Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Dorothy Gill Barnes, 2003 May 2-7

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Dorothy Gill Barnes on May 2 and 7, 2003. The interview took place in Worthington, 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.

Dorothy Gill Barnes 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 Dorothy Gill Barnes at the artist's home in Worthington, Ohio, on May 2, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disc number one. Well, the first question I will ask you, then, is when and where you were born.

DOROTHY GILL BARNES: I was born in Strawberry Point, Iowa, and it was in 1927 on May 30th; and that was Memorial Day in those days.

MS. CUBBS: Tell me a little bit about the town itself.

MS. BARNES: Strawberry Point had a little bit over 1,100 people, and it was in the northeast corner of Iowa, right where the flatlands and the farms and the rugged little hills of Wisconsin come together; so it's a pretty area. It was a nice place to grow up. I liked being there.

MS. CUBBS: Sounds beautiful. Could you also describe a bit about your childhood and your family background, particularly those things that might have in some ways presaged your work as an artist?

MS. BARNES: I was one of four girls growing up in Strawberry Point, and I was third out of the four. I had a little sister who was with me lots of times in the backyard. We would play sometimes in the asparagus bed and make little parks and play with mirrors and stones. And I liked an area under a tree where I remember looking off at the cornfields, and sometimes I would stop and play there when I went out to feed the chickens. And in our house we had a chalkboard: a really good old-fashioned chalkboard, and I remember copying pictures out of the comics. I would draw pictures of Popeye and all those characters, so I got encouragement along the way from my mom and from other people about my little art projects.

A sheet of paper that was blank was always a treat to get at Christmastime. And I do remember one thing that is quite a contrast from the way things are today, and that is that I got a tablet of typewriter paper for Christmas. That was my very most exciting Christmas present. I didn't know, somehow, that I could ask for that at any other time, and so I waited all year for Christmas for that tablet, and it was the most exciting thing that I got at Christmastime: more important than dolls or anything else. I just enjoyed that very much, but I think now about paper waste and how much paper there is available for everybody, and I find myself being very frugal about a sheet of paper.

Because we had no art in our schools, I found that occasionally there would be a poster to make for something, and maybe the high school would have a play and they would ask some of the young people who were interested to go and help paint or something. But other than that, there just was no art around me in Strawberry Point. So it was not until I went off to this little college in Cedar Rapids that I had a real art class, but I knew I was directed in that way from a long time ago.

MS. CUBBS: I remember you telling a wonderful story, too, about your clothes-making as a child.

MS. BARNES: Oh yeah, we did have a wonderful home ec teacher, and the boys all took shop and the girls all took home economics, and we had one project in which we would make an apron and learn a little bit about sewing. And I found that when I was able to put a zipper in a skirt that I could make a dress and other things as well, so I made a lot of my own clothes when I was in junior high. And my mother was wonderful and allowed me to wear those things off to school. Some of them were really pretty terrible, but I loved doing that, and with her encouragement, it was wonderful.

My mother died about three years after I left high school. She was only 52 when she died, and so I have those memories of her being very supportive in the things that I tried to do with my sewing, because she had been a home ec teacher herself many, many years before she had a family. So that was a nice thing to remember with

my mom.

MS. CUBBS: Let's then move to the history of your early education and some of the career choices that came about as you progressed along your educational track. You mentioned, for example, that there was, in your grade school, no art classes of any kind. So why don't you talk a little bit more about that and about your early years of college.

MS. BARNES: Well, I think that when I decided to go to college and I knew that I wanted to be in the direction of art classes, I did sign up for the beginning life drawing and the classes that were offered. I also had a full load of liberal arts. My instructor was a wonderful man. His name was Marvin Cone, and he was quite well known for his own painting and fine drawing and painting. But to have just one instructor for three years was really not a very varied experience. So I think I had one art education class, and then I realized that after three years at Coe [Coe College, Cedar Rapids, Iowa] that it was probably time for me to do something else, and so I decided to go to the Minneapolis School of Art [Minneapolis, Minnesota].

Someone had told me about it and they liked it very much, and so I transferred and went up to the Minneapolis School of Art my last year in college.

MS. CUBBS: You have had a recent reconnection with the Minneapolis School of Art. Could you tell us a little more about that?

MS. BARNES: Yes. It was rather strange to have been invited to the Minneapolis College of Art and Design; that is what it's called now. But in those days the Minneapolis School of Art did not even have accreditation for college credit, and so after I was there that year, I realized that I wanted to finish and have a college degree, so I went back to Iowa and went to the University of Iowa [Iowa City, Iowa].

While I was in Minnesota, I did indeed continue to do something with my sewing. I took a pattern-drafting class from a woman there, Ellen Carney Moberg, but I realized pretty much early on that I didn't want to get into fashion or anything like that, and so I took some other drawing classes.

The wonderful experience of being on the Burlington Zephyr coming and going from Iowa to Minneapolis is one thing that I remember with pleasure. The old vista dome and the wonderful train rides to come and go from school there and the many lakes and the pretty city. But the University of Iowa was a lot closer, and it was where I needed to be and indeed was the right choice because it was the finest and best of the art education that I have had. And my two years at Iowa meant so much to me; that's not to complain at all about Mr. Cone's program at Coe, because he was wonderful. But it just didn't spread out enough into other areas in art. So I took some design at Iowa, and we had wonderful art history classes. They had a fine department; it opened my eyes to what was going on in the contemporary world, and I saw some things on the big screen. You know, even in those days it was unusual to have two slides side by side where you could actually look at some art in color. That was unlike my experience at Coe, so I felt that I was looking and seeing and having access to a lot of shows coming and going from the university and that sort of thing. So I loved being at Iowa.

Unfortunately that was when my mother died suddenly, and it was hard to be there that first fall without friends, not knowing anybody very much. And so it was difficult going back and forth to support my dad when he was so sad. But I worked hard, and I feel like I had a good chance at being introduced to the fine arts there.

MS. CUBBS: So at Coe College, what were your fields of endeavor?

MS. BARNES: Actually it was mostly just trying to get my undergraduate courses underway, and I think I was kind of frivolous and didn't pay much attention and do much. It's those years when everybody's looking for a boyfriend and, you know, having the ASTP [Army Specialized Training Program] boys there. It was during the Second World War and there were young soldiers being trained on campus, and there were other soldiers coming back from the war then, as the war ended during that time. And so it was – the college was very small. Enrollment was down to I think a little over 600, and it was quite a contrast between the 17-year-old boys and mostly girls on campus, and then the boys returning from having been in the war. So I don't think about it as a time when I was very productive in my artwork, but [I] did some decorations on the walls at the school cafeteria: a little lounge area, and I did that with some other students, but I don't remember very much else that was positive. But University of Iowa was really an eye-opener.

MS. CUBBS: You were an art major at Coe College?

MS. BARNES: Yeah. I was.

MS. CUBBS: So you were at Coe College for three years and one year at the Minneapolis School of Art, where you did pattern-making and clothing production –

MS. BARNES: A little bit. Uh-huh.

MS. CUBBS: And then you went on to the University of Iowa –

MS. BARNES: Uh-huh.

MS. CUBBS: – and you said you were there for two years. Where did you officially graduate as an undergrad?

MS. BARNES: What I did was I finished my B.A., which would be my senior year of college work, there at the University of Iowa, and I took design classes with a man named John Shulze, who was incredible. He was a wonderful teacher, and he had been a photographer; that was his background. But during the Second World War there were a lot of strange things happened. Departments were shifting around with their faculty, and they had to drop the ceramics department entirely because of, I suppose, the fuel for the kilns or something. My metals class was held in a Quonset hut, and I remember that there were restrictions on things that we could have and use and materials and all of that, but it was still very worthwhile.

MS. CUBBS: And so you finished your undergraduate degree at the University of Iowa. Did you go on for a master's there too?

MS. BARNES: Yes. Then what happened was that my parents had said that we could – all four girls could have four years of college, and that was kind of it. My older sisters did not go on from their B.A. degrees. So when I knew that I wanted to go back, I had to pay my own way, and so I couldn't just start out and take another year after that. So I looked for a teaching job, and without even education classes I applied around and strangely enough I was offered a job because I had a minor in home economics. I had enough classes in home ec that it was kind of like a minor, and I was offered a job teaching in the home economics department at a little college in Iowa: at Simpson College in Indianola, Iowa. And I taught there for a year and I was a pretty awful teacher; I wasn't very good. I did some teaching in textiles and clothing, but I also taught some art education classes and a little design class, and I got really interested in that.

I liked the idea of teaching teachers, and I had ideas of things that I wanted to do that were sort of playful. Maybe part of that came from having to do that sort of thing when I was on my own as a child. But the summer after my teaching at Indianola, at the very beginning of that summer, I taught a class of people who came in from rural areas in Iowa. And I remember in one case, there were a couple of women from one-room schoolhouses out in the countryside, and I got an idea for some projects for them to do with their children in the classroom: murals that went from spring to summer to fall to winter, and changing colors on blackboards and cutting paper and getting out art supplies to try to see how much they could do with small amounts of material, because they were limited financially. And I kind of got interested in that, so these ladies would bring me kittens and – I don't know, I just somehow enjoyed that very much. I liked doing that. So I did have that experience that was positive.

The other thing that happened was that John Shulze had told me that it would be a very good idea if I could get a summer program at Cranbrook [Cranbrook Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan], and so I decided that I would go to Cranbrook that summer. Because I was teaching this class, I couldn't get in the first week, and it was a six-week program, so I went the second week intending to take a weaving class. And when I got there at Cranbrook and drove my little, funny Plymouth all the way, I saw that everybody had threaded up these looms, and there were just so many threads and it just looked so complicated, and I just couldn't imagine doing that. And so I just dropped out. I just said, "I've got to change my class; this isn't what I need," because they were so far ahead of me and I just didn't think I'd ever catch up.

So instead I took a class in silk-screen printing and surface design painting on cloth and came and went from the classroom and met a lot of interesting people. Had an exciting experience at Cranbrook, and I thought it was a really neat place, and met John Paul Darriau, who was doing painting, and Audrey Flack, who was young, and she was just out of high school and was there. And another person, Neal Cotton. The four of us just did all kinds of crazy things – driving into Detroit in my little old car and getting bagels at 5:00 in the morning and swimming in the pools at Cranbrook when we shouldn't be there and a lot of nonsense stuff. It was fun and exciting to be around interesting young artists from other places in the world. So that was quite an experience.

MS. CUBBS: Tell me more about the work you were doing at Cranbrook.

MS. BARNES: I'm not sure I should tell you what happened there [laughs]. My teacher, actually, was unhappy about something in his marriage, and I met with him once, and he went off to Sweden and he didn't show up after – so we just did anything we wanted to do at Cranbrook. It was very disorganized, but it was still of value and I loved it. I did some mediocre silk-screen drapery kinds of things and some little prints – but I think just absorbing the place, and being with the people, and seeing artists coming from all over, and walking freely in and out of their studios, and just chatting and talking and getting to know other people in the arts is part of it. And I remember John Paul Darriau dancing to Monteverdi in the dining room, and nice little personal

conversations with Audrey Flack, and knowing some of the tools and the materials that I worked with in the shop there had been used by famous people, and seeing the big block of wood where they threw hot water on it or whatever it is to make the first plywood chairs, and things of that sort just mattered a lot to me.

The fact that John Shulze sent me there was very influential in making decisions about what I was doing before and after that. I could go back to one little thing that I'd like to mention too, in connection with that: after, the fall of 1948, when my mother died suddenly, I was very distressed, and as I said didn't know anybody and I was there at Iowa finishing up my undergraduate course. That winter my dad had always planned to take my mother south to see a palm tree, and she'd never seen one, and we felt so sad, and it was a difficult holiday that first time. So I said to my dad, "Why don't we go down and see the palm tree anyway, and take the trip that you were going to take with Mom, and you can meet some other cousins in California? And take your trip, Dad, you need to do that."

So I took time off between semesters, and John Shulze said to me, "Well, if you're going to go down to Phoenix on the way to California with your dad, go to Taliesin." So I went down there, and Dad and I walked over to Taliesin West. And as we were walking up to the booth, or at the booth little area where people could come and go to see the Frank Lloyd Wright home, Frank Lloyd Wright walks up and says to me and to the man beside me, he said "How much did she charge this young woman to get in here?" and he said "Fifty cents." So he said "Well give her back her 50 cents." And so I shook hands with Frank Lloyd Wright, and my dad did too, and he took me on the little start to see Taliesin. So I think it's kind of fun that sometimes when I'm with a bunch of people and architects are around – recently a young man who was just writing a paper about Frank Lloyd Wright, and so I put out my hand and I said, "Now you have shook the hand that shook the hand of Frank Lloyd Wright." We got a kick out of that.

But after that experience of being at Simpson College and knowing that I was not a good teacher, I wasn't doing well; I was short-changing those students because I just didn't do very well at teaching there. But I knew that I wanted to go back, and I would like to get, not in the home economics line, but I wanted to go over back into the arts in a different way. And so I decided to go back, and if I could get a part-time job, that maybe I could do that. So Mr. Shulze encouraged me to come back and to start an M.F.A. or M.A. And I couldn't afford an M.F.A.: it was two years. And I just thought, I can't be an M.F.A. major, and so if I do the art education thing, then I'll have a way to be employed and still be in the arts, and so that's what I chose to do.

So I did go back to Iowa. And in the meantime I had learned silk-screen printing, and so I took another class with John Shulze, and he asked me to assist him, and we did silk-screen printings. So I kind of not really taught, but did some of the surface design things in his industrial design class and worked with him there again. I also took some other classes that would give me requirements that I needed to get my M.A.

Trying to think of something else that might be of interest on that. I think that the university was changing again. It was becoming a little bit more lively in some areas because the war was over longer and there was quite a lot happening there. And I did meet some interesting people in music and art, and actually that's at the time that I met my husband. He was working on his Ph.D. when I was working on my M.A., and so we got together some friends that wanted to dance in *Fledermaus* [Johann Strauss], and he was the accompaniment person for the summer following that. And we dated for about a semester and then decided to get married. We started a family after that and moved on to his job, which was the head of the music department at a little town in Iowa. So that's what happened, how that all turned out.

MS. CUBBS: I hear you talking about your growing awareness of yourself within a larger artist community as you go to Cranbrook and finally to the University of Iowa, and I'm wondering what happened to you at this point? How you went from there. You were experimenting with a number of different kinds of art forms, and after you got married and started to have your children, I'm wondering how your educational process continued. Did you attend workshops? How did you continue to evolve as an artist from that point on?

MS. BARNES: Well, I think that the fact that in art education you're sort of expected to try a lot of things. I mean, you need to teach drawing, you need to work with little people and know how they're going to respond, and so you keep projects simple but varied. And I had the cloth thing in my background, and I had some painting along the way all the time. I had not had any experience with either metal or clay, but that's one of the things that was added during that last time at Iowa. And also, just before Marshall [H. Barnes] and I had made a decision about getting married, I was able to make my wedding ring in the metals class with Mr. [Raoul] Delmar at the University of Iowa. And that was in this little shop, and it also was a time when the first enamel kiln was introduced to me. And it was just a little one, and it was so exciting to have this little thing all shiny, bright red, and nobody knew anything about how to use it. And Mr. Delmar didn't either. I mean, he was doing beautiful copper and silverwork and taught us to raise bowls and so forth, but [the kiln] was quite new, and we were free to try.

And I think the University of Iowa is an excellent school, you know; it's well known for its writing workshop and in

music and the arts and so forth. And I think there was a really good feeling that you could just try things, and people were not stifling or protective of traditional ways of doing things. So I can remember having these hunks of copper and being able to just chop them up with scissors, or big loppers – shears and metal cutters and so forth, and just sprinkling the stuff on any old way. We didn't know how to do it right, but I was melting marbles and having all kinds of happy accidents and things. And that kind of opportunity was fun, and it was interesting.

So that happened in metal, and then after we were married, I took ceramic classes. I'm trying to think where I started at on that. I think it was when we went to Trinity [Trinity University, San Antonio, Texas]. Marshall was at Parsons College [Fairfield, Iowa]. I think we were there for a few years, and we had our second child, and I didn't do an awful lot with the arts because, you know, I was teaching one little class over at the college, but I didn't really do an awful lot with that.

MS. CUBBS: This was at Simpson College?

MS. BARNES: Yeah, at Simpson – no, I mean in Fairfield at Parsons College is where my husband was the head of the department. I guess the thing that I did with him there was I made a lot of costumes and stage sets for his music performance stuff. And so I did a lot of the props that they needed for *Amahl and the Night Visitors* [Gian Carlo Menotti] and I did costumes for *Bartered Bride* [Bedrich Smetana] and this and that, and posters, and I did some covers for some of his music that he had published. Just some drawings and things.

And so that was sort of what I was doing. And of course, playing with my kids. Then we went from there to Trinity – Trinity is a small, very fine college in San Antonio, and that year was when I got very excited about clay, and I went out to the McNay Art Institute [San Antonio, Texas], and I could throw pots and look out at the cactus, and it was just great. And a woman by the name of Mrs. [Margaret] Flowers was my teacher and she was excellent. And I just thought it was great. I loved it, but I was quite pregnant at the time and couldn't get close enough to the wheel to finish up much. [Laughs.] So that was just during the last six months of my pregnancy that I did that, and so I finally had the baby, and 16 days later we left and we came back to Ohio State University [Columbus, Ohio].

MS. CUBBS: What year was that when you were in San Antonio?

MS. BARNES: Oh, let's see. San Antonio. Ted [Barnes] was just born, so that would be '56. '57. '57, yeah, that's right. Goodness; a long time ago. So with two other little boys and Ted, we came back to Ohio State, where Marshall was offered a full-time job in Columbus. In between, we had been here one summer, and then we went to Trinity and came back here. He was offered a full-time job, so we moved to this house where we are right now. We had lived down the road in another house for those two summers, and then we moved here. So we've been here quite a long time. And I continued my interest as the children were growing and going off and taking some ceramic classes. I took one painting class, I remember, also just for a change. It was nice to just get out, and Marshall has been very supportive of any of my efforts in the arts. He always wants me to have time to get away to do that, and we've done some projects together. So I try to be very quiet when he's composing, and he tries to be very supportive when I'm exhibiting or something, and so that's been a big help all my life and as a married person.

The one class that I took that was kind of a surprise to me was that – it was an offering in a little down-the-road community center where Howard Kottler was teaching. And Howard Kottler was, I think, in the graduate program. He was doing some teaching at Ohio State, but he was later to go on to become the head of the department in Seattle. He was here a couple of times. And there's a Kottler jar over there, and there's one in the kitchen and another one upstairs. I have three of his early pieces, and I remember I always told the children they'd have to say, "Will you pass the Kottler cookie jar?" We had to call it the Kottler cookie jar, and it still has cookies in it some of the time. His career was quite exciting and to see him changing the way people thought about ceramics. After he left, most of that happened, but it was very sad for him to die so young. He was a very lively person in the ceramic world, and I enjoyed very much having that little class with him down at the Park of Roses Community Center [Whetstone Park of Roses, Columbus, Ohio].

I actually wove clay. I didn't know anybody had done that, but I just decided I would weave strips of clay. And of course it has been done so many times since – other people have done it. But mine was not packed quite right, I mean, I didn't handle it carefully, and I broke and threw it out, so I don't have my woven pot. But I did do it, and Howard was encouraging to me to try things like that.

MS. CUBBS: Your woven pot sounds like an icon of things to come. [Ms. Barnes laughs.] With your involvement in all of these other kinds of media, how did you work your way towards the art of weaving and finally to basket making? How did that occur?

MS. BARNES: Well, this all has to do with my teaching here in Worthington. After we moved here, I had lost a sister in 1963; and she died at the age of 39 of cancer. A melanoma and with two little kids, and it was so sad. And we thought, well you just can't wait to do things, so we decided we were going to take our three little boys

and go to Europe. And we wanted something happy to look forward to, and so we thought, well, how can we do this? And so I thought, well, if I could teach full time, we could save enough money, and we could take the three little boys, and we could go to Europe; so we did. And there was a need for teachers in this school system here; they needed somebody part-time in shop and part-time in art. Well, I had refinished a table once and done a little bit of stuff with wood, and I thought, well, maybe I could handle it. I had to teach drawing, which is isometric and orthographic drawing, which I'm terrible at doing, but I figured it out. At the seventh grade level I thought maybe I could handle it, so I did. And this was in a Quonset hut behind the high school up here. Actually it was the seventh grade. It had been a high school and then a junior high, and then they decided that they would make it all seventh graders, so we had scads of seventh graders.

