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Oral history interview with Mary Merkel-Hess,  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Mary Merkel-Hess on August 24-25, 2019. The interview took place in Iowa City, Iowa, 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, funded by the William and Mildred Lasdon Foundation.

Mary Merkel-Hess has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

## Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Mary Merkel-Hess at the artist's home and studio in Iowa City, Iowa on August 24, 2010 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is card number one. Good morning.

MARY MERKEL-HESS: Good morning.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's just start at the beginning, Mary, and then we'll move through and get to more current events. But let's discuss your childhood background, when and where you were born and what that experience was like.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I was born in Waterloo, Iowa. Native—I'm a native Iowan. At that point, my parents lived on one of my grandfather's farms. They never farmed, but we lived in a farmhouse. I don't really remember those first few years.

MS. RIEDEL: When were you born—what was the date?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Nineteen forty-nine—April 6, 1949.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so I would say that by two or three years old I—we were living in a different place. But that was my initial home out there in the rural countryside of Iowa.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were they farming—did they farm?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: They didn't farm.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, they didn't farm at all.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, my parents never farmed.

MS. RIEDEL: And your grandparents either?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, my grandparents did farm.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, and many of my uncles. And so I came from that kind of a farming background.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Was that a part of your experience as a child, visiting the farms and—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, absolutely. Absolutely because—my first memories of home are the—we moved into a housing development on the edge of Waterloo. And luckily—I think luckily—we lived on the very edge of this. So there was a cornfield across the road from us, there was a lake, you know, down a path a half-mile away. So I still grew up, you know, in this countrified environment. And just with living in this little development there were kids everywhere—it was right after the war and all the GIs were home, so lots of kids. And that was my initial memory, you know, of childhood.

And then when I was 11, we moved back to the country—we moved back to Gilbertville [IA], where my grandfather lived—where my mother had grown up. And I was tossed out of this environment with lots of kids into living in the country where you're—my cousins were around, but they were still some distance away. I lived—the town of Gilbertville is about 1,000, 1,200 people. It's entirely Catholic; it's entirely—everyone's from Luxembourg originally.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah—very kind of little ethnic enclave.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: On the road I lived on, you know, everyone was either my cousin or my uncle or my grandparent. So for several miles around me were—you know, I was just in the middle of this extended family.

MS. RIEDEL: How extraordinary.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: But I was alone a lot of the time, but living in the country. So that was my childhood background.

MS. RIEDEL: And what did your parents do?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: My dad was a contractor, so he was always involved in building projects. He started out building houses—he and another man. That eventually developed into building primarily commercial buildings and churches and schools and that—kind of larger projects. But always the house was full of blueprints and, you know, that kind of—and my dad did all kinds of things. He knew how to weld, he knew how to build cabinets and do woodworking and plumbing and—you know, he just understood all those parts of building. So he was always doing things. And my mom was always doing things, too. She liked to sew and, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you get involved in either of those activities—the building and the constructing or the sewing?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh yeah, I think so. My dad—I know that my dad taught us a lot of things, we did—he did teach us to just do simple welds and so we got comfortable. And mom, we sewed, and did a lot of—people—we were just always making things. I mean, it was just was just a family where people made things.

MS. RIEDEL: And as a little girl you learned to weld a little bit?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: A little bit. You know, I wouldn't say it was—it was complex, you know. But we were hanging around and so—yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And in terms of your grandfather's farm, were you spending a lot of time out in nature? As a kid were you walking around the fields or—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, we were—generally, we were out and about visiting our cousins because, you know, the—and I can remember you just head out through the corn field. And you can get lost—[laughs]—but, you know, hopefully heading off in the right direction and turning up in someone else's farm; or playing in the woods or the creeks or whatever. So it was a very—I had a very free childhood. When I think about even how protective I was of my own children, you know, it changed a lot. But we were—we just kind of had the run of the countryside.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have siblings?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I did. I have one sister, four years younger than I am.

MS. RIEDEL: And did she—does she work in the arts at all?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, she doesn't.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: She does—she's a medical technologist.

MS. RIEDEL: What were your parents—now, what are your parent's names?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: My dad's name is Lee. And my mom's name was Margaret.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you work early on with a lot of art materials? Were you especially interested in art? As I recall, you began to draw quite early. Did you—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I did. I did. My mom was very—I think she was kind of indulgent. I just remember growing up with—you know, if we were bored she would make a batch of cornstarch clay or salt clay for us or we did finger painting. You know, and she made these things for us out of household ingredients and food coloring and what have you. So we were—we were allowed a lot of creative play. And—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. And she would create the materials with what she had in the kitchen? That's interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I think it was a standard farm practice to entertain children you had, you know, a recipe that made clay and just let them go, you know, and play with something. Plus, there were a lot—we—she did a lot of sewing. So there was a lot of craft kinds of projects and—

MS. RIEDEL: Clothes, curtains, pillows, that sort of thing?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Exactly, exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that something you did then too? Did you sew your own clothes?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. I did. And then I started drawing when I was 10 or 12. I think they—somebody gave me a drawing set as a gift. So I started drawing. And I realized at about that age that I could—I could draw and so then at that point, you know, you get this designation of—even in your classroom—of this is the person who can draw, you know? So that was an identity. And then when I got into high school we had—our art teacher was—his father ran a professional design studio. I think he had been a designer for *Better Homes & Gardens*, you know, which is centered in Des Moines [IA]. So he kind of suggested to me, and took me down to visit his father's art studio, graphic design or whatever it was. And I know I was just completely disinterested in that.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Just not the slightest bit of interest in that. It was also the first time that I went to an art museum there in Des Moines. And there was a—I remember there was a reflecting pool and a collection of bronzes by Rodin. So that was a big memory of seeing that. But, no, I wasn't tempted to go to art school at all. And I didn't. When I went to college I went to Marquette University, which is a Jesuit university in Milwaukee [WI]. I had no—had no art program, which is surprising. I mean, I didn't even think that I would ever pursue it at all.

MS. RIEDEL: So just to back up a little bit, in high school what were you interested in? How did you spend your time?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I did a little of everything. It was a small school, so I participated in everything. The, you know, theatrical projects, and I was never a singer or a star or anything like that. But, you know, I did sets and was in the chorus and—

MS. RIEDEL: Designed and built sets?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: What? Yeah, building sets. The art department took care of that, so yeah that was definitely—and we did the makeup too and all that kind of stuff. So that was—and there were no girls' sports in my little school, which I—

MS. RIEDEL: What is the name of the school?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The school was called Don Bosco High School [Gilbertville, IA]. It was a Catholic high school. There were no public schools in our township because everyone was Catholic, so all the schools were Catholic. And so—and I played in the—I played a musical instrument in the band. I played saxophone. I was interested in journalism. We had a school magazine, so I wrote and was editor for that my senior year.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Did—were there art classes too?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So there were art classes—painting, drawing, 3D?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: There were—there was no 3D. So we did painting and drawing—no crafts. We—it was just basically those two things: painting and drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: So acrylics and still lives, that sort of thing?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And then was that for four years?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I don't think so. I think it was two years. I think that's all I did.

MS. RIEDEL: And were there art classes in junior high or elementary school, or did they really start in high school?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: There were—there were some, I mean, Friday afternoons, you know, the last hour of the week or something, we'd probably have an art project.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: One thing that made a huge impression on me, though, was—and this, I think, was a state-wide program—it was called the Art—I don't—I don't actually know what it was called. It was called—but I called it the Art Postcard Book—Postcard Project.

We had a book—a notebook. And once a month we got a postcard of an artwork. And I remember getting [Vincent] van Gogh's *Starry Night* [1889] and something by Grant Wood. And I remember this great excitement. It went on for years. You had the same notebook fifth through eighth grade, I think. And you got your postcard and then, as a group, you wrote a little essay. You looked at this painting. The teacher asked questions. People suggested things. Somebody made a sentence, and that was put on the board. You copied the whole little essay into your notebook.

And then you had to close your notebook and give it back. You didn't get to keep it with you—you didn't get it for your own until you graduated. But then you had this book of paintings. And I loved that. I wanted to have those postcards. And so I started—I remember I started my own book where I could find cutouts of magazines and things. So that was—that was interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: That is interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you—what were you drawn to in particular or it was just in general?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, the impressionists—far and away I had them all. And they were easily found. There were always—they were always selling, you know, copies of [Claude] Monet and whatever in magazines. So you could get those little pictures and you could paste them in—I didn't write essays, but—[laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: And were you making any sort of correlation between the impressionists and their view of nature and your own experience of nature as a child?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, not at that point. But I did—when I was in high school I did take that on as my style—sort of—

MS. RIEDEL: The impressionists?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, and verging into maybe even abstraction.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I just loved that. I still love the abstract expressionists as my favorite kind of painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Anyone in particular or pieces in particular that have been significant or important?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, certainly—oh I don't know—[Robert] Motherwell and [Franz] Kline and, you know, the—there probably aren't any of them I don't like. I mean, I did love [Willem] de Kooning and all those people. Just—I just really liked that.

MS. RIEDEL: The use of paint, the colors—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The freedom—

MS. RIEDEL:—the abstraction? Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The freedom, yeah. Yeah, I still do.

MS. RIEDEL: And the abstraction, perhaps?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. So you graduated from high school—what was the year?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Nineteen sixty-seven.

MS. RIEDEL: Nineteen sixty-seven. And before we move on to college, how did your family feel about you being

the sort of class artist or the one who could draw and do things? Were they supportive of that? Were they indifferent about it? Did it make a difference one way or the other? Was that something that was supported?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It wasn't discouraged for sure. I think they thought—and I thought too at the time—it ought to emerge into something practical though. You know, not—the idea of being an artist—it actually never occurred to me at that point. It was something I could do.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. So you went to the University of—Marquette University. And what were you studying there?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I studied philosophy—I ended up with a major in philosophy and sociology. I went with the idea that I would eventually go into school—social work school. I never was very passionate about it, though. I wasn't passionate about the study. I liked philosophy better. There wasn't art. There wasn't—there was—

MS. RIEDEL: There was no art at the university?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-mm. [Negative.] Maybe—I think they had one drawing course which I took, and I think I dropped out; I was disappointed in it—so at that point, no. When I got—when I graduated—and then Marquette, being a Jesuit university, required—had very strict requirements. And there was so much philosophy required that I only needed, I don't know, another three courses or something to have a major in philosophy. And so I did that.

And I—in all the time that I was at Marquette I was working for the Milwaukee Public School System in their schools. So I was often working during the school day and then going to school in the late afternoon and evening.

MS. RIEDEL: That's unusual.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, yeah. I left my small town gratefully. I was eager for the big city. And I wanted to go far away—New York [NY] or Boston [MA] or—you know. Well, my parents were insecure about having me so far away. So Milwaukee was as far as I managed to get.

And Marquette was a wonderful city school. You know, it existed and just sort of adjacent to the downtown of Milwaukee. There was no campus. You could walk through and not really see that it was a university. There was no grass, no nothing. And I know our dorms were refurbished hotels and our lecture hall was an old theater. It was quite an odd environment when I think about it. And it was a big school—12,000 students.

MS. RIEDEL: That is a big school.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Especially in Milwaukee.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. And I loved it. And we—and the neighborhoods were tough. I mean, we—and the school I worked at was an—definitely an inner-city school. It was all fascinating to me. So I don't think I thought about my future much for four years. I was just busy absorbing the difference between growing up in this tiny town in the cornfields and living in a city. It was really fascinating.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember in particular things that struck you either in school or as a—in—either in Marquette or at teaching?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I was certainly struck by the variety of people. I was struck by the poverty that surrounded me. And this was the time—this was just shortly after the riots and the burnings in the cities. And so Milwaukee was just alive with protests and, of course, then the protests for the Vietnam War went on.

And, I mean, it was just wave after wave between '67 and '71 when I graduated of things that went on and things to be interested in and upset about, and it was incredibly interesting. The whole country seemed in turmoil. And it was just fascinating. And so then when I graduated it was, like, well, what will I do now, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Had any of your reading in philosophy been especially significant to you?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I really enjoyed—in philosophy—I—and so I'm not—was never a philosopher, and I knew that from the beginning. I enjoyed studying ancient philosophy. I really enjoyed the history of philosophy, the history of ideas. And that played into the kind of sociology I was studying too—a history of our attitudes towards our societal structures. That was fascinating to me. The practicalities of sociology didn't really interest me I found out.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And working in that school showed me that, you know, because I could see that basically social workers are—they're important; they apply the social Band-Aids. But I didn't—and I didn't see myself doing that. I didn't—I felt—and the people I met at that time—I became friends with many of the—many people who'd grown up in the inner city who were—who had had really rough backgrounds and had made something wonderful of themselves, and so could work with kids who had problems and say look what I did.

I wasn't that kind of person. And I had no—I felt I had no authority to say to a kid: You have to do this; this is what life should be like for you. My life had been so easy. So I felt insecure about pursuing that because I—it wasn't authentic for me.

MS. RIEDEL: So when you graduated from Marquette—this was in '71—what was the trajectory? How did you then move to the University of Wisconsin?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I was offered a job by the school—by the Milwaukee School System. So I was working. I had a job as a librarian. And this was the—probably the last year that they were actually hiring just liberal arts grads to actually be a librarian. After that, you were going to be a media specialist. And I think I was hired with the idea that of course I would be going on and get a graduate degree as a media specialist for the schools, which I had no intention of doing either.

And so I was working and I decided, which way should I go? Should I try philosophy? What should I—you know, what should I do?

So I—I had a job and I started going to school at night at the University of Wisconsin [Milwaukee, WI]. I took a philosophy course and I took a drawing course. I thought I've always liked art. I had been doing a little—by that point, I'd been doing some ceramics on and off, a little weaving. I'd been spending all my years at Marquette, which is right near the Milwaukee county museum—has a fabulous collection of craft objects from Africa and South America. So in—and this is funny, when I look back on it: In between classes, instead of going to the library and studying, I'd go to the museum, which was free, and look at these things. It was just entertainment for me and I loved it.

And so then—so I took—so, anyway, back to this—taking these two classes, within about a month, I dropped the philosophy class. It was, like, boy, no. And I had met some real artists, you know? And I thought, this is what I am.

MS. RIEDEL: Who had you met? Do you remember?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I can't remember my teacher's name—a young woman, graduate student. She was so dedicated to drawing. And she talked about her—how—all the ways that she carried—she always carried a stack of notecards with her where she made her drawings. I mean, it was just a dedication to the—to the—to the craft of drawing. And I just—hanging around, talking to other art students, I just knew this was it. I never looked back.

And from then on, I decided, well, I have to have my education all over again; I have to study art history and I have to find out where I belong because it's what I'm going to do. It didn't take very long at all. So it—it's a matter of meeting these people, which I hadn't up until that point.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you meet them through the university? Did you meet them—Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] They were my teachers; they were other students, you know? I fell into this art milieu. I felt comfortable, at home. This was it.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk about the M.F.A. program at the University of Wisconsin and that exploration of how you found metal.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Okay. Well, I just started out taking all the intro classes, so I had design, I had drawing, and then I moved into the crafts which interested me immensely. Of course, I had—because my dad was trained as a welder, and so I was very comfortable, you know, with soldering. It gave a little bit of a boost in that area because a lot of people come in and have, you know, torch—they're afraid of the—of the fire and the heat and that, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I enjoyed that.

I also did so badly - I think I wanted to be in ceramics, but I was so bad at it that I think I was sort of gently kind of ushered into metalsmithing.

And then the teacher—my teacher, who was the first important influence on me, was Mary Tingley. She was the

professor at UW-Milwaukee, and she just created a wonderful environment. We had a large area. We had four rooms; we had an entire room dedicated to enameling. We had another polishing area and a forming area and then a jewelry-making—you know, small soldering area.

So it was a nice department. She always had a pot of coffee on. And she just was such a welcoming presence and very good teacher. She'd been of student of Alma Eikerman in Bloomington, Illinois—or Bloomington, Indiana. So—that—and that's going to come back later on. But she taught in a lot—she just was a very good teacher. And she encouraged me to go on to graduate school.

And I was her studio assistant. She'd always had a studio assistant. So I learned a lot about, you know, running a metal studio—just the nuts and bolts of keeping everything going.

MS. RIEDEL: And she exposed you to a wide variety of techniques, a little bit of the history of metalsmithing?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Absolutely. And she took us on field trips. We went—I mean, I told about going to see Richard Mawdsley do a workshop at his—and Mary was the one who took us all down there. And she took us to Iowa. I mean, we went—we made a visit to a workshop at the University of Iowa [Iowa City, IA], which is how I first met Chunghi Choo. So—

And Mary encouraged me not—she said, “I will accept you as a graduate student here, but I encourage you to go somewhere else and have another teacher.”

So that was good. That was good.

MS. RIEDEL: And when I was talking with Richard just a couple of days ago, he was saying that there was wonderful back and forth among the schools in that general area. And I wonder if that was true here too, that the teachers were constantly sponsoring workshops about a particular technique or something, and that there was back and forth where they would all—all the student and the teachers would pack them in a car and head off to one university for a weekend or another to—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Absolutely, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a real exchange of information. It sounds like there was a sense of community that was established. Was that true for you too?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right. Yeah, I think it was true. And I know Mary did some of that. And then, when I did get to graduate school in Iowa City, somehow Chunghi had money. And I know we brought people in every semester, I think, or at least every year. And I know Heikki Seppä came from St. Louis. Eleanor Moty came. Lots of people came. So we were exposed to a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds incredibly rich.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It was rich. It was an—it was a nice environment for craft at that point. I think there was money, there was interest and there were lots of students. That, I think, decreased the interest of people in pursuing craft areas academically.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, but this was that real heyday of that.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It was the heyday, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Mid-'70s.

So you graduated from UW-Milwaukee in '76 with a BFA, yeah?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: And went directly to the University of Iowa?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: There was a year. My daughter was born, and—that year, in '76. And so I got my BFA in June of that year, and she was born in November. And then I started at Iowa the following fall, so that would have been '77, I think. Yes, '77. So there was a year.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did you decide on Iowa?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I got admitted. It wasn't such an easy thing to be admitted somewhere. There was just a lot of competition for those spots. And I had—as I said, Mary Tingley had taken us to Iowa for some event. I just remembered that Chunghi, who is a famous, famous cook here in town—



MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—yes—oh, she’s just fabulous—cooked for everybody. She had pots of oil set up in the metalsmithing. I mean, metalsmiths are brave anyway, but she was deep-frying there in the studio. And we—all of these 40 or 50 people were eating things that she was frying.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And it was just—I don’t know—it was—the art school was down there by the river; the sculpture department was just across the way. And, of course, Iowa was my home, so that meant, also, that I was going to have in-state tuition. I mean—and my mom was very close by to help me with my daughter, who was just a baby.

So I really was hoping to get in at Iowa. And I did. So I was excited. And I accepted, of course.

MS. RIEDEL: And let’s talk about those years, what it was in particular that you absorbed from Chunghi Choo that was informative, other students that were influential, what that program was like at the time, the strengths and the weaknesses of it.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, Chunghi was doing large-scale electroforming. And that was interesting—500 gallon tank. And she had borrowed some of this technology, I think, from some of the industries in town. I’m not quite sure because that had occurred just prior to my coming, getting this tank set up, making this work. And she was doing these fabulous pieces that are now in the Louvre [Museum, Paris], in MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY]. I mean, they were wonderful. And she worked—because the tank was there, she worked in the studio side by side with us. So you just see this world-class artist struggling and working. And you just can’t help but absorb her process, you know. And so that was a great strength.

And also, Chunghi, like Mary, was a well-taught person in terms of traditional technique. There was nothing she didn’t know about forming. And so the—what I think the real strength for me was, we did vessels, we did big things and we were interested in sculpture. There was some jewelry. She never discouraged anyone who was a jeweler. But when I was there, the group of us, we were into smithing and forming. So we were making the—and strangely enough—and Heikki Seppä played into that. That’s why we wanted him to come, because he was forming all those complex shapes, and we were trying to actually conform some of our metalsmithing to what we were able to do with electroforming. It was very—it was very interesting. And there were three of us—or four of us who were just—we wanted to be smiths. We wanted to—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember who else was there?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, sure. Bob Sunderman—Robert Sunderman. He’s now—strangely enough, he’s a professor of theater in Ames [IA]—theaters design.

