Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ed Rossbach, 2002 August 27-29

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

January 20, 2003

Please read this before you read the transcript of the interview.

Ed had been diagnosed with a neurological illness in 1998 [Lewy-Body disease]. This affected his memory by blocking out whole sections. It also affected his ability to find words for expressing his thoughts. His hearing was impaired as well.

This interview was conducted approximately one month before his death on October 7, 2002.

I have done a minimum of editing your transcript. To get a more complete picture of Ed, I recommend reading his published books on baskets and paisley. Also read the oral histories at U.C. Berkeley Bancroft Library; interviewer Harriet Nathan [1983]. Then for a more recent interview, please read the one completed by Paul Smith for the Rhode Island School of Design [1997].

Katherine Westphal

Interview

CAROLE AUSTIN: This is Carole Austin interviewing Charles Edmund Rossbach at the artist's home in Berkeley, California, on August 27th, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

We'll just start with some of the basics, Ed. You were born January 2nd, 1914, Edison Park, Illinois, near Chicago. Is that correct?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And you went to the Lyons Township High School in LaGrange, Illinois. And I'm going to list the other things so it's on the tape, even though, you know, it might be a little boring for you.

Broadway Night School, weaving class. In Seattle, was that?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. University of Washington at Seattle, you received your B.A. in painting and design in 1940; Columbia University, New York City, M.A. in art education, 1941; Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, with an MFA in ceramics and weaving in 1947.

Looking back, way, way back, can you describe your childhood a bit and your family background and the more important influences in your life as a child? You know, this view may have changed as you've gotten older.

ED ROSSBACH: It's a difficult question right away.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you want to go back to it? Well, I know that you had certain teachers that were important to you.

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And I think you've talked about your family life and the women who did textiles in your family and how you were aware of this.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Though you didn't do any of it yourself.

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: In high school, for instance, who were the teachers that were important to you? Can you remember them?

ED ROSSBACH: The art teacher. And English literature.

CAROLE AUSTIN: English literature. Okay. I will look up the names of those people for you. Do you remember their names at all?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes. Murphy was the art teacher.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And that was in high school?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Now, you mentioned in one of your other interviews—you know, Harriet Nathan did such a wonderful oral history on you, I think, and you mentioned that doing things like going to the Chicago Art Institute, these things were important to you as a kid. Anything else?

ED ROSSBACH: When I was in about fifth grade, I can remember very vividly that we were given raffia and were taught how to make placemats in raffia and cardboard. And things like this were very important to me because my family admired them. I'd come home with a raffia placemat and they liked it. And it still happened when I was at Cranbrook. My mother would look at something and she can't imagine that I was able to do this.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's pretty wonderful. That must mean that you had a tight-knit, very caring family.

ED ROSSBACH: Very tight-knit.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, and it's interesting that later on you've worked with raffia in your own work. Did you ever think back to that time as you were working on it, or does it just come up now as you think about it?

ED ROSSBACH: No. For some reason, I have very vivid recollections of this.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Of this. So this was important. I just think those childhood influences are so important, Ed.

Are there any other things about your childhood or family background that you would like to have noted like that that are vivid memories that you'd like to put out?

ED ROSSBACH: At the same time that my family was sympathetic to what we did, she wasn't interested.

CAROLE AUSTIN: But sympathetic.

ED ROSSBACH: My mother was fairly sympathetic.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Fairly sympathetic. Well, I know you did some creative work, like with your sisters with puppets. Right? And it seems that your family kind of all worked on this together a little bit.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So that was an important thing. And then later on you wrote a book on how to make marionettes, but you don't like to talk about it very much.

ED ROSSBACH: Oh, I think more and more I want to talk about it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. It seems important to me in retrospect, although earlier on, it was almost an embarrassment. I had to explain why I was interested in that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: When I read this about you, Ed, you know, I thought the same thing. And I thought, you know, as you get older, you see back how important these influences were on you, and I think they cease to be embarrassing, you know, as you look at them. And you're

saying now that this was important. You knew that the marionettes were.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. I think you become aggressively—they become aggressively important.

CAROLE AUSTIN: The older you become, you mean?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I would certainly agree with that.

ED ROSSBACH: We gave several puppet shows, and my sister and I did the dialogue and the movements, and my father drove us to wherever we were doing this. And my other sister was doing hand puppets. My family liked the puppets. I thought they were grand.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] Of course.

Well, now besides the marionettes, which I think were probably very important, are there any other things about your childhood that become very vivid in your memory?

ED ROSSBACH: Difficult.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Is it difficult to bring this up? Okay. Should we go on to the next question, then, see what it is?

ED ROSSBACH: No, let's —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you want to stay on this a while?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. What else can you remember? I'm just trying to think about what you've talked about before. I know you had teachers who were supportive of you.

ED ROSSBACH: Very. Just wonderfully.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And were they maverick kind of teachers or where they were like you expected teachers to be back then; you know, very proper?

ED ROSSBACH: I felt comfortable in the art room.

CAROLE AUSTIN: From an early age.

ED ROSSBACH: And she let us have the key to the room and we could go at lunch in the art room. And it was a wonderful art room, with plaster casts.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Great for kids. And not many teachers do that, you know?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it's a lot of work.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. You mean for the teacher?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Anything else? Ed, take your time and think about these things. You know, we're in no hurry here.

ED ROSSBACH: I used to have a great dread of the gym class, and I finally was lying about it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You mean in order not to take it?

ED ROSSBACH: Hmm?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Did you know then that you had an interest in art in some way, or did this not occur to you yet?

ED ROSSBACH: Did not occur.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It didn't occur yet. Not till later. When do you think it first occurred to you, or about the time, that you might do some kind of art? I know you took a weaving class at the Broadway High School—at the Broadway Night School. What got you interested in doing that? Oh! Didn't they tell you at the university you had to do that, that you had to take this night class before you enrolled? No?

ED ROSSBACH: I can't think about that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You can't? Well, how about, then, when did you start thinking about art, any kind of art? Painting?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, there's a peculiar division of interests, where you'd be one thing with the family. And when I was going to high school, my parents wouldn't even know what courses I was taking, anything about them, absolutely nothing about them. And I found all these interests are so absorbing. And you had this family that means so much to me, and they really weren't interested in me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: They weren't interested in you?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Did that hurt?

ED ROSSBACH: Of course.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Of course. Even then it hurt. You knew then. Why do you think that was, Ed, that they weren't, or is that just the way they were? [Pause.] [No response.]

It doesn't come up? [Pause.] Should we go on?

ED ROSSBACH: It always makes me wonder why they weren't interested, why there was no—and at the same time, we had a lot of music in the family. And my oldest sister played the piano beautifully and I just loved to hear her practice the piano. It isn't Beethoven or anything, it's the most ordinary thing that could be, but I just loved it. And in this room that we have here, somebody is practicing the piano. And if I take a nap in the afternoon, they're playing this piano, and it's deeply satisfying.

CAROLE AUSTIN: To you, from that time of your childhood.

Okay. They've got here, Ed—we're discussing your early education, and I've asked you this before—what motivated your interest in painting? I think that was your first interest, wasn't it, before weaving?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: What motivated that, Ed?

ED ROSSBACH: I haven't the slightest idea.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] Okay.

Well, then moving on: How did you move from painting into weaving, into the fiber arts? Did it just happen?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I didn't get into weaving until later on.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Really? Okay. So when you were at Seattle, at the University of Washington, you didn't really get into weaving during that time.

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Not at all. But you had your degree in painting and design. What did they mean by design then?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, they still don't know, do they?

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] Well, since you taught in design, I bet you probably know that they don't know. So you were really more interested in painting.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I still look—I wonder what I taught. If I were going to teach today, what would I teach? I haven't the slightest idea.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Really? You mean because things have changed so much, or your interests have changed, or both?

ED ROSSBACH: Both.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So, then when did you start into ceramics? Was that at Cranbrook or was that in Seattle? Columbia? It wouldn't have been at Columbia. This is a whole aspect of you I didn't know about, Ed, at all.

ED ROSSBACH: What?

CAROLE AUSTIN: About your interest in ceramics.

ED ROSSBACH: Why, that was the absorbing interest.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It was the absorbing interest. More than painting?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: So I would assume, then, that you were doing ceramics when you were in Seattle.

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Not till Cranbrook?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you remember when?

ED ROSSBACH: It was really at the University of Washington. They had a requirement that you had to take ceramics. Everybody in the program had to take ceramics. And this was a sort of motherly type of woman, and she was okay.

CAROLE AUSTIN: She was?

ED ROSSBACH: And she taught us how to make vessels.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was throwing easy for you? Did you take right to it?

ED ROSSBACH: I didn't do any throwing at that —

CAROLE AUSTIN: You didn't?

ED ROSSBACH: Not at that time.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Hand-built?

ED ROSSBACH: Hand-built. And it's interesting that when you come back later, it's hand-built things that I'm interested in.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Even in textiles, isn't it?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. I think more so than on the loom. But we'll get to that later on.

So your interest in hand-built things, that's prevailed through your whole life, Ed, hasn't it?

ED ROSSBACH: It's what?

CAROLE AUSTIN: It's prevailed. I mean, it's been a basic interest of yours, the hand-made thing, object.

ED ROSSBACH: Oh, I don't know. I think if I had my druthers, I'd rather be interested in painting.

CAROLE AUSTIN: In painting. I was curious if that was still one of your major interests. It is. Have you done painting in your later years?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Have you? It's something that it's very private for you, I take it, your painting.

ED ROSSBACH: Oh, I don't know if I'd say it was private. What do you mean?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, it just seems that it's something that you haven't talked about very much. And I don't know, have you shown your work to friends, that kind of thing, your painting?

ED ROSSBACH: Not really.

CAROLE AUSTIN: But you've always had that interest. Okay.

Could you discuss—if this is of interest to you—could you discuss the difference, if any, between a university-trained artist and one who has learned his or her craft outside of the university? And I think we're speaking of contemporary artists now, the traditional craft-making. Do you think a university education makes a difference? That's a tough question.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I value my university education so highly that—[pause] —-

CAROLE AUSTIN: You could recommend it for students, then?

ED ROSSBACH: Oh, I don't know.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Only for yourself.

ED ROSSBACH: It was good for me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: What do you think has been your—some of these questions are tough, but I think they're really good. What has been your most rewarding educational experience that you can think of?

ED ROSSBACH: What was the question?

CAROLE AUSTIN: What has been your most rewarding educational experience?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, usually throughout my education I have been touched by a woman. It started in high school. That art teacher was terribly influential on many levels. And I feel—I didn't finish this thought. But throughout all this, I have had an interest in the theater. I don't know when it started. It was full-blown by the time I was in high school. And we had what was called the All-Arts Club, and this was apart from the classes in high school. And I was involved in making scenery, doing make-up for performances and acting in the performances, the whole bit.

CAROLE AUSTIN: The whole thing.

ED ROSSBACH: And this was involvement with the art teacher.

CAROLE AUSTIN: She was involved in this?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Did this interest continue through college?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I said that wrong. You said it's been an interest all your life; but did you participate in theatrical activities during the rest of your college?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You did.

ED ROSSBACH: I had a great dread of having to speak.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I understand. Did this help that, or did you concentrate on other areas of the theater that interested you rather than the speaking? Or did you play parts? Did you play parts in the theater?

ED ROSSBACH: Did I play what?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Did you take on acting roles in the theater?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You did.

ED ROSSBACH: This art teacher used to run the All-Arts Club that I mentioned, and she liked to direct the performances herself. And her daughter acted in them.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, you said that some of these were really goofy kinds of plays that you did in high school. Do you still feel that?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't understand the question. Did I say that?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. You didn't use the word "goofy," but it implied to me that they—I can't think of another way to describe it, Ed.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, these were really far-out to think of a high school doing them. There was a connection with the Art Institute of Chicago.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, that's exciting.

