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Oral history interview with Carolyn Mazloomi, 2002 September 17-30

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Caroyln Mazloomi on September 17 and 30, 2002. The interview took place in West Chester, Ohio, and was conducted by Joanne Cubbs 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.

Carolyn Mazloomi and Joanne Cubbs 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

JOANNE CUBBS: This is Joanne Cubbs interviewing Carolyn Mazloomi at the artist's home in West Chester, Ohio, on September 17, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disk number one.

Okay, ready to go. Let me first obtain a little bit of background information. When and where were you born?

CAROLYN MAZLOOMI: I was born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, August 22, '48.

MS. CUBBS: And can you give me some idea of what your childhood was like. Your family background. Talk a little bit about all of that.

MS. MAZLOOMI: My father had two brothers that were artists, and my older brother was an artist, painter – self-taught, everyone self-taught. Younger brother musician, self-taught. My father's uncle, mentally ill, very talented artist. And I can remember going into his home. He had a home like a log cabin-type deal on the family property, and all the walls were covered with newspaper and brown paper bags, and there wasn't an inch of that wall not covered with drawings. The entire room, he'd drawn on the wall. And, you know, he was in his own world and kind of out of it, but he could draw. And I like to believe that's how he related to the world: through his drawings.

MS. CUBBS: What did you think about that as a young person?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I found it fascinating. I can always remember those drawings from an early age, always surrounded by drawings. You know, my uncle could draw, and then here comes my brother – my older brother - who taught himself how to paint, and he had no training whatsoever. But he's since passed on, and unfortunately, I don't have any of his paintings. But my sister and my mother have several. And he was quite talented. So the visual arts were always there, but I never thought of myself as an artist, because I couldn't draw. I always thought in terms of art – drawing, you know? That was my thought. Whenever I thought about art, I thought about drawing. I didn't think about the arts in a broad sense: the writing, the music, or whatever, but I always thought about drawing, because that's what I was first impacted with, so there you go.

MS. CUBBS: What about quilts?

MS. MAZLOOMI: No history of quilt making in my family that I can really remember. I can't remember anybody making quilts. My mother couldn't sew at all. I can remember my great aunt's home had a quilt in it, one of those old fashioned, southern quilts, heavy with cotton and old clothes. I can remember my mother looking at this one quilt, and it was only one quilt, and saying that there were pieces of her clothing in it and her mother's clothing in it. And that I remember. And it was so heavy, you know, and I thought of it as not being beautiful. That's my two memories: very heavy and not very beautiful, you know? Very dull and brown tones and gray tones and not spirited with color. Quite dead for me.

MS. CUBBS: Let me go back to the drawings on the walls of your uncle's cabin. What were they about? What were they of?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Figures of people. I think – I know my uncle lived in an imaginary world and these were people in his imagination. And the one thing I remember, they were never black. My family's complex like that. We have this color thing going on that's, I think, very unique to southern Louisiana. But a lot of people in our family – on both sides, my mom and dad – were very fair people. And, you know, every gradation [laughs] in between. But that was the one thing I noticed. There were no black people in any of his drawings. There was nobody that looked like me. [Laughs.] There was nobody that looked like him. So I found that strange. But they were always scenes of people gathered together in all kinds of situations, you know, in the little town that he lived in, just scenes from that little town and people gathered together around the dinner table. Picnics and lots of church scenes. Everything that he didn't do was on the walls. He didn't go anywhere. He went nowhere; you know, he just stayed on that property. So he had no life. And how he could imagine – that was another thing, maybe he

saw these scenes when he was younger, I don't know. Maybe he was out when he was younger, but not as I knew him as a child. He was confined to the property and not allowed to go out.

MS. CUBBS: Hmm. Are there any other kind of formative experiences that you can conjure up from your childhood that have helped make you who you are today?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Geez, lots of things. My aunt has always been an influence on me, and she was one of the first African Americans in Louisiana that became a registered nurse. And I was always interested in medicine and fascinated by her, because I loved her so much. And through her I always knew that I could – I've always been a confident person in myself. I always knew I could be anything I wanted to be. I always knew - from a child, I had this fascination with airplanes, from day one. And ever since I could read. And I could read by the time I was five; I was in first grade at five years old. I went to school reading and loved aircraft, anything about airplanes. And I always knew one day I would fly. And when I would tell that to my aunt, even as a child, she would say, "You can do it, baby. You will do it," you know? And I always knew that. She was just a great woman. You know how people say, "Oh, somebody lift you up," to make you think you can do wonderful things. She did not lift me, she carried me. She carried me. Oh, she was strong. And she inspired me.

She was a nurse, but she also owned this juke joint. She was the juke joint owner. And this is why you see the music themes in my work so much, because I grew up in her juke joint, with all these old blues singers and guitarists who would come on Friday and Saturday nights and Sundays. From all over the country, these people would travel from little town to town, giving performances at these little juke joints, and a little place about to fall off on the ground. [Laughs.] A little, you know, wooden shack, but it would rock on the weekends you know, and I don't forget that. I've always loved music because she surrounded me with music, the music that she loved. But as I grew older, I learned to like all kinds of music. And she was a reader. I love to read. It's a – gosh – it's an obsessive thing, books. I can't envision my life without books. I can't envision my life without being around airplanes. I can't envision my life without being around quilts and my family.

So I would say that my aunt had the most influence on my life. And then when I was in junior high school, I had a teacher, Dr. Carter, who taught English, and he loved English literature, and he was just a wonderful teacher and exposed his students to a totally different world. He took our minds out of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, and he set them in Europe through words and that was fascinating. And I can remember, too, being very young. I never had a heavy southern accent and the kids would always tease me because of the way I spoke. And I could always remember Dr. Carter, who had a wonderful speaking voice, and he would just tell us when we were reading, "Elocution, elocution, elocution," "You must speak and pronounce the words," and, "I want to hear you speak properly." I never forgot that, but I can remember kids teasing me at school about the way I spoke. So, anyway, Dr. Carter taught me a love of the written word.

And then I was surrounded, again, by this art. I've always loved paintings, you know. I guess I'm sort of a Gauguin groupie. [Laughs.] When that exhibition came to the United States, I followed it across the country and at each venue I went several times, and, you know, I love the colors and the people, and especially that time he spent in Tahiti. Brown people. Brown excites me. Black excites me. [Laughs.] So anyway, we are exciting, you know, and I love myself and I love my people. I do. And I like to celebrate them in my work, so that's another thing. We bring a lot of energy to anything we do. It's different.

MS. CUBBS: Those are wonderful accounts. I'm thinking also about what you said about your love of painting and the fact that so many of your quilts are like translations of painting into cloth.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well, if you look across the board at African-American quilt-making and you looked at it statistically as to who is doing what, you will find two distinctive types of quilt-making in the African-American community. You'll find that traditional improvisation-type patchwork and then you'll find the narratives. And when we think in terms of narratives and the popularity of narratives in the quilt community, I would say about over 75 percent of all African-American quilt-makers make narrative quilts. We have some historic African references to that. You know, you've got the history of the Griot, who gave these oral traditions – historic traditions – to various villages throughout western Africa. And Africa itself has a very visual history when you think in terms of Dahomey flags and what not. Narratives are just very popular. Besides that, when Africans came here to the United States they couldn't read or write, they weren't allowed to. So it was a very easy way to express themselves through pictorial quilts. Pictorial quilts in the antebellum South have a very, you know, there's a lot there.

African people weren't allowed to read and write here, so it was an easy transition from that oral African history to a pictorial history. When you look at the quilts that were made by African-Americans in the South you have your American patchwork, but you have a lot of narratives too. We're a people with a lot to say. So what better way than to say it in a narrative quilt? We're always telling stories, you know. We're always celebrating the ancestor stories and we continue to follow that oral tradition. It's just – it's a preference, you know, it's a preference of African-Americans for these pictorial quilts. But I find the trend changing a little bit, but that's

another story.

MS. CUBBS: Well let's talk about that.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well, the trends in quilt-making have changed just since I wrote my book. And when I talk about the trends in quilt-making, I'm talking about strictly African-American quilts because that's what I concentrate on.

Since I wrote the book *Spirits of the Cloth* [Carolyn Mazloomi; New York, Clarkson N. Potter: 1998] three years ago, the work has changed a lot in the community. When we think in terms of the historic nature of quilt-making since African people were brought to this country and when we look at the changes, each 50 years or so has brought a different cycle of quilt-making. Historically each one has been very distinct, and each one has its own set of ramifications, own specific set of variables that cause these changes to happen. We have, in African-American quilt history, a gap in quilt-making from the time African-Americans were freed from slavery to the 1960s, 1970s. There weren't that many African-Americans making quilts.

Why? They didn't want to make quilts. They didn't have to make quilts. They were working, you know a lot of them had migrated north and were working and they could afford to buy store-bought blankets. And in talking to my network members, the older ones today that are in their eighties, and we have some in their nineties, they tell you these stories [about] how they just stopped quilting because they were ashamed of quilt-making, they were ashamed of those quilts. And they didn't want to have those quilts on their bed when they could go and get store-bought quilts. They just stopped quilt-making and to this day when you show them a quilt needle – "I don't want to see any more quilt needles," "I don't do that kind of stuff anymore." They will tell you that today. They hate – they don't like quilt-making because they saw it as work. They saw it as work.

And then in the '60s you had the black power movement of the '60s and '70s, an awakening of the black consciousness about who we are and that back-to-Africa movement learning about your roots, and there was a pride in everything black people did. You had a more educated African-American who could appreciate all that happened before, artistically and historically, and they became interested in quilt-making. And then you had the resurgence of the quilt-making with the bicentennial, you know. That helped as well, but as young African-Americans began to see more quilts made by African-Americans being shown in museums, there was a need there – a want – to learn more about quilt-making and to actually learn it hands-on. So then you got a new crop of quilt-makers. The first generation after that big gap, that's my generation, and it's a small national community, but growing. Okay, so, you know, we've got that traditional African-American quilt-maker with the Southern roots, with that improvisational-type quilt, and then you've got my generation after skipping so many years, and now, since [my book] *Spirits of the Cloth*, which had more people of my generation, you've got new folks that, I'm telling you, amaze me.

Two things have happened. The quilters of my generation have started taking formal quilting classes and learning all these new techniques, and it's caused their work to change as they implement these techniques in their work. Their work still has reference to their culture, but it's a new day insofar as technique. So the work has changed a lot. Then you've got young quilters who are totally with – on this art-quilt movement. They don't input any of their culture into the quilts necessarily, but their quilts are really, you know, art-based. And they're just out there, and they are good. They are slamming. And I have to show you before you leave, or at some point, this portfolio of their work.

MS. CUBBS: Okay, we were talking about the new generation of quilt-makers.

MS. MAZLOOMI: New generation of quilt-makers. Young folks, highly educated, most of them are college-educated of every profession. Right now I am working with a pediatric surgeon who is slamming, insofar as her work. It's just a new day. The work looks so different and really [has] no narratives. You see very few narratives, but what you see is so well thought out and it's so well planned, so well executed. These people have had formal classes in quilt-making, but they follow that art-quilt trend. They don't think of themselves as African-American quilters. That doesn't enter into the picture. They think of themselves strictly as artists. And I find it fascinating that very, very few of them know anything about quilt history. That's not their thing. Creating the art is their thing. I find that amazing that you can leave the history behind and not know anything about it, but their focus is totally on creating. And when you talk to them they talk about their work like an art-quilter who likes to talk about their work as fine art, and this is how they relate to what they're doing. But the work has a different look; it's very polished, it's very sophisticated. And it's exciting – really exciting – extraordinary work.

I know without a doubt, we will have an African-American for the first time in quilt history accepted into "Quilt National" [Athens, Ohio]. I know that because the work is so good. And Quilt National is just that, you know, it's the symbol of the art-quilt movement. Well we've never had an African-American in that show. We have very few African-Americans who are willing to even show their quilts. So even if I curate a show, getting them to show their quilts is like pulling teeth. But these new quilters are different: they want to compete. They want to have

people see their work, you know. It's innovative, a lot of it, innovative. Innovative and cutting edge. I just looked at a quilt last week that one of them made, and the quilt is made of leather, plastic, and porcupine quills. It's slamming. It's wonderful. Exciting work, you know? Defies what – defies the definition of a traditional quilt, okay. They've gone beyond that, and that's one of the criteria, innovation, for quilt nationals. So I know we're going to get there. It's exciting.

So the work has changed a lot. It's changed a lot through these young people. It's changed a lot, too, from the people that were originally in the book, with them taking classes and what not. It's put a new face on quilt-making in the African-American quilt community. And even in my own work as curator, there are big changes that are coming on the scene that I think are indicative of what's happening in quilt-making. They're indicative of what's happening in craft, period. The blending of cultures, okay. The separateness of African-American quilt shows and quilt shows, and Amish quilt shows and quilt shows, and Native American quilt shows and quilt shows, I think that's narrowing and that's a good thing. It's like the rest of politics in this country. We have to conform and ride the wave or stay behind, and this is a good thing. Museums now want diversity. Well it's good and bad. They want diversity artists in their shows. I have museums that specifically say, "I don't want all African-Americans." That's a good thing. A lot of African-American artists don't think of it as a good thing, but that's too bad. It's not to say that we as a people can't implement our culture in our work, okay. You can still do that whether it's accepted or not in the mainstream of art. That may be a little hard, okay, but you've got to keep on trying.

It's like everything else we've experienced as Negroes, African-American black folks, we just have to ride that wave because this delineation is blurring. It is. It's coming together. It is coming together and we just have to go with the flow or stay at home, because I just see less and less. That's my feeling, that there will be less and less African-American art shows. Even I'm working with two African-American museums now where the museums have said, "We need diversity." You know, funding has dictated that you have this diversity. Audiences have dictated that you have this diversity because the audience for both of these museums are black and white. Their audiences are Americans, okay, so you have to come in with American art. And that's who we are. We are artists. I like to think of myself as an artist, so I just see this blurring.

MS. CUBBS: Getting back to what you described as your generation of quilt-makers, and the women and men, the artists, represented in your book *Spirits of the Cloth*, would you describe that generation of quilt-makers as more closely identified, in their subject matter at least, with African-American social life, with a specifically African-American cultural and political world?

MS. MAZLOOMI: One hundred percent. [Laughs.] Events in our lives that have happened to us socially and politically are reflected in our work, okay. We came up in that '60s and '70s generation; you know, we were the children of the civil rights movement. Of course it's going to be in our work, because we can't forget that. You don't live through that and leave it behind. People say we should leave it behind, but I'm bringing that baggage with me, because it's just something I can't forget. It's something that I shouldn't forget. It's a lesson that I try and teach my children, which are of this generation and just can't believe, life could have been that bad. But sometimes you have to reflect this in your work because you don't want people to lose those stories. You don't want them to forget. And yes, if you look through *Spirits of the Cloth*, you will see that. You see a lot of those stories from that era. And you see most of these quilts reflect African-American culture strictly. And this new generation, it doesn't. They don't – they're not thinking about that. They're beyond that. But because we lived that life we bring that with us.

And it makes you – every once in a while I have to make a quilt about that era. And it makes me so angry. And my family can look at that quilt and say, "Oh my God. There's such hatred in this quilt. It looks like such an angry quilt." And it is angry, because that era for me was an angry time, you know. Here I am living in the South and put in jail in Mississippi, twice during the civil rights movement. And I had a friend lynched and it was a confusing time. Brothers going off to war in Vietnam when everything back here is just going crazy, and you think are my brothers worthy? Or is this country worthy of my brothers serving in the armed forces? It was just an angry time, so from time to time something in my spirit just says, "Okay, you've got to make a political quilt," and, "There's a message there that you have to get out." And there are certain things that I see like the quilt-makers in this book. They see certain things and they're moved by certain political issues and they've got to make that quilt, you know. There's a young girl in here that has a quilt in the book about three prominent African-American professional women that were in the national spotlight and she felt they got a raw deal in the press. She had to make a quilt about it. When I read James Allen's book, that motivated me to make a quilt.

MS. CUBBS: You're talking about the book *Without Sanctuary* [James Allen; Santa Fe, NM, Twin Palms Publishers: 2000].

