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Oral history interview with Walter
Nottingham, 2002 July 14-18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Walter Nottingham on July 14, 15, 18, 2002. The interview took place in Idyllwild, California and was conducted by Carol Owen 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.

Walter Nottingham and Carol Owen have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written prose.

Interview

CAROL OWEN: This is Carol Owen interviewing Walter Nottingham at the studios at Idyllwild Arts in Idyllwild, California, on July 14, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Walter, where and when were you born?

WALTER NOTTINGHAM: I was born in Great Falls, Montana, December 4, 1930, to Everett Russel Nottingham and Lucy Mary Marceau. We moved to Missoula, Montana, when I was one, and when I was in the second grade at St. Francis Elementary School, we moved to Portland, Oregon, because it was during the Depression and my father's business folded.

In Portland I attended St. Rose Elementary School and was very involved with the church. I became an altar boy and loved serving mass. Once, when I was asked why I was interested in fibers, I said "As an altar boy I was dressed in lace and handled beautiful and fabulous altar cloths, vestments, et cetera. God, the joy of my youth."

MS. OWEN: Was there any art influence from your family?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: No, there was no art influence in my family. My father was an engineer and my mother was being trained to be a nurse when she married my father but never went back into nursing.

My best memories of when I lived in Portland were the summer months I spent with my grandfather, Levi Nottingham, at a special ocean beach town called Neskowin. I loved that man. He taught me the joy of working with tools and the craftsmanship attitude with the many projects we worked upon around the house. I hung out at the beach and loved the ocean. I am certain it was one of the reasons I retired in Hawaii.

My father's business was flourishing in the early 1940s, and he moved our family and its headquarters to Seattle, to be in a port city, since much of his business was overseas with military during World War II.

I attended Blessed Sacrament Elementary School in Seattle and still was very involved with the church, but not too interested in academics, but loved sports, especially basketball.

I started high school at Seattle Prep, a Catholic High School, but transferred to Broadway Edison, where I was on the basketball team.

MS. OWEN: Did you take any art classes?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I took one art class that was designed to teach cartooning. I did okay in the class, but I really wasn't that interested in it. I still was going through high school and doing okay in academics, but I was still more interested in basketball.

MS. OWEN: Did you go to college?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Upon graduation from high school I enrolled at Seattle University, again a Catholic school, a Jesuit school, as an engineering major. Not that I cared that much about the field, but because my father and uncles were all engineers and my father felt I should follow the family tradition. And since he was paying for tuition, that's what I enrolled in.

Halfway through the year I found that I didn't know what I wanted to do in life, but I did know that I did not want to be an engineer. So I dropped out and joined the Air Force as the Korean War was raging, and by leaving college I lost my college deferment.

MS. OWEN: How old were you at this time?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I think 18 or 19.

In the Air Force I went through training at Lackland Air Force Base in Texas and then was stationed in Little Falls, Minnesota, where I met and married my wife, who was the secretary of the base commander, Leone Dorothy Yasgar.

Marrying my wife was the best thing I ever did. Every man should marry a woman who is brighter than he is.

I was later assigned to security service, part of NSA, the National Security Agency as an historian. The Air Force sent me to Germany, near Frankfurt, where Lee, my wife, soon joined me. We had a wonderful four years in Europe, and when we were not working we toured as much of Europe as we possibly could, visiting castles, churches, and museums.

MS. OWEN: What did you do after the Air Force?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: After my stint in the Air Force and upon discharge I still didn't know what I wanted to do, but I knew I didn't want to stay in the military and deal with governmental bureaucracy.

Because of the connection of my wife's family we found ourselves leasing and running a supper club on the Mississippi in Minnesota. It was called the Homestead and it didn't need fixing.

We improved the business and learned much about running a club. One of the things we learned was that we didn't like this type of business, but we were stuck with it until our lease ran out.

MS. OWEN: What did you think you might want to do when the lease ran out?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I really had no idea, but because the Homestead was only open for business in the late afternoon and into the evening, I had some free time during the day and because Lee and I found that we were running this business quite easily, we discussed my returning to college and decided to do that. The closest college was St. Cloud State [St. Cloud State University, St. Cloud, Minnesota]. I enrolled as a liberal arts major with an emphasis in business administration.

Using the GI Bill, I started classes and enjoyed them very much, and I found that I loved learning, and being exposed to so many things that I had had no idea about before.

MS. OWEN: Did you take any art?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: During the year I found I needed a humanities course to graduate. Looking for one that fit into my schedule, I didn't care what it would be; I found one and I enrolled in an art class called Design 101.

When classes resumed, I entered the class and was taken back because the students were in old work clothes and me in slacks and button-down dress shirt.

The instructor was Professor Robert Rief and he presented an extremely interesting slide lecture on the design of various objects and how they had changed over time. His first assignment was to choose any five squares of construction paper and glue them down on a white paper in an interesting arrangement. I looked up at him and I raised my hand, "Any five squares," since they were different sizes? And he said, "Yes." "Any way I want to glue them down?" "Yes." Many weird looks from my classmates. Oh well.

That evening, after the supper club closed, I finished studying my advanced German and took out my five squares, laughing with my wife about this college "assignment." An hour later I still wasn't pleased with my arrangement. I didn't know it then, but I was hooked.

I continued taking art classes as extra credit and worked on my business major. Especially art history was interesting to me, and printmaking.

At the end of our supper club lease we did not renew. I decided I really liked art and wanted to change my major to art and to use my business credits as a minor.

Since I never thought of myself as an artist-an artist is one who's in art history books and in museums-I made certain I would get a teaching certificate as part of my degree so that I would have something to market when I graduated.

MS. OWEN: Were there any teachers or classes particularly significant to you?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Yes, there were two. One was Pauline Penning, who received her academic art training in Europe and was a phenomenal teacher of drawing and design. She also received her advanced doctorate in art

education at Penn State University under Victor Lowenfeld, and she educated me in the beauty of teaching children.

Also there was another person very influential in my program and that was Professor Jim Crane, who was my painting instructor and also one of my instructors in art history. We will run into him later in my life. He was very much a part of my professional career.

Because I graduated at mid-year and there was no teaching jobs open at that time, I continued my study towards a master's in art education with a studio emphasis in painting and printmaking.

The next fall I accepted a position as art consultant with Jackson, Michigan, public schools and Lee and our new baby daughter, Karron, headed for Michigan and this new experience.

MS. OWEN: What did this job entail?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: As an art consultant I visited various elementary schools in the system, doing demonstration teaching, working on the curriculum and the supplies to put this curriculum into place. I dealt with and helped work with the student teachers from Michigan State and basically was the art expert for the elementary schools that I visited.

I really enjoyed the job, but it was very time-consuming, and I thought it was a very rewarding job but I could do little of my own art.

The end of the second year at Jackson I received a call from my painting professor Jim Crane at St. Cloud, who was now the head of the art department at the University of Wisconsin State University [Wisconsin State University at River Falls, Wisconsin]. He offered me a position as head of the art education program at the University Lab School.

My wife was pregnant with our second daughter, Kristin, but I could see that my job here in Jackson was leading to a desk job, and even though the position in Wisconsin would mean a cut in salary, the Wisconsin job included a studio and free time during the week to work on my art. My wife and I decided, even with all the problems, to go there even though she was pregnant.

The next fall [1960?] I started teaching at the university and retired there 30 years later as a professor emeritus.

MS. OWEN: What was the program like at the university?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: It was the exact same thing I was doing at Jackson, Michigan. It was working with various levels of elementary teaching and the children in the laboratory school but also setting up curriculum, working on various research projects with different professors, et cetera, et cetera.