And then Mike Neville was my dear, dear friend. And he works—actually, he works—he still lives here in town—he works in the—there’s a workshop in our hospital, which is huge, where he creates research and surgical tour—research tools and surgical tools and—

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So he went into—

MS. RIEDEL: More the industrial design aspect.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, yeah. He took all of his metalsmithing techniques, all his abilities, and then he uses them to make these very specialized things that people need.

And then the other guy, Jim MaloneBeach—and he lives in Michigan now. I think he’s teaching a small university there. And he does medals, you know, like, commemorative medals. Art—but they’re art, they’re for funny things. I mean, they’re definitely satiric, and—

And then the other person, David Luck, who still lives here in town—David Luck was very important to me. He helped me set up my studio. He knows endless things about specialized tools for doing metal. And he makes—actually, there’s one on the wall over there. He makes these formed—it’s almost like a fabric, you know, where he hooks them together.

So those guys were just like brothers to me at that point. I never had brothers, but they seemed like brothers to me. So we really had a good time.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you one of the few women in the program?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, no, I wasn't. There were—we were probably half and half. But the other women did more delicate things. I think I was the only one who was a little more interested in the forming than the jewelry aspects.

But Karen Pikelney was there; she a jeweler in New York. Tricia Knox, still working in jewelry, lives next door, bought the house next to me. So—I'm thinking—and Judy Miller. Judy Miller was another—and she transformed herself into a potter or a ceramic person, so she does ceramic sculptures. But she still lives in town too. So I think that was—and then Terumi Fogerty—Terumi was Japanese, native Japanese. And she and I raised our children together, you know, so—and she now lives in Seattle [WA]. So I think that was the group. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What did you feel that the strengths of the program were, and what did you feel the weaknesses were?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, the weakness—the strengths I think I've described to some extent, you know, this wonderful environment and this new technology, this old technology. And Chunghi was definitely intense with us and free with us. So I don't know if those were strengths or weaknesses, but it was a—it was a very—it was a very intense environment.

The weaknesses, for me, was that at that point I had two infants. So I—it took me seven years to complete the program. Four of those, I was Chunghi's T.A., so I was teaching, which I loved—I loved teaching. But I had these little babies. And so I was very—I was very busy and torn, in a way, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet, I bet.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So yeah, my son was born after I—Kate was a year old, and then I got to Iowa City, and then my son—I got pregnant the second semester, so he was really in the middle of all this. And he—it's funny because he just got his MFA and he says in his thesis, "I've been through grad school twice." [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: That's great. And what is his material again?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: Ceramics. Right, right, right, because he's with—he's still with Adrian Saxe, which is why—yeah.

When you look back on this—on these experiences, these three different degrees, is there a particularly rewarding experience, a particularly rewarding educational experience that stands out among them all? And I realize, though, in your case, we might also want to include your experience with Tim—was it Barrett? Barnett? Yeah -

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Tim Barrett, yeah, which is 10—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That happens later.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, 15 years on.

MS. RIEDEL: But is there—and when you look back on your educational experiences, is there one that stands among them all?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, one semester that I haven't talked about, which stands out still in my memory, is the semester we had with Alma Eikerman because that happened—Chunghi went on sabbatical and she said, "Who do you want to replace me for the semester?"

MS. RIEDEL: How generous. What a great idea to ask you. Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, yeah. Yeah. And—well, that's the way Chunghi was. Who—and we all were doing smithing at the time and we said, "Oh, we want Alma Eikerman to come." Alma had just retired in Bloomington [IN]. And Chunghi said, "Oh my God, I can't ask her. I'd be"—you know, "oh my God, Alma." And she came, Alma came. I mean we forced Chunghi to call her, and she said yes.

And so Alma just was another huge burst of energy and so connected to Europe—you know, this—because she had studied in Europe and she had all these—and she had all these ways of teaching things which we just—she just—even though I'm sure she used these techniques on her undergrads, she just set us all to work. You know, she gave us assignments. Chunghi didn't usually give assignments. So all of a sudden, we had—we had assignments. It was a fun semester. And Alma got an apartment. And so we were all involved in helping her. I mean, she was 75 or [7]6 at the time. So I think it was a huge energy drain for her to move and to do this. And—but we all loved her. And so that was a wonderful semester and a great gift to get to know her.

And then, after she went back to Indiana, she would invite us to come. And I—several times I went and stayed with her. And she—she was so generous with her time and introducing us to faculty members there and—I mean, she was just a complete teacher in every sense of the word, you know, of—“You will come to a faculty party,” you know, or—whatever. It was—it was a great experience to get to know her.

And then she also—then we became part of this—she wrote a newsletter every Christmas with every single possible bit of gossip—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—or whatever that went on in the metalsmithing world. So you were connected once you knew Alma.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

And did she bring also new techniques, new ways or working, new—a new sense of metal history—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: A new sense of metal history for sure, since she had actually worked in—she had worked, I think, in Denmark and in Italy if I’m remembering this correctly. So she had those—and that flavor of that era, the Scandinavian influence to some extent.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: In terms of new ways of working, I don’t know that there was any technique that was any different. She had her own take on things. I do remember one—and I she had all these design lessons that we went through—I remember she had us make—she put up a big—kind of covered a big board with black paper, and I think we had to draw silhouettes of shapes of raised bowls and put them all on the board and look at them —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—and then choose which is the best one. I mean, it was a tremendously—she had that kind of ability, these tremendously sensitizing projects for us. And so you’d look at them and you’d say, “Well, of course, this shape stands out among all these others, so then, you know, take this one and then turn it into a 3-D.”

Yeah, she had a lot of things like that. We did a lot of things like that that semester—an assignment of, you know, “use three elements.” And she made us study Picasso sculptures and—you know, just interesting things like that really opened us up in a—in a new way. So that was—that was a tremendous semester for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, it sounds like it—a whole ‘nother way to see.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, yes—so useful.

MS. RIEDEL: And it sounds like—we were talking earlier before we started on disk about working within a—with a very nuanced sensibility, and the way you’re just describing this bowls—this bowl exercise sounds very much like that—I mean, something as simple as bowl, but can be a very tall, narrow cone to a flared out—practically a platter.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: So just really studying form.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: A very detailed study of form.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And I know you’ve mentioned that that was one of the most important things that you took away from grad school, was a really evolved sense of form.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right, right—a real sensitivity to things, and also a sense of precision. Chunghi was a very—you know, she wanted a beautifully finished product. And Alma did too. I mean, that’s what metalsmithing is: to

get to this level of perfection that other craft doesn't usually call forth. And I remember coming up to my MFA show at Iowa. I don't know, just as we're getting the thing set up, I said, "Oh, I see these flaws, you know, these little scratches or whatever they were." And Chunghi just looked at me and said, "Nobody can see that but us."

So it was—it was a sense of, you know, this perfection that we aimed at. And she certainly always attained that in her work. I mean, it was just flawless, you know? I never quite got there. But, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: What was your work like at—in graduate school? What was your final show?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I had—my final show was something—was a folded rough metal—it was called—my thesis was *Rugose Forms in Metal* which—rugose is roughened. And it was a complete repudiation of all the smoothness—Chunghi's work is just so smooth. And I wanted to do something that was really mine, because I had been in school a long time. You know, I think a lot of people would go through in three years, which was the standard. And so it was Okay for them to still sort of resemble their teacher's skills.

But for me, I just had been there so long I felt like I needed to make this step up to something that was really and truly just mine. And that came through the forming. And actually I was also working with our fiber teacher, Naomi Shedl. So I had started to work in fiber and I had gotten some of that sensibility of less precision.

You know, weaving with rough—with rough fiber and wrapping and doing all these kinds of things. And so that influence kind of folded back into the metalwork. And my study of leaves and—drawing leaves and melons and all these kinds of things as—which Alma and—both Chunghi and Alma had kind of guided us towards nature at some point in terms of finding inspiration for vessels.

So it was all coming together that I did this rough—this rougher work—rougher, folded vessels. And working with Naomi, she had given me—this was another huge step—she had given me a roll of paper cord which was very important to me. She said—I remember she said, "This has been lying around the fiber studio for so long—take it. Do something with it." And the fiber studio was in the home ec [home economics] department.

This is—and Naomi is a very interesting artist herself. She was a Yale-trained painter—and I'm not sure how she ended up teaching fiber in the home ec department—but she was definitely an artist and not, you know, a crafts—a trained fiber crafts person.

And so this is all the way—it's not on the arts campus; it's over next to the—in the liberal arts department was the basement of one of the oldest buildings on campus, which was the fiber area. And so we'd make this pilgrimage across campus, you know, a couple of times a week hoping that we would be allowed to use the fiber credits in our—as our—part of our credits to graduate in art, which I don't think they ever allowed. I think I ended up having to take something else.

But it was, of course, incredibly important to me to be with Naomi and—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so she led me, not into papermaking—I think there might have been a little bit of papermaking going on—but she gave me that ball of paper cord—thick paper cord. And I used it to coil baskets. So I was coiling, that was—she—we went through a variety of techniques there. And I'd had weaving as an undergrad, so I knew a little bit about that. But we were doing, I don't know, knotting and a lot—all just, you know, different things.

So—and then when it came time to get my MFA, part of the requirements were that you had to show work to—at your MFA show you had to show work in two mediums.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, okay. That's interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And—yes. It was interesting. And on my end—and so I wanted to do—I had started doing the big rugose vessels, folded—and sometimes even people would say to me, "What are those made of? Are those paper?" You know, so I had this idea in mind and so I thought, well, I'm going to—I have this paper cord; I'm going to do something in fiber.

And then—I had two kids. And so I'm coiling—it's tremendously time consuming to coil a basket. And it occurred to me—my kids are little; they're coming home with all this paper-mâché stuff from their preschool. And I thought why don't artists do something with paper-mâché? Could I do something with paper-mâché? And could it be faster? [They laugh.] I want to—I want to graduate.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I want to get through this.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I need these two areas and—so one day it occurred to me as I'm coiling, why don't I, like, just take those coils and so something with them and put them in place with paper-mâché. And so this was a period of one semester there sort of right at the end, I can't remember which one it was, but the first baskets I used just—I used hide glue. I used just what I had. I had some hide glue left over from a painting class. So I used some hide glue. I used this paper cord that Naomi had given me. I used some garden-variety tissue paper I—

And then somehow it all worked. And I know one of these baskets was still one of the most beautiful things I'd ever made. And I made, maybe, half a dozen of them and I put them in my MFA show. And, you know, I graduated. It was like, I'm—I'm reborn after seven years. I'm finally through this program. [Laughs.]

And there I was with this technique, you know, that just happened—again, just a confluence of events, things—materials that came together. And then when I had my MFA show, those baskets attracted so much attention. I was amazed. People—and they fit in beautifully with the metalwork I'd done. So that was—that was a big step.

So I had—I came out of graduate school then with these two ideas: the metal and the paper.

MS. RIEDEL: And you finished your MFA in '83, yes?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. And then there were two or three years where you really worked in both metal and paper.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I did; about five years in the same studio. Not a good idea. I tried—because I hoped—I mean, I hoped, like everybody who came out of school at that point, to get a teaching job. And all my—almost all my credits were in metal; they were in casting—I'd done some casting. So I expected that if I got any kind of job, it would be as a metalsmith. And actually after—I never did teach metalsmithing—I never did.

And—so—but I did try to stay—for that three or four or five years—I did try to stay in that field and be connected; I would try to exhibit the metal. And I did a lot—and I didn't have a good studio anymore. I was trying to build a studio, gather up all the things I needed. And I went to a lot of different things. I tried putting things together with rivets and just doing things that didn't require quite so much in the way of forming equipment. And, I mean, a metalsmiths—a fully equipped metalsmithing studio is expensive and it's just a marvelous amount of equipment, you know.

And I never ever really—because I liked to work so big, I never really managed that. But I—and then to finance this metal studio which I wanted, I started making paper baskets and selling them. I mean, I just—I took that newly minted MFA degree and I, you know, kind of hit the art fair circuit, you know, selling baskets. And I didn't think of them as sort of my major area of work at all. And so I'd take the money I earned and then I'd buy more tools and, you know.

And then some—very early on I was in a show—Shereen LaPlantz was a big basket person at the time—really important—and did—was so supportive. I think she put some—put my paper—and I was making paper boxes too. I mean, I was just all over the place. She put my work in her magazine. And I—

MS. RIEDEL: What magazine was that?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I think it was—it was just this little news basket magazine that Shereen published. I can't remember the name of it. I've got copies downstairs so I'll—I can perhaps look that up.

MS. RIEDEL: This is out of California?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Her husband was a metalsmith.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, David LaPlantz, I think.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, David LaPlantz, yes. And somewhere in there—I think it was a show that she had sponsored somewhere in California—I won a prize for one of my baskets. And that was an eye-opening experience. It's like, oh, oh. Maybe this is something—maybe I'm being too dismissive about these paper baskets. I didn't know anything about the—I didn't know as much about the fiber world at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember the piece that won?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, I do. It was called *Tortoise*. And it was just a little paper—had little, thin paper cord; had kind of a pattern from the glue drying on the bottom that was kind of mottled like a tortoise shell. And it was a—it was a lovely piece. I remember thinking it was good—I—

MS. RIEDEL: Big open flat form?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, kind of open so that the pattern was all in it—and—

MS. RIEDEL: And paper cord at this point?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Paper cord, yes. Paper cord. Entirely paper. And then no color; the hide glue gave everything kind of a brownish—and the paper cord was brown.

MS. RIEDEL: And what—where were you finding paper at this point in time? Were you working with specific types of materials?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I was working with paper cord and tissue paper.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, just tissue paper?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Just ordinary tissue paper. And I was—you know, I was using the glue. And I was making—I never have made vats of paper-mâché. I never did it that way. I did it by laying on thin layers of tissues. So I was using very, very moldable paper then and just kind of making that structure right on the mold—packing it, you know.

So that was an eye-opening experience. And so I started then putting these baskets—really looking for a fiber market. And I sort of stepped away—at that point I had done some teaching. I kind of realized I was too—living here in Iowa City you're not going to really be hired immediately around because they want a degree from somebody else.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I wasn't—there was no fiber—I wasn't a—I wasn't trained as a—I couldn't take a fiber job. I wasn't going to get a metalsmithing job. And I kind of put the metals away. It was driving—it's not a good mix, all the wet and glue in the midst of all the metal and dirt. And I just went into paper and started making baskets.

And I—so it was five years on—I can't remember the exact year, it might have been '88 or [198]9—I decided not to make the baskets something—I thought of them as something kind of quick and easy. And I thought, what if I turned my entire force of attention and will onto these objects? What—I had ideas at that point that were very time consuming, I could see that. I knew it was going to take a lot of—they were going to cost a lot more than I had been selling them for.

So at that point I put together a body of work and I went to the American Craft Enterprises show in Minneapolis [MN]. So that was another big step. That's four or five years on.

MS. RIEDEL: So that was mid-'80s, late '80s?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, late—probably mid—maybe—probably late '80s.

MS. RIEDEL: And is this when the work began to transform from being strictly baskets to beginning to play with a grid form and becoming more—not yet?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, not yet. This was just simply—I made a piece called *Halo*, I remember, that had multiple, multiple layers. This is when the layering went on.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I made this—these pieces called seed-head with little ticks in each—you know, I have a thousand little picks put in place. I mean, these were time-consuming pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so they were definitely going to be gallery objects as opposed—well, I had been selling in galleries but, you know, these—I really was going to make an attempt to put these out at the highest level of craft and see what I—what people thought. Took a lot of courage in way because I went up there and I thought, well—the response in Minneapolis was very good. And I also started to meet other craft fiber artists like Tim

Harding and people who were doing such interesting things.

So then started about—so this was about a five-year period—and I went to Baltimore [MD], I went to New York [NY], I—the American—they had an American Craft—

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, in Manhattan.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: At the Amory [The Armory Show, Manhattan, NY].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: They had this museum—they called it—it was on, like, museum-quality work or something—a hundred artists. And it was at the Armory. I remember they didn't do it very long.

MS. RIEDEL: This was in the '80s as well?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, I think it would have—1990.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It was 1990. And I also—I went to Philadelphia [PA], I did the Smithsonian show. I remember at the Smithsonian show I met Cynthia Shira. There was some sort of meeting and I met—I just met a lot of people. And that was just very inspiring. And they were—they were there; they were not showing, of course; they were just there for some meeting at the Renwick [Gallery, Washington, DC], I think. And so a variety of famous people came through and, you know, I got to meet them and talk about my work. And so I felt—you know, and then—encouraging words, you know.

And then when I did do the show in New York I met Tom Grotta. And my goal from the very beginning was to get gallery representation and not do any more shows. I never wanted to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: The craft fairs?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I never did. They were exhausting and—[laughs]—and I almost always went alone, you know. And you'd ship all the work ahead and fly in—I remember I had a specialized outfit, you know, so I always had, like, clothes I could work in, and then you'd throw on the silk blouse for the opening and—[laughs]—because the set-up was hard work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, it is hard work.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: When did the work begin to shift from the vessel focus to becoming more sculptural? You mentioned the seed pods and the seed heads, and those pieces begin to feel more sculptural than vessel-focused.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: That was in the late '80s that I did those pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And what was the inspiration? How did that come about? What provoked that shift from baskets to more sculptural forms?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, this realization that: One, I wasn't going to be a teacher; two, I wasn't going to move anywhere and get some other sort of job. I was kind of—my kids were old enough to have an opinion at that point. You know, we want to stay in Iowa City; my husband wanted to stay in Iowa City. And so those were important factors. And I was, like, "What am I going to do?"

MS. RIEDEL: Right?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I thought, I'm going to be an artist. I mean, and so—and then the realization that metalsmithing—I just wasn't really making any impression on anybody with my metals even though I still think I had interesting ideas. And if someone handed me a complete studio, you know, all set up and ready to go I'd

probably go in and try some of them. I still miss forming—that hammering I loved.

But anyway, I thought, as I said, “I’m just going to turn my complete attention to these paper objects. I have a lot of ideas. There are things I can do—is there a market for this kind of vessel? Can I live by selling my work?” Which turned—and the answer turned out to be yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is no small feat.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No. Right, it isn’t. It’s huge because I just couldn’t have gone on making things if no one was interested. I’m just not that kind of person.

MS. RIEDEL: So many artists supplement their work with their—a teaching career or another line so it’s—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right. Whereas I just don’t think, you know, I—for me, the inspiration is often pleasing people and having them be interested. You know, it really is important to me.

MS. RIEDEL: When did the color begin to enter the work, and how did that happen?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: About the same time—and I made, with that show in Minneapolis where I put together this group of more intense work, I did put—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember what year that was?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think it was 1988.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I can look—I can check that on my resume. It was either ’88 or ’89, I would say. And the work would have been done probably in ’87.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: But I put a slight wash on one of the baskets and made the edge—as I said, I work upside down—they’re made upside down. So I just put this wash on the basket as it was upside down that dripped down, kind of flowed down over the folds of the paper cord. And it just sort of rested along the edge. And it dried like that that, so it was just this blush of color on the very tips. It was beautiful.

And so—and then the other thing is, I had been making boxes—I had gone through a period of making boxes—which would have been ’85 or ’86—and I had used torn-up drawings. So there was color there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And Shereen LaPlantz had even put one of those pieces on the cover of her book—*Papermaking for Basketry* or something like that. So there was color there. But it wasn’t intrinsic—

MS. RIEDEL: And pattern too, right?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: What?

MS. RIEDEL: There were patterns in those pieces as well.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, there were patterns. Things were—

MS. RIEDEL: It wasn’t monochromatic or very subtle the way it has become, right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No. Yeah, yeah—with the boxes. So—

[Audio break.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: [In progress]—and I—yeah. And there were metal boxes; I made some metal boxes, and I painted on them.

