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Oral history interview with Merry Renk, 2001  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Merry Renk on January 18, 2001. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Arline M. Fisch 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.

Merry Renk and Arline M. Fisch 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

MS. ARLINE M. FISCH: This is an interview of Merry Renk at her home and studio in San Francisco on January 18, 2001, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Merry, when and where were you born?

MS. MERRY RENK: I was born in Trenton, New Jersey, on July 8, 1921.

MS. FISCH: Tell me about your family background. Were there other artists in your family? Did you become interested in art because of your family?

MS. RENK: No, my father was a very creative man but not in terms of painting and sculpture, but everything he touched, he created something new. With the process of growing dahlias, he developed new strains of dahlias, not in his work but in his pleasure.

MS. FISCH: So he was a very creative person.

MS. RENK: Yes, right.

MS. FISCH: And so you have kind of inherited that.

MS. RENK: And he was a very verbal person. If he saw a splinter or something, he could talk about the tree. He had that kind of connection to the larger scale of things, so that he moved from one thing to another. And I grew up during the Depression, where he had no work, so he tried various of his creative ventures to try to earn money. He started to raise goldfish, which didn't work. So then he started to raise tropical fish, so we had a special room, eventually a special building, in back of our house. And he was the first man in the United States to breed angel fish in captivity. He had this knack of, sort of, knowing without having been trained.

MS. FISCH: Were you interested in art as a child?

MS. RENK: Well, I remember that in fifth grade our class had a project of copying a silhouette in a magazine, and I copied this. And they were put up around-the whole room was filled with everybody's drawings. And I could see my drawing was much more like the one we started from.

MS. FISCH: Did you ever win any prizes as a child?

MS. RENK: Oh, no, no, nothing.

MS. FISCH: No encouragement in that way?

MS. RENK: No, no. And I copied things from magazines, of drawings.

MS. FISCH: So you were already interested in art when you started to study art?

MS. RENK: Well, yes, because I knew that I had this ability to copy. I didn't copy fine paintings. I copied things from magazines, pop magazines.

MS. FISCH: And then you went and studied fine arts at the School of Industrial Arts in Trenton. Tell me a little bit about that.

MS. RENK: Well, that was a school that had a separate department called the Fine Arts Department of the school where I attended. And my father was very happy that I was interested. He supported me.

MS. FISCH: He encouraged you?

MS. RENK: He encouraged me to go. And we lived in the suburb of Trenton then, out in what is now-I lived on a farm right in that area, a 25-acre farm in that area during the Depression, which I loved because we had woods and my mother worked. She was the one who was working in the family and so my sister and I had the run of this great space, and very safe in those days.

MS. FISCH: So did you find nature inspiring when you first started as an artist?

MS. RENK: Well, it was always inspiring. It was always part of my passion. Just the structure, I am really-it has been the structure of nature that I love and that I use. And so it draws me and I draw it.

MS. FISCH: So you never had any inclination or intention to be a commercial artist; you always were thinking about drawing and painting?

MS. RENK: I didn't think-I just studied. I just wanted to learn more about art. But I didn't have any intention-my family didn't say, "What are you going to be? Don't be that." They didn't give me any kind of direction, except I was also very interested and did a lot of performing and working with the theater at school, high school.

MS. FISCH: So you were interested in other arts?

MS. RENK: Right, and that was very appealing to me, because I loved to be on the stage and perform, and I did it well for a young kid. But my father saw the risks that I didn't. As a parent, he did not want me to go to New York and try to pursue-

MS. FISCH: And try to be an actress or a dancer?

MS. RENK: Right, yes. So he encouraged me to go to art school.

MS. FISCH: I'm sure you are very grateful for that.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: In 1946, you went to Chicago and actually then studied at the Institute of Design. What took you to Chicago in 1946?

MS. RENK: Well, I went there because I had been widowed in the war. My husband, Stan Renk, had been shot down in Europe and was missing for a year and finally found through a talk with a psychic. That is a long story. Should I tell you that?

MS. FISCH: Well, maybe just say that through a psychic that he was-

MS. RENK: Yes, we found where he was, instead of going down in the ocean as the government said, and we sent the information that we had to the government, and they said, yes, he was-

MS. FISCH: And they confirmed it?

MS. RENK: Yes, so it was a year of missing after the war was over. So I knew that I would have to earn my living and I was alone.

And I was back at home with my family in New Jersey but I didn't want to stay there. I had followed my husband all around the country, so I had lived all around the United States in various parts of that world alone. And seeing him just when he got off for a little six hours or whatever, came the way for the wives that were following. And I had been in California, and I wanted to go back. We had planned to go back-come back to Southern California after the war. But since I was alone, I knew I wanted to get more training, because I didn't have enough training to earn my living, and I had seen an article in the *Saturday Evening Post* on the Institute of Design.

MS. FISCH: Which was just starting then.

MS. RENK: No.

MS. FISCH: No?

MS. RENK: No, it was in the '30s it started. The name was the same. They showed photographs of the work that the students did. They had made forms with paper that you could stand on. They made chairs themselves in the classes, and it spoke to my need to-an unexpressed need-I wanted to make things.

My father worked as a carpenter, but I never was allowed near his tools. I never asked him, but nonetheless it

was a separate place. So the idea that I could-I wanted to learn to make objects, and I didn't know-I only recognized the idea that they taught design for industrial design, and that seemed to be what I would aim for at that school.

MS. FISCH: So tell me about your studies at the Institute of Design. I know you studied photography, among other things. But what else was on the agenda there?

MS. RENK: They had classes in color. They had classes in sculpture, or three-dimensional form. They had-it was two semesters. They had what they called basic workshop courses. So that you weren't going into any of the advanced directions. We had lectures on history of art. We had workshops, and that was very exciting to me.

You went into a workshop where there were big tools, and we had our first project in the workshop, which was to make a sculpture which was to be felt and not looked at. And that was very exciting, because I was able to work with wood and used all the big tools, and it was a very rewarding project for me. And the idea is to awaken your sense of touch to form, which is a very wonderful way to teach a young person.

But what was exciting was I was renting a room quite a distance from the school, and as the year progressed, the first semester progressed, I met with some other students and they were looking for a place and asked if I would like to find a place with them. And a gal who was in another class who started the same time that I did, Mary Jo Slick, who is now named Mary Jo Godfrey, found a place, an English basement about three blocks from the school. And since we all wanted to do work ourselves, there would be room there to have a workshop. And it was a big space, and she came from Cleveland and had been aware of the museum-she had gone to school at the Museum Art School and was very aware of the craft, excellent craft situation there. So she thought we could have a gallery in the front room.

MS. FISCH: So that was the gallery called 750 Studio?

MS. RENK: Yes, and that was because it was 750 North Dearborn and Studio because we were going to have a studio there, the three of us, as a workshop as well. Rather than call it a gallery, we wanted the idea that we were going to do work there.

So she came to school with a suitcase with a saw, a hammer, and drill and things like that, so we had the tools to begin our venture. And, oddly enough, the owner rented the building space to us. So we moved in. Mary Jo designed the equipment in the shop. I did the typing and took care of getting in touch with getting announcements made, and Bunny did the bookkeeping.

MS. FISCH: Now what was the third person's name?

MS. RENK: Bunny. Her name was Bunny. That is the name she used, but she is Olive Oliver. She died recently. She was not in art school anymore, but she wanted to be part of the gallery. And so when we finally opened, we had mostly student work in there and some craft work. We had Polia Pillen and John Wally's wife, doing pottery. We had Eugene Deutch doing pottery. And then the paintings and pieces of driftwood that friends would bring in. So we began-

MS. FISCH: But ultimately you showed many prominent artists.

MS. RENK: Yes, we eventually had one-person shows, as well as having-at the same time that we had the crafts people work on the shop and the photography. We had such a great source with our professors at the school. As a matter of fact, at that time there was no gallery that showed nonobjective work. And so we were unique in that we did show nonobjective work.

MS. FISCH: Well, you certainly had lots of press coverage for your gallery.

MS. RENK: Well, we worked very hard. We sent out notices, and we were on the art tour. The tour would come in. We'd demonstrate and show people what was going on, and we were getting together our workshop. And we saw that Polia Pillin, she and her husband-her husband was a poet-and they made their own kiln for firing pottery, so they said, "Well, certainly you can do it." So we went out and bought some bricks and went to an engineer where they sold the wiring, the nichrome-

MS. FISCH: Nichrome wire.

MS. RENK: -the nichrome wire to heat the element. And we just talked to someone over the counter and then went home and put it in, and it worked.

MS. FISCH: So the first kiln was for pottery?

MS. RENK: No, no.

MS. FISCH: Or, it was for your enamel.

MS. RENK: It was for enamel, yes, right. And then we went to the Thompson Company and bought our enamels, just on the outskirts of Chicago. And we had also, I forgot to mention, but one of the reasons why the enamel inspired us, we had pieces in the gallery by Doris Hall and her husband. She was an artist from Cleveland. And all three of us had been trained as painters, more or less; that was more of our interest, I guess. And seeing enamel was a fantastic, brilliance of color, and such a possibility, that we were all very excited about it.

MS. FISCH: So that is what intrigued you about the medium, the brilliant color?

MS. RENK: Yes, right, yes.

MS. FISCH: And the relationship to painting.

MS. RENK: Right.

MS. FISCH: And what kinds of things did you make?

MS. RENK: Well, we had some copper bowls spun, so we would have forms like that. And then I started to do jewelry. And since I had no training, I did very primitive things. The first thing I made was-got some wire and made a spiral. It's like what we see as primitive art from old cultures.

MS. FISCH: Many cultures begin with the spirals.

MS. RENK: Yes, it is just a natural. And we began to collect more people to sell their work in the gallery.

MS. FISCH: But you yourself were making jewelry and enamels?

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: Rather than painting, than focusing on painting for the gallery?

MS. RENK: Oh, yes, yes.

MS. FISCH: But you were also still a student?

MS. RENK: Yes, but I still painted as well. We all-

MS. FISCH: You all did everything.

MS. RENK: Everything.

MS. FISCH: Amazing. Why did you give it up, the gallery? It was such an important part of your life at that moment.

MS. RENK: Well, the three of us lived and worked there. And the thing is that by this time I was ready-I finished three semesters at the school, but I knew that I was very happy with doing jewelry and I really enjoyed the entrepreneurship of having my own place to work and doing my own work rather than going on and trying to be an industrial designer. It wasn't the philosophy of the school to return to craft, but that fit my being, my personality.

MS. FISCH: You wanted to be hands-on, making rather than working as a designer?

MS. RENK: Yes, I wanted to make, right, yes.

MS. FISCH: Was that what really prompted you to decide on being a jeweler, that it was very hands-on and possible to sell?

MS. RENK: Well, there were a couple of reasons. I had very good vision and close vision, so I didn't have to wear any glasses while I worked. I had been told that I had a heart murmur, that I should not work under any heavy pressure, having any hard work as if I wanted to be a potter.

MS. FISCH: No hard physical work.

MS. RENK: Right, no hard physical work. And so a jeweler could sit down and work.

MS. FISCH: But was there anything about the scale that particularly appealed to you or the fact that it was worn by people? Did that enter into it very much, or was this pretty much an abstract interest in making form?

MS. RENK: Well, I guess that the fact that it was for people and to be worn was important, because I always-from the very beginning, the wearability was always a very big factor. And wearability at that time-everyone makes their own, sets their own limits, and mine was I only made rings that fit into gloves, because we were all wearing gloves then.

MS. FISCH: It was a very pragmatic approach.

MS. RENK: Yes. But it was really a chance to use these ideas that came through the design process of the basic workshops, where the idea was not to say, this is a chair, this is a place to sit-

MS. FISCH: This is a form to sit on.

MS. RENK: Yes, right, so that you kept things more open, so that was the excitement of working by myself.

MS. FISCH: Now, as the gallery progressed, you actually took it on all by yourself; your partners pulled out and you were on your own?

MS. RENK: Yes, they didn't want to have to invest more money than just their part of the rent to keep the gallery going, because they knew that they weren't going to be selling enough of their own work, and by that time they realized that. But I had become a professional and I wanted to keep the gallery, and the customers were coming in for other people's work as well as for mine now. And our reputation had grown. So I wanted to stay.

So we tried to sell the place to someone else and they looked at our little nook and walked away. [They laugh.] So I received it because they left. And then being alone, it became apparent very soon it was really a very, very big charge to take care of by myself. I did have a friend who rented a room from me, but the fun of doing the gallery, of sending out the announcements, where we used to meet over a dinner of spaghetti and have our friends and sit and chat, and the things would be mailed in a wonderful easy way, alone, there were that many fewer friends.

MS. FISCH: It wasn't a lot of fun by yourself.

