that time.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Which brought its own problems, knowing you had to then leave them and move on.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly. I didn't feel - and I've never felt this - that I wouldn't maybe do one again or to come back to it or look at it in a different way, but I knew that this particular group - that its potency was with that core idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Shall we talk briefly about the Washington State - [inaudible] - series of 10 hands you did a couple of years later for school kids?

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And that happened to be - I was invited to submit a proposal for a series of 10 pieces. The Washington Arts Commission was choosing 10 artists, and what I liked was they were choosing a jeweler among painters and sculptures and other artists, and that jewelry would be included, and that these pieces would travel around the public schools in Washington. There was a book that went with it and also a video that was made of the artists, and it was to be - the subject was autobiography and art. And at first, I was thinking that I wasn't sure that I had an idea in this strict autobiographical sense.

So rather than really refer to my personal autobiography, I thought more about childhood and frames of reference in childhood and how often we are measured on so many counts and so many ways, and since I had been using rulers in a metaphoric way and pieces of rulers in some of my work, and then thinking about the hands, in a way, the hands and the rulers were the autobiographical part of me. But I didn't really want to approach it specific to my autobiography but rather as frames of reference in childhood.

So I made a series of five sets of instances of measuring in our growing up, and then I did two pieces for each set, so it was measuring up to parents, to friends, to yourself, to school, to the world at large. I tried to depict images within the hand that referred to these kinds of

measurement.

I didn't use the same hand, the same template as the Hands of the Heroes. It was different shape and considerably bigger. In this case, though, they were pins, and they were possible to wear; I knew they were never going to be worn, and I framed them in boxes covered in glass and the titles were written on them in the box, so they were almost more like specimens, in a way. It gave me an opportunity to work with that image in a slightly different configuration and scale. So there was an example of immediately using the hand image, but in quite a different way that still felt fresh to me.

MS. RIEDEL: And both of these are just, I think, especially the examples of your preference to work in series and the power of the poetically charged materials that helped that series develop into a larger picture, while keeping each one very much a whole - a separate, thorough complete piece in and of itself.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. It's true. I think the pieces individually were whole in themselves, but they also became another part of a larger picture when viewed in the context of others. And I liked, in the end, thinking they really did make one piece. But in this case, this piece was owned, actually owned, by many people, so the ownership - the idea was owned by many people, if you're thinking of that in the sense of the marketplace.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is interesting when you think about the function of jewelry in tribal and pre-industrial cultures as being not necessarily owned, perhaps, by one person but by a larger culture in general. It's an interesting way of bringing that concept into a culture that doesn't have that concept. Almost imposing it.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And that we're so directed in a different way. We're not too prone to owning things communally, and this was another thing I thought a lot about, in that I was always a part of the marketplace, because I didn't teach or make my living in some other way; I was in the marketplace and - but I did not want to make decisions about deciding what people might buy and then make that. It turned out that the kinds of things that I ended up liking to make might be more expensive and not that affordable by lots of people.

And I think at some point I came to very deliberately wanting to make exhibitions that really existed, again, as a way of showing the work that would be made of these many parts, like the hands that could sell, but that by having them in an exhibition, it was possible to see it as the whole piece, the whole idea, to see that there was intelligence involved in this project, and that I realized that much of what I had loved that has influenced me, seeing art all my life, I don't own at all. But I've seen it in museums or in exhibitions, and it has - and I have that now, and that by seeing an exhibition, other people could, too - I don't mean to sound pretentious about that, but it's just a way to provide an experience you could get excited about, something cool or weird or strange, and because it is shown, you could see that in a public sense, in a gallery.

Sometimes galleries would rather sell this or that, or somebody would want to buy it right away, and I would say, no; it has to be in the exhibition, it has to be shown. Or sometimes they would want to leave out this piece for that piece and I would say, no, it has to be in there.

Or another thing I did for many years in Seattle, when I was showing in a place where I lived, was that I would often show work from previous bodies of work, two or three pieces that had been - that had led into what I was now doing, so that it fit with the new work. It was just interesting to see that there were people who would see these things over the years and make all those connections, and also it was interesting to notice that often, what people might buy would be those things, the older ones, and say, well, I can't quite get caught up with these now. They're a little too-out there, and then that's how it would be the next time. So I could actually observe people widening their perceptions of jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: You also talked about exhibitions as ways of putting ideas and concepts that were important to you out there. You haven't spent years in a specific university, and so, through these very well thought-out exhibitions and through numerous artist residencies and lectures that you've given, you've been able to put out the possibility of connections to a larger audience, through exhibitions rather than a regular teaching schedule.

MS. SLEMMONS: And sometimes there was a kind of didactic quality or aspect to the work, the *Insectopedia* [1997] piece, for instance, was certainly that. But it was also, in a way, a

kind of education about jewelry, because many of the references might be to jewelry history and how jewelry has been used and that kind of thing. And I liked exploring ideas, again, as I have said before, that weren't necessarily associated with jewelry. After the hands, I don't know whether it was a couple of years later, I did an exhibition which was one I actually really liked as far as taking me new places to work with these ideas.

It was called "Figures of Speech" [MIA Gallery, Seattle, 1990], and it was begun around the time that my father was ill and dying. And I wondered whether death and looking at death or talking about death was a place for jewelry. But of course, it's there in mourning jewelry, in Victorian mourning jewelry which radiated out into all kinds of different forms, even in materials like hair jewelry. Recently I saw this amazing catalogue that was from the late 19th century of hair jewelry that you could order, but that all came out of mourning jewelry, and keeping locks of hair, and then making jewelry out of hair which to some people is rather unsettling, but I liked that, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Incredibly intricate, detailed work.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. Quite amazing. So that's pretty radical material to use. We think today we're doing such out-there things. And again, looking at ethnic jewelry, if we think we're using weird materials, plastic or whatever, that's certainly been covered in so many ways in other cultures. And the Egyptians, many of that incredible jewelry was made for dead people. At least you didn't have to worry about how well it functioned. [They laugh.] You didn't have to get every single joint totally sturdy, because it might just lie there. Yes.

And also from traveling to Mexico and the Day of the Dead, the Calaveras, those figures of death, the skeletons, and that kind of combination of looking at death in a strangely celebratory way, is certainly a different attitude than we have in our culture, where death was so often kept hidden.

MS. RIEDEL: Death was almost a part of life, with the Day of the Dead.

MS. SLEMMONS: Absolutely. In fact, they have that expression, that very expression, that life is part of death. It's death that we're sure of. [They laugh.] And I also was interested in a kind of cage form and the idea of the partially seen, that you -looking through something, you can't quite see it, but how that can make you more acute in your looking. And really, that's what metaphor is, the power of indirection. It's rather hard to look at a gorgeous sunset for too long. The best part of it is how brief it is. That form with the skeleton or the cage is where I started to make these pieces, and there were pins and necklaces. And that was where the first breastplate pieces showed up.

MS. RIEDEL: There were certain things inside the rib cages, as I remember. Some had words; some had pieces of coral. I can't remember, but there were certain objects, which often had a charge to them, trapped and framed inside those cages.

MS. SLEMMONS: In different ways. Many of them had letters, words, or printed page - one had a letter as part of the head - so that you had to wonder what they were about, and again, it was exploring this imagery through many different forms. Some were very simple rib cages, just the rib cage alone but made with different materials. Others included more of the torso, the rib cage but the head and the arm- and some referred to expressions, like "dead of night," that were referring to death in that way.

Early on, when I did show my work, I usually ended up doing the installation myself, because people were not necessarily used to showing jewelry, and they would show it in a case horizontally - you'd look down at it, flat, and I knew I didn't want that. I wanted it on the wall, straight, that you'd look at like you would a drawing or a painting, but also, on a person would be that way and not under glass. That took a lot of work to convince people to show it that way, but I ended up doing that for many years. And it was interesting that I think that contributed to people looking at it differently because it was not in that context.

MS. RIEDEL: Which in itself is a shock.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: In the very first glance. You knew you were looking at something different.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And with that "Figures of Speech" show, it was a big show throughout

the gallery, and before the show opened, there were some people that came in and I happened to be there; I was doing something, but some people came in and they went around very carefully looking at everything, and they got to the last piece and they said, is this jewelry? And before that, they were looking at something else. And they weren't maybe looking at it first, at first, as jewelry, and then when they discovered that it was, they had to resolve what it all was, I think. But it was interesting to observe that that they were going along looking at it as small objects, small objects that were in an art gallery. So sculpture, whatever, but they saw it as art first, and then the jewelry - that context torqued it even more for them to think about.

MS. RIEDEL: Because then it could come off of the pedestal and onto the body.

MS. SLEMMONS: And the idea of something being worn like that, and then something that was like wearing a little skeleton, that was maybe strange.

MS. RIEDEL: It ties into your whole idea of taking art out into the world, and having it show up in unexpected places. Something we talked about last night, or earlier today, is the work carrying your ideas out in the world. We'll talk about that - we decided we would talk about that later.

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, that's an interesting thing. It just reminded me of what I remember with the hands. Sometimes people - a few times people would say, oh, I saw so and so wearing your hand and it was just with the most terrible dress in combination, and, like, what was I going to do about that? [They laugh.] What to do? It's other life now. And you can't control everything, and I think that, in some ways, how my worktable has developed over the years and the kind of chaos there and the juxtaposition of things, and sometimes it gets so dense on the table, but if something still holds its own in all of that, I figure that's probably worth finishing. I look at things in that way, and I mean, obviously, you can't guarantee what happens after they leave the place where you have been able to set them up.

I've had a couple of times when I've - I know one time was in the grocery store and I saw a woman, and I thought - with a very interesting necklace on - and it caught my attention across the piles of potatoes, and I sort of made my way over to see what it was. And as I got up close, it was one of my pieces, a very old piece that I had kind of forgotten about, and I really liked that it got my attention - [laughs] -or that I still liked what it was, and that's happened a few times.

[END MD 02 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: So from the Calaveras pieces, you moved into more breastplates. Is that right? From the Figures of Speech?

MS. SLEMMONS: I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Into the Top 10 Hits of Ethnic Jewelry.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. I think in the -

MS. RIEDEL: Ninety-two, I think it started.

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, it seems to me that it was in 1990 that I made the first pencil breastplate.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: But often things overlap, or I will double back and look at something again. So I had made two breastplates, in the sense of bones and ribs, in that Figures of Speech series, and one was with acrylic and silver, and one was with typewriter keys. And someone had given me an old typewriter that I wanted to use the keys, but when it came to actually cutting off the keys, it seemed like a rather violent act to this amazing mechanism, and fortunately, there was some part of it that was bashed, which made me feel a little bit better. It didn't exactly, but I still had qualms - I couldn't just cut off the keys to use them, so I felt I needed to disassemble the typewriter to get to the keys without cutting them. And they actually are on these long arms that are quite amazing shapes, as are some of the inner workings. I took eight hours. One summer day, I sat out in the backyard and I tool the

typewriter apart, and it made me totally marvel at the invention of such device anyway.

And it was the kind of writing references, again, that the typewriter appealed to me, as this contraption that could produce what it did. So in getting to those keys, there were these kind of ribs, and so I made a breastplate out of those parts as well. I called that piece - there's the punning thing that causes groans at times, but it was called *Hunt and Pectoral* [1990]. Isn't that sort of good? From hunting and pecking, which is pretty much a description of what I do all the time! Yes. [They laugh.] And that it was a pectoral, and I guess I think of punning as a kind of found expression. People usually groan, because it's funny but predictable, and then if you start to really listen to what it is and think about it, it can be rather bizarre and interesting, and so, sometimes, I liked working with that kind of found expression, you might say.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it has the connection element that you like and the unexpectedness, but normally, when you use them, you take them to another level of unexpected connections. And then the groans actually turn into gasps, because something interesting happens.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And so it's kind of the hook, I suppose, and it's in disguise. You're saying something in disguise of a pun.

MS. RIEDEL: That reminds me of the series you did about Twoness. There are so many operational elements in that series, the zipper that opened and closed, and all the ruler pieces - I'm thinking of *What's Your Angle* and a couple other ones, that opened and shut, and transformed. Somehow puns seemed connected to that, because the pieces both were and were not what they appeared to be, at the same time.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And they transform in front of you. The pun would take you partway there, and then there would be another layer.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And some of those were more literal on the various levels, so you think, oh, well, that's what that's about, but it somehow lingered a little longer, that effect. And I think that I've also been interested in that. It's not - I'm sure I've done many one-liners, but I really am aiming for something that reverberates a tiny bit or that you might double back to and think about or see in a different way.

MS. RIEDEL: It goes back to the layers that are always working in your work. A pun may connect with one or two layers, but then there are always a couple more that take it in unexpected directions.

MS. SLEMMONS: I like depth of perception, depth of effect, and sometimes depth can come about by the most literal layering to create depth. I think that was something I learned in Japan.

And I don't mean this as any kind of whine or sour grapes, but another comment that would be made about my work is that it was so flat, so there was something wrong with it, that it was flat and not dimensional. And I thought, oh, well, yes, it is. And I think that might have been related to that time I did those dreadful pieces trying to not be so flat.

But I figured I seemed to still like flatness. There was the graphic quality, thinking of the Constructivists and their planes, of flat planes layered. I was very attracted to that kind of imagery.

And when I was in Japan, I think I understood something about flatness that made me feel a lot better. That there was in the shrines or even in the layers of kimonos, that there was this depth created, and the whole idea of what was behind the next layer, the sense of dimension through these layers of flatness, planes in architecture or in the clothing. I think that just happened to fit in my way of seeing - putting things together to achieve depth in that way, but depth also of association or ambiguity, layers of suggestion and something that was below the surface, the visible surface.

MS. RIEDEL: Technique and form always followed your ideas, so it makes total sense that the ideas were often layered, in a literal sense.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. But then how it came out was something different. That sort of

sustained effect was what I was trying for, without really realizing it. There are many things that get your attention and take your breath away, looking, and then it ends. I think I have talked about that a little bit, in regard to imperfection. Craft has come to mean a kind of refinement and perfection of technique and skills, and yet there are many technically perfect pieces or adept pieces that end after that first moment of acknowledging their perfection! They somehow don't last, or they're frozen in place, to my mind. They lack a kind of vitality or that feeling of a bell ringing around the corner. So I learned a lot about that in trying - how to get at that. Being someone who has perfectionist tendencies, it's quite hard - [laughs] - so maybe the openness had to come in other areas.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've talked about intentionally asking open-ended questions in your work, and maybe that's another way you've gotten around the perfectionist tendency. If the question is open-ended, it brings - conceptually and idea-wise - a sense of one question leading to another, and so even though a piece is complete, in its completion there are already the seeds of the next question.

MS. SLEMMONS: It extends. There is an extension beyond it.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's implied in your piece.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. And in some forms of art that becomes like a kind of transcendence. I feel like that doesn't necessarily apply to what I'm doing, and that seems a little higher form of experience than maybe I'm talking about, but it is definitely to extend beyond itself in your own imagination or your own recall.

MS. RIEDEL: Many of the pieces extend beyond themselves because they are so clearly part of a series. So even when there's one, if you've seen the whole show, you have the sense of it in the larger context.

MS. SLEMMONS: You know, another part of craft, and maybe what we all are looking for, is a kind of perfection - making a perfect world in some way (in some miniature way in the sense of jewelry), where there's a clarity. We try to make something in the midst of all this chaos that we live in. But I think I've somehow, at the same time, always shied away from the whole masterpiece idea, which is part of a certain craft tradition in the sense of a single object being the ultimate expression. I like something that's much more fluid and active, not that I don't appreciate some amazing pieces that are in the masterpiece realm. Though I might say that I like certain pieces or I think this or that body of work was good, there are very few pieces that ultimately have gotten to where I was really aiming.

