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Oral history interview with Michael and Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, 2001 March 8-April 17

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michael Frimkess on March 8, March 22, and April 17, 2001, and his wife, Magdalena Suarez Frimkess, on March 22, 2001. The interview took place in Venice, California and was conducted by Paul J. Karlstrom 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.

Michael Frimkess and Paul Karlstrom have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

Interview

DR. KARLSTROM: This is Paul Karlstrom conducting an interview with Michael Frimkess at his home in Venice, California, with studio adjoining. The date for the interview is March 8, 2001.

Well, Michael, this part of our interview will consist pretty much of biographical questions about your life, trying to lay in a picture of just who you are and where you came from.

MR. FRIMKESS: I grew up in East L.A., was born in Cedars of Lebanon Hospital. And I lived in East L.A. for 15 years amongst the leftover Jewish population. It was very minimal. I think I was the only pink-eye in junior high school. My sister and I were the only pink-eyes left around.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was it already pretty much Latino, or barrio?

MR. FRIMKESS: They were thirds, Latino, Japanese, and black. Latinos generally could either be indigenous Indians from the location or Mexicans that came over the border to work, just as it is to a larger extent today. But at that time, that was where the staging area was, one of the staging areas. And so in junior high school -- in grammar school I think, there were a few more Chinese and Japanese, and then at the end of the war, they came back from the camps and then I started having more Japanese friends. I had a few Mexican friends, too. I had friends of all of them. The black, the Japanese, and the Mexicans were friends of mine. Mostly I think I tended to the Japanese. But I was closer to one black fellow.

DR. KARLSTROM: Who was he? This is in junior high.

MR. FRIMKESS: Junior high school, because his sister and my sister were close, for some reason. His mother taught piano. He was a maybe third-generation musician. And early on, I started listening to bee-bop in junior high school because of him.

DR. KARLSTROM: Do you remember his name?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. His name is H. B. Barnum. It doesn't have anything to do with the circus, but it is Barnum. And his son is a junior and he's also a musician, H. B. Barnum. He is an arranger and a writer and a musician in his own right on woodwinds, but he's known mostly for arranging for Lou Rawls and doing --

DR. KARLSTROM: Huh!

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, he made it pretty big. He conducts the choir here, AME Church Choir of Los Angeles. I've seen him on TV conducting them.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you keep up a bit with him?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, I've tried. I wanted to give him some ceramics for being a mentor of mine before too much time went along. But I guess he just didn't want to respond. I only met him a few times since moving out of East L.A. I had several friends from little circles, music circles that I stayed with after we moved to Hollywood.

DR. KARLSTROM: So your family moved to Hollywood. I mean, you were in high school.

MR. FRIMKESS: Went right to Hollywood High School from junior high school. Graduated from junior high school in East L.A., and suddenly there I was in Hollywood, in Hollywood High School, waiting to be registered in the auditorium with all those blue-eyed Anglo kids. I felt so insecure compared to --

DR. KARLSTROM: I was going to ask you about that. This is an interesting and somewhat unusual childhood experience, to really be one of the few Anglo types, white types, in what was very much a mixed minority

community.

MR. FRIMKESS: When I was in East L.A.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yes, in East L.A. But you probably didn't pay much attention to it. These were just the people in your world.

MR. FRIMKESS: No, I felt very insecure and awkward. You know, as a child, I once tried to paint my skin darker so I could jump on a bicycle and drive around and feel like everyone else to see what it felt like. I was a creative guy.

DR. KARLSTROM: See, already you were painting the surfaces of things.

MR. FRIMKESS: With iodine, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, okay. Let me ask, if I may, a few specific questions.

First of all, it seems that then way back in junior high school you had contact with what was to be an important interest in your life, and that is music; I mean, already then in that community.

MR. FRIMKESS: Right.

DR. KARLSTROM: And it's something that we're, of course, going to talk a bit more about next time.

MR. FRIMKESS: I did have art experience. In junior high school, one of my art teachers -- maybe I was in a mid-grade in junior high school -- she was very curious of why I excelled in art, and she wanted to come home with me and meet my mother. My dad, of course, was working after school. We met and we walked home together. I felt very proud and blessed and honored by having her walk home with me. And my mother had the table all laid out with a beautiful setting, the best kind of setting with those goblet-type glasses and very nice stuff to eat.

She wanted to find out how I knew so much already. And she realized that my dad was also an artist, and they had raised me with a studio in the backyard. From three years old, they started giving me Plastoline. My dad got me an oil painting set maybe at age of four, and I started cutting linoleum blocks. He had me doing all kinds of artwork. And I was a kind of child that didn't go out and play. I didn't play baseball that well. I didn't want to play with other kids. I thought that was kind of a waste of time. I would always rather be on the floor drawing. I remember that very clearly. I didn't wrestle around and play ball that much.

DR. KARLSTROM: So not so much the kind of physical horseplay and interacting with other kids, other guys.

MR. FRIMKESS: Interacting with other kids, the games always seemed a waste of time to me. I always would rather do something with the clay or draw or paint or something. I remember wondering what they got out of playing hide and seek, for example, running around like that.

DR. KARLSTROM: It's pretty obvious it was an unusual family situation where you got a lot of direction and encouragement in creative activities. What was it, again, that your dad did? He was an artist?

MR. FRIMKESS: He was an artist. His paintings are on our walls. The best ones we don't have. My niece gets that because she's part Scotch, I guess. But he became an art director and a commercial artist, one of the first in the city to have his walls plastered with awards from the Art Directors Club, I remember.

DR. KARLSTROM: So he was working in the film industry.

MR. FRIMKESS: No. Art director meaning advertising art. He didn't continue painting and doing fine arts after the Depression came along and he fell in love with my mother, so he hoped that somehow he could make it possible for his offspring to do what he wanted to do, I think. That's how I ended up there. I was dragged around to see exhibitions when da Vinci was shown somewhere, any of the Impressionists were opening. I was only five to eight years old, and they were dragging me all over to these sophisticated exhibitions and influencing my mind with da Vinci, for example, the drawings that he did. I remember an exhibition of his devices very clearly. It made a big impression.

DR. KARLSTROM: Where was that, downtown at the natural history museum [Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, California]?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Because that used to be where the art was shown.

MR. FRIMKESS: I remember it being on Wilshire Boulevard. It might have been a private gallery, perhaps, or affiliated. I don't know. It was very well publicized, I recall. I was very young, though. I can't be certain.

DR. KARLSTROM: When were you born? You didn't tell me that.

MR. FRIMKESS: Oh, born in '37 on the 8th of January, which is also Elvis Presley's birthday and Stephen Hawkings's.

DR. KARLSTROM: In good company, I guess.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about your mother? You told me about your father. What about Mom? Was she encouraging also, regarding art?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. She was also, by example. She would embroider elaborate items to wear. You'd think that she was working in a Chinese factory or something, one of those dragons that you embroider, many artworks of her own. But she had the patience, she showed me, to do very fine work. She made an example every time she could.

DR. KARLSTROM: Do you think -- not to suggest the obvious, maybe -- but do you suggest or do you feel that the form of her influence was the concentration, the attention to basically doing something right, to get it right and to control the process?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes. Her family, the Hittlemans, were more scientifically inclined, the musicians, doctors, lawyers. Not her father, but her brothers, a doctor, an engineer. And their offspring became scientists, doctors, lawyers. Those are my cousins, I mean, but my uncle is a doctor, and she could have been a doctor or engineer, I guess.

DR. KARLSTROM: It sounds to me as if you really got most of your art motivation and so forth at home.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Perhaps more so than in school. What about in school? Very much?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, my mom, she told me the other day, with this interview coming up, she said, "Don't forget to mention when you were in grammar school, the first day of grammar school; when I came to pick you up, the teacher said that I called her over and asked for just exactly more clay to finish the leg on the elephant, the elephant's leg." That was significant, she thought, because before I even got to grammar school, she says, I was adept, if you can call that being adept; that I knew I needed a little more clay because I couldn't break the work down enough, I didn't see it clearly enough to get all four legs out of the original piece of clay, and I required another one. Oh, I don't know.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about at school? Did they have the kinds of facilities that were necessary to really work with clay?

MR. FRIMKESS: In grammar school they did. I remember that clay. It was white, and it was earthenware clay. It was just talc, body-white clay that's low fire. And they could fire it. I think I recall in grammar school, I think, pieces fired. There must have been some of that. There definitely was that clay. Not in junior high. But I remember kilns.

DR. KARLSTROM: So way back then, in grammar school, already you were becoming familiar with the craft.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, they had started me with Plastoline at three years old. And then after a while, they built a studio for me in the backyard. There was a shed there. My grandpa was a builder, his brother was a painter, and also he could remodel the shed, and I had my studio, put in windows. And then I had the water-based clay there. So my grandpa would come in, and the Japanese woman that helped my mom clean. She sat for me. My grandpa sat for me.

DR. KARLSTROM: You mean what?

MR. FRIMKESS: Portraits.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, these are drawings or paintings?

MR. FRIMKESS: No, with the water-based clay. And they would take the sculptures to the local clay establishment and they would fire them, for ages it would take to fire. I didn't know about ceramics yet. I didn't know how to

make them thin. So they would treat them like bricks. That's the way they fired over there. So that's the way you did it in those days.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was there a facility fairly nearby, an outfit that would do that for you?

MR. FRIMKESS: I'm pretty sure that was the one they used to take me to called the Italian Terra Cotta. And they kept the same location for a while. They were near the general hospital.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay, still over in the East side of town.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Your interest, then, fairly early on, it seems to me, focused right in on clay, and then later on ceramics, is that right? Or were you also working in other --

MR. FRIMKESS: My dad, once we moved to Hollywood -- maybe I'm jumping ahead too far -- he had me go to a wood sculptor so I could learn to handle hammer and chisel. But clay was the first connection, the Plastoline. And clay was more interesting to me than drawing or painting. I think I tended more to the clay in art. And actually, it's afforded me the surface decoration; now I can go back to enjoying painting.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, you can combine them, really.

MR. FRIMKESS: I'm very happy about, you know, knowing how to China paint on stoneware now. I'm 64 now. I'm using all the stuff I used to learn, getting to tap into experience that goes back 60 years. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, it seems to me from the little I know about you that you actually do combine. It's not mixed media, but certainly in terms of method and practice, you work with the sculptural forms of the clay and create three-dimensional forms, but much of your work that I'm familiar with involves this surface decoration.

It seems to me that from what you describe about your earliest experience with art, you describe yourself lying on the floor rather than going out and playing tag or something like that; you were drawing.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so you were developing that skill and at the same time, from the very beginning, you were working on these two means, these methods that you combined.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. I used to model with Plastoline and a flashlight under the covers because my Mom -- I stayed alert to finish some work or sculpture, and if they caught me not sleeping, I'd get bitching, you know. So I used to work under the covers. They caught me doing that a few times, bringing a flashlight to bed.

DR. KARLSTROM: Do you remember what images you created when you were drawing? What did you like to depict? Animals, or --

MR. FRIMKESS: I liked to depict, yeah, animals and cars. And I'd put cotton inside the thin membrane of Plastoline so that they would work like cushions in the cars. And I'd have hoods that were -- although it should have been done with metal rather than clay, but the wheels would work, you know, and stuff like that.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you created your own, like, model cars?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, yeah, anything. Animals, cars.

DR. KARLSTROM: But what about drawing? I always think that that's kind of revealing, what subjects you would choose to depict.

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. Okay. I just flashed on one. My dad used to take me up to his office on Main Street when he was working on 12th and Main Street with his partner, Ed Smith, and they had a business going. They were winning over the advertising art field together. And he worked weekends and would take me along, and I'd get to tap on the typewriter. I'd make comic-book-like books with my version of Donald Duck and cartoon characters. And I'd make my own books, comic books. So I'm not too happy about that.

DR. KARLSTROM: You're not too happy about it?

MR. FRIMKESS: They saved some of them, even.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, good. They'll be part of your papers.

MR. FRIMKESS: Oh, great, a lot of stuff in my mind.

DR. KARLSTROM: This is really interesting. When I was a kid, I drew all the time. I would even write little stories inspired usually by comic books, and I would usually do it within that framework; you know, the comic-book frame.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. We ought to sue those guys. I'm telling you. You know, maybe they ruined our mind.

DR. KARLSTROM: I can't help but wonder about this because it seems like some of that has been carried over into your decoration later on.

MR. FRIMKESS: I know later on -- I'm moving forward, but in the '60s when I had opportunity to decorate a vessel, a historical shape, the first thing I thought of was this medium somewhat like those cartoons I used to see, although there are no pages, but there's an entire segue, in that it went around the pot and started over again. And that inspired me, you know, and I could tap into that experience again, although there weren't any pages. But you could have an opportunity to do a literary endeavor.

DR. KARLSTROM: Absolutely.

MR. FRIMKESS: So that might have given me some help in deciding how to -- because the characters, the size of the characters depended on the size of the pot. I'm mainly talking about the Chinese decoration, the China painting. You wouldn't see a full-size figure on the whole side of a pot. That would be funny. You wouldn't have a segue there too easily. None of the cultures actually did anything like that. Usually they were cartoon size and they were doing something. There was a literary story going on that wrapped around the whole pot. So it was a medium of cartoons.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about your training? Still, you know, talking about your education, what about your training past high school? I mean, you went to art school?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes. Well, after I graduated, I gathered up my art school projects from high school and the sculpture I did under the woodcarver, wood sculptor -- I did it at home, actually. The one I did with him they have too, still have around. They brought a couple of my wood carvings and my drawings to all the art schools that we had in L.A. at the time – Chouinard [Chouinard Art Institute, Los Angeles, CA], Otis [Otis Art Institute, Los Angeles, CA], and Art Center. And I remember distinctly in the Art Center, the guy was twisting my arm. I was 17. "Wouldn't you like to design cars?" And I wanted to get out of that place. We went to another art school, I think it was Chouinard, and it didn't seem right either. Then we went to Otis, and Millard Sheets interviewed us. And he decided to offer me, on a trial basis -- I'd be the youngest one in the school, and they'd admit me right from high school straightaway. That's where I started.

DR. KARLSTROM: What year was that?

MR. FRIMKESS: I think it was '55, started in '55. I got a scholarship after the first year because of my sculpture class. And then in '56, I was working there under the scholarship. And I had a guy in the next room. We used to walk over and pull off the teacher's -- Renzo Fenji, the professor, had me --

[SESSION1: TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. Continuing our interview, you were describing your early experience at Otis.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, Renzo Fenji, the sculpture professor, had made me do a life size, and I'd be waiting for my dad to pick me up on the way home from work from downtown to Hollywood. And I'd work overtime. The ceramic class would still be going on at all hours under Peter Voulkos. And one of the students used to -- maybe they goaded him -- to come over and pull a toe off or disfigure the nose I was working on. And every time he'd come over--you know, he being a veteran in the Second World War, I didn't want to complain too much. I had to respect that. But I complained to my girlfriend about what I was going through with my work over there, and she said, "Aw, come on, you don't need this scholarship or the degree at all; you don't need a degree; you've got enough talent. Let's go up and buy this piece of property and start making kids." So she got me to quit a school with a scholarship. I'm blaming her because it was her fault. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: And so you were only in there less than a year?

MR. FRIMKESS: No, a year and a half.

DR. KARLSTROM: A year and a half. And your second year, you had a scholarship that you then threw away.

MR. FRIMKESS: I quit under scholarship because --

DR. KARLSTROM: Because of a woman.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. Well, she didn't tell me, "Look, Mike, you've got to either tell the president of the school that this guy is disfiguring your work, or else you've got to confront him." No, she didn't say that. She just said--my Ma, you know, in Jewish families when a woman says something, you have to -- in other words, I wasn't raised to be macho. You know, if my Ma said do something --

DR. KARLSTROM: Women were in charge.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: So, okay, who was it that was harassing you in Voulkos's class?

MR. FRIMKESS: Mac.

DR. KARLSTROM: Not Pete.

MR. FRIMKESS: No. It might have been Pete. Pete always did, too.

DR. KARLSTROM: To his students?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, no, to me. I was a punk. They were Second World War veterans. He was a B-29 rear gunner. Mac had seen action over there, too.

DR. KARLSTROM: Who's Mac?

MR. FRIMKESS: Mac McCloud today. Mac McClain at that time. "McCloud" is an "aka." [Paul] Soldner was in the war. So was John Mason.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so all of them were in your class?

MR. FRIMKESS: And my associates, my student colleagues, were veterans of the Korean War. I think I was the only one that wasn't in the Army. There was another guy there who was about my age. There were two of us that were similar, that were young. But he was a veteran too. And I don't understand how he could have been a veteran at the age of 16, 17, unless he faked his way in.

DR. KARLSTROM: So the fellow students were the ones who were giving you grief?

MR. FRIMKESS: Not all of them. They would kid around with me. I had none of that type of experience in my life. You know, you get the picture already; I'd rather just stay home. And so I had nothing like boot camp or --

DR. KARLSTROM: Right. You weren't prepared.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, I wasn't interested. I was interested in art, art, art, you know, while I was there. And if it wasn't art, I could play my saxophone, you know? I just didn't want to get involved with any conflagrations with a veteran.

DR. KARLSTROM: So what was your girlfriend's name?

MR. FRIMKESS: Her name was Carolyn Wread. She was a W-r-e-a-d. Her father was a public school teacher. Her mother died. She was one of five siblings.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was she a student also at Otis?

MR. FRIMKESS: No. At that time she was, I think, just still in high school. And I was just out of high school. She was two years younger.

DR. KARLSTROM: So did you marry her?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, we later got married.

DR. KARLSTROM: That was your first wife.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, she was my first wife.

DR. KARLSTROM: And you had children?

MR. FRIMKESS: We had children, who provided my four grandchildren now that I have. And we married so young that it wasn't going to last.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you must have been about, what, 19 or 20 when you married?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, I was 19. She must have been 18, 17, 18.

DR. KARLSTROM: Where did you go, then? She talked you into escaping to the country, is that right? Or up on the coast? Where was it?

MR. FRIMKESS: Oh, she wanted me to quit art school and just go to Topanga Canyon, where we knew of a real estate broker, Bob DeWitt. He liked us and wanted to sell us an acre for $100. It had a stream on it.

DR. KARLSTROM: It sounds good.

MR. FRIMKESS: But it didn't work out. I went back to school. I had a vision. When I wasn't taking advantage of the scholarship, my father threw a fit and he pulled some strings. In the visual arts business he knew a lot of people in the city, and he pulled some weight. And he knew executives on the UPA, United Productions of America, which was about one-hundredth the quality animation that Walt Disney did. But I ended up drawing Mr. Magoo, in-betweening for Mr. Magoo. You know what in-betweening is.

DR. KARLSTROM: Sort of connecting the --

MR. FRIMKESS: I would get two main positions, and then I would divide them in half under three pieces of paper with a light table underneath, a glass table. You could see the two lines, and you drew a line between the two lines. You'd take off two pieces of paper and insert another piece of paper and draw the one between those two. I guess Disney animators would subdivide the motions more than that. I think I'd do maybe five motions between the two main outlines.

DR. KARLSTROM: And Disney would do what, like, 10?

MR. FRIMKESS: Probably 30. They were smooth. And they used anatomy, even, you know, Disney. Mr. Magoo was flat as the dickens.

DR. KARLSTROM: So your marriage was already terminated then when you went back to school?

MR. FRIMKESS: No. No. They tried to break us up. They tried to break us up because she was taking over my mother's role too much and bossing me around. So they aimed to take me on a tour to Europe after they saved lots of dough. He was able to take the family to Europe in '57.

DR. KARLSTROM: Leaving wife and children behind.

MR. FRIMKESS: No, I had no children. That occurred after I'd gotten a job in Italy. They left me in Italy with a friend of theirs, a painter named Salvatore Scarpitta, in Rome, because he had a friend named Pedro Carcella [sp] who was a ceramist, a sculptor, mainly, in ceramics, who was a colleague of Melomiro [sp], who owned a ceramic factory in Milan, who also had an atelier, a little studio. I forget what they call the studios over there, darn it. And he owned a little factory in southern Italy where he liked to stay most of the time instead of the hectic Milan environment. He spent a lot of time down South in La Motella [sp], near Bari, southern Italy, Calabria.

And that's where I ended up, and still corresponding with my soon-to-be wife. She had saved enough money that once I got settled over there, she came over. And we went up to Rome to meet the plane, and then we hugged in the airport and we couldn't separate. I was about 20 years old and she was 18, I think, that year actually. So we were back together again. It didn't work. We bounced back. So soon she was pregnant, and we had to go back when it started to show. I guess it scared the heck out of us.

They relented and they bought us a car for our marriage, a wedding gift. We married in Rome. And we picked up a car once we got to France. It was the cheapest German car that they could find, I think, called Borgward.

