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**Oral history interview with John Eric Byers,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with John Eric Byers on June 13 and 14, 2011. The interview took place in Newfield, New York, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

John Eric Byers has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with John Eric Byers at the artist's home and studio in Newfield, New York, on June 13, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is card number one. So we're sitting here at a spectacular table that you made. When does this one date from?

JOHN ERIC BYERS: That's a good question. Maybe, probably 2002 or '03.

MS. RIEDEL: 2002.

MR. BYERS: I don't really remember, somewhere along —

MS. RIEDEL: And did this — so this was done after you moved back to New York?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I moved back to New York in 2001. And I didn't start working in the shop until 2002, because it was a brand new, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Space, right.

MR. BYERS: A brand-new studio. So I finished that, I think, in December or January of 2001. And I think I immediately started working on the Steinway piano. And I think at that time, I probably owned one of my — only one piece of mine, and then I started slowly bringing work into the house. I built this piece specifically for the house, and then, consequently, did two variations on this piece that were exhibited in galleries and, you know, ended up selling.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you have — what do you call this table? Does it have a name?

MR. BYERS: It had a name, but I don't remember what it was. I kind of have this thing about titles. I think I really don't like them. I think I probably just called it a round dining table.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's the — the inside of the house is really spectacular. There is a fair amount of your work here, and then the actual built-ins are — look like you've either done them, or altered what was there.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I did all of them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it's all original. All the window trim and baseboard trim is actually hand-carved

mahogany, and then milk-painted it.

MS. RIEDEL: And you moved back here in 2000? Have you been here since then, is that right, or in this house?

MR. BYERS: September 2001, actually.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay. Yes, and the house was — what was it originally?

MR. BYERS: This was actually, I think — well, I was told it was either an inn or a tavern, and it's circa 1860. But I've still got, you know, I've got a lot of work to do. And my shoulders have, sort of, really slowed down the process. So I put this — actually, I just did the ceilings last year, so I'll get this painted, hopefully, this summer.

MS. RIEDEL: It's such an interesting combination of what clearly feels historical and handmade, and then what clearly feels contemporary and handmade.

MR. BYERS: It's colonial modernism.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yes, it is. I think that's a perfect description.

MR. BYERS: It works, though, which is kind of cool.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it really does. And it's interesting because the whole interior has that way — it feels to me it has the warmth and the sort of soulful quality that you've used to describe milk paint in particular, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's like sitting inside one of your pieces. It's interesting.

MR. BYERS: It works for me, you know, and for most of the people that visit. They like it here. They're comfortable here. And that's nice, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Well, let's take care of some of the early biographical material, and then we can move more directly into the work. You were born in Rochester?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: 1959?

MR. BYERS: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the date?

MR. BYERS: January 12th.

MS. RIEDEL: January 12th, okay. And was your father an attorney? Did I —

MR. BYERS: Yes, he was a patent attorney.

MS. RIEDEL: And your mom?

MR. BYERS: When they were still married, she was just a homemaker.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: But then when they split up, she went back to what she had done previously to being a homemaker — she went back to nursing.

MS. RIEDEL: And how old were you when they split up?

MR. BYERS: They got divorced when I was 11.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And do you have siblings?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I'm the last of five.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my goodness.

MR. BYERS: I was the youngest.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And four boys and one girl.

MS. RIEDEL: And have any of your siblings gone into the arts?

MR. BYERS: My brother, Bill, who's a couple years older than me — he would be the fourth — he was really the artist of the family, and studied art and went to college for art, and moved to New York City, you know, to try to make it as a sculptor. But I think he's — I think he has given up that part of his life at this point. So he's a project manager for a really quality, I guess, house renovation company in New York.

MS. RIEDEL: What were your parents' names, or what are their names?

MR. BYERS: Henry was my dad's name, and Hazel was my mom — Hank and Hazel.

MS. RIEDEL: Hank and Hazel. And was —

MR. BYERS: That's good stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Can't make it up. Was making art, or going to museums, design — was that anything that was encouraged?

MR. BYERS: Not at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Not at all?

MR. BYERS: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so no — was the house aesthetically inclined, artistically inclined — something your mother cared about?

MR. BYERS: Not at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Huh. So you grew up in Rochester. No trips to New York to see museums, anything like that?

MR. BYERS: Well, my father, when we were still a family unit — my father was really into traveling and taking us to — yeah, we would go down to D.C. We would visit his side of the family in Pennsylvania, so we would always go to the Smithsonian.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, the museums.

MR. BYERS: But I'm sure my father thought art was just the biggest waste of time. And my brother Bill, I mean, for me, the introduction to, like, somebody that was an artist was my brother Bill, who would redraw — he'd sort of mimic these caricatures out of Zap comic books. And he was excellent. But I don't think I knew anybody in high school that studied art. No, I mean.

MS. RIEDEL: So what did you — what was interesting to you as a child? How did you spend your time? Did you draw? Did you — were you into sports?

MR. BYERS: No, I never drew.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you spend time outside?

MR. BYERS: I did sports. I ran around with a bunch of teenage werewolves for a while, and then —

MS. RIEDEL: What does that mean?

MR. BYERS: I hung out with a lot of crazy kids that, you know, like most groups of boys, ran around, and they broke things and liked to set fires — you know, build fires and just do all that. We'd camp out. But eventually, at a certain point, I lost interest in that, because as we were getting older, some of these guys were getting crazier and crazier, and I didn't want that to be the direction of my life.

I did sports, and what I liked about sports wasn't so much the sports — but I liked the discipline that they had. So I wrestled in high school. I did some sports before high school, and by the time I got to high school, I wasn't interested in those sports anymore. But I did wrestle, and I loved the physical discipline that was involved in it.

And I wasn't — I was good for a couple years, but I was never as good as I should have been. And it's just, I guess, I don't really think it was that — I don't know what it was. My head was messing me up a little bit. You know, I could beat guys that were really good, and then I'd lose to guys that — you know, I was the only guy they beat all year. So I don't know if that had something to do with what was going on at home. I don't know. You know, I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: It was something you were interested in, maybe, but not passionate about?

MR. BYERS: Yes. I don't think — I think that when times got really tough in those kinds of things, I just backed off. So it gave my life structure. If I didn't have wrestling, I probably never would have made it through high school, actually.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. So not interested in anything academic per se?

MR. BYERS: I hated school.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: But one of the — one of the best things that happened to me in high school, my senior year — I was getting tracked into being — I was tracked into a vocational education program. So what I dreamt of doing was learning a skill to work with my hands. Even as a little — this was how I wanted to live when I was a young kid.

I used to dream of, like, living in the country, doing my own thing, living an independent — you know, it was a very romantic, independent life. I wanted to build my own house, you know, learn to be happy by myself. You know, and not feel pressure and — you know, like if I didn't go to the party last night, then I'd missed everything. Those kinds of things, those things that used to bother me as a kid — that I would be bothered by those. So anyway —

MS. RIEDEL: It bothered you that you were bothered by them.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it just bothered me — like, I need to move on from this. Why is this taking so long for me to find something really, deeply meaningful in my life?

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: So I was being tracked at the — I think it's called BOCES [Boards of Cooperative Educational Services in New York State] the BOCES program. And as a junior, I took this class, this carpentry class. I was there for, I think, two-thirds of the day. And I ended up skipping so much school that year that they wouldn't let me go back to the BOCES. They blamed it on the BOCES. They thought BOCES was having a bad — you know, a bad influence on me. So I think — I think I skipped like a fourth of the year.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Because you were just — you were in shop. You were in wood shop?

MR. BYERS: I was going out to this program learning how to build houses.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And basically, what they did is they had us build, like, scale homes. So you weren't actually doing any real carpentry. You were using these, like, little brad nailers and you were building scale houses — like, this is how a house goes together. But you actually weren't using any real — you weren't really learning the trade.

MS. RIEDEL: It was like model-building, in a way?

MR. BYERS: It was called basic carpentry. Then the next year you were going to go out, your second year, as a senior in high school. And you would go out and you'd actually build a spec house with this whole crew of other students. You know, all these kids come from other schools. Basically, all these guys came from different schools, and we went out and smoked pot. And then we would come back and then we would, like, you know, make some really — do some really bad mistakes on our models.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] And what about the models was so compelling?

MR. BYERS: There wasn't really anything. I mean, you were just doing —

MS. RIEDEL: Working with your hands?

MR. BYERS: It was more fun than being in a math class.

MS. RIEDEL: Got you.

MR. BYERS: You know what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: But your father was a — your grandfather was a carpenter. Is that correct?

MR. BYERS: He was, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So did you spend time —

MR. BYERS: Never met my grandfather.

MS. RIEDEL: You never met your grandfather.

MR. BYERS: He passed away before I was born.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. But he was a carpenter all his life?

MR. BYERS: Yes, he was — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And were there stories about him as a carpenter? Were there things that he'd made when you were growing up?

MR. BYERS: I actually have — I actually have a pair of sawhorses that were his. But he wasn't a skilled carpenter. I'm sure he did finished work and rough work. He struggled with his health for a long time, my dad told me. And I know that, you know, I'm sure that my father chose his path because he didn't want to go down the path like my grandfather.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure, sure.

MR. BYERS: So he became very academic, did the corporate lawyer gig. But you ask me about academics, and so — so they were like, well, you can't go back to BOCES your senior year because it's having a bad influence on you. So I had to fill my schedule now with all of these additional academic classes.

And I ended up taking all these — to me they were — to me, academics was like English 101, English 102. That's what it was for me. It was always that kind of stuff. And I ended up taking a class on mass media, a Hemingway class. For the first time, I'm spending time by myself reading.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I mean, it really — it was profound to me that there was actually things out there that were meaningful to me, but I hadn't been exposed to them yet.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: But there was this other part of me that was like — I kind of had in my head — I had this black-and-white view of the world, that there were academics, there were smart people, and then there were my kind of people. You know?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: So I think at 18, I probably figured I had two ways to go with my life. I could either be, like, a salesman, or I could be a janitor. That's really where my mindset was at.

MS. RIEDEL: Your father was an attorney, though.

MR. BYERS: Yes, but my parents were divorced.

MS. RIEDEL: And you didn't see — spend much time with him?

MR. BYERS: I saw my dad one day a week. And my dad's whole thing — he didn't — he supported going to college as long as it was a state university, so he would — he offered to pay tuition if you went to a state university. If you discussed going anywhere else, he thought it was a waste of money. And he believed in security above all.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Now, my oldest brother was — you know, he was sort of the — he was the chosen son, in effect, that he went on — he's actually a spinal surgeon now. So he's the one that really — and I know he's told me, he at one point thought about going into law, but he didn't want to go into it because he thought it would create such a competitiveness with our father. He thought, you know, he knew that would be a bad decision.

My dad was a trip, man. I mean, I love him. I love him, you know. And the last couple years of his life, actually, he lived down — I had to put him in a nursing home here in Ithaca to keep an eye on him. And he's one of the reasons I actually moved back east, was to take on that role in the family, to sort of keep an eye on him.

MS. RIEDEL: Because you were way across the country, in Portland, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Yes. So that was one of the many decisions to come back. But yeah, so I was kind of saved by truancy, at least for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: And I actually was like — I got A's. It blew my mind. Like, I was really — I was really good when something was meaningful to me.

MS. RIEDEL: So what were you getting the A's in?

MR. BYERS: Like, Ernest Hemingway — [cross talk, inaudible] —

MS. RIEDEL: The class on Hemingway.

MR. BYERS: And then a class on, I think, mass media. I don't even know what the other ones were. But my school — my grades were so pathetic, and my SAT scores were — you know, the joke is I did better than all my friends because I was the only one that could spell his name correctly. That's like the punch line, but I'm not going to —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And what was it about mass media and about Hemingway that was profound to you?

MR. BYERS: That's a good question. That's a long time ago. I don't know if it was the teacher — the teacher made it meaningful. I mean, for me — well, the Hemingway character was, you know, these lonely, existential-angst characters.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So that was — that was right up my alley, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Perfect.

MR. BYERS: So yeah, that resonated with me. And then, I think, the media thing was just getting, you know, an understanding of the world, of how it really works. How, for instance, the majority of the newspaper is actually advertising. Like, that was really an interesting concept for me.

MS. RIEDEL: And you would have been in high school in the late '70s, yeah?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes, I graduated in '77. I think a lot of it had to do with the teacher, because he taught both those classes.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah, that sounds likely.

MR. BYERS: And he just didn't lecture. He asked you questions. And you could challenge him, and, I mean, it was just — you know, he's a really good teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you were reading *Glass Bead Game*, or *Narcissus and Goldmund*, things like that? Oh, no, I'm thinking of Hesse. You were reading Hemingway.

MR. BYERS: Yes, you're thinking — now, I read that — yeah, I got into that in college. So then, when I eventually went to college, I started reading a lot of that kind of the stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay. So Hemingway, it was *Old Man and the Sea*, or *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, that sort of thing?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I even joked — I have a joke that I was going to call Jeb Jones Santiago Jones, because that's the character from *Old Man and the Sea*.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, is it? I forgot.

MR. BYERS: Yes, the old guy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MR. BYERS: Yes, the sufferer.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But that's self-deprecating humor at this point.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

MR. BYERS: It may not have been when I was 18. Now, you know, now I have a sense of humor. But so I didn't go to college for a year, because I just didn't imagine going to college. But then I — the jobs that I worked after high school with some of the other guys from my neighborhood that were a couple years older than me — I was like, there's got to be something more out of life than this.

So I went to — I actually applied to an ag[riculture] and tech school for the carpentry program. And luckily enough, I got into the school, and then, once I got there, they said, "We're full. You're going to have to take liberal arts for the semester. And then you can transfer into the carpentry program." So I took the liberal arts and I loved it.

MS. RIEDEL: This was at Oswego?

MR. BYERS: It was actually Delhi Ag & Tech. I couldn't get into Oswego.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: My grades were so bad. So I went to Delhi Ag & Tech, and I was — I mean, it's like a blessing. They wouldn't let me take the carpentry class. So I actually had to take academics. I remember I took philosophy for the first time; I took a sociology class. You know, it was like —

MS. RIEDEL: At Delhi Ag & Tech? That's amazing.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And one of the other things that really blew my mind was like, wow, these people that behave this way and dress this way — that's called, like — that's a counterculture. That's a subculture. They're not just weirdoes. Because where I grew up, they would just be weirdoes or freaks or losers. And it was just — it seemed like these classes didn't have the same — like all of a sudden, I was being exposed to a less black-and-white perspective of the world. And that was really cool.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this in Rochester too, Delhi?

MR. BYERS: No, it's in Delhi, New York. It's in the — it's in the Catskills. I hope I'm not running around too much.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Not at all. No, not at all.

MR. BYERS: So again, I was saved from — I was saved from carpentry. And then my grades were good enough after the first semester, I could transfer to Oswego. So I stayed to fill out the year, and then I went to Oswego. And I enrolled in industrial arts and found I was about a C student in industrial arts, and I got excellent As in all the academics.

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting.

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah. But I was determined that I still wanted to be, you know — I wanted to do my own thing. I wanted to learn how to work with my hands.

MS. RIEDEL: And so had you done a lot of work with your hands as a kid? Had you built things? Did you work in clay? Did you work in — as a child, do you whittle, did you —

MR. BYERS: No. I built forts with other guys.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I worked on a farm in high school. But that was just repetitive — we were hay boys. All we did is we stabbed hay, 10 hours a day. I think we made — I'm trying to remember what we made an hour. I think the best — I think my last year, I made \$1.50 an hour.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: But those were great summers. I mean, you're 16 years old, and you know, you're out there; you work all day and learn to chew tobacco.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: Even at 16 — even at 16, you know, after 10 hours just sweating and stacking hay, at the end of the day we'd still go out and drink beer.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, of course. Sixteen, that sounds around right.

MR. BYERS: Crazy, right? You have that much energy, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: It's crazy stuff. But no, I didn't — I didn't — even in industrial arts, I wasn't particularly astute with my hands. And I was — I did work in the furniture shop at the school. I did get a job eventually. So it was a production shop, and we built solid oak furniture for the dormitories.

MS. RIEDEL: For the SUNY [State University of New York] dormitories?

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: So there were these, like, solid oak slabs with rails that would be lag-bolted together and then plugged. And then some upholstered seat would be dropped in it. And pretty much the whole design parameter was make something as heavy and as big as you can so, like, they won't throw it out the windows. And if it does, it'll sustain — like, sustain the fall.

MS. RIEDEL: Still make it for a floor or two, right.

MR. BYERS: But, you know, it had its — it had its design parameters. When I was about to graduate, and I had — this was an industrial arts program, so I had — I was getting my teaching degree.

MS. RIEDEL: And when you say industrial arts, what specifically were you taking?

MR. BYERS: Well, it's broken into — I think it was broken into three categories. You would focus — you would either be considered manufacturing, communications, or transportation, which meant — manufacturing meant you were doing more wood, transportation was automotive guys, and communications were people doing graphic arts.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I think industrial arts, now, is called technical education.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And I'm not even sure what they're doing at this point. I did my — I did my student teaching and I didn't like it.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were splitting your time between wood and graphics and auto, or were you focused on the —

[Cross talk.]

MR. BYERS: I took a graphic arts class. I took the wood classes. So I was considered a manufacturing major, so I leaned more towards — to woodshop, if I could get those classes. But it didn't really start to make sense till — I think it was the last year. I did an independent study with this guy, who's still a friend and a mentor to me — this guy, John Belt, and he's head of the design program there.

And I knew some other guy who'd done an independent study on the wood lathe with him, and it was a lot — the objects that this guy made, they were way more creative and interesting and intricate than anything I'd seen come out of the woodworking classes. So I asked John if he would do an independent study with me, and he agreed. And then I just finally spent all my time in his — in his design studio, which is just really interesting. It's not like any other classroom I've ever been in.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe that? What were the strengths of it, what were the weaknesses, what you took away from there?

MR. BYERS: Of the studio?

MS. RIEDEL: Or the classes with — or the independent study.

MR. BYERS: Well, I think what I discovered was I work really well when I'm by myself.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: And I've found the same when I even went to — when I finally went to woodworking school at the Wendell Castle School — is that I'm really — I get really bored watching demonstrations. I mean, it's one — I think it's one of the reasons I don't like teaching, because I find it really boring.

MS. RIEDEL: To show students how to do something?

MR. BYERS: Yes, showing them how to do things. It just seems like the pace is way too slow.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Interesting, that's interesting.

MR. BYERS: School isn't — it's not going fast enough for me. You know, there's a different pace that I'm at. Like, even when I work, I work — I walk really fast from one piece of machinery to the other, because it's time. And I like that. And I think that's also sort of a physical — there's a physicality that I really like about making this work.

You know, it's not just about — it's not about — I mean, there's clearly — my aesthetic is more about imprecision, or the beauty of imperfection, but the physical relationship of making the work, to me, is probably the most beautiful thing about making things. You know, it's not like looking at the material and being drawn in by the material, or even, you know, having this table. I mean, it's nice, you know? I feel good about this piece. But making this piece was just unbelievable. It's great.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's the process.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it's really the process. So discussing the process, the actual step-by-step process, I find to be pretty boring. Discussing why you chose this process — that's interesting to me — you know, why you're making these decisions. But just to —

MS. RIEDEL: Let's, since we're there for a minute, let's just talk about that — why you're making those decisions. So what is — why are you making the decisions you make, when you made this table, for example?

MR. BYERS: Well, I think that — I think now, I know that I made a lot of these — I know that I finally was able to embrace the beauty of imperfection, which, coming from a fine woodworking background, there's these little voices in your head that are telling you you can't do that — because everything has to be a true line, a straight line, a perfect line. So imperfection is — it's not really a discussion. The word imperfection isn't used. It's like, it's either right or it's wrong.

And you know, it wasn't — I had started — I started to embrace — I found beauty in the imperfection. But, you know, I'd never — somebody finally gave me the book on wabi-sabi, I mean, you know, after I'd been doing things like this for a decade. And it was like, wow. [They laugh.] You know, it was like a taking the Hemingway class kind of thing. It was like, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: So you'd found it for yourself, but you didn't even have a term for it.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it was just something that —

MS. RIEDEL: It was just the way you worked.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it just — it just moves me, you know? Just like I'm — just like people that are moved by looking at a beautiful piece of walnut. I think it's the same. Like, when I first wanted to work with wood, besides the — there's a romanticism about, you know, about building your own house and working with your hands and that whole kind of thing.

And I'm sure that that was — a lot of that was — I guess I never really thought about working in an automotive shop. You could have the same romance. But I'm sure that that whole, sort of, wanting to be on my own was driven by the family I was in. And I love them all, but I just really wanted to be away from them. So you know, so now I am. So it kind of worked out.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, we'll get back to process.

MR. BYERS: Sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: No, no, not at all. I asked. But we'll return to process a few times over the course of today and tomorrow. But I think it's an important thing to touch on, and we'll probably get to where we want — get the answers that we want to by dancing around it a little bit.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And the process is really — it's important, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And you can't — you can't cut corners on it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] And your process in particular, there are so many different steps and stages. And we'll definitely talk about that in greater depth.

MR. BYERS: Okay, sure.

MS. RIEDEL: But you were talking about John Belt and that class in particular, and what you were discovering there and then.

MR. BYERS: Yes, so John — well, what I discovered was, I think, that I worked really well by myself. I really liked the relationship — and there was also a one-on-one relationship with John, with the teacher. You know, it made you feel like this person was really paying attention. But his studio was — it wasn't a classroom. His whole studio was just filled with these fantastic design objects. And his philosophy is, everything is design.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Now, some of it's good and some of it's bad. But everything is design. Everybody's a designer, whether they know it or not. So you could freely walk into his classroom while he was teaching a class —

MS. RIEDEL: That's unusual.

MR. BYERS: — and just sit down. That happened all the time. He had a coffee maker there all the time. I mean, he invited people to come in and make it their home.

MS. RIEDEL: That's pretty wonderful.

MR. BYERS: Yes. It was kind of like his own little Summerhill, you know? I mean, he challenged you. I don't think he ever gave a formal test, ever.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know if he could get away with that these days.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I don't know how he did that. I think things have changed — [laughs] — but he's just — he was an amazing teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: I was reading about him as I was getting ready to talk to you, and they were talking — something was — they described his way of working as challenging students not to see objects, but patterns.

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And I thought that that just resonated immediately, when I read that and thought about your work. And then something else that I think is interesting — in what can be fashioned from these patterns to solve problems in a world that's seemingly chaotic, but actually integrated. And just to have that experience, either directly or indirectly, as a student, with somebody who had

that sort of philosophy — I guess we can see that somehow filtering through in your work. Does that resonate with you?

MR. BYERS: Is that an actual quote from him?

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know if it's a quote from him, but it's a quote about his way of working.

MR. BYERS: Well, to him, everything is a problem.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: He doesn't see it as — in fact, when — his assignment was called a problem statement. So it's, how are you going to solve this problem?

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: And I thought that was interesting, because it was a really interesting way of looking at things. It was different. And that he chose to use the word problem — I don't know where he got that. He's a huge Buckminster Fuller freak.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: I mean, he does some — he's part of some Fuller-mania. No, I'm teasing him. But he does something every year — does, like, this — I don't know if it's, you know, the Dymaxion Conference or something. And he's hosted it up at Oswego. And these cats all get together and they all make their own little geodesic domes out of stuff. Yes, he's real passionate about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes. And it's interesting that you said everything is design.

MR. BYERS: Everything.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I was just talking with Massimo Vignelli, I was mentioning, and what he says is, "Design is one." You know, you should be able to design a spoon or a city. It's all design. It sounds like it's, in many ways, sort of a similar sensibility.

MR. BYERS: Yes. I believe that. Yes, I really believe that. That was, yeah, John's blown my mind a lot. Well, I had him — I had him my first year at Oswego, and he — there were two guys that taught the basics. You had to take a basic design class as an industrial arts major.

And I've told this to him. I was, like, man, I had no idea what you were talking about. Like, I didn't understand a fucking thing that came out of your mouth. But I kept saying, "There's something there. There's something there, and one of these days, I'm going to try to understand what the hell he's talking about." And then I didn't have anything to do with him until my senior year. And he started to finally make sense to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it the words weren't resonating, but the objects, or what you were seeing in his studio was somehow speaking to you? How were you — how did you understand there was something there, but you just didn't understand it yet?

MR. BYERS: I think I wanted to understand what he was talking about. I was just incapable of understanding it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: He was just thinking — he was talking and thinking in a way that I'd never — you know, never been around that before.

MS. RIEDEL: It was a whole new language.

MR. BYERS: Yes, and I dug it, because, you know, I like diversity. You know, I'm interested in other ways of looking at things. So I just — I was drawn to it, but I was just like, man, I don't understand what the hell he's talking about. [They laugh.]

And neither did most of the other people, you know? And the people that did — a lot of the other students kind of viewed them suspiciously, like, they're just doing that — are they just faking it? Like, how are they getting this? But they did get it. It was clear that the results of the assignments — the people that were getting it, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: So you could see in the work that there was something there.

MR. BYERS: There were people that actually understood it, yeah. I mean, we were just — we weren't prepared to have that much — I don't think most people, when they get into John's class as an 18-year-old or a 19-year-old — our lives haven't prepared for us, in most cases, coming out of traditional school systems or whatever, to think that openly and broadly and differently, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: About design in general?

MR. BYERS: About the world, really. I mean, we're not — he's not discussing politics.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But the way — the way that we talk now is the way he was talking to the students.

MS. RIEDEL: Who were freshmen, right.

MR. BYERS: And it just — you know. And I think the students who had the toughest time were the guys that were the men and — well, I don't know if there were many women then, but there would be now — but men and women that came back from — that had been in the service. They were real tough. Because they want — they want to be — this is what you need to do to get a grade, you know? They don't want to go off and have to figure things out for themselves.

And if you know you were — he was one of those guys that if you knew your interest in something, you'd end up — just, he'd walk by one day and drop a book in front of you — you know, that kind of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yeah. So even in a group class, there was real individual attention.