ED ROSSBACH: Yes. And the performances were reviewed in the Chicago newspapers. They were legit.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So people took this seriously, you and —

ED ROSSBACH: I did. I took it seriously.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. But if there were reviews of it, it seems that other people took it seriously too.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it's hard to distinguish between what is a sort of social activity or whether you're being a serious artist.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, am I going too fast for you? Do you need more time to think?

ED ROSSBACH: Hardly.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Huh? If I am, tell me, because I'll slow up for you while you think. Okay? Am I going too fast?

ED ROSSBACH: No, it seems like it's a good pace. I don't know what Katherine thinks.

CAROLE AUSTIN: She's not here. [Laughs.] Okay. Then we'll continue.

So, then the theater was a very rewarding educational experience for you.

ED ROSSBACH: Oh, yes!

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yes. And would you consider ceramics a rewarding educational experience, or different, and painting?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, this is one of these influential women teachers.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, Ed, I noticed that in your other interviews that you've mentioned many women throughout your career who have been very influential to you and in your education.

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Right now I can't think of their names. I can think of—I don't know if I'm saying her name right—Maija Grotell.

ED ROSSBACH: Maija. [Clarifying pronunciation.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Maija Grotell in Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan]?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Now, was she ceramics or was she fiber?

ED ROSSBACH: We called it weaving.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. So you don't remember that Maija did ceramics at Cranbrook?

ED ROSSBACH: What?

CAROLE AUSTIN: You don't remember about Maija and her ceramics at Cranbrook?

ED ROSSBACH: I remember very well.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You do. Did that keep your interest going in ceramics?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes. But looking back on it, now. This rich, full experience wasn't rich and full enough. There was a whole direction in ceramics that was ignored.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It was ignored. Those were the early years of ceramics in this country, though. I don't think there were many well-known artists in it yet. It certainly has come a long way.

And would you say the painting has been a rich experience in your education and life?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I was very involved in painting when I was a senior in college.

CAROLE AUSTIN: In Seattle?

ED ROSSBACH: In Seattle, yes. I sometimes think if I had dropped all this craft business and seriously concentrated on painting, I might have done some interesting things. I see a potential there. This man who was my teacher was a Jewish refugee—not Jewish; German.

CAROLE AUSTIN: German.

ED ROSSBACH: He believed in a very strict sort of education, and he was writing on the theory of painting and so on. And he couldn't speak English, so he wrote in German and got translated into English. And I helped in preparing this thing. We worked for, I don't know, a year or two on this book. And later on I heard that he went back to Germany and is no longer alive. He was a remarkable man, one of these—dogmatic.

CAROLE AUSTIN: But that was okay with you.

ED ROSSBACH: I apparently liked it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Now, when did Lea Miller come into your life?

ED ROSSBACH: Who?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Lea Miller.

ED ROSSBACH: At the University of Washington. She was teaching sophomore design.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you feel that she was an influence at that time also?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it's hard to say. She wasn't one of the strong women who seem to have influenced me. Her husband was the director of the Science Academy in San Francisco. And she was very much involved in being a faculty wife.

CAROLE AUSTIN: But she got you here. Isn't she responsible for getting you to Berkeley?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

How are we doing? Running out of time?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Isn't that interesting? Boy, that's going fast. No, we've got a little bit more time, Ed. I thought I would do this in three sessions of an hour each. Or do you want to continue for another hour?

ED ROSSBACH: Oh!

CAROLE AUSTIN: No, huh?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't know. You seem to be going pretty well, but —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, we can do that if you want to. It's up to you. Why don't we finish this hour and see how you're feeling about it. Okay?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Would you consider that you apprenticed with anyone?

ED ROSSBACH: Would I consider what?

CAROLE AUSTIN: That you apprenticed with anyone. Would the German man be someone?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes, I think so.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Would he have been?

ED ROSSBACH: We visited the Bauhaus Museum in Berlin, and I had a couple of drawings, you might say.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Wait a minute. Stop here, Ed. This isn't moving anymore. Oh, boy, I hope this has been recording. No, this is ended. Okay. It looks like this is ended, too.

So let's stop here. That wasn't an hour, I want you to know. I'm going to stop. I'm going to stop this.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, this is kind of "yes" or "no" answers.

Have you had any involvement with Penland School of Crafts, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Arrowmont, Pilchuck, the Archie Bray, or any other educational institutions devoted to craft? Did you teach at any of those or give workshops?

ED ROSSBACH: You aren't interested in Cranbrook?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, yeah. You want to go back and talk more—well, you know what? We'll go back and talk about that instead of this, since you didn't do this.

Okay, tell me more about Cranbrook, then. I'd love to hear it.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I don't know why I ever went to Cranbrook. Somehow, I did. It was the thing to do. This was the best place to go for crafts.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Uh-huh, it was. It's still a fine place to go for crafts.

ED ROSSBACH: I thought I was going for ceramics.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Uh-huh. And?

ED ROSSBACH: And when I got there, I got into the weaving program. This was not my intention and I don't know why I did it, but it's one of these things.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Funny things in life. Well, are you glad you did it?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it was a wonderful experience being at Cranbrook.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, I can imagine.

Wait a minute, Ed. I forgot to say that this is Carole Austin interviewing Charles Edmund Rossbach at the artist's home in Berkeley, California, on August 27th, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

And we've started talking about Ed's experiences at Cranbrook, and this is where he got into weaving. Okay. So you felt at the time it was a wonderful school.

ED ROSSBACH: Somehow, I always felt there was something wrong. It was elitist.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It was?

ED ROSSBACH: It was very elitist and it had few students. The only reason that I could get there was the GI Bill. The government paid my tuition for two years.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, did you feel that the teachers were elitist, or the teachers and students were both elitist, or mainly the teachers?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, when you read that back to me, I thought, "That's lousy; that isn't true." I embraced what was happening at Cranbrook.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You were what?

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.] I embraced.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You embraced what was happening at Cranbrook.

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. I felt privileged. And in a way, it was a very difficult experience for me. I didn't have a car. I was stuck out in the countryside, beautiful landscape, beautiful houses. And I felt nobody was serious enough.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Teachers AND students?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. Me, the ideal, I was.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, now Jack Lenor Larsen, he was in Seattle with you, not at Cranbrook, but you felt that he was serious about what he did.

ED ROSSBACH: Very serious.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Very serious. Did you feel there was anyone at Cranbrook who was serious about what they were doing? [Pause.] Anyone that you could relate to or be a friend with?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, you know, recently there was an announcement in the newspaper that this man who was teaching at Cranbrook had died. And he was developing an alphabet or some way of getting along without the alphabet on the computer. He was all involved with the computer. And I thought, "Oh, how absolutely wonderful that Cranbrook has gotten on its feet or something."

CAROLE AUSTIN: How interesting.

ED ROSSBACH: You had the feeling that you're going to make the most of this privileged institution, you're going to knock yourself out. And I did. Didn't amount to anything, finally.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Why do you feel it didn't amount to anything, Ed?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I reject something about it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You resented [sic] something about it?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: About the school itself?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. In the midst of —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you put that in words?

ED ROSSBACH: Hmm?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you put that in words?

ED ROSSBACH: The woman who was influential to me at Cranbrook was Maija Grotell, and she was the ultimate in dedication to what she was doing. It was almost painful. And she would trudge down to the basement, in her rubber shoes, firing the kilns.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Were you allowed to see her studio or her work?

ED ROSSBACH: I was. But I would say nobody else was.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No one else was?

ED ROSSBACH: She liked me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you think that she sensed your dedication, your seriousness?

ED ROSSBACH: Of course. I was part of this "old school."

CAROLE AUSTIN: But I think what you got from there and were able to give, wouldn't you say that you felt that that was worthwhile for you? You said it wasn't worth anything. I'm trying to understand that.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, that was a silly thing to have said.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, I'm so glad because I just don't think that about you, you know, that anything that you did was wasted. I think a person who's dedicated, you know, nothing that they do is wasted. And you say you really cherished that experience; right? [Pause.]

ED ROSSBACH: [Inaudible.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: You did cherish the experience.

ED ROSSBACH: They had a man teaching painting when I was there. Well, I think Cranbrook had an obligation to have the best painter. Instead of that, it was just a mediocre one.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That was a disappointment.

ED ROSSBACH: It was a very great disappointment. And the students went along with this. "Sep," Sepeshy. Called him by his first name.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Zep?

ED ROSSBACH: Sep. Sepeshy. S-e-p. Sepeshy [Zoltan L. Sepeshy]. He was Hungarian or something like that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So that was a disappointment, then. I can imagine that would be a great disappointment, as interested as you were in painting.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I felt I was more serious than they were, which was a dumb feeling.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] I can understand.

Now, are there any other experiences at Cranbrook that you want to talk about? Feelings, memories, experiences? These are so important.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, we didn't talk about high school, and I want to include something about high school.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. You mean now, this morning?

ED ROSSBACH: This moment.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay, let's talk about it, then.

ED ROSSBACH: I graduated from high school in Queen Anne Hill in Seattle, and —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Tell me the name of that again? What was the name of the high school?

ED ROSSBACH: Queen Anne High.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Green—Green N?

ED ROSSBACH: Anne.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Queen Anne High.

ED ROSSBACH: What have you got there? I don't trust it! [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] Okay, tell me about your years at Queen Anne High.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, they were painful years.

CAROLE AUSTIN: How so?

ED ROSSBACH: I graduated from high school expecting that I would get a job as a stenographer. I took shorthand, and I was good at the typewriter, very fast, and it just seemed like I was going to walk into a job. This was when the Depression started and there were no jobs anywhere.

And most of all—I'm looking back on it now—this was an incredibly damaging experience for my father, to have lost his job for this family that he'd brought up to this point. And I don't know what they lived on. They didn't ever discuss it. And so here they were left with these children who had to be taken care of. My oldest sister was going to the university and we had no money for her to be going to the university. And we would never have accepted charity. I mean, it simply wasn't anything you considered.

And so I had to take a class in high school to—they called them post-graduate classes. There were a certain number of students accepted by the high school. They had an art teacher who was utterly mediocre.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Hold on a minute, Ed. I'm going to stop this. [Stopping the tape.] Okay, let's continue. Okay, so you were talking about how devastating that the Depression was for you when you had graduated from high school and how devastating it was for your family.

Now again, this is Carole Austin. I'm interviewing Charles Edmund Rossbach at his home in Berkeley, California, on August 27th, 2002.

Okay, so let's continue with that.

ED ROSSBACH: It's rather hard to think of, picking it up.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Picking it up, you mean?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, we'll see if we can.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Well, you were talking about how devastating it was to your father who had taken care of his family, and that there was no money, really, to send your older sister to college. So does that bring up any memories of where we were?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, there was an opportunity to take a class in history. I didn't have the right credits for college, so I filled them out while I was a post-graduate. Does this make sense?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yes.

ED ROSSBACH: And this dragged on for several years. I mean, this is such an important time in your life.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, yes.

ED ROSSBACH: And instead of that, it's just wasted. I feel about this illness that I have now, it's wasted. It seems stupid.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, I understand that.

So you felt that that time after high school was a wasted time because of the Depression,

waiting for these forms to be put through.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And this was for—was this for a scholarship to Washington State or just to go to Washington State?

ED ROSSBACH: Just to go. As far as I know.

CAROLE AUSTIN: How long did it take you from the time you graduated from high school to get to Washington State? [Pause.] Those years that you feel that were wasted. [Pause.]

ED ROSSBACH: I try to understand this time, and I don't really understand it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I'm sorry; it's the University of Washington we're talking about, not Washington State.

