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Oral history interview with David Best, 2007
October 23-December 6

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with David Best on October 23-December 6. The interview took place at Best's home and studio in Petaluma, California, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Mija Riedel has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing David Best at the artist's home and studio in Petaluma, California, on October 23, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number one.

We were just talking about a residency that you'd just done at Oxbow School in Napa.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. I mean, it was kind of getting us back on a personal track and not a self-conscious track, you know, for me. But looking at the—going through my slides just was really tough, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

DAVID BEST: Well, partially because I don't, you know, I don't want to ever look back, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: This will be hard, then—[laughs].

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I mean, you know—you know, I mean, that's just what I'm saying is that, you know—and I mean, I like this; I mean, I've enjoyed our interaction, but I didn't—you know, looking at the slides and trying to—you know, that was never my goal; you know, I was never—God damn fly. I've never been that intentional or deliberate and then, you know. And you pay a price for that; you pay a price for being deliberate and you pay a price for not being deliberate. So, anyway, there was that.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's been a way of working for you from the start—very conscious, intuitive rather than deliberate, way of working.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and you know—so anyway, doing that and then going back to my history. And I grew up in San Francisco.

MIJA RIEDEL: What year were you born, David?

DAVID BEST: 1945.

MIJA RIEDEL: In San Francisco proper?

DAVID BEST: Uh-huh, yeah. And Joseph Raphael was born in 1933, and I was born in '45. Just read Joseph's birthday the other day.

So I was born in San Francisco, lived my very early years in the Marina, which was, at that time, an Italian neighborhood. And my first father was a musician.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was his name?

DAVID BEST: Eddie Johnson.

MIJA RIEDEL: Jazz musician, right?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

And I guess my mother divorced him; they got separated when I was, I think, probably six, five or six, somewhere around there.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was your mom's name, David?

DAVID BEST: Jacqueline [ph]. And she married my father, John Best, and he was—well, again, trying to get the

story straight, you know; I just put their ashes in the temple [at Burning Man] this year.

MIJA RIEDEL: You said you were going to do that.

DAVID BEST: And that was remarkable.

MIJA RIEDEL: Both your mom and your dad.

DAVID BEST: Both my mother and father. Really remarkable, it was like, you know—and it's like, I should write that David Best guy and tell him how much I appreciate the temple that he provided for me to do that because I was totally separate from me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was your family there for that?

DAVID BEST: Uh-huh, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was there a reason you chose to do it this year, or did it just seem like it—

DAVID BEST: I just thought it was time; you know, I hadn't closed that, you know, and it was—yeah, it was pretty remarkable, yeah. I'll tell you about that somewhere in the process of this thing, just because it was a nice thing with Maggie [Best's wife], you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: If you want to talk about it right now—

DAVID BEST: Yeah, well we just had—well, we rambled. God, I don't know how in hell you're going to sort this out.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's all right, we'll come full circle, don't worry.

DAVID BEST: Don't know how you're going to sort this out.

Yeah, Kelly had made a box for me. Did I show you the box?

MIJA RIEDEL: No, you told me about it though. Your son, yeah?

DAVID BEST: My son, you know, had made a box for me. And I had taken—

MIJA RIEDEL: A wooden box, a beautiful, minimal wooden box.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, real minimal and there's like—you know, we had taken him to the Judd Foundation as a family, we had all gone, and to me, it was one of the more impacting things that we've ever done as a family. But anyway, so Kelly made this box for me. And so I had my mother and father's ashes for a long time, and you know, it was kind of weird, you know, because I had been dealing with people saying, oh, you know, bring me your pain and all this stuff, and here I had my parents' ashes and I couldn't deal with it, you know. And I mean, people were bringing bags with their mother and father in them, you know, and I never flinched a bit about it. But my own parents I felt weird about, like I hadn't closed it or something.

Anyway, they were in cardboard boxes from the mortuary, right, and they had been in my studio for a long time and then—so I took them and I put them in the trailer, and then finally it was getting time to do it. It was going to be, you know, a day or two before I was going to do it or something. And I said to Maggie, I'm going to go over and put the ashes in the box, and she said, do you want me to come with you. And I said, yeah, that'd be great, you know. And I mean, I don't know why in the hell—I mean, I guess I know why it affected me so, but—so I got in the trailer and I had these boxes, and I just started sobbing and you know, it was like—and I probably hadn't ever really sobbed for my parents, you know. Practical things, you know, taking care of your mother when she's dying, you don't really get the opportunity to sob and then when they die, it relieves so you don't—

So anyway, for some reason, there I was sitting there, sobbing; I had this box, and I had the things and I was sobbing. And then, I get the box and I start to—open it and I start to put the ashes in, right. You know, it's a box about that big and I turn it over—[they laugh].

MIJA RIEDEL: And it won't come out?

DAVID BEST: It won't come out. And it goes from sobbing, and then Maggie comes over to help me, and they're in a plastic bag. So then, we had to—and Maggie didn't want to look at it, either. You know, whether we thought there was going to be a dead body in this box or what, you know.

So then, finally, she gets a knife and we cut it, and the ashes go in, and we just start laughing, right. Then it was

—you know, we laughed. So my mother's ashes were here, and I got my father's and I put them in there, and it was—as they dumped out there was dark gray and light gray. All right, I mean, there were just these two different—I guess everybody's makeup is different—I know there are different colored ashes, so there's light and dark. So then—this is really neat. So then, Maggie goes like this with her hands, and just smoothes it out, you know. So it was a distinct light gray and dark gray, that she just smoothed it out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did she make little ridges like a Japanese garden? Yeah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and it was just, you know—I mean, it was such a loving gesture, for her to have done that. So then, we put them in the box and I put them in the temple in the center altar, and they burn everything up. But it was neat; it was a wonderful closing, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why do you think it was so particularly emotional, this culmination of—well, you hadn't done a temple in a couple years, and you're coming back to do that, probably with some new thoughts about it.

DAVID BEST: And my kids—I mean, little Molly wasn't there, but Kelly was there and my niece was there, and Maggie was there.

MIJA RIEDEL: And now you're a grandfather, too, we should say. Yeah, so that's got to make a difference.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. So it was—and it was just—they meant a lot to my niece, a lot to my niece, and a lot to Kelly.

MIJA RIEDEL: He knew them both?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah.

I guess just—I mean, it was just—I mean, my family's become so—I mean, it's weird. I mean, it's weird to say it, but my family's so proud of me, you know. You know, that I guess that's why it was so special for me, you know, is that my family was with me. So that was the disposing of my parents' ashes.

So my mother was—going back to trying to stay on track. This has been really valuable for me because I've talked to other people, and it's, you know—having somebody—it's like going to a therapist. Having somebody that gives you that much time to talk, you realize how much you talk, you know—[Riedel laughs]—and I mean, it's like—I mean, someone asked me a question, you know, another student in the Oxbow thing, and kind of take 15 minutes to get the answer, you know. And I mean, it's like I just—I talk a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you find that it takes that long to really get—

DAVID BEST: It takes that long to make sense to me, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, or to get all the points that take you to the final point you're trying to make.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. God forbid what it's going to be like when I get really old. Geez, I mean, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, I think it's also because we're now so conditioned to sound-bite feedback, or sound-bite responses, that we just aren't used to an answer that takes 10 or 15 minutes, whereas in the past, answers could take hours.

DAVID BEST: People talked, yeah. No, there is that speed thing that's come upon us.

So, my mother—let's see. So, my mother married my second father, who was John Best—

MIJA RIEDEL: Who was a visual artist.

DAVID BEST: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] He was going to the Art Institute, which was actually the San Francisco School of Fine Art at the time, which is the Art Institute now, whatever they—I guess they still call it the Art Institute.

So, he had a—

MIJA RIEDEL: And this would be the early '50s, say '55?

DAVID BEST: '49.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, you were very small, four or five.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, well let's see, it was '49, yeah. Yeah, it would've been '49, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: And he'd take you with him to some of those classes.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and he would take me to the Art Institute, and so I—and like, he was—you know, I don't know, your parents are both living, huh?

MIJA RIEDEL: No, actually they're both dead.

DAVID BEST: They're both dead. So you've gone past the heroic stage with your parents into looking at them realistically, or do you still—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. Which is a hard stage to get to, you know, because you don't want to do that. But my father was like a—would be a womanizer, you know; introduced Playboy magazine, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: John Best, not Eddie—okay.

DAVID BEST: John Best, yeah. I mean, Eddie was a womanizer as well, you know. But my father brought in Playboy magazine, liquor and tobacco into our family.

MIJA RIEDEL: It hadn't been there before, or not that you were aware of.

DAVID BEST: Not to that presence, I don't think. I mean, he was a man that drank and smoked and looked at Playboy magazine and pornos, had some kind of thing in him, you know. And he was a bar kind of guy, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that difficult for your mom, or was she comfortable with that?

DAVID BEST: You know, there's some mysteries in my life that I don't know about, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: You said she was very—there were a lot of mysteries about her, right? Things she just wouldn't discuss.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, there are a couple mysteries. You know, on my first father's deathbed he said a couple things to me that were mysterious, you know, that—you know, just some of the past is shrouded in mystery with relationship to my mother.

So, you know, my father was a wonderful man; I mean, I have to qualify and be honest, and say he brought alcohol and tobacco and, you know, Playboy magazine into our family. But he also brought—he cried when he ran over a bird, you know. He never killed an animal, I'm sure he never hit my mother, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: And he really brought art into your world, didn't he?

DAVID BEST: And he brought art into my life, yeah. He really brought art into my life. I mean, I guess when someone was talking about—we were talking about heroes the other day, I was talking to these kids at Oxbow. And I can find—I don't have it here probably, but this *Art in America* was in 1952 or something. I think it was *Art in America* or it might have been *Horizon*.

MIJA RIEDEL: *Craft Horizon*?

DAVID BEST: No, it wasn't *Craft Horizon*, so it was *Art in America*. *Art in America* was a hardbound book at that time, and a particular issue had American painters. It had Sam Francis, [Willem] de Kooning and Jackson Pollock, and maybe Lee Krasner but I'm not sure, but I know that Jackson Pollock—and *Life* magazine came out, when Jackson Pollock was on the cover of *Life* magazine. It was '52 or '53, and that was my hero, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: You would have been very—you would have been seven or eight. Interesting.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. And yeah, I probably was seven or eight and I mean, Jackson Pollock and Abstract Expressionism—abstract non-objective; I knew the word abstract non-objective—[Riedel laughs]—when I was very small, you know. And yeah, that was, you know—I mean, my family was a middle-class family, so they didn't have art magazines and books around, but that was not a weird thing for me to want, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: So much of the spirit of the times wasn't it, in the Marina and North Beach, there was so much art—Gallery Six must have been right around then. Do you remember that at all?

DAVID BEST: Gallery Six was later, I think. Or, I think it was later.

But my father, he was studying probably—at the Art Institute—was going to be a cartoonist. Remember, I told

you he was a cartoonist. And the only people—he liked the fine art people, he hung out. I guess because the fine art people drank; you know, I mean he, you know, in retrospect, I mean, he used to hang out at the corner bar, which was—I ended up hanging out at that one, too, in North Beach. God, what the hell was it called?

MIJA RIEDEL: Not Mario's, not Vesuvio's.

DAVID BEST: No, it was the corner of the Art Institute. I can't remember the name of it. Flo Allen [ph] used to go there; Flo had her nervous breakdown and stripped on the bus. Did you know that story?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I guess that's—hopefully that's not a published story.

MIJA RIEDEL: She was a model at the Art Institute.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, Flo was—yeah, she had a nervous breakdown and got on the bus and stripped. I think that's what happened. She might have been drunk.

But yeah, so Flo was the first nude woman I saw besides my mother, and I have to say nude because I said to Flo, I said, Flo, you were the first naked woman I ever saw besides my mother. And she said, honey, I was not naked with you; I was nude. She said, there's a real difference between naked and nude.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm, interesting. And you would've been under 10 at the time, so yeah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So that's when I wanted to be an artist, is from that time that I met my father.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you want to be a painter, did you want to work in—

DAVID BEST: What the hell did I want to be? Oh, I probably went to a number of different places, you know; I mean, I think that the core of me as a small, small child, I wanted to be a painter, you know. Then as you, you know, go through different changes, you know, you think you want to go to arts center and be an automotive designer or an industrial designer, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: But that worked out, too, with all the art cars.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I've actually been an automotive designer. [They laugh.] God, watch out; you get what you ask for. Oh, that's terrible.

MIJA RIEDEL: You've worked in more media than just about anyone I know, David.

DAVID BEST: God, that's a terrible thing to say to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: An unusual automotive designer, David. [They laugh.]

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So I went—my father was—

MIJA RIEDEL: You have one brother, too, right?

DAVID BEST: I have a brother, who's a painter.

MIJA RIEDEL: What's his name?

DAVID BEST: His name is Luke Fargo, and his name was Michael Johnson. And yeah, I changed my name from David Johnson to David Best when I was 21, and that was because John Best had raised me, and out of love and respect for him I wanted his name. So I changed my name to David Best, which was probably—very significant, very significant change for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was interesting, the way you told him. When you were in the army [making] drawings, you'd sign them David Best, as opposed to David Johnson, and send them to your father.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So that was your way of announcing it, was the signing of your drawings.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and I sent him the papers from the court, and he gave people cigars, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a great story.

DAVID BEST: So my brother, who was for a long time—

MIJA RIEDEL: He's younger than you, correct?

DAVID BEST: He's older.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, he's older. Okay.

DAVID BEST: —was, God, probably could have—if he could have been classified as a—well, he was manic-depressive; probably borderline bipolar or schizophrenic, but never got diagnosed because people didn't diagnose people in those times. So he, you know, went on to get involved in alcohol and substance abuse; you know, speed—he did speed when he was in Spain because he was a painter, and he had rented a studio from someone that was a bike rider who collected speed, you know, had jars of speed.

But my brother changed his name somewhere—I guess he was in New Mexico or somewhere on his journey, so he was out on the road a lot, traveling a lot with his car and his painting. And in some motel somewhere, he was watching a late-night television western movie, and the cowboy was named Luke Fargo. So he changed his name from Michael Johnson to Luke Fargo.

And I think, you know, this could go into another book on dysfunctional families or the effects of divorce or separation. You know, my brother—I mean, I became who I wanted to be. I mean, I wanted to be David Best, I didn't want to be David Johnson. I buried my first father; you know, stayed with him on his deathbed, but was not fond of him, you know. And when I changed my name, it was like who I became. And my brother, when he changed his name, he did not want to be Michael Johnson; he wanted to be somebody else. And he became that person and he's, you know—along with that he's had 25 years or 30 years of sobriety and, you know, I mean, he's still crazy as a loon, but then, so am I. But he's a painter.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you both spent your life in the arts.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So he got a different type of support from my father than I did. You know, he got the alcohol, you know. He got the alcohol, that's how he became an alcoholic, you know. And then, the reason I even credit my father with bringing alcohol into this, my brother, you know—my brother kind of said that to me, and I kind of didn't want to hear it, but I realized in truth that that was it. And the tobacco, I mean, I've been smoking all my life; I was smoking when I was 12 years old, 11 years old, you know. I mean, it's just weird, you know. So, anyway.

So, my brother's a painter. I understand, from him—I should get him on the phone sometime for you to hear him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why?

DAVID BEST: He's definitely a very different person, you know. But he's now selling his paintings. He used to trade his paintings for food or whatever; you know, he's trading his paintings to get his car painted. And he was in—*One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, did you ever see that?

MIJA RIEDEL: Of course, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: The psychiatric ward in Palo Alto is where Kesey wrote *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, and it's fastened after that ward. And my brother, in one of his either alcohol or drug-induced somethings, ended up at the Veterans [Administration] Hospital. He's always been able to figure out how to get himself into those kinds of situations; you know, to get Medicare or whatever he gets. But he was there, and I went down to visit him, and he asked me to bring him some art supplies down. Well, at that time, I mean, he was in this psychiatric ward and I brought him a bag of skulls that still had flesh on them, but they were dry and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Actual human skulls, or animal skulls?

DAVID BEST: Animal skulls, animal skulls. I had a whole bag of animal skulls and parts; you know, he likes the same kind of stuff that I do. And the nurse—he walked into the ward, and he was casting resin in his room, right, polyester resin, and he had the skulls in this bag and she says, what do you have there, and he opened up the bag. She freaked out and he started dancing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so he's different. He's a different person. My brother's pretty different, isn't he, Maggie?

MAGGIE BEST: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you actually used a number of those sorts of found objects in artwork.

DAVID BEST: Things all the time; oh yeah, all the time. Oh yeah, always.

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean, I remember an exhibition with road kill, some which were taxidermied better than others.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that came—actually, you know, I didn't bring up the—

So, my early years, right? So I remember sitting on the floor—God, I guess, you know, the memory is better than the actual picture, but I remember my father sitting and drawing. And he could draw; I mean, God, he could draw. I mean, he really could draw, but he didn't—you know, when he did a drawing, and who knows how big it was, but my brother and I—and he would sit, and he did a drawing of—he was in the navy, so he was drawing a ship, a battle scene of, you know, the destroyer hitting the waves, or a submarine or something. It was a battle scene in pencil, and I mean it was—I mean, I'm sure, I don't know because it's gone and I never saw it, but to me in my mind it was probably the most beautiful drawing. I mean, I was probably—I don't know how old, seven years old when he was drawing that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did he show his work anywhere, David, or sell it? No, he just—

DAVID BEST: No. Cartoons, he did cartoons, but no, he never went into art.

MIJA RIEDEL: So he was taking classes at the Art Institute for personal pleasure.

DAVID BEST: No, he was going to be an artist, but when he married my mother he kind of—he set up a studio, he had a studio in the house; when they first got married, he had a studio. And he had that studio for maybe, I don't know, five years, but as things, you know—My father compromised being an artist to provide food for me, you know. That's what he did.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a sacrifice.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, he sacrificed his career so that my brother and I would have food and clothing. And yeah, so I guess that's why I love my work so much, you know. That's possibly one of the reasons, you know. You were asking or kind of looking for some roots into that work, so that would probably be one of the keys to why I love my work so much, is that my father sacrificed his for the sake of my brother and I.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you start out drawing, David, too? Was that the first thing you did? Did you do art in high school as well?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but when I started drawing I used to draw—and I drew when I was—yeah, I was taking seriously drawing when I was eight, nine years old, you know. I mean, I wasn't a great artist but in terms of that was—I mean, I guess some parents do that with their kids, not many, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: No. Did you have classes, or this was something you pretty much did with your father?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I didn't have any classes, but friends of my fathers would come and look at my work and you know, that kind of thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were you encouraged?

DAVID BEST: Oh yeah, oh yeah. Yeah, it was, you know—and some of the things that I was looking at, I could almost draw the kinds of things I drew as a kid, you know. But I used to do this lettering, you know, that I can still do; I mean, I still do, you know, calligraphy that's—who knows where it comes from, you know. But I can sit down and almost write letters in this—

MIJA RIEDEL: And would you tell stories with this calligraphy, or was it more like graffiti?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I would probably—as a little kid, I probably told stories with them, you know, yeah. I was writing—I don't know what I was doing. Mark Tobey, maybe, you know; Mark Tobey used to use characters, you know, and I might have seen that. But yeah, so no, I was drawing and—I forget what the question was.

MIJA RIEDEL: What sort of artwork you started out doing originally.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I drew, and then—

MIJA RIEDEL: And then you got into clay in the military.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, when I was little I would get—God, I would collect skulls. I mean little; I was probably 11.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you find them on the park, or on the streets?

DAVID BEST: No, I would go up in the country with my first father, we'd go up by Redding, a place called Cottonwood, and I would collect bones and stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: What did you like about them? What drew you to them?

DAVID BEST: You know, it's just that same fascination I've always had with all that stuff, you know. Because I mean, I remember now, looking back at being—God, what do I see, what did I see as a little kid. I probably saw, I saw Jackson Pollock; I saw Picasso's figure of the mother in the back room, mother and child, with the car parts; what's his name, a person who was—I want to say Dubuffet, right, who was a primitive. But Dubuffet's stuff, before he got into that painted Styrofoam stuff, I mean, he did a lot of assemblage and junk, you know.

So that was early stuff, and then when I was in—gosh, how old was I, 11? Probably 11 years old, I was taken to the—I used to go to the de Young with my parents, but I went to the Veterans [War Memorial Building], what was the [San Francisco] Museum of Modern Art at the time, on Van Ness, with my—I was selected with my school to go and look at—at that time, I guess the museum had a system of loaning just like the Reynolds Gallery, and went down and picked out a painting and a piece of sculpture to bring back to the school. And God, you know, again, I don't think you could find out—there's no records of that, but I bet that it was [Robert] McChesney's, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Which was what?

DAVID BEST: The painting that I picked was McChesney.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, really?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but it was—I mean, it was an Abstract Expressionist painting, you know, and the sculpture was a bronze, you know, an abstract bronze. But I don't know who in the hell would have done that. But they were early—you know, it was back—you know, if I was 11 it was 52 years ago, 51 years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were other kids your age interested in this kind of art, or were you completely in a different world? It seems that in the '50s you would have been ahead of your time.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, well it just seemed like—I mean, it wasn't—it was just normal to me, you know. I mean, it was like—I mean, that was the one thing that—I remember getting punished once, when I was in trouble later, and I forget what I did and my parents said, you have to stay in this weekend and you have to draw representational. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Were they kidding, or they were serious?

DAVID BEST: No, they were serious. [They laugh.] That was my punishment.

MIJA RIEDEL: Definitely not your average childhood.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I thought that was pretty funny.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were pretty much focused on art, then, all through high school? Painting and drawing and—mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were you a working Abstract Expressionist yourself, you weren't doing anything representational, all non-representational.

DAVID BEST: No, I was doing—sheesh, when I was—I mean, I had—see, I'm tempted to start doing that kind of stuff now, you know. I used to have—I had studio when I was—it was really neat. I had two studios; I had a garage. My parents' house was like this funky, kind of old, little wooden house, and I had the garage as my studio. And I would use coal tar, I got into coal tar, which is ibufen tar, and this was when I was 15, you know. And I would lay out tar and then do Jackson Pollack stuff on it, and then set fire to it, and got into using fire, it gave me a nice—and I still use fire, I just used fire at Oxbow the other day.

But then I went to—I used to go to the car races in Half Moon Bay, right; it was like, drag races. And I would hitchhike over there, I had this friend and I would hitchhike over there. And we found this old building that was abandoned, so we figured out how to get in it and we boarded it up so that no one could—and we had a secret entrance to it. And I painted it white inside, painted it white inside and painted there on the weekends.

MIJA RIEDEL: It was just completely white inside.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it was white inside. And I would—and no one, only one person knew about it, this other friend of mine. And I wouldn't tell—because if I had told my friends, they would have blown it; you know, they would have come down there and tried to have a party or done—ridiculed it or something, you know, because—so I would go there, I had it for like, two years, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was just completely painted white. Did you do anything else inside?

DAVID BEST: Just the paintings, just whatever I painted, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. But the walls themselves were completely white, and then you painted on the walls additionally? Or the walls were just all white?

DAVID BEST: They were all white.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's completely different than the tar and the abstract expressionist work.

DAVID BEST: No, I used it as a studio. No, so I painted it as a studio, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And then, you actually went in there and painted.

DAVID BEST: Went in there and painted, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and no one new about it. My parents didn't know about it, and none of my friends knew about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And was that privacy and that secrecy somehow important?

DAVID BEST: Well, I just wanted to—yeah, they would've violated it, you know. They would have—you know, by that time I moved to the suburbs, where most of my friends' goals were to beat people up, you know, and stuff like that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So you didn't have your studio in the garage anymore.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, no, I still had the studio in the garage. And my friends always—you know, they were fascinated, I think, you know, they were fascinated by the fact that I was an artist. I mean, some of them, you know. I mean, I had a couple friends that were artists; I mean, Peter Albin, who was with Big Brother and the Holding Company, you know. I mean, Peter was actually an artist before he got into music. He wasn't a very good—according to what Peter would say is, he wasn't a very good musician, you know. And there was Peter Albin and Dave Nelson, who's with the New Riders of the Purple Sage, right, and so Dave Nelson—Dave Nelson and Peter—Peter and I hung out a lot together, or not a lot, but we hung out together. We'd go and—when we lived in the peninsula, we'd go to San Francisco to things.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because you were in San Carlos.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were there for high school?

DAVID BEST: Huh?

MIJA RIEDEL: For high school.

DAVID BEST: For high school. When we were in high school, we would go up to see things and do stuff. And I had an old Volkswagen, and so I would—I'd take Peter some places. But Nelson, Dave Nelson, was kind of an artist, so Nelson ended up with—that's where [Jerry] Garcia—see, Garcia was in Palo Alto, but the music thing kind of happened with—before, there was a place in Palo Alto called Mandrake's, and before Mandrake's it was the Boar's Head, and there was a place in San Carlos that was a bookstore, but they let—the guy was, who knows who he was, but he was cool enough to have kids have a coffee-ish coffee shop in there, you know, and Peter Albin and Garcia and Dave Nelson would play there. And at that time, they were playing kind of folksy music, and I think, you know, that's where—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting, I didn't know that was happening down there.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and what's-his-name, Mickey Hart's father had a music store in San Carlos.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, you had this private house to yourself that you used as a studio for a year or two?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That must have been just incredibly—a liberating experience, to be able to spread out and do whatever you wanted, and—

DAVID BEST: Well, it just was what—I guess it was—I just wanted to be an artist, you know; I just wanted to be an artist. And, you know, that was—yeah, it was—it just made sense to me, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were happy to spend that time by yourself, working as an artist, not that you had to hang out with other people who wanted to be artists, you just wanted to do the work.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I just wanted to do it. There wasn't anybody else, really, that I hung out with that, you know, wanted to be an artist, so. I mean, I had a couple—no, that was it. That was what I was going to be, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you get from there to the military?

DAVID BEST: Well, I went—I moved to L.A. when I was 18, I guess, turned 18.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you finished up at San Carlos, graduated—

DAVID BEST: Yes, did high school. Then, I moved to—I was going to go to Art Center [College of Design], and so I applied to Art Center and I got accepted. They accepted my portfolio, which I can't imagine how in the hell I did a portfolio, you know; I mean, if you look at me, you know, right? I mean, this is—that's got to be a—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's extremely organized.

DAVID BEST: That's got to be a real mystery to my parents.

Maggie?

MS. BEST: I'm leaving.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hello.

MS. BEST: Hi. [They laugh.]

DAVID BEST: I just had—listen, I just want to tell you something.

MS. BEST: I'm using the car. What?

DAVID BEST: I just realized—do you know that when I was 18 I had been accepted to Art Center, and that I had submitted a portfolio?

MS. BEST: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] We're marveling.

DAVID BEST: Well, I mean, I'm just trying to figure how in the—

MS. BEST: Back then they were a little more relaxed.

DAVID BEST: How in the hell did that happen, you know? I mean, that's what I cannot, you know. I mean, my parents wouldn't have had anything to do with it, and I didn't have any girlfriends.

DAVID BEST: So I went to—I was going to go to Art Center, I wanted to go to Art Center, so I moved down to Los Angeles. My family had a gasket business at one time, which is automotive gaskets, and my father sold it to a family friend, and so I went down and lived with them for a year, and went to [Los Angeles] Harbor Junior College. And that's where Rick Griffin was. So I got—I couldn't—I was turned down for academic reasons.

MIJA RIEDEL: For Otis [College of Art and Design].

DAVID BEST: No, Art Center.

MIJA RIEDEL: For Art Center.

DAVID BEST: So I had to go for junior college for a year and take, you know, history and English and economics

and public speaking, which—probably the best class I've ever taken in my whole life, probably the most—although that could be questionable, if you have to sit here, listening to me talk. [Riedel laughs.] But I took a—

MIJA RIEDEL: So far, so good.

DAVID BEST: But I took a public speaking class, and it was really—you know, it was, you know, it was just a junior college class but it taught me—it opened something up for me.

But yeah, when I went there, Rick Griffin was in—he was going to go to Art Center and they turned him down because of his beard, and he had had scars, real bad scars on his face from a car crash, and he wore a patch on his eye because he had surgery on a bad eye, and they wouldn't let him in. This was in the days when they wouldn't let people in if they had beards.

MIJA RIEDEL: Even Art Center.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. Well, I got busted—someone busted that one.

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DAVID BEST: So I went to—went down there and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Spent a year in junior college.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: And what did I do? I think, you know, there's a—I don't know how to—this doesn't make any—it does make sense but it's like God, this is like going into a deep therapy session. You know, you kind of—you know, you kind of shoot yourself in the foot. I have—I mean, some people do, some people don't. I've always shot myself in the foot on things, you know, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: You're going to give me an example now.

DAVID BEST: Well, there I was, you know, living in Los Angeles and went to junior college, got the classes, and then didn't go to the Art Center.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you decide to do something—

DAVID BEST: Decided to do something else.

MIJA RIEDEL: —else? Do you remember why?

DAVID BEST: I think the fact that they didn't—I think, you know, maybe—guess I wanted to be—do fine art, you know, and it's kind of when I went back—when I moved back up, then I went to the Art Institute. So I think, you know, the—that I had spent that year doing academic stuff seemed to kind of like, you know, wasn't me, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You wanted to get back into the studio.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. Something happened. So—but then I went back and then 18, 19, 20—so I went to the Art Institute for two years and then got drafted.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And who was teaching at the Art Institute then, David?

DAVID BEST: There was—he's a painter now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Anybody you remember?