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And it sounds as if one of the things that was significant during those Oswego years was, you were exposed to him as a freshman, and that planted a seed that maybe didn't come back for a couple years till, as a senior, you decided to do that independent study. But it was important that the seed was planted right away, so that you could then come back to it.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And the dynamic in his classroom, too, was — he just had a large table, so everybody sat in a circle.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Now, I had never done that before.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: I mean, I'm sure that they were — the students that came out of an art background in high school, I'm sure that it made — they were more — they were used to that kind of individuality. And you know —

MS. RIEDEL: And who knows what his training had been, or what his own experience was, because certainly, there were people doing more innovative ways of teaching in that era, in the mid-'70s. I think there was certainly a lot of it on the West Coast. I'm not as familiar with things happening here.

So he was of great significance to your college years. Was there anything else in particular? What sort of projects were you working on that were — anything that stayed with you, or that was significant at the time?

MR. BYERS: No, I remember — I didn't know that after, like, two years of making these — I mean, it was a drag. You took, like, a metals class, and it wasn't like you designed something and made it. I mean, you — I didn't have — you weren't being given the kind of training to do that. What it was like is, you were being taught — in most of the classes, it was like you were being taught how to make a project that you would then have students in high school make.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: So you would learn sand casting, and you would get to choose, you know, one of eight molds for your sand casting.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And you know, it was just process.

MS. RIEDEL: So no design.

MR. BYERS: No, it was a drag. I mean, I did — in a ceramics class, we also had to do a mold. We had to make a mold. They allowed you to pick your own — they were really flexible. They allowed you pick your own, like, object.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So I actually made a work boot, one of my old work boots. I turned that into my slipcasting, and then ran a production of, like, a dozen of them and just gave them away. But that was at least cool, you know? And you had to do a minimum, like, three — I think it was a three-part mold, and I did like a five or six.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: But at least it had some sort of meaning to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So then I actually applied myself more. But what — I remember at one time I had this, like, cabinet that I made in woodshop. And I took all the stuff that I'd made in these classes and put it all in the cabinet, and then I just threw the cabinet in a dumpster.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow. Yes, interesting. So nothing much that stuck with, yeah.

MR. BYERS: No. But then when I started doing the wood turning with John Belt, then that changed things for me. And John, you know, John was a big fan of Wendell Castle, so he actually — he went up for an open house and encouraged me to come along, so I went with him.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And we'll get there, but just before we move on to that — so in college you experimented with clay, you said. You experimented with metal or something. You had classes. But none of the — no other materials have ever really — have you worked with other materials, is the question, besides wood? Or has the focus always been wood?

MR. BYERS: No, I thought a lot about ceramics. I always thought that that would have been a great medium for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I can see why.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And you know, I've had a lot of people think that — they've seen a lot of my work; they think it's ceramic.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But I also just think the material is, you know, just — I think it would have suited me really well. And the physicality part of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right —

MR. BYERS: And it's not —

MS. RIEDEL: Texture —

MR. BYERS: I mean, I'm sure a lot of ceramicists would disagree with me, but it's a different kind of a technical relationship than woodworking.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. BYERS: You know what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And it's quieter. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] And it's additive and subtractive, whereas here, you're pretty much completely subtractive, no?

MR. BYERS: No, the construction of all the forms is all — that's all constructive. Then the surface is subtractive.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, the surface is what I'm thinking of, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Yes, so — but no, no. It was wood.

MS. RIEDEL: And what in particular is it about the wood that drew you from the start? And then we'll talk about how it developed. But you were talking about turning with John Belt. Was that the first time that wood really spoke to you?

MR. BYERS: Well, no, I think it spoke to me when I was young. I mean, I actually built a chair in high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. BYERS: I will say, I didn't — I guess now that I think back about it, I took an independent study in high school. And again, it seemed like the independent study thing worked — suited me really well. And I did a ladder-back chair. It was so rickety, I mean, so — it was so bad. And I actually, I think, I rushed the seat myself as well, and gave it to my mom. She adored it. And it was just terrible.

But you know, and the woodworking teacher really didn't know what he was doing, but he assisted me throughout the whole thing.

MS. RIEDEL: But you came up with that —

MR. BYERS: But I was drawn to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, you came up with that project.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: If not the design per se, but you rushed it, the chair, too.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That seems pretty extraordinary for high school.

MR. BYERS: I don't know. I don't know if — I don't know, I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: So you had built a piece of furniture.

MR. BYERS: Yes. I guess I had, yeah. Yes, I did. And it was interesting, you know. All the other shop classes had been not very interesting, you know. You know, I was one — I hung out with these guys — I was one of those guys that I could go, I could get — if I kept my mouth shut in class and still did no work, I could go from a D to a B just by behaving.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: You know, and when the teacher looked at you, you nodded your head up and down a couple times like you were getting it, and then you just glazed back out to the window and started imagining a life where, you know, there's no adults; no one's going to bother you. That's what high school was for me, most of the time.

MS. RIEDEL: So college was really different?

MR. BYERS: Yes, it was very different. Yes, it was good, you know. I mean, maybe some of my teachers would look — they'd think, oh, John actually applied himself. But I don't remember doing

any work in high school, any schoolwork at all.

MS. RIEDEL: Till senior year, at least.

MR. BYERS: Till senior year, yeah. But there was very little writing in high school. So I did read all the books, and if there was a test related, you know, obviously I would do well on that. And I could talk about what I read. So I was fine orally, you know. But I think there was — they used to say, you know, to get out of high school, you have to write — I think — didn't they used to say — a five-paragraph essay or something. I remember them saying that. I'm like, I didn't write even a one-paragraph essay. What are you guys talking about?

MS. RIEDEL: In high school?

MR. BYERS: Yes. It's amazing how little work you can do.

MS. RIEDEL: I guess.

MR. BYERS: It's sad. Nobody's paying any attention.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it was —

MS. RIEDEL: Did you write, then, in college?

MR. BYERS: I had to, yeah. And I don't do much of it at all. It doesn't — same with drawing now. I don't do any, practically — very little drawing.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes. But I did when I was in school at first. When I got there, I did a lot of drawing, but now I — now I just do a thumbnail and go to work.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it something you enjoyed, or something you thought was — that you had to do?

MR. BYERS: Well, I felt that I had to do it because I really wanted to make sure that the work was going to be right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And so I would do — you know, my drawings — I would repeat the same drawing, essentially, and just make these minute — and I would do dozens. So a lot of people would look at them and they probably would think I just kept redoing the same drawing over and over and over again. And in a way, I was, but I was tweaking things every single time.

And then I would — I would end up, you know, finally deciding, okay, this is the piece I'm going to make, from, like, two dozen. I'd repeat the drawing over and over and over again. And then, sometimes, of course, I'd make a mistake and then that would be — that would end up being the best piece. But I thought that — I was really interested in form, and I thought that that would be the best way to really learn proportion, scale, and form.

MS. RIEDEL: And theme and variation?

MR. BYERS: And —

MS. RIEDEL: I mean, I think the repetition itself was —

[Cross talk.]

MR. BYERS: Yes, I didn't realize it till, pretty much, now. But now it's like, you know, I know the material. I know scale and proportion. So now I just do it. And I know what, kind of, works, you know? I don't — you can talk to a student — when I did that little thing that — you talk to these students; they don't even know, like, in their head, how tall a dining table is.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Because they just — they haven't done it yet.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But at this point, I had a pretty good idea of, like, how tall a dining table should be, chairs, you know, those kinds of things. So I can just do a squiggle drawing and I can go to work.

MS. RIEDEL: But it's interesting to me to think that way back then, you were doing this series of drawings with such minute variation.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I was kind of doing — I was kind of — [laughs] — you know, if the piece was a rectangle, this was like a series of drawings, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: But that would be the best one.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And so really from the start, that was — that essence was there, that one single thing that you were refining, refining, refining.

MR. BYERS: I think that's — it's why I liked wrestling, because you did the same drills every day. That's why I was a good hay boy, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Those bales, they were —

[Cross talk.]

MR. BYERS: But they were all — all those bales were different. I can tell you that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's interesting, though — and a sense of proportion, a sense of scale, a sense of weight, all of that.

MR. BYERS: It's kind of scary to think back about it now, but yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: I love when that comes out of these conversations, those insights that weren't even necessarily conscious before.

So from Oswego, you went to Wendell Castle School. And I definitely would like to talk about that in depth — how you got there and what that experience was like. You were there from '84 to '86?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And that's in — it was in Scottsville —

MR. BYERS: Scottsville, New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: It's just outside of Rochester.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Right around the corner from RIT. It's like a 10-mile drive.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay. So John Belt invited you to go to an open house, is that right?

MR. BYERS: Yes. They would have a — I think they did it — I think they only did it once a year. So they had an open house. He had also, at one time, he — I mean, he was great. It would be like the two of us. He's — say there was this guy, Dave Ellsworth, that he knew that I was passionate about as a turner — and I love his work. He's one of my favorite turners.

He was giving a talk at RIT, so I think just — I think just John and I — actually, John and I and one of the wood teachers from Oswego. And I was just — it was interesting, because the wood teacher was just so negative and so, you know — he went along, but he just criticized the whole thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What in particular?

MR. BYERS: I don't know. Just the whole — his whole attitude wasn't — it was just like this is — you know, just like, this is stupid. This is stupid. And we'd walk through the RIT school, and he saw some boards glued up and he made fun of how these kids were gluing up boards the wrong way. When in fact, if he had done more reading, there was a logical reason why these guys were gluing up boards the way they were. It wasn't wrong.

But he was still following the same — the same textbooks that were from the beginning of time, you know, which, of course, were being written by textbook writers and not people that were actually making furniture.

So you know, it was — it was great that I was able to meet a guy like John Belt, where the main vibe at the school was just, you know, was completely the opposite from John.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So he took me up — he took me to Rochester a couple of times for Dave Ellsworth. He took me to this open house. And I didn't know what I was going to do at that time. I had finished college, and I was — I think I was working 20 hours a week in the furniture shop. My rent was 75 bucks a month. And it was a good year, you know?

And my father was going to retire early. He gave me a call and he said, "I'm going to retire in two years. If you want to go to grad school" — because I would need to go to grad school to get my

permanent teaching certificate —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: — "and you go to a New York state university, I'll pay your tuition." So I didn't want to be an industrial arts teacher. I started looking into —

MS. RIEDEL: So what had changed your mind?

MR. BYERS: Oh, just student teaching. The minute I student taught, I was like, this is not for me. This is a drag. This is like going back to school again; it's that much of a drag.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You know, the teachers are — it's like the teachers are just like — they're like my classmates in high school. You know, I don't need this kind of — this isn't working for me. And actually, I had filled out a lot of my curriculum, the academic side of my curriculum, with classes in educational philosophy and psychology.

So I was really sort of interested in those kind of things, and then to have that and then to go and teach at — you know, I taught in Syracuse too, for a place in Syracuse — and you know, to have discussions with anybody in the faculty about teaching any way differently than they did was just, you know, that wasn't the way to do it. So I started thinking, well, what am I going to do for the rest of my life? So I actually looked at some programs for educational philosophy.

And of course, that would mean, you know, I'd have to get more than a master's down the road. I'd be going into that world. And I thought, well, do I want to be — in the end, do I want to be — what kind of — do I want to be an academic or do I want to be a practical person? Do I want to talk about these ideas or do I want to live these ideas? And I decided I wanted to live the ideas. Does that make sense?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it makes a lot of sense.

MR. BYERS: So I had — I went down with John to this — and I had always thought that people that worked with their — the skilled people, with their hands, that it was a natural talent.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you think you had any of that?

MR. BYERS: It had changed. I started to get a little confidence in myself, you know, and with the things that I did on the lathe, they were really — they were good pieces. And so I felt like, wow, I can actually — if I put my attention to things, I can make things. You know, I was coming out of that. And I went there and I walked away; I said to John — I said, "You know, I'm not any dumber than these guys, so if they can do it, so can I." So now was — so then I had a long talk with my dad, and he was a wonderful man. He actually offered to help me out.

MS. RIEDEL: Even though it wasn't going for a grad degree.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And classic lawyer — he and I talked on the phone for like two hours. I had to argue my case, right?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: He calls me back the next day — the whole — [inaudible] — two-hour conversation, whatever it was. I had to, you know, I had to go back to court.

MS. RIEDEL: Present the argument all over again.

MR. BYERS: All over again.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Like, like, I should have — we should have taped it, you know, and just rerun it. It was amazing. But I won the case, apparently —

[Cross talk.]

MR. BYERS: — enough that he would — yeah, he offered to help me out. And you know, I got some loans and stuff like that. So yeah, then I went to school.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have to apply and be accepted there? How did that work?

MR. BYERS: Yes, you had to — you had to apply.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have to have any sort of portfolio together?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I think — I think I just had slides of the stuff I made, and I had the bowls that I had turned. I had my industrial arts background, so I had mechanical drawing skills. So those were satisfactory — in fact, I think they even transferred those credits.

One of the things that was different with the Wendell Castle School, which is what it — I think it was called the Wendell Castle Workshop, and then they changed it — was that — I forget what the terminology is. But he was — he set it up so you could get grants to go there, where there were a number of other two-year programs around the country — and I can't think of their names right now.

MS. RIEDEL: Specifically for wood, or for —

MR. BYERS: For fine woodworking, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: What they called fine woodworking and furniture design, I think. But you couldn't get any grants to go there. So Wendell had a library. He did all the basic requirements to — I can't remember what the terminology is for a university, that it needs to be so that, you know, you can get subsidized to go there, basically.

MS. RIEDEL: And was this accredited? Did you leave with a master's?

MR. BYERS: That's it. You left with an associate's of occupational studies. It was an A.O.S. [Associate in Occupational Studies] degree.

MS. RIEDEL: I've never even heard of that.

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.] I don't think any — they may have made it up.

MS. RIEDEL: They just — [laughs].

MR. BYERS: But you could get — you could get, you know, you could get financial aid to go there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Because without it, without them being accredited, right, you couldn't get the aid.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, right.

MR. BYERS: So that was the word I was looking for, accredited.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, accredited. And so did you have to have — did you have to have a bachelor's degree already to go?

MR. BYERS: You know, I don't remember that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so could you —

MR. BYERS: I don't think so.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: I don't think you'd have to.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, so it was some kind of degree, but you didn't — you left there with an AOS, but you didn't necessarily have to have a bachelor's to —

MR. BYERS: No, I don't think you have to have — and you certainly didn't have to have it in wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I did check out RIT. And to go there, I would have — I would have had to gone there — I think they said I'd have to go for three years just to get — I had a bachelor's. I don't know what they were going to give me, but I was going to have to go for three years —

MS. RIEDEL: Probably an MFA?

MR. BYERS: — that part I remember — instead of two.

MS. RIEDEL: An MFA, no?

MR. BYERS: I think to get the MFA. It would be three years. But I didn't care about degrees.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: And I looked at the work — with all due respect to RIT, I looked at their student work — not the faculty, but I looked at the student work.

MS. RIEDEL: That's interesting.

MR. BYERS: Because those are the people that are going to have the standards. Those are the people you're competing with.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And who was teaching at RIT then?

MR. BYERS: And their work was not — not as good.

MS. RIEDEL: And who was teaching there then? Was it —

MR. BYERS: Bill Keyser.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And what's the other guy's name?

MS. RIEDEL: Jere Osgood was gone, yes?

MR. BYERS: Yes, he was — did he teach there? I know he taught in Boston. I don't know Jere personally. He may have been there.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe I'm misremembering that.

MR. BYERS: You might be thinking Boston; they had a program.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: What was his name? Oh, I can't think of his name. I actually just met William Anderson [ph] — or Bill Keyser.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, but you —

MR. BYERS: He's great. When he retired, he went back to school to study painting. I mean, he just got his, like, master's degree at RIT in painting.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Fantastic, yeah.

[Cross talk.]

MS. RIEDEL: So you were not comparing so much the teachers, though, as — you said the student work?

MR. BYERS: Yes, the student work.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was superior about the Wendell Castle School work, to your mind or your eye, than the RIT work?

MR. BYERS: Well, it was — well, there were a number of things. I mean, the studio was fantastic. It was his — it was his own studio.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: This wonderful — I guess it was called — it was a bean mill at one time — but this big building. He was downstairs. He had, like, two-thirds of the downstairs of this building. The classrooms were upstairs. It was just this really cool, groovy building. It was 30 students: 15 first-

year, 15 second-years. It wasn't like going to a university.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And RIT's a drag. I mean, it's a really — it just seems so corporate when you're there, you know? You show up and it's just parking lots, you know, before you — and then you have to walk like — it's like going to Wegman's. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: So this was — yeah, this had to be really unique, the Wendell Castle School.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it was very unique. I mean, there's still some schools out there. I mean, Krenov had a school, College of the Redwoods. God, I wish I could remember — there were a couple other schools, and I don't — I can't remember their names.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, well, perhaps they'll come.

MR. BYERS: And of course, Wendell was the draw.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there anyone else teaching, or was he it?

MR. BYERS: Yes, he — well, he — Steve Proctor was the dean, and he was running the program. I think Stephen was only about 33 then and he was an extraordinary craftsman, and fast. And he had worked in Wendell's shop. My understanding is that Wendell was — Wendell traveled abroad, met this guy, John Makepeace —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yes.

MR. BYERS: You know, he's very renowned. And Makepeace had a school, the Parnham [House] School. And Wendell wanted to do something similar. And now I'm not sure if this is true or not, but the word on the street was that John Makepeace recommended Stephen to Wendell. So Stephen came over, and I guess — I guess the way the school — I think the first year, they had eight students, maybe.

MS. RIEDEL: The first year — do you remember, was it 1980?

MR. BYERS: It might have been '80.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Something, early '80s, late '70s.

MR. BYERS: Yes, very early '80s. It might have been '80.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And he and — I can't think of his name — but Stephen and another guy, and the other guy just ended up really being — he's a wonderful guy — they both worked in Wendell's shop and, sort of, split the teaching. And then ultimately they decided Stephen was going to run the program and the other guy started, you know, to be sort of the foreman, and oversaw Wendell's shop. And so Stephen taught, and there was a second-year teacher. So my first year, I had Stephen, because he taught all the basic first-years.

MS. RIEDEL: And what did that cover?

MR. BYERS: Well, the first semester was — I mean, the first — how many months are there in a

semester? Like, three months?

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds right. Three or four.

MR. BYERS: You spent eight, 10 weeks just truing up your tools — learning how to sharpen and refine all the tools that you'd bought. You were given — you were given a tool list — this is what you have to have when you come to school — and you showed up, you know, with all your tools. And then they'd show you how to make them right, because they're not right.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: That was really technical, wasn't it? Make it right. [They laugh.] So and then, you start learning how to use these tools that you've just trued up and refined, from the first exercises to hand-planing a board flat, true and square, all the way around — to then another exercise, where you actually cut some — like, some — [inaudible] — in a board, and shape a radius. And it was always competitive.

So you were like, okay, it has to be done by this date. And they would — they would hold the — the way they would test the board is they would take a straightedge across the board. And if they saw light, Stephen would pull a hair off your head. And he'd put it where the light was. He'd put the Starrett back down. He'd pull the hair, and if the Starrett — the straightedge — didn't fall over, then he considered it too much light.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? Seriously?

MR. BYERS: Truthfully, they did that. You know, that's true. That happened. And then the next exercise was, like, all the second-years got to judge. And then it was like, there was, I think, a case of beer —

[Audio break.]

MR. BYERS: [In progress] — a case of beer went to the winner of best craftsmanship. [They laugh.] Pure gifts involved, yeah.

Things were different then; it was great. But, of course, you know, that's done, and then, you know, Stephen could be really charming. Of course, he's down, you know — the right thing to do for the winner is to share his prize with the rest of his classmates.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So, you know, he did. Winner ended up with one beer —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — but we all ended up with a beer.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So — but they — there was always this competitiveness.

MS. RIEDEL: And a level of precision that sounds as if the likes of it had not been experienced before.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I don't know. You know, I think — I think the guys at RIT do the same thing. You know, we'd — because I was there and I — you know, I can't say that the second time, you know, he saw — he'd saw light, but he let it go. Who knows?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know?

MS. RIEDEL: But that attention to detail and that level of precision became the standard, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Yes, and I — and I think what was really great was then you — every Friday — I mean to me the things that — besides the technical skill at the school, the things that I — what I — the things that were really — that I learned a great deal from was every Friday, from 4:00 to 5:00, Wendell would open his own studio for the students to come down, look at what they were doing and ask questions.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: And at that time you had like 10 people in a show. They were doing the clocks and you got to go down and see this work that this — was like nothing you'd ever seen before.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And whether you liked it or not, the quality was just so — it just blew your mind —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — and you're just starting.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So, you go down there once a week and there's this standard. The bar — that's the bar.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Can you ever, you know — and few people can get to that bar.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So I think that was really powerful stuff. And one of the other things was the work ethic. When you came to the school, they said, you're going to have to put in — we recommend you put in a minimum of 55 hours a week at your workbench. There were other classes that you took, but 55 hours a week just doing your woodworking.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So those of us that actually got things done — we were there every day —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — day and night. I mean, it was an 80-hour week easy —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: — you know? So that, you know — and that followed me for — the work ethic thing has carried through.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And with Wendell too, you'd see him there. You know, you'd get to school early sometimes, and he'd already be there — [laughs] — you know? So that cat was still — he was in his 50s, he was still working — I think, people tell me now he actually takes — I think he takes two days off a week now, but I don't believe it. [They laugh.] But they said he took one day off a week.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. So the studio was open 24 hours?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Seven days a week?

MR. BYERS: Yes. And you just couldn't run certain tools after 6:00, because it was in a residential area, but, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And so what — were your — you and your fellow students working constantly?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes, all the time, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Who else was there? Anybody else that's still working?

MR. BYERS: [Laughs] — I hope they're all working. I have to think. Well, there's a guy, Peter Pierobon, who was two years ahead of me, so he wasn't a student when I was there.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. BYERS: And Peter's — he's a really talented furniture designer-maker, and he actually — he actually stayed and worked for Wendell for two years.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Charlie Swanson was a classmate, but I don't know what Charlie's doing.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there much of a community among the students?

MR. BYERS: I think there was — there were cliques. There were definitely cliques, and I wasn't — I, you know — I wasn't part of it, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. You were just interested in working?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I was just there to work, you know. I — [sighs] — I'd probably hate to hear what people would think about me. I was there to work, you know? So —

MS. RIEDEL: And what were you working on?

MR. BYERS: Well, I was doing the work, the assignments.

MS. RIEDEL: So there were specific assignments?

MR. BYERS: Yes. So once you got through the hand tool part, then all these joinery tests, all done by hand, you had your first assignment that first semester, which was to do a — I think it was a bench. All the joints had to be — in fact, the entire piece had to be built by hand. The only power tool you could use was the band saw to rough-cut your lumber. So every board was rough, and you had to hand-plane everything through and square. So — and some people made some — just some amazing pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. BYERS: And there was — there were parameters of scale and, in order to encourage a lot of joinery, the dimensions were very minimal. So if you made a bench seat, you'd have to join at the series of slats as opposed to gluing up solid boards. They didn't want us to do this like Wendell Castle stack-laminated stuff that a lot of guys went there to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: They wanted to teach us joinery.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. In order to give you just a broad repertoire of techniques?

MR. BYERS: Yes, to give you skill, yeah. And so after — that was the first semester. Second semester, you could use machinery, but there was certain things that you can't use — that you wouldn't be allowed to use machinery. You could use them to mill all your lumber, but all your joints, I think, at that point still had to be done by hand. So your carcasses or your case pieces, they would all have to be dovetailed, all done by hand. All your drawer construction was dovetailed, had to be done by hand.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: The way that we fitted our drawers, which is a friction fit — it's a box within a box essentially. That was the only drawer system we could use. We couldn't use wooden hangers on the side; that was considered cheating. [Laughs.] And then Stephen had a — had a, you know — those are — that's a nice way of saying it, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: You know, he was very expressive. And so those were these assignments, but within those assignments, you had the freedom to design your own aesthetic. So you weren't given a working drawing, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that's interesting.

MR. BYERS: You designed your piece, period.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: So they were all your own designs.

MS. RIEDEL: Starting from very early on — starting the first year.

MR. BYERS: From the very — yeah, you were encouraged to do that. I think the first piece you were

required to do a full working drawing, mechanical working drawings. It wasn't CAD drawings then —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: — as far as I know. And then I think the second — that second semester the first year, I think you didn't have to do a full working drawing, but they encouraged you to do working drawings for the joints, you know, but they were pretty flexible.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Were there any women in the program at this point or is it all men?

MR. BYERS: There were two women in — there were two women in my class. I don't think — I don't remember if there was any women in the class ahead of me. And there was another — there was a woman, Wendy Stayman, who — whose name is well-known. She was probably, I think, the first woman to go to Wendell's and ended up being one of the — I think she was in the Peter Joseph Gallery, which had, you know, was — yeah — which is the big thing, you know. So —

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a real concentration on technique and scale and tools. Were there also design classes?

MR. BYERS: Yes, there was a — there was — there was a design class.

MS. RIEDEL: That was taught by Stephen as well?

MR. BYERS: That was taught by Denise — I think Denise Heischman; I think "Heischman's" her last name. She teaches at RIT, and her — and her husband Bob is a — is a — supposedly a really well-liked guy. He teaches painting at RIT as well.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Wendell taught — the first semester we had — we had a furniture art history the first year. So I think up until — up until the 20 — I forget — up until 20th century maybe? We had this guy come in — I don't remember his name; he was antiques dealer — and then the second — the second semester, Wendell went from the 20th century — he came in and taught.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And he's great.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. BYERS: But he never taught any tech — like no woodworking.

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing? [Inaudible] — really?

MR. BYERS: Yes, he didn't do any — [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: No design either, just the art history?

MR. BYERS: He — well, he also taught — I'm sorry — he also taught a — what was called a — after we did the mechanical drawing thing, we had this thing called — I don't know what it was called, but it was a drawing class and he did teach that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Yes, and he was great.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I bet.

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah, I mean great. I mean, his drawings are really, you know, fantastic in that they taught us how to — you know, just sort of the basic — then we run through thumbnails, up into doing presentation drawings, you know, in [ph] perspective, you know, and then using colors and, you know, watercolor. I think at one point we had to do a watercolor one or something; I don't know. I — yeah, and something like that.

