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Oral history interview with Ron Nagle, 2003 July 8-9

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ron Nagle on June 8 and 9, 2003. The interview took place in San Francisco, California, and was conducted by Bill Berkson 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.

Ron Nagle and Bill Berkson 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

BILL BERKSON: This is Bill Berkson interviewing Ron Nagle at my home, Bill Berkson's home, 25 Grand View Avenue in San Francisco, California, on Tuesday, June 8, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is disk number 1.

Okay, when were you born?

MR. NAGLE: Nineteen-thirty-nine.

MR. BERKSON: What date?

MR. NAGLE: Two-twenty-one-thirty-nine: February 21st.

[Audio break.]

MR. BERKSON: All right. You were born February 21, 1939. You grew up in – you were born in San Francisco.

MR. NAGLE: Born in San Francisco –

MR. BERKSON: You were raised in San Francisco?

MR. NAGLE: Mm-hmm, raised in San Francisco.

MR. BERKSON: In what neighborhood?

MR. NAGLE: Well, between Glen Park and the Excelsior, which is basically in the Outer Mission.

MR. BERKSON: Is that Badger Street?

MR. NAGLE: Badger Street. My father still lives there.

MR. BERKSON: Is it near where you live today, near –

MR. NAGLE: It's five minutes from where I live. Yeah, I live in Bernal Heights. My dad is – you know, which makes it convenient for – you know, because he's 91, so –

MR. BERKSON: So you can go visit him?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, take care of things.

MR. BERKSON: So how was it growing up in that neighborhood in the '40s and '50s? It's still a predominately Latino neighborhood.

MR. NAGLE: Not in that neighborhood, it isn't.

MR. BERKSON: It isn't?

MR. NAGLE: Well, I mean, it may be slightly more now, and it was – it's pretty white bread. I mean it was probably as close to suburbia as was available in the '40s and '50s. My father had a business at 22nd and Mission, and actually his partner was Latino – a radio and appliance business.

MR. BERKSON: Was it sales and service?

MR. NAGLE: Sales, service. Exactly. Sales, service, whatever.

MR. BERKSON: Did he work on the first TVs?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah, so I had one of the first TVs in San Francisco – so I'm pretty influenced by that, particularly Milton Berle and –

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh. And – but then, what about the neighborhood culture at that time?

MR. NAGLE: Pretty white. [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: It was then?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah, definitely.

MR. BERKSON: When did the Latino influence begin –

MR. NAGLE: Well, I think it's always been there, but not in that neighborhood, because it was further – kind of further – it was this little enclave, or whatever you call it, you know, between Glen Park and the Excelsior, and I think there's always been some degree of, you know, the Latino. But – and I certainly was aware of it, because my sensibilities were, I don't know, affected by things like the zoot suit and stuff, and flat tops. I mean, there was, sort of, this funny kind of spillover on the periphery, which I – my father is a pretty right-wing guy, and very threatened by anything other than pretty white-bread stuff – because I grew up listening to black music, which he didn't go for that at all.

And so a lot of the things that I think were influenced by the Latino culture, like pegged pants – I got kicked out of junior high for pegging my pants, you know? So I mean – and, in fact, he pulled strings, as he put it, so I wouldn't have to go to James Denman or Balboa, which were what he called, "not having to associate with undesirables." This was his euphemism for nonwhites basically. [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: What was the name of the first school that you went to?

MR. NAGLE: James Denman Junior High and Balboa High School. I didn't go to those. Every kid in my neighborhood went to those schools. He pulled strings so I could go – which in retrospect was probably good; I got a better education. I went to Aptos and to Lincoln.

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh.

MR. NAGLE: But it was very – disconcerting at the time, because I couldn't go to school with my friends in the neighborhood. So he got some guy to come up with a phony address that I said I lived in St. Francis Wood, which was probably one of the more upscale neighborhoods, and still is –

MR. BERKSON: Still is.

MR. NAGLE: – in the city, and wangled. And I'm sure he had my best interests at heart, it wouldn't be very PC today. [Laughs.] So anyway. So I did not go to school, and you know – I mean, both of those of schools were totally white. I think there was one black kid in – when I went to Lincoln and he was like the mascot.

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh. Where did – was it the neighborhood or elsewhere that you picked up your involvement in the car culture?

MR. NAGLE: It was from my friends in junior high and high school. There was a guy named Steve Archer, who had a – who was – plugged into – there was a car club off of Ocean Avenue, which is near where I went to junior high, and they were called The Wheelers, and they customized cars. On top of that, I mean, even when I was real young I would – my dad would take me to the Oakland Roadster Show, and I would always pick up *Hot Rod* magazine and *Custom Car* magazine and stuff like that. So I was always fascinated by that when I was a kid. And then I ran into this guy who actually started his own body shop eventually and painted cars and stuff.

MR. BERKSON: Who was that?

MR. NAGLE: This guy, Steve Archer.

MR. BERKSON: Oh, Archer? I see.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, who actually died, I don't know, a few years ago, probably from breathing too much lacquer fumes.

MR. BERKSON: Did he teach you things like multilayering with lacquer?

MR. NAGLE: Umm, yeah, I mean, I was aware of that. I knew that's how it was done. I'd seen him do it. And, you know, materials that I still use today, like Bondo and body putty and primer and all that stuff – I mean, all of those things I definitely picked up at an early age from him and other people that were customizing cars. And eventually I got a '48 Ford Coupe and we painted my car in his basement.

MR. BERKSON: In Steve Archer's basement?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it was like British racing green, stripped all – you know, the stuff off it. So I did have – yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Did your father have any particular interest in this, or –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, he – yeah, he was very interested in that; I mean, more the mechanical part of it, but, you know, a lot of my background in terms of making stuff really did come from my father's showing me – making model airplanes and stuff like that, building – building models and – he taught me – he said, "You always have to sand with the grain." [Laughs.] That's an important lesson. But I mean – and my sense of craftsmanship and everything, it really does, sort of, start with him. I mean, he was fairly fanatic, you know? And, he wanted me to learn how to use tools, and he'd get real pissed off if I handled the hammer improperly, he said I was hammering like a girl and stuff like that.

MR. BERKSON: Did he have any particular interest in art, at all, as such?

MR. NAGLE: Um, not –

MR. BERKSON: Any kind of art?

MR. NAGLE: Well, you know, one time I was going through his closet and I saw these little watercolors of these lanterns that he did when he was going to school, and I actually thought they were pretty cool, but basically not. You know, in fact, I think they were quite embarrassed when I decided that I was going to be an artist, at least in the beginning.

MR. BERKSON: Both your parents were?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah. My mother said, "What are you doing that for? You have no talent," you know, "stop," you know, like – I mean, they were – this was – you know, they're pretty negative people really. This was just their way of trying to help me, I guess.

MR. BERKSON: Because your mother a had sort of artistic –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah, they both did. I think they were both really creative people, and my mother had a ceramic club in the basement. She sewed. My father could build anything and was an extremely great craftsman and still is. I mean, he built my whole living room that I still have today from scratch. The furniture and everything. Yeah, they do, and they wouldn't think of it as art. I mean, I got in – my first set of inklings about wanting to be involved in art were like hanging around North Beach in the '50s when everybody was making jewelry.

MR. BERKSON: This is when you were still in high school?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. Yeah, I started off as a jeweler, you know.

MR. BERKSON: Right, so – I mean, did that come in from North Beach and, sort of, the Beat scene –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. Yeah, we used to go down to the Bagel Shop [Coexistence Bagel Shop] –

MR. BERKSON: – and the Beatniks?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, Bagel Shop. And there was a guy named S. Paul Gee across the street, who was a jeweler, and there was another guy named Bob Winston. And around that time I also realized that there were magazines that kind of started – you know, featuring some of this stuff, like *Craft Horizons* and –

MR. BERKSON: Oh, so you saw those then?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I was looking at them in high school. And – I'm not sure if I actually saw the magazines in high – but I think so. Yeah, I'm pretty sure I did, and maybe early college. Anyway –

MR. BERKSON: So you were making model airplanes, you were making jewelry –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – and some other kind of metalwork.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, metalwork. Well, just, you know, making jewelry, you know, and hand-forging, as they say, or casting it. I mean, I actually built my own little centrifuge, because at the time when you were making jewelry, you sort of had to get everything from places that sold dental stuff, so things like casting crowns for teeth and stuff. And coincidentally, my friend Steve Archer actually worked for a dental lab in Stones Town, so I learned, again, on the periphery, stuff about making jewelry through this sort of backdoor way.

MR. BERKSON: Not officially, not through school.

MR. NAGLE: No, not through school. No, I just picked it up on my own, and by the time I was in, you know – started going to college, I'd already been showing my jewelry and exhibiting it.

MR. BERKSON: Where?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, like, you know, state fair, and then there was a jewelry show at Legion of Honor at one point, and I was in that. I was pretty young doing that, and –

MR. BERKSON: Were you selling then?

MR. NAGLE: I might have sold a few things.

MR. BERKSON: Mm-hmm.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, and I was making wedding rings for people, stuff like that. I mean, so that's how I started off. And then when I went to San Francisco State, I then took jewelry with this guy named John Ihle, who was a printmaker. He just died.

MR. BERKSON: How do you spell "Ihle"?

MR. NAGLE: I-h-l-e. And he was, kind of, the first guy in college to take me under his wing, and he taught at State. And then there were other people out there that I became close to.

MR. BERKSON: What about Rick Gomez?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, Rick Gomez was a guy –

MR. BERKSON: You knew him in high school, didn't you?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, well, actually I knew him not in high school as much. I knew his girlfriend from high school at the time, and what actually happened was, he came to see me when I was first going to San Francisco State. He looked me up or something, as I remember and said, you know, "I saw your jewelry; I like it," blah, blah, blah. He was in high school at the time. He was like a high school prodigy and could throw and –

MR. BERKSON: He was making ceramics.

MR. NAGLE: He was making ceramics in high school, and this was when they, you know, had good art programs in high school, and I think he was going to either Westmoor High. And he said – and I was trying to learn how to throw and learn about ceramics, and I wasn't –

MR. BERKSON: Already?

MR. NAGLE: Already, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: What were you doing?

MR. NAGLE: Well, yeah, I was starting, but I wasn't doing very well. And then a guy that was teaching ceramics there, a guy named John Magnani, he died, and I was kind of like floating around –

MR. BERKSON: Spell his name.

MR. NAGLE: Gee, I don't know. Like Anna Magnani. I don't know –

MR. BERKSON: Oh, Magnani –

MR. NAGLE: And then he died, and it was – so anyway, Gomez said, "Hey, listen, I'll make a deal with you, you

know; you show me how to – everything you know about jewelry, and I'll show you everything I know about ceramics." And so – and he was already doing, you know, really pretty astounding things for a – you know, he was, like, 17 or 18, and he lived in Daly City. And so he and I were really good friends for a while. So we did – I did that. I mean, I showed him all my jewelry stuff and everything I knew, and he taught me how to throw and – I sort of picked a little bit up, but I just couldn't get it, and then he just finally kind of –

MR. BERKSON: Back a little bit, though. What drew you to ceramics before that?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, well, you know, I mean, I always tell people – and this is basically true – that my mother, you know, had a ceramics club in the basement, and I didn't know any of those things that she was doing would have a big influence on me. And I still use the techniques today, but things that were peculiar to the hobbyist, like slip-casting and china painting and low-fire –

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: – ceramics and bright colors and all this stuff. I mean, these are things – and decals. All of that stuff was stuff that she was doing in the early '50s with a bunch of women in the basement, and at the time of abstract expressionism and then the new clay movement, which was starting. It was – that would have been considered very uncool, you know, to use any of that stuff.

So, I mean, I was interested, and – but not that much, you know? I just sort of gravitated towards it. And it was actually Gomez who told me about Voulkos and the whole L.A. – you know, what was going on in L.A. He had – I don't know where he had picked up the info, but it was one of those – information was pretty scarce. I mean, it certainly wasn't in the mainstream art magazines, and it wasn't in even *Craft Horizons*, which was, you know, heresy at the time, you know, even though it certainly was celebrated later, but –

MR. BERKSON: Is this what they called the studio pottery movement?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah. So there were people like Marguerite Wildenhain and – oh, god, you know, Harvey Littleton. There's a whole lot of people that – when we, Pete [Peter Voulkos] started doing this, I mean, they said, you know, this is horrible; what has he done to the field, you know? And he had already done everything they could do in spades, and bigger and better.

MR. BERKSON: Okay, wait a minute. Which side of the line of the studio pottery line was he on?

MR. NAGLE: Well, he started on the right side. [Laughs.] I mean, he was doing – Pete had – was in Montana, and, I mean, everybody pretty much knows the story – and started making traditional – I always do like this, which is this, sort of, amphora – you know, with the small neck, kind of, you know, classic stoneware pottery. And as the story goes – and who knows whether it's true or not – I mean, he saw in a magazine, you know, a piece that he says, "I could make that." And it said three inches, except he thought it said three feet.

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh.

MR. NAGLE: So he says, "I can do that," and he made these things bigger than anybody, and better, and better crafted and more well-thrown, and, you know, entered shows and so forth. And he was "the guy" in that realm.

MR. BERKSON: So the studio pottery at that moment was the more conservative –

MR. NAGLE: Well, it was, like – you know, that was the mainstream movement.

MR. BERKSON: That was the mainstream –

MR. NAGLE: That was what was going on. I mean –

MR. BERKSON: Okay.

MR. NAGLE: – I don't know if it was conservative. I mean, but –

MR. BERKSON: Compared to him.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, compared – well, compared to him – I mean, he hadn't broken out yet, you know. That was just starting to happen, you know. I mean, a lot of people just thought this was – you know, that he'd betrayed everybody, at least the people that I was talking to, because I was working at – by that time, working at a little place out at the Cliff House, which was a gift shop, I think for the American Craftsmen Council or something. And we used to sit there – and by this time I was in something called the Metal Arts Guild. I had been, sort of, accepted as a jeweler at that point.

MR. BERKSON: And this was when you were at San Francisco State?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah, I think the early days of State, and by that time I think I was married or almost married, and pretty young, and – to my first wife. And anyway – and they told me, you know, like, oh, my god, what is Pete doing, you know?

MR. BERKSON: Mm-hmm.

MR. NAGLE: Eventually everybody tried to get on the bandwagon, but most of them couldn't pull it off because their roots were too deep in the other thing.

MR. BERKSON: Okay, so you went to San Francisco State –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – starting about – again, in about 1958?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, '57, I don't know. How old –

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, yeah.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, around in there.

MR. BERKSON: And you were an English major.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I was. Yup, I was.

MR. BERKSON: Although you graduated with a BFA.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, in art. I changed my major.

MR. BERKSON: So you changed.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I changed my major –

MR. BERKSON: You went in as an English major because –

MR. NAGLE: Because I liked it in – you know, in high school I was interested in –

MR. BERKSON: Were you writing?

MR. NAGLE: I was not writing so much, although I did write a little bit, you know?

MR. BERKSON: Had you started writing songs?

MR. NAGLE: I wrote a couple of really dumb kind of, you know, doo-wop songs in the '50s when we – for a little band we put together when I – when we graduated. And I was always very interested in that. And – but I hadn't done it as such, but there were things that, the thing that always impressed me – and I say this in other interviews – you know, *Spoon River Anthology* [Edgar Lee Masters. New York: Macmillan Company, 1916]. Do you –

MR. BERKSON: Mm-hmm.

MR. NAGLE: Just because it was so succinct, and it was all said in a few short little things, and to me that also was a parallel to what great songs are, is to try to get as much as you can in as short an amount of words as possible. So I – I think in high school at the time – I was actually reading a lot of stuff that, you know, kids don't even read till college now -- but, Shakespeare and all kinds of other things that – I'm sure some schools do. So I was interested, but – and so I thought, well, I didn't know what I wanted to do, you know? But there was a guy in high school my last year when I – maybe that's, I think, when I first started getting interested in ceramics, my last year of high school, where I would take a slab of clay and drape it over a basketball and make a free-form, as they called it, you know, one of the – kidney-shaped with a hole in the middle or something.

MR. BERKSON: Who was that?

MR. NAGLE: A guy – his name was Scott Amour. And he said –

MR. BERKSON: Like "love"?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, like “love.”

MR. BERKSON: Scott with two Ts?

MR. NAGLE: I guess so, yeah. I mean, I don’t know how I remember all of this all these years, but I mean – and he – but he was the guy that said, hey, listen, you know, you like this art stuff. He said, why don’t you go out to San Francisco State? And there’s a guy named Seymour Locks out there.

MR. BERKSON: So it was Scott Amour that led you to Locks?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, basically.

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh.

MR. NAGLE: He said, when you go out there, you should take a course from Seymour. By that time there were people –

MR. BERKSON: He was a sculptor.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah, Seymour was a sculptor, but you know, my interests have always been much more far-reaching than just ceramics, I mean, and so – you know, and then when I started taking art history, I mean, I just was a complete sucker for all of it, you know, even –

So anyway, I remember at the time there was a pizza place -- and this was during the height of the Beatnik thing – you know, a pizza place on Ocean Avenue called Biaggio’s, and there was a guy named Roland Hall, who painted these huge abstract expressionist paintings. He also worked there. And I just thought this was the coolest stuff in the world, you know. And then – actually Sam Tchakalian was a student there at the time and Roy De Forest and – well, those are the two people that actually continued to work. I don’t know what happened to Roland Hall, probably became a junkie or something, I don’t know. [Laughs.] Anyway, but I just remember – you know, remember him because he did these huge, like, you know, 10-foot canvases, and, you know, they were hanging in this pizza place on Ocean Avenue. I thought, wow, man, this is really cool.

And this again, you know, was when I was still in high school. So that’s where I, you know – I mean, I think, you know, the die was cast; I mean, eventually I was going to become an art major, but –

MR. BERKSON: Did you go to places like the Six and so forth when you were –

MR. NAGLE: You know, I didn’t know about that at the time.

MR. BERKSON: You didn’t?

MR. NAGLE: I mean, you know, there was a certain – this whole – the thing that’s really interesting about that is, you know, like the Art Institute, or the California School of Fine Arts, as it was called at the time, was almost like another country. It was, like, very, very mysterious, and you know, we used to go to Halloween parties there and – you know, like in high school, and thought this was the coolest thing in the world, but it was like another world on the other side of the city, you know? And so a lot of what was going on, you know, I knew about in retrospect.

MR. BERKSON: But you – but while you were at State, you went to a very important lecture at the California School of Fine Arts, by Takemoto.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, well, that was actually – what happened there was –

MR. BERKSON: Henry Takemoto.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. What happened was, once I found out about Voulkos from Gomez, you know, I wanted to work with him, and he was still in L.A. So by this time I started seeing work that was done by some of his – you know, for a lack of better words – disciples, Henry being one of them. Henry was doing these big hand-built, loose, kind of egg-shaped vessels, and stuff, with a kind of – I don’t know. He was from Hawaii so they kind of have this sort of – [inaudible]. But they were really cool. And Henry was the closest thing to Pete I could get to. So he was teaching a summer school course.

MR. BERKSON: At the Art Institute?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, at the Art Institute. And so I said, okay, I’m going to that, you know. If I couldn’t be with the master, I could be with one of the disciples.

So at that point Henry showed slides of the various people who were working in L.A., and that pretty much – that

was it; that was my epiphany. That was when I said, okay, that's what I'm going to do and that's what I want to be; I want to be part of that. And eventually I did meet Pete. I think he came to State. I mean, I may have it backwards, that he came to State first, but I don't think so. I think I saw these things that, you know – the people that I was most impressed by besides Pete himself, at least in the slides, were Kenny Price and Michael Frimkess, just because they were, I don't know, a little more quirky – and Kenny for a variety of reasons, particularly the color options. I mean, at that point, even though it was just beginning to start, I mean, most ceramic was stoneware and it was brown and white and blue. That was it. So Kenny really made a major move by, introducing low-fire and introducing the palette, which, you know, most people would associate with a hobbyist sensibility. And anyway, so that was – yeah, that was basically my light bulb. You know, okay, count me in. And that was also a point where Henry had said, you know, "If you want to be great, you must hang with great ones." I mean, he's got this in pidgin English. "You want to be great, hang with great ones." [Laughs.] It was, like, out of a bad cowboy-and-Indian movie.