So I would go to work in the morning and this was after getting the kids off to grade school, and the oldest one was in that seventh grade, and I got them all off, went over there, and I taught in the morning. I had 25 boys, and then I had 25 boys, and then I had 25 boys, and then I had 25 boys – four classes of seventh- grade boys in industrial arts at that level in shop. And I decided that they weren't just going to make birdhouses, and so I taught them about geodesic domes, and we made a lot of geodesics. I felt they had needed to know about that, and so they learned a little bit about Mr. [Buckminster] Fuller, and they learned about some other stuff. And my orthographic drawing wasn't very good; I didn't have them sharpen their pencils properly and all that stuff that I was supposed to be doing. After finishing with my four classes in the morning, I had playground duty, and then I had an hour to change the shop into an art classroom, and then I had two art classes.

Then I would go home and get supper and take care of my family. And then often I would go back and learn how to change the blade in the bandsaw and things like that. And grade papers. I don't know how we did it, but we did it. And we went to Europe, and we had a 21-day excursion rate and had a wonderful time. We visited a pen pal of one of the boys, and we collected some music in the Hebrides [Scotland] with my husband and the kids for a few days, and went to London and Paris, and we just flew around and ended up in Denmark with a pen pal, and swam in a cold place in Switzerland. We came back, and I was offered the job again and I didn't think I could handle it [laughs], so I just decided not to try to repeat it, because it was just so hard on the family. I think we were all kind of worn out, but it was a good experience. We managed for a year okay.

So then the high school teacher, who had seen me working at the junior high level and had gotten acquainted with me during the time I taught, had gone down to Capital University [Columbus, Ohio]. He was teaching down there, and he suggested that I go down there and teach part time at Capital University, so I did that. And this was perfect, because it was a part-time job. I was able to get out and do some things in the arts and make a little money for the family, and the children were older and in school, full time, and so that worked out well. So I did that for a few years.

And then when I was 41, I took a pregnancy leave and had a daughter when I was 42 years old. I took three years off after that to be with Juliet [Barnes] and her big brothers, and during that time I did a little bit of artwork here and there. Probably some ceramics. I think I had my potter's wheel here at the time. And then when I went back to Capital, the weaving teacher who had been there had died, and she was a wonderful woman: Clara Ebinger. And I didn't even know that she had died. I was out of touch with that part of the City and didn't have close friends of hers, but I missed her a lot. And she had had a nice rapport with students, and I saw her looms all piled up against a wall in the old gymnasium, and I just sort of felt sorry for the looms. I thought, that's too bad.

And I guess it was during that maternity leave I had taken a short course, about once or twice a week for about three months, with Jon Wahling down at the Cultural Arts Center [Columbus, Ohio]. It was in an old firehouse, and it was before they had their beautiful new space. And so I had learned to string up a loom. And John, of course, is a wonderful weaver, and he was a fine teacher. The only problem was that they had such limited space that people had to take turns in those classes, and I couldn't go on with it. There was no space for me in any of the classes, and so I just didn't have the opportunity to get back to a loom and continue, but I enjoyed doing it. So I knew enough that I could pull off the beginning classes down there. I taught some basic design and some art education, and I even taught one ceramic class when somebody couldn't do it. And I had a variety of experiences in part-time teaching, so I would come and go. Sometimes I taught two classes a semester, and one time I taught three, but it got down to maybe one a year. And I started teaching just the textiles and weaving part of it. And I taught basketry. I mean I started making baskets at that time.

MS. CUBBS: What led you into the experimentation with both weaving and basketry that has become the center of your later work? How did you begin to focus in on those particular art forms?

MS. BARNES: Well, I think it happened in kind of an interesting way, because I had no idea that anything was going on that was three dimensional in fiber or that would take me in that direction. But then I got into our little local weaver's guild, and I saw a few *FiberArts* magazines and a lot was happening at a big show in Cleveland at that time. Some of the famous people in fiber art were exhibiting there and Claire Zeisler and, oh, I'm trying to think of the others. There's so many. But I had taught the school class, and I can remember the idea I had when

these students who were there in the fall had started their weaving. I asked them with a raise of hands, I think there were about eight or nine students in the class, I said, “How many of you are going to be with family at Thanksgiving?” And they all were. And I said, “Do you think that you would have a chance to talk with any of your families who have some interest in textiles: weaving or quilting or crocheting? Anything related to textiles.” And they did. And I said, “I’d like to tell you that if you will give me two hours of your Thanksgiving vacation, I’ll let you have a two-hour class free when you come back.” And we agreed to this. We talked about it, and we decided it would be kind of a good thing to have. I think there was one boy in the class and all the rest girls, but what we did was asked them to interview someone in their family about a textile experience, and maybe even bring back a sample.

And I had one person who brought back a little piece of crochet, and another one who brought back some tatting, and another one who did something with this grandmother that had to do with quilting. And they had stories to go with those things, and it was really a pretty good project. And I decided at the same time that I was going to do something with basketry myself. So I went to my backyard, and I had found some books, but I had no experience with baskets. And at that time there was still some old grasses and lilies and things around, and I tried doing some things with those materials, and I picked up something about coiling. There’s a Central Ohio Weaver’s Guild that I had belonged to. There were a couple of classes, and I took a class, I’m not just sure if it was before or after, but I think it might have been after, with Jon Riis, and I had that class with him and I learned a little bit about coiling.

And I had another class where I observed Dwight Stump, who was a basket maker in Ohio – a traditional worker who worked with pulled reed and he was wonderful. He was a very interesting man. I didn’t get out with him the first day of [the class], because I was busy, but the second day that I went, he was pulling reed through an old record-player turntable stuck in the tree. And he poked a hole through it, and he had another hole through it, and one was bigger than the other, and he would carve pieces of oak that he had collected the day before into long strips and then pull them through with pliers. And he was just wonderful to watch. Nancy Crow and Ora Anderson were in on arranging that. I think Nancy Crow had discovered him. I’m not sure, but I’m pretty sure that she did. And they found that he had figured out how to do this, and he was making these baskets down there near Rockbridge, Ohio, out in the hills.

We went down to visit him, and I remember saying to Mr. Stump that I would like to buy a particular, basket and he said, “It’s $15,” and I said, “But Mr. Stump, that’s not enough for that.” And he said, “But that’s the $15 size.” And so I have my Mr. Stump’s basket, and it’s beautifully made, and it’s very functional. And I have a bushel basket of his also. And then he went on to folk festivals, and people were aware that he had these skills, and he taught a few people how to weave these things. But it’s so labor intensive that I think he did some of his teaching with commercial reed to show people about his process of making traditional baskets. I think he died a few years ago. He was a very wonderful man and one of the people from our Ohio area that I was fortunate enough to meet.

I didn’t have a lot of instruction on how to do things. Some of it came from books. I did go to visit a rather famous woman in textiles from the old days. Her name was Osma Gallinger Tod. She wrote books about textiles – I think she wrote a book every time she lost a husband, but she had written this book on earth basketry, and in the back of the book there was a list of materials that she had found that she could use to make baskets [*Earth Basketry*; West Chester, PA: Schiffer Publishing, 1986. Revised edition of *Basket Pioneering*, 1933]. And the story goes that she had a connection with Cranbrook too, something about looms, and she was a concert pianist. She was just an amazing lady, and she was still alive down there in Florida, so I went down to see my dad and went to visit her, and she was giving a class. She had a few students there, and she was teaching with commercial reed, which didn’t excite me very much. It was rather a traditional thing that she was doing. But I was wanting to ask her questions about the natural materials.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

MS. BARNES: She showed me some things that were so funny. We took banana leaves and ironed them, and she said that makes good stationary because there are sort of stripes on it; it doesn’t have anything to do with basketry, but it was just fun. And then we looked around and handled things, but mostly I was attracted to my way of looking at the landscape by then. I was beginning to look for things that I thought might make good baskets but [ones] I had not read about or had not handled and had never tried to do. And I was immediately attracted to banyon. The banyon trees in Florida were so different from my experience in Iowa or Illinois – or in Ohio, that I just wanted to do something with them. So I asked a man who had a caretaker cutting some banyon if I could have some of those roots, so we rolled them up and put them in my dad’s car trunk, and we were out and driving around, and I started making baskets. I used banyon for one of my pieces, and it was clear and flexible. Not everything always went right, but I started experimenting with unnatural materials for baskets. Things from nature but not specifically in the tradition of working to make baskets.

I think that’s been my focus since. I like to try to see what I can do with materials that I think are beautiful in

nature. Whether or not it's a really strong functional basket, if it's a form that interests me, that's what I like to do with it.

MS. CUBBS: When did you make your very first basket – guided by your experiences teaching weaving and fiber arts and looking at books and experiencing the works of other basket makers, when did you actually make your first basket?

MS. BARNES: Well, I'm glad that you asked me that, because it's an important part of it. I really would love to give you the date, but I'm kind of confused about just when it was in connection with all of this. There was a woman in our community here who came to the University of Iowa to teach, probably during the time that fiber arts were just becoming exciting, and her name was Ruth Mary Papenthein. And Ruth Mary Papenthein was a graduate from Cranbrook, and she had a class going down at Ohio State that seemed to be pretty exciting to me. I went down to see visiting artists' work and the new faculty work when I was on campus accompanying my husband, who was there so much. And I looked in on the art department and got to know some of the people, and we got to know people socially in the art department a little bit. And Ruth Mary's work was quite strong in design and beautifully woven and crafted so well.

So I asked if she would look at something that I was doing, because I had started making a couple of little baskets in my backyard by then. She actually had left the faculty; they were winding down in the whole business of textiles, and I think there might have been a controversy about her working in required teaching of home economics students instead of so much in the arts. In any case, she left. She was still in the community, but she wasn't at Ohio State. And so I went down to see her and she had a setup for me in the apartment, and we sat and talked for a little while. It was a very hot day, and she had one room air-conditioned, I think, and we went into this room, and at the end of her bed, in this apartment, she had a bench, and on that bench she had a wonderful, wonderful teaching experience laid out for me. She had books about baskets. She had not just new baskets, very old baskets. She had books about African art and textiles. She had samples of baskets that she had collected that were a variety of textures and so forth.

She also talked to me about – I think that she had done a project in contemporary basketry at Ball State [Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana], if I remember correctly. But this is before I ever heard of Ed Rossbach or John McQueen or anybody like that. I didn't know anybody was doing contemporary baskets. And she was way early on this and encouraging to me, and she saw my little attempt at doing whatever I was doing in an awkward and strange way with unusual materials, and she liked them. And she told me to come back. And so she just suggested that I do what I could with my own grasses and anything that I found. And I did that, and I worked with other stuff. I think I had two sessions with her, but they were so filled with information, and the materials that she gave me to look at were wonderful.

And about that time I entered an exhibition – a Beaux Arts Exhibition down at our art museum downtown [Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio, 1975]. I hadn't exhibited in that show before, and I made a piece with sweet grass, that I ordered from the Mohawk Indians, because I had heard about sweet grass and I knew we didn't have it around here, and they were selling it and happy to sell it at that time. I think that they're more protective of the sweet grasses now, and it's indeed very special in their art world, but I know it's grown and available many places in the world. But it was quite nice for me to have it in my hands and be able to use it. So I did make a sweet-grass basket. And I went to books to learn about fern stitches and copies from technique books about a very ornamental lid, and then I had a nontraditional way of lining up the fern stems. And an artist from New York, Françoise Grossen, judged that exhibition, and I received the Greater Columbus Award or something at that exhibition, and I was just astonished. I had no idea it was any good. I had no idea that anybody else would ever want to look at it, and it was a real boost.

And I was excited, so a little after that, I found an item in the *Fiber Arts* magazine about a miniature textiles exhibition in London, England ["International Exhibition of Miniature Textiles," British Craft Center, London, England, 1974], and I entered. The good textile people were invited, but there was an open juried part, and so I entered a loom-woven basket. I decided I'd put my hard materials into the loom, and so I was weaving with fern stems and that sort of thing and barks and wax linen and any old thing that seemed right to go along with my natural materials. And I formed them in either cylinders or spheres, and I entered, and that piece was accepted.

So I went over to England and that's where I met Jane Sauer and Francis Wilson, and I remember seeing Kay Sekimachi's beautiful, loom-woven basket in that exhibition. And I was very much impressed, and I was so happy to see the big, important, wonderful textile artists who had worked in the Lausanne Biennale, you know, with big – great big eight-by-eight-foot things. Size was humongous over in Switzerland at that big Lausanne show. And to have some of those same artists invited to be in this miniature textiles thing in London was kind of an idea – I think it was Ann Sutton who got the idea of doing a little one, you know. And I have the books back there; I should tell you some of the people that were in it, I think there might even be a [Magdalena] Abakanowicz, I'm not sure – a little one. But there was this little stuff, you know, eight by eight inches.

MS. CUBBS: Would I be right in guessing that was in the early '70s?

MS. BARNES: You want me to go back and check on that? I could. They are right back there. Just little books.

MS. CUBBS: We can do that in a minute. But is that your memory? Was it around that time?

MS. BARNES: Let's see. I'll have to think of how old our child was, because Juliet went along. I think she was eight when she went to England the first time, so it would be mid-'70s. Early '70s.

And also, the other thing that happened during that time, that Ruth Mary told me about, was "In Praise of Hands" [World Crafts Exhibition, Toronto, Ontario, 1974]. It was an incredible exhibition in Toronto, and we went to that. I wouldn't have known about it if she hadn't told me, and that would be before that even. That would be probably about '73 or something like that, because I took my granddaughter too. So my daughter and my granddaughter were four years apart.

But we went up to "In Praise of Hands," and I saw those wonderful, wonderful textiles and the fun of that show – I don't know if there's ever been anything like it. People who were at that exhibition in Toronto are still talking about it; it was a world occasion. It was all kinds of great craft, and people came to it and did things in both traditional and contemporary ways that were just so exciting.

They had a bell ring. They had huge, big, roving, or whatever they call it, the big, fat yarn. And they had knitting needles about the size of, oh -- they weren't baseball bats, but they were half the size of a baseball bat long. And they would take one stitch every hour or so and they'd ring a bell. They'd pull this great, big batch of yarn over one needle and take one stitch in this weaving. It was really wide, like five or six feet wide, and it was only, you know, about four stitches or five stitches across. It was really funny. And they did things like that, and they had people who were doing shrinking of cloth, from Scotland, I think, and singing with it. It was a wonderful experience. And that really turned me on to working in craft and thinking how important it was. This is not a frill, and this is not boring, and it's not just utilitarian. It's something else. Something that's exciting to do. So I was pleased that I got to do that.

MS. CUBBS: So you find yourself engaged with this art form that came to you serendipitously through your teaching, and you find yourself increasingly engaged with an international community of artists who are doing exciting work in the field, and I'm thinking that this is almost 20 years after you graduated from college.

MS. BARNES: Uh-huh.

MS. CUBBS: And I'm wondering, because you were essentially self-taught during those years, with some help from workshops and your contact with other artists, I'm wondering if you see any fundamental difference between the university-trained artist and the independent or informally trained craft artist.

MS. BARNES: I do. I think I was just lucky not to have had some of that early training that I might have sought if I knew from the beginning that I wanted to make baskets a long time ago, or that I wanted to be an artist in some three-dimensional form in sculpture. If I had learned traditional basketry and made it well, I would be very proud to have done that, but to have had the other experiences were wonderful and having time for family and all of that.

The thing that came together for me that worked so well is that the sewing part and the carpentry part and the love of being in the woods all just kind of came together with this. And I don't think there's any place in a classroom, except perhaps now in the good crafts schools, where you can have in-the-woods experience to collect your art materials. You go to a place and buy your art materials. And if you have that access to the out-of-doors and to observing in nature, and then also have in your head the idea that you could either sew it, braid it, paint on it, break it, fold it, pleat it, burn it -- all the different things you can do to wood and to bark. And to have that available to you and then have some of the skills that give you the chance to put it together one way or another. Not always the good sense to do it in a proper way, and not always the good sense to make a form that's interesting, but the trial and error is constant.

There's never a right way, because everything you pick up in nature is going to be different from the thing you picked up in nature before. It's not duplicated. If you try for the duplicates and try to get exactly the same straight rod of wood from the same kind of tree, time after time after time -- there's a lot of discipline and a lot of learning and a lot of hard work and a lot of persistence for that, and you end up with something beautiful. But I don't have time to do that because I'm too interested in so many of them that I would rather practice each time and try to do something different with it, because I think I wouldn't be able to manage the other way. I think that not knowing what I'm going to find and what I'm going to do with it is the thing that keeps me interested.

MS. CUBBS: So do you think that it is in part because you learned your art outside of those formal educational

structures that you've been able to nurture in your work the experimentation, the innovative use of materials and techniques that's really a hallmark of your own baskets and your own sculpture?

MS. BARNES: I really don't know how to explain it to myself except that if I get excited about it, I find it and it's flexible and it's available and I've done my research to know that it's okay to take it – that's a big part of it. I would never want to just go destroy a good tree. I can't do that. I've got to know that that tree's going to come down, and that it's environmentally okay to take it. An awful lot of young saplings are better; it's good for the forest, for those things to be thinned out. And some of the stuff that I take is doing the environment a favor, so what I really think about this is that if the excitement is there, the piece is going to be better.

And if I'm really excited about it, the tedious part of it is that getting into it and knowing that it's going well. It's going to require certain tedious little things that have to be taken care of in the way of drying or curing or stretching or accommodating things that crack and the corrections of things that are disturbing when I make them. If these things are fussed over too much, I lose it. If I try to correct it in such a way that it looks overworked or I get tired of doing it, my work isn't going to be as good.

And so sometimes I make the repairs very obvious. Or if I'm doing a nice sewing that's going well and it cracks open or something happens to it, instead of ruining it by correcting it, sometimes I'll either change and put in a different kind [of material] -- something on the same piece -- and switch from hickory bark to wax linen if I had to, and not hide it. I mean I feel like sometimes the presentation is better if it's honest, even if it's not technically well put together. If the finish isn't there and if I like the way that the chainsaw made a mark on the wood, I don't want to sand it to correct it, because I like the idea of saying a tool did that.

There's one piece that I made – I don't know where it is right now, but I purposely had five different kinds of saw marks on it, you know, ways of handling the wood, from very fine sanded wood to something different and something torn on purpose. Or where there are sometimes things that bend where the bark is very flexible and the wood is not. These things happen. And those happy accidents will suggest an idea or a repetition. Recently I discovered I can make my chainsaw chatter on purpose where you put it down, and it's because the chainsaw was so dull. It was one that I was borrowing from someone, but to be safe I made a mark away from me and the saw chattered, and I liked the way that it tore into the butternut wood, so I did it seven times and it was beautiful. It was too big to bring back, so I gave it away, but the fuzzy stuff that happened with the wood in rows with my chainsaw was something that I'm going to remember, because I'd like to try it again. If I can do it safely, I'd like to try that again.

MS. CUBBS: What you're describing to me is this wonderful process of careful observation and attentiveness to the operation of your tools and to the nature of your materials that is almost like a continuous education process. To summarize your thoughts about this whole notion of education, is there one experience that pops out as one of your most rewarding educational experiences, and do you consider yourself as having apprenticed with anybody in particular? Or is that not a concept that really works for what you do?

MS. BARNES: Well I wouldn't say apprenticing with, but I think that just having known about both Ed Rossbach and John McQueen. I think that Ed Rossbach and his program in California [University of California, Berkeley] produced so many wonderful textile artists. And to have the friendship of Pat Hickman and Lillian Elliot, you know; they actually wanted to say hello to me when they were down in Cleveland. And I went to see them, and then I met them out in California, and that was just wonderful. And then, at that same opportunity to be in the Bay area, I was able to meet Ed Rossbach, and he asked me to come out to meet him and to talk with him. And he and Katherine Westphal were so interesting, and I cherish that time with them.

Rossbach's direction with the plastic and the rolled paper and the xerox stuff was so much a part of our world now that it was just a thrill to know that his thinking was like that. And then when I saw a magazine come into our house, into this room -- I was picking up this magazine and here was the work of John McQueen, after I had been working for a few years, and I just thought, oh, this is incredible. I was blown away. I just thought his work was so wonderful. I wrote him a fan letter right away. And at the time that I looked at his work, I had found some roots that were bright orange, and I sewed with the roots, the thicker, the wider parts of the roots. And I had all this fine work going in the kitchen. And I almost quit when I saw the John McQueen work, because I was so excited about what I was doing and I thought it was so wonderful, and after seeing his work I thought it was so ordinary. [Laughs.] You know? I just had to think bigger and understand that form was important. That putting this together, the shape of it matters, because his forms were so wonderful, and his patience with the over-unders instilled the fact that they were fresh and new and made with natural materials. It was just incredible. And so I've been pleased to know him a little bit since then. But you know about John McQueen, and you knew him at that time probably, when he was just getting his first notoriety.