MS. MAZLOOMI: Right.

MS. CUBBS: The images of lynching –

MS. MAZLOOMI: Right. Yeah.

MS. CUBBS: – in popular postcards

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yeah. Yeah. I [made] not one quilt, but two or three quilts, you know? And I just get to a point sometimes, my spirit gets full when I think about those things and it has to come out. It comes out in a quilt. And I'm very angry when I'm making those quilts. And they look angry, you know. They're my experience, and once I get it out, then I feel better. and I'm okay for another year or so until something else comes along and pisses me off, and then I'm back to the fabric again working on something. You work it out, you know.

MS. CUBBS: I'd like to go back a little bit now and talk about your education and the way that you found yourself moving from your professional career outside of the art world into your role as an artist and quilt-maker.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Okay, well by training I am an aerospace engineer. As I said before, airplanes have been a big part of my life. Fascinated by airplanes and I think flight. That invention of the plane was just one of the greatest in the world. And the beauty – the sheer beauty of a machine, a winged machine flying in the air is beautiful. It's just absolutely beautiful. My husband and I are the kind of people that sit at the end of the runway just to watch the planes take off, and I really love it. I worked in the aircraft industry for 15 years in Los Angeles after getting out of school, and my husband, who is also in the same field, worked at the same company. At the time we were living in Los Angeles with three small children. And Los Angeles isn't the best place to raise kids, so I made a decision that we would leave Los Angeles and I found him another job. [Laughs.] So that job happened to be in Ohio.

MS. CUBBS: Where did you get your Ph.D. in aerospace [engineering]?

MS. MAZLOOMI: At USC [University of Southern California, Los Angeles, California]

MS. CUBBS: At USC.

MS. MAZLOOMI: And [I] went to undergrad school at Northrup University [Inglewood, California]. Northrup is no longer in existence.

MS. CUBBS: What was the year that you got your Ph.D.?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Eighty-four.

MS. CUBBS: Eighty-four.

MS. MAZLOOMI: But my transition into quilt-making was one I felt of necessity.

MS. CUBBS: What was the year you moved to Cincinnati?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Oh gee. We've been here 16 years. But when we came here, I tried teaching. I taught at OSU [Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio] for a semester. I am not a teacher. Okay? I found that out early on. I hated it. So, in trying to think of something that I could do at home, and loving quilts – that's something else how I got into my first sight of a real, traditional, American quilt. That was something else, but anyway. I just announced one day to my husband that I was going to start making quilts and selling them. And he thought I had lost my mind. He was quite upset. It was him that paid for my post-grad education, which was quite expensive. And he thought to just throw that education away, to sit and cut up fabric and have the audacity to think that somebody was going to pay me for it, was ludicrous. So he was very upset and was upset for many, many years that I was making these quilts. He resented it because he didn't look at it as being a quote real job, unquote. [Laughs.] And he never believed that I would be able to show them in galleries and that people would actually buy them. My husband's Iranian [laughs] and that culture has its own unique place for women. So, he kind of had to be whipped into shape. [Laughs.]

But anyway, he called quilting "needling." So when the quilts started to show, when they started to sell, then he found out, well, there is interest in this, because in his culture there would not be such a thing. So now when he sees that I'm not doing it he says "Carolyn, why aren't you needling? Go needle something." Because now he sees it as a profession, and before he didn't. So I got into this to do something where I could stay at home with my children. That was another thing. And I also thought that there's interest in craft and people would buy these works. I never thought of myself – and to this day I don't think of myself – as an artist. I think of myself as a craftsperson. And I know that's very controversial in the quilt world, but I'm a craftsperson.

MS. CUBBS: What do you see as the difference between the two? Between an artist and a craftsperson. And what do you identify with as a craftsperson?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I think in terms of being taught a traditional craft form when I think of the traditional quilt. It is a

learned craft. When I think of working with the hands, you know, on the cloth. Weaving, I do a lot of weaving as well. This is a craft. It's a technique: a group of learned techniques. And I never thought of myself for some reason as an artist. And maybe that goes back to my youth growing up with my uncle's painting and seeing all these paintings and thinking about painters as being artists. I never thought of myself as being an artist. I often say if I could paint I wouldn't know what to do with myself because geez, the sky is just the limit. You know I've always appreciated painters and I don't think of myself as an artsy person; crafty person. So I know I'll get kicked for that, but I do.

MS. CUBBS: I'm wondering functionally how you see yourself as different, because I see you working with color and space and figuration and all of the things that one would work with to create a painting.

MS. MAZLOOMI: I encounter this all the time in my lectures when I especially go to universities and lecture, and trained art people will get into this stuff, you know. The coloration, spatial elements, and all of this stuff and I find it so funny. I'm an engineer, okay. I have no training in the arts whatsoever. The aesthetics of art, it's just what I do, it's a spiritual thing. It's totally untaught. And I have never had time to read art criticism. I don't give a damn about art criticism anyway, because that's not my arena and how I work it's a very intuitive thing. And I find it fascinating when scholars and academic people describe my work. [Laughs.] I listen and I used to think, oh my, did I do that? Is that mine? Did I have that in mind? Is that what it really means? All of this is fascinating, how the work is dissected and what not. But you know I've not had any art classes, and I often say I don't know what the hell I'm doing. I'm just led by the spirit of the moment. I've never even had any quilting classes. I've never had time. I wish I could take some quilting classes, you know. Everything that I've ever learned about it I've taught myself and I wish I had time to take quilt classes.

I often say I wish I had time to take a class on color. That's when I'm dreaming, okay. Then I come to my real senses and I think, for what? [Laughs.] Because the color has a voice. The color –every color has a voice, and it lets you know where it doesn't want to be when you're making a quilt. When you slap it down on the foundation of your quilt, that fabric, and if it doesn't like the fabric next to it, it screams out "Move me. Take me away." So it's a very intuitive thing and it's not a struggle for me, because the cloth talks to you. It lets you know where it doesn't want to be. Or where it wants to be. It just jumps out. Pow! There it is.

MS. CUBBS: Are you talking about a kind of difference, then, between university-trained artists and a person who has learned his or her craft outside of academia, and that difference primarily being one of intellectualizing your work and your activity as opposed to not intellectualizing it? What do you see as the distinctions between self-taught and non-self-taught?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Intellectualizing the work, that's one thing. And I see it with the art-quilt movement. [END TAPE 1 SIDE A] And I don't have time for that. That's not my job. My job is to create. I don't want to intellectualize what I create. And I don't want to agonize over technique. For what? Then all the substance is gone from the work, you know. When I first started quilting, I didn't know how to quilt and I taught myself. And I got all of these books on quilt-making and to this day I can't make a patchwork quilt. It's very exacting. And after reading those books I didn't think in terms of the improvisational quilt. I have never been good at improvisation. I guess that's the structure of my education. But the books were very specific about technique and some of the quilts were very fussy.

Like I love Baltimore Album quilts. I don't know if you're familiar with that style, but it's a very fussy, floral style executed flawlessly. And I made one of those quilts and it took me three years practically to finish it. Very exacting insofar as technique. That's very restrictive; very anal-retentive. And there's no freedom there. And I would agonize over every little piece. Honestly, every little piece, just agonize over it. Each block would take weeks and weeks to decide the color, you know, just the color. And the placement had to be just so, and it was agonizing because the process was so slow and I'm a results-oriented person. I wanted to see my finished product, but the agony of going through the motions of getting this done. One night I became so angry at the indecision within myself to just choose colors for the block, I took all of my quilt books, my Baltimore Album books, and I had a fireplace in my studio. I burned them. And that was a spiritual release for me. I said, okay, I just can't go with the program. I want to be myself. I want to be free. The whole process of making that quilt was very painful and I knew it shouldn't be painful. Making the quilt should be a joyous thing. Well I wasn't getting the joy, okay. [Laughs.] So, getting rid of those books put me on track to really doing what I've wanted to do.

So in thinking about the rhyme and reason as to why, back to this intellectualizing, I just can't do that. I just can't. My inner self won't let me do that. I don't have time for that. I quilt strictly for me. This is why I don't do commissions. I don't want anybody telling me what to do and how to do it. I will not conform. I will never conform. And I'll never do anything that somebody else wants me to do. I guess that's just my nature too. If somebody says do A, I'm going to do Z. I want the freedom of choice. I want the freedom to follow my own mind. I think there's a place for the academically trained artists. That's wonderful. It's grand. But it's not me.

I can't get into that bag of the intellectualizing because then I might change what I'm doing, and the likelihood of

that happening is kind of null and void, [even though] there's still a little bit that's there that says maybe it's possible that you can change the work that you're doing by reading, listening to this stuff. This art form should be simple. It was at one time simple. To many people today, especially the traditionalist, this is a simple art form that's joyous – brings hours of joy. And that's how I want to, deal with this. It should bring me joy. The minute it doesn't, then I'm not going to do it anymore. I don't do things that I don't want to do.

But I always find it interesting and hilarious going to universities and listening to scholars describe my work and making references to all these Africanisms that I don't know anything about. And the meaning of forms and symbols within the body of the work. I don't know what the hell they're talking about, because that was not my intent. But I hate it when it's stated and printed as fact, which often happens, and then the work, the actual artwork, kind of loses its trail. It loses its meaning for the artist and it's lost in scholarly muck.

MS. CUBBS: I'm working in my own mind right now to reconcile your earlier, advanced educational experience, and your career as an engineer, with your transition into the world of quilt-making. I know in the past you have spoken about a kind of pivotal experience – your confrontation with a quilt that began to introduce ideas to you about your own passion for quilt-making. Do you know what I'm talking about? A reference to seeing an Appalachian quilt –

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yeah.

MS. CUBBS: In one of your travels.

MS. MAZLOOMI: That was a revelation.

MS. CUBBS: Go back, if you wouldn't mind, to the time just before you saw that quilt, and tell me what you were doing in your life, and how that confrontation occurred.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well, I was an engineer at the time, and I also owned a gift store and had gone to a trade market in Dallas as a buyer. And it was during the time when the Appalachian cooperatives were selling their quilts to the wholesale trade. And that was the first time that I can remember seeing a traditional American quilt. And it was a patchwork piece in the center with an eagle in each corner of the quilt. And it was mesmerizing to me; I wanted to go up and touch it, as always. [Laughs.] Quilters are the worst culprits about touching the work. But that's the tactile nature of quilts – every human being, you want to touch it. You know, we as human beings have a love affair with the cloth. It's the first thing we're swathed in from birth. You can't get around it, unless you live in a nudist camp. But we as human beings will always have a love affair with the cloth. So you want to touch it. So I just left that trade center saying, "Okay, I'm going to teach myself how to quilt." And set about doing just that. But that was my first, well my second view after my relative's quilt. My mother's mom's quilt.

MS. CUBBS: What was the year of your encounter with that Appalachian quilt?

MS. MAZLOOMI: This was in the early '70s. And I don't think of it as an Appalachian quilt, it was just a quilt made in Appalachia. It was a typical, American, patchwork quilt. That quilt is a very common pattern, okay. That combination of appliqué with the eagles in each corner. And I found that pattern in many folk-art books that feature quilts, so I like to think of it as a typical, American quilt. But you know, that was the spark. That was the spark that fueled the flame. [They laugh.] And the flame is the torch.

MS. CUBBS: Describe how that flame grew after that.

MS. MAZLOOMI: I was obsessed with learning how to quilt, and I could not find – this was in Los Angeles and I didn't know anything about quilt guilds and just didn't know they existed. But I did manage to get a couple of quilt books and made my first patchwork quilt. And it was a nine-patch quilt and I wanted to make my quilt an authentic American quilt. As I read in the instruction book, the quilt is comprised of your top, your batting, and a backing. I wanted my quilt to be an authentic American quilt with a cotton batting. And when I went to get the batting after making this God-awful top, I couldn't find any batting, not cotton batting anyway. There was only poly batting, this polyester bat. And I wanted cotton. It had to be cotton. So I went to my neighborhood pharmacy and I got these boxes of first aid cotton – this Red Cross cotton. And it comes in a little square maybe about five by six inches or less, and it's rolled in paper in this box. And I must have gotten a dozen boxes from the pharmacy and I took the cotton, unfurled the cotton, and I carefully put it on my backing. These little cotton patches, but I needed so much of it. And I couldn't guesstimate how much I needed, but I kept going back to the pharmacy to get more of this first aid cotton. So one day I was in the pharmacy and buying this first aid cotton, still unfurling it for my batting, and the pharmacist asked me, he says "Dr. Mazloomi, I hate to interfere in your personal affairs, but I would suggest if anybody's sick in your house that needs this cotton to get them to the hospital." By that time I had bought the guy out like maybe two or three times with this cotton and he, I guess, he thought somebody in my house must have been desperately ill.

So after umpteen dozen boxes of this first aid cotton I had enough to put my backing in – my batting together with the top and I quilted it. Hand quilted it because I used to just hand quilt my early quilts. And I didn't pre-wash the fabric. Wasn't thinking. By having small children, the quilt got dirty and I put it in the washer, washing machine, and washed it and dried it in the dryer and I still have that quilt. And my children call it my fried egg quilt because the middle of it sits up like maybe two feet from the bed. It was just a total disaster. Looks like a piece of soft sculpture, this first quilt. Just awful. But anyway, that was my first experience and I thought God it's got to get better. [Laughs.] I mean, I have to get better. I have to get better. But through practice and trial and error, you know, I kind of came into my own and my work is still evolving. I no longer hand-quilt, and I miss that. And I've never liked anybody else's hand-quilting other than my own, so I never sent my quilts out. But now I have carpal tunnel in my right wrist, so I can't do the quilting. And besides, now I need the quilt so quickly I have to do them on the sewing machine.

MS. CUBBS: You need to keep up with the demand from galleries and –

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes. Yes. Trying to keep up with different shows and there seems to be no balance in between my trying to run the Women of Color Quilter's Network and trying to do my own quilt-making. There's not time for both, so consequently they both suffer at different intervals depending on what I'm doing.

MS. CUBBS: I'd like to talk about your multiple roles in the field, but before we get there, let me ask you if there was anything in particular, anything special, about quilt-making that really lit your passion.

MS. MAZLOOMI: The ability to create a piece of work that's graphically complex from a simple piece of cloth is fascinating. The ability to combine various pieces of cloth, various colors and textures of cloth, to create a graphic piece to me is mind-boggling. And to say one didn't paint it but yet it looks like a painting, I find extraordinary. It's a wonderful feat. And it feels good. It always feels good after you've completed a piece that you're really in love with. And you step back and look at it and think, damn, did I do that? It looks good. And it's satisfying. It satisfies me to know from cloth, from nothing it came, and you put life into your vision. That's more than sufficient to keep me motivated in the creation of quilts. It's always about the story and the finished product. And I think as with all artists, all quilt-makers, as long as you're living, as long as you can think, you will always have stories. If you lived 100 lives, you can't get all these stories out. I say stories for the narrative quilt-maker, but I'm sure, I'm positive, it's the same for the traditional quilt-maker, or the art quilt-maker or whomever. We will always have stories and you want to get them out, and that's the satisfaction of quilt-making. For me that's the light bulb, that's the electricity.

MS. CUBBS: I've enjoyed your musings about the nature of quilt-making itself, and I recall one of them in particular from *Spirits of the Cloth* where you talked about quilt-making as a kind of visual manifestation of a family's genealogy. Something that linked the generations, because of the use of found cloth. Can you talk a little bit more about the nature of quilt-making from that aspect?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Okay, keep in mind that everything I talk about, most of the things in quilt-making deal with the African-American, okay?

MS. CUBBS: Yes.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Okay. And the connection to the family. And if I get off on a tangent with this just pull me back because I have to delve off into something else to get to that point. You'll see a lot of references to the family in *Spirits of the Cloth*. You'll find a lot of references in my work to family. This is one of the reasons as a curator it is so hard to find African-American quilts where the artists are willing to show their quilts, because they were made for family. They were made for friends. And for us, friends are family. In the past it was about taking those bits of cloth, and still now in the South, taking old clothes and making them into a quilt to give to the grandkids or to one's children. Again, you go back into that oral history about who we are and sharing who we are, and you know, sharing that with our families and friends. But that was the – that's the backbone of African-American quilt-making. Even to this day the majority of the quilt-makers make the work for their family. And they love to show references of the family, or people in the family, on the quilts. That just binds the family, bonds them closer together, you know. Seeing that image and what it's about and giving it to a family member that you love. It just brings them closer and that's that circle of life, and we want to perpetuate that circle. You're talking about mostly women too. Women artists, you know, involved in this arena.

