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Oral history interview with Michael James, 2003 January 4-5

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Michael James on January 4 and 5, 2003. The interview took place in Lincoln, Nebraska, and was conducted by David Lyon for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America.

Michael James has reviewed the transcript and has made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a verbatim transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

DAVID LYON: This is David Lyon interviewing Michael James in his office – home office, actually – his study, in Lincoln, Nebraska, on the fourth of January 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Do we have that? I think so. And Michael, could I just see the level on you? Just say something.

MICHAEL JAMES: When and where were you born?

MR. LYON: Yes, exactly. When and where were you born? Let's talk about it.

MR. JAMES: Okay. Well, I was born in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1949 – June 30, 1949, and lived my entire life there save for three years during which I was in graduate school in Rochester, New York, and the last two and a half years since our relocation to Nebraska.

MR. LYON: Obviously your childhood had something to do with your becoming an artist, right? Tell me a little bit about your family background.

MR. JAMES: Well, I grew up in a working-class, French-Canadian neighborhood in a working-class, French-Canadian family.

MR. LYON: Did you go to parochial school?

MR. JAMES: I went – yeah, my family was, and remains for the most part, devoutly Catholic, and during the 1950s and 1960s I attended a Roman Catholic parochial school, St. Anthony's, which was the parish that we lived in. And in fact, I only ever had religious-associated teachers, nuns, for my whole education, until I went to undergraduate school. And those were the days when nuns wore habits, so my experience of education until I went to university was definitely conditioned by –

MR. LYON: It was very black and white?

MR. JAMES: - the black-and-white authority [laughs] figures that these nuns personified.

My family – my father was the sole source of income in our family as I was growing up, and he worked as a clerk in a supermarket, an A&P supermarket, for our entire life. I mean, he retired from that company as an assistant manager of a local supermarket sometime in the 1980s, I believe. So, given that we had ultimately a total of seven children, of which I'm the oldest, there was never enough money to do more than cover the essentials, and the single extravagance, which my father would have described it as, of sending his kids to Catholic school, which meant that he had to pay a certain amount of tuition, which in those days wasn't very high. I think it was something like $150 a year for each kid up to a certain number, then after that the rest didn't have to pay, so it was sort of a deal, I guess. But they were really committed to the religious component of our education. And not knowing any different, it was fine with me for all those years.

So we lived in a three-story tenement building that my grandmother owned for many years, and usually – well, for most of my youth she lived – she and my grandfather lived on the first floor of the house until he died. And then I have an aunt on my mother's side who lived above us. She had seven kids also, so at one time there were about 14 kids in that house. And since I was the oldest in my family and also the oldest grandchild, the first of the 26 grandchildren, there was always a lot going on. My grandmother eventually sold the house to my father and mother and moved down the street to an apartment.

But we were what I would describe as an extremely close-knit, traditional, third-generation immigrant family, because the first generation came in in the late 19th century – the first immigrant generation on both sides, grandparents – great-grandparents on both sides came from – on my mother's side from Canada, from Quebec, to work in the textile mills, and on my father's side from Lancashire, England – from Preston, in fact, in

Lancashire - to work also in the textile mills. And my parents' – my grandparents' generation were textile mill workers. My grandmother – I still remember my grandmother working in a textile mill on Collette Street that we – where we lived, and I would – that 2:00 or 3:00, or whatever time it was in the afternoon that the shops let out, she would come out with dozens of other women who worked in these textile shops.

But my parents' generation didn't work in the textile mills, and none of my parents' siblings, to my knowledge, ever worked in the textile industry. By that time they'd already moved into other occupations – mostly, again, blue-collar jobs for the most part.

MR. LYON: Now, did you speak French at home?

MR. JAMES: We spoke French – well, I should say that we understood French, and we went to a French - bilingual French school. St. Anthony's Parish was bilingual, and a lot of – almost all of the parishioners were French-Canadian descent, and the language was still – at least in the 1950s and the 1960s -- was still very much alive in that community, so that I perfectly understood French, because half of my daily school classes through 8th grade were in French, and then in high school I always had several subjects in French – religion and French grammar and French literature, specifically. But eighth never – as kids we never used – we rarely used it outside of school, even if my grandparents spoke to us in French, which they did sometimes. They spoke English perfectly well, but they also – between themselves and their own siblings -- so that would have been my great aunts and great uncles -- they spoke French. But when we were around as kids, they would speak to us in French; we would answer in English. We always answered in English; we never spoke back in French. So that was sort of – I guess it's typical of, by that time now fourth generation kids, to quickly sort of try to distance themselves from that immigrant –

MR. LYON: Actually, I think it's unusual with fourth-generation to even have anything left.

MR. JAMES: Well, I guess it's because the parishes kept it so much alive, and there was also a lot of back-and-forth. I remember in high school I had a girlfriend who was French Canadian – more I think, in her case. She was second generation because her mother – her mother spoke very little English. Her mother was almost exclusively a French speaker and – well, actually I never heard her mother speak English, so she only ever spoke French. And I dated this girl for about three or four years and spent a lot of time with her family. And at home around the table, in her family, everything was in French, always, and I would be there answering in English, as I always did, but perfectly understanding what everybody else was saying.

I just – I guess in high school I just found it really embarrassing to be using that language in a country where English was the main language. I think I also felt that I didn't speak it well enough, that there was a little bit of that. But nobody ever forced us, outside of school, to speak French. As long as we could make ourselves understood when, you know – a lot of the French speakers who only spoke French, like this girlfriend's mother; she understood English, but she just wasn't comfortable using it.

But in any case, there was a lot of that, and today it's pretty much disappeared. By the 1980s the French speakers started dying off, and the parishes stopped – well, actually, well before the '80s the parishes stopped having masses in French, which was one of the main ways of keeping the language alive. And today, those parishes are largely now Portuguese and Hispanic in terms of the makeup of the congregations. So while there are still a lot of French descendants in the New Bedford area, the Frenchness has long since disappeared from their lives, as far as cultural sort of component.

MR. LYON: But how about you?

MR. JAMES: Well –

MR. LYON: You mentioned two things that one could assume at least had something to do with your later development, whether you knew it would or not, and that is at least an awareness of French and some sort of emotional link to the textiles.

MR. JAMES: Well –

MR. LYON: Or is that just pushing it?

MR. JAMES: I think it might be pushing it a little bit. I mean, I've always – I said that I, you know, sort of descended from textile mill workers, but the culture of the textile industry and the life of textile mill workers never really touched me that much. It was part of the environment in a way, but my parents weren't directly involved in it, and it's a loose connection, I guess I would say, although, you know, I grew up being very aware of fabrics and textiles as a result of that, so there is that connection for sure, but I can't say that there's any way that that experience pushed me into textiles, because the last thing I ever anticipated working in would have been textiles, ever, you know, right through undergraduate school, right through – well, almost through graduate

school. You know, I never thought about textiles as anything that I could employ creatively.

MR. LYON: But you were drawn to art. How did that come about?

MR. JAMES: I was drawn to art. That's very bizarre. That's – I often wonder why that came about, because unlike – certainly unlike a lot of middle-class kids I came to know later, I had no exposures to art in a formal sense growing up, other than what I sort of discovered on my own or by accident, because my parents didn't take us to museums. That concept would have been way out of their range of experience. And –

MR. LYON: So what did you do summers as a kid?

MR. JAMES: But I liked to draw, so it started with that. I liked – as a little kid I spent a lot of time drawing, and my brothers – we had seven kids. My parents had four boys in a row. I was the oldest, the second oldest was born a year later – a year and a month later, the third oldest was born a year and two months later, or three months later, then the fourth boy was born another three or four years after the third. Then there was a space of about three or four years and then they started having girls, and then they had three girls in a row. So my two brothers, in sequence after me – and I loved to draw. We all drew as little kids. And my father would bring home pieces of pads from work that – each week he would have some of these pads to bring home, and we would just fill them with drawings. So we liked – you know, we liked to draw, and they encouraged it.

And I was fascinated as a kid. I remember one of my favorite TV shows was Jon Gnagy, drawing sort of TV artist.

MR. LYON: How do you spell his name, do you know?

MR. JAMES: I think it was J-O-N – I don't think it was J-O-H-N. It was J-O-N, and Gnagy was – I think it was G-N-A-G-Y, if I'm not mistaken. I mean, that would be an interesting –

MR. LYON: That's an odd –

MR. JAMES: – name to look up and see what comes up when you search that on the Internet, because he was – I mean, they have some of those TV teachers on public TV today that – I don't know who they are, but I know they exist – and he was of that sort of – he was of the '50s, that person who did TV instruction. But I watched that show faithfully.

MR. LYON: So you must have had a TV early on.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, we had a TV from when I was probably four or five.

MR. LYON: So the early '50s. That's early.

MR. JAMES: I do remember the first TV. My grandmother got the first TV downstairs, so I do remember watching this little screen and it being a big deal that they had this TV. Then my parents got a TV a few years later. But once they did, I was faithfully watching that show.

Now, the other thing that ties into this as a sort of first exposure to art was some artwork that I became aware of through a paternal aunt and uncle. In fact, it was my father's aunt, a woman named Theresa Slattery, and she was married to my Uncle Dan Slattery – S-L-A-T-T-E-R-Y – and they lived in New Bedford also, and he worked for the Star Store department store as a shoe salesman, and they had sort of moved into sort of more middle-class kind of lifestyle and had a nice suburban home, which, growing up, my parents always dreamed of living in the suburbs. That was their dream, but they were stuck in – because they couldn't afford anything more than the three-family tenement house in what, you know, essentially was inner-city New Bedford, and they always dreamed of having that nice little Cape Cod in the suburbs.

Well, this aunt and uncle had that, and they had decorated this house with paintings by local artists, mostly pretty – what I call now pretty-picture paintings of whaling ships and New England landscapes under snow. And I can't think of the names of the artists, but they were well known for that type of painting in the southeastern New England area.

MR. LYON: Were these, like, oil paintings or reproductions or –

MR. JAMES: Yeah, they were oil paintings, and they were good, for what they were. You know, they were what you would find in an average sort of tourist-oriented gallery or something.

MR. LYON: But they were real paintings?

MR. JAMES: But they were real paintings – they were real paintings. And those exposures motivated me to want to paint. That – and I got exposed to those probably when I was about eight, nine, 10 years old, about the same

time as I started going on my own – because in those days it was safe for little kids to get on a bus and go downtown by themselves. I, at a very young age, probably 10 or 11, started going downtown to the main public library in New Bedford on the bus.

And the library in New Bedford in those days was the only place in New Bedford where you could see any kind of real art. There was a [Albert] Bierstadt that I can remember – a huge view of the Rocky Mountains, if I'm not mistaken. And there – I think there also was Thomas Cole. In any case, there were a lot of 19th-century sort of luminist painters, and also painters from that southeastern New England area, painters who had painted in Newport and the Fairhaven and New Bedford areas, Westport and so on, that were in the collection of the New Bedford Public Library.

Those paintings today have been sort of transferred to the New Bedford Art Museum, which occupies a space in a former bank across the street from the public library building in downtown New Bedford. But when I was going there, that was my exposure to art – that was my first exposure to real – real art, good quality art, you know, art with pedigree as opposed to the kind of art that I was seeing in my aunt's home, which wasn't bad for type, but it was sort of high-level Sunday-painter kind of art.

So I started looking at art books in the library, which was also another book exposure, and so by the time I was 13 – actually, by the time I got into high school I was pretty much a confirmed artist. You know, I was with the group of kids who were the "art freaks" and the ones who did art classes at school, because I didn't have any kind of private art training outside of school. My parents couldn't have afforded that. But I remember at that point starting to think that this was really what I wanted to do, that when I went to college – it wasn't a question of if I went to college, it was always – that was always assumed, which was interesting because I was the first person in my entire family who had ever gone to college.

MR. LYON: Because your parents were so –

MR. JAMES: But my parents were absolutely determined that we would go to college, and they didn't care what we studied as long as we went to school and got a degree, so that's why they would – you know, unlike probably a lot of middle-class or upper-class families of the period and today, who would have dissuaded their children from studying art, my parents didn't care what I studied as long as I went to college, so in that sense they were supportive.

But in any case, I think when I was about a sophomore in high school, so I would have been about 15, I asked my father to take me to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. I'd never been there. Going to Boston for us in those days was a big deal. If we went to Boston, that was like a major excursion that maybe we did once a year to go see Christmas lights or to go to the Franklin Park Zoo, which was outside of Boston, or to walk around the North End or to go look at some of the old graveyards, which I remember doing with my parents, and going to the Boston Commons, but we'd never done anything like go to a museum. And so I asked my father to take me to the Museum of Fine Arts.

And I remember that it was – I'm pretty sure it was a spring – late spring day. It was cool, but it was relatively mild, and I do remember my father didn't know how to get around Boston, so we had to get to some landmark location where he could park and be able to orient himself on foot. And I remember that we parked near or at the Prudential Center, which was under construction – it was still under construction, if I'm not mistaken. It wasn't done.

MR. LYON: It wasn't finished until '68.

MR. JAMES: So that – yeah, so this would have been just before that.

MR. LYON: Sixty-four, right before they tore down the rail yards.

MR. JAMES: It would have been right around that, '66 – maybe '65, '66, I can't remember exactly, but we parked there or near there and walked to the Museum of Fine Arts, which is a long walk.

MR. LYON: About two miles.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. And the significant thing about that experience was that it's the only thing that I remember, my entire childhood growing up, my father doing with me alone. None of my siblings came. He took me alone. It's the only thing I remember my father ever doing for me alone, other than driving me to school and so on.

MR. LYON: It's hard with seven kids.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, exactly, and plus, you know, he worked – he worked six days a week, basically. So I remember about that experience – I don't remember much of what I saw, except the one painting that sticks in everybody's

mind who visits the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, and that is the Copley of the – oh, what's the title of that painting? You know, the guy who's fallen in and is about to be eaten by a shark, or appears to be – that huge painting. I can't remember the title of it.

MR. LYON: [Inaudible.] [*Watson and the Shark*, John Singleton Copley, 1778.]

MR. JAMES: I remember that painting, but the thing that I remember most is feeling – going there, feeling like I was coming home, feeling like this was where I was supposed to be, feeling some sort of affirmation I guess. Now, you know, I can say this in retrospect more clearly, but at the time I don't think I fully understood what I was feeling, but it was significant and it was something that confirmed for me that this was what I should be doing.

MR. LYON: Well, you must have at least had a hint for you to have asked your father at all.

MR. JAMES: Well, I felt – yeah, by that point I started to – see, I think I started subscribing to *Art News* magazine when I was still in high school.

MR. LYON: Oh, that's amazing.

MR. JAMES: So I think when I started getting *Art News* magazine, I started discovering that there was this whole world out there that I knew nothing about, that I had had no exposure to, and I realized then that I had to – you know, I had to learn more about this, and so that was my first attempt to learn something about the greater art world out there.

When I went to university – when I got to Southeastern Massachusetts University in 1967 –

MR. LYON: That's what it was called then.

MR. JAMES: Well, actually, when I started – the year I started, it was still Southeastern Massachusetts Technological Institute, SMTI, and then after I was there a year, it became – a year or two years – it became Southeastern Massachusetts University, and then maybe 15 years ago or so, 20 years ago maybe, it became the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth.

MR. LYON: Right, it's technically in Dartmouth.

MR. JAMES: Right, right. And so when I got my honorary doctorate in 1992, it was from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, as an alumnus of –

MR. LYON: SMU.

MR. JAMES: SMU. So, in any case, they – when I got to the university, of course then I really, you know, started getting some real training and also some real understanding of the dimensions of the art world that was beyond anything I'd experienced to that point. But I didn't make my first trip to New York until I was a junior in undergraduate school.

MR. LYON: You did your undergraduate major in art – studio art?

MR. JAMES: In painting – painting and printmaking, yeah – painting major and printmaking minor. That was also what I did in graduate school; I was a painting major and printmaking minor.

MR. LYON: You know, for a small regional university it's a pretty amazing that they would offer you a major and minor in – a lot of small schools you got a degree in art, period.

MR. JAMES: Right. No, they had fine arts majors. And it's curious because almost everybody was a first-generation college student who went to that school, and I discovered actually, when I got there, that I knew a lot more about the art world already, just from what I'd read about, than a lot of kids who were coming in who were my, you know, classmates and so on.

So it is weird that they would have a program, but I think – I think the program did – it had connections to the original – see, before it became SMTI, it was New Bedford – there were two schools: New Bedford Tech and Durfee Tech. Durfee in Fall River and New Bedford, and they were both textile technologies that focused –

MR. LYON: So it was a strong graphic arts college.

MR. JAMES: There was a – yeah, there was a design component in both of those schools that serviced the textile industry, basically, and so these programs came out of that. And even to this day, SMU, or U Mass Dartmouth, still has a strong textile design area and a lot of – you know, a lot of the students who go – because I taught a

semester there in 2000 – a lot of the students who go through that program end up working in the textile industry as designers, so – or at least some of the students -- so there is that connection.

MR. LYON: Although there's not much textile industry in New Bedford anymore.

MR. JAMES: Exactly. There's none – there's none to speak of. So anyway –

MR. LYON: We're at your undergraduate level. Did you know immediately you wanted to do painting and printmaking?

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, my idea that – of what art was was painting and printmaking – painting was it; that was what art was. And I mean, for me, graphic design was commercial art, and I didn't feel like I wanted to do that.

MR. LYON: Now, where did you pick up that idea though?

MR. JAMES: [Laughs.] I don't have any idea. I think it goes back to some kind of romantic notion of what an artist's life was like, and I – really, I have to credit those paintings that I saw in my aunt's house that were beautiful sort of landscape scenes of, you know, snowy New England villages nestled in among hills and rocks, stone walls and, you know, these sort of just fantasies of a kind of Norman Rockwellesque landscape that seemed just so, you know, beautiful to me at the time. So I guess –

MR. LYON: If you were reading *Art News*, I mean, didn't that essentially promulgate the idea of the hero artist – you know, the romantic painter?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, and I fully bought into that through undergraduate school in a program that also sort of promulgated that notion that we, the painters, were sort of following the true noble call – you know, the real – we were the real artists.

MR. LYON: The visual elite.

MR. JAMES: Yes, exactly – exactly. And it was a program, at least when I started out, that was pretty much focused on the conventional fine arts media. As I was there – during the years that I was there, they branched out a bit to include ceramics, and that program – the ceramics program started up while I was there, and also a little bit of jewelry, but not as a program but just as an offering that started there. But there was really no craft program.

MR. LYON: Of course that's changed.

MR. JAMES: And that's changed a lot there. It's there since they acquired the Program in Artisanry. But –

MR. LYON: So you're saying that it was probably your junior year when you went to New York for the first time?

MR. JAMES: I went to New York in 1969 to see the "New York Painting and Sculpture: 1940-1970" exhibition at the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art]. And that was a big deal, going to New York for the first time with some friends from school. We were all undergraduates and we were all painters, and we were all going to New York for the first time, I think, except for maybe one of us. There was one kid in the group who was from Connecticut, and he'd been to New York. We were all making our first trip to New York by bus, and – actually, I think what we did, as I recall, we drove a car to a suburb of Hartford, where this kid lived, spent a night there, and then we took a bus from Hartford to New York the next day, if I recall correctly.

But in any event, however we got there, we did, and we had one day, and we went to see the show at the Met, and I don't know – I don't recall anything else that we did, but I do recall that show having – you know, making a huge impression on me, because here was a collection of all of the artists of the day that we had been hearing about, seeing slides of in slide lectures in our courses at the university, collected, you know, in a major show that probably still doesn't have a parallel, because I don't think there's been a show like that done that surveyed the entire sort of territory of contemporary art – of current contemporary art of the period. Nobody has done that since. The Met certainly hasn't done it.

MR. LYON: Nobody has dared.

MR. JAMES: And it was a huge show, and I recall most vividly two rooms that made a big impression on me. One was Joseph Cornell – a room full of Cornells that was beautifully installed and lit – you know, the black boxes and black pedestals in a black room with little spotlights just illuminating the interiors of each piece. It was stunning; and a room of Ellsworth Kelly drawings, the line drawings of plants and leaves that he did – that he was doing. He was actually doing those then, his most current work. Those two – but of course, you know, everybody who was anybody in the contemporary painting world of the late 1960s was represented in that show.

So that was, you know, like – I think I may actually have been taking the history of modern art at the time, and we may have been – and we probably were encouraged to go see the show by whoever was teaching the course. And, yeah, it was Evan Firestone who taught that course, I recall.

So, in any event, I got to New York and didn't get to New York again until about, oh, probably about six years later – six or seven years later before I got back to New York. By that time I was going back to New York as an adult with my formal education behind me and seeing it somewhat differently. So –

MR. LYON: So was there anybody – you graduated in, what, '71 then?

MR. JAMES: I graduated in '71 from U of Mass. Dart. – from SMU, of course, and interestingly, Buckminster Fuller was the keynote speaker at our commencement. And I don't remember anything that he said except I knew that – I knew what he had done and knew that he was significant, but that's a little – I don't know what that has – it doesn't –

MR. LYON: It's one of those interesting tidbits.

MR. JAMES: – little detail, yeah. But that was at the end of a very stormy period during those four years at that school as, you know, on campuses everywhere else– there was a lot of protests, and I remember being on – you know, striking a lot, classes being disrupted a lot on that campus because there was a big controversy with the president of the university, a fellow named Driscoll, who – and a controversy that erupted around one of our professors, a guy named Donald Krueger. And that is a huge history that I'm not going to go into because it's too complex, but it brings up the subject of Donald Krueger, who had a big influence on me as an undergraduate.

MR. LYON: Sort of a mentor?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, and became a mentor who has – you know, he's been important to me in my growth as an educator, I guess, and less as an artist, although somewhat as an artist because he always served, on the rare occasions when we get together, to be a sort of sounding board against whom I could sort of look at ideas or thoughts that I'd been having about my work. Donald Krueger came to U. Mass., what was then Southeastern Massachusetts University, I believe from RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI].

And it was interesting because at that point in time I didn't know what was – you know, I didn't know the politics of the school or what the school was sort of – how the school was functioning administratively, but I do know that there was – they'd just built this new campus – we were on this new campus that Paul Rudolph designed. They were expanding a lot of programs and the art program was being expanded. In the year that I started, at least three new faculty were hired, and I had all three of them in that first year: Donald Krueger, Caroline Mills, and Bill Elliot. And if I'm not mistaken, they were all nabbed from RISD. So that would raise some interesting questions about, you know, how that happened and what was going on with RISD that so many faculty would want to bail. But in any case, I don't know anything about that; I just think it's kind of curious.

So anyway, we had this young – they were all relatively young at the time – foundation team, and Donald Krueger taught color, Caroline Mills taught 2-D – no, she taught 3-D design, Bill Elliot taught drawing – and I guess Donald also taught 2-D design; I forget. In any event, what stands in my mind the most is that he was important to me as my first sort of color pedagogue. It was in his color course that I realized that I really loved color as a subject, and that I could make art around that subject – around color. So consequently, at the time I got involved – I got interested in all the color-field painters and people like Rothko and Helen Frankenthaler and [Jules] Olitski and various other painters of the period, not realizing really that painting was sort of at its last – beginning its last hurrah. But in any event –

MR. LYON: That's an interesting concept.

MR. JAMES: And it's also debatable, but that certainly became the perception in the '70s. So in any event, I had – Krueger was – oh, I know how I got on this, because the controversy over – that surrounded him in the years – the sort of years that coincided with the civil rights movement and the Martin Luther – the deaths of Bobby Kennedy and Martin Luther King and all that stuff, and the fact that we were spending a lot of time organizing protests and involved in sit-ins and strikes and, you know, Kent State and all that stuff.

Anyway, Donald was finally forced out or dismissed, and he only had taught there, I believe, two years, and I'd had him for – in my foundation year, and then I had him – I think the next year I had him for drawing, if I'm not mistaken, but that was it; then he was booted out. And the commencement was colored by the sort of aftermath of all of that stuff. I remember a number of the more radical students in that graduating class standing through the entire commencement ceremony with their backs to the president of the university, who of course was on the stage at the front of the gathering. So it was – you know, it was a period that was, as you know –

MR. LYON: Oh, I know well.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Donald and I didn't see each other – I should say that I was really intimidated by him. He was a tall, imposing figure who was – he often looked very sort of – well, he would – he had the capacity of looking at you and looking right through you, making you feel very small. He shaved his head at a time when that was fairly uncommon and he – so he was a really imposing figure, and he certainly knew a lot about art and the art world. And I think that one of the reasons for his demise was that he was fairly threatening to the longer-term faculty, and he thrived, I guess, on that, being that kind of – I don't know how to describe him, but somebody around whom students would definitely gravitate, but somebody who would challenge the status quo, who was not –

MR. LYON: Part lightning rod, or firebrand.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, that's what was I was looking for, a firebrand. He was definitely that.

