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Oral history interview with Mark Peiser, 2004 February 26

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Mark Peiser on February 26, 2004. The interview took place at the artist's studio in Penland, North Carolina, and was conducted by Henry Halem 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.

The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

HENRY HALEM: This is session one of Mark Peiser at his studio down in Penland, North Carolina. This is Henry Halem, the interviewer, and it is February 26, 2004.

MARK PEISER: When - coming up next week at the museum so I've had a lot of these thoughts in my mind, and actually, I'm trying to - are we running?

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: And I've been trying to figure out something - I've given a couple of talks at the museum already, and actually, when the show opened, I was real proud of myself because for the first time in like 25 years I didn't have everything written out that I was going to say, just a little remark.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And actually, it went over really well. Of course, it was only like five minutes. I told a couple of stories, you know, about Bill Brown and how I got here, but I figure I can't do that forever, but for an hour when I get there next week.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: - so I've been trying to think of some old stories, but anyway. Okay, so I grew up in Chicago, born in Chicago and, you know, middle class, upper middle class family, something like that. And I think probably relevant to this thing - I guess you could say, had somewhat emotionally distant parents, you know, in the situation, and somehow I ended up with a group of friends, boy friends, you know, kids -

MR. HALEM: Yeah, right.

MR. PEISER: - that were probably not too - in retrospect, even at the time, were a little strange, you know. We'd play sports, but not - we'd play tennis and the point of the game was how long you could keep the ball in motion. There was nothing - no -

MR. HALEM: What year is this?

MR. PEISER: Oh, okay I was born -

MR. HALEM: I mean just generally.

MR. PEISER: Well, when I was in high school -

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: - which would be in the '50s, early '50s and - but, I mean we'd play - it was very noncompetitive. The point was to see how long - there were no boundaries, nobody kept score. If you could just go out there and keep whacking the ball for two hours; that was a good gig. There's some stuff I really wouldn't want to get - it just sounds too weird, but we did - let's see - well, it's a psychological picture.

I found out at a very early age it was really easy to put people on. Things like come running out of the house, and this is probably in grammar - sixth grade, seventh grade - coming running out of the house screaming with another guy running out behind me with a fake knife, you know, stab in the front yard and splatter ketchup all over. We'd wait to see if people were walking down the sidewalk to come out and do this. You know, they were all aghast.

My folks got a new carpet or something; it was like a 10-foot-long, you know, cardboard roll, a foot in diameter.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: So we'd tape a piece of paper over the end and stick a rope through it and walk up and down the alleys with a cigarette lighter, with this like 10-foot-long bomb, and there were three of us carrying this thing. We'd see somebody driving down the alley and set it down and start to light the wick, you know, and run. I mean, shit like this. Yeah, we did that all the time, because it was, like, what we did. I would characterize the group of friends as kind of unusual and pretty creative thinkers in just finding stuff to do, and it was a lot of fun.

In high school we got season tickets to the Lyric Opera, not your, probably, normal thing for high school punks to do. Mostly we wanted to go get out of the house, you know, go downtown on school nights or something like that.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: But it was cool, and I got - well, it probably the first thing that really actively got me involved in classical music, and it was beautiful. Of course I gained from that.

My folks gave me a whole lot of freedom. I mean, on the one hand it was like they were never there, and on the other hand they were never imposing limits. So, you know, there was up sides and down sides to that. We did a lot of just crazy, crazy things, and it was fun and the folks usually didn't get involved, you know, never heard anything unless the police got involved in the situation.

MR. HALEM: Did they ever?

MR. PEISER: A time or two.

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: But we didn't do anything - we didn't kill people or anything. In retrospect it seems more like we just kind of putting people on somewhat -

MR. HALEM: Normal kid stuff.

MR. PEISER: I guess, I guess. Yeah, and in the meanwhile it was always assumed, you know, that I was going to have a career in engineering or something. My father had started - well, his first degree - yeah, I guess first degree was in civil engineering and somehow - like when I was born they got me a - I don't know, I kept seeing all through childhood some kind of certificate enrolling me in some technical high school whenever I got to that age in Chicago, and that was along with a -

MR. HALEM: Your father had this -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, I mean it was just kind of pushing it that way. Like I said, he started off as a civil engineer, but I think probably it was formative to me that later on in life that, for family reasons, he came and actually he worked in various places, you know, around the country - well, largely in southern Illinois; there's some towns down there that he laid out all the roads for that we'd have to go see when were kids. And in South Dakota he built a flume, like I was telling you earlier, a big water conduit through the mountains up near Rapid City. I got the blueprints for it - or drawing - you know, the mechanical layout of it -

MR. HALEM: Is it still there?

MR. PEISER: - which I still have. I don't know if it's still there, but in like fourth grade or something we took a family trip up there and it was still there -

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: - and that was, you know, whenever - late '40s, I guess. So he pushed - it just seemed like that's where I was going and I did have an aptitude for it. I mean, I started making things when I was real young, some way. I mean, I remember my first make-something experience. You know, sitting on the floor in the basement, my mother's running the mangle making -

MR. HALEM: Oh, yeah.

MR. PEISER: - ironing shirts or something, and it's just one of these cardboard cut-out things, you know, of a fire truck - a paper.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: You know, it's got the tabs sticking off out around the edge that you cut out and you stick them through the little slots somewhere.

MR. HALEM: Oh, this was nothing you drew; this is something you -

MR. PEISER: No, no. This was a kit or something.

MR. HALEM: Right, right.

MR. PEISER: You know, make a fire truck thing out of paper. You fold it up into boxes and you stick it together. And I remember - this is my first experience and I'm cutting it out with a scissors, I guess, and I really probably was three or four - I mean, really, really young.

MR. HALEM: Really young.

MR. PEISER: And I see these tabs, and the fire truck, of course, is red, you know, and then they got this white semicircular loop sticking out from it, and I'm looking at it and I said, "I don't need those stinking loops" - [laughs] - so I cut them off. I cut around the fire truck, and then I said, uh oh, I guess you needed those to put it together, didn't you? So that was like the first making experience I remember, but then I just started making stuff on my own. You know, I had my own train layout and airplanes and stuff, but just for whatever reason I made little model work out of a printing press, where the thing went up and down. I don't know why.

MR. HALEM: At home you made these?

MR. PEISER: Oh, yeah. Yeah, just - my father had a workshop in the basement -

MR. HALEM: I see.

MR. PEISER: - you know, where he did family repairs and stuff like that. I still have some of his tools: band saws - a lot of his tools I still have. So, I mean, there was kind of that - it was something I was aware of, of making things. It seemed like what fathers did or something. You know, it was kind of normal.

MR. HALEM: Did your father ever help you?

MR. PEISER: Once or twice. I had very [few] experiences with my father. The only thing I can remember him helping or doing, you know, like that was, for some reason, some day he said, "Let's make a periscope," or, "I'll show you how to make a periscope." And he some had balsa wood or somehow - I always had an inventory of materials around. So we cut out, you know, it was probably a - oh, I don't know - three-by-three-inch block, and he sawed it in half and chiseled out a tunnel through it. Somehow it came up through a mountain or something, with a little mirror buried in the end. You could look in the end and see around the corner. And, oh, man, that's cool, you know?

So we did that one afternoon, I think, and that evening, you know, I'm spying into the neighbor's living room window with this thing, and it's kind of balanced on the basement window thing - the half - you know, whatever you call them - window in the basement, and of course, I slip and kick through, bust the bottom window. Anyway, that was one of the experiences I had with him, you know, making stuff.

But I did see him making things and - well, do you want to get into personal shit? He had some guys, friends of his, men friends, you know, a couple of them came over and he was building like a tool box, a cabinet, you know, over this workbench in the basement. It was an unfinished basement, at that time anyway. And so I'm just standing around, and I couldn't have been very big or old - I don't know, six, seven, something like that.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And so they're doing this stuff and somehow - and it's over there against that wall and I'm kind of hanging back over - somewhere near some tables, and he says - somehow he says, "Give me the plane." I didn't know what a plane was, but there was a model of some, like, D-26 laying there, you know, and I went to grab that, and so he chews me out, says, what the fuck, that's - well, he didn't use that kind of language, but he says, you know, no, you stupid blah blah blah. I mean, I'd never heard of it. I mean - okay, if we're opening this door. I remember once when I was younger, I had the mumps or some terrible ear infection. I mean, it was really grim and I was stuck in my room for a long time, and for some reason I started drawing maps, you know, little treasure maps or stuff, just totally imaginary stuff from somewhere, I guess, at the cemetery or paths and this and that.

MR. HALEM: Right. Oh, yeah. Right.

MR. PEISER: - you know, just drawing them. So he comes in and - well, I guess the point is that he was working

on some level that I was, you know, never knew existed. So aside of saying, you spelled all this stuff wrong, he says, okay, well, like here's a circle. How many degrees are in a circle? I mean, I'm in kindergarten or something, and I think and I think, and a hundred, it seems like a good idea - you, stupid; there's 180. My father - anyway, but that was kind of the relationship I had with him.

He started off in engineering and did these things and he rarely ever - I mean, out of all the time I knew him, I don't think - if you added up all the time that he ever talked about his past, it might have added to a half an hour, you know. I never, never heard anything about his life; I never heard a thing. I mean, I knew some things, but it all came from asides, from my mother or his - he had three brothers and a sister, the aunts and uncle. Never heard from him, which was kind of weird; it was like I never knew him; it was kind of what I felt like.

My mother was from a little town in Iowa and she had been ambitious, I guess, you know, for a woman. I mean, she was born in, what? - 1910 or something.

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: She went to college; she got a degree in journalism and it's very early, you know, for a woman to be doing that. She ended up getting a job as a reporter for a little local newspaper in Chicago, which consequently led to her meeting my father, who had been born in Chicago and lived there all his life. But the journalism thing was, well, you know, that was her thing. She read enormously, mostly early American literature and, you know, always hoped to write the great American novel and that sort of thing. She was very bright and smart and - but she, too, was kind of distant and - well, she was distant.

God, do you want to get into all this stuff, you think?

MR. HALEM: It's your life.

MR. PEISER: Yeah, I know. It's kind of weird. I think it definitely has formed me into what I am. After she died - oh gosh, I don't know - 20-some years ago now - I found her diaries and read them, and she'd written a lot of stuff, especially when she was young, and some of it was very interesting and some of it was really well written, and a lot of - you know, and a lot of stuff from her childhood in this little town, in Ottumwa. And she had three sisters and their father was a railroad conductor. Well, you know, I think he got to be yardmaster, and that was pretty prestigious in Ottumwa, Iowa, where there was the railroad and the Hormel packing plant.

But there was some really beautiful, beautiful writings, you know, of life, like around the potbellies stoves, early 20th century -

MR. HALEM: You found these after she died?

MR. PEISER: Yeah, didn't know they existed.

MR. HALEM: How did they affect you? I mean, you were a grown man by this time.

MR. PEISER: They were - it was very touching in a way, and I learned - she never talked about her life either. You know, probably I knew a little more about her than my father. I mean, it just seemed strange.

MR. HALEM: What were their ethnicities?

MR. PEISER: My father was - it's hard to track him, you know, their family back further, but they were Jewish. I came from a Jewish family, actually -

MR. HALEM: Your father?

MR. PEISER: Yeah, oh yeah. He - well, let's see, I guess it would have been my great - I don't know, great-great-great-grandfather was one of the - whatever you call it - founders of the first temple in Chicago.

MR. HALEM: Wow.

MR. PEISER: I've got the books and documentation of this, and so it was an old family, in Chicago especially. I don't think after Chicago - there's, like, no records before there. Actually, you know, amongst other things one of the family legends is - I mean, his family gave the city of Chicago the land to put the central post office in the Loop. They were a pretty well-to-do family, I guess - I mean, at one point in time.

MR. HALEM: They were the Peiser family.

MR. PEISER: And they were Peisers, yeah. And in terms of the religious aspect of that, one of the few things I ever heard my father say, you know, that was something I could grasp onto, he said - and this must have been

like 1940, late '40s, he says, "In 20 years there won't be any more religion. It's all a bunch of -" well, he never said it was a bunch of crap. I mean, my language is giving a bad characterization. I mean, he was very proper and gentlemanly -

MR. HALEM: Oh, he would say it in a proper, gentlemanly -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, he'd just say, in 20 years there will be no more religion, and there - he wouldn't expand on it, but I would assume because it's not relevant anymore.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: My mother came from Scotch, Irish, whatever, and actually her family, they did do some tracking down, genealogy stuff, down to - I know what boat they left Hamburg on for the States, you know, in the late - and went to New Hampshire and, oh, spread around and the history. But she was basically Scotch, you know, English, Scotch, Irish, and in Ottumwa where she grew up - I mean, they ended up - I don't know, some Protestant thing. And as a kid she played piano, you know, at the silent movies, did that. She never had any real ambitions as a pianist. It was just a talent, but she for some reason wanted to be a writer and that's how it grabbed her.

They met - like I say, she became a journalist in some kind of creepy little newspaper, local newspaper, neighbor -

MR. HALEM: Both college educated, your parents?

MR. PEISER: Oh, yes, yes, yes, though there has been some debate within the family whether my father actually graduated from college. It's real murky. He went to Armor Institute, which became - later became Illinois Institute of Technology [Chicago, Illinois] - in engineering, at least that's what he says. And he was in the First World War. He was in mining and sapping, you know, which sounded really glamorous to me as a kid, you know, where they dig under the enemy lines put a bomb in there and run. And he said, sometimes you hear the guys in the tunnel four feet over going the other way. I mean, it was a strange thing, one of the few things that he ever said about his - aside of that, the only thing he ever said about the war was, he was, I think, infuriated forever because when he got discharged and he got back to New York, they had troops coming back. He had no money or whatever, and he was just sleeping on park benches, and the cops would throw him out. And he was really - that really rubbed him wrong for a lifetime.

MR. HALEM: This was the First World War?

MR. PEISER: Yeah, right.

MR. HALEM: How old was he when you were born?

MR. PEISER: He was - oh, Christ, - he was pushing 50.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, right.

MR. PEISER: He was older, and my mother was, if I remember, like 14 years younger or something, 15, 16, you know, quite a bit younger. These are the kinds of things that somehow, for some reason, as a kid I never learned and I still don't know. I've always felt all my life that there's certain things that somehow I never - get that most, you know, some people just naturally assume.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: I remember as a kid, and I probably was - oh Jesus, I don't know, and that's another thing, I have no sense of age or time. I don't relate any experiences to how old I was. I just somehow don't keep track or never did.

But I remember when I was pretty young, probably in grammar school of some type, and there was a woman who would come to live - lived in the house to, you know, take care of the kids and cook, a housekeeper, a young girl. I don't know how the connection was ever made, but she was from a little family in Wausau, Wisconsin, farmers, and they had a little - I mean, a poor kind of dairy farm up in Wisconsin, and I used to go up there in summers, you know, which was another part of my life, which was one - I mean, I loved to just go up there three or four weeks in the summer and stay on this little farm and take the cows out to pasture and bring them home, and it was woods and wilds and a whole different kind of - a bare bulb hanging and the unpainted wood floor, kind of farm world. You know, and there was three other younger kids kind of in my age - I had an older sister who was two years older than me and she'd usually go up there, too, and the farm family - Lucille was this other lady's name - the younger kids, but younger to me, a little bit older than my sister. So, you know, I mean we had some connection.

But anyway, and Lucille - sometime I'd heard that Lucille was 24 or 25, and for some reason I, over at my next-door neighbors - my buddy next door, friend, and his mother - you know, in retrospect it's hard to figure out how conversations begin. But she says, "Well, how old is your mother?" - or she might have asked me how old is Lucille, and I said 24. Or I had a number, because somebody told me, you know.

And she says, "How old is your mother?" I said, you know, 22 or something - I mean, I forget what the numbers were, but I had her even younger than Lucille, which was - and John's mother says, "Well, I don't think so," but I never really found out. It was pretty much when my mother died and I got a hold of the diaries that I actually started to get a picture of her, you know, of who she was, and really put into context really how old she was and things like that.

But my mother, her journalism thing - well, for better or worse where I was trying to get to was, I guess like I said, my father started in civil engineering. He came back to Chicago from South Dakota and with one of his brothers - well, he had several - three brothers still going. One of the brothers named Roy wanted to be a pharmacist. He had a dream; for some reason he wanted to be a pharmacist. So my father put both himself and Roy through pharmacy school, and they opened a pharmacy and then the second one in Chicago. And my father, when I knew him he was a pharmacist and that was his character.

And in retrospect I always felt that, for various reasons - various little clues that got dropped, I mean this was a big disappointment in his life. He kind of gave up what really he loved to do and he did this. I mean, it was quite successful or reasonably successful, but that was something.

Also, later on my mother, who had wanted to be this journalist, writer, when they got married, after they got married - apparently not very long after they got married and lived in a little apartment building in Chicago and they still had elevators and elevator boys and all that. As the story goes, they're coming home from dinner or something one night and the elevator boy's doing his homework, right, in the elevator and my father says, "Do you need a typewriter?" "Well, yeah." So he gave him my mom's - gave the kid my mother's typewriter. So that was kind of - you know, in retrospect I'm learning that's kind of - well, maybe that's where her dreams went, you know?

So these are my folks. And anyway, reading my mother's diary, I came across just some incredible passages, you know, explaining a lot. Like there was one - I don't know how to tactfully make this sound right. Apparently, you know, when she and my father - my father wanted kids; my mother didn't. So apparently they had a deal when they got married or something, you know, like I'll have the kids but I'm not going to take care of them, and he says, fine, and they worked that out. So that explains Lucille and a bunch of other people that kind of floated through my childhood.

