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Oral history interview with John Mason, 2006 August 28

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with John Mason on August 28, 2006. The interview took place at the interviewer's office in New York, New York, and was conducted by Paul Smith 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.

John Mason and Paul Smith have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

PAUL J. SMITH: This is Paul Smith, conducting an interview with John Mason on Monday, August 28, 2006. The taping is taking place at my New York office.

John, I want to begin this interview by talking about your formative years. Could you begin by telling me when and where you were born and a little bit about your growing up?

JOHN MASON: Yes, I was born in western Nebraska in 1927, but I really don't remember very much of that area. My parents were going through the Depression and things were pretty uncertain. And, you know, there was a considerable period of moving around.

The periods that are more clear to me are in Nevada. There, we lived on a small ranch in the middle of the desert, about 50 miles east of Reno. It was a dairy ranch. We kept milk cows and raised alfalfa. It was irrigated, of course, since it was in the desert. The other crop we had was peaches. There was always the question of whether the crop would survive the frost. Some years there was no crop, and other years it was bountiful. The Mason peaches were pretty famous in that area. Just like another area a little farther east, Fallon area, which was also farm area. It's very famous for its cantaloupe. They still have a cantaloupe festival in Fallon.

MR. SMITH: So this was an agricultural area?

MR. MASON: Yes, it was an agricultural area. There was a reclamation project, and the water came from Lake Tahoe [NV, CA] down the Truckee River, and some of the water was diverted through a canal to Lahontan Lake. That water serviced a lot of farms in the Fallon area.

Anyway, I really found that area very interesting. I mean, it was quite remote and there were not any other farms in the immediate area; there were some a few miles away. And there were many animals on the farm. Originally, the place was farmed by horse, but I remember it more clearly when it was farmed by tractor and more modern equipment.

MR. SMITH: Did you have brothers and sisters?

MR. MASON: I had one sister, who was two years younger than I.

MR. SMITH: Where did you go to school-elementary school, and then later, high school?

MR. MASON: Well, I went to school in a very small community called Hazen. Hazen had a little post office and grocery store, and a bar, of course. There was a meeting hall, where they had dances and other things on different occasions. The school was a two-room schoolhouse and, depending on the population, the enrollment varied from time to time, because people would come in, people would leave. But it was pretty small.

MR. SMITH: What was the range of students?

MR. MASON: Well, it was from first grade through eighth. Sometimes there were two teachers. On some occasions, there was only one.

MR. SMITH: And in terms of the number of students, was it like 10, 20, 30?

MR. MASON: Total? Yeah, I would say 20 or 30, most of the time. I don't think it was ever down to 10 when I was there.

MR. SMITH: Was there any teacher who was an influence that you remember?

MR. MASON: There was an older woman known as Miss Case; she had been there for years and she taught the

younger children. She had devoted her life to these rural schools, you know. I remember her and other activities. There were other schools in districts a little farther away, and on occasion, there would be some competition. I mean, it would be our baseball team against their baseball team and that sort of thing.

MR. SMITH: Was there any art program?

MR. MASON: Well, the programs were pretty typical of what went on at the elementary level. There was some hour on Friday afternoon when you could do something. [Laughs.]

MR. SMITH: On your own, you mean?

MR. MASON: Well, yeah. They would say, "What do you want to do?" And, "Here are the pencils, the crayons." Sometimes, they did have suggested projects, but by the time I really got into it, I usually knew what I wanted to do.

MR. SMITH: What did you want to do?

MR. MASON: I usually found a book on something in nature that I wanted to copy, a bird or something.

MR. SMITH: So, that was the beginning of your drawing?

MR. MASON: My drawing-I think as far as I can remember, I always drew. In the beginning it was more about airplanes and things of that sort. It wasn't anything about art, as such. But I always built things, too. My parents gave me a set of tools at a very young age, and I always had a pocketknife. And I still have the scars. [They laugh.]

MR. SMITH: What did you make?

MR. MASON: When I was in the first and second grade, I made lots of toys. Rubber-band guns, sling shots, and various kinds of swords and shields and projectiles and skates on boxes. My father taught me a little bit about wood, so that I understood wood graining. So I was often out in the community searching for wood I could scavenge to make things out of, and it was always a big event when I found a fruit box that had some soft pine in it.

MR. SMITH: So, the so-called toys that you made, did you actually use them?

MR. MASON: Oh yeah, when I was younger. We played the old games, Cops and Robbers and the other one we called Cowboys and Indians. I don't remember anybody getting hurt with any of these things.

MR. SMITH: That's good. [Laughs.] After elementary school, did you go to high school in the same area?

MR. MASON: Yeah, in Fallon, Nevada, I went to high school. That farming area had a unified school district. And a big part of the high school population came in on school buses. The ranch was 16 miles from the community of Fallon, where the high school was.

Students often drove the buses, if they were old enough and had a chauffeur's license. They could take the test, a chauffeur's license test, to prove they could manage the bus. The buses were all stick shift and you needed to know about shifting. And occasionally, there were some discipline problems, but generally things went pretty well.

MR. SMITH: What was the name of the high school?

MR. MASON: I think it was just called Churchill County High School, at that time. My interests were pretty broad. I subscribed to a number of magazines, and I found programs on the radio that were of interest to me. And that was an era when there was a jukebox in every little food stand. The music on them was mostly country western and western swing and some jazz, people like Fats Waller and the Nat King Cole Trio. The novelty song was very popular in those years. You know, "Straighten Up and Fly Right," the monkey's on the eagle's back and all that stuff.

MR. SMITH: And you responded to that?

MR. MASON: Well, I did get interested in jazz in a kind of a backdoor way. I mean, it certainly was not performed there, although some forms were on the jukeboxes. But I listened to a San Francisco radio station that played tapes that were made in Manhattan, on which the whole history of the development in jazz, in the U.S., beginning with the earliest forms, was explained. Records were played and personalities appeared and were identified, and there was information about new releases or places you could get records, and of course the recordings were on the old plastic records.

The jukeboxes had the 45s, and the songs were all controlled by the length of the recordings, which was pretty short. The 78s would play maybe four minutes, and then later the larger discs would do a little longer. But it was quite primitive, but it was the technology of the day.

MR. SMITH: So have you maintained an interest in jazz?

MR. MASON: Well, it was very important to me because it was a big learning experience, and, you know, to hear the really old jazz orchestras, Jelly Roll Morton and Louis Armstrong, it was very foreign to the ear. I had to listen to it quite awhile before I could really appreciate it. But I was curious about it, so I maintained a persistent interest and began to collect these records.

Occasionally you could find a few in the music stores, but most of my collection, Django Reinhardt and some really old pieces, I had to send away for. I found that Louis Armstrong was such a strong communicator.

MR. SMITH: In high school were there any art programs?

MR. MASON: There were zero art programs. Not unlike some of the situations today, but there was a mechanical drafting class or two. It was all T-square and triangles and the old fashioned ink pens. I took those courses and learned some things about mechanical drawing.

MR. SMITH: Was there any favorite area of study, like history or math?

MR. MASON: Well, I was interested in quite a number of things. One teacher who was very influential was George Jergens; he was the science teacher. And I took chemistry and biology from him, and he talked about the scientific method. He was also a photographer, and I had interest in photography. So often we would spend hours in his darkroom while he was processing work for his clients. He was an interesting man. He had MS [multiple sclerosis], so he had health problems. But at that time he did not have any male children; they were all girls, so I think, in a sense, that was another reason why he was interested in me. So he was important.

I had another friend, who was a math teacher who was also interested in classical music, Tom Haskell. The English teacher, Ann Gibbs, also taught journalism and speech. I took a lot of classes with her, and I actually wrote a couple features for the two local newspapers. They were weekly, and I did what you're doing, interviewed people-teachers, the public officials-and wrote about it. And I did that for a year, maybe.

MR. SMITH: Tell me about your involvement with photography. Did you actually enjoy that aspect?

MR. MASON: Yes.

MR. SMITH: What kind of photographs were you taking?