But I think that's why I keep working, because I'm still trying. Maybe when that kind of perfection comes, it's over, and I don't want it to be over. But it is having some kind of extension beyond itself that I do aim for, and that may account for how I came to work in these series and that they become all parts of a conversation. It's a discourse that is, in fact, a kind of conversation, and the video artist Gary Hill, who I have quoted many times, has a very good line about that, that art belongs by right to an ongoing conversation between friends of the work, enemies of the work, and all those whose lives are informed and transformed by it. The series have a kind of flow to them, adding to that kind of conversation.

MS. RIEDEL: And take the conversation in many different directions. We were talking about that earlier, about the discourse that happened between people who came to hear your lectures - some with a very limited experience with craft and some from a much more academic, scholarly background - and how the work itself created a conversation between this wide range of people who had seen it or heard you speak, and how that conversation generated by the work itself and the ideas that go along with it was of particular interest to you. There's something that exists out in the world after you've finished creating the work.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And I've only come to know that after many years or because people might respond to me differently. I certainly feel good to know that the work has been communicated in that way, and I was very fortunate to have coverage in magazines and articles. It was another form of exhibition of the work.

MS. RIEDEL: To a much broader audience.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And your work has had extraordinary coverage for many years in numerous publications, which I think has generated an ongoing discussion.

MS. SLEMMONS: And so that certainly made it possible to see it in other ways, and I've appreciated that, having those other venues. Books are like that. Sometimes the only way we know - see - work is through photographs in books, and I couldn't be more - [laughs] - blessed in the photoslave I have as a husband. Let's face it. That had a very lot to do with it. If I had to hire a photographer, that's a major expense and time and finding someone that could photograph the work in the way that you want it to look, how you want it conveyed, is difficult. I've lived with someone like that. So I think that has a lot to do with exposure, having these beautiful photographs. They're available, but it also tells young people how important - [laughs] - having good photographs are.

MS. RIEDEL: I can't help but think, too, that there is a sense of language in your work that also had made it especially available to publications, both as a visual language but also just in your love of language. We were talking about puns earlier, in terms of layering. There's something about it that seems to me very given, very accessible to language in photo-oriented media in a way that not all work is.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. I think that's true. It would be interesting to hear how someone else might talk about that. That would be interesting to know. It fascinated me when I was starting to work in Mexico and I had had the show in Palo Alto and the catalogue from there, and when I would show it to people - it wasn't to show off, but to say, this was what I do, so they could have the sense of who I was and what I made. And right away, if I said I made jewelry, an idea was formed, and then they saw the pictures and they said, oh, you're an artist. That was so interesting to me that they saw right away the way I was making jewelry was not unusual or whatever. They saw that there was thought behind it. I like that, seeing how the work itself communicated in a completely different environment or culture.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about the Top 10 Hits.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. Well, then as you know, I always have many things going on at the same time. For different reasons, I work that way, but I wanted to think about jewelry history or jewelry that had affected me, or that was really part of how I was formed into the kind of artist I was, by these influences that all turned out to be from other cultures, other times, and how much I was influenced by what I saw in travels to Africa, to India, to Ireland, and jewelry made in those cultures, which I always looked at, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: The first lecture I ever heard you give at Humboldt State [University, Arcata, CA] was all about jewelry from different cultures.

MS. SLEMMONS: Oh, that's right. That's the only time I ever did what you would call a workshop. [Laughs.] I was asked to do a workshop, and I said, well, I don't really do workshops, but I could talk about things and talk about ideas and show slides. The only taker was David LaPlantz in Humboldt, and I put that together.

MS. RIEDEL: And that slide lecture started off with a lot of your favorite pieces of jewelry from non-industrial cultures.

MS. SLEMMONS: Did it? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: There was a whale's tooth from Hawaii -

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: - and another piece of coral jewelry, and something else, I think jade from Latin America, but it was very clear at that time you were giving that work a lot of thought. That was a lot of what you were looking at, and inspired by.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. And I think I decided I wanted to acknowledge that in some very direct way. Here I am attracted to these pieces that have nothing to do, so to speak, with the culture I grew up in or my history, my personal history- but they had something to say to me, those pieces did, and I suppose, too, there was a layer of thinking about using objects from other cultures, or a kind of imperialism from taking from other cultures, that I thought a lot about. And I didn't want to do that myself, but I thought of how I might acknowledge those pieces and perhaps also that aspect of taking from other cultures, other work.

MS. RIEDEL: When you talk about "taking," I think of how jewelry functioned within other cultures, what it meant as opposed to what jewelry means in this culture. That was one of the main things I always understood you to be interested in "taking."

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. It's true.

MS. RIEDEL: "Taking" in quotes.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. And so I decided to try to look at pieces that particularly had - that were particularly strong or that had lasted all this time or that I continually referred to in various ways. So I wanted to kind of remake those pieces, and I decided that I would do 10 pieces. And I did figure those out in the beginning, what they would be.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you choose the 10?

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, that's it. They came from such diverse places, but it was pieces that were powerful.

MS. RIEDEL: The breastplate from the Native Americans.

MS. SLEMMONS: So that was the first, the Sioux Indian breastplates. That's where they really started, and as symbolic armor. And just visually, that is such an amazing piece of ornament to be wearing, and that's right here in this country, in America. When we played cowboys and Indians as a kid, I definitely always wanted to be the Indian. And there was a history of Indians in Iowa that we grew up with, stories, but of course, we were not Indians, but at least it was close to home. And so I love that form, and also that it was protection, that it was armor, and much jewelry has been used in that way.

And the very earliest jewelry - it was reported in a science journal - were pieces of shell from South Africa that were drilled, that were beads, that were 35,000 years old- I don't know if that's exactly right; I don't remember exactly the age, but this was reported as evidence of symbolic thought, the earliest symbolic thought on the part of humans. But this was jewelry that was making this claim. So much of jewelry has that purpose, that use, or did have, and certainly the armor was one thing. But as I looked into it, the Indian breastplates were initially made of Sandhill Crane bones, which are actually, I would imagine, quite light, delicate bones.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Quite long, too.

MS. SLEMMONS: But they had that shape. But very soon, they became manufactured in New Jersey from bones from Chicago meatpacking plants, to be sold to the Indians for making the breastplates. So right away, there's a kind of synthetic kind of putting together of something from a surprising source that involved trade and interaction. In a similar sense, I'm appropriating this form of the breastplate, not unlike it was also put together very soon in its history. There were also bits and pieces tied on to the breastplates that were sometimes tokens that were taken in coups, jewelry or mirrors that were added on to them.

That was the first piece that I chose in that series, and I wanted to learn more about those pieces, too. I knew to begin with that they were powerful to me visually. They had this impact, and I wanted to know more about what that might be by learning more about them and then by actually making something. It became, in a sense, a kind of odd collaboration between the traditional artist and me - using that form to make a different kind of reference.

So in choosing to replace the bones with pencils right away set up a different frame of reference, a number of different references - certainly what kind of protection did written treaties provide for the Indians, but in another sense, thinking of writing as protection, or the pencil as a tool that could protect you, the capacity of that.

MS. RIEDEL: Some of the pencils were actually made on reservations; I remember Black Feet. And then some of the pencils you actually had carved as if they were scalped; you'd taken off all the paint. There were so many different layers of meaning in those pencils, and how you handled them. That was incredibly powerful, the layers of meaning in those single pencils, and that was just the beginning.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. In the first piece, I gathered all the pencils from artist friends, because artists always have pencils. For me, there was also another personal reference because what

my father left me were two short pencils and a little make-up rule that he used in the setting type, a little metal tool, and he always carried short pencils in his pocket, and they became - I loved those pencils. They were little, beefy, sturdy; you'd use them down to the end, but, of course, you could keep them in your pocket, rather than a long pencil. So the pencils as an object, for me, were totally loaded with all kinds of things. But those initial pencils I got from artist friends - and I preferred beat-up pencils, the ones that had seen obvious use.

MS. RIEDEL: It ties in perfectly, again, to the connection with the personal and the public.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And when those pencils all came together, they all had different names, but many of them were Indian names, Ticonderoga, Mohican. And then I also discovered that pencils were made on Indian reservations in the 19th century as a revenue base. And the Black Feet still make them, and that's what the pencil is called, is Black Feet. So the next piece after that first one, I filed off all the paint from the pencils and left only the names, because it was quite amazing how many names were Indian or American or choice. There was something that came out in just those words.

An interesting thing about that second breastplate is that people always perceived them as yellow pencils, although they were not yellow. But that's how pencils are perceived. They saw pencils and they saw the yellow, and they would insist that they were yellow- so that was interesting. But I did, I think, five breastplates over several years, and that whole series is ongoing. I haven't finished the 10, but I'm sure I will. They just come around when their time is, then I make them. But that particular piece has lasted longer, and I suppose, too, because I asked myself so many questions about using something from another culture and a very powerful symbol in that culture. Was that appropriation legitimate or not, and of course, this was in the time of postmodernism, when that was going on all the time.

And at one point, I asked a friend, a wonderful artist, Leo Adams, who is a Yakima Indian in Washington, about the breastplates. When we moved to Chicago, which is now many years later from that first breastplate, I did another pencil piece out of black pencils that was a kind of mourning piece - M-O-U-R-N - and in a way going back to the breastplate and all those references to death, and I suppose in a sense, I wanted to - I was thinking about the demise of so many things, so many ways of doing things, so many objects or things that were made that are disappearing, and so I did this piece quite recently that was a breastplate again. And I just lost what I was going to say.

MS. RIEDEL: Breastplates over years, black ones, mourning, appropriation, moving to Chicago.

MS. SLEMMONS: [Laughs] I think it was the appropriation. Thank you. That was it. That was the thread. So when we were here in Chicago and I was having a lot of trouble starting to work again, I think mentioned that, and asking myself - what can jewelry do at this point? I was a little bit down, and it felt like starting over in a sense.

MS. RIEDEL: Relocating, and the state of war that -

MS. SLEMMONS: And because the war was about to begin and all that was going on. It had a big effect. And anyway, I started the that black breastplate. Here, how many years later, I was still thinking about that appropriation and wanting to kind of situate myself that there was an honesty to this then-integrity. And I called my friend Leo and just chatted a bit, and I said, you know that breastplate that I did, out of pencils? Would that have any effect on you that this middle-aged, white woman is doing this piece? And he said, not at all; it's art. And I said, oh, and he said, because you were doing it as art; you had certain things to say. And I said, but I'm taking it from someone else, and he said, but that's part of what you are having to say. There was a real openness about that. And he said, besides, the kind of authenticity that people seem so obsessed with, you have to look a little closer that so much is synthesized even in those cultures.

There are certain traditions that stay very strong, and they hold people together because they maintain these traditions and rituals, but there are always new things that are taken in. Some are embraced immediately and become part of it, like using manufactured cow-bone beads that were made in New Jersey to make those breastplates in Sioux and Plains Indian culture. Those breastplates now have become almost a symbol of Indianness, even though only originally those Indians were the ones that wore them. Now in the powwows and the dances, that's very much a part of contemporary regalia and Indian identity, so it has

evolved within Indian culture.

And Leo told a story about his - when he was a kid and he was making his dance costume. It was to be made a certain way, but he actually liked this tail, this element that was done the way - I can't remember which tribe it was, maybe Black Feet; it seems like it was a Montana tribe. He liked their version better than his, but you weren't supposed to do that. Well, he didn't care about that, but he just wanted to find out how to make it. His buddy, who was a white kid and a boy scout, knew how to make it exactly, and that's how he learned how to make this particular element of his costume.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fantastic.

MS. SLEMMONS: And he said, that was my costume. So it tells you a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: He also is an artist looking at it from that perspective.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly. And I said that, to me, I had some trouble sometimes with certain appropriation that made negative references to their source, and that didn't seem right to me. He said, well, that's you. But that's what the artist uses and it was interesting.

So in some of the other pieces that I've done - none of them have been on the level of that piece, as far as what I've examined and what this whole thing is about and what I'm trying to do. But I have learned from each one as I look at it in more depth, learning about the piece itself and learning more about it. And I have not yet done the pin from Mexico that I saw from Tomb 7 all those years ago, but it's on the list. [Laughs.] So it could be that I will now approach that one in, maybe, a different way than I would have 10 years ago when I started this project, because of my connections with Mexico.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you identified 10 pieces, Kiff, that you would do? I know the Masai neck collar is one of them.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you identified the pieces that you would be interested in making - that you feel are so significant, culturally?

MS. SLEMMONS: You mean to myself?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: Oh, yes. I mean, in this case, I sat down and I thought of what those pieces are.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you be willing to cite them, or do you not want to do that until you've made them?

MS. SLEMMONS: Maybe not all. I think I've made six. I did the Celtic penannular, the Masai, the long cuff, that form and -

MS. RIEDEL: Where is that from?

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, that occurs in a number of cultures, as far as a form in jewelry. In some cases, it was, like, a dowry piece in Bedouin culture. Mine, I made out of many slivers of rulers. So, in a sense, that's a more formal reference, and there is a bit of a conceptual base in the rulers standing in for the wealth or the status.

And the Masai is more referenced in form, again, to the Masai piece. One part of it refers to appropriation in music, taking from black musicians, jazz and blues, in our culture. But the people who were first recognized were white musicians who had done the taking, and there is a reference in the record itself. So that there's kind of a play between obsolescence of material and of the cultural artifact itself and how, in ways, we have contributed to that, almost by the very recognition of it.

So, it's a complex thing, and maybe the act of doing the project says something. And probably the breastplate pieces convey more layers than the other individual pieces do. Sometimes the pieces address more formally, like the Hawaiian lei nihou pilau, the big horn, hooklike shape with the hundreds of strands of braided hair. I wanted to do the opposite,

with white horse hair and ebony. Visually, it's simply a reversal of the real thing, and now I have to think about what might be a reversal of the concept, perhaps. So in a way, I've approached different ones different ways. Altogether, they, maybe, talk about appropriation and association of materials or objects from another place.

MS. RIEDEL: You know, in all these pieces that we've talked about, I can't help but think about the poetic overlay that exists in all of them, often through use of materials or through nuance, or juxtaposition, or layering. We've talked about visual language, but it seems poetic language would be a better way to describe the pieces. And I know poetry has been very important to you - you read a lot of it - in particular I think of [Emily] Dickinson. Is there anything in particular about Dickinson or - I know you did a hand for William Carlos Williams; we've talked about Robert Haas in the past. Poetry has certainly been a huge influence, even if it's indirect.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. I will say that it's the way poetry works. It's the economy of poetry. I mean, novels and stories and narrative are a kind of language, and they say something a certain way. I feel it's more natural to me to say something in a poetic way, which is suggestive and has a kind of brevity and a kind of, almost, restraint or tension in what's not said than in what is said, even though sometimes it seems like I get very elaborate in what I make; it's not actually so simple. And I don't totally understand that, but anyway, that's -

MS. RIEDEL: There's a paring down to the essential, perhaps.

MS. SLEMMONS: In the idea or the expression, but maybe -

MS. RIEDEL: And in the juxtaposition of the materials, too.

MS. SLEMMONS: But it's not pared down enough - [they laugh] - and I suppose I could be working all this time to make something simpler and more poetic, but I haven't gotten there yet. And more abstract maybe, too. But I could certainly sit down and make a beautiful simple thing, but what else would be in there? So somehow I have to come by it, and I haven't figured that out yet.

MS. RIEDEL: It's funny, I think of them as distilled down to layers of essence that feel very poetic to me.