MS. CUBBS: That's a wonderful story. Let me also ask if you have had any involvement with educational institutions specifically devoted to craft, like the Penland School of Crafts [Penland, North Carolina], Haystack Mountain School of Crafts [Deer Isle, Maine], Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts [Gatlinburg, Tennessee], the

Archie Bray Foundation [Helena, Montana], and I guess I would include Cranbrook in there of course, where you had some very early experiences.

MS. BARNES: Well, of course I was just a student [at Cranbrook]. I didn't do anything much there. But Archie Bray is not one that I know about, but I've taught at all those places.

MS. CUBBS: You have taught workshops over the years?

MS. BARNES: Yeah, I've taught at Haystack and Penland and Arrowmont and Split Rock [Split Rock Arts Program, University of Minnesota, Duluth, Minnesota], Anderson Ranch [Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, Colorado], Peters Valley [Peters Valley Craft Education Center, Layton, New Jersey], and, you know, just on. And actually I started in – oh, I'll think of it later. But I went into Connecticut. The one real near New York. Well, we can come back to it, but it was very meaningful to me. Brookfield Craft Center [Brookfield, Connecticut].

MS. CUBBS: The Brookfield Craft Center was one of your first workshops?

MS. BARNES: It was one of the first ones that I went to. And I went to the Thousand Island Craft School [Clayton, New York], and I went to Nantucket, and I did these little week-away teaching things at a lot of places. People were so good and so receptive, and it was nice because I could go to little locales where they had things to harvest that were different, and I'd learn and pick up new materials and new ideas and meet faculty who were interested in the crafts, and it's just been an enriching experience. And I think that also to be invited back to faculty gatherings for weekends – those retreats where they have new works coming from their faculty -- those have been incredible gifts to the craftspeople who are serious about their work and wanting a chance to go back. There was one that was designed especially for people in crafts to get to know other crafts other than their own, and that one happened at Arrowmont. And I had no knowledge of dyeing, especially; I had seen a little of natural dyes, but I thought bright color is wonderful. It's something that's so alien to what I do, and so I did some dyeing. And I have almost a bushel of stuff that I've made with natural materials and dyed that I've never shown anybody. And it's down in the basement. And a lot of it. And I'm going to do more and more, and someday I'm going to do some really bright stuff. I'm doing tests on color and putting some of them in the sun. Some of the color is staying strong, and I have two or three little pieces that I like a lot, and I want to continue with that. So that's something I'm just sort of starting. And so that might come along, but the chance to try that sort of thing and to be encouraged to do it is great.

And the recent [workshop] at Haystack shortly after 9/11 was quite an experience because we went to the "New Works" [2001] there at Haystack. It was only about 10 days after, and I remember there were only six of us on the plane going to Boston, and the Boston airport was very peculiar at that time. It was so quiet and strange, but Stu Kestenbaum had lost his brother in the World Trade Center and he was so anxious to continue, and everybody was. And Lisa Hunter chipped in to help organize, and I think there might have been about 50 of us. And we worked hard and everybody enjoyed working with their craft, and they came together. And I was introduced to a new tool there that encouraged me in my work, an inflated drum sander that made all the difference in something that I was doing. The tools can often be the thing that gets you going in another direction, and I do like my carpentry and power tools. I got into that quite a bit when I worked for Habitat For Humanity here, and so I used quite a few tools that are machine operated as well as working with stuff in my hands, with hand tools.

Getting back to the business about the craft schools, I think that you have a lot of respect for the people who come to take those classes. Many, many of those people are working nine-to-five. I remember feeling kind of scared one time when I heard two women saying, as the class was starting, "Boy, this better be good. It's my only five days off all year." And I thought, "Oh!" what a responsibility to have this woman coming to my class and giving up five days of her play for the only – only once a year for five days. My goodness. It better be good. And I think that there are students who come and go from those places where they are learning from some of the mature people in the classes, where it is a precious hour for them. It's not something they can do year round, and it means so much to them, and I think the cross section of ages is good at those summer things and of course getting away, too, into beautiful places, the mountains and the ocean and all. I just feel very fortunate to have been able to do that. And to be invited back, to go back and repeat and know where you are and how to find things, and that's helpful.

MS. CUBBS: I'm struck by what an incredible resource for your work, for you as an artist, and for your work, those workshops and those experiences with the craft schools have been, and I was struck also by your idea that wherever you go, you're gathering materials.

MS. BARNES: Yeah.

MS. CUBBS: I was wondering if you could talk a little bit more about your fairly extensive travels and the way that those travels have had an impact on your life and on your work.

MS. BARNES: Oh, I'm just so thankful – boy, when I look at trees and think – I saw a tree book not too long ago with unusual trees of the world, and I thought, gosh, I've seen some pretty unusual ones, too, when I go to these places, and the woods are different, and the bamboo is there, or the whatever is there that I don't see in Ohio very much. I grow my own, but to go to these places and get ideas from the material is wonderful. The problem is that it [the new growth and harvest time] all starts in April, and it's over by the end of July, and I have my teaching and my harvesting and some of my making, and it's wild. I just cannot get it all done, so I have to learn to store things properly or to freeze them or to dry them, and come back to them later, as the Native Americans know well. Anybody who works with basketry material from nature has to know about that storage thing, but one of the ways that I could get a little bit more time in my experience with the natural materials was to go to Australia and to New Zealand, because that way I had another spring.

And so I accepted a residency in New Zealand, and I was there for three months. I taught in five different locations on both islands and even went down to Stewart [Stewart Island, New Zealand], and I worked with seaweed and I worked with Maori people, and I took a class with the Maori so I could learn their method of working with *harakeke* [flax plant] and learn to spin with the material on my leg. And then I had the experience in New Zealand, which was incredible because I got a hard-hat permit to go into a place where they have terrible fires. There's been lots of bad fires in Australia, and this one was in Bateman Bay, and a glassblower had invited me down there, Jane Bruce, who was a glass artist.

So Jane and Liz Williamson, who is a weaver, had both encouraged me to come. My Australia experience was a shorter time; I think I was there just almost a month. But during that time at Bateman Bay, we went to the place where the fires had been and there were some men cutting a stump. And it was like a stringy-bark eucalyptus, and it had been burned so badly that I could put my hand against the tree, and my finger, my whole handprint, would come away, and it would leave an indentation of about a quarter of an inch or so. The palm of my hand [left an imprint] on the outside of the tree, but on the same tree up a little higher I saw a little tiny branch with green leaves coming out of it.

So the title of the piece was to be *Only Some Trees Survive Fire*. But I'm very straightforward about what I do with my materials in bringing them back into this country, and so I called Maryland to the Agriculture people. I told them I was bringing live bark into the country, and what flight it would be, and I showed them the papers that I had used when I had been to Spain bringing in cork. And I let them know that I was very careful about this and that I had them packed in mothballs before I had come with it. Cleaned them as best I could, and sun-dried them, and packaged them carefully and in white, so I could see if there was any kind of insect inside before I ever even bring them. And so I gave all this material to them and told them which flight, and of course I got right through. I was able to carry them in for that reason, because I was up front about it. And I believe that's important. I do not want to transfer bugs to this country. In some imported baskets, I have found insects. And I don't think it's a good idea to bring insects into our country from other places, or for anybody to transfer bugs around.

Anyway, the other experience with unusual materials probably would be the material from Spain. I did get to the area outside –

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

MS. CUBBS: This is Joanne Cubbs interviewing Dorothy Gill Barnes at the artist's home in Worthington, Ohio, on May 2, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number two.

MS. BARNES: One of the most exciting barks is cork, and to take all that cork off the tree without killing it is just pretty amazing. I've heard about it, and I was going to be going to do some teaching in England, and I made an arrangement to go with my daughter, and she was going to meet a friend in Spain who could speak Spanish. I also had decided that after my teaching with Mary Butcher up in England that I would go to see if I could get in touch with David Drew. David and Judy Drew make willow fences that are live, and I had seen them published, and so I just wrote and said, "Is there any chance that I could see some of your work? Is anything going to be in England while I am there in Manchester," and I was also going to be in another part of England. And he wrote and he said, "I don't live there right now," he said, "I live in France;" [Villaines-es-Roches]; he said, "Why don't you come see us in France?" I went, "Oh, wow." So, between England and Spain is France, and Juliet happens to be fluent in French, and she was with me, and so we went from our experience in England to France and down to Spain.

Backtracking just a tiny bit, it turns out that one of my workshops while I was in England was at the place where *The Hobbit* [J.R.R. Tolkien. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1937] was written. And the *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* [C.S. Lewis. London: Geoffrey Bless, 1950] was written there. It is the place where we harvested, and so I have little pieces of bark that were given to us. And the reason we were to cut them there was so that the butterflies could have more sunshine. So we were actually in the place where The *Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* was written, and I have little bits of that bark that I made into baskets for children so that they could

have that as a bookmark, or actually a braid for the bookmark, and I gave them the book.

So we went from there to Spain. We went to this little village which is southwest of Paris, and we met with David and Judy Drew, and they live in a cave. It's an absolutely beautiful village of basket makers; I think there's something like 30 basket makers in the village. And the community has a store and an organization where they promote their basketry, and it's almost entirely willow. We came at the time when they were stripping the willow [in] early May, and it was just gorgeous because they had this beautiful white willow, stacked in bundles around their windows. And sunshine coming through it in the day, and at night their lights from inside their houses would come through the stacks of willow and it was an incredible time to be there and to see this in this one area. We had some food in the cave in their beautiful little house, and it's not so little. It's, you know, part of a big hill, but it was very nicely designed with glass at the front and his workshop area up above in another cave. We walked on the roof where the flowers were around the chimney.

And he showed me how to strip willow, and we also worked in the strawberry bed and saw some of his woven fences [including] a double-weave willow out in his front yard that is so beautiful. I'd love to see it now that it's grown more. I had already started doing a little bit of this in Athens, Ohio, down at the tree farm where I'd go so often; I had the beginning of our little willow patch there, but this was an entirely different scale. It was so advanced from the ideas that I'd had working with willow.

So we did that, and then we went on down to Barcelona, where I had already arranged with the people in the cork industry near there, because our destination was Barcelona, to see the [Antonio] Gaudi architecture. We had such a short time; I think I had three nights there. We had to cut it to get our little French adventure. And so Juliet met her friend, who of course is fluent in Spanish because she had gone to school there. She was very helpful to us.

We had a man from the cork office, whatever it is, who showed us all about cork. We went to the place where it's manufactured, where it's grown, where it's made into stoppers, and where it's cleaned and stacked. It was just a very unusual and interesting experience. The fact that we did not see it coming off fresh was kind of a letdown, and we were about a month early. We were just too early. We thought about going on and adding some time to our time, but I just couldn't be gone that long because it was beginning to strip in Portugal, so I hope someday to see that happen. I understand that it's beautiful and red, that the bark – the underneath bark is bright red when it's taken off. But it has to be done properly to protect the tree, and so I have one little project that I made out of cork. It's not very good, but I had that fun doing it.

I think to travel and have that chance to do that is wonderful. Also as a volunteer in a sort of craft project, I went to Honduras, and there I was hoping to grow some chairs. I had a design that I wanted to do, and I was looking for a plant where I could plant little trees, and have them grafted in such a shape that they would become the arms, legs, or side branches, or whatever, and change them by binding and grafting, so that we could grow furniture. I still have it in my head, and I've started this project, and I'm growing some chair-backs now down in Athens. Some of my grafting is going quite well, but I'm sort of stepping back from the furniture because I like the object better that I have in my head, and [one] doesn't happen to be able to sit on it. I am doing a table now, and I have done some other things that are related to furniture.

This gets sort of off the subject, and I don't know if you're interested, but in one of the collaborations that I'm doing, I have a tree in a piece that's in a show that has to do with animals and humans. The one that was made by humans is a dendroglyph of mine, where there's a black cherry tree that was in our hedge. And I had made some shapes on them, and one of them has a little branch, and you pull it and it's a drawer, and the drawer comes out of the tree. The drawer was made by Craig [Vandall] Stevens. And it's so much fun, because I think you'd miss it if you didn't know it was there. And to have him take that material out – I think the tree is probably three-and-a-half inches in diameter, and the little drawer would maybe hold a couple of thimbles, but when you pull it out, it comes out of my drawing. The drawing took six years to make. So that and another piece of marquetry that he has done; Craig Stevens has collaborated with me.

And there's a fine furniture-maker, carpenter man, Dan Mayner, who kind of helps me out with his wonderful tools and his precision carpentry. And I've had Tip House, who is a woodturner, and I've had other woodturners and other persons help me, and I certainly acknowledge them with their skills and their art ability to work with me. When the ideas get too big as far as machinery is concerned and storage and technique and knowledge about it, I think that I'm more apt to share projects with other people so that I can finish more things, because I have so much wonderful stuff that I've collected, and I've got things in the garage that I'm not going to get to if I don't have help. And then I've had other wonderful students from Ohio State and people who just want to help. They'll say, "Can I come out and do this?" and sometimes it's kind of like a short apprenticeship where they'll ask to work. And sometimes after they get really good at one skill and it becomes labor intensive, I certainly want to pay them to do that for me; they've been very helpful. And I also can see the work that they're doing and encourage them. Sometimes it's related and sometimes it isn't, but I enjoy being around these young people.

There's one thing that I have been experimenting with in hickory, where I'm bending the hickory; when it's fresh and flexible, it is so strong. And it's just a marvel that you can bend it and bend it, and it doesn't break. I think it's not going to break, and I keep twisting it, and I just turn it and turn it, and then I stick a hole in the tree, and stick the end of it in the tree and marvelous things are happening with that hickory. So I recently have displayed that for the first time in the show that's in Pittsburgh, and it's been a lot of fun. It's very line-like. It's like drawing rather than basketry.

MS. CUBBS: I'm really looking forward to the point in our conversation when we will talk about the notion of play and experimentation in your work and talk more about what a dendroglyph is. Getting back to this notion of collaboration that you were talking about, and highlighting some of your travels abroad and the materials and the influences that you found there, I'm wondering about some of the other influences in your work that might make your art part of a more international conversation or tradition. Would you consider yourself part of an international tradition or one that's particularly American?

MS. BARNES: I see things that come from far away, from all over the world, that interest me a lot. We had some friends who collected a lot on their travels, and they brought me a little prayer that was made from folded palm from Bali. I think it was meant to be temporary. I mean, it's just made and put down as a blessing with flowers or rice something added. Those kinds of things influence me, and sometimes I've had an opportunity to see them and sometimes I have not. All over the world and especially in countries that are more tropical, there are materials that are so available all year round – like raffia and some of the palm-type things where people actually fold a leaf and use it to eat from, you know, stuff like that. I think that's all very exciting, and you can see it in fine cooking, where a plant material has been used for vessels. That all interests me, and I think that comes from all over the world. And I do think of the connection between international [craft] and my opportunities; probably one of the most recent [and] unusual was the fact that I was in China and I exhibited in the "From Lausanne to Beijing" exhibition [2000, International Tapestry Art Exhibition and Symposium, Academy of Art and Design, Tsinghuzu University, Beijing, China].

The Lausanne Biennale was dismantled some years ago, and then some people got together and decided that in 2000 – was it 2000? – that they would have another one, and they did. And they had it in Beijing, and they had some of the people from Europe who had been in the previous shows and a lot of other people invited to come. It was a little bit unusual in the way it was assembled. And people didn't know about it, so it wasn't advertised widely, but because I was going to China with my sister and we were going on a textiles organized trip, we went to south China, and we went to Beijing, and I was invited to be a part of that show. So I met a lot of people from other parts of the world there – and also tied in a family connection between the fact that my aunt was a missionary in China 30 years ago and that I had this chance to show work. I had done a dendroglyph drawing of the word "three kings," which is related to the Christmas story, and so that piece and a rye straw basket that I made are in the catalog of that exhibition.

And to have the contact with young Chinese students and to know how much they want to become a part of the Western world and a part of the upcoming traditional, or nontraditional ways of working with textiles is eye-opening to me. The fact that they have about 10 years of their art world from the time of the restrictions in China, that they feel so behind and they want to hurry up and catch up, and they want to do all this. And right now I'm troubled, of course, because of the SARS – the terrible illnesses there and what it might do to their plans for the Olympics. And friends that we made and the young students who want so much to be a part of the art world as it comes with more visits from the other parts of the world. And they were so anxious and willing and generous in everything that they did for us as visitors to that occasion, so that's another one of my international contacts that I treasure.

MS. CUBBS: So would you consider yourself as an artist and your work to be part of an international tradition and community, as opposed to a distinctly American one?

MS. BARNES: Right now it's hard for me to say this because I don't want to get very political, but I think of the whole tendency to think of the United States as being on top or most important or most powerful in not just our stance in the military world or our powers in the financial markets or whatever they are. All of this stuff is uncomfortable to me. I feel that I'm very proud of our country, and I'm proud to think that people from all over the world think of New York now as the capital of the arts when we all were thinking about Paris when I was a little girl or young person. But whatever we are in the world, I want us to be generous in knowing about the rest of the world and to not forget that some of those wonderful things that happen here could never have happened without the influence from other parts of our world community.

The organization called Weave a Real Peace that I belong to matters to me because as we talk with people in other parts of the world, that's fine, but if we work with our hands with other people in the world and share ideas that don't require language – these are objects that we can enjoy together in the arts in a different way than having to know language. And to see the people who work very, very hard for very few pennies and are not appreciated -- that needs to change. I think that this world view – I'm not saying that I have it, but I think that

I'm more aware of some of the things that happened from having traveled. I know that there's so much out there to discover by traveling and by mixing up and by having opportunities for students to see people who are students in other parts of the world. And some of the old folks – the people who have been in the tradition -- to learn from them what might be lost if we don't learn from them.

In Honduras, when I looked for the basket maker, he was very old. He was deaf and he was blind, and he couldn't tell us where those fibers were. And he showed us the little coffee basket that he had made, and I would have liked to have talked with him. And when I visited other places and had a language barrier, it's been a problem, so I try instead to send – I'll take some money and find a Spanish-speaking art student and send them in my place now. And so I sent Gabriel [Montejo], and I sent Jan [Grau] twice, and I think that these students that have gone have not just worked with craft and with the corn husk, some of the things that I suggested they do there, but they've also helped getting water up to the mountain and doing some things in the community that needed doing and helping some boys travel. And they've taken on some little other tasks along with their craft opportunities. And all we do that relates to the arts, in additional to the helpful things, is adding some beauty to their lives and some appreciation for what they do.

MS. CUBBS: You mentioned an organization called Weave a Real Peace.

MS. BARNES: Mm-hm.

MS. CUBBS: Could you describe that organization a little bit?

MS. BARNES: Well, it's a group of people that got together and like to know each other, and keep in touch with each other and they are anxious to help out in third world countries a lot. But in addition to just helping persons who are economically in trouble, they are trying to bring together factions that are at war with each other.

In Kosovo there was a project called Rainbow Socks, and they brought together persons from two sides of the conflict, and these women worked together. It didn't go real well at first, and then it went better and better. And then the people who were sponsoring it and sending the wool and all the material over there [were] trying to get the thing figured out and [started] going over often. They actually had to give up on it for a while, but it had been such a successful project, it's going again.

MS. CUBBS: Is it connected to the world of fiber arts?

MS. BARNES: Yeah. It all has to do with something that relates to weaving or textiles. Maybe I could give you a brochure about it, but they have meetings once a year and I went down to the one that was in Ohio at Grailville near Cincinnati. I'm not really much of a contributor, but I did talk to them about the idea of going into communities and finding what grows in the community and working with that material. In La Laguna, in Honduras, I discovered the strong bark that is used for chair seats. I also got some ideas and put them in a metal suitcase about how to work with corn husk. But you get into all kinds of troubles. If you want bright color, you can't use certain chemicals, you know, so we were trying to figure out how to make something that we could dye with Kool-aid and this and that. And pleating it and ironing it and all the things that you could do without electricity or water and – oh, I don't know.

We had some good times though, and there are some people there who are doing some sewing. We took treadle-sewing machines on a truck when we went up the mountain, and so some of the corn husk things were put into the sewing machines. So I've got some ideas about putting together the treadle-sewing machines, the corn husk, and planting the chairs and trying to figure out what there is about that locale that can keep the people there instead of going into some of the crowded cities where there are more troubles. La Laguna, the top of that mountain, is so beautiful. And it may be poor, but it is just an elegant place to live, and there are animals and children with happy smiles and people who are now getting clean water and persons who care about them having a clinic and a school. I think that there aren't very many people in the United States that know about the troubles in some place as close as Honduras. And I think that the poverty that I saw there was more devastating than in China – in the remote village in China where I was. So I was kind of surprised about that. There's plenty to be done and lots of people to help, and there are a lot of people helping, and Weave a Real Peace is one of those groups.

MS. CUBBS: Thank you. You've been doing this as we've been going along, but I wonder if you could more directly explore or talk about issues of gender and race and ethnicity as it relates to your work and to some of the inspirations for your work.