MS. RENK: No, it was no fun by myself. And since I wanted to do work myself-if I just wanted to be a gallery owner, that would be different, but being a producer, it was just really-it was too heavy for me. And I was fortunate, because another student who came by said, did I want to sell the place and I said yes. So he bought it.

MS. FISCH: And you were out of there.

MS. RENK: And I was out. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: And where did you go when you left?

MS. RENK: Well, I planned to go back to California, and I planned to go to Southern California. And every time I would tell someone at the school, they would say, "Oh, Merry, don't go to lower California until you go to San Francisco. Go to San Francisco." So it just happened that I was able to get a car to drive out to San Jose to a relative of a friend. So I crossed the country and I took the car to her, and she drove me back into San Francisco. We crossed the Bay Bridge in the rain. The city was sparkling in the rain and crossing the bridge and seeing that city, just my heart-

MS. FISCH: You left your heart here just like the song. [They laugh.]

MS. RENK: I just rooted. I just rooted here.

MS. FISCH: I know that a bit later you went and lived abroad for, was it, 18 months?

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: Tell me about that?

MS. RENK: Well, I was doing jewelry and enamels in San Francisco, and I belonged to the Metal Arts Guild and was selling and consigning in the first year to stores. And, naturally, as an artist, I dreamed of going to Paris, whatever it was about Paris, the romantic idea. And I studied French in high school, so I had some French, and I learned as much as I could before I went to France.

And I thought when I would go there, I would study sculpture or I would do sculpture. I didn't really want to study with anyone. I didn't feel that was necessary. But when I got to Paris, I realized that I didn't know enough French to set up a sculpture studio, so I took the easy way out; I started to paint. And I found a little studio on the Left

Bank where I could go and paint oils, and so I did that. And had time to-the first three months I was there, I just walked around the city; I didn't even go into the Louvre. It was just the whole architecture and being in the streets that were so full of all the memories of stories of artists and history.

MS. FISCH: It was overwhelming.

MS. RENK: Well, the buildings, they were just foreign; I had to just walk around. So I walked for three months outside, and then I started to go in. Naturally, I got to know a number of Americans who were there painting and sculpting and so on. And there was an American gallery that opened when I was there.

But eventually I met by chance a former student from the Institute of Design who lived in a wonderful apartment along the Jardin des Tuilleries. And they were going away for a trip and I could rent their place, sublet their place for a month, and so I sublet their apartment. It was a small, miniature apartment. And on the other side of the house was Lenore Tawney, whose work we had had at the 750 Studio.

MS. FISCH: So you knew who she was.

MS. RENK: Yes, right. And I had been hoping to go to the Maghreb countries, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia, and she was planning to go. So she and I went together, and she had a car, and we drove down to Spain and down into Morocco and back again. We went during the week of Easter-the week before-Easter because we had heard that in Spain, the 10th century comes alive during that time. So we heard that you should go to Sevilla, and so that was a town we were aiming for. And to be there before the Friday before Easter.

MS. FISCH: Before Holy Week.

MS. RENK: And so we were in a town before that, whose name has just slipped out of my head-Cordoba. And we were at the hotel, and they said, "Are you going out tonight?" And we said, "No, we are tired. We are going to bed." And they said, "Well, you should go out." They said, "We are going to have a procession."

So we went out and we stood in front of our hotel, and the procession started, which was unbelievable, as we all know. And there sounded like there was a dog howling, a dog. And we had never heard such sounds before, the *saeta*, the religious flamencos. It was unbelievable. Then we realized that this was something very unique and so we walked around town and we visited churches. But it was all very casual. And then we went on to bed. And the bedroom was on an alley right next to the cathedral and we didn't understand that.

MS. FISCH: You didn't know that.

MS. RENK: And before we had gone to sleep, there were feet pattering by our windows, pounding, many, many people going in this narrow alley. And when they got past us and into the front of the cathedral, the *saetas* started again. And we just sat up in bed with our hair standing up. It was so remarkable. It was just unbelievable. We didn't get up. We were just too stunned to get out of bed and, you know, go see this, because we were sure that, in Sevilla, it was going to be even better. Well the next day we got there and everything was set up for tourists. You had to pay to be in a fancy bar, and then on the bar, there would be the *saetas* singer just as sort of a setup.

MS. FISCH: So you were very fortunate to have the real experience.

MS. RENK: We had a fantastic experience, yes.

MS. FISCH: And you went from there to Morocco?

MS. RENK: Yes. But on the way to Morocco, we went to Algeciras, and when we were there, we were there on Easter day; this is close to the Rock [of Gibraltar.]. Anyhow, so Easter morning we were wandering around looking, and we came by a bar, and in this bar a young man was singing *saetas*. So Lenore and I decided should we stay outside or should we go in because there were only men in this bar. And, finally, we said, well, we will go in. So we went and we sat down and we ordered a glass of sherry and started to smoke. And they all left the bar. The singer and his two friends left the bar. So we watched. They went across the street to another bar. So Lenore and I finished our drink, and we said we will go and just stand outside the other bar. We won't go in. It is because we came in, they left. And so we went across the street and stood outside. We were invited into the bar to sit at the table with the singer. We were offered cigarettes by one man-he shook his fingers, "No, No, No." We had offended them by smoking cigarettes.

[End Tape 1, Side A.]

MS. RENK: Before I knew it, I was dancing flamenco with this singer. And from that bar we went to another bar and another bar and danced flamenco. Apparently lots of singers are there but very few dancers. And we didn't really understand, didn't speak Spanish. But the one thing we understood was they said I was doing the true

flamenco, the real flamenco.

MS. FISCH: And all untrained.

MS. RENK: Well, this is because it is really an improvisation. So, anyhow, that was a very exceptional experience, after which we drove on across-well, we took the boat with the car across to Tangiers and then into Morocco. And I was so impressed with the honeycomb structures of the ancient houses and the castles and dwellings in Morocco and the tile work that has always been, the shapes of the doorways and the kind of-and the jewelry, ethnic jewelry.

MS. FISCH: The wonderful jewelry that was available in the markets. There was so much to see, probably.

MS. RENK: Yes, right, the markets were very exciting.

MS. FISCH: Did you collect anything?

MS. RENK: No, no, I didn't. Well, a piece of cloth to wear, but that is all, not jewelry. I just didn't collect any.

MS. FISCH: You were traveling light?

MS. RENK: Yes. But then we drove back into Spain, but unfortunately Lenore ran into a tree, so I came on back to Paris to catch by boat and came back to California. What was kind of fun was people would say, "Oh, you are going back to the United States? You are an artist and you want to do that?" And I would say, "Yes." "Where are you going?" And I would say, "San Francisco." "Oh, that is all right."

MS. FISCH: That was an okay place to be?

MS. RENK: Yes, yes. [They laugh.]

MS. FISCH: So you came to California in 1948, but then you went away and then you came back. Did you buy this house on Saturn Street right away?

MS. RENK: Oh, no, no, no. I had bought a house when I first came. I had no money to buy a house when I came back from my trip, so I started to rent a house, rent an apartment. And eventually my friend Albert Lanier told me that there was a place available to rent in the Twin Peaks area on Lower Terrace, so I moved into that apartment. And Ruth Asawa Lanier and Al just lived a few-actually, they lived next door. They lived at 21 Saturn Street. So I came there. I visited very often. Ruth had young children and would work in the evenings when they were in bed. And so I would come over with my sketches and sit and sketch and she would-

MS. FISCH: Work on her sculptures.

MS. RENK: -work on her sculptures. We would sometimes be there until 5:00 in the morning, and she had children and she would sleep for two hours and get up. And then I would go home and sleep until I woke up. But one of the exciting things was at that time she had a commission to do a wall for an interior decorator, for a bar, and she was using the fold that she had developed after being at Black Mountain College. And I had been very frustrated, because the way the paper problem was presented at the Institute of Design was to pretend that you were a child and just play with it. My creativity just closed off when I had to use that kind of thinking. It didn't open up anything, so that what I presented as my result was just a mockery of a result. And I knew it. It was the one place I felt very embarrassed by what I had presented as my student work. So with that unfulfilled area, Ruth started telling me about how Albers taught the paper fold. And one of the things he did was he would ask them how would you fold a square? How then would you fold a circle? How would you fold a hexagon? And each one, we learned how that form worked and found that paper only goes-if you start using an up and a down fold, paper will only do certain things. There is no way to do anything but what it will do. MS. FISCH: It has its own rules. MS. RENK: It has its rules, right. So, anyhow, learning that gave me such a boost, and I had an egg carton at home and was a great up and a great down and an up, and I sat up all night long and into the next day until I finally figured out how to make that.

MS. FISCH: How to fold.

MS. RENK: Not exactly, but I mean that idea of being something high and then a large empty space and then up again.

MS. FISCH: So you conquered the folded paper.

MS. RENK: I conquered it and loved it. Then I did it, and I got some lightweight brass and then I did it. And I did a first-since my work, I am very concerned about wearability, and the metal was so light, I didn't want it to be changed. I wanted the form to stay, so I used a very heavy frame around the lightweight metal, even though



once you fold metal, it becomes very rigid in certain areas but not really on the edges. MS. FISCH: So this is work that developed because of your involvement with Ruth Asawa?

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: So tell me, when did you get together with Earle? MS. RENK: I got together with Earle [on] Halloween on a barge over in Tiburon. The Heaths lived in half of it, and the manager of the plant lived in the other half. And Earle had come from Oregon to work at the Heath plant.

MS. FISCH: Now, Heath was a ceramics-

MS. RENK: Pottery.

MS. FISCH: Pottery.

MS. RENK: [The Heaths] had a pottery shop where they produced wonderful, wonderful ware. And so I met him that night, and it was in 1954, Halloween 1954. And eventually we lived in various rentals in San Francisco, and I was saving money, hoping to find a place to buy. And then this house came up for probate sale.

MS. FISCH: This house at 17 Saturn Street?

MS. RENK: Yes, and Ruth and Albert Lanier lived next door to this house, and they told me that it was coming up, and I put in a bid. And with some problems with a crooked real estate man, I paid \$7,800 for the house and lot. And I had a mortgage; I had to put \$4,000 down and I had a mortgage of \$4,000. But I had grown up in the Depression where furniture came in and furniture went out of the house, so I had this desperate feeling that this must be paid for immediately. So that was the year I worked half time as a teacher at the University of California at Berkeley in the decorative arts department and teaching design, which was really quite enjoyable to teach that. So I saved money, and Earle had a little money and we paid the \$4,000 in less than a year.

MS. FISCH: So you own this house free and clear.

MS. RENK: Free and clear.

MS. FISCH: That is absolutely unheard of these days.

MS. RENK: I know and people said if I had used that \$4,000 in some other house, I could have had rental properties, but the fact that this house was paid for, and for 10 years or more, 12 years, the taxes were about \$8 month. And, consequently, we could be who we were. Earle could be the potter eventually, and I continued to be the jeweler, because our income was small, but our expenses were small.

MS. FISCH: Well, describe the house for me, because it so clearly reflects your ideas and your lifestyle.

MS. RENK: It is a house on a hillside, and the rear of the house faces the south. So we have a peaked roof and the sun pours into the house. So we have natural solar heating. And the balcony over the kitchen is where my workshop is. And I have a penthouse view there; I have a window in every direction. And I have a view of a street, Saturn Street, and down to the Bay from my workshop.

MS. FISCH: And you have lots of plants and some wonderful artifacts from Indonesia and lots of paintings on the walls, so it is very much an artist's house.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: You said it was designed by an architect, but you did most of the building.

MS. RENK: Well, Earle did.

MS. FISCH: Earle did.

MS. RENK: Earle did; I can take no credit on the building. But, yes, the architect, Albert Lanier, lived next door, and he was the one who told me it was coming up for probate. We have added a deck-took off an old back porch-and put a large deck with a wonderful tub that is hidden from view, unless you are out with spyglasses. And so we use that as our second bathtub.

MS. FISCH: And you have a wonderful view of the Bay?

MS. RENK: Right, just one sign in our view. It is like looking out over Fez [a city in Morocco], where it is just this wonderful hillside of houses, and that is what we get, all but just one sign.

MS. FISCH: It is a wonderful location. Tell me about your children; when were they born and how many are there?

MS. RENK: My older daughter was born in 1959 and her name is Baunnie. She now is married and lives in our basement apartment that Earle put in after the kids left home and the pottery business went downhill. He decided he would stop doing pottery and have a rental there. So he put a rental in the basement. And now they are living there, my grandson and granddaughter, nine and three and a half. And Baunnie is married to Pier Espinocila. And my other daughter is married and lives in North Carolina. Her name is Sandra; Sandra Settle is her married name. And she is a programmer for IBM and does a lot of wonderful needlework.