And in her diaries there were a couple of things, like shortly after - well, my sister got born first, of course, and then me, and there were a few entries, you know, early on, where she'd write, father and me are on - were in Mammoth to - I don't know, wherever, traveled some place, you know, she says, I kind of feel guilty about leaving the kids. They're with my sister, and they're only a month old or something. I got to get out of here, I got to go do something, you know, or this is my life and stuff. And that was interesting to read, to kind of get a scope on that.

But anyway, by reading through all these diaries it was - I mean, I got to see her as a person anyway and I'm old enough to appreciate, I can - you know, I can relate -

MR. HALEM: Was there ever any religious conflict -

MR. PEISER: No. No, there wasn't. What happened religious-wise, and this was inspired - my friend next door, a kid right next door who was one of my childhood - there were four of us that were really, really close, and one of these kids was John, and they were Roman Catholics and he went to parochial school in the neighborhood. I ended up going for - you know, this is grammar school, and for grammar school I ended up going to a place called the National College of Education.

I started in the local public school, had an incident which was kind of to get me out there and it got me into this National College of Education, which was a - what do you call it? - very special, it was a school for teachers started by Mary Baker Eddy who, I think -

MR. HALEM: Oh, wow.

MR. PEISER: - and who ran the place until she croaked, and it was like a demonstration school for teachers, and they had very - you know, a small grammar - classes. One class each through the grades of, you know, maybe 15, 18 people. It was a very special situation, and this was up in Wilmette. And we lived on the North Side of Chicago and Wilmette - well, it's about a 25-minute, then, train ride from where I lived, or maybe even a half an hour up to Wilmette, which is, you know, northern suburbs. Then it was almost the end of it, end of the city. And

to get there I had to take the train every day, and this was cool. I'm a kid going to fourth grade; I'm riding the train by myself, right?

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And I go to, you know, take the train to the end of the line, then I had to walk across the golf course and through a forest reserve along a canal to get to the school, and this - I adored - it was absolutely fabulous. In those days it was the elevated, you know, public transit, CTA [Chicago Transit Authority], whatever, that you rode, but the trains - the cars were like you see in *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* [1948].

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: They're all wood clapboard with the platforms on the back, you know?

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And the beautiful, beautiful lettering on them; you know, I mean it was a wonderful experience just to do this and take this walk every day back and forth through nature as it were.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: Where was I going to? Religion. So anyway - and John is Roman Catholic - anyway, so my school was like, you know, 15 miles from my house, and the kids that went to this school were pretty much scattered all around; I mean, they weren't like neighborhood. So my friends - the kids I knew at school was one group of kids -

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: - or one group of friends in a way, and when I'm home, it's a different group; it's my Roman Catholic friend next door and his buddies from the neighborhood parochial school, so I kind of fell in with the Catholics at the beginning.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: But when I was a kid - well, God, I don't know, grammar school, I guess, my folks decided in terms of religion, well, let's send him to Sunday school, and I went to every denominational Sunday school in our neighborhood for - until I got fed up with it and said, "I can't do that anymore," and they sent me to a different one, and I went to them all pretty much. I said, it's all the same stuff, you know?

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: I said, what's the big deal? You know, why are they pissed off at those guys? I mean, it's just all the - and after, I don't know, three or four or five, maybe six years said, forget it, don't need it.

MR. HALEM: You had washed yourself - your hands -

[Cross talk.]

MR. PEISER: - there's nothing. No, I actually - later on in high school, early high school, maybe even late grammar school I got into Buddhism.

MR. HALEM: Really?

MR. PEISER: Don't ask me why. You know, and in not a real serious way but it suddenly - well, actually I can tell you a whole lot about it but it - I became aware of it. Actually I was at a museum show for some reason, I don't know why. Me and my strange buddies, we got to the Field Museum for whatever reason. We did it a lot; this is cool, you know? And somehow we end up somewhere where there's a bunch of Buddhists and some - and, you know, I thought, this is cool.

And actually, I can remember the moment, because it became very formative, and I'm not going to get into this very far, because it's just too strange. So we're riding home on the bus, the backseat of the bus and one of my friends, Pat Kennedy [sp] says, we should make little Buddhas. You can't explain where this stuff comes from, but that became - three or four, until we find girls; that was kind of our thing, you know? We had a Buddhist temple in the basement and -

MR. HALEM: So your friends were touched by this also? Or fascinated -

MR. PEISER: Well, we didn't take it - was fascinated, yep, and they were pretty hostile to Catholicism already,

you know, at that age. I don't know if any of them are practicing still, but anyway we got off into that, but, you know, along with the kind of farce made of it, we did - we went to lectures and read about the whole belief system, and at that time in my life I thought, well, this certainly makes a whole lot more sense than anything I've been exposed to.

And actually there's a period much later on, actually when I got into glasswork - I read a whole lot more, on a whole other level, and the whole Zen thing, which I really related to in terms of glassblowing and experiences there. But so the religion thing, it kind of just, to me, it just seems like it's a waste of time.

MR. HALEM: So your father never insisted you be Jewish or -

MR. PEISER: No, no, nobody ever insisted I be anything or even really suggested, you know. They sent me to the - I think it was really rather inspired - you know, sent me to all these got the whole survey course, and it was my conclusion. I don't think I ever discussed it with them, but my conclusion was, there's something fishy here.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: You know, these people are making - it's like Pepsi and Coke trying to tell you which one of them is better - so, you know, that just kind of faded from my life as something to - for guidance, you know, or whatever you might rely on religion for.

MR. HALEM: I mean, that's pretty sophisticated for a young person to find that way.

MR. PEISER: It was - well -

MR. HALEM: I mean, Buddhism, that's unusual for that time.

MR. PEISER: Yeah, yeah, oh, yeah; this is the '40s.

MR. HALEM: I mean, nowadays a different story, but at that time, that's very unusual, in my mind at any rate.

MR. PEISER: Oh, yeah, it seemed definitely - I really don't want to go where -

MR. HALEM: No, no. That's not necessary.

MR. PEISER: But I'm saying we were aware of that, too. I mean, on one level we're saying, wow, this stuff is so weird, you know, and different. And well, my other friends involved in this whole thing are all Catholic, you know; they've gone to parochial school all their lives, and through high school they continued through parochial school, but they were constantly bitching about Catholicism. But yeah, they too were just like, wow, this makes a lot of sense, but they were really, I think - their families were definitely - you couldn't think about seriously saying, screw Catholicism; I'm going to be a Buddhist, or I'm going to be nothing or whatever.

So it was - I don't know. It has colored a lot of my thinking -

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: - or, well, maybe not colored it, but like I was telling you last night or something, I mean everybody in the shop has a problem with everything, you know, politically, worldwide.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: So anyway - where am I going? Am I just going on and on?

MR. HALEM: I don't know. It's an interesting phase in your life, I think. Do you want to take a break here? I can -

MR. PEISER: Maybe so. Let me check - I might give Martha a call.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, figure out how to shut this off without overwriting anything here.

[Audio break.]

MR. PEISER: What am I - okay, so let's see. Should we move ahead in time?

MR. HALEM: Yeah, let's -

MR. PEISER: Let's move ahead in time.

MR. HALEM: - let's go ahead and -

MR. PEISER: So what did I do? So I went to -

MR. HALEM: All right, so we're out of high school -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, we're kind of high-schoolish.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, let's get out of that.

MR. PEISER: I ended up going to a rather special program in high school, too. I mean, my mother - not to knock my mother too much, or I don't mean to do that because there's a lot of good points. Somehow they got me into, and my sister, into a program at Evanston High School for high school that was their progressive education at the time program. I don't - it was again a kind of - what did they call it? Core studies or something, and Evanston High School at the time was great. It was one of the best high schools in the nation and - but it was a big school, almost 1,500, 1,000 students, you know, a big student - and it was a suburb of Chicago.

They had to pay through the nose to have me go there, so I appreciate that. And so I did that, and I guess I went through high school. Meanwhile all along - I mean, I'm figuring I'm headed towards engineering. Still I make stuff all the time. At this point in time I'm developing plans for robots and, you know, electrical stuff, trying to figure out how to - I didn't have the money to put it together but, you know, drawing up schematics for oscilloscopes because I thought I needed one and stuff like this.

Well, I guess in there somewhere I got to mention when I was a kid, you know, real early on I took some piano lessons and, I guess, in retrospect really showed no great promise, but somehow I - it was something I always wanted to do. Later in grammar school I started playing saxophone, just to have a little band, you know, with some guys, and we did that for a while, and somewhere during high school - and meanwhile, one of my friends - one of my close buddies as a kid, whose parents were in education, a principal of one of the local schools or something, they were serious classical music fans -

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: - you know, and so I'd go to his house, and there would be this incredible music and I'd really - it just got to me. And so like I said, so I started really listening to music - well, in high school, of course, I listened to all the pop music, but somehow classical music just seemed to be a lust or a desire or a passion.

MR. HALEM: What year is this? Or -

MR. PEISER: Fifty-one, '55.

MR. HALEM: Okay.

MR. PEISER: Somewhere in there, through there.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And I did start taking piano again after I dumped the saxophone for a while, and then I guess that just kind of petered out. You know, like I say, I found girls and everything changes and priorities -

[Audio break, tape change.]

So that was something that was continuing to go on and - what was I going to say? There was something about my mother. Well, I mean, she got me into this - you know, insisted on education. She thought education was, goddamn, you needed it, you know. And there was several - several really kind of special things she did that made an impression on me. I mean, I actually do remember, you know, the lecture, the world is your oyster and follow your dreams and that, which was very formative.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And I think maybe when I was in eighth, seventh, eighth grade, sometime in grammar school on one of my - some birthday - I'd been collecting butterflies; it was something else to do, you know - had my own cyanide jar. My father, of course, had cyanide. So here's a, you know, whatever, 10-, 12-year-old kid with this big jug of cyanide, which was interesting.

And anyway, on my birthday they had called up and connected with the head of lepidoptery at the [Chicago] Field Museum, and on my birthday took me out to his house, way on the Southside of Chicago, you know, and he just showed me some of his collections, some wonderful things. It was a very special kind of - it was very much, certainly at the time, something way out of any kind of experience I'd had. And I guess I didn't know how to process it at the time, besides saying, wow, look at these wonderful things.

But I've often thought, well, that kind of gave me the balls to call up Walter Mark [sp], out at I don't know where, saying, "Walter Mark, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. Can we come talk to you?"

MR. HALEM: That experience got you into -

MR. PEISER: Well, I think it gave me - one summer - I think maybe it was when-the-world-was-my-oyster talk came. I remember that driving down Lake Shore Drive, you know, with my mother, we're going somewhere, and she's saying, well - and I was really into animals, and I always had animals, you know, alligators and guinea pigs and all kinds of - I mean, weird stuff, a lot of them. You know, not just one, a lot of them. I mean, it was a real -

MR. HALEM: Menagerie.

MR. PEISER: It was a menagerie. And I won't go to where - how that ended; somehow my father sold them off. But we're driving down Lake Shore Drive and my mother's - and she saying, well, you know, we can call up Marlin Perkins, who was the director of the Lincoln Park Zoo at the time; we can get you in with him somehow, or we can try. You know, and I mean, it just kind of gave me - exposed me to kind of what I would consider is very kind of brash and aggressive behavior.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And I don't think I do much of that, but sometimes when I really need something I -

MR. HALEM: When it's important enough.

MR. PEISER: I've had some preparation to do that. So, I mean, there are a lot of things that I got from her that way.

But in high school, let's see. Well, I found girls, girls, girls, you know. Anyway, then I went to college. I guess there wasn't too much happening that I can think of that was real formative except that I was very close, as probably most kids are, with this small group of friends and very rich. Oh, there was - well, we don't want to go - there were a lot of experiences - when I was like - I've been trying to think about this, I think maybe when I was 15 and all my friends, they were ahead of me, the guy next door and their friends.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And I was always the youngest kid in the class because of my birthday, and I jumped ahead a little bit. And I think I must have been - I could have very likely been 15, certainly not more than 16, and we talked our folks into letting us take a trip to Minnesota, the four -

MR. HALEM: The four guys.

MR. PEISER: Yeah. And which was just, you know, our first time out in the wild, as it were, and -

MR. HALEM: By yourselves?

MR. PEISER: By ourselves. And my friends might have been, what, 16 or 17? I mean, none of us could drive yet; I know that, and so we had this wonderful experience going up to Minnesota. We researched it, you know, and found the cheapest cabin on some lake, like, next door to Lake Woebegone in nowhere. You know, and we were there for like two weeks and blew out four outboard motors. I mean, of the crap we packed, there were all these hideous rubber - we're going to Minnesota, right, on a fishing trip. We had to pack our fencing swords, and it was really bizarre. [Laughs.] It was the kind of thing you'd make a movie out of, you know, these days.

But I guess I'm just saying this because on the one hand I felt like I had very little contact with my parents, but they gave me just about carte blanche with a great deal of freedom, and I think that's been very formative. Or, you know, kind of how I'm trying to live my life, I think.

But when I came around to college, thinking about it, I had no plan whatsoever, just this assumption I'm going into engineering, and, yeah, no special ideas. I guess part of me, already by that time, I was very much thinking, damn, I just really want to try and get into music. So and I was kind of indifferent and, you know, the college counselor calling you in and saying, where do you want to go to college? I don't care. He said what about Purdue [Purdue University, West Lafayette, IN]? "It's close. It has good engineering." I said, "Sure, fine, whatever."

So I went there and it was ghastly. I just hated it and - well, I did. I did. I didn't like the place more than anything, you know, and the classes suddenly got into real engineering, and I was there for - in electrical engineering, and the second year I was there in my electrical engineering course, which suffered because it was 8:00 in the morning and I still can't deal with early mornings. I'm sitting in class and Professor Schultz [sp] has filled up the blackboard wall with this - some equation for something, you know, this whole - you know. And then he says, if

you take out, you know, about 30 square feet of this and we substitute in this, you know, ZXY over 12 or something, then we can do this. Finally I asked him, I said, "Mr. Schultz - or Professor Schultz, why did you do that?" And he thinks - and I like this guy, he's another guy - I mean, I liked him, you know, he seemed like a good man. And I said, "Why did you do that?"

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And he stops and he thinks and he thinks and he says "Well, if we do, it just works out." And that was -

MR. HALEM: If we what?

MR. PEISER: "If we do the substitution, it just works out." And that was the last electrical engineering class I ever went to. I mean, when the bell rang, I went to the sweet shop and just thought, what is this stuff? And I couldn't do it.

So this threw me - and I just said, I can't - I don't want to do this, you know, and my parents - well, at the time some of my other friends from Chicago, one or two of them, ended up going to Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago, and in the summers, you know, I kept hearing stories about - they'd make comments like, oh, God, that looks like something they'd do at the Institute of Design, which was on the IIT campus -

MR. HALEM: I see.

MR. PEISER: - which was the new - the American Bauhaus incarnation.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And that just got my attention; you know, it kept kind of registering, and so somehow I got the idea I should go into design, and my folks say, "Oh, dear." [Laughs] "What is this all about?" So I took this enormous battery of - three or four days of testing, you know, whatever, because they have to do stuff, you know, just to see where should I go.

And I remember I went with my father - another rare occasion with my father - we went down there, and this is where he went to school, actually, in Armor. I mean, it's the same campus really because he -

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: Anyway, so I remember sitting there before - you know, we had an appointment at, whatever, 1:00 or something, and we get there early, and he says to me, "Well, if it turns out you should be in music, I don't know what we'll do." And I said, you know, what does - I mean, it's kind of a drift I'd had all my life and I was pretty much discouraged in that way.

Anyway, so when I get in and the guy tells, you know, the results of the test, and I'm actually looking for direction, and the guy talks around everything for a long time and finally says, "Well, you've done all these tests and it shows - well, you can do anything you want to do." I say, "Thanks a lot." [Laughs.] You know, "Thanks a lot." And so ultimately they said, you know, you could go to the Art Institute [Art Institute of Chicago], you could go to the Institute of Design [Institute of Design, Illinois Institute of Technology] - I mean, these are things they said - you could try music, you know, so on and so forth.

Anyway, I just opted to go to the Institute of Design, to go into design, because I had friends at the school and, you know, whatever, and that was pretty cool. I mean, it seemed certainly I had an aptitude for it and it was interesting, and that got me really away from the engineering aspect of it all, and from where I sit now, I look back and realize I learned a whole lot more than I thought I did at the time or at least was influenced a whole lot more than I thought I was at the time.

And [Ludwig] Mies van der Rohe - the architecture department was upstairs. It was all together, and there were a lot of really pretty cool things happening in the '50s there; neat people, a lot of people that had come from Germany were teaching there. And from where I am now, again, you know, I think one of the things somehow I learned most was the superficiality of style, you know, in fashion.

In retrospect, the most influential teacher I had was a guy named Cosmo Campoli, who taught sculpture in the foundation program, foundation year. And I never would have thought this at the time, you know, but there's just some comments he made that I find are kind of a nucleus of what I -

MR. HALEM: Have stayed with you.

MR. PEISER: - about form and what it's all about, you know.

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: And - but at the time, you know, I was doing that, and so I got on - well, anyway I went through that and had a bunch of experiences that somehow - you know, when I think about what I've done with glass, and what we have been talking about for the last couple of days, and I look back at - well, and I go through this show in Asheville, and part of me is well aware, there's probably 30 or 40 pieces between here and Asheville that someone could have made a whole damn career out of, a whole life out of.

MR. HALEM: Of your work?

MR. PEISER: Yeah, yeah. Or I could have made a career.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: I could have stopped on any one of a whole bunch of things and done them forever, you know, and had probably some money and - I mean, I've done fine but just a different kind of life, and for some reason I've not done that, and part of me is kind of angry - well, resentful. You know, I'd like to have a personal life, which hasn't really blossomed too much over the last 35 years because I've been too involved in all this stuff, and I keep changing and it just takes up all the time and energy. At least that's the way I've done it.