So anyway, we renewed our acquaintance years later, close to – well, close to 15 years later. By accident we ran across each other at the Brookfield Craft Center in Brookfield, Connecticut, by which time Donald was teaching at Clark University in Worcester, Mass., after having spent five or six years – maybe not quite that many – after he'd been at the University – Southeastern Massachusetts University, working in graphic design – well, working as a graphic designer for a commercial graphic design firm in New Bedford, and then from there he went to Clark University, and I think he chaired the art department there, but he taught there until he retired in the early 1990s.

And anyway, in the early ‘80s we renewed our acquaintance and friendship through the Brookfield Craft Center, where I was teaching a weekend workshop, and he happened to be on the board of the Craft Center because he had become friends with a guy named Jack – what's Jack's last name? – Jack Russell, who was the director of the Brookfield Craft Center. Even today I think he's still director. And he and Donald knew each other from Worcester, Mass., where Jack had been on the faculty of the Worcester Craft Center. So because Donald went to class, he got to know Jack when Jack became –

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

– weekend, because I was teaching class and Donald was there for a board meeting. And so we renewed our acquaintance on a different level, because by that point I could relate to him much more as a peer –

MR. LYON: And he could probably relate to you more as a peer too.

MR. JAMES: – educator peer and as an artist peer. And so, over the years since then we've kept in touch. He visited us at our home in Massachusetts, and we've visited him in Seattle, Washington, to which he moved after he retired, and we keep in touch. Now he's back living in New York State, in Cazenovia, New York, because he has a daughter who lives outside of Syracuse. And I just spoke with him a couple of weeks ago, so I've kept in contact with him, and he's – you know, he had a long academic career, so he can certainly relate to my experiences as a beginning academic and I can relate to his as a more experienced and long-term academic. He's been very supportive of my work, so I guess he's sort of a kind of artistic father figure.

One little aside that's interesting from a historical standpoint is that Donald was a student of Thomas Hart Benton in Kansas City in his youth, when he – he grew up in California and then he went to the KCIA [Kansas City Art Institute] – I'm pretty sure it was KCIA – and that's where he – I'm a little unsure, actually. My recollection may be incorrect, because he also might have gone to Washington University in St. Louis, but somewhere, when he moved out here to study art, he got connected with Benton, and he became one of the circle of students that surrounded Benton, because he's told me about spending many evenings at Benton's home in Kansas City with his wife, Rita, cooking big plates of pasta for all these students that regularly gathered around Benton. And Benton apparently liked to have, you know, this circle of students that he could, you know, expound on his fairly narrow view of art. In any case, that's a little aside.

MR. LYON: So we were going back to – you didn't start working in fiber, though, until you were well into graduate school.

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, I – what happened in graduate school –

MR. LYON: Did you go straight from undergraduate to –

MR. JAMES: I went straight from undergraduate to graduate school.

MR. LYON: At RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology].

MR. JAMES: Yeah. You know, I have to explain that. I was a fairly sheltered kid. I mean, growing up I didn't

experience much of the world. I didn't know much of what was beyond that small, narrow, very, very – I had a very provincial outlook that – the whole community I lived in was that way. And I lived at home through undergraduate school, so I shared a bedroom in the basement of our home with my brother through undergraduate school. At that time, that school, Southeastern Massachusetts University, was a commuter school, so I knew a lot of my friends had apartments or lived in homes in sort of communal situations with other students, but I lived at home. And so, when I decided to go to graduate school, I decided that I would go to whichever school was the furthest away from home that I could get accepted at from among the schools that I applied to.

And I applied to U Mass. Amherst; BU, Boston University, I believe. I think I applied to BU grad school and Rochester Institute of Technology. And RIT accepted me, and I accepted them because they were a full day's drive away, and that was really my rationale for picking that school. It's weird because we don't – people don't do that today; they don't pick a school for stupid reasons like – at least –

MR. LYON: Oh, I think they do.

MR. JAMES: Maybe they do, but I never investigated the school. I signed on the dotted line before I even saw the campus; before I even knew – you know, before I'd ever been to Rochester.

MR. LYON: You'd looked at the catalogues, right?

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Actually, that's not true. I did go up there with a friend; I do recall that. I drove up with a friend and looked it out – scoped it out and decided this was fine and I would go there. But in any event, I did, and as an educational experience it was useless, I would say. At least –

MR. LYON: I'm sure they'll be happy to hear that. [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: Well –

MR. LYON: It's fine.

MR. JAMES: – maybe it wasn't useless, but what I learned is stuff that I learned myself, because there was no – there was no – I don't recall much in the way of educational experiences with any of my studio faculty. I really don't. There were some crits in printmaking, but there were – there were very few crits in the painting area, and those tended to be group crits. My one-on-one with my professor, we usually ended up talking about everything else but – and I guess in some ways you could argue that that's also –

MR. LYON: Part of an education.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. I mean, there was certainly probably some guidance that was direct enough, and much that was indirect, and a lot that was unspoken, and some that was spoken. So probably I'm being too hard on it, but I have to say that my whole experience with graduate school was clouded by my family life – my immediate family life because by then I was involved with Judy, and we were soon to have a child, so I was beginning a family life and absorbed in that while I was going to graduate school. It all seemed to go by in something of a blur.

MR. LYON: How long were you in graduate – three years?

MR. JAMES: Two years.

MR. LYON: Two years.

MR. JAMES: Two years.

MR. LYON: Those were the days of the two-year MFAs.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, those were the days of the two-year MFAs. And actually, there were a couple of people – there was one person in particular who is very important to me and that I'm still in contact with and am still close friends with, and this is a woman named Susan Russo, who was a graduate student with – she was a year ahead of me. She was in her second year when I was doing my first year, and she was doing fiber type of work. She was doing this work where she was making these 3-D forms in nylon, stuffed with some kind of fibrous batting. And then, if I recall correctly, she was covering them in some sort of resin and making these – would call it today very Eva Hesse-like work. And at the time I wasn't aware of Eva Hesse, but of course at the time, especially among women students, Eva Hesse would have been the goddess, you know. This was 1971 –

MR. LYON: This is '71 through '73.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, exactly – yeah. And so Eva Hesse was hot stuff in the art world, and her influence was, you know, being reflected in the work especially of young feminist-oriented women artists in schools at the time. And Susan was doing work that sort of connected her – Susan and I got along real well, and she was also helpful as a more experienced student at the school at the time, and she – you know, she helped me iron out difficulties in the first year. So we stayed – we became friends with her and her husband, and have stayed friends to – we see her – we'll see them periodically, but they've just recently divorced so – but we're still in contact with her. So that was – I mean –

MR. LYON: You had some other friends from graduate school.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I have another friend, Bob Clarke, who was – in my second year he was a first-year student, and we're still in contact with him and his wife. We became very close friends with them. They still live in the Rochester area, in Pittsford, New York. And he's a graphic designer and illustrator, primarily – very different type of work than I do, but somebody who was, you know, important, because he would give me feedback about my work at the time.

MR. LYON: There was another painter who had written some – wrote one of the first articles about your work.

MR. JAMES: Oh, David Hornung.

MR. LYON: Yeah.

MR. JAMES: No, David didn't – I met David much later.

MR. LYON: Oh, okay.

MR. JAMES: And we should talk about David, but he's later and he's in a totally different context.

MR. LYON: Okay.

MR. JAMES: Anyway, while I was in graduate school I was minoring in printmaking. I was doing these live sort of stained-canvas, color-field sort of paintings in my painting studio work, and then in printmaking I couldn't function in the printmaking studios. Printmakers are interesting, because I've seen this even here at UNL [University of Nebraska, Lincoln] since I came here. They have a – they're very clubby. I don't know what it is, but there's this real sort of – how to describe it? Another kind of elitist –

MR. LYON: It's like a guild mentality?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, maybe it's that, but it's also this sort of overtone. At a graduate level they certainly expect you to come in with a lot of technique, and I wasn't a major, I was a minor and I had been a minor in undergraduate school, so my technique was passable, but it was never advanced, and there was no place in the graduate program for somebody who didn't come in with top-notch skills. There was no support, anyway, for that person; you were sort of left on your own. And since I wasn't that committed to it, I decided that I would concentrate on silk screen – screen printing -- and do it in my own studio. So pretty much I completed my minor doing screen printing that was very much related to my painting work and that I could do independently. So, again, I had very little interaction with the faculty in the printmaking area of that school.

MR. LYON: It sounds like you just wanted to get out of there with a degree.

MR. JAMES: I really enjoyed the time I spent in graduate school, but I pretty much recall it as being mostly self-directed, independent work, and I was left to my own devices. And maybe you could argue that that's ideal in a graduate school, but I think when I look at my experience now, working with graduate students, advising graduate students, or serving on the committees of graduate students in both the textile department and the art department here, that the faculty seems to me to be much more involved in the graduate students' development and progress than faculties seemed to be in mine when I was in school.

MR. LYON: We should probably get to this in a later session and talk about it. It's something to think about that might have – that might have something to do with your professionalization of the studio art teacher.

MR. JAMES: Well, that could be, yeah. I think that may have something to do with it.

MR. LYON: When you and I got our MFAs, I mean, it was a kind of new business then, you know?

MR. JAMES: I think it's something else – I think it's something else. I think it's a question of accountability of faculty today.

MR. LYON: That's true; they have to be accountable.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. And because I think – when I think back to the experience that I had with Fred Meyer, who was my painting teacher, I don't know that – I don't know what he would have been held accountable for and by whom. My recollection was that every spare minute of his time was spent in his studio doing his work. He would deign to come out of his studio and walk around to each of the cubicles once a week, if I recall, and with me he mostly ever – only ever talked about jazz. I don't recall our ever talking about my work.

MR. LYON: RIT is a research institution.

MR. JAMES: Well –

MR. LYON: That was the model.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: You know, it was not pedagogy but research, you know, produce.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. And I think it's – I'm at a research institute today, but I think the faculty are expected to –

MR. LYON: That has changed.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. In any event –

MR. LYON: So you started talking –

MR. JAMES: Again, I – huh?

MR. LYON: At some point, though, you started being attracted to fiber here.

MR. JAMES: Well, here's the story. At RIT – RIT has the School for American Craftsmen –

MR. LYON: Oh.

MR. JAMES: – which was a component of the art school. The School for American Craftsmen then had programs in fibers, metals – Hans Christensen taught there in metals. I can't think of – I can't remember the fiber person. In ceramics – there was a big ceramic program, but I'm trying to think of who the ceramic faculty were at the time, but I can't recall.

MR. LYON: It's probably not relevant.

MR. JAMES: Bill Keyser was furniture. And I didn't take any courses in those areas, but I had friends who were ceramics majors or metals majors, and it was my first real exposure to the craft world, and I found it to be a much more – I found there to be much more camaraderie, much less of a competitive atmosphere. People seemed much more trustful and supportive of one another, and I was sort of fascinated by that, because that wasn't my experience with painters. And also, I liked the sort of down-to-earth sort of, you know, fingers-in-mud aspect of that, and I was getting, at that point, more and more disillusioned with the direction that the art world was going in at the time, which was at the period in time, sort of conceptual art was really gaining momentum, performance art was in its early years, and those directions didn't interest me very much. And I was also getting, at that point, frustrated by this notion of there being this high-art area, this area of noble pursuit, and then all this other stuff that was considered to be less valuable or less important, or considered to have less – what's the word I'm looking for? – not value but –

MR. LYON: Sort of a prestige?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, prestige, I guess, to some degree. It's still not the word, but it doesn't matter. I was just getting disillusioned with it. You know, art that had no purpose suddenly didn't seem to be what I wanted to be doing. And this was also in the early years of – just before the – as the buildup to the bicentennial was beginning. I've written about this a number of times –

MR. LYON: I know.

MR. JAMES: – and I've talked about this.

MR. LYON: But this is for the record, so –

MR. JAMES: But it's for the record. But it did have a bearing on it, because I was starting to notice and pay attention to media coverage of traditional American arts, and connecting those to what I was seeing being done in the studios of the craftspeople at the SAC school. And I also had – for a year I had an assistantship in the

ceramics department making clay, so it was a really ignoble assistantship position, but it put me in contact with these makers, and started to kind of make me conversant in the language of craft artists –

MR. LYON: [Inaudible.]

MR. JAMES: – ceramics artists, particularly.

[Audio break.]

MR. JAMES: Okay, so where are we?

MR. LYON: We're talking about how you came – so run up to the bicentennial. American craft – you were working in the ceramics department making clay.

MR. JAMES: Yep.

MR. LYON: I assume you – in other words, you were mixing dry clays to make stoneware.

MR. JAMES: Yes, yes. I was making different clay bodies to order –

MR. LYON: Okay.

MR. JAMES: You know, I'd get a list at the beginning of the week.

MR. LYON: So much kaolin and so much –

MR. JAMES: Exactly. Exactly. Well, I was writing my graduate thesis, right? We had a written component we had to do, and mine was called "University Studio."

[Audio break.]

MR. LYON: This is David Lyon, interviewing Michael James in his home office downstairs in his house in Lincoln, Nebraska, on January 4 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disk two, session one. Okay.

MR. JAMES: I remember what I was going to say before.

MR. LYON: Okay.

MR. JAMES: I think basically in 1973 I decided that I wasn't a very good painter and that I had nothing original or important to say in painting. And given the direction that the art world was going in at the time, it seemed clear that painting was not going to remain in the ascendancy, and it didn't. It may be in the ascendancy again, now, but in any case, it didn't seem like –

MR. LYON: It went through a bad spot.

MR. JAMES: – there was much of value that I could say in that medium. I think I was a better printmaker in some ways. I think I did more interesting work in screen printing probably. I think maybe because I did more of it because it was a medium that allowed me to produce more and work through ideas a little more prolifically. But in any event, I guess I also started to question the value of making abstract art that had no bearing on much of the average person's experience.

Probably the reasons – you know, probably make a list of a hundred reasons why I made a switch in that period of time. Some of the reasons that I've used in explaining this in the past included the fact of being a new parent and wanting to be doing something that would allow me to be close at hand, so that I could be involved in raising our son and able to do creative work that would not be dangerous to a child in close proximity. So the issue of toxic agents that were common to painters and printmakers was at least something that conditioned my thinking about textiles when I started thinking about doing work in textiles, but initially I never thought about doing that work professionally at all, or even seriously, because when I started making quilts, the first quilt that I ever made actually I made in undergraduate school, so there was a precedent before I even got to graduate school, although it was a one-off thing. It was nothing that related to any of my undergraduate studio experience, and it was sort of just, you know, something that was pushed aside and forgotten until later when I got – when I was working on my graduate thesis at RIT I needed something to – I just wasn't passionate about it and I needed something to be passionate about, and I wasn't thinking – now, you know, I look back on it and I see this now. I wasn't thinking of it that way when it was happening, but it's what essentially is going on.

So how did I get interested in quilts? I don't really honestly – the honest truth is I don't really remember what

made me want to pick up some fabric and start sewing bits of cloth together to make a reproduction of the traditional quilt pattern, but in 1972, late 1972, just after the birth of my son, and early '73, I started doing this –

MR. LYON: Whose name is?

MR. JAMES: Whose name is Trevor. But Judy always had fabric around the house. She's always sewn since she was seven years old. My wife also – Judy has a BFA degree from Southeastern Massachusetts University. She got hers in graphic design a year before I did, so she graduated in '72 and didn't go to graduate school until the last two years.

MR. LYON: She graduated in '70.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, in '70. I'm sorry, '70, that's right, and I graduated in '71 from U Mass. And she got her degree in graphic design, and then she taught as a substitute teacher in high school for a year. And then we sort of hooked up in the summer before I went to graduate school. We had known each other before that through mutual friends, but we didn't start what we didn't think of as dating, but what you would call that, I suppose, until the summer before I went to graduate school. And then when I came home from my first semester of graduate school back to Massachusetts for Christmas, we hooked up in a serious way, and at the end of that school break she moved back to Rochester with me. And we lived together until May, when we got married, by which time she was already three or four months pregnant.

And so, all of this – I mean, I wanted to be home. I wanted to be in that domestic situation; I didn't really want to be in a studio. So I finished my graduate year – I did want to get – I guess I did want to get the degree out of the way because it wasn't where my real – my heart and soul's focus was. That was on my family. And so I think that choosing to make patchwork was both a way to be doing something creative while I was taking care of the baby and tending to family matters, although I did have a studio in the attic of the apartment of the house in which we had an apartment in Rochester. I had a studio which I used to draw and paint and print through the year after I got my degree, although as that year progressed, I did less and less there, and I was doing more and more around a quilting frame that had been set up in the living room downstairs.

So at the end of that third year I had essentially stopped painting – that third year in Rochester, which means that the first two years were in school, and then the last year was spent working at a job as a – at a paying job. I was actually cooking lunch – I was making lunch for 60 kids and 20 adults five days a week for a year in a daycare center. So it was institutional sort of – mostly frozen food that was brought in and that I basically heated up, although I did some real cooking, including a big turkey dinner for all these – and a lot of these kids – not all of them, but a lot of these kids were from poor, inner-city families where some of these kids came to school without having had breakfast and without – you know, their lunch was their big meal of the day and the best meal that they'd have in the day, so it was significant for those kids.

MR. LYON: Did you try getting work with your degree?

MR. JAMES: I did, actually.

MR. LYON: I ask this question because I went that route, too.

MR. JAMES: I applied for a number of jobs and they were – I mean, when I think back to it I think, what was I thinking? You know, I had no experience at all, I knew nothing, and I applied for – at least I didn't apply for any university jobs. That, I realized, was way beyond the scope of my skills and my experience and my level. But I applied for several – see, I hadn't gotten a teacher's certificate because I wasn't an art education major, so I couldn't apply to the public schools, and I had no desire to teach in a public school at the time anyway, so I applied for art positions in private schools. And I interviewed at two – I got interviews at two, so at least I got interviews. I realize now, well, some people didn't get the interviews. I got interviews, one of which was in a private school west of Boston. I'm trying to think of the town, but it was one of those poshy – west of Concord – a community.

MR. LYON: There's Concord Academy.

MR. JAMES: Well, it wasn't Concord Academy. It was a really –

MR. LYON: Weston Navy?

MR. JAMES: No, no, it was further west. It was really outside of the 495 – it was beyond the 495 ring. It was a small Massachusetts town that had this really good school. I can't remember –

MR. LYON: Deerfield Academy?

MR. JAMES: No, it wasn't – no.

MR. LYON: It doesn't matter.

MR. JAMES: Well, it doesn't matter. I didn't get the job. I interviewed though. I actually remember that interview pretty vividly and – actually I remember both of those interviews pretty vividly. The second one was up at the Kents Hill School, Kents Hill, Maine. Judy and I both drove up there. By this time, though, we were – I should say by this time we were living back in Massachusetts, so this would have been in 1974 – it would have been in the summer of 1974 – for positions that would have started that fall. So we decided after I had spent a year teaching – cooking lunch at the daycare center -- that that wasn't what – that we didn't want to stay in Rochester anymore, that we didn't like the weather enough; we had no reason to stay there. We decided that we wanted to raise our son close to his family so that he'd get to know both her family and my family, so we moved back to Massachusetts and moved in with Judy's parents in June of 1974. And that summer I interviewed for these two positions, neither of which I got. Kents Hill School would have been a disaster. The other one would have been pretty nice, actually, if we'd gotten it.

But in any event, by the end of that summer I – well, I spent the summer working for Judy's father – he was a contractor, carpenter-contractor, and I was working with him mostly doing add-ons and renovations, which is what he mostly did, although he built some houses, including ours. But we lived with her parents that summer, and it became a total disaster, and we knew we had to get out of there. We had to – I had to find something. And so, thanks to, actually, my mother, who heard about an opening at my high school in New Bedford, I got hired in September of '74 to teach art in my former high school and in place of the nun who I had had, who was then terminally ill with cancer. She died, I think, during that year. I remember going to her funeral, so I know she died that year.

In any event, I took over her classroom and I taught art, and it was essentially a part-time job. I was teaching a total of about 30 hours a week, but they considered that part-time so they wouldn't have to pay me any benefits. That was fine because at least I had a job that was something that – I hated doing the carpentry work. I liked working with Judy's fathe -- he was always easy to get along with -- but I hated the work. So that fall I started a job, and we moved into an apartment in Somerset about a mile – a little less than a mile from Judy's parents. And I – that was fall of '74. And in addition to teaching at St. Anthony's, I noticed in September of '74 a small – there was a little small article, really a notice, in the Fall River paper that the community college – Fall River?

MR. LYON: It's Fall River, the community college, yeah.

MR. JAMES: Is it Fall River Community College?

MR. LYON: That's what it's called now.

MR. JAMES: Well, then that's what it was called then. The Women's Center of the community college was looking for somebody to teach craft courses. Any craft areas they were looking for people to teach courses. So I wrote a letter in saying that I'd be able to teach a quiltmaking course. And so about a week later I get a call from this person at the Women's Center at Bristol Community College, that's what it is –

MR. LYON: Oh, Bristol, okay.

MR. JAMES: – saying that they'd be interested in having me teach this class and that they would give me X room in this building and the class would start on such and such a day; all I had to do was show up. So that following week, or two weeks, later I showed up for the class. They gave me a room with a banquet-sized folding table and about eight chairs, and 52 people showed up. So I immediately divided the 52 people into three or four classes at different times, different days of the week, according to people's preferences and schedules. I had four classes set up, or three classes, instantly. And that was the beginning of my teaching quiltmaking, by which time I had been making quilts for – you know, I'd been making patchwork – I can't say it was really making quilts, although I made a few small quilts. I was really, at that point in time, working on my first full-size, large bedsize quilts. And these were all traditional quilts, traditional patterns, copies of.

And so this was really – this tied in also – backtracking to grad school. When I started making patchwork in my second year of grad school, in Rochester, I was making these pillows as a hobby thing. Basically it was a just a pure hobby; it was something to do in the evening that I could do with my family. And Judy was doing it too, so we were doing it together. I started selling these, and this was the first time I started making some real money. I had sold some of my art in the past but never a whole lot, and this – this was like what people were just going nuts about. So I could sell these pillows – you know, everybody who bought one had friends who wanted them, and it was like suddenly I was making all this money making patchwork items.

And so that was a big motivation in a way, because I could see that I could generate some income by doing this. And so by the time I was teaching in '74 – by the time I started teaching, I had already been generating some income from this, and the teaching added to that. You know, we started seeing that this was going to be

something that would be viable.

MR. LYON: Like a way to make a living?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, yeah. And of course this is the time, just immediately before the bicentennial, so there was such a huge interest in Americana of all sorts that there was a big market for this stuff, so it was easy to sell it.

MR. LYON: And it was also like really having a whole generation kind of dropped quilting. I mean –

MR. JAMES: Well, yeah, in that part of the country anyway.

MR. LYON: Yeah.

MR. JAMES: Not out here [in Nebraska].

MR. LYON: No, never.

MR. JAMES: Definitely out there. So they were like in New England –

MR. LYON: It was novel.

MR. JAMES: – on the East Coast they were rediscovering it, yeah. And so, that's when I think – in '74 I really got going. I taught at the high school that one year, and then by the end of that year I realized that I could make a living just doing quilt-related stuff and I didn't need to teach high school, so I quit that. I actually got the job for a friend of mine who's still a high school art teacher today. But I –

MR. LYON: Does he bless or curse you for it? [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: I think he's quite happy, actually.

MR. LYON: Good.

MR. JAMES: But he got his teaching start in that school. But, see, I had a real problem – the reason I couldn't continue with that school is because I had a real problem with the religious part of it. That was – it was still at that point when that school was still fully active – because it doesn't have a high school anymore; it's just an elementary school now. But it still had a high school then, and, you know, religious education was a big part of it, and I was, by then, a confirmed atheist. I couldn't subscribe to that, and I felt hypocritical being – teaching there and, you know, having my silence to endorse it, so I had to get out of there.

So I – by 1975 – by summer of 1975 I was completely self-employed, and I remained self-employed for the next –

MR. LYON: Twenty-five years.