Quilting's very important to mothers, you know. Giving that child a quilt is important. It just brings you, or brings them, closer to you. When we're gone, and in my generation I hear this a lot, you know, "I am quilting. This is my legacy for my children. This is what I leave for my children. I leave a bit of myself in these quilts for my children. I leave this for my family. This is who I am. This is who we are." This is what you see in these quilts. That link between the cloth used to make the quilts and the family is important. And children have always played a big role in our lives as mothers. The extended family has played a big role – we're big on extended family, okay, so making quilts for the extended family is important as well. You know, the cloth bonds us

together in the quilts, so when we talk about family images in quilts it's just that it's a unifying symbol giving a quilt to a family member. That's our history.

MS. CUBBS: It's that history –

MS. MAZLOOMI: Birth to death.

MS. CUBBS: So that history and the legacy of African-American quilt-making in an important way grounds your own work.

[tape stops, restarts]

MS. MAZLOOMI: Where did we leave?

MS. CUBBS: Well before we leave your origins as a quilt-maker, let me ask you if there is a specific educational experience that seems most rewarding to you. Is there anything that pops out as having been a pivotal moment for you in learning about how to be a quilt-maker?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Pivotal moment. Learning to be a quilt-maker. I guess looking at that first ugly quilt was a pivotal moment. Knowing that this is more about skill. And this is why, too, I think in terms of myself as a craftsperson. It is about skill. If you don't have the skill, then you can't create the piece. To me, when I look at my brothers and my uncles, they were born with this gift. Nobody taught them how to paint. And especially my brother was a very fine studio artist. That was God's gift to them, okay. I don't have that gift, but I have a mind to learn skills to teach me to get from point A to B to create a piece of work. I look at that as craft. I look at that as, you know, craftspersonship. [Laughs.]

MS. CUBBS: Do you see any relationship between your skills as an engineer and your skills as a quilt maker. Is there anything that translates for you over that divide?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It did and I had to get over it, okay. Because engineering is a very exacting science and it's exact. Everything is exact, you know. That's science. And when I started quilt-making I brought that, you know, I brought that set of skills and that discipline of exactitude in this work, and for me it didn't work, so I had to put it in a different place. I had to put it in the glove compartment because it didn't serve me well in quilt-making. I would be crazy now. I don't think I'd be involved in quilt-making if I looked at quilt-making like I look – or did my job as an engineer. This is how I started out with quilt-making, wanting to be exact. Going by a set of rules and, a set of rules about how the geometric quilt should look and how the appliqué should look. And it wasn't working for me, so the application of engineering skills to quilt-making skills doesn't work for me. And I had to separate them. So they've not brought me anything to this arena when I think in terms of the work itself. It's helped me in the discipline of the business of craft. The business of making art, okay. That discipline from the engineering background has helped, but the actual implementation of the artwork, no it hasn't helped. Because what I do is not exact. In a way it's improvisational, but it's figuratively so.

MS. CUBBS: Did you ever apprentice with anybody, or did you ever consider somebody to be your mentor in any way?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I've never apprenticed with anyone. There are lots of people whose work I admire. Mainly Marie Wilson in New York City, who was a founding member of the Women of Color Quilter's Network. An extraordinary needlewoman. Exquisite needlework. And I so admired her skill. You could look at her hands and tell that she would be the creator of exquisite needlework. She had those kinds of hands. And when you looked at her work it was something to aspire to. And the fact that she, like me, was very interested in creating pieces that deal with women and their plight, their status, and I admired that. I admired Marie Wilson's work for the statement that it made about women. All the statements that her quilts made about women. Very profound. So in addition to her intellect she had the skills.

MS. CUBBS: What were her hands like?

MS. MAZLOOMI: She had long – she was a very tall woman, well over six feet – oh geez, please, six-three, six-two, and long slender elegant hands. But I could just see a needle in her hands. Those hands were the kind of hands that did fine needlework. You can look at a person's hands and kind of judge what kind of needlework they would do. I have chunky hands but when I was doing hand-quilting, the chunky hands were very deceiving because I could do very fine needlework using my own methods that were unique to me and my big hands. But I loved to look at Marie Wilson's hands and to see her at work. So when I think of mentors, it would be Marie Wilson. She's been a mentor and a mother figure for so many of us. Especially all the founding members of the Women of Color Quilter's Network, especially the New York chapter where she lived and – which was the first chapter of the Women of Color Quilter's Network. We all loved Marie Wilson, and loved the opportunity to sit at her knee and listen to her speak because she was a wonderful, extraordinary storyteller. But when you have the

opportunity to listen to someone who is well into her eighties and hear whatever words they say, you hang on those words because these are words from the wise. These are words from people that have paid their dues and learned, learned from living in this world, so everything that they say is like a pearl. So we sit at their feet and listen. And we were just enraptured by everything she said, everything she said. And I look at Marie as a mentor, talented artist and strong, strong woman. And that's important. And she is missed. Sorely missed. She passed away five years ago and wherever we are when we gather as a network there's a seat –

[END OF TAPE 1 SIDE B]

MS. CUBBS: This is Joanne Cubbs interviewing Carolyn Mazloomi at the artist's home in West Chester, Ohio, on September 17th, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number two. I'd like to begin to talk with you about how you met Marie Wilson, and I think that that will lead us quite naturally into your founding of the Women of Color Quilter's Network. But before I do that, let me ask you if you have had any involvement or significant exposure to any other kinds of educational institutions devoted to craft, like the Penland School of Crafts [Penland, North Carolina] or the Haystack Mountain School of Crafts [Deer Isle, Maine], the Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts [Gatlinburg, Tennessee], or the Archie Bray Foundation [Helena, Montana]. Have you had any experiences with any of these institutions?

MS. MAZLOOMI: None. None.

MS. CUBBS: Okay.

MS. MAZLOOMI: At one time last summer someone called from Penland and asked if I would teach a class, a workshop. I said no, because I'm not a teacher and I didn't feel, and still don't feel, that I have the expertise to teach any quilter anything, so I said no. [Laughs.]

MS. CUBBS: Well then let's go to the '80s and your account of your effort to embed yourself in a community of quilt-makers, and particularly African-American quilt-makers. What did you find as you went to exhibitions around the country?

MS. MAZLOOMI: In traveling the country with my work, I found whenever I had an opportunity to take in a quilt show I never saw any African-Americans ever and wondered where they were. Because I was quilting; I enjoy quilting and had a small group of quilters in Los Angeles. Maybe four – four of us that met at a museum in Los Angeles and started to quilt, but I wondered where were the others. Where were the other African-American quilt-makers, and [I] consequently placed an ad in the *Quilter's Newsletter* magazine asking any African-American quilters out there reading the magazine to get in touch with me. And as a result nine people wrote and Marie Wilson was one of those. And that's how I met Marie. And the one commonality that we had together was the fact that we all thought we were the last of the African-American quilters in the country quilting. And just by word of mouth about the network, we started writing to each other and then I got together a newsletter, which I knew nothing about. Actually it was like a journal because the first two years it was like over 100 pages where everything that I found about African-American quilt-makers I put in this newsletter, because I thought everybody would be just like me: hungry for any information about African-Americans and African-American quilts.

But over the years, through word of mouth, the network grew to where it is today, over 1,700 people. And it's objective was to foster quilt-making among people within the culture, as well as to educate African-Americans about the cultural significance of what they made insofar as the quilts, and the monetary value of the quilts, because it was at a time when quilts were being studied and under the microscope of a lot of scholars and really being collected. So you had a two-fold thing, the scholarship and the collecting. Those issues had to be addressed within the body of the network.

So many collectors were scooping up African-American quilts from the South for little or nothing and there was no value attached to those quilts by the African-American men and women who made them. But yet and still galleries were selling them for enormous prices and so were some collectors, and people had not a clue to the value of those quilts. And I find that very unfair. It is theft. It is theft to steal, or take quilts rather, from quilt-makers, or any artist you know, especially folk artists, who do things purely – make these quilts purely for the love if it. And if a collector comes and they know that a quilt is worth thousands and they take it for free, because many, many, many quilts were given away. Quilters are the most giving people on the planet. "You like it? Oh take it." My husband often fusses at me for that, you know. Somebody comes here and they said, "Oh, we love this." "Well, take it!" You know. But we're very giving and that's unfair and it's dishonest to take from someone knowing that you're taking that article and you're going to make a profit on it. It's wrong. So people had to know what the monetary worth of the quilt is.

And they had to get a new appreciation, especially the older ones – older quilt-makers, and that's still a work in progress: to appreciate the quilts for their artistic merit, their historical note. They don't think about that, and still it's tough, me being a young person as compared to somebody in their 70s and 80s. It's hard for them to

listen to me because, you know, I'm so much younger than they are so I don't know what I'm talking about. [Laughs.] You know, in their eyes. So the educational process for the older women is sometimes not that easy. And it's been hard. It's been tough.

But over the last 10 years the Network has sort of changed focus, and I have to say in hindsight this network has always been open to everybody regardless of race. The focus and the objectives have always remained the same, but it's been open. And it's different insofar as a guild because to me it's always been about acceptance of every skill level, every style, unlike a guild. When African-Americans join a guild usually they are the only ones and their style of quilting is totally different than the guild members. So a lot of times they don't show their quilts because they look so different. But the Network is about acceptance. You know, bring it on. It doesn't matter, you know. It does not matter about the skill level or the style or whatever. It's a quilt and here you're at home, so you can share your quilt. Over the last 10 years the focus has changed – it's changed in that the focus is on economic development for women. And we co-opted with a number of organizations outside of the country and have gone to other countries and taught quilt-making to women so they can make quilts to sell in this quilt-market here in the United States. The focus has been on women sustaining themselves by the sale of their quilts. So much so the United Nations and International Labor Department has honored the Women of Color Quilter's Network for the work that they've done in that arena. I'm very proud of that. Women need to be able to sustain themselves. [Telephone ringing in background.] [Laughs.] Sorry.

MS. CUBBS: I'd like to ask you more to talk about the Women of Color Quilter's Network. What year was it formed? Because I've read a number of different dates: '84, '85, '86.

MS. MAZLOOMI: No it – '84.

MS. CUBBS: '84?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yeah. And I guess you hear so many dates because it was quite informal. I don't think in terms of a birthday for the Network. [Laughs.] But I guess, you know, we were laid back. But anyway –

MS. CUBBS: Can you talk a little bit about how the membership grew and how the nature of the organization developed and then changed?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Through word of mouth we, black quilt-makers heard about the Network. We initially started out with the objectives of preserving quilt-making in the black community and educating quilters about the historical significance and the monetary value of their quilts. We offered a lending library of quilt books through the mail. We had a newsletter. Still have a newsletter. We offered quilt-repair services. We had one member in West Virginia that repaired antique quilts. And we offered grant-writing services for those that wanted that. However, we've been financially on our own from day one. We've never gotten a grant. Never gotten a donation from anyone and I used to resent that for the longest, but now I'm very proud of it because we answer to no one and we are independent. No one's given us anything, and we are still here and we'll be here. Regardless. So we're proud of that.

Over the last 10 years the objectives have become a little different in that we're heavily involved in economic and social development programs for women and children. There are chapters of the Network in other countries. We partnered with other women's organizations throughout the world where we've gone and taught women quilt-making in other countries so that they can sell their work here in the U.S. market. So the work is fine tuned for American tastes. Not necessarily that there is any quilt history in any of these countries that we've gone to, because there's not.

MS. CUBBS: Can you give some examples of those countries and a program or two that you were directly involved with?

MS. MAZLOOMI: We are involved in a project in Nigeria and one in Kenya where the women were taught quilt-making and now that's a budding cooperative in both countries. Not only the making of the quilts, the finished quilts, but also dying the fabric. And with the importing of African fabric the last 10 years and the popularity of commercially-made African fabric and its design elements here being accepted and wanted so much in America, I've found that many of the cooperatives the women have started to dye their own cloth. [For example,] shibori is very popular. It's very expensive to get it in Japan. But in Nigeria we have women that are making the same types of shibori. I'm not so much privy to the technique because I've never seen it done; I've only read about it. But they turn out wonderful, wonderful indigo dyed works that mirror shibori work. And they know there is a lucrative market for it, okay, so wonderful tie-dyes and indigo dye techniques that they are putting out in the marketplace.

MS. CUBBS: So they're –

MS. MAZLOOMI: So they sustain themselves with that.

MS. CUBBS: And they are manufacturing, then, Japanese-inspired fabric to sell primarily in the United States?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Primarily, yeah. [Laughs.] All they can make, we will take. You know, we will buy. It's quite popular, so I think in terms of these two cooperatives. Several years ago all of these cooperatives around the world got together for an international meeting in Nuremberg, Germany, to address the issues of marketing for textiles, and it was a wonderful coming together of women from 32 different countries. And a wonderful catalog of proceedings. Extraordinary catalog of proceedings of that meeting, and I'm in touch still with these cooperatives today. And cooperatives means just that: women cooperating together to create a product to sell.

Then on the home front we are involved in several national art – summer art camps and after-school art programs. Prison programs for women. We have a project in two cities where we make what we call Surgi-dolls for children – sick children in hospitals. And that's a component of the Network, and that's an objective of the Network, to do something for the community, in which that chapter is. You have to give something back, okay. Do some kind of charitable work as well.

So we have an after-school program that my business partner and I have been associated with in Columbus, Ohio, for, gosh, maybe 10 years where we started – we worked with a summer art camp. And the first year that we were there – first summer, we taught these inner-city children quilt-making. And these children lived in the projects. They didn't even want to come to the program. People would have to go and knock on doors in the projects to get the kids to come because even the parents weren't interested in getting the children to the summer camp. And there was a lot of resistance to quilt-making. You know, kids look at it as an old-fashioned thing and, you know, what they're making wasn't substantial, it wasn't important. And we got these kids when they were like in second and third grade and the first summer that we were there my business partner, Edjohnetta Miller, and I said, "Okay. We're never coming back to Columbus. These kids are terrible." You know, and they don't want to be here, and you know if they don't want to be here then we don't want to be here either. And it was always some kid that would come up at the end of the program and say something to tear your heart to pieces. And we'd look at each other and say, "Okay, I guess we're coming back next summer."

But over a two- or three-summer period the children became quite good at making quilts, and they started selling their quilts. Their quilts are in libraries and schools and some corporate settings in Columbus. They took that money and enlarged the program to encompass dance and music and theater, and to support sending some of the kids to dance camp. Like Katherine Dunham's dance camp in St. Louis for two weeks. And these children did wonderful things with their quilt-making, but they didn't realize the importance of their quilts until one of the quilts that they made was selected to be in a traveling show "Stitching Memories," a show of narrative quilts made by African-Americans. And the quilts were on a two year tour, and during that two-year period they came to the Taft Museum here and we rented a bus and brought the children from Columbus to Cincinnati, to the Taft Museum. And when they walked in and saw their quilts hanging on the wall of a museum that was a turning point for these kids, okay. Not only were the quilts – their quilt hanging in the show, but they were feted that night with a wonderful party that was sponsored by a social group here in Cincinnati and they were treated like the special artists that they are. And that was a turning point: seeing their quilt hanging on the museum wall.