So paint was always sort of around. But I remember that one—that first piece where I let that wash drip down, and I just thought, you know, this is intrinsic—something about it was intrinsic to the form in a way that the



other use of color had not been.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And all—and I thought I could work in color; I wanted to work with the color as I made the piece, and that has been important to me in getting sort of the form and the color. I want the form and the color to intensify each other, and so some of the pieces like *Orange, Orange*—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—and some of the red—the red pieces, you know, it's like—it's like punch, punch, you know? Form and color.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yes, yes, yeah, yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I'm here. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Do you remember the name of that first piece where those drips happened?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It was called *Horicon*.

MS. RIEDEL: *Horicon*.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. And it is now—I just—I think there were three—there were—it was a three-part sculpture. And I meant all three of them to sit together, and they were never together. They were all sold. So the first one was—had no color.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And that one I just realized is—has just gone into the Museum of Art in Houston.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Does that have a title?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: *Horicon*.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so—it's *Horicon 1, 2 and 3*.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, I think so—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—except for that I'm not sure—yeah, so that one is there, and then the second one belongs to Chungi. She and I traded, I think. I think she has that one. And then the third one is bought—was bought by a collector. Oh, she was on—Jeanne—woman in Des Moines. I'm just blanking on her name. But I—it's—I remember Jeanne. I'll think of it in a—probably at some point; but I can tell you that, and she has the third one [Jeanne Levinson-MM].

MS. RIEDEL: And *Horicon*, what does that reference?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's a—it's a marsh in—

MS. RIEDEL: It's a marsh, okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—in Wisconsin, and it's a huge marsh. It's one of—it's on the flyaway [sic]; so it fills with geese. But it was just—it was important during my pregnancy.

I had—I guess this happens to some pregnant women. When I was in Milwaukee, pregnant with my daughter, I had all these marsh dreams. And I made my husband take me to Horicon several times because I want to—I just didn't understand this at all. I guess now, it's not so uncommon for women to have wild dreams when they're pregnant. But that happened to me and so—but I remember the beauty of that marsh and being there in the fall, various times of year. So that's where that comes from.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That's helpful. I didn't know that.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, yeah. One thing I haven't mentioned is that, in terms of the baskets being accepted also is that Chunghi showed my work to Jack Lenor Larsen.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: He was—he was influential too. He was very encouraging and wrote me a letter. He bought some pieces, and he wrote to me and gave me, you know, various bits of advice. And he put me in a show he had—that he curated in Santa Fe, and so I had a chance to meet him a couple times. And so that was also—that was right in that—I think that was also—I think I was in that show in 1990. So somewhere in that period—also he was in it. You know, the fact that he was encouraging me was very important.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: The early pieces were often built on commercial forms that you found lying around the house, yes?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: How long did that go on for, and then what was the transition to forms that you were actually building yourself? Or when and how—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Let's see.

MS. RIEDEL:—did that come about?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I started out my first one—it's kind of a funny story. The arts campus had these huge—had these lights through the whole—big globes, and I think there were three of them, and they were big. They never seemed that big when they were up on there. But there was one—a big plastic globe—and right—there was one of these lights right between the sculpture studio and the metalsmithing studio. So—and this is one of the first pieces I made.

Somebody broke it; somebody threw a rock and broke it. And the repairman—I mean, the maintenance men came; they replaced the globe; they probably had a bunch of them. They replaced the globe, and they left the broken one, which—it just had a hole in it, you know. It wasn't completely busted up or anything. And I suppose because it was the sculpture yard—[laughs]—and [it was ?] just full of junk anyway—[laughs]—they just left it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I thought—and I saw that, and I thought, I want that. And I sort of moved it closer to the—I didn't know if they were coming back for it, if I could just take it. They just left it in the sculpture yard. So I kept moving it closer to the metalsmithing studio. And finally, I just took it. [They laugh.] And took it home, and I made a big, huge basket called—

MS. RIEDEL: How big was it?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, it was like—this? It was like—

MS. RIEDEL: So two or three feet across? Okay. Yeah.

MS. : [Inaudible.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: 24, [2]5 inches, yeah. And called it *Cauldron*, and that was in my MFA show.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The second—and the other piece was made over a gallon oil—olive oil can that probably was left over from my kitchen. And then what other one I did—was over a wok, a restaurant-sized wok. I don't know why. My husband and I always had these woks, which we bought in Chinatown in Chicago, at the Chinese restaurant supply. I don't know why we cooked in that, but we did. And that just disappeared from my kitchen and became a mold too.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So that—those were the first three.

And then I started—the olive oil can is too small. So the—and I—the way foam core came into my life is very odd because I've always loved to do my own photography. And metalsmithing is—it—filming—photographing metals

is difficult because it—especially if it has a reflective surface.

And so I had built a little box, not so little, you know, out of foam core, and put in—you know, I made this little box out of foam core. And I had been—there was an article in *Metalsmith* magazine about how to do this and how to construct a box out of foam core with glue, and it was very sturdy, and I took—and I photographed my metal in it. You know, I just—through the little keyhole or whatever for your camera, and you got this nonreflective surface. So I knew how to build a box, and I needed—I needed bigger boxes. So I made the—these things that were shaped like a large oil—olive oil can, you know, just bigger.

So I started right away making the shapes I needed, and then gradually it occurred to me how—you know, I could score them, and they could be curved. And I just—one thing after another as I looked at—I'd think of a shape and then try—what can I do? How can I make that, you know? So I—I guess I'm self-taught in foam core. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: One thing that we talked about again this morning—we haven't talked about yet on disc—is the significance of being trained as a metalsmith and then moving into this completely alternative material and what effect that's had on the work, on your way of thinking about the work, on the forms, the construction process.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Well, metal, I think, is very sturdy. It's hard. You have to consider the shape long before you ever put a hammer to the metal. You have to know exactly where you're going. Metal's very unforgiving, and I struggled with that the whole time. But I did absorb some lessons about dealing with that.

And so, when I went into fiber, I just thought in a different way. I knew that from the very beginning. I thought like I was making a metal object, and I had to have a perfectly set base. No rocking—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—you know. It had to have a certain amount of sturdiness. Nothing—people often say, “Oh, your work is so fragile; it's so ephemeral.” It's not. It's very sturdy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Some of those things are a couple inches thick.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so that I got from metal and, as I said, I sometimes just take a mallet and, you know, like, knock that paper into shape. I just want it to be very precise; I want it to be very sturdy, and it's—every piece is well-thought out. So that's just the—that's just what you get when you study metal. And I think that did—very few fiber people probably studied metalsmithing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's just—it's just not a typical mix. And all I think—fiber is so—people, like, go to it because it's soft and, you know—think of all these effects, and I just never approached it that way. I just took all my metalsmithing sensibilities.

The other thing that, I think, makes my work vastly different, and still may, is that I don't make my own paper. So there's a completely different surface. I use handmade paper, and I use commercially—machine-made paper. It doesn't matter to me. I'm making papier-mâché—it's all going to—it all gets kind of scrunched up. But when I need a surface, I sort of start with what I need. I pick out the kozo momi—or whatever it is, I start—I know what that's going to look like.

And so it never—a lot of the work looked like handmade paper, badly made handmade paper, whereas I was buying the very best paper, by the very best paper makers, and Iowa City is a paper-making city. I had access to some very nice papers when I used them. Mostly I'm making papier-mâché, and I'm just concerned that I'm using an acid-free tissue or, you know, whatever, to get the surface I'm after. But, yes, I think those two things made a real difference. And my work didn't look quite like anyone else's.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Structurally, form-wise, their roots are in metalsmithing.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: The other thing that comes to my mind immediately with your work is color and how—what the influences or the inspiration were for your use of color going from very subtle—all monochromatic and then very subtle variations on monochromatic—to then absolutely vibrant, brilliant—still monochromatic, but not in any way subtle. What were—what was the—certainly that's less—that's not metal inspiration.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, not at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, in fact, it took me, as I said, a while to get there. Well, certainly, I'm influenced by the landscape, and I've always—and we haven't talked about my sources of inspiration too much yet. But I'm really inspired by what I see around me, and I decided—that's another decision I made, very early on—is that I was going to draw on the sources of inspiration from my actual experience and what I saw as opposed to—which I think is completely legitimate—but as opposed to other art or something that you see in a technological setting or whatever. I just was going to look at things and that—and then make the work of art.

And so I think of myself in some sense as a landscape artist. And those colors come out of what I see. And so the subtleties, sometimes that's, you know, something I see, but also that sometimes I do—you do see things. You know, like I walk out—those red—some of those red baskets—I have these fire bushes outside my house, and sometimes you just walk out in a certain light and that color just, you know—it's just overwhelming, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Actually having seen your garden now—[they laugh]—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—I mean, I can believe that because I think, that red? But, you're right—out there? Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. It's there, it's there. So that's really the source of it.

And I do some—I do often do a drawing, you know, when—before I start. So there is some of that. I haven't always kept my drawings or protected them; they're just—they're just part of the process. But, you know, I do—

MS. RIEDEL: And we definitely will talk about that working process.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I think we'll get there; I think that—because there have been a few different working processes.

I had a question, and I lost that train of thought. We'll just come back to it.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, I do want to think—early on, there are some pieces that feel very much based on grid and geometric form and not on organic form. And I want to talk about that because it seemed to be, maybe with the handmade paper that you were tearing up and putting together, much more column-like, much more—much more geometric. And that really seems to have shifted in—shifted into a more organic form.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Where did all that come from, the grids?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, and what—was that part of a particular series?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, you know the grid reappears all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I think it has a couple sources. And another—so maybe another line of inspiration—but I used to do a slideshow about my work, and I would do—I would do shots of Iowa and row—like fence rows and telephone poles—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—and the way you can come up—upon an Iowa farm, and there's a row of pine trees, perfectly spaced, but rows—and corn rows that flow over a hill.

So I mean, Iowa is not a natural landscape in a lot of ways. There's a lot of regularity there, and so it does come out of that.

I think the other—the other source of it is kind of a desire, you know, taking that same desire to impose order or juxtapose it with maybe the roughened surface of paper. You know, there's that too; this—just like a completely manmade thing as opposed to this sort of seminatural thing that's also in the piece.

And then the third inspiration is, I haven't studied basketry but I've been grouped with lots of basket makers. And so that's a weaving kind of thing. And there's a grid there. And there are a lot of patterns in basketry that

I've consciously copied. And I don't—I've been grouped with—and this brings up another insecurity of mine—I've been grouped with basket makers, but I'm not really a basket maker in some sense of the word—and all—maybe in all senses of the word, and I know they mistrust me. [They laugh.] They do. I've been out there with them. And these are—these are such marvelous craftsmen. I know—I did a basketry workshop. I think I'm always brought in for light entertainment at these.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so I was doing my paper thing. And then these other people are doing these skills. I mean, these are people who—they say, "I'll make a basket." They go down and cut—they go out and cut down a tree. And, you know, they're starting from the very beginning.

And so, yeah—so I've looked at their work and admired it tremendously. I don't have any of those skills, but sometimes, some of those patterns show up.

MS. RIEDEL: I think that is interesting that you bring that up. We have—you know, the metal influence and then this basket experience and then the paper and the nature influence. And it does seem that you come from such a variety of backgrounds and drawn such a variety of histories and techniques and sensibilities and are not firmly rooted in any one of them.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And that is one of the things, I think, that makes the work so unique, is it really is such a synthesis of different media and techniques and sensibilities.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think that's true.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. I want—we've talked about this, we've touched on it a couple of times. At some point the work—you began to refer to the work as "landscape reports," which I think is such a compelling title. How did that come about? Can you talk about that a little?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I think when people ask me to—mostly, that's the question you get asked. After they say, "How did you make it?", they say, "What is your inspiration?" And so I would talk about landscape.

And I think—I never—I mean, I think most people can't see it that way because I never really liked painting a whole landscape—they say, well—you know. So I guess the phrase "landscape report" means that I've taken this little thing out of the landscape and it's inspired this vessel.

And landscape is another thing I feel somewhat insecure about. I don't understand to this day why I don't get invited to be in landscape shows. I think I should belong there. And no one—I don't know if I should talk to some of these curators and suggest it to them, but it's not really ever—it doesn't happen very often. Once in a while, in my Des Moines gallery, I get paired with a landscape person.

But in some sense, that's where—I mean, that's where they—the inspiration resides. And that's where the spirituality resides for me too, which you said we would talk about at some point and—

MS. RIEDEL: Let's go.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Maybe tangentially, or—well—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I just feel that—you know, you mentioned all these things coming together. And I feel like I'm just a conduit for this particular view, this particular part of the world. This is my life, but I'm just a conduit for all these things to, like, emerge into form. And I don't know if that qualifies as a full-scale spirituality, but that's what—how I think of my job, just to kind of reflect back the influences that have come to me.

And I don't—I try to keep out of my work any sense of my own personality. I know that's not really possible, but anything that you could pinpoint to me and say, "Oh, this happened in her life and so this is," you know—"or, "She's a mother, so thus"—I just try to keep all that out and just be as minimal and pure about the actual experience that I have and the actual skills that I have to make this come about.

And then I hope, on the other side, that the viewer will also have some experience, something maybe even transcendent, just that pause for a moment, that no-thought moment of absorbing what they see. So that's the center of it for me.

MS. RIEDEL: I know you've talked about pieces that you feel as being particularly successful as having a quality

of stillness. Can you say any more about that? Is that something you strive for regularly?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, yes, it is. And I have also stepped away from that. But that moment—people would say, “What do you mean, the moment of stillness?” And I’d say, “Well-- usually that piece is symmetrical; it’s solid. And I’m hoping it’s captivating enough that you have to pause.” Sometimes that’s the impact of the color or the complexity of the color or the—I think, in my case, it’d have to be the simplicity of the form or the beauty of the form.

So yes, I’m trying to have that arrested moment. I mean, everybody knows that moment. Sometimes you see something in the natural world that’s beautiful, which are often, for me, the inspiration for a piece that—but often, in an art gallery too, you just, like, “Oh.” And you’re just caught for a moment.

And I know I had another artist say to me that he always made his work as complex as possible so that whenever anybody came back to it, there was some new element for them to consider. And I guess my method is completely the opposite. You know, it’s so simple and it’s so direct, I’m hoping that that’s the captivating thing. So that stillness is what I mean.

MS. RIEDEL: It’s interesting because I think it is and it isn’t. I mean, I think one of the things that’s captivating about it is it—it is still, but at the same moment, you absorb how incredibly complex it is, that there’s not—there is so much that has gone into it. And whether you understand the technique and the process in full or not, it doesn’t matter; there’s still a sense of stillness and simplicity, or simplicity, but then there’s a sense of just how overwhelmingly complex, you know, it is in order to get that simple.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Yeah, that’s true.

MS. RIEDEL: It’s interesting; when I think of them, I think of them—I think—I liked—I’m engaged by the concept of “landscape report,” but I think, almost with the term “notes from the field”—field notes.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, that’s better. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. They feel like field notes. They feel—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, that’s better. That’s better.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, just little fragments or notes from the field, you know?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. I’ll use that if you don’t mind. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Please do. Please do.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I’ll always attribute it to you, I promise.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah. I think—yeah, I think there are—they feel—each of them individually feels like a different sort of note or report from there.

I want to—I want to make sure that we cover fully what we need to about these early forms before we move on to discuss the workshop.

So it seems that a lot of the initial forms and ideas were in place really from the start, starting with some of the early—there were—there was the sense of the tall grass forms, there was the sense of the seed balls, there was the sense of the bowls. And then it seems as if, for quite a period of time, there was an experimentation with that, with scale, with color—yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, absolutely, because I’m—I need to make quite a few pieces. I mean, I make between 20—on a normal year, 20 and 24 pieces a year. So it’s a lot of production and time—time-consuming.

MS. RIEDEL: That’s a lot of production, yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I make—I’ve made fewer as I—as I go on.

But yeah, so there were—so anything that captivated me about a piece—say, if I made a piece and I thought, what would that look like if I made it bigger? What if it was red? Or could I intensify this? Could—you know, whatever. Whatever caught me, you know, I’d go back into it again at some point and try to, you know, explore that.

So in that sense, there’s a series sometimes. You know, like, I call it the *Seed Head* [sp] series, but they’re all different. It’s hard to make things the same.

Early on—I've been offered all kinds of things—I know early on, someone said, "Could I buy 50 of each of these?" You know, I have a really high-level catalog. And it was, like, "No." [They laugh.] No, I just wouldn't—I just couldn't even face that level of production, and I don't even want that, you know?

So that—and when people—and I did try—I think, once, I tried to make, like, an edition—like, four pieces all the same. And I actually did just do this—not an edition—for this last SOFA Santa Fe, I did three pieces exactly the same; they were meant to be shown together. It's very difficult to get them all to be the same. So no, I never really tried to make them identical except, as I said, a couple of times when I wanted them shown together. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there particular pieces from that first decade of work or—I know the work really does not evolve in series—but before the workshop with Timothy Barrett, that first sort of 10 years from '83 to '93? I know you've mentioned *Inward* [1994] as being a piece that you were particularly happy with.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—I was particularly happy with. I don't—and I think that's in a private collection. I don't actually know who has it. But yeah, that was a piece I just—from my own taste, I loved that piece. It was natural; there was no paint on it.

I think in terms of—I definitely tipped toward form as more of an interest than color. And so the color is—I hate to say, "always in service of the form," but that's how I think of it. You know, it's to bring something new to the form.

And I loved *Inward*. It had this meditative quality. It was very retiring. It was simple. And—yeah, and I don't know where it is. [Laughs.] But yes, I loved that piece.

MS. RIEDEL: There is a profound quietness to the—I 've seen it, a photo of it.

Are there any other pieces that were satisfying for other reasons?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, there was a box. I made boxes and they were extremely unpopular—

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—in terms of sales. I loved every one I ever made; I loved those boxes. And one was called *White Bird*. And it was just kind of a rectangular shape. And then I made these long, painted, spotted legs that kind of were attached to each side.

And I don't know. I loved that piece. It's—I have it here somewhere.

MS. RIEDEL: And what about it was successful to you?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, it was so clean and hard. You know, it could almost have been a metal object. It wasn't white, it was—but there again, kind of more retiring and simple.

Yeah, I loved that piece. I still have that. I don't have it out. It's all packed away, but—

Let me think of another—I made some baskets where I put branches through the center. And I know I collected a piece of birch. And there is a basket. No one was ever interested in buying this either. A lot of my favorite pieces for myself personally weren't—you know, didn't seem to attract the attention that I thought they deserved. But this one had a—had a birch [branch-MM]. So the white birch—kind of rough through the center of the [basket-MM]—of the—it was just a molded white paper basket—and then a gold—a wooden dowel painted gold. And I loved that contrast of the—and I love touches of metal. And not all people who are fond of fiber like any touch of metal in the piece, but—

MS. RIEDEL: So this was a gold-leafed piece of birch if I understand correct—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, the—it was just—no, the—actually, I should have gold-leafed it. I know how to do that now; I probably didn't at the time. But there was no—it was a just a dowel going through that was painted gold. And then the birch next to it that was—just a—the white birch, and kind of not so straight. So it was a contrast. As you looked down into this white bowl, there was a contrast between the two things. And I loved that kind of juxtaposition.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's a word that I think I've just—is absolutely synonymous with your work.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Really?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, absolutely. Just those—those holding of opposites.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: That's amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, thank you. Yeah. It feels like that's where the work comes from. It's just that—a bringing together of opposites that wouldn't necessarily otherwise come together or keep company.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: That's interesting. I haven't—you know, I know I think like that, but I haven't thought about it actually appearing as a—thank you. That's a good thought.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there—do you remember the title of that piece with the dowel?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's right—I still have it. *Double Exposure*.

And then one other piece that I loved—this one is sold—is called *Umbel*. And when I made it, I didn't think anybody would want it. It's, like, a huge—it's 36—almost 36 inches across. And it's, like, a big flying—and it's a gampi piece, so we're maybe jumping into after the post-Tim Barrett period.