MR. JAMES: Twenty-five years, yeah, until 2000, yeah. So we're missing some little details in here. I know that I can say that in 1975 I had my first inkling – my first sort of awareness that the medium of quilts had a potential that I hadn't seen before then and that few other people were recognizing, although there were some artists out there who were beginning to develop their own work in the same sort of – coincidentally, we didn't know each other yet; we would soon know each other.

But it was – you know, the quiltmaking tradition had really pretty much developed as a populist art form with very few, quote, trained, unquote, professional artists involved, although there were some through the history of quilts. But people didn't look at quilts as an art medium; they looked at it as a hobbyist's medium, you know, as – I mean, people didn't even think of quilts in the same context in which they thought of weaving or ceramics or furniture or jewelry at the time, because those were already studio practices, but nobody thought of quilts as a studio practice.

MR. LYON: Quilting was a folk tradition.

MR. JAMES: It was a folk art. Yeah, it was a populist – it was a folk art. It was something that –

MR. LYON: I remember my grandmother's quilting circles, and I remember neighbors with their – [inaudible].

MR. JAMES: There's always been a folk art – obviously, there's always been a folk art tradition in the ceramics area, there has been a folk art tradition in sculpture, but nothing as broad or expansive as quilts. And I think it's curious that quilts could – quiltmaking could be practiced by so many people and yet only – it's only in the last 25 years that artists have begun to practice quiltmaking as studio practice.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

MR. JAMES: There were a few instances of it before, but very few, and they're not – they're not instances that are like the instances today, because, for the most part, they were not art school educated or art school trained personnel. They were – you know, some were graphic designers, but primarily designers who were employed by the women's magazines of the day to design patterns for a mass market.

MR. LYON: Right. That became very popular.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. So –

MR. LYON: Well, is it fair to suggest that your books provided that bridge between the two?

MR. JAMES: Well, I think that the book that did begin to do that was a book that was published before my book, that Gutcheon's *Perfect Patchwork Primer* [Beth Gutcheon. New York: Viking Penguin,1975]. And I say that because that book – well, you know, that book was really still very much focused on the traditional practice of quiltmaking.

MR. LYON: So was your first book.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: The title of which was –

MR. JAMES: *The Quiltmaker's Handbook* [Michael James. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1978] was the first book I wrote.

MR. LYON: Who was the original publisher?

MR. JAMES: Prentice Hall.

MR. LYON: Prentice Hall. That was 19 –

MR. JAMES: Seventy-eight.

MR. LYON: Seventy-eight.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. And then the other one was published in 1980. *The Second Quiltmaker's Handbook* [Michael James. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1980] was published in 1980, also by Prentice Hall. Well –

MR. LYON: I was thinking they were slightly earlier, so okay.

MR. JAMES: I think by the time that book was published in 1980, the idea that a trained artist would take this medium and use it to develop original visual work, that was beginning to be understood, and it was beginning to be accepted in both the quilt world and in related – the related world of the studio crafts. But it didn't exist before 1970, that's for sure.

So I guess – and when this – when people like myself and Nancy Crow and Terrie Mangat and Jan Myers-Newbury, Jan Myers at the time, began showing the work that we were doing, it was controversial in the quilt world because, of course, we were unabashedly dangling our BFAs and our MFAs, you know, in front of audiences of people who – many of whom never even finished high school, never mind went to college, and who owned – who felt a sense of ownership of the craft and who saw us as young upstarts who were interested in tearing down everything that they had worked so hard to carry on, you know, so that there was definitely this antagonism that developed.

And I guess at first we didn't understand the depth of feeling that most of these – most of the traditionalists felt about quiltmaking. For many people even today who are traditional quilt makers, that connection to the sort of idealistic vision of American life is still very important, that quiltmaking is an emblem in a sense of those values or is representative of all of those values that people associate with the traditional American vision. And so they – you know, we were coming at it from a very different standpoint, and those values didn't even mean too much, at least didn't mean a whole lot to people like myself. And then, you know, this ties into being a man in the field that –

MR. LYON: Yeah, you were one of the few.

MR. JAMES: – is a woman's domain. That was doubly threatening, because not only was I coming in and saying that all these historical patterns had been done and there was no point in repeating them, but I was also a man saying it, and that was doubly insulting, I guess, and offensive to a lot of people. I didn't really mean any harm by it. You know, I was then and still am motivated –

MR. LYON: Were you saying that?

MR. JAMES: Huh?

MR. LYON: Were you in fact saying that it had all been done?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I had actually published a letter – well, I wrote a famous, now infamous, letter to a little magazine at the time called *Quilter's Newsletter*, which still exists, but a magazine that basically promotes the traditional art of quilting, and I – it was the only magazine that existed at the time for quiltmakers. There are more today obviously. There are the fiber magazines today like *FiberArts* or *Surface Design Journal*. *FiberArts* existed at that time, and I did subscribe to *FiberArts* back in the '70s, but *Quilter's Newsletter* was the only magazine that really covered the quilt world.

So I wrote them a letter in 1974 or '75 – I guess it was '75 -- posing this question: you know, why are you just always publishing more patterns that can be had in any of the books that are available, and why not put more focus on more innovative aspects of the medium? Well, that just created a huge hue and cry in the quilt world, and they had – for months after, they published letters mostly condemning me and my values that want to, as one woman put it – how did she put it? – that want to do away with everything that – well, everything that had come before. I can't remember the exact quote, but I still have all those letters because *Quilter's Newsletter* dutifully sent me copies of all the letters.

MR. LYON: That's very nice.

MR. JAMES: Well, they definitely were siding with their vast majority of people, and yet they couldn't ignore the question, because I wasn't the only one posing it and I wasn't the only one doing work that no longer fit into the sort of norm visually. So –

MR. LYON: That was also not a time when new quilts were getting a lot of exhibition play yet – not quite.

MR. JAMES: No, no. Exhibitions were still pretty much focused on traditional quilts.

MR. LYON: Even new traditional quilts weren't getting a lot of – I mean, other than the traditional venues, were they?

MR. JAMES: Well, I'm trying to think now.

MR. LYON: Like fairs –

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, that's not true because the Museum of Contemporary Crafts in New York City had already done "The New American Quilt Show" –

MR. LYON: That's right.

MR. JAMES: – in 1976 – I think it was '76 – and I wasn't in that show, but I was aware of it, and I knew – I didn't see it, but I had seen the catalogue, so I knew that it had been shown and I'd seen slides of work from it. In fact, I bought the set of slides that the American Craft Museum sold at the time, and I have the catalogue, so that's how I got to know all that work, and that was pretty innovative. That was really the first sort of artist work – trained artist work that I became aware of. And then there was the exhibition "Bed and Board" at the DeCordova in Lincoln, Mass. [DeCordova Museum and Sculpture Park, Lincoln, MA] in '76, I believe. I have all the dates somewhere. I know this history because I was involved in it, but it was around that time.

And also, "Quilts for '76" in Boston, which showed a lot of nontraditional quilts. There were quite a few – there were a lot of traditional quilts, but there were also quite a few of nontraditional quilts in that that included work by people like Radka Donnell and Nancy Halpern and Rhoda Cohen, all artists in the Boston area at the time whose work I became exposed to through that show. And then –

MR. LYON: People who were working mostly in figurative quilting at the time.

MR. JAMES: A lot were, but some were doing geometric stuff, and the DeCordova show was the most influential on me, because by the time it got hung, I knew a lot of the artists who were in it. Some had been in the "New American Quilt Show" in New York, including Molly Upton and Susan Hoffman and Rakda Donnell. I wasn't in that "New American Quilt Show." And I got into the DeCordova show partly because I was teaching there at the time. I had the two most traditional quilts in the show, as I recall. One was *Meadow Lily*, which is this traditional North Carolina lily quilt that we still sleep under, and it's really just falling apart. It's got holes in it and everything; it's embarrassing. But it was made for that, so I don't care. And *Razzle Dazzle* was the other one, which was one of the first non – it was the traditional style, but it's not a copy of a traditional pattern. So those two quilts were the two quilts I showed in that show, and they were the two most traditional quilts in the show, absolutely, and

everything else like – I mean, to me it was, like, eye-opening, you know, all the stuff that all these other people were doing. So that was a big push.

By that time, you know, I knew that this was what I was going to work in, this medium; there was no turning back. And there was obvious acceptance in the sort of world that I wanted my work to move into, which was the museum world, the gallery world. So, yeah, the shows were important.

I can't remember where we were going before we got onto that subject.

MR. LYON: Well, actually we got a little off. Let me just stop this for a second.

[Audio break.]

MR. LYON: Okay, this is a continuation of – this is David Lyon interviewing Michael James at the artist's home in Lincoln, Nebraska, on January 4th, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. It's the continuation of disk two in session one.

And I think, if I recall, Michael – well, actually we need to address a question more directly, I think, and that's the one – the difference between the university-trained artist and one who's learned his or her craft outside academia. And it would be – I mean, you were talking actually, in fact, about being part of that first movement of people with BFAs and MFAs in the quilt field –

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: – and how, by posing the question to *Quilter's Newsletter*, you know, should we be doing something different, and by being a man you were taking some guff for that –

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: – perhaps even more so than some of your female compatriots. And we talked also about some of the early exhibitions of art quilts. I guess we can use that term, art quilts?

MR. JAMES: I don't like that term.

MR. LYON: You've grown less comfortable with it over the years, I can tell.

MR. JAMES: Everybody uses it now, so it's the accepted term.

MR. LYON: Quilts by – quilts outside the tradition. Maybe that's a better way to –

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: You didn't come to quilting in a traditional way – I mean in the sense of having grown up with it, having –

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: This way wasn't part of your visual vocabulary really. It's something you adopted.

MR. JAMES: Mm-hmm.

MR. LYON: Well, and you came to it after an academic training.

MR. JAMES: Right. I guess that partly – the only way I can explain that is to say that I was very much carried on the wave of interest in American traditional arts that the American bicentennial had prompted, and it was, you know, an opening into a whole realm of creative activity that I didn't know a whole lot about before. So when I was getting interested in quilts as practice, I was also interested more generally in all kinds of Early American art forms, from traditional painting, you know, 18th- and19th-century folk painting, to furniture making, to architecture, gravestone carving, to traditional arts as practiced by minority groups or subgroups within that whole thing, like the Shakers and so on.

So one key influence, I guess, at that time – and this, again, is in the mid-'70s -- was the exposure I had through the DeCordova to a lot of this stuff, because in the year leading up to the bicentennial, the DeCordova in Lincoln did this year-long kind of celebration of traditional American folk art and had a lot of people teaching – they had a festival in the summertime that was a whole summer-long series of events built around traditional American folk art. So all of that, you know, fed into this interest that I was developing. So I was apprenticing in a way with myself in the mechanics of quiltmaking, but I was also researching in the whole sort of broader realm of

American traditional art. And I really like the history that was associated with it, so I guess it was kind of escaping to the past, and it became a way to reconnect with the present, circuitous way I guess, but eventually that's sort of what happened.

Now, one thing I wanted to say that I think is important to mention, and that is that the arrival of BFAs and MFAs on the fiber arts scene had happened a lot earlier in the post-World War II rush of GI Bill-supported artists in art schools and universities around the country and in those programs where they existed that focused on traditional media like weaving and ceramics and so on. Those areas had already experienced the sort of – what's the word I'm looking for?

MR. LYON: Formal education –

MR. JAMES: Well, the arrival of people with formal education who were conditioning the way those arts were practiced. But it didn't happen with quiltmaking because quiltmaking was never an academic subject.

MR. LYON: Yeah, it was always sort of outside [beyond] the pale.

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah. And so, it was probably the last of the fiber arts to be affected by people like myself, but it was the one that put up the most resistance, I think.

MR. LYON: Oh, that's an interesting point.

MR. JAMES: But there were some people – I know weavers – in the fiber arts world -- I knew weavers who would probably debate me on that, because they feel that even in the weaving tradition there's still a lot of resistance to innovative – you know, the work of innovative makers like Lia Cook or Cynthia Schira or any number of people that you would name.

So I guess, you know, the quiltmaking field, from a traditional standpoint, is one that sort of nurtures them and insists on the status quo, and so any challenge to that is going to be resisted. And I think that that's basically what happened in the late 1970s. By the 1980s there was a short-lived – I mean, the resistance broke down fairly quickly because so many people came into quiltmaking at that time that there was bound to be a constituency that would support innovative work. And once that happened, once it started getting accepted, at least in some circles, then the resistance of the more dogmatic and the more sort of fundamentalist makers would start to break down. So I think that today there's a lot better coexistence and less suspicion and mistrust on both sides I think.

MR. LYON: So at this same time you were – when you were – really, you'd have to pick what? Was it about '78 when you started making quilts as a –

MR. JAMES: I started making quilts full time in 1975.

MR. LYON: Seventy-five.

MR. JAMES: Full time in the sense that I was devoting all my energies to work that was somehow connected to quiltmaking, and that included teaching lots of different courses related to quiltmaking in lots of different places. So for five years I taught all over the eastern Massachusetts area.

MR. LYON: In other people's sort of venues, so to speak.

MR. JAMES: Well, I would teach – like, for adult education programs pretty much I taught at the Boston Center for Adult Education, I taught as Mass. College of Art, I taught at DeCordova for five years, I taught at Bristol Community College for five years, I taught at the University of Rhode Island extension in Providence for three or four years, and at, you know, umpteen guilds and quilt clubs and all over New England and craft centers like Brookfield Craft Center. And I did that –

MR. LYON: So this was really before you developed what I sometimes think of as the Michael James road show that you also did later on, you know, where you would go and you would do intensive workshops that were around the world.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, exactly. I started doing those in the late '70s, but I really got full speed ahead with teaching, like, short-term workshops beyond the range that I could drive to in, like, 1979 and 1980. It was in '79 I stopped teaching at all those venues like the DeCordova, like Bristol Community College, where I had to teach semester-long courses.

MR. LYON: Right.

MR. JAMES: I got rid of those because I could make as much or more money just teaching a three-day – well, I

could make more money teaching a three-day workshop than I could make in a whole semester.

MR. LYON: Right.

MR. JAMES: So it was a no-brainer. And then also, once I could stop teaching all those weekly classes that I was teaching, I was able to devote myself a lot more intensely to my own work, so that if I went away and taught a three-day workshop once a month, which might involve a day of travel on either side of that so I'd be gone for five days, the rest of the month I could spend in my studio making my work. And my work started selling real well in the early 1980s, so I was able to support myself.

MR. LYON: Okay. Moving away from the strictly chronological now, could you talk a little bit about your view on the importance of fiber as a means of expression? I mean, you started out working as a painter, as a printmaker – you've done a lot of different things, but fiber is what you settled on.

MR. JAMES: Well, you know –

MR. LYON: Or the quilt is what you settled on, I don't know.

MR. JAMES: Right, but I would say I like the notion of textile, and I have to connect it to the ubiquitousness –

MR. LYON: Ubiquity.

MR. JAMES: Is it? Ubiquity. Yeah, I guess ubiquity is the word – of fabric, of textiles, and no other material is so closely connected to the human body. And I think that essential quality is what gave me a rationale for adopting it as an expressive medium, because I felt that anything that was so closely connected, so necessary for human, you know, functioning, had value, a kind of essential value that to me legitimized it as an artist's material, as a material at least with potential creative value. And it had always been used that way, historically.

And so – I mean, I made peace with the notion of working with textiles as a medium a long time ago, early on, but I think that its problem has been that it's been associated over the centuries with women's work, and women's work has been so devalued for so many centuries that that all played into the reasons why this medium could be marginalized as it was, and still is, actually, to some degree – less so now than it used to be, but still to some degree it is marginalized. So that sort of explains it, I think.

MR. LYON: What are some of the strengths of – well, you sort of talked about some of the strengths of it, I guess. What are the limitations of working in textiles? I mean, do you feel –

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, I actually don't feel any limitations, because I can see now the incredible range of expression, the malleability and the incredible sort of adaptability of the medium that – of fabric and textiles. It seems to me that in many ways other media are more limited, more constrained in some ways, I guess.

MR. LYON: You mean you can't drape a painting over your shoulders?

MR. JAMES: Well, I don't know. Well, you know, painting is – painting has always been associated with textiles too, but one of my arguments – and I make this argument to students – is one of the reasons why textiles have always been sort of marginalized is that in the art world, the function of a textile in the high-art world was as a support. The art went on the surface of it and hid the textile substrate, but that textile substrate was what made possible the art that ultimately presented its face to the viewer.

And I think I started to realize this, honestly, in art school, in graduate school, because when I was finishing my graduate work I was painting washes of heavily diluted color, acrylic color, on unprimed canvas, and at first I covered the entire canvas, but as I developed my work over those few years that I was in grad school, I started leaving more surface unpainted, and so that the unprimed canvas, the textile, became a critical component of the composition – of the abstract composition that happened to be placed on that surface. And I started to recognize that the textile area that was visible had its own sort of inherent beauty – the weave itself, the directional aspect of that weave and the texture that resulted. And so I started to kind of appreciate textiles as beautiful materials in and of themselves, and that had something to do, I guess, with my accepting – you know, accepting this for myself as a worthy pursuit.

MR. LYON: Now, sort of historically your work has been – your textile work has been in quilts. A lot of what I know you're doing now is still in that mode, but it's several steps removed from the assemblage of existing fabrics into quilt form. We probably ought to talk about that at another point but –

MR. JAMES: Well –

MR. LYON: I need to have you define a quilt for me.

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, what a quilt is, technically, is a textile sandwich: three layers held together with some form of stitching, usually a top layer and a middle filling or batting area and a backing. And that pretty much qualifies anything you would call a quilt, no matter what the surface is like or what the backing is like or what the middle material is made of. The fact that those three things sandwich – are sandwiched together and held together in that sandwich with stitches -- is what makes them a quilt. It used to be that you'd associate a quilt with a function, and that stopped in the 1970s, really, that quilts no longer had to function as bed covers, although they could scale – they could still relate to that function, but that wasn't necessarily what they were being made for, so that in a sense many people thought of quilts as flexible canvases. You know, instead of being stretched on the rigid frame they could be draped or allowed to fall across a surface or expanse of a wall.

So in that sense they're very, very closely related to painting. And then the question arises, why not just paint? People ask me that: why don't you just paint the images that you do? And I could have done that, but they would have been something else. They wouldn't have been a textile; they wouldn't have been informed by the work of touch is, I guess, what I would call it, because it's very important to me and to everybody who makes quilts that the process of handling those materials and of forming with one's fingers the surfaces that compose the objects, I think, is what separates it from painting; the different approach to the laying on of form and, I don't know, the different sensibility, I guess, about the act of manipulating materials.

Or maybe I should put it another way, that the materials require a different form of manipulation, and you either connect to one form or another, and I connected better to the processes of sewing than I connected to the processes of taking a stick and dipping it in paint and applying the paint with the end of the stick to a canvas or a roller or whatever it was. The only difference – there's no difference in my thinking when I'm creating a quilt, but I am creating something different than – at least as an object – than I would if I were working on a panel – a wood panel or a stretched canvas panel or a piece of metal, or whatever.

MR. LYON: Well, the mechanical requirements, certainly in some respects, have dictated some of your compositional [pairings?] it seems like.

MR. JAMES: Well, I think that when I started out, I was very much a traditionalist in design too, not just in terms of the form that the object took but the surfaces themselves were very traditional. And my work stayed essentially traditional, at least formally, until the early 1990s, I would say – at least through the 1980s, because my work was always conditioned by the presence, either visible or insinuated, of a grid. The grid is always, you know, the underlying structure in most quilts. And until I was able to get rid of the grid – you know the story very well –

MR. LYON: A bit.

MR. JAMES: – I thought of my work as being very traditional, even though the designs weren't copies of traditional designs.

MR. LYON: People didn't respond to it as being traditional.

MR. JAMES: No. But I thought I was very traditional because the presence of the grid made it very traditional. Of course, in textile pattern design the grid has always been a component of it, because all repeat pattern design is grid based. Some form of grid, you know, determines the distribution of the forms across the surface. So that's been part of textile design tradition since textiles were first designed, so we're talking about many, many, many thousands of years.

MR. LYON: Many thousands of years.

MR. JAMES: So in that sense there's nothing new with this particular textile tradition.

Now, I don't know if I should get into – you see, now I'm going to start getting into the whole digital thing, and that's going to –

MR. LYON: No, let's hold that back for now.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: We did touch on – do you feel you managed to – or do you even try to deliberately exploit the tradition of the quilt? I mean, aren't those things that you kind of – are the associations that necessarily go with the quilt part of what you're hoping for in the response?

MR. JAMES: Sometimes I have wanted that and sometimes – sometimes it seemed more important to me and other times less. I occasionally have had misgivings about having led the charge in a way to move the quilt off the bed and onto the wall, and I've even done – gone back and made some quilts periodically over the years that

I thought of as bed quilts. The last one that I did – the last few I did around 1995-'96, I conceived of them as bed quilts, and I sized them so that they could function on a bed. Of course, they were not placed on beds when they entered into the private collections, but they could – they could function on a bed.

And I did that at a moment when I felt, again, this sort of misgiving that we have sort of subtracted from the quilt a key component of its nature. But I don't think that that's – I think quilts can function in lots of different ways, and if an aesthetic function is its only function, then that's fine – it doesn't have to actually cover a body or warm a body. So I guess I'm willing at this point to accept a variety of functions that might not necessarily overlap for an object that we would call a quilt.

MR. LYON: Okay, that's good. Another sort of pick-up on what we were talking about before – when you first sort of came onto the scene, you were one of the very few men in the quilt world. Actually, before we even go that far, there's a term you use all the time and I find myself using it too, and I'm not quite sure what one would call the "quilt world."

MR. JAMES: The quilt world. Well, the quilt world is definitely a body of people who have a particular interest in or love of quilts. And many of those people make them, although not all of them. But all of them love them, and their interest is such that they'll move mountains to get to them – maybe not literally, but figuratively – and that they hold them very important because it gives them pleasure in lots of different ways.

I suddenly noticed that that shelf is leaning a little too much. I'm going to have to prop it up. It looks like it could come down on you.

So – what was the question again?

MR. LYON: Who is the quilt world? [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: Oh, who is the quilt world? Well, you know, I see the quilt world when I give a talk to the Lincoln Quilters Guild, for example, as I did in November – I mean in September. And, you know, the quilt world is middle-class America largely, women almost exclusively, middle-aged almost exclusively, because there are not very many young women getting an interest in quilts today. It's still very much the domain of women who have a proprietary connection to the medium and who definitely feel very protective of it. And they also largely feel very connected to womanhood through it. They are home – well, a lot of them are professional women, but they're homemakers generally, whether or not they work full time outside of the home, which most probably do today. They still largely value those activities –

MR. LYON: Hearth-makers maybe.

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah. So that's who the quilt world is, but it also –

MR. LYON: But it has an institutional component too, right?

MR. JAMES: What do you mean?

MR. LYON: In the sense of – you've got all these newsletters and magazines –

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: – and organizations and –

MR. JAMES: Yep, there is the, you know, whole group of publishers of magazines and books devoted exclusively to quilts and quiltmakers. There is a quilt – there is a whole commercial world of quilt – an industry really that's developed around this quilt world by manufacturers of tools and machines and fabrics and every manner of material and –

MR. LYON: Kits and designs.

MR. JAMES: Everything, yeah. And that is most on display at things like the "Houston Quilt Festival" and "Quilt Market," which take place each November in Houston, Texas, run by Quilts, Inc., which is probably one of the largest businesses that's come out of this whole revival in quiltmaking, a multimillion dollar enterprise that organizes regional and this annual show, and also organizes a biannual show in Europe called "Quilt Expo Europa" every second year, that moves around. Last year it was in Barcelona, and the next one will be in The Hague, I believe.

MR. LYON: So this quilt world has – I mean, you're part of it, too.

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah.

MR. LYON: I mean, for many years –

MR. JAMES: Oh, I mean, my reputation in it and my visibility in the quilt world was much stronger –

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

– was known in that studio craft world. So it is – I mean, that world has been important to the development of my career, because then the support for all of the workshops and lectures that – workshops I've taught and lectures I've given -- because that's where those people came from for the most part.

MR. LYON: Presumably those are the ones who bought your books, too.

MR. JAMES: Yes, many of whom bought the quilts, because most of my clientele has been what I would call quilt-world people.

MR. LYON: That's interesting.

