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Oral history interview with Neda Al-Hilali, 2006 July 18-19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ned Al-Hilali on July 18, 2006. The interview took place in Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Mija Riedel 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.

Neda Al-Hilali has reviewed the transcript and has made heavy corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

MIJA RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Neda Al-Hilali at the artist's home in Los Angeles, California, on July 18, 2006, for the Archives of American Art Smithsonian Institution. This is disc number one.

So, it's great to be here, great to see you again. I thought we would just start at the beginning. You were born in Czechoslovakia in—

NEDA AL-HILALI: In Czechoslovakia.

MS. RIEDEL: —1938.

MS. AL-HILALI: Nineteen thirty-eight. From the earliest childhood, there were two distinct influences. On the one hand there was my father, a very cultured, educated, spiritual, artistic man and the kindest man in the world. Many of my early memories are of going for walks with him and him telling us children stories. And he was teaching us, and showing us the magic of the world. He was showing us the plants, which ones we could eat, and telling us their names, and in the evenings he would tell us the names of the stars and their stories.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember any in particular?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, just I remember once—I must have been very young—what could I have been—four or five years old. I remember the moment: we were just walking past this little park, and the story was so sad, it made me cry, and I realized I was crying and was surprised that I cried from sadness, not because I had hurt myself. [Laughs.] So he was telling us stories out of the fullness of his heart, and that was my father.

MS. RIEDEL: He was a judge, right, Neda?

MS. AL-HILALI: He was a judge by vocation, and he was a very accomplished pianist. Every day, after the noon meal, he was playing for at least an hour on the piano, his favorite Shubert and his other favorites. And we had books up to the rafters—endless. I remember as a five-year-old looking at the pictures of the Alhambra, the Lion Court, in stereovision. And I remember unfolding the map of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, with the Prophets and the Sibyls.

So he provided a very cultural environment, showed me the richness of the world.

Now, on the other hand, there was my mother. It was the end of World War II, and my mother also was very creative, but in a more practical way. My father was intellectual, but not of much practical use. It was up to my mother to help us survive. And she was a very hardworking and very efficient woman, and I think it is thanks to her resourcefulness that we survived this ordeal.

I think that also had a permanent impact on me. In the war years, you had to be inventive. There was nothing available. You had to cut up old clothes and figure out what could be made out of them for the many children. We couldn't go to the store and buy things, and yet you had to clothe them somehow.

MS. RIEDEL: Make it yourself?

MS. AL-HILALI: I remember, for example, that my mother had this large old bag. It was of good leather, and we went with it to the shoemaker, and he made us out of it a pair of boots.

MS. RIEDEL: From an old leather bag?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. But it was good leather. The shafts of the boots were made of felt, but that's beside the point. My mother, she was very skilled, very creative, and an expert in all kinds of needlework. She definitely had great talent, even though she didn't have much time to practice it. In her younger years, she once went to a

lacemaking school in Falkenstein, near where she grew up.

MS. RIEDEL: Did she weave and knit or sew?

MS. AL-HILALI: She was definitely sewing and knitting and crocheting, and all of this, and the "white work," what they called—

MS. RIEDEL: Piecework?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, white work, where you embroider white on white.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my.

MS. AL-HILALI: And so I think from my father I have the imagination, and from my mother, the love of and practical exposure to textile work.

MS. RIEDEL: The practical, pragmatic, daily routine.

MS. AL-HILALI: Resourcefulness.

MS. RIEDEL: Getting things done.

MS. AL-HILALI: The capacity to work—work hard. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: There is a story about you as a young girl watching the geese.

MS. AL-HILALI: That comes later.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, we'll get to that later.

MS. AL-HILALI: Now we're still in Czechoslovakia.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, and you had siblings, too, sisters and—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, we were a lot of children. When I look back at that scene—oh, and I have to show you where we lived. We lived in this small town. We lived on the marketplace, in this Renaissance building which was built in 1571. The whole front of the building was decorated in the Italian style, with classical scenes and Latin inscriptions about the virtues and the vices of the world.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. [Laughs.]

MS. AL-HILALI: So it was—if you think of it—

MS. RIEDEL: An incredible carved-stone façade?

MS. AL-HILALI: That was—and I think it's called "sgrafitti." It's a sort of carving into the surface. And so we lived in this historic building built by the Rosenberger. That was one of the famous families of Bohemian nobility, but we lived there, since at the time it was the courthouse and my father was the judge of the town. When I looked out of the window over the marketplace, it was like a medieval town, and it had arcades on two sides. It was an old salt city; nobody here knows what that means.

MS. RIEDEL: What does it mean?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, there were these ancient caravan routes from the Bavarian salt mines across the mountains, mostly mule caravans. Those were the most ancient roads.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, the Salt Roads.

MS. AL-HILALI: And in our town there were at one time big salt warehouses—it was a trade center. And I remember, every evening, they still rang a bell, "*die Saeumer glocke,*" to hurry the approaching salt caravans to reach the city gates before closing, or it is said—to direct lost caravans to the city.

MS. RIEDEL: It's a good story. What is the name of the town?

MS. AL-HILALI: Prachatitz.

MS. RIEDEL: Prachatitz.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, okay. P-R-A-C-H-A-T-I-T-Z. Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: Prachatitz, that's where the house was.

MS. RIEDEL: Such extraordinary stonework on all the floors.

MS. AL-HILALI: So, I have, on the one hand, the memory of me lying awake at night, and in the middle of the town square was a fountain, and at nighttime, when everything was quiet, you could hear the fountain running. And it's one of the most beautiful things you can imagine: the town quiet and the fountain running, in the moonlight.

On the other hand I remember the sirens. And if you ever heard the sirens going off when a bomb attack was coming, you'll never forget it. Even if I hear now the sound of sirens on the TV, I have a reflex reaction. I remember the rush to the shelters. You had to go running down to the bomb shelter, not knowing whether you were going to come up again or not. And that also left a distinct impact on my life. You see things in perspective. Nothing seems so important. That is why I get impatient with little squabbles and complaints, when people don't know how lucky they are, how easy they have it, and so forth.

MS. RIEDEL: How old were you, Neda?

MS. AL-HILALI: I was five, going on six. I remember I had just started school; I went for three months before everything stopped. I was bored stiff at school because my father had taught me to read already.

MS. RIEDEL: By the time you went to school, you could already read?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes. And I know my father must have taught me.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you the eldest?

MS. AL-HILALI: I had an older brother. And just to show you what an incredible man my father was, now when we children talk amongst each other, each of us is convinced that he had loved him or her best. [Riedel laughs.] Each one knows it for certain. Isn't that amazing?

MS. RIEDEL: Fantastic.

MS. AL-HILALI: Each one knew he was my father's—

MS. RIEDEL: His favorite.

MS. AL-HILALI: Now, I knew I was his special girl because I was born on his 50th birthday, say no more.

MS. RIEDEL: End of story.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and I played piano with him, for him. So it was wonderful, as a child. To a large extent, you don't really know what is happening. You feel safe as long as your parents are with you. On the other hand, it was terrible because my father—the reason my father wasn't in the war was because he had been shot in the First World War through the leg, so he was an invalid.

MS. RIEDEL: He was also 50, though, right?

MS. AL-HILALI: At the end of the Nazi regime, they had drafted everybody, down to the 14-year-olds. My father had been a judge under the German protectorate. So then when the collapse of everything occurred, when the Russians moved in, everybody that had had an official position was hauled off to the stone quarry and was to be shipped off to Siberia. My father, who was an invalid, would not have lasted a day in the stone quarry, but by some miracle indeed, at the train station, when all the men had to report to be shipped off, he got on the wrong train and was shipped off to Bavaria. [Laughs.] So it was a miracle indeed. And then my mother had to arrange everything to get us out of the country just before the Iron Curtain came rattling down.

MS. RIEDEL: And how many children were there now, Neda?

MS. AL-HILALI: There were five then, with one to come.

MS. RIEDEL: So your mother had five—

MS. AL-HILALI: The little one was one year old, so she had to be carried. It was very hard. But my mother managed to get us out on a pickup full with children and a few belongings and brought us to the border. And from there—

MS. RIEDEL: So you moved to Germany when you were six.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, Bavaria. It wasn't that far.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AL-HILALI: And somebody else can explain the intricacies. But then my father was assigned to a little town, and that was where he was judge, and where he re-opened the courthouse, because everything had been closed down at the end of the war. Schools, courts, everything had been closed down. There were no men left to run anything. So it was a total change, and total disruption and upheaval that we went through. And I remember it was in the middle of a bitter winter when my mother finally managed to get us out.

MS. RIEDEL: This would have been maybe '44.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, '44 to '45. And even so, as I described, my childhood was very rich. It was just a fact that it was very hard. For example, chocolate—in fairy tales, you hear chocolate and marzipan; that was to us the same as jewels and diamonds. It's something we heard about in tales, but never had seen or tasted. And I remember at the train station, there was an old enamel advertisement for chocolate, and we were just looking at it, just—

MS. RIEDEL: But never had tasted it.

MS. AL-HILALI: Never had tasted it. And I remember, you didn't import anything then. Also, I remember once, somewhere my mother had gotten a banana. We had never seen a banana. We shared it amongst the five kids, and it was already on the soft side. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And did it feel half adventure and half—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: How was it arriving in Bavaria?

MS. AL-HILALI: For some reason, before we came out to the west, we always felt safe because of my mother. But she also went through this horrible ordeal. In those days you didn't have TV, but you had radio. And I remember, before we got out of Czechoslavakia, her having a map on the wall, and on this map, she moved her pin showing how far the Russians were advancing, and how they were coming closer and closer.

You cannot imagine with what heavy heart my mother made sort of like backpacks for each of us children. Of course, in those days you couldn't buy backpacks; she made them herself. If we should get separated or got bombed, we had a little more of a chance of surviving with a blanket and some essentials in the backpack.

That was a true mother, trying to do everything she possibly could. But imagine with what heavy heart—with what feelings she would have to do that. She would tell us, Stick together, and if anything happens, stay together, and stuff like that. Yes, to have to go through that.

MS. RIEDEL: There was no choice.

MS. AL-HILALI: To give you an idea how bad the times were: imagine, everything in collapse—I mean no food supplies, and bitter winter, and streams of refugees coming, walking from further east. In those days, still a lot of horses had been used by the military, and now in the breakdown and retreat the poor horses were used until they dropped dead. And the starving people ate those poor collapsed horses.

I remember one day, my mother in her struggle to feed us had cooked some meat. I remember her saying to me, You don't have to eat this. But in those days anything would be devoured without second thought. This meat was kind of strange and blubbery. I remember, only after I had eaten it, it grossed me out and it made me sick. I never forgot the image of that meat, and ever since, I am leery about eating meat. A sort of revulsion remained with me ever since. So that is how times were.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was Bavaria?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, that was still in Prachatitz.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, it's still in Czechoslovakia.

MS. AL-HILALI: When the collapse took place.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: So that was Bohemia. It was a cultured life, a romantic life, and it was a terrible life. It was a terrible struggle for survival.

MS. RIEDEL: Extremes on both ends.

MS. AL-HILALI: So then in Bavaria, it was, in some way a similar life. My father would go for walks with us after his day of being the judge. We would walk through the fields and forests, slow enough for the smaller of us children because, you remember, he had this shot-up leg from the First World War and was walking with a cane. My mother, in the meantime, was struggling to get food on our table for all the hungry mouths. Times were still hard. Everybody was growing their own vegetables and had at least chickens for the eggs or geese for the feathers and the Christmas roast. And on our walks we would collect pinecones for kindling, sometimes mushrooms and other things. But still my father played the piano everyday, and kept receiving more books.

I was just seven, and I knew I was going to be an educated person. In the old European tradition, every educated person knew Latin. So my father taught me my first Latin. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: In the midst of everything, you're learning Latin.

MS. AL-HILALI: My father was a very cultured, but very lonely man. There was hardly anybody in the little town for him to communicate with. But he was the kindest judge, the judge you would want on judgment day. He always would try to find the one good side of a crook—[laughs]—making allowances for this or that. Of course, a lot of the crimes in those days were caused by the hardships of the time. He was a very good man. And even years later, after he had died, people remembered him gratefully and had respect for him. That made us proud

In Bavaria he was a judge again of the little town, and again we lived in the courthouse in the marketplace.

MS. RIEDEL: Again?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, again. And again the fountain was running at nighttime. [Laughs.] So it was beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: Some small sense of continuity, or some type of normalcy.

MS. AL-HILALI: That sounds right. My mother was trying to feed us and provide for us, and that's where the geese came in. [They laugh.] You had geese for the feathers, because everybody had feather beds. So early in life it became my lot to be the goose girl.

We children took turns, but I was the one that taught them, who managed to have them fly after me. First you walk, and in those days there were hardly any cars, so I could walk them diagonally across the marketplace, down the street, then off over the bridge and to the river, which was a sort of common area for the villagers. It was also used for the washing. Washboards were built out into the water, and the women came to do their washing there. And if that does not sound medieval, nothing does. [They laugh.]

And I had to watch the geese, because the people would lay out their clothes to bleach. That's how you bleached in those days. You laid out the sheets on the grass and you watered them with a watering can; you kept watering them. And that's how you did it. I had to watch the geese because they just loved to sit down on the freshly washed sheets and clothes.

MS. RIEDEL: How many geese did you have?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, there were like eight or a dozen; that was enough for a little herd.

MS. RIEDEL: And they would follow you through the town?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes, I called them my certain call, and they would follow me. If one follows, then the others follow too. But my real feeling of accomplishment was when, one day, I was going faster and faster and running, and they started flying after me. Now, that I was proud of, because nobody could do that.

MS. RIEDEL: They would fly after you and land and meet you in the commons?

MS. AL-HILALI: [They laugh.] Not that high. Now, geese—the house geese don't really fly high, but they fly above the street. If they hit you in their flight with their wing, it really hurts.

MS. RIEDEL: It sounds like a fairy tale, Neda, the geese flying after you.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, yes, I was proud of it. But a lot of the time, the goose herding was also boring, especially when it became colder in the year, and you stand out there, and all you have in your pocket for a snack is a black roll—we called it "black bread."

MS. RIEDEL: Like pumpernickel or—

MS. AL-HILALI: No, not fancy pumpernickel. [They laugh.] It's cold, and your fingers freeze while you're knitting gray socks.

MS. RIEDEL: That was part of the story, too, that while you were watching the geese, you had to be busy, and so you were constantly knitting or—

MS. AL-HILALI: And I took pride in doing it faster every day, but the sad part was it was always just that same gray wool. Oh, I got the socks down. So, I learned to knit while reading. I could read a book at home, and knit at the same time. You can get that done. At that time nobody bought their socks. There simply were no socks to buy. And there were a lot of people in our family, and it was a cold climate, so I knitted a lot of socks.

MS. RIEDEL: You were constantly knitting socks.

MS. AL-HILALI: I was constantly knitting socks. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Did you learn to sew from your mom?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, that, too, but I remember. Well, yes, yes, I remember having to do this—they call it "*hohlsaum*" [hem stitch]—it's a kind of white work.

MS. RIEDEL: Hohlsaum? Oh, the white work.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I guess in those days, the quality of the needles wasn't so good. The needle had gotten rusty from my little sweaty hands, and the white cloth had rust stains, and everything was a disaster.

I'm glad we lived in a time when you knew which grasses you could eat in the meadow, which plants, and I remember watching the geese and watching the hazelnuts getting ripe, and they still were green. And finally when they were ripe, they turned out to be full of worms. [Laughs.]

And all of this excitement, digging and finding by the river this sort of clay, and getting some clay home and playing around with it, and shaping things out of it. It was a rich life, but I think it also taught me to be independent. I guess we did grow up fairly independent and having responsibilities early on. And then I was the oldest one. Often I had to take my little sister; I was carrying her on my back down to the river.

MS. RIEDEL: So you had your sister on your back, knitting in the hands—[they laugh].

MS. AL-HILALI: Goose wings hitting my head. Not all at the same time. [They laugh.] And of course, I went to school too. The system was that you went to the village school for five years, and then you went to high school in the next little town.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you already know German, or did you have to learn?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes, we spoke German. So I went through the system: high school, which, I guess, would include what is here middle school and high school. We went for nine years from age 10 to 19. And so I had to catch the train for nine years, always being late, especially in the winter. Just think at 6:30 in the morning having to catch the train with ice and snow, and never wanting to get up in the morning because it was below freezing.

MS. RIEDEL: How far was it and how old were you?

MS. AL-HILALI: I started when I was 10.

MS. RIEDEL: How long a train trip was it?

MS. AL-HILALI: It wasn't long, but it was the only way to get from my town to school. It was about 10 miles.

MS. RIEDEL: And you went by yourself?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I was plenty old enough then. There was no question—there was no problem, no question about it. Only we were always late, always running to catch the train.

Our high school was pretty hard. We had a lot of subjects, and we learned a lot—everything from chemistry to physics and Latin and French and biology and history and on and on and on—a lot of subjects.

MS. RIEDEL: What was your favorite?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I was good in German, composition and so forth. I was pretty good at art—I think I was okay. Because there was no pressure—one tried to do one's best. We didn't have much art education; there wasn't much going on in that respect.

MS. RIEDEL: In art education there wasn't much?

MS. AL-HILALI: No. But I became aware of the art world, again, through my father. He subscribed to this magazine that was called *Westermann's Monatshefte*.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, what does that mean?

MS. AL-HILALI: It simply means *Westermann's Monthly Journal*. And I awaited it each month anxiously. They depicted and discussed modern art, and I absorbed it all. There I learned about the Fauves and Expressionists and all of that.

Also, then it was very important when a big exhibit was in Munich; we went on the train—that was a hundred miles on the train. I saw my first van Gogh and Picasso, *Guernica* [1937]—and all of that.

MS. RIEDEL: You saw that as a child?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I was a teenager then.

MS. RIEDEL: Your father would take the whole family?

MS. AL-HILALI: My father was dead by then. We went, I mean I went.

MS. RIEDEL: By yourself?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, probably, or maybe with a friend. I forget.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you learn about it?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes. In those times posters and billboards were very important for communication and advertising. Those were the times before television. The magazine was a general culture magazine for art and literature. I learned a lot from it, because whatever it contained, I just slurped it up, A to Z. Pissarro, Emil Nolde.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you go frequently?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, but when a major exhibit happened. So mainly I was busy going to school, a lot of times from morning to evening, and then, when I think back of anything related to fiber, it was just that the instinct was there; the instinct was there. [Laughs.] After all of my childhood of gray socks and hohlsaum.

MS. RIEDEL: Gray socks and what, I'm sorry?

MS. AL-HILALI: Translated, it means, "hollow seam." It is a fancy seam you sew around handkerchiefs, napkins, or tablecloths.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: I did some tutoring to lower-grade students and the money I made—secretly, because I knew my mother would very violently object—so, secretly I bought some colored wools that were available by then—colored wools. And in the attic, so she wouldn't find it, I was doing this hooked rug. The pattern was not very creative—it was an image in the *Westermann's Monatshefe* of a Caucasian rug, and that is what I did. I earned my little money, and went and bought more wool, red wool, red and green—beautiful—and worked in the attic hoping she wouldn't catch me. It was my first flying carpet.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you—were you able to finish it?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I finished it, and it took a long time.

MS. RIEDEL: How long?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't know. But I remember in the winter it was very uncomfortably cold.

MS. RIEDEL: Weeks or months?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, months, for sure. Mostly I worked at nighttime. So that was the instinct I had. The fiber instinct was irrepressible even then.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it a geometric pattern?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it was geometric, or let's say, stylized. It was nothing original, because I just copied this Caucasian design. But that is what I did with my first money, my first—my—the first license, my biggest secret.

MS. RIEDEL: Was to buy secretly colored wool?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, to do this carpet thing.

MS. RIEDEL: And how old were you? Teenager?

MS. AL-HILALI: When I was a teenager, yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And what did you do when you finished it?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, then—well, it's still in my mom's house, in a box under the sofa.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you finally show it to her?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, eventually, years later.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember her response?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, it was so much later. Now after so many years, well, it seems strange, but I was afraid—I wouldn't dare tell her I am going to do this. It was too frivolous. That's just how it was.

MS. RIEDEL: You were just compelled.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. I had to do it even if it was on the sly.

MS. RIEDEL: So, let's see. What else was there in regards to culture and art?

MS. AL-HILALI: The most visible aspect of culture was connected with the church. Even in the times of great need and scarcity, the church maintained in those days its pageantry. For example, at Pentecost there were processions in the street, with banners and figures of saints. That was incredible. The whole market square was an adorned hall, with garlands and young saplings and altars adorning the houses.

And then we lived near an abbey, one of the great big Benedictine monasteries, which had been founded in the eighth or ninth century. When I was a child, on Sundays my father and I would walk over there—it was two miles—to hear the organ and the choir. And whatever misgivings I have about the church, it was the important place of culture and beauty; I don't say the only place of beauty that was there, but was full of art, and it was awe-inspiring.

It was the big cathedral; it was high baroque and you could see paintings, sculpture, grandiose architecture, and soaring space. Even if the sermon was boring, you had lots to look at, lots to look at. And they always had a boys choir and the famous grand organ, and that is what we had come for.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this in the same town where you were living?

MS. AL-HILALI: It was two miles away. The abbey stood by itself.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you remember what it was called?

MS. AL-HILALI: Niederaltaich. Niederaltaich.

MS. RIEDEL: And Neda, what was your father's name?

MS. AL-HILALI: Johann Boehm. B-O—with umlaut—E-H-M.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: There were many Boehm musicians. You had musicians, opera singers, and so forth. And "Boehm" means actually "Bohemian"; that means originating in Bohemia.

MS. RIEDEL: And your mother, her name?

MS. AL-HILALI: She was Margarethe Fischer.

So that was that. That was my time in Baveria. I grew up from a goose girl to a secret carpet-maker.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] A secret carpet-maker.

MS. AL-HILALI: And then I just wanted to get away, from village life out into the big world. And I think since I had been uprooted already once, it was easier. I had a school friend whose sister had gotten an au pair kind of arrangement in England, and I said, I want to study languages. So I went to London, and that is where I had my wild teenage years. I thought I was real hot and hippie-ish, but it was before the hippie times; we were beatniks.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. [Laughs.]

MS. AL-HILALI: And those were the days when I smoked the pipe—a regular pipe—buying St. Bruno's, a very sweet-tasting tobacco, sitting at the fountain in Piccadilly Circle with my little black beret with my girlfriend, smoking. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: You were 19, 20, something—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, 19—18, 19, yes, with a pleated skirt.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. And you were studying at St. Martin's?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I went to St. Martin's School of Art. I came to England as an au pair maid. And that was interesting because the school where I worked was built to resemble a castle—kind of gray castle—and all those little boys in gray uniforms like little mice, like little David Copperfields, scared-looking and with red cheeks because they were bullied to death by the older boys. This castle-looking school, set by a lake in a large park, was very romantic.

MS. RIEDEL: You were studying languages?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, yes, I was very serious about learning to speak English, because I had learned to read English very well in school.

MS. RIEDEL: In English?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, but I didn't know conversational English. So that was my objective. But it was basically my first wild time. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: What did you do?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, it was over too fast. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: What did you do that was especially wild?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, well, it wasn't that especially wild.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.] Not especially wild?

MS. AL-HILALI: It was exciting to meet many people of different nationalities, go to the coffee houses, stay out late, hitchhike around the country and go to all the museums, and decorate your room wildly with postcards.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I met my future husband over there; he was a student there.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay. And he was from—

MS. AL-HILALI: From Baghdad.

MS. RIEDEL: Baghdad.

MS. AL-HILALI: Then after my year, I went back to Germany and started going to the University of Munich, and he wrote me letters. So I went back to London instead of studying in Munich. And then I declared I was going to marry him. And now I know it was probably pretty much because he was from Baghdad, and everybody totally objected. I was a fool. In a way I was independent and such, but on the other hand totally naïve—idealistic and naïve. I believed everything I was told. And that is my dear father's fault because I thought men are like my father—

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh, uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: All my sisters were misled by him.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] He was the role model.

MS. AL-HILALI: And the world isn't like my father was. So I believed this man, and I thought I can make him happy, and I went to Baghdad. I didn't even wonder about the political situation or things like that. All I knew about Baghdad were the *Arabian Nights* stories. And so I went to Baghdad.

MS. RIEDEL: This was in 1960, '61, something like that?

MS. AL-HILALI: It must have been '59, because '60—my son was born in '61. He was born right away.

MS. RIEDEL: In Baghdad?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And you lived with your husband's family.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it was very nice. It was also interesting. It was hard, too; I wasn't used to the heat. That was very new to me. From a moderate climate, I was plumped into extreme heat; that was very hard. But I was young, and all the kids, my husband's siblings—he had a lot of siblings—they were all very nice to me. I was treated very well. What I thought I was going to get into was quite different from what I got into, but my in-laws were all very nice.

I knew things would be different, but nobody had told me that I couldn't go sleeveless, or that I shouldn't go anywhere unaccompanied. It was best to wear the *abaya*, that black overall cloak. Also it was convenient to wear this thing, because you went shopping to get the day's food supplies at 5:00 in the morning, before it got too hot. So you had your nightshirt on, and you just put this black thing over it, and you could just run to the market.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AL-HILALI: And then we lived by ourselves, because his parents house was pretty small—and I went to the market by myself and all, and I knew enough Arabic to talk and bargain in the market, and tell them how much I would pay them for a kilo of okra, because you're supposed to bargain.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were learning Arabic?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes. I had started before I came to Baghdad, and after I arrived, all the family was teaching me. I remember especially one little brother, Hamid, he would say "Neda, what is this?" And he was teaching me. He was just a kid, but he was especially enjoying teaching me. And so that went pretty well.

MS. RIEDEL: What were your impressions, Neda? Do you remember anything in particular about the fibers or the art that really struck you?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, yes, of course. It was especially the *suk*, the market. It was really amazing, just this whole clutter of stuff, colorful stuff, all together, stacked in piles together. The brass alley where they were all hammering. That was like *Arabian Nights*, and then the alleys for embroideries and carpets. In those days, we didn't have much money. I was just looking. But I was getting some—

MS. RIEDEL: What did you get, carpets?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, carpets are too heavy, but embroideries for on the wall. I still have some hammered-tin plates, not too many, because when I left again, I was going to America. Especially since then I was carrying my son in my arms.

I could not carry very much luggage, but definitely I remember among hundreds of saddlebags and camel gear, this one specific little saddlebag. That's an image I'll remember forever. A little saddlebag and the tassel strings—the tassel neck wrapped first in navy blue and then rust red, and a white. It was wrapped in different colors just for the heck of it, or the love of it. But I never forgot this, my little saddlebag. It was like a seed, or an essential revelation.

It was an eye-opener. Of course, Baghdad was an incredible eye-opener, but it was what I had wanted, what I got married for. [Laughs.] But in those days, I couldn't apply it; I was busy washing the diapers by hand, but I was absorbing it.

MS. RIEDEL: But it was all registering, right?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes, it was all registering.

MS. RIEDEL: And a lot of it was related to camels? The saddlebag and the—

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes. Well, of course, in the Middle East, a lot of the fiber objects were—

MS. RIEDEL: Decorative.

MS. AL-HILALI: Decorative.

MS. RIEDEL: Woven, beaded.

MS. AL-HILALI: Because this is a culture where historically, traditionally, the animals are very important, and the animals are your survival. And so that is expressed in the way they decorate their animals. I want to show you this slide: there is this little guy in rags, but he will decorate his camel, and it's so inventive and rich and varied —

MS. RIEDEL: The harnesses, too, can be very elaborate.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the whole gear. Oh, I have to show you things—this combination of tassels and bridle bands and fringe and cords, a whole composition of color, texture, and craft techniques.

MS. RIEDEL: And were they silk or wool or a combination of cotton?

MS. AL-HILALI: Mostly wool. Now, this was just so opposite to my childhood environment, where everything was so utilitarian because of the war. Mostly the gray socks. The camel gear and all of the decorative fringe was mostly "useless" except it expressed the value and the love for the animal, and the need to adorn it.

MS. RIEDEL: The reverence and the appreciation for the animal.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and rather than being functional, it was enjoyable and sumptuous. Such richness felt so satisfying, answering a need I barely knew I had, and which gradually became absorbed and expressed in my own work.

After we had come to the States, I went back for a visit, and later I went to Afghanistan a couple of times. I went to Morocco, too, but more in Afghanistan and the back countries, I was affected by this richness.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to talk about your work a little bit now, or do you want to save that for later?

MS. AL-HILALI: Let's keep it for a little later.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: So let's see: so now I have been in London. In London I had some art training. I always had the feeling I was not good enough. I didn't have that self-confidence.

