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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jeffrey Mongrain on December 15 and 16, 2011. The interview took place in New York City, and was conducted by Mija Riedel for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Jeffrey Mongrain at the artist's office in Hunter College in New York City on December 15 [correction] 16, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is disc number one.

Good morning.

JEFFREY MONGRAIN: Good morning.

MS. RIEDEL: We — let's start with some — just a bit of early biographical information and move on from there. You were born in Minnesota?

MR. MONGRAIN: At — in International Falls up on the Canadian border. The hospital I was born in overlooked Canada, across the river.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. Actually, the nickname is Prospect Falls. It's where Rocky and Bullwinkle came from.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: It's always the coldest place in the continental United States. So yeah, small town, very — but very much that kind of wilderness sort of childhood.

MS. RIEDEL: How big was the town? How big is the town?

MR. MONGRAIN: Gosh, I think when I was there, it was about 5[,000] to 6,000, so small town.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah, small. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: There was a twin city on the other side, was Fort Francis, in Canada of course — our rivals.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah, so that was back in the mid-50s.

MS. RIEDEL: You were born in '57?

MR. MONGRAIN: Fifty-five.

MS. RIEDEL: Fifty-five. What was the date?

MR. MONGRAIN: June 24, 1955.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Well, at least you were born in the summer. [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes, indeed. Yes. I was born on my parents' fifth wedding anniversary, so we always had to celebrate my birthday with their anniversary.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, how did that go?

MR. MONGRAIN: It was fine for me. I think that they needed to sneak away after the birthday party to have time alone.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Right, right.

MR. MONGRAIN: But it was — it was nice.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you describe your childhood — what — your parents' names, what they did, if you had siblings?

MR. MONGRAIN: Right. My father is Arthur Mongrain, and he owned — he owned the local garbage business —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: — which I have to say, for a child, I — my best memories as a child were working on the garbage trucks with my father. And it sounds kind of exotic, and certainly I'm not sure how it's affected my artwork, but there were those cold winters where it was 40 below and you were out there working on the garbage trucks. But it made a situation where my father and I were very close, and we spent a lot of time together.

My mother was more of the artist type — actually, a young beauty. She was Miss Minnesota in her younger years.

MS. RIEDEL: Was she really? What was her name?

MR. MONGRAIN: Delores Lydia Rose Mongrain, and very sweet woman. And she sort of brought more of the artistic and music side to us kids. There are four of us, four children. I have an older brother named Todd. He lives in Minneapolis, and he recently retired at a fairly young age. He was into corporate reality and he kind of got out before everything crashed. So my older Republican brother. And I have a younger sister who's about a year and a half younger. Her name is Terry. She's now married to a man, Steven King. And she's a surgical nurse still living in International Falls. She's the last one of the family that's still there.

And my younger brother who's 12 — 12 ½ years younger is James Mongrain. James is perhaps one of the more renowned glass blowers in the United States, and he — he's one of Dale Chihuly's primary gaffers. And all of the glasswork that you in line [inaudible]. Has had nothing to do with my skills as a glass artist, but with Jim.

I was just out there at the Museum of Glass about a month and a half ago, and he and I were working on a project. I got invited as an artist in resident.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that the goblets?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes, my chalice series. I'm recreating the holy grails from about 60 paintings of The Last Supper. So I'm working on kind of a large installation with that. But it's great having a younger brother with those skills. He — should I have a doctor, lawyer or glassblower in the family. [They laugh.] I have a glass blower.

MS. RIEDEL: There you go. We will definitely talk about that.

Was art something that was supported? You said your mom brought the art into the family. Was art something that was supported and discussed when you were a child? Did you have art classes?

MR. MONGRAIN: Not really.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: I mean, my parents were very supportive of us doing whatever we wanted to do, but it was a typical small town. There was perhaps one art teacher in the high school, and there was very little art, per se, when I was a child. The typical thing in a town like International Falls was watercolor landscape paintings, which is exactly where I started. This high school teacher named Jim West was a watercolor painter, and made these beautiful landscape paintings. And I started under him and started trying to learn some of those techniques — incredibly difficult doing these watercolor landscapes. It's a real skill.

But I sort of started there and found my ways into the art studio and started doing pottery and started doing wheelwork, and that's sort of where it started.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that in high school or before?

MR. MONGRAIN: That was in junior high or high school.

MS. RIEDEL: So in the public — in the public junior high there was a ceramics program.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, the — they were — it's a small town, so everything was together, sort of in one building. But my first —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, you mean elementary through high school?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, from about 9th grade on.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: My first eight years I went to a private school. It was a private Catholic school called St. Thomas Aquinas. So I had my early education working with nuns mostly, and occasionally priests and brothers. And that sort of established the sort of Catholic interest, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. That makes sense. Did you draw as a child, or was it permanently 3-D work that you were interested in?

MR. MONGRAIN: I did draw quite a bit. I remember one sculptural piece I made as a child. I was actually probably reasonably shy as a child. I remember — perhaps one of the best pieces I made when I was a kid, I was trying to build these sculptural forts, and it wasn't working. I finally went — of course, lots of lakes — I built it underwater. And I took all these branches, tying them together, and I kept diving down, and I built this little architectural fortress under about eight feet of water. And I wish I had an image of it. I've got some old drawings. But that was perhaps my first sculpture.

MS. RIEDEL: I remember reading about that, but I wanted to ask you: How did the idea come to you to build it underwater?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, like I said, I think I was a little shy. And even though my parents were supportive, making art was something that — a lot of my peers were hockey jocks and this kind of stuff, so it was — it was just a way to do it where it was perhaps a little more private. And also, I kind of like the site orientation. Growing up on a lake and involved with the water — and it's one of the reasons that some of my current sculptures are of mud and water, I think. But it added a kind of a mystery to it, I think. I'm perhaps romanticizing it from — since it was 40-some years ago. But yes, I think that's probably it.

MS. RIEDEL: And so was your house actually on a lake, or you were close to a lake?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes, we had — International Falls are surrounded by lakes, and then we also had a small cabin on an island, which was only three or four miles from our home. So that would be where we would spend our summers, on this island.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds idyllic, was it?

MR. MONGRAIN: It really was. It was — it was the typical fishing and hunting and outdoors things. And yeah, I drew a lot, made small sculptures. Perhaps one of my earlier pieces was I sculpted a crown. It was one of the — it was like fourth or fifth grade, and it was one of the statues of the Virgin Mary. And there was some celebration coming up. And back then, it was very sort of interested in the Catholic narratives. And I carved a crown out of wood and made it for the statute. And of course, it's long gone. But that's one of the first things I actually remember modeling. I was maybe nine or 10 years old.

MS. RIEDEL: That's really — and did you paint it or was it strictly wood?

MR. MONGRAIN: It was painted. And I spent a lot of time trying to carve the detail, get the little, small spears on the surface and put in detail. And I painted it and then brushed it back. I was trying to make it look like something old, so this was my first attempt at something visually historic. But yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's pretty extraordinary for a nine or a ten —

MR. MONGRAIN: It was fun, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was fun. And we all had to do something in class related to — I don't exactly remember what the religious holiday was, but that was my choice. I wish I had kept it —

MS. RIEDEL: Be sure your mom doesn't or your dad doesn't have it tucked some place.

So it sounds as if you had a fairly religious upbringing. You were in church every Sunday?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, my father was the Catholic.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Of course, in the Catholic faith — back then especially — to get married, your partner had to convert. So my mother converted from being a Protestant to a Catholic.

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. MONGRAIN: I'm not sure her heart was fully into the large conversion, but my father was very quietly a religious man. And he took us to church every Sunday. And of course, going to Catholic school, you have all of the communion and confirmations and, you know, going to confession every week and trying to think up sins to tell the priest. [They laugh.] That sort of thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: So that was — and, of course, I was an altar boy —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: — for a long time. It was a really good foundation of an education. I must say that the nuns were generally no-nonsense, and the education was strict and very clear. I felt well-prepared to go into the public school at ninth grade.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. I had two questions at once and I've forgotten both of them now. You mentioned that your father took care of the local garbage business. Was there a sense of recycling at this point in time? Was there sort of the adventure of maybe dumpster diving once in a while and finding fabulous things that were saved and recycled? Anything like that, or was it pretty just straightforward treatment of trash?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, back then there was no sense of recycling.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: But my father, of course, collected wood and copper pipes. And so he actually owned the business. So when I was very young the business was fledging and he was just starting out. We lived in a very small home — two bedroom — so us three kids were in triple bunk beds in one of the rooms. And then, of course, the business got paid off and he started doing better. But, no, there wasn't really recycling like you would think today.

Also, back then there were the old metal steel garbage cans. It wasn't today where it's nice little plastic bags. So we — it was work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: And, I'm almost embarrassed to say this, but my only recycling was I — [laughs] — I used to collect all the *Playboy* magazine's people were thrown out and sell them to my friends for like 20 cents. [They laugh.] My first business had to deal with the porn industry. So when you're the local son of the garbage man you have access to things. So —

MS. RIEDEL: That's funny. And you're the perfect one because, here, you were an altar boy. Completely — who would suspect you?

MR. MONGRAIN: I know. It's sort of like — sort of a subculture thing going on. But — [laughs] — we'll have to think about whether we want that included or not.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Okay.

Were you regarded as a class artist? Did you draw and sculpt to that degree?

MR. MONGRAIN: I probably was, to a degree. I certainly drew and did these small things. I think by the time I got to junior high and high school I was really considered one of the people that spent all of his free time in the art department working and trying to paint and trying to do ceramic work and things. That and the chess club were sort of my things back then.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: But, yes, it was — it was a very supportive atmosphere, but it was also a very small group of people and not — as perhaps art is today, it was not a major part of junior high or high school education. It was just there as almost a resource, more than anything.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Were there any teachers that were especially significant?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I do remember some of the nuns back in my Catholic time, and partially for their discipline.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I think it's one of the reasons that I ended up, at 14, going to the seminary. There was something really kind of enjoyable to me for that kind of learning and expanse — expansive kind of learning, because it was really not a part of my childhood outside. My parents were intelligent people, but — and my mother read some, but I learned so much more from the nuns who were coming from other places besides International Falls. And becoming friendly with them, I actually got to know them a little bit and listen to their life's experiences. And it was really — it was really fascinating. It was sort of my first view of the outside world, was getting to know some of these nuns.

When I was — an interesting transition happened when I was in Catholic school because, perhaps — I'm not sure it was directly related to Vatican II — but all of a sudden, the nuns started to dress more casually. They didn't have the full garb with the headboard. They started to actually dress in a — what would be much more of a natural sort of dress. And they also became younger. So there was this empathy that you could see them more as people that are part of your normal day, rather than a part of an organization that had a kind of a secretism or seclusion to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that was just before I left, when I was 14, to go to Carthage, Missouri.

MS. RIEDEL: And so you were in public school for the — till ninth grade and then you went to private school, or reverse that?

MR. MONGRAIN: No, no, I — reverse.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: I was in Catholic school from first to eighth grade.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. And then —

MS. RIEDEL: Public high school.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then public high school, yes. And in between that was a very short time, when I was about 13 or 14, that I left Minnesota completely and went to Carthage, Missouri, with the thought that I was beginning some studies to be an Oblate priest.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, I see. I thought — I had the chronology wrong. I thought that happened after high school.

MR. MONGRAIN: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: So it was before high school?

MR. MONGRAIN: I think they tend to try to get — at least back then they tried to get young boys about 13 or 14, perhaps before puberty really set in.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: And, yeah. So it — yeah, that's when you usually start work in the seminary, if you feel psychologically that you have, what they always call, "the calling."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: So at 13 you left home and went to Carthage, Missouri?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: By yourself?

MR. MONGRAIN: By myself.

MS. RIEDEL: For how long?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, with a — with another young man that I knew, a friend of mine named Brian Hart. And I saw — I believe Brian stayed, where I obviously didn't.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. How long did you attend?

MR. MONGRAIN: It was not long. It was I think three to six months I was there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And in some ways, I completely enjoyed it, but of course at that age, it's very easy to get desperately homesick and you start missing your family. And also, I — they started talking about what the discipline was to be an Oblate. An Oblate is a very — it's, like, one step down from a Jesuit. So it is a fairly strict order. And the whole poverty, chastity, obedience sort of thing. And I think, about that time, the idea of chastity started to be a question for me. [They laugh.] At least mentally it was one of my main topics in confessions.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I realized that this was really not my life's calling. And as much as I enjoyed the sort of discipline of the education and learning Latin and all of these things, I eventually went back home.

MS. RIEDEL: But you could take those disciplines home with you and still —

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — [they laugh] — without having to be an Oblate. So you were there for a brief period of time and then you returned to public high school.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And in public high school, primarily ceramics. Were you making any sculptural work? Was it all wheelwork, functional work?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, it started off mostly wheelwork and some sculptural work. For some reason, the wheel seemed to come relatively easy to me. And at the — it was terrible work. I think that when I went to — my jumping ahead a bit — when I went to undergraduate school and studied with the great Warren MacKenzie at the University of Minnesota, I got to see how a real potter works, and how absolutely wonderful wheeled, graded vessels can be. I mean, Warren is still, I think, one of the great masters. And he has that circle of people in Minnesota that surround him — that have been influenced by both him and Curt Hoard, who was the other professor when I was there.

So I do very little wheelwork now. I use it more as a tool for building large sculptures, but —

MS. RIEDEL: I would think.

MR. MONGRAIN: — I still throw.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: I just — I haven't — I haven't exhibited functional pottery in, gosh, 15 years if not more. But —

MS. RIEDEL: Were there gas kilns, electric kilns? Did you get into the whole ceramic science of it?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: All the — all the classics — soda firing, salt firing, raku firing.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: In high school.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. Oh, I'm sorry, not high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, this'd be later, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: College, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: High school we had electric kilns.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that was sort of a main part of it. But I probably did — I was probably more of a painter, especially in junior high and high school.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: Like I said, the only art teacher there, Jim West, was a watercolorist. And he was so admirable in how beautiful his work was that — I think my family still has a collection of my watercolors from way back then, which I would — I would never pass on to anybody or allow anybody to see, but, yes, that's sort of where I started.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So I sort of transitioned through things, as experiences sort of related to — while I was kind of finding what I felt was really important to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you looking at anyone's work in particular in high school? Was there anything that was speaking to you?

MR. MONGRAIN: You know, I honestly don't remember that we — that there was ever a lecture about contemporary artists. I know there were occasionally magazines around. And, all joking aside, with things that I collected from the garbage working with my father, I was also collecting whatever art publications. I remember the doctors in town. They would occasionally throw away things of interest, particularly books and magazines. And I think my first exposure to contemporary art in any fashion was picking up things that were — like, even *Art in America*, back then. And I'd occasionally run into a few of them.

It was a — it was a different time, where you didn't have access to the Internet or Google. And you had to count a little bit on whatever the library was presenting to you. And small-town libraries can be modest.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Absolutely. So by the time you graduated high school, were you fairly clear that you wanted to study art?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. At that point I knew that. Of course, entering college, in your freshman year, I was a little open to possibilities. But I think the first classes I took were certainly art classes. And —

MS. RIEDEL: And how did you decide — University of Minnesota, yes?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did you decide on that school?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, it was — it was — it was within my price range, to start with.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: Being a citizen of — or —

MS. RIEDEL: Resident, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — resident of the state of Minnesota, I got to go there for the cheapest tuition. And I thought it was the best school in the state. And I started researching all the artists that were there, the sculptors. And of course —

MS. RIEDEL: And who all was there on the faculty? Do you remember?

MR. MONGRAIN: Gosh.

MS. RIEDEL: Or who was significantly, for you?

MR. MONGRAIN: There was a short time — I'm trying to remember her name — there was a summer residency — you would recognize her work. She's passed away. She did the large wood sculptures that were painted black. They were like pieces of — fragments of wood all built into boxes?

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right. Yes. I want to say Louise [Nevelson].

MR. MONGRAIN: Not Louise Bourgeois, but —

MS. RIEDEL: No, no.

MR. MONGRAIN: — sort of of that generation.

MS. RIEDEL: It'll come to us.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes, it'll come to us. And she was there one summer and was this — was the epitome of the art star, and sort of wandered through the studios just making comments and dropping little intellectual gems as she walked through. And it was probably my first experience with what I saw as a kind of art star sort of status. And that really brought me into thinking about — even thinking and looking much more at sculpture. I remember that as this, like, transitional point.

And, of course, the faculty at the University of Minnesota were very good. I think shortly after I'd been there and spent kind of a year watching Warren MacKenzie work, I probably fit more under the tutelage of Curt Hoard. Curt was reasonably young at the time at the University of Minnesota, and took an interest in my work. And I started doing a lot of drawing on clay — sort of large, flat — and started doing raku things, sort of slight dimensional. It was that — very much that experimental stage.

It's also the first time I think the work started to become a little more reductive. I've never been particularly pictorial. And all of the, perhaps, narrative of my work is as content rather than as imagery. But Curt really supported me, took me into the BFA. And he also really helped me move into the master's program. I'm not sure he would even remember me today, because it was — it was a while ago. But he was very influential at the time.

MS. RIEDEL: Was there a sense of Voukos and what was going on on the West Coast and that whole revolution in clay — clay's new potential?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that, of course, just broke a lot of things open. And this was probably in the late '70s, when I was working with Curt. And all of that stuff — you had Rudy Autio doing those sort of great, huge —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — vessel things, and, of course, Peter Voukos. And there was a whole range of people all of a sudden using clay as more of an expressive — and actually, for the first time, being accepted as a fine art material, even within the abstract expressionist range that Peter Voukos was working.

MS. RIEDEL: And was that your primary medium then, in college? Was there anything else? Had you shifted from painting more to clay at this point?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, at the — at the University of Minnesota, it has a liberal arts sort of emphasis. So you're having to do printmaking, sculpture, photography, and you're sampling all of these things. But it was my main thing. There was something nice about — for me, of how malleable it was, how quickly it kept a record of a mark.

And the process didn't bother me either. That whole thing of the drawing and the kiln firing and the surfacing and the kiln firing — that seemed to be sort of in tune with me. Probably the other main thing I did at the time was printmaking. And again, it was a drawing method and then using process to get a final result.

I haven't done much photography, but — and now I think of myself primarily as just a sculptor using a broad

range of materials. But I am still head of ceramics here. And I'm also now head of MFA sculpture.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think simply because I'm willing to run the equipment. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's true.

MS. RIEDEL: You graduated from high school in '77, is that right?

MR. MONGRAIN: '73.

MS. RIEDEL: '73.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was the name of that high school?

MR. MONGRAIN: It was Falls Senior High.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And that was in International Falls?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And so then you went fairly directly into undergraduate school.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And then from there it looks like fairly directly into graduate school as well, to Southern Illinois University?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes, Southern Illinois in Edwardsville.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: There's the Carbondale and —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — Edwardsville. And there were two young faculty there, Dan Anderson and Paul Dresang. I think Dan has just recently retired a year or two ago. I was lucky enough to be in his — I think it was called "33." He picked — he'd been there for 33 years, and he picked 33 of us to be in his retirement show.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. MONGRAIN: So that was nice. Yes, Dan and Paul Dresang. And I think he's still working on these kind of whimsical vessels that he makes. But a big part of my graduate experience were my peers. I had some great people there. And one, his name was Nicholas Kripal — with a K. And he has become my best friend, sort of lifetime — we have spent the last 25 years traveling together and showing together and doing things. He is the head of his area at the Tyler School of Art in Philadelphia.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And so we had a — we've enjoyed a very long friendship and we do a lot of professional things. My residency a few months ago at the Museum of Glass, Nick came along and he produced work there too.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, great!

MR. MONGRAIN: And he and I are both going to do Pilchuck next summer. So — and we have a long history of

doing — he's also — was part of the Contemplations on the Spiritual group. I don't know if you — I'm sorry, I feel like I'm jumping around a bit.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fine, that's fine.

MR. MONGRAIN: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Just follow that — feel free to follow that train of thought. We'll come back.

MR. MONGRAIN: Okay. About — I guess about 10 years ago, five of us started this site-specific group. And it was Thérèse Chabot, who was a faculty member in Canada, I believe Toronto; Alan Greenberg who lives in Philadelphia; Jo Yarrington, who's a professor at Fairfield in Connecticut; and Nick Kripal and myself. And the five of us, our first project was in Scotland. I had been teaching there during the summers when —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: I'll try not to jump too much.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fine.

MR. MONGRAIN: But — so we started a contemplation spiritual group. And really, the idea of exhibiting in these spiritual spaces, the theatrics of it, the drama of these spaces was really quite inviting. It's also — when I've spoken about this in lectures, I talk about it as being one of the few non-postmodern things — experiences that you can have. Most of them are still visually locked into almost a medieval kind of architectural aesthetic. And there's also not been any huge transition in the discipline or the structure or the politics.

So it hasn't made that transition from sort of a modernist philosophy into a postmodern. It has sort of stayed. And there's something kind of fascinating about almost feeling as though, as an artist, you're tapping into a previous time, even a previous century. And of course, the architecture's so beautiful. It's just extraordinary to go into these cathedrals and churches and synagogues and be able to invest some artwork or some alteration.

MS. RIEDEL: How did — how did the whole concept of this group evolve?

MR. MONGRAIN: I think it began in Philadelphia. I think there is — I can't remember the name of the — but there's a place in Philadelphia. It's connected to a church, and they started inviting people in to do site-specific things.

MS. RIEDEL: Very interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I think —

MS. RIEDEL: Which church is that? Do you remember? We can add that later, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I'll have to add that. And I think —

MS. RIEDEL: Ah. No, I'm sorry. I was thinking it was, you know, something else.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think that Nick had a show there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Nick Kripal, and then I think Alan Greenberg did. And eventually, we got together one day. And I was seeing their exhibitions, and we decided, wouldn't it be great to try to form an art artists group and try to do this in other places? And that's how it started.

And with my years of even the summer connections in Scotland, before I started teaching there, we found a friend named Ken Mitchell, who was a faculty member at the Glasgow School of Art, and he was looking to curate something. He found us five sites in Glasgow, five very different sites. And with complete naiveté, we agreed to do this — a huge project to do internationally.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was before you were teaching in Scotland?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were still based in the States. What year was this?

MR. MONGRAIN: I believe that started — gosh, that must have been — because I taught in Scotland from '88 to '95.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: So I was there about seven or eight years. And I had done about four or five summers there previously. This actually started after.

MS. RIEDEL: It started after Scotland?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: After I had been teaching there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yes. I thought so.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes, of course. Oops. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: That's okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And so yeah, that started — I would guess — so I left, I started at Hunter in '95.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Coming from Scotland, that was the seven or eight years. And it was shortly after that, probably about '99, '98, is when we first started the *Contemplations on the Spiritual* book. And then we all packed up a huge body of work. We, of course, had to fly over and look at the sites that Ken Mitchell had arranged and start thinking about what type of intervention or additions we would bring to these sites, and then, of course, a great deal of negotiation.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: You can only guess. Even if the ministry is somewhat liberal, generally, the congregation is not. We have had people in the congregation actually say, there's no place for art in our church. And you say, please look around. [They laugh.] That's all this is, is art. But of course, they mean contemporary art. And so there's — there's a great deal of conversation and discussion, which is sort of fascinating.

And fortunately, all five of us take a very gentle approach to both imagery and politicking. And so we managed to get these five sites. One was a synagogue, and then the Glasgow Cathedral itself, which is just spectacular, and then the School of Divinity, which was a 14th-century building. We were often reminded by the Scots that every place we were showing in was built about three or four centuries before the United States began. So they made sure that we understand that we were their young neighbors, compared to this.

And so of the five sites we, of course, had to go over a few times, research it, come back, construct the work, build crates to ship, and we even brought our own photographers over. It was ridiculously expensive. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: I imagine. And I can only imagine how progressive the heads of these different religious sites must have been to be willing to entertain the idea in the first place. Were these places that had done anything like this in the past, or was this completely new?

MR. MONGRAIN: Almost never. None of these had done —

MS. RIEDEL: It's such an interesting idea.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I thought the real courageous thing was that we had no previous experience. They had no idea what they were getting. I have now done, I think, about 18 different sites in different churches and cathedrals and synagogues. And so when I go to meet with someone — like, I met two months ago — I have a piece coming up at the St. James Cathedral in Seattle that I'll be doing in March.

But I have all of these reviews and these images, so they have an idea that I'm not going to come in and be destructive or political or antagonize their congregation — or, at least, certainly try. But yes, very courageous, because we had no history at all. But cities like Glasgow in Scotland — they do want to expand their, sort of, cultural awareness. Glasgow is a reasonably big city but, of course, very secondary to London and even Manchester. So they were looking to invite people in.

And one of the things that I didn't realize which I've come to about these spiritual sites — they actually do want a broader public. They do want people to come into their venues, and not just their core congregation.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: And so when we do these sites, we are always there, or we have somebody there to explain the work. And often, when we've done these site projects, they have been connected to conferences on this type of thing. So they get a whole new public that comes in and sees their beautiful architecture. I'm often asked that question. But it's gotten to be reasonably easy to approach these sites, and I don't think I've been turned down in the last 10 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Why the decision to start in Europe rather than the States? Was it simply because you had the connections there?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, we had the connections. And also, as I said, Ken Mitchell decided he wanted to be the curator, and he actually raised some money for the publication and so on. But also, that historic architecture — from the 14th, 15th, 16th centuries — we have less of that, much less of that here. And that sort of ambiance, and the drama, the theatrics of those spaces is just so compelling.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely. So we will go into that in greater depth, but before, well, I'll circle us back around a little bit, to grad school, and we'll come back to that.