MR. BERKSON: But then very soon after that – do you remember what year that –

MR. NAGLE: Gawd, man, you know, I don't know, about '59.

MR. BERKSON: When you met him?

MR. NAGLE: Maybe. I mean, I may have it completely wrong, you know? But I basically took a lot of that stuff and took it back to State, and along with a lot of other things that I'd started seeing. I mean, a complete maniac for every art magazine that came out, so I was – particularly painting, you know? And I was a huge [Antoni] Tapies fan. [Giorgio] Morandi – you know, Morandi – the full significance of Morandi for me kind of came later, but I mean, you know, any kind of new magazine that would come, I was, like, waiting there for the mailman. This was in the library or something. You know, it was, like – I was so nuts about it for many, many years. And so anyhow, as I said, you know, I put everything I kind of knew together and started doing screwy stuff at State, doing big, huge walls, kind of, you know, John Mason, style. I mean, I was up – you know, I was copping everybody's bag at that point.

MR. BERKSON: And then very soon after you left State you became –

MR. NAGLE: Well, what happened was there was a guy by this time after Magnani had died and they had a substitute guy for a while. Then a guy named "Bud" McKee – Charles McKee – was teaching at San Francisco State, and he was there for many, many years. And he kind of took me under his wing, although I wasn't really, you know, that much influenced by what he was doing. I learned a lot of stuff from him, but I was pretty much on my own, you know – on my own deal after having seen what I considered the real thing, you know? I mean, McKee had gone to Mills, actually. He was a classmate of [Robert] Arneson's and worked with Prieto at the time. And he eventually – you know, he actually begged me to stay. He said, "No, you could get a master's degree here working with me." But I – you know, I had my eyes set on working with Pete. And I think he was quite disturbed by that, I mean, but he was good to me in terms of he gave me a little space to work.

MR. BERKSON: McKee was disturbed by that?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. I mean, yeah, he was disturbed by the fact that I was leaving, but he also gave me a little place to work. But it was also very weird. It was like, "Okay, you can work back here, but don't let too many people know what you're doing." I mean it was really sort of off-limits, and I remember this guy McKenna came in, who was the dean of fine arts. Actually they named the theater after him. One time when I was reclining on a table smoking a Pall Mall, which was the artist's cigarette, in my Bill de Kooning Oshkosh overalls, which I still wear to this day – a different pair, a different size. [Laughs.] But anyway, you know, talking to a female student, and this guy McKenna comes in and told the guy who was before McKee, a guy named Louie Ferrario – and he said, what is this guy doing? He's behaving in a manner unbecoming a lab assistant. And then he saw what I was making, and he was absolutely appalled. I was making these covered jars which were influenced by people like Frimkess and Tapies, and, you know, it was sort of my – and they absolutely hated what I was doing. So, you know, being rebellious by nature from day one, I just took this as a sign that, okay, I'm on the right track. You know, fuck these guys; I'm outta here – which is what happened.

But I applied for graduate school. I had no idea what you're supposed to do – I mean proper slides, any of that – and I applied to Berkeley and I didn't get in, and I was absolutely heartbroken. So I went over and talked to Pete. By that time I had met Pete. He had come out to State and given a lecture, and I hung out with him, and that's, you know, as the story goes, which is – you know, he was smoking a cigar, and he took a cigar out to light it and I wanted to impress him, and I took my matches out to light the cigar and the whole pack went up in my hands in this big, kind of, blast of flame. And he just looked at me without missing a beat, and he said, "That'll teach you to believe." And it did. [Laughs.] And from that point on I was in. So I went out to Berkeley. By this time he'd been fired from L.A., from the – what was then called the Art – County Art Institute, later – now known as the Otis. And the whole idea, – I mean, of the lore, the mystique, of just the people that were his followers which –

you know, people like Billy Al Bengston and Kenny Price and the whole L.A. art scene. You know. And these guys climbed in windows after dark to work all around the clock and not being part of the actual enrolled student body. I mean, this all was just great – fascinating to me, a big draw, you know?

MR. BERKSON: You went to Los Angeles a lot –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah, yeah. We made pilgrimages a lot.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: Well, so we'll get to that, but, yeah, we did go a lot, because my roots were not up here at all. I couldn't relate to Bay Area art at all. I mean, there are people I like and respect, I mean like Joan [Brown] and Manuel [Neri] and – but I just – you know, I was much more interested in the L.A. aesthetic, and particularly the Ferus Gallery.

So anyway I talked to Pete and I said, "Gawd, how come I didn't get in?" You know? And he says, "I don't know." And he could have been – you know, he may have known. He may not have known. I don't know. But he says, "You don't want to go to school anyway, do you?" And I said, "No, I just want to work with you." And he said okay. And he said, "Do you want a job?" I said yeah. And he said, "Okay, you can be the assistant, and you can mix clay and do whatever, you know, around here, and I'll give you a little room to work and give you a little studio." And that was it. And that was in the old, you know, what was formerly a women's housing building, which is now where the – you know, the museum is. It was, like, under that site. You know, that's where it was. There was a little hot dog stand called Oscar's there. And he – you know, he built kilns, and we all worked in the basement of that room, and then he had – I think up on the third or fourth floor he had his painting studio, and that was headquarters. That was the first UC shop, you know? And so that was really the roots or the – you know, the ground floor of the Bay Area part of this whole, you know, thing. And that's where I met Jim Melchert, who was his first graduate student at Berkeley. I mean, there were other people who came on later, like Stephen De Staebler – maybe around the same time, but as I remember, Jim was, like, the first guy I met whose work I really liked a lot because he had his own really kind of, you know, personal, sort of brute-dumb kind of thing that not too many people could pull off. And so, anyway – I was part of that whole –

MR. BERKSON: Let's take a moment here.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

[Audio break.]

MR. BERKSON: You want to tell about the visits to the L.A. scene?

MR. NAGLE: Sure. Once – let's see. Well, somewhere between my going to Berkeley and being at State there was a guy who was a friend of mine named Ed Bereal – B-e-r-e-a-l. Ed now – still teaches at – in Washington.

MR. BERKSON: B-e-r?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, B-e-r-e-a-l.

MR. BERKSON: Oh, I see.

MR. NAGLE: And Ed was a bit of an anomaly. He was very tight with everybody in the L.A. art scene – you know, from Joe Goode to Kenny Price and, you know, Ed Ruscha and Bob Irwin. He studied with Bob Irwin. And so he was – he was a black guy, which was pretty much of a rarity at the time for somebody that was, you know, working in the '50s in, you know, mainstream L.A. art. And he did a lot of really neat constructions, I guess you'd call them, not a lot of them, but he was very plugged in, was, you know – and knew all the collectors like Monty Factor and, you know, people like that. And he also knew all the people at the Ferus Gallery.

MR. BERKSON: He was in L.A.?

MR. NAGLE: He was in L.A. at the time, but moved up here. And he was our, sort of, conduit or connection to the L.A. scene, and he became a, you know, real good friend of mine up here, and I'm trying to remember exactly how I met him. It may have been through John Coplans, but I'm not positive, because by that time John Coplans was the editor of *Artforum,* and he had been responsible for putting together the "Abstract Expressionist Ceramics Show" and so forth. So my time may be a little bit off.

MR. BERKSON: That's a little later.

MR. NAGLE: A little bit later, yeah. But anyway, somehow I met Ed, and I'm trying to remember now how, but so we became fast friends, and both our interests were in a particular kind of art, basically L.A. art, and music, you

know, blues and stuff like that. And so, through him, we – myself and then, you know, later on Melchert sometimes and – you know, we'd go down to L.A. and see what was going on, and at that point I was starting to get, you know, all the posters from the shows that were happening at the Ferus Gallery. And those were really, you know, my roots in terms of a certain kind of aesthetic, both, you know, in terms of small-scale work and, you know, this little, very intimate gallery where they were showing people like, you know, Larry Bell, who was, like, 21 at the time, Kenny Price, Bengston. It was the first place I saw Cornell boxes. It's the first place I saw Morandi drawings. So I was really, you know –

MR. BERKSON: They showed Morandi at Ferus?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah, they had a Morandi drawing show. I mean, Walter Hopps and, you know – and then Irving Blum; I mean, they really had a pretty astute eye even, you know, then. I mean – so we used to go down a lot for those shows, drive down in my '51 Chevrolet panel truck – sedan delivery – and just pile in the back and just head down there. Anyway –

MR. BERKSON: Is that – did – and you met Ken Price down there?

MR. NAGLE: Eventually I met Kenny down there, yeah. Yeah, and I'm sure Ed first introduced me to Kenny.

MR. BERKSON: Were you immediately impressed with his work?

MR. NAGLE: Well, I was immediately impressed the minute I saw one of his slides that Henry showed. I mean, that was the guy that was just – you know, it was beautiful, poetic, you know, goofy stuff that I – there wasn't anything like it. I mean, there wasn't anything like it in mainstream art, and there wasn't anything like it in ceramics. It was like, whoa, man, you know, this is something else. You know? I mean, you could just – certain things you can just tell, you know, it's a cut above.

MR. BERKSON: They refer to the cup forms that he made as exploded cup forms. What's exploded?

MR. NAGLE: I have no idea. [Laughs.] I don't know what that means.

MR. BERKSON: It's not your terminology?

MR. NAGLE: No, uh-uh. I mean, I later got on the cup bandwagon too. I mean, he and I at this point are both known for making cups, though I'm not making any right now. But –

MR. BERKSON: And you made cups together, too.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, we did. That was much later.

MR. BERKSON: Much, much later, yeah.

MR. NAGLE: It was much later, you know, in the '80s or '90s.

MR. BERKSON: Right.

MR. NAGLE: He's a good friend of mine, you know. But he's the guy – and in terms of ceramic people, I mean, he's the guy that brought, you know, the biggest influence on me – just in terms of a standard, you know, if nothing else. I mean, certainly there were many things, just visual things that I got from him. There's no question about that, but you could – I mean, if you were going to aspire to be really good, you know, this guy had it.

MR. BERKSON: I want to talk about that, the various things that combined to, sort of, set your own standards. And Voulkos was part of that.

MR. NAGLE: Sure.

MR. BERKSON: Price was part of that.

MR. NAGLE: Yup.

MR. BERKSON: Voulkos – was it Voulkos who introduced you to Momoyama [1573-1603] –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – traditional Japanese –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – 16th-, 17th-century –

MR. NAGLE: Yes, right, right.

MR. BERKSON: – Japanese ceramics, so that's –

MR. NAGLE: Certainly that came into play. I mean, you know, we –

MR. BERKSON: Was it Voulkos that –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I mean, I had not seen that much stuff – again, I think probably he had showed slides and, you know, a few things, but he used to get all these Japanese pottery books from Japan, and I used to see them in his studio. And that's where I actually – just, you know, thumbing through those and going, oh, man, this is something else. You know? This is like another level. And, I mean, there were people that were trying to, you know, teach the Western world about how great it was, except they were always the wrong people, like Bernard Leach or [Shoji] Hamada. I mean, that stuff was crap, you know? I mean, of course, this is heresy to some people for me saying saying that, but it is. I mean, I'm glad that they were opening up people's eyes to that new aesthetic, but – for the Western world, but – anyway, I mean, I just looked at everything. And so everything I ever saw, all the great classics of Japanese pottery, were always in these books, you know? And just seeing those – the profile of those pieces and, you know, the fact that a certain "A" side was shot and this is the one that they wanted the world to know had a very big influence on how I thought about my own work, which basically reads, is meant to be read flat, you know?

MR. BERKSON: Mm-hmm. And that leads to another big area. I mean, in a way, your sculpture is as much influenced by two-dimensional painting –

MR. NAGLE: Probably more so –

MR. BERKSON: – as anything else. I mean –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, probably more so. I mean, occasionally people will try to legitimize me or think that they're being complimentary by saying, "You know, it's almost sculpture." You know? And it's like – I mean, I'm insulted. I mean, I think they think they're being nice, you know? Well, it's just a fucking pot, you know? But it's much more influenced by painting.

MR. BERKSON: And you put in your time – some time -- making paintings, too.

MR. NAGLE: Well, when I was going to school I did, and I still think of these things, you know, without sounding pretentious, but I think of them as more – as much paintings as I do pots or objects or whatever. I mean, the way that I want them to read is head-on, flat, and, you know, on a formal level, or definitely considered from a painting point of view, you know?

MR. BERKSON: I read somewhere that, for instance, seeing Morandi – it may have been first seeing him at the Ferus Gallery – inspired your first cups.

MR. NAGLE: I don't know if that's necessarily true. I mean, what did – well, it's – you know, I can't say it's not true. I mean, the cup thing per se is – Kenny was the first guy that really made these beautiful, poetic cups. In terms of profile, you know, and stuff like that, I mean, you're right that Morandi had a lot to do with it, because the way he rendered objects in this very unassuming, loose way and the way that they were basically flat representations of a three-dimensional object and yet were just still this vehicle for, you know, a serene, kind of peaceful, meditative feeling, just doing these dumb little objects, I mean it was like magic. Now, how the hell – how do you that? And so for me, I just wanted to be able to make pots or objects or cups that had that same kind of movement that felt like they were drawn. So I think you're right in that sense, yes. I think I probably first saw him in slides, and then I actually went down and – and then books, and then I actually went down and saw him at the Ferus. A lot of ceramic people are very much influenced by Morandi, I think, because of the way he rendered or represented dumb kind of objects.

MR. BERKSON: How about other painters? I mean, there's a list of four or five other painters, like Ryder?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: I'm interested in what you saw in his –

MR. NAGLE: Well, Ryder, all the people that I like – and, again, you know, I'm not saying that maybe the influence is that overt, but all the people were in small scale, for one thing. So you've kind of got this – although I remember when I was a kid, one of the biggest charges of, you know, Easter was having those Easter eggs where you'd peep in the little hole and see this little scene on the inside of this little, you know, egg-shaped

world. You know? And I kind of thought about that in terms of the smaller work, and Albert Ryder was certainly one of them, particularly – [END TAPE 1 SIDE A.] – the real simple ones with just, again, a rock and, you know, a sea plane and a sky plane and that rock. I don't remember what the name of that is.

MR. BERKSON: *Moonlit Cove* [c.1911]?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, that's the one.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, *Moonlit Cove*.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, and a cloud –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, that's it.

MR. BERKSON: – above the sea.

MR. NAGLE: You know, you see this sort of weird edge around the cloud, you know? It's like, "Man, that's the heaviest." And the simplicity, you know, and the power of that little thing. And certainly Vermeer. I mean, you know, again –

MR. BERKSON: And [Joseph] Cornell.

MR. NAGLE: And Cornell. But – Cornell, the same thing, but he's dealing basically with a flat space you, sort of, look into. I mean – and I don't know, who else?

MR. BERKSON: [Joseph] Albers?

MR. NAGLE: Albers definitely. Again, you know, the color relationship.

MR. BERKSON: Is more color.

MR. NAGLE: You know, more for color, but –

MR. BERKSON: And [Mark] Rothko is –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, that too. You know, I'm interested in that, you know.

MR. BERKSON: You know he's quite big.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I mean definitely. Yeah, definitely. I mean, there's other people more recently. You know? Obviously [Philip] Guston, you know, because of the similar issues and just a certain kind of simplicity, the way things are – really basically just, kind of, capture the essence of something in this very, kind of, direct way. You know, I was interested in Cy Twombly even then in the '50s; Tapies, which is not small-scale work, but, you know, his golden period for me was, like, around 1958. And one of the things that attracted me about him was that, I mean, it looked like clay, you know, and it – but they had this sort of constructed, unassuming quality about them, like you might trip over that in the street or something, you know, like – it would, like, you know, some asphalt you might – except there was a certain kind of poetic order to it that, you know, wasn't just by happenstance, but almost. I mean, he really was able to snag that beautifully.

MR. BERKSON: Mm-hmm.

MR. NAGLE: And so him definitely.

MR. BERKSON: And [Edward] Hopper?

MR. NAGLE: Hopper, yeah – later Hopper.

MR. BERKSON: Hopper within the small scale?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Was else about him?

MR. NAGLE: Mood, I guess.

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh.

MR. NAGLE: I think, you know, for me the most important thing about any work is if the vibe, you know, the feel, and the kind of presence and quality that something has that you can't quite feel anywhere else, and that's – you know?

MR. BERKSON: Okay, around the early '60s, I guess it was after working with Voulkos and after familiarizing yourself with the L.A. scene and other things, Morandi and other things, around that time, you're doing cups, you're doing your own innovations, including introducing china paints –

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: – and multilayering –

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: – together, and airbrush –

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: – to, you know, sort of what you would call a "serious" ceramic.

MR. NAGLE: Right. [Laughs.] A "serious" ceramic. Yeah, I mean – yeah, yeah, that –

MR. BERKSON: Serious/hilarious ceramics.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I mean, little by little that crept its way in, definitely. I don't – you know, first of all, with the airbrush thing, you know, it was a hybrid of influences, certainly Billy Al Bengston, who came to my last show in L.A., and I was so pleased to see him. And I said, "You know, I got half this shit from you, man." And he was, like, "Oh, come on." You know? Like, "Aw, man." He was very complimentary.

MR. BERKSON: You mean you hadn't met him before?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, I've met many times over the years, but you know, he was very – you know, he really liked the show a lot. And I said, "You know all this stuff," because he did this, you know, like, straight line and then he'd have a fade-off going from that. I mean, he did that around those sergeant's stripes and those Dracula paintings and stuff, and he was using the airbrush, again, something that in the realm of environment of abstract expressionism was probably a pretty bold move, because it was, again, something that a commercial artist might use or whatever. So it was funny when I told him that. I said, "You know, this whole device of, you know, having a line and then fading out from it, you know" – and he said, "Oh, listen, I copped that from [Richard] Diebenkorn." [Laughs.] So, I mean, who knows who started –

MR. BERKSON: – get something from somebody else.

MR. NAGLE: Sure, you know. Well, anyhow – so his paintings – and I thought he was also a brilliant a colorist. I mean, he took Albers, and then added a pop element to it, and the combination of those two things really is appealing to me. And so anyhow, that in conjunction with stuff that – I'd seen my mother using china paints. I thought, "I'm going to learn how to spray this stuff on and fire it." And so I started working on a formula, which took a little while to figure out what to do, but mixing some china paint and oil and then trying to find the proper thinner, which actually turned out to be acetone, and where I could get it to hit and dry immediately and then fire it. But if you use the wrong solvent, it goes into the kiln and then just runs right off, melts off the piece. So it took a while to figure that out, you know?

MR. BERKSON: So when was this development?

MR. NAGLE: Hmmm, I guess the early '60s.

MR. BERKSON: The early '60s.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. And then I really started, kind of, getting it down to a fine degree, if you could call it that, maybe around, you know, my first – sort of what I call my first comeback show in 1975, where I sort of got it together at that point and really started doing many more multiple layers and had the formula down. But it kind of evolved.

MR. BERKSON: Over 15 years –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah. I mean, I first started doing it, like I say, early on, but really I'd say probably '70, '73, '-4, '-5 is when I really started getting into it.

MR. BERKSON: Even though you didn't – and we'll get to the business about showing –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – later on, but people saw these things in the early '60s.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, like in magazines.

MR. BERKSON: In magazines.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah –

MR. BERKSON: But also, you know, other artists.

MR. NAGLE: Well, yeah, there was, like, a show, which really doesn't get as much credit as it deserves, which is sort of a precursor to the "Abstract Expressionist Show," which was at the Art Institute, and I think that –

MR. BERKSON: "Six Artists."

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, "Six Artists." And by that time I think I was teaching there. Melchert got me a job –

MR. BERKSON: Right.