So in London, naturally, I went to the museums, and I remember in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Ardabil Carpet, which is one of two sort of similar carpets which are enormous and there exist only two of them in the world. And I remember that carpet because it was enormous, like a garden. How could they do it on the loom? I don't know how they did it. I really would be interested to know, because it's so wide and gigantic, and what palace it had been made for.

It must have taken many people many years to make. But even though the marvel of the technical accomplishment is unbelievable, plus you think the carpet may tear from its own weight. It was an incredible achievement.

MS. RIEDEL: Technically that was—

MS. AL-HILALI: And for its beauty, yes, the Ardabil Carpet. I went religiously to many other museums in London: the National Gallery of Art, the British Museum, the Tate Gallery, all of which were adventures to me.

MS. RIEDEL: This is before Baghdad, or is it when you came back?

MS. AL-HILALI: Remember, we were talking about the influence of the Middle Eastern textiles; I was remembering the Ardabil Carpet.

MS. RIEDEL: So, even before you went to Baghdad?

MS. AL-HILALI: Before—that was when I was in London, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you spend a lot of time in the market looking at carpets and—

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I didn't say, Now I am going to go to the market to look at carpets. I went with the family to buy something or other, and they would say, "Umm Ali, come, we'll show you something." That was my name, Umm Ali, because it means "Mother of Ali." When you have a son, you're named after your son.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, that is how it is.

MS. RIEDEL: Amazing. Umm Ali, okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: I went along, pretty much hustled, and they showed off things. In the course of daily living, I happened to see unforgettable things, like a Kurdish wedding party in the north on a trip.

But it wasn't long, and then my husband was offered a scholarship at UCLA and other universities in the States to do his graduate work. I opted for California, and so we came to California.

MS. RIEDEL: Your husband was going to study at UCLA?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: What was he studying, Neda?

MS. AL-HILALI: Geophysics, which means oil, which makes sense. We were living on campus, and I was young and bright. [Laughs.] So I started going to UCLA too. Then I discovered that fiber was actually legitimate, a legitimate subject of study. I discovered that after a few years. When I realized that, I was very happy, and I dove into it.

MS. RIEDEL: Dove?

MS. AL-HILALI: Dived or dove?

MS. RIEDEL: Either way, you immersed yourself. [Laughs.]

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes, yes, UCLA; let's make that the next chapter.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to talk about Houston at all, or does that come later? Anything to say about Houston?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, that went parallel to UCLA and later. I was a few years in Los Angeles, and then we moved.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, we'll pause for a minute.

[Audio break.]

Okay, now we are moving into the American chapter, and you're moving to the U.S. in 1961.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: To L.A., to Los Angeles.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, all right, so I started going to UCLA and I took undergraduate courses. Then I took a weaving class, and I realized you can do textile work "legitimately."

MS. RIEDEL: Who where you studying with?

MS. AL-HILALI: There was my textile teacher. He was J. Bernard Kester. And I cannot thank him enough and praise him enough and express my admiration and, as I said, my gratitude for him. He was essential in my life and to my career.

At that time, my English was still very poor. I was very shy, no self-assurance whatsoever. I did my work, and he sort of gave me his blessing and approval, and I was as happy as can be.

MS. RIEDEL: You had two children then too?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. So I took weaving at UCLA. Yes, I did undergraduate work. Then I got a Regents' Fellowship

for graduate work, probably thanks to Bernard, too, but we moved away. So I lived in Texas while I did my graduate work at UCLA.

MS. RIEDEL: In Houston, yes?

MS. AL-HILALI: In Houston. And at that point my marriage was pretty much over. My artwork was my survival. I just immersed myself in the work. The situation was the following: because I was traveling in and out of L.A. from Texas, I could only do so much work on the loom, which ties you down to one location. So I had to think of things I could do with fibers without the loom, and that's where I started exploring all of the non-loom textile methods.

And I think my German thoroughness came in handy, because I really scanned the whole spectrum very systematically. I mean, systematically, I scanned all the possible ways of working with fiber, all the basic techniques.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Everything off the loom.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, off the loom, all of the possible techniques. No book really gave you a systematic overview. There was one, Emery—Irene Emery, and it wasn't logical enough for me either. So to a large extent, I'm self-taught. I picked through many books, investigating the possible construction methods.

I realized I already had a great advantage through the expertise I had brought with me from my childhood. I had not realized that it was anything other than housework skills. So I was handy with my fingers and used to working with fibers, thanks to my mother's skill and teaching. Plus it was my natural medium. It was just like coming home.

I want to say that the two books that were most important to me were the d'Harcourts'*Peruvian Textiles* [Raoul d'Harcourt, *Textiles of Ancient Peru and their Techniques,* 1932], and then there was a little book—Therese—I don't know if it's DeDillmont or Therese Dillmont. You have to look that up.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: Therese De Dillmont, [*The Complete*] *Encyclopedia of Needlework* [1884]. This book was all about the making of lace. But it showed all of the basic techniques with clear illustrations. And I took her instructions just like I took the ones out of the Peruvian book, which also had very clear technical drawings and so forth.

MS. RIEDEL: Detail, step by step.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I could look at the pictures, look at the diagrams and figure things out. And those were my two basic teaching texts, as I said, apart from the background that I had, and the luck that I had.

And Bernard, even though he was not conversant with all of these methods—he was more of a ceramicist—he saw what was good and pleasant. [They laugh.] He gave me his encouragement, and he let me do what I wanted to do. And he is a very sophisticated, a very discerning person, a man of great taste, discrimination, but in a positive sense. And he was definitely a guide, encouraging in the right direction. He gave me self-confidence. He gave me confidence in what I was doing. Naïve little me—he was the first one to suggest I should submit to an exhibition. And he has been supportive in many ways ever since. He is a very refined person, I mean refined in the best sense.

MS. RIEDEL: So he was really a mentor of sorts.

MS. AL-HILALI: He was a mentor and very intelligent, and very modest and self-effacing, but very influential. I really don't know what preceded the history of the textile department at UCLA, but I know that Jim Bassler and I, as his students, were the first two who had master's exhibits in textile design.

And after that, the textile department of UCLA experienced an incredible flowering. A large number of great fiber artists came out of the department under Bernard's guidance. He was also able to make contact with the international scene. He was the first one who brought international fiber artists into town by organizing an exhibition at UCLA. Before that, there was only the Biennale in Lausanne—the Tapestry Biennale—to showcase fiber artists internationally.

So I remember, I don't know which year, but it's written down somewhere—the *Deliberate Entanglements*. It was the first international great fiber exhibit at UCLA: Magdalena Abakanowicz, [Olga] de Amaral, Jagoda Bujic, and other star artists. He included me among them. And I felt very proud.

MS. RIEDEL: What a thrill. Had you just finished your master's recently?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it wasn't long after that.

MS. RIEDEL: So early '70s, it sounds like.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

And so then, Bernard Kester started attracting people who wanted to work in fibers, and he had international figures visit. Like he had Olga as a visiting professor, and he got Magdalena for a semester. And that was a very, very active time, and a lot of good fiber artists developed during their studies at UCLA.

MS. RIEDEL: By all means. And did you study with those people, Neda?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, that was—I was already teaching then. I was already teaching then. Artists that studied at UCLA were people like Chris Dey, Connie Utterbach—I don't know if that means anything to you—Claire Campbell, Carol Sassoon—remember the clothespin sculptures, and many others. John Garrett, do you remember him? Do you know him?

MS. RIEDEL: I don't.

MS. AL-HILALI: John Garrett, he did the *California Baskets,* or rather *Hollywood Baskets*. Flora Ito, Hiromi Oda, Barbara Mendell, Tom Fender, and many more. They all were graduates from Bernard's department. It was an explosion of creative energy.

MS. RIEDEL: Exhibiting and guests—

MS. AL-HILALI: One exhibit after another, and guests, yes. And Bernard was supporting the students and artists by writing reviews for *Crafts Horizons*—and other publications. It is undeniable that he was the pillar, the center or force.

MS. RIEDEL: The catalyst.

MS. AL-HILALI: The catalyst, exactly, and the dynamo and the helmsman of the movement.

MS. RIEDEL: He just drew in an incredible group of visiting professors and arranged exhibitions.

MS. AL-HILALI: He attracted valuable students and guided them in developing their style and careers.

MS. RIEDEL: So this is while you were teaching there.

MS. AL-HILALI: It started when I did my graduate work there, then it continued. Yes, I went to school there. As I said, Jim Bassler and I were the first two who had a master's show in textiles. I had no idea what a master's show is. Bernard and the other students helped organize and put it up. I had absolutely no idea where to start.

MS. RIEDEL: [Laughs.]

MS. AL-HILALI: Coming off the train from Houston, with my kids under the arms. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Right, and you spent a couple of decades in that environment, the '60s and the '70s, being a student and a teacher?

MS. AL-HILALI: I was always in communication with UCLA even though I was teaching at various colleges, and then for almost 20 years at Scripps College and the Claremont Graduate School [Claremont Graduate University]. When I had good undergraduate students, I sent him or her on to graduate school at UCLA. So we worked together. Or when Bernard went on his sabbatical, I would teach his graduate class at UCLA. So I was always in contact with UCLA. Plus, I taught for at least a dozen years extension classes at UCLA.

Sadly, I also taught the last three years when the UCLA Fiber Department was being phased out, in favor of computer graphics. That's the trend of it. It's what happened also at Scripps and at other colleges. The computer skills are replacing more traditional arts. That's how it is; there's no turning back.

So I went to UCLA and got my degrees while I lived in Texas.

To make a long story short, I ended up back in California for the time being with my son only. Then I had to get a job. A friend of mine, bless her heart, let me stay with her temporarily, but I had to get a job. So I had to lie and say I had experience in teaching. I had to.

It was the hardest thing. I remember psyching myself up on the way to the interview. And bless her heart, Virginia Hoffman at Cal State L.A. hired me. [Laughs.] Bless her heart for giving me my first teaching job. So I worked there a couple of years. I had my own place then, and that was when my true hippie times started. True

hippie times. Pretty soon, I moved to the beach to this old hotel building.

MS. RIEDEL: In Venice?

MS. AL-HILALI: In Venice. The lobby—what used to be the lobby anyway—of the old Waldorf Hotel, facing the beach, that's where I lived. And then I had my happenings.

Well, it was ideal. For example, for my dyeing classes I would assign as final project something that would fly. And we were meeting at such and such a date down on the beach, and there you have the most wonderful happenings. A fly-in, a tent happening, a banner event—we had the most beautiful happenings. Everybody came with such fantastic colorful fluttering stuff. It couldn't have been better.

MS. RIEDEL: This was the early '70s, yes, Neda?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes, the beach invaded by flowing, flying colors.

And I was so hot—I was high. I think about two years after I left Texas. I was just high, period. After coming out from under the rock of my marriage. I was just energy, endless, and zipping around with this and that, being foolish, trusting everybody, working like an idiot, having first to wing it at teaching, and then getting some experience, holding onto my cigarette holder for dear life. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: You taught, holding your cigarette holder?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I had quite a collection. I had enameled ones, ivory dragon ones, all kinds—metal ones, wooden ones; that was my little—-

MS. RIEDEL: Your magic wand?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, my magic wand and my blanket—[they laugh]—to hold onto. In those days, smoking was okay. But these are some of my best ever memories, those colorful years and events on the beach.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was all when you were teaching at Cal State or Scripps too?

MS. AL-HILALI: First at Cal State LA, Cal State Fullerton, and other colleges short term, and then at Scripps for almost 20 years. The events happened more with the Cal State people and UCLA Extension people. These people were more grown up, and were nearer the beach. At Scripps, to get the students to come to the beach, we would have to drive them. It is a residential college, and the students were more sheltered, but still I had a great time with them.

But the first years were my liberation, whirling in freedom and joy and idealism. Everything was wonderful and we thought the world was going to be better ever after.

MS. RIEDEL: How old were you then?

MS. AL-HILALI: Late 20s, early 30s. And how old were you then?

MS. RIEDEL: In the '70s? I was a teenager. I had definitely a sense of it, absolutely. The world was very open.

MS. AL-HILALI: Like you could never be the same again. All of this discovering, flowering—

MS. RIEDEL: Right, possibilities were endless.

MS. AL-HILALI: And the singers, Jim Morrison out of Venice. And we were just fluttering and sailing around the beach. I hope everybody who participated remembers this. That is why—I have to show you slides because it was really incredible. And everybody did something different, and everybody got into the spirit, and I was so proud of all of my students.

MS. RIEDEL: Will you talk about one or two that stick in your mind?

MS. AL-HILALI: I remember, of course, people who later became famous, like Fern Jacobs, but as far as good students, I had a lot of good students. I loved to discover them, or rather help them discover their own worth. Even if they didn't make art a career, many were so inventive, creative, developing their own personal style.

Of course, it was also hard work and drudgery, but I really liked teaching. I really liked teaching. And the best moment was when some kid, usually a shy one, or a young boy, would look at what they had made and say, I can't believe I did this. And that was my best reward. Then I felt like crying. It was my satisfaction, when I made him or her proud of themselves.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: And they didn't really know how much I had helped them, but that was okay. It mattered that they had done it. And when they said, I can't believe I did this, there was nothing better in the world. I had made one person proud of himself.

MS. RIEDEL: You took him to a place he couldn't have imagined going before.

MS. AL-HILALI: That's when I felt good.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you have a particular teaching philosophy to bring that about?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, with the dyeing, I really tried to—I don't know if it came across—to try to deal with the unknown. The unknown factor in dyeing is larger than in any other medium. Let's say with woodwork, or any material, there is a certain unknown variable, but with dyeing, especially, you have to deal with the unpredictable. You can channel it, or limit it, or direct it, but you have to acknowledge it, recognize and use it.

And I thought it was very important because you yourself can only imagine that much, and if you produce only what follows a fixed course, the result will be limited. But if you let the factor of the unknown come in, the results are limitless. That was my philosophy. To develop the gift of observation and collaboration with your medium was your goal. Be aware enough that if something wants or doesn't want to go this way, if it wants to go a different way, well, take a second look at it, be flexible and make the most of it.

With fiber work, where the result is not something instantaneous—[laughs]—when something didn't satisfy—one of my simple recipes was, when something didn't work at all, hold it upside down and shake it. [They laugh.] This recommendation was very constructive. Take another look at your piece; look at it from another angle.

Another rule: if something doesn't want to be anything, make a hat out of it—which will be a form totally different from your preconceived idea. A hat is a very open-ended thing. It can be confining; it can be explosive; you can—oh, I had people make incredible hats, expressing a personality. Make yourself into a turtle, a queen, or whatever you think you might be or whatever the material wants to be. It's a matter of finding out rather than dictating.

Fiber is a medium that can expand, spread out easily. We know it has always been a medium to participate in festivities.

MS. RIEDEL: Tents?

MS. AL-HILALI: You know, celebration.

MS. RIEDEL: That's great.

MS. AL-HILALI: In teaching the textile medium, I was conscious of, and took advantage of, the many innate possibilities of fabric: its largesse**,** its flexibility, its mobility and liveliness. Fabric is a medium that exists close to life, to living systems. There you have it. It's more similar to our life cycle than other materials. Stone, for example, has a much longer life cycle. Fiber has a relatively short one and it feels very comfortable to us. Also the familiarity of fabric may be a distraction, a deterrent from unbiased appreciation.

To make a shirt may be a simple obligation. But before people knew there was such a thing as art, they did their best to release their creativity through their needlework and embroidery, and that all over the world.

MS. RIEDEL: You have talked about shirts throughout time.

MS. ALHILALI: This is one of my favorite images. To think of all the shirts of mankind throughout human history, throughout the various cultures. Imagine the shirts of Guatemala, Bulgaria, of Nuristan, or Norway, and all the Asian nations, all of the shirts that were alive with the creative energy of the makers—that would be something. [Laughs.]

Imagine all of these shirts rising up, swaying and dancing, fields and fields of them, the vast harvest of every man's and, even more, every woman's innate creativity and understanding of beauty. Endless rhythms and variations. This is an image I love, the world covered with swaying fields of embroidered shirts.

I just want to pull up a few things for you.

MS. RIEDEL: Is this a *huipil* [Mexican/Central American woman's traditional shirt].

MS. ALHILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: From Guatemala?

MS. ALHILALI: I bought it in Oaxaca [Mexico], but it came from somewhere else. Look at this. Look at this.

MS. RIEDEL: It's extraordinary. We are looking at a huipil with extraordinary embroidered birds.

MS. ALHILALI: And there are how many birds? And each one is different and each one is brilliant. I think there are about 70.

MS. RIEDEL: It's like references to the Quetzalcoatl maybe.

MS. ALHILALI: You see—the ones with the little—

MS. RIEDEL: Crests on their heads.

MS. ALHILALI: Crests and fantasy plumes and—

MS. RIEDEL: Very densely embroidered.

MS. ALHILALI: And each one different from the others—different in color and shape.

MS. RIEDEL: You're right, every single one.

MS. ALHILALI: And it's just like each is a whole composition in itself.

MS. RIEDEL: This is exquisite, Neda.

MS. ALHILALI: Isn't it?

MS. RIEDEL: This is really amazing, and it's on a handwoven piece of fabric as well, yes?

MS. AL-HILALI: And I guess the background is woven in preparation of the embroidery, because you have the subdivisions with little panels.

MS. RIEDEL: Every single bird is different.

MS. AL-HILALI: So if you see this, you're proud to be a human being. I'll have to wear it again.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely beautiful. You bought it in Oaxaca 20 years ago at least.

MS. AL-HILALI: Longer ago even; I've never seen another one like it.

MS. RIEDEL: I haven't either, but it's just absolutely beautiful. And this goes with your idea about shirts, the love and energy that someone has put into this.

MS. AL-HILALI: The dignity it conveys on its wearer, even if it's not as spectacular. I don't know if we should talk about it now; we were actually talking about teaching, because I want to talk about the universality and the timeless quality of fiber work.

MS. RIEDEL: Why don't you talk about that if you're thinking about it now, and we'll come back to teaching.

MS. AL-HILALI: Okay.

[Audio Break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Back on.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I'm not going to make you look at all of these fabrics. I just got these out of my garage, and I've been washing some of these fragments.

MS. RIEDEL: Neda has a pile of woven fragments that she is unwrapping.

MS. AL-HILALI: These are things from Afghanistan.

Now, something like this—I guess it's a leg wrapper. I don't know what you really call it. Now I look at the—

MS. RIEDEL: Incredibly detailed—tiny stitches.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, very tiny stitches and very kind of understated.

MS. RIEDEL: Red, white, and a little bit of gray

MS. AL-HILALI: And even in the plain part, you see little stitches.

MS. RIEDEL: So a little bit of it reminds me of the way you were describing the white-on-white work of your mother.

MS. AL-HILALI: And it's just one everyday object, nothing special, but it's so intense; imagine the thousands of stitches—how much time they took, and some little girl doing it naturally.

MS. RIEDEL: And the pattern is floral and geometric—

MS. AL-HILALI: It's, I guess, a traditional pattern.

MS. RIEDEL: But so detailed.

MS. AL-HILALI: I think it gave the girl satisfaction and pride, and time to meditate and practice harmony.

MS. RIEDEL: Painstaking work—you can barely see these individual stitches. Now, these are all things you collected in—

MS. AL-HILALI: When I was in Afghanistan.

MS. RIEDEL: In Afghanistan. Now this is another leg wrap, pink and purple and orange—much more brightly colored.

You were in Afghanistan for the first time in the '70s, Neda?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I was there twice, one time in the summer and another time in the winter. But the trips take up a large memory space in my mind.

MS. RIEDEL: You went in '74 on a Scripps research grant.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, Afghanistan is in the crossroads of several different textile traditions. The Persian, Pakistani-Indian, Chinese, Turkoman traditions and whatnot. So I thought for a textile person that it would be an ideal area to explore. I had made my case to Scripps College, and they granted me a research grant to go there. We're really getting off the subject. There's one other piece I wanted to show you.

MS. RIEDEL: Neda is unwrapping a dozen exquisite embroideries.

MS. AL-HILALI: Unfortunately, some are damaged—I have many more of these jewels.

MS. RIEDEL: This looks like a little baby purse or a little purse.

MS. AL-HILALI: No, this is actually the front insert of a dress or shirt, or it has been a dress. See how the embroidery is interrupted where the slit goes down the front. I like especially the way the bodices are embroidered on one side, and lined with different fabrics, which are stitched together, making it into something special.

MS. RIEDEL: Quilted?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, quilted with innumerable rows of stitches, but—

MS. RIEDEL: Is that from Afghanistan as well?

MS. AL-HILALI: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] In a way it's anonymous, but on the other hand, no stitch is lost; you can feel it. It has an aura; it has an energy—

MS. RIEDEL: A presence.

MS. AL-HILALI: A presence that is there. And the lines are a little crooked sometimes, but that is how it should be.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, it helps give it personality.

An artist I know just had a show about imperfection and the value of imperfection.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it's natural.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, it gives it that presence that you were talking about that is hard or impossible to find in machine products.

MS. AL-HILALI: It is such an incredible kind of deep satisfaction to feel that you're part of that life of the fiber. Being part of that tradition that has been giving mankind, womankind, a chance to express their sense of harmony and order, because fiber is a widely accessible material, that feeling of creating order out of chaos, turning a pile of yarn into an expression of rhythm, melody. And that need is so innate in us. That is why we feel uncomfortable nowadays; most people don't have anymore the ability to express their understanding of harmony.

Every, every simple woman, for better or worse, had the opportunity to move her fingers, to move her body in a creative way that added up to something. And the varieties and similarities are as vast as mankind, womankind. And it's been such an integral, universal characteristic of us that every culture brought it to blossom. It's a gift to participate in the order and the beauty of the world, just like plants participate—

[Audio break, tape change.]

MS. AL-HILALI: Ceramics, too. Clay is another medium which allowed man worldwide to express the creative awareness and energy that is given us.

MS. RIEDEL: You feel very much a part of that tradition.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That international, historical—

MS. AL-HILALI: The worldwide active participation in order and beauty, harmony and balance.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: And then as a fact, maybe unconsciously, women were aware of the energy that is funneled into their work. If you embroider a shirt for your man or a child, you will embroider your blessings into it, your good wishes, all your blessings. All your blessings you inject while you handle the work. And I don't think one blessed stitch is lost. I believe that is a fact. It's a fact.

MS. RIEDEL: You talked about a talisman—there is a talisman you worked on for a couple hundred of hours, and it had the marks of attention and energy. Any slipshod work can't begin to obtain this quality. Magic can't be faked or hurried. It sounds like you were describing magic.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I believe that. If you make a protective shirt for your man, you can't just do it with a sewing machine—maybe if you tried hard. Definitely you cannot buy it. [Laughs.] No, I do feel that way: the more time I spend tying these little knots, and concentrating on doing each knot, I'm injecting positive energy. It definitely flows through our hands. We know that our fingertips are just like sparklers—what should we call it?

MS. RIEDEL: Conduits?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, conduits. You inject your energy. And then it's all there. If you focus on it, it's all there. If you want to analyze it and identify it, well, you'll just get yourself in trouble, because if you're in that state where you're able to create from your heart, explanations are superfluous. It's like you're being the best you can be.

And I bless the girl that did this embroidery. The blue is a little garish, but I guess that's what came along. Imagine the girl who did this; God knows what pennies she worked for, but she did a masterpiece. She already knew what to do on this one—it wasn't her first one. I think it was done by one person; maybe she let her young sister do the leaves. Well, that's okay—the sister has to learn.

MS. RIEDEL: That's how they learn.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes.

And now we come back to the teaching. I encouraged students to make art they could wear. To approach it from another angle, not to mind any effort spent on something that you will wear yourself. To make something to honor the wearer, not to feel your work is too good to wear. To save your work for what? Who is more important, the piece or you? [They laugh.] You are very important. Wear it, adorn yourself or each other.

MS. RIEDEL: You make pieces to wear. Or you certainly wore certain pieces.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I guess I did.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Some of those huge woven sisal pieces, didn't you actually wear one of those?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't think I would wear sisal. It's much too heavy and scratchy.

MS. RIEDEL: But as a performance piece: I think I remember a photo of you wearing something like that.

MS. AL-HILALI: With the big crown?

MS. RIEDEL: Could be.

MS. AL-HILALI: I made one out of metal, so it would stand up. If I had had feathers, I would have used feathers, but I was not a Mayan at this time.

MS. RIEDEL: And the black feather pieces became a boa at one point.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: We'll get to that.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, of course, textile material is natural to us. It's agreeable to our skin, but sometimes I took a garment piece and kind of magnified it into the idea of the garment. For example, the idea of a shirt—magnified it as large as the height of the ceiling permitted.

MS. RIEDEL: Some of the earliest—well, do you want to finish talking about teaching, because I was also going to talk a little bit about *Black Passage* and some of the earliest pieces.

MS. AL-HILALI: Okay, we can talk about my work or teaching. So, with the teaching I liked to guide the kids. Fiber is such a varied medium. If you think of all the different fibers, the range is endless. Then there are all the options of the many possible methods of using the fiber, the many techniques. And so between the range of the material and the variety of methods, you have richness available. I think it's important to teach people to be inclusive, not to be prejudiced as far as the material, and then how to learn how to use it in the proper way.

MS. RIEDEL: So you focus on certain materials and certain techniques in specific classes.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, first of all, okay, I wanted the students to explore the variety of the medium, and then we would try to find out what specific variants of the medium would do, or would not do.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: Then I would take the students systematically through different construction methods. For example, if you want an elastic web, you don't weave it. It's better to knit it because the knitted structure is naturally elastic. Or even to plait it where you work diagonally. If you want a fixed connection, you make a knot. If you want a flexible connection, you make a loop. It's very systematic. You can go systematically through all the possible options.

So I was teaching the students about the basic different methods, and I was having them utilize those methods to make a form that is either logical, illogical—[they laugh]. You don't have to use paint to express yourself. The students would inadvertently express themselves, maybe find out about themselves.

Fabrics and garments are an extension of our personality, an accentuation or explanation even.

I remember a special case. This girl, she was skinny, very shy, and sort of mousey. We worked on our dyeing; she had a true talent for it, and she came up with this dream of a layered, flowing robe. So one day, glowing, embarrassed, but full of pride, she had to tell me: her husband had told her that she had never looked as beautiful as in this robe. It changed her life. So you can bring things out into the open.

And so it was, a lot of times, a very personal experience. Not always. But that's what I liked about fiber work; you can start by doing something very systematically. Of course, you need a system for most construction methods, so it will give everybody who just starts on it a solid framework in which to grow and expand. But I loved it best when some girls made themselves dance dresses and did the dance for it, so the fabric really became an extension of their movement and step, and that had a completeness to it that was very satisfying. We have examples of this throughout history.

MS. RIEDEL: So the versatility and flexibility—

MS. AL-HILALI: —is incredible, really incredible. You can build—basically you build houses, or you can just make

little flying things. Which materials, after all, can you make fly? Not so many. But it's beautiful to fly colored silks.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to talk about one of those, the flying things on the beach?

MS. AL-HILALI: Those were the times that they had sit-ins and love-ins. We had fly-ins.

The project was to create something that would fly. We held them on the beach in Venice, where I lived at that time. And just to help those who had problems getting off the ground, I had gotten this huge cylinder of helium and balloons so they could tie the balloons on their creations. [They laugh.] I have to find the slides, because the students invented such beautiful things. I personally had the greatest fun, running around amongst these newborn, colorful, floating, fluttering, sailing, waving creations. Fabric at its best: alive and dancing.

But I also remember having the hardest job. One time we had planned this event on the beach, but the weather had been rainy. The students asked, "What if it rains?" I said, "It won't rain." I had to use all my—every last ounce of my willpower; what else could I do? Well, it did not rain, but it was very close. It's not always easy being a teacher. [They laugh.]

Those were the students from Cal State LA and UCLA. They were most creative and active. They could come in their own car. At Scripps, later, they were a little tamer, because they lived in the dorms, and Scripps was further away from the beach. But we had happenings, and fun too.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Would you like to talk a little bit about teaching at Scripps?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, in a way I have talked about it.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, you were the head of the department for—

MS. AL-HILALI: —a couple of years, but that was only by default. Everybody on the faculty had to take their turn. To be honest, I think I didn't really do an especially good job. I have a certain intelligence, but no skill for politicizing. I was naïve. [They laugh.] I can tell you stories. So I was the chair—but I called myself the sofa.

MS. RIEDEL: The sofa?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I thought it was more feminine. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Marilyn Poucher has amazing memories of dyeing, which she remembers as tons of sisal string.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Because it would dry so well out there.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, we would spread it out on the walkways and courts in my corner of the campus. And I also had the use of the dye kitchen there.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: The facilities.

MS. RIEDEL: Dyeing vats.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the sinks and stuff—big things, and containers. Boy, we were working. That was work.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. You just worked all day, and sleep at night there?

