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Oral history interview with James Melchert, 2002 September 18-October 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with James Melchert on September 18 and October 19, 2002. The interview took place in Oakland, California, and was conducted by Renny Pritikin 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 Melchert and Renny Pritikin 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

MR. PRITIKIN: This is Renny Pritikin interviewing Jim Melchert at his studio in Oakland, California, on September 18, 2002, for the Archives of American Art for the Smithsonian Institution.

So, Jim, let's start not with the strict order of biographical stuff, but more obliquely. What are the most powerful influences in your career? And that includes people, art movements, technology.

MR. MELCHERT: Okay. It was in the late '50s when I came back from Japan, ready to go to graduate school. And the last minute, I decided that I wouldn't get my master's in educational psychology, which one – my two brothers are in clinical psychology, and I thought, well, they're enjoying careers in that, so maybe I would, too. But I'd already been accepted at the University of Chicago and realized that I'd rather be painting. And I got permission to change my area of concentration.

MR. PRITIKIN: One of your interviews that I've read, you credited a brother with helping you make that –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh! That's true. That's true. It made a big difference, I mean, a huge difference. And –

MR. PRITIKIN: So an influence – I thought of that – I was very moved by that incredible generosity of him to –

MR. MELCHERT: That's right. He seemed to understand that I needed permission to do something, to even conceive of it. And I owe him a lot for that.

Well, anyway, at the time, abstract expressionism was the great movement in painting. And the instructor –

MR. PRITIKIN: I'm sorry, Jim. What was the brother's name? Because –

MR. MELCHERT: My brother's name was John.

MR. PRITIKIN: Is he still living?

MR. MELCHERT: No, he died about five years ago of emphysema, which is a nasty, nasty way to go.

But anyway, abstract expressionism was the big thing, and yet in – the instruction that I was getting in painting really didn't take into account what was happening at the time. But –

MR. PRITIKIN: This was '50 –

MR. MELCHERT: This was '50 – let's see, '59, '50 – no, excuse me, '57 – '57, '58.

MR. PRITIKIN: So – and it was already an established –

MR. MELCHERT: Fifty-seven. It was '57. Yes. Okay, 1957. But anyway –

MR. PRITIKIN: It wasn't the new thing on the block. It was already – it had won the war.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes. But, I was out of the country –

MR. PRITIKIN: Right.

MR. MELCHERT: – from '52 to '56 –

MR. PRITIKIN: Right.

MR. MELCHERT: – and so I wasn't aware of what was going on. And I didn't know anybody who was close to the

movement. I don't know artists, really.

But – so it's January of '57 that I started at the University of Chicago. And I think it was during the third quarter, which would have been the summer term, that I ran into a graduate student in art history named Max Kozloff. And he was very much aware of what was happening in painting. And the Chicago Art Institute had just acquired two paintings, one a Kenzo Okada, and a [Mark] Rothko, it seems to me. And I didn't know how to read them. And so Max –

MR. PRITIKIN: Could you spell Kenzo's name?

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. K-E-N-Z-O, I believe it is. Okada, I know, is correct.

Anyway, I liked Max very much, and I had several conversations with him. And he and I were going to go to the Chicago Art Institute to look at these paintings, and unfortunately couldn't because of some conflict he had.

But Roland Ginzel was teaching printmaking at Chicago occasionally, at the university. And Roland took me under his wing, and one Saturday had me meet him in the northern part of the city, where there were a lot of artists living. And I met Ellen Lanyon, his wife, and I met Richard Hunt, the sculptor, and a number of people who were doing this wonderful work, new work, unlike anything that I had seen.

MR. PRITIKIN: They were doing abstract –

MR. MELCHERT: It was definitely nonobjective, nonrepresentational; I'll put it that way – nonrepresentational work. Well, that for me was a beginning. It was a little bit like having somebody open a door a crack. But when I –

MR. PRITIKIN: You were doing ceramics –

MR. MELCHERT: I was painting. No, no, I was a painter.

MR. PRITIKIN: No, you were just painting.

MR. MELCHERT: So I got my MFA in painting.

MR. PRITIKIN: And what kind of painting was it?

MR. MELCHERT: Representational. I was painting still lifes, and for my thesis I did a triptych that was rather – oh, I would say, that owed a lot to German expressionism. Actually, I think I did still lifes better than anything. [Laughs.] I liked them – well, in any event –

MR. PRITIKIN: Sorry. So now you're exposed to these slightly older people?

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. And I painted for a year while I was teaching at some small college in Illinois.

MR. PRITIKIN: Right.

MR. MELCHERT: And I was the only art instructor. I just had to teach ceramics, because it was one of the courses listed. Well, I'd had a few classes in it – so I could easily keep ahead of the students, but I would work at it at night, and I'd find that I was getting a bigger kick out of the clay than I was my painting. And that's when I decided to go where I could work in clay for a summer. And that eventually led to going to Montana and working with Pete Voulkos, taking his summer course. He'd come up from L.A.

And he showed a lot of slides of work, not only ceramic work, but also he was very interested in Miró's ceramics and Picasso's ceramics. And the world just opened up. I mean, as I said, the door had been opened to contemporary work, only now it was much, much bigger.

MR. PRITIKIN: Did you start painting nonrepresentationally, or –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes. After I left the graduate program, I took what – some ideas that I had gotten from Roland Ginzel and pursued them. He would make a collage just out of colors of – he would tear up ads in magazines that had a lot of color, and he would use that to put together a small collage. And then he would base a painting on the collage, and so that's how I was working.

But I also took some painting classes then, in Missoula, while I was there that summer of '58. And instead of using oil paint, we were using cans of interior house paint, so that you, you know, were drying immediately – it means that it must have been latex; it could dry right away, and you could use a big brush and you'd do large paintings. Well, all of these things had a positive effect on my joining a larger community of – I should say a

larger sphere of activity than I had known before.

But Pete Voulkos was the one who really changed everything for me – the way in which he believed in doing things larger than you're used to doing, so that you become physically involved. You know, I'd go home at night and I'd just be physically exhausted, and I'd sleep wonderfully well. And it was energizing. I loved –

MR. PRITIKIN: But even though abstract expressionism – that was one of their ideas, that the whole body be involved in painting. You didn't really get it until Voulkos had you doing that with ceramics.

MR. MELCHERT: And I think I got it through Voulkos –

MR. PRITIKIN: Right.

MR. MELCHERT: – because he was the one who was looking at Rothko, and [Franz] Kline particularly, and [Willem] de Kooning, and others. And I found myself going beyond anything I had imagined I'd ever be doing – and how my world expanded that summer. As a result, I taught one more year in this little college and then moved to California, expecting to start graduate school a second time at the Otis Art Institute [Otis College of Art and Design, Los Angeles], only to find that Pete had lost his job there and had been hired at Cal Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley]. So we came here instead. And so for two years I worked closely for Pete as his assistant.

MR. PRITIKIN: As his assistant teaching or –

MR. MELCHERT: Not – no.

MR. PRITIKIN: – his studio assistant?

MR. MELCHERT: No, it was studio assistant. I mixed the clay and swept the floors and fired the kilns.

MR. PRITIKIN: What was the age difference?

MR. MELCHERT: Pete was probably seven years – I think seven years older than I.

MR. PRITIKIN: So it wasn't vast. It was –

MR. MELCHERT: No. Also, I mean, I had been out of college at that point about seven years, so I was older than the other students around me. There were graduate students in the art department who also were a little older; some of them had been in the army. Steve DeStaebler, for example, was – I knew him in college. He was a couple of years behind me. And he was there, having just come from the army, I believe.

But since Pete was returning to the Bay Area, he knew a lot of artists here already; he had gone to CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts] as a graduate student. And one of the first artists I met was Manuel Neri. Another was Nate Olivera. And through Manuel I met Joan Brown. And that sort of expanded my territory to include San Francisco. And in time, Pete saw to it that I would go with him to Los Angeles for a weekend, where I met John Mason and Henry Takemoto and Mike Frimkess and a lot of those artists he had known when he was living and teaching there.

MR. PRITIKIN: They were ceramicists in –

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. They – John had been a studiomate of Pete's, who was working as a designer with some ceramics firm. But it seems that he also worked at Otis, because Pete always brought people in as auditors if they weren't enrolled. And I want to talk a little bit about John because we became –

MR. PRITIKIN: That would be John Mason?

MR. MELCHERT: John Mason. We became good friends. And in time, John came to have an influence on me that I – how shall I say it? – that I feel quite good about. That is, that he was questioning what he called the tyranny of the wheel. Now, Pete used the wheel as a way of making hollow forms that he could use as an understructure in building these tall ceramic sculptures.

John, on the other hand, who could throw quite well, and who, in fact, made some wonderful work on the wheel – he could throw a good bowl, for example, which is a hard thing to do. I mean, throwing a bowl is one of the easiest things you can do, but throwing a good bowl is one of the hardest things. So anyway, John could do that. But he was trying to get away from the wheel because it determined to such an extent what you could do and what you could not do. So he – in time – he was making walls, for instance, huge, very thick clay walls that he would then slice into a grid. And I'm talking about walls that must have been eight or nine feet tall and 15 feet long. It took an enormous amount of physical strength and energy to do that.

MR. PRITIKIN: This is late ’50s?

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, this was late ’50s, early ’60s.

MR. PRITIKIN: People must not have known what to make of him.

MR. MELCHERT: No, that’s right. But he was with the Ferus Gallery [Los Angeles, CA], and Irving Blum was quite good at moving work – you know, placing work. And so John got some good commissions and was selling work and doing very well.

But what I liked about John’s work was that he kept finding new ways of building a structure – for example, something as simple as attaching a two-by-two to a rafter overhead in his studio and then using that as the armature, around which he would build a clay form that needed support until it began to dry. And at that – once the clay could support itself, John would simply pull it out, because there was still room overhead. And little things like that impressed me, that –

MR. PRITIKIN: And was that an unheard-of –

MR. MELCHERT: Well, no, I don’t know anybody who was doing that. And he kept thinking of these things, so that how you did it had an immediate connection with the form that you got. And he got new forms by inventing new ways of putting a structure together.

Well, one of the things he was questioning also was manipulating a form that – or manipulating clay. The hand is a big thing in craft work, and it’s true that a great deal is communicated by the hand. But it doesn’t mean that you’ve got to handle the clay, wet clay, in order to use it as a means of communication.