So you have not been able yet to understand that time and the waste of the time. Well, Ed, but things changed once you got into Washington State, didn't they, for you? I mean, your life started having some meaning to it. Yes? No?

ED ROSSBACH: It was such a stupid time. So many people were not touched by the Depression at all, and at the same time that you are trying to survive, you're surrounded by people who are playing.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That must have been so difficult. SO difficult.

ED ROSSBACH: If I were doing it today, I would apply for—what do you call the money?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Not the WPA [Work Projects Administration]?

ED ROSSBACH: Anything.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Anything. Well, I know you've gotten grants and scholarships in your time, so you have applied for these things, but not then. [Pause.]

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: What, Ed? [Pause.] What are you thinking now about that time? It seems you have a lot of thoughts about that. [Pause.] About how hard it was.

ED ROSSBACH: It was an impossible situation, to be a graduate student going to school with children.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Did you feel that it was demeaning?

ED ROSSBACH: Hmm?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Did you feel that it was a demeaning situation?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, you're putting in time, time that could be used for—I should have been going to the college.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Is this the time when you went to the Broadway Night School?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It is. So that simply wasn't a good time for you. [Pause.]

Is there anything else you want to say about that time, Ed, about high school?

ED ROSSBACH: Apparently not.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Apparently not. Okay. Well, then let's move on. If any thoughts come up, you know, we'll just stop and talk about them. Okay? It seems that it's kind of painful for you to go back and think about that time.

Now we're kind of jumping ahead here. Can you tell me about your travels, how they

influenced your life? And have they had an impact on your work as well, your travels with Katherine—and by yourself, if there were any; and also, you know, your time in the Signal Corps when you were in Alaska? I think you mentioned that that made an impression on you, the Aleutian Islands.

ED ROSSBACH: It's a different sort of life. And I met people that I came to like very much. It was a satisfying experience.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was this before or after—well, this had to be after Columbia, was it? Because it says here you graduated from Columbia in 1941. So you must have entered the war after that. Is that true?

ED ROSSBACH: This is one of these gray areas that my mind is —

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's all right, Ed.

When you were in Alaska, did you think at that time that traveling is something you'd like to do, or did that not come till later?

ED ROSSBACH: It never occurred to me that I could travel.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Really? When did this occur to you?

ED ROSSBACH: [Pause.] Must have been sometime.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] Sometime. Well, do you think it might have been when you met Katherine and the two of you started to travel then?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, she wasn't a traveler either.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Really? Well, when was your first trip? Together as a couple, when was your first—what was your first trip to, I should say.

ED ROSSBACH: First trip was my sabbatical leave, my first sabbatical leave, and we were going to make a grand tour and really hit the highlights.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Of Europe?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Is that when you were gone for nine months?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No? How did that impact you? [Pause.] How did that impact you, those nine months? That must have been quite a different experience.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, we didn't stay as long as we could have, which I think is significant.

CAROLE AUSTIN: How was that significant to you? There was more to learn? What was the significance of it not being long enough?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, somehow you have this feeling that this is a marvelous opportunity. Just like Cranbrook, it's a marvelous opportunity and you have the obligation to make the most of it. You're a poor boy struggling to live, and everyone else is playing. It sounds silly. This all sounds silly to me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You've mentioned so many times that you feel that you didn't make the most of your opportunities. Ed, do you think it could be that you're being too hard on yourself? [Pause.] [No response.]

I think this is an important question. It seems to me, reading your material, that you've been too hard on yourself, and I'm wondering if you feel you might have been too hard on yourself. [Pause.] [No response.]

Is that too difficult to answer, Ed? [Pause.] Would you rather go on?

CAROLE AUSTIN: This is Carole Austin interviewing Charles Edmund Rossbach at the artist's

home in Berkeley, California, on August 28th, 2002. This is session number two.

Okay. Ed, yesterday we ended just beginning to talk about your travels and how they had an impact on your life or work, or if you didn't think they did have an impact on your life. How do you feel about that? Talk about that for me, please.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it never occurred to me when I was young that I was going to end up being a traveler or that I would ever be in an economic situation that this was possible. And we both had strong feelings about what we wanted to do. And I wanted to—I'll get back to that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay.

ED ROSSBACH: I wanted to say something about Lea Miller.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay.

ED ROSSBACH: We sort of touched on that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yes.

ED ROSSBACH: And I can't remember what I'd said, but we'll forget that and —

CAROLE AUSTIN: You said very little, so go ahead.

ED ROSSBACH: I couldn't remember what I said. In thinking about it, I don't know why it worked out that way. It seemed to end up in a Thanksgiving party in which—an old association to travel. It all seemed to come together in a most unsatisfactory model of—and looking back on it, I wouldn't do it differently, mainly. But involved in this was Lea Miller. And when I was a student at high school, I worked in the high school library in checking out books and filing books and all that sort of thing, and I became very acquainted with the collection and where what books were and so on. I think—[inaudible]—all the time all the time I spent in the library.

When I started university, I was required to take design classes, and these consisted of ceramics and metalwork, all these things. And I feel now, looking back—this is all coming on metal, and it may be all right.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It's okay. So this is where you first really got to know her, in these classes?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. Well, I don't think I ever knew her. She was fairly inscrutable. And we moved and I had to take these classes at the University of Washington, and she had just come back from some of her travels. I can't get it straight in my mind whether she was getting back from Japan or getting back from getting married in Paris.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you remember, Katherine?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Oh, Paris.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Paris? Okay.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: It was when she got married in Paris.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay.

ED ROSSBACH: Hmm?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: She got married in Paris. That was when you were a student of hers. Japan was much later.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it was a matter of being very aware of travel; that what she was doing, she was doing this remarkable thing.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh. Mm-hmm.

ED ROSSBACH: And she was doing this glamorous thing of getting married in Paris. I thought that was utterly ridiculous. I still do. But anyway, she was in one room teaching, and then in the adjoining room there was teaching of advanced design, and this was being taught by a

man named Robert Iglehart. And Robert Iglehart was a smoothie and "New York." And it turned out he was from Columbia University and a remarkably nice person.

CAROLE AUSTIN: He was what?

ED ROSSBACH: A remarkably nice person. But he had the New York experience and he could do about anything he wanted in the art world. I mean, you just had confidence in this man. I didn't ever know him very well. But there was a beginning there that I, too, was going to travel. And Robert Iglehart believed in me and —

CAROLE AUSTIN: So important.

ED ROSSBACH: —and wrote letters for me. And the letters were to Belle Boas. Do you know Belle Boas?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, the archeological —

ED ROSSBACH: She's one of the Boas clan.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. Okay. Oh, in New York, the Boas collection?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: At the Museum of Natural History. Yeah, Belle Boas.

ED ROSSBACH: Belle Boas looked like a typical New York old lady that you see on Fifth Avenue. And the program, though, I was in at Columbia University involved the theater and Belle Boas.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, it did. So she was a very important part of that time there at Columbia?

ED ROSSBACH: Terribly!

CAROLE AUSTIN: Terribly. How, Ed?

ED ROSSBACH: Belle Boas was "New England." If I look out this window here, this is the kind of thing that Belle Boas was pushing. She had slides and cards of these various kinds of houses and so on. And the students were elitist. They were all the children of New York money. And you felt that the girls—it was all girls—the girls had so much knowledge, so much more than I did. And I've felt this often, that the people that I'm trying to teach know a damn sight more than I do.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I understand that.

ED ROSSBACH: And she liked me, I mean, to put that simply.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Sometimes that's the most important thing, absolutely. I understand that.

ED ROSSBACH: So they wrote to University of Washington and somehow got a scholarship for me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, I didn't know that. That's how that came about.

ED ROSSBACH: Furthermore, Robert Iglehart was able to sell his artwork, and I saw the thing in action about what they do with agents and who was making the decisions and what these decisions are, and it was a very nonplussing experience to me. One of the things was that there was supposed to be a fad in which designs were supposed to be based on some French motif or something, like blue and white stripes. I had a vague picture of what they were. And I had done a set of designs on boards according to the way it was done in the Iglehart.

And so I was going to peddle my wares. And I looked in the telephone book and was trying to find an agent or somebody. I took my portfolio down to the one I considered the most likely, that there was a better chance that they would be open. I got to the door and turned around and came back.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You did? Why?

ED ROSSBACH: I couldn't do it!

CAROLE AUSTIN: You couldn't do it. Was that your only try, then, with going

for an agent?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Later on, Katherine comes in and she was able to find an agent who would try to sell her work. And this New York agent we never saw.

[To Katherine Westphal]: You didn't ever see Caroly, did you?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yes. He came out very often.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, anyway, we worked up this deal, Katherine and

Caroly, and we were able to sell a good number of our designs.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That was wonderful!

ED ROSSBACH: You were told what to do. When they wanted textiles from the South Seas, you'd go to the library and look at artifacts from the period.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, that must have been fun. Was it?

ED ROSSBACH: I thought it was very much fun. And we were so successful at it that it was really bolstering. I think Katherine is purer about everything than I am. I think people would think the opposite. They think I have these standards or something, the way things are. And I was very happy to do printed textiles from the South Seas or whatever.

CAROLE AUSTIN: How long did this go on? Do you know? How many years?

ED ROSSBACH: A couple years.

CAROLE AUSTIN: A couple years? No? Ten years? It seems probably a couple now — [laughs] when you've lived this long. So about 10 years you did this?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Eight to 10.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Eight to 10. So this must have been a lot of fun.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: For both of you.

ED ROSSBACH: Katherine got bored with it quicker than I did. I was attracted to the money. Meanwhile back at the farm—.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.]

ED ROSSBACH: I was on a special program at Teachers College.

CAROLE AUSTIN: A special program where? At Teachers College where?

ED ROSSBACH: New York.

CAROLE AUSTIN: New York. At Columbia.

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay.

ED ROSSBACH: This is again the theater. Part of this program they had at Columbia, which is innovative and—I can't even think what kind of progressive education. And I won't tell what that program consists of, because that doesn't matter. But we all had to do certain things that were in the program, and one of the things that we had to do was get—I can't think what you call it—of a doctor.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You had to get what of a doctor?

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.] Well, that's the word I can't think.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] That's what you can't think of? You had to get—part of what you had to do was get—oh, permission from a doctor? Or an okay?

ED ROSSBACH: That they would accept me as a student.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. In other words, you had to be healthy.

ED ROSSBACH: Yes. And when I went to my doctor in New York to get this kind of a statement, he wouldn't give me one because I was too nervous. This experience upset me too much. So I went to this New York psychiatrist. And he was very nice.

ED ROSSBACH: I had confidence in him, and I thought this was all—some people thought it was just a waste of time.

MS AUSTIN: And you felt?

ED ROSSBACH: I liked it. So, on the GI Bill of Rights, I could get psychiatric sessions, which were a very great disappointment. But anyway, in the course of all this—[pause] —

CAROLE AUSTIN: You got in the program.

ED ROSSBACH: I got in the program. I performed satisfactorily. They had no qualms about this at all. Belle Boas took me on. Somewhere higher up—[inaudible]—acceptance as a potential student, because they accepted me, and all year that I was there, I was getting training. And Belle Boas was influential, one of these women who were. And everything is done through contacts.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It certainly is, isn't it, Ed. The older you get, the more you understand that.

ED ROSSBACH: You resent it and you have to play along with it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yes, I agree. It's astounding.

ED ROSSBACH: Belle Boas was the teacher of this—art teacher of this girls' school. We all had to do practice teaching as part of this program, and we were all assigned schools. And I was assigned in one the roughest areas in New York.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, really? Do you remember the name of the school?

ED ROSSBACH: No, I don't. I haven't thought—it never occurred to me you'd want to know that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] How long did you have to do this?

ED ROSSBACH: A year.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] Well, I think we kind of established that your first ideas about travel came from Lea Miller and that you felt privileged to do that.