MS. RIEDEL: That's okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Big, round—you know, I don't know how—how anybody really displays—somebody has it, so—but I loved that piece. It was—it just kind of hovered. You know, it was big and flat. And it was up a little bit but just kind of hovering like it was winged. So—

MS. RIEDEL: But not convex, concave, not a bowl shape—more of a flying saucer sort of shape?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, kind of a flying saucer. So—

MS. RIEDEL: I think we need to take a break here for a moment.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Mary Merkel-Hess at the artist's home and studio in Iowa City, Iowa, on August 24th, 2010 for the Smithsonian Archives of American Art. This is disc number two.

So let's begin with a significant shift in the mid-'90s, '94, '95, and a class you took with Timothy Barrett at the Iowa—

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—Center for the Book.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did you—how did you become interested in this and how—let's—did you—well, you studied with him for a year?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Two semesters.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, I did. Tim came to the university to teach Japanese and Western papermaking. And I knew that he was here; it was a very big deal when he came. He's written a book called *Japanese Papermaking* [Barrett, Timothy and Winifred Lutz. *Japanese Papermaking: Traditions, Tools, and Techniques*. New York: Weatherhill, 1983]. And everybody agreed that he was going to be a wonderful resource, which he was and is. And after—I'm not quite sure how many years he was here—but I just thought: I really need to find out a little bit more about paper, this medium that I use, about the actual making of it, and I need to be more in touch with what's going on in paper; maybe I'll learn something really important.

MS. RIEDEL: At this point where you using primarily common, commercial papers? Had you branched out into handmade papers and the—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, no—I was using handmade papers. I was using a lot of Japanese paper. I had been all along.

MS. RIEDEL: All right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Getting a lot of it from Aiko's [Art Materials] in Chicago—we made regular pilgrimages there, and also they—you know, shipping—shipments of paper that I used. But I had never made paper.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.



MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I started the class with Tim, and it was very interesting. They do everything there the way it's—as close as possible to the way it's done in Japan. They grow some of the same plants. The process is the same. We did the vat of pulp and all the cleaning of the pulp and, you know, the way the paper is all stacked—wet sheet on wet sheet on wet sheet—and then laid, you know, on a board and dried. I did all that.

But I really didn't like it. And then I did—

MS. RIEDEL: Didn't like it?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I didn't like it. I just—I don't know, it doesn't—it was like, work, you know? And then I did the same with Western papermaking, which he also taught. And so I did the beating of the—of rags and, you know, whatever. We made the sheets of paper. And it was interesting—a lot of things were very interesting. But I really didn't like the process. I really knew I—and I think I knew it from the beginning—I'm interested in constructing things; I'm really not interested in making paper.

And—but lots and lots of things happened in the class. It was an amazing group of people. We had writers from the writer's workshop who wanted to make paper and then write on it—I mean, all kinds of new ideas. We had lots of book people who—there's a really wonderful conservation department and there are classes on actual book binding. So those people were there. And then also people who do typesetting and printing and—so it was just a group of people who were interested in paper for all kinds of reasons; and some artists, of course, like me and conservators as well.

So I—we all had to do projects. And I—in some of the books that Tim was showing us about Japanese papermaking, I saw a small photo of a Japanese lantern mold. And Japanese lanterns are those incredibly fragile and inexpensive little things that go over bare light bulbs. You know, everybody of my era who went through college, you know, had one hanging over a bare light bulb in their tenement or whatever.

It—there—it's a winged mold with a key at the bottom and the top. The bamboo—the wooden part is wrapped around. There are little notches on all those winged parts that hold the bamboo in place. And then the paper is laid over with glue. And the whole thing is—dries. And then the keys are pulled out which causes all those little winged pieces to just fall out through the bottom. Presto—you've got a paper globe and you can hang it over your light bulb.

So I thought—I immediately latched on to that idea as something that would be useful for me both from the standpoint of a new way to make molds but also a way to do something different and three dimensional with the paper that I was making.

MS. RIEDEL: You mean a hollow sort of form?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, and translucent because it didn't—because of that—well, it didn't need a lot of—it had—the structure was somehow there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: You know, it was embedded in it. It just really hit me. So I started working with it. I mean I did—and I—first I simply made a Japanese—I think I made a Japanese lantern. And then I figured out a way to make the mold so that it could be closed in, so it could be a vessel. And then I got interested in the molds—this is over a period of a year. And then I got interested in the molds and started making the molds part of the baskets.

So then I made these doubled walled vessels—and just one idea after another. So I really—and I—I was having my second show with browngrotta [Arts Gallery, Wilton, CT], so this was '96—1996. And Tom was, of course, quite surprised to see a whole new body of work appear completely different from the one that was, you know, three years before or whatever it was—that was not too big a spread of time.

But he went ahead and showed it; and he sold it. And so I just added a whole group of things to my repertoire that—I learned some things about paper, how it dries and shrinks at different ratios so that, you know, when I made the checkerboard boxes at that point with—which putting those two separate papers side by side with different beaten consistency caused them to just rumple up and—but still maintain the form—so just lots of things to experiment with.

So that led to all the translucent gampi vessels—gampi is one of the traditional papers of Japan—which I had not used before. I had been—I had used kozo—a great deal of kozo. And also this—kind of these ruffled grids I folded into the box forms—it was going sort of back to boxes but now translucent boxes. And then I also went through somebody—there was such a wealth of knowledge in the class. And somebody taught me how to bleach leaves and take the organic matter out of them and so you'd get these leaves and kind of skeletonized and all

that. You've probably seen that kind of thing.

So there were lots of things to experiment with, you know. I never did want to go back to papermaking or add that to my serious processes but I learned a lot. I do make paper now occasionally, buying an already processed and beaten fiber like flax or something and—you know, but not very often and almost never in the last few years. But I do understand it. I made a very simple kind of paper with a very simple kind of screen.

But—Tim also opened up to me a lot—more access to conservation papers. That's the goal of what he does, is to make conservation papers. And he's made the papers that back the Declaration of Independence and that kind of repair that has gone on in Washington. So—

MS. RIEDEL: So very high-quality, acid-free, archival—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, absolutely, yeah, you know. And he does make also a variety of book papers—book—heavy papers that you can use for document covers and that kind of thing. So it's an interesting thing to have right here in my own small town, you know, just a fascinating opportunity. And Tim himself was a very supportive person. More—I mean, he's not an artist, but you really feel that he is in many respects.

And I did take—another thing—I went—there's a conference that's held every year called PBI, Paper Book Intensive. And it brings together people in all these different areas—book making, paper making; you know, leather tooling, scroll making—all these things that revolve around paper and books. And I attended one of those workshops and I took a course there—another course from Tim. It was called the lantern workshop. And he was just experimenting with—and this is before there were LEDs so this was probably '97 or [199]8. And he was just exploring the translucent qualities of paper. He—and it was team taught—Richard Flavin, an artist who lives in Japan. So it was Richard Flavin and Tim Barrett.

And that was fascinating for me. I made a lantern, which I had in my studio for years. I never—I always wanted to go back to it and I didn't go back to it—just never got everything to come together. But now I am—I'm doing, actually, a group of lanterns.

But anyway—and Tim was also responsible for another thing. So that's back in the back of my mind, not appearing until 2010. But Tim also—and this would have been probably 2004—it's the Oaknoll commission. And that came because of Tim. An architect in town was doing an atrium for a retirement home—very high-level, wonderful building.

And the architect—the designer and the architect contacted Tim Barrett and said, you know, "We need a great, big work of art. Do you have a student who could just—I guess there wasn't a whole lot of budget; I'm not quite sure—could you just recommend a student who can just do something for us?" And he looked—I guess he thought about it a little bit, he said, "You can't have as student, this isn't what you need." And he recommended—he gave them my name.

So this led to the—to the Oaknoll commission which was 10 feet—as we finally worked it through—there was a committee and the architect and everybody. And I gave them several ideas. And they came up with this thing that's 10 feet by 10 feet, and it's really a flattening out of the—of the gampi baskets and paper lanterns that I'd made with Tim. So this is long span of time from when I'm studying with him until he recommends, and so we're leaving out a lot about the other work.

MS. RIEDEL: And we can come back to that. But I do think this is interesting because this was another really significant shift in your work—wasn't it—was the flattening out.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Flattening out, making—and making wall pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was *36 Leaves and Flowers* [2008], yes?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, *36 Leaves and Flowers*—36 18-inch-square panels about two inches deep. And there is imagery in this piece. That was what was important to me—imagery of leaves and flowers, not—it was sculpted, but it was more like a bas-relief. And I was actually drawing. And this was—and I had—

MS. RIEDEL: With the structure, with this form—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: With the structure—with the structure, with the—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. With the scaffolding of the entire structure—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The interior structure and then gampi paper stretched over the surface—so all these ideas came directly from these two semesters of work with Tim. And I also did the chandelier for the area—for this atrium, which was a piece 36 inches across. Did not—I had to build it in the garage—I don't have a door that

wide in my studio. And I had to have it welded. I couldn't just—it was too big. So I had—a welder made a metal framework. And so it was built over that with extra-thick museum board.

And so that was—

MS. RIEDEL: And gampi paper on this one too?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And gampi paper, yes, so it matched. The two paper pieces were kind of a pair. And that was just a tremendous experience, you know, having the installation process. I had to hire a truck to get the stuff—to get the chandelier over there. And all these—it was just again a whole new thing for me. And I'd done multiple residential commissions. And this is—was—there were two commissions that year. So this was really my second public commission.

MS. RIEDEL: This was 2006?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. And what was the first? Was that—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The first one was the Marriott, also in town, where I did three baskets—this is behind the reservation desk—three five-foot baskets.

MS. RIEDEL: Those were the *Sentinels* [2006]?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The *Sentinels*, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: The very tall grass pieces.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The tall—and these were like my other vessels, just bigger. So it was a year of intense work.

MS. RIEDEL: And were those the first public art commissions?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, yes—that were completed.

MS. RIEDEL: And certainly two of the most significant—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Still, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And particularly for me, they were important for me. The size of both of them—I still haven't made a piece that's bigger than that 10-by-10 wall piece, that's that Oaknoll piece.

MS. RIEDEL: I want to talk a little bit about the gampi paper too—because that seems to have really transformed the work in so many ways—and what about it is in particular compelling to you and why that material has continued to—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, the—yeah, continued—I love the color; it's kind of a warm honey color naturally. And it has a tautness—so you stretch it over a form and it dries up and it's very—it just kind of pops into shape. Not all papers do that, so—but—and there's no color—not much color involved. I use a little bit of colored pencil sometime to bring forward the lines that are underneath—the structure that's underneath it. And I know several of my galleries have said, "Don't give us that until you get some color into it; we want color."

MS. RIEDEL: Really? Interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So—yeah. And that was another—and I—and I was happy not to work in color. I mean, I think it's enough to take on actual imagery and drawing and—because that isn't something—I'm able to draw, it's not that. But I have—it's not something that's been in my repertoire to a great extent. So I'm still thinking where that can go—and there's so much technical—I mean, there are things you can't draw because of needing the form to be sort of a certain height just to work technically.

You know, there are a lot of things to consider. You almost have to design it on the spot—at least I do—because I can't always just foresee every single place where I'm going to need one structure to be another size, because the planes are what make it work so that the paper can stretch over them. If it doesn't stretch hard enough then you don't get a clean line. So there's just—there's a whole—it's really—I'm just totally absorbed when I'm working on those. I mean, I am thinking hard. And it's really fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Its interesting material too because it doesn't—it doesn't look, necessarily, like paper. I mean, it

almost has a feeling like gut in many ways. Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah it does. It does. Especially—and then I often—I do use an acrylic coating over the surface to strengthen it. And I sometimes dye that slightly. So I change that color. It doesn't work very well to actually try to color it. It's not—

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible]—dry—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Because then—too much pigment in the—in the coating and it's mottled, you know, or you don't—you lose the translucence. So it's kind of subtle there what you can do. And—but I did have a commission just 2008 or—let's see, it was—I did it just before I went to Tokyo. So 2009 I did do a completely colored set of these. And they were geometric. And I didn't—I didn't use the gampi paper. This is the Marshalltown, the *Prairie Flowers* commission [2009]. And those are brightly colored.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. And they're very, very different looking.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right. The architect there—there was a red wall and I wanted—and they didn't have a large budget so I couldn't just cover it with a piece. And I thought, how can I just make that red wall part of the piece? And so I landed on doing these very brightly colored squares that are set a certain distance apart. And then the red wall behind them is what causes that sort of zap visual effect. And that—I think that worked very well. I've been there to see it and I'm quite pleased with that.

But so I have managed color in this. And I've—it takes some careful planning because many—and experimentation with—I used different papers primarily—just thin kozo papers that I painted so they're not -- translucence isn't a part of it; it depends on the color. And then I also have to—because it doesn't dry with the same tautness, it's just a slightly different—slightly different thing.

MS. RIEDEL: And just to clarify, for the disc, this is the Marshalltown Public Library [Marshalltown, IA], yes?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Marshalltown Public Library.

MS. RIEDEL: *Prairie Flowers* is the name of the piece?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: *Prairie Flowers* is the name of the piece.

MS. RIEDEL: All right. Okay. And then there was one other commission that happened right around this time, I thought, at the Methodist West Hospital [Des Moines, IA], is that right?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes. And this was a piece that—

MS. RIEDEL: The commissions all seem to just sort of come at once.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, I know. And it happened twice this way where I have back-to-back commissions and I'm working very, very hard.

The Methodist West commission came about because the designer for the project saw some of my wall work at Olson Larsen—this is another gallery that's been very import to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Where—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's in Des Moines.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: West Des Moines. And Marlene Olson is the owner. And she saw the work there, and then Marlene showed her slides of the Oaknoll piece. And so she was—so the designer for the hospital was—it's a very large, high-ceilinged but very traditional room—has kind of a damask wallpaper and then it had the—she called it the water feature—there's a wall of granite with water falling down it. And then opposite this is a huge fireplace. It's a—I say a traditional room, but everything's so oversized. It was really quite unusual.

And the mantel of the fireplace was 11 feet long. So—and she wanted a piece—we looked at the space—she wanted a piece that went over the fireplace. She wanted it to have flowers and leaves—hospitals—you know, I've worked for—I've had some commissions in hospitals and they don't—they're very specific about subject matter. It has to be very, very pleasant.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: People are not generally happy when they're there—sometimes they are—but a lot of times—you know. So anyway, she wanted flower and leaves. And she didn't want—the piece at Oaknoll was inspired by a colonial quilt in terms of its organization.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And that quilt had geometric and flower images—some applique—anyway. And that was kind of the planning—

MS. RIEDEL: Is this a well-known quilt in a museum collection?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It is. It's in a museum collection and I can show you—I have an—we can—we can—I don't quite remember. I hate to say it without—but anyway.

So she wanted it all to flow together. You know, she wanted not that—not that organizational pattern. And so I worked—it's really hard, 12—so the piece—well, we decided it would look more modern if it extended beyond—it would fill the space better if it extended beyond the mantel as opposed to just being above the mantel.

So I did a piece that's 12 feet long, six feet high. And so really to get the whole thing to—I spent probably more time, maybe a month to six weeks, working and reworking that drawing to make sure everything would work and the design would work and all that—because it's all done in blocks.

And I do think it came out well for the space—

MS. RIEDEL: And this is a very abstract sort of wave, sand pattern piece?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah—no. It's flowers, it's—it is—it's not really abstract. It's flowers and its leaves and it flows from square to square so that—so it's like a big image.

MS. RIEDEL: What's that thing we were looking at downstairs before we started?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: That was called *Wave Patterns*.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Okay. And where is that?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, they're residential.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I can't say—I mean, I'm sure the galleries can tell me who owns them but I don't actually know.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, Okay. So the big commercial installations have been both flowers and leaves?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: All flowers and leaves with the exception of *Sentinels*.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And Marshalltown—that's geometric.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, Okay. And are—how do you—how do you feel about commissions and are these the ones that you are happiest with?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Commissions?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, commissions in general. Are you happy to entertain them?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I'm—I am. I've done dozens—literally dozens—of residential commissions.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow, Okay. And are that 3-D or wall pieces or both; the sculptural forms or—[inaudible]?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Everything—not just wall pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Vessels—everything. And it's been important to me. And usually commissions come to me—most of my—I bet probably way more than half of my commissions have come from Tom Grotta. And he handles it so beautifully because generally I get a picture of the space and he will have discussed with the client—you

know, the clients always see something of mine that they like. And so Tom lets me see the space, he'll give his suggestions sometimes of, you know, this was perfect; too big, too small; too red, too green; you know.

And so then I look at the space and I just—you know, it's a wonderful opportunity to have—to make a piece that will fit perfectly somewhere. It's really a wonderful opportunity. And often, the client puts in request that's kind of interesting. You know, they'll say—I know one client said, "Well, I have this space that's eight feet long—it's an eight-foot shelf or something, but occasionally I need to put the work all at one end."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I—so I designed—you know, I designed this piece that had multiple—it was a multiple-part basket that could just telescope itself, you know? And that was a fun project. And it was an interesting piece. And it—you know, it could work in different ways. So lots of things happened like that with the commission because the clients don't hesitate to say—and they often say what it is they like about your work.

I don't get any chances to interact with people—with clients personally. You know, it's all done through the Internet and through Tom and or through Marlene or whoever's handling the commission. I did do a lot of commissions for Gallery Materia in Scottsdale [AZ] for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like they've all been fairly successful and happy experiences.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: They have—for the most part they have been. I've enjoyed—you know, I haven't—you know, I know lots of artists have sort of horror-stories about being asked to do things that they feel are compromising in some way. But I can't say that that's happened to me yet. If I did, I guess I said no early on the process or something.

I would never—no one—I don't remember anyone ever asking me to do something that wasn't something I did; you know, like saying, "Well, we know you make vessels but why don't you, you know, copy this" or something—no, it doesn't happen. And I think it's because of the quality of the galleries I work with as well. Everything is pre-screened before it gets to me. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And it sounds as if you really have been able—these commissions have offered an opportunity to experiment in a way that hadn't perhaps occurred to you before.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Exactly. You know, I have to be grateful because sometime—you know, when I got the Oaknoll commission, I felt like saying, well, I don't do wall things. Except, how often do you get the chance to do a piece 10 by 10? It hadn't fallen on me before. And I thought, well, how exciting.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you have an immediate sense of how you would do a wall piece?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No. No, I did a whole drawing and even a sample some sleepless nights because I finished it with the idea of doing maybe, like, rolls of paper or—I don't know, just a collage that was kind of attached to a backing. And I—when I finished I thought, all right, this isn't going to work. I mean, this little piece is kind of interesting but, you know, 10 years later I'll be finished with this piece, you know, or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I just—and I showed it to the committee and I said, you know, "I don't think this is successful." And they said, "No, we don't think so either. Why don't you—[they laugh]—why don't you—why don't you try again," you know? And then—you know, then—I mean, I'm losing sleep over this because there's a deadline and I'm already behind schedule and I've got to impress this committee. And, you know, then it just—you know, the light bulb went on and I thought: Let's try this.

And I showed it to the architect and the designer and they were happy. And the committee—the problem was, and they were so—they had a lot of faith in me, I guess, because I said, you know, "I can't exactly tell you how this is going to look. I've never done this before." So I'm—in a sense I would never be that brave again; to take on a big commission like this and not—really not have a grasp of what was going to happen and how it was going to look. That was pretty scary.

MS. RIEDEL: It's pretty extraordinary, though, that it seems like it was the—this commission was the catalyst that moved your work in a whole new direction that probably would not have happened otherwise.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. I think that's quite possible.

MS. RIEDEL: And it—if I'm understanding it correctly—it's as if the internal structure and scaffolding that you used from the lanterns now became the lines with which you drew on the wall pieces.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Exactly, exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: So it was still structural, but was—it was more two-dimensional rather than so three-dimensional, and it was more about line and drawing than it was about form at this point—or as much about line and drawing as about form. That's interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Exactly. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What about lighting of these pieces? Because it seems the gampi paper and especially those three-dimensional forms are so much about light and transparency. And they're flattened and put against a wall. Were you concerned about that and were you happy with the way they worked? Do they need to be lit a certain way in order to really show them off?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, because I was working directly with the architect, there was always—I think they're lit well at night. I mean, when the lights are on. There is a whole wall of windows. And I've actually had quite a bit of fun photographing this piece—that Oaknoll piece at various times of the day and how the light falls across it. And it does change it. I mean, it's a constantly changing thing.

