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Oral history interview with Norma  
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**Contact Information**

Reference Department  
Archives of American Art  
Smithsonian Institution  
Washington, D.C. 20560  
[www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions](http://www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions)  
[www.aaa.si.edu/](http://www.aaa.si.edu/)

## **Transcript**

### **Preface**

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Norma Minkowitz on September 17 and November 16, 2001. The interview took place in Westport, Connecticut, and was conducted by Patricia Malarcher 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.

Norma Minkowitz and Patricia Malarcher 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. PATRICIA MALARCHER: Patricia Malarcher interviewing Norma Minkowitz at her home and studio in Westport, Connecticut, on September 17, 2001, for the Archives of American Art.

When and where were you born?

MS. NORMA MINKOWITZ: I was born in New York City, in the Bronx, in 1937.

MS. MALARCHER: What section of the Bronx?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Actually, I was born in a place called West Eden Sanitarium, which sounds really strange, but it was in the Bronx, New York. We lived in the Bronx in a building on East 174th Street my whole childhood.

MS. MALARCHER: Describe your childhood and your family background.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I had a very artistic family. My father was a concert pianist, and at the age of nine, he was the youngest student at the conservatory in St. Petersburg. And my mother had aspirations of being a singer and was attracted to my father for those very reasons, because of her musical interests and his musical success. My grandfather was both a teacher and a composer. He didn't care about fame or fortune. He just sat at his desk all day writing music. My uncle was a violinist, and there was a lot of music in my house, and it was very beautiful.

MS. MALARCHER: When did your family come to America?

MS. MINKOWITZ: My family came in the 1920s. My father came to New York, and my mother came - actually, my mother came from a wealthy family, and they ran away from Russia,

where my father had permission to come, because he was a concert pianist and was known in the area. But my mother's family was wealthy, and they had to actually try to make themselves look like peasants so that they could get out of the country without retributions for being the wealthy class. So they actually had to rub their hands on cords so that they could develop calluses, so it would be easier to get out of the country.

And they came to Vancouver. My father came to New York and my mother's family settled in Vancouver, British Columbia. And my grandfather had a necktie factory, and my mother lived there for many years until she came to the United States.

MS. MALARCHER: And what brought your mother to the United States?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, she had family here. She had a cousin in the States, and actually, she met my father on a visit to her cousin, who lived in Brooklyn. And they went to a party, and my father was playing the piano, and she was attracted to the music and he was attracted to her. And my uncle actually was also attracted to her, so there was a little bit of a rivalry at that point. But he said to my uncle, "That's my girl. Keep away." And that was it, and they married shortly after that. [They Laugh.]

MS. MALARCHER: Had your mother ever begun to realize her aspirations to be a singer?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, I know when she was in Canada, she had performed in some small, maybe, neighborhood theaters or religious centers, and she sang. I actually have a program where she did a vocal presentation. But nothing ever came of it. She got married, I guess, and that was history. He was the focal point as far as the career.

MS. MALARCHER: According to your interview with Richard Polsky for the Oral History Collection at Columbia University, your mother taught you how to crochet.

MS. MINKOWITZ: She did, yes.

MS. MALARCHER: How old were you then, and what was that experience like?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I just remember that, you know, we used to all sit on a - we had one bedroom; we used to sit on the bed, and my mother was always making sweaters and creating things, and we were always listening to the radio. And my dad, when he was home, would always, like, fall asleep at the foot of the bed because he was getting ready to go play his music. He played music in the evening, so he was kind of taking a snooze.

And she made lots of sweaters and would always give me the scraps, and taught me how to crochet. And I remember being really excited about it, because I had just learned how to crochet a circle, and I kept going round and round, and making doilies, and changing the colors, and I just really got excited about it. And then the circles started to become more - by counting stitches, I was able to sculpt the forms. In other words, by skipping stitches, it would become more cup-shaped. By adding stitches, it would become ruffled or flat.

And I just taught myself how to make a three-dimensional form. And at the beginning, I kind of crocheted around my dolls. And, first, I started making clothing, and then I started crocheting completely around the dolls and covering them and not being able to take it off after I was finished. And I guess that was probably the time when I first - that was my first interest in sculpting.

MS. MALARCHER: About what age was that?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think probably seven or eight. I just, kind of, was thinking about my own daughter, who I taught to crochet. And I thought she was older, but I was just looking at some clippings where, when I showed early on in my career, my children often did small objects and were also in the show. And she was about that age, so I think that was about the age that I learned to crochet. And I really loved it.

MS. MALARCHER: What about your early education? Was art part of your formal schooling?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, in public school, you know, there were always the traditional art classes, where one would draw and one would, you know, do the traditional crayons and pencil techniques, and I always was very good at drawing. And as I got older and approached high school, I applied to the High School of Music and Art, which was a school for gifted

children, and I did get in. And I think my high school education was just filled with, obviously, art classes and different kinds of materials. We worked in sculpting, and we worked with clay and fiber, did a lot of different things, and I think that was a wonderful school for a beginning career in art.

MS. MALARCHER: What kind of fiber work would you have done there?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, you know, we had, like, a traditional class; I remember I really liked it. It was just learning how to weave a little mat, you know, and it was going in and out of the wefts and just learning how to do that, and that was completely new to me. And that was probably the last time I did fiber until I was married, except for, you know, things for the kids at home.

MS. MALARCHER: Was that high school preparing you for a life as a professional artist?

MS. MINKOWITZ: At that time, I don't think I really thought about it. I just liked to draw, and I was good at it, and I just felt that, you know, that was what I wanted to do. I was interested in dance as well, but you know, taking ballet once a week wasn't really going to get me anywhere. And my parents, at that time, couldn't really afford that much, so the arts was really where I hoped to develop my skills.

And when I was in Music and Art High School, they had a competition for only two artists that was sponsored by the Society of Illustrators, New York. And out of all the students that applied – it was just myself and one other student that received a scholarship, and that was kind of a pat on the back as far as validation of my drawing ability. And I did go and I did take the classes in New York, and that was really interesting.

MS. MALARCHER: What classes were those? What was that scholarship for?

MS. MINKOWITZ: It was going to the Society of Illustrators in New York City, which had world famous illustrators, and they would give lectures and they would draw. And it was just for a short period of time, but it kind of gave you an insight to the commercial world and the artists who drew so beautifully in the ads and in the graphics, and in that kind of thing. So I really got a lot out of that.

MS. MALARCHER: You keep mentioning drawing, rather than painting. Were you more interested in line than in color?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yes, I was always interested in line, and I adored Albrecht Dürer and the cross-hatching, the fine pen-and-ink cross-hatching of his linear works and his woodcuts. I think what I'm doing now is really an extension of line, because I consider the fiber to be a line, and I'm actually drawing three dimensionally with the line. And that was more my interest than painting. I also enjoyed woodcuts and things that were very graphic, with black shapes and linear quality as well. So that was really my main focus.

MS. MALARCHER: So you weren't attracted to working with form and, you might say, harder materials that you had to cut into –

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I liked woodcut, which was a flat surface that you cut into, but it also had this raised area that would print the ink, which was also similar to the line and meeting of the shapes, and that kind of thing. I did a few three-dimensional wood carvings, but they were just, like, preliminary kind of things. I think, at that time, other than crocheting around the dolls, which was completely three-dimensional, I wasn't really focused on sculpture, per se.

MS. MALARCHER: Where did you go after Music and Art?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I then applied to Cooper Union, which is one of the finest art schools in New York City, and also to Pratt [Pratt Institute, Brooklyn, New York], which was the more commercial kind of school. I was hoping to get into Cooper Union, because it was free and my parents really couldn't afford to send me to college, and then I could live at home. I applied there and I did get in – two days of extensive tests. It's a pretty difficult school to get into. I think they take, like, one out of ten students now, and at that time, it was one out of four in the art school.

So it was considered by the school to be a real privilege, and if you didn't live up to your

expectations, you were out of there. So I really was happy to get into that school. And even at that school, I didn't really focus on sculpture at that time. I was more interested in the graphics and drawing. There were many courses then. I took architecture, two-dimensional design, three-dimensional design, English, cultural values. There was, you know, an abundance of different types of courses.

I did like painting, but I don't think that I was as gifted in painting as I was in drawing. So that was my focus there.

MS. MALARCHER: When you went to Cooper after Music and Art, where you had been so successful – getting the scholarship to the Society of Illustrators, and so on – did Cooper Union introduce a new level of competition because of the overall excellence of the students?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, actually, it was more difficult because everybody was so good, you know, and you really had to work very hard to stay on that level. It was more diverse because, you know, people either focused on architecture, or advertising, or sculpture, or painting. And at that time, I really didn't know where I was going, I just took all the courses and did better in some than others, and that indicated to me what I wanted to do.

I still had interests in illustration. And you know, I didn't separate it as an art form from drawing because I thought some of the finest artists were doing illustration. So that was my focus also.

MS. MALARCHER: What was your most rewarding educational experience?

MS. MINKOWITZ: At Cooper Union? I know. I had one teacher that I mention frequently, Stefano Cusamano, who was my two-dimensional art teacher. And he really, I think, made me think of the form in three dimensions. It was interesting because it was a two-dimensional art course, but he would make us draw so that we would be seeing the other side, for instance, of a plant. And we had to visualize what the other side of it looked like, and I just became very interested in the three-dimensional quality in that class, and I really think he helped me a lot. And I always think of him.

MS. MALARCHER: Would you say that he was sort of a mentor, or were there other people who, kind of, guided you along the way?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I didn't really have any mentors at that time. I just felt he guided me and gave me a lot to think about, and gave me a path that later became my main interest.

MS. MALARCHER: What happened after you left Cooper? Was that a three-year or a four-year program?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, at the time I was there, it was three years; now, it's four years. I would've had to take maybe one or two more academic courses to make it equal to a four-year course, but at that time, it was only three years. I did some book illustration in my last year of Cooper Union. I answered an ad on the bulletin board, and it was to do a children's dictionary, and it was black-and-white drawings. And it was my first paid job, and there were 99 drawings. She asked me how much I would want, and I said, "A dollar a drawing." [They Laugh.]

So I made \$99. I had to drive to New Jersey about three times. And luckily, at that time, I had my husband. He was a mechanical engineer, so he, kind of, drove me there and helped me interpret the science part of it. But that was my first paying job. I was so excited.

MS. MALARCHER: You said that was a children's dictionary. Was it a science dictionary?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Actually, it was two books: one was a children's schoolbook, and one was a science dictionary. So I don't remember what I charged for the second one, but I don't think it was much more.

MS. MALARCHER: And was it actually published?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yes, I have it – published in black-and-white line drawings, just what I love to do.

MS. MALARCHER: What did that lead into?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Absolutely nothing. I got married after that. I graduated in '58, and the next June, I married my husband, and everything was sort of put on hold. I don't think I really had strong aspirations of becoming an artist at that time. I can only do one thing at a time, and marriage was my next step. And I got married in June, and then I put an apron on and tried to burn liver like my husband's mother used to, because that's the way he liked it. [They Laugh.] And then, like in a few months, my husband says, "Don't you want to work?" And I said, "Yeah, that's a good idea."