DR. KARLSTROM: Borgward?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. And we picked it up at the agency in Paris and did the paperwork and had it delivered to the Queen Mary. And we came across on the Queen Mary. I used to practice my saxophone in the hold. That was all I could do. You know, it was pretty hectic because practicing a saxophone in a ship isn't exactly the best of circumstances. But there wasn't much else I could do until we got home, you know. In those days -- it was '57 still, I guess -- the boat trip was, what, a week and a half or something like that?

So we came across the Atlantic, and we were like immigrants, almost. But we had a car. We had it released there in New York, stayed at my cousin's house for a couple of days until we got our bearings, and then headed across country.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you didn't really stay that long when you returned to Europe.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. We were there for seven months.

DR. KARLSTROM: But did you go with the intention of settling permanently, or was it just a long visit?

MR. FRIMKESS: No. I didn't want to go. I didn't intend to go to Europe in the first place, because I had already become a potter. I was already a ceramist. And I didn't want to leave the Otis ceramics studio, because I was interested in what I was doing. But they insisted, and I wasn't 21 yet, so I owed everything to following, you know, doing what I was told.

DR. KARLSTROM: Michael, it seems a little peculiar to me -- doesn't it to you? -- that after all of this encouragement from your parents, and your father, especially, to go and be an artist, to go into art, that they would disrupt your time at Otis. Because you had returned, if I understand. You had come back to Otis.

MR. FRIMKESS: No. Yeah, I understand how it looks at the moment. I'll try to disseminate all that. While I was still drawing Mr. Magoo, I took to peyote.

They had a brief layoff on the Mr. Magoo project, so I saw my opportunity before I had to go back to work. I took the peyote that was given to me by the Japanese trombone player that was in our jazz orchestra that was a legacy of my friend from East L.A. I hung around with the black youngsters who were learning jazz and getting along with their instruments, and they had a jazz orchestra. And all through high school, I played in that orchestra.

And a Japanese fellow, he knew American Indians, and he provided me with the capsules instead of the horrible-tasting cactus. They were dried. He told me to take them, and I respected my Japanese friend's wishes. I had a vision after 24 hours of extreme experiences. [Laughs.]

I had a vision at the end when I asked myself how I was going to finally solve the mystery of how Charlie Parker executed what he did on the saxophone. "How do you do the Kansas City style?" is what I wanted to say to myself. How am I going to learn to play more like Charlie Parker, like every saxophone player in those days wanted to do? How was I going to learn to do that? He was a leader. Everybody wanted to understand that.

So that's when the vision occurred. And the vision wasn't playing the saxophone. The vision was a pot being thrown on the wheel off of a hump. It was a small pot. It wasn't that I could see the pot, because I saw the cross section of the pot as it was being formed. It lasted a few seconds. I thought afterwards, "What the heck was that?" And I realized that was a pot being thrown.

And the next day I said -- no, at that moment, I mean -- I said, "That's it. I'll be able to sell dishes and make ceramics, and that will support the art, and it will support the music, and eventually I'll learn how to play. I'll get a teacher and learn." The answer was to be able to make something that you could sell, and then you had a future. That cleared everything up.

The next day I dropped everything and ran over to Otis immediately on a bicycle. I jumped on the bike and ran across town from Hollywood to MacArthur Park and asked Pete if he would get me back into the art school. That's how I got back in the art school.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. I see. And he said okay. He said sure.

MR. FRIMKESS: So he pulled strings, and they forgave me for quitting under scholarship, but they insisted that this time I would have to do like everyone else. I would have to go and get some college degrees, I mean college prerequisites, done, get some credits in college to go along with learning to do the clay. And they got me back in. So I started with L.A. City College, a few courses, philosophy, music theory, what else, philosophy of music theory. I took a psychology course, too. That was a pretty heavy load. That was night school, so I was able to attend Otis in the daytime and study ceramics.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. Just to make sure that I have this clear. You left Otis, and then presumably after that went to Europe, if I have the chronology right.

MR. FRIMKESS: I hadn't left Otis when we went to Europe. I didn't intend to stop going. But once we got there and we came back from Italy and we came across from New York to L.A. and we settled in a little rental place, I had gained experience in the ceramic factory in the South [Southern Italy], so I really had some industrial experience now and I was already on the road at becoming a ceramist. I didn't need to go to school except to have a place to work at the time. And then little by little, I got my own potter's wheel, and that went in the back porch of the house we were renting.

I washed dishes to support our baby. I just went into a restaurant right away because I had an experience doing

a little washing dishes while I was in the first year of art school. I had worked in high school, too. I worked most of my life. I was in a department store as stock clerk. I was used to just getting a job right away and getting some money, struggling, especially with a kid, to do something honorable. So, you know, I tried to make enough money.

And we got a kiln after a while. It was stationed at a friend's house in Laurel Canyon, of all places. Then it was down on Santa Monica Boulevard. And then after that, I got another studio that Billy Al Bengston and Ken Price got me, let me have after they moved on. And after that, it was studio after studio. I built a few studios. So I never did complete any formal education.

DR. KARLSTROM: It seems that you were in and out of the program at Otis, so in terms of your formal education, it was a bit spotty or interrupted. But it seems to me you were doing a lot all along outside and finding ways to actually work with material and develop, presumably, as a ceramist in this kind of craft. What do you think of that issue, working entirely within an academic or art school situation as opposed to kind of picking up what you need on the outside? Do you see these as creating a difference in a sort of thinking? How would you describe that?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, if I stayed closer to the academic world, it depends on who the teacher was. With Voulkos, it's kind of misleading because he turned out to be such a genius artist himself that, you know, anybody under him would have a lot of freedom. He provided his students with freedom to come and go in the studio any time, day or night, and his example of how an artist lives. He encouraged me, taught me how to drink coffee and stay up around the clock.

So if you go through a normal academic situation, your studio would be a classroom. He got Otis to build a beautiful ceramic facility.

DR. KARLSTROM: That was called the Pot Shop.

MR. FRIMKESS: Oh, yeah, it was a great workshop.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you would say that that experience of working with Pete, even maybe during the time you were getting harassed, that experience was important for you in your own development as an artist, not just a craftsperson.

MR. FRIMKESS: I was lucky. It was a lucky fact that it was under him, because I could have been stultified by a lesser, you know, teacher that wasn't as broadminded as he, a great man as he.

DR. KARLSTROM: You didn't have any association with any of the other crafts-directed, crafts-based programs, you know, the various schools around the country that were strictly crafts-based? Was there any time that you went to any of them, or perhaps taught there?

MR. FRIMKESS: I taught at Pratt Institute in New York after I wrote an article. After living in New York for about three years and going from studio to studio, I taught ceramics in that type of classroom environment, just without a kiln and a room at all, just a place that you'd think would be an art classroom. It could have been a mechanical drawing classroom, you know.

DR. KARLSTROM: So this is very, then, the opposite of the Pete Voulkos craft shop.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes. Well, that's what I had to work with. This actual ceramic teacher at Pratt invited me to collaborate to a certain extent, but I heard too many bad things about him and about him chasing students down the hall with a hammer. I just didn't want to get started with a guy that didn't sound -- I had already had experience with other potters. Some potters are so physical. You know, in ceramics you have to really be able to carry heavy weight. A lot of these guys get physically oriented and they get kind of pushy, and, "Hey, pal," you know, and they're going to be more like the drunk guy that comes up to the piano, "Hey, play me --" -- what is that tune they always ask you to play?

DR. KARLSTROM: "Play it Again, Sam." I don't know.

MR. FRIMKESS: That's the idea.

I had already gotten to know a few ceramists in New York, and most of them were very basically belligerent, and they were competitive, you know, for their spot, and I always lost. But one place I succeeded. I asked the professor at Columbia University, Teachers College -- it had a ceramic shop -- if he would allow me to work there for the research I wanted to do at the Metropolitan Museum and try throwing the shapes that I saw there.

DR. KARLSTROM: When was that?

MR. FRIMKESS: That was in the '60s. We're jumping ahead, maybe.

DR. KARLSTROM: Early '60s, was this?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, middle '60s.

DR. KARLSTROM: We will return to that.

MR. FRIMKESS: Your question was, was I associated with other ceramic facilities?

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, or any of those schools, especially crafts.

MR. FRIMKESS: I was associated with the Rhode Island School of Design while I was in New York. I was asked to do a little lecture there. And that was also in the '60s.

[SESSION 1:TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

DR. KARLSTROM: I guess the question is, did you have any meaningful experience in any of these kinds of other, besides Otis, other institutions that you would want to talk about that would somehow have perhaps some effect on your life?

MR. FRIMKESS: In the early '60s, Voulkos invited me -- I sold the studio to John Mason, the one that I got from Billy Al Bengston and Ken Price, to John Mason, and we went up to learn to cast bronze. He asked me if I wanted to do that. And from there, after I learned to cast bronze, I went to New York.

DR. KARLSTROM: Now, where did you go to cast bronze?

MR. FRIMKESS: At Berkeley.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, so Pete had moved by then to Berkeley.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. He became the chairman of the sculpture and ceramics departments at Berkeley. University of California, Berkeley. I wanted to learn to cast bronze. He was ready to show me. And then I made a few pieces, three pieces I cast. I'd like to know where one of them is that disappeared courtesy of the Batman Gallery in San Francisco.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, really? You had an exhibition at Batman?

MR. FRIMKESS: Was in a few galleries -- in a few shows there.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was Bruce Conner operating the place at that time?

MR. FRIMKESS: Listen, you know, my ability to know a guy's name at that time, you know, it was pretty hard for me to be a real human being. I wasn't yet.

DR. KARLSTROM: What do you mean by that?

MR. FRIMKESS: I'll tell you. My life cleared up, my mind settled down and cleared up when I made a pact with myself. I said I'm going to quit playing the saxophone once and for all so I can concentrate on art. And my whole mind cleared up and I felt settled down. I felt dedicated and together, in total union. But somehow, I couldn't really keep that pledge. I always had to go back to the saxophone. And the fact that I had no one really to teach me, no saxophone teacher, and wasn't hanging with the right people --

DR. KARLSTROM: That's what you really wanted to do, is that right?

MR. FRIMKESS: The saxophone?

DR. KARLSTROM: The sax was always there in the background.

MR. FRIMKESS: It was always there. It was always there. It wasn't exactly that I really wanted to do it. Once I had the vision, I had a lodestar. The lodestar was the vision, but the reason I saw the vision is because it had to do with learning to play the saxophone like Charlie Parker.

And now that I'm 64 years old, the lodestar has come closer and the vision has come true. I've learned to play more like Charlie Parker. I understand Charlie Parker a lot now by this time. He only lived 34 years, but I at 64 am getting to know more of what he was able to do when he was in his 20s. No one will ever do like him again.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did you meet him when he was here? Because he would come here.

MR. FRIMKESS: No. I knew no jazz musicians of his caliber except for Buddy Colette, who was my teacher when I was 15 years old, was my first teacher. And he introduced me to Billie Holiday. I met her.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

MR. FRIMKESS: At one of his jobs. He was playing for her. And he had me come down. I was at the time 15 or 16. And whenever he had a gig, you know, a job, a music job, he asked me if I wanted to come by. I liked to do that. And I met Billie Holiday in one instance. But I didn't get to know too many really outstanding jazz stars until more recently. I've met many now.

DR. KARLSTROM: If you had to identify mentors or people who were really inspirations to you, would you mention Charlie Parker? It sounds to me as if he, as an image, as an ideal, loomed really large in your consciousness.

MR. FRIMKESS: Absolutely. Yeah. Any saxophone player, once they realize that that could be done, they would become curious and want to see how long it took to be able to approximate just the nearest.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about in the art world? You certainly had the, some people would say, enviable opportunity to have a fair amount of contact with Pete Voulkos, who is considered one of the most influential figures. Do you feel that he was a mentor to you?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, he was both a mentor and at the same time a tormentor.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did this continue over the years?

MR. FRIMKESS: I think so. I think so. The most recent episode was when we were in his gallery in Kansas City [Leedy-Voulkos Art Center, Kansas City, MO], and we had an argument -- I mean, I don't know how much he had to say in the way his gallery was being run over there, but once Garth Clark moved into the neighborhood and down the street, I noticed it was at that moment he branched off from New York. The first thing I heard was that they wanted our prices to be reduced by half.

DR. KARLSTROM: Who, Garth Clark did?

MR. FRIMKESS: No, Voulkos-Leedy Gallery. And I was shocked about it. And then a little while later, I realized, I heard that Garth Clark had moved into the neighborhood, and I wondered if there's any connection there. I often wondered why Garth Clark suddenly appeared on the scene in 1973. The first time he got off the plane and Fred Marer met him at the airport, he asked to be driven to our studio here in Venice, right straightaway to come here and meet me. And they made an appointment for me to show him the town.

I had to drum up a reason out of my busy schedule to drive him around town, which I didn't like. I'm not the kind of guy who jumps in a car and likes to drive around. Once you have MS [Multiple Sclerosis], you don't do that. But most people don't realize what it's like to be a victim of MS. You just don't like to get in a car. You don't like to get out of a car once you get to a place. It's hard to describe, but the body doesn't want to do some things. Now, to ask me to do that was a sacrilege. That isn't the right term. If they had known, if they had truly known --

DR. KARLSTROM: But it was insensitive, that's for sure.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. But the thing that I didn't like the most about it is that he didn't say a word the whole time.

DR. KARLSTROM: What was the point of coming to visit you, then?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, that's what I'm talking about now. The only time he opened his mouth and talked directly to me was when we lost our studio and we finally jammed this whole place -- this place is one-third of the size of the studio we had, both the house and the studio -- packed with what we had at the old place. We moved it across the street here to the studio my dad built, and there wasn't room to turn around.

But that's when he came along and set up arrangements to be in his new gallery across from the county museum on Wilshire Boulevard, and started working on selling what was left over from the old place and capitalizing on that. And he did a little booklet with several slides of the work that he wanted to sell, and a promotion with some of his writing. And he took an article that I had to write for a magazine and included it in there.

But the thing that I noticed afterwards -- I didn't take him to task too much, I mean at the time I didn't talk to him about it -- he made it seem like, well, now that we've moved from the old studio and I've got multiple sclerosis, he made it seem like I came down with MS in 1980 instead of 1970.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, like it was a new development.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

[Break.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. We've taken a little break here and we're resuming.

We were talking a little bit about the whole idea of mentors and apprenticing. And I guess what I take away from what we've talked about is, even if Pete was difficult sometimes, it seems pretty clear to me that he had a real influence on you as an artist and as a ceramic sculptor.

MR. FRIMKESS: And opened a lot of doors.

DR. KARLSTROM: Before we leave him, why don't you tell me, if you can, what form this impact took. You know, was it his personality? Was it his technique?

MR. FRIMKESS: He sort of changed under my nose into an artist from a traditional craftsman type, and it struck me how beautiful his sense of proportion was. Because I was so proud of being a sculptor and so on, and I realized how solid his design sense was. Unexplainable how classic. It seemed to have some connection he denies. It seems obvious to me that it's innate and must be a genius, your Greek genius coming out. The proportions seemed to be the ideal, post-and-lintel proportions, the proportions that were idealized for the temples and for the pots that they used. Later when I studied the Greek sense of ceramic design, how they utilized the principles of the golden means they were always concerned about, and his sense of if there's a large shape, then there's going to be contrasting, beautiful, complementary smaller shapes. Something like that.

That was one turn-on, realizing, as an example, that though it was all abstract, that you have the basic principles, even though it's abstract, going on. And I always tried to incorporate what I learned thereafter. He taught me a lot there about three-dimensional design just from looking at his work.

He taught me how to concentrate on a work until the bitter end, until it was resolved. I've seen him struggle over one little bottle, seemed like such a stupid little thing to put your concentration on, on the potter's wheel for ages and ages and ages. What you could do with just one little tiny bottle, focus all your attention on that for almost an hour—what is he doing, instead of doing a great work, you know, working on just a tiny, little thing? And that goes along with the ability to drink coffee and stay up around the clock. And, you know, examples of that nature.

Of course, he showed me how to wedge clay, and he taught me the fundamentals of kicking the wheel and throwing, and started me off a little bit on glaze technology, but I didn't continue studying after that, so I had to pick all that up on my own.

DR. KARLSTROM: Certainly in terms of technique, the craft itself and the various techniques, you could have learned that from any number of people. But clearly, Pete was offering his students something quite different.

MR. FRIMKESS: The guy was explosive. He changed things everywhere. He had to do everything his way. He had plenty of time to have things resolve. You know, a sense of timing; he has things going. In contrast, anything I want done my way always gets misconstrued. But that's beside the point. But as far as that example, the great example that he set for his students of the spirit of working and from an academic point of view.

Now, there's another difference here. He was always ready to take the class, take all his followers at that moment or that day or that month that were always hanging around him. He walked with a crowd around him. They would all invariably end up in a restaurant lounging around over a bunch of beer in a Mexican restaurant. They were always going out, be it 3:00 in the morning. And it was always a full-sized Mexican dinner at 3:00 in the morning, you know, instead of breakfast.

It's an academic tradition. Whenever you go to the college and the teacher has students always hanging around, they always end up in the local restaurant. That's part of your education, to sit around the table and discuss things. When I taught painting at Oregon State-Eugene, I was pressed upon to act the same way. That's what you're expected to do, from the students' point of view. I didn't take to it too easily.

DR. KARLSTROM: But you liked it with Pete?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, I was a member of his entourage. But that's not exactly answering your question. However, from an academic perspective, that holds true if you were going to be an academic. And I didn't go in that direction myself. I never stayed close to the university. I instead ended up having my own private studio or our own private studio or building our own studio various times, many times.

DR. KARLSTROM: Of course, most people wouldn't describe Pete, I guess, as typically academic, as a typical faculty member, because he was a real rule breaker and so forth, and he got things the way he wanted it.

But to my question, or to the issue --

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, how much did Pete do for me. It's example. By example, mainly.

I think at this point I think it might be pertinent just to say that he invented a practical power wheel, along with Paul Soldner. Those guys put together. I saw them do it in '56. And prior to that, he had struggled like crazy, worked his butt off throwing huge bottles with a kick wheel, big stuff on a kick wheel. It's hard to do. Coincidentally became an artist, and therefore he started just using the power wheel as a means to create art, and it was no longer for throwing bottles or traditional vessels of any kind.

Now, I didn't get that kind of training from Voulkos as a teacher, becoming a fine thrower on the potter's wheel. I had no notion that there was any such thing. And generally, the general population does not realize that throwing on the potter's wheel can be like practicing a saxophone or violin or a musical instrument. They don't look upon throwing as being that type of endeavor; it's more of an action -- it's more of just a "making" endeavor. Most people think you use a potter's wheel and make a bowl, or make a bottle, or make a vase.

But there's an aspect of throwing that I think has come through my unique experiences that you can't find a teacher for. I had become a perfectionist as a result of my saxophone teacher named Bill Green, William Green, who was a colleague of Charlie Parker's. As a teacher of woodwinds in Los Angeles, in the middle ‘60s, it had just somehow coalesced where I had just recently been trained to throw without water. That was unexpected. No one gets trained to throw without water.

Now, if it weren't for those experiences, I wouldn't be anything extraordinary in terms of the pots that I make. They wouldn't be any different than most of the stoneware pottery that you see around. But I had been trained and I had been exposed to some fine throwing instruments from the Orient called egotes -- now, that's a tool that's held in the left hand in a counterclockwise world that throws counterclockwise. Sometimes in the Orient, they throw with the right hand inside the vessel because it's spinning clockwise. So it wasn't hard for the guy to say, "Well, in order to finish this bottle, the neck is too narrow to get my hand in there anymore," and he would just pick up a stick, and he'd bulge it out and shape it with his hand there.

Now, when you have to do it counterclockwise, then you're getting to more of an ambidextrous -- more ambidexterity -- because your left hand has got to operate like the left hand on a guitar or on a violin, so it's more intricate. With the right hand, and spinning clockwise, it can be cumbersome, but it still would work. And there I am studying with this teacher who's teaching me to be a perfectionist on the saxophone.

There's a sense of fine throwing that I envisioned, but I'm afraid only a few of my students have been able to understand and master. It isn't too easy out there to find too many throwers who are that ambidextrous that they are also a musician. They aren't already accustomed to being able to brush their teeth with their left hand and such, you know, to use your left hand equally with the right hand. It's very rare that you find a guy like that.

Now, the ones that were like that were musicians, and they became very good throwers. But they're not known that well. I have one that's probably the greatest and that's not too well-known. I don't know what he's doing anymore, Matthew Leeds. He's up North. He's amazing.

But I have one now I've taught for seven years. He is a musician, and he learned faster than anyone. But when I taught this method at Cal State Hayward [California State University, Hayward] for a semester, I had a few adherents, maybe three at the most, and they didn't stay with it. But one of them I'm pretty sure is still doing it whenever he wants. He's capable because he's also a juggler. And they're around. There are some around. But basically, the course went over like a lead balloon, so they didn't keep me around too long.

[SESSION 1: TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Do you see the music, playing the saxophone, as a metaphor, as a metaphorical connection between the two, or do you see it as one informing the other, a kind of dialogue or conversation?