I've had a lot of positive response. I live in the same community, so people are always saying, "Oh," you know, "I just saw this." And there's been a lot of positive response to it. And so I feel good about that; I think it is a successful piece on many levels. Probably if I—I mean, if I was doing it today, I'd have a lot more experience—it might be quite different. But—

MS. RIEDEL: How so, do you think?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I wasn't very concerned—as I said, I used the inspiration of this colonial quilt as the inspiration for how I was going to combine these—some are—there's actually sort of two drawings styles kind of combined. Some of them are a little more geometric and others are definitely kind of sketched, almost. And that was how this quilt seemed to me—to be between drawing and geometry.

And so I haven't gone back to that. I mean, I was looking for an inspiration for how to do a composition when I couldn't predict what it was going to look like—I couldn't control it. And so that—and I haven't gone back to that. I don't know—maybe I will again at some point. I don't think it's a—I think it—I think it works for the space. It's such a big piece. So that might be different. I've tried to make—

MS. RIEDEL: The sense of composition?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. I've tried to make the compositions a little more consistent.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And that was really a grid that was—they're—they're very distinct from each other—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It was a grid. Yeah. And I was thinking of a—

MS. RIEDEL:—without an overall pattern.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. And I was thinking of it as like a quilt—quilt squares where you could put together, you know, various sort of different squares. And now I don't do that so much. They're either—it's a lot more one thing or the other.

MS. RIEDEL: When you think—shifting gears a little bit, but we jumped right into the wall pieces and the commissions—I want to go back and just talk a little bit about the Japanese lantern pieces. Are there particular pieces from the few years that you worked on those that you are particularly satisfied with or felt were especially successful?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, there are some. The one that's called *Translucent Basket*—I showed it to you this morning, the big sort of pumpkin-shaped—I think that's a very successful piece. And the one that we talked about, Umbel [2004], which is—as I said, it's like a hovering spacecraft—I felt came out very well.

The ones that are—that have—there are some birch-rimmed pieces. And I had a very limited amount of birch bark, and I haven't seemed to come across—somebody gave me that—I haven't seemed to really have any of that or find it or anything. I loved those pieces with the birch. I just thought that, there again, there was that difference in roughness and refinement that I really enjoyed.

So those are the pieces that I felt happiest about.

And there's a piece that's owned here—it's owned by Kirkwood College [Cedar Rapids, IA], which is the local

community college. And they bought one of the pieces. It's called *Oval Basket*. It's a very simple piece. And it has a thick bamboo rim. It has just a regular reed pattern in the—in the—it's such a simple piece that I think it rivals *Inward* for tranquil piece. And that's a piece that I felt was very, very successful.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember roughly when that was completed?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think it was right about the time that I was taking the class or the year after.

MS. RIEDEL: So '95 or '96.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, somewhere in there. I can—I can actually come up with the exact date if you need it.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about what you're working on now, because there—completely—a shift again.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, I know. This is, again, back to Tim Barrett. I really should send him a thank-you note. [Laughs.] I have thanked him in person, but—

MS. RIEDEL: I imagine.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: This stems back to the lantern workshop. We did a—we did a lot of things. We made—actually, what most people were doing—well, I did one too—you make—you take out—you lay—you pull up a sheet of pulpy paper and you lay fibers on it and you make a picture. You make some parts—you use your finger and make some parts—either holes or extra-translucent. You let it dry and you—maybe you put sticks in it and then you bend it around, and it just becomes a candle screen. You put a candle inside. Tim had all kinds of suggestions for how to light these things.

But what I did for that class, I made a box with a little translucent pyramid. It was a pyramid-shaped box with a little translucent top on it. And I had—he had a string of—I know he brought all kinds of lighting things. And it was a little string of Christmas lights or—I can't even remember, but I think—I remember putting the one little Christmas bulb up in that translucent pyramid. And then, of course, the cord had to drag out the bottom. And then all the other lights were inside this dark box. So we had just this one little lit part. And that fascinated me. But, of course, it just didn't function. The Christmas lights got the box very hot. And, I mean, it was a total fire hazard, I'm sure. But I kept it in my studio; even though I couldn't think of a way to use it, I felt, "What kind of tiny light bulb will work?" And, you know, whatever.

And then—and people are always telling me to make these things into lamps. And I don't want to make lamps, but I am really interested in the light effects. So I was out at one of the local home stores and I saw these—this was a couple of years ago or a year ago—these little LED lights; they stick on the wall and they have a little pretty high intensity beam and no cord. And they just seemed so perfect that I could go back—that I could put these into some kind of box; there's no heat, there's no cord, there's just—and then my husband—but I wasn't quite sure—how is this going to work, how is this going to work?

My husband brought a box for me, beautifully made paper box from Japan that was sturdy, and yet there was a refinement to it. And the parts—what was important for me is that the parts fit together. You could pull the one part up, and it came—you didn't have to take your hands and pull it apart; you could just lift it off. And I thought, that's what I have to do. I can make these lantern boxes into boxes and I could put the little LED in and make these lights—they're not lamps, they're just sort of gently glowing sculpture. And that's what I'm—I just can't wait to get started—made one. And they have to be seen in a dim situation or you can't see that they're lights. So they need a special environment to display.

MS. RIEDEL: And that one's interesting too because it's the first time I can think of a piece in a very long time not being so strictly monochromatic but being really contrasting—more like the checkerboard flags, which I don't think we've really talked about yet either; we should do that—but a real contrast between the black base and that tiny white—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: That tiny little—

MS. RIEDEL:—pyramid.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—pyramid, yeah, yeah. I'm excited about and I'm interested in the whole project.

And I—I've kind of decided—I don't know that this is going to happen, I hope so, but the—I want to display them for the first time in a stone chapel or a stone room in—there's a Cistercian monastery in Dubuque [IA] built in sort of the European style; it's a stone building. And down in the basement, below the main chapel, there's a place—there are these stone rooms and they're quite dim. And the abbot has asked me to do a show there. And that's kind of an unusual opportunity. And so—but I kind of am putting him off. I don't—the work doesn't seem right. I thought, "How will I light it? I don't want to haul all this stuff into this—where are we—you know, how is



this going to work? Does he realize this won't work?"

And it just occurred to me, this would work beautifully. This would be the place to sort of inaugurate this work. So I'm hoping that that will—that will—I'm hoping it happens this fall. I have to complete all these pieces, but I don't think I will have a problem with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think you'll be able to get enough pieces done this fall, because you just have one complete and the second started, right?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I have one complete, but I have—see, I have eight—eight or—I have eight weeks coming up where I'll be able to work. And they're actually—they're—these—the building of the boxes, it's not—there's not any drying time there. What makes my pieces tremendously time-consuming is the multiple drying processes. I mean, sometimes, it's dozens and dozens. And it can take a day or two for the pieces completely drying off for the next layer to go on. And that's been true of the boxes; they're just simply built. So I have time. That won't be a concern here, unless, you know, something gets in my way.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Are you able to speed up the drying process at all artificially, or was that—[inaudible]?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I use a—oh, I do, yeah. I use a—because it can't take very long because otherwise, there's the chance of mold.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I—it's a dehumidified room with a fan is what I do.

And usually it needs to happen not longer than two days—it has to be dry. And that—and if—you know, I can't get the piece too wet. This is all part of what I've learned as I've gone along. You can't—the—you can't—you can't get it too wet. You know, there's just a limit to what you can do at each layer.

MS. RIEDEL: Does that mean you normally work on multiple pieces at once?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Absolutely. Usually I work on four to six pieces at a time.

And then, if I have something else going on, like building—building those understructures, you know, that's a good thing too; if you happen to get all your wet work done, then you can go and work on another piece. I'm very efficient.

Well, I—you know, it's part of being a producer—is time has to be used efficiently.

MS. RIEDEL: We've talked a little bit about influences in your career—certainly Chunghi Choo; Alma Eikerman; the material itself; Tim Barrett; we've mentioned nature. Is there anything or anyone else—any particular periods of art or artists or anything else—writers, science, engineering—that has been especially significant in terms of an influence in the work?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: An influence.

MS. RIEDEL: People. Maybe we've covered what—

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe we've covered it. I think there's some—in terms of some cultural things, certainly African art. We haven't mentioned the huge collection of African art that exists right here in Iowa City that I studied when I was in graduate school.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Let's talk about that.

MS. RIEDEL: And there is something about the African design. I know Japanese materials touch me and the refinement and all that, but African art has a lively quality to it, especially the textiles. I mean, I was looking at some Kuba cloth last weekend in the Nelson Museum in Kansas City, and I remembered how important that Kuba cloth is—you know, it's raffia, and it's got these patches here and there.

And my work doesn't have that kind of randomness, but I certainly aspire to that. I think maybe as I age, maybe I'll get less careful. And—I don't know; I was just overwhelmed all over again seeing that, and remembering that I spent a lot of time looking at African textiles at a certain point. So that—maybe that's worth a mention, you know. And that's another thing that's been in my environment, is this—

MS. RIEDEL: From any particular culture or any particular place that comes to mind? Or just what you've seen in that particular collection?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Well, it was the—actually, you know, studying it was important, but I think it's the African textiles and some of the—like, the raffia cloth was particularly important to me, but also that sense of the kente cloth and the strips all sown together and the segmentation. You know, a lot of the ways I deal with my small studio is kind of—you know, I look at the way these traditional craftsmen have dealt with the limitations that they—you know, like, they use these four-inch looms but they make these big pieces of cloth, you know? So it's kind of inspiring in the sense that you don't have to be stopped because of one limitation or other. You know, there are ways—and there are creative ways around all the problems that trip you up.

MS. RIEDEL: That's insightful.

Travels: What particular trips or travels have been significant to your work?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The first travel experience was right after my husband and I were married. And he—

MS. RIEDEL: What year was that?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: That was 1973, May of 1973. And he wanted to travel for a year. And so I'd just started art school and I begged him for just the summer. Let's just—I'll just stay here and do one—I'm going to do one more art class, you know?

So that fall, we left. Actually, we left in August and we drove to San Francisco [CA]. And—so I hadn't been to San Francisco before. And then we drove down the coast highway to Los Angeles [CA], and I had family in Los Angeles, and that had been a frequent destination as a child. So we visited my family.

And then we went on to Santa Fe [NM]. And that was—I hadn't been to Santa Fe before, so that was a wonderful experience. Santa Fe wasn't, like—there wasn't—it wasn't the art community it is now; in '73, it was quite a dusty little town. That was a tremendous—that's a tremendous memory, when I go back there now for some art event and I remember being there when you could just park on the plaza and, you know, walk around, try to find somebody who was moving in the afternoon. It was fascinating.

Then we came back to Milwaukee where we were living and we flew to Europe. And we stayed in Europe until the spring. And we—

MS. RIEDEL: So six months.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Six months. And we landed in Luxembourg; that's when, in the days of Icelandic—\$400 plane flights, I think. We, you know, stayed over in Iceland—I don't know if you remember—that was the thing to do. It was the cheapest way to Europe at that point.

So we went to Paris for a month. We spent time in Barcelona and along the Riviera for a month. We went to Florence for a month. We went to Rome for two months. We—Venice—I mean, all—it was a leisurely trip. And we were—we had Arthur Frommer's \$5 and \$10 a Day, and I think most days we weren't spending that; we were just as careful as we could be. And my husband is very, very thorough tourist—traveler.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So we didn't—it wasn't, like, we got to Florence and picked what we would see; we just started at the top and worked our way through the Michelin guide, you know?

And it was a tremendous education for me as a—I hadn't—I'm not sure I'd had art survey at that point. And I remember walking into the Uffizi [Gallery] in Florence and I was just blown away, because even after collecting all my—you know, my impressionist postage stamps or whatever, I had never seen this work. I remember saying to Steve, "I can't stay here; I don't understand anything. Please, let's go." And we walked out to an English-language bookstore and we bought books. I mean, we bought Vasari's *Lives* [Vasari, Giorgio. *The Lives of the Artists*. New York: Penguin Books, 1897] and we bought all these things, and—so at night—and I was reading Mary McCarthy's *Stones of—*I can't remember—*Stones of Florence* or *Stones of—*anyway, those books about Florence and Venice [McCarthy, Mary. *The Stones of Florence*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1959]—at night, in the—in the little pensiones that we stayed in, and going back and looking again and really struggling with it, you know? "I don't know anything about this; this is a whole new world." And I was just—I just fell in love with it. Who couldn't, you know, with Italian art?

Then we went on to Rome. And, of course, then, you know, I have all the ancient art to look at and early Christian art and just trying to be a total sponge. It was an amazing experience.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you spent a lot of time in museums and looking at architecture—

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—monuments, ruins—

MS. RIEDEL: Six months, yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. And we were in—we were in Pompeii. We got—we were in Venice. We went up to Munich. I spent quite a—maybe a week or two weeks in Munich looking at, you know, the German—sort of the German Renaissance in particular.

And then on to England. We were at the—you know, London for a while and British Museum, and ended—we ended our trip in Scotland, which was just because we had some friends—I had a friend there, a pen pal. And so—yeah, it was amazing.

Flying back to Milwaukee and—you know, I remember just coming back and being just amazed and having to get, like, a temp job or something, you know, immediately. [They laugh.] We had spent every penny we had, yeah, which wasn't too much to begin with, but—and then just going to art school like crazy. I just loved art history; it really meant a lot to me. So that was a huge deal.

And then there are—there's been a lot of travel during my art—you know, my actual professional life, mostly to do with going to fairs and teaching workshops. And that has made—I mean, that began to seem like work. And I did do quite a number of workshops for a number of years, and I don't do that anymore.

MS. RIEDEL: And from when to when and where were they, and what was the purpose of those?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, there was probably so many workshops. I mean, I've been in Florida and California and Ohio and Tahoe [Lake Tahoe, CA] and Ghost Ranch [NM] and—but I never taught at any of the big schools, never at Penland [School of Crafts, Penland, NC] or Arrowmont [School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN] or Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME]—none of those. These were mostly basketry-related workshops. And as I said, I think I was brought in for comic relief or something because people there are very serious craftspeople, and yet there's this—somebody who dares to call this work basketry, you know? So I always had a very enthusiastic group, and we always had a good time.

But I also became frustrated because it's a short time—a weekend, four days—not enough time for this drying process. And people—I know I had just wonderful people; they'd stay up all night with their hair dryers, you know—[laughs]—drying their piece or standing even in the ladies' room under the hand dryer, you know? And—but it just—it didn't allow for enough scope.

And finally I decided, “This is too—this is too hard on me,” you know? And I'd give everyone my email and say, “You know, I can—I can help you through the finishing process.” But we just never got to the finishing process. And so at some point I was—not too many years ago, I was getting fewer invitations, and I just finally said, you know, “I'm not going to do it anymore.”

MS. RIEDEL: Would you be interested in teaching at some place like Penland or Haystack? Or at this point you're sort of done with workshops?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I don't know. I don't know; I don't.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And what would you try and cover in the time that you had? What—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I—that's another thing; I don't think about it until—I haven't thought about it. But, you know, I could do a complete—at this point, I could do not a mold-centered. You know, I never have—tried to pass on the wall pieces and—and I'm doing other kinds of wall pieces too; I'm doing—I'm trying to take the basket technique of the fiber—of the reed and put that into wall pieces; I've done several like that. So that's another area that's kind of waiting out there that I'd like to experiment with.

And any of those could be workshop material. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I think I've stepped—maybe I've stepped away from teaching forever. I certainly enjoyed it. I enjoyed the chance to see people and hear their—there's a lot of input that people can give you, even things that—I mean, you see other people doing technical things that are so fascinating.

MS. RIEDEL: I've jumped us into teaching away from travel—[inaudible].

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, travel, yes. Now, the other travel that's happened in my—so I talked about this kind of short travel with the workshops and all, but in the last three years, my husband and I have lived in Cairo [Egypt] and Tokyo [Japan]. And this involves my husband teaching at international schools; he teaches generally junior high-aged children. And so in 2007, we went to Cairo. And I was there—I'm not—I wasn't there the whole year the way he was; I was there in two six-week periods, so not a whole lot of time—you know, three months altogether.

I tried to see—actually, I've done this both with Cairo and Tokyo of not predicting what it was that would interest

me and just kind of seeing what arises. I've never been one of those people who's interested in, you know, the mystery of Egyptian art. The monumentality is absolutely overwhelming and the simplicity of some of the forms is wonderful, but what really just blew me away—and here again, it was something of—I've never been in an environment like this. We went out about 90 miles from Cairo into the desert to visit the monastery St. Anthony's in the—St. Anthony's in the desert [Monastery of Saint Anthony, Suez Governorate, Egypt]. It's an ancient, ancient place, and it's kind of a stucco Christian architecture.

I never—I mean, I just hadn't seen this. I hadn't known about it. That was an overwhelming experience. And the Egyptian desert isn't like the American desert; it—you know, an American desert seems to have, like, some tumbleweeds or some dead plants that might flower, you know. There's nothing out there. It's rock, it's sand, it's—I mean, how anybody—you know, it's got to be in these little places where there's a little bit of water, and St. Anthony's is like a town in the desert. And inside, there are some trees, and onions were growing everywhere under the trees. I remember that. Onions.

MS. RIEDEL: Onions?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Onions, yeah. Onions? I mean, as I said, the place just was a marvel to me. And it—when it was built, it had no door, because it was dangerous; the Bedouins were always raiding these monasteries and so you had to be brought up in a basket. They—I mean, literally, they put the basket and they brought you up. That's how you got in. There was no door. Now there's a door; you just walk in. But—

And then we—the food we ate. And I remember, we had to make—we made an appointment. We called these monks. They wear the ancient traditional garment. They all seemed to have cell phones in their pockets—[laughs]. And so the one—the number that we were given to call to make our appointment was, of course, a monk who spoke English. And he—you know, we talked directly to him. And he said—he assured us, “Don't bring food,” you know; “You'll be fine, we'll feed you.” And, of course, they—when we got there, 50 tour buses, mostly Egyptian Christians—yes, it's not a—not so—there were some Westerners, but very, very few. And the Egyptian

MS. RIEDEL: Fifty tour buses? Five-oh?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, it's like a city. I mean, they were just massing. And it is; it's like a city in the desert. And they have a big cafeteria where you get lentils cooked in—very thin sort of gruel of lentils, no seasoning, and then the bread. And so you get your meal of lentils and a piece of bread. And then they have a little bowl of salt which looks kind of brown like they just chipped it off the wall of the canyon or something, and then a little smear of molasses in a bowl so that you have your bread and soup with a little bit of salt, and then for dessert you take the last bit of your bread and put it in the molasses. [Laughs.] It's a wonderfully satisfying meal, but the simplest—it's just simple. So—

But that was a wonderful day. The architecture and the shapes—it was a wonderful day.

MS. RIEDEL: What about the shapes was compelling?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, there may not have—I guess adobe or stucco or—I mean, they have that vaguely—I mean, they're certainly reminiscent of the—the shapes in the Southwest—native pueblos and things, but different. So—

MS. RIEDEL: How different?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well—

MS. RIEDEL: Material-different or shape-different or both? Color? Proportion?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Probably slightly different color. I mean, it's definitely that sandy—as opposed to maybe a reddish color that you might see.

