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Oral history interview with Nancy Crow, 2002 December 18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Nancy Crow on December 18, 2002. The interview took place in Baltimore, Ohio and was conducted by Jean Robertson 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.

Nancy Crow and Jean Robertson have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

Interview

MS. ROBERTSON: This is Jean Robertson interviewing Nancy Crow at her studio in Baltimore, Ohio, on December 18th, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

What I'm going to ask you about first is some of your biography, especially as it relates to you as an artist, then we'll get more into the work you've made and your creative process and your ideas.

So, just for the record, when and where were you born?

MS. CROW: I was born August 31st, 1943, in Loudonville, Ohio, actually in my mother and father's bedroom.

MS. ROBERTSON: Really? Expected to be born at home?

MS. CROW: I was told the doctor wanted to go on a vacation so he decided to give mother some medicine that made me come faster than they expected, so they didn't make it to the hospital. And I've always been told that I was born on the floor, under the sewing machine.

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.] Like an archetypal, apocryphal story.

MS. CROW: [Laughs.] Yes. Right.

MS. ROBERTSON: Can you tell me something about your parents? I know your father was a tailor's apprentice and that he died when you were about 12, but what do you remember about him?

MS. CROW: Well, it's interesting, because I try and try and try to remember him, and I don't do a very good job. I think he had very high standards, which certainly impacted me. And what I mean by that is he was a perfectionist, so he really believed that if you were going to do something, it had to be done well. And I think I certainly got that from him somehow, either verbally or genetically. He tended to be very black and white, and I now understand why. I didn't know it before, but I understand why, because his father abandoned him and his mother when she was pregnant with their second baby at age 27. So my father was very dedicated to his family because of that. And no lying, absolutely no lying was allowed. We were punished severely for lying. And I also feel that because of what happened to his mother, he was very close to his mother and saw how she suffered. [Crying.] Sorry, I'm just a little emotional. He really believed – I'm sorry, I didn't want to cry.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's all right.

MS. CROW: He really believed that women should have every chance. And so I think he was way before his time, when you consider that was in the 1940s, and insisted that every single one of his five daughters go to college and supposedly on to graduate school. So we were very encouraged. In my family I always felt no limits were set and there were no limitations.

MS. ROBERTSON: Were you aware of his profession? I mean, do you feel like you got at all interested in cloth or fabric because of him being a tailor?

MS. CROW: [Tailoring was not his profession. He simply worked as a tailor's apprentice as a very young man.] Those are all things that, frankly, I don't know about him, other than we had this drawer in our dining room that we were not allowed to touch as children, and my mother always said, "That is where your father keeps all his tailoring equipment." And every now and then I'd pull it out, pull the drawer out and peek. But it was never a dialogue I ever got into with him. I mean, these are all things that I feel sad about that I didn't really know about my dad. I always saw him as a man who went off to work. He was very strict with us, but at the same time we were always encouraged to be very creative. I mean, there was that dynamic of a stern person with whom you have to be an honest, truthful person, but at the same time, he also was always encouraging creativity. And that's a little fight that I have within myself.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. Where were you in the line-up?

MS. CROW: I was the youngest.

MS. ROBERTSON: Of seven?

MS. CROW: There were eight children altogether. Mother was young, she was only a teenager when she got married, and she had her first child by the time she was 20. They had four quickly in succession. So she had four tiny children, and then they had an eight-year wait. Well, I shouldn't say "wait" – an eight-year space, and my twin sisters were born, and then another eight years, and Andrew and I were born. The thing that I heard through my mother – it's nothing I ever heard my father say, because my mother and father really never argued in front of us and never had what I would call intense discussions in front of us; it was always done in their bedroom. So I don't know how my father thought about things, but my mother always said she felt that Dad was overwhelmed by Andrew and me because he was nearly 50 years old when we were born, and he felt like he hadn't had a chance to do anything other than just work and work and work, trying to sustain this family, all these kids. A person today could say, "Well, WHY did you have all those kids?" And I certainly asked my mom that all the time. But I don't know why they had such a big family. So.

MS. ROBERTSON: Was art part of your life when you were a child?

MS. CROW: It always was, because my mother, I think, my mother was a very creative person who didn't know how to channel it, so she was a person who was always – I don't know. I remember going to preschool in the basement of a woman's house, and the whole preschool was all about art. That was all we did. We spent the whole morning doing art projects. It was not about learning to read. So I think in some funny way my mother was always trying to push us to do artistic things. We didn't have a lot of toys, but she always made sure that we had colored papers to cut up, and we had plenty of crayons and scissors and a lot of collage and pasting. It wasn't sewing, because she didn't sew. She did embroider.

MS. ROBERTSON: Were you aware of artists who were in museums? Did you imagine that there was such a thing as the profession of an artist?

MS. CROW: Yes, because my father – I always say my father, and I don't know if that would be really totally true, but we always had good art books. They were always there on the shelf. We were always allowed to take them off the shelf and look at them. We went to museums. That was always part of our upbringing. It was made clear to us that there was great art out there and we needed to be aware of it.

MS. ROBERTSON: You were lucky.

MS. CROW: Yes, I think in a lot of ways we were terribly lucky, very lucky. And then my father – I mean, I think that's unusual again. Here is a guy who basically grew up in a tiny town, a poor family, and yet he loved Oriental rugs. So after the Second World War, when he had some money, he went out and he himself chose the rugs for our house and we had Oriental rugs in all the rooms. I was still just a young kid, probably eight years or younger, and I just remember the rugs coming in and all the patterning in the house, and I was just overwhelmed by it.

MS. ROBERTSON: That's wonderful, I mean, because you have that sense of pattern now; you obviously got that embedded in you at an early age.

MS. CROW: I think it's because it was during – see, I was born in '43, and the '40s were, as I remember, a drab time in our house. I mean, the kitchen was so drab. I just remember when Mother got that first set of Pyrex mixing bowls. I don't even know if you know what I'm talking about. The huge one was yellow?

MS. ROBERTSON: I think I remember them. Were they white on the inside –

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: – and colored on the outside?

MS. CROW: I was so overwhelmed by those four mixing bowls and those bright colors, and those were things that made a huge impression on me because everything seemed so drab until Dad was able to have more money. It was probably around 1950.

MS. ROBERTSON: After preschool, when you went through school, did you have art in your formal schooling after that, up until college, I mean?

MS. CROW: It's interesting because I think about what's happening today in the school systems and I think back to our little town of Loudonville, and what I remember is that we always had incredible art programs, even from the time I was in first grade. And I remember how important they were to the community. The music and the art

programs were always a big thing in the fall and a big thing in the spring where the art teacher would mat everybody's work and put displays all through the entire school. And so it was always integrated into my life some way.

MS. ROBERTSON: When you went on, then, to college, did you go there specifically thinking you wanted to study art?

MS. CROW: I actually started out in home economics, and I lasted two weeks because what I learned very quickly is, I have no tolerance for there being a set answer to things. At that time, I felt home economics was: "This is the way you can tomatoes; this is the way you do that." And so I got out of home economics and went over to the Fine Arts Department because I liked the idea that art's a discovery, that you don't know this thing at the beginning, but you discover it. And that's how I operate the best.

MS. ROBERTSON: And we're talking about Ohio State University.

MS. CROW: Yes. I went to Ohio State University.

MS. ROBERTSON: And when you went over to the Art Department, were you just exploring different mediums or was there something that was just –

MS. CROW: No, I didn't know what I wanted to do. Probably the main thing I did during high school was draw, not much painting, but drawing with pencil. And I had taken sewing in 4-H, but I was directed towards making clothing, and so that didn't really terribly interest me, and I had no concept that sewing could go anywhere beyond making clothes. So I didn't know who I was or what I wanted to do; I just knew I wanted to do art.

MS. ROBERTSON: And did you have mentors or teachers along the way in your schooling that were particularly important to you?

MS. CROW: I have a terrible memory for what's happened in the past. I wish I could think it through. But the general idea that I can remember is, my freshman and sophomore year [centered on design courses] – I went through Ohio State when it offered classical training, which they got rid of, basically, around 1970. All the teachers [1940-1970] then had been classically trained, and that's how we were taught. We had really in-depth design. What I remember about design is that either I have a learning problem and I don't hear what's being said to me, or – I felt I never understood what they were trying to teach. You know, I'd do all these design exercises and I never understood what I was doing. I mean, I hate to admit that now, but when I think back about it – [because I now teach design myself] – I felt like it wasn't until my junior year of college that I began to have some inkling about what underpins composition; what's it all about.

But at that time, I took ceramics, and a professor named Edgar Littlefield took a real interest in me after my very first class that fall and told me I was so talented that I needed to stay with ceramics. That's the first time I had a professor approach me and say, you know, you've got some strong ability in some area. Never when I was taking design. And I only took one class in painting, and I didn't like painting. It wasn't of interest to me.

MS. ROBERTSON: I know you studied weaving.

MS. CROW: Not really till graduate school because we weren't allowed to. It was not part of the Art Department. It was part of – what do you call it, where you work with people who are handicapped? It was occupational therapy, which I don't even know if they have anymore. That's where the looms were. And we weren't allowed to do any textiles. They didn't bring anyone in until I was in graduate school.

MS. ROBERTSON: Was that because they didn't have a teacher, or was it actually a prejudice against textiles?

MS. CROW: Well, I always thought it was a prejudice, but for some reason, they brought in a woman from Cranbrook when I was ready to start graduate school, and she left after probably about five years. And when she left, they closed the department [after another three years with another instructor]. So the program was very short-lived.

MS. ROBERTSON: You went straight on to graduate school from undergraduate?

MS. CROW: No. I finished my undergraduate degree in Fine Arts in 1965, and then John and I decided to get married. He was working for USAID, United States Agency for International Development, and they were sending him to Ecuador. So we went down to Ecuador to live.

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh, my gosh.

MS. CROW: He worked on his master's thesis there. When we came back home we started graduate school. I got accepted into the MFA program at that time. I think they took four or six of us in ceramics.

MS. ROBERTSON: Were you doing ceramics in Ecuador?

MS. CROW: No. I actually did something stupid. I agreed to teach sixth grade at the American School. I was trying to teach sixth grade and I didn't know a thing about what I was doing. It was a disaster. I should have been traveling around the country collecting textiles. No, I didn't do any art there in Ecuador.

MS. ROBERTSON: So you went into the MFA program in ceramics?

MS. CROW: Ceramics as a major with a minor in weaving. Ruth Mary Pappenthien, the instructor, was teaching tapestry weaving.

MS. ROBERTSON: When did you finally find your way to working with cloth and quilting?

MS. CROW: Well, I've always felt that had I been introduced to it as an art form early on, I might have been doing it as an undergraduate. But it was something that had to happen on its own. In my mind it wasn't until 1970, when I was waiting for Nathaniel to be born – we were living in Brazil by that time, after we finished graduate school. As I was waiting for him to be born, I have no idea why I started to piece a quilt for him, because it's just not something my mother ever did or talked about. And it still didn't make any sense to me as far as an art medium. I was still a tapestry weaver. [But I made a quilt for Nathaniel in red, white, yellow and black. My mother helped me with it. It was twin size.]

When we moved to Athens, Ohio, in 1974, I joined the textile guild in Athens. We had a good textile guild then. They had a very good textile department at Ohio University. They had two full-time professors. All of us were weavers, but for some reason, about five or six of us decided to start making quilts. I have no idea why. I cannot put my finger on why. We met every week. We were so excited that we met every single week, taking turns in each other's homes. That was when the spark plugs started going off and the light bulbs started flashing and I was starting to put two and two together.

But it took probably till 1976, another two years, for me to realize I loved quiltmaking! It was sort of like I had to get my footing in terms of the technique, and then I started to realize that this was the way – I love shape and line, and I wasn't really able to identify that. It was just the beginning of my being able to identify how important those are to me. And in quilts, I could start to lay this down in a much more direct way than weaving. In weaving, you know, you have a shape here, but you have to build it up with the thread going across. With quilting, I could cut the shape and have that whole shape in front of my eyes.

MS. ROBERTSON: It seems like the quilting lets you be more intuitive.

MS. CROW: Yes, I would say.

MS. ROBERTSON: And change your mind.

MS. CROW: Mm-hmm.

MS. ROBERTSON: I'm not sure a weaver would agree, but since the weaving has to be set up ahead of time.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: Were your designs, then – were you reacting to traditional quilts, or right away were you thinking of this as an art form that was contemporary?

MS. CROW: No, I definitely bit off the tradition and stuck with it. I think that's probably how I learn. I have to somehow push through the traditional or classical part and then come out the other end.

MS. ROBERTSON: That goes along with that Ohio State training that you said was classical in terms of painting and sculpture, but you did the same thing with quilting.

MS. CROW: Yes. I mean, one person could say I am a slow learner. I might say I'm a slow learner, but that's how I process. I also worked in a very mirror-imaged and symmetrical format. I was told over and over again at graduate school that working symmetrically was a sign of lesser intelligence. Boy, was that ever thrown in our face constantly, that symmetrical work wasn't as intelligent as asymmetrical work.

MS. ROBERTSON: And yet you went against what –

MS. CROW: That's who I am. That is who I was at the time. And as hard as I tried to do asymmetrical work, I couldn't. I felt so uncomfortable, and maybe that's why I struggled so much in design in my freshman and sophomore year. I have no idea. I don't know how much any professor articulates any of this kind of information so you can understand it really well. I try to be really supportive and more articulate about it with my students

because I see right off the bat there are people who seem to be natively symmetrical and asymmetrical. And so I don't see it as though one is worse than the other or better than the other. I think it's kind of what your make-up is genetically.