MS. CUBBS: Do you recall the museum that originated the show?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Taft. This was out of Williams College in Williams [Williamstown], Massachusetts. But that was a turning point for these children. And we worked with the same group for almost 10 years and we only lost one kid, okay. And all of these children were high-risk students from the public school system in Columbus, and the sponsorship of this camp was under the auspices of an organization called FACE [Friends of Art for Community Enrichment] and a woman by the name of Catherine Willis started it. But it was a wonderful experience for these children. The children later on got scholarships to go to Piney Woods School in Piney Woods, Mississippi, and many of them have gone on to college, okay. But I would like to think that through the arts these children have gone on to do great things. These were inner-city children who learned through this art program the power of visual art. The exposure to dance. The exposure to theater. We even had them in New York, to go to the theater in New York and they performed a play – every year they'd do a play at the studio museum – I'm sorry, the, oh gosh, I can't think of the name of this theater in Harlem. But they experienced extraordinary things. The Apollo Theater. They experienced extraordinary things to the art, and when someone doesn't realize the power of art, it's just a shame. Because of art these children got another view of life. Through this art they got a second chance. They got a new attitude. And it's this art that serves as soul food – visual soul food, to inspire these children to another level.

MS. CUBBS: What were your years of involvement with this program and was it under the aegis of an organization in Columbus?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes, FACE.

MS. CUBBS: What is it called – FACE?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Friends of Art for Community Enrichment, and it was founded by Catherine Willis.

MS. CUBBS: And what were your years of involvement?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I'm still involved with them, and I love Catherine Willis and admire her for her contribution to the arts. How she's brought it to the African-American community. And she's brought it through these – to these children. At one time she was an elementary school teacher, so her life has always been surrounded by children. And she saw a need and she acted. And she brought us and the Women of Color Quilter's Network kicking and screaming into this setting with these children. These high-risk children. And we initially didn't want to be involved after working with them that summer and seeing – it was a hard job because their attitudes were terrible. But seeing the metamorphosis of these kids was extraordinary and, you know, it was a heart-felt experience. And it was a good thing. It's still a good thing.

MS. CUBBS: When did you start with them? What was your first year? Do you recall?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Oh geez, I can't recall the years.

MS. CUBBS: Somewhere in the early '90s?

MS. MAZLOOMI: About '90. 1990. Yeah.

MS. CUBBS: I'm just amazed at the amount and kind of outreach activity you're talking about being done by the Quilter's Network, and I'm curious to know, are you officially the director of the Network?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I'm the founder of the Network. I'm the coordinator of the Network. I'm the curator of the Network. I broker the sales for the Network. This is it. [Laughs.]

MS. CUBBS: How many chapters –

MS. MAZLOOMI: There are over 1,700 members, and we have chapters in 13 major cities, but most of the quilters are from rural areas, you have to keep that in mind. But yeah, I do it all. And unfortunately I think, like with any organization, it's very hard to find someone to lead an organization because it is work. In the years that I've been doing this I've only had one person, young person, step forward and say that I'm willing to help. Then when I tell them what's involved, especially this one young woman, she says, "Well you're crazy. [Laughs.] This is too much. I can't do this." People call here thinking I have an office, you know, it is a job. It is a job coordinating the shows and brokering sales, and I always tell the network members whatever you sell donate back to the Network. That's not a written thing, some of them do, most of them don't. But I don't care. It's still about the preservation of quilt-making within the culture.

MS. CUBBS: So you are contacted by museums and other exhibiting organizations to put together shows, and you are contacted by museums or collectors who want to buy pieces from members?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Museums and corporations and collectors, yeah, they all call here. The Network has established a name, you know. Within the museum and collectors' circles, people know if you're interested in African-American quilts and you've read anything, just contact the Network and it acts as a resource to find quilt-makers to do workshops, to do shows, to do stuff.

MS. CUBBS: Have you had national meetings for your membership?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It's very laid back; we gather together wherever we have shows. God, and there's special meetings; they're not too often. Well they don't happen that often, but we're in touch through mail and what not. It takes money and time to organize a national meeting. I don't have the time and we really don't have that – those kinds of resources, because the money always goes back to the women. And that's another thing, I never accepted any money from this Network, ever. In order to see it thrive I just couldn't take money. Like I always leave it up to them – to the membership to pay the dues. Like most of them, 90 percent of them don't pay dues. I leave it to their consciousness to pay it. I shouldn't have to browbeat you to pay it. You know that I sold your quilt. You know that I've put you in touch or brokered a sale for your quilt. You know that I've gotten $5,000 or $10,000 or $15,000, or $18,000 for your quilt and your conscience doesn't allow you to give back? You know, I leave it to your conscience. So that doesn't detour though from what I'm doing because I find it typical. And I belong to a lot of organizations on a lot of boards, okay, and everybody doesn't always do what is expected of them to do, but somehow I like to believe the best in people will come out and I will leave that to their conscience. Sometimes they come around, sometimes they don't.

But I'm not going to get off track, so as I said I never accepted any money for doing this. I don't need it, you know. But our folks need it. The culture needs it. They need this organization. And there are certain pioneers within this Africa-American quilt community, we have icons in this quilt community, like Cuesta Benberry and

Roland Freeman that we need to sustain with – well, they sustain us with their presence and their writings and I feel like if I didn't do what I set out to do in the Network I'm sort of letting them down too, because they are the pioneers. It's because of these people, especially Roland Freeman, who was the first person in this country to ever mount an exhibition of African-American quilts. We owe it to these pioneers to keep making this work and putting it out there, and to do the best that we can do. I love it when Cuesta Benberry sees new work and she gets excited, and she lets out a little scream and says, "Oh wow! This is wonderful. This is wonderful. I never thought I'd see the day when all of this African-American quilt-work would be in so many museums." I am honored that she can say that. And she's here to say that. And she can say that to us, that she's proud of us, and we owe her that. I owe her that. You know, I owe these pioneers that. So I keep doing what I'm doing.

MS. CUBBS: So you function not only as an artist yourself, and quilt-maker, but also as the founder of this major network and also as the curator of many shows. In addition to being a cultural advocate, you've also written now a major book, *Spirits of the Cloth*, which was published in 1998. Can you tell me a little bit more about that project?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I wanted to write a book to celebrate African-Americans and the quilts that they made, especially from a contemporary viewpoint, because so much was being written about improvisational quilts and the historic traditional quilts within the culture, and nothing about contemporary quilts. There was nothing out there about the contemporary quilts made by African-Americans. And I felt that there should be, so I set about writing *Spirits of the Cloth*. And now it's time for something else because we made such progress insofar as the work. But there had to be some information about contemporary quilts made by African-Americans, because there was a gap.

MS. CUBBS: And *Spirits of the Cloth* was also an exhibition, was it not?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It was a traveling exhibition for two years. The traveling exhibition was sponsored by the American Craft Museum [New York] and the exhibition traveled across the country for two years, and it was very well received and I think people were shocked to see, geez, there's so much diversity in the African-American quilt community.

MS. CUBBS: How did that affect your own work? Doing that project. And how has being in contact with so many other quilt-makers through the Network, how has all of that impacted your work?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It doesn't impact my work. I don't feel that it impacts my work because I'm going to do what I wanted to regardless. But the one thing is, as an artist okay, being in a successful exhibition is a very good feeling. It is so good when you see people respond to your work.

[Audio break. Recording paused.]

MS. MAZLOOMI: – [*Spirits of*] *the Cloth* had no impact on my work. It doesn't have that kind of influence other than, you know, letting folks see what different quilt-makers have insofar as their own styles and what not. And I've never been influenced by anybody's style. I just do my own thing. I am not a follower. I know that in the art-quilt community people are influenced by teachers, they're influenced by other well-known quilt-makers. I don't follow styles. I don't follow trends. And maybe that's why I haven't switched to the geometric art quilt. Because people say it's more acceptable as an art form. I don't care. I'm doing my own thing and it works for me. If it works for me and I'm satisfied with it, then it will be.

MS. CUBBS: Have you done a lot of traveling and has that travel had an impact on your work?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I travel constantly all around the world. I'm gone from my home two weeks out of the month, and it has impacted my work in a negative way. It hasn't impacted my work insofar as style. It's impacted my work in a negative way because I don't have time to devote – I don't have studio time. I don't have the studio time that I need to create the work that I want to get out. So it's always wonderful traveling to different countries and different states and finding out what's going on in the national quilt community. That's wonderful. It's wonderful traveling to foreign countries and picking up fabric made in different countries that has patterning very different from what we would find here in the Unites States, and coming back and using that in my quilts. Now if that has an impact, then yeah, the use of different materials.

MS. CUBBS: Could you give me an example of that?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I'm not taking you down to my studio, it's too much. But I just got a shipment of needlework from Iran and these are little patches of embroidered work made from raffia and silk thread and I plan to incorporate those pieces in my quilts. I'm always cutting up stuff, and I get a lot of beadwork from Nigeria and whenever I cut it up, people just go "[Gasp.] You shouldn't cut that up." But I do cut up the beadwork, it's three-dimensional beadwork, and use it in my quilts. Or just take the whole piece like a belt or whatever and put it in my work. I incorporate molas. I have incorporated molas in my work.

MS. CUBBS: Obtained from your own travels?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes. Yes. I am always traveling and bringing back stuff and every time I go out I say I'm not going to buy any more fabric or any more quilt books. For example, I went to the international quilt festival in Houston last year, actually to do a taped segment for PBS Japan, and I went into the quilt show to buy one book and to this day I hate myself because I ended up buying three suitcases to bring home all the books and fabric that I bought. And I just felt so bad. But then I felt really good when I unpacked it and put it in my studio. [Laughs.] All guilt was lost because I had this wonderful fabric. So everywhere I travel I am constantly looking for fabric. You never get enough fabric. I take that back, you get enough fabric when you – you know you've gotten enough when you have to sneak it in the house when everybody's asleep at night and you bring it in then so nobody can see that you spent all this money again on fabric, which it seems to be a daily occurrence, so I don't know. [Laughs.]

MS. CUBBS: Would you think of yourself as part of an international tradition, or one that's particularly American?

MS. MAZLOOMI: That's a very good question. When I think in terms of African history there is a patchwork equation there. But when I entered this arena it was through, and influenced by, American patchwork. So I would say I am influenced by American patchwork. That's a real flashpoint for scholars; relating what we do to African traditions, signs, symbols, textiles, and unconscious retention of these traditions – African traditions. Well, I take that lightly, okay. I don't take it seriously because we did a study 10 years ago, a survey within the body of the Network, and that is a published survey, I believe it was 1992 published by the American Quilt Study Group, where we ask quilt-makers within the body of the Network about the influence of African history on what they do. And they're just like me. If they have references to Africanisms in their work it's because they've made a conscientious effort to read and learn about them. It didn't come by osmosis, so I look at myself as coming from an American quilt tradition.

MS. CUBBS: What you've just talked about is a rather controversial aspect of scholarship on African-American expressive culture, particularly quilt-making, and the debate ongoing in the field about what constitutes an authentic African-American quilt, and what the relationships are between African-American quilt-making and African precedents, both conscious and unconscious. Can you talk a little bit about that debate and what you think the problems are with some of the existing scholarship in the field of quilt-making.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Since the 1980s we've had a lot of scholars that have been studying African-American quilts and [they have] come up with a set of criteria to define African-American quilts. Among that criteria are quilts that have asymmetrical piecing and bright colors, signs, and symbols that allude to hidden African retention, large patch, large stitching. And what has happened, those early scholars took a select group of work coming from the South, coming from African-Americans and used that work to characterize the work done within the entire culture and pronounced that as being the definitive. And we're only talking about quilts that are from the South, from a certain socio-economic group, okay. We're talking about utilitarian quilts that were not unlike quilts made by white folks in Appalachia. They were utilitarian quilts, but they homed in on these quilts and made them the definitive and what it did was just cut out an entire body of work from the culture. We found in this same survey that I mentioned that most of the quilts were contemporary quilts or traditional American quilts made within the culture, and less that 5 percent of the quilt-makers at the time that the survey was taken made these improvisational quilts. And they were all women over 70 living within a five-state range in the South. So that definitive is not the African-American quilt.

MS. CUBBS: So your protest is really that this characterization of African-American quilt-making as essentially improvisational is a kind of monolithic and falsely generalized vision of what African-American quilt-making is.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Very much so. Very much so. African-American quilts are as varied as the people themselves, okay. And African-Americans take offense to [generalizations]. We have one member in West Virginia who is of mixed heritage. She's African-American, Irish, and Native American, and she just hates it when people refer to her quilts as African-American. And she's a master quilt-maker. Fine quilt-maker. Traditional American patchwork, and she just hates being categorized. You hate being categorized, you know. It leaves a lot to be desired in the quilt community across the board. Nobody likes to be stereotyped, but it's not uncommon for anything that we do.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A]

MS. CUBBS: Let me ask you also what your feeling is about the politics of this phenomenon. The politics of a scholarship or a definition of what African-American quilt-making is from people who are clearly outside the culture. How do you characterize the politics of the situation?

MS. MAZLOOMI: The politics stink. No one should answer for a culture and especially to give a definitive and you're living outside of the culture. Why can't the people within the culture answer for themselves? Why is it that everything that they say must be interpreted through one's own view of how things should be. So many of

the quilt-makers have never had a chance to speak for themselves, to say why they do what they do. And the answers; when you hear them it's so hilarious, okay. When you hear these quilters, old people in their 80s, give explanations of why their quilts look like they look. When you've heard about all the symbolism and, you know, the Africanisms within the work, and you hear their version, they don't jibe. They're not connecting. And you wonder well why isn't this printed? The arrogance – the academic arrogance is extraordinary. The academic arrogance is extraordinary within this field. But what it's done, you know, it's led to a whole bunch of writings that are not necessarily true. We are more than improvisation. We're much more than that. So you have this scholarly arrogance, but you also have this element of financial gain as well. Especially in terms of some collector, when you have one group that can pronounce this is the definitive and I've got most of them, you know, we're talking money. The greater body of quilts within the African-American community, those improvisational quilts are gone. They're gone. And you have to look at who has them. It's about money in some instances.

MS. CUBBS: Is it also about a kind of cultural exoticism, about the search for a kind of ethnographic purity or authenticity?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Perhaps. I can't get into these folks minds, okay. And as I said this isn't necessarily my field of study. I am here as a participant – a participating artist within the field. And, you know, I can't jump into these folk's minds and read why they do the things that they do, but as an African-American I have seen from experience that European-Americans will always look at the worst things that we do and declare them the definitive, okay. And we go into that subject that's a whole other thing. Why is it the worst, worst looking, most shoddy thing that we do that is utilitarian is loved. But when you hold that up as a standard to what somebody else does, it gives this a new definition, another definition to what's low art and what's high art. I look at it like that, as being purely racist; purely racist. It's a very complex and interesting scenario this art world, and this is why I kind of have to take a step back and I don't get into the criticism, art criticism. I'm not going to rack my brains for that and try to figure it out. I can only do what I do, and the other artists within this network do what they do. That's their soulful contribution to the art form. And for that I admire them; that they listen to no one and they march by their own drumbeat. That's admirable. And I'm proud that we can do that. Adhere to no rules. No one's definition about how our artwork should look. We do our own thing and it is truly boundless. So that's great.

MS. CUBBS: On that note, let's go back to your work and talk about how those issues of gender, race, and ethnicity are all grounded in a very real way in your own creative productions, in your own quilts.

MS. MAZLOOMI: I will always make quilts from an Afro-centric view, because I am African-American and this is my culture. What other damn view am I coming from? [Laughs.] What other view can I come from? I know and I appreciate the fact that I am American, okay, but I'm African-American and, you know, that's going to come out in my work whether it's accepted by the public or not. This is who I am; this is how God made me. An African-American living here in the United States, so all of my art has a cultural point of view and it comes from my cultural point of view. And all those issues that have affected me come out in my work. I can't work from any other perspective, but from what I have experienced. That's the only perspective that I can come from.

MS. CUBBS: Could you talk about that kind of consciousness as something that was weaned, or grew and developed, in the midst of the 1960s and '70s and the black consciousness movement. And do you also believe that it is part of, or an underpinning for, a lot of your work?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It's an undercurrent and it's always there. As I said, it will always be with me; those experiences living through that time. And as I said I don't want to forget. And then the special significance of women on the planet is a recurring theme because I feel that women should be celebrated in all facets of our lives. I don't care whether it's the art or politics, religion, or whatever. Women have to be celebrated and lifted up because they have the most important job on the planet – the most influential job on the planet. And you see these recurring themes in my work because I like for young people, young women, to see that work, to know that they have power. Because a lot of times they don't know it, okay. And they have to be reminded of it. I have this power. Older women have to be reminded that they have this power of influence over all humanity because we, as first teachers, influence all human beings, and every human being on the planet comes through us regardless. It can be the teacher, it can be the president, it can be the doctor, it can be the maid, it's everybody. So that's awesome when you think about influencing all of humanity with your teaching your children. That's power. And your children listen. That's power. So we have that – an innate, intuitive wisdom. Only women have it, and young women sometimes don't even know that. They don't think about that, the intuitive wisdom of women. Men don't have it. [Laughs.] Most men don't.