MS. FISCH: How did you manage motherhood and art production simultaneously?

MS. RENK: Well, I never allowed the creative impulse to-I will start again. I expected that when I would have children, I would still be creative and that would still be part of our financial base. And Earle was very supportive. When we bought the house, he said, "Where do you want your workshop? Take the best place so you will be happy." So I took at that point a room in the basement, but then we knew we would have plans to redo the house, which kept changing because when we moved here, we had no children. And then when we had children, the second child-having a balcony bedroom was not viable because you can watch one child, but two children, you can't watch what is happening. So that is when the decision was made to have my workshop in the balcony. And Earle built a room and a deck out on the east side of our house. So the house has changed and my workshop has changed. But I have always had a room of my own, all through the raising of both children. The way I worked out my work time was that because I was younger, I had energy at night; after the feeding at night, I would go up and work in the workshop. Or at nap times-she would nap and I would not nap; I would go and work. And then Ruth Asawa Lanier next door had children. And I would trade time with her and with other friends, so that I would have time, maybe an extra afternoon during the week. Later, when two children were here, that was more complicated. So then I paid someone. I would take the children out of the house for that day so I would have one full day a week.

MS. FISCH: I understand that you often traded work for services.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: How did that work out?

MS. RENK: It was wonderful. It allowed us to have treasures made by other crafts people or work done by them that we could not pay on the kind of income we earned, but they were very happy to have our works, Earle's pottery or my jewelry. Then there were times when work was great, then there would be a dry period for both Earle and I, when there was nothing, no money coming in. Then we would do something else. Earle would hire himself out to do woodworking for some other friend. I would then maybe do-somebody would want me to do a portrait of them, so I would do a portrait of a friend who had ordered it. And I did very little teaching, because what I wanted to do was work at the bench.

MS. FISCH: So you never considered teaching as an option?

MS. RENK: Not as a full time; I taught only half time one year at the University of California.

MS. FISCH: And you taught briefly at Pond Farm?

MS. RENK: One three week period at Pond Farm.

MS. FISCH: Very briefly. [They laugh.]

MS. RENK: And at a certain time, I tried to organize classes at home, but in my small workshop four people maximum, and it was rarely four people, mostly three people, two people who would be there in school year time, and off for the summer, because when the children were home all day long, I had to be even more attentive to doing things with them. So although with the first baby, someone came right after-less than a week after I came home from the hospital where Baunnie was born, someone came with an order and Earle said, "Why don't you go ahead and do it?" But it was wrong, I wasn't really-

MS. FISCH: You weren't ready.

MS. RENK: No, I was not in any shape to do it, but I did it [they laugh], but I learned the next time not to, not to try to force that part.

MS. FISCH: How did you earn your living as a full time artist? I know you told me that you initially did wholesale work but eventually gave that up.

MS. RENK: Right, well, when I was on my own. Well, I started out consigning to galleries. Stores come and go, just like craftsmen come and go, too. But certain stores would be here; they would be remarkable, and then they will disappear. One of the stores that was a great support was Nanny's.

MS. FISCH: Was that a store or a gallery?

MS. RENK: She first had a store on Filmore Street, which was not downtown. It was in a neighborhood. And it was modern furniture. Then she had jewelry but discovered that she sold-the jewelry was a great seller; it brought in the most money for her. And so she opened a small, very tiny store downtown across from one of the biggest department stores. And then after a year, she closed off the other store because the jewelry store was all she needed. So she was really the main support for a number of us. And local people, plus people from out of town, she sold very well. But when I had my first baby, I realized that I could not-my first obligation was to my child. I couldn't just stick her in the corner and do the work. At first I had her hanging from my neck, but that is not very easy. [Laughs.] The fact that Earle was working then allowed me to work part-time. So we decided, you have to make a decision when you are married how you will work these things out, and we talked about it beforehand, and we decided Earle would earn the bread and I would earn the cake.

MS. FISCH: What a wonderful description because I was going to ask you how it is to be married to another artist. I have always been curious about how two full time artists survive in the same household. I suspect it is not always easy.

MS. RENK: Well, all I know is that Earle allowed me the privacy of my own workshop and of my own work. He did not step in unless I asked him. And he supported me in many ways. He built my workshop. He would do any technical machinery work that needed to be done. When I was doing sculpture, he carried the metal in. And he built a motor-driven casting machine for me and gave me space down in the basement in his workshop area to do that, whereas I would never have allowed him to work up in my workshop. [They laugh.]

MS. FISCH: So you have always worked totally independently?

MS. RENK: Yes, I knew that I could not-Earle suggested that perhaps he should work with me with the jewelry, but I knew that that would not work for me. I know my own needs. And the need is to be in charge; in that one spot, I had to be in charge.

MS. FISCH: Do you discuss your work with each other?

MS. RENK: Well, for 25 years I worked in a nonobjective manner. And Earle really never-he has always been a realistic painter and enjoys paintings that use realism as a base. So we couldn't discuss things in the way, if he had had similar training, I would be able to. So I didn't discuss my designs with him. I might talk to him about technical things. He might help me make a little device to hold something. In that part, he helped me very much.

MS. FISCH: But you didn't offer critical evaluations to each other?

MS. RENK: No.

MS. FISCH: On another subject, I read somewhere that you consider that women think two-dimensionally because of their early training in things like sewing and that they need extra help in conceptualizing in three dimensions?

MS. RENK: Someone wrote that, not me.

MS. FISCH: Oh, you didn't say that?

MS. RENK: No.

MS. FISCH: I read this in an article about you, and I assumed you had said it.

MS. RENK: No, oh, gosh.

MS. FISCH: I couldn't understand it, so I am glad you didn't say that.

MS. RENK: I have no idea where that came from.

MS. FISCH: Well, it was an article you sent me.

MS. RENK: One I sent you?

MS. FISCH: Mm-hmm.

MS. RENK: I will have to look at that.

MS. FISCH: Did you ever find that being a woman artist was difficult?

MS. RENK: I found it without any problems. But I wasn't in a field that I had to compete with men. And generally speaking, I designed for women. I did design rings for men, but that was for special orders, but generally in a sense I design for myself.

MS. FISCH: So you never felt that your career was adversely affected because you were a woman; you were perfectly well accepted in places you needed to be accepted?

MS. RENK: People were delighted that I was there because, well, they liked my work. So the work was what made me accepted, not my person or body or sex.

MS. FISCH: Or gender, okay. How did children and family life affect your career and your work? You explained a little bit about working half time sometimes because of children, but did it affect your-

MS. RENK: What I did?

MS. FISCH: Yes.

MS. RENK: I can't think of anything where what they wanted or thought-

MS. FISCH: So you continued to make the work that you wanted to make?

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: And having to accommodate to family life wasn't interfering?

MS. RENK: Only at one time when I thought at a certain point I could maybe earn my living by having exhibits, traveling. Lee Nordness was starting to do that, having a show. He wanted to have pieces that would go from gallery to gallery around the country. But the thing is, when you are generally a professional jeweler, earning your living at the bench, most of the work that you get is special order. You are making a ring for a certain person's finger, with their needs as part of it, from your design. It is more of a special order world, so that what you have made doesn't sell, but the special orders will sell. So I couldn't do that. And, of course, the whole drama of getting the shows together, Earle said, "I don't think this is working. It is too hard on our relationship."

MS. FISCH: So it was better for you simply to continue to generate work locally?

MS. RENK: Instead of trying to do it through one-person exhibits around, I just moved out of that area and just exhibited pieces in various exhibits. And then I had stopped going to art fairs; I guess the Metal Arts Guild had a case at the San Francisco Art Festival, which had been a wonderful place to have things, to sell things, and meet local buyers and critics, and so on. But after the children came, I don't think that I exhibited as much. Well, sometimes I would have one case in a group, another group. I forgot about that one. But it was a place; the art festival was a wonderful event, because it brought a lot of people to see craftsmen as well as artists, and the city purchased pieces from crafts people, and the jewelry that they have is available to borrow from them.

MS. FISCH: So that was a very good venue for you, the San Francisco Art Festival.

MS. RENK: Yes, and eventually when Earle and I, many years later, we were traveling in Mexico, the city, on their second time of giving special awards to artists, gave me an award of the jeweler, of the craftsmen, I was the Jeweler of the Year, and I came back from Mexico several weeks early so I could be at the function. It was very amazing to me. I hadn't-being out of the country, I wasn't aware of what these situations were like. There was a wonderful dinner. And then when they presented you with your award, you were supposed to be like at the Hollywood-

MS. FISCH: At the Oscars.

MS. RENK: At the Oscars.

MS. FISCH: You weren't prepared? [They laugh.]

MS. RENK: I wasn't prepared to give a speech thanking everybody, so I just blew kisses to everybody and sat down. [Laughs.] And the next day, I heard the manager of KQED. I heard her on the radio. I was at my workbench and she said, "I met this wonderful woman."

MS. FISCH: Who blew kisses at everybody. [They laugh.]

MS. RENK: She thought that was wonderful. She was probably bored to death with everybody thanking their mother and father. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: Well, I am fascinated by the four-page visual biography of your jewelry career from 1947 through 1981. I have never seen anyone do that before. So describe it for me, and tell me why you decided to do that.

MS. RENK: Well, I was invited to have a retrospective exhibit at the California Craft Museum, which was down in Palo Alto. And they weren't thinking about-they didn't know exactly what they would use to present my work. And I had done a biography, autobiography, for a *Goldsmith Magazine*, part of the Society of North American Goldsmiths, and I had offered them-I had sent the editor the idea that I could do these little sketches of my work and that could be in the article. But they weren't interested in that. So I had gotten these ideas sketched and so when I had a meeting with the people from the museum, they said, "Well, maybe we could do a poster." I said, "What about could we, if I make drawings of all the pieces in the show, would that be part?" They said, "Oh, yes, we could put that on the back."

MS. FISCH: Well, it is a wonderful format.

MS. RENK: It is a poster, two-sided poster.

MS. FISCH: Have you always made these kinds of drawings? I think you told me that they were actually a form of inventory.

[End Tape 1, Side B.]

MS. FISCH: Interview of Merry Renk conducted by Arline M. Fisch for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is tape number two.

I gather that you have always made wonderfully detailed drawings, but I wonder if these came before or after the actual making of the object?

MS. RENK: Well, when I design, I make sketches, but, as Earle called them, they are like chicken tracks. So they aren't like a finished drawing. But when I sold pieces to galleries, it was much easier for them to have a record. And, naturally, I couldn't afford to have a photographic record for them to have, so I made these sketches with the various available sizes and materials and various costs so that they could-retail price, because I set my retail price.

MS. FISCH: I notice on some of the drawings, there were different markings; could you tell me what those mean? They were R, S, and U.

MS. RENK: The R I use as a design which is repeated. I have certain designs that I made in 1947 that in 1980 I would still make if people came and asked for them. For instance, my boomerang earrings I made until then.

MS. FISCH: And the S?

MS. RENK: The S is a special design. It means a design which I made, a unique design which I made for a customer. It is a design that you are bound by certain needs or dislikes of your customer; it has requirements laid on top, whereas the U is unique, meaning one that I designed without any-

MS. FISCH: Without any dictates.

MS. RENK: Without anything laid on top, except the joy of doing it.

MS. FISCH: I thought we would talk about the work itself. You work a lot with wire, bending it into shapes, forging separate elements, and composing groups of wires. What was the fascination? Was it an interest in line, in movement, in space, spatial relationships, or simply an interesting material to work with?

MS. RENK: I think it was because I didn't really know-it was an easy way to work with metal. It didn't require a lot of strength. It didn't require knowing how to saw, which, again-

MS. FISCH: A special thing you have to learn.

MS. RENK: Right. So I began in that manner. But, basically, I like the line itself. It is really attracted to me. And at the beginning, in my designs, I was very, very intuitive; I couldn't discuss them in words. It would scare away my design if I talked with too many words on top. [Laughs] I began with a bent wire which then I used twice to make the boomerangs, or three times, repeating the V shape three times on one ear. And then I took that shape and

put it together at the center with three shapes, three of these. And then I put three more on the H. And so the forms began to build up. And the training that I had at the ID was to work nonobjectively, so that I couldn't, because I believed in that idea, I wasn't making flowers. I was making structures. If you put things together, they make a certain pattern, but they were reflective of nature, because nature works like that. It works with one form being repeated and repeated and repeated and repeated, so that they were natural forms, but at the same time they were nonobjective to me.

MS. FISCH: Well, you also did more than just bend the shapes; you forged the wire in order to change the dimension.

MS. RENK: Yes, change the dimension so that it becomes more interesting; you get a larger reflective surface. And I tried to work so that when I added a finish, for instance an oxidation, I would only use it where it wouldn't be rubbed, so it would remain black there, but on the surface, where it is easy to polish and take care of, that could be kept shiny, so that I tried very hard to not use materials that would change in use. Wearability was always running through my designs too.