MR. MASON: They were black and white. I did subscribe to some photo magazines, and so I got some ideas. I sent away for a correspondence course in one of the photo magazines, in which well-known photographers wrote about their methods. Eventually, I had those catalogues bound and had a library on photography. I can't say I was trained as a photographer, but I photographed stuff around the ranch, old cars and old equipment and things like that.

I had the skill of an average amateur photographer. My father did build a little darkroom for me, so I had that at home. I reached a point where I was frustrated, and then I thought about it a little bit, and I realized that it was all about the eye, and my eye wasn't trained enough to satisfy me in terms of the photography. So I said, I have to learn a lot more, and around this time I decided to go to Los Angeles and study art.

MR. SMITH: This was after graduating from high school?

MR. MASON: Well, it was during that period when I was in high school. Yes.

MR. SMITH: So when you were experimenting with photography and photographing things in your environment, having your own darkroom was certainly a hands-on experience. So that was an entry into your own creative exploration and sort of whet your appetite? Is that what led you to think, I want to be a photographer?

MR. MASON: It was. I wanted to make some photos that were not just simple documents of the family and my environment. I really wanted to do some things that were visually interesting, but I realized my limitation. I got interested in what professional photographers were doing. I could see the power of those images, and I felt I was just fooling around.

[They laugh.]

MR. SMITH: Well, you were very mature to recognize your limitations. [They laugh.] Especially at such a young

age in high school. I think that's amazing.

MR. MASON: Well, for quite a while I didn't know what I was going to do. I had interest in the sciences and I was interested in politics. I always followed politics. Nevada is a pretty interesting place, and the politicians there, once they got in office, stayed in office, and they had a lot of clout, so maybe I should get involved and get connected with some politicians.

I was interested in all that stuff, and I was also interested in the sciences, so when the time came and it was possible to make a decision about what was next-my grades were good. The counselor said, well, John, so you're interested in art; we think you should go to a university, and Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley] or Stanford [University, Palo Alto, CA] looks like the place for you. And I said, I don't want to study art in a university because of all the academic requirements. And I'm so far behind in my development as an artist that I want to go directly to an art school where I will be involved in art every day. So I stayed with my commitment.

Then the question was, where do I go? And it was obvious that the West Coast was the place, because it was manageable, and it was primarily a question of San Francisco or Los Angeles. I'd been in and out of San Francisco a few times and I really liked that city. I'd never been to Los Angeles. So I began to accumulate catalogues from different schools, and it was more or less a random thing that I picked the one I picked, which I refer to as Otis [College of Art and Design], although at that time it was called the Los Angeles County Art Institute.

MR. SMITH: How did you find these catalogues? I mean, was the school counselor helpful to you, or do just do this on your own?

MR. MASON: I'm not quite sure. I think, again, it may have been from some art journal.

MR. SMITH: What year did you graduate from high school?

MR. MASON: Well, I had some health problems, so I graduated a little late, and the year I went to Los Angeles was 1949.

MR. SMITH: So that was right after you graduated from high school?

MR. MASON: Pretty much.

MR. SMITH: And did your parents support your moving to L.A?

MR. MASON: Well, my father, I think, had originally hoped that I would take over the ranch. But early in my development it was obvious that was not the model for me. I was always looking at other professional people and other places, because I felt I had to know more about what was out there. I knew I was interested in art, but I had no idea what abilities I had. I'd never been tested in that sense, in a bigger picture.

My parents were concerned about how you made a living as an artist, and my father was pretty much just hands-off. My mother loved arts and crafts. It was another time, and when I got to Los Angeles and enrolled at Otis, I found a lot of returning GIs there that had the GI Bill, and some of them were serious, but for some of them it was kind of a lark. They had the GI Bill money, and they thought it would be fun to hang out in an art school.

But everyone was very straightforward about it. To make a living was very difficult, and you better start having a second plan, because the support structure that we know today was nonexistent. I mean, in terms of galleries, teaching positions, publications, exhibitions, museums, critics, that was very, very sparse and collections were also very limited. So you really needed to be real about what the prospects were. So, well, why do you do it? And then you say, it doesn't look like it's got a big future.

MR. SMITH: [Laughs] I'm curious about getting into the L.A. County Art Institute. You had to apply, and I would expect they would want some credentials.

MR. MASON: In those days there were a lot of art schools because of the returning GIs. You didn't have any screening. You paid the money and you enrolled. [Laughs.] And they suggested a few courses you should take, like beginning drawing, beginning painting, and a design course. But even if you didn't want to do that and you paid the money, you could do something else in art.

MR. SMITH: So the important thing was the money, not what you did. [They laugh.] So that was, I would think, a very big change for you to move from this very rural, small community-

MR. MASON: Right.

MR. SMITH: -to Los Angeles, a big bustling city and attending an art school.

MR. MASON: I loved it. [They laugh.] It's what I wanted and I knew I wanted it.

MR. SMITH: So you thrived on it?

MR. MASON: I did.

MR. SMITH: So tell me about the school and faculty at that time.

MR. MASON: The school-I still refer to it as Otis, although technically at that time it was called the Los Angeles County Art Institute. It had been the summer home of a newspaper family, the Chandlers, and the Otis people. It was a series of stucco buildings with red tile roofs in a kind of rambling environment. The faculty was primarily local artists but there were a few imports from Europe. Otis offered a great variety of classes, even sign paintings and lettering. I loved the lettering, taught by a sculptor, David Green. Sign painting wasn't so easy.

MR. SMITH: Did you take painting and drawing courses?

MR. MASON: I took everything except sculpture, I think. I never took sculpture there, and, you know, I walked in-you could walk in and out of any of the class rooms if you were curious. But what I saw in sculpture didn't appeal to me too much. They were hacking away at wood or stone or doing these armature figures, but I liked the people. I liked talking to the people and Hal Gebhardt, who was the sculpture instructor.

But the courses I did take, I found very useful. There were two teachers, James Cooper Wright, who was a California watercolorist, who was from Scotland, and Leonard Herbert, who was a painting and drawing teacher who had studied with S. [Stanton] Macdonald-Wright, who took an interest in me, you know.

And then the second year I was there I did sign up for a ceramic class, which was taught by Wayne Long, who was not a ceramic artist. He was an interior designer, and I don't know how it came to be that he taught the class. But it wouldn't have existed otherwise, and it had virtually no equipment. You bought the clay in the store, and there were a few of these old converted sewing machines, treadle wheels that were used primarily for turning plaster molds. I tried to throw on them, and that was a great frustration, because I was interested in throwing. Eventually I built my own kick wheel.

MR. SMITH: How did you know about throwing on the wheel?

MR. MASON: You know, it's a long time ago. I don't know how I knew about it. There wasn't anybody at Otis that threw or knew how to throw.

MR. SMITH: But I sense you responded to working with clay?

MR. MASON: I responded to the material. In spite of all my frustration, I said, there is some communication here, and I persisted. Yes.

MR. SMITH: Was Millard Sheets there at that time, or did he come later?

MR. MASON: No, Millard was not there at that time; that was much later. I took a break-and I wasn't in school for a while. And then one of my friends said, have you heard about what's going on at Chouinard [Art Institute, which became CalArts in 1961, Valencia, CA]? It was a sister art school, close to Otis, and I said, no. And he said, well they have a new ceramics program there.

So I walked over one day and was surprised to find a very active studio, lots of equipment, and this woman, Susan Peterson, was there. Now this looks pretty interesting. So I signed up and took the night class for a semester or so. Ken Price happened to be in the night class also. That's how I met Ken Price.

MR. SMITH: Was Susan the teacher?

MR. MASON: Susan was the teacher, yes. She was the only teacher. And she taught the night class and she taught the day classes. She was an Alfred [University, Alfred, NY] graduate, and she had also worked with Carlton Ball at Mills [College, Oakland, CA]. She was very well informed, both about the history of ceramics and about technical information, which I found very attractive. Here was somebody that you could talk to and discover answers for your questions.