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, certainly I think there is that quality; I hope.

MS. RIEDEL: It doesn't feel like there's anything extraneous. If you start to pull things out, you really begin to detract from the overall meaning and ideas in the piece.

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, it's interesting, you know. Esther Knobel was a few years ago in the studio, and she said - you know, just this, she'd pull a part of a piece aside - she said, that's enough. And she said, it's too much; all of this is too much. And I said, yes, I know just what you're saying, but I can't help it. [Riedel laughs.] And, there it is.

If I think about Emily Dickinson's poetry, I would feel very good if I made a piece that was like an Emily Dickinson poem, and I don't think I've done that yet. She does things through a kind of paring down, and a way of hearing words differently, familiar words, but she torques them like bending notes in blues, she calls it truth at a slant, and I guess that's a kind of truth I'm interested in. Because I think, sometimes, even though I feel a kind of directness in a lot of my approach, there is something about seeing something from the side, seeing it indirectly, that can make it more there, more present.

[END MD 02 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Kiff Slemmons at the artist's home and studio in Chicago, Illinois, on November 2, 2007, for the Archives for American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number three.

This morning we'll begin with a look at the commercial side of your career - a look at your relationship with dealers and how that's been for you over time, and how that's changed.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I would say overall that I've been very fortunate in my relationships to dealers, and galleries have been the main outlet for my work ongoing. I think I mentioned before that I'm kind of amazed at myself, now that I think about it, that

that was really what I started with. The first work I did, I was thinking to take it to a gallery, when really I'm not sure that what I was doing then fit that venue - [laughs] - but maybe it fit my plans, which were more obvious to some part of me than to other parts of me.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You did a couple of fairs, decided that wasn't what you wanted to do, and you completely bypassed the idea of a shop.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. I'm trying to think -maybe way back, I had it in a store situation - [laughs] - but mainly through galleries.

MS. RIEDEL: That'd be Traver/Sutton, Susan Cummins, Garth Clark, Julie Artisans Gallery in New York.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Julie in New York was way back, and Mobilia in Cambridge. There was Sculpture to Wear [Gallery, Santa Monica, CA], the first one, and Freehand [Gallery, Los Angeles, CA]; I'd showed work there way back. It was around the country, too, rather than showing only where I lived. I think that I appreciated that I would have - I mean, later - that I would have the opportunity to show bodies of work, a body of work for an exhibition, and that was possible through the gallery, which certainly wouldn't be as possible to show in a more commercial setting, or in my own studio.

I like the idea that people could happen onto something and see it that way. Of course, too, it was - it was a little bit different set up, because the gallery gets 50 percent, and for a long time - and I'm sure many artists do - I agonized about the prices. And I found that I had to determine my price, and that if I actually wrote it to the gallery, their price, I would think, oh, that's way too much, and then, make it less, but which was not enough. [Laughs.] And so it's a funny thing that it makes you very aware that they're getting 50 percent and you are. So you do have certain expectations as an artist. Has the gallery held up their 50 percent? And most of the time, that was the case.

There were difficulties, and I think sometimes artists feel - they feel hesitant to say some of their disagreements or concerns with galleries because they feel - they don't want to lose them - lose that exposure. And certainly, we have to make certain compromises in how we show our work sometimes.

MS. RIEDEL: For example, you would have preferred to have your work not in jewelry cases but spread out on the wall. That's not always possible.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right, right. And early on, I most always did the installations, if possible. A lot of the difficulty was talking people out of having it in cases or behind glass. And I wanted it right there and usually on the wall. Not only - I mean, seeing it that way, but it's also the way it's seen when worn. That's the distance. But I suppose, in a certain sense, it has - there's a different way of looking at it by looking at it on the wall, instead of looking down into a case, which is how it appears in jewelry stores and department stores and that sort of thing, and also the space. Somehow people think that since jewelry's small, you can jam it all together in a small space. And you wouldn't do that with paintings or with sculpture. And why would you do it with jewelry? It has to do with the scale. So there was a lot of talking people into leaving more space around a piece. But often that involved making a kind of frame or pallet that the piece sat on - was hanging on separately.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you do that frequently?

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, mm-hmm, pretty much from the beginning. And that - you could see a huge difference in how people looked at it. And in a strange sense, because I wasn't using materials necessarily associated with great value in jewelry, precious stones or gold - I mean, people were not going to have the same impulses for stealing that are associated with other kinds of jewelry.

I remember one time I was adamant about it being shown that way, and the gallery really didn't want to do that. And there was a piece of sculpture in one of the other rooms that was a kind of electronic device with little flashing lights and things, and suddenly the gallery owner said, maybe we could put that piece in with your show, and it would look like some kind of security device. [They laugh.] And I said that was quite fine, and then that solved the problem.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Was anything ever stolen? Did you have problems with

that?

MS. SLEMMONS: No. But because I often did this in Seattle or Bellingham - I had an exhibition at the museum in Bellingham - I was able to see the effects of showing it this way directly, so that I got stronger in presenting my arguments for showing jewelry in various ways. But that's been fairly ongoing. It's interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: You were saying earlier that you had to choose your battles, that it's all a compromise with galleries, but that there were certain lines you would have to draw.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] There were two areas that I felt I had to take a stand. There were several occasions where one of these two things happened. One was that the gallery didn't pay at the time that we had agreed to. Almost from the beginning, I didn't sign contracts or get involved in all that. I felt that I was good for my word and I trusted they would be for theirs. Already, I'd seen in other areas how easily contracts are broken and that that gives the illusion of something or an excuse that - [laughs] - and so I preferred doing it that way.

Obviously, for some other more public exhibitions or institutional situations, you sign things, but with the galleries, I liked to do it that way - but there were occasions where they weren't paying. A lot of artists had this difficulty, and it was tense. And - most people don't like to ask for money when it's owed them, but this is part of the deal. You've sold something and you're not getting your 50 percent.

I think artists are much bolder now, but at that time, people would be afraid to say anything because they didn't want to lose the gallery connection.

MS. RIEDEL: And there weren't a lot of places that art jewelry was being shown either, so there was probably a sense of being - especially cautious.

MS. SLEMMONS: But I'm also referring to other artists - I mean, in other media. It wasn't just jewelry. And on one occasion, I was about to have an exhibition and I hadn't been paid for the previous exhibition, a chunk from the previous exhibition - [laughs] - which was quite some time before. And I had asked several times and - and finally nothing was happening, so I just said that I wasn't bringing the work in for the show unless I got paid. So that's pretty basic. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And you got paid?

MS. SLEMMONS: And I got paid the day before.

MS. RIEDEL: There were no long-lasting ramifications from that. You just got paid.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I mean, there were comments about why I wasn't paid, because of their bills, their rent, their expenses, which, of course, artists have, too. Anyway, that is one area that I realized that I could also maybe afford to address that at that moment, because I felt like I was speaking for other people's concerns as well.

And the other is that sometimes galleries will want to exclude certain pieces that are part of a whole exhibition. Something I did for many years was to include past pieces that had led into the current work, or were connected in some way as a way of informing the new work. And the gallery didn't want to add, because that was old work. [Laughs.] And to me, that was absurd, because if a piece wasn't interesting two years later, then I might as well forget it. So -

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about Ranatar [identify?] and how they might not discuss difficult aspects of a piece.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. So I usually would say, it's all or nothing. [Laughs.] Those pieces inform the other work. Maybe it isn't something that seems as strong to them, to the gallery, but I think it's important for the whole and that it argues for the strength of the whole. Oddly enough, those were often the first pieces that sold. [Laughs.] And, in a way, maybe because they were simpler and -

MS. RIEDEL: That's not uncommon at all, I don't think.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: When a new body of work comes out, the old body of work gets the attention.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm, yeah. And I could sort of see that, or people would say, well, the new work is too strange, but I like your old work better. But that old work, they had said the same thing several years before.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, right.

MS. SLEMMONS: And so it was - I actually enjoyed seeing how you could up the ante of people willing to see new things and look at them more closely. But sometimes there were situations where the gallery didn't want to be bothered with that. They were concerned with selling work, which, of course, is what they do.

MS. RIEDEL: Happily so. [Laughs.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. Maybe if the work was too dark, or there was some aspect that they didn't feel would sell if that were brought out, that was of concern to me. Because if they are going to represent you and you're in it 50-50, it seems to me they are responsible for representing you and representing what your work is about or what your - a sum of your intent. So that would tell me something, too, as far as whether I might continue with that venue or not.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Speaking of the commercial aspect of your work, which has been in the marketplace from the start - especially because you made a deliberate decision not to teach, but to work full-time as a studio artist, and started off doing commissions, repairs, and work to be sold - there was a very funny story about one of your hands being appropriated. And I wonder if you'd be willing to explain that briefly, one of the Hands of the Heroes being appropriated. Was it fabricated in Thailand?

MS. SLEMMONS: In India.

MS. RIEDEL: In India.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And I've always valued what I have learned from being in the marketplace. The work that I make and show, I want to be out there in the world. So the galleries certainly provide that and the marketplace provides that. Sometimes I have felt, over the years, that there has been some negative rap about the marketplace or doing something for so-called commercial reasons. I'm not answering your question, I realize, directly.

MS. RIEDEL: You'll get there, we have time. We're circling around.

MS. SLEMMONS: But it's made me think of something.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: And that even in some universities, university art departments, it was frowned upon to ever put your work in commercial terms, or think of selling, or whether it would sell or not. I think that did a disservice to the students. Because there was a kind of notion that that corrupted the work, that somehow it wasn't more purely art if there were any considerations like that involved.

MS. RIEDEL: Would it sell?

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And that just never made sense to me. I didn't see that if you were thinking in those terms, that that automatically contaminated the art. In fact, to me, to have the art be out - out there and in the flow of living - [laughs] - what more could you ask in a certain sense? Unless you're making art for your own therapy and that - that part, I was never interested in.

MS. RIEDEL: It has to have a certain relevance to contemporary culture if it is going to operate in the marketplace. Maybe that was a limitation that was welcoming in certain ways. And you had to work within those constraints, while still having something that you wanted to contribute to that conversation.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right, uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And certainly, I could have made choices to be - I could be making hands for the rest of my life probably, and still selling them even.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, I'm sure.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I didn't want to do that. That wasn't what I was about. I wanted the ideas to keep fresh, and - so I made a very conscious choice to stop making the hands, though I have made others from time to time, when it comes around and they fit somewhere else.

But anyway, in regard to the hands, one time I had an exhibition in a non-selling environment - [laughs] - in a public institution. And when the work came back, I was informed that one of the pieces had these strange black marks and they couldn't get them off. And they were very sorry that it was coming back that way, and if I could take them off and charge them right away. And they wanted to assure me that no one had handled them other than the staff. And I just thought, well, that's interesting. [Laughs.]

And when the piece came back, it was obvious that it had been turned over so it would lay flat on the page, and it had been drawn, traced around, with a grease pen or a Sharpie. It didn't come off easily. And so I thought that was rather curious that someone obviously did that, but I didn't think much else about it. And maybe six months later, not long, Lloyd Herman, who was the former director of the Renwick Gallery [Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.], came by the studio in Seattle and said, oh, Kiff, I saw a hand just like yours in a gift shop in La Conner [identify?]. And I thought, oh, dear. [Laughs.] And I mostly was distressed that I couldn't imagine that Lloyd would ever think just because it was a hand, it was like mine, because people had said that to me: Oh, I saw something just like yours. And all it was "just like" was that it was a hand.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I just knew Lloyd couldn't really mean that. And he must have noticed my skepticism or disappointment, whatever, because several days later, he showed up with the hand. [Laughs.] He'd gone back and gotten it. And I looked at it, and it obviously was a copy of one of the Hands of the Heroes. But what was so interesting was that it looked nothing like what it had copied.

MS. RIEDEL: It was a flat, stenciled copy, two-, rather than three-, dimensional, that was just drawn -

MS. SLEMMONS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: - as if the objects were there, or the patterns were there.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right, uh-huh. [Affirmative.] It was a slightly formed, flat piece of brass, and it was - lines were drawn to indicate what - it was actually a Joseph Cornell hand that was more like a little box, and there was a little door that opened with things in it. Well, they had the knob of the door and everything delineated exactly how the flat surface of the hand would appear. The other interesting thing about it, though, was that the shape where the fingers - at the base of the fingers - was pointed, which would be the shape you would get from tracing around it, which they weren't.

As I looked at it more and more, I realized the back of it had the pin back in such a way that it would sit horizontally - more horizontally than vertical, which is the way most of them went. And I thought, wow, I wonder why they did that? I then consulted the little catalogue of the show, and the Joseph Cornell hand was pictured and it was on its side slightly. So that's how they placed the pin back, so that it would sit as it did in the picture. So that explained that. The thing that fascinated me is there was the picture. They could have just used the picture. Why did they trace around the hand?

I guess I like thinking that there was some kind of authority to the actual hand; they did that. I don't know, but it was obvious that that's what had been done, and you could - you could document it exactly every little bit why it was made that way. And I found out that where this had come from, where this little gift shop had gotten the hand, was from a place in Texas. And that place said that these came in just as decorated metal - so that it wouldn't come in as jewelry and you wouldn't have to pay anything related to that. And then the pin backs were soldered on in this country. And that hand was around for years in various forms. It actually degenerated - the first copy was the best. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And there was a whole mythology that came with it - it was supposedly related

to some ancient piece of jewelry, a reproduction of an ancient hand - [laughs] - from where - do you remember?

MS. SLEMMONS: There was a little write-up - I don't remember exactly now - in a catalogue. You could get this very ancient rendering of a hand from such-and-such a culture. And it showed there for a number of years, and people would send me hands because it was exactly the same shape and size. I had thought a lot about appropriation and influences and how artists take things all the time that they use and transform in different ways. (With the ethnic series, obviously, and that was more direct appropriation.) And so here it was; I was being appropriated. But again, what was interesting is, it looked nothing like my hand - it didn't have any of its essence or what my piece was about.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: And so there was really no point in doing anything further. However, just as a way of talking about that very thing, I traveled it around. I made it into another piece. I was thinking about those postcards that have giant potatoes on the backs of flatbed trucks or ears of corn in Iowa on train cars. And so I made a truck that had that first hand on the back of it as though it were -

MS. RIEDEL: Off to market.

MS. SLEMMONS: Off to market. And it actually said that somewhere on the side of the truck, I think. And it was a jaunty little truck, and you actually used the pin back of - their pin, because it went horizontally. The hand was on the bed of the truck. And that's how you pinned it on. And it was called *Business as Usual in Texas* [1991]. [Riedel laughs.] So that did suggest that something had gone on there. I showed it for a couple of years with whatever work I was showing somewhere. That piece went along with it, with a little - maybe a little tale about that.

MS. RIEDEL: Such a wonderful reversal of your interest in ethnic jewelry.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yes, really - [laughs] - and you know, I thought, if only they just would have asked me in India. The thing that distressed me the most was I know that people who actually made that, you know, got 15 cents or something. And if it only would have been more direct and they could do well by that, that would be something I'd consider.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, because you've done things - not dissimilar to your project in Oaxaca.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about your travels a little bit, because they have been influential. We've talked about France, but we haven't talked about Japan, in the sense that you did actually study metalsmithing there when you were quite young.

MS. SLEMMONS: Not that young.

MS. RIEDEL: Just out of college, wasn't it?

MS. SLEMMONS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: No? Later than that?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I'm not very good with dates, as you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Seventies.

MS. SLEMMONS: In the '70s, I think, it was, but maybe like late '70s.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm, okay.