Now, this is a little bit about you and your work.

ED ROSSBACH: Not only Lea Miller. There were several things I wanted to say about Lea Miller. I get all mixed up of when these things happened.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Don't worry about when they happened. You know, I think it's what happened that's important, or your thoughts.

ED ROSSBACH: She was a friend of the man—[pause]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Who was she a friend of?

ED ROSSBACH: The chairman of the art school.

CAROLE AUSTIN: The chairman of the art school.

ED ROSSBACH: She was a personal friend of his. There was a whole set at Seattle at that time. There were several sets, and you didn't exactly break into them. One of those sets was —well, you know, Carole, what that was. [Pause.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: What else did you want to say about her, anything? Because we need to move on to some of these questions pretty soon.

ED ROSSBACH: Hmm?

CAROLE AUSTIN: What else did you want to say about Lea? Because we need to move on to some of these other questions now about your work. About you. Do you have anything else you want to say?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay, go ahead.

ED ROSSBACH: She scared me. I thought of her as cold and distant, and you wouldn't break this.

CAROLE AUSTIN: But you were still friends. You managed somehow to break that.

ED ROSSBACH: She was involved in a lawsuit.

MR. AUSTIN: Oh, against the school?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, would you like some tea?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That was because she got married to another teacher, and that wasn't allowed, right?

ED ROSSBACH: And so she proposed to continue teaching, fulfilling her contract, and it was in all the Seattle papers. They brought the press into the art room, and she moved through the art room having her picture taken with the students, and so on and so on. In a way, she was so removed from doing any act of—she was liberal. You knew how she was going to vote, but she was not going to take a stand and jeopardize anything.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, how did that suit come out? Did she win?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So she got to remain teaching.

ED ROSSBACH: She left. She quit.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, she quit.

ED ROSSBACH: That's what I was going to say.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's when she came to Berkeley, right?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes, that's when she came to Berkeley. And her husband, her new husband was the director of the Academy of Sciences. And she became our good friends.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, I'm going to push on now, okay? Because we have to talk about you a little bit. [Laughs.] So are you ready to do that? It depends on the question, right? [Pause.]

Ed, do you want to take your pills before we continue?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No. All right. Well, listen, I'm going to forge ahead with another question and see if you feel like it. Okay? [No response.] It looks like you have something else you wanted to say. Or are you okay for moving ahead? [No response.] Well, let's go ahead. And

if you think of other things, we'll just insert them. Okay?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, when I went to School of Art at the University of Washington, I didn't have any contacts at all. It was just a matter of going in cold. I never saw anybody before. And this was difficult. Many things were difficult. I was too old. All the other people were older—were younger.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Younger.

ED ROSSBACH: The same thing was true when I was taking these classes in high school, graduate classes. There was nobody my age and nobody spoke to me. Absolutely did not. Nobody spoke to me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I'm so surprised. I went back to school late in life, you know, and I loved it. And the younger students were just great.

Well, go on. So this is a memory that you have, that it was hard.

ED ROSSBACH: But it gave me the opportunity to do stage work.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah, we talked about that yesterday in detail, so we won't go over that again today. Is that okay? Okay.

Ed, do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition or one that is particularly American, as an artist? Tough question.

ED ROSSBACH: I was surprised that this movement wasn't more international than it was.

CAROLE AUSTIN: The fiber movement? The contemporary fiber movement? Well, how about people like Olga de Ameral and Abakanowicz Do you feel they fit into that contemporary fiber tradition?

ED ROSSBACH: Not exactly.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, really? Well, I'm surprised to hear that. Can you explain that a little bit?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't think so.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. We'll go on, then.

ED ROSSBACH: I think they were very influential in it, but they weren't part of it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: They weren't part of it. Okay. Now, I can understand that. That's a big differentiation, to be influential to something but not part of it. Okay. I think that's a good explanation of them, actually, and their role in that.

ED ROSSBACH: Good.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And I hadn't really thought of it that way.

Moving on. Some of these questions, I think I know the answer, but I don't dare say.

Does the function of objects play a part in the meaning of your work, objects being functional?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't think so.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I don't think so either, in your work. I don't think that's been one of your major concerns ever.

ED ROSSBACH: [Inaudible.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay.

Does religion or a sense of spirituality play a role in your art?

MR.ROSSBACH: At the time I didn't have a job, the Depression was at its height, I became

friends with a minister who had come from Australia, of all places, he and his wife. And they were the most wonderful people and the most incredibly genuine, and poor. They were poor. I was poor. We didn't recognize being poor. That came later when you look back on it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's good, though, that you didn't think about it at the time.

So to summarize that, I think rather than spirituality or religion playing a role in your art, I think it's the goodness of people who have helped push you along in your work and in your life, the people that you have met that have been so important to you. Would you agree with that to any extent?

ED ROSSBACH: I guess so.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Now, you've discussed your relationship with your agent. Have you had relationships with dealers, galleries, commissions?

ED ROSSBACH: Katherine has for me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Katherine has for you. So she's kind of dealt with these people for you. Have you done commissions?

ED ROSSBACH: Hm-mmm. [Negative response.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Is it something that you did not want to do?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't know. I don't know whether I would welcome a commission if it came along. I don't think so.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, it seems to me, as experimental and as explorative as your work has been, that commissions wouldn't be something that would be of great interest to you. It seems that your interests were in a different area as you worked.

Okay. Can you explain your working environment? Is your studio here in your home? Do you work in your home? Is that where your studio is, Ed?

ED ROSSBACH: When was I working at home?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, were you ever?

ED ROSSBACH: Always.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Always. Okay. So your studio has been in your—your workplace has been your home.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative response.] The biggest piece I ever did, I worked in a studio. Someone lent me a studio.

CAROLE AUSTIN: For this piece. Otherwise, it's been here that you worked. Because your work hasn't been tremendously large.

Is there a community that has been important to your development as an artist? In one of your interviews, you spoke to the idea of the energy of the artists as a group. Did you have that in your life as you were working as an artist, or were your students really your community?

ED ROSSBACH: There was no group.

CAROLE AUSTIN: There was no group. Do you feel you worked in isolation, more or less?

ED ROSSBACH: Oh, yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, did you feel that there was any support for you as an artist when you worked? [Pause.] Is that a question you don't want to deal with?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't—[inaudible].

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. We won't talk about it, then.

In your opinion, where does American fiber rank on an international scale? Do you feel that the field now is moving in any obvious direction or not? How do you feel about what's going on now in fiber?

ED ROSSBACH: Would you read it again?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Read it again? Sure. It says, where does American fiber rank on an international scale to you, and is the field moving in any obvious direction or not at the present time? [Pause.]

Ed, let's stop here for a minute. I want to see what's going on with this tape. The tape is not moving. [Pause.]

ED ROSSBACH: I think the thing I would have to say —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Wait, wait. The tape ran out.

ED ROSSBACH: Hmm! Can't say it!

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] Hold on to that. Hold on to that. Now I'm going to stop this. There we go. And then, let's see, I put it on "pause," put it on "record." Not starting. Must have the tape in wrong here. I'm recording already on this one, but I don't want to stop it because I'm just—okay, we'll try this. Well, that didn't work. We're wasting time here. [Ms. Austin is checking the tapes in a separate tape recorder.] Okay.

CAROLE AUSTIN: This is Carole Austin interviewing Charles Edmund Rossbach at the artist's home in Berkeley, California, on August 28th, 2002. This recording is for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Okay, Ed, let's continue. All right. We were going to talk about where does American craft—I mean, American fiber rank on an international scale. Now, you talked about the foreign-born women. Do you think that this fiber movement is very much an American movement, or do you not know?

ED ROSSBACH: I'd say yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yes, that it's an American movement?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay, let's get to this next page, then.

What do you see as the place of universities in the American craft movement, and specifically for artists working in fiber? What role do you think they play? And do you think it's important?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I think it's important—what's important?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was important?

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.] I don't know what the question is.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's a long question.

How do you see the universities—how do you see their place in the American craft movement, especially textiles? Do you think they have an important role to play?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You don't. Can you tell me why you think that they don't have an important role to play?

ED ROSSBACH: Something that's sort of disappointing. [Inaudible.] That didn't make any sense.

CAROLE AUSTIN: But you don't see them with a specific role, then, to play in the American craft movement. Do you think museums are more important in this, in the craft movement? Exhibitions? Shows?

ED ROSSBACH: Why are these so difficult?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Why are these questions so difficult?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, you know, I think it is because the Archives feel that your opinions of these, as—to use my words—as an elder statesman in the craft movement, they feel that your opinions are important for people doing research for future generations because you're most likely to have the most comprehensive opinion.

ED ROSSBACH: I feel the craft movement to this point has been terribly important and very international. We're in a new phase.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you describe that phase at all or your thoughts about the new phase we're in? Because I agree with you; I think the movement has been very important.

ED ROSSBACH: You think what?

CAROLE AUSTIN: I think the craft movement has been very important. But can you describe the new phase that you think that it is in?

ED ROSSBACH: When I thought of coming for this interview, it seemed to me that the time has been divided into periods, phases, and people have sort of dribbled off into previous phases, so you have everything going on at once. And it's an interesting period, but it's non-existent.

CAROLE AUSTIN: What do you mean by non-existent? You mean this period right now is non-existent? It's interesting, but non-existent?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, you have to explain that.

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.] I'm glad I said something that wasn't obvious.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] Can you explain it at all for us? Or it's just something you understand but can't put in words?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I've felt that there are serious shortcomings in the movement as it existed. I feel that the ACC [American Craft Council] fit in so nicely with Katherine and my plans to travel. They seemed to make things possible. I know I said this before, but—[long pause]—I'm sorry. It's just a jumble.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Is it?

ED ROSSBACH: Of what I've said.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No, but I'm understanding it. Okay. Well, let's go on then.

It seems that you felt that your work has never been in the fashionable mainstream of fiber art, but how do you think your work has been received over time?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I feel terribly isolated. And I think it's a pervading feeling now. Saying something profound.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So you feel isolated, for instance, from what has been going on in the mainstream of fiber art?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Then how do you feel isolation?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't want to be part of it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You don't want to be part of it.

ED ROSSBACH: It's a cop-out for me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I understand that completely. Even though you feel that you've never been in the mainstream of fiber art, I find it interesting that your work has been included in every major and important craft exhibition since I've been in the field. You know, I think of it —

ED ROSSBACH: It must be tiresome.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You think that's tiresome? Ed, you know, I don't, because it points—I think those publications point to your innovativeness, your exploration and your lack of fear about doing something different, you know, than everyone; of following your own vision. And I think those pieces in these exhibitions really showed that very much.

And you know, you are considered by many in the field—and I want to get this on the tape—that you are the founder of the immensely important contemporary fiber movement on the West Coast. Now, what do you say to that? [Pause.] [No response.] And it has to be somehow on the kind of work you've done: your experimentation; your unwillingness to go with the crowd, Ed.

But give me your thoughts on how you feel about that, being considered at the forefront of the contemporary fiber movement on the West Coast. I don't know if you've ever spoken about this to anyone, but it's something I would really like to hear from you, how you feel about that.

ED ROSSBACH: I think it's puzzling. It seems not too long ago I was interested in what was happening in the fiber movement. Now —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Not so much.

ED ROSSBACH: I know you could attribute this to a feeling of being passed by. I don't think it's that at all.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I agree with you. Well, don't you think that it might be the point you are in your life, that those things are now less important to you? What do you think? [No response.] Is it something that you just don't give thought to anymore, Ed?

ED ROSSBACH: No. I think I give thought to it, not very rewarding thoughts.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Mm-hmm.

ED ROSSBACH: There are things I would like to do in fiber but I never will, but I see possibilities.