But it's some experiences that I've had about just not sticking with things that have made me feel that way. I have always had this "best is yet to come" idea that, you know, the next piece has got to be [better] than the last one, and it just keeps leading you on and on and on, and it just never stays somewhere and every - you know, with a particular thing. I heard the phrase once kind of the difference - what is it? Well, there's something; there's "penetrating an area." I've heard that, you know. When you do the same thing forever, as opposed to, I don't know, kind of, flip the switch -

MR. HALEM: Yeah, I want to go back a bit and go back to Chicago and pick up a bit - your training at school and subsequently after that. I'd like to get to what brings you to where we are now and that formative discovery -

MR. PEISER: Well - yeah, well, I can tell you a couple, again, formative little experiences. I seem to learn only by such things. I cannot read a book and learn a goddamned thing. I - it's just impossible. But after I graduated from design school, I -

MR. HALEM: What year is this?

MR. PEISER: Well, probably '61, I think.

MR. HALEM: Okay.

MR. PEISER: Oh, wait! Wait! Wait! Wait!

MR. HALEM: You got it.

MR. PEISER: I've got it. They finally wrote it down somewhere. And when I graduated from design school, the first thing I did is I worked for a product design company in Chicago, and - '61 was when -

MR. HALEM: Good boy!

MR. PEISER: Well, it's refreshed my memory.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, yeah.

MR. PEISER: I worked for a design outfit in Chicago, you know, doing, well, beginning design stuff. I made models of stuff and drawings and finished artwork or this kind of stuff. And then I went in the army reserves for a while. I remember I had - you had to do that then or go in the army, and I went in the reserves, and when I got out of that again - and I also got married. Jane and I got married back then.

And when I got out of the army, I, you know, looked around for another job, and I ended up working for this little point of purchase display company - well, they manufactured them. There were about a couple hundred employees, a design department, sales, this whole thing, you know. And I started working there as a designer and partly because my best friend from design school - was a brilliantly talented guy, I mean, kind of an inspiration on aesthetic levels for me - was the design director. I could go on a digression about his talent. Let me just say he would give - never mind; we won't do that.

MR. HALEM: Okay.

MR. PEISER: But I made it - when I first met him - I mean, it's another kind of story thing. I mean, we were in, like, beginning design or something, you know, and we had a project. They just invented the Boeing 707 -

MR. HALEM: Oh, wow.

MR. PEISER: - and our - the guy who was teaching us rendering, drawing, took us out to O'Hare Field and said, look at these things. They were just starting to fly in. We went out there and we looked at them, holy shit, you know, this is incredible. So we get back to school and he says "Okay, now we're going to draw them, you know, free hand." And I'm sitting at my table and I somehow blurt out, I said, "Jesus, you know, who can draw a straight line 16 inches long?" Because that's what you need to draw the fuselage on these things.

And over from some other corner I hear, "I can." You know, it's like Giotto. And I said, "Oh, yeah?" And there's this skinny guy sitting at this table, and I walked over and said, "Oh, yeah; let's see it." And he's got an Esterbrook pen; that's all he worked with, and he drew - and, you know, after he got four inches, I said, this is looking promising. He did, all the way across, you know, the whole pad. I said, "Okay," and I got a straightedge and laid on it and it was - it was straight. And I said, "Cool."

Anyway, this guy had the most phenomenal drawing and graphic sense that I have experienced. He gave - at this display company we worked for - it was a terrible company. It was a small private corporation. The president was drunk by 11:00 every morning. It was poorly run; they couldn't make anything work, you know, and there were like, I don't know, five guys in the design department and five guys in the model shop. Eventually, I was the director of the model shop, where we made the models of all this stuff.

But my friend, Emerson Perkethyle [ph], was the design director, and we were trouble when we got together out there in this kind of formless, terrible corporate society, and we'd just find ways to do stuff. Every now and then he'd get in the mood and he'd just do - I guess you'd have to call it performance art - get a big sheet of paper, and he'd get brayers or a piece of charcoal or felt-tip pens or all this stuff, and he'd just start drawing, and he'd get on the table in the middle of it. And he'd just put down some marks, you know, and he'd look at them for a second, put down a few more marks.

And people would start coming around, and you'd look at this thing; it was incredible. You know, it was before anybody had a video camera, but we should have filmed it. He'd draw out some stuff, put it down or throw a block on the piece of paper, you know, just throw a bunch of stuff at it. And he'd look a moment, and then he'd put another thing on it, and everybody just intently was silent, and it's like [Andrés] Segovia playing a -

MR. HALEM: Wow.

MR. PEISER: - very intimate thing, you know. And he'd do this and, you know, staring at it, and everybody's looking with this apprehension, and then he'd go, and everybody would go, oh. And it became right and complete, and, you know, it was just amazing.

Anyway, and that's kind of why I went there, but meanwhile, it was just a bummer. I couldn't cope with it. You know, I'd come home - like I said, Jane and I were married. I still was trying to practice piano and stuff at home and stuff like that. And every night when work was over, I'd drive back to our house, and it would be like an hour. I'd say, "I can't talk to you, we can't - don't talk," and I'd just have to regain myself somehow. My head was just so screwed up from all this nonsense and salesmen and junk. I mean, just couldn't deal with it, and it would take at least an hour before I could say anything to her. And so I finally figured at one point, you know, I've had enough of this, but it was a great job. I was making really good money and was department head.

Anyway, I decided it was music school time. Had to do it. This was my shot. The time was right. I'd been through the army thing. I'd done all my obligations to my parents and my folks or, you know, the army, the government. I figured, okay, I'm free; I'm going to go do this. And to Jane's credit she thought that was good, too. So the guy I worked for - my superior, the vice-president in charge of engineering, his name was Harry. I said, Harry, you know, I knew when I quit - he couldn't make anything work. We'd design all this stuff, cool stuff, and he'd botch up the engineering or somehow manage - I mean, it was just awful, and most everything that did work out I had a hand in somehow.

But I liked him, too. He bit his nails all the time. He was a young - seemed like a young guy; he was probably in his 30s, you know, and he always had a bottle of Milk of Magnesia. I mean, you could hear him 12 feet away, this gurgle, because his stomach was always in knots. He was always just like - he was wrestling with shit he had no idea how to deal with, you know, but he was - he had to make all the - anyway, so I knew when I quit, this is not going to help him a bit.

So I waited, and then some really gorgeous - I've written some of this story down. Anyway, really gorgeous morning, you know, one summer, I put it off as long as I could, and I called him into the conference room, and he sits down. And I say, you know - I mean, I couldn't think - I said, "Harry, I quit. I'm going to music school." And he

just collapsed, you know, and he sunk - and we're in this corporate, walnut solid paneling, big beautiful Scandinavian table with trophies everywhere, all this kind of shit.

And he just kind of slumps down and he winces and he says, "Oh, shit; oh, God!" And nobody says anything forever. You can hear the birds outside the window, you know. I mean, it's, like, beautiful. And he finally - he just sort of leans back and starts looking out the window. I mean, this must have been five minutes; it was really weird. I was waiting for some just horrible, cynical or practical kind of response, you know, and he was kind of looking out the window and he says, you know, "When I was a kid, I played trumpet. We had a little group. It was the most fun I ever had in my whole life." And I thought, shit, you know, here's another guy in the wrong place.

Told people all over, you know, at the business there - I took that as a positive response from this guy, and I told other people. I said, I only need three more hours to be a civil engineer. It's what I've always wanted to do, but the wife, the kids, you know, everybody, everybody had some story and some excuse for why they were doing what they were doing. And that made a huge impression on me, and I said, well, screw it. I mean, if you don't believe in yourself enough to give a shot at it -

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: - you're in trouble. You know, you're dead. And these guys were dead already. So that was it. So I went to music school. You know, I quit and after -

MR. HALEM: And you were married to Jane at this time?

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: You were married?

MR. PEISER: Yeah, yes, yes.

MR. HALEM: So mom and dad were out of the picture.

MR. PEISER: They were gone; they were still alive, but they were - they were gone. I mean, or they were kind of out of the picture.

MR. HALEM: So you didn't have to answer to anybody?

MR. PEISER: That was right. Pretty much. And so to finance this I opened a little freelance design business in my garage, you know, and made models and did some design work for - made and figured stuff out for people. And people would call me and say, "Hey, we need this bas-relief tire coming out of a wall by tomorrow morning." And I'd say, "Okay, I'm your guy. I can do that."

So, anyway, I got a job, one night, kind of a rush thing, to make a toaster, a model of a Sunbeam toaster, you know, and I made it out of acrylic. I made that - used that for a lot of stuff and, you know, I'd always make stuff, and they were beautiful models. I was really hot at it. You know, it looks like a toaster. It's all transparent. All the joints are beautiful and all the internal bracing is like - I mean, it's figured out like sculpture. It looks like sculpture.

So I spent about 60 hours doing straight through - I did that all the time - and I reached the point, you know, where you think you're done and you look - me, anyway - I look at it and I said, well, how did I do? Re-evaluate it: what's right, what's wrong, what is it, you know, and all that kind of stuff. And I'm there, and I'm just looking, and I said, oh, my God, that's a toaster. And somehow I hadn't really realized that's what I was doing. I'm putting all this care and effort and useless energy or stuff that doesn't need to be done, and then I knew that I'd take it in in the morning and guys would just take out their magic markers and go scribble all over it saying, well, let's move this over here and that over there, and then the guys in the engineering department are going to put in these crappy mechanisms that have been getting worse for years.

And I really had that, you know, that kind of '60s revelation; I said, I'm just wasting crap on the public. I'm part of it. I'm complicit in this fucking sham, you know. And the next thing I knew, I was at Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] taking a glass class. I mean, it just kind of went from there to there.

MR. HALEM: All right. Let's cut that there and we're going to pick up -

MR. PEISER: Okay.

MR. HALEM: - because I'm familiar with - you're still in Chicago, married to Jane, and, as I recall, you go to an exhibition in Chicago and that is kind of the impetus -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, okay. Okay.

MR. HALEM: - for your coming to Penland in some way or your -

MR. PEISER: Well, I can tell you about that. Yeah.

MR. HALEM: Yeah. And that's, I think, a very interesting little story, but I think we're at the end of this -

MR. PEISER: Okay, okay.

MR. HALEM: - and I want to make sure I do this because I'm going to go back and try and listen.

Okay. That's recording just fine.

MR. PEISER: Okay.

MR. HALEM: All right. I'd like to go back to Chicago and get at the beginnings of your awakenings to this world that you've been involved in most of your life.

MR. PEISER: Well, the first thing that actually - well, I got to talk about Jane for a second.

MR. HALEM: Okay.

MR. PEISER: And Jane Goslin Peiser - when I met her - was a student, a graduate student, at the Institute of Design, and was teaching art history, and she was a painter. She painted; that was her thing then. And eventually she quit painting and somehow got involved with ceramic tile and made some of the most amazing things - well, she made a whole lot of stuff, like trivets and, you know, breadboards and cutting boards and stuff for the - and was selling them at art fairs and - but she made some really pretty incredible things.

We'd go to construction yards and buy these various shapes of ceramic tubing. The double hand - I forget what they're called, but like sewer pipes that are all bent and with outlets on them, and she'd cover those over with ceramic tile and start tiling everything. They were really pretty cool.

But she got involved in the world of craft by doing that, and at that point in history there was, like, no craft. Or there were no outlets for craft. There were a few art fairs in Chicago that had been going on for thousands of years. Anyway, so I became aware of a craft world and somewhere - I mean, we could look up the date, I don't know when it was, but for some reason I went to the Art Institute and came across a show of Harvey Littleton's work, early work from Wisconsin - blown glasswork from Chicago. It was in -

MR. HALEM: This is what? Sixty-three?

MR. PEISER: I don't know, maybe. Or maybe it was later than that.

[Cross talk.]

It was probably later than that.

MR. HALEM: Sixty-four, '65, possibly?

MR. PEISER: It might have been '66.

MR. HALEM: Sixty-six.

MR. PEISER: I mean, there's got to be a record on Harvey's resume -

MR. HALEM: Yeah, right, yeah.

MR. PEISER: - of what time this was. Anyway, of course, I had no idea whatsoever about glass or, you know, special awareness of any kind, and I was still - I had this model shop thing going, and then at the same time I'm going to music school, doing that. But I did tend to just stumble across this exhibition of glass, and frankly I was just - I don't know - not impressed a bit; actually, it just looked awful to me.

And, on the other side of the room or something there was an exhibition of some woman, I can't remember the name, and it was lamp work, little forms, and these were exquisite, exquisite - totally free formed. They were like the Blaska [ph] sea creature things, not as detailed, as I remember, but there was a wonderful sense of form and freedom, and there were these thin little transparent walls. They were just - those I liked. Somehow they made a dent in me. Something was cool about them.

And Jane, you know, when I'd come home from this - somewhere through this period Jane says to me, you know, in some epiphany, "You should be a craftsman," you know, "You should be a craftsman," which I had never - I didn't know what the implication - but by that point I guess I'd been exposed to enough stuff that I had a glimmer, you know. And his is all happening in a rather short, you know, probably less than a year time, these various experiences.

My father died, which I -

MR. HALEM: How old was he?

MR. PEISER: Sixty-eight or something like that.

MR. HALEM: Oh, okay.

MR. PEISER: And I'm not even sure that's right. I mean, that's just some wild guess.

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: But I guess overall that was a liberating experience for me. It's kind of something that you mentioned when we took that little break. Once, my father came down to the Institute of Design when I was a student there, one morning. I'm not sure exactly why he showed up, but it happened the preceding night I hadn't gone home and said something about studying or doing some project where, of course, I was somewhere else, and - but anyway, he showed up one morning and my friend, this guy Perkethyle, was there, and one other kid, and we're sitting at our drafting boards, and me.

So my father comes in, and he was a very quiet man, and he just sort of walks around behind everybody's table, you know, just looking over their shoulder of what they're doing. And then finally he comes over to me, and I don't know what happens, and then he leaves. After he leaves, my friend Perkethyle says, "Geez!" [Laughs.] You know, "God!" And I had really no real - it was kind of shocking to me, but I said, what are you talking about? He said, "God, he's just so intimidating," and "I mean, like the pressure, God!" And I guess somehow had grown accustomed to it or something or so - or was in denial or something.

But anyway, let's see, where was I going with that?

MR. HALEM: Jane -

MR. PEISER: Anyway, he died, and somehow it was a liberating experience for me. I mean, it wasn't like I jumped up and down or anything like that, but I did feel like possibilities were opening up or had opened up, and - but actually my sister was in California and she came, of course, to Chicago and to the funeral and so forth.

There was also another experience going on right then, where earlier Jane had bought a leaded glass lamp for $15 at a secondhand store at the corner of our street and brought it home, and I just thought it was gorgeous, you know. It was just a beautiful lamp, a leaded glass table lamp, a nice base, beautiful shade, and I'd gotten this thought for some reason after doing one of these, you know, three-day, nonstop design jobs - I'm sitting in an all-night restaurant, 4:00 in the morning getting my reward, as it were, for this dinner. I think I still live my life like that. I don't eat anything all day and finally by midnight I eat. It's like the big payoff for the effort.

Anyway, so I'm in this restaurant and I'm thinking about this lamp somehow, and I think, oh, man, I could make those. I mean, I'm good at making stuff; you know, how hard can that be? And I tried to figure out how to do it, and this was just probably a week or two before my father had died. And there was one gallery in Chicago which had recently opened - Ray Williams, I think was his name, opened the first craft gallery in Chicago, and he was this black guy who had been an art director for *Playboy* magazine. And I built a bunch of display cases and stuff for his gallery, and it was a very nice gallery, you know, for showing work from all over the country that, I mean, really had no place to be shown at that point in history.

But he had started marketing leaded glass lamp kits, I just pre-cut, all the little pieces and 25 feet of lead cane and a soldering iron and all this. So I went out to him and I got just a bunch of scrap, colored glasses, you know, and I figured - I looked at this lamp that we had bought and it didn't have the lead channel around it. It was put together with, it looked to me like, brass bushing stock that was bent around and soldered together. So I went out and I bought a soldering gun, and I put it on a variac so I could control the speed.

MR. HALEM: The heat.

MR. PEISER: The heat. You know, and I had plenty of brass bushing stuff, and I started bending it around - and, of course, it doesn't go down; it's like a spring. And I spent about six hours trying to solder some of this stuff together one afternoon, and I'm in this big cloud of lead fumes, and I spent about six hours and I got maybe two half-square inches assembled. I mean, I couldn't get it - nothing was working.

But anyway my father died and my sister came to town and, you know, we'd do all that, and I'm taking my sister back to the airport and she's saying, "Why don't you come out to California for a visit?" My sister at the time is the secretary to the dean of the California College of Arts and Crafts. Her husband - well, husband-to-be, or second husband-to-be - is a student there, he's taking ceramics.

And so my sister had this job, and somehow she said, "Why don't you come out and visit?" and I said, you know - and I must have told her that I was trying to make these leaded glass things, and she says "Well, they're having a glass class this summer." And I said, "Really, what's that all about?" And she's all, "I don't know what it's really all about, but you could come out and do it."

So I drop her off at the airport and I come home - I mean, this was all just - I've told this before and it's just a bunch of coincidence - and I walk in our house, and you walked in the kitchen door, that's the way you got there, and laying on the table in the middle of the kitchen is this month's edition of *American Craft* -

MR. HALEM: *Craft Horizons*.