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. It's because the intricacy of the endeavor, subtle methods, subtle method. And it's similar when you use the Gauthein aspects of throwing, the dry method, without water, that require the similar type of preparation, as a musician playing an instrument, in terms of practice. Without daily renewal, you can get so out of shape that it will take you three days, and if you don't get in shape by that time, it will take four days. You might even consider quitting; you might have to go so far to catch up to where you were at par before. But if you maintain your practice, your ability, and these subtle --

KARLSTROM: Nuances?

MR. FRIMKESS: -- nuances is the word I was looking for, technical nuances, then that's where they are similar. Because if you have an intricate mind, and you have to keep your synapses glowing and growing, and you want

to keep expanding your mind, keep perfecting and improving, you can also do it on the potter's wheel.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay.

MR. FRIMKESS: Now, Peter Voulkos's throwing was like that to a certain extent. And when he changed to utilizing the potter's wheel for structure for major sculptures, he was using the potter's wheel as a tool, an instrument to create a different type of form, not for what the wheel itself could create. He left the field of practical ceramics for pure art and used the wheel for pure art.

So in that regard, I had a teacher at a job where they trained me to throw without water. So she was a major mentor for me.

DR. KARLSTROM: What's her name?

MR. FRIMKESS: Her name was Clara Rosen.

DR. KARLSTROM: She taught you to throw without water.

MR. FRIMKESS: She had taught ceramics at a high school in New York called Music and Arts High School, so she was a very scientific woman. And she had had a studio -- a factory, I mean -- established in Pennsylvania, and that's where she trained me to do this.

DR. KARLSTROM: Does the function of an object or a form, an item, does that play any kind of a real role in your own work as it developed, or was this a changing idea, the importance of the function?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, I always wanted whatever I threw on the wheel to be functional somehow. But when you got into some of the classical shapes, where I was also looking for archetypes between the cultures and shapes, too, archetypal shapes, they were used in temples sometimes, or to decorate the palaces, and they weren't functional in any other way than to be looked at.

DR. KARLSTROM: Right. You didn't drink wine or water out of it.

MR. FRIMKESS: But on the other hand, you know, I had no prejudice against any of the forms that were purely functional, either. And I always wanted to create -- sometimes I wanted to make a teapot or make a pitcher or ewer or plates and bowls and functional work as well.

DR. KARLSTROM: So really you could move back and forth between these ideas. You didn't feel that one was higher than the other.

MR. FRIMKESS: No, because some of the most practical ones were the most difficult to throw, even that they were smaller, and if you were using egotes, left-hand tools, sometimes they would be the most frustrating shapes to mess around with. If I was going to fulfill an obligation for an exhibition, generally if it didn't lend itself to have the correct type of surface development that would go along with what I wanted to say visually for the art world, then I would probably not attempt to use it. But if it fits in, fine, if you could use it at the same time. I doubt if people actually use the teapots that I make, that Maggie [Magdalena Suarez Matute Frimkess] decorates. Some of them just buy them to keep and to look at. But they're still functional.

I love to make Spanish platters. You can eat off of them. They're like upside-down straw hats. And some of the Flemish platters that have all those steps inside, and my God. But to throw them, they're difficult.

DR. KARLSTROM: So it sounds to me as if a big part of it for you is the challenge of the process --

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes.

DR. KARLSTROM: And almost maybe like testing yourself.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, sure. And you can spend a night before the day you throw figuring out the steps you'll use and the choreography that you will follow in order to accomplish the item, the shape. And the next day you can test whether your theory was correct once you get in there on clay. But you know, I haven't yet jumped out of bed and put on my throwing pants and gotten right over the wheel as soon as I worked it out. I'm cool enough to wait until the next day after my exercises to do it. Unfortunately, I can't live like that. I can't make stories of my life like that. My exercises are the main thing in my life now.

DR. KARLSTROM: Right, I understand that.

MR. FRIMKESS: But I would have done that. I would have just jumped right out and figured it out. You learn to figure out the choreography. It will take a few moments of complete silence and concentration. If you can work it

out on the wheel, fine. You can lose a lot of pots that way. And if you figure out what you need to do in order to get the shape done, you can envision, you can see all that in your mind's eye. And so you can create that challenge to that extent.

DR. KARLSTROM: I would guess personal spiritual qualities or ideas, religion perhaps, might be brought to bear on your work and your whole attitudes and ideas towards making art. Is there a spiritual component in any way? Or is that a stretch?

MR. FRIMKESS: No, I'm afraid so. I've had a few epiphanies during my ceramic course of my career, like having experience of precognition while throwing a ginger jar like I have on the other side. This is a medium-sized ginger jar, not the full 25 pounds, but the half-a-bag size. I had a couple while throwing the shape of the body pop into my forehead.

DR. KARLSTROM: What?

MR. FRIMKESS: A blond fellow I never met in my life, and a woman I met once, popped in. They knocked on the door five minutes later. I knew what they wanted when they came. I mean, I knew what they had discussed through my forehead when visualizing. He was talking with her about he was a photographer and he needed a place to have a shop on that particular boulevard that we used to inhabit there on Abbott Kinney Boulevard. And she showed him that she had a very small place but maybe this guy down the street, this crippled guy, who has got this huge studio, he might be able to rent out a corner for you. And that's what they were talking about before they knocked on the door.

I saw the two people. I met the woman one time before. The blond guy, I had never met before. And I was still throwing the same pot, and they knocked on the door five minutes later. I knew who they were; I knew what they wanted. I knew I couldn't break off throwing this pot until it was finished, and I opened the door for them and asked them to please allow me to finish the throwing and that I couldn't talk while I was doing it. And she, being a sculptor, sculptress, asked me if she could look around the studio for a minute while I was finishing up. And I went back to throwing.

Of course, the photographer waited for a couple minutes. You know, most people only have so much patience before they have to start talking again, and I expected that. And so right away he blurted out the whole story that I already knew. He was a photographer, he needed a place, he wanted a place on that boulevard. And she saved me my response because she came over and she noticed, "Wow, it looks like even though you're crippled, you've filled the place up with a whole bunch of pots, you've been working," and so he knew right away that it wasn't for him to have a place there and share the space with us, and they left.

And then afterwards, I was baffled by that. Never happened, anything like that, before. And that's spiritual. That's what spiritually you would call the “time track.” Robert Monroe, for example, and some other authors, they referred to that experience as an area of existence that has no future and no end. It's there forever and it's always there. And you can go into that dimension, and you can see where you've been and where you're going to be, if you can crawl up there. I mean, if you're capable of soul traveling, which I'm not. But they call that the time track. And that's the reason why people can experience things before they happen.

DR. KARLSTROM: Does this have any connection with your work?

MR. FRIMKESS: Everything in the cosmos is spinning. There's revolutions out there. Even the Sun spins. All the heavenly bodies go around, some of them clockwise, some of them counterclockwise. There's so many things in nature that have to do with vortexes. Now, is it true, is it possible that if you're in practice on the wheel -- at that particular moment I had been throwing exactly the same shape many times, where I'd made maybe 25 of the same shape, so I already knew that choreography pretty well -- is there a connection between doing and mastering something utilizing a vortex and possibly being in touch with another dimension because of that? That's one thing that occurred to me.

It's a theory. And maybe I would like to get back in practice on the wheel like I was that day in 1973 and see if it can happen again, but I haven't had an opportunity.

DR. KARLSTROM: So it's a means of not just using equipment and materials to create an object, but in fact to have an experience that possibly --

MR. FRIMKESS: That was unexpected.

DR. KARLSTROM: -- could put you into touch with something more universal?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, that was a phenomenon that I can't explain. I feel that my course, the fact that the lodestar that I started with the cactus in ceramics, I feel that I'm on a trip. I'm on a quest, vision quest. Magdalena gave

me that term. And that my whole career as a ceramist has to do with this quest after the vision, so that my career is a spiritual career as a ceramist.

And I think that the saxophone has something to do with it too. I think the music and the clay work in my life are spiritual in nature. And I feel this. I feel that there's a spiritual connection in my actual career because it started from that first spiritual experience. Prior to that, I was confused spiritually because I was raised an atheist by my folks. They're staunchly -- well, they would pooh-pooh anything.

DR. KARLSTROM: Jewish atheists.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, you know, I'm just a human being. I wasn't taken to -- the only thing Jewish about me is I'm circumcised, you know. I haven't had any training in the Jewish religion.

DR. KARLSTROM: So there's no traditional background, really, in your family.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, they cooled all that out from my grandpa, who was a commie atheist. Well, they raised me to be very sensitive about racial harmony in the United States and equal rights. My grandpa came from Russia and he saw that, wow, the black people in this country are being treated the same way we were being treated in the Ukraine, people throwing bricks at us over there and everything.

DR. KARLSTROM: Is it possible that your folks chose East L.A. as a place to live partly because of the racial mix? And was this something they were seeking?

MR. FRIMKESS: No. No. It was originally established by an Italian, I believe, land investor or developer, and the first guys that moved out there were the Jewish community.

But even though he was an atheist, my grandpa still wasn't going to talk to too many people or confide in too many people that weren't in that same circle, that were also atheists but still Jewish. I believe that's the way it was. So the mixing, the racial mixing started after him. No, after his offspring came our generation. And by our generation, we were ready to be just human beings. It didn't matter anymore to be sure that you married a Jew.

So they tried to give us that option. My folks tried to get me involved with some young Jewish people like myself, but I wasn't like them anymore because by the time I was raised in that same locale, it was no longer a Jewish community. So they didn't go there intentionally.

My grandfather wanted to see the black people treated equally in this country, just to be treated like equal here like he thought the Jews should have been treated in the Ukraine and they didn't get it. That's why he came here, to find freedom. So when he got here, he saw that it wasn't equal. They had black/white bathrooms, the Ku Klux Klan. And so there were more black people at his funeral -- I gave my body away to UCLA, you know, but in those days, you know, you still had funerals. But they don't have to give me one.

So he became a commie because there was a balance there; being more socialistic, you can get laws established more that could change things in socialism. And that's the way that he contributed toward equal rights in this country, was through becoming a commie. But there was never anything about force and violence, overturning the country. He was a peaceful man. And my uncle, too, was in the Second World War, his son.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about this idea of community?

MR. FRIMKESS: I never had a Jewish community, really. I was never in one. But is that what you mean? Only my cousins and immediate family were Jewish. The community was totally interracial where I grew up.

DR. KARLSTROM: Is there a community that you found yourself in at some point that you feel was important for your work, important for your thinking and your work?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, it's a little difficult, but I feel very close to the black jazz community. But I'm in a community, in a way, that is able to invite me to go to this opening with Peter Voulkos.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you see these as different communities, the ceramics, art community and --

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. That community is also highly competitive. Now, I know professionally I'm in that community; however, I've always felt like an outsider because I've been getting beat the hell -- I mean, they've beat the hell out of me, and they've done everything possible to compete against me. And once I became disabled, I had no defense anymore, so I just spent 20 years after we had to move. I was no longer able to compete because I had to build a new facility. So after we lost the old studio, there was no one to ease the transition. And in that regard, I was expelled, in a sense, from that community at that point, or I was on my own.

DR. KARLSTROM: Even though this, of course, was the community for which you became -- represents that

which you became known for.

MR. FRIMKESS: Where I ended up with the Smithsonian.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah. So it's interesting that you have, I think, a pretty clear idea of two worlds in which you operate.

MR. FRIMKESS: I'm not really in the black jazz community. That's impossible.

DR. KARLSTROM: No, but that attracts you.

MR. FRIMKESS: In order to be a musician, you've got to be able to jump in a car and drive down to the gig, or jump down there and sit in with the guys, and ride across town and get something and get your instrument repaired. And I can't do any of that. So I'm without any black jazz musicians hanging around like I used to. One of them died, and through him -- he was left over from 40 years, you know--through him I met Horace Silver and Joe Zawinul and all the greats. But once he was gone, we were alone. We were left alone with no community. The only community is Social Security.

And I also belong to the Tai Chi community. That's probably the main community I belong to. But I don't see my teacher, I just do it every day. For 26 years, I do it every day. I'm very close to the Chinese Tai Chi community, although they don't know it, and I'm not there to show them.

DR. KARLSTROM: I get the sense that you don't really feel a part of this crafts world.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes, I do. Yes, I do. Oh, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay.

MR. FRIMKESS: No. That's my livelihood. And I wish I could do more, and my 6-1/2 hours of exercise kind of keeps me from acting like a normal member of the community. So they don't understand, and people don't understand why I don't produce more and keep up my obligations and make my deadlines like a normal guy can do. But I --

[SESSION 2: TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Do you think of yourself, and perhaps ceramics as they've developed, as an American phenomenon, or do you see yourself and your activity in ceramics as broader than that, or international?

MR. FRIMKESS: I see myself as a phenomenon [in] that I had no control, little control in becoming a ceramist. I looked down on ceramics before I became a potter. I sought to be a sculptor.

I was going to be some kind of artist. I couldn't see how to make a living doing that, and I am today. The way it turned out, I think my position, as it turned out, is that I'm sort of a beacon of light. I'm a harbinger. And I had no idea I would become a harbinger in this field of ceramics. But the current trends are not amenable to what I have to offer today, and I don't know whether it will ever be of use to human society outside of what I've contributed. But I feel that my position in the art world as a member of the ceramic profession is that I'm here to show fast firing and throwing without water, dry throwing, and studying of history. And in that, dry throwing has to do with an ancient method of throwing.

DR. KARLSTROM: I guess what is meant by the question is this: Do you see yourself within an American context or within an international context? In other words, more national or international?

MR. FRIMKESS: Worldwide. Well, I think this show that I'm working for now, this international show, will prove that what I have to give is of international importance.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. And so you feel kind of beyond notions of what is American in developments in ceramics or in art.

MR. FRIMKESS: I'm very adamant about American contribution to the world. And I feel that if we can make this country work, the whole world might work. I have great doubts that it will work and that the whole world will work, but nevertheless, I feel that I'm hoping to provide some energy toward making this country work in the ways that I can assist it as a spokesman, as a leader in the ceramic profession.

DR. KARLSTROM: We've talked a little bit, and we will be talking more, in terms of the melting pot idea, about the importance of social issues, different cultural groups, ethnic groups, and so forth, maybe even gender. I gather that you feel that this is actually like a theme in your work. Is that right?

MR. FRIMKESS: Absolutely. If this world will work, it's because here in the United States we've worked out the differences between the Muslims and the Christians here, and there won't be any violence immediately possible in this country between the different factions since they're guaranteed in this country. Hopefully, we'll be able to iron out all those difficulties in this country.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you really do see your work as having, besides just a formal or an aesthetic function, also a social function.

MR. FRIMKESS: Absolutely. Like you said last time, I think my folks have a lot to do with that, in the example they set when I was growing up in that neighborhood, and the example of my grandfather being so active to help to show that black people were human beings. In those days they weren't considered human beings. And I was in on it. And I mean, those were only the black people, let alone the Mexicans, were tolerated in a different kind of manner.

Of course, the Japanese people had thousands of years of sophisticated culture behind them, so they were just left alone. They could [get] all As in school, you know, like, all their kids did, and nobody thought much about it. But later on you meet them teaching mathematics at Rutgers University, and they're also in the university systems and they did very well. But the rest of those people were struggling.

And I always was concerned; why don't these people have more solid culture and civilization behind them that they could be more accepted? I later found out a little about Mexican history, my colleagues in junior high school. I realize a lot about their Indian roots that I didn't understand at the time when I was growing up.

DR. KARLSTROM: So this is in part a sense of history, that understanding of tradition or where you come from.

MR. FRIMKESS: And fixing it in my own mind, and at the same time it being so imposing in my own mind that it becomes a part of my art, my work.

DR. KARLSTROM: We talked a little earlier, before taping, about your sometimes rather difficult relationships with dealers, and particularly, I believe, in terms of the moment when you had to move your studio to here. And I guess your main dealer was Garth Clark. What was your relationship with him? With dealers in general, but I guess you particularly would like to talk about Clark and the move here?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, yeah. When he came from South Africa, Fred Marer picked him up -- you know who Fred Marer is -- picked him up at the airport and brought him directly. We're close to the airport. First stop was our old studio, where I had met him in the '70s, early '70s. And the next time -- well, we drove around town. They made an appointment. They assigned me to show him the town. They just wanted to put us two together in the same car so he could get a feeling of who I was. He said nothing.

DR. KARLSTROM: That's right. You actually mentioned that last time, yes.

MR. FRIMKESS: I did all the talking, driving him around town. And there was nothing he said. He never said anything. There was no rapport. I didn't know who he was. We lost the studio, and he shows up.

DR. KARLSTROM: Which was nearby.

MR. FRIMKESS: On Abbott Kinney, 1205 Abbott Kinney. So I had to throw two-thirds of the stuff from the old studio out and retain minimum here. It took 20 years to get it to around where I could utilize it similarly as the place that we lost.

DR. KARLSTROM: You didn't dispose of works, did you?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, a lot of works were disposed during the transfer.

DR. KARLSTROM: You mean they broke.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Is that why you were talking earlier about at the Smithsonian, they build beautiful crates for transporting, but you didn't have the advantage?

MR. FRIMKESS: No, in that regard I was referring to the way things are done at the Smithsonian, where there is appreciation and extreme brainstorming, consideration for every minor, little item, and finesse totally. And in comparison to what we experienced after losing the studio, there was nothing of that. In other words, there was no way to continue rolling along as we were at the old studio because we had no facilities, and yet Garth Clark showed up at that moment and attempted to capitalize on what we had leftover from the old place, and tried, perhaps, to get us back operating with the proceeds.

But it didn't take long that I found that one of the commissions he gave me to do, he didn't want to pay me after it was turned over, a $2,400 commission he decided he was going to give us. And then there definitely couldn't have been any money to help set up the place there because I had to take him to small claims court and remind him.

DR. KARLSTROM: But he was your dealer at the time?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, at the time. And then soon after that, we were participants at the Aspen, Colorado -- what's the name of the place -- Anderson Ranch [Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, Colorado], where it was California in the Rockies. And that was the last function we had as members of his gallery. And once that was over, we were out. Of course, I didn't sign the contract over again -- that was optional -- because of the small claims case. He wasn't paying, wasn't forthcoming with it.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did he have an excuse for that?

MR. FRIMKESS: Absolutely no word. He would only -- there were very few things that he had to say to me, and they were very pertinent, to the point. And as soon as he got the answer, that was it. There was never a conversation. I've never had a conversation with him.

DR. KARLSTROM: He even wrote about you. Where did he get all that information if he didn't talk to you?

MR. FRIMKESS: I think a lot of it was gossip and a lot of it was ideas he drummed up in order to smear me. I really believe that he wanted to slow me down. It might be possible -- sometimes you think in looking back, well, he might have read that article that you see here --

DR. KARLSTROM: In *Craft Horizons*, the one you wrote?

MR. FRIMKESS: -- in South Africa and saw what I had to say, and decided somebody's got to go over there and put an end to this guy because --

DR. KARLSTROM: Really? You think that he was --

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, it's a paranoid idea, but if you think back on it and the way I've been treated these 20 years since we lost the studio, what changes I've gone through, we've just barely been hanging on. A lesser artist, even though he was healthy, would have given up.

Now, the reason I didn't give up is because I started with a vision. The lodestar was from the question about Charlie [Parker], and a vision occurred and I became a potter at that moment. And I signed up the next day with Voulkos and I've been a potter ever since.

I found out I was also a harbinger not only of throwing without water and that I also have some smarts on kiln design as a result of the move. If we hadn't moved and had a smaller place, I wouldn't have tried this kiln design that I learned about through Ken Ross, who was the guy who invented the -- well, he didn't invent it, he brought it together. They have these kilns in Maine. They have them back East. He might have changed it a little bit.

The kiln was 120 cubic foot, big kiln, and it fired in four hours. I was teaching there in Maine. So when I came back to our studio, I had to find out what the secrets of that design were.

Now, when we had to move to this location, I had to change the design again to make the burners go vertical, because there wasn't room to put them the classical way, with the flame fronting against the back wall. That's when the flames go horizontal, front against the back wall. The back wall deflects the flame up and around the arch and out the flue through the bottom. This way, without the back wall, the flame has a chance to develop better, and the kiln went from 3 hours at the old studio, suddenly the kiln is firing an hour and 20 minutes. You're cutting off over two hours of firing time and everything's looking the same.

So I run into the gallery, Garth's gallery at the time with a friend who was helping me a little, a UCLA student, and he was a witness. I said, "Hey, wait till I tell him. He loves to write about stuff. He loves to promote people. He loves stuff that really can sell things better." Not one word.

DR. KARLSTROM: You mean you told him about it.

MR. FRIMKESS: This firing phenomenon. At that point I began to realize that he saw -- he looked down at you, and I could only think and figure he looked down on me and either said, "Will you please shut up and go away," or else he just expected me to read his mind, I think. Or else he was thinking, "It isn't how fast you fire, it's what you fire. Now, please leave me alone." You know, something like that. He looked down on you. He's a tall guy, you know, six foot. He never wanted to talk to me, talk with me.