Yes, his drawings are — he's an — he's an excellent teacher. And I think he came through once a week. The reference is bench hopping: He would come through — just do a walkthrough to see what was going on. But he rarely stopped and talked to you unless you were doing something he actually thought was interesting. And I — he — it made me nervous every time. So it was, like, when I saw him doing the walk-around, I'd slip out the back door. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I was like — I don't want this guy to come in and just say something — it's going to — it would freak me out; I got really nervous.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And did he — so he did no formal critiques at all? It was strictly the bench hopping or once in a while?

MR. BYERS: Well, we did — you — we did — we — at the end we did — I don't — I can't remember if we ever did a — I don't ever think we did a design critique before we started building a piece. We — I think we always did that individually with Steven, and then after — there was a deadline and, when the pieces were done for the deadline, then we had a crit.

MS. RIEDEL: Gotcha.

MR. BYERS: But over the time period, it got to where fewer and fewer people were making the deadlines.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Because —

MS. RIEDEL: And why was that?

MR. BYERS: Because it — because I think after a while, those kind of hours start to take a toll.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And you know, one person goes into the second semester and they haven't finished their project for the first semester, so they've — so they're allowed to work on that as well to finish it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Some people — it was financial, you know. They started — they started to take on actually some commission work through Wendell —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: — that he got that he would pass it on to students, if they — if he and Stephen thought they had, you know — they had the gusto for it. So those guys needed money.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So they would do that instead of the actual assignment.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And that was okay?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I think it was cool, you know? You know, they were learning from that.

But, yeah, we would have a formal crit, but I remember times — I think one time it was like just three of us — [laughs] — yeah.

And you asked about teachers, there — there was also a second-year teacher who I — there was — there was a guy in it for a year — when I was a first-year, I was just with Stephen; I can't — I can't remember the guy who was the second-year teacher. My second-year teacher was a guy named Hugh Scriven, who had been a classmate of Stephen Proctor's at the Royal Academy. And Hugh came over for the year and, up until that time, this is 1985 — like, this was my second year, which I think is like '86 or something.

Up until that time, the program for the second-years was to build a desk and a chair. They had the whole year to do that, and these were some really, you know, serious pieces that they were making.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Hugh's philosophy was, you're never — you're never going to get a year to do a desk and a chair; it's never going to happen.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, right.

MR. BYERS: You got to be realistic.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So we started getting assignments that were — we had one assignment; it was like a week to do something. It was, like, pick — you'd like, pick — I think he had four different kinds of objects you could make, and he threw it in a hat. Then you'd reached in and pulled out and that's what you had to make.

MS. RIEDEL: Any way ?

MR. BYERS: Yes. So you had — it was more of a design, sort of scrappy kind of thing. But you would be challenged on technique.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know, standards was always imperative.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So — but as — I think the thing that made what — the significant thing, the chair — that they had done a chair and a desk all those years before. Our assignment for a chair was, we had five weeks to design and build two chairs — they were always a pair — but — and I think that's realistic, you know, that part. So I think that's where only three of us showed up at the crit. [Laughs.] [Inaudible] — was tough.

MS. RIEDEL: So did — is it fair to say that he brought in a real sense of the marketplace and a real sense of pragmatic deadlines and making a living? Yes?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. Yes — yeah, I think that that's really — I mean, I think that the pieces weren't as significant, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But the time frame was such that, man, you have to get going.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You had to get on it, and you can just wallow in the design process.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: It's an easy place — [laughs] —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: — and be indecisive and eventually you just got to get going.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And I think that that was — I can't imagine how many times I would have redrawn, you know, the same desk and chair —

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. BYERS: — how many months I might have done that.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And what I — what freed me up all those — the whole time I was in school, eventually — after my first piece where I agonized over which piece — which types of woods to use, Stephen said to me — he goes, you know — because I was asking all these questions about form and he was like, "You know, if you really want to know whether this piece is good formally, now that you're done, you should paint it black because there'll be no — nothing to distract from the form, the proportions, scale. There's no pretty wood." Well, I didn't paint it black.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But everything I did —

MS. RIEDEL: From there forward —

MR. BYERS: — till I left school was all black.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Everything I did was black.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So that came out of that particular comment?

MR. BYERS: Absolutely, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you —

MR. BYERS: Stephen's fault. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: And it sounds like then you were very clear that what your primary interest was at that point was form.

MR. BYERS: Yes, yes. Because aesthetically at that point, the — probably the biggest inspiration for me was Memphis.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: But I was not into the — into the — into the patterns. I liked the color, but I didn't like a lot of patterning, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Interesting.

MR. BYERS: And I didn't want to use — at that point, I didn't want to go with color because I thought it would be — I'd be cheating, like, in myself. Like, if I'm — if I do the black, I'll learn, I'll know. If I put a little color — now, I did do that on a couple pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So I did cheat. [Laughs.] No, but I mean, it was like that's — it wasn't so much like the piece would be better or more people will like it. It's like — it's not about whether they're going to really like it. This isn't really about whether people like it. I want them to like it, but only if they like it if it's all black.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. But certain forms, I would imagine, would suggest different colors, so —

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — when you made things different colors, was it because the form suggested that to you?

MR. BYERS: No, I just eventually decided I wanted to work with color, down the road.

MS. RIEDEL: And how long were — did you actually work strictly with black?

MR. BYERS: Well, I did black through school. Then I moved to Philadelphia, and I think — I think then I got to Philadelphia and the history of furniture-makers there — there was a community of people making furniture there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: I was like, "I can't live with the furniture I'm making at school. This — I don't think I can live with this work; it's not going to hold up."

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I was using all lacquered finishes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I wasn't — I decided I really didn't want to be around lacquer —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: — that much. And I was —

MS. RIEDEL: Was that a health reasons' choice?

MR. BYERS: Pardon me?

MS. RIEDEL: Was that for health or aesthetic reasons or both?

MR. BYERS: It was both —

MS. RIEDEL: Livability?

MR. BYERS: — it was both. And the work — you know, I had to be careful with the work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, because it was so fragile.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it was — structurally it was sound.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. BYERS: And what I had been doing — I'd been adding all this flattener to the lacquer to get this beautiful black, and I didn't have — finishing's a really interesting thing when you go to schools. A lot of people only know what they do, and it's something that — it's its own part of furniture-making. It's — for most people, it's the last thing that — it's the last thing you do —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — and it's — it takes — it's — they want it over — [snaps fingers] — like — they want it to be quick; it is quick, and they hate it. And they don't put a lot of time and effort into researching it or — it just seems like there's this big lack in communication when people talk about finishing. And you know, somebody should have — you know, if somebody had come to me and said, John, I need to just top coat this to protect it —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — but I — [inaudible] — away because the top coat may have changed the flatness —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — you know, of the paint, and that was the most important thing because of the way it really absorbed and bounced light. It was beautiful — it was beautiful surface.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. BYERS: But it didn't really hold up to wear — not my kind of wear and tear —

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: — not like this wear, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes; yeah. So when you look back on that — the Castle school — what would you say the — its strengths were and the weaknesses?

MR. BYERS: Well, I — I'm — man, I was just so lucky there. In the first, just — so probably the only real challenge about the school, I think, at times it got to be — it got a little claustrophobic with the people packed in there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And there was, you know — there was — there was a group of a few guys that, I think, were — they were pretty immature for a while —

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. BYERS: — so it was hard around that, but it was great. You know, that's the nature of being together with people, so —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — that would have — would have happened anywhere.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: That was a great school.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it sounds like an extraordinary opportunity that was there for just a very short time.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And the — and the work — I mean, it seems like everybody at that school, my — all my classmates made — were so good, and some were amazing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: I mean, they just had this ability to do things so quickly and so — you know? I mean, I'm

a good craftsman, but some of these guys, it was just like — you know, they were gifted.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: I mean, that's a funny thing. You never think about it or — I never thought about that. It's just like being a great — like being an athlete, you know? It's — some people can just jump higher and run faster —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: — no matter how hard you try to jump as high —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — or run as fast, you're just not going to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So — and the same things applies to all these — right? All this stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, absolutely.

MR. BYERS: So — but, yeah, they were all — they were all really excellent craftspeople down there in that program.

MS. RIEDEL: And was there a particular look to the work that came out of those — that program, do you think? Or did everybody pretty much begin to establish their own style?

MR. BYERS: Well, there was supposed — my first year, there was — the second — there were like two camps: There were the guys — there were the guys that considered themselves woodworkers, and then there were guys — if you used paint, you were considered an artist —

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: — and they meant that in a derogatory way.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: So — but that was one of the things I liked when I went there and I went to RIT. I don't think I saw any paint at RIT, and there were a couple guys using paint, when I did — went to that open house, and I thought it was just so cool.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Never seen anything like it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes, so.

MS. RIEDEL: So there was a flexibility and an experimentation?

MR. BYERS: They encouraged you to do your own work.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Absolutely, and in fact, if you went there and you wanted to do traditional — something that was traditional looking, I — [sighs] — I think there was — in fact, I think there was one case where a guy made a beautiful desk and chair, and there was a discussion as to not putting it in the student show because it didn't reflect on what the school was really about, and that was progressive work —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting.

MR. BYERS: — and I think his piece was in the show. It was a beautifully made piece, but it was a — it was kind of a reproduction kind of — I think it had Chippendale legs or something, ball and claw, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: I don't think Wendell was into that. I don't think — he didn't want that to be, you know, what the program was about. So — yeah, he was — he was very — I will say he was really encouraging with me on those times I wasn't — when I did talk to him.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, when you didn't run.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And I — at the end of — at the end of your second year, you have — you have like an oral review, and so I went in and sat down with Wendell, and he said, well, what are you going to do? And I said, well, I thought I would get a job full time and start to make my work part time. And he said, I think you should make your work full time and then get a job to make — just to get by, part time. And he said, you might actually have a shot at this — [laughs] —

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: — you know? So that was pretty cool.

MS. RIEDEL: And did that have an effect on you at the time?

MR. BYERS: Well, it meant a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: It weighed on you just how hard it is —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: — you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: I mean, you got to — you either have no other choices or you just got to be a crazy cat or maybe a combination of both —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: — to make a living. Freedom's tough, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yep.

MR. BYERS: Freedom's hard. So I mean, I think back about the guys that I went to school with, and all these other guys — men and women that I met when I got out of school that were — that were — we were all, you know, chasing the same dream and how few of them are still making work because it's just too — you know. I'm sure they've — I'm sure that they're doing thing now — things now that they enjoy way more, you know, they've made, you know, hopefully they've made these decisions that have worked out for them. But, you know, I hope it's all worked out for them. But I know it's tough.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, and it's interesting too — something we talked about before we actually started talking on the disk here — is that you, very consciously, chose not to teach. So you support yourself solely from the sale of your work.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Well, I — you know, the — I think the plan was, you get out of school and you get a part-time teaching job.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. BYERS: And you make it work. And you just make enough teaching to pay the overhead.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And then hopefully you start to, you know, amount to something. So most of the teaching jobs — I did do some of that. They would be an evening class. I think the first one was with the University of the Arts.

MS. RIEDEL: In Rochester?

MR. BYERS: In Philadelphia. I left — I finished my two years at Wendell's and then they offered me — they offered me a space to rent cheap as a resident for the year. And then I met somebody who knew Michael Hurwitz, who is a well-known furniture maker. You know, I'm sure you know Michael's work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And he was teaching at the University of the Arts and he was looking for somebody to sort of take on a residency position — somebody from another program coming who had experience, you know, sort of —

MS. RIEDEL: Sort of an artist-in-residence?

MR. BYERS: Yes, sort of.

MS. RIEDEL: How — yeah.

MR. BYERS: But it was — it was off the books. So I took it and that — and that — he offered — I didn't have — supposedly, I wasn't going to have to pay any overhead.

MS. RIEDEL: It would just be a space for you to work.

MR. BYERS: Exactly. So —

MS. RIEDEL: And materials — or you supplied your own?

MR. BYERS: No, I had to supply the materials. And there was — there was like 10 hours a week as a shop tech, even though they had a full-time — they had a little room for that. So — and then he offered me some work, which —

MS. RIEDEL: Which made it possible.

MR. BYERS: Just barely. And — but I — but, still, it seemed like — it seemed like it'd be less overhead. And it took me out of my safety zone; it got me out of Rochester.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know, I was like, Philadelphia? I thought I'd go there for a year and I stayed, I think, for eight, and learned a lot when I was there.

I'm trying to remember what the question was.

MS. RIEDEL: Let me take a look because there might have been a couple that led into that.

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.] Oops.

MS. RIEDEL: I can't remember with what — where exactly that was coming from either.

MR. BYERS: Well, I know — I think it was addressing a question. [Laughs.]

[Audio break.]

MR. BYERS: [In progress] — asked me, was that in Rochester? And I said, no, it was University of the Arts in Philadelphia.

MS. RIEDEL: Now we're back.

MR. BYERS: So I taught some, like — yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Teaching!

MR. BYERS: Some evening, adult classes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Right.

MR. BYERS: And it's like — it's just — you know, first, just teaching — you know, you got to — you got to — that's a skill.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know, I was doing it just to make money. I did it — it was nice afterwards. People were like, you know — and I was just doing the same drill. I was like, what did you do? Well, I show a couple slides the first class and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And, you know, after the — after I taught

these classes people would come up and say, you know — especially the old-timers, they'd be like, well, when I saw this young punk teaching this class, you know, I thought I should be teaching him a thing or two. But you did all right, kid — that kind of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: But it — to me — to me, it was just — it wasn't meaningful, like being in the shop. And I tell you, by the time I taught those classes — by the end of the day I was beat.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Because I was still working — I was still working 10 hours a day, seven days a week. I was still grinding it out, just like I got out of school. And as the boogie man was behind me saying, man, if you don't work like you did in school you're never going to make it. So —

MS. RIEDEL: So it sounds like one thing that came out of your school experience was an extraordinary work ethic.

MR. BYERS: Yes, huge. Yes. Yes, that's — yeah. I mean, technically, you know, it's standards. But, yeah, the work ethic is huge. And I know Peter [ph] — because I rented bench space from Peter at one time — he ended up in Philadelphia and he also worked.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know, he was very disciplined. You know? Very dedicated.

MS. RIEDEL: So we talked a couple questions back about the strengths and the weaknesses of the program. Were there any — you talked about — you mentioned some of the students as a weakness. Were there — and how lucky you were to be part of the program. Are there things in particular you would cite as real strengths to that school? Other than the — I mean, we talked about skill, techniques, design sensibility, work ethic — anything else? I mean, the experience to work with, I'm sure, Wendell Castle and —

MR. BYERS: Yes, I mean, Wendell's just, you know — I mean, to have — just he's an extraordinary artist. And whether you — whether you — I mean, for me, the thing that blows me about him and men and women that have continued to — he's still so driven.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You know, whether you like him or not — or you like his work or not, he's — it's amazing what these people have accomplished. I mean, what he's accomplished — not in a — not for a second have I ever looked at someone like Wendell's career and dreamt of having a career like that because it doesn't even interest me. I can't even get that — what that's — what that would be like.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you mean?

MR. BYERS: I'd have to fall into a hole and have it be at the bottom of it. It's like — because my — the career that I want is to live a really simple — and I'm sure he probably thinks he lives a simple life, maybe. But I've always — I mean, I've just wanted to kind of do it on my own, not to have a crew of people, not to — it's — when you get to the level he's at, it's a different scene.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. And I imagine more of that will come out when we talk about your working process because it seems like that's an important part of the — an important part of making work is the process.

MR. BYERS: I think it has to be, right, for everybody. You know, your process is — you know. Yes. But I — it just — I just — yeah, I think — I mean, I bring this up about the — about Wendell is because there's so many — there's so much being [ph] in my field, there's so much gossip and rumor about him. And I often think it's funny when people go, well, Wendell does this.

And I always thought, you know, I wonder if — that everyone refers to him as Wendell instead of Mr. Castle. You hear a story from somebody — because they always call him Wendell that you might actually think this person knows him. [They laugh.] Knows him personally, knows him really well. I don't think — in fact, I don't think many people do.

But to — I think that being in the presence of somebody like that, who has done that much — and I've been lucky enough to keep in touch with him. I mean, I don't consider myself — I'm not a close friend of his — but I actually dropped in, and he's always — I mean, he's great. He always gives you his time. And it's always extraordinary — he always gives you the tour and you get to see what's going on. And it always blows your mind.

Yes, I just —

MS. RIEDEL: That's saying a lot, to be able to say that over years and years of time that that's the case.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And he's — you know, he's had his — you've interviewed all these — you've interviewed —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I haven't spoken with him.

MR. BYERS: Well, you've interviewed — I mean, you've interviewed a lot of artists and you know that it's not just this projectory [ph].

MS. RIEDEL: Not at all.

MR. BYERS: It's like everybody else's lives. We have highs and lows. And — because if it was all about projectory [ph], more people — more people would still be in the game.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: Because it's — you know, it's that thing, like — it's when times get tough, that's how you really measure your character, you know? I mean, I wish it wasn't that way. [They laugh.] I wish we could say I had great character because it's always going good for me but that's not the case.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So that — I think that people view people like that and they just go, well, you know, they don't have to — they don't know what it's like.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And maybe because they — I don't understand why people do that. I don't understand

that perception of things, but — so yeah. He's — to have been around that guy for the — in the way that I was is just, you know, that's gold.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. BYERS: And Stephen Proctor was — he also stressed getting things done. And Wendell stressed getting things done. And I actually had a friend who said to me — he'd seen a couple of graduates from that program work — a couple of us. And he said, "I've never seen guys work as fast as you guys."

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: "You guys even cut wood faster than [ph] anyone I've ever seen." And I thought that was kind of interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: That is interesting.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Because in this whole extraordinary school about — with extraordinary technique, we talked about the hair and the light and the D-square —

MR. BYERS: Yes, I think that might be standard at all the schools.

MS. RIEDEL: But then with the design sensibility and all — but then to have that real practical sense of how hard it's really going to be and how hard you're going have to work.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes. They — I think — my memory is — I was — they asked me if I was married or if I had a girlfriend. And I was living with my girlfriend at the time. And I think that they asked me at the interview — they go, "Is she prepared? Is she prepared to be there with you through this?"

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: "Because, you know, you're not going to see her." And that was — that — we also talked about how some of the — some of the people fell off a little bit as the years went up. But married guys —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You know, they weren't — they weren't sticking around at the end of the — at the end of the day.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, the time commitment is intense.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you find that it's — still has that same level of demand or have you been able to cut back a bit? I know we won't get into the surgeries and all that right now for your shoulders because I know that slowed things down. But —

MR. BYERS: Well, it's — yeah, it's definitely slowed down, partly because — well, it slows down for a lot of reasons. And, you know, the health is one thing.

MS. RIEDEL: We talked about economy too, right.

MR. BYERS: The economy is one thing. And then —

MS. RIEDEL: It seemed like there was a shift too.

MR. BYERS: I'm also a lot more efficient now.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: You know. I can get things done a lot quicker than I used to. I mean, I've been quick for a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And I don't really know in terms of — you know, I've done the Jeb Jones thing. I could have taken that same work, and that could be the show in Boston if I wanted it to. I could call that — that's John Eric Byers. I could have done that. The reason I did the split is because — basically just because it's directed for another market.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And it's directed that it's not going to be made — it's designed in a way and engineered in a way that it could be made by other people that don't have the skill to make the work that I had been making.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But I don't think I'm ever going to make this — I don't know if I'll ever make this kind of work ever again.

MS. RIEDEL: Like this table?

MR. BYERS: Yes. And this stuff requires — you know, you got to — [sighs] — it's just — it's a lot of work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. When did the Jeb Jones work start?

MR. BYERS: I just — I just made that work last year.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so that's brand new.

MR. BYERS: Brand spankin' new, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: All right. So we'll come — we'll come to that later then.

MR. BYERS: And we'll see what happens.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I didn't realize [it was] quite that new. So the spheres weren't Jeb Jones.

MR. BYERS: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: JEB JONES is — [laughs] — it's confusing for people. But it's designed for — as limited production work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. It has that feeling. Yes, that would be my thought.

MR. BYERS: The balls — you know, what everybody does at one point, you try to figure out a way to sort of bring in some bread and butter. And the classic thing is to make a clock. You know, and so you make a cool shape and you stick a clock in it — battery clock. So I was — you know, I was like, I'm not doing a clock.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: God dammit, I am not going to do a clock — because I knew everyone had done — I did a couple standing clock — so I did. But it wasn't so much like I didn't think clocks were a great idea, it's just that, god, I didn't get into this to make clocks, right? So I made some of these balls. And I think in the end I ended up doing — I know I did at least 150 of them. And they became my bread and butter.

MS. RIEDEL: In a variety of sizes?

MR. BYERS: Well, for years they were all nine inches. I glued up the material — I had a guy who was in his 70s turn them.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: And I think his name was Bobby Bigger. He did the turning. I get them back and then I would carve them and paint them. And then eventually I was — it was interfering with furniture work so I then brought in a guy to paint. And he worked with me for three years.

MS. RIEDEL: And do you still make them?

MR. BYERS: Well, what I did is — when I created this limited production collection I decided I just wanted to add some fun and tabletop to the collection. So the six inch, which are the striped ones, the four there, I had been making those and selling those in galleries in groups of three.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, all right. Interesting.

MR. BYERS: But I've — and I could have made them just like that and I could have continued to do that. But what happened is, I don't have any galleries to send the work to. So that — the Jeb Jones thing is not just — it's a health thing and it's a business thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And you were saying before we started talking on the disk that you've had — you were working with 10 galleries on and off, and eight of them have folded over a two-year period.

MR. BYERS: Yes, over the last couple years, yeah. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Because of the economy.

MR. BYERS: Yes, or whatever. You know, who knows — who knows. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk briefly about Philadelphia and your move there, the work there, and then maybe we'll take a little break?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So you moved to work with Michael Hurwitz and the University of the Arts.

MR. BYERS: Well, I went down there as an off-the-books resident for a year.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I worked — I did maybe, you know, between moving cinderblocks for Michael — I mean, he just gave me — you know, I did very little woodworking for Michael.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And then he had no work to hire anybody. So then he turned me on to this guy, Bob Ingram.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And Bob did mostly limited production furniture that he sold through, I think, Dennis Miller in New York. And he would do a show at The Works Gallery now and then — he did some gallery stuff. And I think he was — he and another guy started the Philadelphia Furnishing Show — Philadelphia Furniture and Furnishing Show. But I don't think he's — I think he sold off his section of that.

And he was a real name in the furniture scene down in Philadelphia. Him and Jack Larimore, they owned a building which a whole bunch of us rented space from. So he turned me on to Bob. And Bob hired me — I can't — I don't — forget how many hours. But — so I worked for Bob for like a year, I think, 30 hours a week or something. And built work for him — his production — you know, these pieces, we'd build them again and again and again per order. So he taught me how to really — he sped me up. Yes, it was the real world. I mean, it wasn't just — you know, it was a whole different ballgame. So he taught me really how to make things quickly.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And you were already working fairly fast.

MR. BYERS: Well, no, I don't know if — I mean, maybe for students. But this was a whole 'nother world.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know, and Michael wasn't working fast. I mean, anyone who's — anyone who has made a living — this is off the books. I should turn this off, but —

MS. RIEDEL: You can.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Well, I shouldn't say anything anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. We can let that go.

MR. BYERS: He just wasn't fast.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Well, and people have different priorities; they work at different speeds.

MR. BYERS: Exactly. You know, I don't mean any disrespect.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course not. [They laugh.] But this was limited production or production furniture?

MR. BYERS: It was limited production. So it was — it was — it was marketed — well, not all of it. But mostly it was, he had a collection of pieces that Dennis Miller represented — I think he was the only rep. He also rep-ed Jack. And it was — it's — you know, it's marketed to interior decorators and designers and their — and they are ordered but it's essentially the same piece with maybe a couple of slight variations in proportion or material choices. It's the standard thing. And it was different than fine woodworking and our standards because you could use metal hardware. You could use European hinges, not hand-set brass hinges.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So the standard's very different. The price points are lower. And it's — so it's — I think it's mostly referred to as limited production.

MS. RIEDEL: And when you left Wendell Castle's school and you moved down to Philadelphia, did you have an idea about work that you wanted to make? Things that you'd made at the Wendell Castle School that you were interested in exploring further? Anything in particular that you were — [inaudible] — on?

MR. BYERS: Well, I started — I started introducing texture or surface.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. In Philadelphia?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And I went from painting things black to — I started staining so you could still see the wood. I started — I started — I played a little bit with painting — but I played around with a lot of different stuff. I built some pieces out of plywood and experimented with — well, I'd already experimented with gesso and then lacquered over that, so now I was using oil paints.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And I really — I actually — and eventually decided to go back to paint full time and it was because of the milk paint — because I finally got everything I was trying to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, let's talk about the milk paint, how you — how you — where you were first exposed to it. And what about it in particular has appealed to you over time?

MR. BYERS: Well, it — I knew that people used it. Some other people used it. So I can't remember —

MS. RIEDEL: Was it at Wendell Castle? Was it in Philadelphia with Michael Hurwitz?

MR. BYERS: No, it was in Philly. And I had gone from — when I was working with Bob I was building things mostly out of — it was ebonized — we'd called it ebonized ash. It was ash and then it was dyed with leather dye and then lacquered over the top of that. So I would work for Bob — at first I worked for him full — I had a gig with him. He gave me, maybe it was 35 hours a week; I could use the shop anytime I wanted. He bought a bench for me, and every month I worked for him he would knock, like — it was 25 or 50 bucks a month off the final — so if I left —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know he — [knocks on surface]. So I think by the time I stopped working for him full time, I had to pay him 50 bucks for the bench or something. It was really great. You know what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: That's — yeah. That sounds pretty generous.

MR. BYERS: Yes. So I started — I was — but I tried to put in my hours in four days with him, and I think that's how I did it. And then when I would — what I did is I would do all my other life things — bank, groceries, everything — I'd do that on one of the other days — get all my materials, do it all in one day so that I could have, like, 48 hours in the studio without distraction.

Like, that was a really important thing that I learned because if I decided to work and then do these other things and the next day go to work and do these other things — it just broke up the whole groove, you know what I mean? So that was a real efficient thing that I learned, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was more important to have those solid blocks of time, uninterrupted, than a little bit of time each day.