MS. BARNES: Hmm. Well, I think in textiles we think about the gender thing; over the years I suppose that women have been a big part of that. And as a little girl I would sit underneath the quilting frame at grandma's house and see the little stitches and hands coming through to sew the threads to make the shapes. And the women enjoy doing that together. I think that a lot of the people that I meet are women, but there are a lot of men, too, working with textiles. The ethnic part of it is – I think that some of the designs and the intricate things

that I see in weaving and both basketry and two-dimensional rugs and the sort are handed-down traditions and designs that have been decided and planned for so many generations that they have a quality that is alien to me, because I don't do it that way. But I'm so excited to see them. I mean I love to look at them and to touch them and handle them. And I have so much respect for the people who work very, very fine and with precise, beautiful shapes and lovely forms. I'm not really sure I can say much more than that.

In my source cabinet that I have in a show now, I included a native Canadian – she actually might be in this country. She [Angelique Merasty] might be in the northwest United States or British Columbia. She does biting of birch bark, for instance, and it's something that's been passed down. It's a certain layer of bark that she can bite precisely enough to make a butterfly or an animal or something by pressing her teeth into the bark. I'm fascinated by that and, because of the other parts in that particular show that have been marked by animals and so on, I've included marks by beaver and elk and bear and bugs in that project. All things that have been marked on wood by some other way. And so I wanted very much to include the woman working with her teeth. I think that's very interesting.

The only other thing I think I could say about that is that there is a little bit of a problem sometimes working with persons who are so traditional that I rock the boat in a way that isn't comfortable for them. And they might misunderstand when I offer the idea of exploring new ways. I think that sometimes you can find little ways around that. For instance, with the Maori people my suggestions of variations in the size and the length and the stitches and this and that didn't go over very well, because the young people who are apprentices to the masters need to keep that idea going strong. And I think it was probably wise for me to step aside from that assignment.

But when we found that we could go into working with kelp and go to the sea, and that some of the traditions were so mixed up that it was really fun -- because the white population on the south island are called Pakehas, and it was a Pakeha who had grown up with a Maori and knew all about how to work with seaweed, because he learned it from Maori children.

But the Maori sophisticated women from Rotorua who came down there for my workshop didn't know any of this, so they learned it second-hand through this other person. But all of them got together and were willing to inflate it with a machine to see if we could blow it up. We did all kinds of stuff with it. We all felt free to do that, and we all felt like exploring, and we cast it and we pounded it and we squeezed it – we did everything that we could to make new forms that were not traditional. But we also took the old way, and we made balls that could be bounced. And we made slippers that the Maori used to make by drawing around your foot on giant kelp, opening it, and putting your foot in it so that you could walk on the beach without your feet getting too hot. So it was a mix of wonderful tradition and ethnic stories about their past and how they carried these kelp things between canoes with blankets in them to keep them dry. And they used them like plastic bags: this big piece of kelp.

So all that was fun, but the thing that was most wonderful at the end was the incredible respect the Maori had for the material. When we finished with it at the workshop in the building on the campus where we were, we went back from the Polytechnic with this material in a container, and we had a very quiet, respectful, little ceremony at the edge of the water, and we put the kelp back into the sea. We did not throw it in the garbage. We put it back where we had taken it, and with the kind of respect that I think is beautiful. And I enjoyed doing that with them.

MS. CUBBS: This is when you were doing workshops in Australia?

MS. BARNES: That was in New Zealand.

MS. CUBBS: In New Zealand. What year was that?

MS. BARNES: I think that was 1990. Yeah, '90.

MS. CUBBS: I'm thinking of the wonderful ways in which you have found connections between your work and the basketry and the weaving made within other cultural traditions. I'm also thinking about one of your teaching assignments long ago, where you asked your students to go home and to look where the possible sources for their more contemporary fiber art might be found, [to look at] some of the traditions within their own home life.

MS. BARNES: Mm-hm.

MS. CUBBS: Which I think is kind of a wonderful comment about the way that your art and your sense of your art connects across those kinds of cultural divides. You know, between class divides and gender divides and cultural or ethnic divides. I'm also wondering, to move to another subject, if the function of objects plays a part in the meaning of your work.

MS. BARNES: The function.

MS. CUBBS: Do you view function as an aspect of your creative vocabulary?

MS. BARNES: I think that it helped me to just think about the word *vessel*. And I think that maybe it's because I didn't think I was a very good painter. I didn't think I was very good at drawing. I've never taken a sculpture class. I wasn't sure what direction I was going, but when I came to the idea of a basket, I think that the place of a basket in the whole world of objects is very often put down. I mean, I have pictures of people working in terrible circumstances underground making their basketry stuff, because they were needed, and they had to be making them fast, and it was dirty work coming in from outdoors and stuff.

And so basketry has never been really elevated in the arts and so Ed Rossbach's book, *Baskets as Textile Art* [New York: Van Nostrand Rheinhold, 1973], is a wonderful book. But I think the fact that it has to be done for something and made for a purpose is one of the reasons why it's fascinating, because the shapes are so different for one thing. An asparagus basket is just right for putting asparagus in when you want to carry it. And a basket that you're going to cook in with a lid, where you're going to put a hot stone in it, and some of the ones that nest from traditional trays and all different kinds of shapes that happen are wonderful and varied in the basketry world. So if I have a material that I'm working with and instead of making it flat as soon as it's placed over a ball and stretched a little bit, it's a vessel. As long as it sort of holds something, and it can't roll out of it, it's no longer a flat object. It also is less pretentious in a way because it's not put on the wall to say, this is a painting, or this is a tapestry, or something like that. The fact that it could be used to pass even ping-pong balls around or whatever. It's a vessel, and because it contains air or shape that has an interior space, I don't feel quite so intimidated about doing it and presenting it as an object. So I think that's where function comes in.

I actually wanted to have some things that were functional, and I made a container for holding silverware on our picnic table, and I have slots where you can put the forks and the knives and the spoons in it. I found that I wasn't using it [for that], but it's very handy for my felt markers, so I have two or three objects around that I actually use and that are strong enough and they're wearing well. I have a woven one out there that we keep keys in, and some other things just turned out to be a way of using them. I don't set out to make a basket as a functional object. They're really pretty much experimenting with materials from nature, and some of them are vessels and many of them are not.

MS. CUBBS: So do you find sometimes when you work that you're playing with the notion of function? That you're in a sense being antifunctional or altering the notion of clear function in your baskets?

MS. BARNES: Sometimes there's a sort of an invitation to change the wood into strips. And if I just enjoy the wood for what it is, then it's a piece of wood. If I'm going to change it into something, the fact that I know I can take that hard outer surface and cut it away and pull it back and then take the wood out is a way of showing that this tree goes from tree to basket immediately. But that's not entirely original probably. I mean, I'm sure other people have done it. There is one piece in the front of the John McQueen book that relates to that, and in my tape I want to acknowledge that and show John's basket, because I like the idea of making my work my own. I don't know why I necessarily have to do that, because everybody comes from somewhere else. You know, we all bring our ideas from other places, but I want to be very careful to acknowledge anything like that that I have learned from others.

But I do think that the whole business of a utilitarian use for the material that I am working with that changes from wood to cloth is fascinating to me. There's a material that's called Lin or Basswood [American Linden, *Tilia americana*] and Ora Anderson's tree farm is where I work a lot, and he has grown those trees especially for his bird carving. He's a woodcarver, but he's got lots more than he needs, and he also is willing for me to take some of those. So I've found that a strip of that stuff can be – the inside layer of the bark is so fibrous that it's just like thread, and it's also very slick in the way that you pull it off, and it's clean, and it's got a nice smooth bark.

So I did a piece for the – what do they call that place in England? Barbican Center. It was an exhibition in London, and it went from tree to very fine cloth in the same piece, just as a demonstration of wood to cloth; it's continuous fiber from the very trunk of the tree clear to the very fine cloth. I sometimes use pieces from a different part of the tree and make it into cloth. And then if there's a basket in the piece, I line it with part of the branches from higher up, so that I can take a different dimension, or a very thin to very thick from the same tree in the same piece, juxtaposing them. So that even if I am the only one that knows it, I kind of enjoy maybe taking a root from underground from that same tree and taking the bark from another place and sewing it with the root from the same plant.

MS. CUBBS: So you're really changing the nature and function of the material?

MS. BARNES: Yeah. So it becomes a flat board or a board of bark or a sewn object of a very soft woven fiber that can go inside for lining; all from the same thing.

MS. CUBBS: Here's an interesting question. Does a sense of spirituality play a role in your art, and if so in what way?

MS. BARNES: I don't know about that. I'm not sure about that at all.

MS. CUBBS: I'm wondering, in this regard, if your sense of collaboration with nature – your harmonious relationship with nature -- is not in its essence a kind of spiritual position. Tell me if I'm right or wrong. What do you think?

MS. BARNES: I think that the miracle that the material is there and that it's so beautiful sometimes is just a very special thing. I have that same feeling sometimes from just cutting an orange open, you know, and the shine of light on certain kinds of bark and things that happen when you touch it. Or the objects or natural vessels in nature. I just enjoy seeing them. Sometimes people who love to be in nature will bring me something wonderful. A branch that has strange looking, wonderful thorns or pods or something, and I immediately love looking at them, and I love handling them, and I either photograph them or put them up to look at. I would seldom cut them and do anything to them because they are so beautiful already. There's no way to improve on them. But I like knowing that the other person has shared it with me. I think that's one of the reasons I do all my own harvesting if possible. Even if someone brought me something wonderful to use – in one case I have some incredibly beautiful redbud bark that was given to me, and I'm growing my own redbud to go with it so I can put it all together. But I want to be part of the harvest and preparation and the acquisition of the material. And to be there with it is, I suppose, close to being spiritual sometimes. It's really very beautiful.

I have had responses to certain trees, where I would not take them. I was in a class in Minnesota, near Duluth, one time, and someone told us about this beautiful tree, and she wanted to give it to us. And between the parking lot and the tree was this gorgeous field of flowers, and so I just thought, well, how can we walk through that? There are 15 of us. We can't do this. And then I remembered about the walking in Antarctica, where you put one foot in front of the other, and they had one line that everybody walked. So we practiced in the parking lot to see if we all were balanced enough to do this, and we tried to make the narrowest possible path and to go through the place where the least number of flowers would be stepped on, and to walk gently so they might come back up. So we all got out there in this straight line so we wouldn't hurt the field, and we went out to this tree, and that tree was so beautiful there I said, "Thank you very much, but we're going to go back." And we found some other trees along the roadside in a smaller diameter where there was a construction site. It just didn't want to come. I didn't want to take that tree. I couldn't, even though she wanted us to take it. I said, "Is there any way that you could plan to keep it longer? It wanted to be there." There was no way I could take that tree. And I think that there are sometimes messages like that that I feel are a determination that is made for a reason, but that's probably as close as I get to spiritual.

MS. CUBBS: I'm wondering if that sense of beauty and wonder and reverence for nature isn't one of the most important underlying principles behind your work. It's part of the impression that your work, I think, leaves with many viewers. Do you see it that way?

MS. BARNES: Well, if you say that, I feel very complimented; that's very nice, because I do indeed think that nature is very important to all of us and our earth. I have a beautiful flag of the earth from a distance, and I'm pleased to be here and, for all of us to take care of our earth is important to me. And if there is any part of that that shows in my work, I am pleased.

MS. CUBBS: I think it certainly does.

MS. BARNES: There might be one other little thing that I could put in here at this point, because it's just been Earth Day.

MS. CUBBS: Mm-hm?

MS. BARNES: Several years ago I was invited to speak at Earth Day for a junior high school here, and we found a project that was beneficial to children. [The project involved] taking the mulberry trees away from the track. The mulberries were in the way, and children couldn't run on the track with mulberries there. So the school landscape people were going to take it down. And the children helped with that project and got down in the ground and dug the beautiful orange roots and everything with their hands.

I do think that to share that kind of concern and interest in what grows in nature and what's available as an art material was not just appreciative of what's beautiful and growing, but a way of using it as a material for making art. And it was a nice experience, so I've done that for three years. Not just Earth Day, but a couple of other times too. Just to make children or anybody aware of the things that are going in the garbage out there and, you know, the picking it up today. I will probably get on my bike when you leave and see what's being thrown out. And if there's some beautiful trimmings from people's bushes, I might have my utility knife in my pocket, and I will check it out, because this is May second isn't it?

MS. CUBBS: Yes.

MS. BARNES: So this is it. This is May till June, so I'll be looking all the time at available material to look at and see what's being thrown away that's beautiful and see what I can do with it.

MS. CUBBS: I remember running across a quote from you that was relevant to this topic when you said, "I hope that my structures, some of which are basketlike, honor the growing things from which they came." And I am struck by so much of your commentary about your work, because it involves a sense of ethics about the world of nature, our relationship to it and our use of it, and again I think that for many of us who look at your work it's a kind of underpinning principle.

MS. BARNES: Thank you.

MS. CUBBS: You're welcome. Turning to a whole other issue from the spiritual to the not so spiritual, let me ask you about the marketplace. How do you feel that the market for American craft has changed in your lifetime?

MS. BARNES: I'm not sure that I would know very much about that. I think that I first became aware of marketing and craft before I was actually selling any artwork myself or even trying to sell anything. [It was while trying] to be supportive of our winter fair from the Ohio Craft Museum [Columbus, Ohio] and the Ohio Designer Craftsman program. The craftspeople who came and set up booths there and in the summer downtown all worked so hard, and they have a lot of things that they have to present because they do production work where they are making a lot of the same objects many times and putting them out there. There's such a wide variety in what they do. I felt like I wanted to go down and booth sit or support them –

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

MS. BARNES: – or have them come out for breakfast on Sunday or whatever, to get to know some of these people and how they do what they're doing. The variety and the quality is different from one to another, of course, but the thing that I like about those fairs and all of that is that it's a livelihood for them. It also puts some very fine handmade crafts in many more homes than if they were extremely expensive and sold in galleries. It's great to know that a gallery wants your work and they present it and they show it. It's always a question, I suppose, for musicians to know whether their music is being played or who is listening and for artists to know whether their work is seen and whether anyone cares about it being seen. But I'm not terribly interested in the marketing, and I'm very confused by it because it's so inconsistent in my life. I mean, I know there are places where I could give things away, and there are places where I would feel that I would want that object to be priced somewhere because I have invested so much of my time in it and I really might need the money. The value of work doesn't necessarily tie into the amount of time you've put in on it; you can spend a lot of time working on something pretty mediocre. I could make something maybe in a day that would be better than the work I've done for months, so I'm not sure about my own marketing, and I'm very confused by it sometimes, and I don't know how to value my work. I'm not good at that.

MS. CUBBS: How have you sold your work? Have you had relationships with dealers or have you sold primarily through shows, or how has that worked for you?

MS. BARNES: I think that when I've been asked to exhibit in group shows most of those [venues] are places where you have to have your work for sale. In museums or university galleries or something like that, where they are showing work for some other reason, [objects] don't have to be for sale. And there's not as much pressure to show something that might be an object that someone would buy. For instance, I feel free to do an installation where someone doesn't really want something long on a wall that shows a whole tree, but you want to see it on the wall because it's a wonderful tree. You know, you want to show it somebody, and so I'll sometimes have related objects from the same wood in connection with that.

I think that I've had sales from the galleries probably. I've had two main galleries, Sybaris in [Royal Oak] Michigan and Brown/Grotta Arts in New Jersey, and then I've had others who have shown my work as well. I've had one-person shows at Barbara Okun's in Santa Fe [New Mexico], and then at Brown/Grotta's there was a duo show. The one at Sybaris was a solo show, but the others have been pretty much group shows or where I'd have three or four pieces at the most. That's where most of my sales have been. I don't usually sell work from here, but I did at the very beginning because there were artists who had seen my work published, and they wrote to me directly or called me before I even had a gallery. And so some of my work – the older work that's out there -- was acquired before I got sort of organized into these other ways of doing it.

MS. CUBBS: So now when people contact you directly, if they do, do you refer them to your galleries?

MS. BARNES: I haven't been producing an awful lot lately, and if I do, it's destined already to go somewhere. I mean, I don't have work around here to buy right now, but the SOFA shows come along. You know what SOFA is? It's called Sculptural Objects and Functional Art, S-O-F-A, and the big one is in Illinois, in Chicago at Navy Pier, and that's in the fall. And the other one is in New York, and that's in May, and the end of May or early June. So Tom Grotta would be where my work would go in the New York area, and then probably Snyderman Gallery

[Philadelphia, Pennsylvania] maybe. Sybaris doesn't go there any longer, so either Snyderman or maybe the people from California that want my woodwork, because some of my work is not basketry anymore, and so things that are primarily wood might go to that particular dealer. I will do well to have three pieces this year for SOFA. I'm not sure I'm even going to get anything finished because I'm not making a lot of work right now. And a lot of the things that I'm making I don't really intend for them to go anywhere. I like just making them because I want to make them. Like last summer it was so much fun to make an arch for my daughter's wedding. You know, I spent a lot of time on that one. I maybe could have been making baskets, but there are other reasons for me to do things in the studio than to make things for sale.

MS. CUBBS: It sounds as if selling your work is not a high priority. Is that true?

MS. BARNES: That's true.

MS. CUBBS: This is also going to be a wonderful question for you. What are the qualities of your working environment? Can you sort of describe your working environment, your studio area?

MS. BARNES: Well, in many ways it's ideal, and in many ways it's difficult. I have a small studio off the garage, and it's a delight to be there in the spring and fall. It's too cold in the winter, too hot in the middle of summer, but I like it a lot because I can watch squirrels climbing around and look into the woods even though it's a small lot here. It's a pleasant place to be, and I have my radio, and I also have my telephone out there so that I can help answer the phone and be close to the house. It's not very far from our kitchen. And I have tools in both the basement and out there, so I move into the space in the basement in the winter when it's really cold. I work smaller down there, and I find that if I need to go back and forth to the saw, when I run up and down stairs sometimes 15 times a day, I think, well, there are people who go to aerobics classes and pay to do this, and I can just consider it my exercise for the day, because I can't ride the bike much in the winter anyway. And so I just do a lot of going back and forth. And I've had people say, "Oh, you should have a bigger studio," or, "You should have a woodworking studio," and all of this, but I think that in proportion to the things that I make, if I can decide that the big work can be done in the summertime, I can work outdoors or on the porch or whatever, or at one of the venues where I go to teach, and then I can just plan to work on a smaller scale in the wintertime. I can work it out that way.

Every once in a while I get frustrated about it. On the other hand, there are lots of times when it's just right, because I can have a tray, and I can join my husband and watch TV and work on something on my lap in the living room and then change my mind and go out and say, "well, I'm going to be out in the studio for a while." I'm all here and available to family and to the refrigerator and the comforts of home and all of that. And I use my van for storage and for coming and going with my materials, and so it's handy to have that to use too. I do have two or three pieces in storage right now that I just can't accommodate here. They are big and they're not finished, and so a friend of mine liked them well enough she wanted to have them in her house, and so she's keeping them for me for a while.

MS. CUBBS: What's very striking for the outsider with regard to your studio is the incredible assemblage, installation, assortment of natural wonders and sampled creations that are hanging everywhere and which are themselves an incredible visual feast. A visual and conceptual feast. Can you talk a little bit about that phenomenon?

MS. BARNES: I think that when we built on, I was delighted that the final surface that was on the inside of that little 10-by-14 addition to the garage had something you could stick pins in. I don't think that that old Celotex is even supposed to be around anymore. I think it has some kind of nasty stuff in it, but I just painted it white and stuck things up, and I find that it was handy to do that. And when I have a scrap that is small and it does something special, or if the bark pulls away in such an unusual position that I want to save it, it's pretty much a matter of just sticking it up there so I won't forget it. There's a little thing that I'm doing right now with design tearing where I'm doing some strips, and then I start to saw diagonally and then stretch it. And I found that if I do that with different kinds of wood, some of it is very strong. The bottom shelf of the freezer out there, the bark freezer, has got a whole batch of those that I've made out of poplar. And I just can't wait to get back to them. I mean I've got enough to cover a whole sphere, and they're all stretchy, and they'll be defrosted.

And so there's certain things I like to be kept frozen because there's a quality that you find that's different from when you resoak, and some of that is learned from experience and some of it will be a failure. A lot of what I do is a flop. I mean I have terrible things. I mean, I make awful-looking stuff, and I also make things that don't work and things that crack. And sometimes I know that the accidents, or not accidents but the things that might happen to them, are going to happen. I let them happen, or maybe I have them happen more. Or I work with the damaged material in a way that the damage becomes an element of design sometimes, and so those kinds of things happen in my studio. Maybe partly because of it, I've had areas where I've had to dry things, or I determine the size of an object by where I have to put it. I know that inside my van I can move something that's 10-feet-two-inches long from the front windshield to the back of the inside of the van, and so that's why some of

the things are that size. And I think about the size of the studio and the materials that I put on my bench. I have to think a little bit about where I'm going to be able to turn it around, so that's why some of the pieces are the size they are.