DAVID BEST: Yeah. Oh, yeah—yeah. Bill Moorehouse, Jack Jefferson. Jack Jefferson had tremendous influence on me.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

DAVID BEST: Well, in terms of color because he would only allow—I had a limited palette, and he'd start with a limited palette and then he would give you color after so long, you know. So I got to use alizarin crimson, you know. It was burnt sienna, yellow ocher, white, black—in one color. So I used alizarin crimson, then I got cobalt blue, and then Prussian, you know. So those colors—if you look at my color sense—I don't know where in the hell it would be.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: There is—that's my palette, you know. And that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Very sparse—huge focus on black and white.

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And very sparse, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: So that was Jack Jefferson. And let's see—Wally Hedrick was there, Jay DeFeo. I don't think Manny was teaching there at the time. Let's see—Wally Hedrick, Jay DeFeo, Ivan Majdrakoff, Bill Moorehouse. God, that—who—Jules Olitski was painting but—

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were focusing on painting at this time?

DAVID BEST: Kind of, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Printmaking at all?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, no—painting. No—no—no printmaking—no printmaking. I never got printmaking. That was the thing. So I was going and I got drafted, and what happened is I didn't have my—I needed my draft classification, okay? And I'd lost my draft card so I kept calling the draft board and asking them, you know, what my classification was, and they said—then they would say, you know, well, what happened to your draft card. I said, well, I lost it, and they—so they—finally I called them and they said, well, what happened to your draft card. I said, well, look; I burn it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh. [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: So a week later I was drafted, right? So—I mean, that's how that works, isn't it? So I get a letter and my parents were, you know, middle class people. You know, my father was proud that I was going in the Army, you know. And they—you know, I tried to get out. You know, I went to the Quakers, you know, and they said, well, how long have you—they said, why don't you want to go in the army. I said, well, I don't want to kill anybody. And they said, well, how long have you felt this way. I said, about a week.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: Said this is the first time I've been asked to kill someone was a week ago, you know. I hadn't thought about killing anybody before someone asked me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: You know, so they said, well, no, you have to have a belief, you know. So I went into the army and Majdrakoff was one of my—my drawing teacher and he gave me a notebook, you know, and did a notebook of drawings for me because everybody thought, you know, we're not going to come back. They thought I was going to Vietnam, you know, which—someone just told me the statistics of how many people actually fight in a war and there's only about 10 percent.

MIJA RIEDEL: Only 10 percent that actually fight—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —in combat out of everybody drafted.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's interesting. I had no idea it was that low.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. It's very low.

MIJA RIEDEL: I wonder if that's still the case.

DAVID BEST: I imagine it is, you know. I mean, there's always people that set up trucks and camps and McDonald's and radio stations and then there's, you know, they send out, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: And what did you do? You were in—went to Germany?

DAVID BEST: Tanks—yeah. I was in tanks, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: And what were you doing with the tanks?

DAVID BEST: I was—I started—when I went—when I got drafted I had—at that time that was—you know, so I'd been like two years at the Art Institute and there had been like Wally Hedrick, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: So you'd been exposed to all sorts of new—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL:—conceptual—

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. So there'd been—so there's been like—

MIJA RIEDEL: —installation—alternative, as it were.

DAVID BEST: —Wally Hedrick and Jay lived on Divisadero, right? And that was like just the coolest place. I mean, that was—this—

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you go frequently?

DAVID BEST: Yeah. That was—and that was a—you know, there was—I don't know where the hell the building is—I think there was a garage downstairs. It was like a—it's a—it's right across from—it was on Divisadero and—oh, I'd have to drive by it but it's—now it's probably a hip place and that whole neighborhood is gone but they had—that's when she was doing *The Rose* [1958-1966].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So the—

MIJA RIEDEL: So you were walking in and out of their place when she was painting *The Rose*?

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. And that was—and that was—I mean—I mean, that was—God, the wall—the room—they had a plaster room that when you opened the door the plaster was about that thick. I mean, there was—I mean, it was just—they go in—that was where they did plaster work so they just—

MIJA RIEDEL: It was flung everywhere?

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. So the floor was about that thick.

MIJA RIEDEL: Deep in plaster.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. And they had a television set with a fish tank in it, you know, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Did they have parties there or—

DAVID BEST: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: —did you stop by for conversations?

DAVID BEST: They had parties—parties. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what was it like? Can you describe the, you know, what went on?

DAVID BEST: Well, I was like—God, you know, like that—19—I remember when I was—geez, how old was I when I went—when "Get Off My Cloud" came out. That was the Rolling Stones—"Hey, you, get off my cloud". That was—I was how old, probably 17 or 18, and there was one bar in North Beach that I could go in and drink, right? Because the model—one of the models at the Art Institute worked there. She was a waitress.

MIJA RIEDEL: A bartender—okay.

DAVID BEST: And it was called The Anxious Asp—

MIJA RIEDEL: Anxious Asp.

DAVID BEST: —and it was a—I think someone else probably—North Beach history would know what it was but I think The Anxious Asp was a black bar for white women so that'd be—you know, for white women to get picked up by black guys—something like that. I forget how—that was what I heard as a young kid. But it was like—it was a constant line of people being thrown out of there, you know. It was like there was just—I mean, it was like right down the middle of the bar there would just be people—the bouncer was just throwing people out. It was just—there were—what was it like—it's like different—not unlike what my son has with his friends, you know. Not—I think—I mean, I think it's—yeah. I think the Oakland scene—I think the Oakland scene now is what it was like, you know. It's not like the hip San Francisco scene, you know. It's more like the Oakland scene. It was funkier. It wasn't—it was just funkier—you know, friendlier.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, were there exhibitions that you'd go see in the area? Did people show things in their homes? Were there certain galleries that you were frequenting?

DAVID BEST: No. I would go—I—let's see—it's '60—when was it? I had a studio when I was—so I ended up—well, see, I got another studio. When I was—when I got back from L.A. I went in on a studio with my brother. So I had a studio in Brisbane when I was 19—when I was 19 to 20. When I was 19 to 20 I had a studio in Brisbane. That's right—it's coming back. So there was—there was a community of people in Brisbane but they were mostly San Francisco State [University] people. There was a lot of San Francisco State people. But at that time when I was 20, like San Francisco State, everything was going crazy. You know, San Francisco State was cool. I mean, it was a great school. San Jose State [University] was good, you know. UC Berkeley was good, you know. There—all the—it was—part of it was the Vietnam War, but there was—I mean, there were just a lot of—there was a lot of things happening. I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Absolutely.

DAVID BEST: I mean—I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: Such a dynamic time here.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. I mean, San Francisco State had Mel Henderson, had Seymour Locks, you know. These were—and they were—and there was an openness about everybody there, you know, so there was that. Arts and crafts had Melchert, you know, and I think Manuel was at arts and crafts for a short time. And who else?

MIJA RIEDEL: Manuel Neri and Joan Brown was around. Where was she teaching? Joan Brown.

DAVID BEST: Joan Brown was I think at the Art Institute. Or no, wait. Where was—Sacramento.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: I think she was at Sacramento. Did she teach—something at Sacramento State. Where did she—and then she—did she end up at UC Berkeley? I forget where she ended up teaching.

MIJA RIEDEL: Bruce Conner—was he there yet? Yeah, he came in the late '50s.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. Bruce Conner was—was he at the Art Institute teaching or just working? And there was Art Grant. See, so Art Grant kind of came into my life later.

MIJA RIEDEL: And Terry Fox—was he around?

DAVID BEST: Terry Fox was around, yeah. Whatever happened—did he die?

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't know. I think the last I heard he was in Belgium.

DAVID BEST: Yeah?

MIJA RIEDEL: I think he was living in Belgium.

DAVID BEST: And he was—what was his girlfriend's name?

MIJA RIEDEL: No idea.

DAVID BEST: She—but she's a—she's a performance artist too.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think a lot of that has had all—so many of those people have had the lasting—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —influence on your work and your way of thinking—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —about making art.

DAVID BEST: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: How art is in the world.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So these people—that was going on. So then—yeah, so then I got drafted and that was, you know, like two years and that was so—it was simple. I mean, it was, you know, it wasn't—

MIJA RIEDEL: You were in Germany the whole time?

DAVID BEST: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah, I was in El Paso, Texas, and then I went to—I was in basic training and then advanced training, and I love El Paso, Texas. I still go there, you know. It's one of my favorite places. Did I tell you the story of the old man and the car?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

DAVID BEST: This is one that's almost—you know, you could sell this one to *Reader's Digest*, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: I mean, it's hard to believe it's true. I was 20 years old and I had sketchbooks. I went—when I got drafted I had all the sketchbooks made to fit in my Army fatigues, okay? So that I could—they'd fit in the same size of the pockets and so on the weekends I would walk around El Paso. And El Paso used to be a really pretty town. It was like—I mean, it was a really pretty town and a lot of old Victorians—the old part of El Paso and old buildings, and so I'd walk around on the weekends and draw, you know. I just—you had the weekends off when you were in the army and so I just—I was down just drawing by myself and I was drawing some buildings and there was this '34 Rolls Royce roadster—old Rolls Royce, and at this—I'll make this one brief. And so I'm looking at this car and this guy comes out and says, do you know what that is, and I said yeah, it's a '34 Rolls Royce, you know. I knew my cars. Said, would you like to go for a ride in it? I said, sure, you know.

So he said, well, wait a minute—I got to close up my shop, and so he had this business. To the best of my knowledge I thought it said El Paso Boot and Glove but, you know, that was—so anyway, he finishes up and he takes me for a ride in his car and he takes me to his house and he's a retired Army major and his wife had gone to Stanford, majored in art, and they had me for dinner and gave me a couple art magazines and took me back to the base, right? And, you know, it was like they were tearful. I mean, they were both—when they dropped me off they were close to tears if they weren't tearful, and it was because I was in at that time training in automatic weapons which is machine guns, and so 90—I'd say 90 percent of the people I trained with went to Vietnam. That's what they were using automatic weapons for and so life went on and, you know, but I ended up going to El Paso when I was going to the Art Car Parade, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. When would that be, David? Any idea?

DAVID BEST: Oh, God, I don't know. I've been doing it for 10 years. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: So recently though, in the past 10 years?

DAVID BEST: The past 10—almost 20 years now I think probably. But every time I go to El Paso—trying to think of what other times I had—any time I go through El Paso I would stop at the library and try to find these people. You know, I'd look up in the 1963, '64, '65 phone book or something, trying to find El Paso Boot and Glove, and I couldn't find it and I'd call the Rolls Royce registry, you know, and they said no, we don't know anybody with a Rolls Royce. He had two Rolls Royces. He had a roadster and a station wagon which was called a Brake [ph] which is a—was a wealthy—English estates always had a Brake which was a—for going out hunting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: It was this Rolls Royce station wagon. So—but so I could never find them and I mean, truly, at least once a week I thought of these people.

MIJA RIEDEL: You'd had dinner with them one night?

DAVID BEST: One night—yeah. And I would—you know, the hospitality and the encouragement they gave me, you know, it's—you know, and I just—you know, I always wanted to thank them, you know. And then so it was

like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Could you remember their names?

DAVID BEST: Oh, I didn't know their names at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. Didn't know their names at all. And he was just a major. So I forget how many years ago, somewhere in there, I'm doing the ArtCar Museum in [Houston,] Texas—I'm building it, right? So I've got a crew of people down there and we're doing it and this one kid named Cass was from El Paso, and I said hey, just the hell of it, you wouldn't happen to know anybody in El Paso, Texas, that has a Rolls Royce. And he looked at me, and this Cass is a real crazy guy anyway but he says, you know, he says no, I don't but my family had the only Rolls Royce dealership in El Paso. This is probably 30 years later, right? He says, I'll see if I can find out something for you.

So I get home and there's a phone number in El Paso. So I call up this number and I said listen, I—I said this is kind of strange, I says, you know, but 30 years ago you had me in your house and you gave me dinner and I haven't forgotten you guys. All these years I've been thinking of you and wanted to thank you if you're the same person. He said, well, wait a minute—wait a minute. Let me get my wife on the phone. This woman gets on the phone and she says, you know, we were just talking about you yesterday.

So for 30 years these people have been thinking about me and I've been thinking about them. So they said well, come on down—next time you're in El Paso come by and, you know, come over to the house. So I'd call them up and I said I'm going to be in El Paso, and I had the BMW which was a weird one. Said, well, what are you going to be driving? I said, well, I have a BMW. Said, well, I'll be waiting out in front of my house. So I pulled down to this nice, you know, home by a country club and then there they are and it was like their son came back from the war, you know, and so we—and I brought Kelly with me and then they took me over to—he said, well, let me show you what I do. So he takes me over across town to this garage and just the area the size of this kitchen was just his transmission room for MGs. He had MGs, Jaguars, Rolls Royce, you know, very—you know, just this whole big warehouse packed with cars.

MIJA RIEDEL: Amazing.

DAVID BEST: And he collected cars and he said, which one do you want. [Laughs.] And I said, listen, I just came to thank you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Had—and was the BMW going to be an art car, David?

DAVID BEST: It was already an art car.

MIJA RIEDEL: It was already an art car.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. It was already an art car, but yeah. So he died last—I guess two years ago but I had the opportunity to thank them and they had—you know, they had been talking about me the day before, you know, and it was like—it's like hard to, you know—so when you talk about who influences you, you know, kindness, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: You have said that. Kindness and support—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —especially from the time you were young—early on—

DAVID BEST: Yeah. That's really—

MIJA RIEDEL: As big an influence as anything else.

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. That's always what's, you know, I'll run—I'll run like a wild animal with any kind of that, you know, doubt and I can't handle it, which maybe goes back to the dysfunctional family thing. But anyway so then I got out of the army and let's see, now we're out of the army—we're at the Art Institute. No, Art Institute—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting—

DAVID BEST: —then I got drafted.

MIJA RIEDEL: One thing that I think is interesting to note—I'm not sure exactly how this impacts your career but

it may be something to think about—there are circles in your life, kindness from strangers or distant people. There are extraordinary, unusual circumstances that happen in everyone's lives but they seem to happen repeatedly in yours and they seem to somehow figure in your approach towards your art.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. All the time that happens, you know. All the time. I mean, it's not—I forget, you know—I mean, I never even—I don't even go, oh, what a surprise, you know. Yeah. I mean, it's—I mean, I've been so fortunate but also these things that keep reoccurring, you know. I don't—it's like I said, you know, when I started you saw I was—I—my hesitation this morning was because of, you know, somewhat embarrassment, you know, to be talking to you again and, you know, the compliment of someone taking time to ask me who I am. But there's an embarrassment that goes with that and then there's a—then there's also that thing of, you know, looking back, you know. And, you know, I—it's hard to know, you know, if any—if anybody—it's hard to know if you ever tell the truth, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: You know? It's hard to know if—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it changes depending on which perspective.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. It's hard to know if you're telling the truth or not and I mean, I—I'm truly fortunate, you know. I mean, I can be just as frail and just as much of an asshole as the next person, you know—you need to keep asshole in there—you know, when it comes to being nasty or bitter or jealous or petty, you know. I can be just like anyone else or I am just like anybody else or I am just like me.

But what I'm trying to say is that I really think I mean that I didn't—that, you know, it's like the thing once I said about Rene di Rosa and about someone wanting me to sell a piece to him, and I said to Rene—I said, you know, I'm going to destroy it—I said, there'll be many more pieces, you know. And how that person wanted to take Rene away from me by making him wealthier than me or making him more important or having me take advantage of him, and that's the thing I never wanted to do in my career, you know, is take advantage of someone, you know, and that comes from a—and I can tell you where some of those things come from, you know, some of it—some of that but so I—so insane that I've had opportunities and will continue to have opportunities.

And I think, you know, it's like I was talking to—I was talking to a person about this person wanted to make it, you know, and I said to him, you know, I said you have to give everything that you have to your work and more. I said, you can't compromise. You can't hold back. Well, I want my work to get me this. I said, no, you can't ask for that. You know, you can't ask for money. You can't ask for success. I said, you really want to be a good artist you have to give everything you have to your work and then you get something, you know, and it's like, you know, then it does come back. You know, it does come back.

I mean, you know—I mean, I just met someone who said, why don't you come and meet with me and we'll talk about building a permanent temple, and this is a person who has the wherewithal to do that, you know. And it's like I didn't hustle that, you know. I didn't—it didn't—and this other person who wants to make it would have jumped on that, you know, and it's like, you know, there's something about that that is true. I mean, I really think, you know, that there's—we were talking with—did we talk about this or—

MIJA RIEDEL: There's an element of gifting that we've kind of talked about.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. But no, we didn't—there's—I don't know where in the hell I was talking about this—the Bay Area—and what the Bay Area had.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The reason for making art being different here.

DAVID BEST: Different here. It's different.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You did start to talk about that.

DAVID BEST: And it really—it is—and I think that's the truth. [Telephone rings.]

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MIJA RIEDEL: That is something that we talked about briefly.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. Okay. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But let's talk about that again.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you mean by that?

DAVID BEST: I don't know now because I was—I thought I talked to someone else about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: We talked about it briefly a few weeks ago.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. No, we had talked about it a lot I thought but I thought I just recently was talking about it. But it's about—I don't know. I forget now. It was about—it just that—the difference, you know, the difference in terms of working and reasons—motivation, you know. The motive for working here is—was different or is—

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you learn—can you—you've talked about Wally Hedrick as somebody who—

DAVID BEST: Yeah. I mean, he was—Wally Hedrick was a good example of shooting yourself in the foot, you know. I mean, he would—

MIJA RIEDEL: You had different motivation for working.

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. I mean, he had had the big—he—I forget what show it was that he was whichever, [Venice] Biennale at that time and he represented the U.S. and had this big painting of a bomber. What the hell was it? A penis? I think it was Wally's painting that was a penis flying, you know, an airplane or—I mean, he did these really awful, you know, get in your face, piss you off paintings, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: I mean, he just—he would do that just to, you know, in spite of, you know, and here he had made this big deal. I mean, he was going to be America's—you know, it could have been like what's his name—Gustav—who was the guy that does the cigarette butts? Can't stand his paintings. Does big tennis shoes and stuff. Phillip Guston.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, Philip Guston—yeah.

DAVID BEST: You know, I mean, Wally was like Philip Guston—that kind of painting style. But Wally just went—would just—

MIJA RIEDEL: So that was before the beer cans and all the other—

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah—yeah. I mean, he just would—

MIJA RIEDEL: He made a deliberate choice to go another direction—mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. And most of the people—I mean, you know, at least the ones that I thought were really cool—I mean, Wally, you know, Wally didn't care. I mean, Jay DeFeo—I mean, come on, look at that painting. I mean, that just happens to be a lucky punch that that thing even survived, you know. It was—and now it's got a significant history. I mean, no one—I mean, she was—no one cared about that piece. I mean, it was, you know, Bay City mud—the worst, cheapest paint in the world on it, you know. You know, just this crazy woman making this God damn painting which was that thick, you know. So the—their reasons for doing stuff were not for the market place, you know. It was not for the market. In fact, when anywhere of the market closed in they would, you know, do the exact opposite just to be spiteful. You know, I mean—and I don't think it's because they were bad artists, you know. I don't think it was because they're bad artists. I think it was just something else. It was the water—bad water in California [Riedel laughs]—San Francisco.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, you—alternately over time you've had gallery exhibitions but then you've also made quite a lot of art that had absolutely nothing to do with galleries.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. I don't—and I'm actually—God damn it, you know, I was just—you know, I was that close to going back to my work, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] When we talked a couple weeks ago you were—

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: —thinking about that.

DAVID BEST: And I really want to but, you know, it's just a, you know, I've got Chicago this year.

MIJA RIEDEL: This is the private client—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —who you do the stages for?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's interesting to talk about because that's a commission—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —that you do.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's a collaboration. You work with somebody else, and you've done it for a few years now, yes?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's interesting to discuss how that's different than your own work and Burning Man temples because, more than just about anybody I can think of, you've worked in such a variety of conditions and [with] such a variety of people—

DAVID BEST: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: —in such a variety of media.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. Because we talked about, you know, I just did the thing at Oxbow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. This was a residency.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's a two-week residency and the kids were how old?

DAVID BEST: Probably from 15 to 18—15 to 18. I think there was one 19-year-old kid there, you know, and she got there by—she was on scholarship. God, what am I thinking—what am I thinking? Trying to help put together for you the thing that—the question that you asked earlier about—

MIJA RIEDEL: Reasons for making art.

DAVID BEST: —reasons for making art and the social thing and the thing about my mother being—possibly being adopted or her issues and why somewhere there's some kind of morality thing or something in my work, and then thinking of the teaching thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Something about giving voice—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —comes to mind. Helping others give voice.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Find voice.

DAVID BEST: When I was—you know, because I'm now—I'm now taking—I'm now taking credit for something which I hadn't, you know. I'm actually taking credit and it's still very hard for me to take it and Maggie's been after me about it and Stephen [Thomas], who's the head of Oxbow, hit me with it, and that's that I'm a good teacher. And that's a hard one to accept because I don't have a driver's license.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: Right. You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: That's important to you from the start.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. That there's this—I don't do—I never made teaching my career, just like I never made anything deliberately, and I never made teaching my career. But I wanted to teach.

MIJA RIEDEL: Deliberately you never made it your career but indirectly in many ways—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —you have.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So I've wanted to teach. I mean, it's like when I was shooting at the rifle range in the army. I would miss the target, you know. I would shoot at rocks or wherever but I always knew where the bullet was going. I just wasn't going to cooperate with the military. But I always knew where it was going and in that deliberate—not deliberate thing, you know. Yeah, I've always wanted to teach. I just wouldn't—I just did not want to get a driver's license, you know. And you needed a driver's license to teach. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: When you first came back from the military weren't you teaching in Marin City or—yeah.

DAVID BEST: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So from the start—

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. So I—I've always wanted to do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: But not traditional roles.

DAVID BEST: Well, I couldn't get in the traditional role because I didn't have a driver's license, you know. You have to play—you have to do certain things to get into that, you know, and I wouldn't do those things. And that's a hard one. It's just—it's a little, you know, it's like, you know, you can't look at regret. You know, you just have to—that's why I've dealt with so many people, you know. I met Ray Saunders recently. Ray came over to Oxbow. You know Ray Saunders?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: And he's—I mean, there's a handful of people. I mean, Ray Saunders, Ruth Asawa, you know. Those are, you know, Arneson, you know, really committed teachers, you know. I mean, really educators. Not just teachers—educators. I mean, really—I should—very highly respected people. I mean, Arneson was a very good teacher, you know. Ray Saunders is a good teacher. I mean, he loves it—he believes in it, you know. And those kind of people are not in it for a profession, you know. If—they're in it to make changes. I mean, Ruth Asawa, if she had spent her time working on her work, you know, instead of what she did there'd be thousands of young people who wouldn't be artists but, you know, and she—I mean, she was just committed to the—her work and mission and stuff. And Ray Saunders is committed to his kids. So there's something—there's a real reward for teaching I guess, you know. But I forget—I kind of thing I'm meandering away from it or lost my thought.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm thinking about all the different ways you have taught over the years.

DAVID BEST: Yeah—oh, yeah. Okay. So yeah, so the thing of—this—the payback for, like people that I've worked with, you know, like I'd say it's, you know, people working on a car project with me—they get—that—that's pretty clear, you know. They're—or the Burning Man thing. And that's a very taxing thing for a lot of people, you know, because that—that's—that takes a lot of time, you know. And it's like three—sometimes three, four, or five weeks of working.

MIJA RIEDEL: You're talking about the crew that does a lot of—

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —the prep work beforehand.

DAVID BEST: For [pay]. So—

MIJA RIEDEL: Those can be 30, 40 people, right, David?

DAVID BEST: Yeah. There were 60. Then we have, you know, like Chicago the same loyalty, you know—that same loyalty to me—given to me—the same trust or thing. The only difference is that they get paid, you know, and that's the thing. I've been kind of—I wanted to build, you know, I'm still tempted. That's why I say, you know, damn it, I was that close to getting back to my work, you know. Someone just talked to me about building a permanent temple, right? Someone—there's a thing for a concert in England that's in one of those—100,000 people go to this thing in England. You know, then there's Burning Man and there's Chicago. All these things

involve teams again. And so but the one—but two of them—two of them would actually be situations that people can get paid, you know, and that's what I've kind of wanted to build up that thing for that, you know, five years from now, or it was actually ten years, is what I saw, is that these people that I've been working with would all of a sudden become professional. They'd have incomes, you know, not just doing it for free. But a lot of them don't want any money. A lot of them just want to work, you know, for the other thing. But yeah, so I was kind of hoping to—I thought I was going to get out of it this year, you know. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: This stage?

DAVID BEST: Hmm?

MIJA RIEDEL: You thought you were going to get out of [the stage].

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. So the stage is happening and I'm going to do Burning Man again, which I've—and I'm not sure—I know why I'm doing it. I know why I'm doing it. It's hard to turn down, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Burning Man?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the stage we should describe briefly just for people who are listening. This is a private commission from a wealthy client in the Midwest who has a—

DAVID BEST: Has a one-day birthday party, and he brings in—actually it was my key—the key—my key connection, or the person that I worked directly under, just died.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, I think you did mention that—mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: Yeah. He was—he's a—was a really—Peter Salawsi [ph]. He did—worked with Ralph Laurant—the same Ralph Laurant.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think so.

DAVID BEST: Ralph Lauren? Ralph Lauren.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, Ralph Lauren.

DAVID BEST: Ralph Lauren, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. The clothing designer.

DAVID BEST: The clothing designer, yeah. He worked with him and he worked with—I mean, he was just this—you know, he's kind of a powerful graphic design guy. And he ended up working for this man in Chicago who's independently wealthy. Not independently wealthy—he's wealthy. Independently wealthy is something else. But he's generous and so they do a party every year or every other year, and I was invited to do the stage one year. We did a stage for Elton John and then last year I did a stage for Paul Simon and the stage is like—have you ever seen pictures of it?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

DAVID BEST: Oh, I've got the disc here.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'd love to see—they're very elaborate. Along the lines of Burning Man, yes?

DAVID BEST: Oh, yeah—yeah. I mean, pretty over the top. I mean, the stage I did was—the first stage was 60 feet tall and 60 feet deep, and that was for Elton John. And then this last piece I did was, you know, a 40-foot chandelier and a—and then—40 foot in diameter and 40 feet—40 foot tall and then a stage that was 60 feet deep, so it was big—a real big piece.

MIJA RIEDEL: Huge. So that was the second one?

DAVID BEST: Yeah. And it's an opportunity—what it is is gets me an opportunity to work with my crew in a situation where they're paid, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: I asked you, I think last year when we were talking, what the difference was between doing the temple and the stage.

DAVID BEST: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember what you said?

DAVID BEST: Uh-uh. [Negative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Money.

DAVID BEST: Money?

MIJA RIEDEL: Then we talked about it a little further and you said they're both gifts, and this, I think, comes full circle to what we were talking about earlier. They're both gifts and you treat them both as gifts. You don't think about them any differently is what I—

DAVID BEST: No.

MIJA RIEDEL:—recall your saying.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But in the one case you and your crew are all compensated and the other it really is just completely a gift, almost.

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah. The crew—like Chicago is like—they—two people worked with me for nothing in Chicago, and I'm pretty blind. I mean, I guess you know, like I said to you about, you know, everybody's kind of, you know, you can be an asshole, you know. I'm pretty blind to who I am. I pretty—I'm pretty oblivious to who I am and what kind of wake I make, you know, when I walk through. If I go through the water I think, you know, that I don't make a wake or I don't cause a disturbance and I know I must just knock the hell out of people and things, you know. But I don't notice it, you know. I think I'm just the nicest guy in the world and, you know, I don't mean to be totally oblivious. I don't mean to be an ego person and I guess I am but, you know, I think the people work—I mean, my friends that work with me, we just love working together, you know.

It's like, you know, whether it be for Chicago or a paid gig or whether it be Burning Man or whether it be a Hayes Green project [*The Hayes Green Temple*, 2005] or Detroit—the Detroit project that's coming up it's just like—I mean, we'd laugh when we work, you know. We just laugh our asses off. Then so like I said, you know, I'm pretty oblivious to the fact of the wake I make but I'm sure I wear people out, you know. I've been told I wear people out, you know, when I work.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think—

DAVID BEST: But—and but the people that I work with are so gracious that they don't say anything to my face, you know. Behind my back they may bitch about, you know, what an asshole I am but when we work together we don't say those kind of things to one another, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: You've also mentioned, though [that] for this kind of work especially this installation and performance-oriented [work], that it's important to have a lack of self-consciousness. I wonder if that's not an indeliberate way of being deliberate, or a deliberate way of choosing indeliberately to not be overly conscious of the wake you make because it would make you too self-conscious—

DAVID BEST: Yeah. I—

MIJA RIEDEL: —in the way it all unfolds.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. You—well, someone was saying—I forget what the hell—yesterday—they're calling you the Diehard battery advertisement, you know, like the bunny that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Energizer bunny, yeah.

DAVID BEST: Right? And, you know, I've been—this is about me so I get—now I'm getting self-conscious and embarrassed but—

MIJA RIEDEL: Sorry.

DAVID BEST: That's all right. No, but it's—you know, I mean, we're doing it and it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: We're here to talk about you.

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah—yeah. Duh. [They laugh.] Okay. Be as humble as you can, asshole, you know.

But both my brother and I have never lacked for energy, you know. Ever. I mean, it's a shame we didn't become

athletes or do something more constructive but never have I lacked for energy, you know. I'm in good health, you know, and I can survive with little food, you know, and little sleep, and so in working, you know, it's not a big deal for me to work really hard. You know, it's not—it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: You almost have to, don't you, David?

