



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Nanette Laitman,
2009 May 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Nanette Laitman on May 29, 2009. The interview took place in New York City, 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.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art with Nanette Laitman in her home in New York City on March 29, 2009. This is disc number one.

NANETTE LAITMAN: May—it's May.

MIJA RIEDEL: Thank you. May 29, 2009. Disc number one.

So thank you so much for making time to do this.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh it's a great pleasure.

MIJA RIEDEL: It is a real pleasure to be here. I've been fortunate to work on the Laitman project at the Smithsonian since 2002. First I was collecting artists' papers on the West Coast. Now I've been conducting interviews and the artists are thrilled to be part of this. They're so thrilled to have the opportunity to tell their stories, speak about their work in their own words. The materials that have come into the archives are extraordinary: at least 40 collections of sketchbooks and personal notes and diaries and photographs.

So it is a phenomenal resource that you have made possible and we're just thrilled. So I thank you on behalf of so many people who have told me multiple times how thrilled they are to be part of the project.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I've heard from many of the artists who have taken the time to write me notes or in some way communicate and they've expressed their appreciation in many, many ways. And I'm delighted to be able to continue the project for as long as it takes to document all of the work that these wonderful people are doing.

But I'd like to ask you a question now. How do the people in this field that you have contacted most recently feel about the word "craft" in association perhaps with a different connotation than the art world? Do they consider themselves craft artists or are they artists? This is a part of the world that I feel needs to be changed.

The project has its origins in the craft movement, but craft has changed and the mindset of these artists have changed and now I feel that craft is associated with the commercial fairs and with the less—well, I don't like to use the word "talented," but perhaps the lesser people who have not been picked up perhaps by important galleries and have not been promoted and so forth. It doesn't denigrate their talents, but I do think that there is a very, very strong line now between the two.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And it's interesting that the—it's I think a wonderful question and when artists are asked to identify themselves, they have identified themselves as artists, as designers, as metalsmiths, so there really is a continuum, I think, in terms of the way they think of themselves and their work. And I was just speaking with Marek Cecula last week and clearly, he does very specific design pieces. He does artwork as well. So I think even a single artist can see their work within the range of art, craft and design.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Having seen this show at the museum, you cannot classify Klaus Moje as a craft artist. The glass paintings that he has created for our show are brilliant and they belong next to any important artist.

MIJA RIEDEL: And this was really—I would imagine some of your initial inspiration for getting involved with the Museum of Arts and Design [MAD], with the Smithsonian Archives of American Art.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I was hoping to raise the level of consciousness among the public that this was not a second child.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I'd like to move us back briefly to discuss some biographical information, your own experience as a child. You were born in—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I was born in New York City. We moved to Westchester when I was in the fourth grade, which is a suburb.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you were born in 1924, is that right?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I'll be 85 before the end of the year. My parents were not collectors until much later on in their lives. They were way in their adulthood when they started to buy impressionist paintings. They did not have a mindset for contemporary art. I had, as a result of a wonderful mentor that I had—her name was Marcia Tucker. And Marcia Tucker was my mentor when it came to looking and seeing what was going on beyond the first half of the 20th century.

And I was a member of the board of the New Museum [of Contemporary Art] for many years until I found it becoming a little bit beyond my scope. I guess, as I grew older, I was probably becoming less adventurous and perhaps being more conservative. And I also found her mindset towards feminist art which was really the import of her life, the most important of her life was the women artists and she was an extraordinary woman but a great feminist. And it got a little bit beyond me, so I resigned as board—as a member of the board in those days.

MIJA RIEDEL: And when were you on the board?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh gosh. I guess in the late '70s, early '80s probably.

MIJA RIEDEL: So fairly on to when it had started.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, I was there in the very beginning when they had a little room at the New School on Fifth Avenue.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So 1977, then, I would imagine and forward from there.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

NANETTE LAITMAN: You said—we spoke on the phone a week or two ago—you said Marcia Tucker really taught you how to see. How did she do that?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] She had a special gift of explaining very difficult work. And she knew the mindset of the artists who created it and I could never have figured it out without her. She taught many of us. She would give lectures at the museum early on and she was really a pied piper. And that's how we all started to follow her.

MIJA RIEDEL: I remember—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Vera List was the one who brought me in originally.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And Elaine Dannheisser. Those two women—who both lived in this building, by the way. And we would go down to the museum together for the different events and different shows. And neither one of their husbands was the least bit interested. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So the three of you would go. And the work, I know that Marcia was interested in showing emerging artists who were having a hard time exhibiting otherwise—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Right.

MIJA RIEDEL: —which in many ways is parallel to what you've done with the Museum of Arts and Designs to give artists working in media traditionally associated with craft a place to exhibit that they might not otherwise have.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Right. Well, the original concept was a more conservative one than we have today. We have to branch out. You can't do vessels forever, you know? It's—the artists are growing and their mindset is growing and things change. And the design world has been totally underrepresented. So we felt we should be involved with that and our mindset is totally different from the Smithsonian one on 92nd Street—the—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, the exhibition space.

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. The museum on 92nd and 5th—the Cooper-Hewitt [National Design Museum].

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, okay. Sorry, sorry. I live in San Francisco—

NANETTE LAITMAN: They are a much more historical—

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right, right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: —mindset. And we want to be cutting-edge.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Absolutely. Absolutely. I just want to ask you directly. I know you don't like the word "craft."

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. It was my idea to change the name of the museum and I fought for five years to make that happen. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Would you explain why you think that's important? Is it a way of reframing the way you look at these three-dimensional objects?

NANETTE LAITMAN: All artists are craftsmen. Whether they paint a picture or make a pot or a bowl or an object—they're craftsmen. But I find the word "craft"—in my mind, it sounds like pots and bowls done in your mother's garage on Saturday. [Laughs.] And that's the way I feel.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was by giving the museum a new name, it's a way of recontextualizing the way of looking—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Elevating. I felt that the media needed elevation. And also we did not want to be a stepchild to an art museum. We wanted to stand right up there shoulder-to-shoulder with all of the top museums. And if you noticed today, in the past 10 years, Victoria and Albert [Museum], Chicago [The Art Institute of Chicago], Milwaukee [Milwaukee Art Museum]—they're all starting to have departments for handmade objects, artists who are doing work in the different mediums. They all have ceramics now. They all have glass. They all have wood, fiber, whatever.

And they're opening up their minds as well. Some of the departments may be very small, but it's growing. And we have to be leadership people in that direction.

MIJA RIEDEL: I want to move us back briefly again to your childhood. Did you take art in school yourself?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. I have absolutely no talent except for needlework. That's the only thing I do.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah. And have you done that for most of your life?

NANETTE LAITMAN: For 50 years. I have made rugs and wall-hangings and pillows.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah—this?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: How lovely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I do needlework. And I work two or three hours every single day.

MIJA RIEDEL: You do?

NANETTE LAITMAN: That is my hobby. And I like the creative process. But I'm not a painter.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what is it about the creative process that has held your attention all these years, for that many hours a day?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Working with your hands, to me, is the most wonderful thing to be able to do because it has a mental process as well; you just don't scribble. But I find artists' mentality very, very exciting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Constantly innovating—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Changing, growing. If you don't grow, you stagnate.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And some people unfortunately don't have the ability to grow and they're sort of in jobs that are routine. I'm not a routine person.

MIJA RIEDEL: No. [Laughs.] That, I think, we—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I mean, we all have daily routines. But it isn't the main focus. It's going to do something creative.

MIJA RIEDEL: What are your thoughts about the increasing roles that technology—things like CAD programs—can play in the arts?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I think some of the tapestries, for example, that are being created by these artists that are computer-generated are brilliant. There's no way in a million years they could do it without the computer. It could never be as complicated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. So while you value the handwork, there's room for all—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, they use the computer for design mostly. They don't use it for the actual process of weaving. They have to weave by hand. But the designs are—from the original plan that they make—are computer-generated so that they work better. And it makes the process of producing a little bit easier. It's still very labor-intensive.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: But it makes the finished product a more detailed—it's more detailed and it's also finer. The quality is finer.

MIJA RIEDEL: And to the point you were just making earlier—it allows an artist to continue growing in ways that would not have been possible before that technology came along.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Because they have to create the computer program. It just doesn't come in the mail.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right. [Laughs.]

NANETTE LAITMAN: So therefore that is also part of the creative—it's just that they have a new tool to help them generate their finished product.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's move back, briefly again, to try and cover some of the biographical information. Your father's name was William Lasdon?

NANETTE LAITMAN: William. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And your mother was Mildred.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you have siblings?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I have—had a brother who passed away.

MIJA RIEDEL: What was his name?

NANETTE LAITMAN: His name was Robert.

MIJA RIEDEL: Robert, okay. And you grew up in—you were born in New York and grew up here till you were—did you say 14?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, I was in the fourth grade when we moved to Westchester.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. And was that New Rochelle or was that Katonah?

NANETTE LAITMAN: We moved to New Rochelle and in 1939 when I was in high school we moved further up.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's now the location of the Lasdon Park?

NANETTE LAITMAN: —Park.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. In Katonah?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: When did you first become interested in art?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I guess I probably took some adult-type—oh, actually through museums. I would go on docent tours.

MIJA RIEDEL: Was this in high school or college or after?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh no, no, as an adult.

MIJA RIEDEL: Much later, okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Much later. I would go on docent tours. And I used to—and still do, as a matter of fact—I enjoy many of the travel programs that these museums put out. I travel with museums constantly. I've been with Chicago. I've been with Milwaukee. I get the brochures and I sign up and I just go.