MR. BYERS: And you're much more productive.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You know, you get — ultimately you just get a lot more done. So I learned that. And then I started — I started — I mean, I started exhibiting — I got lucky. You know, right out of school I got a New York Foundation of the Arts grant. So that was with student work. I think they asked for 10 slides, I sent them seven. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And you got a New York state grant?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. BYERS: And it was — I didn't even know they existed. I went to the mailbox and some student who had been at the Wendell Castle School like three years earlier — you know, somebody had obviously had been this guy's mailbox. And, you know, it was just these open cubicles they'd throw — you know, stuff would get in. So there was this application. Some guy, nobody even knew where he was or where he — you know, whatever. So I was like, well, this is cool. You know, I got nothing to lose. So that was some — a little bit of money.

MS. RIEDEL: Fantastic.

MR. BYERS: And I was able to start — Snyderman Gallery approached me when I was in school. So I was selling — I was — I was looking for galleries. I would sell a piece now and then. So I'd — I was doing — I was doing terribly. But I was doing enough that I decided I would subcontract from Bob. He would no longer pay me an hourly wage. He would pay me a — you know, this is how much I'll give you to build the piece I was paying you for.

And then I started getting some commission work through the Snyderman Gallery. But that was — you know, I was just getting by. But at least I was having a chance to at least learn more about business and I was more — I was involved in the whole process, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: And we're — let's talk about those early pieces, but let's change this disk first.

MR. BYERS: Okay. Wow, this is —

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with John Eric Byers at his home in Newfield, New York, on June 13, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, card number two.

We wanted to talk — we just started talking about milk paint. You said you were doing a lot of experimenting when you were in Philadelphia.

MR. BYERS: Right. I think the first time I used milk paint piece was in '89. It was either '89 or '90, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: And how were — how did you become aware of it?

MR. BYERS: Well, it was being used by studio furniture makers. I'd read about it. I don't know if — I don't even know if I — I can't remember — just trying to think when I first used it; must have been about '89. I think I made — I was thinking about another piece, but I think I may have first used it on a pair of chairs. And —

And the thing about the milk paint is, it has — there are so many ways you can work it. And it has all these just natural — it's naturally imperfect. It drives you — if — it drives particularly, like, a lot of furniture people crazy because of the imperfections. And I started working when I — I think, with, like, the chairs, for instance, because they were small members, it doesn't reveal those imperfections as much as if you'd start doing large, flat surfaces, like a dining table. And it's just like — it's a little bit of a beast to work with.

But it's so — when you get it right, it was so — it's so beautiful. And it's — it wears so well. It's so soulful.

You don't even have to mix colors. I mean, the natural Pantone [ph] colors are — asked if they could just — just the stock colors. It's — it comes in powder form. You mix it with water. I bought — get it from the company I've been buying it from since then. Actually, it was cool, they — at one time, I think they had, like, six colors, and they would send you the swatch. It was actually little pieces of wood, and they actually painted them individually with the colors. You know, that wasn't the printed color chart. I wish I — man, I wish I had kept one of those just to have it around.

But the paint — the cool thing about milk paint for me was that as — it got so frustrating at times

when I worked with it because I couldn't control it. I finally said, I'm not going to worry about it anymore. I'm going to design around this paint. I'm going to — I'm going to embrace the imperfections in it. And then the whole relationship with it changed.

And kind of my whole relationship with finishing changed a lot. And the other finishes I was doing — I was trying to get depth and soul by layering, and I was — I used latex at one time, then I went to oils because I wanted a harder surface. Didn't like being around the solvents. Latex to me wasn't hard enough. So milk paint, with all of its individual challenges, just — in the end, it was worth it.

And then I — I think that's all I've used since to finish the work. I do topcoat pieces, because you have to prevent the milk paint from water spotting [ph].

I'm trying to think —

I think there were a couple of pieces that I — I think that might've been before. That might've been one piece — I didn't do it, but it was a commission and it was weird because it wasn't painted. I think I've probably only done, like, six pieces that weren't — that were naturally finished. You could actually see the wood.

MS. RIEDEL: So you said that you were experimenting a lot at this point looking for a finish or a surface that would resonate with you and you were just frustrated with a lot you were — a lot of what you were finding until you came across the milk paint?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Well, I was still interested — I was interested primarily in form. I still — because ideally [ph] I'd prefer to paint the wood.

And yeah, so then I experimented with milk paint. And I guess I was trying to make a point that there was a lot of challenges in using milk paint. There's a lot of, you know — and I don't think I even read the directions 'till like after using it for, you know, 15 years. And I've gone back and read them and it just doesn't make sense. It doesn't work for me. I put a lot more paint on than the directions.

It's just — I mean, it just — it speaks to me. Milk paint speaks to me.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were using the milk paint long before you began carving the surface too — is that true? Or did they come — did they come in tandem?

MR. BYERS: No, you're — no, you're — I was using it before I started doing these surfaces, yeah. So pieces were smooth. Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: In those early forms I'm thinking of, in the *Thelma and Louise*— [inaudible] —

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. Yes. Those were milk paint.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yes. Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes. That was the beginning of the relationship with milk paint. Yes.

And I — and the way that I rub it out, the way I applied the paint and sand [ph] the paint was different then, I think, just — was different than the way other people were doing it, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And you — had you just experimented and found that you liked that?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. But I almost never made — I almost never make samples. I build a piece and

that's my sample. So I would, like — I would commit to, like, you know, like a seven-drawer piece and learn how to — what kind of finish I was going to get with this paint just by going for it.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow. How is that a good idea? [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: You know, it's this — I don't think it's necessarily a good idea. It's this — I feel like — I feel like it's just better to get going, and —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Interesting.

MR. BYERS: I don't know what that's about, but that's — there's, like, an impatience with me that — I still — when I start a new piece now, I still get all excited, like, scared excited — like, first date excited. And that's kind of weird because I made a lot of stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I've actually heard multiple artists talk about that, though, that importance — the importance of a little bit of nerves or fear at the beginning, that it just may not work this time.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Well, I get that.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible] — beginner's minds — [inaudible].

MR. BYERS: It may not work every time.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it's a funny thing that it still there — like, did I make the right decision on this? And I think sometimes that's like, okay, you know, my brain is out to kill me, so I can sit around and worry about that, or I can get going. So every once in a while, I take — I'll — I have to calm myself down and I will make samples. I'll explore things and check them out and —

MS. RIEDEL: Was it a sense of commitment, do you think? Have you had this gorgeous seven-drawer cabinet that you just made that you had to be fully invested in coming up with this surface that was going to suit it?

MR. BYERS: No, I —

MS. RIEDEL: Or you just needed to move fast? You just needed — you didn't want to take time to run tests?

MR. BYERS: You know, I've built pieces — I've done tests and I've built pieces, designer-made pieces, and not been happy with that. And I knew exactly what the outcome was going to be in terms — technically.

And I — actually, I think it was — I can't remember which is Thelma and which is Louise, but the green one — the green one, that was once all red in oil paints.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes. And I hated it. And I refinished that. I took every ounce, all the paint off, and redid that whole piece. I had to — I had to scrap the whole piece.

And I had done samples.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: And it's the other thing about what I've learned about drawing — taking drawings to 2-D to 3-D is — especially when you're working, like, quarter-inch scale — it's not the same — it's not the same when it becomes full-scale.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Absolutely. Right. Right.

MR. BYERS: It's just not the same, you know. It is mathematically —

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. BYERS: — in proportion and scale, et cetera, but it's not the same.

MS. RIEDEL: When you're thinking about a piece, did you use to think about form and surface evolving at the same time? Or did you — was the — did the form come first and then you would think about the paint or the surface afterwards?

MR. BYERS: It's gone back and forth, you know. I think — yeah, it's definitely — it's kind of gone back and forth.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] It feels that way, but —

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. I mean, there were times when it was just, like, I really want to do this pattern, you know. And then I would think about what form to put it on.

And I made some goofy stuff then.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] What are you thinking of?

MR. BYERS: I was thinking about, like, some of the — some of these dressers I made.

MS. RIEDEL: Like, the *Vanity Not Sanity*, that sort of thing [ph].

MR. BYERS: Yes. That is goofy stuff. You nailed it; that's exactly what I was thinking. Yes, that's some goofy stuff, that real whimsical stuff.

MS. RIEDEL: That fertility cabinet comes to mind, too.

MR. BYERS: Yes. The white one?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: Yes, I don't think those — I don't that says — I don't even know where that came from.

MS. RIEDEL: *Siamese Dresser*? I mean, that — wasn't there *Siamese Dresser*?

MR. BYERS: Yes, that's goofy. Well, that's — we were thinking about form and surface, so the fertility cabinet was at least monochromatic. It had the least [ph] surface to it. And —

But those other ones were just, like — and I was living in Portland at the time when I was — I was — I was really into fashion.

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting [ph].

MR. BYERS: Not as — not like the way I dressed or anything, but just really into, like, reading about fashion.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: And patterns were really — Prado was, like, a new word for me. And there were all these killer, you know, patterns, and I just loved it. And — so that was kind of the thing where I was just, like, obsessed with pattern. And then I was, like, you know, "This is a piece I want to make. How ridiculous can I — in a way, can I make this piece?"

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: And I think it was also the sign of where studio furniture was at that time. It had become very, like — paint and surface had started to become popular. And — yeah, I mean, you know, I think sometimes you get influenced by all these different kinds of things.

MS. RIEDEL: But it seems that there is a sense of humor as a thread that runs throughout your work, and sometimes it's more in the fore [ph] and sometimes it's less, but there is a sense of humor, tongue-in-cheek, that surfaces from time to time — I mean, naming two pieces, *Thelma and Louise*, *Vanity Not Sanity*. Yes. Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes. But I think *Thelma and Louise* were a holdup [ph].

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I think — and that there was a whole bunch of pieces after that that were even curvier, that I think could hold up formally.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. BYERS: Those other pieces — well, it was just too much.

MS. RIEDEL: The *Vanity Not Sanity*. Yes. Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes. They were a holdup [ph].

I think that — I think there's a little bit of both. I think I've sort of separated them now.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Yes. I mean, because there are some pieces that don't feel at all that way. But it seems like it's a thread that comes up or did come up from time to time.

MR. BYERS: Yes, well I think there's a — there's — there's a real serious side to my personality and there is a really — you know, I want to have fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So kind of, like, I don't know, like, part sword swallower and part clown. Maybe I'm a little bit of both, I don't know.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a pretty good description.

MR. BYERS: Maybe. This is — we're just learning this now, what the right description is. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Those are the best conversations.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I don't know, you know, I don't know most of the time. But — like, I think some of my — the — some of my pieces, they're really — like, my Open Form Tables, I think those are really — I don't think of those as playful, but they are in a way — in the way that they're stacked together. But just the fact I still do the balls — like, I just have to do them — [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. The balls feel playful. Those Open Form Pieces feel much more poetic and conceptual. They just don't feel playful at all.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: I mean, because then they go more in the Donald Judd direction, which doesn't — you know, versus the clown and the lighthearted patterns on the spheres.

MR. BYERS: Well, the — people ask me what JEB JONES was, and I told them, I'm the — JEB JONES is the bastard child of Donald Judd and Mother Ann — is it Mother Ann Rose? Mother Ann Lee.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't know who that is.

MR. BYERS: She's actually the — the — yeah, that's the, like, the really bad, like, hidden joke [ph] because Mother Ann Lee was the founding — the founder of the Shakers. So JEB JONES is really the bastard child of Shaker and Donald Judd.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] And Donald Judd. There we go.

MR. BYERS: And of course, right, the Shakers were getting it on anyway.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Right. Right.

MR. BYERS: So — yeah. So — sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: No, I think that's actually insightful.

MR. BYERS: Yes. I got to work on my delivery, though.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: That was pretty — it wasn't very smooth.

MS. RIEDEL: Another thing that seems true from these early pieces, the *Thelma and Louise*, the tassel [ph] cabinets, was the feet on them all — or no matter what was happening with the piece, above all, the feet came to such small points as if they were all floating. Was there a specific intention or a reason for that?

MR. BYERS: Well, even a lot of my student had a — like, an asymmetry, had a teetery sort of vibe to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely.

MR. BYERS: And I think that's just — that's kind of how I felt, like, that's how my life was.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] And I've — I actually thought about the asymmetry, of course, in terms — in your work in terms of, sometimes it feels a study in asymmetry, and sometimes it feels more about precariousness and off-balance.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. But then these feet, it feels precarious but it also feels very floating.

MR. BYERS: Well, it's a nice — I think it's a nice — it's kind of nice relationship to the form.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, because the forms are so much fuller when it comes to these very narrow feet. Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: Right. I mean, when I made the — when I first did *Thelma and Louise*, I wasn't thinking about women; I was thinking about cross sections of turnings and vases. And then, you know, you know, you just couldn't help yourself but getting that title. That was the time —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You know? So at least — at least, if they were going to — people were going to look at and then think of women, they were at least going to be, you know, two independent-minded women. That was the thing, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes. Yes.

MR. BYERS: That was kind of the idea.

MS. RIEDEL: Renegades.

MR. BYERS: And I don't know [ph] if most people even got that far with it [ph] — [inaudible] — you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: Yes, so —

MS. RIEDEL: So then there was — I'm thinking about transitional moments in the work. And not long after those pieces — fertility cabinets, the last one I think of as being really monochromatic — there is a transition to more pattern and color. And did that happen right about the time you moved to Portland? Or was that — did that begin to develop in Philadelphia?

MR. BYERS: Yes — no — yeah, the — really got in pattern when I moved to — well, I did — yeah, I did the *Vanity Not Sanity*. That was in Portland. That was one of my earliest pieces. And then I started doing the hat box pieces in Portland.

And what did — what was nice about the pieces like that was — but using a different pattern — those were great pieces to explore a coloring pattern because I could just keep making the same shapes. I could essentially build the same pieces, but they could all be individualized by exploring pattern. So I didn't see round boxes at one point. You know, I just saw a round canvas and just — to explore pattern really at that point. I mean, I think in the end I did 16 of those hat box over a time period.

MS. RIEDEL: Those stacking hat box pieces?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So the — now — we were talking about how you've gone back and forth between form and pattern. So at this point you had established your sense of form or forms that were compelling to you, and so you're just completely refocusing now on pattern and color

MR. BYERS: You mean in Portland?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Well, and those hat box pieces, for example.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And you had moved to Portland for a residency, is that right? At the —

MR. BYERS: I did a residency in '94. I was — I'd actually been planning to — I wanted to leave Philadelphia. And at that point, I had my own tiny studio that I was running and working.

And I was actually —

MS. RIEDEL: And you were showing early on. You also had started commissions early on too, yes?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I was making — but when I was in — in '94, when I was still in Philadelphia, by the time I had my little studio, I was just getting by just off my own work — barely. I might every once in a while get a commission. That might not be mine, but it was rare. What always would happen is, I'd just be — like, at the end of my row, I'd go around to all of the other shops and say, "If you have any bone you can throw me," you know? And I knew the minute I did that, I'd get this small commission; it'd be, like, a week or so. I'd — [inaudible]. It happened every single time.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: And then that one-week project, it would take me a month to do it because I didn't want to do — you know what I mean? I was just — I only — I could only get motivated — so I would — could do only work on this — this other project, like, one day a week. That's all I could stomach. You know, it'd be a TV cabinet or something like that, you know? I mean, they had their place. It's just that — it was just so hard for me to do it.

So I did a residency at the Oregon — I applied and they asked me to come out, the Oregon College of Arts and Crafts. I went out there for 10 weeks in the summer of '94. And I loved it. So —

MS. RIEDEL: What was — what was — what did you love about it?

MR. BYERS: Well, Philadelphia had just been — I'd had enough of Philadelphia. I — coming up — I actually had been up here about a half a dozen times that year before I went to Oregon looking to rent a place up here. I was going to move up here. And — but I got — you know, I got to Portland, and it was, like, "Huh, they have gas with lead in it?" You know, they have old cars and — I mean, it was, like, the '60s. That was — you know, the Neon. It was before — it was right before it became hipster paradise. There were two places you could go to hear, like, good, loud music, only two, you know. There — you know, it was — it was — it was — I don't think there was — I don't think they had any microbrews there at that point. I mean, it seemed, like, within, like, 24 minutes — [snaps fingers] — that all changed.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: But — so I went out and I was there for 10 weeks. And — what did I make? I made those round cabinets with tile doors. So that was — yeah, that was the start of, like, pattern — a lot of pattern on a [ph] surface and a lot of color.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Yes, what inspired that? Is that something that had been building for a while? Did you see something and just decide to completely shift gears? How did that transition come about?

MR. BYERS: Well, I just of felt like I had taken a curve — like, I've done — like, what I've done this — I've always made these changes. I just felt that where I was going, I'd taken as far as I could go with it.

MS. RIEDEL: Gotcha.

MR. BYERS: And I — and I had conversations with friends. They were, like, "Well, why don't you transform these same formal qualities into other types of objects? Why are you always making just dressers?" And I said, "Because every time I tried to transfer them in other objects, they suck."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: "You know what I mean? Believe me, I'm trying. It's not working. They're meant to be like this. This is how it works for me."

And they'd be, like, "Well, I saw those end tables you made for somebody, you know?" And I said, "They were terrible, you know? They were a commission. I'm glad I never have to see them again. But hopefully they won't haunt me for the rest of my days." [Laughs.]

You know, it just wasn't working. So I wanted to —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it must have worked for the clients.

MR. BYERS: It did. It did.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. But it just didn't speak — it just wasn't working for you.

MR. BYERS: I didn't — I didn't think they were successful. So I decided to make a change. And I — it just seemed to work at the same time I made a change in location. And — so yeah, I moved to Portland and became pattern crazy.

And then when I moved here, I was, like, I'm done with it. But I'd flirted with this right before I left. But I said, "Okay, I'm done with that. It's time for a change."

And you know, I make a lot — I made a lot of work. You know, I was making a couple dozen pieces a year. It wasn't like I was making, you know, a —

MS. RIEDEL: Half a dozen. Right.

MR. BYERS: Yes. You know?

And that was a period in Portland where I was doing a solo show almost every six to eight months.

MS. RIEDEL: That's an extraordinary schedule.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I was — I was just — you know, I was an animal.

MS. RIEDEL: Working nonstop, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Yes, and I had Dean, Dean McIlwaine was my assistant; he worked for me four days a week. Wonderful guy. Made some beautiful work of his own for a while.

Yes, my wife helped me out at the time too a little bit, at one point. So — and not — I mean, she helped out some physically, but she helped out a lot in the business side of things, you know.

And I worked — yeah, I worked 70 hours a week, probably.

MS. RIEDEL: Seventy.

MR. BYERS: Yes, at that point, for years.

MS. RIEDEL: And you had a studio in Portland then?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yep.

MS. RIEDEL: And so — and you just moved, got the residency, worked for 10 weeks, decided to stay and found a studio and —

MR. BYERS: I got the residency. [Laughs.] Got the — well, I was just laughing. I got the — drove a little — drove my steady little Toyota pickup truck out to California, you know. Sold it and bought a '66 Chevy.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Did you really?

MR. BYERS: It was never as reliable as that Toyota, but I —

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure.

MR. BYERS: — but so the residency ended and I drove back to Philly in my '66. And then I had met this guy, Richard Ford, who became the new teacher at the — at the — at the school, Oregon College of Arts and Crafts. He was looking for a studio; we agreed to share a studio. So he found a studio.

So I got back, I guess — I guess it was in August, and I had moved out and arrived in Portland, I think, by the first of — first of the year, something like that — '95. Hired a guy — gave a guy some money to haul all my equipment out, and I drove back in a '66 with some personal belongings, which was pretty much just some clothes and my — [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: And did — was there a lot of shop equipment to move cross country?

MR. BYERS: Back then I didn't have as much as I have now. So the guy who took it out, I think, we loaded up his 15-foot. He was a guy I knew in Philly, and he was a mover. So he decided, well, you give this much money, I'll take — my wife and I will take a vacation.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: In the moving van.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Loaded with your equipment.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, is this when you first began to really carve the mahogany too? Or had you been carving before?

MR. BYERS: Well, the first time I started actually doing the carving work was — I think, was that — was that summer at the residency.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yes.

MR. BYERS: And I think that was the beginning of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] And had you been working with that mahogany before?

MR. BYERS: No. I was building most of my pieces out of ash, which was a lot less expensive. But it was — it's just something you don't want to — it's not a — it's not a really — it's not the kind of medium you want to be carving into. You know, the mahogany lended itself perfectly for what I was doing. And then that mahogany became more and more difficult to get.

MS. RIEDEL: This was really — you began carving this mahogany, you began working with that sense of tile, the square and the circle? I mean, this was really — the color came into play. It was really a hugely transitional time for the work.

MR. BYERS: I guess, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Did it feel that way to you at the time, or did it feel like you were just experimenting in a whole new realm? Did it feel like you stopped doing one thing, you were starting to try something new? Because you talked about experimenting a lot in Philly; you found the milk paint and you got to work in a certain way. Did it feel like a new era of experimentation? Or —

MR. BYERS: Well, I think if — what I felt in Portland was — well, there were a lot of things and there were a lot of business things and philosophical things that were going down. For instance, I was out there by myself now. I didn't have guys I could knock on the door and ask them, can I sub a piece from you?

I had — I was out there all — I mean, Rich and I got this place but he was teaching. And we stayed together for maybe six months. I asked him to move out. And we're still very good friends today. That was — that — I know that was so hard for him, but it just wasn't working out.

I had a — my studio was three times what I had in Philly. You know, I mean, my life was a lot more comfortable, but I had to figure out a way, how am I going to make — how can I make a living? So the only way I could make a living, I figured, was, I had to do more shows, because the only time I had money was when I was doing shows. So that's when I decided I had to do a lot more shows.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have contacts with West Coast galleries at this point, or was everything still East Coast?

MR. BYERS: There were a couple on the West Coast. Doing shows wasn't something that a lot of

people did, or there weren't — there just — it wasn't happening. I mean, it didn't really sort of exist. I hooked up with these guys, Tercera Gallery, and they gave me a solo show and they became, like, you know, a real important gallery for me.

MS. RIEDEL: [in] Los Gatos, Okay.

MR. BYERS: I still showed at Snyderman; you know, Pritam & Eames occasionally; [Gallery] Naga—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, so Naga had started way back then?

MR. BYERS: Yes, Naga started — I was in a couple of — I started showing with them around '89, I think. They used to do group shows for the most part, like, once or twice a year in conjunction with Clark Gallery, a gallery that they had a friendship with, and then they would sort of alternate; it'd be Clark one year and then Naga the next.

So that was — I don't know. It was — I'm trying to — it's a lot to think about, all these — with these questions, you know. But —

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe — particular pieces to them — I think of the tile dresser in '95, and I think you called it *Mi Vida Loca* in '96. There is the arrival of the tile. There is the arrival of the circle.

And then in '96, the same year, there was the hat box — just the drawers. Things began to get modular — it becomes — it seems increasingly visible in the work. Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: Yes. Well, that's — I really enjoyed that — [inaudible]. I'm drawn to that. So —

Yes, the *Mi Vida Loca*. I did a couple of white pieces with the tiles, and I abandoned that because I thought it was too easy.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I thought — I thought it was too easy for people to like them. I've — I do that. I mean, I just thought it was too easy. I thought that — I thought the — if I look back at those pieces now, if I strip them down in — just tiles, I think they'll hold up. I think some of the detailing that the really aggressive gouging on the feet] and the top was — I look back on that and I think that I did that partly because that was kind of vogue with what was happening a lot in studio furniture, and it was also because I was afraid to just go out and be, you know, geometric. You know, it was kind of a transition.

But people loved those pieces. And I thought that there was — especially when I did the ones that were white, I thought there was a real primitive kind of vibe to that. And I did not want the work to go there.

MS. RIEDEL: Why?

MR. BYERS: I just thought it was too easy.

MS. RIEDEL: Hm. Did you like them?

MR. BYERS: Not particularly. If I had really liked them, I would have — I would have — if I had thought they were really successful — I thought they were — they were — what — I guess what I'm trying to say is, they were very popular with people. I mean, I didn't take it. I could have taken that for —

you know, gone with that for eight years and then — you know. I just felt that it wasn't — it wasn't what I wanted — where I wanted to go. I mean, I was — I'm hoping that eventually, I'm going to go to a place, you know, that's originally mine.

MS. RIEDEL: And that didn't feel —

MR. BYERS: And I don't mean — no.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. That's what it was lacking. It didn't feel originally yours. It felt something else — of something else, related to something else.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that correct?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that accurate?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. Yes. It's not like I think that I'm after something that's truly — I'm not saying, like, I'm going to come up with something that's absolutely original. That's not what I mean. It just didn't seem right.

And some of that — some of the vibes of those pieces is in the — you know, is in door frames in my — in my — in the trim of my house. But it just wasn't — and the *Mi Vida Loca* pieces, actually, those are — those are pretty sweet, those tiles. They were really nice.

But — yeah, it just didn't seem right for me. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: But years later, you sort of circled back around to that.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I know, I know.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. So maybe it wasn't right then, or maybe something else needed to be explored.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I think — well, I think you're right. I mean, I — you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe it had to get complicated before it could get that simple.

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.] Yes, maybe. You know, maybe there's just time and place, things are right.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

You've talked about doing chairs. You've done a few chairs but not a lot of chairs. I know there is a couple at least in '96 or one or two. Is there a reason that form has appealed to you or not?

MR. BYERS: Well, I'd like to do some seating. I think — but for the longest time, the reason I didn't — I didn't design and build chairs was because I felt there were so many great chairs in the world that — there were just too many good chairs in the world. There is nothing I'm going to have to offer. That's really kind of how I felt about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] But there was more room with armoires and the dressers.

MR. BYERS: Well, I think there was something about — the thing about the dressers and the armoires, too, they take a long — a lot of time. And I enjoyed working on a piece that took a lot of labor and a lot of hours.

And there is — I mean, there's a relationship with seating, obviously. But somehow, my — I don't have the same relationship with seating as I do like a dresser.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Yes.

MR. BYERS: That's a really personal relationship, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, and a dresser too, if we step back and look at your work now, it has much more of a canvas quality to it than a chair does, so in some ways that makes a lot of sense.