I had a friend who worked in the textile industry designing textiles. And I had no experience, and she said, "You know, you're an artist. Just say you've had experience." And I got a job in a big company called Cohn Hall Marx. And because I had not done it before, my first job there was as a colorist. So in other words, if an artist designed a print, like a floral pattern, they would give it to the colorist, who would do, like, three different color combinations at the same intensity as the original.

And I did that for a while, and then I started freelancing and doing my own designs, and I had some success with that. I was selling some patterns, and would actually walk down the street in New York and see something that I did, and I'd say, "That's my pattern."

MS. MALARCHER: What sort of patterns were they?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Mainly abstract, floral, geometric, just colors, just like small paintings. And then, you know, if it was possible to print them as fabrics, and they were good, they would select them. So I did that for a while, and then in 1961, I had my first child, and then everything else went on hold again. And in '63, I had my second child. And at that time, I kind of went back to fiber because it was something I could do at home with the kids. And at first, I started just making clothing, you know, little tops and things for my daughter, without instructions, just making it up as I used to as a child.

And it kept escalating until we moved to - my husband got a job as an engineer in Hatfield, Massachusetts, which was a really lonely place. And I thought I would try something new. And you know, you keep getting these magazines like *Woman's Day* and, you know, just commercial magazines, and there's always craft objects. And so, I started to think, well, maybe I could send designs into the magazine, in *Family Circle*, *Woman's Day*, and stuff like that.

You know, my art career really started in a very decorative beginning. After Cooper Union, it was almost like, when I think back, a letdown, because I was just doing designs. And I started sending them to the magazines, and they started buying them. And at first, they were kind of decorative wall hangings and animal forms, and then they started to become more three-dimensional. Then I started to do pillows that were very sculptural, and they kept buying them.

And then at that time America House in New York opened up, and they wanted to sell my work there. And I did work for them. And I had a few commissions, like - for room settings, and then I joined some organizations in New York, like Artist-Craftsmen of New York and the Connecticut Craftsmen's Society. And I just started showing with them, I started winning some awards, and then I realized that I was doing decoration and started to remember everything I learned at school, and go forward with the sculptural aspect of it. That was probably in the late '60s when I really got into that, as well as doing some wearables.

MS. MALARCHER: When you were doing the designs for the magazine, were these published along with the directions for someone to reproduce them?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, right.

MS. MALARCHER: And did you have to do the directions?

MS. MINKOWITZ: No, they were basically simple. Like some of them were, like, just beautiful animals that were embroidered, you know, so they could figure that out themselves. I also got very interested in reverse appliqué, which are the molas the Kuna Indians do, and I started doing some contemporary wall pieces that were multilayered. And as you cut into each layer, the color is revealed, and it becomes almost like a woodcut to me.

So I did some of those, and then I got a commission to do some skirts that were reverse appliqué, and that was probably the last commercial thing I did. And then, I started to do

wall hangings as more of an art form. I also started to teach, so I did some teaching at Brookfield Center [Brookfield, CT], Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN]. And I did some craft classes at that time in reverse appliqué.

MS. MALARCHER: Had you taken workshops or courses to learn how to do that, or did you just teach yourself?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I just taught myself. It was very obvious. As you cut into each layer, and you start with four layers, you just have to tuck it under. And so, it was very process-oriented, but it had a lot of potential for design. So I did that for a while, and I enjoyed it. It kept going on until I finally went completely into the interlacing of the fiber.

MS. MALARCHER: So when you began to focus on fiber, did some of your knowledge about working in other media feed into your fiber work?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I was always drawing. As far back as I can remember, it's like I was crocheting. And I feel that I'm drawing this intricate crosshatched, you know, drawing, like Albrecht Dürer, with lines that are different and have different weights. And it was almost like each stitch is made the same way, but each stitch is different, because it's a human hand. And you know, one stitch had a different feel to the other, but it was the repetition of one stitch.

And I didn't want to get too involved with a lot of techniques, because I wanted the process to be part of the content. And I didn't want to have a multitude of little stitches and technical things. I wanted them to be really simple, like pen and ink, and you know, the artwork would speak for itself, not the technique. So you know, I didn't want it to be about how it's done; I wanted it to be more about why it's done, which is the art of it, not the craft of it, really. So that was my focus.

MS. MALARCHER: Could you be a little more specific about wanting the content and the process to be the same?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I picked crochet because, as I said, it was very simple, and the body of it, the structure of it actually becomes the surface of the piece. So that I'm crocheting this fabric and it has this fragile quality, which is going to be part of my work, which – the essence of it is this transparency, this structured form that is both fragile and at the same time could be very strong.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you think it would have been helpful to have had fiber courses during your college years?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I probably would have been interested in learning how to weave, but I don't think so, because I think my work is not so much about the process of fiber. But it is in a different sense, because it's like I pick a medium and a way of working that expresses what I want to say in my sculpture. But I don't think that I would want to do opaque wall hangings and graphic wall hangings, because that's not what I like to do. I'm more interested in the transparency of the line, volume and form.

And I think this helps me make this connection between surface, and structure, and volume and form, inside and outside. And like everything I do, you can see inside of [it], you know, and I don't think I could do that with another technique. You know, so I want it to be open. I wanted to be able to see inside of it. I almost want to share what I'm trying to show you on the inside. So nothing is hidden.

MS. MALARCHER: Well, let's go back to the time when you were just getting started, to get a sense of the climate of that time. Somewhere around the early or mid-'70s, it seemed that crochet started to blossom, and there were a lot of artists in the New York area who were almost like a community of crochet artists, most of them working on wearables, and so on. Were you at all associated with that group, or were you aware of them?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I met most of these artists that you're talking about at Julie's when I was doing wearables. And they were doing these beautiful coats and crocheted headpieces and masks, but they were generally with a heavy yarn and a lot of bright colors. I wasn't really associated with them on a personal level, but I did meet them at the openings at the gallery, and we exchanged slides, because a lot of us were teaching and we wanted to show what other people were doing in crochet. But I really was mostly by myself, you know. I just

liked to go home and do what I'm doing.

MS. MALARCHER: You mentioned showing your work at America House and at Julie's. Had you sought out those venues, or did someone there see your work someplace and invite you to show?

MS. MINKOWITZ: America House, I think I sought out and showed them my work, and they were interested in showing it. The wearable portion of my career, Julie came to my house, because she lived in Connecticut and knew my work, and I remember, at that time, she was, like, in her 30s, just a young girl. And she came to my house – and I had never done wearables – and asked me if I would do them, and I said I would try.

And I kind of got caught up in the movement, and I started doing wearables. And unfortunately, for me to do wearables was extremely time-consuming, because I liked the really thin thread. And you know, these other artists were doing these coats with these heavy, you know, textured thread, and I would be doing these coats that would take forever because they were so fine. And it was almost like Chinese work, you know, because it was so intricate and so fine.

And I was able to get very subtle textures, and at times I would even crochet over photographs and get pictorial images in it. And they were beautiful. I just started to be interested in the female form, both for the wearables to be displayed on and for the female forms to be on the wearables. And I remember the first piece I did, which is at the Metropolitan Museum of Art [New York City], was a cloak and it had 99 stuffed, one-inch female forms in the yoke.

And I think that was the time when I started to really want to do more sculptural forms and work with the female form. And I started also, at that same time, doing small white, three-dimensional stuffed forms that had female forms on them. And that was, kind of, something I did at the same time as the wearables. I also showed those in New York City. And the Elements Gallery, at that time, was in New York, and some other galleries in California. But that was the beginning of the sculptural pieces.

MS. MALARCHER: Can you remember the names of any of those other galleries?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think one was Miller Brown and another, Elaine Potter, both contemporary galleries. They went out of business. I showed at another gallery. I would have to look it up. But I did show in California, and I showed in another gallery in Chicago. But, basically, the Elements here in New York.

MS. MALARCHER: What about exhibitions? You said that you had belonged to the Artist-Craftsmen of New York and some other organizations. Did they sponsor exhibitions that would take your work into museums and places other than commercial galleries?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, they had a lot of shows that were in a lot of corporate buildings, like downstairs in the lobby, and then some, I think it was the Interfaith Church, they had some shows there. And they did show your work in numerous New York City locations, and that was a good start for me. I had won a few awards in some of their shows, and that was helpful, very encouraging. At that time, though, some of the work was still heavily textured and colorful. But I showed there and I showed at the Society of Connecticut Craftsmen, also had several shows in the area.

MS. MALARCHER: When you started showing in galleries, were they presenting shows with a  
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[Tape break.]

MS. MINKOWITZ: The best shows, actually, were the ones at American Craft Museum [New York City], because they were conceptual. I remember Paul Smith curated a number of shows that were the most creative shows I think they ever had at that museum. One was "Portable World," one was "The Great American Foot," which I was in, "Homage to the Bag," "Baroque '74." There were numerous shows that had a theme, and they were extremely creative shows. And most of the work was not functional; it was conceptual. And those shows were usually catalogued, and that was a very good beginning for me to be in those shows.



MS. MALARCHER: Was your work selling at that time?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, the smaller pieces were selling, not that much, though. But you know, fiber, I think, took longer than any other medium to be accepted, because most people want to know how to clean it and what's going to happen to it. And at the beginning, you know, the work was not coated. My later pieces became coated with shellacs and things that were more protective. But I did sell, but not a lot.

The wearables sold very well because they were different from the other artists. They were finer and they weren't as heavy, and they made people look thinner, I think, so they sold very well. [They Laugh.]

MS. MALARCHER: When you began to exhibit, were you, at that time, identifying yourself as a craftsman, and were you looking for opportunities in craft galleries and settings?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think from the beginning, I never wanted really to be called a craft artist; I wanted to be called an artist. Because I felt it didn't really matter what material you used; it's what you have to say. And I didn't consciously look to craft galleries; however, most of the galleries that were showing fiber were craft galleries. But I did show in several museum shows. I showed at the Herbert F. Johnson Museum at Cornell University. They had the *Hand-Wrought Object* at that time.

And Carnegie Institute [Pittsburgh, PA], "Fiber Structures," with the Cleveland Museum of Art, showed "Fiber Works." That was in 1977, so major museums were showing fiber as an art form. And then I think one of the biggest shows I was in was "Fiber R/evolution" in 1986, and that was purely conceptual work that was, you know, from Magdalena Abakanowicz to Lenore Tawney to Sheila Hicks. It was a wonderful, wonderful show. And they had curators come in to jury your work, and that was a wonderful thing to be part of, with a catalogue.

I think the biggest success was being in museum shows rather than gallery shows, because the museum shows didn't say, this is a craft show - this is an art show of artists who work with fiber, which put it on a different level.

MS. MALARCHER: And you have work in some museum collections.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I do. I have work in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Smithsonian, American Craft Museum, Detroit Institute of Art. I have a new one recently that's in Korea, the Kwang Ju Museum, and the De Young Memorial Museum [San Francisco, CA] just bought one of my pieces. So numerous art shows - Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford [CT]. So that's very rewarding to be in major museum collections.