MR. MONGRAIN: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: I just want to talk about grad school briefly — the strengths and the weaknesses of that program for you, who was teaching, you know.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think the real strengths for me in graduate school were my peers.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Not only Nick Kripal. Walter Zurko was there, and I think he is now a professor at Webster College. And a few other people that I've more lost contact with. But it was really this thing where we worked together every day, we shared the studios. We interacted a lot.

The faculty was certainly there, but often, as in many graduate programs, the faculty come in for critiques. There's perhaps more of a nurturing aspect with undergraduate students. They just come in and expect us to work, and give criticism. And it was a time where — this was also in the late '70s, early '80s — and I was doing performance.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: It was very typical that a lot of people, at that time — performance was becoming a very big thing, along with — excuse me — along with installation-based work and more expansive kinds of sculptural things. And I was trying to be a performance artist.

MS. RIEDEL: I didn't know that.

MR. MONGRAIN: Leila Daw was a young woman who was one of the sculpture professors. And I started working, perhaps, most closely with her, as one of the tutors, and took performance classes with her. And I did a few things that I thought were okay. And then I did quite a bit of performance when I was in Scotland, too. I had a brief connection with a group of Germans who were doing — whose performance work was actually physically aggressive. There was a lot of contact.

And I've said occasionally that the only reason I joined this group was I am generally shy. And it was so contrary to my personality that I wanted to do it just as an experience. I could probably go through quite a few things in my life — like going to the seminary, that kind of thing — but it was —

MS. RIEDEL: What was the name of the group?

MR. MONGRAIN: We had a small group. There was — the leader, her name was Cortaine [ph], and so —

MS. RIEDEL: Did the group have a name, though?

MR. MONGRAIN: No, no.

MS. RIEDEL: No, okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: But we would occasionally do things in different places.

MS. RIEDEL: What sort of performance work?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, it was — it was a lot about, sort of, this narrative-based work — that we would create sets and we would sort of — it was almost theatrical. But the physicality of it, there was — I wouldn't exactly say aggressiveness, but it was using, almost, bodies as sculpture within a sort of architectural format.

One of my performances dealt with the fact — the registration of the body for the Vietnam War. I had just missed that. I was just a couple of years — but my older brother — I remember us sitting and they were calling off the birthdates for the draft, and us waiting for October 10th, which was my brother's birthday, and it was — it was very emotional, you can guess. And I think he was about in the middle. But you sort of knew that the top third were going to be drafted.

Anyway, so this — this was family experience — I started to speak with some people who had come back, and one of the things they told me was how when you're first indoctrinated into the Army, they search your body for identifiable marks, so that if — so that they can identify you in the most extreme situations. So one of my performance was I, sort of, started identifying all the scars on my body, and I was doing this as I was standing in front of the, sort of, height scale that they use in police stations.

And I was also sitting on the top of two chairs as I was doing it, which was a method that was used for torture. They would place people up on these two high chairs, and when they got so fatigued and they fell — they were bound — and when they fell, they would be falling from about four feet, and they put them back up. So that was one of my, kind of, physical pieces. And then other people engaged in it as I was doing it. Probably my first, most political piece — this was in grad school.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, so it was performed at the university?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. It was performed —

MS. RIEDEL: Did it have a name, a title?

MR. MONGRAIN: Not really. I think as a student, I wasn't really in the mindset of — I recorded it, and I've got some nice images, but I didn't really title it. I'm not sure if it's in the back of the book.

MS. RIEDEL: I don't remember that, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I probably did five or six performance pieces. That was probably the one that I thought was the most successful. One of the other ones — I got invited to a performance conference. This was also in grad school. And in retrospect, it almost sounds a little foolish. But there was a full orchestra, and I asked the conductor if I could conduct one of the songs.

There was also a man at the performance who was performing, and he was in clown face. So I was dressed as a priest, and I got to conduct the orchestra while this person in clown face confessed his sins to me. And I sort of tempoed the orchestra related to the level of his sins. [They laugh.] And so I would quiet them down when there was less, and bring it up.

So there was a sort of parallel between the orchestration of — which I was really — you could see how political this was — but that sense of the authority of Catholicism, and the Catholic Church, in relation to this. This was, of course, the time where — it had probably started earlier — but my real questioning of the authoritarian aspect of the Catholic Church. I still think that the generous premise of caring about people and support is a wonderful thing, but the other parts of it that are almost more discriminatory I've always had a problem with.

And that was probably one of the first performances that I did about that. And that, of course, links back to my time in the seminary.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, absolutely. It's always so interesting to me to examine some of the earliest things that are done, because there are — often you find the seeds of what evolves over the next few decades.

MR. MONGRAIN: I've said that to my graduate students often, that you need to hang onto this. Because in 20 years, you're going to see that there's a thread between what you're doing now and what you're doing — because you're making choices, even if they're intuitive, that probably stay with you to some degree.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And it's surprising, but it's gotten to be interestingly predictable, always in a different way, how often those seeds really are there very early on.

MR. MONGRAIN: I've done very few long lectures where it's had a retrospective aspect, where I've dug into the earlier images, but it's — I remember the first time I did that. It was really amazing how similar. Even that little crown that I made for the Virgin Mary when I was eight or nine years old — it's an image that I've come back to

occasionally, and also the simplicity in how I modeled it. You know, if art really is a reflection of your personality, there are seldom, sort of, huge changes as you go through life.

MS. RIEDEL: Maybe just a refining, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, yes. And hopefully a focus.

MS. RIEDEL: And a trial by fire too. [Laughs.] So we've talked about the strength of some of your peers as one of the strengths of the graduate program. Anything else in particular, and any weaknesses that are worth mentioning?

MR. MONGRAIN: It was mostly an enjoyable time for me. I struggled a bit. And I think the weakness was more on my part. I was coming to grad school, and I generally, as I've said, I have sort of a general temperament, but I was also trying to fit in. And I would have times of speaking out critically more than I should have in critiques, and other times where I wasn't speaking at all.

And it was really finding that kind of balance for me — of how to engage other people who are serious and doing things, and that kind of method of group discussion and sharing. That's probably one of the things that I was very poor at when I started grad school, and I tried to work hard to improve that. And by the time I was finished with grad school is when I realized that I really did want to teach, that, I thought, maybe I could be okay at it. I think at first, it had never, sort of, crossed my mind.

I was also in grad school when I got my first teaching job, and it was an adjunct art history position — a small college called Blackburn College. It was in a little town called, if I remember right, Carlinville, about 20 miles south of Edwardsville. And they would always call up Edwardsville and ask for an adjunct professor. And I'd been after that job. I really wanted it. I really wanted to — and again, it was to just kind of test myself.

I grew up with a bit of a stutter, and occasionally I still notice it. And I went through the, sort of, typical kind of therapy. I took the saxophone because people thought that would help my breathing. And so I had a little bit of that too in grad school. And the idea of standing in front of a group of people, teaching an art appreciation class — and it was the period that interests me. It was that medieval period, with the architecture, early Renaissance painting, all the symbolism, all of that.

And so I started — that was my first teaching job. And I remember I used to write out my lectures. It was a two-hour class, and I would actually read. And probably, like, the third or fourth week, one of my students asked me if I was okay. [They laugh.] Because I think I was so bad. And what I learned was to stop — I learned to just put down bullet points and talk about the imagery. That was one of the best things I ever learned, was to trust that I could address things visually, and I could talk about them in a reasonably full way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [Laughs.] Oh — [inaudible].

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. [Laughs.] I think — I think she actually asked if I was on drugs — [laughter] — because I was so bad — [laughs]. I was so — I was so bad. Thank God I had that experience in graduate school as an adjunct, rather than if I had been given a job, and I was on a tenure track and being evaluated, and they would have just crushed me. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. But it was trial by fire and trial by doing — [inaudible] —

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — there — yes. [Laughs.] You were doing performance work in grad school.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What were the sculptural pieces like? Were there sculptural pieces? You know —

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. Yes. I started doing a lot of flat ceramic work. And I was doing these very large cut-shaped clay pieces. This was mostly — this was about half of my thesis show, and the other was documentation of performances.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And so it was really drawing and playing with the surface and using all of that process. Again, I've got — I think I have — all the images I have from grad school are related to my performance, and some sculptural things. I have almost no clay work from them. But since it — since clay is such a technically rooted part of my experience, the jobs that I was getting were mostly —

MS. RIEDEL: I see.

MR. MONGRAIN: — teaching ceramics. And also — it was also — there has been this transition — as you say, that change that Peter Volkas started, making people working with clay having the potential to be put into a fine arts sphere. That transition was happening as I started going out looking for jobs. So most of the schools wanted people who could teach ceramics, knew all the technical process — the glaze chemistry, but took a very expansive view.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. That's interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. I think even now, it would be very difficult for a functional potter to get a university teaching job.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: Not that they shouldn't, but most universities are looking for people with a kind of diversity, that they can move in and out and take a — take a physically expansive view, and —

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. That's interesting, to hear you say that, because certainly most of the people I've been speaking with are a lot older, as — [laughs] — we mentioned. [Laughter.] But it's interesting to — that you have had that experience in your career.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, here —

MS. RIEDEL: That's a change in this generation, to be sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's a change.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: My job here at Hunter College, the person who had it previously was Susan Peterson.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes, of course. Of course.

MR. MONGRAIN: Susan had it for 30 years. She has written some of the great books on the studio in ceramics. And lovely person; I had never met her until I got this job. But when Susan retired, for several years before they replaced her, and when they were looking to hire somebody, you can only imagine how many really good ceramic people applied for the job.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: I was living in Europe. My reputation in the States was — I'd been gone for about eight years. I had much more of a reputation as an artist in Europe, for what — how much ever that was. And — but when I applied, my — the — most of my teaching in Scotland was in an area called environmental art. And it was really a site-specific —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — so I wasn't teaching ceramics. But when I applied for the job here, and I talked about the seminars I ran on European artists, and the site and installation classes — so they were really looking for a ceramic-nonceramic person —

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — as there were certainly people who were much better established as ceramic artists in the States. And my job here has developed into a sculptural job, right.

MS. RIEDEL: I would think so, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah. I was wondering how exactly that position was framed here. So that's interesting to have you elaborate on that.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, there was a close call. There were several people thinking that they should get rid of — they should drop ceramics.

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

MR. MONGRAIN: I think a while ago, Hunger College decided to have what they called a fine art focus. And they got rid of all kinds of design orientation, or there certainly — so no glass, no fibers, no graphics. We had printmaking, but — and ceramics, when Susan Peterson retired, there was a lot of conversation for years about what to do with that. And I was very lucky that they decided to hire — that they decided to actually search the job, and that I got hired. I'm very fortunate to have this job.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it's a great job.

MS. RIEDEL: And it makes sense, too, when I think about it, because Susan Peterson had such a history in that evolution of ceramic to be a fine art medium.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And she certainly was such a — an educator and a writer —

MR. MONGRAIN: Absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: — historian, ceramic historian. So that actually makes sense, that you would take that to the next — to the next generation.

MR. MONGRAIN: She was a great, great force.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: I do remember — I think it was in Phoenix, Arizona — about three or four years ago, there was the national ceramic — the NCECA conference. And Susan was going to be honored, given a Lifetime Achievement Award — and I don't remember the exact dates, but I think about a week before she passed away. And I was there as one of the speakers, and I talked about what I knew of her time here at Hunter — and of course, as you say, these great contributions in the past 40 years of American ceramics. And —

MS. RIEDEL: Actually, and that reminds me too — one of the things I wanted to ask you before we move too far afield was, if you would describe your experiences with Dan Anderson, because I don't know that there — that we have a lot on record about what your experiences of him as a teacher and an artist might have been. And that might be interesting to record.

MR. MONGRAIN: Dan was one of my initial supporters to come into the master's program. We have — we also have a slightly different aesthetic and —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: — different way of talking about art. I greatly respect Dan. But his approach — and as I — as I realized what his approach was, and that mine was a little different, was when I moved to more — some of the more sculptural faculty, like Liela Daw. But yes, it was fine. He was producing work; he was a very generous teacher. He had us over to his home on a regular basis. He had a great ceramic collection.

I think Dan is — when I knew him back then too, and even now, he is strongly rooted in the tradition of ceramics. And his recent work, these small, architectural things, I think based on water towers —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and things, and even —

MS. RIEDEL: Been doing that a long time, I think. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — yeah, even some kind of photo decal work of traditional billboard imagery. It's — he's getting out there a great deal, and he's showing a lot of work.

MS. RIEDEL: But Leila spoke more to —

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: — the direction you were heading, yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. You know, the — grad school for me was — like many people, I was trying to find my voice.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I was trying to experiment a lot. And it really was the time when you first started seeing people leaving material behind and dealing what — not truly conceptual work, but dealing where it's driven by content and driven by experience rather than physical, discrete objects —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — at least — yeah. And — you know, and of course most of the people I worked with, too, were in that kind of experimental phase.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] But it sounds like a pretty interesting program, in that there was that range of faculty, that you could find someone that could help you evolve in the direction that you were interested in going.

MR. MONGRAIN: Sure. That was one of the great things about Southern Illinois. You could approach a variety of people and get them into your studio. I think my thesis adviser — I think Leila [Daw] ended up being my thesis adviser and took me through the end of the program.

It was also interesting being in what was a small town. It was not unlike where I grew up in International Falls. St. Louis was just across the river. We were almost on the far side of East St. Louis. So on weekends we would all just pile in a car and go to St. Louis, and go down by the river where the jazz was and go to the museums, and it was really nice having a reasonably major city just within about 30 minutes', 40 minutes' drive.

But the nice thing about a small town like that is, you really don't have much else to do other than work. And we would. I — I'm afraid that when I — when I've told this to my grad students, I sound a little bit like the grandfather that walked 20 miles — [they laugh] — through the snow to return the library book. But my memory is that we would work till about 11 o'clock.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — each night — each night. I remember — one of my memories of Dan, and he probably won't remember this, but he scolded us once because every Saturday night we would leave the studio to go home and watch "Saturday Night Live."

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Of course, this was back in the great John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd days, when —

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right. It was worth watching. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and he came into the studio one Saturday evening and no one was there. [Laughs.] And he wondered where we were.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about the — when you finished graduate school, how you came to teach in Scotland.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, there was a — there were several steps before that.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And as I said, my first teaching job was as an adjunct during graduate school.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: My first real teaching job was right out of grad school. I was looking for something for that summer, about three or four months. I can't remember exactly how, but I wrote a grant to the Montana Arts Council to begin an art school for the Crow Indians on the Crow Indian Reservation.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: The Crow Indians have a huge reservation in the southeast corner of Montana — huge reservation. And I was given this money; and I was told, there's a building in Wyola, Montana; and I should show up and try to help start art school. So I did. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONGRAIN: So I kind of packed myself up, and I went directly there.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have any contacts on the reservation?

MR. MONGRAIN: Not a one. Nothing at all. But —

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired you to do that?

MR. MONGRAIN: Like I said, I was looking for things, and somebody had — in Montana, who I knew from Southern Illinois, said, you should write the arts council. They have some money now, and they're offering different things. So I wrote them, and they accepted the grant, and they suggested that I come and help develop this small community art program for the Crow Indians.

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was really interesting. And one of the people who was the leader there — his name was Bill Yellowtail. And Bill was a lawyer; he'd — and he was part of the granting. And I actually came and lived with Maggie and Bill Yellowtail right by the Little Bighorn River, and started — went and spent several weeks trying to get this room — this building developed. And they had materials. And we were going to start our community art program. [Laughs.] I remember — I remember the first evening. I was starting classes, and I was opening it up to the community. Nobody showed up.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Not one person.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And the next day about 40 people show up. And I said, "Great to have you here. Can you tell me why no one showed up for last night when we were having the opening?" And they said, "*King Kong* was on television." [They laugh.] You know, it puts you in your place really quickly. Like, I have to check the television schedule before I arrange [things]. But that was really an interesting experience. And I lived on the reservation. My memory is I think I was the only Caucasian there for the three or four months. I had a horse. I got to ride. It was very romantic in some ways.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was '82?

MR. MONGRAIN: This was '81, '82, when I was just about the time coming out of the master's program.

MS. RIEDEL: And what were you teaching at the community center?

MR. MONGRAIN: It was really a community art center.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I was in some ways following their lead.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I know — I learned quickly that the young boys wanted to build war shields, these sort of shields. And they drew on them. So they made these beautiful round objects and drew on them. And the cultural things were interesting too because if a girl touched your shield, you had to throw it away. They — if — somehow there was this thing about the boys and girls being very separate, especially with kind of iconic cultural images. And of course, this was all based on their historic and — but that was really interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: One of the most enjoyable times was — and again, this sounds a bit like a cliché — but there would be storytelling each evening. A large fire would be built, and they would tell stories. And they would go back as far as — the Crows were very proud that they were on Custer's side.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: And it's — I guess, if my memory is correct — it's one of the reasons they have such a large reservation. But they would tell these stories, and they would — in a very sort of earnest, historic way. And that was a really great thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: Perhaps one of my best, greatest honors living on the reservation was I got invited to a Sun

Dance. And so at the solstice, they have a point where the sun rises in the morning between two mountains in this crevice, with a very long lodge pole, very tall lodge pole, and there would be strings and ribbons tied at the very top. And the minute the sun hit the top of the lodge pole, there was all this enthusiastic dancing. They would all have these things tied around their shoulders, and they would dance around this sun pole while the elders on the outside beat drums.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was really interesting. The drums were so big. They would — they would place the babies in the middle, and you'd see these babies just bounce to the rhythm. You could just see, it was almost being ingrained. It was really fascinating.

MS. RIEDEL: That is — babies — sitting on the drum?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, the drums would be like 8 feet in size. So they would put the young — the very young and the babies in the center. And as long as they were enjoying it, and they would do — just sort of — sort of bounce. And I got — I didn't participate. I helped — I did some of the drumming, but it was amazing watching.

MS. RIEDEL: That it is extraordinary. Not many people are invited those —

MR. MONGRAIN: No. No. And I was part of a sweat lodge once, which almost killed me. [Laughs.] Those are serious.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: So that was a really interesting time.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: Got to have some of the best fishing that I'd ever done. And saw my first grizzly bears. It's — of course, that it — that was — there was a mountainous area around there.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: When I left there, I got —

MS. RIEDEL: So it was a very limited three-month stay and that was it.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then, my job was to sort of help begin this community arts center.

MS. RIEDEL: And then they would continue it.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then they continued it. Yes. So — which of course I think was best, rather than to have an outsider.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: I had a — presumably, I had a master's degree and I had this grant money, so I could help get it started.

MS. RIEDEL: Gotcha.

MR. MONGRAIN: As far as I know, it's still going on. I know about 10 or 15 years ago, it was still there. And it was my first real experience with a homogenous culture, where everybody is from — has a cultural sensibility, a sense of humor. And there's something both enclosed and expansive about having that experience. My second was living in Scotland.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And probably I would say about 85 percent of the population is Scottish and about 10 or 15 percent Indian — very large population from India in Scotland.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah. Okay. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Great Indian food.

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. But yeah, that was a fascinating thing.

MS. RIEDEL: So — yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: But going back to sort of the cycle of my teaching. So that was my second experience with that. And then, I think my very first teaching job was at a small college in North Dakota — Valley City, North Dakota. And it was a two-person art department and I was the 3-D person. And it was really a — just a beautiful little town in the middle of North Dakota. One of these absolutely quaint — you know, in the movies sometimes they'll show the old movies from the '40s and '50s and that showed the little college town —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: — all the brick buildings and the ivy.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was just like that.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh my God.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was the sweetest little place. Probably a student population of less than 2,000.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I was the sculptor.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was — it was really a lovely experience. As much as I love small towns, my goal had always been to live in New York. And I was there for a couple of years before I got hired at the University of Minnesota — Moorhead, which is in Fargo. It's a twin city with Fargo, North Dakota. I was actually there when the movie *Fargo* came out.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? [They laugh.] Oh, what a celebrity.

MR. MONGRAIN: And the accent was dead on, I will say. [Laughs.] I've worked hard to get over my Minnesota accent and my Canadian twang.

MS. RIEDEL: You don't hear much.

MR. MONGRAIN: Not much. I think living in Scotland — I have a Scottish accent, but that got rid of my Minnesota accent.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: But — and that was — that was maybe about my most serious teaching job to date. That was with a faculty of about 7 or 8 people.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were teaching 3-D?

MR. MONGRAIN: I was teaching ceramics.

MS. RIEDEL: You were teaching ceramics? Strictly ceramics?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, during my interview, they said, "We'd like you to teach ceramics, perhaps a little bit of sculpture. But we also have a glass studio. Do you know how to do glass?" And as one does in an interview, I nodded my head, "Yes." I had one class in grad school with glass. I knew — I knew which end of the pipe to hold and that was — that was about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh. Wow.

MR. MONGRAIN: It just so happened when I first got that job, my brother, James, had finished high school. And what had happened about that time, too, was our mother had passed away at the age of 47.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I'm sorry.

MR. MONGRAIN: Very young. And my father at 58. So here's my younger brother, just turning 18 and with no parents. And I just got this new job in Fargo-Moorhead. Jim came to live with me. He took his first college class with me as his teacher.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: But the funny thing was we had a summer together. I moved there immediately, so I had three months before I started teaching. And he and I decided to learn how to blow glass together.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Within minutes, he was better than me. [They laugh.] So — and Jim had — Jim has such a great touch. He is really one of the renowned goblet makers in the United States. His goblets are extraordinary and collected around the world. And he has the skill, too, where he not only makes most of Dale Chihuly's work, but he makes work for most of the artists you see in Chelsea that show work.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Kiki Smith, Meg Webster — there's a whole list of people. And all these people go to Jim out in Seattle.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: But — and so Jim came and lived with me that summer. And he and I, every day, we would get up and go to the glass studio and try to learn how to blow glass. And — [laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: That's how he got his start?

MR. MONGRAIN: That's how he got his start. He always says that he learned all his bad habits from me that he had to break.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: But we were — we were blowing — we were getting broken Coca-Cola bottles from a factory. And if you know much about glass, there's the great lead crystal —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — that stays fluid for a long time. And Coca-Cola glass is like plastic. The minute it comes out of the furnace, it hardens. So Jim and I were really struggling.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: But he managed to do quite well.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it was a really a wonderful time in my life. He spent a couple of years living with me. I remember this very sad thing when he was applying to school there, because as he's checking off his financial aid forms, he actually had to check "orphan." It just broke our heart, because he had just — we'd lost both parents when he was 18. And of course, I was about 30 at the time or 29, 30. But it was really a lovely time. And that — I think it was — I hope for him, it was a good transition. And he then went on to MassArt. He stayed with me for about a year and a half, two years, and then went to a real arts — not that Moorhead wasn't — but he went to an art school that had glassblowing as a major emphasis. And his skill just got honed immediately. I know he — I still think all those — all those months trying to make glass with Coca-Cola bottles —

MS. RIEDEL: Coke bottles. [Laughs.] Paid off in the long run.

MR. MONGRAIN: That's the way to start.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's like rolling a boulder uphill —

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and all of a sudden the grounds level. But yeah. And it —

MS. RIEDEL: It's an interesting detour into collaboration, too, somehow and working collaboratively —

MR. MONGRAIN: It was.

MS. RIEDEL: And yeah. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that's the thing about glass. You have to work usually as a team.

MS. RIEDEL: Though you've done that a little bit it, it sounds like in — like in some of the performance work.

MR. MONGRAIN: Of course. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And even Nick Kripal and I have done some collaborative work together.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: But — so that was — and I was there at — I think then it was called Moorhead State University. Now, it's University of Minnesota — Moorhead, I believe. And you know, I also really enjoyed living in Fargo. For me, it was a slightly larger town.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it was a — it was a really good experience. And almost every summer when I was there, even when I was at Valley City, for about six summers, Nick Kripal and I wanted to find a cheap way to go to Europe.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So what we decided to do was we would get a small group of students and take them on a tour.

MS. RIEDEL: Smart.

MR. MONGRAIN: And so — well, we were young and foolish, but we did it much longer than we should have. There were times that it was like five weeks where we herded around a group of undergraduate students through London, through Scotland, through Brussels, through a variety of countries.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And we would have our way paid.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then we would stay for two or three weeks —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and travel around Europe. And the Glasgow School of Art offered to be our home base.

MS. RIEDEL: Great.

MR. MONGRAIN: So long before I was teaching there, I — we were going there every summer and taking students.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. All right. That makes sense.

MR. MONGRAIN: And we would stay at Glasgow. And there was also a place up in Highlands, a castle called Hospitalfield House, which — and extraordinary for these students. It was an old hospital originally for — built, I believe, during the era of the Black Plague. And so it has all this really immense history to it. And it's now become kind of an art community. And we were bringing students there, and they would get to live in this castle. And there would be studios. And it was right by the North Sea, right off of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh.

