



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Barbara Lee  
Smith, 2009 March 16-17

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

**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/askus](http://www.aaa.si.edu/askus)

# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Barbara Lee Smith on March 16 and 17, 2009. The interview took place at the Artist's studio in Gig Harbor, Washington, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Barbara Lee Smith and Mija Riedel have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, interviewing Barbara Lee Smith at the artist's studio in Gig Harbor, Washington, on March 16, 2009. And this is disc number one.

We have decided to begin today with a description of your fabulous studio where we're now sitting in Gig Harbor. And what body of water are we looking at?

BARBARA LEE SMITH: We're looking at Lay Inlet, which is part of Puget Sound. It has 12- to 13-foot tides, so I get to watch the tides come in and go out. It smells right. It smells salty, like the ocean.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: That's very important to me. Come springtime, I'll come home, and I'll be smelling the cedar and the salt. And there's something very powerful about that combination for me.

MS. RIEDEL: This studio really offers wonderful insight into your work – the emphasis on nature, the ways of framing nature, the ways of looking at it, the different light, the different weather. It was very much a deliberate choice of yours to move here – seven or eight years ago - 2000?

MS. SMITH: Let's see. Two thousand. Nine years ago, almost, now. We had been looking at the Northwest for many years. It was a place where I came to teach, and felt that I had come home. We had lived in Chicago [IL] for 30-some years, and actually, our 39th wedding anniversary is this weekend. So I can say it's 30 years and nine years. And we both really loved the Northwest. My husband loves to sail, and he really likes to be on the water. I like to be next to the water.

So we found this little island through our friend Jill Nordfors Clark, and just fell in love with it, and found this old A-frame [house] that was a little bit tumbledown, but we figured we can do things. We always have worked on reclaiming wherever we've lived. We've just – that's just been something we seem to do. We live in the middle of a construction zone most of our lives, I think.

There was an old concrete pad here for a potential garage, and we decided this would be a great spot to make a garage with a studio over it. We worked with our son, who's an architect and builder in North Carolina – his name is [Randall] Randy Lanou – designing it, and built it in 2001, finishing it in 2002.

The studio is filled with light –

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: – and has wonderful views, framed from upper windows that bring in lots of light. We are facing northeast, so for the most part we have good north light here. And the ceilings – it's a shed roof, and so the ceilings go up to, oh, I forget how high that ceiling is over there, probably about 14 or 16 feet, maybe, coming down to 12 feet, as I recall. So one wall is covered, so it eliminates the view, but it's the view of my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: I pin into it and work on it, and I use it constantly. The other – its opposing wall has my other love in my life, which is books, and bookcases, and storage areas, big tables on which to work, lots of good, balanced fluorescent lights.

MS. RIEDEL: Sewing machine.

MS. SMITH: And a big sewing machine and two smaller sewing machines, which are down under where I'm sitting right now. It has a small kitchen and a little bathroom that works just fine for me up here. Underneath it,

I've claimed half of the garage, and I have a painting area down there where I can make a mess. And that's very useful.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, start the work down there.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, too, just looking 360 degrees around the studio, because we have the fabulous views of the water. We have the beautiful views climbing up into the trees, so you really feel that we're in this forest. And then we come around, and we have your interpretations and ways of looking at this sort of world, seeing your two pieces pinned here on the wall.

MS. SMITH: Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, which pieces are these?

MS. SMITH: This is *The Narrows* [2005] on your right, and *West Northwest* [2005] on the left. I came out here having done geometric work although – the color certainly always referred to water and light and air, but I had no idea that living in this particular place would so affect my work that I would come full circle, to doing much more representational work.

Now, these two pieces that you're looking at, *The Narrows* and *West Northwest*, I don't think of as totally representational. There are suggestions of water and energy and buildings in the Narrows. And movement, certainly. It was constructed during the time that they were building the second bridge across the Tacoma Narrows [Bridge, Tacoma, WA]. The first bridge, or its predecessor, is the one that everyone in high school physics classes gets to see, Galloping Gertie –

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MS. SMITH: – move and fall into the brink.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: And so everybody remembers the Tacoma Narrows Bridge that, in the '40s, six months after it was built, took a dive.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: Then the second one was built a couple of years later, and it's still there. The new bridge sort of matches it, but is made out of different materials. And it slowed down traffic for five years while this bridge was being constructed. It was so fascinating to cross the bridge and see how they built this one-mile span. It was very exciting. I loved the energy that went into all of it.

So *The Narrows* has these sort of ghostlike pilings that come up and out of the water. Then there's lots of movement made with these constructed arrows of color that I think of as the power of the tides that go back and forth within the Narrows. So that's what that piece is partly all about.

And *West Northwest*, I mean, the whole idea of moving myself to the Northwest was kind of tricky.

Working all right, the sound?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Just –

MS. SMITH: Okay. Good. Just moving into an area where you are reminded– the locals, the natives, of which there are not that many –

MS. RIEDEL: I would imagine.

MS. SMITH: But the ones that are here like to remind you that even if you lived here for 40 years, like one friend's husband has, he's not a native. He's from Minnesota. He's not from here. So what am I, you know? I've been here nine years, so that makes me just one of these relative newcomers. Yet I'm tolerated, partly because – I hate to say this, but I'm not from California because –

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: It's true. It's true.

MS. SMITH: It is true. But we're from Illinois, and oh, they can feel sorry for us because of the rotten weather in

Illinois. So it's one of those funny things. I've absorbed this place so much, and I read this wonderful statement. I don't know whether it was by Mary Jane Jacob or Jacquelynn Baas, in a marvelous book called *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* [Jacquelyn Baas and Mary Jane Jacobs. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004], which is one of my favorite books, that an artist doesn't need to be from a place; an artist needs to be in a place.

So I just remind my local native friends, "Okay. Come on. I'm in this place and you can't move me from it, and I'm going to express what I feel about it." And so I think this piece, *West Northwest*, has some of that sense of awe at the power of the beauty of the Northwest, flying over forests, and the incredible pathways of water that Puget Sound is, that it is an awesome part of the country. I feel very at home, despite the fact that I'm not a native.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And the stitching on that piece just really takes on, again, especially, that sense of the topographic line.

MS. SMITH: Absolutely, yes. No question.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. [Inaudible] mapping.

MS. SMITH: I have worked with the ideas of maps, actually, since graduate school, when I first did four of them that were about the four elements, earth, air, fire, and water. I can't remember what the name of them was, something "with Map," [*Landscape with Map*, 1978; *Airscape with Map*, 1978; *Seascape with Map*, 1978; *Smokescape with Map*, 1978], and so the idea of the legend of the map that takes you around nature in some way. One of the things that's intrigued me for years is what we as humans do to mitigate living with nature. We build bridges, or we have boats, or we make maps, and we build houses. Certainly, I've been involved in a lot of construction zones, as I said. We make windows so we can be outside as well as protected inside.

That whole idea of what we do with nature, or to make ourselves comfortable – at home, at one – a little more at ease with awesome nature. You flew in during a nasty storm yesterday. And I grew up – and you probably did, too – with hurricanes. Growing up in the tip end of New Jersey, the warnings would go from Cape Hatteras [NC] to Cape May [NJ] to Block Island [RI]. I mean, that's the way they would talk about the hurricanes.

Out here we live with, not with that kind of nastiness, but we live with the surprise of earthquakes. And that's in itself a whole different kind of nature run amuck, as it were. And in Illinois, it was tornadoes. So there are these things about nature that every once in a while reminds us: "Excuse me, I'm in charge."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: We need these little life support systems, whether it's maps or boats or bridges, to find our way, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think that's a perfect segue back to the East Coast, where you grew up, and this full circle that we're talking about. You spent a lot of time growing up in Cape May, and certainly nature, the immensity of nature there, is extremely moving.

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. It's wonderful. It was a great place to grow up.

MS. RIEDEL: But you were born in Camden?

MS. SMITH: I was born in Camden, New Jersey, 1938.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] What was the date?

MS. SMITH: April Fool's Day.

MS. RIEDEL: April Fool's Day?

MS. SMITH: April 1, 1938, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: And my parents – I think I was about 18 months old when we moved from there. My dad was a Methodist minister, and his church was in Camden, and –

MS. RIEDEL: What was his name, Barbara?

MS. SMITH: John Pemberton. And –

MS. RIEDEL: And your mother?

MS. SMITH: Ruth.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And you had one older brother. Is that right?

MS. SMITH: I have an older brother and an older sister.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. SMITH: My brother is also John Pemberton. He's the third [John Pemberton III].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: And my sister, Jane Buckley, is a quilt maker.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: And my brother is an African Art historian and is connected peripherally with the Smithsonian [Institution]. I think he's program chair for the board of the African museum [National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC] at the Smithsonian right now. He's an incredible scholar.

MS. SMITH: Yes. Primarily about Yoruba art, you said.

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

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's his specialty.

MS. SMITH: Right. But it's pronounced YOR-uba. I have to correct you on that because he would not like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah-ha. Well, let's correct that.

MS. SMITH: Right. Exactly. Southwest Nigeria, that's his primary focus - that's what he's been known for.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: He just did a marvelous exhibition of African beadwork at the Smith College museum ["African Beaded Art: Power and Adornment," Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, MA, February 1 - June 15, 2008] last year and - I'll show you the catalogue for that.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting that all three of you have gone into the arts.

MS. SMITH: In some way or other, yeah. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's very unusual.

MS. SMITH: Art and music seemed to be what was emphasized as we were growing up.

MS. RIEDEL: And your father was a Methodist minister?

MS. SMITH: A Methodist minister. We lived in Ocean Grove, New Jersey, which is really Methodist heaven, you know - I mean, that's a serious, "Methodist till I die" kind of place - and then moved to Poughkeepsie, New York, in - I don't know what year exactly they moved. I could probably check my mother's diaries, since I have a lot of her diaries. But I do remember Pearl Harbor [December 7, 1941] in Poughkeepsie. I was three, and -

MS. RIEDEL: Poughkeepsie, New York. On the Hudson. Right?

MS. SMITH: New York. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And then - well, I must have been in first grade, so five, six, seven, something like that - he was given the job of being the district superintendent for the Methodist conference there, and moved to Kingston, New York. I think we lasted there no more than about six months. It might have been a year and a half, but I'm not sure, because what do little kids know at that point? I just remember coming into a new town and meeting new people as a little kid.

He, I think, did not really like administrative work at all. And at some point or other, they had purchased five acres with a little farmhouse on it in Cape May County outside of the town of Cape May, and we would go there for summers - my brother and sister and I, with our mother - my dad would come down sometimes during the week because he mostly worked on weekends.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And he was always the guest minister at the Baptist church down there. He actually really loved to hunt and fish. I was of a different generation of child from my brother and sister, who were seven and 10 years older than I was, and I think my dad was getting more into the mode of, do I really want to work this hard with the church, or do I want to do the things I love to do?

I think that he went down to Cape May and became a Baptist minister, and changed out of the Methodist [church] to become a Baptist – partly because he really just loved it down there. He stayed there for many years, until the '70s – when he and my mother moved down to start a new church for the Baptists, for the American Baptists, in St. Petersburg.

MS. RIEDEL: In Florida?

MS. SMITH: Yeah. He retired from there, then.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that a difficult transition, from being a Methodist minister to Baptist? Did you have any sense of that?

MS. SMITH: The only thing I remember is that my mother used to say that the Methodist bishop said that John Pemberton had had a lapse of sanity.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: And that I had to be baptized again, for some reason, being the only one left at home at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I got stuck with two baptisms. So I'm twice blessed, but I don't go to church. So it is one of those funny things.

MS. RIEDEL: You said there was a real emphasis on music and art in your home growing up.

MS. SMITH: I think the art part was not heavily emphasized, other than religious art, though I can still remember my brother coming home from college and setting up still lifes in his room and in the little farmhouse to paint. I was always impressed. But I couldn't go in there because I might mess up the still life. I used to tease him about how bad they started to smell after a while, when he'd let these vegetables rot.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: Things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: So he started as a studio artist and as a painter before he went into art history?

MS. SMITH: I think it was really only for fun that he did that, because he majored in philosophy and –

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And he was a professor of religion, too, wasn't he?

MS. SMITH: Philosophy and religion. That's what he did his graduate work in at Duke [University, Durham, NC], and went to Amherst [College, Amherst, MA] as a professor. He had an endowed chair of philosophy and religion. I think it was a[n] [Andrew W.] Mellon chair. But he came onto African art about – well, just about 40 years ago. He was doing some co-teaching – I don't want to say “team teaching” because I'm not sure that's right – with a scholar in women's studies. It was just at the time when women of color were no longer under the radar.

Jack became fascinated with African art, so much so that he had a year – I believe it was a year – sabbatical at Oxford [University of Oxford, Oxford, UK], and from there traveled to Ghana and then to Nigeria to start documenting the various festivals of the Yoruba people. That became really his life's study.

MS. RIEDEL: How fascinating.

MS. SMITH: It was.

MS. RIEDEL: And when did he first start going?

MS. SMITH: Well, let's see. It would have been around 1969 or '70.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: A wonderful opportunity.

MS. SMITH: Oh, it was fantastic. And he went back I can't say how many times. At least 20, probably.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And how old were you then?

MS. SMITH: Well, I was 10 years younger than he was, so let's see. Mel and I were just getting married, and he had just remarried. So that's why I can sort of document these, because we kind of went in parallel time. So I must have been in my 30s, or early 30s.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So before you went back to grad school?

MS. SMITH: I really got to know him when I was in my late 20s and living in Connecticut, which was close to Amherst, where he was teaching. We found we had all these interesting things in common. He had left home for school when I was just a kid, during World War II. While we were friendly, we didn't really know each other. He's a marvelous influence on my life.

MS. RIEDEL: And you really have discussed him as an influence.

MS. SMITH: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk about that briefly. What about it in particular was –

MS. SMITH: Well, for one thing, he's an incredible researcher and documentarian, which our mother was, too. Our mother had a high school education and did some secretarial work. But she was the consummate minister's wife. When we lived in Cape May – and I'll get back to Jack – but when we lived in Cape May, she was always fascinated with history. And she started doing all kinds of research into the history of Cape May. Through the church and some of the women there, she started these historic tours that met every Wednesday morning as a fundraiser for the church. She trained people to take visitors around Cape May in their private cars and tell them the history of the town.

She had a memory that, oh, my, I would just kill for. But she had it all, and I think Jack has a lot of that. Somehow or other, maybe because they always remembered things, I didn't feel like I needed to, being the youngest kid and just letting things be done for me, as younger kids often do. I think the other role of the youngest kid is sort of, "Wait for me," always playing catch-up in some way or other.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember, when you were young, Jack being an inspiration or an influence for you then or –

MS. SMITH: Oh, I just had this huge crush on this man, you know, this boy who had gone away to school and would come back occasionally. I mean, I still remember hiding behind some curtains crying when he left for school one time. And then – oh, and he would kill me for saying this, but I like to embarrass him on occasion – he would write letters to me from Princeton [University, Princeton, NJ] and sign them, "Your Princeton man, Jack," you know, which a six-year-old would go absolutely nuts over.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Of course.

MS. SMITH: I wish I had all those letters. My mother kept – but again, my mother kept everything. She was not only a collector; she was more an accumulator. I went in the opposite direction and tried to just clear myself of things.

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

MS. SMITH: I love the fact that Jack has really reinvented himself, that the scholar of religion and philosophy is still very much a part of him, but he is a consummate researcher in African art, and quite an amazing guy. And being 10 years older than I am and still continually curating exhibitions just gives me hope. He's been through some of exactly the same physical ailments that I have, just a few years before I did. We both have had triple bypass surgery.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

MS. SMITH: And he just keeps on. I think that's great. I'll keep on, too. So he lives a very scholarly and genteel life, where my life is a lot more casual. But we both enjoy each other – and that's very cool.

MS. RIEDEL: I'll take us back now to Cape May.

MS. SMITH: Oh, back to Cape May.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you arrived there when you were eight years old? Is that about right?

MS. SMITH: Eight or nine, probably. I was in the third grade. I remember that.

MS. RIEDEL: And what about the place really struck you at the time or –

MS. SMITH: As a kid?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Because it became important, it seems.

MS. SMITH: Oh, Cape May really did. Since we had summered there, I had very happy associations of summertime at the beach, of fishing with my dad and friends, of diving under the waves, playing in the water, having, oh, various kinds of ducks and chickens and things around the farm, and growing things. It was just a great place to grow up.

MS. RIEDEL: The sand dunes are quite extraordinary.

MS. SMITH: The sand dunes are just great there, yup.

MS. RIEDEL: And the birds, I think, too.

MS. SMITH: Oh, the birds are amazing. We ended up living in the parsonage in the winter, which was just a little four-square kind of house. But then when I was 10, my dad, who would do these kinds of things, bought this huge Victorian mansion. I mean, it was huge, 23 rooms, fully furnished, built in the 1850s as a Southern gambling house. I learned much later that it also had been a bordello.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

MS. SMITH: And it's one of the pieces of architecture that is still used in all of the Cape May advertising. It's a bed and breakfast, and quite an amazing, magical place.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember the address?

MS. SMITH: Oh, yes: 635 Columbia Avenue.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: It's probably the only address I actually remember from my childhood. We would live there in the summer. There was no electricity in it when my dad bought it.

MS. RIEDEL: So did you give up the farm and move there?

MS. SMITH: I think he must have sold the farm when we first moved to Cape May and moved into the parsonage, which was about six blocks away from the Victorian Mansion. My father was never one to not call something by a higher possible name than he could, you know. I was a little embarrassed by it. But that was the name of the place until he sold it in the '70s, and it became the Mainstay Inn.

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired him to do that?

MS. SMITH: He just did things like that. I know it was hard on my mother. But she just put up with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And were there people constantly in and out of there if he was a minister? It was such a large space.

MS. SMITH: They started renting rooms in the summertime. First they worked on getting it fixed up. I mean, they painted it. They cleaned up all the furniture. I can tell you how to dust Victorian monstrosities very, very well. Then they started renting rooms in the summertime. It was no B&B, but it was a rooming house. A lot of the people who came were architects from Philadelphia who would come down to do research in Cape May, because it is such a Victorian seashore resort, which, I suppose, was part of the reason my mother became very interested in history. She started tracing the history of even the furniture that was in the house. And there's all kinds of colorful stories about that.

I remember, in the fall, everything would get covered with dust sheets, and all the electricity would be turned off. I was talking to my best friend from school as a kid just a week or so ago, and I haven't talked to her in probably 20 years. And she said, "Do you remember those great parties?" And I said, "I sure do," because we would have Halloween parties in that house. It was really great fun, with no electricity and dust sheets all over



all the big old furniture. So, quite magical.

MS. RIEDEL: And then you moved into the parsonage?

MS. SMITH: We would move back to the parsonage for the wintertime because there was no real heat in the place except one space heater.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

MS. SMITH: It's all been winterized now. But we withstood a lot of hurricanes through that place and – so architecture –

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: – has also always had a great influence on me. I remember the places where I've lived. And it hasn't just been because of that kind of a fabulous house. I still remember the layout of the houses where – the parsonages where we lived. I'm sure that that has some influence on where I am now and what's surrounding me now.

MS. RIEDEL: You moved around a lot when you were young.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You saw a lot of different places. You went from a farm to a parsonage to a Victorian mansion.

MS. SMITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a real range of extremes.

MS. SMITH: Very much so. And I knew, when I left living in Cape May, that I'd never want to live in a Victorian house, because my summertime job, instead of doing something “fun” like waitressing at the beach, was always dusting the furniture and changing the beds for this rooming house. That was not exactly glamorous work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But it was what was assumed that I would do, and so I did it.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Do you remember as a child having a strong sense of the ocean, of the light and the water?

MS. SMITH: Absolutely. I mean, I went to sleep in the summertime with the windows open, listening to the sound of the water, of the ocean, because it was only three blocks from the beach. And I can still – if I'm in a city or near a throughway somewhere, I can imagine that that obtrusive noise of cars going by is actually the sound of the water.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: I can make myself tolerate it because of that. So there is nothing quite like that, that sound of what's going on while the earth is moving, that is just – just great for you.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you take art classes as a child? Did you draw or paint?

MS. SMITH: Not a lot. I had a medium-sized gift for music. My brother and sister would both be practicing their piano lessons in Poughkeepsie and go off to school. I was three, and I would toddle over to the piano and get myself up on the bench and start picking out what they had played, so much so that my mother was, “Uh oh, she's only going to be able to play by ear. We have to start teaching her music right now.” And I remember taking piano lessons from this wonderful woman, Miss Pagnanni. Now, don't ask me the name of any of my other piano teachers. But Miss Pagnanni was marvelous.

MS. RIEDEL: What about her was so marvelous?

MS. SMITH: Well, she was from Rome [Italy]. She was not an Italian; she was a Roman, and she let you know that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: There was something, just this wonderful presence about her, coming to the house and playing, and teaching me how to play. I was gone. I was enchanted. One of my great learning experiences that I often use

and think about as a teacher was when I was four. It was one of those "people not quite getting the concept" moments. I had learned something to play that didn't really appeal to me very much. But I thought, okay. It was for my recital, my first recital when I was four years old. I was with all these other boys and girls in Miss Pagnanni's basement, which was a very cool place.

I sat down at the piano, and darned if someone didn't sit down at another piano who was also about four years old. It was actually a two-piano piece, and I never knew it until I played it and I made music. I was the bottom half. It was funny because I never heard that music again because it was just this other little girl who played, too. I don't even remember who she was. I'm sure I was told that this was going to happen. But, you know, you're four years old, and you're concentrating on playing this thing. It was just quite wonderful that I didn't quite have the concept until I heard the whole thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: It's like trusting your work. Right now I'm laying in some background on a new piece. Right now it looks pretty pathetic. But I know I can trust this process, and the whole thing is going to start playing its own music eventually. But it's just going to take some time. From the teaching point of view, I just loved that. And it was this "trust the process" kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: And a very clear sense of layers.

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. That's true. Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is such an integral part of your work.

MS. SMITH: It really is.

MS. RIEDEL: And rhythm?

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And movement. Motion.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course, I'm assuming that movement will be apparent in this work.

MS. SMITH: Well, and also thinking in terms of stylistic things. I can remember another thing from piano lessons, playing [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart, and some of the Mozart sonatas when I was 10 or 11, and realizing that there was in one sonata a very similar portion of music that was also in his first piano sonata, the one every little kid learns, that's in C, and going to my piano teacher and saying, "He cheated. He borrowed that piece."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: I suddenly learned, oh, that's okay, because he was using that same thing in a different key, and it was a melody that was his. I loved that. I always discourage students from trying to find a style. I'll say, "Somebody else will tell you whether it's your style or not. That comes from somebody outside recognizing your work." But you can recognize Mozart or [Johann Sebastian] Bach or [Dave] Brubeck, because they have this distinctive style because it's their language.

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

MS. SMITH: I think we all develop a visual language, too, that becomes our style, as it were. But to try and search for that, for the sake of having a style, is like the wrong way around. I think you need to answer your own questions that are in your head, and what your answers are are going to eventually become something where people can say, "I know whose work that is." But I don't think you want to go looking for that.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Did you continue on with the music through high school?

MS. SMITH: All through high school. Cape May was a little at a loss for too many great musicians, though I was exposed to some musicians in late years of high school and early college, because there was a Coast Guard base there, and there was a choir at the Coast Guard base. I actually started accompanying them on occasion. And of course, there were all these gorgeous guys around, which was really fun, most of whom were gay, but I wasn't aware of that at the time. But they knew how to make music, and so I learned a lot from them.

My piano teacher really encouraged my parents to have me go to Philadelphia to study at Curtis [Curtis Institute of Music, Philadelphia, PA]. But at that point, being a girl in the '50s, it was considered not that important for me to try and go on the train to Philadelphia, the big city, every week. So that was strongly discouraged. At that point, I was making decisions about what to do in college, and music was, according to my parents, not going to be practical enough. And so it began to be discouraged.

I did take some lessons at some point during college, and my roommate all through college was a music major. All of my activities outside of home economics, which was what I ended up with because it was practical, were music related.

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this?

MS. SMITH: Fifty-five through '59.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was at Rutgers?

MS. SMITH: Douglass College [Rutgers, State University of New Jersey, New Brunswick].

MS. RIEDEL: Douglass College?

MS. SMITH: The women's college of Rutgers. And so everything I did was involved with choral groups in college. So obviously, I kept up my music there. And I think that –

MS. RIEDEL: So it was wonderful to have as a hobby, but it was nothing [inaudible].

MS. SMITH: Exactly, yes. Exactly. But I think it made me a really good audience. And it taught me a lot, when I moved into visual arts, [about] how to have a voice in the visual arts. I don't even know how to put it. But music very much informs my work. The only time I don't have music on in the studio is if I'm reading or thinking, because I concentrate too much on the music. But I'll have it on as I'm working, where I want to work more intuitively; music is a good way of helping me to get out of too much of a head mode and more into an emotional mode.

MS. RIEDEL: And what do you like to listen to? Do you have certain favorites that you go to over and over again?

MS. SMITH: Oh, gosh. Everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Many things.

MS. SMITH: Well, yes and no. I'll listen sometimes to a favorite classical station from Chicago on the internet [WFMT]. Other times I will listen to jazz. If I'm really feeling kind of low and I need to get my energy up, I'll put gospel on, because then I find myself dancing around the studio, and I get some energy back. I'll start singing along, and I'm hoping nobody comes down the driveway, because I'm really belting it out.