One of the things that John – one of the first things John did that made me see how you could use clay without manipulating it – I mean, handling of the wet clay – was when he had the – in the ’70s, the mid-’70s, he began building brick pieces, and he had a big show at the Pasadena Museum out of brick. And then Richard Koshalek, who was at the Hudson River School Museum – Hudson River Museum – Richard Koshalek gave him a show that toured the country. And John found that an advantage with working with brick is that you could rent it, build a huge piece, depending on how much space you had available with you – for you – and then at the end of the show you could return the brick, go to the next city, assess the space that you have, and build new pieces by renting brick again. And –

MR. PRITIKIN: So there was no –

MR. MELCHERT: No shipping.

MR. PRITIKIN: But there’s no additional work; it was just the bricks that he was showing?

MR. MELCHERT: That’s right.

MR. PRITIKIN: So this is a huge conceptual leap –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: – into found – I mean, nobody was doing that in –

MR. MELCHERT: Nobody was doing that.

MR. PRITIKIN: – in any field, let alone craft.

MR. MELCHERT: That’s right. But John has not really been given the credit he deserves for all of that. I mean, he was working with a computer, figuring out how to do things. He would – he was working with paper, for instance, little cardboard things this big, folding them almost like origami, as a way of rapidly going through a lot of forms and always watching it to see. And when he saw something happening, then he would pursue it.

And the work he’s doing now, for example, is he makes all these slabs and constructs them in ways where he ends up with a fire-glazed ceramic sculpture made out of slabs, where – you even might think of working with wood panels that way, but not with clay. So –

MR. PRITIKIN: So you’ve continued your relationship over the years.

MR. MELCHERT: Yes, yes, yes. I admire John’s work so much, and I think that by getting into tile – my enthusiasm for tile comes partly from his experience with brick and my experience of seeing it.

MR. PRITIKIN: Okay, so we've got – you're – how old were you in –

MR. MELCHERT: I'm – I'll be 72 in a couple months.

MR. PRITIKIN: No, no. No, no, in –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, at the time?

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah. In '58 –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, okay. I would have been 28.

MR. PRITIKIN: So you're in your late '20s. You've been through a lot of school. You come across Voulkos, the body energy, kind of manic excess –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes, yes. Yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: – and Mason, almost the opposite: conceptual, innovative, new forms. Two kind of key figures –

MR. MELCHERT: Two key figures. But going from one to the other didn't happen overnight.

One thing that Voulkos – I must say – this is a confession – when I realized that I needed to get out from under his influence, I felt a certain guilt in doing that. And I remember there was some show called "American Studio Potters" – I'll put it that way – at the Victoria and Albert in London. I've often thought about this. I made a little wall piece, a funny little thing. It looked like it was, maybe, leather. It had a little zipper on it and so on. And it reminded – I mean, I think it stemmed from my having seen a little wall vase that my grandmother had. But at any rate, I made this thing, and it amused me.

And they asked for this show, and I thought, well, I'm going to put this piece in with some of the plates that I sent – a follow-up plate. And the director of the department at the Victoria and Albert – who was involved with education, where they had asked for this show and then they traveled it throughout the United Kingdom – he was intrigued by this piece, and he asked me if he, if – for permission to use a picture of it in an article he was writing. And when I realized that it would be published, it occurred to me Pete might see this, and what would he say? And I refused to give him permission.

MR. PRITIKIN: Because it was different than Voulkos?

MR. MELCHERT: It was so different – and I knew he wouldn't approve. And you know, it's interesting; I always wanted his approval, but as time went by, I made less of an effort to keep him informed of what I was doing. I didn't want that interference and –

MR. PRITIKIN: Like we were talking about earlier, I mean, there's an Oedipal –

MR. MELCHERT: That's right. That's right.

MR. PRITIKIN: Okay.

MR. MELCHERT: But –

MR. PRITIKIN: Don't you think that there are breakthrough artists – you were talking about – or I was reading about your quoting from somebody, I can't remember, about the different kinds of artists, the innovators and the pioneers.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, that was – yeah, that was Bob Irwin.

MR. PRITIKIN: Irwin, yeah. And there – I've always thought a similar thing, that there are breakthrough artists who everyone acknowledges as seminal and geniuses, if you want to use that word.

MR. MELCHERT: Yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: But very often they have no followers or no influence because they've done it, and you can't –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: – like Allen Ginsberg. You know, he stands alone, basically.

MR. MELCHERT: Pete used to say that –

MR. PRITIKIN: And I think Voulkos, in some ways –

MR. MELCHERT: Voulkos, in some way. That's interesting. I'll have to think about that.

Pete used to say that he didn't – he couldn't see where a person could go after de Kooning. In other words, he felt that Kline opened up ways for him, certainly, but he didn't feel that you could go anywhere, that somehow de Kooning – that a path that couldn't be taken elsewhere. I don't know if that's true or not, but –

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, I think when we say that, we're talking about ourselves and –

MR. MELCHERT: With ourselves. That's true. That's true.

MR. PRITIKIN: I remember I had a roommate in college who was a composer, and he said at some point he realized there's nothing left to write.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, nothing. [Laughs.] Oh, dear. Yeah. Well –

MR. PRITIKIN: We're prisoners of our times.

MR. MELCHERT: See, every time I think that you can't go somewhere, I have to remind myself of a statement I quoted in that article, that essay, a statement of Pete's that I quoted: "Never underestimate the power of the artist, because one will come along who will do it."

But that notion of Bob Irwin's, you know, the – he categorized four kinds of artists. Actually, the replicator is his addition, the artist who simply replicates. It turns out – and I need to find this material because I want to read it – it's not original to Bob Irwin. It turns out that it's part of some Eastern thought – "Eastern" being from, probably, Hindu – that there were, like, three, shall I say, deities; I'll call them deities. And one is the destroyer, one is the creator, and the other is the keeper of the flame. And the ideal is to be all three.

MR. PRITIKIN: I think it's Shiva who just embodies all three at the same time.

MR. MELCHERT: Is that what it is? Okay, that's good. And I think that's where Irwin got his notion, although he may well be the first to have declared it in America for artists.

MR. PRITIKIN: Or translated it into the artist –

MR. MELCHERT: Translated it – exactly – into artists. But you see, it leaves out the person who just simply replicates, and that's a lot of artists. And I'm sorry to say it's also a large part of the craft community. I mean, right now, for instance, wood-burning – I mean, wood-fired kilns are really very popular, and what is coming out of it – a lot of American replications of Japanese antique pottery. And who wants to be making antiques, you know, especially if, I mean, it doesn't go anywhere, doesn't add anything to what we already know?

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, isn't that a value, though? I mean, that –

MR. MELCHERT: Well, it's –

MR. PRITIKIN: Obviously, you and I come from the same tradition, but, you know, this phenomenon that we're talking about, this late '50s, early '60s, where everybody was trying to get away from the tyranny of X, whether it's the wheel or the –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes. Oh, yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: – the rectangle and the photograph, or –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: – and trying new forms. I always think of the phrase "the opening of the field" – do you know that phrase, from Robert Duncan, the poet?

MR. MELCHERT: No, I don't.

MR. PRITIKIN: Robert Duncan, the great San Francisco poet, had –

MR. MELCHERT: Right.

MR. PRITIKIN: – his first book was *The Opening of the Field*, saying that in poetry now, we don't have to be limited to this esoteric language; we can talk about sex, and we can talk about politics, and we can use vernacular –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes, yes, yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: – and we can lie, and we can – you know, the field's open.

MR. MELCHERT: Yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: And I think that what you're talking about in ceramics was the same thing.

MR. MELCHERT: Uh-huh.

MR. PRITIKIN: Everything was burgeoning. And one of the values was to make it new, the, you know –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes. That's true.

MR. PRITIKIN: And so we carried that – [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yeah. Yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: But maybe – you know, as we get older, maybe young people don't care about that. I don't know. I mean, there is – what about all the people who just do it because they love it and they're good at it and they make a living?

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. Well, I just don't consider them honest.

MR. PRITIKIN: Uh-huh. What are they?

MR. MELCHERT: I think the best term for them is, like, journeyman potters, journeyman painters, that sort of thing.

MR. PRITIKIN: Mm-hmm. So an artist is an innovator?

MR. MELCHERT: Well, if we go back to Shiva – [laughs] – I mean, there's the creative aspect to the work and –

MR. PRITIKIN: So what's – what does "academic" mean to you – academic art?

MR. MELCHERT: I think of rules. For example, I – at the University of Chicago I studied with a painter who was German but had really been trained in the French academy. He did portrait painting – portraits, primarily. And he once explained to me some of the rules of painting that he had learned to follow. And they were largely based on things [Diego] Velázquez did but later codified and, you know, part of your training – made part of your training.

Well, for example, you don't put your darkest dark next to your lightest light, and you have a transition between them. And transitions are very important – transitions between them. That is a Greek notion, actually, the transitions. I mean, you're – how you get from a vertical to a horizontal in sculpture would require transitional passages in Greek sculpture, as it would in the academy.

Another is that edges require very careful attention that you go from a sharp edge to, like, a slightly fuzzy edge, and you may lose it, and then you get it back again and so on. And if you follow good academic painting, as you can in, say, even in eighteenth century English portraiture that you'll see at the Legion [California Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco], look at the edges, and they're really wonderfully done.

MR. PRITIKIN: [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: Well, at any rate, rules of that sort I consider academic.

MR. PRITIKIN: Right. So is it – rules, and learning what the rules are, and then recreating what you've learned is academic. And making your own rules or throwing out the rules is art, or innovative art, or art that we're interested in?

MR. MELCHERT: Okay, it seems to me that what you have to do after you have gone through an academic program is shed a lot of what you've learned that doesn't belong to you – in other words, other people's ideas. And the nice thing about learning rules is that you have something to question. And you can learn a lot by starting out with your academic training and then gradually dissembling it. And you find that some of it works for you and some of it doesn't.

But the first few years out of college, if you – for example, if you're an artist trained in a college or university, the first few years are terribly important, because you have such serious work to do in – with regard to what you have learned and what you've got to unlearn, which is why, when I was with the arts endowment [National

Endowment of the Art], we put such stress on providing small fellowships for artists who were recently out of graduate school. We called them “emerging artists” because often there could be a woman who had been trained in art, but because of raising a family she had to put it off, and she might be 35 years old before she started in again.