DR. KARLSTROM: Why did he offer to become your dealer?

MR. FRIMKESS: You know, you're asking me now -- I can't say it's actual fact. I just think that he might have wanted to build you up to a point where he can let you drop and you'd splat better. Or he had to do it for a time, but while he's able to write about you, he could go on and cloud the issues, cloud your issues.

DR. KARLSTROM: But I gather -- and you correct me if I'm wrong -- that your perception is that he was really opposed to the way you were going in terms of process. That this represented some kind of an affront or assault to where he was invested. Is that right?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. At the Anderson Ranch in Colorado, just before he let us splat, the conference with the 300 visitors to Anderson Ranch for that session, and around the roundtable the conversation was about content -- what was the two words that you brought up?

DR. KARLSTROM: Form and content.

MR. FRIMKESS: Form and content. Content actually was most. He wanted me to expound on content, or wanted everyone to expound on content. I think he wanted to hear what I have to say about content because I would have tried to say what we just alluded to, that if you do a work of art, you could also be utilizing your creative imagination as an artist to help straighten society out, or if there's something we could do, we can make it beautiful.

And Pop art was there, and it didn't seem like there was anything socially redeeming from Pop art. It's called Pop art, but it was "Pop" in term of "popping" the Pop art. I mean, how are you going to help those poor guys change the black and white bathrooms with a Target or a Ballantine Ale can cast in bronze and painted? Jasper Johns. Or Lichtenstein's large comic book excerpts? But it's Pop art. I felt that we had an obligation as the next generation to include something socially redeemable because I'm seeing it from the point of view of a guy from East L.A., from a Mexican or a black guy.

DR. KARLSTROM: This is, of course, the melting pot idea.

MR. FRIMKESS: I already had that in view. I realized the melting pot idea after spending time learning to cast bronze up there with Pete Voulkos.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, we're going to go into that in considerable detail in a moment. But I want to ask one more question about dealers.

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay.

DR. KARLSTROM: I sense that at least with Garth Clark, and I'm wondering if this is the case with other dealers you worked with, there was a resistance to the way, in terms of technique, that you had elected to proceed, that you were employing a technique that was not typical of Voulkos and company and others, and regular throwing, even, and that for some reason, I gather, they felt that didn't match the way they thought the field of ceramics should go. Is that right?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. Well this article was confrontational. This is what made the difference.

DR. KARLSTROM: It was March-April, 1966, issue of *Craft Horizons*. "The Importance of Being Classical."

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: "A modern potter challenges the trends in ceramics today."

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes.

DR. KARLSTROM: I think what you said was that it was very controversial?

MR. FRIMKESS: No, confrontational.

DR. KARLSTROM: Confrontational.

MR. FRIMKESS: The editor made it that way. What I was trying to bring out was that here I was throwing in this tradition of Voulkos and Soldner and everybody else when you think of throwing. You know, I was really enjoying it and having a ball. And then I get that job at the factory back in Pennsylvania, when I was taught to throw without water, and my boss, Clara Rosen -- part of the job was to visit the Metropolitan Museum. I was assigned to study their classical shapes there, their classical amphorae, basically all the pots that she thought were thrown without water, and to report back to her with the research. They were going to go into those shapes for

their line at their showroom on 52nd Street to sell them for lamp bases. And we left the job. Magdalena didn't want to move to Pennsylvania, so that's why. I loved that job.

But when we got to New York, I had to make money and also study this material that I was trained to do, was so fascinating, and I wanted to go study more at the Metropolitan. I learned that there were libraries all over New York where you can really get into the way the Greeks were in 500 B.C., and what those early potter's wheels were called, and the names of all the pots, and how the society was running in 500 B.C., and to do a little more research.

And when I realized by that time that the Chinese were doing something on those ginger jars I couldn't see beforehand, I began to realize there's a ring of ceramic history that is great art that they have given us. That some of the vase painters in both China and Greece were tremendous artists, the precursors, from the Greek point of view, of the Renaissance, of course, we know. And then the skills that the Chinese brought us with the vase painting on porcelain, shapes that were used in temples. Wealthy collectors in China had to have the finest artists work on their vessels.

[SESSION 2: TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

DR. KARLSTROM: You had problems with [dealer Garth] Clark, and we went into some of the reasons. Did you -- you surely had relationships with other dealers.

MR. FRIMKESS: Right.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did you find in other cases that there were some similar problems with other dealers? Or were there some more sympathetic ones, where you felt they were really understanding you and your work?

MR. FRIMKESS: There was no understanding of my work. There was no documentation about the dry throwing, ever. There was nothing written about the fast-firing kiln. It seemed like this direction was Michael Frimkess, and Michael Frimkess is thumbs-down. So that's what I've been going through for 20 years, until the Smithsonian came along.

DR. KARLSTROM: So in effect, this is an overriding issue in your own career, being excluded or marginalized by your own technique.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And this doesn't even talk about the final objects. It doesn't talk about the decoration, you know, the motifs, the ideas there.

MR. FRIMKESS: No.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, let me ask you this. Do you think that crafts is --

MR. FRIMKESS: Competitive.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, yeah, but that the crafts movement is overly attached to process and technique, to the point where that becomes the determination of significance and quality?

MR. FRIMKESS: I think it's wonderful, the craft movement, the way it's become open to almost a Pop art, I mean a real, true Pop expression, and where it's solidly available now for anyone in any universities to find a means of expression through clay and low fire. And it's beautiful. It's wonderful. Everyone has a -- it's like --

DR. KARLSTROM: If people look at your decoration, if people look at your work, you're very much a participant, even though the way you throw is different.

What we've been talking about so far, or what you've been saying leads me to believe that in the crafts field -- and that means Garth Clark and other dealers, let's say, and critics and maybe the crafts museums and so forth -- that there is more of an emphasis on process and technique than in other areas of the fine arts; and so that to the extent that if you step out of line, if you step aside from the current direction, as you did with your technique, it marginalizes you, it excludes you. This is sort of what you've been saying.

MR. FRIMKESS: All right. The generally accepted techniques and process is not inclusive of using a potter's wheel to perfect one shape, to practice over and over and over, criticize, go back, practice, criticize, practice, criticize, repeat, repeat, repeat, like a musician has to do. It isn't geared for that. And it's probably not too prevalent today, and maybe never will be unless they really want to work hard.

You have to have a very close rapport with the guy who mixes your clay, when you do it the way I do. It gets real

complicated because those guys who mix your clay aren't interested in doing it that way, in the first place. It's a little extra trouble. Recently I ended up saying, "Well, look, if you don't want to do it that way, if I gave you a little more money, would you do it?" So pretty soon you get a reaction. One company refused to do it at all, and they were the company that used to supply me, but they were bought out. So that's one of the aspects.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you actually make it, in a sense, harder for yourself.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, when we came from New York with our young child, and I went looking all over the city for jobs and I got -- I'm going to skirt just for a second.

One particular little job that I picked up to throw some pots in our little one-car garage in one of our locations before we had the studio. I had a little trouble the first time they ever heard of it at the clay company. I was a friend of [the owner, Ernie] Sherril.

DR. KARLSTROM: Can you spell that?

MR. FRIMKESS: S-h-e-r-r-i-l, who used to own the company that is now Laguna [Clay Co.]. At that time it was Westwood Clay Supply. Voulkos drove me out with him to pick up some clay back in the '50s. I met him then. In fact, the clay supply used to be down the street where we are here in Venice. But then they made it a little bigger, clay got to be a bigger field, and they moved to the City of Industry, quite a ways away. When I got this commission, I asked them for the first time to order a ton of clay for me.

And I asked for the kind of clay that I was getting at the factory in Pennsylvania, which is hard. They had never produced clay that hard before. So they made it a little harder, and I was furious when it got there, and I sent the whole ton back to the company and told Ernie that no, I wanted it harder than this, I wanted it hard as cold Plastoline, like I used at one time. And so they must have thought, "Oh, the guy is nuts, nobody does that, but okay, we'll mix it up and we'll send it to him, and we're expecting it to be refused again." And instead, I was ecstatic. It was wonderful. And they were happy, I was happy, and thereafter, whenever I needed a ton of that kind of clay, I'd just order it and I could get it in those days.

Well, that changed quite a bit, you know, after he sold it to Laguna. Down the line it changed for another reason. I had a hassle with the clay in the '70s when my friend Ernie decided that there was a way to make a windfall by cutting out one ingredient, which was the aggregate, and getting a cheaper kind of aggregate. Then he would get twice as much for the clay, and that's what he did. And it turned out that the aggregate that he substituted, when I took the pot out of the kiln and you put it on the ground, before your eyes it would fall apart, just break apart into nice sections. I thought, well, this would be really nice to make piggy banks out of, so I made -- you saw that piggy bank in the courtyard there?

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah.

MR. FRIMKESS: That's been in several exhibitions. There are two of them there. And the rest of the clay, I think I just got rid of the last piece of that clay only a couple of years ago. I used it sparsely for little things like putting under bricks and stuff like that.

Anyway, there was a tremendous change in my ability to get clay that I needed to do the kind of throwing that I wanted to do, that I learned to do at the factory. And I think there is an abhorrence against me doing it in the profession.

DR. KARLSTROM: Why?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, no one around had the skill that I was trained to do. It would have to come through me, and my name was Frimkess. And there were some fantastic throwers, the old, the common, wet type of throwing practitioners. And there were even contests established where I was invited to participate, where, of course, being disabled, I wasn't up for it. And at the peak of my skill at the old studio, the conference Paul Soldner put together from ceramists from Colorado that occurred, I think, in San Diego or Long Beach, I don't remember, called SuperMud Conference.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, right.

MR. FRIMKESS: And people came back from that conference -- that's why, what I described a few sentences ago, why I believe that there was an abhorrence of my method.

But the friends came back who had attended the conference, and said, to my surprise, "Well, he throws fantastic, but he doesn't throw your shapes." What the hell are they talking about? Everybody out there was feeling a competition, and I had no inkling. At that stage, in the '70s, I had no idea there was anything going on like that out there in the field. They were comparing my method of throwing, what I was able to do on the wheel,

to everyone else's method of throwing, and there wasn't acceptance from Soldner and that faction in the validity of the direction I was going in.

And I think they were, with the SuperMud Conference, trying to draw attention away from what I was doing and the direction I was going in on using the wheel to study the classical shapes from all over the world that I saw at the Metropolitan Museum. I felt this was true Pop art. Let the poor people, poor Mexican, black people get in on seeing what the other cultures have done, go to an exhibition where they see the array of all those classical shapes from all over the world painted in subjects that they can --

DR. KARLSTROM: Relate to.

MR. FRIMKESS: -- relate to. And there you have a way to help cure the world of black and white bathrooms and the idea that Mexicans should always stay near wetback [?]. And, you know, there can be a way that society could grow more equally, or there can be equal representation through some "point of light" out there that can help break the ice. Some of my visual devices would be ice getting broken or blood bags, I would use sometimes. We all share the same blood. Things that would remind people that we're all blooming in the same red, white, and blue country, and we're all different colors.

And a lot of times I like to refer to the fact that when we're born, our brains are like a piece of clay, and that, depending on your environment, is really what makes the individual. It's also the way you're raised, but you're going to get a better chance if you're Anglo and white, for sure. You know, especially in those days. But I felt that I wouldn't want to see things change faster than they were actually changing because I fully believe in the Anglo brain power of the United States, the Founding Fathers, what they established. I just want to see it possible for a Condo -- what's her name -- Rice, you know, that [President George W.] Bush has got in his Cabinet? [Referring to National Security Advisor Condoleezza Rice.] Well, she's an African American woman, but look what a brilliant woman she is.

DR. KARLSTROM: From Stanford [University].

MR. FRIMKESS: And so this is coming along. I want his help to make this occur. And we felt that we had an obligation as Pop artists or post-Pop artists to seal things up better with the world and to help them to see that we're doing an experiment in this country, and that they should treat us like the darlings of the world and not as enemies of the whole world. But we have a divine purpose in the United States to make the whole world work. That's what I was trying to bring out. That's when I wanted to try to reach the rest of the world so they can settle down and have all eyes on this country and regard us as -- to fill in that Anglo mind so that we could continue to produce the great scientists and the great thinkers.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, you know, what you've just said, that's very interesting because it sounds very much like an ultimate statement of intent on your part; you know, what you were really trying to achieve --

MR. FRIMKESS: The melting pot.

DR. KARLSTROM: -- trying to achieve, but with the forms --

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: -- with the technique --

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, the --

DR. KARLSTROM: -- and with the imagery on the --

MR. FRIMKESS: Whatever means I had, I was going in.

DR. KARLSTROM: But it takes me back to the earlier question, about to what extent you felt there was an American quality to your art, or that you were American versus possibly international. And what you've just described suggests to me that you felt very much that you were making art as an American, that there was an American story that you were trying to convey internationally. Is that right?

MR. FRIMKESS: Absolutely. I'm a tremendous patriot. I mean, I was 4-F, but I felt I could do my service in another way to the country. I feel that as Americans, that we all have our responsibility to help grow our country. And I feel if I was able to pay taxes, I feel it a privilege to pay taxes. I don't understand why everyone needs a tax break. That's why corruption has ultimately a bad effect over anyone. I feel our economy could be growing like it was before it turned over to the Republicans. Somehow we're back to their agenda before Clinton. And people decided we didn't want a Jewish vice president, he might end up president, and then the rest of the world is going to really be down on Israel and us. I mean, the Americans decided that we had to change the agenda, the whole agendas, and now we're back where I'm not going to be able to pay any taxes, for sure. We haven't for 20

years been able to pay any taxes.

DR. KARLSTROM: You're describing yourself -- and I'm not surprised -- as to a certain extent an ideological artist. This then becomes part of the content of your work.

How would you feel your work relates to that of another very political ceramic artist, ceramic sculptor, and that's Robert Arneson? Could you comment on that?

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. Yes. Yes. The difference there is that my fundamental motivation in being a popular artist that seeks to communicate is that I believe very strongly that we must reach a point in our species in the United States, make this possible to have a form of birth control that everyone could believe is equitable, so we can give nature a way to bounce back.

This is really my main thing. You hit on it. The difference between Arneson and me is that if I do a TV set, it's going to be called *Birth Control*. And that's what it was in 1961. I did a TV -- Pete got me to cast bronze. So I did three bronzes with him. The main one was the one I called *Birth Control*. A black news commentator on TV. You didn't see black people on TV at all then. And I entitled it *Birth Control*. So Arneson would have used a TV to make fun of some kind of sitcom or have him on the TV doing some kind of goofy expression, or he would have done like the typewriter with the fingers on it. Brilliant, brilliant mind.

If I have something to be understood in that Pop art, I would connect it to the idea that we've got to do birth control in this country. If we can get together in this country and end up like it's growing that way, where no one should be proud of themselves because they're black or Jewish.

You should feel proud that you've got a name for getting accurate writing and accurate history tests, you know, in college, and then feel proud, or that you managed to practice an item in your music lesson and the teacher sent you home with a star. Then you feel proud. But when your mom tells you should feel proud because you're black, you forget all that stuff about being a slave and everything, just feel proud that you -- you know, all that's a waste of time, in my point of view. That you've got to feel proud because our people wrote the Bible; I'm a member of the "chosen people." These kinds of things belong in museums, I'm afraid, and I can't go along with them as a source of pride.

I'm proud that I managed to learn to become a specialist with altissimo on the saxophone. That's what I'm proud of. I'm proud that I managed to get into the Smithsonian, that I did work that got that far. Everybody isn't able to work that hard, but still, you know, they look for things to feel proud about. I think they're going down a redundant direction to feel pride in culture or race, but that the soup, the best will rise to the top. I'm proud that I'm a martial artist. That's Chinese. I've learned something. I haven't missed a day of Tai Chi Chuan in 26 years. I'm proud of that, you know? It's helping me. I'm getting cured, in a way.

DR. KARLSTROM: So there's a goal of encouraging pride in the citizenry, whatever form that may take. I'm trying to follow the development from the difference between you and Arneson and the way you would do certain TV images, that he would have one thing; you would have the other, to this notion of pride coming out of birth control. It's a little difficult for me.

MR. FRIMKESS: I was trying to elucidate the way that man in the United States can feel pride and still not feel bad that they're marrying someone of an opposite race. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. That's basically it.

MR. FRIMKESS: Or a different race, I mean.

DR. KARLSTROM: Very much the melting pot idea, still.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so we've got a theme there.

I want to ask you about this present working environment after you had to move your studio to here. How has it worked for you overall, aside from the fact that you have MS and that this disability has affected your work?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, it hasn't worked at all. The first couple of years, where I had to spend most of my time constructing and doing exercises, there was nothing produced. Very little. There was a kiln I purchased for the time being that was an old kind of kiln I knew better than using. As soon as I could, I got rid of it. It was all developing a facility here. I feel like nothing has gotten done toward that exhibition I've been wanting to do.

I still want to do it, the classical shapes from all over the world, done in a consistent manner so that you could see they were all thrown, all the shapes were perfected in that certain period, and they were all decorated after

the shapes were perfected. Everything so far has been practice to me. The one that you have at the Smithsonian was practice. It was a sketch. I'm tremendously critical of it. It isn't right in a lot of regards. It was thrown together. The handles, nothing was perfected on that. It was the first one that approximated what I wanted to do.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, really?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes. And most of the work that I did in the '70s was --

[SESSION 2: TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Your view of the most powerful influences on you, you've given some of that in terms of contemporary artists or artists of your time, Pete Voulkos being one of them. You've mentioned others. You've also given some indication of the importance of the classical masters, the potters. They go back to antiquity, the Greek amphorae and these forms, and the lessons that you learned from that. And I would say that's at least as important for your work as Pete.

There are other things that have been influential. Technology. We've talked already about your introduction to the dry throwing and your ability to make these very thin, single-thrown, thin-walled vessels, and why you do that.

I'm just summarizing a little bit.

What I want to turn to just for a moment is turn back to Pete again, Pete Voulkos. You acknowledge him as a kind of mentor. And there's also a kind of combative quality to that. Pete's having a show that's coming next week, is it?

MR. FRIMKESS: Saturday. Two days.

DR. KARLSTROM: Is that at the Lloyd Wright Gallery?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes. He's Frank Lloyd Wright's grandson.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. And Pete's having a show, and you are invited.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes.

DR. KARLSTROM: Tell me about that. What's going to happen? And what do you feel about it?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, I have to do my exercises that day. I have 6-1/2 hours of exercises on Saturday. I didn't tell anybody that, but when I called the gallery, as I was asked to on the invitation, knowing that I wasn't going to go in the first place, I sought to make do as much as I could toward their estimation of me and their regard, the way they have been treating me, that group of people have been treating me for the last 20 years since we lost the studio. And I definitely wanted to go, but once I became disabled, I'm not able to defend myself. But Magdalena wanted to go, my wife wanted to go. So I asked for somebody to go in my place with Magdalena.

And of course, I didn't bring out that when I had that 6-1/2-hour exercise day, I never go anywhere. You can't go a day without when you have MS. If it was the following day or the day before, I might have thought twice about it, but I would have gone wearing armor. But with Magdalena going, I could at least see what they had to say about it, about me.

And Magdalene [Mills, a graduate student], who will be going in my place, is expected there. And she's able to speak English very well. And so there will be a dialogue with her and it will get back to me and I'll see how everything went. And through her I could send my fondest regards and my love for Pete with her, and my congratulations. She'll do all that. Magdalena won't be able to do that. But that's the way I feel about that.

DR. KARLSTROM: Do you feel that because of your feeling about a certain history, with Pete but maybe with some others, that it might be in some ways uncomfortable if you were there?

MR. FRIMKESS: Oh, absolutely. It's because of them that we've raised our daughter on food stamps and we had to take welfare right away and I had to look for these jobs that help pay the -- we didn't have to pay rent, but we had a lot of bills that we could barely keep up with. We could hardly buy shoelaces. We were poor for most of the 20 years. And litigation I had to go through, first with Garth Clark and then with Social Security three times. And every time you go through litigation with Social Security, that's three months out of the year.

DR. KARLSTROM: In terms of your relationship as an artist to a position that Pete and many of those around him represented, whatever attitudes they had towards you or actions they took that may have had an adverse

effect, there's still a basic, a fundamental difference in your work. Could you explain in a fundamental way this opposition of views towards what you're all doing?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, the prevalent attitudes in art are going in a direction of as little work by the artists themselves, skills being crossed out and not appreciated as much as before in art; where at the same time, if we want to talk about Voulkos's work, here is working tremendously, the pieces that he's done with the help of other people and that way of doing the Renaissance Man. Those pieces are immortal. He's created these huge metal pieces and those huge ceramic sculptures that he's done. But a lot of the other colleagues, it's seen that the way most followers are, that to get by with as little complications as possible, and the main thing is to promote in the society. If you can get by with as little work and more promotion, fine. And that ethic is predominant out there.