The storage is very important. I can't have anything where there's going to be a lot of moisture for certain barks. On the other hand [in] the upstairs of the garage there's a piece that's nailed to the floor. I could design on the floor because it's so hard to get up there, that it's a good place to leave something for a long time, and that makes that part of that studio useful and helpful. So I have mixed feelings about all of that.

MS. CUBBS: Mixed feelings, in what way do you mean?

MS. BARNES: About the desirability of things about my studio. There are times when I would love to have a good woodshop and a great big bench with wonderful vises and more power tools and lots more space to spread out. I think that that goes with either moving to another studio or changing our household dramatically, but I think that so far everything's okay the way it is right now.

MS. CUBBS: You've already hinted at what was going to be our final question for the interview today. And it's one of my favorites with regard to your work. It has to do with the element of play in your work – in the process or in the finished work of art. Can you talk a little bit about the notion of play in your work and in your development as an artist? And by play I mean experimentation, spontaneity, serendipity, inventiveness, and your kind of openness to the material and to the process itself.

MS. BARNES: I think that picking something up in your hand that you know is okay to have in your hand to use, and the things that you want to do with it, if they're varied enough, it's going to be fun. And the fun part is bending it and having something good happen. And then if something bad happens, try to make that happen, repeat it again. So the element of experimentation is really part of the play part. I think another thing that is kind of fun is to share that play with students on a project that is not important. When I say not important, we're not going to sell it; we're not going to exhibit it necessarily. We're just going to see what happens with it.

So there are two things that I do with students that I think are play that comes about also in my work sometimes, and one of them is spinning and the other one is the needle sculpture that we do.

The spinning is the sample that we -- one time when I was at Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, Tennessee], we got into the kudzu, and of course, nobody wants kudzu down there, and it's all over the place. And we'd take long pieces of it from the parking lot, and we'd try to get strands of it that were at least 20 feet long. So we'd have these 20-feet- to 30-feet-long pieces of kudzu, and then we'd shred it by cutting it and tearing it in three or four pieces, and we'd take bundles of these. The bundles were as big around as this saucer at the start and then they'd diminish. So we had two of these, and we put them in a vise. We made one in a vise, and then we had to practically make a thing to hold it onto this bench. And then we had two people on each strand, and they'd turn, turn, and then twist. Turn, turn, and twist. It took about five people to make this one long spun piece of kudzu.

But to do something on a massive scale like that and have it go the length of the room and have this thing – and then we opened it and divided it and went around and spun it some more. But to have a cooperative project that – it's just play and dance and fun and not very serious, and we know it's going to shrink and it's not going to be wonderful when it's finished, but it was good, and it was play.

And then I think the other thing that has been fun is this little business of putting a stick in the ground. And I thought of this in Oregon when we had so much of the filbert branches in trees that they wanted to get rid of, and little side-suckerlike branches that come out of the filbert trees. And we'd cut long ones of those, and I had one that I split and put little discs in and so forth, and it was long and narrow and probably 20 feet long – 15 to 20 feet. And then I put it on a block of wood, a stump. And I had a little V-shape on it, and I set it right in the middle, and I realized that it would spin around. So then I got the idea of putting a needle upside down there and just gently putting it into the branch and it would spin and the breeze would turn it. And if part of it was sort of open in design with either weaving or discs of wood, or even by itself, the tree would spin on a needle. And it was especially beautiful because there were daisies all over this field behind the studio, and the block of wood was so pretty, and the daisies and this thing spinning around was really kind of nice because it would dance up and down over the top of the daisies.

So I got into doing that, and I've been doing it [in] all different sizes and all different shapes with students in many different places. And they've been painted, and they've been covered with foil, and they've been made of bamboo – I do a lot of them with bamboo with marbles so that they'll catch the sun. And I have one now that's made of hickory, and because the hickory is so strong, it's been up, as far as I know, for almost a month. It's indoors, so you have to touch it to spin it, because there's no wind blowing through the gallery. But most of the time they're outdoors. The ones that I did at Longhouse [Longhouse Reserve, East Hampton, New York] were just up for a few hours for a "bamboo day." Some of them are meant to come down and some of them are

meant to be put back up – some are made well enough that they can be stored and put up again. And so they're all different. I never have sold one and never will. They're something I like to give away, or to present to children, or to end up with students using them or whatever.

MS. CUBBS: Hmm. What are you trying to teach your students when you're having them engage in that playful activity?

MS. BARNES: It's a good way to clean up after the class and use the stuff we haven't used. I don't like to see waste, and sometimes the branches are beautiful, and sometimes if they're peeled, they're beautiful white. And it's a way of seeing them in a different way – to see them move. I think that just the fact that you can put that thing up in a few minutes, [that] you could make one of those in a couple hours easily. The post with the points that go down in the ground are the only thing that's any difficulty, and you just put the needle upside down and do it. I think that the students seem to enjoy it, and in one place where we did them, the students got into it: okay, this is good, but I'd like to do something else, and they made them symmetrical. And that's hard to get them to balance, you know? And I thought, great, somebody's going on with this in a way that I hadn't thought of, and they weren't airy and long, they were getting more compact and more engineered. And good, you know, it's great. And the ones that decided that they didn't want to do the peeling of the bark and basketry-type techniques, well, they covered them with metal and foil and stuff, and they shine. The variety and the ideas that come from students – all I do is give them a little start and they go, and that's fine.

MS. CUBBS: Can you talk a little bit more about the way that your work takes advantage of or collaborates with some of the serendipitous effects of nature, or of the animals within nature?

MS. BARNES: There again it's hard to answer because I don't know what's going to be next, and that's kind of nice not knowing. So I could think of times when it's happened. When things have come about where – oh wow, there's something. You know, you just find it and it's there, and it's possible to use, it or it works. Maybe I should tell you about the project with the silkworms; I think that's pretty serendipitous. I've been working with mulberry for so long. Because nobody wants mulberry, it's very easy to find. And using all the stuff from the roots, to the bark roots, to the trunk, to the trunk roots, to the wood roots, the wood in the trunk, the branches, to the leaves.

I actually hadn't worked with leaves, so when one of my students [Elsabe Dixon] said that she had been in South Africa and learned how to make the silkworms spin, something started in my head, and I thought, I'm going to keep in touch with her; I'd like to know more about it. I asked her to send me a picture of the worms because I was curious about the silkworm, what it looked like. And I went to the library and got pictures of silkworms, and then I invited her to join me in this workshop that's coming up. She thinks it's going to be fun, and I think it's going to be great, and she came out for the opening. She drove all the way from Washington, D.C., and back in one day to Pittsburgh just to come out, so she could see the two things that I had made. She gave me two pieces of silk. One is about four by two, and the other one is a circle about the size of an orange, only flat. I mean these are real flat little pieces of what looks like cloth woven by silkworms. She does this for children's projects, and she's going to be doing one in September at a college, and so I said, "Would you like to do one with me?"

So she's going to be a visiting artist at the Pittsburgh workshop, and she's arriving on that Thursday, the last weekend, and she's giving her talk. And then we are going to take care of those silkworms. It takes two nights and three days for the silkworms to weave. And they are going to weave some more discs. The pieces that I have already made that are in the show I made to go with those two shapes, so there's the white one that looks like a little white moon, and it's set in a branch with a thread, and the other one is set into a piece of mulberry bark. So we're going to do this, and all I know is that I'm in on it and that we're all set up to do it and it's coming off. We're going to try it, and I'm going to be involved in feeding silkworms so that they can make the shapes to go into my sculptures. And that's how we're collaborating. I think it's serendipitous that we did indeed meet and that she wants to do it and I want to do it and that they're willing to let us do it in Pittsburgh. So that's the plan. And I think it will be fun.

MS. CUBBS: Can you talk a little bit more about your playful collaborations with nature or with the natural process, including some of the insect markings in your work and your invention of this idea of the dendroglyph?

MS. BARNES: Well, the dendroglyph is a little bit of a concern, because I'm a little bit uncomfortable with it sometimes and the whole business of graffiti. I think there are people who might not approve, and that bothers me a little bit. But I somehow rather go back and do it again. I think I'm not going to do any more, and then I do it again.

MS. CUBBS: Can you describe what it is?

MS. BARNES: Well, it began from just noticing that in any wooded area where there's a narrow road, you can be sure there's going to be a dendroglyph. A car will hit a tree and then it will heal, and everybody has seen that kind of scar when you've had a truck or a car back into a tree. And [on] little trees especially, because they will heal over quickly, there will be this little scar area. Observing this, I decided that somehow or other it was kind

of interesting. I can't remember when I did my first ones, but I think it was down in Athens. I was teaching a class there, and I decided that I would mark on this tree, and then I took the bark off. Or I took the bark off one that was a natural one that maybe had been marked by a deer, and then I used the bark and found that the markings underneath where my knife had been was also marked. And so now I know that I can make a mark that will leave a mark on the wood, that I will also have the bark showing the mark, and inside the wood is another design. So I'm not only marking the bark and the surface of the wood, but the inside of the wood is discolored.

Now that whole thing would be wrong for me if I were doing it in a beautiful garden or in my own yard or someplace where I don't want that to show or in public places where you don't want this kind of thing to happen, but in every case I have decided that that tree is going to be taken down. And Ora will tell me in the pinewoods, "Take that. Take that. Take that." You know, all of those, because they're undergrowth that he has to get out of there so that the grandfather trees can have air and space, and the wood can grow. There are lots of places where people want to get rid of trees. And young trees are especially good for this process, so I'll take the little tree.

And I decided, okay, I'm going to Japan, so what'll I do? So I find a Japanese friend who is fluent in Japanese, and I ask him, "Could you find a character that the sap can flow around? It can't be a circle. It has to be like a stencil. I mean it has to be something where you can deal with this without having the middle fall out." So we got the word *wood* and the word for wood is a nice mark down and two across – one across and two sides. So that one can flow around. So I've done that so that it can actually be on a small tree, a tree about an inch to an inch and a quarter in diameter, and I can draw the word *tree* with my utility knife, and in three months -- I can do that in March, and by the end of July I was going to Japan, so it worked. And so I took the word *tree* to Japan in bark and wood, and made it into a basket at the back and had it done that way. I had done similar things before, but that's the shortest time [in which] I've done a dendroglyph. The others I put on the wood many years ago, and then I didn't get around to cutting down the tree, and unfortunately they're still there. There's one [that is] 17 years old. That's the oldest one.

MS. CUBBS: So you incise the surface of the tree –

MS. BARNES: Yeah.

MS. CUBBS: – and the tree scars over and creates an enhanced version of that linear design.

MS. BARNES: Right. Right. It heals it and changes it dramatically. And in 17 years you wouldn't recognize my lines, but then I did a series with Roman numerals just because I thought it's different from a lot of graffiti and it's something I wanted to do, so I did a few of those.

And now I think most of the marks that I make I want to be more like they happened by stroking – I'm not as interested in having them be pictures of anything or letters or writing of any kind. And the ones that I'm doing now -- I'm making buckles, and then I cut them into strips, and so I make like two letter Cs with a line in between. I have different ones of these in different places in different woods, and then I can cut them into strips, and I can put one inside the other in and out. I've only done one of those so far, but I've got a lot of them growing.

MS. CUBBS: So you're working with the trees in a sense to create the materials and the images for your work.

MS. BARNES: Yeah. Right. The little tree out there looks terrible because it's growing alongside our pine trees, and there are three or four coming up in the garden. I mean those mulberry trees just don't stop. And so people pull them, and nobody wants them, and they're in chain link fences and all over the place, and so it would look better if I took it away. But I'm not taking it away until the end of June because I want to take it for my students, and it will be used, and it will be fresh, and then I'll have it for them in Pittsburgh. And I have other people who are going to give me some in pots so that I can take them on Thursday, because I want to be sure that they're live and fresh and I can actually pull them up and even take the little tiny ones. The root is about six inches long, and the tree is about 20 inches, and I can actually roll that and put it in a chest with ice and take it.

MS. CUBBS: You talked before about the need to use fresh material, and I'm wondering about that earlier question about your working environment. We talked only about your studio, but there are many times when you're working right in the woods – with the trees.

MS. BARNES: Yeah. I go to the sawmill and find out where they're cutting. And I go where the big semis are pulling out the huge logs, and I go on the skidder out into the woods and into the side areas where they're working. And the men in their hard hats and it's distressing to look down – I'm way up, you know; I have to climb up into the skidder to get up in there, and then I look down, and the tires are enormous. These huge tires right down below me, and they're crushing trillium, and it just makes you feel – "Oh! don't do this." But that's a circumstance that's beyond my control. I mean this is going to happen. It's somebody's property. It's

somebody's tree, and they're being hired to do this, and it's where the men are working.

The only thing I ever say is I am sometimes concerned about where they're doing it. And if I have some influence in writing about the particular forest and whether or not there should be logging in there, I try to get involved a little bit as far as access is concerned and the environmental concerns of the organizations in the state that care about our trees. And so I do get involved somewhat in that. I also know if [the trees are] coming off, and they're going to be laid there in the woods, some of them should go back to the earth and that's fine, but the ones that are especially beautiful and can be used as art material – I think it would be a mistake for me not to take it. I like to do that. I like to take that material. And if it's available and offered, I think it's just fine.

MS. CUBBS: And you need to at that moment to harvest in a certain way in order to generate the material for your work.

MS. BARNES: Yeah. Right away. It's very restrictive on the time. It's just starting now. Early May to late June – mid-July in Ohio. April in Minnesota just didn't work very well. I was just there recently, and I just could not quite get the bark off. So I'm sorry that I didn't come back with more material and involve myself better there, but it's okay.

MS. CUBBS: Well, thank you. Let's stop for today and continue our next interview session at our next appointment.

MS. BARNES: Thank you.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

MS. CUBBS: This is Joanne Cubbs interviewing Dorothy Gill Barnes at the artist's home in Worthington, Ohio, on May 7, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number three.

Let's start today by talking about your relationship to your community, or communities, as an artist. Has there been a particular community that has been especially important to you and to your development as an artist?

MS. BARNES: I think that early on when I turned toward the weaving part of it, it was very helpful to have a local organization, the Central Ohio Weaver's Guild, because I had left the classroom, and I was away from college classes that were devoted to drawing, painting, ceramics, and other things like this. Weaving was so new to me that it was helpful to be in a group of women who were spinning and dyeing and dressing looms and doing that sort of thing. And they had quite a lot of interest in that early on in the Columbus area. They had visiting people come in from far away that were quite good. That's when I met Jon Riis and had that short workshop that I mentioned earlier. So that was kind of a community of people, and I run into them still. They're all going off in all directions with quilting and so forth, but I've stepped aside from that more recently.

In the larger community I think that I've always been kind of interested in what's going on down at OSU, even though I have not been in the art department there. In the sculpture department they have recently asked me to come down for just a little talk or to take students out to get some materials. The ones that are in the woodshop. So there are little ways of getting across into a larger circle of people who are in the arts. That's always been of interest to me, and whether or not I was working any particular media, I have gone to art museums to see new work and been very proud to have been able to be a little bit supportive to some of those people too. I mean, I've taken photographs, for instance, for a man in the print department at OSU. When we were going out to Woodstock, I took pictures of the Schmidt house out there, and that was a lot of fun. And even now people are asking me for my slides of the Schmidt house [Clarence Schmidt House, Woodstock, New York] because it's been torn down for so long and is rather important.

MS. CUBBS: This is the one created by the self-taught artist?

MS. BARNES: The man that made the house out of doors and was eccentric. Primitive, I guess. A folk artist. And [I have had] little connections with, for instance, Charles Csuri [who] is in the computer world of art. He was one of the first people to work with computer art, and we know them a little bit. I was very interested in the first time he did a hummingbird that you could see on the screen moving around. It was made by a computer.

So just finding out what's going on around us. And when I go places, of course, I like to visit art museums. Recently the Folk Art Museum in New York [American Folk Art Museum, New York] was new to me. I hadn't been there. So hard to answer that question exactly. I don't feel like there's a big group of us that do anything together that much.

In making my work, though, I find that there is a need for someone to help with the wood turning or some construction slicing with machinery that I don't have. I think that I'm immediately comfortable in the company of woodworkers. I like them and I like what they're doing, and I think that building the houses at Habitat was very

interesting. I feel like I can talk about wood with people, and machinery and hand tools. And my husband's father had been a carpenter, and so there's a lot of interest in that and in the people who do those things.

MS. CUBBS: Do you see yourself as distinctly a part of the American craft community, or do you see your involvements as a little bit wider than that and more various?

MS. BARNES: I think that the craft community is where I am more comfortable and [feel more] part of that. I think it has something to do with this whole business of the representational, the fact that I choose not to work with representational subject matter. A lot of form-follows-function and objects that you pick up and use and that sort of thing. I think it just makes me feel that I can do those things and relax and not think of them as something you frame and put on the wall that's important. And baskets kind of fit in there. If they go in the direction of sculpture or something that's not objective, [something] that's not functional or even a vessel, it's okay, if it feels right as it comes through my hands. But I don't set out to do that and call it sculpture. So I think the craft community is more where I feel like I'm okay to try for that.

MS. CUBBS: Where do you think American craft or perhaps fiber making and basket making rank on an international scale? I'm wondering if you see the field moving in any kind of obvious direction or not.

MS. BARNES: I think that some of the most beautiful, wonderful, exciting things that I see are often found in a *Fiber Arts* magazine of some kind or *Textiles* in the U.K. or even in Australia there's a magazine. And then as I turn into an *ARTnews* magazine or something from other than a craft magazine and see something that's textiles, I'm really pleased to see the crossover, and I think that definitely if something is made of fiber and it's included in major exhibitions in the art museums, it's always pleasing to me that someone sees the work that way.

MS. CUBBS: So you're seeing an increasing conjoining of the world's so-called craft with so-called fine art as it relates to the fiber art?

MS. BARNES: I think so. I'm not sure where it happened and when. I'm sure that it's in the past somewhere, but I'm not sure that it's increasing. The whole business of the new basketry and the big excitement about first working in three-dimensional fiber in a way that has nothing to do with function – I think that happened in the 70s. I mean, I think a lot of that excitement has come and gone. I think it's blending in in other directions, but I think that that was pretty wild. It was a wild idea. It was wonderful and it was exciting, and those people seemed courageous. And I think Ed Rossbach was responsible for a lot of that. But that was probably because it was new to me, you know, but it was happening and it was kind of a big deal. And the Lausanne Biennale and all that was something I wanted to follow; I enjoyed looking at that work.

MS. CUBBS: Do you think that American craft has a distinct international presence; does it now join in kind of a larger craft dialogue?

MS. BARNES: I think that other people could speak about this from their own experience, but in the particular places where I have gone and things that I have been able to do with others, I've discovered that as I go abroad, there's a lot of feeling that, wow, all that stuff's happening in the United States and I would like to go there.

I've had people recently in conversation, not so much in Denmark or Down Under, but in China and in a group of people – I can't remember. Well, I guess it was in Denmark. There have been people who have approached me about coming to the United States to do things in fiber and hoping that they could go to graduate school here. Young people who know about the textile world in the United States perhaps better than I do, and where it is in their life. If they have looked into things like computer art and opportunities to work with certain kinds of looms – for instance there's some famous looms activity in Canada and in the United States. This makes me aware that there is a lot of interest here.

And as we hear about the importance of New York to the whole world in the arts, I have a feeling now that there's a lot of people, young people especially, [who] want to come to the United States. Maybe because this is where the action is and all that stuff. And they'll be joining, for instance, the quilt exhibitions here in Ohio – that big national quilt show – and you'll find names from all over the world who are involved and contributing their work to that show. And I think that's fairly recent.

MS. CUBBS: Sitting back for a minute and thinking again of your own development as an artist, what have been and will continue to be some of the most powerful influences in your career, whether they be individual people or art movements or developments in the field?

MS. BARNES: I think I may have mentioned that I entered some work in a local show here, and it was judged and received an award. After not having had my other artwork necessarily accepted in shows, it was a surprise to me that my work with the little basket became something that was given an award. And then, from that, something was published in *Fiber Arts* magazine, I think. And I [also] got a call one day from somebody – I wish I could

remember, but she said that she wanted to get my name and address because she had been contacted by Jack Lenor Larsen and that he was interested and wanted to know if some of my work might be available. And of course I couldn't believe that. I was pretty excited about it because I knew about his wonderful *Mainstream* book and had bought that big book and so forth [Jack Lenor Larsen and Mildred Constantine*. The Art Fabric: Mainstream*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1981]. I did indeed send out some work to him, and then I think he purchased two or three small pieces. I sent a little grouping of small work that I had.

