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Oral history interview with Robert Levin, 2004 December 11

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Robert Levin on December 11, 2004. The interview took place in Celo, North Carolina, and was conducted by Joan Falconer Byrd 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.

Robert Levin has reviewed the transcript. His corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOAN FALCONER BYRD: This is Joan Falconer Byrd interviewing Robert Levin at his home in Celo, western North Carolina, on December 11, 2004, for the Smithsonian Institution, disc number one.

Well, let's begin with getting a little bit about your background.

ROBERT LEVIN: I was born September 25, 1948, in Baltimore, Maryland. And my dad had a drugstore in Dundalk, Maryland, which was right outside of Baltimore. And let's see. Should I talk some about childhood and those things?

MS. BYRD: Yeah. It would be neat.

MR. LEVIN: I had a, in some ways, kind of conventional childhood. I've been trying to think back in terms of early artistic experiences that might have influenced me. And one thing is that my parents had lots of books and music around all the time and took us to museums and plays and ballet and things like that. So I think there was a lot of general appreciation for the arts that happened in the household.

MS. BYRD: And music very much.

MR. LEVIN: And music, yeah, especially, although neither of my parents and none of my grandparents were musical. My mom liked to sing around the house, so maybe she—I guess she was musical.

And I remember as a child I liked to draw and paint and do those kinds of things, but I didn't really take any art courses to speak of.

I got involved in theater when I was in high school. I guess it was sort of the—a little bit the alternative culture of the high school existence at that time, and that partially drew me to it. But I got real interested in lighting design and set designs. So I did all that kind of work for the productions that we did at the high school. And I also started working part-time at a theater up in Baltimore. So I'd commute there and just do volunteer work and help hang lights and ran the lights for some productions and was in one or two productions, too. But I really preferred the backstage stuff.

So when it came time for me to go to college, I was talking to some of the people at the theater, and they—this theater had been founded by a bunch of graduates from Denison University [Granville, OH]. They had all come out of the theater program there together and decided to start a theater together. And so they suggested applying to Denison and going to school there. And so I was able to get into the school, to Denison, and worked for—in my freshman year did a lot of work in the theater department.

And then during my sophomore year, I started taking art courses to help with the theater design work, lighting design and stuff, and seemed to just gravitate more into doing that kind of work and into being with—in that milieu of the art students.

But I think part of what was going on was I was enjoying working on my own more than working in—with a group of people, which—of course the theater is very collaborative. And for some reason psychologically, I think I needed a little more alone time.

So I kind of drifted more and more into doing artwork and did a lot of drawing and painting, and especially liked the three-dimensional approaches, so I did a lot of sculpture and especially got interested in clay. There was no glass at that school at the time.

MS. BYRD: What year would this have been?

MR. LEVIN: This was—I started college in '66, the fall of '66. So this transition would have happened like '67, '68, '70.

And I just kept—was really very attracted to working with clay and made a lot of pots and a lot of ceramic sculpture. And I thought for a long time that I'd just be—I thought I'd just be making pots for the rest of my life, because I really loved working with clay. So at some point—this was a few years later—while, I think—when I was just finishing up at Denison—I came to Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] to take a clay class. And I saw people blowing glass there and was just fascinated with it. Someone let me try it, and it just felt—something about it felt very right.

And part of it, I think, was the way the material moved. And a lot of the things that I had been doing with clay had to do with sort of gravity and—

MS. BYRD: So fluidity—

MR. LEVIN: —yeah, things sliding down and dripping and things like that.

MS. BYRD: Oozing.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Oozing. Yeah, it's a good word.

So I just felt, I think, very naturally attracted to it.

So Penland was the only place I knew to take a class. So I came back the following summer and took a class, a two-week class, with Audrey Handler. So she was my first teacher—and then, in the meantime, got into grad school at Southern Illinois University [Carbondale] and—which was just setting up a glass program when I got there, so myself and the other grad students helped finish putting that studio together. And we, you know, blew glass for a couple of years. And—

MS. BYRD: And who were you working with there?

MR. LEVIN: That was Bill Boysen—was running that program. And Nick Vergette was in charge of the clay program. I was still doing both clay and glass for the two years I was in grad school. And Nick was, unfortunately, getting quite ill at the time, so I didn't have a lot of time with him.

But the little I was around him and the work of his that I saw I thought was very impressive. And I think that scale, the ideas of the scale that he was working with were real; you know, had an impact on me.

So during the two years I was there, I was doing both clay and glass pretty simultaneously, did a few things that kind of combined the two media but really saw myself moving more and more towards glass.

And in the spring of the second year, my second year of grad school, Fritz Dreisbach came through to do a workshop. And I guess he was talking to Bill Boysen and mentioned that he needed an assistant for that summer at Pilchuck [Pilchuck Glass School, Stanwood, WA]. And Bill suggested that Fritz talk to me. And so kind of out of the blue came this invitation to work with Fritz.

And I kind of had to make a decision at that point, because there were also some job offers for pottery programs. And Wanda [Rob's wife] and I talked it over, and felt like even though the financial situation was much more iffy, that it would make sense to pursue the glass thing. And working with Fritz was, you know, an opportunity that just didn't come along all the time.

So we went out to—does this make sense to just keep talking?

MS. BYRD: Oh, yes. This is good. This actually connects all these things we want to talk to you about.

MR. LEVIN: Okay. So we went out to Washington state, worked with Fritz at Pilchuck for that summer—so that would have been summer of '74—and then came back and worked with Fritz through the school year at Ohio University [Athens], where he was teaching at the time, and then came back to Pilchuck for the summer of '75 and worked with him.

And then, in the meantime, Bill Brown [former director of Penland] at Penland had asked Fritz to recommend some people to teach at Penland, and Fritz was nice enough to recommend me. So I ended up coming back to Penland in the fall of '75 and taught the last summer session there and then taught fall and spring concentrations, so that went in for—that was the fall of '75 and the spring of '76, at Penland.

And then, while I was teaching at Penland, Richard Ritter was in the residents' studio, and it turned out he was planning on leaving at—in the spring, early summer of '76. So I talked to Bill Brown about moving in the

residents' studio, become a resident. And that seemed fine with Bill. So once Richard moved out, I was able to move into to the residents' studio and built equipment and started blowing glass there.

So I was there in residence at Penland from '76 to '80. And that's the studio where Tom Spleth has his studio now, behind the barn. And in the meantime, I think Mark had been building the studio where—that's at the end of that curve, you know, the cinderblock studio. I'm trying to remember when he built that. I guess that was—it seems that was there from the early '70s or something.

So anyway, I owe a lot to Fritz, especially and, I guess, indirectly to Bill—Boysen—for my being able to just be at Penland and then certainly owe a lot to Bill Brown for being able to be in the resident program.

And while we were there, our [twin –RL] daughters were born, when we were living in Penland. And of course we ended up having a lot of very nice long-term connections to Penland, mainly with the people that we knew there. And that's just kind of kept going.

MS. BYRD: So the Penland community has been extremely important for you.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. Yes. It's been nice to just to be in proximity to it for things like being able to go up and see slides and friends who are passing through to teach and things like that. But also each time I go up there to teach—I seem to end up teaching there every two or three years now—it feels like a little bit like going home. You know, it's a familiar place. And people change on the staff and stuff, but it's—there's a certain comfort level there. This summer was real nice because this one particular session was they invited a lot of instructors who have taught there before, so I was kind of thrown again into this milieu of people most of whom I had known off and on for years.

MS. BYRD: And Audrey was part of that, wasn't she?

MR. LEVIN: Well, that was the instructors' retreat last February that she came for, and that was great, yeah, because that was another situation of just showing up where there were all these people who were very much a part of Penland. And a lot of these people had passed through the school either to teach or to study, or some of them as students or whatever, the core students, while we were residents and then, you know, showed up at various times as instructors. So anyway there's kind of an ongoing thing.

And I think the tie with our children feels important there, too, since they were born there. So it's a little bit like going home for them even though they were two when we moved from Penland to come over here, so I don't know how much they actually remember. But they've been going back with us off and on ever since.

MS. BYRD: Billy and Katy Bernstein had moved to Celo before you. And they had been artists in residence at Penland. And did you move here partly because of Billy and Katy?

MR. LEVIN: Somewhat. I mean, we had gotten to know them while we were at Penland. And by the way, I should say, since this is sort of an official record we're making here, that it was really an honor to be able to go into that resident program knowing the people who had gone through that before. Of course, Mark was the first glass resident.

MS. BYRD: Mark Peiser, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, Mark Peiser. And then Billy and Fritz and George Thiewes and Richard [Ritter]. I might be leaving somebody out in glass here, I'm not sure. But anyway, they were all people who I respected and knew on one level or another.

But anyway, yeah, Billy and Katy had moved over here [to Celo –RL]. And we had been able to spend some time with them while we were at Penland, and when it came time for us to move away from Penland, it became clear that we wanted to be somewhere around other people who were working [in glass –RL]. And we talked to them, and they had young kids who had been going to the school here and they had very good thoughts about the elementary school here, and so that was a big part of it. And also knowing that Billy and Gil Johnson and—I can't remember if there were other people who were here in glass at the time. So there was a little bit of community sense, kind of a tie-in with the Penland community, but this separate thing going on over here.

MS. BYRD: Now, talking about an apprenticeship, you didn't really serve an apprenticeship, but would Fritz have been essentially a mentor, in a sense?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. I guess if I had to describe something that I did that was similar to an apprenticeship, it would be working with Fritz. Yeah, because I worked as his assistant for, what would it have been, about—I guess it was about a year and a half—and did all the stuff that assistants do, from the drudge work to the fun stuff.

MS. BYRD: Now, you were in some unofficial capacity there at University of Ohio [Ohio University, Athens]?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. I was not registered as a student. Yeah, I wasn't even officially there. [Laughs.] And Fritz offered me the job of working as the assistant there in return for work time. He had worked it out with the school. He was, I think, officially hired to teach half-time. I might be wrong on the proportions there, but anyway, it wasn't slated, I think, as a full-time job. So he had worked it out with the school that students would be in there four days a week, I think, and then he would have the studio three days a week. So that was my work time as well as his.

MS. BYRD: I see.

MR. LEVIN: So that was nice. I was able to make a lot of work. And also, you know, there were students there that had come specifically to work with him, and so there was a nice little camaraderie there with that group, some of whom had been at Pilchuck. But yeah, I wasn't officially registered as a student there or anything.

MS. BYRD: But I think you helped Fritz on *The Farm* [1975]?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, that was kind of a collaboration both with us—it was actually, I think, started out as Wanda's idea. I might be mixed up on that. But Fritz got invited to be part of a show at a children's museum, I think in Louisville. My memories might be all mixed up. Anyway, so we knew we wanted to make something that children could enjoy. So the idea of the farm came up because of course Fritz is great at making, you know, pickup trucks and tractors and animals and all that stuff. So it became a project, not only a collaborative project between he and I, but also the whole class kind of got in on it too, pulling cane for the fence rails and—anyway, you know, that was a great project. And he and I collaborated on a few other things too that were, you know, nice experiences to work on together.

So yeah, I mean getting back to your original question, I guess if I had kind of a main mentor, it would be Fritz.

There were a few other people that I guess would be important to mention. One was Mick [Michael] Meilhan, who was doing graduate work at Illinois State [University, Bloomington] when I was at Southern Illinois. I met Mick when he and I were both teaching assistants for Audrey [Handler] at Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME]. And that was in between my two years of grad school, so that would have been summer of '73, something like that. Yeah, because I was in grad school from '72 to '74.

And he just had a way of working and a kind of integrity about the glass, about working with the material and a way of working that was very clean but very fluid. And, of course, that's what attracted me to glass to begin with and also made it interesting for me to work with Fritz because Fritz has that very fluid way of working with glass and kind of taking influences like Venetian influences and personalizing them to where they're very much his. And that whole approach interested me a lot, both the fluidity and the way of personalizing the work.

So I'd say those two guys probably were major in terms of my glassblowing. And there are other people whose work I've just admired over the years that I think have influenced me, sculptors who I've never met but whose work I've looked at.

MS. BYRD: Would you like to mention some, some in other media?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. The main one that I can think of is Isamu Noguchi, and his work I've always admired. And I think even though he was working in a different material, the directness and the way of working with the material, I think, has really influenced me in some way, especially when I started doing the mixed media work.

And then earlier on I'd say Claes Oldenburg and just some of the other pop artists, but especially *his* work, where he was playing a lot with scale and doing pop imagery. And there was a period of time when I was doing a lot of things that used certain kinds of what I guess you'd call pop influences. You know, the hamburger goblets and things—well, there's all kinds of stuff with food, banana things and tomato things.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.] You still do variations on those.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Yes, there are vegetable goblets and—yeah, yeah.