MR. PEISER: *Craft Horizons*! *Craft Horizons* it was. And it's just laying there on the table. So I sit down and I start thumbing through it, and it turns out to be the issue that lists all the places to go study that summer, various craft - so I flipped through to see what is this thing they're having at California College of Arts and Crafts. And it says it's a glass equipment-making session, and, of course, I don't even know what that means, and it's conducted by Marvin Lipofsky. And I think, well, I don't know what the equipment - I'd never seen glass blown, had no idea at all what it was, but I'm ready to move on in life, you know -

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: - and so I think, well, I'm ready to get out of town. So I also look under "glass," and there's like three, I think, three other places. One was Mankato State University [Minnesota State University, Mankato], Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME] and Penland, and I go, well, this is kind of interesting. I mean, I could - you know, kind of a change gears - it just seemed like a good idea to just get out of town. So I wrote off to these places to see what the courses were, and Mankato State sent back a college bulletin with, like, you know, glass - basic glass 206, and they've got a college catalogue, and I thought, I'm not going to college. I don't want to do that.

Haystack wrote back and said they were full, you know, and Penland said, we can't tell you what the course is; it depends on who's teaching. We don't know until they get here, and I said fine. So I talked to a few people in the crafts - because Jane - you know, we were making these connections with various potters, mostly is all there were in Chicago but - and I asked them about, "Well, what's Penland?" and they all said, "Oh, that's where little old ladies go." And I said, oh, well, I don't know what - "What's glass like?" And they said, "Well, I never heard of it" - never saw it, never - nobody knew. You know, and I said - well, anyways, kind of by default I came down to Penland and - which, of course, is the most fabulous -

MR. HALEM: This is what - '67?

MR. PEISER: Sixty-seven, I think. Let's look in the catalogue.

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: I think it was 60 - where is it? Yep, '67.

MR. HALEM: Sixty-seven.

MR. PEISER: Summer of '67. So I came down here and a little - just for the record, I'll put in that I was here for - well, it was amazing to come down here. I had been immersed in the classical music world. I'd missed the Beatles. You know, I think I heard them once - I mean, I knew there was a big flap going on. I think I heard once on the radio one of their things, you know, whatever. Pretty much missed Elvis. I was just somehow living in this other world.

MR. HALEM: Popular culture wasn't part of your world.

MR. PEISER: I wasn't popular culture and never was. Never - so anyway, I arrive at Penland and I can't - you might be able to imagine. Nobody else will ever be able to imagine what it was like to walk into there cold in 1967. It was just incredible. They tell me I'm staying in Radcliffe, and I walk to go over there. There's a guy dressed up in a sheet, in a toga, and he's got a garland of flowers in his hair. The Beatles, you know, "Sergeant Pepper" is just blaring out of every place on campus. Walking the little stone walk down to Radcliffe there's a girl sitting on the stones, and she says - I think the first thing she said to me was, "What do you do in real life?" And you know, to sort of explain the real life, we were really on different pages.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: I walk in. It's Christopher Ries, the weaver, as a probably 18-year-old student. You know, it's the guy in the toga. Everybody's doing this. Everybody's weaving little garlands of flowers and the music, and, of course, everybody's smoking dope. I don't think I ever even smoked dope before I got here, and - I drank an awful lot though. You know, it was just such a different atmosphere. But anyway, I was here, and I end up with my glass class. You know, I go up to the glass studio, and it's just a pile of rubble.

MR. HALEM: I remember.

MR. PEISER: You remember. And so anyway, I go there the first day, and Michael Boyland's [sp] teaching. No, Roger Lange [sp] was teaching. There was about, I don't know, 12 people in the class or something. You know, we're sitting around on this -

MR. HALEM: It's a dirt floor.

MR. PEISER: - two-by-fours and gravel floor. No, it was dirt then. It was even before the gravel. I mean, the gravel was the upgrade. And he's trying to do stuff, and what the hell is he - you know, what's he trying to do? You know, it's not happening. And finally he blows one little bottle, and it was about maybe four or five inches tall. And he pulls it off. He gets it stuck up; he gets the lip turned, you know, pointing down. And it's beautiful proportions, just beautiful. It's finished. I mean, I just sort of saw the process. Gee, this is so direct and so elegant, you know? It was beautiful.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And so I stayed on it, just started trying to learn how to do it. And actually, initially, you know what it's like trying to, from nowhere, to blow stuff in. After three or four days, and I kept throwing things away, and everybody's saying, why'd you throw that away - why'd you throw it away? You know, you should keep some of this. Look at it. And it was three or four days, I finally got some blob that I thought was, well, that might be a piece, you know, and saved it. But then it was a three-week class, and after a couple of weeks, I was starting to get things that I was starting to feel pretty good about.

MR. HALEM: Jane's still back in Chicago and you're working here?

MR. PEISER: Jane's - yeah, I'd just come down here for a class. She's up there and living in Chicago. And actually at the end of the session, you know, they have the auction, the student auction stuff. A guy, Jim Harrold [ph], I don't know, he pops up; well, I haven't seen him pop up for a long time. But he was like assistant director, right, that summer. And he paid like $28 for one of these things, and $28 in '67 - you know, wow. That's pretty amazing, you know? Or I guess in a way it was pretty amazing, and it's like, gee, maybe I've got a future at this or something.

But I was very well aware. Jane and I had taken a trip, probably the summer before, because Jane, in the meantime - I've got to give her credit - a year or two before that, she and a sculptor and a dressmaker and another sculptor, I guess, you know, got in together and rented out a string of storefronts near Northside in Chicago and set up shops and galleries. And it was kind of a first thing like this in Chicago.

And Jane was making pots by then, and she got past the ceramic - the ceramic - I should finish that. She's doing the ceramic tile, and then, of course, she wanted to have better imagery on the tile, you know, so she got into china painting and had to buy a kiln that did the china painting. And then she started making pots, and then screw all that other stuff, and started making - so she became a potter, and we got this Webster studio. It's on Webster Street. And so she had this little thing going, and a good kiln. It was a studio.

She's making pots, and she was the first self-supporting potter in the city of Chicago, studio potter, whatever you want to call it. I mean, this stuff - there were two other places in the city where, you know, between the classes and the china painting and the mold figures and all this, , where guys were making pots and they had a business going, but not off the work. It was all off this other stuff. She was the first one in Chicago to make a living. And I mean, I'm trying to set this - you're aware of it, but - set this scene for what - there was no market for crafts.

MR. HALEM: Right. I remember.

MR. PEISER: You know, and to think of getting into crafts was one of those kind of - even dumber than going to music school when you're 25 years old.

MR. HALEM: Well, there was a very active ceramic - I mean, Voulkos was already on the scene, and, you know, there was -

MR. PEISER: Stuff was going. It was on the cusp.

MR. HALEM: It was - yeah, it was starting to move.

MR. PEISER: But there were -

MR. HALEM: And Don Wright was making pots, and so on.

MR. PEISER: Oh, there's stuff getting made. Ruth Duckworth was in Chicago, and I think she might have been teaching out in the University of Chicago or something, but she wasn't making a living at it.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: You know, and I'm not saying - Chicago was notorious - still is - notoriously bad for selling craft, for some reason. There were various reasons, I guess. But anyway, she was the first one, the way I see it, that actually set up a self-supporting studio in Chicago, which, of course, was my world. We did take a trip out to California, Jane and I, because she wanted to listen to this guy Eng [ph], Victor Eng or somebody. There were a couple of production potters on the West Coast who we knew were making a living, but they were doing, like, real production stuff. Jane's always been basically one of a kind.

Anyway, that was kind of the setting, but you know, I came down and did this class, and I made this thing, and Jim paid 28 bucks for it, and I thought, oh, my goodness. You know, this is something. I went back up to Chicago - oh, well, no, I shouldn't say that. After I was here for - let's see, class starts on Monday morning, right? Tuesday night, you know, is the instructor dinner or something. They all went over to Bill Brown's house. And after the instructor meeting dinner party, whatever they have, which was regular, Roger came back to the glass shop, 10:00, 11:00, something like that. And he'd never been to Penland before either, and he came in and I happened, fortunately, to be standing there with a couple of other people. And he said, "You know, this is quite a place. You know, this is really amazing. They got a program going on where - a residency program where people work through the winter. Individuals can get these studios through the winter." And I heard him say that. The wheels start turning, and I think it was the next day, it was like Wednesday; it would have been Wednesday. I mean, I'd been at Penland for three days or something, taken two classes -

MR. HALEM: Oh, you've only been there for three days. Okay.

MR. PEISER: Two classes. And I go looking for Bill Brown, the director. I hadn't talked to him yet or anything, but he had an office then, you know, in the bottom of the old craft house. So I walk in there in the middle of the afternoon. He's sound asleep in his chair, right, and his dog, Belle. You know, everybody knew they were inseparable. He was kind of asleep on the floor.

When I walk in, Belle wakes up first. You know, and she kind of nudges Bill. Bill wakes up, and I guess I'd never been roundabout or diplomatic in things like this. You know, and I just said - well, I did say first, I said, "This is just an incredible place; I've got to tell you." I don't know - he says, "I don't do anything. I just let it happen," which indeed he did, and that's why it was an incredible place. But I said, "I hear you've got this - some sort of resident program, and I want to apply." And he says, "Okay." And I'd just come out of the advertising world. I said, "Okay what?" He said, "Okay." And I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Okay, you're the glass resident!"

[They laugh.]

And that was it. That -

MR. HALEM: Very different than you were used to.

MR. PEISER: Changed my life. Yeah. And a very different thing, too. And I mean, it was just - and we talked a little bit. I said, "Well, what is the glass resident? What do you do?"

MR. HALEM: Yeah, right.

MR. PEISER: "Well, what's that supposed to mean?" And he says, "Well, you know, I would suggest you come back and take another course before the fall." Because at that point what the resident program was, was they just let - of course, the school just had classes in the summer, and in the winter the whole - everything was just vacant. There was nobody here. There was no staff. You know, Bill and his wife and a couple people - Bonnie Cord [ph] was the registrar, just lived a quarter mile down - you know, but there was nothing here.

So basically what he gave you - well, he gave you the opportunity. There were no locks on any doors anyway, but you could just walk in the glass shop and do the best you can. And in exchange, they wanted you to make some improvements. That was it. That's the deal. So - but he said, you know, "I would suggest you come back and take another class before the fall, because there's nobody for guidance." There's no nothing. I mean, and I know nothing, and so I did come back and take a two-week class later in the summer with Michael Boyland. And

then I came down here, and I just walked in this place. There's five people on the mountain. That's what the winter thing was, and it was fabulous. But it was like learning and of course being at Penland was fabulous because, you know, not much in the winter, but you guys, all of you guys, Joel, I mean, all the instructors - it was such a focal point. It was, like, the information exchange.

MR. HALEM: It was the crossroads for a while.

MR. PEISER: Yeah. And they'd come through, and I'd get a little tip from everybody. Well, you know what it's like. Everybody exchanged information because none of us knew how to do hardly anything, and if anybody got an idea, you gave it to somebody else, and it all came around. And it was really truly a beautiful thing. But I had felt, and it might have colored my experience, too, or it might have just fit my personality, because I'm here basically all by myself, trying to figure this thing out. And so I began trying to do that.

MR. HALEM: This is during the winter now?

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: You have the furnaces on. They let you turn the furnaces on?

MR. PEISER: Oh, yeah, yeah. Yeah, you know, the control was how tall a brick you put under the door. And for some reason or another, I figured out those Chromalocks [sp] controls. You know, and I said, wow, this -

MR. HALEM: Oh, you're the one that introduced those. We have you to thank.

MR. PEISER: Take a bow.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: Well, they were cheap, and they worked, kind of.

MR. HALEM: They sure were. Granger used to sell these.

MR. PEISER: Exactly. It was just stuff like that that I'm trying to figure out, as well as trying to blow glass. I don't know how many years ago, a good number of years ago, you know, I always kind of thought that was a plus in my whatever, that it was - I mean, I knew how everything worked because I knew it from nowhere. And like the discussion we had yesterday, I had no idea where we could go for information to get beyond, you know, us trying to figure out.

MR. HALEM: Right. There was no one we could call.

MR. PEISER: Yeah. It was all, you know -

MR. HALEM: We were leading each other.

MR. PEISER: Yeah. And I was well aware, or I felt aware that I was in a somewhat different situation than people like you that I'd met or were affiliated with some school. They got some networking going on, and you've got however many students you got to keep giving experience, an input to what's happening. But I might have perhaps, just because this is who I am, and just really figured, oh, I'm going to figure all this out, and that'll be my - you know, it'll work that way, and then, like I say, up to a certain point in history till the Italians arrived. And I guess we've got Dale [Chihuly] to thank for that.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, absolutely.

MR. PEISER: You know, all of that world kind of has just petered out, became superficial or superfluous.

MR. HALEM: You mean that discovery?

MR. PEISER: Well, that -

MR. HALEM: That excitement. I mean, you talked about that interestingly in that famous talk you gave at GAS [Glass Art Society].

MR. PEISER: I don't think it was even as articulate as even the thing I just said right now, which wasn't very articulate. But yeah, it kind of makes sense to me. Does it make sense to you?

MR. HALEM: It's making a lot of sense. I mean, I know the history. I mean, the chronology is interesting.

MR. PEISER: Because we knew how to make stuff happen, you know, but maybe this is, what, 20 years ago, 15

years ago. We knew how to make stuff happen. But then all of a sudden, we're told, that's not what you call that and that's not how you do that.

MR. HALEM: Right. The real way to do it, the historical way to do it, is known only when we reinvented the wheel; we reinvented it in our own ways, is what I'm getting from you.

MR. PEISER: Exactly. Yeah, it kind of felt like that, and well, it's just something I'm curious about in a way. I'm kind of wondering maybe because we're 66 or, you know, I'm 66 or something, and that for, you know, 20, more than 25 of those years anyway, I've been involved in things that have been so specific that nobody else wants to know anyway, and there is no precedent or much of a precedent.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, but there's something - we're working in the schools, and you're here basically alone. You're working out of the same kind of furnace we're working out of. You're working the same marble glass, and 1970 or '71 the first Glass Art Society meeting comes down here.

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: And you were already here.

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: There's a few things I would like to know. What did you have to do with that meeting, and what did you bring to that meeting from what you had learned separate from us?

MR. PEISER: Well, what I think - and you know this story - taking credit is a little bigger than it really seems, but I was out at that NCECA [National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts] conference in California. I forget what year, but it must have been '71 or something like that. I got invited out to talk about life as a - I don't know what they call it - producing craftsman or studio craftsman, because I was - I believe I was the first guy who actually was starting to make a living out of my own shop with this studio glass, again without - I don't know what other opportunities there were.

But I actually after that first fall that I was down here, I mean, I went back up, fortunately, to Jane's storefront studio, and her sculptors and dressmakers and all the other guys had a Christmas sale, you know, and I took all these bottles that I'd blown down here during the fall, and they had a venue to show them. And I sold them all - you know, for like $3.50 or $7 and was actually starting making a living.

But for some reason I got invited out to this NCECA conference to - I think the point was, you know, as a studio craftsman. And I had never given a thought, never been to anything like that before, and I was really apprehensive, and you know, what am I going to talk about? What do they want to know? Should we use crystal-like brick or clippers? And, I had no idea where to come from, and I really agonized about it for a long time.

And I remember like 15 minutes before the talk, it hit me. I don't know if I said anything or how long I was on stage, but I only remember maybe 30 seconds. And I said, "It's about a way of life and it's an independence and freedom and integrity and control of your whole world," and that's what I said. I must have said something else, but I mean, that's - that was the hook, for me, and that was what was important to me right then.

But while I was out at that conference, there were glass - it was the first time I met, I really met Marvin [Lipofsky] and Bob Ness and Dick Marquis and a whole bunch of other people. It was just fabulous, you know, and there was a little exhibition connected with it, and I stayed out there - and Joel was - but I'd met him before; anyway, he was out there. And we traveled around and saw the different glass shops, and everything, and we ended up at Jim Williams [?], a glassblower in New York City.

And for some reason, I'm walking, and everybody's talking, and it's just a good time. And I'm walking through Jim Williams's living room and I'm looking at all of his work, and other people from out there had work there, and I'm looking and I'm thinking - it hit me. Whether it was true or not, in retrospect, maybe I'm looking at style, but I'm looking in and thinking, God, they're doing everything different. And I'd seen some equipment that was built all different than I was accustomed to seeing, and everything was different. And I just kind of blurted out, you know, we really should get together, these guys from the east and the west, because we're doing stuff different or certainly there's other ways to look at - or something, you know. We've got a lot to gain if we got together and talked about it. And I said that, and you know, a couple of the other kids were like, yeah, you know, that's a really good idea.

And Fritz [Dreisbach] was there, of course, and Fritz at that time was down here at Penland, too, and so we got back and we asked Bill Brown. We said, "Look, we got this idea, we want to have a conference," and Bill says, "Sure, what can we do?" I mean, Bill was - it's just unimaginable even in the '60s. He was such a special man.

MR. HALEM: He was a very seminal figure in our formation. He -

MR. PEISER: Definitely in our formation.

MR. HALEM: And I - yeah.

MR. PEISER: But like all - I mean, all the media. You know, I mean, he had a finger - or the school or the situation he created was just seminal to the craft.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, you know, the other media were established. I mean, clay was very established.

MR. PEISER: Well, you knew - yeah.

MR. HALEM: The whole aspect - all aspects of ceramics were really established - weaving and jewelry making and so on. Glass was the new kid on the block, and he gave us - I mean, this isn't my thing, but as I see it, his - what you just said, his saying, okay, what can I do, brought us together.

MR. PEISER: It did. He did this to everybody, but he had a special love for glass. You know, he -

MR. HALEM: Yes, he had that background from having worked at Corning.

MR. PEISER: Yeah, but anyway, what did I do for GAS, or that thing. I mean, I got - you know Fritz. I mean, he knew everybody. He'd been everywhere, even at that time. And I think I organized, you know, like a keg of beer from Paoli clay and a round of cheese.