And then he invited Jane Sauer and me and a sculptor from Colorado – I'm trying to think, two or three other, not younger, but unknown people in craft – and he asked us to come out to exhibit in Long Island. And we went out there, and I remember Jane and I thought it was really pretty interesting that we were in that, and we were very excited about it because it was Jack Larsen's Longhouse place [East Hampton, New York]. Well, it was before Longhouse actually; it was when he had the Round House. And we were in that show with Elaine Benson at the Elaine Benson Gallery [Bridgehampton, New York], and it was so exciting to see that work and to have my work actually in the same room with Ed Rossbach's pieces and Jane Sauer and all these beautiful baskets and other work.

I think that made me feel that I should just keep going and working on it. It was a compliment to me, and I enjoyed being there. And that's where I met Audrey Flack playing the fiddle, that night we met her. But I think that it gave me a boost, and I just kept making more work, and I was invited to shows and that helped a lot. It kind of got me started. And also to have some opportunities to go to teach.

MS. CUBBS: So that original exhibition, that was in the early '70s and it was an Ohio designer craftsman show? Where was that?

MS. BARNES: Well, the very first one when I had the work shown was called a Beaux Arts Show, and it was at the Columbus museum [Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, Ohio, mid-'70s]. That was the very first time that I exhibited work and had a basket actually receive an award: at that first occasion. And then a couple of years ago I had another piece judged and received an award. That was pretty early on, but the exhibition in Long Island was an invitational that came about because of those images that Jack had seen in a magazine.

So I was then invited to the American Craft Museum [New York] opening show. That kind of got going then, and later there was "Interlacing" [American Craft Museum, New York, 1987].

MS. CUBBS: So with those early shows and the recognition of those awards and Jack Larsen's invitation, you made a sudden entry into the world of fiber arts through those windows of opportunity?

MS. BARNES: Yeah, and then I think that the other one was when I went out to California and was asked to be in that Miller/Brown show [San Francisco, California] and had the request to go see Ed Rossbach. Pat Hickman and Lillian Elliot showed me their studio, and they took me over there, and it was a delight to spend a little time with Katherine Westphal and Ed Rossbach that afternoon. And he actually did a little interview and asked me questions. I'll never forget Ed Rossbach's question to me – the very first one was, "Do you draw?"

MS. CUBBS: What do you think that meant? What does that mean to you?

MS. BARNES: I think he was wanting to know, I guess, whether or not my idea was something I could put down on paper before I made it. I had never done that, so I wasn't just sure whether it was a good thing or a bad thing, but it was great to meet him and to see him working on his incredible paper-covered basket that day. That was good. Wonderful time.

MS. CUBBS: This next question is an interesting one because it has to do with the place of universities in the American craft movement, specifically for artists working in fiber or basketry. An interesting question for you because you began your work in your field well after you graduated from the university. So what do you see as the place of the universities in the American craft movement, as you sit back and think about it relative to your own experiences?

MS. BARNES: I think it was kind of sad to see all of the looms go away, and I'm not sure if it has much to do with craft movement. Maybe it has more to do with the technique and the way that yarns are put together and the interest in the two-dimensional. I'm not just sure why that happened, but a lot of places that had big weaving and fiber departments have just gone. It's hard to find them, and the people who are still working with looms are rare. When I left Capital after I had taught there, they were just stored in the basement as far as I know. They are just gone, or they've been sold or given away because that program is no longer, and the weaving department at Ohio State University is gone. But if there is a fiber department still functioning and going strong – going well, these programs are often connected with new technology in textiles.

I think it's very different from ceramics. I think that ceramics departments stay longer, and I think they move over into sculpture so easily; the techniques and the machinery of it – I don't see those things gone. I think that

in industrial design, maybe the woodshops are still there because they have to build – part of their projects very often are constructed with power tools.

But I'm not sure where we draw the line between the craft and the art and what's offered at the university level. There are programs all over that are good, and there are some that have been good that are no longer around. I mean, they have just been cancelled or written out. And as budgets get tight, I think that sometimes drawing, painting, sculpture – the more traditional fine arts remain, and the craft is going away.

MS. CUBBS: When did the looms begin to disappear in your experience?

MS. BARNES: Well, even now when I went out to the Oregon College of Art and Design [Oregon College of Art and Craft, Portland, Oregon], I was in basketry, but there were very few of the looms being used. Lots of them were set up, and maybe it was just because of the time I was there, but at the craft schools the looms used to be cracking everywhere. You could hear them – students at them and waiting for them. That was quite different. But the place where I noticed this was in Canberra in Australia [Australian National University, National Institute of the Arts], because the housing for the visiting faculty were right beside the loom studio, and those looms were really going, and people were waiting for them. And every loom was filled with a student all the time, all day, and often late, late at night.

I think there has to be a special drive and dedication to keep those programs – to keep them moving, because that's not happening at very many places. I do think that there's a good one up here in Ohio; Janice Lessman-Moss has a program at Kent [Kent State University, Kent, Ohio]. And I know that there are exciting things happening in Montreal [Montreal Centre for Contemporary Textiles, Montreal, Quebec]. I've heard about their – I think it's a Jacquard loom. I'm not sure about that, but I know that Liz Williamson goes there.

The craft schools have really fine courses in loom still, and textiles, surface design, quilt making, beads, beadwork, and other directions in fiber are there too and they're going along. It depends, I think, on whether or not there's a really exciting artist in that particular branch of that fiber program, and if they attract people. And then if their students do well and get excited about it, then there's a sort of circle of really fine work. I think that right now that happens to be in beads. There are a lot of people working in beadwork right now. And I've seen glass programs increasing, and that's fun to watch and to be around, but it's quite an expensive commitment, and I think that's why the glass program was dropped at OU down in Athens [Ohio University, Athens, Ohio]. I think there's no longer a glass program there, but there still is glass at Ohio State. But it's expensive, and, you know, it goes all night and all day.

I really don't know about all the crafts, so I'm limited in my knowledge about it.

MS. CUBBS: Do you see the university as a place where the field of American craft is fueled? That it's the place where most artists and makers are weaned, or do you see artists emerging from other contexts?

MS. BARNES: I might guess this, I don't know, but I think that when I look out at all the people in the craft who excite me right now, I would say that it's almost half and half. I mean, a lot of them come from a university background, and they've been going off into a craft from having had an art education. And a lot of them are coming from the joy of making art and working with material and maybe getting in connection with the traditional artists; they don't come through the regular route. And when I see the work, and it's all exciting, it doesn't seem to me that it makes an awful lot of difference. It depends on the person who is out there and whether or not they want to go through the whole business of getting a degree in art.

And then there are the teachers: the ones who would like very much to pass on what they're doing. They get excited about working with other people, and they end up teaching because they have to make money. Some of the teachers are wonderful craftspeople, and some of the best craftspeople don't necessarily want to teach, so I don't think it's just one way. I think there's a variety of people coming through from different backgrounds.

MS. CUBBS: I want to turn now to a consideration of how your work has been received over time. You've talked a little bit about that moment in the early '70s when you made some of your first baskets, and you showed them and earned some awards and some very sudden recognition that thrust you into the world, the community of fiber and fiber artists. How would you describe -- as you sit back and look over the last 20 or 30 years of your career, how has your work been received over time? Has it been a rather steady acceptance? Has it peaked and waned? How has your work been received?

MS. BARNES: Well, I think I've just been so fortunate. I'm pleased that people like to see what I'm doing. It's been a pleasure for me because it's a joy to think that somebody cares about it and likes to look at it or hold it, or that they think that it's interesting. I just feel really lucky about that – that some people have bought my work, and also that it appears in beautiful places, that somebody has taken the trouble to make white spaces and well lighted spaces to show my work. I'm surprised and pleased to see it. And I think that I've had that kind of opportunity coming along here and there.

MS. CUBBS: So you feel it's been steady?

MS. BARNES: I think it's been steady, but I also think that another thing that's been consistent is that I don't always do good work. When I'm invited to do something and my work isn't up to par, I really feel terrible about that. But sometimes I don't know. Because the works are different from each other, I don't do the same thing that I can depend on looking a certain way. But I'll get off on a tangent where I try something new, and I just can't see that it's especially good. And then I don't think I've done them a favor by taking my work out there or exhibiting it. But that's not new; it's sort of been consistent that way all the time.

MS. CUBBS: It sounds as if you're one of your most stringent critics of your own work. In your opinion, who are the most significant writers in the field of American craft, and why is their writing meaningful to you?

MS. BARNES: I don't believe that I know very many people who write about craft. I wish I could tell you some of the names. But I do know that often when I've had something in a show or it's mentioned in a newspaper or a magazine article, I'm always pleased that the writer will say something about my work that is what I really, truly feel. And that's rewarding and comfortable to read. I have had one woman who I respected quite a bit who said, "Too bad she's not making baskets anymore; this looks like an old boat," and things like that. Well later on, I had a wonderful article that she wrote again, and she was pleased with my work, and I was delighted. And as I thought about it, I think that piece really did kind of look like an old boat, and she was right all the time.

MS. CUBBS: Was this a local newspaper critic of some kind?

MS. BARNES: I don't know. But she's been very generous with words since that time. I think I got better, but I don't know. Or at least I put better things in that show. I'm not following a lot of writing about craft. I just don't seem to know who is doing that.

MS. CUBBS: Have there been any individuals in particular whose writing about your work you've enjoyed?

MS. BARNES: I think that Jeanne Fryer-Kohles, who wrote the essay for my catalog [1999] or the big book that I have about my artwork. It was funded by the Ohio Craft Council, and that was quite a surprise because I was having that show and they financed the catalog and there was a writer for it. Jeanne was very helpful; she came over to visit and actually went out into the woods with me on one occasion.

MS. CUBBS: This is the exhibition entitled "From the Woods?" which is probably the most extensive catalog done to date on your work, is it not?

MS. BARNES: Yeah. It's the one that covers not real early work but a couple of early pieces and up to the year '99. I also have had some writing about my work from Ann Bremner, who is associated with the Wexner Center [Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio]. Ann has been encouraging to me from the time I worked down at Capital and she was teaching some art history classes and we got acquainted. She included my work in a talk about art, which I thought was really nice.

MS. CUBBS: Is criticism written by artists more valuable to you, or in your mind is there a distinction?

MS. BARNES: There have been artists and writers who have responded to my work. I'm not sure who they are and whether or not they are artists. I just don't know them that well, but appreciated their interest and kind words.

MS. CUBBS: Mm-hm. I know you've mentioned many times during our previous discussions some special moment when you saw something in one of the craft periodicals that somehow moved you or showed you where you might exhibit your work. Can you talk in a summary fashion about what role specialized periodicals for craft have played in your development as an artist? Which have been the most meaningful to you, and how they have assisted your development as an artist?

MS. BARNES: The only two magazines that I see on a regular basis are *American Craft* and *FiberArts*, but I think there's *Shuttle Spindle and Dyepot*, and I think my work has been in a *Surface Design* [Journal] magazine and a publication in the U.K. It's encouraging just to see your work and to know that someone has cared about it and that you have had it published. It's too bad in a way that we're all kind of dependent on images of our work, but if you have a card with a good photograph of a piece, it seems to me to be a lot easier to sell it. If it's something that you have made, and it took you five years growing on a tree, and something else, and it's connected with people that you know and where you've been, sometimes you like to hang on to those, or maybe have the kids have some of them. You know you'll never see that particular piece of wood or bark again because you just can't come up with it. It's gone.

But with things out for sale, if you have an image that you see another time or have a good slide of it, it's nice to have that record to remember it. Even for some of the ones that aren't very good, if I learn from those, that

photographic image seems to me to be quite important right now. There are pieces that I made a long time ago and sold without ever having them photographed. One recently came to me through the mail because it was given to an art museum, and I didn't recognize it. I don't remember that piece. I know it's mine because it has my material in it and that I did it, but I think if I had somewhere along the line taken a picture of it, I would remember it and maybe even have learned from it. So I think that that is something that matters: to have a record. I even take pictures of things in progress that aren't right. I know I'm going to change it, but if I see it when I come back from the photo shop, and I know it's terrible and I can see what's wrong from photographing it from a certain angle, it will help me, and I'll change the basket in progress that way.

MS. CUBBS: That's interesting –

MS. BARNES: I got off the subject didn't I?

MS. CUBBS: Well, not really, because I'm wondering if this archiving of images that you're talking about and also the exchange or the discourse in images that is so important to a conversation in the arts wasn't for you in part achieved through those periodicals.

MS. BARNES: Yeah, I think so. I also think that [it helps] the sharing of ideas between artists in your field and outside the field. I mean, it does not necessarily have to be just fiber. If I get really excited about work that I see in other media, it's all good and it's all inspiring. And it's not just in the art magazines, but it's in going to hear music and to see good dance. I mean the things that get you excited about the creative process and get you fired up to go home and work harder. Because a lot of that is not necessarily photos in a magazine, but it can be occasions with live music especially. My husband is a classical musician, and when he has a student coming in here who has just done something that that student is excited about and I hear that music in the living room, I get all fired up. And Adam [Roberts] will come out to my studio and I'll thank him, and I will be working harder because I've heard him play, you know?

MS. CUBBS: Well, this is a good point to then pause for a moment and meditate or muse a little bit about the specific importance of your basket making is a means of expression. Thinking about what are the possibilities of that medium, what are the strengths and perhaps even the limitations of it?

MS. BARNES: Well, of course we really don't need baskets very much anymore. You know, if you're going to go out in the woods, you don't want to carry a basket to bring something back. You can have a plastic bag in your pocket, and you can travel lighter. When I get my rhubarb and cut it, I always take a rhubarb leaf and lay the rhubarb on the leaf and wrap it up in one leaf and bring that one leaf inside, just because of the joy of wrapping it and carrying it as if it might have been done 7,000 years ago when everybody had rhubarb. But the basketry idea and the interest in basketry has happened in the last 30 years or whatever. And whether it's Ed Rossbach or John McQueen that have taken it in a more contemporary direction, it's pretty exciting. But it also makes you realize that the old baskets that you have which were functional and you may have collected are just that much more interesting to handle. They're very, very important too, and while they make a lot of them that look pretty much alike, each one of them is going to be different.

I saw a whole elevator full of the wedding baskets from the Upper Volta [Burkina Faso], it used to be called; I don't think it's called that any longer, but those wedding baskets – I couldn't see two alike out of all of those, and they were so beautiful and so interesting. So basketry is kind of unique in that. I mean you don't find very many machines making baskets. It comes close to that in some of the casting that is done, but it's a special art because there's lots and lots of hand-holding those little over-under strands.

MS. CUBBS: Mm-hm. You mentioned at one point that in basket making you're inspired to explore such a great variety of forms, at least traditionally, because baskets had to serve so many different kinds of functions. And that the notion of this basket function inspired a reconsideration of different kinds of form-making.

MS. BARNES: I think that's true. I think it inspired some, but more than that is the fact that all those baskets are different shapes and different sizes, great big huge ones to hold fish, for instance, and little, teeny, tiny ones to hold a thimble. Whatever they are, they're interesting. I think that the way it comes around to my work is that I go first to the woods, and if the woods or the backyard or wherever is supplying something for me that I can use and put in my hands that I've harvested myself, then the form is figured out. I mean, the form doesn't come first. It has to be the access to the material and what the material will do as I hold it, and not just what I take that is a straight and flexible and easy to weave, but looking into the tree and finding the parts of the tree or the bush or the grass or whatever, and asking myself, why can't I use that as well? And will it show more about what I'm seeing here in nature if I use more of it in the object that I'm going to present?

And so, I mean, you can't take a mulberry tree down and cut it close to the ground without seeing that it's turning into orange. And as you dig down you just go, wow! When you see yellow with purple stripes underground, you just – I've had to take people from my house sometimes when I'm out in the yard doing that, and I'll just say, "You've got to come to see this." Most people don't believe that there's anything that bright

underground. And you can only see it for maybe just a few hours; it's very light, bright yellow with purple stripes, just as if they had been drawn on with a piece of pastel chalk. And it is an amazing experience.

And so these kinds of things that I find are the ones that draw me to making something. And then if there's enough of it to be big or have a large form, then that's what chooses the form.

MS. CUBBS: So would it be accurate to say for you that one of the aspects of the basket making tradition that has been so inspiring to you is that traditionally baskets have been made out of natural materials, and this fact has opened up for you an incredible world of expressive possibilities as you explore natural materials and their ability to inspire fascinating and wondrous forms in your own work? Would you say that's true?

MS. BARNES: I think you're very good at asking questions. It gives me all kinds of thoughts about where I saw these things. You've taken me back to the museums by asking that question, because I just feel like when I see those things, I think, "How did they ever think to do that?" And so many years ago and for a reason they needed those things. And they figured out ways to make them tight and strong and even to hold water, baskets to hold water and to cook in. And when I see and touch and hold those things, it's just absolutely amazing.

Now when I know that I can't do that myself, and I don't really want to do that myself, it doesn't mean that I can't try some of those things, and in my own way maybe take a weave that I've seen and look it up in a book or try it and have it come from the tree. Or to take a part of my bark that's left over that's very fine, and weave it and tuck it into a place, and make a lining using a weave that I have seen in a book or in a real piece. So I think the traditional basketry that I see, especially very old baskets or baskets that have been used and handled, are ones that are quite inspiring.

MS. CUBBS: So you're also inspired by the traditional techniques associated with basket making, this kind of in-and-out movement of the materials, the weaving and the tightening of the materials as they join together?

MS. BARNES: Right. I didn't even know for a while – I was making baskets before I had even read anywhere or tried to figure out why it had to be an odd number. So if you're going around a cylinder and you have an odd number, you just keep going, and it spirals, but if you have an even number, you're going to get all fouled up on your weave, and so you've got to figure that out. And then I found out you have to have an even number if you're going to do bands of bark and shapes of bark in one unit going in. And so I'm changing the rules all the time and trying to relate to what's in my hand that requires a certain weave or whether it's plain or twilled or twined or whatever I'm going to do. Some materials will tuck in better that way.

Going back to someone who has been inspiring, I think Jiro Yonezawa is one of those people, because when I was teaching in Toronto one time, and Jiro was teaching also, he had a demonstration of his preparation for his bamboo, and I'll never forget it. I was just very fortunate to have a very good person in my class who had a good camera, and she photographed the sequence for me. And to see him cut from a big chunk of bamboo with a big knife, and at the time kneeling on a rug on the floor with a chunk of wood in front of him. And when he took the little, thin slices of his bamboo bark and not only cut them from the front and the back of the piece, but also the edges, where he took two knives and crossed them into the block of wood and then pulled them through so that each piece was beveled. Those two little scraps of his, a black bamboo and some light bamboo, I carry with me in my teaching box because I just like people to see how very fine traditional preparation of bamboo is made to put into bamboo baskets in Japan.

MS. CUBBS: I also remember you saying with regard to the basket making tradition that, historically for you as a creator, that it combined a lot of interests that were part of your earlier life, like sewing and carpentry, like weaving and sculpture, which all came together somehow in this particular art form. Would you say that in some ways it's been a very satisfying way to join a lot of your creative interests?

MS. BARNES: I think so. I didn't even think about this until after I'd done it for a while, but I remembered that no wonder I like to do this: it's fun to sew. And I knew a blanket stitch that I somehow had learned along the way in my sewing, and I needed it to put two pieces of bark together, so why not do it with roots or vines? And so that kind of thing came about in a very easy way. And I do believe that wood and carpentry are just something that I've enjoyed. If I needed bookshelves, I've figured out a way to get to a table saw and cut some boards and put them together, and so I've done that off and on while we've been starting our home and needing shelves.

And then the Habitat experience was very meaningful to me because I worked with a crew. I did Tuesday crew work for about six or seven years, plus building the women's house. And the miter saw, for instance -- I had done a lot of the baseboards and framing around doors and so forth with the miter saw. And that right-angle cut and the chopping of the tool. One time when I was working on a project for basketry, I had a log, a pine log, and I just decided to put slots in it. And so I just put it into that saw and made slots, and then later laid the flexible bark into the slots, and that particular piece – the first one I ever did with my power tool – is the one that's on the cover of *American Craft* magazine. So putting the bark into that slot and then letting it spread and come around was not necessarily an –

[END TAPE 3 SIDE A.]

– idea from the start in my head, but from the use of the tool that I had become acquainted with in another way.

MS. CUBBS: So it was through your construction work, the carpentry work with Habitat for Humanity program?

MS. BARNES: Right. I wouldn't have known about chopping up slots in my tree. I'm pretty good at dividing a long tree right through the bandsaw too. I found out very carefully, and with a good helper to help pull it through, that I could cut through a tree quite well and without problem, because of course you go up and down because of the branching, and it's not safe unless you do it very carefully with an accomplished person and a good eye and working well on that. But those long pieces are sometimes in the sculptures that spin around. And you can lighten up your material by slicing it sometimes.