But primarily I would say classical music. Not opera unless it's something like *The Magic Flute*, back to Mozart again. Not much with lyrics, because I don't want to think about the words.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. SMITH: Much as I love it, and have a lot of music with lyrics on my iPod, I don't want it when I'm working. A fair amount of jazz, Latin music. It gives me some energy.

MS. RIEDEL: Composers in particular that you're partial to, or it really is a range?

MS. SMITH: It's a range. I'd say, off the top of my head, Mozart, Bach, and Brubeck – and maybe Ramsey Lewis, because I think they all have piano connotations for me. And, oh, I could just go on and on. It's like naming your favorite foods. But I would say off the top of my head that's – it was the classical training. There's always something to learn and hear something new.

[END CD 1.]

MS. RIEDEL: So when you got to Douglass, did you know already what you were going to study?

MS. SMITH: I had to, because home ec started in your freshman year. I couldn't even do a year of liberal arts, which was just nuts. But it's the way it was. And I didn't fight the system very much.

MS. RIEDEL: Did it just seem that that was what had to be done?

MS. SMITH: It did. I was a reluctant home ec major. I did not fit in –

MS. RIEDEL: What did home ec even entail?

MS. SMITH: Cooking and sewing. The sewing part was okay because I'd always sewed my own clothes, and that was fine. But I don't follow directions well. The culmination was this godawful half a semester, but felt like a

whole semester, in my senior year, where we had to stay in the home management house, which was just ghastly.

MS. RIEDEL: What was it?

MS. SMITH: With this unmarried woman who used to say, and I kid you not, "Housework is love made visible." And you want to gag, just truly gag. I was always coming in late because I'd have rehearsals. And so I never fit in.

MS. RIEDEL: Music rehearsals?

MS. SMITH: Music rehearsals, yes. My senior year. It was a big deal. We were singing that year with Leonard Bernstein, and I mean, this was serious rehearsals.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: My college roommate in the home management house still reminds me of how I didn't fit in. You know, I'm rather proud of it now, though I was miserable at the time. I remember having to have this conference with this dreadful woman whose name I've totally repressed. She told me, well, that I really didn't fit in very well, but I was very good at working with leftovers. And I thought, great. This is cool because now that I look at it, I think, damn, that was the most creative thing you possibly could have done, is to take stuff and make something new out of it.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: So I thought, okay, that was good. I could work with leftovers. But the "Housework is love made visible" was very typical of the '50s. It really, really was.

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

MS. SMITH: It was not a happy time unless I was involved with music and various friends and boyfriends and things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And did you have any sense that once you were out of school, you would find a way to transition back into music, or that it would somehow be part of your life?

MS. SMITH: I was ready to get married. I got married two weeks after I got out of college and got pregnant on my honeymoon. And all of a sudden, there came the real world -

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: - just crashing down around me. This was before the [birth control] pill. I didn't have much of a sense of what I was going to do. It just was sort of, respond to what's going on right now, which is, "Oh, my God, I'm pregnant, and I've got to make the best of this."

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

MS. SMITH: So music was still very much a part of me. I had a piano, and I played a lot during that time.

MS. RIEDEL: While you were raising your children?

MS. SMITH: I did.

MS. RIEDEL: How many children did you have?

MS. SMITH: I have two, and Mel has two. When we married 10 years later, that family got blended. Mel's kids lived with their mother, but they also were all around the same age. And so all of a sudden we had two sons and two daughters, and grateful for it now.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So you graduated college in '59?

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

MS. RIEDEL: And then you didn't go back for graduate work for almost 20 years.

MS. SMITH: That can't be right.

MS. RIEDEL: Mid-'70s?

MS. SMITH: Mid-'70s? Well, yeah, I guess so. That's true.

MS. RIEDEL: So I'm just curious how -

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: - if you just shelved the artistic interest for a while -

MS. SMITH: No, I didn't. Huh-uh. [Negative.]

MS. RIEDEL: - or how that continued on?

MS. SMITH: One of the things that I always did was I always worked with my hands. Growing up in Cape May, and it being a seashore resort, there was a little needlework store there. I used to hang out at that needlework store. My older sister loved to work with her hands, too. She and I would go there, and I would teach myself to do these ratty little needlepoint things.

So there was always something. I was making tablecloths that had been stamped out that I could buy at Woolworth's and things like that. I did counted thread or cross-stitch on them. I was mostly working within the lines.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so that's [inaudible].

MS. SMITH: I wasn't much working outside the lines of anything there. But, I mean, I learned a few technical things that way, and -

MS. RIEDEL: How old were you?

MS. SMITH: I was a kid. Probably 10 or 11.

MS. RIEDEL: So needlework from a very early age?

MS. SMITH: Very early.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And you liked - did you -

MS. SMITH: Oh, I loved doing that. Yeah, I really did.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: It satisfied a certain compulsion in me, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: And you didn't mind following the patterns up to a certain extent?

MS. SMITH: At that point, that just seemed like the right thing to do. It was kind of filling in those spaces and stitching in the lines, just like you colored in the lines in a coloring book.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. SMITH: My boyfriend all through high school was the school artist. He went on to art school, was an illustrator, and Bill did some wonderful things. I was the school pianist. We had our niches. We had a horrible art teacher all through grammar school and high school. She was the same one forever, you know, there.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

MS. SMITH: Because it was a little school.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I can remember, she really gave me short shrift. I mean, she didn't think I was going to do much of anything. And I believed her. So that's the way with art teachers, or teachers.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember any interesting projects, or projects at all?

MS. SMITH: Well, no. They weren't really interesting. I just remember that I could never cut out the silhouette of an animal in motion. My legs were never quite right. And there was never any help with it. You just did it, and either you did it right or you didn't. So once I was in college, I had to take one semester of a studio art course.

It was basic, 2D things, where you got to mix paint in value scales and things like that, and do a little bit of drawing, and some sort of graphic kind of elements. I loved it, and I aced that class. I was so surprised that I got an A in that class, because what did I know about art? Bill knew all about art, and my brother knew all about art, not me. I was the musician.

I just had these things in my head. But I can still remember having to go to see a couple of the art exhibits – this was at Douglass – that were in this little gallery right next to the art studio room. There was an Abstract Expressionist show, but I didn't know that's what it was at the time. I was just bowled over, like, somebody's got to explain this to me because I don't have a clue what's going on here. But something or other about that show I still remember.

MS. RIEDEL: And even though you didn't understand it, you were intrigued by it?

MS. SMITH: Absolutely. I can still remember the works. I remember we got *Life* magazine when I was a kid. I was thinking about this in preparation for talking to you, and thinking about, what do I remember that has a visual art component besides church candles and stained glass and things like that?

One of them was the Jackson Pollock article that was in *Life* magazine. I looked it up online a couple of days ago. That was 1949. I was 10 years old, and I still remembered it. So somehow or other – maybe those were the anomalies that I remember. But still, there must have been something there –

MS. RIEDEL: Made quite an impression.

MS. SMITH: – that made this huge impression on me. I remember going back and forth and back and forth with that article, trying to figure it out. I had no idea it was then. I thought it must have been when I was in college. But I was much, much younger. So I think that intrigued me, that there must have been something there besides working with needlepoint and – well, I loved working with needle and thread, so –

MS. RIEDEL: And color has been so significant in your work.

MS. SMITH: Huge, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember early, the first sensibility for that?

MS. SMITH: No. I just remember remembering colors. Being in Cape May, you'd watch sunsets and sunrise, and you'd go out to Cape May Point to watch the sunset. I remember making paper doll clothes with my sister and friends; we'd design the outfits and make up the colors and that kind of thing. But no real color significance or anything. I'd like to say I did, but I don't.

MS. RIEDEL: It's viewed as a part of the motion in [inaudible].

MS. SMITH: Well, I also think that color comes into how you play music. They talk about color.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I think that was part of it, though there was also a very strong tamping down of an emotional side of me because of just the way my parents were. I can remember being maybe four, and crying because something had happened. We were out walking, and I was doing what little kids sometimes do – they start bawling about things at three or four – and having my mother say, "Don't wear your heart on your sleeve." And that was sort of her rule for life. It was a very non-emotional family, except when my father would get up to preach. Then he could let that out. Or when we were singing, that was fine.

MS. RIEDEL: So specific outlets for emotion were accepted.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, definitely. I mean, it was just part of who they were. And it was fun to realize I could be free of that eventually, because I was the questioning kid that never quite accepted the answers that I was given.

MS. RIEDEL: Was music the emotional outlet for you as a kid?

MS. SMITH: Music, and being on the beach.

MS. RIEDEL: Being on the beach?

MS. SMITH: Oh, I could be free and just be with my friends or by myself. And that was a chance to go out and get my head back together again after living in a very constrained kind of atmosphere. But music, definitely. I could wail away on the piano, and that was my sanity, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: That and nature, being outside.

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Those two things. Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That makes a lot of sense.

MS. SMITH: It's nice to bring them together.

MS. RIEDEL: They do feel very much brought together.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, that's cool.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. That makes sense.

MS. SMITH: It's taken a long time. But rather now than later.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Let's transition to those years when you were raising children and how you got back to graduate school, which was the mid-'70s. Right?

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

MS. RIEDEL: And you'd moved – when did you move to Illinois?

MS. SMITH: Let's see. I was married in 1959, and we moved to Cornwall, New York, where my ex-husband, my former husband, who's dead now, was also a minister – I couldn't get away from this – in the Presbyterian church in Cornwall. And we were there, and I was this brand-new, pregnant, minister's wife. I was so young when I think about it now. My God, it's quite amazing. But you do what you do.

We lived there for three years, and then moved to Long Island [NY], when my ex-husband decided to go back to graduate school to become a psychologist. He went for his Ph.D. at Adelphi University [Garden City, NY]. I was in this brand-new town, in Levittown [NY], with wonderful, wonderful neighbors. A great place to bring up kids, because everybody was sort of the same age but with very different backgrounds, a very New York emphasis in Levittown.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: It was great. The floors were all heated, so little kids could crawl around on the floors. That's one of these wonderful, practical things that the post-World War II housing boom gave us. I had some really fascinating neighbors. One woman was very interested in art and really helped to introduce me to art. She would come home and say that she had been to the Guggenheim [Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY] or MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY] to see [Wassily] Kandinsky, and I'm thinking, "So who's Kandinsky?" So she would tell me. I learned a lot from her. And others who were "city people." I was a country kid. I learned a lot of new things while my kids were little.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you see Kandinsky, then?

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. Then I went to see Kandinsky.

MS. RIEDEL: I imagine it would be really exciting for you.

MS. SMITH: Just blew my mind. When I could find a babysitter. She probably took care of the kids while I went and saw Kandinsky. It was a wonderful way of learning from slightly older women, who have been good to me over the years.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MS. SMITH: Another friend is now in her 90s. When we lived in Cornwall, I would go over to this wonderful little gallery-cum-gift shop that she had there, and we would go to their home. She had wonderful art up on the walls. And I became really enchanted with the way she would combine antiques and modern things. I was like this sponge, just soaking it all up. Val and I still communicate with each other, and I have been able to say, "Thank you. You were such an influence on me as a young wife who was just totally lost." She was great.

We would go to concerts and things when we lived in Levittown, which was really good. A lot of introduction to Broadway and things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a real – a very active independent education going on during this time.

MS. SMITH: Oh, absolutely. I remember getting a copy of a *Better Homes & Gardens* magazine that had a little

step-by-step thing about how to do machine embroidery. I went through every project that was in that magazine. I have a copy of it somewhere.

MS. RIEDEL: What sort of things did they teach? Do you remember what the exercises –

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. They were working very solidly. There was a little robin that you filled in solidly. The designs were actually quite charming, in sort of a folk art kind of way. They weren't these cute little lazy daisy triangles of stitches and stuff like I had been doing when I was a kid.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: These were really fun. So if the kids were napping or whatever, I would get out my little old trusty Necchi sewing machine and make it work. And that was just pretty darn wonderful, teaching myself to do this.

And Levittown had a fabulous library.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I've always been nuts about libraries. So I would go to libraries and start reading every book I could find. That was just about the time when some of the British embroiderers who were doing more contemporary work were actually beginning to write about it. I would check those books out again and again. There was one by a woman named Mariska Karasz that I finally ended up saving the money and buying that book. I mean, we did not have a budget for buying books at that point. I had it out of the library so many times that I finally said, "I'd really like to buy this book." So I did.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember the title?

MS. SMITH: *Adventures in Stitches* [Mariska Karasz. *Adventures in Stitches: A New Art of Embroidery*. New York: Funk & Wagnalls Co., 1949]. It's sitting over there somewhere. And I know the Smithsonian has a number of Mariska Karasz's works. There were these ways of making your own rules if you know the techniques. And I thought, this is something I can do with needle and thread, which I had always loved to do, but I can do something that's my own. So that was the first time when I began to do that.

And then my ex-husband and I moved, when he got a job working in the Chicago area.

MS. RIEDEL: Can we go back for just one second to the magazine?

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: The magazine had really helped you learned the techniques.

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

MS. RIEDEL: And then this collection of books helped you figure out how to extrapolate from there and make your own designs?

MS. SMITH: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: So now, I mean, you were really – the world was opening.

MS. SMITH: I really was beginning to experiment. And one of the things about these books were some of them were how-to books, but most of the ones that I was drawn to were the ones that were why-to, or, look what somebody else has done, and this is why. I mean, that was always much more important to me, having been through all that how-to stuff when I was a kid.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: This was much more –

MS. RIEDEL: What was a why-to book?

MS. SMITH: The why-to books were books about using embroidery as an art form.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah-ha.

MS. SMITH: And so much about embroidery particularly, like knitting was, was all about, you must do this project in this way.



MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: Needlework magazines were all that way. Copy this project.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: But don't make any changes. Well, maybe it would be all right, if you were really thinking "far out," you could change the color.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But that would be about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: These other books were more about the movement, the history of embroidery and what people are doing with it now, and making it into an art form.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: For me, that was just this huge freeing. Being given permission to do something that four years of college had just knocked right out of me in their noncreative approach to home economics.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: Except for making leftovers.

[They Laugh.]

So that was a huge thing for me. Here I was feeling very much at home.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I was realizing that this was a marriage that was not the best marriage in the world. But I had two children, and I had no clue what I could do on my own.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: So I stayed with the marriage, but tried to find my own creative outlets within it.

MS. RIEDEL: What sort of projects would you do at this point, would you make for yourself [inaudible]?

MS. SMITH: Oh, they were mostly Christmas presents. Wall pieces. I can remember making a tea cozy for my mother. And pillow tops, and -

MS. RIEDEL: And would this be a combination of hand-stitching and machine-stitching, or were you just completely exploring machine at this point?

MS. SMITH: No. It was one or the other, and they were not together, but both - and I started doing some appliqué bits with felt because of reading Jean Ray Laury's wonderful book [*Applique Stitchery*. New York: Van Noststrand Reinhold, 1966]. And again, I've had the pleasure of saying to Jean how much that book meant to me. I know it meant a lot to people of my age at that time, because that book also was a book about "you can do this"; this was before I was aware of the women's movement.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: This was granting me permission to do what was inside my head that nobody else had bothered to say to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: Just then Betty Friedan was beginning to come into her own. But these were all sort of intermixed. And the same neighbor who introduced me to Kandinsky introduced me to Betty Friedan.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: And yet I just didn't buy it as much at that point. I was a pretty conservative kid. But I could buy this other art-oriented idea. So I could ease myself into one, out of the other. It was certainly the human

potential movement, the Esalen [Esalen Institute, Big Sur, CA] movement of the late '60s, that did give me permission to tell my ex-husband that I couldn't do this any more, and also more permission to give myself the chance to do more art.

It was more the human potential movement than it was the feminist movement at the time that granted that privilege. I don't think I ever looked back. Well, I'm sure I looked back. Those 10 years that I was married with little kids, I remember some things about it. But there's a lot of memory there that is gone. And I really don't care. I've got plenty of other good memories to think about.

MS. RIEDEL: When did you decide to go back to grad school, and why?

MS. SMITH: Well, it has to do partly with that time, the late '60s. I took a class up in Door County, Wisconsin. My ex-husband and I and our kids had been up there for a couple weeks' vacation. And there was a place there called The Clearing [The Clearing Folk School, Ellison Bay, WI] - which is still there; it's an adult education program - in a wonderful setting of a building that was designed by the man who designed most of the Chicago park districts, an architect named Jens Jensen.

He felt that there was going to be a - between Chicago and Door County, north of Milwaukee, there was going to be one city all the way. He was absolutely right because that's pretty much what it is. He wanted to establish a place where you could go and clear your mind. The Clearing provided classes, and so I had this five-day class on creative embroidery with somebody whose name I don't remember.

I had never done anything like this before. I was both thrilled and overwhelmed. Luckily, a couple of the women in the class, who then became dear friends for years, took me under their wing, because they recognized that this teacher wasn't going to help me too much. They helped me to do this really funky piece of a seagull flying over the water. A couple of them have threatened to blackmail me with this piece at some point, because I destroyed it years ago, and they still keep the images of it.

[They Laugh.]

But I came home, and I presented it to my ex-husband. And this was a good reason why he became my ex-husband. He looked at it, and he said, "In five days, that's all you did?" So I put it away, and I didn't do anything for about six months.

Then I went to a show of a local embroiderers' guild, and I was smitten. I saw all at this work that people were doing. It was so exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: Around Chicago?

MS. SMITH: Right near where I lived, near Hinsdale [IL]. And I was just blown away. I thought, "God, I've got to do this now, and the heck with what he says. I'm just going to do this in my own little quiet, private way."

MS. RIEDEL: What about it was so inspiring to you?

MS. SMITH: Well, I think it was that love of texture that I've always had, and color, and working with needle and thread.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: It buoyed me up to start saying, okay, I'm going to do this. It was a very exciting time.

MS. RIEDEL: This is late '60s - early '70s now?

MS. SMITH: This was mid-'60s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: Probably '65, maybe, '66, something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

MS. SMITH: So I went to once-a-week classes, and I happened to just accidentally pick the one of the two teachers who taught a more contemporary approach than the other one did, who taught crewel work, very traditional work. And I was just totally blown away by it. I was having such fun, and I did a piece that's still around here somewhere of three cats. I still just love that old piece because I learned so much on it. And then I joined the guild, and I enjoyed it, the local guild.

I began taking correspondence school classes from a group called the National Standards Council of American Embroiderers [NSCAE]. I must have done that course in about 1967 or '68, something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: This is really interesting. There was a guild of local embroiderers in the Chicago area?

MS. SMITH: Yup.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MS. SMITH: Yup.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it a range of more traditional to more contemporary work?

MS. SMITH: It was both.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: It was fantastic. They hired people to come in and teach, people like Bucky King. She was married to a Mellon, of King Ranch [TX] fame, and had written some books on contemporary embroidery. Constance Howard from England came over and did a lecture. It was my introduction to what I think of as the underground adult education programs, because there weren't adult ed classes in textiles at that point. In fact, I taught the first one in our area because a friend of mine signed me up to teach it and then called and told me that I was teaching this class.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: Because she said, "I know you'd say no." And so I had to learn how to teach adults. This was a couple of years - just after I was learning how to do all of this stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: And way before grad school.

MS. SMITH: Way before grad school.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MS. SMITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember what the guild was called in Chicago?

MS. SMITH: It was the Hinsdale Embroiderers' Guild, and it's still in existence. Then, years later, I helped to start the DuPage Textile Arts Guild, which was much broader, and it's still in existence. But there were these guilds all over the place that the Embroiderers' Guild of America and the NSCAE had started, sort of copying the guild system in England, though, of course, the guilds in England, the original guilds, were actually trade unions.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But out of them came the Women's Institute from England, programs that were embroiderers' guilds, and they're still going on. I mean, they're still very active. They're mostly keepers of tradition, but not completely, and nothing wrong with that. It's like the quilt guilds and everything else.

But they took up where the colleges and universities weren't doing their job at that point. There was such a huge movement to work with textiles. The '70s were - my God, that's where textiles exploded. It's gone through cycles. And there was this huge research into various techniques of the past, whether it was knotting or twining or macramé. They all just were sort of all part of that same movement.

And they did get mixed up, many of them, with the women's movement. The quilters kind of took off in spades. Embroidery, less so. When I teach quilters and embroiderers, I tease them. I'm also talking about my older sister, because this is how she is. I'll give them, oh, a set of rules of things to work within this size, and you have to do this with this and this with that. You can do whatever you want within those parameters. And quilters will get done very speedily. And then they'll say, "I'm going to make this really big, and I'm going to put it in a show, and it's going to win a ribbon." They just have this very expansive point of view.

Well, I'll give that same set of parameters to an embroiderer, and she'll say, "Oh, well, okay. If I put this little line over here, what's that going to do to what's over here? And then - I don't know. I'm going to have to think about that for a while." I mean, it's just a very different point of view.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: But marvelous, in its own way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It sounds like a different sense of composition.

MS. SMITH: Well, it's composition, but it's also a view on the world. It's much more introspective and – and not quite so expansive. I don't want to say just “contracting,” because that's not it. It's just much more like a pointillist would work as opposed to [how] a gesturalist would work.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: And a sense of also, perhaps, embroiderers may be not just introspective but have a little bit more caution about what they're doing, where the quilt makers make it on a big scale. Constance Howard used to say, “Work big. You'll see your mistakes faster.” I think there was something to be said for that. So I guess I combined both of those sides.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SMITH: I mean, there's that element in me that questions and kind of tiptoes around and then all of a sudden says, oh, the hell with this. I'm going to try it this way, and then goes for it.

MS. RIEDEL: Your work feels very much like a synthesis of those two ways of thinking, those two types of processes.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. But that's taken awhile.

MS. RIEDEL: So a lot of your initial education – along the lines of textiles and color –and I don't know about quilting so much, but certainly embroidery, really had to do with this underground –

MS. SMITH: It was an incredible system.

MS. RIEDEL: – series of guilds. Very interesting.

MS. SMITH: My God, it was wonderful. And what women were doing for each other in this, because there were very few men involved. I think we had one male member at some point, but he kind of dropped out.

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

MS. SMITH: But one of my teachers at that time was a man named Henry Stahmer.

MS. RIEDEL: In the guild?

MS. SMITH: No. He was in Chicago, and he was working as a freelance artist-embroiderer. And this was before I went back to graduate school. I was sometimes the initiator of, “What if we all got together and did this workshop or something or other?” And we decided we would work with Henry. We would pile in the car and go down to his studio on Wells Street, and it was great because Henry had us working with collage before we began to embroider – paper collage.

It was just marvelous. We really got quite freed up. There was one woman who's still a friend of mine that I hear from occasionally, who's still a member of those original guilds, and she was the kind of person who was pretty tight about things. It must have been about 1965 or '66. He would actually bring out a bottle of Asti Spumanti.

[They Laugh.]

This was at 10:00 in the morning. And he would serve Asti Spumanti. We used to tease her something fierce, you know, about this. “Here comes Henry with the Asti Spumanti.” Godawful stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: But then she'd start to get to work and loosen up a little bit, but – she was also the driver, when I think about it.

[They Laugh.]

That was a wonderful learning experience for me because just working with torn-up paper, and being able to rub it back with some Brillo, and using different techniques that I had never used before, and then how do you get this amorphous surface and turn it into art? How do you translate it? And so learning to make translations from another media into what I was doing would take me away from, “This is the only way you can do it,” which had

been my learning in the past.

I think of Henry as a wonderful teacher who got me thinking about new things.

And at the same time, there was Virginia Bath. She worked at the Art Institute [Art Institute of Chicago, Chicago, IL] as one of their lecturers, and she was involved with the textile department there. She was not the head of the department, but she would lecture about textiles. And we would go in for her lectures that were just knock-your-socks-off good on the history of textiles.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: What she would always do was to take some of those traditional designs and techniques and turn them into her own contemporary art. I would just lose myself in envy and wanting to do this myself in the way she worked. It was very rich textures, very rich color – a lot of the same value but multiple colors across the same value scale. A wonderful emphasis on texture.

I really was very influenced by Virginia. I took some needle lace classes from her, too, traditional needle lace, and worked with that in a nontraditional way, working up and over ping pong balls and everything else. During that time of self-help learning, there were all these other sources, other than a college.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SMITH: I did end up going to the local community college. Well, I took one class in –

MS. RIEDEL: One quick question –

MS. SMITH: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: – about Virginia. Was that really your first experience of the spectrum of what could be done, both the historical sensibility and, through her work, a contemporary sense? Or did you already have that knowledge, and this was just taking it to a deeper level?

MS. SMITH: I think that's a good point, and I think that's quite true. It was a hands-on kind of thing with her that way, where people like Constance Howard in England and some of the other British embroiderers would always show traditional samples in their books, or examples in their books, of stump work and things like that. But this was the real thing. It was something other than book learning.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: She really helped me form some of the good questions that I had inside my head. I can remember years ago having her tell me at some point, "You know everything you need to know to be good. You just have to work at it longer." It was kind of a backhanded way, but it was also a very helpful way for me to learn.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SMITH: And very useful to me.

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

MS. SMITH: She was terrific.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember which questions you began to formulate at that point?

MS. SMITH: With her and with that, I think it was the fact that I was – I loved historic embroideries. And how to make it more contemporary were, I think, the real things. That was a learning for me of how to do something the "proper way," as the Brits would say, and then break those rules. And so – oh, here, I'm quoting Martha Graham: "First you master a craft, and then you create a being."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I've told that to my students many times when they – when they want to push the learning process a little too quickly.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

MS. SMITH: Learn it right. Then you can break the rules. "Love God, and do as you please." That was Augustine, but it's the same kind of thing. I think it was a great learning experience for me during those years.