MR. HALEM: Right, and a wedge of cheese.

MR. PEISER: But Fritz and I and Billy Bernstein, too, got together.

MR. HALEM: He was already here.

MR. PEISER: Billy was here.

MR. HALEM: Yes, he was.

MR. PEISER: He was here.

MR. HALEM: For GAS I, was he here? I know he was here for GAS II. He's in the pictures.

MR. PEISER: I think so. This is a little - this is a little contention, because Billy contends that he was. I don't really remember much of it.

MR. HALEM: I mean, there are photographs that I have of - in, I guess, it's your studio.

MR. PEISER: Some of them probably.

MR. HALEM: And I recognize the people in the pictures. Tom McLaughlin was here. Bob Arbor [ph] was here.

MR. PEISER: Dudley [Giberson].

MR. HALEM: And so - but I don't ever remember seeing Bill Bernstein's picture during the GAS I.

MR. PEISER: Well, I'm not - anyway -

MR. HALEM: He may have been and just not in the pictures.

MR. PEISER: I - well - like I tell you, I know he contends he had some hand in it. I don't really remember what, but we were - it was kind of - I don't know. But anyway, mainly when I think of my involvement, like I say, was like going up to Paoli. And they tried to get, you know, tell them about it, bring some - I tried to call a number of people to get, you know, 20 bucks, big bucks, stuff like that. [Laughs.]

Probably the most beautiful thing about it was thinking up names. And well, this happened over weeks and weeks, you know. We were trying to figure out people who might be interested and figuring out names and coming up with all acronyms that we could come up with, and suddenly, I can't remember who said GAS, but we knew that was it. That was it.

But what I remember bringing to it was that I had melted some really what looked like clean glass instead of marbles. I took it as one of the greatest compliments of my whole career. I don't know who said it, but I had

down at my shop then at the barns, you know, I had a tank of glass that I had melted the batch, you know, from a day or two before. And somebody came and said, "You can see the bottom of the tank," you know, which with marbles was -

MR. HALEM: Impossible.

MR. PEISER: - never - you know, it was not part of the experience. I had a polariscope, a homemade polariscope, which wasn't a big deal, but I had it there just to say, "Look, this is all you need," you know. Let's see, what else was there?

MR. HALEM: What about color in the glass?

MR. PEISER: That never struck me as a real issue, because - I mean, starting off with the marbles and cullet, you know, and throwing in your carver - copper, cobalt, or manganese or copper or cobalt or manganese -

MR. HALEM: Right, exactly.

MR. PEISER: - or copper or cobalt or manganese. I don't think I had anything unusual going there, but of course, with that, all sorts of things opened up. But I don't know. I didn't feel any big deal, but those were the things that I remember, plus a lot of little things.

There was - one of my grandest inventions that I thought that nobody seemed to respond to was, you know, I took - well, let me back up just a second. I really took it seriously, that initial freedom that, you know, put the glass in at the studio where you got - you know, one guy's got control over everything. And of course, I'm down here all by myself, and everything I make, it was just me. There's nobody extra walking around or anything, so I need all the hands I had.

And as you know, if you're blowing, say you got the piece made. You got it on the stick. You knock it into the cutoff box, and how the hell do you get your gloves on in the meantime to get it in the oven? Well, I had this idea. Maybe you'll appreciate it. Nobody's ever liked it. I got two of these big, springy clothespins, screwed one side of them on the cutoff box, and hung the gloves in them so they're just hanging down so I just had to -

MR. HALEM: Slip your hands into them.

MR. PEISER: I thought that was like -

MR. HALEM: Wow.

MR. PEISER: This was, like, Windows 75 or something, you know? [They laugh.] It was just amazing. But anyway, it's stuff like that, and we were all finding little solutions to all kinds of little problems, the doors on the furnace. I mean, you know, I look around. I see a lot of stuff still. I go through studios, and I see stuff that I know where that, you know, came out of here. And I know other people can walk around and see stuff that came out of there, 30 years ago, some - oh, there's an idea. You know, simple stuff. But I mean, I like that. I don't say anything to anybody about it anymore.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, I know what came out of my studio from my ceramic background, you know, and the rollout.

MR. PEISER: The rollout.

MR. HALEM: The rollout oven -

MR. PEISER: Oh, yeah.

MR. HALEM: - so I brought that from my ceramic background and introduced it to Fritz.

MR. PEISER: Yeah, well, all this stuff disappeared. But I remember that at GAS I - and this was, well, I guess it's been a major thing - Dudley Giberson saying you can make an opal glass with bone ash and arsenic.

MR. HALEM: Oh, wow.

MR. PEISER: And as you know, I've spent a lot of time looking at opal glasses. And maybe you don't need the arsenic. But it was the entry. It's like, oh, well, we can do this, you know, kind of thing. And then - I don't know what else I can remember. Mostly what I saw, what I gained, you know, was watching all you guys say that had more - and more diverse skills blowing. The things that I picked up on that, you know, just kind of really got me.

MR. HALEM: You had made some unusual pieces.

MR. PEISER: Well, I was doing okay, but you know, my - ah, Jesus. The last time I really taught a class was at Haystack, and this must have been 15 years ago, longer than 15 years ago. Steve Powell was one of my students and a couple of other people who got to be well known. And this was the last time I had the audacity to teach blowing, you know? [Laughs.]

And I know how to blow what I blow or blew, and I could tell you all about it. I have a rationale; I have a whole system, see, which wasn't a talent at first, but I just found out how to do the things I'm doing. And I never used the marble because most - all the stuff I did was, well, you can't make a marver clean enough to do the things I did. And you can't roll - you can't get anything on the surface, all the different kinds of decoration and how many times.

So everything was done without a marver, and I knew how to blow all the forms I did without a marver. And I can explain them to myself with fluid dynamics or hydraulics or something, pressure and heat and thickness and viscosity - all this stuff. I got a real rationale, can explain it all. So when I was teaching at Haystack this time, I'm telling these guys, "Get off the marver!" And they're all just clanking things. They're like clank, clank, clank, clank. You know, get off the marver.

I remember I was sitting out on the deck and giving this lecture about pressure and volume - [laughs] - all this stuff, and these guys - you know, just heads are rolling and all this stuff. Then I really had to think, okay, and so we go back and that time it was, but look at this! And I walk out, and I come back, and about three feet outside the door, you can hear things go clank, clank, clank, clank, clank on the marver, and I come in and everybody jumps, and I said, "Oh, this isn't working." But anyway, I had a system for blowing, and I could do - you know, you work it out.

MR. HALEM: I'm going to shut this so that -

[Audio break.]

All right, all right. We left off - it was about 1971, I think, and we were talking about GAS I and II and what you had brought to those meetings and to glass in general, which - I mean, that basically was glass in general. We were all off at the different schools, and this was the first time we had ever really come together and to share the discoveries we made with you and your discoveries that you were making almost independently on your own down here in Penland.

I mean, we had gone through how you ended up here. Now you were ensconced down here, and you really started to build one of the first independent studios to make a living at being a glass artist, which was kind of new for us, because we were teachers basically.

MR. PEISER: I did feel a certain separateness, you know, from what, at that point, well, from the glass movement, being a part of it, you know. And I guess from my perspective I didn't see much, you know, because that's the way I am. I don't look too much or go out of my way to keep in touch with everybody.

MR. HALEM: You weren't doing workshops like we were.

MR. PEISER: Or wasn't doing workshops, yeah, that, too. So I was - well, I started sometime, I don't know when, doing a bunch of them, but my impression, my read, was I felt kind of on some other pole from what was going on. Partly, and I don't know if it's really justified, but it kind of got set up in my head. And part of it was probably set up from - actually, I didn't meet Harvey for a long time. I didn't meet Harvey until he moved down here.

MR. HALEM: Really?

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: That's a long time.

MR. PEISER: It was a long time. And I'm afraid my impression from that show in Chicago that I'd seen, you know, had something to do with it. And part of what I saw happening, some of the other work that I associated with what was going on in school, and kind of the thrust that I felt here somehow coming out of Harvey himself, you know, does it make art, not craft, or something like - I don't know what it - I mean, because I never was there. You'd know much better than I what he was actually saying.

But I got the impression, you know, everybody was off trying to make some kind of art, and most of what I saw was - well, everything I saw kind of said, "Look, I'm making art." This I felt had no purpose, you know, not valid or worth it or something. And maybe it's because I was in this, you know, the Penland School of Handicrafts, as it was known then, or in this mecca, this area.

It got stuck in my head, I guess when I dropped out of music school, that music somehow is what really touches

me of the art forms, and nothing else is close. No other sort of art experience comes close. And I went through design school, too - and I went through there at an interesting time, when that debate as design art got going. And I went through design school at a time when a big percentage of the other students at the Institute of Design at that time were on there on the GI Bill, after Korea I guess.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, it was Korea.

MR. PEISER: And they were older. They weren't fresh out of school, and they weren't just on some track. They were there on purpose, and a whole lot of them had very creative egos somehow, and you know, really wanted to be making art. And so there was a lot of discussion and activity, you know, debate about that. And then, of course, you got to do the art and craft thing.

But anyway, I'm down here at the Penland School of Handicrafts, but when I dropped out of music school, like I was saying, I feel like I got into glass on the rebound, you know, from some relationship. Part of me said I have no interest in making art. That's not what I'm doing, or that's not what I'm about. And finding myself suddenly in glass, you know, the biggest hope - I mean, it was a real hope - it was just to make a living, learn a craft, make a living, live in the woods. That was kind of my mantra.

And the learn-a-craft thing, I felt that the other work I'd seen going on, the pieces I'd seen the drop art stuff and all that, I was philosophically opposed to it. And in my quiet little way or something, or with some students or classes I taught, I was pushing, you got to learn the craft. And of course, nobody knew what the craft was. Now I guess kids are doing, you know, from Italy or with seeking from the Italian thing.

But at the time, not knowing anything better, I was saying, well, if you're trying to blow a sphere, here's how you do it, you know, without a marver and without a block and so on. I was approaching all that kind of stuff. But it was a craft. I had no aspirations of making art. That had nothing to do with anything. I'm kind of losing track of where I was starting to go with this, but I don't know. Where was I going? What was the question? [Laughs.]

MR. HALEM: You were trying to pick up on the thread of you were down here, you're working independently from us, and developing your own style.

MR. PEISER: What I felt was I was doing, I was trying to learn a craft, simply put. And it was my impression anyway that the academic world was trying to make art and - well, somewhere around this time Harvey says, "Technique is cheap." It just burned me, you know, just trust, you know. So then it got even more polarized, maybe, after that happened for a while.

But yeah, my point was to make a living. I was trying to make art; I wasn't trying to make, you know, whammy diddles either. I had a sense of quality, which kind of goes back to the story about the toaster thing, I think, where I felt that whatever I make should be worthwhile. I don't know a better word to use, although I can't just define that. But it just felt like it needed to be worthwhile, and I guess so far what I had seen of glass art, I didn't feel was, you know.

MR. HALEM: Were you looking at things historically or only domestically what was going on?

MR. PEISER: Well, historically - I'm thinking yeah, in the current milieu, yeah, I was just seeing this. Historically, when I got into glass, I got books and stuff and started looking up things. And Tiffany was my hero. You know, I thought this - it's still staggering I think, what he accomplished, however it was done. And Roman glass, that was my real - I mean, I loved the Roman glass for the form, and just the directness of it is - it still is, you know -

MR. HALEM: We share that.

MR. PEISER: But - you know, and I -

[Audio break, tape change.]

- and that was my model. I may have told you this once. It's just seems ludicrous. I was down in that old studio for not very long, a couple of months, just getting my bearings in this gravel dirt pile, and I remember - I had some pictures of the Scandinavian design, which was the style of the period, or the in-style of the period. And I thought, I like that a lot. And I had some pictures of some Scandinavian goblets - blown goblets from somewhere - Orrefors - beautiful, long-stemmed, elegant tulip forms almost. And that was just on my wall as just whatever, some sort of god or another, and I'm trying to make these things out of marbles. You know how that works.

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: [Laughs] You can't make a wall thickness under three-eighths. Anyway, so, I don't know, it's some night I'm in there and instantly like - well, I guess I'd been trying to make a living and so forth. Well, what's my competition? Which is not a typical question for me, but somehow it hit me - what are the standards? Where do I

got to draw the line? What is it? And I'm thinking and I'm thinking, and finally I said, Steuben! [They laugh.] I'd been working with these marbles and this pile of terrible bricks and this furnace with a straight pipe burner and a gravel floor without even walls on the studio, in the middle of the winter, you know, and it just hit me as a little bit - I don't know what.

MR. HALEM: How did it strike you then? I mean, was it ludicrous then?

MR. PEISER: Well, at the time it seemed ludicrous, and of course, I didn't know jack about any, I mean, in terms of overview - but I think the reason it struck me was just the sense of quality associated with Steuben, you know? I mean, I don't like the design - I didn't like it then, you know?

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: But it seemed like, as far as I knew of glass, at least it seemed worthwhile or worthy, if not overpriced, or whatever. But it just seemed like it was well done, well made, crafted and quality, just a quality thing. And as I left the design world and - you know, quality was something that was very important to me, as a concept: what is quality? And I wanted whatever I did to embrace that somehow.

MR. HALEM: When you're envisioning this and developing your - for lack of a better word - your ethic, how did this impact your making a living at doing this? I mean, how did you marry the two together, what you actually made to sell, so that you could support yourself, your wife, your studios?

MR. PEISER: It was - well, Jane did fine by herself - or, you know -

MR. HALEM: She did?

MR. PEISER: Well, sure, yes, she did. And actually I was doing fine. I mean, I was selling a lot of pieces for very little money, and -

MR. HALEM: Who were you selling through?

MR. PEISER: Street fairs -

MR. HALEM: I see.

MR. PEISER: Mostly just street fairs. I think there was one gallery. Well, there was one guy in Chicago who I had known from the design world who saw this little show at Webster Studios, and I got all these pieces, you know, and made absolutely nothing, put somebody in front of a glass furnace and say, go for it. And so I got all these pieces and I got them priced at like, like I said, $3.50 to $7.00. The really bad ones were $3.50.

So he comes up to me at this Webster Gallery thing and says, "I want to be your rep." I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "Well, you know, I'll buy the pieces from you and then I'll sell them - take them down to the Merchandise Mart [Chicago] and I'll sell them everywhere." And I think Dave Schubach [sp], I guess, was his name. And I said, "Yeah, well, how does that work?" And he said, "You sell them to me wholesale, and I get 50 percent." And I said, "Well, it's $7 and then knock off 50 percent; there's not much profit margin or anything in there." He said, "Oh, yeah, well, okay, I'll just buy them from you for $7 and double it." And I actually said to him, I don't think you can sell them for $14. And I don't know if you could or not - well, he did, actually, because that's what we did, and I did that for a little while, but it didn't amount to much.

Otherwise it was all just street fairs and galleries. Little by little I'd drive around and find places and say, "Hey, I make glass; you want some of this stuff?" And I probably told you, a lot of places I went to, they'd say, "You do what?" I'd say, "I make glass." They'd say, "You mean like the studio glass stuff - the glass art stuff?" And I'd say, "Yeah." And they'd say, "Nah, we don't want it." "There were some guys from Wisconsin who came through here a year or two ago. We got a bunch of stuff from them. People hate it. We've still got it; we can't sell it." I mean, they really have told me - you know, three or four times, different places.

MR. HALEM: They have, two years ago - I'm not following.

MR. PEISER: They got some guys from Wisconsin, came through selling studio glass. I don't know who it was.

MR. HALEM: Came through here?

MR. PEISER: Well, through Southern Pines, some other gallery -

MR. HALEM: Oh, to galleries - they came through peddling their own work.

MR. PEISER: Yeah, to galleries - came to galleries, yeah, peddling their work.

MR. HALEM: I see.

MR. PEISER: And they got fried by it and they hated it, and they didn't even want to see any more. That was kind of part of the response from whatever gallery system there was.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: So I did art fairs. And they were just starting to come up everywhere - spring up. And I did really quite well, but I forget how we characterized it, but when I look back on my work, you know, like at this retrospective show in Asheville, split up into four different periods. Three of them make sense, but the first period, from '67 till I started in on the paperweights vases, I've always just called that, like, early work, pre-paperweight vase things.

MR. HALEM: That's '67 to '72.

MR. PEISER: It would be '74 or five, I think.

MR. HALEM: Because you were making the paperweight vases when I was here in '74.

MR. PEISER: Well, let's see. Let's look in the book again.

MR. HALEM: And you had been making it prior to that.

MR. PEISER: Well, there were some things that were a real - I mean, I did those opaque vessels, the landscapes, imagery things, but the point is that I considered - and I still do, I guess - like everything is just a test. It's not really a piece; it's a test.

MR. HALEM: Now, wait a second. I'm wrong about that. You were making -

MR. PEISER: To '77 is -

MR. HALEM: Seventy-seven, yes, okay.

MR. PEISER: To '77. Well, '75 were the first of the paperweight vases. I mean, the actual catalogue paperweight vases was '75.

MR. HALEM: Seventy-five, okay.

MR. PEISER: But all the early things, like these worm bowls I'm making, you know, it's all a test. And part of that was, I think, in contrast from what I sense to be, like, the artist mentality or approach to career - well, I've never claimed to be an artist, but what I'm shooting for is something different; it comes from a different place and has less -

I think it's pretty honest to say that I really do the work for my own benefit, you know, the pieces, one after another. It's not to tell somebody something or get my whatever off and insist on some sort of recognition. I just do it to learn something, one way or another. And I evaluate them kind of on my response and how that worked for me.