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: You said that you have to tussle and you have to wrestle with the work and you like to work—

DAVID BEST: Yeah—yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: —until two or three in the morning. If it's not a struggle, there's often nothing worthwhile that comes out of it.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So I mean, I was like—it's just the way I do that so it's not hard for me but even, you know, back—this is answering the question that you asked, believe it or not, is—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs] I do believe it.

DAVID BEST: —is that I never allow anybody to be more tired than me, you know, and working with the crew is that I always will be the last one standing, you know, and it's—it has to be that way, you know, so that I work harder than them, you know, and it's not to—it's just because that's what I owe them. Does that make sense?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: Yeah. Is it—you know, if I were—and I get embarrassed, you know, and it's like getting—it's painful to be—have people work, you know. I mean, I'm 62 years old and there's things that just I don't do. I mean, there's people that, you know, do other things when we're working on a project and it just kills me almost, you know. I mean, I can't imagine what it'd be like to be, you know, I mean, you watch somebody like my mother-in-law or my father-in-law—90 years old. You know, he's been pretty gracious. I try not to offer to do anything for him, you know, because I know what, you know, how difficult it would be to give up the ability to do anything, you know.

I saw in the desert this guy who was—fell off a—was hopping freight trains and fell off a freight train and got his legs cut off, and so he comes out to the desert and he works on DP—works with DPW [Department of Public Works] and he's pretty—pretty gnarly cat, and he goes around in his beat-up wheelchair and, you know, he can—he's a pretty gnarly guy. But I forget what the hell—we were unloading—we were unloading some wood. We were either unloading or loading—we were unloading some wood and he was in his chair over by the men and—there—was just pulling this wood apart, you know, or doing something, and just, God, he'd give anything to be able to do that. You know, he'd give anything to be able to do that. And here I was matter-of-factly working, you know. You know, so it's a—you know, I—like I said I always, you know, it's the only thing I know what to do, is work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's interesting because to me it all comes back to loss—your work is so frequently addressing a loss.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it is, huh?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it's not surprising to me that you see it in so many different forms and so many different places because it seems intrinsic to your view of the world and the kind of work that you make.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. Yeah, I don't—so Oxbow, the car—yeah, so we're—so they had me come out to do a car and they give me this nice car, you know, real nice car, kind of like yours—an Audi.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a VW.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but same kind of, you know, when—those nice kind of newer cars, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] It's not so new, David, but I'm glad it looks it.

DAVID BEST: Looks new.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So this car and—and they put—so they give me these kids and I do the lecture at Oxbow, and one of the kids in the school, who was probably 16, her father died a week before she came to the program, you know, or two weeks, and she against her family's judgments, said she was going to go to school. She's going to do this program. Her father had just died. So I'm working with these kids and they don't know the rules, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were—you're gluing things onto the car.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, we're doing a car. Yeah. [Telephone rings.] That's a telephone. That's an insurance person calling.

[END OF best07_1of4_MD_track03.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so the 16-year-old girl is—

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I was just—we'll go fast forward to—what it was about is the loss thing, right? So the car is, you know, doing pretty well, you know? It's a nice car, I mean, it really busted, it really became a successful car. But, you know, I told, I had got this one young girl and I said, well, listen. You know, I walked up to her and I said, you know, I know your father just died. I figured if you'd like to call your mom and ask her if there's anything you'd like to put on the car, you can.

Anyways, her mother comes up and they put something—they make something for the car. And so, the young girl, kind of a—what the hell does she look like? Tough—I think she had a tattoo back here, you know, tough. Her mother is a—I forget where in the hell she's from—Arizona or something. Her mother's a recovered alcoholic, back and forth probably. So I said, well, listen, why don't you call your mom and ask her if, you know, if she's got a sobriety pin that she could give you to put on the car? So she calls her mom, gets the sobriety pin. So the car is all built. The last thing that goes on it is this sobriety pin, the young girl whose father died, that piece on there somewhere.

And the back of the car, I had done, you know, some of it was just this decorative weird-ass car, but the back, we cut out the trunk and we made the gates of hell. I thought it was going to be the gates of hell, okay? And then, I thought it was going to be the ring, you know, from [Dante's] the *Inferno*. But it got, you know, a little amount of time and materials, so finally, I'll do this "hell" in the trunk of the car with the window. It was actually really beautiful; I was real happy with it. Then, they did these—they had these dolls, these figurines—

MIJA RIEDEL: All found objects, yeah?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I have four figurines of young girls. I cut the heads off of three of them and put skulls on it. So I don't really know what the hell this is about, right? You know, there's the young girl in the hell and then there's these three demons. And, you know, I'm working with 30 kids. We're trying to make sense out of this. And so, and the hell is really, sits down in this pit. But the three little figurines all were holding baskets, right? And now, they've got demons heads on them. So it became clear that these were either—these were the demons that take things away from little girls or tempt them with something.

And, you know, so this one girl who has got a scar like this, right, a line right here. And so, the car is finished and we've got—the back still is all sealed up, but there's still a whole about this big where you can fit things in there because I had ran out a piece of metal for it. And she—I'm out there looking at the car and she's there. And she's got a coat hanger and she's trying to put something down into the basket. You know, with our legal systems and stuff, you know, I don't know what to ask anybody, if it's legally right, you know? You don't even want to be next to a young girl without somebody—witnesses, you know? I mean it's just this—so and I kind of—well, you know, said, do you want to tell me what you're putting in there? Or, I said, is it private? You know, because I let other people make stuff if they want to do that, they can.

She said, yeah, I'll show you. She opens up her hand and she's got razor blades and she's putting the razor blades into the baskets; she's a cutter. [Laughs.] I went, oh, fuck. And this other kid, her father is a junkie, a drug dealer, and this is a school; this is like a—you know, I don't know if you've ever been there—

MIJA RIEDEL: I've never been there.

DAVID BEST: It's pretty mind-boggling. Yeah, it's pretty mind-boggling. [Robert and Margrit] Mondavi put up two-thirds of the money and Ann Hatch—you know who Ann Hatch is? Ann Hatch put up a third. So this is, you know, a \$10 million dollar endowed school, you know, and here's this young kid who's from New Mexico who is a cocktail waitress, a 19-year-old cocktail waitress. Her father has been in prison for four years and he's a junkie and a drug dealer. And she just had all of this stuff, you know? So the thing about the loss is, you know, there's

just something so rich about it. You know, it's not like—I mean, that's probably a stupid word and probably the wrong way of saying it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's not just loss. There is a sense of political commentary, social commentary. And there's a profound sense of transformation in so much of your work.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, this all happened. This all happened. I mean, that's where—back to this thing of, I'll take credit for that, yeah. I mean, that young girl bringing the razor blades, you know? Who in the hell knows what that meant for her, you know? She's going to change, she said, I want to change.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think back to your very earliest series. We've talked about—well, we haven't talked yet about—we will—your penchant for working in series, but even the earliest series, the cancer series, and the *Slaughter of the Lambs* there's a real inquiry into loss, transformation, what comes out of that.

DAVID BEST: Well, that was—you know, that all came at really, I'd say—

MIJA RIEDEL: Those were all clay pieces.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but the change came, you know, when Fried, when Bob Fried died. I think that's when, I think, you know, I know that's where the big change came.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you say a little bit about that?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I was going to the Art Institute and—

MIJA RIEDEL: This would have been mid '60s?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I think so, or maybe later. I forget because I went back there for my graduate, but—and this guy. Bob Fried was a friend of mine. He taught printmaking and he was a printmaker. And he's the reason I went back to the Art Institute.

MIJA RIEDEL: For your Master's?

DAVID BEST: Yeah. And that—

MIJA RIEDEL: Because you really were interested in printmaking from the start.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I wanted to be a printmaker. Yeah, I told you why I didn't get to be a printmaker.

MIJA RIEDEL: The class was full.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And you took clay, right? Ceramics.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but I was doing these pieces; I was doing these popes and I don't know how many of them I had done.

MIJA RIEDEL: Popes?

DAVID BEST: Popes, Catholic Church popes?

MIJA RIEDEL: Got it.

DAVID BEST: Right, and Charlie, Charlie—I forget the hell his name—Charlie Wernberg [ph] or something like that. He was a collector, a weird-ass kind of guy. He was friends with Freed, but he was—I don't know what he did, you know, whether he was a drug dealer or something, you know, but he was—and he had collected art. He was kind of more like a poster art kind of guy or something.

But anyway, you know, finally, I like a smart ass asked him, I said, how come you never buy any of my work? And he looked at me and said, well, it's dead. It's all about old, dead popes. There's no life in it. Well, I dismissed him, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: Fuck you. You don't know what you're talking about. My work is good.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: And I had a show coming up at Smith Andersen [Editions] when they were in San Francisco.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this would have been early '70s then.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. So I'm loading the kiln and the whole entire kiln collapses, right? Well, that's the whole show and it's just—[makes sound]. You know, but there I was saying, oh, he didn't know what he was talking about. So the work all just lost a whole big body of work. Meanwhile, Bob Fried, who is my friend, has an aneurysm and drops dead. And that was probably the first person that had died, you know, close to me and I was fond of Fried. And I had to do this show. So I would work on the show thinking of his rules, you know, that he'd say to me or what he thought.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you remember a couple?

DAVID BEST: He said it should be thin, should be light. You know, well, of course, he worked with paper. Yeah, but he worked with paper. He said it should be light. So I'm making these horses. I had a mold for a horse so I started doing horses.

MIJA RIEDEL: Life-sized?

DAVID BEST: No, small ones. And I had some full-sized horses. But I—so I started. That was the first time I put something deeper into it. You know, I always added stuff on, but—so the blankets became kind of prayer blankets, you know, where I'd write in that language that I use.

MIJA RIEDEL: What did you write?

DAVID BEST: Oh, probably grief or whatever I was—I can't remember, nothing good.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: So I did these horses and that was a real departure, where all of a sudden, I really put something into the work. Before that, I hadn't—I had never. I mean, I put physical things in it, you know, but I didn't put any spiritual things. So that was a real transformation.

MIJA RIEDEL: How was that process different? Do you remember?

DAVID BEST: It just felt different. It was an invisible thing, you know, just what I was putting into it. And then it just, it just changed. I mean, my work became kind of like I was laughing and saying, you know, I've got to go thank David Best for building a temple because I got to use it, you know? Like I all of a sudden got to put my feelings into my work. And I didn't realize—I guess I didn't realize that you could do that. I mean, I realized it, but I didn't feel it.

MIJA RIEDEL: To jump back briefly, when you were in the Army, you had a clay studio, right? In Germany?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you were working on very clean, minimal, Danish—

DAVID BEST: Clean, Danish—thanks, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Functional objects that were just very much production—

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I mean, I knew of—by the time I was in the Army, I knew of [Bruce] Connor's work. Seymour Locks, I don't know if you know who Seymour Locks is. Seymour Locks was at State—Wally and, you know, I knew all of that and I was able to do—

MIJA RIEDEL: But you had been focusing on technical—technique up to that point.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I was able to do stuff, but I didn't—I didn't put any of the—well, I was young, you know, I was young. But I didn't put any of that; I didn't know about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were developing technique. You've always had a technical facility—no matter what the media, it comes fairly easily.

DAVID BEST: Yeah and that's the real curse. That's what I've always said to you, you know, getting to the point where your work looks good and doesn't mean anything is really—I mean, I'm struggling with—well, I'm not. I say I'm struggling, but I went to work last night in the studio drawing and, you know, if I don't do something, you know—I talk to people who haven't done any work for two years or three years. If I don't do something for a

month and a half or two months, I go crazy. But I also think I've forgotten how to do it, like, oh, I'm never going to be able to do another thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that important to you, to get to that place?

DAVID BEST: Which place?

MIJA RIEDEL: To get to the place where you think you can't do it again.

DAVID BEST: God, I wish it wasn't.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: I'll tell you, I mean, I'll tell you. Maggie would sure wish it wasn't. I mean, I really turn into a real monster. I mean, I was really pissy yesterday, all day, until I went into the studio and started drawing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that essential to getting you back in the studio at some point?

DAVID BEST: I don't know. Yeah. It must be, it must be a part of it. You know, I mean, I have to build up a, you know, a certain amount of tension within myself to do it. You know, it would be interesting to see what I do when I get back to my own work, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: How is it going? Do you go back and forth between your own work and then these group projects or do you really just completely stop one and focus on the other?

DAVID BEST: Once in awhile, I mean, no. I don't have any reason to do my own work right now. I don't have a place, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's been, what, probably three or four years since you've done your own work?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. But then, you know, it's like I did—what did I do?

MIJA RIEDEL: By your own work you mean working solo on pieces of your own making.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah, no, I've done some pieces. I mean, it's like—and switching back and forth, you know, like I did the car, just finished that damn car. And I think I did another car this year. Yeah, I did the other car this year. So I did Gregory's car and I just did this one. Those are just—like the car I just did was an absolute pleasure. So it's like those are like a vacation. They're fun to do. They don't take too much out of me at all, you know? But, so, doing that or like I was drawing last night, so, trying to think of whether that was my work.

When I was drawing, the first ones were hard and then, all of a sudden, it just—well, it was still mine, you know? So, I mean, the fact that the drawing that I was doing was for—what the hell—some rock concert in England. That was incidental. I mean, it's certainly not going to have any pain in it, you know, but, no, it didn't—I don't have a hard time jumping back and forth from one to another. I don't—I've kind of said something to myself recently because my friend Jack [Haye] and I go to the dump all the time. So Jack is saying, what do you want? What are you looking for? I said, well, I'm not doing anything. I'm not working on anything yet. Finally, I said, okay, I'm going to need some fish tanks. But I said, don't—I don't want them yet, because I'm not—and usually, I can just—I'm really just being very dogmatic about saying, I'm not going to start my work until I get all of these other things lined up.

MIJA RIEDEL: These other projects down the road?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I'm not—and I don't know if I'm, you know, and I'm feeling it. I was going crazy in the desert this last time.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were just drawing in the dirt.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I was really going crazy, ready—chomping at the bit. But then I kind of went, okay, this—I'm not going to do that. I'm going to really—it might be the first time in my life that I'm going to be deliberate about going back to my work. You know, you never know.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think about the paperwork that you did and then the paper temple. It seems like you jump back and forth between private, personal work and group work fairly easily. But it seems like the big challenge—not challenge, but change that happens is material-based.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: We haven't talked a lot, we should—about falling in love with the material and how that is inspiring and motivating for you.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Starting first with clay and moving onto—maybe we should just jump back to the beginning series, too, and talk about how you got from that early horse series to the cancer series.

DAVID BEST: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: It was all clay at the time.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I got the—so I did the horse. So then I did—

MIJA RIEDEL: And a series of horses.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I did a series of horses and then I did a lot of horse plates and a lot of drawings of horses, I think. Then I did the *Slaughter of the Lamb*. Now, that was, I had worked with—in Marin City had worked with the kids in Marin City. And I guess now, at that time, it wasn't all 12, but I think it's about 12 kids that I worked with that are all dead. And so, I saw them as the sacrificial lamb, you know, Reggie and Ramel, the sacrificial lamb. And so, I used the lamb, which was manifesting—I was doing it. When I was smashing the lamb, I was smashing, I was breaking the kid's body. [Telephone rings.]

[END OF best07_1of4_MD_track04.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So we were talking about *Slaughter of the Lamb* and teaching in Marin City.

DAVID BEST: So what I was doing, we were kind of—the layering—the idea of putting something into my work that, you know, I don't know what's the meaning. So the lamb, it kind of, you know, that was kind of a religious period in my life.

MIJA RIEDEL: This would be what, the mid '70s?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, remember, I didn't talk much about that.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, we haven't gotten there yet.

DAVID BEST: Thank God. Thank God we haven't talked about God.

MIJA RIEDEL: Thank you.

DAVID BEST: I washed my hands.

MIJA RIEDEL: I need to wash mine actually. I just put—[inaudible]—I'll be right back. But go ahead and talk.

DAVID BEST: Talk. Well, the speaker is going. I can't remember what I was saying, something about the *Slaughter of the Lamb* and how it came about. What I was trying to say with that, using the kids in Marin City actually get the lamb and also had a lot to do with kind of my childhood as being involved in kind of that middle-class, violent thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I think we should just turn this off for a minute. What do you think?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I think we could.

[END OF best07_1of4_MD_track05.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with David Best at the artist's home and studio in Petaluma, California, October 23, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number two. Well, we stopped for a fabulous lunch.

DAVID BEST: Yup.

MIJA RIEDEL: We were talking about *Slaughter of the Lamb*.

DAVID BEST: *Slaughter of the Lamb*. Well—

MIJA RIEDEL: You were talking about teaching and the—

DAVID BEST: But that was, you know, after—

MIJA RIEDEL: And the transition from the horses.

DAVID BEST: One of the things that was right on the top of my tongue that I wanted to say is, God, there's been shows that I don't even know where they are, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: I know.

DAVID BEST: I mean, things, pieces and stuff that's come and gone. And it's like between that horse show and the next show, what happened in between there is like, God only knows.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this was all of the early- to mid-'70s.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so the *Slaughter of the Lamb* was Smith Andersen. They just—one of the things that Paula Kirkeby had going that was good.

MIJA RIEDEL: They were down in Palo Alto, yes?

DAVID BEST: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] She never ever checked what I was doing.

MIJA RIEDEL: So she didn't come and select a show or—

DAVID BEST: She never selected a show; she never came to see if the show was going to be okay. She just said—she said that I was the only artist that she ever trusted that way. You know, I imagine she had to deal with Sam Francis at a different level.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: But her. But she never questioned me and we did really well with that, with that kind of temperament because that's the kind of personality that I am. So what I—I don't know what show that—*Slaughter of the Lamb* might have had a couple of shows before that, you know. I did—I can't remember the cycle of the evolution of those. I could try to figure it out, but it's not important. The *Slaughter of the Lamb* was—just doing this lecture at Oxbow, which has been a—probably a windfall and a curse for us in terms of this interview. The good part is, I was able to make a lot of fun of myself and see where I'm at. The bad part is that I keep breaking into our conversation or our line with stories from Oxbow.

But I realize, you know, in talking with the kids out there, because it's such a different audience. You know, to talk to clientele, quote, "clientele," you know, collectors and people that you're trying to get something from, you talk differently. And the kids were able to—you know, I was able to—you know, I wasn't going to impress them by stuff, you know, that wasn't, you know, they were there for something else, for inspiration or something. And the part—what I told them and I showed slides that pretty well support that argument, is that—I mean, there were times where I just thought I was so good. I mean, I really thought I was great.

And some of the crappiest work I've ever done was when I thought I was that great. And it's embarrassing and it's, you know, talking about the *Slaughter of the Lamb* like, I mean—I pretend that this goes into several lines at once. It addresses the shamanic thing; it addresses who I think I am; it addresses where the work is. I really thought, at a point, that my work would find—that by doing my work, I'd find the cure for cancer. I mean, that's a pretty big, fucking ego.

MIJA RIEDEL: Literally?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that I would find the cure for cancer. And, I mean, what I was saying to myself is, if my work, if we think—and this was at the time when there was shamanic artists, people thinking they were healers and finders and all of that crap.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this was way back in the '70s?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and I thought, okay, if your stuff is really magic, it should be able to do something. Then it turned out it wasn't magic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not cancer-healing magic anyways.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, because I didn't find the cure for cancer. The *Slaughter of the Lamb* didn't stop the slaughter of young black kids in the black community; that has only increased and increased and increased. So as much as I feel puffed up and great and as much as I talk about my work and putting all of this heart and soul into it, it had very little impact on—a lot of it has very little impact on what goes on. And it's almost like—and the teaching

has some impact. Some of the stuff I've done at the temple has impact. Some things have impact. But I think more if you want to have impact, you have to send some money to Youth Against Violence. I think you actually have to do something different than art. I don't—

MIJA RIEDEL: What about the Detroit temple?

DAVID BEST: Well, I just want to finish with this. I feel bad that I'm not believing in one of my—I'm not believing in my occupation right this moment because I could say the opposite, but, you know, I have to be truthful, too. I have to be truthful and say, you know, I didn't find the cure for cancer or I didn't stop, you know, black kids from getting killed. So maybe that's—maybe we—and there might be some artists that can do that. Ann Hamilton might be able to do that. If she's powerful enough and she's got a big enough loudspeaker out there, she might be able to have an impact. But certainly Richard Serra is not trying to do that. I mean, I have nothing against him. He's making beautiful, big art. It's not feeding the hungry, you know.

So about Detroit, Detroit can do that. Detroit [Dream] Project can do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you describe it just briefly?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, Detroit is a project in inner city Detroit that started in a drunken evening in Detroit—

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: With a group of young Burning Man kids and myself and Larry Harvey talking about stealing the land back from realtors or investment people and doing something with it, you know, because there's so much vacant land in Detroit that somebody in San Diego owns: five blocks of empty—five blocks that they inherited or that their portfolio needed some real estate in Detroit. So they don't even care what they have. They don't even know. You know, they look at their portfolio once a year and, oh, by the way, we've got a parking lot in Detroit.

So I said, let's steal it; build something. So they took me seriously. So we've been trying to get—we got land. Somebody has given us land that they stole from someone else.

MIJA RIEDEL: In downtown Detroit? Right in downtown.

DAVID BEST: Downtown Detroit, yeah. So when I say stole, you know, for anybody to do anything for the black community in Detroit, it's stealing, whether someone gives it generously or not because it's just so screwed. But anyways, so we have this land. Why is Detroit so bad? The riots of the '60s knocked the center of Detroit city out and then the—all the line workers were laid off because of robotics and the automobile industry going through a slump. So all of the low-end line workers, who were predominantly black, were laid off, never to be rehired. So the city was destroyed by the riots, never to be rebuilt, and then the economy crashed.

So it's just on a continual downhill, but it's downhill to the point now where it's—as far as I'm concerned, and I could be wrong, but I don't think I am—the black community has slid all the way down to the bottom of the hill. So they know how to function down there. And they've got their churches. They've got their music. Unfortunately, they've got a lot of other things, negative as well as positive, like drugs, but they've been able to hold their own in poverty.

I think the upper-middle class is going to be hit by this economic crunch that's coming. It doesn't have the churches or the spirituality or the music or the food to back them up. They've built their upper-middle class neighborhoods with fences. They don't know who their neighbors are, you know, who their grandmother is. They don't talk to one another. The elders are not respected. So when they crash, they don't have anything to back them up, you know? In the black community, when it fell, it had, you know, Reverend Smith or Grandma Smith who, you know, took care of kids and knew how to do stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: This temple you're thinking about is in the downtown and it's more rooted in the real urban centers of Detroit.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it'll still be in there.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the original idea was to build it out of old car parts, correct?

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And whatever materials you could find there.

DAVID BEST: Well, we're—so now, genuinely talking and not talking to the—what is that called—a talking head. What's happened is, I thought you were going to be able to get car parts in Detroit. And, God, here goes this long way around the barn. My white mind thought, okay, we'll be able to get car parts. If we can't find them, we'll get

Ford Motor Company to give them to us.

Now, I didn't say this, but the reality is, I probably thought, well, I'm a white man. I can go in and tell them I work in the black community and they'll give me some parts. I mean, that's really where it comes down to. And the community that I was working with kind of went, we'll see. They didn't say that, but I know now that they said it. And Ford Motor Company and Chrysler Corporation and General Motors all just turned a blind ear or a deaf ear. They didn't want to do anything, have anything to do with it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Part of the argument is that the cars aren't even made in Detroit anymore. Is this true?

DAVID BEST: That's it, yeah. The cars aren't made in Detroit; the material is shipped from other places. One of the kids that I was working with at Oxbow's father had a research—a biochem lab at Berkeley, cancer research. And I was talking to her in front of her father and I said, you know, do you realize that your father is working on the frontier of research to find the cure for cancer? And she said, no, I didn't really. I said, well, this biochemistry industry has got this big company. And he said to me, he said, you know, I wish it was that easy and that romantic. He said, the people who invest in my company are looking for a dividend and that they don't care whether they are buying God damn car tires or, you know, trailer parks or cancer research; it's just an investment portfolio.

And the same thing for Ford Motor Company and General Motors and Chrysler is that the shareholders are going to say, what the hell are you doing giving this crazy man car parts when our economy is crashing and our dividends are coming up? So they're terrified because they've got the stockholders breathing down their neck wanting to know where their retirement money is going or their investments.

MIJA RIEDEL: They don't even see it as an intelligent PR move.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, they don't see it as an intelligent PR move. They just see it as, you know, you're giving away 1 percent of 1 percent of 1 percent of my stock dividend. I mean, that's how I see it. You know, and for them to even begin—

MIJA RIEDEL: It should be said that you've tried to talk with a number of—made hundreds of phone calls.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I've gone up to the—up, up into the real tall ladder of these corporations. The other thing is, if they—Christo did the fence [*Running Fence*.]—I just saw this program on Christo in France and when he first did one of his first big curtains. And the people, the government was terrified of backing it, right? And the same thing, if someone backed an inner-city project, so frivolous as to decorate a temple with car parts in light of crack neighborhoods and heroin addiction and homeless and people without food that they would just be—they would get so much flack. So, I mean, they're terrified. So they can't—even if they wanted to, I think they're afraid of doing it because of, you know, that someone is going to pressure them.

So I've come to the conclusion, great realization is that Burning Man has said they want to—they also—we have new board. We have a new board of director—or a new director [Melissa Alexander] of BRAF [Black Rock Arts Foundation], which is another one I get into the political implications of what happened with misappropriating funds. But, so she said, well, listen, we need to raise that budget. That's got to be more.

MIJA RIEDEL: For the Detroit temple.

DAVID BEST: Detroit project, yeah. So she wanted to go from 15,000 or 30,000 to, you know, 40 or 50 or 60 [thousand dollars] or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, do you think they would fund part of it and funds would come from additional sources?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, matching funds coming from Detroit and that they would hire a project manager, which, that all sounds good, but the thing is, the unique quality of what the project was is going back there and stealing a bunch of car parts, stealing a vacant lot, and doing it. You know, getting into this thing is like getting into a grant system; it's getting into who is going to approve it if you get so much money, then it's going to have to go to a committee. You know, I just want to go back there and do it, you know, and that's where I'm leaning, is just to say, forget it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's what you tried to do in San Rafael to some degree, yeah, with *The Chapel of the Laborer* [2005].

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I think, but I think Detroit I can have a better chance of winning.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why do you think so?

DAVID BEST: Well, because there's nobody there—because it's no one there to watch us, you know. I mean they haven't been to—all the way through. So they're not watching.

MIJA RIEDEL: You could get in and get out quickly enough.

DAVID BEST: I could get in and get out quickly. And then they maybe would try to tear it down, but, by the time they did that, it would bring them more grief than they would know. So I think the way to do it is just to go in and do a guerrilla. I didn't, I did not start this Detroit project, get involved in this Detroit project to make a living. You know, and if they're starting to do it and they're starting to jack the budget up like that, it certainly looks like I'm trying to make a living off of it, you know? If it doesn't cost anything, you know, if it's cheap, I don't have any slack or flack. But as soon as it's a \$60, \$70,000 budget—

MIJA RIEDEL: And you've always said that was an important part of public art to you in the first place, or the installations you were working on, is that they couldn't be valuable; they couldn't be made of anything precious and they couldn't be expensive. It would change the quality.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, because if they—and if you go back, it's not—God, where did I see, have I seen anything beautiful lately? Have you seen anything beautiful lately: art installations, sculpture?

MIJA RIEDEL: I have to think. I've been chained to the computer for the past few weeks. [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: I guess what I'm getting to is it doesn't have to be, it doesn't have to be good, you know? It doesn't have to look good. It's got to be something else.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you say a little bit more about that?

DAVID BEST: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I would go into the whole—especially with public stuff, with public things, with working with people. And this came out with the Exploratorium car. And I was working with developmentally challenged people with AIDS. And I realized that, in one year's time, probably at least three or four of them weren't going to be here. So my job as a—my responsibility or my passion or my job or my role working with somebody to facilitate their expression, their creative process, I—it's more important to play music and learn how to play later. So there's a lot of people that are never going to—aren't going to be here long enough to learn how to be, you know, Japanese tea potters or great painters or great sculptors or great musicians.

So does that exclude them from the creative process? Or do we have to change our way of looking at the manifestation of the creative process? And it's a tough one. I mean, it's really hard to work with people that do—you know, when you work with a whole lot of people and all of a sudden you've got something going this way and all of a sudden it just goes—[makes sound]—because somebody doesn't have any, quote, "skills" or artistic ability or whatever the hell it is that keeps people making that straight thing. And you have to be prepared for that tweak and be willing to accept it. [Telephone rings.] If you don't accept it, you're either going to be disappointed or you're going to exclude people.

Hello? Yeah. Yeah. I'm good. I'm doing an interview.

[END OF best07_2of4_MD_track01.]

DAVID BEST: I'm joining the new board.

MIJA RIEDEL: Joining the new—

DAVID BEST: Board—the different board.

MIJA RIEDEL: Of Burning Man, Black Rock?

DAVID BEST: I'm going to join the Black Rock. I'm trying to be on the Friends of the Black Rock Desert, which is a non-profit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Rather than Black Rock Art Foundation, both, instead of?

DAVID BEST: No, probably in addition, but I will get out of the Black Rock Foundation.

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll talk about that probably later.

DAVID BEST: But yeah, this is—they take care of—this keeps the Black Rock Desert open to everyone, not just Burning Man people. This is for deer hunters and for motorcycle people and for recreation purposes. It's just to

preserve it.

MIJA RIEDEL: I want to keep this on—we're right where we were before.

DAVID BEST: Okay, so the creative process, I think I've rambled. I'll try to get right back to it.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were talking about the tweaking point.