MS. FISCH: I know that you were very interested in interlocking design elements, both in jewelry and in large sculpture. Tell me a little bit about that concept and why you found it so inspiring.

MS. RENK: The structure of the interlocking form was really exciting to me because it was a way of leaving the very plain design and finding myself in a very complicated form. It was like making hinges; it was like making various natural forms, because when you interlock something, you can make a wall with it or you can make a tiny piece of jewelry.

MS. FISCH: There is also the magic of taking a two-dimensional plane and making it into a three-dimensional structure, and that certainly seemed to be what you did in jewelry. I have always loved and admired the *Wedding Crown* you made for *Objects: USA* in 1968 [by Lee Nordness]. And that is based on the interlocking principle, isn't it?

MS. RENK: Yes, it is.

MS. FISCH: How did you come to make such an object, which in most jewelers' terms is sort of esoteric? It is not in the realm of ordinary jewelry. Why did you make that particular form?

MS. RENK: The reason I made it was that I was asked by Lee Nordness to tell him what I would like to make for the collection.

MS. FISCH: For the *Objects: USA*?

MS. RENK: For the *Objects: USA*, and that was remarkable. And I knew that some people had gotten large commissions, and I thought that would be nice if I could get a large commission. And I had been doing a number of hair pieces for people. People had been using them to go to the opera and things, but they were like combs that would sit in the back of the hair. But I wore my hair long and in a bun, so I liked things that went around and had a folded hair piece that I wore on occasion. And so when he offered me the opportunity to design-tell him what I would like to do-I gave him three possibilities, small, medium, and big. [Laughs.] And Lee Nordness said, "Thank you, Merry, that was wonderful. Do it, do the *Wedding Crown*."

But I felt that the reason I decided to do a wedding crown is that, for me, that would be a big object and since I find the most fascinating historical pieces are crowns, I wanted to do a crown. But since we are here in this democracy, we aren't supposed to be fascinated by crowns except crowns are worn by brides, and so that is why I chose to do a wedding crown.

MS. FISCH: Well, and you made it in gold, which was really extravagant and extraordinary, and it was a great commission.

MS. RENK: Yes, it was delightful. And I was very pleased; very nice things happened because it was photographed in color in the book and used often as an example for the show, so I was very-I earned a lot of goodies from that.

MS. FISCH: How did you make it?

MS. RENK: Well, I made models; I made drawings on graph paper. Then I made the graph paper model. Then I got the lightweight brass and I made a brass model. And then I bought 10 ounces of gold and sawed it and soldered it together.

MS. FISCH: What thickness of gold, do you remember? MS. RENK: I think 20-gauge.

MS. FISCH: Oh, my, so 10 ounces was an extraordinary amount of gold to be able to work with all at once.

MS. RENK: Well, it was the largest piece of gold I had worked with, yes. But by then I was casting five ounces of gold often, so that wasn't a problem. But for a piece of sheet to work with, wonderful.

MS. FISCH: Who owns the piece?

MS. RENK: American Craft Museum received it from Johnson's Wax Foundation, I guess.

MS. FISCH: Well, so it has a wonderful permanent home.

MS. RENK: Yes, it does. And on it, there is also the addition of the V shapes which I use everywhere. Encrusted on the upper level of the interlocking form, I added these. I can't remember how many went around the crown, but, so to speak, branches with 240 pearls.

MS. FISCH: Right, so it is a really extraordinary and extravagant piece; it is very beautiful. There is a big change in your jewelry in the early '70s, I think, when you start to use symbolic imagery rather than nonobjective designs. Why did that happen?

MS. RENK: Well, I had very wonderful experiences in my life, and I began to feel I needed to make other kinds of statements that couldn't be done in nonobjective work. I wanted to speak to memories of my family. I wanted to use realistic portraits. And so I had to break loose from the fence that I had built around my designs with the ideas from the Institute of Design, that I could leave those behind and go on. And so I made portraits of my family and myself. And I talked about my sense of the air and of animals and all these things I hadn't been able in a way, somewhat of a political statement.

MS. FISCH: How so?

MS. RENK: Well, the bear, I chose-I did a family circle of the bears, the father bears and the mother bears, and the baby bears, interlocking in a circle, the idea that this was *Ursus californicus*, which is gone, disappeared from the earth. And we have to remember those things, those animals that we have done away with.

MS. FISCH: Now, how did moving to this kind of imagery affect the appearance of your jewelry? Did it become more rich in its appearance? Some of your nonobjective things were very linear and not exactly Spartan but certainly compositions of linear elements. And when you start using imagery, the appearance kind of changes.

MS. RENK: Well, the thing is, some of it changed and some of it didn't. I had a bracelet, which was a portrait and it is rounded. It looks like it could be any of the other work, but just that it happened it be a face. And other pieces, I had to use surface treatment to make it read better. To make the hair, I had to engrave, and I had to use different techniques.

MS. FISCH: So it did affect the techniques that you used?

MS. RENK: Yes, I had to add-yes, it needed other techniques.

MS. FISCH: Is that when you started casting from wax, or you had cast before?

MS. RENK: No, I had cast from I don't know what year. I started by dipping cloth into wax and pinching it around and then gradually discovering through the Metal Arts Guild groups, where everybody is so generous about their techniques and discussion about it, I discovered there already were wax sheets that I could use. I wouldn't have to use cloths; I could just go right to a certain gauge sheet of wax and manipulate that very easily.

And then there were hard waxes to use; the whole world of waxes opened up to me, so that I could do things that would hold large stones. And Henry Hunt started to appear about then with his beautiful carved gems, and I could work with them, where before I couldn't. And also earlier, I had this idea you had to wear something small that a glove would fit on, so I realized that there were many women of my age who wore larger jewelry, and it was perfectly appropriate to have big stones.

MS. FISCH: So it became very liberating then.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: You have often mentioned that it is important to you that jewelry be comfortable to wear.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: So even the large-scale things you feel strongly about.

MS. RENK: Very much.

MS. FISCH: Do you try them on?

MS. RENK: Of course. Well, actually, the weight is very important. I couldn't understand a lot of the jewelers that were working at that time when I just felt the jewelers on the East Coast had Amazon women to work for. We didn't have them out here, so I kept making human-scale things. [They laugh.]

MS. FISCH: Well, you did some large-scale sculpture in 1974 and '75 using rusted iron. Was this a big adventure?

MS. RENK: Well, it was, but it was in answer to a physical problem. I banged my eye and lost sight in one eye. And so with the fear that I might not be able to continue with jewelry, I spent more than a year, I guess, doing sculpture. And I had a lot of fun doing interlocking forms with torch-cut pieces. And people bought them. I think there is a lot of need for sculpture.

MS. FISCH: Did it require new technology for you as well as new material?

MS. RENK: Well, I had to learn how to weld, but after all the years of jewelry experience, that is nothing. It is just a little bigger torch and a few different kinds of, so to speak, solder.

MS. FISCH: Did you enjoy working in a larger scale?

MS. RENK: Oh, I did very much. And my husband made a shed outside so I could work out there, and I had my tanks outside. I really enjoyed it, but it wasn't something I could do myself. I had to have my husband's help. He had to go with me to buy the sheets of copper or iron, and he had to carry them back into the back of the house, outside. It just was something that wasn't as easy as just buying a little piece of gold and carrying it home in your purse.

MS. FISCH: So it wasn't as independent for you.

MS. RENK: Yes, and I liked independence.

MS. FISCH: And you didn't like that.

MS. RENK: I don't remember ever making a decision like, I am not going to do any more sculpture, but then I discovered when I went back to jewelry that I was very comfortable with making jewelry and it was fine with one eye. My mind gave me a three-dimensional quality, so I kept on working quite three dimensionally.

MS. FISCH: When you did large sculpture, were any of them public art commissions, or did you sell them after you made them for domestic interiors?

MS. RENK: I did both. I had a show. The San Francisco Art Museum gave exhibits at museums to crafts people. So that I was chosen one year along with Trude Guermonprez and a potter. And we had a show at the de Young [M.H. de Young Museum, San Francisco], and I showed about 10 or 12 of my sculptures, as well as my jewelry, so that I could show both things at the same time.

MS. FISCH: Did that result in any public commissions?

MS. RENK: Yes, so then I sold a couple of pieces at the show of the sculpture. And there was an architect who bought one small piece, and he wanted me to do a commission for a school building, so I did that. Then the City of Orinda-no, the City of Walnut Creek-bought a piece, and it is in the library there. I haven't been there. I don't know if it is still there. But it was put in the library. MS. FISCH: So it was purchased for a public location, but it wasn't commissioned in advance for that purpose?

MS. RENK: Yes, right, yes. But I didn't decide not to make sculpture; it seems like it just-

MS. FISCH: It just drifted away.

MS. RENK: I just drifted back to jewelry. And I have done some wire sculpture, and I really like sculpture, but I have always liked jewelry better.

MS. FISCH: When you work with clients for jewelry, how do you do that? Do you bring them to the studio, or do you go to their home, or do you do it over the phone or you do it through a gallery; how do you work with clients?

MS. RENK: Well, originally, if I had a gallery and they had a customer, I would go to the gallery and discuss the design and present them-go back and present them. But when people came to me directly, then they would



come to my studio here. In my balcony, I had a wonderful table by Art Carpenter, a nice wood table, and cases that he had made for my jewelry. And I have a lighted jewelry box where things were exhibited. So I would show pieces there. And when I did special designs for people, I would present three designs for a piece. And they would pay a fee for the design, and then they could either accept it or reject it. Or I could do more sketches, however things would work out. And then I would make the piece. But the thing is, when you make a drawing, sometimes that wasn't adequate, so I would make waxes, very rough waxes. I wouldn't try to do a finished piece; it would take too much time. Whatever design I presented, I tried to make it as clear as possible. Sometimes when I would present them to a gallery, I would make my drawings-sometimes a wedding set-I would make the engagement ring, and then a transparent paper, which would go over so you could see how the wedding ring would come over it, because most of the rings that I designed for people were interlocking. This is where the interlocking came from, from the wedding rings. One of the basic fun things for me to do were the series of interlocking wedding rings, because it required more than just thinking about design, but it had to do with the mechanical design.

MS. FISCH: It involved engineering.

MS. RENK: Right, because I had none of this, it was just so exciting to make one that would work, that would interlock. So they were a special treat for me to design.

MS. FISCH: How did you promote this work; how did you find clients? Was this always through galleries or word of mouth, or did you have some other means? Now, people use the Internet, but that is a very recent thing.

MS. RENK: Well, the thing is, I found that some jewelers make jewelry that immediately people would come in and buy it right there. They can't go away without it. People who bought my things were people who would see me at an art festival one year, and five years later, they would come to my door and they would want a piece. They would have carried my card for five years. I rarely had this thing where they had to take it away that minute. It was always they came later, after seeing my things at other exhibitions, seeing my things here and there, then they would come.

MS. FISCH: So you actually promoted it by lots of exposure in different places?

MS. RENK: Yes, yes. And articles-that was helpful. There were articles from the craft magazines that would write the gossip of the latest shows and all that.

MS. FISCH: Did your sources of inspiration change periodically, or are they sort of cyclical? Do you come back to ideas, come back to sources of inspiration?

MS. RENK: Well, I think I had a certain number of aspects that I like to work in, and sometimes in designing for someone, I can use one of those aspects and then something would develop. But most ideas developed on the unique pieces, because you had a little more space to find your solution.

MS. FISCH: And what are your sources of inspiration other than nature and structure? Are there other sources? I read somewhere that you sometimes use images from your dreams.

MS. RENK: Yes, that was in the last, in the realistic area, yes, then I used parts of my dreams.

MS. FISCH: How do you remember them?

MS. RENK: Well, Earle and I had a dream together. We had the same dream. And I made a piece of jewelry of that, of our heads being connected. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: But you actually remember your dreams visually?

MS. RENK: Yes, oh, yes. Well, I don't remember all, but certainly ones that are important enough that they do come to me.

MS. FISCH: So that has been a source of inspiration.

MS. RENK: That is another source, yes.

MS. FISCH: That's fascinating.

MS. RENK: But it didn't work in the nonobjective time.

MS. FISCH: You didn't dream nonobjectively.

MS. RENK: No, no, I didn't. The one thing we haven't talked about is certain aspects of movement that I like, with

rolling pearls and things that turned over.

MS. FISCH: Oh, yes. Well, that is an extension of your engineering interests.

MS. RENK: Yes, in a way.

MS. FISCH: Talk a little bit about that.