MS. BYRD: Now, one of the questions is, is there an element of play in your work? I think that's a good one for us to talk about a little bit. Because there is certainly is.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. And part of that, I've realized, has to do just with the material itself because it's a very playful, spontaneous material, you know. So part of it is just derived from, you know, the working process, but also there are certain things that seem, I don't know, seem to take shape kind of naturally. I have the fruit theory of art, which may revolutionize the art world, I don't know, which is that basically all shapes are based on either apples or bananas. Bananas, of course, seem to me a very natural shape to make because of the sort of gestural aspect. There's a little fluidity there. And glass plus gravity wants to sort of elongate, so that seemed a

real natural thing to do.

Plus the colors that I started working on when I was working with Fritz—actually this is another influence that both Fritz and Mark Peiser had on me, which had to with the formulating of colors, formulating my own glass colors. So when I was first working with Fritz out at Pilchuck, he had me mixing up color tests every day with these opaque colors, and he was really interested in finding pretty zonky colors, you know. And I think I just really enjoyed being able to work with that glass and formulate it myself and sort of see what kind of variations we could do.

So some of that glass lends itself to be sort of playful, pop art kinds of things. I don't know if "pop art" is the right term, but it sort of fell into that vein.

MS. BYRD: I think at a certain time you were using a lot of pop references.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: Now, do you still mix your colors rather than using—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. And I think that just in terms of the working process, there's a certain way I can work by having hot colors available that would be more difficult if they weren't hot. So I have one large furnace with clear glass in it, and then another furnace that has five smaller crucibles, and each of those has a different color. So I'm melting five different colors and the clear glass at the same time. So when it comes to doing things like very simple bowls or vases or something, I can layer the colors one over the other, which you can do without having your own colors but it's a little trickier process. And I'd have very soft kind of fades happen.

But the main way I think it's helpful is if I'm doing things like the vegetable goblets or something like that where things are done in sections and then have to be connected with something other than clear glass and then also have handles and things that are made with a colored glass and things like that. So it makes those pieces much easier, more fluid, really, to do.

So I've just gotten accustomed to working that way with a color furnace and a clear furnace.

MS. BYRD: Well, I remember Peiser talking a lot about how hard it was for him to find the opal that he wanted. Did opaque glasses—were they harder to deal with, or harder to melt, or—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, well there were certain difficulties that came up. I remember when I was first working with Fritz out at Pilchuck, there were some questions that came up, and really the formula we were melting was one that Fritz had gotten from Mark, because Mark was kind of like—or in my mind still—is the king of the homemade color realm, you know. [Laughs.] You know, he's—I mean, this was just something he did all the time, you know, these tests and feeling things out.

So I remember there were some issues that came up in terms of some of the ingredients causing some inconsistencies in the glass or something, and I think Fritz consulted with Mark and tried some other things and those got worked out.

I can't remember just what you just asked me. I think I went off on a little tangent there.

MS. BYRD: Well, Mark talked about how difficult it was for him when he was working with opals—

MR. LEVIN: Oh, yeah, yeah.

MS. BYRD: —and one thing or another.

MR. LEVIN: Right. Well, this was a very simple formula. I think what Mark ended up doing for those big vases with the leaves and the trees and all those things, but the very detailed things, is he went to a fluorine opal, which was a denser opal than what Fritz and I were working with. Fritz and I were working with phosphate opal, and that's what I continued working with at Penland and here for a while, which is not as dense of an opal.

But I think what Mark was finding was that the expansions on those glasses would change over a working time of hours because he would take hours and hours to do one piece—you know, all of which was quite mind-blowing in and of itself. But then to find that certain glasses weren't—were changing somehow—[laughs]—I think was just extremely, you know, frustrating for him, but he worked it out. [Laughs.] It was amazing that he, you know, he worked it out.

I mean, he—in terms of inspirations, I have to say that Mark was, you know, also a big inspiration, not so much in terms of his working—his glassblowing style per se but in terms of his intensity of working on what he was interested in. I mean, just that he would continue trying to figure stuff out. It was like this innate curiosity that

had to do with color and form and all those things that everyone in the arts, I guess, is interested in, but also in what the material is and the integrity of the material. And I think for me that really struck me in a powerful way. And just the energy that he put into his daily work day. I found all that very inspiring.

MS. BYRD: There're questions such as discussing your relationship with dealers and your marketing, and all of that. Is that something that you'd like to touch on? Or, maybe, that could be brief if you wanted.

MR. LEVIN: I'll see if I made a little note about that somewhere. Oh, yeah. Well, I didn't write anything down there—[laughs].

I'm not quite sure what to say. I found some of them to be very encouraging, some of them to be—most of them to be basically good business people. I guess the people that I've enjoyed working with the most are also artists who were running galleries. They [… –RL] seem to understand a little more where I might be coming from artistically and that I really would prefer leaving the business side of things to them. Well—

MS. BYRD: Has a changing craft market during the period of time that you've been working—has that been significant to you? Has it changed the way in which you work? Has it made it more possible for you to spend longer working on a single piece now than years ago when you were selling more smaller items and that sort of thing?

MR. LEVIN: I don't know. That's a good question. I mean, indirectly I guess it's helped. I can't say my work has ever sold like crazy, but I've been able to sell enough of it that I've been able to take a little bit of time periodically to do the mixed media pieces. And when I first started doing those I sort of made a little agreement with myself that I wasn't going to think about, you know, well, is this piece going to sell, or how am I going to ship this piece somewhere? [Laughs.] You know, it was more like, you know, gee, I really had this idea for this piece that involves this shape in wood and this piece of glass and how this might all work together. So marketing concerns in terms of those pieces are a little—set a little more to the side, more for just—I guess nothing's pure but more of a—closer to a pure sense of exploration and kind of investigation of things.

So I'm not quite sure how the marketing side of things affects that, other than it's enabled me to sell enough of my other work, mostly the blown-glass work, to sort of buy time for myself to make those kinds of pieces.

I'm not quite sure what else to say about the dealer side of things.

MS. BYRD: That's fine.

MR. LEVIN: There's probably a lot more to say. But I've just tried to keep a good relationship with people as long as they're working in good faith with me.

MS. BYRD: Surely. Well, you have always done quite a range of work. I mean, from, you know, really functional—you still make simple bowls.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. BYRD: And then, you know, more elaborate goblets that people probably wouldn't use.

MR. LEVIN: Right.

MS. BYRD: And then the really very purely sculptural work. So you have continued to work in those areas. I mean, it must be rather complicated. Does it use a different part of your brain when you're working on these different sorts of things?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. I'd say in some ways it does. I mean, there's a difference in—there's a difference in the working process, of course, because if I'm going out and I'm blowing glass every day, there's a whole rhythm and there's that—sort of that specific physicality that you're dealing with with glassblowing.

With the other work, there's a different—there's not that kind of a rhythm with the sculptural work. You know, it's more—I'm usually working on three pieces kind of—several pieces simultaneously, and I may be grinding or carving something in wood on one and doing—trying to get a piece of glass shaped on something else. So there's this different—a different realm of working.

With glassblowing it's sort of like I know the furnace is running; the gas is burning; I need to be out there in the morning at a certain time and start blowing glass. And usually I know what kinds of pieces I want to make and I can easily fall into the rhythm of making those. With the more sculptural work it's more—you know, I also try to show up at a certain time each morning. But it's more kind of a lot of looking at the pieces and scratching my head and trying this and trying that and kind of seeing what works with certain shapes working together. So it's a lot more trial and error. Not that there isn't a fair amount of trial and error with blown-glass pieces. You know,

if I'm trying a new shape, there's a lot of that going on. But there's a little more consistently happening with the sculptural work, I guess, than—what was I going to say there?

I think with the sculptural work, too, there's a few more layers of what I would call meaning or metaphor happening with those pieces. With the glass it's sort of—you know, you're dealing with form, fluidity, color, certain metaphorical kinds of things, certain imagery maybe. But with the mixed-media pieces it seems like, for me anyway, there's other layers of stuff.

And it's most interesting, I guess, when I'm—when other people are looking at the work, especially people who are somewhat articulate about talking about what they're looking at, because people always bring different ideas to seeing what they're seeing with the sculptural pieces, things that I had never even thought of but they seem very obvious once people mention it. So people connect with these things in a lot of different ways, I guess. And I'm learning from them as I'm doing it, especially maybe after I finish them—maybe a while after I finish them. There's other things that I'm learning from them.

MS. BYRD: Are you able to set aside weeks of time to work on these, or do you just fit them into the rest of your schedule?

MR. LEVIN: Well, I try—I've tried doing both kind of simultaneously, but it seems like I basically have to end up setting aside weeks or a few months to do those kinds of pieces. Yeah, yeah. Because it is a—it's kind of a different frame of mind and the working space in the studio and just the practicality of, say, lighting up the glory hole and burning that gas if I'm just going to be blowing glass for half the day.

MS. BYRD: Oh, yes, that's—yes.

MR. LEVIN: So things like that.

But a lot of times, I'd say most of the time when I've been working on these, on the sculptures, you know, the gas is burning in the furnace. I might have it idling down, but often I feel like, oh, I need to cast this piece. So it's nice to have the furnace running for that.

Anyway, it kind of ends up being not the most well-organized approach to working because I'm burning propane when I probably don't need to, if I was a little more organized about it all.

MS. BYRD: Well, are you torn between the two, or does each satisfy a certain part of you?

MR. LEVIN: Well, I've thought about that. I thought, well, you know, if I was in some situation where, say, I could just work on sculptures, would I just do that? And there are times when I feel like that might be the case.

But I think—I don't know if I'd say I'm torn between the two. I'd say I'm slowly—over the years I feel like I've been finding a balance between the two. Because I still just really like blowing glass. I like that activity of doing it. I like—there's something about having the fluid glass on the blowpipe that's very centering for me and very grounding, and I seem to need that in my life.

And maybe I'll reach a point physically—perhaps mentally—but physically is the way I think about it, where I wouldn't be capable of doing the work on the blowpipe that I'd like to do. So that's one aspect of it. And the other is sort of the need for this other kind of expression, you know; the need to work with these other materials and to see how these things fit together; to play with pieces on a larger scale.

I've really been interested now in the surface texture on wood. I've been doing more carving on the wood—things like that. So those things are of interest to me too. And just kind of playing with ideas and seeing how certain influences come through. Like there are certain Oriental influences that seem like they were coming through in that work that I wasn't particularly consciously doing.

MS. BYRD: That's what I—you know, occurred to me early on about that first piece.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. And then the most recent work, where I've been doing more carving, has much more of an African feeling to it. And, of course, that's all work that I've looked at and really enjoyed and appreciated for a long time.

So those are some other influences right there, you know. Of course, the Japanese and Oriental influence probably goes back to when I was working a lot with clay, and just really have appreciated the kind of simplicity of form and just the way certain shapes go together.

There's a couple of books, I think one is called, *How To Wrap Five More Eggs* [Hideyuki Oka. New York: Weatherhill, 1975]—

MS. BYRD: I love that book!

MR. LEVIN: Do you know that one? [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: I do, yes. [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: And it's about, you know, how these packages basically are attached and held together. And those things, the binding and things like that, just really interested me. And I'm sure that has come through in some of the mixed media work.

MS. BYRD: A lot of that is just internalized, isn't it? It just comes out. You don't even know sometimes where it comes from.

MR. LEVIN: Right. Right. And a lot of—I mean, I realized when I was first—well, early on doing those mixed-media pieces, that there was a lot of—a lot of what they were about had to do with pressure, and constraint, and kind of compression and things like that. And I could see that in those pieces. And some of it was very conscious, you know, like—some of it had a little bit more political connotations. There were some that had to do with kind of Ku Klux Klan images and, you know, a kind of constraint that's involved with that kind of thinking, and those things.

But some of it was just something about the way I liked to work. And I've realized, too, that a lot of the blown glass things have that in there too. You know, there are certain pieces, some purely sculptural. There were these creature pieces that I was doing that had that sort of accordion—

MS. BYRD: Oh yes, yes. Yes.

MR. LEVIN: —that accordion look to them, or kind of—

MS. BYRD: Caterpillar, centipedes. Yes.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: What do you call them? Grubs, I think it was, wasn't it?

MR. LEVIN: Well, I called them odd creatures. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Okay.

MR. LEVIN: The grubs came before that. [Laughs.] Those were in the corncob molds back in the old days.

But then even just some of the other blown glass things, you know, just have a certain— there's a little bit of squishing that goes on, you know, like with some of the vegetable goblets or things like that, you know, there's a little bit of a thing that happens where the cup is attached to the rest of the piece, you know, there is that hot bit that goes in there where it's kind of squished down in there—

MS. BYRD: Yes. Splat! [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: —the way the handle goes on, and things like that. So those things are somewhere in there in the psyche that I like this sort of squishy thing happening.

