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Oral history interview with Michele Oka
Doner, 2007 August 20-November 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Michele Oka Doner on August 20 and November 17, 2007. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Josephine Shea 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.

Michele Oka Doner has reviewed the transcript. Her corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSEPHINE. SHEA: This is Josephine Shea interviewing Michele Oka Doner at the artist's studio in New York City on Monday, August 20, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution [Washington, DC.] And this is disc number one.

Hello. I guess we always begin at the beginning. And in this case the first question is, when and where were you born?

MICHELE OKA DONER: I was born in Miami Beach, Florida, December 4, 1945, as the war was ending.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: And my father was stationed in the Coast Guard.

MS. SHEA: Ah.

MS. OKA DONER: And my parents lived there. But I remember as a child seeing his black Coast Guard coat and his binoculars in the closet, and I was so fascinated with them.

MS. SHEA: Was there, like, gold, like, trim and I don't know.

MS. OKA DONER: No —

MS. SHEA: No, just black? Wool?

MS. OKA DONER: — but it was heavy and waterproof and of a kind of cloth material that wasn't very tropical and was —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] I was going to say, it doesn't sound tropical.

MS. OKA DONER: — so different than everything else in the home that I always was fascinated by that.

MS. SHEA: And were you an only child or the oldest child? I think you mentioned a brother.

MS. OKA DONER: No, I'm the second of four children, the middle of three sisters, and then I have a younger brother. And speaking of tropical, I think sometimes about Zora Neale Hurston, who was also a daughter of Florida. In her beginning of her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on the Road* [New York: J.B. Lippincott, Inc., 1942], she begins, "I have memories within that came out of the materials that went to make me. Time and place have had their say." And I think it's so true, because being born in Miami Beach was very significant.

MS. SHEA: For you. And did your family stay there because I know that you have a lot of Michigan connections.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. We stayed there, and when I was 17 I went to the University of Michigan [Ann Arbor], and I lived there 17 years in Michigan; six years in Ann Arbor, and 12 years in Detroit.

MS. SHEA: Wow. I think we're probably getting a little ahead of myself. Tell me about maybe if there was a moment — was your family very oriented toward the visual arts?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, my mother came from a long line of artists, which was unusual. Her name was Gertrude Heller Oka. Her father, Samuel Heller, went to the Imperial Academy [of Arts] in Odessa [Russia] and became a fresco painter. And when he came to New York at the turn of the last century, he painted frescoes in the Metropolitan Opera House as it was being erected on 32nd Street here in New York. And then he painted

frescoes in convents upstate New York before he had a family and went into business. And he became a painter, all right, but it was a body shop and the cars were being painted.

MS. SHEA: Aha, aha. A very functional type of thing. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Functional. And before that his family, they were scribes and they took notes in the Rabbi's Court in Vilna [Lithuania]. Most people in the 19th century were not literate. They couldn't read and write, they didn't do their own letters, and so there were people who were scribes and they did documents and they took down dictation and letters were carried to different towns or for different transactions. So I have a feeling that the ability to coordinate the mind and the eye and the hand ran quite deep.

MS. SHEA: And also literary — [laughs] — as well.

MS. OKA DONER: And literary, yes. I knew him. And there was a heart that he painted that hung in the entrance to my parents' bedroom, where I hung out a lot because in the '50s it was the only air-conditioned room.

MS. SHEA: Ah. So you retreated for the coolness. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: I did. I did. And it was in an old fruit basket, because they didn't have reams of paper and they didn't have art supply places and paper was expensive, so my grandfather painted all kinds of surfaces, and aside from the interior of the fruit basket, which I have here in the loft and it's really a treasure. It's a still life of the Black Sea that he painted in Odessa.

MS. SHEA: Ah. When he was younger, or middle —

MS. OKA DONER: He was about 19 when he went to Odessa, and he was probably then in his early 20s, mid-20s when he came to the United States. And my cousin [Doris Feldman] remembers him taking her by the hand to the Metropolitan Opera House and showing her the frescoes. And also other cousins remember that he had quite a few black employees — in those days they called them Negroes — and my grandfather used to sit and sketch his employees while they worked.

MS. SHEA: And do you have any of those sketchbooks?

MS. OKA DONER: I am looking for them as we speak, because he had a daughter, my mother's sister Dorothy, who studied with Hans Hofmann and showed with Betty Parsons and with Tibor di Nagy. She was an abstract expressionist painter. She died four years ago and we are still going through all of her paintings and drawings, and I'm hoping to discover somewhere this portfolio.

MS. SHEA: Some of those early sketches. That would be a wonderful discovery. And tell me about your father's family.

MS. OKA DONER: My father's family were musicians. My father played the violin, and his father also. And they had my son Jeremy play the violin. And so the point of view was much more musical. And with my grandfather it actually manifested itself and he could imitate any bird he had ever heard in the Russian woods.

MS. SHEA: Oh.

MS. OKA DONER: He was from a small town outside of Kiev called Stravishche [Population of 6000; in the district of Kiev. Before the revolution it had been a town of 8000 half Jews. Most fled programs of 1918-1921 -MOD], which still exists. And he could mimic every animal and tell stories about the wolves and the foxes and make all the sounds. And he visited us many mornings while I grew up. He lived nearby. He walked over and whistled outside our bedroom window.

MS. SHEA: Oh.

MS. OKA DONER: We knew it wasn't a mockingbird.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] It wasn't a Florida bird.

MS. OKA DONER: We knew it was grandpa.

MS. SHEA: The grandfather bird.

MS. OKA DONER: And he had breakfast with us, which was quite delightful.

MS. SHEA: That is. That sounds wonderful. Now, by any chance do you know how your parents met?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, I do. The war had broken out, 1939, and my mother had graduated Hunter College in New York [New York City] and she was a French major. And she had planned to go to France, and she was quite disappointed that her boat was confiscated for troops.

MS. SHEA: That kind of interrupted her French.

MS. OKA DONER: Her French. So her parents had friends in Miami Beach whose son had been drafted and he vacated a bedroom. And they sent my mother down to Miami Beach and she had a job teaching Latin at a private school called the Lear School.

MS. SHEA: And is it L-E-E-R or L-E-A-R?

MS. OKA DONER: L-E-A-R. And that is actually pictured in the book that I published.

MS. SHEA: That you just published.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. And second printing comes out with Harper Collins next month, October 2nd. And his name was Lee and he was killed in the war, and I am named for him; Michele Lee.

MS. SHEA: Ah. It's sad, but it's a nice remembrance.

MS. OKA DONER: It's nice. I did read the wonderful David Brooks editorial in *The Times* a few weeks ago called, "I Am a Strange Loop." And it was about the Doug Hofstadter book about looking into a picture of Doug's wife, Carol, who had died, and realizing that the dialogue that they had had for so many years was embedded in him and that it was a feedback loop. So he talked about the beauty of feedback loops. And in a way this is a feedback loop.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] So she went down there to teach.

MS. OKA DONER: She went down there to teach. She was beautiful. She bought the newest sportswear that was coming out, all those California movies during the war that took place in the tropical islands. And she had palm trees on her backside, I'm sure.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: She met him at a musical. She played piano; he played violin. And that's what young people did and got together.

MS. SHEA: Right. Actually created music instead of just listening to music. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. And the couple were lifetime friends. Their names were Dr. Leo and her name was Elizabeth Fishbein. And he was the first psychiatrist in Miami Beach.

MS. SHEA: Aha. Wow.

MS. OKA DONER: And they were friends with Leo and Libby. I knew them my whole life too.

MS. SHEA: So a lot of good and long connections and —

MS. OKA DONER: Lots of rootedness, lots of connections, lots of music, lots of stories.

MS. SHEA: So tell me, what school did you go to for elementary?

MS. OKA DONER: North Beach Elementary School. It's also in the book, *Miami Beach: Blueprint of an Eden* [Michele Oka Doner and Mitchell Wolfson Jr.; New York: Regan, 2007.] It turns out North Beach was a WPA [Work Projects Administration]-built school.

MS. SHEA: Oh.

MS. OKA DONER: And it's in the book that the government published on WPA buildings.

MS. SHEA: I didn't know they got that far south. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: I'm so proud. And then I even have the mission statement in the Miami Beach book about using the local materials. And I happened to find a photograph of my school in the national publication. And they didn't publish every building they built, but North Beach Elementary School was very beautiful and had the spectacular palm tree in the center of the photograph. So I see why they chose it.

MS. SHEA: They chose that visually.

MS. OKA DONER: And then I called the Library of Congress Photo Archive [Washington, DC] and found out that for \$7.25 any citizen —

MS. SHEA: You could have that same photograph. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. So we have that, and then we even found the name of the WPA photographer. I believe it was Francis Powers.

MS. SHEA: Oh, okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And so he's now remembered.

MS. SHEA: Again. Hopefully. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. So this whole book, I think, is a feedback loop.

MS. SHEA: And was there art taught in elementary school?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I had a wonderful teacher. Her name was Miss Parsons. I think it was Louella Parsons. It was a southern name. We had a lot of southern people.

MS. SHEA: That is interesting.

MS. OKA DONER: Louella Parsons. I can still see her, tall and thin, lots of freckles, and she was a redhead. And I do remember — many lessons, actually, working on an easel, working with big pieces of paper, and once trying very hard to draw an arm, a right arm, and erasing it, and erasing it again and drawing it again until I realized, in a very sort of frustrated moment, that I had gone through the paper.

MS. SHEA: Gone through. I think that's happened to many people because drawing the figure, I think, is such a challenge. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: I think so.

MS. SHEA: And did you by any chance sketch at all with your grandfather? Or —

MS. OKA DONER: No. He was very self-contained. He missed being an artist. He didn't like the bourgeois life. They ended up with five children and a house, and he didn't communicate very much. But I grew up with his paintings all through the house. And what he did is he went on Saturdays, many artists did, to the Metropolitan Museum here in New York, and he sat down and he painted all day. So I go through that museum and I can't believe how many copies of Rembrandts —

MS. SHEA: It all looks amazingly familiar. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: — Cézannes, yes. It was a nice way to grow up.

MS. SHEA: And did you as you were growing up kind of go back and forth between Miami and New York?

MS. OKA DONER: No, we didn't come here very often. We used to go in the summer to Europe. And we played in the Louvre when I was 5 and 6. It was after the war, and France was tired and there were lots of widows in the gardens, women in black dresses, I remember well. And it was an interesting time. It was very low key. There weren't crowds of tourists.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: And you could really look at the statues and look at the paintings and play.

MS. SHEA: Run through those many long hallways. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, run through the hallways and stop and look, and nobody was pushing you forward or moving you out of the way.

MS. SHEA: And was it mostly your mother that was taking you to the museums, or both of your parents?

MS. OKA DONER: Both parents were very interested. But I'd say my mother was really visually very highly evolved. She knew beauty and she knew line and form and color and design. Anything she touched she made beautiful.

MS. SHEA: And it sounds like that would be expressed in your home.

MS. OKA DONER: It was. It was a beautifully edited, very unusual modernist home built 1951 in the new way, meaning there was everything built in, sliding doors, closed off. There was no clutter. It was open in the plans so the living room and dining area were seamless; one poured floor with Cuban tile, which is really a very fine cement.

MS. SHEA: Is it similar to terrazzo, or something different?

MS. OKA DONER: It's similar, and very different in that there's no stone aggregate.

MS. SHEA: Oh, okay.

MS. OKA DONER: But it's poured.

MS. SHEA: Okay, and then polished down —

MS. OKA DONER: Polished down.

MS. SHEA: — like you polish terrazzo.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And the furniture was the first Scandinavian modern, 1951. And then in the '50s she went to Germany when Rosenthal did the Raymond Lowey Centennial 2000 and bought a set of that, which was so unusual.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, extremely progressive.

MS. OKA DONER: She was very — and went to Murano [Italy] and had the glass blown. So she made a microcosm of thoughtful everyday ceremonial life.

MS. SHEA: It sounds like a very special childhood.

MS. OKA DONER: It was. She was difficult, mind you, but these were her shining qualities.

MS. SHEA: Well, I was going to say, probably if you have — I'm guessing — if you have kind of this high standard, then maybe it's not an easy-going approach. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Not easy-going. And I was just discussing at lunch today with a friend, her mother, who was like my mother, worked and had a very high-level job for a woman in her 50s, and my mother with all of her intelligence and skills to organize and do things didn't direct it outside the home.

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.] So that was the focus of — that was her way of expression.

MS. OKA DONER: It was her way of also using — she had enormous energy. And it was just — you know, my younger sister always jokes that she hid from mother.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] So she was kind of like a little whirlwind.

MS. OKA DONER: She was.

MS. SHEA: Sounds like. So you were following your sisters behind in school, it sounds like. Did they go to the same schools you did?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, I had an older sister who I followed and a younger sister who had to follow the two of us. And my older sister was very talented and difficult to follow. Good at language.

MS. SHEA: Often, yeah, that can be interesting as, you know, siblings go to the same school. And are —

MS. OKA DONER: And so I had a mother who was very accomplished and an older sister who was very accomplished, and I was shy.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say that can be some pretty big things to live up to. — So after elementary, then I assume you went to — did you go to a local high school?

MS. OKA DONER: I went to local high school. We all did. We had very fine schools. It was a small community and it was — our teachers were — many of them Europeans who had come out of DP [Displaced Persons] camps, you know, and we were lucky. I asked my mother once why we had so many Europeans from the — refugees from the war, why they came to Miami. And she said it reminded them of the South of France. Now, that can't be.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: But that was the kind of answers. That was such a typical non sequitur. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: That is kind of an interesting response.

MS. OKA DONER: Isn't that? So I had great teachers, many of them, I remember, science teachers especially, just terrific people.

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.] And art teachers, again, in high school? Do you remember any in particular?

MS. OKA DONER: No, I really thought they were — not sophisticated enough.

MS. SHEA: By then if you'd been running around to the Louvre — [laughs] — maybe they —

MS. OKA DONER: Well, also I sort of didn't want to play.

MS. SHEA: You wanted to be very serious?

MS. OKA DONER: Yeah, I wanted to be — no, I didn't want to play, meaning I didn't want to go to class and sit and draw with everybody. I was off on my own exploring and doing things. And I don't know, I just didn't connect in high school. The minute I got to college, though, I began to work very seriously.

MS. SHEA: Now that's interesting, because how did you choose the University of Michigan [Ann Arbor]?

MS. OKA DONER: I chose the University of Michigan because there aren't too many schools that were away that were —

MS. SHEA: So you wanted to go away.

MS. OKA DONER: I wanted to go away — that were coed. And most people thought of me as a Bennington-Sarah Lawrence type.

MS. SHEA: Aha.

MS. OKA DONER: And I didn't want the trap of a girls' school where it was very precious to be an artist. I wanted something very — where I had a lot of freedom and I wasn't going to be watched or judged and I could open up doors myself. And Michigan seemed big and empty.

MS. SHEA: That's what I was going to say, because it seems like such a large, open, sprawling — I'm sure even back then. It's a huge campus. It's a huge school.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, it was a big canvas for me.

MS. SHEA: I mean, compared to a small, private, maybe liberal arts school, I mean it's almost the antithesis of that.

MS. OKA DONER: It is. I had really loved my childhood, but I always knew I was leaving.

MS. SHEA: You were going. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yeah. I was going, because as privileged as it was, it was also confining. And my father was the mayor of Miami Beach, so I always felt I was watched and I had to be good and I had to —

MS. SHEA: Cross at the cross lights?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: No jaywalking. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: My skirts couldn't be short as the other girls.

MS. SHEA: How about lipstick and cigarettes and all those other things? [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: All of that. I smoked. Yes, that I did, but I felt very guilty because I wanted to not disgrace my parents. So Ann Arbor was extremely liberating for me.

MS. SHEA: Had anyone else in your —

MS. OKA DONER: Never.

MS. SHEA: It was a complete break.

MS. OKA DONER: Complete break. My older sister was at Barnard [New York City.]. And then she went on to Yale [New Haven]. And no, it was a very unusual thing to do.

MS. SHEA: It kind of struck me in your resume because also it's not really known — maybe as an art school. I mean, when you think of art schools it's maybe not one of the first schools that you think about, but your degree was kind of an interesting title to me. It had the word "science" in it.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, it's a Bachelor of Science and Design, and they don't give that anymore. They didn't have a Bachelor of Fine Arts in those days. And it wasn't so long before that the school of architecture was in the school of engineering. So in 1920, for example, when the Kahn brothers were building —

MS. SHEA: Right, Albert Kahn.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Who's had such an impact on that campus.