MS. RENK: The Tinker Toys are a tube with a knob, and this idea was in my head for quite a few years, and I would try to do it with my wire. And I never could get what I wanted. And, finally, when I found wax and the wax wires could be melted together, so I finally was able to get this tube and knob into my jewelry. But I didn't know it at the time that it was because it was out of Tinker Toys until I did the memory painting of myself, when I was four years old, *Always*.

MS. FISCH: So are there other things that have come out of the memory and memory paintings?

MS. RENK: Well, the paintings have not given me much more information about my jewelry, but each painting I do, memory painting I do, teaches me a little something about myself or my attitudes or my family's relationship to me and so on. So the portrait I did of my mother, father, and sister, and I in the car-I did a portrait of my father driving. And his hands were huge, when I did the sketch, and my mother's hands were really petite and quiet. But that was how the family was. My father's hands, he was the driver of the family and my mother was the passive wife.

MS. FISCH: Am I correct in thinking that you stopped making jewelry in 1982?

MS. RENK: Yes, it was happening-because we were in Europe, I had planned that we would come home for the conference, the SNAG [Society of North American Goldsmiths] conference.

MS. FISCH: Now, you were living in Europe because you had rented your house?

MS. RENK: Yes, and we had planned to come home so that I could go to the conference of SNAG at Carmel. But while I was in Europe, I started to draw, and then I started to do watercolors. And they were really fascinating for me. And then when it came time to go, to leave from Europe, and our renters wanted to stay longer, Earle said, "What do you want to do here? Wouldn't you rather just stay and do some more?" So I decided I would stay and do more painting. So by the time I came home, I decided I would just keep painting. And it wasn't that I wanted to stop jewelry; it was like my intent became focused on painting.

MS. FISCH: So it wasn't a difficult transition?

MS. RENK: No.

MS. FISCH: It was something you really wanted to do.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: And have you worked as a painter since that time?

MS. RENK: Yes, I have just painted the kind of things I wanted to paint, because starting to paint as an adult, a senior adult, you can just do what you want. And I love to do pictures, history pictures, memory pictures. And I like to do them without having to use photographs; just be a little bit-I want to have a certain kind of-it isn't primitive but, sort of, not so much following the rules of how to draw and keeping whatever drama or excitement that appeals to me rather than working to make a rendition of the objects I am trying to draw. So I tried to keep that kind of combination, because I have had training; I know how to get all those things to happen. But I want to keep just some, a little mix, and it has to be a real thing for me, but still a mix. So that is what I am trying to do in painting. And I began for a while to work with Beth Van Hoesen, who invited me to come to her studio.

[End Tape 2, Side A.]

MS. RENK: I paint with transparent watercolor, using an English watercolor method; then you get illumination from the paper if you follow a very slow technique of having many layers of very light color. So this is a technique that I have been using, particularly in portraits. And working with Beth and models, we have spent many Saturday mornings making portraits of people using watercolor, and eventually we had a show in her studio of our work.

MS. FISCH: Are there elements in common between the painting and the jewelry, or not?

MS. RENK: Well, I often find it is possible. I have the person wear jewelry so I can do my paintings of jewelry.

[Laughs.] But the main thing that is different for me is that with jewelry, since you are working with metal that you have to cut, form, build, you have a lot of things that are set up for you, whereas with the painting, you can just rip it up. It is a piece of paper; you have missed nothing if you just want to-so that there is a lot more freedom, because you can just throw it away and go to the next thing, whereas with jewelry, it is just too much work to do away with, so you work and work and work on the thing until you exhaust yourself. And sometimes then you do destroy it, but generally you find a solution.

MS. FISCH: So what do you think are the strengths and limitations of jewelry making as a means of expression? Part of it is the commitment to the material.

MS. RENK: Well, I think that jewelry fit me very well as a means of expression. I was very happy. And even allowing myself to change my direction after 25 years of not allowing realism to come into my designs, that made me very happy. So no matter where I was with jewelry, I was very content with what rights it gave me.

MS. FISCH: So you felt very satisfied as an artist using jewelry?

MS. RENK: It was my happy passion, right; it was.

MS. FISCH: How does it compare to your work as a painter?

MS. RENK: Well, in the painting, I have never taken a commission since I started, since I have been full-time painting. If I do a painting of someone, if they like it, fine, they can buy it. But I am not doing it for them. Because portraits are very funny. You always do the nose too long, ears too wide, or something. [Laughs.] But I really-I enjoy looking at people. It is a chance to look at people. Again, it is having to do with the people that I am doing. For a while we did people over-70 portraits. And then we did artist friends. So we had a lot of wonderful experiences along with it. And Beth being a creative person, it was wonderful to watch her work. And Mark, her husband, is also a watercolorist of the most magnificent stature. And if I would run into a problem, I would show it to Mark and would say, "Tell me what to do." It was marvelous because I learned so much.

MS. FISCH: So you have a kind of mentor in the painting area that you never had in the metalwork.

MS. RENK: Yes, and Earle also, I can ask him, not when I begin a painting but after I get to a point where I would have a question. When I am beginning, I am too weak to discuss it. I might lose my-

MS. FISCH: Self-confidence?

MS. RENK: -connection to what I am doing. So when I get ready to discuss it, then I can ask Earle or Mark about what they think. Earle has always helped me.

MS. FISCH: So that is a very different attitude than you had about jewelry.

MS. RENK: Exactly. Of course, I am working with realism, so I can talk to Earle, and I have a mentor in my husband.

MS. FISCH: You have always maintained your studio in your home. How has this affected the work that you do, do you think?

MS. RENK: I don't have any idea, except my jewelry, just being able to walk upstairs to my studio is wonderful. I don't have to go through going to park. I taught over in Berkeley, so the days I had to go there, I had to deal with the traffic, and every time I finally got off the Bay Bridge, I said, "Oh, I have done it again, no problem." I feel it has been-one of the joys of being self-employed is to work where it is best for you.

MS. FISCH: So it has been sort of a seamless life, your studio work and your family life and the house.

MS. RENK: And the thing is, for the family's sake I am here; I am here even though I am working. So that I am available even though I am working.

MS. FISCH: So you never found this a limitation?

MS. RENK: Only when I would have customers come, I would have to be the queen and say, [laughs] "No, please be quiet for a little while," or whatever, for a short time. I didn't have parades of people coming. I had occasional people, which was enough to keep me going.

MS. FISCH: You were one of the first members of the Metal Arts Guild in San Francisco, and you have mentioned them from time to time. What made you want to be a part of an organization like that, and was it the organization that you hoped for?

MS. RENK: I think that the Metal Arts Guild was a very wonderful organization for jewelers and metal people, because it was a very supportive organization. We had a little time beginning where people had sort of separate categories for people, and certain people would do this or that and not show. And eventually with just a couple of years, that just disappeared, and then it was completely supportive. I think when there are separations like that with creative people, it can lead to trouble, more trouble than it is worth. That is what we realized.

MS. FISCH: But you worked your way through those problems to make an effective organization?

MS. RENK: Yes, and the thing is, what is wonderful is we exchanged names of customers, we exchanged names of sources, we exchanged names of classes. We were able to just be as open with each other that no guild that we have heard of the past had. We had this very wonderful-and we had exhibits that the group was invited to, or the organization accumulated cases and equipment that we could show an open fair; the art festival was one. To me it was amazing. MS. FISCH: So you felt you benefited from that organization? MS. RENK: Yes, I benefited greatly, and I put my time in as president and worked in the organization.

MS. FISCH: What are its primary activities? Exhibitions, I know, but are there other things that the organization does that you find beneficial?

MS. RENK: I am talking about many years ago, at the early time. Well, we did organize a group session where Margaret de Patta led a four-weekend course; well, I would call it a course, a discussion on design, and that was very wonderful, although it left me with too many words, so it took me a couple of months before I could design again. But I felt it was still worthwhile. [They laugh.]

MS. FISCH: Who were some of the other members?

MS. RENK: Peter Macchiarini was one of the originators and Margaret de Patta, Aileen Runkle, who taught at the JC [Marin Junior College], and Irena Brynner was one of the members, and Florence Resnikoff. Bob Winston, for a little while, but he pulled out very early like Peter Macchiarini did, too. That is all I can think of at this moment, sorry.

MS. FISCH: Is there anything more about its history that you would like to share? It is still an active organization?

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: Do you still participate?

MS. RENK: I go to meetings when they have an invited guest who will talk about their work, which-I will always go to hear and see a jeweler talk about their work. I am still fascinated by what is happening. And I go to their Christmas party, which is a fun event in somebody's studio, and we all bring food that we make and have a nice visit.

MS. FISCH: So it still provides a sense of community.

MS. RENK: Even for me.

MS. FISCH: I think that is terrific. Is there a well-developed community of artists and crafts people in the Bay Area, not just the metal people but in general?

MS. RENK: Well, there was a time when we had the Designer Craftsmen, which was a combination of all the crafts.

MS. FISCH: Was that an ACC-sponsored [American Craft Council] organization or an independent organization?

MS. RENK: Well, it was sponsored by the ACC. It was originated by Mrs. Webb coming and inviting people to talk and have a conference, to which I wasn't invited. But Peter Macchiarini objected to this way of organizing an area, and so he said we must not have this that comes from the East Coast; we must start our own. So we started our own, and I was immediately in that organization.

MS. FISCH: Who were your important professional colleagues?

MS. RENK: Well, my most treasured one was Margaret de Patta. And she was a mentor, I would say, for me because she had been working very early in the field, and she had very clear ideas about integrity and honor, design ideas. And we had gone to the same school, so we had the same language. She had been at the Institute of Design. And I loved her work. I felt that she was really a master designer. And I am indebted to her my whole life. MS. FISCH: So you share an aesthetic as well?

MS. RENK: Yes, yes.

MS. FISCH: Which came probably from ID. Are there others that you would feel close to?

MS. RENK: Well, Ruth Asawa.

MS. FISCH: Yes, I would like you to talk a little bit about that, because I think that has been an important connection for you.

MS. RENK: Well, Ruth was our next door neighbor, and she had four children and had the ability to sit up with me when I had no children and work until 5:00 in the morning-she doing her metal sculpture, and I would be drawing or filing pieces I would bring with me. Consequently, she had children who woke up at 7:00 in the morning, so she only had a couple of hours of sleep, but I went home and slept well. She has that ability, and she can always overwork.

MS. FISCH: But you found her an inspiration for you early on, is that right?

MS. RENK: Yes, another, I suppose, one of our reasons was that we shared a similar school, not the same one, but a similar school. And Albert also was at Black Mountain, so he had an understanding, too, and an appreciation of what we were doing. And he was the one who-when we decided we would try to have an exhibit together, he went to Dr. Morley of the San Francisco Museum of Art and arranged the show, because he was going to design the exhibit and we were going to make everything and so on, so he was very helpful.

MS. FISCH: So this is a very supportive community.

MS. RENK: And Albert is another person. So are Beth and Mark and Albert and Ruth.

MS. FISCH: Have you been involved with national organizations like the American Craft Council and the Society of North American Goldsmiths?

MS. RENK: I joined, or I was accepted by, the Society of North American Goldsmiths after it had been organized for quite a few years. I think because when it began, I didn't know about it.

MS. FISCH: It was very much East Coast-based.

MS. RENK: And basically it was people in the universities and colleges; the word passed around there and it didn't get to us. So then when it started, I was working on my own. I wasn't as involved with galleries and so on, and it just didn't seem-and I couldn't afford to go to the conferences with the work I was doing with helping support the family. So I just didn't bother trying to join until later, when I somehow-I don't know what triggered the need, but I decided that I should join this organization. It was wonderful, it was doing wonderful things, and I should be part of it.

MS. FISCH: And you have been a part of it.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: And how have you participated? I know you have gone to some conferences.

MS. RENK: I went to some conferences, and I exhibited in some of the shows. I mean I didn't see the shows; they were someplace else.

MS. FISCH: Did you go to any of the American Craft Council [ACC] conferences, the early ones? Like there was one at Asilomar in '57. Did you go to that one?

MS. RENK: I went to the Asilomar conference, and it was terrific to have all the crafts people there together. And then I was a speaker at the Lake George conference.

MS. FISCH: Which was two years later.

MS. RENK: Yes. And that is the last-I went to the conference at Lake George with Baunnie, my baby with me, so that was like-the ease of moving around had changed, so I didn't get to anymore.

MS. FISCH: Were they important to you, those conferences; I mean the chance to meet people nationally, was that important?

MS. RENK: Well, the first one was, that was very exciting. But going with the baby, I couldn't mix the way I had before, so it wasn't quite the same. [Laughs.] So I couldn't attend after that.

MS. FISCH: What craft periodicals do you read?

MS. RENK: At this point, I don't.

MS. FISCH: None. But did you?