And even with these early pieces - I know how to blow glass, but still, as you know, even if you don't know how to do that, every now and then you can make something that just kind of has some magic.

MR. HALEM: Have you ever revisited any of your work that never - that you never really responded that well to when you've made it -

MR. PEISER: Yes.

MR. HALEM: - and found a whole different set of issues that you did eventually respond to that -

MR. PEISER: Well, technically I just had standards, or something, like rocks in the glass - if you're making the glass and it's full of rocks, you're not a good glassmaker. And if you're blowing bottles and the lips are all crooked or they're really off center, you're not a good bottle maker - you know, that kind of thinking. And so I've made hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of seconds because they had rocks and the lips were crooked or blown out sidewise. And occasionally you make - well, pieces that I've made that have ended up - and I'd look at them and say, geez, this has no redeeming value. It's ugly, it exudes, I don't know, just some sort of oafish something. I mean, I just don't - and those get smashed. But the things with the rocks and they're a little crooked in a technical - you know, you're pulling feathers around them or something and they're uneven enough, and I say, well, that can't work.

And so those were seconds. And there was a guy who used to come by about every six months, and I'd have all these seconds. I'd have shelves, boxes - they'd just be everywhere. And he'd walk in and say, "How much for all of them?" And I'd say, you know, "A hundred bucks," and he'd get 50 pieces or 100 pieces, whatever, and he'd buy them. And he'd go away and I'd think, God, I'm glad those are gone.

MR. HALEM: When you started batching glass and started to make those opals, those very bright-colors opals that work with each other - you started to really come into your own when you started to find the glass surface as a palette to paint on as well as make form with the material. How did that all come about?

MR. PEISER: It really - how did that come about? Starting with the marbles -

MR. HALEM: That far back?

MR. PEISER: Well, actually it did go pretty far back. The first opal - well, see, I made the pot furnace. Most everything I can trace usually starts with a piece of equipment or something like that, you know? But you remember Kent Ipsen in Chicago?

MR. HALEM: Yeah, sure.

MR. PEISER: I went up and visited him someplace at his studio when he was up in Chicago, and he had a four-pot furnace, you know, the door was just soft brick with a wire stuck in them that he'd stand on end or lay down, no hinges. Anyway, so I thought that was cool, and I came back and I thought - and he made color, and I thought wow, I need one. I don't know why, I just need one, you know. So I made the pot furnace and I got it all done one night - I mean, this was true, in the middle of the night, you know, 2:00, 3:00 or something.

I finally get it done. I got it all done and I go home - you know, you feel good - get in bed and really you have this thought, oh, well, what do I do with it now? I mean, you know, it's like beyond - so I'm laying in bed and I can't go to sleep and what am I going to do and what do I want? And I think, I want opal glass, you know, and so I got back out of bed and I had one - some - I think I had colored glasses then or some sketchy batch books or something for formulas. And so I went up to the - I don't know if the furnace was on or what or anyway. It was on somehow.

And I went up - the beautiful thing of Penland see - then I'd just go up to the pot - I got a formula, you know, so much of this and that, go up to the pot shop at Penland, go to the pot - 4:00 in the morning, there's no locks, go through all the chemicals, find out what they got to make this stuff. And they didn't have any of the stuff, so I make some wild guesses at that point and put some other stuff, throw it in the furnace. The next morning I had opal glass.

MR. HALEM: Wow.

MR. PEISER: This was for marbles - matched [?] marbles. Now - and I blew a piece and fortuitously, I guess, you know, it was a fluorine opal, and it was pretty much burned out by then. It had an average pot life of about an hour. And so it was this, you know, light milky color and it was cordy as hell, which worked well with the marbles, and I just cased some of this stuff and made some pieces with some trailings and stuff on them - oh, I just love it. And then the next day I learned about compatibility, you know, because - and I actually still have this piece. It's - the inside was so far off. I mean, it's all cracked inside there, but I still have that first piece but it's still - as a unit.

[Cross talk.]

Yeah, so anyway I just started using - I guess the first idea was to make an opal to decorate on the marbles, something that would contrast them with, and then - well, and I kind of worked that out. And then I got into making better crystal, and I keep working it as a system, but the - and it was probably about the time, or shortly after that, that Marcos came back from Italy with murrinis, you know, and came to Penland, did his little thing and everybody got all excited.

And I tried making some murrinis, and you had to make dense or really opaque fluorine opals and get some color in there. And the fluorine opal, I just don't know anything that makes more beautiful colors than you can do in the fluorine. They just have the quality that's just gorgeous, you know, and basically it's real simple. I mean, they're very receptive to color.

So actually in the show in Asheville, again, there's the little group of pieces which I've kept as kind of a progression, where I made these murrinis, flowers, of course, what else - well, that's all I do. I made some flowers, and there's a piece in there where I got these big flowers - very stylized - and then I've got a feathered - leaves coming up underneath it. It's just made out of a feather pattern with the flowers set in the low spots.

Then there's another one with the big murrini flowers, where I said - started doing the vine thing, where you just got rid of the mechanized, stylized thing and just dribble on a thing. And I had these materials around and I started making these big opaque things where I'd just make [hot bit ?] flowers instead of the murrinis. You put on a big blob of bright color, and you can kind of hook it into a flower form, put a dot in the middle of it, and that was cool. I mean, they strike me as gorgeous. I loved the material. The forms were pretty good at that - and they were working. I really thought some of these were pretty nice pieces.

And so then one day it just hits me, you know, and again at that show there's a bowl where it hot tooled the fish, which is just like the flower, with another fin on it and so - and you can hot tool the whole thing, and I thought, geez, you can make images. And from there I started making the landscape things, which were just gathers, successive gathers, and you rake the top of the gather to make the hills, and it just - you know, it just sort of seemed that I had a natural disposition, in retrospect looking at it. You know, going to more and more literal imagery.

[Audio break.]

MR. HALEM: Okay, so you're making -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, so I mean it was a struggle. That's the period when Dale Brownskin was working with me, and we spent - well, I've got a refrigerator, a cubic refrigerator, full of steno pads and stuff from formulas and tests that we've run for all these opal systems. Anyway, it was a struggle and actually, in fact, I had a show at Portnoy Gallery in New York that was kind of new, and they'd seen these opaque - the landscape pieces I was doing. They seemed to be hot. People at the art fairs liked them and stuff like that and I did too.

I felt somehow that some of them were worthwhile, and so I was making this show for Portnoy, a bunch of these things, and a week or two before the show I start grinding the bottoms. They're all set up, ping, kaboom, and some of them started popping, and I thought, oh, Jesus. So I at that point - and the show was still happening that - you know, I sat around and this is one of the inputs to it and said, well, okay, we got to leave the opal casing off. That's not good. And that's when I started doing the paperweight vases, and then also got tied into - I mean, it didn't start as, let's make a thing like this. It was like the glass beats you into a corner where this is all I can hope for, and then you find out, this is really much better anyway. I had gotten the transparency from that.

But all that imagery - it was funny. They started off, you're looking at that little butterfly piece over at the house; I think that's probably silver nitrate and cobalt or something like that. But I ended up making all these butterflies. It became an imagery, first of all, because they're, you know - it's something, but, I mean, I do trace it back. As a kid, like I was telling you, I have a connection to butterflies, and I started making them out of - or they were a vehicle to find out - I made them out of silk and carbide. It was really cool to gather, put silk and carbide, you know, and the silver and just all sorts of things through the years.

Working with the marble - starting with the marbles, as only somebody else who's started with the marbles knows, if you're going to try and put some decoration on the thing, you got real limited options in terms of color and chemical or anything. So I went through everything I could think of, you know. Then you say, well, what are you going to put on there? Or that's what I'd ask myself. And it really began - there's all kinds of different butterflies. There are different materials, you know, or processes I'd use to make butterflies. That was like the first test as a way, you know. But the opal things were - I mean, I loved the color. I just love the sense of it. The color was just incredible, and I did a lot of different - tried to think of different ways to use it.

But once I did a couple of these pieces without the background and had the torch work thing started, I tried making a whole bunch of flower murrinis - well, I wanted to make the murrini in perspective, you know, the image in perspective. Like a daisy, a real perspective view of it, foreshortened, and I tried it a bunch of times, and I couldn't. It wasn't working, and I really thought, well, maybe I can get a torch and maybe I can just draw it on there. That's where the whole -

MR. HALEM: Draw it directly on the surface, on the clear glass background?

MR. PEISER: Draw - I tried to draw a distorted or foreshortened daisy. That's where it started, and Dale -

MR. HALEM: With a torch and a stringer.

MR. PEISER: With a torch and a piece of orange glass, or yellow glass or something. And Dale was working with me then, and we sat down one night and I tried to do this. I was going to make a pot, had a bunch of these foreshortened daisies all around it and, I don't know, leaves or something, and I couldn't. We spent a couple hours on this daisy, and they just looked like shit. We were putting them all over this piece and - but as we're doing that, we're finding stringers.

See, I never used that word "stringer." I didn't even know it meant.

MR. HALEM: Right, it just popped into mind.

MR. PEISER: But that's what they're called now, I guess. But I had these canes that we had drawn out, and while we're doing this, these canes are all collapsing. He's holding the torch, I'm holding the cane, and, you know, they're all collapsing. They're making these wiggly lines everywhere. You can't control them, and I look at him and say, geez, that looks like a vine. Screw the daisy.

So then came the wisteria, and we spent about, I don't know, four or five hours on the same piece, and Corning bought the damn thing out of this show that went up to Portnoy. It's like, I don't know, *Paperweight Vase Number Three*. There's a little goofy catalogue, you know. And buried in it - if you x-ray it or something, you'll find these lumpy-looking daisies somewhere underneath all this -

MR. HALEM: Oh, wow.

MR. PEISER: - other vegetation, that we ended up, you know, saying, well, this is what -

MR. HALEM: Oh, you just did it over -

MR. PEISER: We just kept on going, you know.

MR. HALEM: I see.

MR. PEISER: And drew these - well, they were really stylized and they look, to me anyway, really kind of clunky. They were in all respects, but they did have a certain kind of whatever to them. But, you know, it just veered off in a whole different direction, and essentially, for me, the big switch was going from this opal ground, which was so beautiful and graphic and had a big scale and hopefully trying to control it so it doesn't look too cartoony, too transparent surface. And instead, you know, like the big round - well, like a pot, surface [deckers ?].

Up to that time, I think, with glass my main interest or concern on pieces, was, like, how do you relate surface decoration to the form in a design sense? How does it relate just graphically and try and get it in the right place and see what it is. And then when you suddenly had a transparent vessel, you know - I mean, it became hollow. It had a vessel, it had space, it had, you know, transparency, and just by sort of the chance that I was making these forest scenes or whatever, the natural imagery - creating a scene inside the pot just was kind of an accident of the moment that sets you going for eight years or whatever it turned out be.

But the transparency, suddenly it's like, duh. [Laughs.] Glass. You can see through it. Isn't that magic? And there's something - there's a form within the vessel that - or space within the vessel to - what I did was try and manipulate what you perceived there.

MR. HALEM: Did the fact that you can see the back side of the front side - you know, the fact you had transparent glass and through the clear areas you could see the opposite side of the glass -

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: - let's say where the wisteria was, but you could see the back of it. Were - did that make any difference to you?

MR. PEISER: Oh, yeah.

MR. HALEM: Did that have -

MR. PEISER: Those pieces were very carefully thought through, so that what you saw from the back side looked real.

MR. HALEM: Okay.

MR. PEISER: And -

MR. HALEM: Like reverse painting.

MR. PEISER: Basically.

MR. HALEM: You did both reverse and front-side painting as well -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, yeah.

MR. HALEM: - all in the same piece.

MR. PEISER: Yeah. Well, it was part of the conception. The whole paperweight - oh, God, we went through a lot of different - we being Dale and I, always use "we" now. I don't know, it's one of those things I don't know why I do; it's just me. But we went through a lot of conceptual changes - what is this pot?

Once I started doing the paperweight vases, well, I did do other bodies of work. I did those spaghetti bowl things, and they came from banyan trees, and these flowered pots or opaque landscapes came from looking out the window, you know, and different things.

And it's always been my approach. I have a whole set of parameters that define, you know, my working parameter for the thing. And once we realized what it was that we were making - I was making - I mean, the first reaction to, like, that first vase that we made - it ended up it had a bunch of grass at the bottom and then these viney things and some wisteria hanging down on top and stuff like that. And as I was doing that, I thought of making - you know, we were putting an image on the surface of the pot or within the wall of the pot, and I got it out of the oven, set it in the box.

I'm looking at it, and Dale was there and we both - you know, we looked at it for a couple of minutes saying, wow, this is kind of cool, and after a couple of minutes we both said, I got this funny feeling about this thing, like I'm kind of - can sense that I'm perceiving it being within the space as well as, of course, being here looking at the object. And I had that feeling very strongly, or it was a new experience anyway, looking at a pot of some sort. And that became one of the parameters, you know, or a defining characteristic, I mean, that I thought was really cool just because for some reason it resonated with me. I like being in the woods or isolated or something, whatever.

And the first one - because that one got made and because nobody had thought, or I certainly hadn't thought about it, was like an all around scene, and some of them just had pine trees all around them. And you can create this illusion of being inside, you know, and whatever that is, but it was just like all around the piece, and that was the beginning thought. And then I started thinking, well, you know, that's kind of not very interesting, or I can do better than that, and then, well, I got into like, well, what happens if you draw this scene in perspective on this spherical pot? What the hell happens then, you know, and what changes?

And then I went through a long period of time with the issue of should you be able to look at this pot from all around or from one specific viewpoint? I mean, some of the pieces - later pieces, the ones nobody likes, of course, they're like these interior scenes and stuff, were very careful attempts anyway to where the whole image will fall into place and make sense from one place.

MR. HALEM: Vantage point.

MR. PEISER: One vantage point. And otherwise I assumed it to be just kind of random imagery.

MR. HALEM: Well, you say random imagery; it's interesting because my familiarity with them from - separate from the technique, taken as drawings and paintings, I always had a sense of almost ennui from them, a sense of loneliness. The art we make is about ourselves in so many ways. We can't avoid that, and you've talked to that issue -

MR. PEISER: Right.

MR. HALEM: - and getting from the butterflies I can only jump to an empty swing or an empty field, and I get this sense of loneliness. I mean, was your personal life in any way part of this in the format?

MR. PEISER: It was never a conscious thing. Of course - as you say, of course - I guess my criteria for a good piece, you know, if you make it and it's all done and I look at it, either it's got it or it doesn't. I don't know quite what it is, but it's a very thin line that separates it. I'm not very forgiving, you know. And some of it certainly has to do with whatever communicates on some sort of emotional level.

I never thought of them as loneliness, and I found it just incredibly - yesterday morning, I told you, they had a school group go through the show in Asheville, and the kids all wrote a little - they were around the paperweight vases and they all wrote. They gave me copies of them; they're just priceless - you know, a three-sentence thing, write a story about these - they're like, I don't know, third or fourth graders or something - write a story about the piece you like. And almost all of them, they'll say, "I'm in a field; the colors are pretty" or "There's a tree. It's got really pretty pink blossoms," and stuff like that. And a few of them say, "And there's no people around," you know, "I'm on this road and it doesn't go to anywhere," or something like that. But nearly all of them said, "I feel so free," and that's something I'd never had any association with before with these pieces or never anything I -

MR. HALEM: Yes, I didn't either.

MR. PEISER: And I can show them to you; they're over at the house.

MR. HALEM: No, I believe you.

MR. PEISER: But it was just like a shock to me that that's something that they responded - or something they sensed. I kind of looked at them - or at one point, I guess when I was doing those pieces or maybe just after I'd got done and started doing the Innerspace [series] thing, you know, and I was trying to write, define where I had been and where I wanted to go. And I kind of looked at them; I said, you know, they're very much like stage sets. There's nobody there. They sit, they're anticipating what's to come, and nobody's on stage yet, you know, or something to that effect, but they kind of felt to me like that.

Many of those pieces, a lot of them are just kind of, I don't know, a generalized image pulled out of the air, and a lot of them are very specific moments from my life, or they're a picture of where I was or whatever I could communicate about that moment within that format of - and what you could make. I mean, I can't draw anything and you can't - you know, but they were -

MR. HALEM: I wondered about that. If you could have drawn children or adults, would you have?

MR. PEISER: Well, Dale and I spent all the tedious hours, and we had a lot of discussions about everything - [laughs] - during that time, but after a point in time it became the standing joke. I mean, in general terms it started off, we made a field or we made this little space, you know, and the next question was, well, how big can we make it inside there? I mean, how big a space? Can we make it a pasture? Can we make it a field? You know, and can we do this, can we do that?

There was a piece called *Gudger's Field* - Gudger is down the road here - and it was a nice piece. I can't find it anymore; somebody got it. It's another one where I'd look into it and I'd say, you know, it's really great, but it needs some cows in there. It needed the cows. I've never felt I was a good enough draftsman that I'd attempt to put a person - you know, draw or create - but it wants that something inside it. And that's actually how I got to the solid, the Innerspace pieces, because I was dealing with this volume, and I tried to manipulate the space and the kind of imagery and the kind of images and the experiences and all this stuff, like going through all that. And it was very hard work. My elbows were torn out and my eyes were going. I couldn't see well enough to put these lines on before they were blown and all that stuff.

And I wanted to put the cow in the middle of it, you know, whatever it was, and that's where I started thinking, well, I want to deal - and I developed this notion, I want to deal with a solid mass of glass and compose the interior of it some way. I had no idea, you know, and then started off another 12 years in another direction. Those pieces, the Innerspace pieces - I mean, it started off I had this notion of something, like three-dimensional graphics, and that was around '82 or something maybe and -

MR. HALEM: Which pieces are we talking about?