MS. SLEMMONS: It's so interesting [laughs] how some of these things happen. I really had long wanted to go to Japan, and I'm very interested in the Japanese aesthetic as I perceived it then. (I think I mentioned seeing all those Japanese movies in Paris.)

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: [Laughs] I really wanted to go to Japan, but I didn't want to go as a tourist, and particularly I wanted some other closer connection. Well, Parsons School of Design [New York, NY] had a program of study in Japan that was a summer program -

MS. RIEDEL: Nineteen eighty-three.

MS. SLEMMONS: Was it?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Oh, okay. That was studying various areas of craft in Japan: ceramics, textiles, metal. At first, you all studied together and then fanned out to individual areas for study. And at that time, it was quite expensive. And I actually couldn't afford to do that the first year they offered it, but I thought, I am going to try somehow to do that, because that would be a way to go.

And in the next year, I made a whole show of work that went to New York, and it was mistakenly picked up by the garbage guy and taken to a garbage compactor. [Laughs.] And it was so strange because some of those pieces I had just finished days before. And then it was gone. I wish it had been stolen, because at least maybe it's -

MS. RIEDEL: It would be out in the world.

MS. SLEMMONS: Still be out there - [laughs] - but it was just the fish and the sea creatures and that maybe saw it where they dumped it. I imagined what they looked like all squashed together. So it was, like, nine months of work, and, of course, I didn't have insurance on anything, but eventually, there was insurance that was collected through the gallery for this loss, and I decided to go to Japan, to use it to go to Japan.

And so, in that sense, to me that little experience was what enabled me to go to Japan. And it was a time that I really valued. I learned so much being there. In fact, I felt like I was hyperventilating most of the time. I was so wired. I think I never slept more than four or five hours a night -

MS. RIEDEL: Were you in Tokyo, or Kyoto, or -

MS. SLEMMONS: In Tokyo.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SLEMMONS: I would love to have gone to one of the rural areas, where more of the traditional - more signs of the traditional crafts or architecture might be in evidence, but Tokyo was great, too. The metals people stayed in Tokyo and the ceramics people went to Bizen and - but we all worked together for a couple of weeks, I think, in Tokyo and then went out from there.

And it was a rigorous course of study. The metals group was the smallest, and there were two of us who were really working metalsmiths. Several were students, and one person was a curator of arms and armor at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art, New York, NY]. It was an interesting group. Several would react to being given assignments, to do a thing a certain way. And they felt that their egos were, you know - [laughs] - assaulted by having to do these things that were determined by someone else. I viewed it as a great relief, because then you could simply try to figure out how to do something and you weren't encumbered - I mean, I certainly didn't want to be thinking of something earthshaking to do within that context. I simply wanted to learn those techniques.

So it was very good, and the other part of it that was so valuable - other than just setting off when the day was done and walking all over Tokyo, getting lost constantly - the other part was access to certain private and institutional collections to see metalwork. Some of the most breathtaking things I've ever seen were the tsuba and other parts of the sword furniture. Things were brought out quite ceremonially in boxes and layers, unfolding to this exquisite piece. It was very moving to see metalwork in that way.

Many of the techniques were inlaying techniques using different metals to create subtle colors from patinas - I saw how expressive the metals could be and also the sense of design that was in this small frame. In the case of jewelry, there wasn't a particular tradition in

Japan. We were looking at small metal and small metalwork that happened in the swords or the sword furniture.

MS. RIEDEL: And would these be examples of techniques that you were trying to master yourselves?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I mean, they weren't shown specifically to correspond, but those were some of the basic techniques that they used in such elaborate ways. And the craftsmanship was so superb. It was all amazing, breathtaking.

MS. RIEDEL: Besides Monte Alban, was this one of your major experiences looking at in international metalwork?

MS. SLEMMONS: I would say so. You know, completely different. Then there's a sense of design within the frame that I loved, that was so contemporary. Something you see in - and radical in a way - like in the Japanese woodblock prints.

MS. RIEDEL: But these were older pieces; these were historical; they weren't contemporary?

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. They were old pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The woodblock prints you were saying.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh, yeah. The woodblock prints, to our eyes, when you think of what a tremendous effect they had in the West - I mean, [Vincent] van Gogh, and people in Europe -

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SLEMMONS: - but that radical point of view that was in the prints, and you would see that in the small scale of the tsuba also, depicting part of something going out of the frame entirely, but very - very animated, very alive.

MS. RIEDEL: And representational.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Yes, I mean, some were pure design or abstract patterns, but also representational. It was also very humbling. [Laughs.] I thought, well, this has been taken care of. [They laugh.] I don't think you could top this.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. No sword-making for you.

MS. SLEMMONS: No. [They laugh.] But I think when I did the *Insectopedia*, there were layers of different metals combined and put together. I actually put them together - they were cold-formed in some parts of them, so that, in a way, it gave a certain - you could see a very primitive acknowledgement of what I had seen in Japan, because that way the color and the patinas could maintain their integrity without heating them again.

And so there was a certain way of putting things together in the *Insectopedia* pieces that, if need be, you could take them apart, disassemble them. And I think that after that, I came to work more that way, not just for maintaining the colors of the metals. But that sense that there was a kind of structural integrity. The pieces could be disassembled and reassembled without too much difficulty, say, if a part had broken off.

MS. RIEDEL: I see. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Do you see what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: In a way, the layering of ideas, or the layering of concepts, or perception, came out quite literally in just an approach to layering the materials, or one thing holding another down with pins and creating a plane. And so it was both a mechanical or technical evidence of a mental process, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I think that may have had - that all may have come from Japan. And I think I mentioned earlier, too, of having another realization about layers of flatness, seeing

that in the temples, in the shrines, looking through space that might not actually be that deep, but had the illusion of great depth.

MS. RIEDEL: The Japanese aesthetic - since we're talking about Japan, let's just move into it - figured again almost 20 years later - the whole aesthetic sensibility, as opposed to this very technical aspect we're talking about, surfaced again in Re: Pair and Imperfection.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], in a completely different way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: Another aspect of the Japanese aesthetic, what I was just talking about, was this extreme refinement, really, and in some utilitarian objects, extreme reduction to the essence of function and form.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: That's all part of it, and I'm very much attracted to all those things.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: And then there's the concept of wabi-sabi, which is about imperfection and wear and a kind of rough beauty that has many aspects to it and is - is rather hard to define. But I knew some of what that's about before I even went to Japan or could give a name to it. So, in other words, I felt a kinship with a certain way of looking at things.

MS. RIEDEL: That goes back to something we were talking about earlier, I think yesterday. Your inclination towards juxtaposition, and then a slight torqueing of that juxtaposition, and the slight awkwardness that comes out of that, can have an extraordinary beauty to it. And that seems very much akin to this Japanese aesthetic sense.

MS. SLEMMONS: It is.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: It is. So it's a slightly different vocabulary -

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SLEMMONS: - which we might have, or if you think of bending a note in blues -

MS. RIEDEL: Or a Dickinson poem. It's all there. These are just different forms of that sensibility, it seems, or aspects of that sensibility.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And maybe in Japan it's more - I don't think they write it out as what this is, but it is understood and pervasive in many different areas. But in a very concrete sense, if you look at how well Japanese tea bowls are revered, and often there is a kind of roughness to some that they consider the most beautiful. Maybe to our eyes, when you look at this extreme refinement on one hand, and then here is this rougher, edgier kind of piece that might be more difficult to look at as beautiful for some people.

And if a tea bowl like that is broken, it's not thrown away. It is repaired, put back together with the crack showing, and to accentuate that, the crack is often gold leafed. But what's important is that that doesn't take away - that that crack doesn't take away from the integrity, the vitality, the life of the piece, its presence. And the crack becomes a part of the history now of its presence. And that I really love. It doesn't get in the way. That particular thing is quite foreign to a lot of us. I mean, if something is broken or cracked, we throw it away, or if we repair it, it's not considered as good anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Now, when you were doing those repairs for Ella Steffens-

MS. SLEMMONS: Steffens.

MS. RIEDEL: - Steffens, had you already been to Japan?

MS. SLEMMONS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So it's interesting that you were already doing that. You were repairing ethnic work along the similar veins of these Japanese concepts without - there was an intuitive way of repairing for you.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: And then seeing this in Japan probably reinforced something that you already knew or thought.

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, I understood in some way. And I understand even more the farther I go. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: So this catalyst must have been percolating over a long period of time, to come up with this whole concept for Re:Pair and Imperfection.

MS. SLEMMONS: It was. I mean, thinking of imperfection and what that is and what the attraction is and how that works, and it can't just be messy - [laughs] - or it can't just be in a heap, or broken, or - you know, it's some very specific ways of thinking about it.

MS. RIEDEL: And adding something to it, it seems to me.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and that where you could have, on the one hand, in Japan the concept of wabi-sabi, and then the simplest, most perfect piece that is so utterly beautiful. And that is the thing about minimal. Everything has to be absolutely right.

MS. RIEDEL: Perfect, exactly.

MS. SLEMMONS: It does. And I do love some of that work. It doesn't end in the same way as something that's technically perfect but something's missing. It's closed. It's frozen somehow. I think that artists have been aware of that in different ways. If you think about Indian - American Indian - basket makers, how they would leave an opening in the pattern for the leaving of bad spirits or the good ones to come in - [laughs] - I mean, that there was an irregularity there.

In some embroidery in Bukhara, you see irregularities - only God is perfect. So you can't presume to be perfect. So you would have a deliberate imperfection. Or in certain African work, there's a break in the pattern, simply to disrupt the rhythm or to make sure you're still there. Or even looking at that Kuba cloth hanging there over the door is another example. I didn't know this till more recently, how they were woven. There were often holes, and so the placement of the appliqués, the pieces sewn over, was determined by the holes that needed to be covered.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. I didn't know that.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. So there are many different references, layers of imperfection - if that's the word you want to use - or flaws - that you can find, that give artists pause. I mean, even Diane Arbus said that the first thing you notice about a person is their flaws. [Laughs.] Well, her saying that, though, she certainly proved herself right in her own case.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

[END MD 03 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: Talking about your series in particular, the thing that was interesting about that series - Re:Pair and Imperfection - is that it was the least series-like of anything you've done in a long time. We talked about that a year or two ago, when you were working on it. It didn't build the way your series normally do, The Ambassadors or The Allies or the Hands of Heroes, one on another on another. Each Re:Pair piece was like starting from scratch, because you were working with different fragments from 12 different people, or 18 - I can't remember.

MS. SLEMMONS: Eighteen.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And so each one had to be a new world in its own right, and there wasn't necessarily any connection between them except that they were fragments of work from different artists. How different was that from your usual way of working, and why were you compelled to try to do that?

MS. SLEMMONS: It was very different and it was very hard. [Laughs.] And I tried in the beginning thinking that, as I started to receive things, that I wanted to wait until I had received everything, hoping that I might see something there to work in my old way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: And I couldn't. I also even thought in the beginning to photograph the fragments, and that they might exist as photographs, as characters in a play, or using them as elements in an image that I might create photographically. But I also tried looking at them at that distance in black and white to see if I could somehow find a way to work with all of them, but I really couldn't do it. And I feel in part that was because the fragments are so - the artist is so embedded in that fragment in their identity, and it's so strong even in its fragmentary state. But of course, that's what I love. But it was also more daunting because that I didn't want to take away, and I wanted to celebrate that integrity of even the fragment.

So it involved a lot of different decisions, a lot of different angles of looking at it and trying to understand just what I was doing. And that, I suppose, in the end it worked out that I treated each piece individually, and in the context of jewelry, history of jewelry, and in the context of that artist's work, the context of the idea of collaboration and the context of influence were many things I thought about. And some of these ideas took precedence over others in actually making a piece. Sometimes I made a piece three or four times, and so it was very complicated conceptually to work it out, and they did all look very different, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired the project in the first place?

MS. SLEMMONS: Several things. One was I've always wanted to somehow address or investigate further what I meant by imperfection, or why was I so preoccupied with that for so long, and I never kind of found a way to do that. We had recently moved to Chicago from being in the Northwest for 30-some years, and it was exciting, but it was also uprooting. And to move the studio and then resituate myself here -

MS. RIEDEL: And anyone who doesn't know you has no idea [Slemmons laughs] of the collection that you've built over 30 or 40 years, and the sheer number of hundreds of thousands of things that had to be moved.

MS. SLEMMONS: Fortunately, they are compact.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Most of them are tiny. [Laughs.]

MS. SLEMMONS: And they didn't know that. There's something oddly reassuring about that, but still, no. It's true. So I found myself here, and I didn't happen to know anyone in Chicago, unlike many other places in the country, and the Iraq war starting was so deeply distressing and hearing some of the same language of Vietnam and just thinking about how, in fact, we don't learn from the past; we do repeat ourselves. And here we were going again, and it was very distressing, to put it mildly.

MS. RIEDEL: You had no community here either really. You had a huge community of artists in the Northwest that might have helped buffer that time, but you had arrived here -

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. Say I was still in Seattle and that was happening and I was working - I don't think I would have had the same bit of a crisis I did about working. I did - because, somehow, it was like starting over.

MS. RIEDEL: Your studio was completely different. Everything was new. For the first time in years and decades there had been a real cutting off - an ending - and a complete new beginning, cold. Maybe the fragments were a good way back in.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. Well, so I even felt like, what does jewelry matter right now? It was almost like gathering some kind of energy together and convincing myself that there might be something worthwhile. I had never been able to make something that is - or not for very long - that's just making. It has to be exciting to me and something I can really get into and feel - and convince myself might matter to a few other people. That is a kind of illusion that you have to convince yourself of. It's not the same as being a farmer and knowing that the food is going to be useful.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's really important to you that the work have a function beyond.

MS. SLEMMONS: So thinking of the destruction in Iraq and all that was being lost, even just very literally with jewelry and ancient treasures - like the earliest forms of writing that existed in the museum and the museum being looted and that we, as Americans, were partly responsible for that. We didn't take care to think of that part that was going to be destroyed right from the beginning. So there was a sense of thinking about repair and that we've given up on the idea of repair in so many ways - and how much else is lost with losing the idea of repair, how somehow it's easier to just destroy something, as a way of intimidating people into submission, rather than to try to repair other damage through diplomatic means.

So anyway, somehow, all of that came together as I thought about repair and what we have lost. There's also a kind of self-reliance that comes from repairing something and a kind of satisfaction from figuring it out or keeping something going. So I started to think about repair and how I might do something literally that involved repair as also an expression or investigation of imperfection.

So what would I care about repairing? I would probably care about repairing other people's work. [Laughs.] It's kind of funny in jewelry that sometimes when people find out you're a jeweler, they say, oh, you know, I have this belt buckle; I wonder if you could fix it, and you think, oh, no. We are thought of as immediate access to repair. But I guess something I knew I could get involved in would be broken parts of other people's work, because, assuming they had those and maybe some people don't, but I certainly had plenty of them around myself. And so that's where it started.

MS. RIEDEL: And that became not a collaboration but certainly more of a collaborative way of working than you've ever done before.

MS. SLEMMONS: Although it's kind of farther up the food chain of found objects, if you think about it. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: Found objects do have a past connected to them, a previous use, a previous association -

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: - all kinds of things come with them, as certainly these things would be, and I also thought it was a scary thing to do and that I wanted to do something more daring. I didn't want to step back and make something more easy.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And the variety of objects that you received was sort of staggering. Some came with - they all came with history, but some came with a much more clear-cut history, a much greater metaphor, clearly fragments of something else, whereas others were odd objects and you weren't quite sure what they were part of.