But to me they, young girls, have to be reminded through the quilts. When they can look at my quilt *Wise Woman* [*Wise Women* series, 2002–2003]and see this owl in this woman's belly and know that it symbolizes wisdom, and she's surrounded by moons, the lunar cycle, that eludes to her in that cycle of life-giving, birth-giving, you know, that lunar cycle. That's powerful. It is just so powerful. So they have to be reminded, and what

better way than to remind them through these quilts. With this woman surrounded by fire and water, the life sign and the sign of so many trials and tribulations. Women walk through fire every day. Every day. Every day they walk through fire, every day by virtue of being women and not having so many things. Not being privy to education in so many countries. Being a part of a workforce that makes or creates 70 percent of all working hours but yet owning only a fifth of the world's wealth. And being the most undereducated. The world's refugees are mostly women. But yet they have the most important job. So sometimes in the weight of living on this planet as a woman we have to be reminded of who we are. So quilts help to serve that purpose of reminding women about their power.

MS. CUBBS: I'm wondering in listening to you talk and recalling so many of the works that show images of women and mothers in a way that is spiritually empowering to them, I'm wondering about the nature of quilt-making itself. Even though men make quilts, it is in many ways still very much an art of women, and I'm wondering if that fits into your sense of connection to and responsibility towards other women.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Of course it does. [Laughs.] You know, of course it does. When you think in terms of quilt-making, it is basically thought of as woman's art, because this was a way we sat down and communicated with each other over the quilt frame and it is the needle that unites us. It's the needle that unites the women of the network. It's that quilting needle that unites the women of the Women of Color Quilter's Network with other quilters here in the United States. That's a powerful bond: that art that we share together is a powerful, powerful bond to unite women. When we had this international meeting, 32 artist organizations represented, there was not a man in there because when we think in terms of textiles, you know, it's women's work. Except in West Africa, the dying and the weaving basically was man's work. Until today.

MS. CUBBS: You were talking about the international meeting. The Women Economic Development meeting, is that the one that you were referring to?

MS. MAZLOOMI: This meeting in Nuremberg, yeah.

MS. CUBBS: Yes.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Was an economic, like an economic summit.

MS. CUBBS: Yes.

MS. MAZLOOMI: For needlewomen. Yeah. And it was – it was very powerful. Wherever you get a gathering of women together, it's powerful. It is so powerful. And when you come into that gathering, you know that you've entered sacred space with a lot of energy. And too, this is another thing; again, women sometimes have to be reminded of that power. And I love to lecture about that and when I leave that room I have women on their feet. They know, they feel that power, and they go out renewed. They feel that power. And these types of gatherings tend to be very productive because you have this spiritual base of women gathering together. It's very powerful. Every woman should have that experience. It's awesome.

MS. CUBBS: Going back to this issue about Africanisms, you've talked about how this notion of unconscious retentions just simply doesn't connect to your own understanding of what's going on in your work and in a lot of African-American quilt-making, but at the same time you talked about the fact that you, like many other African-American quilt-makers, have sought a kind of conscious reconnection –

MS. MAZLOOMI: Connection.

MS. CUBBS: – to Africa and I'm reminded of a statement that you made in *Spirits of the Cloth* which said "Our vision of our motherland becomes a force for healing," and I wondered if you could talk a bit more about that idea.

MS. MAZLOOMI: When I talk about a force for healing I'm thinking about those remembrances of our ancestors. Our history is such a tragic history, and this to me is a form of healing. When you reach back and honor – honor these human beings from Africa. You honor them in the work that you create. And it's a must be. It's a spiritual thing. You know, we know that our roots are in Africa. We know that. Even as – even though we're Americans we know that our roots are in Africa and these ancestors have had such tragedy – lived such tragic lives. Why not celebrate those lives? I do, a lot in my quilts. One of the first quilts that I made was a narrative quilt about the slave trade, and it was a huge piece, now in the collection of a national African-American museum. But in the center of this quilt it shows a woman of color dressed in African garb holding this much darker child and she is surrounded by a line of African warrior shields, and she's symbolic of that African ancestor whose child she and her child brought to this country. It's indicative of all the hues that we come in as so-called black folk. She and her child are different colors and behind her is a huge outline of a slave-ship with the slaves lying in the bottom of the hull of this ship. And in the water surrounding this woman and child are skeletons symbolic of all those enslaved persons that lost their lives in the slave trade.

We had millions of people that were brought here and those skeletons are surrounded by shells and mirrors. These traditions I read about and some of these religious traditions are still celebrated in New Orleans, which is near my hometown, and in Baton Rouge, where there is the laying on, you know, of gravesites with mirrors and shells. Mirrors to reflect the spirit straight to heaven. The shells you hear the sound of the ocean, spiriting the soul back to the motherland. This is how I choose to bring that ancestor, into my realm and celebrate these folks. Celebrating my ancestors in this piece. The water brought us here, but the water will take us back. Yes, we bring them – we consciously bring them. We must bring them, because they are a part of us. We make that conscientious effort to bring them with us. It's our way of celebrating them and celebrating our history, so.

MS. CUBBS: I recall one of the categories in *Spirits of the Cloth*, I think it's title is "Praise Songs," and I'm reminded of that when I look at a lot of your work, because there are so many different characters in your pieces that are drawn from African history, African-American social life, and I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about your use of the notion of praise songs in your work.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well when I think about praise songs I think about two things, you know. I'm thinking about music, I'm thinking about God, okay. I can't work without music first of all. If I'm working the music's playing and in a lot of my work you'll see musicians and you will see women and men dancing. That's important to me. When we are talking about praising God, even though now I'm not Christian, I was brought up in a Christian church. My aunt was a Christian woman, so that music is a part of me. I will never lose that music. When I hear that music my soul is uplifted and my spirit awakened, and you just get to moving, okay. I want to show that movement in my quilts. I have a series of quilts called *Big City Women* [*Big City Women* series, 1999–2002]. I'm a big woman, okay. People think we can't move but we can, okay. We can, and I want to celebrate that movement, okay. It's a spiritual thing. It's a spiritual thing, working and listening to the music is a spiritual thing. Sewing and quilting allows me as an artist to meditate while I'm working and listening to that music. I'm feeding my spirit. I'm feeding my soul. I'm talking to God because I'm doing His work. I really feel that He is allowing me to do this. So it's a spiritual thing as well, you know. It's a spiritual thing. And I get totally carried away with it because you go to another place. You do go to another place and you lose yourself in the moments that you're making your work in that other realm. You're feeding your soul, you know. I really think of art, the creation of art, any art whether it's writing, visual art, music, or whatever, it's worship. It's no less than worship.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B]

MS. CUBBS: This is Joanne Cubbs interviewing Carolyn Mazloomi at the artist's home in West Chester, Ohio, on September 30th, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number three. Well let me begin by asking you a little bit more about the difference that you see between functional and non-functional quilts. We talked a little bit before about the notion of the art-quilt versus the utilitarian quilt, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit more about what you see as the distinctions, if any, between the two.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well I've long said quilts have jumped off the bed onto the wall, okay. And there's an obvious difference when we talk about function as opposed to art on the wall. When I think about this recent brouhaha about art-quilts versus traditional quilts, it all, as I said before, just kind of floats above me because it's all art. I think, though, more so important we as quilt-makers, and I think of myself as a quilt-maker, stand on the backs of the traditional quilt-maker. We are all on the backs of the traditional quilt-maker, because basic skills came from the traditional quilt-maker. So you know, why should we just kick them off on the side and separate them because the work looks a little bit different? The components that they used, [that] the traditional quilt-maker used, we all use today, and basically we quilt using these traditional methods. Because of technology we've got a new game in town, because of, you know, computer technology and what it's brought into quilts. You have a lot of photo-imagery on quilts. You have wonderful – all kinds of new materials and new inventions to make the quilter's job even easier. And new paints and different types of foils and metallics that people wouldn't think of using on fabric, other than canvas, we're now using it in quilts. So the materials have changed. The technology's changed, but still our roots are buried in that traditional quilt art form. So how can you separate the mother from the child, you know? Can't. Can you do that? No. A quilt is a quilt. Give me a break. [Laughs.] A quilt is a quilt.

MS. CUBBS: How would you describe your quilts then –would you identify your quilts more with the notion of the art-quilt as opposed to the functional object?

MS. MAZLOOMI: My quilts could swing either way. A little story: I have three sons who, at some point in their youth and in their childhood, have had all of these quilts to wrap up in. It's no difference, you know. It's the same warmth. It comes from the same place. Now they've gotten older and the quilts are on the wall. If they were younger, who knows? I don't know. I may have all these little Linuses here, you know, dragging quilts behind them, but it's a choice. It's a choice that the viewer and the buyer – the buyer primarily – as to whether or not it's functional or it's on the wall. And I've had clients do that. Work that I've looked at as being on the wall I've heard people say, "It's on my bed," so who is to say? It's up to the collector, you know. I may think one thing and the collector's thinking something different. If I'm in their home maybe it's on the back of a sofa, or maybe it's

on the bed. Who knows? You know, it's up to the person that has bought it – has bought the work. Primarily now when I'm creating a quilt though it's for the wall.

MS. CUBBS: Does the idea that quilts have functioned in our lives in this special way, even if they're not created anymore to function as coverings for beds and for warmth, does that lend a certain significance or meaning to your work as a quilt-maker? The fact that quilts have, if not an active, a passive history as functional objects.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Cannot get around it. Cannot get around that. I often say that quilts are fabric. It's the first thing that we're swathed in as human beings. How can you get away from the cloth? We live with the cloth. You know, we have a connection to cloth coverings. It's no less significant when making a quilt. The actual touching that cloth, even if I'm in my studio and I'm cold and I'm working, especially in the winter, I throw a quilt around me. And it's not unusual for me; that's what the cloth is for. You're wrapped in it and, it looks good and it makes you feel good. That's that specialness. That's that warmth. There's no separation of the idea of cloth keeping a body warm, you know, from cloth comprising a quilt. We as human beings will always have a love affair going on with cloth, always.

MS. CUBBS: I'd like to switch now to a talk about the market for American crafts, and particularly quilt-making, and I'm wondering what the difference would be in your mind in the marketplace between functional and art quilts?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I don't know. I can only tell you about my market. I'm sure there's a place always for functional quilts, because we see hand-made quilts that individual crafters have to sell and we see hand-made quilts on the retail market, so there has to be a market for them. We know that they are selling. That's not my market, okay, but it's out there. I deal primarily with collectors and museums and corporations and the market is very good. I have no complaints. May it stay this good. [Laughs.] It's wonderful.

MS. CUBBS: Can you describe the marketplace for your work and talk about how that might have changed, and relate it to development in the larger market for American crafts?

MS. MAZLOOMI: My market's changed in that it's gotten bigger. It's gotten bigger because as the years have gone on and I have shown more and more is written, of course, people will contact me or institutions will contact me. I think insofar as the crafts market, it has increased. People love the idea of having anything hand-crafted. And there is more of a need now since we have these turbulent times that we've gone through – our country's gone through, it's made us more aware of our humanity and our connectedness to other human beings and just the world at large. And I think anything hand-made, the beauty of something being hand-made brings us closer to our own humanity, so there is more of an interest now. And that interest is increasing. It's increased every year since I've been doing this.

And I think, too, the fact that especially in some countries, and this one as well, we have less artists that work with their hands. We have less craftspeople. And it's been difficult to interest young people in continuing craft traditions. It's been very difficult. I can say from the perspective of the Women of Color Quilter's Network, it's been very difficult in interesting young people to carry on these traditions. My business partner, Edjohnetta Miller, works with eight artisans. She's on the board. And a few years ago she happened to travel to Ghana to work with the royal weavers of the Kente cloth and that was a problem for these weavers in Africa: interesting young men to carry on this tradition. And it's not an unfamiliar situation here in the United States. Young people aren't interested, in this computer age, this super mechanical age, in working with their hands to craft artwork. Everything has to be easy, you know. And I guess they deem this difficult; crafting with one's hands, so young people don't want to be bothered. But that's unfortunate.

MS. CUBBS: So you find that in the field of African-American quilt-making in particular while the market has expanded the number of makers is gradually decreasing.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Less. Right. And every day I look up and my Network members are dying around me and it's sad. It's really sad because some of the best quilt-makers are gone and there's no one to replace them.

MS. CUBBS: What is the average age, would you say, or the majority age in your Quilter's Network?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Oh god, about 70.

MS. CUBBS: Oh my.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yeah, about 70. In fact I'm one of the youngest, maybe three other people under me in this Network. And when I talk to my Network members, if they've not seen me they think I'm much, much older. And then when they do see me and realize how young I am, then they don't listen to me anymore because I'm a kid as compared to them. I'm a young kid, okay. But it's sad to see them leave. It's sad to see them leave. It's even sadder to see not that many people coming in that are young and talented in this arena. So it's a loss. But

insofar as the market, the market is good.

MS. CUBBS: What is the mechanism for the sale of your work, and what is your relationship with dealers?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well, insofar as marketing, the marketing happens two ways. Either customers will contact me or they will contact my agent. It's every artist's dream. It's every artist's wish to have an honest agent that they can work with. And artist-dealer relationships are often difficult. Every artist has a horror tale of a gallery or a dealer relationship gone bad. When I first started out I always admired Dr. Robert Cargo in Tuscaloosa, Alabama. He was one of the country's foremost dealers of southern folk art, and he handled the work of Yvonne Wells. And I often thought, gee I wish Dr. Cargo could represent me. And I wrote him a letter and asked him if he would represent my work. And he answered me back and he told me that he felt he was too old. And indeed he had gotten up in years, and he also said that the time and energy that it took to promote Yvonne Wells' work he didn't have that energy anymore, and he couldn't take me on. And that was very sad for me and I thought, well, this is it. Then over the years I was represented by three other galleries and had terrible relationships, just absolutely terrible.

MS. CUBBS: What made them so?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well people – agents are very dishonest. They sell your work sometimes and you don't know it and you're not paid for it, and then when you go through a discovery period and ask where is the work, and then you find out that it's sold, okay. And you wonder well when am I going to be paid? And usually you get in essence an answer, "Whenever." So you're constantly waiting to be paid. Then you have agents that don't promote your work. Or either you promote your work yourself and the agent gets all the credit when they are taking 50 percent, and they didn't do squat to get your name out there. Gee, maybe 10 years or more ago I read about Martha Connell in Atlanta at the Great American Gallery. I have often admired her. I admire her writing and her knowledge about the field of craft. And I thought, well, it would be wonderful someday to be represented by Martha Connell. But I never sent her a portfolio and it just so happened that Yvonne Porcella, who is represented by Connell Gallery, curated an exhibition for them and invited me to participate in that exhibition.

Well, that was a welcomed foot in the door, and that was four years ago and I have been working with Martha Connell ever since. I admire her honesty. That's the foremost thing. It's critical to the relationship between an artist and a dealer. Honesty. And Connell Gallery puts a lot of time and effort and money into advertising their artists for each exhibition that's at the gallery. Not only advertising through national art and fiber magazines, but getting out wonderful, wonderful invitations where they spare no expense. And I appreciate that. And I will be at Connell Gallery until Martha Connell kicks me out. [Laughs.] But I've enjoyed our relationship because I really enjoy Martha Connell and her husband. They're both wonderful people and I'm just really thankful that they've come into my life.

MS. CUBBS: What is the percentage, would you say, of the works that you sell through Martha's gallery versus what you would sell through your own agency and especially the Women of Color Quilter's Network?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I'd say 30 percent are sold by the gallery and the rest on my own. People that contact me for special work like commissions or whatever.