MS. RENK: Well, I read the *Metal Arts Guild*, the monthly; yes, that is it.

MS. FISCH: Because I have read articles about you in *American Craft* and *Metalsmith* but those aren't things that you read regularly?

MS. RENK: No, if there are articles about me, I don't even know they are there. Sorry.

MS. FISCH: Well, in some cases you did, because you were interviewed.

MS. RENK: Yes, when I wrote something myself, but if there has been anything after that in mags.

MS. FISCH: No, I think this was one that you knew about.

MS. RENK: Well, the ACC did a-after the fellows, the ACC-ACE, I guess, isn't it? MS. FISCH: No, the *American Craft* magazine you mean or *American Craft Enterprises*?

MS. RENK: That is it. They had an interviewer come and talk to me, so "Full Circle."

MS. FISCH: When did you first exhibit your work? I know you participated in many national exhibitions over the years, but do you remember your first exhibit? It was maybe at Studio 750, but I was thinking more about an open exhibition.

MS. RENK: Well, there was the library, the Chicago Library; I had things there. Mary Jo, my partner, and I had a show of our enamel, so that would be '48. And then coming to San Francisco, I was in the Art Festival the first year I was here. I met Bob Stocksdale at that. MS. FISCH: So over the years, that San Francisco Art Festival has been very important to you?

MS. RENK: Yes. Trude Guermonprez was also a mentor for me, a friendly mentor. When my interest in the ACC was flagging, she would come and talk to me about things and get my viewpoint.

MS. FISCH: Yes, she was very active in the organization.

MS. RENK: And some days she would just knock on the door and say, "I heard this idea that people are working with this. Tell me, do you know anything about it?" And we would have a wonderful chat. She was terrific like that, because when you have children, you aren't going out very much. And she was without children and working with ideas all the time at school.

MS. FISCH: How important do you think exhibitions have been to you personally and to your career?

MS. RENK: Very big.

MS. FISCH: Very important.

MS. RENK: Very, very big. Yes, if it weren't for them-well, I suppose I could be on the street corner and get the attention, but the museum exhibition qualifies a designer to be acceptable in the art world, and the gallery exhibition is the one that pays my bills.

MS. FISCH: So both kinds of exhibitions have been very important. When you are participating in an open exhibition, did you make work specifically for that, or did you just draw from the work you had already done?

MS. RENK: I didn't really have the time to make a piece for an exhibition unless like for the *Objects USA*; that was a particular event, although the *Wedding Crown* was for that exhibition. But they bought a piece which I sold in galleries, which is also in the collection, a necklace. So when I would have time to work, I would go back to-I would look at the sketches I had sort of put down on paper, just the ideas. And sometimes I could work them into something, but most of the time they were from another day, so you are another person a month later.

MS. FISCH: You are in another place.

MS. RENK: Right, so that didn't often work out. But I would work on something that was a unique piece. But many of the pieces I worked on were not pieces that were unique that were in exhibits; they were pieces that were just pieces I produced.

MS. FISCH: They provided income.

MS. RENK: Right. Well, but they also worked in shows, national traveling shows and so on, so that I didn't make in the early days, I didn't make things just for exhibition. Well, no, I take that back. For the exhibit at the San Francisco Museum of Art [now the Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco], I did make pieces for that.

MS. FISCH: Which exhibition was this?

MS. RENK: That was the one at the San Francisco Museum of Art in 1954. I was doing enamels and metal at that time. I can't remember which pieces I made for the exhibit exactly. And I think with-I guess with the two major exhibits that I have, that, which was a major, and then the California Craft Museum, I made some pieces for that exhibit, but mostly they were borrowed or designs which I had done before which I just made one for the exhibitions where that piece would be shown.

MS. FISCH: Were you ever affected, either positively or negatively, by what critics wrote of your work?

MS. RENK: Well, I produced my work when no one gave a critique.

MS. FISCH: Nobody was doing criticism.

MS. RENK: Actually, when I exhibited with Ruth Asawa, she would get a review from the art critic here, but I wouldn't get a review. They just weren't interested in crafts people as an artist.

MS. FISCH: Do you think that has changed at all?

MS. RENK: I hope so. It was easier in a way not to have to deal with the critics if they were so un-positive. [Laughs.] When I had my retrospective show at the California Craft Museum, my reviews were wonderful; the critics wrote whole articles in the newspapers. That was very good, very positive reviews. The thing is, you do things that you love, and if somebody doesn't like them, that is all right.

MS. FISCH: You are not adversely affected by that?

MS. RENK: No, because I love that piece, so that is all right. [Laughs.] Well, I suppose if your income was affected because someone said these things-which happens to painters-that probably would mean something more. But at this point, what they said didn't send people to me or take them away from me.

MS. FISCH: There are now many museums around the country collecting contemporary crafts. Which ones do you think have made a special commitment to the jewelry field, and do you think that is important? I know you are represented in many of these collections. I am thinking about the Oakland Museum and the American Craft Museum, the Renwick.

MS. RENK: Well, I think it is very important that these museums collect our work. In fact, I would like to see more museums collect our work, because they are missing now while people are working. They have an opportunity now to start those collections. And as our craft world begins to-our craft world has begun to change its isolation; we are moving into the mainstream, or we have moved in, I am not quite sure. But a lot of the museums are going to be cut short because they haven't given us credit.

MS. FISCH: Of the work of yours that's in museums, have those pieces been purchased from you or from your galleries?

MS. RENK: I don't know anything about pieces that are purchased from any galleries from me, but most of the pieces have either gone to a museum because they're awards or award purchases or a collection, a private collector, and occasionally I've given a piece to a museum. Bob Ebendorf was getting the Dorsky Museum up at SUNY.

MS. FISCH: State University of New Paltz.

MS. RENK: Yes, so I sent a piece there. What I liked also was that they were getting drawings together, so I sent some drawings of my jewelry. For a while, most of the time, I used photographs of my work, but at a certain stage I didn't; my photographer died and I hadn't found a new one, and I wasn't really making that many pieces. So I started to draw my pieces, larger and life-size. And so I started to make drawings, so I had drawings that I could send. I did make drawings.

MS. FISCH: What institution, if any, would you like to see a major repository of your work? Have you thought about that?

MS. RENK: I don't know. I really don't know. I would like to have Oakland have more pieces. They have just a couple. One piece was a purchase award from an exhibit there. One piece I gave them. And one piece Ken Trapp bought from a gallery.

MS. FISCH: Oh, that is right; he bought that one.

MS. RENK: He never came to me. I had pieces I could have sold. Well, anyway. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: You really would like to have Oakland be a center for your work; it would make logical sense.

MS. RENK: Yes, but I would like in San Francisco, but there is no place in San Francisco. But, anyhow, I am very happy with Oakland.

MS. FISCH: Good, well, and there is also a major collection of your work at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, courtesy of a private collector, Joan Pearson Watkins.

MS. RENK: Yes, yes.

MS. FISCH: So I think that is wonderful.

[End Tape 2, Side B.]

MS. FISCH: Who is Joan Watkins, who made the exhibit of your work at the Smithsonian?

MS. RENK: She is the wife of Malcolm Watkins, who was curator of the Cultural History Museum at the Smithsonian Institution, and she was a fellow at the museum at the time and had an office there. And also over her years has collected 50 pieces of mine. So she wanted to exhibit a contemporary view of jewelry, so all but two pieces belong to her. And the case was beautifully designed by her, and the people in the shops built the forms to put the jewelry on.

MS. FISCH: And this was all your jewelry?

MS. RENK: All my design, yes, that she had bought from me, either special designed for her or pieces which she had bought from me. And at the Smithsonian, when they prepare a case, the glass is carried in by two men with big suction cups and put in place; it can't be a month-long show; it was a year long show. And Joan wrote about it and sent photographs of it so I could have a record of it.

MS. FISCH: So it was seen by hundreds of thousands of people.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: How wonderful. Did you see the show?

MS. RENK: No, when you are a mother working at home with limited income, these shows happen around the country, but you cannot get there because of two reasons, not only because you need to have someone to take all the responsibilities you are used to doing everyday, but also to pay for the trip. Our budget just couldn't include these things when my children were small.

MS. FISCH: But you have wonderful photographs of that.

MS. RENK: Yes, she sent very good photographs and was very good. And since then, she has given two pieces to the Renwick Gallery at the Smithsonian for their permanent collection and also given 20 pieces, plus another year she gave a couple more pieces, including a wedding crown, to the Boston Museum of Art.

MS. FISCH: How wonderful for them.

MS. RENK: The story that I heard from her was that as you give pieces to the museum, they must be accepted by a committee. And the day that they presented these pieces, the *Wedding Crown* in particular, they accepted it and they gave a round of applause. And she said that they said, "We are going to invest money in contemporary jewelry." So that I feel very happy about.

MS. FISCH: Well, and they have done that.

MS. RENK: They have.

MS. FISCH: And I think that is wonderful that you were the start of that collection, a major portion of that collection.

MS. RENK: Well, Joan Watkins did that for me.

MS. FISCH: We talked about some galleries that you have dealt with over the years. We talked about Nanny's, I think, yesterday. But I wonder if there are other galleries that were important to you in particular? MS. RENK:



Well, the wonderful gallery in New York called Lee Nordness Gallery was a very good experience for me. He is a very enthusiastic man and had wonderful connections in New York City; that was wonderful to have a one-person show there. And I went for that. I did go to the opening. Actually, my sister has a movie that she took there at the opening. And it was a very successful show for me, not the dream that every artist has of having a show and you go in and everything is sold before you go in, not that kind of dream, [they laugh] but a successful dream nonetheless. And Lee had tickets to the ballet that he was given, and so he took me to the very best seats in the ballet, and we went to a party in the quarters where they hoped dancers would come. And since I was a very expressive rock-and-roll dancer [they laugh] and wore a sheer overdress over a long culotte, which worked very well under strobe lights and things like that-I was wearing that for my opening. And all the men rushed to me to dance with me because they thought I was one of the ballet dancers. [They laugh.] I had a great time at that party. Lee was startled. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: And he was also a very good dealer. I mean, he knew how to contact collectors and people interested. So you worked with him over a period of years?

MS. RENK: Yes, until he closed. Yes, I was very happy with the kinds of commissions. And the very best commission was a commission for the exhibition which traveled all over.

MS. FISCH: *Objects: USA*.

MS. RENK: *Objects: USA*, yes.

MS. FISCH: And do you have a gallery now that you like dealing with?

MS. RENK: Yes, I do, even though I am not making new jewelry, the Mobilia Gallery in Cambridge, Massachusetts. Libby and Joanne Cooper have been very enthusiastic. And even though I have visited the gallery, but not when a jewelry show was on, but the reports I have had from friends who have seen it have been very-they have been very excited by the kinds of shows they have put on there. So I am very pleased to have my things there.

MS. FISCH: In looking through the archive books that you have put together for each of the past decades, I see a few things that we haven't talked about. One is the workshop teaching you have done over the years. That is a different approach than regular classes. Is that the kind of teaching that you preferred?

MS. RENK: Well, I did enjoy teaching design at the University of California. That was half-time work early on. That was very wonderful. But I really never desired to teach full time because I want to be at the bench. [Laughs.] I want to do the work at the bench and have someone else there. So when I was asked to do a workshop, a one- or two-day workshop, that delighted me, because I could go in just full of stuff and everyone just pulls it right out of you; you pour out like a teapot on everybody, and you go away and feel very happy because you have given everything. It isn't stretched out over a long period of time.

MS. FISCH: What kinds of subjects did you teach?

MS. RENK: Well, I taught several times using the paper fold, to learn how to fold the metal, to get more ease with folding metals. And I have given plique-à-jour workshops, which is a technique in enamel that was the most interesting of all the techniques in enamel for me.

MS. FISCH: Well, why don't you talk a little bit about what it is about plique-à-jour that you love so much and how you started?

MS. RENK: Well, I started-well, because I didn't have any training in jewelry, I didn't know any of the techniques by name or by doing them. So the three of us at the gallery- this was back in Chicago, '47-we got some copper; we cut it. We didn't know how to cut it right. Eventually just gradually doing it, we figured it out, what was best; all the things we just slowly developed. And we got books from the library that gave us some information. And in the gallery, as the gallery started to develop, we carried enamel work from-

MS. FISCH: Doris Hall?

MS. RENK: Doris Hall. And she didn't do plique-à-jour enamel, but it started us trying everything to try to get the quality that she got.

So one day I was working with this kiln that we had built ourselves, and I had a sheet of copper with a wire that I twisted into a spiral and laid it on top and then covered with some transparent enamel. We had used a fork. The thing is, enamel is a ground-up glass that you put on top of a piece of metal with water, often, and let it dry. And when it is dry, you hold it in such a way that you can put it in the kiln and take it to a temperature where this glass will re-melt. It doesn't seep in like glaze does in pottery, but it stays on the surface and it is just bonded with surface tension.