And then a lot of the art is coming through, the critics have to write about you, the degrees that you've acquired, and you have to go through the university systems now in order to be qualified to continue teaching at a university. The Peter Principle is in operation there.

And, you see, when you're not looking back in all the disciplines in the ceramics profession and recognizing the historical contributions and having those attitudes go along with the approach to creating beauty or magnificence, and excluding the historical, that's where I think there is a divergence there. There's a tremendous history in ceramics that isn't getting up front at the universities, up-front treatment. It's way in the background, if mentioned at all. Personality art is in.

If I would be able to run it, I'd also include the opportunity to learn to throw the way the ancient Greeks did, because there are machines, there's a revolution in ceramic equipment that goes along with this other attitude. You won't see them unless someone like me gets to be teaching and it becomes popular, which is really a long shot nowadays. It's getting harder and harder to feature that kind of discipline being offered in art school.

DR. KARLSTROM: Tell me about your idea of the virtue of limitations, because you wrote about that, I think quite eloquently, in "The Importance of Being Classical," your article in *Craft Horizons*. It seemed to me that that was important; that part of success, of moving ahead and becoming a better artist, true artist, is working with the limitations rather than trying to avoid them.

MR. FRIMKESS: I'm surprised I even mentioned limitations in that article, but I can expound on it now. I've, since writing that article, begun to read the I Ching every morning. And one of the oracles is limitations. Limitation is Oracle number 60. There are 64 Oracles in the I Ching. And it alludes to the repetition of the bamboo stalk at intervals. The bamboo stalk develops in increments. Those are limitations of repetition. Without limitations, a man's life disappears into the boundless. B-o-u-n-d-l-e-s-s. Without limitations, what have you?

So in a way, back in the '60s when I wrote that article, the limitations I must have been referring to then is what I learned from Clara Rosen about doing the same shape over and over and over till I got it the way she wanted.

DR. KARLSTROM: That's interesting. So there was a kind of concept you had that then flowed into I Ching Oracle, which?

MR. FRIMKESS: Oracle 60, of limitation.

DR. KARLSTROM: I don't know how long it's been since you read this, but as it came out in the magazine, do you feel that it accurately reflected your views at that time, your position?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, no, because the guy who I turned it over to, he said he's going to have to shorten it for the magazine, and he edited the heck out of it. And it turned out to be confrontational. Even the name of the article was confrontational. It was a challenge. Well, this being a competitive society, what was the result? Every potter, every ceramist out there that was interested slightly in throwing read that article. I became the enemy, the guy to get. So that kind of hurt me in the long run.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you saw, actually saw those kinds of consequences of your article?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: What form did they take?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, for no reason that I could ascertain at the moment, I'd get guys coming up to me and saying, "Oh, well, you know, I can do this and that." And some would even come in and take a swing at you, literally. And that was once we acquired the studio that Michael Cardew established. Everybody in town wanted that studio, probably in the country, because Michael Cardew was the national treasure, you know, in England. Once we got that place, I had an opportunity to do what I had written about in the article. So it was there that I

had students of mine, or "influences," come along and create a lot of --

DR. KARLSTROM: This was the studio prior to --

MR. FRIMKESS: The one we have now.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about your attitudes towards the place of the universities in the American craft movement? You said you had some thoughts about that.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, I'm adamant. They're neglecting history. They could be producing a university course. But from what I can see -- although I really haven't read the latest craft periodicals; I'm not literate in the latest magazines that have cropped up and what's going on, and I don't really know exactly what's going on today -- but it seems to me, judging from what I've seen published and what I heard about from Susan Peterson's letters and what she's showing in her latest publication, her latest books, that the personality cult is in control in the universities in the ceramic field.

DR. KARLSTROM: No sense of the history of the craft or what it meant?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, the course that I saw, that I was capable of establishing for the United States for the university systems, and maybe for the world, was a course that included history. But there isn't any history included unless you practice history. I learned that from the I Ching too. I learned to see more clearly what I feel in this regard from what I've read in the I Ching.

Oracle number 26 is about being a teacher, a university teacher, just being -- it's the teacher. Number 26 is devoted, the hexagram is devoted to how to teach and how to be a teacher. It's about the philosophy of teaching. And according to the I Ching, to teach, the highest form is to practice history, to actually get firsthand knowledge. Where that precedent is widely accepted in the universities today, you find in pit firing. Well, that's widely practiced. It's widely known that early man, Indians, Paleolithic peoples, when they made pots, they dig a pit, a hole in the ground, and they cover it with everything combustible and they fired that way. And once in a while a university class will go out in the country and, under the aegis of the professor, they'll dig a hole and pit fire.

But they're not recognizing my fast-firing kiln, where I'm a harbinger of historical design that comes from the Orient. That's basically an ancient firing principle that, now that we have modern kiln-building materials and angle iron, we can free the kiln from the monolithic attachment to earth that absorbs half the heat that you put in the darn thing. We're free now. You can still practice history by using the same most efficient method of firing that came through the Orient. The Western guys had a simple deal where they put the fire underneath the kiln and had the fire filter through the wares and go out the top. That's updraft.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, right. We talked about that.

MR. FRIMKESS: So the throwing that I had to contribute, that I don't know if it will get anywhere, I have several excellent students. They're not doing it. They're not doing what I hoped would occur. They might not have degrees either, but I've had several students that, of course, got a lot better than I on the wheel because they were able to practice more. Maybe they didn't stay consistently practicing or something, but I haven't seen anything in Susan Peterson's book from any of my students, any of her books. So it's not getting accepted even though I've had a few successes with students.

But the universities should have practice of Greek throwing without water offered. And some of those students are going to go to it like ducks to water. I mean, they would have.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, not to water, because you're talking about dry throwing. So it wouldn't be like -- that's a bad metaphor. [Laughs.]

MR. FRIMKESS: That's the wrong metaphor. They would go to it like hummingbirds to pollen.

DR. KARLSTROM: Good.

MR. FRIMKESS: Oh. I have a course that should be enjoyed by affluent hobbyists today that they could go to the university and learn to develop their ambidexterity further by using the egote method, throwing off the hump. There's stuff that I could have provided for maybe one percent of the population, I don't know, but it at least should have been included with the Pop personality cult that's offered generally in the universities as well. It should also be there because otherwise it's going to die out.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about the reception of your work over time? Have there been high points and low points?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, people have called me -- maybe five years ago, I think, the last person realized I was still

alive -- and they said, "Oh, I thought you were dead!" And they called me on the phone. "Well, what happened to your work?"

Well, the work that I wanted to be accepted was never done. I was successful with a teapot, almost, right at the end of our tenure at our old studio in 1979. I created a teapot shape that's pretty close to what I wanted to do. It was an English-style teapot with Alice in Wonderland depicted on the decoration. Of the major works, my solo works, that was one that was pretty close to what I wanted.

Then there was loutrophoros hydria. The Greeks used the shape to pour scented water over the bride's head. And it's a wonderful shape, unbelievable shape, three handles. Thirty-two inches tall, it had to be, and a tour de force to produce. That was accepted quite well. And the ginger jars were always sought after. People always asked for more ginger jars.

DR. KARLSTROM: So there was a market for your work.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, always was, for ginger jars, especially.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about the big vessels? I would imagine there was quite a demand for the big --

MR. FRIMKESS: The Greek vessels?

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. FRIMKESS: Those too, but sometimes Franklin Parrasch in New York, who popped up about four years ago, five, maybe, appeared to me as he wished to be a little more hip than the usual dealer. And he wanted more amphorae. And so he thought that that's what I really wanted to be doing. What I really wanted to be doing is get all of those classical shapes from all the different worlds together to show to the poorer people for a real Pop art solution to something that they can feel close to and understand. The decorations could reach the people. And at the same time, they would be getting a history lesson.

And it's a simple idea that I wanted to share. And that has never been shared. But if you looked around and you found the collectors and you gathered together the practice ones from all over the country or wherever they exist, with all the far-flung collectors, and petitioned to get a retrospective, you'd get a semblance of what I was trying to do.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about the role of the critics in terms of the reception of your work? It seemed to me that there was certainly a recognition that you were a leading presence in the ceramics world, despite the fact that you felt there was a kind of effort to --

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. I know that question. I can't wait to say that in terms of Christopher Knight of the *Los Angeles Times* --

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, that's more recent, but okay.

MR. FRIMKESS: More and more -- and this is true through the years -- I've been getting left out of the paragraphs. And especially with Christopher Knight, who personally called me about two years ago. And I was sitting there trying to practice the piano at the moment, and I picked up the phone, and he says, "This is Chris Knight." I'm thinking, "It's Chris Knight; I can't remember who Chris Knight was." But he said, "I'm a critic for the [*Los Angeles*] *Times*."

And he didn't sound like anyone too important, because he had a very humble way of talking and he seemed like quite a nice fellow. He asked me what I thought my position was there at the Otis crowd in the '50s. He wanted to get my slant on it. And I had to say that, well, some people feel it was important, some people think it was not. And after hanging up, I noticed after a few years my name -- he felt that it should be not too important. So he's leaving my name out now.

DR. KARLSTROM: Christopher Knight, you think, thinks your name shouldn't be included?

MR. FRIMKESS: I'm pretty sure that he would like to see Adrian Saxe. He's said many times, Adrian Saxe, without the presence of Voulkos, he's the new leader. He teaches at UCLA, Adrian Saxe. And if not Adrian Saxe, Ken Price. Those two guys. Those are the guys. And there's no place for me anywhere as far as Christopher Knight is concerned. There isn't a critic of any newspaper that would want to --

[SESSION 2: TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Magdalena Suarez Matute Frimkess is an artist and the wife of Michael Frimkess, who appears on the other side of this tape. And so we're, in effect, kind of combining these interviews, which makes sense

because you have had, well, a long marriage but also a collaboration in the art, making the pottery vessels, and you decorating and Michael throwing them.

Where I learned more about you, actually, was reading Suzanne Muchnic's article, "Their Lives Poured Into Clay," which was in the Art Section, *Los Angeles Times* "Calendar," on November 19th, 2000. At any rate, it interested me, and all of it seems very relevant.

So maybe you can tell me a bit about your own background, where you were born and your early years and how you became interested in art.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I didn't become interested. It just happened.

DR. KARLSTROM: Just happened.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I never chose, made a choice. When I was with the nuns, I think it started. I was raised in an orphanage because my mother died, so my father put me in this orphanage with these nuns, and they discovered that I could have facility for drawing. Everybody is supposed to embroider, you know, the other girls, and I hated embroidering. They discovered that I could paint, so they saved me from embroidering and told me to paint scenes for the altars and things like that, flowers.

DR. KARLSTROM: Where was this?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Venezuela. I was born in Venezuela.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was this in the town where you born, the city?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No. When I was born, my father had to move to the capital because my mother had tuberculosis. The doctor was only in Caracas, so we all moved to Caracas.

DR. KARLSTROM: And is that where the orphanage was?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so you were allowed, then, or encouraged to paint the altars?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No. They painted flowers in cloth for the altars.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, I see.

MRS. FRIMKESS: So I started doing that, flowers.

DR. KARLSTROM: Instead of embroidering.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes, because I never liked embroidering.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you were a natural painter.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I think so, in a way, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Then what happened next? How did you get to take the next step?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, they told my father that he should put me in art school. So my father decided that he would put me part-time only because that wasn't a career in those days for making money. So I studied laboratory on the side. So I started studying landscape part-time.

DR. KARLSTROM: And that was in Caracas?

MRS. FRIMKESS: In Caracas, in the Artes Plasticas was the name of the school, the only school in those days. So they found out that I was good there, too, so I had a big article in the paper to encourage me that I should keep the career of painting.

DR. KARLSTROM: How did that come about? That's interesting. You were only a student, but there was an article in the paper?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes, when I was 15, was 16. The same like Michael, in a way.

DR. KARLSTROM: How did they find that out?

MRS. FRIMKESS: They used to take us in the country to paint landscapes once a week. So they all decided they liked my painting. They all agreed that I would have a future in painting.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so did they tell -- to make the newspaper article, somebody had to tell the newspaper, right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. It was an exhibition. An annual exhibition. And then they mentioned me in the paper.

DR. KARLSTROM: Because the critic, the writer came to look at the exhibition and liked your work best.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes. Oh, no, the group. He mentioned some people, and among them was me.

DR. KARLSTROM: I bet they said that yours were among the most promising.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, I don't know about that. But I was very touched, and I cried and all that. But on the other hand, my family life was a mess with my father, and I had to get away from there, so I met my first husband. So I couldn't continue with this art because I needed somebody to save me from my house. So I met my first husband and I ran away with him. So that was the end for the art or a while. He was a Chilean and we moved to Chile.

DR. KARLSTROM: What city?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Santiago. So I started raising kids. That was the thing to do in those days, '49. So I had two children with him.

DR. KARLSTROM: This was 19 --

MRS. FRIMKESS: I left Venezuela '49, yeah, 1949.

DR. KARLSTROM: And you had two children, who I think now live in Los Angeles?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. So after three years, I started itching. Something in me started itching, thought I should go back to paint, to art, to whatever it was. So I asked permission, of course -- because we were very strict in those days, women to go out of the house -- to go to a very conservative school, art school, if I could go and paint there. So he allowed me to go for a while. Then I started getting prizes again.

DR. KARLSTROM: Uh-oh.

MRS. FRIMKESS: He didn't like that at all.

DR. KARLSTROM: Why not?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Chauvinist. He didn't like that at all.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh. He didn't mind that you did it, but he didn't want you to get too much attention.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Exactly. So on the other hand, they had an advertisement in the paper for the University of Catholics, with a teacher from Yale University here, Sewell Sillmen.

DR. KARLSTROM: Could you spell that?

MRS. FRIMKESS: S-e-w-e-l. He was a right hand of -- what's the name? -- Albers.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, yeah, Josef Albers. And what was the last name?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Sillman.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. Well, I'll look that up. He was a student of Albers.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. His right hand, in a way. And he had a Fulbright to go to Chile to teach. So in the advertising, I say, "I'm going to try this one, part-time again." And he was against part-time because he thought it was a bunch of ladies who just want to spend time there doing nothing, socializing. So he started teaching us the color theory, with collages and things like that. So I was his best student, again. So it was easy for me. It was my destiny, I guess, to be in the arts.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so he encouraged you to continue and go forward.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. And then another from the Fulbright [program] came next year. It was three years from --

no, the last one wasn't a Fulbright. The other one was a sculptor. What's the name? I forgot his name. Norman Calber. He was teaching sculpture. So I wanted to try sculpture. I had never done sculpture before. But just because he was on the Fulbright and I liked their teaching, so I took the course with him. So I became his best student again.

DR. KARLSTROM: Boy, you're in trouble.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I'm in trouble. So then came Paul Harris the next year.

DR. KARLSTROM: Paul Harris?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. He wasn't from the Fulbright. He was --

DR. KARLSTROM: So this was a string of American-trained artists; is that right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right. Those three. So I became the assistant of Paul Harris.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was he a painter?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, he was a sculptor and painter and everything. He lives in San Francisco now, in Bolinas. He's very well known. He's the one responsible that I'm here.

DR. KARLSTROM: How is that?

MRS. FRIMKESS: He got a scholarship for me to come to this country.

DR. KARLSTROM: And where was that to?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, Michael says it's not a scholarship, it's something else called fellowship, whatever, because some people gave me money to study here one year.

DR. KARLSTROM: To study anywhere?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, I mean to work here for the whole year. Then at the end, we have a show at the end of the year. But, like always, started getting in trouble with my family. So my "ex" said, "If you leave, that's it. You lose your children, you lose everything."

DR. KARLSTROM: He thought you wouldn't.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, probably, threatening me that way, that if I leave, I will lose my house and everything. And I said, "Well, I cannot lose this chance, so I'm going to go no matter what."

DR. KARLSTROM: Was it a hard decision to make?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Very hard. Very, very hard.

DR. KARLSTROM: But you felt that strongly about the art, that you were an artist.

MRS. FRIMKESS: And also, he was so much against my work. He used to destroy all the work I did. He tore them apart and made a big thing about it.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, that must have been terrible, but did you ever think of why he had to go to those extremes?

MRS. FRIMKESS: There was no way to reason with him. He was --because it's a male --

DR. KARLSTROM: You think this is typical of Chilean or Latin American men?

MRS. FRIMKESS: In those days it was. It was. I don't know now if it's the same, but it was.

DR. KARLSTROM: Probably not quite the same.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I hope not.

DR. KARLSTROM: But you kept up with your children somehow.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, yes. We keep writing each other.

DR. KARLSTROM: How old were they? They were little.

MRS. FRIMKESS: My daughter was 12 and the son was 16. It was very heartbreaking for both sides, very, very difficult.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so for a while, then, they were raised by their father.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did he remarry or anything like that?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, but he has girlfriends. He always had. He could have, but I couldn't have.

DR. KARLSTROM: In what year did you come, then, for this scholarship?

MRS. FRIMKESS: '63.

DR. KARLSTROM: 1963. And where did you go?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Port Chester, New York. That's where I met Michael.

DR. KARLSTROM: And the name of the center there?

MRS. FRIMKESS: The Clay Art Center.

DR. KARLSTROM: Clay Art Center. So did you know what you were going to pursue, what you wanted to concentrate on when you went to the U.S.? Did you see yourself mostly as a sculptor or a painter? Did you do ceramics?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No. In that time, I was a sculptor. I got involved in the sculpture field, although my teacher, Sewell Sillman, said I was so good I could do anything I want. That was the first teacher that I had. He knew I was coming with the scholarship. So he said it doesn't matter what I do. But I was still -- the family thing was the -- [inaudible] -- thing for me always, no matter what. So I met Michael, fell in love with him, but I still was pulling with my children, so there was a conflict. I worked hard the whole year, but I had to come back to them again.

DR. KARLSTROM: After one year.

MRS. FRIMKESS: The scholarship was done. Hoping that my husband will repent and take me back or something like that. He did not.

DR. KARLSTROM: He did not?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No. He was military.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, military?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, the police department, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And his pride was wounded.

MRS. FRIMKESS: His pride was the main thing, yes.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so what happened? You got together with your children, though.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I could see them, but outside the house, and it was too painful for me to see them outside. And all my girlfriends had their home with the kids. So I felt, no, I have to leave here, I can't take it any longer. So I came back again to Michael.

DR. KARLSTROM: After how long?

MRS. FRIMKESS: I forget how long I stayed there. Probably six months. I still had my job because I was teaching at the Catholic University, so they gave me --

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, you were? You were teaching before this?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Sculpture.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you actually were a professional.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, kind of, you know. Paul Harris gave me the job of assistant of him. So when he left, he left

me the job.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, so that's where you were taking classes, at the Catholic University?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. Hmm. So you could support yourself.

MRS. FRIMKESS: More or less. The salary was so little, not enough, really.

DR. KARLSTROM: That must have been awful, though. So what did you do for those six months? You couldn't see your children.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I rented one room in a pension, and they came and visited me. When they could.

DR. KARLSTROM: So what else did you do? I mean, did you have any social life?

MRS. FRIMKESS: With my old friends, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did you correspond with Michael?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And did he encourage you to come back to the U.S.?

MRS. FRIMKESS: At the first, yes. And then he got another girlfriend here and he didn't want me to come back, but I didn't understand that one. But he sent me the money, so that was very funny.

DR. KARLSTROM: Hmm. What did he do with his other girlfriend?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, he got involved with her.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, but I mean did he get rid of her, then, when you came back?

MRS. FRIMKESS: More or less for a while they were. He was keeping both of us.

DR. KARLSTROM: You came back, then, expecting to be together with Michael completely, like getting married or something.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right.

DR. KARLSTROM: But not right away.

MRS. FRIMKESS: No. So I paid my dues.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah. What happened then? How long did this go on?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Maybe a couple of years. But I needed the money, and I needed the -- I loved him. And I was devastated without my children, so I decided to get pregnant with my daughter, to save my soul or something.

DR. KARLSTROM: So at that time you were in New York?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, in New York.

DR. KARLSTROM: But he got a job in Pennsylvania, right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, that was before I went to Chile. That was when I had the scholarship here.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, I see.

MRS. FRIMKESS: He wanted to marry me, and I wasn't ready because I was still thinking on the kids.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so this was the period in New York. He was working in New York; isn't that right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, then what happened? How did it finally come that he decided, well, I need to get rid of this other girlfriend and now it's time just for Magdalena?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, because of the daughter. I was pregnant with the daughter.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, maybe that had something to do with it.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Maybe. [Laughs.] It looks like a soap opera, no?

DR. KARLSTROM: Yes, it's very interesting.

MRS. FRIMKESS: It is completely a soap opera.

DR. KARLSTROM: So tell me again what you were doing to support yourself in New York.

MRS. FRIMKESS: In New York? I was taking care of the -- Michael was supporting me a little bit.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, well good. Then he must have been doing pretty well.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, we lived in the Lower East Side, in DeLancey Street, very cheap. And I started working [like a maid?] too. I forgot about that. To help. And I wasn't sure that I was going to keep with him or not.