DAVID BEST: Okay, what happens is craftsmanship is what makes a young girl become bulimic, or a young kid steal a pair of tennis shoes or sports jacket off of someone's back and shoot them, or steal a BMW. It's what drives people to compulsive shopping, you know—craftsmanship and that standard of perfection at the expense of people and people's health.

MIJA RIEDEL: You're really talking about consumerism. Consumption.

DAVID BEST: Well, I'm talking about consumerism. I'm talking not just about consumerism, but about that unattainable thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Object of beauty.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that a lot of people are never going to be able to possess. I mean, I've talked to—it's always the damn paralyzed person in a wheelchair that when they say they want to do art, you ask them what kind of art they want to do and they want to do Renoir paintings or Rembrandt drawings. They don't want to just do art; they want to do good art. And their hands are tweaked and they can hardly move and they're sitting; they're trying to make perfect drawings instead of—I mean, I don't know if you've ever seen that, but I've seen it. You know, you'll see people that are disabled or handicapped who are trying to do something that's beyond them. And it's against the law to say that to anybody, but I know that's illegal to say that—you can't tell someone, no, you can't become a ballerina even though you're confined to a wheelchair. That's a little bit weird, but that's the truth. You know, you can be sued for doing—giving people the wrong advice.

But back to the whole idea of craftsmanship and of perfection—

MIJA RIEDEL: But not to say you can't become a dancer.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, you might not be able to dance like [Mikhail] Baryshnikov. So what I'm—I'm trying to think of where we went with this.

MIJA RIEDEL: It was the difference between a beautiful object and the process.

DAVID BEST: Beautiful object and the expression of human spirit and Detroit. It was about Detroit and it was about the building of a temple in Detroit.

Okay, so again, going to—if it becomes—your father was an architect. This is really rambling, Jesus, but, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs] It's okay, we'll get there.

DAVID BEST: There's something wrong with a building being designed—a welfare office in Sacramento—I think I've said this to you before.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not ringing a bell, but go ahead.

DAVID BEST: Okay, all right, a welfare office in Sacramento that costs \$5 million or \$10, \$15 million. That's not an expensive building anymore—\$30 million welfare office in Sacramento, right? And a woman walks in there asking for \$400 a month and is intimidated by a \$30 million building. The reason that—and it bothers me that the temples are never completed perfectly. I would like them to be completed perfectly.

But it would seem to me that the reason that they're successful is that they're imperfect. All right? And a person can go into an imperfect structure and feel perfect. They go in and they are feeling pretty shitty about themselves, and they go into a building that's going to make them feel even shittier. And that, I would sit and debate with anybody that wants to debate. I think going into a museum where there's work that costs millions of dollars doesn't make people feel better. I think there's something wrong with the value system of our culture.

I mean, I was at San Quentin [State Prison] lecturing. And a guy had lectured right before me showing Vincent Price at the Louvre. Okay, you know who Vincent Price was, the actor? Well, he happened to be a collector as well, and did a walking tour of the Louvre. And this is this—is this is a—you know. And then, it was my turn, and I showed them the—what do they call inmates now? They have a new word for them. They're prisoners; they're

inmates. I showed them Joan Brown's *Rat* [*Fur Rat*] and Arneson's Coca-Cola bottles, 7-Up bottles—I think they were 7-Up bottles, just funky stuff. And I said, you know, the frames on the paintings that you saw at the Louvre are worth a million dollars. I said the crap that you just saw is why you're here. I said, this want of value, I said—this is what has made. I said it's bullshit. You already know how to make art; and that's not art. That's commerce. And I said, you know, you need to—but anyway.

So that's my tirade about craftsmanship. You know how much I fight craftsmanship. And I'm a craftsman and I go into my studio and I draw. I mean, I work all night to get a drawing to work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly, very specific, very detailed.

DAVID BEST: I mean, I'm really after that. But when I'm working with somebody who is either just out of prison or mother just died or has AIDS or liver cancer, they don't have the luxury of spending the next 10 years developing a craft. And I don't see it as a—it's not my hobby to develop my craft. You know, I don't do it like some people talk—I mean, not to knock people tying fishhooks or something. I don't do it as a hobby; it's what I do. I have to sit there and draw and make it better. It's not because I'm, oh boy, I think I'm just going to go out on a sunny day and sketch. I have no choice; it's what I have to do to keep my work going.

But somebody that's got a whole bunch of shit on them and needs to get that out, they're not going to get it out if they go to a—if they have to sit, have to be hammered on how inadequate they are. Okay? So that's what craftsmanship to me, sometimes can—I mean, it's okay. But when it makes people feel inadequate, forget it. That was a long one.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so is there a way that that ties in specifically to the Detroit temple?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it does; it does. If we bring in \$100,000, if we bring in \$200,000, and we get a steel sculpture and we get it powder-coated—if Ford Motor Company says, sure, you can have our assembly-line powder coating, we'll powder-coat it bright red or blue, \$100,000 worth, millions of dollars worth of equipment to make this piece of sculpture perfect in an unperfect neighborhood that is battling to keep the crack dealers out, and all of a sudden it's got this incredible, beautiful, slick piece of sculpture dropped in—it's going to be weird, no? It's got to be in keeping with the economic level of the community. If it gets to the point where it's a million-dollar piece of sculpture, then they ought to sell that piece of sculpture and build a community center.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, because you've done a number of public installations, but they've all been guerilla-type installations.

DAVID BEST: Well, that's my children. That's my son. That's Kelly pushing me.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

DAVID BEST: Because he's one of the people that's going to inherit the earth, you know? He's one of our next generation. And he's saying, hey, this sucks.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you've used recycled materials from the start. I mean, it's been—

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but my kids—I'd say I owe a lot to Kelly on that. And not the fact that he's just called me, but I would say it comes a lot from Kelly and his morality thing that he puts on me. It's not fun. You know, he's always judging the hell out of me. But in a good way too, but he is very judgmental. And his judgment about that, you know, gives me some insight. He lives very modestly. He's not a flamboyant person. So I guess that's where that comes from, is that it shouldn't be flamboyant.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it always seems that the materials are either from—somehow related to—the place of the installation, or they've come from some sort of recycled dinosaur model kits or—I mean, from the beginning, all the Hayes Green temple pieces were recycled.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, Detroit, they took me down the street to this great guy's place. He's already done it. He's stolen it. He's stole three blocks and he's put in kind of a cross between Grandma Prisby and—I'd say his installations look kind of like a cross between Grandma Prisby or, I can't remember the guy's name at the Heidelberg Project [Tyree Guyton]—but a cross between Grandma Prisby and the Heidelberg Project. And he's got these whole stories that he's created about the history of steel. But steel in terms of the African steel—do you know about that stuff?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: Oh, God, that goes way back to the God of steel and they made steel to take people's strength away. So he's got this whole black African trip—old crazy man, but good. But his place is all funky, made out of stuff. And I think that's—is to make it out of what no one wants. I mean, car parts or—if it's valuable, I don't want

it. I mean, it's screwing us up. It's screwing the project up. It's all of a sudden now, oh, we can't do it, because steel is worth a lot of money. Well, we already knew steel was worth a lot of money. We knew everything was worth a lot of money. So we just have to find something that's not, that no one wants.

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes me think of something I was reading about Bruce Connor about the beauty of discarded America, or something about the beauty in what's discarded—finding that as being part of the process of making it work. So finding the beauty in the material, whatever it is, especially without any inherent [value].

DAVID BEST: We should go to the dump. I should take you to the dump with me, because—

MIJA RIEDEL: You go pretty much daily, right?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I do. And the dump has—it's like you can see. Like, I've been going to this particular dump for 20 years, really hanging a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Your studio is filled with things.

DAVID BEST: Well, I'm clearing it out. Well, I did a couple dump runs, getting better.

MIJA RIEDEL: Taking it back to the dump.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but I pick up more. [Riedel laughs.] But there's a new shark out there. It's a new dump shark. These guys come; they're dealers. So they hang around and wait for the stuff to get dropped and then they pick it up. But they're like seagulls waiting for the pile. And I'm much better in that; I'm much better in that because I'll take anything. [They laugh.] You know, so what I'm saying is that with that—even at the dump, in the hierarchy of the dump, there's things that are valuable. So it's there to find what no one wants is the coolest stuff. That's the challenge. As soon as it becomes collectible, then you don't want it, because it's stuff that's got to have no value to really be fun.

And it's a challenge to make something out of something that neutralizes, because I like using good stuff too. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: What are some of the best things you've found at the dump, David? What stands out?

DAVID BEST: The best things I have found at the dump—well, the one that got away was this pig, a stuffed pig; a really nice—

MIJA RIEDEL: You've got a water buffalo hanging, and a gazelle hanging in the barn? Those are from the dump, right? And a third something.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but the stuffed pig was pretty good. I mean, I've got a stuffed pig in the studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: How'd it get away?

DAVID BEST: One of the guys at the dump picked it up. It was an unborn. It had to be a fetus of an unborn pig.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh.

DAVID BEST: At first, everybody thought it was a Chihuahua or a Mexican hairless. But it was a pig. It was about this big. It was just hideous. But what of the best things that I've found at the dump?

MIJA RIEDEL: Even better than the dump, you might say, you've worked with roadkill.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but what's the best thing? I had a story once. I mean, this is really a genuine story. I had inherited—my first wife had inherited a ivory Byzantine crucifix that she gave me. Okay, so it was a genuine Byzantine crucifix. And I was working on a piece, and I had in one hand—and someone quoted me on this, and it's pretty funny because it was true—in one hand—it was on a stepladder—I was working on a piece. And I had a rat in one hand—

MIJA RIEDEL: A dead taxidermied rat?

DAVID BEST: No, not taxidermied, just a dead rat. And I had the crucifix in the other, right? And I was weighing—I was standing there and I was weighing—a dead rat is as valuable as a Byzantine crucifix. And I stuck both on the piece. And the Byzantine crucifix is probably worth, now—the way everything has gone crazy—probably 15 - \$20,000, maybe more, because it was a real one, real ivory. And the Oakland Museum [of California] got the piece for I think \$2,000. And I've been wanting to borrow it back to just take the crucifix out. [Riedel laughs.]

So that was probably one of the dumber things I've done, but good stuff? What do I find at the dump that's good? What have I found that's really knocked me out lately? Nothing, because I'm not shopping right now, because I'm not looking for stuff. But I can't think of anything that's really. I mean, car parts—I've gotten a lot of cool car parts. But they're not the best things in terms of materials, art supplies. It changes with what I need, you know? But I can't think of anything. I mean, there's been—the water buffalo was a pretty cool thing to find.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you'll just go collect things. I've often thought that you would go and collect things from the dump and you'll lay them on shelves in your studio and they just sort of sit there like a palate just waiting for what you need.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah, yeah, I'm just not ready to start doing that. That's what's—I mean, I went to the dump with Jack yesterday or Sunday. I mean, whatever, I go—yesterday was Sunday.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yesterday was Monday.

DAVID BEST: Monday—yeah, I didn't go to the dump yesterday. But I went Sunday. And I forget what I picked up. Oh, I got a car. What the hell did I get? I got a car—oh, I got a car and a snake, a plastic snake—a little car about that big and I got kind of an electronic snake. And but I'm just getting warmed up, [Riedel laughs] so I don't—but yeah, I don't know what I'm going to—the fish tanks are what I'm after.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's the next thing. I think for people to understand, too, the significance of the dump, it might be pointed out that for your 60th birthday, didn't your surprise party start at the dump?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, my surprise birthday party was at the dump with everybody with masks on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, and shorts and cowboy boots, yeah?

DAVID BEST: Shorts and cowboy boots, yeah. Yeah, so I like the dump. So I'll take you there next time, okay?

MIJA RIEDEL: All right, it's a deal. Moving on from *The Slaughter of the Lamb*, should we talk a little bit about the tables or moving to the big stream of plasticwork in the '80s?

DAVID BEST: No, the cancer series was—*The Slaughter of the Lamb*, it was back to—I just wanted to get—you know, I come away from this sometimes thinking of being overly humble or some bullshit like that. I'm not. I'm not trying to be Pollyanna, you know? I really mean that sometimes in my life I've thought I was really—I mean, God, you know, I mean, there were places. I mean, I've had to go back and apologize to people. I mean, I've had to go back and make a number of apologies.

So the thinking back to *The Slaughter of the Lamb*, the San Francisco Museum had the NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts] thing and I was given a grant. So that was one of my real crazy man times, and I thought, well, I was going to do—I'd do pigs. You know, I'd do the—Jesus casting the demons into the pigs, right? Well, my pigs looked like the worst [David] Gilhooly pigs you can imagine. And I don't—and they can be pretty bad, and mine looked 10 times worse than that. So I was like, this is not working. And I had this show I was going to do.

And so, I had gone to Arizona to do a workshop, and I guess I—I don't know how long I'd been there, two weeks or something. And when I came back, I went to my studio and I went to the delicatessen next to my studio and I had a cup of coffee, and I didn't say anything to the people that owned the delicatessen; I just walked in and walked out.

And that night, I had a dream about Josie who was the wife who owned the delicatessen. And I went in the next day. And it was an easy dream—she was Snow White or something, you know, a princess. You know, she was always in the shadow of her husband and you could see where that would have been—she would have been the princess in that situation. And my reason for the dream was that I forgot to say hello to them. So the next day I walked in and I said, gee, I'm sorry I didn't tell you guys I was away. And they said, well, we've been wondering. We were worried about you because we hadn't seen you for two weeks. I was at the studio all the time, so they thought maybe something happened. And I said, no, I was away doing the workshop in Arizona. So I went back to the studio.

And meanwhile, I find out that both Jim and Josie had cancer, right? And this is—he had prostate and she had lymph node. And this is before anybody talked about cancer, right? This was like—this was before—this was actually before the AIDS epidemic, I think. I mean, AIDS was coming. But no one was talking about cancer. It was like, you didn't talk about cancer. It was like you could catch it if you talked about it or something. I don't know. But anyway, I was back in the studio trying to do these God damn pigs that were just really looking bad and bad and bad, but also trying to—thinking about these people having cancer.

And I finally went to them and I said, you know, God, I'm trying to do this work. And I can't concentrate, and you guys have cancer and that seems weird to me. And they said, well—and Jim was from Butchertown. Do you know about Butchertown? Butchertown I don't even think exists anymore. If you went all the way out Third, by Evans, past Martin Luther King or Cesar Chavez, which was Army, out in that area was Butchertown. It used to be where the slaughterhouses were, slaughterhouses, meat packing industry. Swift was out there; all the renderers were out there; and it was called Butchertown. And people from Butchertown sounded like—it was Texas accent. I'm not really good.

Hey Dave, how are you? You know, kind of Jersey—you know, Jersey talk? Yeah, what are you doing? But it was Butchertown. And it was like an Irish, kind of an Irish thing. But you could check, if you went to your San Francisco historians, Butchertown had a type of accent. I mean, I heard a guy from Butchertown is a butcher here in Petaluma. And I said, where you from? I said, are you from Butchertown, and he was.

So anyway, Jim was from Butchertown. Hey Dave, well, why don't you go to the—why don't you come with us to the hospital? So I said, okay, so I would go with them to the hospital, see Josie who was doing chemo, and he had prostate cancer. And then I'd go back to the studio, because I was sharing a studio with Al Ferrell [ph]. I'd go back to the studio, get really drunk and crazy and wild and set fire to things and wreck stuff, and made the cancer series out of that. So what I was doing is intentionally beating myself up so that I could do the work.

And it was like—I didn't take notes when I went to the hospital. And then, they just started coming in the droves. The person next door in the next door studio, her brother died of bone cancer, leukemia, and had his leg cut off and lost his—you know, all kinds of stuff like that, and a woman whose daughter died. So I just—so that's how the cancer series came. So the catalyst for that was Jim and Josie, and that was the one I actually thought I was going to find the cure for cancer while I was drinking and smoking and setting fire to lacquer thinner in the studio in the process. So you can see what a pretty dumb guy I can be.

So but that one, Arneson had prostate cancer and we gave Arneson one of those pieces from that. That was—that's what eventually got him. But so that was a fun show. You know, I don't know what it looks like anymore.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you have any of those pieces around still?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, do I have any of the pieces? There's one in the living room. And I have—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it the white figure with the mask and the handle underneath?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So they were all clay, too?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and then I had—I don't think I even showed any in my last lecture. And I used to show them a lot. But I'm tempted to go that way now with the work. I may end up going back to the figurative stuff. We'll see.

MIJA RIEDEL: And for as wild and cathartic as that experience and process was, the work is incredibly refined and detailed and elegant.

DAVID BEST: A couple of them were. Damn it, the best one—the best one of the whole series—the, without a doubt, one of the best pieces I have ever done—is a portrait of a mother and child. And it was—I mean, it's a great story and it's a beautiful piece. I've been talking to all kinds of people about cancer, so I was just really pretty burned out by it. And Al and I were going—we used to go to a place in San Rafael near the studio called the Panama Hotel. And at that time, it was a funky kind of bar/hotel. And so we went in there late one night and they were just closing. And we were—you know, I think it was just beer and wine.

And this waitress comes up and she says, what do you guys do? And of course, Al loved being an artist. I mean, he's totally—I mean, he wears a beret practically. He's really—he says, oh, I'm an artist. He said what he was doing. She said, what do you do? I said, well, I'm kind of an artist too. She said, what do you do? I said, well, I'm working on a series about cancer. And she looked at me, and she said, my daughter just died of leukemia. And I said, you fucker. I mean, it was like, I mean, it was okay. What you have to understand is that she hit me right in the face. Here I was, I did not want to come across another person. And she, so she sat down and we proceeded to drink and talk and she was—she lived in a '62 Chevrolet Biscayne.

MIJA RIEDEL: She lived in it?

DAVID BEST: Yeah. She was a cocktail waitress—or waitress, not cocktails, but waitress at the Panama Hotel. She lived in a car. And her daughter died of leukemia. And just probably not to—she wasn't too far back removed, so I guess her and her daughter were living in the car. And she—when her daughter lost her hair, this woman—the little girl was afraid to go outside, because she felt bad. So her mother got some shoe polish and a

rag and polished her head like the Three Stooges would have done, you know? And said, well, what the fuck, honey, how does that look, and put her in front of the mirror. The little girl says, great, and went outside. So she was a tough.

And so I went back to the studio—I don't know—two o'clock in the morning, three o'clock in the morning, who knows? And then, had a piece I was working on. And I had a rat and a cat's head. And I set fire to this piece and I put the rat on it, poured a gallon of lacquer thinner on it. We had a big sandpit in the studio. And I just set fire to this piece. And it had pins—I put stainless steel rods in it. And it was a portrait of her and her daughter. And I didn't know her name, and her name was Kathryn, but her nickname was Kat. And I had done the portrait of her as a cat, not knowing her name. And this guy who had paid—this guy used to pay my studio rent. He was a collector. And his deal was he wanted a piece a year. And he took that piece. And it's one of the best pieces I've ever done. And I'm sure it's in the garage or in a garbage can.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really, do you still know him? Can you look him up?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I wouldn't even want to look him up. But yeah, he owns—what's the big country club where they do croquet?

MIJA RIEDEL: Meadowood?

DAVID BEST: Meadowood.

MIJA RIEDEL: He chose that piece? Interesting.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. I don't know why, because it was—but it was, without a doubt, one of the best pieces I've ever done. I mean, it's just so beautiful. I mean, it's decomposed rat, you know? But it's so pretty.

MIJA RIEDEL: Searing.

DAVID BEST: Scary?

MIJA RIEDEL: Searing.

DAVID BEST: Searing?

MIJA RIEDEL: Just cutting straight through.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that's not a word I'd use, because I don't work with words. But that would be a word you'd use.

MIJA RIEDEL: Maybe.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. It's just a beautiful piece. It so captured what leukemia had done to her daughter.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it wasn't—it defied all the material problems we were talking about earlier. There was nothing valuable or beautiful, aesthetically, in the piece.

DAVID BEST: No, no, no, it was not a pretty piece. So yeah, that was the cancer series. It was—I did—that was a successful chunk of work for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you show that with Smith Andersen or Paule Anglim.

DAVID BEST: Paule Anglim, yeah. Probably the worst experience I ever had in my life was being with Paule Anglim.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was so problematic about it?

DAVID BEST: We could not—we could not say hello to each other without the hair on the back of our necks going up. Just oil and water, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Completely different people.

DAVID BEST: Or oil and vinegar, oil and water—yeah, I mean, we just—to this day. And she couldn't stand me. I mean, she brought Robert Duncan to my studio. And all right, I was goofy and young and not knowing things, maybe, but she brought Robert Duncan to the studio. And if I had been prepped, you know, I would have had a bottle of whiskey for him, because he liked whiskey. But he came to see me; I didn't come to see him, you know? And she said it was the worst day of her life. And Duncan walked all around the studio with me, and looked at all the work and talked about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did she say why?

DAVID BEST: She said it was the worst day of her life. We just—she just—we just—like I said, if I said hello to her, she would take insult. If she said hello to me, I'd take insult. We just did not like each other.

MIJA RIEDEL: So that was a short-lived relationship.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, God, it was two years, I think. And it was the longest two years of my life. I mean, I just could not stand being with her. It was—she didn't like my work. She wanted my work because of SECA [Society for the Encouragement of Contemporary Art] and she wanted to be in the catalogue. And she wanted—

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, that was all around that SECA show.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and she wanted—she wanted me, because of some other reason than my work. She did not care about my work at all. And it was one of my biggest—it was the only career thing I ever did that was wrong is when I—and I don't mind even saying it on this, is I traded a friendship for advancement and it was the wrong thing to do. Because Paula Kirkeby had always believed in my work—and to this day believes in my work and is a friend - and I traded that for a different gallery. And it was like—it took me a long time to finally go to Paula physically and sit down and apologize for what I did, because I traded. It was tempting, you know? I mean, everybody was telling me. And everybody said, do it, do it, do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, that was the mainstream, downtown San Francisco gallery.

DAVID BEST: But it was my decision to do it, you know? And I didn't—I mean, it was terrible.

MIJA RIEDEL: And other than that, you've been—the galleries have been more on the outskirts, Inverness and Palo Alto, Mill Valley, Stinson Beach.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, no one—what the hell was—and this again, I think is with all of the people that you do, you know—like with—I was just somewhere when I was—again, back to this last workshop that I was doing, the guy—the director of the school said—and he's working with Deborah Butterfield and a number of different artists on that kind of scale. And you know, with Ann Hatch, you know—and he says, gee, how come no one's done a book on you, right? And you know, it's like trying to think of where that goes with what we were just talking about; for anybody out there, there is only so many.

Oh, you asked me about galleries and people representing me. You know, Wanda Hansen once—I think it was Wanda Hansen—was going to handle me or something. And I realized that no one could handle me, you know? And I mean, I did really well with Susan, I thought. But even so, between you and me, she would roll her eyes. And I didn't do anything, you know, and she would roll her eyes.

And I went over to Oxbow and the guy, Stephen Thomas—it was either Stephen Thomas or the other guy that's working with him; it was the other guy. He says, well, you know, when your name came up to do this, several people kind of went, he's kind of crazy. And for a moment, it hurt my feelings. For a moment, it hurt my feelings. And it's like I said to you about knowing that I'm a good teacher. I knew that I was going to kick their ass. I knew that there was no question. It's like I said. My brother and I both have a lot of energy. You're going to have to go into overdrive to catch up with me. And I just knocked them dead. I mean, I knocked them dead—that little girl with the razorblades and the little girl with her father dying, and the one with the—there's no one going to fucking dance with me like that. That's how I work.

And at the end, he said, we've never had anybody do like what you've done here. And it's not to brag—I know that. I know that. But that rolling eyes just kills me. It just devastates me. I can't—I don't think—I mean, at this point in my life, my heart and soul can not afford to have someone do that to me anymore. And it's like, I was just at the di Rosa Preserve for a fundraiser. And I just don't think I can get back.

I think, you know, I've discovered something else. I've discovered something else and I don't think I can do that to my soul anymore.

MIJA RIEDEL: What have you discovered?

DAVID BEST: That there's a whole world out there that wants art that doesn't have any money to buy it, you know? And that it doesn't have to do with the marketplace.

MIJA RIEDEL: It does remind me of coming full circle to your early experiences with Wally Hedrick and that whole alternative—very alternative—approach to reasons for making art, which had very little, if anything, to do with the marketplace at a certain point, and intentionally turning away from it to do something else.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and I mean, it's like, it doesn't—I mean, I love—no, it's not easy for me to say. It's not easy

for me to turn away from that. It's a conscious thing. I have to—you know—I mean, I would be a liar to say, you know—I just saw Mark di Suvero yesterday or the day before and he's one of the—no, I can't. It's just I can't do it. And I have to do art. I have to do art, so I have to find another place to do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary how successful you have been in finding—

DAVID BEST: In spite of myself.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, in finding alternative ways to do it.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean doing public art that doesn't go through all the normal channels that public art goes through. Teaching not in normal channels.

DAVID BEST: Not in an orthodox way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Installations in abnormal channels. I mean, you've really carved out a different, alternative way of exhibiting.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I wouldn't recommend going the way I've gone. But I would recommend it if you were going to—the person who asked me—and again, we're going back full circle, which is a good thing to end our day on. The person that asked me how to make it wasn't willing to give everything and more to his work. And if I had to have a closing statement, it would be: I'll be God damned if I'm going to cheat my work. I'm not going to cheat my work. And that was—and it's like, how do you make it? Shit, man, how you make it is by, you know, you give it everything. And you don't—I mean, what an honor. It's like coming up at the end of the day for you—I've said to you how honored I am that you—and feel so privileged that you're talking to me, how much you respect me—I appreciate that. And God, can you imagine what that feels like for me as an artist? I mean, you know, it's not about having a gallery. And you've worked in the gallery scene, so you know. I mean, Susan wasn't a bad person, but everyone I've ever worked with rolls their eyes. So if they're going to roll their eyes, I have to figure out where I can work where I can handle it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Some kind of an alternative gallery probably, yeah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, because I am emotionally frail, fragile—not as fragile as I used to be, but still.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you seem to have struck a balance between finding commissions—large-scale, public commissions that can pay bills—and then also helped fund large-scale public installations that you want to make that aren't necessarily well-funded.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, well, now, just to—my great discoveries I've made, which is almost too late—but it's not too late, because I'll pass the information on and it's much better. A major turning point in Manuel Neri's life and his work was when he cast his work in bronze; major turning point in Mark di Suvero's career was when he got a crane.

All right, the real pivotal points. A thing that almost was too late for me but not—I discovered two things. One is how to work with a snorkel lift, which is a man lift that you get up 40, 50 feet in the air. And the other thing was working with a structural engineer. Now, structural engineer, having your father being an architect, now architects today are not structural engineers. You know, you can go to arts and crafts and get an architect's certificate in two years.

MIJA RIEDEL: More theoretical.

DAVID BEST: Yes. And then, you design the drawing and then you take it to a structural engineer and they say this is what it's got to have inside. Soon as I found this structural engineer, it's just there's nothing—I'm not afraid of anything out there. Okay?

MIJA RIEDEL: How fantastic and it gives wings to your projects.

DAVID BEST: Huh?

MIJA RIEDEL: It gives wings to your project.

MS. BEST: Yes, I can approach the people in England and say, sure, you know, I'll do a—you want a 40-foot temple? You want an 80-foot temple? No problem.

MIJA RIEDEL: You can see it as the temples have developed, in the Nagasaki, the recent one, the *Temple of*

Forgiveness [2007]. Was that true for that incredible black and white temple, too? The *Temple of the Stars* [2004], I think that was. Had you already constructed—

DAVID BEST: They call that the Temple from Hell.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I can imagine why.

DAVID BEST: Well, you know, it was funny because we had like, at one point, I think I got a picture of it somewhere or it's in a video somewhere, it's like we're in a tent, right, and it's like the tents are setup kind of like maybe two-tenths of the size of this kitchen. And we've got four guys with scissors, okay. These are four big builder kind of guys and they're sitting in the storm, the dust storms outside, and I think I served tea. And they're sitting drinking tea, cutting paper with scissors.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: Right, these are, you know, with nail belts on, callused hands, you know. And so that was, I mean, that was cute. I loved that, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs]—that's funny.

DAVID BEST: I mean, here were these guys expecting to be building this God damn temple and I have them cutting pieces of paper out. Yes, that has structural engineer, too. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. When did the structural engineer arrive on the scene? Was it from the start with Burning Man?

DAVID BEST: Well, no. I have them for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: Yes. Well, as soon as I get my drawings—as soon as I get a concept, then I—

MIJA RIEDEL: So starting around 2000, there really wasn't a need for a structural engineer before that.

DAVID BEST: Oh, no, before that. No, even—oh, I thought you meant when do I do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: Oh, that one was 2000, I think. The first one I didn't have a structural engineer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: That was Jack [Haye]. My friend, Jack.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, yes, right.

DAVID BEST: And we just built it. And then the second one we didn't have a structural engineer and then the third one we had a structural engineer. I think the second one might have had a structural engineer just on the second one but he didn't do any real calcs. But the third one—but I've actually got into calcs with this structural engineers where they actually do, you know, wind load and all this real stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that *Temple of the Stars*, that was the incredibly ornate one that went on for a quarter of a mile.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: With that one you can see something significant had changed. But even the black and white paper one was increasingly elaborate.

DAVID BEST: Yes, we had lost it. I think if you were to look at this last one, I just saw some pictures of it somewhere, somebody had some pictures.

MIJA RIEDEL: I was looking at some last night, *Forgiveness*.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: But, you know, it had—see, I ran out of material on that. See, I had another weeks' worth of work to

do on it but we didn't have the material budget so I just—we ran up against the—we didn't have enough material to finish it the way I wanted. But I would have had it—but then again, that's what I'm saying, I'm always want to make a—as soon as I look at it all, I just want to make them—that's why it's good to burn them. You know, or else I'd be wanting them. See, it's going to be tough to do a permanent building, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that would be in England or this one we don't know where yet?