And these tours are wells of information. You have the most brilliant lecturers on these tours and you meet interesting people and you have the opportunity to see things that you wouldn't do on—you couldn't get to on your own—I don't care what kind of a guidebook or guide you have. Museums have access to homes and to people and to collections that are not always open to the public.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So I do a lot of that. I've been with the Smithsonian many times. The Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York City], the [Solomon R.] Guggenheim [Museum, New York City]— all the museums. And of course I travel with my museum all the time. Our next trip is the 1st of October and we're going to Spain.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic. Madrid? Barcelona? Both?

NANETTE LAITMAN: And Alhambra.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, yes.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I haven't been to those countries in 25 years, so I forget. And this, you know, I'm sort of phasing out rather than phasing in at this stage of my life. So I have to go back to the places that I haven't been for a long, long time because so much has changed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So much new museums have opened and the—I mean, I did see the [Museo del arte Thyssen-] Bornemisza collection and I did see the [Museo del] Prado [Madrid] when it was redone—but it's constantly growing and they're building all new places, so I want to see them.

MIJA RIEDEL: And were these trips—was the focus primarily France, Italy, Spain, Europe, England or—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Wherever. I've been to India three times already. I've been to the Orient many, many times.

MIJA RIEDEL: Where in particular was especially inspiring?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, wasn't an—I went with the Guggenheim and we went to Myanmar and we went to all those places out there. And then I went—sometimes these travel agents, like Academic Arrangements and all those kind of places, produce some wonderful trips. So I've been a lot of places. I've been to Dubai already and I've been all over.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's extraordinary. Have your travels—I don't see how they couldn't have—but have they specifically affected your collection or thinking about art?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I try to buy something wherever I go, but it isn't always possible because I don't collect paintings and most of these trips are not involved with the medium that I have which is mostly ceramics. And occasionally I'll find something. But otherwise it's really for the information.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. I think in certain of the other cultures as well, there is not the same bias or prejudice against functional art versus fine art—applied art/fine art—and I wonder if that feels very comfortable to you.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I happen to appreciate the fact that they don't have this craft mentality over in Europe or Asia, that these people are artists. And you have to understand that many of them live in 2-by-4 places and they are miles from any place you can go. I mean, they live in the hinterlands and you can't really—even if you take a daytrip just to look at one bowl or one pot—it's quite an—it's exhausting, it's quite an excursion. So these trips have to try to focus on the galleries in the larger cities where you can see a mélange of the work.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you been to Japan?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh yes. My museum did the most brilliant trip to Japan with David [McFadden]. David was fantastic. We want to do another one, but the fellow who ran the trips has just retired. And we cannot find anybody good enough to go with, to replace him. We're looking, for next spring.

MIJA RIEDEL: And was this Kyoto and Tokyo and then some of the mountains where the ceramics are still made?

NANETTE LAITMAN: We went overnight to one mountain to—you know, like a retreat in a mountain. One night. And that was very interesting. But it's hard traveling. It's not easy anymore. I'm not a youngster. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: China?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I do like coming back to the Four Seasons. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It's all about balance, right? [Laughs.]

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't mind dragging any place during the day as long as I can come back to a good clean bath and room.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. Hot water. China? Korea, as well?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh yes. I've been to China with my museum, as well as with—I don't remember who else I traveled with—but I've been there twice. And we always manage to pull together brilliant trips. Brilliant trips.

MIJA RIEDEL: When you were a teenager—I believe your—that's when your parents began to collect, correct?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. Much, much later.

MIJA RIEDEL: Much later. I thought you mentioned growing up with French and English porcelain?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, they had. Yep, that's what they collected. They did not collect paintings. They had porcelains.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And so you grew up with that. And were they utilitarian works as well as sculptural?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh no, no. This was all sculptural. You know, the Meissen and the Dobby and all the things, the objects, that were bought in those days at either Miss Manheim's gallery or at The Antique Porcelain Company or whatever. They had a wonderful collection—English in the country and French in the city.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you said your mother was primarily the collector—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, she wanted to do more, but my father did not have that mindset. Later on he—they bought some impressionist paintings. They had an apartment in New York and they wanted to do it in French and so they had porcelains and some paintings. But I've sold everything. I did not want to keep anything.

MIJA RIEDEL: You weren't interested in those.

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. I didn't live in the environment that created that. I wanted a contemporary environment. And I just felt it was their thing and I wanted to do my thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Were they primarily figurative pieces that your mother collected?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. Okay. All figurative ceramics. Interesting. And did they make any—did they interest you in the least when you were a teenager?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I appreciated them. I guess, by osmosis I absorbed. And just by having them in the house and by living with them.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there was a very high degree of skill, clearly—technical skill involved with those pieces as well.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh yes. I mean, these were brilliant pieces. She collected only the best.

MIJA RIEDEL: And did she collect them in Manhattan or did she travel to find them?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, they bought sometimes when they were in Paris or in London. They weren't adventurous travelers to go to Bulgaria or whatever you want to call it in those days. They went once—they did a routine. Every year they spent a week in London, a week in Paris and a week in Rome. And then they would—because those were the areas in which my father had offices.

MIJA RIEDEL: Your father was in the pharmaceutical business, is that correct?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And so he would visit his people every year. And then they would

have their weeks. Those were the days they traveled by ship. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. The steamer trunks. Did you go along each summer?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. I never went. They went only in the fall.

MIJA RIEDEL: I see, I see. And did you travel, then, when you were younger, or mostly—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I started when I was about 30. And I took a trip with five friends that was run by an organization in New Rochelle—if I can try to remember the name of it, I will—and we went around the world. And in those days we paid \$2200 for the whole trip around the world. Now, I guess it would be the plane fare.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That's extraordinary, \$2200.

NANETTE LAITMAN: That's what we—and we all shared rooms, there were six of us. And we were two together in a room; we paired up. And we went around the world.

MIJA RIEDEL: This was by plane, by ship, by some combination of the two?

NANETTE LAITMAN: By plane.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NANETTE LAITMAN: It was—how long were we gone—I don't know, maybe two-and-a-half weeks. It was two days, two days, two—you know, it was like—

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh my goodness.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, it was like—well, you know—

MIJA RIEDEL: You were moving.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We moved.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow. And when you say around the world—you were in Europe, you were in Asia, you were in Africa, you were all over.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We were all over.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. That must have—was that some sort of an epiphany?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, we didn't go to Africa. I guess it was Europe, probably. I remember we were in Athens. And I remember that we were—oh yeah, we were in Athens for the Six-Day War [1967] in '60—was it '67? No.

MIJA RIEDEL: Let's think. So in the '50s maybe?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. '60s I think.

MIJA RIEDEL: The '60s?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, if I was 30-some years old, and I was born in '24.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's '54? Thirty-four, '44, '54.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, well we were in Athens and we had to—they were shooting from the roof. We were in the Hilton Hotel and the men over here were so worried about us.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it was six women.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We were six women.

MIJA RIEDEL: That was rather unusual at the time, wasn't it?

NANETTE LAITMAN: It was really something. Maybe that wasn't the trip that that was the shooting—no, it was later. Later. This was much—we went earlier. But my friend, my good friend who has passed away—we traveled together all of the time. Her husband hated to travel. He wouldn't leave the United States

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So she and I would take one trip a year together. That was the deal that she made with him. So we were in Athens when the Six-Day War came and they were shooting from the roof of the hotel and we were not allowed to leave the hotel.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine not. So travel has been a significant part of your life from very early on.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, this year, let's see—I took two grandchildren for Christmas last year to India.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Where did you go?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I took the trip starting in Mumbai and ending up in Delhi, you know, the usual route. We were gone two weeks and it was just the three of us. I didn't join any tour groups. And—

MIJA RIEDEL: No tour groups? The three of you completely independently?

NANETTE LAITMAN: With a guide and a driver. I had Abercrombie & Kent arrange the trip for me. And Will and Lee are sister and brother and they don't get to see each other much because one lives in Washington, one's in Rhode Island. So I made that happen.

MIJA RIEDEL: How old are they?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Now they're 22 and 26. Let's see—then, let's see where am I going now. Well, I went to London for three days this past week. Then I am going to fly to Istanbul in August, get on the Seabourn, take a two-week trip to the North Sea which I've never done and come back to Athens for two days and come home. Then a month later I go to Spain.

MIJA RIEDEL: Your schedule is quite extraordinary. And you're just back from London this week.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well—yeah, I went just for the weekend. It was tiring.

MIJA RIEDEL: I bet, I bet. You were married briefly. You have a—you have one child? Two?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Two daughters. And they're 60 and 62.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what are their names?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Bonnie and Cathy. They both live in Florida five minutes from each other in the winter and they live in Maine in the summer.

MIJA RIEDEL: Now, you were in Maine briefly yourself as well. You went to college there, yes? Colby [College, Waterville]?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh yeah, for 10 minutes. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: It didn't appeal to you.

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. College didn't appeal to me. I knitted most of the time through my way. I didn't graduate. I made the most gorgeous argyle socks. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: So you've been working—

NANETTE LAITMAN: —with my hands.

MIJA RIEDEL: —in fiber for a very long time. So you came back to Manhattan after you finished—

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I got married.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, after you left school and you got married. And did you begin to collect right away or you started to raise children?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, I started to collect many, many, many years later. I didn't start to collect until 30 years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So you came back to Manhattan, you were married—

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I bought a teapot for \$150; that was the first thing I bought.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah. Do you remember whose?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. Let's see if I still have it. No, I gave a lot of the early stuff to my children. You know, the beginnings—and they're happy to have it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Of course.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So as I, shall we say, improved the collection, I gave the earlier things to my children. I mean, they're—I'm sure you couldn't buy it for \$150 today, but that—there was a gallery on Madison Avenue that taught me a lot called The Elements.