When I first saw the project, I thought it was rather overwhelming, the variety of things that you had to begin with, and how distinct each was. Beginning each piece would be completely beginning anew. The idea of fragmentation connected them, but each fragment was so completely different from the next. Each had a strong personality.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. They did. Early on, a friend who's an artist, a painter was here, Patte Loper, actually, and she said - I was telling her about what I was thinking of doing, and I don't remember whether I had sent the letter that I wrote at that time or not, but I was talking about it, obviously, because I told her, and she said, well, you're doomed to fail. [They laugh.] And she was right in the sense that if the artist was not finishing the piece for whatever reason, how could I presume to, and it would be failed from the beginning because it would not be completed by the artist, by the original intent or work of the artist. And I actually liked that. I thought, well, imperfection is guaranteed.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SLEMMONS: And it was a kind of freeing realization in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: In an odd way, it takes me back quite a few years, probably about 10, to that piece you made, *Alchemy* [1994] - the neck piece, which had such a transformative quality to it and also was a stand-alone piece. It really wasn't part of a series.

MS. SLEMMONS: That's true.

MS. RIEDEL: But there's something about that - your work has a cyclical nature, we've talked about that - it feels somehow a revisiting of that transformation that *Alchemy* spoke about.

MS. SLEMMONS: Actually, I really like that you made that connection, because in a way it was a kind of alchemical endeavor, the whole thing, both in its seriousness and in its absurdity. *Alchemy* was this amazing proliferation of processes to try to turn base metal into gold or turn the earthly self into a spiritual self - to a kind of perfection.

And that piece I think I made for a show that was to be about gold. But there was partly the sense of the value of gold and that you could make something that wasn't the traditional idea of gold and value, but still, it was made of gold. The only gold in that piece was just a tiny drop, the actual gold, and it turned out to be about gold and about value and about proliferation as a way of understanding something, and yet, at the same time, the piece itself - maybe that's a truly narrative piece, because it's depicting, kind of, the cycle of the processes, quite literally representing the different elements of it.

And a woman from Mexico, a curator from Mexico, was here recently - we knew of each other but had not actually met, and we have mutual friends - I asked her for dinner, and when she came in, she looked around the studio and she said, I feel like I'm in an alchemist's laboratory. I like that, that she - that she used the word "laboratory" also, because in some ways I think of all these bits and pieces around as part of the laboratory, of understanding how things work.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have talked about your worktable, which is an incredible map of what you're doing at any given time, as part laboratory, part active battleground. I've always thought about it as the earth over centuries, with all the continents shifting - [they laugh] - moving around and butting up against each other - new things are being formed, and other things are coming apart.

MS. SLEMMONS: Receding.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Exactly. Sinking beneath the ocean.

Let's talk a little bit about the way you work, and how that's changed over time.

MS. SLEMMONS: Most of the first half of my working life, I could be in a very small space, and it was often in the corner of the living room or the corner of somewhere, and that was fine; that's all I needed. One thing I did like about that is that when other people passed through, even if it was the plumber, and would say, what's that, and then would look at things if invited, I liked hearing what people said and how they perceived certain things. I missed that a bit when I had, in Seattle, my studio in a separate little house from the house we were living in.

When I moved to that space, it was suddenly huge, even though it wasn't super-big, and Rod built a table that I could put in there that became an organism practically or my sketchbook or whatever. And I don't know if you could really see a change in the work itself, but certainly that changed my pattern of working. Maybe I did what I was doing before on a bigger scale because I literally had more space.

It's hard to be really spontaneous in metal, so sometimes you can get hung up on getting a certain thing to work technically a certain way or to solve a particular problem, and you get so involved in that that you aren't keeping track of it in other ways, like looking at it and seeing what it looks like - [Riedel laughs] - like, is this still interesting, what I'm struggling with here? And I think I would work on things to a certain point and put them on the table and then look at them awhile and see how - and try to look at it fresh, so I didn't go somewhere that I really didn't want to go. That kept a feeling of spontaneity to it even though there wasn't the whole flow of working continuously through one piece. So I came to work on a number of pieces at once, and then those pieces would start to interact with each other, and lots of other little dramas took place -

MS. RIEDEL: On that table?

MS. SLEMMONS: On the table, with other bits and pieces that got dumped there or placed there in a very orderly way to see, well, what about this, and I don't want to forget this idea. So if I put these few things over here, that will remind me. Well, then other little spontaneous combustions happened and so it became very lively, the table.

MS. RIEDEL: There is almost a magnetic charge around that table. [They laugh.] Those objects, each of them, have a metaphorical weight to them, and there must be 60 or 70 different materials on that table, and there is tension. Some of them have not much to say to each other, and others have a lot to say to each other; there is a sense of ongoing conversations.

MS. SLEMMONS: And the tension part I like.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: I like when there is a certain tension in the work in some way that can be either the awkwardness of the design or the awkwardness of trying to see two quite disparate objects together, like the Surrealists, or a tension between not quite getting it but feeling like there's something there, or a tension of not seeing everything that it seems like should be there. I do like that, and I learn a lot about how things work on the table and sometimes trying to understand why it seems to happen. I can get analytical about it. It doesn't mean you can reproduce that, and sometimes I've tried to reproduce that, and it's obvious there's another element involved that I don't know about. So I'm constantly learning from that. And it is like a sketchbook in a way, or maybe it's like what a lot of people do through drawing. It is a kind of drawing, weirdly enough, but with actual bits, physical bits.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you still clear it off once a year?

MS. SLEMMONS: I have cleared it off, I guess twice, since we've been here. Originally, it would get more and more chaotic, and I think the other thing is that aspect of it, the chaos. I am a pretty orderly person, tidy, much more than I really care to be, but it does help as far as not losing things so easily, so there is that. My husband spends much more time looking for things - [laughs]. It becomes a kind of deliberate chaos for me to make sense out of. I'm looking for a kind of sense. It's not like everything happens that way. I also have other things going on in my mind about what I might want to do, but I think there is something to that chaos that I - if I get it ordered, too ordered, then it's taken care of somehow.

What else would I want to say about that? There are funny little theatrical things that happen, and I don't want to talk about it too much because I don't think it is a good idea to talk too much about work. Some of the best work I've made I've never made. I've talked about and described, and it's done, and maybe its existence in the imagination is way more powerful, or in its invisibility, than actually making it. And it's interesting why some things need to get made.

MS. RIEDEL: So once you talk about it, it's done, and you don't need to make it. Maybe you wish you had, but something has been diffused in the discussing of it. Or you talk it through and realize that that was enough, and it doesn't need to be made. The latter?

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. I can't explain exactly why, but some things work that way. I would really like to make a book at some point, just because of what books mean to me, but that involves jewelry too. I have thought about my table as pages of the book and photographing the table, and actually I'm getting it set up so that it will be easy to just photograph it from time to time, where you see the whole table like a page. But I don't want it to be too scripted. Just as it works, and that maybe at some point it would end up that way, because sometimes there are quite radical things that happened.

When we went to Hawaii on vacation last year, which was one of the first times in a long time we've actually gone on what you'd call a vacation - [laughs] - I was concerned about how much there was there in Hawaii, like the museums or whatever that we often do, but of course, there was the beach there, and we had a place that was right on the beach, so I spent all my time exploring.

MS. RIEDEL: Which was familiar. You'd done that for years in the Northwest, up on Whidbey Island [WA], beachcombing, collecting stones, and studying what was on the beach, so it was

familiar, only new location.

MS. SLEMMONS: And that's a whole story. Then again, I wondered why is it that I loved doing this so much and that there was something about that particular beach - not smooth sand, but more irregular.

[END MD 03 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: So when you came back from Hawaii, you brought half the beach with you.

MS. SLEMMONS: It felt like it, even though I thought I was severely editing the beach that developed right outside the backdoor.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Rod has said that you are one of the great forces of geology.

[They laugh.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Moving, transplanting bits of rock and -

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. So I don't want to deplete - [laughs] - make too big a dent in the beach -

MS. RIEDEL: Future geologists coming through Chicago are going to be very confused.

MS. SLEMMONS: - in that spot. [They laugh.] Really. And this beach was - it wasn't a smooth sand beach. It was chunky, of coral, worn bits of coral, and there were shell and other bits at one point. But I just loved the array and then seeing what you'd pick out looking at that. And it was bizarre that two or three times over different days my eye would land on the same exact thing that I would notice, and it wouldn't be something I picked up, and there was a tiny thing. And it's just interesting to see how your eyes work when presented with the array and to organize it or to make some kind of sense of it. And it seems so reflective of our culture today with - there is such a huge array of information, of imagery available at all times. It's overwhelming. And how are we going to navigate through this different landscape; that interests me.

MS. RIEDEL: In terms of what we pick up, what we let go, and what we choose to ignore.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. What we take in, what we focus on, what we use in some way, instead of being numbed by it all in the end. There are too many choices. That's in a sense, too, referring back to the importance of limitations and not having so much to work with. But maybe the limitations will be the profusion, and then how do we make sense of that kind of world?

Anyway, I had plenty of time to reflect on such matters, and I ended up bringing these things home and thinking how I might like to - I really didn't go there with the idea that I was going to collect material for jewelry, but there it was. I started thinking about it, and there was also something about the selection process, picking things up. Dominic DiMare was there at the same time, and we started to get smaller and smaller [objects], so at one point, we were picking up the tiniest pink dots. They're about the size of a period in newsprint, but they are actually an entire shell.

MS. RIEDEL: The Niihau shells, those tiny little spiral ones?

MS. SLEMMONS: It was a little spiral, but it was minute.

MS. RIEDEL: The size of a pinhead.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. So what are they called?

MS. RIEDEL: Niihau shells.

MS. SLEMMONS: Niihau, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And they normally come from one island. They range from sort of pink to white to brown. You can find them very hot pink occasionally.

MS. SLEMMONS: These were very bright pink, and so in that case it was the color that announced something that tiny.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: There are other tiny grains there, but that pink was what stood out, so we spent an entire morning chatting and picking them up - and I had been told to bring tweezers. [They laugh.] So I did bring them, and they certainly made it possible. So we picked up these tiny pink dots and had a conversation about esthetics. I, of course, started thinking about jewelry and thinking about shell and thinking about that material, how that has been used in so many cultures, how it was valued, what it signified.

I remembered the Naga, in India, who highly prized shell, and if they couldn't get shell, the lesser substitute was a metal version of a shell form. Did I mention this before? I was very affected by this report a few years ago in a science journal about the discovery of these shell beads in South Africa that were like 35,000 years old. I think I did mention them.

MS. RIEDEL: That might have been at dinner. I don't think we talked about that here.

MS. SLEMMONS: And the way this was talked about - this was jewelry, this was ornament, this was a made thing, but it was talked about as first evidence of human symbolic thought. And this is jewelry that's telling that particular story. So I was wondering about doing something with shell but thinking about it in a much wider way across all the different cultures that have used it, almost more like a show that included shell jewelry from other cultures, as well as something I might make, or how I might put that together. I've only started to think about that, but when I got home with these bags of shell and bits, I couldn't - I didn't have time to work on them; I had other things I had to do, but I still had to lay them on the table.

Now I am getting back to answering your question, which was, do I ever clear off the table? And in that case I did clear everything off, because I wanted to see them there. And then I actually did make a few pieces, a few parts of pieces, just thinking about it, and of course, then I realized that I had a beach on my table. It was like a beach.

And I remember one time Ramona [Solberg] coming by needing some stones for something she was making, and she said, do you have any of those smooth round beach stones? And I said, check the beach, by which I meant my table, and she found them. There were a couple there, just what she wanted, and she took them home.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] Whatever one is looking for is probably, at least in parts, on your table.

MS. SLEMMONS: So it's a little warehouse of material. But anyway, the beach didn't last long, and then I had to put back other things that I was working on. When I had the table in Seattle, it would get more and more full, and finally at the end of the year, on New Year's, I would always have a big dinner. I would clear off the table because it was the one space where we could have more than six people for dinner, and we'd have a big feast on the table.

MS. RIEDEL: So at the end of the year, and the beginning of the next. It's an annual event, the clearing of the table.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. The clearing of the table, and some things came right back. [Laughs.] They came right back even to the spot, and other things stayed put away, and then it developed again.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you do that by memory, or did you move them as pieces - as sections?

MS. SLEMMONS: No. I did it by memory, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: I love the image of that table as a beach, and especially that you collected those things with Dominic. It makes me think of a poem that he always loved, by Garcia Lorca, I think, about all these islands moving around on the top of the water -

MS. SLEMMONS: Really?

MS. RIEDEL: - but deep down, everything is connected.

MS. SLEMMONS: I don't know that poem.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure I have it someplace, or Dominic would have it. I think he wrote about it, maybe in one of his catalogues.

MS. SLEMMONS: Oh, did he?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. But it's just perfect that you would come back and construct these pieces of beach, or islands, on your table.

MS. SLEMMONS: I do like that.

MS. RIEDEL: With this deep-down connection. Yes.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. Very definitely. Now, that brings Oaxaca to mind. Recently I made these necklaces that have long beads hanging down. The whole necklace just hangs down the front, or you can wind it around. We were talking about what should we call this one; I think in this case Christina [Kim] was there and she said, it's like seaweed, algae, and the young women I work with they liked that title, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Algae, because it has a very Spanish-sounding sound to it, as well.

MS. SLEMMONS: And, of course, those particular beads are called caracol, which is a word for shell or core. And so now that I'm just talking to you, I'm kind of putting them back on the table with the shells when they come back out. I don't know if this is going too far off the subject, but I have to tell this one little thing that happened last spring or early summer on the table that was definitely the most dramatic event. In one place, I have several little hands that are wooden hands or a doll hand and also crab claws, so these little gripping devices are laying there together, and I noticed that there was a little pile of dust there, and I looked closely and then I realized something had been eating the crab claw, and then I saw two or three little worms. They were dead, but they were eating, like, the cartilage in the claw, and I thought, well, that's interesting.

And then also in that group of things was a totally dried anole, which is a little lizard from Florida. You see them all over. And one had ended up in my mother's apartment and died and was totally dried. It was a delicate little thing about 3.5 inches long, so I brought it home. And it was there on the table, but out of the corner of my eye, I realized it looked different. [Riedel laughs.] The reason it looked different - it was no longer dark; it was no longer brown; it was white, and the reason it was white is because it was a total skeleton in all its unbelievably intricate detail. It had been eaten - all the dried skin.

MS. RIEDEL: By those teeny little worms.

MS. SLEMMONS: Actually, I think they were little demestid beetles. I had seen some beetles around and I didn't think of them one way or the other, like squashing them or anything. They are the ones they use to clean material for museums. And the skeleton is absolutely perfect, and it's so interesting how you think of the dried skin and the dried animal being totally dead. But, of course, it wasn't totally dead because there was this material that the beetles ate. So I have been a little more wary, if I see other beetles. And Rod said, well, [laughs] what about us in the night... anyway...

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about Oaxaca. Seems like a good place to do it, and that's going to take a little while. You're just back. This has been an ongoing project, a 10-year project at least, yes?

MS. SLEMMONS: Not quite 10; seven years.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. This project started at the invitation of Francisco Toledo in Oaxaca. It also makes me think of what we were talking about earlier in terms of alchemy and material; it's a complete switch for you, going from metal and even found objects to paper, paper that's indigenous to that area. Very different for you in terms of - not necessarily collaboration, but very direct teaching. These are designs that you come up with and then give freely to a workshop, for people there to reproduce and sell. And this has really evolved over these seven years, from the very simplest of designs, bracelets, to very elaborate necklaces, different styles of beads. The people at the workshop have come up with their very own first designs, the gusanos, the earrings. This work is completely different from anything else you

do, but you said that your own work and this project really feed each other.

