



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with James Bassler,
2002 February 11-June 6

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with James Bassler on February 11 and 14, April 9, and June 6, 2002. The interview took place at the artist's office in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Sharon K. Emanuelli 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.

James Bassler and Sharon K. Emanuelli 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

SHARON EMANUELLI: This is Sharon Emanuelli interviewing James Bassler at the artist's office at UCLA, in the Design department, in Los Angeles, California, on February 11, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

So, Jim, when and where were you born?

JAMES BASSLER: Okay. I was born in Santa Monica, California, March 5, 1933, in a house on Euclid Street, which still exists and really hasn't changed very much after all these years. I'm the fourth child of John and Margaret Bassler, and I have an older brother and two older sisters. I mean, I had, but one of my sisters passed on. And we're all four years apart, so that was quite an expanse. And having been born during the depths of the Depression indicates something about the optimistic view that my parents had, because it was obviously a planned family with that kind of expanse.

My father was a major league baseball player, although the greatest part of his career was really before I was born. He was also a Mennonite from a Mennonite community in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. And both of those factors, the baseball and the Mennonite, bear greatly upon who I am.

MS. EMANUELLI: What teams did he play for?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, he played for—well, he—I believe that—now, he was one of 13 children. And I guess that's the sort of thing they did in the Mennonite communities of—you know, they're hard workers and they had to have large families to tend the farms and all that. But I do think that if one were to look back, baseball, I think, had its origins in that part of the country. Obviously, it wasn't out West. And it was very unusual, I think, for someone to leave the farm and leave their community and become a baseball player. And he was searching for ways to get into the Major Leagues, and I think he found the way to do that was to come out West where the—the small clubs played—I can't think of the term they use for that. They're the—

MS. EMANUELLI: Semi-pro or the minors?

MR. BASSLER: The minor leagues, kind of. And he came out to California in 1912 and was actually discovered out here. He tells a wonderful story—or he told a wonderful story; he passed on a number of years ago—he was an usher at the—at one of the big theaters on Broadway in Los Angeles, the Orpheum or Pantages in Hollywood or something, and he'd gone out to see an exhibition baseball game by two of the major leagues who had come out to the West Coast to show. And as a spectator watching the game, the pitcher on one of the teams was injured and Dad was the—excuse me, a catcher; he was a catcher. And the catcher was injured during the game, and so Dad saw that and he talked about getting on the Red Car and going to a job that night, and of all things the manager of the team came to the movie that night and Dad asked him what he was going to do for a catcher. And the manager says, "Why?" He says, "Because I'm a catcher." He says, "Well, come on out."

And Dad ended up on the Detroit Tigers team in—he was with Detroit between the time of Ty Cobb. I think Ty Cobb was getting towards the senior year and Dad was the youngest on the team, from 1922 to 1926. And then—actually, he started off with the Cleveland Americans, and then he went with the Detroit Tigers, and then he went back to Cleveland Indians. It was the same team, but they changed their name.

So when I was born in the 1930s, that was a time that I remember—during the latter part of the '30s, we would go back East every year. And sometimes, being the youngest in the family, they would just yank me out of school and we'd go back and I'd go to school in Cleveland or—I'd go to school wherever they were, where my brothers and sisters would have to stay on in California and finish up the full term.

And so that was a real influence in our family. My Dad was a very strong personality and put a very strong work

ethic in us. And there was never a sense that we were to become major-league baseball players because Dad believed that you were always sort of born with a talent, that you would not be taught. And yet there was always this sort of guilt that you felt like you were supposed to be a baseball player. And I think that would be true in anybody's family.

But when there-Dad was quite well-known and people would come to see him all the time. And there was always the discussion, well, John-you know, Johnny Bassler was his name-well, John, how are your sons going to be; what are your sons going to do? And it was-I was absolutely petrified of the game, absolutely petrified. And it was quite obvious that I was not interested in it, and there were always remarks made about that-my brother not so much, for some reason, I don't know. He was not a baseball player either, but he would show more interest in it. But I just said, "I'm not interested." I'd tell him so.

And yet, Dad also hooked rugs, in the wintertime when they weren't playing baseball, and it's something he learned from the Mennonite community. He would take silk stockings-my mother's friends would always donate their silk stockings that had runs in them-and Dad would dye them in little pots on the stove, which I was very much interested in, and then I'd help him cut them in strips. And then he would hook them, he would hook them in, so he was actually-came up with these sort of hooked silk rugs. And he did a lot of them; it wasn't just now and then. His designs were sort of based on-he'd go to Pressinger's, you know, where you could buy patterns. He wasn't original in that sense, but he was very original with the way he would work with color. And he wouldn't interpret it exactly the way the plan was that he-the little kit that he would buy. Well, he didn't need the kit anymore after he did so many; he would just begin to borrow. And I would help him with that process, and yet at the same time was absolutely petrified of the baseball, always, that was this fear within me, that I was going to be asked sometime to get up and have to play baseball.

MS. EMANUELLI: You never played Little League or any of that-they probably didn't have it then.

MR. BASSLER: They didn't have it. They didn't have it. And there was always this expectation of me to play that, and yet I was sort of saying, well, gee, I'm able to sort of work with that in this other way, why couldn't these things balance out? But it was my own mind-I think it was my own sense of lack of feeling adequate of what I was supposed to do. It was something that I put on me. But he had his way of reminding me, even though the art wasn't-and when he heard that I was interested in art, that was just it, I mean he just couldn't imagine that a Bassler would become an artist. And that was-that would be still grade school. I loved art. I would be the one to do the mural, you know, I would be the one who volunteered to do all that stuff. I just absolutely loved it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did the Mennonite community-how did they respond to artists? Was that a good thing to do or was that just something you did in your spare time?

MR. BASSLER: Well, they fit it into their-sort of like the Amish would, in a very strict kind of sense, you know. And-but I, frankly, think that our whole country was established by sort of repressed, you know, people who loved-had delight in badgering other people who didn't believe the same way they did, you know. What would our country be if Italians had landed on Plymouth Rock? You know, we'd-we would embrace art, we would-we would-

MS. EMANUELLI: Be singers! [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, we'd be-well, we-when do we have dance-when would-

MS. EMANUELLI: We'd have massive forearms from rolling pasta.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-no. But, I mean, it-going back, now, some summers they would drop me off at the farm because Mom and Dad would be traveling around and living in hotels and all that, and I would spend some time-not a summer, but maybe a week or something like that with my relatives, most of whom did not speak English-you know, they were German-and live the life on the farm. And I remember that I was sort of enjoying it really. You know, it was-I fit in pretty well that way.

I was usually much, much happier when I wasn't around my father because then I didn't have to have that kind of reference of what I thought that I was supposed to do. But surprisingly, we finally became very close, and he admitted after so many years, "I guess I was kind of rough on you, wasn't I?" And why he singled me out-and my older sister, the two of us together-

MS. EMANUELLI: The oldest sister?

MR. BASSLER: The oldest, who is 12 years older than me, who still lives in Malibu. And it wasn't just my imagination because neighbors who finally, in their later years, would sort of say, "Oh, my God, you know, how that guy badgered you." You know, this-this constant thing.

But anyway, there's another interesting story to tell about Dad because he really became like a folk artist. Once he gave up baseball he bought some land in Malibu. And he-you know, they didn't get to retirement like they get today. And he was given a certain amount of money. He was very stingy but he was a very, very frugal man. And my mother was a teacher. She always had to work. And she had quite an artistic flair too. But-

MS. EMANUELLI: Was she Mennonite, also?

MR. BASSLER: No, no, no, no. No. She was a-she went to UCLA when it was downtown L.A., and I don't think Dad went much beyond eighth grade, I think-or the 6th grade, I don't know-self-taught, you know. But, anyway, Dad was given a certain amount of money and never would have thought to have spent it on the family at all. He knew how he wanted to spend it, and he bought 48 acres in Malibu in a canyon, Latigo Canyon. And in those days that was 17 miles up the coast, two-lane highway. It-you know, it could have been the moon, you know. It just took so long to get there.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, there wasn't much between Santa Monica and Wilshire Boulevard-I mean, Santa Monica and Fairfax Boulevard at that point.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-no, right, right. And so you just-he drove up there every weekend. He started planting plants. He loved plants. It's probably from his farming days. And he loved the chaparral. And he would begin to tell me I ought to start digging up some of this chaparral and you could sell it. You know, you-I could make a business out of native plants. All very good ideas, but when you're seven years old, you know, it may be a little bit premature. [Laughs.]

MS. EMANUELLI: This was for you to earn-to earn money?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, I see.

MR. BASSLER: And-I mean, he'd take me-anyway, he bought it. He bought this land, \$75 an acre. And when my sisters were both-this is right after World War II, when both my sisters were married, then he says, "We're moving up to Malibu," where there was no house, there was no nothing up there. And he began to go around trying to-no, he'd been trying to build a house, excuse me, during the '40s when I was in-still in elementary school. I've looked at the-I remember this so well. There was a little glass window in the doorway to the fifth and sixth grade, when I was in fifth and sixth grade, and occasionally I'd look over in that window, and when I would see Dad's face, die. And he'd go like this-

MS. EMANUELLI: Your-

MR. BASSLER: Come. Come with me.

MS. EMANUELLI: With your finger.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah. Come-

MS. EMANUELLI: Beckoning you with his finger.

MR. BASSLER: And he'd open the door, and the teachers-you know, Dad was a very imposing guy, and they just let me go, you know; he's going to go. And Dad would take me up to work on this house. Now, why he did me and not my brother, well, my brother was in junior high school and I was just this-this thing that-you know, take him out. It wasn't like a camaraderie. It wasn't like, oh, great, I get to be with Dad. It was a time-

MS. EMANUELLI: Or Dad liked to be with you.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, right. But after awhile I began to believe he did, because there was an old-at that time, the Rindge Castle was being built-Mrs. Rindge-and she brought over a whole Italian-

MS. EMANUELLI: May Rindge, isn't it?

MR. BASSLER: May Rindge. She brought over an Italian tile factory, it used to be, and they set it up right on the beach to make tiles for her-for her castle.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right. And that was Malibu Tile, correct?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, and-but then the-it was going defunct and they wanted to sell out all these tiles, all these bits and broken tiles and this, that and the other. And Dad would call me out of school. We'd drive up and lift flats from-remember when they used to have the wooden flats from the nurseries?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: We'd have these wooden flats from the nurseries, and he'd have me down there picking up all these tiles that was being thrown out, really, because Dad wanted to do a patio or something at the house he was building. And then we'd go home and we'd arrange these tiles upside down on the flat and pour cement on them, and they became these two-well, probably, 20-inch-by-20-inch tiles when we'd turn them over, see? And so we'd come up with different patterns.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, sort of like a modular Watts Towers?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, exactly, exactly like that. And nobody else in the family would bother. We'd do this either in the garage of the Santa Monica house or we'd do it up in Malibu. Dad became a great man with cement. And he'd had me putting these down, and he'd do a few of them himself, and-but I was down there-you know, I was the artist, so I would be-and I enjoyed it. And I-and we had-we were building this relationship which-I didn't know that's what was happening, but I realized that I was sort of enjoying this kind of part of it.

Well, he got-we got the cement floor done to this place, but then he had no wood or no nothing to really the build the place. And they tore-they were tearing down the Venice-yeah, the Venice Pier at that time so he was able to get some wood from the Venice Pier. And we had an old Woody station wagon, and he would roll-we'd go down to Venice and get this crappy wood-you know, because during the war there was no wood available whatsoever for any buildings, and he didn't have any money anyway. And so we'd load this wood up.

And then he got the idea-he needed money, and his baseball career-he had had some tension problems with baseball; it was just too much. He'd tried being a manager for Seattle and all this. And, mind you, he's only in his 40s at this time. You know, he's not an old man at all, and-late 40s, probably. And so he went to work for Twentieth Century Fox, mainly to get building supplies.

MS. EMANUELLI: Was he building sets or-

MR. BASSLER: Well, yeah-no, when they were taking sets apart-you're too young to remember but you could drive on Santa Monica Boulevard and watch them making movies or burning sets or whatever between-you know, where Century City is now-particularly on Santa Monica where it does that rise. And he saw-you know, he saw this wood going up in flames.

MS. EMANUELLI: What did he do for them?

MR. BASSLER: He was a laborer-day laborer. And they all knew who he was. You know, they'd-and he was just-everybody loved him because they wanted to hear all the-you know, what was Babe Ruth like, and, you know, this and that and the other.

And so Dad would-when they'd be through with a set they'd set aside-he'd show what he wanted and they would set aside these sets. And so-one of the funny stories we'd tell about this was that our house went up, like, overnight. And when they build a set they only build the front two walls, you know.

And so the front of our house was from Gene Tierney in Leave Her to Heaven. And it had a Dutch door and everything to it. It's on the television quite a bit. It's in really lurid Technicolor, and Gene Tierney is just so evil in it. And there's one scene where Jeanne Crain, who's the woman waiting for Cornel Wilde when he gets of prison, is leaning on the front-on our Dutch door, and the front of the house that became the front and side of the house.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: It's all made out of plaster, you know, beautifully painted. It's got studs in it to hold it up, but-and the back-

MS. EMANUELLI: And survive the weather?

MR. BASSLER: Well, no, we had to start painting it-yeah, right. And then the back of the house was from Gregory Peck's Keys to the Kingdom and so it became Chinese. And I'm saying to Dad, "How are you going to put a roof on this thing?" You know, there were no roofs on the set; they just went so far. And he just sort of managed-and you know, he'd have me there like a dead man on-I think that's what he called the poles that hold up walls while you're tying it all together.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And I'd be the one leaning, you know, and putting this thing together. And the inspector, who loved Dad-and they didn't do much in the way of inspecting in those days-you know, came out and he said, "I've never seen such beautiful brickwork in all my life." And I'm saying, all he has to do is go inside and see it's

plaster, you know. And-but he'd get to talking to Dad about a baseball game or something like that.

MS. EMANUELLI: So he never really inspected it.

MR. BASSLER: No, no.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And so that was our house: no plumbing, no-you know, a little outhouse. So, water-oh, and all of this was these sets. They would cut them up in segments, partitions, so they would fit in the back of the Woody station wagon.

And then he found a B-17 gas tank, I guess it was-a gas tank that fit perfectly in the back of the Woody. And we would go down to our neighbors where we used to live in Santa Monica and go in and take showers and in the meantime fill up this gas tank with water to take up-back up to Latigo Canyon for water supply.

MS. EMANUELLI: That was your drinking water?

MR. BASSLER: No, it was washing-I don't think we drank with it, just because it was-it had such a taste to it. You know, we'd have to probably buy-I don't remember-we had bottled water. I remember Dad always liked good water.

So that was-the reason I have to tell that story is because it-I realized that very early on, that if I was to enjoy life it was up to me; that I could not do-I couldn't sort of waste my time trying to please my parents; that they had their life, and my mother had, you know, this life with him, and if she wanted to put up with it that was her-you know, that was her problem or that was to be her life. And by age 16 or 17 I said, you know, if I'm going to enjoy something, I'm going to enjoy it. It's not going to be something that I want them to come down and enjoy with me, like you do when you're little-you know, oh, look what I found. It was-there was no point to that. It was-if I was going to enjoy life it was going to be what I wanted to do and had to do.

And then much later in life, after my mother had passed on and I had a sister who very tragically died, Dad was essentially alone because one sister had bought-she and her husband had built a home on his property to sort of-and she was sort of caring for Mom and Dad as they got older, and then she died of cancer very early in life, in her 40s. And her husband dropped dead of a heart attack. And all of a sudden-and then my mother died in the early '70s and Dad was all alone. And we moved into my sister's house just so that we could-we were living in Oaxaca and we moved back just because we thought, what are we going to do, because there he is all alone.

And he took up rug weaving again-or rug hooking again. And interestingly, that we ended up being the ones-and my elder sister, who lived on the other side of the hill, the two of us were the ones who carried through and saw Dad to his death. And that was sort of interesting that it ended up that way because the other two were much closer to Dad, we thought.

But even though my Dad-and my mother's funeral, Dad wouldn't-Dad never went to any of our weddings, never-he just couldn't handle-he used my mother to bring people into his life, but without her there he would never, ever think to invite anybody into his life. And I find myself getting the same way, interestingly. I'm not one to-in fact-well, but anyway, even on my mother's funeral, Dad said, "Jim, you can't go to that." I said, "Why not?" "Because you've got to drive me around." And so I drove him up through the Malibu hills. And I would have thought surely that he would call on my brother because I always assumed my brother, who had done some athletic thing or something like that, but it wasn't, it was-and it would be art that connected us.

MS. EMANUELLI: So you're saying that you didn't go to your mother's funeral either?

MR. BASSLER: I had to drive Dad around.

MS. EMANUELLI: So you did what you were told.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I did. Oh, always with him, at that point because I thought it was more important that I be with him at that time. You know, the roles change all of a sudden and then you feel adult. And he lived 10 years later or more after that. He was very, very healthy.

But, anyway, so-and all that he did around not only the house, but he went on to create very inventive, sort of like a Grandma Prisbee kind of bottle village or Watts Towers. I always wanted to take him down and show him Watts Towers. He says, "I'm not interested." Dad did not want to be upstaged, you know. But that's the kind of thing he did around the house with cement, just forming cement and doing interesting things.

But when I became a teenager that was very hard to understand, which is about the time I just said I'd move to Santa Monica and just get out of this craziness.

MS. EMANUELLI: So you left home while you still in high school?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. I started living in town because at that time we went to Malibu-used Santa Monica school system, and I went to-I graduated from high school-Santa Monica High School in '51. And on graduating-my sister, actually, had taken a class-the one that died-she and I were the only two who went to college.

MS. EMANUELLI: What was her name?

MR. BASSLER: Sally. Sally. And Sally, about the time that that World War II broke out, I guess, or maybe she went-she was-she came to UCLA and she took a course with Laura Andreson in ceramics. And this was the time when Laura was still-they were still digging clay on campus. They would go down-well, right in front of where Perloff is now and the music department, but there's that bridge-you've heard that story about the bridge. Well, there used to be that big canyon there, which is still essentially there. And Laura would take the students down and dig clay on campus. And that's the clay they'd use to make mostly slab pieces and mold pieces, and Sally made a set of dishes-or she-no, she made saucers and cups.

And I was in high school at that time, and I said, that's what I'm going to do. And I-although I was a good student, they didn't usually have room-the art classes were sort of set aside for delinquents and, you know, they didn't track you into art classes at all. And so I said that I want take ceramics, and it was barely-you know, there was barely a room, and it was sewing machines-

MS. EMANUELLI: Was it still in the education department then?

MR. BASSLER: No, this is-

MS. EMANUELLI: Ok-so you were in high school-

MR. BASSLER: In high school, and based on what my sister had done in college I decided I wanted to do the same thing. And I had always been-loved the art classes and the craft classes all through junior high school, elementary school. And Santa Monica elementary, I remember, and junior high had always been very strong, but by the time I got to high school it seemed like they sort of channeled us into more academic courses. We were sort of a group of, you know, supposedly leadership students or something like that. But I insisted that I wanted to take the ceramic class, and it was really sort of a-very poorly maintained, and the teacher was so uninterested in what we were doing and-very lovely woman, but she just had-she was not a ceramist. I remember she dressed very well in the style-

[Audio break.] Anyway, I made a set of dishes based on a mold process-figured out how Sally had done it. And she would explain to me and I'd go to San Mo High and do it. I was so excited by that that when I was counseled for-in a graduation, at San Mo High, I went into the counselor with the idea, I said I wanted to be an art major. And she looked, and she says, "That's impossible." She says, your grade-point average is much too high for that and that you have to select something else. And she seemed so wise to me, and that's her job, you know. And I guess there aren't-there is no such thing as an art major. You know, I just sort of took it for what she said. And she says, "What else do you like to do?" And this is a few years after World War II. And a friend of ours had worked in Europe as-in helping displaced persons of Europe. And I thought that that sounded very good to me.

I have to go back a little ways. My mother's sister, Aunt May, was very influential. She was a French teacher, and she taught in Hawaii for many years and was-and, of course, had been to France and been around. And our family-I don't think my parents had ever gone to Europe. I don't think they'd gone anywhere. They were wonderful in the sense of giving us a-we traveled a lot in the United States-an awful lot, which is a whole 'nother story. But we were always on the move because we had to go back East to watch Dad play baseball.

But Aunt May brought to my life the sense of how exciting the world can be. And I even remember mentioning this to a junior high school teacher-my English teacher-and she says, "Oh, you've got to read Richard Halliburton's Royal Road to Romance," which was-he was a great adventurer and swam in the pool at the Taj Mahal, and I think he was actually lost at sea. I think he died while trying to make another adventure. And I loved those books. They were just so exciting to me that-all of these different things that he-the adventures he had gone on. And so-and so the travel part, and Aunt May was just so worldly, and then the art part.

Anyway, so said, well, I'm interested in going to Europe and helping find-put families back together or something like that. And she says, "Oh, then you have to be a sociologist." So I became a sociology major.

MS. EMANUELLI: May I ask you what your Aunt May's last name is?

MR. BASSLER: Aunt May Aldrich.

MS. EMANUELLI: A-l-r-i-c-h?

MR. BASSLER: Like Henry Aldrich, A-l-d-r-i-c-h. And that was her-

MS. EMANUELLI: Her maiden name?

MR. BASSLER: No, no, she was married, from Denver. Their name was McCandliss.

Anyway, so, at that time, I-upon graduating from high school I got a job at Douglas Aircraft Company, working swing shift so that I could afford to go to school because there was no money coming from my Mom and Dad whatsoever. In fact, it ended up that I began to give them money out of my own salary just to make their lives easier. All the kids began to, whoever had money, give money to Mom and Dad. And it's important to talk about Douglas because later on I got a fantastic job to go overseas with him.

And I went to Santa Monica City College and was a sociology major, and gradually did writing, working swing shift at Douglas, no art in my life whatsoever. And-I actually took an art appreciation class that they offered, and the idea of going to UCLA once I could afford it. UCLA in 1951 was \$42 tuition, which I could not afford. And I wasn't ready yet anyway.

I-Santa Monica College-Santa Monica City College then had just moved to the new campus on Pico in 1951. And they still-and they called it "mud city" because there was no landscaping, and this and that and the other. But I had some excellent classes in English literature and American literature, learned how to write, you know, learned-really sort of grew up quite a bit. And then transferred after I graduated to UCLA as a sociology major, and it did not take me long before I realized that I was not a sociology major. I could not get excited by what other students were getting excited by, statistics and, you know, all of those reams and reams of books you read about the lives of people and this, that and the other. And so I just walked up to the art department and said I felt like I should be there, and became an art major. And the moment I did that, I was drafted. I don't think that had anything to do with it but-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: -I said I want to be an art major and the next thing I know, my number was up. I knew it was coming up. This was the Korean War that was going on-or it was over but it was the Korean conflict, and there were many, many troops-which there still are-stationed in Korea.

And I went to Fort Ord and had something kind of interesting happen there. I got pneumonia at Fort Ord, which was not unusual; a lot of people did. And was-the company that I was with was targeted to go to Korea. And so, I was taken out of that company and I lost too much time, and so I had to be rescheduled in another company that was stationed to go to Europe. And so, that was fine with me.

Something else happened in terms of-I think I really grew up in that particular time because I'd never been around to-I'd never had too many friends. Living in Malibu, you take a bus, you go all the way home, you walk up a-half a mile up a canyon and you're with your parents. And I found activities, art activities really, that sort of interested me, living at home. And that's why I sort of associated myself with my father. I was just sort of self-contained and I didn't feel like I was losing anything. I just was-I'm very much happy by myself. And going into the Army all of the sudden put me in relationship to all of the other guys my age. And I was absolutely petrified because I'd always felt sort of diminished by my father, not being a baseball star, and the amount of-the importance they put on sports in this country, always have, and it's something that didn't terribly interest me.

And yet I found-the day they passed out the M-1 rifles, those of us from big cities like San Francisco and L.A., I was absolutely petrified. I mean, what is this thing? And yet the ones from Wyoming and Montana, all the Western states, you know, they knew what to do and they would give all these horror stories about, watch out for the bowl, it will take your thumb off. And, you know, I thought, oh, my God, what have I gotten myself into, you know? And yet I turned out to be a marksman. I mean, I just-it was just sort of-they would stop, and I became part of one of these teams that went around and put on exhibits where-you know, it sounds like Universal Studios, shooting the guy out of the balcony or something, you know. Things would come up and I could-I was very, very-you know, my hand-eye-mind coordination was just right-on all the time. And it was just a natural for me. It was not something that I had to learn. The moment I figured out how this thing works and how to set this and this and this.

So I really felt very good about being in the Army. I mean, all of a sudden I felt that these-I realized how much smarter I was than a lot of people, which I-if you live alone you never know that. And all of a sudden I could figure things out. Even on those tests they give you to get in the Army-or, not to get in, that you take to put you in something-the idea of looking at something and trying to figure out what is the same object in another view or point of view, sort of like geometry, which I loved, the idea of looking at something and getting the idea, well, I could imagine that. My mind-my eye could travel over that and see what that object would look like from another point of view. All of those things I loved. And this was something very good because it helped me feel a little bit better about myself, because I think most the time I tended to want to be alone because then I didn't

have to necessarily compare myself with anybody, which I tend to do all through my life. It's just one of those things you constantly fight.

So I was sent to New York. We flew to New York, which is a very funny story, but I won't go into it. We were on Flying Tigers, and they were taking penguins to the New York Zoo. [Laughs.] And we got on-it was February, and the flight was-I thought it would be warmer inside the airplane, and you see that they've got all these crated-Flying Tigers was something like UPS is today, I guess.

MS. EMANUELLI: And they still exist, don't they?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, it might; it might. And so I thought, my God, you know-and got all the way to Grand Island, Nebraska, and had to land in a cornfield. And so it took us, to get across the United States I think by plane, something like seven days, where we missed our-the ship that we would ship out on-which is a story there because it gave us a chance-they never usually give you three-day passes for something like that, and I-and we got a pass to go to New York City.

And I was 20 years old, and I went to the Brooklyn Museum, and I saw a Peruvian textile. It was famous. It's called Cabeza Grande. It's the mantle piece of all mantle pieces. And in those days they had it hanging out. They didn't-now they would preserve it. Now you go to the Brooklyn Museum and you-it's in a case and you push a little button and the light stays on for two minutes and you see an inch of it or something like that. But in those days they had the whole thing.

And I said, "That's what I want to make." I mean, I-it had never occurred to me to make cloth. And I never forgot that. I mean, this is on the eve of going over to Germany to be occupation troops. This is-Germany did not get its independence until '65, and so we were occupying Germany. What-[laughs]-it sounds like today or-you know, how we occupy countries, but that's what- So we went over to-I was-we went over by ship on-you know, some ship that went over that was from-because we'd missed our original flight-I mean, ship. It was a Puerto Rican ship. And so we were with an all Puerto Rican-captain and all that, you know, and we went to Bremerhaven and then went down to Frankfurt. And then I was stationed out in the infantry; I was with the infantry, and spent two years there and traveled as much as I possibly could-you know, went to-I mean, I thought about-I didn't-wasn't searching out textiles at this time. Had I known about the Bayeux Tapestry I would have gone there, but I didn't know anything about textiles at all, you know, I mean-but I knew to go to Paris. I took a-on my first three-day pass I went to Paris and went to all those museums because of that art history class I'd taken-art appreciation at Santa Monica and saw these things and was familiar enough with them. I just knew exactly what I wanted to do, you know, when I went to Paris, and took trips into Italy and-

So by the time I came back I was really set to be-to do some art, you know, to try to see what I could do. And-but I also went back-I got my job back at Douglas, because that was my means of support.

MS. EMANUELLI: What did you do there?

MR. BASSLER: I worked in reproduction, they called it. [Laughs.] It sounds weird. But it was making blueprints-[unintelligible]-prints, and microfilm was very new at that time. And I had a top-secret clearance, and I was-we were using-we were photographing blueprints and putting it on microfilm, which was a very new thing at the time. And someone walked in when I was back at UCLA, in the Perloff Building, and was getting-I took ceramics and had basic classes going on, you know. And-no, no, no, I didn't take ceramics then, no, they wouldn't allow you; that was too upper-division-but took some basic classes, painting with Sam Amato, and had Stussy-you know, these are all the teachers who-

MS. EMANUELLI: Jan Stussy?

MR. BASSLER: Jan Stussy, who passed on, but Sam Amato I just saw over at LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] last Monday. I was in to see a show and there he was standing, and we chatted.

But anyway, I was working at night and somebody came in and said, who wants-anybody here want to go to Europe-at Douglas. And it was to go-this was in May, and they said, when do I-I said, when do I leave? They said, June. And school was up then so I took a leave of absence from-because that way it was on G.I. Bill too. But-and I was a lot older than a lot of the students, you know, going away and then coming back.

But anyway, went-it was a secret project to put a Thor missiles on the West Coast of England. It was obviously the Cold War, and I'd been working on the Thor Project but didn't know much about it. You know, I had pictures of it and diagrams of it and all that. But they-it was secret project to put 60 Thor missiles on the West Coast of East Anglia. And I was to go there to receive the microfilm and to photograph parts of the breaking down. And so I was the receiver of the microfilm and also I was to send the microfilm. And it was a very, very secret project. In fact, I was flown over under such secrecy, which was a joke, you know, but a plane-you know, I was flown here to there to there, and then on an SAS flight, first class. The plane lands in Glasgow. I'm the only one who gets off,

and a taxi is waiting for me to drive me to another airport to fly me down there. I thought it was absolute-hoot, you know, I mean, because I couldn't imagine that this-anything could be so secret, you know, particularly with planes flying over. They could see we were putting these things up. But anyway, that's the way they wanted to play. [Laughs.]

And so we lived over there. I lived in Cambridge. I knew nobody on the-most everybody else in the plant were professional engineers, and also secretaries, staff and all that. And I had a wonderful time and, again, took every advantage I possibly could to travel. And I found that basically the engineers, most of them, had had an engineer education and knew nothing of the arts, you know, and they were just-many of them were anxious to learn, but a lot of them, you know were the bar set who spent the weekend at the officers club, because we had officer status.

But the whole thing leading up to was when it was finally time to go home, and that was in 1960, they gave me a first-class ticket to fly. By then jets had come in. Jets only started flying commercially in 1958. In fact, they had the Brussels Fair at that time, and we looked up in the sky and it was sort of-the DC-8 was brand new, where Douglas had had to build the DC-8 on its own whereas Boeing, that had the 747, had been a transport built by the government, and then they were able to turn that into, you know, a commercial.

And I remember looking up in Brussels and seeing the first DC-8. You could tell by the little variation on the wing whether it was a DC-8, and it was the first one. So that was about 1958 was the first commercial-because I'd flown over on a prop plane, the SAS one. But it was sort of interesting, you know, I mean, when did the-we assume they were around forever and they haven't been.

MS. EMANUELLI: Were you at the Brussels Fair?

MR. BASSLER: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. EMANUELLI: Was that a big exposition kind of thing, like the World's Fair?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, it was fantastic. And that's another place where I noticed-in Czechoslovakia, the Czechoslovakian pavilion was one of the most beautiful in terms of their use of textiles. They had done these wonderful kind of-how they'd used them structurally in the exhibit. And Czechoslovakia was always sort of thought of as one of those dirty Russian-you know, this was the kind of propaganda we were always given, you know, just, oh, they can do something beautiful over there? You know, it doesn't-and-oh, it was a very exciting exhibit because-I mean, the whole thing was because it had been the first one, I think, since World War II, I think it was, you know, Europe had come together and done this big thing. And our pavilion was rather beautiful. It was-Edward Durell Stone, I think, did the-was the architect, and it was-[inaudible]. Remember, he was the one who did that-what else did he do? He did the kind of thing that was very lace-like-round banks-in the States, and very filigree-ish, and a plant hanging from it. There was a building in Beverly Hills, and every-when the plants started growing everyone started calling it Edward Durell's armpits.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: [Laughs.] It got kind of gross, the building, but, you know, I thought, well, maybe it's not such a good idea. [Laughs.] It looked good when the plant was sort of-

MS. EMANUELLI: Barely there.

MR. BASSLER: Barely there, but if it got-anyway. But it was-

MS. EMANUELLI: That happens with landscaping sometimes.

MR. BASSLER: But it was an open building, and Europeans-they were sort of talking about the fact that Europeans like to see the front door, where to go, where to walk, where to sit down and do this and that and the other, and this is the building where it had multiple doors where you could walk in, and they felt of the freedom of the American spirit, where people would be walking around in any way. And it was that one that they produced, what Disneyland has now, that CircleRama thing?

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, yes.

MR. BASSLER: That's when it was put up. So they had-within it was the theater in the round where you walked inside, and it was a very-you were very proud of being an American because it was a very beautiful building.

MS. EMANUELLI: How do you spell his-his name is D-u-r-e-l-l, Durell?

MR. BASSLER: D-u-might be two-D-u-r-r-e-l-l, or something like that, Stone. Edward-I don't know why I remember that name because I don't remember anybody else's, but I just remembered he was very important at the time.