MS. AL-HILALI: After teaching and advising, we were dyeing mountains of sisal and rinsing the heavy skeins. We would chain the sisal up, and then dye the skeins in all the beautiful colors you can imagine, and rinse them and lay them out to dry.

MS. RIEDEL: You dye all your own sisal for—

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes, I dyed my sisal.

MS. RIEDEL: To get the colors?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, sisal didn't come in colors. Once in a while in a hardware store you would find a little ball of blue, but only as a surprising rarity. But I did large commissions, for banks, et cetera. I enjoyed the weaving, but the dyeing was backbreaking.

We had these big trash cans, which we would set up. We got six of them going at one session; oh, it was more than backbreaking. I was so tired sometimes that when I drove home, I would drive between the lanes, and I would fall asleep many times on the road. Thank God for the bumps on the freeway. When you drive over the bumps, you wake up again.

MS. RIEDEL: Those were—

MS. AL-HILALI: I fell asleep many times.

MS. RIEDEL: Driving.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I was just so exhausted.

MS. RIEDEL: Because you had an extraordinary work ethic. You would just work constantly.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. I had great helpers then, but I had to be the pulling force. But also I know I was unfair to them, because I thought, if I work hard, they should work just as hard too. I didn't think that somebody might not have the same energy that I had. But on the other hand, I didn't expect them to do more than I did. I was just pulling, you know, for two. Oh, boy, I worked.

Yes, work—I worked, that's for sure. But here we were talking about teaching.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: —and I was talking about my own work, which is a different chapter.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, but if you want to talk about it now, feel free, and we can circle back around. Whatever is in your mind now—

MS. AL-HILALI: No, for years, and that's the truth, I was not walking but always running. And the stairs, I would always take two at a time. I would fall and break my toe, and hammer my own fingers. But I was always hurrying. Now that's not part of the teaching; it was part of the whole: the exhibitions and shows, and commissions and teaching in-between. The teaching I enjoyed. Not that I didn't enjoy the rest. I always liked it when a class started rolling. Sometimes it rolled better than other times. Nothing better than to be able to express themselves, to learn something, create something and be proud of it.

MS. RIEDEL: Lots of students.

You gave a lecture at Fiberworks [Berkeley, CA] when you were teaching too. Do you remember that?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, I gave many guest lectures. That was another chapter. I was at Fiberworks; I think at some time I had something to do with them. Yes, while I was teaching, I was asked a lot of times to lecture here and there. As far as the lecturing, I wasn't that confident; I was too easily affected by my audience. I was very susceptible to what came back. Sometimes it worked very well—there was a buzz—and sometimes it didn't work.

I remember once, I was in Kansas, or somewhere: the lecture was in a large hall, and the kids kept going in and out for some reason—the door closing each time with a horrible smash—and I couldn't hear my own words. And it kept going on and on. I got so frustrated, I was unable to complete a sentence. I think I just stopped—I felt so thrown.

But lots of times I did workshops or lectures and was able to gather my audience all together.

When people come to a workshop, they usually are all in a positive frame of mind. It's different when a class is herded somewhere forcibly, when they couldn't care any less. If somebody comes to a workshop, they will sign up and pay for it, and they intend to get something out of it. I did—all over the country I did workshops.

And I liked to do collaborations where they all participate in a creation. Sometimes it came out very well, sometimes not so hot. But it is very strenuous to get a group of unknown people; it is very energy-consuming when you get a new group and try to get them into one frame of mind, into one shape, so to speak, and get them to respond to your suggestions; that's very exhausting.

MS. RIEDEL: You have a very limited time in which to do it. Did you prefer workshops over university teaching,

one or the other?

MS. AL-HILALI: The teaching actually was better, because you could get a student started and then get him to develop something.

With the workshops, the advantage is the availability of combined energies, the unique set-up as a challenge, but you only have limited time with the individual. In a way you have to be more superficial. Everybody works together on the creation of something "bigger and better" than any single could achieve, but for individual communication and development there isn't enough time.

Back to Fiberworks and lecturing.

MS. RIEDEL: The big Fiber symposium.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. I was invited as part of it to give a lecture at Fiberworks. They had invited several international celebrities to the symposium, also some unknowns. Who knows how much, how many thousands they had to spend for all of it? So I had flown up to Berkeley and stayed in a hotel to give my lecture. But shortly before the lecture, the details were explained to me and I was informed that my remuneration was going to be $25.00.

MS. RIEDEL: Were most of them better compensated?

MS. AL-HILALI: Mija, come on now; what a question. Were you ever invited to give a talk out of town and then received $25.00 and no expenses? I was so crushed; I couldn't believe it. I felt so humiliated. I certainly felt like leaving. Great big international symposium, and they offer me 25 bucks. It was not like I had volunteered for a charity. I even now cannot find words. Such an insult; I really felt like leaving! It was really very hard for me to swallow. I was embarrassed for them.

Well, then my spite stood up. I told myself, I'm not going to let their behavior hurt me or diminish me. I'm going to give the best lecture I know how. And when I walked into the lecture room, there was Dominic Di Mare in the audience. Just think, a master like him certainly did not need to attend a talk by a relatively green thing.

So Dominic was in the audience and he smiled at me and made me feel good. I knew I was speaking to somebody who would understand what I was trying to say.

MS. RIEDEL: He's got a good smile.

MS. AL-HILALI: So I rallied all my positive energy as best I could. And I remember it was a good lecture because I remember people were listening, and I remember somehow a green golden glow over the room.

It ended up being a very special memory for me. I hope the audience felt good too. And I thank Dominic forever, because he rescued me that day.

MS. RIEDEL: Was that a stimulating group of people to have together all at once, or had you really had a lot of that already in the UCLA environment?

MS. AL-HILALI: What?

MS. RIEDEL: Around the Fiberworks symposium, when all of those people came together internationally.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, what about it?

MS. RIEDEL: Was it—

MS. AL-HILALI: Was it stimulating, particularly?

Well, in a way it was—in a way it wasn't. I enjoyed meeting Magdalena Abakanowicz very much. And I met some other artists that I knew. But then, for example, there was another lady giving a talk, acting like a martyr just because she had children and a career. I wasn't impressed. [Laughs.] She made a big thing about herself, but I'm not going to say who it was. I thought, You've had an easy life, woman.

So the whole was a mixed experience.

MS. RIEDEL: What do you think of as the difference between somebody who is trained in a university in crafts and someone who is trained outside of academia?

MS. AL-HILALI: Actually, the question always was crafts verses art and academia. Oh, that's a big chapter. That's

a big chapter, crafts versus academia. I came up against that very much when I was teaching at Claremont. See, there was Scripps College, an undergraduate college, and there was Claremont Graduate School.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: I taught at both, and I had quite a lot of students doing graduate work with me. And there at the graduate school was a very intellectual and conceptual atmosphere. Even at Scripps, the undergraduate college, academics were paramount.

So, the "fiber people" were sometimes struggling to measure up to that, to the intellectual justification of the work. And I myself was affected by it a lot, because I started examining what I was doing from the conceptual angle. I think it's almost another chapter when I talk about the evolution of my own artwork.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: To a large degree it depends on the individual artist, but in the university environment the crafts person, the artist working with specific materials, will be challenged a lot, and will be tempted to digress.

MS. RIEDEL: How so?

MS. AL-HILALI: Maybe become more eloquent about their concepts rather than focusing on the development of their specific material-based techniques.

MS. RIEDEL: So you see it as a trade-off between the philosophy and the very technical hands-on experience.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. I see this to a degree as a trade-off between the conceptual and the physical. The artist should enjoy both. But my personal mentality is such that the conceptual isn't enough for me. The conceptual versus the physical is like a cake recipe in contrast to the real cake. It's fine, but it can't be a substitute. It can't be a substitute.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: So the students are made to feel to be avant-garde, to be on the cutting edge, and to be conceptual enough, they really ought to give up on the enjoyment of the physical.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because you work so much on the cutting edge, avant-garde of what was being done in fiber.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, looking back at my body of work, in my first phase I was involved with fibers per se. And my advantage was that I felt free to use established, age-old techniques outside their conventional mold.

I plowed through them and used them, so to speak, anew. For example, I used lace-making techniques on a more monumental scale, and I took fiber out of the utilitarian range into the fantastic, unpredictable realm.

Very much in the hippie spirit of the time, the '60s, '70s, I took a fresh look at the world with irreverence and love all around.

At the Claremont Graduate School, in conversation and discussion, I did feel sometimes inadequate. I was not versed in art philosophies. It didn't interest me that much. It was informative for me. I learned in discussion with the faculty, when we did the reviews of the students' work, I wasn't very eloquent. I looked at the students' work and I could tell why I liked or didn't like aspects of it. Yes, I think the students working in a craft medium were really challenged.

And the disdain of the capital-A artists for anything remotely connected with crafts was enormous. Enormous! Crafts? Absolutely no. Just like for a long time it was taboo to make something that is beautiful. Beautiful? Absolutely taboo. I wouldn't have dared to paint a flower. I guess it was an environment of quite strict censure. Criticism was quite strong.

MS. RIEDEL: But at the same time, you received the very first Scripps Faculty Award—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: —and the installation of *Cassiopeia's Court*—

MS. AL-HILALI: They were impressed, I think, that I had a "record." By that time I had quite an exhibition record and accomplishments of sorts, several NEA grants, et cetera.

MS. RIEDEL: What about the difference between the UCLA graduate program and the Claremont graduate program?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I was involved with UCLA graduate program, too, through intermittent teaching and serving on graduate committees.

Yes, at UCLA, see, the fiber department was directed by Bernard Kester, and he encouraged his students to make the best of the fiber medium.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: Whereas at Claremont, it was a graduate school of art and the students had to measure up to that. They had to have a philosophical explanation of what they were doing. It gave some of them the opportunity to take the easy way out, because in the art scene, one rope laid out with a good theoretical explanation was, of course, more acceptable than an elaborately crafted piece of work. If a student was not very verbal, not a fluent debater, he/she was looked down upon and made to feel very inferior.

So for some it was a chance to just talk their way through, and others used the place to do what they were going to do anyway, like Fern Jacobs. She did—I tell you—she did some of her very best work during her time there. Nobody could stop her. The power of her work stood on its own.

MS. RIEDEL: The cylinders?

MS. AL-HILALI: Forms, like mummy cases, something timeless, very tall, like funeral baskets that were really tall. She did those while at the Claremont Grad School.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: I've known Fern a long time. I happened to be there when she made her first knots; that had been at a UCLA Extension class. And I happened to be at Claremont when she did her graduate work there. Oh, she certainly just sailed through.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: She had strength; she had integrity; she produced some of the classics of all times.

Other people at Claremont got more into whatever the options of what contemporary art were—minimal art for example, process art, where you let your threads rot—I went through that phase, too—political art, et cetera. The students' perspective got broadened, that's for sure.

So at Claremont, the students had to defend what they were doing, whereas at UCLA, it was more the work that counted. Bernard was not that much interested in conceptual explanations; he would rather have that dignified object. That's what I associate mainly with Bernard: dignity.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you feel like one approach is more successful in the long run than the other?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, it's like this for the craft master: to be challenged to defend their position on the fine art scene is kind of superfluous; it's outside the essential intention. If he makes an object of integrity and beauty, he doesn't have to justify it. The object strives to be understood beyond language. He doesn't need what they call a "defense."

I think that a lively—I mean alive—strong craftsperson is like a plant, like a tree: they don't even need a name. They're happy to bear fruit from the totality of their experience and their being. Whereas for the A artist, the concept is considered the main attribute of his/her work. A conceptual piece, for example, in the event it's supposed to have a certain message, and if you are not told the message, you often don't understand it, and there's nothing really attractive about the work. So there is an idea, for example, a mountain of grease—and it's supposed to represent this and that, okay, okay—but it's not—it doesn't really satisfy our aesthetic needs. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Would you say some more about that?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, yes, as I said before, a concept may be very interesting, but it's more like the recipe in a cookbook; whereas the food is more of a different story and has a different purpose.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So you need the concept earthed successfully in the materials?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, but I just don't want to dispense with the physicality of things, of an aesthetic option. At the

Claremont Graduate School, the concept was indispensible. Yes, a clean concept, or a neat twist, can present a certain satisfaction, but it is no substitute for something beautiful; it just isn't.

I understand how in other ages people kind of sharpened their intellect on theological questions and issues. So the artist in our age often indulges in the intellectual process, and art criticism becomes an intellectual battleground. Philosophy and intellectual pursuits are respected human activities, but they give us what art does. Would you like to have all the art in the world substituted by concepts of it? [They laugh.] That would be terrible. That would be terrible. That would be a black hole.

Was I talking about teaching?

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AL-HILALI: I think I was talking about my thoughts.

MS. RIEDEL: Anything else that you would like to say about your teaching?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I think I mentioned the group project, the happenings, which were exciting because you could use the energy of many; you could get something accomplished that one single person could not, and it was more unpredictable. On the other hand, I liked to work with one person more on an individual basis. This may have been more rewarding for the individual, because if you take the time and give him your open attention, you can help him to grow through developing his work.

MS. RIEDEL: And the university environment allowed you to do both, to have the one-on-one with the students, and then to have the happenings and the energy of the group.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, oh, yes, I loved it. I myself through many years had been given all these challenges of mental justification and making sure to stay avant-garde. [Laughs.] Now you see that I am relaxed. I do what I want to do, and sometimes I paint flowers.

And something else I want to say. I miss teaching, because I would like to pass on experience. Just on the technical level, I know things that I would like to teach somebody else. I know a lot of technical information that I would hate to have disappear, so I'm sorry that I can't teach more people now the processes of the craft—even just to teach people the feel of it, the feel of having something growing under your hands. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: You have a sense of that tradition continuing.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, to join—to link onto that tradition, because nowadays, everybody buys mass-produced stuff, and whatever ethnic traditional fabrics there were, they get bought up, sold, and they disappear. You go to any far-off place that has had centuries of development of their specific crafts, their symbolism and locally adapted skills, and what do you find them wearing: the cast-off T-shirts from our mass production.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: So it's really sad—I don't think I'm unfairly pessimistic. But just like the ice caps are melting and the birds disappearing because they have no insects to eat, thanks to our insecticides—it's true.

[Audio break, tape change.]

MS. AL-HILALI: So much is disappearing, and I was lucky that I was part of the tradition, even if only on the final fringe, so to speak.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you see any work happening today that inspires you, or makes you feel hopeful?

MS. AL-HILALI: I haven't been really keeping up. I've been very involved with my family, and especially my grandson and other people. So I haven't been keeping up with the art scene. I'm in touch with Jim Bassler. The piece that was acquired by—was it the Smithsonian?

MS. RIEDEL: Which?

MS. AL-HILALI: *Soiled* [*Old Glory,* 1992].

MS. RIEDEL: The *Soiled*. I think that was in a museum in Cleveland, wasn't it?

MS. AL-HILALI: Some museum.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AL-HILALI: That was very good. It was subtle, and very good, pun and all.

MS. RIEDEL: The soil on the American flag, that idea—

MS. AL-HILALI: It was very well done. Bless his heart, Jim. He was always very sensitive to his medium, very creative, and a hard worker, a hard worker.

MS. RIEDEL: Another teacher at UCLA for years.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Neda Al-Hilali at the artist's home in Los Angeles, California, on July 18, 2006, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number two.

I'm going to start talking about your work, starting in the '70s with the woven pieces.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the fiber pieces. So when I went to UCLA, at one point—I mentioned—I took the weaving class. And I had found my place; I found where I belonged. [Laughs.] I took to the loom like I was coming home.

I think I mentioned already that during my graduate work, I wasn't able to stay in Los Angeles. I was commuting from Houston, Texas. Of course, I couldn't take the loom with me back and forth. So I had to think of other ways of creating fiber work, which was uncommon at that time. But I have mentioned the background of my upbringing, the socks, hohlsaum , et cetera. [Laughs.] And so, with Bernard Kester's encouragement, I started exploring different methods, what they call "non-woven fiber structures."

And I think my, well, my mathematical mind, that part of my mind, was useful because I was able to sort out very logically the different possibilities of creating cohesive structures out of a basically linear material. And I explored what forms were conducive to the various specific methods. Now, in weaving, the basic structure is a perpendicular interlacing of two sets of fibers. So forms with perpendicular designs are natural to weaving. Of course, there are deviations, but the basic form is perpendicular, the warp and the weft.

With plaiting, now, you may also have perpendicular intercrossing, but the whole structure is worked on the diagonal. You have one single set of fibers that will cross each other on the diagonal, but at the edge of the work return and work back in the opposite direction on a diagonal, which results in a more elastic structure. The angle of the crossing can be almost vertical or almost horizontal.

And so I did a number of pieces exploring one method or another. One aspect particular to fiber work is layering. With knotted forms you can create curves as easily as straight shapes. [Looking at slides.] See, this, the perpendicular is a weaving. This is one of the early knotted things where I realized you can do curves, a rounded object with expanding or contracting shapes with no limitation to a two-dimensional plane.

MS. RIEDEL: This is an oval piece—

MS. AL-HILALI: A sort of shield form—

MS. RIEDEL: We're holding up slides here. Okay. There was a diagonal grid that we were just looking at too. And these are all wall hangings?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, they were mainly wall hangings.

MS. RIEDEL: So these are the earliest pieces while you were still completing your graduate work.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. These I made during my graduate time—these are contemporary portraits—the peeled eye.

MS. RIEDEL: We have some of the incredible portraits by you in the Smithsonian, the Archives collection.

MS. AL-HILALI: So I was involved with the exploration of fiber structures. But then the fiber medium is very rich and immensely varied. I tried to use the whole spectrum, from silky sewing tread to the hawser rope: making one gigantic knot out of hawser rope, or unraveling it into a burst of fiber—and, of course, dyeing it.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was all graduate work?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, some of it was already after I had graduated.

Let's see, there, besides the fringe, a natural occurrence of fiber is the tassel.

MS. RIEDEL: Of course.

MS. AL-HILALI: So I made super-tassels.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, which goes back to the tassels you saw in the markets in Baghdad.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes; oh, yes. I was working up to super-tassels.

MS. RIEDEL: So these are enormous tassels—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, they were. They were tall and intricate.

MS. RIEDEL: And these were all done with sisal?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, no, a variety of fibers.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, and there were a series of these? Two or three?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, this happens to be a pair. The tops are kind of like the Russian church steeples.

MS. AL-HILALI: And here are variations on knotting. This was my lawyer's vest. I made for him a knotted vest in lieu of payment.

MS. RIEDEL: We should maybe talk about these pieces; we should describe them verbally.

MS. AL-HILALI: Increasingly, I was getting more three-dimensional. The weavings were rather flat. This slide shows a knotted form. Well, gradually, but yet relatively fast, I started exploring three-dimensional forms. And some was rib work; like I did this elaborate kind of cage. It was very rococo, with little garlands and tassels and—with much elaboration and loving detail and ornament, and fringes, and tassels: it was a fantasy out of the *Arabian Nights*.

MS. RIEDEL: And huge—six feet by three feet by three feet.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it was not huge, but large enough.

MS. RIEDEL: Colorful. Blues and pinks and deep red.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, very Middle Eastern, an elaborate howdah—that's a transport litter for a princess.

Here in this piece I was following how a rope naturally twists and rolls, getting into all of these possibilities, ending up with a very "trippy" doormat, more of a trap than a doormat.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: I was also thinking more of the function of fiber, not only as garment for warmth, but garment as defining a role, a character. So certain images or figures came to the foreground of my imagination. I made—for example, *Humbaba's Helmet.* It's pretty big. Does it have the size on it?

MS. RIEDEL: It doesn't.

MS. AL-HILALI: It's kind of this large—it's several feet high and wide.

MS. RIEDEL: So, three and a half feet or so wide?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And then twice as tall, it looks like. In reds and black and dark colors.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. For this to be the helmet of a hero, it had to express that. You know who Humbaba was?

MS. RIEDEL: What is that? Would you explain?

MS. AL-HILALI: He was the guardian of the Cedar Mountains, the guardian of the mountains, who went to battle with Gilgamesh or Enkidu, one of the two; I think Gilgamesh. And when Humbaba went to battle, he put on his seven coats of armor, seven coats of armor, and then he put on this helmet. I made the helmet so he could shake his mane with fury and fire, and he was wild and ferocious. At the same time he wasn't simple. It's hard to see, but there are complexities, which reveal that point of his nature.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is all knotted?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And where was Humbaba from?

MS. AL-HILALI: He was, as I said, part of the *Gilgamesh* epic. It was in the ancient Middle East.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: In the Cedar Mountains. It used to be where now is Lebanon, where no more cedars are left; it's mythological. And being mythological, it allows you the leeway to make him any size you want, that will express his character. I loved making him the helmet, so he could shake his—

MS. RIEDEL: Like a lion's mane.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And did you learn about him during your years living in Baghdad?

MS. AL-HILALI: I read about him afterwards. I read the *Gilgamesh* epic, which has been preserved to us in cuneiform writing. Yes, I was very interested in the old civilizations in the Middle East. I actually studied the cuneiform writing. It was great for me that while I went to UCLA, I could study Akkadian there, with Professor Buccelati.

And, let's see, looking at the slides helps me remember what I did.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is the *Black Passage?*

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the *Black Passage* is coming up here. Here are other pieces, all the Medusa things, and all of that. It kind of culminated in the *Black Passage*, which actually evolved over a number of years. It was first a piece in the *Deliberate Entanglements* exhibition, but that was only a small section. It just grew and grew and grew. Every time I showed it, it was bigger.

MS. RIEDEL: It became a wall-size installation.

MS. AL-HILALI: Not only wall-size, this is museum wall-size. Does it have a size on it?

MS. RIEDEL: It's huge.

MS. AL-HILALI: It's really crazy huge.

MS. RIEDEL: And I've seen it also installed as a corner piece. No?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, it may have been installed in a corner once in Sacramento. It needs to spread out to a certain extent.

MS. RIEDEL: This has to be, what, 12 feet tall, 10 feet tall?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. Something like that, and very elaborate, and all intersecting parts. I may have mentioned to you that I conceived of it as a funnel. It had this big seat, or throne, of big rope, an ornate knot of hawser rope, and spreading wing shapes around a central space. I thought of it as a funnel sucking in all the energy you can handle from above—[laughs]—if you sit in the center. That was the idea. And only much later when I looked at the black-and-white photo of it, I realized it looked nothing but a big demon, a multi-horned devil. Well, so, what do you know about what are you making? Well, so what do you know? It had evolved over the years.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. A couple of years at least, '71 to '73.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, certainly several years, because here I have slides from another exhibition. And the thing I liked about *Black Passage* is the idea that the whole thing started from an opening, a little hole. That's where it started. Not with a solid center, but with a little opening.

MS. RIEDEL: Is there a photograph of you looking through that little opening?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't think so. Some photos show me as I peek through one of my pieces, but the central hole of *Black Passage* was only about an inch wide. So you can take it symbolically: you pass through things, and so forth. I like that idea that I started with an opening and passed through it. That's what the name of the piece refers to.

MS. RIEDEL: So, that's how the title for that piece came about. But many of the pieces are named after a mythological character.

MS. AL-HILALI: When I made my pieces, sometimes I knew what I was making; I was planning to do pieces for certain personalities or feelings. The *Howdah,* that little ornate cage—I made that when I lived in Venice, in that very high place, that old hotel lobby—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: It might have been a little gloomy there at night, so I figured we need a friendly ghost in there. I thought, I'm going to make as an invitation this howdah. A howdah is a litter they put on camels and elephants to transport important beings.

MS. RIEDEL: Someone rides—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, so someone can ride in comfort and protected from the elements, mainly the sun. So I made this fancy howdah to invite a nice ghost to settle in it. [Laughs.] If you hang something from a long string, it will always turn. So when it would spin, like late at night, we would say, Look, our ghost moved in. It worked. The inside was nice; we made it elaborate, and the side openings had curtains of fine silky thread.

What fantasies. I have to say, in those days, I felt so excited and so sharp and unlimited. Whatever could I think of next? I was making things that had never been done before, or not like this. I felt I had the world to choose from, all the visual treasures and ideas of the world to befriend with, to respond to and let wash through my mind and hands. Yes, I could make something to adorn my beloved, or I could make a play piece for the beach, or a travel home for a friendly ghost—

And the personality of the material is so strong and varied, it has a power of its own.

MS. RIEDEL: And a density.

MS. AL-HILALI: A density, yes, and energy, the range of the material so grand, from raw, unspun sisal to fine silk cord or hair. It would speak, yes, and provide answers, when I didn't even know the questions.

MS. RIEDEL: And to invest the time and effort in doing a piece.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and making it as well as I can. With *Black Passage*, it was more of an accumulation that kind of grew—it wasn't a one-shot thing.

So I did a lot of fiber pieces, not too many, actually, because they take an incredible amount of time. All these little knots—and I showed you that little necklace that I made, that little blue one; I showed you once?

MS. RIEDEL: I think so. Last year.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. And in those days I still had good eyesight, and there were threads, like a single sewing thread, like hair. You can't do too many pieces like that because they take endless hours.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, right.

MS. AL-HILALI: I was going off on my wild journeys, my farfetched thoughts, but on the other hand I was always checking myself, like my own teacher. I said to myself, It's easy to be impressive with a large piece like *Black Passage*. Is it the size? What about being impressive with a small piece? So that's when I did the little necklace, the talisman, that amulet that I talked about.

MS. RIEDEL: Two hundred hours or so were concentrated on it.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, back and front and in and out—yes, concentrated intense labor, and, oh, the joy of the glorious texture. What indulgence! Forever after?! No!

The big question came up: what is seen beyond the texture? If you look at a piece like *Humbaba*, all this wild mane of raw material, well, the physicality of the fiber is so pronounced, is so thick, so evident, that it is hard for the viewer to look beyond it. And that was the "problem," the controversy between "Fiber" and "Art."

What is a fiber piece and what is an art piece?

A fiber piece, let us say in a mixed show, is always easily identified immediately—whoops, a fiber piece—because of its texture. Its hairiness, or silkiness, is just so evident, so pronounced. It absorbs the viewer's attention and will quickly be filed away. So however intricate a piece may be—and fiber work does tend to

intricacy—however balanced, harmonious, expressive, or impressive it may be, it will mostly just be classified as the "fiber piece" of the show and dismissed as such.

Now living and teaching in an "Art" environment, I did not want to be confined to this corner, so to speak, to the basket weaver, "sock knitter," limited to displaying the materials of my craft. The material is so obvious that it appears to be the main fact about a fiber piece. So I figured: if fiber is too physical, which material would be more sober, more neutral, closer associated with intellectual pursuits? [Laughs.] The answer for me was of course: paper.

I used paper in two distinct ways: first, I used paper for its simplicity in a minimalist kind of way. I used 48-inch-wide brown wrapping paper and crunched it together to obtain one single magnified filament. I employed traditional fiber construction methods, like knitting or plaiting, but eliminating the customarily associated seductive fiber qualities, and I worked on a scale that denied any connection with the sewing room.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I knitted that heavy paper string. And the mechanics were not simple, because for knitting needles, I needed 12-foot-long four by fours, which were too heavy to manipulate, so I was struggling, and building muscles.

My intimate knowledge of knitting told me how to achieve, with increasing and decreasing stitches, three-dimensional forms, three-dimensional zigzag shapes, like deep furrows. I was really concentrating on structure, magnifying little old needlework into simple room-size forms.

MS. RIEDEL: Nine feet by 16 feet, a floor piece.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Knitted paper.

MS. AL-HILALI: That was just a simple form. The first installation of it was at Mt. San Antonio College. It was a form more than a fiber piece, without the lushness of fiber, but using fiber construction methods. So I did several more minimalist pieces which approach led to the beach piece, *The Beach Occurrence of Tongues.* And then I used another quality of the paper, the fact that it's easily transformed.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: If you have, for example, a strand of sisal or silk, it will always appear as such; that's what it is. Even if used in various ways.

MS. RIEDEL: But paper is so adaptable and so flexible—

MS. AL-HILALI: In reaction to my experience with precious fiber materials, I used purposely very common paper, not handmade fancy stuff, but mostly rolls of paper towel. I did away with the preciousness, seductive quality, and I found that it worked for me as a point of departure. I mostly used plaiting as technique, because when you press it, it will stretch, and is the structure that worked best. I did some knitted forms and explored other structures.

MS. RIEDEL: You did everything to it. You crumpled it; you folded it, plaited it; you ironed it; you pressed it—

MS. AL-HILALI: I can show you many slides of how I changed it, and I enjoyed that. Like, I would give it one look—first dyed the paper, then let's say, plaited it, then maybe bleached it, then cut it, then opened certain stitches, then painted it, then did something else to it, and pressed it. You could change it endlessly. Turn it over, work on the back side, or snipple it up. A woven piece, you don't want to cut it up; it's much too precious, but since this is unprecious paper towel, you feel free to do anything with it. That liberation was important, and I really enjoyed the fact that I was able to change the piece completely.