MR. BYERS: I mean, I remember when I was in school, I went down to New York, and it was the first time I'd seen — I think even heard of Donald Judd, and there was a 20th century design show or something at one of the museums there, and they had two of his chairs. And I remember just thinking, there is no reason to ever make a chair again; they're perfect. And I knew they — you know, they aren't comfortable, but that was — I just thought, they're perfect. [Laughs.] And now that I'm — and it wasn't, like, God, I could never come up with something — it wasn't like that. It was, like — [laughs] — it's been done, you know. That was sweet. Yes, that was pretty sweet.

MS. RIEDEL: And were you drawn to his work — after — was that the first you had seen his work? Were you aware of it before?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I love his work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Would you cite him as a significant influence or a source of ideas?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes, he's — I mean, I think — yeah, absolutely. You know, I'm not — I — I mean, I started with Wendell, but his work isn't — you know, the vocabulary — you know, doesn't — doesn't speak to me. I'm not fond of, like, really organic work. I mean, I guess if I — that might be different with ceramics, but — with things that have more of an abstract organic quality to me, you know. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It's 5:00. So shall we stop here?

MR. BYERS: Okay. I think we have to, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I'm starting to really get bored with myself.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with John Eric Byers in Newfield, New York, on June 14, 2011 for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is card number three. And we'll start this morning with a look at the different artists or movements or technologies that have influenced your work over the years.

MR. BYERS: I was thinking about that. I was thinking as — like, as furniture makers —

MS. RIEDEL: It doesn't have to be furniture makers.

MR. BYERS: Well, it was easier for me if I kind of — if I was looking at it in terms of — well, I was thinking about my favorite artist. So clearly, Donald Judd is on — in a couple categories. You know, Castle — Wendell Castle — clearly is a huge influence on me. I'm a big fan of Scott Burton. I think Ettore Sottsass is, you know, brilliant.

The Memphis movement had a huge — just opened my eyes. Just — you know, I went to woodworking school — I didn't even know what I was going to make. And probably before I'd seen Wendell's work, I was looking forward to maybe making shaker chairs and, you know, mission-style couches or something. Do you know what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: That was like the extent — like, to — and to discuss things like maybe art deco and nouveau was like, wow, that's way out there. And I go to school and I stumble into this Memphis movement thing. And it just blew my mind. So I guess I've always gotten excited about these things that at least seem like new ideas to me. That didn't frighten me. It actually, you know, made me happy to know that there was this much diversity out there and I needed to sort of broaden my — I had to broaden my world, you know?

And what I like about Sottsass is he — his work is — it's really playful. It's also really — a lot of it's very complex in all the different forms. But if you break it down the forms are very simple. You know, they're very minimal.

MS. RIEDEL: That makes me think of Judd too and why you would like his work — just those incredibly simple forms that are both very contemporary but very primitive in a lot of ways, they go back a long ways but they feel very much of the moment.

MR. BYERS: Well, Judd is to me more of a repetition of a repeated form where Sottsass can take — it's like a collection of forms and puts them all together. And there's like an instability or precariousness in a lot of his work. But it's not — but there's also stability in that — when I look at that. I don't feel unsteady with that.

And I think a lot of precarious work — particularly when you get into functional work — that can make your life uncomfortable. And I think when you get into your home, unless you're just — you know, unless you're really young — [laughs] — you know, you don't want an uncomfortable place to go home to.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: And I think his stuff would probably hold up in the home, I think. And I was a big fan of Wharton Esherick, but probably more with regards to his lifestyle as an artist and a recluse. You know, that lifestyle really appeals to me — a friendly recluse.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: And then I think in the — in the other fine art world, I mean, I think there's sculptors that I've liked. But I don't think about them. I mean, and then in painting Brice Marden I think is — I love his work — the simplicity of his work. I'm a fan of Ellsworth Kelly. I really like — I really like Serra's drawings. I'm not that crazy about his — I think at one time I really loved his sculpture but when I've seen his work in person it doesn't really — it doesn't speak to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes, it doesn't —

MS. RIEDEL: Even those big torqued ellipses?

MR. BYERS: Doesn't do it for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Because there's got to — for me, there's always got to be sort of a — there's got to be something emotional — I don't really think too much about it. You know, I see it and I just — it speaks to me or it doesn't. Furniture is a little bit different. I can break it down a little bit more. But particularly with paintings, it's just like — it's sort of a boom thing.

MS. RIEDEL: What about Mondrian?

MR. BYERS: You know, I mean, John Perreault said all those really nice things. But I don't — it doesn't speak to me. You know, it's nice work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But I don't — I don't think about —

MS. RIEDEL: What about Albers?

MR. BYERS: Definitely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. All those *Homage to the Squares* in particular by him.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And LeWitt. I mean, those guys — I'm not — I'm really not schooled in art history at all. But when I see their work it really — it excited me, you know? So —

MS. RIEDEL: Whose work do you think of when you think of the interaction between interior and exterior? Anybody in particular?

MR. BYERS: Can you be — I'm not quite sure what that means.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, there is — I was reading about neoplasticism and there was a comment about Mondrian's work presenting this balance between the internal being externalized and the external being internalized. And I of course thought of —

MR. BYERS: Wow, that's too deep for me. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: But your chest of drawers are exactly that. I mean, the ones that are completely carved inside and out and top and bottom. I mean, there's something — you talked about the pieces that you had to carve the inside, regardless, even though it wasn't going to — it was like making two pieces. But you felt compelled to do that.

MR. BYERS: Well, I think — I think with Judd's work I did that. I think about that all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I think it's in the — I mean, I look at those pieces and I think — I think — I have to consider everything. I don't think about that when I look at paintings, obviously.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: I think about texture when I look at paintings. I mean, I like Pollack too. I mean, some of his work is just amazing, you know? You can just — you feel like you could fall right into his paintings. And I think — but I think with the — you know, we'd think that way with Sottsass work — and getting back into furniture — I mean, I think — and the sculptors that make furniture. So Burton, I think about — I think about ever surface when I look at his work, like with Judd. You know?

And I think when I was in school we did — we discussed the — you know, the importance of — about the quality of finishing everything inside and out. And Wendell did that for — I — at one point his whole thing was he finished everything as beautifully on the underside of a table as on the top of the table, you know. So there's — I don't think about that too often but I'm sure that's probably even the first time I even thought about that — about inside/outside.

And I also — I read a book also in college — I think it was called *The Poetics of Space*.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, Gaston [Bachelard], I think, isn't it?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I think — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. I can't —

MR. BYERS: And I think there was something in there about, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Bachelard, I think that's it. Yes, yeah, yeah.

MR. BYERS: I think he — there was something about a dresser or about drawers that — but I'm — I might be confused. That was a long time ago. And that was one of those books I went back to maybe a decade after I'd first read it and it just didn't — whatever it did — the magic it had the first time I read it wasn't there for me —

MS. RIEDEL: The second.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. And I like the idea that the interior space is as important as the exterior space. I mean, it's like the character of a person, isn't it? I mean, you know, we all are inside/outside.

MS. RIEDEL: And you know, I think — I was thinking about this last night — there was a certain point in your work — not to jump around too much, but I think it's relevant to this — I think in 2003, I'm thinking of one of that — I think it was called the circles squares dresser — that's how I've referred to it — but where the interior space and the exterior space became central to the — to the piece. And maybe I should find a photo. But do you know the — I'm thinking of a — I think it was a table — but, no, actually the first one was a dresser — but where there's a very pronounced interior space.

MR. BYERS: So there's a negative space sort of like this space.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, yeah, in the interior.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And that is the first time I remember seeing that in your work, was early in 2000, was that pronounced interior space.

MR. BYERS: Well, this piece —

MS. RIEDEL: Did it happen before?

MR. BYERS: Well, this piece I did this as well. The inside of the doors are carved just like the exterior of the doors. Now, this doesn't have drawers. At least I think you're thinking about — had drawers? Was it sort of the tile pattern?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Which I do return to. And when I returned back to that I tried to eliminate all the little details that were present when I did tile work back with, like, *Mi Vida Loca*.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: Like there was a shift. I became more just pure geometric.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, exactly.

MR. BYERS: And I also at that point had started to — I stripped all the feet from the work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, exactly.

MR. BYERS: And started moving to pedestals. And then in — by 2008, I had gotten rid of all the pedestals and everything was hung on the wall. Even the dressers were hung on the wall.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And what motivated that shift to get rid of the feet?

MR. BYERS: To get rid of all that wasn't necessary.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I mean, from a — from a practical aspect, it's — you're — from a marketing aspect you're kind of making things hard for yourself because most people don't have the wherewithal to know how to hang a dresser — [laughs] — on their wall. So it's a tougher sell in the marketplace. But it was just the place I wanted to go — and to see if I could go there. I mean, ultimately, you know, sales are important because they allow you to continue — besides just paying the bills and buying beer and stuff. I mean, you know, they allow you to keep pushing yourself.

So — but I think the — so I had started to do the inside-outside even at one point — I'm trying to think about how far this goes back. But, I mean, I would always paint the insides and my drawer bottoms at one point, because I thought that that carried — that had more of a connection to the

external painted surfaces that I was — instead of using, like, a pretty veneer for the inside. But I think — I mean, I don't know. I mean, I think I was doing the inside for quite some time.

I did a series of square, wall-hung cabinets. I think they were called *Two Square Cabinets*. You'd think I'd remember my own titles but I don't. And they weren't surfaced on the inside but they had negative space.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Those, I think, are 2007, right? Are you talking about —

MR. BYERS: No, I actually — those — that was a form that I returned to. I started doing those — god, in like the mid-'90s.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. I don't think I saw those. Okay.

MR. BYERS: Yes. I started that and then I went back to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And basically it was I had sort of changed the surfacing and the pattern and the palette that I was working with. So I returned to those forms to see how that surfacing would work, you know, with that particular form, because I thought that form was — I — that it was perfect.

MS. RIEDEL: That seems like the beginning of a more formal exploration of interior and exterior.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I think so. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And positive space and negative space.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. And then I think by 2008 — like, for instance, with those dressers — I finally had the confidence to just give up, like, having a mirror. Which is cool, because then you get this reflection that appears like you have this double depth. You know, when you look at the inside of this piece, it looks twice as deep as it is.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Actually, I was doing — I was doing sideboards. I had a series of sideboards that I did in the late '90s.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And they also were completely surfaced on the inside of that negative space. But I wasn't until the show that I did for Naga in 2008 where I decided to — with all the cabinet pieces that actually had doors that opened up, they didn't have drawers — that I decided that I would surface the whole inside — including the back panels. And then with the dressers in that show — it just wouldn't have worked to do the — I guarantee, if it worked I would have done all the drawer

sides. But what I did is I — is I just — I did all drawer bottoms. So they were —

MS. RIEDEL: Carved as well?

MR. BYERS: Yes. But not the drawer boxes — not the —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: That just wouldn't have worked out so well. I thought about it. [Laughs.] But it was like — [claps] — you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: Yes. I just wanted to see how far I could go with it and then see if it — if it changed the relationship between — the relationship with the person who was actually using it. And I'd say that the — that the outcome was probably — for me it was — I would do it again. I don't think that — I don't know if — I don't know if the audience, it made any difference to them.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems as if maybe those are the bookends for what we might call one of your series is to start with an idea and then take it as far as it can possibly go. And when you've gone that far, that would be the end of that series — unless you decide to come back and revisit it.

MR. BYERS: Yes. I can see myself — yeah, because I think I like to revisit forms in particular.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And then I revisited surfaces to see if I could — if they would be successful, for instance, like the — you know, these paintings that were — that were — these insides with carved paintings that John Perreault reviewed. It was — well, these surfaces — are these surfaces successful enough? Are they — do they have magic that they can stand on their own? And, you know, there's only one way to find out.

MS. RIEDEL: What's — since we're here, let's just talk about that moment when you made the first wall pieces — the first paintings. How did — how did that come about? What was the decision?

MR. BYERS: You mean these or the ones that I very —

MS. RIEDEL: The very first.

MR. BYERS: The first nonfunctional?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, the first nonfunctional, non-furniture, non-utilitarian.

MR. BYERS: It was — it was in — I had a show of I think a dozen of them. And it was either — I think it might have been '99 or 2000. And I had — it wasn't — it wasn't — that wasn't — I had made one or two earlier in the '90s — like '96 or something. And I had — I can't remember what happened. I had a show.

Things were going pretty well. You know, financially I was getting by. I had a show. And I had — my — this is what my marketing plan was: I moved out to Portland, it was 1995. I realized that the only way I ever — I could — I could bring in some money was I had to do more work, not less. So I would go into a show \$10,000 in debt. I'd finance the whole exhibition with a credit card.

Now, I got that bad influence because I had bunch of friends — right before I moved I met this

community of independent filmmakers in Philadelphia. And these cats would — they were blowing 30 grand on their credit cards to make, like, some, you know, 10-minute short film, hoping it would be in the Philadelphia film festival.

So I'm out in Portland. I'm like, geez, if these guys are willing to blow 30 [thousand dollars], you know, maybe I'm — I can step up to the power of 10 grand in each show. So that was how I financed a show. I'd sell enough work to pay off the credit card debt, have cash in my pocket for two months, but by then — the cash was just, you know, to buy groceries, everything like that — but by the time I'd paid off that debt I'd already started buying materials for the next show.

So I was going into these consecutive shows, I'd keep going in \$10,000 in debt. And I said, my goal is that in two years to go into a show with no credit card debt. I had no — you know, I'm learning business on my feet. I'm not going to get a loan from anybody so it was the only way to finance it. And I considered it a huge success because two years later I had a show and I had like \$500 in cash in my pocket.

So I was — I was — you know, I had a surplus. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. BYERS: You know, we joked about what a brilliant businessman I was. You know, it's all luck, right, with what you — you know. So I had fun. I had sort of gotten to the point where I wasn't doing that so much. I had a little bit of money put away. I was feeling pretty good about things. Had a show — the economy turned in the late '90s. There was a time there — I forget when — and sold nothing. So I decided everything that I was going to make until I started selling that work — or sold some of that work — was — I was going to make everything out of my scrap materials — all my inventory.

So that's what I started to do. And I started building some small cabinets, a couple of chairs. And there was a business downstairs of my business that had gone under. And they had cleaned out whatever they wanted and they said, you know, the rental company will be in here on Monday to clean out. You guys, there's a bunch of stuff down there and materials that we're not want — if you want it — you know.

So I went down and I got all these free panels of fiberboard. I brought them up and I had time on my hands so I started — that was the first time I started carving them.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Did a couple of them.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: Sent pictures off to the gallery in California. I had a show lined up with them.

MS. RIEDEL: That's Tercera?

MR. BYERS: Yes. And I said, listen, I'm going to bring the work down for the show. I'm going to throw a couple of these pieces in the back. If you don't like them, I'll take them back. So he liked them. And he hung them up for the show and they were the first things, I think, to sell at the show.

MS. RIEDEL: The paintings?

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And they were — were they fairly monochromatic too or were they real colorful?

MR. BYERS: They were monochromatic for the most part. They were black and white I think — black, mostly. Black with white — I was painting the relief surfaces, so if they were black I was painting the relief surfaces white. If they were white I was painting — and so then a couple years later I actually had a show with a dozen of those with a few benches. And they sold all of them. And then — and then I made my move and I just stopped. I decided not to do them.

MS. RIEDEL: I want to talk about that because function, you know, has been so significant a cornerstone of your early work. How have your thoughts about function changed? Have they changed in any sort of specific way? Doing pieces that are — if they have a function it's a completely different function as a painting versus furniture. Or do you not think about it that way at all?

MR. BYERS: I'm not sure if I understand —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, I just — in terms of function in your work —

MR. BYERS: Do I think — I'm sorry, go ahead.

MS. RIEDEL: No, in terms of — well, let me think about —

MR. BYERS: Do I feel differently about —

MS. RIEDEL: Do you consider the function of the paintings, I guess, is a way to think about it.

MR. BYERS: Well, I think they have a function, but it's not the same function as a piece of furniture.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course, right.

MR. BYERS: I mean, I — you know, it's like we talked about — everything is design. Design is everything. Everybody's a designer, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So everything has a function whether it functions for you or not, right?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So I mean, its function is just to provide you joy or to cover up a wall. I mean, hopefully it's more than that.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think about the paintings differently than you think about the furniture?

MR. BYERS: I think my emotional commitment's the same. Yes, I think — I think when I do the nonfunctional work I get to think about purely proportion and scale.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: If I — when it comes to furniture the proportion and scale is always going to be affected by the function of the piece. And it's one of the reasons I've always — and I haven't done a

lot of commission work. I've made most of my income just on spec work. You know, I'd say probably I get one or two commissions at best a year. I've never enjoyed doing the commissions because you're making — I mean, what happens is the proportion and scale is often defined by the needs of the client for how they want that piece to function and where they want it to go.

MS. RIEDEL: So it's not someone saying, "I want one of your dressers." It's someone saying, "I want something that's going to fit here or do this."

MR. BYERS: It's — yeah, it would be more like, "I love your dresser. Can you make one this size?"

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And that can kill the whole piece.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure.

MR. BYERS: So, you know, doing the paintings — that's just not — you know, scale is an issue. I mean, people will say, well, it — you know, I need something smaller. [Laughs.] I haven't had to deal with that.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: But it's kind of just pure. Or there's different — there's just different challenges, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: What are they?

MR. BYERS: Well, there are just different challenges. I mean, it's — a lot of people — I've known a lot of guys — met — and I said guys, men and women, that's right — they — when they get into making furniture, they're like, "I just want to make sculpture," because they feel trapped by all these restrictions of function. And I actually think it's actually the limitations of the functional requirements is actually freedom. And Stephen Proctor — when they gave us assignments at school — I think this was just a great saying is — "Freedom through limitations."

And it gives you these parameters to get started in. And, you know, it's — so I actually think — when I do the non-function after a while I want to get back to the function, not actually because it's freer but there's different challenges. So now I've been able to just focus, for instance, on surface and proportion and scale, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And the geometry of the canvas, right? What that form is going to be — square, rectangle, horizontal, vertical. Do that for a while, then I come back to furniture. Well, can I — can I accomplish the same objectives, but now I have to bring in another challenge. This piece has to function. It has to work. So it's just — it's sort of like playing with different challenges. That's how it is for me. That's how I see it. And then, you know, you do that for a while and then it's like, Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems as if the paintings always come in series and it's — they're often set on, quote-unquote, a "problem" or a "challenge" that you've set for yourself. It might be a palette, it might be scale, it might be smaller work, it might be longer, horizontal, vertical — but do you set yourself a problem and then —

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Come to develop a series of paintings to look at — to look into that.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And then — I think I told you, I rarely can sample, so it's like the body of work is the — is — that's the sample.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yes.

MR. BYERS: I just — you know. And I tried to do some different things. But yes, typically I — you know, I might say this — all this work is going to be horizontal or vertical. And set that as a parameter. And then, you know, I can get halfway through and think, Jesus, man, you know, I should have done all this, you know, sideways — [they laugh] — or something. But what I find is every time I do these samples that — it's like we talked about doing two dozen drawings of the same — even if I did 2,000 drawings or two — I'm sorry — two dozen drawings of the same image, they're not all going to be the same.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So it's kind of just — you got to — it's just — for me I just want to get and get started and do it. And I don't think there's any time I've ever made anything that I haven't stood back and known that I could have done it differently.

MS. RIEDEL: Where do the ideas from the work come from? Does one piece suggest the next or how are they generated?

MR. BYERS: Yes they do, yeah, absolutely. Yes — because I do so little drawing. You know, I start with a sketch and I have a — I have an idea. And typically when I do draw — if I do — if I do have — if I am getting ready for, like, a solo exhibition, for instance, and I take a *New York Times* — it's like a Sunday Times — I haven't recycled it yet — and that's my drawing paper with a couple of Sharpies. And I'll sit down for a couple hours — that's about all I can do. And then I leave and I'll come back to it. I can't sit and draw for that long.

A couple hours and I just — I just thumbnail on the paper. And if something looks halfway decent, I'll rip that piece off and keep it. And inevitably I will go through, like, this paper and it'd get — I recycle all of them. I just throw all the thumbnails out into the recycling bin. And then I — hopefully, there's some things in there that were worth saving. And then I might redraw them a couple times to sort of refine it. And then it's — sometimes I might even stick it in a — in a — it's funny. I used to stick them into, like, a formal sketch pad. And then I just never go back to the sketch pad.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: I'd end up just sitting down and drawing again.

MS. RIEDEL: So you never revisit something that you put in there five years ago —

MR. BYERS: Rarely.

MS. RIEDEL: — to think maybe it would — maybe it would generate a new idea?

MR. BYERS: Rarely.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Okay. Interesting.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it's very rare. I mean, I haven't — yeah, I haven't looked — I do have a sketch pad. I keep buying them and I keep thinking I'm going to get — [laughs] — get it together. And I draw on them for like a — you know, I have, like, four or five pages. And then that's it. Then they go on the shelf. And then you know, a couple years later I'm like, oh god, I'm really — you know, I've got to start doing more drawings. And the same thing happens again. [They laugh.]

It's just — the whole newspaper thing works — it frees me up. The minute I get to a sketchpad I'm, like, uptight — like, the drawings have to be good or they have to — like, wow, this is really got to be important now because it's going in a binded book.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. That blank white sheet of paper.

MR. BYERS: Yes. It's intimidating to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So — and my sketches are pretty — man, they're really loose. Actually, that was — I remember seeing sketches by — I think it was first by Sottsass. And it just — it made my day. Like, this guy could do drawings that would be considered so horrible and they're publishing them. And I would look at them and I thought they were brilliant, but coming from my background it was like, you know, I'm not allowed to draw that way.

And now it's almost like being kids, right? They go to — there was this great short film about a little kid who — he used to draw all the time and then he goes to a new school and the teacher just keeps, like, watching over him drawing a flower and telling him he's drawing the flower wrong. I forget what — that was a really great short film

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'd love to — if you remember the name, let me know. We'll put it in.

MR. BYERS: I bet John Belt knows it because I think I showed it to his class one day.

MS. RIEDEL: Probably figure it out.

MR. BYERS: But yeah, typically I start working on pieces and once it become — I get into the three-dimensional part, I start just looking at the forms and shapes, and that inspires me to make, you know. And in the pieces I've shown you today —

MS. RIEDEL: The JEB JONES pieces?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I was doing the drum tables and that's — just as I was making them I saw the spools inside the drum tables.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So one form suggests another.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What about the surfaces — the painted surfaces, is that true too? One surface will suggest the next?

MR. BYERS: Yes, pretty much. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: The form as well, I imagine, would influence the surface pattern.

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah. Yes, I mean, some pieces, it's just — it just seems right, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Just we've come full circle, which is just fine. Before we totally leave influences, is there anybody we haven't mentioned that we should have? We talked about Wendell Castle. Sam Maloof? Nakashima at all?

MR. BYERS: You know, I have respect for all those guys, but aesthetically the work doesn't — you know, doesn't do it for me. I mean, the thing that — that's — the influence those guys would have on somebody like me, is that they were committed to their practice, and I'm sure they went to work every day — just about every day of the week, you know? They were their work. Their lives — it was their lives' work. So —

MS. RIEDEL: Actually one thing I would like to address is, more specifically, the whole concept of imperfection and wabi-sabi.

MR. BYERS: Yes, but wabi-sabi — [laughs] — is a new word for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

So how do you want to address it?

MS. RIEDEL: Well, when did you first — did you ever — when did you become consciously aware of just that beauty of imperfection or the consistency of — the consistently inconsistent? When did that surface to you consciously? And then, is it something that you've gone on to consciously cultivate, or is it something you've just paid attention to over time, revisited to see how it's developing?

MR. BYERS: Well, I've always liked vintage, you know, just my own — my own aesthetic is in objects. So I like rustic — you know, in America, wabi-sabi is rustic, essentially, right?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And —

MS. RIEDEL: I know Michael Hurwitz had gone to Japan in the late '80s, and did that whole concept of wabi-sabi come up at all then?

MR. BYERS: No —

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. BYERS: — because wabi-sabi is — it's a — it's just another — you know, it's a philosophy that — you — I mean, it's — I don't even know if that's a philosophy the Japanese — that part of the Japanese culture Michael even —

MS. RIEDEL: Experienced.

MR. BYERS: — experiences. And then some people's reflection of what imperfection is, is different than someone else's —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. BYERS: — and — but I remember when I was at — I was a first-year at school, maybe a second-year, and the work I was making at school was this very sort of precarious asymmetrical geometric pieces —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — you know, flat black, very stoic. They were playful, but — you know what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And I made a little footstool for my mom, and it was really rustic, and I made it for her, and I thought, this is like — this is the most fun I think I've ever had in the woodworking shop. Now I don't know if it was because it was fast, but it was completely different than the student work I was making. And —

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MR. BYERS: Well, for instance, it was — [inaudible] — in texture. It was really — it was really rustic in its — in its character, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: But probably a little bit of a post-mod vibe, which wasn't — isn't my thing. But — it was just — no — or maybe it was just different. But I thought to myself, well, I can't make this kind of stuff, and there were a couple times I went off, trying to go in that direction and then, years later, I tried to sort of bring it in, but I never really figured it — I don't think it ever really worked. But I was just drawn to it. And then when I — when I got into the — [inaudible] —

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a looseness to it that drew you?

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah, absolutely, and then what I found when I started doing the card patterning work that when I was less precise, I liked the results better.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: But I hadn't really — I guess, I mean it is — it is — it is intentional because there were — there would be — you know, some of the very early pieces, if I was to go back and look over it now, you could see how there might be very rigid work in the patterning, and then it'd be looser. And it was just a bad day when it was loose, you know what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: But I really liked it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So then I got the courage up to start doing things — everything, doing it looser, and the more I did that — see, that's a scary thing because then you start to think, well, now I'm — this is imperfect and what's the criticism of that? I'm doing this because I'm not good; I'm at — I'm doing a bad job, because it's the — you're not doing straight lines; you're doing irregularity. So, you know, the — in my background, words like — and maybe there were words that weren't used, but the mindset was — particularly as a guy who also painted his wood — which was, you know, that was

bad — you know, that was bad news.

MS. RIEDEL: Bad to start with, right?

MR. BYERS: Yes. So now I'm embracing lines that are irregular. But in a way, that's soul.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: It's not like this real deliberate and —

MS. RIEDEL: Not at all.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And there was — there was a — you know, one of the — when you get into design and things, one of the discussions is, well, you should — you should always make things — exaggerate things so people know it's intentional. But the sadness about that is that then you lose the subtlety of detail, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So you know, when you're — you — it takes — it took me years to make this work and not feel like I was doing something — [laughs] — that was wrong.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like the milk paint played a role in that too.