MR. MONGRAIN: Great experience.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: That would always be — we'd have about 10 days in Glasgow and then like two weeks at Hospitalfield House — as romantic as you can imagine it, especially for kids that have had never seen a real brick, a real stone building — but certainly brick, and so they got to be invested in the history. And it was a little — a little Highland village called Arbroath, and it was a fishing village. And you know, you'd walk into town and get fish and chips wrapped in the newspaper and have a pint of beer, sitting at the docks. It was really sweet.

So after doing that for about, I think, five or six summers, I had just been tenured at Moorhead. And I've actually been tenured three times.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONGRAIN: I seem to — I left immediately.

MS. RIEDEL: And leave immediately.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes, I left immediately. [They laugh.] So I had just been tenured at Moorhead, and there was a one-year position open at the Glasgow School of Art. And they asked me if I was interested, and I immediately said yes. So I took a year's leave, thinking I was going to go back. And then they offered me a second year at Glasgow, and I took another year's leave. And when they offered me a third leave, Moorhead pretty much said either come back or don't. So I decided to stay in Glasgow — one of the best art schools in Europe. Amazing place.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: When I was there from '95, it was the time — Douglas Gordon was just graduating. I had all of these young kids that have gone on — to the Saatchi Collectio — Jim Lambie, David Shrigley. I think Christine Borland was there. And all of these — and they were all in the environmental art, which was site-specific, conceptual. It was a great energy at the time. And still, it's an absolutely amazing school.

The teaching was something I have never experienced before, because as an art school, one of my years in environmental art, I taught — I was in charge of what they called the third-year students. There were no classes. There was no structure. It was just me and these 12 students, and we just worked together for a year. I would bring them in. We'd have conversations. We'd do seminars. We would tour around, see things. But — and these European art schools, it is really a job. For the most part, they show up at 9:00, and they don't go to the pub till 4, 5 in the afternoon, unless the faculty were in the pub, then they'd come in — [they laugh] — which happened a lot. This was really like what I imagine American schools were back in the '40s and '50s where a lot more kind of communal interaction. But that's another story.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then eventually I went through a process of trying to get a work permit. And that happened after a couple of years where we had lawyers, and we had to work it out. I finally got a work permit, which is good for the entire European community. It's a — it's a little treasure.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Not that I would ever leave Hunter or New York, but — yeah. And then I —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Wait till you get tenure.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. [Laughs.] Well, I am tenured. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Great.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, that's what happened in Glasgow. I got what they call a permanent position, and then I got offered the job here. And I did the same thing. I took a year's leave — [laughs] —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] They saw that coming. Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and a second year's leave. And eventually they replaced me. Yeah. So that's a little bit of the trajectory of the teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: And how has the teaching evolved over the past couple of decades? Are there specific courses that you've taught repeatedly? Has it evolved based on the different — sounds like the schools have been quite different, so I imagine the curriculum has changed significantly.

MR. MONGRAIN: They've been very different.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And of course, as I've moved to more senior schools, the research orientation becomes more of a focus. When I was in Minnesota teaching, it was four full days a week.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONGRAIN: You know, the classes met twice. And then you were teaching four classes for two or three hours each. And it was a real teaching school.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And there was some support for research, but — and then in Glasgow, too, there was a lot of teaching, but a little more emphasis on your own professional development and research. I must say Hunter is very supportive. Most of us probably work two full days a week —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and — but with the expectation that we are out there and making a contribution to our field. And that's really — that's — again, one of the real pleasures of having this job is the — in some ways, of course, the academics has become the academy that supports artists. That's the new Medici for the family. So it allows — it — you hear this from a lot of artists, especially on the West Coast, that have these great teaching jobs. Some only work one or two days a week with a very decent salary. So I get to do things I would never be able to do if I was trying to make a living selling my work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: I would be like many artists in New York, trying to work a second job just to keep things going. I'm always aware of how fortunate I am. And as far as the teaching — I work a lot with graduate students. And I teach some — I teach more sculpture. I don't think I've taught a ceramic class in like five or six years.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I do sort of miss it. But the real joy for me is talking with the MFA students, where you go in and you have really serious people.

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MR. MONGRAIN: You know, the classes met twice — three — and then you were teaching four classes that were two or three hours each. And it was a real teachers' school. And there was some support for research, but — and then in Glasgow too, there was a lot of teaching, but a little more emphasis on your own professional development and research. I must say, Hunter is very supportive. Most of us probably work two full days a week, but with the expectation that we are out there and making a contribution to our field.

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like, five or six years.

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MR. MONGRAIN: And I do sort of miss it. But the real joy for me is talking with the MFA students, where you go in and you have really serious people. We get about 750 applicants each year for about 40 places. And so it's quite a good group —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: —that we get. If you have a chance, our MFA thesis show opened last night.

MS. RIEDEL: Ooh, I'd love to see that.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's at 41st Street —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: — 10th Avenue.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: We have a gorgeous exhibition space — I think about 13[,000] to 14,000 square feet, massive for New York. It's museum quality. And these students have these large individual spaces. But —

MS. RIEDEL: How fantastic.

MR. MONGRAIN: — you should see it. It's actually a very good thesis show.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, I would love to see that.

MR. MONGRAIN: We had the opening Wednesday evening, and we'd get these huge crowds.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's really a New York event. Critics, gallery dealers — a year or two ago MoMA came in and bought some work out of a thesis show. So — and it's quite extraordinary; it's like a lot of these — a lot of the New York critics and galleries, you know, they're looking for the young artists more than the middle-aged. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.] Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And, you know, they're looking for that next hot thing. And so they go to the thesis shows at Columbia, at NYU and Hunter. And it's quite a serious event. And these young people are so much more professional than certainly I was in grad school. I was telling them that I think when I applied, I'd set a few pieces on a trash can and took some snapshots. [They laugh.] And now they're so smart about their imagery. They have their own websites, you know. They have a professional bent that we certainly didn't have.

MS. RIEDEL: And I've heard that is — can be both a strength and a weakness.

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, absolutely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. They're — and we have this conversation occasionally, because we always have a couple of art stars that come out. Jules de Balincourt has hit it big; Ian Burns is doing — you know, so we always have some — Johnston Foster — who are get — who get museum shows, that get major shows. And so the potential for the young star status is right in front of them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it's that ring that they sort of grab for. So they know that it — the possibility is there. I don't think I ever thought of that in grad school, you know, certainly. Maybe living in New York makes a difference.

MS. RIEDEL: Does — I'm sure. Does that, in some way, affect your teaching — what you hope to accomplish in the way — in what you feel — or what you feel is important to teach.

MR. MONGRAIN: It does.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: It does. And —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. How have your thoughts about teaching evolved over the past couple decades?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, the students these days are so knowledgeable because of the Internet and Google access. They know what's going on around the world. They're aware of all the biennials and what's — you know, who the hot artists in Asia are, and who the hot artists in South America. Their exposure is massive compared to anything we had even 10 or 15 years ago. So you're walking into a room of smart people.

It's also — for me personally, it's a balance between teaching from my own aesthetic, which I'm cautious of. And I spend a lot of time trying to have them tell me what they're after and what they're interested in. Usually my first two sessions with any new MFA student is having them tell me their background, show me their undergraduate work, tell me what their interests are, so that, as best I can, relating my criticism to their interest rather than my own perspective.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: But of course the students are also knowledgeable about the work of the faculty. And those who feel they have some kindred link to what my practice has been are the ones that come to me mostly.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And at this point, is the emphasis primarily on environmental and installation work sculpture, for you?

MR. MONGRAIN: For me. Well, I'm one of the few what we would consider object makers in my department. I actually do things with materials. As you've probably seen from my book, I really enjoy the site, but about half of my work is discrete, gallery-based objects. I cast in resin; I carve — I carve clay; I work some with wood. And so I'm sort of seen as the builder, their sculptor guy.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So a lot of students — even the class that I teach, one of them, is called sculptural methods. And the first five or six weeks, it's sort of a — an expansive Martha Stewart sort of, here's how you cast in plaster; here's how you do rubber mold or woodworking. So I just take them through process. And then it becomes a conversation about their work.

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

MR. MONGRAIN: But I quite a range of people. One of my upcoming thesis students is a performance artist.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: And on rare occasions, even, I will get a painter who thinks that the — we have similar narratives, or that there's some — or else we've had some good conversations and they want to work with me. And that's another nice thing about Hunter: The students can pick whomever they want to work with. They don't have to stay within their discipline.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: When I was a grad student, ceramic students were in the ceramic studio, primarily working with the ceramic faculty. And it was a — you could venture out, but you had to sort of force the issue. Now it's not even a thought with our grad students.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: And they know all of our work. And one of — Nari Ward, who just had a show at MASS MoCA, who does this large-scale, amazing art — and he's starting to show all over the world, and he's in all of the biennials. And a lot of students are moving towards him.

I also notice, of course — as we hire the younger faculty — we've just hired a performance-related artist, Malik Gaines, who's part of the — you might know the West Coast group — performance group called the Barbarians? Malik is one of the leaders in that group —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: — this young guy that we just hired. And Paul Ramirez Jonas, he just did the piece in Times

Square with keys. And then Daniel Bozhkov and Carrie Moyer, these — and so the younger faculty we've hired — and of course the students are moving — will move towards them.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And as I — as I become more of the mid-range faculty — and it's the normal transition.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] What was the main focus of the teaching in Glasgow? And how does it differ from what's happening here?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, Glasgow — I mostly taught at the undergrad —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: — in Glasgow. But it was an art school. So these students would come in, and they would spend one year doing foundations. They would draw for eight weeks — and they could draw, really draw. Our students don't have that focus of eight hours a day for eight weeks, drawing. It's amazing. I mean, people — anyone could learn how to draw. And then they would do sculptural things, and they — so that year was a foundation.

The second year, they would go and do one thing. If they wanted to paint, they would go into the painting area and work with the painters, and have a space to work in, and that's all they would do. The students that came to the environmental art area that I mostly taught in — and I — and I taught with amazing faculty. Samantha Ainsley — and I worked with her for several years as almost teaching together; and David Harding, who headed the environmental art area.

As I said, we had a really wonderful group of art stars that came out of the program. And they would come and they would work in the program. And the teaching was much more of a mentorship than a kind of teaching. You would have these same students for three years, and you would just be a part of their life, basically.

That sense of the art school, it certainly has a kind of a focus. And it gives a lot of credence to that kind of development within a very specific area. What I like about liberal arts schools here as undergrads is, they almost have to take a painting class, photography class — and they go through a range. They are perhaps less developed within a specific area, but they have more diversity.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So it's a little bit of — it kind of depends where you philosophically fall on art education.

MS. RIEDEL: That's very interesting. That's very interesting, because I want to — we wanted to touch on the place of universities in environmental art, in craft, in —

MR. MONGRAIN: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: — and ceramics. And that sounds like one of the strengths and the weaknesses at the same time.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, this was an issue about seven — no, maybe about five or six years ago. The ceramic — *American Ceramics* magazine — which was led by Ron Kuchta and Harry Dennis, who just recently passed away — they did an issue on New York ceramic artists.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And they picked I think eight of us — including, like, Betty Woodman and Steve Montgomery and a lot of us. And almost all of us — and we were interviewed by John Perreault. And John would always ask us this question about, sort of, craft and how we thought ceramics was seen in the New York art circles.

And almost all of us — of the eight of us — really spoke about clay simply being a material — and we used it that way — rather than the more tradition of the focus of working within that medium, and with a process and being very, very true to its history. Very few of us talked about it as though we even considered ourselves ceramic artists. I certainly do. I really have a love for working with clay, and it makes up over half of my work. But I don't think I take that kind of craft approach.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: I have been, over the years, of course — I've been on several panel discussions, the art versus craft thing. And that's gone on for centuries.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: And, you know, it can be a bit tedious, but it's a conversation — especially if you're entering the field, if you're fairly young, it's worth having the conversation. And, truth be told, there's still a prejudice that people bring towards anybody — the fine arts bring towards people working in what they consider craft material —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — I think far less so than it used to be. But, you know, still. But that — I think that stopped bothering me, or even being a question for me, quite a while ago.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I would think so — because your work has gone such a different direction. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. My last three, four years in Scotland I think is where the current work sort of started — the more reductive sensibility based on sort of a consideration — whether for science or some — having a[n] emphasis on a — sort of a conceptual mechanism of some kind.

MS. RIEDEL: What was the catalyst or the thought process, or the process process, behind that evolution to how the work shifted in that direction?

MR. MONGRAIN: It'd be a little difficult to pinpoint it to one specific thing.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: But were there a series of events, or a series of thoughts, a series of pieces that led up to that?

MR. MONGRAIN: There was.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I think there is — you know, like we were talking about earlier, you always see the inklings of an aesthetic very early on, even like in high school? I was always drawn to a kind of minimal, reductive sense. And a lot of the artists — beyond the historic things of, like, the early Renaissance iconography and those paintings — most of the contemporary work that I thought had this poetry and intelligence was minimal work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: I mean, Judd and Morris and all of these people, they were just extraordinary objects — the clarity, and what I thought was still an expressiveness. I always had this love of Clyfford Still, too, and — as sort of a counterpoint to that. But when I was in Glasgow, I had gone through all the experimentation phases, I think, of performance work. And I was still doing some of that. And I finally started working in the studio a little bit more quietly.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I think I did my — I did this bed piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was a 12-foot-long bed. And it had this sort of obvious emotive content of separating the two people in the bed and a pillow on each end.

MS. RIEDEL: — it was a very narrow, long piece. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Very — yes, very narrow.

MS. RIEDEL: So nobody's sleeping side by side, but — yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Twelve feet long. Yes. They're really almost toe to toe.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: So it's sharing an intimacy with complete separation.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And all of a sudden, these kinds of — projecting these kind of issues — that both had a suggestion of the autobiography, along with what I thought was a slightly more reductive visual aesthetic — started creeping into the work. I think the piece I did after that was — and I had no idea why, but I started making these large-scale bells.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that was the first form that I think started this work that I'm doing now.

MS. RIEDEL: You say you had no idea why?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I didn't, except — the idea that, you know, a single image, altered in slight fashion, can re-address its social position — all of a sudden, all the things — and I started thinking about all the things about bells. They wake you up in the morning; they — they're part of the churches and cathedrals; they also ring people's deaths; they all — and also it's so common and generic. The diversity of a position of such a simple object — and I really think that's sort of where it started. And that's really been at the root of what a lot of my work is. To be poignant and simple at the same time is something that I really drive for.

I would probably say one of the great influences, too, was Robert Gober. It's when I first started looking at his work and I — some of his images, I think, have that — have what I would interpret as that sensibility. What was really interesting was about eight or nine years ago he approached me and wanted to build some ceramic pieces here. I'd been running this artist-in-residency program where I'd been bringing — I'd been allowing well-established New York artists who want to make something in clay and have none of the technical facilities to come in and use the shop. I think Kiki Smith was one of the first.

I got to know Kiki because my brother Jim made all of her glasswork. But — yeah, Robert Gober at that last big show he had — I don't know if you remember the show, but there were two white chairs that looked like those plastic lawn chairs you see on people's patios. He made — those were made out of clay. So he made the molds and worked on building them downstairs in the ceramic area and we fired them here.

I remember always trying to convince the students that you had to be really careful. This is really — this guy is very well-established. Now, I think MoMA ended up buying his entire show for like \$4 million or something. And then all of a sudden students started to be more careful. [They laugh.] Put a price tag on it and —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: But, yeah, I've always really loved his work. And then he gave a lecture to — the only payment I require when these artists come in and work is that they give a lecture to the MFA students. And he gave —

MS. RIEDEL: So generous.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and he doesn't lecture often, and he gave this really lovely, wonderful lecture about his work. And so that was nice, that I got to be influenced by his work long before I had ever met him.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you come up with this artist-in-residency program or was it place here?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, it started —

MS. RIEDEL: It's a fantastic idea, a great resource for the students and the artists.

MR. MONGRAIN: Great resource. And it's one of these — I always think it's just kind of a logical thing. But when I was in Scotland, my brother Jim was already making Kiki Smith's work. And he introduced us. And Kiki came to Glasgow and stayed with me for a week and did tutorials and did lectures. And that's when I got to know her a little. And then when I got the job here — of course you know Tony Smith or Tony Smith's sculpture? Her father was our head of sculpture.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So all of the older faculty grew up with Kiki. So she had a very tight connection with Hunter College. So then I got the job and she sort of says, "Can I use your kilns, I'm doing these little ceramic things." And I said, "Sure, come in, use the kilns." And I said, "Tell you what, use the kilns for the whole summer or whatever and give us a talk — that's it."

MS. RIEDEL: That was it?

MR. MONGRAIN: That's how it started.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I said, you know, tell anybody that you want. And Beverly Semmes then calls. And I go down a long list of pretty well-established people who've come through the program.

MS. RIEDEL: Fantastic.

MR. MONGRAIN: And the undergraduates get to work with them. They get to produce the work and get shown in Chelsea and we get lectures and no money exchanges hands. It's just a simple exchange for — it's been really nice.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fantastic.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. So that's one of the advantages, I'm sure, to New York.

MR. MONGRAIN: It is.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I just got a note from Meg Webster the other day, she wants — she wants to come back in and do some work.

MS. RIEDEL: So let's talk a little bit specifically about the evolution of your work. And you said that — we've talked about the bed. We've talked about this — one of the very first bells. And this was done still in Scotland, that bell?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And was it a pierced bell? What was this —

MR. MONGRAIN: No, it was about three feet across, about three and a half feet high. And it was just a bell.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was just a — I just decided to sculpt this object.

MS. RIEDEL: Out of clay?

MR. MONGRAIN: I think the first one was out of wood and the second one was out of clay.

MS. RIEDEL: And a quick question about the process, how did you come to start sculpting the clay as if it were stone?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, everybody who works in ceramics knows that when you work at a large scale, it warps.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it used to drive me crazy. And I almost gave up clay because, for whatever reason, if it's supposed to be a straight line, I want it to be a straight line. I think — I think architecture has been another real strong influence. And when all of a sudden I found myself living in Europe, around all this Victorian architecture, and the ornamentation and sort of the grace in which humans interacted with that architecture is so different.

The staircases would be like arms that moved you in. And the tracery would define spaces. You could visually move from the first floor to the second to the third. And there was kind of a hierarchy in architectural development with these buildings. And also they would be fun. I mean, the — of course the Glasgow School of Art, made my Charles Rennie Mackintosh, it was an art school — it was a building built for an art school, in a climate that had almost no sunshine.

And it is one of the most extraordinary art schools, I think, in the world. And you walk around, and there's tiny little accents every place. I mean, he designed every tile, every tiny little stained glass that goes into every little door that was different. And it's just absolutely amazing.

But there's a clarity to architecture, usually. And so you're asking why I started? I realized that with a little bit of effort, and almost like stone carving, I could fire something that would be a half-inch or an inch thick, and I could carve that down to a sharp edge, sort of like this handrail, and make it perfectly straight.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And — [laughs] — I've jokingly talked about how, in the seminary, they used to make us recite our Latin verses by polishing the marble floors. And we would do this for hours as we recited our Latin.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: [Laughs.] Yeah. I know, it sounds like of weird. But, yeah, and — but — and there was something — and, too, I think — I think I would say, in deference to my father, that wonderful man — I mean, he — we worked as kids. From the age of 12, I was working on the garbage trucks with him. Again, I sound like the person who walked 20 miles in the snow, I'm so sorry. [They laugh.]

But I loved that. I loved it. And it was sort of real physical labor. And so the idea — anyway. I'm sorry, I — it's the sound — I'm making this process sound more important than it is, but —

MS. RIEDEL: No, I think it is interesting because it's interesting to think about why one would treat clay that way, what the motivation behind it was and what the difficulties of doing it are.

MR. MONGRAIN: I have learned to bring it as close as I can before I fire it, but I always take it down a good quarter inch after it comes out of the kiln. So I have to do a lot of hand carving, a lot of very rough sandpaper polishing. A lot of my surfaces in my clay work have nothing on them, it's just polished. Like the — what is this called, this one?

MS. RIEDEL: *Hollow Drop*?

MR. MONGRAIN: No, no —

MS. RIEDEL: *Balustrade*.

MR. MONGRAIN: *Balustrade*.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: It really has almost a marble surface.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that's really from going from a coarse sandpaper down to a fine sandpaper and working a lot of hours so that the surface has this touch to it. And this piece, *Balustrade*, again a minimal form that just comes straight out of the wall.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And the whole contact with the human gesture, for me, it's one full step. It's also with an intent to get a kind of a physical precision, this is also exactly a meter long. So it's just under 40 inches. I was sort of fascinated in Europe because different countries have their perfect meters. And they actually build buildings on soft cushions so that their meter doesn't get disrupted by vibration. There's some amazing things, yeah.

The British meter is the standard. And it's the steel core that is the perfect measurement of a meter. That's kind of — isn't that fascinating?

MS. RIEDEL: It is. [They laugh.] It's interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: It is. It is, yeah. And there's — and it's almost a revered object, their meter.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah. And there is something about the finish of your objects. Is it a particular kind of clay? Is it earthenware? Is it low-fired? Is there something that just — a particular kind of clay that gives it this soft, luminous —

MR. MONGRAIN: I use different clays for different reasons.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Sometimes I've made some of these white pillows where I wanted them very pristine. I try to

polish those down — you know, the little white Mint-o candies? The mints?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes?

MR. MONGRAIN: That's what my surface — they feel almost like glass. And that's just, like, from polishing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: I want that almost white, marble, pristine — it's sort of conceptually fits the reasons behind the pillows. This is more of a sculptural clay. And to me, that sandstone Victorian architecture that I experienced so much in Scotland, it has a little bit — to me, it has that coloration.

Also, the surface is very smooth, but it's also has a tiny pitting on the whole thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So it's not dead flat. And it has — it has a stone-like presence. People often think that the work is made out of stone. And in some ways, since the clay is over cone one and it's vitrified —

MS. RIEDEL: Vitrified, right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — it really is stone. But — and I do sort of —

MS. RIEDEL: And a piece like *Balustrade* just, I mean, to have that be incredibly straight, that is a feat. [Laughs.] That is a feat.

MR. MONGRAIN: It is, actually. And it didn't start that way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: But, of course, it had to be 10 inches longer because it cantilevers into the wall. So I had to cut a hole in the wall and go into the wall and pin it to the back wall so that it could be perfectly straight.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. And I do enjoy the — I enjoy sanding. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: You would have to, I would think. [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: You would have to. You have to — it's really — I shouldn't even joke that it does back to my polish marble floors, but —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — but it is kind of meditative. And I enjoy the very tiny alterations and steps forward with sort of surfacing. It can be frustrating when you do all that work and it doesn't work out, but it's a fun part of the process.

MS. RIEDEL: It always feels like there's a ritual quality to the process. Does it feel that way to you?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, yeah. It does. It does. It's Catholic. [They laugh.] Eleanor Heartney just has written a book about the difference in artists who have an upbringing in Catholicism and artists that have a Jewish upbringing, and even the way they approach imagery and abstraction. And it really is.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that would be fascinating.

MR. MONGRAIN: I mean, us Catholics, there's a huge narrative aspect to the work that often moves it forward. Not that any of these are, you know, set in stone, you only do this. But we grow up with this imagery in the churches and the stained-glass windows and all of the stories. And of course, it's been interesting for me showing in synagogues, because you can't have human imagery. And then you notice these beautiful windows that are mostly floral or are — yeah. And so there is a slightly different aesthetic. But I have often heard that my — that there's a Catholic quality to my work. And I think that's just more of the teaching than anything else.

MS. RIEDEL: The plumb began to appear in your work fairly early on.

MR. MONGRAIN: Also in Scotland, and shortly after the bell. An actual plumb, of course, is an object of precision for usually measuring architecture or else taking the depth of the water off the front of a boat. And it has this historic place in lots of different things. It was also a time when I really started reading nonfiction. And I've

gotten it — I've invested myself in things like the development of the compass, and an historic trajectory of how that happened — and even how time started to be measured.

There was a time not so long ago — my understanding is — where Russia had five-day weeks. So time is not as locked into what we believe it is as a measurement today. So there's this long history of how time — And so those kind of things interest me. My friend Nick reads a great deal of fiction. And I think that the fact that I read a great deal of nonfiction and science books and that kind of thing — and I wouldn't consider myself a scientist or a historian, but those are often sort of an initial trigger or a little mechanism to where the work starts.

And so in looking at this, I just one day saw in one of these antique stores, they had like 20 plumbs hanging. And it was just sculpturally really beautiful. [I] Started reading a little bit about plumb bobs and all the different ways they've been used through centuries, particularly architecture. And so my first one was to have a figurative plumb. And my very first one was the shape of my own body. I spread out a large piece of paper, took a very simple contour of my body, and made it on the potter's wheel by coils. So I threw it in pieces over the course of, like, two weeks.