MS. RIEDEL: You talk about the transformative nature—

MS. AL-HILALI: Transformation.

MS. RIEDEL: —is really an important part of your paperwork.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes it was. And so, yes I got a great kick out of that: taking a totally blah material like paper towel and turning it into all kinds of different things.

With fiber, if you have a beautiful, sumptuous red wool, well, that's what would be in the piece. It remains the

same. Now with the paper stuff, I was playing God again—[laughs]—and of course, I started pressing it.

First I used the printing presses at Claremont. But because I put such high pressure on, the press broke. And I don't know to this day how I got away with it. I broke their printing press. Yes, they were kind to me. They didn't crucify me. Eventually I had my own my own steel roller press built by my dear friend Marion Todd. What would I have done without him?

When I started using the printing press, the original structure was thick, dimensional to a degree, like a puffy fiber structure. This I flattened repeatedly between the steel rollers, while it was moist. If too wet, it would be pressed apart into mush. If dry, not much would happen. But if moistened just right, the plaited papery structure would be flattened through repeated rolling, become burnished flat, almost glossy. The original physical diagonal structure would be transformed into this cardboard-like thing—with a memory of its past, a visual memory of the original structure.

And also, it turned into a flat painting surface, to some degree, so I could draw or paint on it, like adding and subtracting. Sometimes, in a piece, I would paint over the whole thing, then pull out strands so the inner color became visible again. And I just had a great time experimenting, observing, and discovering.

One of the things I did a lot was this business where I plaited the piece with little knobs, which were flattened down in the pressing.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: And then I could raise them up again afterwards if I wanted to, so they achieved dimensionality again, to an extent. Also I did a number of pleated pieces where the pleats were pulled open after the pressing. Then with my painting, I repeated or emphasized certain stitches, or then just flagrantly painted something else over it, a pattern—juxtaposition. Then I got into this whole pattern and rhythm fascination. A piece had to have at least seven different patterns or rhythms before it could amount to anything, sort of attitude.

MS. RIEDEL: You talked about building form out of pattern.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I liked having an overlay of patterns, which results in something completely different, unexpected. And I delved into it and did a lot of pieces exploring that.

MS. RIEDEL: These were the wall pieces?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, they were all wall pieces in this series.

MS. RIEDEL: Like *Road to Mazar* and—

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes, the *Road to Mazar*. That was another important piece for me. It was in my early stages of paper art, and quite large. You see, the press was only so wide, maybe three feet. So to create a large piece I had to put it together out of sections.

When I went to Mazar-esh-Sharif—that's in the north of Afghanistan. It was a long road over many hills and mountain ranges. I had plaited many long strips with one zigzag edge on each. I assembled the pieces in an overlapping fashion, with zigzag sides bent forward, with the result of a field of protrusions. When I arrived in Mazar, the Mosque of Ali there is so brilliant, a vision of sparkling tile, blue domes, many different tile patterns, many geometric, blue, yellow, green, like the end of the rainbow, after traveling far through desert hills.

Of course, I could never do justice to that experience, but I felt like paying homage to that vision.

For some reason, it was very hard work and I was very nervous about this. It was going to be the first exhibition where I would confront my audience, who knew me as a fiber person, with flat paper. Anyway, I was working away furiously, hammering the sections down onto a heavy canvas background, hammering full force down on my finger. After the necessary howling, I kind of felt I had made the due blood sacrifice for the cause.

Don't get me wrong, I never indulged in self-pity or anything morbid like that. That was my problem with the feminist art movement. My attitude is, If I'm hurting, or depressed or suffering, I'll be damned if I let it show in my art. That's my spite, and that carried me through a lot of trouble—plain spite. I remember clearly occasions when I felt desperately hurt, devastated. That is when I told myself, The only thing to do is to make the best art I possibly can. I will make some beautiful art today.

MS. RIEDEL: Is that something that you remember—do you think that came from childhood, or just everything you lived through, or do you think that came from the women's movement?

MS. AL-HILALI: Not from the women's movement, because my attitude was, Shall I be sitting there feeling sorry

for myself? Complaining? Asking for commiseration? Not me.

No, I think it came from my early experiences. After my childhood, throughout my life I had to depend on myself. It is easy to get affected and hurt by somebody. But if I have just one moment to step back and look at the situation, I will say to myself, I will not give that person or situation the power to get me down. Yes, really I remember—and that's just not talk. Feeling really bad and hurt and not knowing what to do, and then I'll say to myself, Now I'll make the best art I can.

And this business of overcoming is what art should do and what art has done. Whoever this little girl was, she didn't live in paradise—God knows what she went through, this little girl who did this.

MS. RIEDEL: The huipil, the embroidery on the huipil—

MS. AL-HILALI: A brilliant assembly of birds, no two alike.

MS. RIEDEL: And they're exquisite, absolutely exquisite.

MS. AL-HILALI: They are born of her. She can be proud of them, and proud of herself, whoever did it, because her devotion, her diligence, her need for beauty took her above or beyond herself.

Anyway, so we were talking about *Road to Mazar*, and the paperwork. Alright, so I paid my blood sacrifice—[laughs]. Over the years, I made quite a few blood sacrifices, and they increased when I was working with metal. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: I'm sure, all those sharp edges. It's a good thing you started with paper.

MS. AL-HILALI: So I did a lot of paper pieces; it was an exploration. I did a lot of commissions also, which turned somewhat repetitious. But I thought, oh, well, they haven't seen one like that, and if they wanted brown, for example, I'll give them a beautiful carved-wood-looking sort of thing. And it's a great opportunity for me to make a huge piece.

MS. RIEDEL: *Babur's Garden,* too?

MS. AL-HILALI: *Babur's Garden*, that was different. That was another idea that meant something special to me, because Babur—well, I had seen his grave in Kabul, which was quite simple; it wasn't much. It was a roseate, pinkish-white marble slab topped with the Moghul-shaped rosette arch.

MS. RIEDEL: Stepped?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it's kind of a stepped arch. What impressed me was that he, Babur, had gone through a lot of hardships and struggle, and when he won his decisive battle, to commemorate the victory he laid out a garden in the desert. Now, that thought was something beautiful.

MS. RIEDEL: It was his response.

MS. AL-HILALI: So I was paying my respect to that; it inspired me. So I braided a series of arches and columns with stylized, fan-shaped curved tops, slim and simple. They where white, but I ran them through the metal roller press so many times that the surface became glossy, like polished stone, with discolorations, and grain and stain, and structure marks of ancient stone.

I hung these slim forms sort of alternating about an inch or two away from the wall and—I actually should not reveal my little secret—I painted the back side orange-pink. This back side was not visible, but it created, through reflection on the wall behind it, a pink glow. So my white columns and arches were surrounded by a mysterious pink nimbus. That was very gratifying and appropriate for him.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, this was the time of *Beach Occurrence of Tongues* too?

MS. AL-HILALI: The *Beach of Occurrence of Tongues* happened later. I will have to go back and check the dates for all these pieces. The *Tongues* were another test to myself. At that time I had financially real problems. I had to pay rent for a large studio, and I had to pay my helpers, and my galleries did not pay up. They sold, but did not pass on the money. Not all galleries, but some. My teaching salary paid the rent, but money was very tight.

Therefore I said to myself, I'm going to do this art that will bring no financial gain. It won't be sellable. There was this big question of commercialization. I had to prove to myself that I was not for sale, or something like that. So, idealist that I am, fool that I am, I decided I needed to do a piece for the beach. In those days, I lived right on the beach, and I was immensely thankful for that and felt I ought to show my appreciation.

I was also dealing with the concept of Minimalist art and the then current vogue of macho sculpture. This big metal I-beam stuff would be dropped anywhere in the landscape. Like now, they have in Venice now—and that's so typical—this sculpture of gigantic I-beams. Do I need I-beams to enhance or explain to me the beach?

Anyway, I lived on the beach and I was trying to make something that would agree with the beach. Well, I could not match the size of the beach, so I thought I might make something that reflects the small easy patterns and ripples of the sand, something on that scale.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was all out of paper too?

MS. AL-HILALI: It was 40- to 48-inch strong craft paper, and it all had to be crunched—miles of it, rolls and rolls—to provide the linear elements.

MS. RIEDEL: Literally miles of it.

MS. AL-HILALI: And it was hard to crunch it. It was so stiff, my hands became sore really soon. What I did then, at nighttime I would roll out a lot of paper outdoors, so from the moisture it became softer, and then I crunched it early in the morning before it would dry up again. It was like working in the fields—and if you think paper crunching is easy, ha, ha, ha! Hours and hours of physical work. You should have seen my biceps then, after weeks and weeks of that kind of work.

MS. RIEDEL: You crunch it with your hands?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, what else? So the paper would be more of a linear element rather than a flat sheet. I always was a worker; I wasn't an organizer to the extent like, say, a Christo, or somebody who has an idea and has people execute it. I was always more of a worker. So I spent months preparing and then plaiting the paper to prove something to myself.

MS. RIEDEL: And then you dragged them to the beach?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I had made them at a place some distance from the beach. I had some helpers, and whatever would I have done without my faithful helpers?!

So at a certain point when we had made enough of these "tongues," I rounded up everybody I knew and their pick-ups and we rolled up the tongues and hauled them to the beach. I must say there was a lot of good will, cooperation, and enthusiasm. From the boardwalk we dragged them near the water, but above the surf line on somewhat of an incline. Previous to that day, I had studied the beach and carefully chosen the area.

We dragged the pieces out there and buried them, so only the bumps that had been plaited to stick up from the tongues would protrude from the sand. The idea was that the hole should not be an invasive big foreign object, but a herd of little knobby visitors, a flock of scattered marks, casual like footprints. And when we were finished, I saw that the beach liked them and accepted them. The beach and the tongues were very comfortable with each other.

MS. RIEDEL: And you installed them on Friday evening, Saturday morning, something like that?

MS. AL-HILALI: Friday evening, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And so they were there all weekend and you had to strike a deal with the people on the beach.

MS. AL-HILALI: Saturday morning—no, I'm not going to tell this whole story on tape, but part of it. Well, nobody was going steal them easily because they were too big. And I had selected their location carefully, because the beach isn't so straight; it goes a little up and a little down. I had walked the beach long hours, and had placed them carefully and everything.

MS. RIEDEL: And there were what, Neda, 60, or a hundred, little tongues sticking up?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, no. There were no more than 40 tongues, but each tongue had about 20 protrusions, and those were what you saw above the sand.

And so Saturday morning early, I was getting ready to go and check on them, and I remember I was just putting on this long skirt, when my 10-year-old son comes rushing in and yelled, "They got them; they got your tongues." He was disgusted with all these art goings-on and nonsense. He says, "They got them; they got them" And I saw, they had the tree chompers out there, and there they were trying to chomp up the tongues. [They laugh.] And the funny thing was—it was like a bad old disaster movie. This tongue was halfway down the tree chomper, and it stopped the machine, and it couldn't go in and it wouldn't come back out. And I ran out there, I was barefoot—well, I was sort of dressed—because I had to run out there in a great hurry. I was up on the

machine—

MS. RIEDEL: Trying to wrestle it out—

MS. AL-HILALI: I was out there on the machine trying to rescue my tongue out of its jaws. The machine operator was switching back and forth, but he realized his machine couldn't swallow it. And I told him, I promise I'll remove it by blum, blum blum. And so he let it go, and he was glad because his machine couldn't handle it, and I lovingly put the tongue back into the beach.

I'd liked to have seen them out there for a long time. I had done a lot of preparation to see how they would last. I took once a couple of small tongues out to Zuma Beach, which was back then a quiet beach at some distance, to see if they would last the night. The moisture just might disintegrate them, I thought. So the next morning, they were gone, but then I saw one floating out there. So that experiment didn't give me much information. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Except that they do float.

MS. AL-HILALI: Anyway, so as I said, I would have liked to have seen them a little longer out there. But, I guess because I observed them from morning to night and took pictures in every light and from every angle and observed the interaction of people and animals and elements with the tongues—that in my memory, the whole event takes up a large space. Yes, in my memory, they seem to have had a full life cycle with its seasons, and in my thoughts, they are out there forever.

I took many pictures, because they changed through the day, with their shadows. And I think they evoked more honest interaction with people than the average artwork because they were not labeled as art. We had installed them on purpose in the evening, at dusk, so not many people had seen us take them out there. So Saturday morning, all of a sudden, they were there. There were, as usual on a Saturday, a lot of people on the beach. What is that? What's out there? What is that? And people were unprepared. They looked at it not like when they're looking at a piece of art. And that was really funny and really gratifying.

And I just hung out there. [Laughs.] Dogs loved it. Dogs went crazy—in those days dogs were still allowed on Venice Beach—because they didn't know which one to pick.

And people gave me explanations—well, they didn't know it was all my doing. I was happy, and I was satisfied in many respects. Number one, the beach accepted the tongues. They were accepted; like when you make a sacrifice, it has to be accepted, yes? It wasn't actually a sacrifice; it was just what I had to do.

MS. RIEDEL: An offering.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, an offering, an offering, exactly. Number two, it was wonderful to observe how the people had a chance to show themselves. Somebody would say, A herd of school children left their sack lunches. Another one would say, It's blimp droppings. Others were starting to count the knobs; they were trying to figure out a secret message, a number message. Somebody saw an army sunk into the sand up to their cone heads. Then somebody would try to sell them to me. I said, I'll buy a few if you deliver them. Somebody thought it was something that was washed up, or something starting to grow, mushroom out of the sand.

MS. RIEDEL: And there was no description out there?

MS. AL-HILALI: Everybody could have their own interpretation as to what it was. I had mailed out to some people that I knew a card—it just said "*Beach Occurrence of Tongues,* Venice Beach." Some artists that lived in Venice saw it, but it was just there for everybody. There was no public announcement.

MS. RIEDEL: You didn't hand out any flyers or explain it—you just watched the reaction?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. I'm glad I did it like that, God, yes. See, that way I deserved my spot on the beach.

MS. RIEDEL: That was really the first outdoor installation, wasn't it?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't really remember. Maybe it was. But I know my students and I had had many events and happenings before then. The *Tongue*s were more my own personal product. People had certainly helped me, but it was my idea and I did most of it alone. They helped me install it because that was really impossible for one person to do. It was for me a major effort—it took months—it took months of hard labor, but I am glad I did it, and to this day I'm rewarded with clear and happy memories of it.

MS. RIEDEL: The tongues were heavy and huge.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. And then, later when we tried to pull them out of the sand, well, they were connected; they

didn't want to leave.

Later I installed them several times in different ways. In the Museum of Science and Industry in Los Angeles, we had them hanging from the rafters. I had thought, being paper, they would disintegrate, even on the beach. They would not. For years I hauled them around. Then I had the big studio. We rolled them up into this voluptuous furniture where we could lounge around on them.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was reincarnated in a few different places, in the Museum of Science and Industry, and—

MS. AL-HILALI: At one college, I had them rolled up as vertical, as a maze. Some of them were once in Hawaii. Then some were in a traveling show that went to New Zealand, and I felt so bad for them, because they had miscalculated the shipping cost. So I told them they shouldn't ship them back, just pay me the cost of the paper, like a hundred dollars or something, to save themselves the shipping cost.

MS. RIEDEL: So there's one in New Zealand still?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, I don't know if they kept it. I had most of them for a long time. It was so comfortable to lie on them. They had good resilience when they were rolled up, because of the knobs in between. When I had the big studio on Washington Boulevard, we had them piled up like a three-story divan.

MS. RIEDEL: So they went through numerous incarnations.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: They didn't decay. And where are they now?

MS. AL-HILALI: Finally, I took them to the recycle place. I didn't get much for them. [Laughs.] They had more than their 15 minutes.

MS. RIEDEL: So the versatility of paper was really working for you.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, that's what happened. With the other paper pieces, the wall pieces, I went very consciously back and forth between the physical, the material, and then the illusionistic surface. Sometimes I even drew an image of the braiding on the surface with India ink, and went back and forth between image and substance. And that was more acceptable in the art context. I was in art shows, no problem, because people could see other things than the—

MS. RIEDEL: —than the fiber. The illusionistic surface of the paper was really important, I know. Would you talk about that a little bit?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I could use the art pieces, or parts of them as drawing surface or painting surface, and in drawing and painting you deal with an image. And then, to some extent in the same piece, I can refer back to the substance of the material; sometimes there were pleats or other protrusions.

MS. RIEDEL: And a range of possibilities between the 2-D and 3-D.

MS. AL-HILALI: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Between the image and the body.

MS. RIEDEL: Form.

MS. AL-HILALI: Sometimes I went through many solutions with the same piece. I remember one: it was so dull and painted-over with pale colors that it was almost smooth. I went over it with pencil and called it my stone drawing, and it really just looked like sort of a stone surface, et cetera, et cetera.

Yes, I forget many of the different things I did. Often I went through a lot of stages; I would exhibit a piece and then paint it over, and then cut back into it. Then on some of them I had different sizes, in different shapes of images drawn with stencils on them to give it a certain impersonality, and then again the brushstroke, the noticeably painted brushstroke, on and on. And then some got very detailed, very detailed, with double dots; that means shaded dots and shaded hatching. Especially small pieces were detailed. In the catalogue, you've seen one of them. I called it *Pin Cushion*. Sometimes I withdrew elements of the original paper weave, as if you would draw threads out of cloth, so that the original inside color would appear in a new pattern.

MS. RIEDEL: This is a little later, I think, in the later '80s.

MS. AL-HILALI: More in the '70s. I don't know. So then what happened was that I had a reaction to the pettiness of the detail, and I said to myself, This isn't all that fiber is about. Surely detail work is very innate to fiber, but let's not forget about that aspect of fiber that is more exuberant, the grand gesture, the far-flung opulence of it.

And that's where the Cassiopeias come in.

MS. RIEDEL: And this piece, *Blue Favorite,* is interesting because it's detailed and exuberant. It's all of the things we've been talking about—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it's friendly, but compared to some of my other work, it is tight.

MS. RIEDEL: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Right, right.

MS. RIEDEL: So shall we talk a little about a couple of other installations at this time? *The Red Feathers,* I'm thinking about in particular, in New York at Art Park. This is '79, or do you want to just keep on with the paper for just a little bit?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, well, I can—

MS. RIEDEL: Because it's interesting; you were doing different things, various media at the same time.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Indoor installations, exterior installations.

MS. AL-HILALI: So when were *The Red Feathers*?

MS. RIEDEL: Nineteen seventy-nine.

MS. AL-HILALI: And so when was the first Cassio?

MS. RIEDEL: I think was a little later, in the '80s, wasn't it—early '80s?

MS. AL-HILALI: This is one of the earliest one. What does it say?

MS. RIEDEL: This is *Thousand Islands*; yes, 1981.

MS. AL-HILALI: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And *The Red Feathers* were in '79.

MS. RIEDEL: But we can just deal with the Cassios if you think you want to finish that thought.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, so they came about by themselves in a way. Well, with my paper pieces, I started halfway into collages.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: This is a collage.

MS. RIEDEL: So the paper led directly into the Cassios.

MS. AL-HILALI: In three steps—three easy steps. [They laugh.] So I got into collages because I said I should not always be confined to a plaited background. I continued to structure the pieces visually based on patterns, repeats, layering, cross movements, but I enlarged the patterns. One inspiration was the old movie house lobby carpets with the baroque, boisterous gestures. Back to the carpet. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Always back to the carpet.

MS. AL-HILALI: That was that. Well, so I started doing collages. It's a very clear progression. I was still working with rhythms. Sometimes with tight stripes as understructure and other times more gestural, more of what you might call a melodious mood.

Then I said, Well, since I don't plait the understructure, I could make the pieces really large. So I did these large things.

I had gotten these huge stacks of canvases that one company threw out—different-size pieces. So I had canvas as much as I wanted for a while. I laid out these huge pieces and started rolling out rolls of paper towel, dyed in different colors, and we glued them down. This makes an interesting pattern, because when you unroll a roll, the pattern gets smaller and smaller. Put down row after row, the pattern decreases, and the rows form a large curve or spiral pattern of their own. It's hard to explain, but anyway that was interesting.

When I started doing these large collages, we used a lot of Rhoplex. After we laminated a few layers of Rhoplex on the canvas, it would be kind of stiff. One day, late at night I was working in my studio alone, and I was trying

to hang one of those large pieces up. [Laughs.] I just couldn't do it by myself—holding this big thing and hammer and nail, up on the ladder, I just couldn't do it. I had nobody there at the time and I was cursing and I couldn't get it straight. The thing was hanging and drooping and sagging, but because of the stiffness, hanging in big swags. I didn't know what to do and I looked at it, and I said, Wait a minute—is that what you want to do; is that what you want to do? Well, I'll think about it. [Laughs.] And that's how it started.

So at first they were just hanging in folds, and then I said, Well, we can do better than that. Then I started getting into the engineering, the mechanics of folds, aiming for very dimensional forms. The aim, of course, was to make it all look spontaneous and accidental, like fluttering pieces of cloth or paper blown around by a breeze. I tried to make these huge, cumbersome pieces look weightless, catching them at a moment arrested in time.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: I can show you. What you need to do is, you have to take a fold—and a fold is three times as strong as the plain fabric—and you have to anchor this fold with a cross-fold. That's how you give it spine and strength. If you nail it down in strategic places, the folds will stay up.

Sometimes I tested just how dimensional I could make them. I learned how to deal with this semi-soft, semi-hard material to give it definite form.

Because normally, if you nail up a piece of fabric, it will just hang there inert and heavy. The material has to be stiff enough, and you have to be able to understand the dynamics of folds.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: There is definitely a science to it. [Laughs.] And again, like in my previous work, it was killing me. It was mostly my assistant and I, and it was killing us. But the ambition was always not to let the effort show.

And one lady in Seattle, she was—she was very nice. She wrote a review, and she called this "sprezzatura" [studied nonchalance].

MS. RIEDEL: I remember that, yes.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I liked that, and that's exactly what they were supposed to look like—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: Weightless, even if they weigh a lot.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, effortless.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. And that was an ambition good enough for me to pursue. So I did quite a few of them and I enjoyed it. The nice thing about it was, that's what fabric has always been doing throughout the ages. It could animate space, bring movement and music into geometric space. Fabric can deal with architecture, kind of pushing it or pushing away from it, hugging a corner, or stretching across space. It could be effective outdoors, and I liked to install them outside of buildings. This was difficult, of course, because I couldn't nail into walls and roofs, but I did when I could.

What was so great also was that I could reuse the pieces in different configurations. They were stiff, almost like linoleum sort of, a little more flexible. I called it "low-grade linoleum." [Laughs.] So we could roll them up after one installation and ship them to the next showing. This, for example, was a nice shape that I got one into, very grand and dramatic.

MS. RIEDEL: Interior or exterior.

MS. AL-HILALI: With fabric, you can get very sculptural forms. You realize, all through the Renaissance, Middle Ages, what did those Madonna painters do besides painting a beautiful woman? They enjoyed painting fabric. The crystalline folds or flowing folds of heavy Madonna mantles cascading down from the pedestals. And that didn't have anything to do with anything, except they were beautiful forms, intricate and gestural—generous forms. I liked that about fabric.

As I said, when I did an outdoor installation, I was limited because I couldn't nail into the pillars and roofs, but I did my best.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was—

MS. AL-HILALI: Scripps!

MS. RIEDEL: The Scripps installation.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the courtyard.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, that was great. And that was outdoors in '82, and you couldn't nail anything to the walls or the roof; you had to balance them with the weight of the—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I used some string that pulled them and attached them to the roofs, and I let them cascade down into the court. And it looked like the pieces more or less had fallen from the sky. But that was fine because that was my story, that these pieces were little flecks of debris that had drifted down from Cassiopeia's realm. A little dust and color from Cassiopeia's realm.

And Cassiopeia, of course, is the superwoman. The glorious, self-confident, happy feminine spirit and energy. I like paying tribute to Cassiopeia. She was—do you know the legend? Somehow there is always a connection to Africa, which we associate with the original fertile life. But then the Greek story goes, she was a little too much. What she did, she claimed to be more beautiful than Zeus's wife. So she was banned by the Gods to be a constellation in the sky. But, listen, if you're made into a constellation, you are closer to a Godlike thing than anything else, you know? How could you honor anybody any more than lift him or her up to the stars? So was this banishment and punishment, or was it total admiration? So Cassiopeia, to me, symbolizes the original positive creative energy.

And then it came back to me—I felt so comfortable with her because a memory from my childhood resurfaced. That was of my father who showed me the stars. He showed me Cassiopeia. He said, "This is your star."

MS. RIEDEL: Really.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: He said, "This is your star." I didn't know that.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, that's why it felt natural.

MS. RIEDEL: It all tied together.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: So you did the Cassios for quite a while.

MS. RIEDEL: In Santa Monica?

MS. AL-HILALI: I did an installation at the Santa Monica College Art Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: This was *Atlantis*, right?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, *Santa Monica Atlantis,* I called it. The special aspect about the gallery there was that it had rafters across the whole ceiling, which was black. So I took some of the Cassios and added black—I cut black satin fabric up and laminated it onto the Cassios. The pieces snaked through the rafters and tumbled down, and it looked like some of the blackness spilled down with the Cassio pieces. It was definitely a site-specific installation.

Yes, I enjoyed the Cassios, they were an expression of strength, exuberance, and the old function of fabric to be bigger than life, and dazzle us with patterns. What else can carry big patterns, big colorful patterns like that? Only fabric.

MS. RIEDEL: And there is such life to them and such spontaneity.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I enjoyed their forms, the very animated forms.

MS. RIEDEL: And the versatility of the forms was extraordinary.

MS. AL-HILALI: I could move and alter the forms.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And that's something you seem to have been doing repeatedly—to take forms or take pieces and then reinvent them and reinvent them again.

MS. AL-HILALI: Make the most of them. Well, yes, it was natural, and I think that's partially my practical background. And also I think an artist likes playfulness. You play with something; you turn it upside down; you make it into something else; you play God. You look at something not in a preconceived way; that makes it fun.

If I have only one preconceived idea, that's okay too. Be glad if you have an idea.

When I did that little howdah cage, I had a specific idea. One night I had a glimpse; I just saw it complete before me, in my mind. Well, then I set about to realize it. It took me a long time. I had to find somebody to weld a frame. But you're happy when you see a piece ready, complete in one shot. That's okay, and gratifying when you complete it. But the other way is fun, too, to take an old pair of pants and cut them up and make a lot of things out of it. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Well, there is certainly a spirit of play in the process and then in the final product.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it's very much part of fabric or fiber, the flexibility.

MS. RIEDEL: And can be used in various ways.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes, yes. I think, for example, ceramics has other fundamental and unique qualities that are wonderful, but fabric has its own. We just said flexibility and liveliness, so it's a very enjoyable material.

MS. RIEDEL: Should we talk about the tables at all?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, the tables? Yes, they were part of the Cassiopeia series. I enjoyed the flying forms. And the aim, of course, was to make them look like they are flying.

MS. RIEDEL: Airborne.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, flying. The idea of a little fluttering tablecloth was not that far-fetched. So I made a number of tablecloths. I painted them on both sides, because in their fluttering they showed both sides, and I had to fiberglass them to make them totally rigid. I formed them to sit on clear Plexiglas stands, but I had to weight them—I had to fiberglass big lead weights underneath so that they would balance, and wouldn't fall over, because there was no nailing involved. We had to do these behind-the-scene tricks.

MS. RIEDEL: Constantly defying gravity.

MS. AL-HILALI: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] I liked that idea of having the tablecloth look like it was flying away. If I was a business person, I could have made some money out of this idea. But since I'm not, they got left in some backyard. [Laughs.] I had them in the studio for a while, but I really didn't have enough room to have flying carpets around.

MS. RIEDEL: Should we talk a little bit about the musicality of the pieces?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, that's in the perceiver, to a large degree.

MS. RIEDEL: But you talked a lot about the influence of jazz and—

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, yes, that's kind of what I attempted a lot in the paper pieces: a kind of overlay of rhythms and beats and coloration, like what you would equate with different instruments and different sounds. And giving the whole a richness and personality. And then the unexpected. That has to be there too. There has to be a little surprise and syncopation.

MS. RIEDEL: The unknown, as you said.

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't even know that much about jazz except I enjoy it, savor it. I like the spontaneity and complexity.

And more than anything, I like it when a group turns into one compact whole. You know what I'm talking about. The musicians play together and they mesh, and all the different strange rhythms turn into one glowing vibrating whole, and that is—I think that is paradise.