MIJA RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Do you remember them?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. But you have heard of them?

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Okay. They had ceramics. I think they were before Garth Clark and Garth taught me a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. I would imagine.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Garth—I bought a lot from Garth.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I bought a lot from Garth. And then I also bought from his compatriot out in California—

MIJA RIEDEL: Frank Lloyd.

NANETTE LAITMAN: —Frank Lloyd. And they would send me pictures and I would say, send the pot or send the bowl or send the this or send the that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you worked with specific dealers over time to build your collection?

NANETTE LAITMAN: They didn't—I went, saw what I wanted and bought it. Did they say, now, this is what you should have and this is what you should have? They knew me better than that. They knew that I would pick, probably, the best of the litter. I mean, I was not looking at a price. I was looking for the best of show, and I took the best out of the show whenever I could.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that's an interesting aspect of your collection is that you tend to focus in on one particular fantastic piece and you don't have to necessarily—or you're not interested necessarily in collecting an artist in-depth. You're interested in a particular piece.

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. No, an artist in-depth—I'll tell you why. I didn't want a house full of all the same things. And they don't change that much. Bennett is still making these pots and this must be 20 years old, you know what I'm saying?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, at least.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So do I want 18 more pots?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. So you were looking for what was new and what caught your eye.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I guess. I guess. It was an unconscious thing. I didn't think about it. But something new and different. Now, I have this lovely Isupov. Now, I know he's doing bigger and bigger and more and stuff, but one is enough. Also, in an apartment you have a space problem. What am I going to get rid of? And I don't want to.

MIJA RIEDEL: You have, over time, focused—it seems particularly on figurative work.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Only figurative. I hate abstract art. I don't understand it; I never will. I mean, Bridget Riley with those things and that guy with the string hanging on the wall—you know, whatever his name is. No, I haven't got anything like that. You remember the artist who just made strings on the wall?

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh yes. I can't remember his name right now. I know exactly who you mean.

NANETTE LAITMAN: But you know what I mean?

MIJA RIEDEL: I do know exactly who you mean.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I would have probably taken it off and thrown it away—[they laugh.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that happened.

NANETTE LAITMAN: —and figured that it was a dirty thing. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. And—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't get it. And as much as Marcia tried to teach me that, I couldn't figure it out. I couldn't absorb it.

MIJA RIEDEL: But she taught you to look in a new way and to challenge yourself to the degree that you were comfortable.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Now, I would give my eye teeth for those glass pieces in the show, in the Klaus Moje show, but not the bowls. I would only want the paintings on the wall.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Interesting. So you like—you're interested in figurative work, but you're also—you've always been drawn to objects, three-dimensional work more than flat work.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Only three-dimensional.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why is that, do you think?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I suppose because my parents had those porcelains. And they're tactile. You can hold them in your hand.

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MIJA RIEDEL: I'm going to back up just a little bit more and discuss biographical information. You, as a young woman, were married. But then you went into business, correct?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, no, no. I wasn't in my own business. I became a fashion coordinator for the Ted Bates advertising agency. And I worked there for many years, until my children were about, I don't know. It was the Beatles era, and it was the drug scene—like, they were like 13, 15 years old. And, you know, there was a lot of protests in the city, and even though they went to a very fine private school, they were influenced by what was going on in the city. And I stopped working then to stay home so that I was—be sure that they didn't do drugs, and smoking, and all the crap that the kids did in those days, and I watched them like a hawk, because the teenage years were so formidable.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And by then the nanny had gone—[they laugh]—they rebelled, they rebelled against the nanny! [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: But you, albeit slowly, built up a business—

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, no, no, no, no. I never did a business of my own.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I was never in business on my own. I never did that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Did you begin to work with your father at some point?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, I started off with an organization when I was very young, when I was in my 20s. It was called the Victory Guild of New York Women, and we supported the University Settlement House, down on Eldridge Street. And I have always been involved in charity. Then I went to the Albert Einstein College of Medicine [Bronx]. And when the Victory Guild disbanded, I put my efforts over there. Then I grew into other things.

MIJA RIEDEL: You were one of the founders of the Albert Einstein School, yes?

NANETTE LAITMAN: My father was. My father was one of the original founders, yes.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you served on the board?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, I wasn't on the board—I was on the women's committee.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And we did things to build up—for example, we took on a project, we would go on a fund-raising campaign. It took sometimes, it took three to five years to make that happen, you know, to the amount of money we needed. We did it with an annual luncheon most of the time. And the women's division was very active, and it still is. It still is very active. I'm not active with them anymore. I support their luncheon. And I—but, you know, you move on.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. Exactly.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I've been active at the New York Hospital a little bit more now. And with MAD, and, you know that's—you can't do any more. You can't spread yourself so thin. I don't want to be on 50 boards at this stage in my life. It's too much.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I have had a lot of meetings all my life, and I don't need so many meetings any more.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right. You started—

NANETTE LAITMAN: And it ends up with three people making all the decisions and having it happen anyway. [Laughs.] You know that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

You started collecting when you were in your 30s, then?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, about 30 years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. So 40s or 50s?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And you began with teapots?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, there was a reason. I had a very traditional home, until I—my kids got grown up—

MIJA RIEDEL: Here in New York?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. I had a big apartment, an old—not an old-fashioned one, but it was filled with antiques, English antiques, and all that kind of stuff. And I said, I've had it. I want contemporary. So I moved—

MIJA RIEDEL: What changed your mind?

NANETTE LAITMAN: So I moved, I sold the apartment and I moved. And once I started to do things like this, I had to create a new environment. This is not the original environment. I learned how to buy things beyond that. But I collected teapots because I could afford them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And they were objects, and they reminded me, I guess, of my mother's mice and this, and teapots, and figures, and figurines, and whatever.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is that an Annette Corcoran?

NANETTE LAITMAN: What?

MIJA RIEDEL: I have—the teapot with the two—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, yeah. I got two of them.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the birds. Yeah, I haven't seen one in a long time.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I have one on the bottom and one there. She died. I have two of her teapots. I don't know the names—oh, I can't—

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fine; you're fine.

NANETTE LAITMAN: —know the names of a lot of the artists. I have it in a book, but I forget.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's a marvelous teapot collection. Have you collected them consistently ever since?

NANETTE LAITMAN: There's nothing more to buy! [Laughs.] I mean, if an artist has made one teapot, so that one is green and one is blue and the other one's got a yellow spout and the other one's got an orange spout, but I've got a teapot, so what do I need another one for?

MIJA RIEDEL: So the teapots started because you had a classical, more traditional home, and that would enable you to do something more contemporary—

NANETTE LAITMAN: But no, I had the contemporary house by the time I got the teapots.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I had to have what I called "accessories."

MIJA RIEDEL: I see. And what were those?

NANETTE LAITMAN: They started off with the teapots.

MIJA RIEDEL: Teapots. Okay. And was this when you were working with Marcia Tucker? Or was this before Marcia Tucker?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. This was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NANETTE LAITMAN: This was later.

MIJA RIEDEL: So she helped inspire this way of thinking and branching out?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, not really. It all got started when I joined Collectors' Circle and the Old American Craft Museum, and I started traveling with them and seeing all of this stuff. And that's how I started to collect.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And what drew you to that museum, to the American Craft Museum, way back when?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Paul Smith's secretary was the daughter-in-law of our neighbors in Katonah.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And she invited me to an opening in the little brownstone across the street, before they even got the building on 53rd Street, and it was called the Shoe—the Great American Shoe. And I saw all of this stuff. And I got very excited about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: It was fresh, it was new, it was three-dimensional.

NANETTE LAITMAN: To me, right. So I started buying out of the shows, because I figured they were curated.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. Exactly.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And everything was for sale. They needed the money. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: The actual show itself?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, sure. I bought right out of the shows.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I figured, the show was curated, this was the best of what there was, and I would buy it.

MIJA RIEDEL: You also—it seems that many of the pieces have a narrative quality. Do you look for that in work as well, or is that just a by-product of it being figurative?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Just a by-product. It's a by-product.

It's been a lot of fun. But when you go to shows like SOFA [Sculpture Objects and Functional Art expositions], for

example, okay, you don't see this stuff any more.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NANETTE LAITMAN: It's not as good.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you think? Really?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't mind it—you don't mind—I shouldn't say that for the public.

MIJA RIEDEL: Please do! Be candid.

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. I find SOFA is not my cup of tea. As a matter of fact, we're not going to be doing the show next year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. We're phasing out—we've phased out of it this year.

MIJA RIEDEL: And why is that?

NANETTE LAITMAN: They have a different mindset. And Mark Lyman is not—I don't think what he's doing is—it's becoming too commercial.

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you feel that happened when SOFA was sold? Yeah?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Now it's strictly bottom-line. And most of the good galleries were not there this year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Here and the Armory. They felt that Mark was charging too much for the space, and they couldn't recoup, especially in this economy.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And most of them have wonderful galleries here in the city. Why can't someone just take a cab ride and go to 28th Street and see this stuff? They don't have to—

MIJA RIEDEL: Spend the money to do the show.

NANETTE LAITMAN: The booths were, minimum—I think Donna Schneider said her booth cost her \$50,000. Well, you got to sell a lot of stuff to recoup that, besides which you got the packing and the shipping and the, the crate—you know, the moving it out of the storage and into this and that. I mean, it's a lot of money.