And the shapes are Christian. I mean, they're kind of—they're kind of aiming at the—which happens sometimes. I mean, it certainly happens with the Spanish churches in the Southwest too, but more African. I mean, it's just more the way a mosque might be shaped, except not exactly. I mean, it was just—just everything about Coptic Christianity fascinated me because it was just something very—I just didn't—there again, I just totally didn't know anything about it. This is—

I certainly haven't digested that experience. And that's the other thing, which is also true of being in Tokyo—living in Tokyo two years later—that I can't say, “Here, I made this piece.” Except I made one piece this spring, and that was the piece that was at SOFA Santa Fe [Sculptural Objects and Functional Art, Santa Fe] this last early summer. And it's called—the piece was called *In Chephren's Temple* [2010]. And that had to do with the

repetition of columns, which is something I've thought about. So that's—it's three red baskets that are kind of flared on the top, and they're definitely columnar and exactly the same, so you have, like, you know—so that piece is the first one I can honestly say, that came from Egypt.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, and that involved a lot of drawings of, you know, series of red baskets, you know, receding into the distance. And they're—they're large. They're not huge, but they're larger than, you know, just—so a little bit of monumentality.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because the way you just described that and the way you just—the hand motion you just did made me think of when you were talking about the Iowa landscape earlier—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL:—and those pines going sequentially in a perfect line down there. But maybe, then, visually you already had this in your mind, and then you saw it in this other—in this other frame.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, yeah, I think the—you know, it's definitely that. And certainly the idea of repetition was what came through in Japan, too. You know, like, the Japanese are fond of, like—we went to one temple in Kyoto with—it had a thousand Buddhas, all the same size, each one different. And they're all there. It's—the building is about a block long and it's—you know, you're just walking along, and you're looking at, like, a thousand. And I remember thinking, "Can I make a thousand things?" Because this wasn't made by one person; it was multiple artisans, but—you know, a thousand things.

And there's a series of prints called *A Hundred Views of the Moon*—

[Audio break.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: [In progress]—I thought, can I even make a hundred things? So yeah, repetition definitely interests me.

Japan was—you know, I've studied Japanese art; I've used Japanese papers; I've thought about the culture; I've read about the, you know, Zen. So it was hard to be surprised. It wasn't—I loved the gardens. I think the one thing that was—well, was surprising was the Shinto religion and the beauty.

We did get to see bits of ceremony, and these clothes that they wear are just fascinating. These are the ancient outfits and the headdresses and all the music and it's all—the ritual is so precise. You know, the brides wear this white hood, and I guess quite a number of Japanese still marry in the Shinto—with the Shinto ceremony. It's gorgeous. Just what I—I mean I—you can't go to the actual ceremony unless you're invited, but you—they walk through the courtyards, and they get their pictures taken in the temples. And so I became—that was just fun and—to see—and the music, you know. I don't know very much, but I—that was just—still—I still think about it, you know. Very interesting.

And of course there is repetition too. We went to one temple, the 10,000 Torii Gates. The Torii Gates are the big orange, and 10,000 of them are on a high—on a hillside, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? Ten thousand?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, really. Ten thousand, yeah—you—so you walk through—there are tunnels that go seemingly for—I don't know—up and down this mountain, and the Torii Gates—it just looked like being in a building because they're just one on the other. And—

MS. RIEDEL: Where is that?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's in Kyoto, in the hills just beyond Kyoto. And there are pictures—my husband has lots and lots of pictures. It looks amazing. So there were those things that I think are—will turn up somewhere. But they'll probably, you know, filter through my own ideas of—I, you know, that I—that are in my life, I would imagine. Well, it's hard to know, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it's interesting because that segues nicely, I think, into your working process. And two things come to mind. The first is that you've talked about having ideas that you're interested in developing. But sometimes that just doesn't happen for years.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Doesn't.

MS. RIEDEL: And the second thing that it makes me think of is what—something you mentioned very early on

and as we were starting to talk was making a commitment to working with things that you yourself have personally experienced. So maybe these are things that will, at some point, materialize further in your work.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right, they might. Or I might discard them as not in my particular subject matter, you know, and so not authentic to me. I think that's really important to me, that it be authentically mine to deal with as opposed to, say, a borrowing like—just what—borrowing something from another culture because I find it interesting. I'd like it to be—I guess I regard this—you know, here in Iowa, this is my actual life as opposed to—and my subject matter. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And that's important.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It is important to me, yeah.

And my working process—you mentioned keeping ideas around for years. Yes, I—everything has to kind of fall in place for me. I don't—I don't struggle against things that I haven't got an answer for. You know, it's like these little lights appearing finally and saying, ah, yes! I don't have to deal with the cord. Because if you—it has a cord, it's a lamp.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I'm not going to make a lamp; I don't care about lamps.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so that and then the box appearing from my husband, just a total out-of-the-blue gift. And so the problems are solved. So I can go ahead; what did it take? Fifteen years.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I'm bad. [Laughs.] Out of my control, though—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—you know, if you don't have the right light, you don't have it. So—[laughs]. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about your working process and how it's changed over time. One thing I think we haven't really addressed directly is that you really developed your own technique for working with 3-D collage and papier-mâché. And would you describe how that came about and—you do a wonderful job of describing that great detail in the video that you sent. What was that called? Very, very impressive.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's called the *Makers* series; so I think it's just my name.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe we can get a copy to send to the archives—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—and we can have a look at that. But let's discuss it at least briefly here because not everybody who's listening to this or reading this is going to have a chance to see that.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: So the evolution of that process, if you would?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And didn't that—you've really worked in at least two different processes from the papier-mâché on the molds to them in more lantern-based work.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Although it is really just a thinner version—

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—of what I do with small pieces of paper. But I started—I think I mentioned this earlier, maybe this morning, that I wanted to finish up a body of work to go with my metals work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I was coiling and not—finding that so time-consuming and not completely satisfying, and my teacher had given me the roll of paper cord. And I—my kids who were, I think, you know, five and seven, probably four and six, somewhere in there, were making all this papier-mâché stuff. And my husband is a teacher, and he had a book on his shelf called *Recipes for the Classroom Teacher*. And I had a big paper carton of hide glue that I needed to use up. I mean, there were all the ingredients, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I saw my kids just so fascinated, and I thought—as I said, I thought, “Why doesn’t—why doesn’t—why doesn’t—why isn’t this an art process? Why don’t—is there something we could do? Could I make these coiled baskets faster? And will I ever graduate from art school?”

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Is there a way out for me? And so it all came together.

And I mean the first—probably two things were just complete failures, and I threw them away. I mean—and I was using, as I said, I had a recipe for rice glue, and I—then I used the hide glue. And eventually those—I did use those two things for about a year, two years, before I went to methyl cellulose. I mean, everything improved.

But it was just a confluence of all those things, and that’s the crux of my technique is to hold some linear element in place with paper and glue—thin paper, and that simply pushed in and it’s—and I think I was as amazed as anyone. It’s a very strong; it can be very sturdy. You can layer it; you can make it translucent; you can embed paper, wood, paper cord. You can use torn-up drawings. Any paper really that doesn’t have much sizing is a possibility for me, which is why I went almost immediately to Japanese papers because they aren’t sized in the way that Western papers often are. So you didn’t need a lot of soaking to use them or anything.

So, yeah, and I just see—I just saw all kinds of things opening in all directions. I couldn’t wait to get to the studio in the morning once I had these elements kind of under control, and I just experimented. And I sold all that work, as I said, trying to build a metal studio. But it was fascinating for me, and it hasn’t stopped.

Paper has been that inspiring to me. I still see things I can do and ways I can build with this. I’ve added paperboard and gatorboard and a lot of other things. But I haven’t—basically I’m still staying, you know, in those four or five sort of ways of working. It just looks different because of these slight variations.

MS. RIEDEL: And something else I recall from, I think, reading about the process is that a lot of the technique is based on variation with thinner and thicker papers—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL:—with different shapes, paper cord or reed or fiber. So depending on what you choose to vary, the—you can get a lot of—there can be a lot of variation in the final product based on—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL:—variations in the process.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Absolutely, you know. A lot—so many things have occurred to me. I mean—drawing, using my own drawings and using thicker papers, using textured papers, using very smooth papers, you know, translucency—I mean, there just seemed to be endless number of things to experiment with.

MS. RIEDEL: Does one piece suggest the next?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Often.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: You know, I think the best way to be inspired is, you know—and I do run into a dry period. I just go down and do something, even if it’s not any—you know, even if it’s—doesn’t seem creative at all to me and just start working on something and—so that—you know, the hours alone in the studio, you know, things occur to you—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—or mistakes happen, and you think, how I could—I could utilize this.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you give an example? Does something come to mind?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Of a mistake? Well, let me think. I'm sure I could because I think that's been—if I can just land on something that's—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, while you're thinking about that, I—another thing that I've noticed is that most of the pieces are all singular forms. But then, at some point, pieces began to appear that were actually a combination of forms. When did that start and how did that come about?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: That—yeah, probably—I'm trying to think. That was part of the landscape, the attempt to make a landscape of baskets. And I go—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—you know, there might have been—I'm not sure if I thought of it or if it was that telescoping commission that sent me off in that direction.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, very interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I mean, that's the kind of thing where you think, well, I can make, you know, a landscape and use—putting the baskets one in front of another and going back and back—so, yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And were there many of those?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Trying to think—

MS. RIEDEL: Well, [you ?] can think of two or three.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But they were this sort of tall grass pieces, maybe wedge-shaped—things where there was a way to make them longer, larger--

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Yeah, there probably were less than a dozen.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Probably less than a dozen. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Have—and are those the only pieces that are comprised of multiple elements to make a single piece—other than the wall pieces?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, yeah, the—then—the wall pieces, yes, multiple, and then this piece that I just did that's three pieces in a row, the *Repetition*, the red one.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right. The temple piece, right? Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. So, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That seems to have interesting potential in terms also of positive and negative space, dimension, shadow—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, and my hope was that it would have—that, at some point, I was—I was kind of angling for a—an architectural space—

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—where I could expand on that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: You know it's—because it wasn't three pieces I wanted to make; it was 10. I just—you know, I just didn't get that far with it. But I really wanted there to be 10 and to have some long space, and that would recreate better what I experienced in Egypt, very often walking through these—or even looking at a fencerow in Iowa, I mean—just, you know, wanted to do that. But I—I don't—maybe I'll manage it. But it's a big commitment of work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.



MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I know I told Tom that after he photographed it, if he wanted to sell the pieces individually, that would be fine.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: We'd have to, you know—because it was really the desire to see it, first of all, but also that it might be better to make it for a specific space. And maybe that'll happen and maybe it won't.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah, that's interesting—right, in terms of a public commission.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Or something or even a residential.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I mean, it wouldn't have to be 10 huge pieces. It could be 10 small pieces. Maybe that I'll—maybe I'll try that, you know. There is something about size, though.

MS. RIEDEL: I know, it's something you've experimented with very consciously.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, the weightiness. My work—often when I've tried, people often say, "Well, couldn't you make a lot of miniatures?", or—you know, and they're—they are really not the same.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: There's a certain size—it gets to a certain point where it doesn't work, and—but, you know, you have to—when you get smaller, it just has to get more refined; it has to get more delicate. The materials have to be smaller, thinner.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Everything—it has to work for the scale. And I did do a piece for a shoe—I did a Shoebox Sculpture show that the University of Hawaii did. And I did have—I thought that was a small successful piece. A lot of my smaller pieces I don't like as well as the bigger, so I—

MS. RIEDEL: And what was the size of that? What were the dimensions?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, it had to fit, all in a—

MS. RIEDEL: A shoebox.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, a shoebox. So it was about—I don't know—

MS. RIEDEL: Six feet tall? Six inches tall?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Four-by-six inches or something like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, tiny. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And using the gampi paper and—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, I used reed. And I bought an extra—and here's what may be a case of—it's not exactly a mistake; but I bought this extra fine reed—comes in sizes; so this was zero—to make this little piece, and then I found that there were so many things I could do with the zero reed that I couldn't do with the slightly thicker stuff and that it made this kind of cloud effect when I made a big piece because there were so many ends. And so then I made a few pieces using that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And now I'm going to do—I have on the drawing board a wall piece of reed. And I bought zero reed, all smoked reed, which is kind of brown. I'm going to do this long wall piece that's going to hang in sections, sort of inspired by—there were so many wonderful bamboo fences in Japan and stuffed with grass or something. I mean, they were just beautiful.

And so I thought—I just immediately thought of them; like, "Wouldn't it be great—hang this fence on the wall?" So I decided I would maybe try to—haven't started. I shouldn't be talking about—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—I have this rule that I don't talk about stuff I haven't done yet. But I've been doing it all afternoon here; so—[they laugh]—

MS. RIEDEL: Sorry about that.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I guess that's from—whenever I—Tom will say, "What are you doing?" And I'll say, "Well, I'm planning." Says, "No, no, I'm not interested in what you're planning; what have you got?" [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Actually I have heard—I've heard artists and writers in particular say that. They just don't—until it's done, they don't want to talk about.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, yeah, you don't really.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

How have your sources of inspiration changed over time? Or have they stayed fairly constant?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think it's been fairly constant, except for these things that I've mentioned about travelling where you—and it's more a way—I think, for instance, with the idea of a hundred things, it's more a way of organizing what you're going to make than changing the inspiration. I go to Japan, I look at the plant life, I look at the way the gardens are manicured. These are things I look at in Iowa too.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I don't know that the sources of inspiration have changed. Things suggest—just, you know, I think it's the—it's not—it's just being out and about and looking at things that—you could—I can go out in my garden, and I'd probably find something there I never looked at before, which could be very—as inspiring as going to Japan. It's possible.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's a matter of taking the time to look at things, and I think we do that more when we travel. And the novelty of what we see can surprise us, I think.

No, I'm not really much of a traveler. I prefer to be in my studio and be at work.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you see as the similarities and the differences between your early work—not meaning metal per se—well, actually it might be interesting in this case to look at it in terms of early work, both metal and paper—and then the more recent work.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I don't think it's changed dramatically. I think it's been a continuum. Like I said, I've used this technique; I certainly got my subject matter under control. I suppose if I was going to—you know, I keep hoping that I'll take time to draw, that there might actually emerge more drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I tend to draw as a tool for—in preparation for building something. So—and once in a while, especially with commissions, I'll do a color drawing before I—I mean, a painting, a water color painting, mostly for the client, and generally send a copy.

And I enjoy that process and it's, like, well, why—maybe I would just enjoy, you know, doing more of that and that, you know, might—that always—that's way out there though. I—if I haven't—so I guess if I were—if I could do anything, I think I'd like to document more, what I—actually do the drawing and keep all that stuff, whereas it tends to get lost in this—you know. I start out with a—with a quick sketch and then a life-sized drawing and then sometimes, if I need to work out the colors, work out the colors and then, you know, somehow this stuff just kind of gets used up in the studio process of, you know—

MS. RIEDEL: So the sketches actually disappear?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, things disappear and—you know, certainly the scale—to-scale drawings are cut, and they're laid out, and they're just on newsprint, and they're gone. And so—

MS. RIEDEL: And do you really—do you have a really specific sense of what you're going to do before you start, and does that change as you work?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I always have a specific idea. It changes—sometimes things don't technically work as well. It's—or something about the piece—as you start to get into the 3-D part of it, from the drawing, you know—usually this can be—you can see this on the mold: Something's not quite right, but you can usually change it. And then sometimes you get, you know, to the piece and it's not—doesn't quite work. And then you might have to make a modification or whatever.

MS. RIEDEL: The mallet comes into play.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. The mallet comes into play. [They laugh.] Yeah.

Alma Eikerman used to say—we'd be bemoaning having to throw a piece away or something, and she'd say, "Well, if you don't lose a piece once in a while, you're not trying hard enough."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I try to remember that. But I almost never actually feel that way, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. I—I'm trying to think. I think I was just talking to Elsa Rady, the ceramic artist, and I think she was talking about studying with you, like at Heynow [ph], and that there would always be hammer by there. And if the pieces—if they weren't—she wanted to install the idea that certain—that pieces shouldn't leave the studio unless were of a certain quality.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And so there would be hammer and—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—you would be encouraged to—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Get rid of them.

MS. RIEDEL:—be very discerning.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Yeah, you don't want all that bad work floating around out there. I don't anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: But I lose—I used to lose a number of pieces, you know, early on, things—but—

MS. RIEDEL: What would happen?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Or just—well, sometimes a warp.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: You know, especially—I did these pieces over the wok, which I loved. But, boy, it was tricky. If the—if the layers weren't put on in—uniformly, you could get warping. And then when you'd pull it off the mold, it kind of—as it dried up—if you took it off before it was completely dry or—

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—just all kinds of things could go wrong. They were so touchy. So, yeah, sometimes there would be some warping or something would not quite gel or, you know—I just lost a piece to warping. I'd used a paper that was highly beaten. I'd made it myself. I'd forgotten how highly beaten it was. I made part, and it just came off the mold, and it just went like that. You know, so that piece was sitting down there, and I'm thinking what to do. It's going to have to be rethought, you know. So—

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe that'll be one of those mistakes that evolves into something else.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah. It'll evolve. But I'm not going to use that paper again. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Has technology affected your work in any obvious way, other than something like maybe LED lights?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, certainly, it's changed the business. If you—we would talk about computers and photography. You know, I started out with learning to take 35-millimeter, black-and-white photos. That's what—

MS. RIEDEL: To document your work.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, and that's what was required by galleries. That's what people wanted when they wanted publicity. And then we sort of moved to wanting slides, and slides were always okay. And the time element, you know—used to be you had a couple months to produce the black-and-white photo, I mean. And now, I mean, my gallery will call me, and say, "Well, send me a photo right now."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: You know, so you pick up your digital camera, and you take the photo. You download it, and you send it to them. So I mean, it's almost instantaneous, you know, compared to the prep time. I mean, I used to do a body of work, and then I'd photograph for a few days. And then, you know, you'd get everything printed and then decide where—I mean, it's just like whoosh! That's worth—we've just gone right past that process.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And almost—the other thing that's changed is that you—you know, I'd have work at various places in the country, and there wasn't any wait. Now all the galleries that I deal with are still in different places in the country, but all the work is online. So any customer can look at everything that's available that I have.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: They can see everything, and they can know every price, and so that's really changed. And the galleries cooperate in terms of selling. They know, too, what I—you know, they cooperate in moving these pieces around, and that's—I mean, there's just—there's no possibility of selling one kind of work somewhere and having another kind somewhere else or different prices or—not that I ever did that—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—but it's, you know, it's all out there. It's really very, very open: what's available, what it costs, who has what.

MS. RIEDEL: And as a studio artist who has made their living strictly from their work, that's—must be really beneficial.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It is.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It is. Yeah, yeah. I think that many of the changes that have occurred in the craft world are because of the way the galleries are dealing with things, because I don't see—like, here in Iowa, we don't have the kind of fiber departments that we had. I don't think there's as much fiber academically as there was when I was young. And the galleries are carrying the burden of keeping that, and that's from my perspective since I don't have an academic job. But the galleries carry the burden of keeping the—this medium at the forefront. And—at least that's the way I see it.

MS. RIEDEL: How would you—can you describe your relationships with dealers? You've been involved with browngrotta for a long time. You mentioned Gallery Materia, Olson Larsen. What's—what is your experience with galleries been like?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I started out having many galleries when I was doing the large art fairs and I would ship work, you know. So I had many galleries, and then once I could get to the point of just working through galleries and not going to any art fairs and not doing any kind of wholesaling or anything like that, I just had very few galleries.

I met Tom Grotta in 1990 in Manhattan at the Armory Show, and he's been really wonderful to work with. Plus, you know—[laughs]—he calls me with all that East Coast energy. [Laughs.] And it's just like crackling off the wires and, I think, I got to get to work here! [They laugh.] You know, it's like, "What do you have? I need it!" you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And that's been very exciting. Plus he's very—he's very honest with me, you know. And we discuss, you know, what works and what doesn't work, and I just am really—plus he does beautiful photographs of what I do and so that's been a very beneficial relationship.

Then I've also dealt with Mobilia [Gallery, Cambridge, MA]. I still have a relationship with them. I'm in a show

there, usually once a year, and I really enjoy that gallery. I've never been to Mobilia, which is my goal. They're doing a basketry show next August. So I'm hoping to make it to Boston and see that.

Then Scottsdale has been another center, and I started with Joanne Rapp—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—very, very briefly she sold to Materia, and they were very good to work with, although not—it was less personal in that I never knew the owner; I just knew like whoever was working in the gallery. But that always was a positive relationship. And then now with Wendy Haas at Cervini Haas [Fine Art, Scottsdale, AZ], I—and I enjoy working with her.

Another—but I would say the other gallery that's been tremendously important has been here in Iowa, and that's Marlene Olson [Olson-Larsen Galleries, Des Moines, IA]. And she's about my age and probably started her working in the gallery when—about the time I started being an artist. And she's completely different. When she calls, it's always—she's always got—she's so stable and so settled, and it's like, "Now don't get all bent out of shape; don't get so worried." You know? "We'll do this."