MR. PRITIKIN: Mm-hmm. Right.

MR. MELCHERT: And we certainly wanted to include people who had to – or whose work had been interrupted.

Nevertheless, it’s very hard for a young artist, because that’s the point – I mean, when you’ve just gotten out of graduate school, you’ve got a lot of debts, you’ve got to find a job, your parents aren’t supporting you anymore. And that’s when you need time, and that’s when you have the least amount of time. I certainly found that to be true.

MR. PRITIKIN: Right. So – we’re straying. [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: Get me back.

MR. PRITIKIN: Actually, the whole Mason conversation was a tangent to the Voulkos conversation –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes, because we were talking about some major influences.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah.

MR. MELCHERT: Now –

MR. PRITIKIN: So you said that Voulkos had taken you down and introduced you to all these folks in L.A., but your life was up here –

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: – teaching at the art institute [Otis College of Art and Design], then at Berkeley.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. Now, let’s get to this matter of – I don’t know what you call a community, but –

MR. PRITIKIN: What the –

MR. MELCHERT: I was very interested in knowing where I was, in that, yes, I was teaching at the art institute in San Francisco and I had a – I mean, I enjoyed my colleagues there very much, but I found there were people I wanted to get to know, and some of them – Bill Wiley was a recent graduate student, Bob Hudson was a recent graduate student, and I was very curious about their work, the work they were doing, because it was so different from what I had been exposed to up to that point.

And I don’t know why, but I find it very necessary to get to know people, and I think very often, as part of getting to know them, I would empathize with them so closely that it would affect my work. And when I think back on the work that I did from, let’s say, 1960 to 1975 – well, 1970, put it – take it that far, from 1960 to 1970, for 10 years I was essentially making up for the fact that I hadn’t gone to art school. And all the courses that I didn’t have I was having to teach myself, in a way, by choosing people to pay attention to.

And there was a point at which I know that the figurative activity at the art institute in San Francisco, and particularly – I mean, Manuel Neri, Nate Olivera, and, let’s see, Wiley – Wiley to a lesser extent, but nevertheless – I did a series of what I called ghost boxes. And it was, for me, liberating, because it was so far a field from Pete that I was on my own now. And I found that you could take an idea like the – an idea, a theme, like the Lindbergh kidnapping, and think of the various competing forces at that time, and actually end up with a box that had to do with people vying for power.

And it’s interesting to me that when – before Bob Arneson died, he was asked to name five works that he admired. And it was in some magazine – some catalogue for a show. I was in the same show, but I didn’t know until after the catalogue came out and after Bob had died that one of the pieces that he showed was something of mine. And it was, in fact, this jar with a – like the ghost with the competing theme, the theme of competition. And these ghosts were blind; I always made them blind. But I gave them teeth, and I tried to seal their lips with a little mark in them. But how interesting that – I mean, Bob saw the death mask in that piece, and I can’t say how all he interpreted it, but it really touched him. And that was very interesting. Well, I did that during that period, you know, when I was sort of –

MR. PRITIKIN: So are you melding the abstract expression –

MR. MELCHERT: No, that was gone.

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, yeah, but I mean, I'm thinking the Bay Area figurative abstractions –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes, yes, yes. I see what you mean.

MR. PRITIKIN: – filtered through ceramic.

MR. MELCHERT: I was certainly drawing on it, the way you would if you were taking formal classes – you get this instructor, that instructor – only since I hadn't had it, I used the '60s to make up for it. And consequently –

MR. PRITIKIN: Was it your major – undergraduate was –

MR. MELCHERT: Art history.

MR. PRITIKIN: It was art history. So, not studio?

MR. MELCHERT: No. I did a lot of drawing then, you know; I'd take extracurricular classes in figure sculpture and drawing – figure drawing.

But one thing I learned is that you shouldn't do that. You shouldn't be, as it were, all over the place as I was in the '60s. And I remember one time Alex Katz sort of challenged me, because I had no signature, he said. And I didn't know what he meant. I had to find out. But it's one of those things where people sort of – dealers and collectors back off from somebody who doesn't have a signature.

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, yes and no. It sounds like you're still taking that to heart 40 years later. [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: No, some of these things I've never heard of –

MR. PRITIKIN: I mean, [Bruce] Nauman doesn't have a signature right?

MR. MELCHERT: That's quite true. That's quite true. But on the other hand –

MR. PRITIKIN: But Alex Katz has too much of a signature. [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: That's right. That's right. But you see, you've got to have – if you don't have a signature, you've got to have a big enough reputation to cover it.

MR. PRITIKIN: Chutzpa.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. Really, that's sort of – [laughs]. But in any event –

MR. PRITIKIN: You were all over the place in the '60s.

MR. MELCHERT: I was all over the place. And I did some very good work and I did some very bad work. I'm sorry that I stayed with the games as long as I did, because it was an interesting idea when I first got into the games, an interesting idea, but it could have been done so much more easily than the way I was going at it. But the funny thing is, a few of the best pieces I did in that decade, two of them were games, but the others – I mean, I could have spent my time much more profitably doing something else.

But, now, you mentioned Nauman. Bruce and I got acquainted while he was a graduate student at Davis, and I used to – well, we used to visit each other. We'd go out to his place. He lived in the Wileys' house in Mill Valley. The Wileys were in Italy, I think, for a year, or something like that. And since we both read, we always had a lot to talk about in our reading.

And somewhere along in this time, since I am gregarious and I go out of my way to meet people, I'd met Emmett Williams, the "concrete poet." He – Jimmy Suzuki knew him, and Jimmy was somebody who was interested in my work. Jimmy's a painter who's been teaching at Sac State [California State University, Sacramento] for many years; is retired now. But I met Emmett, and I read a lot of concrete poetry. I was very interested in it. And Emmett edited the Something Else Press books, and I remember Daniel Spoerri did a terrific little book that was all about the contents of a drawer in his dresser. He pulled out the drawer, and then he took item by item and talked about it, as well as wrote about it. And there were things of this sort that – Bruce was attracted to it. I was also quite taken with it.

Another thing. We were both reading [Alain] Robbe-Grillet at the time. And I have a friend named Bertrand Augst – A-U-G-S-T – who taught –

MR. PRITIKIN: I know Bertrand.

MR. MELCHERT: You know Bertrand.

MR. PRITIKIN: Through Connie Penley.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes. Well, he was teaching French and Film Theory at Cal. And Bertrand and I were good friends, and he would be enthusiastic about certain movies and would always tell me, and I'd go see them. There was a lot of film talk with Bertrand. But also – oh, yes, someone – Raymond Roussel. And I based a whole series of pieces, the "a's", on a Raymond Roussel book. But who is the one who wrote *Adventures in Africa* [*Impressions of Africa*]? This was somebody else.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yes, I know who you –

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, another Raymond – Queneau. No, Raymond Queneau and – okay, now I've got it straight. Raymond Queneau wrote the *Exercises in Style*, on which I based my series of "a's".

MR. PRITIKIN: Okay. Roussel was the one who did *Adventures in Africa* [*Impressions of Africa*].

MR. MELCHERT: Roussel, that's right. And –

MR. PRITIKIN: How do you spell Queneau?

MR. MELCHERT: Q-U-E-N-E-A-U.

MR. PRITIKIN: Oh, okay.

MR. MELCHERT: All of this was going on in the '60s. The Queneau book came just after the games, so '69, '70, '71 was when I was involved with the "a's". And that, to me, was a wonderfully productive period.

MR. PRITIKIN: Let me stop you. We've spent 55 minutes on the first question – [laughs] – the most powerful influences. You're now in mid-career by '70.

MR. MELCHERT: That's right.

MR. PRITIKIN: So influence is kind of over, to some extent. Would you leave it at Mason and Voulkos, or would you throw in Wiley or Nauman, or is it just those two guys?

MR. MELCHERT: I would say – [pause] – I think I was interested very much by Wiley. And Nauman. At the time we did the "Slant Step Show" [1966, Berkeley Gallery, San Francisco, CA], that was actually a terrific period. I don't remember anymore what year that was, but there was a group of us who got together often up in Mill Valley, a group to which Wiley was central. And there would be volleyball games, there would be Sunday picnics, we'd bring all the kids, and so on. Bill Allen, I remember, came back from the state of Washington, and there was a wit in Allen's work that I was quite taken with. And when we did the "Slant Step Show," we worked – we planned it together for quite a while, and to a certain extent, we were – everybody was learning from everybody else.

And a show that followed, that I wasn't part of, sort of continued some of that series of exchanges. And that was the "Repair Show" at the Oakland Museum that I think Bill Allen was the principle person behind. And it had to do with making a work based on the notion of repair; something needs fixing. And it was a very funny show. I mean, it was the sort of thing where you'd – a lot of chuckles. But what I liked about Wiley and Allen was the way in which they didn't deal with art issues; it was the things about everyday life that they're so curious about and played with. So I was definitely influenced by them.

Now, I know you're supposed to have one mentor, but I can name several, and even people outside the art world. I think it took me longer to grow up than most people. I know in college I was very green. But there was so much that I needed to know all the time, and somehow I was always looking for somebody to teach me how to do this or teach me how to do that. So maybe instead of calling them mentors I should call them just teachers.

MR. PRITIKIN: So who, outside of the art world?

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, for example, I think I learned quite a bit from Russell Lynes, who was editor of *Harper's* for many, many years.

MR. PRITIKIN: L-I-N-E-S?

MR. MELCHERT: L-Y-N-E-S. Russell Lynes was on the board for the American Academy in Rome. And Russell had a spare room in the house that had been intended as the maid's room. And whenever I was in New York during my Rome days, I could stay there. And I'd be there, actually, two months out of the year, February and July.

But Russell and I became great friends. But he had many thoughts about, particularly, the decorative arts that I paid attention to. I liked the way he thought about things. I liked the way he wrote about things. And I think my writing improved from reading Russell Lynes. He knew a lot about architecture and architects as a lay person. So I would have –

MR. PRITIKIN: What was his area of expertise? Or was he an editor?

MR. MELCHERT: He was primarily a writer. He had a column –

MR. PRITIKIN: A journalist?