But I don't want to work symmetrically now.

MS. ROBERTSON: No, you're working now seems like it's –

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: – very quirky.

MS. CROW: Yes, and that's what I really love, but it took me all those years of processing to get to that point.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you wish that you had had more training in what you do now when you were in a formal educational program? I mean, basically even though you've got an MFA, you're self-taught as a quilt artist in some ways.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you think it would have been helpful to have had fiber classes in graduate school or undergraduate school that were specifically on quilting?

MS. CROW: Well, you know, I'd like to say that I wish I had started understanding all this much younger. I mean, we all feel that way. I don't know how to answer that because I feel like I've come to so many ways of working that are specifically my own, and I don't know if I could have come to those if I had been too influenced by – I don't know. That's a good question. I have no way to answer it. I have come to a lot of ways of working just by sheer hard work, and not very many people work the way I do, even though in my teaching I kind of give a little bit around the edges, but I don't believe in teaching the core of what I do, because that's who I am and that's how I got there.

MS. ROBERTSON: Well, maybe coming at the question in a different way. With the students that you teach, what kind of differences do you see between ones who are self-taught as quilters and ones who might have learned it in a formal program in college and now they're coming to learn some new skills? Not that there are a lot of formal programs out there.

MS. CROW: Yes. Boy, that's a loaded question because I've been thinking a lot about this of late. I'm going to say it the way it's coming out of my brain right now, and I don't want it to sound egotistical, because that's not what I mean. But what I discovered is, when I have the students in class, because I'm there watching what they're doing and I set up design exercises and I'm critiquing, all at the same time, I can guide them into doing some pretty fabulous, terrific work. That's my point of view. But when they go back out on their own again, they revert right back to doing their schlocky work, what I call their schlocky work. And I finally realized after teaching in New Zealand – I was there for three weeks last month – you know what? People just don't get it, and you can't make them get it if it's not sinking in. And I finally – it's probably a blessing that I've come to this, because I kept saying all these years – I've been teaching 25 years – "How can people be so gifted and talented and then go back and do the same old schlock? What is going on here that they do good composition work in the class, then they get back on their own and they're back doing crummy composition work again?"

I've even forgotten what the question is now.

MS. ROBERTSON: I was asking if you saw a difference between students who have trained in a formal program versus students who are just learning on their own, in terms of quilting.

MS. CROW: No, because I've come to the conclusion that there is some – what is it? – there is something that you can't even quantify that allows this person over here to make breakthroughs that are fabulous, and maybe they're isolated and they don't even have all that much training, and then you have a person over here who has access to everything, the best work, the best books, and they don't get it. I don't know what that is.

MS. ROBERTSON: Well, I want to talk now about your own creative process and maybe how it evolved over time. You said you love composition and line, and of course you love color.

MS. CROW: Mm-hmm.

MS. ROBERTSON: How do you start working on a new series of quilts? Did you always work in series?

MS. CROW: Well, I didn't always work in series, although certainly I started to get that idea even as an undergraduate. I think, again, if I had to be critical of my own education, that's probably an area that should

have been far more articulated to us as students. I mean, it's kind of hinted at in graduate school that it's time to get on with a series now so you start to find out who you are and the work becomes identified with you. I mean, I feel like if a person works in a body, then the body of work becomes identified with them, whereas if they're just skipping all over the map working in all different styles, whether they're styles of people who are their peers or styles of people who died a hundred years ago, then you don't know whose work it is.

MS. ROBERTSON: So that's good in terms of your career –

MS. CROW: Right.

MS. ROBERTSON: – to have an identifiable body of work, but also in terms of the work itself, I mean, if you have an idea and work through it in a series, there must be something inherently attractive about it.

MS. CROW: Okay, then I'll go back and address that more specifically. That's also another thing I've had to learn myself, and maybe we're going back to my being a slow learner and not hearing things that were said to me or whatever I read, but I have also discovered that working in a series is important because there's a tendency on the part of an artist to want to resolve everything in one piece, and I think that's a grand mistake because it's biting off too much. So why not break it down and start at some point and do that piece, see what's wrong with it, go on to the next piece and resolve that area? At the same time, you're constantly making connections back and forth, which make – as you go on, the whole thing gets richer and richer. That doesn't mean that when you see the whole series of, let's say, 20 pieces, that maybe number two was still a knock-out piece in that. You know, it could still be one of the best pieces.

But I find that in teaching, that because quiltmaking is such a slow process, that people have this almost anxiety about, "Well, I've got to do it all in this one piece because I've given six months, eight months of my life to do it." And I'll say over and over, "No, you don't have to, because you're already biting off more than you can handle." You have to figure out, to me, where your ground is – visually, or with color, or with shapes and lines, or with proportions, or with composition – and bring it back to a level where you can make some progress and not drown.

MS. ROBERTSON: For yourself, what would be the trigger for a series? I mean, what usually starts you off?

MS. CROW: Well, I honestly have never had real problems with coming up with ideas. If anything, I have more ideas than I know how to shift through. And if anything, for me it's reining myself in and saying, "You've got to get focused, because you're just letting your brain go all over the place, just kind of running around."

Generally an idea, for me, is going to end up being geometric in terms of how it's seen. In other words, I'm not interested in doing landscape, but I may have looked out here and looked at landscape – like, *Constructions # 17* is definitely about tall trees, but it comes out as line, all vertical lines. I don't want it to obviously look like trees. But nonetheless, all my newest quilts are under the umbrella of constructions. And that idea hit me in 1995. I didn't pick up on it again until 1997. I've now made 64 quilts, been working on it since then, and they're all under the umbrella of things being constructed: I don't know; that is enough. That's all I need, for an idea in my mind; it just takes me in so many different directions in how things fit together like puzzles.

MS. ROBERTSON: Did that relate to moving this barn onto your property at all?

MS. CROW: Yes, I think it did, because if you go into the main huge room of the barn and look at particularly the roof, you'll see it's gridded, the ceiling, the way the wood has been put together.

MS. ROBERTSON: Because construction, I mean, I think of architectural construction and pieces of a – [inaudible] – building fitting together.

MS. CROW: I brought this magazine down here because a statement in an article really hit me. This is the interview in the current issue of the *New Yorker* magazine, and this is about a man who lived during the Holocaust, who actually died in the Holocaust, as a young artist. This is really what I believe, and here's what he says. His name is Schultz. I don't remember what his first name is. "All artists spend their lives interpreting images that are stamped in their minds during childhood." I believe that. I believe that for me – and I know you know this from my book – I would lie in bed at night staring out the gridded windows in my bedroom, because we had those panes, those small panes with the wood between –

MS. ROBERTSON: True Divided.

MS. CROW: Divided. True Divided Pane windows or whatever they called them. As a child, those windows just impacted me incredibly, and it just comes up over and over in my work, the fact that I was up in a room where there were a lot of windows, and all I saw were big trees out the windows. So I think those two images, the gridded window and the tree, have just impacted me.

MS. ROBERTSON: Just for the record, what's the issue of that *New Yorker*?

MS. CROW: The issue is dated December 16th, 2002.

MS. ROBERTSON: And it's an interview. Just the page number would be good.

MS. CROW: It's page 99.

MS. ROBERTSON: When you work on a series like – let's take the *Constructions*. Do you work on one and finish it, and then the second and finish it, or do you work on many at once? Take me through your process.

MS. CROW: I mean, I don't know why we all tick the way we do. I am a person who gets bored very easily, so I need to be multi-tasked and I need to be stimulated all the time, so for me, it's better to work on multiple pieces.

Also, I'm going through what I call my ruthlessly honest stage. I'm trying to weed out all kinds of behavior that keeps me from going forward in my work because I feel like at age 59, I really can't waste time on things that don't help, like getting depressed or spinning my wheels because I hate what I'm doing. So it's better to have at least three, if not more, quilts going at the same time so if I get stopped on this one, I can move over to this wall. And since I've taught myself to work this way, I've become far more efficient, and happy, actually, happier about doing my artwork and wanting to be in my studio.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A]

MS. ROBERTSON: How long have you been doing it that way, working on several at once? Did you figure that out pretty early on?

MS. CROW: I think this, frankly, came after you interviewed me the last time. By 1990, I had had it with quiltmaking. I was sick of it. I hated it.

MS. ROBERTSON: By 1990?

MS. CROW: Yes. I said: "This is it. If I don't learn how to work in a new, different way, I'm outta here, because I'm not going to give another bit of my time to making quilts," because up to that point, it had become so tedious. I was working with templates. All my work was mirror-imaged and symmetrical. I knew that I could never really go on if I didn't figure out a way to get out of this. I thought I had dug myself into a hole. My work had gotten incredibly complex with prints, but I felt like in some ways I had dug myself into a hole. 1990 was a pivotal year. I made virtually nothing that entire year, except for one tiny piece. I kept working on it, thinking, "Why can't I allow myself to work asymmetrically?" I kept trying and I kept trying, and I didn't know how to do it.

So it took me – I finally made a piece that year that was sort of on its way, but it took me another three years to break through, to work improvisationally.

MS. ROBERTSON: I think at that time that I interviewed you, you were just starting to look at some African American quilts. Might we bring that in?

MS. CROW: Yes, bring that in, because I think that was another – I think for me visually to see particularly the work of Anna Williams. I didn't understand how it was going to impact me, but I knew that it shocked me when I saw her work because her lines ––

MS. ROBERTSON: Tell who she is.

MS. CROW: Okay. Anna Williams is – I'm making a guess on her age. She really needs to be documented, if you want to do it. She's about 72 or 73. She lives in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She's illiterate. She's totally self-taught in her quiltmaking. She started making quilts on what I'd call a regular basis when she was 58. She's now made over 300 quilts. When I saw them for the first time, it would have been 1988, '89, and I was dumbstruck because she hadn't used a ruler. And I just thought, "What's wrong with me?" This is what I'm talking about; how could I not realize that quilts – why did I think quilts had to be made with a ruler? Why did everything have to be straight? Why did I bite that off hook, line and sinker? You know? That's what I never understand about myself, that I am slow in some of my departments here.

So, seeing her quilts, the fact that the line actually could be what I call sensuous, or lyrical, just blew me out of the water. But at the time, you know, I could see this in passing, but it hadn't really kicked in. It took another couple years for it to kick in and really slap me up around the face. And she never used a ruler. Everything she did was with scissors, so that's why the lines were crooked, because she just sort of cut the way she felt.

MS. ROBERTSON: Working more intuitively.

MS. CROW: Yes, working totally intuitively, and in her case, working in a nine-foot by nine-foot room on top of a bed. She didn't work on a wall. And she made huge pieces.

MS. ROBERTSON: When we were looking at your original studio earlier, before we started the interview, you were showing me a tool that you use to cut out your pieces of fabric. Is that a new tool since this change?

MS. CROW: No, we've had rotary cutters – gosh, rotary cutters, when did they come –

MS. ROBERTSON: But I mean the way that you use it.

MS. CROW: Oh, yes, that's when the bell went off in me. I knew I wasn't going to start using scissors, like Anna, but I thought, "Man, I can take that darn rotary cutter and I can start to use it in a more expressive way." And I did. But it took me two years. I really believe you have to train the muscles. The muscles have to work with your eye and your heart. It all has to be a coordinated effort.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's like a physical skill.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes.

MS. CROW: To me it's like practicing drawing. The muscles have to get good enough to make that pencil go where you want it to go.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you use the cutter as fluidly as if it was a pencil?

MS. CROW: Oh, I'm pretty fluid. I would say that when I'm really working, cracking in my studio, I almost can sense it; it takes a couple days, but once I start to find my footing again, I can just feel the rhythm. It just flows through me into the sewing machine, into the cutting board, and back and forth, back and forth. I love it, because that calms me. It's meditative.

MS. ROBERTSON: So now do you not draw the designs?

MS. CROW: I never do. Never.

MS. ROBERTSON: You never did?

MS. CROW: All that work in there is done by eye.

MS. ROBERTSON: But what about when you used to do the symmetrical ones?

MS. CROW: All that work –

MS. ROBERTSON: With your templates.

MS. CROW: – up to 1990 my work, my compositions were done with templates, was very intellectualized. The only thing that wasn't intellectualized is what went into the shape. See, in other words, I pre-cut and made all my shapes and they all fit together like a puzzle, but what went inside those is the part that was intuitive, and that's what I loved about quiltmaking. But I didn't understand how to take it outside those parameters, and that's what I learned in the early 1990s. I honestly think, frankly, what I taught myself during that time and learned and then went out and taught on some level has been the big turning point in contemporary quiltmaking. People who have studied with me understand that, but anybody who's outside of it would not understand that because they don't know how I teach.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. Could you explain a little more about that?

MS. CROW: Well, because basically until I started going out and teaching people to cut improvisationally, no one had caught on to it. They hadn't figured it out. They all did it by – see, in appliqué, with just the appliqué, if you want to do something that's more amorphic, you can do that; you just cut that out of the fabric or you make a shape on paper and then lay that down on the fabric and do it; but then you have to painstakingly turn under and hand-piece it or do it with a machine. And I taught – I came up with ways to cut things like that and directly piece it without any templates, with nothing.