MR. BYERS: It was huge, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes, once I embraced the imperfection of milk paint, then — and the quality of how that — the tactical, and how that feels on your hands, yeah, it was easier for me to — and you know what, these — I don't know if these pieces would have ever happened if I hadn't discovered, like, the joy of working with milk paint.

MS. RIEDEL: Because there is inherent imperfection in that material.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And I don't know if these pieces would work with any other — any other paint.

MR. BYERS: They would, but they'd be different — definitely. I mean, finishing is, you know, it's a really important — it's — you know, it's as important as everything else, but — so — but I wish I could remember who it was that sent me that book on wabi-sabi that — the — it was — it was somebody that did a phone interview for me — Ursula Ilse-Newman —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes, of course, sure, yeah.

MR. BYERS: — wrote a — wrote an essay for the John Elder Gallery show —

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. BYERS: — and this person — we talked for a couple hours and then, a couple of days later, she

said she was in a bookstore, stumbled on this book, and thought of me and sent it to me.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, I think I know exactly the book you mean. I've got a copy too; I can't remember the exact title or author, but — yeah.

MR. BYERS: I actually — I actually I bought like a dozen of those, and I sent them to all the people that represented my work. I don't know if they — if they ever thanked me and read 'em. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: You did your part.

MR. BYERS: I did. Yes, I've got that book around here somewhere.

MS. RIEDEL: This — one of the questions on this list is, do you think there's any — does any form of spirituality play a role in your work?

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah, absolutely, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you talk about that a little bit?

MR. BYERS: Well, it comes and goes, you know? It's like there are periods where it's more pronounced than others. There's a real sort of — I have a real — I have these problems when I make work that I set out to solve — these parameters. But, in the end, there's got to be something, whether it's spiritual or it's emotional; I think it's a spiritual relationship to the objects. So there's — there is a couple of different ways in which I can measure and know a piece is successful. And I — you know, I can — I can sometimes live with it; it's just sort of formal —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. BYERS: — it works formally or it works — but it almost always — it has to work formally before it can work spiritually.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So there's a couple of different things that I get from it. And you know, I want all this to sort of have harmony and balance in the way that I live my life, you know, the environment that my work is in — not when it goes to a client, but this — it's all — I'm trying to make this all one big, sort of happy, sort of — with the objects and the way I live my life and that spiritual relationship, the 30-foot commute, you know?

It's easy to be — you know what? It's real easy to get spiritual when you have a lot of time to yourself. Like, I finally figured out, like all the monks —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: — live in isolation, you know? It's a lot easier to be spiritual when you're not stuck in traffic. [They laugh.] You know, you're not going to the grocery store, you know. There's a lot more love and forgiveness, I think, in your heart when you have a — I'm kind of making a joke. So some of it's a joke, but —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: Yes, so spirituality is important to me. But it's not a formal religious —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. And is that part of — is it a part — I'm thinking about how it enters your work: Is it part of a process? Is it part of your physical practice of making the work or how — when you look at a piece, how do you distinguish one that's formally successful and one has — that has a spiritual element that you're — [inaudible] — with?

MR. BYERS: Well, the formal things, whether or not, it satisfied the parameters that I, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — and the 2-D work, it's more of a — it's more of a — I mean, spiritually, in that it's — I don't know what the words are. You just feel it or you don't.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] You have formal sort of harmony or juxtapositions that are successful.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I mean, typically the ones that are just right, I can then sit down and look. But when I get that feeling, I can look at them and know that it's — that I got it right formally too. But sometimes I do get it, and it's — and then I'm — I don't know, something about the 2-D work that's got — I don't know. I got to think about this; now I'm confused.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: It's a — it's a different relationship with the 2-D work than it is with the functional work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Definitely. Yes, I don't know if I get — I don't know if I get so much of a spiritual response to the functional work, but there's definitely the same emotional and spiritual connectedness to the process of making the work.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: It's very similar, the process. I'm using essentially the same tools and, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: I'm using the same paints and the physical — the physical part of making the work is the same. I work the same, you know; the methodology is the same; the discipline of drawing work is the same. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because when we were looking at the — just the Jeb Jones work out in your studio before, I was saying to you that the work is so much different in person than it is in photo, and I think so much of that is its tactile quality, and I think specifically of the edges. And there is something — there's a real, I think, emotional quality to the edges of the functional work somehow, where the — that very satin-like surface meets those hard textural edges, there's a — so when you're saying that it's present in both the functional and the nonfunctional are in the 3-D and the 2-D, I think that one — it — who is seeing your work can have a tactile understanding of that.

MR. BYERS: Well, I think the furniture actually has more of a spiritual — you have a more of a spiritual connection to it —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — when you actually start to use it, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I would think so; I had that exact thought.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And you know, with the 2-D work, you may not go up and rub that. But maybe because of the way it's — because of the way it's presented, you get to see some of that detailing, because the detailing is the — [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: But what I really like about the wall pieces is just the way that they play with light, the relationship to light. I mean, the furnitures does [sic] as well, but particularly the black pieces, you know?

I mean, if you turn the lights down, the relief surfaces, the gouge marks can be either — depending on the lighting, they're either light or they're — that you can — you can — you — they're either recessed or they're pronounced.

MS. RIEDEL: So did those — with the evolution of those pieces, then did light become a more significant part of your thinking process? Or was that always the case?

MR. BYERS: I think I'm just more aware of it now, you know? It's not — I don't think it's part of my — I don't think about light; I want to get into it. But I do think about color, you know, obviously.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: How have your sources of inspiration changed over the years? Or have they been fairly consistent?

MR. BYERS: I think they've been pretty consistent. Yes, but I think — I'm trying to think. They've been pretty consistent.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you see particular similarities or differences between the early work and the current work.

MR. BYERS: Do I see — what was that question again?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: I was thinking — I was thinking about the other question about how — well, those haven't changed it, but I just wanted to say I don't listen to classic rock, like my musical tastes have changed — my musical — [they laugh] — the music I listen to has changed a lot. It's still predominantly rock 'n' roll, but it's — you know, it's more independent music. But that — I'm not listening to classic rock.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, let's talk about your working environment then: When you work, do you normally listen to music?

MR. BYERS: I listen to it from the minute I get — I get it going till the end of the day.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's always rock?

MR. BYERS: I go through periods where I listen — I go through periods where I listen to — I don't know what it's called anymore. It used to be called "country rock." I go back — the old roots for me would be The Birds, old Neil Young, and I go — I go through occasionally, but mostly I listen to rock. Rocky — I mean, I don't know what they — you know, there's so much music now. I mean, it's —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's actually really interesting to think about that, in terms of your work and the paintings in particular, that — you know, that you're listening to music all day long.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Because we've talked — I don't know if we were on — we were taping, but we were talking about dance and choreography and choreographing; I can't remember if it was color or something, but —

MR. BYERS: That's why I'm going deaf. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Between the machinery and the music —

MR. BYERS: Yes, I keep it on. I wear — I wear little earpiece things and —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: — put the headphones over that, the ear protection over that, and — I'm not alone in that, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: Yes, it keeps you moving.

MS. RIEDEL: And also, while we're talking about process and working process, your working environment, you have worked with assistants in the past; then you've gone through a long period of working by yourself; and now you're gearing up to have at least a part-time assistant again.

MR. BYERS: I'm going to — I'm going to — I met a guy who's a student up at Cornell architectural program. And just through happenstance, he — I had some material I wanted to sell off, that I don't use anymore, some — of wood species, and I passed the word around to a couple guys. This guy was looking for exactly that material and gave me a call; came down to buy some wood. And we got talking and he called me up a week later and asked me if I'd interested in bringing him in on — as an apprentice.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: So we've had this discussion now for about six months. He just got back from Rome. He was over there doing a semester through the program; he's still got one more year at school.

So right now, I — the discussion is I'm going to allow him to set up a bench in the shop, and he can use it for one day a week, and we'll see how it goes. And in exchange, he's got to give me eight hours a week, whether it's in the studio or whether it's — whatever, it's going to be — but we'll work together. And then the plan is to go through the summer and see how it goes, and that's as far as I'm willing to go with it right now. And his one day will be on the weekends, so it doesn't interfere —

well, even when I had — even when I had a full-time — a so-called full-time guy, it was four days a week. I had to have — I had to have Wednesdays. I could only take — I mean, he was an amazing employee, but I needed to have one day after two, just by myself. So —

MS. RIEDEL: And how does it affect your working process when there's somebody in the studio?

MR. BYERS: It's a distraction. I mean, it's — when I had friends come and stay, and I'm trying to work — and they're just in the house — it's a distraction. But I do come back and forth, and my sink is my working sink.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. In the kitchen?

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah. When I built the studio I was like, this is how much I have to spend; I mean, it would have been nothing, but I was like, nope, that's more than I'm willing to spend. And if two years from now, I'm living on the street because I put in water, I'll hate — I won't be able to live through that. So I was like, this is all I'm spending. So one day, you'll know, I'll have to spend more because I could have thrown a pipe in with the other ditch — with the other things that ran out there, but that's the way it goes, you know? [Laughs.]

So, yeah, it's a nice sink though.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: That's my — one of my best friend — that's his wife's mother's childhood sink.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: It's an old farmer sink, you know, with the big backsplash.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it's beautiful actually.

MR. BYERS: Isn't it sweet?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes, when I moved in, I pulled out the relatively modern kitchen with the stainless steel sink and put that in.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Wabi-sabi.

MR. BYERS: And the people that — it's funny; the people I bought that from —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: — they had just pulled that out to put in like an identical stainless steel sink that I —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: — that I had given away, yeah. Different strokes.

How are we doing? All right?

MS. RIEDEL: Good, want to take a little break?

MR. BYERS: It's up to you. No, I'm good.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. We've got maybe 20 minutes left on this disc, so —

[Break.]

MR. BYERS: For the record —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, for the record, we're going to actually — you're going to talk about how these pieces are painted and sanded.

MR. BYERS: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: I mean, it's not sanded between every coat.

MR. BYERS: It's — it is not.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And what you have to realize is these — the pieces that were sitting at the table we're standing at are not finished the same — quite the same as the pieces with the — with — how do we describe it?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Those are incised surfaces and painted. These are gouged and painted surfaces.

MS. RIEDEL: And the gouged are far more intricately patterned than; is that the way we can describe it?

MR. BYERS: Yes, maybe. I mean, you could describe it as that. I — to me, these are the gouged surfaces; these are the incised surface[s].

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, and the gouged are much more intensely patterned, in terms of — in terms of sculpting, in terms of 3-D. There's much more — yeah, okay —

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah, yeah; got you.

MS. RIEDEL: — not in terms of painted surface, but in terms of carved surface.

MR. BYERS: These are carved — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: These — and these — these are done with — using what's called a "gouge." These would be used — with a gouge tool, but it's a different tool. What I'm doing is just incising the outline of a geometric shape, all right?

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Whether it's a square or it's — I think I did circles or stars on the balls or triangles —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — where this has more of like a cobblestone —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That's a good description?

MR. BYERS: — for quality too. Is that a good description?

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Okay. So these pieces, the outlines of the patterns are incised with a V- groove gouge. And then each individual — in this case, let's — well, let's — whether it's a square or whatever it is, we've already said that, the inside surface — each of those shapes that makes up the pattern — each of those shapes has to be hand-painted individually with six to seven coats —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: — to build up the layers of paint before I can aggressively come back and sand it —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — to get the surface that I want. In some cases, you have to — throughout the series of applying this paint, it gets — it gets lumpy; it gets chunky. There's a hair brush in there — brush hair in there — sometimes you do come back and you break off, like, at the hard tooth of a service, but you don't want to polish it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And in fact, you don't really want to sand it with anything more than a hundred grit. Typically, we'd just use 80 grit. Just as with the surface of a wood, you know, all the sanding in these pieces is done after it's painted, where, with the wood that we're painting, I'm not sanding that material more than 80 grit before I start doing the painting and that's not because I'm lazy — [laughs] — and when I first did this —

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. BYERS: — I didn't know; I sanded everything to 220 like it was finished. And what I found was I was actually hurting the bond between the wood and the paint.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So 80 grid allows a really wonderful tooth for the paint to — you know, to —

MS. RIEDEL: So it can really adhere, yes.

MR. BYERS: So in some cases, I do sand maybe, but it's not the same kind of sanding. The real sanding comes after all the paint is applied, okay?

MS. RIEDEL: So we've clarified that.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And you're mixing this paint all by hand, and it's — so I'm measuring it all visually and by

the feel of the viscosity with a brush, with paint in a cup. I'm not — I never measure it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I do it all: I pour water in, I keep putting in paint until I get the right viscosity —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: — add a little more water. That's the way I do it.

MS. RIEDEL: And then are they all finished with the same material?

MR. BYERS: I'm confused.

MS. RIEDEL: We were talking about the Jeb Jones pieces out there, that you said you apply a finishing coat to the paint.

MR. BYERS: Oh, there's — so there's different — after you've done all that and you have to do all this — we're talking about the sanding process — once that's been sanded to where I want it to be — in this case and — well, actually in case of all the incised pieces — I then put down what's a black wash, which is why you see the black lines —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — that fill in the incised surface, and that's brushed on — that's really watered down — it's a wash of — in this case, it's a black, you know, paint. And I lay that down, try to wipe some off with rags —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yeah.

MR. BYERS: And then, after that's all done, I come back with a damp rag, try to wipe up as much of the black wash, and that black wash also then gets into the surface of the primary paint that I've already applied. That's where you get that nice black depth; it's coming from the black wash —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — Okay? Then I re-sand. Then I have to sand again. So there are two significant sanding processes that go on purely by hand.

MS. RIEDEL: On the incised pieces?

MR. BYERS: Yes, I'm at, like, the — yeah, yeah. These pieces, again, like the wood would be the 80 grit, all the carving would be done, and then I essentially paint — well, I did it with these as well. I would first put down two coats of what I call a base color. These are made out of a — out of a mahogany, but because there's variation in the — in the material in itself — sometimes there's lighter color — to even out that tone or maybe to — because sometimes what you could come up with is you could have a lighter piece of mahogany here and a dark piece here and, as you sand through, you start to get a variation.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: It can almost look like a stripe. So you even that out. What I do is I even it out by mixing two colors together to come up with a really dark mahogany — similar mahogany reddish brown,

and I lay down two coats of that over the entire surface —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: — and I even one put coat into the grooves or the gouge marks. That gets lightly sanded. You have to come through and clean out any of this surface area, that maybe you got gunk in there, right? Then I put down five coats — in this case, the mustard — the top coats, and I try to — again, I'll do one coat in this — in the grooves, but that's it. Then this gets — the flat surface gets all sanded and polished and, even though when I sand that through, I'm hitting the mahogany, because I've laid down this burned red — it doesn't have the same — it seems to disguise any variations and that this color from the materials that would glue it up to create the mass for the form of the top. Am I making — am I making sense?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely.

MR. BYERS: Okay, so then, once, in this case, the mustard is all sanded, and I say "polished," meaning it's been sanded to 280 grit; I've steel-wooled it; I've made it very smooth.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, and so it's — [inaudible].

MR. BYERS: I then come back and apply the second color —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And that's done, not with a big paintbrush, but it's done actually with a stencil brush, a round stencil brush, because then I can — I can really drive it into the gouges to fill this up, and typically that can be two or three coats. If you put it in too thick, it gets too crackly.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: There's sort of a fine line between what's, you know, what's imperfect and then what's just bad work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [They laugh.]

MR. BYERS: You know, there is — you know what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So — yeah, and there is too perfect — [laughs] —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: — too perfectly imperfect.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So once — and that's sort of applied in — again, and you get a feel for — you've mixed up this paint, you brush it in, then you try to wipe off as much of the top surface; that's done with a cork block and paper towels. Then once you've got this to where you're satisfied, which is, again, two or three coats, come back, polish the surface again because now you've got all this whitewash that's all over the mustard —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: — but it comes off pretty easily.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Then, individually go in and sand each of these to clean that up. And then what you do is — what's really kind of cool is when you do sand this and polish it — and you don't go the whole way when you do the mustard because you — what's going to happen is once you do all the whitewash, you've got to take that off. That's when you really get to sort of set the tone of how far you're going to go with it. So you'll sand for a while and then you'll step back and look, to sort of see how aggressively you're going through here as opposed to here —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — and whether that's going to be consistent.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Because sandpaper — you know, you've applied this paint. It's not going on the same thickness on every surface.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You've mixed up different thicknesses of paint, you've put it on at different times of the day, this part might have to be a little thinner than this part.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: If you're using the sandpaper, the sandpaper breaks down —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — so you're not as aggressively sanding here, even if you're putting as much elbow grease, you're not going to take as much up.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So you can't just go in there with your eyes closed.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You have to keep standing back and visually seeing how much you're taking off. Then once that's done, and you've satisfied these — this — these edges, I have another little tool, the same — similar tool to what I sand these to, I actually come through and break all these edges with this other sanding tool.

MS. RIEDEL: All the gouging edges?

MR. BYERS: Yes, well, there's — see, this is like the incised — this is the same V groove —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: — that's used to create the

[Audio break.]

MR. BYERS: [In progress] — these patterns.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And then this is the gouge that I use. So they're — they're two different tools.

MS. RIEDEL: So one's warp, one's weft — basic idea, yeah?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's — [inaudible].

MR. BYERS: And then — and then, when you're satisfied with all that, then you need to protect it. The milk paint is this — I can't — other than, like, these catalyzed — I'm sure there's automobile finishes and catalyzed lacquers that are unbelievably hard. But as far as, like, a healthy, you know — they're labor-intensive, but a very healthy paint, because nothing beats milk paint.

And if you're ever had the nonjoy of, like, refinishing an old antique piece of furniture that was painted with milk paint, you'll never forget it for the rest of your life. If you bring up milk paint to somebody who tried to, like, strip an old-milk painted piece, they'll be, like, "Oh my god, that stuff's crazy."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: Like, they all — they'd never — it's so — it sticks. It's so wonderful, you know. I swear to god, it happens all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: And that's how they know it. That's how they remember milk paint. It's very funny. It's this universal — it's this universal recall that they have.

So then you have to topcoat it. And you get to decide what you're going to protect this from getting water spotted. So I've experimented with a lot of different types of finishes: varnishes, different lacquers, and — but what I'm using now, with the new collection of furniture that I've created, is a water-based — it's a water-based lacquer that's designed by the same manufacturers of people to produce the milk paint that I buy.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah. Perfect.

MR. BYERS: And it's — once it's hard, it's a VOC-free.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes. You can eat — you can eat the finish, I guess, after it's hard. So milk paint and the finish I'm now top-coating, it's — they're both completely VOC once they harden. And I'm sure milk paint is VOC-free before it's hardened. But —

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Was that important to you from the start?

MR. BYERS: No. No. I mean, I — with what I'm doing now, with — I mean, that's the direction I want to go with. And what happened was, for a long time, these pieces were so — the pieces I was making, up until, like, say 2008, you know, when I took a break from furniture after that show and — back then, I experimented — I wanted to do [ph] a piece and used a gel varnish. I might lacquer it. But I wasn't around it a lot because it might be one day out of the month, I had to do top-coating — finishing. And I was never really happy with the solvent experience. And I'd go try something else.

And then — and then when I decided to create a collection of pieces that are — that are — you know, they're less labor-intensive. You're going to go from beginning to the top-coating part in the process maybe daily. Now, I'm exposed to this stuff, or anyone who helps me is exposed to this. And I don't want to be around it. I mean, I've — I never — I didn't have the allergies I have today because — just around the materials. You know, when it finally starts, your body can only take so much. It's nasty stuff and — so it's not just that I'm environmentally conscious for others; it's about — again, it's the quality of life, and do you want to be around that? I don't want to be around that. You don't want to be around that.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. BYERS: And what's nice is that you actually will get — you could get this — you could buy one of these pieces or have one of these pieces. And it's not going to off gas on you.

When I was at the ICFF [International Contemporary Furniture Fair], I went up to a couple pieces of furniture of my neighbors. And man, it was, like, I opened up the door and it was — it was just bam. So —

It's important to me now. I mean, there's a — it's a huge compromise, because the type of finish, it's not as easy to use. It's not as sweet. Nothing's sweeter than a — like, a nitrocellulose lacquer finish is easy; it's beautiful, you know. But, you know, those are the compromises you have to make, so —

And then once — and even when I was — in that case, I made lots of samples of what the topcoat finish — what I going to topcoat these pieces. It was really hard because the — because solvent base finishes are just — they're nicer-looking.

But they are for me. It's so obvious, the difference. But I would' show those to other people that didn't have the same, like, visual sensitivity to the finishes, and it was really hard for them to tell the difference.

And now that I've put away the samples of *The Night for Silos* [ph], I'm really starting to see, like, a beauty in the finish of the new healthy friendly finish.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll talk about the JEB JONES work, I think, but I'll change this card first.

MR. BYERS: Okay. You want to eat lunch or something?

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with John Eric Byers in his home and studio in Newfield, New York, on June 14, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, card number four. I'll start off this final part of the conversation with a question about university-trained artists, and the difference between an artist that's learned to make art through university training and one that may have learned on his own, or her own.

MR. BYERS: Well, I can't — I don't really know how to speak to it, because I went to a school, but it wasn't university training. But I went to a two-year school that was —

MS. RIEDEL: You had industrial design at Oswego, yeah?

MR. BYERS: It was actually industrial arts.

MS. RIEDEL: Industrial arts, okay.

MR. BYERS: But I don't know if I really learned anything in industrial arts that I would say — other than the experience I had with my design teacher — that actually, any technical skills that translated themselves very well into the world I'm in now.

But my feeling about this discussion between, you know, the self-taught or the school-taught is the day after you leave school, or the day you leave school, you're self-taught. I mean, the things I'm doing, the techniques I'm using — that I've been using now for years — no one taught me this in school. So I mean, it's taught through a community of reading, talking to other people, you know, and solving problems.

But, you know, nobody was doing the work that I've been doing at school. So you learn how to use hand planes and tools.

MS. RIEDEL: Basic skills are established, right?

MR. BYERS: Basic skills, yeah. And I think it's — I mean, I think if you say, "Okay, this is going to — I'm going to go to school for two years. I'm going to have this block of time" — I think that, for instance, if we're talking about learning skills as a crafts artist, you know, I think you accelerate it just because now you get to give it your undivided attention.

You know, and you pay a heavy price for that financially, typically. Particularly now, it's unbelievable the amounts of money people pay. So I think you can accelerate learning the fundamental, basic skills. So that's probably a plus.

And I think that there's all these other — you know, if you go to school, and depending on where you go to school, the environment that the school is in — there's all these variables that you're going to experience that you wouldn't be if you're, you know, locked up in your studio by yourself, you reading, reading a manual, and then — you know what I mean?

So I think there's a lot of advantages to it. But I don't think that you could say, "This person is going to have this outcome because of this, and this person's going to have this outcome because of this." It's going to — it's all going to come down to the individual, and what they do when they've got these basic fundamentals, if that's, sort of, what you're comparing. You know?

MS. RIEDEL: And it's interesting, because you, once you were done with school, really have spent a lot of your time working alone in your studio.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And there wasn't necessarily a big teaching community. There wasn't necessarily the art-school community that we've talked about. I mean, Penland or Haystack. And you intentionally chose not to teach. So a lot of your work since graduating from Wendell Castle School, in a lot of ways, was self-taught.

MR. BYERS: Well, there was — I was in Philadelphia. You know, I did work for Bob Ingram. Briefly, I did a little — a few things, a few tasks for Michael Hurwitz. I learned. You know, I learned every time I did something for somebody, whether I, you know, I learned that I did it the right way or I learned I was doing it the wrong way. You know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And usually, when you do it the wrong way, you learn a lot more than when you do it the right way. But when I was in Philadelphia — up until I moved here — I was always in a building, renting space in a building with other people working, making things, furniture, and working with their hands. So there's discussions about just about everything — machinery, technique.

I mean, when I got to — when I got to Portland — I probably learned a lot more in Philadelphia from the guys around me, because it was — it was a tighter community. When I got to Portland, I had a much bigger space. I had all my own equipment. I didn't have to borrow other people's equipment anymore. You know, I'd gotten to a point where I had the luxury of having my own space and working more by myself.

And I think, probably, then, I learned a lot more on my own.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Because in Philly there were a number of guys that were doing speculative work and exhibiting in galleries. You know, and they were — you know, I looked at them, and they were really inspiring to me. And that would be, you know, Peter Pierobon, Jack Larimore, Bob Ingram. And those guys are all a few, if not more, years older than I was.

And they all — they were all generous with their time and information. You know what I mean? But yeah, Portland, I think, is when I really — yeah, Portland is when I really became self-taught in that sense —

MS. RIEDEL: So then —

MR. BYERS: — depending on how you look at it.

MS. RIEDEL: When you think about whether there was a community that was important to your development as an artist, would you point to that time in Philadelphia?

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes, I used to say Philadelphia was my formative years. I spent those in Philadelphia.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: And Philadelphia is a great city, too, for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Why?

MR. BYERS: Well, Rochester always seemed like a very cynical, sarcastic, and kind of uptight place. And Philadelphia, it can be all those things, but they're going to tell it straight to your face.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: It's more out in the open, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: So I didn't like — and eventually, I got tired of the crime and the other things about being in a city. It wasn't where I wanted to spend the rest of my life. But yeah, it was a great experience, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: So the Wendell Castle School, would you consider that a community as well? Or that was really, pretty much, a school environment, and community-wise would be Philly and — that's about it?

MR. BYERS: Well, I've always — I've always been kind of — you know, I've always kind of, sort of, been on — you know, I've had friends, but I've always been — I've never been much of a community guy. But yeah, there was a community at school. But I don't have the same memories. I have memories — you know, I learned a lot from the faculty at school, and in Philadelphia I wasn't learning from faculty. I was learning from other makers, and that's different.

But Wendell and Stephen and Hugh Scriven, they were makers. So I don't think I learned a lot from my fellow classmates at school, other than I was just astonished by all these great ideas they came up with. And it was just — it just seemed so competitive. Like, everybody was so good, you know? And then you had Wendell Castle. It's like, well, how you going to top that? So my thing was, like, I'm going to have to work my ass off.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about your travel —

MR. BYERS: Sorry about the profanity. That's not good, is it?