And then the-and the Russian one was so stoic and, you know, Lenin out front and heavy duty and all that, and we just pointed out, you know, during that time, oh those poor people and this and that and the other. Politically, I-that's when I really became a very staunch Democrat, during those periods over there. Well, I'd always been the Democrat in my family of Republicans.

MS. EMANUELLI: You always had?

MR. BASSLER: Always-I knew I had. I remember the day Franklin Roosevelt died. And I was home from school and I was sick that day. And I remember when he died, and I felt sorry. I thought he'd been a good person. And my family was so happy. And I went-I went next door to our neighbor. She still lives there, and I told Yvonne Smith how-I have never forgotten at the time she was crying, and I understood, you know, and she told me he was a very good man. And yet, there was none of that in my family. And I said, you know, there is something going on here. Am I the ugly duckling or something that-you know, am I going to find the family that I can really talk to about these things?

MS. EMANUELLI: Were you adopted, is that what you were thinking? [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, well-oh, no, I knew I wasn't because I look too much like my father. Oh, no, that never occurred to me. I was-my-we look very much the same. No, but it was their view of minorities, the constant, oh, what we used to put up with, in the way of people, you know, talking down the Jews, the Japs, you know, this constantly. And I was just-I would say, "I don't think you're being very fair there," or, "What chance are we giving them?" I mean, this was in elementary school. My best friend was Loren Switzenberg, you know, a wealthy family who lived in-on Rockingham-and the amount of ridicule I received from my brothers and sisters on that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Because he was Jewish.

MR. BASSLER: Because he was Jewish. And I knew it was wrong, you know. Or when I was in junior high school wanting to bring a Filipino and my mother would say, "What's his name again?" And I'd say, "His name is Sidney Vataan [sp]." "Oh, you'd better talk to your father about that." You know, so this control, and I don't think it was that unusual at all, particularly for Santa Monica. I really don't. And when-and just yesterday, going through the Japanese-American Museum and seeing the way-I mean, the quotes they have on the wall there. And yet, Dad brought home a Japanese ball-what do you call them-a batboy at dinner. He could do it because he had an association and a relationship.

Anyway, they-Douglas Aircraft gave me a ticket to fly first class back to L.A. from London. And I said, "Give me the money and give me six months off; give me some time off. I don't want to come home right away." And it was \$601 or \$501, whatever it was, or \$515, whatever it cost then. I bought passage to Hong Kong on a ship that cost \$500. And it was only once I got to Hong Kong that I realized I was farther away from L.A. I didn't realize the Pacific Ocean was quite as big. I thought I'd at least be closer. [Laughs.] But that was-and when I came back, I mean, I went-it was the British P&O Line, which stopped off at all the major cities of the old-of the old empire. They stopped in Egypt, which I'd already been to before on one of my little sojourns. And then we went through the Suez Canal, went to Aden and Yemen, went on to India and so on. And all the time I was going, taking pictures, you know, and by the time I got back-well, I got to Hong Kong and then I really had to figure out-be clever as to how I was going to get-because I didn't want to take the ship all the way across, and I really had no idea how much money I had because I was with Security Bank, it was, and not Security Pacific. And they would only send my bank statements, because we were paid in the U.S. so we didn't have to deal with the laws of taxes and all that in England. And they would always send it by boat, you know-[laughs]-so I hadn't a clue as to how much money I had.

So I finally got to Japan and landed there the day Gary Powers was shot down, May 2-May 1 [1960], and Eisenhower was scheduled to fly to Japan, and there was such outrage by the Japanese people of our sending spy planes all over that Eisenhower had to cancel his trip. And that's exactly when I landed there. And there were not riots going on but, you know, Tokyo has very wide, broad streets, and they had these mounds of people all dressed in black, marching down, you know, there's even a-[inaudible]. I said, oh, brother. And so I'd go-[Audio break.] MR. BASSLER: [In progress]-freedom that women all of a sudden began to feel during the war because they were no longer bound in the house.

MS. EMANUELLI: They had to do men's jobs?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And-

MS. EMANUELLI: We were discussing Douglas Aircraft again and how our mothers both worked there. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah. And-but anyway, when I came back from this trip, finally came back, and you know how it is when you've been away. I'd been away over two years and then-but I'd only been back for six months from the Army. So most of the '50s-this is 1960, and I was then 26, 27 years old, and it was finally then I thought,

well, I've really got to-oh, and then Kennedy came up with the Peace Corps idea, and I applied for the Peace Corps, and they wanted to send me to Colombia. And at the last minute-and I decided, you know, you better get your education; you better get some sort of degree because otherwise all you're going to do all your life is just do all these exciting things.

And so I came back. I looked at all the slides I'd taken on this trip, and it just sort of told me what my-what seemed to interest me. And I was constantly taking pictures of stacks of baskets, and I was constantly taking pictures of objects; craft objects that just absolutely fascinated me: the textiles, wood-wood prints. I'd found some quite nice wood prints in Japan, in Tokyo, at a contemporary-and it told me that I-it seemed like that's what I should sort of center on, and, you know, that I wanted to learn more about that.

I've said in one article the idea that I really learned about the crafts from the world, not from the United States. You know, it was really on that kind of thing. Then I began to search out, well, what's happening in the United States? You know, what do they make here? And-

MS. EMANUELLI: What do you think is it that attracted you? The patterning or-

MR. BASSLER: I think-I have a feeling-if my wife were listening-[laughs]-my wife says that I was born-and she even knew my Dad-she says, "You were practically born with a silver spoon in your mouth. You did not have it hard." She's from Eagle Rock. Her father was a salesman. They never went anywhere. We were always traveling, our family.

MS. EMANUELLI: This is Veralee [Osborn] Bassler, right?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, Veralee Bassler. And she says-parents never took them anywhere, never had the money. "You went everywhere." We went to the 1939 World's Fair. I told her one time I remember sitting in the Waldorf-Astoria. And Mother loves the menus, which had to do with Pennsylvania Dutch life, and so the waiter brought her all the menus that had hand, you know, artwork done on it, which she framed. They were in our kitchen forever. And I always thought that was kind of neat that Mom took the metal tin pans of the frame and put these pictures of menu in it, you know, sort of a Depression kind of way of decorating. [Laughs.] You know, loving-hands-at-home kind of thing. But that was the way my mother was. And Veralee will say, "Well, we never did any of that stuff." I said, "Yeah, but it was done under duress sometimes," you know, or-you know, but-so I don't know what the point was. The point was that it was-

MS. EMANUELLI: Why were you attracted to crafts?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, that it was-these objects-I think-I know what it was: the idea that I'd see behind it. I'm interested to know why they made these things and how it made their life better; you know, that this kind of thing, look at how they solve that problem. I've got fabulous pictures of fishermen sitting on three poles, you know, in the middle of a-near Singapore, where they figured out how to put these three poles together in water, and they've got a boat tied to one of 'em. They shimmy up this thing, and they're in the middle of this lagoon kind of thing, fishing. And I just think, my God, that's really a nice solution to that, you know.

And then, just the display of them. I found that I was very attracted to patterning; you know, the idea of putting something down and kind of-and the idea of actually making something that has some kind of sense of protection, of identity, you know, this is who I am, by putting this on, by-when we lived in that house in Malibu, my God, the idea of survival was very real. You know, you're freezing to death in that place. And the idea of how they dealt with textiles in order to do all these things, just I found very interesting. And then the-going from India to Southeast Asia and seeing the variations on all that; the variations of customs, of the way that different people carry themselves, getting into Hong Kong-I stayed in Hong Kong a long time, and I just loved it there, just observing.

MS. EMANUELLI: How long were you in Hong Kong?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, probably a month. And I had-on a lot of these ships, they carry civil servants. And this one fellow I met was a policeman in Hong Kong but had gone back to see his mother in Darby, England. And so, when we got to Hong Kong he was able-he introduced me to this whole sort of network of British people who had never met a Californian before. So I was able to simply housesit, you know, in order to allow me to stay here, you know, and just-and it was-at that point I felt really good about life, really, you know, and I felt like I could probably get on a boat and just keep going wherever. [Laughs.]

MS. EMANUELLI: So you went back to school-and then what happened?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I went back to school and started out-loved photography, and I thought, oh, I think I should be a photographer, and took ceramics. That's where I met Veralee. And then we-and then Bernard Kester, who was under Laura Andreson-you sort of find out all of this stuff later on after the fact, but Laura Andreson ran the

program and Bernard Kester was indeed the second in command.

MS. EMANUELLI: But you didn't know that then?

MR. BASSLER: I knew it, but I didn't know what that meant. In other words, you look at these people and you think they're Gods and they know all and they're going to teach you something about how to put things together. But I didn't realize the fact that Bernard-how the university works and how someone has to make a name for himself in order to get promoted. And Bernard had always sort of been interested in textiles and he started offering textile, which they wouldn't even allow in the building-well, because it takes up space. In other words, you can't have a room with looms and teach anything else. So he found space in Royce Hall, in the basement of Royce Hall, next to the women's bathroom-restroom in the-really a basement room. And that's where he offered textiles.

And I had taken a course in patterning with Madeleine Sunkees, who was-she was an associate professor-

MS. EMANUELLI: How do you spell that?

MR. BASSLER: Sunkees, S-U-N-K-E-E-S, Sunkees, Madeleine. And at that particular time, design was of-oh, it was sort of career-oriented. In other words, you took a certain number of classes and you could become an interior designer. They had furniture design, they had-but not to the point where anyone ever made anything, you know, yet-but you learned about furniture design, you learned about textile design, but not to the point where you would get hired by any industry because there were no industries on the West Coast. All the industries are on the East Coast. And all these courses, were we taking them on the East Coast, would also teach you dye chemistry and so that you really were a professional in the field.

And so it was sort of-it was teaching you to become a designer but not giving you all the tools to actually be able to go out and-

MS. EMANUELLI: Work in industry.

MR. BASSLER: -work in industry. Because-and that's something that people on the East Coast never understand, that the West Coast never had the industry here because it was all established on the East Coast, and we were slightly different out here, you know. I mean, there was-well, first of all, think of Rhode Island School of Design. They were funded by all the industries in the area in order to have designers go to work for them. Well, we didn't have that kind of backing here.

And so, you'd take a pattern class, you'd take a little interior design class, you'd take this and that, and sort of a little smorgasbord going around, and then you hope you had-it was, what do they call it, a general education or, you know, a broad-based education. You're educated-general education.

And so-but I loved the patterning and printing. But then I got to thinking, I want to make the cloth that I'm printing on; that's what I want to do. I want to-and we were printing on a lot of silk. So I said, I'm going to go weave China silk. Well, China silk has, you know, got probably 300, 400 ends per inch. And I didn't know anything about weaving but I went over to Bernard Kester, who was a kind of personality you never forget if you've ever met him. I mean, he's just a very, very kind of stern, and a very critical eye. And if he likes you, things are great, and if he doesn't think you have potential or think that you're interested in what you're doing, he won't give you the time of day. And I went over there to announce that I was going to-I wanted to take this class to learn how to weave and I was going to weave China silk, or something like it. And I refused to do a rya rug because all of his students-because they were very popular at the time from the Finnish design kind of influence. Everybody took a second semester of it and wove a rya rug. And I said, "I refuse to do anything like that. I won't do it." And he was sort of anxious to have students, you know, particularly a male because most everybody who could ever find his class was female. And so that's where I began. And then I saw the folly in trying to weave China silk. But I was very much interested in the dyeing of whatever it was I did, and I still do that to this day. I've never really changed. And I don't think I've ever really changed-well, I've changed, but I-my-the moment I sat down at the loom I knew this is what I want to do. I was alone, I had my own space, and I could work in the kind of rhythm that was comfortable. And it was-I'm a very thoughtful, slow-thinking kind of person. I mean, I really sort of think through everything. I'm not very spontaneous. And that was a perfect kind of thing-although I might do spontaneous things with cloth, but I had this sort of thing under control. I love ceramics. I taught ceramics for six years at Emerson Junior High School and loved teaching it, but I loved to go home and wash my hands and do something else.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did Bernard teach you the dyeing and weaving? Is he the one who taught you that?

MR. BASSLER: Not the dyeing. I almost had to do it on my own. Bernard gave a wonderful critique. When I look back now-and I was in school with Neda Al-Hilali, who was at that time-both of us were-she even came here. She was living in Houston and would come up here to take a class with Bernard. There was no sense of community to

speak of. And I don't know-later on it sort of blossomed and there was a-maybe it's because there were more students and there were more women who were being liberated, and they took this-and the fiber-arts movement was very big. But this is pre-fiber arts.

MS. EMANUELLI: This is early '60s.

MR. BASSLER: Very-yeah, '60, yeah, '61. And there was-he was still having students who patterned leaves. And in fact, when my wife had taken the class just prior to my taking it, they had to do three yards of fabric, a patterned fabric, and some were upholstering chairs with it. So it was a very-it was still-it was never thought of as anything other than an applied-and Bernard was sort of moving out of that, but he was almost-he was almost encouraging Neda and me to do that, but I had no idea what he was talking about, nor did he I don't think. You know-

MS. EMANUELLI: That you would move away from just functional-purely functional.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I was weaving things with holes in it, and that was perfectly okay for him, but I had no idea how-for what. But then I began to think-and, see, he never taught a history of textiles class either. So we never had that kind of point of view, because he was taking a history of textiles class at County Art Museum from a woman who was curator of it. So, neither one, Neda and I, we-Neda, coming from Baghdad, though, you know, had a certain-and she's just an extremely talented woman but, I mean, she came from an influence of textiles, and she also, being German, had, I think, much more kind of mysticism, much more myth, much more-

MS. EMANUELLI: She was German and-

MR. BASSLER: She was German, married an Arab.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: And I was always in awe of the kind of things that Neda was doing, and she would refer to a myth or a story and I knew nothing of that. I'm just kind of a meat-and-potato kind of guy, you know what I mean, and I'm thinking, gee, there's so much I don't know, you know, about that. And it wouldn't even-it would seem so foreign to me to even draw upon that kind of thing because I just-I didn't, you know, really think of it.

I think-anyway, so I kept working with dyes a lot and, through more association with Peruvian textiles, began to see-and actually Indian textiles, the tie-dyes and all those gauze weaves and all that kind of thing began to affect me greatly. I really sort of learned-just learned, and would do one piece after another. I've never given-I've always been interested in that, never really given it up after all these years. That was '60-that's 40-some years-and there's always some kind of idea that I wonder if-I wonder if I do this, and-

MS. EMANUELLI: So it's more or less the same technique? Is that what you're saying?

MR. BASSLER: No, the techniques have changed quite a bit, but it was the-I still get excited over the possibilities of what I can do; of what-how this could evolve into something.

And in the first works, there was never the idea of developing a concept, of having some concepts and adapting a weaving to fit a concept. And that was not-I mean, that's so popular now, of course, in the field of conceptual art and the idea of being driven by some thought or something that is driving you. In our education, I think basically they had very specific guidelines as to what you were doing-the lidded pot, the footed pot, the-you know, anyone tried to become figurative it would just simply-it wasn't allowed in ceramics. And weaving, I think he was more open to the possibilities.

And then, his critiques were excellent but very narrow. He was never interested in why you did it. In fact, he didn't want to hear it. In fact, later on when he had all these women who had these concepts about their place in society and this, that and the other, you know, you get the roll of the eyes, and he wanted no-he wanted it beautiful. He wanted it powerful and beautiful, and that was-

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, he got a lot of that, actually.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah, he did, he did, but it took me a long time to get away from that, to begin to develop, what did I really-I mean, sometimes, of course right now, I will sort of sit down and I'm just going to develop a thought about something that turns into a whole piece, and in-and maybe I can attach a concept to it. Other times I've had a very strong concept about what it is I'm doing and a mood, and that directs me; and that directs the size, the shape. And I think that's very important, where that wasn't any part of our education at all, which I really feel as though it was-I look back and I feel somewhat cheated. I wonder-I can't really-you know, just yesterday we went to MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles, CA], and there was a show-God, I can't-it just opened.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh-

MR. BASSLER: The drawings of-I can't think of his name.

MS. EMANUELLI: His wife and-

MR. BASSLER: De Kooning. ["Willem de Kooning: Tracing the Figure," MOCA, February 10 - April 28, 2002.]

MS. EMANUELLI: De Kooning. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: De Kooning. All right, I'm looking at those; they were '49, '50, '51. This is 10 years after my-when I look to see what was going on, what Pollock is doing, what Jasper Johns-they were a little bit later, but what-even-even [Robert] Rauschenberg was in-Rauschenberg's paintings were in Brussels at that-in the Pavilion, his all white paintings.

MS. EMANUELLI: What is Russell's?

MR. BASSLER: Hmm? In Brussels.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, in Brussels, Brussels, yeah. MR. BASSLER: In Brussels, at the Expo. And yet I think, why didn't we know about this? But then there weren't the magazines at that time. There were no slick magazines of art then.

MS. EMANUELLI: When did Art Forum start?

MR. BASSLER: I have no idea, but we were-

MS. EMANUELLI: It started in L.A.

MR. BASSLER: We were not aware of those kinds of things. An all-white painting of Rauschenberg's looks an awful lot like a textile. You know, I mean, there's-you know, there's nothing there. I mean, there's everything there; there's nothing there. And yet, here we were-I remember Bernard giving the tapestry assignments and wondering why-maybe we-why weren't we sort of shown the relationship of what was happening in the fine arts? And there was this terrible division. There was no communication between the art faculty and the design center. They hated one another, and you felt that as a student.

MS. EMANUELLI: Was that the art-craft prejudice thing? I mean-

MR. BASSLER: Oh, I'm sure; I'm sure.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you think that Laura and Bernard knew what was going on in art?

MR. BASSLER: I have no idea. I bet not.

MS. EMANUELLI: I mean, did they pay attention?

MR. BASSLER: I remember once-and this was much later when I became a graduate student, they-right after I graduated, then I went to teach at Emerson Junior High, but when I came back-maybe it wasn't-oh, no, no, no, when you're a teacher-so we got our teacher credential; you had to go an extra year. And during that period of time they hired me to become an instructor. And I had full rein of what I wanted to do, and of course I just based it after the class I'd taken in color.

And I remember, there was a student I had. Lee Whitten was his name, and he's teaching right now in L.A. someplace. He was brilliant. He was one of these articulate, Jewish-really, I just admired him so much because he was so articulate, he was so outgoing and he was so knowledgeable. Oh, I know why I say Jewish, because he's from New York; you know, a New York Jewish guy who is so smart, and he was in Bernard's ceramic class right across from the room I taught.

And Lee had to take my color class. And I was absolutely petrified because I had just begun to teach it, and I'm trying to figure out, how am I going to become a teacher? Do I even like teaching, you know? And here is this guy who is so much more knowledgeable about artists, and I don't even know who the hell he's talking about, you know.

And Lee built a Superman in a very-did it very-out of clay, built a Superman chest, and an S on it, and, you know, the whole torso of Superman without arms. And Bernard said, I-and I just happened to be in my room, and I heard him talking. And he was giving a critique to Lee, who I just admired so much because I just thought he was so smart about art. And here, obviously, Lee had brought something from the East Coast and had done this

like an artisan. You know, I mean, he'd done something different rather than a footed pot. And Bernard says, "I will not discuss it," and slammed the door on him.

And I thought: there is the problem. You know, that's-this answers some of the questions about an education in a university where you've got these movements going on and a rather rigid kind of-you know, the rigidity of a certain department to hold on to what was and not look to see what could be.

MS. EMANUELLI: Or just what you think? I mean, not to contradict you, but to think of what he expected and what he-I mean, in a way, he demanded later, after you were there-that's my experience in the early '70s when my friends were here-demanded something unusual.

MR. BASSLER: Later on. But maybe this was the formative stage when all of a sudden you're being-you know, when a student, you give an assignment and all of a sudden they'll come out and say, here it is. Well, whew, what do I think of that? You know? Well, let's-then I have to hear, what is the concept? Well, Bernard, if you don't want to hear the concept, then you're taking it on a, is it beautiful?

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, even then, when he was getting all these interesting things out of people, he was also very rigid about what he would accept.

MR. BASSLER: Yes. Oh, I know that to be true. And there were those who got along with him well, and there were those who just had to drop him or went some other place, which he didn't-I don't think he cared at all about that. But it was interesting, I remember-I will never forget that. And Lee is saying, "But I want you to say something about it." And he wouldn't. And, of course, I know he wouldn't dare have shown Laura, because she'd just go get a pot of tea, and talk about the lid and-[laughs]. And so, there-and then what he began to get, but I think in our day he-we didn't have much guidance. And Neda says that was wonderful. We were given good critiques-because I still see Neda, and we-she says we were given good critiques, and based on what it-where we were, we probably couldn't have handled anything more. We probably couldn't have handled something like a-you know, a-somebody who would want us to know-be more informed about what was happening in the world.

But I just sort of saw those things, and I-it's interesting, my first reaction in seeing the show yesterday was, my God, look when that was happening. Look what-look at the freedom that they had at that particular time. And I don't understand that because we were-everything we did was formally judged: we did this, we did that, even what colors were in it. And that was-but that was typical of that particular time.

MS. EMANUELLI: But look who's-look who Pollock's teacher was: Thomas Hart Benton.

MR. BASSLER: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: So he probably didn't do that in school. You know what I'm saying?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Maybe it's the school experience for everybody.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, maybe that's true.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did-do you think, though, in terms of-since we're on that subject, in terms of the university-educated artist, do you think there are benefits to that as opposed to someone who just finds their own way? I mean, do you advocate university education for an artist?

MR. BASSLER: Well, I think there are those who need it, and I probably needed it. And there are those-you know, sometimes when I used to teach color, occasionally I'll get an art student who will take color, and it's a design course but you'll-you know, Sam sent me down; Sam says I've got to learn something about color-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: -or, I'm trying to be a painter and I just don't understand it; I'm not-but there are a lot who just figure it out, and you don't need to spend all that time in a course. And so, I think that sometimes it gives some sort of foundation in order to go ahead, just like anything-you know, that a little refresher course doesn't hurt. But I think it gets dangerous when it gets to be a certain look. Well when Cornelia was here-

MS.EMANUELLI: Cornelia Breitenbach?

MR. BASSLER: Breitenbach, see we shared-

[Audio break.]

MS. EMANUELLI: [In progress]-students?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, but Cornelia had a formula, and the formula was so specific and so narrow, and students saw that as a way of making something that would be-less chance of failing. And so they would go into the class and they would essentially make a Cornelia.

And Cornelia would say, "Well, this is where I get all my ideas to see what works and what doesn't work." And I said, "How can you do that? You know, I just-I don't understand." She said, "Look how happy they are," because they get-they get exactly-you know, it's so programmed. They do a little drawing, they figure out that gradation of color, and she tells them how wide to make them. But every one's different, slightly. But I could barely tell Cornelia's work from the student work. And I think that that can be kind of dangerous. But she had very happy customers. You know, they-I don't know if you read just recently in the calendar section of-that Laurie Anderson, where she worked at McDonald's?

MS. EMANUELLI: McDonald's, yes.

MR. BASSLER: And she said, "It was so wonderful. They all loved what I gave them." You know, they-

MS. EMANUELLI: "I could give people what they wanted," she said.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, right. [Laughs.] And I'm not so sure that I always do that, you know. And I think that that-I don't know that I always want to give them what they-I want-I hope that I give them what they probably don't understand, and something like that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, they probably come for technical information.

MR. BASSLER: You know-anyway. So, that-a woman who teaches at Long Beach State, Carol Shaw-Sutton, she occasionally invites me down to give a talk to students or sometimes I even teach classes down there. And she'll usually tell the students that I have been weaving for, you know, 30 years or 20 years or whatever it's been, and basically still sort of involved-it's essentially the same process except things-major things change in them, but still it's basically the same thing. And I suppose it's like a painter painting or something. It's very specific: change materials occasionally and of course dyes in this and that and the other.

But I think it's basically the process that I'm really in love with. And I make it challenging for me, but it's something that has brought me a great deal of satisfaction. And I don't know if there's much more to say about that. I mean, I've got a lot to say on that, but it's the process itself as being one that is satisfying. And also, with so much, kind of, attention now going toward-for the last 10 years in electronics-and I just got an announcement about a new show where they have hooked up the jacquard loom with electronics now, and there's just no end to the possibilities of what one can do. And the work is just revolutionizing the whole possibility of what can be done in terms of imaging.

And I do find it interesting, and I do like to go look at them but I'm not, myself, enticed to become involved in that, because I still think there's a reservoir in my head of things that I haven't yet done, and I'm working on a couple right now. They're just something that-either being invited to a show with specific kind of limitations, that's kind of a challenge to try to figure out how to-Jack [Lenor] Larson's having his 75th birthday come up in May, so he's invited a few people to do pieces for that particular event, a miniature. And so-

MS. EMANUELLI: Where will they be shown?

MR. BASSLER: I think it opens at the Longhouse, and then-which is his place-I've never been there-out on Long Island; sort of a museum of his collection. Longhouse is all one word. And it houses his collection and I don't know what else, but it sort of looks like an interesting place to go see. And-or it might be in American Craft Museum [now the Museum of Arts and Design, New York], I'm not really sure. But he's making sort of a big deal out of it. He invited us and gave us plenty of time to come up with something. And so I'm working on that.

And I've just finished a couple of pieces. And I'm going on the twentieth of February for four days to Detroit to be in an exhibit and actually be the keynote speaker for this exhibit which is opening up, and then I'm also doing a workshop. And when you invited me-or when I talked with-I don't remember her name-

MS. EMANUELLI: Liza Kirwin.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. I've never met her, just over the telephone. I-you know, I wondered, what is this woman talking about? What is this all about? I take all this very seriously, but I haven't got a clue as to-and I had the same reaction when they asked me to be a keynote speaker. I don't know why. I really don't.

MS. EMANUELLI: Why you?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, why-and I don't know-and it's not the first time that I've been a keynote speaker, either. In fact, they're inviting me back. This is the second time. And I'm trying to figure out, geez, I can't do the same thing I did before. And-but then, it's been five or six years. And a lot of what we've been even talking about now I can do visually, you know, with certain slides. And there's a few things I read from books that I've read that are-that help me to try to figure out why I'm the way I am.

There's a wonderful passage from Annie Dillard's book *American Childhood*, I think it's called, growing up in Pittsburgh. And I read it to the students occasionally because it has to do with her relationship with her parents at a tender age. And-anyway, I thought-when this Liza phoned up I thought, quite honestly-I said, she has me mixed up with somebody else. I don't even know what she's talking about. [Laughs.]

MS. EMANUELLI: You don't think you're one of the most 100 important-[laughs]-craftspeople in the United States?

MR. BASSLER: I don't think I-and when-you know, when they-when the American Craft-when the American Craft [Council] gave me that fellow award, we went to St. Paul, and I took it very-I didn't take it lightly at all, but I became an absolute basket case. It was-I just could hardly stand the attention. In fact, I couldn't. And yet, when I get to be a keynote speaker I can do sort of very-well, slides help a great deal to keep you on course, you know, and I can move through the information and-be funny. And it's always-seldom is it rehearsed. I don't like to rehearse things because it sounds like a politician giving a-you know, a candid joke or something like that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did getting that fellowship have any-well, it's not a fellowship, what is it? It's becoming a fellow-

MR. BASSLER: A fellow, yeah. MS. EMANUELLI: -in the American Craft Council. Has that affected you in terms of your career at all? Do you find that you got more attention because of it, or-

MR. BASSLER: None whatsoever. I-

MS. EMANUELLI: Does it make you feel any different about yourself?

MR. BASSLER: I suppose it must. Oh, I'm sure it does. But I wouldn't-I have never-I suppose if you ask the question, why do you do what you do, it's to-unless it's a commission, which I don't do any of anymore; I don't like to do that, and teaching has allowed me to have enough of an income that I didn't have to rely on it. But then, I must say that when someone buys something that becomes, you know, public space, I think, gee, I was lucky that it fit that space, because I wasn't-I didn't see that, somebody else did. I would say that the only reason I do something is extremely selfish, and it's just to make me feel-myself feel better-make me feel better, and to make me feel better about myself. I have no idea, when I'm making something, where it's going or even how big it's going to be sometimes. And in the process of making things, more often than not I might cut the whole thing in half and make two pieces out of it just because I've decided it looks better that way. I have-and except for this Larsen thing, which is so specific; I know what that's going to look like. But then I've tried three different attempts to get it started, and it's time-consuming like you would not believe. But I'm enjoying making these sort of three-dimensional objects.

But I just-I never know when, I'm interested-my wife-or a very good friend of ours, Marilyn Neuhart, who worked in the [Charles and Ray] Eames Office and wrote the Eames book and all that, speaks of John as always having the dis-view and she has to have the big view. In other words-

MS. EMANUELLI: John?

MR. BASSLER: John, her husband. And she said that's the same way with you. The moment I get a project I immediately zero down to how I'm going to be feeling about this, the elements. I'm always focused on details. And I have to push myself to imagine, Jim, this can only be so big; you've got to-unless I'm driven by a concept, then I think I'm most happy in this little world of my own just dealing in these little things and then finally it grows into something big. And if I don't like what it looks like, I cut holes in it or I'll patch it. And that gets back to just like indigenous cloth or some of these fabulous textiles from anywhere where people just sort of patch them and do this because that's where they need a patch. And I noticed in the de Kooning show-it's a fabulous show-he was cutting, and it made me feel so good. I said, well, I'm not such an asshole after all, you know, that people can work that way, not really knowing what you're doing. The cutting, the gluing, the masking tape on those drawings is just amazing. Putting something-you don't know what in the world is over this one sheet. You can see little bits of it, but obviously what he wants us to see is this thing. And the tracing paper has gotten so yellow and the masking tape has gotten so yellow, and that's all part of the drawing.

And I thought, you know, that's the way I work. That's-that-just putting things together and-think of all that was thrown out, or probably set aside. They said he didn't throw much away but would take a drawing and take a drawing and put them together and then begin to start anew. And I'm just trying to solve a problem, you know. So I thought that was very refreshing to see that.

MS. EMANUELLI: You never worked as an apprentice for anybody; you just pretty much-

MR. BASSLER: No, not really, uh-uh.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Inaudible.]

MR. BASSLER: I would have-I wish-you know, if-I don't have too many wishes of doing something over, but I wish that I would have had the confidence-I would have never had the confidence to do that. I wish maybe now I would have had the confidence to want to go work for someone, just to learn something, because I think that's the way you really work, to work with someone. Bernard Kester would not be the kind of person I would ever want to work with. I think that would be impossible. And that's all, essentially, I had.

MS. EMANUELLI: But you have a grant award, I noticed, for an apprenticeship grant. So did you have an apprentice then?

MR. BASSLER: I had an apprentice back when I was back in Tennessee, and that was a good period of time. I was-I had really-I left UCLA and really hoped never to come back.

MS. EMANUELLI: What year was this?

MR. BASSLER: 1980. Susan Petersen-oh, Bernie-in fact Bernard Kester had said, "Oh, Susan's looking for faculty for the Appalachian Center for Crafts." And he said, "Oh, you ought to talk to her." Well-and I knew Susan; she sort of knew me. And so she-I went over to her house and I showed her, you know, what I did. And she says, "Oh, you'd be perfect." And I said, "Well, I don't know. I'd have to talk with my wife."

And so I went home and we talked about it. And then Susan actually went ahead and set up an interview and flew me back there. And so I went back there. But this all happened in one weekend. It was like Friday, Saturday, Sunday, and Monday I was back here. And we decided we wanted to do that.

And I remember going to the Egg and Eye [Egg and Eye Gallery, Los Angeles], some opening there, and Bernard was talking with Darcy Hayman. And Bernard hadn't realized I'd done any of this, but he was the one who told me about it. And he says, "What's new?" And I said, "Well, I'm taking a leave of absence. I'm going back to Tennessee." You don't often see Bernard absolutely shocked, and he was just absolutely speechless. He said, "What do you want to do that for?" You know, that-because essentially I did all the grungy classes and he taught the graduates. I said, "Look, I want to try it out." I really wanted to get away from him because he-as wonderful as he is and a dear, sweet person, he was-I just felt as though I didn't want to be around him.

MS. EMANUELLI: So you needed your independence?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah. And so we went back there and really started working in a totally different way that became-I did a-it was the only time I did a whole series of work that all sort of reflected one another, and that's where I held up-an apprentice helped me get some of that work done. And I had a show in New York, which gave me enough money that when we came back we built our studio, which you'll be in. It was the only amount of time that all of a sudden I had, you know, something like \$30,000, and I'd never had that amount of money before. Well, it was just-no, it was-no, it wasn't quite that, it was-because I also got a big NEA grant at the time. I got a \$15,000 NEA grant, and probably something like, probably \$18,000 from the show in New York, or something like that. Anyway, the studio cost \$30,000.

MS. EMANUELLI: So the apprenticeship grant was the NEA grant?

MR. BASSLER: No, that was separate.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, that was-where did that come from?