But again, to emphasize this: **"I have never taught anything about the core way I work to anybody and I never will. When I die, it's gone, because that's who I am, because it has taken years and years of working so hard to understand how to do these things technically, and I don't – I guess I feel like that's not information that any artist ever really in the end gives out. I mean, that is who they are**

and that's what their work is. I don't know, maybe I'm wrong, but I don't want to, I'm not prepared to, because it's how I can make things happen, like in *Constructions # 41*. It's been so hard to get to that point."

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. I wonder if people could even physically do it, if what you're saying is correct that you have to kinesthetically learn how.

MS. CROW: It has a lot to do with the eye. You know, we were talking about what's important. I would say what I really love are proportions. When I see proportions that are on target, it's just like, oh, my gosh, I just feel overwhelmed. So it's proportions as much as anything.

MS. ROBERTSON: Of one shape to the next?

MS. CROW: Of a line to a line, a line to a shape, how they all fit together and work in a composition. And I just go crazy over that.

MS. ROBERTSON: Another thing that looks so different to me in that work out there that's new compared to when I was here 15 years ago or however long it's been. At that time, I had the feeling that one of your challenges was to put as many colors as possible into a quilt and almost as much pattern as possible. I mean, your quilts were evolving toward more and more and more complexity in terms of –

MS. CROW: They were. They became incredibly complex.

MS. ROBERTSON: And these, there's a more – almost a minimalist aesthetic, to me. Not that they're not rich and complex, but –

MS. CROW: See, I didn't put any of my really complex pieces up because, frankly, they're at a gallery in Philadelphia. But I actually veer back and forth.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you still use as many colors?

MS. CROW: In a given piece?

MS. ROBERTSON: Mm-hmm.

MS. CROW: I would say no. I probably have pared that back to some degree, but it doesn't mean I might not in the future. I find personally that being more and more spare is the hardest, because the proportions have to be right on. And to me, it's all instinctive. It's all by eye. You have to keep re-cutting. See, I 'm willing to just cut and cut and throw away and throw away to make it happen, which I guess would be the same thing as erasing or painting over.

MS. ROBERTSON: Making lots and lots of drawings almost.

MS. CROW: Right. Exactly. Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: What do you think when you look back at the earlier, symmetrical series? I mean, do you –

MS. CROW: I almost don't know who the person was. I really don't. I feel sometimes like I don't know who the person was anymore. I mean, I think – like this piece the Smithsonian bought. I hadn't seen it for years, and pulled it out and hung it up before I sent it off. And I thought, you know, "Man, for 1977, that is one heck of a gutsy piece." I did. I felt that way about it. I thought it was a – forget the fact that I called it *Crucifixion*. I thought it was a really strong piece. And in the context of those times, it was probably strange, a bit.

MS. ROBERTSON: I don't want to lose that train of thought while we're on it, but dropping back to the '70s when you had that group of fellow artists in Athens that you were meeting with, were you aware that – I mean, in the rest of the country, most quilters were making traditional quilts, but there were a few people being more experimental. Were you aware at all of – I mean, I know you're one of the people at the forefront of it, but just how radical it was to be branching out into your own –

MS. CROW: I don't think we were. We were too isolated yet.

MS. ROBERTSON: I guess what I'm trying to ask is how much at the beginning you were working in isolation from –

MS. CROW: Well, I don't think at the beginning I felt – I always thought doing these quilts, going back and forth from one home to the other in Athens, was kind of an enriching experience that complimented my weaving at the time. I'm a person who's always got more things going in the fire. I just love being busy all the time. And the

kids were so little then. I was really busy with raising my kids and trying to be a weaver and fiddling around with the quiltmaking on the side.

MS. ROBERTSON: I see. So you were still weaving. You weren't really quilting.

MS. CROW: No, no. I was weaving. I considered myself a weaver at the time. Yes, I didn't consider myself a serious quiltmaker. I think 1979 was the year I finally said, "Okay, make up your mind. You're either going to weave or you're going to make quilts." And I put my looms away in 1979. But that was the first year I quit weaving. I think by 1978, it was starting to settle in that, "Wow, I love quiltmaking!" But I had to put the looms away and get them out of my sight so I would be focused on quiltmaking.

MS. ROBERTSON: And then when did you make the break from working with the traditional patterns?

MS. CROW: I would say that 1989 was the last year I worked in my old, traditional way with commercial prints. Starting in 1990, I started little by little working with more what I call hand-dyed solids. And I probably did – no, I don't think I did. Honestly, when I think back about my quilts, I don't think I used prints at all anymore, almost, after 1990. I actually tried this year to work with prints again, and I can't do it. It's a whole different way of thinking. In many ways I have a lot of respect for my early work because it's one thing to cut this out as one big shape of colors; it's another thing to think of that shape filled up with visual texture and what is it doing in there.

MS. ROBERTSON: And then you put it next to another visual texture and –

MS. CROW: Yes, exactly. It's a lot of work, enormous amount of work, actually.

MS. ROBERTSON: What attracts you to solids now? Or maybe, what makes you not want to work with the prints?

MS. CROW: I think it's because I'm so in love with pure shape and line and proportions, and I feel like I need to get those so tight and so squared away under my belt, and I still think I have a lot of work to do with that. I mean, I think one is always teaching, fine-tuning one's eye visually. And I don't know, I'm just so excited about working that way that I – I don't know, some things I can't explain.

MS. ROBERTSON: You were talking about when you get in the right frame of mind, you can really be working so fluidly in your studio. Can you describe a little bit about your studio routine? I mean, do you tend to work in spurts, that you'd work for a month and then not work for a month? Do you work every day?

MS. CROW: Well, I think as an artist, first of all I think you have to be very driven to develop. And I don't know where the drive comes from. And then the next thing is you have to figure out how to focus your thoughts and your energies so you're productive. And I think that one of the big struggles for an artist is always the administrative side and the artistic side. So I would be the first to say that's been an ongoing struggle for me, is how to balance out the administrative side so that it doesn't eat up week after week after week. I find that when I become committed to doing my artwork, then all of a sudden the administrative work becomes so unimportant to me that I let a lot of stuff go that needs to be attended to. I find that I'm good about getting into my studio at a set time and I'm a workaholic. I mean, if I get into the routine of being down at my huge studio in the timber frame barn – particularly down here like, let's say, by no later than 8:30 AM, I will go up for meals, but I'll often work till 10 or 11 at night, day after day. And I physically can do it. I have a lot of stamina and I love doing it.

MS. ROBERTSON: And when you're in your studio, are you in silence, or do you play music?

MS. CROW: I play music, but I realize that it's just noise, because I have a very vivid imagination. I'm pretty much inside my brain. I do like to try to make connections – I don't know how to put it a better way – that come – these are connections that I think only come when you're relaxed. In other words, I try to let myself go deeper into my work.

Actually, that's where I am in my work now. I'm trying to work up to a much higher level. And it also means I have no one to talk to, because almost nobody in quiltmaking's trying to do that anymore. Most people plateau and they stay at their plateau, but I'm trying to make inroads into understanding about where I can go with the work. And part of that is by doing the work, seeing results, analyzing the results, and part is just simply saying, "You know, you can do better than this."

MS. ROBERTSON: So you set a really high bar for yourself.

MS. CROW: Yes. That's the way I am. And I'm, frankly, pretty disappointed that almost nobody in quiltmaking is willing to do that. I'm going to just say it for the record. I feel very strongly about it. One of the disappointing things for me is that most people sell out their talent. I don't know why. I think it takes enormous courage and enormous character to keep on with your work knowing full well that at any point in time, the work may not be acceptable to anybody but yourself.

MS. ROBERTSON: I suppose if you are successful in selling a certain kind of composition and your collectors expect it, it's hard to –

MS. CROW: See, I never went down that road because I don't believe in going down that road. But I know that is probably the biggest dialogue and point of contention with most people. If the work isn't selling then they're no good. They identify with selling. Their worth as an artist is totally tied up with whether they can sell their work. And I think that's probably the biggest barrier to doing good work there is.

MS. ROBERTSON: Thinking of it too much as a commercial product.

MS. CROW: Yes, because you're not paying attention to yourself and you're not pushing yourself to do better and better work, because you know you can get away with what you're doing; people will buy it where it is. And again I can go back to my education and say, well, this is certainly not an area that was ever addressed. I can't remember their ever talking about it at undergraduate or graduate level. My attitude about it comes from my family. And if I had to put my finger on it, I couldn't tell you why. But I can tell you that my sister, Mary Crow, who is poet laureate of Colorado and my sister Martha Crow, who is now an editor at *Food and Wine* magazine in New York City, but who was a painter, feel the same way. We're all that way. We'd never compromise our work. We'd never prostitute our work. We're driven to do the best we can with the talents we were given, whatever that means. Whether we'll ever be considered good in the end is another issue.

But I would say that, going out and teaching, I rarely encounter this kind of almost fanatic attitude. Never, almost never. It's always, "Well, I can't do artwork unless it sells."

MS. ROBERTSON: But you had the gift of being self-motivated.

MS. CROW: Oh, I don't know why. I mean, I would love to know. I think it comes from our father. Again, I think it goes back to perfectionism, doing the best you can. I always thought one could find ways to earn a living without compromising one's work.

I mean. Oh, I don't care. I'll say it for the record: Here it is, "One of the best galleries for textiles in this country wanted me to have work in their gallery in February. The owner gave me a phone call a couple days ago and says, "I would like you to do such and such." And I said, "Well, I'm sorry, but I don't do commissions and I don't do work to please other people." I have a piece right now that's at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. It's in a major collection. So the gallery owner wants me to do work that's derivative of that piece because people go in there to see the show and then they want to come back to her gallery and buy a piece that looks like that piece. And she says, "Well, in that case," she says, "then I want to see slides of what you're submitting to me because I know" – here's how she put it – "I *know* what my clients will buy."

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh, my.

MS. CROW: And I thought, "Well, right there you just told me everything I need to know about you; you're not about promoting the artist. In other words, to me if a gallery owner knows a person's really good, she promotes the work because she knows it's good work. And I thought to myself, "You're just the flip." I was so shocked. Now I feel like calling her back and saying, "You know, I really don't have time and energy to put into this because it's so opposite of how I believe." So I'm debating what I'm going to do because we don't have that many galleries we can go to that are on a good scale to show our work.

MS. ROBERTSON: In terms of your own career, do you work with galleries or do you just try to –

MS. CROW: I'm working with a gallery now that I really like, and that's the Snyderman Gallery in Philadelphia.

MS. ROBERTSON: Is that S-n-y-d-e-r –

MS. CROW: – m-a-n. And the owners are Ruth and Rick Snyderman. They've had the gallery for forty years. They have a director named Bruce Hoffman, and here's what I told Bruce when he approached me. [He had shown a piece of my work off and on for the last six years, I guess, six or seven years.] I said, "First of all, I would like to have a major show," which I just had in October 2002 ["Mary Barringer and Nancy Crow," October 1-31, 2002; Snyderman Works Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania]. And then I said, "I'm not interested in the politics in the art world. I don't care anything about it. I don't like to go and schmooze with collectors. I have no personality for it. I just want to do the work. I want it to be honest work. And you take it from there. And I won't do commissions and I won't do work that anybody else wants me to do."

He says, "Fine." He says, "I have a thick skin. I can fight any battle. I'm willing to take you on."

And I said, "I don't care if my work sells." That's what I told him, which the gallery probably doesn't like to hear. So right now, that's the gallery I like working with. And maybe it won't – you know, that's one thing; if anything

you learn in life, that you can't count on anything. Right?

MS. ROBERTSON: Uh-huh.

MS. CROW: And the sooner you understand that, the better off you are. So.

MS. ROBERTSON: When you started off in the '70s, did you work with galleries?

MS. CROW: Oh, you always do. I think you have to start out on what I call a regional basis and get known. You know, get into a little local art center. Then move up to the next level and the next level.

MS. ROBERTSON: Were you showing at galleries that dealt pretty much with craft media?

MS. CROW: Yes, I would say I did. I'm trying, frankly, now to be more involved with – for instance, I was invited to be in an exhibition with three painters and a sculptor, and I'm the only textile person. And it includes that fellow from Ohio State who's so famous. What's his name?

MS. ROBERTSON: [Off mike.]

MS. CROW: No, he's a sculptor.

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh, Todd Slaughter.

MS. CROW: Yes, and this is at a university museum. So I'm trying to do more of that type of exhibiting because – I hate to say this, it sounds terrible, but it's how I feel – I don't really respect very many quiltmakers because I don't think they work hard enough. I think that's one thing I realize now at my age, that you really have to work incredibly hard.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes.

MS. CROW: You really have to work hard. You have to be so critical of what you're doing. Not enough – I don't mean to keep stopping you, but just to know what's procrastination and know what's just repetitive and what's junk, and weed it out of your work and get on.