MR. NAGLE: – and I started teaching at the Art Institute.

MR. BERKSON: Well, that was '63. That's pretty early.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, you know, and that show, you know, I think was pretty important at the time. I mean, a lot of –

MR. BERKSON: Who put that show together?

MR. NAGLE: You know, I can't remember whether Jim had something to do with it. I even remember the announcement for it, which I wish I had now, which was a giant cone pack with this cone falling over. I'm not sure. I can't remember. I mean at that time – most of us were just, I would say, almost drunk all the time. I mean, so like, things like details like who the curator was or who was – and I was highly irresponsible. [Laughs.] I mean, to say the very least.

MR. BERKSON: I want to, sort of, save that until we talk about shows generally –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, sure.

MR. BERKSON: – but I'm interested in when you're making your early work, like you say, even until as late as '75, although you had a gallery show –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – in the late '60s. What was –

MR. NAGLE: That was at the Dilexi Gallery [1968].

MR. BERKSON: What and who was your audience, in a way –

MR. NAGLE: I don't know.

MR. BERKSON: Well, I mean among other artists?

MR. NAGLE: Well, I think some other artists probably, you know?

MR. BERKSON: Was it mostly people like Melchert and Price and Voulkos –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: What was – since you made small work, what was Voulkos's attitude?

MR. NAGLE: I mean, he was always encouraging.

MR. BERKSON: He was okay with it?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, sure, you know? I mean, because, you know, he knew that I was influenced by Kenny, and he

– you know, he saw what I was doing, and he was always very encouraging. He'd get involved –

MR. BERKSON: He didn't insist that other people saw him –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, gawd, never.

MR. BERKSON: – as a monumental –

MR. NAGLE: Everybody did, but I didn't want to do that. You know?

MR. BERKSON: Yes.

MR. NAGLE: I mean, I was certainly influenced a lot by Price and, I think, Frimkess, you know, at the time, but only Pete could do Pete. Anybody else that would try to emulate that – it was just – it was horrible. You know, there were people that could learn from his sensibility or a variety of other things about him – the way that he worked and did things – but to try to emulate that was ridiculous. I mean, there's only one guy that could do that.

But you're right. The first show I had was in '68 or '69, which was at the Dilexi Gallery, and that was – so people were aware of what I was doing, you know, even early on. And a guy named Jim Newman, who is a friend of mine, and still – and who still collects my work, you know, he started the show. And the Dilexi was originally on Union Street and that's where I first saw Manuel's work. It just blew my mind. And this is sort of pre-figurative stuff, where he was just doing these sort of boxy shapes out of plaster and chicken wire, and this idea of permanence, it was really fascinating to me, like, wow, you didn't care if it – you know, I mean – and it's just the feel and the kind of sensitivity and the way that they were done.

MR. BERKSON: That's 1968.

MR. NAGLE: Well – this is – yeah, my show, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: At the Dilexi.

MR. NAGLE: My show, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: So before that you'd seen –

MR. NAGLE: But I'd seen a lot of stuff – when I'd gone down to visit. And so he presented an alternative – I mean, Jim did – at the Dilexi that was on Union Street, an alternative to, kind of, mainstream – you know, what was considered Bay Area art. I mean, he wasn't showing figurative work that much. He was showing other kinds of stuff – more object-oriented, smaller scale. I mean, it was as close to the Ferus as you could get up here. It was a different sensibility.

MR. BERKSON: He had shown Jay [DeFeo] –

MR. NAGLE: Jay – yeah, and there was actually a big Dilexi show at the Oakland Museum several years ago that Jay and I were in.

MR. BERKSON: Also for you that's – and I don't know about for the other – I guess the other people, the people in L.A., could show in galleries like the Ferus –

MR. NAGLE: Yes.

MR. BERKSON: And so you were showing and they were showing not in –

MR. NAGLE: Right, right.

MR. BERKSON: – craft-oriented galleries. You show very rarely in galleries that are specifically oriented –

MR. NAGLE: Well, I do now. I mean –

MR. BERKSON: Garth [Clark]–

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, Garth, who is –

MR. BERKSON: Is it Revolution [Revolution Art Gallery, Detroit, MI]?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I don't – I haven't shown there in quite a while. They actually – you know, they mix it up also.

MR. BERKSON: What about the place in, is it Michigan?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, that's Revolution.

MR. BERKSON: That's Revolution?

MR. NAGLE: No, they show other stuff. They show –

MR. BERKSON: Okay, so most of your showing is in straight art galleries, right?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: In the case of being with Garth, which is very definitely – you know, that was for business reasons, which made sense to both of us. And my career has never done better, because there's a core audience there and –

MR. BERKSON: Also it is like an intellectual caliber.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, there's a higher level, and he's doing a lot of interesting shows. Now, we can get to that later, but – I mean, about other artists that ordinarily they don't work in clay, that work in – I mean, he's raised the bar considerably. But anyway, by and large, yes, I've always shown at non – you know – media-specific galleries.

MR. BERKSON: So what was the reception of the Dilexi show, for instance?

MR. NAGLE: I did good. I got a great review, you know, from Tom Albright. Jim had an – you know, an amazing budget for promotion. So, I don't know if you remember this, but you know I had that guy Chuckie who was on my *Bad Rice* record, that kind of punky-looking guy, which was a fabrication that was basically done graphically.

MR. BERKSON: How do you spell "Chuckie"?

MR. NAGLE: C-h-u-c-k-i-e. Booth – B-o-o-t-h. That was the character, which was basically me kind of in '50s punk drag, and that picture of Chuckie was on every bus in the city with a phone number, and that's all it had, was his picture and a phone number. And Jim says, "However you want to promote your show, let's just do it." So conceptually, I mean, people would call it, you know, something else now, you know? Performance, conceptual art, whatever. I mean, basically a phone number – and this is pre-answering machine, so you had to go down to Pac Bell and rent this huge box, and then they had the phone number, and that box was in my basement with a recording of this song called "631 Clay," which was the new address of the Dilexi Gallery, Jim's new location, and basically, you know, playing this song, and the message sort of being don't go down there. And, of course, everybody went, you know? [Laughs.] So, it was well received in that sense, you know? And it was my first time. I'd gone through long periods of not doing any work, you know, because I was doing, you know, my band, The Mystery Trend. And – but I'd always spend a lot of time thinking about, well, when I get back to it, this is what I'll do. So I started making these box pieces and so forth. And so I was – you know, I mean, I was already doing the china painting even then, you know? So anyhow, that's – yeah, that was my first, sort of, credible show, I guess.

MR. BERKSON: Well, the six artists – it was referred to often as –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – "Six Artists in Clay."

MR. NAGLE: Right, right.

MR. BERKSON: But I see it listed as "Works in Clay by Six Artists [San Francisco Art Institute, San Francisco, CA]."

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: What's the difference?

MR. NAGLE: I don't know. [Laughs.] But you're right, I think they were referring to both things.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, I think in each instance it's sort of back to that issue that keeps – that's going to come up again much more thoroughly later on. You know, there seems to be sort of an insistence there of, like, somewhere the words clay and artists are –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, they're supposed to legitimize each other –

MR. BERKSON: They're legitimizing each other, and they're conflicting with each other –

MR. NAGLE: Yes.

MR. BERKSON: Sort of like, "Aha, you didn't think –"

MR. NAGLE: Oh.

MR. BERKSON: "—these two words could exist in the same title."

MR. NAGLE: Oh, listen, Bill, every single show that is supposed to give legitimacy to this bastard movement we have here is – always they'll put – if it's not something really lame like "Feats of Clay," and I don't know how many fuckin' times that's been used -- if it's not that, it's usually – like the last big show was at the Metropolitan, "Clay into Art [November 24, 1998 – May 30, 1999, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City]." Okay? "The Art of Clay." They always sort of put it together, like, you know – they never say, "Oil Paint Into Art." They never say, "Wood into Art." We're just, you know, as Arneson says, the back of the art bus, you know? And it's still perceived that way. And I don't even – you know, we could spend every disk you've got there arguing about, you know, art versus craft and all the rest of that crap, which I think is – everybody would like to think it was a dead issue, and I think it is for me, but it's still not. You know, there's always a sort of legitimacy. We wouldn't have this conversation in Japan, you know?

MR. BERKSON: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm.

MR. NAGLE: So –

MR. BERKSON: Then the next show, even before the Dilexi show, before your first gallery show, was the show you mentioned that John Coplans curated –

MR. NAGLE: Right, right.

MR. BERKSON: – called "Abstract Expressionist Ceramics [University of California at Irvine/San Francisco Museum, 1966]" –

MR. NAGLE: Correct.

MR. BERKSON: – which was probably another form of legitimizing –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it is.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, he could have called it "Action Ceramics."

MR. NAGLE: But, you know, the thing is there's a lot of work – you know, any time you've got a label – I mean, we could say the same thing about abstract expressionism. I mean, that included everybody – I mean, in painting – you know, from [Jackson] Pollock to Rothko. You couldn't think of two more diverse. You know? And the same thing with the ceramic thing. I mean, there were people – the only true abstract expressionist was Pete, you know? I mean, and John Mason at the time. You know? I mean, there were other people that were doing things, but most of the stuff was really pretty, you know, plotted out, if you will. I mean done in a different way. If it means that it sort of deviated from what you would traditionally think of as ceramics, well, yeah, that, but I think anybody who was working was thinking about – you know, the pot was just a vehicle for something else, you know? I mean, when you look at a Morandi painting, it's not about a vase; it's about a feeling, you know? And I think we, sort of, look at it in the same way, you know?

MR. BERKSON: I'm interested in how this plays out as well in the context of teaching.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Because – well, for instance, "Six Artists in Clay" happened at the Art Institute –

MR. NAGLE: Correct.

MR. BERKSON: – at the same time that you were teaching at the Art Institute with Jim Melchert.

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: And what's always said about that is that you and Jim transformed the clay pit, which is still called the clay pit, from stoneware to low-fire.

MR. NAGLE: [Laughs.] Yeah –

MR. BERKSON: That in itself was a big, bold move.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it was.

MR. BERKSON: That, you know –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it was. Well, yeah, it did it in two ways. I mean, it did it through the kind of material. I mean, up to that point it had been stoneware, and there was a guy named Ernie Kim teaching there who was really one of the, you know, foremost – and I knew Ernie at the time – foremost practitioners of the studio potter thing and was part of the whole, kind of, Prieto – in fact, he already had his own version of it, but you know, again, the classic, sort of bean-shaped, tall or round vase, with a small neck. And so it was all stoneware. And that's kind of what was going on there at the time. I mean, there were people who were trying to do new things, and again, were trying to do things like – you know, not in that way, but basically that was what was going on. And when Jim got the job there – I mean, Ernie eventually left, and then Jim hired me.

Now, prior to my working there, I had spent, you know, all summer, maybe even a whole year, doing low-fire glaze tests, because, again, I was enamored with the color possibilities, you know, that Kenny had, you know, started. And Jim started doing a lot of stuff in low-fire too. And, you know, the thing that low-fire has is basically it's more like painting. I mean, it's more direct. It's more predictable. You're not dependent on all the ooga booga that goes on with the atmosphere, the kiln, and all the rest of it. There's a different kind of – [laughs] – ooga booga. I mean, it's not always that dependable, but basically it opened up a whole different way of thinking.

And once we started working there, I mean, other people – a few people got on board, like Manuel [Neri], with these really neat, kind of, loop sculptures that were done in low-fire, and I made all those glazes for them. And I think Manuel [Neri] was in that show, as a matter of fact, "Work in Clay," if I'm not mistaken. And I remember – I think I told you this. You know, Al Light came up to him and said,"What are you doing in that show, Manuel? You're an artist." You know, it's like, oh, yeah. I mean, I was eventually fired from there, but that's a whole other story I'll tell you – well, I'm sure I've already told you. Well, Fred Martin sent down a henchman, but I'll tell you about that later maybe.

MR. BERKSON: Well, I'm interested in – not just then but even continuing –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – you know, if you're there, it seems like maybe I know the answer already – that you're not teaching the craft of claywork for the technical information –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – that's available and probably insisted upon, because you're not going to come up with an object –

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: – unless you do it through a process that works.

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: Now, you know how to work that equipment.

MR. NAGLE: Well, yeah, right, I mean, you've got to know the basic stuff.

MR. BERKSON: You have to do the kiln and all that –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, sure.

MR. BERKSON: – and all that stuff. But I guess the – it's a double-ended thing. Does teaching give you ideas? And are you teaching a, sort of, idea-based art –

MR. NAGLE: Yes.

MR. BERKSON: – an emotionally based art to the students –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, absolutely, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – through the technique at the surface of that?

MR. NAGLE: Right, I mean, any time – even to this day I'm still teaching after 42 years. I mean, basically they're all – all the assignments are idea-based, but in conjunction with "here's how you do the stuff."

MR. BERKSON: The material side of it.

MR. NAGLE: But it's never – it's never isolated, and I would say 90 percent of the slides even today that I show are not ceramic slides. They deal with ideas. They don't, you know – all that being said, I mean, I might do, you know, two slide carousels of the greatest Japanese pottery, plus a world survey of everything from African mud huts to, you know, hornet's nests, in terms of, you know, when a vessel can be made out of mud. I mean – so, it's – but it's just kind of taking a bigger scope of things to just show you that we're dealing with ideas or feelings or whatever you want to call it, you know, that it's definitely idea-based. And at that time, part of that, you know, was also to incorporate other materials which were not ceramics. I mean, one of the reasons I was allegedly given for being fired at the time was that, you know, Roger Jacobson came down and said, "Hey, I understand you're using fiberglass and rubber and things like that." You know, this is pre-Eva Hesse. And so I said, "Yeah, I am. You know, I'm showing people how to make other stuff besides, you know?" "Well, you just teach the old ladies how to make tea cups and leave the art to us, and if you don't –"

MR. BERKSON: What department was Roger Jacobson from?

MR. NAGLE: Well, he was teaching sculpture. But Fred sent him down. I mean, Fred was, you know, a honcho at the time, and Fred didn't like me very much. And then as I always said, you know, if they fired me for drunkenness or arrogance, that's fine. But nobody ever said that. You know? They just said, you know, like, "You can just leave the art to us." I'm sure Al Light weighed in on it, you know, too. And they just – you know? And by that time, I mean, I had my band, you know? I'd bring in – you know, we had a pre-release of *Sergeant Pepper*, and I brought in a huge, you know, amplifier and cranked it up to 20 and played, you know, before the album even came out. I mean, you know, I was doing what I do now, except now, you know, it's like, cool, but it wasn't then. And it took years to get back to the Art Institute. They would never hire me.

MR. BERKSON: You went back there in 1976 for a couple of years.

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: But prior to that one of my first students was Richard. You know, Richard Shaw was my student there.

MR. BERKSON: Right.

MR. NAGLE: And that's – and a lot of the stuff that Jim and I were doing there – the low-fire stuff, the decals, the china paints – Richard, you know, saw a lot of that, and you know, certainly not as involved as what he, you know, eventually really expanded on, but all of that stuff. You know, there were other people who were making stuff that was nonclay stuff in the kiln room, because that's the only place you could do it. And, again, it was sort of secret, you know? I mean – [whispers] – "Yeah, we can use resin, and cast stuff." You know? Because this again was from L.A. I mean, you know, guys were doing all kinds – you know, there wasn't any of this media hierarchy, you know, in L.A. But there sure was over there, man. I mean, clay was not a cool thing. We were definitely isolated. It took a long time until Richard became famous. They still treated him like shit – for years – until he was the most famous guy there.

MR. BERKSON: How does it – and after you taught at the Art Institute, or even during the time you taught at the Art Institute, you were teaching at Berkeley –

MR. NAGLE: I thought – yes – well, yeah, I had a chance to teach there.

MR. BERKSON: As well?

MR. NAGLE: As well. But the thing is then Roger Jacobson came down and said, "Okay, you know, do what we say or leave." I said, "Fuck you, I'm out of here." Because I already, you know, had –

MR. BERKSON: So you went to Berkeley?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I went to Berkeley and started teaching there, and of course I could do anything I wanted there. I mean, you know, Pete was in charge.

MR. BERKSON: Of course, Voulkos was still there.

MR. NAGLE: Oh, sure, yeah. I mean, yeah, he was the guy that gave me the job. He said, do you want to teach

there? Jim stayed on for a while at the Institute. And –

MR. BERKSON: And then you – and then after 1973 – in 1973 you went to CCAC [California College of Arts and Crafts, Oakland, CA].

MR. NAGLE: Well, that was just a very, very short time, a very short time.

MR. BERKSON: Two years.

MR. NAGLE: Well, it was just a summer thing –

MR. BERKSON: Oh, yeah.

MR. NAGLE: – you know, I think. That was fairly short-lived.

MR. BERKSON: And then –

MR. NAGLE: '73 – I mean, '72-'73 was probably one of the worst periods of my life. I mean, because by that time I had left Berkeley; I had taught there for, you know, quite a long time. You know, for whatever reasons, I mean, they, you know – they basically – I think Pete went over to the art department, and they phased out my position and so forth. And it was real – and so I had no idea what I was going to be doing, and fortunately a friend of mine, Jack Nitzsche, you know, asked me if I wanted to work on this movie called *The Exorcist*, and things started going uphill from there.

MR. BERKSON: All right, here's the big question.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: How do you spell Nitzsche?

MR. NAGLE: N-i-t-z-s-c-h-e.

Anyway, yeah, Jack just died a couple of years ago. He was my – what Voulkos was to me in ceramics, Jack was to me in music. He produced my first record and taught me about the music business and actually got me this – hooked me up with a lot of great opportunities. Unfortunately, he became a heroin addict, but – anyway, that's another story.

MR. BERKSON: What was going on in that time, though, that it was so depressing?

MR. NAGLE: Lack of money.

MR. BERKSON: Ahh.

MR. NAGLE: No job.

MR. BERKSON: Oh, okay.

MR. NAGLE: I couldn't figure out – I had a house. I had a mortgage payment.

MR. BERKSON: – jobless.

MR. NAGLE: Nothing. I mean, this was –

MR. BERKSON: No sense of worth.

MR. NAGLE: Nothing. Oh, yeah, and I was – and, you know, plenty of drinks, plenty of – you know. But I mean, I had met my current wife, who – we've been together almost 35 – well, yeah, 35 years. I met her, you know, in '68 at Berkeley, and she was working at *Rolling Stone*, you know, at the time and was the production manager. And I got a job there as a carpenter, and I absolutely hated it. I mean, I was an elitist. I thought this was beneath me. [Laughs.] And I'd already done – you know, my record, you know, had come and gone in 1968. I'd been in bands and all this stuff, and I said, "Fuck, man, what am I doing?" You know? And so finally I, you know – I worked in L.A., going back and forth for a year, working on *The Exorcist*. I learned a lot about recording and had enough money. I was making 500 bucks a week, which was like astounding, you know, going from nothing to that, all expenses paid. And I saved my money and built my first recording studio with that money in my basement of my house over on Bocana Street.

MR. BERKSON: How do you spell Bocana?

MR. NAGLE: B-o-c-a-n-a. It's in Bernal Heights on the other side of the hill from where I live now, just off of Cortland up the hill. And that's where I actually did my Dilexi show, at that house. And – 156 Bocana. And then that's where I built my first recording studio with the money I'd gotten from *The Exorcist*. So things started to improve, and then eventually in '75 I had what I call my first comeback show at Rena's, or at the Quay Gallery, which was Rena and Ruth at the time.

MR. BERKSON: Rena Bransten and Ruth Braunstein.

MR. NAGLE: Rena Bransten and Ruth Braunstein. Everybody always gets it mixed up, but – and that's when they were on Sutter. And they were actually one of the first, if not the first – I mean, even prior to Garth – to legitimize ceramics in a mainstream art setting. I mean, it was called originally Quay Ceramics, and there were basically showing –

MR. BERKSON: Ahh!