So this particular piece, I put it in the kiln and we carried it in on a fire brick, which can be put in high heat of about 1,500 degrees. And it has little holes and you have a little fork, a long-handled fork, and the brick in there with the copper, with the enamel powder that is dried very carefully on top of it and gently set it in, and then you watch through a little peephole because it has orange red heat in there. So you look in and you see that the piece is showing a gloss. So you open the door of the kiln, which has a little-this particular one had a door that is lifted, you moved it up to open it and you take your fork in and you get it back into the holes in the little brick and you bring this hot brick out. Well, as I was doing that on this piece, I bumped the side of kiln and the metal wire slipped off of the sheet and slipped forward, halfway off the metal. And I brought it out and set it down and it cooled. And there I had like a metal separation with a clear window; the enamel was red; it happened to be red, and it had a transparency that you looked through.

MS. FISCH: So it was like a stained-glass window.

MS. RENK: Like a stained-glass window. So all of a sudden I was thrilled, because at our school, the Institute of Design, they talked about not doing decorative things, but doing structural things were very much approved of. And here I had enamel becoming structural, so it was a thrill. And from then on, it was really the technique that I tried to make more and more of. Of course, no one knew what it was.

MS. FISCH: Did you know it had a name, or did you find that out?

MS. RENK: Well, I thought I had discovered it. Well, Kenneth Bates wrote a book that came out about that time, and there we found the name of it; it had been discovered. It was one of the last techniques in enamel that had been discovered. But it had been done by 1800 or something. So from then on, that was-whenver I had the opportunity, I would work with that technique.

MS. FISCH: Now, did you learn about putting it on mica as the background?

MS. RENK: I did, but I didn't need to-I did that when I did very complicated things, but often I would just stamp out holes in a circle, and then you don't have mica in a round shape, so it doesn't work. So when I could use it, I would use it on small flat things. And I used quite a lot of cloissoné, used as accents rather than-I don't necessarily like to have everything plique-à-jour but to have the ability to make your own jewels. You see, I hadn't learned how to work with jewels, so this gave me my own jewels.

MS. FISCH: Do your own gemstones.

MS. RENK: Right, yes, so that was very exciting, and eventually at one time I applied for a National Endowment for the Arts grant and received one to work on plique-à-jour. So, later, because I had to give it up because no one could pay the money for it. And at Nanny's store in San Francisco, people thought it was plastic. It was cute and plastic. So I stopped trying to sell pieces with plique-à-jour and just said one day I hope I will be able to do it again. And I was fortunate enough to have the National Endowment [for the Arts] give me a grant, so I worked for a year later and did a number of pieces, including the *Wedding Crown* that is at the Boston Museum, has some plique-à-jour at the top of it; part of the crown that makes it sort of special is the plique-à-jour. So I felt that is very happy to bring that again, to have a chance to do it again. But it is really a love of your life or you can't do it.

MS. FISCH: It is incredibly labor intensive and also very iffy.

MS. RENK: Exactly, I made one small box-Mobilia has that in their gallery now-an inch square; it was one whole month work.

MS. FISCH: I think I did plique-à-jour once in a tiara and never again. So I am very admiring of your ability to do that.

MS. RENK: Well, it was a passion, but don't get into plique-à-jour unless you have a passion for it.

MS. FISCH: Let's talk again a little bit about the 750 Studio, because you showed-in that year and a half that that gallery was in existence, you showed some really prominent artists. I was very impressed with the caliber of artists that you were able to show in that gallery.

MS. RENK: [Laszlo] Moholy-Nagy, who had been the head of the school at the Institute of Design when I attended, died in November. I started school in September, so I didn't get to know him very well, but his widow also taught, lectured on culture and various philosophies at the school, so we did get to know her. And the Chicago Art Institute had planned with her to have a retrospective. So she gave them the pieces. He had never had an exhibit there.

As you know, the Institute of Design was the modern version of the art world, and the Art Institute was the

traditional version, and so there was a lot of rivalry between the students between the attitudes. And so the show was important from Sibyl's point of view, Sibyl Moholy-Nagy.

And at the same time she said she would like us to have a show so that the students could come and buy things, because we were just three blocks from the school, the Institute of Design. So we sent out our notices and put the show up. And the day before it was to open, Sibyl called almost in tears. And we didn't know what was wrong. So she said that the Chicago Art Institute saw that our show was opening two days before their show was opening, and they said that if our show dared open, they would cancel the show.

MS. FISCH: Oh, no.

MS. RENK: So she said, "I don't like to ask you, but what could you do?" So we said, "We will cover everything with newspapers." And she said, "That is fine. Just open the show after theirs is open." So that is what we did.

MS. FISCH: [Laughs.] And that satisfied the Art Institute?

MS. RENK: Well, they didn't pull the show, no. It was important that he have a big show there.

MS. FISCH: Well, who are some of the other people that you showed?

MS. RENK: We gave Emerson Woelffer—who was one of my professors in painting—we gave him a show. And it was at that show that we sold a painting at the opening, which made us feel like a very professional gallery; we were very successful.

But then the first show that Harry Callahan had, the photographer—had his last show that I heard about was at the National Gallery of Art in Washington. Then we had a show of Henry Miller, who is a writer who also paints watercolors, and he had some of his watercolors and original manuscripts that we sold. And the people at the University of Chicago were very connected to him because they felt it was so wrong that his books were not allowed to be brought into the United States. So they came up from the southern part of Chicago to come to the gallery and buy things. So that was very fun.

Then we had shows of children, we had group shows where people like Ruvolo, Felix Ruvolo, and Richard Koppe, who was also a teacher at the school. We had Winifred Mason, a Haitian woman who had a shop in New York. We had a show of her work, her jewelry. We had a show, the first show of Warren and Ethel MacKenzie in our gallery.

MS. FISCH: So it was a very heady time for showing.

MS. RENK: Yes, and we sold quite a lot of jewelry and pottery. Weaving was very hard for us to sell, which was too bad, because there were beautiful weavings in the area. And Lenore Tawney made some cross-stitch glasses cases that were just beautiful, and I am very sorry I did not buy one myself; I regret it. [They laugh.]

MS. FISCH: Well, Merry, the fact that you lived at the gallery as well as worked there had an impact on your work.

MS. RENK: I am really grateful that I lived there for a year and a half, because seeing pieces everyday, working with them, showing them to people, it allowed me to realize how your taste judgment can be refined. You learn a great deal by living with these paintings.

When we would go to an artist to select the pieces, we would look at everything together with the artist, and the artist would choose things and we would choose things that the artist might not think—well, an artist loves all his work. And the two of us would choose or three of us would choose or one person wanted something strongly and the other two of us didn't feel so inclined; we still said yes, because it was important to have.

And when we got the pieces in our gallery and lived with them, some days or weeks would go by, and we would see them every day and find some pieces turned out to be what you might say flashy. And then as you watched them over the week, they would diminish. And some paintings or sculpture would get more interesting and have more depth, and you would see more interest in it. So it was wonderful to see that your aesthetic can change in such a way, and so it allowed my aesthetic decisions to grow very much, to know that you can look at things and put them down and then come back to them and your attitude might change.

MS. FISCH: So it was a great educational experience in your relation to your own work and your aesthetic.

MS. RENK: It added a whole dimension beyond what I had learned at school, because at school they gave the basic information, the structure on which I worked. But this gave me the ethereal, the cloud around it. So that is what I carried away from Chicago. It was wonderful. I could not buy that kind of an education that the gallery gave me.

MS. FISCH: So it was a great experience at all levels.

MS. RENK: It was fantastic, yes. And I was able to leave before too late. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: In 1950, '51, when you lived in Paris, you had some wonderful experiences.

MS. RENK: Yes, when I was in Paris, I met and dated several American artists who were studying there on the GI Bill. One young man that I dated, his name was Tajiri Shinkichi, and he was a sculptor and he still lives in Europe, and I know that there is one of his large commissions down in Southern California. But we did a motorcycle trip down to Dorgogne country, south of Paris, to see the caves where the great historical cave paintings were, and we were able to go in and see.

MS. FISCH: And they were open then.

MS. RENK: And I had to touch it, because it was so exciting to be in there. I can see if everybody wanted to touch it like I did, it would be wrecked, but I just had to touch these drawings. Anyhow, so we saw that. And then also we visited in Paris a man who was the first sculptor to use the acetylene and to weld iron and metals to construct sculpture, a man by the name of Gonzalez.

And during the time we knew each other, Shinkichi told me about a story about him visiting Brancusi and that Brancusi liked to see young people. And that interested me because not only did he like to see young people, but he liked Americans. Many of the well-known artists in Paris were very slanted against Americans, although they were the young men who were there, mostly young men on the GI Bill, taking classes in the various ateliers. I understood enough French when I would hear these men talking around the cafes to know that they were very demeaning about their American students. So I didn't intend to visit an artist who was not agreeable to me.

So Brancusi liked Americans. One reason was that people from America came and tried to buy his things, and he was very happy. And the French people at that point weren't that interested in his sculpture. He was not French. He was from another country. But anyhow, so Shinkichi told us that we just had to write a letter to [Constantin] Brancusi and say that we would come on a certain day, so that he knows who is coming before we go.

And I had met two women, one woman who had been at the Institute of Design. And the three of us went on a Sunday afternoon in February. I don't know if I said Shinkichi told us to wash our hands well, clean under our nails, push our cuticles back, get our hands prepared hopefully that he would look at them. So we went with our polished fingernails, and we got to the studio and there were two or three very large rooms filled, one with his finished work and the next one had a very big tree he was working on. And it was very cold there.

It was April but Paris isn't that warm in April. So he had on a heavy coat and a wool cap. And I had on a fur-lined cape. It was a cold time; sometimes the sun was shining outside, that is why they say, "April is in Paris," but that is because it has been gray all winter, but it is still very cold inside. And then it was so close to the end of the war, that not many people had much heat.

So, anyhow, we looked around. There were about 20 people there, some nuns with children and other people around. And he came over to us and said, "Stay after everybody leaves." So we did. And so he made us some tea and served some cookies. And I joined him in smoking a cigarillo. And then he said, "I would like to look at your hands." [Laughs.] So he looked at the first girl's hands. He took his large magnifying glass, felt her hand and looked at it, and he said, "You have a nervous stomach." And she did. And he looked at the gal who had been at the ID, whose name I will say is Priscilla. And he said, "You should go back to the kitchen." And he looked at mine and he said, "You have the potential." So that was my story of Brancusi. [They laugh.]

MS. FISCH: I never asked you what your name was, so maybe you would like to tell us about your birth name?

MS. RENK: My birth name was Mary Ruth Gibbs, and I was the daughter of Samuel Bud and Mary Ruth Gibbs. But my mother was called Ruth and so they called me Mary, so we didn't have two Marys being called all the time. And I have an older sister, Thelma Martha Gibbs. And talking about names, I found that it was much discomfort that in most of the classes I had in school that there were always at least two or three Marys, and I became, rather, Merry.

[End Tape 3, Side A.]

MS. RENK: Used it whenever I made a painting or did a creative work. I signed it Merry, although I never changed it legally. Then I married a man by the name of Stanley Renk in 1941; I became Mary Renk, legally, M-a-r-y. But M-e-r-r-y Renk by choice later on. By the time I got to Chicago, I was M-e-r-r-y Renk. And I continued to use that for creative work, even though I am now Merry Renk Curtis, being married to Earle Curtis.

MS. FISCH: You spent some time as an artist-in-residence at your children's school, and I think that was a really interesting opportunity, both for the children and for you. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?

MS. RENK: Yes, the artist-in-residence was part of a program that had been started by Ruth Asawa and a group of parents at Alvarado Grade School in San Francisco, which spread to the junior highs, which spread to a senior high, and the actual beginning of an arts high school in San Francisco, very exciting. But little by little, as Ruth's children got older, the friends who were part of this great triangle, or pyramid, of people interested became larger and larger. It was a wonderful, very exciting thing to have happen. And what she felt was that in a city like this, or anywhere there are parents who are artists, so they are in the school and their life will be enriched by having a parent come to school and work with them in some aspect of their artwork. And sometimes Ruth was able to get money so that people could be paid to come in; the artist-in-residence was a place and time when you were paid to come and work.

And I did that at my daughter Sandra's junior high when she was at Everett Junior High School in San Francisco. And we did a project-I wanted to work with metal with the children, but there was no equipment and there was no studio in which it was really a safe place for children to work, or young junior children, junior high.