And at that point, I was married to my husband now, Mel. He's another influence because he's a very freeing kind of man, who can't figure out why I'd question my ability to do anything. He knows I can do it, so why not just stop whining about it and just get on with it? I mean, he wouldn't say that, but it's like, "So? What's your problem?" And, "Just do it, and I'll be very proud of you and help you do whatever you need to do."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. So he was – he was a huge shift for me.

MS. RIEDEL: And when did you meet him?

MS. SMITH: We met through the human potential movement, at a conference in Cazenovia, New York, in 1969 – '68 or '69. We both eventually were divorced, and then married in 1970. So it was a pretty quick turnover there, which made for some difficult first years. But we made it through the difficult first years and have our 39th anniversary coming up this week.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MS. SMITH: It's cool.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.] You were just starting to talk about –

MS. SMITH: Yeah, yeah. I'm sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: No. That's all helpful. But you were beginning to talk about community college when I asked that second question [inaudible].

MS. SMITH: Okay. I took one adult ed course in drawing, and I thought, man, I really need to do more of this. I had taken this correspondence course in teaching embroidery, and I thought, I just don't know enough. So I went to the local community college, College of DuPage [Glen Ellyn, IL], to begin to pick up classes in 2D and 3D design and drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: This would have been late '60s or early '70s?

MS. SMITH: Early '70s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: Because Mel and I were married at that point, and he had gone back to graduate school. I had one particular teacher there who was a huge influence on me, primarily as a teacher, because she was just one of the best teachers I'd ever had, ever. Her name was Sister George Ellen Holmgren, and she came out from the convent in LaGrange, Illinois, to come and teach. She was a painter, and she taught both drawing and 2D design.

She became a very dear friend. Sadly, she died way too young, with Alzheimer's. I have a painting of some nudes down in our bathroom – I'll have to show it to you – that she couldn't keep in the convent, and so she and I did a swap after I was – well, at the point that, I guess, I was going back to graduate school. She was one of those teachers who was willing to learn from her students. As an adult going back to school, I so appreciated that.

I was not the oldest one in my class. There was a man who was in his 70s. I think it was just great. But then there were also a lot of younger people, too. I am very impressed with the community college movement, and I'm a great supporter of community colleges for all that they can do. I eventually ended up teaching some classes at that community college, and loved every bit of it.

I taught all kinds of stuff, basketry and embroidery. I did an artist-in-residency there with students, helping work on a project and things like that. So it was just a great place to pick up my undergraduate credits, because it began to occur to me that I probably would want to teach on the university level. After all, my brother did that. So by the time I went back to graduate school, I was kind of ready to teach.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were 30 –

MS. SMITH: No. I was in my late 30s.

MS. RIEDEL: Thirty-seven, 38, 39 when you were [inaudible]?

MS. SMITH: Yeah, because I was – I remember celebrating my 40th birthday and somebody else's 30th and

another person's 24th birthday. We were all friends in the same class.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MS. SMITH: That's the nice thing about schools these days, because there is not that ageism, only if you bring it in with you. But I think having that 70-year-old guy in my other classes made me realize, I'm not so old.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: And what I loved was I had more life experience than they did.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: They had youthful energy, and they had a lot more art training at a younger age than I did. But I wasn't worried about getting my next date. I was worried about getting home and putting food on the table for the kids primarily during that time. I was going to quit with my bachelor's [degree], not with my M.F.A. But then I was awarded a fellowship, a university fellowship, that paid my way for the next 18 months, so I went ahead and got my M.F.A., which was great.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was at Northern Illinois University?

MS. SMITH: In DeKalb [IL].

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And it was a lengthy drive from where I was living in the western suburbs. But it was a – it was a good time. And –

MS. RIEDEL: And why did you choose that school?

MS. SMITH: They would take me. It was that or the Art Institute [School of the Art Institute of Chicago], and the Art Institute turned me down. And then someone said to me, "Well, didn't you apply a second time? Because they always turn everybody down the first time." And I thought, who needs it? I was already ready to go. And it wasn't just that Northern would take me. They actively recruited me. The head of the craft program at that time was the head of the jewelry department, metals department, and she actively recruited me into –

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember her name?

MS. SMITH: I could look for it, but I don't at the moment, no [Eleanor Caldwell].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: In fact, a lot of the teachers out there I'd probably prefer to leave nameless, with the exception of a couple, because –

MS. RIEDEL: But you actually ended up in the metals department [inaudible].

MS. SMITH: I did. I started as a metals major, and then realized – she and I both realized this was not going to work. I really – the only thing I really liked doing was working with wire, and that was after a workshop with Mary Lee Hu, who you're going to see very soon.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah-ha. Right.

MS. SMITH: And I thought, oh, I could do this. But then I realized, no. There's still too many other metals techniques that I'd have to learn, and I hated the way my hands smelled after I worked with metal. I mean, it was just as simple as that. And I also had to persuade it to do something always by heating it or banging on it or, you know, cutting it, and I really liked the softer forms of persuasion to make fabric do what you wanted it to do.

MS. RIEDEL: After so many years of fabric work, what persuaded you to even consider metals as a major?

MS. SMITH: I really didn't consider metals to be a major. She recruited me into that department –

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MS. SMITH: – and she said, "This is how you will start."

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MS. SMITH: So I thought, okay, I'll do this because it's something new to learn. At one point, I actually combined metals and fiber, and I was very happy with doing that. Those projects, jewelry kinds of things, neckpieces and whatnot, turned out to be quite successful. In the fibers department there, it was, well, Northern was one of the land grant universities, and so the land grant universities always had weaving as part of their curriculum. There was a weaving program. And there was also silk screening yardage. And that was it. That was the fiber program. And I didn't really fit in with either one of them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: Neither – and I, you know, I felt like I had already done my apprenticing, as it were, in learning embroidery and machine work, which was pretty new still at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: And I wanted desperately to continue with that. Then there was – the silk-screen person went on a sabbatical, and a woman named Barbara Krug, K-R-U-G, came into that program. She had been trained at Indiana University [Bloomington, IN], where a lot of the great Midwestern people – like Diane Itter and [William] Bill Itter were there. And there were just some fabulous people from IU. They were spreading their education around. [Breskin] Renie Adams also came to Northern from there.

Barbara was a wonderful – a remarkable teacher that allowed me to begin to find my own way of painting the fabric and doing machine work with it. I had some unsuccessful studio classes with a couple of other people and decided, no, wait a minute. This is my choice to do what I do in this program. I don't have to work in a class where I'm having a miserable time. I'm going to work with somebody who gets it and who feeds back to me.

I can remember coming home and saying to Mel, at the end of a semester, when I had this ridiculously banal critique from somebody I really admired, who shall remain nameless, saying, "Well, I'll give you an A if you'll do better work next semester." That was my critique. It just made me nuts. So I came home, and I'm really, really upset about it. And Mel said, "Look, I've been watching you trying to make her a better teacher all semester. Why don't you just forget about her?" And I thought, oh, yeah, that's a good idea.

So I dropped her class and took a double class with Barbara Krug, who was only going to be there for a year or so. And I learned so much during that time because I began to really find this combination of painting and machine work that has not left me yet.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was the first time that you began to combine the two?

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And was the first time you painted on –

MS. SMITH: - -on fabric, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, on fabric, which was –

MS. SMITH: Right. It was. I mean, otherwise I'd been using other fabrics and doing appliqué techniques to get some of the same thing. But this was much more my own hand from start to finish.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] The combination of the gestural and the more pointillist began to come together.

MS. SMITH: Yes, exactly. I began – well, and that came through two teachers who I would love to name because they were such extraordinary teachers.

And the art history classes there were wonderful. I took as many classes as I could from Dimitri and Avra Liakos. They were both from Greece. They only used their own slides, none of these slides from the slide library, thank you, because they had both worked on digs. They had done restoration. They spoke from this wealth of information that was just marvelous about Mycenaean and the art of Crete and the Greek Islands. I couldn't take enough classes with them.

What I became fascinated with, and became my first expression in my graduate show, were the restorations – the pieces, the photographs, of restored work, as, for instance, in the mosaics. The shiny mosaics were the old ones, and dull mosaics were the new ones, so that you always knew which was which. Or if something was painted in, you could tell where the restoration was. And so the overall pieces as restored objects were so fascinating to me as visuals – not thinking about them as they were, but thinking about them as they are, as new kinds of objects.



MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: Part of the rough time of Mel's and my marriage happened when I first went back to graduate school. Actually, and this was pretty traumatic, the first day I went off to take my first class was the day he moved out for a period of about nine months. So here I was trying to get myself together in graduate school and be the mother of two kids and commute, and that was not an easy time.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MS. SMITH: But I was going to do it. I was bound and determined I would do it. And he would come back and help with things on occasion, which was great. But it really was - during that time we tried to work on restoring our marriage. And then once that was going, we ended up moving into a huge old house that we were also going to restore. So the whole idea of restoration on all kinds of levels was important to me.

So I would make a painting, and then imagine that it had been torn apart and that I had to repair it. Now, that doesn't - that doesn't explain it in the slightest because I didn't cut it up and mend it or anything like that. I just took other - another painting that I had made on cotton organdy and cut out little bits and pieces as though they were mosaic tiles and stitched them in place.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: So that became the theme of my graduate work. And what was interesting to me at that time was that the crafts people, while they were interested in it, were not as responsive as the painting students were.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: All of a sudden, I was being recognized by the painting students. This was cool. So that was how all of that particular voice kind of came together, I guess would be the way to put it.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. And did the stitching begin then, as well?

MS. SMITH: Oh, yes. I was using the stitching to hold all those little bits and pieces together, not solidly, but letting them curl up, fray up off the surface itself. And while I was stitching, I had this old machine that was badly out of tune, and so some of the bobbin thread started coming to the top. And I suddenly realized that I really, really liked having that introduction of that tiny dot of color on the surface.

Then I realized, oh, I know how to do that.

I'll loosen the bobbin tension and begin to bring the bobbin thread to the surface. And that led to the next body of work, which I worked on for 10 years, painting and then doing - working over that service with a different color in the top and a different color in the bobbin, and bringing that bobbin thread up to the surface as a texture.

MS. RIEDEL: And at this point, you were still stitching on the top. You hadn't flipped it over and started stitching on the back yet?

MS. SMITH: Right. Everything was done from the top, though I loved the way the backs often looked in my work. And I see that in my students, too, that the backs are a lot freer, because you're using any old color and you're not worried about what the surface is going to look like. And oh, God, the backs are beautiful sometimes.

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

MS. SMITH: Take a break?

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

[END CD 2.]

All right. We're back after a lovely lunch break, and we're going to pick up talking about the work itself, starting with the early work right out of graduate school.

[Aside.] That's just an ephemeral sound that this recorder makes from time to time.

MS. SMITH: Oh, okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there an event, or the experience of grad school in particular, that launched the idea of exhibiting your work or handling it in a different fashion than you had up till this point?

MS. SMITH: Not so much about the work, but in general, working in general, because before graduate school, I had been teaching adults a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And I gave that up for those couple of years while I was doing that. In the meantime, by the time I finished graduate school, my daughter was of an age where - well, it was shortly after I finished graduate school - I really didn't think about doing studio work. I just thought, well, I am not ready to go teach at a university. I was rather turned off by watching what was going on among the various faculty members, the - it was not a happy situation. It was not a situation that lent itself to doing one's own work. And this is very crude, but I had this mental image of most of the professors, who were quite capable of doing their own work, were spending most of their time with their hands covering their asses, didn't have their hands out in an open kind of way to actually work.

So I was really turned off by it. I was 40, and I thought, I don't want to start with a social committee. I don't want to start playing all these political games. I don't have to do that when I'm working with adults. I don't even have to encourage them to get their work done after they've had a late date, you know. They come to these workshops primed and ready to work. So maybe I'm just going to do that.

I already had people waiting for me to get out of school to come back and teach in various parts of the country.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this through the embroiderers' guilds?

MS. SMITH: It was, primarily. It was back to that "you never know who's in the room" idea

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And one person might suggest me to a group, and they would organize themselves. Or it could have been through the guilds. It could have been for a national conference. I did a lot of that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Would these be workshops during conferences?

MS. SMITH: Yes. They were workshops that went from two to five days, some as long as two weeks.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: Which was really intensive work. You're on all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: It's not like teaching in a university, where you come in, you do your thing, and you go home. I mean, you're there every moment. It's a very high-intensity kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: And would these workshops be offered at local art centers or -

MS. SMITH: They would sometimes have them at art centers. But often it would be at a bank or a church building or a church basement, wherever they would find a space.

MS. RIEDEL: Find a space.

MS. SMITH: And again, it's that underground kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: And it's really quite an amazing phenomenon.

MS. RIEDEL: We don't hear very much about that.

MS. SMITH: No, we don't. But they should.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I mean, it's really pretty amazing in the textile world. I think it's partly because textile materials and tools are relatively portable, despite the fact that some machines weigh 40-some pounds. But, you know, you couldn't exactly do glassblowing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: You know, you could do lampwork, maybe -

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. SMITH: - but not blowing or something like that unless people were coming into a place like Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] or Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME]. And I had done some of that, too, teaching at Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN]. But I really was on the circuit. I was probably traveling 30 or 40 percent of my time. And -

MS. RIEDEL: Was this mostly Midwest-based?

MS. SMITH: No. It was all over.

MS. RIEDEL: And is this when you started traveling internationally, as well?

MS. SMITH: I have to think about that.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe that came a little later.

MS. SMITH: That was a little bit later when I started doing more international traveling. It was more like the late '80s and the '90s. But this was all coast-to-coast kinds of things.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And it was a wonderful experience.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were doing this once a month?

MS. SMITH: Once or twice a month. I was doing a lot of traveling.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a lot.

MS. SMITH: For instance, I had a group in Detroit that got themselves together, and I would go just once a month to work with the same group for about four or five months, you know, giving them a project to work on, or encouraging them to keep on working on such-and-such. Come back, do critiques, get them started on something else. And then they would work. It was just about the time the frequent flyer miles began, but too early for me to collect on most of those.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was an independent embroiderers' guild in Detroit?

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] It wasn't even a guild. It was just a group of independent people who wanted to just do more.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: They had been in classes that I had taught, and they bonded, and hired me to come up and work with them. So I did a lot of that. It was almost like a consulting business in some ways.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. It sounds like it.

MS. SMITH: It was great. I mean, it was really interesting. And then my daughter got mono[nucleosis], and I was someplace else. I wasn't home. And suddenly - it was like this - something hits you upside the head and I had to think, wait a minute. I can't do this. I don't want to miss out on her life. She was a sophomore or junior in high school at that point. So I stopped. I just - [makes noise] - I didn't cancel anything. I just didn't take any new ones on.

And so I thought, well, what am I going to do? I really thought about it. I thought, well, I'm going to listen to what I've been telling all these people about how to do stuff, and I'm going to take my own advice for a couple of years and see what happens. And at that point, I moved - well, I moved into the living room of our old house and kind of took over the space.

Mel had some good questions for me about, "How are you going to feel about not being with all these people?" I said, "It's fine. It's fine. I really like to be alone." And then his next question was, "How do you feel about not being a star? Because you come in, and you're on, and you're the lead." And I said, "Oh, I can't wait. It'll be quite wonderful." Because right about that same time was that movie - oh, who was the guy who did *Chorus Line*?

MS. RIEDEL: Fosse? Bob Fosse?

MS. SMITH: Bob Fosse. Do you remember that awful moment when he looks himself in the mirror in the bathroom and goes, "Showtime!" And there are those moments when you're going to go out and teach, and you have to kind of rev yourself up to be more than you feel like you are at that moment. And it can be showtime, but when somebody says that word, it just gives me the creeps because I want to be real. I don't want to be "on." And yet you are on when you're doing that kind of thing.

So I said, "No, no, no, that's fine." What I didn't recognize at the time was I felt horrible because I wasn't earning any money. Not a cent. I hadn't realized how important that was to me and to the family. But, I mean, Mel was working full time at that point and really supporting us. So I went three months without earning a thing, and then within the next year I doubled what I earned by selling my work. I mean, just the timing was so amazing.

And that was important. But what was really important was I just loved making things. I just loved the process. I loved making the notes. I loved doing the research. I loved doing the reading. I loved – I loved it all. And I've never, ever gone back since that time to teaching as much as I was at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you walk us through that process, the research, the notes, the books? Yeah.

MS. SMITH: Oh, sure. It's – well, it's just one of those things where you just – that's where Rollo May says, "Learn to court chaos in the creative process." And I think it's a chaotic time, and it probably goes back – this is where I am my brother's sister and my mother's daughter, that research.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: Not necessarily into history, but it can be into ideas. It can be phrases. It can be maps. It can be visual stuff. And it all gets piled together in my sketchbooks. It can be somebody else's work. I mean, it can be all kinds of things that I want to just feed my soul at that point, until I get so much that I'm beginning to get a little crazy. This sensitive husband of mine used to say, "Is it about time for me to leave for a few days?"

[They Laugh.]

Because it was like this itch you can't scratch, and then the work started coming out like crazy. And then that leads to a series, in which one piece leads to the next piece, which leads to the next piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: It's a little bit of everything. I can't say it's any one thing. It might be reading the right poem that finally sets me off, or taking the right photographs. So all of that is, for me, food for the soul. And as you can see from all the books around me, I don't read them all at any one time, but they provide what I need at a particular time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: As well as old magazines and things. I have – I have a really good library.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I use it. I share it sometimes. I have found that I don't get things back, and that makes me crazy. I don't want to be in charge of something coming back to me. But for the most part, it's here, and it's – there is something about the company of books that just keeps me sane.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's been true for you since you were a child.

MS. SMITH: Absolutely. Very earliest.

MS. RIEDEL: The early work, the pieces were separated, yes? They were individual panels.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, they were.

MS. RIEDEL: Texture was prominent.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Heavy lace patterns.

MS. SMITH: Well, there were some that were lace. But that was much – when did I do those? Those were before graduate school times.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: At this point, it was paintings that were stitched in sections. I was really exploring the idea of transparency and light and how you make opaque materials transparent, or the effect of transparency. I know that Michael James was doing quilts a little before that time, and seeing some of his quilts, I'm sure I began to think about, now, how did he use color to make that movement in and out? Michael and I are old friends. I didn't know him as well then. I sure knew his work, though.

So the whole idea of trying to get rays of light that crossed. I had taken, as an undergraduate course back at that community college, a wonderful course on color that was based on Josef Albers's *Interaction of Color* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1963]. And I know that that was a major influence on how to make opaque things look transparent. Those experiments, that was a very intense class that I took there.

MS. RIEDEL: This was at DuPage?

MS. SMITH: Yeah. DuPage, with a woman named Wendy Arbeit. She had, I think, trained at Yale [Yale University, New Haven, CT], not with Albers, but with somebody after Albers. She didn't last in the community college system, which was too bad. I don't know what's happened to her. She probably – you know, check her on the Internet at some point. She was not the easiest teacher in the world, but boy, she was really good.

I learned a lot from her, and I learned a lot about color from her. You were asking about color earlier, and it just occurs to me that I did learn about how to make color work. That was very – a very good class, and it was a good course of study for me to work with Albers because at that point, I was working with mostly store-bought fabrics that were opaque fabrics, and I could make transparent effects with them.

All my projects were done in textiles rather than in paper. I did cut up paper using the Color-Aid paper. But I also stitched every project, I think, for her. And, oh, man, that was tough.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MS. SMITH: Time-consuming.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: But I really learned a lot, so it was well worth it.

But back to the pieces worked. There were a couple of reasons for pieces that were worked in multiples, and that gets into commissions, because commission work was going on at that time, or I was beginning to do commission work. And one of the incredible people who helped me along the way – well, a couple of incredible people – were Ellen and Hank Kluck from EllenHank Designs in Riverside, Illinois. They lived an artist's life that was quite amazing. They had met, I believe, at IIT [Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, IL], and they did silk-screen designs for the commercial trade. I really adored both of them.

Ellen introduced me to a man named Bertil Soderberg, who was the buyer for the decorating of the stores of Marshall Fields. I don't know what's ever happened to those works, because all of those pieces that they owned were just sold off or thrown away. There was a Cynthia Schiara piece that, God, I would have just died for.

He wouldn't commission, but I would take – every so often, I'd make an appointment with him and take in what I did. And he would say, well, I could use this here, and I could use this here, and I could use this here. At one point, I remember, my daughter helped me take things in, and she said, "Mr. Soderberg, you just paid for my college tuition next semester." You know, she was so excited. So it was really a wonderful experience. And he was this gentlemanly man. It was marvelous.

And it was partly working in units that he could rearrange.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. SMITH: – because if I offered him some flexibility –

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I was also doing work that had a puzzle-like quality to it, and it was fun to see it in different arrangements and rearrangements. So a rectangle in three could become a kimono form in –

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: You know, that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: So just to confirm, you were working in –

MS. SMITH: In modules.

MS. RIEDEL: - modules that you designed to be interchangeable.

MS. SMITH: Yes. Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: It was fun for me to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: And to also see if I could make the colors work. I mean, it was setting some pretty tough parameters for myself -

MS. RIEDEL: I would think.

MS. SMITH: - but somehow or other, I got into it and really loved doing [it]. I loved sketching all those out and that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: So you would sketch these out specifically before you [inaudible]?

MS. SMITH: Not in color, but just little geometrics.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: And when I sketch, I mean - if you're talking about a thumbnail sketch, that's the size, about the size of the sketches that I do. I work very, very small when I'm doing those. So then I started working with the modules, partly because of Bertil Soderberg.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: And for, oh, four, five, six years he was still there. He had been there for a long time. Then things started changing at Fields and whatnot. But it was a great run -

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: - for me. And those commissions paid me to do other work, which was great. I didn't have to have another job. I didn't have to go off teaching or waitressing or anything else. I mean, that was very helpful for me. And it made me think in a new way.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like you really - go ahead, please.

MS. SMITH: Oh, about the commissions, you mean?

MS. RIEDEL: No. But you just think in a new way, you were about to say.

MS. SMITH: Well, the commissions themselves -

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: - I mean, working like that helped me to think in a new way. And that was very useful. I could experiment.

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to say, this is one of the few instances I've heard of where a commission is a completely positive experience that you're using to further develop ideas that you have -

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: - in a way that's just completely symbiotic with your own style of working.

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] It really was. I still see commissions as problem-solving. And if you - now, the thing about commissions is the problem-solving is done in the designing level. Once you've made that design, then what you have to do is exactly what the client is expecting, and that's a challenge. It's like making a pair of earrings. One has to be just like the other if it's commissioned that way, for instance.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But you make the design, you give the sample, and then you've got to promise them that there are not going to be any surprises.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is very different from your way of working.

MS. SMITH: Oh, it is. Very. These days when I do commissions, I will say - usually it's - well, it's not through just me any more. It's mostly through a gallery. And they'll say, "Well, they want something in the spirit of...."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: And that's fine. I used to have friends who would say, "Oh, but how could you work with their colors?" I said, "Well, it gets me working in a new way. It introduces things that are surprises for me that I hadn't really thought of before." And yeah, can I make that purple work? Well, I can give it a try and see what will make it more purply or less purply or whatever. I've always thought of commissions as being something that stretches me.

MS. RIEDEL: Were there some that you felt were especially successful? Or some that were especially not?

MS. SMITH: They're probably the easier ones to remember.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: Well, one commission [*Flight*, 1993], for instance, which was for a woman who was a colleague of my husband's and a real diva - once it was up, she decided she hated it. And she told everybody who was around her at that moment and really made my life miserable. So I quick took it down and sent it home, and it stayed for a year or so all wrapped up in brown paper because I didn't even want to be reminded of this, because I had never had a commission that had gone south before. They had always been very successful and very positive experiences.

Then one day I got this crazy call from the husband of a friend of mine who was in our guild. He was a framer, and he said, "Do you still do large work?" And I said, "Sure, I do." And he said, "Well, there's this - there's this man that's looking for some large work for an office building in Chicago, and he'd like to come see you." So he came over the next day, and I thought, what do I have that's large? At that point I'd been working on things that were mostly about 18 by 24 inches or so. And I thought, ah-ha, I'll get this piece out, because it was monstrous.

And he came over and he saw it - or he saw my work, and then he saw - or I showed him that piece so he knew I could work big. And it led to the biggest commission I've ever done, which was a 15-foot-by-15-foot piece [*Boundless*, 1994], for what was then the RR Donnelley Company, and hanging downtown in Chicago. It was their world headquarters. The piece now belongs to Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management [Evanston, IL] because I guess they moved out of the building where they were on Wacker Drive, and they donated this piece to Kellogg.

Then I ended up selling that other piece. So what was a misery at one point led to other things.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SMITH: It's - you just wait long enough and things do have their way of coming around full circle. And that commission, that big 15-by-15-foot piece with the Gang of Four that were always looking over their shoulder at the CEO, who was an "I don't know much about art, but I know what I hate" kind of guy, when the piece was finally installed on this marble wall -

MS. RIEDEL: Is this the Donnelley piece?

MS. SMITH: This is the Donnelley piece - the CEO said to the architect, "We know she's worked a lot harder on this than she billed for." So they gave me a \$10,000 payment over and above what I had charged them at the end.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

MS. SMITH: So, I mean, that was a really nice, happy story.

MS. RIEDEL: That's an extraordinary story.

MS. SMITH: It doesn't happen very often.

MS. RIEDEL: No. And the work at this time - this piece was done when, Barbara?

MS. SMITH: Probably in the '90s sometime.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: I have documentation on that one.

MS. RIEDEL: Going back to the earlier work -

MS. SMITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: - just to clarify, it was primarily abstract at this point in time?