So, beginning with the night class, and then later when I looked around and saw all the activity there, I said, Susan, you need a TA [technical assistant] around here. She immediately responded to the idea, and the next thing I knew, I was in Mrs. [Nelbert] Chouinard's office and we were talking about it. And at that time, I went on full scholarship and I was in the day class; took other courses besides ceramics and did a lot of the physical work in the lab. The clay was all mixed in the lab. The technique was to make this slip and dry it out in big plaster molds and wedge it up and put it into some bags or containers. Then there were studio glazes that had to be

mixed and often tested and there were two new high-temperature gas kilns out on the patio, and those needed to be tended to-loaded, unloaded, fired, and all that stuff.

MR. SMITH: So working in the studio was also giving you a lot of actual experience-

MR. MASON: Right.

MR. SMITH: -and you learned a lot in the process.

MR. MASON: I did, yes.

MR. SMITH: What about Mrs. Chouinard? What do you remember about her as a person?

MR. MASON: Well, I mean, she was an amazing woman. Nelbert was her first name, and she had direct connections with Walt Disney. And I'd always known that Chouinard was much more commercial than Otis was. Otis was sort of the old fine art mentality, and Chouinard is where you went to become an illustrator or a graphic designer or work for Walt or something of that sort.

MR. SMITH: More of a career-focused program.

MR. MASON: It was, and they also had fashion design. The people that taught those programs were all professionals, so that was a big change, too. And it was a big change for me, because once I got into ceramics with Susan, who came out of Alfred and who was really pretty much into the craft track-I mean, it was an Alfred craft track. I talked about it before-if you're not going to be an engineer, your choices are: you might be able to teach, you might be able to design for industry, or you could set up a shop and be a studio potter. And that was pretty much the information.

So I said, well, I don't know about any of those, but they certainly sound better than what I have heard and been told in the past. And there were some months then when I thought of myself as a potter, and I developed a fair amount of skill on the potter's wheel, and that was my primary interest at that time.

MR. SMITH: Could you make a good teapot?

MR. MASON: I had no interest in making a good teapot. [Smith laughs.] Susan was a person that did give assignments, and they could be to formulate, from scratch, some glazes for a specific temperature and test them, or some throwing assignments, you know; she did give those.

But I was mostly interested in developing more skill on the potter's wheel-throw more clay, make bigger things, you know. It's one thing to throw a handful of clay and another thing to move up to 25 pounds of clay. And you say, oh well, I have to go through this stage, and you learn certain techniques with this amount of clay and learn different techniques with greater amounts of clay. I did develop a fair amount of facility, and I was ready for something else.

MR. SMITH: So you focused on vessel forms?

MR. MASON: I was throwing-I threw a lot of bowls and some big ones. I certainly threw-yes, vases and vessels, threw plates. I made teacups, but I was not particularly interested in the standard items-teapot, which some potters thought of as the ultimate form-and I was not particularly interested in handles and knobs and lids, but I did a few.

But I was interested in the material and how it moved and how you could control it. I did not do very much in slab work at that time, and I was not interested in casting or any of the more industrial techniques, although I was curious about them.

MR. SMITH: What about surface? Did you decorate them or paint them?

MR. MASON: Surface? Yeah, what about surface? Oh yes, of course, I did a fair amount of work on the surface, carving or changing the surface or painting on the surface or painting on top of the glaze. You know, I did go through tests and investigations with stains, engobes, all that stuff. I did have a limited knowledge of all that, but I was still in the very formative stage.

MR. SMITH: When you created some of these more accomplished works, did you sell them?

MR. MASON: I did sell a few things. A designer who had a shop on Melrose had some things. I don't think I sold very much, but people did see it and, on occasion, they would tell me, oh, I saw your work.

MR. SMITH: So how long were you at Chouinard?

MR. MASON: I'd say probably two and a half years and-

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

-and Susan and I became good friends.

In one of my trips to San Francisco, I had seen a big show of Peter Voulkos's work at Gump's Gallery, in Gump's Department Store. It was very impressive work; the scale was bigger and the control was very real, and it was elegant. It had a lot of brushwork and it was all high temperature. It was obvious that he was a leader. I was curious about him, and he came up in conversations with Susan. Susan also knew [Bernard] Leach and [Shoji] Hamada and Yanagi [Soetsu] and Marguerite Wildenhain. She was making trips to the Southwest and had gotten to know some of the Native American artists. All of this might be part of a conversation, all these people, and what was going on.

And she knew instinctively that I'd reached a point where I was ready to do something. And I was living on next to nothing at that period. I had a small room I paid $10 a month for.

MR. SMITH: This was at the school?

MR. MASON: No, this was within walking distance. And that was an interesting building, too. A Mrs. Snively and her daughter ran a modeling school on the first floor where Marilyn Monroe had once been a student. And they also rented grand pianos by the hour. And then the top floor had a bunch of garret studios, tiny little things that she rented to what she called "her artists." She must have had a very interesting life. But that room made it possible for me to move into the next stage. I could walk to and from school.

And so from there and from talking to Susan, who said, oh, why don't you go up to Montana and work with Pete Voulkos? I said, Susan, you know, I came from Nevada. [They laugh.] I don't want to go to Montana. [Laughs.] But anyway-

MR. SMITH: You didn't want to return home?

MR. MASON: I didn't. And then the other thing she said to me, there is this designer, Elliot House, in one of my other night classes. He's head designer of this dinnerware place down in Vernon called Vernon Kilns. And he's looking for a designer. Why don't you go talk to him? And I discounted that, too. I said, no, Susan. That's not a track I want to be on right now. I don't want to be a designer.

But Susan is very persistent, so she would still mention these things. Go to Montana; study with Pete. Or go talk to this Elliot House and see if you can work something out with him. And then one day at Chouinard, Pete Voulkos and Paul Soldner walked through the studio door. Says, hello, hi. And we get talking, and this would have been the fall of '54 when he came down to L.A. He was just visiting other schools to see what was going on in L.A. And I'm sure he went to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles], and USC [University of Southern California, Los Angeles], and now he was checking out Chouinard. He wanted to see the kilns and see what the level of the equipment was.

Peter loves people. So all he has to do is say, my name is Peter Voulkos, and shake hands, and then you're his friend. And it doesn't matter what level you are or what you do. So we enjoyed talking, and I met Paul, and then when they left, they said, come over and see us, because we're starting a new program.

MR. SMITH: And where was the new program?

MR. MASON: At Otis, which was-see, Otis was on one side of what had originally been called Westlake Park that was renamed MacArthur Park. And Chouinard was on the other side of that park, so it was maybe three blocks away. So walking over was not that far, and it was not too far from where I was living. So I did; I went over. And I liked it, and I met Mac McClain and a few other people.

And they said, we're starting a new M.F.A. program here. And I said, oh, I've had all this time there. I would have to take a few academics at a junior college, but I could come out with a degree. There was no degree program in the old school and there was no degree program at Chouinard. So I thought, it wouldn't hurt to have a degree. And this looks like a happening place. So I did that. By the beginning of '55, I had moved back to Otis and with the group there and had enrolled and received a full-time scholarship. I did have to present a portfolio at that time, and I probably did to get a scholarship at Chouinard, too, but all that stuff is back when things were much easier.

MR. SMITH: But when Pete visited Chouinard, he saw some of your work?

MR. MASON: No, I don't think he saw any. There might have been something in a display cabinet.

MR. SMITH: He knew you had talent.

MR. MASON: No, we both came from rural, Western areas that affected us in ways. So this is somebody I understand, you know?

MR. SMITH: So that must have been an exciting opportunity then, to be in that environment.

MR. MASON: It was, and I knew I was ready for it. I wasn't ready to go out and start a studio or to become a designer, so it was time to develop further. I always had that view. Who am I? Where am I? By what am I judging where I am? And I knew it was not the peer group. I knew that from the beginning. The judgment is not about the peer group. The peer group is the first ladder, the first step. But if you're really committed, you want the world.

MR. SMITH: Working with Pete was obviously something that you felt excited about.

MR. MASON: Well, I could tell from the work I had seen, and I could tell from the little bit of our conversation, that the man had a vision. I mean, he knew things that other people didn't know. It was obvious. And it wasn't very clear what it was, but it was obvious once you went over to his studio and talked to the people.