MS. RIEDEL: For the players and the listeners.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I think that's really—that's really being blessed, if you can be part of that. When that happens, the players are more than responsive to each other; they harmonize, and then comes a part where it seems to happen by itself. Those are the moments when they can be happy to be a live human being. That's when we can be proud of being a member of the human race.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Neda Al-Hilali at the artist's home in Los Angeles, California, on

Wednesday, July 19, 2006, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number three.

And we finished talking—yesterday afternoon we were talking about the Cassios, and we just wanted to say a little bit more about them, talking specifically—

MS. AL-HILALI: If I think about it, it was kind of arrogant of me, but I just—that was my moment—one of my moments of glory, so to speak—[laughs]—just making this full-blown, open-armed gesture, rather than twisting your little fingers, the conventional way of working with fibers. It was exuberance, a baroque indulgence, and it has been criticized as being gaudy, and it's fine, gaudy or Godly, whatever. [Laughs.]

This celebratory, positive kind of energy that you might identify as parallel to women's creative, natural energy, asserts the use of fabric in the context of celebration and joy. Think of the banners through the ages all over the world—rolled down from the Potola, you know, on the special feast day.

MS. RIEDEL: So you found fabric to serve as an announcement or identification of celebration.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, indeed. Then also we talked about the fact that fabric has been the conveyer of patterns throughout the ages. Not the only medium—just think of Islamic tile work—

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AL-HILALI: When I think of *mazar* [shrine], the mosque, one pattern after another and each with its own balance and system and its message, subconscious or subliminal message, because of its abstract configuration. Each gesture, even on a small scale, has its message, its effect.

You may know that you're receptive to it, or you may deny that you are, but it's a fact—it's an obvious fact—that we empathize with gesture, with rhythm and form. We emphathize with gesture; we understand gesture, which is form.

And I think this play and effect and power of patterns emanates from fabric. It's been existing forever, even though it may have been intellectually analyzed and intellectually appreciated. I think there's no doubt of it. We respond positively to pattern, which is a colorful form of rhythm, and rhythm is part of our life. Rhythm is part of our nature, like the beating of our heart—

MS. RIEDEL: It's got color; it's got form; it's got a system—it embodies all of that—rhythm.

MS. AL-HILALI: So, anyway, I let the Cassios fly. Of course, there was a physical limit to it and I—little me—I didn't have the crews of a Christo, but I did my best and enjoyed it a lot. And they were recognized for their potential to interact in an architectural situation. Not just like a painting placed on a flat wall, it was able to accentuate and interact with architectural space.

So I had some exhibitions with architectural companies, and commissions where the Cassios were able to kind of slither up a staircase, because they command a large space easily through their gesture.

And maybe I think of them idealistically as I would have liked them to be, rather than what they turned out to be. Maybe sometimes I achieved what I really wanted; sometimes it was too hard because of gravity. And I wanted to defy gravity. I wanted them to look airborne, but I had to make them sturdy enough so that they would keep their shape.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: And so there was that trade-off. The larger, the more gestural, the heavier they would have to be, the curves would have to be reinforced with additional layers of fiberglass, and therefore, the heavier.

And I remember one installation that I did at the Lake Merritt Plaza—

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: —in Oakland. Did you see it?

MS. RIEDEL: I didn't.

MS. AL-HILALI: No, you didn't. And they had it up for many years. Just recently they called me and asked me if I had any use for them, because they were yellowing. And that's too bad, because when I made them, I didn't think about the fact that resin would disintegrate. I never was too much concerned about the permanence of things. I mean, fiber is innately impermanent.

Well, I just got the best resin there was. I did a lot of resining and fiberglassing. That's how I backed up and strengthened the pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: So the fabric, and then the paper, and then the paint—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the paper and paint on the front of the canvas, and on the back fiberglass for installations that were permanent.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: And mixing up these gallons of resin, and then also rigging the piece, putting supports in the back of the folds, so they wouldn't gradually crack and bend under the weight, added a lot of weight. Fiberglass is heavy; a gallon goes like nothing, but it adds to the weight.

So that was a major effort, the Lake Merritt piece. It was going on a granite wall. You couldn't just hit nails anywhere. The whole piece had to hang from two or three points, and that was it. But I think it looked okay. I know I have the slides here somewhere. So this was, for example, one piece which I liked, and one that I thought came out okay.

MS. RIEDEL: The Cassios were such an amazing mixture of balance, of structure and system, and then gesture and nuance, and what we talked about earlier—play—the motion and the spirituality, the play, and celebration, which is so important.

MS. AL-HILALI: Celebration, celebration, and again, like throughout all my years, the challenge was to make it look easy, natural.

MS. RIEDEL: That was that sprezzatura we were talking about yesterday.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Something difficult made well, as if made effortlessly.

MS. AL-HILALI: Made to look effortless, like joy.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes.

MS. AL-HILALI: Joy to the World.

MS. RIEDEL: I think that really one of the first things that one would notice in the Cassios is just the exuberance and celebration that is so important to a lot of your work.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I was on a roll then. [Laughs.] But the technical aspect was really rather Stone Age. I had overcome the hesitation of the fiber worker, the craft person, who has to justify what he is doing by doing it well and doing it precisely and diligently. This was more like gestural painting—-

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: So I wasn't afraid of gesture, and the gesture was light enough so—so it felt right.

MS. RIEDEL: They really are a wonderful example of your combination of painting and sculpture and fiber that just all came together.

MS. AL-HILALI: It seems like my work took many different forms, but somehow always came back to the essence of fiber.

MS. RIEDEL: What comes back?

MS. AL-HILALI: The results of my endeavors come back to the essence of fiber.

MS. RIEDEL: Always back to fiber.

MS. AL-HILALI: To the flexibility, the flagrant patterns, the joyfulness. Yes, the forms that come about because of the flexibility of the material.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: I always also enjoyed a process that surrendered total control. I had my systems, my experience, but one factor of the system was always the unknown, the unpredictable. My control was partial, and I let the

other aspect of the work, the material and the method, be an equal partner.

Yes, I always thought the unknown participated. And I was trying to pass that on in my teaching, especially in teaching dyeing, that working with the unknown. To be able to do that, I think, is a much more pleasant state of being than insisting on total control, working with what comes toward you, yes.

I remember the day when I couldn't hang this thing up straight. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And that's when you first had—

MS. AL-HILALI: If I had been hardheaded, I would just have had to wait until an assistant could help me to hang it straight, and all the Cassios would never had happened.

MS. RIEDEL: How did you teach that?

MS. AL-HILALI: [Laughs.] Well, I tried to. They didn't know I was manipulating them. [Laughs.] I don't know if it got through, but we had a lot of fun. When I look back on the teaching, on the whole I'm happy about the many beautiful things that the students made, and I was proud of them. There must have been some problems or misgivings—well, sometimes they were lazy, especially when the class was just after lunch and everybody was sleepy and drowsy—and it was hard to get them excited. But on the whole, I just remember the time as a real happy experience of discovery and accomplishment.

MS. RIEDEL: And where did you yourself learn first that idea, not to force yourself, but to achieve a collaboration with the material? Any idea?

MS. AL-HILALI: I think, sort of a living, a survival attitude—survival situations. [Laughs.] First of all, make do with what you have. I remember as a child during the war, there was nothing to be bought. There were rags, and there was somehow yarn around, and we had taken pieces of wood and we made our dolls. We wrapped them up and drew faces on them, and that was okay.

MS. RIEDEL: You were working with what was at hand.

MS. AL-HILALI: Whatever was there—

MS. RIEDEL: From the time you were a child.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And in the Cassios there is a sense of a suspended motion, as if they have just been caught in mid-flight.

MS. AL-HILALI: That's the aim. Sometimes they're not as successful as at other times, but I was trying, oh, yes.

So that was my statement. And it was in a way my best response to the feminist movement. Just to be positive, assertive, grateful for the gifts in life, rather than whining about discrimination. And we know women have been tortured by men through the ages. Just think about the poor Chinese women with their broken feet, tortured throughout life just to please men. But nonetheless we are the creative ones. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And Cassiopeia was an extraordinary example of that.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Exuberant—

MS. AL-HILALI: Exuberant. That's why they didn't approve of her. Zeus, the super male, he didn't like her. It was a macho thing. She knew she was beautiful, she was powerful, she was it. [Laughs.] And she admitted it rather than submit. So he didn't like her; besides, he didn't have the power to diminish her. So she was condemned, according to the story.

Anyway, to me, she represents the original happy, generous, creative force.

MS. RIEDEL: Feminine.

MS. AL-HILALI: [Laughs.] Happy. Generous.

MS. RIEDEL: She feels like a mentor for you in a way.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes; oh, yes. I like to think of her. And I did my best to impart a feeling of her, to share the sense of her strength.

MS. RIEDEL: And she was everywhere—she was inside; she was outside. The Cassio pieces became very architectural.

MS. AL-HILALI: That's right. They were large enough to interact with architecture. I have to admit, again, that in my imagination the Cassios went much further than I was physically able to achieve. In my mind, I see them flying and dancing around the downtown skyscrapers, being caught for a moment here and there at a corner, to join the whirlwind again with abandon.

MS. RIEDEL: They took different formations in different places, so depending on the environment the pieces changed.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and you saw the book on how we made them?

MS. RIEDEL: The book?

MS. AL-HILALI: The book of photos about the installation at Scripps. Talking about all the joy, I almost forgot about what hard work it was.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, for weeks we worked on these pieces, laying out the canvases, gluing them together, and then laminating the dyed paper on them, painting, and adding collage patterns.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: They were so large, to get a view of them I had to climb up on a ladder to see what was going on. Working on them was like working in the fields all day long, working up and down the furrows, so to speak, the rows of patterns.

MS. RIEDEL: On the ground bent over, painting.

MS. AL-HILALI: It really made me feel like I was working in a field.

MS. RIEDEL: So you did elaborate patterns laid out on the ground, and these are all painted on paper?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, in a way. So for weeks we worked on these pieces; I needed many of them. Luckily, at Scripps I had large court spaces to do this in. We laid out the canvas pieces, laminating at least two layers together, then rolling out dyed rolls of paper towel and gluing them out onto the canvas for a basic stripe and pattern to give the piece a direction, over which we painted and collaged other patterns.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: We dyed the rolls in vats, dipping one corner in one color and the other corner in another color, and then rolled them out to dry. Then we glued them down on the canvas. So we got the basic pattern going, a pattern of changing, increasing and decreasing shapes.

MS. RIEDEL: Blues, reds, whites, and browns pretty much.

MS. AL-HILALI: In different pieces I used different color combinations, usually quite bright colors.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: And then we collaged on it. And we cut out stencils and painted stencil shapes on it. We worked the fields that turned rather into flower gardens spread out in the courtyards of Scripps.

And I have to say, I had good helpers. I'm thankful that I had good helpers. Chris McHenry, Andrea Woynick, and others.

And then, when we had our acres of canvases laid out all over the place and were in the midst of gluing and painting, it started raining, oh, my God!

We were scurrying like ants when somebody had stepped in their ant hill, except we were relatively few ants. And dare we roll up the pieces that were wet with glue and paint to try and drag them to safety? Using every last

ounce of commonsense and ingenuity and energy to save the crops—madness! What for?

Well, a couple of sunny weeks later, when everything was forgotten, we rolled them up and took them up on the roofs.

MS. RIEDEL: Dragging them onto the tile roofs. And then they were being unrolled from the roof—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, but trying to keep them from slithering down. And trying to give them dimension so that they wouldn't just lie flat.

MS. RIEDEL: How much did a roll weigh? Do you have any idea?

MS. AL-HILALI: If you imagine a big roll of linoleum, it's heavy. You see on the picture four of us are carrying one. We rolled the larger pieces from both ends so four people could carry them.

MS. RIEDEL: Over a hundred pounds, easily.

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't know; I only know that two people could hardly move one.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: And so we were struggling. Look at the pictures. My friend Louisa took the pictures of the process of the installation. She also took pictures of other works of mine.

MS. RIEDEL: Like the *Beach Occurrence of Tongues?*

MS. AL-HILALI: Exactly.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, okay. Do you remember her last name?

MS. AL-HILALI: Colla, it used to be Bowles.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, yes. So these are just extraordinary snapshots of the entire installation process at the Scripps courtyard.

MS. AL-HILALI: I have to tell you, when we did this installation, I had good helpers. I mentioned Andrea Woynick, John Garrett.

MS. RIEDEL: Ah, yes. Okay. He traveled with you to Afghanistan, right?

MS. AL-HILALI: You are right, oh, yes. And these are Louisa's pictures—see my arm—she took great, great pictures.

MS. RIEDEL: These are great, great shots.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, backbreaking work. But then at the party, I would put on my gloves over my worn working hands to look elegant and dainty.

MS. RIEDEL: Long black gloves.

MS. AL-HILALI: Long black tulle gloves.

MS. RIEDEL: And all black, lacy vintage outfit—a great black hat.

MS. AL-HILALI: I had these antique dresses. I was slimmer at that time. I could wear these '20s dresses. For the openings, usually I had to wear my long gloves. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: You wanted a different look for your opening.

MS. AL-HILALI: That's right. If I sweat and struggled with my work, that's nobody's business. I'm not going to show it.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: I liked to act like I just flicked my fingers and it all happened.

[They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, and how long did the installation take? Did you work at it for a week or two? Do you

remember? Months?

MS. AL-HILALI: To make it all? Months, for sure.

MS. RIEDEL: Months.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, you see, so many pieces, and each piece went through all these processes.

MS. RIEDEL: And then you stored them until they were all going to be installed?

MS. AL-HILALI: We piled them up in a space where they were somewhat protected from the weather.

MS. RIEDEL: And they were installed for how long?

MS. AL-HILALI: The installation at the Scripps Court, which has the title *Cassiopeia's Court,* was up for about one month, as far as I remember, it may have been longer.

MS. RIEDEL: And did it rain at all?

MS. AL-HILALI: Of course. [They laugh.] I remember, it rained; it poured. And I was afraid that all would be destroyed.

MS. RIEDEL: So it rained.

MS. AL-HILALI: It rained on one weekend and I thought, I don't want to see what happened. The piece was installed all over the administration buildings; it's not like it was in my studio. It poured for a couple days, and I didn't want to face it. And then I drove out one morning very early, and *Cassiopeia's Court* was so beautiful. It was like it had just been born; it was sparkling and glittering. It seemed the Rhoplex covering had sealed the surface, had sealed it sufficiently. Everything was just sparkling. And I was by myself up on the roofs at sunrise. It was so joyful; it was glorious.

MS. RIEDEL: And completely intact.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Nothing had drooped or fallen?

MS. AL-HILALI: Nothing. I was so happy.

MS. RIEDEL: Fantastic.

MS. AL-HILALI: That was a good feeling.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems like an extraordinary thing to have seen in person. This was '82, yes?

MS. AL-HILALI: Whatever it says on the catalogue.

MS. RIEDEL: I think so, '82, yes. Was this the largest outdoor installation of the Cassios?

MS. AL-HILALI: I think so, yes. And it was lucky because the court of a building is very conducive to creating an environment, a stage, so to speak, and I made it into *Cassiopeia's Court*.

MS. RIEDEL: With columns. Was there a fountain in the court?

MS. AL-HILALI: You know, I forgot. The Scripps campus had fountains here and there, and they were part of the ambience. Actually, you can see on this photo the fountain.

MS. RIEDEL: But the courtyard had beautiful rounded arches.

MS. AL-HILALI: The courtyard was small enough, so the Cassios did make an impact. Swags were hanging down, half wrapping the pillars, echoing the curves of the arches.

MS. RIEDEL: They definitely commanded the space. And was this one of the last installations of the Cassios? There was *Santa Monica Atlantis*.

MS. AL-HILALI: That was somewhat later, a few years later.

MS. RIEDEL: And the installation at LAICA [Los Angeles Institute of Contemporary Art, 1974-87]?

MS. AL-HILALI: That was much earlier. If you look at them, you can see they were still more hanging. They weren't as activated yet. They were starting to curl off the wall, but still mostly dependent on it.

At Scripps I was trying to make it look like my Cassios were casually tossed, having landed by chance, the flotsam from Cassiopeia realm.

MS. RIEDEL: Now this was the room with the black ceilings overhead—

MS. AL-HILALI: This was *Santa Monica Atlantis.* It was another installation. The special feature of the space was that the ceiling was black and crisscrossed with beams. So here the Cassios moved over and through the beams and came swooping down. I had cut out pieces of black taffeta and laminated them on some of the Cassios, so that it looked like the blackness of the ceiling was shattered and scattered down over the piece.

But I think I talked about this already somewhere earlier.

Yes, the LAICA piece was earlier. It was actually maybe the first major installation of any Cassio. They still kind of worked along the wall in a more traditional fashion even though they were curving and folding.

MS. RIEDEL: So during the period of, say, '81 to '83 the Cassios really came to fruition at Scripps and Santa Monica. And then you moved on to—

MS. AL-HILALI: Let's check—can you see when Santa Monica was?

MS. RIEDEL: I think it was '83. Yes it, was '83. And Scripps was '82; LAICA was '81.

MS. AL-HILALI: Then I had the installation at the Seattle Art Museum, even though the picture on the poster was taken at the Hunsaker-Schlesinger Gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. You have to have a picture ready before you have an exhibition.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I had several shows at the Hunsaker-Schlesinger Gallery, and actually showed my first Cassio at that gallery. I showed the Cassios in quite a few places.

In my mind I still see them fluttering around downtown, catching on the skyscrapers, after a while getting disengaged and flying on. I think I still should do some collages of downtown photos on the day that Cassiopeia above does her housecleaning and is shaking out her blankets and skirts to dust us with her sparks of joy.

MS. RIEDEL: That's wonderful, that image.

You did that for proposals, some photo-montages.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It's not too late.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, but—

MS. RIEDEL: The Cassios came to fruition, and then fairly shortly [afterward] you moved on to the metal, no?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, well, the Cassios were fun, fun, fun. In the meantime, you had to survive; you had to make some money to be able to continue.

MS. RIEDEL: Scripps.

MS. AL-HILALI: The Scripps salary paid for my rent. Even though there were exceptions, most [of] the people that worked for me had to be paid. You can do only so much for fun. [Laughs.] You have to pay your helpers.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: And you pay the studio rent—there's overhead.

MS. RIEDEL: So this wasn't at all a student project at Scripps.

MS. AL-HILALI: No, no, no, no. The project was my problem, and the helpers were my people. On the day of the

installation I had volunteers, mostly students from the Claremont Graduate School. My main volunteer was Chris McHenry.

MS. RIEDEL: Chris who?

MS. AL-HILALI: Chris McHenry, she was then; now she is Christina Leon. But my regular helpers I had to pay. So I had to come back to make things that were sellable. The Cassios were not practical for living rooms, even though they were great for business spaces, hotel lobbies, et cetera, and so forth. And some collectors were brave enough to buy one for their living space.

MS. RIEDEL: Was this one of the installations of the Cassios, the installation at the Bonaventure Hotel [Los Angeles], or that was different?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, no. The Bonaventure piece was a much, much earlier weaving commission.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, not the Cassios.

MS. AL-HILALI: No, a series of weavings. And I sure paid into that deal. I was inexperienced then and did not anticipate the cost of commission.

MS. RIEDEL: We should talk about commissions, but we can talk about them later.

MS. AL-HILALI: So we did many Cassios, and I had a pile rolled up, after the use in various installations. I had a stack of them accumulated, so there was no urgency to make more.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Are they still in a garage somewhere?

MS. AL-HILALI: A few of them; most of them disappeared.

MS. RIEDEL: They're gone?

MS. AL-HILALI: They're gone. I threw away most of them. Well, rain had gotten into the garage, and when I unearthed them after a few years, they had gotten moldy. They didn't look so good.

But I don't really know why the metal surfaced. Oh, I know, it was the collages; they relate to the collages, but how the very first metal pieces started, nobody knows. I don't remember.

There is this fact: even the most beautiful and glorious fiber basically hangs. This is alright for the hero's shirt and for the royal mantle for your mythological man, but to complete the adornment of your hero lover, you need the crown, the bristles with erect energy. Through my mind and imagination shivered and waved the feather crowns of the Mayans.

The plumed serpent—the idea, it went through my mind a lot at that time. At one point I must have just started —

MS. RIEDEL: I think, like, in '84 was the plumed serpent tower and the feather skirt and the great feather coat.

MS. AL-HILALI: Do you have the year on those?

MS. RIEDEL: Sort of mid-'80s, no? Eighty-four, '85? Before the retrospective.

MS. AL-HILALI: Eighty-three. So this was a collage, but made of metal pieces, with spikes sticking out.

MS. RIEDEL: *Thorny Palm.* Seven feet by nine feet. Lots of pattern—

MS. AL-HILALI: But it's a collage, a 3-D collage.

MS. RIEDEL: Out of aluminum.

MS. AL-HILALI: I bought sheets of aluminum, which formed the background and which I cut into the shaped pieces, which I riveted together. I tried galvanized steel, but it was too heavy and it was too hard to cut and too sharp. The piece that you see on this slide, for example, is very sharp and spikey.

MS. RIEDEL: A galvanized-steel metal piece.

MS. AL-HILALI: At this point, the great revelation occurred when I found out I could use my steel roller press to press the aluminum. I had my own custom-built steel roller press, which I had used to create my pressed-paper pieces; I had had that made a long time ago. Now I was using aluminum, and there stood the press and was

asking for it. By running aluminum pieces through the press, the rough edges were smoothed. The curl that happens through cutting is flattened out, and by pressing the piece at an angle, you could curve it.

MS. RIEDEL: To achieve a grass like quality.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. It was because of the pressure it would distort the metal. Let's say you have a straight piece, and you run it through at a slight angle and pull a little in one direction: you can create a curved shape. You have to learn how much you want to curve your material. So instead of rigid shapes, you can produce gentle curves.

MS. RIEDEL: Soft, gestural—

MS. AL-HILALI: Soft—and that was my claim: that I made the softest metal pieces ever. I took metal, which is symptomatic for macho art, and made it into my own, into something gentle and feminine.

MS. RIEDEL: Soft.

MS. AL-HILALI: Soft and gestural. And it wouldn't have happened if I hadn't had the press from my paper period sitting there. When you work with metal, you don't necessarily have a roller press, but it was there waiting.

So then I went into that, that happy time again. I know it sounds so simple; we remember the good parts of our life. I did many metal pieces to explore the endless possibilities of this process. They were similar to the paper pieces in that they were based on overall patterns, composed of small modules.

MS. RIEDEL: The patterning has changed, though; it's gotten softer.

MS. AL-HILALI: Maybe more organic.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly, more organic.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and then these metal pieces had their own dimensionality. I enjoyed overlapping the sections. In some pieces I concentrated on the depth of the third dimension. So I cut the shape in a certain way, something like a triangular spiral, where I riveted down the central part and outer edge of the shape raised off the background. Then I painted the background to reflect the movement of this, even though after application of all the parts, hardly any background showed. The idea was that the painted form and pattern and the metal sections and shadows intermingled and got you thoroughly confused.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. This says, "*Codex of the White Serpent* from '84." I wonder when you first went to Oaxaca, because the titles and the imagery now—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the pieces are more related to that world. With the rigid forms, I could do more featherlike objects. The image of and the idea of feathers, standing up, prancing appealed to me. That's when I did my crown—you have a picture, a portrait of me wearing that crown thing. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: I can remember you wearing a number of different things—

MS. AL-HILALI: This was the Aztec queen, a Hollywood parody of the Aztec queen. All this raving romanticism, but tongue in cheek.

MS. RIEDEL: Looking through the catalogue, most are wall pieces.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, they're mostly wall pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: So you've gone back to flat wall pieces with some dimensionality.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, the metal came in sheet form, like a traditional painting surface, but the spring of the metal made the small elements bristle and shiver.

MS. RIEDEL: *Message to the Emperor of Tashkent*.

MS. AL-HILALI: *Emperor of Tashkent*, yes, that's another story.

MS. RIEDEL: What's that story?

MS. AL-HILALI: I'm not going to say.

MS. RIEDEL: Tell me your thoughts. [Laughs.]

MS. AL-HILALI: It wouldn't be fair to him. You shouldn't talk about somebody when you're sure he would not wish to be talked about.

MS. RIEDEL: It was your message. What did you want to say?

MS. AL-HILALI: A lot. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: A lot.

MS. AL-HILALI: And with the metal pieces, I enjoyed their specific kinds of textures. I primed the sheets of aluminum, and then they were painted and cut into small sections and then filed and painted some more. Through filing, you could reveal at the edges the several layers of paint. We were doing it with various files and strokes and scratches so that the metal sheen would slice through the painted surface. Boy, did we file. Because innumerable components, individually prepared pieces, went into one art piece.

In this work, on this slide, the basic unit was a triangle, one triangle overlapping the next one, kind of like shingles, but really dense. Many triangles were cut into an angular spiral shape, so that the cut section would curl up considerably. In placing them on the background, I had to make sure that none of the curls hit each other, that they would not hinder each other, but could vibrate freely. It was all shimmering and glistening. This piece was very dense.

MS. RIEDEL: Extremely dense.

MS. AL-HILALI: After several of these sharp and shiny pieces, stepping back and looking at them, I thought they were getting a little too precious, so I started using soft-drink cans, Coke cans, 7-Up, anything. So this piece is an example of soft-drink cans cut up and assembled on the background. We painted them, too, but not too much, so the original colors of the cans would not be obliterated. The 7-Up cans, the green ones, were my favorites. The individual can pieces looked kind of crumpled and alive.

MS. RIEDEL: Where did the roof, the copper roof you got from Pasadena, fit into all this? Did it come before?

MS. AL-HILALI: It comes later, let's see what dates it is.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was patinated copper that had been a roof in Pasadena?

MS. AL-HILALI: I'll come to that later.

MS. RIEDEL: This is a more vertical piece.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, a vertical piece, a practical solution for installation in a stairwell.

MS. RIEDEL: This one is more monochromatic, a lot more gray and blue.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it's blues. Now if you have a piece like this—

MS. RIEDEL: The *Unicorn Meadow.* This is very long.

MS. AL-HILALI: I think it was made in three adjoining sections. It was made for a big wall.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: For this kind of piece I had first to paint several sheets of aluminum in different colors and patterns. Then these sheets were cut up into simple shapes, like blades of grass, which had their edges filed, and were smoothed by the press. Then from the different piles of these pieces, which were pre-fashioned "brushstrokes," I would select one, two, or three at a time and rivet them onto the background. Each of these little pieces required at least two rivets so it wouldn't turn. So I riveted row after row of the individual elements. Each following row would cover and hide the rivets of the previous row. No problem until you come to the last row, what then? How do you hide the rivets on the last row?

MS. RIEDEL: What did you do?

MS. AL-HILALI: I had to be tricky. I had to be very tricky, and it took a lot of time.

Well, you overlap sideways here and there, and sometimes I had one element fold back sideways over its rivet. That element would have to be specially shaped so that after folding, it would go in the right direction; it would fit into the general movement of the other elements.

MS. RIEDEL: That's a beautiful piece. They all feel very meadow-like; they feel very grassy.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it was almost the natural shape of these—

MS. RIEDEL: —aluminum shards, blade-like.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the pieces were like blades of grass or—

MS. RIEDEL: —feathers—

MS. AL-HILALI: That was the natural shape that would happen if you cut a piece of aluminum.

MS. RIEDEL: And that actually echoes earlier fabric pieces that you've done—the red feathers and the black feathers. So it's something you've done in fabric, and now you're doing in metal.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, it's all somehow related to fabric.

MS. RIEDEL: We are in 1985 in this slide.

MS. AL-HILALI: Okay.

MS. RIEDEL: Seventy-two by 88 inches.

MS. AL-HILALI: A good-size installation. I guess I don't have the slides in chronological order here.

MS. RIEDEL: Were these the carousels you used for your slideshows?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

I don't know where it fits chronologically. Now the last one was '85, but this piece is an important one. It precedes most of the metal pieces, and it's on the cover of the catalogue here.

MS. RIEDEL: What was this one called?

MS. AL-HILALI: That was *River Journey* or *Nutpa's Journey on the River Woman.*

MS. RIEDEL: That was *Nutpa's Journey.*

MS. AL-HILALI: Nutpa. Whoever Nutpa is. It's just a name for him, mythological man.

The *River Journey*. That's one of my favorite images: to drift down the river among sky-high reeds. At the time when the Sumerians or other ancients built their temples out of bundles of gigantic reeds, the ones you see on the cylinder seals—you know what I'm talking about?

MS. RIEDEL: I don't.

MS. AL-HILALI: You don't. Well, in ancient, ancient times, the time of Gilgamesh and Enkidu, there were these marshes of gigantic reeds, like forests, and bundles of them were bound together to form the pillars of their halls, which were bent towards each other to form grand arches. The roofs and walls were made of plaited reeds in different patterns. And there were all these waterways between the islands, where I floated in the boat with my mythological man. So then that was the *River Journey*.