MS. OKA DONER: They were engineers.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: So you think about how recently the school of architecture and design was built by Dean Lorch. It's in one of the Lewis Mumford books I have, [*Architecture as a Home for Man: Essays for Architectural Record*, New York: Architectural Record Books, 1975; p.33 -MOD]. Let's say that was 1920. I came basically 40 years after that. So it was a very new thing to have a free-standing school of architecture, and then the school of art was embedded in that. And then in 1970 they pulled the school of art out and made it separate. So this is very new, very recent thinking to take art out of architecture, to take architecture out of engineering.

MS. SHEA: And how do you feel about that?

MS. OKA DONER: I think we should all be trained as engineers.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say I think — I think there was — a real benefit to that.

MS. OKA DONER: I do, too. I think the further and further segmentation has not benefited any of the different divisions.

MS. SHEA: It's been interesting because some of the people that I've talked to had a very strong practical background that later on came to be very helpful. So it's interesting for me to hear what you're saying about that kind of separation that seems to be — or is it specialization, I don't know if you want to call it that, seems to be a kind of continuing and, you know, I guess looking all of the way back maybe to, you know, like Leonardo da Vinci, who went, you know, all the way across the board. [Laughs.] But that was the Renaissance, maybe.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, science is really my second love. And I do love reading Lewis Mumford. I love *The City in History* [New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961.] I think it should be required reading. I like being part of a collective culture and — which is one reason why I love public art. But the school of art was not very practical and I didn't learn practical things. It was the '60s. It was about slideshows and breaking egg yolks —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: — on the slides and, you know, the rules were all being broken. And so I didn't have a very classical education.

MS. SHEA: But in a sense maybe you had already kind of had that, it sounds like to me.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I could teach myself things when I left. And I did have a great time. And that does count.

MS. SHEA: Did you live in a dorm or did you live off campus?

MS. OKA DONER: I lived in a dorm my freshman year. And then I lived in a sorority house, which was a very common thing to do. There were so many because there was no alternative. You couldn't live off campus in those days. So either I stayed in the dorm four years —

MS. SHEA: Forever. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: — or I went into a smaller unit with a group of girls and a housemother. And I found it very nice. The meals were better, and it was about 70 people instead of 350.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] And tell me about your kind of — you say that the art classes, it sounded as though those were real structured. What about the rest of your education? Did you take sciences? Did you take writing?

MS. OKA DONER: I took a lot of art history, and those were very strong. They were much stronger than my art classes. I studied with Oleg Grabar.

MS. SHEA: Oh, okay. Right.

MS. OKA DONER: And I took five years of Islamic art.

MS. SHEA: Oh, yes.

MS. OKA DONER: And I studied also with Dr. Spink, both of whom I'm still in touch with all these years. So I had a very strong background in the Asian arts, Eastern arts, Middle Eastern. And I studied printmaking also with Frank Cassara and Emil Weddige. And I've just gone back to printmaking.

MS. SHEA: Ah. Do you remember any particular term papers? But you said you were studying the Islamic and the Asian arts. Anything you remember about writing about something that really particularly caught your imagination?

MS. OKA DONER: I do. I was given an assignment to pick something in the Alumni Memorial Museum and write about it, of a certain period, I think Chinese or Indian. And it was a summer day and there was tornado warnings, as can happen in the Midwest.

MS. SHEA: Yes.

MS. OKA DONER: And I went into the museum and they had this huge terra cotta pot. And I wrote about how there were tornado warnings so I took refuge in this pot. And it was a very strange and kind of ridiculous paper. But they gave me an A-plus.

MS. SHEA: But still memorable and—

MS. OKA DONER: And I still have it. I still have my notes from classes, too.

MS. SHEA: And any writing? Because it seems to me that you've continued to write. Did you take classes in that at all?

MS. OKA DONER: No, I really wrote —

MS. SHEA: Or literature?

MS. OKA DONER: I wrote when I needed to. And not until my own sons were beginning to learn to write and needed some help, my older son in particular, and I taught him how to write, that I realized that I knew how to write.

MS. SHEA: That you just knew how to write.

MS. OKA DONER: And so for me in many ways raising the sons was a reflection back onto skills I didn't know I had. It was very interesting.

MS. SHEA: Going back to them.

MS. OKA DONER: Going back to them and bringing them back in a way that I had some distance from myself.

MS. SHEA: And any more aspects because you said your degree was a Bachelor of Science. Was there —

MS. OKA DONER: No, they called it a Bachelor of Science and Design.

MS. SHEA: Aha.

MS. OKA DONER: A B.S.D.

MS. SHEA: B.S.D.

MS. OKA DONER: So it's the science of design.

MS. SHEA: Science of design. And so were there design classes?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. Two-dimensional design and —

MS. SHEA: And 3-D.

MS. OKA DONER: — And 3-D. And Buckminster Fuller was a big icon at the time, and so we had to make these tens — what are they, tensor, tensor — structures, where we bought balsa wood rods and had to cut them into two-inch and three-inch lengths and then saw the middle of the edges and get nylon thread and with one wrap make them stand up. It was hell.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] I was going to say, it sounds. — And did you read his writings? Because they're quite interesting.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. They're very interesting.

MS. SHEA: About the Spaceship Earth, which is an interesting way, I think, to think about things. Then did you go directly from there to Wayne State [Wayne State University, Detroit]? Because I know you did some work there.

MS. OKA DONER: No, I finished two degrees and then we moved to Detroit. And they were just starting to make paper. They hadn't even set it up. They had it in the basement of a building.

MS. SHEA: Oh.

MS. OKA DONER: And I knew an artist, Aris Koutroulis, who was teaching it.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: So I went and did postgraduate work because I didn't particularly want to go back to school, I just wanted to make paper. So I had to sign up.

MS. SHEA: And what interested you about paper? Well, you said you were doing a little bit of printmaking. Was it a part of that process?

MS. OKA DONER: No. I think I've always loved beautiful paper. I used to peel the bark on trees in Miami Beach, and I used to love the idea of papyrus. And so I think it was just loving paper. I still love paper.

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.] I was wondering what kinds of trees those would be. Eucalyptus?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, we had fabulous Eucalyptus trees, and on quiet afternoons we'd sit there and just peel.

MS. SHEA: [They laugh.] And it didn't hurt the tree, apparently.

MS. OKA DONER: No. We called them paper trees.

MS. SHEA: So when you came to the Midwest, ever do that with — I think you can do that with —

MS. OKA DONER: Birch.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, birch trees.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, I did. I found the birch trees.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] And you said we. By then were you with someone that you moved to —

MS. OKA DONER: Just children would sit under trees and, you know, play. You didn't have TV and you didn't have video games, so —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] Or iPods.

MS. OKA DONER: — you could spend the whole afternoon. It was a certain kind of tree, that Eucalyptus. I don't see it anywhere but Florida, and I don't have a name for it.

MS. SHEA: I wonder if it's in California at all, or not.

MS. OKA DONER: No, I see different Eucalyptus.

MS. SHEA: Okay, a different kind.

MS. OKA DONER: They have more bark. This is like paper. It's like layers of paper. It's very pink and white.

MS. SHEA: I was flipping here. So your second degree was a Master of Fine Arts also at the University of Michigan. So you continued studying art. Did they try to teach you how to teach art?

MS. OKA DONER: I did. I taught. I was a teaching fellow. And you didn't have to, but to get an M.F.A. [Master of Fine Arts], they assume you're going to teach. And you could apply for a fellowship, which I did. And I had a fellowship in art history. And so I liked to do the lectures that they gave in this school, which I didn't attend. I took my art history in Tappan Hall —

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: — in the serious, with the serious students.

MS. SHEA: Art historians. Yes, they have a very strong art history program. I think it's always been, as far as I know.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: It has a very strong reputation for art history.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I knew them all, and really I consider all of those teachers my friends. In those days it was very open, very nice. But I taught a section that was for artists who needed to fill an art history —

MS. SHEA: To have more of a grounding in the history of art?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: The kind of the art history 101 and 102 type of — survey classes.

MS. OKA DONER: Right. With a painter. I worked with a man named Al Mullen who was a real New York abstract expressionist painter and had great attitude. And I was his teaching assistant.

MS. SHEA: I'm guessing that might have been a contrast — [laughs] — because it sounds like he had great — (inaudible) — where you were, I'm guessing, a little more quiet, a little more —

MS. OKA DONER: Not by then.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: Not by then. But, you know, he was really a caricature of a '50s artist.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] If you were casting.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. You know, big drinker, sad wife, lots of girlfriends and mistresses.

MS. SHEA: Oh, dear. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: You know.

MS. SHEA: Yes, that does sound like a not very positive stereotype. So you taught both, you said, the art history and in art classes? Or not in art classes?

MS. OKA DONER: I didn't teach in the art classes, but I took a degree at the school of education and I taught in the summer at Ann Arbor High School. My mother's only requirement was that I get a teaching certificate because she had taught Latin and she was of a generation that had seen the Depression. And I think many of those parents saw that wealth can come and go —

MS. SHEA: And that you needed to have something just in case.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. In case. So I didn't argue, and didn't realize I'd get an M.F.A., so I wouldn't need it either. I couldn't project that far at 18.

MS. SHEA: And what was it like teaching high school?

MS. OKA DONER: I liked that, too. I have interns here. I've always liked to teach and it's natural for me to explain how things are done. And I like process, so I didn't mind those. They seemed like small requirements attached to an activity that I like to do so much it was just a minor request.

MS. SHEA: Part of it — So you went to Wayne State, and then were you teaching at Wayne State as well, or just learning how to do paper?

MS. OKA DONER: No, I took a few courses in paper.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And then I went back to full-time work in my own studio. And I did a show with Gertrude Kasle, who was the best dealer in Detroit. I believe it was 1971 because I was pregnant with my second son. So I worked and exhibited all those years in a small studio in Troy. And then we moved to Franklin and I had a rather large studio. And I showed at the Detroit Institute of Art. I had a one-person show there and then I was part of a show there that traveled to New York. And I had a wonderful review in *The New York Times*.

MS. SHEA: Yes. I was going to ask, do you remember your first show? Were you a part of — as in school, were you part of a gallery show?

MS. SHEA: Oh, yes, first show. I was part of a show at Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills] called "Sixteen Michigan Ceramists" [1967] And it was with my teachers. In most of these shows I was the youngest. But I really somehow hit my stride running, and from very early on, and I wasn't looking for a voice, I had a voice. I think I was just waiting for the opportunity to have some freedom to work in kind of peace and quiet. And that's what I found in Ann Arbor. That's what Ann Arbor held for me. It was really wonderful. Miami was sunny and busy and other things —

MS. SHEA: And distracting?

MS. OKA DONER: Distracting, yeah. Ann Arbor, I could really center.

MS. SHEA: And just completely focus.

MS. OKA DONER: And focus.

MS. SHEA: And did you have a studio on the campus? Do art students have their own studios?

MS. OKA DONER: I did in graduate school. And the first time they set up graduate studios, that was very exciting. Again, it was in the basement of one of these wonderful old Ann Arbor houses. I also showed in the only gallery in Ann Arbor at the time, called the Forsyth Gallery [1968.] They invited me to have a one-person exhibition when I graduated. So, galleries always came.

MS. SHEA: So you were kind of off and running in that gallery world.

MS. OKA DONER: I did, and I also exhibited early on and won an award, the Malbin Prize [1967], which was Lydia Winston Malbin.

MS. SHEA: Oh, Lydia, yes.

MS. OKA DONER: And that was very exciting, for these tattooed porcelain dolls. And then Lee Nordness came and I had three in the studio. He was looking for something for "Objects: USA" [1970.] And he asked me how much they were and I told him, I think, \$350 each, which sounded like a lot of money to me. And he said he'd take all three, and then I knew I'd made a mistake.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] That you should have gone a little higher, maybe?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, so that was exciting. So the world came. Patrick Lannan came and bought.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: Lucy Lippard came and looked at the studio. So the years I lived in Michigan, people had seen "Objects: USA." They sought me out. They called. There was no e-mail in those days.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: And so I was working and busy.

MS. SHEA: So, was your first dealer the —

MS. OKA DONER: Forsyth Gallery.

MS. SHEA: Forsyth Gallery in Ann Arbor and then later on in Detroit.

MS. OKA DONER: Gertrude Kasse.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: And then there was another dealer, Charles McGee, whose gallery I just loved and I loved Charles. And Gertrude was showing very, how would I say — I use the word "slick" not in a negative way, but slick New York, things that were big chrome frames and lots of glass and you couldn't touch it. And Charley, Charles McGee, had all these gunnysack runners and all this strange stuff. And I once said to him, you know, I belong here, not there. But he gave me a look. And so I said, would you show my work? And so he said, well, if Gertrude doesn't mind. So he called Gertrude Kasse and she didn't mind. And so I changed galleries, which was a very radical thing to do.

MS. SHEA: That does sound —

MS. OKA DONER: That was unusual, to go from the proper New York moment to something that had texture and soul, I'll say.

MS. SHEA: Right. Right. And where was his gallery?

MS. OKA DONER: In the Fisher Building also.

MS. SHEA: In the Fisher Building, okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And that show was so successful it brought me many things. It turns out that John Neff was the curator at the time at the museum.

MS. SHEA: Aha.

MS. OKA DONER: And he took Claes Oldenburg through the Fisher Building.

MS. SHEA: Wow. That's — must have —

MS. OKA DONER: Claes Oldenburg saw my work and said to him, this is really great work. And then the next thing I knew my phone rang and they asked me to come to the museum with a portfolio, which I did, and John gave me the show "Works in Progress" [1978.] Then he immediately left for Chicago, [... his assistant curator – MOD] Jane Jacob, worked with me on that exhibition.

MS. SHEA: Okay. That must have felt, I would think, like an amazing honor to be recognized like that. I mean, I think often artists think that they have to be here in New York to be seen, and that wasn't at all your experience.

MS. OKA DONER: No, I really built what I have piece by piece. I wasn't ready to take on what New York was. New York was slick. New York was masculine.

MS. SHEA: Right, at that time, I think.

MS. OKA DONER: I was feminine. I had an organic voice. There was no context for me, and I think I would have spent my energies fighting battles I couldn't win.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: And suffering from having the, some kind of weight on me that I couldn't possibly remove. It was too cultural and too historical. So I think I very smartly took on as much as I could do and master, and then when I could do that I took on the next bit.

MS. SHEA: The next — step.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. Absorbing and growing and enjoying what I was doing. Earning the respect of other artists in the community, and my own sense of self-worth as well grew. So by the time I came here at 36, I feel I knew who I was and I knew what I wanted to do and I could begin to set out to do that slowly again the same way I did it in Detroit.

MS. SHEA: And, this is just a bit of trivia, but the Fisher Building is another Albert Kahn building, I believe. And

it's an amazing building.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, it is. No, it's actually not trivia. It's very important because —

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: — you know, I have these three *Science Benches* [1989-1990] in Ann Arbor that they asked me to do, and they're right in front of his Natural Science Building.

MS. SHEA: So it's wonderful connections.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. Well, one of the first things I did when I moved to Ann Arbor, is I set up a tour, and they gave them in those days, of the Rouge plant.

MS. SHEA: Really? This astonishes me. The Ford Motor Company Rouge plant [Dearborn, MI.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Which, of course is, I guess many people would say, was Albert Kahn's —

MS. OKA DONER: Masterpiece.

MS. SHEA: — industrial masterpiece.

MS. OKA DONER: It's a masterpiece. I've always had a connection with that place, with the Sheeler painting of it. And then I spoke at the Center for Creative Studies about three years ago and they had booked me into a hotel that cancelled the reservation. And Michelle Perron who was so upset because of — "But I made this reservation months ago," she said. I said, "Don't worry. Don't worry." So I'll go to the hotel they sent me, which turned out to be the Pontchartrain. "Oh," she said, "You haven't been in it in years. It's all run down. You're going — I'm so sorry." I said, "Don't worry, it's one night." So I go and I go up in my room, and I open the curtain and I look out at the river and all of a sudden I realize that down the river is the flame. I could see —

MS. SHEA: You could see the flame from the —

MS. OKA DONER: The Rouge plant.

MS. SHEA: Oh, my.

MS. OKA DONER: And I had the strange thought that Albert Kahn was a German Jew and he knew what a Ner Tamid was. Do you know what that is?

MS. SHEA: No.

MS. OKA DONER: Ner Tamid is the eternal light. And it's in every single synagogue.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And he had made an eternal light for American industry. He had made, it was really — I knew at that moment he had taken that idea out of the temple of the spirit and put it into the temple of industry and made a temple of industry.

MS. SHEA: I've never heard anyone talk about that before and make that connection. And then that you just happened to be staying there and look out the window from —

MS. OKA DONER: And there it was. He knew. I know he knew.

MS. SHEA: It's interesting. So you stayed in Michigan for quite a while.