MR. MELCHERT: Well, in a sense. He wrote for some architecture digest for many, many years; he had a column. And before that he had been with *Harper's*, I think it was.

MR. PRITIKIN: Was he a critic?

MR. MELCHERT: Primarily editor.

MR. PRITIKIN: Editor/critic?

MR. MELCHERT: Editor, critic, columnist.

MR. PRITIKIN: I have a few ideas I wanted to point out.

MR. MELCHERT: Go ahead.

MR. PRITIKIN: One is that there is this very literary thread coming at this point, in the '60s.

MR. MELCHERT: Mm-hmm. True.

MR. PRITIKIN: Two, your involvement with the Wiley circle, was this the beginning of the end of you being a, quote, ceramic artist?

MR. MELCHERT: Okay. I can remember a point at which I was trying to think in terms of rooms as opposed to doing an object that would probably be seen in an interior. I wanted to think in terms of the space and then make objects that somehow energized the space, or worked with the space.

MR. PRITIKIN: Where did that idea come from?

MR. MELCHERT: I think that came from contact with Bruce. One of the first things of his – one of the first performances of his that I remember was one he told me about that he'd done at the Whitney in New York, where he stood near the wall and would just fall into the wall. And he'd stand back up and he'd fall. And of course, he started hurting himself, but nevertheless, it was this relation to the space. And I found that so intriguing.

And often there would be things that I would hear that I didn't understand; I couldn't fathom. So I just had to work at it, you know, and I'd keep thinking about these things and so on. And you can't be making objects that are somewhat, like, isolated and unrelated to other things and be thinking about this other stuff.

One of the first series of pieces that I did – oh, I haven't mentioned John Cage. Goodness. Reading *Silence* [*Silence; Lectures and Writings*. Middleton, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press,1961] really had a big effect on me. And that came during these same years.

MR. PRITIKIN: You met John in the '60s.

MR. MELCHERT: I met him in the '60s, and met him more often in the '70s. But the book *Silence* had a profound effect on me. The interesting thing is, I came across it, oh, sometime in the last couple years, and I said, "Oh, I've just got to reread this," and I couldn't find anything in there that said anything to me, whereas initially it was so loaded.

MR. PRITIKIN: Does that mean it was – it's become – it was so seminal that it became self-evident, or that you've outgrown it?

MR. MELCHERT: No, I think what happened, later it was – I was always told that you had to read – there's a Thomas Wolfe book, not *You Can't Go Home Again* – what's the other one, big one? In any event, there's a novel by Thomas Wolfe that you shouldn't bother reading once you're past 18. Well, I felt that there was a time when I really connected with what was in *Silence*.

And I found two ways in which I could, with an object, engage the room. I did pieces that had to do with shadows, where, using ambient light, a piece could change throughout the day, because my objects on it simply cast shadows. They were there to cast shadows.

MR. PRITIKIN: These were still ceramics objects?

MR. MELCHERT: They were still ceramic objects. There's one right next to you there. You see there's a cup on the thing? Well, on the slab itself is the word "Listen." The cup is a little like this only, curiously, it's turned down, and there's a little thing in there.

But I did shadow pieces.

MR. PRITIKIN: So that was one way –

MR. MELCHERT: That was one way.

MR. PRITIKIN: – and you said there was a second.

MR. MELCHERT: The other was – we listened to things. And another that I did – Rene de Rosa has one of these pieces.

I got very interested in photography, not photography the way a photographer would, but photographs. I didn't get interested in photography; I got interested in photographs. And I couldn't get over the notion that you have a positive and you have a negative, and your negative is as positive as the positive. That was intriguing.

Well, anyway, we had a little darkroom, and I used to print pictures of the kids all the time and stuff. I did go around the house and take pictures and then print them out. I did a short series of slabs that were square, and it would be – I would make on it something that was like a photograph you'd take. There'd be a hand and there'd be an ashtray, and there might be a cup in there, as though it were a photograph taken of a table, only it was three-dimensional. And then there would be a square within it where it was actually colored, and that's where the ashtray was.

Now, there always had to be a hand in this, but the hand was in the part that – it was in the negative, and this is what you didn't print, and therefore it would never change and would never become positive. But the part that was in the colored area, the ashtray, was part of our world because it had been printed. Well, what – you were to use the ashtray. In those days, we all smoked, so you'd put your hand near the ashtray to flick the ash off your cigarette, and your hand would complete this situation. Anyway, it was a series that nobody would know what to do with because we don't smoke, you know. [Laughs.]

But it had to do with the piece coming alive only when being completed, only when it was being used. And you had to be able to see that here was the potential. There was always potential, and never realized.

MR. PRITIKIN: So you were bringing conceptual and environmental installation ideas into the ceramics.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, into the ceramics, yeah. And that's also part of the '60s.

MR. PRITIKIN: Right.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. Now, in the '70s, when I stopped working with clay completely, was – my last series was with the "a's", variations on "a's", lower-case "a's." That was when I began using a camera to photograph things from two positions, so that I called the series "Points of View." It was like your eyes: you need both to understand what's going on. And what I found was so interesting was that if you're imagining a clock face, if one person was at 6:00 and the other was at 3:00, and you're both shooting what was going on in the center, you would have two totally different images. And so it's juxtaposing them. I had a wonderful time with that series. I just loved it.

MR. PRITIKIN: Was that the first totally conceptual photo-based –

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: And this was the early '70s?

MR. MELCHERT: Yes. Probably starting around '71 I was starting it.

MR. PRITIKIN: Did you get any grief from your colleagues?

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes. Yes. The major writer in the ceramics field is someone named Garth Clark. He's written

over a dozen books on ceramics. He has a gallery in New York. And anyway, he wrote in one of his – I was mentioned in one of his books, and he called me a turncoat.

MR. PRITIKIN: Like Bob Dylan going electric.

MR. MELCHERT: [Laughs.] Yes, something like that.

But, you know, I consider it timeout from clay, although I didn't know it at the time. I just needed to deal with something that clay couldn't help me with.

MR. PRITIKIN: That "timeout" became 20, 25 years.

MR. MELCHERT: No, it wasn't quite that long. Probably more like 10 or 12, because when – I did a lot of drawing while we were in Washington – I had done rubbings, that's right. In the '70s I started doing rubbings as well. I would do a rubbing of a photograph. I don't know if you've ever seen that series.

MR. PRITIKIN: I think I have.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. I would just tape a photograph on the wall and then put paper over it and do a rubbing of it. And the object would register but, of course, not the image. And so then I would write below the photograph something having to do with what was in the picture, so that a person would project back into the image what they picked up from the writing. And it was, like, this kind of thing. [When Melchert showed these works at the University of New Mexico in 1983, they were announced as "graphite drawings," but he has always referred to them as "graphite rubbings."]

MR. PRITIKIN: So it's that literary thread again.

MR. MELCHERT: Yes, that's right. That's right.

Well, in any event –

MR. PRITIKIN: I was asking about reaction to your taking this time-out. You did say something about getting in trouble at school. I guess we can talk about that when we talk about teaching. But did your –

MR. MELCHERT: Ohhhh, yes. That's right. See, that also happened around 1970.

MR. PRITIKIN: I figured, yeah.

MR. MELCHERT: That's right.

MR. PRITIKIN: But let's do that later. But in terms of trying to stay on the subject of influences and the milieu and all that, I imagine your friends didn't bat an eye, or they thought it was great.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: What did Voulkos think?

MR. MELCHERT: Well, he himself had left clay for a number of years and when he was doing bronzes, bronze casting. And then not only bronze, but other metal as well.

When I took a job at the arts endowment in January '77, I think that was a bigger sort of break with friends than when I left clay.

MR. PRITIKIN: How about Mason? What did he think of the photography-based work?

MR. MELCHERT: John has always been very supportive. I saw a lot of him when I first went to Washington because he had moved to New York. He had tenure at Irvine, U.C. Irvine, and left it in the mid-'70s because he felt it was time for him to be in New York. And so he had a loft, and it was always available to me if I needed a place to stay. So I saw him often. He certainly never seemed to feel that I was doing anything I shouldn't be doing. But what happens, though, like – when you get off the bus and you get back on later, you find that you don't have a seat.

MR. PRITIKIN: [Laughs.] Yeah, I saw that in your writing; that when you came back from –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, from Washington.

MR. PRITIKIN: From Rome.

MR. MELCHERT: From Rome. Oh, yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: Or was it from Washington?

MR. MELCHERT: From Washington – first Washington, and then later Rome as well. For example, when I came back from Washington, I had really lost a sense of continuity with my work. I'd been to Egypt, saw tile, and decided that I wanted to go back to clay and I would work with tile.

MR. PRITIKIN: So that was early '80s.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, '82.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah. Let's finish up with the pre-Endowment, post-clay.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: I mean, you really moved into a new group – you know, Pomeroy, Jock Reynolds.

MR. MELCHERT: It was very different scene.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah, it was a different scene. Talk about that. Because that's when I came on the pictures.

MR. MELCHERT: Yes. Yes. I was very active with – I was having installations, performances, and so on before I left, say, in the mid-'70s.

MR. PRITIKIN: The culmination, to me, was the slide show. Was that at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco]?

MR. MELCHERT: Yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: I mean, that was, like, a seminal show for you –

MR. MELCHERT: That's right.

MR. PRITIKIN: – and for me as a young student.

MR. MELCHERT: That's interesting. Sue [Suzanne] Foley did that show, and –

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah, I saw her recently.

MR. MELCHERT: Did you really?

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah. She looks exactly the same.

MR. MELCHERT: Yes. Well, she did me a great favor by seeing to it that I showed that work, the body of work.

MR. PRITIKIN: What was the name of that show?

MR. MELCHERT: "Points of View." But Sue was also a curator who was very interested in, like, what young artists were doing, like performance and installation and so on. And it seems to me she was on your board.

MR. PRITIKIN: She was on my board, yeah. And she did the most important show, you know, "Space/Time/Sound," that was probably done in San Francisco in that decade –

MR. MELCHERT: That's right.

MR. PRITIKIN: – which got her fired.

MR. MELCHERT: Which got her fired. And yet, how necessary it was for it to be done.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah. But she never would have done a ceramics show.