MR. NAGLE: – you know, Bay Area ceramics, and that, you know –

MR. BERKSON: They were showing you and Richard Shaw?

MR. NAGLE: And Voulkos.

MR. BERKSON: And Voulkos?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, and Ruth – you know, and then when Rena and Ruth split up, you know, like, Ruth kept Pete, and Richard and I went with Rena. But there were people like Bob Brady. There were a lot of – I mean, they had constant ceramics shows there, and then when – so it was like a downtown, on Sutter, and it gave, you know – it really did give the movement, if you will, a shot in the arm. And it was called the Ceramic Gallery, but it was, you know, the upper echelon, if you will.

MR. BERKSON: Hmm.

MR. NAGLE: So that was, you know, '75. And by that time I was doing a lot of songwriting and started to produce and so forth.

[Audio break.]

MR. BERKSON: Okay, this is Bill Berkson interviewing Ron Nagle at 25 Grand View Avenue in San Francisco, California, on July 8, 2003, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Disk number 2 on this date.

So since we were edging in this direction, the question I wanted to ask you was about the relation of music to so-called studio work, because music is studio work –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – but to the art studio work. I know you've made some remarks about that just in terms of the forms of songwriting, but I was thinking about how your early feeling for music kind of continued to interact with –

MR. NAGLE: Well, yeah –

MR. BERKSON: – with your sculpture.

MR. NAGLE: Sure. Yeah, well, maybe it took me a little while to realize that there was a connection, but I, you know, didn't think of it maybe in conscious terms, if you will. I think the main thing that I started to understand about things was, in terms of music, is that there was an emotional content there that – right from the time that I – even when I was like, you know – gawd, as far back as when I was, you know, five or six, listening – I was standing there, like, listening to a Kate Smith record and then eventually, you know, "Shrimp Boats" by Jo Stafford, and then eventually doo-wop came in, and that closed the deal right there, you know? Early blues, and rhythm and blues, and doo-wop, and the stuff of the '50s. I mean, I was just transported into a whole other realm. I used to just be put to – literally put to sleep by it every night. Just put the – the music on. There was a couple of DJs – one guy's name was Rockin' Lucky, and Jumpin' George Oxford. And, oh, there were – there were a bunch of them, but those were the two early ones I remember, and I – and it was when gospel music was sort of making a transition. You could hear gospel, and then more and more you started to hear doo-wop in the '50s. And my father was absolutely appalled. And he had a room upstairs, and he used to bang on the floor.

MR. BERKSON: "Turn that stuff down!"

MR. NAGLE: No, “Turn those niggers off!” [Laughs.] Since he had a radio and appliance business, he had one of the early intercoms. So I had this sort of hammer tone, which is this paint job, this sort of deco-style, you know, box, where he could communicate with me down below and listen in to what I was doing, but I couldn’t do the same with him. And headquarters was on his nightstand, and on my nightstand was this thing. So he could listen in to what I was listening to. [Laughs.] Like all the great stuff. And he would just – and I would have – I mean, I was in another world, and so I realized that the power – I mean, you know, various – even prior to this I was playing classical music and all the stuff that I really liked, whether it was Debussy or whatever. I always said I used to really play a really good “Claire de Lune.”

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: – on piano. And I could, like – always responded to the emotional value.

MR. BERKSON: How did that come about? I mean, playing the piano –

MR. NAGLE: Well, I always did. My parents gave me piano lessons. And I used to have to –

MR. BERKSON: They had a piano in the house?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah, a couple.

MR. BERKSON: Did they play?

MR. NAGLE: No.

MR. BERKSON: Your mother didn’t play?

MR. NAGLE: Uh-uh. But – well, even when I was kid, I mean, the first music that I really got hooked on was boogie woogie, and I could – I really could play boogie woogie really – really well at that time and listened to people like Meade Lux Lewis and, you know, Albert Ammons and Mary Lou Williams and – all these great boogie woogie piano players, and then I went and saw Jack Fina with Freddie Martin and His Men, who had a big hit with “Bumble Boogie.” And there was a sort of transition between Rimski Korsakov, you know “Flight of the Bumblebee” and changing into a boogie thing, and I could do it. I could play that stuff really quite well. But again, it was –

MR. BERKSON: There’s one name that’s unfamiliar to me in there –

MR. NAGLE: Jack Fina?

MR. BERKSON: Fina. F-i-n-a?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, he was, like – he was the piano player for Freddy Martin –

MR. BERKSON: For Freddy Martin?

MR. NAGLE: – and His Men. And also I cannot – just absolutely not forget prior to doo-wop probably the most – the major epiphany I had was hearing Johnny Ray sing “Cry” and the “Little White Cloud That Cried,” and he was, like, ahead of his time on so many levels. I mean, he was, you know – represented androgyny, even though people didn’t call it that. And he sat down at the piano and played, and he actually cried when he was performing. And I thought, “Man, this is heavy shit,” you know? And I – so I went down and saw him when I was 11. He was at the Orpheum Theater, and just that was it, man. I thought, “Wow!” So, you know, the first thing I learned about music is that it could affect you emotionally and take you to a whole other place that you can’t get anywhere else, and not too much art did that. So there was a standard there for being moved by something outside yourself. And, again, you know – and then get into this whole high-low thing. I mean, all of this music that’s really not. And what’s the fucking difference, man? You just think you’re going – now if it’s at some downtown gallery or a museum that somehow there’s more value there? I never could understand that.

MR. BERKSON: It seems like that was something that, you know, was a problem or a question for everybody, anybody, up to exactly our generation.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, you and I were born in the same year.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And it seems that – the way that we grew up with pop culture was just like – I mean, unless you

were what they now call a nerd –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – you know, I mean somebody who was somehow, you know, denied watching TV, listening to the radio –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – you know, going to the movies, whether, I don't know, because your parents had some kind of religion, or because they had – they wanted to protect you –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – from that stuff and wanted you to do your homework all the time.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: But otherwise you were just going to be immersed in it –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – constantly. And, you know, there was going to be that culture, and anything else that comes along – whether Morandi and –

MR. NAGLE: Right, right. Yeah, and I –

MR. BERKSON: – or Rembrandt or Momoyama –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, right.

MR. BERKSON: – who's going to be –

MR. NAGLE: On the other side, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And they have got to be seamlessly included.

MR. NAGLE: Right, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: You know, you can't play the high-low business.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, well, I can't, you know? And I mean, I teach people accordingly –

MR. BERKSON: You've just have to take it all together.

MR. NAGLE: Right. I mean, that's the kind of stuff that I talk about in my graduate seminar, and fortunately I think those barriers are, kind of, somewhat broken down now, and of course people like Dave Hickey and so forth have helped to eradicate those barriers a little more by presenting it in a more articulate way than perhaps I could. But I mean, I never saw the difference. And I never thought of them as mutually exclusive at all. Either you dig it, or you feel it or you don't. I mean, it's that simple. This isn't rocket science, you know? But anyway – so eventually, I started, when I was in my first band and we started writing songs and so forth – I started over the years to realize that the process wasn't that much different and the people that were the true great songwriters or record producers were – more creative and inventive than most of the artists I knew, in terms of their intuitive thinking, in terms of a good idea is a good idea. I mean, I'll put [Jerry] Lieber and [Mike] Stoller up there with, [Willem] de Kooning or anybody. It's just – it's a different – it's just a different way of doing things, you know? It's not – one's not any better than the other, you know? And I love de Kooning, but I mean, you know what I'm saying. I just – I just think, creative thinking and coming up with an idea, developing it and running with it and that kind of involvement, that was being done in the recording studios all the time.

MR. BERKSON: Your first band was Musical Trend.

MR. NAGLE: Mystery Trend.

MR. BERKSON: Mystery Trend.

MR. NAGLE: Right. Which was a mistake, because it was –

MR. BERKSON: Mystery Trend.

MR. NAGLE: – it was supposed – we got it from, you know, “Like a Rolling Stone” – the Dylan song, and it was actually “Mystery Tramp” –

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: – but I – we heard it wrong. Anyhow, so we started writing songs, and I just realized over the years that the process is pretty much the same. You know, that’s the way I make stuff.

MR. BERKSON: Well, you commented on the – I don’t know – it was the 32-bar song.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Well, anyway, you know, you’re supposed to –

MR. NAGLE: Prescribed format.

MR. BERKSON: Standard forms for music – pop song format –

MR. NAGLE: Right, verse, chorus, you know, whatever. Verse, chorus.

MR. BERKSON: being comparable to the cup as a –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it’s a prescribed format that you work within, and I think one of the things that we’ve talked about before was, again, the people that I seem to like, whether it would be Morandi, who took a very simple format, which he basically developed and just kept honing it down until it got more and more and more to the essence – the stuff that he did before he died was – that was the best shit. I mean, he just said, “Oh, this is the essence” then. The same thing with, you know, songwriting. I mean, how much can you say in as few words as possible, having a traditional format? I mean, Albers, the same thing. Basically the same format and putting together a relationship. That always appealed to me for some reason. I mean, there’s other artists who I admire, say a guy like Bruce Nauman, who I think is great, who does all kinds of different stuff. I mean, my way of doing different stuff is, you know, going between a song and a cup and a this and a that or whatever. I was always interested in –

MR. BERKSON: So what eventually happened after that experience in the ‘70s, where music took over for a while –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – because it was a way of, for one thing, making a living –

MR. NAGLE: Mm-hmm.

MR. BERKSON: – is that you kind of made room for both of them in tandem.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah, I did.

MR. BERKSON: You keep doing – you keep doing the music, just like you keep doing the –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, except I’m not doing too much music now –

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh.

MR. NAGLE: – although I just – I think the last time I was in the studio was around Christmastime. My ex-music partner has got a big – you know, got a nice studio in Mill Valley, and so we recorded stuff that I think was probably the stuff that I liked the best of what I had written, which was done in the early ‘70s – ‘73, ‘74. It was kind of a, you know, good – you know, well, ‘74 on, ‘75, is when a lot of people were recording my stuff, and then there’s just a whole other bunch, really personal kind of songs that I really still respond to, and we’re, kind of, redoing those. And he said, oh, we’re going to do a song a year. [Laughs.] I don’t know if I’ll live that long, but anyway, I’m still doing it. You know? If somebody said, “Hey, write me a song about blah, blah, blah,” I’d be – you know, I’d be thrilled to sit down and do it. But, you know, between having a kid who’s now going to be going to college and teaching – and then my show schedule is just brutal. I mean, I’ve been doing three shows a year for the last, I don’t know, gawd, eight years or something now, and so I don’t have as much time. But – [END TAPE 1 SIDE B.] – sometimes I’ll do it at school. You know, I’ve got a little sound room there, and sometimes for my graduate seminar we’ll collectively write a song. I mean, I still love it. I still keep up with what’s going on; I still buy music all the time and the advantage of having younger assistants is they keep me, sort of turn me on to what’s happening, although I sometimes know more than they do.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, or your daughter does or –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah. But I'm still – I'm still a huge fan. I wish I could spend more time doing it. And I will. I'll go over once in a while. I know a couple of guys that have studios, and do it for kicks. Anyway.

MR. BERKSON: Well, let's talk about – since I think we have enough time, let's talk about the assistants, because they wanted me to ask about the working process.

MR. NAGLE: Sure.

MR. BERKSON: And it's funny; I always thought that you worked totally alone.

MR. NAGLE: In essence I do, but over the years there's stuff – I do have – I do have assistants for basic stuff. It took me a long time to get to where I could do that, and I would say in general I do work pretty much alone. But there's a lot of mechanical, if you will, or technical stuff that I – you know, that can save me time. Also I've had assistants that take care of the rest of my life – I mean, whether it's doing my taxes or, you know, dropping off the laundry so I can just concentrate on my work. And each one of them has been great, and each one has brought their own sort of specialty to the table.

MR. BERKSON: Do these tend to be students?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, they're usually former students.

MR. BERKSON: Mills students or –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, former graduates.

MR. BERKSON: Former students.

MR. NAGLE: You know, or graduate students. And I –

MR. BERKSON: Do they come under the heading of apprentices or –

MR. NAGLE: Some would glean something from it besides getting paid. So I don't know if it's – but not really. I mean, I pay them, you know, relatively well, I think, and depending on their talents, I mean, I'll put them in charge of certain things, you know. I've sort of become more – it depends on the nature of the work. I mean, the work I'm doing now is, like, all cast, and there's a lot of models to be made and so forth, and it's just, the beginning and the end are fun but the middle is not, you know. I'd say, "Okay, do this, do that, whatever." I mean, now I'm working with doing things like – these bigger things I'm calling "snuff bottles," and the molds are so heavy I need two people to help me – I mean, it takes two people to move them.

So, it depends. If I'm sitting down just doing what I'll call, like, hands-on kind of stuff, where I'm doing just more of a meditative, direct way of working on the clay, then it's not – I don't always have people around. I should also say, if I'm in that frame of mind or whatever, I have the ability to kind of shut out whatever is going on around me, and somebody could be around, but I must also say that the people that I hire, they have to – you know, they have to be easy to be around and be very accommodating and give me the right kind of space. And fortunately, I've had people that could do that, because if there's somebody that's got some boundary issues or whatever, you know, "Out!" You know, I mean, it's not going to work.

MR. BERKSON: Do you have music playing in the studio?

MR. NAGLE: Always, constantly. Constantly.

MR. BERKSON: Your own choice? Not radio but CDs?

MR. NAGLE: I sometimes listen to the radio and sometimes I just really get into stations that I'm not crazy about, only by virtue of the fact that I can't get certain stations. But usually it's CDs, and there's certain favorites I have that I'll put on that I just, you know – that I know, okay, if I'm going to be doing something, I want to relax and not be distracted; I'm not going to have metal thrash or punk rock, you know? I mean, it's like – you know, one of my favorite pieces of music to relax to is the theme from *Chinatown*, the soundtrack from *Chinatown*. I don't know why. It could be *Clifford Brown With Strings*. It could be – I don't know, you name it. It could be classical, you know? I mean, a pretty wide variety of stuff.

MR. BERKSON: Okay, so the work is – when I last asked you about this, the work was starting with drawings on tracing paper.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Is that still pretty much your starting point?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. Usually they're not on tracing – they'll go – they'll go from – yeah, they'll go to tracing paper to tighten them up a little bit, but they could be on –

MR. BERKSON: Very small.

MR. NAGLE: Very small drawings. And –

MR. BERKSON: One or two inches high?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, like, you know, two or three – you know, like a notepad you'd get at a motel or something. I mean, you know, that type of thing. And I'll draw – I always feel – and this comes from, you know, the Morandi/Guston mentality that the essence of the piece is basically in that first few moments when you're just drawing it, when you're not thinking about it, or, you know, you're feeling it or something, but there's a sort of – I always draw when something else is going on. I don't sit down and grit my teeth and say, "Okay, now we're going to draw." I use either music or television, or I could be talking or something, you know? I mean, faculty meetings are great for that because I just sort of zone out. And so, yeah, I mean – you know. And then I'll go back and tighten them up with tracing paper and go and crop the best ones. And then, the best little investment I've made as far as a tool goes is, I got this little Xerox machine with – that blows them up, and so I can just take those small drawings and hit 400 percent, and then I'll look at them and say, okay, how does that look as an object in terms of scale? Too big? Too small? And from that point on, then I will actually mechanically translate those to three-dimensional models. That's for this particular –

MR. BERKSON: Taking clay.

MR. NAGLE: Well, I'll take clay, and from there – it's incredibly labor-intensive. So I'll actually make – again, going back to making things like model airplanes, I'll actually make a riblike structure using the profile of the pieces that I've blown up from the drawings, put clay around them, trowel to the edge of those skeletal ribs or –

MR. BERKSON: Like an armature.

MR. NAGLE: Like an armature, right. But I'll trowel to that. From there I take a silicon mold, dig out the clay in the armature. From there I'll pour in polyurethane two-part plastic and pull that out. And that'll give me a solid form. Then I go into my body-and-fender routine.

MR. BERKSON: That's your prototype.

MR. NAGLE: That's my prototype. Then I'll use Bondo and trick it out: sand it, fill it, eventually prime it with gray auto-body primer. I mean, I spend more time at the place called City Paints [1088 Howard Street], which is where I get all my art supplies –

MR. BERKSON: Bay City Paints?

MR. NAGLE: No, not Bay City. Well, I used to buy my paints there, too. No, it's called City Paints, and it's an auto-body supply place on Howard Street. And then, of course, Douglas & Sturges [730 Bryant Street], which has been around – and I buy all – you know, anyway, that's –

MR. BERKSON: Douglas & Sturges?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, and they've been around for the last – gawd, ever since I started almost. When I was doing those elicit materials at the Art Institute, that's where we got them. Anyway – and once that model is tricked out, then a plaster mold is made, and I have an assistant make those for me. And then I cast them, in this case, you know, either low-fire or porcelain. I've been doing a lot of them in porcelain, my current stuff, which I'll show you.

So it's a real long process, but the essence of the piece comes from that first drawing, where I'm not really thinking too much, and then I'll – you know, something will just pop into my head and say, okay, try that; you know, let's do that. I mean, the last drawings I did, which I'll probably do some – I've already started doing pieces from – well, I was – just got back from England, and I was on the train, you know? So you're watching – I got what I'll call peripheral cognition or something, you know; something else is going on but not enough to distract you. I used to do a lot of songwriting in the car, not – it's kind of dangerous because I usually had a joint in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other one. [Laughs.] And then I'd have the band track on the – on my, you know, cassette machine with just the music, and then I would have a little mini-recorder and I would just bark stuff into it as I was driving down the coast, and you know, like, whatever would pop into my head, or a melody or something. So I – you know, I think that works a lot better.

MR. BERKSON: The studio is very, very – for one thing, it's compact.

MR. NAGLE: Yes, it is. I always – every time something goes wrong, the first thing that comes to my mind is, that wouldn't happen if I had a bigger studio.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: So –

MR. BERKSON: But everything – it's very neat. Everything is sort of laid out –

MR. NAGLE: Sometimes, yeah. I mean, I have a little place I call the perch, you know, where I sit there and that's my –

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: – that's my main place of work.

MR. BERKSON: That's one reason why I couldn't imagine anybody else in here, like assistants.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I know, it's pretty tight, but it's got to be the right person, you know? I've got a good guy now; I've got a couple of good people, but the guy that actually comes, he actually – he works at the UC museum doing installation, and he's just – he just had a show – two of my assistants just had shows downtown. His name is Seth Koen, and he's got the right sensibility. He gets it, you know? But, yeah, again a former Mills student.

MR. BERKSON: So then there's the model parts box?

MR. NAGLE: Oh – [laughs] – the model parts box, very observant. Well, I sometimes cannibalize parts and stuff. But the models – most of the stuff I'm doing now, they wouldn't go in the model parts box. [Laughs.] That's for – that was for –

MR. BERKSON: I didn't remember what the model parts box is, but I wrote it down –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, well –

MR. BERKSON: Wasn't it some toenail, glued on plastic?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: All these things come from the model parts box.

MR. NAGLE: Well, no, I mean, I have to make them first, you know. Actually I just threw away – I threw away probably 90 percent of what was in those boxes. I saved a few things. But I did have a show of my models, and when I did the "Bay Area Now" show ["Bay Area Now 2," November 20, 1999 – February 13, 2000, Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco, CA], I was drawing the models.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: I actually liked that show. It just sort of boiled it down to the essence.

MR. BERKSON: The models are the same thing as the prototypes.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, right, right, right. And they – for certain pieces, like the "thin fins," they're actually constructed of a variety of parts, hence the parts box. But the stuff I'm doing now, these – I'm calling them snuff bottles, which are sort of figurative actually. And that's my newest deal; that's for my next show in October with Garth. And I'll probably show those here also in January, a similar group of things.

MR. BERKSON: When does it open in October?

MR. NAGLE: Like the 7th or something.

MR. BERKSON: I'll be in town. I'll get to see it.