MR. BASSLER: The NEA-oh, no, no, no, they were two separate grants. I've received three NEA grants.

MS. EMANUELLI: So those were two separate NEA grants? I see.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, that was back in Tennessee. And then when I came out-oh, came out, Cornelia and I were being judged for tenure at the same time. Very bad planning on Bernard's part. Two people in the same area, and she was sure she wasn't going to get it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, you were competing?

MR. BASSLER: Well, we said we weren't competing but obviously, coming from the same area-

MS. EMANUELLI: They weren't going to give tenure to two people?

MR. BASSLER: They would never tell us that. And you really aren't competing, but it seemed unusual. And I-and I can't-she committed suicide at that time-it was awful.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did she get tenure?

MR. BASSLER: No. She didn't last long enough to get it. I mean, she-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, she committed suicide before the tenure decision? What a shame.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And-but what was interesting about it was, I didn't get it at first. They didn't give it to me, and they-this is about '83, I guess, and I-I wrote a letter of protest or something like that and they said, you have to-there were all these stipulations as to how important to my work and this and that and the other, and one of 'em was, prove that you're in the upper 10 percent, or something like that, and this is something where God comes in.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: I was so discouraged because also I've been owner-builder on this studio I'm building and I felt really, really good about everything. And then all of a sudden to be-not get tenure and have this letter to write, and how do I prove that I'm upper whatever percent? And I went home and got a telephone call and they said it was the NEA and that-to announce that I would be getting-that was the big one at the time, the \$15,000. And they said, oh, by the way, in case you're interested, this puts you in a certain percentage because of the number of people who applied; you are this. And I could use that. I said, would you please write that?

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And, based on that-based on that I got tenure.

MS. EMANUELLI: Wow.

I'm going to stop for a just a second here.

All right, this is Sharon Emanuelli interviewing Jim Bassler at the artist's home and studio in San Pedro, California, on February 14, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is the middle of the second side of tape two, where we're starting.

Okay, Jim, we have gone over your early life and your education quite a bit. There were a couple of questions I wanted to ask to just follow up a little bit. Your siblings, what did they end up doing?

MR. BASSLER: Okay. Remembering that there are four of us all together, each four years apart, one sister, the eldest, during World War II she went into the WAVES, which was really kind of a gallant thing to do, and for her it was really a period-it really allowed her to grow. Anyway, she went and she was stationed in San Francisco. And after the war she met a commander in the Navy and married, and they had one child. And they were rather conservative as to where they lived, both of them being rather conservative people. And they ended up having most of their tour of duty in Hawaii. And she now lives in Malibu with her husband. And they have one son, who has been quite remarkable; graduated Stanford and has a family back in Arlington, Virginia.

MS. EMANUELLI: What was her name?

MR. BASSLER: Her name is Barbara.

MS. EMANUELLI: Barbara. And her last name?

MR. BASSLER: Johnson.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay.

MR. BASSLER: Then my sister, Sally, who passed on of cancer at age 49, she and I were quite close. That's not to say I wasn't close to Barbara, but Sally was the only one besides myself who went to UCLA or went to a university and got a higher education. And Sally was very, very curious about the world, as was I, and that was one of the things that brought us together.

And she-when the war was over she was-her high school sweetheart was George Chest. They met at San Mo

[Santa Monica] High. He was a Marine who was in the thick of it during World War II in the Pacific. He came back, they got married, and Dad gave them a piece of the land in Malibu. They built a home there and they raised two children there. And, very, very tragic: George dropped dead of a heart attack at age 49, and a year later, almost to the day, Sally died of-at 49. And that was one of the reasons that compelled us to come back. We had been living in Oaxaca.

My brother, Johnny, he had a career. He went to Santa Barbara, which-I don't even-it was a teacher's college then. It wasn't even part of the university yet. And-but at one particular point he just went into the Air Force and made that a career and retired. He now is suffering from Alzheimer's and lives in Phoenix. And, again, not a very happy story at all.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did he marry and have children?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah, yeah, he had a family-he has a family of three children. And his wife is really struggling quite a bit right now, trying to get the proper kind of medication and the proper kind of services from the Air Force, which seems to be not forthcoming. I would have thought that in Arizona with all the retired people that would be something that would have been solved years ago, but it isn't. So that's very, very sad.

MS. EMANUELLI: And then there's you.

MR. BASSLER: And then there's me.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay. One thing we didn't talk about specifically was your most rewarding educational experience, and also if you saw a difference between university-trained artists and non-university-trained artists, which I imagine could be any other kind of, you know, formal or non-formal education. And then-and I also wanted to talk to you a little, before we move away from that, about some-more about your colleagues; some of your colleagues that you-who you might have admired as teachers.

MR. BASSLER: As teachers, okay.

MS. EMANUELLI: So let's start with your most rewarding educational experience.

MR. BASSLER: Okay. The system at UCLA, and I imagine other universities, is that they require you to-when they had an arts education program, which they no longer have, Veralee and I-Veralee, my wife, and I met in the teacher training program-actually a year before but we were together because we were both planning-this is during the early '60s and they were building all of the state university system at that particular time. Long Beach was being built, Fullerton was being built and-

MS. EMANUELLI: They were state colleges then?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Instead of colleges they were becoming universities, and it seemed like an excellent field to go into. And so, you go one extra year in order to get your methods courses, which also means that you have to do your teaching-your teacher training in your major and your minor. We got general secondaries, and both of us taught-I think Veralee had a ceramics course that she-no, no, we both taught the same thing, sort of, which was general crafts at a junior high school.

And when it came time for me to teach my minor, which had been history, I-you had to teach in a good school district and you had to teach in a poor school district. And so I had to teach my minor in a poor school district, which at that time was Venice, Mark Twain Junior High School. And I was really blessed and fortunate to have a wonderful training teacher who allowed me-the course I taught was world history and geography, and you went from cavemen, Lascaux cave painting, to the Renaissance in 20 weeks.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.] Uh-huh.

MR. BASSLER: And he allowed me to essentially turn it into an art class, because most of my students had real difficulty in reading, and they were from-they were mostly minorities and they had not had a real rich experience. They had been sort of segregated into being a very low class.

And I found that out the very first day, because I thought, well; let's see what they know about the world. And I passed out one of those little 8-1/2 by 11 maps of the world, and I written on the board certain things I wanted them to find. And one clever thing I thought, well, let's find Venice, California, and Venice, Italy. Well, in five minutes I found that they couldn't distinguish land from ocean. That is, I had to point out that the blue was ocean and the white was land. And it just went downhill, let alone-I mean, they weren't going to find either Venice, I could figure out rather-right away.

And so, knowing that information, I began to go through history and try all of the art skills, craft skills that I'd known in order to introduce them to them, along with some reading. And it was a fabulous class. I think it was

the best-one of the best experiences I'd ever had, and it was great to have it. In fact, I wasn't sure that I wanted to teach art when I saw how great it could be to teach history to those kind of students.

In particular, our Egyptian unit-it was the time when Elizabeth Taylor's Cleopatra had come out, and it was just such a terrible movie, and none of the kids had seen it, but we had all that wonderful kind of-terrible kind of makeup that had been used in the course. And so we set up a little Egyptian village and we had people making little clay pots, and I had them beating on their desks papyrus branches, trying to make paper, which was just a disaster. All the juice was running in their laps and all that, but they didn't care. And then we set up-one young lady in the class, who had never had any kind of positive experience, she set up a cosmetics shop. And so, she was doing all the-I brought in pictures of Elizabeth and she was doing all the girls in the class with these extraordinary eyes and this-and then, of course, when the class was over, they all went out-[laughs]-on the playground and freaked everybody out.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: I mean, it was that kind of thing that went on. And it was-it was just really wonderful. And I think they got a lot out of it. So that was really great.

I think that probably my current teaching-and I would say within the last 10 years or five years, when the department at UCLA-Department of Design became the Department of Design/Media Arts, and we hired a new chair, and the new chair was really involved in websites and electronics, and it was very clear to me that my role in crafts was going to take a-was going to be a minor role. And in order to deal with that I found another department on campus that was very receptive to the ideas of-that they wanted their students to know something about the origins of crafts and the origins of simply making things, and that is the Department of World Arts and Cultures.

And so, I proposed to teach a course called Design Processes in World Cultures. And it became a core course for the Department of World Arts and Cultures. At that particular time, the woman who was chair, Judy Mitoma, really a fantastic woman who has great vision about what education can be, she felt as though her students, who were either dancing or doing something that dealt with the world, should know how things were made so that perhaps could add depth and-depth to their own projects. And so, that's been really great.

The class became so popular-and once the enthusiasm of the design students over the electronics sort of waned a little bit-in other words, what has happened in the last 10 years is students in design who thought they were going to be perfectly satisfied to take a series of courses that dealt with electronics only, they have returned and they began to demand to take the same class that I was teaching for the WAC students-World Arts and Cultures, we call the WAC, W-A-C. So, then what that course has become is a mix of both WAC students and design students.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you teach it in Dickson?

MR. BASSLER: I teach it in Dickson, yes.

MS. EMANUELLI: In the art building.

MR. BASSLER: In the art building. But since my retirement-I retired just because-I just thought it was time. They were going to remodel the building; they were tearing it down. The chair of the department sort of gave lip service to what I was doing, but there wasn't really the-I would say the deep-held interest in what I was doing. The students would demand it. She would answer to the demands of the students, but she herself never particularly saw what the value was because she believed so much in what she was doing. And that does happen in a university.

And-so I retired, but I am back now teaching full-time-this is after-two years after my retirement-just because the students went to the chair and just said that we need a course. It didn't necessarily have to be me, but I'm such a generalist and it's sort of hard to find people nowadays who do what I do. There's not too many people who had the kind of education, which I got at UCLA in the arts training, in the arts education. I was trying to teach junior and senior high, and it became very appropriate for university students. And so-

MS. EMANUELLI: Based on that situation because-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: I mean, before there would've been several design teachers in each medium.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, right. But as they retired they would just simply close that kind of thing. And it happened even in the art department. When a printmaker retired, they wanted to close printmaking because there was

such belief in new genre. They didn't want any art making that was associated with a process. In fact, there was a group of art faculty who even wanted to get rid of painting. This is maybe five years-or six years ago. But the painters became-all of a sudden painting, you know, moved in and became popular once again. And so, fortunately, they have now painting, they have printmaking because they found, in time, faculty who could offer those in a very contemporary kind of way.

MS. EMANUELLI: It's my understanding that UCLA's painting department now is one of the hottest to get into in the United States.

MR. BASSLER: Right. And it-

MS. EMANUELLI: Roger Herman is the-

MR. BASSLER: Roger, and Lari Pittman. And Roger is the printmaker. And he had to fight to keep that room because faculty who were new genre, which is roughly Chris Burden and Charlie Ray, believed so intently, not unlike our chairman, Victoria Vesna, who believed so clearly that this was-that electronics was-they could get by with just teaching electronics. And it hasn't been necessarily true.

So I would say that I really have enjoyed coming back. I'm sort of surprised; I thought that retirement was forever, but I am sort enjoying back there. Now, the building that was to be torn down is now scheduled to be torn down in July. And the room that I have, which is an enormous space, I know will not be duplicated in the design of the new building. Nobody has ever talked to me about the new design. And, I mean-and it would be interesting to find out-I mean, all we need is a sink. But-[laughs]-but sometimes things don't-you know, sometimes they just don't do that.

So I would say-we're talking about my teaching back in junior high school in the '60s, and now it is '02, and I must say that I'm very enthusiastic about teaching and I really get into; I really do. I try to figure out what students want and what I want to present them with, and we go from there. And that all informs my own work too. I mean, I get lots of wonderful ideas from the outcome of something I couldn't possibly have imagined.

MS. EMANUELLI: Who are the colleagues that you've admired the most?

MR. BASSLER: I would say most of that-most of the colleagues-at UCLA it hasn't happened too often, although I must say that Judi Mitoma, she's a former dancer and she is-she's sort of all over the map, and she's much more of an intellect than I am. She's not a craftsperson at all but I've always sort of admired the way-the all-encompassing kind of way she approaches her teaching, which happened to have included me, so of course I'm very complimented.

Another one who's in that department is Peter Sellers, whose-it's not often you meet a genius and can have a conversation with a genius. [Laughs.] And so, Peter has always inspired me.

In our own department, Adrian Saxe, who is now in the Art Department-Adrian Saxe, a very well-known ceramist-artist in clay, I guess. I don't know if he likes to be called a ceramist. Titles are very touchy these days.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: And Roger Herman, actually I'm very impressed by his work.

I would say that the many years I was at UCLA we were so compartmentalized that you were never aware-and actually very competitive. It was not an atmosphere I particularly cared for. I can't say that I was very close to anybody at that particular time. And then when I became-when I got professorship I also became chair of the department, and that was the chair of the Department of Arts, Design and Art History. These are two bodies of professors who seldom spoke to one another. Historically, it was just this can of worms. And I was chair for five years. And I was chair-and during that period of time was when the department was broken up.

MS. EMANUELLI: What year was that?

MR. BASSLER: That would have been during the mid-'80s. And it was a time when Chuck Young-Charles Young, who was our chancellor, who was never really thought of as being a real kind of supporter of the arts-not like Franklin Murphy-decided he wanted to get rid of the undergraduate program in the arts. And so, battle lines were drawn, and it was just my bad luck to be chair at that particular time. When he wanted to get rid of the arts that did not include art history, so it allowed art history to go over and be with their colleagues in-I'm trying to think-humanities, I guess, or something.

And so they left, and the rest of us sort of scrambled around trying to figure out what to do. And, you know, there were lots of marches by students, candlelight vigils in front of Royce Hall that indeed I had to become involved in, and that was not my way at all. At one point, marching with students into Royce Hall, I thought, you

know, this is really just crazy because it just-I believed in what the students were doing but I just am not the kind of person to be so vocal and to have to have-stage, you know, lock-ups in Murphy Hall. And I have to show the support of the students because I believed in it, but I thought, how did I possibly get in this situation, because it's not-I like to stay in the shadows; I really do.

And so-[laughs]-but I would say I-where-when we moved to Tennessee [Appalachian Center for Crafts] in 1980 was when I really began to feel the sense of colleagues, because we were a faculty that had been selected by Susan Miller-Susan Petersen. And Bob Brady was ceramics, and I'd never met Bob before. And his assistant was Sandy Simon, whom-and later on they married. And there was a glass artist. His name is Hutchhausen. And David Hutchhausen was a really different kind of personality. I've never met-he's like a CEO of a big business, almost.

But it was interesting to see these different kind of personalities come together. And each of us-I headed fiber, Bob headed ceramics, Hucker-I'm trying to think of his name-the youngest of the group was Hucker-

MS. EMANUELLI: H-U-C-K-E-R?

MR. BASSLER: H-U-C-K-E-R. He was in wood.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is that his last name?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. I can't remember his first name. And Phil Fike was metal. And he has since passed on. And he was from Michigan-Wayne State.

All of us were invited for one year, and all of us stayed two years to try to get this school accredited and to open it, essentially; to organize the department.

MS. EMANUELLI: Who was starting this school? It was the Appalachian Center-

MR. BASSLER: Appalachian Center for Crafts, in Tennessee. And it had been money-it was built by the government. And Tennessee chose to build a craft center-

MS. EMANUELLI: This was state government or-

MR. BASSLER: No, federal-federal. And it was out in the middle of nowhere in the Appalachia-out 70 miles from Nashville and a hundred miles from Knoxville, so right in the middle.

And it's interesting to know, North Carolina got some money and they chose to build a craft shop right next to the-there's a federal-oh, what is it?-the Blue Ridge Parkway or something like that. So they chose to go a totally different way where craftspeople who made things would sell their work in this craft shop, which is another way-it was a commercial venture; it made off quite well. Ours had a very difficult time because there was no money to-

MS. EMANUELLI: Which was the other one you were just talking about?

MR. BASSLER: It was North Carolina.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: North Carolina made-in other words, the states had this pile of money-I think it was \$5 million each. And in 1980 that was a lot of money. It was also a recession time. And they put this thing up in the middle of nowhere, and then they had no means of funding it. Then it was up to the state to fund it. And it had no accreditation. We wanted to get-we were promising people we'd have a graduate program, which would have been perfect because in that isolation-how do you bring young people into the middle of the Appalachian Mountains and run a program? I mean, we really found ourselves being mother/father and- Anyway, but we really did-I began to sort of see something that we never had on the West Coast, and that is a network of craftsmen. Because, first of all, the East Coast, including Tennessee, you've got cities and towns which are closer together. You could drive one day and you can be in Atlanta. You could go to Washington, D.C. in a day and a half. You're fairly close to Chicago. You're close to Detroit, you know. And you had craftspeople coming through to teach classes. You'd invite these people to come through, or they were interested and they would come through. And so we met quite a few people that way that-and I got to thinking about how California is sort of out on a limb; LA is. You drive one day here and you're in Phoenix. You have to drive two or three days before you're sort of in a hub where there is that kind of activity.

And I found that a lot of people who live sort of east of Chicago have that sense. They drive to Detroit. These schools are close enough together that they share experiences; they share noted craftspeople. They get on this little circuit. And that's where I came involved with Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] and with

Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN]. Both of them, it didn't cost a lot of money to have us come down. In other words, Arrowmont-Penland would pay for airfare-travel, but they would never give you a stipend; it was an honor to go to Penland. But Arrowmont would actually pay you. And so, the first year I was there, and the second year I was there I became-I went to Penland every year, and really enjoyed that because, then again, you've met even more craftsmen that you had never have met before. And that's something that we never experience on the West Coast.

MS. EMANUELLI: Even in San Francisco, which is still a day's drive, a long day's drive-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: -people didn't make that-it's always been a-[inaudible].

MR. BASSLER: And air travel, you know-of course, air travel used to be more expensive than-you know, it's a little bit more usual now for people to fly on airplanes and do that, but in those days you could drive; you know, people would drive around. And so, that exposed me to a much broader craft community than I ever felt on the West Coast.

And then later on Arrowmont picked up-you know, invited me, and then I started going to Arrowmont every year, and enjoyed both experiences. Both were very, very different. I never went to Haystack. I've been invited. But I guess Haystack has a little bit of a different thing. They want you to write a letter and say you're interested, and I would never do that because I wasn't, frankly, so sure I wanted to go there. I understand it's very, very beautiful, but it sounded so isolated. And I would find-I usually taught two-week sessions, or week sessions, sometimes, but I didn't like a week session. And sometimes I did find that a two-week session is a long time to be away from family and kids and Veralee and all that.

And so-but then, contrasting that to the West Coast, the only kind of connections that I felt in terms of there being a craft community on the West Coast was through Eudora Moore and California Design. American Craft-or Craft Horizons was our only source that told of a craft tradition. I'm talking about earlier now; I'm talking about the 1960 when I was just getting my own education. Eudora Moore was doing those wonderful shows. And Bernard Kester, of course, helped her a great deal with the installation. And Bernard would have us come down-students-you know, he was great at getting student help to go down and help put the show up. And we became-both Veralee and I became very good friends with Eudora.

And then there was-but there was one other thing, there was American Craft-oh, and then Edith Wyle and the Egg and Eye. Edith had some wonderful shows there, and it gave us a chance to feel sort of professional. You know, that was something we had on the West Coast where you saw that maybe this was a way of supporting yourself, although I never believed I could ever support myself in the crafts-I never, for one minute-I didn't like that idea. I mean, I really enjoyed teaching. And the way I work, it's just too long and too involved to thinking that I would ever want to do that.

I think it's kind of interesting at this point to talk about-although we haven't talked about our move to Mexico, I'd like to talk about our move coming back from Mexico, because when we came back-we came back in 1975. We'd been living down in Mexico from '70 to '75 full-time, although we would come back occasionally to get our papers renewed because we were essentially tourists down there. So every six months we either went to Guatemala or we went to Texas. And then if we went to Texas, the parents would say, oh, come back and see us, because they thought-they just didn't know what to think of us living in Mexico and bringing kids up.

MS. EMANUELLI: How many children do you have?

MR. BASSLER: Three-three daughters. And one was born in Oaxaca.

So we went to Oaxaca with a baby six or seven months old, and Megan was about a year and a half. And when the kids would come back and not speak English or speak with a Jose Jimenez accent, you know, my Dad just-what's wrong, doesn't the kid speak English, that kind of thing. But we came back basically to ill health. My mother was ill, my sister died, and my father was left alone. And we were flat broke. The summer program we had-I mean, this house we purchased was huge, and part of it was 19th century, and something was always going wrong with it.

MS. EMANUELLI: In Mexico?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, in Mexico, in Oaxaca. And that's another story. But anyway, in coming back-in weaving down there my influence was really the textiles around me. I was enthralled by learning something about these indigenous people and the sort of scale they worked and the functionality of the objects. I loved to sort of connect the function of something to why they made it, you know, how it made their life better and-

MS. EMANUELLI: How did you find this? You were in a small village, right?

MR. BASSLER: No, no, we were in Oaxaca City.

MS. EMANUELLI: In the city.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. It was all through Travises. Do you know Joan and-you know Nancy Wyle?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: Well, she went to it-I guess we'll get back to that other point later. [Laughs.]

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay, later. Okay.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. But-well, I guess we should talk about-well, what are we talking about? I want to talk-

MS. EMANUELLI: We were talking about how you came back.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. I want to talk about that because it's on my mind. I was-my whole work had been affected by what I'd learned at UCLA and then being isolated down in Oaxaca, and I was doing these pieces.

In the '70s Bernard Kester put on a big show called "Delivered Entanglements." And it was probably '74, '75, I would imagine. And he had it in the Wight Art Gallery. And in conjunction with that, Edith Wyle wanted to have a show of textiles in The Egg and Eye. And she-someone, probably Dorothy Garwood, called me and said would I send a piece out for that exhibit? So I sent a piece out. And the only comment I got was, "Oh, it's so small and fine." You know, "We love it; it's so fine and small." And I thought, well, what's that mean?

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Well, I had no idea how-you know, the people were doing all this stuff with rope and had become so experimental, which was really what Bernard had developed since Neda and I were-you know, he had moved and began to see what [Magdalena] Abakanowicz and all these big names were doing in Poland and-and so, everything had really changed and people were doing these big commissions. That was also a time when Portman was making all his big hotels in Atlanta and, you know, big-there was big architecture going on.

MS. EMANUELLI: Lots of commissions.

MR. BASSLER: Lots of commissions. And I came back. And I came back because Mary Jane Leland at Long Beach State asked me to teach. She was going on a sabbatical. And I got a job there and we're living in Malibu because-taking care of my father. And then, Bernard Kester says, "Well, maybe you should teach a couple of classes for me." So I was teaching at both schools part time. And it was so nice to have some money.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: I mean, we were-we had no money. And here I saw this graduate program based on what Neda and I had been through. All of a sudden Bernard was really doing these-you know, with his students, was doing this imaginative, fantastic stuff. And one woman in particular, Kris Dey, was doing these wrapped pieces, and Karen Chapnick was doing these plated pieces, and they were enormous, and they were selling right out-you know, they were selling right out of the studios of the students. And I thought, oh, my God, is that what I'm supposed to do, you know? Immediately I was just-I was overwhelmed by it. And Bernard was very excited by it, you know. And I thought, oh, my God, you know, what-I'm so really out of it.

And-but, still, what I taught was fine, and he would never make any kind of judgments about the way I taught my classes. But I saw that I had to begin to be a little bit more reflective of what was going on. I was teaching only undergraduates. I wasn't allowed the graduates because that was his bailiwick. And, in fact, he didn't even have interest in the undergraduate program.

And so, I thought, well, maybe I should get a commission, and immediately I was given commissions. And it was very, very difficult for me to take what I did and what I felt and try to blow it up larger. You know, it-and it seemed so forced to me, because I never changed the size of my yarn. It just simply meant these were intimate pieces made 12 feet long or something like that.

And I felt-I did a little bit of it, and then the problem comes in that-and then I found this to be true of Kris Dey; she burned out. And all of a sudden the client doesn't want you to think anything new, they just simply want-I like the piece I saw there but we'd like a little more yellow in it, and we'd like a green one. And then I was sort of stuck in this way of, can you do that but do it just bigger, but this is our color range, you know?

MS. EMANUELLI: Commercial designers.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, commercial designers. And that's what was happening when I went back to-in 1980. I was-I had made a lot of money-well, I don't remember where it all went but, I mean, I was fairly successful but I was not at all-there was no heart in it whatsoever. It was just simply, how long do you want it?-and trying to figure out something new.

And, in fact, one piece I went ahead and tried something new and the whole piece was rejected. It was to go into Oklahoma City Security Bank. And it turns out it was in a vault. I phoned to ask, "Well, where do the people come in?" I never saw the space. I said, "Could you just"-and they gave me the blueprint. I said, "Well, I just don't see where people are." And they said, "There are no people. These are investment bankers and they want a piece on the wall." I shipped it off and they sent it back saying, "We don't like pink, and we didn't say pink." And I had a little bit of pink and I had to remove the pink and, you know, and I thought, well, this is the end of this business, you know; this is-

MS. EMANUELLI: There are no people; they're investment bankers? [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, right, but it was in some kind of a hallowed hall, you know, or it's on the floor where nobody gets.

And then another commission was, I went to see the CEO and he said, "What we really need"-and I was hoping for something inspiring like, what do you make?-and I was replacing a picture that he had purchased in the airport gift shop in Hawaii, in Honolulu. And of course it was a sunset with a palm tree and all that. And they needed something to keep the noise down. And so-"Can you make it fat because we really need a buffer on this wall." And I thought, well this is not at all what I-and so it was all of that that I was able to take to Tennessee. I'm all of a sudden-I'm colleagues with Robert Brady and people who were really doing such exciting work. And I thought, it's really time to forget about all that commission stuff and try to figure out what I want to do.

And that was a real breakthrough for me. And I also think it happened-I don't think it would have happened had I stayed at UCLA because you're just sort of in-you're looking over your shoulder at this competitive thing, competing with your graduate students over commissions. And that was a big, big deal out there at the time.

MS. EMANUELLI: I remember that, actually. That's when I sort of came on the scene, '73.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: And all my friends-I was a-I shouldn't put this in your tape-Kris Dey and I met. We were working in the L.A. County Museum one summer, cataloguing the collection, and she introduced me to Patty Sue Jones, who became my roommate because she needed a roommate.

MR. BASSLER: Oh.

MS. EMANUELLI: And so that's how I sort of-that's how I met Bernard Kester. And soon after that, a couple of years after that I started working at The Craft and Folk Art Museum. MR. BASSLER: Yeah. MS. EMANUELLI: So I remember that time, and the commissioning was a big deal.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah. And Edith-but Edith had some wonderful shows there that helped us. And we'd have to go in, you know, even-some of the shows only lasted over a weekend or a week, and they'd go in there in that lower area. We'd be pinning them up, and it was just great; it was just great. That was a different thing than California Design, because California Design was so much more sort of formal.

MS. EMANUELLI: It was a major exhibition.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, being accepted into it and all that.

MS. EMANUELLI: A museum exhibition, yeah.

MR. BASSLER: So, in going back there, that was really wonderful, and I was able to really kind of figure out what it was I wanted to do, and took the time. And it was a less demanding program at UCLA, because I was still an associate-assistant professor; I had to teach three classes a week, some quarters four. So you're teaching-you're going-driving in every day and teaching in the morning and afternoon. And so, getting back there, you know, you're isolated.

And I came up with this method of working, which was the wedge weave, which is what I did back there. And I said I really wanted to explore-and wedge weave is basically associated with the Navajo Indians, where you're weaving on a diagonal. And they have some of those-not the eye-dazzlers, really, but there are specific rugs that are-they're very unique because they have sort of a scalloped edge to them, based on the fact that you're

beating the warp always at a diagonal. And that interested me because it was a natural way to kind of push it into a dimensionality and not be doing it with all that stuff they used, the-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Off mike.] [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Well, the roplex [sp] and all of these synthetic materials to try to make fabric dimensional. Here was a method of structure, and it's a very-it's very physical. You really have to beat and beat, and you've got to really concentrate on it so that you are sort of putting within the cloth this structure that is inherent in the structure and in the cloth, and it happens right there. And so I really love that idea.

And so, in a period of time, in the last year, in '82, I did-and then actually finishing them up when I came back, I was told at UCLA-Bernard Kester said, if you don't come back-if you stay any longer we won't hire you. [Audio break.] And I finished up this body of work. It was the only time that I'd had a body of work that reflected the same kind of idea going through it. It used to be I'd do one thing and then another thing, and the two pieces would be in the show together. But this was one time when I had about-I think I had about eight pieces that I was able to do, which I started in Tennessee. I also-it's kind of interesting to mention that-the idea of John Cage. Another thing I was able to do back there is read. At UCLA I never did any reading about other artists, but back there, there was somehow more time to really contemplate and take the time to sort of get other ideas. And John Cage had always been someone I could never understand. And so, because of that, I thought it'd be interesting to try to figure it out. And I had a book-and I can't think of the title of it right now, but it was a wonderful that just told about his interest in mushrooms and his interest in so many different things, and of course his ideas about chance. And I thought-I'd always known that I'd had a rather-my education had been extremely tight in the 1950s, when I had my basic core courses. And I wanted to break away from that, and so I used the idea of chance in terms of my color placement on these wedge weaves I did, based on the idea of simply throwing dice-assigning colors to numbers and throwing dice, which when I would get a number; that would be the next color in dye that I would paint on. And I didn't allow my kind of-my sophisticated judgment to go in. Of course, I was the one who mixed up all the colors, but I mixed up a variety of colors, and if it so happened that a black hit a black hit a black, that's the way it was. And I did a whole series of pieces based on that chance kind of performance, and each one came out quite different just because of the amount of the color and also the chance of placement of color that went into it.

Well, I was invited to have a show at The Elements, when The Elements Gallery had moved to a section of New York that was brand new; it was called Tribeca. And they were really ahead of their time, and they actually ended up closing there a few years later. I don't think it was because of my show; I think it was just simply-it was too-nobody was willing at that particular time, in '84, to go down to Tribeca. The Elements had been on, I think, even Madison Avenue or Fifth-they'd been on Madison Avenue, where there was all that foot traffic, and in '84 there was no foot traffic down in Tribeca.

But all the pieces sold, and it was a show with Paul Soldner. It was clay and fiber. And all but-actually, all but one piece sold. And that was the first time that I'd actually seen a check come; that all of a sudden I realized that that is a way of making money. It never happened before and never happened since, where I've been able to get that many pieces together and have a single one-person-or actually, a two-person show.

And so, it was then and in conjunction with that I got the NEA grant, the \$15,000 one, which was the biggie. And with that amount of money, Veralee and I were able to build a studio, which is here in the back of the house, and a two-story, so that she's downstairs and I was up above. And that-and the building cost \$30,000, and that's exactly what we had. We had \$32,000, which we would never have had.

And for the first time I was able to move the loom out of the back bedroom, which is where-we have always had to have the loom in the house someplace because we've never had the opportunity to have that kind of money. When you've got three kids and, you know, the salaries have never been that great at UCLA. The salaries only get good when you get to be a professor.

MS. EMANUELLI: What year was that, your professorship?

MR. BASSLER: That was '80-oh, my professorship was '80-and I-we've already talked about that. I had to fight for it, but I think I finally got it in '86 or '87. Adrian Saxe and I got it together.

And no sooner did they give me professorship than they gave me the chairman of the department. And so-and then that was really a bummer. I mean, those were dark, dark years, which really sort of informed my work too-I mean, because I just-all of a sudden my work became very, very protective. I had to-I had no time to weave because I had to go in every day and be in the office and try to fight not only the chancellor but fight the faculty about the future of the department and all that. And I began to-there are three sources that I figured out: the idea of taking old cloth that I'd woven, pieces that I didn't like or, you know, just stuff I'd woven, and I had to figure out what to do with it. And so, there is-in the Aztec tradition, the pre-Columbian costumes, there is a warrior costume which was so effective in fighting the Spanish that the Spanish adapted it for their own use,

which was a layered tunic. It's called an ichcahuipilli worn by men. It's either open or closed. And I love that idea of being-that layering of cloth. And, of course, there's the firemen's jackets from Japan, which have been-always been one of my very, very favorites. And then there are those wonderful kind of warrior jackets from Africa, where the men go into battle covered with little string amulets around their neck, which are little leather pouches, which of course deflect spears and arrows and all that.

So all-those three costumes, articles of clothing, I began to do a number-oh, and there was one other one too, my Dad's vest, his pitcher's vest-

MS. EMANUELLI: Catcher.

MR. BASSLER: -catcher's vest, which was-in those days was a padded-heavily padded protective shield.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: And so, during that period of time I would come home and I'd-because I couldn't weave I would just simply begin to cut things up and put them together. And I made a number of pieces that way. One of them ended up in the Oakland Museum, which was-I think it's just called Shield. And then one of them ended up in another museum. And then I actually did one based on my Dad's-it's called A Catcher's Shield-really based on the whole shape of the way they used to be-based on an old photograph. And what I did was embroidered-not embroidered, well, sort of, stitched onto the front-sort of like an Amish Mennonite quilt is on the front. And that piece was shown an awful lot. In fact, all of these pieces were-they sort of did a circuit. They were in every show and went around. And the Catcher's was even reviewed in Art in America, which is really kind of amazing to me.