MS. BYRD: That's been there since you were working in clay, really.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

MS. BYRD: Now, as far as political statements in your work.

MR. LEVIN: Do you want me to expound on that a little bit?

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.] Yes. I was thinking, well, I mean, you know, there have been different times. Very early on I think you were making political statements, weren't you, sort of with guns, the holster—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Well, yeah, it's funny because I didn't really think of those as political statements at the time, but they certainly could be. And, yeah, I was doing—I did a series of little—of guns in holsters with the whole outfit. There was the banana gun with the—it had little banana slugs on the cartridge belt, and things like that.

MS. BYRD: The *John Wayne Baby Bottle*. I remember that.

MR. LEVIN: Right. There was the *John Wayne Baby Bottle*. [Laughs.] Yes, that's a little political statement.

And one with fish, a fish gun. And so, yeah, the banana gun I thought of as a specialty—I called it *Specialty Item for Robbing a Fruit Stand*, because I figured even thieves needed—you know, it was the age of specialization.

But—yeah, so there were those kinds of things. And then—I don't feel like I've done a lot of real overtly political stuff. I mean, the mixed media things I was doing that had the kind of pointy tops on some of them, I specifically wanted those to be kind of a reference to a Ku Klux Klan image.

Well, there's another image—influence, is Philip Guston with his—he did a whole series with the kind of goofy Ku Klux Klan guys, you know, riding around in his paintings and prints and things.

But when I was doing some of those mixed media pieces, I was doing some of them in 1990 when Jesse Helms was running for reelection. And listening to the kind of rhetoric that he was using, I realized that there was a tie-in there—[laughs]—you know. And there was all the stuff going on with the National Endowment for the Arts. And so the ideas of constraint, and sort of restriction, and constriction and things were real interesting to me.

And so some of the pieces I was doing had glass pieces that were lashed to wood, and the wood was burnt where some of the glass was placed on it. So all those things have tremendous connotations to me, anyway—the rope, burning wood, you know, the Klan imagery. And some of those were rather spooky pieces to do. Several of them had lead on them, which is a very malleable material, but very sort of cold-looking material.

And so anyway, for me they had, you know, very specific connotations. I'd show them to other people and they'd see much more nautical kinds of things, you know, with the lashed rope and things like that. And that was great, that was fine.

So I guess I've never been partial to anything that's really overtly political. When I look at other people's work I don't like being hit over the head with "the message." So I don't know that I've done a whole lot that's overtly political.

But I feel like what we do—you and I—as artists working with our materials, is in some ways political because politics deals with people's perceptions and interpretations of the world around them and, then, you know, well how are we going to—what are we going to do with that information. And I feel like anytime we make work that deals with forms and making up new shapes or contexts for different things, that's going to—that's getting into the same realm of sort of questioning perceptions or changing perceptions. And to me, that's somewhat political.

MS. BYRD: Yeah, that's a good point.

MR. LEVIN: So—yeah, so that's—I guess that's kind of my take on the political side of things.

MS. BYRD: Well, nature has been an influence on you, has it not? And continues to be.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, tomatoes and eggplants and bananas and—[laughs]—

MS. BYRD: I remember you said that was the slug—didn't you?—that was a slug, at Pilchuck?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, the smiling slug cups. Yeah. Yeah. That's—yeah, and with the more recent pieces, the—oh, well, let me just backtrack a minute here.

I think the things with the goblets and things with the vegetables and the fruits and all that stuff, those are such natural things to use with glass because they're very organic and very soft kind of a shape. And with the way I'm working now with using transparent glass and then frosting it, the surface kind of has that soft quality too. So those work well.

And then with the mixed media pieces—I try to walk almost every day, you know, and I just end up walking in the woods because that's here. And I see things a little differently, I think, than before I started working with these pieces. You know, I see shapes in trees and I see branches, and of course I want to take all that back to my shop. I want to just cut that section off and take it home. But regardless of that, there are ways that things kind of move in nature that I think are interesting to me.

But it's funny, I never thought of myself as being particularly inspired by nature, but I think things have had an impact on me that I'm around, you know, especially materials. Materials kind of have their own sensibility to them, kind of carry their own metaphors, I think. At least that's how I think about, when I'm—that's one of the things I think about when I'm working with these mixed-media pieces is that different things kind of innately have their own personalities in a way; you know, a tree stump, a log, a chunk of glass.

And that's something that goes back to my childhood, I think, is when I was a kid I felt like objects kind of had their own personalities, and I just assumed everybody thought that. So I started mentioning it to some people—[laughs]—and they started looking at me like I was nuts. But—

MS. BYRD: Well, how old were you when you started mentioning it to people?

MR. LEVIN: Fairly recently.

MS. BYRD: Oh, I see. [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: [Laughs.] Because it took me a long time to realize that I had been thinking that way all my life; you know, that objects, you know, chunks of something or a stone step or rose bushes or trees had sort of their own little innate personalities. I don't want to sound too mystical about this, but it's—but I think it's just something that I always felt. And then, I think, when I started working with my hands, making—you know, doing, quote-unquote, artwork in college, something made sense to me in terms of materials and objects and how our hands can change things but still kind of leave some sort of innate qualities to that—to that material.

MS. BYRD: It doesn't have a—it's not so much that tree stumps and so on have a spiritual essence or anything like that, it's essentially a personality?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, I guess. I mean, I never really tried to define it much more than that. I mean, with—

MS. BYRD: An energy, maybe, but—

MR. LEVIN: I guess, yeah.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: I mean, the spiritual thing, I guess, is in there too. [Laughs.] But—and I guess I—I guess there is a certain—there is what I guess you'd call a spiritual connection that I feel with the work that I do. The process certainly feels that way. I mean, the Zen—I was reading a lot of Zen and thinking a lot about that when I was in college.

And I think that's kind of stuck with me too, which is, you know, you learn certain things by just doing very simple tasks with your hands, and you're learning more than you think you're learning and you're learning on different levels than what you may think you're doing. You know, you may think you're just making a simple little dish or something, but there are other planes on which you're working on, too. And so I think those things are in there, too.

And there are connotations that I have with the pieces that I've made. That's not really a good way of phrasing that. There are connections, I guess, that I see with the—with pieces that I've made where I've been working on something and there is a very sort of profound aspect to that piece that may strike me. There is one piece in particular that I was working on this spring, and as I was finishing it, it just struck me very strongly that there was a kind of a spirituality to that piece, you know? And of course, when you're making something like that, you don't know whether, you know, that's just you just stayed up a little too late that night and—[laughs]—and that's why you're thinking that. But then when I've showed that piece—it's on display in—it's in Winston-Salem right now—and it was at Blue Spiral in Asheville for a while in the summer. And a number of people have remarked on that particular piece that they felt the very strong connection with that piece. So that's very rewarding when there's a response like that and kind of affirming to my own sensibilities that, yeah, I guess there was—you know, I was responding to something that other people can respond to.

MS. BYRD: What did you name the piece?

MR. LEVIN: *Reliquary*.

MS. BYRD: Yeah.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. I'm not sure if I showed you those pieces. I don't know if you got in to see that show that was at Blue Spiral in the summer. I have some pictures of those.

MS. BYRD: I saw a show of yours at Blue Spiral [1 Gallery, Asheville, NC], but I don't remember that being in it—

MR. LEVIN: It was one of the black wall pieces that was there this summer.

MS. BYRD: No, I don't think I—I saw a—didn't I see a show of yours more recently than this summer, like—

MR. LEVIN: Would have been July, month of July, yeah.

MS. BYRD: Well, I look forward to seeing that piece.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: Now you do some actually religious items, do you not?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Well, I've done some Judaica pieces: Kiddush Cups, Elijah's Goblets, Mezuzot. Did quite a few Mezuzot. Yeah, and that was—that was interesting for me because there's kind of a little bit of a connection to my Jewish background.

MS. BYRD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Do you work for specific collectors in this way, or where did you market these pieces?

MR. LEVIN: Some of them have been on commission. I first started doing the Mezuzot as a result of a commission from a woman who had a Mezuzah collection. And she apparently liked my style of work and asked me to make a couple of them for her. And at first I said, "Well, I don't—I don't do those, I've never done one." I mean, she said, "Well, I'd really like to see you try." So I did, and it was neat. It was like a lot of commissions; it was kind of opening up, opened up some territory for me and gave me some things to explore and to think about. And so I continued to make them for a while. I haven't actually made any new ones for about 10 years now, I think. I still have a few, but I haven't really made any new ones.

MS. BYRD: I'm sorry, I don't know what a—

MR. LEVIN: Oh, it's the—a Mezuzah is the little container that's usually on the front doorpost of a Jewish home. And usually they're only, you know, like two, maybe three inches tall, and they're usually not made of glass. They're made of metal or stone or wood or something. Mine are bigger. Mine are like six inches tall.

MS. BYRD: Something contained—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, there's a scroll inside. It's basically a container for the scroll that blesses the home. Yeah, and traditionally people will kiss their fingers and touch the Mezuzah as they come into the house. And then often they're also used on interior walls for different rooms, depending on how people want to—I guess how they want to bless their home. So a lot of the ones I've made have ended up on interiors, interior walls in homes. They're a little vulnerable to being outdoors, being glass.

MS. BYRD: Yes, I should think so.

Talking a little about different things that you've done, I know at one time, despite the fact of the—you know, the fact that your work is so incredibly fluid, you were also doing cold working and putting sheets of—that was plate glass or cut and polished glass, but you were doing cold working as well as—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: And I could ask you about it. Is it sandblasting you're doing now to get the surface, or acid etching?

MR. LEVIN: It's both, yeah. For the frosted surface, the pieces are sandblasted and then acid etched. The sandblasting frosts the surface, kind of evens off the texture on the surface, but it leaves kind of a dry surface. So then the acid etching kind of—I guess if you looked at it microscopically, it would be taking down those little pits a little bit, but it still leaves that, the texture.

MS. BYRD: Sort of polishing.

MR. LEVIN: So it's a little more of a satiny finish instead of a dry, such a dry, frosted finish, yeah. Yeah.

And the—yeah, for a while I was doing a lot of cold working. It was—when was that?—early '80s, I guess. And Harvey [Littleton] was really great about—[laughs]—letting me come out and use his cold-working shop before I had mine all set up. So I guess actually, yeah, I was doing a lot while I was still at Penland because I didn't really have cold-working facilities other than a basic grinder at the studio at Penland, and then I'd go out to Harvey's and do a lot of polishing. And then when I came over here I continued to do a lot of work and I had my own stuff set up, but I'd still go over and use a lot of his polishing equipment and stuff.

But yeah, a lot of these pieces were these fabricated pieces. They were based on blown sections that would then be cut and polished and put together in different ways, sometimes with plate glass as a base or sometimes other elements that would be made out of plate glass. It's a lot of very finicky cutting and grinding and polishing and beveling and all that stuff. And I think one reason I started doing the mixed-media pieces was somewhat in reaction to doing those pieces because that was all very—well, like I say, very—sort of finicky is a word that keeps occurring to me. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: You know, very—

MS. BYRD: Oh, precise.

MR. LEVIN: Precise, that's a good word. And at one point, I woke up with this—I think it was while I was doing this—[laughs]—doing the very precision-oriented pieces, I woke up one morning with this kind of image in my head of pouring hot glass onto a log and then dropping another log on top of it. And it was one of those states of mind, you know, where you're sort of half asleep and half awake and you're not sure what's part of a dream and what's part of a conscious thing. But that stayed with me somehow, and of course I dismissed it as being kind of a silly, silly thing. But at some point I had the opportunity where I just needed to shovel some glass out of the furnace, ladle some glass out, and of course we heat [the house –RL] with wood so there's always logs around. So I just—I went ahead and did it.

And it was just a very, very liberating moment, just one of those moments where this thing that sort of had been in the back of my mind just came into fruition. And of course, the difference between actually doing something and just thinking about doing something is, of course, the difference between night and day. It's in actuality and it's in the materials and there's a sensual or sensory aspect to doing these kinds of things. You know, there's the smell of the burning wood, there's the smoke, there's the heat of the glass that you feel, there's, you know, the texture of the wood that you're working on. There's all those very direct kinds of things that are part of the experience that aren't part of what you—are in your imagination.

MS. BYRD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Good point.

MR. LEVIN: Same thing with glassblowing, you know. I mean, just the—you know, the smell of the wood burning as you're blocking your glass, and the smell of the wax on the jacks as you're putting the neck in for the piece. They're all parts of that same experience, the heat—the sensation and the heat.

They're all—and I think, you know, talking about that idea kind of in generalized terms, I think that's a part of what attracts me to doing the kind of work I do, is those—there's a very direct kind of sensory—there's a—yeah, sensory sensation. Is that being—I don't know if that's being redundant, but—

MS. BYRD: Sensory experience.