MR. NAGLE: So, anyway, there are these bigger things, and I call them snuff bottles, because they have those little caps at the top that are kind of like the traditional Chinese snuff bottle, and they're sort of simple. But they're figurative-looking. Some of them are actually kind of, you know, erotic or they look like body parts, and – well, you'll see.

MR. BERKSON: The process is now very different from what it used to be?

MR. NAGLE: Well, it's just more –

MR. BERKSON: From where you began –

MR. NAGLE: It's evolved and gotten more refined and more fanatical – that part of the process. And I'll go from that, and then I'll just hit the wall and say, I'm so sick of doing this; I just want to get a little hunk of clay and pinch it out, and I do that, too. And I probably, hopefully, maybe have some of those – I'm not sure for New York, but I think for my show here.

I just did a thing at Kent State about a month ago, and just sat down with some red clay and had a group of students around and just shot the shit with them while I was pinching these things out. And I had done those before, and I'll probably go back and do those again. That kind of renewed my interest. So I'll go back and forth between these two things. I sort of think of a hands-on thing; they're almost like three-dimensional drawings in the sense that they come from the same place, they're just direct, and they kind of go where they want to go, and it sort of has the qualities of what attracts most people to clay in the first place, which is its malleability and directness, which this other process I'm talking about has none of. I mean, it has it in the beginnings with the drawings, but –

So, you know, I've got – kind of got two different ways of working; sometimes a combination of the two, but usually, you know, you have these involved models with the casting and the whole deal, or just sitting down and making what I call my hands-on stuff, you know, sort of glorified pinch pots. I mean, the pinch pot was the first – the first thing you would do when you took 101 ceramics, you know? You get a ball of clay and you just pinch, you know? And I remember out at State they had art education out there, and so they were trying to introduce people that were going to teach art – they weren't artists but they would teach art to grammar school kids or something, and everybody would get a ball of clay, and they'd say, "Okay, now, close your eyes and feel it," you know? [Laughs.] "You're peeking! I saw you." "I didn't." "Close them." You know, and that was the pinch pot. And that's – that's the first thing you would learn. I mean, I don't teach that anymore, but, you know. But that's kind of, like, still there's a big draw there for me just pinching out a piece of terra-cotta or something. So that's sort of – it was a response, or my rebellion against all this incredible, fanatical process that I use to make, you know, the other –

MR. BERKSON: A lot of the process has always come from some kind of response or – even, sort of, an interpretation of the material you were working with.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: So that when – I mean, when did you start? In the early '90s you started using porcelain.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And what's the porcelain difference?

MR. NAGLE: It has a different quality about it. It's very unforgiving in terms of how it responds. It's either it's wet or it's dry. It's the weirdest stuff in the world, but it has a quality about it and a density in terms of the material that's very appealing to me. But one of the other things I've been doing a lot lately in the last several years is adding tons of color to the porcelain itself, so that the color is actually in the clay body. So I may take a gallon of slip and add a pound of stain to it, which is, like, you think this couldn't be done and still be clay and cast, but it seems to be working. I've also been using doll porcelain a lot, which, you know, has these various, quote, flesh colored, and making stuff out of that, casting it. You could never work with it kind of in a direct way, but you can cast it and – depending on which porcelain I'm using it – you know, some of it's, you know, like pretty – you know, slumps and starts to distort in the firing. Other stuff doesn't.

But the quality that it has is – it's not the same quality as putting a coat of glaze on top. So I'll cast these things and then put a clear glaze on it, and it's just – the color is right there in the clay. It just has a different feel. And it's really quite intense and quite unified. And a lot of it does have a kind of car-like look, if you will. I mean, it's just a different quality. I don't know, it just appeals to me.

MR. BERKSON: It has the sheen of the lacquer.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, kind of. You know, I mean, it's like the color is just coming in the body, you know? I don't know quite how else how to put it. And then there's the clear on the top. But it does have a very – just a different quality than low-fire or layering of china paints. It's a different deal.

So, yeah, I've been using that a lot lately; that's what I'm doing now. It's not without its problems technically.

There's always something that's going to bite you in the ass when you least expect it. [Laughs.] It's, I don't know why I do this. But anyhow, I guess because nobody else is, you know? I mean, it's fun to do that, come up with something that – anyway.

MR. BERKSON: Have any of your students ever – or assistants – ever turned you on to a technique or material that you hadn't –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I'm sure they have. You know, I say that one of the fun parts of teaching is you can always tell people to do stuff that you don't either have time or not – or the inclination to do yourself. Yeah, go ahead and do that, you know.

MR. BERKSON: And see how it works out.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, see if it works out. And, you know, usually it does. I mean, I'm not doing it to be perverse or anything, I mean, to send them on a wild goose chase, so to speak. But –

MR. BERKSON: Do you pretty much find that – I mean, since you've been teaching – you've been teaching rather long, actually.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, for 42 years.

MR. BERKSON: Except for the – that dry spell.

MR. NAGLE: Except for that dry spell, when Richard couldn't get me a job at the Art Institute and Fred Martin wouldn't let me in.

MR. BERKSON: But, you know, it seems like it's become part of the process.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it is, you know. I mean – yeah – everything that I do in my studio I show my students, and it's not to produce clones; it's to help facilitate what they're doing. And a lot of the methods that I use in my model making – I mean, I would say 95 percent of the people that come to Mills as ceramic students graduate doing something else. I mean, they'll do it plastic or rubber or you name it. I mean, I share that with them, because I don't really have any secrets. I mean, it's what you do with it. And at the same time I can't say that anybody's doing what I'm doing, I mean, because I'm not interested in that and nor are they. Whatever I know how to do, I'll say, okay, here's what I think – here's how I think you can do this and make it be most effective in terms of your own idea. So, I mean, in that sense – but I'm sure there's stuff that students have turned me on to that I didn't know about, or in the process of teaching have come across that I probably wouldn't have if I was just working in a vacuum. So –

MR. BERKSON: What about the aspect of what you once called unpredictability, which is maybe something built into certain materials or just something that you insist on as – or do you, as part of your process – you don't know where something's going to – you know, like where a series is going to go –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – or the next idea is going to come from.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. What about that?

MR. BERKSON: Well, I wrote that down "unpredictability" next to the question that was on the format –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, okay.

MR. BERKSON: – which is "Is there an element of play in your process?"

MR. NAGLE: Oh, sure.

MR. BERKSON: Or finished work of art –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, like I say, the fun part –

MR. BERKSON: With Ron Nagle, it goes without saying.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, well, no. I mean, so – you know, there's the beginning, which is always unpredictable. I don't know where these things are going to pop into my head. I would say, you know, a lot of times I'll just redefine what I've done, you know, 30 years ago. I mean, whether it's the box pieces I did in '69 and now I'm – I said I could make this better and I know how to get to the essence of that better, or whether it's – you name it. I mean,

these snuff bottles I'm doing now came probably from these little – I did these little kind of Morandiesque jars in the '60s, and, you know – like '63, '64, and those eventually evolved into the last thing in the world I thought, which is, you know, these, sort of, figurative bottles, which kind of grew out of heart shapes, which I've always been drawn to. I mean, now I'm wearing – so I was married on Valentine's Day.

But anyway, they have this kind of heart-shaped thing, but they also look like busts or asses or the top part of a figure. Now they kind of look like – you know, like, almost like a dress at the bottom. I'll show you. I mean, I never – nobody could ever predict that they would evolve, but that's the fun of doing something, is to watch these things. So there is that unpredictability. I would never have thought that they were going to go in that direction. And so, to be surprised by that and watch the work evolve in ways that I never expected is half the reason for doing it, you know. Even though the process is very labor-intensive and so forth, how the ideas themselves evolve is, like, really the fun part of doing it, you know.

MR. BERKSON: In terms of those ideas then, also, thinking of the different people that you've mentioned who are, you know, reference points or inspirations or influences that range is pretty international, but one of the things that the Smithsonian wanted me to ask about was whether you felt that you were part of an international tradition or one that's particularly American.

MR. NAGLE: I would say it's probably American, even though my influences are international in terms of Japanese ceramics.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, but there's sort of something American about that, too.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I mean, I would even – you know, some people say, okay, well, you know, you're a California artist. I know I am, I think, you know.

MR. BERKSON: I think the gist is probably whether you feel particularly tied to an American craft tradition.

MR. NAGLE: No, I don't. I certainly don't that, at all. In fact, I would sort of rebel against it in a sense because I'm in this, sort of, sphere of ceramics and I have a, sort of, a support base there and people have been nice to me in that area, I mean, you know, I – you know, I'm not going to diss it, you know, but I don't really relate to it as such – occasionally, you know, rebel against it or make my feelings known about how limited I think it is.

MR. BERKSON: It's a whole area that we'll get into –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, sure.

MR. BERKSON: – for sure next time –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – because there are a number of questions that they want to ask about that, you know, which also comes into the business of where – not so much that movement or craft versus art but how it works to the advantage of the pieces.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. Well, my main goal is to keep working. I mean, I – if somebody, whether it's a craft audience or a craft gallery or whatever, whatever it takes, if I sell the work – and I'm not saying I'll do anything to sell stuff, but, I mean, if I can sell a work and it enables me to keep working, that's my most important goal. In terms of international, in fact, you know, I would like to show my work internationally.

MR. BERKSON: Has that happened?

MR. NAGLE: It's starting to happen, yeah. I'm in collections – a couple of collections in Japan, and I, you know, was in a big show in Holland. The Stedelijk's [Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam] have got about five pieces that it bought many, many years ago.

MR. BERKSON: Did you go for that show?

MR. NAGLE: No, I didn't. Garth had this big Ceramic Millennium thing ["Precious" Garth Clark Gallery, Ceramic Millennium, Amsterdam, Netherlands, 1999]; I was all over the place, and I was really honored to be there. I went to Italy then to see the Morandi museum. I thought that –

MR. BERKSON: Oh, I wondered if you ever did that, in Bologna.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, oh, yeah. Man, it's heaven. Yeah, I went there in – I was – you know, went there twice, you know? I mean, it was like Mecca for me. And –

MR. BERKSON: But never when he was still around?

MR. NAGLE: No, no. This was just a couple of years ago. And so Garth – they had this big Ceramic Millennium thing in Holland, in Amsterdam, and there was a woman there – they're building a big ceramic museum and I'm supposed to do a big show some time, I don't know when, in the next couple of years, which will travel around Europe, hopefully.

MR. BERKSON: Organized by Garth Clark?

MR. NAGLE: Well, Garth will put it together, but there's a woman named Yvonne Joris, who's part of this thing called the Kruithuis [Kruithuis 's-Hertogenbosh, Netherlands] or something like that.

MR. BERKSON: J-O-R-I-S?

MR. NAGLE: I think. I can get the – you know. And they have about 15 pieces of mine. They're big fans. I mean, so there is some international –

MR. BERKSON: Have you ever been to Japan?

MR. NAGLE: No. I'd love to go. I'd like to apply, you know, for a Guggenheim to go to Japan sometime.

MR. BERKSON: You were just in France.

MR. NAGLE: I was just in France. I do have a – I have a piece in a collection in France.

MR. BERKSON: What was the trip to France about?

MR. NAGLE: My wife said, do you want to go Paris? I said, yeah, okay – I mean, sure. And so they just put it together. I hate traveling. I cannot tell you how much I hate it. Once I'm there, maybe after three days, I start to acclimate.

MR. BERKSON: You never did anything like the residency Richard did at the Sêvres.

MR. NAGLE: No, no. If they asked me, I might. You know, I loved Paris. I mean, everybody was just wonderful. All that, sort of, anti-American and "the French are rude" and shit, I never saw any of it. Everybody was so helpful. I mean, there were certainly language problems, but not that much. And then we went to London and we did a whole thing there, my wife and I, and I saw more art, man, in the last month than I've seen in my whole lifetime, but, man, I just – it was like going to the Louvre, it was like going – it was back in my art history. It was like, wow, man, there's the *Raft of the Medusa*. You know, like when my kid and her friend, an art history major at Oberlin, and, you know, they posed – a nice picture. So I saw a lot of stuff. It was really – it was, you know, quite a thrill. But do I hate traveling. Gawd, I just hate it. I get depressed.

MR. BERKSON: So it's very infrequent, huh?

MR NAGLE: Yeah, it is.

MR. BERKSON: Is it just because you're away from the city?

MR. NAGLE: I'm a control freak. I think if I can't control what's going to happen, I think something bad is going to happen, you know, whether it's my dog at the dog sitter or my father's going to die when I'm away. I was raised in a very neurotic family, and my parents were never, ever on a plane. Never. And if you went away, something bad was going to happen. I don't know, it's just – it's the most fucked-up thing, and I get terribly depressed. I mean, plus the fact I can't sleep on the plane. So by the time I got there, I mean, I'm just totally dingy. We had a beautiful apartment in Paris, and –

MR. BERKSON: So you managed to enjoy the –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah, I mean, you know – and the same thing happened on the Italian trip. I mean, the most horrible thing that happened was the fucking Italian drivers. You know, that's all I could think about was that it was terrifying to me, and I was driving in that shit. In retrospect, I say, gawd, I sure saw some great shit. I mean, I remember most of the good stuff, you know. But I'm just not a good – I hate traveling. If you could travel first class and everything was taken care of for you, you know, no hitches, that would make it better –

MR. BERKSON: Yes.

MR. NAGLE: – for anybody. I mean, you know? I mean, I'm thinking, are we going to get to the airport on time? You know, I'm a punctuality maniac. I just – I can't – I'm like, okay, is that cab going to be there? Okay. But we're

getting a recorded message in French. We can't fix that. How are we going to do that? I mean, just wacky shit. And everything always goes wrong. And the first thing that happened to me – I mean, I've got to tell you. I get to the Paris airport, no fucking money, and the goddam ATM machine eats my card immediately. And I got a guy outside with the motor running ready to take us to Paris, and I'm freaking out. It took an hour to have some technician fish my card out, because I asked for too much money. I mean, they just take it. Anyway, sorry. [Laughs.] That's my little thing. But I love to be in new places. I thought Paris was wonderful. I had a great time.

MR. BERKSON: When you go to those places, do you – you go to the museums –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Do you, you know –

MR. NAGLE: I did all the tourist stuff.

MR. BERKSON: – responsibly search out ceramic work?

MR. NAGLE: No.

MR. BERKSON: No?

MR. NAGLE: Never. Just painting. [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: I mean, did you go to the Asian museum? Was that reopened, the Guimet –

MR. NAGLE: No.

MR. BERKSON: – when you were in Paris? No?

MR. NAGLE: Geez, I should have done that.

MR. BERKSON: Well, they do have a great Asian museum. I don't know –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. No, I did all of it. You know, I did – you know.

[Cross talk.]

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. See, all the good stuff, all the really great Japanese pottery, never gets out of Japan.

MR. BERKSON: Ah.

MR. NAGLE: They won't let it out.

MR. BERKSON: Uh-huh.

MR. NAGLE: I mean, there's tea bowls there that are like – you know, the Vermeer, the Rembrandt or the –

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: – you know, of tea bowls, you know, like Mount Fuji. And there's a couple of other classics that, man, they wouldn't let those travel. They're smart, you know?

Anyway, I mean, the other thing I was really amazed at when I went to the Louvre was, like, everybody was huddled around the *Mona Lisa*, and I turned the corner and, like, here's, like, *The Lacemaker* and *The Astronomer*. Nobody gives a shit about those paintings. It's like, what – man, this is it, right here is the bomb, you know. Nothing. There's nobody near them. And I'd gone all the way to Washington to see those paintings when the Vermeer show was up, which was just an outstanding experience.

MR. BERKSON: I saw it there, too.

MR. NAGLE: Wow!

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: And here they are just completely on their own side by side, nothing, nobody's around them. They're all hovering around *Mona*, you know, like – anyway.

[Audio Break.]

MR. BERKSON: Okay, resuming. This is Bill Berkson interviewing Ron Nagle at 25 Grand View Avenue, San Francisco, on July 9, 2003, continuing on tape number 2 for Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disk number 2.

I wanted to – I think we've been talking about process in the studio. And I wanted to continue that to talk about color. And since we were talking about the process, I was wondering at what point in the process do you begin to know or begin to feel what colors the piece will have?

MR. NAGLE: Well, probably not until the end, really. Sometimes color choices will be made based on, for lack of better words, prior successes. I mean, I'll say, okay, that worked before; I'll try it on this one. But usually I'll in some ways start off somewhat arbitrarily just as a challenge, like with a basic color idea, say, "Okay, this one's going to be basically red; this one's going to be basically whatever. Or, hey, I've never done a white one before." That type of thing. And then from that point on each subsequent color in the piece is built upon in a kind of sequential sense. I have no ulterior goal or whatever you want to call it, you know, in saying, okay, this piece is going to represent X emotion or it's going to be this. I mean, it's pretty much an intuitive process, just one color follows another, and depending on the nature of the piece – I usually I start off with one basic color and then everything builds from there.

MR. BERKSON: Does the shape of the piece suggest color?

MR. NAGLE: Not really, although in some cases if a shape suggests – for example, the pieces I'm working on now which I mentioned – you know, these snuff bottle things are figurative, and some of them are, you know, fairly suggestive in terms of, you know, erotic imagery, I mean, very subtle, but – well, my kid says not so subtle – but, I mean, so, you know, consequently I probably would not make that piece pink, for example. I mean, I would steer away from that as a conscious decision so as not to be heavy-handed or tip it too much in one direction. You know, that kind of thinking. So in that sense, shape will determine sometimes what color I don't want things to be. But usually I cast stuff – or try a bunch of color tests and then just see, you know? Well, there's – I've got one piece now, for example, I mean, that's – it just sort of reminds me of a Japanese helmet or kind of a Darth Vader look or whatever. And then that piece, for example, I consciously made, like, dark green, almost black. I mean, so sometimes it suggests things, yeah, yeah. Sometimes it does.

MR. BERKSON: But there's some way – well, you've said, for instance, that you don't want it to be – I think the expression was "just a paint job."

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: So actually the expression you used was to make the surface conditional to the piece –

MR. NAGLE: Correct, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – and the color is the surface.

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah. And so conditional to the piece means that it is a condition.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, well, you know, it's integrated into what the whole feel is going to be, I guess, yeah, rather than just, okay, yeah, paint. Yeah, so, you know, in that sense –

MR. BERKSON: You're not just adding paint to –

MR. NAGLE: No, I mean – you know, every little bit – every little color that's put on there or whatever is considered.

MR. BERKSON: It's part of its character.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it's part of the character, you know.

MR. BERKSON: So that if you have sort of a screwball character –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – it looks like the forms and the color is a screwball –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – or the piece is screwball, and it's not going to be, you know, extricable that the form would be

one thing and the color another thing.

MR. NAGLE: No, it's always integrated, but how it starts out – what the thing is going to look like in its totality, I never have an idea in front. It's always starting with one basic color. I mean, it's just like – I don't know. What's it like? Well, you know, like – did you ever see those TV shows where they have, like, you know, "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" and somebody just throws you a situation and then you just wing it from there, you riff from that point on? I mean, you're just given a context. And that's basically what I do is it's all intuitive.

MR. BERKSON: So it's a long, long process, but all of it is improvisational?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I would think – yeah, I think it is. I mean, I will get color ideas from a lot of sources. I mean, my favorite source in the past couple of years is I take this Japanese fashion magazine – it's fashion, slash, you know, good living. I mean, it's a real expensive magazine, beautifully produced, and they usually have something on pottery, food presentation, shots of clothes and stuff. And the colors in there are just incredible, and I'll just – I have a big stack of stuff, and I'll refer to stuff. Sometimes I'll – you know, like my wife called me up on the cell phone one day and said she was so excited, she'd seen these colors that she knew I would just be crazy about on a shopping cart down at Bell Market, you know. I mean, she says, you've got – and we went up there three times looking for it, you know. I mean, so – I mean, there's things – I see color everywhere, and I do see, you know – I'll say, okay, I'm going to use that, you know. So sometimes I do – like, will have a vague idea of just stuff from outside.