MS. OWEN: Talk about your artwork at this time.

MR. NOTTINGHAM: During the next few years I spent a considerable amount of time in my studio. My painting and prints were technically competent but not inspired. Some of my works were accepted in a couple of regional exhibitions, but I was really not pleased with them at all.

On a trip to New York City I visited the Metropolitan Museum of Art and encountered these wonderful old battle flags hanging from the wall. They were torn and frayed, with much of the weaving destroyed, leaving open-work threads. The decay of these flags was so beautiful to me.

When I returned to my studio at the university I tried many ideas to produce the visual magic I saw in these flags with my paintings, but I couldn't make it happen. Over a period of time I finally decided I would really try to make them. I never took a weaving course and didn't know anything about the craft. I bought a simple book on weaving and built a frame loom, dressed it, and started to weave.

MS. OWEN: So you wanted to make something, but you didn't know how?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: That's very true. But there's two ways a craftsman can work. A craftsman can make an object by developing a technique and learning as much as he or she can about that technique and then use that technique to make an object. But there's another way an artist can work, and many do. A craftsman can take an idea of an object and then create a technique to make that object, and that's the way I was working.

I worked for days on that simple loom and soon found out I couldn't make a decayed battle flag, no way, but what I finally made was wonderful, the best thing I have ever created, and it had much of the qualities I had felt and seen in my museum flags.

I sent it to an exhibition at the Milwaukee Art Center, where it won an award, and it was also purchased for the textile collection of the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

I became totally dedicated to learning as much as I could about the art and craft of weaving. I purchased a floor loom and built a tapestry scaffold loom. My wife called me an addict, addicted, yes, addicted to my studio and weaving. She was right.

I continued to submit my work to regional and national exhibitions, where they were well received and receiving awards and being collected.

MS. OWEN: Was it difficult being self-taught as a weaver?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: It was very difficult, but not really. It was as though I had been a weaver in a previous life.

Once I was at a conference sitting next to a weaver and she asked me, "How did you get into weaving?" I said, "I don't know." I said, "I basically am self-taught." And she said, "Oh, I know what happened. There you were with an art history background and a design background but not doing anything really very significant, and there was this weaving soul going through this space and it just came and embedded into you." And I said, "You know, that might not be too wrong." When I got into my advanced weaving in a few years and people would tell me this technique was very, very difficult, when I read about it, it sounded like it was, but as soon as I started to weave and research it, it seemed very logical to me and I just went right into it. Maybe it was the engineering background from my family.

MS. OWEN: Did anything change at the university for you?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: After a few years I submitted a proposal to develop a fiber program for the art department. It was approved and I was given studio space and monies for equipment and supplies.

The program was an instant success, with full enrollment each quarter. I left the art education position at the university laboratory to devote all my time to teaching fibers and art appreciation and art history courses.

MS. OWEN: So up to this point you were self-taught in fibers. What did you feel you needed to advance?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Well, I continued to teach myself as much as I could, but I realized there came a place where I needed some professional training. I put in and was granted a one-year sabbatical and funds to do anything I wanted for that year. After researching what was out there, I chose to apply at Cranbrook Academy of Art in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan. I was accepted, and we hired Don Miller, a graduate of Chicago Art Institute, who had a minor in textile arts, to replace me while I would be away.

MS. OWEN: What was Cranbrook like for you?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Cranbrook was everything I'd hoped it would be and more. Glen Kaufman was the head of the fiber studio, and Meda Johnson ran the textile surface design program.

The fiber program at Cranbrook was designed to allow each student to explore their research but with basic instruction and assistance and critiques from Glen and Meda.

I was in awe of my fellow students, who were from Japan, Europe, and the best weaving programs at the universities and museum schools in the United States. Many had a number of years of weaving behind them.

Every Friday we met together to share our research and present our solutions to projects that were periodically assigned by Glen and Meda. These projects included such things as dyeing and spinning of wool, basketry, tie-dye and silk screen on fabric, lace making, working in various types of looms, crochet, et cetera.

We were also visited by artists who met with us to critique our research and discuss various things happening in the field of the textile arts. These were always leaders in the field, people like Jack Lenor Larson, Marianne Strengell, and others.

Cranbrook was by far my most rewarding educational experience.

MS. OWEN: What did you do after Cranbrook?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: After Cranbrook I returned to the University of Wisconsin and was very busy with two large church tapestry commissions, as well as developing my fiber program, using many of the things I had learned at Cranbrook.

One of the things I explored at Cranbrook was three-dimensional weaving on a floor loom. I continued this

research after the commissions were completed. I found the loom frustrating, and I decided to try modular crocheting. Modular crochet is something I also investigated while at Cranbrook.

MS. OWEN: And what did you particularly like about crochet?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I liked crochet because it would give me a three-dimensional unit that would be modular, that when I put them together, I could get a sculptural form that would hold itself, like in a cellular pattern, and hold the form into itself.

Working this way, I created a few small sculptural wall reliefs and was quite pleased with them and very pleased with the process. I enjoyed crocheting; I enjoyed making these small works.

I also had an idea for a very large work, for me very large, six feet, and decided to go for it. A little over two months later it was completed. I could tell it was very strong and possibly the best textile work I had ever made.

I heard through the grapevine that the Museum of Modern Art in New York City was putting together an exhibition of a new movement, an international movement called Wall Hangings. No one had asked to look at my work, so I sent a letter to MoMA's head of the museum, Alfred Barr, telling him about my work and a few slides for his review.

Very soon I was contacted by the museum, who sent people to pack up my work, and it was displayed in the main lobby of MoMA's wall hanging international exhibition in 1968. This one exhibition was very important to my career.

MS. OWEN: What did you do next?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I think I'm going to back up on that, Carol.

It was important to my career because it gave me a national standing, which opened up many doors for me nationally, not internationally, but nationally.

At the end of that year I got a call from Meda Johnson, who told me that Glen Kaufman had accepted a position as head of the textile department at the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, and that Cranbrook was in the process of looking around and trying to find a new director of the textile art program at Cranbrook.

Meda and Cranbrook offered me a teaching assistantship for the year, to assist her in the weaving program. I would receive a full scholarship, and if I would present my graduate exhibition and my research, I would be then awarded an MFA.

My wife and I talked about this. By this time we had three children and our last daughter, Kathy, and so what to do. But we knew that I needed an MFA as a terminal degree if I was going to stay in academics and go anywhere. We decided to go for it, but now I didn't have a grant; I didn't have a sabbatical. We had to get money to pay for our health insurance, so we sold a small home we had bought. Lee moved back to her parents with our three girls.

MS. OWEN: What important thing happened to you next?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: After receiving my MFA from Cranbrook [1968] and returning back to the university-but first of all I'd like to say that during the year one of my patrons felt sorry for me that my wife was with her parents, and for a trade for my artwork he let me use his summer home that was near Cranbrook Academy, so that I could bring my wife and children there, and so they were there right after Christmas for the rest of the year.

And what was the question again?

MS. OWEN: So what happened important with your work after this period?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Oh, okay, after this period I submitted and was accepted at the "Lausanne Biennale" [Biennale Internationale de la Tapisserie, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland, 1971] representing America as one of the textile artists in the exhibition. It really was an enlarged work that was at MoMA. It's called Celibacy. And this show in Lausanne really put my career into an international mode, where then I started getting asked to exhibit in Europe but also Australia and New Zealand.

By the way, later on I traded that work to an architect named Mike McGuire, who designed my home, and my studio, in the hills outside River Falls, Wisconsin.