The studio was just a basement room, no equipment in it-there may have been a kick wheel or two, and there were some tables. People were doing drawings and things. And there was some clay.

By the time I went over there and then classes were actually going, there were a few wheels-and they were power wheels, which Peter knew about. They were not the wheels that were at Chouinard, which were designed by Susan's husband, Jack Peterson, who is a ceramics engineer. Which were a combination kick/power, and had a friction motor drive, but it was basically a kick wheel. The wheel that Voulkos used was a direct-drive motor with a wheel head on it. And it was a powerful motor. You could throw a lot of clay on it.

MR. SMITH: So then you began working with these new good wheels-

MR. MASON: Well, everybody in the school was not buying them at that time. You just showed up, and Pete said, this is the wheel and this is how much it costs and this is where you get it. [They laugh.]

[Audio break.]

MR. SMITH: This is an interview conducted by Paul Smith with John Mason on Monday, August 28 [2006] at my office in New York City.

John, let's continue hearing about your involvement with Pete at Otis.

MR. MASON: All right. When I left Chouinard and moved back to Otis, it would have been the beginning of 1955, January. I was in a program then-and I'd mentioned before that the construction had not begun yet on the new ceramic building. So ceramics was in a temporary, basement room with not much equipment. There was a new kiln, which Peter had ordered from Advanced Kiln, which was the same company that built the kilns at Chouinard. And it was in the parking lot. And work that was made in the basement was passed back and forth through the window to the parking lot.

And one of the people that was in the room besides Peter was his first student, Paul Soldner. And Paul was six years older than Peter. Another person there was Mac McClain. He was three years older than Peter. And then me, I was three years younger than Peter.

Anyway, it was an interesting group of people. Paul came after hearing about the new program and had great expectations about what was developing there. Before long, we were all busy making pots and passing them back and forth through the window. Also, there was a fair amount of drawing that went on. And often, it was-Pete liked to draw. And since we weren't in the new facilities, it was a little more restrictive, so often it was just a big pad of newsprint and some Japanese brushes and some oxides or inks or something and just having fun. And I don't think any of that stuff was ever kept. It was just sort of like a loosening up exercise of some sort. Some of them, I think, were tacked up. And other things that were tacked up were illustrations of ceramics made by [Pablo] Picasso.

And Paul had his M.F.A. program underway, which was what he called "extended throwing." He would throw a vertical form and let it set a little bit and throw another vertical form and attach it, and before long, he had a cylinder that was four, five, six feet, maybe. I think he threw some that were taller, but he could never fire them. But I think he could fire them if they were-certainly five feet tall. Paul was interesting. And this was a new program. A lot of people, strangely enough, started to find their way down there to the basement. They just wanted to talk to Pete or just see what was going on.

Sculpture was also down there in an adjacent room. It was taught by a sculptor Renzo Fenci. He was an Italian sculptor that Millard had hired, Millard Sheets. So there were activities there.

But other instructors would come in and chat, and occasionally someone from the world outside would come in. In fact, very early, Fred Marer wandered down one day and talked to Pete. Apparently, they had some conversation by telephone. Fred had seen a piece of Pete's in a display cabinet and wanted to know if he could buy it. Pete said, sure, come on down. Fred taught mathematics. He was a mathematics professor at Los Angeles City College. But he was a man that was curious about the world, and he did collect some art. By the time he got down to purchase the piece, it had been stolen.

So Pete says, that's all right. You can get something else. Come on down and have coffee with us, because the coffee pot was always on and people were always invited to have a cup of coffee and talk about whatever they wanted to talk about. Fred became a regular. He was often down there, and he was always curious about who was working and what they were making. And he did begin to buy a few things, and usually with the excuse that they were a gift for someone else. But he was very regular, and he became a friend of all the artists, and we became good friends. And over the years, I spent a lot of time in his house for meals and conversation.

Anyway, he was one of the people that surfaced very early.

MR. SMITH: Would this have been 1955?

MR. MASON: This was 1955, yes.

MR. SMITH: And do you think the piece that he was buying from Pete was one of the first pieces Fred acquired?

MR. MASON: Well, it must have been one of the pieces that was put on display as evidence of the production of the new man in ceramics, you know? And I think so, but Fred was famous in that he'd walk in the door and say, hi, what's new? And eventually, when Peter saw Fred coming, he'd say, "Here comes What's New." Fred was a great spirit and a wonderful man. Anyway, to move on, after a few months-oh, I'll talk about Paul a little bit more.

Paul was into photography, and he was always shooting photographs. And one day, I said, Paul, you certainly take a lot of photographs. And he said, well, you know, this is an important time. And I said, what do you mean it's an important time? He said, things are happening. I said, what's happening? It didn't seem like much was going on. A few pots were being made. But he had great expectation about what was in the works there.

And a little later, when we were in the other studio, I was into manipulating a lot of thrown forms. Paul said to me, you know, John, that's really good subject material for a thesis. You should do a thesis on the manipulation of thrown pieces. You're really doing some interesting things. Well, of course, I never did a thesis. And I continued what I was doing on the thrown forms, but it wasn't too many months before I was mostly into sculpture anyway.

Paul also had invested in some property in Aspen [CO] and had plans to build a studio there and live there. And by the time he was through his M.F.A., he'd been hired at Scripps College [Claremont, CA], so from then on, he spent half the year at Scripps and half the year in Aspen. But he was always interested in equipment. And very early, he got involved in building ceramic equipment-kick wheels, and a little later, a clay mixer. And he also built power wheels, so that was a side business. But he knew from the beginning that was something he wanted to do. What happened with me that first semester was, I eventually did go talk to the head designer at Vernon Kilns. It was then the second-largest casual dinnerware plant in Los Angeles. The biggest one was Gladdy McBean.

Elliot House was the head designer, and after we talked a little and I showed him some of the things I'd done, he said, do you want to come to work? I'm looking for someone to do surface design. He says, I do all the forms. It was a plant that had a great many ways of decorating surfaces. It had women that did hand-painting and decal. It had a multicolor stamping machine. At one time, it did the old English transfer process. So I said, you know, I'm not trained in this at all. He said, you can learn on the job. I said, okay. And we made a deal that I would start.

I had just signed up for a graduate program at Otis, and now I'm going to work full-time for Vernon Kilns. So how am I going to deal with that? Well, it turned out the new building was completed. I had a day job. I commuted to the day job early in the morning. I came back. I went over to the studio, checked it out, and talked a little bit. I went home, took a short nap, had something to eat, and I came back to the studio. Pete was a night worker, and so about 10 o'clock, we both would converge on the studio and we would work probably until two o'clock or later in the morning.

MR. SMITH: This is the ceramics studio at Otis.

MR. MASON: At Otis. The new studio, yeah. So we were there every evening except for weekends, and I might be there weekends, too. But Peter was probably with his family on weekends, unless there was something that brought him down. I did that for two years.

And the experience at Vernon was also very educational, you know. I had complete run of the plant. I could talk to anybody. I talked to the engineers all the time. They had two-Bert Reisner, a glaze person, and John Lathrop, a clay body person. And so I really learned what they did. And the kilns were amazing. And once some of my stuff went into production, it wasn't coming out quite the way I thought it should. So then I became part of the quality control group, too, that looked at it to see if the women had done the design and the handwork, as I had asked them to do.

And I did some travel, too. At one time, I went to the East and visited a number of dinnerware plants and Mason Stain company [East Liverpool, OH] and Blenko Glass [Milton, WV] and a bunch of other stuff. And the company gave me some money to do that.

MR. SMITH: Did they credit the designers?

MR. MASON: No. It was not that level at all. And I did also get a few people into the program, too. A friend of mine, Larry Corrick, who eventually got into the technical end, and after Vernon went out of business, he moved to Matlox Pottery. And I think he spent a lot of years there as a technical person. And I met a man from Alfred who was there, Chester Jelly, who was part of the design staff and did work in glazes. He did lots of tests and formulation, and that was his obsession, glazes. And it was interesting.