MS. SLEMMONS: I think sometimes when you've been working a long time and you completely change to another media, it presents all these new difficulties and challenges; it is very stimulating. I'm thinking of [Pablo] Picasso making ceramics, for instance.

And the way this came about, we certainly had developed stronger and stronger connections to Oaxaca, and I've always felt I have learned so much from traveling and also the way people work in other countries and make things. I've always had a particular interest in that and the utmost respect for that kind of work. And certainly, travel has been very generous to me.

And when we were in Oaxaca, after several years of visiting and doing some art related things there, Francisco Toledo had started this handmade papermaking workshop. It's a beautiful place. I loved it. I loved the idea that all the material for the paper came from plants grown there. And there is something about paper that is so appealing and also, to me, just growing up with the newspaper. But paper in the culture in Mexico also had very strong roots, complicated roots, so as a material it's not a simple material but -

MS. RIEDEL: You're referring to the codices in particular - yes?

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. When the Spanish came, I think they were quite shocked that they had paper, they had books, amazingly beautiful, elaborate books. That was apparently very threatening. There must have been something wrong there because they burned all the books, but 14 - that's how many, 14 - remained out of thousands.

MS. RIEDEL: Survived.

MS. SLEMMONS: But they had paper technology, papermaking technology, there for a long time, so I liked that connection, too, that they would be making paper again. Even that enterprise in Oaxaca was a collaboration of sorts, because the Finnish government had donated considerable expertise and equipment to get it going.

Finland produces more paper than any other country, and they have a project that is subsidizing or contributing to making paper in developing countries around the world. So already this became a connection between two unexpected places, Oaxaca and Finland. And Francisco Toledo, who has done so much in Oaxaca with art and culture in many different areas, was behind this one, too.

When I said how much I loved it there and it must be wonderful to work there, he said, well, why don't you work there and see if you can make some jewelry out of paper? And I said, I don't know anything about paper, and he said, well, I don't either [they laugh], and I'm working there.

And he also said, maybe you could make something that the people working there could make. And I said, oh, no, I don't think I could do that because I don't think in production terms and I don't know anything about that, and I wanted to say that upfront. I just seem to think in one-of-a-kind terms, and he said, that's okay. Whatever. But of course, he planted that seed. I'm sure he knew very well.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure he did, too.

MS. SLEMMONS: And of course, since I didn't know anything at all, I did very simple things. And one of the first things I did was, in a sense, to appropriate something I love very much. My pearls are - my equivalent of a string of pearls are African bakelite or plastic disc beads, so I thought this could work in paper. And we stamped out paper discs and made essentially the same kind of necklace but out of paper. So I was working out a number of things and experimenting and coming up with some things that I could see might actually work and that could be sold there.

Francisco was working there, too, designing covers for handmade books; I think he might have done 300. He was having a big retrospective exhibition in London at Whitechapel [Art Gallery], and he wanted to make these books so that if they sold, then the proceeds could go to the paper workshop to build up the revenue. And I think he sold all those books in three

days. It was a very good idea also because he had other artists do other covers, and it was an opportunity for people who might not be able to afford that artist's work, but it was their work in a different form that was accessible, and people did buy them for that very reason.

It was interesting that the labor was divided. The papermakers were the guys, and it was the girls - they were girls then, 15, 16, 17, young women - who were making the books and then the jewelry. Now they're in their 20s, and they're getting married and having kids, but they are the same people. The workshop is up in the mountains outside of Oaxaca, and the building is actually an old 19th-century hydroelectric plant.

And the water for Oaxaca comes from a newer plant higher up. The big pipe is right there and the water is rushing through it, and then you hear it all the time. We were riding down to Oaxaca one day - and we didn't talk much; we were just working all the time when we were up there - and Francisco turned to me and said, when do you think you'll be ready to have an exhibition? And I said, oh, well, maybe next year or so. And he said, I think we can have the gallery cleared by the end of next week. [Riedel laughs.]

And you know how I do things. It's lots of planning, getting organized, having everything put together, but somehow that's how it was going to be for Oaxaca. It was important to do that, to show that work, so actually, for the next week, everyone we knew, including Rod and some people staying at the hotel, were cutting out paper - [they laugh] - so we could get enough pieces done, and it was at the Institute of Graphic Arts, which is also the library that we were involved in.

MS. RIEDEL: This is in Oaxaca proper?

MS. SLEMMONS: In Oaxaca proper, and at that time, and for quite a few years, they had a kind of store gallery that sold the books and the sheet paper from the taller [workshop], so that's where the show was. And I think there were maybe 25 pieces. It looked pretty good, and people were pretty jazzed by it.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was the first exhibition of the taller, or the first exhibition in jewelry?

MS. SLEMMONS: The first exhibition of jewelry. There had been others of the books with the artist-designed covers, but this was in Oaxaca, in the town and in the Institute of Graphic Arts where the gallery space was. It was not up in the mountains. But everyone came down for it, and it was - there were probably 300 people there and -

MS. RIEDEL: I would think. But no publicity went out ahead of time?

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. Publicity; that happened a couple of days before, thanks to the Xerox. I think it said, from Seattle to Oaxaca, and this showed up all over town. And that often happens in Mexico. Why do it so far ahead of time, then people forget and it doesn't happen, but two days, it's everywhere; oh, let's go check it out. There was a huge crowd. Admittedly, there was some spillover from a very good show of a well-known artist in Oaxaca that was in a gallery nearby. They said at the gallery, you've got to go over and check out the paper jewelry. That included the Norwegian ambassador and his wife, who had supported this artist who was showing nearby, and they came up to me, and the ambassador said, I have to admit I thought, do we have to do this? Everyone told us we had to come over and see this show, and he said, it's very amazing. [Laughs.]

And it was good, and it didn't end there. They began to make some of those things and sell them there, and when I came the next year, of course, I had some new ideas and we added those and that's how it proceeded. Then, as you know, in the last year and a half, things have not been so good in Oaxaca, and I really felt - well, in the meantime, I became very committed to the survival of the paper. Even though I didn't live there all the time and work there, whatever I could do that might add to it, I tried to do, and it was a whole new way of working. Many villages have particular craft traditions, like a very strong tradition of ceramics or weaving, but in this village, there wasn't that. So it wasn't like the people working there had anything to draw on. They hadn't inherited any knowledge from previous activity. This was completely new.

MS. RIEDEL: There had been textiles made up there, though, hadn't there?

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. In the factory.

MS. RIEDEL: But that had closed, so there was no way to continue, because it was a factory operation, not cottage industry.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. It was much more industrial, very definitely.

So I began to assume the role of a teacher. Initially I was there to make things, but I did find myself more and more interested in how they might continue and really develop something that they could make. Then I hoped, eventually, they would develop their own designs and ideas. I never wanted it to be they were making it for me. Somehow we would have to work together, but I was more in the role of a teacher.

Over the years, I was not there very long. Maybe a couple of weeks, and so we didn't have a lot of time to be working. But when I would bring new things to try or new designs, and when we would meet - everyone met, the guys, the papermakers, the maintenance guy, the driver who takes supplies back and forth from the city or to Mexico City - all of those people sat in. This was serious business to learn. This is owned by all of them.

MS. RIEDEL: It's a cooperative.

MS. SLEMMONS: I don't mean that literally. It is owned by the municipality, but all of the workers are even.

MS. RIEDEL: Personally invested in this process.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And there were certain interesting things I could see happening, of a kind of respect for the young women, because they were doing something that was a considerable contribution to the income of the taller. But when we would all meet, like the maintenance guy would say, I know where you could get some cord like that. If you try such and such - because it was always to have the materials that they could get there and keep it as low as possible, the price, but always somebody had something to offer, and they took it very seriously because this was good for the business. Those discs, those paper discs that were first stamped out one by one with a punch - [laughs] - and I thought, this is not a good idea. Once I made a necklace and it took me for absolute ever.

MS. RIEDEL: And it takes hundreds to make the necklace.

MS. SLEMMONS: About 400. [Riedel laughs.] And I thought, this is not a good idea. This is one of those production problems. This is not a good idea and it would take too much time. It's also centering them to string them. That takes too much time. It took me forever. They wanted to do that one. They liked that one, so they got one of those carburetor guys downtown to make a little device that was a lever to cut each way, like eight punched out beads in one motion, and then you'd go back and forth and you'd cut quite a few, so that was the -

MS. RIEDEL: A new machine, a disc maker. [They laugh.]

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And as far as stringing them and having them even, I said, how did you do that? Ojos; you eyeball it.

MS. RIEDEL: They did it by eye.

MS. SLEMMONS: And they were great. It developed over the years with more elaborate possibilities, and also more confidence, that they could make their things that could actually sell. I really hoped that the jewelry would sell in Mexico, and people did come from different areas of Mexico and buy for their gallery, or they would order bigger orders with all the materials that they made, and sometimes I would bring things back here and go to museum shops to try to sell them. So part of me, for quite a few years, has been thinking about paper.

MS. RIEDEL: And teaching and design.

MS. SLEMMONS: And how to teach and how to work together in a different way that isn't the old imperialist mode or the maquiladora [foreign-owned factory] mode. So recently I was just there and for a much longer time. I actually lived there, and so we worked every day.

MS. RIEDEL: For three or four weeks. Yes?

MS. SLEMMONS: No. Two solid weeks. Before I was staying in Oaxaca, so it was coming up and back. Being right there and starting to work first thing every day, working the whole time, we got a lot done. I was asked if I would have another exhibition in Oaxaca, and that seemed important because of so many difficulties in the last year and a half. And it would be something that we could make exciting to do. All summer I ordered elements for them to make, which they would send, and then a lot of the jewelry I worked on here to figure out before I spent the two weeks there.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MS. SLEMMONS: By then they made certain elements beautifully, and I also knew more about what colors were possible -

MS. RIEDEL: You'd begun to add even more color at this point.

MS. SLEMMONS: Or taking the ways that they were working and torqueing them in a way that made them bigger by being something else, something they already were doing; so we made quite different pieces -

MS. RIEDEL: With simple variations.

MS. SLEMMONS: With simple variations and also keeping new designs quite simple.

When it came to selling the pieces, they asked - way back, seven years ago when they asked about the price, I said, that's totally up to you. You know what you can do and what you expect for your time. I couldn't even presume that, and that was their decision. Well, they're very inexpensive, and it was only this time, recently, that we had a little talk about prices for them there, too, and how this might be a little bit different. It was no huge increase or anything, but they are making beautiful things now and still extremely affordable in Mexico and certainly here.

MS. RIEDEL: So you have another exhibition coming up next month, right? It opens December and runs through January.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: This will be the second exhibition.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And in the meantime, which I forgot to mention, they were very shy about their own design ideas.

And then one time, they asked me if I would make earrings, and there was a crisis because one of the papermakers - who actually wasn't from there, they were very emphatic to point out - [Riedel laughs] had made earrings that were copies of the beads that I made, and he was selling them in Oaxaca to someone else. And this was outrageous, this rip-off, and what could they do, and of course, I had no leverage because I was a foreigner and had given them the designs. But really, he should be sued, they thought; and I said, no, that's not worthwhile. We just have to come up with a better design. And they had asked me if I would do earrings before, and I wasn't really interested, frankly, because that seemed harder, and as far as how I was more interested in the more sculptural forms maybe, that approach - but they really wanted earrings and I thought, I have to think of something that's flashier than his. [They laugh.]

And so that's when I agreed to make some earring designs, a couple of things, and they liked them. So that gave them a start, and they made those, but then, because they really liked the earrings, and I think people buy a lot of earrings and they're even less expensive, they started coming up with their designs.

So when I came the next time, they showed them to me for my approval. And those were these earrings that they called gusanos, that are like little caterpillars, and I loved them. They were way better than what I came up with, because they needed to make earrings, and they were much more into earrings and that's what pried them loose to make something of their own.

But what I liked, too, was that in one of the many little sessions of talking, I was saying, well, the great thing about jewelry is that it's small, so that if they have defective paper that

they're going to scrap, they can actually use the good parts of it for the jewelry. And then they save time there and they could use that paper, or, I said, the leftovers, or even little scraps that are left over, you could use those.

MS. RIEDEL: For the earrings or for something else.

MS. SLEMMONS: For anything of the jewelry. You don't need big pieces necessarily, so those earrings, the gusanos, were made from the corners that were left from cutting out the discs, stringing the corners. So that was using every tiny little last bit of that sheet of paper, and it was a great design. So far, it's mostly in the earrings where they're trying things, and they've come up with some good ones. It also meant that we had to introduce wire and pliers and other things for working with the metal. So here I was showing them how to make earrings, which, when I think of it, is where I myself began 40 years ago.

[END MD 03 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Kiff Slemmons at the artist's home and studio in Chicago, Illinois, on November 2, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number four.

We were talking about Oaxaca and the teaching that you'd been doing there. Most of your teaching has happened not as workshops, but as visiting artist residencies or lectures. Over years, there have been a number of them that have taken place, from Humboldt to New Paltz to Ball State University, most within an academic environment. They've been a way for you to pull together your thoughts beyond the specific series you were working on at the time - sort of independent entities in their own right.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Clearly, they reflect very specific trains of thought. How did you formulate those over the years, and are there any that stand out as particularly significant?

MS. SLEMMONS: I think I mentioned before that at one point I thought about teaching or even going back to school and getting a degree, that I could do that, could teach, but that I learned that I couldn't do both with the kind of concentration - [laughs] -required to do the kind of work I wanted to do. So I definitely made the choice for the work. But I think some of my work has certain didactic characteristics and can be another way of talking about jewelry as art. I have come to teaching in other forms perhaps. I feel it's important that people are more educated about art, too, that maybe it wouldn't seem so removed as it does to some people. So it's all in the service of, you know, opening up channels of thinking and seeing.

Quite a few years ago, I was asked by - well, I don't remember the official title, but it was a national art teachers' conference that took place in Nebraska, in Omaha, I think, and they called to see if I would give a talk and be on a panel for their conference. I almost thought they'd made a mistake, because they talked, they introduced themselves by saying they always had an artist, a number of artists, who would speak, and I was very impressed that they would consider a jeweler as an artist. I felt that I wanted to do that, because it was important that I was considered in that context and to follow through with that, and that again this was a group of art teachers, teachers in public schools, where many art classes and programs were disappearing.

So that was an early talk, and I learned early on that I needed to construct the talk and write it out and to make it, in a way, a piece in itself. Partly, that's the way I do things, but I also wanted to get the most in there that I could, and so I actually have done quite a number of lectures over the years that are put together in that way. I mean, they do exist in written form, and sometimes they will be changed and added to, but there are a core number of these lectures that are written down, and there are always many slides that go with them, too, and they aren't talking about my work alone. They use many other references. And I like to talk, make the frame of reference wider.

And when I gave those first talks, one - it's interesting that I remembered these two, because they were in Nebraska, one to the teachers, and another one was in Lincoln at the Sheldon Memorial Gallery. And that was a talk about *Insectopedia*, a piece I had done. The whole talk was about insects and insects in art, and instead of trying to talk directly about why jewelry might be considered art, or craft, might be considered art, all those points, I tried to talk very matter-of-factly as an artist.

I often use poetry or other areas of art, or quote artists from other realms, not as a way of saying how different we are, but how similar we are, and that there is a language there that is out there for all of us. That talk in Lincoln, I remember I read a Robert Haas poem, a prose poem, that's quite powerful. And I was very nervous for that talk because I hadn't done this very many times and - it was completely packed. There were like 300 or 400 people there. I hadn't slept much the night before from being nervous. But anyway, I got to that poem and read the poem, and I could feel the response; the attention in the air was palpable, and I could see that people were very moved. I mean, they were transfixed by the poem. Maybe we don't have this very often in our everyday lives, that we come across moments like that, and I really liked feeling that. That, to me, made it worth saying.