MS. SMITH: Yes. All abstract.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: With the exception of the feelings of light that are in them, plus the rather atmospheric color that I was working with. But, yes. Sometimes they had rather strange figures in them that were very geometric, but figures like dancing figures or figures that moved. And you could tell it was a figure. It was a human form. They were based on, oh, photos of dancers that I had just collected over time. But for the most part, they were geometric, and they were, oh, God, everywhere from Allstate headquarters - corporate headquarters in Chicago - and hotels -

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: - and hospitals. Hospital commissions are different. You can't use any brown. Not strong reds. Not too much gray-blacks. They have to be pretty upbeat. They're there to provide healing, not just for - hardly for the patients, because the patients don't get to see them. It's the people coming in to be with the patients. And it's also for the staff.

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

MS. SMITH: So whenever I'm doing something for a hospital, I - actually, this is one of the things I do when I'm doing a commission for any kind of an organization, corporation or university or whatever: "Who's your audience?" is the first question I ask, because I never know what they're going to say. "What do you want? Whoever your audience is, what is it that you want them to experience from the work?" And that really helps me to do the designing then.

So the most recent hospital commission I did [*Blessings*, 2009, St. Anthony's Hospital, Gig Harbor, WA], that just went to the opening on Friday night, is in the surgical waiting area. So I needed to find out from them who's going to be seeing this. And they agreed with me: the staff and the people waiting who were anxious. It's not going to be the patient.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: I remember doing another one in Evanston, Illinois, for Evanston Hospital [1994], in a building that's adjacent to the hospital itself, and it's where all the doctors' offices are. This is a three-story piece that was under a light well and over a fountain, I mean, all the worst possible things for textiles that you can imagine. I mean, at least they didn't have smudge pots. That would have been the only other thing that might have made it difficult.

But I remember coming to the guy who was commissioning it and asking about the audience - he said, "Oh, it's the doctors. They own the building. That's the audience. We want to please them."

MS. RIEDEL: So what's the difference between working on a piece for doctors and working on a piece for other people?

MS. SMITH: Well, in that situation, they wanted something that looked pretty grand, because they'd spent their money on it.

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MS. SMITH: They weren't thinking about the patients. But what interests me is that I've heard from more people that I know in Illinois who've had a doctor's appointment there - the piece, as far as I know, is still there. That was installed probably 20 years ago. It was, in fact, installed the same time the Donnelley project was. I worked on both of those pieces over a period of nine months.



MS. RIEDEL: And the new piece in the surgical waiting room, how is that different?

MS. SMITH: Well, it's full of light. I was a little disappointed that they didn't want something that was inspired by what's here, because it's within this community. I thought that they would want something about the sea or the sky or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. SMITH: They said, well, no. They had a lot of that. They wanted something more abstract. And I had – it was funny – another commission, a small one, where the people had asked me if I would do something – I wasn't paid anything – for their bedroom. I did it, and they didn't like it. And I thought, well, too bad. But the committee saw it: "We want that, but bigger." And that one I did with thoughts about the edge of the garden and what grows out where you're not cultivating. I was also exploring light again. So the piece has a lot of light in it, and – it's for a Catholic hospital. I called it *Blessings*.

I'm at a point now where, probably Wednesday, I'm going to get a call from the art consultant, because I'm not happy with the way it's installed, and we have to work on it. They didn't use nonglare plexi [Plexiglas], and they hung three pendant lights right in front of it. It really looks dumb.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm.

MS. SMITH: So you'll see behind you a couple of little samples over there that I have put some varnish, some Golden varnish, on. And I'm really hoping that they will just take the plexi off it completely. I'm going to be rather firm with them about it, because right now they don't have their money's worth out of that piece. There were a number of people I knew who went to the opening and saw it and had the same reaction that I did. So we'll be working on that. I won't charge them anything. I just want it to be right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: It's wonderful to do a commission in your home town.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. SMITH: And I love doing hospital commissions because I feel like I'm helping with healing in some way or other. I'm hopeful that it will be a positive distraction, not a negative distraction, for those who are waiting who are in tough times.

MS. RIEDEL: For the most part, have you been happy with the installation? Has the commission [inaudible] –

MS. SMITH: Yeah, usually –

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: Usually I am. I don't always see all of them. But mostly, yes, I'm quite happy with them. Sometimes they have to be under glass or plexi because of where they are in a public space. I have had one smaller work stolen. They just ripped it right off the wall. I'll do the best I can to make pieces – I like to make sure that they're not going to self-destruct in any way, so I use materials that won't fade. And they're pretty heavily stitched and put together to make sure that nothing is going to happen to them over time.

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

MS. SMITH: In certain cases we've done them where they're bolted to the wall and that kind of thing. But there are times when, if it's an area where there used to be cigarettes, they'd get smoke damage. Or they'd hang them in a south window, which you don't do with any art, really. So for the most part, though, it's been a really good experience for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: Because you never know who's going to see the work and be moved in some way by it.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've done them from the beginning of your career.

MS. SMITH: I really have. I mean, it certainly has fallen off in the last few years, but that period during the '80s was great for commissions. And it'll happen again.

MS. RIEDEL: In the early '80s, you also did a series based on – the Sam Lee series. And this might be a good time to talk about that.

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Yeah. In fact, Marshall Fields owns that, or owned that piece, interestingly enough.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, interesting.

MS. SMITH: Sam was the college roommate of my father's. My father, during World War I, dropped out of high school and worked in the Camden shipyards with his father, and then went back to high school in his 20s, which was very unusual at that time, and then went on to college and to seminary. Sam, Samuel Lee, was from China and was my father's seminary roommate, and obviously a very influential person on my father, who used to tell stories about Sam.

Sam went back to China and was the Methodist bishop in Peking, which is now Beijing, and he had two children, named Ruth and John, after my parents. So I had the middle name of Lee, named for Sam. He wasn't truly a godfather, though I think of him in that role, as this mysterious man from the East for whom I was named. And my daughter is Lee Ann. And -

MS. RIEDEL: You never actually met him?

MS. SMITH: I did finally meet him. When I was - well, I guess I had met him when I was really little, but I don't remember. I remember when we were living in Cape May, so I was probably 10, nine or 10, Sam came to stay for a few days, and he taught me how to do - what do you do with the strings and -

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, a cat's cradle sort of thing?

MS. SMITH: Cat's cradle. He taught me cat's cradle. He was quite brilliant with that. And he had another friend of his who was there, another Chinese man, a businessman of some sort. I never quite learned what he did. But Sam, I was just goggle-eyed over this guy. And then he went back to China when the Communists took over because he wanted to be with his church people and his family.

One daughter of his lived in what was then Formosa [Taiwan]. And we never, ever heard directly from Sam again - so that would have been '47 or '48 - something like that, other than that he - they smuggled embroideries out of China to Formosa, and then they were sent to my parents, who then sold them in the church for \$10 or \$15. And the money went back to Formosa, and then back to Sam.

So the wedding robe that I have - I guess at that time when you were married, you were considered to be royalty. And so that's - that is, you know, a really beautiful -

MS. RIEDEL: Exquisite.

MS. SMITH: - beautiful robe. I am thrilled that my mother gave it to me because I was named for Sam. Then I have another small embroidery, too, that was one of the ones that they sold through the church to collect money for him.

So there was something about the magic of Sam Lee's name and of having that Asian influence -

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: - inside my head. And while I've never been to China, my sister has. I've spent a lot of time in Asia, working in Japan, and I realize they are not the same at all. But there is something about that magic, from a Westerner's point of view, of the exotic East. And so that's just a rather sweet story about Sam.

MS. RIEDEL: It must have made quite an impression on you for you to make a piece based -

MS. SMITH: Oh, absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: Yes. And that kimono form that I used, with a rectangular piece in the middle and then two smaller pieces on the right and left - of course, a lot of people at that time were doing kimono as -

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: It's such an easy form to work on. And I didn't want to get into having it be a cliché.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But it became part of the rearrangeable pieces. I'd love to know whatever happened to that piece,

but I have it in imagery, so that's okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Moving on to – well, in the early '90s, you took some time off to work on your book, *Celebrating the Stitch* [*Celebrating the Stitch: Contemporary Embroidery of North America*. Newton, CT: Taunton Press, 1991].

MS. SMITH: That started in about 1987. I was teaching a one-day workshop on creativity and on working in the kind of circular courting-your-ideas manner that I write that's based on Tony Buzan's book, *Use Both Sides of Your Brain* [New York : Dutton, 1976]. And it was a one-day class that was at “Convergence,” the Handweavers Guild of America conference that was in Chicago that year.

When the class was over, a woman came in and introduced herself. Her name was Chris Timmons. Chris used to be the editor at *FiberArts*. And I really always – the years that she was the editor, I think was one of their best times for *FiberArts* magazine. So I had a chance to say, “Wow, I'm glad to meet you, and I loved what you did at *FiberArts*.” And she said, “Well” – she was just coming – cold-calling on all the teachers and saying, “If you're ever interested, let me know. I'm now working for Taunton Press, and I'd be interested in seeing if you have a book that you would like to propose.”

Without any thought, I said, “I do. I want to do a book that is a why-to, not a how-to. I want to make it for the students that I have that are on beyond the beginning and looking for new ideas and looking to make art. I want it to be about work from North America, the U.S. and Canada, because all the books that are really good are coming out of England, and I think it's time to show what's going on here.”

When I finished saying that – and it was like I had my five-minute elevator speech, and I hadn't even thought about it – I was just stunned. I thought, where did that come from? It was quite amazing. I had thought off and on about doing a book on design or whatever. I'd off and on given it some thought. But the only class I ever got a C in in college was freshman comp, so I figured, I can't write.

But she said, well, let's talk about it. So we made a date to talk about it later.

I ran into a very dear friend of mine, who no longer is alive, a fellow named Stephen Thurston, who was a weaver, tapestry weaver, marvelous guy. And I told him about it, and Stephen was psychic enough to really know what was going on inside a person and head them in the right direction. He was just a pretty amazing guy, and a very dear friend. So he and I started talking about it, and he said, “This is the right thing for you to do. It's just the right thing” This must have been – I think it was 1987.

So she said, “Well, write me a proposal,” and she sent me all the information about what to do. And she said, “I think this sounds really interesting.” Things got delayed because just about the time when I was going to work on this, my mother was taken very ill and died. So that stopped me for a couple of months.

But then I went back to it and started working on it. And they accepted the proposal, and I spent the next three years, until 1991, working on – well, I spent about half of that time, a year and a half, working on the research and finding the right people and doing the interviews. Then they spent another 18 months on producing the book.

There were about a hundred artists in there. If there's one thing I can look at in my career that I think was really useful, it was writing that book. I mean, it was useful for me. It was like graduate school all over again. Not only did I learn how to interview, I learned how to write. Chris was a terrific editor. I worked with her most of the time, and then I had another editor later because Chris just got too busy. But I learned so much from her. She's a marvelous person.

I do think that I really helped the field of embroidery with that. I've had any number of people who were included in that book who said that it really gave their careers a big push, which was – none of that was my intent. My intent was to work – I had a student's voice inside my head, and I was really wanting to show the student something that I couldn't do except through this book.

It was a terrific experience, but it was three solid years. During that time, I did have one two-person show. In fact, Stephen Thurston, who at that point was not well, essentially gave me that show, because he couldn't do it, and he recommended me to do it. And I thought, I can never do this. I can't write a whole chapter in the book, which is what the deadline was, and also get all the work ready.

At that time, I was listening to Studs Terkel. He always interviewed on WFMT at 10:00 in the morning. I was driving the car somewhere, and I was thinking, I can't do all this. There's just no way. He was interviewing Quincy Jones, and it was one of those sermon moments for me. It was at that point that Quincy Jones was beginning to do the Live Aid things, and he was producing. He was also performing. Studs listed all these things that Quincy Jones was doing. And he said to Quincy Jones, “Now, how can you do all this?” And Quincy's response was, “Hey, man, as far as I know, life's for expansion, not contraction.”

I thought, ah, got hit upside the head right there. I thought, okay, I was meant to hear that. So I did get it all done, and it was pretty exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MS. SMITH: However, I didn't do that much work during that three-year period. And I had all these artists buzzing around inside my head. And when I did start to work again, where was I going to start? I had to get them out of my system so I wasn't copying anybody.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: That was a real delicate kind of change. That's when – well, I had a couple wonderful dreams. One of them was being in the back of a Volkswagen with no protection and all these gorgeous honeybees all around, all in different colors, buzzing all around my head. I had no way of getting away from them. It was all these artists going, buzz buzz. They were all inside my head.

So I had to think about that. Then later when we decided to tour an exhibition ["Celebrating the Stitch," traveled, 1991- 95] connected with the book – that was certainly never an intention.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Separate.

MS. SMITH: It was definitely separate.

MS. RIEDEL: Completely separate.

MS. SMITH: And meant as – it was just one of those, oh, let's have a show in our back yard kind of things, really, that came up as I was talking to the marketing people about the book. So it was not a show, and the book was not a catalogue for a show.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: The book was it, and the show was meant to show a few people's work. And somehow or other it got confused in translation, and it became everybody's work. Going from a show of 50 pieces, it went to 133 pieces. Suddenly there was this gargantuan thing happening that was taking me along with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Was Taunton handling the exhibition and the tour? That's a whole other project.

MS. SMITH: Well, the PR woman at Taunton [Donna Pierpont] at that point thought it was marvelous. Taunton thought it was a terrible idea. But Donna went ahead with it, despite the fact that her bosses said, "We are not in the show-touring business." And somehow or other, this Peter Schlessinger at the Newton Art Center in Newton, Massachusetts [New Art Center, Newtonville, MA], heard about it, saw the work, and thought, "I'm going to do this."

He was not the easiest person in the world. But he had a vision, and he decided, yeah, maybe we can make this happen. I said, "Well, I'd really like it to be in Chicago at the Cultural Center. That would be very cool." So Donna let it go. Peter took over. He'd never done anything like this before. None of us knew that. But we were all beginners in the whole thing.

So they had the show at Newton, and for sure it was going to go to Chicago. That was it. It was going to be in those two places. And I was up at Newton Art Center for the opening. It was very exciting, of course, and all 133 pieces were at the Art Center, and also at the Society of Arts & Crafts [Boston, MA].

MS. RIEDEL: In Boston. Right?

MS. SMITH: In Boston.

MS. RIEDEL: The Cambridge area?

MS. SMITH: Right. And I went to a little – I went to this needlework store [in Salem, MA] that wanted to do a book signing that weekend. Well, it was snowing, and I think it was also Super Bowl weekend or something. I mean, nobody was there. One person came to this book signing. So here I was trying to pretend to be a crowd. It was very embarrassing.

And this one person had been in a class of mine through another national needlework guild called the National Association of Needlearts. Anyway, she realized the situation. And she sat down to chat, and the two of us became the crowd. They had sandwiches and everything, those poor dears.

Anyway, she bought a few copies so that she could give them to friends. And then she asked about the show. She said, "Is it going to travel?" And I said, "I'm really delighted because it's going to go to Chicago." And then she said, "Well, is it going anyplace else?" I said, "Well, not yet," being very positive. And she said, "What about Texas?" And I said, "Well, I'd love for it to go to Texas because there are Texas artists in the book." And she said, "Well, maybe Karen could help." I didn't know who she was talking about.

Turned out Karen was her daughter, Karen Crow, who is married to the nephew of Trammel Crow, the big Dallas developer. The Trammel Crow Center was right in between the Dallas Museum of Fine Arts [Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, TX] and the Symphony Hall, and they had this gallery space. So she said, "Let me talk to Karen about it."

Well, she called her daughter. Her daughter flew up to - this was after the show had opened. I was already back in Chicago. And her daughter flew up, fell in love with the show. Told her husband, "Okay, I'm taking over this for a while; you're not going to see that much of me." Karen had contacts with American Airlines. And American Airlines cargo said, "We'll travel the show for free as long as it goes to England and Japan because we're opening new centers there."

And pretty soon - I mean, it was just - you never know who's in the room! One person in this little needlepoint store in Salem, Massachusetts, and you better be careful what you wish for because this show then took off and had a life of its own. It was seen by I don't know how many thousands of people. It was in 13 different locations, quite a few in the United States, Canada, England, Japan. And that's what led me to be teaching in Japan, because of contacts I made while I was there. I mean, it sort of took me, and I went right along with the current. It was quite amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, it is extraordinary. It's one of those things that I think if you are open to the world, things happen in a way that - I could never have predicted that I would do what I do or have done. Not at all. I was much too conservative to have planned out a future like this.

MS. RIEDEL: The process is interesting. I wonder if you figured this out from the work, or if the work became what it did because of what you were learning, the whole process - the learning of the process, the evolving in the process, the ideas generated by the process, the new steps, the new work, the next steps [inaudible].

MS. SMITH: Yeah. It's all a part of that. It is. It's all a part of how you make your life, too. I do think that there's a certain amount of just being open to what's being offered to you and working with that. Maybe that has to do with being home ec major, you know? I mean, it all is part of that. I don't have any complaints. It's pretty exciting.

But anyway, we're getting ahead of things. I know you had asked me about the work, but -

MS. RIEDEL: Let's pause here, and then we'll get right back to the work. This disc is about to end.

MS. SMITH: Okay. Station identification.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

[END CD 3.]

This is Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, interviewing Barbara Lee Smith in her studio - in Gig Harbor in Washington State on March 16, 2009. This is disc two.

We decided to talk about your boats, which were a complete departure. You went from 2D to 3D, and from very fluid pieces to stiff, stand-up works.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. They were a huge departure. Boats had been a part of my life from the time I was a little kid and would go fishing with my dad in the Atlantic and out in Delaware Bay. Boats were part of my personal life, in that my husband's also a sailor. I like being on the water, but I don't like sailing. Having grown up in the ocean on power boats, if you heeled over like you're supposed to when you're sailing, I just figured I was going to die. What I loved was après-sail, the parties afterwards.

[They Laugh.]

I was ready to party, usually, by the time we would come back into the harbor.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MS. SMITH: So boats have been part of my life.

MS. RIEDEL: So you sailed a lot in Chicago?

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. Mel sailed a lot in Chicago, and I would often get on the El [elevated train] and walk down and meet them when they'd come back in, partly because I was busy working on a lot of different things. It was fine with me, and it was also fine with him. We have a boat in our basement now that he's working on rehabbing, so one of these days we'll be out on this water, too.

But boats are also very symbolic. I remember seeing some Indonesian textiles when I was working in Australia a few years ago at the National Museum in Canberra [National Museum of Australia]. And I thought the boats on these textiles were quite wonderful. I also am a fan of the work of Bertil Vallien, the Swedish glass artist, whose boats are just something like nothing you've ever seen before, if you haven't already seen his work. I love the multiple images of things that he has embedded in the glass in his boats.

So all of that is by way of introduction in some ways for what turned out to be a most remarkable dream that I had. During the time that the "Celebrating the Stitch" show was running in Chicago, there was a great problem with my oldest son, who was having some real issues at that point. And the youngest son was getting married. And the show was going on. Every time I'd think, I just won't wash my hair today, I'd get a call saying, "Channel 7 wants to interview you about the show."

I wasn't really getting anything of my own done, and I was not sleeping. There was no question that I was not sleeping. Then one night I had this remarkable dream of walking into a gallery and seeing these small, lacy boats, each in its own little case in this gallery, marvelous blues and greens in some of these boats. But they were - they were lace. They were full of holes - I mean, they'd never float. What were these boats all about? I had no idea. But I woke up feeling so refreshed and satisfied; it was one of those memorable dreams that just stuck with me.

So when I couldn't sleep, I'd start pulling that dream back into my head and try and figure out, how could I ever do that? How could I make a boat out of lace and let it stay like that? Could I stiffen it with starch or what? I'd just work on this problem. And it went through one whole summer where I was just messing with this and trying to figure out how could I make the fabric that I'm used to working with, which is soft and supple and was mostly a rayon and silk blend, and how could I do that? Well, I couldn't use that. I'd have to use something else.

So I just gnawed on this dream for quite a period of time. Finally, the show left Chicago and went on elsewhere, and I had time back to myself. I thought, well, that dream sort of saved my sanity over that summer. I really need to do something about it. I felt sort of obliged to do something.

I found three yards of a material called Lutradur that had been sent to me - or I had asked for it. It was from an ad in *FiberArts* from the company that makes this stuff. They were going to have a show at North Carolina State University [Raleigh, NC] of people who are experimenting with this nonwoven material. It was a new material, and they wanted to see what artists would do with it.

So of course, seeing three free yards of something, I sent for it. I colored it a little bit, never worked with it, and there it sat. And I thought, I wonder if I could use this stuff? But I didn't have any of the specs on it anymore. I had thrown away all the reading material, any of the specs. I just had this stuff.

So I thought, well, I'm going to call Deidre Scherer, who was one of the artists in the book, because Deirdre keeps track of everything, and I knew she had also had some. And she gave me all the specs on it and said, "Try it and see what it will do." So I started experimenting with it a little bit and couldn't - didn't get too far. I tried a lot of different experiments, in fact, making lace and stiffening it with epoxy and all kinds of things. Somewhere I still have all those little experiments of what might work and what might not.

And then, again, it occurred to me that a friend of mine in England was working with students in melting polyester materials. Jan Beaney is her name, and she was coming to the U.S. And I said, "Jan, when you come to Chicago" - I knew she was coming to stay with me for a couple days - "would you do a couple days' workshop if I put it together for you? And this is what I want it to be on, and this is why, because I want to learn these techniques, too."

So she said, sure, and I put together an informal workshop in my studio, and we did it. And I started working with fusing and melting this material, which is something you don't try at home without a respirator.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But I didn't really know that much about the dangers of it at that point. Now I wouldn't even teach working with it because I think it is dangerous stuff to work with, even though I do it myself, but I do it with a

respirator.

Jan is the kind of teacher who'll teach you - you ask her a question, she'll tell you everything she knows, which is my kind of teacher. Because I think you don't teach if you're going to start protecting your information. There had been too much of that in graduate school, as far as I was concerned.

So that led me to make my first small boat. I realized a lot of different things. You have to work with inside and outside, and you have to be able to see it. It has to stand up on its own in some way, and how much sewing was going to be involved in it, and I just learned a whole lot on it. And the boats became, for me - for me emotionally - a means of letting go. I know that in certain cultures, boats have all kinds of different connotations.

Then I remembered, as a kid growing up right by the ocean, on Memorial Day every year there would be a big parade. The high school band would be there, and the mayor, and all these people. They would take one of the lifeguard boats, and they would fill it with flowers. And it would be pushed out to sea while the Coast Guard band played Taps. It was very moving. It was really wonderful.

The idea of the flowers contained in the boats somehow became also part of letting go and saying goodbye because of the problems with this older son of ours. And I just - he was of an age where I had to let go. I couldn't solve his problems for him. And that's saying it very easily now, though at the time it was a really tough time.

But the boats led to a whole small series, and then the works got larger. I find I still do the boats occasionally, generally when I'm doing some kind of either actually moving around the country or from place to place, when something new is going on, when there's change going on in my life. So that's how the boats came about.

MS. RIEDEL: Were these the first pieces that involved paint on the fabric and intense stitching? Or did this stitching get much thicker as a process of making the fabric stiffer?

MS. SMITH: Well, I know what you're asking. Yes, I guess when I think about it, that is the first time of that sort of work, yes, because I was moving away then from the solidly stitched whipstitch with the raised portions on the fabric. I'd had enough of that when I did the Donnelley and the Evanston Hospital commissions. After I did those two in nine months, I swore I'd never make another one. At that point I also lost my Japanese dealer because that's all he really wanted me to do. And I just said, nope. I'm not going to do that any more.

I just needed to move in a new direction with them. And I think that the boats helped that. They have a translucency about them, but they are also tough. I really wanted the outsides and the insides to be different. But you can experience them - because they're small, you can experience them both at the same time. And I wanted to keep that delicacy about them that is a certain fragility, but a strength with fragility, too. The boats certainly got stiffer and heavier than the very first one that I did. But even then, it's still holding - we're looking at it right now, and it's still holding together quite nicely.

MS. RIEDEL: I can't remember. Does this one have cutouts? Did the earliest ones already have cutouts?

MS. SMITH: I don't think there's many in that one.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: But then they did start having cutouts right away because as I was making - as I was melting the edges of them with the little soldering iron that I use to melt the edges, I began thinking, well, I could put little wormholes in here and little peepholes. And so, yes, I did start making those little wormy bits.

MS. RIEDEL: And was this the first time for that?

MS. SMITH: Yup.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting. You had an interior and an exterior, and you immediately had a way through it.

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Exactly. And I wanted light to come through them. Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you make them in series, or one at a time?

MS. SMITH: I do them in series. It always seems I do, oh, at least three and maybe five or so. When I first moved out here in 2000, I did a series of white ones called Ghost Boats. They're all gone now. But I did a couple of small ones, and maybe one or two large ones on those. I did some - a couple of basket forms that way, too. I just met the person who owns the - what was it, the *Lizard Basket*, because it has a lizard coming up and out of it, a flat one. It's quite nice. Her name is Cathy Wice, and they're collectors [Cathy and Martin Wice] in St. Louis

[MO]. And they bought it quite a few years ago. It was nice to meet them last year at SOFA [Sculpture Objects & Functional Art]. And she says, "Oh, we have your basket." I said, "The *Lizard Container* [2001]?" "Yes." That was good.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MS. SMITH: Because, well, in some of those, I would be experimenting and making a new material in some way and then decide, well, I could turn that into a basket, or I could turn it into a boat or whatever. So -

MS. RIEDEL: So did the baskets evolve concurrently with the -

MS. SMITH: Along with? They did. But I didn't really pursue them. I used to do coiled baskets, and I taught that for a while. But I just - three-dimensional forms are still more, I think, about the surface than they are about the form. I love being able to see through them and around them, and I like the fact that they take up a different kind of space.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: But they are still, for me, experiments in inside/outside. And the baskets were a little too enclosed. I want to be able to see the inside, too. And I just didn't pursue it as much. I might go back to it sometime. I mean, I don't dislike the idea.