MR. JAMES: I've sold outside of the quilt world. I've done corporate commissions that went in corporate collections, and I've done – I've sold work through galleries to some collectors who are not necessarily quilt collectors and not necessarily people who knew much about quilts or came from the quilt world, but for the most part most of my work has been placed through exposure in the quilt world.

MR. LYON: So, in a sense, despite some hesitance or maybe even resistance by some people because you were a man, it hasn't proven to be an enduring problem.

MR. JAMES: No – no. No, and I think that that worked the other way too, that the fact that I was a man had its advantages, because as an anomaly you get noticed, you know.

MR. LYON: Well, that's true.

MR. JAMES: And so in that sense I think being a man in this field drew more attention than being a woman might have, although – and I've always said this, and I maintain this to this day that the quality of the work is ultimately what was the determining factor, and if the work hadn't been good, the fact that I was a man would not have been enough to give me a career.

MR. LYON: Well, there are other men making quilts --

MR. JAMES: Some have come and gone.

MR. LYON: – and many – I was going to say, and many who have come and gone.

MR. JAMES: Right – right. So –

MR. LYON: Okay, so that's not really a problem. We're actually down to the point where I'd like to – probably a wrap-up question for this session – it's a quarter after 6:00 – and that is, do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition or one that's particularly American?

MR. JAMES: Oh, well, that's easy to answer, because I definitely think of it as an American tradition, that the practice of quiltmaking as a communal – as a popular enterprise – I think while there are precedents in other countries, never – it never became as organized anywhere else as it did here – as it became here on a sort of national scope, I would say. There are traditions, you know, in England – in pockets of England there are particular long-standing traditions of quilt practice, but it never seemed anywhere else to become as widespread, as present a practice in the lives of huge numbers of women as it did here. And those numbers – I think the reason why the catalogue of quilt design that we refer to, or that we begin our first experiences of quilts with, is all quilt design that originated in this country, that was developed out of traditional practice in this country, especially in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

For example, in England there is a long-standing patchwork tradition, but it's almost exclusively one type of patchwork. There was very little experimentation, and certainly no experimentation on the scale that it evidenced itself in this country in the 19th [century].

[Audio break.]

MR. LYON: And we're rolling. This is David Lyon interviewing Michael James, with questions prepared by David Lyon and Patricia Harris, at Michael's home office in Lincoln, Nebraska, on the fifth of January 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is our second session, and we're going to start talking about sort of what made you who you are as an artist.

So, what were some of the more powerful influences in your career? You know, people, art movements, technological developments [inaudible] to you?

MR. JAMES: Well, since my career has essentially revolved around quilts, those influences, the strongest ones or the most important ones I think are connected to that work. So I would have to say that a really big influence on my work, on my pursuit of this medium, has been traditional American quilts, and specifically Amish quilts, which had a big influence at the beginning because they were the first quilts that I – the first traditional quilts that I looked at that seemed to me to convey the kind of originality and power, I guess – visual power that I associated with art, what I call art, at least in terms of two-dimensional art. And I did incorporate aspects of Amish quilts and Amish – not quilts but Amish sort of approaches to color and composition in some of my earlier quilts. So I think that was a very important influence and still remains important in the sense that I still admire and draw some amount of inspiration from Amish quilts.

Art movements that have influenced my work. I think I would say, you know, from a formal standpoint anyway, the Bauhaus has been pretty influential in – not always in specific works but in the works of some of the artists and designers of the Bauhaus, especially Albers and – both Albers, Anni and Josef Albers, and some of the textile designers like Gunta Stolzl, whose work I've studied and been interested in for a long time. I have read a lot about Black Mountain College [Asheville, North Carolina], which was a sort of experimental college to which Josef and Anni Albers went to teach in the 1940s, and I've been very interested in the sort of pedagogical history of the Black Mountain College, in the people who worked and studied and taught there and in the impact that that sort of art-oriented program had on arts and culture in this country.

Other influences on my career.

MR. LYON: I mean, when we've talked in the past, I think you and I both sort of found a translation of Paul Klee's notebooks, for example, to be kind of a seminal moment, at least at one point in our lives.

MR. JAMES: Well, I read the notebooks so long ago now – I should reread them, actually; it's time that I reread the notebooks. I've been interested – you know, anybody who's interested in geometric design, which informed my work at least through the 1970s and 1980s, would have been interested in people like Klee and in the whole Russian Constructivist movement and the Op and the geometric art movements of the '60s and '70s. And that definitely influenced my work, but I've been interested in a lot of different types of artists and have read a lot of artists' biographies over the years and have studied a whole range of different types of work by painters and sculptors and –

MR. LYON: Were some of those people less than obvious in the sense that – I mean, the examples you've given, certainly the Albers, one could see sort of a direct translation into your work, but I suspect that there are probably other people whose work you've looked at a lot who you may share very little affinity and obvious sort of artistic expression –

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: – but that you took something else away from it.

MR. JAMES: Well, yeah. I would say, you know, people like Philip Guston or Joseph Cornell, that I've already mentioned, are artists whose work I admire immensely – did then and still do. Other artists that have had influences on my work – well, not maybe on my work, but on me as a person, as an artist person, artists like John Bellany, who is a Scottish painter, not very well known in this country; Jon Schueler – we have to double-check that name because I'm suddenly not sure – but whose journals and edited letters were published a couple of years ago. I have the book, and I'm trying to locate it as we sit here, and I think it's upstairs in the library.

MR. LYON: Why don't we double-check that?

MR. JAMES: But, well, you know, I have a very, very eclectic and –

MR. LYON: That's part of what I was trying to get at.

MR. JAMES: – and catholic, I would say, taste – not Catholic –

MR. LYON: With a small c.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, with a small c. You know, Bridget Riley I admire a lot. I have to say I like her work a lot. I always have. I've followed it for the last four decades since the '60s when she first appeared on the contemporary scene in this country, the Museum of Modern Art show, "The Responsive Eye" [1965], and saw her retrospective show at the Dia Art Center [Dia Center for the Arts, New York, NY] two years ago, which I really enjoyed. I'm fascinated, you know, by interplays of color in all kinds of forms, so that has been a constant

influence, as have artists that are of a previous generation, but people like the color synchromist painters, starting with the Delaunays and the American offshoots of the Delaunays [Robert and Sonia], like Stanton Macdonald-Wright and that group of artists, you know, of the '20s and '30s, who worked with color as a subject.

I mean, any artist that you could describe as a colorist is probably somebody whose work I've been interested in, in one way or another. So I put Ellsworth Kelly in that group for sure, and Frank Stella obviously. David Hockney's work I've been interested in over the years pretty consistently. It's interesting because when I start listing influences, I tend to be listing painters and people in the sort of fine arts mode, and I'm less likely to list artists who come out of the craft tradition, at least at the outset, although there have certainly been influences there too.

I have to say I've been very interested over the years in the sort of English Bloomsbury tradition, both literary and also visual, and interested in the work of people like Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, and Roger Fry even, not that they were good painters particularly, but something there that was interesting in the way that they handled color. But I also, I guess, have been interested in their lives, the way that their lives wove through a number of artistic traditions, and that also would include artists in this country working at the same time, like William and Marguerite Zorach, whose work I've been interested in for a long time.

And I can't say that many of these artists' work had specific influences on anything that I'd done visually, but I think reading about their work and reading about their lives has always been a way to participate in the community of artists and in artistic history. So it was a way of getting some kind of affirmation, I guess – feeling.

MR. LYON: Understanding art's place?

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah. So –

MR. LYON: That's pretty good. We'll get to technological developments in session three, when we start talking about your new work in particular.

MR. JAMES: We'll probably have to go in the other room to do that – in the studio.

MR. LYON: That's fine. Do you see your work falling into phases or periods? I mean, at some level it has to seem all continuous to you, but –

MR. JAMES: Actually it does fall into clear –

MR. LYON: Okay.

MR. JAMES: I would definitely – I mean, to me that seems very obvious, that from 1974 – let's use that as a starting date, although I had actually started making patchwork objects a year or a year and a half prior to that, but from about that point when I started making actual what you would call quilts to about 1978, that four-year period is really a kind of apprenticeship period, and the work is very, very classic, I would call it classic phase in the sense that I was doing sort of take-offs on traditional quilts, and the formats were very, very traditional. I was also kind of hopping around at that point, stylistically, and exploring different types of surface constructs, kind of trying to find something that I could really dig my fingers into.

And then from 1978 to about 1981 there was a period of a kind of solidifying of my sense of myself as a quiltmaker and my sense of what I felt I needed to do artistically as I started to get more confident in using this medium to act as a structure to support the images that I was visualizing. And then I think from 1980 to 1990 my work pretty much was entirely using the strip-piecing process and had a particular look that was informed by that process but also informed by the grid, the skeleton of the grid that underlaid everything that I produced in that span of time. And then –

MR. LYON: Would you call Sonia and Robert Delaunay a phase?

MR. JAMES: Well, I think by that point I'd sort of gotten over the Delaunays. That influence was more evident in the late 1970s. But I think those – you know, I was doing something that was fairly original at that point, and all the previous influences that I had absorbed were coming out, but blended, you know, definitely digested and reconstituted as something that was much a more personal expression.

By 1990, though, I was becoming disillusioned. I felt that I had reached – that I had exhausted the possibilities for what I could do, certainly using the grid as the underlying skeleton, and I was actually very frustrated by the presence of the grid. And so I struggled for a couple of years to get rid of it, and one of the key factors that allowed me to do that was the three-month residency that I had in the South of France in 1990, thanks to the National Endowment for the Arts, which gave me an artist exchange fellowship to work at the La Napoule Art Foundation in La Napoule, France, near Cannes. And so for three months at the end of 1990 – in the fall of 1990 I

worked with 14 or 15 other artists, 10 Americans, and five or six Europeans, including, among the Americans, Faith Ringgold, who was there at the same time.

And when I got that residency, I decided ahead of time that I would not work in fabric while I was there; I would just work on paper. I would basically spend three months drawing, both to distance myself from the work that I had been doing intensely for 10 years, and I had also just completed about a year's worth of work for a show that happened at the same time in Switzerland. I had an exhibition in the Galerie Jonas in Switzerland. And so I had basically reached a point of mental exhaustion relative to my ongoing work, and it was a good point to do something different.

So I haven't done really much work on paper since the early 1970s, and so it was like sort of stepping back in time to grad school all over again in some ways. And actually, the first couple of months were difficult in that respect, because I felt that I had to retrace a lot of territory that I'd sort of put behind me, even forgotten, and I had to kind of relearn, in a sense, how to draw. But after a couple of months I started then doing some work that was more exploratory for me and that involved using oil pastels and oil crayons, which I had never worked with before, at least not the type of oil sticks and so on that were now available.

And I spent quite a bit of money on these wonderful Sennelier oil pastels, these big, thick, greasy, wonderful, luscious instruments that let me manipulate color in a very different way. And the work that I did in that last month – and one of those pieces is sitting – it's hanging on the wall across from us, that set of three drawings.

MR. LYON: Oh, yes, I remember those.

MR. JAMES: Those drawings were critical in my making the leap that I made within a year of coming back from La Napoule that led to the work that I did between 1992 and 1995, still strip piecing but totally disconnected from the grid. And it freed me up at that point to re-embrace strip piecing, which I thought I may have reached the limits of what I could do with it before I'd gone to La Napoule. It renewed my enthusiasm for the process and did let me create another body of work that stands apart from the work of the 1980s for its freedom of form and its flow and sense of movement that was unconstrained by comparison with the grid-based stuff of the 1980s.

It was a sort of last hurrah, however, because any work, I think, that is informed by technique and process, I think ultimately has to exhaust itself. And I finally did reach a point in the mid-1990s – 1995 -- where I definitely understood that I had reached the limits of what I could do with the strip-piecing process. Having divested myself of the grid, there was nothing else to divest myself of in that technical context. So I decided in 1995 to change completely, to really make an about-face. And essentially that really is like the end of the fourth phase of my work and the beginning of another phase that's taken up pretty much most of the last six years or so – or that took up about six years, because my work took another about-face last year, which we'll talk about momentarily.

Anyway, that period from about 1995 to 2001, the first part of 2001, I think I would sort of look at that as a separate body of work that had one kind of connecting thread, and that was the use of juxtapositions of totally disparate surfaces in one piece that create for me a kind of tension that's akin to the tensions that exist in our lives constantly as we try to negotiate a physical world and political worlds and social and cultural worlds in which very conflicting ideas and circumstances exist side by side. We make peace with those things in one way or another; we accommodate them.

And so my feeling is that in my art I should be able to accommodate in single surfaces components that don't initially seem to have much connection to one another, but in whose juxtaposition and sort of enforced cohabitation some sort of accommodation, visual accommodation, ultimately results. And actually, my work now is still informed by this idea. People I think find it difficult – they don't think always that these works are logical visually, because I think that most of the people in the audience that my work has have a tendency to base their judgments on formal sort of rubrics, on formal qualifications, and I think that I'm less interested in the formal aspects now and more interested in content and the ideas, or the sort of philosophical rationales. I mean, I know I can compose well and I can handle color well, and I know I draw decently, so I've mastered those things, and it doesn't seem to me that important anymore to address any of those issues.

So the final phase I'm in, or at least the most recent phase I'm involved in now – and this is a very different set of parameters because it's informed by digital technology, and I'm certainly not unique in that respect, because artists all over the world are heavily involved in –

MR. LYON: And people say you're a latecomer.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, exactly – exactly. I do feel that that is the case. But in a sense it has an inevitability, so at this point I'm rediscovering my work through the lens of the digital age, and the availability of technology that I would not have had access to prior to coming here to the University of Nebraska I think is significant. I've been designing and working with fabrics that I've created in Photoshop and that I have printed on a cotton substrate

with a digital textile printer that the department got about a year ago – exactly a year ago. I was trained on this in February of 2001, and since then have been working intensively to explore both the possibilities of the CAD [Computer Assisted Design] software and the possibilities in terms of incorporating the output from that CAD software work.

So to date I've printed something in the neighborhood of around a hundred meters – maybe I'm up to about 125 meters of fabric. Relatively little of that I've actually used in my work in actual pieces, because most of it was experimental in terms of trying out different things and getting used to the programs, and a lot of it had technical problems that, you know, prevented me from actually incorporating it into a – but it gave me a lot of experience very quickly with this device, this digital textile printer, which prints with fiber-reactive dyes on cotton. I'm working mostly on cotton. I've done a little work on silk, but I haven't incorporated any of that in my own work. But I have made a number of quilts at this point entirely from digital fabric – digitally developed and digitally printed fabric, and it makes literally almost anything possible visually.

MR. LYON: That must be frustrating, too.

MR. JAMES: Well, no, I haven't felt – the one frustration that I've felt is the lack of time to pursue this, the lack of adequate studio time to devote myself to this, because academia conspires to make that nearly impossible, getting that amount of time, say, for vacations or sabbaticals. And, anyway, my biggest problem right now is time.

MR. LYON: So those are the phases.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, that basically breaks the phases down.

MR. LYON: The five phases of –

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah.

MR. LYON: That's pretty amazing, actually, given – you know, it's not that many years we're talking about, 30 years – the last 30 years.

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, it's interesting because it's somewhat problematic. I can say this, that since I changed my work – my style in 1995, that point where I stopped making strip-pieced quilts as I had made them – I still used strip-piecing processes, but not exclusively. You know, a portion of a quilt might involve some strip piecing, but strip piecing that isn't the kind of diagonal, banded look of the work that I did through the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s.

But people have a very hard time accommodating a major shift in an artist's work, because people get used to associating an artist's name with a certain type of work and feel somehow that you've deceived them in some way if you change direction. Well, you know, you can think of [Philip] Guston and what happened when Guston changed his style so radically. It certainly didn't happen overnight, although to a lot of people it seemed like it did. But there was a lot of resistance to the new style of his work, this almost sort of cartoonlike kind of style of these strange, nonsensical almost, figures, almost threatening, and definitely not these kind of lyrical kind of post-Post Impressionist, you know, abstractions.

So that's sort of been the case with my work in the last few years. I have sensed a lot of resistance, and I've had a lot of people tell me how they find what I'm doing now interesting but how they really liked what I did before. And –

MR. LYON: Is –

MR. JAMES: Go ahead.

MR. LYON: Oh, I was going to say, is an aspect of that – although what you were doing before was incredibly daunting from a technical standpoint for someone who made quilts, and a large part of your audience are people who make quilts, it somehow seemed achievable. They could – somehow if they worked hard enough, they could do it, and what you're doing now somehow seems less accessible in terms of –

MR. JAMES: I think that –

MR. LYON: I couldn't do that.

MR. JAMES: Yes, that's true. I think that through the '80s the sort of overriding feature in my work was a kind of formal resolution. The emphasis, while I always have some kind of conceptual sort of – or thematic concept running through every piece or through a series of pieces, the overall impression was more formal than anything else, and I think that now the formal is still there but it's a support for other ideas that don't relate to formal

issues particularly. And I think that for people who don't have a wide knowledge of 20th-century and recent art history, it's more challenging. They are less comfortable with it because they don't quite understand it.

MR. LYON: Was there – was it simply the availability of the technology that launched you into wanting to create your own fabric?

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Well –

MR. LYON: I mean, you've always been making your own fabric in a sense.

MR. JAMES: Well, actually, you know, in the 1990s I hired – I paid Mickey Lawler, who is from Hartford, Connecticut, and has a business called Skydyes – I commissioned her actually to make fabrics for me, and for a few years she made a lot of hand-painted fabric for me. And she was doing this also as a business sort of aimed at the quilt market and doing quite well selling fabric to the quilt world – hand-painted fabric. But I asked her to do specific types of surfaces in response to ideas to more sort of – things that were more, I guess, generated by emotion somewhat and that would give a particular type of emotional effect.

And so I'd give her lists of adjectives and ask her to do work that – to create fabrics – paint hand-painted fabrics that had that particular feeling, you know. Like I said I wanted – once I remember telling her I wanted a fabric that was "murder-scene" red, because I had an idea in my head of what I wanted. I wanted this particular red to have a kind of violent, you know, blood-splattered quality, and I remember giving her lists of words like toxic and –

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

– radioactive and stuff like that; that I wanted fabric to look like this because I wanted to be able to create certain effects, and I felt that that was – and she did; she provided me a large stock of fabrics that I used through the late 1990s and the beginning of – you know, in 2000 into 2001 I was still using her fabrics. But the arrival of the printer made a big difference because it – in some ways there's an aspect to it that pushes it beyond what I would call artisanal and it makes photography, for example – it makes that discipline – you know, it makes it possible in the fabric framework. So it opens, you know, basically limited – unlimited imagery. Then there are the CAD programs associated with this printer that I have access to that are designed for textile design, for repeat pattern design in textiles, that offer an incredible and literally unlimited range of possibilities in terms of configuring motifs and elements in a printed fabric.

But I had already decided that I needed to adopt or embrace the digital world because it's a tool, and it seemed like I was overdue for getting to know it and taking advantage of the possibilities that it would offer me. And of course coming into academia, that urgency to exploit digital media of all kinds to, you know, the various purposes that occupy academics, not least pedagogical, just made it logical that I would pursue digital media as tools to aid in all aspects of my work, from teaching to administering my ongoing career, and also informing my creative work.

MR. LYON: Just to back up a little bit for the benefit of whoever is listening to this, you were not – you've never been a technophobe. I mean, you embraced having a computer to do your word processing, e-mail and so forth fairly early on.

MR. JAMES: Right – right.

MR. LYON: And as soon as Internet access became available to you, you grabbed it.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, true. I'm definitely not a technophobe, but I'm not –

MR. LYON: You're not a geek either.

MR. JAMES: I'm not a geek either, exactly. I don't really understand how it all works.

MR. LYON: Do you care?

MR. JAMES: No, I don't. I don't think it's that – well, I do think it's important. If you understand how it works, you can make its possibilities even more expansive than if you don't, but I'm satisfied to be able to use it, you know, to the degree that I can. And I am learning more constantly, and at this point in time I think I've reached the point of no return, that it would be very difficult to go back to working the way I worked 15 years ago. I could never do that in probably any aspect of my life that is touched by the available technology.

MR. LYON: Well, one of the interesting aspects of it, though – and you alluded to it when you said it made photography possible in a textile framework.

MR. JAMES: Well, it's always been possible. I mean –

MR. LYON: I know. I mean –

MR. JAMES: – since the 19th century.

MR. LYON: [Inaudible.]

MR. JAMES: Yeah, but even earlier. I mean, there were people who were printing photographically on fabric in the 19th century, almost from the start of the photographic, you know, revolution.

MR. LYON: Since light-reactive emulsions were available.

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah.

MR. LYON: But you've always been an abstract artist, or considered yourself as such, and in fact I can recall points in your career when you became almost convulsed by the idea of representation in your work whenever it would creep in.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, but I haven't liked it in other people's work, at least in the quilt world, in the quilt medium.

MR. LYON: Yeah, you've been very clear about that in print –

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Well, all I can say is –

MR. LYON: – never using appropriated imagery –

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: – whereas it may not be strictly representation. I mean, you know, you're not doing landscape paintings –

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: – but, you know, from the wallpaper of your childhood home to your own X-rays to – I mean, it's straight representation in a sense.

MR. JAMES: Yes. Yeah, and the only thing – I mean, I guess the ease of adopting or adapting those images to fabric is what made the difference. The ease that the digital media have offered is what encouraged me to – but also it came at a time when I was feeling like I really needed – I wanted to be saying stuff in my work that needed to have representational imagery. And I think it started with the final pieces that I was doing in 2000, including a piece that I called *Spiritus Mundi* that had a lot to do with the interior of the body and the whole notion of us carrying around within us this incredible landscape, this cosmos in a way, this interior sort of physical landscape that we couldn't see but that was, you know, essentially who we were. And I think it – when I was doing that piece, I was wishing that I had some practical mechanism for using real imagery of the body and – I mean, certainly there has been lots of different technical methods available for artists to use – fabric artists to use representational imagery, but the processes always seemed too complex. There always were practical difficulties that made it seem like it wasn't worth the effort. But this digital technology has removed that impediment for me.

MR. LYON: Because you can manipulate the image as well as transfer it?

MR. JAMES: Yeah. You can do unlimited manipulation of the image, whatever it is, whether it's photographic or drawn or, you know, totally constructed digitally or scanned and adapted, you can manipulate it endlessly. So it makes it practical to do that.

MR. LYON: Then does that very ease of being able to do that imply a responsibility to actually do something with it rather than just transfer it?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, absolutely – absolutely. And that – I mean, I anticipate people saying, oh well, it's so easy, and dismissing it, but it isn't easy. There is ease to the process, but it isn't easy, and given that I've printed now somewhere in the neighborhood of 125 or so meters of fabric in the last year and have used probably a total of about, at most, a tenth of that in the three pieces – three or four pieces -- that I have completed that are entirely digital, it says something about the difficulty, actually, of coming up with imagery and sort of integrating the imagery that the technology makes possible with the notion of the quilt, that that's a concern. You know, I'm certainly still a quiltmaker and still making objects that are quilts, and I have to – and I'm interested in textiles and textile history and the history of printed textiles particularly, and I want my work to come out of that lineage

as well. So I'm thinking about all of these different aspects of the problem, and so finding that it isn't easy. In fact, it's quite difficult to –

MR. LYON: Well, where do the difficulties lie? Is it in selecting the image, manipulating it, in the technical problems with printing it? Finding out how to integrate it?

MR. JAMES: Well, for me right now it's in getting the right kinds of juxtapositions of images to convey the particular conceptual notion or thematic notion that I want to work with. And I'm working right now in several different – sort of working several different threads that are parallel to each other, but they're not actually interweaving. So I'm doing some images now based on an interest in Japanese culture and artistic history that I've sustained over the last 12 or so years that I've been traveling to and from Japan. I just made a trip in November, and it sort of renewed this interest that I'd like to explore in my own work. So I'm working on a few pieces right now that incorporate imagery inspired by Japanese design and traditional Japanese woodcut, ukiyo-e art. I'm also working on – starting work on a new series – what I think may be a new series at any rate – that deal with the landscape of this part of the country.

MR. LYON: Real two-dimensional work right?

MR. JAMES: Huh?

MR. LYON: Real two-dimensional work.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, actually. It's very appropriate to be working in the flat quilt surface. But also I'm interested in the whole problem of the – that the agricultural states are facing, and that the whole – the problem that is plaguing the whole family farm scene that's still tangible here. And then there's –

MR. LYON: A third stream?