Don't you have a nice easy one?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Pardon me?

ED ROSSBACH: Don't you have a nice easy question?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Nice easy question? Okay, my dear. Let me see what I can find here.

ED ROSSBACH: We could work over the same ones again.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] No, we want to go forward. We have to go forward.

Are there any writers in the field of American craft who you think the writing is important to you right now?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Well, the only one that I really know was Matthew Kangas, I think, in Seattle; and then the new curator back East. I can't remember his name now. He spoke at —Adams is his last name. He seems to be a very thoughtful writer and thinker about the crafts. He's at one of the museums back East. I can't remember what it is.

I want to get on the tape here the books you published. I think I did that, didn't I? I didn't? Okay. I just want to list these so we have them down. You wrote *Making Marionettes* in 1938, *Baskets as Textile Art* in 1973, *The New Basketry* in 1976, *The Art of Paisley* is 1980. And

your book on 18th Century brocades is unpublished, is it not?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. What was the impetus for you in writing these books, Ed? [Pause.] What got your interest? Let's not use the marionettes; we've talked about that. But the books on basketry and paisley, what sparked your interest in doing these books?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't know.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Is that a hard question?

ED ROSSBACH: Somehow I've never been able to get the one on brocade published, and it makes me question the whole output; what do I think I was doing? But thinking about the brocade book that hasn't been published, I feel I want to revise it. It's been dragging out so long and so much thought has gone into it, and without any product. The time was ripe when I got these other books published, and that doesn't exist now.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's for sure. Very difficult to get published now, no matter how good it is, it seems.

Well, I think when you wrote the *Baskets as Textile Art*—which I have—in the '70s, you know, I think those books presented the possibility to artists of—all the possibilities of basket-making. I think they were important then. I can remember that I pored over these books, and I know, you know, other artist friends who did.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So maybe they just came at the right time, too, you know. It was needed. They were needed.

Okay, we're going to go on here. What do you see as similarities and differences between your early work and your later work? That's a good question. [Pause.] Is that another hard one?

ED ROSSBACH: No. [Pause.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you tell me what you see as the differences between your early work and your later work?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, my gut feeling is there is no difference.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. How is there no difference?

ED ROSSBACH: I'm still trying to do the same thing.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Figure how? Oh, you're still trying to do the same thing. Explore? Experiment?

ED ROSSBACH: Understand. I think in much of my thinking about what I've written—[pause]—I had something I wanted to say, and it's gone.

CAROLE AUSTIN: What? About what you've written, you had something you wanted to say?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And you lost it.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, darn.

ED ROSSBACH: Two minutes ago.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Two minutes ago. Okay. So anyway, so your gut feeling is that you're still trying to understand, to explore in your work, as you were in your early work.

ED ROSSBACH: But I'm also painfully aware of how limited I am in having access to research

material.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's always been important in your work, hasn't it, being able to read.

ED ROSSBACH: Right.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. You know, that reminds me, Ed, you know, when you were teaching, you had access to the fabulous facilities of the Lowie Museum, which is now the Hearst Museum. That must have influenced your teaching and your work, to see this plethora of textiles from all over the world, all ages. Did you use them a great deal in your teaching?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. Oh, in my teaching? No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No? In your own work?

ED ROSSBACH: Just seeing it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You bought textiles for your own collection. Did you buy any for the Lowie Museum at all?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Just for yours. But you did have access to those textiles whenever you wanted to research them?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you think that in teaching your students, you saw a difference in the work of those students who had some textile history and those who didn't?

ED ROSSBACH: I'd say yes. I don't know why I hesitate, because I feel it strongly.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I feel it too. I think it's important. I mean, when I've talked to students who have had you, they feel that that was a real important part of their studies; you know, the talk, the access about textile history.

Ed, you know, I want to stop here for a minute because I want to remember some of the students that you had. I know Pat Hickman was a student. Was Lillian Elliott a student?

ED ROSSBACH: Hmm?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was Lillian Elliott one of your students?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't understand what you're asking.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. When you were teaching in the Design Department at Berkeley, I'm trying to recollect some of your students.

ED ROSSBACH: Oh.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And Pat Hickman, I know, was a student. Was Lillian Elliott a student, or not?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No. Was Ginger Laky a student?

ED ROSSBACH: Who?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ginger?

ED ROSSBACH: Ginger Laky?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah.

ED ROSSBACH: She was a student.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was she? And was Chere Mah?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you remember any others?

ED ROSSBACH: I can remember every one.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, tell me some of them, would you? I would like to have that recorded. [Pause.] Any names stand out in your mind at all?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Pause.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you not want to mention them?

ED ROSSBACH: It's very confusing because students I would like to include, I don't, and some students that I—[inaudible]—I include. So you can't just look at that result and say these are the ones that he likes, see.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I see.

ED ROSSBACH: Tomorrow something different, maybe.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I think the impetus behind asking that question of you, Ed, was that the students that you have have a phenomenal record of doing well in the field success-wise, and that's unusual, you know. And that always reflects on the teacher. I can remember in one instance there was a very well-known teacher in ceramics—and you knew this person well—and she was so tyrannical that none of her students, in all the years after they had her, ever got out of that mold of doing things the way she did.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And with your students, they've just done such amazing things.

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And you know, one thing I think of which is extraordinary are Pat Hickman's gates. You know, I just think that was such an amazing creation of hers. And that was because—you know, a lot of that had to do with having you as a teacher, Ed, even though you may not agree with that.

Let's see. We're doing fine on time. Okay.

Do you remember your early exhibitions, and can you recall the character of these? I mean, were they massive museum things, massive museum shows, or were they small, little galleries? [Pause.] I mean, were these important to you, impressive to you? Tell me about them.

ED ROSSBACH: They were important to me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Were they?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't know why they were.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You don't know why they were, but they were important to you.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you remember—this is really hard. I wouldn't remember this. But can you remember any of your early exhibitions?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, the early ones were all —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay, that's the end. Stop. [Referring to the other tape recorder.] Gee, I don't know why this is that these two recorders say very different things. This says 30 minutes, and this is stopped. Oh.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Maybe these are 30-minute tapes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I bet they're 30 minutes on each side.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. I'm going to leave this one running because I'm terrified that it will erase if I stop it. I've never figured out how to do it. So what I'm going to do is rewind that—oh, good grief, I may not have another one. I don't. So we'll stop here for today.

[Next day, but continuing on same tape, Tape 2B of new copy from minidisk.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: This was misbehaving yesterday. Hello. It's working. Okay, they're both working. We can start.

Ed, have you had any involvement with the American Craft Council?

ED ROSSBACH: What do you mean, involvement?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Have you done anything with them? Have you shown with them?

ED ROSSBACH: [Inaudible.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Now, you were elected a fellow of the American Craft

Council. Okay. Is that the only association you've really had with them?

ED ROSSBACH: Gold.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You received the gold—what's that called, honorary? No, not honorary. Gold Medal?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: From the American Craft Council. Okay.

Can you talk a little bit about when you were—let's say in the 1970s and the '80s when you were working in your studio, what was your process? How did you go about doing your work?

ED ROSSBACH: I'm trying to get a picture of what the work was like at this period. Everything is definitely in—divided by dogs and other things.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Other things.

Katherine, can you give any examples of what his work was like then?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: No. I'd have to get the catalogue.

CAROLE AUSTIN: The catalogue?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: The Textile Museum catalogue. That would give us a clue.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Can you do that? And then I'll go on to another question and we'll come back.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Well, it will only take a minute. I just have to cross the room slowly.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay.

Now, you mentioned that you really didn't have any major shift in your process, that you continually experimented and worked with different techniques and material in order to try to understand them, and that didn't change through the years very much. Is that correct?

ED ROSSBACH: [Pause.] After all this long thought, I don't know.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You don't know? Okay.

Has technology had any impact on your work? In other words, the jacquard loom, any of those things, have they been important to your work in any way?

ED ROSSBACH: They make me regret that I'm not going to be around to use them.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Really.

ED ROSSBACH: I had the opportunity to use the most advanced power loom, and with technician to go with it. It was an absolutely marvelous opportunity.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was this at Rhode Island?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative response.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was it? Were you doing tapestry on the loom?

ED ROSSBACH: No, I was doing damask.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Damask. So that was a marvelous opportunity. I can imagine that was exciting for you to do that. Can you talk about what the results were at all? You did damask.

ED ROSSBACH: And it looks machine-like.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Does it? That's exciting. Would you like to have done more of that?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes. And as I say, I had the opportunity to do it, which I didn't follow up on. It was a whole, total package. It was like, if you were good, you'd go so far, you'd go much farther, and I was not willing to do it at that time.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Now, when you did this on the power loom, this was not at Rhode Island. Where was it?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I don't know. We were taken to the mill where it was, and we saw the new looms, but I don't know where we were.

CAROLE AUSTIN: When you did this. Okay.

Now, at Rhode Island, that's where you worked on the jacquard loom.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative response.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: And was that as enjoyable an experience, or did you really prefer it with the power loom and the brocades?

ED ROSSBACH: It was all exciting.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was it?

ED ROSSBACH: Very. You'd see the potential for using the loom.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And they're doing such wonderful things with computer looms now, with computers on the loom. Is that something you would have liked to have experimented with if you had the chance?

ED ROSSBACH: I think so. I don't know if I would have been able to do it. By that I mean I'm not technician-oriented. I don't think you can make all these distinctions so clear as to what this was on the power loom or on this or that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, Katherine just brought down the catalogue from the retrospective show at the Textile Museum. *Ed Rossbach, 40 Years of Exploration and Innovation in Fiber Art.* And let's see when this was; 1990. Okay. Now, I'm going to look here for some of your earlier work. No, let's go to the '70s and show you some pieces here and see if they strike a bell.

Okay. Well, you know, one of the things that I remember about your work is your newspaper baskets that were rolled in—they were rolled in plastic or cellophane. Let's see what it says here. Polyethylene film. Can you talk about that, about these baskets and your impetus for making them? At this time you seemed to do a lot of work with newspaper.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Talk about that a little bit, Ed.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I like newspaper to work with. It pleases me. I don't do it in any sense of how clever it is to use newspaper, about running around to see what the different

materials are.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It was just there and available to you and you liked it.

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, you said that also about the images that you used; they just happened to be there available and you liked them.

ED ROSSBACH: That's right.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Now, the different materials that you used, that you experimented with, with plastic, the different natural fibers and so forth, including newspaper, what drew you to these fibers?

ED ROSSBACH: What what?

CAROLE AUSTIN: What drew you to using these fibers, the variety of fibers that you used? I'm looking in this book to see some, and there was so much plastic in your work then. Plastic polyethylene. Vinyl tape, newspaper, vinyl tape, cotton string. You used lace damask, synthetic raffia, sea grass, ink on paper, just about anything you can think of.

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.] Anything that was there. There was a lot there.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So in other words, there was plethora of materials, and you just used what took your fancy at the time?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay.

ED ROSSBACH: I tend more not to like going out and buying something.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's very important.

ED ROSSBACH: But just what's there.

CAROLE AUSTIN: What's there in the house. Did people bring you materials to use that they thought were fun? How did you accumulate them in the house?

ED ROSSBACH: No, no, people didn't.

CAROLE AUSTIN: They didn't bring you materials. Then how did you accumulate them? Just where boxes came with stuff in them, that kind of thing?

ED ROSSBACH: I got a lot of material at Jim's. I can't think what the name of the store was.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Caning shop.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Caning shop. Well, that's a shop that all the artists really loved in Berkeley.

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So that was a place that you went to get your material, as well as what you found around.

ED ROSSBACH: The medium really determines pretty much what you do. If cane is available, you do cane objects and you're flexible to go any direction on the spur of the moment.