MS. RIEDEL: So you'll do a series of boats, and then when that series is done, you're done. But they do surface periodically.

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Like the books, the -

MS. RIEDEL: You've done how many series of them now?

MS. SMITH: Probably four or five. Yeah. And the most recent ones, which are about 30 inches long or so, were three or four or five of those I call Red Right Returning [2006]. And this is 13 years later, when our son reappeared in our lives, having turned his life around. That's a sailing term: red right returning. When you're coming back into the harbor, the red markers are always on your right as you're coming back in. And so it was a letting go, and now he's coming back. So that was very cool. That was just a couple of years ago when I did that, after his long absence.

MS. RIEDEL: And the very first boat series were in the very early '90s. Is that right? During '93, maybe?

MS. SMITH: I think '93 would be about right, because they were done at the time that the - maybe '92 or '93. They were done at the time when the book was out and the show was traveling. I really associate them with that time.

Then the other three-dimensional forms, the pilings, the tall columns, came - and again, I - jeez, I wish I could say I had a dream for every piece. But, you know, that would be a really nice way to solve all my problems. I seem to dream in 3D, that's the crazy thing.

They came in 1996 with another dream. That was what was really crazy. I dreamed I was walking through - and I think I know what got that dream going. There was a wonderful show at the Museum of Contemporary Art [Chicago, IL] of Japanese artists, and I still have the catalogue somewhere so I could give you the exact name of the show. But there were some really large, upright, carved wooden columns in that.

And then there was also - at the Art Institute in Chicago, there's a permanent installation of Tadao Ando's columns that are back in a very quiet room in the Asian section. There's 16 of these columns there. And I used to just go into that room, where hardly anybody ever went in; there were the columns, and a couple of old screens, and some ancient jars. You could sit there, and it was just the most wonderful place, in the middle of the city, that nobody seemed to ever go into. It was wonderful.

So I know that those probably were in my head at the time. But again, I had this dream of walking through these very brightly colored, all green and purple and other colors, solid columns, and wandering around them. And I thought, hmm, that was cool. Then I got thinking, well, you've done boats. Now, could you actually make a form that was really tall out of soft, slippery fabric?

At that point, I was now totally working on this nonwoven material because I was so -

MS. RIEDEL: The Lutradur?

MS. SMITH: Yeah, the Lutradur. I was just very taken with it because it's a very beautiful material. It looks like



rice paper, and it looks very fragile, and it's just tough as nails. And it takes paint nicely, and, you know, what else could I do with this? And so on. How big could I make this? How can I think about this in a new way?

The Oregon College of Art & Craft [Portland, OR] has a senior residency program. I had taught out there a couple of times and loved it, in Portland. A friend of mine encouraged me to - "Why don't you think about going out there?" But I said, "Oh, it's a three-month residency. There's no way I can leave the family." At that point, my husband and my daughter were home, and they both looked at me and said, "Why is there no way that you can do this? If we say it's fine with us, why don't you just go?"

And so I gave it 24 - I like to give myself 24 hours to think about something. Usually I'll say - if somebody asked me to do something like that, I'd say no. I've learned to say, "Give me 24 hours, and I'll think about it." And so in 24 hours I decided to say yes. So I made a proposal that I make these columns. I hadn't a clue whether I could do them or not. But these were the ideas, and this was the proposal. And they accepted the proposal.

It was interesting. I found out later that there was another person making a proposal who was a professor of photography. This person was going to just do more of the same. And they decided since I was trying to do something that was completely new to me, that they would give me that opportunity, which I thought was pretty wonderful.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: But I could have blown it completely. The thing is, they wouldn't have minded if I did, because they just - you know, you went out there, and you worked. And it was marvelous, a great experience. And so -

MS. RIEDEL: So you went for three months. When was this? What year?

MS. SMITH: The summer of '96. And it was, oh, a great experience, just great. But before I got there, I also have to give a huge plug to other places that offer residencies, because you really can get wonderful things done as a resident. And that's - this was at Ragdale Foundation in Lake Forest, Illinois. I've been a resident at Ragdale a number of times, for two weeks at a time. It's a marvelous place to work. In fact, Mel refers to my studio as Ragdale West -

[They Laugh.]

- because I'm always generating good ideas out here. It's a place that leaves you alone. You know, you have your meals. You're expected to meet with others at dinner. Otherwise, you're completely antisocial if you want to be. They don't expect anything at the end, just that you've worked. And working may be sitting and sleeping for the whole two weeks or three weeks or six weeks, depending on how long you're staying there.

But I did three small maquettes to see if I could -

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] - to see if I could actually do it. Then when I got out to Oregon, I did a small, half-size one. And it's actually in San Francisco [CA]. It's in a collection in San Francisco now. Then I did two or three larger ones, too, while I was there over the summer. And those I worked on off and on for - till probably 1999, three years at least.

In 2001 I did those smaller, not-quite-upright forms that are up there, the Balancing Act series. Those were done in 2001 and the beginning - well, actually, they're 2002. They were done post-9/11 and post-heart surgery, and they had to do with fragility and strength and not being quite upright and aging/crumbling sorts of surfaces. That moment when somebody like Fred [Astaire] and Ginger [Rogers] are at their most beautiful is also at the point when they're at their most possible chance of falling over.

That's what I was thinking about the world as well as me personally at that point. That series never really took off, but I still have a great affection for them. Sold a couple. I've torn a couple apart. And -

MS. RIEDEL: And that form has continued to evolve in your mind - from the columns, they became at some point the Pilings.

MS. SMITH: Right. There are also some screens that I did, again trying to see if I could make the slippery fabric stand on its own. I was thinking about the columns, the Pilings, which sort of are all the same, and how to make that fabric thick, and then how to work it like that, was when I started thinking, well, what if this weren't fabric? How would I treat it if it were wood? What would be different about it if it were wood? And that gave me permission to do things that would be against my learning experiences from working with a textile. So I began to treat it as less of a precious material.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: I could burn it. I could melt it. I could – you know, in fact, a friend of mine gave me some material one day, and her husband was around. And I said, "Oh, this is so cool. Look at this. You could burn it. You could tear it. You could melt into that." I remember him just looking at me, and he said, "You know, usually you don't talk about destroying a gift when it's offered to you." [Laughs.] He was absolutely right. But this was the perfect material to do this with.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: It's like working with a sewing machine. I sew the way you would never – a sewing machine dealer doesn't want you to sew.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: So you just sort of try to make them your own. But I could not do what I do without my industrial machine that I have. And that is – well, we'll get into new technology at some point.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But I couldn't – I couldn't make what I do without that machine.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about your working process.

MS. SMITH: Okay. Well, with those – with what I'm doing now, as well as with those other – the sculptural forms that we've been talking about – they're very stiff and very thick by the time I have fused multiple layers together, so that it's like, oh, a thick leather by the time it's done.

MS. RIEDEL: Stiff and light?

MS. SMITH: Very stiff – yes. Exactly. But unlike leather, it's stiff. It's not pliable, and I don't want it to be. I don't even want it to be friendly, like a quilt, for instance. That's not part of what I'm about now. I can bend it a little bit, but I can't really fold it over or anything like that. I have to be able to – for that final layering after painting and collaging – to do the stitching, I really have to be able to work it in such a way that I can get all the way into it with the stitcher.

The machine that I have was a custom-made machine that was an experimental machine for a few years that was aimed at quilt makers, because it's taking an industrial Bernina, and they cut it right in half and then spread it apart so that the needle and the body of the machine are probably 16 inches apart.

They're making a newer one now for quilters that are like that. But this one is much tougher. It's an old Bernina 217, which they don't make any more. It has no feed dogs, no teeth in it. I have them for it; I've just never used them. But it allows me to draw in any direction, because all it does is make a stitch.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And it works just great for me. I wish my back worked as well as it does. I have more trouble with my back because of working with this stuff –

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: – where I'm reaching up and over and trying to get into the center. And the working process for that is to turn the work upside down to the white side, so the white side is up.

MS. RIEDEL: When did you first do that and why? Do you remember?

MS. SMITH: Yeah. Oh, I know why exactly. I like to have rayon thread on the surface to catch the light. The machine is so strong that a rayon thread worked on the top would break immediately. So I have to use a stronger thread, like an all-polyester thread. Even an all-cotton thread will break on that.

So I use a heavier – you know, more of a sewing thread on the top. And then I put all of the rayon thread on the bobbin. So it's just a technique that I've used in the past. Sometimes, if I'm using a heavy thread in the bobbin, you work upside down. And the same case: if you're using a really light thread in this machine, I'll work it on the bobbin.

And what was wonderful about that, though, is that it allowed me to be free of too many color constraints. I always curve into an area that I'm not expecting to, and so I get surprised. The process that I –

MS. RIEDEL: What do you mean by that? [Inaudible.]

MS. SMITH: I want to back up for one minute, and then I'll get to that.

MS. RIEDEL: Please.

MS. SMITH: Chaos/control. Chaos/control. I mean, it's that balance in the whole working process that I do. So when I'm making a painting down in the garage, I'll work really large, and I'll work with just about everything but traditional painting materials. I don't work with brushes very often. I work with foam brushes. I work with sprays. I'll scrape some stuff on with the edge of an old credit card. I will print with rollers. I'll spray on or just flick my brush and just spray on some gesso and then work over that. So it's really pretty chaotic. Very informal.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is acrylic paint? Is this watered-down acrylic paint?

MS. SMITH: It's watered-down acrylics, and it's also - it's watered down, but it also could be made into a glaze with just an acrylic medium mixed in with it, or a glazing material mixed with it. The only other thing that I use beside that is a Jacquard silk pigment that I can spray more evenly than I can the acrylics. It comes out softer. It works great for skies and things like that. But again, they're pigments. They're not dyes. I don't work with dyes at all. I used to, but I don't any more.

So I'm working in this rather chaotic manner, very large, as big as I can make my fabric on the table. Then I'll come back up and pin it up on the wall and have a long staring contest with it, and walk back and forth and look at it and think, well, do I want to use all of you, or would you be a good background, you know? Because I know that most of the time I'm going to end up covering up a great deal of it and adding more layers onto it. But once I've decided something would make a pretty good background, then I'll cut that out. In the meantime, I have all the stuff that's left over that was in the reject pile, and it becomes the fodder for the collage that goes on top.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: So that is backed with the fusing material called Wonder Under. I love the name. In England it's called Bond-A-Web™.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible] interesting.

MS. SMITH: I know. It's quite marvelous. It works like photographic dry mount.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: But it's meant for fabric. And I'll bond all this material, or the backing, onto the material. Then I have baskets that are filled with the colored materials, all of the bits and pieces. And that becomes my palette. And I start cutting little bits and pinning them up. Then I walk back and forth. I do a lot of pacing at this point. So I've gone from chaos to control, and now it's really pretty controlled while I'm working on the composition itself and getting the bits and pieces all in place.

When I feel like, okay, it's ready to go, then I will take that, and then I start by drawing on that wrong - on the other side, on that white side of the - of the material. And by drawing, I mean, sewing with the sewing machine.

MS. RIEDEL: And you never draw that out ahead of time?

MS. SMITH: No. I never do.

MS. RIEDEL: It's all just done -

MS. SMITH: Yeah. The only -

MS. RIEDEL: - improvised as you go?

MS. SMITH: Exactly. The only thing that I do to maintain a little bit of control over the right side is to perhaps take a certain area where I know I want a line to be and stitch that on the right side with the poly thread, and stitch that in a few little areas, especially on a very large piece, when it's really hard to remember what's where.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. SMITH: So I'll block those in with maybe four or five lines, max, on a big piece, and then use that to relate to when I start working the stitching on the other side. And at that point, I want to work fairly intuitively. It's not automatic drawing. It's definitely thinking like a topographical map.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: Some areas – some other times I have actually – I think I have a couple of them here I can show you, where I divided the line as if I'm measuring it and then worked within that. That's a slightly different approach. But for the most part, it's this topographical map. And my machine is very loud. I found I used to be so tired after I ended up working on it because I'd have the radio blasting so I could hear something. Then for Christmas a couple years ago I said, "I need Bose headphones."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: I got the headphones and my iPod, and I don't listen to music. I listen to books on – well, books on iPod and – because that just gets my mind just engaged enough. I don't listen to heavy stuff that I really have to think about. It's mysteries or whatever, just current. And I can actually look at something and remember what I was listening to when I look at it. Every once in a while it's like, woo, that's weird. Anyway –

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of the mind map.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, it is. Well, and these have that whole – there's that whole quality to all of that that all fits in. And so that's the last stage.

But having said all that, no piece goes through that process just one at a time. I work on multiple things all the time. If I'm painting, I usually take a day to do that or a couple days, because it's such a mess to set up and get going, and I have to kind of rev myself up for it because the painting is – it's fun, but it's harder for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: So I have to say to myself, okay, you're going to paint today. No, you're not. You're going to paint tomorrow. Once I finally get into it, I thoroughly enjoy it. It's just that getting out of the inertia, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: And will you paint 10 different sheets and then –

MS. SMITH: Three or four. Yeah. In fact, right behind you are three or four ready to go that I had Kristen [Johnson] cut the other day, that are this length. And –

MS. RIEDEL: This is the Lutradur?

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

MS. RIEDEL: It is quite beautiful.

MS. SMITH: It is. It's gorgeous stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: It's the same as on the shoji screen behind you, or our pseudo – our own – Randy's and my take on a shoji screen.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] It looks very much like rice paper.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, it really does. And you can't tear it. It's just – it's tough, really tough stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Will you use layer upon layer of that?

MS. SMITH: Absolutely. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And that begins to play with the transparency in a passive way, too?

MS. SMITH: Yes. Another thing that I've just begun doing in the last year or so is to think of this as underpainting. On the second layer, I'll often lay in more, brighter colors that then show through, so that you get a sense of mountains in the distance. Or I can intensify an area by coming in behind it, but still give that transparency.

So while I've worked with the idea of glazing with my acrylics, I now am thinking about glazing, a different kind of glazing, by layering the colors.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: I don't know why I didn't think of it sooner, but I wasn't ready to, I guess. It's really adding a lot of

depth of color that I'm very happy with.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And then more layers are laid on top, too. So I can't just say it's all on the surface because a lot of it is embedded underneath it. And then all of them are embedded together when the stitch holds them together. I have to remind myself, when a piece is in its final stage of composition but still looks really raw, that – I have to remind myself it's going to be fine once you start stitching all that together.

MS. RIEDEL: And this three-step process has really been your way of working for 15 years?

MS. SMITH: I don't even think that long. Certainly since I've been out here. Those not-quite-upright Balancing Act pieces were also the first time I experimented using acrylics. I had always used other, more textile-oriented things. And then it occurred to me, duh, you're not wearing them. You're not washing them. Why can't you use acrylics, you know? I guess there are times when I think, jeez, that was a slow thing. But, you know –

MS. RIEDEL: What did the acrylics offer you? More of a palette?

MS. SMITH: Much more of a palette. More textures. More colors. More stability. All of those things. I love working with them. I really do. They're fun. So – and a whole new way of thinking about stuff, more like a painting all the time.

A year ago I had a show at Jane Sauer Gallery, and a woman came in who had been in a class of mine a couple years ago. She was a quilt maker. She said, "Oh, look at that. Oh, these are beautiful, all this appliqué." And I thought, oh, yeah. I guess it's still appliqué. But I think of it as collage.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: So it's going back to Henry Stahmer and –

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SMITH: – the collage elements and how much I love collage. But I just don't think in those terms any more. And, yes, okay, I'm making a quilt, if you consider that it's multiple layers sewed together. But –

MS. RIEDEL: Sort of reversed as well.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I love the backs of the works, and that's part of the reason that I really like the boats, because with the boats, you can see the wrong side and the right side. They're both right sides.

MS. RIEDEL: One of the things that's interesting to me about the Pilings, the column forms, is that the cutouts are also very prominent.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I think there's a whole separate dimension. It's not just interior and exterior, but it's inside –

MS. SMITH: Light coming through. Right. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Exactly.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. I've often had people say, "Well, why don't you put a light in the bottom of them? And I've thought about that. Then you have to deal with heat, and you have to – I mean, there's just a lot of stuff to deal with. I much prefer to just put them under a light and let them glow on their own.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've paid a lot of attention to edges over time.

MS. SMITH: Yes. That's true.

MS. RIEDEL: They're especially apparent, I think, in those upright forms.

MS. SMITH: Right. They were kind of funny. The edges came about very accidentally with about the – well, probably with the first boat, come to think of it. I had assumed I would sew the edges together on the boat when the boat was finished. It's a simple flat pattern that is just like a butterfly that you push together at the ends. And so, okay, I'm going to sew them.

Well, that looked really awful when I did that. I'm starting to try and pull out the threads, and boy, this was impossible. So I thought, well, I'll just melt this part out. And I discovered, oh, my God, when I melted it, all the

ends fused together. So now I actually add more fusing material in there to make sure they stay together. But it was one of those just discoveries.

Then I realized, well, I can just do so much on the edges, and I can burn into them. And I loved working with that tool, despite the fact that I hate working with a respirator on. It's uncomfortable. But I don't do anything else but that. I love the drawing possibilities with this little pointed pattern-cutting tool that I use.

Then I began thinking about the edges on the flat works. I had a catalogue in England, when I did a residency in Cornwall, from a woman from Ireland [Melita Denaro]. She worked with very thick impasto. And you could tell, even in these very small paintings, that the mark of the brush mark extended off the edge, and I loved the energy of that and the energy of movement.

So I decided, well, I could do that. I could run these right off the edges and – because nature doesn't stop with an edge, even though you've got a frame around it. Nature keeps going. Nature has this energy that keeps growing. So for some time I worked with the edges of all the Xs and the little marks coming right off the edge.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: Now, I must say, technically they're a real pain to do. And from a shipping point of view –

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: – they're miserable to ship. You bend one and – I mean, they're easy enough. People say, "Oh, it's bent." Well, take an iron and iron it back together. But I don't want that to happen. I had them pinned down and sent flat.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: So I've sort of – I don't do that quite as much anymore because – well, for that and a few other reasons. But what I always do is melt the edges before I start to stitch, so they at least have a deckle edge of some sort. There's always some movement in that edge. It's never a hard edge. It's a great finishing tool for this material because I don't particularly like the work framed. I like to push it out of the wall. They're on a hidden frame underneath that pushes them out. So then you get the shadow on the wall, and I like that. The frames for these two are downstairs if you want to see them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. SMITH: They're velcroed onto the frame.

MS. RIEDEL: So they seem to float above the wall a bit?

MS. SMITH: Yeah. And the frames are about, oh, a couple inches in, all the way around. The material is stiff enough at this point that it just stays straight, with the frame pushing it out. There's the iconoclast in me that this "do not touch textiles" thing used to just bug the daylight out of me. So anything I did, even in the most fragile materials, I pretty much pushed off the surface of the wall. I didn't want to frame them. Just go ahead and touch.

Textiles have been around – they're the earliest known craft. The very earliest craft was baskets in which clay was fired. But the basket came first. And they're still around. They're still here. And I don't know, for me it was a little bit like women. They can appear fragile, but they're so strong. And this material, I think of it like skin, which appears so fragile, and it's tough. It holds in all of our – all of us.

Well, I love the nonwoven stuff. I used to be kind of the queen of natural materials only, and now I feel like, it's all poly.

[They Laugh.]

All the time.

MS. RIEDEL: When did the map imagery, metaphor, begin appearing in the work?

MS. SMITH: Yeah. Well, maps, I did use maps in my – in my graduate show, something "with Map."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: The whole idea of travel and anticipating travel is also very important to me in ideas about what I do. I don't always have that in my head. But I can remember – and I will get back on the subject – going to a

wonderful lecture that Helen Frankenthaler did at the Art Institute years ago. I had thought it was really kind of weird that I would go someplace and then see images or colors that I had just been doing in my work.

And what she said – and it sure made me feel good, because I thought, well, this is just really weird; I had done this with some work right before I went to Australia for the first time, and had no clue that those were the colors I was even going to see. And she said that the need to go on a trip shows up in the work long before you actually go.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: And I thought, woo, this is good. And so, in anticipation, I often will start working. I think the maps – well, that whole idea we were talking about earlier about our mitigation with nature, whether it's maps or boats or bridges and those kinds of things. So they started showing up in the late '70s in the graduate work. Then I got away from them for quite a while.

But I think it was really more when I – probably when I moved here or was just about to move here, I began to use my husband's old navigational maps. When he was finished with them, I would take them, and I'd photocopy them, and I'd print them on fabric.

I did a series called Treasure Maps [1996] that I had in a show in Japan. It was a really nice, kind of a crazy series that were – all the pieces were maybe 14 by 18 [inches] or something like that. And they were all about the treasure that is involved with travel and with people that you meet, and the different surprises in life.

They didn't actually have map images in them, but they had a trail or maybe some hand-stitching that led to an X, and some other little bits that led to another X. When I was a kid, we used to search for – Captain Kidd was supposed to have come to Cape May, and we'd go pretending to look for buried treasure in the dunes and things like that. So there was something childlike in these pieces about treasure maps.

They were also – at that point I had taken a course in monotype, and I was experimenting with monotypes, and on fabric, and doing chine collé [“Chinese collage,” a printing technique] on fabric. And they led me in some new directions that way. I could work small. It was a nice – almost like a breather. Sometimes I'll work really, really big, and then I'll just do some of these ideas on a small scale. Then those did actually grow into a few larger pieces.

They still combined hand and machine work, but the maps themselves, I think, really appeared more when I was here, when I moved here. They were maps of this area. They were maps of other parts of the country that I had picked up over time and printed, and then began to use them. I really began to use large portions of maps for a while. They became part of the sky in some areas. I've gotten away from it a wee bit, but I've certainly kept to the topographical line. I probably would go back to it. I just felt like I'd used enough for a while, and I was afraid I was getting – as though I was quoting myself –

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: – a little too much. I didn't want to do that any more. But I wouldn't be surprised if they show up in some new form at some point.

[END CD 4.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art, interviewing Barbara Lee Smith in Gig Harbor, Washington, on March 17, 2009. This is disc five.

We're going to start this morning with a discussion of three different series that we're looking at on the wall that you worked on fairly simultaneously in 2006.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, 2006, '07, '08, they all kind of grew together. And they all had ways of looking at nature and looking at the world around us, and back to the mapping ideas again, too.

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mercator we're looking at?

MS. SMITH: Yeah, Mercator, as in the Mercator projection maps –

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

MS. SMITH: – on the far right. That one is *Mercator No. 2* [2006] on the far right. I began thinking more about the keys to maps and ways of measuring. I had an interesting book on measuring the land. And I loved the graphic design of a map. This *Mercator No. 2*, where the linear elements come down on the side almost like you're seeing part of the globe –

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: - came from something that was in a book on maps that was being reviewed in the *New York Times Book Review*. They just had this wonderful sort of "Where's the rest of the world?" kind of feeling, you know. This was the edge of things. And there were - it was, beyond this is all unknown, and the kind of a map from, oh, maybe the 1600s.

I just loved its graphic quality, and I thought, well, I'd like to play with that idea. So I had a painting that I had wanted to mess with a little bit. So within the known world on the far right side are all these carefully squared-off measurements that are done in red thread, red stitching thread. And then within that, there were fine white lines of topographical stitching, a little different from the topographical stitching that I've done in other things where it more blends into the color, because I was just rather taken with the graphic parts of that.

There have been just three in that series. But it doesn't mean that I'm not going to do more. I'm rather taken with it. It's not the kind of work that the average person coming into a gallery responds to. But I was asked - when I was in a show in England, by somebody who was doing an article for a newspaper - which of the 40-some pieces that were in that show I would grab if there was a fire siren, and that was the one.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: So, obviously, it means something to me, and I'm happy to have it with me right at the moment. I may go hang it down in the house for a while before I share it again.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting to note that the grid surfaces time and again in your pieces. But it comes and it goes.

MS. SMITH: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is, I think, the most specifically I've ever seen it on one of these wall pieces.

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

MS. RIEDEL: We were just looking at it [inaudible] in this -

MS. SMITH: Yes. Right. Right.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems it's something that you play with, to more and lesser degrees of transparency and opacity.

MS. SMITH: Exactly. I mean, I think for me it's the - I love doing 2D design. I love good graphics. And I think that, often, the work can take off and be a little - I'm always concerned that the work can be too soft, because I do work with rather luscious colors. I don't want the work to be seen as just pretty.

I can remember - we were mentioning Helen Frankenthaler, talking about her maps and the - or the need to go on a trip yesterday.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: And in that same lecture, I can still so well remember her saying, "Don't make it gorgeous. Make it good."

[They Laugh.]

And I just - I really loved that and very much took it to heart.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MS. SMITH: I want the works to be beautiful. I have no apologies for beauty. In fact, I think we need more of it in our lives. And I want my work to be - if it's about light, it has to be dark in some way. So it's not saying there is no dark in our lives, because there's plenty of it. But I do think that you need dark in order to make something appear light. But I also try to make my work be relatively optimistic, especially in tough times. It's the iconoclast in me again. I don't want to just go along with the current trends on, oh, let's beat ourselves up some more, you know, please, please.

MS. RIEDEL: And all these pieces - the ones we're looking at, also *Sea Changes and Language* - these have all been made since you've moved here to Gig Harbor.