MIJA RIEDEL: And so, what did you think of SOFA when it first started, back when it was Chicago—I can't even remember—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I haven't been to Chicago in five years. Too big, and not well vetted.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. There are many more dealers—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Junk.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. There are many more dealers in Chicago than New York. New York is much more limited because of the space.

NANETTE LAITMAN: This year it was half the size.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

NANETTE LAITMAN: They closed off half the place.

MIJA RIEDEL: Closed off half the Armory. Interesting. But you have seen what you think of as a decrease in quality in SOFA over the past few years?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I think that the good pieces are now in the major art galleries. The good artists. I mean, Andrew Lord—where do I start, to think about people? Leo Kaplan Modern specializes mostly in glass. He's got the best; He's got Dan Dailey. Now, the other fellow retired—he stopped working. The other major, major glass

artist—

MIJA RIEDEL: Keller? Oh, artist.

NANETTE LAITMAN: He made the, made those heads, the jars, the canopic jars. William Morris.

MIJA RIEDEL: He's not working?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, he's retired. He retired over a year or two ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm going to be talking with him in a month or so—I'll have to ask him about that.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, he retired.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah! I didn't realize that.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So there's no more of his work around. And now if you go to buy one of his major pieces, they are three or \$400,000.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Michelle Oka Doner is still a good artist. I have two of her things. But she's also now designing for Steuben, which doesn't enthrall me. I mean, they have got to make money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I'm not denigrating that. But she doesn't show in any of these places—she shows at Marlborough [Gallery]! And that's where I go to look at the work.

MIJA RIEDEL: I was going to ask, where do you go now?

NANETTE LAITMAN: And Garth Clark closed at the right time, because you cannot live on a ceramics gallery any more. You've got to be multifaceted.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely. Leslie Ferrin [Ferrin Gallery] still works, but she's more part time.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And she's never going to bail out a fortune, if you know what I mean, you know. She's going to make a living. And she has the best—some of the best artists.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, she does.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I bought one of those [Chris] Antemanns from her for the museum last year. Which—I think she's tremendously creative.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I love her work. When and if I can find a place to put it, I will commission her to do something for me of the right size. But if you look around here—you've been here before?

MIJA RIEDEL: I have. A few years ago.

NANETTE LAITMAN: There's no place to put anything! I haven't got a lot of space.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it's nice because you manage to have a lot but it doesn't feel so full that you can't see each piece.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I can't handle it. I have to have breathing room.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you go to Marlborough, when you're looking for work; you go to Leslie Ferrin—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I really don't look any more. If the postcards come through on the announcements and I like something, I call up. And they have wonderful images that come on the machines. Or they make a—they send me a slide because they know I'm very good, I send them back, because I know they cost money. And I buy from that way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Are you looking for anything in particular?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. If it's—I see something that I think is drop-dead, I'll buy it, but I haven't seen anything. I

mean, I commissioned Tim to do the—Dan, to do the chandelier for my dining room—

MIJA RIEDEL: Dan Dailey?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. And I commissioned all this furniture.

MIJA RIEDEL: And who—yeah, that was the next question. You started off collecting ceramics, but you moved into furniture. How did that happen and when did that happen?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Because my parents had magnificent English and French wood pieces, and I only like wood. I didn't want furniture made out of stainless steel and glass. Too cold. Wood is warm. I've just commissioned a—I did it about four, five months ago, and I should get the table by the end of August or September. John Makepeace, in London, is going to—is making me a coffee table for my living room. And I need—what I do is upgrade.

MIJA RIEDEL: Aha.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't add new things, now. I'm upgrading. But I can't find enough good stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really? Interesting.

Did you find there was a period of time that you thought you would consider really the pinnacle of ceramics or furniture, in the past few decades, when you found so much work that just captivated you?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Not now, any more. It—I think that the movement peaked in the '80s.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ceramics? Furniture? Both? Craft, for lack of a better word?

NANETTE LAITMAN: First of all, John Makepeace is probably nearer my age than yours. And he has closed his workshop, but he has put—not put into business, but he gives—he had five people working for him that were superb craftspeople. And he also was doing, besides directing, doing some work on his own. He couldn't do it any more. He got too old. So he set each one of these people up in their own places, and now he gives them the work to do, and he supervises them in their own ateliers.

So he's supervising my table, so I said—he designed it. So I said, John, is it going to be a signed piece? Because after all, these things are not cheap any more. He said, absolutely. I said, well, how does the artist who is actually making the work feel about it? He said, they were trained by me, they worked for me for 25 years, they knew that when I retired from my—and didn't run my own space any more, that this would—he didn't say "this was the deal," but that's what you understand it to be. This was the way it was going to happen.

MIJA RIEDEL: And in many ways, that's a traditional apprenticeship set-up.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Now, if they design, and make things on their own, they can put their name on it. But it's his design that I wanted.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. So none of the people who had followed after him spoke to you as much as he—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I've never met them.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. I just did an interview with John Cederquist, who has done some work—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Now, his work is a little too funky for me.

MIJA RIEDEL: More that California aesthetic, yeah. So you are just drawn specifically to the warmth of wood, the lines of the form—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, I love wood. I love wood.

MIJA RIEDEL: Who else besides John Makepeace have you been particularly interested in?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, just this fellow here. But it also has to be practical furniture, you know what I mean? I can't just have art pieces—people have to have a place to sit down! [Laughs.] And if this card table is used constantly—I do a lot of entertaining at home, and they have their hors d'oeuvres and cocktails in here, and you know, the men can't balance plates, so I put the men over there.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I think I had tea here a few years ago with you, on that very table.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And so that's how it works. I have eight for dinner every week or every other week.

MIJA RIEDEL: Really?

NANETTE LAITMAN: All year long. I have a wonderful cook. And I like to eat at home.

MIJA RIEDEL: I understand that. Do you collect Judy McKee? Is that more your style?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Judy McKee?

MIJA RIEDEL: Wood, some animals?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I have her chair. I have her monkey chair. I bought that out of a picture from the Pritam & Eames gallery out in the Hamptons. It's an edition of 12, and you can't get them any more. Our museum will get that, at the end. They get a lot.

MIJA RIEDEL: So besides funding and helping to found the new incarnation of the museum, you're also helping them specifically build their collection.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. I buy—try to buy one piece a year for them. And I'm a member of the acquisitions committee. I'm not—it's the collections committee, where we go through things every three months: We look at what's been offered, and we decide if it's top, top quality. If not, we don't take it. And then we pay our dues—every member of the committee, I think there are about 25 of us, whatever it is—we pay \$5,000 a year to join the committee. And that \$5,000 goes towards an acquisition.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Plus the fact that people gives us stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what are you planning to buy, now that the museum has opened? Have you picked—selected your first piece?

NANETTE LAITMAN: David does that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: David comes to me with his wish list, and if he sees something that he feels we have to have, he calls one of us. And sometimes, if it's very expensive, two or three of us will get together and buy it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: You know what I mean?

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So he hasn't called us lately. [Laughs.] Which is a good thing.

MIJA RIEDEL: When we spoke a few weeks ago, you mentioned that the quality of work is essential to you, and—

NANETTE LAITMAN: The workmanship, the quality of the work. I mean, look at this wonderful table—

MIJA RIEDEL: It's exquisite.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And you know all of that is ivory. It's real ivory. Do you know how I got that?

MIJA RIEDEL: No.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I wanted ivory inlay. And of course you can't get ivory—that's, everybody uses plastic, right? So he was in a—and I said, go look in the, I don't know, what do you call it? Sales in the country—they have these junk sales.

MIJA RIEDEL: Like rummage sales, or tag sales, estate sales?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, or go to a junkyard.

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure. Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So he went to a junkyard, and he found an old piano. And he called me on the phone and said, I found this old piano that is absolutely worthless, but the keys are ivory. I said, how much is the piano? He said, \$200. So I said, buy the piano—I'll mail you a check tonight—strip the keys, and throw it away.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. So recycled ivory? And that's part of this table.

NANETTE LAITMAN: That's all those white things—

MIJA RIEDEL: All those white diamonds.

NANETTE LAITMAN: On the bottom, and some around here.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you said that that also, this interest in quality, that it, that is so essential, that also has led you to be more interested in collecting mid-career artists rather than emerging artists.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I can't wait any more.

MIJA RIEDEL: What do you mean by that?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I'm too old. I got to have a finished product. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: And so you find that the mid-career artists are more sophisticated, that there's more—

NANETTE LAITMAN: They've got more experience, and they've learned more. I mean, look at Cosmo [ph]—he's got to be 70, don't you think? Something in that range? I mean, I could sit and look at those panels all day. They are so fabulous. But where the hell am I going to put it? I don't have any walls.

MIJA RIEDEL: Upgrade. [Laughs.]

NANETTE LAITMAN: I'm thinking about it.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I can see.

NANETTE LAITMAN: There's one place that I could take something down and put up those panels. The show just opened, and I have to get somebody to measure, and I—you know, after all, in that size room, it's—I have a little room, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right. How has your collection evolved over time? How have you seen it change in the past 30 years? There's less of an emphasis, clearly, on teapots. Are you—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I have one—like a mistake. It's not a mistake, it's an artist that just never went anywhere, never grew. And it's sitting over the couch in my sitting room. And that's where I would love to put one of the panels, but I think they are going to be too big.

MIJA RIEDEL: Aha. So you really—it's just now down to a question of space.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I never collected glass.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right! I was going to say.