I was going to say, the one at the Wadsworth Atheneum, which I am very happy to be in that collection, but Andrea Miller-Keller, who was a curator there at that time, did an all-media show of artists working with the human figure. And she took my piece out of the fiber collection and mixed it in with artists like Alex Katz and people who were using the form in painting and sculpture. And I thought that was a really wonderful thing for her to do.

MS. MALARCHER: What about at the Metropolitan?

MS. MINKOWITZ: At the Metropolitan, I think I have a couple of vessel forms that were given as gifts by collectors, but also the piece I mentioned before - the cloak with the 99 female figures - is in that collection, and they displayed it in the show. I remember what year it was, but what was it called? Let me just look at my list here. It was "Modern Design, 1880 to 1990: Twentieth Century Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art." And they did a book about that, and my cloak was in that collection.

MS. MALARCHER: Was that in the costume collection, the Costume Institute?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah.

MS. MALARCHER: And what about the vessels? What department were they in?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I'm not sure. I just heard about this recently, that they were given as gifts. But frequently - someone just gave a gift to the Mint Museum, and De Young Memorial Museum also got a gift from a collector. So that's nice.

MS. MALARCHER: Did you ever encounter bias toward your work because of its being in

fiber?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Not really. I think most of the reviewers who've ever written about my work have just said, "The Sculpture of Norma Minkowitz." I think it's probably harder to get into a New York gallery because some of the galleries don't recognize fiber as an art form. But I think, you know, that's changing. My gallery [Bellas Artes] had, for a few years, the gallery in New York – and I was very successful there, and they were very successful. They just had no way to run it, so they decided to close it.

MS. MALARCHER: You have said that you were involved in teaching. At what stage was that?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I taught at the beginning, when I first started to do the reverse appliqué and that kind of – probably in 1975, I did a workshop at Brookfield, at Arrowmont. I did a small seminar at Yale University [New Haven, CT]. And in 1975, I presented and did a workshop at South Dakota State University [Brookings, SD]. It was about women artists and it was focused on women artists. And I remember the workshop was so much fun because they had these big football players coming in to take the workshop. These big guys were sitting and trying to crochet.

It was really nice, because there was no, like, differentiation: everybody was interested. And I did some lectures at Brockton Art Museum [Brockton, MA], and I just recently did something at the Katonah Museum of Art [Katonah, NY]. But I don't really enjoy teaching that much. I know a lot of artists really like it, but I just find it's harder to teach because of my process. Because a lot of people come to the class and they don't know how to crochet, and so you end up teaching how to crochet rather than teaching an art course.

And I think I don't have a lot of different techniques that I want to teach, so it basically ends up being a crochet course with, you know – for the more advanced students, you could approach it more as an art class.

MS. MALARCHER: What did you do at Yale?

MS. MINKOWITZ: It was a slide presentation, a one-day presentation. It was quite a while ago. I think it was in the '70s, and it was just showing my work and discussing it with a group of people in the audience and some other artists. I remember a famous woodcut artist; I can't think of his name. Oh, and Tony [Antonio] Frascioni also did it. So it was very interesting.

MS. MALARCHER: Since you've been doing this for quite a long time now, can you say something about how your process and/or the relationship between your process and your ideas evolved?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, my primary interest was in the transparency, and line, that happened in the '80s. Before that time I was working more in opaque and solid structure forms that were very sculptural. And then I crocheted around a shoe and stiffened it, and took the shoe out, and I had this wonderful transparent form, which, to me, was the closest thing to drawing, as I mentioned earlier. And it has evolved probably more by combining new materials and natural materials such as wood and roots.

Beginning, the forms were singular; they were just, perhaps, a torso. And then, as time went on, I started putting things inside the torso so that you had, like, a double image. For instance, I did a male torso with a female inside, and the silhouette was very effective, the way you could see parts of it in the colors. And the work completely changed depending on the light. If it was lit from the back, it was darker, more contrasty, more mysterious. If it was lit from the front, you could see more of the colors, because frequently I paint on the surface.

But now I've been experimenting with resins and wooden roots, and some of the torsos actually have parts of trees in them, which is almost like a certain kind of intimacy, like being able to view the circulatory system or the insides of the body, and it's kind of an eerie experience, but it's, like, open for everybody to see and determine what they get from it. Lately, I've been using wire, and I've also been actually putting stitches on top of the surface, like trying to actually stitch into the holes of the openings to get a different kind of feeling.

I keep changing all the time. I took a course using resins, and sometimes I make little dots of

resins in certain areas. Sometimes they have a luminous glow to them, which gives it a kind of sparkly effect, which I've been experimenting with lately. So I just keep changing what I'm doing all the time.

And also, I've discovered that I could actually cut out a piece of the surface and do another surface in spots so you could have a different effect. And I'm working on that right now as well.

MS. MALARCHER: It seems that you must have had to solve a lot of technological problems. For example, putting one form inside another sounds –

MS. MINKOWITZ: It's hard.

MS. MALARCHER: – like it would be a difficult thing to work out.

MS. MINKOWITZ: It is, but everything falls together. You know, obviously, you have to open up the piece to take it off the form after you cast it, otherwise you can't get the piece out. So once you cut it, you have the opportunity of putting something inside, and it's basically just connecting the inner parts to the outer parts in different ways, sometimes with wire, sometimes with an epoxy. But you just keep discovering things as you go, and it's such a flexible material. Even though it's structured and strong, you could always take anything out of it. And I actually have a whole bag of parts that are cut out, and sometimes I can use those.

MS. MALARCHER: And that doesn't weaken the structure, to cut into it?

MS. MINKOWITZ: No, it's pretty strong. Of course, the strongest time is when you put a tree or a wooden structure inside. But when they get really large, it's harder to keep it from shifting, so I don't really do extraordinarily large pieces. The largest I've done is 98 inches, but it had a tree, so nothing could happen to that. But, like, a single torso, you have to think of ways of keeping it from shifting.

MS. MALARCHER: A whole tree?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I had, like, a huge branch. It was like a tail; I think it's on one of the slides I sent you. And it has a pod at the end, but the pod is the branches with wire and all kinds of things inside. So the wire really makes it strong.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you watch what's going on in, say, technological developments in, sort of, the art world at large?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, I'm not a really technical-oriented person, but from time to time. Like the epoxy was something, the resin was something new, and now I'm trying to – the forms that I use to cast the fiber on have always been something either I've made or a mannequin. But it's extremely difficult to get it off after you stiffen it, because it gets stuck to the form as well as stiffening itself. And often you have to pick it off, one stitch at a time, and sometimes the paint comes off with the surface of the mannequin.

So now I've been investigating fiberglass forms, and, in fact, I'm looking for one right now, but they're very expensive. But that is so hard and smooth you can just take it off. I've also been working with, like, a plaster kind of compound that comes off easily, but that's, you know, if you want to make your own form. I've used rocks for certain shapes that are obviously easy to get off.

You know, I think I invented this technique, and I, kind of, keep thinking of new ways to develop it. But nobody was doing transparent forms like that when I first started. Of course, now, more and more people are doing them, which is, I guess, what always happens. So I keep moving on, hopefully.

MS. MALARCHER: What would you say are your most important sources of inspiration?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think my themes are generally universal, psychological, mysterious. I think the weblike structure of the surface gives a kind of ominous psychological quality. I guess just the human condition in nature, the landscape, and sometimes I'm interested in the body as landscape. You know, the body has so many similarities in shapes and forms to mountains. And I try, if I do a figure, for it not to be like exactly a figure. I like to leave a

quality that is open to different interpretations.

Because, you know, I think the viewer should look at it and get his own or her own feeling of what it is to them. And I think those are mostly my inspirations: psychology, deathlike, things that everybody else thinks about, but I just try to do it in a way that's personal and different.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you get ideas from reading, or do you find that looking at the work of other artists is inspiring?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I don't really get too much inspiration from – you know, I admire other artists' work, but I don't really want to work like them. I just admire certain ways of work, and there's certain artists whose work is really exceptional and I admire it, but I don't work that way. I don't know; I just get inspiration from watching people, from things that happen. You know, when my mother died, that was a great source of inspiration for a couple of years, because I was very interested in, like, recycling, after death, coming back and having some connection to a person who is gone.

And several pieces are obvious results of her death. I had done a piece that was featured in *American Craft*. It was box shaped, with a head inside of it looking up, but the hands were on the outside of the box, and they obviously couldn't touch the head, which was called *I Can't Touch You*. And then, the one at the Wadsworth Atheneum, where, like, two figures lying in a small box, one above the other, and the top, had, like a flamelike quality. I called it *Permeance*, so that one body was going into the other, and they were disappearing. And I guess it was the mother-daughter thing coming together. So there are a lot of inspirations from everyday life that I am attached to or get involved in.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you ever find that when you finish with something, you're surprised at the outcome?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I've had some happy accidents or happy things that, you know, make me go in a different direction. I never plan a piece out from the beginning; I just have an idea of what I want to do. And I don't know. Sometimes I'll be working with something, and I'll just go cut the head off and do something else. I don't know why, but it just says something to me. It's very spontaneous. And I'm never afraid of destroying anything; it just happens. And I think that's what makes it exciting.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you do any work on commission?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I've done probably five commissions in my life. I just did one last year. I had done an announcement piece that was a series of five heads that hang on the wall. The subject was assimilation, where the colors of the first piece kept changing and mixing in as the progression of figures went. And then the last figure was like a product of all the figures, and it was all marbled in different colors.

And the gallery said that they must have had ten calls for that piece, which sold immediately. And then finally, one person asked if I would do another piece like that but not the same, so I did that last year. I did probably four other commissions, and then I did some wearable commissions when I was doing wearables, but I don't really like to do commissions. But that particular piece with the heads, I probably could have done ten commissions. That's how much everybody was interested in it.

MS. MALARCHER: Could you describe your working environment?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I have several. I have my studio upstairs, which is over a three-car garage, where I do most of my heavy work, where I do my shellacking and coating. And I have three different tables: one is, like, for woodworking, one is a table where I have a fan and a vent where I can exhaust out some of the fumes from the shellac, and another one is cleaner, where I paint and have a wall space where I can hang a piece up and step back and look at it.

I also like to work downstairs a lot. I think it's like a connection to when I was a little girl and my whole family sat in one room and we worked together. And I remember when my children were little, we used to do the same thing. We had a big room and everyone was doing something different. My daughter was embroidering, my son was making models, my husband was reading. So I have a real connection to being with someone when I'm working, and certain aspects of the work allow this.

I hold a sculpture in my lap, perhaps, that I'm doing something that's kind of repetitious, and I can sit in the couch and have my coffee and my snack. And I even brought down a little dish of paint, because this piece that I'm working on now has some paint on it as well as fiber. And I really like the connection of both painting and fiber because, you know, it's always been you're an artist if you're a painter, but you're a craftsman if you're a fiber artist. And here I am doing both on the same piece. So I work here.

I also sometimes work outside, because I've been sandpapering a lot, and I can't stand the fine powder, because I've been working with, like, a plaster, and it's very powdery. So in the summertime, I can work outside. And then, upstairs, I have a vacuum near me all the time so I can suck up the dust.