And if those are in here — I'm sure they are. But — let's see. Well, of course, there's — one in here. But, yes, that's sort of how it started. And it was really just an experimentation to expand upon another — and, of course, I then had some of them made by my brother in glass. So this is really — he made — this is a beautiful object he made. It's very translucent.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting that you mention time, too, because just hearing you say that makes me think of how there is such a measured quality to all of these objects. And I'm not — it seems like something is being measured, different means of measure, different —

MR. MONGRAIN: I think so.

MS. RIEDEL: — things being measured, you know.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. I think there's some of that. There's — even the — a sense of time in a very momentary sense, as an instant.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And —

MS. RIEDEL: So much been done with, you know, breath and blood and water, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right. Right, those seem to be things I keep coming back to. But the plumb has really been a fascinating — I've done some figurative work. And I did — one of — the piece right before the bell piece was a life-sized — [bell rings] —

MS. RIEDEL: Got a couple — [inaudible].

MR. MONGRAIN: — [laughs] — was a seven-foot almost neoclassic figure that I carved out of wood.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I think it was so labor-intensive with measurements of just, like, the nose. And I really tried to do something as close to neoclassic proportions as I could. Then the bell was almost a relief to do, in its simplicity and directness. But I think that led to my thinking, if I'm going to deal with figuration, I want to do it within the scope of this slightly more reductive imagery where it's more of a ubiquitous symbol rather than being portraiture.

And then the figurative plumb sort of came to mind. So I wanted to reduce that down to just the suggestion of the figure, more as — well, universal's probably not the right —

[End of disc]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Jeffrey Mongrain. We're just finishing disc number two, finishing your thought about the plumb.

MR. MONGRAIN: So yes, so, the first one I made was just a figurative plumb as a kind of experiment. And sometimes that happens. I will come up with an image that just seems to be a sensibility that I like, and it takes me a while to kind of figure it out. And then I — the exhibition at the Glasgow Cathedral, we were going through the space below the cathedral, and it was — it was a small chapel that used to be the women's chapel.

And they had just put in a new flooring into the basement. It was really the crypt of the cathedral. And they said they had just got the flooring done because when they put the vent in underneath the floor, they found all these skeletons buried. There were like eight from the Black Plague and a couple of leprosy. They'd had them tested.

And they showed me where this was, this vent, and so I asked them if I could make what I would consider kind of a memorial marker there. And that's how that figurative plumb became positioned there. And so that's really in — and it was interesting to me too that the women were not allowed to pray in the cathedral. They had their own chapel below.

MS. RIEDEL: Very interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: This was back in, I think, the 1350s when the Glasgow Cathedral began. And so that was an interesting thing, too. I was very, very lucky. A woman whose photograph I worked for quite a long time, Cathy Carver, she came to Scotland to help document all of these site projects we were doing. And we showed up early in the morning and she set her camera up, and the sun came out and we got the shot like that. It was just the easiest thing, the easiest photograph we've ever taken. And it's just a lovely shot.

MS. RIEDEL: It is. The light in it is extraordinary.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes, and so that became a kind of a memorial marker. You know, we were talking about installing in these site things.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, it took about a month to get permission to drill the hole to hang this piece.

MS. RIEDEL: I would imagine.

MR. MONGRAIN: So a conservator came in and saved all the dust, and then when the piece came down, he replaced the same dust into the hole. And it took — it was a lot of negotiation, because all I had to do, all I wanted to do was drill about a quarter-inch hole, but it was into the stone of a historic preservation building.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is a heavy piece, I'm sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's a heavy piece, yes. Yes, it's got a little bit of weight. But you know, we went right into stone and put in a pin, and it was fine. But what was interesting, too, there was a breeze, so it would sort of move, that almost ghostlike presence of a sort of little vibration moving through it.

MS. RIEDEL: Now, was this piece one of the — one of the pieces that was part of that Ken Mitchell — the group that was — that you mentioned earlier?

MR. MONGRAIN: The Contemplations on the Spiritual group, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was. And all five of us were a part of this. I've not been a part of this group for a long time. I think we did about three sites. We did Scotland; Cologne, Germany; and the Cathedral of St. John here in New York as a group, and that was a while ago.

MS. RIEDEL: So this was the first one.

MR. MONGRAIN: This was the very first one.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was 2000, 2001?

MR. MONGRAIN: We started about 2001, and then we worked together for about three or four years. We got a nice piece in *World Sculptures*, where they featured all five of us. But what else was I going to say about this? Yes, so also my work was sometimes moved between gallery pieces and site pieces. So when I first started devising the plumb, particularly a figurative plumb, no idea about it being sited. And then I adjusted it a little bit — the coloration and the size — I remade it from the original piece to fit the site.

But that's the fascinating thing. I tried to go to these sites with no expectation of what object I'm going to make. Of course, I have my visual language. But you go there, and it's really interesting that all of the stories, the history, the emphasis of the church, the congregation, the community, the country — and when you start playing in all of these sort of mechanisms, whenever it works, then something results from that.

The piece I'm doing at the St. James Cathedral in Seattle in March, there's this beautiful statue of Joseph, and

he's in about half to three-quarter — it's a marble statue against the wall in about half to three-quarter relief. And of course, Saint Joseph — fascinating biblical character. I started finding out that — and I dealt a little bit with a halo image with Thomas Aquinas — so I found out that Joseph is famous for his three dreams.

He had the dream about the annunciation of the Virgin Mary. He had the dream, I believe, of taking Mary, the pregnant virgin, to Jerusalem for — and so there are these paintings of the three dreams of Joseph. So I found this imagery of the electrical impulses in the brain that the synopses hits in dream states. And I found all these really beautiful images.

So I'm sculpting these little electrical synopses and I'm creating about a hundred of them that will just circle around his head — and they're just placed in a little tiny — sort of like a halo. But they'll also be that kind of electric energy that happens during the dream state. So it's another reference to a halo, but it becomes more of the science rather than — like, with Thomas Aquinas, that was a very different thing. That's the piece that I'm working on now, along with my search for the Holy Grail. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And we can talk about that briefly now, since we've touched on it. The search for the Holy Grail — is this the first time that you've collaborated with your brother to this extent since the Coke bottles?

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, well, this —

MS. RIEDEL: I know you've worked together on and off, but this seems like a major project.

MR. MONGRAIN: This is a major project. And Jim has made a lot of my glass plumbs and that kind of thing. But let me see here if I can quickly show you some images. Where would it be? Do you mind if I just look for a second?

MS. RIEDEL: No, no, take your — I'll pause this.

MR. MONGRAIN: Here it is.

MS. RIEDEL: And this eventually will be a collection of 60 goblets, did you say?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah, I'm working on —

MS. RIEDEL: Or chalices, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: These chalices. And so the image I'm showing you now is from a Hans Holbein painting. And then you see it's more this kind of shape. And what was really lovely at the Museum of Glass, I just came up — I just came with the image of the painting, and I said to Jim, make that for me.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's nice.

MR. MONGRAIN: And he did. He is so — a lot of Seattle glassblowers started to come to the museum because these images haven't been made before. And these processes — to be able to recreate that foot, and to be able to do this glass that, for the most part, is from these historic paintings from a long time ago — these were a little tricky.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'm sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I just showed Jim this and showed him the detail, and he made it. And all the Seattle glass artists were coming around just to see — he is such a master — to see how he figured out how to make these things.

So my idea with this piece is that I'm going to exhibit them — I love this painting — I'm going to exhibit a large group of them, probably on the floor — I've been talking with David McFadden about this — probably on the floor, with a small penlight coming down into each of them. Because I made them all — I had Jim make them all out of this sort of blood-red glass, so they have that kind of connection to the "you will drink of my blood" sort of thing.

And then I found — it's a little too close to Maurizio Cattelan, perhaps, but I had found this taxidermy dog and a taxidermy cat. In a lot of these paintings, you will see that there's always a cat sitting very close to Judas, as the evil, and then you've got the loyal dog. And so a lot of them have dogs and cats in them as that kind of early Renaissance symbolism. So I'm going to be including an actual taxidermy dog and cat in the show.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] And this is at the Museum of Arts and Design?

MR. MONGRAIN: David and I are talking about that. He and I are working on a show now. He's such a lovely man. He's invited me to help a little bit with a show called *Solidifying the Ephemeral*. And so we're — he's looking for

artists and I'm making some recommendations. And of course, really, it's hard these days to thematically come up with something that hasn't been done, with all the curators that are around in the world. And I think it's really kind of a fascinating title.

It's become such an amazing museum, I think, especially since they moved to Columbus Circle and the new space. The scheduling has really expanded. But of course, a lot of my work, like trying to sculpt water — solidifying it into that kind of moment — and I think David is perhaps most interested in my sound translations. But at some point I'm hoping we can work out where I might get to show my grails, my Holy Grails.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, absolutely. You mentioned the sound translations. Let's talk about that, because we haven't talked about them at all yet, and they came a little later than some of the other work. They started in 2003, 2005?

MR. MONGRAIN: About then, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did those come about? They're absolutely fascinating.

MR. MONGRAIN: I'd been invited to do an exhibition in Australia, in Newcastle — my friend Nick and I. A student of mine, Ian Burns, who has now developed a great reputation as an artist, was Australian. He helped set up a residency for me in Newcastle with my friend Nick came. And I was there trying to think of something to do, and not just bring — strictly bring my own studio practice to this country which was — I'd never been in before and I was really experiencing for the first time.

It turned out that we were relatively close to the — this famous satellite dish that — that first transmission from the moon was only heard in Australia. And that first transmission from the moon was "the Eagle has landed." And they're very proud of this. And so I started thinking about how I might use that. And I had already sculpted a water drop, and it just sort of made sense that I took the recording that I found — "the Eagle has landed" — and —

MS. RIEDEL: Sorry. Go ahead, and then we'll go — I want to go back to the water droplet too, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Okay. So I took that recording, and I had it grafted — *The Eagle Has Landed*. So it had the sort of bumps and gestures as rafted sound. And so I translated the water drop into this gesture of sound. And —

MS. RIEDEL: The sound of a droplet of water falling? I don't understand how you — how do you translate a water drop?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, the other — the piece, the water drop piece, was more of the format. So the fact that it was a drop of water got set aside. And it just became the reverberation of sound from a circle.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah, so the circle of *The Eagle Has Landed* — and that was the first sound piece that I did in Australia and left it with their museum. And ever since then, I started doing a sound piece in every country and kind of major city I've gone to as a site relationship.

One of my next pieces was I did an exhibition at a museum in Vera Cruz, Mexico. And again, trying to — it's sort of fun. I enjoy research, and I started trying to figure out what to do there. And I found this weird connection, where the person — the person who I took my laundry to here in New York used to call me gringo Jeff. And then I got this thing in Mexico and I started thinking about that word, and I found out that there's an old Scottish folk song that got translated by Texas cowboys. And the song was "Green Grows the Grass of Texas." Now, the story is that the Mexicans heard the word "green grows" and started calling them gringos, and that that's where the word came from.

So I found the earliest translation of that folk song I could possibly find, and I took a recording of "Green Grows the Grass of Texas." And that became my sound piece. And all these friends that I had made in Vera Cruz, they thought that I was really being kind of nasty to myself, because they saw it as a bit of a negative slang towards Americans. But they also really liked it.

And so I've done sound pieces. And one of my favorites was the one I did for New York. I think —

MS. RIEDEL: Was that the Lou Gehrig?

MR. MONGRAIN: The Lou Gehrig piece, yeah [*The Luckiest Man*]. And you know, for me, it's a hard balance, because you don't want to use celebrity. You don't want to use something that is just comical. Something that really feels like it's part of the place. And Lou Gehrig's speech — the hardest thing about that piece was getting permission from Yankee Stadium to go in and collect sand from home plate, where he gave the —

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: And they finally let me do it. So I have this little container of sand from home plate of the Yankee Stadium — not the new one. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, THE Yankee Stadium.

MR. MONGRAIN: The Yankee Stadium, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So the sound recordings are all really related to very specific places.

MR. MONGRAIN: I tried.

MS. RIEDEL: More so than even any of the other work, it sounds like.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. One of the galleries I show at is the Perimeter Gallery. And the great blues artist who did "Mannish Boy" — gosh, why am I spacing out on his name [Muddy Waters]? Anyway, I did a sound piece of the bassline. He was one of the first blues artists to use this very specific bassline, and he was a Chicago blues artist. Sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, that will come. And then one of the most recent ones is interesting. Well, then there was — well, one of the most recent ones that was so interesting was juxtaposing the speech from Barack Obama and — it was a Seneca —

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, it was Chief Red Jacket. And that was absolutely fascinating. The Katonah Museum invited about eight of us in this show, and it was really a group of artists working with clay that I greatly admire. It was Betty Woodman and Judy Moonelis, who I've known for a long time, and really a great group.

And I started to think about what I was going to show, and I found out that this chief had been part of that area — this Chief Red Jacket — and I started researching him a little bit, and just researching the area, trying to figure something out. And I came across this very famous speech that he'd given on race relations. And then I looked at Obama's, and the language was so similar. They hit on the same topics and even used the same kind of poetic phrasing.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it was just really a lovely kind of connection. And I must say, I'm a great admirer of Barack Obama. And so I took a graft of his speech on race, and there were people who have done recordings of Chief Red Jacket's speech — because of course, there were —

MS. RIEDEL: Back 200 years ago.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, there were no recordings then. But the written speech has been read, and so there are recordings of —

MS. RIEDEL: And oral history too.

MR. MONGRAIN: Oral histories, yes. And then I decided to sort of split the piece into the section of a brain — sort of a left — so I made two halves that, sort of, you know.

The most recent one — the Lyons Wier Gallery in Chelsea invited me to a show based on finance. And I found this recording of Herbert Hoover shortly after the crash of the stock market, and he was giving his State of the Union address. And one of the first things he said was, there's nothing to worry about. [They laugh.] So that was — and that was like a month after the crash. And of course, the depression went on for, I think, about eight or nine years.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that also related to — all things are returning to normal? Was that connected to that?

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh yes, yeah. And I had found the marble quarry upstate where the financial district — the marble it was built from. So I found some marble dust and I polished the surface with the same marble dust that Wall Street was made from. And so it was one of my few, kind of, polished white pieces. Just to bring — a lot of these little connections perhaps mean nothing except to me. But I like the threads and the sort of linear connections with small aspects of the content.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems an essential part of the content, somehow.

MR. MONGRAIN: For me, it is, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. How many sound recordings, transcriptions have there been so far?

MR. MONGRAIN: I'm guessing about eight or nine.

MS. RIEDEL: And it seems that they've been really all over the world — in Australia, a couple in Mexico, right?

MR. MONGRAIN: A couple in Mexico, certainly in Europe. One of my favorite ones I did in Minneapolis.

MS. RIEDEL: How many sound records, transcriptions have there been so far?

MR. MONGRAIN: I'm guessing about eight or nine.

MS. RIEDEL: And it seems, because they've been really all over the world — Australia, a couple in Mexico, right? At least —

MR. MONGRAIN: A couple in Mexico, certainly, in Europe. One of my favorite ones I did in Minneapolis. The very first open-heart surgery performed was a young woman and she had tiny hole in her heart, and they covered her with ice and froze her body to slow down the blood pulsing, and they actually opened her heart and repaired this small hole and closed it back up. And I found the medical history and they showed the heartbeat.

And this woman is still alive, this girl. And she didn't come to the opening, but I was told that she came and saw the piece. And the center of it had this tiny — I carved this tiny little hole in the center, which according to the medical history, had been the size of the hole in her heart. And it's just this very famous medical event. I think it was back in the mid-'50s. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there this strong thread of science that runs through the work, and scientific research. Is there some sort of guiding theme to how that starts for you — what sort of scientific discipline or threads you're interested in following?

MR. MONGRAIN: You know, I —

MS. RIEDEL: Really related to place?

MR. MONGRAIN: I wish I was that smart, that I had a kind of a clarity to it. It's certainly an interest, but it feels almost a little bit more piecemeal. And it probably develops in steps. It's a little bit like my interest in blood. The first blood piece I did was just a sculpture of a pool of blood that equaled the average amount in the human body. So I measured out the thickness of a — of blood and then flattened out the dimensions of that much liquid and basically grafted a human's blood. And it was placed in a church in front of a depiction of the Last Supper where Christ is — [inaudible] —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And you have that —

MS. RIEDEL: Was that here in New York?

MR. MONGRAIN: — reflection. No. Where was that?

MS. RIEDEL: Where was that?

MR. MONGRAIN: But as I started to then research blood a little bit and started thinking about it, it became really clear that it was — science has kind of made it a new portrait. Our DNA, our — where is this thing?

MS. RIEDEL: In Baltimore?

MR. MONGRAIN: St. Peter — Columbia, South Carolina.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, right. Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that was probably the first blood piece that I did. [Laughs.] It was — it was also the easiest installation I have ever done in my life. I was there — my friend Nick was also doing this very elaborate installation. And we get there and we start unwrapping. And I pull this piece out and I put it down in front. And I go, "I'm done." [They laugh.] And it was just — but the — that doesn't happen very often. But —

MS. RIEDEL: And this was, you're saying, the first blood piece?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: My first — my first puddle of blood. And then it sort of has developed into something which is more about portraiture — scientific portraiture. Nowadays they examine your blood, those sort of DNA genetics, and they can tell so much about our history and even our potential medical future, that it really is now a portrait.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I recently had an exhibition, I don't know if you have seen any of this, but it was based on the idea of contemporary reliquary. And it was here at the Leubsdorf Gallery at 68th and Lexington. A beautiful exhibition curated by Cynthia Hahn. And she got about half a dozen of the authentic, historic reliquaries from the Metropolitan. And then she invited a group of us, and I was very fortunate to be a part of it. It was Joseph Beuys —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right. Yes, yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: — Hannah Wilke and Olafur Eliasson and I was very lucky to be a part of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I sculpted a small — I sculpted the amount of blood that when loss creates begins death. So it was a much smaller pool. But to parallel that, I went and met with the New York City chief medical examiner —

MS. RIEDEL: This is the *Dr. Hirsch* piece.

MR. MONGRAIN: *Dr. Hirsch*, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And the sweetest man I've ever met in my life. And I'm talking about this piece, and I said, you know what I would really like, since there is a reliquary aspect, a lot of the original, historic pieces from that — [inaudible] — they have small body parts. I said, would you mind giving me a few drops of blood?

And he pulls out a needle and a little cup and goes — [inaudible] — and he gives me — he gave me a fair amount of blood. And so I put his blood into the exhibition. And in part because he was also the chief medical examiner for what happened on September 11th. He is the man who was in charge of identifying a lot of the remains.

Unfortunately, some blogger got the impression that I was saying that the blood I was exhibiting was about the World Trade Center and it was from them. I got this — one of my — [laughs] — I almost wrote this person and suggested that perhaps somebody in the gallery gave them misinformation.

But anyway, yeah, so Dr. Hirsch was very, very generous about that. And I had Jim blow me a really beautiful little glass vial. And the piece is entitled *St. Januarius*, who is the patron saint of blood. And there's this suggestion of this miracle, because they take his blood down from the reliquary once a year and it's supposed to foam. It's supposed to — yeah. [Laughs.]

He's also — Januarius is the — his alternate name is that — the big festival in Little Italy, the one depicted in *The Godfather* movie — gosh, I'm sorry, I'm spacy today. But so he's also connected with — he's a famous Italian patron saint. And so that was sort of a connection there. It was much closer to a reliquary than anything I had done.

And I found it's really fascinating working with scientists and these really brilliant people. My most interesting one, perhaps, was — where is it — it was John Daugman.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And, again — I was just saying this to some students who were dealing with scientific experiments. I said, you should call up these people, because I find that these kind of brilliant, perhaps, nerdy scientists, when artists call them they're just thrilled. And you wouldn't think of it, but — so I get in touch with him. He's a professor at Cambridge. And I looked at his books. I frankly barely understand the titles. So he's this brilliant guy.

And he is the man who invented the iris scanning technology. And I told him I was thinking — I had first come up with this window — again, an architectural feature, sort of like the handrail or the plumb or the bell — and I'd thought there's something fascinating about a round window. The reason it's on cathedrals and courthouses is

it's authoritative. It's sort of this eye of —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and it adds to — that figurative element to these great pieces of architecture. So first, I came up with the window. And I had no idea what I was going to do on the inside. And it's a little bit like the sound pieces. I didn't want to select something that was about celebrity or silly or just — and after a while, I finally thought, the guy who has invented this security technology, which is very ominous for a lot of people, and also, though, it's becoming more and more important.

So I just called him up. And I said, "Would you mind if I got a photograph of your eye? I'm doing this artwork." And he was so nice. And I said, "Well, I'm going to hire a photographer in London to come and photograph your eye, if that's okay." And at first he said, "Yes." Then he calls me a couple weeks later, and he says, "I'm actually doing a conference in New York." He said, "Do you mind if I stop by your studio?" And I said, "That would be really nice."

And so I set up this entire room with a complete black curtain and this tiny little hole so that we could — and I took about a hundred photographs of his left eye — the evil eye. [They laugh.] I never said that to him. He'll probably read it. But I got these beautiful images of his eye. And he — this brilliant man — spent the day telling me these stories.

You probably remember there's this famous photograph on the cover of *National Geographic* of this young Afghani girl with these piercing eyes. This was done about 20 or 30 years ago. And they went back — National Geographic went back looking for this woman, put out a reward if she would come forward. And about 200 people came forward. They brought John in to scan the eye of the original photograph and he identified her that way.

MS. RIEDEL: Extraordinary.

MR. MONGRAIN: He also worked on — you know that Tom Cruise movie where there is all this eye scanning — I don't —

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like a Tom Cruise movie, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah, so some Tom Cruise — and so, yeah, and you know, he's just this really fun, lovely, brilliant guy. And so I've gotten past the nervous stage of contacting brilliant people. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right. This might be an appropriate time to talk about this new proposal for Times Square — [inaudible]—

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, sure.

MS. RIEDEL: — because that sounds like a fascinating project, and different than anything that you've really doing before or anything I'm familiar with.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right. It is a little different. And I came across the Creative Time and I put in this proposal to do this. My idea is — it's certainly an extension of my *Iris of John Daugman* piece. And I started researching a lot of artists that deal with issues of security. And there are a lot of them, primarily politically-based artists. And this was not long after the car bomb — the potential car bomb was left in Times Square.

And there are more security cameras in Times Square than any place in the United States — almost equivalent to London, which has more security cameras than I think any city in the world. But — I don't remember the number exactly, I think there's like 48 cameras just in Times Square, keeping an eye on things.

And so this Creative Time is a public art project here in New York. And I put in a proposal. And I'm kind of fascinated by both the positive and negatives about this technology. It's actually now being used in a lot of hospitals. And what they do is when — before a patient goes into surgery, it's a small as a little camera, and they come up and they take a little photograph, just to be 100 percent sure that if you're having your kidney removed that you're the right person. And it's also that you get the right medication.

And so it's — there's also now a school in New Jersey that when you want to pick up your child, you walk to the door, camera photographs your eye to make sure the child's not leaving with somebody they shouldn't be. And so more and more it's being used in very common ways. Was that — there's this town in Mexico. The entire town has engaged in this experiment in iris scanning. And all the doors and businesses have these iris scans. So there's — this whole town has agreed to this sense of community identification. And they say the security is really great.

But, of course, I also got ahold of the — it's not the UCLA — the civil rights organization.

MS. RIEDEL: ACLU.

MR. MONGRAIN: ACLU. And I started finding all of these statements put out about how — about the dangers of this technology, because it's now gotten to the point that an iris scanning camera can identify you within like six or eight feet. You don't even have to come up to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that was that Tom Cruise movie — *The Minority Report*.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: There's this scene where he's walking through a GAP clothing store, and it says: Hello, Mister; you know, please look at our t-shirts today, because they had his whole history and just by seeing his eye — and anyway. So that the — so it's a very interesting thing. But it's — I think it's about to leave the science fiction consideration and it's about to become so generic that people are going to have to start forming opinions. There's a transition — there's an awareness that's going to happen in the next five years.

So my proposal to Creative Time was that I wanted to bring it in on many levels. And my first suggestion was the romance of the eye, the looking — gazing into your lover's eyes. The — that's sense of portraiture and intimacy. And that's certainly a part of that. And then, of course, you have all the — where's this data going? Is it going to the government? Is it going to be a database? There's all of these things.

So my proposal was that I'm going to — I'm going to build this structure. Anybody is welcome to come in and have their eye photographed, and it'll be printed as a kind of romantic photograph for them to take away. It will also make it so that they get to look — they get to look at themselves looking at Times Square for approximately three and a half seconds, the average duration of a blink. So it's really the blink of an eye. So it's them viewing Times Square.

I have had a little opposition, because there are people at Creative Time who've been very supportive and other people that are actually kind of worried about it. And I've talked about the technology, of the fact that if you're carrying a cellphone you can be found. It's — it gives out a signal even when it's closed. You have to take the battery out in order to not be — have your location identified.

So the idea of — and right now, every time you go through the Holland Tunnel, there's a facial identification cameras. You're recorded every time you go through the Holland Tunnel.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. And so when you start talking about how expansive this — the way the government is moving into our privacy issues, how we're — that is almost a lost sense. And, of course, you can't use a credit card, you know. You can't — we're all on the grid in some fashion. So — yeah. So that's —

MS. RIEDEL: And how long would this be installed in Times Square if it goes through? Is that set?