NANETTE LAITMAN: But this is a painting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Aha. Aha.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't look at those things on the wall as glass. They are strictly paintings. And they are brilliant.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you normally don't collect paintings, either, correct?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I have two pieces that I just got, probably—

MIJA RIEDEL: Aha. And what are they?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I bought a [Philip] Pearlstein—I don't know if you saw it.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, that's new since I was here.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I'll show you. And then I bought a young artist who lives in Brooklyn. His name is David Nissan—N-I-S-S-A-N—and he does portraits. And it's haunting. And I got rid of something that was on the wall last year—gave it away to a museum.

MIJA RIEDEL: To make room for—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Jonathan Santlofer, who never went anywhere. He ended up writing mystery stories.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's funny.

NANETTE LAITMAN: But where am I going to put a painting? I don't have any walls.

MIJA RIEDEL: There is not a lot of wall space left. That's true.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I focused on objects. So I didn't need walls.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. And you need to keep the windows.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, God, yeah. The window-cleaner comes here—he hates me every time he comes, because he has to—we have to move all this stuff.

MIJA RIEDEL: But the windows are always wonderful. The views are pristine.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I opened up—I took the walls down. That was the point.

MIJA RIEDEL: To open up the space.

John Kearney told Liza Kirwin that when he was teaching jewelry at the Contemporary Art Workshop in the 1950s, you took one of his classes.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: What did you study?

NANETTE LAITMAN: In Chicago. Sculpture. I made a few of these stupid little pieces around here, but I gave them all away because they're not very professional.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what material were you working in?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I worked in clay and had things cast in bronze.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NANETTE LAITMAN: That little thing there is one I did.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right here?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. I use it for bookends. And here's another one—I use it for a bookend.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's lovely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Figured that was my Picasso—whatever you want to call—period or whatever. And that was just an abstract something or other.

MIJA RIEDEL: I was going to say, that's abstract. But I thought you hated abstract.

NANETTE LAITMAN: All right, it was something like flying, you know, whatever. So I use them for bookends. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: They're lovely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I made bigger pieces, but they got all dispensed and I didn't keep them because they were terrible. My parents never encouraged me because they didn't think I was a Picasso or a [Pierre-Auguste] Renoir, you know.

MIJA RIEDEL: But you had—your parents didn't encourage you—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I always wanted to work with my hands, so I ended up sewing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Because that was acceptable then.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I bought this as my latest acquisition and it's wood.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, that's lovely. Who is that?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I have no idea. I have to look it up on the bill. But I bought it in Palm Beach where I was this in winter in a craft show. But the work of every other artist was awful. It was crafty. This was the most professional man in the show. And I think the way he's done this—

MIJA RIEDEL: Exquisite.

NANETTE LAITMAN: —is beautiful. I mean, I normally don't have wood, but this was gorgeous. I had to have—I was going to give it to my granddaughter, but when it arrived, I liked it so much, I didn't give it away. So I figured if he's there next year, I'll buy another one and she can have that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Or she can have that later when you decide to upgrade it again, much further in the future.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, later. Oh, I like this, I like it very much.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's very beautiful and it's very different than any of the other teapots. It's a lovely Richard Notkin, one of the heart pieces and Akio Takamori—he does not do many of the teapots.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah—that's a teapot. But you see, I haven't got any space to put anything. I bought a chair last year—that was the most—that was what I did. I bought a Nikki Sandil [ph] chair. Here.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, see if we can stretch this.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, we can't go without the mic.

MIJA RIEDEL: We can't go too far. We can't go without the microphone—be very frustrating.

NANETTE LAITMAN: That was in Sotheby's show last year in London and I had somebody bid on it for me. But I love that.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's lovely. It's more—it's very colorful, but it's more abstract than many of the other things I've seen in your collection.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, I love her work. I love her work. See, she's figurative most of the time. But this is my two great grandchildren, who are two-and-a-half and five-and-a-half. They love to sit on this chair. They sit back-to-back.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's fantastic. And who did the coffee service? Is that John Marshall?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't know. I bought that from—what's his name that moved downtown—Barry Friedman.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, Barry Friedman. Okay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't know. It's got a name on it, but I can't read it.

MIJA RIEDEL: We can look later.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And it's a multiple. It says, 12 out of 99, but I'm not sure they sold 99. But anyhow, what's the difference. It appealed to me because of the shape and all that and it is silver.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's lovely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We don't use it. These are Jim Dine's candlesticks.

MIJA RIEDEL: Spectacular. Jim Dine.

NANETTE LAITMAN: See, this is the only place I could put something. But the panels that he's made are so big that I can't do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, you'll have to measure. How do you think the market for this type of work has changed over the past thirty years.

NANETTE LAITMAN: There is no secondary market, except for what Donna does and a few things that Jim Zemaitis does at Sotheby's. Do you know him?

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, yes. No, I don't know him, but—

NANETTE LAITMAN: You know of him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NANETTE LAITMAN: You know that—well, they're having next Monday night—I believe it is, or maybe it's the Monday after, I have it down in my calendar—they're having a viewing for like a charity. So I'm going to go there to see what they have and if there's anything that I want to buy.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it will be all three-dimensional objects.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Now, I don't think they're auctioning that night. I think they're just having a viewing that night. He's trying, but you know people are not—this stuff is not so valuable, so therefore they don't have a resale market. They don't want to put—the auction houses don't want to put any money into this. They're not going to print a catalogue for something that's—they're going to get \$4,000 for.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So it's very tough.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you—I want to go back briefly to these ceramic pieces you did that were then cast in bronze. Was that your sole experience sculpting in clay? Did you take other classes?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, I had—oh, I went for years. Not with—

MIJA RIEDEL: John Kearney.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I only lived in Chicago for a couple years. But I went to a place here called Art Life Craft Studio on 79th Street and Lexington Avenue and we all went there—a lot of us went there. Some of the people were more professional than others. But I started off working with Lizette Sarnoff at the Sculpture Center before Art Life Craft Studio.

And then the Sculpture Center went out of business; there was a woman who ran it called Dorothea Denslow and she had more cats than you could shake a stick at. And the place would drive—we would go crazy from the cats. But she was wonderful. And Lizette Sarnoff was a good sculptor. That was David's wife, the founder of RCA. And she and my mother were very, very close friends. So you know, she said come to the—and I started there and I used to work there two, three times a week.

MIJA RIEDEL: Always in clay.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Always worked in clay. That's what Dorothea was special in. She did clay. You could do—I did some stone carving. And I had the tools and the goggles and the drills and the this and I did that too. And I chopped marble and it was very difficult.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. And this was when you were in your 30s, 40s?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I started—yeah, that was, you know, something to do. It was an activity that wasn't Lady Sue lunch.

MIJA RIEDEL: No, absolutely not.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I would—I didn't want to play cards. I did early, early on, but I stopped playing cards after a while. That was not my thing to sit with the women and play cards. After I got through working at the agency, I needed something to fill my time and it wasn't going to be card games. So I went into this art situation because I was always sewing, even 50 years ago. I started making needlework 50 years ago.

MIJA RIEDEL: So you have worked always with your hands.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I've got 50 years of work. I could have a, a retrospective if I gathered all the pieces that I've made—15-by-20 for the rugs, 10-foot wall hangings.

MIJA RIEDEL: Did you ever think about it pursuing it professionally?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. I give it all away.

MIJA RIEDEL: You said your parents weren't encouraging.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, you mean in the artwork? Oh no, it was never good enough. I was never good enough. I was better technically than creatively.

MIJA RIEDEL: I understand.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I couldn't draw.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, not that that's essential these days, but—

NANETTE LAITMAN: It helps.

MIJA RIEDEL: It definitely helps.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I took some life drawing classes and after a while, I said this is not for me. I went to the art students league for one semester or whatever it was and it was simply awful. I was so bad. I couldn't see what I was supposed to see. I couldn't see it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting. But yet when Marcia Tucker was talking about artwork, she helped you see, learn to see in a way that you hadn't seen before.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, she learned—taught me how to appreciate the contemporary art world, but there was much that she had in the museum that I couldn't fathom at all.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. And do you ever miss not doing that or continuing within needlework has been completely satisfying?

NANETTE LAITMAN: That's enough for me right now. It's enough for me right now. And I do go to class. I joined the—I don't know what you call it—the name of the group is whatever it is. I give \$5,000 a year to New York University graduate school on the Duke Mansion and I can audit all the classes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Ah, how fantastic. And do you audit some?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I go. Some years, now, but this particular fall and spring, they didn't have anything that was interesting to me. It was too Byzantine and too ancient. But when they have more 19th and 20th century, I go.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that's essential to you, that it be of this era.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, I don't, you know—I mean, if I want to look at old master paintings, I just go to the Met and walk around for an hour. But I can't listen to those lectures. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I actually do understand that.

NANETTE LAITMAN: They're pretty dry. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: They are pretty dry.

NANETTE LAITMAN: But all these people, all the kids in the class are all going for their master's of fine arts. So I'm really in with a very intelligent group of people.

MIJA RIEDEL: I'm sure.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And there aren't many older people that come—maybe a half a dozen.

MIJA RIEDEL: What a wonderful opportunity to have, an option.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So I do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: I want to move us to the Museum of Arts and Design. How did you first become—you mentioned that you become involved with that through the collectors' circle. How did you get involved with the board?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I guess I believed in it. They invited me to join the board. Of course, there was a financial obligation involved and I accepted. Not knowing I was going to be in for that kind of situation. [Laughs.] In the beginning, it was a very, you know, doable amount of money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. And that was the mid-'90s or so, I think?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Even before. Earlier '90s, I think. They were on 53rd Street, just moving kind of in there or—not quite, but—don't forget my first show that I went to was across the street in that brownstone.