MS. OWEN: What direction did your work take after the Biennale?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I continued to work on three-dimensional crochet and enjoyed what I was doing, but then a phenomenal thing happened to me. I received a box from my Aunt Edna. My grandmother, Angelina Marceau, had died and this box was sent to me. I opened the box and it was filled with my grandmother's crochet, small little doilies, little crocheted bags, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. It was just filled and I put it out on the floor and, my goodness, I was just amazed at the power of this material. I remembered my grandmother's ranch outside of Missoula and she had crochet everywhere, even crochet on the toilet seats, and then starched crochet on table centers.

Anyway, I looked at this, and I was, "Why me?" I called my mother and I said, "Mom, I just received from Aunt Edna this box of grandma's crochet. With all the granddaughters and daughters in the family, why me?" And my mom said, "You don't like it." "No, no, I love it, Mom, and I just wondered, why?" And she said, "Well, we were talking, and Aunt Edna is the oldest sister and said, 'What are we going to do with this crochet?' And everybody said, 'Well, Walter is crocheting; let's send it to him.'" So I got it.

A couple weeks later I received another box, but this time from my mother, and what was in it, you know, it was my mother's crochet. For a number of months I didn't know what to do with this. I would spread them out on the floor looking at them. They had a few things in common. They were all very thin-gauge cotton and they were all crochet, but they were different colors, different textures, different patterns, and they made no sense to me whatsoever. But what did fill my studio was the presence of these two women, and I really was a third generation of a crotchetier, my grandmother, my mother, and I.

I finally came upon the idea I could not work with them in their entirety. They were too much. So I had to deal with them in sections. I welded together a few metal frames, like stretchers, and painted these. Then I crocheted a base, flat form like you would stretch linen canvas, painted canvas, but upon this I would crochet and stitch on one piece of my mother's, one or two pieces of my grandmother's, and then I would crochet into them too, quite sculpturally. I continued making these squares. I put them down in a quilt like pattern. But because they were so strange in color—there was hot pinks and green; in fact, whatever color was in vogue that month is what was there—and these patterns were all strange, I had to do something to unify them, and I used a technique that I'd learned at Cranbrook called piece dyeing, where you take and put different colors to a dye that modulized them all into one, kind of tonational, color. I did that and it worked quite well.

And I placed these together in a quilt like form, but because of the dye, they lost some of their gloss that the crochet cotton had, that pearl cotton, so what I did is I went into it and I painted, and with acrylic paints I painted into the piece and brought back some of the luster and form and color of it and I was quite pleased with it.

I was asked to be in an international show at the Cleveland Art Institute ["Fiberworks," Cleveland Museum of Art, October 15 - November 20, 1977] and I submitted this piece and they accepted it. It then traveled with other works around the United States.

I noticed that it was going to be in Seattle, Washington, my home. I called my brother Tom and told him to get a hold of my other brother, Don, and to make sure my parents saw this. It was going to be at the main museum, Seattle Museum in downtown Seattle, Washington.

He did this and then he wrote me a letter saying, "Wow, I knew it was about Mom without reading the title." And where did the title come from? My mother was magic woman, and one of the things, like a lot of us, she would talk to herself, and when you'd say, "Mom, who you talking to, are you talking to me?" and she'd go, "No, I'm talking to my yahooties." The name of this piece is *Yahooties*. [END TAPE 1; BEGIN TAPE 2.]

MS. OWEN: This is Carol Owen interviewing Walter Nottingham at the studios at Idyllwild Arts in Idyllwild, California, on July 15, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Walter, what were you working on after this piece, *Yahooties*, and did political and social commentary figure into your work?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I worked on a number of things after *Yahooties*, but the Vietnam War started to become a pretty important aspect in my life of what was happening to the students at the university and what was happening to the war, what was happening to America.

Once on my way back to the university from Madison I was driving on a freeway, on Highway 90, in fact, Interstate 90, and it was packed and it was like a parking lot. We'd crawl a few feet, then we'd move a little further. There on the side of the road was this seagull, coming from the Great Lakes in Milwaukee, of course, and it had hit a truck or something, where the body had decayed to such a point that there was just a skeletal form, but one wing was in the air and as though it were flying, because it still had the feathers and the wind was moving it. What a powerful image. I decided later on that I had to do something about Vietnam, but what?

One of the pieces I had made for my graduate thesis at Cranbrook was called *Skins of Us*. It was two full-sized

figures that had seemed to have lost everything inside of them, and they were placed in a sarcophagus on a velvet plate and then with a Plexiglas roof, but out of the base of the sarcophagus came the colors that they had lost.

Anyway, I decided I would do a piece that I ended up calling *Icarus*, and what it was, was a four-, three-to-four-foot man, fully crocheted man, but instead of arms he had wings, but he was dead and he was lying in a sarcophagus. But on the top of the sarcophagus I crocheted a napalmed landscape. It was a very powerful piece, very political, and I was pleased with it.

But I also was ill and I didn't know why. And one day a friend of mine, in fact, a neighbor of mine down the road, came in and he said, "Walter, why are you using arsenic?" And I said, "I'm not using arsenic, I'm using wool." And he said, "Well, you're using arsenic. I know the smell of arsenic." And this is the middle of winter in Wisconsin, all closed up, and he asked me what I did. And so I told him that I was crocheting with this wool that was a mixture of different types of wool and acrylics that I had bought in Mexico and had it shipped up here for me, because what I found, with this that I could crochet, like the man, *Icarus*, but then I could take a small bernzomatic torch and melt them into forms that made them in this beautiful decayed form, as I did with the landscape. Well, I found that whatever was in this was producing cyanide gas, and I was getting really sick. I stopped at that time using this material. I did not stop crocheting. I worked with my crochet, but I did various other aspects of forms that I was concerned with, but I didn't do any more political works at this time.

MS. OWEN: Well, then after crochet how did your work change?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Well, first of all I was with crochet a long time, so you're assuming that it did change in this way, but it did.

The next thing I went for is that I wanted something more spiritual, and I wanted to make a basket form that was stronger than my crocheted forms to hold an image, but I didn't want to make a basket. What I wanted to make is that beautiful form that I would see as a young boy in church, of the sculpture of the Madonna, of her veil that would come down and that beautiful form in it. And so what I did was I switched, going to basketry, which again I taught myself, but I worked with it a bit at Cranbrook in one of the assignments that Glen Kaufman gave, and I made these beautiful forms coming down in the veil. But inside, where there would be a Madonna head or so, was an enshrinement of natural objects, often feathers and beads, making up different types of mystical imagery, imagery that asked a question of the viewer, what is this all about? And I made a number of these and I was very pleased with them. I also incorporated basketry into my curriculum, and my students started producing some wonderful things in that way.

MS. OWEN: And next, after basketry?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Okay, after basketry one of the things I had learned while I was at Cranbrook was papermaking, but I didn't care to make paper. That was another life, when I was a printmaker, with arches and some other types of paper, and I didn't want to make it. But I was really intrigued with paper casting and so I started casting paper, and I did a number of pieces for about three or four years where I did cast paper and then I'd go into them with weaving techniques. I would set up little looms inside of them and weave formats back and forth. I would do stitchery into them. I would add different types of wrapping, or what they call whipping forms, on it, integrating natural objects such as reeds and branches, feathers, different things of that nature into these pieces.

What I was looking for, but I didn't realize it at that time, I was looking for a spiritual object that was like a-oh, a non-Christian, Judaic imagery and that that would give me a religious folk craft type of format.