MS. EMANUELLI: Wow.

MR. BASSLER: Which-a woman of-Janis-oh, what is her name? I can't think of her name. She's quite a well-known writer for Art in America. I want to say Kavis-that's not it. Koplos? Koplos is her name, Koplos [Janet Koplos]. She's a writer for Art in America. I saw it in Poland; I had a show in Poland.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right, in Warsaw.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, in Warsaw. And so that was-that made me feel pretty good, you know. When you think of all the years when you wonder if anybody is seeing these things at all, and they get some kind of notoriety, that made me feel very good. It helps with one's confidence. That's something I've always had to struggle with is my confidence, you know; a sense of what I was doing was relevant.

MS. EMANUELLI: There's a '60s word for you-'70s.

MR. BASSLER: What?

MS. EMANUELLI: Relevant.

MR. BASSLER: Relevant?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-yeah. And-because in our society it's no secret that arts really are sort of on the fringes. And, again, that's something that was so heart-warming to be in Oaxaca, to sort of see how integrated the arts were. And just earlier last year Veralee and I went to Bali, and we were just sort of-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh my God.

MR. BASSLER: What?

MS. EMANUELLI: It stopped; I don't know when. Let's see if this one is still going. This one is still going. See, this is why we have two.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, I see.

MS. EMANUELLI: I'm going to stop it from-[audio break]. Okay, I think we're-I want to know if this is actually recording. I guess it is because it's not playing.

Okay, we were just discussing Oaxaca, how wonderful it was to be in Oaxaca.

MR. BASSLER: Okay. Shall we talk about how that came about?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes, let's do.

MR. BASSLER: Okay. In our first jobs-Veralee got a job at Uni High before me; she started teaching. And I-

MS. EMANUELLI: She was teaching crafts, too?

MR. BASSLER: She was teaching a ceramics program and crafts, but mostly ceramics, really. And I was teaching-then I got a job at Emerson Junior High School, which feeds into the University High. Both of these are sort of the plum jobs, because they're West End-Emerson is in Westwood Village.

MS. EMANUELLI: And Uni High-that comes from UCLA, that name, right? University High?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: So it's near there too.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah, at West End. And I had ceramics and design craft, they called it. And we-it was-oh, we were not married yet. And then it got a little bit too cute because, you know, my students feeding into her school and sort of saying, well, Mr. Bassler said this, and, oh, is that the way you do it?"-you know. Of course, we're talking to one another all the time. So in 1965 we got married. And we continued teaching for two years-a couple of years, and then trying to start a family with no luck whatsoever.

And so, Veralee figured out that she couldn't take the strains of teaching, that she needed some time off. And so she was off for one year, and I was still making work with the idea I was working on my master's, but I wasn't taking any courses. But sooner or later it came to the fact that I had to take some courses at UCLA and I would have to stop teaching. And because Veralee wasn't pregnant or getting pregnant-I remember-[laughs]-the night I asked her in bed, you know, "I'd like to go back to school. Would you mind taking my class over at Emerson?" And so, the long pause, you know-[laughs]-this quiet-this thud-[laughs]-this heavy-and finally she agreed to do it.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.] Oh, I thought you were going to tell me she was pregnant suddenly.

MR. BASSLER: No, no, no. And-so she took my job and I was able to go back to UCLA and take courses which I had to take so I could get my master's in 1968. It was a master's because they did not offer MFAs to-they didn't have an MFA for textile at that time. They didn't know whether we would-they would allow us to get a master's in fiber, you know, without some huge kind of theoretical project to go with it. And so both Neda and I got our MAs at the same time. Anyway-

MS. EMANUELLI: Did Neda teach at UCLA?

MR. BASSLER: No.

MS. EMANUELLI: Never taught.

MR. BASSLER: No, no. But the point in why I'm saying that is, Veralee-we had been to Oaxaca right after we were married, and loved it. And so she was teaching at Emerson, and she says, "Guess what? I have a little girl from Oaxaca in our class." And I said, "Oh, that's odd." And she says, "And I'm her favorite teacher and she wants to invite us over to the host family where she's staying."

MS. EMANUELLI: She was an exchange student?

MR. BASSLER: Well, sort of, yeah. And so we went over. And actually we were invited over the night of my master's, but I was so tired and sick we-but they were insistent that we come over. So the next week we went over there and met this family, Joan and Arnold Travis, who still live in West Los Angeles. And they had at the dinner table a woman, Frannie Sciaky, Frances Sciaky, S-C-I-A-K-E-Y, I think it is.

MS. EMANUELLI: S-C-I-A-K-

MR. BASSLER: S-C-I-A-K-Y, I think it is, Sciaky. Anyway, and she was this 75-year-old woman who had a house in Oaxaca, who took summer girls from the United States, from all over the United States, for two months. She would bring them-teenagers-bring them down and they would have this international experience. And they would go-[interview interrupted by a barking dog].

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay. So we were talking about Frances Sciaky bringing girls in the summer to Oaxaca.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Now we had, through the years, always sort of heard about this through students that I had had at Emerson; they always would come back and say, "Oh, we had a summer in Oaxaca," and I was always was sort of wondering, what is this summer experience? And then, of course, Cindy Travis had gone down; Nancy Wylie had been, you know, although I did not know Nancy at the time. So it was something-it was sort of this experience that relatively wealthy young girls would do, but from all over the nation. Frannie came from

New York. So there was a big contingent that would come from New York, and we were very much interested in this.

So as we sat at the dinner table, and Irma, this little student, Irma Ortiz was her name-is her name-she was the cook's daughter, and the Traveses invited her up to have this little educational-

MS. EMANUELLI: The cook for the school down there, or the cook-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah, Panchitas-Panchita. And so we thought, God, this sounds pretty good.

Now, Veralee, up until this time-one summer we went to a Navajo reservation thinking we wanted to teach there, and then we had gone-we were thinking of going to a kibbutz. You know, we didn't know what all that meant, but all these different experiences. So all of a sudden, the idea of going-[interruption to let the dog out].

So anyway, we had this idea of, there's got to be more to life than teaching at Emerson Junior High School. As often I've said in some of the lectures, you know, it was about the time that Peggy Lee sang the song, "Is That All There Is?" And we had this idea, we've got a cute little house-oh, and about this time we were also planning to adopt a child, and so there was the idea of having a child in our life, we had a cute little house, we had a cute little job, we had a cute little car, and is this what we do for the rest of our lives?

And so it was suggested-Arnold Travis, in a stage whisper to Frannie, which Veralee heard at the table said, "Maybe this couple would want to buy your house,"-buy the-you know, buy the-and Veralee heard that. And as we drove home we thought, gee, Oaxaca is really a nice place, you know; what could this all be about? Well, it wasn't a week before we had another dinner engagement at their house, and now there wasn't quite so many people but there was Frannie, and Frannie said indeed she did want to sell.

Her program had been very successful for her for the 1950s when she said a morning activity was to shake out these blankets and wear peasant dresses and puff the pillows up and do a little embroidery, and she was having somewhat of a difficult time with '70s-or the '60s liberated woman, and she thought that maybe fresh blood was needed to carry on this program.

And she ensured us-if we bought the house she would ensure us the first year's girls in this transition. And I think it was \$1,500 per girl is what she got, and she would have something like 15 or 18 girls in this house; it's a big house. And all of a sudden we're thinking of money. I mean, that's twice as much money as we made teaching for LA City Schools at the time. I said, we are going to be wealthy. You know, I mean-[laughs].

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And it sounds like a good deal. Frannie wanted \$20,000 for the house, I think, and she wanted the money quick. And she didn't want it dribbling in because she had to live on that money. And we bought the house, sight unseen. All the parents who would come over and be cheerleaders for this whole project said, oh, you'll love the house. It's beautiful; it's fantastic.

And we took our money out of our retirement. I don't know where we got \$10,00 but we got \$10,000 and gave it to her before we even got down there. And then we thought, well, maybe it would be a good idea to go down and see this house. [Laughs.] And so we drove down the summer before we moved down there. In 1969 we drove down with-oh, and then-well, I'd forgotten to tell you, she-Katie became-Veralee became pregnant with Katie and she had Katie right after we adopted Megan, so they're only a year apart.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, I see. I wondered how they were so close. One was six months-yeah. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah, yeah. And so we drove down there in our Volkswagen van to see the place and meet Panchita. And Panchita was crucial to this whole thing because Panchita was the one who did all this cooking, was the manager and of course the mother of Irma. And Panchita was so attached to Frannie, and we thought, this is going to be-you know, this is going to be difficult. But as it turned out-I mean, Panchita's still cooking. We'd gotten out of the situation-we sold out quite a few years ago in the mid-'80s, but we'd had it for over 15 years, you know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Wow.

MR. BASSER: And it was la-la land. I mean, it's just absolutely beautiful.

MS. EMANUELLI: What did you call it?

MR. BASSER: Well, we didn't have any name for it. It was just sort of this experience. Now it's called Casa Panchita. And it is-runs as a-it's a pensione; it's a-you know, people come in there and they pay-they have three meals a day. And it's lovely. It has a swimming pool. It's almost three-quarters of an acre so it's quite large. But

what was sort of funny going from this little house we rented in Venice Beach, you know, packing up the car, selling all this stuff in the house and going down there to live forever, and our parents absolutely at wit's end.

In fact, we had a-some of our friends that we'd gone through UCLA with who had been-gone out into teaching, we had a big party. This is while we still lived in Venice in this rented house. And we told them what we were doing. And it was the-really an interesting study of human nature how they became so angry and protective of us. You know, they wanted to protect us. And they were saying, "You're out of your minds." They wouldn't talk-you know, they were, "How can you do this?" And we said, "But we're going to be making all this money and we're going to do that"-they would tell us all the reasons why we shouldn't do it.

You know, it's that kind of thing, you sort of wish you were doing it but you don't have the nerve to do it, but now they're doing it. It was really-later on we talked about that, you know, the idea that we were breaking this mold, because all of us were teaching in art programs because we'd all been educated at UCLA, and now we were splitting; we were going to do something else.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: And so we went down there, and it was a fabulous experience for the kids, for us-I mean, the dimension it added to our lives and to-

[End Tape 3, Side B.] [Begin Tape 4, Side A.]

MS. EMANUELLI: [In progress]-Bassler, at Jim's home in San Pedro, California, on February 14, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Okay. And Abigail was born.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. But how the program-just talking a little bit about the program, how our program changed from what Frannie had had was she was not a craftsperson, she was really sort of an intellect. And so we brought down interest in the weaving and the ceramics. Veralee being a potter, we built a kiln down there that we-hadn't been before. There had been looms down there but Frannie had never really known what to do with them. And so, in time we built a studio that had looms in it. And, as I say, we had a kiln that would go high-fire. And our idea was that this was-we were really making a home for ourselves and we would share it with students during the - you know, during the summer months. Then the other part of the year we thought that we would be doing our own work.

But with all the work that we had to do on the house, then we started-well, we continued what had been as a pension. In other words, guests would come down, and in those days they would pay eight dollars a day and get three meals. And we made money, you know. I mean, that's what it was. But the '70s were a very difficult time in Mexico with the inflation going on, and neither one of us were very good business managers to figure out when we should be raising the amount of money. So, you know, that was somewhat of a problem.

But ceramics, I mean, was very, very strong. And we'd go to the villages or we'd invite craftsmen in to show how they made things, and the girls would be able to do that, and of course the weaving. And I bring that up because the weavings-as I said before, the weavings that we would see in the villages, the techniques they would use, the materials they would use, I would begin to buy to incorporate into my work. So the work was very particular to that particular time and that area, and the work of that period sort of reflects that kind of thing.

MS. EMANUELLI: You incorporated their actual textiles into it, or just the way they worked?

MR. BASSLER: No, the way they worked, but the materials, like the brown cotton was just something I've never seen before. The silk-I met a woman on the street who was spinning silk. And I used a lot of silk but I'd always purchased my silk, and now I was using handspun silk. And that wouldn't have happened had we not been down there.

And so, when we moved back up here that's sort of what I brought with me, and then I was-there were these rope weavings going on, and I-and then you get a public who-there was so much press about that kind of thing, so that's what people wanted. You know, they'd see my work: "Well, can't you work bigger?" Or, "Can't you use like I saw over there?" A lot of that kind of thing. But, as I say, moving back to Tennessee helped me a great deal with that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay, I'm going to find some more questions here.

MR. BASSLER: There was-

MS. EMANUELLI: Was there something else you wanted-

MR. BASSLER: There was something else I might-be interesting to talk about. We were really interested in trying to get legal status in Mexico, because we had to leave Mexico every six months in order to get our new tourist visas. And I was at one particular time offered-given the opportunity to go to a little, tiny village-and this was a Mexico City project. They were having this problem then, as they have now, of people leaving their small villages to go to Mexico City or go to the United States. And this one particular village, which was isolated in the mountains, had been a mining community called Capulalpan-Capulalpan de Juarez. So they thought that maybe I could go up there and teach them some craft that would, you know allow - you know, interest them enough and give them some kind of income that they would stay. And it was sort of a haphazard project. They also invited people-I was teaching weaving, somebody else was teaching furniture making, somebody else was teaching rabbit hutches-a rabbit hutch or-

MS. EMANUELLI: How to make a cage for a rabbit, basically?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, making those, that they maybe would get some rabbit industry going. And there was a little bit of farming. It was right on the side of a hillside, so the farming was somewhat of a disaster because it was just so steep on that little side of this-I mean, on this very large mountain. And there was no tradition at all in the weaving-there was no tradition at all; they used to be miners. And it was basically a disaster.

In other words, I was up there working daily for six months, and then we had to go back to the States. But at the end of the six months I thought I had all the looms set up. It finally turned out that they wanted us to weave a fabric for the furniture they were making. Well, they didn't really spell that out in the beginning, so I went up there first of all and introduced to them simple tapestries that could be-little tapestries that would hang on walls. And then they said, oh, no, we really want you to be able to do fabric that would be upholstery fabric.

Well, I wasn't in charge of ordering the material. Somebody in Mexico City had ordered 3,000 billion pounds of very fine wool, white. And so they said, well, can't you do natural dying, because that would be very unique? Well, I sort of tried to start doing that, but I finally switched over to chemical dyes because they had also purchased-the same person who ordered the wool had ordered, natural-synthetic dyes.

So I dyed all - I taught them how to dye the wool. I taught them how to set up the loom. And I must say it was sort of a very simple sort of Danish stripe, very sophisticated for West L.A., and I wasn't so sure it was ready for the furniture that they were doing downstairs. And they wove the fabric, and it came out fairly well, but then I wasn't in charge of the upholstery part of it because I don't know much about that anyway, and it turned out that most of the fabric was cut too small to fit the foam-rubber pads they had for the furniture. And so then I went back and just sort of wondered what in the world to do with it, and so ended up making pillows because that's all they could make with it.

And I also found that the energy there-I read in a book, in a sociology book once that the secret to making a successful project is to find the leadership within the community, and I was never able to find who the leaders were. And finally I talked to someone who had-a shop owner in Oaxaca who 10 years before tried to do something in that same community with embroidery, and he said the problem with that community is it's divided right down the middle between the Catholics and the communists, and if you pat a Catholic on the back, all the communists would pick up their needles and go home. And that's essentially what was happening to me. I would be praising-or put the wrong person in charge of one thing, and then nobody else wanted to work on that project.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: But that was all hindsight afterwards. And he says that it's like trying to domesticate a zebra; it will never happen in that particular town. It maybe something else, you know, maybe if you could find another vein of gold that, well, I'll go back and work in that in the mine. But it was interesting to have that experience. I learned from it, but-

MS. EMANUELLI: You don't feel like anything was really done after that?

MR. BASSLER: Nothing I did-as long as I was there like a taskmaster, you know, sort of doing it, but the moment I would leave, nobody was there within the community to want to push it through. So that-

MS. EMANUELLI: How did they decide that that's what should be done there? Did the community ask for something like that?

MR. BASSLER: The community had to do something, and they thought with the furniture making, with the rabbit hutches, with fabric, maybe one of them would stick. And I had a feeling probably the rabbit hutches was the closet thing that would do because that's something they could sell, rabbits in town, or for food or something like that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right, or spin it or-[laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Many years later I went back to the community just to sort of see if there was any evidence, because they have a very famous church there that tourists will go to. And I looked around and looked in the room where the looms were. The looms were still there. I mean, this is maybe 15 years later.

MS. EMANUELLI: But nobody was using them?

MR. BASSLER: No. No, there was nothing going on.

MS. EMANUELLI: There was one question that-an early question, which we need to move on from these early questions-was whether you think there is a difference between university-trained artists and ones who aren't. Do you have any thoughts on that?

MR. BASSLER: It's interesting. How I relate to that is, when we went to Tennessee-because we were not really a university, we were a crafts center, and I think that what informs my work more than anything is information that I got from my academic classes a lot. In other words, learning how to study, learning how to retrieve information, being curious as to the world. And I think you get a great deal of that in a university.

And we did find-in fact, Veralee was a graduate student in Tennessee in the ceramics area, and most of the people with whom she had worked had come from a craft kind of tradition. They had not been to a university. And they were just sort of satisfied to continue to make a utilitarian this or a utilitarian that, and they didn't question the what-ifs-what do they do here, what do they do there-to sort of expand, sort of, what can one do with the processes that you're learning?

And I think that is a big difference, I think. People who have had the opportunity to go to a university just simply have much more information at hand. And you learn how important it is to go to a library to look something up, to be curious, have a broader perspective rather than being satisfied with production pottery, for example.

And I would say that sometimes the criticism that-oh, this is a good point. Penland once invited me, and they said-at both Penland and at Arrowmont, the request for weaving classes was steadily going down in the late '80s and the '90s. They wanted mixed media more. They wanted surface pattern and sewing them together. They had fewer and fewer people who were challenged by weaving because they saw probably the time involved or it was too restrictive. That wasn't true of ceramics. Ceramics are always probably some of the most popular classes, but weaving was really going downhill. And so they asked me to write a real challenging statement about what the class was going to be, and I wrote a real challenging statement where we were going to look at certain periods of history, certain techniques used by certain people, and you people, who want to be in this class, would be required to come with that information. And nobody signed up.

MS. EMANUELLI: They would be required to come with-

MR. BASSLER: To do prior investigation, prior research into the Coptic textiles, into pattern weaves of Islam. And I gave specifics-these are really interesting ones to look into-and nobody. The class was cancelled.

MS. EMANUELLI: Ah.

MR. BASSLER: And I would say that the last time I taught at Penland was a fantastic group because they all knew me and they knew the way I teach. But I would say the criticisms of Arrowmont in my teaching-and we read our evaluations-is, oh, he's too much an artist; all I wanted to do was weave a shawl and he wouldn't help me with that, or, you know, that kind of thing. Because I would say, well, you know, the warp doesn't have to all be the same yarn; why don't you dye some of that? Or, why don't you use a big yarn, a thick yarn? Or why don't you-you know, trying to sort of introduce-

MS. EMANUELLI: Mm-hmm, new ideas.

MR. BASSLER: You know, "You can go home and get Lily cotton and make a shawl if you want, but I think it's going to be dull." "Well, why do you say it's dull? It's just like the one I'm wearing." "Well, I think that's dull."

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: You know? So, sort of challenging the hand weaver. And Arrowmont gets an awful lot of less-sophisticated people, and they don't want to-I would say that wasn't during the '80s, but toward the end of the '80s and '90s, and then Arrowmont never invited me back, just because I wasn't interested in teaching-

MS. EMANUELLI: Just technique.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, or a belt project, you know. I notice now in their catalogues, well, we're going to-very

specific-we're going to be doing wearables. Wearables are very, very popular. Well, I'm not interested in wearables. Or there's another-somebody-Randy Darwall sells scarves. I think Stella probably has his scarves at the Folk Art Shop [Craft and Folk Art Museum, Los Angeles, CA]. Randy-very popular. He can get a workshop anywhere because what he teaches is a scarf, and he gets \$300 for a scarf. Well, Randy will teach you how to do your own Randy Darwall scarf. And that's what they do.

But that's getting off the point. But the point is that a lot of those people are craftspeople and they're not university. There's a big difference.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you think that it's less valuable to be making functional objects?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, no! No, but I just think-

MS. EMANUELLI: Or do you just wish they would make them with more creativity?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Yeah. I just think that they could be-you know, I love to go to, you know, see what-go to a reservation and see what the Hopis are doing in a very traditional sense because they're tied to that kind of tradition. But if you're not really-you can learn from that and then investigate it and sort of do a refreshing kind of interpretation of that. All of my work-I mean, what interests me about the crafts is the function of it. You know, functional things, I think are-you know, there's a good example of Sandy Simon taking ceramics and doing hand-built and thrown together. And yet I bought this from Sandy, and this had been returned-this is a pretty old bowl. This had been returned by the Elements Gallery, saying she didn't understand why those little spots were bothersome and it wouldn't sell in their shop.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, it's got green polka dots on the bottom of this white bowl.

MR. BASSLER: Polka dots, and that little-

MS. EMANUELLI: But there's some flecks of oxide or something.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, the gesture of this-Sandy was laughing about the fact that she'd just gotten this back, returned from the Elements because Kay couldn't sell it.

MS. EMANUELLI: It was a little messy looking.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Yeah. And there's going to be a certain-well, and Kay probably knows her New Yorkers.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: And there's something very refreshing about that kind of thing.

No, I think-well, look around the house. I mean, we've got objects that serve a function. Sometimes the function is just simply an aesthetic kind of function. The Zaire pieces on the wall, we're not using them as wrap-around skirts, we're using them as something to contemplate. And there's a wonderful energy about just the way the materials have been confined-you know, I mean, just the way the materials have been used to create those. So, I-

MS. EMANUELLI: So you're not encouraging people not to make functional objects so much as to experiment in the way they make them.

MR. BASSLER: Mm-hmm.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did any of the students from Arrowmont come from traditional families, hand-crafting families?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: But they had already learned that probably at home, those techniques.

MR. BASSLER: It was a whole national thing. I mean, Arrowmont draws from people all over, but basically they come from the South. And all during the '80s when I taught there it was really great because there was sort of a movement-it was the end of the big fiber push, and it really went downhill at both Penland and at Arrowmont at the same time. Surface patterning classes continued, and in sort of a feminist kind of-why do I say that? Well, because in surface patterning they can print things that have images on them that have to do with the feminist movement, what they were concerned with. You have photo silk screen. You can get images on that-you know, you're reading textiles now, and that kind of thing. And weaving, a much slower process, less likely to get the same kind of image or get it together in the same amount of time. Weaving is very slow, and that's another thing that might work against the textile classes.

I just know that I have-the last time I taught was at Penland, and I said it was such a fabulous class, they were so great, I don't want to do this again; I just want to leave on a high note.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you teach any weaving at UCLA now?

MR. BASSLER: A little bit. The class I teach now is from World Arts and Cultures. I'm teaching two classes now. And I teach a class, it's called-there's a series of courses called Textiles of the World, and I teach the Americas. And it's out of the Fowler Museum [UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History]. Patty Anawalt [Dr. Patricia Rieff Anawalt] has the Center for Regional Dress in the Fowler Museum. And Patty Anawalt is an authority, one of the leading authorities in the pre-Columbian dress of Mesoamerica, the Aztecs. She's an authority on the Codex. But she does not have an academic appointment there. And I've learned a great deal-what I know, I've learned from Patty. And I'm teaching this class the fifth time now, which is Textiles of the World, the Americas. Somebody else comes in and teaches Indonesia; somebody else comes in and teaches Africa.

So part of what I do is-

MS. EMANUELLI: So this is like an art history class or world arts and cultures?

MR. BASSLER: It's mostly reading discussion. But I bring a little bit of studio into it because in the readings, Patty will talk about, oh, a twining fragment found and a coiling fragment found, and they don't know what that is, so I make them do one. So they have to do twining, they have to do coiling. What I do is I say, you've just been taken back-from the 20th century, you've been taken back 20,000 years and you've been dumped into a society of hunter-gatherers. What can you teach them to make sure that they will continue to exist? And it usually turns out they say, "I don't know anything."

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: I said, "You can tell them you had a Maserati. Can you make a Maserati?"

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: "Could you tell them how to weave?" And then all of a sudden somebody in the class will say, "Oh, I know how to knit; is that helpful? "Well, of course that would be helpful; anybody else know anything?" And things will come out. They'll all of a sudden begin to say, "Well, my mother used to crochet." "Do you know how to crochet?"

And then the first day of class I say, "How long did it take you to get dressed? Did you change your mind? What made the decision?" You know, talking about dress. So they sort of center on, "Well, what do I feel about dress?" And then I'll say, "Where is it all from?" And it turns out, after they look at all their labels, nothing's made in the United States anymore; it's all imported. And it's reasonable that they've never seen anybody weave, they've never seen anything made, because that's the way we live today. So I say, "Well, we're going to correct that." "And so you would go back-" "Would you know how to catch a fish? How would you catch a fish? You don't know how to make net?" "No." "Well, you're going to learn how to make a net." And so I make them make a net. They have to make a basket to act as a pocket. And then I take them up to Dixon where I have a few looms left, and then they have to learn how to weave a twill; very, very basic. And if I were to teach a class again at Penland or Arrowmont, I would start with the same approach.

One time, one of the greatest assignments I had is-sometimes I just sort of walk in the room and I don't know what the hell I'm going to do. We're on the airplane and I'll think, what will I do? I know what I'll do. To sort of get them all on a level playing field, I'll say, we're going to roll paper on a diagonal, and we're going to do 12 of them. So they get these long-and roll them real tight. Okay, overnight you're going to do something with those that allows us to-that's your introduction to the rest of us. You're going to figure out-we're going to figure out who you are by what you do with those.

And the next time they come in-and it's just so revealing, you know, what they've done. One young lady once-we've got newspaper, which is really sort of beautiful-you know, one lady wrapped them all with pretty yarn because the newspaper was so ugly.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: You know? [Laughs.] And it's really revealing that they're all stuck in the same place.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, then do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition or do you think you're particularly American-

MR. BASSLER: I don't know. I've never thought about that.

MS. EMANUELLI: -in terms of where you fit in?

MR. BASSLER: Well, you know, a couple of times I was part of a-three times, I guess-well, two times I went to Poland and seemed to feel rather comfortable. You know, what I was doing was accepted. And then one time I went to France to an exhibit, was invited there to be in something. And then Veralee and I went down to Chile to a conference that Yoshiko Wada-do you know Yoshiko?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. You know, what an organizer she is.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, she's quite the indigo historian, isn't she?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, and she-and also shibori, the tie-dye.

MS. EMANUELLI: Shibori, yes.

MR. BASSLER: So she got a bunch of us together. And I had no intention of even getting involved in this, and she was just so insistent that she got me into doing that scaffold weave, which later on I was really glad she did, because we were trying to recreate a Peruvian textile. We had the picture of it and we were going to see how we could spin Alpaca, do a scaffold weave and do natural dyes and then put it next to the museum that had the original piece there. And so we went down to Chile.

MS. EMANUELLI: You were recreating the old-

MR. BASSLER: The old, yeah. And so, in that instance I would sort of say, being a little bit more of an art historian-and I've learned so much by teaching this class with Patty Anawalt. And of course, being in Oaxaca and all that, I'm very interested in textiles of the world. And I draw much more, probably-well, I draw as much from that as I do from political situations, too. Even this apron I did-I weave Softwear-that's a reaction to the world at large, it's not just the United States.

MS. EMANUELLI: No. You're now talking about a sort of workman's apron with a split for the legs that you wove-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, and using Softwear meaning S-O-F-T-W-E-A-R, because I got so sick and tired of sitting in a faculty meeting at UCLA where their language is so beyond me because it all has to do with electronics; they're talking about hardware and software, and I'm just sitting there saying, well, what are these people talking about?

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And so I thought, well, I know what softwear is, so that was just what I did there.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right. And you used the scaffolding weave to make that.

MR. BASSLER: A scaffolding weave, and a pattern that is based on a Peruvian textile.

MS. EMANUELLI: But it looks a little computer-like, a bit map-like.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Gender issues, race or ethnicity issues. Do those figure in your work at all? I mean, you are doing something that's often seen as a-

MR. BASSLER: Women's-oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: -women's field.

MR. BASSLER: Another thing is when I've gone to traveling around the world, there are societies where the weaving is done by men, and-although it's always been brought out, if I'm on a panel, I'm the only male there, and there's a few more males in the field now. But actually, when I first started weaving and became aware of Craft Horizons, I remember one of the first articles I ever saw was Dominic Di Mare, because he and I are the same age and he had a show in the Craft Museum in New York. And I still have the article. And so I thought, well, there's somebody, you know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Ed Rossbach.

MR. BASSLER: Ed Rossbach, yeah. I knew of Ed Rossbach. I never met him until many, many years later, because he sort of had that program up at Berkeley, and then when he retired they just closed the whole thing.

But that was never-I made the decision that-I think that I received so much criticism from my father when I was young, I just didn't simply care; that simply I decided that I know where I'm happiest, I know what I'm happiest doing, and so therefore it could no longer be an issue with me. And if I was in a situation where it was all women, and usually any class I have is all women-occasionally there will be a male, but not often-look, that's the way it is.

MS. EMANUELLI: I mean, it's obviously not inherently a woman's thing to do, except for maybe small hands or something.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. It only is this country. And then this country is so specific about it, and the idea of having to be an athlete is so out of control.

MS. EMANUELLI: What do you think about the Bauhaus influence? Because they also, in the beginning, you know, crafts were part of art, in terms of how they taught it, but it was still the women who did the weaving and the men did the metal, and that kind of the hard things were men and the soft-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And that's probably reflective from even very early on. I mean, when we study Aztecs, the women were the weavers. Oh, but then just recently in my class I've got an article on the Kogi Indians, K-o-g-i, of northern Colombia. And then recently our daughter gave us this tape, Heart of the World, and the Kogi, they receive the information on how to weave from the mother Goddess, and the men do all the weaving.

MS. EMANUELLI: They instruct the men on how to do it?

MR. BASSLER: Men instruct men on how to do it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, I see.

MR. BASSLER: It is not a woman's activity.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh. But they receive the information from-

MR. BASSLER: From the mother Goddess. I mean from the mother-from the Earth mother. I mean many, many centuries ago.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: And so-

MS. EMANUELLI: That's the myth.

MR. BASSLER: And in Oaxaca, the men are the weavers of the tapestries.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you ever address this in your work at all, this issue or this thought? No, you just ignore it, kind of?

MR. BASSLER: I don't think I ever have. I think, in that Dad was both an athlete and a hooker of rugs, I thought, well, I've got my choice.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: I can go either way, and I'm not going to become a baseball player, I know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. So you were free to do the other.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. But I think that one of the reasons I started running marathons was to prove a point that I was capable of doing it, but I waited until after his death.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh. You started after your-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you still run?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, but I'm not running marathons anymore, but I've run 12 marathons. I mean, I was very serious with that. And I think that that was also kind of a balance to this-well, just an outlet. I was always a runner, but never to the point of being that serious about it. But I suppose getting that kind of-it's something-when you're teaching there's all sorts of ways of impressing a student, getting their attention-not impressing them, just getting their attention. And if I could come in and say, this is what we're doing, but also be wearing a

marathon tee-shirt, they can sort of say, oh, gee, there's-

MS. EMANUELLI: Like a real guy. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Well, really, it really helps. It helps a great deal.

MS. EMANUELLI: Was John Garrett one of your students?

MR. BASSLER: Bernie and I were on his committee, but he was not one of my students. He and I were sort of competitors in a way because if I stayed back in Tennessee, they were going to give the job to John. But then John sort of decided he no longer really wanted to teach anymore, I think. And the last few times I've seen John- we're very good friends, really, but we just never see one another.

MS. EMANUELLI: Does he still live in L.A.?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, no, no, no.

MS. EMANUELLI: He's in New Mexico.

MR. BASSLER: He's in New Mexico. And he's done very well. Now, he probably sort of depends on-he's very frugal and very careful about his expenses, and I think he probably lives off his art.

MS. EMANUELLI: Are there any other issues of race or ethnicity or political issues that you think influence your work? I mean, your work, to me, is so abstract I can't imagine it, but-

MR. BASSLER: Well, you know, there was a big flag I did.

MS. EMANUELLI: No, I don't know that piece.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah, I did a huge American flag based on-I'm not real fond of Bush, either one, and during the war, the Gulf War, and that was followed by the Exxon Valdez [1989] kind of thing, I did a piece in relationship to the Exxon Valdez, sort of a big shroud, where I just sort of took black-I was about ready to start on a piece and I heard about the Exxon Valdez and all the publicity of all the birds being collected and all that kind of thing. It was a lovely warp. It was going to be a long panel. And I just sort of took black dye as though it were that oil slick and poured all over it and wove the piece. And it's about an eight-foot shroud.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is it called Shroud?