DR. KARLSTROM: Then what happened to bring you to Los Angeles? Because all your experience in the U.S. had been in the East.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right. Well, then I started having a problem with Immigration because I wasn't a citizen or anything.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did you have some kind of a visa or card of some sort?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes, a visa, and I was pregnant with the little girl, but I wasn't aware of the green card, and I was thinking of the emotional part of my life. So I went to the interview and they treated me very badly, said I was using the child to get status in America and all that. So --

DR. KARLSTROM: So what? [Laughs.]

MRS. FRIMKESS: So what? But it hurt me a lot in those days. So Michael applied through his girlfriend, a lawyer, who would help me to get a residency here, a Philippine lawyer, whatever. So he arranged for me to leave the country and come back. So I went back to Chile with the daughter I had, eight months old.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh. By then, had Michael moved in with you?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. We were still living together. He made his choice one day. I think he decided to make a choice, I suppose, half a choice, whatever. So I was kind of contented because I had the child, and I missed the other ones too much.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you went back to Chile.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes.

DR. KARLSTROM: You got to see your first kids, the big ones.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right.

DR. KARLSTROM: And you had an eight-month-old one.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right. And I stayed in the house of one of my friends for the whole month until they gave me the visa to come back here.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so you came back then on another visa.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, the permanent.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, a permanent visa.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, the green card.

DR. KARLSTROM: Because the daughter was born --

MRS. FRIMKESS: In America, right.

DR. KARLSTROM: And then where did you come to?

MRS. FRIMKESS: We came to New York again. And then Michael started feeling, I don't know, his conscience, whatever. He decided we should move to Los Angeles because his parents were here, and they helped us with the trip. So that's the way we ended up here.

DR. KARLSTROM: But your other children still stayed down there.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, yes, they stayed there.

DR. KARLSTROM: So here you come in Los Angeles, when? What year?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Probably -- let's see, the daughter was born in '65, '67, maybe, around that time.

DR. KARLSTROM: You settled in L.A. Where did you first settle?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, first we stayed at his parents' house in Hollywood Hills for a couple of months. So his father decided that he had to help us because -- I don't know, he knew Michael always had problem making money or finding jobs or whatever, so he helped us to find an apartment in Echo Park.

So we settled in Echo Park, and they were helping us for a while until we would get settled, whatever it was. So then Michael started working in some factory, I think he was working for a while. Then what's next? I still wasn't working in ceramics.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, I was going to ask you about that. All of this time, then, your last professional art job, I guess, was back teaching at the Catholic school. After your big opportunity of studying --

MRS. FRIMKESS: In America.

DR. KARLSTROM: Right, and in having a show. Did you ever have that show?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, never had it. Mrs. Poindexter, I remember her name, she invited me for lunch one day and she said I should wait here more, for another year.

DR. KARLSTROM: So for all of that effort, basically then still it was eluding you. You know, you weren't able really to grasp on to that career.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I went all the way bottom up. So what happened? Oh, then Michael started having problems with his legs, I think.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh.

MRS. FRIMKESS: So he decided it probably was because he left his girlfriend in New York.

DR. KARLSTROM: No!

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes. So he decided to move to New York to see his other girlfriend.

DR. KARLSTROM: You mean it was like psychosomatic.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Whatever it was. And then we end up on welfare. Well, his parents had stopped helping us now by that time.

DR. KARLSTROM: You mean he went to New York or you all went to New York?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, no. He went by himself.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, I guess so. Right. Okay. What did he find when he went there?

MRS. FRIMKESS: He couldn't live without us. So after three months, he came back here again.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was the girlfriend there, or was she married?

MRS. FRIMKESS: She was there.

DR. KARLSTROM: She wasn't with somebody else?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No. He is lucky with women, I guess. [Laughs.] I don't know. So he couldn't live with us, so he came back.

DR. KARLSTROM: Couldn't live without you, you mean.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, with the daughter, too. So we were living in Echo Park in that time. He was having still problem with his legs, so he couldn't figure out what it was. So when he came back, a doctor, friend of a lady who ordered him throw amphoras, he started working in ceramics in the garage there, and her husband was a doctor. And he suspected it could be something more complicated, so he told him to go to the hospital, and then they found out it was MS.

So since that day, his parents changed all around and started to help us, since he came back and all that. So they found a studio.

DR. KARLSTROM: Here in Venice.

MRS. FRIMKESS: In Venice.

DR. KARLSTROM: The one from which you moved to this place.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right. So that was the beginning of the ceramic collaboration. Well, we still collaborated a little bit in New York, but not as much as serious work in the studio. With the help of his father.

DR. KARLSTROM: So they were supportive.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes, very much. They bought this house so he didn't have to walk around and drive around, so it would be convenient for him to work in the studio.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so that was like in the late --

MRS. FRIMKESS: '70s. Like '71, I think.

DR. KARLSTROM: And you moved to this place when? What year? This house?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Let's see. Louisa is 35, so 30 years we've been here.

DR. KARLSTROM: '71?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, that's the time we moved here, then.

DR. KARLSTROM: First, though, you lived in the other studio, across on Abbott Kinney?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, they arranged everything at the same time. They rented the studio. That was rented. And they bought the house.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, you had the house here anyway, and the studio was there. Is that right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right.

DR. KARLSTROM: Now you're here, and the studio is over there, you've got this house, and then the new phase begins.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes.

[SESSION 3: TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Just to reiterate, you actually trained as an artist, a sculptor, and you were in South America, and you came to New York briefly. You had studied, actually, with some -- I guess they were Fulbright professors who came down to one school, in particular, but at any rate, while you were studying. Now, tell me again where it was.

MRS. FRIMKESS: The Catholic University of Chile. And there were three teachers from the Fulbright, from Yale. Two from Yale University; another one wasn't. That's the one who got me the scholarship to come here.

DR. KARLSTROM: And to come to New York.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Paul Harris.

DR. KARLSTROM: Which is where you --

MRS. FRIMKESS: Met Michael.

DR. KARLSTROM: -- met Michael, which began a whole another adventure.

At any rate, we did talk about your then coming to Los Angeles, this area, being set up in several different places but then ending up here in this home after the loss, I guess, of another studio across the way. Is that right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so you consolidated everything here. What year was that, again, just to remind us?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Probably in '80 or '81, because they charged too much there. Michael told you about that?

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, we did talk about that. So that really changed your life. It concentrated everything right here in this place.

MRS. FRIMKESS: That was another earthquake here, because his father died, we lost all the supply, money-wise, I mean. I have panic in my background about money. And before, his father was supporting us. His father was gone. I felt like all the responsibility was on me, and I wasn't able to. Then my son came with his wife from Chile. So I felt really very tight.

DR. KARLSTROM: At a loss.

MRS. FRIMKESS: At a loss. That's when Garth Clark showed up. Fred Marer brought him because I told him -- I was kind of friend with Fred -- "Look where we are now. No money, no show, no--" -- we used to have sales, with his father. So he said, "Okay, I'm going to send Garth Clark here because he knows the world, maybe we can help you." So he came by here. So that was another stage of the life because I fell in love with him, so it was a tragedy here too again. Then I went through breakdown, and my son and my daughter were living here. It was chaos for many years. I didn't know what it was. So it was very bad.

DR. KARLSTROM: So there was a personal connection with Garth Clark as well as the business connection; is that right? I mean, you became friends?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, not really, because he just offered the first show. That was it. We made 12,000. So Michael invested in making a second floor there and that was it. Then after that, he abandoned us. He didn't want to help us anymore.

DR. KARLSTROM: The reason I was asking that is that Michael felt very much abandoned. I think that was the term he used. That expectations were raised by Garth Clark, and the potential, the possibility for having good representation and getting the work out there and getting sales. And this did happen for a while; isn't that true? I mean, there was a period of time when he was selling work for you guys?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, he only took care of the one show, and that was it. I don't remember he did any more.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, do you have any idea why he sort of went cold on something that he was enthusiastic about? Didn't he tell you, "Oh, this is wonderful"?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, we lost touch with him completely almost. After the show, we just used to get advertising for the next show that was coming up and that was it that I remember, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was he operating in his gallery here in Los Angeles at the time?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, Wilshire. Yeah, it still was there.

DR. KARLSTROM: Because then he ended up, I think, on LaBrea for a while. He probably had several galleries. Well, anyway, he disappeared.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. Well, he didn't disappear, but, I mean, he didn't help us anymore.

DR. KARLSTROM: And you have no idea why?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, no. Maybe he was -- who knows? No, I don't know.

DR. KARLSTROM: How did you deal with that? I mean, it must have been very discouraging --

MRS. FRIMKESS: Very, very. It was.

DR. KARLSTROM: -- for you as a couple and with your family.

MRS. FRIMKESS: It was very rough time for years, I think.

DR. KARLSTROM: So what happened then? I mean, how did you move on and manage?

MRS. FRIMKESS: After that I think people started coming around, some friends, some bought pots. Friends used to come around, and private people used to come around and --

DR. KARLSTROM: Collectors?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Collectors, you can call it.

DR. KARLSTROM: I mean, did they come and buy?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, they come and buy things. So that's the way we made it. People used to come and buy things, individuals.

DR. KARLSTROM: But you had no gallery representation.

MRS. FRIMKESS: No.

DR. KARLSTROM: You weren't really being promoted. The work was not being promoted.

MRS. FRIMKESS: No.

DR. KARLSTROM: You just dealt from your house, from here.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Right. Until another guy showed up, Lee Spider [sp]. I forgot his name.

DR. KARLSTROM: Lee Spider?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Maybe I'm not pronouncing the right name. He has a gallery in Malibu. So he did very well with us. We used to have food stamps at that time because we had little money, so then it started trouble with the Social Security because they saw that we were making too much money. And then Michael was declared -- whatever it is. They were going to take the Social Security. Oh, he collected Social Security in those times, but only for him, very little money. So they were going to cut it off because we were making too much money in this gallery in Malibu.

DR. KARLSTROM: They said you can't do both. You can't have this income and then still --

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. And then they decided that we were very wealthy and we were cheating.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh. So what happened?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, then he went to court. He will tell you more about that.
He went to court because then, the law, they decided that the art is worth nothing until there's a buyer for it. It doesn't matter if we have a thousand dollars or millions here, if nobody buys it, it's not income. So that what was what the court decided. So he got absolved.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you won.

MRS. FRIMKESS: He won. Yeah. He won.

DR. KARLSTROM: But that must have taken a lot of time.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, yeah, the whole year, because when he takes something, he really takes it, you know him. So for a whole year I was hearing that thing, that thing. So it was a torture.

DR. KARLSTROM: This must have put a lot of --

MRS. FRIMKESS: Pressure.

DR. KARLSTROM: -- pressure and tension on the family.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, yeah. Everywhere. So I forgot how long that was. It was for quite a while. So after that, we were afraid to sell anything because you know you will get caught and then that's a balance that you don't know how to keep it. I don't know how this is going to work now with this show, that we will start selling again.

DR. KARLSTROM: This show, you mean, in Korea?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, no, this one -- the last one, that Magdalene organized.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, at Stern [“Vessels of Satire: The Art of Magdalena and Michael Frimkess,” 2000, Louis Stern Fine Arts, East Hollywood, CA].

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And that sold pretty well? Work sold?

MRS. FRIMKESS: A little bit, yeah, more or less.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, I mean, people do sell work, and there's a way to make it okay.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, now they have a new law that you can allow making a little bit more money even if you are in Social Security, I think.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, let's talk about your collaboration with Michael, because this is something not everybody knows, that you two actually have worked very much as a team, as a collaboration. In other words, you've done, as I understand it, much of the surface decoration, the painting on these vessels, on these pots. When did that start?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, it's been since we met, I guess.

DR. KARLSTROM: From the very beginning.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, because in New York, like I say, I still needed to do something, so he used to have little studios around there and he brings little pots and I used to decorate the little pots, but with low fire, different temperature. And we used to put it in little stores and sell it. But the full time was when his father found that place. That was the main thing, that we started really full time.

DR. KARLSTROM: Now, you were mainly a sculptor, though.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I know, but for practical reasons, I had to --

DR. KARLSTROM: So you had to paint. And one of the famous things about the Frimkess pots is the nature of some of the decoration, which would draw on popular culture. Popular culture, perhaps cartoons, movie characters, Mickey Mouse, perhaps, but anyway, aspects of contemporary life and entertainment on these friezes that would go around the pots, which is very much the classical Greek way of decorating.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, I got that from -- easy comes, easy goes. I mean, it was easy to paint those things.

DR. KARLSTROM: But how did that idea come up?

MRS. FRIMKESS: I cannot even explain you how it came out. Everyday thing, the struggle in my life, I painted, you see. That's my escape.

DR. KARLSTROM: So was this your idea, though? You're the one who chose the --

MRS. FRIMKESS: I always choose my things. But Michael painted the cartoons too, so it's an influence all over, too.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you were both doing this at the same time, or were you basically picking up what he had already begun in terms of choosing the subjects to decorate?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, I think he chose first because he did it a long time. He started Superman and all those guys. Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: But you were not just trying to continue his subjects, his images?

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, I saw they were mine. I saw they were mine. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: And so you expanded the repertory.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Probably.

DR. KARLSTROM: You introduced some new subjects.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: You weren't just imitating those that he had already established.

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, I tried to do not what he did or something. My own things.

DR. KARLSTROM: Describe some of your favorite subjects that you liked to paint.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, I started copying the Mexicans first, I think. That was the one thing I used to do, copying the Aztecs and all those, because I felt more familiar with my culture. I tried to give something of myself. So I started making cartoons with the Aztecs, making it to the nowadays. And then, without knowing, came everything then, came the Mickey Mouse and came the Snow White, came everybody, so they were all mixed up.

DR. KARLSTROM: But the Mickey Mouses and Snow Whites were things that you chose.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, yeah, for the particular day that I was working on, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, did you and Michael talk about how to decorate these?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Never. We don't talk. We really don't talk. I'll be crazy if I talk to him. So I avoid.

DR. KARLSTROM: Even about the work?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, less. Never. Like we talk about the dog, the food, never about even the glaze. First time I started working with the glaze, he said, "You figure it out." He didn't help me.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did you figure it out?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, I did.

DR. KARLSTROM: How did you do that?

MRS. FRIMKESS: I don't know. Just trial and error, you know. And he has a kiln there, so there were a lot of facilities. So, "There's the glaze, and you figure it out." That's all.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so how many years did this working relationship go on?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, 30 years.

DR. KARLSTROM: Thirty years. And in a regular basis, certainly since you moved into the new studio; is that right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Here in Los Angeles.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, that was the full time because we had deadlines and all that, twice a year. So it was a lot of production. So I learned there how to paint very fast.

DR. KARLSTROM: And when was it you moved into the studio across the way?

MRS. FRIMKESS: There? When we moved to Venice. Let's see, Louisa is 35. Like 33 years, I think, we are being in Venice, yeah, in the studio.

DR. KARLSTROM: And so certainly from that time, you regularly have been working as a collaborator on the making of these vessels.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Oh, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, Michael earlier said that for 20 years he hadn't been doing his art, making his art. Is that really true?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, his view, you know, he used to be famous for these ginger jars that he paints all the stories and all that, and he did the last one before we moved here. So, since we moved here, his father wasn't around to push him doing it, to force him to do it or something. He has to have a big motivation to do it. The Korea thing did it, in a way, and Magdalene [Mills], too, forced him to work. And this is what I'm happy about because otherwise he'd drive me nuts. He needs to do something.

DR. KARLSTROM: So after his father died and you were established --

MRS. FRIMKESS: I think it's my point of view he found excuse to not get involved in the painting anymore. I don't

know his reason why, behind. He blames Garth Clark and all that. I don't know.

DR. KARLSTROM: But did he continue to make these vessels?

MRS. FRIMKESS: He still throws. So [he's] keeping me busy, I guess.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, so he provided, then, the canvas for you to paint on.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah. At least it kept me busy, in a way.

DR. KARLSTROM: But with these new shows, like the one at Louis Stern Gallery, which Magdalene Mills helped organize, and then you have one coming up in Korea -- is that right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: When will that be?

MRS. FRIMKESS: In August. That's the one he's working on.

DR. KARLSTROM: And before that, he had no motivation.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Not really. I think it's lack of motivation, maybe. He felt like everybody was putting him -- I don't know if he believes it or not. He saw all my work, and he totally was resented to me that I did the work and he didn't. So who knows?

DR. KARLSTROM: And you talked with him, or at least tried to get him to -- you'd say, "Michael, why aren't you --"

MRS. FRIMKESS: Never. I did a few times. Forget it. Not even his mother can talk to him. Nobody. Everybody give up.

DR. KARLSTROM: During this time, was that when he really started to focus more on music? Because he was very wrapped up in his music.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I know.

DR. KARLSTROM: And it, frankly, sounds to me almost as if it became a substitute for making the work for which he was better known.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Mm-hm. Right.

DR. KARLSTROM: And did that happen at about the same time? Did he pour himself into his music when he wasn't making his vessels, making the pots?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, part of. Yeah. But he did music before, too. He was playing the saxophone all the way, all the time. So it's nothing new.

DR. KARLSTROM: No, I understand that.

MRS. FRIMKESS: So sometimes I think it's an excuse. I tell him, is it excuse or you cannot paint? Because now he has proved that he has time for both.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MRS. FRIMKESS: And instead of bugging me or everybody bugging, he has to be busy. Some motivation or something.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, this is a good thing, then, that he's busy.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I'm for it. Even the challenge is good too, sometimes, you know, because we have to be challenged, in a way, everybody. And Magdalene organizing was good too, you see.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah. We're talking about Magdalene Mills, who is a student at Cal State Fullerton.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And who took as her master's degree project, I think, kind of a documentary about you guys, about the Frimkesses. And so she ended up spending quite a bit of time doing interviews and some video, mostly audio, all of which are now in the Archives of American Art. But the main point here is that she helped

arrange the show with the Louis Stern.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, that started the whole thing.

DR. KARLSTROM: Which is very important. It sounds to me as if it's very important because it revived the working.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yes.

DR. KARLSTROM: What about your observations on Michael's relationships with other artists? I mean, I know that you recently, with Magdalene, I think, went to the Peter Voulkos opening, which was only a few weeks ago.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And I'd be interested to hear, you know, what happened there, if there was anything interesting from the standpoint of --

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, for me, you know, that's not my group because I didn't grow up with them.

DR. KARLSTROM: So you didn't really know any of these people.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Only slightly that I met him once. So this is not my group, really, because he is friend, right? They grew up and all that. So when I came there, I just said this looked like a school reunion. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Did you talk with anybody there?

MRS. FRIMKESS: A little. I tried to, but everybody seemed so tense. I don't know why.

DR. KARLSTROM: Really?

MRS. FRIMKESS: It's funny, in a way, from me looking through. Magdalene was next to me, so she started talking with this fellow next to her. I don't know who he was. And I asked Bacerra, who was next to me --

DR. KARLSTROM: Who?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Bacerra, Ralph Bacerra. I didn't know him. He introduced himself. We didn't know each other. So he was sitting next to me. And I started asking him who is everybody because I don't know who's who. So he told me this, this, this, this. Okay. But it's hard to recognize people by names the first time you've seen them.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did you talk to Pete? Did you say hi to Pete?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Well, yeah, I make a line to try to get to him, and Magdalene told me to use Paul Soldner. He didn't even recognize me either, so I had to be introduced to people.

DR. KARLSTROM: So Soldner was there?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, in back of Pete. So Soldner took me to Pete. He was sitting there signing autographs to everybody. So I told him that I was Michael's wife, so he said how Michael was and all that. Told him Michael cannot move around too well. He said, "Well, I cannot either, but I -- sit down."

DR. KARLSTROM: Who, Pete said that?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, I don't think it's quite the same.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Probably. So that was the only time. Then we went to the dinner, so he was sitting far away, so I didn't see him again.

DR. KARLSTROM: At one time Michael really had quite a bit of attention for his work, in which you either were involved or were becoming involved as a collaborator. After you came here back to L.A., did you do much socializing at all with the other artists, say around Venice, you know, Ken Price and all these other ceramic people, [John] Mason?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Never. Once when I came to Los Angeles, he introduced -- he took me to everybody's house. I met Mason, McCloud, all of them, few of them, just for a visit to introduce. And then there were a couple of dinners that somebody organized -- I forget his name, another artist who lives in Venice -- for a barbecue, and we went to that when we were in the gallery of Lee Spider, when we were selling and all that. So they invited us

to a dinner and he went a couple of times, and that was it. But they don't come here. I feel bad. It's weird, to me. I don't know. I like to more --

DR. KARLSTROM: Socialize.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Socialize, yeah, I do. So I use the church for socializing. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, do you think that this was something that Michael really wasn't seeking, or did you sense that he was seeking to reconnect with other artists, other ceramists, other people in the field?

MRS. FRIMKESS: I cannot tell you because I never saw them interchange, you see. I just only heard he complains about the others that they don't appreciate him. But he has talked so much complicated things that I don't know which one is the truth. So it's very difficult for me.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, did he ever suggest, "Oh, we really ought to call up and try to get together with so and so?"