MS. MALARCHER: In that piece right here before us, how would you describe that form?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, this is a perfect example of using part of something else, because originally, this was the torso, and it had buttocks on it, and I cut the buttocks out, and I just had it in my drawer. And I did another piece that was kind of a related shape, and then I cut out an area where I could insert this buttocks form that comes right out. And it almost looks like a rock or a monument, but it has this connection to the human body.

And it was all done in the crochet form, and I started to use some copper wire and, like, just pulling it through the holes, because in my work, it's all holes. And I just started to - I can't use a needle because it's curved and very organic, so I just use my crochet hook. And I can honestly say everything I do is with a crochet hook. I have different weights, and I just pull a thread through. And there's an area here that's a little more; you can see more of the effect.

And then, I also use a little epoxy to strengthen the pieces, because as you pull the threads in, it can distort the piece; it pulls it in. But again here, I feel like I'm drawing with a pencil or a pen. This is what I am attracted to. I'm still not finished; I have a ways to go with those things.

MS. MALARCHER: What about the color, the, kind of, very dark, ominous color?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I don't know, it's just coming that way. I started to put a lighter color on it because it was getting hard to see the lines. But it does have that. My thought about this piece was, like, a red river flowing through the landscape, and this part is kind of red, but, of course, someone else might interpret it as blood. You know, there are many readings of it, but it's more of a landscape, I think, to me, but it's a landscape. The look could be rocks; it could be a body; it could be a lot of different things.

I'm kind of enjoying working on it because I keep thinking of something else I want to do, so let's see where that takes me. My working area is all around the house, really.

MS. MALARCHER: Yes, this area where you've done the -

MS. MINKOWITZ: The white fiber.

MS. MALARCHER: Yes, white thread over there, almost looks like mending.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I guess everything in my work relates to woman's work, in a way, but I never think of it. But the crochet is a female occupation, mending, the threads. But it's not something I'm consciously thinking of. It maybe is a connection. I guess in the back of my mind, I'm always thinking of saving things and holding them together in protection. I guess maybe I'm protecting this thing by keep going around it and around it. And it's also vulnerable, because you can see through it, you know what I mean? I mean, it's not like a solid thing. But it's almost like something that's never going to get done, because you keep wanting to make it safe, or protect it, or cover it.

MS. MALARCHER: Have you ever become involved in consciously feminist art?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I don't think so, not consciously. I mean, I am using crochet just because it was a childhood thing. And I guess maybe I feel comfortable and think of being safe with my mother in this room where we're doing something together. But I guess, in an indirect way, possibly, if I start analyzing myself - but it's a very comforting way to work for me. But I think my themes are really more universal, because I don't do anything to show the bondage of women or anything like that; it's more materials that maybe make me feel safe or

connected to my mother in some way.

And also the line, because I loved to draw before I was a woman. So that's maybe a combination of everything. I'd sort of have to think about it, because you know, a reviewer once wrote about my work that, "Don't women have enough troubles in this world without crocheting sculpture?" But she was very positive about the sculpture. It was like, you know, I'm torturing myself by doing something that's so designated to women's work. But I am a woman; I guess these are some things I was brought up with.

MS. MALARCHER: You mentioned someone writing about your work. Have you found that writers have had positive responses to your work?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Very. I have never had a review written about me that didn't call me a sculptor or – you know, I mean, I'm sure there are reviewers who might not like the work, but it's always been, like, powerful, with a lot to say. And one of the nicest reviews I had was by Kathleen Whitney of Santa Fe. And it was interesting because she said the most significant parts of the sculptures are the areas where there's nothing. And she said, "Even her material, crocheted thread or light wire, is a nearly theoretical web just barely defining the boundaries of there and not there." And I thought that was very interesting.

And, you know, she goes on to say some very powerful things, which, you know, working in this material, you're just hoping somebody will take me seriously and speak about you as a sculptor with something to say. And that's basically what I've always wanted.

MS. MALARCHER: I remember seeing some pieces of yours a few years ago that were very different from what I had seen before, where there was more like a solid surface, where you were actually drawing fiber as subject matter. It seems there was a drawing of a ball of yarn or something. Was that sort of a departure for a while? How does that fit into –

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, for a while, I was very interested in hog gut, and I think those are the pieces you were talking about. I had gone to a fiber – I don't know what you'd call it – a symposium or something, and Pat Hickman was there, and she was talking about her hog gut. And I was attracted to the hog gut because when it dries, it's like a parchment paper and you can draw on it. So I started to cover – I guess I'm always covering and exposing at the same time.

And I started to do some still lifes, which I would cover balls of yarn, and then I would draw yarn to show it again. And I guess it was almost, like, similar to the fiber things. It was enclosing and exposing at the same time, which is another idea that I've been working with. But I did that for about a year, and I did a lot of pen-and-ink drawing on that, but it was also exposing the materials that I use in my work, and somewhat more, I guess, domesticated, because it was in bowls and things that are from the kitchen.

But I try to do different things; I try to experiment. And now, I'm even doing some works that are solid that have drawing on them. I don't know if you saw it; it was the big white piece upstairs, and it had, like, a surface of a landscape, but it had roots coming through it. And then, I had the shadow of the roots on the piece, and I drew those in. And again, that's also an example of hidden things being projected on the surface.

[Tape break.]

MS. MALARCHER: When I looked at your slides, I was really struck by the strangeness of some of your images. One in particular, the one called *Get Thee Up*, is like an image of a horse with feet that seem to be made of twigs. It almost has a mythological feeling. Would you say something about it?

MS. MINKOWITZ: It was a really powerful-looking object, this strong horse. And I guess my object was impotence. Because it was this really strong horse, and "giddy up" is something you would say to a horse, and "get thee up" is something you would say to someone who is impotent. And I guess I just thought of this really strong, masculine-looking thing that was vulnerable.

And I mean, nobody ever asked me what it meant, but that's what I was thinking of when I did it. And I'm sure that the people who bought it might have had a different interpretation,

but it was that kind of thing, of a really powerful form that was human. But it wasn't; it was a horse.

MS. MALARCHER: Was that piece sculpted over something else?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, I bought a horse at a tag sale, one of those rocking horses. And I used the head, and then I used the torso, and I also used branches and twigs, which, you know, was the strength of the earth combined with this animal. So that was the concept in that.

MS. MALARCHER: What other kinds of ready-made forms have you used?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I have lots of mannequins upstairs. I also sculpt forms sometimes if I want a specific shape. I'm doing a head right now that's kind of like a goddess, because I couldn't find a goddess form. Sometimes I crochet around twigs. When I was doing vessel forms, I would crochet around salad bowls, or sometimes I would take two halves of something, put it together. I use a basketball sometimes when I need a round shape. So anything that really attracts me.

I did one form that was two little girls, and I put them over a child's chair, so the wooden chair was actually part of the sculpture. Whatever I find that gives me an idea, I use.

MS. MALARCHER: Another piece that seemed very psychological is called *Goodbye Mother*. It looks as if there's a small head emerging from a form that could be either – it suggests both a heart and a rock. Could you say something about that?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, actually, if you noticed, it's a heart-shaped form, and on one of the rounded parts is a little nipple. And it's just like when the child leaves the nest, and the little baby on one side of the other breast, and it just was my feeling of the children going to college and leaving, and that kind of thing, and just saying "Goodbye Mother," and going on to grow up. It's a very simple shape.

MS. MALARCHER: Now we're sitting in your large upstairs studio that you said was over a three-car garage. What is the square footage of this? Do you know?

MS. MINKOWITZ: No. [Laughs.] That's not my strength.

MS. MALARCHER: This is a very strong contrast to your comfortable living room, and this does not look at all like the cozy comforts of being home with your mother, with all of these branches, and tools, and wire, and pipes, and all sorts of things that look like work in progress. Is this a space where your ideas germinate?

MS. MINKOWITZ: To some extent. Because, you know, naturally, while I'm working on something, other ideas come to mind. But it's more a finishing and getting the work manipulated and stiffened, and that sort of thing. It's more like a place where things get done. I'm always thinking. You know, sometimes I'm sleeping and I wake up in the middle of the night and I have an idea to do something.

But you know, sometimes things evolve here. You know, obviously, if you're painting on something, it suggests where you're going from there. But you know, no matter where I am, I'm always thinking of what I'm going to do.

MS. MALARCHER: You have some things here that are quite surprising. For instance, there is a figure over there, a sort of classical figure, a small sculpture that looks like it might be a replica of a classical figure.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Venus de Milo, yeah.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you have a plan for that?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I don't know. If I see a figurine or a figure that has possibilities, I take it. A lot of my forms are universal, or classical, or you know, they have the possibility of change. Because frequently, I would have a sculpture, and I could just change the shape of it by adding plaster or molding on it. I have mannequins, for instance, that I cover with paper maché because I want the figure to be heavier.

So you know, they're all potentially going to be used for a sculptural form. And obviously,

when I see something, I just take it. Sometimes it sits here for a year or so before I know what I'm going to do with it. That piece over there, I was interested in doing a bust of a Victorian woman. So I bought it, and I put it on the floor and it broke in half because it's plaster, and I didn't realize it wasn't made with anything inside to reinforce it.

So I covered it with epoxy, so that's probably going to strengthen it; then I can crochet over it and do what I want with it. But I like doing people in a bust, and things of that nature as well.

MS. MALARCHER: These branches: do you walk around looking for those?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, I just walk in the yard sometimes and I find a branch that has an interesting shape to it. And you know, I always change it and add to it, or sometimes I connect it with wire and cover it with pulp until I get the shape I want, so that I can either crochet over it or use it as it is. There are very many possibilities. I've been using wires now, and the resins also are something I use in each form.

But I like to have them hanging around, so that when an idea strikes me, I can get to it. One of my husband's workers always comes up with roots for me, when he's working, which is nice. So a lot of different directions.

MS. MALARCHER: You said your husband is in building -

MS. MINKOWITZ: He's a real estate developer, and sometimes, you know, another worker knows that I collect wood, so he brings me some. And on the construction site, there are a lot of these things around.

MS. MALARCHER: How much time do you spend working?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I work on and off all day. I might work a few hours in the morning, then I might go for a run or I might go biking, and then I come back and I work again. And because I do a lot of work on my lap, you know, I can work until 11:30 at night. So maybe five, sometimes eight hours a day. Sometimes I don't work, but I usually do something every day.

MS. MALARCHER: Has it been important to you to live close to New York?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, I go into the city from time to time, but you know, I don't think it's that important. There's certain shows I like to see. I probably go into New York every few months. But, you know, there are other places to go. We've been to Poland, we've been to Santa Fe, we've been to Chicago for the - you know, if we really want to do something, we just go. We travel if we want to see something bad enough. But New York is interesting. We might just see what the galleries are showing.

MS. MALARCHER: Has travel to other countries influenced your work at all?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I don't think so. I mean, I like to see what everyone is doing, but I think, you do what you do. And I find that life sort of repeats itself sometimes. Something that I've done a long time ago, all of a sudden, I'll do something similar, but in a different way. And I think, you know, it's just my own inspiration, really, that makes me go.