MR. BASSLER: It's called Shroud, yeah. And then right after that, not long after that, really, we had the Gulf War, and I just thought it was so disingenuous for us to be saving the Kuwaitis when we were really just sort of saving our supply of oil. You know, the whole way we've dealt with the Middle East has always been so troublesome. And so I decided to weave an American flag. And I'd always remember that fabulous American flag at the Smithsonian that used to be hanging, but now it's being repaired, you know, that hung over some fort or something. It's in the Smithsonian.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, the Star Spangled Banner.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Mm-hmm.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And so it's about 6 by 12. It took me a whole year to weave. But stenciled onto it is the word SOILED. And, again, I used sort of black dye. It's not black; it's just sort of like an oil spill, and it has the word SOILED on it with the word "OIL"-O-I-L-sort of coming out stronger than the "S" and the "E-D." And that piece got a lot of notoriety. And in fact, for a while the Smithsonian wanted to buy it, but then the curator-I'm sure he was very political back there-he asked me how much. You know, this year's budget is all tied up in a [Dale] Chihuly, so we'll think about next-and then I could tell-his name was Ken Trapp.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right. Oh, this is at the Renwick [Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.].

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And Ken had purchased one of my pieces for the openings of the Oakland, and so we knew one another. And he saw the piece. They brought the Renwick Group out one time, so Carol and I put a little exhibit up. They wanted to see something.

MS. EMANUELLI: Carol Shaw-Sutton you're talking about.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. We had a one-day exhibit in one of the galleries at Long Beach State. And he asked a lot of questions. Currently the piece, the curator at the Oakland Museum wants to buy it but now she's running into flak. And I think that would be a much better place, with Jerry Brown, and it is much more liberal than Washington, D.C.

MS. EMANUELLI: Although for Washington to have a piece that's a little critical of something is not a bad thing.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, I'd love for it to be back there, but I think it would take someone who-it would be very offensive. I mean, I'm even wondering, with this-you know, that woman at Sacramento was booed off the stage. Some chancellor was talking about trying to say, perhaps we should be more introspective about who we are and what we are in the world, and all that. I'm even wondering about showing a picture of it in this thing in Detroit because people can be so angry. They're so filled with this patriotism, this patriotic spirit going on. And it's an enormous flag. It's huge, and it's just right in your face.

MS. EMANUELLI: How often have you done pieces like that?

MR. BASSLER: Not often, really. Oh, when it strikes me. I mean, like the Shield for my Dad, that was very specific to my father. And, you know, you can work in different ways. You know, you start with a concept, and that determines everything on the flag and with the shrouds. Other times, it's just this searching for-you know, just recently we saw the de Kooning show, the drawing show. It's just so fabulous to see the way he'd tear up and cut up, and it made me feel much better. In fact, I think in one of the tapes I've already said that, I think.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes, you did.

MR. BASSLER: Because this piece that I've just finished, I was going by the seat of my pants. I'm trying to bring two kinds of methods together just simply to make some kind of a composition that looks sort of intriguing, and that's all I'm trying to do.

MS. EMANUELLI: You're using that dye transfer kind of process.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, from something that came from Mexico.

MS. EMANUELLI: From Mexico. With some appliqué, or with a kind of piecing.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, sort of the scaffold weave on it and all that. Oh, the piece that I'm working on now, Jack Larsen is having a birthday party.

MS. EMANUELLI: Come back and say that because I want to make sure the microphone picks this up.

MR. BASSLER: Jack Larsen is having a birthday party, and he wants a miniature show-he's invited people to be in a miniature show. And it's his 75th birthday. So there's my 7-5.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, I see. Yeah. It looks a little bit like it's almost a figure because it's so blocked out and there's a little piece on top that's a-

MR. BASSLER: And I'm doing scaffold weaves. I'm making these little-this is a "7," see?

MS. EMANUELLI: Uh-huh, great. It's little boxes, black and white boxes.

MR. BASSLER: And the "5" is going to be blue and white. But now I've decided what I'm going to do is do them in cubes. I think I like cubes better.

MS. EMANUELLI: The "7" was being done in little flat boxes, and now you've got-

MR. BASSLER: Like dominoes.

MS. EMANUELLI: Like dominoes, yes. And fit together like a puzzle, like one of those block puzzles that you can turn around.

MR. BASSLER: See, so you could do all sorts of things with them.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, with the pictures that you can make in different patterns.

MR. BASSLER: And it takes a month of Sundays to do one of them.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: And I started with-

MS. EMANUELLI: Are you going to tell him what the pattern is or are you going to make him figure it out?

MR. BASSLER: No, make him figure it out.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: I started with this and I decided the gray was too subtle, so then I did this. Then I thought, well, I really like the idea of the cube, but then I decided those would be too big because it only can be eight inches by eight inches.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: So now I'm going to do little cubes.

MS. EMANUELLI: Little cubes about an inch, inch and a half.

MR. BASSLER: They're inch and a half, where these are 2 inches. So that's-we've got enough, haven't we?

MS. EMANUELLI: For lunch. We could stop for lunch.

[Begin Tape 4, Side B.]

MS. EMANUELLI: I'm going to ask you questions, and if you don't have too much to say about it, you don't have to say too much.

MR. BASSLER: Okay.

MS. EMANUELLI: How has the American market changed-American craft market changed in your lifetime?

MR. BASSLER: In my lifetime? Well, I would put it this way. Related to the '70s when-in my field, which is fiber art, there was a great deal of architecture being built which could accommodate very, very large fiber pieces which serve to add to the architecture or to help in some way to make those interior spaces warmer because the architecture at that particular time had so little architectural detail that was interesting they sort of almost relied on some sort of art piece. It could be ceramics, it could be anything, but fiber was usually a pretty good way to go. And it also gave warmth to the interiors. And during the '70s, that, of course, made a marvelous market for the fiber artists.

And that is almost non-existent today. In fact, it's not the fashion at all to have that kind of thing. And occasionally you'll hear of someone getting a commission, but it isn't what it used to be in the maybe mid- to late '70s, in the '80s. In the '80s it began to really sort of deteriorate. So that would be one big difference. There's still interiors that one can get a commission on, but that's changed. I was never a big part of that anyway.

MS. EMANUELLI: What about galleries? Are they available to you?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. I've had a lot of good luck and bad luck through the years. At one particular time I was represented by a gallery in New Mexico, in Santa Fe; New York; and Washington, D.C., and for a period of time they all went very well. Because I am teaching a lot, I don't produce that much work, but they always seem to be interested to accept my work and to show it, usually in group shows kind of thing. But in each of those instances, all of those galleries closed. And now I'm-

MS. EMANUELLI: What period of time was that?

MR. BASSLER: That was in the '70s and the early '80s-early to mid-'80s. And then right now there's a woman who I understand has a very nice gallery in New York who has asked me to-that she would like to represent me, which I'm very, very pleased with.

MS. EMANUELLI: And her name?

MR. BASSLER: Gail Martin. And I've not met her, it's been through somebody else, but I'm supposed to contact her and as yet I haven't. I've been busy with other things and I just haven't done it. So that doesn't show a real good business sense. I should have phoned her immediately. And it's been about a month and a half, so I will get around to that. But I haven't had the work, actually. I've had work that's been in a show that's traveled for two years; I've got three pieces in that. I'm about to get that work back. When I get the work back I will phone this woman and tell her my work is available.

MS. EMANUELLI: What show is that?

MR. BASSLER: That was "Men of Cloth." And it just closed after, must be, two-and-a-half years of traveling.

MS. EMANUELLI: Who organized it?

MR. BASSLER: Loveland Museum, Loveland, Colorado.

And now, yesterday or day before I sent off three pieces to be in this exhibit in Detroit, which is only for a month, so I will in essence have six pieces available that I would be anxious to place somewhere. And then that usually spurs me on to phone somebody up and tell them so.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is it Gail Martin Gallery [New York]? Is that the name of it?

MR. BASSLER: I think so, yeah. And she deals in, supposedly, ethnic cloth-ethnic and contemporary. So that usually fits in with someone who would probably be interested in my work because I think my works do echo a lot of the kind of ethnic geometry. That's where the source is anyway, so that's sort of a natural.

MS. EMANUELLI: What are the other galleries that you were with in the '70s and '80s, the ones in Santa Fe?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, gosh, Frank Josephs, I think was the name.

MS. EMANUELLI: In Santa Fe?

MR. BASSLER: No, in New York.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, New York.

MR. BASSLER: And then, of course, the Elements was earlier, was in the early '80s, the Elements Gallery in New York. Shirley Koteen in Washington, D.C., and Barbara Okun, O-K-U-N, Okun Gallery in Santa Fe. Oh, yeah, I forgot about Jan Wetsman, W-E-T-S-M-A-N, Janice Wetsman, in Michigan outside of Detroit.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is that who's having the Detroit show?

MR. BASSLER: No. That is the Center for Creative Studies. It's a school, a private school. And then in the '70s I had the Miller Brown Gallery in San Francisco.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did you ever show at Mandell?

MR. BASSLER: I never showed at Mandell. Oh, I showed in there, but I was never represented by her. I did have a piece, that's right, but we were living in Oaxaca at the time so I never connect with that because I never saw it.

MS. EMANUELLI: That was a gallery in L.A. for a while.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. The only place I've ever shown in L.A., really, is the Craft and Folk Art Museum and in Mandell, only once, and then California Design. I've never been very successful, and L.A. has never really had much in the way of galleries that show fiber.

MS. EMANUELLI: That's true. Most crafts they don't. Ceramics.

MR. BASSLER: San Francisco. Miller Brown did the same thing as this Gail Martin, putting Bolivian pieces and contemporary pieces. There used to be-American Craft Council opened up a little mini-museum once in Ghiradelli Square.

MS. EMANUELLI: Museum West, wasn't it?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And this is ages ago, while I was still an undergraduate. And Bernard Kester sent some of my pieces up in that, and they were shown. It was the first time I was ever published, in Craft Horizons. They selected one of those pieces to be photographed. But that was late '60s, you know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Have you had much interaction with the American Craft Council?

MR. BASSLER: Yes and no.

MS. EMANUELLI: And the museum?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I have. Quite a few years ago, I took my class on a field trip. We went to Chinatown and we were playing around with little toys that you stick your fingers in the little plaited things and try to pull your fingers out.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, handcuffs-Chinese handcuffs.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And we got some milk carton material. My brother-in-law worked at a packaging plant, and he gave me rolls of milk carton material, pure white, and we made those things, but large. And somehow-I can't remember how it was-Jack Larsen saw a picture of what we did. And when he had his "Interlacing" [1986-1989] show open at the American Craft Museum, he invited me back to work with students from the Fashion Institute to fill the atrium of the American Craft Museum.

And so we were doing these things in a 60-foot drop, which was very different from what we were doing in our classroom. In other words, in our classroom we were making them maybe eight feet long or 10 feet long. And we made hundreds of them and we hung them in the gallery. And I can't remember ever sending Jack a picture of that. I don't know how else he would have seen it. But anyway, the American Craft Museum invited me back and gave me a little stipend to put a piece up. And it took me about a week and a half to get it up because I had to figure out a way to suspend it over that atrium, which was a 60-foot drop.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: But kind of funny: It stayed up for quite a few shows, and then about two years later they phoned me, hesitantly, to ask me what should they do with it. And they'd have to take a 707 to fly it back to me because it was so big. I said, "Get a big dumpster."

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.] Document it first, right?

MR. BASSLER: And they were so glad to hear me say that, you know, because they were treating it as though it were archival, you know. I couldn't believe it was still up.

MS. EMANUELLI: They had a picture, I'm sure.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah. And then I've been in shows. They've got a piece of mine in a collection and-you know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you have any relationships with dealers in particular that you think are worth comment? Any dealers that you've worked with that you think are worth commenting about your relation to?

MR. BASSLER: Well, Shirley Koteen was always-and Barbara Okun in particular, but Shirley also. But at the time that Barbara was representing me, I got the opportunity to-the Chicago Art Institute was interested in one of my pieces, and I didn't really know how to deal with that because I didn't know whether I should deal with my gallery. In other words, should the Chicago Art Institute, Christa Thurman-Christa Thurman is the curator of the textiles at the Chicago Art Institute-and they have a lovely collection. Anyway, she contacted me wanting a piece, and the Okun Gallery had it. And I phoned Barbara Okun and I said, "Look, this is what I should do." And she says, "Don't include me in on it. Go for it."

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, how nice.

MR. BASSLER: She says, "That's just wonderful." A lovely, lovely woman.

MS. EMANUELLI: That is so nice. They hadn't actually seen it at her gallery or anything.

MR. BASSLER: No, no, but they wanted one piece and I suggested another piece. And the piece they had seen-and I told her I was doing that. It was a big piece that I won an award on in Poland, and it was 8 feet by 8 feet, and it was that size because Poland, for that exhibit they wanted big pieces, and so I made a big piece specifically for Poland and it won an award. So I was willing to give the Chicago Institute that piece at the same price because I wanted to unload this big piece because I didn't know what else I'd do with it, you know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. Roll it up.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Right. And Shirley Koteen in Washington, D.C. was very, very supportive and would help me a great deal.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay. Let's see, where does American fiber rank on an international scale? Is the field moving in any obvious direction or not?

MR. BASSLER: I can't comment on that, really. I don't really consider myself-I think once I lost my textile classes-where I would refer to publications and all that to see where things were going and all that-once I was no longer teaching textile classes I didn't think that I was-I just wasn't interested in keeping up to see where it was going. I knew where I wanted to go, and so I don't feel myself a part of any of it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, we've talked about how your work's been received over time. Do you pay attention, then,

to any writers in the field of craft? Are there any writers that you particularly like?

MR. BASSLER: I saw that and I was trying to think if there-I think there are two people that if I see their name-or actually there are more than two. But Mildred Constantine, who was very instrumental in bringing this whole fiber movement onto the national scene, along with Jack Larsen, she and I juried a show together. And not only has she been every supportive of my work and she's just such a real wonderful person, but I do enjoy reading what she has to say about things. And Laurel Reuter, who is the curator of textiles in North Dakota Museum of Art, she occasionally will write something. Early on, of course, we depended on Bernard Kester. Bernard Kester wrote-for Craft Horizons, wrote an article. I think it was "From the West Coast" or something like that. And he did a great deal to promote not just textiles but everything that had to do with the crafts on the West Coast. So he was very good. Oh, Margo Mensing. I've always sort of enjoyed reading what she has to say.

MS. EMANUELLI: How do you spell that?

MR. BASSLER: I don't know. Mensing, M-E-N-S-I-N-G, Mensing, I think it is-Mensing. And she has, you know, a good point of view. Ann Wilson, who teaches at Chicago Art Institute.

MS. EMANUELLI: Where does she write for?

MR. BASSLER: Just an occasional article, you know. Being the head of the fiber department, you know, she's much more in tune with what's going on. She sees exhibits.

MS. EMANUELLI: Where does Margo Mensing write?

MR. BASSLER: The same as Ann, just writes-and she usually has a very interesting point of view about something. She teaches at Skidmore.

MS. EMANUELLI: I know you mentioned often Craft Horizons. What about FiberArts, or any of those others?

MR. BASSLER: FiberArts I get, and also Surface Design. And I look through them-I look through them. I get them saved up to try to read articles, but as I say, I don't really feel a part of that anymore. I find myself reading about politics more than anything. [Laughs.] I mean, I'm much more involved with what's happening in the international world today than I am with what's happening in the fiber world.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you prefer to read writing by artists as opposed to art historians or other critics, that sort of thing? Does it matter to you or do you find any difference?

MR. BASSLER: It doesn't matter. But in just preparing for this history class I teach, I find myself reading much more art historians, about textiles of Peru. Well, actually one book that I look at probably more carefully than FiberArts is the Textile Museum's Journals, where it's the reports from historians-textile historians-about their new finds. That interests me and it helps me with my own lectures.

MS. EMANUELLI: So you don't get too involved in criticism-craft criticism or anything like that.

MR. BASSLER: Not really.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay.

Other than what you've already said, is there anything you would say about the importance of fiber as a means for expression?

MR. BASSLER: Gosh, this is going to be sad.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Well, for me, I've just found it seems to be my chosen path. I don't know about its importance. I think I'm quite selfish that way. I mean, I just look at it as it's my own salvation. I can't hope it would be anybody else's.

MS. EMANUELLI: But you did talk earlier about the importance of it serving as a social function and that sort of thing-

MR. BASSLER: Well, sure.

MS. EMANUELLI: -fiber in general.

MR. BASSLER: It's amazing how many articles I can cut out of the paper and relate to my class when we're

talking about the Aztecs and their defeat by the Spanish, and the students won't understand these two philosophies coming together. And then I can take something out of the paper whereby the military no longer requires military women to wear the burqa in Saudi Arabia, and Saudi Arabians are objecting to that fact. And you think, you know, here are two philosophies coming together; what's this all about?

Or another one was, who was it that banned Harry Potter that it was satanic-the reading of Harry Potter? There was a whole group that was moving away from another school because they allow that-the YMCA or something like that-about shamans and this and that and the other, and we're reading about the same thing of the Spanish, you know, seeing these shamans in the Peruvians. So I find that really, really very interesting.

MS. EMANUELLI: Here's this other question: What are the strengths and limitations of the medium of fiber?

MR. BASSLER: Well, the limitations-there are built-in limitations. Just the very process of it can be very, very limiting because you have to sort of formulate-if you're a traditional weaver you have to sit down and figure out everything.

And I mentioned Mildred Constantine. In a book that she has out that came out a few years ago called Whole Cloth-and she features me in it and a rather nice photograph of one of my pieces. And she's talking about the idea that I was sort of a pioneer in the idea of taking the cloth and cutting it and doing with it what I want. And so that breaks down that limitation which so many people will say they don't like about it.

Or another thing is that it's so soft you can't fold it, and yet through certain structures you can make it very, very strong, just as the Aztecs with their hiskahuipil [ph] figured out they can make it, you know, worthy in warfare. But I do think that there's something-sometimes, going to a fine art museum like the de Kooning show, looking at something and just sort of marveling at the spontaneity of it, which is something it's difficult sometimes to get in textiles. You can do it sometimes with dye or you can do-you know, you can get that, but it's doing the running. And that wonderful-I love drawings, just that intimate kind of mark.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you make any drawings?

MR. BASSLER: I do; I do. In fact, they help me a great deal. That's why I liked what de Kooning was doing, because sometimes I'll be doing a drawing and I begin to do almost like Matisse, cut things and put them together to give me an idea as to where I want to go. And sometimes I'll look on the floor and say, why does the floor look more interesting than what I have in front of me, and begin to pick up some of these chance overlays of images that have fallen from the debris; the discards. And all of a sudden I say, that's what I want, and I'll do that. And some of my pieces are that. I mean, I'll put something together and work and work and work, and turn the whole thing over and say, the back side is really so much better, you know?

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.] But you don't draw things that are meant to be drawings on their own?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, no, no. Veralee is an excellent draftsman, but I-

MS. EMANUELLI: Is she?

MR. BASSLER: -I don't take the time for that.

MS. EMANUELLI: We talked about your commissioned pieces. It says, "What are your most important commissioned works?"

MR. BASSLER: I think the best one is one that Shirley Koteen got for me, and it wasn't even meant-it was a commission after the fact that she sort of-and it was at USA Today.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is it still there?

MR. BASSLER: I guess so-maybe, I don't know. I have no idea. That was a long time ago when they first opened up. And it's in their corporate office. I've never seen it.

[Audio break.]

MS. EMANUELLI: This is Sharon Emanuelli interviewing James Bassler at his home in San Pedro, California, on February 14, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number three.

MR. BASSLER: When we were talking about that commission at the-

MS. EMANUELLI: USA Today.

MR. BASSLER: -USA Today-I think it's Arlington, Virginia. I don't know where it is-John Garrett, at some place I

saw him, stated he saw the piece. He says, "It really looks great." And so all the time-and Shirley was the one who got the commission for me, and I was staying with her. She invited me, Lia Cook, and a few others who had gone to New York for the big American Craft "Poetry of the Physical" ["Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical," American Craft Museum, New York, NY, 1986-88]. And so we flew back there, anyway. So she says, "We'll fly to Washington then take the train up"-or I forget whether we went to New York first or came down. But anyway, it never occurred to me to go see that piece, even in the time-

MS. EMANUELLI: Or to her, either, evidently. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, or-yeah, right. I mean, it was something-I remember doing a marathon run. It was beautiful weather there-and I've been back two or three times-and running over to Arlington Cemetery and going to the Vietnam War [Memorial] and going to the Smithsonian and yet never thinking to go see that piece. And so, once it's sort of out of my mind I'm not very fond of going to revisit an old friend.

MS. EMANUELLI: And are there any other major commissions you think should be mentioned?

MR. BASSLER: Well, you know, commission usually means you make the thing specifically for a spot. I mean, pieces placed in a museum, that's not really a commission, now is it? It's a different thing.

MS. EMANUELLI: No. Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. But commission-no, I can't-there's a hospital in Tennessee that was a lot of fun to do. And for a while I would take people by to see it. But I don't think I'd want to see it. And, no, I can't think of-they don't really interest me.

MS. EMANUELLI: And in how they differ from your other work would be that they're usually bigger, right?

MR. BASSLER: Usually bigger, and they're controlled by lots of factors that don't allow for much spontaneity.

MS. EMANUELLI: What are the similarities and differences between your early work and recent work?

MR. BASSLER: Well, of course I've got all those political pieces I've done, and very autobiographical. I would've never been autobiographical-well, you are autobiographical by merely doing it.

But when I was first working, the reference to pre-Columbian textiles from Peru was very much in evidence. And I was learning how to weave is what-you know, I was trying to sort of get all this information and put it together, and I just did these strip-woven pieces. I did them for years, and then would explore painting them, being quite experimental with dyes and batik. I can't think of anybody who batiked woven pieces, and I would be doing that. And they were just really jewel-like and they really looked-I mean, students, when I was in the graduate program, would always say, your pieces look like they've been dug up. And I just thought, that's great, because that's what I want them to look like, because I would submerge them so many times in different dye baths, sometimes natural dyes and sometimes synthetic dyes and sometimes the two together. And I don't do anything like that anymore. I could, but I don't.

MS. EMANUELLI: That's not what you're interested in now. Now you seem to be doing more technical experimentation. No?

MR. BASSLER: No, not really. I mean, when-I would hope-I hope, you know, that the work would become even more political in a way, or really be very contemporary to what's happening at the time.

MS. EMANUELLI: But these little boxes, now-you don't do those kinds of things-

MR. BASSLER: Well, that's-but that is almost like a commission because it's for a specific show for somebody's 75th birthday. And I just love the idea of working in this manner, because it's very Peruvian. And-but I'll be working on this along with something else.

MS. EMANUELLI: But you were experimenting with the dyes-the Mexican dyeing with those intense dyes and the-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah. If there's something consistent in all of my work, it's that I've never shied away from using dyes, any kind of dye, and that's almost always consistent. I mean, like there's an indigo dye up there and this other thing that I'm doing with this Mexican stuff.

MS. EMANUELLI: It says, "When you began exhibiting, can you recall the character of the early exhibitions?" Were they different than exhibitions are now, or is there some character that-

MR. BASSLER: You know, the very first exhibitions were Bernard Kester doing them, and they always had such finesse and such sophistication, and we learned a great deal. Even when we had our graduate shows, Bernard

was there to guide us, giving us the strength to, you know, use sort of operatic kind of colors for the walls, depending on what piece was going against that. So there was real coordination. It was never the white New York kind of wall gallery; it was always color. And he always did that. And he taught us very well.

In fact, I didn't even talk about a show that I curated in New York City on Mexican textiles in '78 at the Center for Inter-American Relations. And it's a very wonderful three-roomed gallery-an historic building on Park Avenue that used to be the Russian embassy. And they called me up because a woman, Mary Kahlenberg-remember Mary?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes, yes.

MR. BASSLER: Well, Mary had told these people that I was the one to get a hold of-that Veralee and I were the ones to get a hold of in order to curate a show on Mexican textiles. And what had happened was, Mexico's country was going to be doing the exhibit, and there was a political problem and they got mad at us and pulled out of the obligation. And so they had a show advertised-a month and a half to go and no show. And we were living in Mexico, and I flew up-

MS. EMANUELLI: They got mad at the United States, not at you.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: And so they had no exhibit. And so, in a month and a half we put together what turned out to be a beautiful show, but it was this kind of thing, walking into a white-walled gallery and just sort of saying-because I had to fly to the West Coast to get more costumes and consult with Patty Anawalt, because had it not been for Patty I wouldn't have even had a concept; I wouldn't know what to do. You know, I had to say, "Patty, I've got costumes." And she says, "Get codex. Figure out what they wore then," you know, "and see what they wear now. And then you can sort of make that relationship." So we had codex and my photographs-

MS. EMANUELLI: Codex-C-O-D-E-X?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-codices. Yeah, pictures of the codices, which showed what people were wearing at the time of the conquest. And Veralee and I put together a real nice show. She stayed down there for a while just writing up what was going to go on the walls. And this is before fax and all that, so it was phoning all the time and, you know, running up the bills.

But the point being that my education at UCLA gave me the power to go in and sort of say, well, let's just try this, you know. And it was a very popular show.

MS. EMANUELLI: You painted the walls?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, orange and purple and, you know. And it's funded by the Rockefellers, this gallery was. So it was a good experience.

But we're really sort of intimately involved with those costumes. You know, I mean, that's something that we've collected and we have.

MS. EMANUELLI: I should say that Mary Kahlenberg was the former curator of textiles at the L.A. Country Museum of Art and is now a very well-respected consultant in the field of textiles, and writer.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. She did some great shows at LACMA. She used some of my photographs in her "Grass" show.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, the big-what was that called, "The Grass Show?" Is that-

MR. BASSLER: "Grass."

MS. EMANUELLI: "Grass," yeah.

MR. BASSLER: Which was-[laughs]-controversial at the time.

MS. EMANUELLI: Why?

MR. BASSLER: Grass-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah-oh, because-

MR. BASSLER: -marijuana and all that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Marijuana, oh. The title was, but the show itself was not.

MR. BASSLER: It was just on the way people use-

MS. EMANUELLI: -grass to make things.

MR. BASSLER: -pliable materials, yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Let's see-involvement with national craft organizations-American Craft Council.

MR. BASSLER: Mingei International [Mingei International Museum of World Folk Art, San Diego, CA].

MS. EMANUELLI: The museum?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. We've loaned, through the years, many, many costumes and objects. In fact, Martha Longnecker right now has a whole slew of things that she-we're not fighting with her, but it was to have been a show for a year and a half, and it went into its third year. She's got about 50 of our items down there.

MS. EMANUELLI: And she hasn't put 'em up yet?

MR. BASSLER: No, they're up. She doesn't want to take it down. It's a jewel of a show.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh. Trying to get 'em back, huh?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And, let's see, what else?

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, these would be more like-what they're asking for here are like organizations that you would be a member of-

MR. BASSLER: Oh. Hmm-

MS. EMANUELLI: -although that's also interesting, where you lend your collection.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And that includes the textiles. And she has a contemporary arts collection. She wants a piece of ours, but I haven't given it to her yet. She doesn't want to buy it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Of course not. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Let's see. I'm not a real joiner of anything.

MS. EMANUELLI: But you speak at some conferences sometimes, right?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Oh, yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Where have you been speaking?

MR. BASSLER: Well, I quite often-oh, I do belong to the Guild. I'm an honorary member of the Handweaver's Guild of Los Angeles. And-

MS. EMANUELLI: What is that?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, they meet around-they meet monthly. They're a very strong group, actually. But where they meet is-they used to be a church off of Hollywood Boulevard, but they don't meet there anymore. And-but I'm trying to think of what other-

MS. EMANUELLI: Where's your lecture coming up at?

MR. BASSLER: Detroit.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is that for the-that's just for the school?

MR. BASSLER: The Center for-but it's funded by something else. They have an ongoing lecture series, and they selected me to come in and other people that had been in before me. It just so happens that there was a fiber show opening up at the same time. I was a keynote speaker for the Northern California Conference a couple of years ago.

MS. EMANUELLI: Of what?

MR. BASSLER: Of Weavers.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is it a specific organization?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-Northern California Handweavers Association, as opposed to the Southern California.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh. Got it.

MR. BASSLER: And I guess this is Southern California, rather than Los Angeles.

MS. EMANUELLI: Were you ever a member of Southern California Designer Crafts?

MR. BASSLER: No-I don't know. I think it might've been because we were in Oaxaca.

MS. EMANUELLI: Maybe. It was sort of in the '70s.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. We lost out a whole-you know-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: We weren't around for a while.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right. Yeah, they were pretty active in the '70s.

MR. BASSLER: And we would continue to go-we still continue to go down to Oaxaca. See, we take groups down there.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, do you?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah. We take tours down. We had this wonderful group for the Day of the Dead [November 1]. And then there's a big dance festival in the summertime. And we take usually about eight or 10 people down for about 10 days.

MS. EMANUELLI: But you don't maintain a home there.

MR. BASSLER: No, but we use the house.

MS. EMANUELLI: The same house?

MR. BASSLER: The same-oh, yeah. Yeah. It was built in beauty.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you own it still? You don't own the house.

MR. BASSLER: No, no, no, no. We gave it up to-we sold it back to the Traveses.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: And, you know, we-no, we don't have the-

MS. EMANUELLI: Are they collectors, the Traveses, or are they just interested in this?

MR. BASSLER: They're just real philanthropists. We met-we didn't meet Joseph Campbell there, but he had just left the house. Jane Goodall we've met at the house. They were great supporters of the Leaky Foundation and just wonderful, wonderful people. They were great examples of talking about-you know, looking around and seeing the world in this broad kind of way rather-and then I think that's what you get in a university kind of situation.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, obviously-it says, "What impact has technology had on your work?" If we don't talk about high technology but just maybe-have you tried different looms or-

MR BASSLER: Well-

MS. EMANUELLI: -or has high technology had any influence on your work? [Laughs.] I'm sort of assuming it doesn't, but-

MR. BASSLER: Not really. No, I can't think of technology. In fact, that's sort of the joke, that I am so uninterested in it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Except that you use technology; it's just a hand technology.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, right.

MS. EMANUELLI: And obviously you'd have to have a loom and things like that for what you do.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And dyeing and steaming and other-

MS. EMANUELLI: Chemistry.

MR. BASSLER: But there's not much technology, really.

You know, maybe you should put down for authors, also-because two authors that I really love was that James Burke, Connections [Boston: Little, Brown, 1978]. It was a whole series on television years ago, where he showed how one invention would sort of be connected with another-you know, with another invention. Or they'd invent something and they wouldn't use it because that's not what they were looking for, and somebody else would come along and pick that up and do this.

And another one is Jared Diamond, his Guns-what is it, Steel and Germs? What is the name of that?

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, yeah. My husband read it.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, I loved that book. I-

MS. EMANUELLI: Germs, Guns and something.

MR. BASSLER: Guns, Germs and Steel [New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1997], Jared Diamond. He's a professor at UCLA, and I just think that he's fabulous.

MS. EMANUELLI: Guns, Germs and Steel.

MR. BASSLER: Steel. Just showing-

MS. EMANUELLI: -the way-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, domestication of things. Things like that just absolutely fascinate me. And I wouldn't be a bit surprised if something that I come up with next wouldn't have been coming from that.

And another one I'm using in my class right now is Tim O'Brien, The Things They Carried [Franklin Center, Pennsylvania: Franklin Library, 1990].

MS. EMANUELLI: What is that?

MR. BASSLER: I heard him interviewed on NPR [National Public Radio], and I loved the idea of-we're such a mobile group of people right now. And I loved the title, so I gave that as a title to my class, who's doing block prints and silk screens. Now they've got to figure out what they carry with them. And it's amazing what students are coming up with-the thoughts.

There's a picture on your drive down to San Diego of the three figures running across the street. It says "Caution."

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes. It's a traffic sign.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. A young man now, but he says-"Always when we've traveled to San Diego, I would see that. When I was little, I used to laugh at it. And now I see how cruel it is." And he's doing that thing; he's carried that all these years. And-

MS. EMANUELLI: What you're talking about is a traffic sign set up by border patrol, in essence, because-well, the traffic powers that be put it up because illegal immigrants cross the freeway, and it's very, very dangerous. It's this eight-lane freeway from one side to the other, and how dangerous it is-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, and he's using it in-

MS. EMANUELLI: -to watch for these people-like deer crossing.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, like a deer crossing. But he's also found some that he used in other parts where there's obviously a Caucasian group crossing the street, and she has a purse in her hand and a hat on. It's, again, a silhouette. And they're not diagonal running; they're walking.

MS. EMANUELLI: They're just regular pedestrians.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And they're walking in-you know, in a very sophisticated way, like just coming from church; you know, that's what they look like. He's got a suit on. You can tell all this from this little-and so he's trying to figure out how to use that.