MS. CUBBS: Let me switch gears a little bit now and ask you more about the actual nature of your production. What, for example, what are the qualities of your working environment – your studio?

MS. MAZLOOMI: When people – when my friends come and they look at my studio space, the first thing that they ask me is how can I work in this environment, because it's so clean and it's so neat. Everything has to have a place. Everything has a place. If the least little thing is out of order, I can't function. I cannot function. It's like something in the back of my mind is saying, "Okay, this is not right." I'm manic for that. I think that's my downfall. I'm too orderly. But everything has a place. It's so bad sometimes when I look for stuff in my workspace; I can't find it because I put it away somewhere.

MS. CUBBS: But you have a designated studio space where you create your quilts.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes. Yes. I work downstairs.

MS. CUBBS: Downstairs in your home?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes. And it's very orderly. All the fabric is color-coded. All the beads, the buttons, the threads. [Laughs.] Everything. Everything is coded and it has a place. It has a drawer, it has a bin, and the floor is always clean. My friends – when I go to their studio, everything looks like people are really working there, but my space isn't like that. I have to have order in my life. I can't create without having order in my life. It has to be a specific way or I can't function.

MS. CUBBS: Talk a little bit more also about your process of working, because many people would imagine that a quilt-maker would be sitting in a soft chair somewhere doing many, many hours of tiny stitching, and your process is really quite different is it not?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I keep notebooks of ideas. Since I don't feel I can draw that well, I have little journals and diaries of ideas, and I write them as I see them in my mind. And I think for all artists, especially quilt-makers, if we live several lifetimes it's not enough – it's not enough time to create all the ideas that we have into quilts – same thing for me. I have the ideas. I usually work in series. Always I work in series. That's another manic thing. Usually there are anywhere from 10 to 15 pieces with a certain theme in a series and a lot of the work, most of the work, is cut freehand and I don't do as much hand-quilting or hand-needlework as I did before, unless I'm doing reverse appliqué and that's a sewing process. That only looks good if it's done by hand. Initially when I started out, everything was by hand and I refused to send my work out because I liked my own quilt stitches and I never saw anybody else's quilt stitches that I liked as much as my own. So, and I did all my appliqué work by hand, and now I have the sewing machine smoking. [Laughs.] Because now I need the work. I need the work expeditiously and I don't have time to do handwork like before when I started out.

And I think, too, I've gotten wiser. I found that I can create the same piece and not necessarily do it by hand, I can do it on the sewing machine and it looks just as great. But I had to learn that the hard way after several years of toiling, you know, doing work by hand and having carpal tunnel in both wrists and you learn. And that's a process of growth as artists. We learn newer and better ways to do things. And our work changes. The methods that we [use to] create the work changes. That's progress.

MS. CUBBS: Briefly, what are some of the titles or the subject categories for some of your favorite series of works?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I have an ongoing music series that deals with jazz and blues, and in the series I pictured jazz players. I love jazz. I pictured the faces of jazz and blues singers, just these huge portraits. And I was going for a up-close type thing, you know, with faces that you could just walk into, and I've enjoyed that. I've enjoyed that a lot. Celebrating the music that I love and can't function without because usually when I'm working there is music playing. And each time I finish a quilt I'm playing blues, so my family knows when they're hearing blues I'm done. I'm done with my quilt. I'm done. My job is done. I'm finished.

A lot of work deals with women. I have the image of women on every other quilt that I make and it's to celebrate the status of women and their specialness in the sphere of things here on this planet. As special people. It's to remind young women, especially too, that they're powerful. They're very powerful. Sometimes they don't know how powerful they are because they have the most important job on the planet and that's raising children. So through the raising of our children we influence all of humanity. It's a powerful position to be in: mother. It's great. So I like to celebrate that in my work.

And I also have a lot of Africanisms in my work. When I say Africanisms I mean I love to use African cloths, and the color is exciting and African beads and shells in my work. I love that. I love the color, the movement from the color and design of the fabric. So always that will be an integral part of my work as well. In the near future I want to start painting. Whenever I am afforded that time I would love to paint, so it's coming.

MS. CUBBS: Have you ever worked in any other medium besides quilt-making?

MS. MAZLOOMI: No. I've not worked in any other medium. The only thing I know.

MS. CUBBS: You've talked a little bit – actually I take that back, you talked a lot in our past sessions about the community that you built up around your work. The community of other African-American quilt-makers through the Women of Color Quilter's Network, and I'm wondering how that community has affected your development as an artist, or if there have been other communities that have been important to you as an artist.

MS. MAZLOOMI: There is no community as important as the Women of Color Quilter's Network to me, because it's my family. It's not only – it's an emotional support, okay, it's an artistic support, and we're truly like family. So much so that there are certain members, especially the founding members, that my children call aunts and uncles and they are treated no less. That's important. Okay. To have that kind of human relationship with any group is important, and I think there are very few groups that can say for almost 20 years they've been together and especially the founding members. That is so awesome. Every artist should experience, or every human being should experience, that human family outside of their own biological family. Because it's an ideal of how human beings should interact with each other. It's an ideal model of the human extended family, and that's how I think of this Network, as an extended family. It's no less.

MS. CUBBS: Has that encouraged you as a quilt-maker?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Of course. Who wouldn't it encourage, you know. That you'd have so many people. When I talk

about so many people I'm talking primarily about the founding members, okay, that have lifted each other up and carried them from point A to B, you know. When I think in terms of some of the older members, especially my members from Alabama who have been more than a sister or mother to me, closer to me than my own mother or grandmother. I don't separate these people from my life. There is no separation, okay. They have brought me joy. They have brought me joy.

MS. CUBBS: Who are the founding members?

MS. MAZLOOMI: There's Cuesta Benberry, noted international quilt historian. There's my business partner, Edjohnetta Miller, from Hartford, Connecticut. There's Peggie Hartwell from Charleston, South Carolina. There's Michael Cummings from New York City. Jim Smoote from Chicago. And the one and only Marie Wilson, our queen who is no longer with us, but she's from New York City, and as I said earlier I deem Marie my mentor. And Cuesta Benberry as well. Hazel [Rodney] Blackman from New York City. Marlene [O'Bryant] Seabrook from Charleston. There are so many, these are to name a few.

MS. CUBBS: So if I asked you the question next, what are the most powerful influences in your career, including people and art movements and technological developments and anything else you could think of, what would you say beyond those that you've already mentioned as founding members of the Network and your close associates?

MS. MAZLOOMI: In my influences?

MS. CUBBS: Yes.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Okay, these people primarily. I can't say that I've been influenced by other quilt-makers because I don't look at other quilt-makers work. I don't follow trends. I often say I wish I could take classes in, you know, other quilting techniques. I've not had time. I don't know if that's a good thing or a bad thing. I don't know that my work has suffered or not. I don't know. Because I work quite intuitively, so yeah, maybe I could spruce up my quilting skills. So again, I don't look at what other quilters do; the work of other quilters hasn't really influenced me insofar as creating what I create. The compassion with which quilters create has influenced me. Mainly Penny Sisto. I love Penny Sisto. I love her as a human being. I think of her as my sister in and outside the arena of quilt-making. She's such a wonderfully talented artist, and her work has always reflected the concerns on a social and political level of human beings all around the world. You can look into Penny Sisto's work and see the suffering that people, especially minority people, around the world have gone through. You can look at her work and see the joy and the importance of mothering in her work. Her work brings me joy. It's a pleasure to look at. And I'm very proud and privileged to know her because I feel that she's one of the most honest people in quilt-making. Never followed any trends, but she follows her heart and conscious – conscience insofar as the work she creates. It is important to her. She's thinking about herself and no one else in the creation of this work. And that's important. That takes courage. That takes so much courage not to follow the trends and to be able to do your own thing. And it's a mark of honesty. I appreciate that. So Penny's been influential as a friend, and a mark for artists to aspire to because she does her own thing. Very few people out there are doing their own thing.

MS. CUBBS: And I can understand that that has been your stated philosophy as well, to work independently and to follow your own heart and mind. I'm wondering, though, if there is anything that you would liken your quilts to. If you were trying to describe them, for example, to somebody. If you'd be yourself conjuring any connections between your quilts and, say, somebody else's paintings, or another person's drawings, or if there are any other kinds of connections you'd make between your work and the work of others?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I'd have to really think of myself as a really great artist to connect and compare them with anything, you know. And I dare not. [Laughs.] I dare not do that, you know. I couldn't do that, okay. I don't know, geez, an artist to compare them to. That's very humbling, I'm nobody. [Laughs.] I'm just Carolyn.

MS. CUBBS: I understand. Let me broaden our discussion again and ask a general question about American craft and African-American quilt-making in particular, and ask how these activities, these fields, rank on an international scale. And if you can see the field as a whole, either American craft or African-American quilt-making, moving in any kind of obvious directions or not?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Each country of course celebrates their own craft. But at the same time, with the importance of the United States as a world leader, you know the world is always looking at what we're doing. I find that there are more opportunities for international shows of American craftwork all around the world and they're increasing. People want to see what we're doing here.

MS. CUBBS: Have you organized any exhibitions of African-American quilt-making for a venue outside this country?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I have. [Laughs.] Not without mishaps, and that's why I'm laughing. We have a show that's going to Cuba next year and we've exhibited in several African countries. We've not done anything in Europe. I don't anticipate that we will too soon. I don't think they're ready for us. There's quite an interest, though, around the world in American quilt-making. American quilt-making has led the pace in this resurrection of quilt-making around the globe, okay. They've been the examples for the quilters in Japan, and in Europe, and in Africa, and in South America. They've been the example and they are the leaders, you know. So everybody who has an interest in textiles of course wants to see the latest and the greatest coming from American insofar as quilts. Because American quilts set the pace for quilt-making and have influenced quilt-making in so many countries. So many countries have quilt guilds because of the influence of American quilts. And Robert Shaw writes eloquently about that in his book *American Quilts* [*Quilts, A Living Tradition*. Robert Shaw; Westport, CT, Hugh Lauter Levin Assoc: 1995]. He writes about the influence on an international scale that American quilts have had on the world, and he didn't miss a beat. He did not.

MS. CUBBS: Have African-American quilt-makers been included in this international interest and fascination?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Not really. No. Hmm. Now we get into a different arena here. There was not interest – and still not interest on an international level in African-American quilts per se. There's an interest in American quilts, but not necessarily African-American quilts. And I think that's because they look so different, you know. People from outside of the United States want to see that European model that they can relate to, and our quilts are quite different. And we inject our own cultural nuances in our quilts. I had one person that told me once that looked at a couple of quilts at a show, and this was a white American, he looked at the quilts and they were filled with African masks and what not, and he said, "I've always found African masks frightening." And he could not see the beauty in them. That's not unlikely, okay. That's not unlikely. It's very difficult for folks to relate to them sometimes, so.

MS. CUBBS: Can you describe the difference you just referred to between American and African-American quilts.

MS. MAZLOOMI: I think the differences are derived purely from culture, okay. And this is how I describe my own quilts, and this is why I don't deal with artist statements that are so full of crap, okay. I am making my quilts from my own cultural viewpoint, okay. Which is totally different from a white American's viewpoint. I am putting into my quilts what I am familiar with as a black woman living in the United States, as a black woman coming from the South, okay. I am injecting my experiences into my quilts. So because European Americans don't experience – you know, we've got totally different experiences, so why shouldn't the quilts look different? And most African-Americans make narrative quilts. They're making these quilts from their own cultural perspective which are uniquely our experiences, so it's very hard for somebody coming from another culture to relate unless they are really open-minded. And that's a very few people.

MS. CUBBS: So the fact that they're narrative or figurative, that they have imagery drawn from African-American cultural experiences, that would be the main distinguishing –

MS. MAZLOOMI: That's one of the main distinguishing factors. When we get into, you know, the scholarly writings about African-American quilts. Well early on scholars who studied African-American quilts took a small segment of quilts from the rural South and studied those quilts and came up with a definitive description about African-American quilts that they were asymmetrically pieced and [had] bright colors and [were] full of signs and symbols that related to Africa, and [had] large stitching. And that didn't include quilts made by black people across the board. That was just a small segment, but African-American quilting is so broad; it's as broad as the people within the culture, you know.

MS. CUBBS: Although as you've pointed out before, it was a rather small portion of the whole field of African-American quilt making [END TAPE 3 SIDE A] – traditional Southern, rural, African-American quilts that are called improvisational did exist, did they not? Do exist?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes, they do exist. There are less people making them because the people are dying out every day. Every day, and there is just a precious handful of these women and men left. And the few that are left are so old they can't make quilts anymore. Of course they exist. What I am saying, again, is that's just a tiny segment of the quilting styles within the black community.

MS. CUBBS: Yes, and that's the style right now – the improvisational style – that has or continues to gain a lot of scholarly recognition, as opposed to what you see as the larger part of the African-American field –

MS. MAZLOOMI: It's gained. It's gained a lot of note through the scholars, but also you have white quilt-makers that are mimicking that improvisational technique, which boggles my mind. When they look at other stuff that comes from the black community, you know, in the quilt-making community they can't relate to it, okay, but they picked up this particular style of improvisational quilt-making and, you know, just took off and ran with it. And now when you look at quilt shows, you don't know whose work is whose, okay. And even when you read about improvisation now, the last several years, when you read about it in terms of African-American art quilts,

it's not even connected to an African-American arena. I find that hilarious. I just find that so amusing.

MS. CUBBS: You mean the only distinguishing characteristic being that the maker, the artist, happened to be an African-American person?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Right.

MS. CUBBS: But that the quilt itself reflects no special African-American cultural references.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Right.

MS. CUBBS: Or aesthetic traditions.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yeah. And it's intriguing how this style is now accepted. It's accepted if it's done by European-Americans. It's not accepted if it's done by – known to be done by an African-American. Some quilt-makers find that very hard to swallow. It's crazy. It's so asinine.

MS. CUBBS: What do you see as the place of universities in the American craft movement, and specifically for artists who are working in the field of quilt-making?

MS. MAZLOOMI: The place for universities and scholarly study. It's important that history be correct. It's important that history be fair. Right now I don't see that it is fair, because universities are still looking at that improvisational quilt, okay, that so-called folk art quilt made by African-Americans and have included that in their broad range of studies and left out the rest, okay? So the story, the true story hasn't been told when you have not included a greater body of the work coming from a culture and you've only chosen a segment of it. The segment that white folks think is important, then all the research is for nothing. To me, that's not research. It's not research. It's so one-sided it's not research. It's not historically correct.

MS. CUBBS: And I wanted to clarify with you, again, exactly what an improvisational quilt is.

MS. MAZLOOMI: An improvisational quilt is a quilt made without benefit of pattern. The pieces are cut freehand. Sewn together freely. It is not planned out on paper. It is not refined. A refined design on paper. It comes from one's own mental imagination, and we cut, we sew, we make it, and there it is.

MS. CUBBS: Other qualities associated with the form have been often bright colors, lots of contrasting colors and values. Is that something you would also see as part of that aesthetic tradition? Or not?

MS. MAZLOOMI: That I would have to say yes, because we as African-Americans love bright colors, okay. There's a lot of historic reference to the reasons as to why, okay, like scholars have related everything we do to African cultures. Certain bright colors denote royalty and family lineage and can be seen from afar, you know, on the African plains, and I'm just saying that's all okay, but when I see today's African-American person using a lot of color – we use color – we use the colors that we can relate to, okay. We have dark skin tones. Pale colors do not look good on us. Okay. So we don't deal with pale colors. We deal with bright, rich colors that enhance our dark skin. We have a love affair with color. You only have to walk outside and go into any city and watch African-American people and the way that they dress. The colors complement their skin. I'm not going into any scholarly diatribe about why we use the colors that we use. To me that answer is just so simple. It's what looks good on us.

MS. CUBBS: Getting back to the idea of the university again, and looking not necessarily at the scholarship about African-American quilts, but looking at the university as a possible training ground or place to nurture African-American quilt artists, what would you – how would you appraise the university.