So I decided to do a project where I would make plaster masks of the children's faces, and then these children would design some animal, bird, flower, or image that this face would be made into. And so we did plaster masks on people's faces, one by one, and then they covered it, they worked on it, and then I took them home and put them in an electroforming vat and formed an electroform over the plaster. And then we added pieces of copper cut, and the background of the mural was made with aluminum cans cut and opened and flattened. And we had a mural about 25 by four feet high. And that was the biggest amount of time I ever gave to the school.

But with every single grade that my children were in, all the years that they were in school, in the public schools, I offered a day or two to each class to do something. So I often either demonstrated my jewelry making, or I did some special art project with them, so that even an offer of a project, I worked within the school.

MS. FISCH: That was a wonderful contribution I think. Merry, I know you had a long relationship with Imogen Cunningham, the photographer, and I wonder if you would like to talk about that?

MS. RENK: Yes, she was a very wonderful person. She lived to be in her nineties, and I think of her as my dream of being old, older than I am now, because she lived to about 94. And she was very active. She could only work five hours a day in her workshop when she was 94. Didn't become infirm until a few weeks before her death.

I met her because she was a friend of Ruth and Albert Lanier. And we met and she came over to my studio and did photographs of me at work in the early '50s. And then she saw me wearing a Spanish cape, a man's cape I bought when I was in Spain. And she said, "I have a place to pose you in this." And I went with her and posed on some stairs wearing the cape and sandals. And she made several poses.

What was wonderful was she gave me pictures, copies of these photos. And one photograph was used in an article for her in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. And it was because of that photo of my sitting on these stairs with the cape, she received a commission which she had never-in all the publicity she had ever gotten, she had never received a commission from any articles before, so she was very pleased, and so was I.

And then I posed again for her when she wanted to do some photographs along the edge of the Bay. And Maurice Lapp, who is a painter, was in town, and she wanted to take photos of him. So we went with her to the edge of a cliff, and she took a number of photographs. They were posed photographs. She did enter some of these in the Women Artists Shows, and they rejected them because they said they looked posed. [Laughs.] But we saw each other relatively often. We both attended the Museum of Modern Art's openings, and we also always were invited to the group birthday of Imogen and Albert Lanier and other friends having the birthday on the same days, so we would have a great birthday party out in the park. And when the first film festival began in San Francisco, Imogen invited me to go with her in this first show. And she was a wonderful woman, very sharp and almost vinegary in her attitudes. And sometimes she would startle you because what she would say would be so tart. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: But you liked posing for her?

MS. RENK: Oh, indeed. And then, of course, when I became pregnant and she asked me to pose, I had never done any nude posing for anybody. And I talked it over with Earle and he said, "Well, do it." He had posed nude for his art school and for his college classes and for Minor White and felt that you should certainly use-he felt it would be wonderful if I would do this.

So I had about a four-hour afternoon with her in this house before it was renovated. And the picture that she took that she chose as being the most beautiful was one which was taken in the space which is now our bathroom. And it shows my hair coming down. I didn't ask that my face not be shown, but this is how she chose

to show this pregnant body. The one that she loved, my hair hung down and then through a-with a very soft light-some of the plants outside came through just lightly in the background. So it was quite a beautiful photograph. And she took photographs out on the back porch against the door. And she took me lying down on the couch. And all I did was move to where she wanted me to be, and it was very nice; I mean it was very agreeable.

MS. FISCH: She never photographed your work at all?

MS. RENK: Well, early on, we made a trade for the studio photographs that she did. And so I made her a hair piece, silver with pearls, that she wore because she had long hair and had a bun, similar to the way I wore my hair. So she did give me a photograph of the hair piece, of the little comb in someone else's hair, but it was her photograph of it. I never would have asked her to photograph my jewelry.

MS. FISCH: Well, she wasn't an object photographer.

MS. RENK: No. She loved flowers. I just never thought to ask her. Well, because she earned her money by doing portraits of people.

MS. FISCH: Well, it was a very nice symbiotic relationship that you had.

MS. RENK: Yes, and actually I did some photographs. Her son, Padric, owned a farm or a place out in the country across the Bay, which was going to be flooded when they put in a lake. So we went there for a party, Ruth and Al and Earle, and Baunnie was about a year old or less. And I took my camera, so I took a lot of photographs. And I got quite a good bunch of photographs of Imogen photographing Ruth's son. And she tried to encourage me to send my photograph into the magazine. [Laughs.]

MS. FISCH: Because she thought it was good.

MS. RENK: Right, but it is with regret that I felt too shy about that.

MS. FISCH: You've made a number of wedding crowns over the years, including one for each daughter, as part of the dowry. And I am sort of curious about what the dowry is and what else is included?

MS. RENK: Well, when my daughters became of an age when it seemed like they were getting ready to be married, I wanted them to have my *Wedding Crown*, my design for them. And also I wanted them to have a group of jewelry that they chose of my designs, so that they would have a group of pieces with them, because about that time Earle had stopped doing pottery, and I hadn't had a chance to get a whole set for my kitchen, my own set.

I had pieces that he had made, but I never had the whole caboodle. I should have spoken earlier; he would have been very willing to make things for me. But he just stopped at a certain point. And the whole structure of the pottery world just disappeared in the late '70s. There were so many potters and not many places were selling so he stopped making pottery, like today and tomorrow. It seemed like that.

So I wanted my daughters to have what I called the dowry. It is certainly not a typical American gift, but I felt that my dowry was my jewelry gift to them. And so I asked them what they wanted, what size they wanted. I made earrings and bracelets and brooches and necklaces. I don't remember the number of pieces but I also included a wedding crown designed for them. So Baunnie was older, but Sandy was getting married before Baunnie. So I made a wedding crown for Baunnie later. The one for Sandy, I used as a theme a name that I gave to her when she-a familiar name. When Baunnie was born, she was my peach blossom. And Sandy was my cherry blossom. So I made a wedding crown with ivory petals carved, piano keys that were carved and stained. And there was a wreath of wire leaves that came around with the flowers on the end and some branches that were very fine branches with gold melted balls and pearls. And she wore it in her two weddings.

And then Baunnie's group, I made all the various pieces she wanted, but she was away at the university studying and came home on breaks in the summer time. So when she came home, we would talk about the designs. And it wasn't quite right. When she would come home again, we would talk again and I would show her some designs. This was about two years before we finally found a design that pleased us both.

So for Baunnie, I used an experience I had one day when I was in the garden having a moment of reflection, and I looked at a plant that was growing in the garden, a wild dandelion. And on the dandelion was all the buds, the flowers, the dying flowers, and then the seed pod, all parts of life on one stem and all beautiful. So it spoke to me as I was getting to the white-haired stage that all life was beautiful. And it was a great sense of ecstasy. And I wanted to take that idea and make a wedding crown which was going to be four repeating sets of bud, flower, dead head, and seed pod. So that was the circle. Baunnie thought that was fine, so she went off to school again, and I started to make one of each first, just to see how they would work out technically. And when I did the seed

pod, I nearly went out of my mind, because it was very lightweight wire with all these parts being soldered together. So I realized I did not ever want to make one more of these. So back to the drawing board. [Laughs.] When she came back, she said, "Well, Mama, why don't you let me look through your drawers, look through your gems, and maybe we can figure out what to do." She has that kind of nature, she likes to work spontaneously, whereas I have to plan. So she went through and she pulled out-this can be a snake; she was taking a degree in biology, or wanted to. So we ended up by having the four dandelion parts and different things of her life, the Lotus, because she is a Buddhist; the snake and the lizard and the shell with the crab who goes into someone else's shell, these three because of the biology aspects of her life. And so every one had a particular meaning to her life. So that was the design. And every kind of metal and gem that she chose, opals and pearls and so on.

MS. FISCH: So it was a very successful ending to a long story.

MS. RENK: Right, and I called it *All Parts of Life are Beautiful*. And I have just recently added that to my memory painting, I made a mandala of these parts.

MS. FISCH: Well, why don't we talk a little bit now about your paintings, because that is really what you are most involved with now.

MS. RENK: Well, one aspect of my paintings is I like to do memories of my past. Having started painting at 60, I could be very free; I had only to follow my own path. So I started to do paintings of my childhood. And eventually realizing that what I really wanted to do with these is to make books for my grandchildren from these, because at this time there were print shops where you could take a snapshot and they could make a laser color print-laser color copy, I like to get the words correct-laser color copy of a photograph and it could be made into an eight and a half by 11, and I could put this into a book very easily. So I did that. When I would make a memory painting, I would get it printed, get it copied.

And I did it because when I would go home to my sister's where I grew up-my sister is still living in New Jersey in the home we lived in last, the whole family together. We met with cousins all of the same generation, we are the elders now. [They laugh.] We are surprised, but that is where we are. And we talk about our families. We talk about our uncle and grandfather and try to exchange the memories that we have, only we aren't sure if grandfather did it or an uncle did it. After a three-hour evening, we would come away with less solid information than we went in with.

So I decided that I was going to make paintings and make books for my grandchildren. I am skipping a generation because my kids are grown-up already, but for the grandchildren, I am making these books.

So I continued making them, and finally I was honored by the American Craft Council and became a fellow and traveled to Michigan to receive this honor. And I realized that I hadn't done any paintings of my making jewelry. And it felt wonderful that I had this wealth of my greatest passion that I hadn't even started to use. So that began a whole new aspect of my painting.

And it seems like so many years have gone by; I haven't done dozens of paintings, but when they come, I am so happy to work on these. I get such delight out of working on the memory paintings. I find that I also learn about myself and my family relationships. I learn so much each time I do it. I even recently did a painting of my stay in the hospital where I had my 10th birthday. I was there for four months, and I finally cleaned out that drawer, so to speak. And my next painting planned-and I am going to ask you, Arline, if I can look at your hands before you go to see if you have a jeweler's tattoo, and you do. I should get a photograph of your hands so I can include you in my drawing of hands. I don't know how it will-

MS. FISCH: I saw that you had one.

MS. RENK: Yes, I have three. So I don't think many people are aware that jewelers have tattoos from their work, so I want to make a painting about that.

MS. FISCH: What have you learned about your work as a jeweler by doing these paintings? I am quite fascinated by the way in which you developed the subject matter for the paintings, and I wonder what they mean to you. I love the one with the floating pliers.

MS. RENK: Yes, on a cloud. That is because the most precious pliers to me were these parallel pliers that I used, and I had one for each hand. And there is something about having the two of them that gave me the greatest sense of security and assurance that I could do these things. And because I gathered only a few tools-I have known other jewelers who might have 30, 60 pliers; pliers for every different need. But I apparently worked in very limited ways, and I only need a few pliers, so that these pliers were a great gift to jewelers, to all jewelers. So I wanted to, more or less, put them in their place in heaven on a cloud. [Laughs.] And that is the wonderful thing about painting, is that you can just use your fantasy. I realize a lot of the jewelry that is going on now is really quite wonderful, because the fantasy is coming out again, and I am delighted to see that.

MS. FISCH: Well, there is a piece of yours that I think combines fantasy with realism, and I wonder if you would like to describe that piece. It was called *Ursus Californicus*.

MS. RENK: Yes, well, that was a piece-I actually did that-that was one of the pieces I did for my retrospective show. I designed it with that in mind, because it was the California Craft Museum, and California's state animal is a grizzly bear. I don't know if it is the *Ursus californicus*, but it is one of the bears that-it is the one animal that frightens the Indians. They were completely respectful of the bear because they had no way to-they couldn't run fast enough and were badly mauled by grizzlies. But the sad thing is that this grizzly has disappeared from the earth.

MS. FISCH: You mean the bear itself.

MS. RENK: The bear itself has disappeared. But what I enjoyed, one of the parts of doing something about an animal you can't see and you have to find out about, you have to go to books and look up things about-you find out things about bears, and you have all this serendipity information that sort of enriches the experience for you. What I wanted to do was a family of bears in a circle, the male bears on the outside of the piece, basically a circle with, I think, six bears. And the next circle with some somewhat smaller female bears, mother bear. And then the inner circle had the baby bears. And the bears were all made in wax and cast. And then riveted on to a ring, a sheet, and interlocked together. So then I made a handmade chain, sort of a hinge tubing. Well, anyhow, I can't remember exactly how that worked out, whether it was a solid material. Anyhow, a linked kind of handmade chain that went with it.

MS. FISCH: And I understand that piece has vanished.

MS. RENK: No, no.

MS. FISCH: You know where it is.

MS. RENK: It was purchased by the California Craft Museum [San Francisco, CA] for their collection. Someone donated money for that at the show, the exhibit. And it was in their collection. And, unfortunately, the California Craft Museum is no longer-it was put up to auction, and it is now in the collection of Ms. Breier.

MS. FISCH: So we do know where it is.

MS. RENK: Yes.

MS. FISCH: That is wonderful. Well, thank you so much for all of that information, Merry. This is the end of tape number three.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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