MIJA RIEDEL: The shoe show?

NANETTE LAITMAN: The shoe show was in the brownstone.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Interesting, interesting. And why did you choose to focus on the Museum of Arts and Design, rather than any other museum? Do you know what in particular—was it the mission, was it the need, was it the work itself, was it somebody's particular vision?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, a lot had to do with the people. I mean, I was—

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. Holly [Hotchner] and David [McFadden]?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Early on I was doing things at the Whitney. Early on I was doing things with the Guggenheim. Through the travel programs. But then it got to be beyond where I could afford to stay there. Because if you wanted to be on the board of these organizations, you would have to give hundreds of thousands of dollars a year and I was not in a position to do that. Nor did I collect that art.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. That wasn't what spoke to you.

NANETTE LAITMAN: It didn't speak to me.

MIJA RIEDEL: What are your aspirations for the New Museum, for the museum in this new location on Columbus Circle? It's a spectacular building.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I hope that we will continue to find cutting-edge work in the art and design field. People who are doing things in the medium of—but breaking boundaries—ceramics and this, that and the other thing—but breaking boundaries.

MIJA RIEDEL: That objects factory show that's there right now—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Isn't it wonderful?

MIJA RIEDEL: It's fantastic. It's one of the most interesting shows—certainly the most interesting ceramic shows I've seen in a long time.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Wait till you come back in the fall and see the paper show which is opening in October. And it's fully funded by Kate's Paperie. I think they're going to have some fantastic things in that show. It's going to be our biggie for the year.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine. Remind me to tell you about this a little bit later.

NANETTE LAITMAN: That's paper.

MIJA RIEDEL: It is paper. So are there any of the new exhibitions in particular that you have felt have been especially successful. I know you mentioned "Second Lives"—

NANETTE LAITMAN: That was brilliant, brilliant.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what about that show was so exciting to you?

NANETTE LAITMAN: The fact that they had taken recycled material and made artwork out of it which is fantastic. I'm so sorry—did you get a catalog?

MIJA RIEDEL: I didn't. But I have to get by the museum, so—

NANETTE LAITMAN: All right. They'll give you a catalogue. It's incredible. And the jewelry is marvelous.

MIJA RIEDEL: The jewelry—the permanent installation, you mean?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. It will change from time to time. We have more jewelry that we haven't put out yet, but so far it's there and I guess we'll change it in a few months. We're having a—

MIJA RIEDEL: The jewelers are fantastic.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, we're having a jewelry show in July where it's going to be changed.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, you know, here's a lovely synchronicity that I think you'll enjoy, was that while I was working on the Laitman project for the Smithsonian out in California, we found an entire archive of papers of Margaret De Patta that really has—is untouched. And Ursula Ilse-Neuman right now is working on an exhibition of De Patta jewelry to be at the Museum of Art and Design which is—

NANETTE LAITMAN: When? A couple of—

MIJA RIEDEL: I believe in 2009-2010—which has come about in large part due to this resource that was found three—

NANETTE LAITMAN: She died?

MIJA RIEDEL: She did. She died in the early '60s.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Where is her work? I've never seen it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Some of it is in the Museum of Art and Design. There's a large collection of it at the Oakland museum—probably the largest and also some in Toronto.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Did we get the papers? You get the papers, when I say, "we," I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. Well, some of the papers. But a lot of the papers are still in the hands of the estate. And so Ursula's been out to the West Coast to look at them and is working on an exhibition right now. And that's directly due to papers that were found through your Smithsonian project.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, is the estate willing to release some of these papers now?

MIJA RIEDEL: They'll certainly release some of them for the exhibition. I think they haven't decided exactly where they're all going to go. They did give us—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Did she have children and siblings or whatever that are controlling it?

MIJA RIEDEL: She had—after she died, her husband remarried and his second wife and daughter are caretaking them and they're doing a very nice job, I think, of maintaining them. It's very important to them that they get—she get recognition, but—there was an initial donation made to the Smithsonian of the papers, some fabulous letters from a trip to Japan. But—

NANETTE LAITMAN: What was her work done in, which metal?

MIJA RIEDEL: Primarily silver. Very modern, very abstract. She was really one of the first modern jewelers and had a huge impact on jewelry in the States.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Hmm. It's very hard to find modern jewelry today—good modern jewelry.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. But this is specifically due to your funding of the Smithsonian project—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, I'm so happy.

MIJA RIEDEL: —that it's coming full circle to the Museum of Arts and Design.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, we have a meeting—I believe it's next week—I think it's Wednesday or next week. They're coming in from Washington—Smith?

MIJA RIEDEL: Liza Kirwin?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Liza is coming in with John Smith?

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, it could be, right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, you know, the director of the thingy. And we're going to talk about next year's artists. David's going to be there and we're going to select the group of next year's artists.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, fantastic. Well, one person I would love to see interviewed is Margaret Ford who did that marvelous sculpture, you know, out there? I don't think we've done her yet.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. Is she important?

MIJA RIEDEL: I think so. I think her work's wonderful. And I think it's significant. She is more West Coast-based.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, you know, a collectors' circle trip to Seattle—we bought the whole show out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Of Margaret's work.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We bought the whole show. Every one of the people in that group bought a piece. And we sold—they sold out the whole show to us.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's unlike anything else. It's very unique, I think. And I think that—very powerful, wonderful narrative quality. Beverly Mayeri—I know you like her work as well.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I have one of hers.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. We did an interview with her, a year or two ago, I think. But all of this is because of that Smithsonian grant. It's just extraordinary.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I'm so happy that it worked out. I'm very happy that it worked out.

MIJA RIEDEL: The artists are thrilled which is actually perfect segue to—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, it was for them that I did it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. That's been clear.

NANETTE LAITMAN: They didn't have enough recognition.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's interesting. Liza Kirwin—

NANETTE LAITMAN: She's a brilliant gal, isn't she?

MIJA RIEDEL: —she is a brilliant gal; she's a brilliant gal and she works tirelessly—wanted me to read a few things to you. She's—because when you decided in 2000 to fund this project, you have this—

NANETTE LAITMAN: God, is it that many years already? Wow.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah. I think it was 2001 it was initiated or with the—the initial conversations happened I believe. But you made this major gift to the Smithsonian to document the field of American craft and decorative arts, as it was called. And today, because of that, the archives has collected the personal papers of more than 50 artists and completed 154 oral history interviews. That's just extraordinary.

So Liza said, for the record, she requested that I read some of these comments to you from the artists who've participated in your project.

Rosanne Somerson, the furniture artist, said, "It is a great honor to be part of this project."

Jan Yager summed up her experience interviewing Tom Joyce: "Tom is calm, contemplative and soft-spoken. His recounting of his long and evolving artistic career and his endless quest to self-educate is a stunning example of an insatiable and multi-faceted mind seeking perfection in all he does with wide-ranging thought and focused energy. It was my pleasure to spend time with him and an honor to relay this to the archives."

And then Lisa Gralnick, that fabulous metalsmith teaching at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, says—described her interview like this: "I did surprise myself. There were moments when things had a kind of clarity that I haven't had before." And I don't know if you know her at all, but she's wonderfully brilliant, an incredible mind and extraordinary work.

And curators and scholars also, besides the artists, have found these materials and the online interviews to be absolutely invaluable for their research. I know I talked to Cindy Sherman, I think, who's putting together the Drutt [Helen Williams Drutt English] collection and she said she used the papers and the interviews extensively as she was putting together that catalogue for the Houston show.

In establishing this wonderfully ambitious program, what was your vision for the field?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I'm not sure that I can say that it was a vision? I felt it was more of a need. It was a need to document what these people had done. After all, from the beginning [Peter] Voulkos and all those people in California started the clay movement and what has evolved from them is amazing—the growth.

But I can't tell you that that is continuing. That's where I feel there is an—it's an unfortunate thing, but I don't think there's growth in the field. I don't think it's an area that artists are going to decide to come into.

MIJA RIEDEL: You know, it's interesting. I—living on the West Coast, I—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't know what the schools are producing today. I haven't got any idea.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, it's interesting because I was reading about Marek Cecula and something that Garth Clark had written which I thought was wonderfully insightful as he usually is. He said that when he talks to young artists today, more than any other influence or—not necessarily mentor, but inspiration—they talk about Marek

Cecula. And I—after seeing his exhibition at MAD—I do think that he—while Voulkos hugely elevated the potential of ceramics to be used as a medium in sculpture, per se, independent of pottery—Cecula seems to be expanding the range of ceramics to an extraordinary way, going back to 17th, 18th century.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Who is he?

MIJA RIEDEL: Marek Cecula. He was the head of the Parsons [The New School of Design] design department for 15 years.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah, but what do we have of his?

MIJA RIEDEL: He did the industrial, the incredible ornate Baroque ceramic coffee and tea services, but they'd been fired and salt-fired and were beginning to melt.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh. On the table.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Okay. Okay, okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly, exactly. And what he's presenting in terms of ceramics—both in terms of its technical innovations and what people can do with it now, what the artists can do with it now in terms of design—lamp forms, things like that—and then also the interventions that are happening between artists and designers in traditional porcelain factories.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, that—I think it's fabulous.

MIJA RIEDEL: I would imagine it's kind of wonderful for you—coming full-circle with that interest in porcelain going way back when—to see what they're doing in Nymphenburg or some of those—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Exactly. And they have wonderful—they have much more sophisticated equipment today than when Voulkos was just firing in a very simple kiln.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely. All the anagamas and the salt firing, the gas firing. And this interaction between designers and artists and industry—I think—

NANETTE LAITMAN: That's why we feel our name is so great.