MS. OKA DONER: I loved Michigan. I stayed six years in Ann Arbor, 12 years in Detroit, and I loved Pewabic pottery and I went down there often. I explored Detroit. I had never lived in a city, and Miami wasn't a city. And I had never seen industry and machines in process. And I likened Detroit to the grain of sand that really enabled me to make a pearl, because without irritation you don't do anything, and Miami had no irritation.

MS. SHEA: It was too comfortable.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, and New York was probably too irritating.

MS. SHEA: Too uncomfortable. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: So it was just a great time in my life. I was there last week at Higgins Lake [Midland, MI] visiting a friend and client [Junia Doan], and I saw pileated woodpeckers in the woods. And I had never seen woodpeckers that are as large as dogs, and they were so close to me. And I realized, always in Michigan I found magic. I found morel mushrooms in Franklin, and wild asparagus, and I was very, very busy the whole time I was there.

MS. SHEA: And a lot of your work, it seems to me that you've said, goes back to your childhood in Miami, but also I'm hearing you say that there is a lot of the Midwest.

MS. OKA DONER: I think so.

MS. SHEA: The richness of —

MS. OKA DONER: I think it was the wonderful yin to the yang of Miami.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: It gave me a fullness. And also I think the people were so different. And Midwest was a — you know, you read about Simon in the desert, or people going to the desert for 12 years and 18 years. I think for me it was a good desert. It allowed me to take everything I had learned my first 18 years and absorb it and process it and come out, emerge from this period with things ready to move forward.

MS. SHEA: Move forward. For some reason that reminded me of St. Jerome in the — I don't know why that image just came to me. But yes, absorbing things and then coming to where you could really work on them. So you stayed in Detroit, you said for, was it 12 years or 16 years?

MS. OKA DONER: Twelve years in Detroit and six years in Ann Arbor.

MS. SHEA: Okay. And then you decided to make the move to —

MS. OKA DONER: Well, the loft period had begun, and artists could live in the city and work in the same space. And the city was becoming a little bit safer. The idea of bringing children wasn't so strange. It just seemed ripe. And we were in our mid-30s, my husband and myself, and we felt this was the time. The children were just about old enough to take the subways. And if we didn't go now it would —

MS. SHEA: It wouldn't — [laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: — Yeah, it wouldn't happen. And so we just took the risk, and it was a huge risk.

MS. SHEA: So, for their schooling did they go to private schools?

MS. OKA DONER: They went to private school. My older son went to Friends Seminary [New York City] and loved it. And the younger one went to Trinity School [New York City], which was very much like Cranbrook, where he had been going.

MS. SHEA: And I was going to say in Michigan were they going to, for example, Cranbrook or —

MS. OKA DONER: The younger one Cranbrook; the older one Roeper.

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.] So

MS. OKA DONER: These were very similar schools.

MS. SHEA: So, that's very interesting to kind of — I think people don't often think of the mid-30s as a time to make changes. I think often people think of making those kind of changes slightly earlier. But it sounds like it was the right time for you.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I think that I had a certain amount of experience and a certain amount of youth.

MS. SHEA: Right. Right. And when you came back to New York were there family and relatives that —

MS. OKA DONER: I never had lived here before.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: You're right. I was wondering if there were still relatives.

MS. OKA DONER: My Aunt Dorothy, my difficult Aunt Dorothy [Heller] was still in the Village. And my older sister was here. And so that was nice, and nice for my sons. But it was really new. I knew a few people from Ann Arbor and they were living on the Bowery and they were drinking and partying.

MS. SHEA: And you were in, it sounds like, kind of a more of a family, stable type of mode.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I never did the bar scene. I didn't want to drink that much.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: I like to drink. I love wine, but I like it when I sit down and have a meal.

MS. SHEA: With a meal? Right.

MS. OKA DONER: Yeah. I've never hung out.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] Which I think a lot of artists spend some time doing.

MS. OKA DONER: I guess, but I just never have.

MS. SHEA: It wasn't part of your —

MS. OKA DONER: No, it wasn't part of my calling.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] So when you moved to New York, did you move to this particular studio or have you moved around?

MS. OKA DONER: We lived near Trinity School — Jeremy was only 9 — for a year and a half on Central Park West, and then I found this space and we moved in. It was pretty raw, and it's actually, as you see it, the library was built in 1990, and that was built 10 years later. And we're just about to return that to open space, which had become the boys' room. But it's otherwise pretty much the way it was.

MS. SHEA: And it's a wonderful space. Are these —

MS. OKA DONER: Original columns.

MS. SHEA: — Original? Were they cast iron?

MS. OKA DONER: [Affirmative.] Cast iron, and the heaters work. And the building's from 1885, and it was a button factory.

MS. SHEA: Aha. So it was an industrial space.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: So instead of making buttons, now art is being made.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, sometimes I refer to the space as an old-time atelier, because we make everything.

MS. SHEA: Everything.

MS. OKA DONER: We've made chairs and tables and sinks and hardware, jewelry, sculpture, floors.

MS. SHEA: And all in this space.

MS. OKA DONER: We make them here. Sometimes when it gets too big, like these huge 10-foot benches, they make them at the foundry and I come out and work there.

MS. SHEA: And you've really worked across the board in terms of media, it seems to me. Ceramics, metal. — Do you have a favorite or do you love them all? Or do you have favorites at different times? You talked about paper.

MS. OKA DONER: I like them all. Different needs. I have to write on paper; I can't write on metal. Well, I guess I could. And I figured out with Steuben how to write on glass.

MS. SHEA: Glass. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Maybe that's my scribe ancestry. [Laughs.] And look, with the Miami Beach book, limited edition, it has a beautiful piece of handmade paper in the — yes, in that edition. There's another printing coming

out and I'd love to — I should give one to Archives, probably.

MS. SHEA: I'm sure they would love to have that.

MS. OKA DONER: And then with the serving pieces and everyday pieces, I do love silver, it's so beautiful, and my vases, the bronze tables. I just like it all.

MS. SHEA: So do you feel that you kind of continued along with the galleries, or do you feel like you kind of went your own way and would use the galleries when you needed them or wanted them to? Or how did that relationship develop?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I'm not making one easily identifiable, commodifiable thing, which is what a gallery needs.

MS. SHEA: Yes, I think it is. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: And so I'm lucky I have such a wonderful gallery that indulges me. And they take my sculpture and have helped me to develop the figurative sculpture and go back to the early work. And what's interesting is that galleries are changing now as young artists want to make what they call installations. So it's all opening up.

MS. SHEA: Because in a way, to me you've been making installations all along.

MS. OKA DONER: All along. Yes, I'm the grandmother of installations.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: In my exhibition at the Detroit Institute of Arts, "Works in Progress" [1978], it was an installation.

MS. SHEA: It was an installation. That's interesting.

MS. OKA DONER: And I've always made installations. So — the world will catch up.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] And then — tell me a little bit about the technical aspects, because it sounds to me like when you first started exhibiting you were working a lot in ceramics. Is that fair?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I started in clay because I think it's like sand, which I had done a lot of building in as a child sitting on the beach. And it was wet and responsive to my hands. And also one of my teachers had studied with Maija Grotel at Cranbrook, John Stephenson, and then he had a Fulbright to Japan, so he was on a wavelength I liked. And so it was one of the stronger departments.

MS. SHEA: I didn't realize he'd taught at University of Michigan, because isn't he now at Eastern?

MS. OKA DONER: His wife taught at Eastern.

MS. SHEA: Okay. Okay, I see. I didn't realize.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. So there wasn't a strong painting department, really. And it was an odd time. If you were a sculptor, you were welding. It was that moment. And if you were a painter, you were doing color field or stripes. So I didn't want to paint stripes like Kenneth Noland. I didn't want to do color field like Larry Poons. It was very rigid, what art was at that point.

MS. SHEA: That's interesting, because it was supposedly so experimental or so breaking the mold, but then —

MS. OKA DONER: No, it was breaking the mold away from what the last —

MS. SHEA: — mold had been.

MS. SHEA: — had been, the last didactic people had said you have to do. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: Then the new didactic began.

MS. OKA DONER: Then they were even mad at Philip Pearlstein for doing the figure. The figure was dead. There were all these laws and rules. So no one cared about ceramics. So again I found a place where I could explore and create without dealing with all these politics and all of these manifestos and arguments about was it art, wasn't it.

MS. SHEA: Was art.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, yes. So I've never wanted to spend my time being — what is that, pol —

MS. SHEA: Polemic or polemicizing?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, polemicist.

MS. SHEA: Whatever the variation of that that word is. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: You weren't interested in that. Well, that's interesting to me because sometimes it seems that ceramics has been associated with women. But it's interesting to me that —

MS. OKA DONER: Really? I mean, I associate it with Paul Soldner, Kenneth Price, Peter Voulkos.

MS. SHEA: No, I was talking about women — maybe that's not right — more associated with the home. You know, Maija Grotel and then — I know that you were creating ceramic pieces, but there was the whole, you know, the decoration of pottery that women were doing. But your teacher was John Stephenson. Did you have any other ceramic teachers?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, one who didn't last very long, Fred Bauer. And he went to Mills College [Oakland, CA] after he left Ann Arbor, and he then ended up growing pot.

MS. SHEA: From pot to pot. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, he was a wild guy.

MS. SHEA: In the '60s.

MS. OKA DONER: In the '60s. But what was interesting is that I did explore the domestic landscape. This was probably the most political thing I've ever done. I felt that if women were, quote-unquote, relegated to the home, why not make it fabulous? And I did play with it, and so anything that I had, I made special or I found a special one. I used the Japanese model that any spoon, any cup, was special. The Scandinavians did that, too. These were cultures that didn't have a lot of excess, and they built in the beauty. And Japan didn't have a word for art. Everything was.

MS. SHEA: There was no differentiation.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. So I used the Japanese model. I read a lot of Japanese literature, studied all kinds of ways of working in Japanese philosophy. And that's how I patterned my home.

MS. SHEA: And did you travel to Japan? I assume that you —

MS. OKA DONER: Not until mid-1980s, but my parents had lived there. And my mother had a really good sense of what spare was, what Zen was. My mother was a minimalist before the word was coined. And when she was there she studied Sumi-e painting.

MS. SHEA: And what is that?

MS. OKA DONER: That's a Japanese ink and a very beautiful stroke.

MS. SHEA: With a brush?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. In fact there's a beautiful spread in the Miami Beach book of her Sumi-e painting because my parents went to Japan head of the People-to-People program for the city of Fujisawa and Miami Beach. And they lived there —

MS. SHEA: Were they sister cities?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And that was the beginning of the Sister City program.

MS. SHEA: That's interesting. There are some very interesting combinations of cities out there. So the Japanese city was Fujisawa?

MS. OKA DONER: Fujisawa.

MS. SHEA: Is that a smaller city?

MS. OKA DONER: I don't know. That's a very good question. Miami Beach wasn't such a big city either. Still isn't. You know, it was then 60,000, maybe today its 80,000.

MS. SHEA: Okay, I didn't realize it was so small — is so small.

MS. OKA DONER: It's a barrier island.

MS. SHEA: So it's limited. Did you travel? You said you didn't go to Japan until much kind of later. You've mentioned going to Europe. Did you have other travels?

MS. OKA DONER: I traveled quite a lot in the '70s to Central America, which was a clay culture. You know, Pre-Columbian, I have some Pre-Columbian pieces I collected during that time, and then books on papermaking. You know, they made wonderful paper. And so I'd say the '70s when I lived in Detroit were the decade where I studied the Mayan civilizations and was interested in Diego Rivera, which of course started in Detroit with the murals.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: And then we moved here in '81. And so back to Europe quite a bit in the summers. And then in 1990 when both boys were grown, I traveled extensively.

MS. SHEA: Then you really started travel. I assume you took your children to the Louvre like you had been taken.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, of course.

MS. SHEA: But I suppose now it's a little different. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: It's quite different. Now it's like Yankee Stadium, you know.

MS. SHEA: And when you're traveling in, it sounds, like both Central and South America, how would you do that? Would you drive? Would you fly?

MS. OKA DONER: We flew. We didn't take the children often. We would read and we would organize. We'd choose two or three sites a year and study them and then go visit them, get a guide. There were very few people going in those days.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say probably you were one of the very few people.

MS. OKA DONER: We had four-wheel drive over rivers, and it was dangerous. We went to Copan [Honduras], for example, from Guatemala City and we were the only people there. I mean nobody. There's no place to eat. It was very abandoned. It was a long day. You leave before dawn and get back, it's dark. It was a very exciting time.

MS. SHEA: And would you, for example, when you're doing travels, would you sketch? Would you take photographs? Would you just try to —

MS. OKA DONER: Photographs. And what I was interested in were how things were — symbols. I loved the language, loved the glyphs. I have a lot of books in the library on the origin of writing, the origin of language — pictographs.

MS. SHEA: And I guess they're still making discoveries in —

MS. OKA DONER: I keep clipping those and adding them to the books.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] So travels in Central and Southern America. Did you ever go up to Canada?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, we went to Arcona, Ontario, over the Blue Water Bridge. Went to Sarnia [Ontario] from Port Huron [Michigan].

MS. SHEA: Right. It's very flat there.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: I just traveled across there.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, not if you take that Route 7 all the way up to the Au Sable River. There's these bluffs, and we found lots of fossils. I found a Devonian Sea, 350 million years old.

MS. SHEA: Wow.

MS. OKA DONER: And we collected a horde of fossils.

MS. SHEA: Along the coast and the bluffs?

MS. OKA DONER: Along the bluffs. And what I'm going to do is, when we renovate, is I'll be able to get them out of the boxes again.

MS. SHEA: But now they're packed away in storage?

MS. OKA DONER: They're packed away now because the studio's taken over everything. But they're coming out. 2008.

MS. SHEA: It's crawling forward. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes

[END MD 01 TR 01.]

MS. SHEA: Let's see. You mentioned — it sounded like some of your public projects were very important to you.

MS. OKA DONER: Very much so, because when I studied in the '60s, the WPA was only three decades earlier.

MS. SHEA: And you'd gone to a school. Did you know that when you were a child?

MS. OKA DONER: No, not until I did this book [*Miami Beach: Blueprint of an Eden*].

MS. SHEA: I don't think one would have tuned that in.

MS. OKA DONER: But what was terrific was Miami Beach had a lot of WPA murals, and Ann Arbor had a few, and Detroit had a lot. And Detroit had a lot to explore. It really was very vital in the '20s and '30s, the Scarab Club, all the Pewabic tiles everywhere. So the idea of architectural installation came from both cities.

MS. SHEA: Both from Miami and then also from Detroit?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I'd say the Miami was the deco, you know, kind of funky, and Morris Lapidus, and the Detroit was really serious. And the Ann Arbor was Bauhaus and Cranbrook influenced. The teachers had come from both directions.

MS. SHEA: Did you spend much time at Cranbrook?

MS. OKA DONER: I did when Jeremy went to school there.

MS. SHEA: You would be relatively close. Franklin is a suburb of Detroit. That's not too far away.

MS. OKA DONER: No, I was 10 minutes away.

MS. SHEA: And it's a wonderful, beautiful campus.

MS. OKA DONER: Wonderful.

MS. SHEA: And very, I think, inspiring setting in many ways.

MS. OKA DONER: Very undiscovered still.

MS. SHEA: It's another one of those undiscovered Detroit treasures that more people should know about.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I was in St. Louis printing at the Wildwood Press. And they used to be such a big city when the West was opened. You had to go through St. Louis. And that's where everybody started and packed their wagon trains and the boats. And it had fabulous building stock, a wonderful Louis Sullivan building. And you see how small it is now. And then I met one of the old-timers and he told me that when he started on the stock exchange there, there were 32 companies from St. Louis. And now there's a handful. So I understood — I thought about Detroit quite a bit, and I saw —

MS. SHEA: Of that kind of cycle of emergence, preeminence and then —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. Well, being in the right place at the right time for a particular thing; but then there's also — they hold onto it.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: They don't have flexibility.

MS. SHEA: And then that particular thing — because I was just reading about the telegraph, and you know they thought the telegraph would be forever, and it's not. You know, that things just keep moving, moving forward. But we were starting to talk about some of your public art projects.

MS. OKA DONER: So I liked the '30s, and I was wishing in the '60s that I had had that opportunity. And then, of course, the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] was formed and the Percent for Art programs. And so in the '70s I was very excited about them and I really felt I began to think about how to apply what I was doing to that.

MS. SHEA: And how did you hear about it, just out of curiosity?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, just reading and being alert, paying attention. And then when I moved here I applied for Herald Square in a competition [1987] and won that, and went back and used Pewabic tiles, 11,000 gold-luster tiles for a 165-foot long wall under Macy's at Herald Square. And I also did a maquette for Celestial Plaza, "Radiant Site" [1990] which was also inspired by the planetarium at Cranbrook.