MR. MONGRAIN: I requested two weeks. In part, the — and it's as with any sort of large project, the finances start playing a part of it. But to have access to the large screen, it's very expensive, even with short amounts of time. So I think I mentioned earlier that there's some conversation about actually bringing in a large truck screen, which would not be my preference.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: But in order to do the piece, I mean — so we're still negotiating for the final things. But I also think it's a nice public experience, and seeing how people deal with a politic, how some might just enjoy having their eye up on the big screen. It may just — for many people — just be fun. And I even have some friends who I've explained this piece to in detail go: I'd never do it. You know? [Laughs.] So it's the — that's the sort of intrigue forming.

It is more overtly political, perhaps, than anything I've done —

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: — which is, for me, an interesting step. To me —

MS. RIEDEL: Do you — please, go ahead.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, to be honest, I think there's a political position with a lot of the things I've done in churches too.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's not nearly as obvious, but it certainly raises questions. But, I'm sorry, what were you going to —

MS. RIEDEL: No, when — I'd like to hear more about that, actually. I've got notes here about what I want to ask, because that brought up all sorts of interesting questions. But would you say more about the political pieces in the religious spaces and when that first became apparent to you or it was apparent from the very start?

MR. MONGRAIN: I think it has been apparent to me. And it's — there's a lot of fine lines drawn when you're dealing with spaces that are so compelling to individuals, and they have — they have a connection to that goes to the core of their beliefs. And one of the questions that would always come up, and we would have conversations with the congregation, and that idea I mentioned earlier about there shouldn't be art in these places.

But I had this wonderful bishop in Scotland who said to the congregation, "Art used to be about telling you things. It used to be about the narrative." And he said, "Contemporary art is more about asking you questions." He said, "When these structures were built, the literacy rate was at maybe 5 [percent] to 10 percent. And the role of the church was to educate. And art was there to educate." And he said, "Now you are all well-educated, you're aware of so much. Art has moved into a new phase of being put there to ask you questions and make you think."

And it was such a lovely thing. And I've taken that sentiment to other congregations and said that. And it is not meant — is not meant to establish a propaganda in any way, or even my point of view. But I'm — when it does work, that it makes people wonder why it's there and what it's about and how does it fit this entire context and this history.

MS. RIEDEL: The work does seem to have gotten increasingly overtly political. Is that by choice, or is that something that's just sort of evolved through science and, for example, technology? And as the technology comes in, there's perhaps inherent politics involved with it? But how have you — I think also of some of the more environmental pieces, the *Pierced Moose* piece and the *Leaf* piece — and so it does seem that environmentalism and politics has become more significant.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, in the arc of my work, when I was doing some of the performance pieces and intentionally trying to challenge myself in ways where the politic was very obvious, and it was — it was way out of my comfort zone — and I went through that little phase — I don't — I'm not sure what the answer to your question would be, but I think maybe I'm getting even more confident with making my statements.

I think as I mature, I'm hoping that I'm learning to communicate better in a way that can discuss politics in a more direct fashion without being alienating. And that — again, an extremely fine line — because nobody wants to be told what to think. And if you do a work that has an autobiography to it, it is coming from your own position, but that's kind of boring — to only make a self-centered work. I'm probably not answering your question, but I think I'm getting more comfortable with making more distinct statements.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it does make sense, too. Coming out of a very profound personal, there could be a universal aspect to it, especially when you were dealing with a very minimal, iconic form that allows the personal to be more universal — so that everyone can find a way, or many people can find a way into that narrative.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right. I would hope so. And it's sort of my joy of working with images that have — the interpretive range of them for each individual is vast. And so I have almost never — probably the *Daugman Eye* is the closest, and even now, *The Blood of Dr. Hirsch* — [inaudible] — I mean, those are more distinct and specific than I've done before. But I tried to balance them with the round window, or the pool of blood.

And I don't think — I don't think I will let that go. I think the reductive form that is a commonplace object that's been altered is something I really like, and how they describe a kind of visual language. But I hope I'll keep being daring and maybe do a few things that are even more political. I mean, the Holy Grail — the chalice piece, to me, is specific, but it will bring — there will be lots of interpretations. I'm not going to make a Last Supper table. I'm not going to reference that part.

And of course, holy grails are things that have this, also, sort of broad interpretation. I can't tell you how often Monty Python gets mentioned too. [They laugh.] You know, and a lot of people reference it that way, or even the old Indiana Jones movie — and you know, of course, the euphemism of searching for the Holy Grail and all that. And that's what I like — that kind of broad interpretation that, to me it perhaps even quietly has some specifics

to it.

MS. RIEDEL: I was thinking about the context of these pieces and the themes in the *Daugman* piece. That both is a piece that can hang on a gallery wall, is a piece that then has — could be reinterpreted and reformatted in the case and the venue of Times Square. But then I'm also thinking of that very, very politically charged installation — in the Pennsylvania penitentiary, wasn't it? —

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, yes. Yeah, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — and how the context of where this piece, or this idea, it takes form, changes it significantly. And that was such a powerful place for that piece.

MR. MONGRAIN: It does. Amazing, I was thrilled to be invited. Actually, John Carlton [ph] was the curator. But I was thrilled to be invited, and I have seen — I share a studio with my friend Nick in Philadelphia, at the Crane Arts Center. And he is a partial owner and I'm kind of a silent partner in that, and so I go to Philadelphia regularly. And I was really thrilled. The Eastern State Penitentiary has had great artists, great shows.

And you start researching about the Quakers' impression of penance and isolation, and meditative thought was the way to get past your sensibility of sin. But it was also cruel, in ways, to put people in isolation. What I've read is they would blindfold people and bring them to the penitentiary, put them into their cell, take their blindfold off — for security reasons too. They would have no idea how to escape, because they had never seen the exterior. But some of the windows had those round eyes, and that was the only sense of light.

And of course, it was — the Quakers wrote that it was intended to look into God's face. It was the eye looking towards God. So it made a kind of natural connection, especially with all of the security issues. So I just resculpted it and placed it, but it wasn't enough for me just to do that. I'd found this — I'd found the — I'd put in a mirror with a very old frame on the floor as a reflection. So you didn't view the piece by looking up into God's eye, you viewed the piece looking down. And you saw — because you couldn't enter the cell, so mostly, what you saw of the piece was from the floor, from down up.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting, interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: Some of the new text-based work I'm doing — I did a piece for the French Biennial in Vallauris. And I'm starting to sculpt words now and put them on — you know the stone plaques you would often see in Europe, particularly, Rome? You walk around the streets of Rome at every corner, and they would just have the name of the street, but it would be sort of carved on a little stone plaque with a stone framing. So I've now made about 30 of these and I'm starting to work on text pieces.

And I took the French word "guilty" and I flipped it, so it was read in reverse and could only be seen in a mirror. So when you walked in, you just had this little stone plaque and it was barely legible. And then, of course, you look in the mirror and you see yourself along with the French — so anyway, I'm starting to do these text pieces. I'm a little uncertain about them. It's really just some things that I'm starting.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, that's interesting to hear.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah, yeah. I've also been kind of interested in doing that. One of the new pillow pieces — I have this — it's similar to this one, with the water, and it has a very sort of wide, sharp edge going across it, flat. And I had laser-cut this chemical formula for when the electrical impulse in your brain slows to the point where you lose consciousness, which is the same moment you either lose consciousness or begin to die.

And it's this really beautiful chemical formula, and it's going to trace all the way around. This is a little bit more tomblike than anything I've done. And it's just so — there's just this — these little symbols, these science symbols, I think they're so gorgeous. And I've had them all laser-cut, just cut into like an eighth-inch high black plastic, and they're all just going to go around and trace around the outside edge.

MS. RIEDEL: And where will that piece — is that for a gallery exhibition or is that for a site-specific —

MR. MONGRAIN: It'll be a gallery piece, yeah. And it links a little bit — I even thought about St. James Cathedral in Seattle, where I'm going to be showing in March, because they both deal with a kind of electrical impulse in your brain. The one I told you about will be the halo around Joseph. But so that —

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: So they're sort of two very different pieces based on sort of similar research.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems that technology has had a big impact on your work, and continues to have a significant impact. Have you had specific thoughts about that and when it first started? I mean, certainly, if you're involved

in science, it's going to touch on technology. But I can think of the iris piece. I can certainly think of, I mean, the brain scan pieces, or the sound transcriptions; certainly the medical surgery that resulted in the young girl's heart surgery.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think I look for real-life things to — as a mechanism to start with. And there's something really lovely about science, but I don't consider myself a scientist at all. I really cherry-pick things that sort of fit an interest in physiology — you know, the human body — interest in identity as portraiture, that sort of thing. Also, where science can give me a depiction of sort of a cultural accent, like the sound piece.

And then, of course, the blood piece really came from the Last Supper, you know? And then it staged through it — there was a little bit of just synchronicity that kind of went from stage to stage. And I do — I do enjoy these sorts of fascinating parallels between science and art. But I'm always a little leery about sort of — sort of claiming that it's a — it's a real passion. I more feel like I just constantly dip my toe.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems that it — there's something that resonates on a deep, intuitive level about using such minimal, iconic forms and then such cutting-edge technology that is so much of the moment and of the time. And then as you say, if you go — if you're looking for scientific phenomena, it relates to physiology or to portraiture, that that would be a way to unite or marry profound content with very minimal form in a — in a — in format or an icon that would be accessible to a human understanding.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's something I probably strive for.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And you know, these things are always a bit hit-and-miss. It — but it brings up another interesting point that I often have a couple of sentences that are displayed with my work. And it's an issue that gets discussed about how much information do you — how much literary, written information is best to give with an object that is more about a visual language. And if you don't describe the content or why something is there or what the choice is, that then people are just looking at the image. Like the — *An Evening's Breath*, you — I've had people come into the gallery and look at this, and they see 8 ½ ounces of what they presume is water placed in the center. Now, unless they knew that the amount of moisture a woman breathes during 8 hours of sleep is the reasoning behind it, I think they're going to miss something.

Now, people have different opinions about this, but I personally think that it's a good thing to be knowledgeable about the artist's intent. And I don't think the object has to hold all of the information. I'm also a real believer that the author of artworks is, in part, a reference point. If you have somebody making artwork who is an 18-year-old woman and — or if it's an 82-year-old Eastern European male, they are a little bit of — that that position of the author, that of who they are is a little bit of a thread to understanding their work.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: I would look at work differently depending on a huge age difference or a huge cultural difference.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: And — yeah. I think this happens naturally as artists get more famous. You start having seen a body of their work. And you know who they are, whether they're a male artist or a female artist, or — [inaudible] — book — even about religious upbringings as how you experience narrative thought. I like knowing a little bit about who's making the work. It adds to my impression. Of course, there are people who disagree with that. Look at what's in front of you. It's an experience with an object.

So I've got in the habit of when I exhibit that I don't simply have a nameplate with a title and date and dimensions. I will have a couple of sentences. And I am very comfortable having people know the reasoning behind the work.

MS. RIEDEL: That strikes me as generous.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I think it — I think it helps. And it's also important to me. If you — if you didn't know that the photograph in the center of this round window is that of the inventor of iris scanning technology, you are missing some of — some of the interest — of the interest.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I — if — yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. We've talked about in passing, but I'd like to talk about the travel and how it's affected your

work. And I think it really has more than some — to be sure, your travels had a big impact on your work, not only from your personal experience with travel, because you've made certain pieces based on location.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: And specifically, the sound transcriptions, and there was also so much site-specific work. But are there particular places that stand out in your mind as particularly significant?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I read that question, and I was — I was sort of thinking about it. And my first thought, of course, was all the travel I've done through Europe and a little bit in Mexico. But then I started thinking about just the locations, and not just the architectural, but even the organic nature. I mean, growing up in International Falls, it is a — it is the wilderness. And I mean that in the best possible way.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: We would go — I could leave my home and Portage in half a day and be on a lake that was remote, that almost no one had been to it. It was sort of amazing. A lot of the lakes were enclosed. Depending how eager you were and strong to carry canoes, you would really find yourself into places where you wouldn't see another person.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: And there's — yeah. And it was this interesting sense of being alone and taking care of yourself, and even isolation. And there was something I kind of loved about that. I would never go back. But it was — it was that kind of great experience.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: But it also made me yearn for the city. And as I moved to Minneapolis and had that experience, I've always wanted to be in that kind of urban situation rather than the rural, even though it has a certain romance for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you know why?

MR. MONGRAIN: The rural?

MS. RIEDEL: The urban.

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, the urban. It's really the interest in art. It's the — it's the constant amount of stimuli. When I'm in a smaller town, I don't walk very much. It's because — unless it's like in a forest, I — like — but it — in a small town, I don't walk. New York, I love to walk because there's just so much to see. And I walk every day, and it's out of just pleasure.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: But I really do love cities. We have all the — of course, the usual stuff — all the museums and everything and the restaurants and the —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: But my travels — the first — I was telling you about the five or six summers that I took students to Scotland. In my — I had just started teaching. I was in my mid-late 20s. And it was a way to go to Europe and spend four weeks with students and then two or three weeks just going to the Greek islands —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — going all the way through Italy, going to all these different countries. And in your late 20s, to be able to do this was absolute wonderful. And that was a real strong experience, but it was more of a kind of peripheral experience, almost tourist-like.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then I would come back to the States.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: But then when I got the job and I lived in Europe for 7 or 8 years, I feel — it got a bit more ingrained.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that visual aspect became a part of my daily life. And that's when it altered — the worked altered a little bit. And I became a little bit more responsive to that. Even —

MS. RIEDEL: Could you say more about that?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I've always had this love of — for architectural reasons of going into churches and cathedrals. I mean, there's nothing like going into a great cathedral, especially when you think that when that was built, probably 98 percent of the population lived in ruins where the ceiling was maybe six feet high and they were very enclosed. The mind-changing — how could you not believe in God when you walked into a cathedral? I mean, it was just impossible. And still holds that kind of aura to it, I think. And just knowing how — and then researching and knowing how these things were constructed and the rib-like structure, they are just massive pieces of sculpture. And to be able to live with them — and of course, different than the United States.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's that — it's the real, real deal in Europe. And then you, as you begin to learn more about them, you realize the reasons for all of the different aspects of it, not only as support structures but also as symbolism — that the entire floor structure is usually a cruciform of some kind, and all the meanings behind the rose windows and the transepts and the naves and all these things. I'm sorry, but I've lost track.

MS. RIEDEL: You were talking about your travels and you know —

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, the travels — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: But it just thinking — just the way you just described that as such an informed object, just as a giant symbol. Really.

MR. MONGRAIN: It truly is. And maybe — and even through this conversation, it makes me think of the link between the simple objects that I'd like to make, and how it's really — whether it's a building or a part of a railing or part of a bell. And a lot of these have connections to that kind of architecture.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay. So that's where we're getting with the travel and how it suits into the pieces. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: A lot of my travel has been in Greece.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: And — yeah. And —

MS. RIEDEL: Where?

MR. MONGRAIN: The Greek islands. There's a — certainly Mykonos, but a lot of time on a smaller island called Paros —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: — where I used to — I'd love — for about four summers in a row, I just went to Paros.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And there's a — there's a visual uniformity that you don't particularly see in American cities. All the buildings are white. They've got the blue — the blue line to it. And there's this — and they're all kind of constructed in similar fashion. I remember first experiencing that visiting the southwest in the United States. And you'd see the Anasazi cliff dwellings. And they — and you got to actually walk through them or the remnants of them. And — but that felt like a ruin. That felt like something that was no longer alive.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then when you go to Greece, it's like it's —

MS. RIEDEL: They're alive.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. Very much alive. Yes. And those sort of influences were great. It was more about architecture and then I think, too, perhaps being more aware of cultural differences. And I'm hoping — I think the less xenophobic someone is, the more prejudices related is eliminated from your life. You start seeing that it's natural for people to think differently about a lot of different issues. And going back to my first experience of

living with Crow Indians and then the Scots, traveling through Europe, it's been — it's been really wonderful to interject myself into other cultures. Of course, not whole — not completely. You're always the expatriate to a certain degree, but you're — you become a part of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that's been a real pleasure. I'm not absolutely certain how that's kind of translated into my work, but I'm hoping it has somehow, with the images having sort of broader interpretations. And it might be the reason that I try to pick imagery that is digestible by almost anyone.

And like — even like the pillow form is such a — is such a potent image for me. It first started when I would visit these cathedrals and I would see these marble crypts. You would see the whole body carved in marble and their heads would always be on a pillow.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: One of the first ones I saw in Spain was the crypt of Isabella and Ferdinand.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I asked one of the curators why Ferdinand's head was so deeply sunk into pillow and Isabella's head was just barely. And he said — or I'm sorry, other way around. Her — and he said: Well, her head is deeper in her pillow because she had brains.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: She was the smart one. And I thought, well, there's conceptual art back from — in the 1490s. And you know, those little things —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and you start thinking, of course, that's how you can think about that and the fact they considered that as a little, tiny political gesture. It's really wonderful.

And then of course pillows, for me, they're where we spend a third of our day. We share our most intimate conversations at times. We die with our heads on pillows — you know, and so they run the whole trajectory of our lives in very intimate, poignant ways and very simple fashions. It's why it's a — it's perhaps been my most consistent form. I maybe over the years have made 10 different versions in different states, and I'm still working with it — the sort of electrical impulse, scientific — [inaudible] — I'm working on —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — that I told you about. But it — it's those — the rare times that I'm really paying attention and I see things like the tomb of Isabella and Ferdinand, that really does become a kind of a mechanism for my work, I think.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm just thinking of the site-specific pillows in the — in the synagogue, that installation floating above the seats of the deceased members and just the poignancy of that. There's a universality, and at the same time, a person, a very specific individual associated with each of those and just what a profound icon that can be, especially in a particular context.

MR. MONGRAIN: I always liked that piece. I never felt like — it in some ways the site pieces are then translated into photographs for me. And I've exhibited the photographs as photographs, not just documentation of site pieces. And I never got the second stage of that artwork as a — what I felt was a compelling image. But yeah, I think that — I was working with a contemplation group at that time. I think Jo Yarrington had been working with some of the congregation. And what I did was I asked — it turned out that these seats in the synagogue were usually assigned to people for life.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I asked the people sitting next to the last number of people who had died to write stories. And inside each pillow had a very small hole in the back, I put in their written statements. So they sort of contained a very small echo of their lives. All of them were really positive. I did get one daughter-in-law who — [laughs] — who maybe wrote some things she shouldn't have. [Laughs.] But yeah, yeah. That was — and of course, trying to be sensitive to how sort of Jewish faith and what's best to put into synagogues. As the time went on, I think people started even bringing small stones and putting them on the pillows, like they do on grave markers, because these were the — this was the last — I can't remember how many it was. I think it was 12 or

13.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. That — I think that's the other thing. I've only seen an image of it, but it — that was another thing that so profound, was just to see, you know, almost a dozen of these pillows just were scattered throughout those seats, floating there.

MR. MONGRAIN: I don't remember the specific math, but there's a certain amount of time of mourning. And so I paralleled that amount of time —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: — of — yeah. And they were — they were the last people who had passed away. So it — they were the most recent and the most connected to the memory of the congregation.

MS. RIEDEL: And that pillow was one of the first forms that appeared in your work. And it's — you're still using it today. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. Yeah. It's — yeah. It — for me, it has the most diversity as being romantic and connected to cryptostatuary and all of these things.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: There's nobody that doesn't have some kind of — will understand the form. Even the fact that I'm making it a little more architectonic, it's even more rigid. It was one of the first — among the first pieces I exhibited at Hunter College. And Robert Morris told me that he liked it. It was the, I think, one of the biggest compliments I've ever had in my whole life. He's always been one of the great art stars. And when I got the job here, even being able to teach a little bit with him was really amazing — and of course, one of the great minimalists — [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: Who would you cite as of significant influence on you and your work over time?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, in —

MS. RIEDEL: Or what?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. In different ways, it's a — it's kind of hard to — certainly, my long friendship with Nick Kripal.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like it.

MR. MONGRAIN: We have — we share a lot of conversation —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and studios and travel and art. When I first got to New York, I started working, so I got to know Judy Moonelis, who's a very well-established ceramic artist here in New York; the contemplation's group with Jo Yarrington and Aleman Torres [ph]. But the work that I look at — I look at the most is — it changes sort of constantly.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? Interesting. There's nobody you'd go back to again and again?

MR. MONGRAIN: Gosh.

MS. RIEDEL: Or who was specifically important during a certain time in your life?

MR. MONGRAIN: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: This might be one of those questions that occur to you at 6 in the morning. We can discuss tomorrow.

MR. MONGRAIN: Exactly right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I — there was a — there was a point where I really started enjoying people that I considered more kind of conceptualist, and who — where that was really the kind of emphasis of their work —

MS. RIEDEL: I would think.

MR. MONGRAIN: — where the image was really quite secondary. And that's why I think I've tried to blend this real love for the visual quality of minimalism with these people who work on a — on a — strictly a conceptual basis. And the — I think if — whenever my work works best is when it sort of employs both of those sort of devices as a[n] artist. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. I'll ask you again tomorrow.

MR. MONGRAIN: Okay. Please.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: That's a — I'll be — I'll be clearer tomorrow about that.

MS. RIEDEL: Have you done commissions?

MR. MONGRAIN: I have done a few. My gallery got me a commission for a bank in St. Louis. I made a very large plumb that is hanging from this dome.

MS. RIEDEL: Really? In a bank in St. Louis?

MR. MONGRAIN: In this bank — a bank in St. Louis.

MS. RIEDEL: How interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was just coming directly down from the top of the dome. That was a very nice commission. I've worked with a few architects, that I'm just starting to work with too, where a piece that was proposed — it's been postponed — but he was interested in my — in my water pieces. And now that they've translated it into not about water but about a sound, he's making this domestic home, and the young girl in it is blind. And he wants me to create that ripple going around the edge of part of the homes, so she can follow it. And so just by the change in the ripple, she will know where she is.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow.

MR. MONGRAIN: So she'll have a sort of tactile lead that takes her through the house. And after — I've been trying to work with him and this girl I asked to — how — and a little bit related to braille — how braille has — and actually braille put down on a straight line has this kind of gesture similar to the translation of sound.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: But that project is a ways away. But that will be a large commission piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. How interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. That should be fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Do commissions bring opportunities or challenges that are interesting to you, that you welcome? Or do you find them — or do they not come up very often?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, they don't come up often. And I'm really not that interested. I enjoy working with an architect. That — that's a sort of commission that feels inclusive. And I have on occasion done things, but the sort of community-based work that I really enjoy is the cathedrals and synagogues, the spiritual spaces. And that's enough for me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I have this great luxury of being an academic. And I have a salary that I'm never going to starve. So — and I feel a little bit like my taking commissions is a little bit like — there are artists out there who make their living off of commissions and grants. And I think it would almost, might be wrong. But there are other people that need that more for their creative practice than I do. And since it's not something I really enjoy or strive for, I almost feel it's ethical not to.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting. Okay. Let me stop here today.

MR. MONGRAIN: Sure.

MS. RIEDEL: It's a — gives you a couple of — 10 minutes, and we can pick up again tomorrow.

MR. MONGRAIN: Okay. That's great.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. Any final thoughts that are hanging that you want to finish up now?

MR. MONGRAIN: I will have some tomorrow. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

[End of Disc]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Jeffrey Mongrain at Hunter College on December 17th, 2011, for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art. This is card number three.

It — is it Hunter College and this is the art department in —

MR. MONGRAIN: Hunter College, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it's part of the whole CUNY system, so we're the City University of New York.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think there are 28 colleges in the whole CUNY system, and we're the senior college —

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — the one with the main master's program.

MS. RIEDEL: Is Hunter? Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Let's start today with a question we didn't address at all yesterday, which is about working process, and if you would describe your working process and how it's evolved over time. Has it changed significantly, and if so, how?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I've always sort of thought of myself as a builder. I do enjoy the manipulation of material. I very seldom have been one of these people that does much casting or even uses found objects. So it's usually constructed from the very beginning. It's one of the reasons that clay — it's so malleable — that I work with. But even when I work with wood or resins or other things, I like to sort of address it.

It's a way, too — a little bit of what we spoke about yesterday — when you're using definable objects, almost ubiquitous sort of cultural forms, in my mind, they need to be readdressed. They need to be given sort of a different sort of visual statement, rather than just a recreation. And that's why, working in materials where — and even that kind of shift in materiality, I think, in some ways redefines it contextually. It's the sort of classic little surrealism, where you're just looking at it made either in a different way or a different material or with a different sort of tension. And that's what material does.

I also kind of like the physical engagement with these objects and actually the work of constructing. And I often get asked about why — as I think you did — why I often work clay after the fired state. And even using saws and carving it down and then sanding it down and functioning, there's something kind of gratifying to me in that state of doing that.

I have a hard time even working with assistants to bring the work along too far. I'll sometimes help them make — have them help me make slabs and this kind of thing with the larger pieces, and even some figuring out hanging devices, because a lot of my — sometimes my work's presented in a way where the hanging mechanism is intended to add perhaps a little suggestion of mystery to it.