MR. LEVIN: Sensory experience that happens when you're—when you're involved in these activities. And to me, that's a big part of it, you know. It's like—it's like if I haven't blown glass for a while and all of a sudden I get that glass on the end of the blowpipe and then—and I sit down and block it, just those smells and that feeling are very, very centering for me, and it's like a return to part of who I am. There's a real direct connection. Maybe it was the connection I felt when I first experienced glass, but there's a very direct connection that I feel with that material and with the working process. And I think one thing that had happened with the mixed-media things was I think I was questioning what my—

Are we out of disc, or are we still going now?

I think especially when I was working with those—doing that very precise polishing and shaping work on those pieces in the early '80s, I started questioning, you know, well, is this something that—you know, why am I working with glass, you know? This is something that's kind of like driving me crazy doing these pieces. And I think I kind of pared things down a little bit at that point and started wondering, you know, well, I know there's this sort of primal connection with glass, and it has to do with the hot material a lot for myself, but there are other materials that I feel an affinity with, too.

And I think that's when it felt real natural to start working with wood and with stone. Those were kind of the two that I was working with at the time. This would have been around '84 or something like that, I guess. And then later on with the rope and some of the other materials, especially rope, which has a real softening effect on the other materials and, of course, has a binding quality.

But I think I realized that I was feeling a connection to these other materials, and that goes back to that thing I was talking about from childhood, where all these things—and maybe this is true with everyone. You know, these things that you experience from your childhood—you know, very simple materials—you know, playing with a rope or playing in the mud or playing with fire. That was a big one for me.

MS. BYRD: Oh, really? [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: I was very—I was the pyromaniac of the family.

MS. BYRD: Oh. [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah. [Laughs.] Yeah, when we'd go on camping trips, it was always my job to start the fire, and it was because I wanted to do that, you know, get up in the morning and start the campfire.

But anyway—but all those things, I think, are in there somewhere, you know. And it's kind of our—part of our job description, you know. If there was a classified ad, it would say "artist," and here's your job description; part of your job description is to kind of pare away all of this other stuff and kind of get back to those real simple, basic connections that you have from real early on.

MS. BYRD: That's very well put.

We have about four minutes, and I was trying to think if there's something short for you talk about. I'm drawing a blank, but just a very short topic.

So your childhood influences have been—now was your family very religious?

MR. LEVIN: No, kind of semi-religious.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.] Semi-religious.

MR. LEVIN: [Laughs.] Yeah. We'd go to synagogue—well, when I was a kid I'd go to Sunday School. They sent us to Sunday School, and then—

MS. BYRD: That seems rather broad-minded.

MR. LEVIN: Broad-minded?

MS. BYRD: Oh, Sunday School as in—

MR. LEVIN: Oh, it was a Jewish Sunday School, yeah.

MS. BYRD: Jewish Sunday School. Oh, I see.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, it just would happen on Sundays, yeah.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: I guess more these days they do it on Saturday. But yeah, well, it was interesting. The religious thing was interesting because in Dundalk, where we lived, I think we were just about the only Jewish family. There might have been one other one. So that was a little—made me feel a little bit like a fish out of water.

MS. BYRD: So you were conscious of not quite—did you feel as if you didn't quite belong in some way, then?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. That's a good description. [Laughs.] Yeah, I've thought about that—

MS. BYRD: It's hard.

MR. LEVIN: —fairly often since then. I think part of it, too, was that my dad had the drugstore and most of the people in the area were steel workers or worked at other factories in that area. And so my dad, being a pharmacist, and I think that somehow—whether it actually set me apart or whether I just felt like it did—it might have just been I felt like it did—but it did—and then I realized at some point that my sensibilities were different from other kids, you know. I was interested in the theater and appreciated, you know, things like going to museums and stuff like that. And I think it took me a long time—I think in college I started to come to terms with that a little more because it was a little easier to find other people that kind of had similar sensibilities.

Oh, so religion, yeah. So yeah, I went to Sunday School and then I got bar mitzvahed, but I never felt very at home with that community because where the Jewish community was—the main Jewish community was all the way on the opposite side of town. We were in the southeast corner and the synagogues were mostly on the northwest, out in the northwest, and there was a sort of a whole other milieu out there that I never felt part of.

So I think at some point after being bar mitzvahed, I sort of let a lot of that slide. But we continued to—you know, we'd try to light candles on Friday night when we can and we'd try to do Passover, Hanukkah and things like that. So we raised our daughters basically in a Jewish tradition, but kind of a secular Jewish tradition; you know, more of a cultural Jewish tradition, I guess.

MS. BYRD: There's quite a Jewish community in the Penland area, isn't there? I mean, with Norm and Bernsteins are Jewish?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. BYRD: And so there are quite a lot of Jewish artists in—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Jeff [Todd] and Yaffa [Sikorsky-Todd].

MS. BYRD: Yes, Jeff and Yaffa, who are right here and—

MR. LEVIN: Right, yeah.

MS. BYRD: —as the Bernsteins are.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. And I think—

MS. BYRD: I would think that would be nice.

MR. LEVIN: That's—yeah. We periodically had Seders—you know, Passover dinner together in various combinations. Yeah, and I think more than that it's just a cultural thing. There's sort of a type of sense of humor or something. [Laughs.] Well, you know from being around Billy, I'm sure. And so, yeah, certain kind of things like that that are held in common that make it pleasant.

MS. BYRD: Well, so obviously you don't have that same sense of aloneness now that you had when you were a child.

MR. LEVIN: No. Well, especially not being married to the wonderful person that I'm married to. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Oh, well, that's true. That is true. When were you and Wanda married?

MR. LEVIN: We were married in 1971. In fact, we just had our 33rd anniversary last weekend, December 4. So—yeah, and then I—I think I mentioned before our daughters were born when we were at Penland. They were born in 1978.

MS. BYRD: Yes. Twin daughters.

MR. LEVIN: Right, yeah.

MS. BYRD: Molly and Hannah.

MR. LEVIN: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So—no, I don't—I don't—I think that sense of—that sense of isolation in many ways is gone, although I think there's something about working—for some reason somehow I chose a way of life and a way of working that is basically—relatively solitary. I mean, I have a helper who's there—

MS. BYRD: I was going to ask you about that.

MR. LEVIN: —quite a bit. But basically it's an alone job, you know. I mean, the decisions are pretty much all mine, and I'm having to deal with the other aspects of doing what I do by myself; you know, being my own secretary and business manager and doing phone calls and all that stuff, so—paying the bills.

MS. BYRD: Well, you do have—you have the assistant when you're blowing glass?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, and he helps me a lot with what I'm doing the sculptural stuff, too. You know, if there's a certain area that needs to be sanded down or prepared in some way, you know, he can work on the wood. The guy that's been helping me recently for the last few years is Jay Zietlow, and he has a good background in carpentry and woodworking, as well as being pretty adept with the glass, working with the hot glass. He does—he's been doing all my grinding for me, so that's been a great—been a great help.

MS. BYRD: He's somebody—is he somebody who is trained in—trained at Penland?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. He took a concentration at Penland. And so, yeah, that's kind of his main background, I guess, in glassblowing.

MS. BYRD: Now, do you think of your—the tradition in which you're working as part of an international tradition, or do you think of it as being specifically American?

MR. LEVIN: Oh, gosh. I can't imagine blowing glass and not feeling part of an international tradition. I guess I've been aware for a long time of the—well, I felt a real connection to the early glass era, Roman blown glass and the—well, it's called Roman, but it was really Middle Eastern.

MS. BYRD: Under the Roman Empire—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, Roman Empire.

MS. BYRD: —Roman occupation.

MR. LEVIN: But yeah, and then—so a lot of that work—I've felt a great connection to that work when I've seen it in museums, like at the Corning Museum [of Glass, Corning, NY]. You know, they have a great display of that early work, and I can look at that. And I can see the—how those guys, you know, were moving their wrists, and they're doing the same things, essentially, that I'm doing when they apply a handle. You know, so there's a great sense of connection to that.

And then, in one way or another, a lot of that Venetian work was—you know, the later Venetian work in the 1500s, 1600s was very influential on me, partially through Fritz, you know, who was real turned on by all that work, too. But—so I've felt a big connection with that.

And then a lot of the other work that I've seen historically has made an impact on me, too. But I think these days that the way—people communicate so well, whether it's through the magazines or through the Internet or whatever, it's really become an international phenomenon, the whole modern glass movement. So there's so much interesting work being done in this country and all over the place, it seems real international to me. I don't know if that's quite the answer that your question—

MS. BYRD: Oh, no, I think that's a good answer to the question.

But the American studio glass movement, well, for a time was—you know, really a very exciting center of glass. Do you feel now that it's been dispersed more than—

MR. LEVIN: Well, yeah, I think there's been a lot of—there's a lot of international influence, you know, with people doing workshops back and forth, from here to there, and Europeans and Japanese people and Australians coming over here and—but I think when I was first getting into it, certainly the people that affected me were people who were kind of seminal in the American studio glass movement—Harvey, well, Audrey, who was my first teacher, Fritz, Bill Boysen, you know, all those people. I think Audrey and Fritz and Bill were all at Madison [University of Wisconsin, Madison] with Harvey pretty early on. I don't know. Were you?

MS. BYRD: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: You were up there right around that time, too.

MS. BYRD: Yes. They were there, yes. They were there in—oh, around '66, '67, that time.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. And so that group of people were primarily my first teachers. And so that had an impact on me. And you know, of course a lot of the emphasis early on, especially from Harvey, was on doing sculptural work. And—but I think with Fritz especially there was such an interest in doing vessels that had a kind of a personality to them; you know, that that really—you know, that had a big impact on me.

So—and then I think where I started to maybe get a little more internationalized in my sensibilities might have been when I was on the board for GAS, the Glass Art Society. And there were people from other countries on the board, and we did a conference in Mexico City. And I think just seeing what people were doing in different parts of the world and the kind of interactions that we'd have—I think that opened up quite a bit for me. I mean, I was certainly aware of it through the magazines and things from before that, too.

But I mean, it's sort of like everything else these days. It's multinational. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Oh, yes. It is.

MR. LEVIN: It's gone multinational.

So it's really fascinating, the work that's being done these days and the kind of cross-fertilization that's happening, although I have to say I'm not out there very much anymore. I don't really—I haven't been to a conference for a long time and haven't done a whole lot of traveling that involves seeing what people are doing from other countries.

MS. BYRD: You don't—

MR. LEVIN: So I'm a little bit out of it. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: You don't feel a need to get out there—

MR. LEVIN: Well, I do feel a need. I just don't seem to do it. I don't seem to be able to do it.

MS. BYRD: You don't have the time?

MR. LEVIN: I don't give myself time. I'd like to be able to get out more and, you know, just to go places, go to museums and things, but don't seem to be able to do it.

[Audio break.]

MS. BYRD: This is Joan Falconer Byrd interviewing Robert Levin at his home in Celo, western North Carolina, on December 11, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number two.

Rob, could you discuss the difference that you think exists between someone who's trained at a university and someone who learned his craft outside the academic world?

MR. LEVIN: The main differences I've seen have to do with—let's see. The people that I've seen that have just kind of gotten into blowing glass outside of the universities seem to be—how can I phrase this? I had a really great way of thinking about this the other day, and now I can't remember. I think, having gone through a university program, for me, it gave me a broader context of the art world that I'm a part of and so that the way that I think about my work, I think, falls into those—into some broader parameters. And so I'm thinking about sculptural ideas and maybe I have a certain kind of philosophical framework for what I do.

And a lot of the people that I've met who have just gotten into glass from either just working with somebody else or just because they somehow fell into it seem to be more—oh, gosh. I hate to make this sound like one is better than the other, because I really don't feel that way. They don't seem to have the connection to the broader art world. There doesn't seem to be that much interest in looking at other work and sort of learning from other realms, other avenues of the art world. So it doesn't mean that they're not doing great work or whatever. It's just kind of a different philosophical framework, I guess, of the—for the work that they're doing.

I guess that's the main difference that I see.

MS. BYRD: Do you think that the universities have a special place in the American craft movement?

MR. LEVIN: I think one thing that has been helpful is that they've helped to legitimize the craft media. Now that there's university programs—I think that's what Harvey was sort of trying to do when he brought glass into the art department at the University of Wisconsin. I think now that there's craft programs in the universities, it's established them as more of a—[pauses]—well, I hate to use the word "legitimate," but part of the art world, just because when something's part of academia, it's viewed that way.

And also it's been a way for people to receive training within art programs and sort of within general liberal arts education, so that's got to be good for people, and it again broadens their experience. I think it's beneficial.