The next thing that happens, Carol, is that I put in for an NEA grant [1974] and I received one, for a National Endowment of the Arts grant. And what I did with that is I took it to explore this idea that I'd been working on in the last few years of cast papers to try to make these religious objects that were, like, not so religious but more of a folk craft format, because I was intrigued with this, and many of them had some of the decayed quality that my crocheted images had.

Well, what I did with my NEA grant is I bundled up my three daughters, who were young teenagers at that time, and my wife; we had a large van, and we headed for Mexico. We stopped at a few places on the way down to Mexico City, but my goal was to get to the Anthropology Museum of Mexico City [The National Museum of Anthropology], which I had read about and I had heard about and I had to see it.

What happened is I went into the museum there and I spent at least four or five days in the area that dealt with the old religious folk craft imagery that was not, again, Judeo-Christian, but kind of an Indian form.

The museum down there in Mexico is set up by areas of the country, and when I'd find some work that was interesting to me, we would head off and drive there and visit it, and I would meet people and talk to them

about their works and take notes and do photographs and things of that nature. Coming back to the museum we'd do it again, so Mexico City was our hub.

I ran into objects that just knocked me out, but there was nothing in my background that I had prepared myself to make these. So I started working with handmade papers, castings, stitchery, weaving, crochet, all of these things, multimedia, and the one thing that I was looking for was a spiritual form, for me spiritual, that had an ancient or aged look to it, a decayed-look format, and I loved what I did.

Probably the best piece that I made soon after that was sent to the Museum of American Crafts [American Craft Museum, New York], and a book was published on it and the name of my piece was Shrine but it was in the book *Poetry of the Physical* [Edward Lucie-Smith and Paul J. Smith, *Craft Today: Poetry of the Physical*. New York: American Craft Museum, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1986]. I love the title of that exhibition. And I am still working on these yet today.

MS. OWEN: Let's talk some about your important commissions and how they were different from your other work.

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Okay, one other thing is that my daughter Karron was my studiomate from the time she was 16, and she and I worked very differently on our individual work, but commissions work we set up a company and we called it Off the Wall and we did commissions. Most of them were quite decorative. They were for banks. They were for hotel lobbies, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. The majority of them are done with either sculptural crochet or they were done with a very large basketry form, all of them relief sculptural forms. Colors were utilized strictly for design. They had nothing to do with content. They had to do with the design of the bank, design of the lobby, design of the insurance company. They were very lucrative for us, and my daughter and I continued this when she moved to Hawaii and when I retired and we had a studio in Hilo.

Since she moved back to the mainland, she kept the company. I do not work that way anymore, and my commissions-I don't take any more design, as I call them, commissions. I strictly take commissions that have to do with my shrines.

MS. OWEN: Well, while you were doing the decorative, as you call them, commissions, did you run into any problems or difficulties?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Oh, all kinds of them. I learned a lot that I wasn't taught anywhere. I remember this one church tapestry that I was doing for another state. It was a very large tapestry. It was about I think, 30 feet high, and 12 feet wide, and it had some real difficult technical problems because it hung behind a floating altar, and the commission was set up in such a way that my tapestry would hang three inches from the floor and would not go down to the floor, and one of the things about any fabric that big, tapestry or not, or rug or whatever, it stretches. And so I had to learn how to weave with wire, and I came up with some techniques of how to weave with wire so that I could control the lengths of this.

I finished the piece and it was a relief sculptural piece and I was very pleased with it. And I was delivering it to the church, which is three states away from Wisconsin. When I got to the church, I was devastated, because I'd been to the church two or three other times talking to the architect, talking to the designers of the church and to different people, and there had always been scaffolds. Everything was done. My tapestry was the last to go in. There was nothing there. Oh well, I'll get a scaffold. Oh, right. There's such a thing called a union. I had to hire union laborers to get this scaffold and to put it up. I lost my nose on that, but I certainly learned.

MS. OWEN: Talk about your relationship with dealers.

MR. NOTTINGHAM: They've been not love affairs, except for one, okay. My first dealer to work with me for a long time, until he died, in fact, was Lee Nordness in New York. The story about Lee, I'd never met him but we talked on the phone, and he was very good for my career. He did all kinds of things for me, got my work into many different major international shows, into collections and so forth and so on.

But he also educated me to the market. He had a couple pieces of my work in his New York gallery, and a friend of mine, Clint McKenzie, who was a buddy of mine from Cranbrook, was teaching at Tyler in Philadelphia [Tyler School of Art, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA], and he called me up and he said he'd been to New York and was at Nordness Gallery and said, "Wow, Walter, you sold that piece, one of your pieces." And I went, "Wow, yeah, that's great." "What a great deal. Boy, that much money." And I went, "Well, what do you mean, that much money? I'm getting \$400." And he told me what it sold for and I went, "Whoa, wait a minute."

So I called Nordness up and he said, "Yeah, yeah, you're right. You signed a contract for \$400." And he said, "I can put a price on it for whatever the market takes. And by the way, Walter, the reason people buy your work at my gallery is because I tell them to. If I tell them not to, they won't." And I went, "Oh."

Well, I learned a lot. And as I said, he was very good for my career. I'm sure I made him a lot of money, but he did a lot of things for me.

My best relationship was with a woman who just died, Shelly Ross. She was a corporate client-no, that's the wrong term, but she was a corporate collector. She collected for corporations and built their collections. And Shelly loved my work and she got many, many commissions and sold many of my works for me and I loved her a lot.

I have not re-signed with anyone. Shelly's major area was not on the East Coast but Chicago, the West Coast; she did a lot of work for me in Minneapolis. She got a lot of work for me there-Seattle, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and so on.

Recently in the last couple years I have been working, but not exclusively, with Helen Drutt of the Helen Drutt Gallery in Philadelphia.

MS. OWEN: How do you see the market for American crafts? How do you feel it's changed in your lifetime?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: It's changed a lot. I feel sorry for some of the younger artists. In the '60s they had a number of regional shows, and when you got into one of these it wasn't just a regional show, like at Milwaukee or the "Fiber, Clay and Metal" in St. Paul, Minnesota. And why wasn't it just regional, although people from any place in the nation could enter, is because the dealers came from all over to look at these works and include people into their gallery stable. And so there was an actual place for us to have a way to move up the ladder of success and to become more economically successful. This is not true today. Regional shows, there's all kinds of them, but the only ones that really have that same flavor are the ACC [American Craft Council] shows that they have in regionals like Baltimore, St. Paul, so forth and so on. That's the major difference.

The other thing is the market changes, as any market does.

MS. OWEN: Do you think of yourself as part of an international tradition or one that's more American?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: The basic difference is I see myself as international, not just American, and the difference in the tradition is this: Way back earlier in this conversation we've had, in fact, yesterday, I talked about the artist who thinks of an idea then creates a technique to make one. Really that's not an unusual technique; that's the way artists work. It's not always the way craftsmen work. Craftsmen work more from technique to object.

There is an international movement that started way back in the '60s in the wall hanging at MoMA, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, that almost everybody in that show did not come from the craft tradition. They all came from a fine arts tradition, and fine arts tradition where you create your techniques for the objects that you're trying to deal with.

The other thing is that for many of us and for many of the other artists, because it's international, it's not just America, are dealing with content, content like my *Icarus*, content like my *Skins of Us* and other ones that had to do with content, of a storytelling format.