MS. ROBERTSON: Getting back to your work environment, work routine. You have an absolutely incredible studio here, this former – I don't know what the barn was used for, but this former barn. Obviously your studio, your working space is obviously very important to you. How have you evolved to this point to get this? I mean, when you first started working –

MS. CROW: It's funny, because I realize now I felt strongly when I was in high school about – I somehow knew in high school I was going to be an artist. I didn't know what kind, but I always knew. Going to New York City by the time I was in high school was sort of a jaunt that we did about every two years. It was so important to me. I was already romantically thinking about the big studio in New York City, and probably because of my sister who is a painter. You know, she pretty much always lived in New York City. So it just was fixed in my mind, "By gum, I'm having decent space. When the time comes, I will have a decent space." I've always been focused on a good space. I absolutely have no patience – I will say this. It may be one of my shortcomings; I have no patience or interest in women who work in horrible situations because they won't – I have worked hard to get this. I've worked like a dog to get this. And I paid for all this out of my teaching. So it was a focus of mine. And I just think if you put your mind to it, you do it. And I don't understand why anybody wants to work under crummy conditions.

MS. ROBERTSON: Even when your sons were small, did you still manage to have a nice studio?

MS. CROW: I always had a space. I married a guy who understood that. I never would have gotten married otherwise, because my sisters married artists and their marriages failed because in both cases neither of my sisters were supposed to have a space; the space was supposed to go to the husband. And it was a big turning point in their marriages. And boy, that impacted me. John's the only one I ever dated who came over to the Ceramics Department at Ohio State and said, "Wow! This is interesting! I'll help you load the kilns. I'll help you do this; I'll help you do that." And, you know, we were so inarticulate way back then, I had no idea that he had his own eye. He's got a good eye, you know? He's self-taught and is just now starting, but, you know, he's good with his hands. He welds together old metal objects into fences and also bends heavy wire for mobiles.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. And just because people aren't going to be able to see it on this tape, for the record, with your studio, what are your ideal conditions that you've managed to achieve? I mean, what do you want your work space to do for you?

MS. CROW: Well, I want that big, open space like I have now, with just lots and lots of pin walls because I hate

the inefficiency of taking something down. If you only have one wall to work on, then you're going to have to take the current piece down in order to work on the next thing, and that is just totally backwards. I always say I like to go from A to B very quickly; I can't stand going backwards. So I believe if you have talent, then you do everything you can to support the talent and encourage the talent. And having all those white pin walls, having color-corrected lighting, having multiple tables. That's one of the things I hated when I was a child. Bless my mother, because she had so many kids, we had to work on the dining room table. Then we had to constantly clean it off for all the meals. And then we had to lug all the junk back out onto the table after the meal was over so we could do our artwork. So I've got this thing about having lots of tables, not to move anything.

MS. ROBERTSON: And your lights are all color-corrected, you said?

MS. CROW: Yes, they're all Verilux lighting. [Lighting that was originally developed for photographic labs and museum use.]

MS. ROBERTSON: That's great.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: Your studio that's attached to the house, I mean, that's a cornucopia of – [inaudible] – fabrics, and this studio is actually much whiter, other than the things you're currently working on. But you used to work in the other studio. I mean, do you thrive working on your own, working in an environment that has other, like, ethnic textiles from around the world and lots of materials and colors, or would you rather have all that cleaned away and just have –

MS. CROW: I think in some ways what I'd ideally like is to have all the stuff that's up at the house at one end of this room down there [pointing to the north wall of the barn]. I mean, if I weren't going to use this for teaching, I could take it over as my studio.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B]

MS. CROW: Because I'd like to be able to move more quickly between ideas and have the work space to do this in. See, because of having my knees replaced, it's taken me eight years before I could go up and down a ladder again. And now that my legs are strong enough and I can do it, I can work on big pieces. I mean, I have huge pieces at Snyderman's that I haven't been able to – I'd never be able to do them in that space at the house because visually I can never get far enough away from them. I'm working on really large line shapes, and you've got to have a distance to see what they're doing. They almost look awkward up close. So that's been a challenge this year, 2002. It's been a gift and it's been a challenge because it's made me start to reexamine composition on a much larger scale, which I want to do, but then I also like going back to work on a really intimate scale up at the smaller studio.

So I think, frankly, I like working with color, line and shape, and I love sewing, but when I'm working, I don't even think of whether it's a quilt or not. It's just I'm working with things I love.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you use any technology? I mean, has the computer made a difference, other than in your business side of your work? Do you design at all with the computer or do you use any kind of computerized sewing machine or –

MS. CROW: No. I'm not interested in any of that. I know some quiltmakers are caught up with new technology, particularly Michael James. He's printing his fabrics, I guess it's called digitalized fabrics that he's using in his newest work. I mean I've seen the work. It's nothing that interests me. I don't have anything against it, but –

MS. ROBERTSON: It's not for you.

MS. CROW: Not for me.

MS. ROBERTSON: And you said earlier today that you only have one person left who does the hand quilting for you.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: And you think that's a dying direction in art quilts, or in any quilts?

MS. CROW: Well, I'll tell you exactly – frankly, this is another sad thing that I'm only seeing because I've been teaching for so long. I am a piecer. Piecing means I put one fabric together with another fabric, either by hand with a running stitch or I do it with a machine. I happen to be a machine-piecer. Well, the way our whole culture is going now, machine-piecing is going to be a lost art also because it is too time-consuming. The way many quilts are being made today is by the use of what is called Wonder Under, which is basically a soluble glue that

goes on the back of fabrics so that – let's go back to this idea again. You cut out a shape; you put soluble glue onto the back of it by ironing it on. It looks like a piece of white paper, but it actually can wash away. And then you take that and you glue it onto the next piece. And that is how quilts are being made because it is fast. It's very sad. I think in another 50 years, a machine-pieced quilt is going to be considered valuable just because of the amount of technical work in it.

MS. ROBERTSON: I didn't realize about that.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: Now, another sort of big area I want to talk about is the content; that besides the design idea is the meaning and content in your work. And I know that some of your series in the past that I was familiar with when I lived in Ohio had specific – you worked on a series when your mother died, the *Passion* series. You worked on the *Bittersweet* series that I remember you saying it was about the relationship between a man and a woman. Do you still feel like autobiography and your personal experiences are something you're thinking about in your quilts?

MS. CROW: I would say that when that happens, it happens naturally. I don't go looking for an emotional content. It isn't necessarily happening now, only in that I am trying to do more authentic work for myself. So if there's any emotion involved, that's it.

I don't know if you're familiar with the *Chinese Souls* quilts that I did after I came back from China because of –

MS. ROBERTSON: The *Chinese Souls*?

MS. CROW: They're called the *Chinese Souls*.

MS. ROBERTSON: S-o-u-l-s?

MS. CROW: Yes. And that's because we were in the – what's it called? – The Blue Goose Pagoda. I think it's in Xian.

MS. ROBERTSON: I'm sorry to interrupt you, but is this the trip to China when you went for a month?

MS. CROW: Yes. Ohio Arts Council did an exchange with China, and four of us were chosen to go. Actually, the Chinese chose who they wanted from 20 artists. They chose two quiltmakers, a painter, and a sculptor.

MS. ROBERTSON: And this was right after Tiananmen Square.

MS. CROW: Yes. It was in September – September 1990, which was the year after Tiananmen Square. Susan Shie and I were doing a little sightseeing with an interpreter. We came out of the Blue Goose Pagoda and heard sirens coming from police cars. All of a sudden, right up in front of us – because we had come out and we were standing right there on the edge of the street – police cars came up near us, right behind them was a huge truck – like a cattle truck with wooden sides. Standing in the cattle truck were young men packed like sardines. They were about the age of my kids at the time, in their teens and early 20s.

The next thing I noticed was that every single one of these young men and boys were tied with heavy rope. It wound around their neck or head some way, around their shoulders, and their heads were pulled over like this, with their hands bound behind their back. And you see, Susan has very poor vision. I mean, she's albino and she has very poor sight. She really couldn't see what we were seeing that well. Because I kept saying, "What's going on?"

And finally I asked the interpreter, "What is going on?" and she wouldn't tell us. So I said, "You're going to have to tell me what's going on," because by that time another cattle truck had pulled up. They were stopped there in front of us because the traffic was so dense, and all these sirens were blaring on and on. And finally the interpreter, in a very hesitant emotional voice, told me that they were being driven around the city as a deterrent to scare people because they were on their way to being executed.

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh.

MS. CROW: And I tell you, I said, "I gotta get out of this country. I cannot stay here another minute. I have to leave this country." I said to the interpreter, "What have they done?" She was so upset, that's why she didn't want to tell me. What they had done was absolutely the most nothing things, like pick pocketing. Absolutely minor things. But she said, "They don't care because there are so many people and they want to stop crime, so they just drive these people around to scare people because they knew they are going to be executed."

Well, unbeknownst to Susan and me, the painter and sculptor, who came to China with us, were stationed at the

Xian Academy of Art. The school was located right across from where these boys were being taken. And I didn't know any of this, but when we got back together a couple of days later where we stayed in the same compound, they told us, "You know, it's the strangest thing, but there's a huge, long, white wall across from the Art Academy in front of this police" – I don't even know what it was, a police station or whatever. And she said, "They came out and they were painting all these – they made black dots and they put all this calligraphy under the dots. And we asked what was going on, and they said they had just executed a lot of young men and that they had to put the writing on the wall so parents could come and find out what had happened to their children."

Well, I had a piece of fabric with me; it's what is called a fat quarter and it had been resist dyed, with – actually, I think it had 16 circles. And I had some hand-embroidery thread and I started – it was like if I didn't do this, I thought I was going to crack up. I was close to hysteria, being hysterical, frightened. I just started embroidering around each of these circles. And then I did this; I made a grid.

MS. ROBERTSON: Making a grid.

MS. CROW: I made a grid, but this grid had meaning. And actually it also went through the circles, because they told us that each of those boys had to kneel down on the ground and they were shot right here. They put the gun right up and shot them right at the base of the neck. So basically, the cross – you die on the cross, or whatever, and you're killed, right there. And this is the rope going around them. So I called them *Chinese Souls*. I made ten quilts in rapid succession when I got home.

MS. ROBERTSON: It looks like the cross-hairs of a gun, too.

MS. CROW: Yes, the cross-hairs of a gun, too. All of that. And I was like a maniac there in China until I had that little thing embroidered. And that's the only thing that saved me before we got out of that country, because we were about halfway through the month by then. So that series of quilts was very, very emotional for me and it had a reason for being. But that happens only if it happens. I don't go looking for a subject to happen.

I'll show you – actually, you know, the Indianapolis Museum of Art has the finest piece from that group [*Chinese Souls #2* 1992]. Whatever her name is, she came after that piece. [Leaving the microphone briefly to bring something to show Ms. Robertson.]

MS. ROBERTSON: The textile curator?

MS. CROW: Yes. [Her name is Niloo Paydar.]

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. I can't think of her name. I don't know her, but I've seen her name.

MS. CROW: I had no idea that she was aware of that piece. And they paid – I wanted a lot of money for that.

I did a study – and I don't know if the study – [taping ends mid-sentence].

MS. ROBERTSON: This is Jean Robertson interviewing Nancy Crow at her studio in Baltimore, Ohio, on December 18th, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is the second tape.

Okay. Well, I was asking you about some of your ideas for your work, and we were talking about the *Chinese Souls* quilts, and I was commenting that it could be seen as having something of a political message because of not only mourning the boys but saying something about repression in China and the value of human life right after Tiananmen Square. So I was asking you if you normally or if you at other times have had a political or sociological, ideological message in your quilts. And you were saying that isn't really your bent.

MS. CROW: No. I really think my work is about beauty, frankly. That's what I want, beauty in what you see. And really, I want you to go into a gallery or museum and see this hanging and react to it just on that level without knowing if there is any meaning behind it.

MS. ROBERTSON: Like being just swept off your feet by the colors and shapes and the lines.

MS. CROW: Yes, just by what you see. So that's ultimately what I would have worked on in terms of doing this composition. In fact, when I look at this [showing illustration], I'm wondering why I put that dead center. Gads. Like a bulls-eye.

MS. ROBERTSON: Although maybe the real one isn't quite as contrasting.

MS. CROW: Yes, it might be that it's not. I don't remember it being so strong.

MS. ROBERTSON: What about your travels as an influence on your work? I mean, you were in China and, of course, this specific event happened. I know you've been to Mexico. I know you've done a number of Mexico –

MS. CROW: South Africa. South Africa's had a big influence, I think. But it all comes out more in probably what I call the improvisational – I don't even know how to put it. That's more the impact: the graphic and the improvisational approach to creating the object. It's not so much the social dynamics or the politics or the poverty or those kinds of things I would find in those countries.

MS. ROBERTSON: So it's not really a narrative or a story about the country.

MS. CROW: No.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's more the colors or textures or patterns that you create?

MS. CROW: Right. Right.

MS. ROBERTSON: The designs.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: Although you did have – I mean, the *Virgin of Guadalupe* had kind of that cloak she has around –

MS. CROW: Right.

MS. ROBERTSON: That was the content? I mean, for instance, say that particular series, did you have a spiritual –

MS. CROW: I think, again, that was more about goodness, you know? I mean, always a sense of, is there good in the world or not?

I don't know. I just do not sit down with my sketchbooks and start working on intellectual ideas. I just don't do that. I don't approach my work that way. It's more basically structures and then going and doing those structures totally intuitively and by eye. I don't want to do them after they've been thought out.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. You're not sitting there and thinking, this quilt is about –

MS. CROW: No.

MS. ROBERTSON: – religion, this quilt is about death.

MS. CROW: Right. No. I don't know where work like mine fits in today because today so much of the artwork is about ideas, and the ideas are almost more important than any other part of it. But I don't care, I guess, I'm going to keep doing my work the way I have to do my work.