MS. RIEDEL: And the bundles of reeds were used architecturally—

MS. AL-HILALI: As pillars. I just want to convey how tall these reeds were. And they were all surrounding when you drifted in those waterways and channels between the higher land, and your boat or barge would move along with some current. That's one version of paradise, to just drift on the river and feel peaceful.

MS. RIEDEL: Among the reeds.

MS. AL-HILALI: So that was what the piece *River Journey* was about.

So with the metal pieces, before I would start putting together a piece, I had to prepare, so to speak, all the brushstrokes I might need for this piece ahead of time. And in composing the piece, I would select one small sliver at a time from the various piles I had prepared. If towards the end I would be short of a certain red piece, I could not duplicate it, because of all the processes all the other red pieces had gone through, the cutting, filing, painting.

It's as if you would be short one piece of cake at a birthday party, you couldn't just quickly make another piece.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. AL-HILALI: So it all had to be there before I started the piece. Of course, there were different colors, and all had a very balanced, allover kind of arrangement. You have a certain allover theme and mood even though you also always need the little contrary guy, the salt in the pie. It was not a rigid geometric pattern, but a distinct mood.

MS. RIEDEL: And subtle too.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes subtle, aiming at the right combination and right degree of variation.

MS. RIEDEL: And you would need plenty, you would need to have extras.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, plenty of pieces in the right proportion.

MS. RIEDEL: Exactly.

MS. AL-HILALI: This piece, the *River Journey,* was one of my very early metal pieces. I had actually no idea how many little components I would need to cover the background. I started at a certain rhythm and pattern of combinations, and tried to maintain the mood and feeling consistently through the piece. But about halfway through I started to go through agony. What if my vision of paradise would run out of parts in the bottom corner?

MS. RIEDEL: And it should be said, there were thousands of pieces.

MS. AL-HILALI: Anyway, it was a very intense and tense week when I was putting the piece together. I had to use all my mental energy. It reminded me of the time when I had to provide sunshine and hold off the rain for our happening on the beach.

The difficulty lies in the fact that you want to achieve a flowing design, but you work in horizontal rows. It's like trying to weave a circle—that means forming a curve through perpendicular lines.

But when I was finished, I had about two little slithers left. I don't know if you understand what a miracle that was for me, that I had somehow used the hundreds of little sections as though by pre-arrangement or something, so that the whole of the puzzle came out right. What if I had run out of pieces in the middle of the last row? It was very exhausting, but in the end I was very happy and thankful.

That's why I like that piece, because it wasn't guaranteed. It was a test, in a way, and I won. Well, actually, it was given to me; I was lucky.

And then in those days—I don't know if that sort of thing should go on tape—

MS. RIEDEL: We can always take it off.

[Audio Break.]

Okay, we're back.

MS. AL-HILALI: I had gotten into the habit of doing the Ouija board. It took years to develop a kind of ease, to clear the channel for communication. I don't want to explain who it is that speaks to me; I only know I had beautiful conversations with him. And I don't know if it's actually myself talking back to myself.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: But it was very rewarding. I had gotten to know my friend on the board by many names, and I would ask him questions. We had gotten on such friendly terms that then he would ask me questions. [Laughs.] And he helped me remember different times and places. When he started speaking of certain times, it all came back to me. For example, the Mayan times—the times in Mesoamerica—

MS. RIEDEL: Mesoamerica.

MS. AL-HILALI: Of course, we talked about my art. When I made this piece, I asked him, I know it's a river journey, but what is the name of the river? And he answered, You know it is Woman. [Laughs.] Things like that.

MS. RIEDEL: You're questioning into the work as you're in the midst of it.

MS. AL-HILALI: And it was totally positive. I think it was a way of opening myself up, in a sense. And whatever you're willing to receive, that will come. If somebody is afraid of it and thinks evil come through, that's what probably will happen to him. Sometimes I had interferences which were negative, but I would firmly ban them

and send them away.

MS. RIEDEL: You were very specific about what you were willing to let in.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and I had such really beautiful experiences. It was like talking to the old-time lover, father, brother. When he said to me, You are to me like a tree with laughing branches, what can you say? [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: That was one of the messages.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: That's beautiful, a tree with laughing branches.

MS. AL-HILALI: This work doesn't look so good on the slide because it looks small, but in reality it was as large as the room would allow.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting. Let's see, does it have a title? Oh, it's *Tecotl*?

MS. AL-HILALI: *Tecotl*, his moonlit crown. His silver feather headdress.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting because it has a lot of gestural qualities, like the Cassios.

MS. AL-HILALI: Coming from the textile background, it was still a revelation to me to work with a rigid material. I could do large forms because the aluminum kept its shape. I did a great deal of filing and scratching through the paint on this piece, so it looked quite shimmery and silvery.

Oh, and you are right. After doing so many pieces composed out of many little parts, I had to react again and do something large and gestural. Here I made the feathers as large as I could, but the sheets of aluminum come in four by 12s. I cut my forms more or less diagonally to achieve maximum size.

I had a studio in Inglewood at that time and it didn't have high walls inside, but the back side of the building I had painted white; that's where I photographed my artwork. It was my hanging wall. So when I had this piece all finished, I hung it up there to try it out and see if it worked.

It was late at night and I turned off the light, and the moon was shining on it and all the silver was shimmering out of the dark and I—[laughs]—I felt again like I did okay. I never expected this. How would you know that something looks better in moonlight? It was just lucky that I actually got to see it. It somehow took on a whole new identity. It was like a dream had become a reality, and reflected back towards me.

MS. RIEDEL: A wonderful serendipity.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. And here on this slide, this work, this work was gigantic. I said to my friend on the board, I said, What do you want me to make for you? He says, Oh, it's time you made me a shirt. [Laughs.] So I made him a shirt. Can you see the detail in the middle, because that, of course, is the heart of the matter. I made this shirt as grand and as wild as I could.

MS. RIEDEL: This is a shirt of aluminum.

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't know what size it was.

MS. RIEDEL: A mantle—120 inches by 170.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. It was big. I made it as large as I thought a museum wall could handle.

MS. RIEDEL: It's huge. That's quite a shirt.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I really paid with blood and sweat for that one, mostly blood though.

MS. RIEDEL: And it's quite gestural.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, well, it had to be. You can see in the middle where everything converges, it became very, very precious. And then after I finished it, I looked at it. I said, It's a nice feeling when you do something and you step back, and only then you see what you actually did. So in the middle then, when I looked at it, it was a lotus. An opening lotus. [Laughs.] And it was just there.

In this piece, some sections were made of galvanized steel, and the piece had to be made in sections, and oh, that was the other problem: my studio was way too small to hang all the pieces up as planned together.

MS. RIEDEL: Right. Because it was the Inglewood studio.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. All I could do was hope that the separate pieces would work together, because I could not try it out anywhere. But just to get the finished sections out of the way, I would hang them on the wall, and I remember one night—it's kind of corny, but it was bad. These galvanized metal spears, they're just like daggers.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, yes.

MS. AL-HILALI: But thicker.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, and sharp.

MS. AL-HILALI: They're thicker. To cut the galvanized steel, by that time I had gotten an electric machine because you simply couldn't cut it with shears; you had to use a machine.

Anyway, I was working on the floor, because we were always working on the floor, and I got up too close to the wall, and as I got up, my butt got speared from the top. Now, when you get speared your instincts are to run away. [Laughs.] But if you are more or less nailed down in a vertical direction, you can't. I had to go back down, to get myself off the spike. Oh, the blood. Get the tape, get the tape, get the duct tape. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, my gosh.

MS. AL-HILALI: My trusty helper was there and all I could do was yell, Well, get the big tape. [Laughs.] Pull it together!

MS. RIEDEL: Did you go to the hospital for stitches?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, we didn't have time for that. I figured as long as it bleeds enough, it gets washed out from the inside. [Laughs.] I had for a long time a witch's mark, a triangular scar on my butt.

Yes, we worked hard. I always had a deadline.

MS. RIEDEL: The retrospective.

MS. AL-HILALI: The retrospective was very important to me. And I am thankful to the end of my days that Josine gave me this opportunity. That was Josine Janco-Starrels, who for many years was the great vivacious and knowledgeable director of the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery at Barnsdall Park.

You have no idea how hard I worked, day and night. Half a year before the retrospective, I realized I had a slim chance to get everything accomplished if I hurried nonstop. These six months, I worked without a half day off, without one evening off. I not only worked, but hurried all the time. I had good helpers, yes, but so much I had to do myself.

MS. RIEDEL: So we covered the metal, except that one, the copper one.

MS. AL-HILALI: You asked about the copper piece. Yes, some nice person mentioned and then brought to me some pieces of an old copper roof. I wish I could have had more because it was so beautiful. I didn't paint anything on it. I just had the green tarnish, the patina of the copper, on one side. And also it was so soft.

Now the rollers of my press, from pressing so many metal pieces, they had these little imprints of all the points of previously pressed metal blades. Now when I ran the copper through the press, these little imprints were transferred onto the green tarnished copper and created this beautiful subtle pattern, sort of like pointed reptilian scales.

MS. RIEDEL: It looks like a meadow and a headdress all at once.

MS. AL-HILALI: Because there's no paint applied. It's just the aged material, and it's so rich.

MS. RIEDEL: And where is this now?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, some company bought it. It was a grass company of some sort. [They laugh.]

MS. RIEDEL: It's a beautiful piece, and it was the only one you did out of copper?

MS. AL-HILALI: I did a couple more, but they were smaller. Yes, because I didn't have any more copper, and I really should have pursued it. If I had had a crew, or if I had a business, I would have sent somebody to wrecking places to look for old tarnished copper roofs. Maybe I still should.

So I want to say that even though I worked in metal in that period, it was the reference back to garment and fabric that was very strong. The layering of many elements, for instance, the pop cans, the feathers and grass and all these images. Also the objects were called *Mantle* or *Shirt* or *Headdress*. But this was the skirt.

MS. RIEDEL: A piece called *Spill*.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, that was also something my friend had said, "Let your skirts, my lady, spill." [Laughs.] Okay. It just instantly created the image in my mind. Let your skirts spill.

MS. RIEDEL: It seems to be flying as well.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, just swirling. Yes, the skirt, the perennial dancing skirt with swinging tassels and fluttering ruffles. The metal allowed me to freeze the gesture, so it was in a way like the Cassiopeias.

MS. RIEDEL: It captured that moment, that feeling.

MS. AL-HILALI: So with my metal pieces, too, I was again deeply involved with my hereditary fiber connection; my instinct, my fiber instinct was right there. Nothing much had changed. [Laughs.] It always came through.

MS. RIEDEL: You said the materials changed based on what you wanted to accomplish in your ideas. You really began choosing materials that would allow you to realize a particular vision.

MS. AL-HILALI: A particular vision. And it just happened to inevitably refer back to the glorious world of fiber and fabric.

MS. RIEDEL: So now we have to talk about the professional aspect, the life as an artist. Do you want to also talk about the travels and how they affected the work while you're still talking about the work, or do you want to talk about the professional? Whichever you prefer.

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't know, I think it will roll together.

MS. RIEDEL: So start with some of the exhibitions.

MS. AL-HILALI: So as soon as I came back to California, which was in—

MS. RIEDEL: When you first came, in '61?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, no. In '61, I arrived in the U.S. I studied at UCLA and received my first degree. Then we—that means my husband and children and I—moved to Texas. While we lived in Texas, I finished my graduate work at UCLA, and after a few years in Texas, I left Texas and came back to Los Angeles and started working.

Yes, it must have been '69, '70. Okay. So my first job was at Cal State LA—

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I started exhibiting. I know I was very naive, and I know it was Bernard who prompted me to start thinking of exhibiting. The first exhibitions that you submit to, you enter with your five dollar fee or whatever it was, send in a photo of something you made, and then you are accepted or rejected. Then you ship your piece to the show. Pretty soon, you are invited to shows, and you don't go down the list of where you should send it anymore. Many of my first occasions to exhibit I owe to *Artweek.* That was very useful in *Artweek* that they had all the shows listed which you could enter.

MS. RIEDEL: In the back of the periodical, right.

MS. AL-HILALI: In the back. That was very helpful. So, soon I was invited to shows. And the first, not solo show but dual show, that I ever had, I was invited to Arlington, Texas, to have a show with Paul Soldner. I was so flattered. I was honored because at that time Paul Soldner was already an icon. And that was the first—semi-solo show. It was like being ushered in. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And did you know him already from Scripps?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, that was sometime before I went to Scripps. I had not met him, but I knew about him. And then later I met him at Scripps, and we were working alongside each other for many years, teaching at Scripps College in Claremont.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you know the name of the gallery, Neda, in Arlington?

MS. AL-HILALI: I think it was the University of Texas at Arlington. Bless their hearts. How they knew about me, I

don't know.

So then I was teaching, teaching busily; I was teaching in two places and driving around a lot. And I was trying to get ahold somehow of all the students, trying to involve them, reach them, and bring together their energies in those happy happenings.

I told you about them, our happenings here and our happenings there, the best ones on the beach, of course. And at the same time I was busy with my own creative work. Soon exhibition demands increased and I had to have a studio, and I moved into a studio.

MS. RIEDEL: The first one was in Venice, yes?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. The first one was in Venice. I lived and worked there. Oh, I've got to show you pictures. It was facing the ocean. It used to be the hotel lobby of the old Waldorf.

At that time it was all fiber still. In Venice it was all fiber and fabric.

Anyway, so I was starting to rush, rush, rush. I think back and feel really guilty about my children. I had children. My daughter lived part of the time with her father in Texas. To be separated from her was an uninterrupted stomachache. But she needed a more secure, stable home life, and I was busy here and there and rushing around. My son grew up pretty independent. He always, since he could stand, was a grown-up.

MS. RIEDEL: And he was a teenager by then, or was he still small?

MS. AL-HILALI: He was a young teenager. He had come out with me from Texas. And we two, we did a lot of things together, or should I say, we went through a lot together. Yes, I feel forever guilty about not devoting more time to my children. It's easy to judge in retrospect, but remembering my own growing up, we were treated as adults at an early age and did not expect a lot of attention or consideration. Rather, we children were expected to fulfill our responsibilities.

Well, I had told you how my father taught us a lot and told us stories. But from the age of 10 I was considered grown up. I took the train to school every day and took care of my younger siblings.

I think, though, one thing rubbed off on my kids. They are both hard workers.

MS. RIEDEL: It all worked out. He's got a great job now at Pacifica.

MS. AL-HILALI: He has great musical talent and absorbed computer work at an early age. He did a lot of different things. He's very creative. He's always involved in different projects and still surprises me by working on something new.

MS. RIEDEL: Was he engaged at all by the artwork going on in your studio? Was he excited or interested in that?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, it was a little too much for him. He hated having all these people come into our house. But he helped me, and later through the years he often helped me install pieces. Yes, in Venice times we were pretty close. I remember the first NEA grant. I had applied for my first NEA grant in—

MS. RIEDEL: Seventy-four, maybe?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, in '74, when a new car cost $3,000 new—and I applied for NEA grant and he wanted that Selmer [saxophone]. And I said to him, It's a deal; you put your mind to work, because you've got a strong mind—you put your mind to work. If I get the grant, you get the Selmer and I get a car. I got the grant; I got a car and he got the Selmer. It was one NEA grant that did a lot of good.

MS. RIEDEL: And what was a Selmer?

MS. AL-HILALI: You don't know—a Selmer sax. The perfect sax.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, a saxophone.

MS. AL-HILALI: It was what he wanted most on earth. Yes, he was playing the sax at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: Because you were a big fan of jazz, he must have heard a lot as a child.

MS. AL-HILALI: No, no, no—he did not care that much about my favorite music. I don't know where he got it from or where he started playing. He started playing at school. And he met a lot of people at that time in Venice. It was all very fluid. But the sax he played on at school was a banged-up old school sax, and his dream was the

Selmer. And that was my son. If he put his mind to something, it often worked.

MS. RIEDEL: And is he still playing music?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, he's not playing the sax enough, but he's playing other instruments.

MS. RIEDEL: He has kept up his music all his life.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, he did at one time a lot of mixing and producing. It is in our background. My father was such an excellent pianist, and both my grandfathers played I don't know how many instruments. So it's in our genes. The music thing is in our family. It sort of skipped me, or rather it came in from the visual side. My daughter played the flute for many years, but she is also primarily a visual artist; she's an excellent artist, painter and graphic artist. Look at this self-portrait she did as a student at UC Santa Cruz. And her daughter again is a very talented oboe player. Maybe we should cut out all this family talk.

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting, though, to have the whole sense of musical tradition and history of your family and music coming out of you visually. It's a nice detail.

MS. AL-HILALI: Nothing to be embarrassed about.

Alright, so we were working like maniacs, and I have to say over the years I had several very devoted and fantastic helpers. Foremost, Marilyn Poucher, for years we were pulling as a team. Before her and for years, John Garrett was my faithful and wonderful friend and helper. But I want to give credit to all the others—Andrea Woynick, for example, and the neighbors down in Inglewood across the street; the people from El Salvador: Blanca Luz, she worked for me many years faithfully, and Norma, her cousin, and all the others.

My pieces often involved a lot of preliminary steps. A lot of time-consuming manual work, which could be done by my helpers. My processes, all my pieces were always time-consuming.

MS. RIEDEL: Very labor intensive.

MS. AL-HILALI: In a way I guess I needed that. That's the old work ethic: if something is to become worthy, you have to put your effort into it. And as I said, a lot of it was mechanical, repetitive, but still you had to concentrate on the piece. I always felt any time devoted to a piece would not be lost. It's never lost; it's there. I made myself believe that; otherwise I would have to say I wasted my time. And I hope I didn't.

MS. RIEDEL: No.

MS. AL-HILALI: So as I say, hour-wise, the work I did was immense. I don't think I'm bragging, but now when I think back to it, I get tired thinking of it. I think between the '60s and the '80s that was roughly 20 years I was rushing continuously.

It got to the point where between exhibition schedules, commissions, proposals, traveling, and teaching, I couldn't keep up. Teaching itself was fine, but I never mentioned the committees, the squabbling. The smaller the outfit, the pettier the jealousies and the politics. I wasn't up to that.

At times it was really somewhat uncomfortable for me at Scripps. The art department had supported me pretty much, apart from some cases of backstabbing. But Scripps is not an art school only; it is primarily a high-level, highbrow, academic college. The academicians always had to prove that they were better and smarter, and kind of sniggered at you, and that was the unpleasant part. And the committees were exhausting.

When you have to make an extra trip, that would be a hundred-mile trip, on a day when you don't teach, for a committee meeting, just so they couldn't say, Well, if she's committed to the job, she ought to be here and blah, blah, blah—just to satisfy bad-mouthers and envious people. That's a waste of time.

MS. RIEDEL: That was draining.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: And you were working so hard and intensively on the teaching, there wasn't time to spare for politics.

MS. AL-HILALI: And then there was the other thing. Okay, I was teaching at Scripps College and I was also teaching at the Claremont Graduate School. Soon I did attract, or maybe the school did attract, quite a number of people in my field; their focus was fiber; well, they were working with me. So I had a substantial amount of good students there.

So Scripps says I'm giving too much time to the graduate students, and at the same time, some of the graduate students complained—and I'm sure those weren't the good students—that I didn't give them enough time. I actually don't know what the financial arrangement was between the two colleges, but I got complaints from both sides. I remember there was a time when I got physically sick. Something happened to my shoulder and my back, and I couldn't move anymore. It was terrible. And it lasted quite awhile.

MS. RIEDEL: Right.

MS. AL-HILALI: It was so bad I couldn't even get into a car; it wasn't a cold. Luckily, someone told me about good old Dr. Wing, a Chinese doctor, who worked on the balance in my body and this and that. And he told me it was tension. I was young still and I was insecure, and they were coming at me from both sides.

And I remember laying there, and not being able to move, and then my son saying to me, Well, he says, the only thing worse than feeling miserable is being sorry for yourself. Alright. [Laughs.] So I got through feeling sorry for myself.

MS. RIEDEL: And that eventually drew you out of teaching?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, but when I think of the students, I cannot but remember the good students and the beautiful and the wonderful things they did and the energy and pride in their creations and accomplishments. With the undergraduates, often it was for me like watering a garden, when I didn't know when and what would bloom. That was so great. So the teaching was really very rewarding and enjoyable.

Meanwhile, at the home front, I did quite a few commissions. I made some money, but I had a lot of expenses. I had to pay my hired people, and the days I wasn't there, you kind of keep them busy, and I tried to pay them fairly.

MS. RIEDEL: It should be said your exhibitions were nonstop from the mid-'70s forward.

MS. AL-HILALI: And so for years I was never walking: I was always running, and always taking the stairs two at a time. I was rushing, rushing. And I remember two years distinctly, when at New Year's—I said to myself, Look what I have to do. And I knew I wouldn't be able to take a breather till June, I mean not a breather. And I remember also I booked my flight for June to Oaxaca as the end of the tunnel. And I knew I could not possibly get the work done; I couldn't possibly get it done. And I was working and I didn't have one afternoon off; I didn't have one night off. After the day, there was always the night shift, and so continuously for six months without having one evening off.

So that's why I stopped at one point.

MS. RIEDEL: And you would have two and three and sometimes four solo shows in a year?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes. Look at the exhibition schedule in the catalogue.

MS. RIEDEL: Plus group shows.

MS. AL-HILALI: And that was in between the commissions.

MS. RIEDEL: We haven't even started to talk about that.

MS. AL-HILALI: Alright, there's really not much to say except there were quite a few. I enjoyed weaving. Weaving for me was like taking a warm bath. I did a lot of plain weavings even after I already had started the paper work. I did simple weavings for commissions and I really enjoyed doing them.

They were simple designs, simple interlocking forms, a sort of direct outcome of the loom—geometric. The loom likes geometric forms. And the joy in them was the coloration. These weavings were mostly made out of sisal, and I dyed the sisal many shades, because in a design of interlocking forms, the shading gave the piece a more dimensional look. And the beauty of sisal was that each single filament would contain a whole range of colors in itself. So the colors were very rich and gratifying to work with. Sometimes we had large commissions when we dyed hundreds of pounds.

MS. RIEDEL: There was the Hawaii hotel and Cassios and the stagecoach for Wells Fargo.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, we made all kinds of different things.

The Hawaiian project was fun. I had to do these huge ceiling fans. They were not rotary fans, but they were large, almost semi-circular shapes, which were installed to move back and forth. And they were to be made of all natural materials—raffia, cane, and other basketry materials—and different kinds of shells. I used basketry

techniques, and each of them was of different design and material. I forgot how many of them there were, maybe seven or eight. That was a gratifying project, in contrast to some other commissions.

But the stagecoach, that was another story. It was just one of those things we got talked into. Marilyn helped me on that. I was really embarrassed about the stagecoach. I was approached by somebody to weave this gigantic stagecoach, the emblem of Wells Fargo. I said, Marilyn, do you really want to do that? We had a big loom, but we had to do the piece in panels, and to have the panels match is easier said than done.

In retrospect, I think I should not have accepted this commission. It was for us a technical challenge, and it was fairly early in my professional life. It was a technical challenge but not a creative accomplishment.

Then another time, I got a big commission for Buffalo, New York. They wanted these gigantic hangings woven in one piece. Now, I didn't have a loom that wide; nobody had a loom that wide. And I don't remember how many feet wide it had to be. So we built one.

MS. RIEDEL: You made a loom?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. John Garrett and Tom Fender helped me with that. So we constructed this loom between the ceiling and the floor. The old weaving room of the weaving department at that time had old loom parts lying around, so we could get the ratchets and some other parts there, and we made this loom thing to weave these two gigantic pieces.

Now, because of the size, we used heavy-gage fiber. And the weight factor became multiplied. The piece was all shades of white. So we dyed mountains of sisal shades of white. [Laughs.] And this gigantic thing, it needed special devices because anything that is eight feet long will bend.

MS. RIEDEL: In the center.

MS. AL-HILALI: I remember how the problems just multiplied. That was another time we worked ourselves to pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: And this was for—

MS. AL-HILALI: Buffalo, New York, some bank or corporation. And it was another project I should have skipped, because again it was mainly a technical accomplishment, but the outcome was not particularly memorable. It took up months of my time.

MS. RIEDEL: Marine Midland, no?

MS. AL-HILALI: Marine Midland Center, that sounds familiar. I did a lot of commissions for hotels and business spaces.

MS. RIEDEL: The Bank of Tokyo, too.

MS. AL-HILALI: Could be.

Commissions were great in one sense, especially when they were site specific, and commissions gave me the chance to do very large, very visible pieces. But there were also lessons to be learned. I was naïve and trusting, but I found out there were necessary rules. I found out the hard way.

You can't do a commission unless you have the down payment; you can't. So, as a young girl, ready for anything, I got a call from this well-known college in the south. They were going to open another building and they wanted these big hangings; they wanted them for the opening of the building. And I was kind of proud, because it was a black college, and I was proud that they had selected me. I remember which college it was, but I cannot mention the name in this public statement.

They begged me to please get started right away, because they wanted them to be installed for the inauguration. The size and form and price was all agreed upon over the phone. But they explained that the process of getting the money was somewhat lengthy, but they were on it et cetera. And so again, I killed myself and my helpers. And that was a year when the smog was very bad, and we had to drive out into the smog, and killed ourselves dyeing the material and making those big hangings. And then, I get a call, Oh, they decided they should rather have a black artist do it. And I had nothing on paper, and I really felt devastated. And I felt so bad. We had forced ourselves to do it, and I couldn't do anything about it because I didn't have—

MS. RIEDEL: No contract.

MS. AL-HILALI: No, no. They just decided they should have a black person do it. I had bought all this material,

and had paid my helpers for the labor. And that was the year I had planned to go back to Europe to visit my people, and then I couldn't go. I had planned to finish the project and go on the trip with my pay for it. Instead, I had put out all my own money and didn't have anything for it. I lost my money, wasted months of hard work, and lost my trip to Europe.

MS. RIEDEL: Were you able to resell the pieces?

MS. AL-HILALI: I think they were just lying around; maybe I sold one later, but it was basically—

MS. RIEDEL: A loss.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I learned my lesson, you would think.

But years later I fell for it again. And I will not go into the details, but it was even worse: the whole effort and expense and shocking disappointment. Again, I cannot mention the parties involved, it happened in San Francisco. It would have been a very exciting construction, composition, but it never was installed. To use a corny comparison—it was like a flower bud that never got the chance to open up. The comparison isn't too appropriate because the piece was going to be gigantic.

I was sad because I had put several months of my life into it and had approached it with great enthusiasm, but the piece never had a chance to be seen. I was devastated. It had been made for a specific space so it couldn't be re-used in another situation.

Anyway, it was not always just fun in the sun; there were times that were very hard and disappointing.

Let's talk about and remember more happy times. As I said, I had a lot of exhibitions. I was lucky in Los Angeles; my primary dealer was Joyce Hunsaker. She was more than fair and probably the best dealer I ever had. She was always very supportive, which meant a lot to me, especially when I changed from one medium to another and awaited with trepidation the public response. I had regular shows in her gallery on La Cienega and got many commissions through her. For quite a few years she was my main source of income.

Later Laura Schlesinger became her partner, and they moved eventually to the Bergomot Complex in Santa Monica, California. I did a lot of commissions for banks and hotels through her.

MS. RIEDEL: *The Flying Serapis* too. Was that for a bank?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, that was for a Clarion Hotel in Ontario, California, I believe.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay.

MS. AL-HILALI: That was a difficult project too. The hotel had a sort of Santa Fe theme. So on the big lobby wall, they wanted something in that vein. I thought, I'll weave images of Southwestern blankets with zigzags and stripes, but I would have them fly across the wall. Twenty years earlier I would have proposed a flat weaving hanging on the wall. By now, that wasn't good enough. I wanted those carpets or blankets flying around all over the wall. I don't remember how many pieces there were altogether.

Now, number one, we had to weave them; that was all fine and fun. We had to dye and weave and dye and weave. Now to create flying forms, we had to use curved metal frames. To get them on the frames sounds easier than done, because they have to be taut in every direction. It was rough work to sew them on tightly. You think you might just make a sleeve and slide the metal rod through. But you can't slide it on if the frame is already welded on all four corners. And you can't just weld three corners and weld the fourth one afterwards, because the flammable weaving would burn.

MS. RIEDEL: So what did you do?

MS. AL-HILALI: My guess is we probably sewed them on the completed frames. That was very hard work, so I think I did all the sewing myself, because I was the only one that had the strength, and I wanted it done good and tight. I had this huge curved basketry needle. We called it the shovel. [Laughs.] My hands were so calloused at the time, like the soles of a barefooter's feet.