MS. OWEN: Do you think, then, that work in America in fibers has held up internationally along those lines? How does it rank with other artists around the world?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Right now you can hardly tell where an artist is from. There was a time in the '60s and '70s you could go to an international show or even a regional show or a national show, and you could go, "Okay, California, that's out of Berkeley, this is out of Philadelphia, this is out of Chicago Art Institute. Okay, there it is out of Rhode Island School of Design. Oh, there's Scandinavian countries." There's et cetera, et cetera, that there was a national and an international and regional look to people, to a lot of people, and that based on their education that that parroted and the workshop and the people who were going through.

But what was really interesting is that-and it has been pervasive-you cannot do that today. You cannot look at a piece and say, "That's from Los Angeles." No, it may be from Sydney, Australia. You can't look at it and say, "Oh, that's from New York." It may be from Bismarck, North Dakota, or it may be from Israel. And one of the things that has helped that are some of our craft class schools that-of Haystack, Penland, Arrowmont, Idyllwild School of Arts-that have international classes in the summer for people to exchange ideas with artists from all over the world.

MS. OWEN: Well, that's a good lead into my question about your teaching experiences at these schools like Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] and Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME] and Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN]. I know you've been to a lot of them.

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Yeah. Yeah, I've taught at all of them a number of times, not Arrowmont so much. I've only

taught at Arrowmont twice, but I've taught at Haystack four times at least and Penland maybe 10, 12 times. They're an unbelievable experience, for me. Although I'm there as an instructor, the things that I learn is much if not more from the other people. What a wonderful opportunity for people to come to a place where they can study with people who don't even teach, who work out of their own studio and who are leaders in their field from different parts of the world and in a community where everybody has a similar craziness; in other words, here all of a sudden you're living with your brothers and sisters of all ages from all over, all who are totally involved in the crafts. And so these schools are so, so very special and it's proven by what they do.

I have a copy of a letter that I wrote to Fran Merritt [Francis Sumner Merritt, Founder/Director of Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, 1951-77] that I would like to read. I wrote it in 1969. This is the letter that I wrote to Fran Merritt in September 22, 1969, after I had spent a session at Haystack School of Crafts in Deer Isle, Maine: "Dear Fran, I am moving with time and time is not. I am still very full from the near past time spent at Haystack - Wow, beautiful people. Thank you for the opportunity of once again being a part of your and the craft world's magic place. My mind runs but my hands crawl; births are slow in weaving and man must move with faith, for like in life, one cannot do everything. (Damn it.) Be good to yourself and hold fast. Sincerely, Walt Nottingham."

MS. OWEN: Let's go back to your work. How has it been received over time? In your opinion, who are the most significant writers in the field of American craft for you?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: How has my work been received over time? I think that's been pretty well covered, Carol, that I've been very lucky to have my work very well received by galleries and by collectors. What was the second part of the question?

MS. OWEN: Who were the significant writers and critics? You had talked to me about Ed Rossbach. Did you want to go into that?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Well, only that I felt that Ed Rossbach, who was the head of a textile school at Berkeley-I don't remember talking to you about it, but that that's who I would have chosen. Ed Rossbach had a phenomenal insight into where contemporary weaving was going. He understood the tradition of the textile arts and was able to bring, through words and his own work and definitely through his teaching, the ability to take something from the past, a magnificent object or technique, and through manipulation of contemporary ideas and imagery bring it to the present.

I think many of the ideas that we find from Jack Lenor Larsen and Mildred Constantine and people of this nature and all of the writers in textile arts magazines and *Fiberarts*, don't quote me, but Ed Rossbach was, as far as I'm concerned, was the spiritual and technical leader of the new movement in America in the textile arts in the '60s.

MS. OWEN: Could you discuss your views on the importance of fiber as a means for expression, since your career has been in that?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Okay, because fiber-again, paper is fiber. I make my paper out of fiber, the wool and the cotton and material from nature, leaves, bark, et cetera.

One of the problems I found with glass, as it's emerged into its king and queenly state that it is today in America, is that glass was so beautiful that it was a cliché of the blowpipe. Well, this happens also in fibers, that we are familiar with these; we wear fibers and fabric, we walk on them, we sit on them, and to see them being utilized in other than a decorative manner is difficult.

The other thing, they're luscious. My God, angora is just unbelievable to touch and to see.

And so I think it's very difficult-just like with glass and why glass has definitely gone past it and so has fibers-that it's difficult to work with these media because they're intrinsically beautiful and succulent. And how to do something that isn't just pretty, you have to work at it. And like with my *Icarus*, I was burning it, even with the smell and the poison that it was producing.

MS. OWEN: Did your work change when you moved from River Falls to Hawaii?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Only in one respect. As I told you, my work for the last, oh, number of years in Wisconsin and now in Hawaii had to do with multimedia. It had to do with my natural materials, the things I would gather in the woods where I lived, where I would gather when we take trips. These materials were natural and I would try to enshrine them into beautiful forms but also forms that had mystery and, I would hope, have a spirituality.

Well, what happened when I went to Hawaii, I had to revamp everything, because the flora was totally different and I had to work with it.

The other thing is that the colors in Hawaii are just so succulent, and I still wanted my works to have an aged

look. And so I was looking very carefully around where I live on the beach outside of Hilo for things that had dropped and had started to decay. I use those as metaphysical models.

I have done this before, as a metaphysical -- what is a metaphysical model? Okay. Metaphysical model to me is some type of object, man-made or from nature, that has a quality you would like in your work. You don't copy it, but it may have the texture you would like. It may have the color you would like. It may have an ambience you would like in your work. And so rather than just guessing and looking around you, collect things that have the qualities you want within the work that you do.

And I deal with this with my students. For them to start to look for metaphysical models, different things in nature or man-made, like rust, is something I love because of the color and the texture.

PBS [Public Broadcasting Service] did a little thing on me once, and I was talking about this and in my studio in Wisconsin, and I said, "I go to great lengths to try to get the color I want of this decayed or aged look." And I had a couple small pieces I had been working on, and I said, "These colors came from this old orange that had dried out, and it was in umbers and yellow oxides and all kinds of things, and through dyeing and paint manipulation I worked very hard to get these colors," and then I hold it up in the television program, and I put the orange in front of my piece and it just disappeared. I loved it. I loved what it did.

Anyway, that's a metaphysical model to me, a model, something that you collect and it's in your studio. It may not go into your work, and you don't copy it for your work, but you may take from it a quality you want of your work.

MS. OWEN: I know you worked in series over the years. Talk a bit about your feeling about working in series.

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I'd like to do that at a later time under something what I call structured freedom. It's something that I would like to go into in a greater depth, Carol, after I do some thinking on it. I just don't want to wing it. Basically, structured freedom to me is the-the discipline of limitation, and I feel the greater you limit, the greater the creativity, and part of that has to do with, as you start to limit, you work in series, but I'll go into that in greater depth at another time.

MS. OWEN: Yes.

MR. NOTTINGHAM: If you want to put that down on your notes then we can talk about that at another time.

MS. OWEN: We'll get back to that later then.

Talk about your involvement with some of the national craft organizations. Over the years, have some of your organizations changed?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Oh, no, other than internationally I do a lot and have recently, after moving to Hawaii, with the Pacific Rim, and so I've been to Australia a number of times working with the Textural Arts Council of Australia, in Brisbane, Sydney, Melbourne. I just got back a couple years ago from the three cities and then also working with the Textile Arts Commission in New Zealand.

But basically here I've attended programs and of the ACC and the different councils, American Craft Council, but the three that I was most involved in was in the '70s, at the Salt Lake ACC conference I presented workshops and was within a panel, a couple panels. I was part of the program.

In the '80s at Los Angeles I was at the national ACC program West Coast edition, and there I gave the -- I don't know what you call it -- it's the ending speech, the wrap-up speech. Gerhardt Knodel gave the keynote speech. I gave the ending speech for them and also did some panels work, and we were in some sessions of that nature.