MS. MALARCHER: From your experience, would you say that the marketing and presentation of fiber have evolved over the past 20 to 30 years?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Definitely. I think at the beginning, the whole fiber movement was very crafty, and, you know, the flower children, the denim, and everything was very ethnic and kind of free. And I think when I first started in fiber, everything went - as many materials in each object as possible. And I think it's becoming more refined, very simple works, surface design, computer, digital, environmental. I think even the installation art has progressed quite a bit, with artists like Ann Hamilton and Ann Wilson's work.

I think there's a tremendous connection to the fine arts movement now. Everything is overlapping, and I think there's a tremendous new way of presenting it in a museum quality experience. And I think that's going to continue to go that way. And there are also a lot of men that are working in fiber and using commercial materials and even embroidering. I've seen some art by prisoners who unravel socks. And there is a lot of conceptual and personalized expression in the fiber field, and it's not just using as much fiber as you can, which I think was what was happening, but being really selective and doing a really fine job



of presenting.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you feel that fiber has made a contribution to the art world in that mainstream artists have picked up things from what fiber artists were doing, sort of like a reverse influence?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think there's a lot of influence. I mean, I just mentioned Ann Hamilton. I think a lot of artists are now doing this heavily processed work that they sit there and do for hours and hours, which is directly influenced by her. But I think good artists go on to other things. And I think, you know, she's experimenting with a lot of different materials. Magdalena Abakanowicz started with burlap, and now she's working in bronze.

And I think other artists who are working with hard materials are now going to soft materials. I mean, just think of Christo. He's using fabric to wrap a building, you know, and that was at the same time as the fiber movement. And - soft forms could be fiber. And so, there's a lot of connection - Rauschenberg painting with a quilt. I mean, there's a lot of connection.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you feel that the gap between fiber and other art forms is closed, or do you think it still exists?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think there is a gap, not in the quality but in the perceptions by collectors in museums. I think the clay movement has moved further ahead with acceptance, and actually, I think the fiber movement is right behind it. I think it's becoming more accepted and it's on a much higher level than it used to be. You know, there are people going to graduate school to study fiber. And I think there are probably different categories.

I think weavers who were taught as weavers are often considered craftspeople. But I think, like, artists who have a fine arts degree and do fiber are considered fine artists, but I think that's changing.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you think that there is such a thing as a fiber sensibility that is somewhat different from just the fact of using fiber?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I don't know how to approach that. Explain it a little more.

MS. MALARCHER: Well, for example, in your work, in spite of the complexity of your ideas, you're doing the crochet yourself and your work reflects a very sensitive use of that medium. It's not imposing the medium on an idea, if that makes sense.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I'm using fiber, but I'm not using it because it's fiber. I'm using it because it best expresses the feeling and the three-dimensional possibilities of molding it and wrapping things with it. I mean, if there was another medium, I would use that. I'm not using it just because it's fiber, although I really like the repetition. It's almost like I'm repeating a cell over and over, and each cell builds a part of a body, and it connects to the human form, to the forms of nature.

And I can't think of another material that would work as well for what I'm trying to express at this time. So it's basically not really because it's fiber; it's because that's what I'm trying to express and it works for me.

MS. MALARCHER: That repetitive nature of your work is a way of working that sometimes is associated with meditation or spirituality. Do you feel that is part of your work?

MS. MINKOWITZ: It's meditative; I definitely feel that. And I like being able to repeat the same thing over and over again as I think of what I'm going to do with it. When I do it, I always start with a circle. I think that's from the days when I was doing doilies when I was a little girl. But also a circle is symbolic of the eternal - what word am I looking for - like movement, motion; it's, like, continuous. And that might connect to the spirituality of what you were asking me.

But I do feel it's very meditative, and I do like to feel that way. And it just grows. It's also something that keeps growing. Where it goes I will soon find out, but I do like that nature of it.

MS. MALARCHER: How many crochet hooks do you have?

MS. MINKOWITZ: [Laughs.] I have tons of them. I use them for everything. Like I mix paint

with them; I use them for epoxy. Sometimes when the piece is – like, I want part of it to pop out a little, I stick the crochet hook into the surface and pop it out. I probably have hundreds of them in all sizes. And, you know, sometimes you can control the movement of the piece by using a thin thread with a heavy needle, or vice versa, so you get all this variation of the fiber, and it could be really very delicate and fragile, or heavy and knotted. There's so many possibilities. And I like changing the fiber while I'm working on a piece because it makes it, you know, like the pressure of the pen and ink. When you release the pressure, it gets lighter, and when you press it, it gets darker, and you can do that with the fiber as well.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you have a sketchbook or a journal that you work out your ideas in?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I have books where I write down thoughts, and sometimes I, like, actually paste a picture of a Polaroid of something I'm working on. I don't usually work out an idea, because it changes so much while I'm working. Sometimes I write down quotes that other artists have said that I think are meaningful. I just write all sorts of things. And sometimes, I just do a really complex ballpoint pen sketch with figures and bodies.

And sometimes, I just actually draw something that I've completed, after rather than before, you know what I mean? And then, I do change on that.

MS. MALARCHER: You just mentioned writing down things that other artists have said. Are there any books that you have found, not necessarily inspirational, but that give you affirmation in your direction or that help you move on?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Most of the things I read are, like, *ARTnews*, and *Surface Design*, and magazines that talk about the artists' philosophy and what they're doing, not about technique but the meaning of their work. And I'm mostly inspired by reading reviews or catalogues from major exhibitions. I don't really read that much, because when I do have time to read, I like to read about what's going on in the art world. So I get most of my inspiration from that.

MS. MALARCHER: What is coming up next for you?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Next for me, well, is coming up in a few weeks. I have to ship some work to that. The Arkansas Art Center [Little Rock, AR] is having a vessel show, and I'm shipping two pieces for that. I'm supposed to have a one-person show at Bellas Artes in Santa Fe, which was coming up, but we postponed it because of – that will probably be maybe in the spring. I'm doing a show at Snyderman/Works Gallery [Philadelphia, PA] in April. That's a major textile exhibition, and I'm working for that. And I'm just getting ready for all of those things. Shipping and slides and all that takes an awful lot of time. And I like to document the work, because if you don't have good pictures, you know, it's really not a good idea.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you do all of that clerical work for yourself?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yes. It's not that time-consuming. But I have a calendar, schedule where I write down all the shows, when they're due, what I've done. And, I write down when something's at a show; I just write "return." I write it down so I know I don't have to do anything more. I have a schedule of when slides are due and when résumés and paperwork are due, and I just have that written down, like, on a chart, and then I cross it off as I do it. But, you know, there's always a lot of paperwork, which is what artists probably hate most to do.

But I think no one could do it better than me. Sometimes the gallery does some things, but I prefer to do it myself. And I wouldn't want anyone working in the studio with me, because you know, some people have assistants, but I think you lose the spontaneity of what you're doing. So many times I've started on something and I totally change my mind. If someone is doing something for you, you can't do that. So I like working alone.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you have any definable goals that you would still like to realize?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I would like my work to be more recognized on a fine arts level. I think every artist wants that – I'm getting a lot of that, but you still want that. I just want to do the best work I can do and keep growing, try different ideas and try different materials and have something to say. I just want to be progressing. And every time you do something, you know, you think it's really good, and then you do the next thing and you think that's better, and then sometimes you look back and say, "Why did I do that," you know.

So we just kind of have to try to do the best we can do. I'm not really interested in networking or being on boards of things. I know a lot of artists do that. I don't enjoy that. I just want to stay home and work. Everybody's different. So I just try to get better.

MS. MALARCHER: Has it been important to you to be able to be at home with your family and do artwork?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I've always wanted to be at home. Even when I went to college, I would go to Cooper Union, and everybody would go hang out; I would take the train and go home. And even now, I have this need to go home. Like when I go on a trip somewhere, I'm always uneasy. And then coming home, I feel safe. I like to work at home.

My kids always were around and we always had a family situation; we always worked at home. And I never really have the need to run around or go places, unless I want to see something.

MS. MALARCHER: Looking around your house, I can see that you're a very serious collector of other artists' work. Could you say something about that and what it is about some of these pieces that has prompted you to purchase them?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, first of all, we buy work from any kind of medium or material; we just have to be attracted to it. These ceramic pieces by Richard DeVore I feel really connected to, because they're almost like replicas of the human body, but stylized in a certain way that makes it extremely attractive to me. He also uses a lot of texture within his forms that, I guess, looked to me like pen-and-ink drawings, but attract me as well. The Bennett Beans are very decorative but have a wonderful flow of colors and forms that are also very beautiful to me.

I have a Judy Pfaff that sort of has calligraphy in it, and it has many interpretations. She uses antique paper and pages from books, and she's recycling the materials and putting her own personal touch on it. The Robert Kushner is sort of decorative, but when you look at it, it has a lot of depth to it. It has many colors and many materials. It's kind of floral, but it could be many other things.

We have Mark Lindquist, which I'm very attracted to wood and the natural things that happen within the knots and the burrows, or whatever you call them. But they're just so beautiful, and they're also very linear, because he uses tools that actually create these lines throughout. And, as you know, I'm attracted to lines. I have a beautiful John McQueen that is an early piece. And it's almost, to me, like a human form. It has a presence like a coat of armor or a shield.

And he uses materials that other artists use, but he uses them in a very unique way that you know it's his when you see it. And we have a couple of his pieces. This is one of my favorites; it's an early piece. I have a small Lenore Tawney, which is very sensitive and delicate. She writes in the pieces and she uses bone, and I guess I'm attracted to elements from nature and from things that are past, like bird bones, or skin, or stuff of that nature.

I have some of Ruth Duckworth's sculptures. One is very organic. I think it's almost like the human body, which is another thing I'm attracted to. I have this piece by a Japanese artist; I forget his name. But he uses Japanese newspaper, and he actually weaves it, so he's using a product that's fibrous, and then weaving it, and then making a statement about the material as well as being attractive in a way that's graphic. And that, I think, is a very beautiful piece.

I have some large weavings in the other room. I have an Olga de Amaral, which is one of the few that's one color, and it's very detailed and has grids in it. I'm also interested in grids. I think it shows my interest in the repetition of forms, because the grid is repeated over and over. And that is echoed in a sculpture we have by Ursula von Rydingsvard. It's a triptych, and it has three parts, and each part is made of little grids that build up into a rectangular form.

And I'm attracted particularly to her explanation of her reason for making it. During the war, she was in a holding station for prisoners, and the squares are replications to her of the cots and the beds that they all had to sleep on. And I thought the piece had a lot of meaning, and I really was very interested in obtaining it. We have some glassworks, and we have a lot of other ceramic pieces. But everything we buy is an object that is unique to us and something we really want to be in the company of.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you think that you subconsciously or intuitively buy work that has some characteristics that resonate with your own work?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think so, when I think about it, because describing the ceramic pieces, they also are involved with the body and the landscape, which is one of my interests in my own work, and also the detail of the lines I find very captivating. I like the linear portion of the crackles in the clay. I like the structures of the repeated elements, which is part of what my work is about. The same stitch done over and over and over again is similar to some of the segments of the weavings and the sculptures.