MS. RIEDEL: You're actually in very good company. Let's talk about the travels that have had an impact on your work. They're not necessarily trips, but actual relocations, and how that has affected your work. So the first one was from —

MR. BYERS: Rochester.

MS. RIEDEL: — Rochester to Philadelphia, and that was '87, '86?

MR. BYERS: '87, that was '87. You know, different environment. I mean, each environment — I think that there's, I mean, there's always going to be influences by the work that you see, the people that are working. You know, they share their philosophies with you. So the transition — but it was — I was so young, you know? I was just getting started.

So it would make sense that I would end up in another environment — that early on, I would start questioning what I was doing. So that had an impact. But when I moved to — I think it was — the more pronounced impact was when I moved, the other two moves, when I moved to Portland.

MS. RIEDEL: That was '94.

MR. BYERS: You know, the difference was — you know, I'd made this student work. And when I went to Philly, I continued to make pieces in that vocabulary, though I explored other kinds of finishes, some different materials, but still, overall, the basic aesthetic lingered for a couple years. And then it got into the *Thelma and Louise* work.

Then, when I moved to Portland, I said, "I'm done. I'm not going to do it anymore. I've taken it as far as it can go." And sometimes — and I started to get a lot more into color when I got into Portland,

and pattern. And I think there's — we were talking about light earlier — there are so many differences in light where you live. And in Portland, you — I don't know if it was the lack of light there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Right? But I really think it was the quality of the light there that made a difference in how I started to think about color.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: I don't know if — you know, that's — and then when I made the transition from Portland to here — and looking to leave Portland, where were we going to go? So we looked at a lot of different places. And it was — we were either going to move into a place with snow or with sand. We were looking at the desert.

Actually, my preference was this place called La Grande, Oregon, which is nowhere, in eastern Oregon. But we chose to come back here for — there were, you know, a handful of reasons, and it made a lot more sense. And I think that, you know, looking at snow, looking at desert, it had an effect on my palette.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you say more about that?

MR. BYERS: So I made that — I moved here, I decided that I was going to — and again, it also becomes these, sort of, like — it's like creating a problem. Can you solve that? Okay, if I change up — if I abandon all this type of pattern, all this color, will the work be — how will it hold up as I started to strip things down? So I don't know if it's just coincidence, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: So then it sounds as if your environment really affects your work.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it has to. I mean, how can it not? I mean, for me, I can't imagine it not. So I'm thinking maybe I need to move again.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Where next?

MR. BYERS: Not staying here.

MS. RIEDEL: So then, I'm trying to think of — when you were moving from Portland back here, you said you were looking for a place with snow or sand. Were you looking for a quality of light? What were you looking for?

MR. BYERS: No, we were looking at real estate. And it was up to Kay. And what I wanted at that point was, I wanted to get out of Portland. I didn't want to live in a small, little house in a neighborhood. I wanted to be — I wanted space.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And I wanted a house where I could build my own studio, and I could have as much, you know, lots of space. So we started looking at real estate, and we talked about moving — you know, where are we going to go? So it seemed like it was either going to be the desert or it was going to be back around here, which — you know, I mean, it's beautifully lush here — but the snow, you know, is a big part of it here.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. BYERS: But it just might be a coincidence, because now it's — you know, 2001. It's a decade later and I'm making transitions again.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. BYERS: And I'm revisiting, you know, some of the vocabulary that I played with in the past.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And it seems like that does happen periodically, that there is a cyclical nature to that — to your work.

MR. BYERS: Yes, it's like — it's sort of like that with life, isn't it? You know, record players and —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Exactly.

MR. BYERS: — you know what I mean? Things —

MS. RIEDEL: I do want to talk about the — in 2006, there was that massive, two-tier sideboard, which felt like one of the most massive, complex pieces you'd done. And then things got very simple. I'm thinking of, you know, the JEB-like wall installations the next year. So what provoked that switch to those very simple wall installations?

MR. BYERS: Just reduction, you know? Trying to simplify things. I mean, I've always thought — I've always thought that the greatest challenge is to make — would be to make, like, the perfect block, the perfect cube.

MS. RIEDEL: That's sort of what we were looking at there in the Jeb Jones work, yeah?

MR. BYERS: It's more like that. To me, that is — that, to me, is the biggest challenge, because you can't hide with something like that. You might bore the shit out of somebody with it, but you know, so be it.

MS. RIEDEL: Because it's just distilled down to form and proportion and scale?

MR. BYERS: Yes, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Pure form, again. And surface, to some degree, but not so much color.

MR. BYERS: Well, yeah. I mean, the size of — the proportion and scale of the form is going to affect — you know, and then, again, materials or colors. The light's going to — you know, it's going to be — it's going to affect it. It's going to have a big relationship between those things, or in the environment. But it was all about, pretty much, just trying to see if I could now start to reduce things to just keep it simpler.

You know, my life has become a lot simpler. And where I am now — you know, you brought up the Jeb Jones things. It's gotten simpler still. But it wasn't a labor — it wasn't a decision as to reduce labor, because as I eliminated, you know, certain elements, like legs — and I even went, eventually, I went from pedestals to the wall-hang cabinets. You know, that's when I even spent more time on the interiors of the pieces. You know?

MS. RIEDEL: No getting away from it.

MR. BYERS: No, but it was cool. You know, I mean, whether those pieces are successful or not isn't — I mean, that — I hope I can look back on them, and the people that own them, they feel good about them. But I think the most important thing for me is that I decided that was something I, you know, I just wanted to do. I needed to do it. And then I had the courage to do it.

MS. RIEDEL: The JEB JONES — [inaudible] — work.

MR. BYERS: No, no, no. I'm sorry. I'm still talking about the — well, all this work.

MS. RIEDEL: You're doing — yes, about the —

MR. BYERS: You're just talking about the white pieces that —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, the white and black installations.

MR. BYERS: Well, it's the same with — it's the same with the new, the JEB JONES collection, you know, which was created for a lot of reasons, because of problems I've had with my shoulders. And they're not as labor-intensive. It was also — it's turned out to be a fantastic opportunity to actually distill the work even more. And there was something else. I can't remember what it was. I'll come back to it. But yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you — are there particular commissions that you feel were significant, that were especially important to you over time? Have you done many commissions?

MR. BYERS: Well, the really important one was the piano, the Steinway piano.

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about that. We haven't talked about that at all. That was done in 2000?

MR. BYERS: I worked on it in 2001. I think — they've dated it — I think it's dated 2002, maybe. I get confused because it was — no, actually, it was — I worked on it in 2003 and I think it finally went public in 2003.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: After I finished my work, I sent it to them, and then they do their part of the deal — which is to do the interior casing, drop the guts in, you know. They laid up the rim for me, provided me with a bunch of materials, did the lid for me. But then once I get that, I did all the — of course, I do all the surfacing work.

The process really started in 2001, where — I can't remember if they first flew out to my studio and visited me to see some work. And I had just started to transition into the white pieces and — the mustard and white pieces. And then I submitted them, I think, two or three design options. And I think there were two that they liked, and then I chose the one that we ended up making. It was even the simpler of the — it was the simplest of the three.

And I came out to their — I did the tour — the Steinway tour in 2001.

MS. RIEDEL: And where was that?

MR. BYERS: It's in Queens.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: Yes. On Steinway Boulevard, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: It's an — if you ever get a chance to do it, it's pretty cool.

MS. RIEDEL: Is it?

MR. BYERS: It's really amazing, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: I think there's a film about how the pianos are made. Something like that. My physical therapist was telling me he just saw it — said how amazing it was.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. That would be interesting.

MR. BYERS: Yes. And he could sort of empathize more with why maybe — because he saw these guys doing the repetitive, like, chiseling work. So he could understand now why maybe I was a little beat up.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: So that — so I didn't get started on it until I made the move — you know, closed my studio there, moved here, had the shop built in the fall of 2001, took a couple months and then went to work. And then, I think, in 2002 — yeah, 2002 at one point I finally received the rim, which was — had a couple of extra — well, the two final laminations were in mahogany, which isn't stock. It would have been maple.

And then in their case they either take the maple and they lacquer it — I think I have this correct — and — or they're going to give the veneer finish, right? They're going to veneer it with some, you know, beautiful species of wood. But that's very thin. So they ended up giving me the rim with, like, quarter-inch thick mahogany so I could carve into that.

MS. RIEDEL: Perfect.

MR. BYERS: And the lid was also done in mahogany. And then I did all the small detailing changes on the lid. I flushed it off; I shaped the actual back arm area of the piano. I think I — I either made or modified their existing music stand. Basically, I did everything but the rim and the lid, you know? And then I added my surfacing to everything. So I did build the legs, did the stools, the *Duet Stools* that I made instead of a bench. And I even hammered and patina-ed, I think, the foot pedals.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: But I did send — I did send out, I think, the rest of the brass. I hired somebody to do the rest of the patina work on the brass. It was something — it matched the patina that I still use today with brass. But the quality of the brass — it had so many variations in the different — you know, these hinges didn't match the quality of the brass, you know, in the foot petals or — I don't think that's the right words anymore.

They gave — it was great. They gave me this big map. I had this — I think I still have it — big map with the nomenclature of all the piano parts so when I called them and we were talking on the

phone, you know, I knew what the hell — you know, I could tell — I could call these things by the right names.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So when I finished all my work — and then a couple of times they came up to visit and see how things were progressing. I sent every — they had a shipper come up and take everything down and they put the keys in it and the guts in it. And it's cool; they have a room there where you can — there's all these pianos and there's like two or three soundproofed booths. And you see these guys in there tuning.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Wow. And so then does that — did that piano become part of their permanent collection? Does it — is it available for sale? How does that work?

MR. BYERS: It's available for sale. It's part of — it goes in — like, historically it's part of the Art Case Piano Collection. And my understanding is Steinway has collaborated with artists and designers and craftspeople over — you know, over a hundred years they've done this. And then, yeah, they debut it at some annual music fair out in L.A. And then it's up for sale. And it went to some exhibitions. It traveled to different exhibitions. And it's now in a Manhattan apartment.

MS. RIEDEL: So it sold?

MR. BYERS: It sold, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fantastic.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: How do you decide which commissions to accept and which not to?

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.] Well, you take just about every commission you can get.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you? Okay.

MR. BYERS: But — no. It's — I get — I get — last commission I did was I actually got commissioned to do an accompanying — like a bench for the client that bought the piano.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: She had a bench she wanted put in the window by the piano. And this is before I just had this third operation, but I did that piece. It was about a year and a half ago or something like that. And that's when I realized I'm not going to make this — I can't make this work anymore. It was just too hard on me. I just can't do it.

So that was the last commission I've had. And I think I told you, I'm — it's amazing if I get one commission a year. So my income is almost always just on speculative — you know, on gallery sales.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: That's how it's pretty much been. There was a time when I was — when I started out — you know, there was a certain point where I did commission work that didn't make me really happy but it paid the bills. It would be some variation — you know, we discussed that — it would be a version of another — a piece that I made in a show. They wanted the same piece but, like, three

inches longer. You know, that's just the way it rolls.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So you get used to that. There was a — there was a time when — I remember one time I had a gallery contact me and they go — so we have — we — I think it was for end tables. And so they asked me if I could — I'd submit a sketch. And I sent them a sketch of — the work was kind of making a transition. So I sent them a sketch as the work was — the work that I wanted to make. And they got back to me.

They go, "You know, we're not really that — client's really not that crazy — but this is what they would like." And they kind of did this. And I remember having these discussions in school where you have to really careful when you present drawings to clients because if you submit — like, if the designs are really different, they'll start to take, like, leg from — right, drawing one and knobs from drawing three —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So it was — it was all happening, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: But I had — didn't even send them three drawings. I sent them one drawing. Gallery got back with their own drawing. [They laugh.] And it's exactly what it was. It was like — it was like elements from four different pieces. And I said, "I'm not doing it. No way."

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. BYERS: I have this other idea, let me submit another idea to you. They said, "Okay. Really, you're not going to do it?" You know, that was really — "and let me send you" — I sent them the first drawing again. And the clients — "Oh, John, it's great. The client's loved it."

MS. RIEDEL: True story?

MR. BYERS: True story.

MS. RIEDEL: Amazing.

MR. BYERS: So I ended up with the commission, yeah. I don't know if they ever submit — even submitted the first drawing — if they actually even showed it to the client. And that's a true story.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. BYERS: I don't know what it is, man. It's just — it's —

MS. RIEDEL: How odd.

MR. BYERS: Let me just say that's some kooky stuff. [They laugh.] Yes, it's — but for me the big thing was that, you know, because we've discussed the challenges of making a living, so for me to say, you know what, I'm not doing that. That was a good moment for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Are — is there — are — have there been any commissions that have come your way that have presented interesting challenges or opportunities that you might not have considered

otherwise?

MR. BYERS: Well, the piano was a — was just — it was a — it was the longest piece — longest, hardest piece I've ever worked on, physically, because I was working alone. I would move that rim around by myself. And I'd put rigid foam down — like insulation foam — so I could actually flip it around and drag it around. And I'd have to get it in these really — because I carved the whole inside of the exposed rim as well as the outside. So to get rim, you know, in position clamped to a bench was really — that was challenging physically.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I would think.

MR. BYERS: And then there was so much surface that it was really challenging on my hands. That was the first time my hands really started — you see my shoulder's hurting just talking about it. It's something.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: And you know, it was — it was — it blew my mind that they were interesting in having me do this piece, and having — you know, my mentor having done pianos and thinking, like, you know, wow. This is — it was a little intimidating. But it all worked out.

MS. RIEDEL: And that commission came about, you said, through a publicist — is that correct — that you had for a brief while?

MR. BYERS: Yes — Mike Venema was a — was a publicist that saw an ad of my work at the Tercera Gallery and approached Tercera Gallery to represent me — and for a brief while represented the gallery and me. And then that didn't last for very long. But then Mike and I worked out an arrangement. And, you know, fortunately in my case it was all barter. And he subsequently — what he — in the end — and he — his publicity helped to generate sales.

MS. RIEDEL: Of the piano — helped to generate those sales?

MR. BYERS: No, not the piano.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. BYERS: He — basically what he became was a guy who made phone calls for me. So if I was interested in — I thought a gallery would be suitable gallery for me, rather than me having to make an introduction, which was something that was really hard for me to do. It's still a challenging thing for me to do. I mean, email makes that a lot easier for me now. But he would pick up the phone and make a call. And I'd find out that day. He would get — he would talk to the people that ran the gallery.

I mean, it was — and he put my work in some interesting places that I don't think without his assistance — well, I never would have picked up the phone, you know? Some of those galleries didn't in the end sell any work, but it was some of the work — for a while I ended up in a couple glass galleries to see how that worked. They were flirting with that and I don't think it really, like, worked out very well. Not just for me but for some of the other furniture-making guys.

But — no, but in the end, I mean, he had things published and then pieces sold as a result of that. And then so I would think that his commission was about 25 percent.

MS. RIEDEL: But that was in material — in barter?

MR. BYERS: Yes, it was all in barter.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: But if you looked at — it was — barter was basically like a monthly rate to my — to sort of — based on like a monthly — a monthly number. So in the end I did make him a piece. But — because there were a couple instances where I sold some work in a city where I had gallery representation. So I spoke to my — I would call my dealer and I'd say, listen, I've got — I'm selling this piece to this person. I've encouraged them to come into your gallery. But I'm not going to give you 50 percent. I'm going to give you 25 percent because the ad was placed by this — was in there because of this publicist and in the end I'm going to have to repay him.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: So that's the way it goes. And nobody had an argument with that. So —

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like you've really, from necessity, come up with some innovative business plans.

MR. BYERS: Just thinking on my feet. [They laugh.]

But Mike — you know, Mike came to me. I mean — I mean, what that — the real lesson I learned about that, besides all the really interesting things he told me about clients, but — is the assumptions that we all make — we were talking about this — the assumptions of appearance. So people that now knew that I had this publicist thought that I was much more financially successful than I was. And Mike was interested in my work because he saw a full-page ad that a gallery ran for me. He thought that I was much more financially successful than I was.

So when he and I first met, he came to Portland — I think he was living in — yeah, he was in L.A. at the time. He came to Portland; he actually came with the gallery that was representing me. And they came to the studio and I took Mike, the dealer and my wife — I took them out to dim sum — this Chinese place. And what [ph] was cool is, we all fit in the front seat of my Chevy pickup, my '66 — that's how big they were. You could get four people in the front seat comfortably.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. BYERS: So we went and then afterwards we went back to my house for some beer and these guys were cigar guys — that whole cigar thing was happening — so we went back to my place. And so the four of us went out in the back yard. So that we — all four of us would have chairs to sit on, I had to take the two kitchen chairs out back. And — [laughs] — and the dealer told me, because he called me when he finally — he flew back to, you know, California, they both did.

The minute he got back he called me and he said, "The first thing he said when we got in the cab was, so, he's a little tight on money?" Little tight? Like he kind of — he was pretty shocked. But he was a great guy, we didn't — he was a wonderful — he was — if he was still around, I'm sure we'd still have a relationship. He was a wonderful guy. And he loved to work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You know. And he lived in the work, so — and it turned out there were a number of

other artists that — whose work he believed in. And he did the same thing and — but he had some really — some really, you know, financially successful artists that he represented. So —

MS. RIEDEL: I haven't heard many artists in your position talk about a relationship with a publicist so that's — it is interesting to hear what sort of impact that had and that Steinway, you think, came from that.

MR. BYERS: Well, you know, Steinway may have — they may have responded to me had I made the call.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MR. BYERS: But I wouldn't have made the call — no way. It scared the daylights out of me. So — now, I don't know what — I don't know what he said to them, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk a little bit about exhibition and dealers since we've just sort of touched on that and that's something that we should address. You began exhibiting pretty much directly right out of school, yes?

MR. BYERS: Yes, well, Wendell would — Wendell had students show — we had an end of the year show in a gallery in Rochester. It wasn't at the school. The Shirley Dawson Gallery, it was a gallery in New York — or, I mean, in Rochester. And so I think I got my first piece in that first show. And then he — actually, that was — that was the first semester. And then the — oh, wait, trying to get my years together. That was I think — that was during Christmas. And then, I think, in the summer he had a show of faculty and student work at the — I think it was the Fendrick Gallery in D.C.

MS. RIEDEL: So how would you describe your relationships with gallery dealers over the years?

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.] It's a working relationship.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes?

MR. BYERS: You know, you — if you're going to go — if that's how you're going to sell your work, you have to — there — you know, what can I say? You've got to — there's rules — there's rules that you have to follow. You know, you have to — you have to accept the fact that this is what their commission is going to be.

I think the most valuable thing I've learned over the years though is that your relationship with the gallery — you need to talk to them about everything because everything is negotiable. They don't all work the same, you know? And when you're inexperienced and you start, gallery is going to go, "This is how we do business." You might just assume that that's how someone else does business. It doesn't work that way. And just like most people, they leave out a lot of details when you — if you don't ask those questions. You know, like what are the shipping — you know what I'm saying?

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Who ships —

MR. BYERS: You know, I mean, after the —

MS. RIEDEL: Who ships the work to the gallery, who ships the work back, right? Who's responsible for what?

MR. BYERS: Yes. I mean, after all these years, I've pretty much learned by my mistakes. And, you

know, so — but it's been — it was the way I wanted to do — it's the way I wanted to business. Or that was the place I wanted to do business. I never wanted to sell my work myself.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. BYERS: So —

MS. RIEDEL: And you've had one very long-term relationship and many other shorter terms. But I'm thinking Gallery Naga is probably the longest.

MR. BYERS: I think Snyderman's probably the longest.

MS. RIEDEL: Snyderman even longer? Okay.

MR. BYERS: Yes, because he actually came up to the Wendell Castle School when I was a student. And I remember he wrote a letter asking a few of us — it might have been all of us, I don't know, I can't remember. You know, at that age you just see your name.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [They laugh.]

MR. BYERS: So — that he was interested in people — those students following up and keeping in touch with what they were up to. So, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: And we don't have to get into any specifics, but from our conversations over the past day or two there have been ups and downs, and not those particular galleries, but gallery relationships in general. Some are more — some have been more ethical, some have been more financial stable than others.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yes.

MR. BYERS: It's — yeah. Yes. Yes. And you know, I'm sure for the galleries they can say the same thing about the artists, that there are artists that are — that are professional and ethical. And, you know, I'd like to think that they would say that — you know, I know John — John Elder would say that about me. So — I mean, it's challenging for a dealer if their artists are selling work out the backdoor to the same clients that were introduced to that artist by that gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. BYERS: You know that's unethical. And it's probably a little more excusable from a young artist who's so — struggling so hard to get by. But it's still unethical. People do it all the time.

MS. RIEDEL: What changes have you seen in the market for craft, design, furniture, over the past 15 years?

MR. BYERS: I don't know. I guess I don't really know. Like, I only really know for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, and for — I mean, certainly we talked about the economic recession and how that definitely impacted the market.

MR. BYERS: Yes. But that's — and that's happened probably three times. I mean, it happened — didn't it happen in the early '90s, and then it happened in — I mean, it was the dot-com thing that

was the late '90s. Then thing started to recover and then there was 2000 — or 9/11.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. BYERS: Just as it seemed like people were waking up. But I don't know. I'm not sure that that emotional impact had that much of an effect out West. I think it did here. At least I think that's what the New York people would say. And then —

MS. RIEDEL: We talked about now the more interest — the rising interest in design versus craft. Has that had an impact on your work — the sales of your work or marketing of your work?

MR. BYERS: No. I think — I don't think that the galleries that have been representing my work all this year have a clue about the design world. So it's changed the way I'm starting to look at ways of selling my work. It's not affecting — and how — the marketplace might affect — the market place is going to affect things like price points, of course, and things like that. I'm not making things like with the Jeb Jones collection because I want to make things for less — really less price points.

You know, you still want to make — you want to make a living wage, whether it's a piece you spend 200 hours on or four hours on, you know? But obviously a piece you spend four hours on is going to be lower price points, you know what I mean? And then, again, how do you make these things? How are they produced? You know, one at a time and those kind of things.

So I don't think the design world has affected my work, but there might be a — the expanse of the design world may change the marketplace that my work goes to. And so with this new — this new group of pieces —

MS. RIEDEL: The Jeb Jones work you're talking about?

MR. BYERS: Yes. When I was at the ICFF show, the International Contemporary Furniture Fair, a lot of people were asking where I was marketing my work, who was — and I said, that's what I'm here to find out. I said, this is — this isn't anywhere yet. So — and the people that, you know, were on it, they'd be like, you know, this is — are these — are these the original designs.

And I said, yeah, these are the original design prototypes. And they go, wow, it'll be interesting to see where your market goes. And those are — typically those were architects that I was talking to. So any interest there came from anything from, you know, groovy little retail shops to architects and discussions with developers with hotels in Hawaii.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: I mean it was — and if anything, probably a discussion about my background as a crafts artist would probably be — it might actually be a disadvantage.

MS. RIEDEL: And how so?

MR. BYERS: Because everybody thought — everyone looked at — people that dug the work, they all thought I was an industrial designer. And they wanted to know where I went to school and, you know, where I've been all these years. And it was really funny; it was a trip. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And did the answer impact the way they felt about the work, one way or the other?

MR. BYERS: Well, if I told them that — I said I studied with Wendell Castle, most of them had no idea

who I was talking about. And he's — you know, he's the guy that's crossed art, design and craft. I mean, his work encompasses all of that. And —

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: Now, some of the woodworkers that I met, they were just people checking things out, they knew who Wendell Castle was.

MS. RIEDEL: That's — yeah, interesting.

MR. BYERS: You know, to — it's like Wendell, Malouf and Nakashima — like those are the big, yeah, three. So — and I actually think Nakashima had a — somebody told me they had a booth there.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. BYERS: Yes, because they still produce furniture. It's operated right by his daughter — or — daughter maybe?

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Yes, I think.

MR. BYERS: So I was told that they had a booth there but I didn't — I didn't wander in that direction.

MS. RIEDEL: I'll be really interested to see where this goes. It's an interesting time to have this interview.

MR. BYERS: Yes. I mean, it's kind of funny. It's kind of — yeah, it's interesting time.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's really interesting to see how craft and design is connecting or not at this juncture in time too.

MR. BYERS: Well, you know, you — we talked about how there was never a discussion of art versus craft — I mean, I'm sorry, craft versus design. It's always been art versus craft.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Now, I haven't heard the argument of design versus craft. But it — I'm thinking with what was happening in design right before the recession, the crafts people started to pay more attention to how they could get involved in the design world. Now, I don't know if that discussion about art versus craft thing is still happening.

MS. RIEDEL: I think it's cyclical. I don't know that it ever fully goes away.

MR. BYERS: You would know. You know that — every time — [inaudible] — that comes up.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I think it's absolutely always there. [They laugh.] Absolutely. Well, it's interesting though because I was just a — at a — one of those ACC convenings and I was talking to J. B. Blunk's daughter — I can't remember her name right now [Mariah Nielson]. But she was saying that they were having a lot of success selling his work, marketing his work, due to the resurgence of interest in design.

MR. BYERS: That's correct.

MS. RIEDEL: That that was — he, of course, had been associated with the craft world forever. But

there — he — they weren't able to move the work. They weren't getting the interest or the sales in the craft world that they were getting through design —

MR. BYERS: How old is he?

MS. RIEDEL: — be re-framing it design. He passed away quite a long time ago.

MR. BYERS: Oh, yeah. I wonder if that's part of just because it's — it's got more of a '60s vibe, look to it. I'm sure aesthetics is a big part of it.

MS. RIEDEL: But it sounded as if they were very intentionally presenting it in a design world as design rather than —

MR. BYERS: That's correct [ph].

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. But it's exactly to your point — such a divide between those two worlds.

MR. BYERS: Well, I — yeah, I don't know. I mean, it seems to me that — well, when I was in school it seemed like so many people went into architecture. And, man, that's a lot of school — to end up being, like, now a CAD monkey for somebody else, you know? I know guys that did — they've actually, they're — you know, they're going back to school to do something else because that's what they — that's the word that they use. I didn't do all this school to end up a CAD monkey.