The latest one was on the East Coast, ACC convention and meeting and exhibition and that was at St. Petersburg, Florida, where I had works in the exhibition. Also I was a presenter of a fellowship, and I also did a workshop and sat in on a panel.

The ACC is a very, very important organization. In fact, one of the few letters of gratitude and admiration years ago was to a woman who is still the director, Lois Moran, for what she's been. I ran into her at Arrowmont one time and told her of what I felt, that her contribution has been in the ACC convent to all of the crafts in America.

MS. OWEN: I want to back up a bit on your travels. You lived abroad early on. You talked about your NEA grant when you went to Mexico. Were there other areas that were important to you in your work?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: My travels mainly were not necessary to that effect. I was always looking for religious folk craft. Wherever I went, that was one of my goals. You know, my wife and I, she knew that when we hit a city, most likely we'd go to a museum of anthropology before fine art, and the Field museum in Chicago, I've spent

hours there where, in fact, they didn't know it but I'd be lecturing at the Art Institute or giving a workshop there at the school, but my free time was always at the Field Museum.

My interest in many cases far more relates to anthropological objects than they do to the fine arts. I love the fine arts and I'm aware of it because I'm part of the field.

In Hawaii at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu there's a set of collections from the South Seas and it's called Artificial Curiosities. And what it is, is what Captain Cook collected as he was going around, and I'm sure you know that there was a botanist aboard and an artist to draw, but these are artificial curiosities. And what they were, were things that he couldn't identify; he couldn't figure out what they were. They weren't functional. They weren't utilitarian. They weren't warlike. What were they? In every case they were spiritual, and in almost every case they were made by women and the women made them and it's called Artificial Curiosities. And if you're in Hawaii and you're in Honolulu, stop by the Bishop Museum, because I guarantee you, just look at some of the works of the Pacific Islands that are absolutely marvels. [END TAPE 2; BEGIN Tape 3.]

MS. OWEN: This is Carol Owen interviewing Walter Nottingham at the studios at Idyllwild Arts in Idyllwild, California, on July 18, 2002 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Walter, does the function of objects play a part in the meaning of your work?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: It has in many times, depending on what I'm making, and function, by that I mean is it used as I'm defining it.

I made a number of rya rugs, and their function was to be a rug, although I must admit the majority of my rugs have never touched a floor; the clients have put them on the wall like a textured tapestry.

When I was at Cranbrook, I was intrigued with rya or what they call ryja rugs, because of the luscious textures and the colors that you could get with the wools. And I was using them as colored paintings, because they were a functional rug if they wanted to be.

The other thing where there is a function was where I made tapestries for particular spaces. Many of my commissions, there was a problem. They needed something behind an altar to bring the focus to the altar and to give images of the church and the spirituality of the area. Also, the tapestries that I have made for public buildings, there was always a problem, a project that they needed that they wanted to have this particular wall a focus point, and in that case we, as I said, Karron and I, as with our company of Off the Wall would make something to deal with that. And as I said, before it was designed, we did not deal with content in that and I didn't deal with content either with my rya rugs. They were strictly luscious, beautiful colors, and with the banks and the lobbies often we were working with designers who were giving us color design options.

But there's another type of function, if you define function as what do you want this piece of work to do, for the function of this piece. The majority of my work that is not part of Off the Wall or decorative installations, that function of that work is to ask questions of the viewer. I want the viewer to come up to my work and not go, "How was this made; what beautiful materials he has here." No, I want them to come up and say, "Wow, what is this about? Oh, it makes me feel good, sad. What is the ambience that's playing upon me with this work?"

And so a lot of art asks questions of the viewer, sculptors, painters, and so on. It's not often with the crafts, but it is moving more and more towards that way where the content is one, which is not decorative, but one that is narrative and asks questions of the viewer again. And so the function of most of my work is to entice people who come in contact with my work to wonder what it's about and to try to feel it and explore it.

MS. OWEN: Then what are the similarities and differences between your early work and your more recent work?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: The differences are in the techniques that I was using at the various periods of my career, and the ones that I'm using right now are a combination, as I said, of many of the things I've done before, because I'm working with mixed media and mixed techniques. And I could have never been doing the work I'm doing today without doing the things I'd done before, because there was no way I had that much expertise with the combination of materials.

But there has been an underlying aesthetic concern that I've always had, and that is the beauty of aging. Ever since I first saw those battle flags at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, my search has been to look for objects around that had those qualities and try to incorporate whatever that was that I saw, either the color, the texture or the form, into my work.

In fact, I remember I was at the Contemporary -- I had some work at the Contemporary Museum in Chicago, and some critic was writing and said, "I don't know what contemporary textiles or fiber arts are coming to. Walt Nottingham's piece looks like it's an old dishrag. It looks like it's decayed. It looks like it's been stamped upon."

And I realized he was putting me down, but truthfully he was getting exactly what I was trying to do. He just didn't realize that I was looking for that quality.

So if you give me a rose, I'll thank you for it and appreciate it and I'll see its beauty, but I will love that rose as it dries out and the color is lost.

There's an Oriental philosophy of aesthetics based on this idea of aging and the beauty of decay. It's called wabi, W-A-B-I, and it's one that has been with me and in almost all my works since I saw the battle flags.

None of this appears in my commissioned works for banks and churches and places of that nature. There it's designed for as beautiful of an object that I can possibly make.

Does that kind of answer it, Carol?

MS. OWEN: Oh, yes, very well.

I'd like you to talk a bit about the philosophies that are important in your teaching. I know you've been teaching for many years and you have some very important things to say.

MR. NOTTINGHAM: I don't know how important they are, but I can share with you some of the things.

The first thing that I believe in, in teaching, I learned when I was at Jackson Public Schools and also at the Laboratory School at the University of Wisconsin State at River Falls, and that is working with the children. I found that the children, if you would give them a problem that didn't have one answer but was open-ended where they felt free to risk because they didn't feel that there was an answer to this particular aesthetic problem, whether it was making a painting, a drawing, that it could be personalized, that every child would have some satisfaction, and so that I am very careful when I present projects while at the university or when I give workshops that they're open-ended, where individuals can apply their own ideas to these, there is not "A" answer; there are many answers, all of them relatively true.

And this frustrates my students a lot when they ask me to do some critiquing of some of their things, because I don't give them, "Well, this is right." No, I'll give them four or five or six answers, all of them correct, but whether it's a technical question they're giving me or whether they're asking for a critique of something they're making.

Anyway, so that I try to instill upon them that there's multiple answers to anything in the aesthetic world that we're working with and also, come to think of it, in life. But when you choose one, you choose it almost in an existentialist way, not because you know that this would be better than the next; it's just you have to take a chance, you have to risk, and that term is really important to me, because here at Idyllwild I was just talking with some of my students and they were asking me about different things and I said -- and we were talking about how well the workshop went, and I said to one of them, "Well, my main job is to present an atmosphere where you can risk failure, that you can try things out, that you're not trying just to make sure that it works but to explore different things." In fact, in my workshops or in my university classes the only way you could fail is to quit risking, but as long as you risked, you didn't fail, and that's a very important part of it.

The other thing I tried to do from the moment I would get a student, even in a workshop, I would try to wean them from me. I would try to be there as their technical assistant and I would be there to talk with them, to assist them and critique them, but every time I could, I would make them make those decisions.

And so I was really pleased at the university when my students would be graduating and they didn't need me, they didn't need me.