MR. JAMES: A third – yeah, a third stream that has to do with my own sort of – my autobiography in a way, myself in relation to the world, that started with the brain pieces that I did last year. I just drew a blank and I can't think of the title. Oh, *A Strange Riddle* – a series I called *A Strange Riddle* from a quote that I took from Freud in his writings on memory and infantile amnesia, and I did a series of pieces relative to my own infantile amnesia that came out of questionings about where I drew this love of pattern, the compelling impulse that I have to work with and to seek out pattern in all its forms and all its diverse manners of expression.

And so I was inspired in part by a photograph of myself as an infant, three months old, laying on my parents' bed in the brightly sunlit bedroom of their first apartment in New Bedford back in 1949. And I'm sound asleep on the surface of this bed that its sheets have been pulled back so it's essentially a white surface. And against – and behind me is my crib, and the crib is pushed up against a wall that's covered in this large-scale floral wallpaper of the time. And it occurred to me that that was the first room in which I was exposed to pattern, and that pattern was so graphically strong, how could I not have noticed that as an infant, and how could I not have been influenced by that in some way for the many months that I spent in that room? I would certainly have drawn some kind of visual stimulation from that wallpaper. Of course I don't remember any of that, and no way to remember that, but I at least would like to think that that first exposure had something to do with my attraction to pattern.

And I also realized, in looking at that photograph, that that was the first room in which I heard sound and in which I, you know, heard the sound of birds through the window and the sound of my parents' voices talking, and also the first room in which I experienced light. And in the particular photograph the light is coming from the right, so there's a definite sense of the window. I have another photograph taken in the same apartment a few months later where I'm sitting on a chair – on a rocking chair in the kitchen looking at the window, looking toward the light. And the window, which is out of the view of the photo, is very brightly lit, so that side of the photograph has a strong sense of light. And I know from talking to my parents about the layout of that apartment that that kitchen window was on the west side of the apartment, so I was looking west, which I thought was kind of a neat metaphorical idea anyway.

But I've always been attracted to light, too. That's been something that's been very important. I think most colorists would probably say that, and so I think that, you know, there again, the attraction to the substance of what would become inspiration later occurred in the first few months of my life. And so the pieces, *Strange Riddle* series, were all created to address this question of why we don't remember some of the most significant influences on the rest of our lives. They're subsumed in some way, but I think that they must still be there. We can't retrieve them, but they're something that becomes so essential and elemental in our being that they sort of govern and direct everything else that follows. Nobody could ever prove that, but it's kind of a nice idea anyway. It's a rationale for – and a way of maybe coming to some kind of understanding of one's place in the universe.

MR. LYON: That's fascinating, actually. I want to turn back to some simpler questions in a sense. You travel a great deal, and you have now for 30 years, and a lot of that overseas –

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: – a lot of it in Europe and frequently to Japan. Do those travel – have those travels played a part in influencing your art? I mean, you spoke of the Japanese woodcuts, for example – although you could have as easily seen them here in the States.

MR. JAMES: Well, I think that the great thing about traveling has been that when you can travel to all these places and see the art in the places where it was made, it's like kind of living art history. Instead of, you know, opening a book to a picture, you're standing in front of the actual thing in the place in which it was made, and that is – there's nothing like that. You can't get that from any book no matter how good it is. So in a sense it's basically broadened my art historical knowledge and understanding of developments as they happened in various places. Most of my travels have been in Europe and, as you said, in Japan, and in this country, in North America, but there's still a whole lot of the world that I've never seen that I'd like to see, particularly now India and Africa, which I'd like to figure out some way to get to in the next five years or so.

MR. LYON: Well, places with certainly deep textile traditions.

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah, especially – well, both.

MR. LYON: Yeah.

MR. JAMES: And that's part of the attraction, certainly. But I think that those exposures – it's just – I think a more important thing about travel has less to do with the exposures to art and to other cultures and so on, but one of the things about travel is that it makes you more aware of yourself in relation to the world. And so I think on that basis alone it's something that anybody who has an opportunity should do it, and the younger the better. I think there should be a mandatory overseas two-year stint for every child going through every school in this country, to experience other cultures in their environments, in their places. I think it would –

MR. LYON: Yes, it used to be called the draft.

MR. JAMES: It used to be called the draft, but did that work? – because the indoctrination could be a way of blocking the absorption of other cultures and lifestyles and political systems and viewpoints. But anyway –

MR. LYON: I'm going to – let's just change topics because we've just got a few minutes left on this particular disk, and then we can go upstairs and have some coffee. Let's talk about commissions. What are some of your most important commissioned works?

MR. JAMES: Well, I think that the one that stands out most prominently is the commission that I did for the Newark Museum in 1985, *Rhythm/ Color: Spanish Dance*, which was commissioned –

MR. LYON: *Rhythm/ Color: Spanish Dance*?

MR. JAMES: Yeah – which was commissioned by the Newark Museum through its curator of decorative arts, Ulysses Dietz, D-I-E-T-Z, through a grant from the Tiffany Foundation. It was a large piece, and it was the first of what became a series of approximately seven or eight quilts, all under that common title of *Rhythm/ Color Series*. They all had different subtitles. But that one was probably the most explosive of the group, the one that – well, it had an instant sort of integrity to me that the others – none of the others in the series bettered it, I think, although there were other group – really strong pieces in the series, but that one got it right – you know, I sort of nailed it the first time.

MR. LYON: How did that commission come about?

MR. JAMES: I'm not sure how Ulysses Dietz found out about my work, but I think it –

MR. LYON: From your standpoint anyway?

MR. JAMES: Well, I don't know. He just called me up and said, you know –

MR. LYON: Would you make us a quilt?

MR. JAMES: – would I send some slides? They were interested in possibly – they were building – they had a collection of historical quilts, and they were interested in adding to the collection but interested in commissioning new work by living artists. And they already had a piece of Joy Saville, who is a New Jersey – she lives in Princeton – quiltmaker, originally from Nebraska actually. She – they had already purchased one of her

quilts, and so this was the ongoing sort of intention to build the collection with a little more focus on the work of living artists. So anyway, that's how that came about, and that commission prompted a series of pieces that led to other commissions.

Another really significant commission – it was actually the first commission that I did – was for a bank outside of Boston, Waltham Federal Savings and Loan Bank in Waltham, Mass [*The Seasons*, 1980]. The quilt was commissioned for the public – main public sort of customer service area. It's a very large piece that I worked on over a period of about eight months, seven months of which were spent quilting it by hand, so entirely hand-quilted. The quilt no longer hangs in that building – the building was renovated about six or seven years ago, and when they did the renovation, they no longer had a wall large enough to display the quilt, and it was ultimately sold to a private collector by the bank. I don't really know its whereabouts at this point.

MR. LYON: *Konkordiaplatz*.

MR. JAMES: No, not that one.

MR. LYON: No, but I mean –

MR. JAMES: That was another one. Yeah, that *Panorama: Konkordiaplatz* [1989], which I did – that was another series that I did in the late 1980s – was an important group of quilts that were commissioned – well, actually the first one was commissioned for a bank in Phoenix, Northern Trust Bank, and then the next two I did one-off essentially. And another – and the last major commission that was significant was the commission for the Mass. Mutual Life Insurance Company in Springfield, Mass., the big piece that was installed in their boardroom. That's the largest commission that I've ever done, and that, as far as I know, is still in situ.

MR. LYON: And that has been, what, '89?

MR. JAMES: It was in '90 – oh, maybe it was in '89. I think you're right.

MR. LYON: I don't –

MR. JAMES: I should just look it up. It was something –

MR. LYON: The commissions must have had some sort of an influence on you. I mean, getting the commissions.

MR. JAMES: Well, the main thing about getting the commissions was that the money was up front, that I knew I was going to get paid for it, that I knew I could – that I had a means for sort of budgeting my finances that was concrete as opposed to speculative. And so that was – I think that was the most significant feature of those, plus the affirmation that came with knowing that somebody was willing to spend X amount of dollars for a piece of yours before you even created it. So I think that's, you know –

The downside of commission work is that you're creating – in each of these cases I did preliminary studies that were very detailed. They were sort of like doing the quilt in miniature, only in gouache, and in a sense the creative work had been done before the actual work started. So that's the drawback to a commission like that. The actual work is an attempt to reproduce as closely as possible the preliminary mock-up, which was already done. And that, you know – it made it a little less of a process of discovery than the average work would have been, because most of the time I didn't have a preliminary to work from and so it was more spontaneous.

MR. LYON: So really it didn't change your work, having a commission – I mean, other than giving it this –

MR. JAMES: Well –

MR. LYON: – artistically.

MR. JAMES: I think in a few cases that the commissions prompted developments that shifted my work at that point in time. But I think most of those tie into the strip-pieced sort of construct and don't depart too dramatically from it.

MR. LYON: We're at the end.

[Audio break.]

MR. LYON: I need to do the announcement here. This is David Lyon interviewing Michael James in the artist's office in Lincoln, Nebraska – his home office – on January 5th, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is picking up on what's essentially the fourth disk, the second session of questions, in which we are talking about Michael's artistic philosophy, in a sense. And I think the place to start is to ask you, where do you get the ideas for your work?

MR. JAMES: That question is not on the –

MR. LYON: Yeah, it is.

MR. JAMES: Where?

MR. LYON: It's right here. "Where do you get the ideas for your work?"

MR. JAMES: Oh, I'm looking at – well, you know, where do I get the ideas for my work? A lot of the ideas are generated by the work itself. You know, you're working on one concept or you're working on one piece, and you start thinking about different other ways that you could approach the same imagery or the same idea, and that leads you into attempts to rework it in another way. Then, you know, you encounter some new possibility that you haven't opened up before, and you pursue that. So in that sense the work is self-generative.

But, you know, I get a lot of ideas from the things I read and from exposures in the world around me and from other art, as most artists do. And I think that – I have to say that there has been some sort of consistent elements in my art that underlay pretty much everything I do, and one of those is the interest in pattern that I mentioned earlier that resurfaces continually in my work, and that's a kind of essential element anyway that threads its way through all of my work. But I get ideas from – you know, I get ideas from all sorts of sources: from music a lot, from theater a fair amount, from – as I said, from stuff I read.

MR. LYON: Well, ideas – it's a big word. For such a small word it's a big word, because even going back to work that one could say is entirely about color and pattern, but they're not.

MR. JAMES: Entirely – you know, right.

MR. LYON: There are these themes moving through them about the ephemeral versus the lasting. I'm thinking to a great extent of *Panorama: Konkordiaplatz*, that whole group, the [glacier] group.

MR. JAMES: Well, they were about a particular place and my responses to that place that involved space and light and sound and movement and experience of nature that was metaphysical – it was physical in one sense and metaphysical in another sense. And I think that a lot of the work that I was doing in 1989, including those *Konkordiaplatz* pieces and a piece called *From the Mountaintop*, were all songs to nature in a sense.

MR. LYON: Did they coincide with a shift in your own sort of religious or spiritual experience?

MR. JAMES: I think I could say that they might have coincided with my making peace with my lack of belief in any kind of traditional religious system and my conviction that rational thought was a better – rational thought as supported by empirical evidence -- a better guiding principle, I suppose, in one's abstract belief system. And it did coincide, too, with my sort of first experiences with Buddhism, reading Buddhist philosophy and beginning to look seriously at Buddhist art, which I did at that period in time. In the 1990s I did quite a bit of yoga, and that informed my outlook, because of course there's always a dimension of spiritual practice in yoga that I certainly explored and experienced in the 1990s.

MR. LYON: It seemed like – you know, as someone who knew you a bit, it was a time in which you also sort of apprehended your own mortality.

MR. JAMES: Well, that's true, and I was thinking a lot about mortality at that point in time. Curiously, I've stopped thinking about it a whole lot. I used to think a lot about how short life was, or is, and I used to think a lot about the unpredictability but inevitability of one's end. And it preoccupied me for many, many years, I think especially during the years that my son was dependent on me, on us, and somehow I seem to have let go of that in some ways, at least I don't dwell on it anymore. I don't really even think about it very much.

So I don't know if that represents some sort of acceptance or some sort of coming to terms with it, but at any rate, I guess another aspect is that I'm just too busy. There's only so many hours in the day that I have, and I don't have enough time to think about things over which I have no control.

MR. LYON: That's very good. That's pretty Buddhist in a sense.

MR. JAMES: I guess, yeah.

MR. LYON: Well, going into – now, also still staying in the realm of ideas, so to speak –

MR. JAMES: You know, I wanted to say one thing, though. If this ties – I don't know if this can relate to that question about does religion or a sense of spirituality play a role in your art – is that what the previous question sort of was?

MR. LYON: That's what we just did, yeah.

MR. JAMES: Because I did want to say that my religion really is art, and I've believed in the transcendent power of art much more – for a much longer period of time than I ever believed in the transcendent power of the belief systems of organized religions, such as the one that I grew up in. And my belief in that transcendent power of art has never wavered or never failed me, at least in the sense that it's offered me a way of achieving a sense of balance in life. And so I just wanted to throw that in, because people have – I've read, you know, people denigrating that idea of turning art into some kind of religion as an affectation of the elite middle class, but experiencing it on sort of the level that I have experienced it over the years as a maker has made clear to me that it does have a capacity to – art-making that is – to allow an individual to come to terms with both the rational world and the irrational world, and I've used it that way. So I don't feel a need for any other kind of more conventional belief system.

MR. LYON: Thank you – [inaudible]. [They laugh.] The last of the rational humanists.

At the same time, it seems to me that your relations with organized religion, particularly before you moved here – you joined the Unitarian Universalist Church in Providence, as I recall, and in fact helped direct the music program there as I recall.

MR. JAMES: I was director of a program called The Arts at First Unitarian for a couple of years, and it was my own invention essentially. It was just a series of performing – literary and performing arts series that was short-lived because it lost money, but that really represented an effort to bring national names in those areas to Providence, to an intimate space in which there could be really close artist-public contact. And we brought in people including Robert Pinsky, and Donald Hall, and Anonymous Four, and the Orion String Quartet, Awadagin Pratt, and a number of other groups and performers over that two-year period. And that was a neat thing to do. I mean, I don't – we associate ourselves with Unitarianism more –

[END OF TAPE 3 SIDE A.]

– that is an antidote to the mainstream sort of – how can I describe – well, just an antidote to the mainstream, which I think tends not to question enough, that it's generally too accepting of both authority and also the status quo. I've never been too enamored of the status quo.

MR. LYON: Well, which takes us right into questions about political and social constructs in your work. I mean, you're an abstract artist –

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: – so there's a sense that they're not necessarily overt – or are they?

MR. JAMES: They haven't been until this point, but frankly I've reached a point where it seems more necessary now to use my art – it's not to make overt commentaries on political situations but I think to – what I'd like to do is provoke discussion and thought that is directed at, or connected to, political or social issues. And one area particularly is this business of the prevalent crisis in agriculture, in family farming particularly – the demise of the family farm that's been going on for so many years and that is definitely a political issue in this part of the country, but something that I've been interested in for a long time anyway, even before we moved here, I guess because I subscribe, like many Americans, to this romantic notion of, you know, settlers and pioneers and people engaging with the land and building dreams around the land and providing for a civilization through their exploitation of the land, you know, ideas that have always sort of been germane to what it means to be an American.

And what has got me somewhat fired up right at the moment is the business of – the increasing poverty in rural America. In fact, here in Nebraska we, according to the *New York Times* several weeks ago, have the dubious honor of having within our borders the poorest county in the nation, which is Loup County, Nebraska – sort of north-central Nebraska -- and also one of the highest crime rates in the nation right now, due in large part to the problem of methamphetamine production and the pervasive problem that that represents in rural America. So what astounds me is that in a Republican state that is so – that is so staunchly and aggressively Republican, this statistic – you know, this little detail of having the poorest county, of having one of the highest crime rates in the nation could exist. And so I thought, well, it might be a good idea to use my art in some way to direct people's focus to these issues, not make political art but make – but create art using themes and images that would hopefully provoke discussion and stimulate some kind of reflection on the irony of – that these problems represent.

MR. LYON: That's a tall order.

MR. JAMES: So I've started playing with some ideas that I've been developing imagery for, and they're really still

in the incubator stage at this point, so I don't know where they'll actually go or how successful I'll be. And I may not be very successful because frankly I'm not a political – very political person. Although I have, you know, pretty strong convictions politically and socially, I'm not an activist and I never have been. So I have to just – I feel at this point I have to find a way that works for me to use this kind of imagery, and it's too early to tell whether it will bear fruit or not. But I think I've got some interesting images, at least at the outset, and we'll see what happens with them.

MR. LYON: Well, that's good. Something beyond "cows on crank."

MR. JAMES: Yeah, definitely.

MR. LYON: Okay, that brings us up to the questions about your working environment.

MR. JAMES: Well –

MR. LYON: It's changed now. I mean, when you were in Somerset, you managed to build one of the world's most marvelous fabric studios.

MR. JAMES: It was a nice studio, definitely. That was a great studio that we added on to our home in 1990. We actually started in 1989 and moved in in 1992, so it took a while to get it done. But it got off the ground thanks to the second NEA grant that I got, and it certainly wouldn't have been possible without that support. And I worked in it for a little under 10 years. Well, actually – eight years actually. But it was a great space and it was an ideal studio, but no artist's work is totally conditioned by the space in which it's made. You can make art in lots of different contexts.

MR. LYON: Well, and you have.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. So now I've gone to a much smaller space than I had there and much less well –

MR. LYON: Your home studio space you're speaking of.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, my home studio space.

MR. LYON: Well, let's just describe it physically. It's what – is it in a basement or a split-level?

MR. JAMES: Well, yeah, this is a basement space essentially, but it's a walk-out basement, as many of the homes here are. So there are large enough windows.

MR. LYON: And it's what, like a seven- or eight-foot ceiling –

MR. JAMES: Yeah – it's not an eight-foot ceiling.

MR. LYON: – compared to 20-some feet –

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: – in your old studio.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, or 15 or so feet that I had before. The light isn't great in here. We have to have an artificial light on all the time when I'm working, which I never had to have on in my previous studio. It's a much smaller space square-footage-wise, and now that I'm working with assistants, it does get cramped in here when there are four of us in the studio.

MR. LYON: Well, that's part of your working conditions too.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: You now have up to three assistants?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, since I came here I've learned –

MR. LYON: To the university.

MR. JAMES: I learned very quickly that – because in the first year that we were here I got no work done at all in the first academic year. I completed almost nothing. I think I finished one piece maybe, but it was very, very little work. And in the subsequent year – or in that first year I learned that I would – in order to keep up with production I would need to have somebody working for me. And happily I learned about a program that the university ministers called UCARE, which is an acronym for Undergraduates in Creative Research

[Undergraduate Creative Activities and Research Experiences]– I can't think of what the exact words are, but in any case it's a program that is supported by a major corporation – it happens to be Pepsi, whose soda machines – pop machines -- are all over campus exclusively – that that provides funds to place undergraduate students in research projects with faculty.

And for two years now I've applied with – each year with two students, and in both of these last two years have been awarded grants that fund – that pay the students to work with the faculty person. So these two students that – now at this point it's been four students; I have two active and two from the previous year – have both years provided me with a total of 20 hours a week of labor at Pepsi's expense, essentially – the university's expense, and has been a great, I think, educational tool for them and also practical tool for me to advance my work. And I also had a graduate student the first – the second half of my first academic year and then through my second academic year, which was last year, and through this past year. Actually I take it back, only through this past summer, through the summer of 2001 –

MR. LYON: Two-thousand-two.

MR. JAMES: – a graduate student, Leah Sorensen-Hayes, who worked for me as my grad teaching assistant and research assistant, and I used her primarily in the studio, although I used her at school also in the classroom, but primarily I used her in the studio, and the quality of her work was so excellent and her skills coming into it were already so advanced, as she is a quiltmaker and had decided to study in the graduate program in our department so that – specifically so she could study with me. Once her graduate work was completed at the end of the summer, she was no longer – she has since got her degree – I realized that I needed to keep her, so I started employing her out of pocket and get a – I get about 12 to 15 hours a week out of her.

So altogether it varies from about 35 to 40 hours a week of other sets of hands helping me to construct my pieces.

MR. LYON: And your home studio, you have, what, a large workbench or worktable?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, we have three sewing machines set up in there and a large workspace that's about – covers an area probably six feet by nine feet that is basically the main worktable. I feel like I could use about twice as much space as I have now for the number of people that occupy the studio part of every week. When it's me alone, it's fine, but – actually, that said, it isn't fine, because I don't have enough wall space right now because the pieces that I'm currently working on are largish. I tend to always work – I've always tended to work large. And I made a resolution a year or so ago that I wouldn't work small because I was in much different quarters and the market was such that small works might move faster. I just – I have to work at a certain scale. It's just a natural sort of fit that I don't find that I achieve the level of expression that I'm after unless I have a certain sort of scale coverage in, you know, sort of –

MR. LYON: It's been a long time since you've made a big quilt, but you've made things that –

MR. JAMES: But this – yeah –

MR. LYON: But there's something about that that informs the scale of the work.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I think I want my work to at least have a dimension that is embracing that the viewer can confront and feel a real physical relationship that I don't think you get with a small, you know, one-foot or two-foot, or even three-foot piece. In any event, I just work – I just feel that it's a better field size for what I have to say.

MR. LYON: So working conditions, just the little technical stuff. You've got what, three Bernina sewing machines?

MR. JAMES: Mm-hmm.

MR. LYON: They're all Berninas. You have had a relationship at one time with Bernina.

MR. JAMES: Well, my wife used to be a Bernina dealer in Massachusetts when she owned a fabric store called the Fabric Studio in Swansea, Massachusetts. So she sold and serviced Bernina sewing machines, so it was natural to – Bernina Sewing Machine is a Swiss company that has made a big push over the last 15 years into the quilt market. You know, and it's a very high-end – all the machines being sold in this country today are foreign machines. There's almost no sewing machine industry left in the United States, so the machines are all being made overseas by – largely by foreign companies and then sold and distributed by – well, distributed and sold by subsidiaries in this country. So if I wanted to buy an American machine, I couldn't.

MR. LYON: And you have one high-end iron, I noticed.

MR. JAMES: That's also a Bernina product.

MR. LYON: Oh, is it? Okay.

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, it's good quality in the top-end tools.

MR. LYON: And you've had these for quite some time. You've had some –

MR. JAMES: Well, I bought a whole series of Bernina sewing machines. This one which I have now I've had for, I don't know, five or six – well, maybe close to 10 years or a little less, but it's a very good machine. We do a lot of intensive sewing that's repetitive, and because the work is so labor-intensive, there's a lot of it and these machines hold up really well.

MR. LYON: That's good.

MR. JAMES: If I had my druthers I'd have a better studio – you know, a bigger studio with bigger wall space and better lighting, but for the time being it's probably fine. I may build another studio. There may be one more building – major building enterprise -- in our future. You know, we've talked about, you know, if we stay here long-term, which looks like the case now, buying a rural property and building a house that would be our final and last sort of project house in the sense that we would design it to our needs specifically as two artists working side by side, so that we would have two studio spaces and pretty much a minimum of other living space, because our lives are focused more on our work now and less on family than before.

So I think we'd like the connection to the natural world that living in a rural setting would offer that we don't – well, there is a dimension of that even here in the city because we are so close to rural –

MR. LYON: Well, you're on the edge of cornfields, literally.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, you're very close to it, and there is a –

MR. LYON: And there's a lake out there.

MR. JAMES: – lot of wildlife, yeah, just outside our door with the lake there, but I think I'd like to live in a place where, when I went outside, I didn't hear the roar of Main Street traffic as we do here almost 24 hours a day, and there wasn't the lights of the city to interfere with, you know, with the star-filled sky at night. But we're not very far from that, that's for sure. We could certainly live contentedly here for quite a few years. But I think I sort of would like to have another really good studio somewhere down the line.

MR. LYON: Now, do you have a studio at the school as well?

MR. JAMES: I don't really have a studio at school. There is no space. I work there, though, in my office, both in my office where I work at the computer and at the printer, which is in the classroom studio behind my office where I teach. So in a sense when classes are not in session that does become an adjunct studio.

MR. LYON: And execution studio of some sort.

MR. JAMES: Well, it's – yeah, I do a fair amount of creative work there because a lot of my creative work now is being done digitally. The actual manufacture of the objects that incorporate the fabrics that were created and designed there is more functional or hands-on building of the pieces, and that aspect of it I feel I can easily delegate that to other people because it is busywork. It's just skilled labor, manual labor, and I did it for close to 30 years myself, and I have no problem giving it out at all. I would be happy for the rest of my life if somebody else can sew my pieces.