MRS. FRIMKESS: I said.

DR. KARLSTROM: You had said.

MRS. FRIMKESS: Even family dinners. We have a dinner for his cousin this Saturday. He said, "No, you go, I don't go."

DR. KARLSTROM: It's sort of hard for him now, isn't it, though, to go out?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, I guess so. But it's hard for me to take it too that he's not going --

DR. KARLSTROM: I mean, if I invited him to go to dinner right here in Venice, he would probably say no; right?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Of course not. He cannot go because he has his own diet, special food that he doesn't eat.

DR. KARLSTROM: But does he sometimes? Like, did he go to the opening at Louis Stern?

MRS. FRIMKESS: He did. If it's really important, he goes.

DR. KARLSTROM: It's not just the MS and his diet.

MRS. FRIMKESS: No, no, no, no. He can do it. He goes sometimes to Thanksgiving dinner and for Christmas with the family. I tried. I'm his wife, and everybody's given up. I wish he would more see the other world, you know? He's not the only disabled [person] in the whole word, you know? It's filled with people with disability, and they move around, and they socialize and all that. So I don't understand anyhow. But he wants to find the excuse that he only cares for meditation, you know. I say uh-huh, don't give me that. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: How much do you think the meditation has perhaps been a factor in his thinking about art? Can you tell at all?

MRS. FRIMKESS: Yeah, for him I think it helps a great deal with the MS, yes, because he says the tingling in the feet got better with the MS. Well, that's part of the MS, part of the life in the art, too, you know. He probably feels that his main thing is his health. The rest is secondary. So that's probably why. But he could do it now that he feels better.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, let's hope that with this rekindled interest in art, that that then will be therapeutic too.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I think so. It's been, in a way, because I told you he stopped bothering me. When he's not working, he finds one way or the other to bother me. You know, nagging. Nagging. He gives nagging because he feels rejected or he doesn't go out, he doesn't interchange with people, so he gets nutty too, locked up here 24 hours, going nowhere. It's not healthy, I don't think.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, maybe that will begin to change.

MRS. FRIMKESS: I hope so.

[SESSION 3: TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Michael is our subject once again.

Well, Michael, in our earlier conversations, we covered the earlier period. And we talked about how you were

forced to set up everything here. You moved into this place, built a studio here.

We talked a little bit about galleries and dealers. You did talk about Garth Clark and when he appeared and how promising that was. From both you and Magdalena, we talked about it looked as if this was really going to offer a kind of security for you and a kind of promotion of the work. But it lasted for, I guess, one show and then he kind of disappeared. Is that right?

MR. FRIMKESS: I think we were in more than one -- we had one solo or collaborative show for my wife and I, but we were also in a few collaborative shows with them. And during that time, he also had me do an interview with the Canadian Broadcasting System on videotape. It seemed like he was getting -- at that point he was squeezing me dry because I didn't realize, but around that time, he had already decided to let us go.

But then, when it came time to renew the contract, we decided -- I decided not to renew a contract with him. And that was probably the reason that he didn't want to keep working with us, because the contract meant that he would come by and -- I associate it with orders from the boss: "Decorate this, do this, do that. No, you don't have to be in that show. Let that slide." And stuff like that. Those were the only words we would have, I would get from him.

And in many cases I was unable to follow his orders because we didn't have a place to work yet. At first I would try, and I'd have to go -- once the piece was finished, we were already out of his gallery, and if I did get it completed for his gallery, I would have had to do the same thing, go to someone else and fire it. It was very hard for me to haul it in the car and go somewhere else and have it finished. In both cases, to get the piece done for the Smithsonian traveling exhibition show, that was the first thing that I had to get done because he had us curated in that show. This is before we were in the gallery. But he knew at that time that I didn't have the facilities to finish that particular piece, and I had to get it completed in a factory. It's just miserable not having facilities. But to keep up with his --

DR. KARLSTROM: Requirements?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes, requirements. Just it was impossible. Maybe that's why he couldn't understand why I wasn't acting like a normal one under his aegis, normal artist under his -- yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: So that's why you didn't want to sign the contract, with the conditions that were on it?

MR. FRIMKESS: They were a little harsh because he was asking us to do things that we weren't able to do here, and he wasn't seeing that what first we had to do was get a place to use to make the stuff that he would sell. And he didn't know how far away we were, or else he simply wanted to get us up there as high as possible. We went as far as the Anderson Ranch in Colorado before we were out of his gallery, and we were being seen by only 300 at a time at the Anderson Ranch.

And the meeting, summer gatherings up there were pretty important to the ceramic field and the craft fields. And once we were well known to that extent, then he let us drop, right after then. So the high point was the roundtable discussion with Voulkos and Ron Nagle and Rothman and Cornelius and Soldner and Bob -- oh, God, you know, up there in the Bay Area, Bob --

DR. KARLSTROM: Arneson?

MR. FRIMKESS: -- Arneson was there. All the leading California ceramists were around. And that was the high point. And right after Anderson Ranch, we realized that we were through with him.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did Clark help convene that gathering?

MR. FRIMKESS: Oh, yeah. He got close to the curator of the show at the Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York] that included Gilhooly and Price and --

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, they were all in it too?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, but they left me out. So Ron Nagle --

DR. KARLSTROM: You mean at the Whitney show you were left out.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. There was a Whitney show. And that was part of the controversy. One of the things that they wanted to talk about was -- the curator of the Whitney show was there and Garth Clark was there and everyone made speeches. It was near the end of the conference. And of course, I never did have any words with the curator who left me out. I didn't get to know him at all. And Gilhooly wasn't there either at the workshop. But I felt that Voulkos wanted to lean the controversy, the roundtable discussion, argument or whatever toward how come they let all these other guys in, you know, and they didn't curate me into their show. I felt that there was

an inclination toward that subject, which we never touched upon.

DR. KARLSTROM: Were you the only one in the group at the Anderson Ranch who had been left out of --

MR. FRIMKESS: No. No.

DR. KARLSTROM: Others were left out as well.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: And you're talking about a previous show at the Whitney, right?

MR. FRIMKESS: Yes. It was the leading ceramists, students of Voulkos, or some type -- I don't remember. Some of them felt that I shouldn't have been left out. Some of them felt I should have been left out. But the subject didn't get around to that. And what Garth Clark wanted to focus on, I remember very clearly, was content of art. Content. And I think he wanted to bring out my philosophy at that point, at the roundtable discussion, to the 300 people that were attending so that we could get into something serious of why it would be self-explanatory why I should have necessarily been left out of a show of that caliber at the Whitney, although the Smithsonian showed my work in the traveling exhibition. It was going on during that time, actually. But to be in the Whitney, I couldn't be in there because of content.

But there wasn't that controversy either. I didn't get worked up on it. They knew me as a rabble-rouser, most of the Bay Area ceramists, my contemporaries when I was up there studying, when Voulkos had me up there learning to cast bronze. I wasn't studying at the university. He had me there as an auditor so he could teach me bronze, and probably also to sell the studio I was in to John Mason, to get me out of there because I was beginning to make -- I was working regularly as a landscape laborer and coming home and doing my second job in ceramics, and that got me into some -- there was a couple of shows curated by Walter Hopps and Richard Ruben, were there one day when I came home from work.

They were in my studio. I don't know how they got in there except that Ken Price and Billy Al Bengston had it just before me, and they might have got the key from them or the landlord. They were in my locked studio when I got back from work.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was that in Venice?

MR. FRIMKESS: No, this was in L.A., around Echo Park and Hoover Street.

But the point I was trying to make is that if I would leave that studio and go up there and cast bronze, well, then I wouldn't have that successful role that I was on continuing, but I would learn to cast bronze and then go in another route. Who knows? Maybe it would help me or maybe they could get rid of me. I don't know. Or maybe he wanted genuinely to get me to learn to cast bronze, and then my next step was to go back to New York to the Clay Arts Center.

But getting back to the seminar at the Anderson Ranch, I did not have anything to say around that roundtable discussion because I had learned to use the I Ching. I had been doing the I Ching every day, once I started in with the I Ching and found it so fascinating. When I was up there, I would throw the coins every morning as usual, but I've never had an occurrence like that before, that so many times the coins would direct me to the Oracle Number 1, the creative. Most of the time, it kept telling me, the I Ching, the oracle kept telling me over and over and over, "Arrogant dragon will have cause to repent."

Now, being an "arrogant dragon," you know, and being a number one, that was a compliment from the oracle, first of all, to tell me what was my day going to be like today. I would ask every morning. Number one, it would give me, you're the creative kind of guy, but don't be -- I took it as an admonition not to be arrogant or I would regret later. Not to fix my thoughts so high, I mean objectives so high that I would have a tremendous fall.

But arrogant dragon didn't necessarily mean arrogance. I misinterpreted arrogance for just being meek. What arrogance truly is -- I mean, to be not arrogant would be not to be meek but be forthright and to come out and make the conversation. And it was telling me that you're being too meek, you're not showing your mind, you're not expressing. I was afraid to say anything because I was afraid to come across as being arrogant, you know. [Laughs.] And I kept getting that same oracle in the morning. And I had to do a lot more I Ching before I realized how my interpretations were so off center, you know, off the meaning that the oracle was trying to communicate to me.

DR. KARLSTROM: But do you think that that behavior of yours has been pretty typical throughout your career? I mean in terms of acting with the art world, do you feel that in some ways, for whatever reason, you've held back?

MR. FRIMKESS: I only got involved with the art world itself when I became a part of the community in the Bay Area, with Melchert, Jim Melchert and Ron Nagle; and Voulkos was up there and Richard Shaw. I got to know all my colleagues there. Prior to that, I had no gallery. I got in a show once in a while. I was drafted into a few shows. I never went to any coffee shop and sat around with a bunch of colleagues.

I would go to Barney's Beanery when I was in that area, but I wasn't going there for any philosophical ideal like they would have gone for, reasons like van Gogh and Gauguin used to sit around drinking absinthe. I was sitting around drinking beer. I was just dreaming about beer all the time. Beer, beer, beer, and being around pretty girls. You know, it wasn't anything like that. The only time I got into the artist community, the first time was in the Bay Area. And at that time, I was a rabble-rouser.

DR. KARLSTROM: You were what?

MR. FRIMKESS: A rabble-rouser. Everyone just wanted me to sit back in the car and shut up, you know. Melchert would take only so much of me. Like my driving up to the Trinity County when we were in Boyle Heights. My sister and I were in the back seat and I'd be trying to sing with her or something. My dad would lean over the front seat and say, "Will you shut up!" It's like that. You know, it was a problem that was causing a lot of trouble there.

I was still 22, 23, and I wasn't the type of guy that would have a turn for listening. Nobody, in fact, was that sophisticated around that time. The problem was that we were scared about the atomic potential. The cold war was getting hotter. And I was worried about having a world left for my daughter, who I wasn't allowed to see anymore, but I felt that it was important that an artist should give part of their time toward ensuring that there would be a world left out there.

It was the wrong thing to do for those guys. They were more interested in doing stuff that was unique and beautiful, and I was more interested in basically doing the same thing, but once in a while having it unique, beautiful, and also redeemable for mankind. Not in every case, but since I was the only one that was thinking that way, it ended up in every case. I got locked into that position because no one was going to allow some of it to bleed off. You know, I was under pressure.

DR. KARLSTROM: So do you think that to a certain extent created a distance between you and some of your other colleagues that might not have existed --

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. You know Bob Rasmussen, don't you?

DR. KARLSTROM: No.

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. Well, he was going along with me. You know, he felt the need for that attitude. Bob -- you have to help me with his name again.

DR. KARLSTROM: Arneson?

MR. FRIMKESS: Arneson. Arnie. Arnie. Why? Why? We were all working together in the same place, and Arneson was getting kind of militant about -- everybody, most of my colleagues had been veterans, and of course I didn't go through that. But Rasmussen seemed to be on my side and we did kind of faction off, although he wasn't 100 percent going to go along with me and have a show together and do some social commentary. He wasn't about to do that.

DR. KARLSTROM: Let's talk a little bit about the possible political and social commentary in your work or on your work, if you will, of that dimension because it keeps coming up as something that matters to you. And you've talked quite a bit about the idea of the melting pot, which, of course, is a great metaphor because you're making pots. But then you have this philosophical image of the melting pot and ideas about America. And I gather that in some ways your work, for you, could be viewed as a critique of modern America, that this is very much or at least a big part of what it's about. Is that true?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, you know, basically what I see is that if there's going to be peace in the world, there's going to have to be examples set for all of mankind, and that we have an opportunity in America to do that, to make an example for peace in the world among all the ethnics out there. That if the melting pot did become a reality, then the whole world would work and there would be peace. So it isn't exactly a critique; it's just that if you imagine in the future that -- as you see we're getting more relaxed about interracial marriage in the country.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. FRIMKESS: And when I started in 1960 thinking that way, it was maybe a critique because there wasn't -- when I started, you know, this attitude that carried through with my work, there were still black and white

bathrooms, you see. And coming from an interracial neighborhood in East L.A., it was very clear to me that, you know, I saw things from the point of view of the only pink-eye in the whole neighborhood for 15 years, and so I saw things from those guys' eyes, and I was boiling inside, seething inside. You know, I was under pressure and I had to let it out, and it came out in the art. And my folks raised me to do something like that anyway, in a sense. They gave me these thoughts --

DR. KARLSTROM: Values.

MR. FRIMKESS: Values, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: How did these values and ideas reveal themselves on the work? Was it in the choice of the decorations?

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. Okay. I'll be succinct as possible and not beat around the bush. I noticed that Arneson, for example, as a later example, there would be lots of artists that would depict a beautiful atomic explosion, but I took another tack, in that I would say: What is the main problem? It always goes back to the way I grew up. Wouldn't it be possible for eventually the United States to be so intermarried that we would be able to reduce the population? The main thing, from my perspective, is overpopulation. *Silent Spring*, Rachel Carson's book, made me realize the resources, natural resources. And who knows, you know, once we take that last drop of oil out of the Earth, that the size of the Earth might shrink in those areas and that might cause the Earth to tilt or something. [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay, but, you know, we're talking about your ideas, yes, and your concerns and your values, but the question is, how, specifically --

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. I figure in order to get that across, take birth control, same thing as saying atomic explosion. No. To create, to think of a way that you could actually guarantee there would be peace in the world. Of course, where you look around, the Mormons got this idea where they can have as many wives as they want, and then in the Bible it's okay. You know, all of those. And Muslims, you know, if you're wealthy enough, you can have a palace in every city and 75 wives.

DR. KARLSTROM: Right.

MR. FRIMKESS: So what's the matter with having more than one wife? Well, it might be a saving. Of course, it's an impossibility, I know that, but the idea would be foolproof if there were four adults and only three children per family. And that would cause implosion. So that was what I'm getting at, in other words, without beating around the bush, my winning idea that I would express on all my works of ceramics, my major works, would be Uncle Sam would have three wives. And he would be Anglo, he would have a black wife, he would have an Oriental wife and he would have an American Indian wife or Mexican, and they'd have three kids and that was it. I'm sure you've read that in some of my writings. I've brought it up a little bit. And that would be the example. That's the idea, the winning idea.

DR. KARLSTROM: Shrinking.

MR. FRIMKESS: That we would shrink the population and, through love, just put all our ethnic pride and all that stuff in a museum and forget about it and just go ahead with pure human minds as they come out without regard to what color they were, and just starting out with equal education and squeeze the true genius out of the resulting population without any regard to how it came out of an ethnic group. You know, "Einstein was a Jew, you know. I'm a Jew," and stuff like that.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. It's pretty clear what your beliefs are on this. What is it specifically that people would see in your work? You mentioned the Uncle Sam. And so some of your works have the Uncle Sam with the three wives. What would be some other images that would carry these ideas?

MR. FRIMKESS: Another image I would use is the interracial space crew. I didn't get too much recognition about that. In the '60s, I would say, okay, we're getting to space; we're going to have some interracial space crews; all those guys can't always be English, German, or Irish, you know? [Laughs.] There's going to have --Some of them are going to have to be of different ethnic groups, you know. And some have to be women, as well.

[SESSION 3: TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

DR. KARLSTROM: You were describing some specific iconography or imagery that you chose to pictorially represent some of your beliefs about society. And you said you had another interesting one.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. I have the war of the gods, where Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, the Indian one, Krishna, Buddha, then the only one I could find from South America was -- what's his -- I call it -- you better turn the tape

off.

DR. KARLSTROM: No, it doesn't matter.

MR. FRIMKESS: They're all having -- they've all got their spirit swords locked in the center of the image. They all struck out, and they can't get their swords removed. And that represents what's going on in Heaven. I put that on the lid of a pot for the one jumping at the Moon Lodge, when they turn the Moon into a summer resort. They have the enclosure, the resort enclosure where they go up there for recreation. And they look out the window, and by golly, there's all the gods from the planet Earth engaged in a battle up there in Heaven. And they can see them engaged just like they are down there on Earth, you know, as it occurs in Heaven, you know, in the Lord's Prayer. The same thing is happening up there. And that's what's happening, I guess, and making evident what we can't get around down on Earth. And that's another image I have.

I have the Adventures of Uncle Sam running through most of my -- I'm having an update. I'm doing my first work of art in 20 years now for the show in Korea, and I'm going to visit back with Uncle Sam. He's sitting down this time. His son is half-black. He's wearing his hat now. [Laughs.] And poor Uncle Sam is just sitting on the ground, happy as the dickens because his daughter with the Japanese wife just got her Ph.D. I don't know what she got it in exactly yet, but they're celebrating. She's in her 30s and she's got a Ph.D., you know.

DR. KARLSTROM: The daughter? What color is she?

MR. FRIMKESS: She's half-Anglo, half-Oriental. And she's getting her degree. Uncle Sam, Jr., he's head of the whole goddarn country, you know. He's wearing the Uncle Sam hat now. I guess he'd be something like if Colin Powell won the presidency. I guess that's what it would represent today.

DR. KARLSTROM: One of my questions, of course, is where the ideas come from, how you get the ideas.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, it's the melting pot idea.

DR. KARLSTROM: So this is becoming quite clear that certainly all or most of your decoration in some way connects to these concerns.

MR. FRIMKESS: Oh, it's a main concern. From the way I see it, it's happening over and over and over, more and more and more. The more they're making room for cows and cutting down the rain forests and limiting the range of the indigenous species all over the world and using gorillas and chimpanzees for bush meat and stuff like that; the more we're doing that, the less the weather is going to know where to go. It's going to be flooding all over the joint.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, you're an environmentalist, among other things, it would seem to me. And that comes through your work.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, I'm a militant environmentalist. And I'm also militant that I like to see another artist use his creative ability to come up with an idea that's better than having Uncle Sam have three wives and limiting the family to three children.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. What are the similarities and differences between your early work and recent work? You had a break, you say, of about 20 years where you feel that you haven't been actively producing work. Now, with that show at Louis Stern and now the show that's coming up in Korea in August you have needed to go back to work, and that includes, presumably, some decoration, you know, painting of the vessels, which Magdalena has done a lot of for many years.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, that means I'm throwing.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. FRIMKESS: I'm not throwing now. I'm not being a potter.

DR. KARLSTROM: No?

MR. FRIMKESS: No. With a deadline, what I wanted to do before Magdalene -- I don't know if you want to enter her name -- somebody came along --

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, we've already talked about her, Magdalene Mills.

MR. FRIMKESS: She got me off the track. I was going to do it right this time. I had a deadline. This time I wanted to be throwing and taking my time and doing everything, firing and throwing. But after she came along, all that got upset because she got us involved with an exhibition and turned my schedule upside down, got me to fire a

kiln a month ahead of time, where I was going to do it on my own speed in another month, which would have included being a potter and getting this major work done.

But now, after what we just went through, another problem was that I was also getting my teeth worked on by UCLA, and that was several days, and weeks sometimes, out of a month. So my schedule was completely interrupted, and now I'm just doing like the stupid old thing I used to have to do at the old studio. I thought I knew how to get around better and still fire and throw and have her decorate my pots and that would keep rolling along. Well, she hasn't had a new pot to decorate since --

DR. KARLSTROM: So are you beginning to throw again now?

MR. FRIMKESS: No. It's all had to -- my throwing muscles, I'm very worried about the atrophy.

DR. KARLSTROM: Because of the MS.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. I'm very worried. Because of the show and because of the dental problems of UCLA –

DR. KARLSTROM: I want to make sure I have this straight. This period of, like, 20 years where you haven't been actively producing, what aspect of the work were you doing?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, the only thing during this last 20 years, once we didn't have a gallery and I had to take a little job with the City of Los Angeles to make a little extra money because Social Security, I had to go and sit in the welfare line and do that right after we lost the gallery. All that I could manage was the exercises to maintain my health, which is number one, and build and set up, set up, set up, set up. And work for the city teaching a little bit, to little black kids.