MR. BERKSON: A lot of it comes from, you know, some people call it pop culture, or you just think of it –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – as general culture.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, a lot of the early colors and maybe still new ones came, I remember you said, from this stucco –

MR. NAGLE: Right. I mean, there's a certain power –

[Cross talk.]

Yeah, definitely. And I lean towards certain colors. I mean, there's no question. I mean, people, I think – or I, you know, associate with, you know, brighter colors or pastels or whatever, but actually my favorite palette is really more of what I'll call the Japanese palette, with the dark browns and olive greens and blacks and so forth that you might see in a tea room. Those are harder to pull off. And, you know, for some reason people aren't as receptive or I haven't been able to do it properly yet or something. But, I mean, if I had my way about it – I mean, you know, like from these magazines I'm talking about, I've got stacks of stuff, and they're all these tans and browns and, you know, dark olive greens and dark green. You know, like they're really down. Maybe with a little zinger of Shibui, you know, maybe just a little edge of something else. And that's the stuff I actually prefer. There's some great Morandi paintings that are, like, these chocolate browns, the colors of the buildings you see in Italy.

MR. BERKSON: Tonal colors.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, you know, like terra-cotta, but sort of pink but not quite, and earthy – very down. And I – emotionally I respond to those a lot, you know, much more than I do just, you know, bright, sort of, hot rod colors and stuff, but it's harder to pull off.

MR. BERKSON: And then you'll set one against the other –

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: You'll set a very subtle tone against an iridescent.

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: It would be like a sunrise or sunset color.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And I often feel that you can have those changes on the surface of the piece, and the changes will sometimes be like you're crossing time zones as you –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – as you –

MR. NAGLE: I know what you're saying –

MR. BERKSON: – as your eye goes across the piece, you know?

MR. NAGLE: Uh-huh.

BERKSON: And particularly where it seems like, okay, this edge is where the sun is coming up.

MR. NAGLE: Uh-huh.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, like over there is Asia, and back here –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. No, you know, I know you've said that. I mean, that's interesting, and it does kind of feel like that, I guess. Yeah, nothing I do is all – you know, is totally conscious. I mean, there's always – you know, if it feels right, I'll do it, you know? So anyway –

MR. BERKSON: Did you feel that your experience with all those visits to L.A., did the L.A. color – did the color of L.A. finish – [inaudible] – get into it –

MR. NAGLE: Well, yeah, I think that, yeah, it did. I think that –

MR. BERKSON: You said it was Bengston who –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, well, Bengston I think was – you know, in the '60s was doing really great color, and he – you know, my favorite stuff of his was these very –

MR. BERKSON: A lot of that just came out of car culture –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it – yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – which was broader than just L.A. or San Francisco. I mean, it was really sort of –

MR. NAGLE: It was.

MR. BERKSON: – American pop culture.

MR. NAGLE: Right. And then there's, you know, surfboard art and – I mean, you know, colors and – again, it was never conscious, you know. My favorite stuff of Bengston's was like, again, these very dark green and, you know, ochre and stuff that wasn't the bright zappy stuff. The same thing with Albers. I think they're great, but I'm not as nuts about them as these oddball combinations. It's just, like, how the hell did those things get together? They'd evoke a different kind of – they're just unusual and shouldn't work, but they do, you know.

Anyway – but, yeah, I would say that there was more of an acceptance of a certain palette, let's say, in L.A., you know, as opposed to up here or, you know, in New York or whatever. I mean, it was a different kind of -- it's okay to use those colors; it's not lame and it's not – and it was very pop-oriented. It came from other sources besides, you know, art from art, let's say. I mean, it came from other, you know –

MR. BERKSON: Yeah –

MR. NAGLE: So using, you know, bubble gum pink against lime green against what have you.

MR. BERKSON: Some people see that as the content of the work. I mean, I think that Charlotte Moser wrote at some point that all of your pieces are metaphors for social history ["Ron Nagle, Mills College Art Gallery." *Art in America*. May 1994, p. 125].

MR. NAGLE: Well, that sounds good. [Laughs.] Yeah, I mean, it is like that. I mean, ever since I was, you know, a kid I've always – I mean, even before I was an artist, I was always very conscious of, you know, how I was dressing and, you know – and went through a period when I was in grammar school where there was the fluorescent craze. I don't know if you remember that. And I had every fluorescent thing, and I was so obnoxious about it I actually got beat up for wearing it in school. [Laughs.] But, you know – but I was, you know, okay, I'm going to have a lime green, you know, beanie or watch cap, and my socks are going to be bright pink, and I was always thinking in those terms, you know. I mean the baby blue of a zoot suit, you know, against a yellow tie or –

MR. BERKSON: Remember when we first talked about that remark of Charlotte Moser's, that you remembered

knotty pine versus gas-chamber green –

MR. NAGLE: Right, yeah, yeah, because my –

MR. BERKSON: – about your father's painting your bedroom.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah, and that's a story I always tell when I show my slides.

MR. BERKSON: Well, what was it again?

MR. NAGLE: Well, he had said that – everybody in my neighborhood had a rumpus room, or a basement room, that they used to party in. Well, they didn't call it "party" – I mean, to have parties and listen to Frankie Laine records and have streams of crepe paper. And they were always paneled in knotty pine, and I thought, well, that was really cool, and that represented – to me knotty pine represented a certain kind of freedom and counterculture if you will, because my parents never drank or anything at the time and never had parties and never listened to – [END TAPE 2 SIDE A.] – pop music. So I thought – I wanted my room in knotty pine, and when my sister was born, I moved downstairs to the basement room, and my father built the room, and he painted it gas-chamber green, which he had heard was – he read *Reader's Digest*, it said that – it was a color that he read that science had proved to be calming to mental patients, which is –

MR. BERKSON: [Laughs.] Was it really described in the magazine –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – as gas-chamber green?

MR. NAGLE: No, no, I call it that. Other people would call it landlord green or whatever. It was – actually I think it's the color that most frequently is called sea foam green, and it was this really hideous, pale, pastel green. And I absolutely hated it, and I was always very bummed out that I never got the knotty pine that I wanted. He said we couldn't afford knotty pine and that this was a calming color, which turned out later, I think, they proved that that wasn't; actually pink was more calming. But that was a girl's color. You couldn't have that in your room. [Laughs.]

Anyway – but all of – that whole palette – I mean, my whole neighborhood was, you know – and even when I did my last show, I drove around that neighborhood and actually started taking pictures of buildings, at least kickoff points for color, the building and so forth, and the shapes and so forth. So, yeah, I mean, definitely. And I absolutely hated those colors, and when I was a kid, I thought – I always said I wanted to live in a Victorian house.

MR. BERKSON: The colors of the buildings?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, and the shapes and everything. I mean, now I think it's great, and I mean –

MR. BERKSON: You wanted to live in a painted lady?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. Oh, yeah, and actually I sort of did. I mean, I moved – when I first got married, I had a place in the Haight – pre-hippie Haight – on Delmar Street. And it was sort of a little – sort of a quasi-Victorian place, and I thought, wow, this is it, and I had grass mats on the floor and shoji screens. And this is when Cost Plus first started, and so this was my idea of Bohemia and my rebellion against stucco and that whole pastel deal, which I later embraced, as they say.

MR. BERKSON: Let's talk about coloring a cup.

MR. NAGLE: Uh-huh.

MR. BERKSON: When we're thinking about the pieces as cup forms –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – when they are, does the color take the cup further away from a utilitarian look?

MR. NAGLE: Well, as I said, the cup is just a format; it's just a point of departure, and sort of in some way or another – although I'm not doing cups right now; I'm doing these bottles, but –

MR. BERKSON: Or a bottle.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Or – yeah, “snuff bottles” or other – any –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. Does the color take it away from – yeah, in some ways. It’s just a format to see how much I could break it up or – I don’t know what would be said now, deconstruct or whatever; use, sort of, elements that could represent certain aspects of the cup, whether it be a handle or an opening at the top or the main part of the vessel or the foot. I don’t – I guess the – I guess the way that I’m using the color sort of takes it away from that, and it takes it away from being a straight cup, although I would think in the next year or so that will probably be one of the things I’m going to be doing, particularly since Garth is going to be having a huge cup show in, I don’t know, 2004 or ‘05. I’ll probably go back to a more traditional-looking cup, which will be probably fairly simple and actually look like – more like a cup. I’m sort of – and that’s sort of on the back burner, but I’ve been thinking about that a lot.

MR. BERKSON: I think it’s very complex, what happens in those pieces, whether it’s a cup or bottle, in terms of that sense of function, because –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – in another way, the color – a lot of the form that you put into it, the vestigial handles –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – or even if there’s a real, full-fledged handle, has to do with handling the thing –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – sitting here and touching it.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: And then the color and texture suggest and actually sort of encourage, and then also repel touch.

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: So you have these two things going on at once, which is you want to reach out and grab this thing, kind of like Price said, you know, a cup is scaled to the hand.

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: So you’d have that immediate relation –

MR. NAGLE: Right.

MR. BERKSON: – with the size of your hand and the size of this object. But then much of the feelings of the work has to do with this complicated emotion of, do I touch; don’t I touch?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Can I touch; should I touch?

MR. NAGLE: Well, you can if you buy it. [Laughs.] I mean, there is – depending on what pieces we’re talking about, I mean, there are some pieces – I mean, like these – the last stuff I did, these smooth wares, which are in the catalogue, where I’ve always – the thing that’s peculiar about ceramics, which I’ve mentioned before, is that you’ve got this hollow form which basically, sort of, at first appears to be solid, but in reality it’s an enclosed hollow, buoyant kind of form. So to even visually, as well as, let’s say, tactilely – whether you actually physically lift it up or not, I do enjoy the idea of having something that has got some of some kind of mass, but by virtue of things that I reveal, whether it’s a small hole at the top or the fact if you actually do lift it up, it’s, like, very light, you know? So there’s this funny kind of play back and forth.

And these are all things that are peculiar to the ceramic idiom. I mean, there’s not any other kind of form that really – you’ve got this hollow thing. It looks solid, but it’s actually lighter than it – so I do, you know, fool around with that as an idea. And certainly one of the things when people do pick them up, which I’m ambivalent about, I guess – I mean, I want them to, but yet I don’t, because I’m afraid they’re going to drop them. And then certain surfaces, as you say, you really shouldn’t, because you’re probably going to get fingerprints on them, I mean like the stucco surfaces. So there’s this funny kind of play back and forth that I’m aware of, yeah, that –

MR. BERKSON: But there’s what you also – as you mentioned before, maybe your daughter’s faster to see it, and even you are, you put this erotic charge on it –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – where you also make a cup into a kind of a body or a body part.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, there's definitely stuff there that comes from that, you know.

MR. BERKSON: It has references to genitalia.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Male and female.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Sometimes you think – I think you once said that you get into – this thing is alive and that it's insides are going to begin to spill out.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: So it's going to give birth.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Which is also, because of the look of it, the screwball form, very comical.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, humor is a big part of it. I mean, there's no – yeah.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, well, of course, a part of the humor is there's something slightly eerie or –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – you know, macabre.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, that's in there definitely. [Laughs.] I mean, I think of all the things I feel that I enjoy doing or that I'm halfway good at, probably humor is better – you know, I'm probably much – I'm more – most proud of my sense of humor, more than almost anything else. I mean, it's not like I consciously said, okay, I'm going to work on that, but I think I do have a pretty good – or at least I enjoy humor, and – I don't consciously try to put it in there, but I can't help myself, so – yeah, it's definitely there.

MR. BERKSON: Hot spots.

MR. NAGLE: Hot spots?

MR. BERKSON: Well, hot spots are like –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, oh –

MR. BERKSON: Places that maybe you want to touch, but you don't know –

MR. NAGLE: Oh. Oh, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – if you touch it what would happen or –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – you know, contested areas. [Laughs.]

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Well, I would say – I'd guess there's more eroticism than spirituality.

MR. NAGLE: Well, I'd like to think there's some spirituality. I know it sounds very pretentious. I don't know. I don't even – to this day I'm not quite sure what that means: spirituality.

MR. BERKSON: Maybe the spirituality is in the eroticism.

MR. NAGLE: Maybe. Or maybe it's – maybe I –

MR. BERKSON: Like in Hindu sculpture.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, maybe. I mean, spirituality for me is – I mean, it's good for my spirit to work on these things. I mean, I think that's what it is. I mean, if a certain kind of meditative quality happens or, you know, if somebody feels the same kind of thing as when I'm working on them at its best point. I mean, what I mean by that is, you know, some of it is just pure labor and it's not spiritual at all; it's just sanding a piece of plastic, you know. But there's a certain frame of mind that happens when one is working on things, which I think – a certain kind of depth of involvement and connection to the piece itself that I think if the work is good, is a work that I respond to, if I go back to Morandi again, you can just tell. There's something happened between the artist and the work, and hopefully, if that comes across or the viewer gets a sense of that or feels that, to me that's spiritual. I mean, it's something that's intangible, and you can tell it. I mean, I could tell it in students' work, who had never even worked before. You can tell the person who really got involved and was in that place, in the zone if you will, or deep into a certain kind of involvement, a connection, with the execution, and it kind of goes beyond just doing the – going through the motions. I mean, good work has that. It's just transcendent in terms of, like, it doesn't matter if it took you a minute or four weeks to make. There's a certain kind of other thing that goes beyond, you know – and I guess that's spiritual, you know. And so –

MR. BERKSON: And kind of what you call relaxed concentration?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Can you use that term?

MR. NAGLE: Lax –

MR. BERKSON: Relaxed concentration.

MR. NAGLE: Relaxed concentration. I don't know if I used it, but it's a good term. Yeah, that's what it is. It's just a deep involvement. Yeah, it's like an unassuming kind of connection with that – some people can do it, and some people can't. I mean, I don't know. The work I respond to I think has that. Hopefully – and that's what that – that's what I'm going for. So that part –

MR. BERKSON: Almost all those painters that you mentioned, whether it's Morandi or Albers or Rothko or –

MR. NAGLE: Ryder.

MR. BERKSON: – Ryder, have that sense of –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – or Vermeer.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: You know, a kind of meditative space –

MR. NAGLE: That's right.

MR. BERKSON: – have real silence in the work –

MR. NAGLE: That's what it is.

MR. BERKSON: – where things are spread out in some sort of orderly way, an often unexpected order, you know, become entirely visible, in what you would call a profile.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, Japanese work has that. If that's called spiritual, then that's what I'm responding to. I think the reason it appeals to me so much is because I'm basically a pretty hysteric kind of – I mean, I'm pretty nervous and pretty hyper and Type A and all that stuff, so when I actually see stuff that has that other quality, I will just go right to it; it's appealing to me. And to try to make stuff like that – it's the only time, when I'm working, the only time where I actually am relatively patient. I mean, in the long run, I guess I'm patient in terms of certain kinds of things, but, I get – things annoy me very – you know, I'm easily annoyed and distracted, whatever. Once I sit down to work, I'm in a whole other place, and, you know, hopefully it shows, you know? So it's my salvation really. [Laughs.] I used to do it, drinking and taking drugs and all that other stuff, but I have actually – I got lucky and found I could do it without doing that – and so I'm very connected to it when I sit down and start working.

MR. BERKSON: There is a set of questions about your work in relation to the craft versus art issue –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – which may be –

MR. NAGLE: Here we go again.

MR. BERKSON: – may be aggravating.

MR. NAGLE: No, that's all right. I mean, I'm more than –

MR. BERKSON: But I guess the question that occurs to me, is this – is that really an issue or a problem for you as much as it is kind of a goad, because I think what you've done is take the issue of utilitarian objects and made it sort of, in a way, the nerve center of the work.

MR. NAGLE: Uh-huh.

MR. BERKSON: Or maybe it's more like the, you know, the lower spine – [laughs] –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – and built from there.

MR. NAGLE: Well, I mean, it seems to be a bigger issue for other people than it is for me. I mean, sometimes I don't know the difference, and I don't even know whether it matters, except there is, as we talked about earlier, this high-low thing. There's a whole hierarchical deal about the way things are perceived that I think frequently gets in the way of people being able to enjoy or see stuff and so forth. And it also – let's face it – has a lot to do with how much money you get for one – for your work. I mean, if it's craft, it's X amount, and if it's art, then it's something else, and if you straddle the line like many of us do, then it's sort of in-between. So, yeah, I have a problem with it in that sense.

MR. BERKSON: You sort of developed this strategy where if you put a piece of yours out in the world – or a set of pieces, you call them "wares."

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, which is a term that Kenny Price had used too, but I mean, it means that – yeah.

MR. BERKSON: But I mean, in a way, that solves the vessel problem.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, yeah, right, you know.

MR. BERKSON: Where it puts it on another plateau –

MR. NAGLE: Well, somebody said, what's the difference between a pot and a vessel, and I say, about $5,000 – [laughs] – but it's actually more like 10 [thousand dollars] now, which is good. [Laughs.] I have been lucky. My priorities, even though I think of myself as probably a really good craftsman, that's not my priority. It's whatever it takes to make the piece believable and have the feeling I want, you know? And, in terms of how I learn stuff or what inspires me or what my priorities are, even though I have a certain degree of credibility in the so-called craft world – I'm not denouncing that, but it's not my – it's not the tradition in some ways that I come from. I mean, some – I just read something recently that said, well, you know, up until – I don't know when it was – you know, the Japanese didn't have a word for fine art, or something, you know. And, yeah, it's like what's that all about. One time I saw this Japanese helmet show at the Asian Art Museum, ["Kawari Kabuto: Spectacular Helmets of Japan," December 17, 1985 – January 26, 1986, San Francisco, CA] -- did you see that show? Man, was it good.

MR. BERKSON: Yes, I did, yeah.

MR. NAGLE: Beautiful, you know? Was it art? Is it craft? Is it just headwear? Who cares? It just doesn't matter. I mean, it's like one of the best things visually I had ever seen in my life. And there's all these priorities, you know, that went through, like, well, you've got to see the hand of the artist. Man, I will take the car off the fucking assembly line and it will move me just as much as some guy running his fingers through a hunk of mud. To me emotionally it's just as satisfying. It has got nothing to do with that. It's like, what's effective. So, anyway, but the whole art/craft thing, the only problem I have with it is it getting in the way of people seeing the work properly and getting paid properly, frankly.

MR. BERKSON: How about simply the matter of clay?

MR. NAGLE: Sure.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, in terms of the strengths and the limitations of the medium –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – for you?

MR. NAGLE: Well, it's certainly limited, but it's also immediate, although most of the time I don't do it and make it in an immediate way, except maybe in the beginning, I was going back and making these little hands-on pieces I – that's immediate. I mean, I certainly enjoy working in it.

MR. BERKSON: You have never been tempted to step out of it and make –

MR. NAGLE: Just make them in plastics?

MR. BERKSON: – steel sculpture or –

MR. NAGLE: No, not –

MR. BERKSON: – fiberglass –

MR. NAGLE: But – yeah, occasionally.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: I'm just not – I don't think I'd just be good enough at it, and it's – to this day I couldn't tell you why I'm not doing that. I mean, as much as I made jokes about people being, particularly in the craft world – being purists about what kinds of materials can go with what or what could be done in what, I think I – deep inside, there probably is some sort of a purist in me also, that, to make this believable or whatever you want to say, it has to be made out of clay; it's not going to look right if I paint it in lacquer. There's a slight difference. There's a slight surface difference and feel difference, and it just doesn't quite add up in terms of the idiom I'm, sort of, working in, you know? So yeah, occasionally I have been tempted, but –

MR. BERKSON: What does it do? What are some of the things that are most enjoyable about clay – about working with clay?

MR. NAGLE: I will be honest with you: not a lot. [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: That's what I thought.

MR. NAGLE: I mean, the directness, when I'm working right in the clay. I mean, I have been doing this so long that I really don't have a choice.