So I think from that time on, I figured I wouldn't always be that nervous - [laughs] - and so it did get better. Part of it was knowing that something could happen, that happened in that poem.

MS. RIEDEL: Makes me think of your affinity for making connections, and this was making more and more connections with people that might normally not have been part of that.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. So in that sense there was a teaching element to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Sort of a way of pulling your thoughts together that went beyond the particular series of work at that time to a broader context of your work in a larger context, over a longer period of time.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. And a way of informing about a previous history of activity that was not unlike what I was doing. It was a way to tell about other goings-on in jewelry or art that were related to now. So I've continued, and often if I'm asked to come as a visiting artist to a university or a school, I usually give a talk like that, in addition to other symposia and other conferences. But often it is at the university, and part of my visit will be giving a talk, and sometimes that talk is public. It isn't just for the students; it's open to the public and other people do come.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm thinking about the diversity of students that you meet - when you go to universities and colleges, academic institutions, and what these students are concerned with; and then the people that you meet at lectures, who are not necessarily from the university; and then the work you've done in Oaxaca with the artisans there. What if you were to discuss the difference between an academic, university-trained artist and one who's learned to make art outside of academia. Are there particular traits or differences that you notice between artists coming out of different programs?

MS. SLEMMONS: You mean, in the artists that come out of different programs?

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Artists that are trained from an academic background as opposed to artists that learned - well, for example, yourself - you have an academic background, but you didn't learn your technique, you didn't learn your skill per se within that academic background. Are the university programs producing artists that are concerned with - that have certain overall concerns or ways of working that seem distinct from people that - well, from ethnic backgrounds, for example, who are from the cultures who made the ethnic jewelry that you look at? Do you see differences in the approaches?

MS. SLEMMONS: Oh, certainly, and I can't say that I would know as much about what the approaches were in those tribal cultures, but I think that there can be different concerns. First of all, as to me specifically and others like me who are autodidacts, there are certain prejudices both for and against people who have - who are self-taught. I mean, it goes both ways. Sometimes, there's a kind of authenticity or almost preciousness that's bestowed on a self-taught person, as there is a kind of disregard for any kind of deep knowledge or training or skills. I think that's fairly ridiculous in the sense that there's shades of all to that, also in people who have been academically trained.

Some of the least interesting work can come out of an academic environment as well as the most interesting work, and in some ways, I guess what has seemed important to me is a kind of mutual respect that exists, that people come at things from many different angles. And I would like to see more respect for the skills developed in whatever way you happen to come at it.

MS. RIEDEL: There are all sorts of programs - in certain universities, apprenticeships,

mentorships - where one learns a skill for the sake of learning the skill, or to create a certain end product. What strikes me throughout your work is that the technique usually evolved to serve a specific idea that you wanted to convey. The technique was, as far as I can remember - and you'll correct me - it was always in service to the content, or the larger - the piece at large. There wasn't much technical virtuosity for its own sake.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I guess I'm not so sure that you can go to school to become an artist. I think you can go to school to learn skills, to learn a language, to know how to use tools that, should you choose to be an artist or think of working in that way, they might serve you very well. Perhaps schools had rules and rules are useful, and you do need to learn them, and you do probably need to learn them in order to break them. I think sometimes - I wonder if I had gone to school for what I do, would I be doing this? Or maybe would I be doing this sooner? It took me a long time to learn certain things about what I wanted to do and how to do them that maybe I would have learned them faster in an environment that was more set up for that.

At the same time, I think I learned other things that people might not have learned in the same way going through school. But I never expected to do something fast, and I think it's different now. I mean, if you say to a young person it took you five years to figure it out, that's an appallingly long time. It's a different reference. I find that I've always been interested in going deep, rather than wide. And so maybe the way it was set up, that's what worked for me.

I think many people who are so-called outsider artists or self-taught know way more than people think they do. I think they make very complicated decisions. Making something involves hundreds of decisions, and they have their standards too, and I certainly did. I might not have known all the rules that were for metalsmithing, say, but I developed certain standards that I had to meet and that I would ask myself constantly in making all these little decisions: should it be this way, that way; should I use this - this color; should I make it this big, this small?

So complicated aesthetic decisions - people make those all the time - I don't really think of art as some kind of spontaneous thing that happens, that artists are conduits. I mean, that is a romantic notion. I think it's certainly different now, but maybe this idea is still true for some people.

When I was in Japan, I had several conversations with Japanese metalworkers in different capacities, and, you know, what they do technically is astounding. And yet they would talk to me and say how they felt a burden of their training; they felt a burden of their tradition, or their ways of doing things. It was very difficult to break from that, and they admired and longed for a kind of freedom, free-wheeling experimentation, that they would see American artists doing. And that's interesting. I think that's really true, an extreme where so much training and so much rigor can be inhibiting. At the same time, I think I've always felt that the rigor of working is very important. And learning how to put out there what you're trying to say or think about, finding the form for that, is very rigorous, and actually then implementing it. There is a discipline involved.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: And which is what academia is about. I think going to universities and speaking as someone who didn't go through that particular system is valuable. Students can see another approach.

MS. RIEDEL: The lecture you were just asked to give at Ball State pertained directly to that, what someone from outside academia has achieved in the metals community, a level of respect and recognition received, although you really did not come from a specific metals or art program.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: It seems that tribal cultures and artists have been really instrumental in your development. We've talked about Japan and Mexico. But you've also been to India and to Africa.

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes, and there again, there's another connection with makers, with workers and other cultures. Many people come from a tradition of making that they inherit. In India, I

would be so amazed at some of the work I saw in the most reduced circumstances, and, you know, we sometimes in the West think of, if we just had this tool or that tool or this piece of equipment and - but there they have very little. But they have time and skill and persistence and how to make the maximum use of those tools; there can be such ingenuity and richness of what's produced.

I remember seeing people soldering something on the street, you know, with just a little tiny area and working on the ground and repairing jewelry, or making something. And I felt in awe and certainly respect for that. There is a teacher who likes to tell his students that they can make anything I make after one semester of jewelry, learning those tools. And he's right, in that my techniques are very, very basic, and, in fact, the tools I mostly use are the same tools I bought 40 years ago for, like, \$8. And they are beloved tools by now, and there are very few and mostly hand tools. And it's not to say that's better or worse; it just ended up that way, and I never ran out of things to do with those few tools. And sometimes it was - I liked what you could discover by trying to get something to work with this very minimal setup.

There was a series I did of -

MS. RIEDEL: The toolboxes?

MS. SLEMMONS: - toolboxes that actually refer to some of that and thinking about making by hand. That has been a long-time concern of mine, the importance of manual knowledge, so to speak, as well as experiencing manual labor, that experience of making by hand and also what you can learn by working that directly. Friends who were teachers in universities were saying that now students barely knew how to use a hammer, let alone any other tool, and that that was really having to start way at the beginning. I do like tools, however; I mean, they are so related to our humanity.

MS. RIEDEL: Those toolboxes, one had little tools that were worn as rings, hammers and a little wrench, I think, and some sort of ruler. And then there was another one that was a digital toolbox?

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh [affirmative], that had a pencil and erasers and a ruler that you could wear on your hand. It was like the tools themselves became part of your hand, and your hand itself was the prototypical tool, and also measuring device, and so that series of toolboxes were celebrating and referring to that, and thinking about the hand - the tools actually residing on the hand.

MS. RIEDEL: That series was interesting because it was a series within itself - a series of toolboxes about rings for the hand, but also part of a larger series about the hand in general, a revisiting of the hand from another angle.

MS. SLEMMONS: Exactly, exactly, which I do a lot, and that was another way of talking about the hand. I may have mentioned, and I think this may often be suggested by people, well, why don't you make sculpture instead of jewelry, as though sculpture is better, more important or more art than jewelry. And I knew early on that I wanted to work with that limitation, too. Seeing something in the context of jewelry and art was more unexpected, and I wanted to make use of that.

MS. RIEDEL: What about that unexpectedness was so appealing?

MS. SLEMMONS: I like countering assumptions. I think that a kind of narrow-mindedness sets in, and people can close in more and more, and assumptions, prejudice contribute to. Instead of looking closer and opening up. We all do that. I'll assume something, and then I find out it's actually not at all what I thought. And so I like making use of that. Again, there's a sense of opening things up rather than closing down, having a wider view, a more inclusive view.

And with the toolboxes there was a sort of reference to sculpture because tools usually reside in boxes. I mean, that's where they're kept and moved around, and so they do need a box. That allowed me to put the tools in a box, and the box became, in a sense, sculpture occupying space. I mean, the box itself was not jewelry, and I liked that the container, the three-dimensional form, had that function, but it also occupied space as sculpture.

I was asked to be in an exhibition of sculpture. Everything was metal in the exhibition, and

they chose the toolboxes for that show - of course, the smallest things in the show. For that exhibition, I actually made enlarged photographs of my hand with the rings on them. The boxes with the rings in them were on pedestals. And then behind them or along the wall were these very large images of a hand with the rings. The hand became almost a landscape.

The last day of the show - when I first saw the show, two guys - this was at a university gallery - two guys from the sciences were there to see the show, and they were looking and looking, peering in at the toolboxes, and one of them said to the other, I bet this guy could make jewelry. [Riedel laughs.] Now, it was interesting, of course, that they thought it was a guy first, and that they saw it as sculpture, which is what the show was. And they looked some more, and then finally one of them did notice the photographs, and he said, but he does - he does - this is jewelry - [laughs] - and it was quite wonderful to observe that it, in fact, was seen as something else first in that context.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's happened to you a few times. We were talking about it in terms of the "Figures of Speech" show.

MS. SLEMMONS: Did I talk about that of being -

MS. RIEDEL: Not on the disc, I don't think.

MS. SLEMMONS: - being in the gallery when I had put up that show, and it was quite a large show and filled the whole gallery. So it was a fairly large space, but with these small pieces in the space, and at the time, some people were walking around and looking at everything very carefully, and they got towards the end and one of them said to the other, is this jewelry? And it was then that that occurred to them. That wasn't the first thing that mattered; something else is what they were looking at.

[END MD 04 TR 01.]

MS. RIEDEL: Travel's clearly been very significant to your technical and conceptual training. Are there any other avenues for learning or for study that have been specifically significant to you, things you've read? Certain poets? Criticism, theory, writers that you particularly have admired?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Maybe another example of difference between academic training and working outside academia is that maybe those artists wouldn't always be as inclined to read theory and criticism, which is part of an academic program usually. It's important to know the discourse connected with the medium, and I think that's true. It is.

I think I've seen something in the last years where the emphasis has gotten out of whack. It's almost like you make something to fit the theory, where I see it just the opposite. Artists work and work, and then the theory comes in assessing what it is they've done. But there is a little bit of a switch there that seems not terribly useful, or it makes it, to me, seem purely academic! [Laughs.]

You know, it exists as interesting for others that know the discourse, i.e., others in academia, and that certainly isn't my only audience. I mean, I care about connecting with the viewer. As I may have mentioned, [Marcel] Duchamp's idea of art is it takes the connection between three things: the artist, the art made/the object made, and the viewer, and until all of those are present, there is no art.

And I very much think that. It's not that I don't think theory is important or even interesting, but I don't go out and read theory or criticism for its own sake. A lot of it is not that interesting, and though it is important, to me, to have an intellectual dimension to what I think about, there wasn't a lot related to metalwork specifically that was intellectual writing that I responded to in the journals. It wasn't that interesting to me.

But I do very definitely remember reading Bruce Metcalf, the metalsmith, and though I didn't always agree with him, he was a good writer and an interesting thinker. And I very much responded to that, that there was someone out there that thought like I did. But I wouldn't be thought of as thinking that way, because I was not in academia, though I am an intellectual, oddly enough, and certainly had very intellectual concerns. But I really appreciated reading Bruce's writing and also Lisa Gralnick. I very much responded to what she wrote and I liked the passion in their arguments, and it was - it was very affirming to

read, to hear those kinds of voices.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Speaking critically and about craft, and about metalsmithing in particular?

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And there are certainly other writers - I read all the time. There are people I might read, like Walter Benjamin, because he relates very specifically to something I'm thinking about right now in his Arcades project. So I will seek out something like that when it relates to a form of inquiry that I might be involved in. So I do like reading critical writing, definitely, or even theoretical, but for its own sake, not particularly.

You know, this is really off to the side, but I remember one time meeting a woman who was getting her Ph.D. in literary criticism, and she was talking and talking, and I said, well, what are you reading right now? And she referred to all these literary critics - [laughs] - and I said, but what are they reading - I mean, what are the books you're reading; what is the literature? And she said, oh, we don't read literature. This is about literary criticism, and we don't read any literature at all. And I thought, wow, how can that be? It seemed quite absurd. I mean, I do understand, but you know, there is the source; would literary critics exist without the literature?

MS. RIEDEL: We haven't talked very much about insects, and they have figured repeatedly in your work, specifically in the Ambassador series and in *Insectopedia*. Why insects?

MS. SLEMMONS: They're little.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] Okay.

MS. SLEMMONS: They're deceptive. They may be thought of as - since they're small - as insignificant, but of course, they're very powerful in numbers. Even the atmosphere of insects can be unsettling. And again, their numbers, there're 800,000 species of Coleoptera beetles. So there's an example of something very small - [laughs] - that can say something big.

In a very immediate way, growing up in the Midwest, I remember collecting insects' skeletons, exoskeletons, from the grill screens of cars, or cicadas, their shells on the trees on their way up. And in a certain sense, it was this detail that was present and also this - there was a kind of metallic quality about them, I mean, in the detail and the linear edges that I was fascinated by, and I liked that when you kept looking at a smaller and smaller part, there were yet more details.

So I suppose I also was fascinated by that and by detail and, later, how detail could draw you deeper into something, the use of detail. But insects as a metaphor had all kinds of possibilities. They had certainly been used many times before, back to Egyptians. It was the scale and that there was a chance to make something bigger than it actually was. [They laugh.] And there were possibilities there to work with our notions, our assumptions of smallness, inferiority, and punch, bite.

MS. RIEDEL: And a bit of danger, a bit of unease that comes with our sense of insects.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Very definitely. So I came to do several series about insects. In one, I made small insect pins that were holding bits from my table, scraps from the table, and they were very connected. Those pieces I called Ambassadors. So they were leaving with bits from the table - [laughs] - and were ambassadors-to-be.

MS. RIEDEL: Turning your work out into the world.

MS. SLEMMONS: Right. But I think choosing to make these - and they were more imaginary bugs - came from reading a Primo Levi story. There was an image in the story of late afternoon light on a verandah in Italy, and this man was showing his friend his place and where he lived and how beautiful it was. And they were sitting on the veranda and his friend wondered about this big crystal bowl that was in the middle of this table. The light was glinting off the bowl, and as they were talking, something appeared in the distance that got closer and closer, and it eventually ended up hovering over the bowl, and it was a dragonfly, who then deposited a blueberry in the bowl, and the visitor was, like, whoa. And then soon others came and deposited the blueberries until it was full. His friend proceeded to say how

he had devised this whole system of training dragonflies and how much that was going to help the labor force in Italy, and it became this quite absurd story after that. But it was this image of the dragonflies carrying the blueberries that I referred to directly in those pieces.