I was thinking about this while you were coming over. We ran over to Jim's one day, and he was having a class. He offered classes in the weaving studio.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I remember that.

ED ROSSBACH: And people were all sitting around eating lunch and doing whatever they do. And it seemed terribly important. [Inaudible]—always seeing things that are terribly

important. It seems that more and more, the tendency is for the people in this field to drift away from contact with anyone else. I think it's almost isolated. You don't welcome anybody intruding on your privacy, and at the same time, you miss it. And these people in Jim's studio were having a good time, very self-confident. You could walk around and look at what they were doing. Great.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, you know, you've spoken before of the energy created by the community of artists working; you know, when they work together. So you still feel that's important.

ED ROSSBACH: Very much so. I don't think it has increased. When I hear about these universities that are getting rid of their looms, there is a tendency to be more just working at home with what they have, and as a result, they're limited in the materials they use and they're limited in contacts they have with people's reaction to things. When we first came down to Berkeley, we took a class at night school, Katherine and I, at the Berkeley Evening School. And it was the most surprising exchange constantly between people.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, yes, I can imagine. And do you miss that?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, in a way, I never had it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You never had it.

ED ROSSBACH: And I didn't want it. I mean, it's all contradictory.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, in the community spirit, you know, a number of your students—I don't know if it was while you were teaching, I think probably during and after—Katherine can help with dates—founded Fiber Works. And that was very much inspired by you and your works, and that was very much a community place for fiber artists. What was your involvement in that?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it was a good involvement, not just for my own work, encouraged my work, as far as I know.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I know you did an installation there.

ED ROSSBACH: More a sense of involvement in something.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So you felt that this was a good thing, that Fiber Works was a good —

ED ROSSBACH: Oh, yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Very good. Even though it didn't last long. Okay. It was such an interesting time then.

Now, how do you feel about the competition between fiber artists now? And like who's the top dog? Is there a shuffling around to be top dog?

ED ROSSBACH: Not that I know of. I wouldn't have any idea who is the top dog or what that means.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, in other words, the one who has the most notice, I would think, for what they're doing. Did you ever feel competitive in this sense?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I don't know how to answer that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, you know, I think some artists are competitive and I think other artists simply aren't competitive. And so you don't know where you fit in that, whether you were competitive or not.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I can't believe that I'm very competitive.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you think about in your mind, for instance—did you then think about who was having the most notice or the most shows or the most notoriety?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And can you remember some of the people who were, besides yourself? Do you think that you were having that kind of notoriety?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I notice that you have a very impressive list of museum exhibitions, Ed.

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And I think the entire craft world and fiber world were very interested in what you were doing because you were kind of the harbinger. You know, you introduced new ideas into the fiber world on a continual basis. So I think you were looked up to in this way. What do you think? [Pause.] No comment?

ED ROSSBACH: My mind works slowly.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's okay, Ed. Take as long as you want. Just let me know if you want me to go on. Well, I think it's important to know where you think you stood in the fiber movement. I mean, the West Coast feels that you were the leader of the contemporary fiber movement. Where do you feel you stood in that relationship? Were you able to see that about yourself?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I know that I wasn't interested in doing the ordinary thing.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You certainly weren't. You were very experimental.

Okay. Your students were very devoted to you, Ed. And you talk about teachers that just knew technique but they didn't have a fire. And you had that fire, that spirit that kept your students very excited all the time. Do you think that your personal approach to teaching had something to do with that?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you elaborate?

ED ROSSBACH: It meant a lot to me to be involved with my teachers.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And your students.

ED ROSSBACH: Yes, I meant my students.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You said you seemed to be able to get across more of what you wanted to get across by lecturing rather than creative classes. Can you talk about that?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I think all these processes in fiber work are so slow, you know —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, yes.

ED ROSSBACH: —nothing happens and you lose your audience, so you have to somehow involve them.

MR. AUSTIN: So this is kind of your philosophy. I wondered what that was. That's interesting. Can you talk a little more about that, Ed? That's really interesting. So, through your lectures, you were able to involve them more, to get their spirit fired up.

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: How did you do this in your lectures?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I think they believed in me. And I believed in them. But there's a mutual thing.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Absolutely.

ED ROSSBACH: Both Katherine and I have involved ourselves in travel and in photographing, and we have sort of a background to play against.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And that was helpful to your teaching?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative response.]

[End Tape 2B of new copy from minidisk.]

[Begin Tape 3A of new copy from minidisk.]

ED ROSSBACH: My students are dying.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Your students are what?

ED ROSSBACH: Dying.

CAROLE AUSTIN: They're dying? Like who? Can you name some?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, Lillian Elliott.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, of course. But she wasn't a student. She was a friend. Lillian Elliott was a friend; she wasn't one of your students.

ED ROSSBACH: No, she was not one of my students.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was that difficult —

ED ROSSBACH: [Cross-talk]—indirectly.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yes, I'm sure, because you shared so many ideas?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. We had a very nice relationship with Lillian and Roy. And it was a very accepting group, this little group. It seemed to take something serious that you believed in. I would say I believed in Katherine or believed in someone else. It was more of a deep thing.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I think those people are also important to one's work.

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. But it wasn't a matter of showing your work to them, you know? They have this little group that meets somewhere, in Denver somewhere, and they take turns presenting what they're doing. Well, I'm not interested in that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No, I understand that. I think you mentioned you're just interested in the exchange of ideas in general between people.

ED ROSSBACH: Well —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Or is there more to it than that?

ED ROSSBACH: As I said yesterday or the day before, it's been a very lonely business. There was not much exchange. And there is with—was with Lillian and Roy. There was a good exchange.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So that was a great loss, wasn't it, Ed, when she died?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. She was valued. And she knew it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So are you.

ED ROSSBACH: She played a role, in a way the grand dame. She knew she was it. She has these followers. She moved among them with the authority, and see what I'm working on now, or he is. If she was interested in you, she would go. And people had great confidence in Lillian. Roy played a role I didn't understand and I don't understand yet. They always came over. They came over on Sundays, but he never participated.

CAROLE AUSTIN: He was a very quiet man.

ED ROSSBACH: Never said anything. And you thought, my god, how dull this must be for him. And apparently it wasn't.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, you know, I think of another person who—unfortunately, she moved, but I think that Pat Hickman was a good friend to you, too. And she had great reverence for

you, too, Ed. Do you remember that relationship when she lived here in Berkeley?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Didn't these relationships help you feel less isolated, with Lillian once a week?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. We were very fortunate to have that. And there were others.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you name some of the others?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, we have a nice relationship with Pat and Mark Balken.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Pat and Mark who?

ED ROSSBACH: Balken.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Pat and Mark. Okay. I'll get their last name. Do you still have this? Are they still here? Do you still see them?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, maybe once a year. They're considerably younger than we are and lead a different life.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Does Pat work in textiles or is she something else?

ED ROSSBACH: She did, but she's teaching school now, not in textiles.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Not textiles.

ED ROSSBACH: Teaching, like, fourth grade or something.

MS.AUSTIN: Ed, anyone else you can think of that have been good friends over the years and encouraged you and you've encouraged them?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, Lea Miller was very important. I think I sounded rather negative yesterday.

CAROLE AUSTIN: About her?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I didn't get that.

ED ROSSBACH: I don't want that.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No. Well, was Lea like a personal friend as well as a colleague?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative response.] She represented something to me, of someone who's moving in a more—I'm not saying monied. I don't mean that, exactly.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Sophisticated?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah, I guess so. I always felt comfortable with her. There was no sense of awe that this woman has done many things.

MS.AUSTIN: As you have.

Now, for the *American Craft* Magazine, you wrote a series of four articles: on Dorothy Liebes, Marianne Strengell, Annie Albers and Mary Atwater. These were very early, seminal weavers. They were very important. Can you tell me what drew you to writing these articles about them? What interested you?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I felt involved somehow with these people. And I met Dorothy Liebes once, just shook hands or whatever; and Annie Albers I didn't even meet.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You never met Annie. And of course, you didn't meet Mary Atwater either.

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: How about Marianne Strengell?

ED ROSSBACH: She was a cool one.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Was she? She was cool?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: What do you mean by cool? Like, cool demeanor?

MR.. ROSSBACH: When you went to a gathering where there was Dorothy Liebes and—well, it would be an interesting meeting. These were very assured women, very —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Self-confident? Wrong word?

ED ROSSBACH: They had a sense of their own importance. And I associated Annie Albers with Black Mountain College. And I was invited once to teach at Black Mountain College, and I refused, but I've always been extremely satisfied that I got invited.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yes, I agree.

ED ROSSBACH: This was a very important thing for me. And I wonder—I ponder this—what would have happened if I had gotten over my shyness and mingled in the society, which I could have.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So, Ed, do you feel that your shyness has been a drawback for you?

ED ROSSBACH: What?

CAROLE AUSTIN: So you feel that your shyness has been a drawback for you?

ED ROSSBACH: Been a what?

CAROLE AUSTIN: A drawback.

ED ROSSBACH: Drawback.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, maybe I didn't accept things that could have been meaningful.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Ed, you mentioned that these women had a sense of their own importance. Now, this is an important question. Did you have a sense of your own importance as an artist and as a teacher?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, surprisingly, I DO have.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Good news. Tell me more about that. Please. [Pause.] Please, please elaborate on that for me.

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.] I don't think I can.

MR. AUSTIN: Okay. Let me put it another way. In what way do you sense you own importance as an artist and a teacher?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it's a rather ridiculous comparison, but if Pete Voulkos walked into a room, it's a different thing than if I walked into a room.

MR. AUSTIN: So you knew that you had a presence.

ED ROSSBACH: I was satisfied.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's wonderful. That's wonderful, Ed.

Katherine, I want to interrupt here. He was talking about two of your friends, Pat and Mark, and he couldn't remember their last name.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Pat Charley and Mark Balken.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I know her. Pat is in ceramics.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And he says that they have been—you said they've been friends over the years.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Mm-hmm. Pat Charley was a student of Ed's.

CAROLE AUSTIN: She was. Okay.

Now Ed, this is a question that I formed on my own by reading through a lot of material about you, by thinking about what I've known about you over the years. I want to read this so I get it right. I wrote it down. And I would like to have your comment, though it's a little bit complicated:

From your weaving, from your off-loom weaving techniques, your writing, where you've mentioned the fascination in the stringing of words together, to even your war years with the Signal Corps, it seems to me that you have been immensely interested in the structure or construction of communication in art as well as writing.

ED ROSSBACH: Okay.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay? Do you agree with that?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I never thought of it in those terms particularly, but I see that it could be.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It could be.

It seems—I would call it the leitmotif in your career, this interest in construction of fabric, of textiles. You talked about the stringing of words together, and even your interest in the Signal Corps, you know, and the work that you did there. Do you think—and then you've also mentioned that you said you've been interested in structures through disintegration. Talk to me a little bit about structure and construction and how you look at that in terms of your work.

ED ROSSBACH: Well, when we went to Egypt, I was photographing structure. What I meant—I mean, it sounds highfalutin, but it was the disintegration of these things which seemed so permanent, and yet you can just look from their photographs that they're going. Everything's going.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Everything's disintegrating. Did you find this interesting in textiles that you studied? You know, the old textiles that were mostly disintegrated, did that interest you too?

ED ROSSBACH: Very much.

CAROLE AUSTIN: So the structure interested you as well as the disintegration of the structure.

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. Both.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Both. Did you work with that in your art at all, with that whole idea, that whole concept?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, it kind of surprises me that we're so impermanent. Everything is. It's like the pyramids.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you care whether your work lasts?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't know. It won't. I know that. We're having trouble saving anything.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You do have trouble saving it, saving things? Why is that?