I get nothing spiritual out of – well, I shouldn't say that. I get something very deep and strong out of touching fabric. I certainly like the processes of sewing, but I don't need the processes of sewing to feel fulfilled as an artist. I do need the creative part, and when that's in short supply, the time for dreaming and then for taking those dreams and giving them visual form – which I happen to be doing now largely through digital media – without that I'm pretty miserable, and that has been a problem in the last couple of years because the academic year tends to overwhelm you with work that's dictated by the exigencies of faculties and colleges and academic programs and so on. And I've been heavily involved in committee work, both in my college and at the university level.

And so all of that eats away at the time that I get to do creative work, but when I get to do it, it is the most fulfilling thing that I do, no doubt about that, as the last couple of weeks we've been on Christmas – on end-of-the-year break -- between the fall 2002 and spring 2003 semester has proven, because I had about 10 days of very productive and private creative time that I absolutely loved, because it felt like my experience of days and weeks and months over the years that I worked as an independent maker not affiliated with any institution. And I think that I'm, at least now, more optimistic that I can continue my output in creative work production and also, you know, balance it with my obligations as a full-time faculty member of this university.

MR. LYON: It seems like you're moving more towards an atelier model in a sense.

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, I like that idea. I think that for Leah particularly – less so for the undergraduates because the undergraduates have their –

MR. LYON: They are doing the scut-work.

MR. JAMES: They know when they start that it's only for two semesters; it's an academic year. And then in the second year of the UCARE program, the students, those undergraduates, those same undergraduate students, do their own project, and they do that project under my supervision, but they're self-directed and sort of self-propelled in the second year. They don't work in my studio; they work on their own. And that's the end of it usually at that point, but in the case of somebody like Leah, her experience working with me will definitely have an influence on her career as a studio artist as she develops that. Now that she has her master's and she's spending – she has a studio and she's working on her own.

MR. LYON: Well, you're effectively serving as a mentor for her in some respects.

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah, I think definitely. And I like that role, and one of the reasons that I decided to accept this offer to come here and participate in this – and become a member of this department -- was that I felt that I wanted to impart, in a sense, to young people the knowledge that I gained as an artist over the 25 years that I worked independently, and I find that that's really satisfying and fulfilling. And I sort of feel, you know, it's not – I don't want to make it sound like some kind of altruistic motivation, but I do feel like I have had a good – you know, a really – I've been fortunate in having a long and steady and successful career as a studio artist, and I would like the opportunity to help to pave the way for other people to have that, especially young people.

MR. LYON: Just for the record – I realized we haven't done this – you came to teach – you came to the University of Nebraska when?

MR. JAMES: I came here in the middle of 2000. We moved here at the end of May of 2000, and I began as a senior lecturer in the Department of Textiles, Clothing, and Design.

MR. LYON: Which is in the college –

MR. JAMES: In the College of Human Resources and Family Sciences on the East Campus of the University of Nebraska in Lincoln – the East Campus being the former – well, it's still part of it – the Ag [Agriculture] Campus. And the college itself, Human Resources and Family Sciences, that's part of a land-grant university – was originally the College of Home Economics, still thought of today as the college of home ec, and like most land-grant schools in this country, the textile programs were always in the home ec department, and those that still have textile programs, it's usually where they are. A few have moved into the art department, but a number of others have dissolved their textile program. [In August 2003, the college merged with UNL's Teacher's College to become the College of Education and Human Sciences.]

In any case, we still have one, and it's a hybrid department in that we have three, sort of, branches of textile study: textile design, textile science, and merchandising. There's also a textile history component that is connected to the International Quilt Study Center, which is really the main reason why I was asked to come here. The International Quilt Study Center was set up in – it was inaugurated in 1997 as an institute – a center of study that is focused on a collection of quilts that was given to the University of Nebraska Lincoln by Robert and Ardis James of Chappaqua, New York, both former Nebraskans. Robert James was from Ord, Nebraska, and Ardis – A-R-D-I-S – was from Lincoln. Her family owned Wagey's Drugstore in Lincoln, which is still a functioning drugstore, no longer in that family but –

And the Jameses, no relation to me – curious coincidence, my father's name is Robert James also – they started collecting quilts in the late 1970s, early 1980s, and I met Ardis James then. She took a workshop that I gave at the Brookfield Craft Center in Brookfield, Connecticut, I think in 1980. And that was just at the beginning of their interest in collecting quilts. They have family quilts. And the Jameses became good friends and patrons and collected my work. They acquired over the years somewhere around a dozen pieces, mostly fairly important, substantial pieces. And they gave – anyway, they decided to find a home for their collection, which had reached, you know, a total of over 1,000 quilts by the early 1990s. And they sought out a number of museums and institutions, one of which was the University of Nebraska Lincoln, and were satisfied that the University of Nebraska Lincoln seemed most committed to investing in the collection in the long term to a degree that would assure them its visibility and accessibility to the public.

So they gave the collection of just under 1,000 quilts in 1997, but now today in 2003 numbers a little over 1,200 quilts, because they've continued to finance additional acquisitions that we continue to make, including some really important objects. The quilt that we got last year for the collection was made in 1867 – just after the Civil War, in New York – I think in Brooklyn, New York – and it's a quilt that at auction in the early 1990s went for the

highest price that's ever been paid at an auction for a quilt. The Jameses bought it afterward and then gave it to the collection. And the name of the quilt eludes me at the moment but it's a really great post-Civil-War era quilt [The *Reconciliation Quilt*, made by Lucinda Ward Honstain].

MR. LYON: And your position with the Quilt Center is –

MR. JAMES: Well, my position with the Quilt Center right now is that I'm a faculty fellow of the Center. I served on the board of the Center from its inception, and that was my real initial connection with the University of Nebraska Lincoln, so from 1997 to 2000 I was a board member of the – an advisory board member of the Quilt Study Center and came out here annually for meetings and so on, so I knew about the programs. And the thing was that I had already, in the 1990s, begun to look at academia as a sort of next step in a sense. I had started to get – to feel some – I started to feel the limitations of the type of teaching that I had been doing for over 20 years, which was workshop teaching where I go to a place and teach a two- or three-day workshop, sometimes a five-day workshop, and really never more than that, although a few exceptions were cases where I taught for two weeks, but that was fairly rare.

So I would be teaching these workshops that were mostly color and design workshops all over the world to groups of people that I would likely never see again. And while I think I made a contribution that was fairly important in the quilt world by doing that, it was limited, and I never – I knew that I would never, or very rarely ever follow – ever see anybody develop over a long period of time – ever have an influence over a long period of time on a particular person's development – on a student's development. So I had already started to think by the early 1990s that I might want to teach at the university level, because it would give me the opportunity to participate in somebody's – in a student's growth as a designer, as an artist over a period of time, and also, you know, give me an opportunity to share at a deeper level the things that I have learned and experienced in my career as a practicing studio artist.

So I was looking actively at – in the mid-'90s I began sending out resumes in response to positions that I was reading about in the College Art Association and listings in various other places, and I think the Jameses might have gotten wind of that somehow. I can't remember exactly what the circumstances were, but in the spring of 1999 I was here for a board meeting, and I was approached by a member of the board who asked if I might be interested in coming to teach here, and that was the beginning of my association at that level with the university. So they did extend an – they did give me – you know, offer me a position as a senior lecturer in the Department of Textiles, Color, and Design, and I accepted it and we moved here.

MR. LYON: That's a real radical change.

MR. JAMES: It was totally –

MR. LYON: I mean, both in terms of geography and –

MR. JAMES: It was a change in every single aspect of our life. It was very difficult in the first year; it was terrifyingly difficult, I would say. It was emotionally a huge strain, because we were giving up everything about our lives, and we had lived our entire lives on the East Coast except for – I mean, in the southeastern Massachusetts area except for the three years that we lived in upstate New York while I was in grad school. So we knew that area intimately, but we were both ready to live somewhere else.

It was time to live somewhere else, and this seemed as good a – well, you know, I've traveled all over the world. There are a lot of great places in the world and pretty much everywhere I've been, even the most mundane places, there's something to like once you discover it, and sometimes it takes a lot to discover what you can't see if you're just passing through or what you can't experience if you're not staying put for a while. And so I knew that all of the basic fundamental things that we needed were here, and so it was a big adjustment, but we've adjusted, and it suits us in most respects.

MR. LYON: One thing that must seem very different is through all those years that you were working as a soloist studio artist, your wife, Judy, who is also a trained artist, was running a business basically that provided a certain level of security, and since you've been able to come here –

MR. JAMES: The tables turned. [Laughs.]

MR. LYON: Well in a way, yeah. I mean, that must have some real impact on you and your work too. And we don't have to talk about it if you don't want to, but –

MR. JAMES: Well, what do you mean? I'm not sure that you –

MR. LYON: I mean, I've been watching Judy's work blossom, and it's very exciting.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: I mean, she's a really terrific artist, you know, and that has to be at some level both inspirational and daunting. I mean, I don't know how it works.

MR. JAMES: Well, I think it – I'm very proud of her development as an artist, and I think it's great that she's had this opportunity. She decided to get a master's degree, and she did it in my department, in Textiles, Clothing, and Design. She got a master's this December – December 2002 -- in textile design. And I think that in all the years that she had a business or that she worked in the home-sewing business -- because she worked for somebody else for many years – she did creative work, but it was never artistic creativity in a sense. She was making clothing, her own mostly, but it wasn't – it wasn't the kind of original design work that she's doing now.

So while it was fulfilling, not to the degree that it is now, and I agree that she has blossomed in many respects thanks to being able to do this. And I think it's great, and I hope that she continues to be able to advance her work. I expect she will. She's also a good teacher, so I hope that she's able to continue teaching. She's done teaching in the last couple of years as a grad teaching assistant for Wendy Weiss, my colleague, and has taught surface design and weaving, and this next semester we'll be teaching a color unit in the same visual literacy program that I teach in, which is a inter-departmental program in which three colleges invest faculty in leading a foundation – what is essentially a foundation program for all visual arts majors. So Judy will be actually employed by the art department in the next semester teaching a color unit in this program. So, you know, it's more experience for her, and it's a challenging program, but I think it'll – all the teaching that she's done has also reinforced her work as a studio artist.

MR. LYON: Well, just having both of you focusing on studio art and education – I mean, you have essentially the same type of focus now, both of you –

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: – in a way that perhaps you've never been able to.

MR. JAMES: I suppose in some ways we're the quintessential '70s couple – you know, that we were both, you know, liberal Democrats from the East who both heavily subscribed to the feminist dogma that was sort of etched into stone in the early '70s. And we've had a fairly equitable long-term marriage relationship and have pretty much shared all responsibilities. And while I think that's wonderful, I do sometimes think how nice it might be to be an old-school male artist who had a wife who took care of everything – you know, the sort of – I don't know, in some ways the Philip Guston model, you know, or the Picasso model, you know –

MR. LYON: That's even worse.

MR. JAMES: – whose women partners facilitated their, you know –

MR. LYON: Their own enslavement?

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Well, yeah, but they also facilitated the male artists' careers. But I'm very, you know, happy in this relationship; I think we both are and we wouldn't want it otherwise. So that's a misguided fantasy, that's for sure. And anybody, male or female, would love to have a kind of facilitator who made their lives – their creative lives –

MR. LYON: A mommy?

MR. JAMES: Yeah [inaudible] person. But that's a dream; it will never happen again. It was another time and another culture.

[END TAPE 3 SIDE B.]

MR. LYON: Okay. This is David Lyon interviewing Michael James in his home office. It's in Lincoln, Nebraska on the 5th of January 2003 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is session four.

And we are going to talk about – let's start with dual perspective of the man who for years worked outside of academia and now works inside of academia. And I guess I'm curious – we've talked a lot about what it's meant to you personally. Are you still sort of the only quilt artist working in an academic setting?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I would say that I can't think of anybody else who I would consider a disciplinary peer who is working in academia, at least full time. I think several teach occasionally in academia as visiting artists or as adjuncts, but for the most part I don't think there's anybody that I can think of who is teaching full time who is a quilt person. You know, of course there's a lot of fiber artists.

MR. LYON: Yes.

MR. JAMES: Most of the named fiber artists that you can think of are full-time academics, from Jane Lackey to Jason Pollen to Lia Cook to – well, a lot of people. So some recently retired people like Cynthia Schira and Warren Seelig, and there's people like –

MR. LYON: Well, it seems like a lot of artists who work with a strong and obvious message in quilt medium are often guests at symposia and academic lectures and that sort of thing, and I'm thinking, for example, of Faith Ringgold.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, but Faith Ringgold isn't a quiltmaker.

MR. LYON: Yeah, that's true.

MR. JAMES: And doesn't, I don't think, associate herself with the quilt world that much. She associates herself with the New York art world. So the objects that she makes happen to be quilts, but their association is a little bit different, at least in her public's mind, I think, as well as in her mind, although I think that the tradition of American quiltmaking certainly interests her.

MR. LYON: Oh, yeah. Well, we're talking about you anyway, not – and I guess I'm kind of curious too. Obviously it's meant to change the way you work, talking about going from being a studio artist to being an artist working with assistants, not that that couldn't have been the case when you were a studio artist, it's just –

MR. JAMES: I did actually pay someone for three years to sew for me, and that person happened to be my mother-in-law, who, between 1987 and 1990, sewed strips for me and made strip panels for me.

MR. LYON: And her name is?

MR. JAMES: Florence Dionne.

MR. LYON: D-I-O-N?

MR. JAMES: N-N-E.

MR. LYON: D-I-O-N-N-E. Okay.

MR. JAMES: She was sort of an assistant in that sense, although she didn't work in my studio; she worked in her own home. But I did pay her to do that work, which was essentially busywork, and, you know, she understood that and I understood that, but it was work that had to be done impeccably well, and she did it well, so that worked for three years and that also helped at that point to augment my production, to give me more time to do the actual design development and construction of the quilts themselves, which I always did myself. So, you know, I feel like I've put in my time as far as that goes, so if anybody has a problem with the fact that I am no longer the hands-on, you know, builder of each quilt that comes out of my studio, I am the foreman who runs the operation, and I do make all of the creative decisions, and that's satisfying –

MR. LYON: And it's the university context for you to provide a – I mean, we've talked about what it's meant differently from – more than how it structures your time, and also in the tools that it makes available to you. But having a community of artists, in particular student artisan, fellow – and your colleagues, maybe it's too early to tell, but does that make a difference for you?

MR. JAMES: Definitely. And I would say that one of the things that's been most important to me in coming back to academia after nearly 30 years absence –

MR. LYON: Hiatus. [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: Hiatus. Is that the critical – level of critical discourse is much higher and much more active than it ever was for me in the quilt world – than it is in the quilt world, where there is almost no critical discourse, which I think is its primary problem. So –

MR. LYON: And you've been saying that for some time.

MR. JAMES: I've been saying that really pretty much most of my career, but it seems to fall on deaf ears. And then, you know, there are all the – the predictable reasons for that. But I think what's been great for me – the best part of my experience so far here, back in the university, is serving on a graduate committee, not just for textile artists, which I've done, but also for students in other areas, including painting and printmaking and ceramics, because there is constant questioning and critical dialogue that's taking place between faculty and students that's very enriching for me. I get a lot out of it, even though most of it is directed toward the students'

work or the students' development.

That kind of dialogue prompts a lot of self-questioning and self-examination, and I think that that's been really good for my work, that it stimulated quite a lot of reflection on my part. Not that I didn't always do that, but I think it's been a bit more intense, and given the learning curve that I've faced the last few years, it's been much more concentrated, and I think consequently it's had a much more visible and immediate effect on my work, so that the timing for me coming here was great in a lot of respects, that the – I came to the options that digital technology made available to me at a point in time when I, once again, was pushing my work to some kind of transformation, to some kind of new dimension that it hadn't broached before, and the critical dialogue that I've been engaged with with students has helped me to kind of re-engage with some of the ideas about art that I, you know, first encountered in undergraduate and graduate school. So I think it will, in the long run, have – it will have had, I think, a really positive influence on my work.

MR. LYON: Do you think – does it make you wish that you would –

MR. JAMES: No.

MR. LYON: – gotten a teaching job right out of graduate school?

MR. JAMES: No. No, actually I think I'm a much better instructor at this level now, given the world experience that I've had. So I think the timing was right in that respect too.

MR. LYON: Do you think it's better for your art?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, obviously. I mean, I don't think I could have – well, it's hard to say what would have happened had I done that, but the way it's worked, it's been really good, and I think that if I'm in this situation for 10 years or so, I think it will have ultimately a really positive impact on my work, because I'm starting to feel, after two full years and now into the third year here, that I am going to be able to manage studio production and also full-time involvement on the university scene. And, you know, so I feel optimistic about that at this point.

MR. LYON: So, going back in time, can you describe for the record your experience teaching non-academic workshops?

MR. JAMES: Well –

MR. LYON: I know it was your bread and butter a long time.

MR. JAMES: I always enjoyed doing that teaching, but as I said earlier, I was frustrated that I didn't get the opportunity to see people develop over time. Certainly I was engaged a lot of the time with students who weren't necessarily – had no creative – had limited creative ambition, let's say, or whose creative drive was very narrowly focused on a particular technique or particular style of work, and I think what was the biggest frustration for me through all those years was that I was always limited to teaching basic, really, foundation elementary levels, sort of start-up design and color. I could never get involved in more advanced –

MR. LYON: Technique or subject –

MR. JAMES: – technical or conceptual work because, you know, the time frame was too limited and the skill level of the student was too limited. That said, those students, who were mostly all adult students, women 99 percent of the time, and quilt amateurs, were enthusiastic to a degree that I rarely see among undergraduates.

MR. LYON: [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: You do see it among graduate students, but you don't see it among undergraduate students, or rarely anyway. And so, those people all wanted to be there. They were paying good money to be there, and they all wanted to be there. They were eager to learn. They absorbed everything you gave them and never seemed to run out of enthusiasm. And in my current teaching, with these undergraduate students especially, it's very difficult to sense any enthusiasm on their part, for the most part. There were a few exceptions, but a lot of the students right from the get-go seemed to be putting in their time, and their primary thought seems to be getting through the course and getting on to the next one. And they are certainly not taking advantage of everything that they have at their disposal; they're not taking advantage of me for the most part. And that's a bit frustrating, although I've had moments that have been so – a few moments that have been so satisfying – affecting -- that it's made it worthwhile. And I know that a lot of kids won't reveal, or can't reveal, the effect that you're having on them, but you're having an effect.

MR. LYON: Yes.

MR. JAMES: It will – you know, at some point maybe some day they'll appreciate it and maybe even be able to

tell you that, but I suppose to do this, especially in a public institution like this, where you're dealing – where your student body is 99 percent from the state – you know, they're almost all Nebraskans, the undergraduate student body here – and a lot of them are from rural areas and have had few exposures, I think that, you know, to expect more at that point is unrealistic. And I think that I've – I've come to terms with that. I'm not taking their disinterest personally, as I did at first, you know, but I know that I'm a good teacher, and I think I've got a good program for these students, and I've seen, you know, huge development in groups of students over an eight-week period – I'm talking about my freshman-level students – that, you know, reinforces the sense that I'm getting through to them and that they're learning something.

MR. LYON: You're teaching – your freshmen students are taking visual literacy class essentially, right?

MR. JAMES: And I teach the color component, so I'm teaching only color. I'm teaching also upper-level courses, graduate-level courses as well. I taught a graduate seminar in our department called "Design Perspectives and Issues," and I'll be teaching it again next fall, and the first round that I taught a year ago – ended just a year ago this fall – involved graduate students from the textile department and also from the painting department and ceramics department, so that there was a really good interchange between the colleges through that class, and it culminated in an exhibition that was a really good student exhibition in the Textiles Gallery in our department, and included a whole range of work, from conceptual work to sculpture to fiber to drawing and felting and so on, so it was a real diverse collection of pieces that got quite good notice in the local newspaper. So, yeah.

MR. LYON: Okay. Well, I mean, it sounds like you're – once again, no one knows where to put you. I mean, you're in textiles; you're firmly in –

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I guess I –

MR. LYON: – textile design, but yet you're able to cross over.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. The – most people sort of think that – they connect me to the art world, and the artists, for example, that I work with who are in the art department here, don't quite understand why I would be in a former home ec college, and it's a circumstance that I don't have any control over, but – and then the people in my college don't fully understand the nature of creative work of this sort. I think everybody across the board, except for the people directly associated with the International Quilt Study Center – well, maybe that's not true. I think, certainly in the art department and some other areas, people really do wonder whether quilts are worthy of being considered –

MR. LYON: Art.

MR. JAMES: – an art medium –

MR. LYON: Capital A.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Yeah. But that's their problem. To me it's not a problem. I mean, I don't have a problem with that, but, you know, I know the answer to that question so I just carry on.

MR. LYON: Okay. Let's move on to what I think of as sort of a hardball question. What do you see is the place of universities in the American craft movement, and specifically for fiber artists?

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, the broader question is, what is the place of American universities in the education of artists and designers? And probably, you know, we could go back to a guild model or an atelier model like a Renaissance model if we wanted to, and the students could get the same kind of training. I think that the –

MR. LYON: That's why the art and design schools were set up to begin with was to get away from that, in the 19th century.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. And I think – I've been actually reading about this whole question, and it doesn't – the reading I've been doing, which includes James Elkins's book *Why Art Cannot Be Taught* [James Elkins. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2001] – recent book – and another one whose title I can't remember right now. But in any case, you know, it does raise the question, what are we doing educating all of these people who statistically have relatively little chance of making a living doing their art?

You know, I'm in a unique position in a way because I'm also – I'm in a textile design department whose focus is apparel design more than anything else, and the textile design students that I teach for the most part are apparel design majors, and so I'm sort of trying to emphasize formal design issues just to keep them sensitive to the importance of those concerns in any kind of design. I'm not expecting to send out into the world a lot of textile designers, although I'd like to prepare students for the possibility that they might pursue careers as repeat-pattern designers, let's say, for the textile industry, either freelance or employed by a design studio

somewhere. I also – more in the years ahead I'll be working more with graduate students in the Quilt Studies program. I'm going to be teaching a distance course, the same design perspectives and issues geared to quiltmakers, that will be a studio course.

MR. LYON: So there will be a studio course. That's great.

MR. JAMES: Well, in the sense that it will be people working in their own studios and will be doing all of the sort of interchange digitally and electronically, but the focus will be on quilt work as creative practice, and I'm going to be teaching this seminar again next fall, "Design Perspectives and Issues," and I've already come up with a concept for the seminar, in which the graduate students who participate will choose a work from the International Quilt Study Center's collection of over 1,200 quilts, and will do something in response to it. That something could be anything. It could be a performance, it could be a sculpture, it could be a textile, it could be a clay object or vessel, it could be, you know, some conceptual response, but they're going to do something in response to an object from the collection.

I think – I wanted to connect the students to the collection as a resource, and I like the idea of asking students to look very closely and deeply at something from art history and do some contemporary response to it. It's not an original concept, but I think it's one that is a legitimate pedagogical strategy, I think, for engaging students in new creative work or some sort of new area of research that they might not otherwise have –

MR. LYON: Well, is this an advantage of a university, say over a craft academy, as it were?

MR. JAMES: Oh, I think there are lots of, you know, the craft schools that I've taught for, like –

MR. LYON: We'll come to those actually in – actually, I'm interested in universities – I mean, the university role here. You know, where does the training of, say, a fiber artist fit into the university concept?

MR. JAMES: You know, again, I'm in a department that's not training fiber artists, generally.

MR. LYON: The university concept, of training of other artists? Okay.

MR. JAMES: It thinks of itself as training designers. The design program that I'm in, which is small, is, as I said earlier, focused on apparel primarily, although we have some students who are more interested in textile design, and that involves weaving components or surface design components. But the thrust of the department itself is toward the apparel industry, and we send out students into the world who go to work in retail areas or who go to work for catalogue retailers, wholesalers, and who design for major corporations like Wal-Mart and Penney's. You know, the reality is they're not going to have high-end apparel careers if they went to design school in the Midwest. They would have to have gone in New York if they – although we've placed some students with companies in the past on the East Coast and elsewhere in major metropolitan areas.