But I bet the most — I would think the most popular — like, in the sort of arts-related place — studies would be in design because everybody is a designer. Everybody thinks that they — that they have a good idea. And they can go to school — and it's a lot easier to be creative for a lot less school, I think. It's wide open, the possibilities, you know? You don't have to, like, design a building and make sure it doesn't fall apart. You can design a pencil.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: You can design a building that does fall apart. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Oh dear.

MR. BYERS: I mean, it's — and I think that the generation now is — people get — people look at every object — it's like every object matters now. And every object is — people are starting to — you know? But I don't think they look at — they — you don't have that same relationship in your home with art. But your young kids, you know, you have all these gadgets and all these things. And then you want to get the new one not just because you want to keep up with your friend but it's cooler.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: It's better designed. Like, those are the discussions I think. I think — I mean, I think that's — it's — design is more — it's more accessible by the masses, by the general public.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you think technology has something to do with that?

MR. BYERS: Sure — I'm sure of that.

MS. RIEDEL: I would think so too.

MR. BYERS: I mean, you don't have to make it. You know, it's not — it's a whole 'nother world now.

MS. RIEDEL: And so many of the gadgets are technology gadgets.

MR. BYERS: Absolutely. Yes, absolutely. So I think — yeah, I think design is king. You know, whether or not the work that you make — it ends up being a favorable thing for the work that you make because ultimately, I mean, it depends on what kind of work you make. But if you're making work, you know, for yourself, I mean, you make the work and then you find the — hopefully you can find a marketplace that will sell your work for you — unless you're just chasing — you know, you're chasing the money.

And I don't mean that in a — you know, I'm judging anybody that does that. But that's — I mean it's — the new work I'm making now is — I mean, really the reason — the biggest reason I started making this work, besides it provided me — was because I really don't think I can make the work that I was making anymore because I don't — I know a — I know I have — I still have the get-up-and-go for it but I'm just, by physically, I'm not going to hold up to it.

MS. RIEDEL: So now you've got the Jeb Jones line of work you're working on. You're working still on a show for Gallery Naga this fall.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes, September.

MS. RIEDEL: And that will be some furniture and some paintings, or is it all paintings?

MR. BYERS: Well that's — the reason I — there's a distinction between John Eric Byers and Jeb Jones because I wanted to make — I wanted to throw a line between this work and my personal work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: And, you know, I didn't have to do it but that's the way I decided to do it. And Jeb Jones has got a pretty good ring to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.] So — and all my friends — my nickname is Jeb so that's —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: You know, my name. So that's probably pretty obvious.

MS. RIEDEL: Well it took me — actually I had to get the initials before I picked that up, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Yes. So the show in Naga and what was the other thing?

MS. RIEDEL: The show at Naga, JEB JONES and then also the Good Joy Design work you're doing.

MR. BYERS: Yes. So I met this — I met this — I met the project designer Leslie Roeder. She's a — she's a friend of mine, she lives in New York — in New York City. And she's a product designer — freelance product designer. So I've been collaborating with her in stuff. I mean, we've just — it's — the whole thing's — she was discussing with me a product that she was working on. And — you know, over some years. And we went off about — you know, I started going off about, you know, if I was going to buy this, this is what I would want.

And we had a lot conversations like that — just bouncing around ideas about design. And so — I can't remember — I think one day she — I got on an email, if I remember this correctly, and she had done all these quick CAD sketches of these toothbrush concepts I had. And her designs were — I thought they were fantastic. And — so that led to us actually — we actually — because her world is in the design world. She's a design director for a company called Built New York for a couple of years. She's now doing freelance.

And she had these contacts, so we tried to see if we could sell the concepts. And that's a whole — you know, that's a whole 'nother interview in itself, that whole experience. But it was — it was really great for me. I mean, I learned a lot, you know, in this — in this process. So in the end we weren't getting — you know, we didn't — we weren't about to find anybody who was interested in concepts. And there was — we actually started working with children's toothbrushes, but there were all these liability issues we were told. And we were going to this boutique — more boutique design online stores.

We, you know, at this point we were thinking pretty small. So in the end, we were like, all right, let's just make it ourself. And she was telling me what it was going to cost. And I was like, that's nothing — to get a minimum order. And she had never done — she had done fashion and designed and made clothes, I guess, for a decade. And then had had enough of that and gone back to school to RISD and — I think around 2000 or 2001 and got her master's in design.

But — so we decided we'll just — we'll make — we'll make these. And then we'll see what happens after we make them. We became designer manufacturers.

MS. RIEDEL: A new chapter.

MR. BYERS: Yes, a new chapter. So the hooking toothbrush, at this point we've sold — we've got a couple orders from Colette in Paris, which I guess those in the know think that's — you know, that's supposed to be the grooviest store in Paris for the latest in design objects.

MS. RIEDEL: Great.

MR. BYERS: We've done some wholesales in Luxembourg. We've — you know, the thing is, what we need to do is we need to get a rep — and then Leslie rep-ed the product at *designboom* at the ICFF. And we've got — we made some contacts at that. We're waiting to sort of hear back. So that led from the conversation from toothbrushes. And that was one of three designs. And ultimately we chose that design. They are made in China but they're recyclable plastic once you get rid of the bristles.

I mean, the cool thing about this was, like, okay. Now we got this manufacturer in China and here's your minimum order. And we're like, well, how many colors do we get in — no, no no. You get one color. But we wanted to introduce color. So the cool — the cool problem-solving or design process for me was, well, if we wanted to have different color handles, we would have to do a minimum order of 5,000 toothbrushes for each color handle.

But then with the conversations with them, found out that there was no minimum order for the bristles. So we were able to introduce color by having them — because there was a minimum order, we produced all the toothbrushes with the five different color bristles.

MS. RIEDEL: Fantastic.

MR. BYERS: So they are all different — they are different. So you can distinguish by the color

bristles.

MS. RIEDEL: So how many colors do you have — they're all white toothbrushes and you add the bristles —

MR. BYERS: Yes, so there's yellow, blue, red, green and orange, I think, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Yes.

MR. BYERS: And that's one pack we sell. We have a two-pack.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. BYERS: And we — I mean, we came up with, like, the his-and-her toothbrush, which is great. It's actually a toothbrush with the ends — two different bristles on each end. You know, and she — we even designed, like, the concept where it's like, hey, is that my toothbrush and the response was — we even did advertising, marked up advertising — no, that's our toothbrush. You know, because it's like one of those classic things, people when they first meet, you know, there's the whole toothbrush thing.

And then — she was brilliant. She came up with — they were — they — they were for — they — she actually had like — they had two different colors on each end and then they had — they had the symbol for male or female. So we had, like, male-female, female-female, you know, male-male.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. BYERS: Yes. They're great. Nobody — we haven't made those. Those — I love those. So through these — all these times we had we came up with that. We have a razor that's — it's disposable and it comes in packs of four. We have — what else did we do? We just — this was her idea, but it was inspired by — she used to be a motorcyclist. And — which is pretty cool, because she rode a Beamer across country once. She's pretty cool. And then I just finally got my first hobby in my whole life which is now motorcycles. And so that's something we share.

And so she turned me on to her — some of her stuff, and one of the things were these great "pudding bowl" helmets made by a company called Davida in England. They're still made in England. And they have these magnificent — this — these racing — the racing series, which they're painted like — these guys back in the '50s and '60s had their helmets, you know, painted with these — with these great graphics so you could distinguish one rider from the next. And they're beautiful and they're so — they're just fantastic. I mean, if I — I'd collect them, you know. They're that cool.

So we — she's a swimmer. So we just — we just produced a — is it three, yeah — three swim caps that the graphics are inspired by the — yeah, the café racer motorcycle helmet designs.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's great.

MR. BYERS: And there's a store in New York now that just put in a wholesale order for those.

MS. RIEDEL: What's the store's name? Do you —

MR. BYERS: Top Hat. It's a new store down in the Lower East Side. And you can see all this stuff at goodjoy.com.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Good.

MR. BYERS: And then what's the other one? We have the toilet-paper dispenser. It's a toilet paper dispenser that has — it has a small-cut, relieved-out shelf that a box of matches fits perfectly into. And those are being made in a — in a — in a shop out in Portland, Oregon.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: And if you lift the box up there's a little — you know, there's a little relief of a matchstick. Yes, I've actually got — I've got actually got one. Can I do this, can I walk away?

MS. RIEDEL: Sure. Let me pause it.

MR. BYERS: I actually just — we've got a couple online stores. Well, we got one online store that does drop-ship which means they order, we get it manufactured. But we did just do a wholesale order for — I can't remember the company. So this one is mine. It's got a little imperfection in it which is, you know, perfect for me. But that's —

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MR. BYERS: What was funny is that — we got a lot of blog action on that. You know, and people get to respond, you know, they get to type in their comments. It's — all these people were freaking out, like, how children-unsafe that is.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So I don't know. I think you should teach kids about matches at home.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right.

MR. BYERS: So that's that. And —

MS. RIEDEL: And this is white ceramic?

MR. BYERS: Yes. I can get it — it's — I don't — I can't remember what — which of the two it is because we ran into problems — there was a problem at one time and we had to slip what the type of — what the type of the — whether it was earthenware or — what's the other one?

MS. RIEDEL: Stoneware? But that would be awfully high fire.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I think that was the problem was that at one time it was, like, stone fire, and it was so high that you get a lot more — there's a lot more problems, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Warping problems, yeah.

MR. BYERS: We ran into a lot of problems. And I can't remember what — I mean —

MS. RIEDEL: I can't imagine why it would be stoneware. That seems awfully high fire for —

MR. BYERS: Yes, it was a mistake. And it was resolved.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Okay. And so then we have some of the razors here with handles.

MR. BYERS: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: Yep.

MS. RIEDEL: Hooking razor.

MR. BYERS: Yes, that's the hooking razor. And so what we did to — what we did there was, again, it was a thing where we stayed with the white plastic and we put color into the logo so that they're different.

MS. RIEDEL: Very cool.

MR. BYERS: I think we just got our first order of those. And —

MS. RIEDEL: That actually is a great idea — well they all have hooks.

MR. BYERS: Yes, I don't have much need for a razor, but —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. BYERS: So the whole — the whole thing's from the idea that I always brush my teeth in the shower.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

MR. BYERS: Well, some people do. Some people are just — some people — well, I do in the morning. And usually —

[Audio break.]

MR. BYERS: [In progress] — covered with dust and milk paint, so I showered twice a day, so —

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. BYERS: And this is great. I can just hang it up.

MS. RIEDEL: Right in the shower.

MR. BYERS: Yes. I don't have to, you know, put it in a cup or — hangs right on — right on the shower head. So yeah, go figure.

MS. RIEDEL: Pretty cool.

MR. BYERS: So those are the four products that we have and — it's fun.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. BYERS: It's fun.

So for a while — it's — I have to give her all the credit for getting it done, because she's — she really runs the whole thing. And then she does the design work, and then it comes back, and then we did — like, I critique it with her. So —

You know, and part of that is maybe the physical relationship I have to objects. But so far she hasn't fired me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And you're really, in this case, wearing that conceptual designer hat.

MR. BYERS: That's what I am now. Yes. I mean, it's pretty amazing. It's — it's kind of a — it's — the last couple of years were just hard for so many artists, but they probably have been the most creative couple years in a long time. I mean, it's different. You know, I'm doing things differently right now. I'm experiencing a lot of new different things.

And, you know, the story — the stories I was told was that at this point in my life, I should be doing the same thing over and over again and, you know, have years of backorders to keep reproducing the same designs that, you know, finally got me recognized.

And in a way — I mean, I'm not starting all over, but it's — because of all my experience in making work and, you know, like, my — just my life experience — but in some ways, I kind of feel like I'm starting all over.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Well, it's interesting, if we look back at what we've talked about the past couple of days, each time you moved, there was — or because you moved or you moved because, there was a change in the work, a significant change in the work from Philly to Portland to here — and we were joking about needing to move again, but maybe this is just the next evolution in the work, is it's going — it's expanding in a completely new direction.

MR. BYERS: Yes. I mean, I don't know what's going to — you know, I don't have my heart and soul into designing product.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MR. BYERS: But from a — just — but it's still a creative outlet.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. BYERS: It's a creative process. And there is — there's a business process which you can either see it creatively or you could see it some other way.

And the challenge for me with all — for me with the whole sort of — the business end of everything is managing the business stuff and doing all the communications stuff with that. So I happily give my dealers 50 percent because they — they can have it.

But all the other — but the — but the workings of how these things are made, even, it's just really — it's very cool. So —

MS. RIEDEL: And if we look at the design, they're beautifully paired down. You know, they're just very elemental.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. I just got to give Les a lot of credit for that, because — I mean — I don't know; she gives me a lot of credit, but — which is good. So I still get my percentage. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, there you go.

Have you done many collaborations? I mean, this sounds like a real collaborative.

MR. BYERS: No, that's the other thing. I've never done a collaboration in my life — never wanted to. But I think it's because we bring two different things to the mix. It can — it can get to where, like, when we start getting into — there are — there are times when we butt heads. And, you know, it's, like, "Okay, you can have this one. But, you know, next time, you know — next time, I get my" — you know what I mean? "Let me win the next one."

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] "Next time it's my turn."

MR. BYERS: You know, you got — it's — and that's actually — that's good, you know? So —

I mean, my whole thing about the whole Goodjoy [goodjoy.com] thing was — at least with the toothbrush — if people don't — I mean, to me, I give her the credit. I think it's a great toothbrush. I would buy that toothbrush, without a doubt.

But if we don't — if we don't move the inventory, then we have toothbrushes for the rest of our lives.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: And you know what? I haven't bought a toothbrush in over a year now. That's pretty nice.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Very practical.

Shifting gears back to your other work —

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: — about more of the craft hands-on work, do you think of that work and yourself as part of an international tradition or one that's especially American?

MR. BYERS: Ah, jeez, I don't — just don't know enough to — I have no idea. I don't —

MS. RIEDEL: — don't think about it one way or the other?

MR. BYERS: No.

I don't really think about that so much. I don't really think about, like — I just think about myself — I'm just some guy trying to do his own thing. And my thing just happens to make the work that I make. And so I would think that there's a whole lot of people just trying to do their thing, making their work, whether they were — and they're not — I just think there is all these people out in the hills all over the place and valleys and a lot of people just doing their thing, and they're making some extraordinary things. And most of us are never going to know they even — they walk the planet. I'm not trying to sound cynical. I mean, I think that that's just — so I don't — I'm sure that it's a global thing — if I understood the question.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

All right. Well, I think we've done a good job here of covering these questions.

So in summary, just a few final points here. Do you see your career in terms of episodes, periods that are distinct? Or do you see a thread of continuity that runs through the work?

MR. BYERS: [Laughs.] I just have to laugh. I don't even see myself having a career yet.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: I feel like I'm just getting started.

So you can leave that in if you laugh. That's okay.

I think there's a thread, definitely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I would think so too.

MR. BYERS: There's clearly —

MS. RIEDEL: Multiple threads would be my thought. There's warp and weft.

MR. BYERS: Yes. Yes. It's threaded.

MS. RIEDEL: What about it in particular matters to you about the work that you make?

MR. BYERS: What is — oh. Well, there's a lot of different things. I mean — I mean, certainly, with the functional pieces, it's — you know, I have — I have furniture. I have — you know, I have really — these are — these are objects I could never have had if I didn't create them myself.

MS. RIEDEL: And it is — it is worth noting that we're sitting in a house that is absolutely full of your work.

MR. BYERS: Yes. That's not creepy, right?

MS. RIEDEL: No, not at all. It's exquisite.

MR. BYERS: Yes, that also is kind of, like — I mean, in a way, it's also sort of a test. Like, what's it like to live with the work, you know?

Trying to remember the question.

MS. RIEDEL: What about the work is — matters to you?

MR. BYERS: But the — I think the biggest thing — I mean, the work — it's just the — it's the creative — it's the — it's — it's the creative lifestyle. It's the — it's — it's all-encompassing. I mean, I — you know, my work is my life. I mean, there's no separation. Though now, I'm actually — I don't want to go out too far, but now I'm starting to see processing and other types of processes and problem-solving in everything I do now. It's — there's no — there's not as much separation of how I approach other things in my life, or it's — it's becoming more and more the same, the way I approach the work, I approach everything else in my life. It's all, to me, work.

So — and the work all brings me joy, whether it's — I can't say that about all the work. But, you know, it brings me joy to be able to do, you know, and to do labor. Just, for instance, doing firewood, you know, and stacking firewood and burning firewood; the processes involved in that is — it's redundant, you know, which works probably pretty perfectly for me.

And there was a time when I thought, even doing that would take me away from my work and would have me really unhappy.

But I — it's — whether the work — you know, in the end, whether or not the work — if all the work is gone, you know, it's, like, whether the work — if all the work was destroyed, I still would have — I still have — in the end, I have all the experience of making that work, and all the ups — you know, the good things and the bad things that go with that.

But it's — I mean, I was an incredibly restless, impatient kid. And it was — it took a lot of discipline to learn the patience to make this kind of work. And I was a very self-conscious kid. So it was — it was a struggle to finally break out and do my own thing and not worry about people judging me for that. You know, I could hear all the negative criticisms, not the positive criticisms.

And so, like I said — I mean, in the end, it's about the whole experience of making the work, you know? And it's got to be that way. Otherwise, you're not going to — you're not going to make the work because the work requires — it demands too much, right? So —

So I think that's it.

MS. RIEDEL: What — would you discuss the importance of furniture and then painting or some combination thereof as a means of expression, and what it does better than anything else? What about your particular process or your particular final pieces — what's the essence of it?

Well, that's — maybe we'd separate them out. What is the essence of the furniture that is so particular to it that nothing else has that same essence? And the same with the paintings, what's the difference between the — maybe this is something we touched on a little earlier too where you were talking about — I'm actually going to be quiet and just let you answer that.

MR. BYERS: No, I'm still — I'm still not quite sure I know what the question is. I'm sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Let me try — [laughs] — no, let me try again.

Okay, let's just take it one — [inaudible] — at a time. What is important about furniture as a means of expression? And what does furniture do that nothing else can do? Or wood furniture?

MR. BYERS: I don't know if there is — I wouldn't — I don't know if there's anything that furniture can do that nothing else can do.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, maybe objects. We were talking about the tactility of objects and —

MR. BYERS: Well, I think that I came into this — I came into my field because I wanted to make things that were functional, practical. The word artist was something that I never even started to associate with myself, up until maybe the last five years, you know. It was always really difficult to come up with — to find myself, you know.

So, you know, I made this decision and I went in this direction. And so, you know, the thing that furniture does for me, besides — I mean, it has its own — its own particular challenges that doing nonfunctional work doesn't have. And you said, that's kind of what we touched on earlier.

And I don't know if there's any other thing out there because I've only done a few things, you know. I mean, I have — I'm not making other — I know when I do carpentry, I don't enjoy it, but it's also — I'm not a master of that.

And my shop is — I've gotten my practice and my methodology and my — in my studio down, that it's —

You know, most days, I go in and I'm done and I don't even know I'm there. It's, like, all muscle memory. It's all, you know — you get in a groove. You know, occasionally, maybe once or twice during a week, you yell and scream. And then it's over. [Laughs.] But that's usually because something — you had a breakdown, you have to do some — you have to do something that stops you in the middle of this, like — it wakes you up for being so lost in what you're doing. You know, when you — when I first started, it was, like, kicking and screaming all the time, and every once in a while, I get — you know, I get to go in a groove. Do you know what I'm saying?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] Absolutely.

MR. BYERS: So — but the — but, you know, the thing is, they're called paintings, and that's become — that's kind of a great breakthrough, in that that was a real stretch at one time. And now, you know, thanks to John, you know, there is — more people are using that to describe the 2-D work. And I call it 2-D most of the time.

But it's — I mean, that's not like I've gone from — you know, the practice is still the same, basically. It's what — whether it functions or doesn't function, you know. So — and —

I don't — I don't really know how the people that have been behind the furniture feel about the 2-D work.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] You don't.

MR. BYERS: Not — well, the galleries that have represented my furniture have been openly excited about showing the work. But I think it's — I don't know. It's — I just still don't know — I don't really know how people feel about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Have there been any new galleries yet to exhibit the 2-D work?

MR. BYERS: No. No. So —

MS. RIEDEL: Is that something you're interested in pursuing? And are the 2-D pieces pieces that you'll be able to continue making now, do you think?

MR. BYERS: Oh yeah. Yes. I just did — two of the pieces that are — [inaudible] — I just did. Yes.

But I've actually been thinking about doing some without any carved surface.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. BYERS: And I'm going to do it. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'm sure.

MR. BYERS: I don't know — I don't know what the result is going to be. But eventually, I'll do that.

MS. RIEDEL: That makes total sense.

MR. BYERS: Yes. We'll see — you know, we'll see what the outcome is.

So, um — I do a lot of "ums" now, aren't I? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: No, not too bad.

MR. BYERS: So, you know —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: Yes, sure, why not? I mean, it's — yeah, I mean, I need to exhibit work. The reason I exhibit work is to sell work so I can make more work. It's that simple.

You know, one time, it's exciting. It can be exciting when you have people really respond to the work. It's really — I mean, the reason I — the only reason I enjoy going to a gallery when I have a show is to see the work in a different context. But that can be a slippery slope because if you're not involved in hanging the work, it can be off-putting sometimes. It's — but it's nice when it's surprisingly, you know, really well done.

And then, the way my nature is, if I was given the opportunity to hang my own show or to say — I'd have to spend, like, two weeks in a gallery. You know, I'd have to run through every imaginable combination, you know. So it's better that I don't get involved in that. So —

But for the most part, everybody's done — with the 2-D work, they've all done a really beautiful job with the work. And — but yeah, I mean, the, you know —

So yeah, I would love to have — you know, I hope that some people will dig the work and they'll exhibit it. And at least, that's — you know, that's the step towards selling the work so that I can make more work.

MS. RIEDEL: How has the work been received over time? It seems like it's been fairly enthusiastic from the start and consistently so. But is that your experience as well?

MR. BYERS: The 2-D work?

MS. RIEDEL: The work in general.

MR. BYERS: Of my work?

MS. RIEDEL: Your work, yeah.

MR. BYERS: Well, you guys are here. You're here, talking to me. So that's —

MS. RIEDEL: You were talking, there was a Tiffany — you won a — won a Tiffany Award in 2006, 2005?

MR. BYERS: I think it was 2005. I've received a lot of grants, state grants.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.] There was a nice mid-career retrospective a couple of years ago. Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. BYERS: Yes. I've got two New York Foundation, I think; couple of others because I moved around a little bit. Now, that's — boy, that's — that's huge in terms of continuing to make it work, you know. And it's —

It's a funny thing. The longer you do think these — do things, it's, like, how — how — it's funny, like, when you — when you — when I — actually, when I received my first grant, I didn't even know what that was. And then it took me a while, like, a couple of years 'till I got another one. And then it's, like, you're beside yourself. You know, you — you know the right thing is just to be grateful and humble,

but you got to tell everybody.

And it's just so — such the wrong thing to do. No, because, you know, especially if you tell your other struggling artist friends, they're happy for you, man, but man, they could really use scratch, you know what I mean? They applied for the same grant.

And then at this point now, it's wonderful and it's flattering, but it's about a day. The buzz lasts maybe a day, you know what I mean? You think about, okay, what am I going to do with this and — you know. And — I think that's kind of interesting. I think that's really healthy.

So I guess — I mean, if I — I think if — what I usually tell my friends is, if I didn't know me and I read my resume, I'd be impressed.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

So what's next short term and long term? You've got the gallery show coming up in the fall. You've got this design work you're doing with Leslie Roeder. You've got the Jeb Jones work. It's a lot in the immediate. And the — perhaps the 2-D paintings without the carving.

Do you have anything long term you'd like to see happen, anything long term that you're interested in experimenting with? Or do you work pretty much from project to project?

MR. BYERS: Well, it's — this is — this is also unique for me over the last — in the last couple of years, is that during the recession, with the loss of the gallery representation, because these galleries are no longer in business, I always projected — I always had schedules for two — I knew what my schedule was for the next two or three years.

MS. RIEDEL: And you did pretty much a show, as we said earlier, every six to eight months, every eight to 12 months?

MR. BYERS: That was a while when I had an assistant. But I think — I continue to do it, I think, close to every year. And I may — I'm not sure if I'm on track with that anymore. I think I did a show last year.

A year seems like a long, long time now. And especially when I do the 2-D work, it's so — it's so much faster to produce that work.

So I don't know. I mean, I — I'm looking for people to represent Jeb Jones. I need to find who's going to represent that work. And I'll do the Naga show and see what happens from that.

And I'm really eager to get, like, really crazy busy. But it's — I keep telling myself, this is a good time; this is actually — not to be impatient, but this is a good time because it's giving my left shoulder time to heal. And the last time I did — I went through this, I went back to work way too soon. And the first thing I did was, I did an ironing table that was essentially two of these. You know, it wasn't the smartest thing to do. But, you know, I'm not that smart, so — [they laugh].

So I have — I have an out; that's my excuse. So —

So actually, what's been really healthy for me — till I sort of — is, you know — I don't know if this got to do anything, but now that I have my first hobby, which is riding motorcycles, I'm able to do something that's physical. As long as I don't crash, I'm allowing myself to do something really physical without beating up my body. It's unbelievable. It's — it's just been — so far, it's been

fantastic for me.

MS. RIEDEL: It'd be interesting if that has any effect on your work one way or another.

MR. BYERS: I — yeah, I hope — it might keep me out of the studio. It might — I might take the weekends off.

What I did last year was, I started — I changed my schedule. I got up an hour earlier every morning so I could go in and out early. So if it was sunny, I could punch out an hour earlier. So I still got the hours in, but I gave myself an hour at the end of the day where I could ride around the hills. So — it didn't distract from the work. You know, it didn't distract — [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: It'd be [ph] beautiful riding around here at sunset.

MR. BYERS: It's beautiful. Yes, it's fantastic. We could use a little sun.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. BYERS: [Inaudible.] So — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: That's all I've got, so —

MR. BYERS: So —

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you for your time, and —

MR. BYERS: Thank you.

MS. RIEDEL: Appreciate it.

MR. BYERS: You're awesome.

MS. RIEDEL: Thank you very much.

[End of interview.]