MR. PEISER: Well, the cut and polish things. These -

MR. HALEM: Oh, the test pieces.

MR. PEISER: I mean, these! These.

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: And - well, yeah, these.

MR. HALEM: Okay, and those cut and polish, those -

MR. PEISER: The inner -

MR. HALEM: - the harder-edge pieces -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, that's Innerspace. Yeah, 1983 to '94, I did those.

MR. HALEM: Right, so you now depart from the blown vessel -

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: - and you start getting into a -

MR. PEISER: It's a whole -

MR. HALEM: - a simplified sculptural cast image just to do the landscapes. Or -

MR. PEISER: Well, it wasn't to do the landscapes. I didn't really have much of a plan except I wanted to deal with the interior of the mass. I wanted to put something in there, you know, and essentially I wanted to develop a technique that I could put something in there. And hence this thing we had about these Chinese things at the gas station at the corner yesterday.

MR. HALEM: Your work is always - the aesthetic has always gone hand in hand with the technical.

MR. PEISER: Absolutely.

MR. HALEM: And so you had an idea for an aesthetic, and then you developed a technique that you had to now push the material in ways that you had never pushed the material before. So you begin to invent things.

MR. PEISER: I invented a process.

MR. HALEM: Talk about some of your inventions. I mean, you don't have to go in great detail but -

MR. PEISER: On these Innerspace pieces it's not very - again, I'm not a student of the history of all this, but I'd certainly never seen anything like them or seen anything like these done. The point was that I had a vision, something like three-dimension graphics. What would that look like? Can you isolate a colored volume within another colored volume? Can you compose a space, a volume, out of color and light, transparent colors and light?

MR. HALEM: Inside the glass?

MR. PEISER: Yeah, this would be inside glass. What does that look like and how do you make it happen? And after I quit doing the paperweight vases I committed myself to doing this somehow. Like I say, for various reasons, physical, emotional, and as well as the paperweight vases, I just didn't know where to go from there. I didn't know how to develop them any further -

MR. HALEM: As I recall they sold very well -

MR. PEISER: They sold -

MR. HALEM: - but that wasn't of that great an import that you couldn't move on from there and -

MR. PEISER: I've had - call it hubris again. Back to when Harry and himself playing trumpet and all those early experiences, I think. My experience has been, you know, every time I've changed - take that risk but it doesn't even seem like risk - make that change, everything always got better than I could ever imagine. I mean, the opaque landscape pieces were selling. They were really hot at the time. They sold; they were great. I got into these paperweight vases; they were phenomenal. Of course, the later pieces became all personal. They were all scenes from my childhood, and I've still got nearly all of them, but every now and then one of them still sells. But overall, you know, it's paid very well.

And when I change that into these Innerspace things, they sold very - my experience has been - had been, at least maybe up until this last body of work.

MR. HALEM: We'll get to that.

MR. PEISER: I've been rewarded for that change.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, yeah, sure.

MR. PEISER: It doesn't feel like it takes courage, you know. It takes something else to stay where you are. Anyway, so I quit blowing the paperweight vases and I basically took a year off, just trying to develop techniques and casting. And I hadn't done casting in - what did we say this was? Eighty-one or something?

MR. HALEM: Yeah, '81, '82.

MR. PEISER: You know, been doing some casting and stuff was starting to show up, but not kind of on the level - I mean, I knew if I was going to look inside it, it had to have polished surfaces, and I had never polished anything. It was all change in machinery and technology and stuff. But I tried different things, and I actually ended up with, you know, a very simple thing using graphite molds. Well, very simply, the way it resolved itself was I was using graphite molds to pour glass into - and the molds were used really as just containers. I was going to cut what I wanted, the shape, the final exterior form of what I wanted out of a block. The mold was there to hold some other kind of gizmo or whatever to allow them to be embedded or something within this other mass.

And that's what I did, and then there were a lot of - I mean, compared to what would be possible - I mean, I didn't get terribly far, you know, but I did get some satisfactory directions.

[Audio break, tape change.]

It kind of became compound casting - I started calling it compound casting, where you - at a given time you cast one part and then switch it to another bowl and pour some more glass on it and craft that, and then pour another glass on it, you know, to try and accomplish this sort of sense of composition, what you could see.

The big problem I had was, of course, cleanliness, just in terms of pouring hot glass against hot glass. You can't have anything there.

MR. HALEM: This is getting closer to your Steuben vision.

MR. PEISER: Well, it's starting to get there, but what I've found out - I mean, the earlier pieces I did like that, again, I just saw them as tests, you know, and occasionally something would come along that kind of said, well, this is okay; this is kind of nice. There's something there, you know. Your possibilities keep closing in on you in terms of what you can do really well.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: Anyway, it led to this body of work that, within the things that I determined to do, that fit for various reasons - subjects that I chose to try and make this way - it worked. I could pull them off pretty well. You still probably cast three times more pieces than you ever finish. The bad ones just don't -

But at this point in time, or even 10 years ago, I look back and say, well, the way everybody does this now is with glue, you know, and it's perfect, and I felt primitive in what I was trying to do with that idea.

MR. HALEM: You had no model for what -

MR. PEISER: Well, there was no model and -

MR. HALEM: There was no model.

MR. PEISER: And at the time, in '81, there really wasn't much glue - or nobody trusted glue -

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: - and I was the last guy who ever trusted glue, though I made something.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And like yesterday, these damn things at the gas station from China. That's what I was trying to do - or kind of, not exactly. But things have moved very quickly, but those things - actually in terms of a few little inventions, I don't know, probably nothing that special, but you learn little techniques. I think all of us do. I mean, I learned how to make palm trees, you know? I mean, that's silly, but I'm sure there's an Italian word for you make a "palm treeo," you know, and you do -

MR. HALEM: Well, I'm not sure about that.

MR. PEISER: But you make palm - you know, all this stuff - I always figured like the drawings - like the paperweight vases, you know, people say, "Oh, they're nice drawings," or something, and I never saw them as drawings; they're all constructions. They're made out of little bits of glass, literally constructed. They're not drawing; there's nothing free about any of it. And I guess after probably the first three months of my blowing glass, there's never been anything free. It feels that way anyway.

MR. HALEM: It's interesting, when you look at the work, there are many artists working in glass in America that they develop their style, and younger people come along and in no small way begin to emulate - you know, use them as a model to either build upon, or in many cases just plain copy. Your paperweight vases were influential on, I know, some people in this area that have been influenced. Beyond that, the different styles that you've worked in I haven't really seen as being influential. They've been yours wholly. How do you account for that? The difficulty - the degree of difficulty that -

MR. PEISER: I think so. I think the paperweight vases - well, even the Innerspace, those cut and polished things, but the paperweight vases were really, in retrospect, kind of Herculean tasks to make one of those with proficiency.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And I think that's one of the problems. They're hard to make, damn it! They're really hard to make.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: And to make them - and frankly, I've never seen anybody - and I'm proud to say I've never seen one made as well as the ones Dale and I did. And we really - well, I hate to use the word team, but we really had to be on the same page at the same time to make one of those things worth it, and all he did was hold the torch. I did the rest. I did all the blowing, I did all the reheating, I put all the drawings - but he held the torch, and if he didn't know where I was going with the little cane and when I wanted to end the line and how I wanted to end that line, the pieces just were clunkers. The images, they're very - yeah.

Well, there wasn't anything special about that equipment, but, of course, we made all our own glasses and all our own colors for those things. And, I don't know, I have not seen anything made out of store-bought colors that have the same sense.

MR. HALEM: You know, there really is a very important aspect to your work historically, as I see it, within the world context, and that is there really was no model. For instance, the Italian style that's so prevalent today, wherever it's made, it's a technique that can be learned by observation, because there are pieces historically, and eventually one can figure it out, and one is making an aesthetic based on the repetition of the latticinos, how they're laid out, the canes, and so on. What you did not only depended upon your development of glasses that fit each other, which historically was not very prevalent - I mean, in the art nouveau period -

MR. PEISER: Actually -

MR. HALEM: - it was, but you took it into a different direction. What I'm getting at is that to develop a style based on Peiser, one has to have an aesthetic besides just laying canes out in a pattern. One has to have a sense of drawing. One has to be able to draw. One has to be able to have a sense of color. I mean, the degree of difficultly that you lay out based upon your ability to draw, your ability to develop the technique, to combine a type of lampworking to a hot-working technique doesn't lend itself to very many people being able to do it, even if they want to.

MR. PEISER: No. I mean, it was tough; it was tough. They were really hard, and it took a lot of - but if there's anything I'm proud of on them, it is the - I don't know, the image, or what the object kind of conveys. In going back, again, at this show in Asheville, some of those pieces, I hadn't seen them in a long, long time, some of the paperweight vases. Well, even the ones I have, I've had just in a box in the basement for the last 20 years, and I go back in there with kind of a fresh eye and I look at them, and my first reaction is, wow, it has it, you know, whatever it is that harmonizes with me. But it's part of me.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, I would codify it -

MR. PEISER: And there's a lot of things that go into making that happen, I believe, way beyond the technical.

MR. HALEM: That's what I was getting at. I would codify it by saying that all the techniques you've developed were at the service of your aesthetic, pure and simply.

MR. PEISER: Yeah. That's why I did all this technical stuff, you know.

MR. HALEM: Right. It served your aesthetic.

MR. PEISER: I got pictures in my mind, even with these wormy things I'm trying to pour - or cast, you know. It seems to me my way of working. Like on these things we've done for five days, you know, over five weeks or something, and we just tried pouring them, and each time they're getting a little bit better. Each time I've seen the possibility and trying to project, what if, you know, and each time I'm trying to take those possibilities and arrange them into whatever - something that makes sense, and with these things I find to be pretty similar. It's like just plain design, just proportion and balance kind of stuff, which I find - well, it's not easy in this process, but as a basic exercise for me is very easy and natural to do.

I'm trying to do that with these pieces, but all of them - I mean, again with the Innerspace pieces, I tried to develop a technique. I had a picture in my mind, not of a piece but of a look, I guess, of a style or something - it's not a style, it's just a look; an atmosphere is really what it was - and try to figure out how to get there and then try to make pieces and seeing what can you actually make - what can I really accomplish as a tangible object, and then that always keeps closing in more and more, it seems like. You know, it's very rarely do I find something that opens it up, but it says, like, if you're going to do a piece with this kind of an image, you can't do that thing.

It's all the chess game of what's balanced. I'm not absolutely sure about this, but it started from the first day, but by the third day - I was in that old studio at Penland in '67 - I've never made anything, even a $3.50-cent blob, without making a drawing of it, without having thought about it enough to have a very, very specific internalized image of it. During the paperweight vase thing it just seemed like, oh, God, can I just start something and see where it goes? And I tried that on - well, there's one piece I know we finished like that, which actually came out not too bad, but it wasn't much, and I have to confess that three minutes into it, once I saw, well, there's where it's going, you know, okay; I got the program, you know, I mean, I had the plan; it wasn't like it really grew. Still, I've got to work from an internal and it's not a specific vision.

I've had this - and this is a typical problem - I don't know, I suppose everybody does to some extent or another, but I had this other kind of really presumptuous feeling. It's much less now than it used to be, or the kinds of pieces I've been doing for the last 10 years just are different. Again, a different kind of challenge, but the earlier things, I see the pieces, I can think about what am I going to make tomorrow, or next month, or I want a whole new body of work; I don't want to have to blow for 14 hours straight, or whatever, and at some point it's like the terrible scene out of *Amadeus* [1984], of Mozart, the notion - which is as mind boggling to me as, yeah, he just gets the whole thing and it's all done, it's all conceived as a unit at one time, in a flash, you know, and then he just has to write it down.

I kind of work on these ideas until the piece, whatever that piece is, is in me enough that I - I mean, I may not know exactly what it looks like, but I know all the damn - you know, you're making it out of glass, the fucking processes, to get them on hand, to get them lined up, or do I really know how to do this, until all these things are together at once, and then to try and make it.

MR. HALEM: That eureka moment that you speak of is really not a moment; it is the bringing together of maybe years of thinking -

MR. PEISER: There's lots of stuff.

MR. HALEM: - about all this stuff.

MR. PEISER: There was - small digression. You getting bored yet? A small digression. I took a couple of slides the other day of a thing that I did 20 years ago to try and maybe put in this talk next week: you know, the stair pieces, the various kind of groups of stair pieces that I made in the Innerspace series, the cast glass with the opal interface and a stair going either up or down or something like that. Not long after I made the first piece, [Paul] Stankard, sometime we were talking, and he said, "You know, the collectors are saying you stole the idea from Bertil Vallien."

MR. HALEM: Which idea?

MR. PEISER: The stairs. And I said - and I'm incredulous, so I say, "What are you talking about?" He says, "Well, they're saying you stole the stair idea from Bertil." I said, "What did he do with stairs?" He says, "No, it's the ladders that he puts in the boats," okay?

So, you've seen all these boats got a couple ladders.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, I know exactly what you're talking about. It never crossed my mind.

MR. PEISER: I'm thinking, stairs, ladder; those are two different things, I think. And his boat - he's carrying for some siege of some fortress.

Anyway, and I kind of dismissed it because I didn't want to get into it too deep. I think probably ever since that time, if I'm ever dealing with a collector or a gallery, I say, "Okay, I'll send you some of the stair pieces." They say, "Oh, the ladder pieces." And I just let it pass because I tend to not even want to believe it.

When we were organizing the show, Lynn, the woman you met yesterday - who's you know, not a - well, actually she has a little glass collection and antique -

MR. HALEM: The woman in the small office.

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: Yeah.

MR. PEISER: The curator at the Asheville Museum: sweet, wonderful lady, bright and all this kind of stuff, and just worked her whatever off trying to find pieces and do everything, and some time when we were shutting up the show, she says something about the ladder pieces. And I - what the heck? So anyway, just finally - well, I need something to fill up some time during this talk anyway, but I'm giving a little short presentation on where it

came from, but it kind of personifies how I think about this show.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: Some time when I start doing the Innerspace pieces, they started off as cast - well, I did different things. I invented canes and spheres and stuff in the larger cast thing. I was cutting forms, doing these mixed color pours, you know, trying to make some sort of sky or whatever.

Anyway, one day I just had this idea: if you poured, like, a phosphate opal into a mold, and then you pour some more phosphate into a mold, the second pour ought to strike the first, and if you had the opals, the chemistry, down, it'll strike and give you this interface of this line. And this was 20-some years ago, and it was sort of, whoa, I can really use - there's maybe a whole new - oh, bunch of words for my vocabulary in this body of work, you know?

So I run downstairs. Somehow I think that maybe I had opal in the furnace for some other reason. I don't know what it was doing there. But I had never done pieces like that. And I ran downstairs, and I have a lot of graphite boxes around for molds, and I find there's this big spur gear; you know, it's about like this - big steel gear, and I lay it at the end of the box. And I poured glass on it, you know, take the gear out and crunch, crunch, crack, pull it up, pour some other glass over it and bingo, there it is.

So I got this block of glass. It's downstairs on the photo table now. It's about so big, and it's got, you know, a bunch of teeth going around like this, and I said, God, that's - it in itself, the glass, is, I mean, it's nothing, but I'm saying, wow, this will work.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: What can I do with this? And for about six months, or longer, every night before I go to bed, I've got my sketchbook and I keep drawing this thing out. You know, you get back in your head and say, okay, here's this kind of art with all these teeth going; what do I make with it, what do I - you know, but that's the image I have of it. Meanwhile I'm trying to think, what can I make?

Well, it's only natural, you know, after a little while I think, oh, somehow it flattens out and I got this - you know, in no time you got stairs, right?

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: So I'm thinking, well, okay, what do they do? I mean, that's not enough information for me to make a piece.

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: So I think probably another three months, you know, where do the stairs go? You make drawings; they go up, they go down, they go sideways, they're flat, they're - so it seems only natural - [laughs] - only natural that I remember a set of piano exercises called "Gradus ad Parnassus," right, that I got when I'm studying piano: "Climbing Mt. Parnassus," you know. And I remember the moment my teacher, who traced her lineage directly back to [Franz] Liszt, said - I mean, her instructors - and I'd say, "Well, what the hell is that?" She said, "Here, get this next week." "Well, what is that?" She says - I forget what she says. She was from Czechoslovakia; you couldn't understand a thing she said. [Using accent.] "I've only been here 12 years and now you can't tell." [They laugh.] It was just - anyway.

So, it's this notion, climbing Mt. Parnassus. It's the home of the muses, and this is like finding expressionistic freedom in 49 exercises or technical perfection. You get the whole scope of it, right?

MR. HALEM: Right.

MR. PEISER: So I remember sitting on the piano bench, and I'm thinking, what the fuck does that look like, you know, Mt. Parnassus; what is this?

So essentially that became the piece, the stair piece. I mean, that's climbing Mt. Parnassus. It seemed to tie in. Everybody has always been on me about my, you know, technical perfection, and I started making these cut and polish things and all hard edge, and I was getting a lot of it 20 years ago, this kind of thing. At that point the piece had meaning to me.

And then I said, okay, now the problem is you've got this transparent piece of glass and you've got to do it in two casts, and the stairs have got to go up to somewhere, but you better not see where they get to, and the thing's supposed to be a mountain. And I think, it's old and it's foggy and it's misty, and I made - and those became the requirements for the piece. And then you do that, and then people say, "Well, you stole it from Bertil Vallien's

ladder."

MR. HALEM: No, people didn't; collectors did.

MR. PEISER: Exactly. Exactly. Well, I'm going to get my little shot in at the collectors in that I just wanted to put it straight.

MR. HALEM: When they do mine, I'll get my shot in, too.