As the pillows are often displayed, they're coming directly out of the wall. And a little bit of that illusion of them in situ without an obvious support mechanism sort of becomes an important part of the illusion.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think that there's certain theatrics to some of my work. And I like that play. I like the — where you're having to almost guess or consider the presentation. Other things like the — that hanging bell piece that's pierced, it took a long time just to drill all the holes. And it was really — and I lost a few of the pieces. But the idea of making something that was solid — relatively solid — that also felt like it had the ability to breath — and it was it another way to sort of visually represent a suggestion of sound.

And the hanging mechanism there was, again, a small kind of autobiographical nod to my mother. Those were — those were sewing threads that went from the piece up to the ceiling. And as I was sort of considering the most delicate way to present this — because with all those holes it was a very fragile piece — there was this thing when I was child, and whenever I was in trouble my mother would give me a sewing lesson so that we could sit down and she would talk to me.

I always knew I'd done something wrong — [they laugh] — I know how to sew really well, so that doesn't bode well for my childhood. But, yes. And so that was just — you know, how sometimes you bring sort of sentimental, autobiographical things into it. And, if you're lucky, it works visually. So that's my process.

But I do cast at times. Certainly I have a — I had made this figurative piece and there's — it was a little bit based on a figure I'd seen on a Flemish cross when I was lecturing in Amsterdam. And then also, I'm really intrigued by that time in art history where I was looking at a lot of the early renaissance periods, and even renaissance, and the beautiful kind of figurative images that — the muscular neoclassic. And —

MS. RIEDEL: Is this *Fear of Falling* you're speaking of?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I've done several versions. I actually took a mold of that figure. And I maybe made six different versions of it. What's nice, when it comes out of the mold, I can completely reconstruct it. It's a little — I'm always a little curious about how I should define that piece, because you know how when you run an edition of prints you list them — like an edition of 10, and one through 10. When I sell these pieces, I always make sure that if anyone knows that I have — I do have a mold. They're completely unique but they do have an origin. And you want to be completely kind of upfront about those things.

The original piece of that figure was a piece that I did in Glasgow, Scotland. We were talking a little bit yesterday about occasionally my work, and even more so now, is becoming a bit more overtly political. I did a piece in Scotland where I was given this really beautiful, small room about five feet by eight feet.

And I filled the room with about three inches of water and covered the floor with volcanic stone. And in the corner of the room I created a steel bar that went across the corner. The bar itself was about four or five feet across. And it just spanned the corner. And on top of it I took an actual Christ figure off a cross, put him on top of the wire with an umbrella in his hand. So it was this sort of tightrope piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: Now, I thought it was really kind of a nice symbolism about Catholicism and the view of Christ and all of these things. It wasn't meant to be as much a negative comment as a — as a question, because here is this figure sort of teetering, walking a tightrope with all the classic suggestions that walking a tightrope have. My only exhibition that ever got protested. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. There were — there were a handful of people that were — found the piece very objectionable.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. That I was — I was using — well, and perhaps because it was an actual Christ figure off a cross. It hadn't been blessed, because I purchased it from a shop. And I have enough of a Catholic upbringing to know about sanctified and desanctified. But I tried to explain that, but it was still — and that's a touchy issue.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. I'm actually surprised that that does not come up more often with your site-specific work.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, that certainly helped my learning curve. I did that piece before I had done any of the real site works. And it quickly made me realize — and of course I knew it intellectually — but it made me realize how incredibly sensitive people are to spiritual spaces, and rightly so. So I have been a little bit more careful.

I have — I should say, though, there have been people who have objected to some of the works that I've had in these sites, simply because it changed their — it changed the presence that they were so accustomed to. But that's not happened very often.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems, from what you were saying yesterday, as if there may be a fair amount of dialogue within the congregation in these sites before the installation actually takes place. Is that primarily true?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I've come to realize, too, something which I thought — I found a bit odd is that almost always the ministers or priests or rabbis are very liberal thinkers.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: You would generally think that there would be this conservative religious sense, but I've never found that to be the case. Of course, they're — they've all had broader life experiences. They've been well-educated — that doesn't necessarily mean liberal or conservative — but they've been very welcoming — or at least the ones who have brought me, and earlier on my contemplation spiritual group, in to do shows.

I think the piece that got the most acceptance by a congregation was the blood pool in front of the altar. As time went on, people were actually coming and praying in front — in front of the piece. And I have some photographs of people kneeling down. The suggestion that it was the blood — a full body's blood seemed to sort of resonate a little bit with the congregation.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fascinating.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. Yeah. I had no idea how that piece would be accepted. And you never know — especially that piece had a specificity to it that things like the plumb really don't have, or even a pillow. They can be viewed with a little bit more abstraction, where a pool of blood is a pool of blood, you know?

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And how many of the site-specific pieces are temporary installations relatively? Are they primarily all temporary? Are they primarily all permanent?

MR. MONGRAIN: All of them have been temporary.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. I've had a few suggestions of leaving pieces, but — yeah, they've all be temporary.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think the longest installation was here in New York at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine where I installed five different pieces. And speaking of very especially art-sympathetic religious sites, the cathedral of St. John the Divine has an exhibition series that goes on constantly.

MS. RIEDEL: And I did want to talk about that, because I know that you had quite a few pieces in there. This was 2002, correct?

MR. MONGRAIN: Correct.

MS. RIEDEL: And how did that come about? Was that the first religious site in the States?

MR. MONGRAIN: In the States? Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah? Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: A few of my group had done some things in Philadelphia. And we'd all done some independent things. That was the first large one, I believe, in the States that we did as a group. And I alone had five sites. And I think Jo Yarrington had about three. Nick Kripal had two or three. Nick Kripal had a gorgeous piece.

In those large arches, Nick recreated a — he will — he'll be upset if I get this incorrect — but he recreated the molecule of a piece — of water. And it harkens back to genesis when the world was being created. And he layered these almost clear, sheer pieces of cloth. And he made a silver molecule that fit this huge archway and it was lit from behind. It was a stunning piece.

And Jo Yarrington, who has done these — is a photographer and has filled windows in these spaces with very provocative images. She actually had an Adam and Eve piece in there. Thérèse Chabot, the artist from Canada — Thérèse would dry flowers and she would bring all — she would bring boxes of these colored flowers — petals, and recreate things out of just flowers. She recreated the rose window on the floor in the center of the floor.

A funny thing, when we were showing in the synagogue in Glasgow, she recreated a Jewish star out of flowers in the center of the synagogue. And the rabbi accidentally walked through them. And she yelled at this poor rabbi.

[They laugh.] That was the first time I'd seen anybody yell at a rabbi. But, yeah, so very — of course, very delicate, very ephemeral work that really just almost got swept up at the end.

And Alan Greenberg was my fifth — our fifth in the group, worked with sort of altering large-scale sites, whether it was wrapping things or hanging large, large, large boats or logs. And he brought in a real sort of a physical kind of alteration to the sites. But yeah, the — that was — and of course, the St. John the Divine, the Cathedral, was one of my favorite sort of sites. And it was very close and very easy.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely. Going back to the working process question that we started with, I'd like to look at the working process even earlier — in the earlier stages of the idea stages, and before we get to the actual functional fabrication of the objects, how the ideas for the work have evolved.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, you know, you go out with a group of artists and you start talking about your work. And I have this habit of talking about my work as soon as I have a sketch of it. So, for me, when I draw it — when I do the research and come up with the idea — and we talked a little bit about the parameters of — you know, I will touch into science and — or I will find out what the history of sites are. But once I figure a piece out on paper, it's done.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. So first is the idea and the preliminary research, something that captures your attention, followed with a fairly in-depth sketch or rough sketches?

MR. MONGRAIN: A fairly in-depth sketch —

MS. RIEDEL: Of what the final piece might look like?

MR. MONGRAIN: — and a lot of writing about the research.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: But I'm almost to the point I've been doing this long enough that I've got the stage of — the most exciting — well, I — the first stage is very exciting, of conceiving the piece and getting it figured out. Then I know I can make it. I may have to make it two or three times to get it physically as precise as I may want it.

But the piece I was telling you about yesterday, I'm working on this pillow piece that will have text tracing around the outside of this beautiful scientific formula of when the electrical impulse slows in your brain to the point you lose consciousness. And the piece will be entitled *The Loss of Consciousness*. I have this piece on paper. It's a piece that I like even though I haven't made it yet. And it's one of these things, like, I have — as with most artists, I have the pieces that I think really work, and others that are maybe okay. But this is a piece that I like. And it'll be a piece that I'll put out there.

So for me, the — and so when I'm with friends and they say, "How's your work going?" and I said, "Well, I've just got this new piece called *The Loss of Consciousness*. And they said, "Can we stop by and see it?" And I say, "Well, I haven't even started it yet." [They laugh.] But I've got the piece. And other friends will go, "Well, how can you do that? You've got to — you've got to build it." Anyway —

MS. RIEDEL: But that's interesting though, it's so — and do they evolve at all in the actual process or are they fairly true to the original idea?

MR. MONGRAIN: They might evolve and they might shift a little bit in form — you know, then you start thinking of all the formalities of balance and how bulbous a shape might be or exactly the scale. But pretty much, these days, it — when I have it on paper, when I've conceived it, if I like the idea, it feels, it has a bit of humor or science or politic — once I — once I get that figured out, that's the — then I — then I can construct the piece.

And I do enjoy the construction process. But — I probably have five or six pieces that I have on paper. And because I've been the interim chair at Hunter College this last semester, I've been working five days a week and have less studio time. So I'm — I have a body of work for the next three or four months in front of me and it's just a matter of producing it.

That sounds kind of boring, doesn't it? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it sounds like — it sounds like a very particular way of working. And I ask because I haven't heard too many people talk about working that way. So it's very interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: [Inaudible.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And you touched on something that was another one of these questions I want to be sure we address, which is humor.

MR. MONGRAIN: Ah.

MS. RIEDEL: And how important is that in your work?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I think it's more important for me than perhaps my audience, because I think there is some humor in my work but it's — perhaps not as obvious as it might be. I think — I think the *Pierced Moose* is just really funny.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: But of course — but of course it's —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: The reasoning behind it was I got this exhibition in Minneapolis and — my home state, and I — when I was a child there was four feet of snow on the ground. And it was cold. And these days it's not like that. In my lifespan the climate has changed. And we now have pelicans in northern Minnesota, which I never saw a pelican. We now have coyotes, things that were never there, because the climate's warmed.

So I started finding out that animals were dying because the shorter winters, for some reason, lessened the nutrients in the leaves that they ate. And it's also very sad. But I've always had this really funny thing about moose. [Laughs.] I think they're just really kind of gorgeous, goofy, wonderful animals. [Laughs.] And I thought, I finally have a reason to do a moose. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: There you go. There you go.

MR. MONGRAIN: And there we go. And I'll put it on this glowing hot branch that is — it — so it goes — you can shift far to the humerus, and then of course far to the — [inaudible] — depending on how you — how you view it.

MS. RIEDEL: Which goes back to that sort of performance art sense of —

MR. MONGRAIN: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — tragedy and comedy, right?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Exactly.

I did a piece that I also thought was a little funny in Rome a few — a few years back. I was offered an exhibition at the Temple Gallery, and it was an exhibition that started in July. And very sort of elemental things like water are a part of my work — and snow — I've often used that. And I found that there was a basilica to the Virgin Mary in Rome that — the miracle was that the pope had a dream that, wherever it snowed, he would build this great basilica.

So as you — I'm sure you've been to Rome — it was in the middle of July. The pope had a dream — [laughs] — and he wakes up in the morning, and it's snowing in Rome in the middle of July. That's a miracle itself. That's the story. So he etched around the snow, and it made the footprint for the basilica of the maggiore — and then this beautiful, great basilica. And so every day on — I think it's July 17, when they have the anniversary — all these young children are up at the top of the basilica throwing white petals down and so that it snows.

MS. RIEDEL: Snows.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's really beautiful. And so the exhibition that I was offered was during the same time. So here I am going through customs with huge bags of artificial snow. [They laugh.] They were a little wondering what that was.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I have a bad reputation with customs to start with.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you? Oh dear. [Laughs.] That's another story.

MR. MONGRAIN: But I showed up and I filled this room with snow.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it was 110 degrees outside. And then I went around and I cut down all of these trees, these small trees — because originally the columns in the very first religious buildings — the columns were of course trees. And so then I re-created the nave and the columns that went down the center, and that was the piece.

The one thing I did do was, on the wall, the — one of the famous things of this basilica is that the windows were designed by Michelangelo. So I — with a very light, shiny, white paint — almost exactly the same — I painted the shadow of one of the windows on the background. And so it was very much a sort of reflection of what was going on. But it was really lovely having people come in from the heat of the day into a room full of snow.

MS. RIEDEL: Snow, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. [Laughs.]

But I was mentioning my experiences with customs agents, or getting through airports. And when I was — when I had one of my shows at this Sharjah Biennial [in] the United Arab Emirates — this was about — the museum ended up purchasing my piece, and called me up and asked for my bank information. And they did a wire transfer into my bank. Now the museum is owned by the government; it's a government-owned museum. And I got a call from FBI Agent Hansen [ph] asking why there was a money transfer from the United Arab Emirates into my personal bank account.

MS. RIEDEL: That's amazing.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I said, "I'm just a goofy artist. I've" — [laughs] — "they — this museum purchased a piece, and I'm not sponsoring anybody." [Laughs.] That was really interesting.

MS. RIEDEL: That's extraordinary.

MR. MONGRAIN: This was probably about a year after September 11th, or year and a half. It's amazing that they're paying that close attention.

MS. RIEDEL: Close attention. That is amazing.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Wow. One wire transfer and they were on the phone.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: It took them a while. It wasn't immediate, but they were — they were checking. And apparently it was just enough money that it was — had a bit of a red flag to it.

MS. RIEDEL: Question about — you were mentioning the elemental aspects of the work. And I think about that when I look at the work over the past couple of decades, that there are certainly certain forms that recur — bells and pillows, twigs or branches. Do you think about the work at all in terms of series? Or do you think about them as completely separate, independent pieces? Does it feel like there's a dialogue of sorts going through the years through these different pieces or forms?

MR. MONGRAIN: I would think so. I mean, I feel like — I'm hoping what I'm doing is creating a library of images. And there are times I will only use that image once or twice, or it gets used multiple times. Most of my images I've used multiple times. But it's a little hard to say, because at times I just enjoy the kind of simplicity. There's times I'm — I hope I'm just trying to create something that has a kind of an elegance to it.

The sculptures of bottled water that I've tried to make, I really enjoy doing those. And I really enjoy them as objects. There's less a sort of a narrative mechanism behind those, as much as — it is what it is. And it has some specificity: It might be a yard of water; it might be within that kind of black, deep lake water that I grew up with, so it — have those sort of things. But — if — I'm hoping it's really — it may be perceived a little bit more as simply a poetic object that fits into the — that kind of modernist sensibility of the mid-20th century; where the other works often are driven much more by specific content.

But then I've recently taken that elemental aspect of that yard of water and re-translated it into a show I just had on the four chaplains. And so what I did was — this is a famous story from World War II. I got offered to show at the — initially at the four chaplains church, which is part of Temple University. And then it got moved to another space in Philadelphia, so I went ahead with it. But I grafted out the floor to the place — the longitude and latitude where this event happened.

MS. RIEDEL: And which ship was it that sunk? Do you remember?

MR. MONGRAIN: I think —

MS. RIEDEL: I have a note of it someplace too.

MR. MONGRAIN: I can tell you in just a moment.

MS. RIEDEL: The *USS Dorchester*.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: In 1943.

MR. MONGRAIN: [Laughs.] That's great.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.] February 3rd.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right. I brought helpful hints of some of my work. Oh my god.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right. And, I mean, a very powerful story.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: And anybody who is 70 or older knows the story, because it was so — it was so famous. These four men gave up their life jackets, gave up their places when their ship had been hit by a German submarine. And they all died. And they had just been ordained or brought into the Army ministry. And so I just sculpted that piece of water and then grafted the floor. And, working with Nick Kripal, we also created the stars in the window.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible] — that location. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. Yeah, that was a —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — one of the examples of — [inaudible]. So it's nice when pieces can have multiple lives, for me. And I'm happy to show this piece even again, in a gallery situation, and then have it — have been existed in this sort of — where it becomes more of a, perhaps, memorial or even a monument to the event, rather than just a discrete object that's more about just this very primal gesture of the — of water moving.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm thinking of the circular format that you used in St. Thomas Aquinas in the church, that it frames the large sculpture. And it feels like a frame, but it also feels almost megaphone-like. And then I think of the *John Daugman* iris piece, again that peephole. And there's something about the element of roundness of both of those forms that, in my mind, almost set up a dialogue of connection. Does it — does it feel that way to you when the forms are that elemental, that there is a conversation and a connection between those pieces, or not at all?

MR. MONGRAIN: You know, I think so. And it goes back to the — my enjoyment with kind of the reductive object, and whether the water is square or the water drop is round or — it's a — and also there's very little color, you know. So I try to stay authentic to the material, whether it's meant to replicate stone or black water or — and so I think of them — I think of them as sculptures, and not as putting a dimensionalized surface or drawing onto it.

But yeah, I think that — I would hope that the thread that you see is that. I do — come to think of it, a lot of my work is either square, rectangular or round. [Laughs.] I have to — I have to break that, I think. [They laugh.] But of course — and the — and the kind of — the figurative plumbs and things, and — you know, I shouldn't say — it's all that. But I think a lot of my — a lot of the ceramic, gallery-based pieces, certainly — yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Let's talk about the galleries a little bit, because we haven't discussed that at all, and how — what your experience has been like, exhibiting in galleries — how that has changed over time, or how that feels different if you're preparing for a gallery exhibition rather than site-specific.

MR. MONGRAIN: It was a big shift for me, working with galleries, coming from Europe — because in Europe, a lot of group shows, and they — there's almost more of a less commercial consideration to a lot of the exhibition spaces. It has a[n] organic nature to it. And then when I came to New York, of course, the commercialism — and there's more of a rigidity, almost. And it's a business; you understand that. People need to pay the rent.

My first gallery in New York was the John Elder Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And John had his gallery — a great art dealer — had a really lovely gallery going for quite a few years. A lot — he had a stable of artists that I really respected, and I showed two or three times with John.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: Of course, hard to keep commercial galleries going. And then I got picked up by the Perimeter Gallery, which is a larger entity. I'm still with them in Chicago. Their New York venue eventually closed. And Meredith Kaye [ph] was my dealer here in New York. And I absolutely loved working with her. She gave me some commissions, gave me free rein. It's lovely when your gallery dealers feel like they're giving you complete support like that.

My last show with her, I — she offered me a solo show before they closed. I was going to be her last show. And I asked her if I could do [a work with] my brother James. And the two of us did a twofer, the Mongrain brothers. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's wonderful.

MR. MONGRAIN: We did a two-person show together. It was really lovely. And it was very generous. And she's continued to kind of support my work and put it out there.

The space I — the gallery I'm with now is Loveed Fine Arts, which I've had a long relationship with. It brings me to one of the people that I wanted to talk to you about, too, Ron Kuchta. He is I think the — either the director or chief curator of Loveed. And for a long time, Ron was also the editor for the *American Ceramics* magazine, which was a gorgeous publication. In my field, it was the best as far as criticism and writing, and even its look was so beautifully designed. Unfortunately, it didn't come out as often as it should have. They were running on a very tight budget. But Ron was the editor — and Harry Dennis, who recently passed away.

They were — these two men were very good to me. When I first got to New York, they were the ones who first called me up and invited me out for a drink and wanted to sort of get to know me and introduce me a little bit to the New York art world, particularly the New York ceramic world. Both Ron and Harry had become very good friends, and Ron's been a supporter of mine for a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. And, you know, lovely people. It was interesting, coming to New York, because —

MS. RIEDEL: I can imagine.

MR. MONGRAIN: — everybody — not everybody; a lot of the people in my field had applied for this job. And I was coming from Europe, and there were a lot of questions about who I was. [Laughs.] I remember Judith Schwartz started having these salons, and — where she would invite about 20 to 30 of the New York ceramic artists.

And I remember her inviting me the first time, and I got introduced to a lot of the people I've now become friends with. And it was an interesting experience. [They laugh.] There was a lot of, "So, who are you?" You know, "How did you get the job?" sort of thing. Yeah, it's been really interesting going to Judy Schwartz. She of course is the head of ceramics, and I think — I think it — I'm not sure exactly her title, but she's at NYU, and has been there for a long time, and been also very nice to me.

I — it was — I genuinely miss Harry Dennis. He tried desperately to keep this beautiful publication going. And I know there were questions about the fact that it didn't come out as often as it should have. But the fact that he stayed with it, and it was always of absolute the highest standard, was really extraordinary. When he passed a couple of years ago — maybe a year and a half, two years ago — I offered to hold the memorial here. And we rented one of the theaters, and Ron Kuchta and I housed it. And about 20 or 30 people came and spoke about Harry. Ron put up all the covers of the *American Ceramics*— put magazines, and it was — it was lovely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Very touching. So they were — the — if you don't mind, the two of them — and certainly David McFadden has been very sweet and generous, from the times when he was at the American Craft Museum to the move to the new space. And it's been a real pleasure kind of working with him too.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great to hear. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. Lovely man — he's come to all of my shows. At times, of course, I've sent cards; his mobility from having polio as a child is a bit limited. But he still — I remember him climbing the steps of the

Cathedral of St. John the Divine to come and see my work, and walking around that huge cathedral, and just being sort of the most generous, sweet man, so — I'm afraid I've strayed a bit from your original question.

MS. RIEDEL: No, that's okay. That's okay. That was — I — absolutely worth taking time for. You mentioned Harry Dennis and Ron Kuchta and *American Ceramics*. Are there publications that have been especially significant to you, your work, the development of your work?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, yes. Certainly a few authors who've —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: — have placed things — Glen Brown, I think — along with these other people, Glen has made a contribution to my work. He did a solo article in *Sculpture* magazine. He did a long piece in *World Sculpture*. He's written about me a half a dozen times. And even when — I put — when I had my mid-career retrospective at the Daum Museum — Douglass Freed, who was the director who brought me in and helped put that show together, and also the book on my work — I was — I was one of Doug's last shows before he was going to go on. And I was recommending Glen Brown as — to take over the Daum. And he would have been brilliant.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: It didn't work out, but he — of course, you've read some of how Glen writes, and he is a wonderful writer. His intelligence and how — I hope he'll take this as a compliment if he reads this — he's a little dense sometimes with how he writes. I occasionally joked that I've had to read things he's written about me two or three times —

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: — to understand them, and they're about me. But he has been great. And also, Eleanor Heartney —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — who writes for *Art in America*. And she also wrote the opening essay to my Daum book. And Eleanor has been — she's been absolutely lovely.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. They have both a great ability, I think, to put your work in a context and to examine in it in a way that's really insightful.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. It's nice when you have real generous writers like that, who will also work with you and sort of crosscheck data and text and allow you to have a voice in — not necessarily a final edit, but to have a look —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and to give some feedback.

MS. RIEDEL: And you've mentioned that you're very specific about who you choose to write, about what sort of images go out; that that's something you've been very careful with, that you — it's not been haphazard in any way.

MR. MONGRAIN: No. I think it's really important that there — there's a lot of aspects to making art, and perhaps half of it is the actual production in the studio. And I think you and I were speaking about this, that I think you need to manage your own career. You don't want to approach the creativity as a business. But I do think the way in which your work is put into public and the way it's written about, there is an aspect of managing it. And certainly, after the Daum publication, I have much more control over my images. I've learned the resolution they have to be, the sizes they have to be. I even learned how much can be Photoshopped, which is very little, to keep the image authentic —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: — for publications. I once had a — I Photoshopped out a[n] electric switch off a wall. And it didn't get accepted for a publication because they — I guess they were able to scan it. The computer scanned it to see if that was the — the digitation was — had changed. And they saw this spot on the wall that was slightly different. And you're not allowed to do that.

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. It's getting so — my understanding is certain publications, if the image has been Photoshopped too much — you could Photoshop — and I'm just telling you what I've been told by friends — but you can Photoshop an entire image by changing a color.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: But if you change one small part of it, then the image they're giving may not be what the actual object or the installation was.

MS. RIEDEL: Sure, but if you're trying to take out a light switch, that seems like really harmless.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well — [laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: I would have thought that they —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Who knows what could have been there? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right, I guess. Yeah.

You mentioned coming to Hunter from Europe. Do you think of yourself and your work as part of an international tradition, as part of an American tradition, as a hybrid of sorts? How do you — do you think about it one way or the other?

MR. MONGRAIN: I probably did earlier on. I've now been at Hunter 15 or 16 years. So I've been here for a while. I remember when I came to interview, I told them the seminars that I was teaching, and they were all European artists. And they all dealt with performance groups and sculptors and artists that were working in Europe. And I didn't reference anybody from the States, and that became very much part of my world — that contemporary sense.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Like I said, a lot of these young art stars had come out of Glasgow. There was that period in the '90s where Saatchi was coming in from London and just almost gathering up our graduates. Jenny Saville — I remember her paintings as an undergraduate. And my memory is her show sold out. The Saatchis came and bought an undergraduate painter's show. And there was this miraculous thing where she was cutting drawings out of her sketchbook and selling them at her undergraduate show. And of course, she has become — I think she's a[n] amazing painter — a painter's painter. The physicality of her work is just extraordinary. And it was all of that kind of energy.