MS. RIEDEL: Do you want to talk about Poland and the exhibition in Lodz?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, the trip to Poland never happened. My work had been invited to this important exhibition in the textile museum in Lodz. I had sent this piece which had been very important to me. I think it was called *Atlantis*. It had been on the cover of Mildred Constantine's first big textile book. I was so proud of that.

Anyway, it was very scaly and grand in a way, and it looked like something very tarnished, very tarnished,

maybe like something retrieved from the very deep sea. That also had been a piece that had happened on its own volition. I had no idea what it was going to turn out to be. I was very surprised and excited. It also looked kind of reptilian, with scales going in opposite directions, very dimensional. And I'm sorry I could not go to install it myself. Because if you don't know how to hang it, the piece will just look flat.

In connection with this piece I would like to tell you about the sale, which will give you a very good idea of my business acumen or lack thereof.

I was contacted from Lodz and asked about the price. I think their currency then was in zlotys. Neither Marilyn nor I had any idea what a zloty was worth. So we looked at the letter from Poland and counted what the postage had amounted to. And by comparing it to what a letter to Poland might cost here, we figured out the rate of exchange. It probably was ridiculous, because they right away agreed to buy the piece. But it turned out they couldn't send the money but only deposit it for me at the Bank of Poland or some such, and I would have to retrieve it in person.

I had planned to go to the opening of the exhibition and I had already obtained a visa. But when the time came, I simply didn't have the money and I couldn't go. That was many years ago; I must not have had a credit card,. And I never did get to Poland and I never did get a penny for the piece. Anyway, it shows what kind of business person I was.

But there were other trips in connection with my professional life when I did see a lot and had wonderful experiences. Actually, there were quite a few of them. I remember being invited up to Banff—that's above Calgary in Canada—and going up to Lake Louise and going into and under the glaciers. And I got to go to Hong Kong. And very importantly, I got to go to Japan. That was unforgettable, because I met some great people and had very special experiences, which take up a lot of space in my memory drawers.

Of course, there were many trips, the professional little trips for installations and lectures and workshops, when I did not get to see anything of the locality. I got picked up at the airport, hauled somewhere, did the job or did the lecture, and then was rushed back to the airport. So I did a lot of traveling where I didn't see anything.

But as mentioned above, I made also those trips where I was able to see beautiful sites, for instance, Yellowstone and the buffalos.

Back to the galleries. So I mentioned Joyce Hunsaker as my number one gallery.

Another gallery connection that was very positive was the Modern Masters Tapestries in New York. I feel stupid not remembering the name of the gallery owner now. She was a very nice lady. I remember her as the unique case of a gallery owner that actually would pay me more for some pieces than I had asked. Unfortunately, the gallery closed.

Alice Simsar was also a very nice lady. I had a couple of shows at her gallery in Ann Arbor [MI]. And there were many other nice gallery connections. But I also have to say that quite a few were very bad experiences. They were scattered all over the country. They requested, and I sent them, work and gave them time to sell it. Time passes, and then often, they chose to forget or were unreachable. I lost several shows' worth of work.

MS. RIEDEL: So it sounds like your experience with dealers is absolutely mixed.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, because you get taken advantage of, and you're considered easy-going and busy and geographically far away. I know I lost a lot of work that just wasn't returned. First, you give them time to sell, and then a year passes, or two, and then they become unreachable. And it would be a full-time job to keep track of all your pieces if you have so many pieces out in shows. Or sometimes I had shipped pieces from one gallery to another, and before you know it, they had disappeared. It's sad to think that artists are taken advantage of, and it happens a lot.

As far as the large number of art pieces out in exhibitions, you can tell by the number on the pieces how many I had produced.

MS. RIEDEL: Two-sixty-four for the paper pieces?

MS. AL-HILALI: That wasn't necessarily the highest number. In my record book, each piece has a number. The fiber pieces all begin with an F, the paper pieces with P, and the Cassios with C. The fiber numbers didn't go up too high, because they were the most time-consuming. I think they go up to 53. The most numerous were my paper pieces—I know there were over 400 pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: What about the metal work?

MS. AL-HILALI: Metal work, there were also not that many. Here I have 59. The last piece may have been 59.

Skirt was M57. There could be a few more. I'll just show you this photo: that's the shiny press, which squeezed my finger off, but it did all these good things too. It pressed all those beautiful paper pieces and especially those soft metal pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Was it reattached?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, the part that had been caught by the press was entirely squashed. The finger was gone to here. The little bone was sticking out. Of course, I was gushing blood. Luckily, my great helper Andrea Woynick was there. She had the ingenious idea to stick my hand into a whole loaf of bread that we happened to have there and rushed me to the hospital.

There—it was at UCLA—this clever surgeon did this intricate surgery where part of my middle finger was carved off and flipped over and attached to my injured finger with metal pins, while still attached to the other finger. So the fingers were pinned together for a few weeks until it kind of grew, started growing on, and then the fingers were separated, the metal pins taken out, and more patching was done, using patches of my upper arm. And I guess there was a little nail root left in my tissue, so I grew a little nail again.

MS. RIEDEL: The nail was taken completely off and the whole tip. It's the right index. Did you actually lose some of the length?

MS. AL-HILALI: Not much. But it was my left index finger. The right one I messed up as a child when we were sleigh riding: the sleigh collapsed on an icy hill and squeezed my finger in half. Now you know all about my war wounds. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Not for the fainthearted.

[Looking through photos.]

MS. AL-HILALI: This was at Joyce's gallery.

MS. RIEDEL: One of the Cassios at the Hunsaker Gallery.

MS. AL-HILALI: This is the beach piece again. I shouldn't interrupt our train of thought; we were looking for numbers.

It really looked like—like many things. Here like a little army disappearing over the hill.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of the way you described the desert in Afghanistan, and the endless hills of sand.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I'm satisfied that it was compatible. It kind of fused—

MS. RIEDEL: With the environment, with the beach.

MS. AL-HILALI: Venice Beach.

MS. RIEDEL: It feels very much at home there. That was '74—1975, I think. So you had to bury the entire understructure, the connection in the sand, so just the top pieces would protrude.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, just a little—like little sprouts. And I like that feeling that the main object is covered and just a little bit of it shows.

MS. RIEDEL: Like an iceberg.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it would have been hard to bury so many little individual pieces. So the main body or connective tissue was physically immersed and settled in the sand there.

I did these site-specific pieces—this is the *Red Feather* project in Buffalo, New York—

MS. RIEDEL: This is in New York Artpark, right. Such a beautiful saturated red. And there were 40 feathers strapped to a fence, is that how it worked?

MS. AL-HILALI: It could be, I don't remember how many there were.

MS. RIEDEL: This is 1979. And one of the things that Marilyn mentioned that I didn't know was that this was on the land that had been part of the Love Canal. She said you hopped over a fence and there was this beautiful, colorful ooze that you were photographing, only to find out that it was extraordinarily toxic.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I was wading in this poison.

MS. RIEDEL: And these feathers look like they were eight feet tall maybe?

MS. AL-HILALI: Look at the photo of them on the floor there. And can you see here this little person standing next to it, so you can get an idea about how tall they were. Definitely more than eight feet. Here is where we had them installed along the river, and they were brand new and nice—and that's how they look after the rainstorm. See, we had glued them together, and then in the rain, the glue started to dissolve, and then it hardened again, but it hardened in a different kind of shape.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, they start off looking like perfectly flat, beautiful feathers.

MS. AL-HILALI: And then they're more like skin stretched over bones. They were kind of nice along the fence there. And then we moved them, had them go up the stairs.

MS. RIEDEL: Overlooking a river, is that right?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, the Niagara River. We had them going up the stairs, and then another day, we carried them into the forest, which was nearby, where they looked good amongst the greenery.

MS. RIEDEL: So they moved through the landscape over how much space—a mile?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't know. They were light enough to be moved around. Yes, they were designed so they could be moved around relatively easily.

But we were limited in where we could set up the feathers. My first impulse was to make holes in the ground to stand them upright in the landscape. But I was quickly stopped and told I must not do any digging at all. There was only a thin crust over all the bubbling toxic stuff underground. So we had to tie them onto the river fence, or to the stair railings, or bushes or trees, or any other existing structure.

MS. RIEDEL: It took what, a week, the whole process?

MS. AL-HILALI: Probably two weeks—some days to construct the pieces, to laminate the fabric over the spine and ribs, and then the remaining time to set them up in various parts of the park.

MS. RIEDEL: The red was just brilliant.

MS. AL-HILALI: It seemed appropriate.

MS. RIEDEL: You seem to have a love for that brilliant, sumptuous red.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, okay, let's see what we forgot. Oh, this is nice. I should have shown—these slugs. They look like slugs in that picture.

MS. RIEDEL: This is the *Tongues* again. These are great installation shots.

MS. AL-HILALI: Then this was an installation at—

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right, at Cal Poly [California Polytechnic State University, at Pomona].

MS. AL-HILALI: Cal Poly Pomona.

MS. RIEDEL: Like a plastic curtain made of a multitude of strips.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it filled the whole atrium, a multistory atrium. And it just filled the entire space.

MS. RIEDEL: And then the light streamed in and made a beautiful atmosphere of stripes and shadows on the floor and through the plastic curtains. And this was in '82. So there was a period of installations for a while?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, these site-specific installations happened intermittently, as opportunity arose.

I was happy that I was invited to do the installation there at Cal Poly. The people gave me leeway, the confidence, so I could do whatever I wanted to do.

MS. RIEDEL: And a breeze came through here, or did you run a fan?

MS. AL-HILALI: No fan. A breeze wafted in through the doors, which were open most of the time. It was very fluid, and got stirred up every time somebody walked across the atrium. It was sort of like swimming through a floating medium.

MS. RIEDEL: So people could walk through it. And it was huge. It was 25 feet by 25 feet by 35 feet.

MS. AL-HILALI: So we had to figure out a system of hanging these hundreds of strips.

MS. RIEDEL: And what did you mark on it? Did you use paint on the plastic?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, it was paint. We had to try different things, because paint doesn't usually stick to plastic. They have a feathery quality; some of them do.

And it also, well, it's like crosshatching in mid-air. That was nice, because the idea of having this space and softening it with kind of airborne hatch marks.

MS. RIEDEL: What inspired you to use plastic this time?

MS. AL-HILALI: I guess it seemed a good medium to fill that large space without closing it.

MS. RIEDEL: There's an illusionistic quality that's very strong in this piece. And the movement and gesture is really pleasant.

MS. AL-HILALI: It was nice, because of the size, and the whole thing was just kind of breathing. I enjoyed that I could make a cube, which is an utterly geometric and rigid form, into a breathing medium.

MS. RIEDEL: Then also, the light participates in this piece more than any of the other pieces.

MS. AL-HILALI: I'm glad we painted it just with whites and beiges.

MS. RIEDEL: And little bits of reds and browns.

MS. AL-HILALI: I think those were the shadows. Anyway, kind of low-key.

MS. RIEDEL: It's very beautiful. It feels like you've created, really, a world here.

MS. AL-HILALI: Now, these are the *Black Feathers*. And why I did those, nobody knows.

MS. RIEDEL: We talked a couple of years ago, and you talked about climbing a ladder in your studio with these huge black feathers, and then dropping them just to watch how they fell.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, I don't mean to interrupt. This is another plastic strip thing. I did a workshop at Harbourfront Art Center, in Toronto, Canada. We painted sheets of plastic on the floor and then cut them into strips and suspended them to have these interacting fields of color. It was really a 3-D painting.

Back to the *Black Feathers*, I think you saw pictures of where I just dropped the feathers.

MS. RIEDEL: You talked about experimenting just for the sake of it.

MS. AL-HILALI: I had made them in the first place for this shaft of light in our studio. I really don't know why I had to do it; they were never shown anywhere else.

MS. RIEDEL: But then you cut them up and turned them into other things.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I had to do something with them. But it was nice just to have them there for a while.

MS. RIEDEL: Did they stand like a forest at one point, or hang?

MS. AL-HILALI: You see this big light shaft coming through the skylight, and they were rising into it, or rather suspended from it. And that was near the time that I did the beach piece. And it, too, wasn't very practical. I just did things—

MS. RIEDEL: And people come to see it? Did you invite people to come to see the installation?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't remember if anybody saw it. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: It's interesting how it gets so pale and bleached-out towards the top, towards the skyline.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it was a bright light that hit them.

MS. RIEDEL: This must have been shortly after the *Red Feathers*.

MS. AL-HILALI: No, no. It was long before. The *Red Feathers* came much later.

The idea had been of doing something light that could be moved around, of a size large enough to be seen in the landscape, to function outdoors. So our *Red Feathers* were light enough to be carried around and moved around the park. They were relatively fragile and impermanent.

Then I did this thing in the Old Field Hall at Notre Dame in Southbend, Indiana.

MS. RIEDEL: Right, let's talk about that.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I was invited to give [a] workshop.

MS. RIEDEL: That was in '79.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and there was this old field hall which wasn't used anymore. So I did these fabric things which were a response to the shape of the space, the curved girders in the ceiling, and it being a big, high space. Wing shapes or shapes in flight seemed to be called for. But to hang them up was a trick.

MS. RIEDEL: You tied a rope to a rock. [Laughs.]

MS. AL-HILALI: You're right; that's how we did it. And you don't know how difficult that was, because you had to gauge how far away the rope should cross the girders so that the object pulled up would hang with the proper curve. It wasn't just getting the rope up there; it had to be in the right spot, and you had to estimate whether this rope should go above or below the previous rope. And so, yes, we tied the rock at the end of the rope and threw it until we got it over the right beam. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And these were white kite, or banner, shapes.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. They had little strips of wood, sort of like a kite, with little ribs across. The result was these simple, abstract bird shapes. Actually, birds were flying in and out the old field house; a lot of window panes were broken; so it was natural to make sort of a bird thing.

MS. RIEDEL: How high was the ceiling? It seems really high.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes, it was high; it was very high.

MS. RIEDEL: Like two or three stories at least?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, it was a whole stadium—let's say, a little stadium. And to hit the right spot among the girders was almost impossible.

MS. RIEDEL: And there was only one student or two students—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. There was one young man that helped. He made the project his business—[laughs]—and helped me to the end. We worked at it mostly in the evening. Nobody else was interested, so we spent our time throwing rocks attached to the ropes that would pull up those bird kites. And I thank him sincerely. I'll never forget this adventure. Bless his heart.

MS. RIEDEL: And how long was this installation up for?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't know. I just left it up. Maybe they left it up awhile, because as I said, the field hall was in disuse.

MS. RIEDEL: And it was all white? It's the only white piece of yours that I can think of.

MS. AL-HILALI: It was kind of an off-white, natural color. Maybe it was what I had available.

MS. RIEDEL: But everything normally is so brightly colored or patterned.

MS. AL-HILALI: In the old field house, with deteriorating clutter all around, it needed something simple. Clean shapes rising up and flying seemed the thing to do.

MS. RIEDEL: It's beautiful. It's very minimal.

MS. AL-HILALI: I tried to mirror to an extent, to echo, the structure, the curves of the girders.

MS. RIEDEL: So it was really inspired by the space, very site-specific.

MS. AL-HILALI: Okay, what else have we here? Yes, here are some of my geometric weavings. They are simple shapes and colors. And in the photo you don't see the variations, the color range, but it was quite rich.

MS. RIEDEL: These are earlier weavings?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I did them kind of all along.

MS. RIEDEL: Did you?

MS. AL-HILALI: When I had commissions for weavings. They started relatively early, but I continued to do them because I liked to weave. Some were pretty large. This one was huge. Weaving was basically a pure pleasure which I cannot quite compare to anything else. We dyed all the shades, each one a pleasure in itself. I like to do the shading to make the image more dimensional.

MS. RIEDEL: Here's another one of the commissioned weavings. And again you're creating dimensional form through the shading of the pattern.

MS. AL-HILALI: So I was very busy with commissions, with installations, workshops, lectures, et cetera.

MS. RIEDEL: And then you had a retrospective in '85.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I had to pull many pieces together from different locations. I had to raise the *Black Passage* one last time, which in itself was really hard, because every time when I had it installed in the past, I would be there to install it, but not for the taking down. I used to say, just cut it down, any way you have to, into pieces. Then the next time, I had to figure out how to connect it again, to create it out of bags full of pieces.

MS. RIEDEL: Where is it now?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, it's still in my garage, but I think it's rotted by now. I haven't looked at it for a long time. I have to figure out a way to dispose of it honorably. I couldn't face hanging it again. The best thing would be to cremate it, but where?

[Audio break.]

Yes, I was always just rushing, rushing, rushing, rushing—always forcing myself to keep going. My only thinking time was while I was driving. I was always planning and creating all this stuff, and hauling it off. I get so tired just thinking of it.

There came a time when I went home to Europe. I closed up the studio and went to see my folks. And I'm certainly glad I did the year I went, because since then, my little sister died and also my mother. For 30 years I had hardly ever seen them. Sometimes on my way through Europe to somewhere else, I saw them for a couple of days.

So I closed my studio and spent one year with them. I thought they had probably forgotten all about me. Half of the year I spent with my little sister. She was running a kindergarten. When I got there, low and behold, she had little Cassios hanging all over the kindergarten. I was really moved. She had interpreted the pictures she had seen and constructed her own little Cassios. I was very moved and realized that I meant something to her.

MS. RIEDEL: So you went back in the mid-'80s?

MS. AL-HILALI: It must have been the late '80's because '91 to '93 I taught three more years at UCLA after I came back from Germany.

And so I made the best of my time with her. I made her a magic sweater. She was great with needlework herself. All my sisters were good with needlecraft one way or another. Remember, the fiber gene runs in my family. So she had all these yarns and we bought more, and I knitted her the most beautiful sweater with all colors and in zigzag patterns, the whole rainbow, but mostly blue and yellow in stripes and combinations, the best I could do. And it had fringes and little pockets with tasseled covers. I made secret double pockets and other surprises so she could do magic tricks for the little ones in her kindergarten.

I'm glad I had that time with her. There are many things in your life that you wish you had done and you missed your chance, and then there is something that you did and you're glad that you did it.

MS. RIEDEL: How old was she?

MS. AL-HILALI: Young.

[END CD03]

MS. RIEDEL: This is Mija Riedel interviewing Neda Al-Hilali in the artist's home in Los Angeles, California, on Wednesday, July 19, 2006, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number four.

Okay, so we were going to wind this up. Tell me about the exhibitions, and then we'll talk about your working process. Tell me about the exhibitions and the importance of some of your work.

MS. AL-HILALI: Okay, about the importance. Some pieces were naturally more important to me than others. *Atlantis* was very important to me. For some time, let's say from the beginning of working with paper, I subjected it to different types of treatment, changed it by wetting it, cutting it up, painting, and pressing it. By doing all that, I was kind of in the mode of process art, where you examine a material and subject it to different processes and observe the effects. So that was a lot what was happening when I was working with paper. I remember other artists working in this direction, like Charles Christopher Hill; he was doing these fabric pieces which he buried and kept buried for some time to see what would happen.

Speaking of process art, I remember one piece I did—it was really big, huge. And I thought I'd try something else. I had been trying all these wet methods. I had been trying water. What about trying fire? [Laughs.] So, at Scripps, at nighttime, we dragged it to the kiln area. I wasn't sure what we were going to do. We would try anything. So we wetted it to some extent so it wouldn't just burn up. I don't remember if we put clay over it or what else we did, and then we put the heat on it.

MS. RIEDEL: Torches?

MS. AL-HILALI: I think we had some metal tools, road-working tools. We would heat them in the glass-firing kilns and stamp them on the art all over, and—[laughs]—we were in the midst of the process, and all of a sudden, the whole thing—[laughs].

MS. RIEDEL: Burst into flames?

MS. AL-HILALI: Here and there the flames shot up. Douse it, stomp on it. Oh, that was a process piece. [They laugh.] The best thing about it is my memory of dancing between the fire; that's what I always had wanted to do. Yes, I think that was the height of my process experience. It really didn't lead anywhere, but it's a nice memory. We had to do it by night so we wouldn't be in the students' or teachers' way. It was fun to dance around between the fire.

MS. RIEDEL: Would there be students that would assist you?

MS. AL-HILALI: I'm sure there was somebody there with me who helped me, helped me drag it there. If you have a big thing, it's one thing, but if you have a big wet thing, that's another story.

So with these works I paralleled the Process movement in contemporary art. On the other hand, earlier I mentioned some pieces, which were very simple, which were my version of Minimalist art. The beach piece in a way could be called that, but it can be called other things too.

Then all of a sudden there was the movement of Pattern Painting, another contemporary trend. So, well, fine and good, I was doing patterns from day one.

Especially in my many pressed-paper pieces, I always tried to orchestrate quite a number of different patterns. I aimed at a musical harmony of different patterns and beats. We had talked before about my admiration for jazz, the rhythms, the tone color, the syncopations. So many of my paper pieces were a study in complexity of patterns.

On the other hand, with the Cassiopeias, the patterns had a different function. They aimed at proclaiming baroque, boisterous exuberance. Not intricacy, but large gestural movement—joy.

Some of the Pattern painters I enjoyed, but others I found a little empty. I felt insulted when somebody took a coloring book of Islamic patterns and then, almost in mockery of the brilliance that Islamic patterns can be copied, the coloring book simplification, and called it their art.

MS. RIEDEL: And what you loved so much about the Islamic tile work was the nuance and richness of color and variations.

MS. AL-HILALI: Middle Eastern tile work is a crystallization of form, with their repeat of one pattern and another, which from a distance turns into another overriding form, creating a vibration which I call "beneficial vibration." So I especially like the geometric patterns rather than vases, et cetera. They seem to me more intricate, complex, and magical. It's like building crystals out of molecules.

So, much of my work was in a way parallel with the Pattern painters and was shown in exhibitions with them.

MS. RIEDEL: Nineteen eighty-three, for sure, *L.A. Pattern Painters*, Arco Center for Visual Art.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, that was one of the shows where I was included amongst the Pattern painters. I was not that much part of an art trend, but the involvement with pattern, its energy, vibration, and gesture, was part of my hereditary connection with textiles, the aforementioned fiber gene.

I did not have to drag patterns out of black-and-white coloring books. It was part of me from the beginning.

MS. RIEDEL: And we just looked at three blue-and-white plates in the kitchen, from Morocco. Extraordinary patterns.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, they are just in two colors, and even though they are plates, their design resembles what you see a lot of time in tile work or calligraphy. It shows how one image is part of a larger image, and an even larger one, and how they all joined in different ways so that you have an eight-pointed star, but at the same time three triangles, and so forth. Just by blinking your eye, you see it differently, blink, blink, blink, blink, and you see the parts join in different ways, very close to magic.

Obviously, coming out of a long tradition, it wasn't devised by one person overnight. The enjoyment of pattern, the depth of pattern, it's something so rich, a very brilliant visual affair; at the same time, it's such a mathematical accomplishment that is gratifying to the whole being.

MS. RIEDEL: When you went there to Mazar, did you go there deliberately as a pilgrimage because you knew you wanted to see that, or did you stumble on it?

MS. AL-HILALI: When I was in Afghanistan, I heard about Mazar Ash-Sharif. I had seen pictures. I was in the south of Afghanistan, and I thought I ought to go and see that. This man was willing to drive us, so we went. And I am so happy I did. I have slides here of hundreds of different patterns. They all just sparkle together, each panel and each niche. When you found a mistake—I mean an unexpected variation—it was so gratifying, because it said, this has been done by a human being.

MS. RIEDEL: It must have made a very strong impression.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it made an absolutely permanent impression. My life would not be the same if I had not seen this. We're getting a little sidetracked again, we were on the subject of Pattern painters, but it showed me whatever I already knew.

There isn't too much to say. Pattern comes out of fiber work. Pattern and fiber work, you cannot separate one from the other. So I was a natural Pattern painter, sometimes recognized as such, usually not. I worked with layers of patterns, creating a visual depth. And I also worked with patterns in motion. With fabrics, that is natural. Think of garments or curtains and banners. They are in motion, flexible. So I thought my Cassios, with their shapes of frozen motion, in a sense were proper conveyers of pattern.

MS. RIEDEL: An appropriate form for the patterns.

MS. AL-HILALI: Anyway, so I found myself working parallel to the Pattern painters.

The other thing, which was relatively new in the arts, which was a contemporary trend, was the installations, the happenings and events. The events and happenings seemed a natural expression of my energy at that time.

MS. RIEDEL: And you went back and forth more successfully than most artists, working with the material traditionally associated with the craft, into the art world, back and forth, and that is cited over and over again.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it happened. But I also took very conscious steps, and I described them, how it went from the sumptuous fiber to the neutral paper towel. They were conscious decisions in the development of my work. But essentially it was always an inner need, a desire and instinct that I followed.

There was this natural interaction and participation in the art scene, and especially in the California art scene with all its joyfulness and daring and exuberance. I considered myself definitely a California product from that point of view. I think only in California could I have done what I did. It was a good place to have beach happenings, where you could have good weather when you needed it. [Laughs.] And things like that. Because for happenings, you want to be outdoors.

At the beginning of my art life, it was the hippie days; people were willing to do foolish things, yes. And so I think I was lucky that I ended up in California at that particular time. I don't know, if I had remained in Germany and the winter lands, that I could have done what I did. So that was lucky that I ended up here. Especially after the pressure of my marriage, I just bounced up, and then I was bouncing for a while. [Laughs.] That worked out. It just did.

MS. RIEDEL: You sprang back.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, I was lucky.

On the other hand, from the beginning and from a long time ago, from the time I sat in the attic secretly stitching that carpet, I found myself deeply connected to the beginnings of human consciousness: when people started decorating themselves, when they started being aware of a sense of aesthetic and they started functioning as human beings. That means thinking not only of clothing, but of adornment.

I feel connected to the need of the simple person who found himself attracted by a shining blue stone, who had the intelligence to create a weave, to device a system, and then immediately to feel the need for variations, to amplify through decoration. As soon as we accomplished the weave, I bet you there was immediately the stripe and other patterns.

So in most parts of the world, fiber work was practiced early. It's the earliest, most universal art form next to ceramics. Every household had the women weaving and making clothing. The women, as extensions of their warmth, created protective coverings.

MS. RIEDEL: The clothes for the family.

MS. AL-HILALI: In some places, men were or are the weavers. But generally, universally, the men were out hunting and the women were at home with the children. And gradually, in the course of centuries, people devised a thousand ways of needlework or fiber work, looping, plaiting, basket weaving, et cetera. Expressing humans' awareness of the aesthetic qualities in the world. System, beauty, and pattern. And I cannot help feeling proud of that weaver who developed a zigzag, a curving zigzag in his baskets, something so essentially beautiful that it's just about perfect. Every culture on earth proved its desire or need to adorn themselves.

Think of the people in colder climates who had to rely on fish and animal skins in order to cover themselves, so they created designs out of fish skin.

I think one has to look hard for any indigenous clothing that doesn't have some decoration. And of course, they are plain everyday clothes, but every culture had its special garments that were masterpieces of human creativity, combinations of forms in balance, expressive rhythms and patterns, the awareness of the power of symbols, produced through billions of hours.

It's not like the culmination in a big cathedral, even though that was a work of many hands, but man's adornments are such a broad-reaching effort, they're like a butterfly cloak surrounding the entire earth. It's just there. And we should be proud of it, that we are a being that has this creative capacity in ourselves, that we can let emanate through our fingertips the creative energy that turns the items of our surroundings into blossoms, a reflection of what we see, what is given to us, but also a transformation and reaffirmation of the marvels of our world.

You see your surroundings, your flowers, your world. And you are lucky enough to be aware of them and their beauty. That is the important thing. And since we are aware of the gifts of our world, the best we can do is try and offer it back. Give the presents back, ingest them and let them flow out through our hands again. That can be as modest as a little zigzag, a little curve, or a full blossom for a special occasion. It just seems right to be aware and to be thankful for the gifts—the palm frond and everything—and use it in giving back and wear it as a badge of honor.

Here's one other thing—why the desert countries are so important. When you go through lands where there's nothing but rocks, sand, and desert, a hot dry nothing, you certainly value a flower. You value color. It's so important. All-important. And that's why out of the desert come the carpets. This is the garden that you can roll out anywhere. That's why the desert people have the carpet. They need it. And they need to have colorful clothes. And they need to have the blue mosque at the end of the journey over all these desert mountains.

MS. RIEDEL: Now what is this, Neda? It's a little textile?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, this is a textile that comes from the north of Afghanistan, where it borders on Bukhara [in Uzbekistan]. It's made by nomads, and it's a certain style that's typical of the area. It happens to be mainly red and black.