MS. SHEA: I mean, I've read about that, but I don't think I ever made that connection.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, most people wouldn't know, but I used to go there and come out, and there would be the fountain with the Milles sculpture and there would be beautiful — reeds growing in a pond. And in New York I'd go to the Hayden Planetarium and I'd come out and there's broken asphalt. And I said it's ridiculous. So I had an idea and did a maquette and it was funded. And of course, it lasted only about 15 years before they tore down the Hayden Planetarium.

MS. SHEA: I didn't realize that.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, it's okay. What we did is we saved the bronzes and we installed them inside.

MS. SHEA: So there's a slightly happy ending. Why did the planetarium —

MS. OKA DONER: Just the same way people want the new. They saw that Liberty Center in New Jersey was built with a big glass dome right after I.M. Pei did the glass pyramid. It was about, I want one, too. And so all of a sudden the Hayden Planetarium looked small and old and 19th century. They should have kept it and built a big glass box over it.

MS. SHEA: And that would have been really exciting and interesting.

MS. OKA DONER: That would have been very interesting.

MS. SHEA: Kind of like the Apple store —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: — on a much grander scale. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: So those, the Hayden Planetarium, Celestial Plaza, had a back page in the *Sunday Times Magazine* [June 19, 1988; p.74] and then I got a lot of calls. And I submitted to the Sacramento Central Library ["Codex Sacramento," 1990]. And I wanted to work indoors in terrazzo because I found the cement also very forbidding. It really devoured the bronzes.

MS. SHEA: Really?

MS. OKA DONER: Yeah.

MS. SHEA: Because of the cement, is it awkward?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, that and it held dirt and it was very hard to get them to keep it clean.

MS. SHEA: To keep that clean.

MS. OKA DONER: It's easier to keep indoors clean than outdoors clean. So I wised up quickly, and the next project was in terrazzo and it worked, which meant I got rid of the texture on the bronzes, but I found out the beautiful texture was holding the dirt, too. I'd never really understood how dirty urban life was —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] Well, it's a dump.

MS. OKA DONER: — So once I did that, Miami Airport saw it, and so they evolved. And at the same time I was doing the wall at Herald Square, and so they just grew up simultaneously. And I was also making objects.

And at the time of the airport we bought an apartment in Miami Beach[1990], and the apartment had no soffits. It had cement, as they all are outside walls. And you can't really run electrical cords through, and I don't like the cords hanging, so I had to create light in the evening. And I made these burning bushes [1991-present], and those have become iconic also. And I made them because I needed light.

MS. SHEA: Out of necessity.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: But you wanted to have something that was beautiful.

MS. OKA DONER: I wanted to have something that didn't have a cord coming out of the walls.

MS. SHEA: That wasn't ugly. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: And then what would you say — I thought that I read somewhere you'd talked about the federal courthouse projects as some of your favorite, or maybe that's not a fair word, but —

MS. OKA DONER: Well, they're very exciting pieces. It's really an honor to be involved with the government in making buildings for civic purpose. And of course my father was a judge, so that was even more exciting too to come back to that part of my childhood in some way. The first one was in Greenville, Tennessee ["Poplar and Iris" (Garden of Justice), James H. Quillen United States Courthouse, 2001]. And I used the state tree, which was a tulip poplar, and the state flower, wild iris. And like you see the columns here, the Corinthian columns are adorned with flowers and leaves. We did that for the state of Tennessee in a much more random and voluptuous way in their own building.

MS. SHEA: And how was that received?

MS. OKA DONER: They loved it.

MS. SHEA: They loved it? Because sometimes, I would assume — it seems to me a lot of your projects have been very favorably received, but maybe sometimes —

MS. OKA DONER: They're really meant to do what Lewis Mumford thought cities should do. He said that people got together at the riverside, and after they traded and swapped, they stayed and told stories and sang songs and they made the arts, they communicated. And cities are about that. And that's how cities grew. So these are not meant to startle, shock, horrify or —

MS. SHEA: Some of the things many people, I think, sometimes associate with contemporary art, the shocking, the horrifying, the —

MS. OKA DONER: Well, we have a cult of violence now that is —

MS. SHEA: It makes me sad to hear you say that.

MS. OKA DONER: We do, though. We have a cult of violence because people are so numb from being anesthetized by television and drugs, and overfed, over-everything, over-sated, that they don't feel. So you have to keep turning up the volume to feel today.

MS. SHEA: I don't know why that reminded me of Madonna's comment about movies and how, you know, her work would get certain ratings because of sex, and then she was saying, well, you know, then on the other hand there's all this violence that isn't looked so negatively upon. I don't know; it's just curious to think about the assault of the senses.

MS. OKA DONER: It is that. So the third courthouse — well, that's the first one. The first one's Tennessee, tulip and poplar. The second one ["River of Quintessence," United States Courthouse, 2003, The Webb County

Courthouse] I did was Laredo, Texas, and the largest geographical element there was the Rio Grande River. And it's basically a city with a lot of poor Mexicans, 98 percent. And they don't have much. And they haven't had a new building in a long time. And so I used Texas aggregate and I ran in glass the Rio Grande River through the footprint of the courthouse, which is something everybody could connect to; their own land, their own place. And it's quite beautiful. It came out like a painting, really, using the different-colored aggregates from Texas, that range from pink and grays and browns. They're just gorgeous as color. And the floor is the canvas. Very unstructured piece. I laid it in in sort of geological time; took me time, too.

And then the third courthouse is Gulfport, Mississippi ["Wave and Gate," The Dan M. Russell Jr. United States Courthouse, 2003]. And that was around the time that was before 9/11, but they still had magnometers and were checking people with guns and knives coming in. And they seem all kind of plunked down in these wonderful buildings. All of a sudden you'd come in and it's sitting there. So I designed a screen, and that was quite a success, and it's a terrific project also.

So they're three different approaches. One was decorative, really, to bring back the essence of how justice began. It was meted out in the early days under a tree. That's where the column came from. And then the second one was, again, the geography of the land. Then the third one was dealing with the social issue of being stopped and screened, and how to dignify that in some way.

MS. SHEA: And it seems so wonderful to bring beauty and art to courthouses, because sometimes they can be so grim and fortress-like because of, I guess, the purposes they have to serve.

MS. OKA DONER: Necessity today, yes. Well, they used to be beautiful buildings. There's a wonderful book by George Hersey called *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture* [Cambridge: MIT Press, c1988.] It's very slim. He taught at Yale. And he wrote wonderful things on justice and courthouses and how they evolved, and the rituals.

And the Tennessee courthouse also has, besides the wonderful articulation at the top of plant life, around the column shaft itself, like you see on these Corinthians, there's usually a secondary band. And I gave it the charm bracelet, so to speak, with the symbols of justice hanging. There's a history of justice, Hammurabi receiving the code of justice; and there's the Buddhist wheel of justice; Thoth the Egyptian god of the underworld, but who's the god of justice. Then I have the scales of justice which we often see in the French representation. Then I have swags that were from decorations they used on the horns of the bulls because they used to sacrifice to have the gods help them make a good decision.

MS. SHEA: Create the right decision.

MS. OKA DONER: And then I have the tablets of justice. And then I have a wonderful image in that one of the American eagle holding the tablets, one-half in each of its talons, which came from a book called *The Torah Treasury*. And it's the collection of Judaica here in New York at Temple Emmanuel. Somebody gave me, because of the remarkable silver in it, the silver work. And it was immigrants who came who wanted to be both Jewish and American.

MS. SHEA: American.

MS. OKA DONER: And so this symbol combined the eagle with the Ten Commandments. It's really terrific. And that's now hanging in Greenville, Tennessee.

MS. SHEA: That's a wonderful combination of symbols from all of the different types of cultures.

MS. OKA DONER: All of the cultures. I did also, in Philadelphia, the Criminal Justice Center ["Lexicon Justice," 1995]. It's on the corner of Filbert and Juniper, so I used the filbert nut and the juniper sprig of berries and leaves.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And then I have the keystone from the Keystone State, and then struck the floor with big streaks of lightning for Benjamin Franklin.

MS. SHEA: Benjamin Franklin; we just had an anniversary a while ago.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. And let's see what I put in there. Also I had the small Greek temple in the floor. So that was a mix, but that's mostly juniper and filbert, lots of plants with a few of these symbols scattered.

MS. SHEA: Going back to — nature.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I've done a lot of libraries, too. We started with the Evanston Public Library. That was "City

of Trees" [1994].

MS. SHEA: In Illinois?

MS. OKA DONER: [Affirmative.] And that tree had roots. And then I walked around the area where they built the library and picked up different leaves and twigs and brought it back to the studio and worked from whatever was there. That's a very simple, small project, and that was my experiment with would these forms work in terrazzo as well as cement. This was right after Celestial Plaza and before I won Sacramento.

And then I did a library recently. It's the largest state library in New Jersey, at Tom's River. It's called Ocean Branch. And I did diatoms, which are just charming and really they look like charms. And we used for the Ocean Branch — the ocean is very deep green, not turquoise like Miami, and so we have a kind of Northern Atlantic color. And we used aggregates, stones that are also very grey like the northern beach. That came out beautifully ["Jewels of the Sea," 2005].

And another library — Sacramento, Evanston and Ocean Branch. And another fabulous project bringing back my interest in sciences, Rutgers Life Science Building [New Jersey.] We used the DNA and talked to the scientists and they gave us a lot of material. And I've got a wonderful big disc in there that represents Vitamin D as seen under a microscope ["Life Forms," 2004, Genetics and Biomaterials Life Science Building, Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey, Piscataway, NJ].

MS. SHEA: Oh, my goodness.

MS. OKA DONER: And that was a very successful project.

MS. SHEA: So — you've talked about a lot of these, but it sounds like, do you have the same process for getting ideas or with each one do you kind of approach it differently searching for the inspiration that's going to spark the project.

MS. OKA DONER: Each one has a set of — it has a geography which dictates in a way the color; you know, what tone. You know, I wouldn't use turquoise, let's say, in Ocean Branch, and I wouldn't use this deep, dark aggregate in Miami. It just doesn't want to be there. And then this iconography is different. You know, I'm working on the Michigan Botanical Garden now.

MS. SHEA: Oh —

MS. OKA DONER: Grand Rapids

MS. SHEA: Oh, Meijer.

MS. OKA DONER: Meijer.

MS. SHEA: Meijer, yeah.

MS. OKA DONER: And I'm working with Michigan trees.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And I have a book on Michigan trees. And the Walk on the Beach in Miami [Miami International Airport], I pick up things there. And there'd be nothing from the Hamptons, not those kinds of clams and those kind of oysters. And so each one is unique. Each one comes from its place, like the Rio Grande or the Poplar and Iris. — The Sacramento.

MS. SHEA: I wonder what you did for Sacramento.

MS. OKA DONER: That was wonderful. I had the railroad tracks because that's where the train was.

MS. SHEA: Oh, the Continental?

MS. OKA DONER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And I had the state bear. And they have a tremendous number of extraordinary Native American woven baskets in their museum because there's lots of rushes and reeds along the Sacramento River and they had a Neolithic culture. So I have ancient weaving patterns and I have [images replicating -MOD] chunks of gold. I used an aggregate called Neva black, which is from Nevada, and it had little bits of gold in it, too. So it came out very well.

MS. SHEA: It sounds beautiful.

MS. OKA DONER: And I shouldn't leave out National Airport [Washington, DC], where I did — now Reagan National — I did a medallion [1997] for Cesar Pelli based on flight. There's only 79 bronzes in an 18-foot in diameter medallion, but it has moths and bats and butterflies, birds, propellers.

MS. SHEA: So all the things that can fly.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: And where is it in Washington National, in the airport?

MS. OKA DONER: There's a long area where you can stand on a balcony and look down that has —

MS. SHEA: Look down on it.

MS. OKA DONER: He cut the floor into circles. He liked Miami, but he wasn't going to give me the whole floor, so he doled it out.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Selfish of him. I didn't approve, but I couldn't do much about it. And everybody else did graphic design and they handed in something and he had mosaics made. But I was my own fabricator and I did terrazzo. And it's quite wonderful, the piece. And that's a bluish background, because I did sky.

MS. SHEA: For what these creatures would be flying in?

MS. OKA DONER: Things flying.

MS. SHEA: Ah. Sounds like a lovely way to fly, as opposed to the way air travel seems to be of late. [Laughs.] You talked a little bit about studying religions. Have you continued to do that in any particular path, or have you followed a lot of different religious studies?

MS. OKA DONER: I read a lot. And I'm interested in all kinds of pathways and journeys. So I'll read Mahfouz on *Palace Walk* [Najib Mahfuz; Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, c1989], *Palace Dream*, on living in Egypt. I'll read Tagore poetry on Bengal. I'll read Martin Buber, *I and Thou* [New York: Scribner, 1958.] I like all religions and I don't really practice any of them. I say I like them all because they all have a lot in their literature and in their expression that I find really beautiful. The songs, the objects, the costumes, the colors, the — you know, the houses of worship.

MS. SHEA: Right. The architectural settings for —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. So I like them all.

MS. SHEA: Do you ever go back — you say that you read a lot, and I have two questions about that. How do you find time or make time to read?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I just finished, for example, traveling to these sites to do proposals and meet with clients. I brought several books I bought in Sun Valley where I have an exhibition at the present of my Miami Beach Library as an installation. I bought Lewis Mumford's *Sticks and Stones* [New York: Boni and Liveright: 1924], a small book, in a secondhand bookstore because I saw in it a building in St. Louis. And there was something else in it that was just so immediate and I read it on the plane coming back.

And then I read on the way to Michigan a book somebody sent me on the shamanistic beekeepers of England, you know. And I found it wonderful because I love honey and bees, but it's also so much about alchemy and raw materials and processing nature into something transcendent. And if you think about fairy tales, folk tales, you know, the idea of weaving straw into gold, you know, basically that's what I do. I take straw and weave it into gold by using my internal spinning wheel.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] And I wondered if you went back and reread books.

MS. OKA DONER: Recently there was one thing I pulled out to look at again. I look at books again, that is true. I sit in the library, sometimes Saturday evening, and pull things out. Well, I got involved after the shamanistic bee with speaking to the friend who sent it to me, and then we talked about trees, ancient trees. And then I said I have a song I learned in elementary school that was called "The Ash Grove", and I know it was from the old English. And I said, I have the recording, Peter Pears, and he sang it and Benjamin Britten accompanied him. And I still have the record. So that's sitting out. And so she said, "What does it sound like?" This was Sunday morning. So I sang it. So I'm in touch with my books and records and words and poems.

MS. SHEA: And going back to them.

MS. OKA DONER: I think why I'm able to continue it is that I have a dialogue with certain friends that are also engaged in the same things, so I don't have to start it up.

MS. SHEA: At kind of the beginning?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. All the time I can, certain people that we maintain certain discussions. And then the client I visited in Higgins Lake, she said, "Tell me a book to read so we can discuss it when I come." She knows I read. So I gave her Antonio Damasio, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow and the Feeling Brain* [Florida: Harcourt, 2003.]. And she had read it, so we went into that.

MS. SHEA: So you kind of have like a floating book club of sorts?

MS. OKA DONER: I have a salon. And at a dinner party a few months ago at Thierry Despont's, who also shows at Marlborough [Marlborough Gallery, New York City], I met two men at the table and they kept referring to William James as the great American philosopher who opened the mind to what we call synchronicity now and resonance. He understood this. And I said, what, really? Oh, yes, Henry James. The two of them were geniuses. So we decided we would all read Henry James with William James; we'd go through it. We haven't gotten organized. But then I innocently said, well, can we start with *The Golden Bowl* [Henry James; London: Methuen, 1963]? And they said, are you kidding? That's the hardest one. You don't start with that one. It just sounded so great.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] I was going to say it sounds so beautiful.

MS. OKA DONER: Sounded so beautiful. So I was admonished.

MS. SHEA: To start with what is the — oh, we haven't determined. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: We're all so busy, and one of the men [Joel Sanders], it turned out, wants to write a book on Morris Lapidus. He's an architect. He was just terrific. So I promised him I would work with him on that. We all made so many promises. We fell in love. We promised eternal devotion. (They Laugh.) So this is how I maintain it.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: I find — I seem to find a resonant dialogue. I believe that the ancients, when they said you're on my wavelength, there was a wavelength. We know that now. We all pulse electrical waves, and we are tuning forks. We pick up; you can hear it. And that's why I can read, because I'm engaged in dialogue, where I'd never be able to maintain it, I think.