MR. MELCHERT: Well, she did do – yes, she did a ceramics show. She did a wonderful show, as a matter of fact – talk about seminal – with Richard Shaw and Bob Hudson. She also then – I think she co-curated a show at the Whitney of, let's say, five ceramic artists from the Bay Area.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah. I wasn't saying that to be critical of her at all; I was trying to be provocative about the difference – or maybe it's a question. Had you moved from a "square" to a "hip" field, or any of that? When you were starting, ceramics was where it was at, and now conceptual work was where it was at, and you had moved

with the times to the more cutting-edge form.

MR. MELCHERT: I was just so curious about it.

MR. PRITIKIN: It sounds like your motivation as an artist is to satisfy your curiosity, and the form is not as important –

MR. MELCHERT: That's right – that's right. I mean, I never thought of myself as being disloyal to clay. Certainly by the time I got –

[tape stops, re-starts.]

MR. PRITIKIN: Okay, Jim. This is Renny Pritikin interviewing Jim Melchert at his studio in Oakland, California, on September 18, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

We're continuing our conversation of this day with one more question. We're going to approach what are the similarities and differences between your early work and your recent work, I guess since you've retired, say, or since you took up tile work?

MR. MELCHERT: I think in the early work I tended to have an idea and then I'd pursue it with the clay, to some extent. And let's say, for example – what would be an early work? – the *Ghost* series. I liked this idea of a box that would hold secrets, that it wouldn't be an empty box. It's just that you couldn't see what was in it because there's a secret. [Laughs.] And in a way, what got me started in that series was a head of Pete Voulkos, kind of caricature of him, that Nate Olivera made out of clay.

MR. PRITIKIN: Did he ever work in clay seriously?

MR. MELCHERT: He used to come down to the pot shop occasionally, across the street from Kroeber Hall. Where the museum is now, there was an old fraternity house that was converted into offices upstairs, and there was the pot shop in the basement.

MR. PRITIKIN: And that's where they used to get in trouble with the police. [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: That's right; all that stuff, right.

Well, anyway, Nate would come down once in a while to talk with Pete. There was always a lot of banter. And a few times Nate actually made some pieces.

MR. PRITIKIN: I wonder if those are still existing.

MR. MELCHERT: There is one that he made that he gave to me, a big – about this big – with two faces on both sides, that I later gave to Mrs. Toki. She and her husband – T-O-K-I – her husband, they had Leslie Ceramics – it was Leslie Toki. But she admired Nate Olivera so much, and I thought, goodness, I shouldn't have this piece; I should give it to her. But I think they still have it in their collection, although they could have lost it in the earthquake. But it's a big thing.

Well, anyway, Nate did this caricature of Pete, of his head, and stuck it on top of the kiln where we used it as a kiln god.

MR. PRITIKIN: [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: Then somehow, maybe a door slammed, you know, but it fell off the top and it broke. The cigar was gone and the face mashed a little. And I picked it up and fired it. And I had this head for a long time, and it ended up put in a time capsule at the university art museum put in the ground somewhere. Someday somebody will find it, with this little story attached.

But I was quite intrigued with that head. And one of the things that you just didn't do in ceramics was to put, like, not a drawing of a face, but – how shall I say – a solid face, like Tobey Mugs or something. I don't know if you've ever seen those. My mother collected them. They were some kind of mugs and pitchers that really was –

MR. PRITIKIN: More like a head.

MR. MELCHERT: Like a head. Well, I mean –

MR. PRITIKIN: T-O-B-E-Y?

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. In any event, I –

MR. PRITIKIN: So that was, like, kitsch, to do that.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, that's right. Exactly. But this head intrigued me, this –

MR. PRITIKIN: Arneson put an end to that, huh?

MR. MELCHERT: Pardon?

MR. PRITIKIN: Arneson put an end to that prejudice.

MR. MELCHERT: Yes, that's right. He did put an end to it, indeed.

Well, I made a mold, a press mold, in which I could – a press mold is where you have your plaster form, then you press clay into it, pull the clay out, and you have something to start with. And so I would put these heads on the lid on the box, and each box would have a different theme. The first one, I remember – the first two were sort of sketches for what might follow. And out of it came a series where each box had a theme, had its own theme.

Now, I don't work that way anymore because I'm not working with wet clay, for one thing. And also, I've been working with tile for quite a few years now, trying to see what can be done with it, and I'm finding that what intrigues me most about it now is that when you drop it and it breaks, the breaks reveal a structural element inside the tile and, consequently, is as much a part of the material and the way it's made that allows a lot to work with. So I'm working with a structural aspect of the tile, of clay, that I wasn't doing when I made those ghost boxes.

MR. PRITIKIN: So that's a difference?

MR. MELCHERT: That's a difference.

MR. PRITIKIN: But you are working with units.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes, that's true. I'm working with units, and I probably always will. I tend to work in clusters too. You know, I'll do a number of pieces that all have to do with the same issue, and then when I feel that I've done as much with it as I care to, I'll leave it alone and go on to another. But I've been trying to work longer with some of my clusters than I used to.

MR. PRITIKIN: Elongated clusters. [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: Elongated clusters, right, that go on and on.

MR. PRITIKIN: It sounds like astronomy.

MR. MELCHERT: [Laughs.] Yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, it seems to me, you know, sitting here talking to you and looking over your shoulder at these beautiful pieces on the wall, that one reason you're so – you seem so happy and satisfied with your work in the last decade is that you really have synthesized your early ceramic interests with your mid-career conceptual interests in a way that very few people really integrate.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. I'm glad to hear you say that because I remember talking with a fellow artist, who is a conceptual artist, about tile, and this person absolutely refused to believe that there could be any connection between a material like clay and conceptual concerns. But I hope the work shows that there can be.

MR. PRITIKIN: Is there any other through-line that we can discover from the early work to these?

MR. MELCHERT: Well – all right. Within, sort of, American ceramics and so on – it's a connecting thread. I've always looked for a way of working that hasn't been really sufficiently explored yet. When I was doing those ghost boxes, for example, the color I used was from what we call China paint. It's over-glaze enamel. You glaze the piece and fire it, and then with a combination of ceramic pigment and oil, you apply your color and your drawings and so on, and I was using decals. And now, goodness, it's commonplace to use decals, but it wasn't then. Decals were strictly for hobbyists, and a serious ceramic artist in 1964 was not using decals or China paint.

MR. PRITIKIN: Why? What was déclassé about China paint?

MR. MELCHERT: China paint was what, in the old days, young ladies did – young women did who would decorate the rims of dishes as they were taking voice lessons or dancing lessons. So it was part of the preparation for married life. And –

MR. PRITIKIN: Right. So it was a certain kind of ironic appropriation.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, that's right. That's right. Where instead of using the materials you're supposed to be using as a serious potter, you're using materials that are identified with hobbies.

MR. PRITIKIN: So we didn't really touch on this earlier, but an argument could be made that even at your most committed to ceramics, you were pushing the boundaries or –

MR. MELCHERT: Yes, I've always tried to. And – now, where I am now with the tile pieces is that there are people devoted to ceramics who aren't sure whether I am seriously involved with clay, because I am at an edge somewhere that – like, say, with conceptual art – that it's the edge of what is considered to be ceramic. I don't make the tiles –

MR. PRITIKIN: Because they're commercially manufactured.

MR. MELCHERT: – I use commercially manufactured tiles. Now, I do – if I use glaze or if I use pencil, the pencil is ceramic pencil, so that it's fired on. And I do respect the relationship of materials – the clay is fired, so I think that the pencil should be fired, too. It creates a bond there.

But I think that an obligation that an artist has, in a way, to his or her field is to keep it alive and growing, which is to say that your edges keep moving. And I'm very interested in what the boundaries are, like the definitions of a discipline.

MR. PRITIKIN: Right. So the true through-line is that you've never given in to being academic.

MR. MELCHERT: Well, that's – [laughs] – that's interesting. I think you're right. Well, maybe we can –

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah, a good time to stop.

[tape stopts, re-starts.]

MR. PRITIKIN: I'm talking to Jim Melchert in his beautiful studio in Oakland, California, on October 19, 2002. This is the second session of two.

And Jim has just returned from a trip to a university in the upper Midwest, where he was heavily involved with ceramics, and has some thoughts that he would like to start the conversation with.

So, Jim, go ahead.

MR. MELCHERT: I taught ceramics for, goodness, four years after I got out of graduate school at Berkeley. I taught at the San Francisco Art Institute. Then, when Berkeley hired me, I was in the sculpture wing of the art department and Pete Voulkos was teaching the ceramics classes at Cal, so I was assigned other courses. And only once in all my years at Berkeley did I teach a ceramics class again, and that was for one semester years and years later, after Pete had retired, when Richard Shaw was in charge of the ceramics studio.

MR. PRITIKIN: And is that by your choice, or is that by happenstance?

MR. MELCHERT: Richard's choice. Richard had –

MR. PRITIKIN: No, no. I meant the fact that you never –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, no, no. There really needed to be only one person teaching. And I don't think Pete particularly wanted me to replace him when he would take a leave, because he knew that I would teach the course differently from the way he liked it taught.

MR. PRITIKIN: Meaning more conceptual and –

MR. MELCHERT: Meaning that – he felt so strongly that a student's progress depended on motivation, and if the student wasn't motivated, there wasn't a whole lot you could do for them, and therefore, why bother with them? And his way of teaching in the later years was very different from what he used to do. In the '50s and '60s, early '60s, he gave a lot of thought to his time in class.

But then, with the '70s and however long he taught in the '80s, he began to sit back and feel that it was enough to demonstrate how you can build a clay sculpture in the beginning of the course over one or two days, and then see what the students do with that information. And he also believed that there needed to be impediments, that a student had to overcome something, and was very opposed to having the tables cleaned, floors swept, that sort of thing.

MR. PRITIKIN: By other people?

MR. MELCHERT: By other people. And when – this worked all right when there were artists coming in as auditors just to work in the department. You know, Jun Kaneko was there in the early ’70s; so was Dick Marquis. Well, Marquis was in glass, excuse me. Pat Siler, he had just gotten his masters in painting, and he started working in the pot shop.

MR. PRITIKIN: I don’t know that name. Could you spell it?

MR. MELCHERT: S-I-L-E-R. He’s up in Washington – the state of Washington; Spokane, I think it is.