MR. SMITH: I'm curious. Outside of the fact that you had a full-time job and were making some money, which was certainly good for surviving as a part-time student, did you benefit from the experience of being in a real business operation?

MR. MASON: I certainly did. It was a privately owned company, and people from sales and marketing, of course, talked to design. And I was in those conversations. Twice a year, they had industrywide sales meetings, where new products were brought out.

And then the sales manager would take samples of new work and travel around the country and talk to buyers in big department stores. And would say, here are some samples that we're considering for production. Will you rate them for us? What would you buy if they were in production? And then he would return, and as often is the case, certain colors were popular in those years, and others were not. Yellow, you would never see. Now, it's on everything. So that was interesting, I mean, the marketing part, and how they planned it.

What occurred in the two years when I was there was the arrival on the market of plastic. And it began to replace, in many homes, the casual china, because if a kid drops it, it isn't going to break. So that cut into the market. And then the Japanese brought in casual china, and that really hurt. So eventually the company said, well, it's either bankruptcy or quit. And they had been in business a lot of years, and they had people that had worked for them like 20 years or something, that were suddenly cut free. And so the owners just closed the plant.

So I'll go back to the studio at Otis now, what went on, on the other side, at my other job. Actually, working at night and being pretty much on my own track, I produced a lot of work and did get involved in a number of exhibitions. Shortly thereafter, I won a few prizes. And Peter and I had been talking. Peter was a gregarious guy. He loved people around, even when he was working. I found that difficult. But the coffee pot was always on, so there were people in and out all hours, because we were there late. So people would come in after a movie or something, come in, hang out a while. Peter-oh yeah, have a cup of coffee; let's talk. And I'd say, oh well, looks like the work is done for the night.

But anyway, there was a big flow of activity. And we would talk sometimes about getting a studio away from school. It would be good. And we did talk about it. And we always had breakfast after we were through working at one of the local late-night restaurants.

MR. SMITH: So this would be like three or four in the morning?

MR. MASON: That would be after two o'clock, yes. And then I would go home for a nap. [Laughs.] And off to work again. But some time in '57, Peter says, I found a place. I think I found the studio. And it wasn't too far from his house. He was living in Silver Lake. And down the road a little ways on Glendale Boulevard was this clapboard building that had been a woodworking shop, and the old man that ran it died, but it had a lot of electrical power in it because of the woodworking tools. It really looked like a derelict building. Pete talked to the new owner, and the guy said, sure, we'll lease it to you. I told Peter I had accumulated a little money working at Vernon, which I gave him, and we ordered a kiln and moved into the place.

MR. SMITH: That was 1957?

MR. MASON: Nineteen fifty-seven. And you know, two things about the personalities of Susan and of Peter is they both believed anything is possible. It can be done. So we had a studio that was in a residential area that was not zoned for our activity. And certainly not on the scale that we were going to do.

And there was no place in this building for a big kiln. But we had ordered a big kiln. A number of us could stand inside of it, you know. So Pete talks to the landowner and says, you know, there had been some foundations laid for an addition to that building that had never been realized. He said, we need a kiln room. Is it all right if we add it to this building? The guy says, I think so. If you get in trouble, it's yours. Pete says, okay. So we ordered some lumber and pre-fabbed this thing and tilted it up and put a roof on it and painted it, and added it. That was the kiln room.

The guy from the kiln company, Mike Kaolin was also one of the guys that liked to hang around and drink coffee. And he looked like a businessman. So Pete would say, go out there and walk around, act like an inspector. Look it over; take some notes.

The room had a dirt floor. We poured a concrete floor two days before the kiln showed up. And then we hooked it up to the gas line and we were in business. In the meantime, we had acquired another, smaller kiln. So we had two kilns in this space hooked up to the gas meter. And in talking to Mel Nordstrom, who was Mike Kaolin's partner at Advanced Kiln, about this little meter and what we ought to do about it, and he told us what to do. Take the cap off and screw that thing down as far as you can, and that will give you the most gas that meter can give. So we were in business.

And the idea in getting the kiln was to make some big things. And once we got into the studio, we decided also to build an easel to make walls on-ceramic walls. So we put in the easel and we had the kilns. Peter loved to paint. After we were there awhile, he said, you know, we could also extend the rest of that area that has foundation and I could have a painting studio. I said, great. So we did this second addition, which was a painting studio. And then I said, well, we also have to have a darkroom. So we took one end of that room and made it into a darkroom.

MR. SMITH: You shared the total studio, or did you have separate spaces?

MR. MASON: Yeah, the whole studio. It was small. It was not a big studio. It was in an area that the locals called Mixville. Tom Mix made some of his Westerns in one of the ravines, which is now part of a freeway. But at that time, it was still a ravine. And the locals said, you know, that building is where they kept his horses. And if you looked at the floor plan, you could see this was a stable at one time. So our studio was in an area where Tom Mix and Max Sennet had made movies in the old days, and that history and mythology was pretty interesting.

When Pete first came to Otis, most of the clay came from this place in the Central City called Italian Terra Cotta. They had a couple beehive kilns, and they mixed and sold clay. They also fired work for people who made ceramic objects, sculptural figures or ornamental things. Pete noticed how they were mixing clay in bakery dough mixers, and Paul found one, you know, a bakery dough mixer.

In the meantime, Gladdy McBean gave Otis a big Simpson muller clay mixer. So when Voulkos and I set up on Glendale Boulevard, we took Soldner's dough mixer and put it in that studio. And then we could order the clay by the bag and mix it to whatever formula we wanted.

MR. SMITH: Of course, as you were then working in such a large scale, you needed a lot of clay, especially with two of you working on a large scale.

MR. MASON: Well, you certainly needed 500 pounds of a variety of clays, but often a ton, or two tons. Now the studio was really functional, and we took another area and made it a glaze area, and built a small spray booth.

MR. SMITH: Is that when Pete began to make the really large sculpture?

MR. MASON: Fifty-seven is the first year. The first large-scale sculpture I made was in '57. It's a spear form.

MR. SMITH: What was the maximum height?

MR. MASON: Well, in the kiln, I'd say five and a half [feet]; in some area you might get a six-foot piece in there. And it was a periodic kiln; it was not a car kiln. So you had to find a way to move the stuff into the kiln after you made it, either lift it or slide it.

MR. SMITH: You didn't have a trolley.

MR. MASON: It did not have a trolley, yeah, which became a major challenge sometimes. It really did. And the

biggest challenge later, when I had the studio alone-when I was doing the geometrics like the *Red X* and so forth-was to get that in the kiln without a car, just by shoving it in there.

MR. SMITH: I want to go back to the school again in Pete's era. In the beginning before the studio, was Pete actually working there? Was that something he did only nights, or was it part of the teaching process, where students saw him work?

MR. MASON: He worked at night. On occasion, he would demonstrate something. Peter's attitude was, if you're in the program, you are a mature adult artist. You did not need much instruction. So he did not instruct. It was an open, supportive environment. He never gave assignments.

MR. SMITH: Did he ever make critical comments?

MR. MASON: He did not do crits. I mean, he would acknowledge good work, you know. But he felt you didn't need much of that either.

MR. SMITH: So you were on your own.

MR. MASON: You were on your own, yeah. You were on your own. It was like, this is the world.

MR. SMITH: But Pete's kingdom and all his energy was kind of an inspiration, I suppose.

MR. MASON: He definitely was the catalyst. But it's true that the critical thing was who was selected to be in that program and what caliber that individual was and what their vision was. So in the beginning it was a very small group-as I said before, Paul Soldner, Mac McClain, Joel Edwards, Janice Roosevelt. Then when the new building was in place, Henry Takemoto, Jerry Rothman, Larry Shep, Ken Price and Billy Al Bengston were there for a while. So-

MR. SMITH: Did Pete find these students, or did they just come because they heard of the program?

MR. MASON: Well, I think it's the grapevine. You know, the art world is small and the communication is very direct. People were always welcome. So people would come, and then they would tell other people.

And I don't think I mentioned Michael Frimkess, another important person there. Did I forget anybody? And then one other person who came later, after-not at Otis-but after Peter and I had the studio, was Jun Kaneko, who came as a young painter; did not speak English, didn't know anybody.