I got to be so well known for the city, the Cultural Affairs Department, that the City of Los Angeles School Systems went there to see if they had a guy like me, and they drafted me to teach middle school all of a sudden one semester. I also taught in the city school system for a semester. But all that time, it was just I was doing my service. I was being dragged around here and there, and there wasn't any work of my own being done. The only thing I could do was set up. I would do a little throwing, and she would be able to keep decorating.

DR. KARLSTROM: Okay. This 20-year period, I'm trying to get a sense of it.

MR. FRIMKESS: The studio was set up by Michael Cardew. We were there nine years. It was a studio already to go. And it was three times the size. I made very few alterations there. I built a couple of kilns in there.

DR. KARLSTROM: But I can't get a sense of what was involved in this 20-year period. You describe a period where you really weren't working, is what you said. On the other hand, it sounds to me as if some work was being done, because Magdalena had surfaces to decorate.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, I consider myself really a potter. The thing I love to do, more than decorating, is to throw pots. That's what I really love to do.

DR. KARLSTROM: And that's what you really weren't able to do during this time, very much.

MR. FRIMKESS: No. I haven't been able to do anything other than setting up a place that I can throw pots and decorate. I like to do that too. That's where the big bucks come in if I can get one of those pots decorated like they have at the Smithsonian. But just the time hasn't allowed because of the 6-1/2 hours of exercise I do every day. Then when that's done, then you have to use the time the way you figure will bring the best returns later once they're set up. I've just been building.

DR. KARLSTROM: So now, though, with the incentive of these shows, you obviously have to be doing something, because you're having to produce some work for the shows.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, the show that just occurred at Sterns was a collaborative show. It was all her decorations.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah, but who made the pots?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, then I had done a few pretty good shapes, and we still had them around. They weren't the ones that I really wanted to do, but she enjoyed herself. And now I have a deadline, first time for many years, with the show coming up in Korea, and I'm doing it again, a deadline.

DR. KARLSTROM: Who arranged that show?

MR. FRIMKESS: Apparently my name cropped up through Voulkos and Jun Kaneko.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, right.

MR. FRIMKESS: Jun Kaneko apparently; his name came up when Magdalene found out who referred me to this exhibition to be one of the contributors. They recommended that Magdalena and I be contributors. And I think it was either Jun Kaneko-- I think Voulkos remains the boss, I guess.

DR. KARLSTROM: Who else is in the show?

MR. FRIMKESS: I have a list. There are about 20 American artists.

DR. KARLSTROM: So it's a pretty big show.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. It's about 20 American artists, ceramists, and maybe a few more than 20. I think it's more like 20 or 30. I don't know how we got included.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, that's good, though. I mean, obviously some of your colleagues thought that you should be in the show. That's sort of a nice thing.

MR. FRIMKESS: The way they invited us is they assumed that I was a professor. They addressed me as Professor Michael Frimkess.

DR. KARLSTROM: They have respect for artists and professors.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, the first thing the letter said when we got it was, "I'm sorry to inform you." In other words, that was something like a bow, you know? “At this late time, I'm sorry that we're coming at you so late, but we're inviting you to this show.” [Laughs.] It was something like a bow, I figure, you know, being polite. You have to be polite over there.

DR. KARLSTROM: Let's talk just a little bit more about shows and galleries and dealers. I think we have a kind of sketchy idea of some of your early experiences with exhibitions and so forth. You've actually been in lots of exhibitions, and that's all documented and down. But what about your earliest shows? Now, I don't have the date on this, but there was that R. Mutt [R. Mutt Art Gallery, Hollywood, CA] solo show?

MR. FRIMKESS: That was a collaborative show.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, that wasn't a solo show.

MR. FRIMKESS: No. No. It was made to appear a solo show. I was curious about that. Now, the guy, the curator who owned the gallery, Frederick Sauls -- have you ever heard of him? He was a friend of --

DR. KARLSTROM: We may have talked a little bit. How do you spell Sauls?

MR. FRIMKESS: S-a-u-l-s. But he knew Pete Voulkos. Yeah, the gallery was in Hollywood.

DR. KARLSTROM: And when was that?

MR. FRIMKESS: It was in '93, I think.

DR. KARLSTROM: Oh, it's not that long ago.

MR. FRIMKESS: Okay. You want to get into some of the galleries in the '80s? The same guys got me involved in a show, not to involve Magdalena in it the first time. The first time, they wanted me to respond like a normal artist and produce some work to be involved with a show with Jack Farley. And he was around in those days, in the '50s, around the Otis crowd. He was a painter. Still is a painter, a functioning, still operating. And Sauls is gone now. They were both Korean War veterans. But Jack is still around, and Sauls, his purple heart, he got shrapnel. But he knew Voulkos. And for some reason, these guys were always on my case. "Mike, Mike, Mike, why aren't you" -- you know, he's our mutual friend with Llyn Foulkes. Jack Farley and Llyn Foulkes.

And so they always wanted to know, "What's the matter with this guy? Why isn't he keeping up? Why isn't he in the papers a lot like we are?" Of course, Jack isn't in the papers at all. He's an obscure artist. He's a great painter. We were just trying to set him up with our last gallery.

DR. KARLSTROM: You mean with Stern.

MR. FRIMKESS: Stern, yeah. We got him an appointment. I don't know whether he even went in there. But Jack always, and Sauls, twice tried to get me started in a new gallery where my career would help sustain the gallery. And I pooped out both times, I think, because they didn't understand I had to build a facility. I couldn't

just start doing the work. No one could understand that, that I had no facility to do it in, that I wasn't operating the same as we were in the Michael Cardew place. Once we lost the place, I didn't have a place to do it in. If you're a painter, you go out and buy a bunch of paints, get some canvases. The brushes cost a lot of --

DR. KARLSTROM: What about here? Do you have what you need here? Is this an adequate facility?

MR. FRIMKESS: It's almost ready. It's adequate. I have developed differently in this new place. As a result of the move, I've received several blessings in all this horrible 20 years of layoff from my work. I've had technical blessings in the ceramic tool area that I wish I had found when I was younger when I started in the ceramics -- that I had a kiln that would fire in under one hour to stoneware when I was starting out in ceramics, and I had a wheel that I really needed that I could have really used, not the kind that they're selling out there. I had to make these things, the wheel, on my own, and a few other tools. A lot of those tools have been getting developed over the past 20 years, and it's been very difficult to make the progress because there isn't money for investment, there's no money for R&D.

DR. KARLSTROM: So there are really technological developments that are useful for you.

MR. FRIMKESS: Should be useful for the whole profession.

DR. KARLSTROM: Yeah.

MR. FRIMKESS: However, the pressure is impossible. I've demonstrated the fast-firing kiln to a kiln company, and they've wanted to see me stop doing it because, you know, it offered too much competition for the profession. They don't want to see it happen. I've had the same demonstration -- I had the equipment manager from the local clay company here as well to investigate whether it was a marketable item, and everybody's seemed at that point -- we were sabotaged.

DR. KARLSTROM: That's right. We talked about that.

MR. FRIMKESS: I had to get the gas company down here. They just wanted to see me sit back and shut up here again, and this is for technical reasons, not sociological reasons this time.

The potter's wheel is something we didn't get into. It's been a million years and tremendous amount of money just down the drain, as far as Maggie's concerned, because every time I'd get a big chunk of money, I'd sink it into this potter's wheel that I needed. I've had to learn everything the hard way. But now I'm smart enough about building a potter's wheel. I'm not looking to come out with a product. The actual potter's wheel that I would really like to see, you'd have to build a whole art school around it.

DR. KARLSTROM: Wow. What would that be like? Describe --

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, I can describe it. It would be something like the studio that Voulkos established at Otis. They built a studio for him over at Otis.

Now, in this case, I'd want to study the way the Greeks used to throw without water, and I would like to make that available to the young potter to practice as an endeavor, and therefore, the wheels would be different. They would slide out from under the floor. They could take this gizmo like a clicker for the TV, and they would tell the wheel head to rise higher or lower. You know, it would be an adjustable wheel head. And the motor would be under the ground. All you would have are the wheels, and you'd walk in the studio and you'd see maybe six to eight stainless steel wheel heads coming out of the ground on kind of a wide cylinder, and the mechanism would turn inside the cylinder. I mean it would only be a one-inch shaft inside there, but the wider cylinder would allow it to go up and down the floor level.

And then there would just be the lights, the lamps that you would have to use to practice with. And you'd have the controls -- the speed could be controlled with the foot or the hand. But the difference would be there would be no table that you normally see a potter's wheel on a table. Here you would be limited to throwing standing up. Stand wheels, like the Greeks used to throw amphorae, standing. That, I would hope to preserve that for the future. I always used to say that if there will be peace in the world, that endeavor will be around and young potters will be interested in taking a course of Greek throwing.

DR. KARLSTROM: Why would that depend upon peace in the world?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, what we have going now is the computer. The websites have everyone engrossed and people aren't easily able to comprehend utilizing their left hand doing anything other than running a keyboard. And one good thing about it is that they are using their left hand, and they are developing their right brain. But when you play an instrument, you're always aware that you're using both right and left fingers and hands. When you're throwing a pot, you've got your left arm inside. Now, the choreography it takes to execute a certain

profile depends on how well you control your left arm and the right side of your brain. It takes practice like a musician. Clay is hard to pin down with formula, but there are formulas they can use, choreography.

DR. KARLSTROM: I still don't quite see the connection between your statement "when we have peace in the world," then people will be able to do this Greek-style standing throwing.

MR. FRIMKESS: Because it's an endeavor that would only be around if there was peace in the world, if there was time for people to take that up in a university or an art school and go to study throwing pots, Greek throwing, no-water throwing. If there's a war going on, there's too much tumult. The world is in turmoil. There's no one going to be wanting to get into some area that hasn't been done since 500 B.C. I just don't see that anyone's going to be talking about, "Did you see this guy doing the Panathenaic amphora the other night over there?" "Well, I saw what's-his-name do it even faster, less moves." In 500 B.C., the Panathenaic amphora was probably only accomplished by the best throwers of the times because it's a hard shape to achieve.

DR. KARLSTROM: It seems to me that there is this very important regard on your part for the past, for tradition, for antiquity, for the classical forms and techniques. And it seems to me that it isn't just an aesthetic or technical concern of yours, that it has much more of a philosophical base. And can you briefly just review that?

MR. FRIMKESS: It's something like playing a tune, if you're a musician, to throw a shape. Now, if somebody's going to write a tune, the chord changes that go with a tune. When you're throwing a pot, you're throwing a tune, you're creating a -- you know, one fellow would throw the same shape, and it would be slightly different because his soul would be physically visible in the profile. You'd know that potter was So-and-So and not "X" or whoever. But it would be the same shape. If you were going to offer a course, you know, you offer a throwing course, learn how to throw.

[SESSION 3: TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Wrapping up your point about the importance of, I guess, individual shapes.

MR. FRIMKESS: There would be a course. If you say, "I want to learn to throw," most of the time if you go take a course in throwing, you want to learn to make a bowl, is what they advise, to throw a bowl or throw a cylinder. Well, that's okay, but once you can throw a cylinder, you should be able to learn how to leave thicknesses on the wall of the cylinder that later get widened, or you need more clay or it will get too thin, and you leave clay for later on to pull a tall neck, stuff like that. That's the kind of throwing that takes choreography. And when you're involved with choreography and practice, and practicing every day, then you want to fix on certain shapes that could provide the experience you need for executing whatever shape you're looking to throw.

So the best shapes that you could find where the cultures have tested the extremes on the potter's wheel, what the potter's wheel can do practically with whatever the resources, the clay that you have available, you have the greatest examples -- I think the Greek and the early Roman Empire, they explored the distance from the axis with the wall of what you can do with the limitations that are available on the potter's wheel.

So, why devise your own organically conceived shape when you've got these classical shapes available that have already done all that research, and go right to the classical shape the way they trained their apprentices in 500 B.C. They'd start of with teeny-weeny Panathenaic amphorae that are three, four inches tall. Then when it got too efficient on that shape, proficient, then he would be allowed to throw one that was a couple inches taller, et cetera, et cetera, until finally he could execute a 28-1/2-inch-tall Panathenaic amphora, which takes a lot of choreography, a lot of experience. But the shape remained the same from the miniature to the actual shape.

The Chinese generally, and the Oriental countries, kept generally the foot of the shape right angles to the floor or to the table, wherever it would be sitting. And if they created a roundness near the foot, it was trimmed for that profile, left thick enough to trim and create the profile that you wanted. The Greeks generally used the choreography to reach the profile through the throwing itself. And because of the dry method that they used, it's just an exuberant experience nowadays to be able to practice what they did.

And so of course, nowadays if we were to exist in a peaceful society as an endeavor and for retired people to go to learn choreography, throwing on a potter's wheel, it would require enough leisure time and enough time to practice and to do that and to offer it as a course in college.

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, what you're talking about also, I guess, is a transformed society or culture where the values have shifted to make that important to allow time for that.

MR. FRIMKESS: I think that's a better way to put it, yes.

DR. KARLSTROM: This also answers one of the questions, which is your working process, I guess you would have to call it, and how it's developed over time. And it seems to me that these are the concerns or the ideas,

technical ones, that underlie really how you approach your work.

MR. FRIMKESS: I've been trying to build a facility where I would be able to handle that type of work, I mean visit with all the choreography I've gathered. I've got everything in the notebooks. I've got all the books of choreography, of methods of creating one or another shape.

DR. KARLSTROM: These are in your notebooks.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah, I have it all that I've done in the '70s. I kept all of the choreography in a notebook so that when I got everything all clean-cut, that I would start over again and do that show using the knowledge, the choreography I've established that would help me to create that show I'm after, I'm trying to do. So I kept that record.

DR. KARLSTROM: That's great. I mean, that's good that that exists.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, it's there. The choreography is there, but if I can get the clay that I need to do it now. That's a problem.

DR. KARLSTROM: So that's a material problem, not of lack of idea.

MR. FRIMKESS: No. I have not been able to get the clay delivered the way I did in the '70s. I can't get the clay. I've managed to have one good kind delivered from the Aardvark Company clay supply down here in Orange County a couple of times, and they changed hands, and now I'm having a little more trouble there. I know the guy's mixing the clay. The only trouble is I think he's trying to just -- I can only afford to pay for eight tons I have on the premises to get it the right way. One of the ingredients is not available anymore. They don't mine it anymore. The clay is a little different. There are a few things that I can't rely on like I did in the '70s, and it's really a problem.

DR. KARLSTROM: You have done some commissions, and you were about ready to tell me about one particular project that sounded interesting.

MR. FRIMKESS: The fellow that created the monument to Ralph Bunche in front of the U.N. Building, his name is Dan Johnson. He's an old friend of mine from the '50s. He's from the East Side. His brother is the all-city quarterback that got me to start Tai Chi Chuan, to study with his master, and I haven't missed a day in 26 years. And I love it. It's the main thing I do every day. But he got me started on a commission. He brought Dr. Banks, a black doctor. They're black guys. He brought Dr. Banks -- a pediatrician well known in the art community here in L.A. -- to give me a commission for a ginger jar. And he wanted three artists on a stage. It took me two years. It was just after we started in the studio, the Michael Cardew studio. I finished it after two years and learned quite a lot about China painting and firing in a down-draft kiln this time.

DR. KARLSTROM: Who are the three artists on the stage?

MR. FRIMKESS: Miles Davis, Sarah Vaughan, and Billie Holiday had to be depicted.

DR. KARLSTROM: You must have liked that.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, it was a commission. I didn't know what to charge, and I couldn't ask any price until I saw the darn thing finished, and then I could figure what I wanted for it.

DR. KARLSTROM: Was he pleased?

MR. FRIMKESS: Very pleased, yeah.

DR. KARLSTROM: Did that lead to other commissions, or is the commission sort of an unusual activity for you?

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, the only thing we had, we had a couple of collaborative -- we've had many collaborative tile jobs, commissions.

DR. KARLSTROM: You mean you and Magdalena.

MR. FRIMKESS: Yeah. The only part I would play would be stacking the damn things in the kiln and providing the firing with the --

DR. KARLSTROM: What about the ginger jar? Was that entirely yours, or was that a collaboration?

MR. FRIMKESS: That was entirely mine. That was a solo work, is what I call it. You know, when I was 20 years old I had a commission to do a portrait bust that came up. I have a record of that and photographs around on that.

In clay. I wasn't able to really complete it without help because I needed a mold maker.

DR. KARLSTROM: It seems that you really have been limited, the way you work, which is a pretty distinctive technique. It sounds to me like you, for a variety of reasons, have chosen as your means, your method, a fairly unusual, fairly, shall we say, demanding technique.

MR. FRIMKESS: I think what you're touching on there is I didn't stay on the right side of the counter often, when you go on to the clay supply, and you've got more tools in your own mind than they're selling in the store and stuff like that. So oftentimes I'd have to build my own stuff. And what that would result in is -- the slab roller, that was my invention. Voulkos used to make slabs for his large abstract sculptures of the '50s by rolling pin and mallet on the floor over sand, so they'd release from the floor. And that gave me the idea that, "Oh, I'd like to see a large tile, 30 by 30 inch tile, one inch thick. That would be beautiful." So I conceived of that item, which resulted in the slab roller, because Brent, Bob Brent, word got around -- I don't know if we taped this already. Bob Brent asked me once for advice on his potter's wheel.

DR. KARLSTROM: Is that B-r-e-n-d-t?

MR. FRIMKESS: B-r-e-n-t. No "d." He had me explain to him about what we really need to throw large pots, because the potter's wheel he was making at the time wasn't powerful enough. So when it came time, word got back to him that I had created this huge roller out of cement with a big bead cast in a cardboard drum with a pipe in it so that he could roll out the large tiles. And so he checked it out, and he said, "I can do that with a lithography press." I mean, he figured it out. He came back after he perfected the slab roller, and he thanked me for giving him the idea, but I've never received any dough on it.

Now what I've been doing, that comes through me and not from going to a clay supply and staying on the other side of the counter and buying what they have available, is, I think, what you were talking about earlier, you're satisfied with what's available and utilize it and create from there. I've been a harbinger of throwing without water. I've been wanting to have a certain facility, certain tools that you don't find in the clay supply.

And also now I'm a harbinger of a firing principle that allows you to reach high temperature in under one hour. And that's very interesting to me. I feel it's important for society, even, not alone only the ceramists, my colleagues. Now if they had a kiln that was a thousand times more efficient than the normal updrafts that everyone is using, you'd think that they would pay me a little attention, but I haven't had enough dough to really do the R&D on it. I asked Garth Clark if he wanted to write about this success back then when we were in the gallery, and he didn't respond at all.

DR. KARLSTROM: He seemed to have a limited idea of just how to work with you.

MR. FRIMKESS: Those techniques of the tools that I use aren't normal, aren't usual that you just go and buy. A lot of them have come through experience that I've had. And they could be improved.

DR. KARLSTROM: Regarding your thoughts on clay as a means of expression, what is an advantage of clay as a means or a material of artistic expression, and what might be the disadvantages? You obviously have chosen this as your medium and you chose to work with it. How do you feel about that? There are many things that you could choose to work with.

MR. FRIMKESS: I can be very clear on that without beating around the bush, again. I only saw clay as a means for creating sculptures until I had the vision, until the peyote.

Once I received that vision, I realized I had a lodestar, automatic lodestar: I was a potter. And I never intended to be a potter and never would have thought of being able to express myself in clay as a potter.

DR. KARLSTROM: So it wasn't like a choice, in some way.

MR. FRIMKESS: No, it was not a choice. I'm in disbelief to this day that I find myself a potter. But the reason I'm a potter is because I asked myself how I was going to learn to play my saxophone like Charlie Parker.

So the reason I'm sticking with it is that through being a potter, I ultimately would learn about -- I mean, that's what I took the vision to imply as an answer, is that someday I would understand Charlie Parker better, I would understand how to do like Charlie Parker better. And it's come true. So I'm very happy, from that point of view. I'm very unhappy about my products that I haven't done, about my -- what's the right term, my prolific --

DR. KARLSTROM: I don't know. "Prolificness."

MR. FRIMKESS: My lack of "prolificacy"? To coin a new phrase, a new word, "prolificacy"? I haven't been doing a damn thing, but the course that I'm on has provided these other involvements, the fast-firing kiln. And ultimately I'm very happy now that I've got my new teeth. The tape that I recently recorded, I was in

tremendous pain. I was getting my teeth pulled out and my horn was broken, and the tape came out very bad; but the thing that you would notice is that I'm understanding Charlie Parker a lot better on that tape. So that's why I realize it's come true.

DR. KARLSTROM: I think that's a perfect point, a perfect conclusion, because that's sort of where we started out.

MR. FRIMKESS: Did we? [Laughs.]

DR. KARLSTROM: Well, you made it clear that music was an important theme.

MR. FRIMKESS: The enigma of that vision after the question.

DR. KARLSTROM: Anyway, this is great. And on behalf of the Smithsonian, I want to thank you, Michael Frimkess.

MR. FRIMKESS: Well, on behalf of Michael Frimkess, I want to thank the Smithsonian for this unique honor and privilege.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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