So that's a-the book is actually about young men who went to Vietnam and how they would gather up all their objects and put 'em in a body bag-oh, just heart-wrenching-but how each one was different. Not all of 'em died, but I mean-and so those are-I just-I don't know; I just thought it was wonderful. And it's turned out to be fabulous for this class because they're really, you know, looking into photo albums and figuring out who they are.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is there anything else you think that we've missed that you'd like to talk about?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, I can't think of-maybe if I look this thing over I'll see something, but I'll want to scratch on it.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: [Laughs.] You know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. Well, I'm sure you can do that if you want to. But you don't think of anything that you want the world to know?

MR. BASSLER: One thing I thought of was, I-perhaps I thought the other day. At UCLA I was in a different mood, and sort of uncomfortable in that room. There's always a nicer place to sit than there.

But my father, and my family, I sort of suggested that they were-in terms of race, they were so critical. But I think that was very-is very typical of baseball players. Baseball players are extremely superstitious. Now, maybe all-maybe not just baseball, but I think there is that. And so-

MS. EMANUELLI: Italians are superstitious. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: You know, and that kind of-having been brought up minorities; my grandparents didn't speak English. So then you rise a little bit above that, and then you are looking to see who you think is fast on your trail-I mean, on your footsteps. And I don't think it was unusual that even during World War II that there'd be lots of anti-Semitic kind of statements made. I don't think it was that unusual. I just found it-I remember being very offended by it, even at the youngest of age.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. I think it was not unusual for the '50s-'40s and '50s at all.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: And also, we were a much more homogenous culture than we are now.

MR. BASSLER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. EMANUELLI: But with all we did with internment camps at that time, it couldn't have been too unusual. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Right.

MS. EMANUELLI: Even-I mean, it wasn't-of course, even then it wasn't the Japanese; there were also some Germans and Italians interned.

MR. BASSLER: Or even that-they had that special on television on jazz. And Dave Brubeck [Dave Brubeck Orchestra] talked about the fact that he traveled all over Europe with his group and came back. And he got almost teary-eyed talking about the idea of landing in the United States, and they couldn't play together in certain clubs. And he'd been able to play all over Europe because-but he had black members. And that was in the '50s.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: And I just remember being-perhaps it was because I was so selective. I didn't have many friends. I can hardly count three good male friends, ever. I mean, I just don't-I don't take-or even female friends. I'm just simply not the kind of person who goes out of my way. Veralee does that. I just don't. It's not that I don't have the time; I just sort of have an agenda that I know what I want to get done. And yet, when I think of some of the friends I had-that I went out to make friends in elementary school and junior high school, and to have them rejected by my family, I said, there's just something wrong with this.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. Was your mother artistic?

MR. BASSLER: She was. She was more of-she was fabulous at copying. My sister-my eldest sister, Barbara, who I was just telling about fact-you know, here we had this house on Euclid, near Georgina, but it always sort of iffy whether we would be living in it or not, because if Dad got someone to rent the house-when we would come back from the baseball season we'd drive into town, and we might not live in the house. And there's a-[laughs]-there's a hotel-it's not a hotel anymore, but you know the-3rd Street in Santa Monica-4th Street?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: There's the Criterion Theater. Above the Criterion Theater, to the corner of Arizona-it used to be the Avon Hotel, and they were friends of ours. And we would all of a sudden come home and have to live in the Avon Hotel because Dad had rented the house again because he needed money. And then all of a sudden you're thinking, oh, but I-the point is that my sister says we always dressed well because mother had a photographic memory of how things went together, and she'd go to Saks Fifth Avenue, and she'd go to Bullocks-Wilshire and look at something and come home and make it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Wow.

MR. BASSLER: But she couldn't make the shoes, and so Barbara would say she'd put cardboard in her shoes, you know, at certain periods. Then all of a sudden Dad would get a job again, then we'd be on our way again. But this was the Depression. And so Mom made the shoes to the point that she'd even buy labels and sew them in the back.

MS. EMANUELLI: You could buy the labels?

MR. BASSLER: No, she'd find 'em around, or she would have gotten them when she would have nice dresses, and then she'd put these labels in things.

She was a very talented, very loving, wonderful woman. I always thought about Dad going back for spring training and then expecting Mother to drive four kids back on a two-lane highway, Highway 66-

MS. EMANUELLI: Did he fly?

MR. BASSLER: No, they didn't fly; mostly just took the train. But it was up to her-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, this is in the-yeah, Depression.

MR. BASSLER: -to drive us back. And one of the stories that I've told sometimes that people never thought about was the only air-conditioned building in the Midwest in those days was the movie theater. And we would usually drive the same route that the guy who had the movies. And so every time we'd get into town, we'd go to the movie just to stay cool because it'd be so hot. And the movie would-because the towns were so small, they'd play the movie then he'd get in his car with the movie and go to the next town, so we usually saw the same movie all the way across the United States because we were traveling with the guy who had the movie.

And I remember-and I particularly loved Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire. And there was one thing with Dorothy Lamour that I will never forget because-the Moon of Manakoora [Moon Over Burma?] and Top Hat, but the one-I'm trying to think of the best one of that pair. It was-you really were sort of living-you really can see where you'd get into that dreamlike world of Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, and you expected the world to be sometimes like that. I mean, I'm talking about, I'm three years old, and those shiny floors-I will never-I mean, I will never forget it. It was impressed in my mind.

MS. EMANUELLI: Amazing.

MR. BASSLER: And that's the way you-and that's the way I remember-and this piece there, that was done by a woman at Penland.

MS. EMANUELLI: Which is this, the-

MR. BASSLER: The water tower.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, it's a metal piece.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: And it looks like a little tiny water tower on top of a huge scaffolding.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And she's from the Midwest; she's from St. Louis. And she was-it was a comment about the disappearance of the Midwest or the disappearance of the little town. And driving across the U.S., seeing water

towers meant we were going to stop, we'd have to get gas, and we could just get out of the car. Oh, I forget how many days it took to drive in those days, you know, across-back to Cleveland, because it's practically on the East Coast.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: And so the water tower-when I saw her work-and she had a whole gallery full of these things-I said, now there's a memory I've got too-because-I'll just never forget them.

MS. EMANUELLI: How old were you when your Dad stopped playing?

MR. BASSLER: Well, '41, '42, so I was almost 10 years old.

MS. EMANUELLI: Were you impressed by any particular baseball players that you met or-

MR. BASSLER: Well, Bob Feller was very well-known, and he's still living.

MS. EMANUELLI: Bob Feller?

MR. BASSLER: Bob Feller. He's a very famous catcher-excuse me, pitcher. And Dad coached him. And I've seen him-he's been interviewed to this day on television. He's very well-known. And Bob Feller was about the only one I can really remember because he became-he was a very young man, and Dad sort of coached-helped coach him. Bob Feller wrote a book and, you know, gave a lot of tribute to Bob [sic]. And Bob is the same age as my sister, so they'll occasionally talk.

And he came out one time when he was just getting out of the Navy, and Dad was working at the studio, you know, ripping out sets. And so Bob and his wife had always wanted to see the studio, so Dad got him into the studios. And that was a big day because, in fact, even Alfred Hitchcock knew about Feller, and they were filming Lifeboat. So they got-Hitchcock never liked anybody in on his sets, but they allowed them in to watch. And I grew up-if you've ever seen Lifeboat with-

MS. EMANUELLI: I may have.

MR. BASSLER: It all takes place in the lifeboat: Tallulah Bankhead and John Hodiak, William Bendix and-

MS. EMANUELLI: I think I did as a child.

MR. BASSLER: -you know. It's on television occasionally, because it-well, it's a Hitchcock. And so Dad-interesting, a day laborer, but all of a sudden all of the studio bosses came around because Bob Feller was so well known-and went back to pitch-in other words, he was out for the war, and so this must've been about '44.

MS. EMANUELLI: When you went to Poland, did you spend time with any of the artists there?

MR. BASSLER: I did. I did. That was wonderful. Fortunately, the ones spoke English whose work I particularly liked. Actually, most of the Polish artists speak English, because that's a very difficult language. I went down to Krakow. I don't know why I went there; I just wanted to go down there. And it so happened that this one artist that I wanted to meet-and spent a couple of days with him, actually.

MS. EMANUELLI: What was his name?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, God, I'd have to write it. It's been a long time. I've got it written but-because I-he gave me a set of slides. But it's a very difficult name.

MS. EMANUELLI: And [Magdalena] Abakanowicz, you didn't spend time with her?

MR. BASSLER: Well, she'd been in UCLA.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, that's true-

MR. BASSLER: And she was such a sour-she was so-sort of this Eastern European funk. You know, she was complaining about the fact-that's while I was chair-and she was complaining about the fact that she didn't have access to the people, you know, so I-we were going to plan a picnic out here and come down, but we could never get her to say what date. She said, "Well, I don't know when I want to go." Well, we have to-you know-trying to do this thing.

MS. EMANUELLI: Westwood Village wasn't enough people, or-

MR. BASSLER: Well, she was doing an awful lot of politicking, and selling her work in Bel Air is what she was

doing. But then she, I think, felt a little guilty that she wasn't seeing the little people or seeing anything else outside of it because we had made an apartment for her.

But when Olga de Amaral was here, then that was much nicer. And Veralee and I went down to MOCA, and we took them places and-you know, she was much more approachable.

MS. EMANUELLI: Now she's from where, Argentina?

MR. BASSLER: No, Colombia.

MS. EMANUELLI: Colombia.

MR. BASSLER: Right-she and her husband, Jim Amaral. And-

MS. EMANUELLI: Any other international artists that you've-

MR. BASSLER: Let's see. I met quite a few of them before, but I can't think of their names. I mean, I've got them listed, but right now I just can't think of them-because I was in Poland two times. One time I was asked by the embassy to give a lecture at the ambassador's home about California artists, because there's the program-the government program, "Art in the Embassy," and I had a piece in the Polish embassy that was on loan to that program-not in the embassy, but in their home.

MS. EMANUELLI: It was called "The Americans" or something like that-that show, wasn't it? Is that the USIA show that traveled?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, it might have been. Anyway, I had a piece there, so since I was coming over because I was going to be in the show where I won the award, would I come up and do a little thing? And so, at the last minute it turned out their son-the ambassador's son was graduating from Harvard, and they left. So we had this reception in their home without any hosts, which was strange. [Laughs.] Kick up the rug and do-[inaudible]-day, and see you tomorrow.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And I had an interpreter, and I had a carousel full of new slides. And I thought maybe I should sort of, first of all, show them the landscape of California. And so the-[sound of tape recorder.]

MS. EMANUELLI: I think that's the end of it. Yeah, we need to stop. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. But anyway, I had a picture of just California poppies. I went out to the Lancaster and shot pictures of that. Well, they were so enthralled with that. They had a million questions, you know-

MS. EMANUELLI: About poppies?

MR. BASSLER: -about poppies. And I get to slide two, and, you know, they-oh, they want to know about this and that. There was some mural-some Mexican murals, they wanted to know about this and that. And I-

MS. EMANUELLI: You know what? This is interesting. I should flip the tape. What time is it?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, no, no, no. That's all right. But I think-you know, we're not going to get through-we're not going to get to slide 10, you know-[laughs]-I mean, they just-these were all-these were all-the whole room was filled with Polish artists. That's who were invited, see? And I was going to show a picture of Lia Cook's, because she had a piece in the show, and I had a piece here and there-well, forget about it. I said, you know, this will-I don't know how long we went on, and they were really intense. They wanted to know who planted these plants. I mean-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: God, the pope? [Laughs.] So anyway, that was very funny.

MS. EMANUELLI: Sounds great. Okay, so we're done.

MR. BASSLER: Okay.

MS. EMANUELLI: This is Sharon Emanuelli interviewing James Bassler at his office at UCLA on April-what is today?

MR. BASSLER: April 9.

MS. EMANUELLI: April 9, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Laitman Project.

Are you ready?

MR. BASSLER: I'm ready.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay. Your children. I want to-I learned about your parents and your siblings, but I didn't learn about your children, what they turned out to be and their relationship to art.

MR. BASSLER: Well, let's see. It makes me think of when Megan, you will recall, was adopted, and we brought Megan home to this wonderful house we'd lived in-rented in Venice Beach in the '60s. She was born in 1968. We painted up her room as one could only do in the '60s; you know, the child's room all of sudden blazing with color. And either a sister or a friend said, "Well, you know what this will do. The child will reject color completely." [Laughs.] And it's sort of interesting that Megan is a very black and white kind of person, and sort of pretends to be interested in art, but not a gut-level kind of interest at all; a somewhat troubled woman, still struggling with her identity in being adopted I think, or having two rival-two sisters who were natural-born. And she'll put up with art for a little while, but not much.

Katie, born in 1970, who, you know, had her first formal education in Oaxaca, was-her interest-she has not much interest in art either. She is very practical-very, very practical, very sports oriented, and an excellent linguist. And so her specialty really-has her masters-was in-foreign language and how to teach foreign language. As we move into our twilight years and we wonder what's going to happen to all this stuff in the house, we put on the back of quite a few things, "Katie, don't sell at garage sale. This is worth big bucks." [Laughs.] But then we-

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you have, like, stickers you've printed out?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. We narrowed it down to, "Katie, big bucks." Now, of course there are three daughters, but Katie would be the one to-she's the practical one to come in and go, let's figure this out, and want to do it in a weekend.

Abby, very-the third daughter, born in '72-

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you spell that with a "y"? A-B-B-Y?

MR. BASSLER: No, no. A-B-Abigail. A-B-I-G-A-I-L.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, Abigail.

MR. BASSLER: Abigail. And she was an art major at-art major and women's studies, which I think is something that's required at Santa Cruz. Any woman had to go through women's studies and whatever else you're interested in. Anyway, she was a-is an art major and is interested, and is spiritual. And had she gone to another school-I don't think that Santa Cruz has a real strong art department. I think she was much more involved with women's studies. And had she gone to UCLA or had she go to another school I think that she-her interest now would have been much stronger. As it is now she's studying Buddhist studies, again which I think is a direct result of Santa Cruz.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is she still there?

MR. BASSLER: She's in Boulder, Colorado, at a Shabala Center. And she's by far-I think her studies, both in feminist studies and in art and in women's studies, has made her probably the most sensitive, the most articulate in dealing with other people. She's a fabulous listener, and wants to keep everything that we have because she-because she sees the value of it. I mean, she has an aesthetic eye, where the other two, well, sort of halfway believe that it's good. They don't understand it.

MS. EMANUELLI: When was she born?

MR. BASSLER: '72, she was born at the time of the Watergate break-in. I always sort of-when Megan was the trip to the moon, Abby was the Watergate. If when you ever wonder, when did that happen, it happened in '72.

MS. EMANUELLI: What happened when Megan was born?

MR. BASSLER: Trip to the moon.

MS. EMANUELLI: I mean Katie.

MR. BASSLER: Katie? I don't know-'70. I think-

MS. EMANUELLI: Vietnam.

MR. BASSLER: Well, we ended it, you know.

Anyway, so that's-that's what-and-and they don't swing together real well. Abby and Katie are good friends, but Megan was always sort of apart, which was-

MS. EMANUELLI: Was that true always, as children too?

MR. BASSLER: Always-always. They sort of dance to a different tune. The '60s, I think, were a time when we believed the environment was all in the genes-we could overwhelm the genes with the environment. And I don't think that anymore. I really do think that genes play an enormous part. She's part Armenian, part Italian, and just has that kind of fiery kind of way.

MS. EMANUELLI: Does Megan have a profession?

MR. BASSLER: Not really-not yet. Went to-we sent her to Paris, we sent-well, she being the firstborn and knowing she had this kind of-we tried to find what would be appropriate for her. And she-she did International Studies. She-she is the linguist of all of them. She picks up language like you cannot believe, but has not found her own self worth is the problem. So everybody tells her how great she is and she doesn't believe what you say, which I think is a lot of our-

MS. EMANUELLI: A lot of us are like that. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: I just told my class this morning. They have a little clip on KCET-Bill Moyers in a conversation with-I can't-a senior moment-the myth-Joseph Campbell-and you go for your bliss; you do what makes you happy. And I told my students that today because they're so hesitant maybe to do this or that. And I said, "Don't try to figure out what I want. You've got to figure out what you want."

MS. EMANUELLI: That was sort of the theme of our first conversation, actually-your childhood and finding what you wanted to do and realizing that.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, but still keeping at it. And after all these years, still having to reinforce that. I said, "Because I'm not going to be happy if all I back from you is what you think I want. I want you to discover something that I could not possibly have imagined." And that would be what we would hope for everybody. So-

MS. EMANUELLI: And Katie, does she-she's teaching foreign language now?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, she's a foreign language teacher.

MS. EMANUELLI: At what level? At college?

MR. BASSLER: No, no, no. Although she has her master's, she's still at a high school.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay, artists that you've had friendships with and-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I like that question. It's interesting that as I thought about it, I thought that the strongest relationships that I've established is with other artists, either in fiber or any field-really it was established when Veralee and I went back to Tennessee. And I'm not sure why nothing really sort of grabbed hold at UCLA. And I think it's just the particular personalities of the faculty, or maybe it's just the way we live out here, but-or maybe because we were such an enclave in Tennessee in the middle of the Appalachia, we became very close to other faculty.

And I've mentioned Bob Brady before. He's quite versatile in his ability to be accepted into art shows and to be accepted into craft shows. His work seems to-sort of like Martin Puryear in a way, where Martin Puryear sort of looked down upon the arts community. I mean, I'm reading Christopher Knight, and they almost hold it against him, the kind of craftsmanship he does. And yet on the other hand, that's what sort of attracts me, because that would be true of Bob Brady, too; the versatility in wood or in clay, but also being sensitive and articulate about what it is he's doing, and just a fine person, that I'm attracted to that seriousness. Bob Brady-[inaudible]-fun, much more fun than I am. I'm not a very fun person. And I think I learned a lot from Bob just in the one-[inaudible]-just sort of, let your hair down and be crazy.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, you let loose with a joke now and then.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, I laugh, but it's laughing-but I don't-I think I can talk funny, but I don't think funny.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: There's a difference, you know. And I can do something because it does something to a crowd or

to the students, but I'm always very serious about why I'm doing it, you know what I mean? Anyway-and his wife, Sandy [Sandy Simon Brady], who's also a potter-a functional potter, which-that subject might come up too because she does some of the best ceramics, and it's all functional, but with this wonderful kind of clay. And that would be true-Veralee and I are both very close to these people, and Veralee was Bob's student. And so we have that to share, and the way Veralee was able-in Tennessee it was the first time Veralee was able to put all the kids on a school bus. It was the first time they all went to school on the same bus.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh. And she didn't have to drive them.

MR. BASSLER: And it freed-well, it was the first time Abby was finally in school, and so it meant that she could spend at least a day or a portion of the day as a serious graduate student. And the difference between a Bob Brady and a Kester, who had been her previous instructor-but then, we're talking about a span of 20 years, you know, how-because she had Kester in the 1960s and this was 1980. So how much things have changed in terms of our attitude towards materials and what was appropriate, and particularly under Bob Brady, who had very functional potters.

And I think even somewhere in the tapes, Veralee had heard us talking at the house where the other graduate students-some had never gone to a university; they never had that inquisitive mind. That's not to say a university is the only place to get it, but they just had this sense of going to a craft school and becoming potters, but never the curiosity, the need for something else. They just wanted sort of technical kind of information.

Anyway, so that was-

MS. EMANUELLI: But Bob Brady sort of expanded that.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, he tried to; he tried to. He wasn't too successful with some of them because they-the world of art-the world of making something nonfunctional just to pay-they didn't really see how they could do that. They took sculptural forms and were into making-starting from a conceptual base, they started from the functional kind of thing. And there are about two or three of them who are fantastic potters, but somewhat boring. You know, it was just all so predictable.

And another person was a glass student at the time that has become quite well known, and his name is Hank Adams. Now, Hank-if we could we would adopt him, he's so close to us. And I don't know if you know his work or not.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes, I do. It's that glass sculpture. Beautiful work.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Yeah. And we just love him.

MS. EMANUELLI: Very soulful work-it's very soulful.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And his comment-how he hated to comment about today's society and the frantic-ness of it. His sculptural pieces, we have two or three of his pieces. And we met him, oh-actually I met him at Penland. And-

MS. EMANUELLI: Did he study with you or just-

MR. BASSLER: Oh, no, no, no. He-but just mostly socialized and then-and he then became a student at Appalachia. But he was then sort of a perennial student at Penland-kind of-I was teaching a workshop there and then finally Hank came over from Penland. It's not very far away; it's only a day's drive.

And anyway, he's remained sort of someone who really challenges my own thinking, because he's so much more aware of the larger kind of world, art world, than I have ever been able to keep up with. I just can't keep up with this. But, so Hank clues us in on what is really happening in the world through e-mail, through just popping in and seeing us.

MS. EMANUELLI: He lives here?

MR. BASSLER: No, no. He flies from-we're very close. I mean, he just-whenever he can, he will come out here.

MS. EMANUELLI: Where does he live now?

MR. BASSLER: He lives in Troy, New York. And in fact, one time Abby went back to a body-mind center in Massachusetts, and Hank drove over to pick her up. He's very close to the kids too.

But anyway, his work has helped me a great deal-he more than Brady, really, because Hank really speaks of the condition, of the frustration of how to take what's happening in the world and try to put it into some visual kind

of sense that's personal. And he's sort of given me the opportunity to sort of look at his work and how I can try to see how I might do that.

So anyway, that-and then another person is Pat Hickman, who is from the Bay area. I don't know if you know Pat.

MS. EMANUELLI: No, I don't know him.

MR. BASSLER: Pat-no, she.

MS. EMANUELLI: She. [Laughs.] Her. I don't know her.

MR. BASSLER: Pat, and Lillian Elliot for years did collaborative baskets together. They're from the Bay area.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Inaudible.]

MR. BASSLER: Lillian Elliot, who passed on a few years ago. And they were some of the last students who worked with Ed Rossbach. And then he retired-[inaudible]. And Pat now has the textile program in Hawaii. And she-

MS. EMANUELLI: At the university?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, the University of Hawaii. And she's very active in the Textile Society of America, and did some wonderful big commissions. She did some very-what was it-the well-known-some big sort of net gates that were cast in metal in the Maui Cultural Center on Maui. I've never seen them, but I've just seen photographs of them. They're fabulous. And she made big, huge nets, which she did with pliable material then they were cast.

And I meet with Pat and a group of people who are artists, and they're sort of realists, I guess. Their specialty is Peruvian textiles. We meet once a year in Santa Cruz. And I was invited to be a part of this group. They've been meeting for 16 years. And, oh, the agony I went through to know if I should accept-you know, being with strangers for five days, mainly through these doubts-you know, these self-doubts: What in the hell could I possibly bring to-and who are these people? I was afraid they were all going to be art historians. And some are. And they usually gather together prior to a Peruvian-Andean meeting that happens at Berkeley every year. And these people fly out anyway.

And there's only one man in it, other than me now, and his name is Ed Frankemot. And Ed Frankemot is one of the leading authorities on Peruvian textiles, and he's the one who did a NOVA series on putting the bridge across-NOVA did a series based on how-did-they-do-it kind of thing; how did they make the pyramids? How did they cover their Coliseum? And the only successful one-you know, they never made the pyramids. They never got the cover over the Coliseum, because they used canvas rather than gauze. You know, a storm came up and the whole thing blew over. And then they tried to do something with the Cusco rocks, and then some other one. But the only one that was successful was Ed, who was able to, using the Peruvians, stretch a suspension bridge across a ravine in three days. And I've got it on tape. And I've always shown it to my class.

And when finally they said, well, you know, there is-I thought his whole group was going to be a bunch of women. And I thought, that's the last thing I need, you know, because I've had to deal with that all my life, you know. But they said, well, you know that Ed Frankemot is in this group. And I thought, God-[inaudible]. And I meet this guy -he's really in home construction is how he makes his money. And there he is, spinning fine silk and knitting socks-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER:-as we talked, you know, huddled around.

And so I met with them a few years ago.

MS. EMANUELLI: So you had already seen this series.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah, I knew who he was. I knew who he was. That's why I said, I think, maybe I will, you know, because that guy really sounds interesting. And I knew Pat Darrow, but I didn't know anybody else. It was about 73 people. And so-

MS. EMANUELLI: Is there a name for this group?

MR. BASSLER: The Ann Blinks-

MS. EMANUELLI: B-L-I-N-K-S?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, Blinks-she was sort of the original leader of it-Ann Blinks Research Group? I don't know what they call-I can't think of what it is that they called it. What did they call it? It just sort of a group.

And so I met with them, and later on I see it the way it is. They invite people in and then they say, that's great, we met him and we had a good time, and that's it. But they invited me back. And then the angst of that-and then the second time I came, they said, "We'd like you to be part of our group."

MS. EMANUELLI: You're not so boring after all. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And I just-it took me a whole year, up until November, to meet with-[inaudible]-and finally-[inaudible]-I said, okay, I will. And I-this is the first year I didn't come, just because school started.

And it's been-it's been very interesting, for lots of reasons; you know, just first of all, the art historians talking about things that I don't know anything about. One woman, Mary Dusenbury, is an authority on dyes in the 14th--century Japanese kimonos. And she gave a big lecture here in town recently, and she is sought out for that very particular information. So Mary will tell us what she learned, you know, in that period of time. We each have a morning and an afternoon. And so it's been interesting.

MS. EMANUELLI: And have you developed friendships with that group in a way that-or is it mostly just-

MR. BASSLER: Well-and see, everybody sort of flies in. With Pat-I mentioned Pat because Pat is the only one who is usually moving around enough that she comes to L.A. If Ed were to-Veralee hasn't met any of them except Pat, and Mary, actually, because they met-they both were in town for a meeting and we all had lunch together. And-but I would love for her to meet Ed because he's just such a live wire and so-a bull in the china closet kind of guy, you know, and just so knowledgeable. And I just didn't enjoy that kind of context.

So anyway, that is what, in terms of-oh, and then Neda. Neda is also one in which-she is important. And I noticed in this summary that I mentioned her quite often, because she was-

MS. EMANUELLI: You sort of quote her. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Well, she was just someone who, at a time when I was trying to make up my mind what I wanted to do-and I thought it was photography-that I-here was this woman here in the basement of Perloff, which is the old art department, in this terrible room-no windows, you know-I had already learned to weave in the basic class, but now as a graduate student I had to sort of come up with what it was I was going to do. And I was the only student, except for this woman who flew in from Houston and would do her weavings and fly home.

So-I mean, she was really, you know, this powerhouse of no messing around. She would come in, string a loom up. If some guy would be walking by in the hall-industrial design was nearby-she'd grab him to help do this-and I was just never that forward. And, you know, just doing everything myself, you know, and just never having the nerve to ask anybody to do anything. Well, she was-you know, she'd even have people sit down next to her at the loom and say, look, if you do-do what I'm doing-you know, with this wonderful accent. And I thought-and I'm so intimidated-just absolutely intimidated. She was-I don't know if it was a sexual thing or whatever, but she was just like this femme fatale. You know, she reminded me of a Marlene Dietrich; a very attractive woman. And yet she'd also have her kids with her, you know. And she'd get the kids to play with something-

MS. EMANUELLI: A high-energy person.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-Oh, God.

MS. EMANUELLI: Sounds like she was very expansive-brought people into her-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Yeah. That way. And I was just absolutely the opposite. And yet she would be so warm and, you know, "You know what I think?"-you know. And I wouldn't want-I would be afraid of what she would think, you know. Where she would want to know everything about what you thought about her work, I was just so unsure.

Anyway, we would go in and out. You know, we'd be together, and all of a sudden she'd disappear, and I'd ask Bernard-because we'd never had a formal group together-who that woman was. "Oh, that's Neda," you know. And sort of, in some ways, never-Bernard being the same type, never being very social, sort of kept-you know, never wanting to grow. Later on that's not true. Later on he had enough students who began to-well, who-a lot of women who were going to go together, anyway, whether he likes it or not.

And so I was just always amazed by what she was doing, just absolutely amazed. And she would talk later about the fact that, you know, having been married to this fellow in Baghdad, having lived and seen that society, the use of textiles; all of that was a great inspiration to her. And I think also having been-you know, she's German so she had a much, probably-I would probably have to believe a much richer kind of education in terms of the classics, you know, because she was always sort of referring to myths, from which she would draw-"Oh,

Cassandra," you know. "Oh, well, Cassandra, and the gown she wore," and I'd think, "Who the hell is Cassandra?" You know, I-and so there was that kind of thing too. And so always, when we would drift apart and come back together, Neda was into something new and fabulous somehow.

MS. EMANUELLI: And you stayed in touch with her all this time.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Oh, there were many years when we weren't too close just because of living-you know, while in Mexico or something like that. But it was a sense of-when we would come back together it was always-

[Audio break.]

MS. EMANUELLI: This is Sharon Emanuelli interviewing James Bassler in his UCLA office on April 9, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Okay, we were discussing the fiber artists that you admired.

MR. BASSLER: That, but also just artists.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right, artists also.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And I'd mentioned Martin Puryear. And I think what I see in his work is this kind of-well, kind of-oh, the way he constructs with a variety of materials. In other words, the process which goes in. But also I think the forms that he comes up with are reminiscent of sort of a universality of shapes that we-whether it looks like the Tin Man's hat or whether it looks like some functional object, but it's more than that functional object, and it just allows for a free association. And I think that's something that I enjoy looking at very much, which would also be true of John McQueen's work, where, again, process is very, very important. But the forms that you're looking at, these shapes you're looking at are-they're more than just volumes. They have a certain kind of reference to ancient developments or to inventions of some sort, almost like, I don't know, not Rube Goldberg kind of thing, but there's just something about them that I think is very animated.

And then, I've mentioned Rauschenberg before just because he, I think is a great-and Rauschenberg in his influence with John Cage and with Jasper Johns, but Rauschenberg on his own, just the way he would work with dance companies to develop sets, very fluid and very open as to the application of his art, and just an extremely fertile mind and one who just gets up-I've heard him interviewed, and the idea of just getting up in the morning, and he's not-he's not sure he's going to make art, he's just going to work, you know, and if it works to become something, great-and perhaps never quite sure of where he's going, but just is very aware of things as they come together, elements as they come together. And I like that-I like that way of working, not-one never knows, I don't think, if you're going to make-just because you're an artist I don't think you're going to make art. And so, in the best of circumstances something comes out and it looks pretty good. But lots of times it needs more working with.

And I saw an interview on Jim Lehrer NewsHour with Wayne Thiebaud, and I've always enjoyed his work. As a colorist, I remember going down to USC and seeing a body of his work in the 1970s, and I thought, this would be someone to really study with, I thought, because just the way he approached subject matter, any kind of subject matter, and making it so, I don't know, just so approachable, and being able to enjoy it on so many different kinds of levels. And in this interview-here he is in his 80s now, and I'd seen his work when he was in his 70s and still teaching, I think, at [University of California] Davis. And I was right, he would have been someone to have been able to know because he was so unassuming and just the kind of person that you would think he-he gets up to-he said about his plate of pies-he was talking about his plate of pies, and what he was really trying to do is create the color closest to pumpkin. [Laughs.]

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: He was trying to make pumpkin pie. And he said, well, that's not quite right. Well, maybe the next slice will be closer to it-and allowing that progression, that learning to be displayed in terms of slices of pie. And I think a public responds to that, you know what I mean? It's not terribly pretentious, but it just is so full of honesty.

So those-he is one I thought of. And, as I said, Rauschenberg, just the amazing ability to work in so many different kinds of ways and to problem solve as he goes along, not really sure of what he's doing. Rauschenberg and Brady I think are probably very similar kind of people. They have sort of a lot of fun. They're very serious, but they have a lot of fun in doing what they do.

And let's see what else you had asked here.

MS. EMANUELLI: I'm just going to repeat this question that you've been answering, which is that-I said that you

had spoken of your interest in John Cage and in abstract expressionists such as de Kooning, and of your interest in the weaving of various indigenous cultures. And I wondered, besides your teachers, if your work had been influenced or inspired by other contemporary weavers or craftspeople in other media or other artists. And we've been talking about that here. And earlier-I'm just doing this for the transcript.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Earlier you asked, what artists-I asked what artists do you maintain friendships with? Do these friendships have an importance for him-for you besides socialization? And we spoke about many of those.

MR. BASSLER: Mm-hmm.

MS. EMANUELLI: And I wondered if you-did you want to talk about Veralee? I mean, I don't mean to get personal-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, no, no, no. And I'd left out Veralee because I think that she is probably my best critic. We really maintain a very private life, even though we take these tours to Mexico and have all these people in our lives. We're really happiest when we're alone. And whenever I have a question about anything, I pass it by her. And she is-she's very, very honest, and I think is one who looks at it in a very clear way and says what she feels. And I usually listen to her. Her work is-well, first of all, it's in a different material. It goes fast-she gets things done quicker than I do. And she has a very personal way of working, somewhat liberated now-very frustrated for many years because she was also wife, mother, teacher, and all that, and didn't get much work done, and now she's got the freedom to do what she wants to do.