MS. BYRD: Do you—can you point to one educational experience that you had, at a university or elsewhere, that was particularly important to you?

MR. LEVIN: Well, I think probably undergraduate school—well, let me backtrack a minute. I think the—my early experiences of coming to Penland as a student were extremely important, because it just opened up a whole world for me that I hadn't really known existed. Before I heard about Penland and Haystack, I didn't realize that there were specific schools set up for teaching in the craft media. And when I first came to Penland, that was just a great eye-opener for me.

And in fact, when I first came to Penland, it was for a ceramics class. I think I mentioned that before. And I came early—it was for the first session in the summer—I guess it was in 1970. And I had written Bill Brown and asked if I could come early, if they needed help with any kilns or whatever. So I came a few days early and helped—I think the guy's name was Jim McBride; he was one of the residents at the time—do some of the work around the school, to get kilns in shape and things like that.

And so it was during that time that I went down to Mark Peiser's studio and saw what he was doing firsthand and got to see—at that time, he was making these beautiful little perfume bottles with the iridized surfaces and those kinds of things. And so that was a great revelation, and then just being in the milieu at Penland. So I'd rank that as a pretty important educational experience.

And then also when I was first at Denison—this would have been in—I started in '66, so—I started taking art classes there in '67 and '68. And I think the first art classes I took were really important for me because they just opened up another world for me from what I had experienced. I'd never really taken much in the way of art classes in high school. And just the simple act of spending time with a pad of paper and pencil and drawing and then working with painting, and then especially with the 3-D media was real important for me.

And then, as soon as I started working in clay, I think that just—there was a clear affinity that I felt for clay; I just felt very attached to working that way.

And then the other experience I guess I'd talk about was when I was in grad school, one of the things we did as part of our graduate school education was we had these seminars where we'd just—a group of graduate students would sit and talk. And usually the—whoever the faculty person would be at that time would sort of throw out some questions and we'd talk about some of these things. And I think that was good for me because it opened up some broader philosophical issues for me that I wasn't necessarily thinking about, you know.

Prior to that, I might have been thinking mostly about, you know, I enjoy working this way and working with these materials, and hopefully I can make a living at it. And a lot of what we talked about was the artist's place in the world, and just kind of a little more contextual things. So I think those things were important.

And also in grad school I had my first teaching assistantship. And that was good because that got me thinking more about how to present material in some kind of organized way.

So I guess those are the main ones that occur to me.

MS. BYRD: Of course you made it as a teacher, and then that really began when you were a graduate student and you just sort of kept on ever since?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. I think I was always attracted to that, and part of that was the—I know when I worked with Fritz, that's a lot of what he was doing. You know, he was either teaching at Pilchuck or teaching at OU [Ohio University] or he was going around doing workshops. I mean, you know, for a while that was a large part of what Fritz did was traveled around and gave workshops.

So yeah, I think I was somehow attracted to teaching, not necessarily as a full-time profession, but as a way to—maybe as a way to understand what I was doing in a little different way. And I think that that's been true in the years since, and I've thought about that a lot more since then, of how—if I'm mostly spending time in my studio just doing my work, without realizing it I'm accumulating a fair body of knowledge without it being necessarily conscious. But since the nature of the work that we do in our studios is to some extent exploratory, then you're involved—you're kind of integrally involved with the learning process the whole time because you're basically creating problems for yourself and then you're creating solutions for them. So that's another sort of job description for the classified ads, you know, is you want someone who will be able to create problems and then solve them. [Laughs.] It sounds like kind of a crazy way to live, but—

MS. BYRD: No. I mean, it's okay as long as you're not living dangerously! [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: [Laughs.] Yeah, right. Yeah, that's good. Yeah, there's a certain amount of risk involved with that.

So, with that process you're always learning. And then, I think what's been interesting for me is to teach periodically and to realize each time that I teach that there's a little more that I'm bringing to it. And, of course, part of the idea of teaching is you not only have accumulated a body of knowledge, but you're able to try to communicate it with people, and that can be a little tricky.

But that's, you know, part of the fun of teaching. And then sort of responding to people's questions, questions that I never would have thought of, that make you think in a new way about what you're doing. So the whole thing of working in a studio and of teaching, both those become part of the creative process and you can bring new things to teaching and new things to studio work from—one from the other.

And I guess we were talking at lunch about the—that I'm teaching—that I've taken on a few guitar students lately. And that's been interesting in the same way because I realize I've been playing for years—my gosh, I guess I've been playing for about 40 years, playing the guitar, and I had never thought of myself as a teacher of guitar. But a few people asked me and I said sure, you know, we can try it. And it's turned out to work out pretty well, partially I think because I've had to think—with the glass work and the glass teaching I've had to think about how things can be sort of deconstructed and articulated in ways that make sense to someone who doesn't have all the background.

I think that's one thing that's interesting with the machine that we've been using today to record the—[laughs]—to record the discussion, is that a lot of the—I don't know about this one in particular, but a lot of the manuals for those things always presume that—not for these necessarily, but, you know, for computers or whatever, presume that someone has some kind of knowledge that they're bringing to it. But often, people like myself don't have that knowledge. So the jargon or the way things are presented sequentially don't provide enough information.

And I've realized that with both glassblowing and guitar teaching; that there are assumptions we all make about the knowledge that people have that aren't necessarily—those assumptions aren't necessarily valid. So it's helpful to sort of deconstruct those things and be able to think about communicating them. And one of the best ways to do that is to occasionally feel stupid yourself, you know, in situations like running into, you know modern

technology—[laughs]—and scratching your head.

MS. BYRD: I was going to ask you about—I know you've been involved with the Glass Art Society. Have there been other organizations? Would you like to expand a little on, you know, the role that GAS has played in your career?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Well, in times past I had gone to some conferences and I spoke—was invited to speak, I think, in '84 at the conference. I think that was the one at Corning, one of the ones at Corning. And that was great for me sort of in the context of what we were just talking about with the teaching and doing the work in teaching because I had to put a presentation together where I could speak with showing slides and be articulate about this work I was doing, which I really wasn't quite—it was—well, let me complete that sentence for the transcriber. This work wasn't quite resolved at the time, and that was when I was doing the mixed media—just starting with some of the mixed media pieces and pouring glass onto wood and placing rocks on the hot glass, and things like that.

And it was very, very helpful for me to have this deadline by which I had to organize my thoughts and be able to talk about what I had been doing and kind of how it fit into the big picture of my life. And I guess that helped me see how much what I was doing with my work, how that integrated into the rest of my life. And that's been a big—that's been important to me all this time, is that idea of integrating what I'm doing artistically with the rest of my life, because you're always learning in both spheres; you're learning about yourself as a person and you're learning about yourself as an artist, and those two are not separate. So there's a great deal of flow.

And I'm going to digress here a little bit from your question about GAS because it makes me think about some of the work that I was doing.

A lot of the work, I guess that I've still done, that I've still continued to do, has to do with various parts used in the same piece. So whether it's something like the vegetable goblets or bird goblets, or whatever those things are, there's a vessel, there's a vegetable or a bird or something, and then a base and a handle. So they're all sort of separate things, but they need to be unified into one thing so it doesn't look like a bunch of stuff stuck together. And the same thing with the sculptures; you know, there's usually some glass element, some wood element, some other materials—rope, or whatever. They need to be in some unified form that makes sense sort of visually, and just the overall impact of the piece. So—oh, God, why did I start talking about that?

So anyway, I think a lot of what I've done has to do with—oh yeah, now I know why I started talking about that—because it had to do with relationships—it all has to with relationships. In art it has to do with the relationships between different parts and different materials. But that's what a lot of life is about, too, is about—at least the sort of primary, essential things have to do with relationships and how those things work together, you know. And it seems like a lot of what we do just as humans is to try to integrate these things that might seem rather disparate and somehow integrate them into one thing.

So that's my little digression there that I wanted to just talk about that.

So, back to GAS. And then—so I spoke at that conference. And I've been to a few conferences over the years. And then at some point I was asked to be on the board. I think it was '91 or '92 I was asked to be on the board. And part of that had to do with there was a conference that was being planned for Asheville and Penland. And so I think it was helpful for the board to have someone on the board who was from this area to scope out things and sort of start to get the ball rolling.

So that was a real interesting time for me because it was a great interaction with the other people on the board, all of whom were extremely interesting and often very funny people. And it got me—made sure I went to each conference and went to planning sessions prior to the conferences, where we'd go on on-site visits and things. So that was a really special time, I think, for me because I felt very involved and in touch with a lot of what was going on in the glass world. And like I was saying before, I've sort of slipped out of that over the last—gosh, I guess it's been eight or nine years. I think I've been to one conference since then. So I kind of miss that, but it's somehow been difficult to work into the rest of my life.

MS. BYRD: Did you go to NCECA when you were—the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts?

MR. LEVIN: I think I went to one or two when I was involved with clay. I'll tell you one thing that was interesting for me that I hadn't thought about until you just asked that question, was there was a national sculpture conference put on I guess by the International—what's now called the International Sculpture Center, or whatever it is, but the organization that puts out the *Sculpture* magazine.

MS. BYRD: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: And it was in Lawrence, Kansas, and it was in 1970—when was it?—'70, '71? Anyway, they decided to

feature glass, hot glass as a sculptural medium. So they got in—I think Harvey was there, Joel Myers, Marvin Lipofsky—I can't remember who else—Fritz might have been there. And that may have been the first time I saw glass blowing, now that I think about it. I was thinking it was when I first went to Penland, but it might have been at that conference. Anyway, I was just mesmerized, you know, watching these guys swing these blow pipes around and all the—with glass on the end of it.

MS. BYRD: Did they have—was glass at the university at that point or—

MR. LEVIN: No, no. They had a furnace—they had a furnace set up in the Field House in Kansas.

MS. BYRD: Okay. Bill Boysen didn't bring his mobile—

MR. LEVIN: No. No, that wasn't in existence yet, I don't think.

MS. BYRD: It wasn't in existence? Okay.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Because we—when I got to grad school in '72, he was just—that was one of the things we were working on. He was just kind of finishing that up. I'm pretty sure that that wasn't part of it, but I may—my memory might be playing tricks on me.

So that was the conference I went to that was very kind of eye-opening for me.

MS. BYRD: Very important.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. And there were—let's see, there were some exhibitions, you know, that had people's work, and I remember seeing some of the things that people were doing. So that was important.

So anyway, so organizations—so there was GAS, and NCECA, I don't—I may have been—like I say, may have been to one of those, but that's very vague for me, you know, if I did.

MS. BYRD: Well, the *GAS Journal* is valuable. Even if you don't go to the conference, you have the journal.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. And I've tried to make sure I keep up my membership so that I get the journal. And the technical information that's available now is much more—there's just a lot more available now, with suppliers there's a lot more available, a lot more tools and things.

And then, I guess in more recent years, I've just had more involvement with more regional organizations, Piedmont Craftsmen in Winston-Salem, and Southern Highland Craft Guild that's based in Asheville.

MS. BYRD: You've been an exhibiting member of both of those for sometime?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah. And I was on the board for Piedmont Craftsmen for a while. And let's see, what else? Let's see, I was on the board for Penland for a while, and that was another interesting experience. And was on the search committee for one of the directors. So that was all very interesting—you know, a very enlightening experience, all those situations.

I'm trying to think if I've left anything out in terms of organizations. Oh, the ACC Southeast has its own conferences that they put on each year. And so I've taught workshops, I think, for three of those conferences at various times over the years.

MS. BYRD: There was a question about whether publications put out by such organizations as the American Craft Council had influenced you over the years. Have publications been important?

MR. LEVIN: Boy, what a good question. I don't—I don't know. [Laughs.] I don't really know. I don't look at a lot lately. And I'm trying to think over the years—I think at some point previously it was helpful in terms of trying to—of feeling connected to the larger world. But I can't say that they've been unimportant, but it's hard for me to articulate how they've been important. It's always nice to see my own work in print, and it's always interesting to see what colleagues are doing with their work, and to read about, you know, what people are thinking about. But I can't say that I've really kept up with that, all that material, as much as I probably should.

MS. BYRD: Well, obviously you're doing well. It's how you got there. And if that's not been part of it very much, that's perfectly all right.

MR. LEVIN: I think one thing that's been interesting is seeing—especially like in *American Craft*, which isn't so media specific, is seeing what other people are doing in other media and how people are just dealing with very basic things like form and texture and things like that that are very—I think very simple design ideas, but also more universal—I don't know, more universal concepts or something. I just find that I'm often as interested in

what someone's doing with wood or iron or clay. I just seem to be interested in shapes, shapes of things.