[Tape break.]

MS. MINKOWITZ: The sculpture I was talking about is a Stephen de Stabler, and, again, it echoes my interest in the human form. It's fragmented and it's so unique. You look at it and you know it's his work. No other artist is doing anything like that. It has subtle tones, muted colors that I find very appealing.

MS. MALARCHER: Besides works of art by other artists, you also have some very interesting collections of objects. You have a wall that is covered with shoe laths in different sizes. There's a repetitiveness there that reminds me of what you've said about repetitiveness in your work.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, as much as repetitiveness, it also echoes my interest in the body and the human form. And the shoe laths are like - they're all shoe laths, but each one is different from the other, which expresses that we're all people, that we're all different. And I like the graphic effect of having them all on one wall, side by side. And depending where they came from, the shapes are different. Like an English shoe lath is very slender and narrow, and the one from Mexico, for instance, is very broad and wide.

So it really is interesting to me, and they're very sculptural as well. I also collect hat forms, which are extremely sculptural and have a presence of their own. And they're like puzzles; they come apart and you can put them back together again. But when you turn them, the shapes are just so beautiful; they have this presence. And even though they're hats, they look like people to me.

Another thing I collect is cages and traps. I guess that also relates to my work, because you can see into it; it's exposed, but it's enclosed, and you can't really get into it. And it's an example of a shelter or a trap, and this is another focus of my work. Is it a shelter, or is it a trap, you know? Is it a home, or is it the place that you can never get out of? And I think my collection maybe in some way does reflect parts of my own work.

MS. MALARCHER: I think we need to fill in a couple of gaps from the earlier part of our conversation. Did your father's family come to America at the same time your father did?

MS. MINKOWITZ: My father's family - they all came together in about the 1920s. My father was born in a town in Russia called Ekaterinaslav. And he came from a family of musicians. My grandfather was his teacher. He taught him how to play the piano, and my father was the youngest student ever accepted in the St. Petersburg Conservatory, and he played concerts, at that time. And then, when the war came, they had to leave, and they all came to New York together, my grandfather, my grandmother, and my father and his brother. His brother was a musician as well.

And when they came to this country, they were probably in their 20s. And my father gave some concerts. He gave some concerts in Boston and in New York City. And my grandfather was a composer. He just wanted to stay at home and write music, and that's what he did his whole life, and he taught piano. My uncle was a concert violinist, and we really had wonderful times at home when they all used to come over and practice.

And later on, my father had the concert group with the cello, the violin, and the piano. And they always would come to the house and practice, and it was wonderful to hear the music. So I did grow up in a musical atmosphere. I inherited none of the talents. [Laughs.] I could never carry a tune. My brother, who was older than I, was very musical. And, unfortunately, he became an insurance agent, and his talent was really music, I think. He would have been a lot happier as a pianist, but I still think he plays for himself.

MS. MALARCHER: You mentioned they came during the war. Was that the First World War, or the –

MS. MINKOWITZ: The Russian Revolution.

MS. MALARCHER: The Russian Revolution.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, the Red Army came in. And actually, my father was in the army himself, and they captured him. And he was in front of a firing squad, so someone walked by – it was his own army that captured him – and the head of the army said, “Hey, that’s Alexander. What are you doing? Let him go. He’s a musician.” You know, so he was, like, going to be shot, and they let him go.

And he was a character. When he came to the United States, they came by boat, and he was sitting on the boat waving to all his girlfriends, and he leaned back and he fell off the boat. So they had to get him out of the water. [Laughs.] He was always getting into trouble. He was a character, but a great musician; he was a wonderful pianist. It was nice having that to grow up with.

MS. MALARCHER: What was your father’s name?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Alexander Chigrinsky. But at that time, they would always put in the middle name of the father, so it was Alexander Demetrvich Chigrinsky, a real Russian name, a good name for a concert pianist, and he kept it.

MS. MALARCHER: Did you know your grandmothers?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yes, actually, my grandparents lived – when I grew up in the Bronx, they lived a block away from us. So it was kind of nice coming home from school and seeing my grandmother in a park and stopping by the house, where my grandfather was always composing music. He would just write music all day. And he wrote “Polka Norma” for me, which I have somewhere. And it was a nice atmosphere being close to my grandparents.

MS. MALARCHER: So they were your father’s parents.

MS. MINKOWITZ: My father’s parents lived right near us. My mother’s parents, because they settled in Vancouver, remained in Vancouver, and I saw very little of them. I think in 1955, we took a trip to visit my mother’s parents, but there was really no closeness because I didn’t see them as often as my father’s parents. But my grandfather gave me piano lessons. That’s probably why I can’t play. He would always say, “All right, you can go outside and play.” My brother plays because he was stricter with him.

MS. MALARCHER: So your father continued as a concert musician.

MS. MINKOWITZ: He played concerts till probably the late ’20s, and then I guess making a living became a little more important, so he started giving lessons. And as time went on, I know he was disappointed because he hoped to pursue his concert career. But they had a child that they lost in 1933 in a very tragic accident. And I think after that, things kind of changed and he just started playing, you know, in hotels.

He played at the Hotel Barclay, the Hotel Astor, the Russian Troika, different places where he was able to have his own continental music. It was him and a violinist and a cellist, and they would play – as I said before, practiced in my house. But I think his aspirations for himself ended in the ’30s. But he just played on and on. He had a lot of different engagements in different places, which was not what he wanted to do, but he did.

MS. MALARCHER: Was he encouraging to you as an artist?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, I saw very little of him, actually. My father was sort of like a child. He was, like, a typical Picasso-ish kind of artist where he loved the sensual things of life and took very little interest in the children’s education or ballet. My mother did all of that. And I really didn’t interact with him too much, because, like, when I was in school, he was home sleeping, and when I came home, he was getting ready to play in the evening.

And you know, the little time I saw him was when he was unemployed, which was from time to time, in between jobs, he was unemployed. So I don’t think he really knew what I was doing. You know, he just would hug me and stuff like that, but I didn’t really spend that

much time with him. My mother was more instrumental in encouraging me to be an artist.

MS. MALARCHER: But you said your brother was a good musician.

MS. MINKOWITZ: He played very well.

MS. MALARCHER: Was he encouraging to your brother? Did you feel that he was more conscious of your brother's artistry?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Not really, no. They really didn't get along that well. They both had high-strung tempers, which once ended up in a fistfight. But, yeah, he just was very - artists often are very selfish, and all he thought about was his own career and his own stuff, and he really wasn't involved with his kids at all. Very different from fathers today. And my mother just had us really, because he wasn't home much and they didn't get along that well, so she really spent most of her time with us.

We were sort of her allies when she got in trouble with him, but you know, she was there for us, and he was there in a different way. I have a lot of fun memories of him. [Laughs.] He was a character.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you feel that your experience with your own children was in any way parallel to your experience of being at home with your mother and working together with her?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I would definitely say my lifestyle reflected my lifestyle with my mother. I always like being at home and I like doing things with my kids and spending a lot of time with them. However, my husband was much different than my father. He was an involved parent and he was home a lot, so it was a rewarding kind of family togetherness that we enjoyed.

MS. MALARCHER: Have either of your children continued their art activities into adulthood?

MS. MINKOWITZ: My son, Steve, has a master's of fine art. He went to the University of Florida. He's a very talented artist. However, he's building homes now with my husband. And my daughter, Karen, used to embroider the most beautiful jeans. It was at the time when, you know, the flower children were doing jeans. And I know she embroidered beautifully, and she would do T-shirts. And at the beginning, when I was in my 30s, I did a lot of craft fairs, and I always took the kids with me. And she would sell little pillows she embroidered and he would make things; he would make jewelry.

And it was wonderful experience. They would sit at the table with me and they would actually sell their things. And I think that was a lot of fun. And then, like in the early '70s, I sold a piece to the Wallingford Rehabilitation Center, a small stitched panel. And then the woman came here. She saw one of my son's drawings that was, like, a dragon, and she also bought that for the rehabilitation center, which was really nice. And they still do things, you know. My daughter actually became a caterer, but she still does embroidery with her little girl. So it's kind of nice to carry on the tradition.

MS. MALARCHER: That's wonderful.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, it's good.

[Tape change.]

MS. MALARCHER: This is Patricia Malarcher talking with Norma Minkowitz on November 16, 200,1 at her home and studio in Westport, Connecticut.

When I listened to the tapes from our previous meeting, I realized that we had passed over some details. For example, you said that your father's name was Alexander Chigrinsky. Does that mean that you were Norma Chigrinsky before you were-

MS. MINKOWITZ: I was Norma Chigrinsky, yes. I also had a middle name, Miriam, which I rarely used, but that was my whole name.

MS. MALARCHER: You had talked about how you used to go home every day after school.

How did you meet your husband?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I actually met him six months before we graduated from Cooper Union. But I didn't socialize after school. A lot of the students would go to bars and have drinks and walk around Greenwich Village, and I just had this need to get on the train and go back home. And I think I did that for three years. I met him – actually, Cooper Union had a camp called Green Camp, and both the engineers and the artists would socialize and stay for, like, a weekend and live very rustically, and cook, and clean, and do some outdoor things.

And I met him there. I think he was directing some square dancing; we had some dances there, and stuff like that. And I met him, and I saw him frequently at lunchtime, where the students would gather for lunch, and we started going out. And then, it was time to graduate and he had plans to go to Europe, and he was going to cancel, but he thought he would prefer to stay with me. And I kind of encouraged him to go because it was a chance of a lifetime, you know, going through Europe on motorcycle.

So he went and, you know, we communicated over the summer, and then he came back and we got married the following year. So it was a fast courtship, but I did spend time with him. [Laughs.]

MS. MALARCHER: So your husband graduated with an engineering degree from Cooper Union.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yes, he graduated in engineering. And he was there for four years. The art school, at that time, was only three years, so we graduated together, although he was a year older. He went on later to get a master's in business at NYU [New York University, New York City].

MS. MALARCHER: You also said something about your parents not getting along too well.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, my father was, like, he was five foot four, and he was this explosive Russian. He would explode and call my mother names and scream and, you know, carry on. And then, in five minutes, he was, like, kissing and trying to make up, but she wasn't ready for that. So they didn't really have a terrific marriage. He was away a lot, because, as a musician, he would play in the evening and sleep most of the day, so I really didn't have a connection with him as a father, which most little girls really look forward to.

So I kind of thought about him the way my mother did, which was unfortunate because I resented him for the way he treated her. But we had fun with him anyway.

MS. MALARCHER: Did they stay together?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think when my brother and I both got married, she finally told him to get out. She couldn't take it anymore, because it was just too stressful. So I remember, she was probably in her mid-60s, and we were all married and out of the house, and she kind of felt she had to get away from him. So she asked him to move, and he was so explosive that he didn't try to talk her out of it, he just left. But he moved like a block away – [laughs] – and he would stand on the street just looking up at her window, you know. He was kind of like a prankster, even at that age. So that was funny.

MS. MALARCHER: But you stayed close to your mother.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I stayed very close to her, yeah.