DAVID BEST: No, no, the one in England is just for—

MIJA RIEDEL: For a concert.

DAVID BEST: —for Glastonbury or something. It's a concert that 100,000 people go to it and they sell out. I guess they sell out as soon as the tickets go online.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because you've never done a temple that was permanent; that's always been part of the point, is that they aren't permanent.

DAVID BEST: Yes, right. Yes, so I don't know. I mean, I was talking with, you know, off the record, with Eleanor Coppola and, you know, she had lost her son. And she had done a piece addressing parents losing their children, in Oakland. Something to do with hay bales and salt. I haven't seen it but she came to the lecture and then she came by and talked to me again and I'm going to meet her in November. We're talking about doing something—I told her I'd like to do something in Cleveland, Ohio or, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why?

DAVID BEST: Well, because I think doing it in Taos, New Mexico, you know, or Sedona, Arizona or the Keys in Florida, you know, would be—or Storm King, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: Or Dia Foundation. Those are not places where people are facing alcoholism and drug addiction and suicide, you know. Those are all power points in the spiritual power frame of the greater of the world, you know. Going to Machu Picchu to build something, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Been done. [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: Yes, and, you know, if you've seen it—have you seen Machu Picchu?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: And you've seen what they have. They have a four-star hotel there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, I was there a long time ago.

DAVID BEST: Okay. Oh, so you've actually seen—

MIJA RIEDEL: Before the four-star.

DAVID BEST: Yes, you've seen Machu Picchu.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: Yes, but now there's a four star hotel.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. That is unfortunate.

DAVID BEST: For the spiritual people that go there to get the crystals. They bring their crystals to get they're—to sharpen their crystals. Sorry, I don't mean to knock Machu Picchu, but, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. So it goes back to why you want a temple in Detroit. The same idea.

DAVID BEST: Yes, it's to go where people need it, you know, or where, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Which had to do with the San Rafael temple, too, which I—

DAVID BEST: Yes and it's the throw away-thing. It's again, you know, working with material—now we're going to a whole philosophy about junk and stuff, but we're working with a material that no one wants. There's also communities that no one wants. You know, no one cares about, you know, or the—I mean, I can't imagine—after

being in Detroit, I can't imagine it. Although, I loved—I loved the community that I was working in in Detroit because they were beautiful. You know, they were cool. But Detroit itself is not a really cool place so I can't imagine Cleveland, Ohio being much better, you know. But maybe it is. I mean, you know, or where those places —

MIJA RIEDEL: And what would be the point of a permanent temple?

DAVID BEST: I don't know. I don't know. I don't know if it'd work, you know. I mean, that's, you know, I haven't said yes to anything. But I don't know if a permanent temple would work. You know, it might be, you know—I know the steel piece I made stunk, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: The one that you trailed fire toward—the *Temple of Steel*. Yes, you were doing that in 2005.

DAVID BEST: Yes, it stunk. It didn't hold up at all and I think the magic of the stuff is that it disappears. So I don't know. I don't know what—I mean, the only point would be—it might be wrong. It might just be wrong, you know. It might just be wrong to do it, you know, because it, you know—I mean, you think it is.

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't know. I'm just thinking out loud and I'm thinking about your personal pieces that I've seen that are permanent, the clay pieces, the [extruded] plastic, the wood, and then I'm thinking about the temples and how and why they're different.

DAVID BEST: Yes, there's a—I think it's going to be real tough to do it. I—I—you know, I'm not 100 percent sure. We'll see out in Detroit. Now, if Detroit is made with junk, that could work, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: But—

MIJA RIEDEL: Because Detroit would be semi-permanent, you know.

DAVID BEST: Yes. I mean, it's like Maya Lin. Is it Maya Lin—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: —who did the Vietnam Memorial. She just did another piece somewhere. She can never do it again. You know, she's stuck. I mean, she can never top that, you know. She couldn't, you know, and I can't do that kind of work. You know, I'm not that kind of artist, you know. I don't think I—as I draw, I am not that—I've said you know many times so I think it's almost due to the end of the day. I'm not an architect. You know, I'm struggling with that now because of trying to draw this thing for—I mean, I'm not struggling with the thing for England because that's a simple thing. Doing the thing for Detroit—well, not Detroit but for Chicago and Burning Man, I'm having to really go into overdrive to try to figure out where in the hell I'm going to go with this, especially with Burning Man. I mean, I can kind of—Chicago I've got pretty much an easy thing, but to come up with an architectural thing that's stunning, I don't know how to do it. I mean, you look at a really good architects so you have a vocabulary. I don't have a vocabulary as an architect so I don't—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, maybe we should end this here for the day, teetering on the edge. [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: Teetering. That's it. Thanks a hell of a lot. [Riedel laughs.] You started off—I thought we were going to end on a good thing. [Riedel laughs.] But now we're on the edge.

MIJA RIEDEL: Teetering on the edge. [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: That's all right. Sometimes you have to do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs]—to be continued.

[END OF best07_2of4_MD_track03.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing David Best at the artist's home and studio in Petaluma, California, on December 6, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number three.

We've had a little break since we were last here.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so what we were just talking about was where I'm going right now or what I'm doing, you know, for this year. So I had just said to you that I wasn't going to do Burning Man and then, on top of that, we were talking about other stuff.

So what had happened is Detroit—I got fired.

MIJA RIEDEL: You got fired from the Detroit project?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that was very interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: That is interesting.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I got fired from the Detroit project. Someone—if you can imagine that this person—a person phoned me and said, hi, my name is Warrior Girl, and I'm moving back into the United States from New Zealand and I'm going to be taking on working on the Detroit project, and I'd like you to call me and tell me about your ideas, I'd like to talk with you about it. Well, I never called back because, you know, one phone call, I didn't make the phone call.

So a month later, I get the email. They send this message out that—they described the Detroit project and they said, we have been working with this well-known artist but he's no longer working on the project, and we're going to do this other thing; you know, we're going to do this other thing, you know, we're applying—we're going to solicit people to apply for—to do the design. So we kind of looked at it, Burning Man, the office looked at it because we'd—

MIJA RIEDEL: So this came to into Black Rock.

DAVID BEST: Became—yeah, so, and we're giving them a grant, so we kind of called them up. I said, hey listen, I think you guys just fired me. And the person on the other end of the phone said, no, it looks like you fired us. And I said, what are you talking about, and he said, well, we haven't heard from you and I said, well, I've got a telephone and email. So it was—it got into this—a little bit of electronic drama, email, figuring out, and no one was being straight with what was going on, and then one of the people that supposedly is the leader said, well, I just wanted to stir everybody up and I thought this would get people interested in participating again. And I thought, well, that's weird; I said, but you're still not addressing why I was not in the thing. He said, oh no, we want you to do the project, we want you on the project; you're the project, don't worry, you know. So we went back to the office and we spent a day developing what we really require. See, because we stopped the project because they didn't do anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: And [to be clear], this is the project that you were going to start working with car parts—

DAVID BEST: Car parts in Detroit.

MIJA RIEDEL: And then maybe you were going—and build a temple for—

DAVID BEST: Build a temple, and working with the inner-city—

MIJA RIEDEL: In the local community.

DAVID BEST: Local community.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was local materials that were found there.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and what happened is that the reason the project got kind of stopped is that the steel industry—and this is good for history; 20 years from now, 30 years from now, we'll figure out where in the hell we are, as China has taken over the industry. And so all the steel, all the scrap steel, is being shipped to China, so the scrap industry is not selling or giving any scrap to anybody in America, so—

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's what you were hoping to use for the temple.

DAVID BEST: That's what we were hoping, is to buy scrap or get scrap.

So then we stopped the project until they could—we could figure out where we were going with it. So I don't know exactly why they did this—nix this confusing letter because no one wanted to be straight with it; you know, we couldn't find out what it meant.

So anyway, we told them they couldn't get a grant, they'd have to reapply for a grant if they wanted—the grant was based on me doing the project, and if they wanted to start another project, then they'd have to reapply.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, because they'd already gotten a grant from the Black Rock Foundation.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, they got a grant. Yeah, so we've raised—we've already raised \$26,000 for the project.

So anyway, so where the project now stands is that we're sending them a list of what we want them to do, requirements; they need to develop—they need to identify who their players are, give them titles, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right, who's in charge?

DAVID BEST: I'm a secretary; I'm the coordinator; I'm going to be working with David directly.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this is a community group in Detroit?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it's a community—yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And is it an arts group or is it a community—

DAVID BEST: No, it's just a loose group that—they formed a non-profit. They were—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you know what they called themselves?

DAVID BEST: Spark.

MIJA RIEDEL: Spark?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: So, they started—they were Burners, and then they wanted to start organizing, and when they started working with me, then they decided just to become a nonprofit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, so this is all coming out of Burning Man?

DAVID BEST: This is all coming out of Burning Man and out of the original Detroit project of getting drunk in a bar and telling everybody, let's go steal some land.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so it's still going forward, but one of the things that was—and again, probably in this—if somebody's going to spend this time to listen to all these tapes or try to figure out who in the hell I am, one of the things that we discovered. I think it was, you know, we've always joked about me not having a good memory or not being—I'm a slow learner—so, here was Detroit, the scrap industry was closed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: Right? Not happening. Well, it was mostly more than that, when you start to really sit down and think over a cup of tea. It was inappropriate to go—if Ford Motor Company would have given me scrap, you know, that would have been in the face of the black community.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hm, right.

DAVID BEST: Sure, they give a white man scrap steel; we can't even get a job. Right? You know, there's people on the street in inner city Detroit picking up scrap steel trying to sell it to pay for rent, you know, or crack. And here I am trying to use that as a material. And it's inappropriate, you know, you can't—and this came out of the Hayes Green project, it came out of the San Rafael project, you can't—for me, this is only for me, this is—I'll put a disclaimer, this is not anybody else's opinion but mine—to build an inner city project, you can't spend money on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you've talked about that in relationship to—

DAVID BEST: Because it's inappropriate, you know, the people—if you're going to spend money on something, then you spend money on a school or food or a lunch program or a clinic, but you don't spend it on a piece of sculpture.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: I mean, it's—I just—I feel really strongly that it can't—it's like Henry Moore or a Calder or a Oldenburg piece of sculpture that cost a half a million dollars, a million dollars in a community, in a time like this where the economy is so bad. It seems insensitive. And that's not to say you can't—one needs a budget. I mean, I have to have a budget to do structural things, but the actual material itself should not be—I don't think it should be—of value.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's been true for all your temples. It's been scrap material gathered from someplace, recycled material, absolutely, and the *Chapel of the Laborer* in San Rafael, the Hayes Green project, a lot of that recycled material.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so it's got to be cheap. Not that—I mean I've—over the years, I mean, there's a piece in the Oakland Museum, I think I told you about that one, there's a piece in the Oakland museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, with the crucifix—

DAVID BEST: That has the crucifix in it, you know and it's like, the devaluing—

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was a very expensive crucifix and artifact from—where was it from?

DAVID BEST: It was—where was it found?

MIJA RIEDEL: [That's what I'm asking].

DAVID BEST: Oh, it was inherited, it was an inherited gift.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was—but where—

DAVID BEST: It's a Byzantine ivory crucifix from France.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you put it into one of your works of art?

DAVID BEST: —put it into one of my pieces, next to a rat.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs]—exactly, well, a dead rat, a real rat.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but so—so, now that we're going with the Detroit thing is to do tires.

MIJA RIEDEL: That makes sense.

DAVID BEST: And this, I guess, it would be interesting to see this because we were talking about what doesn't someone want, right, use the material that someone doesn't want. And I mean, I am not—I don't know how to say this, and if it gets—if it doesn't work in here, if it sounds illegal, we shouldn't put it in, but—what we should make the temple out of in Detroit is black people, because that's what Detroit doesn't want. They don't want the people there, they don't—and I mean, that sounds like a weird thing to say.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, who do you mean by they?

DAVID BEST: This is the organization, the company—the government, you know, the black community has pretty much been dumped, you know, in the Detroit industry and the automobile industry. They're the one's—you know, you don't see a lot of money being poured back into—

MIJA RIEDEL: Into downtown Detroit.

DAVID BEST: —into the black community anywhere in America. So, I mean, we have been saying, we could just have a thousand people stand like acrobats and make a temple out of the people in the community, you know, but I mean that sounds—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, was Spark—

DAVID BEST: I'm not going to say that because it sounds bad, but it is, the reality is that no one wants.

MIJA RIEDEL: Nobody's paying attention. Nobody's investing in that community.

DAVID BEST: Nobody's paying attention. Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And your work is often about bringing attention to communities or places which don't get much attention.

DAVID BEST: Right, so we'll see what happens—right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that was one—the temple you were talking about building with Gavin Newsom in San Francisco for a while.

DAVID BEST: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: It—what was the name of it where you two were talking—

DAVID BEST: Hayes Green? Hayes—

MIJA RIEDEL: No, the one in the—

DAVID BEST: Hunter's Point.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

DAVID BEST: Hunter's Point.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's the same idea of bringing a temple to a part of the city which doesn't get a lot of good press, has a lot of difficulties, a lot of drug traffic, a lot of violence, and bringing a temple there, not made out of precious materials, but engaging the community as a way of establishing a non-denominational secular space.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, good, you should put that one together.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: That was great.

Yeah, so anyway, that's what that's doing. So, I'm back on with Detroit—I'm drawing tires.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's also interesting. It seems to me that that's often the way your projects evolve. You start off with an idea but then the process evolves. It's very much process oriented. So, you start with one idea but that may change as you work through the projects. That seems characteristic of your work. This one just seems to be going through more incarnations, perhaps, than others.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I'm trying to think.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems like there's—

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it is—it's about the same. Everything, you know, I can't—I mean it's over the years have been—you know, we've talked about this throughout the thing, you know, there is a—we'd be foolish not to or we'd be ignoring the elephant in the room to not acknowledge that I'm certainly an odd person, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll, you've chosen a very different route.

DAVID BEST: So, I'm an odd—I'm putting it more politely than a lot of other people would, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: But I'm not Orthodox; I'm crazy, I have a reputation for being crazy. I have a reputation for being a wild man or whatever, all those things. I can be very deliberate, very adult, you know. I can follow orders, you know, I was in the army. I did get an honorable discharge. I didn't enjoy the army, but I mean, I have, actually have a driver's license. I have automobile insurance, I mean all the things—

MIJA RIEDEL: You work with an engineer, your temples stand up. They don't collapse.

DAVID BEST: But I am capable of being an adult, but I also don't want to let that get in the way of my creativity, you know. So, I can go—when I have the option of letting a project or a piece of art go haywire, I let it go haywire. If I have to keep it online, if it has to be an adult thing, then I won't allow that craziness to happen, but as long as it's in a process—in a project that I own, I can afford it to get—wobble down the road. It doesn't have to go straight and direct.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what's the attraction in that?

DAVID BEST: Well, there's always this—there's always something nice that happens out of an accident, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. You know, what you can't predict. I mean, it's like—I was working, like when I work with a lot of people, I mean there's people that have no quote, "skills" whatsoever, you know, and I'm skill-challenged, I'm educationally challenged. I know too much. I know how to do things too well.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you've had a facility with materials—that's always been easy.

DAVID BEST: And I have a facility, and there's people that don't have that, and wow, what they can make, that there's no way in hell I could ever—I mean, thinking it's wrong, but to see somebody that can throw something together crooked, that's pretty neat, you know? So, the accident has that quality to it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you figure that out early on?

DAVID BEST: Did I figure that out early on?

MIJA RIEDEL: Or do you remember when you first figured that out?

DAVID BEST: I'm trying to think if—I have to—there's a long pause with that question because it takes me all the way back to making an automobile out of rusty nails and nuts and bolts and a wire wheel from a tricycle with no tire on it. And I dug kind of a hole in the ground, and this is appropriate to going to Africa, I guess, I dug kind of a hole in the ground that served as the interior of the car, and then I made a dashboard out of the bank of the dirt, and stuck all these things in it, you know, the steering wheel and the nails and the bolts and that was my dashboard, and the steering wheel. And the shift lever was a, who knows, a railroad spike or whatever I found as a little kid. I mean, I was very small, I know I was very small when I did it. And I built this whole interior of a car underground

And so, I did that, maybe I was nine years old, nine, 10 years old. So, that was when I—that was junk or found object stuff, and then going to, like I think I said to you, there was one—it was *Art in America* back in those days—there was an article on American painters and it had Sam Francis and I think Jackson Pollock and maybe de Kooning or Motherwell, I can't remember, but Jackson Pollock. And I mean that—we could look at the date on when that came out, but I was probably 13—or younger than—maybe 13. And looking at Jackson Pollock or Dubuffet, you know, those people were never—those were not—they were accidents. You know, I mean Jackson Pollock's painting was, it was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: So, I mean I never think deliberately that we—I mean, the most deliberate I've ever gotten to approaching that is our discussion about it. You know, you identifying that, oh, yeah, you seem to always let your projects go wobble down the road. I do that but I don't—I wasn't aware, I'm not conscious of it. It's not like my technique, you know, like when I start a project and say, okay, now we're going to let the city of San Rafael cause us some trouble or we're going to let the material dry up; we're not going to have it. I don't deliberately go out of my way to shoot myself in the foot, but when I get shot in the foot, I usually enjoy it.

MIJA RIEDEL: [They laugh.] That's great, yeah.

DAVID BEST: So, that was a long way around that one.

MIJA RIEDEL: Not that long, that actually, makes a lot of sense. Because that goes way back. It goes way back.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it does.

MIJA RIEDEL: There is a looseness that seems to come with all of your projects and it seems like the downside of that is something like Detroit where the looseness is not always working in favor of the project, but oftentimes, or more often, it seems like looseness really does benefit the project.

DAVID BEST: Well, it's going to open up that because it was too rigid, you know, it was way too rigid. I mean, it's going to be, it's going to be a real challenge. I mean, it's actually fun now—I'll show you the drawings because I was—I'm having—kind of went through a drawing circle last night working and it went from one type of drawing to a Chester Arnold drawing, which I really laughed at the, you know, and I thought—

MIJA RIEDEL: The rubbish or the junk of Chester Arnold?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I thought maybe I'm getting—and I looked at the drawing style, and I thought—well, maybe I'm getting—you know, I'm kind of going through this thing about—because I've changed my diet and not smoking, I'm kind of—you know, and I have a grandson and I—I'm thinking, maybe I'm getting older, my drawing style's getting sloppy. You know, God damn it, I don't want that to happen. But it isn't, it's just—I was just enjoying a looser style of drawing that I don't usually possess, so that was—it was kind of fun, so I'll have to show you that.

But, so I've got Detroit, then this—these are all kind of Detroit, everything has kind of evolved out of, you know, which we're going to around to, Burning Man, but there's a concert—a rock concert—all the rock concerts now are becoming green. Everybody's, everywhere you go, people are becoming conscious of green, so the rock concert promoters are trying to be as green as they can: recycle plastic bottles, educate the community, so this one particular group of musicians—there's a band that they've formed their own non-profit organization and

they're educating the community on recycle and reuse.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this—who is this?

DAVID BEST: It's called String Cheese—String Cheese Incident, and they were like a jam band. They've been together for about 14 years and now they've started this—and they have kind of like a Grateful Dead kind of following, you know, they're a loose jam band, but really nice kids. And anyway, they are working with several different promoters on these concerts. They're going to tour, and they're—what I'm designing for them is a series of pyramids that will be made out of plastic bottles, either Odwalla—it's either Odwalla or another drink like that is going to be their sponsor, so they're going to supply them. And behind the curtain, Odwalla belongs to Coca-Cola, so all these—these are all big corporate people behind it, so they're going to—if they fund it, then they'll sponsor the construction of it and setting up of it and all these venues. And it's kind of for them to look like they're being green and I think it's pretty real.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you're thinking about doing this this year as opposed to Burning Man, doing something different? This would be sort of an alternative to that?

DAVID BEST: Well, no, I won't travel with this thing at all. I'll do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: You designed them?

DAVID BEST: I've designed it. I've already given them an initial budget and I'll bring in some of the temple crew on it, probably about seven or eight people to work on it, and they'll fabricate it. But on—so that's just a small, that's a couple months; it's like a three-month project. And it's actually—

MIJA RIEDEL: Will you build the pyramids here and then ship them up there?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah, they'll have to be shipped. And they have to be—they're 60 feet tall, so they have to be designed—so there's four of them, so they have to be designed so that they can be broken down and transported in trucks. And that's—

MIJA RIEDEL: And you won't go to install them?

DAVID BEST: No, I may go on one install just because the client would like to see the artist with the beret doing something, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: But basically, no, I'm not going to—I don't see going on a lot of them. And then there's the—I don't know what this—how real this one is either. There's another concert in England. There's the—Glastonbury is the one that I talked to you about, Glastonbury—and that's been a long-going concert. And it has about 300,000 people. And the people that—apparently someone that started, not the founder, but someone who's been running Glastonbury is now starting another one in Kent, and so he's talking about commissioning me to do a temple, a stage, the whole venue. So, they—if they do that, they want an exclusive.

MIJA RIEDEL: What does that mean?

DAVID BEST: That means that I can't do another stage for another—

MIJA RIEDEL: Organization?

DAVID BEST: Organization.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ever?

DAVID BEST: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Just in England, or for?

DAVID BEST: Just for England, probably for England, or for, you know—I don't know how long they want it. You know, they might want an exclusive for two years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because you have the private project in Chicago which is a stage?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that wouldn't touch that and it wouldn't touch Burning Man, no. It's just they—I think they would want me not to, let's say, if I did the Kent one, they don't want—they want to have me for the next. They don't want me to go and do something for someone else in England, you know, because they want to have—

MIJA RIEDEL: So that they have the option?

DAVID BEST: They want to be the ones. So, we'll see, I mean they're talking—they thought, I mean this is all such an interesting new cycle for me, I mean, I don't know how. There was—they think \$1 million is a big budget. And, you know, I mean I don't how to say this and make it sound all right, but that's not a lot of money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Compared with other projects you've worked on, other commissions.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I know from other projects, yeah, that to do something like this is a lot more money than what they're expecting. I mean, they're—especially if they have a concert that gets 300,000 people and it's for profit, you know, they've got to figure that out. I mean, Burning Man never is for profit, so it's, you know, whatever I build it in the desert; it's not based on a monetary exchange, but doing a commercial gig like this. I mean, it's—even with me cutting a low commission for myself, which I would, I'm not taking a big commission—it still has to be a lot of money to do this.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, because your entire crew gets compensated.

DAVID BEST: Crew, there's just going to be like 25, 30 people going to England to build it. So, there's—they have to pay for that and the material. It's—

MIJA RIEDEL: And it wouldn't be recycled material in this case like the Odwalla bottles?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it would be recycled, but I have to find it. I mean, it's a little bit hard.

MIJA RIEDEL: And is it material that you'd find in the States and have shipped to England or are you going to have to go to England?

DAVID BEST: No, I'm going to find it in England, or Finland, or the former Soviet Union.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where do you even start looking, David?

DAVID BEST: You'd start probably with Google—[they laugh].

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you Google, "junk?"

DAVID BEST: God, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Catch junk?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, you could—yeah that's funny, it's like thinking of this going into, they don't, it's just—it's almost like I don't mean to just make this all into a conversation because I mean, I know people want to—I mean, I'm respecting this, but it's funny, you know, thinking about this, what we're doing, this archive, and I mean, there's a tremendous value in saving information for future generations, but I have to laugh thinking that here we are, going to put this into some situation where it's like a time capsule, where maybe 30 years from now, someone's going to look at this and they're going to say, what the hell was Google?

I mean, it's like, I mean I'm laughing that here, we're talking about art or you think of—I just was reading a—I'm trying to think of the artist's name, Robert Morris. I was reading a thing, Robert Morris was talking about public art and it was such an adult, serious paragraph that he had written. And I thought—here we are talking about coffee and rats, you know, Google. But that's—20 years from now that will be what we were talking about, how things were accomplished. And you were asking me how I'm going to find out my resources. Well, now we have a new system instead of driving around in the truck looking for dumpsters, I can go, I can find somebody that will call Google or link up Google and I can search for wood manufacturers and Soviet Union or Finland or England, and see what kind of products they make and then see what kind of scrap they have. So, that will be how I'll do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's really interesting because one of the things that we were going to talk about later was how, if and how, technology has impacted your work. And I've been thinking about all the laser-cut stencils that you used and the huge black and white prints that went into the Temple of Honor and your collage work.

DAVID BEST: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: But Google is making it possible for you to do international projects.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it is. Yeah, and it does. I mean, I like on the Chicago project—we'll get on to that later—but in the Chicago project I spent—see, there's this big joke that I don't do computers or I don't return phone calls or I don't do this or that. I mean, I was—I sat in the house for two months on the computer every day.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, now the cat's out of the bag, David. Now I expect you to return my emails—[laughs].

DAVID BEST: But I was on the computer for two months and, I mean, every morning I'd have to ask Maggie how to turn it on again, for two months. But I went—I mean, I was searching and communicating with these companies about plastic, but after the two months then I forgot it, but I will turn it on again. I mean, now we're—I'm getting much—God, it's coming, it's coming. I mean, I guess we're talking about technology coming into our lives now. Is that what the new subject on our theme here?

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure, let's talk about it while we're here.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, okay. The computer programs that can generate—for C and C routers, you know, I can draw. I can then transfer that to a program and have it cut out.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, you're talking about drawing for?

DAVID BEST: Drawing for a pattern, for—let's say for instance, for temples, or for ornate artwork—looking, searching for materials. I mean, I've—I can actually go online and check manufacturers and see what kind of waste product they have, you know, anywhere in the world. But the computer, I can do it, I can—someone was just at my house last night or yesterday, who's with—it's this computer company in San Rafael. Data—

MIJA RIEDEL: Data Tech? No.

DAVID BEST: No, who does—it's the biggest, one of the big ones.

MIJA RIEDEL: Intel?

DAVID BEST: Not Intel.

MIJA RIEDEL: I know what you mean, I can see the building but I can't—the Sen, Sen something? I don't remember.

DAVID BEST: Anyway, these—he does, is a European, works in Germany with universities supplying computers and programs and they do AutoCAD.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: So, they do all that. So their programs, they have an AutoCAD program that they would apply for me that they use for architects. So, I could do a line drawing. I can a drawing and have a 3-D rendering of what I do. But with all that said, he went into my studio and looked at my drawings and says, well what program did you use to do these? And I say, well, I did it with a pencil. Oh, so you didn't do a computer with this? I said, no. So, I still—I find that I can draw. If I were to show you my drawing for the Detroit thing that I'm working on right now, I'm drawing tires. And it's like I have to learn to—like I've said, about taking stuff into the bathtub with me, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. We should tell that story here because we haven't talked about it on the disc.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, when I'm working with something, I oftentimes will take it into the bathtub with me because that's where—I take a bath to relax. And I'll bring in a fender of a car or a piece of wood or, it doesn't matter, whatever I'm working on, then I bring it on into the bath. And if it's something that can go into the bath, then it floats in the bath, and that way I—but it's about—the thing for me is—the reason is it's like—it's important to love—for me, it's important for me to love what I'm working with, you know, to embrace it.

MIJA RIEDEL: The material itself, yes?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and like with the tires, you know, if I had a computer program, it wouldn't give me—it would solve the things that I need to struggle with. It would wipe—it would eliminate that struggle.

MIJA RIEDEL: Can you give me an example? Something you're working on right now maybe?

DAVID BEST: Yeah—well, if I just had the perfect tire, you know, I have to learn how to draw the tire because I have to—I want to be familiar with it, I want to know which ones I like. By drawing it, you know, that line, that electric current that goes from my hand into my brain and into my being, records which ones I enjoy, not unlike a computer.

So, if I didn't struggle, you know, it's like I'm struggling with trying to figure out how in the hell to draw a tire—where the heck is that? I just had them here. Yeah, I said that, it made more sense when I said it, now I'm kind of forgetting how to get back to it. I said, if I had a computer it would eliminate that struggle.

MIJA RIEDEL: The struggle that's so important.

DAVID BEST: And we talked about—and it's like with the idea of doing a project and having it, going down a crooked road.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: A straight project doesn't allow for any curves; a perfect program, a computer program that has the tire doesn't allow for that struggle, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Got it.

DAVID BEST: And in that—that's a learning process. And if you don't—if you eliminate that learning process, it's a shortcut.

MIJA RIEDEL: You also—it sounds like you're figuring things out during the process.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, you figure it out and you feel it. I just saw Fisher Price, the toy manufacturer, now has a, what is it called? I forget what the hell it's called, but you can find it on television, it's the art program for Christmas, and it's like a child, a kid's photo shop. And it shows them—you see water color, you know, they push a button and they're doing water color. And it's like Photo Shop.

I mean, Photo Shop can—you can use, you've got airbrush, you've got water color, you know, but there's the mistake, you know, it's like when you knock over a glass of water when you're doing a water color and it screws up your drawing. That teaches you. You learn to set up your table so that your glass of water is away from your work. If you're airbrushing, then you set your airbrush down on your artwork and it drips on your artwork, you learn not to do that, all right? So, you learn good habits by mistake. And if you don't have the reality, if you don't have the real things to do it, if you don't make those mistakes, you never develop a good work technique. And this program that Fisher Price makes for kids doesn't have a glass of water for them to knock over.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: The computer program that would have all the perfect tires, there's no mistakes in it. It's flawless, you know, I could just print out a thousand tires. But there's something about having to draw them. You know, when your hand gets tired, I mean all—1,000 tires—some of them are going to be wobbly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: They're going to be wobbly in real life and if I familiarize myself with it, I mean it's like—I'm trying to think. I'm really, I'm genuinely, you know, with the like, God, I wanted to say—I was going to tell you this this morning. I wasn't necessarily going to tell you this, but I was thinking this and I want to say it, you know, here I am bitching and moaning because I do bitch and moan about things, you know, and get—I have a neighbor that's much older and one starts to think, what's happening? Am I getting older? Am I doing it? And God I just got so—I mean at 2:30 in the morning last night I was drawing and that was like—I'm discovering a whole new things again, you know?