And that's something that I can relate to I guess in all different media. And the gestural aspect of what I do, I look for that in other work too. So I guess in those ways there's been—you know, those kinds of publications have been interesting to me. And, you know, I've probably lifted a few ideas here and there from what I've seen.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.] Well, one of the things people have said about Penland—I think you may have said about Penland—there's a nice aspect of sort of cross-fertilization that goes on there.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: Is that what you're saying, the same sort of thing about the publications?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, I think that's true. Another thing about Penland—we were talking about teaching before—and I'm sorry this is so scattered, but these different thoughts are kind of—you know, keep coming through my mind.

MS. BYRD: No, that's fine.

MR. LEVIN: But one thing I found about teaching at Penland, in particular, is, maybe more so compared to the universities, is that people come, I think, expecting to learn certain skills. And while I and everyone else that teaches there I'm sure is trying to impart certain skills, ways of handling the material, there's also this other thing that's happening, too, which is more of a way of thinking about—maybe thinking about the material in some different ways. And that idea that we were talking about before with the—how your work plays—has the context—how your work fits into the context of your larger life, the rest of your life. And so I feel like when I teach at Penland there's a little bit of a subversive element to the teaching because people are coming expecting to get one sort of set of information, which is kind of on the skill level, but hopefully they're coming away with some additional thoughts or sort of philosophical things going on as well. And maybe having raised more questions than providing answers, sometimes maybe that's good.

MS. BYRD: Do you bring those students out to your studio and show them how you live in that entire environment that you work in?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, and try to take them around to other studios, different people's studios in the area. And yeah, just to show that your work environment is quite personal, and that everyone's working situation is set up sort of towards their own idiosyncrasies. So, you know, depending on what a certain person's making and their equipment and studio space allocation and those things are going to vary, you know.

MS. BYRD: Let's talk about your studio. Do you want to draw a picture for us of the space in which you work?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Let's see, the original part of the studio has a blowing room which is 20 by 20. There's a high end to that room where the furnaces are on that end. And then connected to that are—there's a batch room off to one side. And then a larger room that's the grinding, polishing, kind of finishing, cold-working room with grinding wheels, the beveling belt, polishing wheels, cutting saw. And then there is a smaller room for storing packing boxes and things like that. And then off of the grinding room is the addition which I added on four or five years ago. And that's got just a very large work space in it on one side and a separate, small acid etching room, which is ventilated, which I was extremely glad to get in there.

And then along the other side are two rooms—one is a photo room, so I can—I take pretty much all my own pictures of my own work—

MS. BYRD: Hmm. Oh that's interesting.

MR. LEVIN: And yeah, so that was great to have out there. And I used to have—the photo room was up here, upstairs here in the house, and whenever I'd want to take a picture of something I'd have to carry the piece over and clear the laundry off of the photo table, set up the lights and stuff.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: So now it's all just set up out there. So that's one room. And that kind of doubles as a gallery space for the mixed media sculptures.

And then there's another gallery room that's just for the glass work, the finished glass work. So that's been great to have. And it's been nice, especially if people want to visit the studio now; I have these separate areas that show the finished work.

So that's basically the layout of the studio. And it's worked out really well, except I'm always running out of

space. I'm sort of a pack rat, so I'm always collecting things and storing things and setting things on every available horizontal surface. So things are kind of filling up out there. [Laughs.] And I could use more gallery space and more work space. If I go out there periodically and just do a little clean-up and reorganization I seem to function okay.

The work room is really nice to have—the new work room—because it has a large table that's a four by eight work table, and so I can work on some of the sculptures in there. And in the past, before I put the addition on, I had to clear out the blowing room, which was the only sort of large work space that I had. And I could work on pieces in there and then—but then I'd have to, you know, move the bench back in.

This way I can work even in the winter when I can't work—a lot of the work on the wood I like to do outside when I can, but in the winter I can work inside if I have to because of that work space that I have now. So that's nice. And that same room provides a lot of space for storing wood that I might be able to use with some of the sculptures. So that's been real nice to have that addition on there.

MS. BYRD: Now you mix batch.

MR. LEVIN: Right.

MS. BYRD: And so you mentioned you had a batch room so that—the ventilation in that must be extraordinarily important.

MR. LEVIN: Well, it is important. It's not real good; I mean, the system that I have isn't real good, but it's adequate for what I do.

Actually, the batch that I've been using for a while I've been using—I guess since the 1980s [1989] I've been using Spruce Pine Batch [pelletized glass batch made in a plant a few miles away which is owned by the Littleton family].

MS. BYRD: Oh, you have?

MR. LEVIN: Yes. They pre-mix the batch for the clear, and then I get a color—what they call color base from them, which they've measured out but not mixed. But it also doesn't have—it's got the oxidizers left out. So—

MS. BYRD: The oxidizers meaning that the color—

MR. LEVIN: Well, it's mainly sodium nitrate [and antimony –RL]—it's not in there because that can affect color. So they leave that out and then I screen this color base that they give me and put it in a mixer and then add some other materials which—mainly what I add is potash which brings the expansion back up because they're dropping out sodium—sodium nitrate. So that's an alkali; that would affect the expansion, so I have to compensate for that. And then I mix the color base, and that's what I weigh out for my colors.

And so I'll weigh out usually around six pounds for each pot. There's one pot that is a larger one that takes 15 pounds and then I'll add different oxides and—metallic oxides to get the colors in. So that's all just hand mixed in individual buckets once the basic color base is mixed up.

MS. BYRD: And you told me you run about five different batches of color.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, five crucibles—different colors, yeah.

MS. BYRD: What you call a pot furnace?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. The color pot furnace.

MS. BYRD: You told me that at one time you developed heavy metal poisoning?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, I was using—I was melting a cadmium selenium glass.

MS. BYRD: Red and orange?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah. Cadmium by itself—well, with sulfur will give a yellow, and then selenium in the presence of cadmium and sulfur will give a red depending on how much selenium you add. Well, it turns out I wasn't ventilating very well, and was—when that material melts it's quite volatile, so it's putting off fumes all the time. And all glass is actually doing that but some are more bad than others.

MS. BYRD: More deadly even. [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, more deadly. And so I started not to feel well and wasn't sure what was going on and eventually got checked out and was told that I had selenium poisoning. So I went on a very rigorous diet and started to do a lot of different homeopathics and things like that to try to get it out of my system. After a while I started to feel better. But the people that saw the chart for the metal analysis thought that there was something wrong with their testing machinery—

MS. BYRD: Oh, I see, yes.

MR. LEVIN: —because they thought—they said this person should be dead. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Off the scale. Oh, how frightening.

MR. LEVIN: I can laugh about it now but it was scary. So I don't use that anymore. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: You don't use that color?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, I've used—I've managed to formulate a red that's a copper red somewhat similar to what, you know, potters would use, but—

MS. BYRD: Reduction red?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. And usually that works pretty well. Occasionally there are little glitches. But—so that's the red that I use. And then the other colors that I'm melting are also not real great for you but I redesigned the color furnace to include a hood that goes around the whole color furnace and ventilates constantly. So when I'm using it it's a much lower chance of getting bad fumes. I'm sure I'm still getting some just because I'm—you know, I'm working with that material on the end of the blow pipe, but I try to take much more care these days. So it was a big wake-up lesson for me.

MS. BYRD: Sounds really frightening.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: Now I expect—

MR. LEVIN: No, I said it was—it was frightening. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: How has your working process changed over time?

MR. LEVIN: Well, let's see. I'd say when I started I used to do a lot more on my own, and that's basically the way we learned in grad school was to do it on your own. So you'd blow a piece, hang it up, get your punty, lay your piece down on the bench, stick your punty on, crack it off and finish off the piece. And I had often worked with a helper, worked as part of a team, and I'd work helping other people. Of course then I worked with Fritz. That's what I was doing. I was getting—

MS. BYRD: Hot bits and—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, punties and handles and bits and all that stuff, yeah. So I was familiar with working that way, but still a lot of things I was doing were on my own, and over the years I think I've just ended up, you know, finding that it's much easier with a helper there all the time, even if I'm doing very simple pieces. I can still do them on my own—like simple bowls and tumblers and things like that I can do on my own, but it's a lot simpler and smoother with a helper. But that's a part of the change that's happened.

Let's see. I'd say the glass that I'm using is different. I guess that sort of feeds into your question.

MS. BYRD: Yes.

MR. LEVIN: Because I had been using the opaque glass that I started working with when I was working for Fritz. So I had been using that opaque glass with these very zonky colors and playing around a lot with different color combinations and seeing what kind of made sense together. And also we formulated a clear glass that went with that, with the opaque glass, so I could do pieces that had this colored glass inside and then encased in clear glass. So I did a lot of perfume bottles with these—they have the clear overlays over the color with this kind of internal stuff going on.

MS. BYRD: And you sliced them into the color inside.

MR. LEVIN: Right, right. Faceted and polished them. Yeah. And a number of just kind of sculptural things that were done that same way, you know, like cutting and polishing. So I was using that up till about 1989 and then I

switched over to the clear glass, which was simpler because I didn't have to mix everything up from scratch; I could just get the batch from Spruce Pine Batch and shovel it in the furnace. So that's been nice. That's made a difference in terms of the working process. I probably melt less often now than I used to. I probably melt once every two weeks; at the most maybe once every 10 days, and I think for a long time it was more like once a week. And that's changed partially because my furnace has a larger capacity—well, since the late '80s—has a larger capacity. For a long time I was working with a smaller furnace. I think I had about 60 pounds of clear glass and now I have more like 150. So that lets me go for a longer period of time.

And I work it out with the colors—kind of gauging the amount of color to the amount of clear as I'm working through the batch of glass so that there's enough color for the amount of clear that I have left and sort of try to use them up at the same time, and I'll charge both of them on the same day. Usually it takes me an entire day to do a melt, charging the clear glass and charging the colors.

And let's see, another way that I guess my working process has changed is that I used to do a lot more polishing on pieces and I don't do very much of that at all anymore. And there's a lot more frosted surfaces that I'm doing now, so there's a lot more sandblasting and acid etching and less polishing that I'm doing in terms of the finishing work. And then, let's see, other changes in the working process. I guess the advent of doing the mixed-media work has meant that I'm doing different—working on different materials and I'm doing more woodworking and occasionally spending less time actually blowing glass. Where I used to blow glass pretty much, you know, year round—that was my work—now I'll blow glass a fair amount of the time, but I'm spending a certain amount of time—trying to allocate a certain amount of time to doing the other—the mixed-media pieces, working with wood especially.

MS. BYRD: I remember, but you won a competition to design for Corning. Wasn't that—am I getting that wrong?

MR. LEVIN: Oh, yeah. Well, it was very fleeting. Yeah, it was an afternoon's work of—[laughs]—design work.

MS. BYRD: No, but I want you to comment on that. I thought it would be very interesting if you would talk about that.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, well, it was a very nifty project that they had. They—it was when the conference was at Corning and—oh my gosh, when was it? I guess it was—they had a conference there in—was it around 1990 or '89 or something like that?

MS. BYRD: I was there, but I'm afraid I don't remember the year. [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. I could look it up. I should know this. But they had a conference—I mean a competition where you could submit a design that their blowers would make on the floor with your—with the designer's supervision, which is the way that they do things there; you know, one person will do the design, and then the guys who are actually hands-on are executing what the designer wants them to do, not what they necessarily want to do. So mine was one of four designs that were chosen. It was an early one of the basket pieces, kind of vertical basket thing. So it had kind of this gestural thing to it and a handle over the top and different kinds of frou-frou on it—

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: —and bits going up the side and—somewhat different, I think, than what they were used to doing.

I'm trying to think of who else. Susan Stinsmuehlen was one of the other people, and she did something really interesting with lots of—I think lots of glass trails around the outside of the piece, just one over the other, and it was really neat. I can't remember who the other people were.

But anyway, it was really—it was really interesting because it was a whole behind-the-scenes look at how Steuben works. First we went and spent some time with the designers, whose names have just—have flown out of my brain. But they showed us, you know, how they go about—you know, doing drawings and what the—what—you know, just going into their space and what their workspace looks like for the designers.

And then went and spent some time talking with the blowers, the guys who were doing the hot working, and sort of going over the piece and showing them the drawing. And then I think we did a couple of versions of it, at least two, maybe more of the piece, and it was great. I mean, they were great guys to work with, and of course they were, you know, really good at handling the glass.

And one thing that was interesting was that the glass—it's a lead glass that they're using up there, so it's very—much heavier than what I'm used to using. And so they let me—at the end of the day they said, "Well, would you like to try this?" [Laughs.] And I said, "Sure." And I got this stuff on the end of the pipe, and you could feel the difference in the weight for the volume of glass.

MS. BYRD: Yes, how interesting.