MR. SMITH: He had come from Japan?

MR. MASON: He came directly from Japan. And one of his teachers knew Jerry Rothman, who had spent some time in Japan.

So-they put Jun in touch with Jerry. And the story goes that Jerry brought him over to Fred [Marer] and said, "Here's a young Japanese artist. He doesn't speak English and I'll be back later." And he didn't come back later. [Laughs.] I mean, he may have checked or called, but that's the story. Jun learned English pretty quickly and decided that there was more energy going on in the ceramic field and it was more accessible to him, because of Fred and people that Fred knew, than painting was. So he did get involved in that. I was often at Fred's for a meal or something, and after Jun was there, he was often there, too.

MR. SMITH: Fred was a great supporter of the artists.

MR. MASON: He was. And he really-he was very human. He was really interested in the individual.

MR. SMITH: And his home became kind of a center where people could come and discuss problems and their work.

MR. MASON: Yeah. Well, and he knew that some people needed a meal or some money. At times, I had kind of an open account with him; he would come and say, "You could use a few bucks?" I would jot it down somewhere and-

MR. SMITH: In terms of your own work, when did Fred buy from you?

MR. MASON: Yeah, he bought work very early-and over a period of years. He was not happy with me when I began to change. He thought I was a deserter or a faddist or something, I don't know. But when I moved out of what has sometimes been called the Abstract Expressionist or Expressionist period into other things, he did not appreciate that at all. And he never said anything to me, but he did to other people, and he felt I was unduly influenced by other stuff. So, that was all right. We were still friends. But he was really an important person in

that time, in many ways. And his collection, it's been acknowledged as significant for those early years.

MR. SMITH: I know because I presented it at the museum in a featured collector exhibition ["The Collector," 1974, Museum of Contemporary Crafts, New York, NY]. He was, really, a pioneer collector at a time when nobody was collecting ceramics.

MR. MASON: Well, it's because of his curiosity and his willingness. He was really close to Pete, and Pete helped him. Pete actually educated him, trained his eye a little bit. Because he would say, "Well, what's new?" And Pete said, "Well, I think you ought to look at this." And stuff like that.

And I never did assume that role after Pete left, which, I don't know, sometimes I thought maybe Fred thought I would, but I didn't-I didn't feel comfortable doing that, and I thought he had developed enough. Why should I confuse him?

MR. SMITH: Tell me about the Millard Sheets era.

MR. MASON: Oh, yes. Well, after we had been in the new Glendale Boulevard studio, I had decided I was not going to pursue an M.F.A. I wasn't at school much, but I saw Pete all the time, and we talked about things. It was well known that Millard hired Peter, thinking that he had hired this studio potter with great skill, that was nationally and internationally recognized. There was some eclecticism in the work; it looked like a cross between Scandinavian and some Asian influences. And he thought that's who he had hired.

But Peter really thought of himself as an artist, and now he was a professor in art school and had no vision of continuing that track. So immediately he found ways to begin to move away from it. And he did travel a fair amount. He spent part of a summer at Archie Bray [Archie Bray Foundation, Helena, MT], and when he came back, the work was totally changed from what it was when he went there.

And the new forms were constructed from modules that were thrown on the wheel, often closed forms, and changed in some way, and stacked and cut. It was a constructivist approach and did not have pretty slick glazes on anymore. Sometimes they looked a little nasty, actually, and rough.

And then there were other things. I was really whacking stuff up in the studio, and Millard did not like that. He did not like seeing Picasso ceramics on the wall, either. He was much more into the Chouinard thinking-he was a graduate of Chouinard-more commercial. He believed in art, he really did, but a certain kind. He wanted to edit that. He wanted to be the editor.

And eventually, he was going to leave Otis. He had been the director, he had hired and fired the faculty, and he was leaving. And I heard that he said, "Voulkos has got to go before I do." Now I don't know-and I never really asked Pete directly-what the issue was other than the direction that Peter was going. Sheets may have had something else, but Peter was not harassing students, he was not restricting students, he was not bothering girls. He was about his work and fully committed to it. But one day he came back to the studio on Glendale Boulevard and said, "Well, I'm out of there. And I've got some time off and some money, but I'm not at Otis anymore."

So, I've heard other stories as to why he left. But from what I know, it was basically a philosophical, aesthetic issue.

MR. SMITH: As I recall, that was 1959?

MR. MASON: No, I think it was '58, actually. It might have been '59. I think it was '58, because he continued working in the Glendale Boulevard studio before he was approached by the University at Berkeley, who had heard that he was available and offered him a position there.

MR. SMITH: In 1959, you landed a really big commission for the Palm Springs Spa [Palm Springs, CA]. Could you talk about that?

MR. MASON: From '57 on, I had shown at the Ferus Gallery [Los Angeles, CA], which was a new gallery started by Walter Hopps and Ed Kienholz. The original gallery location was behind an antique shop-Streeter Blair's antique shop-and you walked through an entranceway-it was like a driveway-to the back. Ed Kienholz had built or had supervised the construction, and he was there every day. He had a little space, office, in the back, where he did some of his own artwork.

Ed was interesting and I knew him, at that time, better than Walter. Although I did know Walter, too, because Walter had visited the studio and actually had tried to get Peter to come to the Ferus. Peter was then affiliated with Felix Landau, who had a very respectable gallery on La Cienega, and Peter had shown with him one or two times. And he said, "No, think about John." But he said, "I'm not moving."

So anyway, why am I telling you all this? Because in the studio on Glendale Boulevard, I began to make some big walls. And visitors would ask, "Is that a commission?" I would say, "No, it's not a commission." "Well, why are you doing it? How are you going to sell it?" "I don't know." But the Ferus, first operated by Kienholz and then later by Irving Blum, had outdoor space. So if it was shown inside, they often said, "Now take it outside. The show's over, but we want to keep it for awhile." So my work was visible, although it was not commissioned. And people got curious about it.

I think the architects saw some of this work at the Ferus Gallery before they contacted me. They asked me to propose something for the exterior of a new spa in Palm Springs that they were building. And I said, "Sure." I made a clay maquette, scaled way down, but it simulated the piece. They visited the studio, they liked the maquette, and said, "Can you meet our schedule?" I said, "Well, it looks like a rush, but I'll do it," and I did.

MR. SMITH: How big?

MR. MASON: How big? I'm trying to think how big the mounting wall was. It was 10 or 12 feet by 50 feet. The first wall relief was eight to 10 feet tall and about that wide. The two other reliefs on that wall were a little smaller. They were very active, made out of strips and chunks, and were constructed on the floor. I made these figures that might have come out of the Nevada desert. Then I glazed them and built a steel support so they floated a few inches from the wall. I drilled the backs, set bolts in them so they could be attached. It was all a new technology for me. It was a challenge to get it done before the end of the year, '59.

MR. SMITH: Do you remember what price you got for it?

MR. MASON: Five thousand dollars. [Laughs.]

MR. SMITH: That was a good acquisition.

MR. MASON: Well, you know, clay was cheap. I had everything in the studio I needed. I had to order the steel. And that may have been when I ordered the electric welder, too. But I just had to figure it all out, and the pieces were fired around cone five.

Once we moved into the studio, we had agreed to cone five or six and no bisquing, one fire. Later I did do some second firings for low-fire color, but most all the work in that period was single fire. All the crosses and most of the wall reliefs.

MR. SMITH: When one looks back, that era of the mid-'50s to 1960 was a very pivotal time, especially in L.A., and the so-called Otis School now has become part of history. But it was also part of the environment of Southern California that was very different from Northern California. Could you talk a little bit about what was happening in the other arts, the gallery scene in La Cienega, and the spirit of that period?

MR. MASON: I think Walter Hopps was central to that period.