I mean, it's like, God, I'm back—you know, the idea of being able to learn and develop things is like—I'm trying to think of—what I'm trying to say is, I'm—I was—I wrote on one of my drawings, I said, I'm trying to learn how to draw. I mean, at 62 years old I'm trying to learn how to draw a tire and I'm—you would think, well gee, maybe you already know. You should know how to draw tires at 62 years old. But, you know, I don't; I'm having to learn how to draw tires and it's like—oh!—I mean, it's like really neat when you start to break through because I mean, I think, yeah, for me as an artist, to learn how to do something new. I mean, I think other people probably do things all the time. I don't learn languages, I don't learn how to cook different things, I don't—although I actually do learn how to cook different things right now by accident. But I'm surprised that I'm still learning, you know, I mean it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Look at all the different materials you've worked with through the years, clay and prints and wood and paper, road kill. One thing we've discussed is—because you have such facility with materials, you're constantly trying new materials to stretch yourself, and that's what keeps it fresh and interesting. You're constantly having to go beyond the border of what's comfortable. Here you are doing exactly that again.

DAVID BEST: But the tires are like, I mean, I'm blown away that I'm—because you go through a thing, you know, it's like—[sighs]—you can't help but see things. You look—I opened up a book the other day and there was something that looked exactly like mine, I mean it was like—and it was the first time I've ever seen this.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was it?

DAVID BEST: It's a pattern. The guy, an artist, did some kind of very baroque tractors out of welded steel. And you would've looked at it and you'd say, God, did you see that? And I'd never seen it, and it's not like—and his work was actually better than mine.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember who he was?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I can show you the book. And it starts to get you—you know, now talking about that process, about the learning process, it can discourage you or hurt your feelings when you see something that's better than yours. You look at it and you go, wow, did I copy that, or, is that person better than me? And I couldn't discourage you, you know, I was like I was—knocked me off. I went, oh, God, I'm just no good, you know I'm just no good—[Riedel laughs].

And then, you know, working on the tires—so then, I've also got this tire thing hell, and there's got to be artists—there's an English artist that did a tire thing. There's got to be artists everywhere that have done tire things. Probably Picasso made something out of tires, I don't know, there's Mexicans on the border that makes sandals out of tires, I mean there's all kinds of things, so I'm going to run up against that when I start with these tires. Right now, I think I'm discovering something. I'm going to turn around and open a book and there's going to be somebody that's done tires.

And that will, again, that's the knocking of the water off of the—onto the water color. It's like, oh, shit, there's, you know—it's a learning process. You're not—you're never going to be as good as you think you are, you know, or—but I mean, I always—and I've said this all the way through. I love everything I do, it's not necessarily always good, you know, I don't think I'm—I've tried to qualify that in not trying to be overly humble or gracious. I know that I'm not necessarily the greatest artist in the world. I love what I do.

MIJA RIEDEL: You've said that repeatedly. You've talked about the importance of falling in love with your material. And at one point you said passion and love become technique. Do you remember that?

DAVID BEST: No, I don't, but that sounds pretty good. Passion and love become technique. Wow, what a nice line.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, that was yours—[laughs].

DAVID BEST: I don't know how the hell I came up with that.

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MIJA RIEDEL: You're working on a new piece—you went to that dump and got ten dwarves?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, well what happened is I was—I had done a car project for Oxbow and when I got home, I was—I had enjoyed. I kind of enjoyed the process of doing that gluing stuff with the kids, kind of thought—and I had taught them how to do the Shake and Bake technique of just mindlessly throwing stuff on without thinking. And it was kind of these kind of—get a bag of junk, put glue all over something and then you stick it into the bag and shake it, like you'd put—

MIJA RIEDEL: Shake and Bake.

DAVID BEST: Shake and Bake, and whatever you get is what you get.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, just cover the object in glue and throw it on the thing?

DAVID BEST: Throw it on the thing. I mean, I've got a couple of tea pots are kind of like that, some of them are more honest than others, but sometimes I stay real honest to it. And then I, you know, because you're an artist you end up putting a little bit—cheating.

But—so, I thought I would do some stuff at home. So, I went to the dump and got 10 doors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sculptures?

DAVID BEST: Just regular doors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Little dolls?

DAVID BEST: Doors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, doors. Okay.

DAVID BEST: Like house doors. So, I've got two going right now and I'm going to do 10 of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wooden? Glass?

DAVID BEST: Wooden doors. Just plain, blank doors, and I'm gluing them, one I'm—first one is much more—you'll see them—they're, I'm just trying to just throw stuff on them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Shake and Bake.

DAVID BEST: Shake and Bake, yeah, kind of Shake and Bake, I mean it's a little harder, because I'm—bigger surface and I'm trying to—and my heart's coming into it, but I'm going to do 10 of them and just find out what the hell they are.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

DAVID BEST: And kind of—again, the dumb guy realization, oh, doors, I'm opening—I'm going to open some doors to something that I don't know what the—I don't even know what I'm doing, so by doing the doors, I'll find out what—if I do enough doors, I'll find out what's behind the doors.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that is the way you are. Yeah.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I'm doing doors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Another thing that's really interesting is how much a part of your process the dump is.

DAVID BEST: I love the dump. Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you go pretty much daily, and have for years.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Your 60th birthday party took place at—started at the dump.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, no, I'm very fond of the dump. The dump is—I remember going to the San Rafael dumps with the people that were going to—they were doing a film. I think it's funny that people use me as a prop.

MIJA RIEDEL: People use you as a prop?

DAVID BEST: Yeah—[laughs].

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

DAVID BEST: I think—I mean, I'm thinking of, you know, I don't think of myself as an actor, right? And yet people seem to use me as a prop.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, we've talked about that, there is an aspect of performance in your work.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Especially the temples, but the car projects, a lot of the communal projects.

DAVID BEST: But always, you know, I mean, it's like, there I was at the dump, but—this is you asking me if I love the dump.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the role it plays in your work.

DAVID BEST: I'm at the dump and this was 30 years ago. And we're in San Rafael dump, and there are guys filming me. And two artists, they're making a film of it. And I just down into the pit and this one guy looks, God, I wouldn't touch that or want to get near that, and I mean that was—there's so many little things in my life that have stuck me and went into my heart and that just broke my heart. I mean, it just went—God, you wouldn't want to, that's the earth! This is the earth, you know. This is our planet, you know, you wouldn't want to touch it. How does it make you feel that this is our earth and that you are repulsed by it?

MIJA RIEDEL: It's just a giant dirt pit?

DAVID BEST: Well, it's just a dump. I mean, dumps are not places were most people want to have a picnic. But it's the earth, it's you know, if we—I'm not a—maybe I am. Maybe I am a hippie mellow person. The earth is like, you know, we talk about the earth being our mother, that the earth is a body, you know, and that it's a complete

thing, and it's, this is a part of the body that's hurt. This is a part of the body that's cut or that's infected. And as an artist doctor, you look at the earth and you're not repulsed by an infection or a scar or a tumor, you know? You look at it, you don't turn away from it.

And the earth, for me, I mean I go to the dump and I just—I mean, I really do love going to the dump, you know, but I see it as—I mean, this is how I feel about it, is what I'm saying to you, whether I—it doesn't always sound, get manifest that way. A lot of times I just go into pick up doors or I'm getting junk, but it's always—rooted in it is that, the earth, that this is where we throw all our stuff, you know. We put a cut in the earth and we bury our stuff in it and we don't think it's going to fester and get infected? And I guess, I'm—God, I must be the infection?

MIJA RIEDEL: Or you're pulling it out, is another way to look at it.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but also maybe I'm the infection of the earth, you know. It's an awful way to look at it. I'd rather not look at it the way I just did.

MIJA RIEDEL: But the dump, it seems to me, plays a lot of different roles in your work. I mean, you go there for material, you go there for inspiration.

DAVID BEST: Social. I go social, yeah.

[END OF best07_3of4_MD_track02.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So, we were just starting to talk about Burning Man and the art community and how they don't necessarily coexist peacefully.

DAVID BEST: Right. Burning Man in my career, you know this, the art world, and seemingly that I've chosen a number of different directions all the time—[laughs]—doesn't make sense. Maggie just was expressing recently that she's really glad that I'm not doing Burning Man this year. And my mother-in-law and father-in-law are glad I'm not doing it. My son is glad, you know, they all feel it takes me away from my art. But I just—I've just had—talking about trying not to be bitter, right, and how dangerous that is, for an artist to become bitter, you know. And I think that's one of the things, you know, in the Bible it talks about Lot's wife and that she turned and looked at the pillar—turned to look back at Sodom and turned into a pillar of salt. Looking back in regret can turn you into a pillar of salt, so you can, you know.

But I have to say, you know, that over the years of working as an artist and working in the art system and then not working in the art system, working other places and then with the Burning Man thing, for instance, Burning Man doesn't have the same aesthetic that the art world has; it's not a commercial aesthetic. So, nothing's for sale. Nothing could be possessed. And if it's not possessed, it's not sellable, so there's a threat to the art world in that here's Burning Man that gets this much attention and doesn't sell anything. Well, we've worked our ass off; we've made our business and we don't get as much attention. We spend all this money to try to do it and Burning Man does it, and doesn't sell anything, so you can't get famous from it.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you can.

DAVID BEST: Well, you get infamous.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, okay—[laughs].

DAVID BEST: Yeah, you get famous from it, but it's not the premise, you know, I mean it's like—I mean I look at this, like I know when I go to the desert and I work on a project, there's—like this year, there was 40,000 people. That's a lot of people, so I can say safely when there was 30,000 people, I could say hello to 30,000 people. I actually said hello, you know, whether I said it to each individual or as a—

MIJA RIEDEL: Group.

DAVID BEST: Group. It was like they weren't distant, you know, they were all close to me, you know, and I was close to them. And that's different, that's fame that you know 30,000 people, or 30,000 people know you, but it's also not—there's another reason for it, you know, you want to know those 30,000 people because you love them, right, because you're friends with them, because they're part of your community.

MIJA RIEDEL: Because you're all participating in something together?

DAVID BEST: Well, yeah, we're all participating in something together versus being an artist that is famous, that doesn't have interaction with the people. I mean, I've delivered pieces to back doors of houses, you know, and had to go in the servants' entrance and drop off my pieces. So, that's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Both ends of the continuum.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so, you can get famous at Burning Man, but it's more than famous, it's embraced. You can become part of 30,000 people. And that's a—and that is a unique thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: That community has been really significant for you.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah, yeah, and it's been significant for me and I've been significant for it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

DAVID BEST: So, it's been a real—for me, I mean my—Maggie and the kids and a lot of people will say, oh, Burning Man ripped you off or you don't get your work done or—it's been a very symbiotic relationship. Is that the right word?

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that you know, we've helped one another.

MIJA RIEDEL: Grown together.

DAVID BEST: Grown together. But for the art world, you know, they're threatened by that, that here they can—30,000 people can look at a crappy piece of art. Not all the art that's at Burning Man, including my own, is not all perfect. But the audience doesn't have perfection as its motivation. It's not one of the criterias that it has to be a perfect piece of art. It's more about sharing; it's a gift. It's just—it's not—it doesn't have the same rules that the art world has and it pisses the art world off.

MIJA RIEDEL: What are the rules for art at Burning Man?

DAVID BEST: There aren't any. There aren't any.

MIJA RIEDEL: How are pieces accepted or permitted or not?

DAVID BEST: Well, there's several ways. You can go up to the desert, you bring whatever you want up and put it up. If you ask for a grant, there is a grant system, and that they, you submit proposals and then the Burning Man office looks at it and weighs it and says, okay, we'll give this person \$10,000 or \$5,000 or help them to build their piece in the desert. And that aesthetic kind of goes around a committee of people, but it's not—it's—the things that they look for are how does it impact the community, you know, more than is it a good piece of art or not. There's a couple pieces of art that came up there this—over the years there's been several pieces of art that are good art, quote, "good art."

MIJA RIEDEL: What comes to mind? Anything in particular?

DAVID BEST: Well, I would say that there was a ladder that was up there that was really like an *Art in America* piece, you know, very conceptual, minimalist, but very sophisticated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember who did it?

DAVID BEST: No. There was another—there was an inflatable balloon piece that fit into the art world look. There's a guy named Zach Coffin who shows in the art world and he shows big steel piece up, several times he's put these big pieces up there that are more high art than the rest of the stuff up there, and it's almost inappropriate, you know. It's like, there's been people trying to crack that, you know, bring in art, and I prefer to see low—I don't like that high-caliber art, you know? I think it's—

MIJA RIEDEL: And by high caliber you're talking about slicker work?

DAVID BEST: Museum quality, art world-passing. No, I like the kind of the goofy people that make stuff that's poorly crafted but has a lot of soul.

MIJA RIEDEL: But it's interesting because there's a fine line, it seems, because there are some pieces that are, that could be for example, your temples, they've been at Hayes Green at San Francisco. There are pieces that could be public art installations if not permanent, then for a period of time. I'm thinking of that fabulous chandelier that I've seen photos of at Burning Man. Again, some of that I can see as part of your installation work.

DAVID BEST: Some of that has, and it's gone. But I don't like to see—I don't want to ever see Burning Man get to where all the work is good, you know? I like seeing where there's other requirements to the work.

MIJA RIEDEL: But there's work there that you think is good, but it's good in a different way. What are the

qualities that you're seeing in that?

DAVID BEST: Let's see, how would I qualify that? I'm getting myself into a corner on this one. How do I see it? There's a guy that brought up—he works in a dog food factory in Kansas and has been collecting, studying Coca-Cola bottles, plastic Coca-Cola bottles and has figured out which ones, if you cut them, become the best whirly gigs. Okay? So, he has these particular Coke bottle that he's collected and he cuts them, he glues the mirror on it, makes two magnets, you know, a stainless steel washer, probably loads everything back into the back of a Ford Pinto station wagon, comes out to the desert with 100 Coke bottles with these cuts in them, puts up a pole like a box using twine, not sophisticated, hangs all his Coke bottles out in the middle of the desert, and the wind makes them move. He's probably never looked at *Art in America* or *Art Forum*. The whole cost was probably \$100, and it's elegant, you know, absolutely elegant, for nothing, you know. And no idea of anything other than the magic of making a Coke bottle spin. So, it's real pure.

And I mean, I came—the only thing I had, I had one of my card on me, and I went out to the thing and I left my card and wrote on the back, I said, this is my favorite piece in the desert. And the guy framed it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Aww.

DAVID BEST: I mean, he works in a dog food factory. You know, he's a goofy—I don't even know what he looks like. He dressed up to come see me, but I wasn't there. So, the battle with, you know, I make a big temple just like that guy does his Coke bottles. I mean, it's like, wow, look at all this stuff we can make something out of. And oh, look at all this stuff, we can make it bigger. It's not, I want to make it bigger because I want to get on the cover of *Art in America*, it's because it's just fun to make it bigger.

It's just a challenge and it's exciting and it's fun, it's fun; it's not even exciting, it's fun. But I don't see the temple in any better light than that guy's Coca-Cola things, you know, nor is it more important than that guy's. And that's what I'm—I'm always a little bit concerned with Burning Man because there are giving big grants and bigger projects at the expense of, you know, I mean I think it's changing radically. I think it's really changing out there radically right now. I don't like to see that big change, you know, I like to see the funky stuff.

But the audience, you know, it's like they're required. The audience is—you know, anytime you perform in front of an audience, you know, they keep wanting you to play "Stairway to Heaven" [Led Zeppelin] or "Truckin'" [Grateful Dead] or whatever it is. The audience where they want it louder, they want more of it. So, they're—they have a big appetite. So, that's a little bit hard. So, I think that's about as much as I can say about the difference between the art world and you know, I mean, the art world—I'm in the basement of the San Francisco Museum, all right? The Oakland Museum just got—I think I told you this—the largest—Ruth Nash and Ted Nash—they donated their whole collection, Ruth just died.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: And they donated their whole collection to the Oakland museum. Well, Ruth's son invited us over to the house before the collection was going to be taken part and there's 60 of my—70 of my pieces at the di Rosa Preserve. So, Ruth Nash—Ruth and Ted—had I don't know, I'd have to count on my hand, but probably 30—25, 25 of my pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? And what pieces—what sort of pieces, David, from which periods?

DAVID BEST: They had a Cancer series, a beautiful cancer piece, they had self-portrait, they had interest in the assemblage of a bird or fish.

MIJA RIEDEL: Plastic or paper?

DAVID BEST: There was a plastic thing, they had a collage, they had two collages. They had a big painting. That's what they have. I don't know, they probably had—

MIJA RIEDEL: Range, nice range.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, they had a—but all really well—a good cross-section of my work and some significant pieces. The Oakland Museum a temporary show setting up, introducing some of the works from the—Ted and Ruth Nash's, that's right. I mean, in their collection, I was, if you were to walk into that question, you would see that I was fairly well represented. And there's not one of the pieces in the Oakland Museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, in this first installation, they didn't put anything out.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: But they have shown your work in the past.

DAVID BEST: Oh yeah, yeah, well yeah—

MIJA RIEDEL: They've done a car—

DAVID BEST: Well, yeah, but what I'm trying to say is like, with the di Rosa Preserve, you know, each yes one less of my pieces is out, you know. The Oakland Museum, San Francisco Museum having a piece in the basement, I mean, I'm treated well by some people. I mean, I've really been treated, I—my cup's truly runneth over and all that stuff, but there's also a part of that system that brings out that and I don't want that. You know, I don't want to get into that, you know, so that's why I'm saying that I have a hard time calling them.

It's just I don't want to get back into it. I mean, Maggie and Kelly, and Molly, they all want me to get back into it and, I think, God, you guys don't know what it'd cost me when I do.

MIJA RIEDEL: So, making work at Burning Man is a much different experience.

DAVID BEST: Much different.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, it's a completely different motivation, different concerns.

DAVID BEST: Doesn't cost me, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: At the same time we talked, you really wanting to get back to doing more of your own work, as opposed to the more collaborative work. You have worked alone in your studio on a variety of different pieces, and then you have done so many types of collaborations, the cars, the temples, so many different projects, but you were saying that you were feeling an urge and a desire to get back and work.

DAVID BEST: Yeah I am. And I'm back in, you know, and I'm—like I said, and I'm drawing and doing another thing and I just went to a gallery in San Francisco the other night and I thought—I could show with this gallery, you know? I thought that this would be a fun gallery to show with.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who is that? Do you want to say?

DAVID BEST: What's his name? I'll have to show you the thing. I think it's—I can't remember the name of it, let me get the announcement.

[END OF best07_3of4_MD_track03.]

MIJA RIEDEL: We can look later.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. I forget the name of it, but it was a neat gallery. I mean, I thought, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: You liked the—

DAVID BEST: I liked the feeling of it, yeah. But, you know, it's just—I don't know. I mean, it's a hard one. It's a hard one to get into.

MIJA RIEDEL: You've shown with a lot of different dealers over the years—Smith Andersen—

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I used to like, well, all of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: And Inez Storer had a gallery in Inverness [Lester Gallery].

DAVID BEST: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You showed briefly with Paule Anglim, Susan Cummins—

DAVID BEST: A gallery in D.C.—she was going to sue me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ann Gardner. How has that gone? It seems like it hasn't been completely satisfactory because you have changed galleries over time. That's not always a happy experience. [They laugh.]

DAVID BEST: That was pretty polite. Is that the word? Polite.

MIJA RIEDEL: I hope not, was it?

DAVID BEST: That was sneaky.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, dear, was it?

DAVID BEST: That was pretty sneaky.

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't intend it to be.

DAVID BEST: [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: There's something about Burning Man; there's something about [your way of] working—you have intentionally chosen to show outside of the gallery world.

DAVID BEST: I just, you know, I loved, I used to really enjoy going to openings all of the time. I mean, it used to be—I mean, it was so much fun, you know, in the days. It could be Ruth Braunstein, Buzz Sawyer, [John] Berggruen, [Wanda] Hansen, [Mary] Fuller. They would have openings and there would be like, Arneson would—Arneson show or Daniel or—it was fun. It was fun. So I enjoyed that. You know, I never—the whole career thing, you know, like young artists always—people will say, oh, you have to kiss someone's ass to get somewhere. You know, they have all of those kind of—they hate it, you know, they hate the thing. That's—how could you hate your profession, you know?

It's your profession. You have to like it or get out of it. I liked the galleries. I liked being in galleries; I liked being represented. I liked museums. You know, I have reservations about the contemporary museums in terms of excluding—I mean, they really—the San Francisco museum, in particular, seems to be a European museum and a museum of wealth. You know, the funding is high versus like the Oakland museum which is more of a people's museum. But then, that dates me.

That dates me as a person, you know, and as a—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, the focus is different, too. One is regional.

DAVID BEST: But, you know, to answer, you know, to look at my career and see my relationship with the galleries and stuff, Anna Gardner was a friend. She was never a major gallery, but she was a friend to everybody in the community, you know, at that time. I was much younger and was part of that community, you know? I lived in the Bay Area and worked and that was—it was fun to be with those people. Anna knew everybody. You know, Inez knew everybody. It was a fun time. Probably the most adult gallery—I mean, Smith Andersen was a good gallery, but, again, they were—you know, they had a different—they weren't a hungry gallery. Paule Anglim was probably, of all of the galleries, probably the most professional and the biggest type of person, type of gallery.

That was a difficult—that was a difficult relationship and I think, you know, because it's just different personalities is all. You know, it's just—I can't, I can't say that she did anything wrong. I can't say that I did anything wrong. I think our, just our personalities, you know, it was like some people communicate—you can say hello to someone and they think you're swearing at them. And it was just how her and I, we had different types of personalities. And to have somebody handle your work, deal with your work, who finds you difficult, you can only cloud the work as far as I can see. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: Would it be accurate to say that it's important when you deal with whoever you are dealing with in the art world that there is some sort of community spirit or some sort of a feeling beyond the business and marketing aspect? When that becomes too prominent, it becomes more problematic? And that there's a looseness in the way you work that you also appreciate in the whole field?

DAVID BEST: Well, I went through, you know, lots of struggles trying to figure out where in the hell the—my role is with that kind of system. If you're—I don't know if I was pretending to be polite, you know? If you're pretending to be polite, then right behind it, there's a rudeness. So maybe I was rude, you know, pretending to be polite. And maybe I should have gotten over that rudeness. I don't know. But the—[pause]—for me, I don't think I'm a good example of how—I know I'm not a good example of how to do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: How to do—

DAVID BEST: How to accomplish something, you know? I do it the backwards way or, you know, the—

MIJA RIEDEL: The indirect way.

DAVID BEST: The indirect way. I'm trying—you can see, this is probably the most difficult. This is going to be the most difficult section for me to come up with because I don't want to say I have a hard time with dealers. But it is hard. It's a hard—

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, you're not alone, so it's interesting to hear your perspective.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it is a hard thing to do. There's—Smith Andersen never questioned my work, ever, never doubted me, never ever, ever, ever doubted me. And I could run with that. You know, as soon as someone has a

doubt is where I start to, you know, that's my inadequacies and my insecurities when I don't. When I don't feel trusted, I have a hard time working with someone. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: By that you mean their wanting to direct your work or—

DAVID BEST: Or just—wanting to direct my work or just not being, not thinking I'm going to deliver on time, or whatever. Whatever, I mean, I'm like a little—I can be pretty delicate. Say the wrong thing to me, it can throw me off, or used to. I don't—I try to avoid that. That's why I don't have—yeah, I have a hard time with bringing that dealer element into my work. I don't—it's hard, it's hard. It's very difficult.

MIJA RIEDEL: So that must make it difficult when you want to go back and do your own work.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, well, no. You know, actually, I'm looking at—now, for me, I just want to do a lot of work. I don't care; I don't care—

MIJA RIEDEL: Where it's shown.

DAVID BEST: Where it goes, yeah. I just want to do the work. That's what I—I don't want—I don't want to put the—I'm working on another little simple project with some people. And there's three artists that are going to be doing, going to be making some things. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Is this an installation?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, we're going to work with a theater, a concert hall, with some kids. So we're doing—they—this one person said, oh, yeah, well, I want to do this big—we could do a big thing. Well, you know, that's simple. That's simple. I of course wanted to do a big thing. I know how to do big things. I said, listen, let's, let's do—we were having a meeting. There was two other artists and the director of the Phoenix Theatre and volunteer, two volunteers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where's the Phoenix Theatre?

DAVID BEST: In Petaluma here. So this one person was—someone was interrupting her. You know, kids talking and they're interrupting. And she'd recoil and you could see her going through this. And she said, oh, yeah, but we're going to build this big thing. I said, listen, let's see if the three of us can learn how to talk to one another and not interrupt each other. I said, let's start with something small, okay? And let's see if we can get these three small things done. And if we can do that and if we still are friends after the end of these three small things, then we can try building something bigger, I said.

But let's develop a friendship first, you know? And that's like wisdom, you know? It's like, where in the hell did that come from, you know, in me? But with the work, I'm really, you know, one of the big things I always do is I project or I put, you know, a plan before I do it. And I'm just going to—I just want to—I really want to do a lot of work and not have lots of Handem, Hansen look at it or that gallery in San Francisco that I saw. I don't want to confuse it, you know, so I want to just try to—I'm going to do the work. And who knows?

MIJA RIEDEL: And by that you mean the series of doors or is there something else?

DAVID BEST: This is the next few years of work. Whatever I do, I don't want to put it out on a—I don't want to put it on the marketplace. You know, I want to get back to really doing it. And then, who knows? There's not a whole line. You'll notice there isn't a line of people waiting outside trying to buy my stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: But there are lines of people waiting to talk to you about installations—with regard to installations.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, uh-huh, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So you'd have to really work to carve out some time to do your own work. Clearly, it's very different to work on your own versus the collaborations. And in thinking about it, it seems the collaborations are a way of bringing in the unexpected and the accidental because the minute you start to collaborate with somebody else, you have the unexpected and the accident. How do you—well, it sounds like you do that. You have, over time, done that in your own work when you worked by yourself. By introducing new types of materials, you had to learn new skills. Now, you're introducing tires. Is that part of it? When you're doing your new work—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you're working by yourself versus with the community, how do you work when you work by yourself? You go to the dump. You look for inspiration. You find something and then you just start.

DAVID BEST: I don't know how I work when I work by myself. [Pause.] Well, I'm having a hard time. I work at night, you know? I work at night. And damn it, actually, I work at night.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: You know, I really work at night, you know? And most of the day, I do things, do whatever people do in a normal day. Then I work at night. So I start working at night. I don't know how in the hell I'm going to start on these doors. I'm just starting them without—it's—I always—you know, I used to be able to—see, I don't have a space right now. The studio is gone over on the other side of the property.

MIJA RIEDEL: You're not working in the barn?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I am. But that's not—I never think of that as a studio. And I'm getting ready to get another space for Chicago and this other thing, but I don't have a real studio right now.

MIJA RIEDEL: I thought you did all of your work in the barn.

DAVID BEST: I do, but I don't think of that as a studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see.

DAVID BEST: I used to have, I mean, I had different kinds of spaces. I mean, I have a studio on the other side of the property that was just totally a studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't know that. I've never been there.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So that's where a lot of the work actually is put together?

DAVID BEST: Where?

MIJA RIEDEL: In the studio.

DAVID BEST: Not—

MIJA RIEDEL: As opposed to the barn.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: The barn is so full of things, or at least it was the last time I saw it. Is that a place where you generate ideas and sketches?

DAVID BEST: No, it's not. No, that's where I'm—I'm in a stuck place with that. You see, I'll take you over and show you. The drawing that I'm—it's no problem. I've always established that place for where I do my paper work so that's what I use that for.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, I see.

DAVID BEST: And then, you know, over the years, I used to—I had the studio over here on the other side of the property that I did all of my stuff, my other work.

MIJA RIEDEL: By that, you mean all of the collages and plastic and—

DAVID BEST: Collages, no, the collages I did—I did in a little room up here, a little tiny room. And I did the collages in that little room.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I remember watching, seeing some of the paper work up there.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I did the collages here. I didn't do any of the collages—

MIJA RIEDEL: So this studio was for plastic and clay?

DAVID BEST: Plastic—was for clay and stuff. But, so now, kind of what I've done is, I've just got those doors and I started doing them. And I've done this many times in my life, where I've just gone from one show or one body of work and just shoved everything, when I'm finished with that, shoved all of that stuff into a corner and then started on something else. So I have rubble everywhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: And it's a real pain in the ass, so I haven't—and this, because I started working on these doors without really clearing a space, you know, I didn't clear out anything in there. I didn't take the little Honda car out of there. I didn't take the junk out of there. There's different concepts, just a million different things going on in there. And in the midst of it, I'm doing these doors. So everything else is going to hell because I'm starting to concentrate on the doors.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: But I can't let that all go to hell because some of it is tools. You know, so I'm struggling with trying to do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems that chaos is critical. [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: [Laughs.] It certainly is. Yeah, it is critical. I have it a lot, don't I?

MIJA RIEDEL: It tends to play a very important part.