So I think that – what I hope will happen in time, as I've been here for awhile, is that I will attract students who do want to pursue textile design study with a focus on the quilt –

MR. LYON: Studio art?

MR. JAMES: Well, the quilt as a medium. And, see, the problem with our department is we don't offer an MFA through our department; we only an offer an MA or MS. And so if somebody wants to come here and major in textile design toward an MFA, they have to go through the art school, and we have a program set up where they can do that. We have one student right now who is doing that, who just spent her first semester here. And she's going for an MFA, and her MFA will be through the art school, but she has her studio space on our campus in one of our buildings, and she has two of our faculty on her committee along with two faculty members from the art department. And I think that we'll be getting more students like her. We'll never be able – I don't see that we'll ever be able to offer an MFA through our department, so it will always have to go through the art department, which then ultimately would suggest that the logical evolution down the line might be for the faculty who teach textile design to migrate to the art school. And that may yet happen, but I don't want to speculate on how or if or when that might happen, because the vagaries of the economy would certainly have something to do with that and, you know, the vagaries of [unintelligible] –

MR. LYON: The Johnny-come-lately in the department, suddenly after having been in another place for a long time, it could be very difficult.

MR. JAMES: Well, yeah, it's – there are areas that there are too many variables to speculate at this point. For the time being, I think it's fine, and I do – I did come here to work with the International Quilt Study Center that's in this department. We're about to start a capital campaign, well, this month to raise the funds to build a building, which is already in the design stages, and if we can house the collection, I think – when I say that I mean so that we can have gallery space, so that part of the collection can be on display at all times, which is not the case

now.

I think we can turn this into a truly international center of study of quilts, and I think that, you know, my career here could go more in the direction of the quilt study center in the long run, and, you know, that may happen.

MR. LYON: Can you offer your thoughts on the formation and philosophies of various art and craft media teaching programs? I mean, I don't know how familiar you are with – well, you are. I mean, you told me about, for example, the School for American Crafts at RIT that is sort of parallel.

MR. JAMES: You know, but I wasn't in the SAC school at RIT, so –

MR. LYON: I mean, I don't know how much relationship you've had with these sorts of programs within the university context.

MR. JAMES: Well, we don't have a craft program here per se. There is ceramics, but that's basically it.

MR. LYON: I think the Smithsonian is looking for your general comments actually on –

MR. JAMES: I do think that schools like Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] and Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME], Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gaitlinburg, TN] and Pilchuck [Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA] have been incredibly important.

MR. LYON: Well, what about programs within university contexts like, say, PIA [Program in Artisanry]?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, likewise. I think that these schools, Penland and Haystack and so on and Arrowmont, I think have been – how would I explain it; how would I put it? I think that they've been really important in the growth and development of programs like the Program in Artisanry at Boston University, and that went to Swain [Swain School of Design, New Bedford, MA] and New Bedford, and that became the Program in Artisanry at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, as it exists now. I think that those programs saw the viability of craft instruction because it had taken place over so many years in places like Penland and Haystack, and – and, you know, there was an audience for it, and those programs produced enough people who wanted to go on and do further study and get the degree that I think that there's a good sort of symbiotic kind of relationship between those programs and a lot of university programs. A lot of people – Haystack always has undergraduate students from various schools who go there in the summertime to work with other faculty, or even to follow their own faculty over the summer. And so I think those programs have been really important.

MR. LYON: Now, what's your – you've had some relationships, I know certainly with Haystack, I don't know –

MR. JAMES: I haven't taught at Arrowmont or Penland. I visited Penland. I was asked to teach at Arrowmont a couple of times, but at the time they were being so [unintelligible], and I was able to earn so much more in the three-day workshop teaching for quilt guilds, for example, that it just never seemed worth the time. Haystack I taught at in 1997 for the first time, and will teach there again this summer in 2003, and fell in love with Haystack; it's a very special place, and I think I appreciate the atmosphere there that's part of the mystique of Haystack. The 24-hour-a-day studios and the intensity of the commitment of the students who come there, even though for many of them it's their one annual excursion into the craft world, at least intensively. I think it's – you know, it's a special and unique place, and I would like to see all university art departments having that same high level of commitment – that same intensity of activity. And a lot do, but – I don't know if that answers the question.

MR. LYON: Well, I think it does sort of, as much as we can.

MR. JAMES: I mean, those schools have been very important in terms of kind of popular –

MR. LYON: Well, there's something very different, though, between a program that we accept now since the '60s – either MFA programs that – a university is an appropriate place for an artist to be trained, and we could argue that one way or the other. The question is, is it an appropriate place for an artist who works in craft media to be trained, and what are the advantages of it?

MR. JAMES: Well, but you get that. If you –

MR. LYON: How do you go about setting up the kind of program that works?

MR. JAMES: If you want to be a functional potter, I don't know if you need to be in art school.

MR. LYON: No.

MR. JAMES: You know, if you want to make dinnerware, if you want to make, you know, pots and doorstops and

whatever, if you want to make tiles, I don't think you necessarily need to go to art school. You might get some benefit from some design training, but you –

MR. LYON: I think if you want to be a studio artist working in –

MR. JAMES: Well, if you want to use the media –

MR. LYON: – working in craft media –

MR. JAMES: – or some kind of – to some kind of expressive purpose that goes beyond function, conventional or the types of conventional functions that were associated with a particular medium like ceramics or like metals or whatever, then, yeah, I think an art school is a good place to be, because of the critical discourse that it fosters.

MR. LYON: So you're saying that –

MR. JAMES: It also is a place where you acquire a working understanding of the broader art history that preceded what you've done or you're doing or what your contemporaries are doing, and that's something that you're not likely to explore in depth on your own outside of that academic environment.

MR. LYON: Many universities don't include, for example, a jewelry component, for example, within an art school.

MR. JAMES: We don't do that here.

MR. LYON: Or even necessarily a fiber component in an arts school.

MR. JAMES: Right. We don't have that here either.

MR. LYON: Well, I mean, this is a broader philosophical question, I guess. I mean, if you're talking about a studio artist whose – prospective studio artist in fiber, let's say, that is ultimately textiles.

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: In the best of all possible worlds, would that person get an academic education in an art department where he or she would also get instruction in the medium?

MR. JAMES: I'm not sure I followed your question, but I think that a lot of art education today is, at least at the graduate level, is focused on the idea, the concept that drives the work, and that it's assumed that you have a certain level of technical competence when you come into a program. If you don't, you're in trouble. And I've already seen people in trouble because they didn't have the technical skills that the average BFA would have had in that particular area. But I think that the overriding activity seems to be working with students so that they begin to address the issues that are at work in their work, whatever the medium, relative to the art world in general that they are members of. And, you know, ultimately it's the making of people who at the end of the program would be working at a level where they could sustain creative output over an indefinite period of time – a long period of time. And I think that certainly there is some making of future teachers going on as well –

MR. LYON: Oh, sure.

MR. JAMES: – and a lot of graduate students – MFA students particularly -- have that as an ambition to, you know, go into academia. But I think what I've seen is that the overriding focus seems to be on interacting with and creating dialogues with students that will enable them to articulate for themselves and for their audiences, which include the faculties, the ideas that drive their work, and certainly once people understand what those ideas are, they're much more likely to be able to build on them and expand outward from them.

MR. LYON: I think we've probably exhausted that topic.

MR. JAMES: Well, you know –

MR. LYON: Well, I mean, yes and no.

MR. JAMES: It's a very difficult topic in a way.

MR. LYON: It is.

MR. JAMES: You know, there's some question as to what the role of the university should be in the education of artists, that probably always will be, because it comes back to James Elkins's thesis that you can't teach art. Everybody, I think, would agree with that, but you can certainly create a platform on which art is likely to be an outcome by training people in the various technologies of their field, and also by training people in the

philosophic enterprises that – around which that, you know, that hands-on building work takes place.

MR. LYON: It can be in the intellectual disciplines.

MR. JAMES: And another thing is that it's a way of separating from the world so that you can concentrate on one thing. And, you know, you become a student in a program and you dedicate yourself to three years of study of a particular thing in a particular place that's outside of the mainstream of what's going on in the world, that it's a concentrated block of time to really pursue an education in a particular area, and so that has to be beneficial in the long run and in the short term. So I think it's valid, although when I look back at my graduate school education, I've always said that I was paying quite a lot of money for a studio space, so I could have spent the same amount of money or less and had a studio space and done the work, you know, but I'm being facetious in some ways when I say that, because I think that I did get a lot out of the interchanges with other students over the work.

MR. LYON: Maybe that's what graduate school is all about.

MR. JAMES: Sure. Well, you know, all education is self-education and, you know, faculty can only do so much, and if the student isn't willing to be his or her own teacher then, you know, a faculty is limited.

[END OF TAPE 4 SIDE A.]

MR. LYON: What kind of involvement have you had with national craft organizations?

MR. JAMES: Well, not a huge amount. I've been somewhat active in Studio Art Quilt Associates, which is one in my area, and I've been a member, though not too active, of Surface Design Association, and a longtime member of the American Craft Council, although there again I haven't been particularly active in any way other than to –

MR. LYON: Get the magazine.

MR. JAMES: – get the magazine and pay my annual subscription membership fee. I was nominated and named to the ACC artist fellows – craft fellows last year, became a fellow of the American Craft Council, and would actually like to participate more actively, and if and when asked, probably will.

MR. LYON: What about local craft organizations, guilds and annual gatherings?

MR. JAMES: No, I've never really done that – not very much.

MR. LYON: That's fine.

MR. JAMES: Well, actually I used to be a member of the Massachusetts Craft Council – was it? Mass. MCC – Mass. Craft Council it was called -- that John Heller was president of for many years back in the early '80s –

MR. LYON: Yeah.

MR. JAMES: – late '70s, early '80s, and I was a member of that and participated in exhibitions and so on related to that. And that was important because it connected me to a small community of like-minded people at a time when I wasn't connected to any immediately-at-hand community, although I've always felt connected to the quilt community in general. So that's about it really.

MR. LYON: Okay.

MR. JAMES: I mean, I go to a lot of quilt things that basically would fall in the category of annual gatherings and have done a lot of lecturing workshops at these events.

MR. LYON: Well, when you lived in southeastern Massachusetts, your home was in many respects sort of a central gathering point for a number of artists from southeast, from Cape Cod and –

MR. JAMES: Well, I don't know if –

MR. LYON: – and Providence, and so people who were in fact your friends.

MR. JAMES: Well, we had a network of artist friends, sure –

MR. LYON: Yeah, a network.

MR. JAMES: – that included people like Randy Darwall, the weaver, and Roseanne Somerson and Alphonse Mattia, the furniture makers, and, you know, Donald Friedlich when he was living in Rhode Island, that we saw socially and participated in exhibitions with and so on.

MR. LYON: That's an obviously less formal kind of organization.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. I was a member when we were living in Massachusetts. I was for many years a member of the Boston Society of Arts and Crafts.

MR. LYON: And you also did some service – if I can step back – I know, chairing meetings for funding –

MR. JAMES: Well, I was – yeah, participated –

MR. LYON: For the Mass. Council –

MR. JAMES: – for the Mass. Council on the Arts, yeah – Massachusetts Cultural Council.

MR. LYON: It is now, yeah.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, whatever it was at the time – Boston Artists' Foundation.

MR. LYON: Also, yeah.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. So I did do some work in the '80s relative to those groups. You know, I had a moderate level of activity, I would say –

MR. LYON: But it was more actually it seems like in service rather than –

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: – than places where you were drawing inspiration or assistance.

MR. JAMES: No, no, definitely – definitely.

MR. LYON: I mean service to the field.

MR. JAMES: Right.

MR. LYON: How did you start exhibiting? And can you remember what those early exhibitions were like?

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, the first exhibits in which I participated, showing my quilt work, were quilt exhibits, the kind of church-hall quilt exhibit that you would – that sort of defines the medium even today. And then I got, in the late '70s, connected with organizations like Worcester Craft Council and the Society of Arts and Crafts in Boston that made possible exhibitions in, you know, in more conventional gallery spaces. And I always participated right from the start in any group show that would have my work.

So there's a long list of places where I exhibited in those early years. I mentioned the DeCordova Museum's show yesterday, "Bed and Board," in 1976, I believe it was, and, you know, things like that, shows that the American Craft Council – American Craft Museum in New York [now the Museum of Arts & Design], the "Pattern" exhibition for one, which I think took place in 1980 or ‘81, when they were sort of in transition. I can't remember if the building was closed for renovation or something, but it was in a different space; it was in the American Craft Museum II space, which was a corporate sort of lobby-level space in Manhattan. And other shows – I was in their "Art for Use" exhibit in 1976, which was shown at the – I think it was '76 – it was shown at the – it might have been later. It was the Lake Placid Olympics.

MR. LYON: That was in '80.

MR. JAMES: Was it '80?

MR. LYON: Yeah.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. All right. So it was 1980, a show they organized anyway that showed in New York and also showed up in Lake Placid during the Olympics.

MR. LYON: So how did you get involved in these shows? Were you invited to them or did you seek them out?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I was often invited. I was in the "Young Americans" show, too, in '79, which was one of the series of exhibits they did over the years called "Young Americans."

MR. LYON: Who did?

MR. JAMES: That the American Craft Museum did in New York. Those were very important exhibitions for me

because, you know, the American Craft Museum still is the premier venue for the – it's now called the – they've changed to the Museum of Arts & Design, I think –

MR. LYON: I believe so, yeah.

MR. JAMES: – recently changed the name. So you know, it's still the premier venue in this country for shows of work in craft media, fine craft or studio craft media.

MR. LYON: Even though – well, of course, the Renwick [Renwick Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC] doesn't do shows that way.

MR. JAMES: No, the Renwick is important, too, obviously, but – the Renwick seems to concentrate on shows culled from their collections –

MR. LYON: Exactly.

MR. JAMES: – as opposed to shows that are curated.

MR. LYON: There's nothing temporary about it, yeah.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: Can you describe your relationship with dealers?

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, I've sold work through dealers over the years. I can't say that I ever really had a strongly positive feeling about dealers, the third party, and recent experiences with dealers have been disillusioning. So I think I would have to say that I'm pragmatic about it; it's a necessary evil. I don't – I would like to have a dealer that I felt cared about my work and was committed to it to the degree that would assume – really assume an active role in advancing my career, but I have not encountered any gallery who is willing to do that or interested in doing that, or who even sees their role as doing that.

MR. LYON: I think it's very rare in craft media.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: I mean, I think, only a handful.

MR. JAMES: So I guess I would like a classic relationship – you know, the classic artist-gallery relationship of the '40s or '50s or '60s.

MR. LYON: That people imagine existed.

MR. JAMES: Well, yeah, yeah. It may not have been always totally satisfactory to either party, but I think I – now, that said, I have had four, I think, solo shows in Switzerland at the Galerie Jonas in Petit Cortaillod –

MR. LYON: Yeah, okay.

MR. JAMES: Petit Cortaillod.

MR. LYON: Can you spell that please – the gallery?

MR. JAMES: C-O-R-T-A-I-L-L-O-D, Petit, small – Petit Cortaillod, which is near Neuchatel in the French-speaking western part of Switzerland.

MR. LYON: Right.

MR. JAMES: And I showed there at least four times, and those shows have all been very successful. They were one-person shows. I was the only artist in the gallery, in all three rooms of the gallery. No gallery in the United States has been willing to give me that kind of air time, let's say, and I really haven't been willing to settle for less. So, consequently, my major solo shows have been overseas, with the one exception of the show at the Museum of the American Quilter's Society [Paduach, KY] in 1998 or '99, a 25-year retrospective of my work that included about – I think in the neighborhood of about 30 quilts from the mid-'70s to the present.

MR. LYON: And those weren't quilts for sale principally.

MR. JAMES: No, that was – exactly, that was not a commercial venue.

MR. LYON: And has Galerie Jonas done well for you at those shows?

MR. JAMES: Yeah. It's always, you know, either anywhere from half to two-thirds of a show would sell, so they were very well received in Europe. So I have quite a lot of work in European private collections. There isn't the bias against quilt work among the intelligentsia in Europe as there is here. There's not –

MR. LYON: Well, they don't have the folk tradition either.

MR. JAMES: Exactly, so that they don't associate it with "women's work," which we do in this country: If my grandmother can make it, it can't be art, or, if my grandmother made it, it can't be that special, or – that's sort of the attitude here. And, you know, it's –

MR. LYON: Who are you speaking of as having that response? I mean, potential buyers? Art buyers? Gallery owners? Critics?

MR. JAMES: All.

MR. LYON: All.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. The fact is that most of the work I've sold over the years – and I've sold most of my work, most of it I sold myself directly to the client with no go-between, because my clientele often came out of the quilt world.

MR. LYON: Right. And in fact many of them were your students in workshops, right?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, and people I encountered at lectures, whatever, and often times it was people who didn't habitually go to galleries. And so I think that there was always a little bit of tension with galleries who knew this fact and didn't really want to invest the time and effort in representing me, because they felt that I had a direct line to the clientele. I may be wrong – you know, somebody might dispute me on that – but that's been the sense that I've had over the years.

You know, I asked one gallery once if they would be willing to make a commitment to my work and I would give them exclusive rights to show and represent me, and they were not interested. So that was it. I mean, I didn't really need them, I mean, except that it would have freed up some time for me to get back to my work.

MR. LYON: Well, it would take you out of the market.

MR. JAMES: And now the general art market is so, you know –

MR. LYON: Dismal?

MR. JAMES: – dismal that I think that in the craft area, selling high-end items is a major challenge right now. And since my work has gone up in value over the years, naturally, it's reached a level at this point that means it has an even smaller, you know, range – you know, audience – clientele, I'd say.

MR. LYON: It's not a discretionary purchase for very many people.

MR. JAMES: No. Exactly. So I actually, at the moment, have more quilts on hand, stored, than I've ever had at any point in my career. And I've just been –

MR. LYON: But you've been making fewer.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I've been making fewer, but I've also been selling a lot fewer, and that I think is just a general economy – everybody I know is selling a lot less than they were a few years ago.

MR. LYON: Let's talk about critical reception, as in how has your work been received over time on the part of the critical community?

MR. JAMES: Well, I think it's always been well received. I think I've been treated fairly. I think that – I have no misgivings about that. I think that my work has always been well explained or considered in articles that a number of people have written about the field or about –

MR. LYON: And those articles have almost always appeared in craft media publications.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, the textile magazines or the quilt magazines. You know, I think that – I'm not going to relate this just to my work but I think it's true for all of American craft. The level of critical discourse and the level of critical writing that these media deserve has not been forthcoming in this country, and that where you find a lot of it in the mainstream art world, you find relatively little really critical writing in the craft world. But I say that knowing that –

MR. LYON: When you say critical –

MR. JAMES: Well, I think that it's changed greatly. There's been in the last few years a much better level of writing, critical writing, in publications like *Surface Design Journal*, and *American Craft* certainly has had some critical, you know, writing over the years, but it tends to be sporadic in that magazine, because I think that often the reporting on the work of different artists tends to be more descriptive or documentary rather than critical.

MR. LYON: Oh, yeah.

MR. JAMES: So I think I would actually embrace more critical writing about quilts, about my work, about other quilt artists' work, about other fiber artists' work in general. You know, fiber is still thought of as a soft medium; it's a touchy-feely medium. It's a woman's area predominately, and women generally resist being critical and don't like to think of themselves –

MR. LYON: How are you using the word critical? Critical as in finding fault with or critical as in criticism, which is sort of a weighing of, in many cases, the philosophical – underlying philosophical issues.

MR. JAMES: I mean, you go to a – you open a magazine or a newspaper and you read a review of a play or a film – you know, this is what this film is about; I didn't like this film because, yadda, yadda, yadda, yadda, or this is what this play is about, and this play failed – it succeeded in this area, or this actor succeeded here and that actor failed, and this is why I think that actor failed. That kind of writing doesn't exist in the fiber world, and you can't find it in *FiberArts* and you can't find it – you can't find it in *Surface Design* either and you can't find it in *American Craft*, I don't think.

MR. LYON: Okay.

MR. JAMES: Maybe a little bit, but not much, because if you have anything – the philosophy seems to be, "if you have nothing good to say, don't say anything."

MR. LYON: I think that's quite the philosophy.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Well, I wrote a very critical review some years ago of a show that I saw at a small gallery in Connecticut that I was asked to review by *FiberArts* magazine, and I wrote a very critical – it was – I felt that it was a fair review; it spoke positively about aspects of the work, but it also spoke critically about other aspects of the work that I thought were problematic, and why I thought they were problematic, and the review did not get published.

MR. LYON: We've had the same experience.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, yeah. So there's definitely a fear factor, and I think it's that partly – a part of it is, you know, we don't want to shoot ourselves in the foot. If we start getting negative, if we start saying things – you know, this is not working or that is not working, then it may look like we don't know what we're doing or that we're not good enough to compete at a level that – so let's only look at the good side, or let's only look at the superficial things. Let's only report on the facts as I see them and, the facts, ma'am, you know. The pot is red, it is 12 inches high, or the weaving is 72 inches long and it is made of linen and cotton, and the maker produced 24 weavings for this exhibition, you know, and the theme was the seasons. And that's not critical writing.

MR. LYON: No, it's the basic background before you launch into the criticism, presumably. So I'm guessing that the question about who are the most significant writers in the field of American craft and why is their writing meaningful to you is probably moot. [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: Well, I have to say that I think there has been some good writing, and I think that I can – I think that yours and Pat's articles about individual artists' work have posed some interesting questions about specific media or specific works in an artist's field. And I think that people like Lois Martin, who's also written for magazines like *American Craft* and *Surface Design Journal*, and probably *FiberArts*, too –

MR. LYON: Yes, she does.

MR. JAMES: – has done some really excellent writing, not so much critical writing but exploratory writing about the nature of craft and the nature of the specific disciplines that she's addressed, including textiles. I think we're really – and there's more – actually, there is some critical writing – good critical writing in the works now, that new series that has been published by Telos. The first book was called *Reinventing Textiles: Tradition and Innovation* [Sue Rowley, ed. Winchester, England: Telos, 1999] a compilation of essays that begin to, you know, bring together critical writing about textiles, not so much about individual artists but about the media in general, I think are good and positive. Their most recent one is gender – related to gender [Janis Jefferies, ed. *Reinventing Textiles: Gender and Identity*. Winchester, England: Telos, 2001]. I can't think of what the actual title

of that volume is, but I think that it's probably at the point where that will start to happen now, and I certainly think, anyway in the quilt world, it's badly needed.

MR. LYON: Well, there are fields I think that do better, certainly.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: Better than fiber in general, certainly better – I mean –

MR. JAMES: Well, jewelry does, I think, and I think ceramics does, too.

MR. LYON: And glass.

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah. But fiber, you know, especially quilts –

MR. LYON: Especially quilts.

MR. JAMES: – and until the quilt makers start getting – start being willing to question aesthetic decisions and question aesthetic strategies in their medium, they're never going to advance.

MR. LYON: Do you find – when you do find that rare piece of criticism, do you find the work written by other artists more meaningful or more useful to you?

MR. JAMES: Not necessarily, no. No, I think the writing –

MR. LYON: It's a field in which almost everybody –

MR. JAMES: I don't think of Lois Martin as an artist, although she makes art. I think of her as a writer first, and I think she's done some of the best writing related to quilt media that I've read. It happens that quite a few makers do write about the field, but that's true across the board. I don't think that writing is always the best. In some ways they can't – it's too subjective; they may be too close to it. They can't see it as objectively as somebody who doesn't have their fingers deep into it physically.

MR. LYON: Well, you write criticism too.

MR. JAMES: Well, I don't write so much criticism – what I would call criticism.

MR. LYON: Well, you tend to write polemics. [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: That might be closer to the truth.

MR. LYON: Statements. Well, essentially artist statements – opinions on the field.

MR. JAMES: Well, I've written a number of catalogue essays related to different exhibitions that I've either juried or curated, and I use those sometimes as places to vent a little, as I just did with a show that I just juried in Japan and for which I had to write a catalogue statement, and was rather disillusioned with the quality of the work in the show, and address this exact issue of the dearth of critical discourse around quilts. And I did say that quilts would never advance as an art form unless people were willing to engage in this. But, you know, the quilt world is somewhat unique in that, unlike ceramics, where most of the major practitioners –

[Audio break.]