The Ferus exhibited lots of different artists and art. Walter brought artists down from San Francisco and other areas outside of L.A. What else was happening? The Pasadena Art Museum [now known as Norton Simon Museum of Art]-L.A. County [Los Angeles County Museum of Art] was, at that time, in Exposition Park in the same building as the Natural History Museum [Los Angeles Museum of History, Science, and Art]. It had some important exhibitions, too. It certainly showed some of the Abstract Expressionist shows. I remember seeing an exhibition of Miró's ceramics, which was pretty amazing. And then there were exhibitions of pre-Columbian work and exhibitions of Abstract Expressionist work. So, that institution was important.

The more contemporary work was shown at the Pasadena Art Museum, which shared a space with the Asian Museum [Pacific Asia Museum, Pasadena, CA] on Los Robles. Tom Leavitt was director there. He invited Pete Voulkos to have an exhibition in 1959. In '58 or '59, Pete had a one-man show there. It was well received, and as a result of his contacts with Pete and visits to our studio, he became interested in me. I was invited to exhibit in 1960. My exhibition included a number of ceramic walls and quite a number of abstract vertical sculptures.

Walter seemed to be in lots of places, and he became a curator at the Pasadena Art Museum, working with Tom Levitt. And once Tom left and went to Cornell [Cornell University, Ithaca, NY] and the museum moved to the new building in Pasadena, Walter was involved in bringing Hal Glickman, John Coplans, and James Demetrion into the organization. Coplans became another important figure in the area here.

Many activities were at L.A. County, down in Exposition Park, and at the Pasadena Art Museum, and then when L.A. County started to build a new facility on Wilshire, they were closed. So Pasadena became doubly important and there was more and more focus there. And the Ferus was, I'd say, the other main source. In retrospect, you look back on those periods and realize there were not very many galleries. There were not so many artists, either. There was not the support that began to develop later. The principle figures were really critical because

there was no one else. And Kienholz and Hopps and Blum were all key people, and the Ferus certainly was important. Irving Blum exhibited [Andy] Warhol's Soup Cans. Walter brought [Marcel] Duchamp to the L.A. area. The gallery also exhibited the work of Giorgio Morandi and Joseph Cornell.

For somebody who was not widely traveled, this was a real window. It was here to see and to think and to talk about. I'm surprised the Ferus survived. Sadie Moss was the woman who recognized it was important that it continue.

And La Cienega did become an active center. There were more and more galleries opening up. And then there was a community of galleries on La Cienega that became a focus, particularly the group at Ferus, because Walter was the one that really had the vision.

They were formative years for all these people. The community around the Ferus functioned like an incubator. The Ferus Gallery was a place to exhibit that was sympathetic and supportive of new ideas. The local artists included John Altoon, Ed Kienhulz, Wallace Berman, Craig Kauffman, Ed Moses, Ken Price, Larry Bell, Bob Irwin, Ed Ruscha, and myself and others.

That was true of Coplans, too. He came from South Africa through England, and he did not settle in New York. He went to San Francisco. He saw a need for an art journal. He was very instrumental in getting *Artforum* started as a West Coast publication. After he moved to Southern California, he became director of the art gallery at the University of California at Irvine. One of his exhibitions was Abstract Expression in ceramics ["Abstract Expressionist Ceramics," 1966]. Then he also was involved as a curator at Pasadena.

MR. SMITH: In retrospect, your instinct, when you left Nevada to go to L.A., could not have been better. [Mason laughs.] You were in the right place at the right time, and you blossomed by that nurtured environment. First, of course, at the school and then later in the bigger community. So it was the right choice, obviously.

MR. MASON: Well, yeah. The big question for me, when I came, was how little I knew about anything. I knew I had the passion; I didn't know if I had the talent or the ability to sustain my interest. I had to take that chance. And it worked, in the sense I was doing the things I wanted to do. Even working at Vernon Kilns was interesting. And teaching has always been interesting to me. It's another part of my education. I certainly have taught at quite a number of places.

MR. SMITH: We'll stop here.

[Audio break.]

MR. SMITH: This is Paul Smith, conducting an interview with John Mason on Monday, August 28, 2006. The taping is taking place in my New York office, and this session is taking place in the afternoon.

John, I would like to, now, talk about your teaching career. And, as I understand, your first teaching assignment was in 1960, when you taught a summer session at the University of California in Berkeley. As the early '60s was a very exciting time to be on the campus at Berkeley, can you talk a little bit about what was happening in the art department there and also a little bit about the whole environment of the Bay Area?

MR. MASON: In 1960. Right. Summer.

I don't know how much I knew about the art department at that time, because summers are different. And the facilities, ceramic facilities, were not on the main campus. The new facilities in the School of Environmental Design had not been completed. So there was a building on Bancroft Way where ceramics was temporarily located.

And I showed up and my TA turned out to be Jim Melchert, and he would mix clay and did all the physical work. And I got to know Jim and his wife, Mary Ann, and over the years we've maintained an active friendship and have kept in touch with each other. And Jim has had a very varied career, both at Berkeley and at the American Academy in Rome and at the NEA [National Endowment for the Arts]-and then back to Berkeley.

So what was happening then? That was the first time I was teaching in a real classroom situation. I'd had some private classes in the studio on Glendale Boulevard, where people came in a couple nights a week and worked, and I used that as a method to generate a little money to pay the rent and things. But to have formal classes was a new challenge.

And at that time I thought I would also make some work. So I had asked them to put up a little easel so I could make a ceramic wall. So I did that while I was there. Some people were very interested in it, and Harold Paris certainly was. He said, "Hey, that is a great idea. I'm going to do some of those now." And he did. [Laughs.]

And then there was a question of what to do or say to the students. And the first thing I did was tell Jim to mix a

lot of clay, at least a ton, and pile it in the middle of the studio. And I said, all right, there it is. Get familiar with it. Take some and now make something big out of it. And I think that was about all of the instructions I gave. I might have done an assignment for some glaze test, too. I'm not sure if I did or not. But it was a very open-ended situation. It was one of those nondirectional-I was a nondirectional professor, but it was obvious I expected them to do some work. And we did look at work whenever it was finished and talk about it.

What I recall as being significant was getting to know Jim Melchert and his family. And seeing the environment, the Berkeley environment, which is a beautiful old campus. And this community of Berkeley is so closely tied to the university. It's very friendly.

And summer passed pretty quickly. It was about six weeks.

MR. SMITH: As the '60s was an era of a lot of campus revolt and demonstrations, did you witness any?

MR. MASON: Yeah. Well, you're getting ahead of the story. That happened in '64.

MR. SMITH: Okay.

MR. MASON: Ahead of the story.

MR. SMITH: Okay, we can talk about that later. So then after your first and short experience of teaching at Berkeley, you went to Pomona [Pomona College, Claremont, CA].

MR. MASON: Right. I was recommended for a part-time position by an artist I knew, Richard Rubens, who was a friend and also exhibited at the Ferus. Bates Lowery was then the art department chairman, and he hired me to teach sculpture, not ceramics.

But my interests really were sculptural anyway. So I thought of some kinds of projects we could do with different materials. So it was really like Sculpture 101. And sometimes we might have a model; other times we would be bending wire or carving some plaster mixture or something of that sort. But we talked a lot.

And now the challenge for me as an intuitive artist and one not used to critical rationales was finding the language to express that intuitive knowledge. It was another era, I mean, from what we find today, when everybody has to say everything they can think of about whatever they have done. But I was working with really bright, liberal arts students that came from different disciplines. And so they would make something, and I would understand what they had done or what they hadn't done, and they didn't. And they expected me to talk to them about what I knew intuitively and instantly.

So what was my approach? It took me a while before I realized it had nothing to do with language. It had to do with reading form. It had to do with pattern recognition. How do I talk about that? So I did; I talked about it. I talked about form as an idea, and pattern recognition as a sub-language experience.

And I had accumulated some books in my library. Eliel Saarinen wrote a book called *Search for Form* [Eliel Saarinen. *Search for Form: A Fundamental Approach to Art*. New York: Reinhold Pub. Corp., 1948] that had been recommended by a teacher at Otis, and I found that book very interesting. And another book I came upon was by Henri Focillon, who wrote *The Life of Forms in Art*, in which he talked about form. [*The Life of Forms in Art*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1942.]