In any event, when there were people like them, or Marilyn Levine working still as a graduate student, other students, less experienced, had someone to watch and ask questions to, and so on, and that worked very well. But when there weren’t more experienced artists working in the studio, kids tended to flounder. And he would deliberately pick somebody to replace him when he would be on leave, who would essentially just, in a sense, be around but not give instruction. And it didn’t work; it just didn’t work.

So that Pete’s reputation as a teacher was based largely on what he did in his early years of teaching, both in Los Angeles and at Berkeley. What he was happiest at was when he retired, he had time to give these workshops all around the country and could be paid to turn up somewhere and do a workshop, and he would get sculptures made. He always traveled with an assistant or someone who would meet him there, and this person would throw the forms that he couldn’t throw anymore, because he was getting up in years, and then he would begin working on them with these thrown forms. And sometimes he would do his own throwing. But he liked working for an audience. He drew a lot of energy from them, the way performers do. And that was the kind of teaching that he also did very well. He wouldn’t explain what he was doing; he would actually concentrate so hard on the work that people were silent, and he’d be working silently, except every now and then make a wisecrack, I mean something back at – sort of –

MR. PRITIKIN: So is that one whole – as a teacher, you could be completely solicitous and explanatory and very involved with the students’ practice, or you could just be a model and expect them to extrapolate?

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, he liked the word “catalyst” rather than “model.” He thought of himself as a catalyst. And certainly his – most of his teaching career, the earlier two-thirds of his teaching career, he had only to be around and there was a sense of excitement. But it’s nice to remember that part of his teaching rather than that late period at Cal. And then it’s nice to pick up with the workshops, if you’re thinking in terms of what he did as a teacher, because –

MR. PRITIKIN: So let’s contrast that with the Melchert method.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, okay. For myself, I felt very much that, first of all, students have a lot to learn from one another. They don’t come in without some aesthetic sense and experience in making aesthetic judgments. It might be that a kid is really into striping cars, or somebody who knows what clothes to wear that will bring out her best features or his best features, whatever. And consequently, students are already someplace, and you don’t have to start from scratch with them. You can also depend on them to learn from each other. And –

MR. PRITIKIN: So it’s more of a respectful – that they bring something to the table?

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yeah, they definitely – they do. You have to find ways to get them to do it. And it took me a while before I understood the situation well enough to devise a way of teaching that worked not only for me, but worked for the students. And I found that instead of having students work in a classroom together on their own – some assignment where they’re working with clay and there’s a model sitting there, essentially learning how to recognize form, human form, and reproduce it in the clay, I found that they learned a lot more if they were in a situation where they had to think and analyze, and where they had to stretch their imaginations a bit. And this is really with team projects. And I did it with both beginning classes and advanced classes.

I even changed – I think I told you this. I changed the name of the beginning class from “Introduction to Sculpture” to “Introduction to Visual Thinking,” because while we were working with physical objects and spaces and particular places, and so on, it had more to do with three-dimensional structures, and yet I didn’t want to call it sculpture.

And so what I would do is give students – I’d, first of all, divide them into teams, four or five people on a team. Classes tended to be large, about 25 students, so you get five teams, sometimes six. And at the beginning of the class, I would give them a problem – I’d introduce something – for example, you look at two shapes in the distance, and you decide not only which one is physically closer, but in fact which one is optically closer. And then you might give them – an assignment might be to make something far away look near. And they would have – the teams would go out on the campus, they’d have to choose their own site, and they had something

like an hour and a half to solve the problem. And then they'd come back to the room and we would have at least 45 minutes to – I don't remember the times of the classes; they were about two-and-a-half hours long, it seemed to me – no, it would be a little longer, about three hours. Yeah, 9:00 to 12:00 – three hours long.

Anyway, we would then, as a class, go to each site and see how that group of students solved the problem. And they would have to discuss it. They'd have to think, what on earth could we do? And they'd look around to see what was there. And as ideas were thrown out, they would all have a chance to discuss them or – you know how one idea would trigger another.

MR. PRITIKIN: Right.

MR. MELCHERT: And there would actually be some excitement generated about, hey, this is a great idea; let's do it. And I think that moment of hitting on an idea, of getting excited, is very powerful. And this particular – so, to make something far away – produced some extraordinary pieces.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah. I read this in one of the interviews. It was great; it made me want to be a student in that class.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes. That's probably – I'll describe one, and maybe this one, unless I described it to you last time. Would I have done that?

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, I don't think so. I think that was –

MR. MELCHERT: This was where we went to a site, and one by one we were asked to look at this object. It was a ping pong paddle that was propped up on a ball, you know, on a – it was on a ledge, actually, and here was this ping pong paddle, and the paddle part was held up off the surface with this ball. And, you know, you look at it, and you think, well, what is this? And so you would get down to where, you know, you were sort of – your eye was at the level of the paddle, and it made you realize this ball was in fact a huge light globe on a standard way across the field.

MR. PRITIKIN: I love that kind of stuff.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, my goodness. And these are beginning students. They weren't necessarily freshmen, because every now and then you'd have somebody who was in another department but always hoped to choose an art course for an elective, and often in the senior year. But they would grasp the idea and they would do it. And it gave you the feeling – I mean, as you walked around from just site to site, it gave you a feeling that this is fun, you know.

MR. PRITIKIN: [Laughs.] Art can be fun.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, like – I mean, you're engaged.

MR. PRITIKIN: You, as a sophisticated professor/artist were engaged.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, I was engaged and the students were engaged. And, you know, somehow or other, when you are engaged, it puts wind in your sails. And I loved it, and the students loved it.

MR. PRITIKIN: How did that affect your own work in practice?

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, my – [pause] – okay. I would go back to my studio feeling as though – how shall I say? – it just gave me wings, I'll put it that way; it just gave me wings. And I produced very good work in those years. It seems to me that those are the years when – I was doing rubbings, for example, rubbings of photographs. And I was also working with a lot of light projections – slides, not clay. I had stopped working with clay. But – I had set it aside during those years. But anyway –

MR. PRITIKIN: It gave you license to be as inventive as you can?

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes. Yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: So, you used the phrase, "It worked for me." And this is the kind of thing you're talking about. You were trying to find a teaching method that worked for you.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes. That's right. That's right. And it – a mistake that a fledgling teacher is apt to make is to teach the way you've been taught. And you're not likely to succeed, you know, because you're not that other person. And there are – by trying to be the other person, you're not drawing on all your resources, your own resources.

I also found that the way I had been teaching when I started would exhaust me at the end of the class period. And I just – my battery was run down. Whereas once I devised this other way of teaching, I wasn't with the students every minute of the session. I would have made the presentation, chosen the teams, given the assignment. They'd go away, and I would simply disengage. And then I would have time to do other things, see students or whatever it was. But–

MR. PRITIKIN: So you didn't go off with any of the teams?

MR. MELCHERT: No. No. Then they – I'd meet them again, and for the last 45 minutes to an hour, we would go around the sites, and so on. And that's when, you know, the discussion would be, like, somewhat critical or analytical. And I'd be exhilarated by what I'd experienced. But also, I had a break in there.

And now, with the advanced classes there are things you could do. Berkeley had some very sophisticated students, and I found that often all I would have to do is bring something in the room; like once I – I don't know how it happened – I had a bunch of ping pong balls and I walked in. I may have told you this; I told somebody about it. And I just, sort of, handed them out, and, you know, we started just dropping them and developed a kind of rhythm, and then people started doing things with them, so that it was like a sound piece without anything from me excepting handing out these balls. And this is when Theresa Cha was a student, for example. She was – well, she became my TA when she was a graduate student. But Reese Williams, Mark Thompson, there was quite a group.

MR. PRITIKIN: So you set the psychological parameters of, let's be as creative and wacky as we can be, and you didn't – after that, you just had to step back and watch them do it.

MR. MELCHERT: That's right, exactly. And, you know, ideas would come out of this, and the whole group would be attentive to one another. Now, if we were – say we finished something and nothing was coming out of the group; I could then propose the next activity. And I'd usually put it in the form of a problem that had, like, a hook on it, where your response to the problem usually would be, you got to be kidding.

MR. PRITIKIN: [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: [Laughs.] And –

MR. PRITIKIN: I took a class with Bill Morrison once. You remember Bill?

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: And the only rule that he set at the beginning of the class was you had to keep your mouth as wide open as you possibly could. [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: [Laughs.] Oh, that's good. That reminds me of Bill Allen – I may have told you this or you may have read it. He had a – was invited to teach a painting class one term. And he arrives and here's this class filled with, like, 30 students. And they were in a small room with easels, and there's just hardly any room for anybody to move. And so he decided that his first assignment would be for everyone to paint the largest mountains of the earth on lima beans. [Laughs.]

MR. PRITIKIN: So, questions occurred to me while you were telling this. I don't want to derail you.

MR. MELCHERT: Please.

MR. PRITIKIN: There are many people who think that teaching is harmful to an artist's career. Do you, in hindsight –

MR. MELCHERT: I think it depends on the person. There are some people who shouldn't be teaching. I mean, there are some people shouldn't be parents. There are some people who relate very naturally to other people. And I think that if –

MR. PRITIKIN: But you know that prejudice that –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, I know the prejudice. Well –

MR. PRITIKIN: – the talented artist gets a teaching job at 35, and you never hear from him again.

MR. MELCHERT: Well, that sometimes happens. I think that the – there are faculties – how should I say this? – that have such problems that if you're teaching there, it's likely not to be the teaching but the faculty meetings and committee meetings and interaction with your colleagues that's going to wear you out.

There was a period of strife at Berkeley with the art faculty when you'd give anything to avoid a faculty meeting. There are people who are so miserable that they try their damnedest to make sure that you'll be miserable too. And these often are frustrated artists whose careers have somehow fizzled, put more time into the work that it takes to run a department than into the work that they're – that they initially intended to do as artists.

MR. PRITIKIN: Do you think it's fate or – I mean, I think of Jock Reynolds, who I thought, when I was a student, he would be one of the great artists of his generation. And –

MR. MELCHERT: Well, I think in a way he may be. It depends on your definition of art. You know, the art-life thing to me –

MR. PRITIKIN: Right. Right. That's what I'm trying to get to.