And by the way, workshops are the same way. If I do a really good job on a workshop, by the second or third day I can go out and have a cup of coffee. They want me around, but they don't have to need me for the next step, because we've set up a personal program and process.

Oh, another key word with me, I am not that concerned about the making of objects as a teacher. I want students to understand and explore the process by which they make work, because the process is a part of the art education that's going to go on. What choices they make, how they utilize this technique, what do they go through to become the person that is doing this particular object, this particular creation that they're working upon. And so the process of how we create was very important to me.

I know that one of the things that a lot of my students are very concerned about -- wrong word; they were not concerned -- upset about was that how much drawing and particularly exploration of design that I would demand of them before they started to do work. I didn't want the first answer to their solution. I wanted them to explore. And if they would make a cliché, yes, I would tell them it's boring and it's a cliché. You've got the right idea but you're a symbol maker, so take that idea and turn that cliché into your symbol of communication.

There are a couple things that I work with and I believe in very strongly that I think is an interesting way to deal with the crafts and I will share them with you. One of them has to do with mystical symbol projects. I would give projects for mystical symbols. The idea would be to make an object that was a mystical symbol.

One of the things that I've tried to get students to do is to come up with words, which I call cover words, a word that had a meaning that had a relationship to the object that you were making and that that object would always go back to that word, and the project that I would give in the workshops that I would give on this, I call them mystical symbols, mystical symbol project. And then we'd look into it and we'd go okay and we'd discuss what makes something mystical. It's unclear. You don't know the answer. It's a veiled image, et cetera, et cetera. It's a mystery. You have to solve it. You don't know what it is. Well, what is a symbol? Oh, a symbol is something you do know, if you know the language. In other words, there's two yellow lines on a highway; I hope you understand that that's a symbol not to pass.

And so a lot of times symbols are used from a different language, and so if you give me Russian poetry, it's a mystical total to me, because although it's symbolic, it's just that I do not understand and read Russian.

And so one of the things I did and I did a lot, was to give them projects where they would take the mystical symbol and try to make something that was mystical but also symbolic.

In doing this we discussed ritual objects. By the way, this goes back to my Catholicism and my boyhood in church. One of the things that I loved about the mass was the ritual and the ceremony of the mass and also the symbolism.

Now, when I talk about rituals and ceremonies, I would ask them to explore rituals and ceremonies that they developed, not that were given to them by their church or their society. I'll give you a couple of mine, and they're not big things.

I have a ritual with my underwear. I have three types of underwear. I have "okay" underwear, I have "dynamite" underwear, and I have "bad karma" underwear. And it's really funny; you've got an instructor who has a ritual with his underwear, yeah. How do they get this way? Is it because of their design, are they briefs or is it boxers? No, no, no. They get these qualifications by what happens to me when I wear them. And so most of my underwear are "ho-hum," and once in a while I'll get a "dynamite" underwear, and then I have "bad karma" underwear because these underwear when I have them on, bad things happen to me and I give them three chances and they're in the garbage, which would really upset my wife a lot because here was fairly new underwear and she would find them in the garbage, but she knew my ritual and even though she would allow it to happen, thought it was pretty crazy.

By the way, I'd go to my underwear drawer; I can't pick out what I'm going to be wearing to have a good day. No, no, I have to feel. Then I grab one and go, "Oh, there it is." So that's one of my rituals. Now, it's just something I do. Do I believe this? No. Yes. But it's a ritual to help start my day. And so if I start my day and I go, "Oh, another ho-hum day," I go, "Okay" or if I go, "Wow, this is going to be a dynamite day, and I go fine." If it's a bad karma day, I'm a little paranoid, so if you come up to me and ask me, "How are you?" I'll probably go, "Why, do I look sick?" or something of that nature.

Anyway, so we talk about different types of rituals and ceremonies that we work with. The objects of a ritual object or mystical object should embrace meaning. The object itself should embrace meaning; not just its color and design but the entire object should have meaning. It should have a power. You should feel its aura or its energy. You should see it as a persona. Like Martin Buber, it should not be an "it," it should be an "thou." Think of that object as though it were a persona, that it would have life with it.

Objects to me have attitudes. They are sad, they're sexy, they -- and it has nothing to do with the imagery; it has to do with the totality of that object that presents.

The whole idea of the persona-a good example would be one of my daughter's dolls. My brother gave my youngest daughter, Kathy, a Pooh Bear when she was very, very young. Pooh Bear is not just a little bear in our life. That bear has been with her -- we've had to back up because we've left it at a motel. She takes it everywhere. Her sisters being mean would hide it on her and she would come crying to me or my wife and ask where it was and things like that. And when she went away to college, Pooh Bear by this time had very little fuzz. Pooh Bear had been stitched up a number of times because of one problem or another. And when she'd go to college and she'd come home, who would she be sleeping with? No, no one. Pooh Bear. She's a corporate person at this time. Pooh Bear still travels with her.

I would no more think of taking that stuffed little ragged cloth and throwing it against the wall than I would my daughter. It just exuberates love and care. Besides that, it's decaying, so I like it even better.

Mystical symbols-one of the things that artists do is try to make the unseen visible, the things that you feel,

rather than just the things that you see. I'll give you a good example.

One of the days I was working with one of the small children, about second or third grade in the lab school, and I came past this little girl and she was painting a portrait of herself and on the forehead was a butterfly. And I looked down at her and I went, "Oh, Susie, that's a beautiful butterfly," and she looked up at me and with kind of child disgust and went, "No, that's a nice thought I'm having," making the unseen visible, an unreal reality.

A good example of that is when we see something that we know what it is but because of some type of situation with the atmosphere, it gives off a different image. I'll give you an example that I've often used.

I can't even remember where this first happened to me, but I was on the road someplace and I came in late at night and very tired and I threw my jacket over the edge of a cabinet. Later in the evening I woke up, and I don't know why, but there at the end of my bed was not my jacket, it was this frightening image, and I broke out into a sweat and I'm talking to myself and I'm going, "It's a ghost; you don't believe in ghosts but it really scares me. Oh, it's our jacket." So my multiple selves see that. At that time I knew it was my jacket, but there's no way could I go back to sleep without getting up and moving it.

Now, that jacket, we've all had that experience, but how many people can you come up to and say, "Wow, my jacket really scared me last night," without them backing off.

But that's what art is; art should give that type of an expression.

Anyway, life experiences, I'm not going to go into this too much, but one of the things I worked with my students was having them write down life experiences and then see if they could come up with symbolic translations of this from the written word to a visual symbol or from an experience and a symbol of that.

I've talked before about it, but this is where it came in a lot, is I had my students collect metaphysical models. Remember what I said, Carol, it had to do with collecting things that you wanted your art to have, the qualities that you want, and it could be colors, it could be a texture, and so forth and so on. I talked about that earlier.

Umbrella words is the last part of this thing that I would like to discuss, is how do I help students keep a focus on what they're trying to do, especially when you're working on a woven tapestry that may take you a month? How do you keep a focus on what's happening on that, other than from your design, because your design may not work with all the colors and everything all the way along?

And so what I'm really concerned about is that I'd have my students, and I use them to come up with a cover word, an umbrella word, a word that you go back to all the time and say, "Is this object doing it?"

I'll give you an example. Your umbrella word is a veiled image. You want an image that you see through but is still mystifying because you can't see it totally. So everything you do, you come back and say "Is this a veiled image? Am I making it too clear? Am I making it not clear enough?" Because you're not trying to dilute this image, or delete it rather, but you're trying to veil it.

So the umbrella words are really important words to me. Mine, you know what they are. I want my work to have a look of aging. My umbrella words look and color and texture of decaying, of wabi.