MS. ROBERTSON: We're here in December, but I know you've got absolutely beautiful gardens, and then also in your house in here you have a lot of collections, of masks and metal – you know, these fish, these wooden fish. Do those play into your – I mean, you know, is there a landscape element in your work that would come from your gardening?

MS. CROW: No. I would say no, but it doesn't mean that – particularly with my collections, it's just constantly – I mean, just even looking up right now at those wooden fish that are on the wall, just looking for patterning. I think that's what I'm looking for, patterning; and what is the patterning doing; and why is it doing what it's doing? Just always looking for relationships.

MS. ROBERTSON: And when you collect something, I mean, you're making a pattern, in a way, by having a dozen fish next to each other or –

MS. CROW: Or in rows.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes.

MS. CROW: Yes. I love that. I just have to see things in rows and congregated. It just makes me feel really happy.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. I mean, it must make you feel happy when you see your quilts themselves exhibited as a group rather than just having one.

MS. CROW: Well, this show in October, it's funny, we drove all the way to Philadelphia from here, which is about an eight-hour drive one way. I worked myself up into a frenzy, thinking, "If this show is poorly hung, I'm going to be sick." But I walked through the door of the gallery – it's a big gallery – and found that Bruce [Hoffman], the

director, had done a first-rate job hanging the show. I just was in a state of euphoria. I couldn't believe how well done he'd done it! So that was really important. It was important to be able to see all the work at once, see that much work at once. I think I had 22 pieces in the show. ["Mary Barringer and Nancy Crow," October 1-31, 2002; Snyderman Works Gallery, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania]

MS. ROBERTSON: Wow! That's great.

Besides working on pattern and shape and composition, are there technical problems? I mean, I know you've done a lot of innovations with strip piecing. I mean, are some quilts, some series just simply you're trying to work out some technical issue?

MS. CROW: It's not even so much a technical issue as much as what I've discovered. I have discovered that by sticking with a process – (I'm just going to use the process here of strip piecing, which is a way of working technically), by working with it over and over, year after year, doors have opened and ways of working with it that no one has ever done before. Not that I'm looking for ways that no one else has done before. But I have opened doors to ways of creating a more expressive composition just because I've understood technically how to do it with strip piecing. And it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't practiced strip piecing all these years. There's no way, because none of what I'm doing is written up anywhere, so I couldn't have learned it from someone else.

MS. ROBERTSON: So it's like you've got a technical mastery that comes from experience.

MS. CROW: Absolutely. And I believe that is part of the hard work of being an artist, particularly an artist who's doing what I would consider fresh work.

MS. ROBERTSON: Does the function of quilts ever play a part in the meaning of your work?

MS. CROW: No.

MS. ROBERTSON: No.

MS. CROW: I never think about it. In fact I think sometimes, why do I make quilts, since quilts are so looked down upon in the art world? I've been talking about it with a friend of mine who loves to piece as much as I do, and we both came to the conclusion there's just no way, there's no way to explain it to anyone else. You're just absolutely consumed. I'm consumed by machine-piecing. I'm consumed by cutting up fabric and putting pieces back together. And I don't know why. It's when I really feel happy.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. And you actually like sitting at the sewing machine.

MS. CROW: I love sitting at the sewing machine doing it. But I don't care, basically, whether it's going to be – I don't care whether it's a quilt. The only reason I go through with all the hand quilting is to finish it in some way that makes it easy to display, because if it's not hand-quilted, I guess I don't like how it looks when it's on a wall. It looks like a rag.

MS. ROBERTSON: And you think the hand-quilting itself adds something.

MS. CROW: It's a softness. It's a soft way of interacting with the fibers of the fabric that doesn't look harsh to me like machine quilting does.

MS. ROBERTSON: And there's a hand-made quality that matches the fact that you've come out of your own brain to think it up.

MS. CROW: Could be. I don't know.

MS. ROBERTSON: If you just look back over your whole career, are there certain of the series that you've made that you consider your most significant ones? I mean are they all like, in your mind, you've worked through them all till you've gotten them all up to an even level, or are there some ones that just stand out as these are really, really –

MS. CROW: Yes, I would say I could go back through and pick out all the pieces that are important pieces from each period. And I think they happened because they happened. It's not because I was directing my force towards making this particular piece a masterpiece. I will say this: that I am more careful today about working on a piece till I bring it up to that level as much as because the hand-quilting is so expensive, the finishing-out is so expensive that I know that if I work on a piece long enough, I can bring it "up to snuff." And if I can't, I'm absolutely ruthless about destroying it. I don't get caught up with ego and how much time I've already put into it. If I've put in six months and it's hideous, it's hideous, and I should have figured that out before six months.

MS. ROBERTSON: I guess it's a matter of pride, too. You don't want something going out under your name that you don't –

MS. CROW: It's just that I know I can do better than that. Whatever the weakness is in the composition, I know I can correct it. So there's no reason, because of the way I work, because nothing is sewn – all these shapes and lines are pinned, they're not the final answer. I know that until I get the whole composition in place, even if it is weak, I can pull off any parts and redo whole areas.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. Yes. The improvisational thing that allows you to –

MS. CROW: Yes. Right.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's funny. It's making me think of – I've seen photographs of David Smith's studio and how he would – you'd think with a big metal sculpture, how could he possibly work improvisationally, but he would lay it out on the ground and not actually weld it together so he could take pieces away when they weren't working.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: And it's so different than having to think of the structure and having it stand up. And he could do that later; at first just work much more freely.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: And it sounds like you can, also.

MS. CROW: Yes. I just love that. I think it's exhilarating to work that way.

MS. ROBERTSON: Besides individual pieces within a series, do you think certain series are more significant? I mean, I'm sure some are more significant to you personally; but just in terms of just how successful you think they are, which ones do you –

MS. CROW: Let's put it this way. Oh, successful. Hmm. I don't even necessarily think that way. I guess what I would say is some series are small just in and of their nature, like the one I did about my mother when she was dying. That was it. That was all I had to say about it at the time.

MS. ROBERTSON: *Passion* series.

MS. CROW: Yes, the *Passion* series. Whereas the *Constructions* series keeps growing. One of the comments made to me by a man in Philadelphia in October at my exhibition, which contained the biggest number of the *Constructions* series quilts at one time was, "Do you realize that within this group of 22 quilts, you have enough ideas to work off the rest of your life?" I have a hard time being totally linear; my mind's always going so fast. I tend to think, okay, if my mind wants to go over there, I'll go over there. So I probably have about eight different themes under the *Constructions* umbrella, any one of which I could go and run with and it too would probably start sprouting laterals. My mind or brain is always crowded with ideas.

So within this particular series right now, I have tons of ideas I've jotted down in my sketchbooks that come up as I'm working, I have to just get the fleeting idea down before it's lost. I would say the *Construction* series and the *Color Blocks* series are the two series for which I've had tons of ideas. But the *Color Blocks* I'm done with. I have no more interest in that.

MS. ROBERTSON: Was that in the '80s?

MS. CROW: No, I did it during the 1990s. But I did 80-some quilts. But, I have no – I mean, there's nothing that draws me to it.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. Would you only work on one series at a time or would you be working on –

MS. CROW: That's one thing I have done; I've tended to stay within a series and work. Well, I shouldn't say that, no, because during *Color Blocks*, when I was working on the *Color Blocks*, I was doing the *Chinese Souls* and I was doing the *Bow Ties* and I was doing – what was the other one – what I call the *Linear*. That's when I was actually experimenting, trying to learn how to cut more of a linear type of shape, more free-form line work. So I was sort of flitting back and forth.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's interesting too that the overall – I noticed with one out there in the studio, that the overall outer perimeter of the quilts, you're allowing that to be irregular, too.

MS. CROW: If it looks authentic. I hate things that look, what do you call it, sort of silly, sort of done on purpose

to be cute.

MS. ROBERTSON: Like sort of like faux naïve?

MS. CROW: Yes, right. It has to be because it's meant to be, but not because I was deliberately trying to –

MS. ROBERTSON: To not have a right angle.

MS. CROW: Yes. It just turned out that way and it looked good to my eye, so I left it that way.

MS. ROBERTSON: I mean, I liked it. It looked very biomorphic almost – that played against the geometry inside it, but the outer perimeter had irregularity.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's very nice.

Let's see. I'm going to want to ask you about your teaching and also your service to the field in terms of the Art Quilt Network and the Dairy Barn shows, but I'm wondering if we should break and then come back and do that other category after we've had a break.

MS. CROW: Let's do, and I'll go make a salad.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's a lot to keep talking.

[Break for Lunch.]

MS. ROBERTSON: This is Jean Robertson interviewing Nancy Crow in the artist's – now we're in her kitchen rather than her studio, in Baltimore, Ohio, on December 18th, 2002, for the Archives of American Art. This is our second session, starting after lunch, which Nancy made a wonderful lunch, and we're about to start again.

Actually, since we were sitting here with your son Nathaniel having lunch, I realized I haven't asked you anything about your family other than your parents. You've always worked at home, you've always had a studio at your home. And what did that mean to you to be able to be at home with your children here and also be an artist and be able to manage those two parts of your life?

MS. CROW: Well, I would say that I made a decision. I couldn't pinpoint the month, day and year, but I made a decision at some point. I knew I wanted children, I knew I was going to be an artist, and I knew I did not want to leave my children and go out into the work world. And luckily, my husband and I agree about that.

So it was important for me to have a working studio at home because I am a person who doesn't believe you stop your career as an artist while you raise your children, which could be a span of 20 years, although I hear that constantly when I'm teaching, from women, as to why they haven't been a practicing artist. So, yes, it was real important for me to have children, raise my children and be an artist at the same time so my children could know what it means to be an artist since they would be exposed to it on a regular basis.

MS. ROBERTSON: And both of your children have gone into art.

MS. CROW: Yes. That's kind of what I was hoping they might do. [Laughs.]

MS. ROBERTSON: It sounds funny because you think of so many people who, if their child says they want to be an artist, they just practically have a meltdown.

MS. CROW: That's right.

MS. ROBERTSON: They think that's the worst decision they could possibly make. Your children have had the opposite message all their lives.

MS. CROW: Yes. Well, my husband and I both feel very strongly that people need to do what they need to do in their lives, so whether it had been an artist or whatever, we would have been supportive.

MS. ROBERTSON: Also, a couple things came out at lunch that I didn't want to forget. You were talking about color at lunch, and I know you're dyeing your own fabrics now. I don't think we talked about that on tape before, and so I wanted to ask you, is that something that you've done consistently throughout your career as a quilt artist, or is it just recent that you've been dyeing fabrics? How did that all come about?

MS. CROW: I have to go all the way back to when I was a weaver in the 1970s, actually even back to the late 1960s, in graduate school where dyeing our yarns was a very important part of our education –

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A]

MS. CROW: For some reason I never transferred to quilt making that I could dye my own fabrics. It actually came about by watching other groundbreakers – namely Jan Myers, Jan Myers at the time, now her name is Jan Myers-Newberry.

MS. ROBERTSON: M-e-y-e-r-s?

MS. CROW: M-y-e-r-s. She lives in Pittsburgh. She was dyeing fabrics before she even began to make quilts. I don't know why. She was in the Surface Design Department at, I believe it was, the University of Minnesota.

And then a man [Eric Morti] this is just incredible when I think back about it – in the late 1980s, an engineer by training, lost his job and was desperate to do something to support his wife and child. They lived in Houston, Texas. Because his wife was a budding quiltmaker, he decided to learn how to dye fabrics so she would have this huge range of colors. I met him, saw his fabrics, which were beautiful and started buying fabrics from him. But then he got a job and he didn't want to dye fabrics anymore. I thought, "You know, the time has come, I've got to dye my own." So I didn't start dyeing probably until 1991. So I was really late to it.

MS. ROBERTSON: Before that, you were using store bought?

MS. CROW: Pretty much commercial fabrics except the occasional hand-dyed I bought from someone else. What happens when one starts hand-dyeing is that one's fabrics become very specific looking. Our fabrics would look different because there is even what we call a hand to how you dye the fabric and it takes on a personality and a characteristic that's you. So, after a while, I couldn't use other people's hand-dyed fabrics. They had to be mine. It would be the same for a painter mixing paint, I would mix my colors my own certain way. I would assume that's what a painter does. He doesn't have someone else mixing his colors for him.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. Your colors look very saturated.

MS. CROW: The way I dye – I don't teach dyeing because I'm not technically very good. I mean, technically I can do it, but I don't have the vocabulary for teaching it, since there's a lot of science involved. But the way I dye is like a water-colorist. I dye one layer of color, process it, then I re-dye it again, process it, and I do it a third time, and so it has a very saturated depth, which I like. That's the only way I can get it, by triple-dyeing.

MS. ROBERTSON: And it looks like you have – I mean, I know you have in your studio huge quantities.

MS. CROW: Yes. I still don't have the kind of sophistication I'd really like, which includes just the slightest stepping down. I would like a huge range of "cold and warm" or "flat and luminous" colors, thousands. I'd like to have that kind of range, but I don't have it because I haven't dyed it, basically.

MS. ROBERTSON: You were saying when you work you don't want to have to stop because you don't have the right colors.

MS. CROW: Right, because let's just say you're working with odd shades of yellows, like what I call gray-yellows or sort of cold-yellows, you have to have them. When you need 'em, you gotta have 'em. It's just too hard to go and dye them and then hope that they will match what you're doing.