MS. RIEDEL: And what—

MS. AL-HILALI: It's a little tablecloth. In this area, that kind of chain stitch was very popular. But look at it: it's so brilliant. It's abstract, but if you want, you can see bugs with antennas, or some other creatures. It's a strange combination of a square thing with definite strong waves. It's bold and detailed and colorful.

MS. RIEDEL: Black and red, green, blue, yellow.

MS. AL-HILALI: There's a whole series of them.

MS. RIEDEL: And fringe.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes, the fringe, and the little border, and then the lining in the back; isn't that special? It has its own pattern.

So what causes a person to make a thing like this? It's like your mind and the world and everything else, a whole cosmos.

MS. RIEDEL: Circle at the center with waves—

MS. AL-HILALI: Circle and the cross and the square—

MS. RIEDEL: Four quadrants.

MS. AL-HILALI: And the waves going one way and another and—

MS. RIEDEL: So again, it's an intersecting of seemingly completely discordant patterns, all fitting together in a way that forms something entirely new.

MS. AL-HILALI: It's a system with a purpose. There is a symmetry, but it's a kind of natural symmetry, not a forced one. Because you see on a butterfly, the wings are not the same.

MS. RIEDEL: And the fringe is a couple different colors.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, it's a little faded.

MS. RIEDEL: And the border.

MS. AL-HILALI: You can see, you can tell, it's a style that has a tradition, but leaves room for the maker to be inventive. And then these little stick things. On the one hand, the design is systematic. It goes three-three-three—three yellow ones, then come two yellow and one blue. Or then he gets into a pattern where he is alternating three yellow and three blue. And I just love discovering a system, and a contradiction to the system. And here he shades a light blue and a dark blue, very fancy. Or this area—the direction of the stitch makes a pattern. The whole thing so bold and proud and lively.

MS. RIEDEL: Well, it's interesting, too, because there is this wave pattern and insects. So again, the way you describe a carpet as being the rolling out of a garden, here is water and life.

MS. AL-HILALI: We know every little thing has a meaning.

MS. RIEDEL: So you were in Afghanistan twice, right?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, once in the summer and once in the winter.

MS. RIEDEL: And that was in '74?

MS. AL-HILALI: Seventy-four and either the year before or the year after. The trips were close together. And I knew from my times in Iraq the importance of fiber material in the desert cultures. When I first came to Iraq, it was a real revelation; you might capsulize it in the contrast between the gray sock and a colorful tassel. Because the textile object was not utilitarian in the narrow sense, but an expression of an abundance, richness, wealth, and playfulness. What is a tassel? Of course, it helps keep the flies off a little bit, but mostly it's just an indulgence, and joy.

If you look at some camel gear, you have no idea how elaborate the construction can become. The tassel on the very top was sometimes made out of horsehair so it would stand up; and all these different parts of the gear, the different rows of fringe and tassels, like a whole composition of many parts. And what for? Just to show you're proud of the camel; you have a good camel, a camel to be proud of, and you are well enough to show it, and you're wise enough to show, and you want to show it. [Laughs.]

So it expresses the existence of men in a positive light, where he relates to his environment, to the animal, and he values it. And he shows it. And what better way to show it, besides feeding it, than to adorn it?

I think it's one reason why a lot of people nowadays are unhappy. They are stopped up. Every person, I think, naturally wants to produce something that is satisfying, pleasing, not necessarily beautiful, but something that

has integrity. And a lot of people nowadays don't have a chance to do that, by a long shot. They don't learn how to use their hands, and they don't do much with their minds. They just get bombarded and don't have a chance really to develop their own form of mind, their own opinion.

People now from childhood on are flooded with commercials and TV; they are formed into a shape that is a general shape. They don't even know that they are supposed to be a channel and something might come through them.

I think that's when we are the happiest, when we feel connected and we know we are receiving and we are giving. I think that's natural. You breathe in and you breathe out. If you receive something beautiful, or if you see something beautiful, you want to do something good. You want to be nice. You maybe want to make something beautiful yourself.

MS. RIEDEL: And do you see that more routinely among the desert culture?

MS. AL-HILALI: No, not necessarily. You find that in every culture you can think of. I think I was lucky to grow up before the time of TV. You had to do something with your time. You read, or you made something. And I was also lucky to experience some of the cultures before they were all modernized, even though they were on their way. But I think I was very lucky. At the same time, it's so sad. It breaks your heart. I got to see Afghanistan before it was butchered.

MS. RIEDEL: You saw the Buddhas before they were—

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes. I saw the big Buddha of Bamiyan before he got blown up. And that's, yes, that's the big accomplishment of this day and age, to get a big bomb, and powerful explosives.

MS. RIEDEL: You talked about meeting a curator, too, in Afghanistan, who hid treasures in caves so they would be safe.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, at the time when I visited Kabul, the curator or director of the museum, Mr. Barakzai, was a nice man, a very, very civilized man. And he was glad to show me what they had when I was doing this research on textiles. Their textile collection was not very extensive, but he was very happy to show me everything they had and got it out of various corners, and everything was rather primitive. But they also had the Begram treasure. And there were several things from Alexander's time. And I remember one thing, it was a dish with silverfishes. It was a special inventive construction that had the little fish move and flicker in the water. And then there were also in the museum from the Kushan Empire these ivory thrones and carvings and other incredible treasures.

Anyway, the room with the treasures was locked every night. At the closing ceremony each day a big padlock was attached to the main door, and a piece of paper tape was glued over the lock, and Mr. Barakzai wrote his signature on the tape. And in the morning ceremoniously, the staff assembled and all saw that the paper was not torn, the signature was still in tact, and they would open the room. That was their security system.

I heard later that when the Russians took over the country, they backed up the truck to the museum and shoveled everything in. And then later on, one time in the newspaper I read that before the Russians could do that, bless their heart—and it must have been Mr. Barakzai and people like him who had taken their most valuable treasures and put them in a safe and buried it somewhere. I was very happy to hear that. They had risked their lives to do that, and bless their hearts for having had the courage and sense of duty to do that.

But now nothing is safe over there.

So I sympathize with and I think about Afghanistan, the Bukhara region in the north where they produce all these ikats. You know what they look like; I have some here. This happens to be a green one, but I want the red one. All these ikats come in narrow width because they are done on little backstrap looms. All these ikats are silk, and the method of producing the pattern is very complicated, because you have to dye the individual threads before you weave the cloth. Each little section had to be tied off separately, and a curve in the pattern will consist of innumerable little steps. And all this painstaking work took place in very primitive surroundings with absolutely glorious results.

MS. RIEDEL: What are these, Neda? Robes, men's robes?

MS. AL-HILALI: There are not many things as bold and as striking as a Bukhara ikat robe. And look at the lining—the lining is an unexpected extra.

MS. RIEDEL: The linings are pink and yellow and white and this incredible dandelion pattern. Red and green and white, and that's the lining, an incredible floral dandelion pattern, totally unexpected.

MS. AL-HILALI: And I just love these people for creating something like that, out there where it's basically desert, to stand there and produce such flowers, such blossoming of color and beautiful designs. That's why I respect them so much, and I can't stand the fact that all this has been ruined and is gone. Modern technology is stopping it in the first place, and a bomb will stop it even more thoroughly.

MS. RIEDEL: And this is exquisite. It's green silk with tiny pink stripes.

MS. AL-HILALI: And there's this funny thing, the cut of it. This developed from the habit of men wearing their robes just over the shoulders without using the sleeves. So eventually, the robes developed into a form where the original sleeves were just nonfunctional strips hanging down the back.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, yes, I see. The sleeves are just tied behind.

MS. AL-HILALI: They're held together with a piece of embroidered cloth. The overlong sleeves come out of the courtly tradition. In the old days, it was polite and protocol to have your hands covered, so you always had this extra-length sleeve hanging down over your hands. But that goes way back.

MS. RIEDEL: And now they no longer function as sleeves. They've been completely transformed.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, just like today we have collars [that] are not functional. They're just a habit or a tradition. So I think those overlong sleeves, when you walk along and have them trailing behind you, it makes you kind of dignified.

MS. RIEDEL: There is a lot of variation in the stripes on green silk.

This little tablecloth that we have here, you collected also in '74 during your research trip? Everything seems so special. This dress is a saturated purple.

MS. AL-HILALI: Full of little stitches, and even a simple dress has a lining. The lining isn't just hanging there, but it's attached to the silk fabric in many rows of little stitches. Do you see how the whole dress is stitched in rows? It gives the garment more body, and even though it's relatively simple, it has this beautiful embroidery around the neck.

MS. RIEDEL: Absolutely beautiful, and again that iridescent sheen, and tiny little stitches everywhere. This would all be handsewn.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes. And this deep purple is one of their favorite colors. When I picked up this one dress, it was torn in the back. I replaced this section with a patch, and I tried to do it in the same manner with the rows of tiny stitches. I had to patch the dress because I wanted to wear it.

MS. RIEDEL: You were wearing the dress after you repaired it?

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes; oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: It is spectacular. When would that date from, Neda? Any idea?

MS. AL-HILALI: It could have been almost contemporary to the time I was visiting, but that was over 40 years ago. But the style is very traditional and distinct, so it could have been from a hundred years ago. It isn't too old, because the fabric is in good condition, but it's in an ancient cut, the gathering under the arms, and the narrow fabric panels.

MS. RIEDEL: The sleeves are so elaborate.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, they like to have the double sleeves.

MS. RIEDEL: Incredibly intricate, tiny embroidered stitches all along the hems of the sleeves and the bodice opening.

And you went traveling throughout the country, is that correct?

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, no, not through the whole country, but I traveled around. I went north as far as Balkh, and then I traveled south to Jalalabad, where the Greek influence was strong.

Afghanistan is a relatively small country, but it's situated between these various cultures. In the north you have Bukhara, southern Siberia with its Mongolian traditions, then you have Persia in the west, China in the east, Pakistan and India in the south. Then in the land itself, you have many distinct textile traditions. The mountain tribes in the Pamirs and the Hazara, they all have their own tradition. Nuristan is another one—Nuristan means

"the country of light." They were the ones who held out the longest against Islam. They held onto their own religion.

MS. RIEDEL: Which was—do you know?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't know much about it. Just that they had dancing shirts—wait, I'll show you one. This is a typical Nuristan dancing shirt. They had them in white too, but a lot of them are in black. They're dancing shirts for men. You see, it's constructed out of these innumerable little gussets, and between even smaller gussets. And it's made for twirling. And then they are decorated with things that sparkle and jangle. Anything they could find.

MS. RIEDEL: Buttons and coins and bells—

MS. AL-HILALI: Coins, and sometimes I saw old metal zippers divided and used to form decorative edges, little wheels—watch wheels, thimbles, and what have you. Here in this embroidery, in the satin stitch, you see a little bit of the influence of Pakistan.

MS. RIEDEL: Tiny bit of beading. Beads along the edge of the sleeve.

MS. AL-HILALI: Bells here. Yes, beads, buttons, and I just love the idea of men doing their dancing through them. Yes, whirling their hearts out. Again, sadly, a thing of their past.

I really should count how many gussets it has, every seam a double seam, because during the whirling, the underside will be visible. So it has to be finished on both sides.

MS. REIDELRIEDEL: I've never seen anything quite like it. It looks like a flamenco skirt, only I don't remember so many gussets.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and it's shorter because it's a man's shirt-skirt.

MS. REIDELRIEDEL: Much shorter, but the flare—

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, the flare, but it's not only a full circle. See, half of it goes around more than 360 degrees. See, one half forms more than a circle.

MS. REIDELRIEDEL: I know I've never seen anything like it. And where did you say it is from?

MS. AL-HILALI: Nuristan, what was once Nuristan.

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, we don't have to pull out—we don't have to pull out anything else.

MS. AL-HILALI: I would have loved to have seen it in action. In full twirl.

MS. RIEDEL: Not something one sees very often.

MS. AL-HILALI: Not anymore.

Very well. So we talked about the necessity in a desert to produce, if you can, a bloom, a blossom—and the necessity to assert yourself as a human being. That means a being who understands beauty.

MS. RIEDEL: Because it was essential in the desert.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, not only in the desert. It is essential for all of us. And we talked about how nowadays, this universal creativity is all blocked up.

MS. RIEDEL: You just came across one thing after another that was strikingly beautiful.

MS. AL-HILALI: I experienced the idea, the acknowledgment of your place in this creation, to recognize it and return its beauty. In a way it's almost a presumption, the kind of pride to roll out your carpet in the desert. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: Something a little defiant.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, to not submit, not to lie down in the dust and let the dust cover you. Rather spend your life making a carpet, making a thing of beauty. Yes, we are in a desert, but I'm going to make a garden here! That seems right. [Laughs.] That seems better than going to tear out the last leaf, last tree.

And in that sense, I feel proud of every simple woman, wherever she may be, in Asia or America, wherever this

simple woman may spend her hours focusing on something beautiful. That doesn't mean complete perfection. It means something that is somehow pleasing, surprising, inventive, gratifying. Repetition and motif, of course, is part of it, and color is a big part, and the gesture, and the symbol.

I like the idea of the mother embroidering the shirt for her child with the symbols of blessings. And they are as effective as anything because she *wills* it.

So now that's one of my most profound pleasures and gratifications, that I was part of this long chain and universal will of humankind that was trying to use the world around it, channel it, give back what you can. The harvest of the needle.

Jesse [Al-Hilali's grandson] said to me the other day when I was sewing up his blanket where the stuffing was coming out, he said: I haven't yet learned how to needle. And I said, I'll teach you how to needle. [They laugh.] And I will teach him, too, because I think the needle is somehow like the pen.

Then if you look all around the world and you see this special embroidery from Bukhara, you find it looks just like the embroidery you bought in Oaxaca, because the patterns and rhythms are so universal. I really found many things that look a lot alike, that are almost exchangeable, from different parts of the world.

MS. RIEDEL: From Afghanistan to Mexico.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and here and there and everywhere. I remember a very long time ago, I was supposed to do a lecture on plaiting. It was for some women's weaving club or something. And I was so young and thorough. I thought I had to know and learn all about plaiting. So I went to the Southwest Museum, which they still had then, and I looked at all the basketry from all of the different Indian tribes. I went to the Museum of Science in Los Angeles. In those days they still had storage up in the rafters, all kinds of Indian artifacts. And I think I went to the ethnic collections at UCLA—that was before they had the Fowler Museum—and I found African baskets and New Guinea masks and other interesting things.

Anyway, I saw the same method used in very similar and very different ways in different parts of the world. Again, I saw evidence of this creative heartbeat from every part of the globe. Oh, it's such a strong gratifying feeling to see not only the motifs universally understood, but also to see the trace of the human hand bending the piece of cane or frond of grass to construct a perfect basket.

Yes, you can find a lot of things in Los Angeles. Nowadays, I guess, you can just go on the computer.

Where I tracked down the laces, I don't remember. Because one of the utterly finest applications of plaiting is bobbin lace. But then, I already knew about laces from my mother.

I think I'm a natural daughter of all my proud mothers. But I'm just sad, and it's hopeless in a way, because everything is disappearing; everything is disappearing. Flowers in the desert? Don't look twice. There's only a bomb crater left.

I know there are many other countries in the world that are suffering and are being murdered and humanity annihilated. It just so happened that I experienced it in Afghanistan personally. That's why I keep mentioning Afghanistan. Now the image of Afghanistan is that of a murderous minefield. But it wasn't like that before the religious fanatics took over.

When I was there it was like a different lifetime, a different place altogether. The people were nice and hospitable and we could just travel anywhere without any fear.

In the winter when I was out there, we traveled one time to an old Buddhist stupa [mound-like shrine], the ruins of a Buddhist monastery; it was all deeply covered in snow. Our driver had to stop because the road stopped. And we started hiking towards the monastery with the stupa. So we were walking across the snow; there was some sort of trail of little steps in the snow, and there was some kind of farmhouses—that means mud-walled compounds—in the distance. We met one person who was carrying a big bundle of firewood.

So we went up to the monastery, and it was interesting because we saw all of the little cells, each with their niche, and it was so beautiful that day. The day was so clear, and we were so high up; we were at the side of the Hundu Kush, and I swear, I never, never in my life had I been able to look so far. We were so high up, and it was crystal clear, and the mountain ranges were going on forever. It was like you were standing on top of the world. Never, by any comparison was I able to look so far; it was endless. The world seemed endless.

On the way back, on the way down from one of the mud houses, somebody was coming toward our path. It was this man—and I don't remember much about him—and he had a piece of bread, and he gave it to me. And it just makes me cry to remember it. I guess that's all he had. And he gave it to us as a sign of hospitality. I'll never

forget that, when that man came and he was giving me what he had.

MS. RIEDEL: That resonates so much with everything you've been saying about giving and receiving. And then about that defiance of spirit in spite of it all, making or doing the best you can, the way you said you would make the best piece, or the best lecture, no matter what—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. It's just horrible to think the whole country is being annihilated. And it's making us all the poorer. I'm lucky I've seen it before, but that's not good enough.

MS. RIEDEL: And you started going to Oaxaca, too, and—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, that was later.

MS. RIEDEL: You were there a number of times.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, a number of times, and I had many good experiences there.

MS. RIEDEL: It's an amazing art center.

MS. AL-HILALI: Oh, yes.

MS. RIEDEL: History, textiles, ceramics, and incredible painting.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes. Have you been in Oaxaca?

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: Monte Alban is great. We'd go at daybreak up there, early, before the tourist buses, before tourist noise. Oh, that was so inspiring. I love Monte Alban. It's like a ship somehow. The huge temple complex on the high plateau, surrounded by valleys all around and then in the distance, mountain ranges.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. AL-HILALI: When you go up the steps to the main pyramid, on the side there they have what they call "the ballplayers," which is nonsense—ballplayers, with all that blooming out of their body? Well, that's another issue.

Going up the steps, as I said, you realize that stone blocks have been re-used from older buildings, and on one of those blocks was a flowering hand. It had this plume coming out of the middle of the palm of the hand. Maybe it was a bleeding hand, but I prefer to think of it as a flowering hand. That's what my trademark, my banner, should be: the flowering hand. I made a paper rubbing of it, but I don't know where I put it. It's in this stylized form, like the ballplayers. I may have to go back and make another rubbing.

Yes, Oaxaca, a culture that has been weaving forever. Really a land of the flowering hand.

MS. RIEDEL: The codices. You did a piece about the codices, and those were on paper, too, which have lasted quite awhile.

MS. AL-HILALI: There are only three left, or anyway very few left, because the Christian missionaries were so good at burning things they couldn't understand.

MS. RIEDEL: So you traveled between Afghanistan and Oaxaca, and anywhere else?

MS. AL-HILALI: I very much enjoyed my trips to Japan, which were another eye-opener. I had very nice introductions. I was not just a surface tourist. Well, I was formerly, and very nicely, received by the museum where we had a show; that means the Museum of Contemporary Art in Kyoto. And then some very special people took me to very special places.

MS. RIEDEL: Where were you in Japan?

MS. AL-HILALI: Mostly in Kyoto. I came in through Tokyo, of course, and then you have to take the bullet train, and you had better be quick. [Laughs.] You better jump when the bell rings. Everybody hops automatically.

So I made very good friends. Some distance out in the country this person had this country house. It was so beautiful. A big old country house with a thick thatched roof. On opposite sides of the single large room, doors could open onto the fields. The owner was Masaki Ueshina, an antique dealer in Kyoto. The best antiques he kept in this house in the country. He never locked a door. It was beautiful. And then in the middle of the house you have the little sunken place under a table where you sit, to keep your legs warm when it gets cold. I'm very grateful to him for what he showed me.

Another time I went with a student of mine who was Japanese. I guess she was a nisei [born in America]. But I went with her, so I was a sensei [teacher], with the privileges that entailed.

I was also taken to a place to see the shibori, the traditional tie-dyeing, which has a long history in Japanese kimono-making. That was especially interesting to me because I had been teaching tie-dyeing for many years at Scripps.

At Scripps we had quite a few students from Japan. And I know my trips to Japan really enabled me to understand them better. I'm not that familiar with China because the closest I got was Hong Kong.

Anyway, so we had this river, this ocean of beautiful energy rippling all around our Earth in colors—not only blue, but red, red and yellow, too. We can be proud of this effort and this gesture. Luckily there are people in some countries who are still active in spreading color and beauty. And we have creative individuals in this country too. But humanity as a whole is the poorer for not using their hands creatively, being reduced to pushing buttons.

[Audio break.]

MS. RIEDEL: Okay, we took a little break.

MS. AL-HILALI: In praise of the tassel.

One thing that happened along the way—I don't remember if I was asked to, or if I proposed to do the tassel lecture. [Laughs.] There I had to do research, and it was fun. Fringes and tassels are really not necessary. I can think of only few cases where a fringe or tassel would be functionally necessary. It's all excess and indulgence and playfulness. I scanned the cultures and what I had from my travels in the Middle East; I already had the best tassels. [Laughs.] Have you seen this one here?

MS. RIEDEL: We're looking at a red beaded tassel dangling from old thimbles and shells at the bottom of them.

MS. AL-HILALI: Look at this one. One tassel subdivided.

MS. RIEDEL: Three tassels dangling from two—six tassels dangling from two tassels.

MS. AL-HILALI: And beautifully and individually wrapped necks and then the bodies made out of something else to give the tassels shape.

MS. RIEDEL: And is this part of a camel's decoration, or would this have been something that somebody wore, a belt or a sash?

MS. AL-HILALI: I don't know. I think more likely animal gear. It's a little large or big for human clothing.

MS. RIEDEL: I can see it draped on a camel.

MS. AL-HILALI: It's a very long band—maybe it was used to fasten the baggage.

I had a great tassel collection. Some of them disintegrated because I had them hanging everywhere. The Chinese tassels I found were more controlled, silken. Like this elaborate composition of precise knots and tassels. What I have here is less animal gear; it's more like royal adornment, court furnishings.

Among the Indians, the fringe of soft leather attached to their clothing was very popular, and I saw some with some little silver cones attached to each string.

And I saw things from Indonesia and from those parts of the world, where the whole dress was covered with fringe and little bells and tinkling with every movement.

I went through several textile collections to educate myself. There definitely is a whole science to tassel-making. The tassel is the beautiful extra; the variations on tassels in many cultures of our world is endless. The tassel is like the loophole in the firm structure of the practical use of fibers, an outlet to creative whimsy, and play, a showing-off of materials, and pure joy.

I think today there is no need for me to knit socks or hem the linen. We get it all already made from China. So I think maybe I should use up some fibers that I still have around to make some special tassels. Maybe I should.

Apart from that, rather than making fiber objects, I would rather do drawings or paintings of flowers, because I still like to look them in the eye. [Laughs.]

MS. RIEDEL: And it should be said, your walls are filled with your drawings and paintings of flowers.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, and you find most of them all down there.

MS. RIEDEL: Down in your garden?

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes.

MS. RIEDEL: Which is a pretty extraordinary garden with bergamots, amaryllis, bromeliads, and succulents.

MS. AL-HILALI: This little one we call a Mexican orchid.

MS. RIEDEL: Oh, right, the blooms are like little ballerinas.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, so what were we saying before we got sidetracked again—the tassel. A tassel is kind of like the dessert, the icing on the cake. It's frivolous, it's unnecessary, but it's important. [Laughs.] And of course, one of the places it found its culmination was in the camel trappings. But there were other instances where the tassel developed to greatness, so to speak.

MS. RIEDEL: One thing you wrote in an artist's statement—you were talking about your work making accessible the flavor of certain memories past and future.

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, yes. The future is a little hard to defend or explain. I'm just not yet accustomed, or resigned to, synthetics. But the flavor of the memories past, that's like an endless store of dreams. The past is really just another place, and all is also concurrent. I talked about my friend who I met, or intersected with, in many lifetimes. Very important the Mayan times, for example, and the headdresses. I was very involved with the headdresses. To make one now would not mean duplicating them, but kind of remembering the flavor of it.

Yes, the flavor of memories. I think in art-making one somehow tries to recapture the feeling of paradise, of happiness, of well-being that can take, or has taken, so many forms and colors through the eons of our memories.

There are many things to speculate about: the nature of time, which gives us either memories or dreams or concurrent experiences that bubble through each other. Or another thing to wonder about: the nature of joy that arises at moments at what we see, the meeting of certain colors or sounds that will cause our being to shift into another state. On and on. Ah, yes, the flavor of memories.

MS. RIEDEL: It makes me think of that tiny talisman that you made that took so much time and effort, and somehow it makes me think of your talk about tassels, too, just so much energy put into such a tiny object.

MS. AL-HILALI: Into a little thing to hold in your hand.

MS. RIEDEL: It would be interesting after all the large-scale, huge architectural pieces—

MS. AL-HILALI: Yes, well, I have in my other garage a box full of spools of sewing thread, and sewing thread itself is too fine to do much with, but you can wind them together. I could make tassels of very fine strands. I think I could do that, start making nice special tassels and give them to friends for Christmas decorations. Maybe they like them.

I gave a lot of my drawings to people. I took some to Germany to my sisters. I gave my best ones to my sisters because they liked them. And I liked putting in their homes these marks of positive energy, because my flower paintings are definitely all about appreciation of life.

MS. RIEDEL: They're so bright, they feel like California.

MS. AL-HILALI: I did a whole series of little nasturtiums. My sisters liked them because they have them in the garden, too, but only a couple of months of the year, not like here where you have them the year-round.

I did a lot of amaryllis paintings because that's a flower my father had in his office. In the cold countries you have sometimes flowers that grow miraculously inside. In his little office he had this one pot which produced this red bloom every year. You would think it wouldn't grow in snow country, so I made this big energetic painting of red amaryllis in memory of my father's amaryllis.

MS. RIEDEL: I feel we've mostly covered everything. Is there anything, a final thought or anything you'd like to just sum up with?

MS. AL-HILALI: My final thought is what I mentioned a couple of times. I feel very lucky that I was born at a place

and time where the fiber crafts and needle work were still actively practiced as part of everyday life, so that I can feel like part of that long chain of needle workers and weavers that goes back through the ages.

And I feel lucky that I was put by fate in a time and place where I could practice the fiber arts freely, where I had the choice of doing anything with my medium, where I was even encouraged to do so. California in the '70s was definitely the place to be for an inventive craftsperson or artist.

MS. RIEDEL: Yes, I thought about that yesterday.

MS. AL-HILALI: Well, I had the chance to do all these different things. I had the energy, and whatever blew through me, or whatever I had in myself, I did my best to pass it on, and to give it back. That felt so right, and it was truly living.

Yes, the heritage of the fiber worker is being eliminated; it's like a garden that's being bulldozed. We can find traces here and there, but basically it's being killed, like our environment is being killed. And that's how it is. You can try your best to tell people about the past and try to teach some people some of it, but basically it's all just like—it's almost all like a memory.

I'm glad for every corner in our world, for every instance where the hand is still alive, and the connection is still there, the circle, the river still runs. It's incredible: instead of giving back what we get, we kill it. We don't want it, and then what are we going to do? It's just really, really sad: the chain of tradition and the creative hand is broken in most places.

I'm so proud to be part of the species that produced these things that I have here, and all these beautiful things like them. They were adding something to this world.

MS. RIEDEL: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] This is [an image of] the dancing shirts, with all its seams.

MS. AL-HILALI: Let's see—eight, nine, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, times four, that makes 120 vertical seams to make the fullness of the skirt, 120 seams of tidy, tight stitches. She seamed it and she double-seamed it: 120 double seams.

MS. RIEDEL: It's almost unimaginable.

MS. AL-HILALI: I would do it for my man. [Laughs.] That's what we are proud of, to do something that you really don't think you can accomplish.

MS. RIEDEL: You certainly did that.

MS. AL-HILALI: In a very small measure. Yes, we should set out to do more than seems possible for us, and probably we will be able to do it. But I doubt that we will be able to turn around the trend of our self-destruction on our Earth.

MS. RIEDEL: I wish the trend could be turned around.

MS. AL-HILALI: But greed is too powerful. All you can do is try to conduct yourself honorably and responsibly. Appreciate the beauty of our world and participate in it where you can. Be thankful, and above all, be kind.

MS. RIEDEL: Neda, thank you so much for going through all those memories and explaining things in such detail. I know sometimes that was a little painful, but thank you so much for taking the time and effort to go back and visit all that.

MS. AL-HILALI: I'm glad to be able to tell somebody about it all. I know in our conversation I constantly got sidetracked from the point we were discussing and started rambling; I'm sorry about that. That's what you get when you give old people a chance to talk about themselves. I wish I could communicate the good experiences I had, put them on the wide screen.

MS. RIEDEL: Hopefully, we just did a little bit of that. Well, thank you; it's been a real pleasure.

MS. AL-HILALI: Thank you, Mija. Thank you for coming through my life and making me remember things.

MS. RIEDEL: It's really been a pleasure.

MS. AL-HILALI: For me too.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]