MR. PEISER: But basically that's where that piece comes from, and I think that's what I need to make a piece, every one of the goddamned - I need to know all about it, and of course with the Parnassus pieces I had - then you figure out, how do you make a mold, how do you actually pull it off? But once I conceive the image, kind of within the format of my technology, then it's possible. Then it's just hard work - or easier, whatever.

But I need to do that, and I've been doing those - it sounds complicated, but back in drawing these little pieces, I mean, I'd draw everything. And if I don't have that in my mind, I'm just wasting my time. I just stand there and nothing happens. Nothing gets made. And I don't know what that means or how that relates to other people's working things. I don't really think - well, everybody's different, I'm sure, to some extent.

MR. HALEM: But how has your relationship been over the years with collectors?

MR. PEISER: Minimal. Minimal. I think over the years there's two of them that I've encountered that I felt were intelligent and somewhat sensitive, at least to my work. I certainly haven't cultivated any - I hope I'm not really antisocial, but I am kind of a recluse and I don't go out -

MR. HALEM: Well, they're two different things, I think.

MR. PEISER: Well, yeah, but I don't even keep up with friends very well, much less would I go out of my way to keep up with collectors.

MR. HALEM: Well, I mean, you chose to come down and live on the side of a mountain here -

MR. PEISER: Yes.

MR. HALEM: - and that speaks to, you know, how you feel in so many ways, not in any sense other than to be with yourself and your ideas and your thoughts, and I think perhaps you think clearer when you're isolated that way, you know?

MR. PEISER: Sure I do.

MR. HALEM: I mean, do you feel isolated?

MR. PEISER: No, I mean, I might feel separated, but I feel that's basically been my choice. I don't feel shunned or anything like that, but my normal disposition is I'm always thinking about something, solving some of these problems in some way. It's almost impossible for me to shut it off.

MR. HALEM: I mean, isolated is very different than recluse. If you were a recluse, you wouldn't show up anywhere either.

MR. PEISER: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MR. HALEM: But you show up at all the - I see you -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, but basically I feel, I suppose, maybe a term like self-absorbed or - I'm just caught up in this stuff - have been for 35 years.

MR. HALEM: If that's what it takes to reach your level of creativity, you've chosen a way of life that services, again, your aesthetic.

MR. PEISER: Yeah, unfortunately. [Laughs.] Or fortunately, whatever. You know, it's a mixed blessing.

MR. HALEM: There is a community of artists down here -

MR. PEISER: Oh, I've got wonderful friends. I know that. And I could be out 24 hours a day socializing with really bright, interesting, creative people, but - well, most of them are home working, too.

MR. HALEM: How do you feel at this point in your life, 66 now? I mean, we never thought we would ever be this old. I mean, when our parents were this old, they were old.

MR. PEISER: They sure were.

MR. HALEM: And how do you feel about yourself in reflection and the way you're going? What does the future have in store?

MR. PEISER: My guess is nobody is every going to listen to this again. I'm afraid that that touches into the last body of work that I did for, like, I think, nine years or something like that, maybe more, you know, that really didn't receive a whole - I mean, it's not selling well enough to - well, I'm losing $20 [thousand], $30,000 a year five or six years and that's it. I'm tapped out. And that's been disappointing because when I started this last change - I guess they're called Forms of Consciousness. That might have something to do with Gala [ph]. From my perspective, right now it's what I'm most proud of. It's the work that I feel best -

MR. HALEM: From what point of view?

MR. PEISER: Well, from all points of - well, maybe not all points of view. I think they're the most personal things I've done, you know, in terms of really trying to put myself out there, and I'm aware of what the pieces themselves - well, I think most people don't have any sense whatsoever for what to make of them, but for me, they're probably the deepest into me that I've tapped on this internalized vision. You know what I mean?

MR. HALEM: Well, they're certainly the most abstract. It's interesting to hear you express this because your work, for the most part, has never been abstract; there's always been some narrative within the context of your work. What is the narrative of this, if there is one, and how does that tie in with anything you've done?

MR. PEISER: It's not a narrative. I've expressed this a bunch of times and wrote down something similar from some catalogue or something. But the way it came about, or got to this point - as well as it was another time in my life when the Innerspace pieces had kind of culminated. I couldn't make them any better than they were. I didn't have any place to go with these parameters or whatever you want to - the format of the whole idea, you know, that initial idea composing a three-dimensional volume.

It essentially turned into things that were more images than objects, and they weren't sculptural, you know, and they were quite beautiful, I think. I was proud of them, and I had, I think, the same sense - or I felt when I looked at them or felt them or, you know, whatever, they had the same sense as probably all the pieces - good pieces, anyway - that I ever made back 'til day one, you know, blowing paper with images, no images, whatever, and at the same sense, which I considered kind of something about me we talked about earlier. Somehow, whatever it is, you know, anybody who makes stuff or things or whatever ultimately, you know, might get into their work.

And anyway, with those pieces I couldn't figure out where to - I couldn't make them, you know, for a combination of technical reasons, all kinds of reasons. They've driven me into these mountain skyscape things, which were landscapes again, and I just couldn't. And you know, the coloration, which makes or breaks the pieces is - though I had rationales for trying to control a bunch of different colored glasses and how they pour out of crucible into a mold to kind of give something like a believable effect, something you could relate to - it was pretty much hit or miss.

You know, like I said, we poured two or three of them, well, two or three of them or four to get one or five or six. And I made enough of them - and by the way, I felt with that series it was the first time I actually penetrated an area. You know, I said, well, these are really cool. If we make enough of them, some of them are really going to be great. And it was all essentially chance, stuff really beyond your - the kind of magic - which was cool. I kind of liked that.

But after I'd made a fair number of them that I thought were, you know, Jesus, that's really great, you know, I really, really lucked out, it wasn't worth the trouble to make 10 more to get one that good or 50 more to make one that - or I would get the feeling, wow, I did something cool today, you know. So that all fizzled out.

And it was just the time to change. I actually for a year or more, I guess, I was saying, I've got to get out. You know, I need a new direction. I'm hitting the end of the rope with this one. So I'm listening to this Zen tape - you've heard this story. I'm driving down the road - well, I'm driving down the road from my therapist, bad time of life. And she'd given me this tape by some Zen master, just thought it'd be good for me. And so I'm driving down the road, and like I said I think earlier sometime back when I was blowing, I was really into this Zen thing just because of the process and all that.

And so I started listening to the tape, and I think, oh, yeah, I remember - spaciousness, the topic of the tape. I said, oh, yeah, I remember that. I used to - and it goes on. You know, it's like two hours. It's a long bunch of tapes. And I said, yeah, I remember, I used to feel like - oh, my God, that was a long time ago. Where am I at now? I had lost so much touch, you know, with what I thought was a really vital part of me and how I operate and what I brought to my work even.

And this guy's going on and on - you know, spaciousness. And I'm sitting there, and I'm - it was really unusual for me because I'm trying to remember, you know, back to that head, and I'm in a whole different place, you know. And I become aware that I'm sensing the shape of it, the shape inside my head. I can tell where I am now, and I can remember what it used to be like inside my head, and it had form. Somehow my consciousness, or whatever is in the center of this point, but I didn't sense a boundary, you know.

And I said, damn, you know, that's sculpture. That's like real sculpture. This stuff I don't see as sculpture, everything I'd done wasn't sculpture. I don't know what you want to call it, but it wasn't sculpture as I understood sculpture. From the sky I wanted to add foundation at the Bauhaus, you know. I mean, it's suddenly that kind of kept creeping in. I thought about it. It's not thinking about it; it's just sensing. You know, I'm just in my head trying to figure it out. And I'm thinking, that's a piece. That's a form. It's a piece. It represents something, and it's specific. It's not abstract. This is where it gets weird, because nobody else can relate to this, you know, where my head was at or how it works or something.

So I made a piece called *Spaciousness*; that was the first of these Forms of Consciousness pieces. And I can kind of - I thought about other things, you know, or other frames of mind or other issues that were big in my life then, and denial and internalization and, you know, just stuff - and compassion and contrition and, Jesus, there are a million of them. I forget them all. And I'd make drawings of these and I'd get into this zone or whatever, and it really only worked if there was some real specific incident that I could relate to, at least for me. You know, I said, what was this moment in my life that goes back to zero? I mean, I've got drawings for a piece that - well, model too. I mean, that happened - must have happened when I was 4, but I could remember the feeling, you know, and I could remember my head. I could remember the moment - I mean, I'm aware it's kind of out there kind of thinking.

But it worked for me insofar as I mean I really can sense, you know, like the form, a different form, you know, within my head. Now it might relate to something. Jung might come up with - it might be all sorts of stuff, you know, or it might be just bullshit or a lot of Chinese stuff. You know, you can sense different points in your body. And all these different things, at least to me or my take on it, you know, they have a different kind of form, a definite, different kind of form, and some of them have real features. I mean, it's not just like a big, amorphous blob. It's shaped in a certain way, and it relates to your body in a certain way.

And this is where I'm not sure if I'm dreaming up stuff, you know. I mean, you're really stomach and, you know, head and heart, eyes, all this stuff. But somehow it starts all fitting together, you know, if I keep poking around. It's really weird. It's like being inside and you're poking around. How far is it to there, you know. And it's - it comes up with a form. And draw these things down or, you know, I'm not a good draftsman at all, but I can sketch them enough to get a sense of it.

So to me, anyway, the point being, to me, these things are very real and specific, you know, which I can understand why nobody can relate to them or call them or relate to them, and say abstractions. But to me, they're very specific, and it's fucking me up - sorry - over and over. And I made a decision - well, not all these pieces, but most of these pieces is where they come from, and it's really screwed me up. I made a choice early on and said, well, can I draw this thing or make a clay of it or something, and I say, well, yeah, it's a form, but it's a lousy form if you look at sculpture, or it doesn't have - you know, it needs to be bigger here or there, or it needs something over here. And I said, no, I'm not going to do it. I'm going to make these things, you know, the way I see it. I don't want to turn them into this - a, you know, a starting place to go off on some kind of a trip to go off of.

And so I see them as pretty specific. And as such, I don't see as they've got any great - there's no reason you should think it's a worthwhile thing, you know, I mean, coming back to that kind of notion.

MR. HALEM: Well, that's my subjective view towards your work.

MR. PEISER: Yeah. I mean, it doesn't mean you have to buy it, and you know, nobody has to buy - I've never told anybody has to buy anything. I've been lucky because people have bought a lot of it, so I've been able to just do whatever the hell I wanted for 35 years. I've been so fortunate it's unbelievable. And I've always done just what I wanted to do.

And the thing about these pieces that kind of kept me thinking maybe this was a worthwhile idea was that there's a number of them. I have to go back, and I guess for like the last year and a half, I've been so tied up just with the problems of making the patterns that we've found out how to actually cast them, you know. And in the last year I guess we made like half that showing actually. Prior to that, they've just been models of clay lying around. I didn't know how to actually materialize it. So - but for all the drawings that I've, you know, done for different subjects - and there haven't been a whole - you know, probably not more than 40 or 50 different things that I've kind of focused on and come up with a feeling for.

A bunch of them I worked on *Compassion* - was it *Compassion*? Yeah. I worked on *Compassion* for a long time, I

did. It was real easy. I could see it, you know?

MR. HALEM: Compassion is the name of the piece?

MR. PEISER: Yeah. And you know, if I try and sense it, and I've got an experience that ties into it and all that, I know definitely what this form looks like, and I'll sketch it. And I think: it's a fucking angel. It's like every Madonna that's ever been made - the seated Madonna -

MR. HALEM: Right. That's what you saw.

MR. PEISER: Well, that's not what I saw. I drew this thing.

MR. HALEM: Oh, that's what it became?

MR. PEISER: Well, that's what it was. Well, if I made it, that's what it looked like.

MR. HALEM: I see.

MR. PEISER: You know? You know, oh, a whole lot of - I can't even think right now.

MR. HALEM: I mean, but with -

MR. PEISER: But these things were happening.

MR. HALEM: But with the religious context or with -

MR. PEISER: Oh, it had nothing to do with religion. If I made this thing that I pictured as, you know, using this process to define the shape, 99 people out of 100 would immediately - and as abstract as any of them are, you know, they say, "Well, that's the Madonna," or it could have been Buddha.

MR. HALEM: Oh, interesting.

MR. PEISER: Well, that's what I thought when I saw these things. I did one - I can't even think of the names, though. It's another one of the seats in compassion, the contrition, compulsion.

You know, and I said, it was a goddamn heart. A heart, a Valentine, a giant Valentine; this is what's inside me. I'm in this fucking frame of mind. And I go through this process, and that's my consciousness, the shape like that. And I think, I can't possibly make this. This is so hokey, nobody would ever buy it. But I'm thinking, well, what have I stumbled into? What am I doing? And I'm thinking, if what I'm doing has any honesty to it, I think there are a set of forms that are probably universal within us that somehow we can sense or access.

MR. HALEM: If you work at it hard enough -

MR. PEISER: These are fucking stereotypes of states of mind. And I mean, not stereotypes, caricatures. Well, these are the archetypical caricature. And I started looking at caricatures, any political drawings, all these people, all these - and I started seeing hunks of forms. If you want to take Bill Clinton and the way they draw him, you know, and I say, well, that's how he's done. There it is.

[Audio break, tape change.]

I mean, it's an unconscious - this is all probably just rationalized bullshit. But this is the trip I've been down for the last nine years. And it made me think there was something worthwhile about it, like there - this was a set of forms or a set - or a way, an aspect of either, you know, there's all communication or sculptural formal communication, you know, that no one's really identified yet, and it has no visual history. But it made me think like this for - well, whether it's worth a hoot or not, I don't know, but the point being that I feel very close to these pieces and being very specific, you know. But I don't see them as abstract.

Dan Klein wrote an essay for the catalogue [*Looking Within: Mark Peiser - The Art of Glass*, December 18, 2003 - March 2, 2004]. And we didn't have much time. He had to go on a trip. I sent him tons of stuff that I'd written, and largely he quoted, re-quoted it back, which was fine with me, because I've given a lot of thought to trying to verbalize a lot of different stuff about my work. And then I had to go back and re-edit it and send it back to him because some of the quotes he picked would apply to the wrong - you know, stuff like that.

But he left in a line in there, which at first I had a lot of problems with, because he started - and I figured it's for the simplicity of his thesis, you know, about me and the work. He says everything, you know, everything's a landscape. He sees the world as landscape and so forth, and then he got to this last body of work and says, well, they're just landscapes of the mind. And I said, no, Dan, that's not, you know. And the more I thought about it,

well, maybe he's got a point.

MR. HALEM: It's such an abstract statement; it's difficult to deny it. A landscape of the mind can be almost anything.

MR. PEISER: Well, it can be, but in a way, taken in the sense I was just trying to explain, it's true. I mean, that's kind of what I'm looking at, you know, or sensing. You can't really see this. But anyway, looking back, I think, was your question, how do I feel about it all? But like I say, I felt probably more committed to this last work than any of it.

The other previous work - I mean, there was a statement I wrote a long time ago, 20 years ago or something, saying, you know, a small percentage of the pieces I do present references to my personal life, and experiences, and I have no interest that they be regarded as the focus of my work. I'm not trying to make a point. I just make them for me, and otherwise, the rest of the stuff has this - whatever the other qualities we were talking about.

I see them as this sense of anticipation and a kind of a sense of viewing landscape, you know, on a cosmologic - cosmic or, you know, macro - micro scale. It somehow relates to that, and it's not presenting issues. It's just sort of a feeling, but it's the same feeling, from the little bottles up to the, you know, whatever. And these things were different for me. And I knew I was taking a jump, and I knew the collectors, glass collectors, weren't going to get it. But it was a real break for me, and I thought, we'll give it a try. And like I told you last night, I kind of ran out of steam in terms of the idea of finding a whole new market and galleries and trying to get into some place and saying, well, this is art, guys. You've got to put it in an art gallery or someplace else, but a glass gallery.

But looking back, really I feel very fortunate, and I don't know. What can I say?

MR. HALEM: It's been a great trip.

MR. PEISER: It's been a great trip. It's been a great trip, and I'm - yeah, I don't know. It's a shame, like when we were talking earlier today, all of a sudden half of my brain's doing these things, and half my brain's going over to Czechoslovakia and how much is it going to cost to make it. [Laughs.]

Well, I don't know. Got a question? Say so.

MR. HALEM: Well, you seemed to have summed it up, and I think it's a life. You know, it's an ongoing -

MR. PEISER: Yeah, it's been a trip.

MR. HALEM: I always see it as the best is yet to come, and maybe not having any money may lead to things that -

MR. PEISER: Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, I'm fine. I've reached the point where I say, I can't spend anymore.

MR. HALEM: Yeah, no, no, I know, I understand.

MR. PEISER: I just can't take that chance, but part of me is really excited about doing, you know, these things. I'd love to have a show called "Return to the Vessel," because I love vessels.

MR. HALEM: I think all of us that have taken our own trip might participate in that.

MR. PEISER: Yeah.

MR. HALEM: Might be nice. That's a nice idea.

MR. PEISER: I'd love to do it. I talk like I was, you know, a rat leaving some ship when I quit blowing. But anyway, that was part of it.

MR. HALEM: I don't know. That's -

MR. PEISER: And it's -

MR. HALEM: It's like going from the brush to the palette knife, or to go from finger painting to the brush, you know.

MR. PEISER: Well, I think it was the Zen thing. It was the relation to the process, you know, because there's the blowing. Well, for me anyway, it tied into performance and playing music and all this kind of stuff. It was a beautiful kind of life. I like what it did for my life as a process. All these other processes I've gotten into are just

work and drudgery and tedium and technicalities, you know. But the blowing thing was - you know, when you were in the zone, it was just great. It was just beautiful.

MR. HALEM: Let's kill it.

MR. PEISER: We're done.

MR. HALEM: We're done.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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