MS. SMITH: Oh, yes. Absolutely.



MS. RIEDEL: I would imagine it's pretty hard to be depressed here for too long.

MS. SMITH: Well, you know, you've got the tides every day to remind you that, yeah, the waters may be rising, but the tides still go in and out. The birds are still here, and the eagles in the back yard are still nesting after 20-some years. And yes, exactly. It is a reminder of, things change, but they do stay the same.

MS. RIEDEL: And the weather changes here so quickly, too.

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: From moment to moment.

MS. SMITH: Yes. In fact, in the paper today they said, "Showers with sun breaks," in the local paper or the Tacoma paper. So it's a very optimistic way of talking about the weather out here. How many different ways can you talk about rain?

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

MS. SMITH: And they find all kinds of different words. The Language series – okay. So that's one way of looking at the world, was the Mercator series of measurement and finding our way with a map.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: In the Language series, I really tried to see nature up close, so close that when you lean down to inhale the scent of a flower, your vision is all blurred and obscured. And so this is that kind of feeling that I tried to get, almost a smudgy, slightly out-of-focus feeling of nature. Here, as you've seen, when the sun does come out, the trees, the moss, everything just sort of lights up. I think you see that in this *Language of October No. 1* [2006], where the sun is coming in and streaming through whatever that pathway of reds and purples and rusts are.

So that's another way of looking at nature. Then there's the straight-on, sort of horizontal view that you see in the Sea Changes series. Each one in that series – and I think I've done about nine, maybe, maybe 10 – each one is 20 inches by 50 inches. Each one looks at a straight horizon line of sea and sky. And in each one, there is also those little keys to the map that you see on the left-hand side that, for me, have something to do with, well, where is the sun at any particular point?

But they also have to do with just the graphic elements that I felt added something there to the left-hand side of the work. I've had a lot of people ask me why they're there, and it's not – I mean, they're just puzzled by it, because it looks like a straight-on landscape or seascape to them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: So why did you put that in there? Again, it's just something to remind us that we need all kinds of ways of looking, whether it's what is at our feet or what's at the distance or what's – when we're crossing our eyes because we're so close to the rose or the daphne or something that smells marvelous. But there's also a measurement in what we do. I mean, every view changes every step we take. So I think that that's probably what those little keys are all about in them.

So these pieces just kind of came simultaneously. When I'd make a painting, sometimes I would think, well, this time I really want to introduce a horizon. And then other times I'd say, well, hmm, I think that looks better without the horizon, and maybe it's going to become part of this particular way of looking at something. So it's just different viewpoints on the land around us, the land and the sea around us.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: We don't just see – right now I'm looking past you to a horizon. I'm looking at the other shore. And what are you looking at? You're looking at something that is all chopped up in the woods.

MS. RIEDEL: Primarily the verticals on the trees. Yeah. [Inaudible] the trees.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And right down below us, doggone it, there's a grid for measuring that I have on my table. But they're all viewpoints that happen almost simultaneously. So I've never been one to want to just, oh, I'm only going to deal with this, because I can transfer what I've done with this to that, to the next one.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] It is interesting, though, that these three series were unfolding simultaneously, because they are quite different. The Language series is so lyrical, and the other, the Sea

Changes, are much more traditional landscapes. And then the Mercator series is really an interesting synthesis of a variety of ways of looking at the world.

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And they're all – but now that you mention it, they all are expressions of works that I've done in the past and feel, I think, at ease with, so that I can make that shift back and forth. For me to work representationally is fairly new. I had to prove to myself that I could actually do it, because I'd always relied on color and on 2D design, for the most part.

For me to do something that is actually inspired by what is around me, and say, yes, this is a seascape, and you can't miss it, that took a little – that took some courage to do that. I started studying a lot of painters whom I had always liked for various reasons – [William] Turner, for instance; I love the color and the infusions of light in his work –

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: – and did a series, actually, in graduate school called T at the Tate [1978], meaning T as in Turner at the Tate [Tate Britain, London, UK].

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But they were very graphic depictions of some colors and the effect of the geometric – some geometric designs that I sketched while I was having lunch there that were reflections in a Turner painting that had glass over it. But I didn't dare try to do something that actually was the sea.

And then I thought, hey, it's here. It's all around me. For heaven's sake, just give it a try. See whether it works or not. So I've been going almost to too much realism, and, you know, then I pull back and make it a little bit more abstract. So –

MS. RIEDEL: You mentioned [Richard] Diebenkorn earlier as an influence and –

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: – he immediately comes to mind.

MS. SMITH: Oh, yes. No question, Diebenkorn. And what was so interesting was just last week I saw this exhibition of [Pierre] Bonnard's late paintings. I've always loved his color. In fact –

MS. RIEDEL: And light, too.

MS. SMITH: Oh, and light, yes. I did a piece years ago, another geometric piece, called *Après vous, Pierre* [1982], and it had to do with the light in a Bonnard painting. I had seen a show of his with poor Marthe [Bonnard] shivering in the bathtub at – well, at the Tate in London a few years ago. And then this one was even more light. You could see near the end so many pieces that could have been – if you just crossed your eyes a little bit, they were Diebenkorn.

So it was really fascinating. And I must look. I know that he was influenced by some paintings that he saw at the Phillips [Phillips Collection, Washington, DC] a long time ago, and I'd have to look and see, gosh, was it Bonnard? Maybe it was, you know. I don't know. But oh, they were just really – they were in a very dark section at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, NY], but they just lit it up, you know. It was really, really cool.

So – okay. Where was I? Another influence, Bonnard, other than I didn't like his attitude toward women too much. You know, he has these spectral women in there that just give you the creeps. But they are full of light.

MS. RIEDEL: The books are something that you've come back to –

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: – time and time again. How did the first ones come about, and when did they come about?

MS. SMITH: I think the first couple of books – and again, they were all about maps – were in the late – mid-'90s, probably – let's see, probably 1995 and '96. And another artist – her name is Jane Dunnewold, and she's in San Antonio, Texas. She was teaching at the Southwest Craft Center [Southwest School of Art & Craft, San Antonio, TX], and she had asked me to come down and do a workshop.

And the two of us just had this wonderful communion. I know that many people who work in textiles have worked with Jane, and she's just an absolutely beautiful person, just great, a real free spirit in her own wonderful

way. She said, "Would you like to do a collaborative project with me?" Because she had done some in the past. I said, "Yeah, but I'm in Chicago. You're in San Antonio. How are we going to work this out?"

We just kind of flirted with the idea. This was before e-mail. We were faxing each other things. I mean, it was that bad.

MS. RIEDEL: That's amazing.

MS. SMITH: That was harsh.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: We were still paying for long distance phone calls at that point, too. So mostly it was letters and faxes.

We got together, and we started having these huge thoughts of what we were going to do for this collaborative project. Then we honed it down to doing a series of books. The books were really quite wonderful because, for a period of one month, every day we sent each other a postcard. It could have been a postcard that we made, or I was away at one time and sending her postcards from where I was. And then after that month was up – and it was pretty hard.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MS. SMITH: The discipline of sending a postcard every day was pretty terrific. But it was great fun to receive them, so it was even more fun to send them and know that she would be receiving them. Of course, the postcards weren't just one side. They were both sides. Each side had a lot of visual information on it, whether it was the stamps or the lines where they got messed up. Or we would do rather absurd things with some of them. Some of them were ripped, and some were cut up. Some were sewed. Some had safety pins in them, and they made it through the mail.

So once we had all of those 60 cards with – because 30 for each of us, plus double-sided, so we had 120 pieces of information, then she came up to Chicago. We took over, at that point, my husband's photocopy machine, where he was working, that printed things, really enlarged things marvelously, and we started enlarging them. And they were all black and white. I mean, we didn't have access to color copiers in 1996. So we started getting all this visual information.

We made a decision that we would do a series of books worked collaboratively. We were going to use this material that I'd been working on, the Lutradur, which you can feed through a Canon – well, through a carbon-based copy machine.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MS. SMITH: I'm sure you can feed it through an inkjet, too, but we wanted to use the carbon one because we knew that that was going to stay – it was light-fast. She already had some marvelous materials, which she had given me, and I had given her some of mine. So the first book, which was a pretty rough book, used some of her materials and some of my materials that I had cut up from one of the treasure maps that I had done.

Some time before, I tried binding a book that didn't open quite completely but was all about maps [*Untitled*, 1995]. It has the rough edge that the Pilings do and that the Boats do, holding it together, and consequently it doesn't open very well.

But then another influence that I met, that I think I mentioned yesterday, was Tim Ely. Tim saw some of these books that I had with me when I was teaching a workshop at the Oregon College of Art and Craft, and he left me a little card and a note saying, "We need to meet," and a beautiful little stone on my desk where I was teaching.

So we met. And he gave me this marvelous critique. He said, "Your books are great. They're fascinating. They're magical. They're mysterious. They're poetic. But they don't open all the way, and they need to open." So that led me to start thinking about how could I make a binding for them? So the later books then were bound in a rather unusual way that was made on a – they were made of a fabric that I constructed on the machine on a dissolving film. And he approved. He approved so much that he and his wife have one of my books.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was no longer the Lutradur, or you're talking about simply the binding?

MS. SMITH: Just the binding.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: The rest of it was done with the Lutradur.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. SMITH: And now back to Jane. We had already painted a lot of fabric, and we started printing on it. We sat at this table, plus a couple of other tables in my studio in Illinois, and we started sort of - oh, it was almost like we were dealing cards. "Oh, this image goes well with that, and this color goes well with that." And between us, we came up with nine piles of materials that might work - each one might work as a potential book, even though we knew we'd have to add more and take more away and all that kind of thing.

So we divvied these up so that we each had about half of them, and we started to work on them. And once we had worked a little bit, to a point where we had something that felt pretty good to us, we would swap. We had the right to do whatever we wanted, which meant maybe sometimes printing over the other person's work, cutting it out, mending it, completely transforming it. There were times when it would come back to me, and I wouldn't recognize anything, and I just was scared to open it up. And she was scared to death to cut up something that I had done.

We had to get over the idea that our own work was precious, until we found what was the visual voice for the two of us. So we did these nine books, and it was a marvelous experience. I don't remember how long it took us - oh, probably six or eight months to do that. We had a deadline at that point, so we had to work.

Then we decided we would each take some of those same printed pages and make two books that were just our own. And this was a really smart thing to do because it got us away from the combined collaborative voice and back into our own voice as the end of the - of the show. And it was extremely well received, nicely reviewed, and -

MS. RIEDEL: Where was it shown, Barbara?

MS. SMITH: It was shown at the Southwest Craft Center in San Antonio. We each kept one of the collaborative books, and I'm looking at it as we speak right now. The show was called "Correspondences" [1996-97], which had a nice - you know, a lot of different meanings to it. We found some images that were very much the collaborative image. One was an image of a ladder, and another was a mended hole. And those work their way through a number of the books.

It was just a marvelous project. I learned so much from her, because she's willing to try everything in what she does. She uses much more intense color than I do normally. I had probably more technical skills, but she had more risk-taking skills and also had done a lot more different kinds of printing than I had. So we each had some wonderful things to give one another in this.

Neither of us has the time to do it now, but I would work with Jane again in a minute, and I think she'd probably do the same with me. We became very dear friends, though we hardly see or hear from one another. When we do, it's just right back where we picked up and left off.

So that's the story of those books. And one -

MS. RIEDEL: Had you done books before by yourself? Or the first experience of books was with Jane?

MS. SMITH: I started doing them by myself a little bit. But it was thinking ahead -

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: - to working with Jane.

MS. RIEDEL: All right.

MS. SMITH: And no, I hadn't done books before.

MS. RIEDEL: But after this?

MS. SMITH: After this, the books, yes. I've done quite a few. I only have a couple. I did four books for this show in England that was called - well, it was called "Insights," was the name of it [Barbican Centre, London, 1999]. It was a four-person show. And I had read - it was in 1997 or '98. Where are we here? Nineteen ninety-nine, sorry - when the new library, London library, was opening, and there was such a controversy about it. And then it was also shortly after the bombing and burning of the library in Sarajevo [Bosnia and Herzegovina] that just literally broke my heart.

I had done 12 of the Pilings for the show in Lodz, Poland, "The Triennial of Tapestry," the year before as an

installation ["9th Triennial of Tapestry," Lodz, Poland 1998]. I used some of those same 12 and built some more of the Pilings as these rather protective presences that would stand around four books. Now, this was a show sponsored by the Embroiderers' Guild in London, and of course, it was a "do not touch this precious stuff" show.

And I said, "I only want to put the books in if you'll allow them to be touched." And they had to – they had to really fight with their thinking about that. But then they said, "Okay, that's fine, as long as you don't mind how they come out." And I said, "Fine. I am donating these books to this particular installation. If they come out fine, good; but if they don't, I'll have done what I wanted to do."

And actually, what was marvelous was that this material and the way I work with it lends itself to being touched, and people were very respectful. Little kids would come in, and they'd leave me notes saying, "This was like a magic book." That was just so touching for me; I was really delighted. And then that show traveled up to Gateshead [Shipleigh Art Gallery, Gateshead], and then the books themselves traveled to another show in France. So they were touched by just thousands of hands, and came back, and there was one tiny little piece loose on one of them, and that was it.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. It was very delightful.

MS. RIEDEL: And people were allowed to handle them on their own? [Inaudible.]

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Oh, yeah. And I said, "No gloves. No gloves. Don't use gloves, because the cotton fibers would stick to them, and it would be worse. So use your hands. Leave your imprint on them. That pleased me no end.

A collector wanted a couple – here in the U.S. – wanted a couple of them, and I sent them down to her. She said, "I really love them but," she said, "I don't know how to display them because they're going to get dirty." And I said, "Do they look bad to you now?" She said, "No, they look great." And I said, "Well, they've already been touched by probably 3,000 hands at least." And she said, "Oh, good. I'll take them."

So I've done books off and on. There has to be some moment in time that inspires me to go back to doing them, because they're very labor-intensive, and they are hard to display and – because each page is kind of its own artwork. And yet I do feel the necessity to make them every so often. The most recent one was after September 11 of 2001. And I've not – I've started a few pages since then, but I've been just wanting to work big. I think that's – one of these days I'll do some again.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems that, over time, your work has taken on an increasingly nonprecious quality, and you seem increasingly insistent that it have a durability and a toughness.

MS. SMITH: Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: In spite of what looks to be incredibly fragile, the edges in particular, they're extraordinarily durable.

MS. SMITH: They are. They really are. Trying to convince people who have an assumption that textiles are fragile is one of the things that I keep trying to do. In fact, back to the book, I did another book that was in this exhibition with Jane. Someone in Chicago wanted to buy it, and they are collectors of ceramics.

I was talking to this woman on the phone, and she said, "I don't know. My husband's really uneasy about them because they are fragile." And I said, "Well, honestly, they can be handled. They really aren't. They're not going to fade, you know. There's all these things" – and just at that moment she said, "Oh, wait a minute. I've got to go. Just a minute. I'll be right back." Well, her husband had dropped a ceramic pot and broken it. I actually bit my tongue. I did not say a word. She did eventually buy the book, as well as a couple of other pieces. These, you know, would melt in a fire, but that's really about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk briefly about the Urban Illumination pieces –

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: – because they're so different from anything else.

MS. SMITH: They're about making the transition from Chicago to here.

MS. RIEDEL: So these are 2000?

MS. SMITH: Yes. Right around 2000. They are – I was commuting back and forth – it was 2000, 2001. I was

commuting back and forth between our old house here that was pretty funky and at that point sort of – well, let's see. The sofa came from the dump, and we were still using a really raunchy bed that was left in the house. I was sort of camping out here.

But we were living in a downtown loft in Chicago that was a live/work building but was mostly supposed to be only work. I mean, we were actually living there illegally, along with a couple other people who were living there illegally. But it was a great, old, beat-up loft, and we just loved it. We looked down on the Amtrak trains. So we were really in gritty downtown Chicago. It was a no-cruising zone area, meaning prostitutes were in the area. And Mel would come home from work and say, "Gosh, one them just looks so happy to see me come home." And I said, "Get in this place."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: We had this old freight elevator. It was marvelous. There was so much energy going on the building, with all these people working and coming in and out. And of course, we had one car stolen and the other one broken into twice. It was just that kind of a neighborhood. But I loved it. It was only a block and a half to the El, and then the first stop in was the west side of the Loop. So it was – it was a great building.

MS. RIEDEL: How long did you live there?

MS. SMITH: We lived there for three years. And I had –

MS. RIEDEL: The kids were grown and gone, I guess?

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah, yeah. This would have been 1997 to 2000. I had a great studio space there where I could make a total mess and not worry about cleaning up. And we really both liked it, until a record distributor came in above us. They were not nice neighbors, and the noise 24 hours a day was just painful.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow. Yes.

MS. SMITH: So we decided – well, we had bought this house out here – I would start to move us out. And I literally moved a lot of things by – at that point, you weren't paying for luggage to go – so I would really pack heavy, heavy pieces of luggage every time I came out, and come home with an empty suitcase, and start all over again the next time I came out here.

So I was back and forth a lot between the gritty urban side of things and out here, where the gray was just a different kind of gray. So these pieces, I called them Illuminations, because I felt as though they corresponded – I had been Ireland. I'd been to see the *Book of Kells*. And they corresponded in some ways to old illuminated manuscripts, in my mind. They had that sort of ancient language look about them. Some of the printing in them was actually from a book on languages, ancient languages.

I was working with a silk – a cocoon-stripping material that you can tease into a flat surface and then, with heat and moisture, turn it into a silk felt. I was fascinated with this particular material. It traveled really well, so I could stitch into it and do different things to it. Then it was adhered to a piece of the Lutradur, which I so often cover up completely with paint, and yet it's a really beautiful material in its own right. And they're mounted on just a hardware cloth, which again was, for me, something that has to do with the chain link fences that were around where I was in Chicago. And yet the hardware cloth is actually painted with a bronze paint, so it has a little bit of the light that was out here.

I think they were very definitely transition pieces. Again, they're pushed off the wall, too. So while these are a little more fragile, in that they're white, I still like to not put them behind any coverings.

MS. RIEDEL: They're by far the most minimal and the most monochromatic of your pieces.

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Yeah. Yeah. And they –

MS. RIEDEL: Was it related to seeing the city from a new perspective?

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. I think so. And seeing the similarities and the differences between here and there, and that 2,000 miles of thinking about where I had just been, and coming home. Which place was going to be home? So that took me a while to make that shift mentally to being here. I loved being here, but I also loved coming home to Chicago and vice versa because Chicago is just a wonderful city that I really love, and it's given me a great deal.

MS. RIEDEL: They also have the most orderly edges. They're the most rectangular pieces.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, they do. They're, in essence, framed by the Lutradur, because the silk part itself is very fluid,

almost cloudlike. I did about 20 in that series, plus a couple more. I only have maybe four, maybe five left. I keep thinking I should hang them down in the house and just - well, the house isn't quite finished with things that we're hanging yet. But -

MS. RIEDEL: They're also by far the most strictly drawing [inaudible].

MS. SMITH: Yeah, they are. They are, and I've thoroughly enjoyed that, because I could feel like I'm working on a white surface. I was using horsehair and thread to do almost a calligraphic line on some of them. They just took on a life of their own. And that's interesting that you say that because I just saw this show at the Guggenheim on Asian influences on artists from the - oh, gosh, from the early 1900s, from [James Abbott McNeil] Whistler up to Ann Hamilton [**"The Third Mind: American Artists Contemplate Asia: 1860-1989."** Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, NY, January 30 - April 19, 2009].

And the pieces that struck me the most - I mean, you're catching me thinking about this - in that show were a series of Brice Marsden pieces that were drawings in ink, very calligraphic-looking works, that were based on Chinese poetry. And that all fits with, you know, interests of mine. I was just so taken with that series. And these pieces, these Urban Illuminations, have, I think, some of that quality about them.

MS. RIEDEL: The absence of color emphasizes the line and the texture.

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] They do.

MS. RIEDEL: And then they have a very different feeling.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And then, of course, mounted on the grid.

MS. SMITH: Right. And when I first showed them, it was in a gallery [The Source Fine Arts] in Kansas City [MO] during one of the Surface Design conferences in the late '90s ["New Direction in Fiber," 1997]. The entire wall was filled. The pieces took up probably 15 feet by maybe 8 feet. I had them very close together so that - so that they were almost looking like they were hanging on a fence. And I was happy with the way that looked.

[END CD 5.]

MS. RIEDEL: The bridge is an image that's come up repeatedly in your work.

MS. SMITH: Again, it's back to those maps and those things that we do to accommodate nature. I was teaching in England. I had been asked to come over and be the first "colonist" to come and be sponsored by the Embroiderers' Guild and travel around and teach, from Aberdeen [Scotland] to Brighton [England].

MS. RIEDEL: What year was this? Roughly?

MS. SMITH: I knew you were going to ask that. Let's see. It would have - probably '92, maybe, something like that. I would say maybe the late '80s, but I can look and see. It was quite thrilling to go over there. I was there for about a month, and there were 12 or 15 places where I did lectures or taught workshops. It was like, get on the train, get off the train, change clothes, do a lecture, maybe do a workshop the next day, and get back on the train. It was a pretty nonstop kind of experience. But it was also very exciting, and I had a marvelous time doing it. Some of my dearest friends are - I got to know even better on that trip. So I count myself lucky to have spent a lot of time in England, or in the U.K.

I was leaving Edinburgh [Scotland], and I was on the train going up to Aberdeen, and I was photographing the views from the train. We came across the Firth of Forth, and there was the bridge there. I quick took a shot of that bridge. And that led me, when I came home, to work on a series called the Bridge Is Embroidery - Embroidery Is the Bridge [1991] - which for me had to do with not only how embroidery has taken me places I could never have imagined, but it, too, is a bridge of communication, because when I've worked in countries where I don't know the language, as soon as you get the interpreters out of the way, frequently, the better off you are with the people you're working. Embroidery is a common language that we use with our hands and thread.

That becomes the bridge, then. We don't need to have words that sometimes get in the way, especially if, like in England, we are two nations, you know, that are divided by a common language. There are so many word phrases that are just not the same in England as they are here. They mean almost the opposite.

Having said that, I had a marvelous interpreter - have had marvelous interpreters - in Japan. That's been just terrific. Mexico was a little less like that when I worked with the Mayan women, because the woman who was supposedly the interpreter had something of an attitude about her, and mostly she would say what she wanted

me to have said to the Mayan woman, who then translated from Spanish into that particular Mayan dialect. So when they were gone, that's when things worked beautifully, because we could work very directly with each other without words.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk a little bit about that time in the Yucatan, because that was very unique.

MS. SMITH: It was.

MS. RIEDEL: That was with Artists in Aid? Is that right?

MS. SMITH: No. It was Aid to Artisans [West Hartford, CT].

MS. RIEDEL: Aid to Artisans.

MS. SMITH: It was a three-week trip in the central Yucatan, a little town called Xpencil. And -

MS. RIEDEL: Who sponsored that?

MS. SMITH: Aid to Artisans.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay.

MS. SMITH: And Aid to Artisans has - I think they still do; I'm sure they still do, they're a very lively organization based in Connecticut that works with artisans all over the world, local artisans, to help make their work more marketable. Then they take some of these objects, and they take orders from them at the New York Gift Show [NYIFG, New York International Gift Fair]. And it's a marvelous way of helping people -

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: - who do what they do well, make their work more marketable. What they try to do is keep the middlemen down somewhat. But they also want everybody, including the middlemen, to make money.

This was the first time I had ever done anything like that, and I'm not sure how skilled I was at it. I probably learned more than the women did. But it was a marvelous experience.

I really felt - I was in the back of beyond - this was the early '90s. It was well before the time of cell phones. There were no phones in the village. You had to go to the nearest town, if I could get a ride, and then you'd have to wait in line, and maybe you could make a phone call.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were you close to? Were you close to Mérida [Yucatán, Mexico]?

MS. SMITH: No. It was - oh, gosh, I'll have to look. But, no, we went through Merida, and stayed there for a night. It was a wonderful city. No, this was just a little town in Quintana Roo, which was the little area where we were. And I was - I was very moved by the humor and the warmth of the women that I worked with.

MS. RIEDEL: And they worked on machine [inaudible]?

MS. SMITH: They were working on - yes, they were. They were working on these great old treadle machines. If the treadle broke, they would just tear a piece of fabric and wind it on their thighs until it was nice and strong, and then they'd replace the treadle. Now, the Bernina sewing machine company at that time allowed me to take a machine, an electric machine, with me, because they had electricity in the village - not much in the way of what you'd call running water, but they had electricity. And the women would get on and start powering it like they would power the treadle, and I mean, the machines would tear off.

Everybody had a wonderful time. They just loved using them. And they loved just seeing things around them. They were great artists. They had a marvelous eye. What I was encouraging them to do was things that were more Mayan and less Spanish, though Spanish is what - the way they would - the garments that they would wear.

My concern about them, which was so funny because with my own students in the Western world or whatever you want to call it, I would say, try to not have everything be precious. But with them, the dirt floors where they lived, you know - let's keep it clean because it's not going to sell if it isn't. So I found myself telling them things that I would never, ever tell my other students. I had to think, hmm, what does this mean? You know, what's right here?

So it was a marvelous experience. The men in the village were up in arms because it was changing the balance of power, that the women were going to actually be making more money than the men were. Another one of



those precious things that I had never thought about was the price of a sewing machine needle. You can't break a needle there because that would be about the cost of what they would have made during a day. You had to be much more careful, less casual about some of those materials.