MS. ROBERTSON: Or lose your train of thought while you're waiting for the dye process.

MS. CROW: Right. Exactly.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you always use the same kind of fabric, or do you dye on different fabrics?

MS. CROW: No, I'm pretty much consistent now. I use a type of cotton broadcloth. It's a very good-quality fabric. It's fairly hard to hand-quilt. Then when the interstices of the cotton structure get filled with dye, according to my hand-quilter, it gets harder and harder to get the needle through because the dye actually fills up the interstices in the weaving.

MS. ROBERTSON: Sounds almost like canvas.

MS. CROW: It's not quite that hard, but it's fairly tough. And it dulls the needles down fast, so you have to keep using new needles. I don't like muslin. A lot of people dye with muslin, but it contains a short staple cotton and it doesn't have the strength. It doesn't have the sheen.

MS. ROBERTSON: The other thing you mentioned that I didn't pick up on before was your sketchbooks. I wanted to ask you about what role keeping the sketchbooks has had.

MS. CROW: Oh, I was going to show those to you, too, when I was down there. [Turning to Nathaniel Stitzlein] Nathaniel, just for the heck of it, go get that one that's lying on my big desk in studio one.

The sketchbook's real important in terms of I'm pretty diligent now about keeping a running commentary and a running group of photographs about works in progress as I'm doing them and the sequence in which my work is made. I didn't do such a good job prior to 1990, but I've been pretty good about it since 1990. I need to spend more time going back through my notebooks because I feel like I've got so many good ideas that I jotted in there and then I let go of them and never go back to them again because I'm on to something else.

MS. ROBERTSON: Have you kept a sketchbook consistently? No, you were saying –

MS. CROW: Well, I've kept sketchbooks, but I haven't kept a record of how I did each piece very well until 1990. I've been sloppy or careless about that. Basically I did not make doing this a priority before 1990.

MS. ROBERTSON: And then as you're working, if something occurs to you for another idea in a series, you'll write it?

MS. CROW: I'll draw it in right then and there so I don't lose it, but then I forget to go back and look in my sketchbooks. [Laughs.] So.

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.] Yes. And then do you also keep, like a scrap book, that if you see a pattern in a magazine or a color or –

MS. CROW: Sometimes. I probably keep more written. Anything written that will psychologically propel me forward, I tend to keep those kinds of things, like quotes. Like the quote I told you by the man feeling like our ideas, are established in our childhood and they're there and we keep bringing them out.

MS. ROBERTSON: Another thing I noticed walking around your house is just how many books you have. I mean, you have books on gardening, you have books on art, of course, and many other topics, and I'm wondering what role – are the books a central element in your creative process, or is that just separate?

MS. CROW: It varies. Sometimes when I'm in a period when I need to generate ideas and I'm feeling – I wouldn't say stuck; "stuck" is not the right word; I don't feel that way -– well, let's just say I need to look at some new ideas, then I go through my books, a lot of my books.

I also – I don't know, we haven't talked about that, but I have been a fabric designer for three different companies in New York City since 1993, and so the library out there, that's actually the room where I design my fabrics.

MS. ROBERTSON: Designing patterned fabrics for them?

MS. CROW: Yes, printed commercially.

MS. ROBERTSON: I wonder if that's partly why you don't use them in your own work, because you get that patterning interest out.

MS. CROW: No, I haven't been designing fabrics for a year, and I'm sort of happy not to be doing it anymore. It's a very different way of thinking. That's why I have to keep it in that one room. It's a totally different way of working from my own work. And I have found that, frankly, depending on how you're working, for me, whether it's a different technique – well, let's just say I did paper collage and made quilts. Paper collage would have to be in a studio of its own. I just could never have them intermingling. And that's the way I feel about fabric designing. So the files that are out there were special files built just for doing that kind of work, and I have libraries of ideas.

MS. ROBERTSON: I suppose for one thing, it's not piecing; it's just one big sheet of the same –

MS. CROW: It's intellectualizing in a different way.

Anyway, here are my sketchbooks. And this would be an example. This one starts from September 29th, 1999. I mean, one could see, probably, where some of these ideas somehow came back up again. Now, this would be what I would paste in. This happens to be one of the artists I admire probably more than anybody else, and that's Rosalie Gascoigne, who grew up in New Zealand but moved to Australia as a young wife. She is actually considered an Australian artist. She's a sculptor. What I like about her is that she is absolutely, ruthlessly honest in her reflections about herself and her work. And I like that. I like people to be straightforward. I don't want to read paragraph after paragraph and try to ream out some meaning. One of the things she said that to me is extremely important: "You can choose to go deep or you can choose to go wide." And she said, "I chose to go deep in my career." And it really made me think.

MS. ROBERTSON: How do you spell her name?

MS. CROW: Rosalie is R-o-s-a-l-i-e. And Gascoigne is G-a-s-c-o-i-g-n-e. This is another woman who started at age 58. She just died three years ago, at age 83 [1999]. And because she had spent her lifetime – I mean, she always knew she wanted to be an artist. But she never could figure out how it should be manifested. So what she had done all those years up until the age of 58 is she had become an expert at Ikebana.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes, the flower arranging.

MS. CROW: Yes. And so when she started to do sculpture, her eye was so incredibly trained that she was successful immediately. And she went out and foraged and collected road signs and tin off buildings. All her works are all made from found objects. They're really powerful.

MS. ROBERTSON: Did you actually know her personally?

MS. CROW: I wish I could have. When I was in Australia in 1999, we called her. My hostess [Helen Gray] got up enough nerve to call her and say, "Could we come meet you?" – not knowing that she was four months away from dying. She died of cancer. She didn't tell us that. She just said that she couldn't have visitors or something like that.

MS. ROBERTSON: So anyway, you would use your sketchbook not only for your own writing and drawing but as a kind of scrapbook occasionally for something.

MS. CROW: Yes, particularly because probably the thing that I'm always looking for personally, and I can't seem to find *the* book, so I thought I'd ask Craig [Craig Robertson, husband of Jean Robertson] here, is an answer or answers to what does it mean to be creative; what does it take to be creative? And, just what are some of the parameters?

I mean, it helped for me to hear her say, for instance, "Wow! My studio is too small! If I could have my druthers, I would want a whole airplane hangar." "Wow! I need to have all my stuff all over the floor. I fall over it, but if I put anything away, I'll forget. I need to have it right there so I can see all those connections and all those relationships."

See, that's incredibly helpful, hearing her state those thoughts.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes, because you're the same.

MS. CROW: Yes. I mean, that sort of says to me, "You're okay. What you're doing is fine, because that's how I think." Whereas like, for instance, another person whose work I really love is Mary Cassatt. Well, trying to find any writing in depth about what she was thinking, what her studio was like is impossible. I can't find anything. I don't know if she never wrote about it or – you know, it's so concealed.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes.

MS. CROW: And here's another thing Rosalie said, which I think is a hoot. And that is, "I have probably two solid good hours a day I can work, and I realize that now, so I prefer to get up, go out to my studio and work hard during those two hours and know that those might be my most productive hours for the day and not beat myself up over it."

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. Yes.

MS. CROW: Then she says, "I can't help it, but I've been watching" – some soap opera, "As the World Turns" or something – "year after year after year." So every day she would take off just to watch "As the World Turns." And I thought this is hilarious, because she is this incredible artist and she's admitting to sort of rather normal human behaviors.

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.] Yes.

MS. CROW: I mean, I don't watch soap operas, but I thought it was funny that she did.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. I mean, I thought it was amusing at lunch how – you know, you think –- we think Nancy Crow, sort of on a pedestal, this artist, and then you were talking about going to Trader Joe's to go shopping, and, you know, getting ready for Christmas. And, oh, yes, she has a regular life just like the rest of us. [Laughs.]

MS. CROW: Oh, yes, I do. You know, I'd love to get into these incredible discussions with my sister, my same sister who I said is coming. She has such a good eye and she – oh! She's so smart, but I can never get her into a discussion. I cannot get her into really talking about what it is to be an artist. I don't know if, because she hasn't

gone on with her painting, it's too painful.

[Turning to someone in the room] Would you go get one of Rosalie Gascoigne's books out of my studio?

NATHANIEL STITZLEIN: Is it over here?

MS. CROW: They're over where I keep all the Ardmore books. Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: What about the isolation? Well, if you want to finish with the sketchbook.

MS. CROW: Yes, I'll finish this.

[The following discussion describes items in the book as she's paging through it.]

So this would be an example of – I keep Polaroids. That's one of the things I try to get my students to do. They all laugh. They say, "Polaroids!? No, no, no, we all use digital cameras." "Hey," I say, "Look, the reasons for the Polaroid is because we're working improvisationally and we're taking parts of the composition down. It keeps a record of the work in process. You would be surprised how the human eye flips things over and you forget how they go together."

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh. So you're free to change something.

MS. CROW: Yes. So if you have your little Polaroid shot beside your sewing machine, you can kind of eyeball and make sure it's going back together correctly. Once they catch on, then they think it's a great idea, but they all think I'm an idiot.

Let me see here. I hate sports, but there was something really interesting about this football player. I wonder why I kept this. Something about something he did that was a –

MS. ROBERTSON: It would be something you'd be reading at the time.

MS. CROW: That was important to me about – whatever. I don't remember what it was. I'd have to go back and read it.

MS. ROBERTSON: There are the Polaroids.

MS. CROW: Yes.

[Continuing to refer to the book.]

So this is what I call keeping a record of the fabric vocabulary. So first you start with your dyed fabrics. I don't know what the parallel would be to painting. Then I have to actually create – this is the vocabulary now that I'm going to work with. So this is what I'm going to cut up and restructure.

MS. ROBERTSON: So by vocabulary you mean the colors and the shapes?

MS. CROW: Everything. This is almost like I'm creating my own printed fabric, but I'm doing it by way of strip piecing, in my case. First I'm experimenting with it, cutting some of it up and getting a sense of what happens when light value is on dark and dark value is on light. Then I investigate what happens if I'm playing with more graphic against less graphic.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you always work on the wall like that, you don't use the table?

MS. CROW: Yes, I always work on the wall. Well, I have to cut it on the table, but I have to do everything from –

MS. ROBERTSON: You're seeing it like it's a picture –

MS. CROW: Yes, stepping away from it.

MS. ROBERTSON: – a pictorial. I mean, you're seeing it like a painting.

MS. CROW: So this was an enormous amount of work. And this is an incredibly heavy piece because of all the seams. The seams make it bulky. Now, these weren't too good Polaroids, even so I keep a record.

MS. ROBERTSON: We're looking at part of your *Constructions* series.

MS. CROW: Yes. This is actually *Construction No. 33*. And then what I keep is the raw size when I take it off the wall, and then the finished size.

And I write down in this case what I paid Marla [Hattabaugh] for 90 hours, and she charges $10 an hour, so it was $900 to get the quilting done.

So that's the kind of records. So I have a pretty good record. And then if I have any thoughts. Sometimes I don't have any thoughts. Sometimes I'm just – [cross-talk].

MS. ROBERTSON: You've actually glued little pieces of paper in, I see. It looks like little notes you've jotted someplace else and added them here.

MS. CROW: Well, this is actually what she sent back to me on this particular paper whatever it was. She's written – this was the name I had on the back of the quilt so she knows what it is. And she wrote on here exactly that on March 16th she quilted for two hours that day; March 18th from 11:15 to 2:15. And then she adds those hours up and that's how she charges me, 115 bucks. So I just glue those in.

This is a particularly difficult piece. I don't have it here. It's in Philadelphia. You know, you were talking about complex, spare and complex. This is one of the more complex ones I've done.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes.

MS. CROW: I actually started with something that looked like that, and in the end it was this. Here's what it looks like.

Now this, color-wise I find people are not receptive to it, but see, for me, I love this piece. This is one of my favorite pieces.

MS. ROBERSTON: I was asking before, I was saying that it seemed to me you were using fewer colors, and here this is contradicting.

MS. CROW: Yes. That's why I said if you could really see my work, you might not say that. This is *Construction No. 38*.

MS. ROBERTSON: And this was what year; 2000.

[Continuing to describe items as she turns the pages.]

MS. CROW: Again, this would be showing fabric vocabulary. When I made this piece, actually I'm wondering now when I look it if it wasn't some form of *Lady of Guadalupe*, but if it is, it's subconscious, because that's not what I was thinking about, I don't think.

So that gives you an idea. And here's what I sent her in regards to how I wanted it hand-quilted. I send her a drawing of how I want a quilt top hand-quilted.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you feel like your palette has changed?

MS. CROW: I always want my palette to change. I always try to work on my palette.

Like here, patterning with black and white prints. That type of thing. See again, I fax this to her – here's my original drawing – fax it to her, she writes on it. This is hilarious because she's always writing what she needs at the grocery store.

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.] It's like not wasting anything. She's using every scrap of paper.

MS. CROW: That's Marla.

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.] That's wonderful.

MS. CROW: She even sent the needle back that she did it with to show me it had gotten thin.

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh, gosh. [Laughs.]

I wanted to ask you too about sort of like – so much of your work you have to do by yourself. In fact, you said you didn't like to have an assistant. You have Marla doing the quilting, but otherwise you like to work alone. Do you ever start to feel isolated?