MR. MELCHERT: Okay. I think that living your life is your big treat and challenge in being born. And art-making is certainly one way of engaging in life, but it's not the only way. And I think that if you have a creative imagination, there are so many ways in which you can use it that will make life a better experience for many people, or that will enrich life, people's lives, and art-making isn't the only one.

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, how about conversely, though, would you make the argument that everything an artist does is their – is part of their over – that teaching –

MR. MELCHERT: It depends on intention, I think. Now, there's a very interesting term in German, I think it is; it's the whole work of art. It came out, as I remember, during the Jugendstil period in Vienna at the turn of the century, the "total work of art" – all right, that's what it was called, the total work of art.

Now, Wagner is a good example of somebody who wrote his lyrics – he probably even designed the costumes, I mean, everything, for his operas. But what I'm thinking of more specifically are those architects who in Vienna would begin designing the furniture, would be doing the dishes on which the people would eat who lived in this house.

And if you expand on that, there are artists – and I think of myself this way – whose notion of the total work of art includes many of the things you do that are not going to be read as artworks.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yes. That's what's very interesting to me. I learned this really later in my life from Nayland Blake, who is a very dear, close friend. And, you know, he graduated from Cal Arts in the '80s and was from New York, and made an existential decision to not go back to New York but to move to San Francisco and get very seriously involved in his work and in the gay community, and developed a very important gay intellectual scene in the Bay Area and made great work, and published zines, and gave performances, and was politically active. And he thought that was all his body of work.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, well, it is. It is.

MR. PRITIKIN: And taught. He was a great teacher – he is a greater teacher.

MR. MELCHERT: Interesting. Where's he been teaching?

MR. PRITIKIN: Harvard and Bard.

MR. MELCHERT: No kidding? Yeah, I can imagine him at Bard.

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, that's where he went to school.

MR. MELCHERT: Ah-ha. Interesting. Well, good for him. I like that a lot. But there's an example of, you know, the artist who thinks in terms of the total work of art, you know. And the intention there is to create something, to generate something that is beautiful, needs to be, that's going to make a difference somehow.

MR. PRITIKIN: Talk more about that.

MR. MELCHERT: I think there's a notion of how things should be that an artist is working with, that circumstances as they are, are not right and not as good as they could be. And so you reinvent your circumstances. Now, if I use the word beautiful – I know that it's gone out of the vocabulary now; it's not used any longer, like, in critical discourse, but it has to do with a sense of wholeness, it seems to me, where the parts are all working together, where even the dissonance fits.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah, you mentioned dissonance – a full life with deep involvement with other students and children and friends and colleagues. You mentioned Theresa Cha. I understand that that was a deeply tragic moment in your life.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: And losing Jim Pomeroy as well.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. Yeah. That's one thing when you teach, you're in for some shocks when students come to a sad end. I mean, it could be someone you enjoyed enormously who was killed in a car accident, dies of cancer. But with Theresa, I mean, to have been murdered, it – what happened to her – it wasn't just a matter of dying; it was a matter of her name being in the papers in New York, where it was assumed that she was some hussy.

MR. PRITIKIN: Oh, really? I never –

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. And, I mean, all these – she was found sort of outside, clothes off her. And it was sensationalized, on top of her having to go – experience the horror of the attack from a security guard. Yeah, wow. Of all people for that to happen to. But I think one of the hardest to take is a suicide. And I've experienced that. A student I liked enormously took his life.

But I like people very much, and consequently, teaching has agreed with me.

MR. PRITIKIN: Som no regrets?

MR. MELCHERT: No regrets, not about time spent teaching.

MR. PRITIKIN: So maybe we should move on to – what we thought we would start with was –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yeah. Oh, I meant where I was, this – anyway, what I discovered was that – it was in a ceramics class, or in several ceramics classes that I witnessed –that the teaching was still, sort of, pre-Voulkos, in that there was no particular catalyst around. Assignments could even have been given in a printed sheet. Instructors seemed caring, attentive – answered questions, gave suggestions – but there didn't seem to be either passion for it or a philosophy, which I think you have to have.

And one thing that happens in something like ceramics, particularly if you work at tables, and you've got chairs and people sitting at tables and they're to do something like – let's imagine an assignment is to do a hand. And so they begin to visit with one another, and they're talking while they're doing this and that, and the radio's playing music. You know, two hours go by and people leave. What a waste of two hours, you know?

MR. PRITIKIN: Not because they weren't working, but because they weren't communicating and growing or –

MR. MELCHERT: Exactly. I mean, how can you – I mean, what you are making you would hope is going to begin telling you how to proceed. I mean, you have to prime the pump, but once you've got a flow, the water's flowing; what you're working on becomes your partner as opposed to being the object. And when this partnership occurs, you're beginning to discover ways of proceeding that have never occurred to you. And now, how can that happen if you're sitting there talking about last night's basketball game, and you're just making a hand and – I mean, what you get out of it is a credit at the end of the term, and then you can get out of school sooner. You know, I mean, that's how you get out of school; you accumulate enough credits.

And I just – I can't fault the teachers for being bad people, you know; it's just I think they were tired, and their main – I should say their classes were sort of auxiliary to what they were doing with their lives.

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, that brings it full circle then.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah. But may I run an idea past you?

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah.

MR. MELCHERT: And you tell me what you think of this. I've been thinking about something – a question I saw that was discussed. It's an old, old question: Is craft art? Can you imagine; is craft art? But I was thinking about what, kind of – if pottery-making – you're making functional pottery, if it isn't art – maybe I brought this up last time; I've been thinking of it since.

MR. PRITIKIN: No.

MR. MELCHERT: If pottery – let's say pottery is art; what kind of art is it? And it occurs to me that it's a situation similar to theater and music, where you have a composer and you have a performer. Now, who is the artist in – is it Shakespeare, or is it the actor who played –

MR. PRITIKIN: Olivier.

MR. MELCHERT: – or Olivier? They both are. The nature of their work is different. Olivier depends on what Shakespeare has given him, but it's his responsibility to bring Hamlet alive again, and to become a unique Hamlet, if he's good – the actor's good.

All right. Now, if you're making – you're a utilitarian pottery – potter, and you're making bowls – and Pete Voulkos told me one time, I said, "What's the hardest thing to make, you know, if you're making utilitarian wares?" They call them functional wares. I don't like the term, but functional ware. And he said; he thought the hardest thing to make was a *good* bowl, and the easiest thing to make is *a* bowl.

MR. PRITIKIN: [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: You know, a good bowl is hard. Well, what a functional potter is doing is producing something for which there – we already know what it is, but to make it fresh, like when you see it, it's like the first encounter of it. Now, that's a lot like what actors have to do, or a violinist performing a sonata. And –

MR. PRITIKIN: So it's engaging with the tradition and making it fresh?

MR. MELCHERT: That's right. And in a way, it's not unlike what composers like Gershwin or Cole Porter had to do, in that there are X number of bars you have to fill, in which you have a standard – you have a melody, you have a text, you've got, like, an A-B-A form, and there's no resolution, like in a sonata, to your B part; A and B relate differently. B, I think, is even called a bridge, and so it's like A-A-B-A. But Cole Porter could make it all – could follow this and make it all fresh like – and you'd think the simplest thing to do is just write a tune, a popular tune, but it's not. And these standards – I find jazz musicians know a lot about music, and they know a lot about chord progressions. And it's interesting how they build on a sequence of pitches and chords that takes you still farther.

So it isn't necessarily just, you know, being creative; they're all being creative. So anyway, just in terms of –

MR. PRITIKIN: Being creative is one thing, being an artist another?

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, all right. Well, the last time we talked, I used the word *journeyman* for the individual who –

MR. PRITIKIN: You're talking about academic versus nonacademic?

MR. MELCHERT: Actually, yes, but the person who knows how to do it and does it well. I should say, doesn't transcend a certain level of excellence; well done isn't good enough, you know, and the replicator is the journeyman.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah, yeah. But what jazz, good jazz – I mean, bad jazz is as bad as anything else, but bringing intellectual leaps into the material, is that what distinguishes art?

MR. MELCHERT: I'm not sure "intellectual" is the – there are leaps. The word *intellect* implies a system to me, somehow. And I don't think there's necessarily a known system. I mean, there are a lot of artists who aren't necessarily very bright who can do this.

MR. PRITIKIN: Right. Maybe intelligence –

MR. MELCHERT: Intelligence.

MR. PRITIKIN: Yeah, because there's different kinds of intelligences –

MR. MELCHERT: That –

MR. PRITIKIN: – there's conventional wisdom –

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: – In thinking about our mission, we talk about innovation, contemporary, tradition, and the argument that's always made is we – you know, we say we want to show experimental art, and people say, well, there can be experimental art in traditional art forms. You know, they're not like, I guess, ceramics. [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, all right.

MR. PRITIKIN: I'm thinking off the top of my head.

MR. MELCHERT: Pomeroy disliked the use of traditional instruments. Once he unloaded some LPs on me of guitar music, and I think there were some cello works and so on, because he thought that music could be made, should

be made, with a much bigger range of instruments. And Paul de Marinis –

MR. PRITIKIN: Paul de Marinis once said to me – you know, I said, "How was that concert?" And he said, "Well, nothing I couldn't have heard 200 years ago." [Laughter.]

MR. MELCHERT: One of the reasons I enjoy being in Europe, living in a city like Rome, is that your environment is so much broader in terms of the voices you're exposed to. And voices I mean in this sense: you can walk into a seventeenth century church, you can walk into a fourteenth century church, you can walk into a twentieth century theater, and all these buildings are part of your world. And so there's a richness to the whole thing that we don't have – I mean, not to that extent. And I think, in a way, music provides us with a breadth that we don't have in architecture.

Now, I was in Milwaukee a week ago; I just left, yes, a week ago. I was in Milwaukee, and I wanted to see the new art museum there.

MR. PRITIKIN: Oh, yes.

MR. MELCHERT: I can't think of the man's name – Casa [Santiago Calatrava] – something Spanish. Wow, what a building! Oh, my goodness, it's breathtaking! I mean, it's so beautiful and so fascinating, and there is – it seems both so simple and complex at the same time.

MR. PRITIKIN: That's great.

MR. MELCHERT: Unfortunately, it may be inappropriate for an art museum because you look at the building and you – no, I don't want to see the art now. [Laughs.]