ED ROSSBACH: There's no way of saving it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Because you know eventually it's going to disintegrate. I can't think of a better word. And don't you think this is also one of the qualities of textiles, that, you

know, it doesn't last as long as ceramics or sculpture, that kind of thing?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative response.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: How have you felt about that when you were working with textiles, knowing that it had a shorter life span than many other craft materials?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I like the sense that this textile has had these life experiences.

Is that the end of—[referring to one of the tapes clicking off.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's the end of the tape. Boy, we did good today. Oh, we did so good.

Okay, here we go, Ed.

Now, this last tape, I want to spend most of the time talking about some of your major shows, recent shows and their catalogues. And I touched on it earlier, but I think one of your important shows was the one at the Textile Museum, *Ed Rossbach, 40 Years of Exploration and Innovation in Fiber Art*. Do you remember anything about the show being put together?

ED ROSSBACH: No. [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: You don't?

ED ROSSBACH: I can't think what the show was.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, it was a retrospective.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: It's the one that Jane Brite was the curator on.

ED ROSSBACH: Oh.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And she came to your house and picked pieces; I know that.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Papered the house with pieces.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. And what I'm doing now is I'm going through the catalogue from your earliest work, where you have experimented with every technique, from—did you do tatting? Did you ever try [ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.]—you did try tatting. Okay. I know you did a great deal of work in ikot, and, of course, in printed textiles and many varied types of weave. And you know, raffia was an interest of yours too, wasn't it, the use of raffia. [Pause.] Can you talk about that at all?

ED ROSSBACH: Raffia?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. It seems to come all the way up from your childhood, you know, into the piece that you did on the frame and had to cut it out of the frame, and then who put it back in the frame? Was that American Craft Museum?

[No audible response.]

Do you have anything to say about your work that's in this catalogue, because it was an important show of your work. Do you know if this show traveled, Ed?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't know.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You can't remember?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It did travel.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yes, yes, yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And it's quite an honoring of your whole life in the textile arts from a very prestigious museum, Ed. And as I look through here, things that catch my eye are the images that you've used, everyday images. Many people have talked about Mickey Mouse, but I see a lot of Katherine in here. And I'm not going to talk about the ones that everybody

else has. I see your newspaper work in here, every kind of material one could ever imagine as I go through here. It's just quite exciting.

So you can't comment on the show, I take it. You don't remember it that well. Is that true?

ED ROSSBACH: Well, I was doing that disintegrating.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Huh?

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.] The pyramids disappearing; you know, wearing out. I had a show at Fiber Works of something like 40 photographs. They weren't really photographs.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: They're combinations of photographs and manipulations of the images. They're all upstairs. Raymond packed them in a box—in paper. They're all together, those photographs of the disintegration of the pyramids. Also in connection with that, you photographed the holes in the wall at Marrakesh, in Morocco.

ED ROSSBACH: Those two things seemed important to me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: To you, those two things. Well, when you were putting up an installation at Fiber Works at one time, you said that sometimes you don't know whether the object is more important as a work of art or the photograph of it. Can you elaborate on that? Which is the work of art, in other words, you were questioning. Remember that? Okay, well, we'll go on.

ED ROSSBACH: I'm not being very satisfactory. I thought, at the time that I did this thing, I had done something interesting that someone should be interested in, but nobody was.

CAROLE AUSTIN: What was that, Ed?

ED ROSSBACH: The pyramids. There seems to be no audience for things that interest me.

CAROLE AUSTIN: There's been a huge audience for things that interest you, Ted—Ed. It's because—I call you "Ted" because I keep thinking of Ted Cohen—because, as I was talking to you before we were taping, what you did, whether it was with the pictures of the pyramids or your experimentations, you opened up the field of fiber. You made that interesting for fiber artists all across the country, Ed.

ED ROSSBACH: I don't think so.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, I do.

ED ROSSBACH: [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.] I'm speaking as a past curator; I'm not just talking as, you know, somebody next door. I think you made a huge impact. Maybe not in the way you would have liked to have, but I think it was very important. I think, in a way, it's like an architect who builds a building. It's the engineer that makes sure that the building stands up, but the architect gets all the glory. Well, you were like the engineer, with the construction, the deconstruction, with finding out, experimenting, all those—that's what you were doing. And maybe other artists got a lot of glory for what they did, but what you did was very important.

Now I want to go to this next catalogue. It's called *Ties That Bind*, and it's going to Boston soon. It's not there now, is it?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: No. That show, just things from the Daphne Farago collection are going to be in Boston.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I see.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: This show has traveled, and it's been in many places.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Let me look up front. Okay, this was organized— [Reading:] *Ties that Bind* is fiber art by Ed Rossbach and Katherine Westphal from the Daphne Farago collection. And it was organized by the Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design in 1997.

Now, this is one of the more recent shows of your work, and so therefore, it's important. And in this catalogue, like the others, it gives really quite wonderful background, and the pictures

that it shows of your work and Katherine's work is just outstanding.

Do you remember this show at all? No?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: We didn't see it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: You didn't see it.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: You see, we have never seen this show installed. We haven't seen—probably haven't been out of Berkeley since '96.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And this was in '97.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: The last time we traveled was to Philadelphia to see the Cézanne show at the Philadelphia Museum, and I think that's 1996.

CAROLE AUSTIN: '96. Okay. Let me see. I'm trying to see where this—it was shown at the American Craft Museum in New York, as well, in 1998.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: But it's been in other places, too.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It has, besides that. Okay. So they probably got those venues after the catalogue had gone to print.

What this shows, Ed, is that just these two catalogues and these two shows in the last 10 years, the last decade, almost the last decade, it shows the importance of your work—and Katherine's work—to the whole idea of fiber art, not only on the West Coast but in the country in general. And both of these shows were organized on the East Coast. So that means that the importance of your work has traveled to the East Coast. It's nationwide.

Talk to me about that. I want—you know, this is exciting.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Want me to talk?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. Tell me a little bit.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I think that we are not recognized on the West Coast. Neither one of us have ever been represented in a gallery, a selling gallery on the West Coast.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's astounding.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: We have had a limited number of shows in this area. The Craft and Folk Art Museum in San Francisco —

CAROLE AUSTIN: The University Art Museum, the small show I had of his baskets.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: But very small.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Very small.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: And Davis.

CAROLE AUSTIN: And Davis.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: And Davis, the gallery at Davis [University of California at Davis]. And, let's see —

CAROLE AUSTIN: The Oakland Museum.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Oakland Museum.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Very good show.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: But the—first show, the Textile Museum show, that was in Los Angeles. That traveled to Los Angeles, because we saw it in Los Angeles.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you remember that, Ed?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: It was when the Craft and Folk Art Museum in Los Angeles was at the May Company.

ED ROSSBACH: Oh, yes.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: And it had a very interesting entrance to the exhibit. [Laughs.] They had taken the photograph of Ed and the buffalo, and they had drawn the buffalo in color on the wall.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It's just wonderful. And his pieces with the buffalo are wonderful, and the cowboys in the corral. And, you know, all of these images, they speak to my heart, Ed. Well, you know, they say—there is an old saying that a prophet is never known in his own town. And I think that so often happens with artists. But you must be pleased that it came back to the West Coast, though.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I don't think—well, I don't think we even felt—did you feel pleased that the show from Washington, D.C., came to Los Angeles?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't know.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: It was a mediocre installation. I shouldn't say that on tape. You know, it was a mediocre place, a floor in a department store.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, sure. Their facilities were so limited while they were —

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: It had something to do with remodeling or —

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah, retrofitting, for the earthquake.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Oh. I don't know what it was. But I mean, it was—you know, you'd go through men's underwear and slacks and find the elevator and get up to the fourth floor and wander around among china and dishes, and then in a corner there is a wall with a buffalo head on it and Ed's face looking at it. [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: That was kind of obscure, then, when it came here.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yeah.

CAROLE AUSTIN: That is too bad, though. But you know, I do think that the number of catalogues, the number of shows, important shows, the number of museum collections that you were in speak to your importance, Ed, as an artist. And I was glad to hear you say, you know, that you understand your own importance in the field.

Now Ed—and Katherine—are there any other questions that you want to talk about, any things that you feel that I have neglected from the questions here that I have in front of me that you'd like to talk about, about your work? [Pause.] Your work as an artist. [Pause.]

Ed, do you feel that teaching cut into your time for making art? Or do you think it inspired it?

MS. ROSSBACH: I think in some funny way, I'm stimulated by my teaching, all the slides that I took various places and being able to show these to the kids and talk about them.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Photography has been important to your teaching and your work, hasn't it?

ED ROSSBACH: [Inaudible.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Very. I didn't hear you, Ed. Do you agree with that, that photography's been important?

ED ROSSBACH: Yes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Katherine, can you think of anything that we should discuss with Ed as we come to the close of these tapes now that we have not covered? I mean, there's much we haven't covered, but let's say any very important areas?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I think you should talk about commitment. What is the most important activity in an artist's life? Is it making art, or is it appearing in exhibitions, or what

is the thing you enjoy doing most?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Are you trying to say is making art more important than, for instance, being a celebrity in the field?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I think that's what you should ask Ed about.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay.

Ed, then let's talk about that if you would like to. How do you feel personally about making art versus being a celebrity in the field?

ED ROSSBACH: I think it's difficult to make art, and it should be pleasurable. Doesn't make any sense.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah, it makes sense. That's fine. Well, it seems that even though being a celebrity hasn't been important to you, because your students and your art have been what's important to you, you've become important anyway. Do you feel that?

ED ROSSBACH: It's a fantastic setting, the way everything converges on these.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: On the palm trees? Everything converges on the palm trees out the window?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Well, you know, I think this is probably time to stop.

Anything else, Katherine?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I think that last question that you put to him became the wrong direction of what I thought I was asking.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Why don't you rephrase it?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I will try. I don't think the word *celebrity* is involved in it. What I'm talking about is the pleasure you get, that you would rather do this than anything else, and that it is so compelling that you can't leave it alone; you think of it constantly. And I think that my evaluation of what Ed is doing, this is the thing he's most involved with, is thinking of these solutions or working out these problems or finding a piece of material that suddenly speaks to him and something else happens to it. I think of in particular a little piece that's kicking around here somewhere that was a plastic palm leaf that he bought somewhere. He took it all apart and plaited it together so it becomes another thing. It is no longer the explosive fan palm; it is a fan-palm material that has had a structure imposed on it.

You know, that green one that I like so well? It's a little—probably 12 to 14 inches.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, Ed and Katherine, I think if we go back through history, I think that is the one true aspect of a real artist, is his devotion, his or her focus, that—I like the word *compelling* need to do art. I think that's the one most truthful definition of an artist. Would you have any other ideas on, for you personally, what is the definition of you as an artist?

ED ROSSBACH: I just wonder what—that stuff in the catalogue, is it joyous? Am I having a good time?

CAROLE AUSTIN: But is it joyous?

ED ROSSBACH: I don't know.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Then your process is what's joyous to you, or has been, not the final product? Is that what you're trying to say?

ED ROSSBACH: No.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No. Can you explain that to me, please?

ED ROSSBACH: Hm-mmm. [Negative response.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: You can't?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Is it the message that finally comes through that is not joyous, but the act of doing it was joyous, was pleasurable? Think of the protest things that you did, the baskets of El Salvador and the memorial thing with a few sticks in a piece of camouflage cloth. It isn't—it's a very somber memorial thing, but you enjoyed putting it together. And this was very, very compelling while you were constructing this thing. And you weren't—I don't know, maybe you were thinking gloomy thoughts, but I don't think so. You know, I sit around at the edges and see you doing these things, and I know—[tape ends midsentence] —

[Pause in Recording]

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: [continuing]—the involvement, of this constant, repetitive action. For example, in Greece we were—you were sitting on the porch or the cement slab in front of a little hotel room and knotting together pieces of string that we had gathered as we traveled. And a fisherman came up next to you and he started talking to you about making nets, and watching what you were doing, how you were knotting them together. And to me, this was a wonderful meeting of two unrelated people who found a common joy in knotting pieces of string together. This is memorable when this meeting of the minds comes.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Do you remember that, Ed?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Do you remember when we were in Astir Beach outside of Athens?