MR. BERKSON: It comes to your hand.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it comes – but, as I say, I'll do everything other than clay, and the clay is – the cast pieces is the very last thing I do, you know? It's just – it gives me a particular kind of look, and I'm trying to – I guess, in some ways trying to do something that quite hasn't been done in ceramics, or build on a tradition in a way, or deviate from it. I don't know. And I'm sort of stuck here, and I don't mind that so much, but it's extremely frustrating. It's the most – in some ways, the most unforgiving stuff in the world. You never know when – after 15 firings it's going to come out and you've got a crack or a piece of porcelain's going to warp and a little dent in the surface is going to drive me nuts, you know? I mean, I'm a control freak, let's face it. I think it's pretty evident by what I'm doing. And there's – I don't know why. I mean, you know, people ask me, and my wife says, "Well, why are you doing this? I mean, it's driving you nuts." I don't know, you know; because I'm pretty good at it, I guess, by this time, but it's not easy. I mean, the fun part, as I said, is the beginning and the end. You know, the last firing, I pull it out, I glue the foot on: "Oh, wow, hey, looks pretty good." And you sort of withhold any kind of enthusiasm until that very last, whatever it is – glue job or the last firing or whatever. That's satisfying.

Drawing them is fun; that's pretty effortless. Working directly is pretty good. But, man, it's – this medium is a big pain in the ass, and it's so indirect in other ways. I mean, I put the color on, you put it in the kiln, you have got to wait. I mean, right now, as we speak, I'm waiting for the kiln to cool off so I can get another firing in. I mean, how – man, how odd is that? I mean, because in other ways, you know, if you're making music or something, you record it, boom, you play it back, yeah, it sounds good, doesn't sound, whatever; it's direct, you know? And I use other – I guess, other ways of doing things in, you know, music or, you know – that are more direct. This is – it's extremely frustrating. I mean, half – most of it I hate, really, the process, but it's the only way I can get it to look the way I want it to look. And so, there's a lot of labor and a lot of time and a lot of process, which I feel in the long run shouldn't show at all in the piece. It's got nothing to do with the value of the piece. People – when I'm talking about my work, a potential collector or buyer, you always have to throw that in: "Well, you know, that has got 20 firings." They're like, "Oh, you get paid by the firing, I see." – [laughs] – yeah, that's it, you know. I mean, but it should have nothing to do with it. I always say if I could wish them into being, I would

do it that way, but I can't. [Laughs.] So, I just have to do them, and it takes a long time. Anyway –

MR. BERKSON: When you go to conferences like the SOFA [Sculpture Objects and Functional Art] Conference, you know, when you went to Florida –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, mm-hmm.

MR. BERKSON: – now, a lot of those people are, I suppose – would they be called potters, I mean, or people who – or they are studio pottery people?

MR. NAGLE: Well, they're more, I think – well, some of them might be, but a lot of the – a lot of people – I mean, SOFA is just a venue to sell stuff in the craft realm. And it's not just ceramics; it's furniture and glass and jewelry and all the rest of it. In this particular case –

MR. BERKSON: So most of them are artists who work in those medias?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, they're sub-craft artists or artists who work in the sub-mediums – [laughs] – if you will. And –

MR. BERKSON: Do you find – you know, are there a lot of people who would be in a convention like that that –

MR. NAGLE: Or NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts] is probably another thing, which is the conference where all the ceramic people get – I'm sorry to interrupt you. Go ahead.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, no, go ahead.

MR. NAGLE: Same kind of thing. But I – what was the question?

MR. BERKSON: You know, do you feel attached to a community within that –

MR. NAGLE: No.

MR. BERKSON: – with that broad body of artists?

MR. NAGLE: No, uh-uh, I don't. I mean, I'm not putting them down, but I think their priorities – I think that's – I think it's changing, but I think the tradition and their priorities are maybe somewhat different than my own. It's not like I'm mad at them or don't like them, and they certainly seem to like me, and that's fine. But I – I'm not really part of any community. I'm not – I don't hang out. I don't go to openings, I don't have a lot of artist friends. I have a few, and people I teach with, and so forth. But I'm just – I'm just, kind of, on my own little – [laughs] – island, and that's okay with me. I mean, more of my friends are musicians. The people that I'm closer to are producers and writers and guys that have music studios, and there's a much less pretentious, sort of, element to that. I mean, you know, we communicate on a much more intuitive level, or – and the enthusiasm for the – for a good record or something that has just got another level to it, that it, you don't find and – I don't know. So –

MR. BERKSON: Do you go to annual gatherings such as Super Mud?

MR. NAGLE: I have been to Super Mud and been –

MR. BERKSON: What is Super Mud?

MR. NAGLE: Super Mud was a sort of a precursor, maybe, to NCECA in a sense. It was a – they're all conventions, and everybody gets together and get fucked up in their hotel room all night and hang out. And I have had probably one of the most memorable nights I remember, was Super Mud, and it was the first time that Kenny Price had agreed to do one of these things, and he and I sat on – along with Richard Shaw – the Spode line. You know, they made Spode pottery. I don't know if you – well, anyway, it's a particular kind of very traditional, proper English pottery. And we sat there with the Spodes or whoever, these guys dressed up in English costumes –

MR. BERKSON: How do you spell Spode?

MR. NAGLE: S-p-o-d-e, I think. It's a particular line of porcelain. And we just made – made stuff, made cups and so forth. And I remember after the end of it these guys – you know, they said, "Well, what do you want to do with the stuff you made?" And I said, "Oh, you know, whatever." And they just enjoyed the hell out of breaking all that stuff, they had such contempt for us. But I remember staying up late at night getting loaded and drunk and whatever with John Mason and Richard and Kenny and my wife and just laughing and having such a great time. But it wasn't like I felt like I was part of any community. It's just, like, here's some guys that I like, and – that trip was particularly memorable for me because this was at the height of my marijuana days, and I thought I had brought my stash in one of my shoes. And I got to the airport and I needed a joint really badly, and tore off –

tore apart my suitcase right in the middle of the airport looking for it. Then I realized I had left it home and completely – I was totally jonesed out. And fortunately there were some fellow potheads there that took care of me. [Laughs.]

MR. BERKSON: At the airport?

MR. NAGLE: No, once I got to the hotel – But this was at the height of my addiction, which – let's go on record and say I have – I've been clean and sober for 18 years now, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But anyway – but I do remember that quite fondly, and in fact I wrote a song about it called "It's Finally Sinking In." It's about two drunks that get together and are trying to clean up but they can't, but this is one last time to kind of say goodbye and have a good time. And so anyway that was Super Mud. It's the only Super Mud I ever went to. And I go to NCECA. I mean, a couple of years I was –

MR. BERKSON: NCECA is about education.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, basically it's, like, ceramic teachers from around the world at this point. It's quite a big organization, and I did a closing address in North Carolina, I don't know, about two or three years ago. And, you know, it's quite rewarding, and it's, you know, get the, you know, respect and whatever of your peers, and I enjoy it, and there's people I like a lot, you know. But I don't really hang that much, and there's certain things about the whole ceramic world that are still to me – I don't know – they're limited.

MR. BERKSON: If you were invited to give a keynote speech at a convention like that –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – because that's about university and college teaching.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: So it must mean that there's an openness or even an eagerness about the kind of work that you do –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, absolutely.

MR. BERKSON: – within the –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, sure. Oh, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – real general ceramics educational structure –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah, no, yeah. I mean, I'm definitely – have support in that area, there's no question about it. I like to think, and maybe I'm wrong or even pretentious about thinking that, you know, my priority is somewhat different; maybe I'm – maybe they're not. But, yeah, I definitely have support, and we talked about that, even in terms of where I show my work and will I be in the occasional ceramic group show with most of the work I'm not crazy about, with other people's stuff. And the answer is, yeah, sometimes, you know, I'll do it. I mean, there are other people who have purposely distanced themselves from that whole community and reaped the benefits financially. There's a guy named Andrew Lord, who shows at Gagosian, and he, you know, has done pottery. He's a British guy. And then now the sort of, you know, vessel forms, large and in bronze and so forth. He had never associated with ceramic people, and, you know, he gets probably four times more money than the rest of us. I mean, Voulkos, even the same thing. I mean, you know, it was a back-and-forth thing, and when he had his last big show at the American Craft Museum, I mean, that should have been at the Museum of Modern Art or the Whitney or something, but –

MR. BERKSON: Is that the same show that was at the Oakland Museum –

MR. NAGLE: Yes, right.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: And it was hideous. Not his. Not him – his work, but the way that it was shown in the Craft Museum. It was painted like – you know, the room was painted mauve, museum mauve, and it was on these sort of step pedestals. And it was just – gawd, you know? And as good – as great as he was, I mean, he still couldn't cross over, you know. That's disturbing to me. And so even he had to walk the line.

MR. BERKSON: So the tragedy – is still sort of – stays there.

MR. NAGLE: Oh, man. Oh, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: But the market is kind of – is better, is more open for you?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, the market is definitely better. I mean, there are several things – in the very beginning – well, I'm talking about the very beginning, meaning, let's see, the late '50s, early '60s. I mean, Kenny Price basically – I don't know how it started, but there was a cup that the Museum of Modern Art wanted. I think one of his turtle cups or something. And he says, "I don't want to sell it." And as the story goes, they – you know, they made him an offer he couldn't refuse, and I don't know, but at the time it was like five grand or whatever, you know. And that sort of, I think – you know, the kind of money that he was getting for cups, even at the Ferus days, I mean, that kind of like raised the bar in terms of the kind of money that – he was the first guy really to – I mean, Pete, too.

MR. BERKSON: He broke the ice.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, as far as, like, what one could get for a small object, namely a cup, or even utilitarian at that. I mean, I think he helped immensely. And then from that point on, say later on in the, I don't know, '60s, '70s, where Pete was showing at Primus-Stuart [Primus-Stuart Galleries, Los Angeles, CA] and –

MR. BERKSON: How do you spell that?

MR. NAGLE: That was P-r-i-m-u-s dash Stewart, S-t – I'm not sure if it's S-t-e-w-e-r-t or a-r-t. But that was the gallery up the street on La Cienega from the Ferus Gallery, and that was also a mainstream gallery that also showed, like, African art and stuff like that. I mean, so there was an introduction into the mainstream, if you will, art gallery as opposed to the craft shop or whatever, and it was only until the '70s that there were, like, sort of, ceramic galleries, which is somewhat of a step up. And then, you know – then Charlie Cowles [Charles Cowles Gallery, New York] started showing myself and Pete and Kenny, and I think that sort of raised the bar a bit. And then Garth, when he started his gallery, he has done probably more than anybody at this point to really cultivate an audience and to – between his writing and the seriousness of which he has – that he has taken with his gallery, and it just keeps getting better and better, I think, in terms of his – you know, what he's doing in the field in terms of promoting ceramics. So, yeah, it has gotten better – but it still ain't where it ought to be.

[Audio Break.]

MR. BERKSON: This is Bill Berkson interviewing Ron Nagle at 25 Grand View Avenue, Bill Berkson's home, in San Francisco, California, on July 9, 2003, for the Archives of American Art at Smithsonian Institution, disc number three.

So we were talking about arts and crafts and the existence of your work within or not within the general circumstances of crafts in America. And have you had any direct connection with various craft-type schools, like Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] or the Archie Bray Foundation [Helena, MT], or Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN] –

MR. NAGLE: None of those, none of them.

MR. BERKSON: Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME], Pilchuck [Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA]?

MR. NAGLE: None. No, and I'm not interested in – no I haven't. I mean, I basically –

MR. BERKSON: Have you ever – you have never been invited to teach at these places, or any such?

MR. NAGLE: I have taught at Anderson Ranch in [Snowmass Village] Colorado many times; in fact, I just gave them a piece for their auction. That's probably the closest to that kind of thing. As far as some of the other places that you have mentioned, no. I think they think I'm too much trouble. [Laughs.] I don't know.

MR. BERKSON: You would corrupt the students?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I think I would. [Laughs.] I have never been invited to teach at – to do anything at Alfred [Alfred University, Alfred, NY], you know, and I mean, you know, that's the number one ceramics school in the country. And I know those people, I get along with them, but they know I'm big trouble; I would talk against the party line.

MR. BERKSON: That's where Richard Shaw went.

MR. NAGLE: I think he did go there. Kenny went –

MR. BERKSON: Oh, he went there too?

MR. NAGLE: Kenny went there. That's where he developed his low-fire pallet – short period of time. But I mean, you know, I had remembered, and I think this is changing now. I just recently talked to a woman who teaches art history there and who seemed pretty reasonable. [Laughs.] And they actually had a percentage – if you made anything, like, it had to be 70 percent clay, you know, stuff like that. Even if you wanted to introduce another material, I mean, I don't know what the percentages were. But again, this is like – it's a tradition that – I just don't get it. And I – like I say, I love good pottery as much as the next guy, more, but I don't know. Anyway –

MR. BERKSON: Have you ever done commissions?

MR. NAGLE: No.

MR. BERKSON: Even public commissions?

MR. NAGLE: Uh-uh.

MR. BERKSON: It doesn't seem that your work would lend itself to –

MR. NAGLE: No. I thought about that the other morning, because I know people that do; you know, I work with people that have gotten commissions and do commissions all the time, and if it was the right thing, I'm not against it, certainly. I would if someone commissioned me to do an edition; say, okay, we're going to reproduce, you know, a thousand of these; I would be fine with that, you know. When I just look at a phonograph record or something, you know – [laughs] – it's like, no, you can only have the original recording and that's it, you know. I thought about that, too, you know; like, only one guy gets to buy the record and you get a million bucks for it. Yeah, no, I haven't, but I wouldn't mind.

MR. BERKSON: Back to the business of specialization and craft. The magazines – I mean, obviously, you – what is now called *American Craft*, which used to be *Craft Horizons* – *Craft Horizons* was important to you early on because you could see different kinds of work that was being made under that rubric in the early '60s. Is that when Rose Slivka was the editor?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, Rose was there, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: She is still alive, I guess.

MR. BERKSON: Yes, but she doesn't work for –

MR. NAGLE: No, no.

MR. BERKSON: – *American Craft*, right?

MR. NAGLE: Right, not now.

MR. BERKSON: Maybe editor emeritus?

MR. NAGLE: Right, right.

MR. BERKSON: And have you ever – have you ever written for them, or –

MR. NAGLE: No.

MR. BERKSON: No? How about *American Ceramics*, *Studio Potter*, *Surface Design Journal*, these?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, I mean, I have been in them; I haven't written for any of them. I mean, I have been in *American*, you know –

[Cross talk, inaudible.]

– all of them. I have been in almost all of them, probably. *Ceramics Art and Perception*, which is a woman named Janet Mansfield in Australia – actually, a collaboration that Hung Liu and I did was actually featured, I don't know, about a – I don't know. But last year, sometime, a guy named Glen Brown from Manhattan, Kansas, wrote a thing about this collaboration we did in the '90s, and we're actually going to collaborate some more; we're working on some stuff.

MR. BERKSON: What form of collaborations?

MR. NAGLE: Well, right now I'm doing these things of – the stuff that we did before were taking either her

images, that she had used in her paintings –

MR. BERKSON: You mean Hung Liu's?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah?

MR. NAGLE: And – or drawings and whatever and making decals, and then kind of doing a collage surface thing, both kind of weighing in on, well I put – let's put that with that. Sometimes they have Chinese characters or –

MR. BERKSON: You mean your images and hers together?

MR. NAGLE: No, not my images, but images that I would select or say, let's put that with this, or, you know, let's put that word with that Chinese character, or things like that. Again, pretty much just whatever felt right or looked right, you know.

MR. BERKSON: And these are collages or these are –

MR. NAGLE: No, these were on commercial plates and cups that I made.

MR. BERKSON: Oh.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. And we had things like those – she had those – most of her stuff is photographically from books, Chinese books and so forth. So that particular collaboration was some of that source material. And then more recently what we're starting to do, slowly, is collect material from, again, her books. Everything from, you know, landscapes to Chinese architecture to – and I got a book on, you know, scholars' rocks, and just kind of copying all this imagery which is peculiar to her background and culture. I'm making these plates, which I call tablets. They're, like, about two inches thick with kind of – they look like sort of – they're tablets in the sense of Moses tablet; they're tablets in the sense of – they, like, look like vitamin tablets, kind of half – so they're oval-shaped with a – kind of a raised thing, and they will be colored porcelain. And then we're going to start layering in images on that that we will collectively weigh in on it and say, we can put that with that, let's put that on top. I mean, it's a slow – you know, it's evolving, but, so that's happening. And that was basically kind of a –had renewed interest after this guy wrote this article, because nobody really saw this stuff, you know.

MR. BERKSON: And this was in – the article was in –

MR. NAGLE: In *Ceramics Art and Perception*.

MR. BERKSON: What were the art – what were the collaborations you did with Glen Brown?

MR. NAGLE: No, I didn't do anything with – he wrote about it.

MR. BERKSON: Oh, he wrote the piece.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, he wrote the piece. He had seen some slides, I think in fact at that talk that I did at – for NCECA in North Carolina. He saw me – I showed some – showed a couple of the pieces that Hung and I had done, a couple of cups, and he knew her from another context or whatever, and eventually we connected and he wrote this article. And then, after having seen it, we started talking – Hung and I started talking about doing it again, so it's in the works. We have scanned a lot of images and we will make decals. Then they will be fired on, probably multiple-fired, layered decals, and stuff that she may paint on top of. I don't know yet; we will just see where it goes.

MR. BERKSON: Have you done a lot of collaborating?

MR. NAGLE: No. I did a collaboration with Kenny. Kenny and I –

MR. BERKSON: With Ken Price? When were those?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, geez.

MR. BERKSON: '70s?

MR. NAGLE: No.

MR. BERKSON: Oh, yeah, it was in the –

MR. NAGLE: It was in Anderson Ranch. I don't know – early '90s, 80s – no, not '80s, maybe early '90s. Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Those are the ones that included the “Nose Drip”?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, “Nose Drip,” yeah, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Which was your contribution –

MR. NAGLE: No, that’s his.

MR. BERKSON: That was his contribution?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. I mean, when we decided, okay, the division of labor, he said, “Well, I think it makes sense that if I do the cups, then you do the surface.” I said fine, and we did that. So he made the cups –

MR. BERKSON: So he made the cups and you did the coloring?

MR. NAGLE: I did all the color, yeah.

MR. BERKSON: How did that work out for you?

MR. NAGLE: Great.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. I mean, you know, I have a couple of them that I really like a lot. I think we split them up, maybe sold a couple of them. There’s one in particular I’m very – you know, I’m real fond of and I have. You know, yeah, that worked out great.

MR. BERKSON: Did you discuss, you know, themes or –

MR. NAGLE: No.

MR. BERKSON: -- imagery beforehand.

MR. NAGLE: No. We just went in and he said, okay, I’m going to make these. Okay. I mean, I have an immense respect for the guy, so I’m not going to say, no, I think that’s fucked, you know, do this. [Laughs.] You know, whatever you want to do is fine; I’m honored to be able to do this, you know. So that’s what happened, you know. So I – and then some of them I didn’t finish there, and then of course, one of the assistants there got loaded and over-fired the kiln, and – but I took – but I still worked with them, you know. So I took a lot of them home and worked on them at home after, you know – we did some at Anderson Ranch and then I finished most of them at home, and then we split them up, and – anyway. So there’s still – there’s a few of them kicking around.

MR. BERKSON: Back to magazines for a minute –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – not just the craft magazines, but generally in, you know, magazines and newspapers and criticism generally. What’s your reception – what’s your sense of the reception – [END TAPE 2 SIDE B.] – of your work maybe over the years to begin with, I mean, the –

MR. NAGLE: Well, it’s been pretty good except locally. [Laughs.] You know, I always tell this story of Kenneth Baker, who’s never been a big supporter of mine, you know? Tom Albright was a huge fan, but then they got –

MR. BERKSON: [David] Bonetti wrote –

MR. NAGLE: Bonetti – you know, “top 10 shows of the year,” you know? I mean, he was, yeah. Baker – I had a show with some big work in 1988, ‘89, I don’t know, and he closed the article by saying – you know, everything was fine, and then he goes, “But they were barren of sculptural intelligence.”