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, they also – this is gossip, but they have an edifice complex. They're getting criticized for not having programs or collections worthy of the building.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, that's –

MR. PRITIKIN: And they're also – they can't afford to operate the building.

MR. MELCHERT: They can't afford to operate it? Well, see, it's a blue-collar town, for one thing. A lot of industry has moved away. But right now – I mean, it just opened recently. Well, they've got a director from the Tate coming, and maybe with his English accent – [laughs] – he can get some money somewhere.

But, I mean, that building – and the landscaping. You know, there's a bridge in front of the museum. You can approach the museum from across the street by way of a bridge. Well, I was in a car, so we entered the museum at the parking garage. It's a little bit like going to the Getty in Santa Monica, where you can park and then you go in, only there the parking is in the same building, elevated. But I wanted to see the bridge anyway, so we went up and left the building to cross the bridge and then came back.

And the bridge spans this long strip of land that's been planted very simply, very formally, with hedges and water fountains – and I don't know fountains – again, I don't know; I'm going to guess 100 to 200 yards of fountains – they're about this big – that catch the light. And it's in the – it goes north and south, so that in the morning it's glowing from the sun coming in from this side; in the afternoon it's glowing from the sun coming that way – marvelous planning. It's like Versailles in terms of its formality.

And then you look at this building; it's a wonderful building, and inside is just as terrific as the outside, where the light – all white walls with these many apertures that let the light in, and you get the color of the sky affecting the color of the walls. It's right by the water, so it's situated very beautifully. And I found it just thrilling.

MR. PRITIKIN: Is it in the [Frank] Gehry school of –

MR. MELCHERT: Not at all.

MR. PRITIKIN: It's the other direction, then?

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes.

MR. PRITIKIN: More like the Getty?

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, no, no. Not – it's unlike anything we have in the States. It's like – it's closer to some kind of airplane or something, you know, a ship, maybe, something like that. It's very sculptural, like some kind of new kind of automobile, you know – but it's sort of like that. Yeah, a kind of airplane maybe better than automobile because it looks like it could take off.

Well, in any event, I mention this just that – in relation to an environment, I mean, it adds something that was never in this country before. I mean, it's unique, and I can't think of any building I've seen in America that's like it. It's like looking at a miracle.

MR. PRITIKIN: Wow.

MR. MELCHERT: All right, now. How many such miracles from the past do we have? Well, not as many as a city like Rome. [Frencesco] Borromini did some churches in Rome, two particularly: one, San Carlino, where he works with ovals inside, and then another one, Saint Ivo, where he's got spiraling things.

Now, when you have that sort of thing behind you, like, around you, you see and it's part of your world; you have present around you these wonderful visions creative people have had. And, you know, Milwaukee adds one to ours, but – you're going to have to remind me now how I get back to what we were talking about.

MR. PRITIKIN: Well, we were talking about tradition and breaking out of it.

MR. MELCHERT: Tradition and breaking out – oh, yeah, okay.

Well, here's an example of a break from tradition in a sense, but where I see it relating to – okay, relating to something is Corbusier's first building. He conceived of – it was a house, an international house, or something like that. International style, it was called. Well, he built a house. He wanted a house to look as though – the way – you know, you look out in the street in the morning and there's a car parked out there; it wasn't there yesterday – a car parked, and you just accept it. You look out the window; there's a house there – [laughs] – my goodness, that wasn't there yesterday. And some of it was arrived – he wasn't interested in its relating to a site at all. He thought of it as a machine, that everything had to function for you, and, you know, lots of planes, and windows and light. It was like a house in that it functioned as a house, but it was like a machine in its concept. And I see this museum relating a bit to Corbusier's notion of –

MR. PRITIKIN: We were talking about – you were saying that we didn't have great architecture, and music was our substitute.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh. Well, we have some great architecture; I don't want to say we don't have any.

MR. PRITIKIN: [Laughs.] But that was leading to –

MR. MELCHERT: But, okay, with the music, yeah – what we don't have in terms of what Paul de Marinis could have listened to 300 years ago. I mean, we don't have buildings from 300 years ago, but you do have music from that time, which has point of view and is based on experience, comes out of someone's experience. And I have no difficulty in this kind of space travel from one century to another with music any more than I do with buildings.

MR. PRITIKIN: I always felt that the reason that American artists have come to dominate contemporary art, or did for that period of time, was not having the burden of history –

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: – and we could reinvent ourselves and art forms with that. And still, when I – so often when I work with European artists, they're making references to things from art history from hundreds of years ago, and American artists very rarely do that. I mean, it may be more ignorant, but it's more liberating.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yeah. No, that is quite true.

MR. PRITIKIN: All of which – we're trying to get back to your question of art and craft.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yeah. All right, okay.

MR. PRITIKIN: [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: But one thing about pottery-making, again – and this relates to all the growth of functional crafts, for example, textiles, basketry, things of this sort, furniture. It relates to the cycle of birth and death that just goes on all the time, where, with every new generation there must be – things that have been used and worn out have to be replaced. And so, 30 years is sort of – how should I say it? There's a life span of activity, in a sense, in what you think of 30 years, whereas, if I were to say something like – I'll say a painting – I'd rather use something else, say with a performance, for instance. When I first came to understand performance and to attend performances, the impermanence of the event was an essential factor.

MR. PRITIKIN: Right.

MR. MELCHERT: And so that if the performance lasted two hours, it was gone. And it always reminded me of conversations with someone. You know, you have it, and it may – the memory of it may stay with you, and it can affect change, but it's gone. And the last thing you would want is for your conversations to be taped. [Laughter.]

But anyway, there is a sort of life span to, like, connected to what we do and what we hope, you know, what will happen and so on. A lot of buildings in America are only meant to be around for a short time, so that – I think of a video. I did a piece on film one time. I thought it was a very good piece; it was projection. When Sue Foley, one summer, invited four of us artists from the Bay Area to do installations at the museum – let's see, it was Bob Kinmont. He had a room –

MR. PRITIKIN: That's the Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco?

MR. MELCHERT: The Museum of Modern Art in San Francisco. Bob Kinmont did a chair. He made a chair, wooden chair, that was in a little room. One person could go in at a time and shut the door, and you're in this room by yourself. And on the seat of the chair he carved – I think it was, "I love you" – wrote it backwards. So what you were to do was to go in the room, close the door, and drop your trousers and sit on this, your flesh pressing against the type in the seat of the chair long enough for it to imprint "I love you" on your rear end. [Laughter.]

And Tony May, was his name, had an installation that was terrific; and I can't tell you what it was, but I just remember my impression at the time was –

MR. PRITIKIN: Wasn't it the books, the *Robinson Crusoe* books?

MR. MELCHERT: Maybe it was; maybe it was. That could well be.

MR. PRITIKIN: There was a big boat. Nah.

MR. MELCHERT: That's right. And someone else, and I'm forgetting who that is – well, what I did, I had a film loop projecting this huge head on the wall – my head with – I'd stuck it in wet clay, something I did later for a performance – I mean, for an event. But this was–

MR. PRITIKIN: Right, right. This was before that.

MR. MELCHERT: – before that. I put my head in the slip and proceeded to eat a green apple while the slip was drying. And I was on a chair that kept moving, a stool that kept moving, so that the filming wasn't continuous. It would be like maybe every five seconds or something. So you would get this turning around of this head, and it was drying, and you could see it beginning to crack and everything.

Well, the technology wasn't available yet to have it be a video projection. So the piece turned out to last about three days because that film loop would get tangled and it would tear the film. And so, the technology can affect the length of a work.

I think of Eva Hesse's things, how many of them are gone, and [Marcel] Duchamp's using paint that eventually turned color. It was a yellow that, I think, went black, in a big glass, maybe – something like that.

But at any rate, we have a tendency to think of time as something linear – a linear progression, whereas I don't associate pottery with linear; it's cyclical. You're replacing – sort of, nature played a break, and the need for replacement.

MR. PRITIKIN: So does the kind of work that you and Voulkos made break that cycle? Is it outside that cycle or is it within that cycle?

MR. MELCHERT: Well, what Voulkos was doing was sculpture.

MR. PRITIKIN: So you're talking about pottery functions –

MR. MELCHERT: I'm talking about pottery function.

MR. PRITIKIN: – oh, okay. Okay, okay.

MR. MELCHERT: See, I'm talking about, you know, pure functional fiber work, for example –

MR. PRITIKIN: Right.

MR. MELCHERT: – wearable things, chairs, furniture.

MR. PRITIKIN: So is that the distinction, it's functional? I mean, the time, the relationship with time is different in

art?

MR. MELCHERT: I think that's one. I think that's one. Now, it doesn't mean that – you know, we've got pottery from the Sung Dynasty that's still around, but it wasn't made to be around for, you know, a thousand years, whatever.

MR. PRITIKIN: So why did it last, because it was so beautiful?

MR. MELCHERT: Somebody took care of it.

MR. PRITIKIN: Because?

MR. MELCHERT: They treasured it. Well, some things are simply buried and then dug up. But –

MR. PRITIKIN: So the equivalent in art of being worn out is being out of fashion. [Laughs.]

MR. MELCHERT: Well, one thing – what's cyclical with art is that it goes out of fashion and comes back. We have to – we seem to need to bring things back for another look. And some things don't hold up the second time around. That's true – that's also true.

MR. PRITIKIN: So we're – oh, go ahead.

MR. MELCHERT: Well, your questions are ones that I will have to think about more – I'm glad you raised them – because at some juncture I'd like to just write about this, and it's better to think through something like this through conversations than just by yourself.

MR. PRITIKIN: Is there anything that we haven't covered?

Your biography – it may be true of all biographies – is about the people in your life pretty much.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah.

MR. PRITIKIN: And it seems like you're still, after all these decades, still working out your feelings and relationship with Voulkos.

MR. MELCHERT: Oh, yes. Well, for a long time, because he had enormous influence on me. I mean, he rescued me from what I think would have been a rather pedestrian life. I mean, I would have been a teacher in some college in the Midwest, I suppose. And I might have been a painter, I imagine – not a very good one. [Laughs.]

MR. PRITIKIN: Maybe that's a good place to stop.

MR. MELCHERT: Yeah, it's all right with me.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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