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And she has ushered me through these large commissions, and she does the meetings with the architect and the designer, and she handles all the details on the plans that I'm apt to overlook, and deals with the installation and gets the—you know, whatever we need to install the work. So she's been great.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a wonderful story. Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's a wonderful—yeah. And she's retiring in a month. So her gallery will pass to her very able assistant. So I'm looking forward to working with her. But that relationship with Marlene has been very important to me—and also that she's here in Iowa and it—you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yeah, it's wonderful to have someplace local.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Especially given the commissions that you've done.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. She's had—

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible]—as well.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. There are—and she has a lot of contacts in Des Moines, and so she's sold a work I have—like a major installation at the University of Northern Iowa [Cedar Falls, IA] for—that she handled. And then Wellmark, which is the local health agency, just—and I think—there are a number of corporations in Des Moines that now have my work because of what she has done—and also a number of large residential commissions with her, and installations. So she's been very, very good.

So I would say that my relationships with dealers have been, by and large, positive. And if they weren't positive, you know, I didn't stay with them. I don't—I'm just really—I find it unpleasant to call and hound people about payment. That's—I just—that only happens once and then I'm—I step away. So—

MS. RIEDEL: And has that happened frequently or—[inaudible]—rarely?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No. It's happened in a couple of instances. And if, you know, unless there's some really good reason, I just step away. I've always had other options for representation, so—

Another really positive experience was with Katie Gingrass [Gallery, Milwaukee, WI]. I was with her a number of years. And she was the first person who took me to SOFA.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So when I was—my work was—along with number of other fiber people. So I've enjoyed—but I don't—I don't show with her anymore. Her work—her gallery has turned increasingly, I think, to clothing.

MS. RIEDEL: I think so too, yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so it just hasn't been such a good fit, although I have great respect for her.

MS. RIEDEL: How have you seen exhibitions evolve over the past 20 or 30 years, starting from the early craft

fairs to the—more recent galleries? Have you seen a change in approach or change in—let me think—has there been a general shift from—has there been an evolution that you've noted at all? I mean, I can think of a number of different ways that things might have evolved, but rather than putting words in your mouth—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, I see. Well, I think I've—I have fewer single-person shows. And I think that's because of the way the galleries have changed. I do have—if I have a single-person show it's usually in a college setting or something non-commercial. At least the shows that I—Tom almost spends most of his effort on the SOFAs, and so he's always bringing a group of people. So for him I—as opposed to taking a whole group of work he takes one piece, but he wants—every couple months he wants a new piece. So there's—you know. And Marlene does exclusively group shows.

And so that—I'm actually—I don't know, as an artist I'm—it's really less stressful than having to do a whole—you really put in months of work and you collect your work and then you ship it all, and it's all in one place, and it's tied up for a certain amount of time. So I do fewer of those larger shows. And I like this better.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Less pressure. The work's moving around more. And then I do—still do enough, you know, single shows where I feel like I can gather a body of work and, you know, explore something.

MS. RIEDEL: And that would be gratifying, as we were talking earlier, in terms of being able to light a space specifically for your work, which can call for really sensitive light.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right, that's right. Right.

MS. RIEDEL: The Cedar Rapids Museum [of Art, Cedar Rapids, IA] did a solo retrospective, right, a solo exhibition in the late '90s?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. RIEDEL: How did that come about? And that's the major solo exhibition of your work to date, is it not?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It is. It is—museum show. It is. And it's really the only thorough one where I'd gone from the beginning up until the present time of that show. And that came about because Jane Milosch was the curator in Cedar Rapids and she had just, I believe, taken the job as curator at the Renwick [Gallery, Washington, DC]. And she wanted to do this show before she left. And I wanted her to do it. And so that was really an interesting—it's only—so I've only had this experience once where she came.

We took—I mean, we just unpacked all the boxes, everything I had. We looked at all the slides. We talked about what she could borrow. I mean, it was a really thoughtful collection of my work. And that I really thought—I was so happy with that show and to have done that process with Jane, who is very—because she'd known me so long and followed my work almost from the beginning, she really was very knowledgeable.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a catalogue from that show?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: There was not a catalogue.

MS. RIEDEL: That's too bad that—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I—that would have been nice. But, no, there was not a catalogue. So I have some photos of it and I have the list, but that's it. It was beautiful show. And it was in, like, three galleries—three of the larger rooms. So it was nicely done.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was 19—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It was 2000-and-something.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: [200]3 or [200]4—I can always—we can check that, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: All right. Yeah. And I assume there are installation shots of it someplace.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think I have them.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. What—how has the—how has the market for fiber art and craft changed over the past 30 years? Is there something in particular that—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: That hits me about that?

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

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I think, maybe it's just the progress of my own work. But I think people take it more seriously now. And I know—I'm sure when I started out—I mean, there was wonderful high-level work. There was—Claire Zeisler was in Chicago and [Magdalena] Abakanowicz was doing her wonderful things, and Sheila Hicks. So it's not—so that isn't—perhaps this is just my perspective of—you know, I've been able to work with—and my own attitude toward what I did has become more serious. Yeah. So maybe I've changed more than the market—I guess I couldn't really say. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And have you seen interest in your work increase? Has it stayed fairly constant? It sounded like you had a fairly enthusiastic response from the start. Has it maybe stayed fairly constant?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I don't think there's quite the level of interest in basketry, per se. That's my feeling, is that it's—the field has matured. And so there—and most of the people don't do just vessels. They're kind of—and so there's more sort of fiber sculpture. I'm thinking of Mary Giles, for instance, and—who did vessels but now seems to do—and even Gyöngy Laky had less vessels and more sculptures.

So I see that happening with people that I think of as about in my age range. I think fewer younger artists coming in—in that I think it's harder to be an academically trained fiber artist, because there are few—I think—I really think there are fewer programs.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems that way.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I think that might have an effect too of how people come into this medium. But other than that I'm not sure.

MS. RIEDEL: That actually leads into an interesting question too which is—and this will be interesting from your perspective—is, what difference do you see, if any, between an academically trained artist and then one who's learned his or her craft outside of academics? And it's interesting because you were so academically trained in terms of metal—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—but that's really not so much the case in terms of paper and fiber. There was a lot of—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Experimentation—

MS. RIEDEL: Personal experimentation—right. Independent experimentation.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. Although I think that being academically trained has less to do with the techniques you learn than in how you think about what you do.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, that makes sense.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So—and I have to honestly say that I can't answer that question because I often don't know. Working in the gallery world, I don't necessarily know who's academically trained and who isn't. I don't—I mean, I might look at the work but not read the resume. So I wouldn't always know.

MS. RIEDEL: That might be a question that's more geared to someone working in academia—[inaudible]—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL:—someone working at one of the craft schools on a regular basis.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right, right. Yeah. I certainly think that it isn't—you don't have to be academically trained to enter the art world. I mean, it's still one of these professions—[laughs]—where it's kind of self-designated, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So—

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about some of the writers who've been especially significant to you, especially the artist

or crafts people.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, early on Ed Rossbach was very, very inspiring. And I read his books early on. And I was really taken with the things he said about basketry and also—you know, not just his—I didn't—you know, his approach to analyzing baskets and basketry, but also his urban foraging and these things that turned up in his baskets. And so he was very—and I have his books still. And that—he was very important in terms of going in toward fiber—going toward fiber.

Jack Lenor Larsen and Mildred Constantine—those books were important: *The Art Fabric* [Constantine, Mildred, and Jack Lenor Larsen. *The Art Fabric: Mainstream*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981], *Interlacing* I think was the other one. And I remember carrying those around even when I was a metalsmith. This is surprising.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm, interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: This is in Milwaukee. And I checked them out of the university library over and over again and looked at them. And I—see, I did have weaving classes.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I—so—

MS. RIEDEL: Was that with some of—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Ruth Gao.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And she was—she was a fabulous weaver. And she also introduced me—she did these things; she was a new professor at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. She came from University of Northern Iowa. And she took—she wrangled an invitation in to see corporate headquarters that Sheila Hicks had decorated—these were all private.

And I remember that we flabbergasted—the work that Sheila made had cost \$50,000 or something. It's like not much by today's standards, but overwhelming. And this work just blew me away. I had a chance to meet Sheila Hicks a few years ago and I told her—I said, "Do you know how important getting to see these pieces were?" She had decorated numerous rooms—

MS. RIEDEL: And where was this?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Must have been Milwaukee. And I know it was a corporate headquarters. I can't remember what company. It was right downtown. It had a new kind of cantilevered kind of upside-down pyramid building or something—not very high.

And Sheila had done these big kind of skeins of yarn that were gathered at certain points all around the wall of a conference room. She had done one room that was dim and then—or the lights fell; these little metallic balls that had all been covered with reflective gold so that it was like the stars—I still remember this work. It was just—hit me.

And then Ruth Gao also took us to Chicago to the Baruch gallery [Anne & Jacques Baruch Collection, Chicago, IL] to see Abakanowicz—to see those pieces. And I remember that was startling. It wasn't a very—it wasn't a museum-sized space. And I remember kind coming around this room, and this piece of fiber just like filled the whole place, you know. And that was a revelatory moment, yeah.

So those experiences were—and that's why I was—so I guess I was sort of imbibing fiber thoughts, you know, long before I had a chance to do a lot because I had a couple of weaving classes, and we actually were working on a loom.

MS. RIEDEL: But then here were all these other examples—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I know!

MS. RIEDEL:—of extraordinary things that could be done. And Rossbach sounds as if he was just—those books opened up the possibilities of what could be done and how it could be stretched and experimented with and—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.



MS. MERKEL-HESS: And dealing with it seriously was—basketry—you know, people used to make so many jokes about baskets—I suppose they still do. But basketry is really highly complex, you know.

So—and then the other writer who was important to me—this is somewhat later, and my husband gave me these books—the diaries of Anne Truitt [Truitt, Anne. *Daybook: the Journal of an Artist*. New York: Penguin Books, 1984] who was a minimalist sculptor. But I think what I gained from her—because she talks so frankly about what the problems, like making a living and getting a teaching job and dealing with her marriage and her children and—I don't know. I loved those books. So those writers were important to me.

I don't think there are any writers sort of recently—I read some things I—now, of course, but, you know, I don't think they hit me with quite the same force as those, because I was so alive to choosing an area and—

MS. RIEDEL: What about publications, magazines, periodicals, that sort of thing—American Craft, Fiber Arts?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I've always subscribed to American Craft, and that—and Fiber Arts. And living here in Iowa—I—well, those things kind of keep me a little bit abreast of what's going on, you know. And I try to see shows wherever I go whenever I can. But I wouldn't say that I really have my finger on the pulse of the fiber arts.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I try to keep, you know, in touch with basket makers and what they're doing, and 3-D fiber people. But it's wide open now, especially so many things coming in from Japan—hard to keep up.

MS. RIEDEL: So have you seen a real shift, then, in the fiber world in 20 or 30 years—in craft in general?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, I guess I think there's less of it. Maybe—well, maybe that's not really what I want to say. I guess I—the number of people crowding into the programs to study craft, I think, has reduced. And I think the number of craft programs has reduced. I think the universities—at least when I visit the art school, you see people working on computers and doing this kind of modeling and building, you know, these virtual environments. I don't—I don't even know what they're doing.

And still, there's—there are people actually making things. But I think that technology has changed that world to some extent. We still have a metalsmithing program here, but we don't really—as far as I know, we don't have any fiber program at all. Just—

MS. RIEDEL: Who is teaching in metalsmithing here? Do you know?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Chunghi's still teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, is she? Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I think her successor will be this Kee—can't tell you how to spell his name, another—Chinese—[Kee-ho Yuen -MM]—I'll have to—write that—I'll get that for you.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there a community that's been important to your development as an artist? It seems like it's been mostly a solitary experience.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Early on there were—because when we did have a fiber department here, when Naomi was still teaching—we had a real—there are weavers in town and there are fiber artists. But we used to get together and we used—there—people visited. You know, Sylvia Seventy visited and—I'm trying to think of—there were just a lot of people who came through; the same sort of things we talked about with the metalsmiths.

There were many fiber artists, and they would come and do a week-long workshop. And there would be potlucks and, you know, all that sort of thing. But as the—as we—and for years afterward—and Naomi's still alive—we still do occasionally have one of our potlucks where all the fiber people in town get together. But less and less as you go on, you know?

So, no, I don't have—I have one very dear friend, Emily Martin, who's a book artist, and I have some contacts with various—a few people, fiber people, around the country. But, no—yeah, I'm much more solitary.

MS. RIEDEL: There's—I can't think of a group that is the equivalent of SNAG [Society of Northern American Goldsmiths] or NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts] or GAS [Glass Art Society] for fiber. I mean, the Friends of Fiber Arts, but—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, there's Friends of Fiber Arts, which is really a little more geared toward collecting.

MS. RIEDEL:—collecting, yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: The NBO—I was on the board of the National Basket Organization for a couple of years. And Michael Davis is the head of that. And he—that was wonderful fun. And I was in touch with basketry people.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know about that organization. Do you know the history of it and—[inaudible]—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, it's really new.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Michael founded it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And a couple years later he asked me to be on the board. So I don't know—

MS. RIEDEL: When—do you know roughly when it was founded or—when you were on the board?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I would say at the end of the '90s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I'm trying to think. When was I on the board? I think in the early, like, 2000s.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Is what I would guess—I was—or sort of around 2000, 2001 or [200]2 I think I was on the board.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's loosely built around baskets and basket and fiber?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Not loosely—very—

MS. RIEDEL: Specifically? Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—specifically around baskets—

MS. RIEDEL: Baskets.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Both historic baskets and contemporary.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: You know, and they've tried—they've also tried to bring in the Native American teachers, some—the ones that—many of them don't like to share with contemporary basket makers. But, you know, he's—and there is a magazine. I don't know if I have it right here.

MS. RIEDEL: Where are they based? Do you know?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: North Carolina.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That makes sense.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. And Michael is just doing a fabulous job. I mean, we've gone from a newsletter up to this glossy—small, glossy magazine, very nicely done. And we're having—there's a show—as I said, the show and conference—there's a yearly conference, and this year it's going to be in Boston. There's going to be a show at Mobilia.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, great.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So he—you know. And there—they've had shows at Arrowmont and Ghost Ranch. And I used to teach sometimes at the conference.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And it was that—and now I'm hoping—as I said, I'm hoping to go. I kind of—you know, since living in Cairo and Tokyo, I haven't—there's a big gap in my attendance at any—[laughs]—anything. So I'm hoping to go and go to that conference in Boston.

So, yeah, so that's been a community—not recently, but I did enjoy that. And it's many traditional people—

maybe predominately people who make traditional—or use traditional basketry techniques, but also a lot of contemporary artists. You know, Michael is—I don't know if you've seen his work.

MS. RIEDEL: I haven't.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's in—[sound of phone ringing]—the Art of—the book that I was first in—*The Art of Basketry* [*The Basketmaker's Art: Contemporary Baskets and Their Makers*, edited by Rob Pulleyn, Larkbooks, 1986]. So—and I don't think Michael is a producer anymore. I think he's just taken on this job of being the head of NBO.

MS. RIEDEL: Why don't we pause here for a little bit.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, let's pause and I'll—

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Mary Merkel-Hess at the artist's home and studio in Iowa City, Iowa, on August 25th, 2010 for the Smithsonian Archives of America Art—disc number three.

Good morning.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Good morning.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's pick up this morning with some thoughts that you just mentioned regarding a few things we didn't discuss yesterday about the work. And in particular, you were talking—we had discussed the piece *Inward* [1994] and the stillness of that piece. But you were talking about the important of motion in the other work.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I have tried to put motion—or the sense of motion into some of—some pieces that I've done—particularly *Windblown* [2004], *Tree One* and *Two* [2001]. And they're asymmetrical pieces. And I used the—I used reed or paper cord and through that—through the asymmetry of the construction—which really was a construction problem for me in a way, because the pieces have to stand upright. And I don't use stands or any other sort of thing to hook them in place. So they had to stand as a vessel. And I wanted—

MS. RIEDEL: Do you weight them at all?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, I don't. It was just a matter of the balance. And I like them—as I said, I want the person to—who touches it to just sit down and have it be perfectly stable. But anyway, to get this sense of the wind blowing the piece was interesting for me. And I think that particularly *Windblown*, which is a green piece, was very successful. And *Terrill*, T-E-R-R-I-L-L, *Terrill*, was another one that I think worked relatively well.

Another thing that I did, which was not so much a sense of movement, but I also made a series of pieces that I call the bridge pieces that have kind of cut-out in the base so they're—they have feet. And that was in a sense to get this lightness into the—you know, not a sense of stability, sitting down, but just a little bit of a—of a—as if the piece was taking a breath, you know, coming up.

And *Martelle*—I was happy with *Martelle* and also *Viola* was a—kind of a long more bridge-shaped piece. And so those were a couple of series where I tried to get a sense of motion into the work. So—and that was just directly suggested to me by people asking me about the constant symmetry of what did. It made me really conscious of how I had worked, you know, for that sense of stillness and stability. And could I—could I do something else? So it was an interesting diversion.

MS. RIEDEL: And structurally how did those evolve? Were they—did you—were you looking at natural structures in order to evolve the pieces themselves or—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I actually did a series of sketches. I have this habit, and I—and I have quite a few notebooks full of what I call carscapes.

MS. RIEDEL: Carscapes? [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Because I do them when I'm riding or—not when I'm driving. [They laugh.] No drawing while I'm driving. But if I have to take a long car trip and there are hours when my husband is driving, I amuse myself by just having a sketchbook there.

And so I do these—like a gesture drawing with the landscape. And it's very quick. And I was doing that with trees. And so, you know, especially on a day that had a certain amount of wind or sometimes even trees they've experienced in some landscapes so much wind that they actually—so I use that as—these drawings of blowing grasses and blowing—particularly the trees because they have—they can have almost a sinuous quality if their—if the wind is strong enough. So that's where I started; and then, of course, make the mold and see if it stands

up—that's the test—and then construct the piece and hope that you don't so unbalance it that it falls over.

So—and I stopped with that project because really there are a lot of constraints, you know. And so I felt like I'd done about what I could do without actually—I mean, the next step would be to connect the piece to a base, which is something I haven't done. And I think that does—is a response to my vessel-making past. I haven't just—maybe that will come at some point, but so far, no.

MS. RIEDEL: So can we break the work down primarily into objects that were focused on stillness and objects that were focused on motion and then additionally break them down technically from the paper mâché objects and then the objects that were based on lantern structures? Do you think everything pretty much—and then the wall pieces, of course—that everything pretty much falls into those—that sort of frame of categories?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, I think so—sounds good. There are some pieces that are very tall—that might be one other—very tall and thin. And they—I think they were my first attempts to bring—to have the work, you know, as I said, take a deep breath. So these are very tall and narrow piece. *Lota* would be one. And then they kind of have this burst at the top. And those were extremely difficult to make. *Avocet* is another one, A-V-O-C-E-T.

MS. RIEDEL: After the bird?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. And you have to destroy the mold to get it out. So that's always—you know. And that—actually, that happens often, where I just have to actually go down in with a knife and cut the mold apart and take it out piece by piece. That's always—actually it's physically difficult. You know, it's hard work to just kind of get that all loosened and out because the paper contracts so much. That's what keeps these pieces sturdy, is that the slight curve with which most of them are made is what keeps that tautness in the structure.

MS. RIEDEL: And you have to remove the mold for archival purposes?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think for aesthetic purposes. I have done very large pieces where I've made the mold and it's still in there—*Rapt III*, R-A-P-T, is one. And it's a six-foot-tall piece that's owned by the Cedar Rapids Museum of Art. It has its mold in it because it needs to there because of the size of the piece—as an additional—

MS. RIEDEL: What about the *Sentinel* pieces? Those two—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, the molds are out of those.

MS. RIEDEL: And are those the tallest pieces that you've made?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. *Rapt* is actually—I think it's 72 inches.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And, you know, those are the big—

MS. RIEDEL: That's huge.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. It's a little taller than I am.