MS. MAZLOOMI: It's not happening. Where is it happening, you know? Nobody's touting anything that we do anywhere in the country. Anywhere, okay. Any university. I don't know of any university that's doing such a thing and I try and keep track of that, so I believe you have the American – what is it? The University of Nebraska [Lincoln, Nebraska] with their huge quilt collection [International Quilt Study Center]. Dr. Robert Cargo has a significant body of work that was purchased for that collection. They're Southern – basically quilts from Alabama, we're talking folk art and improvisational quilts. But if you look at the body of quilts that are in the Nebraska collection, I think other than Faith Ringgold, there are not any contemporary African-American quilts. And this is supposed to be an institution for the international research of the American quilt. Well, I think it's one-sided because it's not inclusive. It's not inclusive. So what can you say? It's not there and that's the bottom line.

MS. CUBBS: Okay. How has your work been received over time?

MS. MAZLOOMI: [Laughs.] It depends on by whom. Most quilt-makers, most European quilt-makers kind of look at it askew because it's, you know, it's not done by the book. It's done by the seat of my pants, okay. So and I

care less about technique. I know that the quilt will last for centuries and centuries, but I am not into technique and I don't like being told what to do, so the receiving on that end hasn't always been great. People like the colors and they like the style and, you know, I'm thinking in terms of quilt guild now which we're talking mostly European women. Euro-American women. They like the style and the spontaneity, but sometimes they get a little taken aback by the technique that was used to put the quilts together.

MS. CUBBS: What do you mean by that: the technique?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well I'm not going by – it's not precision oriented. It is not anal-retentive. I just do my thing and – I do my thing. That's the bottom line. I do my thing my way; techniques my way. And they're not always the done thing, but I don't care about that. Insofar as receiving – how the work is received by museums and what not, I'm in a lot of museum collections. Still today there are museums that don't necessarily show African-American quilts. There are a lot of museums that don't show American quilts, so like with all work that comes from any so-called ethnic minority, we are still trying to struggle up the ladder to get museums to show the work. And slowly those barriers are being broken down. They're not crashing through the gates, but it's happening. It's better now than it was 20 years ago, I will say that.

MS. CUBBS: Can you give me a good success story? Over the last 10 years a place where you didn't expect your work to be where it now appears?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well I'll have to talk about the Smithsonian. I've been tracking the Smithsonian quilt acquisitions for the past 10 years or so and that was one of my goals: to get quilts made by African-Americans other than Faith Ringgold. Museums think Faith Ringgold is the definitive for all African-American quilt-makers and you know we're so much broader than that. So trying to get them to bust out of that has been difficult. But it was always my goal to have African-American quilts at the Renwick, included in the Renwick collection. And last year, no this year, that happened. That was the paramount goal of this Network for me personally. To have African-American representation in the Renwick collection. In the people's museum. In the United States this is the premier museum and the Smithsonian Institution is the keeper of American heritage and we are part of the American heritage, so by right we should be included in that museum and our children and children's children should be able to come to that museum to see what contribution their ancestors gave insofar as this art form to this country. And since the Smithsonian is the keeper of the heritage, we by rights should be included. Because it is the museum for the people. All the people in the United States, not just a few people. So that inclusion of several quilts from the Women of Color Quilter's Network was, I think, the greatest thing that happened.

MS. CUBBS: What year was that?

MS. MAZLOOMI: This year.

MS. CUBBS: This year?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes, 2002. It's the greatest accomplishment that I can say I've had a hand in. Nothing has been more important than that.

MS. CUBBS: Was one of your works included?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes.

MS. CUBBS: Which piece was that?

MS. MAZLOOMI: A piece called *Family*. And it's a black and white piece that mimics a linocut. So I am happy it was included.

MS. CUBBS: Great. In thinking about developments in the field of African-American quilt-making, in your opinion who have been some of the most significant writers in the field of African-American quilt-making? Or American craft at large?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I can only talk about quilt-making and that would be Cuesta Benberry. Cuesta Benberry has been the pivotal point – the pivotal point in the across the board acceptance of African-American quilts of any style. She has been the pivotal point of acceptance of African-American quilts beyond improvisation, because it was the writings, the scholarly writings of Cuesta Benberry that opened the door to let other scholars know that what they had written prior to her publications about the broad range of African-American quilts was a dead point. It was about inclusion and she made that point, so she is our pivot point for today's contemporary African-American quilter. Somebody had to write the scholarship and talk about the broadness of African-American quilts beyond improvisation. This woman did that, okay. And then on the heels of her research we have Roland Freeman, who was the first person in this country to ever mount an exhibition of African-American quilts and has devoted his life to documenting all African-American quilters regardless of style, regardless of location, all across

the United States. So for these people, you know, they contributed a lot to the knowledge of African-American quilt-making and what it's all about. Insofar as critical craft writers, I read them. I like get all these magazines, you know, *Craft in America* [*American Craft*], the *Surface Design Journal*, and I read them. I have no specific critic that I like.

MS. CUBBS: What was the name and the year of the exhibition that Roland Freeman curated?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It was "Something to Keep You Warm," and I don't recall the date but it was in the '70s. Early '70s I believe, but I'm not sure.

MS. CUBBS: Do you recall the sponsoring organization?

MS. MAZLOOMI: The Smithsonian.

MS. CUBBS: Great. Is criticism written by artists valuable to you in any way? Do you know, do you follow any criticism written by artists? Would that be more valuable to you if you did?

MS. MAZLOOMI: No. I mean, it's very seldom an artist can write criticism without being biased. We have enough bias from writers who are writers of criticism and not artists. Please. No.

MS. CUBBS: I think you've already answered this question previously, but what role, if any, have the specialized periodicals for American craft fields, like American ceramics or fiber arts, or, as you say, surface design, played in your development as an artist?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Okay. I read *American Craft* religiously. I want to see what's happening in other fields, in glass and ceramics and what not. I'm interested in what other people are doing. I read the *American Quilter's Society* magazine, the *American Quilter's* [*American Quilter*] magazine, and the *Surface Design Journal*. I'm always interested, especially [with] *Surface Design Journal*, in new techniques because I know in the next two years I'm moving away from quilts and I will start painting. I want to start dyeing my own fabric, so what's in the *Surface Design Journal* is important to me. And with the others, it's good to see what other quilters are doing. And even though I get these magazines, especially the quilt magazines, they tend to pile up for a year and a half before I can get to them to read them. Sometimes I think I put it off because I don't like to be influenced by other quilt-makers. Even though I think I've gotten to the point now I can read it and really wouldn't be influenced because I take a strong stance in what I do, and a don't care attitude about what others are doing. [Laughs.] So I don't know that it's affected me. But certain journals I can't live without. I can't live without the *American Craft* magazines. I must have that. I must have the *Surface Design Journal*. It's an absolute must. But also, you know, *Art in America* is a must. *Raw Visions* is my absolute favorite magazines. Favorite magazine.

MS. CUBBS: Talk a bit more about that.

MS. MAZLOOMI: *Raw Visions* is a magazine of international folk art. I love folk art. I love folk artists because they are so honest – very honest people, spiritually honest. Their work is honest and it's so untouched and I just like what they do because they are themselves. And I like to see the new work that they are doing and I see that through *Raw Visions*. And then I collect folk art. I have nowhere to put it, but I collect it. So it's good. I like to see new artists.

MS. CUBBS: What folk artists would you say you feel most connected to.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Minnie Adkins. Minnie Adkins is one of my favorite folk artists because she's not only a wonderful artist, but she's a wonderful human being. And she's from Isonville, Kentucky, and she's a carver and a painter and just an all-around folk artist, but above that she's a good human being. And she's like my sister. We did a residency together and we're just spiritually connected. I love Minnie Adkins as a human being. I love her as an artist. And I respect her work.

MS. CUBBS: Do you feel that your work is somehow connected to the spirit of self-taught art or folk art?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Of course. Because I am self-taught, you know, and I would like to think that my work is honest. So, you know, these are honest renderings of my thoughts and pure in that I am self-taught so there's nothing contrite about it. It's just all me and what I do, and untouched. Untouched to me is always the best because it's the most honest.

MS. CUBBS: Let me ask you a question about commissioned works. Have you taken on commissions? What have been some of your most important commissions?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I've taken on two commissions and I hate commissions. I don't like being told what to do. The very first commission that I took on I had to change it several times because the person that commissioned it had several changes within her own family dynamics which affected the work that she wanted me to do, and by

the time I finished with it I was just ready to, you know, choke her. It's very difficult, though, for me to take orders to create something that might not necessarily relate to my spirit. And I turn down a lot of commissions because I don't like being told what to do and because I can't relate to the subject matter. Some folks have come with some really weird ideas about renderings that they want in quilts. And I'm thinking I can't do that. You know, I can't relate to that. Like I had a collector come and ask me if I could do a quilt about, well he wanted a scene of the first recorded cesarean, and these were two GYN-OB physicians and they had an etching of this procedure. And I couldn't do it. I couldn't do it. So I get weird things like that, you know, nobody comes with the good stuff. Nobody wants any airplanes rendered or whatever. But it's very hard to do stuff that you can't relate to.

[END TAPE 3 SIDE B]

MS. CUBBS: This is Joanne Cubbs interviewing Carolyn Mazloomi at the artist's home in West Chester, Ohio, on September 30th, 2002, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disc number four.

MS. CUBBS: I'd like to begin this session by asking more specific questions about your work and its development. What, for example, are the similarities and differences between your early work and your recent work?

MS. MAZLOOMI: My recent work is not at all similar to the work I made when I first started out, because I first started out with very basic, traditional patchwork and then gradually switched to narratives. And even my narratives are much different in that the features are more polished. The human figure continually shows up in my work, and you only have to look at my work earlier on to see how I've progressed as an artist, where I could really get the features, facial features, down and make the work look more realistic as opposed to just the silhouette form of a human being. So the work has more of a touch of realism. And that comes through practice and making the quilts.

MS. CUBBS: What about your use of materials and techniques?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Insofar as the materials, that's changed a lot as well. Initially when I first started out I was basically using traditional cottons and the basic cotton calicos, and now everything that can be sewn, pinned, stapled, buttoned, is subject to be found on a quilt. So insofar as fabrics, I now use a wide range of fabrics, from synthetic fabrics to silk to hand-dyed cotton. And the use of beads; I love beads. And various other materials to give texture to the work, such as paper and foils, bits of plastic, so the range has just broadened tremendously insofar as the use of materials from when I initially started. And then insofar as technology, I would have to say the computer figures a lot in my work because I do a lot of photo-imagery on fabric where I've downloaded the image and scanned it on my computer and printed it out with the fabric going through the printer to get that image. So, that I love. I love that technology where you can print images, or print fabric that you can use in your quilt. It's wonderful.

MS. CUBBS: Could you describe your working process in a little bit more detail? And explain how that has also changed over time?

MS. MAZLOOMI: That has not changed so much. As I said initially I started out making traditional quilts, and they were patchwork quilts, and quite detailed and quite well thought out. And the reason I switched from patchwork is because I could not make the angles meet and could not get that perfection that I love to see in traditional quilts, so I switched over to narratives. And as I said I keep journals and diaries of ideas that I would like to see quilts made of, and my method is a freehand, totally freehand, method. I just start cutting the fabric. It's a collage-type method of just cutting the fabric, layering the fabric on a foundation piece and building on it until I get the look that I want. So it's a totally intuitive thing.

MS. CUBBS: And how do you attach the pieces –

MS. MAZLOOMI: The pieces are machine appliquéd in place.

MS. CUBBS: What do you think were some of the motivations, or the motivating factors, for some of your shifts in forms, in techniques, and materials? You've already talked about increasing your, or developing your sense of the figurative, your ability to render things more realistically, and then you talked about the computer. Have there been any other major shifts, and what have been the reasons behind those shifts?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Insofar as design?

MS. CUBBS: Mm-hm. Or materials, or technology, or anything else.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Gee. I'm trying to figure out how this would influence my designs. There's not really that much that influences my designs. Really, when I stop and think about it, because it's what's in my heart. And what I'm

thinking about at the time. Where I am psychologically in my life. I'm my biggest influence. [Laughs.] It depends on me.

My income has afforded me to indulge myself with buying fabric. Indulge myself to the point of embarrassment at the type of, amount of textiles that I've been able to collect over the years. Like hundreds of silk kente – antique kente cloth. I hate myself, but that income has, you know, afforded me the opportunity to buy fine shibori cloths or fine hand-dyed African indigo fabrics. You need money to buy these fabrics. Fabrics are quite costly. Sometimes a yard of fabric can cost hundreds of dollars, or even thousands of dollars, so yeah, you need money to indulge yourself. So that's been a change.

MS. CUBBS: So your ability to generate income as an artist –

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes.

MS. CUBBS: – has helped you develop the use of certain materials in your work.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Right. Yeah.

MS. CUBBS: When did you begin exhibiting your work, and can you recall the nature or the character of any of those early exhibitions?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Gosh, I would have to look at my résumé. It must have been really bad. Somebody else recently asked me what was the first show I ever did. I can't remember. If I can't remember, it must have been awful. [Laughs.] I would have to look on my résumé and see.

MS. CUBBS: Was it soon after you began to create quilts?

MS. MAZLOOMI: No.

MS. CUBBS: So for many years you didn't exhibit?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Right, I was trying to learn how to make a quilt. I think, okay, the first show that I did was at a little gallery in Los Angeles, because I was living in Los Angeles at the time. And I know I blocked it out of my mind because I remember those quilts and they were awful. [Laughs.] So probably I don't want to remember them. But of course I would say I wasn't at my best.

MS. CUBBS: And what year was that again?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I'd have to look at my résumé to tell you the year. I'll give you a copy of it, of the résumé. Late '70s.

MS. CUBBS: Late '70s. When did you start rocking and rolling in terms of exhibitions?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I've been rocking and rolling for a while. Geez. I guess the late – no, the early '90s. I had quite a few museums that contacted me asking if I could loan a quilt, one of my quilts, to group exhibitions. And again I would have to refer to the résumé to let you know which museums these were. But among them the African-American Museum. The Los Angeles African-American Museum. The Corcoran. National African-American Museum in Wilberforce. The National Civil Rights Museum. And various university museums. So there's a wide array of institutions.

MS. CUBBS: What would you describe or pick out as one or two of your most important showings? Most important shows and most important exhibitions of your own work?

MS. MAZLOOMI: My work, solo shows you mean?

MS. CUBBS: Solo or group.

MS. MAZLOOMI: The most important show would have to be the show "Spirits of the Cloth" at the Smithsonian.

MS. CUBBS: Now was your work included in that show?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes, it was based on my book, *Spirits of the Cloth*, and this was the first major show of contemporary African-American quilts at an important institution in the United States. My favorite quilt show, or favorite art show, would be one that was held at the National African-American Museum in Wilberforce, Ohio, and it was a show to commemorate the year of the craft, the year of crafts. And it was a mixed media show of fine crafts made by African-Americans and it was a stunning show. The show had such spirit. It had such spirit it was talking. It was vibrating, pulsating, wonderful: the colors, the work itself. All the mediums: fiber, wood,

metal. And the people, the artists, that turned out, every artist that was in that show came to that opening and they themselves were walking pieces of art.

MS. CUBBS: What year was that?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Ninety-three.

MS. CUBBS: And do you recall the exact title of the show?

MS. MAZLOOMI: "Uncommon Beauty." I have a catalog in the living room, but it was a very spirited show and it made us as artists very proud to see the best – the best our people had to offer.

MS. CUBBS: And where was this held again?

MS. MAZLOOMI: In crafts. It was a traveling show that originated at the African-American Museum in Wilberforce, Ohio, and the show traveled the country for approximately a year and a half. And there was such pride. Every artist wishes in their lifetime that they would be included in such a show; that had such a life of its own.

MS. CUBBS: Do you have any idea where it might have traveled? [Inaudible.]

MS. MAZLOOMI: It went to the Smithsonian. It went to the Dallas African-American Museum. It went to a museum in Atlanta.

MS. CUBBS: Which museum at the Smithsonian?