MIJA RIEDEL: I think there's a huge opportunity for growth there in ceramics. And it seems that some of the young artists—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Did you see the radiators?

MIJA RIEDEL: Not yet. I have to go back and see that. I want to go see the Gord Peteran show too, so I'll go see that then.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. I saw that yesterday. I took some friends from Florida to the museum. It's quite interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: Is it?

NANETTE LAITMAN: If it—but if it wasn't for the fact that I got tagged into a docent tour, I would not have known what I was looking at. I wouldn't have understood it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Yeah, you do have to spend some time in really looking and reading, but with a docent tour all the better.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We have marvelous docents. We have a fantastic docent program.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah, well, it takes that. It really takes help—education is a huge part of it.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Well, a museum has to be—to me, it's an educational—it has to be an educational institution as well. And we do have loads and loads of children. And of course, the sixth floor with the open studios where people are there all day long is—

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. That was such a fabulous idea.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Good, good working out, working—worked out well with

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes. And I've seen some of the programs available for teachers online to engage the students—wonderful questions and the ability to go up and see the artists actually working. It's fascinating. And the fact that the exterior of the building is actually ceramic, or some sort of ceramic tile, is wonderful.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, we wanted to represent what we were. That took a lot of doing.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Absolutely. Yeah, that sounds like that was an enormous project. How do you think this Smithsonian project will change scholarship and collecting in the art market? And the artists' sense of themselves in the world?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I don't know. I really haven't—I don't know if I can answer that question. I don't know how it's going to change people. To make them aware of looking at the objects and doing some of the things online, I suppose, is the modern way. But I really don't know how it will change; I just really wanted to know that we had some documentation for all the work that had been done in the field. And this field, having been given short shrift. I felt that it would elevate it.

I would love to give you an off-the-cuff comment—not for publication—about something that I saw.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, why don't I just pause this briefly?

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One of the things that I thought was especially successful about this program—the Smithsonian program—was the combination of oral histories and the collection of papers. And I'm wondering what inspired that perspective because the oral histories alone are magnificent, the papers alone are extraordinary, but the combination of having the written and visual material to back—

NANETTE LAITMAN: How are you combining these things? Are you taking these papers and putting them on tape or are you leaving them as original papers?

MIJA RIEDEL: Some of them are digitized and so they're available online. You can go online and click on—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Where do you actually store all this material?

MIJA RIEDEL: The material is stored in Washington, all in archival boxes. It's all catalogued and stored archivally. But certain of the pieces, I believe the archives was given a grant a few years ago to begin digitizing the collection. And so for example, if I want to understand more about Sergei Isupov's work, I can go to the Laitman site. I can see if there's an oral history with him and then I can also see if there are pages from his sketchbook or photographs or notes from a journal or teaching notes that are online that then can compliment what I read in the oral history.

NANETTE LAITMAN: It's too bad that the archives can't take over the Smithsonian.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, I'm—you know what I'm trying to say? And we make it.

MIJA RIEDEL: In terms of what?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Public viewing, paper—I mean—

MIJA RIEDEL: Do you mean the Smithsonian in its entirety or the—

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, no, no. I'm talking about the archives.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay. The Archives of American Art.

NANETTE LAITMAN: This project—it's too bad that we can't combine—we have a fantastic space if we give you some money to paint and clean it up and fix it up.

MIJA RIEDEL: You mean the [Smithsonian American Art Museum] Renwick Gallery?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. It's too bad that you cannot have a gallery like that in conjunction with what you're doing and, every year, put in a show of the year's doings.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a great idea. That's a marvelous idea.

NANETTE LAITMAN: This, in '09, this is what we accomplished. In '10, the end of—you'll put in—and each year,

the show can run a year. Why? Because you have visitors there. It's not for the locals.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there's so much material.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So each year, you can say this is what we've done this year, and change it every year.

MIJA RIEDEL: That's a marvelous idea and there's lots of material—

NANETTE LAITMAN: All right, tell somebody. [Laughs.]

MIJA RIEDEL: I will. I will absolutely pass that on.

NANETTE LAITMAN: They have a built-in—they've got the building. I think if they could—if you could find \$250,000, let's say, you could fix it up.

MIJA RIEDEL: By that, you mean paint it, add more lighting, change the display space?

NANETTE LAITMAN: And the carpets and all that sort of stuff. Now, as far as display space is concerned and each show has to be put up, you can get somebody to do that for very little money every year. I mean, what is it, you know, Wendy Joseph did brilliant installation here—brilliant. And she didn't charge us a lot of money.

MIJA RIEDEL: Good to know, good to know. Well, I will definitely pass that on. And certainly the materials warrant—

NANETTE LAITMAN: And she knows our stuff so well because she's Peter's widow, you know, Peter Joseph's widow. She's remarried, but she knows all about how to display all this stuff and she would come to Washington and make you displays and she's—just between us—turn it off—

[Audio break.]

MIJA RIEDEL: You were saying if somebody would just grab this place—meaning the Renwick—and use it differently.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Use it differently. Use it differently.

MIJA RIEDEL: What would you envision?

NANETTE LAITMAN: What do we do? Twenty artists a year?

MIJA RIEDEL: Perhaps. Oh, in terms of interviews and collections? Oh, I would think, yeah, at least that.

NANETTE LAITMAN: All right, so those 20—or let's just say 20. You put up some of their work, which you can either gather from collectors or from the galleries or whatever because you don't own it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right, right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: It's a show. And you put some—an audio-video where they're talking and they can explain what's going on and you have a few papers in a flat case, some drawings maybe. That would be a great show.

MIJA RIEDEL: It would be fantastic. It would be fantastic. And the sketchbooks and the photographs—

NANETTE LAITMAN: And the place—Bonnie and I—my daughter and I were the only ones in there and the shopkeeper—they were like begging us to buy something because they didn't have anybody in there to buy anything. They were standing there like idiots. It costs the government money to run the place, so let them give it to you for something worthwhile.

MIJA RIEDEL: And the private funding could perhaps make a huge difference in—[inaudible, cross talk].

NANETTE LAITMAN: They had Friends of the Renwick. They're not active anymore because there's no leadership. You guys should take over the leadership.

MIJA RIEDEL: Okay, I will pass it on. [Laughs.] I will definitely pass it on.

NANETTE LAITMAN: You know, I don't live there and I don't have any connections, but if I had the opportunity to present a plan to the board of directors or whoever it was, I would be glad to come to Washington and be a spokesperson with you guys to do that.

MIJA RIEDEL: That would be marvelous. That would be marvelous. Because what you've managed to accomplish

with the Archives of American Art through this project is extraordinary. Thank you. I will pass that on.

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, but I think it takes a little planning, but that's what this director should do, if he's creative.

MIJA RIEDEL: The new director at the Renwick?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No.

MIJA RIEDEL: The new director at the archives?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. It's John Smith, isn't that his name?

MIJA RIEDEL: I think that's right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Okay. Let him make—let him figure out something. I'll work with him if he wants me to, but let's try to take it over.

MIJA RIEDEL: [Laughs.] I think that they're completely separate bureaus of the Smithsonian. I don't know that they really necessarily have anything to do with each other, but I will pass—

NANETTE LAITMAN: It's all under the same umbrella.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes, that's true. That's true.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And you put the building to better use than have it stagnate.

MIJA RIEDEL: And there is dynamic new material that's come in as a result of this grant.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And they're not taking advantage of it. You know why? Because they haven't got the mindset. They're not creative over there. They are just not creative.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Interesting. Well, what's happening with this material, I think is extraordinary in that it has—it's accessible by such a wide audience, now, through the Internet. And by having the oral histories available online, anybody anywhere can read them so long as they have access to a computer and the Internet. And then to be able to see some of the visuals that come along with the papers, it gives a much broader dimension and insight into the artist's work.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Anything with visibility.

MIJA RIEDEL: You also, through the [William and Mildred] Lasdon Foundation, you supported the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Metropolitan Opera—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, not in any dramatic way. But I try to take up a level of memberships wherever I can afford it.

MIJA RIEDEL: And you've been—you've supported the arts for decades in Manhattan. The opera, the New York Public Library—

NANETTE LAITMAN: My father gave the Met a very nice donation through Mr. Rockefeller when they first built it.

MIJA RIEDEL: So in many ways, you're carrying on that family tradition.

NANETTE LAITMAN: It's exactly what it is.

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. Interesting. I understand that you commissioned Albert Paley to do a window screen.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. There is a building—

MIJA RIEDEL: The Lasdon Biomedical Research Building [Cornell University Medical College]?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yes, at the New York hospital. And I commissioned him to do the gates for the building. I wanted a piece of artwork, and he made this beautiful window-gate. And it's there.

MIJA RIEDEL: Have you done other—have you commissioned other major works like that?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No. Because I haven't built any buildings. [Laughs.] My father built that building, but he didn't want it done until after he died.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NANETTE LAITMAN: He didn't want anything while he was alive.

MIJA RIEDEL: Why was that? Do you know?

NANETTE LAITMAN: That was his way.

MIJA RIEDEL: Just very behind the scenes.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Low-key man.

MIJA RIEDEL: Low-key, absolutely. Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I mean, I feel that way about myself, too. I'm quite low-key.

MIJA RIEDEL: Yes.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I mean, Barbara Tober is the spokesperson for the museum, not me. But I don't want to make all those public appearances. It's not my need or my want or my desire. I do what I do because I feel and believe in it, and I don't need to have public—

MIJA RIEDEL: Attention.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Attention. I don't need it.