MS. RIEDEL: And how wide is it?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: 30 inches—32 inches? I'm guessing. It's a big—it's rectangular, like the tall grass pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: One thing I realize we haven't addressed directly is color of the pieces and what material you're using to get color in the work—whether it's dyes or acrylics or—what kind of combination of materials?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Right now I'm using acrylics, even using them to dye the glues—I call it dyeing the glue. I put some acrylic paint in the glue that I use, which is methylcellulose, to color it so that—and then the pieces are—the fiber—the reed is dyed before I begin. But it's also painted while I'm working and painted afterward. And the paper cord—

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—is painted while I'm working. The glue is—it has the acrylic in it. I do use a special reed dye. And I did do a few pieces where I tried—I was using Procion dyes at the time—and I dyed them in sort of range. You know, so I was actually doing the color work with the dyeing.

That was a little more difficult because when you go back and then you have the reed all dyed along a—you know, a continuum from end-to-end and then you build the piece, you're also disturbing that in some sense. So

that was difficult, and I don't do that anymore. I just go back in and I paint the pieces. I always paint the pieces with a brush. I have a variety of long and short brushes that facilitate this. I don't like any kind of spray paint. I use it very, very seldom.

MS. RIEDEL: So the color really evolves very much along with the form.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It does.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, an integral part of the process from the start.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It is. It is. And I like to paint my baskets the way a painter would, in that I go over each inch of it. There's even—what I think makes the monolithically colored pieces interesting is that they're not monolithically colored. It's not one color put on. There's always a deepening of the color toward the base. There are always at least two, sometimes three, different shades with which I'm painting that color.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And then the top always—almost always a bit lighter and sometimes touched at the very tips with something darker so that whether you can be consciously aware of it or not, your eye is moving. And this is—this is, I think, a technique that the impressionists use of having people move their—or blend the colors in, you know, with their eyes. At least that's what they said.

My intention is to make that piece, even if it seems entirely red or orange or whatever, to have your eye be moving. And I think that's what gives that intensity of experience to the—to the piece. You know, a piece like *Orange, Orange* [2000]—I mean, I called it that because it's not one color of orange; it's multiple colors of orange.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I don't know—I don't know if the typical viewer registers that or not. But I think it does add to the actual physical pleasure that people get from looking at it.

MS. RIEDEL: That makes a lot of sense, and that's very insightful. I wouldn't have known that some of those pieces that I've seen, clearly in slide form—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes, you can't really tell.

MS. RIEDEL: You couldn't tell.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So I spend a lot of time painting. And that's sometimes a very lengthy process in that I keep the piece around and I look at it in different lights. And then as things change or dry I go back in. And sometimes—I mean, I take—I have the freedom, if the piece comes back from the show and I look at it again, sometimes I paint it again, you know. So that's—I'm always rethinking those colors. Sometimes, you know, I think, well, I could intensify this or, you know.

But it's—and I also like sometimes splashing color on the paint—on the piece, you know, just little dots of color. Either, like, putting paint on through a screen or something so that, there again—that I think people definitely notice, you know. That grabbing people's eye, that contrast, you know, can just jar you visually whether you—as I said, whether you really conscious of it or not.

MS. RIEDEL: So sort of complementary colors that—[inaudible]—shockingly—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, shockingly different, like, a little touch of green and yellow in there—sometimes on the tips as well. And some of the pieces are actually—you know, they're one color on the bottom and another color on the top. But still, those colors are modulated, you know, from dark to light. So I think that's a detail that might not come out in photographs.

MS. RIEDEL: It's funny because as we're talking I'm looking now at the four or five pieces behind you, and I can see the one down there, the sort of tan that becoming increasingly pale and more cream colored towards the top. And that's the first thing one notices about it. But then the more you stare, the more you see the slightly—the more orange, you begin to notice the variety of color in there, which is really extensive, but you—you're right; it's something that appears over time when you study—whereas others are—appear to be, pretty much, one color.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, some of these that are here—in fact, the pieces that are sitting in my living room are monochromatic. Does that say something to you? They haven't sold. [They laugh.] So I think, you know, that this something people are enjoying, you know, this complexity of the coloring. So—

MS. RIEDEL: And it's interesting because I know yesterday you talked about what's really most compelling to you is the form and the structure—the color is secondary. But—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: But I think the color can intensify—for me, you know, I'm—I really do enjoy the form and I enjoy the simplicity. And I think white or naturally colored work would be fine for me. But I do think that when I get—that when I get into the color and I'm actually trying to intensify the experience of enjoying the form—and how will the color do that, how will that color keep your eye moving top to bottom and looking through the reeds and out—I think that really does work. And people enjoy it. And consequently, those pieces are more desired.

MS. RIEDEL: People are drawn to that.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think they are, yeah. And then there's just—I think people love—most people love color in their environment. I don't. I tend to want to leave it behind in my studio. I come up to this very neutral environment where I live and it's just like—[sighs]—Okay. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: I can see why that would be essential though.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: We haven't talked at all about your working environment and how that's been consistent or changed over time, and if there's anything in particular you need in order to work.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, my working environment—I've always had my studio in my house. And that started when my daughter was born. And I knew that I wouldn't have enough time to work because I wouldn't take her to a metal studio. And so we—I always set up a working environment, even—when she was born, we lived in an apartment. And I made the foyer of our apartment my little metals studio. And she was tied in her seat, you know, when I was working. So—and she wasn't moving at that point either—wasn't mobile.

But throughout graduate school and all those times, I always had as much—as many tools as I could at home and as much space as my family could give me in the various houses that we lived in. And now—and I got used to that environment. I got—I loved it. Especially when I began making baskets I could get up at night, I could check the drying process—which, you know, I would put them in front of a fan and dehumidify whatever room they were in.

And I could get up at night, I could change that situation and move them—turn them around or whatever they needed. I got used to working at home, and my life just sort of seamlessly moved into the studio. The kids were in and out at all the time and my husband too. You know, it was just part of the life that went on. And I never had my studio closed to my kids.

And that—there—true, there were very few things that I did that were dangerous, so it wasn't a problem in that sense, even when they were very small. I think only hassle is occasionally, I mean, they felt very free about walking through and borrowing drawing materials and losing your—for instance a favorite tool, the husband has it the backyard or something, you know? [They laugh.]

So that—

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing to see here.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No respect, no respect, you know. [They laugh.] But I got used to just having my life—and I like that. I mean, it's—I love it now. I wouldn't have it any other way. I wouldn't have a studio. I think right now I have a house with a studio. I'd probably have a studio with a very small living area; you know, kind of a cell or something. And just not to have even deal with a house. But I don't think that's going to happen either.

MS. RIEDEL: Probably not. [They laugh.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I've just gotten used to my life. You know, I love this. I go down every morning I'm quite regular about my work. So I work every day—almost every day. I try to forcefully take a day off, and usually that's from Saturday—usually Saturday I knock off at noon or early and I don't go back until Sunday evening when I go and prep up for what I plan to do. But often if something's fascinating to me I'm down there anyway.

I—and I—and my—anything I do on my house just melds with that. So if I need to throw in a load of laundry or go and do a little gardening, you know, I do that. It's a break for me to think through something I'm working on. So I like—I like that working environment. And—

MS. RIEDEL: It seems an especially integrated way of working with life in general. It's not at all a separate, isolated part of life. It's just very much—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's—right. I think, and what was surprising to me in the last two—few years when my husband's been living abroad, I've lived alone, which I thought, well, what will happen? And it wasn't as successful as everyone predicted—me included. I—since I didn't have anybody in my environment to interact with, I spent a lot more time socializing. So I was out and about, inviting people in for dinner. So it—and then there so many things that I realized that my husband does for me, like yard work and car and garage and, whatever, cooking. So I had no more time to work.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And my schedule, also, it was quite odd. I didn't dislike it but I tend to be a very early riser. So at points I was—

MS. RIEDEL: What's early?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, 3:00, 4:00 in the morning.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow. That is really early.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so I would often be up working—I mean, my working hours gradually shifted from about—oh, I'd probably get down there 4:30 in the morning and be working until mid-afternoon, you know. And then I would just simply have a snack and fall asleep, you know. So people would call me at 7:30 in the evening and say, "Did we wake you up?" And I'd say, "Oh, no, no, no!" [They laugh.]

But yeah—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So that was—and after a few months of that, I really—I had to stop. I mean, it's just too odd—

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—you know. [They laugh.] So then I put the—

MS. RIEDEL: What did you like about that?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: What?

MS. RIEDEL: Why was that compelling? Why was that appealing? How did you—[inaudible]?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, you know, I don't know. It's just when I'm most awake and most focused.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's like, "Wake up." I've always been that way my whole life.

I know I've always been an early riser. I came from an early rising family. But I'm just focused. I'm happy, energetic. I'm full of ideas. And you know, I just—I'm just down there. Just couldn't stay out of the studio at that point.

MS. RIEDEL: I was talking to the ceramic artist Otto Heino, and he said something wonderful about that. His favorite time to work was about that. He said he liked to work from 4:00 to 8:00 in the morning, and he said at that hour pots are born—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL:—not made.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And I thought that—he said it was just pristine—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL:—there was no interruption, it was quiet.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And you're not going to run out of time. You might run out of energy; but really, you've got so many hours ahead of you to work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so sometimes, I know, when I'm working at night, which is very, very seldom anymore, I'm feeling like, oh, any minute now, I'm just going to fall over. [Laughs.] You know; I won't get this finished and —

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And so yeah, it's a wonderful time, and no one calls you or, you know, interrupts. So yeah, it's a wonderful time.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there anything in particular you need in order to work? Is there any—or do you have any constraints for a working environment? It doesn't sound like it. It sounds like you're able to work pretty much anywhere, from a tiny hall to a basement.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yes. I need—right now, working with paper, I need water, and I need an environment that's not precious. You know, so—many artists—oh, I—have such beautiful studios. I just can't have anything precious —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—anywhere in my area, because it's messy, what I do.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Glue falls, paint—I don't—I mean, the clothing I wear is just covered with paint—the shoes, everything. I just can't think about being tidy while I'm working. And I'm often up to my elbows—I mean, I wear rubber gloves and all these things, but a lot of the processes I just do with my hands, and they get all over everything. So people would say, oh, you'll do something in your—you know, when you're in Tokyo, you'll do something in your apartment. And it's like, oh, I just—I would just be losing the security deposit over and over, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you sketch when you travel?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I do.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you photograph as well?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: My husband does all the photography. I'm not fond of carrying a camera around, and he's quite good. So we have thousands of photos. And often I'll just grab the camera from him, if we're together. If I'm alone, I do carry a camera. But often if I'd see something, he'll just say, "Well, take your own photo if you know what you want." But mostly he handles it, and he's very good.

So—and I think I'd like—I think I need my husband to be really productive. I'm—I'd prefer having someone here in the house with me because it saves me a lot of time and effort of—I don't have a—I'm not have—don't have great desires to socialize. But I guess I'm not a hermit yet, so—

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [They laugh.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I do have good friends that I see often, so.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I think we're coming towards the few final questions here. I think we've done a really—a very good job of covering what we need to address. What—in retrospect, at this point in time, what do you see as the importance of fiber as a means of expression, its strengths and its weaknesses, and what it does that nothing else can do? What has kept you enthralled with it, it sounds like, for decades?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I can't speak about fiber broadly—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: But I can talk about paper, and I just—and maybe I said this before. But after years of



metalsmithing, working with paper is so freeing because it's—you can—you can do very precise and geometric things. You can do things that are strong. You can paint it, you can tear it, you can cast it. I just can't think of any effect that paper can't mimic.

And then it has its own qualities of beauty, you know, that seem almost limitless because there are so many ways of casting it, pressing it. I mean, it's been—it just seems like the perfect medium for me since I think of things that I'd like to deal with and then try to think of a way to make them. I think that the only drawback I come up against with paper is that people think it's not "long-lived" and fragile. And it's not necessarily; I think it can last a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, it certainly can.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah. And I've looked at beautiful papers, you know, from the time of these beautiful books that were printed in, you know, the Middle Ages and since the time of—even before. And so I think that paper, with proper conservation, can last a long time. But I think there's that perspective that you're working in something that's fragile.

Other than that, I just don't see any—I don't see any end to what could be done with paper.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't think we've directly addressed the concept of light. And I think of that very much in relation to your work because I think of the work that's more opaque and denser that very much reflects or refracts light in a certain way. And then I think of the lantern pieces that are almost more vessels and containers of light that contain it or hold it. Do you think specifically about light in relation to your work?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Oh, I definitely do. And I think that a—some of that study of light started with the metalsmithing experience too, since metal can be so reflective. And you can—you can dull metal and light it up by how you handle, you know, either making the surface dull or making it very shiny. So I think I started thinking about light early on. When I made the first baskets, I think I mentioned this before: I painted them, and I still do, paint them as if light was falling on them. And I remember I—people would say—in an exhibit—"Well, it's so beautifully lit; what'll happen when I just take it and put in my house?" And it's like, "Well, it probably is going to be okay because I painted it to look like light is falling on it."

And then as I got interested in the translucency, these pieces respond to light in variable ways.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: You know, either if you light them directly, sometimes they would light up like lamps, if you could get a spotlight on them. Or just the way they—the gampi pieces and the wall pieces, the way they responded to the light changing in the room was very interesting. And of course, now, I'm actually trying to, with this series that I've just begun, I'm actually going to put the light—I'm actually going to try to control that in a way and put it in the piece and see if I can actually deal with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: So, yeah, light is always a consideration. Light's a consideration for—in another way, it's a—it's an archival issue of how—I just repaired one of my best pieces, one of my favorite pieces, which was *Red Crescent* [1998], which was the piece that was on the cover of *American Craft* in 1996. And the owner had let it sit in, I guess, direct light.

And I actually loved the way it looked when it came to me. She wanted it returned to its more—that was a piece that was more monolithic than most. It had some darkening at the bottom and some lightening at the top, but it was very subtle. So it was—but it had kind of this mottled quality from sitting in the sun, which was, I thought, kind of lovely. But I did return it to the original thing.

But there is that about paper, too. I guess we haven't talked about—you know, and all fiber, that it's not like a piece of pottery or glass or metal that can just—it does need a little bit of concern. So light, yeah, I think about light a lot: getting it and not getting it. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: How has your work been received over time?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Well, I think pretty well. I'm satisfied because when I realized that I wouldn't be teaching very much, unless I moved somewhere, you know, the only other option I thought that appeared to me—and I never really thought about this as an option for my life—of actually just being in the studio all the time. So the fact that I could make a living selling work has been very positive for me. It's been a happy thing, and I'm grateful. I'm grateful every day to everyone who collects my work, even though I don't get to interact with them much, except through the work.

Yeah, I never—I didn't expect this or even think about it as a—as a career path. And I know, it's so funny to sit here and, at the beginning, and sort of be—feel sad about not teaching when almost every teacher I ever met wanted more time to work, which is what has been—has been more of a gift than I expected. It's been a wonderful—it's a wonderful life.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I just hadn't thought it was possible. So the fact that it was even possible, you know, has been very good.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you see your career in terms of episodes and periods that are distinct, other than the ones we've already discussed, the earlier work from metal to paper, then the work with Tim Barrett and then the wall pieces? Do you see any more distinctions than that or does it—

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No, I don't.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: And I don't—I don't know that I would even divide it into those distinctions always because I haven't had—I don't go—I haven't gone through these periods and not gone back to them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: It's sort of like I have this wealth of techniques, and I just range over them. I figure, oh, I invented these; I can go back if I want, you know. And that's just the way it's been for me. I go back and rethink—or I think, well, I could have done that; why didn't I do that? I'll do it, you know?

So that's how I think of my life. Now I'm sort of considering—so I—this has been since my father died last year, last winter, I have been kind of thinking about, you know, how many more years will I work? And what will—you know, do I have 10 years, 15, 20? Should I retire now and do something else? I mean, it's kind of interesting. So I'm also thinking about what's coming ahead and how—I always have thought that I wanted to be the kind of person who worked right up until I absolutely couldn't anymore. But I do think about it. I don't know what will happen.

I also have grandchildren now. They are endlessly fascinating to me—the one I have; I'm getting another one soon. So the whole process of becoming a grandmother is very absorbing. [Laughs.] I'm surprised. And people say that, "Oh, you'll be surprised." But it is surprising how absorbing—as my own children were in their own time. Interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Were your children ever interested in doing what you do? Did they ever want to come down and work with you on projects?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: No. [Laughs.]

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I don't think—I don't remember that. They did do things. They did—they were very creative, and I'd devised various projects to keep them occupied while I was working. I know when they were very small, I could give them a roll of tape and a stack of paper, and they just would go at it. Or a ball of yarn and say, why don't you make a spider web?

And then they would, you know, carry things around the house, and they were very—and I kept a lot of their drawings and they worked—both of them worked with graduate students on their—graduate students in art education as little specimens, you know, of doing stuff and were the subject of several of these—their—the thesis. You know—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—they were the guinea pigs, so to speak. So they had a lot—they did a lot of work. But I don't think—and I don't think my children—they think they know a lot about what I do, but I don't think they actually—I don't think—it was just like, "Oh, Mom," you know.

And my son now is an artist himself, and I know I've heard him say some things about me that aren't true, you know? [They laugh.] So I don't think they were really paying attention.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Is it something you have any interest in introducing to your grandchildren? Neither—one way or the other?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, I don't care, you know. Yeah, if they ask, certainly. But no, I—my kids never made baskets, or I think they thought it was probably pretty strange.

MS. RIEDEL: What about the work in particular matters to you? At this point in time, having accomplished what's been accomplished and looking forward to the things you're interested in exploring, what about the work is significant to you?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: What is significant to me?

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

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Hmm, that's an interesting question. Well, I think it's been important to me that I've gone on as long as I have. I've given it a good shot. Even if I quit tomorrow, this has been my focus and my passion for many, many years.

MS. RIEDEL: Since '83 really, and the first 80s—the little first paper pieces, yeah, and then before that with the metal.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, yeah, right, right.

I think it's significant to me—and this is just really—I've become aware of this more in the last few days as we've talked—that I did have these interactions with other people, like knowing Chunghi Chu so well and Alma Eikerman and being part of Tom Grotta's gallery. And I think these people have done marvelous things, and so the fact that I could interact with them in some way—and there're many, many more people on the list—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS:—of artists that I admire that I've been able to meet and interact with. That's been significant.

And then I hope that the work—and this one involves the work going into museum collections—that I think it's been significant—it is significant to me that the work will probably exist and be cared for after I'm gone, that it made it into some spot where there's a chance that, if I have made a contribution it'll be—someone will see it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I mean, that's very comforting. I don't think it's so much an ego thing as comforting to me that the work mattered that much, that people are willing to expend some time conserving it.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds as if, in some ways, it's the process itself and it's the actual process of working that has kept you inspired about the work all this time. It's not that you have a lot of ideas out there in an abstract sense that compel you forward. But there's something about the actual—the process, the working process that has kept you engaged and experimenting.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think that's true.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think that's accurate?

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I think that's true, more than having some sort of lifelong drive or vision, you know, to be or do this. Yeah, there's been this process that's developed. I can accept that. And another thing, I think, is the fact that, you know, that what's so important is that people, as I said—and actually people who bought the work enjoy it, and sometimes do tell me that.

So, yeah, it's—it—I do think that if the—if I hadn't found a way to produce the work and have it sell and be part of that process, I wouldn't just be at home making it for my own pleasure.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: I mean, I would probably find another way to interact with my society. I want to be a functioning, useful part of something, and art has really fulfilled that for me, but something else might have as well. I'm not so sure, you know, because I intended to do so many other things in my life, and this is what happened, you know.

I have a friend, David Luck—I mentioned him before—and he said something that I think is maybe true of more people than just me. He said, “You know, you don’t choose art. You’re just left with it.” [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: That’s fascinating. Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Yeah, it is. It’s—but it’s kind of true, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: Some people—and I think I’m the lucky one. I got to do this, you know? And certainly my financial situation would have—I would have had to make a living somehow, you know. But I got to do this; I think I’m lucky. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you very much.

MS. MERKEL-HESS: You’re welcome.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]