MS. MALARCHER: Until the end of her life.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah. You know, my father visited as well. He would come up and stay for a day, but, like, he would never want to sleep over. He would, like, play with the kids and horse around and leave, but she would stay. She was much more dependent emotionally than he was. You know, she needed her kids. And I found that I always felt guilty because she would say, "Oh, if only we could do this together." And we did a lot of things together. I mean, every time I was in a show, she would come to the opening.

I did the presentation in South Dakota State University and I took her with me. And she was very proud, you know, but she always made me feel, oh, this was the best thing in my life, if we could only do it. And consequently, I felt really guilty, but I loved her very much.

MS. MALARCHER: Did she realize how important she had been to your development as an artist?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I don't think, at the time that she was alive, she did, because I think it was only when she got really ill and was so sick that my work started to reflect her passing and the relationship of, you know, your physical relationship to the earth, and passing away, and remembrance, and connecting with someone who's gone. And she died in '86, and I think that was when my work really started to come out, so I don't think she was aware of it. And also for seven years, she was in this state of dementia, so that made her life so much more fragile. And I think the transparency of my work reflected the fragile quality of life, the openness and seeing inside of things. And she definitely was a major force in my work.

MS. MALARCHER: Was it during her illness that you began to do the transparent work? You had mentioned a shoe that you had crocheted around.

MS. MINKOWITZ: It was a little earlier; it was, like, in '83. But then I think when she died, the work became vessels. They were more inaccessible vessels; they were transparent, and the layers - the vessels reflected my feelings of the layers of the earth and getting beneath the layers and, you know, where man would be in this place. And I think it was in '86 I won my National Endowment for the Arts grant, and that was the first grouping of vessels that I had done. Before that, the work was more, maybe, human form-oriented. But it came back to that again afterwards.

MS. MALARCHER: Did the vessel seem to be something that you just intuitively went toward, or were you consciously kind of saying, okay, now I'm going to do vessels?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think it was more intuitive. I was doing the shoes, and then I wanted to do, like, minimal forms that were very ethereal and poetic, and were open to many kinds of, you know - I can't think of the word I want to say - reactions from the viewer. And also I wanted them to be a little ominous and not have a really direct meaning. I wanted the viewer to be able to put his own thoughts into the piece and see it in his own eyes.

So I think that it was not conscious. I mean, it was not planned; it was more just the intuitive, like you said. And they just became more complex. And, of course, the ability to do it became easier. You know, I had all these ways of doing it by stretching and, you know, plating it, and doing all kinds of different things that evolved or continued.

MS. MALARCHER: And then, the interest in vessels kind of then converged with your earlier interest in the body.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah.

MS. MALARCHER: New forms.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I mean, my work always involved body parts, nature, the whole body, the human form, psychological complexity, just mostly universal themes. But I try to do them in a very thought-provoking way. Even the mannequins that I used in the figures were generic. They stood for all man, not a particular person. And you know, I don't think it really had anything to do with self-expression. It was just a way of using the vessel as a metaphor for earth, and the figure as a psychological complexity.

MS. MALARCHER: What is the source of your, not your interest in, but your knowledge of psychological complexity?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I don't have an educated knowledge, but just studying people, and human reactions, and the nature of a person, their entrapments, their way of expressing themselves. And the vessel was a beginning; you know, I considered it a cage, a shelter, a trap. And the person is the same. They're involved in being trapped in a way that they consider it a shelter. You know, like I said in a previous interview, that, you know, sometimes marriage is a shelter, but it's also a trap, because many people, like, would not go out on their own because they feel safe. And I wanted these vessels to incorporate that idea. And the psychological part is just being human, the nature of being human.

MS. MALARCHER: Have you always been interested in observing human behavior?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, I always kind of watched people. I remember riding in the subway to



school, there were so many different kinds of personalities. And you could almost watch people and see what they're thinking, I guess, in my own interpretation. And a lot of them were basically universal. It's like everybody has these problems, everyone has happiness, everyone reacts differently to life. And I guess, you know, this is the way I would express how I see it. And I guess a reviewer who looks at an object of art might see something different –

MS. MALARCHER: This idea of feeling safe is something you've talked about a lot.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah.

MS. MALARCHER: And you said you like being at home and working at home because it makes you feel safe. And then you also mentioned that sometimes when you're crocheting around a form, it feels like you're protecting it. Were ever in a situation where you felt unsafe?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I know when I was a little girl – I don't remember it, but my mother always told me that I got lost in the park and a stranger took me by the hand. And she had already lost a child, a three-year-old boy before I was born, and she was frantically running through the park looking for me. And she ran into a tree and banged her head, and she was bleeding, and she was frantic. And apparently a police officer saw me crying with this stranger and took me to the police station, and she consequently found me.

I don't remember this, but I remember hearing the story frequently. And I just remember my whole life, I always felt safe being at home. It was like a ritual. Every evening, my family – well, my brother usually wasn't there because he was older. But we had a one-bedroom house, and my mother and I would sit on the bed, and she would knit sweaters and I would crochet. And if my dad was home, he would fall asleep at the end of the bed, because he was getting ready to go to work.

And I just remember the safety of sitting with her, and making things, and listening to radio programs. And like, till this day, I still have a little niche in the couch and watch the TV, and I feel safe, and I feel creative – I feel very creative when I'm in, like, a cozy nook. You know, I obviously go places. I go bike riding, which is probably more dangerous than anything else. [Laughter.] But even in my studio, I spend more time working on the couch. So I guess I feel most creative when I feel safe.

MS. MALARCHER: That's interesting. Well, speaking of biking, you have also mentioned that you do running.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, I've been running since 1985. I started running on a lark. My husband bought me running shoes, and we were both trying to lose weight, and he says "If you run around the tennis court 17 times, that's a mile." And after a while, that got boring, so I started to run on the road, and consequently joined a group and started road racing. And in 1985, I did a marathon, and then two more after that. And then, I just kept on running outdoors.

MS. MALARCHER: The New York Marathon.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I did the New York Marathon three times, yeah.

MS. MALARCHER: And you got all the way to the end.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I got all the way, yeah. I did it in a good time, and I practiced and trained.

MS. MALARCHER: And you weren't last.

MS. MINKOWITZ: No, I was, like, very high up in my age group – four hours and six minutes, and I was 49 at that time, so that was considered a good time for my age. And I had only been running a couple of years. And then I did one more, and then I just decided the training was a little too rigorous, and body parts were starting to go. So now I run, like, five miles and I bike.

MS. MALARCHER: Every day.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I exercise five days a week. I go to the gym a couple times and I take a spin

class. And I'm running less because I'm having back problems. But I think the combination of an endurance event and then sitting and working all day is very healthy, because, you know, you're so happy to relax after that that I think my work is more productive.

MS. MALARCHER: You had mentioned an early interest in dance. Have you pursued that at all as an adult?

MS. MINKOWITZ: No. As a child, I took ballet, and I was always very athletic. I had this problem of not retaining or focusing on the class, you know. Like the teacher would give us steps to do, and I would always fantasize. And when it came time to perform, I would not remember the steps that well, so she would yell at me to go back. So I decided I would have to do something without directions.

I could never, even with the crochet – when I was little and I told you I was crocheting around the dolls, I could never stand to follow directions; I had to make it up. And I would crochet around the doll, and then I couldn't take it off because she was trapped. As we spoke about confinement before and trapping, I would do that.

MS. MALARCHER: Well, to go back a little bit, I want to fill in some details that we just passed over in the beginning. You had mentioned that you were in several exhibitions at the Craft Museum in the '70s. And you mentioned "Portable World," "The Great American Foot," "Homage to the Bag," and a "Baroque" show.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Right.

MS. MALARCHER: Do you remember the sequence of those shows and what the work was that you put into each?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, in '86, I did "The Poetry of the Physical" at the American Craft Museum. I did – I'm not quite sure of the dates – but "The Great American Foot" was in the '70s. "Homage to the Bag" was an interesting show. At that time, I was doing wearables as well. I was also in two wearable shows at the American Craft Museum. They probably range from the '70s to the '80s. For "The Great American Foot," I did these stuffed feet with feet on top of them and a lot of body parts, and the feet were almost like parts where you could walk on the feet, and it was kind of a little bit whimsical.

MS. MALARCHER: Life-sized feet?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yeah, life-sized. My feet were, like, a size five at that time. And then, I did the "Homage to the Bag." I remember I did a pill purse that contained birth control pills, and I actually put a compact of the birth control pills in a little circular disk. And from the bag were these one-inch female figures just dangling all the way down. It was a nice piece.

In the "Portable World," I did a sleeping bag that functioned as a wall hanging. It was an actually functional sleeping bag. I did another piece that was a double-handed pot holder. I forget the name of the show, but it was, like, everyday objects for the home – I forget the name of the show. But Paul Smith curated the show, and it was an intricately crocheted shape with two hands, and there was a double-handed pot holder. And I think I probably did five or six shows at that time, including those two wearable shows that traveled.

MS. MALARCHER: Were you invited to be in those shows, or had you submitted?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Early on, I submitted. "Portable World," I think I was invited, but the "Homage to the Bag" and "Great American Foot," I submitted. And the wearable shows, I was invited.

MS. MALARCHER: And were those shows important to developing your ability to conceptualize about your work?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I don't think so. I think I was younger then, and I was really anxious to be in a museum of that quality, so I just tried to make an object. I don't think any of those pieces really reflect what I'm doing now, but I wanted to focus on doing a really sculptural, good-looking, structured piece. The pill purse obviously had a message with the birth control pills in there. "Homage to the Foot" was sort of – the foot was sort of like a magical kind of piece.

And then the sleeping bag was, I guess, a little more conceptual. It could be an art form; it

could also be a functional piece. And the wearable pieces were all fantasy pieces. They just were never planned. They just grew out of starting to, you know, crochet an idea or a feeling, and then it could form itself around a body.

MS. MALARCHER: When you were making wearables, were you thinking about a person of a particular size for each piece, or was it –

MS. MINKOWITZ: Pieces are generally small because I model them and I'm petite. But it was more of a story. Like I did a piece called *The House Coat*, and the whole thing was a whole intricately crocheted house, and the seam going around the coat. Birds were very often images in the wearable pieces, like, you know, being able to be free and to fly, and I thought that related to the body. There's some elements from nature.

And then, the most successful piece, which is in the permanent collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, was a cloak that looked like it would takeoff, but the whole yoke of the cloak had, like, 99 female one-inch figures, like, all tangled up going around it. And it looked very lacy until you looked closely, and you could see they were nude. And that was getting back to doing the body.

I continued after that to do the human form in sculptural pieces that were solid; they weren't transparent. They were like trapunto, but they were all like muted tones, mostly whites, very sculptural. And then I did some wall hangings like that as well.

MS. MALARCHER: Your house is so lovely, and comfortable, and interesting. Have you considered your house and garden as an extension of your creative activity?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think, in a way, my garden is, because when I'm always looking at it; I look at it as if I were painting. And, like, I'm spotting the colors, and, like, if I have a really colorful plant and I want it repeated, almost like you would in a painting, I take part of the plant and move it to the other side, and I kind of plan it as if I were painting, because I did paint for a long time. And the house is just mostly other artists' work that we collect. I don't have any of my own work, really, in the house, with the exception of a piece that was cast in bronze.