MS. SHEA: Because I don't think, it seems to me not that many people are reading seriously.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, not the way we used to. — Yes.

MS. SHEA: Right. Or I don't know, yes, how you want to call that exactly.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I read poetry quite a bit. I memorize poems because I find it's very good when you're sitting in a taxi not to get annoyed at the traffic, or when you're in the subway. You know?

MS. SHEA: And then so you'll recite the poem?

MS. OKA DONER: I'll say it over and over until I know it — the poems I like. For example, like when they started the poetry in motion in the subways, one of the first poems was called *Hope* [1924] by Emily Dickinson. Four lines. You know, by the time I got to 59th Street, I was there.

MS. SHEA: You knew those.

MS. OKA DONER: "Hope is a thing with feathers that perches in the soul. It sings a tune without a word, and never stops at all." And then I read one by W.S. Merwin that I haven't quite memorized, but the thought was, "Your silence goes through me like a needle through cloth." It's so beautiful. "Your absence goes through me like a needle through cloth."

MS. SHEA: Ah.

MS. OKA DONER: And I wrote it down. I still have it. I scribbled it on *The Poem of Chalk* [1994] by Philip Levine; a Detroit, by the way.

MS. SHEA: I didn't know that.

MS. OKA DONER: A Detroit. His brother, twin brother Ed, was a painter.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And I met them both when I was young and lived in Detroit. And I had scribbled it on *The Poem of Chalk*. So I went to the Writers' Conference in Sun Valley as a guest that year, and wouldn't you know W.S. Merwin introduced Philip Levine. Now, that was an amazing coincidence.

MS. SHEA: Right, right, right. The one that I saw coming down was Walt Whitman.

MS. OKA DONER: Oh, yes. They do a lot of our bard, our local bard. And for the 10th anniversary they had Langston Hughes, called *Luck* [1947]. "Sometimes a crumb falls from the table of joy, sometimes a bone is flung. For some people love is given, for others only heaven."

MS. SHEA: That's very wonderful, the words.

MS. OKA DONER: Very nice. So when you think about these things and you dwell this way, you don't think about all the things that I think artists get distracted with. You interview more, maybe, you know, you come across it or don't, but who got what show or, you know, all of the —

MS. SHEA: Kind of the fame and the —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: — publicity and the —

MS. OKA DONER: It's a very, very distracting energy.

MS. SHEA: We're sitting on some very wonderful chairs by the Italian, was it brothers?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, there were three brothers.

MS. SHEA: Carlo?

MS. OKA DONER: One did bronzes, one did furniture, one did cars.

MS. SHEA: Cars.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: And I don't remember which did which — [laughs] — was it Carlo?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, Rembrandt did the bronzes.

MS. SHEA: Okay, that should be easy to remember.

MS. OKA DONER: I think Carlo did the furniture, didn't he?

MS. SHEA: And then I wonder which one did the cars.

MS. OKA DONER: I don't know why I'm thinking it's Betoss or something. We'll look it up. I have it. But, Ettore, maybe, something like that.

Well, somebody interviewed me for a magazine article on Bugatti because I had said at a party, before anybody knew who he was, that I really liked him because he incorporated so many different materials.

MS. SHEA: Materials. There's such richness.

MS. OKA DONER: He was the first sort of multicultural —

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, and then often looking at the Middle East, the Islamic —

MS. OKA DONER: All the themes. So I got a call from a dealer after it was published and he said, you know, I've had a chair. I'm so tired of keeping it the right temperature, if you want it.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: So he gave me — it seemed like a decent price. I bought it. And then once I had it —

MS. SHEA: That was the start?

MS. OKA DONER: That was the start. Then somebody came in and said, oh, I see you like that. I'm moving to Paris and I bought Andy Warhol's set on the street and it's in bad shape. And it's not the one he had in the house, it's the one from the studio. So that's these four. —

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.]

MS. OKA DONER: — Then I did work for Peter Marino, and he had that piece and he traded me a silver tray for it. And then the other two I found in a window in a store on Madison Avenue and I thought, well, I need a little more seating, and this way it all makes sense.

MS. SHEA: It all comes together.

MS. OKA DONER: So those are really the only two I actually bought in a store.

MS. SHEA: And I'm also looking at a very — is it a lacquer chair with the inset of shell?

MS. OKA DONER: That is mother of pearl in lacquer. It's an Irish Victorian. It was my Mother's Day present. It's from Michigan. Remember Schmidt's in Ypsilanti, this wonderful old barn?

MS. SHEA: I don't know if I know that. That's Schmidt's in Ypsilanti. Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: It used to be. This is talking about 35 years ago.

MS. SHEA: Okay, so it's certainly not there anymore.

MS. OKA DONER: Probably not. I've had that a long time.

MS. SHEA: Is it a particular English maker? Or [inaudible.]

MS. OKA DONER: I don't know. It could be. It could be a very fine chair. I've just had it as my Mother's Day chair and it is quite beautiful.

MS. SHEA: It is. It is lovely, and the lacquer. So is it papier-mâché?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: It's the base and then the shells are inlaid and — it's very lovely to look at. Do you collect, or do you feel that you collect?

MS. OKA DONER: No, I'm really not a collector. I have some books, I have some chairs, but it's not about collecting or connoisseurship. It's about an interest in an object for its texture or what it's saying and living with it. I have to sit on something. Or the book is an object but it also has information I need. And I'd say more than anything that's a little research library.

MS. SHEA: Right, to go back and forth.

MS. OKA DONER: We can, tomorrow, start in there —

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: — and look through it. It would be interesting, and it's so much a bookend to what's out here and what I've done and in the studio. So perhaps that would be a nice thing to do.

MS. SHEA: That would be nice. Terrific. I also had some kind of technical questions. You've done some things that have involved a lot of, I guess one would say, the trades. I mean the terrazzo, the foundry. How did you go about finding people who could help you create your work?

MS. OKA DONER: It's not easy. It's very hard to find them, and getting harder and harder.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say I would assume that.

MS. OKA DONER: Mostly I learned from old craftsmen. They'd teach me and I'd make it myself, or with them. It's very hard to delegate things out.

MS. SHEA: But for large-scale pieces, like I'm looking at —

MS. OKA DONER: I made them. I made the patterns.

MS. SHEA: Okay. And how do you do that?

MS. OKA DONER: In wax I make them.

MS. SHEA: Like all the pieces that we're looking at.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. In this book [*Michele Oka Doner: Natural Seduction* by Suzanne Ramljak; New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2003; p.190-191] it shows a little bit in the back; there's some process. Let's see, and you can see me making one of the tables. See, I'm cutting it.

MS. SHEA: Aha. You were just basically scoring it along the —

MS. OKA DONER: [Affirmative.] With a ruler and a knife. Here making wax. Laying in Celestial Plaza. Welding.

MS. SHEA: Where do you get the wax from? Does it come back to bees? Is it beeswax, or is it a different kind of wax?

MS. OKA DONER: No. Well, actually that's beeswax. See, I'm making the model for a Christofle vase. I'm reading in Miami. It's nice. It's a tiny bit of —

MS. SHEA: And there's the photograph of the studio [p.186-187].

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, and this is what's now in Sun Valley at the library and [p.187] —

MS. SHEA: And I remember these tables as well.

MS. OKA DONER: It's a stool, and this is what we'll do tomorrow. And my tree.

MS. SHEA: Ah, that is a wonderful tree [p.184-185].

MS. OKA DONER: Isn't that a wonder — it wasn't that big when I grew up, so — but here you can see. I make them. I mean, it's not like I get an idea. It's not like you have an idea and you send it to a fabricator and they make it. You need hands and you need the rhythm of your own body, the way you cut it. It's your breath that's in it.

MS. SHEA: That's really interesting to me.

MS. OKA DONER: I know, everything now is — secondary and tertiary, it's not primary.

MS. SHEA: And — So do you have a particular kind of rhythm of the day when you're working?

MS. OKA DONER: I do. I get up early. And I do my best work early and usually by four in the afternoon.

MS. SHEA: Do you drink coffee?

MS. OKA DONER: I have one nice cup in the morning.

MS. SHEA: Oh, okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And then I drink chamomile tea.

MS. SHEA: Tea.

MS. OKA DONER: And then I drink this hot water with fresh ginger all day, and around seven in the evening, a glass of wine. And it's nice.

MS. SHEA: So you said you feel that you work the best in the morning. So is that when you do kind of — is it when you do your best physical work or your best —

MS. OKA DONER: Everything.

MS. SHEA: — intellectual work, or across the board?

MS. OKA DONER: I don't do intellectual work at night. I don't know how people do it.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] So it sounds like you're definitely a morning person.

MS. OKA DONER: I didn't used to be, but I have been for about 20 years now.

MS. SHEA: And work till about noon or something? Is there like a —

MS. OKA DONER: No, no. I work till about seven every night.

MS. SHEA: Ah. So I'm actually interrupting your work time. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Well —

MS. SHEA: This is another type of work. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: It's part of the work. But I work differently. At 4:00 I wouldn't start an intense project.

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.] And so let me have a little more of a sense of things. So you work and live in the same space.

MS. OKA DONER: [Affirmative.]

MS. SHEA: So you have a cup of coffee, a good cup of coffee, and then do you know, say, the night before what you're going to start working on?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, absolutely.

MS. SHEA: Okay. And it sounds like you kind of plan the things that you need to be thinking about the most in the morning.

MS. OKA DONER: Absolutely.

MS. SHEA: And then —

MS. OKA DONER: Early I check the e-mail, but it takes me no more than 10, 15 minutes, and then I do some quick things at the desk, and then by the time they come in at ten o'clock, I've gotten a lot done. And so I need like from eight to 10 by myself.

MS. SHEA: And it's quiet. Sounds like it would be quiet time.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, so, and —

MS. SHEA: Or as quiet as it is in the city.

MS. OKA DONER: It's quiet time. And then from ten to about 4 I'm on my feet and working and doing, and maybe five sometimes or six. And then the last hour I wrap and get things set up for the next day.

MS. SHEA: Kind of like getting out your outfit the night before. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. And I don't work well in the evening if I've worked all day. I just feel like I'm spent.

MS. SHEA: Kind of that. Yeah.

MS. OKA DONER: And I don't want tired work.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] You want it to be fresh and — That's very interesting to me. I'm guessing different people work probably at different times. Some people are probably night people and. — But I think that it's interesting that you know when the best time for you to work is and how to work. — I have a question about advice. If you were talking to someone you said that you have interns in the studio.

MS. OKA DONER: [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: If you were talking to someone that thought that they wanted to be an artist, what kind of advice would you give them?

MS. OKA DONER: I think one of the best skills to have is to have mastered your body, if you have cravings, if you have ups and downs. It's very hard to sustain a working day and the kind of intensity that it takes to create physically and mentally. You know, it's rigorous. So you have to make a choice. You know, you have to live, in a strange way, pretty cleanly to sustain it; be a long-distance runner.

MS. SHEA: Explain to me a little bit more about what you mean by that.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I've had wonderful artist friends who are gone because they drank a lot. Or I have other friends who — well, it's health. It's such an amazing thing, but such a simple thing.

MS. SHEA: It is. Without it you can't do anything. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: But it's amazing how it — yes, how it drags you down. I think you need a lot of energy, is what I'm saying, to work.

MS. SHEA: And do you feel that you kind of maybe got that from your mother, or do you feel like you've carefully developed that and focused on trying to have that?

MS. OKA DONER: I had a great start, and I think I learned more and more to respect it. And then also I've lived long enough to see what happens to those who don't. So I think that's critical as much as knowing art history is, all those obvious things. Making contacts, yes, but if you don't have that first circle mastered —

MS. SHEA: Then you really can't —

MS. OKA DONER: — you really can't sustain it. You can't grow it.

MS. SHEA: You can't be in there for the long haul.

MS. OKA DONER: You can't be in it for the long haul.

MS. SHEA: You can be like a brief flame. But —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I think I understand what you're saying. And that's an interesting piece of advice, I think.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I think it's something that then extends out into everything.

MS. SHEA: And that sounds a little — going back to you said you studied a lot of the Buddhist and those traditions?

MS. OKA DONER: Not a lot. I mean but it is — you know, I mean I don't really practice anything. I don't do yoga. I don't do anything on a regular — I don't go to classes, I should say, but I'm aware. And I think that awareness is critical to integrate your mind and your body — is — you can't not do that. You can't not respect the hands and the body as a tool.

MS. SHEA: But do you think many people think about that? It doesn't seem to me on a conscious level. I wonder about that.

MS. OKA DONER: Maybe today they are. Maybe people are becoming more conscious.

MS. SHEA: Of it. Of it.

MS. OKA DONER: Period. Some people.

MS. SHEA: I was going say, yeah. Be a good thing — So I'm also looking at glass bowls with fish, I believe.

MS. OKA DONER: Those are the Steuben Reef Bowls. Those are from a collection two years ago. — And they've been very successful. One went to the Yale Museum of Art and one to the Corning Museum [Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, NY.] And I enjoyed making them. It's a limited edition.

MS. SHEA: Did you start off with Christofle first? Was that kind of, that type of project, was that the first project?

MS. OKA DONER: That was the first collaboration with an old company, old design firm. Yes.

MS. SHEA: And how did that come about?

MS. OKA DONER: I was in Milan to show some work in silver to another company, and I met somebody I knew for dinner. And he said, I didn't know you worked in silver. Show me what you do. And I said, well, actually I'll just send you. I don't have it with me. And I sent him a portfolio when I got back and he called me. He said, do you mind if show this? I have a friend on the board of Christofle. So I didn't mind. And a year went by, and when I got a call from the creative director, I hardly remembered the dinner.

MS. SHEA: Doing this whole process. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. She [Monica Lachasse] said, I'm coming to New York and I'd like to come over. And that's how it began.

MS. SHEA: And then — Steuben was more recent, you said, like two years ago?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, yes. Steuben then came. And now Nymphenburg, which I had spoken with them before, so — and there's one more coming, but it's not signed, so. I'll have to, you know —

MS. SHEA: Ah. So it's a secret at this point.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: So Nymphenburg, it sounds, that would be very interesting because that would be getting back to ceramics.

MS. OKA DONER: It's very exciting. We just have to figure out, we have so many ideas which one we want to do.

MS. SHEA: And so have you traveled over there too?

MS. OKA DONER: Many times, and they've been here. But the new CEO hasn't been here.

MS. SHEA: Aha.

MS. OKA DONER: And he's the one I'm working with now.

MS. SHEA: Because that's, I mean, the firms that you're talking about, such a tradition, a very long tradition, and then Steuben for the United States has a very long tradition. So it's interesting to be working with —

MS. OKA DONER: It's really a privilege.

MS. SHEA: Yes, yes.

MS. OKA DONER: It's very nice.

MS. SHEA: And do you think, it sounded like with Christofle it was a little bit random, almost, I guess.

MS. OKA DONER: I think that's how most things happen.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] But they weren't necessarily thinking, oh, we want something —

MS. OKA DONER: — to hire an American woman designer.

MS. SHEA: — that's based, and do some designs, because it seemed to me that your designs for them are based on nature.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, and they began based on nature. The early work is — a lot of their period is art nouveau.

MS. SHEA: I hadn't thought — right. You're right. I hadn't thought about that. Yeah, and Nymphenburg, I would think, would have some of those early, very realistic ceramic traditions. Very interesting — Well, is this a good time to pause before our next —

MS. OKA DONER: I think so. Yes, this is good.

MS. SHEA: — journey? Well, we'll pick up tomorrow, then.

MS. OKA DONER: That would be lovely.

MS. SHEA: We'll stop, and hopefully save.

MS. OKA DONER: Good. I think we covered a lot of territory.

MS. SHEA: Yes, I feel the same way.

MS. OKA DONER: Tomorrow I think it would be nice to start in the library.

[END MD 01 TR 02.]

MS. SHEA: Oh. We're in business. Okay. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Okay.

MS. SHEA: Do you feel like you've been in a screen test?

MS. OKA DONER: It's all right.

MS. SHEA: Once again, this is Josephine Shea interviewing the very patient Michele Oka Doner at the artist's studio in New York City on Saturday, November the 17th, for the Archives of American Art. And we have both sound bars and a countdown. So let's keep our fingers crossed.

MS. OKA DONER: This could be it.

MS. SHEA: And just to kind of recap, we were beginning by talking about a recent talk that you gave at Meijer Gardens in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and how you started off your talk by mentioning about how we all seek the garden. And I thought that was a very interesting way to begin.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I think there's a primal urge to connect somewhat to the agrarian root. After all, we've been mostly agrarians, our sojourn as human beings. And the technological age is so new. And we move thus. And all these home gardens, I think, and botanical paintings, there's so much reflection taking place, and maybe even more now that it's not part of our daily lives.