You know, we haven't talked at all about the show at San Jose [Museum of Art], the *Faith & Fantasy* exhibit. To date, that was the major museum retrospective of your work, right? And [it focused on] of the large plastic, extruded pieces. And they were very different than the temples. There was a real narrative quality to [those pieces]. They felt like they were out of stories, out of magical realism novels or something like that.

DAVID BEST: That was a funny show. Do you know that I found out—now, I have to get it clear. Maggie is going to—Maggie is always—if she wakes me up, if I'm supposed to get up at 10 o'clock, she says, it's 10 o'clock; and it will be quarter to 10, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: She has a different sense of time and a different sense of—so I found out, let's say I cut a deal with Maggie and say three months instead of two. Three months before the show at the San Jose museum, I found out that I was having the show at the San Jose museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So I called the San Jose museum and I said, I understand I'm having a show here. And they said, yes, you're scheduled for a show in three months. I said, really? I said, well, no one has talked to me about it. Oh, we didn't—no one has contacted you?

MIJA RIEDEL: David, you're kidding.

DAVID BEST: No, I'm not kidding. No, I'm not kidding at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Nobody contacted—Maggie knew nothing about it?

DAVID BEST: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's very unusual.

DAVID BEST: What had happened is that the guy who was the director of the San Jose museum had—what he had done is he had printed all of these fancy catalogues, big catalogues and exhausted their funds doing all of these catalogues, then left the museum to go onto another job. So he just was using the San Jose museum as a stepping stone. So he had booked in my show and then he left. But he had left the San Jose museum with a sour taste in their mouth. So they inherited this whole agenda, string of shows with no wherewithal or anything to do with it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Preparation or infrastructure, anything.

DAVID BEST: So I called them and then we kind of just tried to figure out how to do this show. So it wasn't—it was like trying to figure out where to get the work or what work could go in it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And those were enormous pieces, the carriages and the cages.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and one of the big carriages was built for the show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Like an old Wells Fargo stagecoach and a circus wagon combined, something an animal would have [traveled] in.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So a lot of that was done for the show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Within three months.

DAVID BEST: Within the three month time, yeah. So, but then—

MIJA RIEDEL: But that is something you do.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, but then they also like, they said, okay. I said, well, I want to do a catalogue. And they said—and that was like a red flag. They said no. We're not going to do a catalogue.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was surprising.

DAVID BEST: And they said, no, because they had no money and the guy who had ripped them off. And I said, well, no, that's all right. I have people that are going to pay for the catalogue. You know, I was going to put up \$10,000 or whatever it was. And they said, well, if we get the money, we're going to use that towards the show. I said, what? They said, yeah, well, if you get \$10,000, we're going to put that toward the cost of the show. Do you hear that?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, I do hear that. And I can understand why Burning Man sounds like a good idea.

DAVID BEST: So they ended up printing the catalogue, *Faith & Fantasy*, that I threw in the garbage. I mean, to me—

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't remember seeing that catalogue.

DAVID BEST: It was the—it looked like a Sausalito jewelry store advertisement. I mean—and it—so, I mean, literally, I've never even—I threw it away. But I was going to pay for having a catalogue. So anyway, so, basically, the way I described the show is that myself and the guard and one of the installers put the show together. And it was pretty close to that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. That was a beautiful exhibit.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, it was a pretty show. I mean, they did a great job and they were nice people. But they were, you know, they were scarred. They had had this bad experience with this guy. Yeah, it still wasn't—they were still very fond of that show.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, you never would have [imagined] that if you had just seen the show because it looked spectacular.

DAVID BEST: No, and they did a great job. Yeah, but behind the curtain, they were—

MIJA RIEDEL: I always wondered why I never saw a catalogue.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that's why. You know, they said, we're not going to—the board of trustees, everybody was pissed off because this guy had printed all of these catalogues because he wanted to, for his resume, he wanted to look good. So they exhausted their thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's unfortunate.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: How did you get started in plastic?

DAVID BEST: I had a studio in Petaluma next to a plastics factory. And, at night, when they'd clean the machines, they'd run the plastic through. So they'd—I would go over there and they'd give me a hot blob of plastic. So I'd run back to my studio with this big baked potato of molten plastic, right? It would cool off in minutes. So I kept getting all of their scrap and they said, well, hey, we've got an extra machine. Do you want to buy it? So I bought a surplus machine from them and set it up in my studio.

MIJA RIEDEL: A plastic extruder?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you'd been working in clay, and [plastic] would enable you to do everything you could do in clay and more because it wouldn't break or snap off, right?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you did that for years, probably the mid-'80s until the mid-'90s.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, for a while, and then everybody was after me to get rid of the plastic machine. See, my family seems to always tell me what to do.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Do you listen?

DAVID BEST: Apparently. I don't have a plastic machine. [Riedel laughs.] I'm not going to Burning Man. Yeah, no, I had the machine and then I moved out. I was going to move out of the studio in Petaluma and it took too much power. And it was, you know, the fact that I started smoking when I was 13 should give you a bit of a clue about how safe I am with chemicals, right? You know, so it was like, I mean I was definitely carcinogenic—

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely—

DAVID BEST: —tumor-generating, polystyrene fumes. And I was not being very careful with it. So it just became a point where—and it was the same thing that happens with my work, you know? I get to a certain point with it and then it's like, you know, I'm no longer respecting it. I mean, I kind of looked back and wished I had had the plastic machine again, but I can get one. But I think I'm going to go somewhere. I'm going to do tires.

MIJA RIEDEL: Tires, exactly.

DAVID BEST: I'm going to do tires, yeah. So yeah, the plastic machine was fun.

[END OF best07_3of4_MD_track04.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's talk about the printing projects that you have done over time, mostly in the late '80s. I'm thinking about the work at Magnolia [Editions Printmaking, Oakland, CA].

DAVID BEST: Well, remembering back to college, Marin days and that I wanted to be a printmaker instead of a ceramic artist or a sculptor or whatever the heck I became, so I always wanted to print. See, I'm trying to think of who was the first press that had me. It was Smith Andersen I think was the first press that I printed with. So Smith Andersen, actually, the first press I was going to print with was Garner Tullis. And I didn't print with him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why? Any particular reason?

DAVID BEST: [Laughs.] Well, the people told that he was difficult to deal with. I mean, that's kind of—that was why, which, I mean, it seems funny. I actually told him that once after, because it turns out I'm probably difficult to deal with. So Smith Andersen, Paula Kirkeby had Smith Andersen editions. And they invited me down to print. And I went down and worked with their printer and that was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Late '70s?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. And that was good. It was the—they were probably pretty—I just saw one recently. Someone called me up—they're saying someone called up and wanted to know how much something was worth or something. They were pretty rigid, kind of crummy-looking prints. [Laughs.] So then I went—then Magnolia, a friend of mine was printing at Magnolia. So Magnolia asked me, said, come on over and print. And Magnolia was great. You know, it was like—at the time they were printing, they had I think—[dog barks]—aww, the dog barks. You know, sometimes you just wake up and it makes you want to bark. I know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: They were printing Squeak [Carnwath]. I think they were printing Squeak, just beginning to print Squeak. They were doing a lot of Voulkos, some Arneson. Who else? I think Joan Brown. Yeah, so they had—they were familiar with a wet printer, which would be—when I say a wet printer, it's like Voulkos. You know, Voulkos was a real solvent, flash, fast printer or painter. So I was able to work with solvents, a lot of lacquer and just really crank it out. I mean, I would do like 50 prints a day. You know, I mean, it was like, I would produce as fast as the printer could pull the prints. And we were—I mean, it was just, you know, I—

MIJA RIEDEL: On.

DAVID BEST: I mean, I'm a fast printer. I work the hell out of the printer when I work. You know, it's fun. So it was like a real explosion. We just, you know, I couldn't get enough of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: What were you working on? What were the prints at the time? Do you remember?

DAVID BEST: God, they were—the first ones were women, did a lot of women. I've done a lot of women over the years, you know, just because women are beautiful, right? I mean, that would be probably why I've done

women. So I did a lot of women. What else did I print with Magnolia? Mercury—

MIJA RIEDEL: What size were they? Do you remember?

DAVID BEST: All different sizes from big—I mean, the biggest print I did was a four-foot-by-eight-foot. Interesting thing, especially for the Smithsonian Archives—I—after just qualifying that that I did a lot of women, I prefer to work with a woman printer, a female printer. And that may be sexist, you know. It may be—who knows how we're—there's movies that they make fun of that 10 years from now or 20 years from now, people are going to eat Twinkies because they're health foods, right? So maybe this won't sound bad 20 years from now, you know? [Laughs.]

But I've chosen to work with women. I choose a woman printer. And maybe women are more nurturing; maybe they're more patient. This could be all sexist stereotypes that are against the law to even say. But for me, as an artist, I've found I don't—I need a gentle hand when I'm working. It doesn't mean that I need a yes person, but I don't need an aggressive personality working with me when I'm printing. And we're pulling a big print and I'm working with this young gal who is a great printer. And she had, you know, just—she was an assistant getting into becoming a printer and make—the head printer shoved her out of the way to pull this big print and blew the print. [Laughs.] And the young gal and I kind of looked at each other and winked, you know? And it's like—

MIJA RIEDEL: And you've done that repeatedly—[I'm thinking of] your team at Burning Man. It started off being more male, and then, over time, it's become at least 50 percent female and you've made a real effort to do that, to be very inclusive.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, not out of a legal thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, no, not at all.

DAVID BEST: Not at all legal. I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: The thought of inclusion is what—

DAVID BEST: Well, you know, there's inclusion, there's—I do use this line for the woman printer. I mean, if you have the opportunity to work with a woman in any situation, this is not—what the hell is the word? God! It sounds like—what the hell is it? Like magnificent or whatever that word is, like who in the fuck do I think I am offering freedom to someone, right? But if you had the opportunity of employing a woman over a man, you should do it, especially in the arts because, you know, even today, I mean, if you look how many female artists are there that are—women artists that are—I mean they're more, but still, it's still closed. It's still closed. And I have two daughters. Molly would not allow anybody to—right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: You know that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes

DAVID BEST: But, yeah, no, there is—it's just, it's nice, you know, working—I don't know. I think now we're getting into talking, asking that about the printing and about working with male-female roles. You know, I mean, I guess I'm getting a little bit embarrassed by it.

MIJA RIEDEL: We can move on to the prints.

DAVID BEST: No, I just want to say that that's a little—as a man, I have no right to offer freedom to anyone. And it sounds like, oh, y'all, y'all come in and have some food in the big house. I mean, I'm not, that's not my role. The evolution of working in the desert and having women come off and become part of the crew is just because the macho roles just are bullshit; they don't work. They are dangerous. They are dangerous. You know, that masculine energy is what cuts fingers off, you know. It's too much, too much heroics. And it's just not safe. It's not safe anywhere, so, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: You've talked about watching that, actually, in the desert—

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where people will, certain crew members will make choices that don't feel safe.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and it's because they're heroic. So yeah, back to the—so the printing thing, it just—it's just so fun to print, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: There's a speed and a looseness.

DAVID BEST: Oh, God. I mean, I did—I miss it. I'm getting ready to start building up to print again, you know? I went to someplace and—again, here's the thing where stuff disappears. I went to some university, Bowling Green. I think it was Bowling Green, wherever that is.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, is it Ohio?

DAVID BEST: Ohio or somewhere. I don't know where the hell it is. So I mean, it's like, you get on an airplane and you get out of the airplane and you're there. So I told them, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: The university, right?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, so I was there as a visiting artist. I said, okay, do you guys have a printing facility? They say, yeah. I said, well; let's go print. So I went into their—

MIJA RIEDEL: How long ago was this? A while, or recently?

DAVID BEST: A long time ago. But I printed like 150 prints.

MIJA RIEDEL: How long were you there?

DAVID BEST: Two days, but I mean, I did a car.

MIJA RIEDEL: You also did a car.

DAVID BEST: I also did a car, but I did the prints just as a side thing. But there's 150 prints sitting out there somewhere, all different, you know. And then, we did the same thing with Sonoma State [University]. Those vanished.

MIJA RIEDEL: The prints.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, those vanished. And they were some nice prints.

MIJA RIEDEL: You printed there and they just disappeared?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I have no idea where they went. I did them—I went. What the hell did I do that for? I forget. I went in and I had Jodie was working with me; Jodie is a woman that works with me. And we printed and we did like—I did like 150 prints. I gave them to the art department to use as a fundraiser—

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

DAVID BEST: But they never did it. But they were, you know, they were big. I don't know, and they all disappeared. I'd like to find—I'd still like to find out where they are because some of them are—they were—that was when I was on a good run. They weren't ugly prints. Those were nice. I could use those. Yeah.

So the printing process—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's something you go back to from time to time.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I'm dying to go back to it. Yeah. I worked with Trillium [Fund] on two—one, two—two prints for Burning Man. I never did any prints for my own work. I did two sets of prints for them. And then I worked with another press in Sonoma. But it was a dry press. When I say a dry press, etching kind of press, and I like more painterly kind of press. I need to make a mess when I work.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were talking about doing cars at the same time you were printing at Bowling Green. We haven't addressed the cars that you've done repeatedly over time which have been shown in Oakland and the di Rosa Preserve, you did a big one in Rome and they've been in Germany, is that right? Do you remember when you did the first one? Beside the one when you were 13 and you made a car in the dirt—

DAVID BEST: In the dirt, yeah. Yeah, I did that.

[END OF best07_3of4_MD_track05.]

DAVID BEST: It's actually right up there.

MIJA RIEDEL: The oak?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, there's an oak up at the little house.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, yes.

DAVID BEST: I mean, you were just talking—I was going to get back to the car thing, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: The cars—we will.

DAVID BEST: But you were talking about the beauty of our home, you know, and how pretty it is where we live.

MIJA RIEDEL: You live up on a mountaintop.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I live up on Sonoma Mountain Road, which is up in the upper part of Petaluma. Let's see, 1940? I can get you the actual dates. Hassel Smith, Clay Spohn, Richard Diebenkorn, Robert McChesney, and Mary Fuller were sitting underneath the tree drinking wine on a bench up here. I—was that 60 years ago or something?

MIJA RIEDEL: And you know this from a photo? Is that right?

DAVID BEST: It's a picture, yeah, of them sitting together.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did one of them own this property?

DAVID BEST: What happened is, there was an artist named [Andre] Moreau and he bought all of this property. It was 110, about 115 acres. And he was going to start a community.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

DAVID BEST: He wanted to do an artist community. So he sold Robert McChesney and Mary Fuller a half acre of land and Ed Ryan another acre of land. And then, the whole thing was—that was the days when McChesney and Mary and Diebenkorn and Hassel Smith and Clay Spohn and all of those guys were together. So he was going to make this into an art community, kind of was the days of the Communist Party and stuff. And he ended up with just Mary and Mac and Ryan. And Moreau finally went to Mexico and committed suicide. So Maggie's dad bought this property from Moreau's family.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, William Roth?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. So we got—Maggie got this property from her dad 34 years ago or something. So Mary and Mac still live up here. And Mac is getting radically senile. He's 93 or four. And Mary is 90—84 or 82.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and they're still up there. You should—it would be impressive to see their place. I don't know. I'll try to get you a walk-through.

MIJA RIEDEL: That would be interesting.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's just—it's spectacular.

DAVID BEST: But so the spirit, so the same—there'll be times when we sit out here at night, maybe four or five, always when there's a whole bunch of artists sitting out bullshitting or something, and I just always feel that spirit. I mean, this was the place where those guys—this used to be. It was always an art place up here, you know. I mean, Mary and Mac were totally—Mary and Mac were good friends with Wally. Wally used to come up here all the time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hedrick?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, even driving up here, there's just no place else like it in the Bay area, that wonderful, wild, pitted roller-coaster of a road.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I love that. There's one section there that, every time I drive up, I love. And sometimes, the thing that puzzles me is, sometimes I'll drive right past it. And I—where was that? And I actually have to back up.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] It's amazing though because, on a clear day, you can see pretty much the entire valley

down below, on the drive up. And today, it's just, the mist is—it's very—

DAVID BEST: And it can be warm. That's the weird thing is it will be warm up here when it's cold now—you know, because heat rises.

So the cars. My father, John Best, who took me to the Art Institute when I was six years old, took me to the Art Institute in a '40 Ford convertible. So he was a car freak.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: So then he had a [Ford] Model A with a Merc flathead in it. So I grew up as a car freak.

MIJA RIEDEL: California. [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: California, but not really a—not a very good mechanic at all, I mean, at all. I mean really bad. Well, no, I got over it. I paid someone to teach me how to be a mechanic.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you work on the interiors as well as the exteriors.

DAVID BEST: I have to make them work, yeah, but I paid someone to show me how to do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: There's a great shot of you, what, five, 10 years ago on the cover of big—or on the *San Francisco Chronicle*—with a BMW that you're driving down to the city to turn into an art car. It's broken down on the side of the road. Do you remember?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I've got many pictures of me broken down on the side of many roads.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: You know, there's actually a story in one of these Burning Man books about teaching someone how to get a flat tire. Yeah, I get them pretty regularly. So my friend Larry Fuente, so Dickens and Mary and the Unknown Museum [Mill Valley, CA], they didn't come in much.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, we haven't talked about them at all.

DAVID BEST: Oh, okay, yeah. That's my club.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, the Unknown Museum, let's please, yeah, how did you first become aware of that?

DAVID BEST: Well, see, now, that's where the cars came from. The first decorated car was Dickens, the Falcon. So I lived in Fairfax and Dickens lived in San Anselmo.

MIJA RIEDEL: This would have been in the '70s?

DAVID BEST: The '70s, yeah. So I met Dickens and then Mickey, then Larry, and Lois, Lois Anderson.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, and Mickey who?

DAVID BEST: McGowan.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: So that the Unknown Museum. So we—they started—the Unknown Museum became a non-profit, or tried to. So we formed a board, but the trouble was, Dickens didn't understand, you know, that you can't get money and just do anything with it. He thought that was going to be money for him to live on.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was in Mill Valley, wasn't it?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that was in Mill Valley.

MIJA RIEDEL: And was it more than cars? Or was it just cars?

DAVID BEST: The gas station. Oh, yeah, it was Mickey's and Lois Anderson's studio. Mickey did—was the Apple Cobbler at that time. And Dickens had a lot of his work stored there. But it was mainly Mickey's studio. And Larry

had stuff there and I had cars there. So Fuente got a commission from the Texans. Ann Harthis was a long-time friend of mine. To do a car, so he did a cab. So the artists' soap-box derby race, that the San Francisco museum did it. So I did a car. I wanted to do a car because Larry had a Cab; Dickens had the Falcon. So I wanted to do a car. So I did the Oldsmobile. So that was my first car. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember when that was, David?

DAVID BEST: No. I have no idea when it was—'70s sometime? So then, Mike Bishop called me up and asked me to do a car up in Chico. So I went up and did a car with—that was the first collaboration. You know, I did a car with maybe 30 students at Chico State. Then the L.A. County Museum [of Art] had commissioned—yeah, commissioned myself and Mike Bishop to go down there because Mike Bishop had set me up in Chico. So we went down and did a car at the L.A. County Museum. That's the one that di Rosa has, the *Rhinocar* [1985]. So then I did that one. So that's two—one, two, three, sorry.

MIJA RIEDEL: No worries.

DAVID BEST: That's what happened. I did go to bed at 2:30.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, I was going to ask how you slept.

DAVID BEST: So then we did—so then I did—God, after that car, I forget where in the hell I did another car. Somewhere else, then I did one at the Exploratorium [San Francisco].

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, I remember that.

DAVID BEST: Then, I did the—

MIJA RIEDEL: One went to Rome, didn't it?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I did one in Texas. I've done a couple. I did a car in Texas, then I did one in Ohio, I think or somewhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: And have they all been collaborations?

DAVID BEST: All been collaborations, yeah. The Cadillac I just did wasn't, but—

MIJA RIEDEL: And the Cadillac was for Burning Man?

DAVID BEST: No, that was a commission for a friend of mine.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: You haven't seen pictures of that one I don't think. I just did it. It was probably my best car.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm, I'd love to see it. And you do them for Burning Man as well or do you just take—

DAVID BEST: No, no, I never think—the Burning Man cars I don't consider—

MIJA RIEDEL: Art cars?

DAVID BEST: Art cars, yeah, no.

MIJA RIEDEL: That hovercraft?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, those are a whole different.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really. And all of these collaged—

DAVID BEST: Those are the art cars.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, but they don't go to Burning Man?

DAVID BEST: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

DAVID BEST: So—[yawns]—pardon me, oh, God—so I did the—which ones did I do? I did a bus for the—I did a car for the Pittsburgh children's museum. And then, they called me back to do a bus. So I did a bus for the

Pittsburgh children's museum. In that, I worked with 1200 people.

MIJA RIEDEL: In Pittsburgh?

DAVID BEST: In Pittsburgh. That was a lot of people. So, actually 1200—

MIJA RIEDEL: That sounds like the largest group I've ever heard of you working with on a car or really on any project.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was huge.

DAVID BEST: That was the largest I ever did, although I'm playing with some other figures on something now to do larger. But I'll—so then I did—I did the bus at Pittsburgh, then I did—

MIJA RIEDEL: And is there almost a happening quality to these, do you think, David?

DAVID BEST: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: No performance quality to them at all?

DAVID BEST: No. Well, a tiny bit, but it depends. Like on the Pittsburgh bus, I chopped that bus up before the public got to it. So I reworked it, put shapes on it, and then brought it.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you radically altered the structure of the car.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah, yeah, which was—that was an interesting one for the—they had brought me back. I am—I have some places where I'm very popular, okay? I have to say there are some places. I don't know how to say it because I've gone through this thing of talking about art galleries in the art world and having had some of my fingertips burnt, burnt a few fingertips in my day. [Laughs.] But there are places where I am—where I'm well-received.

MIJA RIEDEL: Pittsburgh is one of them.

DAVID BEST: Pittsburgh is one of them. So I had done the car for the Pittsburgh children's museum and they called me back to do a bus. So I had to meet with the transit authority, right? These are the bus people. And I had sent them, you know, pictures. They had transparencies and they had the art-car book, the one that the Texans had done. I don't know if you've seen that one, but I have—

MIJA RIEDEL: A while ago.

DAVID BEST: Yeah. So they had all of these books. So I'm meeting in the headquarters of the Pittsburgh transit authority and there is the director of the museum and myself and the head of this program, the event where the car is going to be done, the bus is going to be done, which is some festival, Pittsburgh festival, and then some PR person. Now, the PR person owned a television station. Television station, right?

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: And we're there and I had brought a drawing, a printout. Magnolia had printed out a bus for me and I did the drawings of the bus and it's up there on the easel. And I talking to him and I'm just excited. And I'm going, yeah, so we can just chop it up here. I'm going to put this here and there. And there's all of a sudden, there's this quiet, before that, before that they said, this bus has got to be for baseball, right? This is—Pittsburgh—whatever the Pittsburgh baseball people are, they were going to drive it into the stadium or something, you know, and have Mario Andretti get out of the bus or some bullshit.

And I had never heard anything about this until I get there. And I look at the—I said, well, you know, I don't know anything about baseball. [Riedel laughs.] And this woman says, well, what do you know about?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Gasps.]

DAVID BEST: And I said, well, I know about—I know about hockey because my kids play in hockey and I'm playing hockey with my son. And that was it. She glared at me. Well, it turned out that she owned a TV station. They had just lost, you know, Wayne Gretzky or one of these big-deal hockey guys. Okay, they had lost the contract. So they lost like a multimillion-dollar hockey contract. So hockey was the wrong word for me to have used, right? So she didn't like that. So anyway, and then I'm going on. I get back up on the horse and I'm saying, well, you know, here's what we're going to do with the bus.

And all of a sudden, it's silent. They said, well, we thought you were going to—you're just going to paint that, aren't you? I said, paint it? I said, no. Have you seen the pictures of what I do? Oh, yeah, we saw the pictures. We thought that was all painted on.

MIJA RIEDEL: They thought the collage was all paint?

DAVID BEST: I said, you thought all of that was painted? So that was it. So I walk out of the room and they say, we—and this woman, who hated me, says, we don't want it. This guy's going to—you can't. This isn't going to happen. We don't want this guy here. So the children's museum said, well, if you don't want him, then we won't do the project because we won't do it unless we do it with David. So they recanted and said, okay, you can chop up the bus.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: And it was—this woman—it was—actually, it was a very successful project. I mean, it was really good, but I had to—this was one of the biggest, one of the great lessons. I didn't tell someone how to do this yesterday, but I told him some of my other secrets. But I was working on this project and there was this woman who had just come out. So she had left her husband. She was the head of the Pittsburgh celebrate festival or whatever it was.

And she just hated me. You know, I mean, I'm from California. I'm not homophobic, you know? She, for whatever reason, thought I—I don't know, but it was like just this nightmare. I mean, it was a nightmare. And I would call home crying, I mean, literally crying when she was just sabotaging the project, right? So she had just torn me, just was hassling the hell out of me about everything. So the—you know, you can't do this here; you can't have these people, you know, blah, blah, blah.

So I called up—I went back to my hotel and I got a phone book and I got the Boy Scouts of America, right? So I called the Boy Scouts of America and I said, do you have a developmentally challenged troop? They said, yes, we do. I said, well, I'm working on a project tomorrow at this, in this—in Pittsburgh and I would like to have you bring your troop of developmentally challenged scouts out to work on this bus with me. And he said, we'd love that; we're always looking for projects for the kids. So that morning, I called up the newspaper. So the newspaper was there. The Boy Scouts of America, developmentally challenged, were there. It was on the front page of the paper. You can fuck with me all you want. You don't fuck with the Boy Scouts of America.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: You got it?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

DAVID BEST: So I brought in the Boy Scouts. After that, they had to leave me alone.

MIJA RIEDEL: Smooth sailing. And you have, I mean, the Oxbow project. So you have, over years, worked with a range of volunteers, a range of collaborators with a range of skills.

DAVID BEST: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: So this isn't, per se, anything new.

DAVID BEST: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's just bringing together different groups to make a project move forward.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, I always, I always, well, like, yeah, no, it's—I mean, I don't like crazies. You know, I don't mind crazies, but I don't like heavy crazies. You know, alcohol, drug-induced crazies I can't work with. But crazies I can—I can work with people that are not all there. That's fine. And I kind of, you know, I make a stipulation with whatever projects I'm working with, you know, that I have that leeway. I've only asked—I've asked three people in all the time that I've ever worked on a project, to leave, and that's—and there's about 10,000 people. And the only ones I've asked to leave are where I have felt that they were being either unsafe or taking my attention away from safety, you know, and they were distracting me, so I had to ask them to leave.

And that's the only—there's three people out of 10,000. So I can work with damn near anyone. The only thing I will not tolerate is safety or sexual harassment. That just doesn't work. I've never—I had on the Burning Man projects, I've asked two people to leave, actually three. I just had a third one, the first third one. My newest person was this last year. And she was a safety issue, but the other two people were sexual harassment. You know, and I just—the only thing I provide, you know, is I have to provide a safe environment, safe meaning a safe environment for a woman or a man to work in, where they're not going to be harassed.

So yeah, so the cars—so I did—God, I did the ArtCar Museum; I built a museum in Texas.

MIJA RIEDEL: You built a museum in Texas?

DAVID BEST: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't know that story.

DAVID BEST: Yeah, that was another—that's another one of those, you have three days? The Texans—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember when, David? Recently or a while ago?

DAVID BEST: Oh, it's been a number of years ago. It's been—it's still in existence.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where in Texas?

DAVID BEST: Houston.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: Ann and Jim Harithas, who are—Ann is a very good friend, a collector. And one of my more significant shows, she put together a show with myself, Larry Fuente, Jesse Lot, who is a black artist from Houston, Louise Hernandez. Do you know who Louise is?

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

DAVID BEST: And Alfonso Osario and Anna Marie Metcalf and James Metcalf, who are from Mexico City. And they put together a show called *Collision* [Lawndale Art Center, 1984] that was actually a big-deal show. It—it was credited with changing the Houston, whole Texas scene.

MIJA RIEDEL: And where was that?

DAVID BEST: It was done in an alternative space called Lawndale.

MIJA RIEDEL: Lawndale?

DAVID BEST: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And you don't remember when?

DAVID BEST: No, I have the catalogue somewhere.

MIJA RIEDEL: '90s?

DAVID BEST: No, it's a long time ago. But I don't even know if it's even in here.

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't think so, but—

DAVID BEST: It's not even in here.

MIJA RIEDEL: We're looking at the résumé. There are a few things that aren't in there, but—

DAVID BEST: Anyways, they spent—it was—they brought in people from all over, flew people in to come in to this show, big opening. They had the Neville Brothers. And then, they had—they spent a lot of money. They used to spend a lot of money. Anyways, they were—over the years, they were probably the—Ann was probably one of the key players in the art car community in terms of supporting and funding it, Ann and a woman named Marilyn Oshman, Oshman's Sporting Goods, right? So they had the—there was a thing called *the Orange Show* [Center for Visionary Art, Houston, TX] and then they—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, right.

DAVID BEST: Right? So—but Ann was one of the key players in that. So she had—always had a studio, kept a studio in Texas for Larry and I to come down and work in.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's pretty nice.

DAVID BEST: Oh, yeah, wonderful friend. I can tell you how good of a friend she is. We were—I hadn't talked to her in maybe six months. It might have been longer, about six months. And my father was in the hospital. And I

go into the hospital room and I had—like I said, I hadn't talked to her in six months and there is flowers in the hospital room. All right, and I got down to Texas later and I said to someone, I said, how did Ann know my father was in the hospital? And they said, it's Ann. She knows everything about her friends, you know, and she does. She keeps track that way.