MS. CUBBS: I'm curious: what would you advise somebody to be the limitations of basket making, if any?

MS. BARNES: Right now I think that it is the material and – it's the limitations of time and moisture content. Drying and keeping things bug-free, and storage, and all that kind of stuff is a pain. I've had really nice pieces that have warped when I tried to dry them properly and were just not quite right. They don't have a correct posture when they don't dry quite right. And to cast them in the wintertime is best for me because we have two old-fashioned registers in there on either side of the fireplace, and I just lay my work on the register at night to dry. There I can keep good, clean work and dry it quickly. But in a damp, warm place, where the work has to be out for some reason, you can have mildew happen, and things don't smell very good. And you have something come up, and you've got all your work already wet, and so you roll it up and throw it in the freezer, or in the refrigerator if it's not too big. And you're constantly wondering whether you're going to have time to work with it while it's in good condition. Those are a pain.

MS. CUBBS: So you're really talking about the tricky logistics of working with organic materials.

MS. BARNES: Right. And that's what happens. I think that those people who go to a store and buy what they are going to use, and they know how it's going to behave each time – it's easier than making baskets. Good basket makers who work with natural material and do all those wonderful splints and the really well constructed, good, traditional baskets -- I just have so much respect for them and all the work that they go to to prepare that material. It's very labor intensive and exacting, and sometimes physically challenging.

MS. CUBBS: Let's start talking again here about the notion of commissioned works. I'm wondering if you have accepted and undertaken commissions at any times throughout your career, and if so what were some of those pieces?

MS. BARNES: I have not really. I think that the closest I'd come to that would be when people have seen work and that already belongs to someone else, or they see it published and they know it's not available and they'll say something like, "Could you make something for me in the spirit of that?" or something like that, because they know I'm not going to make the same thing again.

I think that on one occasion I tried to make the same basket again, and I sent it out, and that was one of those to Jack Larsen. But I sent others as well, and he sent the one that was like the one in the magazine back. The others he wanted better. And I thought I didn't want to make it; I didn't like trying to do it a second time. That's why it wasn't any good. It just wasn't as fresh and right as the first one, so I have not made two-alikes.

I have had one particular thing that I repeated with the corkscrew willow project, because all the corkscrew willow was so different from each other that when I divided them, I made a series, and that's one of the few times that I've done that. I think I made six or eight using the same technique and the same material, but they were all very different from each other.

MS. CUBBS: Have you ever had anybody offer you the opportunity to do something larger or more public, or at an institution of any kind?

MS. BARNES: Yes. I have had a garden ask me to make something, and I realized that what I wanted to make would not keep well outdoors. So Patrick Dougherty's work, for instance, is so beautiful; he works with natural material, but on the little sign that goes with the work that I saw of his recently in Minnesota, it said that it would be for approximately two years in place. So these works are not meant to be there for a long, long time, but they're very exciting and fun to look at and to walk into, and he's a delightful person. I think that is true of some other people who are working in natural materials outdoors. Some of them are meant to last and some of them are not expected to. I think that's one of the reasons why I haven't been asked to do commissions. And the textile things that would be indoors, too, are something of a problem, especially for people in tapestry that involves color or where there is a problem with light and fading and that sort of thing.

I have commissioned myself to do something, and it's kind of a promise that I'm going to make to myself, but I've got almost a bushel of things that I have dyed. And so one of these days I'm going to make something out of bright color, but it's going to all be connected with nature. And so I've got that project started. It's been ongoing for about eight or ten years. And a couple of different times I've had access to dyes. And then I credit the person who made the dye or gave it to me, and I'm seeing what I can do with that. I'm not in any hurry, but I do want to do that; that's kind of like a little plan for myself.

MS. CUBBS: I like that idea of self-commissioning.

MS. BARNES: Yeah. [Laughs.]

MS. CUBBS: In looking back at how your basketry and sculpture has evolved over the years, what are the similarities and the differences between your early and your more recent work? Have there been changes? What are those?

MS. BARNES: I think that in the early work, I was less experienced with how materials would behave. So in some ways, I was a little bit more courageous in what I would try, and there might have been more happy accidents. But I did also do a lot more work on the loom. And because I was teaching that part-time class down at Capital, I had the loom set up and got the idea of putting material that was rigid or would dry rigid into the loom. Those were both in 1978 and in 1980, when I went to England and did that miniature textiles thing. Both of those pieces were loom-woven. I didn't know at the time that Kay Sekimachi was making loom-woven baskets, and it was just real exciting to me to see her work. We worked in very different ways, and my material was different, but to change a two-dimensional form into 3-D was something that I did a lot earlier, and I've stepped away from that somewhat.

I actually went back about two years ago and tried it again, and it didn't go well at all. I didn't like what happened, and so I think I'm going to be very happy to pass my loom on to my granddaughter, who is sort of interested. That's probably not something I will do, but the pulled-warp project, with threads being pulled tight to make a shape, is something that I used in teaching and that was part of my early work. And it's sort of related to what I do now, in a different way without the loom. I've found other methods of pulling barks together in shapes that are similar to what would happen in a loom. But my work has changed more toward where the wood and the bark are more important to me than the fine parts of the weaving. I think the weaving and coiling and very delicate, fine work is not as noticeable in my work, and sometimes it's more related to wood than to the bark or the thinner, finer materials.

MS. CUBBS: You also mentioned at certain points that you would introduce new kinds of materials along the way.

MS. BARNES: Yeah. I think that quite a long time ago I made a piece for that show -- I think it was in Miller/Brown -- where I actually had a chunk of wood and some sticks across in the piece of bark that went over the edges, and I just stapled the whole front of it. Those staples were why it was holding together, and they stayed there as part of the design. At that time, there were other people using pieces of metal and so forth, and I also had made a piece called *Rocking Banyan,* where the whole thing is put together with copper wire. The wire doesn't show because I wanted it very clear and plain. They weren't hidden just to be hidden, but because I wanted the lines to be unbroken; the whole construction is held together by wire.

I used to work and did a little jewelry work, and felt that copper seemed comfortable in my hands. I was used to it, and I like copper because it doesn't rust and you can mix it with wet materials. So copper comes around every once in a while. I'm working on a piece right now that has copper wire that has brought it together, and it's possible that the copper wire will come out. I'm not sure. I may replace it with wood pegs. Occasionally I use copper wire or wax linen, both of which I've used in the loom with bark.

I think, too, that this whole business about glue – I have a little rule that I seem to set for myself: I'll just say to myself, "This basket is going to be made entirely of materials in a way that I could have made it 7,000 years ago." And then all my stitching will be done with roots and perhaps even a thorn to use to poke a hole. I just do that for the fun of it. And then there are other times when I think that this particular bark is wrinkled, or it's cracked, or it's been broken and I need a repair, and I think, well, okay, there's pine sap out there in the world, but Elmer's glue works better. So there are times when I do repairs and touch things up with glue. Or if something discolors in an area, I might even touch up with watercolor in a spot that is going to bother the line or the perception of the piece as you want it.

MS. CUBBS: So would you say that you have felt more freedom as you have moved on in your work? More freedom to use things like glue and wire and string?

MS. BARNES: I don't think that it's changed that much. In fact, I think that the whole idea form-follows-function that I thought about in college in connection with architecture and with industrial design and all of that – I do like the idea of being very direct and bold and showing what you're doing with the way you're doing it. And if you're

going to pinch something together and hold it there, I think that if you want to show the holding device, it should be shown. Even before I saw the wrapped Ed Rossbach pieces using string and plastic, and the fasteners used in some other works by other basket makers, I've always felt that there was an honesty and directness in that. I think that I have used that off and on from the very beginning. I like that idea.

I also like the idea – and it's been consistent – that when I make saw marks, the saw teeth marks are pleasing to me. I have one piece where I have used several different tools in several different kinds of saws and left all those marks on purpose in that piece. It's kind of a thank you to the tools. It's a way of my saying, I don't want to sand this smooth; that's not what it's supposed to be here. I want to maybe have the sanded place next to the rough place. And I didn't do that completely by myself. It was sandpaper or the saw that made those marks with me, and so it's in cooperation with tools and an appreciation for the tools, and that means a lot to me. I like doing that when it works well.

MS. CUBBS: So that honesty or forthrightness about material and form and technique has been one of the consistencies in your work?

MS. BARNES: Yeah, and I think it's kind of misunderstood with some very fine craftspeople. I sometimes want to ask them the question, and maybe it's just not troubling, but it's something that I think is a kind of freedom that you can allow yourself. If you want to do that thing your way, and if someone doesn't like it, that's alright. But I think that if that person is offended by the fact that there are little splinters of the wood sticking out, and if I have torn it on purpose to get the splinters to be there -- I mean, if I can start a cut and then tear it – I have some pieces now that I'm doing that are whole units that just have to do with tearing wood. And starting the cuts and then spreading them so that you can have different kinds of lacy-like things happen when the inner bark is spread -- those accidents – not accidents, but things that just happen, as you're working with the tools and the wood, as they happen and if you pay attention to what's happening in your hands -- all of those things can become ideas and purposefully repeated to make a structure or a surface that's unique and interesting.

MS. CUBBS: So a kind of openness towards and a close observation of what is happening to your materials when you undertake certain operations also been an important hallmark of your kind of creative process.

MS. BARNES: Right. Well, that changes when you're right there. As you pull something off of a tree there are – just the piece that streams off instead of having a little piece of bark with a long piece of – a heavy bark with a long piece of thin bark that has just been torn away – just to pick up that torn-away stuff and tie a knot in it and hang it up and let it drape. I mean you could do something like that in 30 seconds or at the most a minute. And I don't want to make anything out of it. It's just too beautiful to see that wood drape. And I don't sell them or anything like that. I just look at them. But later on maybe the pulling and the tearing might turn up somewhere else, but I just think that the happenstance action of material in your hands – the weight of it, the time of year, the color, if it gets rained on -- all these things that happen to materials and tools -- if you aren't paying attention, you're going to miss out on something that's really fun and helpful in your next activity.

MS. CUBBS: It reminds me of, again, of the great poignancy of Ed Rossbach's question to you about whether or not you do drawings. Of course that would be completely impossible for you to do.

MS. BARNES: Right.

MS. CUBBS: To prepare or to preconceive isn't a part of your process. Turning now and going back again, let me ask you about your exhibition history. We've already talked about when you began exhibiting; that would be in the early '70s with a number of important shows that thrust you into the world of contemporary fiber. Can you recall the character of those early exhibitions?

MS. BARNES: Well, of course the one that followed the Biennale, the little miniature show in London, was the first important show, and those were well attended. They were displayed in London, and they were designed to space all the little materials in a certain interesting way. One of them was put up with pipes, and it was a very imaginative installation. And then there would be exhibitions over here later where you might be one of several artists, and you'd have an area with a space, and your work would be there. In all cases, I was very pleased to have the opportunity to show my work. People in the museums and the galleries have been so helpful in presenting work, and I think that I'm always anxious and concerned a little bit about placement. Once in a while something will get upside down or right side up – I mean, kittywampus, but if you notice it, why, that's fine if you can fix it. I did have, at the old gallery downtown, an accident over a holiday when pipes froze and a whole lot of ice and water fell and ruined a couple of pieces. I remember rescuing one and painting it and putting gold leaf on it and everything, just so I could save its life, but that was just once that that happened.

MS. CUBBS: I'm wondering if you had a feeling during those years in the '70s when you started to exhibit in some fairly prestigious venues, did you have a sense that you were involved in something exciting that was fermenting, which was the interest and the new acknowledgment and the new developments in fiber art that were occurring at that time. Did you sense that in the atmosphere of those exhibitions?

MS. BARNES: Well, I was very pleased to be there, and very often with other people's work that I respected and liked a lot. To see that their work – I was honored to be in that company and it was a pleasure and I enjoyed that. I saw some of the shows, went to some of them. And some of them were far away and I didn't see them. I think to exhibit also – there are a lot of other basket makers who I know feel the same way, that if you have a deadline, it helps. If you know that you're going to be in a show, and you want to represent your work and have something that you love doing that's in your woodshop at the time, and you want to finish it, it keeps you going and you can move along faster and concentrate and focus on what you're up to. So in a way shows are good like that; but deadlines are also a real pain when you have other things come up, and you want to do things with your family or are needed in some way. So I'm trying now to be a little bit more careful about that and not overextend and also to decide where things should go, because there are certain pieces that I am making that I would like very much to see put together.

The piece that I'm exhibiting right now has to do with the human, elk, bear, bugs, and beaver, and all that. It seems like it's a unit, and there are seven or nine [objects] or whatever there are now. I have some additions to them that I have just found, and I know that I want to see them in a different form, probably standing in a circle or something. But I can't put those things out for sale until I'm pleased to see them together, because they're kind of like a family of material and might even turn out to be one piece.

So there are often things like that that are happening in my show which has recently come back from the U.K. It traveled in several venues in England and Wales, but when it came back, one piece was damaged, and so I had to very quickly change how that material was going to be presented in Pittsburgh, because some of it needed to be there. It was going to be shown twice. I feel justified in doing that, partly because they're installation pieces and not necessarily of interest to people to buy for their homes need to be for sale; they don't. But pieces adjacent to them that are from the same bark, or from the same trees, or related in technique for some reason -- I hope to hold onto them a little while, so that they can be shown in another venue in a different way, and there will be a different experience in looking at them.

MS. CUBBS: In contrast to the way that you talked about some of your early exhibitions and entering a piece or two, it's interesting to hear you now talk with a great deal of exhibition experience about the medium of the exhibition itself and about strategies of installation, grouping of objects and creating a kind of collection of things to be seen at one time. It's interesting to hear you talk in a different way, a much more sophisticated, experienced, and contemporary way about the nature of exhibiting your work.

MS. BARNES: I think that has changed. I think that they were single objects sometimes going off, or someone would say, "I would like to have two or three pieces in a group show." And that can still be. When someone asks for a piece now, sometimes a group of six will suffice if they're small. I mean, they'd rather have the work that is something different from the way I worked before.

I'm working on a piece now that is a pair. They stand beside each other, and they need each other. The woven areas face each other in this piece, and actually you look through a window of one into the window of the other. But there are things like that that I enjoy working on that are multiples, and that's rather new. Although I must admit that a long time ago I made a nested piece, so that indeed can come apart. And the recent collaborations with Craig Stevens – one has been the marquetry, where it comes out of a little container, and the other one is a drawer, where the little drawer comes out of the tree. That is new and fun, and I'm enjoying very much working with other people. I think I mentioned before Tip House and his wood turning and other people who have turned wood in the past with me. So some of those things are a little more recent than the early exhibiting.

MS. CUBBS: That's an interesting point. It goes back to the earlier question about the differences between your older and more recent work, that new development in collaboration.

MS. BARNES: Well, I think that also is because of the limited time that I have. I have some other responsibilities now – I have limitations in my studio space as well for the things that I want to do.

[END TAPE 3 SIDE B.]

MS. CUBBS: This is Joanne Cubbs interviewing Dorothy Gill Barnes at the artist's home in Worthington, Ohio, on May 7, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disk number four.

Let's begin here by taking a summary look at your extensive teaching experience. Right out of your undergrad work, you were actually teaching – teaching elementary art. Is that true?

MS. BARNES: I did a little bit of practice teaching in elementary art. Then I taught at the junior high level, the industrial arts, and art in the public schools here. And then I was able to be a part-time person down at Capital and taught some classes in college, and that was usually a basic design class. Then I went on later into the textile and fiber-weaving classes.

MS. CUBBS: And you taught not only classes at the university, at Capital University, but you also have now, in the years since, done extensive teaching in workshops across the country.

MS. BARNES: Right, and that sort of took the place of the regular classroom. One of the reasons I left teaching in organized university situations is because of the grading. I really didn't like to do that, and it is so difficult in the arts to have to assign a grade.

MS. CUBBS: Well, let's not forget that in 1951-52, you actually got your master's in art education as well, from the University of Iowa.

MS. BARNES: Mm-hm.

MS. CUBBS: So you have various sorts of grounding in the field of teaching. Is there a kind of a guiding philosophy that you could describe behind a lot of your work as a teacher?

MS. BARNES: I think in my case because I finally realized that my best teaching was not in a classroom, but was out in the field, I knew from the start that if they didn't have the material experience that [students] weren't going to catch on to what we were talking about. So at one point they had been told that they could gather and bring their own material, and I told them how to store it and bring it. But there is something about having a whole lot of people unrolling old dry bark, or bringing it in in disarray, or vines or whatever, that was a little chaotic and not working so well for me. We did it for a while off and on, but I found later that I really prefer teaching in a place where I can have the field trip at the beginning. So almost entirely now when I teach, we have to know ahead and do research to find out where the trees are, whether or not they're proper to be taken, and then design the transportation and be sure that people are able to come and go.

Once in a while, I'll have someone for whom it's not easy to be in the woods, and we'll harvest for that person. But most often everybody goes in their old clothes and with their tools, and we get the stuff. And it can be difficult, as in the case of my least successful harvesting. On Nantucket, where everything is so manicured, we had trouble finding anything we could cut. I finally did at the end, but there are also places where there is just such an abundance that it's just incredible to have to leave some of that material on the forest floor that has been cut by a sawmill and is in humongous amounts.

So I never know exactly what's going to happen on that, but it does require going in to get fresh material, from [something] as fine as a fern stem to [something] as big as a big chunk of bark that you can barely carry. So the experience has to do with finding the material and relating to it, preparing it, sorting it, and then designing a project to suit the material.

MS. CUBBS: So what you teach is really your own artistic process, which is to start from the base of those natural materials and allow the project to grow out of that experience.

MS. BARNES: It does. On the other hand, the time constraints require that every student has a certain amount of this material. For instance, if a student is in a craft school where they have kitchen duty, say, in the morning, and we're going out or something like this happens, or someone's late, we will try to share. And so some students will share their harvest, or they will indeed bring a few things from home. Or I might even take a little batch of bark that I have leftover in my own studio, just to be on the safe side so that something's there for them.

I also would allow a student who really, really wants to to work with material other than natural. If they wanted to work with paper or cloth, I would allow it. I haven't had that happen more than, I think, twice in many, many years, but I have a project that I do with folded paper that's a good way of teaching without the labor-intensive acquisition of that particular weight of bark.

For the most part, it's a sort of abbreviated, quick-step version of what I do in my own work, but it has to be different from what I do, because everything that we handle in nature is different from every other thing we handle in nature.

MS. CUBBS: Wonderful. This is also a wonderful question for you. We've talked some about this already, but can you talk more about where you get the ideas for your work and how your sources of inspiration have changed over the years? Oh, before we leave education though, you mentioned something to me about a weaving book that was important to you.

MS. BARNES: Oh yeah, I'm glad this worked out because there is another thing that I do in my teaching that's important. I take one time every day, usually it's after lunch – we'll do something in the way of continuing what we're working on in the morning or starting out with our harvest, but very often I'll say, "I want everyone here absolutely on time because we're going to have a little demonstration," and that's when I put in a little bit of teaching about textiles and traditional methods of putting these materials together. So I'll have spinning; I'll just

have a few strips of something, and we'll do some spinning, or we'll do a little bit of braiding. I also will have a cup covered with a few strips of waste bark, and I'll do some over-unders just for people who have never done it.

And this instruction could be as short as 20 minutes to half an hour. Then if students are interested, that particular technique could turn up in what they have in their hands already, or they could translate it into a very different size, or do variations of it, or make up their own, related to a structuring material from a traditional start. So those teaching procedures, such as the berry-basket where you fold bark – I'm sure that somebody else teaches it another way, but I've got a little thing that I do with pins on the edge and a saucer or a lid – ways of cutting it so that it always works. And then the assignment is made so that none of them can be alike, because I have a little surprise for them about the assignment, and I change that all the time, so that they're not going to be able to do it the way it is in a book. They're going to have to take that idea and expand it. But the structure of that teaching – the little bit of instruction along the way -- is something that I think all students should observe whether or not they do it.

MS. CUBBS: So you expose them to the classic or traditional techniques in the field of basketry as a kind of grounding for their explorations and experiments?

MS. BARNES: Right. And it may not turn up in their work at all, and they are not required to do this. Some of them want to. And there's a weave that I made up called *Windfall Ridge*, which is eight layers of weaving, and usually somebody wants to try it. So I very often will have a sample made if they want to do that, but it doesn't usually show up in their work. It's just something they want to experience, and then they can try it with variations if they like later.

MS. CUBBS: What was the relevance of the name Shirley Held that you mentioned to me?

MS. BARNES: Yes. I think that Shirley Held was active in the weaving department at Ames at Iowa State [Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa], and she had written a book on weaving that I bought when I was doing my first loom weaving [*Weaving: a Handbook for Fiber Craftsmen*. New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1973]. To be able to understand the fine threading and the difference between plain and twill and all of that and to get into some intricate design – her loom weaving and the whole book was just written in a very accessible way. It's good for students to know about it and to have it.