I love antiques and I love contemporary art, so it's kind of, you know, a challenge to try for them both to live together in the house. And I have, like, certain rooms that'll have a collection of cages, which I guess connects to my work. I collect heads that are hat forms, which are very sculptural, and also connects to the body parts in my work and also the sculptural aspects of my work. Because it's functional, which my work isn't, but it's also very sculptural and relates to the human form. So there is a connection.

MS. MALARCHER: You just mentioned a piece cast in bronze. Have you had many pieces cast?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Two. Once when I was running outdoors, I found a piece of wood that resembled a foot part to me, and I manipulated it into a foot, and the ankle part was all these roots coming out that was almost like a foot torn off from a person, and it was a very, kind of, aggressive-looking piece. And at that time, I was working with hog gut. I worked with hog gut for a while, which is an organic material, but when it's stretched over a form – I'm sure you know this – it dries and becomes like parchment paper. And then I actually drew on it with pen and ink, and it was like almost drawing, like, the inside of the foot on the outside. So, again, there was that connection between inside and outside.

And it had a very strong, like, graphic form. And when I showed it at Bellas Artes in one of my shows in Santa Fe, a guy from the foundry said, "That would really look good cast." So I had it cast, and I did, like, an edition of three, and it was really, I think, a powerful piece, especially in one color, because the one with gut had wood and the hog gut, which I still have. And then the other piece I cast was I had a hairbrush that was my daughter's. And my son gave me a whole bunch of these roots, so I connected the roots to the hairs on the brush, and I had this really very interesting flow.

And I had that cast, which didn't come out exactly as I had hoped it would, because the roots were so fragile that some of them broke off. But we tried to mend it at the foundry, and it looked okay, but I never cast more than the one because it wasn't exactly the way I planned it.

But I also had pieces of the crochet, you know, the fabric, the interlacing part, actually cast. And they can cast that, even though it's so fragile. It came out almost like a coat of armor. I never pursued it, you know, because you really have to have a reason for casting something. And so far, I haven't found the piece that would say, this should be cast. Because it's successful in the fiber, and it would change and lose the color and some of the spontaneity. But maybe at some point I would do that.

MS. MALARCHER: You mentioned you're a grandmother.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yes.

MS. MALARCHER: How many grandchildren do you have?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I have four grandchildren. The oldest, Max, is going to be ten, Lily's going to be seven, Sammy's just turned eight, and the baby, Jack, is nine months, and he's really fun. [Laughs.]

MS. MALARCHER: Have you taught any of your grandchildren how to crochet?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Yes. I mean, Lily and Sammy are wonderful artists. They don't have that much patience yet, because I started when they were like five and six; Sammy has done some needlepoint and she likes to draw; she's very good at drawing. And Lily likes to work with magic markers. But she has tried cross-stitch. I think they need to be maybe nine to have that much patience. I'm working on it.

MS. MALARCHER: So Sammy is a girl.

MS. MINKOWITZ: Is a girl, yeah.

MS. MALARCHER: When your grandchildren come to visit, do you talk to them about your work or about the art that you have around the house?

MS. MINKOWITZ: You know, it's like when my children were growing up, everything was around them - and like, they'll come in, and I may be working on a piece, which I think it's really terrific, and they wouldn't say a word. They don't notice it. I think the grandchildren do look at times.

Max had gone once to a show that I was in. Actually, he was probably eight then. He was focusing on it and looking at it; actually, they do look, and they do want to come up to the studio and work with me, so I'm grateful for that. It's a nice way to have a relationship with them. I enjoy that very much.

My children are grateful because then they don't have the mess in their house. But, you know, I love it. It's fun.

[Tape break.]

MS. MALARCHER: When we were talking about responses to your work, you mentioned an article by a writer named Kathleen Whitney. Where did that article appear?

MS. MINKOWITZ: The article appeared in *American Craft* after my show at the Bellas Artes Gallery in Santa Fe, and that was in 1999. And I thought it was very well written and touched on a lot of the thoughts and concepts that I had. A particular paragraph that I liked, if you want me to read it, is - would you care for me to read it?

MS. MALARCHER: Yes, why don't you just read a couple of sentences?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Okay. "Minkowitz draws from a vocabulary of emotionally charged forms - forms that are the result of her attempt to find a clear, visual language that, although intensely personal, is neither privileged nor private. Her work speaks clearly of her own intense involvement with it. Her work refuses to pander to its viewer; instead, the viewer is allowed to collaborate, to blend personal experience and imagination within Minkowitz's transparent arenas."

And I thought that really covered a lot of the feelings I had, and the forms that I use, and the

idea of the viewer being part of the concept of the art and interpreting the work in their own way.

MS. MALARCHER: This is kind of jumping back. We're sort of jumping around here. But do you think that your sense of identity, as an artist rather than a fiber artist, was helped by the fact that you studied at a generalized art school rather than in a fiber program?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I think so, because, you know, most of my adult life, I wanted to be an artist. And while going to Cooper Union, there was such a diverse group of students working in different materials that I never considered myself a fiber artist, although I am labeled that from time to time. But I think it did help going to a fine arts school. I think if you study weaving, you're considered a craftsman, but if you study fine art, that's not always the case.

And I find now, there's such a fine line between the arts. You know, artists painting or doing sculpture, who are generally connected to the fine arts world, are using fiber and are using plants, wood, you know, lint from dryers. The materials are something everybody uses, and I think being in a school like that has definitely helped.

MS. MALARCHER: But would you have come to where you are without that early introduction to crochet?

MS. MINKOWITZ: No, probably not, because I took to it immediately, and the possibilities were evident to me, even as a child. And my love of drawing, which I mentioned before, I think, connected to the linear quality of the fiber. And the things I remember doing most as a child are, you know, drawing, the pen and ink, cross-hatching, and then crocheting, which, to me, is also cross-hatching, but with fiber. And you know, when you crosshatch in a pen-and-ink drawing, the human hand, you know, each shape is totally different, even though you're repeating the same process.

And in the crochet, even though I'm repeating the same stitch over and over and over, each one is different because of the human hand. And I think this connection came simultaneously.

MS. MALARCHER: I'm still intrigued by this experience of working at home with your mother. And what gave you the idea that you could be an artist who wasn't just a mother at home crocheting with her children? Were there role models or other artists that sort of gave you a vision of what was possible?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, my father was a musician, but wasn't a visual artist. But we had some family members that were architects, and a cousin of mine was an artist. But I just always loved to draw, and I always - I never had, like, a plan to be an artist; I just felt like an artist. And I never was, like, a person who, like, planned my career. I just mostly wanted to do what made me happy and what, you know, I felt I could say something with.

So I didn't have an agenda. Like, you know, you see so many artists who belong to everything and join everything, and suck up to people just to get ahead. And I never did that. I just did my work, and I got married. When I got married, I stopped thinking of being an artist; I thought of being a wife and a mother. And at the beginning of my marriage, I didn't really do artwork for a while. And I guess just the love of it came back. And with little children, I kind of started to fiddle with fibers and didn't really consider it as an art form at that time. It was probably in the '60s. And then the more I did, the more my education connected with the fiber, and I started to think of it as an art form, and I just kept on going from there.

MS. MALARCHER: And did the profession of being the kind of artist that you are, was that something that sort of grew along with you? Maybe I'm not saying that quite clearly. But I think that at the time you started working, this field of working in fibrous materials was beginning to emerge. And it seems that there was a connection there between your own personal development and the development of that field.

MS. MINKOWITZ: I never thought of myself in the movement. Like, I knew that artists were weaving and artists were doing fiber off the wall. I kind of connected to painting for a while. At the beginning, I was doing fiber pieces that were stretched on canvas, because I felt I was still painting, but I was using the threads. And I started later on - at first, they were more flat and they had more graphic kind of look to it. I was working with reverse appliqué at that time, and the blocks were more like woodcutting.

Then I started to crochet and maybe became more three-dimensional. And at that time, the movement was these very textured and very fibrous artworks hanging off the wall, and pouring out, and very organic. And my work wasn't that organic because I always worked with fine threads. But I started to do pieces that were three-dimensional, but on a stretcher. And then, gradually, they kept changing the shape. They weren't square anymore, they were round, and they were more structured.

And then, they actually came off the wall into pedestal pieces, and I always kept going towards a sculptural direction.

MS. MALARCHER: You seem to have a remarkable gift or ability to remain true to yourself. Where do you get that strength?

MS. MINKOWITZ: I just resent people who do things for success without really being true to themselves. And it always shows in the end. I mean, just doing things to succeed and not being true to yourself, it always comes out. And there's no reason to do anything unless it's part of you, and I've always felt that way. I like to experiment. Like if I'm finding success in, say, the figurative pieces, and I want to do something that's totally different, you know, it's taking a risk, but you can't succeed unless you take a risk.

So now, I'm even doing pieces that are more solid and have more found objects on them. I'm using wires and resin. You know, I'm still doing the transparent works because I really have a feeling for that. But I'm experimenting, and I think you really have to take a chance to express yourself and say what you want to say.

MS. MALARCHER: You seem to defy all stereotypes. You're a successful woman artist living in a beautiful suburban home instead of a loft in SoHo or Tribeca. You fulfilled the role of wife and mother, and now grandmother, while you persisted in developing your work, and you've been working very sincerely, not ironically, with the process and materials that are traditionally used by women. Yet your work is fully accepted as sculpture rather than craft. What can you say about that?

MS. MINKOWITZ: It's very hard, but I want to be everything, you know. [Laughs.] I want to be good in sports, I want to be a good grandmother, I want to be a good cook, which is questionable at this point. [Laughs.] I want to try to be good at everything I do, and that's very hard to do. But I think it's really important in the end to be a good mother and grandmother. My daughter-in-law recently paid me the highest compliment by saying that I'm a really good grandmother and I care a lot about what the kids are doing and what toys they're playing with, and, you know, that I really take an interest in them.

And I think that's a great compliment, but, at the same time, I want to be good at my artwork, and I want to grow all the time. And I think you just have to keep doing it. You know, you just have to have time for everything.

You know, I have friends that are more art hobbyists. And they won't go to baby-sit because they're working. And like, sometimes I have a deadline, and if someone asks me to baby-sit, I'll drop my work and go baby-sit and feel I could do that later. You know, the kids grow so quickly and they change so quickly, and if you want to be part of their life, and you want them to be part of your life, you just have to do that. So I'll work the next day longer.

So I accept everything as a challenge and I try to be the best I could in whatever I do. It doesn't always work that way. [Laughs.]

MS. MALARCHER: Could you offer any advice to other women artists?

MS. MINKOWITZ: Well, lighten up a little would be one of them. [They Laugh.] I think sometimes people take themselves too seriously, and I think you have to laugh, I think you have to cry, I think you have to just take time out sometimes. Sometimes I just sit and stare at something for a day or so before I even work at it. And I just think you have to accept your good fortune and you have to accept your failures, and just keep trying. And that's what I try to do.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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