And I'm just amazed by-well, not long ago, she went over to Long Beach [California State University, Long Beach] to work with Tony Marsh, and he gave some excellent assignments of how to-mostly to undergraduates, how to take this material and layer it in many different kinds of ways. And her solutions were just-well, just so sophisticated and so wonderful in the way she tried to tackle and do so much more with the material than it could possibly-[laughs]-almost happen. And so that's been always really great, because having shared a life together since 1965, more or less, we are-we work together pretty well, although I have tended to, as she says, suffocate her at times.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: She now has the nerve to sort of tell me when I'm doing that. You know, you can come home and be so full of stuff, and if you've been home all day or in a high school with non-speaking-English kids, and you can be-you can sort of get overblown about certain things, and she can sort of say, so what? You know?

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: [Laughs.] And that's always been good, sort of a leveler. And so that's been very good.

Let's see if there's anything else.

MS. EMANUELLI: Any other artists you want to talk about?

MR. BASSLER: I mean, there are many-or, I mean-well, going back to the anonymous weavers just of the Americas, I suppose if one were to really sort of say, what-what is the greatest influence on your work, I would have to say it's probably the Peruvians. And I, time and time again as I read more and more information about what has been discovered from the graves, or this past quarter more information I've learned about the Aztec costumes and all that, either supports what I've already discovered on my own or gives me a challenge to go back and reinvestigate that now that I know that they did certain things. And it usually has to do, in the circumstances of early people it has to do with the functionality of something. I never deal in functionality. I mean, I never, ever think of that. But I reflect on that in my work. I sort of suggest-what I'm trying to get at is like a Martin Puryear kind of gives us a big kind of a mesh, gauzy kind of structure-sculpture that looks like the kind of thing they used to put over cakes or pies on a picnic. You know what I mean?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: That kind of thing. There he's got one that's eight feet tall.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And so I try to-in my own way try to reflect on something that would have been-had a use, a function-because weaving is so important in making this thing I like it to reflect a woven surface or a woven object, that might have been used by or could be used by another people that we're not quite sure of.

But where Martin Puryear goes around and you're not really-you know, it might be of wood, it might be metal, it

might be screening material, with me I always start with a woven form-I mean with a woven surface.

[Knock on door.]

MS. EMANUELLI: Is that you, Carol?

CAROL SAUVION: Hello, yes.

MS. EMANUELLI: Hi. We still are interviewing. Do you want to sit and listen for a few minutes?

MS. SOVIAN: Sure, I'd love to if it's okay with Jim.

MR. BASSLER: Sure. That, I'm not-try that very gingerly, that-

MS. EMANUELLI: Chair?

MR. BASSLER: -chair. I think it's off its-no, no, that one's okay. This is the one off its base. That's an old Eames chair you can try.

MS. SOVIAN: Thank you so much.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, Carol Sauvion has just walked in, and we're going to finish up our interview while she waits for us.

MR. BASSLER: Okay, so-but I would always start-Carol Sutton has always said she finds it so remarkable that she-when she was in high school she went to a California design show in Pasadena, or something like that, and saw a weaving, you know, of mine. And she says, think of all these years, and you've never ventured-haven't you ever wanted to get off the loom? Because she has moved-you know, she's off-loom and-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: -and it offers her all this latitude to go here and there and-and I give students assignments all the time. They're never on the loom anymore because we don't have any looms. But, you know, I-we do things with all sort of material. She says, "Haven't you ever wanted to do that?" And I said, "Well, I do that for an assignment, you know," like a head to show them how to do it. And it's wonderful to just have the freedom to just do this thing, but only to show students this is sort of the way we might go with this or something. But I would never think of giving up the loom, because I just-that's what-it might be what isolates me from everybody.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: You know? Keeps me-I know that that's where I get to go to and I can sit down and there's only room for one to sit. Where Neda always found room for somebody else to sit, you know-

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: -if she needed it. That would never occur to me. And so it's-that's-and that's what I can focus on. And I think that's very important for me.

MS. EMANUELLI: It's obviously worked well for you.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Any other-

MR. BASSLER: No, just a little bit about the trip back to Detroit, because I'd mentioned it earlier. I was-you know, we'd mentioned the fact that-

MS. EMANUELLI: That you were going-

MR. BASSLER: -that woman had been booted off the stage-

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: -where-because I think she tried to suggest that perhaps we could-

MS. EMANUELLI: We shouldn't go to Afghanistan, or something.

MR. BASSLER: Or we should be introspective about why perhaps people hate us in the world, you know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Mm-hmm.

MR. BASSLER: And here I've got this big flag project where I've got it soiled with oil. And I thought, well, is this crowd in Detroit-[laughs]-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.] How did that go?

MR. BASSLER: And it went very well. I went ahead and just sort of told them what I believed, and particularly in the car capital of the world. And they were-no one said much of anything. I mean, they-and they had lots of questions at the end. And it was-it went very well. The next day was the symposium where there were three other speakers, and we sat around and chatted. And two of them I knew and one I'd never met before. And we had a very good-I think a very good conversation. It was a very vocal group who had lots of questions of us.

MS. EMANUELLI: And what was the name of the organization? You told me before.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, it's the Center for Creative Studies [College for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI]. It's a school back there; a private school.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is it a college-level school?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah. Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: And who was on the panel with you?

MR. BASSLER: [Bhakti Ziek] Bhakti-Bhakti-oh, what's her-Bhakti-B-A-K-

MS. EMANUELLI: B-A-K-T-I [sic]?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. She came from Philadelphia and-I mean, was teaching at the Philadelphia Institution of whatever it is back there. She's a master at the jacquard loom. So she is so different from me. But she is very knowledgeable about indigenous people. She's done a lot-she's a Cranbrook graduate. And-but she gave that up. She was sick and tired of it and has moved to outside of Santa Fe in a little community, Cerrillos, where I don't even think they have telephones. Well, she's outside of the town. Anyway, she's just given up. She wants to see if she can go it alone without the jacquard loom. I love it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, what is she going to work with?

MR. BASSLER: I don't know, but I think she can send it back to this place. There's some mill in the South that just sort of whacks it out if you send the proper cards, or something.

The other one is Annalisa Helstrom, the tie-dyer who's so well-known. She's been doing workshops forever.

MS. EMANUELLI: She taught at Berkeley?

MR. BASSLER: Berkeley area.

MS. EMANUELLI: I've been in her studio.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, and you've seen her work always being featured. And we know one another very well. We met at Arrowmont years and years ago doing-when we were both doing the circuit of doing the workshops. And Martha Posner, who is someone I've never met-she's a fine artist. She doesn't think of herself as a-as a textile person, and yet she uses textiles and she lives on a farm in Maryland. And she does these huge kind of like woman-metal-there's all this metal fencing that's sort of deteriorating on this old farm, and she takes all this fencing and makes it into women's forms, and then sort of interweaves strips of cloth into these. So it's the formal white dress. And her figurative forms are maybe, oh, six, seven, eight feet tall-very large. And she was wonderful-to be introduced to her work. And that was it. That was it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Sounds great.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: And you taught a workshop there [Arrowmont]?

MR. BASSLER: I taught a workshop, a day workshop. And I gave a night-this night talk, this keynote speech, and then was on a symposium. I was there three days and worked every day.

MS. EMANUELLI: And what was the subject of the symposium exactly?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, they had a whole list of questions. I don't know that it actually had a-

MS. EMANUELLI: A theme?

MR. BASSLER: -a theme. It was talking about our work, and each of us was quite different. So they had-they posed questions. It was quite a large group there. And they all had questions for-they came prepared and wanted to know about this and that and the other.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay, my last question-are we ready for this?-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I guess so.

MS. EMANUELLI: -[laughs]-is that it's obvious to me that you operate-I mean, you're interested in technique and skill and that sort of thing-you are a craftsperson-but you also have the mentality of an artist. Can you comment on that? Or do you think of-you have talked about crafts and so on and called it that. Do you have thoughts that you would like to express about art and craft and-

MR. BASSLER: Well, I've never had much luck in getting in too many art shows, I'll tell you, although I did have that interview in Art in America, or that-you know. But that was really a fluke, or-

MS. EMANUELLI: Was that an interview?

MR. BASSLER: No, it wasn't a-

MS. EMANUELLI: It was a-[inaudible]?

MR. BASSLER: The woman phoned me-she phoned me up. And I have-I've never wanted to get into what it must be like to get into exhibits, you know what I mean?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: I've just never wanted to put myself in that position, particularly in L.A., when you think of how-what a hard time crafts-craft-related, or something-process-oriented art has in getting into shows. And so I've just had to rely on craft exhibits, which was the way I started, you know, with California Design over at the Egg and Eye. That's where my work was first exhibited, and in the American Craft Museum in New York.

And I think that because my roots are so close to indigenous cloth, I feel most comfortable. If someone wanted to come along and have an exhibit that's based on that and try to get it in a fine arts gallery, I just don't think I could handle the amount-I don't know, the amount of discussion or rejection or what it would be to try to get a gallery-and it's not often that I have enough work to exhibit.

MS. EMANUELLI: Do you think-you think of yourself as an artist though, is that right?

MR. BASSLER: I don't know that I think much about it one way or the other. I just know that I-when I'm doing what I'm doing, I have no high hopes for what it is, I just sort of-when it comes out, it comes out. Recently, I got a nice phone call from this woman in New York, Gayle Martin. She's somewhere mentioned in here. And I told you that I'd heard that she was interested. So I finally got organized enough-I wasn't hesitating, I just got organized enough to send her pictures of my work. And she phoned up, and she-she has basically a gallery of pre-Colombian textiles, and-but she ventures out occasionally I guess with contemporary things. And there's a big show going up in New York in the end of May, which is called "SOFA" [Sculpture Objects & Functional Art Exposition]-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: -which is sometimes-I've been in that-

MS. EMANUELLI: In Chicago.

MR. BASSLER: -in Chicago, but now it's moving to New York in May. And she's-I don't know if she's going to be-she hasn't figured out whether she's going to be a part of it or not, but she wants to give me a show during SOFA, but she didn't know where that would be. And she said that her gallery is primarily known, and the success has been through pre-Colombian textiles, and she thinks that this one series that I did will work in very well. She wants to sort of just have them right next to one another, which I think is absolutely fantastic.

So that, I think, is the best circumstances for-I mean, I feel most comfortable. That's exactly where I think I should be. And so, if-I think that just sort solved it because I just know that what I do has to be-I have to be, you know, a craftsperson to be able to stand the endless hours that I do things. And I think that the attitude that I

have is one that is comfortable being an artist to a point, but I don't do all the homework that I think an artist has to do to know what's going on.

I talked to Adrian Saxe-

MS. EMANUELLI: Go ahead, this one's still-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, Adrian Saxe is-has been so successful as an artist, and he sees himself as an artist and as a craftsperson, but will never allow a photograph of a potter's wheel. You know, he orchestrates things so that he's got something in his hands or he's got something-but never does he want that machine that allows him to make the form in. And he's just so articulate and knows who's-you know, he know who's on first, and he knows who's got all the records; you know, the forward pass and-I'll just tell you this: once a long time ago-and I tell my students this-I had a student in my class who was a football player. And halfway through the semester, so it was a long time ago-[laughs]-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: -Don said, "You know what I've noticed?" He says, "You know, we get laughed at a lot on campus because they think we're big, dumb football players and we don't know anything. But I'll tell you something we do know. We know who has all the records. We know who's got the longest forward pass, the longest kick, the longest this, who's on top, who's on bottom, who's on the team, what the referees names are." And I ask these students around here in class who are design and art majors, well, who's your hero, who's your this, who's your that? They don't know anything. And I think that's important. I tell the students it's important, and it depends on how aggressive you are, you know, to know that-and I'm not willing or I just don't-I don't have the time, or I don't think I have the information.

MS. EMANUELLI: I guess I was thinking in terms of your attitude about making things.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, but you have to know what's been-I know a lot about pre-Columbian textiles. There's so much more to learn about it. And I guess it's terribly romanticized, but I just think of that process of those people and what they did and how they did it and where'd that blue come from, and, oh, my God, all those things really kind of excite me. And then I think, you know, I think the next piece I'll just use a little bit of blue to kind of reflect the fact that they had to go all the way over the Andes to get that indigo dye. And so I'll put-it's just like John Cage putting up a-you sort of orchestrate something to make a chance thing happen. So I've only got six areas I'll use blue. Now, how am I going to determine where that blue is used? And so I force myself into these little chance things, and then I finish it and then that's it.

And so-but I-so I don't know if-one wonders-when Elizabeth Farnsworth was talking to Wayne Thiebaud on this interview on Jim Lehrer NewsHour, you know, she asked him these questions about being an artist. He says-or, no, one of his paintings had just sold in the National Gallery-one of his, you know, pies or cakes or something like that-for something like \$4 million. "Did you ever think that?" "Well, of course," he says, "I never thought that." You know, I mean, that's not what you-that's not what inspires. That inspires somebody else; it's all about money. What inspires you is this idea you've got: this is the problem I've got to solve. And it's not a function. It's not to look good, you know. It's not a fashion thing; you know, oh, purple's coming up so I'm going to have to work with purple. Annalisa is always dealing in that because she's dealing in fashion, you know. She-because she wants-you know, she wants-people are going to wear her art. I mean, and that's what she has to deal with.

So I think that's about all I can think of.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay, well I think that's good. I got what I wanted.

MR. BASSLER: All right.

MS. EMANUELLI: Great. Thank you very much.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, you're-well, thank you very much.

[End April 9, 2002 interview.]

[Begin June 6, 2002 interview.]

MS. EMANUELLI: This is Sharon K. Emanuelli interviewing Jim Bassler at his office at UCLA on June 6, 2002. And we thought we were finished last time, but we're starting a few more questions today and then we'll be finished.

Where do you think your attitude toward making nonfunctional weavings comes from?

MR. BASSLER: Well, we were talking about this, and we'll-I'd first of all written down here that I think what

motivates me is usually a very personal kind of idea. And it might be an idea that deals with a particular kind of process, or it might be an idea that has something that has to do with current events or current events as they relate to historical events, and the idea of making it into a functional weaving of some sort just never-never, ever has really sort of been what the objective would be.

And we were talking about the fact that, other than Western nations, a lot of these attitudes are so sort of entwined within the culture that we-it is a function, it does have a function even though the function isn't necessarily something that is wearable or something like that.

I'm not being very clear. I'm not being very lucid.

MS. EMANUELLI: No, you were-you were talking about in Bali. I thought that was pretty interesting that when they make things and then use them as offerings. Talk about that.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Or-but I think that-and people-certain people within a certain period of time within a household for a two-week period of time or a week period of time, if there's some kind of blessing coming up or something like that, their role within the family structure is one in which they are very actively involved in processes, many of them are sort of textile processes, in order to play a part in the grander theme of what's going on at that particular time. And so it's very clear as to what it is they're doing, and they have pride in the fact that what they do has something to do about their culture, their family. And we don't necessarily have that in Western-in the Western picture.

In Mexico, you have the same thing. Communities go together. There are community spirits where people go together and they are performing techniques that-it all comes together and it-either decorate the church or it does something that gives people great pride, great happiness. And it gives them a sense of who they are within the community and within the nation.

MS. EMANUELLI: So it's the process, not the result.

MR. BASSLER: Exactly. And I think that I have-I've really thought about this. We've talked endlessly about that, and I'm afraid I'm being so redundant, but I've wondered why is it that I do what I do? And I think that a lot of it is extremely self-centered. It's just simply saving myself so that I don't have to think about-I mean, I become so involved, it's meditation is what it is. And for that reason, sometimes I'll have a grand plan at the end of whatever it is I'm doing. Sometimes I'm just struggling, struggling, struggling, but somehow it begins to come together and-or I will cut it up and put it back together in some way that is meaningful.

And I have been able to capture time. I mean, I look down there and I think, my God, look at what I've done. I've done that, and that represents two months or a week or something like that. And that's kind of a thrill to look-to sort of justify what I-[laughs]-my existence. And I think a lot of this probably comes from Amish/Mennonite kind of things too; that hard work, and you show some kind of-you have some evidence of what it is you've done.

MS. EMANUELLI: But work in itself is the virtue?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Oh, I'm sure that is part of it, because if I learned nothing else from my father and my family, it was you got up and you got-you went to work. And you would hope to find something that would be meaningful, that you would delight in. And so that's-I think that's sort of-I suppose I could have done something functional, but when I first started to learn weaving it was just at the beginning of-we on the West Coast don't have any mills around here, and it was a natural thing for Kester to sort of steer us in the direction-particularly being in a department of art and design art history. And why shouldn't weavers be able to make art?

We were sort of pushed that way, you know, although we didn't know what that meant. And I happened to be interested in what the Peruvians did. I thought, God, that's great stuff there. And I think-

MS. EMANUELLI: Of course, you weren't looking at as its practical purpose; you were looking at it as an art object basically.

MR. BASSLER: As an art-aesthetically looking at it. I mean, someone just recently-Kaye Spilker, the curator of textiles LACMA, gave a lecture on the Wari textiles of Peru. And somebody had referred to them, the abstractness of their compositions, referred to it as jazz-jazz in weaving because it's so far removed from the feline, or something like that. You really have to struggle to see how far they push these images. And isn't that what Picasso had done? Isn't that what-and so you think, my God, Picasso was doing it; he was doing it with paint. I can do that, you know, weaving, because I like the building of it. I like to-that sort of discipline of sitting there and doing these things.

And so-and I think that the function is that it adds a dimension to the lives of the people who see it. I mean, why do we have to have it so separated-the arts so separated from daily life?

MS. EMANUELLI: You also were speaking about-I mean, I liked it when you said they'd make the little things and they'd put them out and burn them as offerings; they're just offerings. And I liked the connotation of your artwork being an offering.

MR. BASSLER: Mm-hmm.

MS. EMANUELLI: You put it out there, and it's there.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: And then you talked about ownership and signing. Would you tell that story again?

MR. BASSLER: Well, it's just that I-someone had once said, "Where's it signed?"-a dealer who markets my work or does-you know, shows it. She said, "But these aren't signed." And I said, "No, I don't sign them. It just never would occur to me to sign it." And she said, "You've got to sign it." And sometimes she would sew a little thing on the back and put my name on it. And I got that-find that it would never occur to me to have that kind of ownership. And again, this could be something I think is marvelous to imagine all the things in history that we look at that you don't have to have a signature to validate. You should be able to look at it and sort of say, geez, I like it, because maybe they'll last longer than we do and nobody's going to remember my name, but they might get something out of the piece and what-you know, that's just the way I feel about that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay.

MR. BASSLER: Do I keep records of all my work? Yes, I do. I photograph it and I have a pretty good up-to-date record. In fact, the American Craft Museum just informed me that I had to bring my record up to date since I got that fellowship or the Fellow Award. They said I hadn't added anything to my file there since 1986. And so I was able to pull from the files and send them the work. So I think that's important to do.

MS. EMANUELLI: What is Lee Whitten doing? Are there any significant students you've had?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, right. Yeah. That was-most of the students that I'm still aware of, most of them have gone into teaching. And I think Lee does teach at L.A. City College. It seems to me it was somewhere-and there's another woman on the East Coast, Lisa Hart [Atlanta College of Art], who teaches at Georgia. She's now chair of the department. And I'm sending her slides of what I'm still doing in my form classes because she'd like to get slides of my work. She's in Georgia Tech, I think, or something in Atlanta. Ina Conradi [Ina Conradi-Chavez] teaches at Long Beach State. She's a weaving instructor there. And Deborah Krall-these are just sort of people that I'm still in contact with-she still exhibits in L.A., Deborah Krall Cohen, and she's a teacher with L.A. City Schools.

I was trying to really think of-that's hard. I don't really-I haven't kept up with students, but it's amazing how I'll see someone or they'll come back. But I don't-I'm not really aware of too many.

What do you teach in Design Technologies, in Textiles of the World? I don't know if I said that. It was a design-the one course I used to teach, but I don't teach it any more, was Design Processes: World Cultures.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: And that was one where we would do printmaking. We would try to define what basic skills people learned in order to become a society. And they tried to-and, you know, students will sort of say, well, of course they have to have writing; of course they have to have this and they have to have that. And yet when we begin to discover certain major societies, we find out the Incas-or the Peruvians never had a written language. The Mayan did; they began to. The Aztec were on the sort of pictograph kind of thing. But the Peruvian never got around to it, but they had so many other things. They had architecture. They had, of course, weaving tradition.

So anyway, with that in mind, I teach printing, I teach papermaking, I teach mask-making.

MS. EMANUELLI: Out of what material?

MR. BASSLER: Any kind of material that my-but sometimes it's just-they have to take a paper bag home and create a mask from it-and of course weaving and sometimes sort of architectural kinds of things. A long time ago we'd go on field trips and they had to build something they would sleep in overnight. And so it's really sort of-oh, how to create toys, you know. Anyway, we don't get into agriculture or anything like that.

MS. EMANUELLI: And in your textiles-your textile history class?

MR. BASSLER: In the textile history class I cover a lot of these same things. I'll sometimes, say, give them the materials and they have to figure out a way to make a vessel that holds water. And I will teach them knotless

knitting-I mean net-making. Oh, first of all, the first thing they have to do is figure out how to catch a fish with a net. They have to make a net then they have to make a vessel that holds water. And they can go to Home Depot, they can go anywhere to buy any goo they want to try to line the basket to make it hold water without clay. In other words, the textile's tradition-to show them how important that is. Then sometimes they have to make robes that would cover their body just using newspaper or whatever.

MS. EMANUELLI: No woven material?

MR. BASSLER: Well, it would have to be hand-woven because they don't have looms-sort of paper weaving kind of thing.

And I've also had them try to, using pictographs, write a sentence so that they see how difficult it is to come up with some sort of a language.

And-so anyway, those are-and then I do teach them how to weave.

MS. EMANUELLI: And that's in your textile history class.

MR. BASSLER: That's in the textile history class.

MS. EMANUELLI: So it's really a history of process, not a history of-

MR. BASSLER: Well, I get into history too. They have to do a lot of reading.

Oh, dyeing, natural dyeing I have them do too.

But now that the looms are gone, when I teach the class in the winter of 2003, I'll have to figure out a new way to do it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Are they getting rid of the looms?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Even though you're teaching this class?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, but it's not design. It's a WAC class.

MS. EMANUELLI: World Arts and Cultures.

MR. BASSLER: World Arts and Cultures. And it's taught in the Fowler. It doesn't have room for looms.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: But I can do a handloom. I can do that. There are ways of getting around it.

MS. EMANUELLI: You're referring to the fact that they're tearing down Dickson and rebuilding it.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And I don't think I'll be replaced.

MS. EMANUELLI: And you are not going to teach the design processes class because that was in the design department?

MR. BASSLER: No, that was a design class offered to another department, which I don't know how in the world I talked design into doing that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: I think it's probably because they didn't know what else to do with me. And so I just went shopping around and found that WAC wanted that class. And it became so popular that design students wanted into it too.

MS. EMANUELLI: I see.

MR. BASSLER: So then I had a mixture of the two.

MS. EMANUELLI: I see. So from now on you'll only be teaching the one textile history class?

MR. BASSLER: I could probably go down to WAC and ask them if they'll-if they want me to teach the class, and

they probably would. One of the people who really impressed me, and I have a little-

[Audio break]

-something like a Fulbright and went to Bali and found-exactly what I was saying before. She [Julie Taymor] found me, the meshing of art processes and daily life was all one, sort of mixed together. And of course that philosophy holds true in WAC so much, and design, I've just sort of been the ugly duckling in a way. You know, they've moved on to these wonderful technologies.

Oh, and by the way, I still-these new technologies, I really do call upon students to use those. In other words, I might-I do use them. I find I use new technologies quite a bit through patterning-even though I don't use a computer myself-copy machines, creating multiple images, all those sorts of things really come in very, very handy.

You had a-you had one of those gray areas back here.

MS. EMANUELLI: You're now looking through the interview log from before.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Oh, "What impact has technology had on your work?" I said, "No effect," but it's not really true. Students are able to use computers, copy machines to generate images and patterns much more quickly. And so, I call upon them to do that even though I myself might not know how to do it.

Then, "What influence do you think you might have had on the field, or at least on your students?" I think in some ways the idea of-when I've given lectures before and students-not necessarily in this program because we no longer have the textiles program-but I think students have found it sort of intriguing that I have stuck with the loom and stuck with basically the same kind of thing with subtle variation throughout the years. That is a real focused kind of energy that-I think that sort of has impressed people quite a bit. I haven't moved off into all of this new kind of technology in terms of-oh, God, all these new materials: synthetics and this and that and the other. I've really sort of seen myself as-I've got still so much to learn on the loom, and still wake up for that kind of excitement.

Now the school's out-today's the last day-and when we went to see the Andy Warhol ["Andy Warhol Retrospective," Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, May 25 - August 18, 2002] yesterday, and I've been stuck on-I've got two looms going. One I know exactly what I'm doing on it, but I've been at sort of like a writer's block on the other loom, trying to figure out what it is I wanted to do. And yesterday Andy Warhol solved the problem for me because I saw something there that I thought, that's how I can deal with it.

MS. EMANUELLI: What was it?

MR. BASSLER: It has nothing to do with-but it had to do with the repetition and the form, and it was his Dollar Bill piece-the silkscreen dollar bills, and actually his Green Stamps. Have you seen the show?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: The Green Stamps, did you love it?

MS. EMANUELLI: They're wonderful-wonderful.

MR. BASSLER: And nobody would know what a Green Stamp was in the class, of course, you know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, but I do.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah, but there was something about the width of those dollar bills, and I thought, that's how I can solve this problem. I was trying to figure out, using this one particular process-I've just struggled and struggled and struggled, and for that reason have just sort of left it alone because I didn't know how to deal with it, and now I know how I can do it. And so I'm very anxious to get on it-really anxious.

And so that's how I'm solving a problem-a technical problem, but it was through looking at somebody else's work that I could-you know, my piece is not going to be using dollar bills in any way, but it's the scale of the whole thing. The scale of the dollar bills was what gave me the feeling. And so that really helped a great deal.

And anyway-

MS. EMANUELLI: What technique are you using at the moment on that loom?

MR. BASSLER: Well, you know, I bought this-or I got this heavily saturated, deep magenta silk down in Oaxaca that they use it-they weave with it and they fold it on itself so that it will-and stick it in water so it'll bleed.

MS. EMANUELLI: So you bought it already dyed.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yes, already dyed-heavily saturated. And they use it in a specific outfit, and I have it and it's harder than hell to use. You just-because the color is just so intense. And now, as I say, I know how I can do it. I mean, I've got it clear in my mind, which I don't usually have anything that clear, but I've got all this back information of trial and errors, and really a lot of errors. I mean, a lot.

MS. EMANUELLI: Does that frustrate you, making errors?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, no. No, I just sort of-I think that most of the things I've done are errors. I probably mentioned this before: I am a terrible perfectionist.

MS. EMANUELLI: No, you didn't mention that.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah. And so, anything that I see-maybe that's why I never sign my name to anything, because I don't think it's really up to what I want, and never have anything of mine hanging in the house or rolled up.

MS. EMANUELLI: That's true; very little-one or two pieces I saw here. In your living room there was a small piece hanging up near the front door.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah, well, I took that down-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: -because I saw the blemishes in it. But you can also learn from that. It's not like I'm flagellating myself with it, it's just-anyway.

MS. EMANUELLI: Try again.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I'm going to try again. And that's why you keep doing it. And so, never-I say to students, "Well, what would you change?" "Oh, I wouldn't change a thing," they say. What do you mean you wouldn't change a thing on what it is you've done? Otherwise you're going to be satisfied and you're not going to have the-where's the challenge to go on to do it again or to do another? And so I've said, I'm not trying to lower your grade on this thing; I'm trying to-what would you change if you-

MS. EMANUELLI: Do the next one?

MR. BASSLER: -do the next one? Because there's got to be a next one, you know. I mean, a lot of times they don't know that.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.] Well, they're in the class; they're going to do the class and move on.

MR. BASSLER: And then they go on, right.

"Who are the people that go on your Oaxaca trips?" Just people that we pick up. We-although-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.] Where do you pick them up, at stations?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, we're not very good, really, at promoting that. We keep it-I don't know, neither one of us are very good promoters, so sometimes we have-it's word of mouth. And-in other words, we've never advertised in a national magazine or anything like that, where I know if I were to advertise in American Craft or something like that-but then you wonder, well, do I want to spend 10 days with those people? I want to know who they are.

MS. EMANUELLI: So they're mostly friends and friends of friends.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah, somebody who doesn't sort of say, oh, we're going down for a margarita holiday, you know what I mean?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. Do you-are you able to fill your tours up every time you go, or-

MR. BASSLER: Sometimes there's only 10 people, and sometimes it's hard because we-we've now got eight people and there are two friends who have sort of said, well, do you-if you want more people I can get you another person, and we're trying to find someone a little bit younger because we have a feeling the people who are going are selecting people their age, and we would like it to be-

MS. EMANUELLI: A mixture?

MR. BASSLER: -mixed.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: So-and the tours of course-Oaxaca is just a readymade little town. You know, it's so fantastic with the archaeology, and there's now a cooking school down there that we go to that's, I guess, quite well known-Susana Trilling.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes, I have her cookbook.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, do you?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: Well, she has this school down there, you know, that we go out for the day. It's very expensive. But the people loved it, and you end up with a big, fabulous meal that they've been cooking all day. And it's-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, that would be-she-and the food she makes is so-it's not what you find at a Mexican restaurant typically-

MR. BASSLER: No, no.

MS. EMANUELLI: -in California anyway.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: And in New York you don't find anything even half as good as what you find here, so what she's doing is very different.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. She takes the people to the market, so they pick the stuff, and then they go back and-it's a whole day they spend there, so-

"The specifics on the Mexican textile show in New York." That was-two have been-this is sort of clarifying what I already-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: It was an exhibit that was to have been presented by the Mexican government, and Mrs. Echeverria, who was the president's wife, was the one who was going to inaugurate the whole thing, or curate it, or her assistants were probably going to curate it, so it was a Mexican-sponsored exhibit. And [James] Schlessinger, who was with the-our government at the time, made Mexico so mad-now, would that have been-

MS. EMANUELLI: Ambassador? Was he an ambassador?

MR. BASSLER: No, he was the secretary of Energy, and that-who would have been president then, Nixon? No, no, it was after Nixon; it would have been Ford-Ford administration-it was '77 or '78 I think-made them so mad that they withdrew the offer, and the museum was left with a show-

MS. EMANUELLI: Which museum was it?

MR. BASSLER: It's called the-

MS. EMANUELLI: I mean, I know it's in another-

MR. BASSLER: -the Center for Inter-American Relations at Park Avenue and-right across from Hunter College, which is-the building was the former-the former Russian embassy, and then [René] D'Harnoncourt from the Museum of Modern Art came in and-

MS. EMANUELLI: D'Harnoncourt?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, D'Harnoncourt designed it as a museum. It was a beautiful space-four huge rooms. And so then I had to fill that space with Bali costumes-you know, make a show out of it. And it was, you know, turned out real well.

MS. EMANUELLI: It was your personal collection that you used-

MR. BASSLER: Well, and I borrowed. I borrowed from International Folk Art Museum in Santa Fe, San Antonio, and the Natural History Museum. And I happened to know all the curators, so I just flew in and practically walked

out the door with them on my arm it was such a rush. Oh, and the Southwest Museum.

MS. EMANUELLI: The Natural History Museum in L.A.?

MR. BASSLER: No, Natural-in-

MS. EMANUELLI: In New York.

MR. BASSLER: Junius-Junius Bird was helping me with it, who was-I don't know if you know him, but he was the authority on Andean textiles.

MR. BASSLER: J-U-N-I-U-S, I guess. Yeah, Junius Bird.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Inaudible]-Southwest.

MR. BASSLER: In the Southwest Museum, yes. It was a-it was very successful, I mean in that amount of time, in six weeks, or something.

"Who's included in 'Men of Cloth?'" Just most males who do textiles. And I'm just-I'd have to give you a-I could give you a brochure of that or something. I can't-I never saw the show-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, okay.

MR. BASSLER: -but it was quite a few. John McQueen, any-and Archie Brenner. It just-oh, I-

MS. EMANUELLI: Is this person at Berkeley-that was at Berkeley?

MR. BASSLER: Ed Rossbach? Might be. Ed's very, very ill right now, but he-they probably borrowed something from him, yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Di Mare-Dominic?

MR. BASSLER: Dominic? I don't know that he was in it, but he could have been. I think it was curated by a much younger group, so I'm probably thought of-as the senior citizen in the whole thing.

"Is his father's house intact?" No, no. It finally had to be destroyed.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, what a shame.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. A young couple bought it-it had been worked on after my parents moved out in a real weird manner, and then this couple bought it thinking they were going to do sort of the Martha Stewart thing; peeled back the wallpaper, which would reveal all these fabulous-you know-

MS. EMANUELLI: Did they buy it from your family or-

MR. BASSLER: No, no, no, no, from somebody else.