I remember one time writing her a note and thanking her for the use [of her book] over the years; I've enjoyed having it. And I do turn back to it once in a while to see something or to remind myself, just as I would, say, the book on interlacing that Jack Larsen did. There are things in those books, and Shereen LaPlantz's twill book [*Plaited Basketry: The Woven Form*. Bayside: CA, Press de LaPlantz, 1982] – many people have written wonderful books about basketry and basketry techniques that I think are wonderful to find and to refer to as you need a particular construction technique.

MS. CUBBS: Well, I guess now we can more seamlessly move to that question about how you get ideas for your work and what have been some of your sources of inspiration. I guess one of those would have to be a kind of grounding in those traditional basket making techniques.

MS. BARNES: Yeah, I think so. I think that it helps to know that they're there, and if it's going to be a box form, you think about corners or folding. The one thing that I don't see in those books that are traditional [methods of casting and shaping] -- I'm sure they did it, and in fact I know that they did it because I've seen forms, but the forms that I use and the way that I cast the material and clamp it and shape it is a very big part of what I do. Because if you bend a piece of bark and it's rather a large expanse, as it dries, it will distort sometimes. And if you really want an arc that's pleasing or an edge that's just right, I find and use a plastic dishpan or a Quaker Oats box or whatever – those things pressed against them – a Styrofoam cup; it's one of the few things I do save, Styrofoam cups that come my way. I don't buy them, but when I have them, they're very gentle to hold against bark when I put a clamp on.

I've got scads of different forms and boxes and spheres and so forth around because I want my pieces to have some strength and perhaps even be symmetrical, and these things won't happen unless I support them as they dry.

MS. CUBBS: Mm-hm.

MS. BARNES: So I've picked up and learned some things about casting, and sometimes cardboard is much better than plastic or wood, because it will indeed be damp, and you can pull it away from the inside. So unlikely sources of construction material comes and goes through my hands because I have to make it up as I go along.

MS. CUBBS: Would it be safe to say in thinking about the sources of inspiration for your work, about the place where you get your ideas, that you most fundamentally begin with the forms and the materials of nature?

MS. BARNES: I think so. I think that's true. I wish I'd had a better sense of form all the way along, because that's usually the most difficult thing for me to do, because I get excited about the line or the texture or something. But a nice, beautiful form that is just right and the proportions seem pleasing – if I can find that in my work, I usually end up liking it longer and better. And I think that's a weakness in my work. I think sometimes my pieces are not sculpturally very strong, and I'd like that part of it to be better.

MS. CUBBS: So that's one aspect of your work that you're very sensitive to, the idea of creating forms that are strong and well conceived. Is it true in your work that you also sometimes play with the growth structures of nature? That you replicate them or play off of them as you create your work, so that one source of inspiration is actually the way that things grow – the patterns of growth structures?

MS. BARNES: Well, I think so, and the recent pieces that I'm using now that have the peeled areas between the trunk and the branch – when I discovered how beautiful that area is, it's like bending the elbow of a baby, where the skin is so beautiful, and you see the little wrinkles as it bends and things like that. That particular juncture in a tree and a branch – I'm doing a whole batch of those. Just peeling that area, and not the rest of it points, out the lighter color of that particular space, and that has to happen in the field. I mean you might not think to do that otherwise. And I think the peeled and nonpeeled gives you two things. And then of course you have the other side of the bark, so from one branch and the branching from that, you have the wood, and you have the bark; you have light and dark bark, and then you have heavy and light from the same tree; and you have the root structures. So all that will all come about from one small harvest. You have all those opportunities for it to change in color and change in weight of the material.

MS. CUBBS: So in your work, the way that the branch connects to a trunk or the way that roots themselves will be shaped often influence the structure of the work itself, find themselves repeated in the work, or preserved in the work.

MS. BARNES: There's a lot of trouble with that too, like mildew and stuff. You know I have to fight that all the time. The pieces I just came back with have been out there, and it's rained, and now all the colors – I mean, it's not white anymore. It's got, not mildew, but it's discoloring, and I have to cope with that kind of problem as well as insects and other things.

MS. CUBBS: Speaking of insects and other kinds of animal markings, those also have been a kind of inspiration for you, or at least something that you've incorporated as a design element in your work. Is that true?

MS. BARNES: The recent ones are fun. Have I spoken to you about those already? The human, elk, bear, bugs, and beavers?

MS. CUBBS: Yes, I think you made reference to it.

MS. BARNES: I think we've talked about that, but I do think that those marks, when they are there, are fun to look at, and they give me a feeling of not just humans on this earth, you know? It's a lot more than just us that are moving around there and breathing and making marks and making a difference in what things happen and how things go back to the earth by being chewed. The elk have to rub their antlers on the trees, and I think they're just beautiful.

So I've started that series, and I am working in collaboration with Elsabe Dixon on the silkworm project. She will be bringing the silkworms to actually do the silkworm weaving, which takes three nights and two days. We've done two collaborations already, one with a white circle and one with a rectangle. And these little pieces of silk are in the mulberry constructions and another one, so that we can put together everything we could think of that has to do with mulberry: from the roots to the branch to the bark to the leaves that are being fed to the insects and the silk that's being made because they ate the leaves. It should be kind of fun. We haven't done it yet, but –

MS. CUBBS: You spoke about that during your last interview, and it's almost as if you've extended your collaboration in this project. Going beyond the human collaborators that you've been working with, you are now also collaborating with members of the animal world, as if they're the same kind of creative agent in the world of nature that you are – creating the markings.

MS. BARNES: Yeah, I don't think it's going to go very far. It's like a little thing, an episode. Since I spoke with you about this, I also have added pieces that I found that are spalted. And that is another action that goes on inside the wood. I guess it's a fungus of some kind, or whatever it is. But people turn wood like that, and the design of the pieces that I found in the sawmill up in Minnesota are really quite beautiful. And so I've got two of those that are going into the additional parts of that unit that I've been talking about with the animals. But I'm going to move on from that. I don't think I'm going to stay with that very long. I still have my turtle bones and the turtle skin cover and lots of beautiful things that are really so wonderful, I'm not sure I want to touch them. On the other hand, they may indeed turn into vessels. I'm not sure about that.

MS. CUBBS: Is there anything that you'd like to say about bark? Bark is such a central part of your creative world, a very distinctive part of your work. And I wondered if you had anything to say about the nature of bark and the way it has inspired you for so long and in so much of what you've done.

MS. BARNES: Well, I don't know. I guess it just seemed a little stronger than lily leaves or something at one point, and I just like using it. I like the places where you go to get it, the fact that I have to take it most often from a live tree. That taking bark destroys the tree is not bad, or good, but it's sort of in between, because I don't like to take the life of a plant. On the other hand, an awful lot of people have to cut wood away or weed their gardens, and any of us who have done any gardening know that. It's like farming. And so I think that all of that and the fact that it's not terribly archival. I mean bark really is meant to sort of be gone, to be ground down into the ground to nourish the earth or whatever. But if you take proper care of it, and you have the right kind of bark, it can be very strong.

Learning about all of that is interesting to me. I found out that hickory bark that is woven can last in a woven chair seat for like 200 years. On the other hand, little bark items that I've made have been discarded in a few years. I'm trying to find out how to prepare bark and weave with it in a certain way, or sew it, or whatever I'm going to do with it in a way where I can be more certain that it will remain in good condition longer. I think that would be nice. I think there are important little quickly made things that are not meant to last that are beautiful and wonderful too. But it's harder to store them, and I'd like to work both ways. Sometimes I need to work quickly on something fun and for a short duration, and sometimes I have a longer period of time to work, where I have to cure something for a year or two.

MS. CUBBS: I suspect you must be one of the world's greatest experts on bark: its harvesting, its handling, its preservation, its use, its unusual varied properties from tree to tree. Would you think that's true?

MS. BARNES: Oh no. I think there are a lot of people that know a lot more about it than I do. All I have to do is go to the Northwest, and see that wonderful cedar bark, and think about what it will do, and how the Native Americans have used it for so long for such beautiful fine work. And the original peoples of the Southwest, where they would make something as soft as diapers from yucca. There are a lot of people who know about natural materials, but the bark thing, especially in the Northwest, is the most exciting because it's not only strong and varied in its use, but it also lasts so long. As you know, cedar chests have a quality that can preserve and take care of your wool sweaters, keep insects out. But that bark is wonderful, and there are people who care about it.

There's a nice story that goes with that involving people in the forestry industry up there. They have a ranger up there who helps basket makers take a tree down that has to come down. And he sees to it that those trees are offered to the Native American basket makers first, and then to the basketry groups, and then to any of us who have access, so that the bark is not wasted. So there are caring people out there who know the value of that particular bark. Some of the best quality of that [bark] can be stored and taken care of for years before you use it again, soak it and use it. So that's one of the prizes in the bark world. And there are lots of others out there that I don't even know about.

MS. CUBBS: Are there any other kinds of influences that are less obvious – musical pieces, different kinds of visual experiences – that also might have and continue to serve as inspiration for your work?

MS. BARNES: I think that the joy of the out-of-doors comes first, of course, but outside of that I know that when I have an opportunity to go with my husband to hear a great musician, a singer, a pianist, an orchestra evening – if it's wonderful and if I am excited about that music, I come back and I can barely sleep. I mean, the ideas just – what am I going to do tomorrow? I've got so much to do. I mean it's just like a shot in the arm to have really, really wonderful art around. And it sometimes can be from museums, drawing, paintings, sculptures of other kinds: things that I'm not usually seeing, you know, in craft areas. But a lot of things get me pretty excited about working.

MS. CUBBS: Have any of your sources of inspiration changed over the years?

MS. BARNES: I don't think so especially. Maybe just discoveries of new things and new places as I travel. And discoveries of other people. Seeing the world in a new way and thinking, wow, that's wonderful. I don't feel that this has anything to do with copying if it's out away from what I do, but it's sort of contagious to be around people who are excited about their own work and doing well with it.

MS. CUBBS: I don't know if this is a relevant question or not for you, but let me ask it. In what ways, if any, do political and social commentary figure into your work?

MS. BARNES: I have lots of opinions about what's happening in the world, and before I go to work in the morning, two or three times a week, I either write or call a congressman. Or I plan to attend something where I will learn more about issues that concern me. I feel that we, as a country, need to be very much concerned about the entire world. We have a beautiful world, and we want to take care of it, and I am anxious for our government to

pay attention to the needs and concerns about the environment and about world law and order for all. And I think that there should be opportunities for people in all countries to be healthy and comfortable, well fed, and free of disease. Those things matter to me and so I try to take a little time to know about that. And then in my travels, if I have an opportunity to see that there are persons who want very much to be involved in making something with their hands and they don't have those tools or they don't have the opportunity, I'd like to see if there's any connection with others who can help that get better. And so I'm involved in that a little bit.

MS. CUBBS: You were talking about two organizations or projects before in that regard. One was Weave a Real Peace and the other was Rainbow Socks, both projects to engage in that kind of work.

MS. BARNES: Yes, uh-huh. Rainbow Socks is a part of Weave a Real Peace. And then there is an organization that I learned about that's now the Walker Center, but it was NY/ Help. That's the group that I went with when I went to Honduras. And the Honduras experience was just unforgettable -- to be at the top of that mountain with no electricity, no plumbing. And one of the things that we did was to take treadle sewing machines with us, because they had a start on working with some sewing there. Have I talked with you about that before? That is a concern of mine. And also, related to that, I think that in my work that it's very helpful for people to be able to touch the same baskets, and it's nice to be able to talk about them. I wish now that I had had Spanish. If I were to go back in my education, I would certainly work on my Spanish because it's close to us and it's where I think a lot of need exists in communication about all issues, in addition to all regular concerns in the arts. I'd have liked very much to have talked with some of those women about not just making a basket to sell, but making something because they loved to make it because it's beautiful.

MS. CUBBS: You're talking about your work in Central America?

MS. BARNES: Yeah. Right. So that's why I found people who could speak Spanish to take my turn to go back there.

MS. CUBBS: So you are using your art, your interest in the world of fiber and textiles, as a point of intersection with other peoples who can benefit from textiles production in an economic way?

MS. BARNES: A little bit. I'm trying. I haven't been very successful at it, but I've been supportive where I could be. And I think that just mixing people up that do the same thing with their hands or with their interests -- it just matters to make our world closer and to have people understand each other.

MS. CUBBS: Shifting gears a little bit, let me ask what involvement you have had with national craft organizations like the American Craft Council, as well as any local craft organizations, guilds, or gatherings?

MS. BARNES: I'm a member of the Ohio Designer Craftsman group, and I am a member of the American Craft Council.

MS. CUBBS: You are?

MS. BARNES: Mm-hm. And it was very nice to be invited to be in that group and to see the Mint Museum [Mint Museum of Craft and Design, Charlotte, North Carolina] when I was down there on that occasion. I'm sorry to say that I am not especially active in either of those now. Early on I used to help at the winter fair that we have locally, because lots of people would come from all over the United States, and they had over 200 booths. And I just think that those people who are starting their craft and in production sometimes need some help. And so I would take my daughter over, and we did some booth sitting and that sort of thing, and having people in for breakfast on Sunday to relate to the other craftspeople in our state and beyond.

MS. CUBBS: You also mentioned the Central Ohio Weaver's Guild that you had been involved with for a couple of years.

MS. BARNES: Yeah, that was for a while, and that was early on.

MS. CUBBS: We've also discussed a bit of this next question before. Maybe there are some more things that you would like to add to our conversation, but I'm wondering if you could describe your working process and describe how it's changed over time if at all. It begins, I know, with the harvesting.

MS. BARNES: Oh, yeah, that's the big deal. It's really restricted to this whole business about the seasons.

MS. CUBBS: Mm-hm.

MS. BARNES: And the spring harvest and my teaching have to come at the same time, so this is the very busiest time of year for me. It's not always the most convenient, depending on what's happening in family life and so forth. A lot has to do with my working methods and [my ability] to acquire, properly store, and make myself available for teaching, so that those same procedures can happen in my class; [these] things are a big part of

what I do. To have time and space and a warm studio or a cool enough one – those concerns come around, and I just work on what I have space for sometimes. In the winter it's easier to work small because I'm usually in the basement and sometimes work on the washer and dryer and wherever I can find something to put down. In the summer, if I have enough nice weather, I can use the garage and the porch. My studio is so small. I'm not unhappy about the small studio, though, because it's easier to keep it cool with my little tiny air conditioner or warm with a heater, because it isn't so big. And then the garage turns into a storage area.

But to come and go from there and to plan a piece – I get going on it, and then it comes to a place where it has to be dried, and so I have at least three or four going all at the same time. And I have maybe 15 around that I could stand in the room and say, "I've got things that happened in the woods that started them, or I got into them and didn't have enough material and I'm waiting for another year for that material."

So it's pretty chaotic. I don't just sit down and make something and finish it – ever. Right now I have three pieces going, and one of them is going to take at least six months from now because it's cracking, and I want it to. I know where it's cracking and I know why. And I also have a person who is helping me who is not available for another month to help me finish some of the wood turning that's involved in that piece. Then I have a deadline for SOFA which I want to deal with. And I also have a couple of other pieces where the bark is just right. And I just love it so much, I want to work with it and it's in the refrigerator, and I want to get back to that very soon. So that's where I am. It depends on how much I have to do and depends on the weather and things like that.

MS. CUBBS: Something that struck me as you were talking about the physical aspects of your medium was the notion of time and the way that the materials are changing, morphing over time. And your need to intervene at just the right moment to make something happen formally. That you have dendroglyph markings in forests that are growing for a number of years. That you have bark that is being preserved in refrigerators as we speak, and that other things are changing. Cracking or moving or shifting or drying in so many stages. And that you have to be constantly aware of the effects of time as a part of your process. Time is a part, really, of the nature of your materials.

MS. BARNES: That's right.

MS. CUBBS: Which complicates your process.

MS. BARNES: It does.

MS. CUBBS: I'm also wondering if anything has changed with regard to your tools over the years. You know, the technology of your work.

MS. BARNES: Yeah, I think that I've added some appreciation for what a power tool will do, and I like them. I'm not sure whether I mentioned it, but we talked a little earlier about the miter saw and the slots business. But also there's an inflatable drum sander that I found at Haystack that is just so beautiful. It's as if it's just caressing the wood to sand it. And so I have that piece going, and I'm anxious to finish that one, too.

MS. CUBBS: How long ago did you discover that piece of equipment?

MS. BARNES: That was just a few days after 9/11. That was at the workshop at Haystack.

MS. CUBBS: Did you find yourself being more and more open to the use of power tools?

MS. BARNES: You asked me at a funny time because I just got back from that residency and I'm less interested. I think partly because I just wanted to be outdoors. And there were quite a few people working, and I think it was great to be among them and the young students with their ideas and all that. Just being around that. It's sort of weird because I got more interested in what they were doing over in metals for some reason, because they have such an incredible group of tools doing strange things with metal. But I felt, after I walked away from there, that I needed to get to the woods. I'm more comfortable, I think, working more quietly out in the woods or in my own space. But I know those tools are there, and I like the fact that they are and that I can maybe get to them sometime when I need them.

MS. CUBBS: We've already covered this aspect of the question as well, about whether you work alone or with others. We've been talking about the fact that while you tended to work solely for much of your career as an artist, more recently you've been engaging in collaborations. And one of the reasons is practical, because you want to get more done in a shorter amount of time. What have been some of the benefits or the character of those collaborations?

MS. BARNES: Well, I've met some awfully nice people, and I enjoy the experienced craftspeople that have helped me. But when I've been invited down on campus or to go out to the Worley Willow place or someplace

with students, I will sometimes say to them, “If any of you are interested, I might need some help.” And then we sort of work with it this way, that I ask them to bring a couple of photos of their own work, because I think they like to do that and they want to come. Or I’ll have someone hand me a note sometimes and say, "If you ever need help please call me." Because they want to do it for the fun of it.

And so I have had some adult women and some young students, both men and women, come into this, come here, and they’ll help me for a while because they want to do it. It’s not paid or anything, and they just bring something to show me that day. And then if I have a continued need, well then I say, “Could I hire you to help me?” And so then I pay them. I’ve had some paid help that have been wonderful, and I might say, “Well you know it’s not always going to be this much fun, it might be cleaning the garage,” and they are willing to help me. And so they’ve become friends, and they’ve become very good at helping and knowing what I need, in some cases making my studio more convenient because they know more about how to organize than I do. I just need a wonderful genius now to come out and help me sort slides, because that’s where the pain is right now. [They laugh.]

MS. CUBBS: What impact, if any, has technology had on your work? And I think you can interpret that in a number of ways for yourself – technology.

MS. BARNES: I think maybe the whole business of not being computer literate and on the internet and all that sort of thing. I think there’s a world out there that I don’t know about, that would be something I ought to know about. I am going to be in a virtual exhibition coming up, and I think that that will be a new experience. My husband does e-mails for me sometimes, but I just am not very good at learning about new machinery and not terribly interested in doing that. I don’t think it affects my work a lot.

MS. CUBBS: So it’s not a burning issue in your work?

MS. BARNES: Mm-hm.

MS. CUBBS: Well, we have reached the end of our list of questions for the interview, and I just want to conclude by finding out if there’s anything that you’d like to say about your work that we might not have talked about. If there’s anything you feel we left out, or anything important you feel you’d like to say.

MS. BARNES: I think mostly what I would like to say is that I’m just delighted to be a part of the project, and I want to thank you so much for coming.

MS. CUBBS: You’re very welcome. Thank you.

This is Joanne Cubbs reading a statement submitted on May 9, 2003, by the artist Dorothy Gill Barnes, who wished to conclude her interview for the Smithsonian Institution’s Archives of American Art with the following acknowledgment of the National Basketry Organization. Her statement reads as follows:

“Beginning in 1999, the National Basketry Organization set out to promote the art, skills, heritage, and education of traditional and contemporary basketry. In September of 2003, the organization will return to its birthplace at Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts in Tennessee for a special celebration of Native American basketry.

“Since the inception of the organization, gatherings put together by its hard-working leaders have been extraordinary. I was privileged to take part in just one such gathering at Little Rock, Arkansas. At this conference I slipped into busy classrooms where participants were learning very valuable information from gifted teachers. There were many exhibitions, including showings of folk art, Japanese bamboo, and the wonderful work of Ed Rossbach. It was a special joy for me to see recent fine work by traditional and contemporary basket artists that I have known and respected for years. I was also introduced to innovative, creative work by upcoming new artists.

“The National Basketry Organization’s publications contain reviews, a calendar of events, articles by makers sharing their skills, and fascinating information about basketry worldwide. It is gratifying to know that within the fiber arts field basket makers have such a very helpful, lively, and inclusive way to come together.”

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated... December 8, 2004