MS. SHEA: That's probably very true. You talked about how you've kind have been looking at the intersection between water and earth. And you actually showed a slide of yourself as a very young child; I'm guessing maybe four — three, four?

MS. OKA DONER: Probably, yes.

MS. SHEA: On the beach in Miami with your sister, and how it's been such a long, continuous thread in your work and in your experience.

MS. OKA DONER: I think I mentioned the littoral zone is so interesting because it's full of surprises. The water continuously, I wonder how many times a minute it brings up something and takes something away, brings it up and takes it away. So it's quite a wonderful opportunity for discovery and surprise.

MS. SHEA: And it can be both, I guess, beneficial and negative sometimes; things, you know, that might be washed away that are of value or things that are washed up that are of interest and value.

MS. OKA DONER: I never saw it as negative. I think it's a metaphor for life; things wash up and we go through them. You cook a beautiful meal and it's eaten. It's the same kind of — it's just life.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] And we were just trying to feed your fish that is, it seems like, going through, I guess, part of that cycle of —

MS. OKA DONER: — withdrawal, which is very normal when you're an aged fish. The fish has trouble swallowing, and even trouble grasping its food pellet. So we were watching this poignant —

MS. SHEA: Poignant struggle.

MS. OKA DONER: — struggle to have a hungry belly but a mouth that, a jaw that doesn't have the musculature.

MS. SHEA: To support that. You had a beautiful quote, and I hope that you won't mind quoting it again, from the author Zora Neale Hurston from her book, is it?

MS. OKA DONER: *Autobiography, Dust Tracks on the Road*. She said, "I have memories within that come out of the materials that went to make me. Time and place have had their say." And I use that because it's very true of my work growing up in Miami. I keep referencing the corals that wash up and the patterns on the shells and the broken aspect of everything, the fragment. And the beauty of the sponges. And also there's a real seasonality. Certain times of year there are seaweeds, other times there is —

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: People aren't aware of how seasonal the ocean is.

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.] Bringing up the debris on the beach. And then we were talking about how you came to it, in a sense, the inland lakes, which were the Great Lakes, when you moved to Michigan. And your first, the

exhibition that you said you started with John Neff.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, when he was briefly the curator at the Detroit Institute of Art. He was the curator who was the first to show the Matisse cutouts, which I loved. And that was, I believe, at Harvard what he had done his thesis on and brought it to Detroit. It was quite spectacular, quite wonderful.

And he gave me an exhibition entitled "Works in Progress." It was his series. And I was able to choose not to use pedestals. So the slide I showed at the Meijer Garden was of work on the floor of the North Court, and it was all on the floor as if by predetermination in some ancient culture.

MS. SHEA: And what was the reaction of the public to the exhibition? Did you get a sense of that? Did you come and watch people in the galleries and see if they looked?

MS. OKA DONER: They liked it. Yes. Much to my disappointment, they had to put stanchions and ropes to mark off the area where the pieces were on the floor. So that was disappointing. But otherwise, people really were very curious as to all these things on the floor.

MS. SHEA: And did you give a talk along with the exhibition and —

MS. OKA DONER: I did. And what I have from that is a wonderful slide record, which I'll include in the Archive.

MS. SHEA: Of that. And this was after you had finished — had you finished your graduate school at that point in time?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. This was 1977, and I finished graduate school in 1968. And I have slides of installing those pieces. Being down, scrunched over, so to speak. Putting them down and looking at them. So there's quite a document —

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.]

MS. OKA DONER: — of the exhibition.

MS. SHEA: And those were — your figures, they're porcelain, right?

MS. OKA DONER: There's porcelain, white stoneware and terra cotta.

MS. SHEA: Oh, so it's a combination of the materials.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. So it looked richer. Otherwise it would look pretty strange if it was in all one material.

MS. SHEA: All one — you got more of a texture, more of a —

MS. OKA DONER: Nuance.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, that's very interesting. And those were the smaller — you'd call them human figures? Would you? Or —

MS. OKA DONER: No.

MS. SHEA: No? Dolls?

MS. OKA DONER: They were sort of porcelain, I called them tattoo dolls.

MS. SHEA: Tattoo dolls.

MS. OKA DONER: And there were seeds, germinating seeds. There was glyphs set out into ancient writing. Pages. I had page one and page two. And lots of animal skulls that had been explored. And a large scale.

MS. SHEA: And even at that point, for your collecting of those kinds of things, when did you feel that you really started doing that? Did you do that in grade school?

MS. OKA DONER: Always.

MS. SHEA: Did you do that as a child?

MS. OKA DONER: I had a Rikers mount very early on with a wonderful shell collection from Sanibel Island [Florida] going back to the days when Sanibel Island wasn't connected to the mainland and one had to take a ferry. And that was in the mid-50s; early to mid-50s. And I couldn't understand why, if my father drove our car

onto this ferry, it wasn't going to sink.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] Because the car would be so heavy.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I was amazed that we survived the ferry ride.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] And then did you go back often? Was that a place that you went to frequently, or that was kind of a big, special trip?

MS. OKA DONER: Big, special to go to Sanibel Island. And since my parents weren't interested in shells, we didn't go often. The reason why Sanibel was such a fantastic place for shells is that most barrier islands run north-south, and Sanibel goes east-west. And it sits there like a scoop.

MS. SHEA: So there's a lot of land or territory.

MS. OKA DONER: A lot of activity from, coming up from the Yucatan. It's in the Gulf of Mexico. It goes right into the waiting scoop of the crescent of Sanibel and Captiva.

MS. SHEA: So you collected shells. Did you collect other things?

MS. OKA DONER: I started with shells, and then insects I always liked.

MS. SHEA: Did you kind of try to get different types of insects?

MS. OKA DONER: I did.

MS. SHEA: And did, like, friends or relatives — you had relatives in New York. Did they send you insects?

MS. OKA DONER: No. I had, most of my relatives were in Miami, actually. And my parents brought me a butterfly collection from Brazil, which I still have.

MS. SHEA: Oh, I bet there were some amazing colors in that.

MS. OKA DONER: Amazing.

MS. SHEA: And then did any particular thing spark your collecting after shells and insects?

MS. OKA DONER: Fragments from pre-Columbian pieces. As I traveled I used to shard on the ruins, just things that had branching patterns and interesting textures, a real compost heap. I have stones.

If you read Sir Herbert Read's *The Art of Sculpture* [New York: Pantheon books, 1956], he has a chapter in there called "The Amulet and the Monument." And he says that sculpture began — you know, plastic arts — with picking up the stone that looked like a shaped buffalo or a skull or, you know, something like that, and in the niche in the cave. So between those two, say, concepts, ancient man began to shape his universe. And I think that it's just instinctive.

MS. SHEA: And one of the things I thought was very interesting in your talk, about how you felt that you gathered, or you father, and then I guess you distill or you — there were some very interesting words that you used about how you saw yourself in this cycle of gathering and then distilling and then creating, I guess.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I study things and I do distill. I might have used a metaphor about perfume, because often I think that, you know, in perfume you're getting the essence of a whole field of jasmine —

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: — or bees when they make honey they go to many meadows and bring the pollen. So there's a distillation that goes on. And I'm kind of like a free-ranging bee. I go all over and bring back my mental and spiritual pollens, and it fertilizes. I fertilize the raw materials I have, I guess, and make something that's my honey.

MS. SHEA: And when you talk about this, I often think about a young artist starting out that wouldn't have that same depth of experience, but it's — what are your thoughts on that?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, it's like musicians. Milan Kundera [ph] wrote in one of his books, it might have been *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* [New York: A.A. Knopf, 1980], that Mozart or Beethoven could listen to birds and had silence and it wasn't music all around. But today, he said, that music was going off like a comet and has now fallen out of the sky because people don't have silence, and how can you compose without silence? And you hear sounds and music every day, so it's just remixed, which is exactly what happened when he wrote this book

about 15 to 20 years ago. The same is true in art. There's white noise all the time, visual white noise. You can't come with a clean slate. It used to be that people hadn't seen so many images. Unless you were wealthy, you didn't own any. You didn't have many things unless somebody wove something to hang up on the wall or —. There wasn't a lot until the invention of lithography, really, wasn't a lot of printed paper out there. You know, Guttenberg press came and put books out, but not images. So it's really in the last 200 years you have any kind of production of images. And in the last 50 years we seem to have gone over the top. So young people today don't — they're like the musicians; they're remixing all of this great stew and they've never seen the blank slate. They can't — it's tertiary. I don't even know words for beyond tertiary, because maybe we didn't have it. [Laughs.] But it's certainly not primary anymore.

MS. SHEA: So what are you, we did talk a little bit the last time about your thoughts for a developing artist. And it seemed to me my memory was that you felt there was a great benefit to going out and to studying and to learning, not just this — expression or something. It seemed to me that you recommended them both working, in a very serious way, and reading, I think, you thought was important.

MS. OKA DONER: I think it's wonderful to have a basis in all of art history and to understand you're part of a continuum of visual expression. But sometimes, you know, there's all these books out that I haven't read, called "The End of History." You know, we're at the end of something.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: And I was in Chelsea today, and it's such a strange thing because there's no longer any consensus on what art is, and many galleries have artists who've taken photographs of photographs. I don't really understand what they're doing.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] And did you see some things that interested you out in the gallery realm? Or if you —

MS. OKA DONER: Not today. Sometimes I do.

MS. SHEA: Okay. If you go out and seek those kinds of experiences, what kinds of exhibitions would interest you?

MS. OKA DONER: It's hard to say. But today what I did see, besides the photographs that were rephotographed, I also saw the paintings of [Giambattista] Tiepolo [ph] that were taken by another artist and studied digitally and then painted larger; so again, it's postmodern. It's the regurgitation, with some attitude or irony, of something that's already been done. If that's not postmodern, what is?

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: So it's not — the idea of originality is not very important anymore,

MS. SHEA: And how do you feel about that?

MS. OKA DONER: I'm not certain. I know for myself I'm not interested in being original, but I'm not interested in doing something someone else has already done.

MS. SHEA: Done. Right.

MS. OKA DONER: So it's not originality for its own sake, but I certainly think that developing your own voice was a good idea. I don't know if that's going to matter down the line, because it might be impossible to people who are sitting in front of a visual screen every day. That didn't used to be.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: And getting the same information, even though there's a lot of it, somebody's processing it. You know, it's not coming from a rainstorm. You know, it's not random in the same way nature was — But it's random in other ways. And of course, one could say all manmade images are nature too, are natural. We're certainly at a new frontier with our ability to digitize and to print at home. So what used to be, 200 years ago, scarce, is now a flood.

MS. SHEA: Right. That reminded me of something that you talked about, how you kind of — it seems when you first moved to New York and you first moved to the city, it seemed like you were talking about how you missed the —

MS. OKA DONER: The randomness of leaves falling from trees or the way things grow along the edge of the walk if you happen to be on a sidewalk. In the city it's a lot of right angles, and out in the country there are fewer. And then I learned that there was a lot of randomness, I just had to begin to look for it. I started looking in the streets and seeing banana peels run over by trucks and the shapes they made, and lost gloves and grape stems that

had been discarded that were also run over. And I could really do a whole series called "urban botany," there was that much fruit and vegetable life in the city as debris.

MS. SHEA: And then did you collect that or not?

MS. OKA DONER: Some of it's here.

MS. SHEA: Or did you just collect it visually?

MS. OKA DONER: No, both. I collected physically and visually. I recorded it in some way.

MS. SHEA: And you do a lot of travel, it seems to me.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I work all over. I work in Miami Beach, Miami at the airport. I just won an Intermodal Center there, so it seems I'll be there at least five to seven more years working, working in Michigan, and possibly another commission in Ann Arbor as well as Grand Rapids. And last week I did a proposal in Los Angeles. Before that, in Charlotte, North Carolina, I did a proposal. Then Newark. I've got a piece at the Cancer Center that's about to go to contract. Then I was printing in St. Louis [at the Wildwood Press -MOD].

MS. SHEA: Tell me, how do you feel about all the travel? Do you find it draining? Do you find it reenergizing? Do you find it both?

MS. OKA DONER: Both. I think today it's a reality. It's such a small world. And you don't want, let's say, Los Angeles architects just to consider Los Angeles artists. That's very provincial, so everybody's drawing from a larger well, a deeper well, and that's probably very good since you can just get on a plane and be someplace. Plus travel has become more difficult because of the security issue. It used to be simpler. And yet I see it as part of work.

MS. SHEA: And how do you use that time when you're traveling?

MS. OKA DONER: That's when I read. Because it used to be the phone didn't ring. Of course, now it might, and there's e-mail to work on till you pull out of the gate. And you can even work on it on the plane and send it when you land.

MS. SHEA: But you're actually going back and forth between time zones. It seems to me that would be a challenge.

MS. OKA DONER: I'm in pretty good physical shape. I sleep well. And if I know I'm going between time zones, I watch the caffeine, I watch the wine. But if I'm here —

MS. SHEA: Then both are good. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. But I pay attention. I monitor and control my body so that I can serve my work. That's what it is. It's not the end in itself, the body; it's the instrument to serve the higher purpose.

MS. SHEA: I think you mentioned that last time as well, the need to be rested, to be —

MS. OKA DONER: To be respectful so that it can allow me to get up every day and get all the things done and not have to think about my body. I feed it well and I bathe and I have a wonderful meal and that's that.

MS. SHEA: And then you're also involved in the book realm. You just had one book come out that you wrote with —

MS. OKA DONER: Micky Wolfson on Miami Beach. It's called "Miami Beach: Blueprint of an Eden." It's in its second printing. And it's a social history starting in prehistory, showing how the land was formed — I guess 10,000 years ago is prehistory — when Lake Okeechobee was connecting the Atlantic Ocean to the Gulf of Mexico.

MS. SHEA: Oh, it did. I didn't know that.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. And Miami was surrounded by an atoll. And then of course when the Ice Age came and it shrunk up all the water, froze it up and so the water level went down to what we've lived with, all the corals were sticking out and they died. Then they dried out and fell over and became rubble, and somehow that all got accreted at the bottom of the ocean as stone, which is what was dredged and carved and made Miami Beach. So, little stories like that.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: And recipes, and the notion of how to open a coconut, and Florida honey, where to look for it. And how to take the grape — the funny-looking green grapes on the sea-grape and actually make jam.

MS. SHEA: And had you learned that before or did you learn this for a book?

MS. OKA DONER: Oh, I knew how — we kids knew how to open coconuts. And you couldn't find sidewalks in those days, so you had to really hunt around and then find something hard to take it up and bang it on. Once you got a crack, then you took something like the screwdriver you weren't supposed to bend —

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: — stuck it in there and tried to wedge up the husk. Then you got the hairy nut, and then everybody stood back while you banged it on the hard surface, because the milk would fly.

MS. SHEA: Splash everywhere.

MS. OKA DONER: Yeah.

MS. SHEA: And it seems to me that you have a lot of projects and a lot of different types of projects going in different types of realms. Is it hard to keep track of that?

MS. OKA DONER: No.

MS. SHEA: Or how do you do that?

MS. OKA DONER: What do you mean, how? It's very stimulating to work on different scales with different materials. And then when one project, like Miami, stopped for two years, I had so many other things going, I didn't mind. So you're not sitting there saying, oh, I wish it would start again; you just keep moving.

MS. SHEA: And I'm looking across the table at the beautiful — are they called fishbowls? I know you use them as fishbowls.

MS. OKA DONER: Reef. It's called the Reef Collection and that's the *Reef Bowl* [2006]. And there was a magnificent "Reef Bowl," one that was huge, which I have a picture of. And it's in Michigan. Somebody bought it in Michigan.

MS. SHEA: Ah. Tell me about kind of the — using that as an example, tell me about that process kind of from the beginning. Does it start with a phone call? Did you call them? Did they call you?

MS. OKA DONER: No. I got a phone call from a curator, Donald Albrecht. He's wonderful. He's at the Museum of the City of New York, before that at the Cooper Hewitt [New York City.] And he had done the Russel Wright show, exhibition ["Russel Wright: Creating American Lifestyle" 2001.] And he called me up and said there was somebody who was working for Steuben who was wondering if I was interested. And so I said, sure.

MS. SHEA: And is this someone you kind of knew as a friend? Or —

MS. OKA DONER: No, I knew him professionally.

MS. SHEA: Professionally.

MS. OKA DONER: And he's a lovely person. And the person that he mentioned who thought my work would be good for Steuben I also knew peripherally, but she didn't want to make a cold call. And I said it would be a privilege to work for Steuben. It was one of the last of the glass companies, or the last, because I don't think that there's any glass being made in Libbey Owens in Toledo.

MS. SHEA: No.

MS. OKA DONER: No.