MR. LYON: This is David Lyon interviewing Michael James in his home office – and we'll change here actually and walk next door to the studio about halfway through this session – in Lincoln, Nebraska, on January 5, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

And we were going to pick up talking about – well, we're talking about criticism, and I'd said that you had, in fact, written some yourself, and you were talking about how you had in fact written a critical essay for this exhibition in Japan, that just happened, and you started telling us what you said when the last tape went off.

MR. JAMES: Well, one of my complaints with the quilt world is that the work is feeding off itself too much. It's so focused on itself – the people who are doing nontraditional work still seem only to be looking at other quilts that they're – you know, it becomes this kind of incestuous recycling of known techniques and imagery and visual strategies, and I think that until they really start looking intently beyond the confines of the quilt world and the fiber world that they are always going to be restricted to repeating the past and repeating what's already been done, the overly familiar. So I think I was feeling that I needed to prompt people in that direction. And also because in quilt shows, even so-called art quilt shows, you see certain styles that are promulgated by certain

well-known names in the field mimicked by people who, you know, are hanging out shingles as quilt artists, or who are students of or protégés of certain makers, who shall be nameless in this context.

MR. LYON: But in fact you're sort of an anomaly in that no one is trying to repeat you. [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I had never taught how I do – you know, I've never taught my work. I've never taught my techniques, let's say, in the quilt world. I've taught design courses, and I've taught color courses primarily, and most of my courses have been non-fiber-related. We didn't even use – we used paper and paint.

MR. LYON: They weren't classes in how to make a Michael James quilt.

MR. JAMES: No, but I've done some sort of hands-on fabric manipulation workshops in the last few years, but those, too, are still focused on design problems and don't present my techniques or the techniques that I'm currently using, but rather encourage people to use their techniques to solve the visual problems that I've proposed. So consequently I think they end up doing work that is more their own; that reflects their own sensibilities and skills, strengths and weaknesses. But I think that some other people teach a technique, which happens to be their technique, and I think that that dooms the student to doing work that looks imitative, whether it's intentionally imitative or not.

MR. LYON: Or the technique subsumes the subject matter.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Well, I saw quite a bit of that, actually, of techniques subsuming subject matter in that show that I recently juried, and so I think that it's something that the quilt world needs to look at closely and talk about and write about.

MR. LYON: Do you think the same is true in other aspects of fiber arts?

MR. JAMES: Well, maybe less. You know, the fiber art world is a big, broad area of which the quilt area is a smaller microcosm, so –

MR. LYON: It could be worse; you could be in basketry.

MR. JAMES: Well, there's some good basketry being done today.

MR. LYON: I know there is, but there's very little being written about it.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, that's true. Well, I think that the recent attention that the Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York] exhibition "The Quilts of Gees Bend" has created, I think – may be positive in the long run for quilts because it certainly created, for the first time since the last Whitney show, you know, a level of discussion of and looking at the quilt world that I think has – in media that are not fiber media – in art media and news media that rarely focus on this medium, so I think that that's –

MR. LYON: Or even aware of it.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, or even aware of it. So I think that that's good in the long run.

MR. LYON: Which, if any, of the specialized fiber media have played a role in your development as an artist?

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, I have to say that one of the most important influences, really, on me as an artist was Diane Itter – as a fiber artist, you know, as somebody who was a fiber – somebody whose position in the fiber art world in the early '80s was something that I aspired to and looked up to. And I did get to know Diane, and we became friends and corresponded over a 10-year period before she died. And I think that I've – I always connected to her as a colorist, certainly, and I always appreciated her critical take on the fiber arts, which she was very articulate about, both in her talks and her teaching and also in her writings. So I think she was really –

MR. LYON: I asked the question the wrong way. It's a great answer and I'm really glad to learn that. The question I actually was trying to ask was were there specific publications, magazines or newsletters or journals, in the fiber media that sort of played a role in your development?

MR. JAMES: Well, yeah. I mentioned *FiberArts*, and more recently *Surface Design Journal* for the last 10 years that I've subscribed to it. Those magazines have been important primarily because they are a way of keeping on top of what's happening in the fiber world in general.

MR. LYON: Even though they're running two years behind in reviews, or whatever?

MR. JAMES: Well, maybe not two years behind, but maybe six months. Are they as far as – sometimes maybe.

MR. LYON: By the time it comes out.

MR. JAMES: But I think that both those magazines have had some good writing in the last five or six years that I would put in the category of critical writing and that have raised provocative questions about the nature of fiber arts and its place in the art world. And I hope more of that continues, but they've been important to me because I haven't been able to find it in the quilt world.

MR. LYON: Now we ask one of these big soapbox questions, which is, where does American fiber rank on an international scale? Is it moving in any obvious direction?

MR. JAMES: Well, I definitely think the fiber art world – textile art world in general -- is very strong in a number of places, not only here in this country but in England and in Germany and in Australia, and I would say, at least in terms of innovative contemporary work, that those four places are – those four countries dominate on the international scene. Scandinavia you could probably –

MR. LYON: I see a lot of strong Polish work too.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, but the work that I've seen from what was Eastern Europe always seems 20 years behind the time – not always but often. And certainly people like Magdalena Abakanowicz, you know, and a few others that are definitely at the forefront of contemporary fiber art, but in some ways were anomalies. But I think – in general I think certainly the United States is on par with – there are artists working on a par with the best artists in those other countries. Some might argue the reverse, that the American fiber artists are really at the forefront and that everybody else is two rungs down the ladder.

MR. LYON: You said you would argue –

MR. JAMES: Some might argue. I wouldn't, but some people might argue that.

MR. LYON: You travel more than most people.

MR. JAMES: I think that there's some really good work coming out of other places. I've seen some really good work in the last couple of years from those countries.

MR. LYON: It's probably too broad to ask the question, is fiber moving in any obvious direction? The question might be, is the quilt world moving in an obvious direction?

MR. JAMES: No. In fact, I sort of wish it were; that's the problem. I think that the quilt world – I'd like to encourage it to demand more of itself, but, you know, the largest percentage of people interested in quilts are interested in the history of quiltmaking and are interested in the populist folk art sort of aspect of the quilt, and not interested particularly in the quilt as innovative, expressive media. For those people who are, I think many of those are handicapped by not having had extensive formal art training.

MR. LYON: Sort of limit the chance of critical discourse, do you think?

MR. JAMES: Sure. And I think it also just limits the chance of –

MR. LYON: The vocabulary –

MR. JAMES: Aesthetic development – at least the development of original work. It all brings it back to the question that you asked earlier about –

MR. LYON: University trained?

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: Or art school trained?

MR. JAMES: But, you know, they are also – I'm fully aware that in saying that there would be a constituency that would argue against the necessity of having an art school education to do creative work, and so, you know, they would be entitled to their viewpoint. I think that I would not have been able to do any of the work that I've done over the last 25 years if I had not gone through formal art school education, so everything I've done has been conditioned by that. And I see evidence now that students in art school programs, whether in universities or other art school situations, are developing as artists at an accelerated rate that the self-taught individual might eventually do, but it would take a whole lot longer to do it. So maybe my complaint is with the pace of change in the quilt world, that it isn't fast enough; that it's happening, but it's not fast enough.

MR. LYON: Glacial.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Well, it's taking – it's still moving in fairly small steps, and I think that when I look at the show like the recent "Visions," ["Quilt Visions 2002"] San Diego 2002, that's currently hanging in the Oceanside Museum of Art in the San Diego area, I lament how disconnected a lot of that work seems from the mainstreams of contemporary fiber art.

MR. LYON: Not even just from contemporary art, but from contemporary fiber art even?

MR. JAMES: Right.

[END TAPE 4 SIDE B.]

MR. LYON: I think one might categorize as being somewhat more conservative than the contemporary art world even.

MR. JAMES: Maybe, but you know, there are some people who are doing really wonderful exploratory work, like for example, Jane Lackey or Lia Cook or people like that, Cynthia Schira, and you know, people like that.

MR. LYON: Well, we should take a pause here and move over here to your studio, yeah.

[Audio break.]

MR. LYON: Okay, so here we are in your studio, and it's kind of a gray day, so we have the lights on and so it – which makes everything a little too yellow, but we're here so that we can talk about where your work is moving now. You know, do you see a specific line of artistic development that you're going to follow, problems you're going to solve?

MR. JAMES: Well, yeah, I have a couple of things. One thing I want to do is explore repeat pattern surfaces, sort of very traditional textile design, essentially using motifs that connect somehow to the thematic issue that I'm involved with in the particular piece or particular series of pieces. And right now, one of those series is the one that I referred to yesterday that dealt with – that deals with Japanese imagery, either drawn from the sort of catalogue of Japanese design or inspired by sensibilities evident in the Japanese aesthetic.

MR. LYON: So we have here a piece of fabric with mulberry repeat –

MR. JAMES: Well, it's a ginko leaf.

MR. LYON: Oh, it's ginko. Sorry.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, yeah, it's a repeat pattern, but essentially a foliage pattern using ginko leaves. It's a sort of all-over pattern essentially, square repeat –

MR. LYON: Square repeat on about a one-foot –

MR. JAMES: Well, actually, it is a half-drop, but it's not so clear because there's a big cut-out in the middle that's taken out, so –

MR. LYON: The cut-out.

MR. JAMES: The cut-out is a photographic image that I took in a traditional Japanese ryokan in Nikko last year – two years ago when I was there the previous time, against a sliding screen, the shadows of the late-afternoon lowering – or the shadow cast by the late-afternoon lowering sun against the screens of the – the shoji screen that separated my room from the outside. You know, it's a motif, sort of a classic vision – at least tourist vision of classic Japanese elegant and spare beauty. So those are two motifs that I think are kind of iconographic, really, relative to Japanese art design.

Now on the other – the other panel is something else again because it's so completely different from that foliage panel, and in it I'm playing –

MR. LYON: Can you describe it just a little bit?

MR. JAMES: Well, I – to describe it, it's – how would you describe it? It's actually –

MR. LYON: It looks like a corrosion pattern.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, it – yeah, it looks like it's something –

MR. LYON: Like a metal corrosion pattern.

MR. JAMES: It's actually the wall in one of the Tokyo – a wall that I photographed in one of the Tokyo metro stations, a subterranean wall in an area that was undergoing rehab. And I've posterized it, in a sense, in the Sophis CAD program that I work in, and reduced the colors, and then changed the colors and added color that wasn't there in the original to make it look less photographic, and also to sort of amplify the sense of the distressing – the distressed surface, that corrosive – corroding surface as a backdrop for imagery that will, I hope, suggest a kind of narrative; in this case an image that's taken from a late-19th-century Japanese newspaper that shows a geisha being accosted by at least one – it's a little –

MR. LYON: Ambiguous.

MR. JAMES: – ambiguous whether she's being accosted by two men or one, but –

MR. LYON: There are two men in the –

MR. JAMES: – one may be protecting her. But it suggests a drama, a kind of narrative – a dramatic narrative line that I want to amplify, and my problem at this point is I haven't figured out what other imagery to use to do that, and that's where I'm at. So this piece is very much in the beginning stages. [The eventual work, titled *The Nature of Things*, was exhibited at the Snyderman-Works Galleries in Philadelphia in April 2004, and from there entered the private collection of Gary and Rebecca Stevens.] I've been photographing –

MR. LYON: This panel is what, about four by five feet, or –

MR. JAMES: Yeah, it's about – they are about close to 60 inches square, each panel, so the whole piece across is right now about – close to 110 inches anyway.

MR. LYON: Oh, this was two – okay – panels.

MR. JAMES: They would be two panels side by side. There's one quilt – one quilt would be – eventually they will be connected, but I have to figure out what – I need to do other things in that right-hand panel that will visually connect to this and that will sort of dramatically connect to that image that was laid into that surface in Photoshop, that image of the geisha from the late-19th-century Japanese newspaper.

Now see, I've reworked that wall panel in a number of different ways. That panel there is several layerings in Photoshop of the wall with some figures from traditional Japanese ukiyo-e prints, including this one by Hokusai, a detail of the – sort of an erotic print from the 19th century. And, you know, at this stage it's just a fabric panel. I don't know how I'm going to use it, but I've been interested in – have been photographing a lot of walls over the last couple of years in my travels, so I've got a whole collection of digital files of walls.

MR. LYON: These were done with film cameras but then scanned in –

MR. JAMES: No, they were done with digital cameras.

MR. LYON: Okay.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, of walls in Europe on a trip last summer to Switzerland and Germany, and walls that I photographed in Japan this fall. And I've been sort of compiling this – actually, it does include some images that were scanned from slides, from film images that I took over the years – the last few years, because I've been collecting these without really sort of knowing how I would use them in my work, and only now they're beginning to enter into it.

I'm still a little ambivalent about using photographic imagery that's so close to the original photograph. I like breaking down the photographic images into components that are no longer readable as a barn door, as, you know, that image is, so I may not actually use it so that it's identifiable as an unhinged barn door. But then again, on the other hand, I like the juxtaposition of that barn that I photographed a few weeks ago here in Nebraska out – about 30 miles outside of here, and the field of cornstalks –

MR. LYON: Right, broken stalks after the harvester has gone through.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, exactly. I like that juxtaposition. Just texturally it works, and coloristically it works, and it sort of says – begins to say what I want to say about the demise of the small farm in this part of the – in this part of the country.

So most of what's on the table now are components of these different series, the third being the – the –

MR. LYON: Is this your childhood wallpaper?

MR. JAMES: – the *Strange Riddle* series, yeah, and this is a panel of the childhood wallpaper that –

MR. LYON: But it probably never looked that good.

MR. JAMES: Well, you know, it's interesting, because when I printed it the first time last spring – late last spring -- I invented the colors, because I was working from a black-and-white photograph that was taken in 1949, and I guessed at the colors. And in – during the summer when we went back to Massachusetts and visited family, I brought a panel of the fabric as I had created it for that quilt where the background was a kind of sort of gray-green color – I think I actually have a piece of it. Let me see if I can – yeah, here it is. And I showed this to my mother, and I said, "Does this mean anything to you? Do you recognize this?" And she looked at it and she said, "Yeah," and she said, "in the apartment." And then she named – she said her bedroom, and I said, "Yeah," and she said, "on Collette Street." Well, Collette Street was the tenement house that we lived in – that I lived in from – you know, from before I was conscious of where I was through undergraduate school, and that wasn't the house in which this apartment – their first apartment was. So when I told her which bedroom it was, she immediately recognized it, and she said, "But it was pink and maroon." So that's where the change came.

And that's one of the beauties of this technology is that I can change the color instantly at the touch of a button. You know, it took me 10 minutes to – well, maybe a little more, but basically it was an easy job of changing all of the colors in the piece. So that's something that wouldn't really be feasible or possible in another medium.

Now, I haven't done anything with this in the last month and a half or so because I'm sort of stalled in this series. I had one idea of what I would do to continue it, and I did some preliminary work digitally, and ultimately decided that that wasn't going to work; it wasn't what I wanted. So I don't know where the *Strange Riddle* series is going to go, although I fully expect to continue to do some work that has an autobiographical aspect.

Oh, here's a wall – this is another kind of wall image that I printed some time ago that I may eventually use. I don't know.

MR. LYON: Okay, so this is very strong –

MR. JAMES: That's a corrugated metal wall.

MR. LYON: Yes, so it comes out very striated with false colors and –

MR. JAMES: Yeah, exactly.

MR. LYON: – sort of this strident green, aqua –

MR. JAMES: Yeah, yellow.

MR. LYON: – and buttercup yellow. [Inaudible.]

MR. JAMES: Yeah, yeah. And it will probably show up in something at some point, you know. [This eventually became a component of a 2003 quilt called *Abstraction No. 2: Circumstance*, sold into a private collection in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, by Galerie Jonas, during the March-April 2004 exhibition "Art Textiles: Two Perspectives – Judith and Michael James."]

MR. LYON: This goes back to your – in 1995 you started – suddenly you wanted corrosive colors and – which this is.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Oh, I can go – I can get very extreme with the color now. I can do incredible things with color at the push of a few keys, so –

MR. LYON: Well, the other pieces we're seeing, though, are actually fairly reserved.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, well, you know, I'm trying to – like with the Japanese work, I'm trying to keep to a certain spirit that, at least to me, epitomizes Asian art, specifically Japanese art, this refinement and elegance and understatement that I think – this happens to be a wall in Japan also, though, but it's almost an abstract image.

MR. LYON: Industrial Japan image.

MR. JAMES: I can't remember exactly whether it was an industrial building. I would say it might even have been a domestic residence. It wasn't this color.

MR. LYON: It's urban. [Laughs.]

MR. JAMES: Yeah – yeah. So – I mean, I don't know that any of this stuff will ever actually end up in a quilt. It may – some of it may, but it was all stuff that I printed going along that –

MR. LYON: Now here's some work with words on it.

MR. JAMES: That's one of the braiding panels.

MR. LYON: Oh, right.

MR. JAMES: You know, for that *Strange Riddle* quilt, and I didn't like the color that I created for this so it didn't get used, but I like the layering of text. And you know, there's another –

MR. LYON: Do you anticipate using text much?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, I do plan to. In fact, I'm now involved with a writer at the university who is in the English department and is a professor in English and a poet. She's also the editor of *Prairie Schooner*, which is the literary journal that –

MR. LYON: One of the longstanding major literary journals.

MR. JAMES: Yes, Hilda Raz is her name.

MR. LYON: Yes.

MR. JAMES: And Hilda, at my invitation, has agreed to participate in an artist/poet project where we work together to each create new work that is connected in some way. And in fact, she's just recently given me a poem that she wrote with this project in mind that I will address in some way – not necessarily interpret, but that I will create a work that is connected in some way to this – this poem that she – and we are thinking along the lines of, if this is successful between the two of us, of trying to build a project that would expand outward and involve lots of different visual artists and poets.

MR. LYON: It's been done.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: You know, it's been done well, occasionally, you know.

MR. JAMES: It's not anything new. Sure, sure.

MR. LYON: My favorite is that Octavio Paz and Manuel Alvarez Bravo.

MR. JAMES: Yes. Well, I think it's a neat – I've always been interested in poetry, and I think it's a neat way to collaborate with somebody whose work I admire, and I felt that this was a good way to get to know that person's work a lot better. And it's actually being – I decided to do this at the instigation – or because of a group called the Contemporary Quilt Association based in Seattle, Washington, which is organizing an exhibit of artist/poet collaborations. And I'm going to – I'm involved in it as sort of a – not exactly curator, but I'm going to be involved in introducing the show at its opening. And Hilda and I, in fact, will both go present at this thing next fall in Seattle. They've – I don't know how many artists they've connected with poets at this point, but probably a couple of dozen quilt artists working with poets to create new work, so I think it's something that at least in the quilt field hasn't been done.

MR. LYON: No, I think you're probably right.

MR. JAMES: Now, those panels are for the Japanese quilt that you're standing next to, and they are two – I'll show you one of them. They're identical images of bamboo –

MR. LYON: Oh, sure.

MR. JAMES: – that will be used as the backing for this quilt.

MR. LYON: That's lovely.

MR. JAMES: And the two of them are just flipped. They're reversed images so that there's like a right and a left. They lean outward from a center spine. And it's just a grove of bamboo basically –

MR. LYON: Very – [inaudible].

MR. JAMES: – a stand of bamboo. And I photographed it in Japan on a trip – not the most recent one – and these were scanned from a four-by-six snapshot.

MR. LYON: Oh, my goodness.

MR. JAMES: Yup. See, that's the other thing, you know. I can take a small – you know, this tiny – relatively small image and expand it to this surface area that is –

MR. LYON: Well, the advantage of that I suppose is that the details abstract as they blow up.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. Well, I've done that deliberately. This could also be done – I mean, so that it was a true photograph at this scale, but I reduced the colors, again, to break it down so that it becomes almost somewhat Impressionistic, I guess, but definitely amplifies the sense of texture.

MR. LYON: Well, without the top and the bottom actually, it reads as a purely abstract pattern.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, definitely. Yeah. It's – you know, I feel like I'm at a new beginning in a way, and I'm a little concerned about getting too dependent on technology, but on the other hand it's a tool, and I feel like I need to maximize it, and I don't see any reason not to. So it seems at least to be serving my purposes now, so for as long as it does, I'll use it.

MR. LYON: Well, you know, the first person who decided to use paints instead of just scratching with a rock on the cave wall probably would have thought, God, what if I can't get pigments, could I ever go back?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, exactly – exactly.

MR. LYON: Well, that probably brings us to wrap.

MR. JAMES: Well, I can't think of anything else I would add to anything I've said. I'm still actually working, as you can see here, a little more conventionally for me. This actually involves some strip piecing, and it's sort of that image – actually, this is digitally propelled, too, in the sense that although this is just pieced silk and wool, the image, which is an abstract sort of geometric – nonfigurative geometric construction of this rich blue, purple, and olive color, and black, was actually a monitor image that appeared on the screen of a computer monitor that I was working on in the New Media center at the university a month or so ago when I was transferring film image to QuickTime to use as a component in a PowerPoint presentation for Visual Literacy. And when we rewound – when we pressed rewind, the image became this geometric figure on the monitor, and I loved it, so I sketched it, and am doing this piece that was inspired by that.

MR. LYON: Digitally inspired.

MR. JAMES: Yeah. It's not at all digital in and of itself, but –

MR. LYON: An all-digital – artifacts of digital technology.

MR. JAMES: It's an interpretation of a digitally propelled image that was a sort of accidental or circumstantial image that resulted when we pressed the rewind button on that monitor – on the reel.

MR. LYON: And here we have strips being assembled here.

MR. JAMES: That's my students who are working on that strip piecing, my old style of work, which I use as a training mechanism basically, although they're probably going to set that aside now, because I've got enough new work for them to do that I won't need for them to be doing that this spring.

MR. LYON: So this whole table of fabrics are all fabrics you've printed basically, almost all?

MR. JAMES: Yeah, almost all fabric that I printed. And I printed a whole lot more that is here, but I've used some of it. And if the quilts weren't all rolled up and nicely packed, I'd take them out –

MR. LYON: No, I understand.

MR. JAMES: – but it's such a pain in the neck to unwrap them and then have to reseal them.

MR. LYON: Now, does this take the fun out of going to cloth shops across the world, or are you still going to?

MR. JAMES: Yeah – no, I don't do that much, but I haven't done that much for years, because once I started working with Mickey Lawler in 1995, I basically stopped buying commercial fabric, except for backing quilts. And so I haven't done much fabric shopping over the years, over the last four or five years, six years now maybe, and I certainly don't expect I'm going to need to any time soon.

MR. LYON: Let's just hope the machine doesn't break down.

MR. JAMES: Well, that's my big concern, yeah. That is a big concern. And there are students using it, and they're

not always as careful in the way that they handle it, so eventually there will be problems in that area, and we'll solve them when we get to them.

MR. LYON: There's no real need – there's not enough need for it to have a second machine.

MR. JAMES: Well, it might get to that point. I hope it gets to that point. I'm going to be incorporating it in the courses I'm teaching this next semester, Advanced Textile Designs, and the best student designs that they create in Photoshop and longhand for repeat pattern will actually be printed as yardage for the exhibition that will terminate the show. And that will only be a handful of students, because I'm going to restrict it to the very best designs. And I'm going to make it very competitive, and they're going to have to engage in a real critical approach to designing and then to evaluating the work. So it isn't going to be democratic, you know, where everybody's going to get a piece of fabric printed, because it's too expensive to do it and the resource is so limited that it has to be restricted.

MR. LYON: It reminds me of a question I did need to ask, which is, do you work on a computer at home on design, or do you do that at the office – or do you take it into the office?

MR. JAMES: I have to say that my laptop is now starting to function as a sketchbook. So I am doing design work here and on the road when I travel that I might once have done as sketches in the sketchbook.

MR. LYON: Well, that's true, and you probably – the Sophis software doesn't run on your home machines.

MR. JAMES: That doesn't, no. The only place I can do that is at school.

MR. LYON: That's a Unix program.

MR. JAMES: Right, right. And I don't – and it's protected. You can't – you know, I can't get that software into my computer. I wouldn't be able to do it.

MR. LYON: Well, if you were to print Sophis they might – as a user. It depends on what their software license is like.

MR. JAMES: Well, it's very restrictive.

MR. LYON: It's very restrictive.

MR. JAMES: Yeah.

MR. LYON: But the idea of your laptop as a sketchbook is an interesting thought.

MR. JAMES: Yeah, in fact, I brought home some sketch work this weekend to try to advance. Again, I might have some time – probably won't but – [laughs].

MR. LYON: Actually, I think you're free now. I think we're done.

MR. JAMES: Oh, well, good.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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