So a number of years later, you know, my father dies. A number of years later, I could sense that Ann's mom was in the hospital. And so—she lives in Victoria, Texas. So there's two hospitals in Victoria. I called the office because it's such a big family, so they said, we can't tell you anything. I said, well, which hospital is she in? Well, we can't tell you. So I went to the florist and I had flowers sent to both hospitals for Maude Cotter. And they arrived on Mother's Day, okay? So Ann's mother died the day after the flowers arrived, right? So I'm down in Texas and Ann says, how, how, how'd you know? How'd you know my mother was in the hospital? [Laughs.] That's how Ann talks. I said, how'd you know my father was in the hospital? So that's our friendship. That's what our friendship is based on, you know? So we go back a long time.

So she wanted to do a museum, always wanted to do an art car museum. So they bought a building in Texas, called me up, and said, we've got a building. We're going to open it in a month, like a month. I think it was a month, maybe a month and a half. I think it was a month. So they had gotten this building and I immediately start chopping, chopping up the front of it, right? And the guy that owned it came by and said, what are you doing? And they hadn't made the deal yet.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Gasps.]

DAVID BEST: And, I mean, I was tearing the hell out of the building, right? So, anyways, they bought the building. So we had a month. And I completely re-skinned the outside of the building in aluminum. This is before—this is early Frank Gehry look.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: This is way before Frank Gehry did his folded stuff. So it covered the outside. I had the whole outside covered in aluminum and then built cones and points and a dome and had a big dome on the top, and Cadillac, lots of Cadillac bumpers. All chrome, the whole building was silver and chrome.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

DAVID BEST: And then, they did the inside. They put—the whole inside was renovated and—put air conditioning in and—they spent a lot of money real fast.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is this the first building you'd ever done?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, yeah. So it was, it was—I don't think I have any pictures of it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hopefully someone—is it still there?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, oh yeah. It's gone—it still looks pretty much the same. It's gone through some, you know, some hard weather because—it was put together—it was supposed to be temporary. So it was in a month and now, it's been up for I don't know how long. So they did that and then they opened another building, another space, called The Station, that's an alternative art space. But Jim is a real political guy so The Station only shows, you know, Palestinian art or, you know, all real left political stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And that's still there.

DAVID BEST: He was the curator of the Buffalo museum and then the museum in D.C., the Hirshhorn?

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay, yeah.

DAVID BEST: And then he got fired from the Hirshhorn. He's been fired from a lot of jobs. Then he was the head, the director of the Contemporary Arts Museum in Houston.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

DAVID BEST: Then he got fired from that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Huh.

DAVID BEST: So he'd get—he used to get in fist fights. He's a real macho, aggressive guy. He's gotten a little bit mellow, but not a lot. But anyway, so they commissioned me to do the ArtCar Museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, I'm going to pause this because this disc is about to end.

[END OF best07_3of4_MD_track06.]

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing David Best at the artist's home and studio Petaluma, California, on December 9, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number four.

We're just winding up about the art cars and getting ready to talk about Black Rock. Just—

DAVID BEST: Black Rock Arts Foundation.

MIJA RIEDEL: David, you had just said that you've done 38 cars to date and one and a half buses. And we were just starting to talk about Black Rock Arts Foundation.

DAVID BEST: Yup. I'm actually going to do one more car.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, you are?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, to have one for myself.

MIJA RIEDEL: For yourself? What is it?

DAVID BEST: It's a Miata.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, a little convertible?

DAVID BEST: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And do you know what you're going to do with it?

DAVID BEST: No. I'm going to chop it up. I know that.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why have you decided to do one for yourself after all of these years? Is this the first?

DAVID BEST: I've got the Cadillac out there, but I can't stand the Cadillac. I always, you know, I always say I'm going to do one for myself and ended up doing—I just—there's no method to my madness.

The Black Rock Arts Foundation—

MIJA RIEDEL: You've been working with them since you started doing Burning Man in 2000?

DAVID BEST: No, no. I've only been on the board of the Black Rock Arts Foundation for, I think, three years now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: It's a non-profit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: Again, this is like the Google and the coffee and watching my dogs play.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: I was asked to be on the board of the Black Rock Arts Foundation. I don't know exactly—you know, I kind of—because they have a good reputation with the Burning Man community, I guess it was a good person—I was a good person to be on it. I had never had any experience working with a non-profit or working on a board. And our first meeting, I came away really puzzled and called up my father-in-law, who had worked in the Kennedy administration, and I said, I don't know what the hell these guys are talking about.

He said, don't worry. He said, they're just—they're speaking English; it's just a different type of English. And he said, you just have to—you'll have to learn what they're talking about. And they were using board terms, right? You know, they're saying stencil, meaning the stencil, not like a silkscreen stencil, but a stencil to repeat a concept or something. Anyway, I really enjoy it. It's—what the vision of the Black Rock Arts Foundation is is to kind of take what the Burning Man experience is and bring it out into the community.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

DAVID BEST: And to support art installations that will empower and help to change situations. I forget what our

bylaws say. They say something else; it's a nicer description. I can get it and read it to you, but—to work with the—civic, to work with the government. And so, it's—I've seen, you know, in the three years that I've worked with the board, I've seen a real change in terms of where we've gone, where we're—you know, our budget and how much money we're starting to get to raise and where we're accessing things. You know, it started with working on the—they used one of the things I did. They used the Hayes Green as a pilot to kind of get access to working with the mayor's office and with the arts commission.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was an amazing project. It was a temporary installation that was to coincide with the Green Cities Conference, an international conference, 40 mayors, I think, from around the world, that coincided with the anniversary of the signing of the U.N. charter in San Francisco, right?

DAVID BEST: Right, yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right? The 50th or 60th anniversary? And it was the first, well, it was the second urban temple built, the second temple built outside of Burning Man. Is that correct?

DAVID BEST: Yeah, and it was—the whole premise was there was no temporary art installation space in San Francisco. So this—because we kept using that term, temporary art installation, we ended up establishing that Hayes Green as the first official temporary art site in San Francisco. And Gavin Newsom got behind that and the arts commission got behind it. So now, installations can go up for a month or two months. The thing that backfired is that, because I was on the board, someone, an investigative reporter, inquired to the appropriateness of me being on the board and receiving a grant to do the Hayes Green project. And, you know, I had—what is the word when you abstain from voting?

MIJA RIEDEL: Recuse?

DAVID BEST: Recused—I recused myself from voting. But they felt that it was still inappropriate that I was given a grant. And I couldn't argue with them. I mean, that's how they saw it; that's how they saw it. I mean, the reality is that it cost me probably \$6,000 out of my pocket to do the project, you know, as well as raising the money to do it. But that's—what's happened now is because of that. I'll probably have to drop, quit the board because I want to do Detroit. And if I go ahead with Detroit, I'll be facing the same problem, you know?

But yeah, that was—I'm going to join another board.

MIJA RIEDEL: Which is that?

DAVID BEST: Friends of the Black Rock Desert.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

DAVID BEST: Which is an organization that is protecting the Black Rock Desert, which is where the event is, is also where land-speed records are held. It's where amateur rocket people shoot their rockets off. It's where naturalists go. It's where elk hunters go. It's where off-road motorcycle people go. So it's a recreation area that needs to be protected and being on the board will help me—I will be part of a group of people that are ensuring that the Black Rock Desert is preserved for all kinds of recreation, not just Burning Man, and that it will be, you know, survived. It won't be, you know, made into a parking lot or something.

MIJA RIEDEL: Going back for one second to the Black Rock Arts Foundation, it's interesting because it seems, again, that that intersection of art and commerce is where things tend to get tricky in your work. Burning Man was going just fine but when you join the board, the conflict of interest becomes more of an issue.

DAVID BEST: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: And has that in anyway affected your thoughts about making temples at Burning Man? Was that part of the reason you decided not to do it or are [those decisions] independent?

DAVID BEST: No, I mean, no, that didn't have anything to do with it. I mean, it's like anytime—well, you know, now I think I'm talking to somebody that's going to hear this, you know, and I think, you know, the price you pay to do something is being vulnerable, you know. And I think if, you know—I mean, I'm feeling like we're winding down on some things and trying to get to the—to summarize how I feel about things is that you have to take a chance. And, you know, like I said about the welded steel tractor that made me feel bad, you know, or someone challenging me for my integrity on being on a board made me feel bad. If you don't put yourself out there, you don't ever have to feel bad, you know; but if you put yourself out there, that's the price you pay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: And it's a pain the ass but it's all part of it, you know. It's like you can't always think your work is good. You know, your work isn't always good. Things that you do aren't always going to go smoothly, you know. So no, that type of thing affects me just like the tractor affected me. It's just like spilling water on a watercolor affects me. You know, all this stuff, you know—everybody would like a perfect world where you don't get challenged or have things not go right. But it didn't—what it affects is just—it's just stupid that it interferes with—you know, I just have to figure out another way to still manifest my vision for supporting the Black Rock Arts Foundation.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: I just can't be on the board now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: But I'll be damned if I'm going to let that keep me from that joy that I had, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: —with working on the board. I will have to figure out how to do it without being on the board. No, the thing about not doing the temple is, you know, it's a mixture. I mean, you know, without getting too much—well, it doesn't matter. You can edit what doesn't work anyway. You know, this last year the raves are taking over.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: You know, I mean they were—

MIJA RIEDEL: The big, all night, dance parties.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: I mean, they really are having—they're stronger. They're more powerful than, you know—it's like I saw it. I mean, if you were to look at this silhouette of the desert, at one point there was the man. You know, and that was a fun thing. It was the man and then it was the temple. And they were two fairly pronounced parts of the culture. Now, with the increase of the population to 40,000 and these people are now—the art car has gotten to the point where people have figured out, okay, they won't let us do an art car unless we do a radical thing. So we'll do a radical thing. So now, there are buses. There are two-story buses running around with neon and Day-Glo and fluorescent lights on them and stuff, right.

So the landscape is now taken over with thousands of glowing sparkling things so that the temple, even though the temple was 60-feet tall, starts to look like a small structure within a city. It's taken it over and it eventually will become—just like in our cities, you know. You see churches kind of disappearing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: You know, Jiffy Lubes and Costcos. So Burning Man is getting Costcos and stuff like that now. So it's the importance of the temple. It's always there but it's, I think, you know, I don't feel like I'm ready to go to battle the ravers and the loud music people. I just, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: How did the concept of the temple first come to you because you had never done temples until Burning Man, right?

DAVID BEST: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Oh, well, you know, it was an accident, you know. I mean, it wasn't—I had found that material.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was it the dinosaur kits?

DAVID BEST: The dinosaur stuff and I just kind of liked it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was wood or balsa—no.

DAVID BEST: It was birch plywood.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

DAVID BEST: Yes and I kind of liked the look of it. I actually showed it to my friend Jack and he hated it.

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Jack Haye, who you collaborate with.

DAVID BEST: Yes, and Jack said, oh God, I hate this stuff. It's no good, you know. And I said, I don't know, Jack. I think it's pretty cool and he hated it. I mean, really hated it.

So I had this material and this young kid that I was working with—a kid named Michael Heflin—

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: —who was a Shakespearean actor and just an all around hell raiser. A talented kid, you know, and he was just coming out of trouble and bad areas and was getting to the place where he was going to start, you know, going somewhere. And I was very fond of him and he kind of was using me as a role model and I was, you know, being that role model. He was killed about a week before we went to the desert, going 140 miles an hour on a motorcycle. So, you know, in retrospect, would you say he was killed or killed himself, you know? So he died on a motorcycle and when we went to the desert a lot of the kids that were working with us—we were going to build something, you know. But—

MIJA RIEDEL: Wasn't decided what yet.

DAVID BEST: Yes, it was just a big structure, you know, and, you know, was going to be an ornate house thing. But as we were building it, it became a tribute to Michael because these kids had never had death before. So in addition to them, about a thousand other people came and put names of people that they had lost in it, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: They actually wrote them on the temple.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was somebody's idea or did it happen spontaneously?

DAVID BEST: Just automatic. Just spontaneous. So next year, when Burning Man asked me to come back and build a temple, to build another one, then it became a temple. So it just evolved, you know. And, you know, I was saying to—who the hell was I talking to? Someone that was an architect, I think. I was talking to an architect about the evolution—or a city planner. It might have been a city planner—in the evolution of the city, that what had happened to Burning Man—or was it an architect I was talking to—was that Burning Man had all of a sudden reached its population. It had reached its peak of height. You can only go so high during eating ecstasy, you know, so you're as high as you can get and the population had gotten to the point where there was no place for a low.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: There was port-a-potties. There was the fire department. There's a police department. There's medical. You know, there's café for coffee but there's no place for reflection. So it just was an obvious void that if I hadn't done it, someone else would have or something would have identified itself as a temple because the community needed it, you know. And I think, you know, although that seems to be my argument and justification of why a temple happened. I don't know if we need them in our culture now. I think we've pretty much numbed ourselves so we don't need one.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, though, because when you had the Hayes Green temple—I went to see it a few times, and there were always people there sitting right in—

DAVID BEST: So they were using it. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: I was never there when there weren't people coming and going, staying, spending time there, walking through, bringing people to see it.

DAVID BEST: Yes, okay, well, you know, I mean, I'm just still trying to figure out if, you know—there's, you know Francis Coppola's wife is talking about trying to do something. I don't know. You know, well, I'll see what Detroit does.

MIJA RIEDEL: But again, that will be temporary as well.

DAVID BEST: No, no. Detroit's permanent.

MIJA RIEDEL: Permanent.

DAVID BEST: Yes, Detroit's permanent. Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: The Hayes Green temple was supposed to be a couple months, right?

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: You ended up stretching to about six.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: I have a friend in the neighborhood and she said that everyone was really so sad to see that go.

DAVID BEST: Yes, it would have been nice to make it last longer.

MIJA RIEDEL: It really suited that space.

DAVID BEST: Yes, compared to the others.

MIJA RIEDEL: I saw one other project there but I haven't seen anything since.

DAVID BEST: No, there's some other things but they're kind of art things. So with the Black Rock Arts Foundation, it was a, you know, it was a nice—they still want me to stay on the board and we're still trying to figure out if I can stay on the board and do Detroit.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

DAVID BEST: Or if it's going to be an ethical question. So that would be—do we need more on that?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

DAVID BEST: No.

[END OF best07_4of4_MD_track01.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Well, I think we have done a great job of covering most of this.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: The one thing we've talked about, I think, briefly when we talked about Wally Hedrick, but then we really haven't addressed head on are the major influences in you career.

DAVID BEST: Right. Well, probably the most important influence in my life was my father, who at six years old, brought me to the Art Institute.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: So I'd probably say that John Best was probably the most important influence in my life. I had an aunt who thought I was an artist when I was a little kid. So that probably had a great impact on me. I would say, in an odd way, you know, my brother is also an artist and I would say probably, even though as painful as a relationship as I've had with my brother over many, many years, I'd say probably that we both still—even though I don't see him hardly at all, I would say that he had an influence on my life as a brother and as an artist and that we both, you know, kind of continually marvel that we're both still artists, you know, and that that became our professions.

So, kind of surprising that, you know, when I think of influences that probably I would say my family influenced me in a lot of ways. Again, the wonderful museums for a young kid to see, the San Francisco museum, that was an eye-opener, you know, and I'd say that if I were looking at it like getting an Academy Award and saying thank you for my influences, I would have to thank the San Francisco museum and the de Young, you know, the Legion of Honor [Museum, San Francisco] has all influenced me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you remember any artists in particular when you were younger that—we've talked about Pollock and—

DAVID BEST: Oh, probably—

MIJA RIEDEL: *Art in America*.

DAVID BEST: —gosh, I'm trying to—at that point I was so young I wouldn't have known what I was looking at, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you knew Abstract Expressionist, right?

DAVID BEST: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You learned—

DAVID BEST: Yes, Abstract Expressionist probably—I can't even recall what work I would have seen at the di Young or the Palace Legion at, whatever, nine years old, you know. The people that, you know, or artists that inspired me, who are all the Bay area people because I grew up in San Francisco, you know. I mean, as a young, young kid, everybody would have probably thought of Benny Bufano, you know, not that I think of Benny Bufano as having anything more to do with me except that he was an artist in the town that I grew up in, you know.

So from there, all of the people, you know, that were there at the time; Joan Brown and—

MIJA RIEDEL: Jay DeFeo, I think you mentioned.

DAVID BEST:—Jay DeFeo, Wally, you know, Bruce Conner, Art Grant. You know, Art Grant had a real influence on me because he was—I was at one point, when I was a young kid wondering around trying to figure what the hell to do, Art Grant looked at me and said, you're supposed to be an artist. He said, you're supposed to be an artist and that was, you know—I mean, how old was I? Twenty-five?

MIJA RIEDEL: Had he seen your work?

DAVID BEST: No. No. Just, you're supposed to be an artist. You know, that was a pretty good influence, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: A drafting teacher named Richard Sungali, who taught me how to draw as a draftsman. I got his name—

MIJA RIEDEL: Was that at the Art Institute?

DAVID BEST: No, he was in high school. I've got his name written down on one of my checkbooks somewhere to call him and thank him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Hmm, Richard Sungali.

DAVID BEST: Yes. Just a drafting teacher but as I work on these temples and these projects that I'm doing, it all goes back to the discipline that he struggled to teach me.

MIJA RIEDEL: Terry Fox, too, I think we talked about.

DAVID BEST: Well, Terry Fox was not so much an influence as a—I'd say Terry Fox was more of a—God, what would that—he would be a—what's a thorn in your side?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: Huh.

MIJA RIEDEL: It could be an influence that's not necessarily an easy one.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, yes.

DAVID BEST: Yes, he's—

MIJA RIEDEL: Why a thorn in your side?

DAVID BEST: Well, he's just tougher. You know, he's a tougher, you know—I was more of an object maker. Conceptual people, you know, they used to be—they were snottier. Either they were snottier or the object people were snottier but somewhere there was not like object makers and performance people were not exactly best of buddies. At least I didn't feel they were, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you feel you straddle those two worlds in a way?

DAVID BEST: [Laughs]—probably, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, I think so. Yes, I do and, you know, I'm not necessarily

that fond of myself either. [They laugh.] That was a pretty good quick—that was quick. Yes, Terry Fox I wouldn't say a strong influence on me. By the time I went to school I was already married and had kids so I was having to work to sell art to make a living. And I'm trying to think of who, you know, like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Manuel Neri.

DAVID BEST: Well, I'd say more that—yes, Manuel—God, you know, like I'm drawing right now. I'd have to go look at the drawing and see if Manuel came into last night or not. I don't think of Manuel as an influence as much as somebody that I admire. I mean, you could look at some of Neri's work and see—you could see Manuel or [Nathan] Oliveira in my work if you looked at it, you know. If you were to stencil—put something over it, you could probably see both of those people. But I think more it's I admire Manuel and I admire Oliveira. I admire Neri more than Oliveira. And, I mean, I think, you know, people like [William T.] Wiley—God, I mean, Wiley is so good. He's so good. I mean, I like Wiley's work a lot, you know. I wouldn't want to be influenced by Wiley, you know. There's not enough room for two Wileys, you know. [They laugh.]

No, anytime I find even traces of Wiley coming into my work I throw it out, you know. I mean, I'm real territorial about that. I'm pretty territorial about who comes into my work, you know. When I do a collaboration with the community or public, that's a whole different thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: And even that, when I was talking with Jack about that—I hope this is all answering the question of influences. Jack said, well, yes. He was talking about—he was working on this project with me. He says, well, I'm going to make sure they don't take any tools and you'll make sure they don't put the wrong thing in the wrong place. And I have this free-form as it looks, and as chaotic as it looks, and as collaborative as it looks, the closest I can get to is when I was in the army and I refused to shoot the targets right. So I would be at the rifle range and I would just shoot over in the left or the right. All the time I was screwing around and not hitting the target, I always knew exactly where the bullet was going, right. So I'm very deliberate about even collaboration, you know. And so, when I say I'm territorial about what I let into my work, you know, I'm pretty critical of my stuff if I see things—I mean, like I said, how it affected me to see that tractor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: So if I see Wiley coming into my work—I mean, I've done direct copies of Wiley, you know, and Bob Hudson because I was interested in Hudson's thing or I was interest in Wiley's line. But I destroyed it instantly, you know. It never went out at the studio. It never went outside. I mean, right now, I think probably I'm looking at—I'm thinking if I were to go into the studio, I'll show you the drawings I'm thinking of Oldenberg, Christo, Larry Rivers, Jasper Johns right now.

And I'm thinking of all four of those people for their drawing ability, you know. So that's what—when I go in and look at the drawings—and there's an Oliveira in there too, in the studio right now that I'm fighting with, you know. So I mean, their presence is what I—you know, when I work I think of those. I can look at it and say, oh, that looks like—I mean, and most people wouldn't find that, you know. But I mean, I could show you where I was thinking of Jasper Johns. But whether someone's going to go, oh yes, that looks just like Jasper Johns drawing, you know, or more if it's the gesture or the manner. Other people, I mean, God, there's a lot of people that have done things for me and have been good to me and helped me who I admire, you know, and—

MIJA RIEDEL: How about in terms of inspiration?

DAVID BEST: Yes, in terms of inspiration, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Where do you find that these days?

DAVID BEST: Well, I have to say, dammit, you know, and it's—last night all hell broke loose in the house so I wished I didn't have to say this, you know, but I would say that, you know, my inspiration has always been Maggie, has always been my inspiration. Good and bad, you know, and I am not a person that you would want to inspire.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why do you say that?

DAVID BEST: Because I get really pissed off.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs]—if someone inspires you?

DAVID BEST: Well, yes. Well, you know, inspiration means push. It doesn't mean push but for me, to inspire me

MIJA RIEDEL: I see, challenges.

DAVID BEST: —means to, you know, shove me out the door and make me go back to the studio and work. I mean, what I find in there comes from who knows what. I mean, I just pretend that I'm doing something and then I end up doing it. You know, I mean, there is no—huh—there is no reason for me to do anything, you know. I mean, it's like I have to pretend it all. I mean, I have to make up a column that's going to have plastic bottles on it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: I mean, there's no, hey, let's go make a glass thing with plastic bottles on it or let's make something out of tires. I mean, I have to make that up, you know, because—I mean, I'm trying to Google a book on making something out of plastic tires but there isn't a thing on tires. So that inspiration comes from who knows what. The clutter around me, you know, but the inspiration to go to work always comes from Maggie, you know. I mean, she's never allowed me not to work, you know. And I kind of credit my kids as well. They're not as good as it as Maggie. I mean, Maggie has had 30 years of experience of inspiring me, you know. They're behind me a lot, which is an inspiration, you know.

But then, what makes me figure something out? Drawing it, you know. Drawing is well.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, always go to that.

DAVID BEST: Yes, drawing is what always gives me my answers, you know, is to draw. You know, it's like—I mean, I love to draw. You know, it's magic to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: It seems also from time to time as you fall in love with the new material, that that's inspiration as well.

DAVID BEST: Yes

MIJA RIEDEL: It's just running the course with that material until you've—

DAVID BEST: Yes, and it's really funny that how—because these people in Detroit who—let's see, I'm trying to think of how to put this in a nice way. My friend Ann said her father—Ann has this wonderful voice and says, my father always said, little men and little animals are both the same. They're mean as hell. [Laughs.] You know, and what I mean is, you know, that Detroit in their little innocent way of thinking that whatever they thought they were trying to say to me or communicate by their thing, they didn't realize what a nasty little animal I am, you know. And, you know, I mean, that's like, okay, I'll show them another concept, you know, but I'll be damned. You're not going to be able to do it—the only way you can do it is you have to fall in love with the tire, you know. You can't—you know, the only way that piece is going to work, you know, is you can't just draw some tires and make it. You got to love them, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting, too, because this piece feels very specific to the location. The material feels very specific to the site, which I don't think of that, I mean, in any of the other temples so far.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: But the tire and the location, they feel very much related.

DAVID BEST: Yes, it's going to fit. I think it'll fit there. The tire has been in and out of my life for a long time, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Clearly.

DAVID BEST: I mean, I remember when Maggie and I were first together when we were in the little house, I had a Pirelli tire sitting in the living room for a while.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

DAVID BEST: Ask Maggie. I'd get a tire once a month.

MIJA RIEDEL: Just to have a tire around.

DAVID BEST: I do, yes, just have a tire around.

MIJA RIEDEL: And even long before this project? You just had tires?

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. What is it about it? The material is clearly is part of it.

DAVID BEST: I don't know. It's a love-hate relationship. If you're a car freak, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: If you're a car freak it's a big part of—it's one-fourth of the picture, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: You have to have four wheels to make a car go.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: They're just something, you know—there's something elegant about a tire. There's something about it that has an elegance to me but for this project, you know, I'm really developing that. So other inspirations, God, you know, friends always give me a lot, you know. Friends give me a lot, you know, and it's such an honor, you know, and such a privilege. You know, like I said to you many times throughout this interview, to be considered an artist, to have somebody take the time to take your picture or to write an article about you or to ask you something, I mean, that's like, God, you know, how many artists get that opportunity or that respect? Not many, you know, and that's like—I mean, that's inspiring. You know, I can—like I said, I can do anything with the slightest bit of faith shown to me, you know. And I'll do absolutely nothing when I'm doubted, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

DAVID BEST: So that might be inspiration, is someone's confidence in me, you know. What inspires you?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] This is one of the things.

DAVID BEST: Is it?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

DAVID BEST: Does your husband inspire you?

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] This interview is about you, David. We'll have that conversation later.

DAVID BEST: What? What did you say?

MIJA RIEDEL: This interview is about you.

DAVID BEST: Well, that's why I'm asking you the question. [They laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: We'll have that conversation after the tape ends.

DAVID BEST: Well, that's as much a part of me—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's true.

DAVID BEST: —as any other part, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: I have actually thought about that. I know that sometimes that is a difficult part of the interview process, especially with certain artists who are much happier or more comfortable having a conversation. It's much more—

DAVID BEST: Yes, no, I'm much more—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes and I know that.

DAVID BEST: Well, I don't mind—

MIJA RIEDEL: And I appreciate you making an exception in this case. [They laugh.]

DAVID BEST: No, I mean, I can—it's like I wished I could reach that one, that description that what's his name did. You know, the artist about public art. Who did I say his name was? It's not that one. I'd have to dig that up but—what the hell is his name. It's not Robert Smithson but he's one of the New York guys, a minimalist. But anyway, and he just was so dry. And, you know, there's no way I could talk that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, the fellow you were just talking about.

DAVID BEST: Yes, the one I was talking about.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. I can't remember who that was.

DAVID BEST: I'm going to have to get the book and show you because it's great. Let me get it.

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DAVID BEST: I think it's in here. It was just so good because it's so dry and, not to be boring, but I thought if I showed you this you'd see the difference between—look, temporarily and public art. I want to find this because it just was so—Robert Morris. Yes, here we go. Yes. I mean, "It has always seemed to me that when an artist has asked to speak about his work that one of two assumptions is being made. One that because he has made something he has anything to say about it, or two, if he does, he would want to. Questionable assumptions, in my opinion." [They laugh.] "But in my case, I was not asked. I was told. It was part of my contract and I couldn't get it changed. In any case, one should not forget Claes Oldenburg's remark that anyone who listens to an artist talk should have his eyes examined."

[They laugh.]

DAVID BEST: "Now, the work I came out here to do has even started"—but it gets into here is where he gets him. "I would like to address the question what is public art but the very question suggest further questions rather than answers. For example—" I mean, it's just he's so mature.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what would you say about public art?

DAVID BEST: [Laughs.] What would I say about public art? Got to be cheap.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's a starting point.

DAVID BEST: It's got to be cheap. What would I say about public art? God, I don't—

MIJA RIEDEL: What public art have you done? How is that different from the—the public art, how is different from your individual work?

DAVID BEST: God, there's a difference.

MIJA RIEDEL: I mean, they're always collaborative, all the public pieces are always collaborative.

DAVID BEST: Yes—I like the public stuff better. That's not the difference. The difference is—

MIJA RIEDEL: You like the public stuff better.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why, do you think? What is it about it?

DAVID BEST: Gosh, no, I mean, I was trying to see what the difference is between the two. I'm fascinated by the fact that it's not possessed, okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it's also temporary—

DAVID BEST: Yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: —as public art.

DAVID BEST: I like things that are not possessed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

DAVID BEST: You know, once they've become a possession—and that doesn't mean I don't mind—I mean, I make objects. I make drawings like the drawings I want people to have them, you know. I mean I'm making them

thinking, God, this would be fun. I hope someone likes these, you know. But the possession thing, you know, I'm not sure if—I'm trying to think of what I've—some of the objects I've made over the years have really backfired on me, you know. You know, they've just become that. They've become these objects, you know, and that maybe is the influence of those damn people like Terry Fox, the performance people. Art shouldn't just be an object, you know. But I don't know, I mean, it's like, I like objects, you know, but I like less some of my objects than others, you know. And bigger things don't seem to be objects, you know. They seem to go to some other thing if that makes sense.

MIJA RIEDEL: It makes a lot of sense.

DAVID BEST: Yes, so they're different, you know. Yes, that's it.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's it?

DAVID BEST: Good.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fabulous. Thank you much.

DAVID BEST: Did you have a good time?

MIJA RIEDEL: I had a great time.

DAVID BEST: Good.

MIJA RIEDEL: How about you?

DAVID BEST: Yes, thank you.

MIJA RIEDEL: Good.

DAVID BEST: It's been a real honor.

MIJA RIEDEL: Thank you. It's been a real pleasure, David. Thanks so much.

DAVID BEST: It was fun. It was a good job.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well done, thank you.

DAVID BEST: That was fun.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was.

DAVID BEST: Yes.

[END OF best07_4of4_MD_track04.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]