MS. SHEA: Not much. No.

MS. OKA DONER: So I was really excited and they brought me up for a visit.

MS. SHEA: To Corning?

MS. OKA DONER: [Affirmative.] And took me through.

MS. SHEA: And that must have been before they redid — now it's kind of part of the museum, the glass shops.

How, or —

MS. OKA DONER: Well, the glass shop is, but the facility where things are made are not really connected, I don't think, to the museum.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: I think it's — I'm trying to remember, now that you mention it, how that's laid out, because you can walk through the museum to the executive offices behind a closed door. And once you're in the offices, I do think you can go down into the hot room. So maybe it is —

MS. SHEA: Possible.

MS. OKA DONER: — possible.

MS. SHEA: So you went and you talked. Was it an engineer type of person or was it a marketing person? Or were all those kind of people represented?

MS. OKA DONER: I spoke with the — a public relations person made the call. But she turns out to be more than a public relations; she was trying to get them to think about how they could be more current so that she could get magazines to be more interested.

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.] Right.

MS. OKA DONER: Instead of just trying to place what they were doing, she was trying to help them think about what they were doing.

MS. SHEA: Kind of grow and develop in new —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Because Steuben has a long history of working with different — artists.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, but I don't think they had for a while.

MS. SHEA: Okay. That had kind of fallen.

MS. OKA DONER: [Affirmative.]

MS. SHEA: And then — I guess once, did you agree about the project kind of in a big-picture kind of way, or what were kind of the —

MS. OKA DONER: Well, they asked me to do a bowl and a vase, and I had other ideas that I thought were exciting, and they ultimately did them. So it wasn't like they said, what is it you'd like to do, Michele? We'd be so happy to help you.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] We'd love to create [inaudible.]

MS. OKA DONER: But it was — I had seen a beautiful beaker in the Corning Museum that was a German glass from the Renaissance. That glass was so rare that only noblemen would have it. I mean, think about that.

MS. SHEA: And it's now, it's —

MS. OKA DONER: Ubiquitous, the same as —

MS. SHEA: Crushed on the street. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: So if you were a nobleman with glass and you had your best friends for dinner, they passed it with a scribe and they signed this beaker, so they had the reference for all the people who had signed. I was so fascinated by this. I guess I love social history, and who these people were and what the town was and where the glass was blown, the beaker. And I thought, what a great idea to have a beaker where you could write poetry. You could say who's at the dinner party. Every time you have guests, you could bring out your signature beakers, you know.

But all they had in the room where I was meeting was this big bowl. I quietly went down where they showed me Steuben would sign their bowls. And I asked them if they had any extra scribes. And they did. So I borrowed a bowl they had, I borrowed a scribe, I took it back here to New York and I tried it out, and it worked. The next time I went back up there I said, see what I did. I signed this bowl. And they thought I was just signing it because I

thought I made it and you sign a signature. I said, no, no, I passed it. And they were slow to take to the idea. Of course they've sold a thousand of them now.

MS. SHEA: Aha. So that was an idea that —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Well, that's what I — very interested in the — and I think, you know, I'm [inaudible] about maybe younger artists, how ideas grow in sometimes kind of random ways. I suppose, you know, this phone call, and then you seeing this object and that inspiring you, and then you thinking about it and implementing it and then coming back to them. And then finally it does —

MS. OKA DONER: It's a dialogue. It's what it takes. And the *Reef Bowl* was very ambitious for them. And they finally did it and they've done very well. One went to the Yale Museum of Art, and the Corning Museum. It's been a very exciting —

MS. SHEA: And how did you both think of the idea and then how did you present it to them?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I made a wax form. They had wanted me to bring bronze. They liked the idea of integrating bronze.

MS. SHEA: Ah, metal and glass.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. In fact, the signature bowl has a silver scribe.

MS. SHEA: So they liked that combination of glass.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, they thought that was a good thing.

MS. SHEA: And then, as I'm looking at them, they all look different. Is each one individual?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, each base is unique for the bronze because there are so many undercuts and so much energy you can't make a mold. And with the glass one, it took several tries till I made them something they could actually take a mold from, even though they kept insisting they could not do this, A and B; once even if they could do it, they couldn't take a casting out of the encased material. I said, oh, I'm sure you can.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: And they did. And they did an edition of five, and they were nice enough to give me one. That's what you see. They were very generous. Once it all got up and running, they were very happy.

MS. SHEA: And then the bowl, of course, is made of the beautiful, very clear Steuben glass.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. Yes.

MS. SHEA: And then it's —

MS. OKA DONER: The forms are algae, which I love. I love the fact that I could bring to life something that you would only see under the microscope. And these floating bubbles are real life forms. I think the fish like them, too.

MS. SHEA: You said there was one that came into the bowl for a photo shoot, was it?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: And you were told it would only live —

MS. OKA DONER: Oh, yes, a few months, and that's almost two and a half years ago.

MS. SHEA: Later.

MS. OKA DONER: So I think that there's something very magical.

MS. SHEA: Very agreeable about that.

MS. OKA DONER: Very agreeable. I'd like to be in there if I was a fishy.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] And that series, I remember, you actually gave me an example of it, and you showed a slide

of the design that's on that. And you said it's actually a close-up of a salt crystal.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. That's in the bowls and the vase. And that's also in Miami Airport. The idea of sodium and how salt lines up on axes; it's really quite beautiful, and they're kind of fuzzy lines. And there's a real structure and geometry, which I thought related to the architecture of the building even. So having so many amorphous shapes, like the coral reef that holds the bowl, it's nice to come back to something that has structure again. It's yin and yang.

MS. SHEA: And you talked a little bit in your talk about — I'm thinking about the other — it was very interesting to hear about the project you were doing, I think it was for — was it for a library at Hofstra with the grapes in the —

MS. OKA DONER: Oh, I did that for the Center for Jewish History ["Biblical Species," 1999, New York]. That project was probably about seven years ago. That call came from Beyer Blinder Belle, Richard Blinder. And he was a wonderful architect. He said, Michele, we've got this building and it's getting ready to open and I'm very worried about it because it's so stark. We didn't have much budget and we've cut back many things. But I was thinking maybe you could add something to the architecture, an installation. And he brought Bruce Slovin down here, who was a patron, and we came up with the idea of biblical species as a theme. And it's the only floor I've done in aluminum, because the finishes in the building were aluminum and he was afraid of the yellow of the bronze. But I convinced him at the end to let me use some bronze because I thought it was going to be very sterile with just bronze.

MS. SHEA: It reminds me of your comment about using both the porcelain —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: The stoneware to get that kind of texture with the contrast of the different materials.

MS. OKA DONER: It gives it a depth, and it's not so harsh. It has a nuance.

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.] I thought that was a very interesting project. —

[END MD 01 TR 03.]

MS. SHEA: I was wondering, do private clients ever call you up? Is it usually working with an architect? Or I know you've done, I think we've talked before about the work you did for the clothing —

MS. OKA DONER: Joyce Ma.

MS. SHEA: — store in Hong Kong.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: Do individuals call you up?

MS. OKA DONER: Many, many architects. I do a lot of work with Bill [William] Georgis. I've done extraordinary silver tables. I've done hardware for doors. I've done work with Bill Sofield. I've done banisters. I did a doorbell for a client [Joel Silver, Laqaretta Home, Casa de Plata in Los Angeles]. I'm trying to think of the buildings for architecture. Again hardware, tables. I'm doing, right now, for Alexander Gorlin, I'm doing grates for the vents —

MS. SHEA: Really.

MS. OKA DONER: — so they have something interesting.

MS. SHEA: Instead of the — [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I think — with Beyer Blinder Belle, the floor. With many, many architects. Right this moment it seems to be centered on the projects I have now, but going backwards, there are so many. Oh, Peter Gluck. I did a beautiful silver sink for a client in Chicago. You know, many times they call and they need — oh, Peter Marino. I've done legs of furniture. I've done mirror frames. Almost anything you need to make, I've made.

MS. SHEA: And that just reminds me of how you kind of talked about how you started, which was making things that you wanted to be beautiful and useful, like your fireplace tools.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. I couldn't find anything except pieces of brass at the hardware store that had duck heads. And since I wasn't a hunter —

MS. SHEA: You got a good chuckle for that in Grand Rapids.

MS. OKA DONER: — I couldn't relate, so I made really — what they're called, *Burning Branches* [1980-1989]. They're really quite beautiful. They're from the corkscrew willow, so they had a wonderful, wonderful kind of sense of a helix, and movement, almost like running sticks. They were very animated. And I put little heads on them, of people, not ducks.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] But then you've also made things — I'm thinking of the — and I think you did sequence to the chairs with thorns, because you said that was one plane that you missed.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. The only time I ever missed a plane, I was up in a honey locust tree cutting more thorns than I should have been, and I just lost track of time. But those were very playful pieces.

MS. SHEA: And then you're also doing these sculptures that we can see.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I've gone back to the figure. I started very strongly with the figure. And then that was as large as my kiln would hold. And then when I did build a kiln, I did raku. And that was the show at the Detroit Institute of Arts that we've discussed, in 1977.

MS. SHEA: And those are quite relatively small pieces, right?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, no, they go from — one of them is two feet by two feet by two feet.

MS. SHEA: Okay. Okay. I didn't realize.

MS. OKA DONER: And that was as large as I could do of bisque. And you'd have to be someplace, I would say, rural or industrial to build the kind of kiln it would take to make the larger figures. And instead I moved to bronze, went into bronze, to make things that a foundry could do in parts and weld together and wouldn't break.

MS. SHEA: You know, you kind of talked a little bit about the problem of still getting things manufactured and made in the United States. So much of that seems to be going or have gone away. You're still able to find a foundry that can do the kinds of projects?

MS. OKA DONER: A few. A few. Not so easy, and certainly a contracting situation, that I have thought about going to Bangkok, to Thailand, for one certain project, casting there. We're looking into it.

MS. SHEA: More travel. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, there's a lot. And I'm working for Nymphenburg, and that's in Munich, but they'd like me to stay two weeks.

MS. SHEA: Ah. And tell me about the wax piece that's around the corner here. That's the beginning of the sculpture, isn't it?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. Yes.

MS. SHEA: Somewhat attached here.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. First they are made in wax, and the waxes are sent to the foundry.

MS. SHEA: And how do you make those? I'm looking at almost a person height of — what would you call, they're almost rough, small, stick-like or coral-like strands that come together.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, it's a funny piece, that piece, isn't it? And I'm still working on it.

MS. SHEA: And it's being suspended through a central cord.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. So that when I work on it the weight doesn't — the pressure I put doesn't make it crumble at the ankles. All the ankles were coming apart on these pieces, so when we suspended it, it's being held by something other than standing on its feet.

MS. SHEA: And you showed me, I think it was the last time, how you created the wax shapes of — at the time you were working on, I think, *Michigan Leaves* [To be installed Oct 2008].

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: But how do you create those more spindly, pretzely, strandy shapes?

MS. OKA DONER: Just rolling them out. It's funny, "pretzely," that's a Midwestern — they are sponges, again.

MS. SHEA: Is that it?

MS. OKA DONER: [Affirmative.]

MS. OKA DONER: And I'm glad you didn't know what they were.

MS. SHEA: No. Or roots. It's very hard to tell.

MS. OKA DONER: I like that, so it's enigmatic.

MS. SHEA: And I guess, it has a tree bulb maybe because of its shape. The trunk, the gnarly aspect of it.

MS. OKA DONER: Hmm.

MS. SHEA: And you told me, or the person who was assisting you. Tell me about the wax again. It's very specific. It's a red wax.

MS. OKA DONER: It is. It has to hold some shape and harden. If you have a yellow wax, it stays sticky and that's very good for sort of gluing broken red wax pieces together.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, bits back together again.

MS. OKA DONER: And then the brown wax is also — it's sort of very sticky and it's called, I think that's called Victory wax and it's used even for another purpose. So this red is the one that really gets hard.

And then there's this beautiful natural beeswax that I have here that I used to make that archival piece. And I have another piece that's in a museum in Genoa, the Wolfsonian. And I learned from the Byzantium show [Metropolitan Museum, several years ago -MOD], looking at the frames that were holding some kind of embedded semiprecious stones and pearls. And I'm reading the labels, and it says beeswood, beeswax, pearls, aquamarine, crystal. These things are 500 years old. So at that point I realized the beeswax had held up.

MS. SHEA: How long ago was that exhibition?

MS. OKA DONER: A couple of years ago.

MS. SHEA: But not real long ago. It seems like it was —yeah.

MS. OKA DONER: Not real long ago, and I went through it twice. Not the same day, mind you.

MS. SHEA: We're looking kind of across the studio. Tell me about what we're looking at. [Laughs.] They're suspended from, again, from the ceiling.

MS. OKA DONER: And you know why now, because we needed to take the pressure — now it has a base, so it's standing, but we needed to take the pressure off of the ankles. And that's a collage of a lot of natural materials. But it's been suspended. It's caught like a bee in amber, in a way, in this — let's say lode — L-O-D-E, not L-O-A-D — of archival wax.

MS. SHEA: And that's a pure white wax, or whiter?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, it's pure yellowish, and what the white is, is a pigment that I bang up. I get it in the block and I add as much as I like or not like.

MS. SHEA: And it's interesting there's more — or at least from the viewpoints, I really can't right now — there's more kind of a charcoaly look at the top, it seems, and then there's lots of drips. And do we call those stalactites or stalagmites? [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Well, it's so funny because that's what I was going to call a piece that's not here, but that is coming out. There is a stalagmite or -tite piece happening, but it's not that. But you're certainly picking up the vibe in the room.

MS. SHEA: And it's also interesting because I assume, though, it's surrounded by little silhouette cutout — are those leaves or different types of shapes that are drying? Are they drying?

MS. OKA DONER: Oh, those are for Miami Airport. They're not drying. They were cut out and then they're set there while they get completely hard.

MS. SHEA: Hard.

MS. OKA DONER: And then they get cleaned. So I'm working on both the Michigan project and Miami Airport at the same time.

MS. SHEA: So you're both tropical and I guess —

MS. OKA DONER: Botanical.

MS. SHEA: And botanical. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: I have a wonderful book from the [Ann Arbor] University Press [Charles Herbert Otis 1915] from 19, maybe, 17 Michigan trees that — I had the paperback and now I've got the first printing. It's really nice to have. Thank goodness for AbeBooks. Thank goodness for the Internet.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say. And was that a book that you already had in your library, by chance?

MS. OKA DONER: I had the paperback, which we're ruining, —

MS. SHEA: Even as we speak.

MS. OKA DONER: — filling it with wax, yes. And then I saw in a friend's [Junia Doan] library in Midland the original book. And then I realized, of course, this had come out in a real book at one point. And then it was out in successive paperbacks over the years, of which someone [Reva Schwader, a painter, member of the Samsonite Luggage Family] gave me a gift 30 years ago in Michigan, never realizing what I would do with it.

MS. SHEA: And then just to talk a little bit more about the setting. We're sitting on wonderful Bugatti chairs that I thought maybe you'd purchased together, but you said, no, they kind of came to you.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, there's the one you're sitting on. This is a three or four-part bench. And that's a two-part bench where I sit at the desk. And these two chairs were a set. And they were in Andy Warhol's studio. And the person who did the restoration found all of his day-glow paint. I would have kept that, but the parchment was so torn you couldn't sit, so I had no choice. Not this. We didn't replace this part of it, but the seats were really in very bad shape.

And then the piece across from us: I had been quoted in one of the early articles on Bugatti because I liked the way he mixed materials and I liked the motifs. So I received a phone call from Barry Friedman, the dealer, and he said, I have a Bugatti chair and I'm tired of keeping it in storage in a temperature-controlled room. And if you want it, I'll sell it to you at a very good price. So I said, how much? And I agreed. So that was the first piece that came.

And then Peter Marino and I swapped that piece. He wanted one of my silver trays ["Celestial Tray"]. And so that was that. And then the last two over there —

MS. SHEA: We're looking at a chair on one side and then like a two-person bench?

MS. OKA DONER: No, that bench is a two-person. And then there's two chairs flanking an old piece of — it was a console that I bought from an antique dealer in Michigan, who bought it from Dr. [Paul] Grigaux [Associate Director of Museum of Art in Detroit; retired to Ann Arbor as Emeritas Professor in the early 1960s -MOD], who used to teach at the University of Michigan.

MS. SHEA: In the —

MS. OKA DONER: In the art history department.

MS. SHEA: Okay. So it's all —

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: — circular and connected.

MS. OKA DONER: It's all circular and connected. There's sort of nothing here that's not deliberate or considered. And everything is speaking, which is — it's a very live atmosphere for me.

MS. SHEA: And one of the things that I think really is speaking is your wonderful library.