MS. CROW: No. I like it. I love it. Maybe that's why I teach, because it does get me out. Maybe one of the reasons I've been able to be successful to some degree, is I love being by myself. I happen to believe that the more solitude you have, the more you're able to delve inside and find those rich levels of ability that are fresh. Otherwise, everyone's – I mean, you're allowing all this chattering constantly coming at you and you can never

reach into that part of yourself, whatever that part is. I don't know if it's subconscious, unconscious. I don't know what it is. I don't think anybody does. If you don't have that quiet and solitude – because it takes a kind of calming down to let yourself reach in there. I know a lot of people who will tell me, "I could never live out on a farm like you do; I could never live the way you live," who are artists. They need a city, they need traffic, they need people to meet.

MS. ROBERTSON: They feed off the energy of the city.

MS. CROW: They feed off that energy. So I have no idea where they get – you're going to have to see – [showing something in the book] – this is her work. And you have to consider this is all made from –

MS. ROBERTSON: This is the Rosalie Gascoigne?

MS. CROW: Yes. But in so many ways, it's quilt-like, what I call her base format. But this is either wood – what?

NATHANIEL STITZLEIN: Metal road signs.

MS. CROW: Metal road signs. Now I want to show you a picture at the beginning of her [catalogue].

MS. ROBERTSON: That's great, really inventive.

MS. CROW: Oh, here's her studio before she died. She thought it was too small. Her studio only happened because her husband, a scientist, was fed up that she had filled the entire house with junk.

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.]

MS. CROW: But you know, he recently said if he had known how good she was – I don't know how he couldn't have known – he wished he had helped her out to have a better, bigger space much earlier on.

MS. ROBERTSON: Okay.

A big area that we haven't really talked about much yet is your involvement in the development of art quilts in the United States. And this is both through your teaching and your work with various organizations. So I guess I'd like to talk about your work as a teacher and curator and supporter of quilts, as well as your own work. So let's start with your teaching.

I'm wondering at what stage you got involved in teaching.

MS. CROW: I started teaching in the early 1980s. I didn't really venture out before then, I suppose because I felt like I had nothing to teach since I was still in such a beginning, learning stage. Teaching was very difficult for me the first number of years because perhaps I didn't have a system. I tend to believe that for me the best teaching is teaching in which design exercises are offered to students in such a way that they must be interpreted by the student, so that all the work doesn't look alike. And I don't think I understood how to get that across. I mean, I think it takes practice to become a better teacher. And I think I felt unhappiness in my classrooms because people were dangling too much and were not happy about that. They wanted more structure. And that was something I had to learn. I had to learn how much structure was enough without imposing too much structure. I don't know how to explain that.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes.

MS. CROW: Now I definitely feel comfortable when I teach, but I still always get a little anxious about it.

MS. ROBERTSON: When you first started, were you doing it here at your home or were you going out and teaching in another space?

MS. CROW: I did a little bit here, but not really that much. Most of the time I was being hired by other organizations.

MS. ROBERTSON: And what made you decide to invite people into your own environment?

MS. CROW: Well, one of the things that happens when you're a freelance teacher is you sign a contract to teach somewhere without really knowing what you're walking into. I have taught under the most dreadful conditions, and I've also taught in wonderful places, like the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts [Gatlinburg, Tennessee].

But what was pestering or festering – actually festering with me was the fact that, first of all, quiltmaking was not considered an acceptable medium to be part of a university art department even though everything involved with it is parallel to painting; that is, parallel in terms of composition, color, line, shape development, et cetera.

Therefore, I felt that as a freelance teacher, when I went out, I had to accept these horrible conditions. It was not unusual to walk into a room where, instead of each person having their own table – which I happen to think is very important so that you can have some space for your own brain to work – there would be three people to a table, with all their equipment and supplies.

I'd walk into a place where I had asked that we be able to work on the wall, but nothing was prepared, so we couldn't do it. How can you teach when that's what you're expecting, to start putting things on the wall, start looking at them, start thinking about how your composition might work, and there's no wall to work on?

So I thought years ago, "You know, I'm getting pretty hot under the collar about this. I feel like we're not respected, because we have to teach under these crummy conditions." So I thought, "Boy. Someday I hope I can have a facility that's correct for quiltmakers, give them some respect and treat them with respect and let them work in a good situation."

You know, actually, frankly, I will always give Sandra Blaine, who was the director of Arrowmont for 30 years, the highest esteem. She's one of the first art school administrators in this country who recognized that quiltmaking was important enough to be taught and it needed to be taught in a decent facility. I will always thank her for treating me well and treating all the other quiltmakers who came in to teach with that kind of respect.

MS. ROBERTSON: How many years did you teach at Arrowmont?

MS. CROW: I started teaching there probably mid-1980s.

MS. ROBERTSON: And are you still involved with them?

MS. CROW: Yes. I'm going to actually teach there in two years. I had to stop because of my knees. They have cement floors in the classrooms and I just couldn't stand on those floors. It just killed me to stand on cement.

MS. ROBERTSON: So when did you start with your workshops here?

MS. CROW: I didn't really start the workshops here on the farm until I knew that we could have this barn. And we got the barn in 1996. We didn't start the renovations until 1997, 1998. So that I've really only been doing workshops here for two and a half years.

MS. ROBERTSON: And at the beginning was it just you, or have you always had several teachers?

MS. CROW: I've always tried to have another teacher.

MS. ROBERTSON: And how many students would come at a time?

MS. CROW: The maximum for either class is 20, but I've had classes with as few as four.

NATHANIEL STITZLEIN: [Off mike.]

MS. ROBERTSON: Did I say '76? Oh, I meant 1996.

MS. CROW: Oh, with the teaching. Okay.

MS. ROBERTSON: No, no; the barn.

NATHANIEL STITZLEIN: With the barn.

MS. CROW: When I got the barn.

MS. ROBERTSON: And so you've been teaching classes here since –

MS. CROW: It's only been – well, next year is 2003. We've really been doing it since 2001.

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh. Okay. I was thinking when I was here before I don't remember you talking about –

MS. CROW: No.

NATHANIEL STITZLEIN: Yes. The barn was renovated in '97, '98, '99.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: What do you think is the connection between your teaching and your own work?

MS. CROW: Well, all right. I think I definitely get stimulated by teaching. When you have great students or you can make a difference, it's incredibly exhilarating. I think I'm one of the – I'm not going to say – I'm definitely not the only one, but I'm definitely one of a handful of teachers who have propelled contemporary quiltmaking forward. I do believe that, because there's only a small number of us who teach it as an art form. Most quiltmaking teachers have entire careers built on what I call gimmicks, and that's how they teach.

MS. ROBERTSON: What would be an example of a gimmick?

MS. CROW: A very set thing that's going to be made that everyone knows ahead of time, and so the instructions are absolutely – I mean, the instructions are there and you have to do what the instructions say in order that your end product looks like what you were told ahead of time. I don't call that art at all. But the bulk of the teachers' careers are built on that. I don't know if there's a parallel in the teaching of painting?

MS. ROBERTSON: You were saying off tape before, I think, that when you have a class, it's hard to get students to come up with ideas. You find that one of your biggest challenges?

MS. CROW: Yes. I find that people don't look. They just don't look. They don't use their eyes. They don't pay attention. In fact, after I get through the beginning classes, I start concentrating in my design exercises on line and shape. And when they start seeing it a different way, then they start to become more able to abstract anything they see down into line and shape. But they hadn't thought of it that way before. They're very – what do you call it when you take everything verbatim? Like, "This is a quilt shape; this is what we're going to do."

MS. ROBERTSON: Literal.

MS. CROW: They're very literal, yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: So you have to try to free them up?

MS. CROW: You have to get them to start thinking a different way. The thing I find is that people DO like to know what they're going to make before they do it. That's the one thing I've learned. And I just say, "Hey, I'm sorry, but you're going to be teetering in here and you're going to feel like you're ready to flee, but that's the way it is."

MS. ROBERTSON: Because it's funny that in your own process you've become more and more and more improvisational, and now you're seeing students who are way back at the beginning.

MS. CROW: Yes, and they're so uncomfortable.

MS. ROBERTSON: Trusting themselves.

MS. CROW: Yes, trusting themselves is exactly right.

MS. ROBERTSON: Have you had any students that you would actually consider apprentices?

MS. CROW: I don't know. How would you define an apprentice?

MS. ROBERTSON: Someone you really worked with one-on-one and you felt like you really brought them along.

MS. CROW: I guess – [tape runs out].

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B]

MS. CROW: So I wouldn't say that I've worked with someone as an apprentice, but I would say that I have definitely been able – been lucky enough to see some people become totally captured by quiltmaking and all that it means and all that it personifies, who have actually quit full-time jobs and who have given their whole life over to it. They're very, very good. There have not been a lot, but a handful.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's exciting.

What about the trips, the foreign travel? I mean, that's a form of teaching, in a way.

MS. CROW: Yes. I kind of do it more, probably, because I want to travel. [Laughs.]

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.] Well, how did that all start and come about?

MS. CROW: Actually it started through the Symposium with a woman I'm going to go see tonight, Vivian Harvey. She wanted to take a group into Guatemala, and she asked if people at the Symposium would be interested in having pamphlets there. So it started from there. And then, you know, Linda Fowler and I were actually doing

the trips originally with her because we both ran the Symposium, Quilt Surface Design Symposium. Linda wanted to stop, so I went on with them with Nathaniel. So Nathaniel and I do it. Nathaniel does all the graphic design and gets the brochures all ready, and I recruit.

MS. ROBERTSON: How long have you been doing that?

NATHANIEL STITZLEIN: Three or four years?

MS. CROW: Mm-hmm.

MS. ROBERTSON: And how many trips a year?

MS. CROW: We pretty much only do one trip a year. This year it was Chiapas, Mexico, next year Guatemala, and with fingers crossed –

NATHANIEL STITZLEIN: France, South Africa.

MS. CROW: France next year, but South Africa in 2004.

MS. ROBERTSON: I also wanted to ask you about some of your involvement with things happening nationally. I know you're one of the founders, if not the founder, of Quilt National Show at the Dairy Barn.

MS. CROW: Mm-hmm.

MS. ROBERTSON: Can you just tell me for the record, really, a little bit about how that all got started?

MS. CROW: At the time, which would have been 1977, 1978, people who were doing contemporary quilts were really having a hard, hard time getting their work shown. Everything was geared towards traditional quilts. So I was approached by a woman named Harriet Anderson in Athens to do a workshop.

She says, "I'm going to go to the Ohio Arts Council and apply for grants to give workshops. Would you be a teacher?" And I said, "If you're going to go to all the work to get grants, we need to work on an exhibition venue. We've had enough teaching going on here, we just need venues to show our contemporary quilts." And who knows why this woman, who was a painter by training and pretty much – what do you call a person who does good works in a community? She and her husband had moved back to Athens from Columbus when they retired, and she was very involved in trying to bring the arts up in Athens. I mean, she was willing to take this on like a bulldog.

So Harriet agrees: "Okay, we're going to have a contemporary quilt show. Now. Where are we going to have it?" "Oh, yes, we'll have it at the Dairy Barn out there," which was part of the – what do you call that when people used to go there – mental health institution. It's a huge facility which got closed down when they closed down all the mental institutions everywhere in this country and that's why all of a sudden we have so many homeless people. They had already destroyed, I think, three of the barns and had one left. So she said, "My husband used to be a lobbyist. He has connections." So somehow, lo and behold, he got the state of Ohio to give Athens the Dairy Barn for a dollar. And that was the start of it.

Next, she went after grant money, and a lot of volunteers started cleaning out the barn because it was filthy. It still had the milking stanchions in place. It was just really dirty. And one thing I learned from her, I'll never forget it. I was probably in my early 30s and she was already my age now, early 60s. We had our first committee meetings. I'll never forget. I learned more from that, and because these were volunteers from the community and not quiltmakers, or not even artists. We had our first meeting, and I noticed that one woman was very negative. She would say: "Well, there's no way you're going to do THAT! You can't do THAT. Where are you going to get the money to do that?" And Harriet said to me privately, "I'm getting rid of all the negative ones." And she did. They were gone. And after that, we just went forward like a straight arrow. It was incredible.

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.]

MS. CROW: I just thought, well, yes, it's good to learn that. I mean, why put up with all that negativity? I mean, Harriet's the kind of person, which is the way I really actually believe, that, "It's going to happen." In other words, you don't go at it with the attitude that it's NOT going to happen; it's GOING to happen unless it DOESN'T happen. You know, you're going to MAKE it happen because you believe you're going to make it happen! And that's the way she was. She was fabulous, this woman.

So yes, I probably had the idea for an exhibition; a competition for contemporary quilts; but she knew how to make it happen due to her lifetime of experience. Then, you know, it evolved. After that first year of volunteers, they had to hire someone to direct it. There was just no way. It was too big already after the first year.

MS. ROBERTSON: Was the first year national?

MS. CROW: Yes, I think it was just national. I'm not sure we had any international entries at that. Yes, it was national right off the bat. We didn't want it to be regional and look hokey or anything.

MS. ROBERTSON: And what about the Art Quilt Network? Was that related to the Dairy Barn?

MS. CROW: That actually started out with the best intentions. The reason that started was, when we moved here to the farm in 1979, one of the things my husband said to me over and over, "If you will move to a farm, I guarantee you, you will have a studio." I already had a nice studio in Athens. I had the whole top floor of our house and one of the other rooms. And I was just – you know, to move from Athens, because I had always been a town girl, to this farm, which was quiet and isolated. I thought, "Oh, it sounds romantic." But the truth of the matter is, once I got here, I was pretty depressed about it.