The men actually were quite threatening at one point. The women insisted that I sleep in my hammock in this little house where I was with a machete by the bed, by my hammock. It calmed down after a while. But that was - that was a little unnerving, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And they really saw your arrival as an event that was going to shift the balance of power?

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It wasn't that the women had not been doing it all along, because they had been doing it all along.

MS. SMITH: No. The women had been doing it. Exactly. Exactly. So they were -

MS. RIEDEL: And how were they finally persuaded?

MS. SMITH: Well, one of the women ran away from her husband during that time because he got very threatening to her. She just took off for even further into the back of beyond. And that calmed them down. He had been one of the instigators, as I understand it anyway, and from what they could communicate to me. It all got started when the men wanted to borrow my Swiss army knife and wouldn't return it and were getting drunk. It was a very interesting experience.

It was tough because I had talked to Mel shortly after the initial part of it. But then I could not get away for another week to talk to him again, and he was really upset. And I thought at the time, I can't do this to him. The kids were younger at that point, too. And I thought, no, that's it for me. I mean, I loved the adventure of it. I mean, an adventure is discomfort remembered at leisure, and that's sort of what I was doing.

But I learned so much, and I loved the women. And then a couple of them came and visited in Chicago in the middle of winter, and of course, they'd never seen snow before. That was such a treat.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: They were so wonderful. One woman would nurse her baby while she was sewing at the machine. So I would come back to my U.S. classes and say, "No whining. Absolutely no whining. You don't know how good you have it." It was a marvelous experience for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you ever or did they express any interest in beginning to develop their own designs? What was the [inaudible]?

MS. SMITH: A little bit, yes. They worked from some drawings that they had done, and most of them didn't even know what a lot of Mayan designs were, I mean, because they'd never been to Mérida. They'd never been to - oh, what are the big ruins right there - Tulum [Quintana Roo]. In fact, one day we took the woman who spoke both Spanish and Mayan, who was kind of the local instigator of all of this - we took her to Tulum. She had just never been there before, and it was probably 15 miles away.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MS. SMITH: So they seem to be doing pretty well, from what I hear occasionally.

MS. RIEDEL: Whose idea was it to make the designs less Spanish and more Mayan?

MS. SMITH: Mine.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the thinking behind that? It was yours?

MS. SMITH: Mine.

MS. RIEDEL: And you thought that that would benefit [inaudible]?

MS. SMITH: Yeah. And I'm not sure whether that was right or not. But what they did do that they really enjoy doing was just taking natural things like leaves and plants and birds from around that area and developing them. And I think that was much better than, say, going into the history museum in Mérida and drawing glyphs from there. That would not have felt right to them.

But because they had worked on these more Spanish designs of the floral forms that they wear on their huipils [traditional tunics] –

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: – they could understand that. I can remember one incredible mistake I made with them, which was having them do the huipil designs on black and not on white. I thought they would be very beautiful for purses or something; it would really appeal. They hated it. The woman who did it absolutely hated doing it because it wasn't their idea of what was beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah-ha. [Affirmative.]

MS. SMITH: And it was just so different. But then the other thing that they liked was quilting. So they would quilt some of these designs and make them into little purses. And those were really quite wonderful. I still have one that they gave me somewhere here. So I think I was of help to them. But, you know, every time I travel, I feel like I come back with more than I give.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about the travel, because it has been a significant part of your life and a significant part of your career.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, it really has.

MS. RIEDEL: And really, it's had a huge influence on your work.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Did this trip have that same effect, or this one less so than the others?

MS. SMITH: Well, it did, in terms of the research and the understanding of teaching. But I don't know that I – I was just looking to survive those three weeks in some way that was okay with me. I didn't come back with lots of things that I wanted to work from. I think if I were there now – I still have some images in my head of some of the beauty of the place, and I still have the slides from that. But I didn't come back and get right to work on that. In fact, I think I was in the middle of working on the book at that point, so that was all kind of –

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That makes sense.

MS. SMITH: But definitely, the places where I have been or anticipated going, as we were talking about yesterday, have meant a great deal to me. I love meeting other artists in these various places, students that I've had or fellow teachers or going to see exhibitions. That has been – I mean, that's been an education that has – well, just so fruitful, and I'm very grateful for.

I've kept journals on a lot of the trips, mostly word journals, not so much sketches. And now, with digital photography, it's easy to keep longer amounts of visual information.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I'll often write notes to myself. But I'm not one to be making a lot of drawings. I don't save a lot of ephemera, as many do, who illustrate marvelous journals that way. It's just not what I do. At that point when I'm writing in the journal, it's more about the people and what's going on during that day. I'll come back with lots of great catalogues, and that's always really fun. And I find wonderful books while I'm away.

I love borrowing the views from what I see. That's been true in Japan and in Cornwall and New Zealand and –

MS. RIEDEL: Australia?

MS. SMITH: Australia. Absolutely –

MS. RIEDEL: The color and the light, too, is often [inaudible].

MS. SMITH: Oh, it's so different in each one. And that appeals to me very much. I feel like it's one of the things where I'm always learning. I get back here, and I think, I'm not going to go again. And then the moment I have the opportunity, I'm off and doing it again. So the travel has been a marvelous experience, and that bridge is embroidery. Who'd have thought it? It's just one of those things that my work has led me to.

MS. RIEDEL: It has so much to do with your teaching, as well.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: You have developed a teaching career that's especially international.

MS. SMITH: Right. It has been. And that's been just great. I find that, when I'm teaching in other countries, that I'm very careful about how I word things. I'm always making mistakes, and thank goodness I have a relatively good sense of humor, that I think comes from being born on April Fool's Day, because I'm always doing something truly goofy. I can apologize in Japanese really, really well, for instance.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: It's just sort of silly, I mean, the things that – the trouble I get myself into on occasion. But I do try, when I'm working with an interpreter, to be very careful about how I word something, to not use a lot of slang, figures of speech; to say things as clearly as I possibly can. I still end up with really funny things happening, but for the most part, I think that people have said to me that they appreciate the fact that I am being careful about what I say.

Now, this last interpreter that I had a month or so ago in Japan was marvelous because she grew up in Brooklyn and [Washington] D.C. –

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: – and English was her first language before she moved with her parents back to Japan when she was 11. We could have these wonderful conversations in short, brisk ways that Westerners speak to one another rather than in the rather gracious, polite, manner that the Japanese do, because I may say to an interpreter, "I suggest that you sew this this way." Five minutes later, that has been interpreted, and I've already forgotten what I said by that time. So it's just one of those things where you have to get into a rhythm of whatever the local speech is.

That's been a great learning for me. It's helped my writing, too, that I want to be clear without being pedantic. I think all of those things have been things that I certainly wasn't expecting. But I'm really glad they've happened.

MS. RIEDEL: You've traveled to Australia, to New Zealand, to Japan, to England multiple times, the U.K. –

MS. SMITH: The Netherlands. Well, and I have traveled, not to teach, to France, though I've been in exhibitions there. And there's still so many places. I have a friend who's a world traveler, and she and her husband have been to well over a hundred countries. What they do is travel. I can't imagine that, frankly, but that's sort of their life. But there's always so many more places to learn from.

MS. RIEDEL: Your travels must give you an especially expansive viewpoint of textile arts and embroidery in particular. Over time, have you formulated any thoughts on where U.S. embroidery, especially contemporary textiles and embroidery, fit on this larger international scale?

MS. SMITH: I think that we Americans are seen, particularly in a place like England, as being more expansive in what we do. Their homes are smaller, and they think more in doing a little piece for the wall. That is what I see when I'm working with the students that I've had there. The others, major artists, have no qualms about size because they have a different point of view. But certainly my students can't imagine doing something too large.

MS. RIEDEL: Even though they'll see old textiles or tapestries in museums?

MS. SMITH: I know. Yeah, but they're thinking for their home. And it's that kind of point of view that I try to have them think more expansively. But then the comeback from the student then is, "Oh, well, it's easy for you. You have big houses." And I'll say, "Not everyone has a big house. You just have to have bigger thoughts." So that has been very interesting. I think it's less so now than it was even a few years ago when I was working so much with the people who were involved with the City and Guilds [Adult Ed National Program], which is a way of teaching in the U.K.

MS. RIEDEL: These also would be adult students –

MS. SMITH: They're all – they're adults.

MS. RIEDEL: – as opposed to university art students?

MS. SMITH: Right. Right, though I have worked occasionally with the students at Windsor College. They range in age from college age to adults. And they're also the students of Jan Beane and Jean Littlejohn, who think expansively themselves. And so they're fun to work with. I mean, they'll try anything. And I love that. I like to – especially in England and Scotland, I like to go and shake up the troops a little bit. It's fun to do.

I think that many people think that textiles would sell better in the U.S. than they would in whatever their country is. They have this vision of, you know, all these people selling. And I think it's just because we have more people showing work. I will say, "We have just as few galleries, outlets, as you do," though in France it's amazing. I had a conversation with a woman who has worked at showing French contemporary work all over the world, really, and she said there are just no galleries in France at all. They have to go elsewhere to sell.

MS. RIEDEL: For fiber in particular?

MS. SMITH: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] For fiber.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. None in Paris. I just found that really sad.

MS. RIEDEL: That's surprising.

MS. SMITH: Yeah, considering tapestry and all the great history of textiles. But she said there's just no places there. So -

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: Her name is Jacqueline Govin. Jacqueline has been great at taking French artists and showing their work in Japan. She has put together marvelous international exhibitions in France. She published - she and her husband have a business - he's an architect, but they have this business together doing great catalogues of French artists' works. And it's just miserable that they can show at some museum settings, but there are no regular - at least two years ago when I talked to her about this - there were no French galleries, which I think is rather sad.

MS. RIEDEL: It's surprising.

MS. SMITH: Yeah. I'd love to spend a little more time in Europe. I will be just vacationing there this fall, but - and I'm looking forward to that being a time when I'm not so tired from teaching that I do have the energy for doing a lot of just spending time looking around.

MS. RIEDEL: And photographing.

MS. SMITH: And photographing. Making notes. Doing a little bit of - some color sketching.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you ever thought about working in another material, working in paper or doing collage with another material besides fabric?

MS. SMITH: Yeah, while I - you mean while I'm on trips and things like that?

MS. RIEDEL: Or in general.

MS. SMITH: Well, I work in my sketchbook, and I work with weird media, rubber stamps. I work with coloring with the stamp pad itself, using it as a large gestural wash of color and then sketching over top of that. And I find that very helpful. I just don't feel like I've fully explored what I am doing. It's still very satisfying to me. I think I've come to a limit with this - with the materials that I'm working with right now and with the tools that I'm working with. And then I realized, no, it's just me. I'm the limit. Because I think there's still plenty of other things that I could go further with them.

MS. RIEDEL: And you do have a very painterly approach when you paint on the -

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And you also handle the collage -

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: - in a very painterly manner. And then you've also handled it in a variety of different ways. What is it about this particular process of working in fabric that you feel is so compelling?

MS. SMITH: Right. Well, less and less do I feel like I'm working with fabric. When I was - my earlier work felt much more textile-like.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I was doing hairy, ropy things, you know, that were very much a part of the '60s. Those were so textile-like. You could wrap them around yourself.

This way that I'm working now, I really do feel like I'm painting, collaging, and drawing, and not necessarily thinking of the fact that I'm working with fabric. Canvas is a fabric, and I work gesso over the canvas. It's just more being perhaps an obsessive painter at this point by combining the three.

So I feel it's less fabriclike, but I love what happens with these materials if, for instance, you wanted to mix two or three different colors together. If I did that with paint, it would be mud. But if I do it with layering the stitch or tiny bits of this painted material and fusing it together, and then adding little colors of stitch on top of that, then you end up with a more translucent and iridescent kind of surface. Iridescent is probably not the right word, but it's full of light and color, and it's not mud.

I can layer all kinds of gray things together, and it will appear to be rocks, or it'll appear to be, you know, something, sand or whatever. But it's not mud. I don't know how else to get that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. There's a very pointillist quality, pure color juxtaposed, one color beside another beside another.

MS. SMITH: Right. And I think that came out of the work that I did when I was just painting on the rayon and silk material and then introducing the whipstitch, the loose bobbin thread. Because that was always a different color from the top thread, and it was also a different color from the background material. So there was always the optical mix that the viewer's eye was making.

You don't see that until you get up close. What you would see from a distance is something that looked very - like a watercolor. And that's still true of these that I'm doing now. For me, there is a dance in the making that is reflected in the dance when I'm watching people looking at my work.

I didn't realize that until I was involved in 2006 with an organization called Twisted Thread, that sponsors these big events in England, the likes of which we have nothing. They're called the Knitting and Stitching Shows. They're in four different venues, and they are long weekends, going from Thursday through Sunday.

What's interesting with the two head people, Andrew Salmon and Jan King, what's interesting about them is their business is to bring in all kinds of dealers, whether it's in sewing machines or threads or - I mean, it's strictly a trade show. But what they have done to keep themselves interested, and to also raise the quality of the people that come in to buy from these dealers, is to invite artists to come and exhibit their work.

They set it up in such a way that it is very, very professionally done, with solid walls, professional lighting, people who will come and hang your work, professional installers. You are expected to stay with the work during that time of each one of these shows. So the first show was in Birmingham, England, and then in London at Alexandra Palace, and then up in Dublin [Ireland], and then back down at Harrowgate, which is up near the Scottish border.

They asked me to do this show. I had been to one of the Knitting and Stitching Shows and been incredibly impressed with the quality of the art that they were showing. They asked me to be the featured artist in 2006. They were wonderful to deal with. All the work had to get shipped over. We used their shippers and packers, and still, one of the shipping guys, every time he'd bring something to one of the SOFA shows, we get together and have a beer. I mean, they're just marvelous people.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MS. SMITH: I did this show at the same time that I was doing a show ["On Mapping: New Perspectives," June 8 - September 3, 2006] at the Bellevue Art Museum [Bellevue, WA]. That's part of the reason you're seeing a lot of work from 2006, because I was literally creating two solo shows that year. It was some serious work.

But sitting in this space - which was a big space; it was about 20 by 40 feet, with outside walls, too - and sitting and watching people look at the work really fascinated me because I realized they were doing just what I do. Because I'll put something up on the wall. I'll back up. I'll sit on one of the stools at one distance or another. Then I'll come back up, and I'll move a piece, and I'll put it back up again. And that's exactly what people would do, who took the time to come in and see the work.

It was funny because Mel said to me after my show in Philadelphia ["Going Out Going In: The Language of Landscape." Moore Galleries at the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts, Philadelphia, PA, 2009], "I love watching people come in, and they go back and forth with the work." And I said, "Yeah, that's exactly what I saw in England." And I realized it was kind of an observer's dance that really echoed my little pas de deux with the work itself as I'm making it. So that pleased me no end when I made that observation.

That's part of the reason I don't want the work to be glazed in any way or under glass, because I think that you need that up close and personal side. It's a very different view of nature or whatever, up close, from what it appears at a distance.

MS. RIEDEL: And that ties in to an aspect of the work that I don't think we've talked about specifically yet, and that's the layers. It is so layered. And it seems to me that that might be one aspect of this process that's unique - that nothing else would allow you -

MS. SMITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: - the multiple layers of paint and fabric, and then collaged elements, and then stitching.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It's sort of mind-boggling.

MS. SMITH: Well, it's pretty obsessive when you come right down to it.

[They Laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: But it demands that you go back and forth -

MS. SMITH: Oh, it does. Right.

MS. RIEDEL: - because you can't see it all from one perspective.

MS. SMITH: Well, I'd hate to have my work take this time that it takes and have people just give it a casual glance and say, "Ah, well, she did a landscape," and walk away. I really want to draw them in and make them stop for a while and not go on to the next piece.

MS. RIEDEL: And unless you get within a foot or two of those pieces, you don't see a lot of the work.

MS. SMITH: You don't see what's really, really happening.

MS. RIEDEL: And when you're that close, then you can't see something else.

MS. SMITH: Yes. Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: So there is -

MS. SMITH: Again, it's like looking down at your feet when you're on the beach and seeing the rocks or the stones or the shells, and then looking up and out and over the waves to the horizon so that it's all the same. It's just a different viewpoint. I mean, it's all the same experience, but each one layers on top of the other - that you can feel the sand, the heat of the sand or the wetness of the sand under your toes, and you can feel the sharpness of the shells or the rocks, and you can hear the sound of the water, and you can see the horizon. It's all still part of that same feeling. As Pat Malarcher so wonderfully said about my work, "It was like walking into weather."

The gift of that phrase was so nice I ended up using it as the title of a show a year ago. I do want you to have more than just a visual experience of the work. I want it to be a very sensuous, sensory experience, too. And yet then the other side of it is that the materials are not sensuous at all. They're tough materials.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: I'm not doing what we associate as sort of the Marlene Dietrich, kind of sensuous, silks and satins and whatnot.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: I almost purposefully avoid that, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: How have your sources of inspiration changed over time? Certain things, of course, stay consistent.

MS. SMITH: I think a lot -

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MS. SMITH: But I think a lot of the sources of inspiration were also textile in their orientation, and learning how to do things. And so, I'm going to try this new technique that I just learned how to do in this way in this scene or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: The challenge of that process?

MS. SMITH: I think it was trying to learn as much as I could about textiles, and then limiting myself to what felt like it was a personal expression. I tell this to students all the time. They all want to use everything they know in one piece. You do that as a student. You think, wow, that's cool. That's going to save me for the rest of my life. But you have to find what is really your own expression and your own materials, and what works with you with the rhythm of your own working.

It sounds like I'm doing a lot on each piece. But it's a lot that is similar. I mean, I'm making a painting, I'm doing a collage, and I'm stitching. I do those three things. And I don't make the stitching fancy in any way. The stitching is to construct the work, to hold it together, to give it structure. But it's also going to give it some color and texture on the surface of the fabric. But just trying to stay limited is the tricky part, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you ever exhibit the flat pieces in the center of a room so one can see both the front and the back or [inaudible]?

MS. SMITH: I talked to the curator [Stefano Catalano] up at Bellevue about that. He was keen on my doing that at one point. We decided not to, but it did feed into the most recent boats, where I really wanted to see the back and the front of the work. So I didn't do as much work on one surface as I usually do on both surfaces with the boats, so that it could be like the back and front of the work.

There's no reason why I couldn't and why that couldn't be worked out, but I haven't. The closest I've come to that is a screen that I made, that I will show you over there, that was done after September 11. On one side it's called *After the Fall*, and then on the other side *There Will Be Spring* [2001-02]. It was a double-sided work that technically was just incredibly difficult to do. But it was made in a slightly different way from what you're seeing here.

The works could be fine as room dividers. No reason why not, though I would have to adjust some of my technical finishing.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] How it would be mounted, that sort of thing.

MS. SMITH: Right, and how it would be mounted. There's been the temptation on occasion, but there's walls that beckon, so -

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Doesn't seem to appeal to you.

MS. SMITH: No. I'd rather do three-dimensional pieces that way.

MS. RIEDEL: With all your traveling, all your knowledge of the field and its history, do you think of your work as part of a particularly American tradition? Or do you think of it in some other way?

MS. SMITH: I think probably so, though I've been very influenced by the British, embroiderers and artists, painters, the landscape tradition. Yet I also feel that the amount of time I've spent in Japan has had a huge influence on me, too. It's a real compliment when I show my work in Japan, and they will comment on it that it looks Nihon, which means Japanese. That pleases me no end.

So I don't like to stick myself in a category, particularly. I guess I see that I work with what's around me, and that's not necessarily an American tradition.

It's just, I'm a maker, and I do stuff wherever I am and about wherever I am. I guess I'd leave that up to somebody else to decide. I love the freedom that we are offered to do things in our own way, as individuals. It's very different from other countries, where - well, the Mayans would not want to move too far away from what they know that is theirs. In New Zealand and Australia, Australia particularly, they have that phrase about "tall poppies." Those are the ones that get picked. And so you don't go above the crowd, though many of them do, certainly.

And in Japan, there are certain ways that work is taught, and so many of the quilt makers, which is what I work with mostly in Japan, so many of them have their own little following of students that come into their homes and they teach them. They teach them to work exactly the same way that they do. They collect these students - it's a real ego trip, frankly. It's part of how they rank themselves with one another. It's very competitive.

So I try to ease into that situation without offending anyone, but also saying, well, there is also this other way of

looking at things.

MS. RIEDEL: Your entire process and career is, in many ways, the antithesis of that. It has so much to do with innovation.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: New materials that weren't even available before being used in –

MS. SMITH: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: – ways that you invent as you go along.

MS. SMITH: Well, but that's true, too, of the contemporary works in Japan and in England, for instance. They are ones to try anything, or many of them are. Enough of them are willing to do that, so it pushes the field, I mean, so much so that in England, for instance, one friend of mine refers to a lot of the work as the "sponge and gunge" school, where they'll try anything. And with the Japanese, my gosh, they always have all these new materials that they're showing me when I'm there.

MS. RIEDEL: That's true. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. SMITH: So I think that's changing. I think it's changed a lot in the last 10 or 15 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: That's one of the things I love about travel, is because I find all these new materials – that's just great. And there's always somebody willing to show me.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: You've been teaching now for how many years?

MS. SMITH: That's a tough question. Probably 30 or – probably since the late '60s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So over 30, close to 40?

MS. SMITH: Close to 40 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Primarily workshops? Primarily short-term, anything from a few hours to a few weeks?

MS. SMITH: The first teaching that I actually did was an adult education program. So it was a semester long, once a week in the evening. I don't know how many years I did that. I also taught at a community college, but again, it was more of an adult ed program. But it was for credit. And I've taught at places like Arrowmont, which –

MS. RIEDEL: Penland?

MS. SMITH: Not any of the others, and the reason being, frankly, they didn't pay as well. And that takes us into the university issue because, being a studio artist without any kind of income other than what I make for myself without a salary, I had to be very careful about –

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MS. SMITH: – what kinds of "privilege" it was. Okay, so Penland was great because your husband could come along or a friend could come along and take a course. But if it didn't pay me very well, I have to be able to afford to go there. And I think that's why they can get academics there, who are there because they also have a year-round salary.

MS. RIEDEL: Their academic salary.

MS. SMITH: So as an independent studio artist, I didn't have that behind me. But Arrowmont always paid quite well. Split Rock [Split Rocks Arts Program, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN] I've taught at a couple of times and enjoyed that, too.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you evolved a specific teaching philosophy or certain points that you try to make in a few days or over a few weeks?

MS. SMITH: I think one of the things that I really try to pose to the students is to listen to the questions that are



in their own heads, and to answer those questions, and to know that I don't have the answers, and I can help them by asking more questions. I can help them by helping them to learn to pose questions. But they have to listen to what's inside their own heads. I can't possibly reach around inside there and supply them with an answer.

I try to help them look further afield from their own field for ideas and for inspiration. I strongly suggest to groups that do nothing but go to quilt and embroidery shows that they perhaps consider Fra Angelico, or just who has seen the last good museum show, or what happens if you go to a show of ceramics or woodworking or glass, and what can you learn from that?

I remember, again, hearing Studs Terkel. Certainly I learned a lot from listening to Studs Terkel, I think, over the years. But he was interviewing John Williams, the guitarist -

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: - and I remember John Williams saying to him, "When somebody does something that I really love and I envy, I don't think, gee, I wish I'd done that." He said, "Gee, I wonder how I could use that."

[They Laugh.]

And so I tell the students this. How can you make something that is not within your own media, something that feels like you? If you've been inspired by a particular glaze on a pot, okay. So how could I create that effect, that same effect? And that way, then, you're not borrowing from your own field. You are using something as an inspiration.

So I try to get them to think about the process more than the product, which is another thing - that in textiles, so much of the way things are taught is that you come home with this little souvenir thing that you've finished at the end of the week. And I very strongly encourage them to take the small studies that we do in most of the workshops that I teach and not to stick them in the bottom of a drawer - and I usually get a few guilty expressions from people that that's what they usually do - and make sure that they are part of their sketchbooks, and with notes on how they were made and when and what they were thinking about. What I try to have people do is think about the why of what they do and - learn the process, and then make it work for them,

I also always tell people a couple of rules. One, the Jean Littlejohn school of teaching, in that, the person next to you in the workshop is always doing better work than you are.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: And then I have to remind them that it comes all the way around, so that you're next to somebody else, too, and that I'm not the only resource in the room, that everyone who is in the room is a resource. And not asking questions because you don't want to look stupid is really stupid - or, you know, because you're afraid of appearing stupid is really stupid because you're going to ask a question that's going to get somebody else thinking in a new way, or somebody else who's too shy to have asked the same question will have an answer.

So I try to open it up. And I also try to be, when it comes to assignments in a workshop, to be purposefully vague so that people will already have an image inside their head because I've not spelled it out for them. I find that 99 percent of the students can really run with that, no matter where I'm teaching. There's always the one percent that comes away frustrated because they wanted all the answers, and they wanted it from me, and they wanted a handout.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. SMITH: I love it when I'm teaching and somebody makes a big breakthrough. But I never think of it as being me. I just happened to time it just right to be the person -

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: - in a long line of workshops who happened to be there to bear witness to this breakthrough, because it takes so many different people telling you a lot of different things, and sometimes different people telling you the same thing in different ways -

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. SMITH: - until you finally hear it. And, gee, it's fun to be around when they do it, but I certainly don't take credit for that. That's theirs to enjoy. And so I guess that's sort of the way I teach.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you noticed differences in your workshops? You mentioned that when you were in England,

sometimes you were teaching at a university or a college there. Have you noticed any distinctions between university-trained artists and artists who've learned their craft outside of academia?