MS. MAZLOOMI: The Renwick. And it also went to the American Craft Museum. It was a wonderful show. And it was especially important to me because the quilt – another important fact – a quilt that I had sold to a young man from St. Louis was in that show. And this young man saw one of my quilts at a show that I did in St. Louis, and he called and he was so enthusiastic. This was my first individual African-American collector, just an ordinary Joe, you know. He called, he said, "Dr. Mazloomi, I have to have two of your quilts, and I must have them. And I want two of them." And I'm thinking, he doesn't know how expensive these quilts are. And he said – I told him they were expensive, he said – and he worked for the telephone company in St. Louis. And he said, "Well, I'll just take one of them then."

And at that time the quilts were several thousand dollars and he was so enthusiastic about that quilt. I had never had anybody call me before that talked about how much they would love to have a quilt, and how much they loved my quilts, and anyway, I let him have the quilt for little of nothing, okay. And he had to pay for it in increments, but that quilt was juried into the "Uncommon Beauty" show. And this young man came from St. Louis to the opening with his entire family and when he walked into the museum and saw on the signage his name as a donor to the exhibition. Well that was really very special for him. But he brought his mother to every venue that that show traveled to. I thought that was very significant because here you had a new generation of my people collecting work made by African-Americans and who could appreciate that work. That in itself is significant. That in itself is significant. To have a young person find work in the art created by his own people. It is significant and if anybody deserved a quilt, this young man deserved a quilt.

MS. CUBBS: That's a wonderful story. What was the name of the piece, do you recall?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It was the second, no the third in the *Family Series*. And it's a very historically significant piece. And when the quilt came back to him from the exhibition he called me. He said, "Dr. Mazloomi, we're having a libation ceremony to welcome the quilt home." I thought, you know, this is just wonderful. I appreciate him appreciating what I do. That's important.

MS. CUBBS: That's a wonderful story. We've already talked a little bit about your varied roles as an artist, curator, writer, arts advocate, organizer, and I was wondering if you could make kind of a summary statement about those varied roles that you have assumed.

MS. MAZLOOMI: One statement. It will kill you. [Laughs.] Oh geez, don't print that. [Laughs.] Anyway, there's a need for the advocacy of African-American craft, African-American folk art. I wish there were more organizations to help African-American craftspeople. African-American fine artists. Fine artists I'm not so much concerned about, but I always connect myself to the folk artist and to quilters and any help that you can give to a potential artist – a rising artist – they should have that help. They should have it because they're not going to get it from the average museum. They don't have that many organizations that are geared specifically towards the needs of African-Americans, and there's a lot that they could benefit from. Especially insofar as marketing and how not to be ripped off. They need that. They need a little push down the career path. They need a little lift.

MS. CUBBS: It's interesting because in addition to all those roles that we've just mentioned, you've also served as a kind of dealer or agent or representative for a lot of artists in the marketplace too.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes.

MS. CUBBS: So you've actually assumed that additional role.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes.

MS. CUBBS: Have you found any conflicts between these various roles? A lot of these activities take time away from your work as an artist, but has it all worked well together for you or have there been difficulties in trying to wear so many hats at the same time?

MS. MAZLOOMI: There are difficulties. I have artists that I work with every day that are talented in some things and not so talented in other things, and people expect that you would put them in exhibitions and sometimes you can't do that because their work isn't up to snuff. Then you've got to stroke them to get the work up to snuff so that it can be of that quality where you can show it in museums or galleries. You know, that takes away from your job as curator because you've got to nurture. That's time-consuming. Everything takes time, so every time you turn around and you do one job, of course you take a little bite out of something else that you could be doing.

MS. CUBBS: But your point is also here that they are in a sense contradictory; your role as kind of an objective curator –

MS. MAZLOOMI: Oh yes.

MS. CUBBS: – versus your role as a very subjective and supportive arts advocate for the men and women in your Network.

MS. MAZLOOMI: And I have to be objective. And I would like to think at all times I am objective. Sometimes to the dislike of a lot of the artists, okay, who don't understand sometimes the requirements for different museum exhibitions and, pure and simple, the requirement that you give me good work, okay. The work has to be up to snuff. The workmanship must be good. You can't give me shoddy work. Museums and galleries don't want it. So people have to realize what their role is as an artist and sometimes that's very difficult because, again that role requires nurturing. But the role as curator is absolute. When you are given directives by a museum, it's absolute. You have your set of objectives that you have to deal with and you have to deal with it. And there is no favoritism or curry favoring or whatever, and a lot of members find that difficult to comprehend.

MS. CUBBS: So you have to balance –

MS. MAZLOOMI: They find it difficult to comprehend why one person's work is worth $20,000 or $15,000 and they can only get $500, okay. You have a lot of variables that enter into the pricing of the art. How long has the person been doing – what's their track record? Where has their artwork been placed? And I have a lot of people that have just started out and made three quilts and expect that they get $5,000 for a quilt. So that's another fight, again, to get them to understand, okay, this is how it works. This is how it is.

MS. CUBBS: Putting on another hat, as a broker or dealer you have a whole other set of political and practical issues to deal with. Do you find that serving as a broker or dealer in any way contradicts any of your other roles?

MS. MAZLOOMI: No, I mean prices for the work are set, and if somebody wants it and they contact me they pay what the artist is asking and that's it. It's finished. It's a done deal. So that's very uncomplicated. That's very uncomplicated. And for those collectors that do know me, they know they can't call and say, "Okay, I'm looking for so and so's work, five – what can you give me for $500?" Then I have to hang up without saying something really bad. But they know that doesn't happen.

MS. CUBBS: How many exhibitions do you think you've curated over the last 10 years? Do you have any idea?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Not that many. Maybe 20.

MS. CUBBS: That's not bad.

MS. MAZLOOMI: About 20.

MS. CUBBS: I'm also wondering about your philosophy of teaching. You've mentioned a couple of times in the past about your hesitancy to teach quilt-making to aspiring quilt-makers, but then you also talked in amazing terms about the work that you've done with the Columbus, Ohio – based organization FACE and the teaching of at-risk, inner-city kids.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well those are special children. Those are my children. They're special. Of course there's a need for teachers if you're going to pass the art form on and hope to see it in future generations within the confines of

American craft. We need teachers. It just so happens that I am not a good teacher. I have something to offer for those children that are a part of FACE. I don't feel I have anything to offer the professional quilt-maker. I should be in somebody's quilt class. I don't have the time. That's my only problem: I don't have the time. But what I do is very simplistic. I'm not one on a myriad of techniques here, you know, it's just a plain state – straight stitch. And that's it. That's all I can do. So, I mean, when that's all you can do, how can you teach anybody anything? I don't have anything unique to teach anybody that somebody doesn't already know. That is not to say that I don't appreciate the teachers that do teach. I greatly admire them and admire what they do, because they further the cause of this craft that we know as quilt-making. They only serve to enhance it and enhance what the artists create.

MS. CUBBS: You mentioned a number of times that you might like to take some classes.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes.

MS. CUBBS: What would you want to learn?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I want to paint. I want to learn how to paint and that's my goal. When I retire in two years from the Women of Color Quilter's Network I hope to behind an easel painting.

MS. CUBBS: Are your paintings going to look anything like your quilts do you think?

MS. MAZLOOMI: No. [Laughs.] No.

MS. CUBBS: How are they going to be different?

MS. MAZLOOMI: They're going to be calm. They're going to be linear. I want to look at them and relax. Because when I look back on my life right now it's hectic and chaotic. I want calm in my life. That should be everybody's ultimate goal as we age: to have peace, serenity, and calm in our life. That's what I want for myself. And I think I can find that through painting. I will find that through painting.

MS. CUBBS: Great. Where have you gotten the ideas for your work over the years, and have your sources of inspiration changed?

MS. MAZLOOMI: The source of my quilts come from my own life experiences and every day that's different. I just finished a piece that you saw last time you were here, "Rasta", and that was inspired by Lauryn Hill's music. Music has that capacity to lift the human spirit and take you on a spiritual ride to another place. To another place where you are so entrenched in that spiritual moment you have no control over what you create, because it's coming from a totally different place. It's coming from a spiritual realm. And we're not in control. Her music takes me to that place. There have been certain people that I have known in my life to take me to a different place and inspire me to do – to create works that I would not normally think I even have the capacity to create. Talking with Nkosi Johnson, who year before last spoke to the International Conference on AIDS in Durbin, took me to another place, because his spirit was so strong. Marie Wilson inspires me with her work and her spirit. She was such a strong woman, who made you think you could do great things, you know. Who expected great things.

[Telephone ringing in background.] Excuse me. [Audio break, tape paused.]

MS. CUBBS: Talking about people, and kinds of inspiration for your work. You talked about music and certain individuals.

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yeah. And certain individuals and family. I had an ongoing series – my first series ever was about the family, and family is very important to me. Because my husband and I waited a long time before we had a family – thought we'd never have a family, so I like to depict the family theme in a lot of my quilts just to remind me how precious family is. How important family is in the overall scheme of things.

MS. CUBBS: You know, in a kind of practical way, too, I've heard you make reference to a print here or a painting here that has somehow found its way translated into your work. Do you find yourself drawing on a lot of visual sources around you and what might those be?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Well I love linocuts; I collect woodcuts. And I love the power of black and white, the simplicity of the colors black and white. So early on I had a lot of work that featured black and white. I think it's powerful. Today when you look at quilts you kind of overdose on the color, and everybody's into hand-dyed colors and very intense colors, and you go into quilt shows and it's too much. I find it's too much. It's too busy. I'm looking for a quieter place in my life. That was okay then, early on, but now I'm at another point and I want calm. So I see more quilt-makers that are leaning towards calm. Not so busy insofar as color and complexity of design. It's simpler.

MS. CUBBS: So do you find that your compositions are growing less complicated and that your color's becoming

more subdued or less contrasting, less high effect?

MS. MAZLOOMI: My – no. [Laughs.]

MS. CUBBS: Did you say no?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Oh geez, the colors, yeah. The colors over the years have gotten a little calmer, but that's black-folks calm, okay, not white-folks calm. [Laughs.] Hollers is just a shade under a scream, but anyway, the colors have changed somewhat. Yeah, they're more muted. Not too much. There's still a scream or two left. But not in the next phase of my work.

MS. CUBBS: Any other visual sources that you can think of, besides your collection of lino cuts, that might be an inspiration for your work?

MS. MAZLOOMI: No. I think the greatest source of inspiration would be the lino cuts but – not the greatest source, my greatest source are my own dreams – my own dreams and visions. That's my greatest source.

MS. CUBBS: What do you draw from when you're doing your figurative work? Do you have sources that you draw from? Do you draw from photographs?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Mental sources.

MS. CUBBS: Mental sources.

MS. MAZLOOMI: I can't draw. I don't think of myself as that type of artist that can sit down and draw. I think we talked about this earlier. If I felt the least bit that I could draw, I'd take wings and fly because I wouldn't know what to do with myself. I can't draw. My drawing's very cartoonish and I guess maybe that's why it's easy to collage these faces that I do. It's not so intense as actually drawing on paper. I don't draw on paper. I write. I write my ideas and they're in my mind. I can get a – I have a mental picture of what I want to do and I just start cutting the fabric and shaping it, layering it in a collage-type method to make it happen. Heaven help me if I could draw. [Laughs.] Really.

MS. CUBBS: Would you be surprised if people think you can draw because –

MS. MAZLOOMI: Everybody thinks that. Yeah, everybody thinks that I can draw or have some educational background in the arts or, you know, majored in art. Yeah, viewers feel that I have that ability.

MS. CUBBS: What involvement over the years have you had with national craft organizations like –

MS. MAZLOOMI: None.

MS. CUBBS: – the American Craft Council.

MS. MAZLOOMI: None.

MS. CUBBS: What about some of your local craft organizations or guilds?

MS. MAZLOOMI: None.

MS. CUBBS: You haven't gone to any annual gatherings of any –

MS. MAZLOOMI: I have spoken at them, but have not been a part of them.

MS. CUBBS: Which ones have you spoken at?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I've spoken at guilds all across the country.

MS. CUBBS: Quilting guilds?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Quilting guilds. I've spoken at museums and universities. Every kind of organization you can think of, but I am not a part of them.

MS. CUBBS: One thing that we haven't talked about is your activities as a lecturer, which seem to be a significant, part of the role that you assume in the field of quilt-making, in African-American quilt-making. How many lectures would you say you do a year?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Not that many, maybe a dozen, or two. [Laughs.] Let's say maybe 15.

MS. CUBBS: Does the field see you as a spokesperson for African-American quilt-making?

MS. MAZLOOMI: Yes. They do.

MS. CUBBS: You are the spokesperson.

MS. MAZLOOMI: They do.

MS. CUBBS: And how do you feel about that?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I am, in some sense, insofar as the Women of Color Quilter's Network and contemporary quilt-makers. Because I started this organization almost 18 years ago, and it is the largest organization of contemporary African-American quilters and we do have a voice. People want to know what we have to say, so this is why they call. They want to know what we are creating. So this is why they call.

MS. CUBBS: I understand. And here's almost a final major question, and it's something we've talked about in relationship to other ideas or issues before, but in what ways do political and social commentary figure into your work?

MS. MAZLOOMI: A lot of my quilts deal with, especially early on, with social and political issues that affect me as an African-American living in this country. I can't help but be touched by events and actions that affect me as a human being here, and I have to get them out sometimes in my work. I may not have a voice that can be heard nationally on a certain issue, but I have this medium of quilt-making where I can create a quilt that can be seen by hundreds or thousands of people that are in attendance at a museum or gallery show that will voice my concerns about racism. Voice my concerns about aids. Voice my concerns about violence in the African-American community. Voice my concerns about the daily theft of a legacy of art created by African-Americans. I have a wider audience in the creation of quilts that are shown at museums to address certain issues that bother me.

MS. CUBBS: Is there any work that you've created that is not in some overt or overarching way political or social?

MS. MAZLOOMI: I think the jazz series is exempt from that.

MS. CUBBS: In what way? Is that about a kind of pure pleasure?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It's pure joy. Pure pleasure. Pure pleasure. But everything else, like the blues, has a story. Sometimes it's joyful. Most times it's sorrowful. And some of them are so much so, that I might create the work, but nobody knows that story but me. And nobody will ever feel that pain that's in that work but me.

MS. CUBBS: I'd like to ask you just one final question here, and that is how you think your quilts have affected other people? And how would you like them to affect people?

MS. MAZLOOMI: It's always good when the artist who has created a piece can find that the viewing audience can relate to that piece and somehow see the same message that the artist is thinking about. If they get it then, you know, that's a job well done. I've had many instances where audiences, especially African-Americans will look at my quilts and be strongly affected by the quilt. There are instances where I've made quilts that address the issue of trial and pain and bringing up children, and some of the things that our children put parents through in the course of growing up and had viewers relate to that issue. I've had viewers that have been strongly affected by quilts that I've done on the topic of racism. Particularly, I made a quilt two years ago for an exhibition about the Underground Railroad. That exhibition took place at Oberlin College [Oberlin, Ohio], and I chose to not make a quilt to celebrate the Underground Railroad movement, but my own childhood experiences growing up in Louisiana and having one of my young friends lynched by members that we assumed were in the Klan. And this quilt was a very visual representation of that memory. That memory of finding my friend. That memory of seeing Klansmen with torches and lighted crosses, burning crosses, crossing the highway.

And this quilt depicted all of my childhood experiences, and one viewer came up to me and she was just absolutely enthralled with this quilt. And coming from the South [she] could relate to the experiences that I had [END TAPE 4 SIDE A] growing up in Louisiana in the 40s and 50s. And [she was] very touched by the quilt, so strongly that I felt compelled to give her that quilt. Over the years I've given away a lot. And I am of the adage the more you give, you always get it back. There are people that I know in their lifetime wouldn't be able to afford one of my quilts, but they have such a love and understanding of the work that I feel compelled to let them have it, because I know that with them taking it, they honor that work. And they honor me in that they understand it. And they are so compassionate in their understanding, just as compassionate as I was in making it. So it's always good when people can understand your work and go deep. It's a joy when they can go deep. When the viewer can go deep and they really get it and understand what you're trying to say, and I find that

that’s rarely the case; that the viewer gets it. That’s a rarity. So when they do I am thankful.

MS. CUBBS: End of interview with Carolyn Mazloomi.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

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