MR. LEVIN: So that was—that was nice to be able to try it. And unfortunately the pipe was a shorter pipe, I think, than what I was used to and the design of the bench was different. So at some point I was rolling my piece on the bench and it just kind of rolled right off the bench. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Oh, no! [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: And that was it. That was my—you know, that was one that I was trying to do. But they were great at working on the design that—you know, that was basically coming in cold for them, you know, in terms of, you know, okay, make this thing. I mean, we had a—we conferred a little bit about it, but it was very—it was a very interesting opportunity to be able to do that.

MS. BYRD: Did they think it was funny that you had trouble with their glass?

MR. LEVIN: Oh, probably, yeah.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: They—yeah. [Laughs.] I don't know. Yeah, I can't remember their reaction, but they were very—they were great guys. I mean, you know, I think that was one of the things that stayed with me from that experience, just, you know, like any people who work with their hands and are good at it, they were very competent but fairly humble and matter-of-fact about what they did, which I enjoyed.

MS. BYRD: Do you have commissioned work out there that is particularly important to you?

MR. LEVIN: There's a few—a few things that were important, I guess partially because of the opportunities that they presented, and then also because of the placement of the pieces, too. One thing that occurs to me is that I was commissioned to do a series of awards for the governor of North Carolina to present to—as education awards. And the idea was that there would be a team of teachers that would be on the committee from the governor that would go around to different schools and select schools that were being the most innovative in terms of their—the program. And the project was called the Entrepreneurial Schools Award, and it was for schools to take the initiative at improving their education and improving parent involvement and different things like that.

So the first year that they did it, they asked me to come up with a design that would transfer to a graphic image. So I worked in conjunction with a woman—a graphic designer in Raleigh. We sort of went back and forth with my drawings and her ideas for what would translate into good graphic design, and I came up with an image of—boy, I'd love to show you this as we talk. It might make more sense for you. I don't know if it would make sense for the recording. But it was a three-dimensional shape that was based on the shape of pi and also on the Japanese gate. I think you can imagine that.

So it had two vertical and then basically a cross piece, and to me it combined those two things. And I loved that combination of images because pi being the mathematical, rational sort of side of things and then the tori, or Japanese gate, being the sort of—the Eastern, more intuitive kind of serene-looking thing. And I liked that combination of the intuitive and the rational and the East meets West, all those things; you know, just layers of little metaphors there. And it was very simple, and so it translated really well into this image.

So my job was to make the piece in glass, which I did, and then the graphic designer, Barbara, borrowed one, did a series of plaques so—there would be one school that would receive the glass piece and then maybe 10 other schools that would receive plaques that were sort of like honorable mentions or, you know, they wanted these schools to be recognized, too. So that was the first year.

And then, in subsequent years—I think it started in '94 and then it ended in 2001, unfortunately—it had to stop, I guess, for budgetary reasons—but anyway, each year after that, the committee that commissioned me to do it said I could do anything I wanted in terms of like a small glass sculpture as long as it somehow included that image of that sort of pi, you know. So each year it became an opportunity for me to explore some, you know, relatively small, they were all like 12- to 16-, 18-inch high glass sculpture. And like I said, I could do anything I wanted. And then I would sandblast the image on a piece, you know, that somehow integrated itself into the piece.

And so that was a great opportunity, both because, you know, I—to be recognized by the governor and be—have a little thing printed up in the book, and there's a booklet at each presentation banquet. And so, I mean, I'm sure that's good publicity and all that, but the main thing was it gave me an opportunity to—where I'd be paid to explore a different glass piece, sculptural piece.

MS. BYRD: Now how many of these did you make?

MR. LEVIN: Well, let's see. I guess I did seven, or actually I did eight because the last year they—well, in the next-to-last year they had—they wanted to present Governor Hunt with one of the—an award, too. So one of the schools got the award and then Governor Hunt got an award. And then Mike Easley came in as governor and he continued it for the first year, so there was still one more after that that I did. So that would have been 2001, I think, was the last one. But for some reason they discontinued the program.

So that was a shame because every year, like I said, it was an opportunity to kind of explore and know that I'd be paid for that exploration. And I always came up with something that was real interesting to me and the people in the governor's office always loved them, too. So sometime if we have time I have pictures of those and you can see kind of that progression, but one thing that those pieces did was that they led into some other pieces that I've still been doing even more recently, you know; very sort of flowing kind of flame-like pieces that sort of remind me of water splashing on the flames. So I took my early steps on those pieces by doing those commissions.

So that's one commission. So those pieces—another nice thing about those pieces is they're placed in various schools around the state, you know? They're not housed in some museum basement. [Laughs.] They're on display, I think; you know, as you walk into some school somewhere on in the principal's office or something. So I kind of liked that idea, too, of these things that were special for me to make being in learning institutions, you know.

And—yeah, there's a quote that I wrote for that, that they would print in that publication every year, that had something to do with—that learning and creativity are not separate; that the most profound learning that takes place is usually in the presence of creativity. So I liked—I like that idea a lot.

MS. BYRD: Well, that has to do with your own philosophy of teaching, too.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: That's nice.

MR. LEVIN: So that was one commission that was—that definitely stands out. And then there were some others that I did.

Also, for the state, there was a series of awards called the—I think they were the Governor's Awards in Business and the Arts [North Carolina Governor's Business Awards in Arts and Humanities], and they would go to businesses that had been particularly supportive of the arts around the state. So I think twice I did pieces for those awards.

And so that was nice, too, although those were supposed to be like one image that was repeated eight times or something like that, you know, and then all those pieces were presented all at once.

So I've received, though, a lot of very nice support from the state—[laughs]—both in terms of commissions and also several grants that I've been lucky enough to get. I got two North Carolina Arts Council fellowships, and I got one North Carolina Arts Council project grant also. So that's been very nice. You know, the state arts council has been very, very supportive, not only of myself but of, you know, a lot of very talented artists around the state.

And then I was also lucky enough to get a grant from the Southern Arts Federation of the National Endowment for the Arts gave one—I think that was in '95—that—I think you wrote the page for that—

MS. BYRD: Oh, absolutely.

MR. LEVIN: —inclusion in *American Craft*—

MS. BYRD: Yes, yes.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: That was a pleasure. I remember that.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Yeah. So—and that was with that group of mixed media pieces that I did in '94 and '95.

So I got a little off the subject of commissions there—

MS. BYRD: No, no, that's something else that's very good to cover.

MR. LEVIN: But in terms of commissions, there have been a few other ones that have meant a lot to me. I guess one—one that's just in a private home, that was based on a sheaf, which was the one that was illustrated in the—on the page that you wrote in '95.

MS. BYRD: Oh, yes.

MR. LEVIN: And she had seen that piece in a gallery and really felt a connection with it but wanted something for—that would go on a wall. So this woman in Winston Salem commissioned me to do this piece. And that was very nice, because it came at a time when I hadn't necessarily sold very many of those mixed media pieces and wasn't really necessarily intending to sell a whole lot of them, but also was appreciative—I was appreciative of any good feedback—[laughs]—that I could get on them. And to have someone say, "Well, I really love this piece and could you make one for my home?"—that's a definite boost, you know.

MS. BYRD: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Absolutely.

MR. LEVIN: In terms of artistically as well as monetarily, it's great to get those kinds of commissions.

MS. BYRD: So you don't really find it difficult to make commissioned work?

MR. LEVIN: Well, sometimes it's trickier than other times. You know, for example, I'm not really a goblet maker when it comes to like functional—

MS. BYRD: Sets.

MR. LEVIN: —goblets. I mean, I used to do a lot of them. But this past summer, fall, I took a commission to do a bunch of goblets, and you know, it was a little frustrating at first. And then I kind of got into it and became—you know, I just kind of got into the rhythm of making some, and it worked out well after that. I gave these people a nice group of goblets. So—

MS. BYRD: How many did they want?

MR. LEVIN: They wanted six, and I had to make—I think I had to make maybe 16 of them to get—

MS. BYRD: Oh!

MR. LEVIN: —[laughs]—to get six that were right. And then it's funny—I took four of the extras to a fair in Winston-Salem, and some other people came into the booth and saw these goblets and said, "Oh, we really like these. Would you make 12?"

MS. BYRD: Oh!

MR. LEVIN: "Would you make 12?" [Laughs.] And of course I couldn't say no, because it's, you know, a pretty good financial return. So anyway, that's on my agenda for when I get back to work in January.

MS. BYRD: Oh, I see.

MR. LEVIN: So that's sort of by way of answering your question of whether it's enjoyable or—I can't remember how you phrased it, what the word was, but intimidating or whatever the word was, about doing commissions. I think the best ones are when it's something of a more sculptural nature and one that I can use my—where I have a lot of latitude, where—the ones that are more defined are more difficult—like, say, a set of goblets or a set of tumblers or something like that. But they're also the things that pay the bills, you know. They—the bread-and-butter pieces. And so I'm not knocking those at all. That's come in very handy over the years.

MS. BYRD: But essentially you seem to like the routines of glassblowing?

MR. LEVIN: Right. Right. And that's what I find. I mean, whether it's making tumblers or something more kind of experimental, there's a rhythm of doing it that I fall into and that I like. You know, I try not to be telling myself in the back of my mind, you know, "Oh, you should be doing this other thing instead of doing this." I try to focus in on what I'm doing and find the rhythm has a large part to do with it and sort of just get into the groove doing it.

And we were talking, I guess at lunch—was it?—about the music. That's a big part of my life, too.

MS. BYRD: Oh, yes. Yes.

MR. LEVIN: And I think that that relates to the rhythm of working, you know. It's a big part of the glassblowing. And a lot of the music that I play, which is what you'd call old-time music, like fiddle music and stuff—I play guitar with a lot of—with several fiddle players in the area. And that's a great deal of what that music is about, is

about the rhythm, because it's all based in dance music. So I think that that's—you know, that's kind of a common factor, one reason I'm interested in both of those ways of working, you know, playing music and doing the glassblowing.

MS. BYRD: Would you say that you're—I was thinking about your music changing. Even though you played guitar, had your music changed after you came to this area?

MR. LEVIN: Well, sort of. I had gotten into playing that kind of music actually in—out at Pilchuck, with some people that played that style out there. So I was already familiar with it, and then when I had moved to Penland, of course they had a square dance every session. And that was bluegrass, which is a little more sort of—I don't know what you call—almost more uptown than the kind of music that I mostly play.

But it was—it's very related, because it's all based in—kind of in this area, you know, the Appalachians.

So yeah, I guess I've just found that—over the last few years I've found that I'm devoting a little more time to that, to the music. For a long time, I really put it on the back burner. I'd play some but was more concentrating on work in the studio, and our daughters were younger. You know, they were in school, and there was a certain amount of time that I felt needed to be devoted to them and, you know, issues around their schooling and stuff like that.

So I have found that the last maybe five—oh, gosh—five, six years, maybe, I've spent—tend to spend more time with the music. And I organize the contra dances that we have here in Celo and things—so things like that, that I hadn't been doing before.

MS. BYRD: And does Billy play with you—Billy Bernstein?

MR. LEVIN: No, no. He plays with some other people, and he's a little more into the rock and roll vein.

MS. BYRD: Oh, he's—[laughs]—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah. He's great. He plays a mean electric bass.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: So—and that's one thing that's nice about this area, is there are a fair amount of musicians playing all kind of things. So there's a funny little homemade festival that happens pretty much every summer here. And so I play with my friends there our variety of music, and Billy and his band will play. And it's just great to hear these people.

MS. BYRD: That's nice.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, because you know—often you know people in a particular context, and sort of to see what people are doing in kind of a different realm, especially when it's also a creative activity, you know, it's—

MS. BYRD: Yes, it is.

MR. LEVIN: —it's a nice thing.

MS. BYRD: Absolutely.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: Let me think. One thing that I think would be very interesting for you to talk about is, oh, the North Carolina glassworkers as a group. Are you still coming together with the—with glassworkers, whatever it was called—the North Carolina glassworkers group—remember, it used to have a—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah.

MS. BYRD: —used to meet periodically.

MR. LEVIN: Right.

MS. BYRD: Is it—it's gotten to be so large, I think, has it?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. I think something kind of faded there. [Laughs.] I'm not quite sure what, but there seemed to be a real coming together that happened when the conference, the GAS conference, took place in Asheville and Penland, and there were a lot of people just volunteering to help, and we all enjoyed that experience. Kate Vogel was real involved, and we were on the board kind of together for a little while, and she was real instrumental in

helping to plan that conference. And a number of other people that just helped to do stuff on that conference. And we found that after the conference was over, we just kind of enjoyed getting together. So there were—for a few years there were a bunch of—you know, there would be a party once or twice a year and people would get together. I think maybe it's—Shane Fero and me bear the responsibility for not having it happen more. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Why is that?