MS. OWEN: So what would you say is the underlying principle behind your own work?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: One of the underlying principles that I work with all the time is something I call structured freedom. This is not for everyone. It was for graduate students that I worked with or undergraduate students who had really explored many aspects of art before. This structured freedom, for me, is for those individuals who want to push their art as far as they can and as hard as they can, and I call it structured freedom.

The idea of structured freedom is that without structure you have no freedom. The basic premise of this entire philosophy is called the limiting order and it's based upon this idea. The greater you limit yourself, the greater the creativity. The greater you limit yourself, the greater the creativity.

I would give these ideas in projects very early in workshops and classes that I taught. I would give them really very limited materials, a limited technique and make them do it like crazy. What do I mean do it like crazy? To do it over and over again without ever changing the limits. They were astounded at what they would do by the third, fourth, and fifth try.

So the idea of structured freedom is to push your work to the greatest quality that you can make. It is the unspoken discipline. Why? Because in college, no matter at the undergraduate or graduate school, you're constantly asked to be doing a different project, a different technique, et cetera, et cetera. With structured freedom, no, you take and you limit yourself.

Now, the way it works is this: By limiting your work, and we'll go into in just a minute of what can be limited, by just limiting your work, you will automatically make your work individual. It will be an individual piece. It will not be like other people.

Secondly, if you use your personal life and your experiences when you limit and what you choose to limit because of the life experiences, you will make your work personal. And if you continue working on these, you will produce a work that for you is unique and something you could never have done by just going on. And when I say over and over again, 10, 15, 20 pieces.

Okay, so what can you limit? What are the types of things that you can limit? One is technique, equipment, the media used. And how do you choose this? You choose it because you like it. There are things that I've taken that I've done well in, like clay, but I didn't like working with it. I love my hands with fibers and handmade paper.

And so you should first look for a technique that you like, it likes you, you enjoy doing it, even if it becomes very compulsive with it and work hours and hours on techniques with it, that you like it, and that you stick with just that technique and that equipment; you don't change it every five minutes or every five days or even a month or two.

The next thing is you choose a shape or a format, not just locked into a rectangle, but you may have a triangle, you may have a circle, but you choose a shape that you're going to have as one of your limitations, and I would hope that you would choose that shape because it has meaning.

Another one is your color palette. Now, if you're working in design, like when I work with a church or if I work with a designer for a bank or something like that, I do not have a color palette that I present to them. What I present to them is the colors that are necessary for this particular project that has to do with the room; it has to do with the painting; it has to do with the other objects.

But artists, when you're working on your own work, you should have a color palette, just like van Gogh has a color palette. Any artist that we look at, and one of the things that you should look at when you're going through an exhibition is, does this artist have a color palette that speaks to him or her and then speaks to us? So a color palette is something I think is very important. And as you choose this color palette and as it develops, it will make your work individual. And if you use, again, personal life experiences, sure, those colors, they become symbolic and they become personal expressions.

One of the things you can be known for is subject matter. I remember there is this one young lady that came to work with me at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina and she was a very good tapestry maker. She did not need to know how to do it, but she was bored with what she was working with. And so I used every trick in my bag of how to get her to look at different ways of dealing with imagery and subject matter because she was interested in it, and on a pretty positive basis, you know, what makes you happy with that, et cetera, et cetera, where do you live, and it wasn't coming on.

So one day I said, "Tomorrow at breakfast bring me things that scare you, that you don't like." She did, and she said, "I live on the coast, North Carolina coast and storms scare me." She is now known as the "Storm Lady" at North Carolina. Her husband said I've developed a monster because she asks him to drive her to storms, where she photographs them and then puts those images into her tapestries.

Design motif: the motifs that you use in your designs or your rugs or your tapestries or your clothing can be symbolic or can be just an image or a symbol that you like, that is not a content symbol at all, but that has a beauty that you have found and that you work with, whether it's lines or squares or something like that.

Now, nobody I know does all of these, but these are some of the possibilities that you can use in limiting yourself as you're working.

And so design, you may work with triangles, and so these triangles, you would do all kinds of things with triangles, but you would work with these, and no, you wouldn't go to circles. Everything you would do would be working with triangles. It would be like variations on a theme in music; yours is triangles.

And so if you think about it and look around, you'll find artists who have a significant design image or motif that they use that is theirs. Other people can use it, but they have taken it to another level.

Another thing that you can use is intellectual concern, where you deal with political, social, economic situations in your work, and that this is what you're dealing with, this is what your symbolism is, your couple of colors are about, your designs are about, what your images are about, the political aspects that you were concerned about, the social and the economic aspects.

Another thing that you can limit yourself to is an aesthetic concern. What do I mean by that? A specific concern

of beauty; the best example I can give of this are the Impressionists. See if I can say this right. They were more concerned by the way atmosphere-smoke, snow, fog-affected an object than the object. They were more concerned about how it looked as it was being seen in the atmosphere than the object, and that's why Monet did how many haystacks and cathedrals, but in every case they were done not to make you look and say this is sharp, this is-oh, this is a haystack, but a haystack in the morning with the sun on it, a haystack with snow, a haystack in the fog; again, their aesthetic concern was how did atmosphere affect the way you and I saw an object.

Another thing that you can consider, and this would go back into the function thing especially, is the type of object that you make. Is it one-of-a-kind, even though it could be a series, because I promote series, as you can know, that you can take these limitations and you do a number of them, and all of a sudden you will find you will do something that you had no idea that you were capable of, but it's one-of-a-kind. You don't make 10 of them that are exactly alike, like a potter will make 10 plates that are exactly alike, multiples, but you can choose that. So one of the things you can limit yourself to is doing one-of-a-kind or you can limit yourself, I'm going to be known for doing multiples and this could be forever.

The last one I call spiritual realities or separate realities, but it has to do with spiritual works. I strive to have my work have a spiritual quality. I have seen things around, other art, other things in life that have that quality. I don't know how to say what it is. I just know when it appears and I know when it's not there, in my work especially or works that I'm visiting.

So going back to cover words, metaphysical models, one of the cover words, as you know, is decay or aging, but my other one is spiritualism; does this piece have a spiritual quality? Again, I don't know how to talk of it, but I know when I see it.

Anyway, to make individual work, again, set up a system of limitations. Use personal experiences for those limitations and you will produce personal work, work that really is you. To make creative work, keep those limitations and work in a series.

I've talked about visual poetic models, metaphysical objects that we would carry that would have the colors on it, aesthetic concerns, a search for form, and understanding our goals, that focusing, and again, with that it's cover words.

Does that make any sense?

MS. OWEN: Oh, yes. Well, as we come to the end of this interview, is there something you'd like to say to sum up?

MR. NOTTINGHAM: Oh, let me see. Okay.

I went into my briefcase and picked this out. I brought this here for this talk. Every time I'm in a show or somebody's reviewing my work, they want to see my biography with my exhibitions and awards and places I've taught and et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. Sometimes they want a brief biography, a paragraph or two, but they always want a statement about my art. And so I have it here and I'll end this interview with it.

The atmosphere that my work presents to the viewer is my main concern. Each of my works is an attempt to articulate spiritual and aesthetic content of an object that is enshrined. The media I use to give these feelings and ideas for them are mainly handmade paper and multimedia objects and techniques, special objects that I enshrine in packages within my work, sometimes visible, sometimes not, and natural fibers. My shrines are best related to aged religious folk craft and the crafts more than the fine arts.

Thank you.

MS. OWEN: Thank you, Walter.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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