We did move one of the existing barns up near the back of the house and finally we started renovating this barn into a studio. Well, we never had enough money. So after we got the studio renovation far enough along so I could have workshops, I had workshops.

Well then what happens is, you find you have people coming from all over the country who in some ways are lonely because they're serious about their work but they don't have anybody to talk to. We'd get into these wonderful dialogues. So I got it in my head by 1987 that we really needed to have a little network here where we could meet once a year, and we would take turns with subject matters that were meaty subject matters, like, you know, creativity or whatever. It was wonderful. It was wonderful the first three years. Since this is – I'll get in trouble if I tell the truth.

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.]

MS. CROW: Should I tell the truth? This should be a very truthful thing.

MS. ROBERTSON: It should be truthful, yes. I do think they send us a transcript, and –

MS. CROW: But if this goes on, people – oh, well, I'm going to tell the truth, and I'll be tarred and feathered at the ripe old age of 60. Okay.

It started out wonderfully because the people who came at the beginning in 1987, were so pure and emotions were so strong, and there were so many fewer of us.

During the past five or six years I have tended to not be involved because most of the time I have teaching conflicts and I am simply gone out of state. But I also feel the whole original structure broke down. It was to be an uplifting intellectual exchange. But it has become much more diffused and that original sense of intense purpose seems lost. A lot of those original people who came and who were so incredible have died, unfortunately. You know, some of them died fairly young from cancer and things. So that core group is pretty much gone.

MS. ROBERTSON: Have you been involved with any of the other national craft organizations, like the American Craft Council or the –

MS. CROW: No. I was made a fellow two years ago, three years ago. I was the first quiltmaker to be made a fellow. You know, with age and intolerance, I'm not affiliated with much of anything anymore. I don't do well in groups. I've never done well in groups. I'm too oddball. I always feel like the oddball.

MS. ROBERTSON: Plus, you know, like you were saying, you have to get your priorities straight and your work is a priority and – [off mike].

MS. CROW: I don't have much patience with a lot of griping and complaining. I actually have almost no patience with it. I just think people need to do the work and quit blabbing.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you read any of the periodicals, like *Surface Design* or –

MS. CROW: I subscribe to *FiberArts*, *Surface Design*. The magazine I love probably more than anything is *Hali*, H-a-l-i, out of Great Britain. Incredible textile magazine. And the other one I like is *Raw Vision*, out of Great Britain.

[Turning to Nathaniel Stitzlein] Do you want to show them, get two examples, Nathaniel?

MS. ROBERTSON: I've seen *Raw Vision*. I haven't heard of *Hali*.

MS. CROW: *Hali* is wonderful, and I've been subscribing for, oh, I don't know, it's 20 years now. It's the kind of

magazine that once your issue arrives in your house, instead of being $35, it's now worth $100. You just don't throw them away.

MS. ROBERTSON: Is it visually, or do you also like the writing?

MS. CROW: Both. It covers textiles worldwide, and it's just beautifully done. It's really aimed at collectors, if you want to know the truth. So it's an educational tool for people who have museum-quality collections.

MS. ROBERTSON: Speaking of that, collecting, do you have particular collectors, including museums, that have been especially important to you?

MS. CROW: You know, I always wished I could have had someone like that, but no particular collector has taken me on, not like Michael James has been taken on by the James – the couple called the James's. They have one of the biggest quilt collections in this country. Instead, for instance, the James's own a key beginning piece, or I should say an early piece, and they own a very good – they own one of my best *Lady of Guadalupes*. And then they never collected a thing past that point. So that's way back in 1985. Whereas someone like Michael, they have collected key pieces all the way through his career.

MS. ROBERTSON: So you don't have any individual collector who has a representative selection of your work.

MS. CROW: No. In fact, I probably have some of my best pieces myself.

These would be the two magazines, *Hali* and *Raw Visions*. You can look at these on your leisure.

MS. ROBERTSON: And also, your history of exhibitions. Have there been particular exhibitions that you've felt like you were just really grateful you were in those exhibits or that have been particularly important for you?

MS. CROW: Yes. I think I wanted them to be important. I've wondered sometimes how important they'll be in the context of my career. I was the first quiltmaker to be given a full-blown exhibition at the American Craft Museum in New York City, and that was back in 1993 ["Nancy Crow: Work in Transition," November 19, 1992-March 28, 1993; American Craft Museum, New York, New York]. Then I was the first quiltmaker to have a full-blown exhibition at the Renwick, and that was 1995 ["Nancy Crow – Improvisational Quilts," August 25, 1995-January 1, 1996; Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C.]. I think if I had to say this, to be honest, I think an artist is a fool in the end to think that anything is going to make her career. Maybe I'm wrong on that respect, but I think in the end, you've got to gather the strength and character and courage to just believe so strongly in yourself that that belief will carry you through.

MS. ROBERTSON: And not look to the outside for the validation.

MS. CROW: You can't look for that person who's going to do it for you.

MS. ROBERTSON: Let's see, we talked about – you said you don't do commission work.

MS. CROW: Nope. Doesn't interest me.

MS. ROBERTSON: You never have?

MS. CROW: I have, and that's how I learned I don't want to do it. It makes me very anxious and it's boring.

MS. ROBERTSON: Because you're just trying to please someone else.

MS. CROW: Right. I don't see it as a challenge, but I do know people who see it as challenging. So.

MS. ROBERTSON: And then you also talked about how you do all your administrative work for yourself, basically?

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: You don't have a secretary. [Laughs.]

MS. CROW: I don't have a secretary, but I will say that my son Nathaniel does all my graphic design and he does my web page [. He's very good on the computer. But I pay him an hourly wage to do that.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you think of yourself, when you look at your work and your career, do you think of yourself as part of an international movement or trend, or do you think of yourself as particularly American?

MS. CROW: I don't think of myself either of those ways. I just want to make my best work. I don't think that way. I don't think of trends.

MS. ROBERTSON: So you don't think of, like, the history of American quilting, and you're advancing – [off mike].

MS. CROW: No. I don't know where I am. Because unfortunately, the whole quiltmaking world has become so incredibly – [deep sigh] – based on profits. Merchandising is shaping it. So I just choose to keep to myself.

MS. ROBERTSON: Beyond a market, do you see any trends of where you think American or any quiltmaking is heading, in terms of its designs or –

MS. CROW: I can tell you exactly what's the "in" thing now in quiltmaking, and even with galleries, which I find fascinating, and that is landscape. Landscape quilts and pictorial quilts.

MS. ROBERTSON: Really?

MS. CROW: Geometric quilts are totally out. I mean, if you want – I mean, let's face it, the art world cycles the same way. Right? I mean, realistic painting was out for a long time. I don't know if it's back in. And I actually asked Bruce about this at the Snyderman. This is the gallery that represents me. And he said, "It's true in almost all mediums. If there's any remnant of landscape in it, it's a much easier sale."

MS. ROBERTSON: That's interesting.

MS. CROW: Isn't that interesting?

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes.

MS. CROW: He said you can always sell landscape paintings before anything else.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you think that in general the market has shrunk for art quilts?

MS. CROW: I think the market of genuine collectors – or I should not say the market of, but group of genuine collectors – [sigh] – has been small and hasn't changed too much. I can actually only think of two for sure, and maybe three, in this entire country who have put together collections that – I don't know why they're putting together the collections, if it's because they love them or because they think they're going to become more valuable or because they're holding their collection to go to a museum. And outside of that, it's just the person who randomly buys a quilt.

MS. ROBERTSON: People are not being systematic.

MS. CROW: Well, in the case of the James's, they have been. They have worked with – Penny McMorris. So has John Walsh. They pay her as a consultant. So she doesn't get a commission from the artist when she sells their work.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you feel like you personally have encountered bias because of your work being in textiles?

MS. CROW: Oh, yes. Yes. Oh, I think that's a given. And the thing that I find fascinating is that many other quiltmakers who I respect and who are serious actually won't even use the word "quilt" in defining their work because they feel that immediately puts them in a bad place with a curator.

MS. ROBERTSON: What do they say?

MS. CROW: Oh, "I'm a textile artist." Or "I work in textile collage." I'm trying to think of all the words they use. And I say, "I'm an artist; I make quilts," because that's the truth. And I don't care. If that word quilt is going to make me a second-class citizen, a second-class artist, well, that's the way it is. I don't care. Because I'm more interested in the truth.

MS. ROBERTSON: Yes. What's so funny, you know, I look at your work compared to, say, abstract painting, and I'm not at all interested in the abstract painting, whereas I love your work. And I think there's something about the dimensionality of it, the richness of the color when it's actually embedded in the fabric rather than being on a surface, that just couldn't be achieved in a painting.

MS. CROW: Huh. That's interesting.

MS. ROBERTSON: How about the goals that you still want to realize in your career? Not your career, but in your art, in your work. Do you have definable goals?

MS. CROW: You know, I don't know where I can go with my work in terms of personal development, all I know or feel, is that I want to keep growing and changing. I want the growth and change to be, in a sense, organic. I want it to be because it's feeding on what I've learned beforehand.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you think that the *Constructions* – you said this is a big series with all these tentacles going out in a lot of directions.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: Do you feel like at least for the next foreseeable future, that –

MS. CROW: I will probably stick with it because there's a goldmine of ideas that I haven't even begun to explore yet. You know, you try one thing and you don't necessarily like it so much, but it leads on to something you do like. I mean, that's kind of how I think it happens.

MS. ROBERTSON: You mentioned before that you've been working quite large in some of these. Do you just keep trying to vary the scale you work at?

MS. CROW: I think it's good. I want to be more flexible, and I feel that because my knee problem was shutting me down in some way, I was becoming restricted, and I don't want that. The biggest problem for me, again, will be how I will finish this work if I'm going to work large, because of the fact it's a major commitment of time on Marla's part and money on my part.

MS. ROBERTSON: Your quilter.

MS. CROW: Yes. I mean, pretty much it's a month out of her life to do a major piece, which is fast. I mean, most people would take a year to hand-quilt what she does in a month.

MS. ROBERTSON: Wow. You're lucky.

MS. CROW: Yes, I know I'm lucky. But she loves doing it! And she, knock on wood, has not had carpal tunnel problems or rotator cuff problems with her shoulders. That's the other big thing that's happening to the quiltmakers, they're really destroying their shoulders from all the cutting with the rotary cutter.

MS. ROBERTSON: I noticed that she signs. Her name is on the back of your quilts.

MS. CROW: Yes. I always have her sign her name on the back.

MS. ROBERTSON: Have you been working with her for a long time?

MS. CROW: She actually approached me – in 1987, I think – and asked if she could hand-quilt my work. I had never known her before then.

MS. ROBERTSON: And just for the record, could we spell her name?

MS. CROW: Yes. It's Marla Hattabaugh. It's M-a-r-l-a, and her last name is H-a-t-t-a-b-a-u-g-h. She lives in Scottsdale, Arizona. I have had a company on the east coast ship her cartons of cotton batting so that she's already got the cotton batting there at her house, and then all I have to send her is the front of the quilt, which I machine piece, and the backing and the thread and the pattern that I want her to do on the quilt with the stitching.

MS. ROBERTSON: And you said she approached you. Is that personally, or did she just write a letter?

MS. CROW: Years ago when the Folk Museum in New York City was doing – I don't know why they were doing this – two-day classes and a festival, and asked me to teach there, she was in the class. She came up to me afterwards and asked. She brought her hand-quilting with her and showed it to me. I said, "Oh, yes! I would be very interested in having you hand-quilt."

MS. ROBERTSON: [Laughs.]

MS. CROW: And I had no idea how fast she was.

MS. ROBERTSON: It's incredible.

MS. CROW: Yes, it is, actually. Sometimes I think we were meant to be together.

MS. ROBERTSON: Let's see. Oh. Do you have any advice you would give to other women artists who might be thinking about pursuing a career in quilting, making art quilts?

MS. CROW: Advice. I don't know what kind of advice. What do you mean?

MS. ROBERTSON: [Off mike.]

MS. CROW: Well, I guess probably one needs to come to terms with what the space is going to be like that one is working in, and one definitely needs to come to terms with techniques. Part of the attraction of quilting is the fact that there are so many techniques. I mean, women who are process-oriented just love floating around from technique to technique.

And another thing, is that one has to get focused on, what one really wants to do in order to find one's way with the work instead of trying – 40,000 techniques. That to me is just a form of procrastination.

MS. ROBERTSON: That's that depth and breadth thing you were talking about.

MS. CROW: Yes, right. Exactly.

MS. ROBERTSON: Going to depth.

MS. CROW: Yes.

MS. ROBERTSON: Well, I think we've covered a lot of ground here. Is there anything that's just springing to your mind you just –

MS. CROW: No. But I will say for the record that Jean is a wonderful interviewer and had very good questions.

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh, thank you. You're very kind.

MS. CROW: And she's also a very good writer.

MS. ROBERTSON: Oh. I hope that I'm one of the people using my own interview for some writing! [Laughs.]

MS. CROW: [Laughs.] Yes. Good.

MS. ROBERTSON: Okay. Well, thank you very much, Nancy.

MS. CROW: Thank you.

MS. ROBERTSON: This concludes the second session of our interview on December 18th.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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