And then I had always wanted to do an alphabet of some sort, and again, never quite figured the angle that I might approach that. I think also the metal letters, the type, that I grew up with and the kind of graphic tradition of alphabets was there all along. And so, in a certain sense, this was another take on series, to do an alphabet. I would be doing 26 pieces, which was quite a few pieces, for a show, and I put the two together and decided to do an alphabet of insects, which was called *Insectopedia*. I also decided early on that I wanted them to be recognizable insects, which had to do with classification and identification. Those systems of ordering referred to how I would depict these insects with each letter.

I made the frames and the letters first and laid them all out so the alphabet was actually there on the table, and I started in the middle and arranged them in rows, and that's how it remained. But I started in the middle, for some reason, with lacewing and then worked out. But as it turned out, I really worked on the piece as though it were one piece, visually. And though I had said that this would be 26 pieces to sell, I actually changed my mind and asked the gallery that it be kept together as one piece, which it was. I also made a poster from this piece, because I thought that this would be something you could legitimately connect in the graphic tradition of alphabets and that this could - that this could exist and have another life in poster form and be more out there and available. Besides, kids could learn their bugs, because the actual insects were listed.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: When I gave a talk about insects and talked about that piece in some detail in Nebraska (as I referred to earlier), right after the lecture, three people came rushing up with questions, and they were all entomologists. [They laugh.] And - oh, no, before that actually, I think the one guy who was in the ag department, agriculture department, said, there's something I wanted to say to you. And he identified himself and he said, when you discussed all the insects, I found it fascinating. But I would like you to - the only one you were really rather negative about was earwigs, and he said, I'd like you to feel better about earwigs. [They laugh.] And I was more worried with the entomologists that they were going to complain that I hadn't accurately portrayed some particular detail.

MS. RIEDEL: Did he give you a reason?

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes. He said, because earwigs are among the few who care for their young. So he thought that was a very positive - [they laugh] - characteristic and unusual that you might associate with insects, who often eat their lovers or their children or whatever. So anyway, I liked that these were all science guys who came up and they were excited; they were excited that anyone was even paying attention to insects from an art realm or an aesthetic realm, which they all had sensitivity to, that aspect of bugs also. So I liked that kind of crossover connection between those so-called disparate worlds of science and art.

Some of the talk was about that. And that - we aren't so far apart in our thinking or in our making at all, and I said that I thought that good artists and good scientists had way more in common than a good artist and a bad artist, or a good scientist and a bad scientist. And I think that's true.

MS. RIEDEL: A sense of curiosity, attention to detail, yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Imagination to invent, ways of looking at things in order to discover some new thing, the acute observation that's needed, the rigor that we talked about. I mean, that's in both, and there are many similarities.

I was asked not long after that talk - an editor of a magazine of American entomology called up and asked me if I would consider - he said, I've had calls from four different prominent scientists to ask me to publish an article. He wanted to know if I would do the talk in the magazine, publish the talk. And I am sorry that at the time I couldn't do it. It wasn't that easy. I mean, the talk was an hour. There were maybe 150 slides, which obviously couldn't be in - it would have taken considerable effort to do. But I would like to have had it there, to have had the *Insectopedia* in that kind of venue. And I do like the idea of jewelry showing up in unexpected places.

MS. RIEDEL: Unexpected places. And clearly, there's a parallel spirit of inquiry and curiosity coming from the scientists that were interested in having this article -

MS. SLEMMONS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: - in a scientific journal. And something you said had triggered their curiosity.

MS. SLEMMONS: And, you know, in a funny way I think they liked the importance, the significance coming from this other realm attached to insects that was from an art standpoint, an aesthetic standpoint, instead of what the usual prejudices were and assumptions about insects. There was something else that even for them, I think, was an aesthetic dimension to these creatures, which they looked at so closely - [laughs] - in various ways, from the particular angle of their profession.

MS. RIEDEL: From *Insectopedia* - I think, that was '96 and '97 - you went on to *Cuts and Repose*, which was a huge shift in your perspective. I don't know if there was anything between the two, but you began a whole series of pieces with photographs, which you hadn't done before, that were completely new in terms of your jewelry, no? I'm trying to think of anything that might have had photographs before.

MS. SLEMMONS: No, I don't think so.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't think so either. So as a material, that was completely new.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And in that sense - you know, often I'm asked, where do your ideas come from? As though there's some kind of hidden reservoir that I can go back there and tap into, or open up and they're in there. And it's from so many different sources or circumstances, and, in that case, I certainly didn't say, now I think I want to do something with photographs. Not at all.

One day, my husband, who's a photo curator, historian, and teacher, appeared in the studio holding a little stack of photographs, 19th-century portraits, mostly, and cards, cartes de visite. And he said, you know, I just cannot keep everything. I'm going to have to hone down some of the files and the archive. He said, I have to throw these away.

And it's interesting, now that I think of it, that he made this little announcement to me, because I knew how conscientious he was to use everything he possibly could, or if people gave him things, he would use them with students. He said, but these are family photographs; no one knows who they are anymore, and they aren't particularly noteworthy at all as an image. I can't salvage any more from them or use them. And he said, I'm just going to have to throw them away. And, of course, he knew I would say, you can't. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: He was setting you up.

MS. SLEMMONS: You can't possibly throw them away. And he said, well, I just can't keep everything. And he said, do you want them? And I said, well, okay - well, I'll take them. And I've said that a lot to a lot of things - [Riedel laughs] - as you know, that people have given me, or they couldn't throw away; they bring them to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SLEMMONS: And so I looked through them after he left, and I thought, no, they aren't very interesting. But, of course, people are interesting and they were photographs of people. I started thinking about how jewelry is so much concerned, or thought of as concerned, with preciousness, precious materials, and I thought, what could be more precious than photographs? I mean, people will save their photographs if their house was burning, maybe even before their jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: But these photographs, where was their value now? Because their identity was no longer with them. So without the identity in a certain sense, their value had also been lost. And certainly, there were many artists before who have worked with photo images. I think of Hannah Hoch, an early avant-garde artist in collage, used photographs, and then the contemporary artist Annette Messager. I wasn't sure what I could do with them

that hadn't been already addressed. But there they were, and they kept asserting their presence, and I kept looking at them. I started to look at the hands in the photographs and thought, well, maybe I could do something with that, with cutting out the hands.

So it was hard to cut into those images, in a sense destroy them. But it became also a way of possibly reinvigorating the images by recontextualizing them, so that, in a certain sense, it extended the life of the image by doing that. It was hard to cut into them, but I think the first pieces I made were images of the hand that I made into rings. I had been working on the toolbox pieces not too long before that, and this was a set of five or six rings that each had the image of the hand set in a box under mica.

And then it started, and I started to, in fact, get really interested in how images communicate and the ways they're used and what were all the possibilities in these few, simple portraits of people. And I ended up making I don't know how many pieces, but a whole exhibition, that I called "Cuts and Repose," that was looking at these images and using them in different ways to sometimes say something about the image itself. I often wondered how far could you cut something down and still read what it was; that usually involved the face. It led me to look at images in many different ways and to deconstruct the photographs, both the literal photographs and the idea of photography, which of course, I was very familiar with in conversations with my husband, whose entire work and life was involved in thinking about those things.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And it was about paring them down to essentials and recontextualizing them, but it was also setting up connections between them - I'm thinking of the Wall of Silence [a piece? or a series? italicize if a piece], all those lips, that wouldn't necessarily have had anything to do with each other, and couldn't by themselves be a wall of silence, but you created new meaning, new connections by putting them together in a way of your own devising that had nothing to do with the photographs themselves. Yeah.

MS. SLEMMONS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And also a curious thing happened how some of them became so abstract in a strange way, like that line of mouths. Even though they were very direct representations of a very familiar image, they became abstracted or almost generic in a strange way, and that really interested me, too, how abstraction worked in that case, how abstraction occurred within a very representational form, either through repetition or juxtaposition.

There was one very minimal piece that was a shoulder. It was actually two shoulders, one in front of the other, but it was very dark, and I liked the palette of these images that was quite varied over time. They had changed color, and then with the mica over them, that accentuated those qualities even more. There were these two shoulders that you first just saw as a shape; you didn't recognize shoulders at all. But the way it was framed in the metal, and when you looked at it more closely, then you saw one or realized that it was a shoulder. And then it was not only one but two - one in front of the other. So there were lots of discoveries in those pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Shifting gears completely, we haven't talked about Africa yet, and I want to make sure we do. Because that jewelry has been significant in so many ways. When were you in Africa and for how long?

MS. SLEMMONS: Oh, I should have looked up the date. I went with a friend, Virginia Holshuh, who invited me to go with her, and we were in West Africa, Bali, Benin, Togo, and Ghana.

MS. RIEDEL: For six weeks, was it?

MS. SLEMMONS: Well, it was almost a month, I think, and that was a fantastic trip. When I think of that rich world of jewelry - jewelry from Africa - I am always moved. If I ever get down or think now why am I doing this, or what does this matter, I go get *Africa Adorned* [New York: Abrams, 1984], a book by Angela Fisher. I think she is a world national treasure for doing that book, photographing all over Africa, the fantastic jewelry that is there. I mean, we can get very puffed up about what we're doing in contemporary jewelry with material, with design, relation to the body, outrageous in this way or that, and you look at what's there. I mean, it's fantastic. And talk about a vitality, on so many levels. I mean, it's such a rich heritage of what there is in jewelry - in other art forms, too. Africa has probably affected me the most profoundly, and still does.

And so the opportunity to go there was amazing. I felt very privileged to be able to make

that trip. I took those beads that I referred to, the plastic, the bakelite discs that I dearly love, with me, some of them, because I had already spent considerable time trying to find out about these beads, where they were made, how they came into the country, or were they made there? There was very little information I could get about those pieces, and in the process of many years of inquiry, I sort of wrote the paper about them without ever really finding out anything. It was more what I surmised, and it all had to do with, again, value and trade and exchange and so many issues that occupied my thinking about jewelry for a long time.

These beads that were simple strands of discs in different colors, rich colors, were not expensive and they still aren't. I think that's one reason people don't pay much attention to them. If they were hundreds of dollars, probably people would find out a lot quicker where they came from. Do you see?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely.

MS. SLEMMONS: I mean, the connection with the marketplace and trade. In West Africa they were certainly valued and used in huge numbers. I think they were traded and came from elsewhere, possibly as an industrial byproduct. Similar forms were already existing in West Africa, disc-like beads in different materials, like ostrich shell. And then the plastic beads presented all these new colors and sizes and shapes.

Anyway, I did take some that I would wear on the trip, hoping that someone might know about them. Mostly people said that they loved those beads - [laughs] - but they did not connect with them. They didn't know they'd already disappeared from most areas, but among the Dogon, there were actually a few people wearing them as necklaces. I had seen photographs of people wearing them as belts, hundreds of them, almost. But I didn't really get any closer to finding out where they came from.

MS. RIEDEL: What in particular did you see on that trip that stayed with you? Was it the function of jewelry in some of those cultures?

MS. SLEMMONS: I didn't see that much jewelry that I would see in the book. There wasn't that much in evidence anymore. Maybe what I saw more was in the clothing, in the colors, in the putting together of materials, the boldness, the vitality of that, the elegance. I mean, it was not just to look at jewelry. It was whatever I happened to see. I was very affected by the time that we were in the Dogon country, even though we were there a very short time. I also was very affected by going to several of the slave fortresses in Ghana. Even though I knew about them, I had read about such things, it was quite a different experience to be there.

And, in a way, it was seeing on so many levels what was disappearing, what was reemerging. It was a constant surprise in a way.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Continual encounter with the unexpected?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And it was just keeping your eyes open and seeing what presented itself. I mean, we had some incredible experiences, partly because of the contacts of my friend. We went to certain ceremonies and visited certain villages that wouldn't maybe ordinarily be on the beaten path. But you know, these were glimpses, only glimpses.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And as we talked about earlier, sometimes the glimpse is more compelling than the full view.

MS. SLEMMONS: Thinking about trade in the sense of those beads and how things moved around and got traded. Well, of course, there's the whole bead - [laughs] - panorama in Africa that were traded from Venice, and the glass beads, but all kinds of beads, and how much came there through trade. And we were in a little market in Northern Benin that was teeming, and I loved just seeing everything, all of the activity, and people were very, very warm and yet respectful. I think partly because my friend was older, white-haired, and they found that quite phenomenal, that she would be there, and that was interesting to observe.

But in this market that was teeming, there was a little girl about eight, in a little dress and this great stance and way of moving. And she was moving through the crowds with this tray, with something on it, and I was immediately caught by her elegance, her grandeur, her self-composure, and I thought, I want to see what she's selling. And eventually we kind of made

our way in her direction, and she came around to us, and it was a tray of boxes of matches.

And I thought, oh, that's amazing, and so I said that I'd like to buy those and how much were they? And they were something like five cents a box, and so I said, well, I would like to buy them all. I mean, there were only eight. [Laughs] - but I also didn't want to be conspicuously consuming these boxes - but no, that was fine. So I bought all the matchboxes, and later when we got back to our rooms and I looked at them in more detail, they were made in India. And I thought, how can this be, that these matches that were made in India and ended up in Benin for five cents a box? Well, there you have it.

MS. RIEDEL: The odd values at a marketplace.

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And the exchange.

[END MD 04 TR 02.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we've done an excellent job of covering a lot of territory. Is there anything that you would like to say in summary about your work so far?

MS. SLEMMONS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, I think we have covered most of what I might be trying to say in my work or what my approach is through jewelry, and that so much of my approach has been through series, or working across an array of many pieces to communicate some ideas, and that it is ideas that interest me the most, and finding ways to plant those ideas in the jewelry.

MS. RIEDEL: And then send them out in the world?

MS. SLEMMONS: Send them out in the world, and to make them available in various ways. I have cared that they be seen, both in the exhibition context, as I discussed, and in a public way, and also that they are seen as individual pieces, too. When you think about it, jewelry has the possibility of being the most public of art forms, in that people, if they are wearing it, it will be seen and it will be seen in different contexts. So there's a lot that can happen. Sometimes people seem to feel that the main validation, or the ultimate goal of their work, is to end up in the museum, that that's the place - the best place for it. That's true to a certain extent. I like the idea, that much of the great jewelry of the world has ended up in museums and they have taken care of it.

But I don't necessarily feel that, in fact, it needs to be in the museum, because often a lot of work that ends up in museums, ends up in storage in the museum - [laughs] - and isn't always seen. So I think I prefer that it's out there in some way, that it's in the flow.

MS. RIEDEL: Because even in the museum, the best it's going to be is under a glass case.

MS. SLEMMONS: That's right. And so, to me, I like that it being out there doesn't necessarily - it certainly doesn't just have to be a gallery or a museum. It can be shown in a bookstore. In fact, I've tried to think about doing that at some point, or a butcher shop, even. That idea I love. I mean, in a place that you're not necessarily expecting it. Whoa, what's this all about? That maintains a kind of vitality to the work, or keeps it in the flow of things. I do like that.

And I think, as far as work that comes from me and is being identified as me, I really think that I see that I've made not that many pieces made of hundreds of parts. And I think of a story that a friend told once about - this friend lived in Beverly Hills. His father was a doctor, and they had a Japanese gardener, who tended their garden for many years. And my friend said how much he had admired his - their garden and what he had done. And the gardener said, come with me, one day when they were talking, and he took my friend up to a hill, a rise, a prospect that you could see out across many houses and many gardens, and it turned out that he was the gardener for all those people in the neighborhood and that he had designed it as one garden. In his mind and his plan was that he made a garden out of all these gardens.

And I think that like, all good gardeners, they have a plan and they have a garden and they never really confused the two. Maybe that has been my charge. I would like to make a garden in that way.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you, Kiff, very much.

MS. SLEMMONS: Thank you, Mija.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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