MS. EMANUELLI: It had already been sold before.

MR. BASSLER: And my sister, who lived across the hill, told me this couple bought it and they wanted to talk to me because I remember how it was constructed, and I said, "Don't start peeling back anything because you'll have the roof on your head." And then when they started to do a little bit, the inspector came in, which we didn't really have in those days, in the '40s, and he condemned the thing. So it was torn down. But there's lots of things in the garden still-you know, there are lots of these weird little structures that are still there.

MS. EMANUELLI: And the people maintained those?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, fairly much, you know. There's a fabulous-Dad made these handmade cement bricks, and I think I might have said it before, leading into the house over this little hill is-he took a line out of "Old Man River," by pressing things-you know, making a mold out of it and then casting in cement. So it's, "He don't plant cotton, he don't plant taters," that one line. And I'm sure he was talking about himself.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: And then he put them up backwards so you have to read it backwards-

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: -because he started at one end, moving to the other. [Laughs.]

MS. EMANUELLI: Have you documented it?

MR. BASSLER: I took photographs of it, yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, the old-the whole thing when it was-[inaudible]?

MR. BASSLER: Not well.

MS. EMANUELLI: Not well.

MR. BASSLER: Not well, because I was only maybe 12 or 13 when the house was going up. In fact, I got to thinking-

MS. EMANUELLI: No, I was thinking more about-even after, when you were an adult.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I've got some, but more of the garden than of the house. I got to thinking today is D-Day. I was telling my students about it today, like they will always remember September 11th, and one of our dates is, of course, December 7th but also June 6th. And I got to thinking, that was just about the time all this was going on with the house, and so I was about 12, 13. And there wasn't much of a way of-actually, I did have a little black and white Brownie camera, so-

Then there was something back here-way in the back.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, now we're going to go back into the notes that-just the log of topics that you spoke about before.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. You said the Art Institute of Chicago, that piece-I don't believe you spoke about this one. "Do you want to write a sentence or two about it?"

The piece that the Art Institute got was-it was prior to that I'd been invited to be in show in Poland-

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: -and I represented the U.S. And the restrictions on that show was that a piece had to be eight feet by eight feet-or it had to be-it had to be sizable. And I had a piece that wasn't quite that large, but it happened to have been woven in strips, and I called it Skins. I had six skins, each one, and then I just sort of plaited them together. And I remember Ed Rossbach saying he saw it at the Craft and Folk Art Museum in fact.

MS. EMANUELLI: Really?

MR. BASSLER: I exhibited it there. Edith [Wyle] had one of her crazy moments of, oh, let's have a textile show, and we had to go down-it was up for three weeks-or two weeks, something like that. And I put this piece up. It was down in that funny space down below. And it was six skins, so it was sort of like a huge shield. And I was invited to be in this show, and I knew I couldn't possibly weave anything big enough for that, so I wove four more skins. It gave me 10 skins. And these were about-oh, they were maybe 18 feet long by-and they started at a point and became six inches wide.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: Because I kept cutting the outer wefts-the warps and making them the wefts-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: So it kept diminishing as it went up to these ends. And then I plaited this whole thing together and it gave me my eight feet by eight feet, and then I shipped it off. So I took one piece apart and added something to it. And it won a silver medal, and it was because of that they invited me back the next year to be a judge and to have a show at the embassy.

And so, when Christa Thurman, who is the curator of textiles at the Art Institute, said she was interested in buying a piece for the collection, she wanted a piece that she had seen in an exhibit that was purchased by a woman in Santa Fe who ran the gallery that represented me. And she-Barbara Okun bought the piece for herself, and so that piece wasn't available. So I talked Christa Thurman into taking the big piece that I didn't know what I was going to do with it anyway-you know, eight feet by eight feet.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: And so she was delighted. And I gave her a real good deal on it because I think once it came back from Poland I said, "Let's get this placed someplace."

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: And it was this wonderful Barbara Okun who ran the gallery in Santa Fe who helped negotiate this whole thing. She told me what I should tell her and-you know, even though she represented me, she said, "I just want to help you get in the Chicago Institute. Don't call me on the money or anything like that. You don't have to." Because she represented me I thought that she should-

MS. EMANUELLI: Have a commission.

MR. BASSLER: -have a commission. She said, "Don't worry about it." She says, "Get it in the Chicago Institute." And so, that's what that was. And, "Was the character of your early exhibitions different from more current ones?"

MS. EMANUELLI: You wrote something.

MR. BASSLER: Well, I said it's very different now because my sources are different; I'm older now.

MS. EMANUELLI: Your sources-you mean?

MR. BASSLER: From what I draw from. In other words, I would say that it used to be the Peruvians or ethnic cloth or something like that, but now I find-and I think this could be an influence of just knowing a little bit more about the art world in general, the way again-again, an example of Andy Warhol, how revolutionary that was of what he did. Just when we got used to looking at Jackson Pollock and thinking we knew something about art, somebody comes along and does, you know, Brillo pads or Campbell's soup as a statement about how art reflects the life-you know, what-the living world. So that's certainly something that I never learned at UCLA when I was an undergraduate, particularly under Bernard, because the only thing, it had to be was gorgeous was him, and now drawing upon other resources to try to figure out how to make these relevant to the society in which we live.

And you look at all those people in the gallery yesterday, and it was like-you know, you wonder if they really understood what it was he was doing, how he was criticizing our society, but you can't help but fall in love with Marilyn and Liza and all of this, apart from what the real thrust was, his real criticism, because these have become such icons now. Who wouldn't like to have Green Stamps-to live with Green Stamps or Coca-Cola and all that?

MS. EMANUELLI: That was interesting. Did you take the audiocassette with you?

MR. BASSLER: No. No.

MS. EMANUELLI: They quoted him-it's actually one of the best audiocassettes I've ever had because it adds to the show. It doesn't-

MR. BASSLER: Detract.

MS. EMANUELLI: -tell you what you're looking at so much. It tells you about the situation in which they were made, and his thoughts and things he would have said at the time. I mean, they actually sometimes even had his voice recorded.

But he talked about in one case, especially the tragedies, the disaster painting, and he would say, you know, you repeat it often enough and it sort of becomes nothing, and then you feel nothing and then you feel better. I mean, it's something to that effect: you feel better because you don't-because the tragedies themselves are so intense. And what he was talking about I guess was, you know, mass media kind of taking out-taking the emotion out of life in a way, and the personal involvement. The way he said it made you think he preferred to be a nebbish, but I think what he was really doing was reflecting how society responds to media culture and mass production and that sort of thing. I found that-that was the one thing I probably walked away with the most out of that show.

MR. BASSLER: Christopher Knight did say-he says, "Walk around and see it, and then get it because it's good"-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: -in his review. And by the time we walked around it had already been two hours and, you know, we had other things we had to do. And I thought, oh, my God, to go around again.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, it's long too because they have additions that somebody like Dennis Hopper, the main person who speaks on it. He'll say, if you want to learn more, push the continue button and then there will be more about the-you know, more personal stories or something.

We're talking about the Museum of Contemporary Art in L.A., and seeing the "Andy Warhol Retrospective."

MR. BASSLER: And so I think that has obviously-I mean, things have changed. And another thing is I don't find-feel the urgency that I did when I was younger, particularly under-working in a university where there is such enormous pressure to exhibit exhibits so that you can have a big, fat resume. That doesn't mean-and, I mean, my God, you slow down just because there's other kinds of responsibilities that-I take a lot of pride in my teaching. And I haven't been able to work much, and I never was really able to work a whole lot when I'm teaching because I just put so much energy into that.

And so, that now school is out I'll be able to pick up what I'm-what's going on at home. And I don't-I don't really keep up too much with exhibitions either. All of a sudden, I'll see that there was an exhibition and I think, gee, I-my wife saw something about that, you know, but I didn't bother-for some reason it just didn't-I didn't think I had anything that I wanted to show at the time. So that was that.

Alright, "Do you think you would like to film-[unintelligible]-California State University?" Oh, this was an early-very early on, Bernard-when I was a graduate student I came here and Bernard took a job at Fullerton to set up their textile program. And he had a gorgeous show called-I don't know. Anyway, it was a fabulous show, and he invited Neda and me to be in the show. And he had Olga de Amaral. That's just about the time Olga was showing-had had her show at the Craft and Folk Art Museum. And it was such a thrill to be included with these people.

MS. EMANUELLI: Who else was in it?

MR. BASSLER: Well, let's see. It was-God, it would have been Ruth-probably Ruth Asawa, and Trude Guermonprez. I've got the catalogs from that show. It was-but it was a beautifully installed show, and it was the first time that I had actually seen Olga's work-well, that's not true because it could have seen I would have seen her work probably at the Craft and Folk Art Museum.

MS. EMANUELLI: Was this was the Egg and the Eye again?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah-oh, yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, it wasn't the museum yet.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, no, no.

MS. EMANUELLI: Because I don't remember her having a solo show at the museum.

MR. BASSLER: No, no, no, it was just the Egg and Eye, and it would have been-it would have been '67, '68 and that-I've got the catalog from that show, and it was-it was-oh, Dominic Di Mare I'm sure was in it because-and probably even Lenore Tawney. And it was-of course in those days they still weren't working real big, you know. Most of our pieces were rather small and intimate, and it was just-I mean that was just, along with Eudora Moore doing her "California Design," this is what was so encouraging to think, well, you know, it's really vital, you know. And of course we begin to see the reality of it all when you begin to see that it's a very close little community, and that-

[Audio break.]

MS. EMANUELLI: Or wish it would be.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah. Well, Neda al Hilali Wolberg, she was living in-that's where-you've got it here Wolberg, and it's- anyway-

MS. EMANUELLI: She changed it to al Hilali Wolberg, or Wolberg first?

MR. BASSLER: With whom she was married to a man in Houston.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, I see.

MR. BASSLER: And then she dropped that when she got her divorce. And she taught at Scripps [Scripps College, Claremont, CA] and she had this problem with drug addiction in the late '80s.

MS. EMANUELLI: I think that was what I want of that story, is-I don't think that was told elsewhere. Is that where

you talk about-

MR. BASSLER: I don't know.

MS. EMANUELLI: -Neda?

MR. BASSLER: Well, Neda-yeah, she had a couple of-well, she had quite a hard time getting back on track again, and never really got back to where it was-where she was. So she went to Germany. Finally her sister helped her out. She was German, and she went to Germany and went to-I don't know exactly how she did it-she's a very strong willed person-and came back. And I got her a part-time job here, and then she had a-

MS. EMANUELLI: At UCLA?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Then she had a couple of problems at that time too. And then she went back to Germany again and came back and is pretty well in good shape now.

MS. EMANUELLI: And you had to take care of her artwork and-

MR. BASSLER: Well, she-

MS. EMANUELLI: -and I've heard on occasion-

MR. BASSLER: That was the time when she decided she had to get out of the country and go back. I don't know whether she went to some kind of an institution or what it was. And I helped her move out of her apartment, which was something like out of a movie. It's something I've never experienced. It was such a bad situation that she was in, and she was in such bad shape, moving all her stuff into one of these storage places, and, yeah, I had a Volkswagen van, so that's why, you know, I could load up a lot of stuff and-

MS. EMANUELLI: And how did that happen? She just got into it?

MR. BASSLER: The man with whom she became associated while she was out at Scripps-she was, you know, exceedingly successful, and was-and she was just going all over the world, you know, getting big commissions and this and that and the other, and she says-she just met some guy who turned out to be-you know, have a drug problem, and he shared it with her. And she says-she blamed herself, you know, but she says that's how it happened.

MS. EMANUELLI: And her children were grown by then?

MR. BASSLER: Her children are grown now. She has a daughter who-

MS. EMANUELLI: No, I mean by the time she was-became-began to have this problem.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah, yeah. Oh, yes. Her children were three or four years old in the '70s when I first met her. They were babies actually. So her kids are just a little bit older than ours. Her kids must be-35 or-and then the daughter I don't think I've ever met.

MS. EMANUELLI: So she was at Scripps when-

MR. BASSLER: Eighties. Yeah. And something about Carol Shaw-Sutton, fiber artist, basket techniques. She was a student of Veralee at University High.

MS. EMANUELLI: I think you were discussing-is the section where you're discussing artists that you admired.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Well, it was up above here. Anyway-and Carol is one who-I've taught for her. She now has the textiles program at Long Beach State, and she's even suggested that I come down and teach at Long Beach State. They're in the big throngs of moving into a new building now, and Carol was wondering if I was available this coming year to teach, which I've done before for her. She has a very strong program-very, very different from the program I had when I was a student, just because of her point of view, and lots of similarities, you know. It's very much involved with an arts program, with students who take art history and they take ceramic sculpture, so that you can deal with all those kinds of issues, but with the pliable materials. So it's very exciting to teach down there, actually.

I've mentioned fiber artists, or other artists I've admired and been inspired by. I find myself mentioning Martin Puryear quite a bit because I think that the way he uses craftsmanship, along with that John-John Nash. Do you know John Nash's work? He's an English wood sculptor. He's got quite a few things in the Walker Institute.

MS. EMANUELLI: John Nash.

MR. BASSLER: He does truncated kinds of things. You know, he'll take a tree and-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, yeah.

MR. BASSLER: -very raw, beautiful kinds of things.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes, I have some of his work, yes.

MR. BASSLER: Of course, John McQueen, who has been very successful-Dominic Di Mare.

MS. EMANUELLI: Is he still working pretty steadily?

MR. BASSLER: Yes, he does; he does. Dominic and I are about the same age, and he taught for many years at a junior high school in the Bay Area, but finally gave that up. Lenore Tawney-Dominic Di Mare and Lenore Tawney were both already having their work published in Craft Horizons when I became a student, so they were-and I remember Bernard taking us out to Scripps to see a show of Lenore Tawney. And it was quite inspirational to sort of see what could be done with textiles, moving them beyond the functional ethnic cloth kind of thing, because both of them were-some of the work got quite dimensional in terms of-well, just very innovative. They were both using rather traditional materials, but it was rather innovative what they did-Ruth Asawa, who did crochet or knitting-I'm trying to think what's-with wire-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, crochet, kind of.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: Or macramé.

MR. BASSLER: It could have-well, I think-I don't know.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, it looked like baskets in the end. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah, with the way they hung together. And then Lia Cook-I've not mentioned Lia Cook, and I know Lia very well. I'm always impressed by her energy and what she's able to do, even as a mother, you know, she's able just to sort of give herself the time to do what she had to do, where both, I think Veralee and I sort of trip over ourselves to try to come to the needs of the kids a lot. Lia was the one who sort of-you know, she didn't have that kind of guilt thing.

MS. EMANUELLI: Either that or her kids were easier, you know? [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, right.

MS. EMANUELLI: Sometimes the kids condition you.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, that's true. And I didn't mention Peter Shelton. Now, Peter-do you know Peter?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yes.

MR. BASSLER: He graduated-and Peter's work I just think is always kind of amazing. We went out to Palm Springs-

MS. EMANUELLI: Was he a student of yours?

MR. BASSLER: No, no, he was in the art department, and that's when of course art and design was separated. And we went out to Palm Springs, and there's a new piece that-I think it's fairly new because I haven't seen it before. It must be 18 feet tall, but it's a wonderful kind of metal and some kind of plastic material, like an old kind of Victorian nightgown; little sleeves, it gets smaller and smaller as it goes up, very see-through.

I see a lot between Martin Puryear and Shelton, that is that-and I think why I particularly see their work is because there's always that kind of utilitarian-

MS. EMANUELLI: You know who else-Mark Lere is in that group.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. That's true, yeah. Yeah, that's true, and I've got photographs of his work.

MS. EMANUELLI: You know, the three of them actually are people that I've been-I've always watched too, and I've been affected by a lot.

MR. BASSLER: And it might be a reference-some literary reference I have to it, or-there's a fabulous-the last time

Martin Puryear was in a show at MOCA there was this thing-and the moment I saw this piece-it was like a tar over some sort of screening material, a mesh, and it was-it looked like those little things they would put over pies or cakes-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, yes.

MR. BASSLER: -at a fair to keep all the flies off of them, you know?

[Audio break.]

MR. BASSLER: When we used to live in Cleveland, you know, they'd have summer picnics kind of thing, and all this food-

MS. EMANUELLI: As a child, you're thinking, yeah.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Or it even had the Tin Man hat kind of shape to it from The Wizard of Oz; you know, all those kinds of things. And Peter Shelton does the same thing. And I think that I like to get the textile to look as though it-there might have been a shoulder-or, you know-

MS. EMANUELLI: It's a blend of sort of the minimalist aesthetic, and a drive for metaphor and narrative, you know, that people just have anyway, but they tone it down and pare it down so much, and that's what I really find fascinating.

MR. BASSLER: There's a woman's name-now, what is her name? The dress patterns-have you ever seen?

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, was it-Judith Shea? Anyway-

MS. EMANUELLI: I know who you are talking about.

MR. BASSLER: And they'll just be the-because my Mom used to do a lot of clothes-making, you know, and the patterns on the table, and those kinds of shapes. In fact, the other day I got out-when we used to do our big papier mâchés, I'll get dress patterns out, and we did a whole bunch of fish, and we were running out of paper so I just got dress patterns out. And here are all these dress patterns-you know, tissues-

MS. EMANUELLI: Where did they come from?

MR. BASSLER: Huh?

MS. EMANUELLI: Where did the dress patterns come from? I mean, from school? They were they here somewhere?

MR. BASSLER: No, I got them from some swap meet or something, you know. And then some woman says, "What do you want those for?" And I said, "Well, I'm using them for some papier mâchés." She said, "I've got a lot of those at home." So I just dropped by her house and she gave me a whole bunch. And these students are looking-these are kind of interesting, you know, because all these arrows are going, and these darts, and doing all this.

Anyway, just-that's the kind of thing that if I have some kind of memory tug like that I find-of course you can do it in a painting too, but sometimes with sculpture, there's just, I don't know, something about it.

And Bob Brady, also who was a ceramic artist from the Bay Area-I've mentioned him before because we taught together in Tennessee. He looked into the same kind of things, although his things are much more obvious. You know, they're angels or figures or something like that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Did you ever interact with Françoise Grossen at all?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I was on her committee. Oh, yeah, but it's been-that was so long ago I forgot about that as well.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, she became quite significant.

MR. BASSLER: Oh, yeah, yeah. And I haven't talked to her for quite a few years, but, yeah, she was a graduate student here and I was on her committee. She came-it's hard to take credit for someone as talented-you know, she came with this sophistication that was quite remarkable-and she didn't speak English.

MS. EMANUELLI: She was French, or-

MR. BASSLER: She was Swiss, I believe. And, yeah, that would have been-it's when Bernard left. Bernard wasn't here-I was getting my graduate degree, and she came at that particular time. It wouldn't have been that late-that early. Yeah. And then I contacted her in the '80s about something, and I saw her in New York at that particular time, but it was so many years ago. Don't really know what she's doing now.

MS. EMANUELLI: I think she was living in New York when we were there in the mid-'80s-the late '80s.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. And there are probably so many people that I hadn't even thought-like Beth-simply it's so long ago. It's just hard to remember [laughs].

MS. EMANUELLI: But you were teaching then too. When she came you were-you had her-

MR. BASSLER: When I was a graduate student they gave me a job. I was essentially-it was really kind of a screwy situation because I came to get guidance from Bernard, and he left-took a leave of absence from here, so I was essentially my own instructor. But Neda was here, so the two of us were just alone. And Bernard, when he would drop-he still commuted from his Montana-living in Montana there, so he would drop by occasionally. But it was a very lonely, uninspiring kind of education because he wasn't here, and it was Neda and I, sort of-and Neda always looks back to this, great, who needs anybody to ask you questions? But I did. I had a lot of-she was so much more sophisticated. I-

MS. EMANUELLI: You wanted the input.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, I wanted input. I want to know why I was doing this. I wanted something to-I wanted-I wanted to know more than-about it, and Neda, I think-I know I mentioned because I read about it-Neda would speak of myths, you know, coming-a good German education, and I'm sure so much richer and deeper than ours in terms of literature. And she would draw upon those. You know, she would call this piece, well, that's Caspian's headdress or something like that. And I would think, well, who's that? [Laughs.]

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, you've spent time building up your own reservoir.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah, but I mean, that's what it was. And then Françoise, that doesn't sound right to have Françoise and Neda here at the same time. Neda must have gone on, and Françoise-because I didn't come here until '75. I mean, I left with-

[Audio break.]

-and Neda must have left or something. Anyway, it was-

MS. EMANUELLI: What's that down there?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, I'm just spelling her name right-Bhakti Ziek.

MS. EMANUELLI: I'm sorry, Bhakti Ziek, okay.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, left to move to New Mexico, and then later on it is New Mexico. I admire her quite a bit. She's done an awful lot with the jacquard loom.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: Along with Lia.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right. Okay-

MR. BASSLER: And she just-she's just absolutely given up. She was at the University in Philadelphia and she said, it just is not worth it. I don't know what we're going to live on, but-and I had thought I would tell people passing through, well, who can we go to in education? I said, oh, go back to Bhakti; she's got this fabulous program going, and this and that. Oh, actually, she'd gone on to-she left Philadelphia-I didn't even know it-and got the plum job of Cynthia Schira's at the University of Kansas. And it was from Kansas she left and said, to hell with it.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: She says-and I saw her-you know, I saw her there at Detroit and we went out to dinner. And I thought I was going to hear all these fabulous things, that she was moving onward and upward and doing all this great work with the jacquard loom. And her work is just so strange. I mean, she draws-talk about drawing-appropriating images-just-but she was able-I don't know if you saw on American Craft cover, she did-she drew upon-she was able to scan in her notebooks that had the blue line on them with the holes, with the-you know, when you tear it out-

MS. EMANUELLI: Uh-huh, uh-huh.

MR. BASSLER: -and she was able to scan those, her notes, her written notes, and made weavings out of them.

MS. EMANUELLI: Wow.

MR. BASSLER: And I thought: now that is really impressive to me. She said, "Well, yeah, the idea is good, but anybody can do it, you know." And I said, yeah, but still. Anyway-but she-she said, to hell with it.

MS. EMANUELLI: She doesn't work anymore either?

MR. BASSLER: No. They both moved out and they don't know how they're going to live in-but it's south of Santa Fe.

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh.

MR. BASSLER: And just because, she says, the politics, the student interests-I mean, it just-and I said, that doesn't sound like-because she's really a very articulate, smart woman that I would think, if the program is basically made up of women I would think that women would look and say, oh, there's really a smart cookie, you know; I'd like to learn from her. But she said it was-she said it was a disaster, and she left.

MS. EMANUELLI: That's a shame.

MR. BASSLER: And-because that was a very strong program. But then I said, well, Cynthia Schira, you know, she talked about this one-textile was accepted in the department of art and all that. She said she didn't find that to be true at all. She felt like they were the stepchildren of the art department, and that's not where it was all at. And Cynthia never had a full-time job. I mean-this is just what she was telling me. And I thought, well, gee, I've talked to Cynthia about how wonderful the whole thing was.

MS. EMANUELLI: I guess different people at different times, and everybody responds differently to the same situation.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. So we answered all that. I've made just a few-oh, I found the name of the artist with whom I chatted.

MS. EMANUELLI: Okay, good.

MR. BASSLER: And we did that one. There was nothing back here, huh?

I think-you know, based on just that-that getting together of people the other day-

MS. EMANUELLI: Are you-you're talking about the Craft in America symposium?

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, and I thought, you know-I was sort of overwhelmed by all the information that was going on, and I thought it was just such a-for me, I understood what was going on, but how do you share this enthusiasm with a society that hasn't had any kind of education in aesthetics; whose main motive in life is-isn't necessarily it has to do with anything that's not going to make a buck. You know what I mean? How do you-how would you show something on television-I mean, I look at KCT all the time, and I'm sad-you know, or Discovery Channel or something like that. But-but how do you generate within the society that which the Lakers seem to do very successfully-

MS. EMANUELLI: Mm-hmm. [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: -in competition or something like that? How do you-

MS. EMANUELLI: The glamour of that.

MR. BASSLER: Who is the audience who is going-who you think would be interested to know this about all of this stuff?

MS. EMANUELLI: Well, the-what are the-CODA, the Council of-what is it, the Council of-no, the Craft Organization Directors Association does a study periodically, and they did a survey and the numbers of-the percentages of people who actually engage in some sort of craft in this country are huge.

MR. BASSLER: Really?

MS. EMANUELLI: Now, of course all of them aren't doing anything on the level that you might be doing-[laughs]-but, you know, people making things at home and that sort of thing, and the craft materials business-anything

associated with that is huge business, millions and millions of dollars-or billions of dollars a year.

MR. BASSLER: Sort of like Michael's [Michael's The Arts and Crafts Store] and-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. So I think that's who they're hoping will be the audience; people who want to do something, you know, especially maybe retired people or people who have some time to do things and want to find something like that, maybe can see a way to do it, be inspired that way, or will find an interest because they already have started to somehow be involved or think about it. And, you know, I guess that's what they're hoping for.

This is-what we're talking about is Craft in America, which is proposed to be a five-part series on-as an overview, a sort of comprehensive overview of craft in the United States, historic as well as contemporary. And we had a symposium that I coordinated the agenda for and moderated. And the project itself is conceived by Carol Sauvion, in Los Angeles, who owns Freehand, a gallery here. And it's for television-meant to be a five-part series for television, probably PBS. And at the symposium were a number of scholars in the field and related fields, and the filmmaking group and a few special guests. And Jim was included in that as one of the artists.

MR. BASSLER: I just think that yesterday, in seeing the Warhol show-or you could probably do the same thing with van Gogh or probably Monet; I doubt whether you'd get the same thing of Pollock or Franz Kline, or maybe you'd get Rothko-but I think that the people-I mean, it's something to make something, then it's something else to get people to look at it and really see what you want them to see or to try to imagine.

And that's why it's dangerous to talk about the fact that, oh, I'm just involved in process. It's so much more than process. But the process is what keeps me going. But there's all this nuance of that little thread to this big thread and this kind of thing, you know, it's very, very intimate as it begins to construct itself. And some of those things that we saw yesterday, the nuance of a green eyelid to a pink face-and you're not looking at Marilyn Monroe, you're looking at more than that, you know, the depth of all those decisions that go on. And I think if you don't have an educational system which supports that kind of seeing, then you're-it's missing the point of why you do what you do. And, I mean, that's-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. I think one of the tricks will be in the writing and the editing of this material that's put together eventually, which will be mostly interviews with artists and visits to sites that, you know, have been made by hand or encouraged that, such as, you know, Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI] or some place like that, which are on the list of things to possibly include. And I think, you know, the storytelling aspect of it is really the crucial part. I don't think anybody really wants to sit and watch you weave for very long-

MR. BASSLER: No. No.

MS. EMANUELLI: -you know, five or 10 seconds of that will probably be as much as people will want to see-maybe a little more, but-

MR. BASSLER: No, I can't believe it. I mean, a potter's wheel, that goes a little bit faster, or glass-blowing-you know, glass is very, very popular because it's jazzy, it's fast, there's something happening, there's the element of danger in it. Ceramics, throwing on a wheel, much more than probably hand building.

MS. EMANUELLI: But seeing it in the context of your thoughts and how you approach it, I mean, then you can watch it a little longer when you're hearing something. And some people will be interested in how do you do that. I mean, I think some people will, but I don't think that's what's going to sustain the entire series.

MR. BASSLER: The interview that they did with Julie Taymor on the Jim Lehrer NewsHour was-I show it to the students occasionally; I didn't mention it. But it's about seven minutes or 10 minutes, and it packs a whole lot in there. And it does show, very briefly, moments of her mold-making or, you know, trying to make a decision about how the jaw is going to flop down on a mask or something like that, which then makes you look at it because then they show it in production, and all of a sudden you see this jaw doing this.

MS. EMANUELLI: And you have a new appreciation for what you're seeing.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, yeah. So there's that. But what I want students to get out of it is what she has to say about her process and how she got to be where she got to be.

MS. EMANUELLI: And that's one thing that is intended to be in that segment on process-one of the segments is called "Process," and it is intended to have not only artists and their process of making things, but also their process of becoming crafts people; how did they learn it, where did they-you know, what are the different ways of becoming a crafts person, and then once you're there, how do you live in order to do this? How do you make a living or-you know, different ways people do that and the choices you make as a crafts person in order to both

do what you want to do and also support yourself and families and that sort of thing. And of course, that isn't always so easy to do in the long run. Some people end up with no medical insurance or limited medical insurance or-and then-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah. Or I've been able to hold on to teaching positions.

MS. EMANUELLI: Right.

MR. BASSLER: And had I not had that-

MS. EMANUELLI: Some people aren't good teachers or don't like it or-you know, or they teach and then they don't get to do their work as much or-you know, you have to find your balance. And then some people just stop, I think, because they can't manage.

But that's-the process idea was more than just how to make things. And that's sort of the beauty of Carol's conception of these segments, is that they have a broader metaphor, I guess, you know, beyond just the literal landscape or your memory, but there's something about that, a community that's, you know, even bigger than the literal description of it.

MR. BASSLER: Wasn't there a quote of Paul Klee that-when asked why he works, or why he makes art it's, so as not to cry, or something like that-

MS. EMANUELLI: Oh, yeah-

MR. BASSLER: -you know, to avoid all the hurt of life. You know, I've got this-this was on the wall at quotations from the MOCA exhibit, "A Room of Their Own" [February 4, 2001 - March 31, 2002]. And it says, Rauschenberg: "I work every day and I never know what I'm doing." And this one I love because it's sort of what-I never know what I'm doing. "If you know something, you have a responsibility. I don't think any artist sets out to make art. You love art, you live art, you are art, you do art, but you're just doing something, you are doing what no one can stop you from doing."

And I-and I would never be presumptuous-and a lot of artists I know think, oh, I'm making art today. And I say, that's to be judged, it seems to me.

MS. EMANUELLI: [Laughs.]

MR. BASSLER: I can't say that I'm making art. This might just be a pile of nothing, what I'm-but I'm in hopes of discovering something along the way that might be significant, even if it's a mess, its significant-well, don't go down that way again. Because with this heavily dyed silk I've got from Mexico, I've gone the same way two or three times, thinking that this time it was going to be great-[laughs]-and it hasn't been. And it was only yesterday with Andy Warhol I said, "That's how I can solve that problem." You know, the scale was what told me, and that's the scale that's going to work, because that dollar bill, when it begins to repeat itself, but not the same way, is a pattern that sets up that's going to be-that's the scale that-I've been working either too small with it or too big with it, and now I know. So it's this little dollar bill size.

MS. EMANUELLI: Amazing.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: So did you like being part of that symposium? Did you think it was worthwhile?

MR. BASSLER: Oh, for me it was. But I always feel like I gain so much more than I give. And I was just sorry that I couldn't stay on because I was-some of the people there just had such interesting things to say, another point of view, and I really did enjoy that.

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah, I did too. I was pretty stimulated. And I thought people gave such a great-so much of themselves, such thoughtful-I mean, they really-I asked them to do certain topics and they thought about them very carefully.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: I mean, I assigned the topics by who I thought would be the best person to present it who was going to be there, but I also think that people accepted that so quickly and graciously, and really the thought-and even though people may have had different ideas about things, it was all in such a great collegial spirit it was-

MR. BASSLER: Yes.

MS. EMANUELLI: I don't think I've ever been in a meeting quite like that before.

MR. BASSLER: No, no. I thought-

MS. EMANUELLI: The level of people-

MR. BASSLER: What happened the next day with the filming and all that? Was that a totally different kind of-

MS. EMANUELLI: Yeah. It was at Freehand and the filmmakers spoke about what-their thoughts about how to make a film from this, what their processes so far have been in thinking about it. And they interacted with the scholars that were still there, and a couple of artists that were still there. And that was interesting too. And then, that was it; it was two hours long and that was it. They didn't have as much to discuss yet-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, right.

MS. EMANUELLI: -but there were ideas. And Steven Poster, who's a cinematographer, and actually the president of the Cinematographer-I don't know, the society; the, you know, Association of Cinematographers [American Society of Cinematographers], and works in feature films, has helped Carol put together that group of people. And then Steve Fenton, who's a worldwide creative director-has been; just recently retired from a huge advertising agency-was going to be the writer. I'm not sure now that he will be the main writer because I think he's finding it way bigger than he ever thought it could be. [Laughs.] But-

MR. BASSLER: Yeah, but then how do you pare it down? That's another thing too.

MS. EMANUELLI: Well that-yeah, now, that's one of the things I said about complexity-I don't know if you were listening in, but when I was first opening the thing, the more you get into the complexities of the subject, the more complex it becomes. And the process is one of really synthesizing and narrowing down to essences so that you can get the most important thing out of it. But until-from my point of view, until you've had that, you don't really know-until you have the broad picture, you can't find the essence.

MR. BASSLER: Yeah.

MS. EMANUELLI: You have to really see all the sides of it first. So I'm-that's what I'm hoping will happen. But-

MR. BASSLER: I have got to-

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...September 7, 2006