MR. BERKSON: Oh, and who was that? Baker?

MR. NAGLE: Baker, yeah. And I – you know, so I always say now, you know, at last somebody understands me.

MR. BERKSON: Didn’t that earn you a new moniker –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah – yes, right. “The Baron of Sculptural Intelligence.” [Nickname for Nagle after Baker wrote of his work as “barren of sculptural intelligence.]

MR. BERKSON: The Baron.

MR. NAGLE: “Heavier than the Duke of Earl,” I said. [Laughs.] So, you know – but, I mean – you know, in terms of mainstream critical acceptance, I mean, it couldn’t be better; I got a great review from Roberta Smith on my last show in New York, and David Pagel when I had a show in L.A., and then another; I got two great reviews the last show I had. I do – every time I have a show in some city, I mean, I do extremely well. It’s not, you know, craft people writing about it. It’s – you know, I mean, it’s accepted in mainstream press or whatever you want to call it. So, yeah, I’ve done okay that way, you know? I’m very proud or honored or whatever you want to call it to have gotten some attention from something outside the craft world, if you will.

MR. BERKSON: But does that – is that a – given that terrible period in the ‘70s, do you feel it was all a long time coming? I mean, was there –

MR. NAGLE: Well –

MR. BERKSON: Was there a similar good reception in the ‘60s when –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, I mean, again – and so –

[Cross talk, inaudible.]

Yeah, I mean, you know, again, Tom Albright wrote a great review when I had that show at Dilexi. So, I mean, I think early on, right from the beginning, the reception has been – you know, and then Dave Hickey, you know, “Top 10 Show” in *Artforum* in ninety-whenever-it-was, ‘99 [“The Best of 1998.” *Artforum*. December 1998, p. 94] I think. And that was a great honor, and, listed number three, after [Robert] Gober and [Richard] Serra. [Laughs.] That’s pretty good.

MR. BERKSON: Not bad.

MR. NAGLE: Thank you, Dave.

MR. BERKSON: [Laughs.]

MR. NAGLE: So, you know, I’m –

MR. BERKSON: Have you ever met him?

MR. NAGLE: Oh, sure.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I’ve spent time with him. I was somewhat disappointed. I did a thing up at Las Vegas. His wife came, Libby.

MR. BERKSON: Libby Lumpkin?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. And it was one of my probably – I was really proud of that talk. I was totally psyched for it and I really had a good time doing it, and unfortunately, he wasn’t feeling good that night. But he was sort of instrumental in recommending me to come up there, and I had a ball. But, yeah, I’ve met him, and I’ve brought him out to Mills actually. Garth turned me on to his writing through *The Invisible Dragon* [*The Invisible Dragon: Four Essays on Beauty*. Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1993], you know? He’d gotten it from Adrian Saxe, and then I said, “Wow, I’ve got to know this guy,” you know. And it turns out that actually Hung Liu and Jeff Kelly, they had known him from – I don’t know – Texas or –

MR. BERKSON: Probably Texas –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, Texas. And so –

MR. BERKSON: That’s where he’s from.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. And so –

MR. BERKSON: And he had his musical background –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, exactly. So we hit it off and –

MR. BERKSON: – on this bus with – what was it – ZZ Top or –

MR. NAGLE: Probably.

MR. BERKSON: Or Steely Dan. I don't remember which.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: I think it was ZZ Top.

MR. NAGLE: Probably more like ZZ Top. But here is a guy who – he was the first guy to really kind of legitimize where I was coming from without even knowing; he was incredibly articulate and at the same time, you know, blurred all that high-low crap that we've been burdened with and was actually a fan of pop music as well as – I mean, I use his writings for my seminar. There's this piece he did called "Goodbye to Love," which is about the Carpenters – a song that the Carpenters did. It's like one of the cornerstones of assignments that I would give in my graduate seminar.

MR. BERKSON: What is that?

MR. NAGLE: Well, basically, I mean, he writes about "Goodbye to Love" in terms of the success of deviating from a prescribed format, and he talks about the structure of the song. But he addresses other issues, one being guilty pleasures; admitting that, hey, you know, the Carpenters are cool, which I do think they're cool. And I think Karen Carpenter is one of the great singers – beautiful voice. And so, guilty pleasures, deviating from a prescribed format – where was it – there's a third issue that he addresses in there; I can't remember what it is. But anyway, so I give it as an assignment and have students find other examples that are successful or are –

MR. BERKSON: In their own experience.

MR. NAGLE: In their own – yeah, in their own experience, you know, bring in examples, and it's frequently music, but it could also be other art or whatever. Gawd, I'm trying to think of the third thing. But the main thing is deviating from the format and this sort of withdrawn – what he talks about is the cookie, meaning withdrawn satisfaction of when you think you're supposed to get the payoff in a song, which is usually the chorus, but you don't – you don't do that, and how this song builds in this screwy kind of way and that's what makes it good, and he – anyway, it's a really great article. So –

MR. BERKSON: Talk about style.

MR. NAGLE: Sure, I'm big on style. Style is content.

MR. BERKSON: Is that a lifestyle?

MR. NAGLE: Any kind of style, you know? I don't know.

MR. BERKSON: Sort of like where the woman in a war movie looks at a guy and says, "I like your style."

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. Style is just essence to me. It's an ambience. It's a presence. It's a – it's – I don't mean style like – I mean, Kenny always said, you know, you should never develop a style, because you do, and then you're going to be, you know –

MR. BERKSON: – locked into it.

MR. NAGLE: – locked into it, and I agree with that. I am not talking about that kind of style. There's a certain way that, to me, great artists have that's just undeniable. You just look at it and say, yeah, that's, you know, he did that. I mean, there's a – and it has to do with a kind of involvement that we talked about earlier, that only – you can only get it there. You know what I mean?

MR. BERKSON: Connected to touch or attitude or –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, I don't know. Yeah, touch, attitude, quirkiness, making the right sort of decisions. I mean, it's – you don't see it as much anymore. You can see stuff that –

MR. BERKSON: Voulkos was a early example of that –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah, yeah, exactly.

MR. BERKSON: – too, but –

MR. NAGLE: Price.

MR. BERKSON: – but think of it out of your childhood. There have been people like Clyde McPhatter –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, yeah, Clyde McPhatter. That's the first – yeah, that was the first record I bought, Clyde McPhatter.

MR. BERKSON: I don't know why it came to mind.

MR. NAGLE: "Money, Honey." Well, wow, you get a good, you know – yeah. Clyde McPhatter and the Drifters doing "Money, Honey," and I had to sneak up to the Fillmore to buy this in a record store, which was – and that was, like, heavy, man; it was like going to Hunter's Point in those days, you know, and of course, my father knew nothing about this. And I had heard – I had heard that on the radio, and I said, man, there is just something about that, because that record had such a – you know, talk about kind of eclectic influences. Do you know "Money, Honey" by Clyde McPhatter where it's, "Hmmm, hmm." It almost sounded like bagpipe music; it had this sort of modal drone. The lyrics were incredibly sophisticated, written by a guy named Charles Calhoun, who also –

MR. BERKSON: Not Lieber-Stoller?

MR. NAGLE: Not – it wasn't Lieber-Stoller. Charles Calhoun or – oh, what's his name? That was his pseudonym, was Charles Calhoun, but his – I'm trying to think – his last name was Stone. But anyway – [singing] – "The landlord rang my front door bell – [resumes talking] – I let it ring for a long, long spell. I went to the window and peeped through the blinds" – whatever – "Money, Honey." And it just had a vibe, man, that was like, wow, what is this? And, yeah, I mean, that was style, no question about it. Nobody could sing like Clyde McPhatter.

MR. BERKSON: How about –

MR. NAGLE: Johnny Ray.

MR. BERKSON: – just people that you knew?

MR. NAGLE: Well, Pete was one of the first guys –

MR. BERKSON: I mean before Voulkos, because I'm talking about sort of formative –

MR. NAGLE: I don't know.

MR. BERKSON: When you were a teenager, like people that you knew that had that –

MR. NAGLE: There weren't that many. I don't – I can't think of it. You know, I really can't think of any.

MR. BERKSON: So Voulkos is the first?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, he was the first guy that had it, that had a – yeah, that had a, yeah, personal style. I mean, it was like – it was totally embodied, I mean it was 100 percent. He exuded that, you know? It was like, wow, this is like a, you know, movie star or something. You know what I'm saying?

MR. BERKSON: How would you characterize it?

MR. NAGLE: Well, I always say unassuming authority for one thing, and a certain kind of cool. I mean, I was raised in the '50s, and, you know, like, I didn't know any really, firsthand, any jazz people, but you know, if you were to think like – you know, somebody that would just be – who was so cool and so self-assured without being totally arrogant or obnoxious, I mean, Pete was the guy; it was like, you know, he just – he knew he was good – [laughs] – but he wasn't an asshole about it, really. You know, he was extremely generous, and he was everything from the – what we used to call the Flamenco boots, which the Beatles wore on their first tour; the elastic and up to the ankle. And we used to – so when I first started hanging with Pete, he used to go to New York, and there used to be a place on Sixth Avenue where he'd buy them and then bring us all back these boots. We all want to have that, you know?

But I was always interested in style, I mean, mostly from just, you know, seeing pictures and stuff. It was usually from, you know, black culture or Latino culture or something else, which was always forbidden fruit for me. I mean, it was like, oh, you can't – don't try to do that. It was only after, like, some white guys co-opted it. And so when Elvis came along, I said, what the fuck is this? I'm not interested in that. I mean, I'm interested, like, later as a kind of what it became on a cultural level, but you know, why would I want to hear him sing "Money, Honey," which he did and fucked it up? It's a shitty record. Why would I want to hear "Hound Dog" by Elvis when I can hear it by Willie Mae Thornton? I mean, it made no sense to me at all, you know? And so, in terms of Elvis, I mean, there was style there in a sense, but it was sort of fabricated. I mean, it was a different deal, you know?

So, in answer to your question, I didn't know anybody. I'm trying to think. Maybe guys that built cars and stuff, you know? Hot rod guys. Well, you know, I mean – but nobody I knew. Only James Dean; I mean, you know, I

could have watched *Rebel Without a Cause* [1955] for, shit, 100 times and not get tired of that. I remember the first time – I know exactly where I was the first time I saw that movie; it was at the El Rey Theater on Ocean Avenue. I was like, what the fuck, man? Who is this guy? I mean, that was cool, you know? And he kind of looked like Chet Baker a little bit, sort of. [Laughs.] I mean –

MR. BERKSON: I read last night that he said – where did I read this – some magazine said he once said to Dennis Hopper, "Now I know I'm going to make it because I have got Brando saying 'fuck you' in one hand and Montgomery Cliff saying 'please forgive me' in the other."

MR. NAGLE: [Laughs.] What is he –

MR. BERKSON: It's like the undeniable combination.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, whatever it was he had, it came across, and I just connected with it immediately, I mean, you know, because I was extremely rebellious and I – and all that parental conflict. And you put all that stuff together, and you know, for a white teenager who can't be black, which is what I wanted to be basically during that time, it was like, okay, you know.

MR. BERKSON: Did Voulkos share any of this with you? I mean, did he have any of the love for the kind of culture that you did?

MR. NAGLE: No, I don't think so. I mean different. I mean, he was into the Flamenco music, yeah, you know? No, I don't think he did. I mean, he appreciated it, and I – my band played at his studio and stuff, you know; he had a big party there, very memorable. But, you know, he was, you know, coming from a different place, you know?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, I mean, it seems, in a way, a perfect example to have for style, you know, artistic probity, is partly because you're so different.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: I mean, he went big.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: You went small.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah. I mean, when everybody got started, everybody tried to do that, do what he did, and then you realized pretty quickly that –

MR. BERKSON: He loved, sort of, the messy abstract expressionist work –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, and he could do it. I mean, somewhere along the line, there's a lot of things – you know, if you're going to be an artist or be anybody – be yourself, you just sort of have to sort out what you really are, you know. I mean, without getting too profound about it, but I mean, you know, I always thought, well, man, you have got to work at night, you have got to do – you know, you got to be a – well, I realized that, actually, I do a lot better during the daytime. I get, you know, fairly depressed at night and whatever. I mean, I like getting up, and yesterday I was in my studio at, shit, 6:00 in the morning, you know.

MR. BERKSON: Did you ever try to work in the monumental scale?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, when I was going to school, I did these big walls that were kind of like a cross between John Mason and Tapies. And, you know, and then, kind of, throw like Pete, you know, throw 100 pounds of clay. And, I have done a few big things, but not monumental, and I –

MR. BERKSON: Not recently.

MR. NAGLE: No, nuh-uh. I mean, in the – you know, in the "Baron of Sculptural Intelligence" period. [Laughs.] And I actually bought one of those back – traded one of those back from Rena. I have it in my basement. That's my retirement piece. [Laughs.] But, no, I just felt –I said, well, man, I – what did I really feel comfortable with; what I call the whittling instinct, some guy sitting on his back porch with a pocketknife and a hunk of wood. And that's – those are my roots, you know; I mean, making model airplanes and the work I responded to, and just – in terms of just my comfort zone, I did some small-scale work, and I realized that was what I wanted to do. So there's a lot of things that you think you ought to be if you were an artist that really aren't for you. I mean, for me anyway.

[Audio Break.]

MR. BERKSON: What I wanted to do is to go back into the area of the erotica and the macabre and talk –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – a little bit about, for example, the piece *Blue Grady* [2001], which I found –

MR. NAGLE: Yes.

MR. BERKSON: – really fascinating because it seems – maybe it's not unique, but it seems to be unique in the way of being based on a kind of a story.

MR. NAGLE: Lobster Boy?

MR. BERKSON: Yeah.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: Yeah, which maybe you could tell that story and –

MR. NAGLE: Sure. Well –

MR. BERKSON: [Inaudible.]

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, well, there was a guy named Grady Stiles, Jr., who was known as "Lobster Boy." And my wife had gone to this bookstore and – I don't know, over a period of time, over the years, she kept going back to this one area called, you know, "The Truth to the Story of Lobster Boy." And they since have had this on television and so forth. And Grady Stiles was born with a deformity that was genetic, and his family also had it and his kids had it, and he was a sideshow guy, a circus guy, and he had hands, these claws, like lobsters – lobster claws. But he was very abusive with those claws, and eventually his wife basically hired either their son and a teenager, and they killed him. But he had already murdered somebody and had gotten off on a sympathy – anyway, it's very long, and I've read cover to cover, but my wife got me this book.

She said she'd go there because it'd be thumbed through and so forth but nobody would buy it. I mean, everybody was fascinated, and I was particularly fascinated by the autopsy photo, which zeroed in on the claws. And, you know, they lived in Florida in this trailer park or whatever for carnies and circus people. So the whole idea was – but more than anything, I mean, you know, was this image of these claws, and so I did do – there's a precursor to that piece and a couple of others called – you know, called *Lobster Boy*. Rena's got it down there, and it's probably my favorite of the bunch. But – so I – so I did several pieces that would kind of – I mean, they don't really look like it, but certainly were inspired and influenced by it. And these thin – what I call "thin fin" pieces, I don't even – I don't know where they came from. They just popped into my head, and they're kind of like a cross between – a landscape or a still life or I don't know what. But in that particular case, of –

MR. BERKSON: Well, that one –

MR. NAGLE: – definitely –

MR. BERKSON: – is – because you had this sort of a green foreground, blue then green –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – and then this sort of block –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: – behind the limb.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: You know, it looks like a tombstone.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah.

MR. BERKSON: You know, that as if the limb is coming up out of –

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, I don't know. Yeah –

MR. BERKSON: – out of the ground –

MR. NAGLE: It's a combination. I just – I mean, I'm sure if you were to –

MR. BERKSON: Living dead.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, it's got – it's in there. Again, I don't – you know, it's not conscious. I mean, sometimes I literally will just, like – it will pop into my head, and then the whole thing will evolve. In this particular case, that, you know, fingerlike protrusion or whatever you want to call it was – it's definitely inspired by that autopsy photo. And – yeah, so *Blue Grady* –

MR. BERKSON: Why – is it *Blue* just because the piece itself –

MR. NAGLE: Oh, I just thought –

MR. BERKSON: – has blues in it?

MR. NAGLE: No, just – yeah, yeah, I mean, it basically is just blue.

MR. BERKSON: What did you call those other pieces that you were –

MR. NAGLE: Thin fins?

MR. BERKSON: Thin fins?

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, that represents this thing. They're like this thing –

MR. BERKSON: Oh, I see.

MR. NAGLE: – they're like a – almost like a wafer.

MR. BERKSON: Like a fin on a car.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, like a fin on a car. And I somehow got into – these are all outgrowths of this, I don't know, thing I did – I did these knob jobs. There's one called *Dick Tracy*, which basically has – basically a square with a little nick off the edge. And it's an image I have been using for a long time in one way or another. Again, I don't know where it came from, but it just evolved, and I keep doing it.

MR. BERKSON: What about some of the other titles? You know, I mean, a lot of your titles are very specific and some of them are puns.

MR. NAGLE: Is that *Wolfgang* [2001]?

MR. BERKSON: Well, this is *Wolfgang*.

MR. NAGLE: Yeah, that's like Wolfgang Laib, you know, because –

MR. BERKSON: – because of the sort of pigment look?

MR. NAGLE: Well, there's kind of – yeah, well, the – they look like – it looks like yellow pollen, kind of. I mean, you can't tell as well in there, but I was always fascinated by, you know, by his work and, you know, working with bee pollen, and I kind of – to get that yellow color, you sort of dust – start off with a red base and then dust it with the – and then I did a piece, which was in my last show, which is not in that catalogue, called *Fortgang* because I wanted – because it's sort of related. And *Fortgang* was named after –

MR. BERKSON: Is that one word?

MR. NAGLE: F-o-r-t-g-a-n-g, yeah. And it was sort of a tribute to this guy named J. Fortgang, who wrote "Some Guys Have All The Luck," which I always say, you know, Rod Stewart just destroyed, but it was a great record by The Persuaders in the '70s.

MR. BERKSON: Persuaders, not Persuasions?

MR. NAGLE: No, not Persuasions. Persuaders. They also did "A Thin Line Between Love and Hate" and – they had a couple of hits. But, "Some Guys Have All The Luck," I always loved that record and the lyrics, and I said, who the hell wrote that? And it just says J. Fortgang, and I have no idea who the guy is or if it's a guy or woman or whatever. But –

MR. BERKSON: What about *Vandelay* [2001]?

MR. NAGLE: Well, *Vandelay* is, you know, it's a guy – it's a *Seinfeld* reference. George Costanza talks about being an architect named Art Vandelay. And, I mean, we were – I was a latecomer to the Seinfeld craze, but once my family and I got into it, I mean, I have every episode memorized practically. But he just a sort of pretentious guy who's telling people his name is Art Vandelay or Vandelay Industries. I don't know where it came from, but it's a reference to that. And there's another piece in there that's related to that called *Cartwright* [2001].

MR. BERKSON: Yes, what –

MR. NAGLE: Well, that's another *Seinfeld* deal; like, they all go to a Chinese restaurant, and I think George leaves his name as Costanza and the Chinese guy who's like the maitre d' can't say Costanza, so he just kept doing "Cartwright, Cartwright." [Laughs.] I don't know why, and it just cracked me up. Did you ever watch *Curb Your Enthusiasm*? Well, it's Larry David, the guy that's – on HBO.

MR. BERKSON: Oh, yeah, yes, yeah, very rarely, but yeah, I have seen it.

MR. NAGLE: And he's not a likeable guy, but when you – I mean, what's – you know, but once you get into it, I think it's probably the funniest – one of the funniest shows on television, and when you see that, you can just see he's the – he was the *Seinfeld* show. I mean, everything about it. It's like these guys were just, you know, part of the cast, but I mean, Larry David was the guy. Anyway.

MR. BERKSON: Well, this seems to be where we terminate the tape.

MR. NAGLE: Okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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