MIJA RIEDEL: We can also operate it much more quickly, when you can just operate behind the scenes. And I imagine that's very satisfying, to see how much can be accomplished.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, we all pulled ourselves—pulled our shoulders to the wheel to make it happen. Jerry Chazen was certainly a major force. He ran the whole campaign. And he had held—was head of the building committee as well. And nothing would have happened without Jerry. We all know that. He really did a magnificent, tremendously important job. And the rest of us gave him money and the moral support.

MIJA RIEDEL: And a new name for the museum. [Laughs.] New contacts.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Nobody was really for that, but I fought very hard for it.

MIJA RIEDEL: So it was your idea?

NANETTE LAITMAN: And Holly has been an amazing director. Amazing. She brought us out of the doldrums.

MIJA RIEDEL: You two have really worked together very closely for 10 years.

NANETTE LAITMAN: A lot. Well, she's been there more—I think it's 12 now. Created a whole new image. And David has been amazing. David McFadden.

MIJA RIEDEL: What is it in particular about his leadership and his eye that you admire?

NANETTE LAITMAN: He's a visionary, he's forward-thinking. He doesn't think about just pots and bowls, like the old curators used to do. You know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We're not steeped in history. We're making history.

MIJA RIEDEL: And opening up a future for where things can go to next.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Exactly.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Interesting.

NANETTE LAITMAN: That's where my mindset is now—what's new?

MIJA RIEDEL: What would you cite as the most powerful influences in your life?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Now?

MIJA RIEDEL: People, or art movements, or museums? Trips? Artists?

NANETTE LAITMAN: What motivates me?

MIJA RIEDEL: Sure.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I don't know. Curiosity, I guess. I'm curious about a lot of things. I don't always have the energy to go and do everything. I'm slowing down a bit. [Laughs.] But I do want to get to the International Center of Photography to see the [Richard] Avedon show, which I hear is great. So next Tuesday, when I take my class at NYU, which is on 42nd Street—this is a class in global affairs, that I take—it's around the corner. So I will figure out how to get there.

MIJA RIEDEL: You're taking a class on global affairs?

NANETTE LAITMAN: I do that every Tuesday morning from 10 to 12. Ten to 11.

MIJA RIEDEL: How long have you been doing that?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Few years.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting

NANETTE LAITMAN: Four or 5 years now.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting.

NANETTE LAITMAN: There's one professor who's brilliant. His name is Ralph Bultjens, and he's brilliant. He's been teaching there for years, and I find him very, very stimulating. And his mindset is—it's right on. Right on.

MIJA RIEDEL: How so?

NANETTE LAITMAN: First of all, he spends a lot of time traveling when he's not teaching. And he goes to the places that he talks about. So he's not bringing up material on the Internet that you can find out if you're good on the machine.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Or what he's read in *Forbes* or the *Wall Street Journal*.

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. He's actually been there, conducting research in person.

NANETTE LAITMAN: He goes—two, three months a year he travels. Usually to the Middle East—Middle East and Israel and Jordan. He goes all over those countries. And that's where his main focus is—on the—

He talked about the election, he talked about this—he tries to be very current—pick up the immediate problems or needs, and what's being done around the world. And he talks about the leadership of these countries, and who's fighting with who, the factions, and the fact that the ruler of this country now wants to hand it over to his brother-in-law, and they're all crooked and corrupt and that sort of stuff. But it's down, down—he gets down into the trenches. He just doesn't give a boring lecture. He doesn't use any notes.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wow.

NANETTE LAITMAN: No notes. He comes with a couple of three-by-five cards just to give him the bullet points of probably what he wants to talk about. But he doesn't use any notes. And I took a class in Florida when I went to Palm Beach for a couple months this winter, at the local university. And this guy—he was so bad. He was just awful. Excuse me. You could do anything—he, you could have literally lifted it off the Internet. There was no personal involvement. Terrible. So I quit.

MIJA RIEDEL: So what's next for you? The museum is up and running. Are you happy with the way it's progressing?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, I think I just have to continue. What I'm trying to do now is raise endowment money for the museum. That is the next step. That's the job that I'm taking over now to the best of my ability, but it's very, very difficult at this time because of the economy.

MIJA RIEDEL: I imagine. Right.

NANETTE LAITMAN: But I think that the most—what I'm going to try to focus on, actually, is the planned giving.

MIJA RIEDEL: And what about the Smithsonian and the Archives of American Art?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, I'm going to continue doing that. As long as they all come up with matching funds, I'll do it.

MIJA RIEDEL: Wonderful. So all the artists that still have yet to be interviewed, or perhaps their papers collected —

NANETTE LAITMAN: But I think you're pretty caught up.

MIJA RIEDEL: We're fairly close. The papers probably—I would imagine there's still a fair number of collections that could come in as well. But the interviews seem fairly good. They seem fairly current.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We're seeing current right now. We've gotten all the 80, 70, and 60 year-olds, you know?

MIJA RIEDEL: Exactly. The oldest one I talked to was 95. Otto Natzler.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Oh, my God. How are they?

MIJA RIEDEL: Well he—that was a few years ago, and it's good that I talked to him when I did because he's passed away since then. But it was—it was very wise.

NANETTE LAITMAN: She's still alive.

MIJA RIEDEL: His second wife, exactly. She is still alive. I think she was quite a bit younger. But then I talked to Heikki Seppa. He was 82—the metalsmith—when I talked to him on the West Coast. So it was, it was—Paul Soldner was 80 years old.

NANETTE LAITMAN: We're not doing any Europeans, are we?

MIJA RIEDEL: We have not so far. We have not so far. But it might be interesting to think about that as for—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I'm going to bring it up next week.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh, good. I think there's a—I think—

NANETTE LAITMAN: I think we should—out of the 20 we do a year, I think we should do five.

MIJA RIEDEL: I actually think that's wise because just in speaking to Marek Cecula again, he goes back and forth all the time. He was at Parsons for 15 years, he lives in Manhattan, but he goes back and forth and is doing amazing things right now in Poland. So, he was born in Poland, he spent 16 years there. He moved to Israel, he was there for 16 years. Briefly in Brazil, and has been in Manhattan ever since. But now—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Now, have we done Klaus Moje?

MIJA RIEDEL: I don't—I don't know. Actually, I'll have to look into that.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Because, I mean, this is the perfect time.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. But I think that that would bring perspective that could be wonderful. And as the continuum spreads, as things stretch out, it allows the opportunity to, to—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Why shouldn't Europeans be aware of this, so that they can look on the machine too?

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I think I'm going to bring it up that we should start to include foreign. Europeans. I mean, the ceramics movement in England is brilliant.

MIJA RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I'm sure that we don't have those—of course they're not alive any more, but who knows what's happened to all those papers and all that work?

MIJA RIEDEL: Yeah.

NANETTE LAITMAN: What's—what are their names, again? They made small pieces.

MIJA RIEDEL: Out of ceramic?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. English.

MIJA RIEDEL: English. Current?

NANETTE LAITMAN: No, no. They died.

MIJA RIEDEL: Oh. I'll look into it.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Linda Schlenger has a lot of their work. A lot of their work. And what's wrong with—with what's his name, that won the Turner Prize? Ceramicist. [Grayson Perry]

MIJA RIEDEL: Right. Right. Right. Right. Absolutely—I think there's, that's a wonderful opportunity to display—yes.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I'm going to bring it up this year that I think we have to expand our horizons and give 20 percent of the interviews each year to foreign.

MIJA RIEDEL: And that might be a way to—if it's frustrating to try and get the attention for this sort of work in this country—

NANETTE LAITMAN: And I'm sure you'll find people over there, such as yourself, who knew—know how to interview who would be very happy to do this for the small stipend that we pay.

MIJA RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Okay.

MIJA RIEDEL: And it would put this in a broader perspective not only in terms of our history but also internationally.

NANETTE LAITMAN: I mean, look what the Victoria and Albert is doing now. They're building a gallery the size of Grand Central Station and it's going to open next year. Reinstalling, redoing, reevaluating everything. It wasn't open—I couldn't get in. The ceramics gallery is closed now because everything is out.

MIJA RIEDEL: Interesting. Amazing.

NANETTE LAITMAN: They gutted the whole space, and it's going to be totally modernized, and opening next year.

MIJA RIEDEL: Fantastic.

NANETTE LAITMAN: So that's interesting.

MIJA RIEDEL: How have your sources of inspiration changed over the years? You mentioned Marcia Tucker as an early mentor. Is there anyone that's come along since?

NANETTE LAITMAN: David.

MIJA RIEDEL: David Revere McFadden?

NANETTE LAITMAN: He has opened my eyes to a lot of things. He's brilliant.

MIJA RIEDEL: How has he opened your eyes? You've talked about Marcia.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Well, he's shown me—he's talked about the process of how things were made, which I didn't know anything about. And so I learned a lot from David.

MIJA RIEDEL: The technical process? The entire creative process?

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yeah. We go around and he talks to us in the galleries sometimes. And I ask him questions about this and that, and he tells me how it's all made.

MIJA RIEDEL: So he's really given you additional insight into the work, and—

NANETTE LAITMAN: Tremendous. Tremendous.

MIJA RIEDEL: It's—how it's formed, its historical context.

NANETTE LAITMAN: He's been amazing. We are so lucky to have him.

MIJA RIEDEL: Well, I think we've done a fairly good job of covering the basics, and I want to respect your time here—I know you have a meeting in a short period of time.

NANETTE LAITMAN: Yes. Oh, my God, it's 12:00.

MIJA RIEDEL: Thank you so much, Nan.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]