But then, when I came here, I — to ask if I think of myself as an international artist, I suppose where all the fractions and parts of our lives come together to make — to make some kind of whole. To be honest, I think of myself as a guy from Minnesota — [laughs] — you know, who — that still is really at the heart of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh. And separating yourself from the work, does the work feel to you like it's part of an international tradition?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I'm beginning to think I might work in a generational sense.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I'm beginning to think that I'm mid-career, that I have the — when I was a — when I was a grad student, Eva Hesse was the most wonderful person in the world. And all of us thought: My God, look at what this person's doing. She is altering minimalism. She's working in a free-form fashion. The work has this sort of lyrical quality, and it also feels very poignant. And she was it.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then, of course, a lot of performative work and a lot of experimentation. The object became — the rigid object became secondary, that it's got to be cast or made out of metal or honed. And it became what Eva Hesse was doing or performing — and so there was this opening of it.

But I'm still rooted in that history of the imagery I looked at from the '50, '60, '70s that led into my graduate work in the '80s. And I say I'm feeling generational because I think — because I'm a teacher. I work in this

wonderful master's program. We have about 140 MFA students. We have a huge master's program.

MS. RIEDEL: That is huge.

MR. MONGRAIN: And these kids are doing absolutely brilliant things.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's amazing. I've got — I have the thesis catalogue that I brought for you.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible.]

MR. MONGRAIN: But I think they look at my work and they think that I'm of the older generation.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I am. And that's okay. You know, that's — I told them they'll get there. [They laugh.] But I have a slight — and so it's important that I keep looking and I keep looking at artists beyond my niche, my age group, my genre.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: But yes, I would say I'm a product of my generation and my history. And I think it happens with everybody. We were talking about this yesterday. You look back to the first things you were doing, even if it's childhood or high school or undergraduate, and the suggestion is still there. And with my students in grad school now, they'll see the same thing in 20 years.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think your question was about feeling international.

MS. RIEDEL: The work, perhaps.

MR. MONGRAIN: The work. I — honestly, I wish it was more, but I don't think so.

MS. RIEDEL: You don't think so?

MR. MONGRAIN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: Hmm.

MR. MONGRAIN: I — and part of it is my — the way in which information is dispersed and imagery is dispersed with the Internet. I think almost nothing has become — nothing is international any longer. We are now part of a whole.

MS. RIEDEL: Interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: That sense of — that sense of regionalism. I remember reading an article about one of the Venice Biennales from about 10 years ago. A lot of the Eastern European countries were exhibiting for the first time. And there were all of these conversations that this is the — our last glimpse of regionalism, because they were more contained. And even the expanse of Google and the Internet hadn't — this might be 15 years ago — but they were a little bit more internal. Nobody is internal — at least, my students aren't. They're more aware of these great, massive artworks coming out of Asia these days, as they are with what's going on in Los Angeles or — yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: So the whole — it sounds as if you think the entire pool now is international, that there's no distinction one way — there's nothing separating.

MR. MONGRAIN: Very, very little. You know, I don't want to be naïve about sort of cultural sensibilities —

MS. RIEDEL: Sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: — or how things —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: There are things that develop. There is imagery and sensibility that starts somewhere, and then it expands.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And there really is the sense that you see a commonality that moves through artists the same way you do with politics or cultural entities or anything. And there's a reason why all of a sudden it seems like artists across the world are dealing with this image or this sensibility or this content. It's very much a cycle in which through — and we — none of us are working in a bubble, and none of us are absent from these kind of effects.

What's going on in the world now with the sort of financial crisis and occasionally people have the suggestion that it's mostly just us in the United States. And of course, it's not. Europe is suffering even more, and in some ways, others countries too, and I think eventually China. But all of these things are going to have an effect on how people produce work and how — and how they think of culture and also authority, which I think is getting to be more of a question with the younger students, harkening back to perhaps the '60s. You're too young to remember the '60s. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Not really. [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: But it — you know what I mean?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. That's me just speculating. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Are there particular qualities that you need in a working environment?

MR. MONGRAIN: To create the work or to —

MS. RIEDEL: Would you think about the work or to create the work? Or it seems like that this question may be for somebody who doesn't vary media as much as you do, but is there anything in particular you have to have? Or really is completely dependent on whatever the material is needed for the project, where you're working on glass or where you're working on ceramic, you're working on wood?

MR. MONGRAIN: I would say at the best of times I use materials to imply a content or —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — what I'm wanting to work. The — a great boon to me has been being able to research so quickly and being able to sort of digest broad ideas and then start to specify them.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that's sort of the way in which the research of content has been.

MS. RIEDEL: Can you give an example of that in a piece?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, even with the Daugman eye piece and understanding — having a look at — first, trying to decide the image and what felt right. And then all of a sudden being able to go — well, let give me you an example of a — of a simpler one.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: The black pillow form — the *Evening's Breath*: It took a long time to figure that piece out. It had been — at first, I have a basis of the piece. I have an object that feels important to me — the pillow. And then I feel that, by itself, it's not enough. There's almost — there's usually parts to how I try to construct an additional element that brings a suggestion to it that might be somewhat obscure or at least not obvious. So the pillow is sort of almost like a framework. It's what holds the work. It's kind of a foundation. And then for a long time, I have this head impression and what goes into it.

And you can even think, I mean, I've done versions where I've done a negative ear impression into it — into the pillow. And all of the considerations of it — as dreams of intimacy, as sexuality, as death — and you go through it — and I go through all of these sort of transitions of thinking of the parameters of this object. And I just started thinking about breathing. And I was able to do the research, which — and then find out these really interesting things. We lose more moisture through our breath than through sweat or urine together. And all these sort of little fascinating parts sort of came together. And then, physically, it turned out that 8 ½ ounces of moisture was just about the size — it creates a puddle about the size of a head. So all these nice kind of things linked on to it.

So it's really sort of a very slow stepping process. And the first stage is the object, and then sort of researched to

expand on suggest — suggestions that might be peripheral to that object, and then what physically sorts of fits it.

It's a little bit like — one of my favorite pieces that I don't talk about very much was the drop of water piece — a very simple, about four feet across. And it was one of the first water pieces I did, and it was a ripple of water. And I exhibited at the Greenwich Gallery here in New York. And I said to the curator: There's one thing I desperately want to do with this piece. I want to cut a hole in your floor about four inches around. And they had this beautiful hardwood floor. And they were nice enough to let me do it.

So the drop of water is big enough that from a distance it just looks like a ripple from a droplet. When you go up to it, there's a hole in the center that funnels down. And you lean into it with a slight emotional sense of vertigo, and all of a sudden it goes down into darkness, so it has this kind of continuance. So for me, it was this physical sense of being pulled in. So it was that additional suggestion beyond the definable object. And that's become — with most of my work, that's become an important part. Even with the water — with the square water, the fact that it's a yard doesn't really mean anything, but it specifies it in some way. And so that's become an important part — I don't think I've ever said that out loud before. But that's a really — those are a really important — if I — if I try to think clearly about the staging of my work, that that's probably the process.

MS. RIEDEL: That was very insightful. You know, thanks for following that through.

Have your sources and inspiration changed over time? Are they just refined? Stay fairly constant? Circle around?

MR. MONGRAIN: I would say that they — it's shifted from the object to the content. During my — during my younger years when I was trying to search things out, the forms were implied, that I'm using now. But I was really interested in just the physicalness and the construction. And I made a lot of things, a lot of them really bad things.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: But I made a lot of things. And you know, I've discarded 98 percent of them. But it was that youthful energy of building. And if anything, I've learned what — I hope I'm becoming a little more in tune with the sensibility where I don't have to do that so much anymore, and I can make sure there's clarity with how the content fits the form.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: That's the really hard part, especially with objects that aren't overtly expressive — they're rather simplified — to be able to have that sort of link together. And the few times that that works, I really enjoy that kind of balance. So it hasn't been a market change other than a shift of emphasis.

MS. RIEDEL: And nuanced too, it sounds as it — yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I would hope so. Yeah. I would hope so, although the work is now starting to turn into being more expressive and the theatrics are coming back, even with the gallery-based stuff. When — if I get — if I make 60 blood red Holy Grails with a taxidermy dog and cat, there's going to be nothing reductive about this. You know?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] That's true.

MR. MONGRAIN: There's going to be nothing simple about this. But it's going to be — but it's also where the content led me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: And — but you know, part of it is — this piece really started because I got offered the residency at the museum of glass.

MS. RIEDEL: That's in Tacoma right?

MR. MONGRAIN: In Tacoma.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And Jim and I have worked together before, but I've shown up with my molds and I said, "Jim, make this." And I thought what I really want to do with this residency is something where I'm really working with my brother.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And he's such a skilled craftsman and creative person. And I thought: Well, of course. Jim is renowned, not just for making Chihuly's work and almost all the other artists' glasswork that you see, but he's a goblet maker. And I thought — I started thinking, how could I use goblets in my work? And for a long time, I just couldn't think of anything.

And then, at some point, I was talking about my college degrees — and I have a minor in art history in the Renaissance, Gothic period — I started thinking about these Holy Grails. And I thought: Of course. Then — a lot of — and I was even that naïve that I couldn't think of many other Last Supper paintings, of course, besides da Vinci's. And there's no chalice with Leonardo da Vinci's *Last Supper*. But then, you start looking and there's hundreds of them. And I thought: Well, that's just great. I'll have Jim create — I'll go in search of these Holy Grails. And so the connection — the connection was really because of Jim's skills, because me trying to — my trying to parallel to it, find ideas that fit me.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: And so — it was funny, I was in — I was in Miami last month. The — a group is creating this documentary on a group of artists, not just visually but also — I was there with an author and a singer, and they were making a short film. And the title was *Synchronicity*. And that's when I was talking a little bit about this piece —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: — in the same way. It — I'm making this piece because Jim makes goblets.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it's — that's the start. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

It's extraordinary, too, that there's that diversity in those goblets or those chalices.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's amazing, isn't it?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. The variety — how —

MR. MONGRAIN: Of course, it — you know, it goes over centuries.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'm sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: And some are — some are just kind of simple.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Was it the Indiana Jones where he had to pick, among like 10 chalices, which one was the Holy Grail? And I think he picked the simplest one. So there's always that philosophical question — would it be a grand object that represented this, in Catholicism, historic event, or would it be a little wooden cup? You know that — and so it depends where you sort of place that, the importance or — I think it depends whether you're a Jesuit or whether you're — [they laugh] — whether you're not. But, the diversity is absolutely amazing. The Spaniards — I've got a group of Spanish last suppers and very ornate, big flurry of handles and real flourishes.

MS. RIEDEL: I look forward to seeing that. So actually, it looks — it looks as if we've just answered this next question: the similarities and differences between your early work and recent work. And you just said that really now, content — you've followed — is that how you think you would answer that?

MR. MONGRAIN: I think so. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there anything you would add to that?

MR. MONGRAIN: I hope I've become more confident with the work too, as I've grown up — as I've grown up. [They laugh.] And also, the I'm more aware of being able to express a political point of view. I think artists that work with politics can fit in lots of categories. It can be propaganda, where you're actually trying to tell people that this is how they should think, or it can be really beautifully elegant, like — one of my favorite works is Felix Gonzalez-Torres, is — have you ever seen the photograph of *The Bed*?

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it's this beautiful piece. And it's been on billboards here in New York. And it's an unmade bed, and there are two pillows with head impressions. And, of course, what's he's talking about is himself as a gay man, and trying to just very simply talk about the fact that it's a normal, elegant, sharing of intimacy and — just the way it would in any other situation.

And he deals with these issues in kind of the most poetic sort of sense, and very — but it's about the politics of being a gay male in this society. But if you weren't aware of it, you might not even know that. And in some ways the same with Robert Gober's work — there's that underpinning of having two sinks next to each other and constructed.

So that's the sort of politic that I like, where it is referential rather than propaganda or rather than autobiographical or — it poses the question rather than forces an answer. And at best, I think that's what works. And I think — I think it's something I hope I've become a little better at. It — and it might come with the — a calmness of aging, where you —

MS. RIEDEL: I was going to say the generational — [they laugh].

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: Perhaps.

When I was talking earlier about people like David McFadden and Juan Coutga [ph], there were — there were two other people who, after I returned to New York and I'd had some exhibitions, I had never experienced it before, but I just received letters from these two artists: Jim Melchert —

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: — and also Richard DeVore. And out of the blue I get these letters from these two artists whose work I absolutely love, saying the nicest things about my work. And we'd never met. And I — it was so touching. And I've started to — I'm not sure I'm of that prestige, but I've done that with a few young artists too. I've just written them and talked about the impression that their work left with me, because I've seldom been so touched as getting these letters.

And then, of course, I've met Jim and got to know — Richard came to my show at the Perimeter Gallery in Chicago. I met him briefly before he passed away. But what a — what a lovely, generous thing to do.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely, absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: When I — another person, Petah Coyne, when I first got to New York, she took me around to the Chelsea galleries and introduced me to all of the dealers. And I thought, oh my god. [Laughs.] I remember about a year later I had invited her to Hunter College and I was introducing her. And I told this story: I said, "I'd just come to New York. Petah took me around, showed me to all the galleries. Told all the dealers, you must look at this guy's work. It's absolutely fab. She was so nice." And I said, "And I, of course, thought all New York artists were just like Petah." [They laugh.] That was the response from the audience. Everybody laughed. And I said, "This is — this is really one of the sweetest, most generous artists I've ever met." And of course, her work is really wonderful. Another — you know, and all of these artists that have been so generous and that — and not just because they've been so generous, but I also really respect their work and really like their work. Yeah, that was —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. I'm glad you mentioned both Melchert and Coyne. I think we've talked about Petah briefly yesterday, but I think that is an interesting connection to make, just in terms of this — their sensibility, that makes — that resonates on a level, in terms of a generational ceramics thing even, perhaps.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I think it's important to give that kind of support to people. I — it's something that I honestly try — there are a lot of people that I try to recommend for shows or to be included in books and things. I wish more people did that. I don't think it's only being generous, I think it's just the right thing to do. And it keeps the people who you respect kind of moving forward. Opportunities can be difficult to come by. Really good people sometimes get overlooked simply because, perhaps, the wrong place at the wrong time. And helping your fellow artist is — it just seems kind of like a natural thing.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that segues beautifully into this next question, which is: Is there a community that's been important to your development as an artist, other than the people that we've mentioned so far? We've talked about Hunter, we've talked about Glasgow, we've talked about the group of five working on the spiritual work.

Maybe we've covered that question, but it does seem that community — there has been a community of people, whether formal or not —

MR. MONGRAIN: There has been, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — that has been significant.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. I would guess I've got several communities. Certainly as an academic I have — and there's a lot of really wonderful people that I work with. Hunter has just been a lovely place to be at. We've got really great artists here. And the New York — there's — there is a kind of a little New York ceramic mafia.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: There's a group. And I think Judy Schwartz sort of helps perpetuate that with some of her gatherings.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I know a lot of — a lot of people sort of of my generation that I've become close to. Judy Moonelis is a wonderful artist, and I've worked closely with her for a long time and known her. And Steve Montgomery and Arthur Gonzalez and Walter McConnell from Alfred — all of these people are sort of — and one of my — along with all of them being great, one of my favorite ceramic artists is Marek Cecula.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: I love Marek's work.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: He and I — he and I — when we are — when we have shows together, I just love seeing what he does. I think he makes such smart work.

MS. RIEDEL: I did an interview with him a couple years ago, right when the factory exhibition was at Museum of Art and Design. That was such a wonderful exhibition. He's so smart and generous.

MR. MONGRAIN: He is.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And you know, all the other people that I mention have — are closer friends. And Marek and I show together, but he is often in Europe and he travels. And I wouldn't say we've socialized much, but I just really love his work.

And Charles Simonds too, we've been in a few shows together. Interesting, he had a new show up that — speaking of sort of an elemental sensibility, he seems to be reducing the objects that define — [inaudible] — you know, the small buildings and things, and he seems to be reducing down to almost stone and rock and form.

The show that we were both in together at Katonah, he hung this eight-foot piece of ceramics in this room that was absolutely amazing. It did include a lot of his — the things that felt little bit like the Anasazi dwellings in the Southwest. But the last image I saw of his, it's really kind of simplifying. Isn't it great he has that piece at the Whitney in the staircase?

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I haven't seen it.

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, next time you go to the Whitney, take the elevator to the top and walk down and in front of the window is one of Simonds's pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, good.

MR. MONGRAIN: Been there forever. It's really, really gorgeous.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, great.

MR. MONGRAIN: But I have to tell you, one of the favorite pieces I've seen in the last year, have you ever chanced to see Christian Marclay's piece on time?

MS. RIEDEL: Mmm. [Negative.]

MR. MONGRAIN: He did this absolutely amazing piece where he clipped — he took clips out of movies that referenced the exact time of day that you were watching it. So if you walked — and it was a 24-hour film.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So if you walked in at 8:00 in the morning, everything on the screen is from movies and there's always a little clock that shows — says 8:00 in the morning. And then the next scene it's 8:01. And it — and people would go — this was here in New York, and there were all these sofas. Hundreds of people go and just sit there for hours.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I don't remember the exact title of it, but it was a 24 hour time — it harkens a bit back to Douglas Gordon's work, you know? And I was — I was actually in Glasgow when Douglas did *24 Hour Psycho*, which became a phenomenon. But the Christian Marclay piece, you must see it. It's just so fun and entertaining. And I went three times, one in the evening where you're sitting there and it's always the right time in this movie. And what I really want to do is show up at 4:00 in the morning and see what movie clips could there be for 4:00 in the morning. But that's a — yeah, really, very, very, very cool. But that was so much fun.

And I just a few weeks ago invited Gabriel Orozco to come in and give a talk. And he — it's about that kind of process too, where there's a sort of physical engagement with a process, or there's this — related to physiology or science or these kind of things. I mean, wonderful artist, Orozco. I run a lecture series called the Zabar artist lecture series, where the wonderful Judith and Stanley Zabar from the — the bagel people — [laughs] — if you're a New Yorker.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: They gave us a quarter of a million dollars to —

MS. RIEDEL: Zabars is in the kitchen and food supplies, right? Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: That's them.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And they gave us this great group of artists to work with. So —

MS. RIEDEL: They selected the artists?

MR. MONGRAIN: No.

MS. RIEDEL: They funded the project; you selected the artists.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, okay. That's what I thought.

MR. MONGRAIN: I work on the small committee — Joachim Pissarro, the great, great grandson of Pissarro; Katy Siegal, who writes for *Artforum*, and Nari Ward and I. We're the committee.

MS. RIEDEL: Sounds like fun.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it's just — it is so much fun.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: So these are the artists that we've picked. And we just bring in these absolutely great people, and we have a little money to throw at them.

MS. RIEDEL: That's fantastic.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's so cool. [Laughs.] It's like the funnest thing in the world. And —

MS. RIEDEL: Is this — does — this takes place over a year's time, over a term, over multiple years?

MR. MONGRAIN: This is — we bring in four people a year, because you can imagine, these — a third of these people are MacArthur winners. You know, it's that sort of distinguished group. So we just bring in two every semester. So we just had Glenn Ligon, who had his solo show at the Whitney — fascinating. But that's been —

you know —

MS. RIEDEL: How lovely.

MR. MONGRAIN: — when you talk about an extended community, being an academic in New York and being able to be the chair of this program, I'm meeting people that I'd only read about.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: I mean, before I came to New York I knew a lot of these names, and all of a sudden I'm going out to drinks with them. [Laughs.] I feel a little bit — I do have a little bit of this sort of star thing of — [laughs] — you know how it is, you see a movie star up — kind of thing?

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: I feel a little bit the same way about some of these artist that I've gotten to know.

MS. RIEDEL: What an —

MR. MONGRAIN: Kerry James Marshall is just about absolutely amazing painter. We brought him in from Los Angeles. I could go through all of them, but I'd just really — it's been a really great experience.

MS. RIEDEL: What a fantastic resource.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

So we touched briefly a little earlier about how certain elements reappear in the work. And you had just started to say something about being in studio.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I think the — my vocabulary of images, they tend to get reconfigured. I will be in the studio and sometimes an object will happen out of just an interest. I was visiting my family in Minnesota. And we were clearing some brush off an island. And I started to collect these branches, and simply because it was one of those kind of elemental things. And I brought them back and I cast them.

I knew that I was considering this moose piece and wanted to exhibit it. I wanted — it actually began where I was trying to make fire. It sounds very caveman like.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: So I was trying to devise a way, and I've made probably four or five of the ugliest sculptures on fire. And I'm still working on it. This is something I'm going to try to achieve. But the — since that was unsuccessful I took these branches and I cast them in this amber resin to give them a kind of a hot glow, sort of visual, and the transparency and a real alteration. And so it started with the moose piece, but then I have all of a sudden, sitting around my studio, 20 or 30 red glowing branches. And then, of course, the next thing kind of comes up, this potential exhibition in Cologne, Germany.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I walk into the space and I asked them what this is about. And they say, well, this really beautiful space with this sort of gothic sensibility, they said the thing that used to happen here is it used to be a classroom where they would hold classes during World War II for children being indoctrinated to the Hitler Youth Party. And I thought, oh my god.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And as I looked at that a little further, I found out that one of the pagan rituals for these kids, before they became part of Hitler Youth was to demonstrate their courage and allegiance they would leap over a small fire. Now, I had just made these resin branches, and I had just been trying to sculpt fire. And so you see the pieces starting to come together.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: And then it got reconfigured into a traditional kind of Boy Scout, because you look at the photographs and they're almost like Boy Scouts. I remember being a Cub Scout and having the scarf and, you know, the shirt and things. And I thought, "Boy, that's not far off from how I dressed back then." And there's this,

I mean, almost horrible innocence when you look at these kids.

So then I constructed what seemed to me like the campfires that we were trained — so all of these things sort of linked together. It was another place where I brought artificial snow, so I sort of glazed the ground to get the juxtaposition.

MS. RIEDEL: And then these glowing branches appeared again above a confessional.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. [Laughs.] Yeah. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs] — which is — and it had — did it have a title?

MR. MONGRAIN: That one —

MS. RIEDEL: I feel like that had a title; maybe not — *Confessional Flame*, I think.

MR. MONGRAIN: *Confessional Flame*.

MS. RIEDEL: That was 2006, right? Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: That was — that was — you know, you spend — you perhaps have a day or two days to walk around these sites and start to devise pieces. And I've always — I've always just absolutely loved confessionals. And —

MS. RIEDEL: Why?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, they're — because — well, I used to have to go to them —

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — on a regular basis. [Laughter.] But also, I mean, how wonderful that you can walk in in one state — in one negative state of grace, and walk out in the state of grace. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, I guess that — [laughs] — is pretty quick.

MR. MONGRAIN: [Inaudible] — but yeah. So I built one of these fires on top of it, because the whole burning away sins — the whole purgatory thing —

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: — seemed — [inaudible] — just sort of a[n] easy reference. I am working on a piece now, and if I'm able to find about 20,000 [dollars] to \$30,000, I'm going to be able to make this piece. There's a place that sells religious furniture. It turns out they also sell confessionals — the actual — the real deal. And they're selling between 10[,000 dollars] to \$15,000, the — and what I — what I want to do is buy one of these confessionals. I want to glass the entire thing in, so it's sealed in glass. And I want to place a vacuum and remove all the air from inside.

There's this wonderfully quirky thing where — when the vacuum was first invented, and it became part of a social consciousness — the Catholic Church said it was demonic, because to create a space that was completely empty meant it was void of God. And so for a long time, the church stopped the invention of the vacuum — [laughs] — because it removed this space that was defined by God's presence. Isn't that wonderful? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: It's a — it's — [laughs] — can't make it up.

MR. MONGRAIN: I know; it's wonderful. It's — you can't make it up. And so I've had — like I say, I've had this idea on my book for about a year and a half. And I'm having a hard time raising the money. [They laugh.] But I may actually sculpt a small — like, two- or three-foot confessional, and glass it in, and create a vacuum and suck all the air out. [Laughs.] Have a — have a vacuumed confessional. [Laughs.] And I'm working on it as a title.

Anyway, back to what — [laughs] — we were talking about.

MS. RIEDEL: [Inaudible] — in the railings, you've done — you'd started to talk about how those have been reconfigured to such powerful effect, depending on context and what they're paired with.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: The one confessional about — with the shotgun blast. And that's an interesting link to this piece I'm talking about with the confessional — because anybody's who's been inside, you know that you have this sort of screen. And there's a filter — there's kind of a physical filter of what you say to the priest and what the priest says to you. And it also eliminates identity. Generally you can't see each other or — I guess reason's to make you more confident about expressing yourself whatever horrible things or sinful things that you may have done.