MR. LEVIN: Because—well, because we were the ones that always ended up organizing the ones when they did have it, so then somehow we both—I guess we both just got busy. So every now and then, you know, I'll see Shane a few times a year, and every time I see him I'll say, "You know, we really have to get the party together." And he'll say, "Yeah, I guess we should do that." And "let's get in touch." And then, you know, months go by. So—but yeah, it's a nice community of people and it's always nice to see people and just, you know, talk about—you don't necessarily talk about glass. You talk about kids and you talk about, you know, the stuff that goes on in people's lives, you know.

So—and that's one of the things I've enjoyed when I teach at Penland and then take people around studio visits because sometimes it's the only time in a year when I might see some of these people, you know, especially go into their studios and see—and see what is new that they've been making. Yeah, it's quite a mutually supportive community of people, although I've also described it as the Lake Wobegon of the glass world because it's sort of like where all the shy people come to blow glass; you know, people who are kind of doing their own thing in their studios. [Laughs.] You know, their social lives—I mean, I'm assuming everyone has some sort of a social life, but most social lives don't hinge around glass being a common denominator, you know. Like for me and for Wanda it might have to do with music or her school where she teaches or something like that.

MS. BYRD: Oh, Wanda's teaching now?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, she's teaching at a Montessori school, teaching preschool.

MS. BYRD: Oh, very good. Good.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah.

MS. BYRD: I didn't realize that.

MR. LEVIN: Oh, yeah, yeah. This is, I think, her twelfth year. Yeah. Right, you asked before if she was still making photographs, and I didn't really finish my answer to you.

MS. BYRD: Well, she was a very fine photographer, and then before that she made—didn't she do the stained glass that you have around?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah, and there's a real nice piece that's in the wall of my studio in the new addition out there. Yeah, she did a lot of stained glass, and she's an excellent collage artist, too. That's really a good part of her background in school was doing collages, printmaking, drawing.

MS. BYRD: She was also an art major?

MR. LEVIN: Yeah. Yeah, she got to start at school knowing that she wanted to be an art major.

MS. BYRD: And you started school—

MR. LEVIN: As a theater major.

MS. BYRD: That's right. You were a theater major.

MR. LEVIN: Right, right. Yeah. Yeah, and you know, it's interesting that that came back up now—[laughs]—because there's something else I was thinking about before, which is that sort of early connections to what I ended up doing—I mean, for a long time it seemed like just an anomaly where I was—well, it seemed in a way like a logical progression I guess from clay because a lot of people had gone from being potters to being glassblowers. A lot of the technology for burners and all that stuff is similar. But—and that was certainly true for me, I think, you know; a certain amount of the chemical aspects—you know, mixing glass, mixing glazes—there's a connection there, and the equipment and technology and stuff like that.

But prior to that I was thinking, you know, I had been involved in the theater, and one of the things I was intrigued with was lighting design. And a lot of what you do is you're dealing with the way light affects a scene or affects the mood and the feeling in a scene. And one of the things you're doing is using transparent gels to create the correct color shade. So I think that was all in there and I just wasn't—you know, because that's such a connection with glass for—

MS. BYRD: Yeah, the light.

MR. LEVIN: —for me, yeah. And I remember—

MS. BYRD: The color, mm-hmm [affirmative].

MR. LEVIN: —from when I was a kid, remember when I was—probably just about my earliest memory is walking along in Baltimore when we still lived in the city and walking along the street and seeing the way light filtered through the leaves of a tree. And you know, when you're a kid that's just like a pure sensation; you're not interpreting it as, well, that's light coming through the tree. You're just sort of experiencing this sort of dappled effect. And that's the sensation that I remember from being a kid, a little kid.

And then also my dad having the drugstore, I remember the apothecary bottles that they had, you know, the big jars.

MS. BYRD: With colored—

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, with colored water in them. Nice—one interesting thing about those is that they—there would be a jar and then there would be a stopper for that jar, but the stopper would also be a vessel that would have a different color of water, and then maybe another one. So there would be three different tiers of different—you know, three levels of these different colored liquids. And later on with my dad we visited a man in Baltimore who—I wish I had kept his name and address—who had a collection of different kinds of apothecary bottles, and there was a tremendous variety of these things.

And I was so blown away because by that time I was already involved in glassblowing. And so I could look at these things from a glassmaker's point of view, but also just as a little bit of throwback to this one sort of keystone, maybe, of where I might have developed an interest in color and light—you know, how light came through color and things like that. So those are some things I've thought about in terms of the background. I realize that's a little bit out of context for where—

MS. BYRD: No, no, no, that's not. No, that's good. That's good.

MR. LEVIN: —where we were. But hopefully whoever edits this can fit all that back in at the right place, with the early memories. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Don't worry. I think this is—no, this is really very good.

Now I was going to ask you, and I thought a final question would be some comments of yours, they ask a question about your views on the importance of glass as a means of expression and the strengths and limitations of the medium. Kind of a major question. Well, it was on your list. [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah. [Laughs.] I'm sure I looked at it. I'm sure I thought, "Oh that'll be a breeze!"

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.]

MR. LEVIN: Did I write anything down? [Laughs.] Yeah, I think I did.

MS. BYRD: [Laughs.] Well, just a little bit about the strengths and limitations. I know you could say that.

MR. LEVIN: Say it again. I'm not sure where that—is it written down here somewhere?

MS. BYRD: Could you discuss your views on the importance of glass as a means of expression? What are the strengths and/or limitations of that medium?

MR. LEVIN: Oh, geez. Well, I know what the importance is for me. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Well, that's fine. That's all right. That's all—that's what we want.

MR. LEVIN: And I guess I've talked about this some already, but it has to do with being a very direct way of—a very direct and spontaneous way of creating shapes. And I think the possibilities are pretty endless. I mean—

MS. BYRD: Well, you've explored a tremendous number of aspects, I think, of the possibilities of the medium, haven't you?

MR. LEVIN: Well, I guess I have. I mean, I've done—yeah, I mean, I've done a lot of hot working, I've done a lot of cold working, cutting, polishing, sandblasting, texturing—

MS. BYRD: Mixed media.

MR. LEVIN: —mixed media. But I also see what—yeah, and some casting and things like that. But yeah, I don't know. I mean, it sounds a little trite, I guess, to just start talking about the infinite number of possibilities that there are with material. But there certainly are, and you see it when you see what people are doing out there. You know, people are exploring all kinds of interesting ways of working with it.

I guess—I guess there always seems to me to be something that I want to get at that I can't quite get with the work in general and with—at times with hot glass work in particular. I feel like I've gotten closer to it with some of the work that I'm doing, but I think that's always the process that, you know, is getting a little bit closer all the time. But I don't know. Maybe I need to think about that for a little while, about the question.

MS. BYRD: Well that's all right, and you've said—you've said some good things with that. And you don't find it, say, for example, too seductive for one to make a so-called artistic statement with—you know, people are always saying things like that.

MR. LEVIN: Oh, that it's eye candy? [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Right.

MR. LEVIN: I don't know. I don't know. I mean, the way I've used it at times, like in the mixed-media pieces, is not—I don't think it's—I don't think it's got that glass seductive aspect to it so much. But there's something about it that, I'm just thinking of the most recent pieces that I've made, which were—which had very minimal glass objects in them, the last five mixed-media pieces that I did. They're mostly—they were mostly wood with a little bit of glass in them. The glass just is kind of a highlight and focal point of some of them, you know.

And I kind of—I found myself on the last one that I worked on kind of roughing up all the surfaces of the glass, so it was—it didn't have a smooth texture, you know. So—and it was frosted glass. So I don't—it's hard to quantify that about the seductiveness of it because some of the pieces I've been doing are—I think use a certain quality that I think you can only get with glass, that very fluid kind of look. And maybe that's using a certain seductive quality, and that's probably part of what those pieces are about.

I don't know, somehow I think that it seems like when the glass is shiny then it has a different quality to it that's a little more of that—the bauble aspect. It's hard for me to explain that. But I think that's one reason I'm interested in frosting a lot of these pieces. Then again, a lot of those shapes are sort of soft shapes so that surface really lends itself that way.

MS. BYRD: Well, to say something like that, to say it was eye candy, it was really a major oversimplification of a very, very sophisticated medium, I suppose.

MR. LEVIN: Yeah, yeah. I guess with the work I've been doing lately I've been thinking about whatever materials kind of make sense to me to use as materials; meaning that glass makes sense to me to use, wood makes sense, and some of the other materials. I mean, there's just a—there's a fascination for me both with the process and a way that things look, or the texture of things and a certain connotation that those have, the certain feeling that they bring up.

So I guess in terms of this question about the importance of glass as a means of expression, I guess I'm thinking that all the—that whatever materials I'm using or that people want to use make sense, you know, as important means because they're being worked on with our hands and being transformed. And I guess that's an important thing right there is that transformation. You know, and just kind of to make the leap to the big philosophical state of mind, a transformation is what's going on, you know, not just with the material but, you know, but with the person that's doing it.

And I guess that transformation is what has a lot of interest for me. So kind of this odyssey of working and growing and understanding more as you go through that whole process, you know, understanding more about the materials and about the forms that interest you, but also about your own personality and idiosyncrasies and relationship to the world around me. So I kind of made the jump from the micro to the macro right there. [Laughs.]

MS. BYRD: Well, that's a good note to end on, I think.

We appreciate this, Rob. It's been a very good discussion.

MR. LEVIN: Oh, well thank you. I feel like there's a bunch more that I would like to have said, but I don't know what it would be right now. [Laughs.]

[Audio break.]

MS. BYRD: This is Joan Falconer Byrd interviewing Rob Levin at his home in Celo, western North Carolina, on

December 11, 2004, for the Archives of American Art, the Smithsonian Institution. Disc number three.

MR. LEVIN: You had asked before about a working process. And one thing that I realized is that I—when I'm working, when I'm making pieces, I will often think I know what is going into the piece. I think this is probably not that uncommon of an experience to people.

But—or sometimes I'm aware that I'm just kind of following my intuition and I don't really know quite what's going on, but I'm just kind of following what—my instinct and what makes sense. So I'll sort of pursue something until it makes some kind of sense visually or until I can't—well—yeah, until I can't go anywhere more with it, if it feels like it's resolved. And this is mostly talking about the mixed media pieces, but maybe some of the other pieces, too.

And then often what happens is I'll be looking at the piece and maybe living with it for a while and I'll start to see some things in there that I didn't even know were in there. And it also connects with the kind of feedback that you get from people, from other people. When someone looks at the work and says, "Oh, this reminds me of such-and-such," or, "I see this issue going on or this feeling—it arouses this feeling in me." And often that's not something that I have thought about. But it all gives more information for me as an artist to work with. So that was a little parenthetical about other people's reaction.

But the main thing is that I'll look at the piece and I'll see things going on in the piece that are possibly indicative of something that had been going on internally with me that I wasn't totally aware of, or just some other issue, whether it's a formal issue, you know, of design and materials, or a more kind of philosophical or nitty-gritty issue, and I'll start to understand something more about the piece. So there's a kind of a dialogue that happens with the work where there's information going into the work that I may not even know is there, but it's somehow encased—ensconced in that work, and that I can learn about either—learn something more about the work or about myself from looking at the work and understanding more about it. And often that doesn't happen till later on, till after the work is done.

And I guess I feel like that's an important notion to me because I think it's important for people to understand that the work doesn't happen linearly. It's not like, okay, you design it, you make the parts, you finish it up, and that's it, you know, it's all kind of once the designing is done, it's all—you know, it's all just fabrication from there. I mean, there are people who work that way and quite well. But I found that with me there's a lot more involved with the working process, and somehow that ends up in the piece, and that I don't necessarily know ahead of time what I'm going to end up with. And even when I've ended up with something, I may not know what I have until I understand it all.

So it's much more of a right brain—that's the intuitive side—kind of way of working, and then kind of having your left brain comprehend it a little more. And that helps with being able to articulate about what the work is that you're doing. So I like that idea of a dialogue with the work because there's a certain amount that goes into the work that's unconscious, and then there's a certain amount that becomes conscious through existing with the piece and having it around or viewing images of it, and that then comes back to you. And some of that's on an intuitive level and some of that's on a more intellectual, articulate level.

And I think that's part of what's so interesting about viewing artwork in general. I mean, you've had the experience, I'm sure, walking into a gallery or a museum where you're struck by a painting or a piece of sculpture or something, and you don't know quite what that impact is, you just know you've been impacted in some way. And at some point you're able to articulate that and understand it more on the rational level. But there's sort of that intuitive level which is, you know, like the experience of art that's such a profound thing and which I think is kind of, unfortunately, not understood by a lot of people because I think people are used to just seeing pictures of art in books or whatever. So I think that that experience is important for people to have.

Well, anyway, that was one thing that I realized I hadn't really gone into detail about that I wanted to try to talk about.

MS. BYRD: Okay. Well, I appreciate that. Thanks.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]