MS. SMITH: I can't answer that with a definite answer because it depends on the personality of the student. Some who are academically trained are the ones who are the toughest ones, because they feel like they need to prove themselves to me. They're more guarded and/or, "I knew that already. I've already done that; show me something different."

And that's really a shame when that happens. But for the most part, I find the academically trained ones are much more willing, I think, to see a broader spectrum of possibilities. That's good because they've been trained mostly to do that, or to look to the past or the future, to look to other mediums for their inspiration. And that's great. Some are marvelously trained in drawing and design, drawing particularly.

But if I'm teaching – say one country changes to another. In Holland, for instance, the graphic capabilities that are taught to high school students, people who have not been university-trained, their graphic skills are so phenomenal. They're just wonderful. It varies from place to place. In Japan, they are very technically astute and really good at various practical techniques. The Brits are often ones who really love to make big messes and try new, experimental materials.

So it varies. But again, it varies with the person. It varies with the mood I'm in when I start the class. Every class varies, which is part of the fun of a short class, because I just have to take the temperature of that particular class, and, okay, are they going to ask lots of questions?

I taught three of the same classes in Japan a couple weeks ago. One class was very big, 25 in a small room, and it was the first class. It was Tokyo. The next class was in Nagoya, and there were 12 in the class. And then there was a class in Osaka, and there were 18 in the class. Of the 25 in Tokyo, two or three really were doing marvelous work. Only a few that I had worked with before, and they were in some new kind of adult ed program that I didn't quite understand until near the end of the class.

They were ones who wanted handouts, because they were going to go teach what I was teaching. And I'm thinking, you're not ready for this, and small wonder you want handouts. But that's not the way I'm going to do it. Your notes you've taken are your handouts. But I had to explain that to them at the end because I didn't realize they were going to want handouts.

Now, nobody asked a single question in that class of 25. It was very crowded. They were all real tense, and I couldn't figure this out, but I thought, oh, boy, I hope the other two classes aren't like this. So when I went to Nagoya, where there was a class of 12, they were much more traditionally oriented in what they did. They were not big-city people as much, and they were an absolute delight. They were very happy with themselves. There was one woman who sort of set the tone for the class by disagreeing with me, humorously, but disagreeing with just about everything I would say, in kind of a light way. She was a woman who was two years older than I, and reminded me of that at the end of the class.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: And she just had a ball. I mean, we got along marvelously, because I love somebody who'll at least say what they're thinking about something.

By the time I got to Osaka, this was a group that knew each other really well. There was no protective barrier up, as there had been in Tokyo. And this group, I could not teach them everything because they were so full of questions, which was marvelous. I would much rather answer questions than anything.

We'd get off onto all these crazy subjects, and they were fantastic. Here was the same material; the same age women, for the most part; the same – they had had a whole series of the same classes before my class; and yet each class was so entirely different. That's one of the things that I love about teaching adults, because you just get so many experiences. One class that I taught years ago really almost bombed. There were three Ph.D. biochemists in it who wanted to know how to do something "one, two, three, four, five, six." I mean, that's the way it has to be. And I've had physicians be in classes, and they are used to having to, like airline pilots, have a checklist.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And so to try and have them think in a completely different manner is tough. Now, many do; I mean, they're very creative people. But, boy, it takes a little explaining that this is the way we're going to do – you know, we're going to try it this way. It's okay. It'll only be for a couple days. You can go back to "one, two, three" as soon as you want to. But right now, let's try it in a different way. And so that's part of the fun of teaching, though.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. SMITH: It's something you can't prepare for. You just have to come in and do, and be yourself, and say, this is what I do, and it works for me. I think that part of teaching, also, is convincing students that they do have the capacity to do art, to think like artists. Only on very rare occasions, they might convince me otherwise. But for the most part, I go in knowing that every person in every class has the capacity to do something that will surprise themselves.

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

MS. SMITH: And will surprise me, too. So I become coach and cheerleader and also somebody who says, "Well - you are doing it this way. But if you try it this way, you may be happier with it." Then I can work with them on their techniques.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have had so much success yourself working that way - that is your process.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: The intuitive way of working -

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: - of figuring it out in the process, the making the work as the initiator of the next idea.

MS. SMITH: Right. Right. I do my best learning when my hands are occupied. I can be thinking up a storm, but unless I try it, it's not going to work. Because - just like we were talking yesterday about our son who teaches a studio course in architecture - because if you build it, you'll know it -

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: - so get your head out of the clouds and out of that, you know, nice ivory tower, and actually pick up the hammer and make that thing true. And they learn.

MS. RIEDEL: Billie Ruth Sudduth said to me once that - I think it was her grandmother who said to her: "If your hands are always busy, you'll never go mad."

MS. SMITH: Yeah. I think it's true. Right. Well, my mother used to quote some Scottish parent: "It's dogged as does it, not thinking about it."

MS. RIEDEL: That's right.

MS. SMITH: And I think that I probably drove her nuts, because I usually do think a lot about things.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: I spend a lot of time just making notes, as you can see from my sketchbooks. I do more notes than anything else.

MS. RIEDEL: Diagrams, almost.

MS. SMITH: Lots of diagrams.

MS. RIEDEL: Not linear notes. Not at all.

MS. SMITH: No, not linear notes. Diagrams that are messages to myself. Then it's time to focus and start seeing if any of those messages are going to work when I get right down to it. And a good part of the time they do; not always.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And so will you have an idea, or you'll see something on one of your trips, and that will just -

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: - one of these diagrams?

MS. SMITH: Yeah. Right. Yeah, absolutely it will. And if I'm thinking about new things or a new body of work, and I have one little idea, then I will start doing my mapping around that to court whatever is going on in my head. I can always go back and fill in more later on.

MS. RIEDEL: And to clarify, these are diagrams of ideas. These aren't sketches.

MS. SMITH: Right. They're diagrams of ideas. There may be lists of color. If I see something that I really like – it may be something out of the side of a train that I'm going by – and I see certain colors that I love the way they're working together, I will actually try to make a list, starting with the largest amount of the color, and describing it as specifically as I can, like medium gray/blue, that kind of thing. I try not to use names of colors particularly, but just whether it's medium value or something like that, or more grayed than otherwise. And then I try to make them in that amount of proportions, going from the top on down, the biggest on down to the little color surprise that's always there somewhere if you look hard enough.

I will often have little color lists here and there. I may have some shapes of something that appealed to me, whether it's the shape of a particular rock that I saw, and what was around that shape that made it that shape. If you look at the space around it rather than the shape itself, it's easier to draw it.

And so I'll do little things like that. But I don't do anything that has this marvelous finished quality that you'd want to display, not too often. Those kinds of little sketches have led to an awful lot of big work. I find in England they put an incredible emphasis on the amount of preliminary work in sketchbooks, which are gorgeous.

Then I look at the finished work, and it doesn't have anywhere near the energy that the sketches did. They put all that energy into making sure this is a beautiful sketch. I do a sketch to give myself a problem to solve on a larger scale, and that's where my energy goes. I mean, I envy these beautiful sketchbooks, but they're like an end in themselves. And you might as well display those, because you're better at doing them sometimes than you are at actually doing the work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: And so it's just a different way of working, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] You've had the vast majority of your teaching career outside of universities. Do you have any thoughts about the place of craft in universities?

MS. SMITH: I'd love to see it thrive, and I'd love to see textiles thrive. But they have a really hard time. I've helped to write letters at various universities to make sure that the textile department survives in some form or other, and, man, it's tough. For some reason, and I don't know why – it may be a male-female thing; I hate to think it is, but it may be – I mean, ceramics do fine. Metal, for the most part, does fine. Glass does fine if there's enough budget to keep it going. But I don't know, textiles, they have a hard time with that. I wish I could figure that out. Maybe wood's in the same boat. I don't know. Because wood seems to be another place where there's an awful lot of underground learning, workshops, that kind of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Were your own most significant educational experiences within a university or some sort of formal academic setting, or not? Or can you not point to any single –

MS. SMITH: Oh, yeah, I can. One of the most significant, I think, was a two-week workshop at the Smithsonian in the Museum of Natural History [National Museum of Natural History, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC], in one of their rooms, with Constance Howard. That was a terrific experience. And that was in the mid-'70s, and a marvelous experience.

Any workshops that were maybe two weeks long were wonderful. I also did an adult ed course a few years ago on monotype, and that was just a series of Saturday morning classes at one of the local community colleges that was very helpful to me. Anytime you're within some other field, and you see that everything doesn't have to be so perfect, which is such an emphasis in textiles, I think, and when you see that you can come up with something marvelous and recognize the accidents that happen, and make them work for you, I really like that. That monotype class was a very good one because I needed to loosen up at that point. And that was good.

As I said yesterday, I think that the experience of the art history classes that I had as a graduate student were wonderful because they were with people who really knew what they were talking about, had experienced it, again, had hands-on experience in what they did. And –

MS. RIEDEL: Is it the Liakos?

MS. SMITH: Yeah, the Liakos. They were marvelous. And the class at the Art Institute that was an ongoing adult ed class, the lecture series that Virginia Bath gave. I think, again, that was another very powerful one for me. So there have been various teachers, certainly, that have meant a lot to me. But I think in any class, when you come with a few questions in your mind, that's so helpful.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. SMITH: It's another thing that I always do with the students, is ask them at the beginning what their goals are for the class. Because don't measure success on whether I taught something to you in a particular way. Measure what you learned. And that's, to me, much more important. It takes the onus off me, for one thing, which is not all bad.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: And it's their problem if they haven't asked me the questions. I know that when I've done residencies, that one of the best things about the residencies, besides the fact that they leave you alone, and they provide you with food, which is quite wonderful, is getting ready for the residency. You are focused because you've already put together your materials that you're going to haul across the country or down the road or whatever. And the more you're prepared for the residency, the better you're going to - the happier you're going to be when it's all over.

So I have found that that's very useful, and it's something I really try to remind myself when I come into the studio every day. Okay, what is it that I want to accomplish today? What questions do I want answered? What do I want to research? What do I want to finish? What do I want to begin? And it helps me not get just lost behind the computer for long periods of time, which is a little too easy to do these days.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. SMITH: It's a heck of a tool, but it's a heck of a diversion, too.

MS. RIEDEL: That's true.

Do you see the textile field in general, contemporary textiles, fiber, and in particular what you've done, how you've helped evolve the machine embroidery aspect of the field, developing in any particular direction?

MS. SMITH: I'm not sure, to be honest with you. I can see changes as I travel in England, and much more of an acceptance of machine embroidery, particularly, among many of the guilds, which 15 or 20 years ago wouldn't even allow that kind of work in their shows. I've seen the quilters doing more work with machine embroidery than they used to.

It's certainly become something of an end in itself, but I think that the sewing machine companies, for one thing, aren't doing themselves much of a service. They're wanting to sell machines by their connection with the computer and with all these really, really plug-ugly designs that are right back to the kind of little counted-stitches stuff that I did when I was a kid in the '50s, that are cute beyond belief, and are about as much fun to make as watching paint dry. You know, your machine is doing it all for you. You plug this stuff in.

I know there are some people who are using some of those machine computer programs. I can think of one person, anyway, in Canada who has done jacquard weaving [Louise Lemieux Bérubé], and so has then worked with the computer-aided design on her sewing machine to do smaller versions of what has been in the jacquard weaving. And mostly they have a kind of photographic quality to them that is just dense and exciting and really, really beautiful. They're just gems. I saw a show of her work in Japan three years ago and was very, very impressed with her work. She's since been in the *Surface Design* magazine.

I hope there's going to be more of that for those who can take the computer-aided part and really make it into a strong statement of some sort or other. But the companies that are selling these \$9,000 home sewing machines to do little ducks and geese that you could buy at any dime store, and they're so pleased with themselves, w

ell, that's great if they're pleased with themselves. Fine. That's good. I can't knock that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But it just seems to me a heck of a lot of money for watching paint dry. It's just pretty boring stuff. I programmed some writing one time in a machine that I had on loan, and I can't tell you how boring that was to sit there and watch this happening just because I had put my foot on a pedal. I ended up burning up sections of it and using it inside one of the boats, and I was happy with that at the end of it. But I thought, there is no way I can do this, just no way at all. I need to have my hands controlling where it goes.

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

MS. SMITH: I think there are some really good people who are doing that, who are drawing with the machine. I think that's coming along.

MS. RIEDEL: Anybody in particular you'd like to mention?

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

[Audio break.]

Suzanne Gregg is one. She lives in Ohio, and she has - I think her job is as a scientist. But she's doing wonderful, very exciting little drawings of people, great studies of people, but also of, oh, glass scientific vessels and things like that.

There's a show that I mentioned, Jacqueline Govin, a little while ago. Every other year she helps the Pfaff Sewing Machine Company sponsor an exhibition of machine embroidery that usually shows at the Knitting and Stitching Shows and then travels in a couple of different places. A couple of years ago I helped to select the winners in that show. I thought the work was just spectacular. I think we gave Alice Kettle, who's a British artist who does fantastic machine embroidery work, the grand prize. I hope that they can continue to do this. This year they're doing one on travel, and I may very well enter the show myself, because I've been doing the sort of things that would connect with travel.

There is that show, and I would love to see that show come to the U.S. But it hasn't so far. It's just been in Europe. I think that there is a call for these kinds of shows. I'm working on one right now for 2011 that will be at the Gregg Museum in Raleigh [Gregg Museum of Art & Design, North Carolina State University, Raleigh, NC], and it will be about a sense of place. It's going to be called "Traces," and it will have some artists who work with a machine, but it will be all textiles of some sort or other, about 12 or 13 artists.

Another artist who uses the machine in an extraordinary way is a Dutch artist. Her name is Marian Bijlenga. She works with horsehair, doing very small modular pieces, tiny pieces that are the size of a quarter or a half dollar. And then these works are put together, held together with monofilament, and so they float away from the wall and make these marvelous shadows. Her work, I think, is extraordinary, and we've asked her to be in this exhibition.

So there are plenty of people I look up to, Alice Kettle being one, Marian being another. I don't know what their particular training is. I know that Marian trained in graphics, and I'm not sure about Alice. She may have trained at Goldsmiths [Goldsmiths, University of London, England]. But it's out there. It's just finding the time. And I wonder about young artists who can't afford these machines, for one thing. That's tough.

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

MS. SMITH: I just wish the machine companies would continue to make the sort of the bottom-of-the-line, basic sewing machines and not try and dude 'em up with so many bells and whistles.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting that you mention this exhibition that you're preparing to curate, or are in the process of curating. It takes us full circle back to your exhibition history. You've been exhibiting now since - I think the earliest exhibit we were looking at here was '75 or '76 - so, long before you even had started grad school, you were exhibiting.

And I would imagine that the nature of those exhibitions has changed -

MS. SMITH: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: - extraordinarily over this time.

MS. SMITH: Oh, they really have.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you describe that?

MS. SMITH: Well, I remember the very first one, which was a two-person show with a potter. It was in this very funky, North Side of Chicago alternative kind of space, a little storefront space. I was so thrilled and so excited. My work was soft and slightly padded and hand-stitched and appliquéd. I'm not apologizing for the work, actually; there's a couple pieces in there I wish I still had.

But it was very exciting. Friends and family came, and we drank some wine and beer, and it was a party. I like to have exhibitions as a goal. They help set some dates, and they do make me focus sometimes when I'd rather be, oh, going in a variety of directions. But they do help me focus because I know I have to do something for this space at this particular time. So they're useful that way. If there's some documentation along with them, that's useful, too.

But I still just love working for the sake of working. I don't like thinking about, well, will it sell, or what will people

think, because that just stops me from really experimenting. So it's a kind of a mixed blessing to have a show coming up, and then know that it's going to have to stand up on its own when I'm not there.

The shows have changed. The most recent show is in a beautiful space with lots of white walls around it in a wonderful old storefront in Old City, Philadelphia, at Snyderman-Works Gallery [Philadelphia, PA]. I'm very happy with the space that they gave every piece. They didn't try to sell other things on that floor, but they did arrange very carefully some large pots and a wonderful seated figure that looks like it's meditating on two of the pieces on the opposite wall, which is lovely. I think it's a beautifully displayed show, and I'm very happy with that, that in this time right now that is so rough, that galleries and artists alike are -

MS. RIEDEL: Economically, you mean?

MS. SMITH: - yeah, can spend an awful lot of time worrying, time and energy worrying. The show is doing very well, thank goodness, and I just feel honored that they gave me that space and allowed the work to speak - to hum. I told them it was humming on the walls. Each one was humming its own tune.

So things change. And you have different dealers that are - some are easier to work with. Some are less so. I like it when somebody who's showing my work can tell me some things about the work that they see, or the comments that they get from others. That's great feedback for me. And I always take that to heart.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] You've exhibited, especially at the beginning, a fair amount in the Midwest and on the East Coast. But in 1994, you were in Tokyo. Was that the first international exhibition? Solo?

MS. SMITH: Right. I had two solo shows in Tokyo.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. In '94 [Ginza-Eye Gallery] and '96 [Orié Space Art Gallery], actually. And 2000 [Orié Gallery], it looks like, as well.

MS. SMITH: I guess so.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] In 2000.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And how different were the shows in Tokyo from the ones in the States?

MS. SMITH: Well, you're expected to stay there for a few days because the shows aren't up as long. It's not like here. If an artist wants to have a show in Tokyo, a Japanese artist, they hire a space, usually, and they do all the announcing and all the publicity. They stay in that space for the four or five or six days, constantly, and people come in and bring flowers. It's a big deal.

I was in a slightly different setting because I was in a commercial gallery. But I hadn't realized until the first show that I was going to be expected to hang around to just be there, even though I couldn't talk to people unless somebody was there to translate. I didn't always stay, because I was teaching or doing something else at the time. But it's just different - the gallery is expecting you to do a fair amount of the work, too, of meeting and greeting. I don't do that real easily. It's tough.

MS. RIEDEL: You went to the show in Poland.

MS. SMITH: "The Triennial of Tapestry" in Lodz, Poland. Camille Cask, head of the Friends of Fiber Arts in the U.S., is the person who chooses the artists, the American artists, for that show every three years. I was quite challenged by Camille because she had seen a couple of the Pilings, and asked me if I was going to continue to work big, and could I do something with them? I ended up doing 12 of them. It was a challenge. If she asked me again, I would do something entirely different.

It was a great trip. Wonderful artists who were along, too. We had a super time. It's an odd space in that it's an old factory building where the lighting, at least when I was there, was pretty minimal, mostly fluorescents and daylight, and that was about it. But there's a good spirit, and you get to meet so many artists from all over the world. That was fun. I enjoyed it very much.

MS. RIEDEL: You mentioned earlier *Surface Design*. Are there particular periodicals that have been helpful to you over time?

MS. SMITH: I think so. I would say the very earliest one was the *Better Homes & Gardens* article that was how to do machine embroidery, oddly enough. That was great. In the '60s and '70s and '80s, the British magazine *Embroidery* had marvelous articles on British artists who were doing embroidery of various sorts. They also had history articles. I have all of them, and I still look back on them. There's still some just wonderful, wonderful

work in them.

*Craft Horizons* was, I think, a terrific magazine when Rose Slivka was the editor, and she was a terrific writer. There was a Chicago art magazine that was very good for a long period of time [*New Art Examiner*]. In fact, Janet Koplos wrote for them before she began to write for *Art in America*. It was a very interesting magazine that really got to the heart of a lot of work and was about art, not about a particular craft or anything.

I think the British *Crafts* magazine has been good off and on. For a while they had such an anti-American bias in some of their writings that I finally stopped subscribing. I just got annoyed. I figured, you can't have my money unless I'm in Britain and I buy one. There's also an Australian magazine called *Craft Arts* that has been quite good.

I'm down to very few magazines – other than the *Surface Design Journal*, and I have to claim that I'm on the committee that decides what the themes are going to be for the journal. I also do some writing for them. So I'm biased, perhaps, but I think that Pat Malarcher has done a great job of making that magazine worthwhile. There's always something, some challenging article in there that I find terrific.

*FiberArts* has gone through a few iterations. I loved it when Chris Timmons was the editor, as I said yesterday. They have a new editor now who I think may be going to be good. I've known and loved every one of their editors off and on. Worked with them. Done writing for them. But I'm curious to see what this new editor will do.

*Selvedge* magazine in England is a very beautiful magazine, and I subscribed to that for a couple of years. But it's a little pricey for me with the value of the pound to the dollar. It's the kind of magazine that I've sometimes given to wealthy friends as a gift. And I wish them well, but I can't always put my money there.

*American Craft* – is it still called *American Craft* now?

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

MS. SMITH: Okay – I think has gone up and down. And I'm curious to see how it's going to be. For a while I felt that it was very oriented only, like the old [Saul] Steinberg cartoon, to what's in New York, and anything beyond the Hudson River bridge was considered the boonies. I find that attitude pretty annoying.

I'm not sure, personally, about the Craft Museum [Museum of Arts & Design, New York, NY] and Craft Council [American Craft Council] dividing. I think they cut off some of their best sides when they did that. I just don't think it did them any favors, though I'm sure from some kind of a political point of view, it had to be done. I don't know. And thank goodness I don't.

*Ornament* is an interesting magazine, particularly in its history.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MS. SMITH: Their historic study of beads is quite fascinating. For me, it's on the same line as, say, perhaps, *African Arts*. There's a lot of wonderful research in both magazines. I find that I often pick up some of the ceramic magazines, because I like the writing in them, and I like some of the pictures. I like the photography. And so I'll read them even though I'm not a potter. I find that I learn something from them.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. SMITH: But I come back to *Surface Design Journal* and *Art in America* and *Mac World*.

[They Laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MS. SMITH: I don't get too many right now. Another one that I like that I don't subscribe to is *Sculpture* magazine. They have excellent writing. They have a terrific editor. But it's cheaper for me to buy that one. Their subscription rate is pretty high.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: I'm better off just doing that.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, Barbara, I think we have done a wonderfully thorough job here.

MS. SMITH: Good.



MS. RIEDEL: We were going to talk a little bit about *Time and Memory* [1999], perhaps, is one final series of work that we hadn't yet discussed.

MS. SMITH: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Which sums things up nicely, with the concept of time and memory.

MS. SMITH: The whole idea of memory is fascinating to me because it's sort of like maps. You can write a map to whatever it is you want to write it for. I mean, a map isn't real. A map isn't the journey. A map can show how many televisions there are on the South Side of Chicago, or it could lie about how many Polish people are on the South Side of Chicago, or whatever. I mean, maps are very personal bits of information, and they only answer certain questions.

And memory is sort of the same way.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. SMITH: I mean, I'm just thinking this off the top of my head as we're talking about it. But just these two days and the days preceding it, thinking about what is important to me that has been in my past, and being grateful for so much, and also realizing that some things that got in the way were really all for the best.

We were just talking a few minutes ago how life's not fair.

Sure it isn't, but it's what you do with whatever you have of it. And the alternative is not a whole pleasant kind of thing to think about. My husband is prone to say, "As long as you're on this side of the grass, you're doing pretty well."

[They Laugh.]

I think that memory can be so altered. But it's how you use it now. The five pieces that were all one installation called *Time and Memory* were done at the time that we were thinking about moving to the west, the far west, the Northwest, from Chicago. I had been working on the Pilings, the tall column forms. And I began to think about stalactites and stalagmites and the accumulation of memory, as it were, accumulation of time and memory, and the beautiful things that are created when something drips down and forms its own shape. And memory has that kind of capacity to come and change us as we dwell on it over time.

So these five pieces were made of five sections that were on the floor, five small columns that were five feet high. And then hovering over them, as if they had been torn apart, were columns that were, oh, two and a half to three feet high that suspended from the ceiling. So they have this tension between them, where the opening could be no more than maybe three or four inches. They were done at about the same time as those *Urban Illuminations*, when I was really loving just not putting any color on the surface at all.

They were printed with a heat transfer dye that works on polyester just fine and really stays put on it. I would paint on paper, often on newspaper, and then just iron that print, that paint, onto the white fabric.

But also on them were old photographs that came from, oh, photographs that my father had had from old conferences and conventions, where they're black-and-white photographs, and they can be 30 inches long, and have all these men in their homburgs and wool coats standing outside some nameless building, you know, all looking very official.

I had a whole lot of these old photographs. So I printed them onto the fabric. The columns were lined with gold - synthetic gold leaf which, frankly, I would never do again in a million years because it was just very labor intensive, so that when you cut holes in the surface, you saw either gold or black because of the reflection or lack thereof. I really liked that.

So those pieces became about memory, about time, the accretion of time. And they are now at the Racine Art Museum [Racine, WI]. Two of them were in the Art in Embassies program down in Lima, Peru. When they came back to me, I always wanted them to live together. Darcy Walker, who owned the other three pieces, donated them to the museum. So all five are going to live together at Racine for now.

MS. RIEDEL: Great.

MS. SMITH: It was nice to find a home for them.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And is that the single largest grouping of the Pilings that exist together?

MS. SMITH: At this point in a public place, yes. Others, Indianapolis Museum [of Art, Indianapolis, IN] owns three

that they commissioned. But I think others that were in various office buildings, there were maybe five, but no more than that.

MS. RIEDEL: It just occurs to me how well suited to those concepts of time and memory your work is, the whole concept of layers.

MS. SMITH: The layering is very important.

MS. RIEDEL: And how the colors change with the overlays and the underlays and things that can be seen -

MS. SMITH: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: - from one side and not the other.

MS. SMITH: Right. Right. Exactly. So it's fascinating to try and peel away some of the layers with you. Not something that I would want to do in my spare time all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. SMITH: But a really interesting experience. So thanks for that.

MS. RIEDEL: Good. It's been a pleasure. Thanks so much.

MS. SMITH: Me, too.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...January 6, 2008