So when I first made this railing — of course, I think that originated from the sense of the prayer rail — and also the bar. You know, in British courtrooms, you step to the bar. That's — but it was during a — it was during a time where some of the pieces that I would — I was doing were a little more personally autobiographical than some of my — and I had requested my sister Terry in Minnesota. And she was there with her three girls; she has these three lovely girls — Amy, Stephanie and Olivia. She's the one in the family who's had children, my sweet nieces.

I asked her to send me my mother's gun. My mom had this — had a small .410 shotgun. And she — we — she — we had to break it down, and she had to send it to me in parts —

MS. RIEDEL: I bet.

MR. MONGRAIN: — as you can imagine. You can't send it just through the mail. And she was nice enough to send it to me — it was before my show at Perimeter. And the idea was that I would create this railing, and I was going — because, along with the threads of where I — my mother would give me sewing lessons when she needed to talk to me — we would also go partridge-hunting.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: Very Minnesota. And so I had a little sense of personal nostalgia. I had this gun sent to me. And the idea was, I was going to create this railing as a position of meditation or prayer or confession or judgment. And I was going to take the gun and shoot it into the wall to create that screen pattern. And the — my dealer, Meredith Kaye [ph], was thrilled by this. And she said, "We're going to do it at the opening. We're going to get a hundred people in the room, and you're going to step back with the gun, and you're going to shoot it into the wall." [Laughs.] And I said, "That sounds great."

So I went to a firing range, and I did some practice to see how this would work. And it turned out, I had to actually be kind of — I got buckshot, the simplest sort of shot, so I wouldn't actually blow a hole in the wall. But I had to get back way too far to get the size pattern that I wanted.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So I couldn't do it in the gallery. [Laughs] — and Meredith [ph] was sure I would get arrested, and this would make my art career, because — [they laugh] — I — [inaudible] — you know — [inaudible] — "Wild Artists Shooting in Chelsea Galleries." [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: She was very disappointed. But I had to — I went out to a firing range, and I took a pattern — paper pattern. And I shot into about 10 of them, to sort of get the visual pattern that I liked. And then I took the pattern into the gallery, and I pounded the holes into the wall, and then I opened up a shell and I put the buckshot into it. So I re-translated it. But it was fun — it was more fun and silly. But it also was kind of a process.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I still have my mom's gun, so — [laughs] — that's — [inaudible]. That's the sort — that's the nice thing — you don't — when you talk about — the way we were talking about the fun part of making art, I thought that was really a fun piece. But it was also — involved a gun. And people have strong opinions about that. And of course, even the sense of the confessional, for many people, is not an object of — that's lighthearted; it — anyway, it is for me in — but in retrospect only — [inaudible].

MS. RIEDEL: Yes. And I think those are both also excellent examples of the powerful infusion of the personal in these very universal, iconic objects that allow the pieces to walk both those lines.

MR. MONGRAIN: But I'm really cautious about that. I'll tell you the things I'm cautious about —

MS. RIEDEL: Please.

MR. MONGRAIN: — with my work: cleverness. It's really — I sometimes come up with ideas, and then I pull back because — not that I'm clever. I think cleverness is superficial.

MS. RIEDEL: I understand.

MR. MONGRAIN: And it's like a punch line to an easy joke. And some conceptual art has that; it's a punch line. And if that's primarily what it is, then I don't think it's good work. So I try to pull back a little bit on just being clever, or simply being funny. I'm sorry — what was the —

MS. RIEDEL: No, I'm thinking of personal and universal.

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And also having the work be too autobiographical or too nostalgic or primarily about the author.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yeah. That doesn't seem to be a problem, though. I mean, but clearly you've worked at that very intentionally.

MR. MONGRAIN: Right. I think all artists draw from their personal experience. And I've done memorial pieces to my parents. And I've done things that are very directly referential to their lives. And they're not pieces that I generally show. But that's another fine line. If your audience — if your spectator thinks that, "Well, this is — this is about the childhood of growing up in Minnesota or having a father who was the local garbage man," if it gets to be too much about your personal life, then it can border on narcissism or therapy. And I want to be a little careful of that. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: At the same time, I think from personal experience there is an authenticity, too. For example, that moose: If you didn't grow up in Minnesota, you — [laughs] — might not be able to have even come up with the idea of that piece —

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh sure, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: — with a sense of, you know —

MR. MONGRAIN: No, and I do think almost all art is autobiographical in some way. It is — even in the most abstract sense — it's portraiture. But if it feels like its interpretation is only about the author — so, yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: It was interesting that you — and it seems fairly early on — made a decision to be very clear about that, and to not go in that direction.

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I've looked at a lot of other artists' work, and — earlier on, mostly through publications — and in the last 15, 20 years by actually viewing it. And it — the nice thing about being exposed to so much is, you also develop a criticality.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And you start defining what you like and what you don't like. I'm also a real believer in reading about the artists and what their theories and attentions are, so that I have more of a whole view, rather than just trying to interpret one or two images. I think every artist needs to be looked at within the context of a broad range of work to have any real analysis of their work. Anybody can do one thing that appears to be brilliant.

And we talked about this a little bit with my great MFA students that are coming out. And some of them do very well. I do think longevity, and being able to continually work in a creative sphere that has some integrity, is what an artist is. Yeah.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there any critics or art historians in particular that you have read that you have found particularly insightful? Or are there any artists who have written that you have found particularly — and you do find criticism written by artists more important, or more significant, than criticism written by critics who aren't artists?

MR. MONGRAIN: I think a lot of things that are written in contemporary magazines are — as far as reviews — are often more descriptive than critical. I do — I do read some theory and criticism. I — I've taught this at the BFA level here, and I taught it a little bit in Glasgow. Linda Hutcheon is one of my favorite writers. And of course Rosalind Krauss used to teach here, and she was one of our art historians. And then you can — you know, you can go back and do sort of a historic survey.

But it's a — it's — when the theory starts to become more important than the creative side, that can be a little — something that needs to be kept an eye on. As you can guess, in such a large master's program, I have some students who have no interest in theory and criticism; and others where that's their primary focus, and the

development of their work seems like a tertiary thought. But I do enjoy some reading. But I think I do it more to maintain a certain level of awareness as an academic, rather than as an artist. As an artist, I go and try to see exhibitions.

As I said, with most of my personal reading, it's sort of nonfiction. I really — and there's a thing that's been happening the last 10 years, a certain genre of publication where a lot of people are publishing books on very weird little topics, like on mold. There'll be a book just on the history of mold. And, you know, there's something quirky and fascinating about that. I think I was telling you, I've just been reading about time. I've been reading about alcohol. I've — [laughs] — been reading about how fabric has — how fabric became a part of an industry that became one of the first industrial things that started to be produced, and that transition of how fabric is produced.

And some of these things I may pick up on in the future, but I'm a real believer that artists need to try to make themselves aware of things. As a teacher, I always say, "If you're taking on a topic, I want you to be as knowledgeable as possible. Read everything you can. And then, if you want to set that aside and take an intuitive approach, at least you've got that behind you. There's not — no one will accuse you of being naïve."

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I think it's really important because we're in the business of being — of communicating through a visual format. And if content is suggested, you need to be prepared to address that, and perhaps even defend it, depending on what your work's about.

MS. RIEDEL: Two pieces we haven't talked about at all, and I'd like to at least touch on — the 2007 *Chimney* and *Frame*, since they both seem so distinct from most of the other work.

MR. MONGRAIN: Ah, yes. A bit, yeah. And when it — a chapter of my work seems to be about the things that — where the political line is more linear — certainly, like, the *John Daugman Eye* and the piece that I'm proposing for Times Square. And I — the *Frame* piece — I was giving a lecture and I was talking about what happened after I got the sale of the piece to the United Arab Emirates at the Sharjah Biennial.

And I was entering the FBI building downtown, and I passed through one of these metal scanners that you walk through. And it looked just like a door frame. So I took a measurement of it the next day, and then about a few days later, very, very early in the morning, I went down with a large piece of clay and I took — it's not a very good mold, but I took an impression of that step —

MS. RIEDEL: Of the FBI step.

MR. MONGRAIN: As you enter the FBI building, that first — what's it called? The floor sill?

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: So I just took a little bit of an impression, and that's what's at the bottom of the piece. So it's really — it's a door frame in a Gothic tracery, but it's of the entrance of the metal detector for the FBI building. And I don't know how much I really addressed that, but that was sort of the trigger there. And then I was thinking too of the moose piece, and how it's something that does intrigue me.

I don't shout my politics, particularly with things about environmental issues, but I wanted to make this piece, and you know, every — I was traveling back and forth constantly to Philadelphia, and you pass through New Jersey and you see the smokestacks. And whatever pollution that is still — although it's less, but there's still a great deal of pollution coming out. I wanted to make a healthy chimney.

So inside this piece is a humidifier with distilled water. And for a while, when I had access to this, I was buying little Viagra tablets. And I was putting — I was putting one Viagra tablet into the water, so this enthusiastic mist was coming out of this phallic form. And I thought it was so funny, because it's certainly phallic. It's a horrible chimney. It's got this healthy mist coming out of it that is a male stimulant. And it all just seemed like it was just the funniest thing. And that's what that piece is.

And it's — so sometimes, when I'm looking at work that I've done, I think about what all those ideas are and how I might sort of reinterpret them in a completely different way. And so that's how those two pieces sort of happened.

MS. RIEDEL: I didn't know that about *Chimney*. That's an interesting detail. And the door frame piece — the one way I — the one image I've seen of it was it was not installed flush to the wall. It was actually at an angle. Is that correct?

MR. MONGRAIN: It just leans against the wall.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah, yeah.

MR. MONGRAIN: And of course, you go back — the minimalist that made the tall rectangle that leans against the wall — what's his name? Anyway, you know, it's very much a part of that sort of mid-20th century genre, where the sculpture — it would just lean — I wanted it to be a sculpture. I didn't want to set it up where people might walk through it. It is the classic way of sometimes presenting things, where it's an object that is leaning against the wall. I wanted to hold to sculptural objecthood without its function, utility, being the primary. So yeah, that was just leaning.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. And it adds — it adds a sense of precariousness too, somehow. And particularly with that object, that form; it almost feels dangerous.

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, that's nice. Also, I was hoping, a little bit of a sense of being discarded — how you see, kind of, architectural elements that are not in full form and are just left or set aside for a short time.

MS. RIEDEL: I'm surprised the FBI allowed you to do that in the first place.

MR. MONGRAIN: [Laughs.] Well, it was — it was so fast. I just walked up to it before — and it was on the outside, the very entrance to the sill, and it was just this kind of marble — the first step. I just sort of leaned down and took a little clay. I mean, it took me 30 seconds — and yeah, before they came and grabbed me and set me aside.

MS. RIEDEL: Are there any other pieces that we haven't touched on that you would like to address?

MR. MONGRAIN: Oh, no. You've been — you've been very generous in hearing all the content of all my pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: No, that's the point. It's actually a pleasure.

MR. MONGRAIN: This was a recent piece I did at the Trinity Cathedral in Pittsburgh. And again, I had no conception of what this piece, whatsoever, other than — I had this really — and as you've seen even with —

MS. RIEDEL: This is *Mountains of Orators*, is it?

MR. MONGRAIN: Yes. As you've seen with the conventional piece, I do like working on platforms. It adds to the stage of sorts. And also, when you're in these Gothic spaces, doing something that feels incorporated is a little tricky at times.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I'm sure.

MR. MONGRAIN: So here I had where — the lectern, where the minister would get up and give his speeches. And I thought about that idea. Because there are always about five or six steps up, so the minister is always speaking from above, speaking from on high. And then I started thinking about the three primary mountains in the Bible, where things like this have happened — whether it was Moses or Noah's Ark or Jesus's ascension.

And so I actually went online and the wonderful Google landscape thing, and I found lots of images, both from above and I started drawing all of these — the actual mountains — the actual ones where, presumably, Noah's Ark landed — [laughs] — or presumably, Moses came down with the Ten Commandments. But the actual mountains are — they actually exist, so I started drawing them and sculpting them, and I did them to scale. And of course, in the center is Ararat, where Noah — and then you've got Sinai and then you have Mount Olivet. And I tried to just blend it into the same marble, the same brownstone.

MS. RIEDEL: And that piece strikes me as funny.

MR. MONGRAIN: Me too. Especially when you have this minister walking up and giving the Word to the people, which has at times a bit of pretention to it. But yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And the title of that one in particular is really funny.

MR. MONGRAIN: But — oh, yeah, that was when the cathedral caught on fire in New York. That was the Santa Maria Maggiore, where the snow piece was in Rome.

MS. RIEDEL: There have not been too many outdoor installations. I can think of the one at the school, the divinity, is the one that comes to mind — but that's the main one I can think of that's outdoors.

MR. MONGRAIN: I've had a few of the sound pieces I did out of doors, and a few of the bell pieces, but yeah, I've not done a great deal of work out of doors.

MS. RIEDEL: So if the — [inaudible] — comes through, that would be —

MR. MONGRAIN: Right. I think, in part, because the scale of my work is sort of a human scale.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that makes sense.

MR. MONGRAIN: I was just speaking with Nari Ward this past week about his piece at MASS MoCA, and of course, some of Nari's pieces are of just mammoth scale. And I think to work out of doors, the physical presence has to hold a little bit more weight to it. There's a human scale to my work which I — which I enjoy.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is important to it — yeah, I think it makes sense, content-wise.

MR. MONGRAIN: Which is important, especially with my engagement with surface and sanding and moving. I think it's — yeah, because my work is constructed from material, it would be really difficult to make massive things. I've considered at times — I mean, there is one piece which was out of doors. It was at the school of divinity.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yes. That's the one I was thinking of.

MR. MONGRAIN: And that was — right.

MS. RIEDEL: And was that — did it have a title?

MR. MONGRAIN: It was *Cloister Memorial*. It was 550 bells —

MS. RIEDEL: Bells, right.

MR. MONGRAIN: — in the same circles, so they — the size parallels the openings to the cloister. So they're exactly the same. My idea with this was — it was their 550th anniversary. The School of Divinity had been there for — so it was really almost like a[n] homage, and even souvenirs. Having been living in New York, and I knew this was going to be up for four months, and I also knew the grass would grow on the inside, which it did — so they just mowed — so it would leave — it would leave a residue. But I was sure that people would just take these bells. Not one was missing. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Really?

MR. MONGRAIN: In four months, they were all still there when I went to take it down. I guess — I guess honest people go to the school of divinity to study. But as a New Yorker, I thought, I'll be lucky if this gets through the night.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that is interesting.

MR. MONGRAIN: Yeah. It was.

MS. RIEDEL: Take heart.

Well, I have a couple of summary questions just to — one, just to start off with this, how has your work been received over time?

MR. MONGRAIN: I guess — I guess well. I think that — I was doing okay before I left the States, which is now 25 years ago, when I left to go to Europe. And I was just starting to get the work out there. I remember being in a show at the Smithsonian, at the Air and Space Museum, and having a few of these things which — and starting to be invited to shows, and as a ceramic person, and the work was very much clearly in the context of the ceramic arts. And back then — we're talking 30 years ago now — it was a much more conservative atmosphere.

I think the work took off a little bit when I moved to Europe and I started doing —

working in performance with groups, and I started being — doing some larger-scale pieces. I guess it's been accepted okay. I think perhaps my last 16 or 17 years, being in New York, is where I've begun to feel that my more defined work, more mature — or the work has more clarity.

And that's a difficult question that perhaps other people should answer. But it's done well. People have been very generous about the press and the shows. And the Daum Museum that — which was a touring museum show, certainly changed my position in the field, I guess.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, it seems like it started off fairly strong and it's gotten progressively stronger, the reception.

MR. MONGRAIN: I've been really fortunate. I mean, the best thing for an artist is to receive invitations, where

really good places are asking you to show and where you get thought of when there are group shows or thematic exhibitions that fit, and where people are reaching out to you. So yes, that's been very nice.

It still is odd when I go to conferences, and people who I've never met come up and have these long conversations with me about my work. And occasionally, you get graduate students at other schools who contact me and say they're writing papers about me. That's a little discerning [sic]. Coming from — coming from Minnesota, have you ever heard Garrison Keillor talk about Minnesota people?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: His — one of the things he used to say is, you should be in the newspaper twice — when you're born and when you die. [Laughs.] You know, that's it.

MS. RIEDEL: Detour from that plan.

Do you see your career in terms of episodes and periods that are distinct?

MR. MONGRAIN: I think my life's experiences have been that way, and of course, that's reflected on my artwork. I would actually think of them in segments or pieces. Certainly, graduate school was a unique experience, where I made — I made close friends and I started to define my work. And then the things — like, working with Crow Indians for that amount of time was a short but fascinating experience. And I did some performance work when I was on the reservation.

But then, for any person living in another country, living in Europe was a great definer of my work, even that sort of sensibility. And there's a real quality of conversation that's, I think, rooted in that culture. It certainly has to do with the fact that it's also a drinking culture. But you go out with a group of people and you're telling stories. You go to Robert Burns suppers and they're very festive and literary.

My partner at the time was an actor, and so I was around a lot of theatrical people and actors, and actually did a little bit of writing — actually performed in a movie. I had a supporting role as a Canadian psychiatrist in a film called *The Treatment*, which actually got around a bit. You know, and so I did a little bit — all of these, I'm sure — like anything, all these bits and pieces helped to make up the whole.

MS. RIEDEL: And through the series, do you see threads of continuity as well?

MR. MONGRAIN: Sure. It probably is more of my upbringing I've never let go of. There's something about having such lovely, stable, smart parents. I think of both my father and mother as people who are very generous with the people around them.

My dad was this very strong man. He had a lot of people that worked for him on the garbage trucks, many who had difficult lives or even recently out of jail. And I used to watch my father deal with these people and be very authoritative and strong with them, and then come home to us and be just this really lovely, gentle, supportive man. And as much as possible, I've tried to sort of keep that kind of sensibility.

And my mother was also very engaged with her —

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MR. MONGRAIN: But it — talking about the things — or the things that continue in your life are the threads that you carry forward — I think those sort of things of our growing up in a small Midwestern town.

And my lovely supportive siblings — and we're all very different from Todd and Terry and Jim — that it's always that part of your life that is always there, especially since we've lost our parents now; we've become — we've become our own unit. And if there was ever any emergency, you always have that to fall back on. And even here in New York, I have people that occasionally joke about how Midwestern I am.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MR. MONGRAIN: And I — [laughs] — I'm — at times, I think that may be meant as a compliment. Other times, perhaps not. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. [Laughs.] Probably.

MR. MONGRAIN: But — you know, but that's true. I have — I have the background of being what you — we were talking this a little bit with Jim Melchert who, I would say too, a — such a smart, measured, considerate man.

And I have been in — I've seen opportunities where he could have been different, but he wasn't. And I find that character really admirable, much like — much like my father and my parents. And so yeah, I hope that some thread of that initial family upbringing has sort of been one of the threads.

As an artist, I think the first things that I found exciting — minimalism, intelligence, crafting with — if it needed to be done with some perfection or clarity, then that's what it needs to be. I've thrown away a lot of pieces that were just not straight or had a crack or had a blemish, so that — well, crafting should be done to the point that it's not noticed, I think. And if it becomes an issue, then it — when it shouldn't be, then it's a problem.

Sorry.

MS. RIEDEL: No, so it seems other — [inaudible] — should be iconic images, elemental materials, certain things like an emphasis on research, on science, on technology to some degree, some degree in religion, you know.

MR. MONGRAIN: I'm sending my sister Terry a nice high-resolution camera. I'm going to ask her on the 49th parallel overlooking Canada to do about a five-hour image into the darkness of a snowstorm. And so I'm going to take one of the round windows, and I'm just going to put a video behind it and just have looking into another sympathetic culture through a snowstorm with all the other things going on in the world, and the same — with the same dangerous considerations that drowning might have or anything else. And I've had this idea for a while that sculpting water is one thing. We're trying to create fire visually. Sculpting is another thing.

And I also want my sister to do the photographing for me because she lives right there overlooking Canada. And it needs to be in that place and it needs to be on the 49th parallel that separates our two countries. And it also needs to be at night so she might cast a light out into a snowstorm and then just do this long video at night. And you just see the strength of this very simple thing.

You should — you see what I mean about when I get a piece on paper, when I get —

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: — get to — get to figure it out? But it's —

MS. RIEDEL: Very specific.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's pretty much done now, you know.

MS. RIEDEL: Yeah. Yes.

MR. MONGRAIN: And I even know the — I'm going to make a slightly larger ocular window that kind of — that eye, that architectural authority that that eye has.

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

How or where do you see yourself and your work fitting into contemporary art?

MR. MONGRAIN: This may go back to our generational sort of question.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

MR. MONGRAIN: I think I'm a product of my time. And when I gave you a list of the artists that I'm both friends with and like, we came out of this — we came out of academia and most of us came out graduate schools. Many of us had faculty who had been World War II veterans who — or some younger. And so you've got the sort of torch passed on.

But I think of myself as a — as a contemporary artist. But I also think there is — I may be not as daring as these kids in their 20s who are — and it depends how you look at it. Some might say their approach to physical development of their materials is more casual. They work more quickly. Their digestion of imagery from the Internet, they see things quickly. Whenever a student brag[s] that they spent a whole two hours working on a piece, you sort of want to go, "well, I polished this little piece here for" — [laughs] — "for eight hours." But, you know, there is — there's — and all of that shifts as people age.

But I guess I — I guess I would say I'm perhaps a typical mid-generation, mid-career artist as far as my sensibility and the influences that I had.

I'm not sure I'm answering your question —

MS. RIEDEL: Well, that's how you place it. And — so that's — I think that's the question.

What about your work in particular matters to you? What about your work in particular matters to you?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, I have to say I really enjoy constructing my work. And I enjoy the quiet of it. To me, my work is quiet. After you get past content or what initiated the work or what material it is or how it was constructed, I think, as an object, to me they feel kind of peaceful, and there's a gentleness that I feel, like, were cast for me.

I live with my — some of my pieces. And it has that — I wouldn't say contemplative — I think that would be too generous — but, you know, a kind of quiet. I don't have things around me that feel noisy, visually noisy or aggressive or assertive, and so it makes sense that this is the way that I like to work.

It's not even incredibly complex work after you get passed all of the things that I mentioned about the reasoning behind it. And that's the fun part. And then I can go on to the next pieces with all — with whatever researching or devising methods or getting to a certain point. But the past work always feels these are — these are objects that sit quietly.

MS. RIEDEL: At the same time, in that simplicity, there seems to be enormous complexity that has just been distilled, distilled, distilled down to something that's very quiet and minimal. But that doesn't — I think there is absolutely the quiet residue of great depth and complexity —

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, it's been — it's been interesting. When I did the show at the Daum Museum, I had three floors in this huge, beautiful museum — and a lot of what went with each other, what would have a discourse in a room where the language would not be disruptive and they would be supportive — and I made one room that felt like my older work, the work that had this sort of calm to it, and then another room that was much more active. And it was really interesting for me to experience the work where I got to see it presented in one of the most beautiful spaces I have ever shown at. That let me have time to reflect upon it as it interacted.

Yeah, I —

MS. RIEDEL: And what did — what came out of that for you? What came from that reflection?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, that I'm — for — whenever the work might be successful, that it has — it has a life to it and that it can — it can be experienced over a period of time from enjoying it as an object that is reflective of content, and then enjoying it as an object which has a — has a sort of a — you're physically aware of, and then even as an object that is quiet, and then even getting back to the — and so I think the best work can have a — have a long history.

It's like — [laughs] — this will sound terrible, but it's like — it's like developing a friendship and getting to know somebody, and you get to know it in lots of different ways. To be able to come back and — to be able to live with something, come back to it and look at it multiple times, is unique, I think, in the art world.

We've both seen a lot of work that you see it once, and it's either, like, "I got it" or "I've got the image." If it's possible with a few of my pieces that people would engage them over several years, I think that would be the ideal.

And I do have a few of those pieces for myself. I think all artists, especially when they work with multiple images, come away with a few things that work the best. But it takes time.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you be willing to mention what comes to mind?

MR. MONGRAIN: Well, one of — one of my favorite pieces has always been *An Evening's Breath*.

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

MR. MONGRAIN: And it could be that it was the — early on in the beginning of this series, but it just felt right. And it just felt that it was a piece that hasn't — for me, hasn't lost its vitality over age or over my viewing it. And I often start my lectures with that piece because it seems to put a context to the fact that if there's — however you view the pillow form, I view it as a kind of a poetic object and also as this kind of staging, and then what's inside of it. And it's not — it's not the breath of my lover; it's the breath of a gender, of — you know. And so it's — it has a slightly more open — I'm sorry; I'm not describing this well. But that's perhaps one of my — I always like what I'm working on at the moment, but that's a piece for me that, I think, will — I will have as a primary piece 20 years from now.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] I can understand that.

That's all I have.

MR. MONGRAIN: It's been such a pleasure talking to you. And thank you for taking me through this and being so kind of generous and leading and letting me talk and ramble. It's been — this has been a real pleasure.

MS. RIEDEL: It's been a real pleasure here too, absolutely. Thank you for being so generous and so forthcoming.

MR. MONGRAIN: Not at all.

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel with Jeffrey Mongrain at Hunter College on December 17, 2011, in New York for the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art at the end of card number four.

[END OF INTERVIEW]