ED ROSSBACH: Yeah. I remember it very well. This was very accepting. They accepted me making knots on a different level than —

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's quite fine, when you think about it, you know, that they did accept you.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Well, they're accepting in a different way than people in our society. When you spend days working on a little, tiny thing, they look at you and they think you're crazy that you're spending all this time knotting things together. They have no appreciation. The only appreciation is how many dollars is it going to bring.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you think of any other pieces of his work that invoke this kind of thing where you remember how compelling it was to him, Katherine?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: No?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: You're trying to have me think back 50 years or 52 years. [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, I just think it's a good way to talk about his work a little bit, you know, which it's been difficult to do here.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yeah. Now for example, I'm going to talk about this one that is in the Daphne Farago catalogue. It's a basket. It's called Cairn. It is silkscreen textile adhered to paper, and then he cuts it all up into little half-inch strips, probably, plaits it together, but in the very middle of this Cairn is a little rabbit. It's a block print of a rabbit. And this little block print was purchased in Isfahan in Iran in 1970 in a junk shop where I was buying little things. Well, that little rabbit has become a very important symbol both in Ed's work and my work. We both use this little stamp of the rabbit in various ways. Ed has ikatted this little—printed it on threads and then put it together in an ikat. I have used it as a block print all over a long length of textile. And it appears in many little things. So that little rabbit has had a life beyond its life in the junk shop in Isfahan in Iran. That's a 1970 rabbit that has moved on, and it's still around somewhere.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, you know, this also speaks into this business of, Ed, talking about that you use what's around you, what you happen to see in a store. It's not like you walk down to this store and purposely buy these materials; it's the strings that you found in Athens, this little block print in a store. These are the things that you seem to gather from your daily life wherever you are and in your travels that have informed your work. Would you agree with that?

ED ROSSBACH: Mm-hmm.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Can you elaborate on that at all? No? [Pause.]

ED ROSSBACH: Don't you think we've done enough?

CAROLE AUSTIN: Well, I've got —

ED ROSSBACH: No. [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: No.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: She wants me to hunt through the book again.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Yeah. I think that these stories that Katherine tells about your work are lovely. So, you know, with a little bit of stuff remaining on these tapes, I would like to really have her talk about them. Is that okay with you?

ED ROSSBACH: Of course.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Of course. Okay.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Okay, let's talk about the *Eagle's Nest Box*. And that is 1984. And these are all twigs from—I think they're probably prunings from our fruit trees in the backyard. And I don't know, somewhere along the line we saw an eagle's nest, and it may have been in a National Geographic special on television or something, and Ed started making—tying these things together with raffia. And it was quite floppy, and the more sticks, the more intersections that went into it, it became more stable. And then he decided it needed something to lift it up off the table surface, so he constructed a cardboard box with newspaper and then green paint over it, and so it has a box to sit on which, in reality, is a tree. The box is a metaphor for a tree, because the eagle puts his nest up in the top of a tree.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Katherine, is there anything that you can tell us about the bison images that he used? I think they're on bark, aren't they?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Well, those are on tapa cloth.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Tapa cloth.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I don't know; are there any in here?

CAROLE AUSTIN: I saw them in one of these. It might have been in this catalogue, the Textile Museum. I'll look and you look. I think of it because they used this picture of him with the bison for the show, which was so wonderful.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: For some reason or other, I think—I'm sort of taking over here, but I think perhaps I can talk faster. The bison was an endangered species, and I think that is the relationship; that maybe the artist is an endangered species. Maybe I'm going off too far and just saying what these things mean to me. But the bison, and then that photograph of Ed with the bison was taken in Los Angeles on Beverly Boulevard near Fairfax. And the bison head was out in front of an antique shop, and Ed wanted his photograph taken with the bison's head, so I took my point-and-shoot camera and proceeded to do it, with an explosion from the antique shop. The woman raced out: "You can't do that! That's mine! You can't photograph it." So finally she said, "For $1.00, you may take one photograph." And I snapped three, being a nice, honest person, and gave her $1.00. But we have used that photograph over and over. It's like Ed photographing me about running through the pyramids on the top of the —

CAROLE AUSTIN: The Louvre?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: No, that was in Basel. There is an opera house underneath, and the glass pyramids are glass bricks to let light into the concourse below. But we use these images over and over again.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I want to interrupt here, just for reference. That he did these three pieces —*Bison; Bison; and Buffalo Basket*—1987-88, and this was in the Textile Museum show.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Mm-hmm. Well, he did a lot of drawings of bison. And those are not drawn actually on the bark; they're drawn on—the drawings are up at the top corner, and then I put them in the color copy machine and put them on heat transfer paper, and he transferred them onto the bark. Much of the—you know, when technology moved in with color copiers and heat transfers for tee-shirts, this opened a whole new window.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, I can imagine.

Katherine, you know, as you talk, it seems to me that between the work of both of you, that if you went through, let's say, two catalogues and did an oral history, it would be a wonderful biography of both of your working processes and your life in art. I mean, as you tell these stories, they're wonderful. Can you just—I mean, I'm trying to use every second on this tape, and we've got some more time. Can you talk about any other pieces? I mean, they've talked forever about John Travolta and Mickey Mouse. We don't need to talk about them.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: No. And Mickey Mouse has gotten overworked by the public that thinks this is fun, to collect a Mickey Mouse.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Right.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: And actually, one of the baskets, I think, that is in here of Ed's, this one, it—[laughs]—this one never had a Mickey Mouse on it to begin with.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Oh, it didn't? Give the title of that piece, would you?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: [Laughs.] This is going to be deflating for Daphne, but—this is the one called—44, *Reconstruction*.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It has an image of Mickey Mouse on it.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yes. At first, when this basket first appeared—now, correct me if I'm wrong, Ed—this did not have Mickey Mouse on it.

ED ROSSBACH: No.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: It was just this ash splints with the paper over it and a felt pen drawing of these intersections of things. And the galleries were screaming for baskets with Mickey Mouse on them.

CAROLE AUSTIN: [Laughs.]

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: So we had a lot of heat transfers—I still have some in the box—of drawings of Mickey Mouse, and we put one on this, and immediately it sold. [Laughs.]

CAROLE AUSTIN: That's a great story.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: But Mickey Mouse is a great attraction, and I shudder to think what will happen if Walt Disney ever catches on. We'll probably be sued.

CAROLE AUSTIN: No, I doubt it. He's just such a loved—he's a—what do you call it—a media icon, you know.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I mean, the iMAC computer should have Mickey Mouse as an icon across the top.

CAROLE AUSTIN: I think so, too.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I would push this all the time.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Talk about this piece.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: This one is the *Early Cross*. And it's wool/cotton netting with pile. And this is our neighbor across the street. Her name was Mrs. Cross. And every morning, she would get up in her chenille bathrobe and go out to the street and pick up her newspaper. And Ed was doing this piece which has rectangles of various things, and at the top square, it has a pile fabric with a woman's head, very influenced by Coptic textiles.

CAROLE AUSTIN: It looks very much—and also looks like a fragment.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yes. And actually —

CAROLE AUSTIN: What's the size of that, Katherine?

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: It's tiny. It's 13 by 13. Most of Ed's things are quite small. They're in relationship to human beings in houses. You know, they're not in relation to big public spaces or the wall at BART.

CAROLE AUSTIN: In other words, the world around him, again.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Yeah. Very—enclosed within his personal space.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Let's see if there's any others that I want to know about of his that catch my fancy here. I think in one of his interviews he did talk about Mrs. Cross, I think, across the street.

You know, when you go through the catalogues, the use of materials is just overwhelming, Ed, the kind of materials that you used. For instance —

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Let me talk about this one.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Okay. Read it first.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: This is Eucalyptus bark folded and stapled. And it's from 1988. The Berkeley campus has a lot of Eucalyptus trees along Gayley Road, and at the rainy season in February, the trees lose their bark and these long strips of eucalyptus bark hang like great fringes off the trees. At that time, this bark is very flexible. So Ed collected a lot of this and kept it damp in the laundry tray, and then he has formed it into round forms; and to fasten them together, he used metal staples. And as these baskets dry out, they become rock hard. They're terribly strong. They are no longer soft and flexible; they are another piece of wood. And basically, they are all sort of the shape of the eucalyptus tree as the trunk grows up, without the fringes hanging on. But the tree disintegrates and then it becomes a basket.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Now, before you go to another one, I want to interrupt here. I forgot, both times today, to start my interview with: This is Carole Austin interviewing Charles Edmund Rossbach at the artist's home in Berkeley, California, on August 29th, 2002. So this is for the tape—oh—for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And the tapes before this are the same date.

And what we're doing right now is, Ed is tired and he wanted to end these tapes, and since we have room, it gives us time for Katherine to talk a little bit about his work and give some insights. And what I'm finding as she talks is it's amazing the plethora of materials and techniques you used, Ed. And, of course, the stories behind them are just as good.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: I think I should talk about his printed textiles, which haven't been on this. You've just talked about construction. And this is the last printed textile, I think, that Ed did. It's a very long length. What he did was a *Sports Illustrated*. I'll read it. *Sports Illustrated*. It's from 1980 and it's on commercial cotton fabric, dye, silkscreen, and heat-transfer printed. It's 140 inches by 42 inches. And he took a *Sports Illustrated* magazine and cut sections out of it and put these on an open screen and screened each one of these images separately. The paper is used just once. The color changes very often, but they're page by page of *Sports Illustrated*.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Tremendous work!

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: And then it has some heat transfers on it. I don't know—I can't tell where they are. I think this one of a man's head might be a heat transfer on top. It's hard to tell from the photographs. Actually, if I pulled out the textile, I could find—I'm sure the little car at the bottom is a heat transfer.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Katherine, can you talk just a little bit about some of his baskets? Like these pages, I think. The color in them that both of you have used that have just been so wonderful.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: The first one is called *Croissants*. 1987, commercial cardboard

packaging spray-painted and stapled. This is a variation on the eucalyptus basket. The sections of cardboard are put together in the same way as the eucalyptus bark, except this is cardboard. And again, it's this thing that comes every day, cartons with food in it, and instead of throwing them away, you make art out of them. You recycle them. And I think it was Nance O'Banion who told Ed about the wonder of spray paint that they use on model cars, that comes in all these lustrous colors.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Metallic colors.

KATHERINE WESTPHAL: Metallic colors. And he spray-painted over them. And this is kind of a calm one. Some are much wilder in color. This little one down here, these two baskets are *Poetry of the Grasslands* and *Mummy's* Room.

The *Poetry of the Grasslands* is a woodblock print, woodblock that he cut and then he printed it on rice paper. And the undulating lines are the grass moving. The one next to it is *Mummy's Room*, an announcement from an exhibition of my work at Davis.

And this was the announcement thing, and it was a drawing I did of a mummy and a little sign saying, "To Mummy's Room." And he took these—again, cardboard stiff things, stapled them together with some grasslands at the top and then spray-painted a section on it.

CAROLE AUSTIN: Could you describe his last work that you remember?

[Sound of other tape clicking off.] Uh-oh, maybe we won't do that. Okay, that's through. Okay, we're going to end here because this is almost through here.

Ed, I want to thank you so much for doing this. I know it's been difficult, and I appreciate the effort that you've put into these interviews. And also, Katherine I appreciate your talking about his work at the end. I think that gives such an insight too. And so again, many, many thanks for doing this.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]