MS. OKA DONER: The library is five generations of family books and has some of my childhood books and some of my children's paternal great grandfather's and great, great grandmother's books, which is really lovely. In

fact, there's Japanese books from their great grandmother's dowry around 1900. She had an interest in Lafcadio Hearn and some very strange stories and books on Japan, which was unusual.

MS. SHEA: And then I'm also seeing an interesting lacquer chair with the inset of —

MS. OKA DONER: Mother of pearl.

MS. SHEA: Mother of pearl.

MS. OKA DONER: I think I always liked mother of pearl, and I certainly have always loved black lacquer. And that's a Victorian, an Irish Victorian chair that was my Mother's Day present about 30 years ago. And I've just kept it in this environment, which has — it's a working environment, but it seems very happy here.

MS. SHEA: Well, the fish seem to enjoy it. [Laughs.] And then on the piano we have a piece that you talked about during your talk in Grand Rapids, which is — again it seemed like it was a situation where you looked for — was it a candelabra or something that you were searching for? Or how did this particular piece come about?

MS. OKA DONER: I didn't have enough light in the Florida apartment in the living room. And the walls in those buildings are cement and you can't run a wire. And you would have to build a soffit or run — put a plug and have a sort of, what do you call it? Cord.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: That thing that —

MS. OKA DONER: And I don't like cords, and I didn't want to build soffits and spoil the purity and integrity of the room. So, thinking it through, I saw that the other part of the living room had a beam where you could recess lights, so I could read there. And the part that faced the ocean, I could create light with about three of these large burning bushes, which I did, because in the aggregate of candles it's amazing how much light —

MS. SHEA: Is it? I wondered if when you — how many candles are on?

MS. OKA DONER: Well, not this one, but on that one I got so ambitious there's like 18 on one, and 17 on another, and nine on another. Now, I probably should still put a fixture in there, but I didn't even want to disrupt the ceiling. Seventeen years, so I'm still making do. There's maybe one or two nights a year I wish I had a real reading light, when I'm having dinner by myself. But that's so seldom.

MS. SHEA: And where did the branches come from? Where did you collect those?

MS. OKA DONER: This piece is from the Hamptons. These are incredible bushes. They're from the mustard family, and the word "Eden" is in their name. It's *Cakile edentula*, something like that, is the Latin, because we went to the nature preserve to find out what they were. And I love it. It has this kind of pinwheel feeling.

MS. SHEA: Yes. I'm guessing, when you collected them were they dried or were they still green?

MS. OKA DONER: Can't do them green. They wouldn't hold their shape.

MS. SHEA: Okay. So you'd already seen them. Do they look kind of tumbleweedy?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. Yes. In fact, it's funny. This is that time of year and most of them are probably washed away by now, but I found two unexpectedly in Miami. I just have to figure out how to get them here. They're so fragile.

MS. SHEA: Right. Well, maybe the people who pack the Corning, the glass flowers — [laughs] — can help you with it.

MS. OKA DONER: It's true. I have to build big crates to get these things moved.

MS. SHEA: Yes, take their little journey from Florida. So as I look around the space, I see space for eating and entertaining. And you have another one of your burning bushes on that space. Then you have, would you call it the intellectual or the history — how would you describe your library?

MS. OKA DONER: I describe it as a research library —

MS. SHEA: [Affirmative.]

MS. OKA DONER: — because I do a lot of research in it. There is a section on literature and a section on poetry. But there's a huge section on the history of design, on architecture, on photography, on ancient Egypt, the ancient East, ancient Americas, paper making, the origin of language. And I don't have a huge section on contemporary art, curiously enough. But probably the largest and the most interesting section for me is art criticism and the history of design, the history of shape.

MS. SHEA: Are there any — you have a lot of volumes in there, but is there any one in particular that stand out, or different ones stand out when you're working on different projects?

MS. OKA DONER: I think different times I'm interested in different things. The newest section actually is not the history of design, it's microscopic photography and botany. I have some wonderful unpublished books that are cyanotypes of algae. And I have some rare books. I have *Architectural Mysticism and Myth* [W.R. Lethaby; London: Architectural Press, 1974] by Lethaby, who was the father of the Arts and Craft Movement. And again, there was no Internet and I knew he had written a book that had a chapter called "Pavements Like the Sea," which I thought would be wonderful to read while I was working on Miami Airport. And somebody had copied that for me and faxed it through, and I could see the next chapter was "Ceilings Like the Sky." And I thought, "I've got to have this book."

MS. SHEA: What a great book. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: So I put it in at this architectural bookstore called Archivia, and two years later they said, "Well, we have it. That's the good news. The bad news is we have a presentation copy that Mr. Lethaby signed himself and it's many hundreds of dollars for this book." So I said, "Okay, well, I don't think we're getting too many more coming around. I'll take it." So that's a special book.

And I have a book on Mayan papermaking that's really remarkable, with samples, and several rare books on Egypt. And I have a book with actual photographs of Pompeii. So there's several books here that are quite —

MS. SHEA: Wonderful. And special.

MS. OKA DONER: — Wonderful and special.

MS. SHEA: And wonderful to look at. And then the next as we're kind of working our way around clockwise, is that space, would you say, kind of the working space? It kind of looks like more of a studio type of space, in that corner.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I'd say it's the space where I can put a lot of big pieces and raw material and fill it up in a different way than this space, which is more considered. It has the original factory floor from 1885 that's unfinished.

MS. SHEA: Oh, okay.

MS. OKA DONER: There are parts of this floor that are original, and they are finished. So that's the big difference. Some of this floor is new where it was rotted, so you can see the line of the old and the new. It's uneven. It's nice the way as much as could be kept here of the old is here. And that's more random in there,

MS. SHEA: Yeah, it has a very different feeling, because I was noticing there are drawings —

MS. OKA DONER: In the rafters.

MS. SHEA: — tucked up in the rafters.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. It's used differently. It's an unfinished space. The floor's not finished. The walls are plywood. The I-beams are exposed so you can slip — since there's no wallboard sealing up the structure, you can slip paper on rolls along the I-beams so that all that space is used. You know, there's no quote-unquote ceiling. If you remove all the things that are on the rolls, what you'd see is the plywood under the second floor.

MS. SHEA: The next layer, the next floor.

MS. OKA DONER: So it's unfinished space. That's what's different.

MS. SHEA: And then my memory was there was the warming pan or heating element for the wax.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. Heating elements for wax. We don't do a lot of wax at a time. It's not necessary, and it's probably dangerous. I started with one pot and went to two pots when other people joined me who didn't have my patience. And it works very, very nicely. We poured it into a rubber mat that's a quarter of an inch, and as it sets up you start drawing whatever image or symbol you're making, and you put the pots back and add more

wax. And it takes about 45 minutes by the time, anyway, you've drawn and cut out your wax and it's cooled and your other wax is melted and you can start again. So in a day, if you do six, seven pours, that's a lot.

MS. SHEA: That's a long, serious, study working.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, it's a big day.

MS. SHEA: And my memory is that you said you plan your day the night before. You have what you think and hope and plan that you're going to accomplish. And —

MS. OKA DONER: I have to.

MS. SHEA: — do you think that's important?

MS. OKA DONER: Very, because I have people here. I need to delegate.

MS. SHEA: Aha.

MS. OKA DONER: I can't just sort of wing it.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: You know, what, are they standing there waiting till I throw a morsel in their direction? I need to assign certain pieces of work. I have to figure out what it is I want to be doing or need to be doing and then assign other jobs.

MS. SHEA: And then as we circle around we come to that most modern — [laughs] — of instruments. We have computers and printers, which I'm guessing are also very important for you now in your work.

MS. OKA DONER: Well, I think because so much communication, I'd say you get more e-mails today than phone calls. And that way people know that they're not interrupting you. You'll go to the computer and check your e-mail when you have the time.

MS. SHEA: When you have that time.

MS. OKA DONER: So you need that, and sending images. And people send me images too. It's very exciting. And, you know, to do presentations today you can really send JPEGs. So yes, we use that.

MS. SHEA: It's the new technology. And then you have a wonderful round circle bench. Is it the same as the one that surrounds your table?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. One is positive, one is negative, meaning one is empty inside. And one has a table. It's a 10-foot in diameter bench. It's called an *Ice Ring* [1989.] And it was a period of time in the '80s when Voyager was sent out into outer space. And it was the first time that photos were taken of the gases around, I guess, Jupiter. The rings of Saturn, which were supposed to be gases, or space rubble, they used to call it, and found out actually were ice. And the moons, all of these — every day in about '86, '87, *The New York Times* had these extraordinary pictures of craters and shapes. So I was very excited about the ice rings, and the table's called *Radiant Disc* [1999], and it's pretty apparent why.

MS. SHEA: And did the tables come first? I think you said in your lecture first you did the tables; is that correct?

MS. OKA DONER: No, the rings were first.

MS. SHEA: Oh, the rings were first. Okay.

MS. OKA DONER: And there's three in Ann Arbor, and I hadn't done the table yet. Had I had done the table, I would have designed it to have a table. I've encouraged them to consider a table.

MS. SHEA: It must have been quite an adventure to put the table in the middle of the ring. Or how did it happen?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, it was an adventure.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] How did that go?

MS. OKA DONER: It was an adventure.

MS. SHEA: Because —

MS. OKA DONER: That's a very good word.

MS. SHEA: We're looking at — the table base is round and presumably quite heavy. And I'm sure that the table top —

MS. OKA DONER: Isn't light.

MS. SHEA: — is also very heavy.

MS. OKA DONER: I don't quite know how they did it. I think I looked away.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Also, it's a lot of years. I've had it here probably — I don't know. I know I did the benches about 17 years ago. So the table is about at least 12 years ago.

MS. SHEA: And were the benches actually I see a join-line. We're they actually created in two pieces? And are they — okay.

MS. OKA DONER: There's three pieces because you couldn't get a 10-foot in diameter bench in the freight elevator or you couldn't crane it. I wonder if you could crane that through the window. I've since craned other things through the window.

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.] What have you craned through the window?

MS. OKA DONER: I've craned the beautiful long doors of the pantry, which are single because we didn't have to cut them to get them in the elevator. And the same with the top on that wonderful sculptural kitchen. It's all one piece.

MS. SHEA: Ah. Okay, okay — And I think that's very interesting what you were saying that one is positive and one is negative. And one seems to work mostly to hold projects, it looks like.

MS. OKA DONER: A circular file.

MS. SHEA: And it is a very circular file. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Well, it's nice because I can really add to the piles or walk. I know what's going on. And I know when something's done. I have great satisfaction removing it from —

MS. SHEA: From the — [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: And some of them have been there five years. Like the Miami Beach book, it took 12 years to write. That was a great day.

MS. SHEA: That was on the bench?

MS. OKA DONER: Now it's back on the bench because Harper Collins has done a second printing, so all of the PR and everything.

MS. SHEA: And then the dried branches that are within, is that the same plant?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, much smaller. And it's to put them in there so nobody would step on them. So now we have it functioning as a circular file and a corral.

MS. SHEA: Or in a sense a stanchion. [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, a stanchion, back to the stanchion.

MS. SHEA: And then I'm looking, as we continue the visual tour around to the right, and I see very dark pieces. I assume they're metal.

MS. OKA DONER: They're bronze.

MS. SHEA: They're bronze.

MS. OKA DONER: And they're cast from molds that are from these remarkably ancient trees that fell over, rotted, and left these sort of — I wouldn't say the crown. They're when you spread out — when the tree spreads out to make the roots underground, you know how it makes this wonderful kind of accordion movement of in and

out all the way around. That's what's left after the trunk rots. And that's what those are. They look like they're burning stars. I use the Sanskrit word for them, *tara*, which is star.

MS. SHEA: And you chose black candles for them.

MS. OKA DONER: The white looked very strange in them.

MS. SHEA: But with the burning branches you have the white candles.

MS. OKA DONER: Yeah, the white doesn't look strange with those. I know why, there's a lot of black mass there. Those are — again, those are positive, and these are linear. There's no mass on these *Burning Bushes* [1991].

MS. SHEA: To segue back, you said what's on your — normally I would think your dining room table, is projects that you're working with, with Nymphenburg?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes.

MS. SHEA: And that has a long ceramic history.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, that's a very old company. I've also worked with Christofle, and I don't know which one is older. In fact Christofle took this *Radiant Disc* and reduced it to a wine coaster, which has been a wonderful product. It's nice to see something that is this, here, monumental —

MS. SHEA: — in a much smaller form. And when you did your lecture you showed — it's a certain type of palm leaf?

MS. OKA DONER: Yes, it's a palm leaf that I made a vase from using the concept of how did you gather things, fruits, nuts, roots. You could take a beautiful frond, any frond, and make a funnel out of it, a cone shape, and put your gatherings in there. It would hold a lot more than your two hands and leave your hands free if you tucked it under your arm.

MS. SHEA: And these things are probably hard to sum up in words, but do you find it easy to always have ideas? Or when you first hear about a project do you have a million ideas? Or do you kind of think about things for a while? Or how would you describe the kind of creative — process for you?

MS. OKA DONER: I have ideas. I get excited. I respond. Very rarely is something so dry that I'm unable to find a point of departure in it or something that interests me. I just did a presentation, as I mentioned, in Charlotte for Wachovia. In that project, they left me the plaza identity, but it was so highly designed and there was so little room to do anything that I had trouble sinking a taproot in and expanding.

So sometimes that happens, but otherwise there's usually — for example, in Philadelphia, The Criminal Justice Center, it was on the corner of Filbert and Juniper. There was a wonderful amount of iconography. It was serving justice, so I found the symbols of justice. I found the Buddhist wheel of justice. I found the ancient tablets, the French scales of justice, the Greek idea of meeting under a tree, and the garland that was used for the bull that got slaughtered when they got together for justice.

And Orpheus came and played his lyre. And it wasn't really to tame wild animals, as some myths say, but it was to tame the beast within ourselves, connected to justice. That's from a little book in the library, George Hersey, *The Lost Meaning of Classical Architecture*.

MS. SHEA: Oh.

MS. OKA DONER: So that's how the reference library functions.

And so that was Philadelphia. But the whole floor is scattered with juniper branches and filbert leaves, and nuts and seeds dispersed among all the justice. Oh, Hammurabi receiving the code of justice. That came from the Joseph Campbell book on myths and symbols.

And, let's see, North Carolina, when I did — no, Greenville, Tennessee. I did the federal courthouse there, not Criminal Justice Center. That's Philadelphia. The state tree was the tulip poplar. The state flower was the wild iris. There was one big empty plaster column, so I went and referenced that same book. And instead of using the Greek and cantis [ph] and more sort of generic symbols, I used —

MS. SHEA: Classical, yeah.

MS. OKA DONER: I used the local. I brought the vernacular, too. And then I did a charm bracelet as the second part of the column. Usually they do something at the top and there's a band and the charm bracelet hung these

symbols of justice. I used them differently.

And in Laredo, Texas, for the federal courthouse, they had an amazing amount of beautiful stones that I knew came out of Texas, lots of different marbles. So I proposed, because the Rio Grande River was the largest geological factor and the town was otherwise kind of depressed, I ran the river through the footprint of the building. I used glass aggregate to represent the river, and then for the river banks I used and layered all of these different beautiful Texas stones. There were so many of them. There's white marbles called Persian Cream, Bianco Mexicano. There's pinks, the Rosa Mexicana. There's Cadet Blue, Rebel Gray. How's that for the Civil War?

MS. SHEA: [Laughs.]

MS. OKA DONER: There's so many beautiful stones, and so that was, again, taking the vernacular and almost making a painting out of the floor there.

MS. SHEA: So it seems that you have always been able to make — find inspirations that make your projects relate back to their —

MS. OKA DONER: Time and place —

MS. SHEA: Right.

MS. OKA DONER: — have their say, yes. And you know, there are larger ideas, global ideas like, transcendent ideas. And I think that abstraction, when it's successful, embodies those ideas. And we seek — or I seek for both. I seek to pull out of the vernacular, the time and place, something that becomes again reduced to an essential element, compressed, so to speak. Just like a drop of perfume; you're not seeing all those flowers and stems.

MS. SHEA: The fields of lavender.

MS. OKA DONER: Yes. But it's the essence of it. And these projects are about the essence.

MS. SHEA: That seems like that might be a great note to end on. Is there anything else that you want add or elaborate?

MS. DONER: No, I think you've covered quite a bit.

MS. SHEA: More territory today. Well, thank you once again. It's been a great pleasure to sit in this wonderful, working, creative and, as you said, very thoughtful space, and talk with you. And we really appreciate you sharing your past, your experiences, for this project. It's been a pleasure.

MS. DONER: Thank you. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]