Now when you talk about form to liberal art students, the first thing they think you're talking about is the physical characteristics of an object. That wasn't what I was talking about. I was talking about perception-and to become aware of the experience on that level. It had to do with seeing and it had to do with this intuitive sense of form. Further reading involved the Gestaltists, and particularly Wolfgang Köhler.

I also talked about the power of the presence of an object. I said, "What is that presence? What goes on between you and the object?"

So I learned a lot and I hoped the students did, too. In fact, some of them did tell me that those experiences were important to them.

Chris Burden was in one of those classes. Chris is probably the one that is the most recognizable today. I do not claim him as a protégé of mine. He is a friend.

Pete Voulkos, who was teaching at UC Berkeley then, was going to go on sabbatical leave in 1964-'65 and asked me if I would be his replacement.

[END TAPE 1 SIDE B.]

So in '64 and '65 I was on leave from Pomona and went to Berkeley, rented an apartment there, kept my studio in L.A.

And ceramics was in a new building, brand new building, part of the school of environmental design. It was quite active. There were many visitors from other areas that came in as faculty. And I don't remember when I met some of those people, like Herman Cherry and others, whether it was 1960 or 1964.

Anyway, that year was the year of great unrest. We had student uprisings all over the country, and certainly there were some major ones at Berkeley. And I was commuting between Berkeley and L.A. The political climate was quite different in those two areas. I mean, L.A. was much more conservative, but when you went to Berkeley, the students were marching. They were occupying spaces. That did not really affect ceramics, because there were not many issues there that were worth challenging.

The TA, Peter's TA, was Ron Nagle, so I got to know Ron Nagle during that year. I got to know quite a few people then.

MR. SMITH: In the Bay Area?

MR. MASON: In the Bay Area, and particularly around Berkeley. There was Jimmy Suzuki, who was a Japanese immigrant that was a painter, and he was in the area. He helped Peter some. I got to know Vaea Marx, who also helped Peter and later became the TA at Berkeley. And I also met faculty members. And what else?

Main thing I would say was, as they say, "the times were a-changin'." I mean, the energy was very strong for the women's movement, for the civil rights movement, for rights of students. And that was all very alive. And also somewhere in there was Ronald Reagan's political ambitions. And so there were counter forces operating, too.

But the thing I always am aware of with any of these colleges or universities is what amazing places they are. They are like a magnet that attracts so many kinds of people, both professionals, highly skilled, and just curious students, and they all come together. And being in any of those facilities, you have the opportunity to meet and learn about so many ideas in the world.

MR. SMITH: So what you're saying is that, being a teacher, you're also learning from students?

MR. MASON: Oh, in a big way. In a big way. And I did teach for a lot of years, and each generation was different. The generation of that time was very socially conscious. Other times not so.

MR. SMITH: Was it in 1967 that you then took on a full-time position at the University of California, Irvine?

MR. MASON: Right, after '64-'65 I was back at Pomona College. I knew about several new campuses being built by the University of California, one at San Diego and one at Irvine, which is about 30-35 miles from L.A.

And I had learned being at Pomona, which is a liberal arts college, that the mission of school is not to produce artists; it was to educate and broaden the education of liberal arts students. So in talking to the dean or the president, they were pretty clear about the fact that they didn't support a professional art school, whereas the University of California did.

Pomona College also wanted you to live on campus, and the door was supposed to be open for students at any time. Well, I never did live on campus; I always commuted from L.A. But it was a different mindset, a different philosophy about the mission and about the relationship of the faculty to the students. And I always had good relationships with the students, but I saw my role a little differently.

MR. SMITH: At Irvine who else was on the faculty?

MR. MASON: Well, I knew John Coplans. And he was hired as the director of the gallery at Irvine. I told John, I'm really interested in Irvine, what is the chance of getting in line here?

At that time the art department had one full-time person, Tony De Lap, who was teaching sculpture. They had some adjunct, or part-time, faculty. I think Coplans was hired year by year. They had a historian. But the school was very small, and they did not have a ceramic program.

But Coplans talked to the people that would make the decision, and I was invited to come down to be interviewed. And at that time I had a big show up at the Los Angeles County Museum. So there were plenty of reasons to be interested if the possibility was there. And the dean, Clayton Garrison, was interested, and he said, yes, we'll start the bureaucracy rolling. And they had to go through many levels. It was not something as simple as the chairman saying, yeah, you're hired; now talk to the president. This was committees and letters of recommendation, all that.

And it was a new school. And, again, in those situations there is always a possibility for things to happen, depending on who comes in. It's not locked up in tradition.

So when I began in the fall-what was it-'67? I think it was '67. The ceramics facilities were kind of put together. Ceramics was off campus in metal buildings that were part of another facility. A kiln was ordered, a clay mixer, some potters' wheels and tables, and a room was found, and students were enrolled. But the environment was brand new. It had been part of this big holding company, the Irvine Ranch, and a section of it was either given or made possible for the university to purchase. You could look out and there were cows grazing in a pasture and there were migratory birds flying in. There were a few industrial buildings, most all new-age, high-tech buildings coming up. So that was the beginning there.

There were plans for a new studio art building at that time. Meanwhile, all the classes were being held in temporary spaces. Tony De Lap's sculpture class was in the same general area where the ceramic class was.

We were putting together a program there and planning for the new buildings and ordering the equipment for sculpture and ceramics. We were involved in all those formative activities, and it all came to pass.

And then, of course, as the school grew, more people were added to the faculty, and visitors were invited in from New York and other places to teach for a quarter or for a year, depending on what the arrangement was.

John Coplans was very active in the gallery and did some very important exhibitions; most of them were regional material. I think I mentioned the "Abstract Expressionist Ceramics" show, but he also did exhibitions of paintings. People would drive down. I mean, he could draw people down from L.A. to come down to his gallery for openings and for events there.

Then the school began to take shape. A master's program with an M.F.A. was put in, and there were reviews to select students. There were no studios on campus for the graduates, but there were a number of small industrial buildings where they could rent a little space. And a few people managed to live in them, too, if they had plumbing and things. But they were off campus.

As the structure of the art school began to take shape, it had considerable flexibility within the academic structure. There were seminar structures where you could pretty much write the class prospectus. Some of the graduate courses were pretty open-ended too.

MR. SMITH: It's nice to have all that freedom.

MR. MASON: Yes. And I got to know a man in the physics department, Richard Ballard, who was also an expert on computers. He had quite an interest in artists, and he had worked some with artists before I knew him. His students kept telling me-you better go see that guy.

So one day I did. I went over to the physics department and tracked him down. We did some team teaching, brought art students into the physics department and into the labs. And as a result of those experiences, we became good friends, and I still see him today.

And he opened quite a few doors, made me aware of things I wasn't aware of previously. And looking at some of my work, particularly at that time I was doing some brick pieces-and one day he says, well, what do you know about symmetry? What do you know about group theory? And I looked at him with a very quizzical look and said, what are you talking about? He said, well, I can see in your pieces a lot of symmetry, and I just wondered how conscious you were of what you do. So as a result, he told me the history of it and gave me some research to do.

So what had been intuitive and unconscious now had a conscious aspect to it. And I did realize that from the very beginning I had been dealing with some of these issues. Of course, if you throw a form on the wheel, it is automatically a symmetrical form, but if you transform that form, you can also transform it in a way that it is still symmetrical, although no longer circular. So a major insight for me was an awareness about my own intuitive direction.

And what else? They had some very interesting graduate students there. Jim Turrell graduated from that program. Chris Burden graduated from that program. Chris was into the work that he became well known for. And as part of his graduate thesis, he was locked up in one of the larger lockers for a week, and it was not one you could stand in. But he survived the week somehow with the assistance of his wife. I talked to him a few times when he was in there.

The other faculty members at that time were Ed Moses and Craig Kauffman. Moses and Kauffman taught painting. Ed Bereal, who had been one of the war babies in the exhibition in L.A. that included Larry Bell and Joe Goode, and one other artist, Ron Miyashiro.

But what else was going on? There were a lot of visiting artists from New York. And Frank Stella was invited, and I think he actually came out, but he refused to sign the loyalty oath, so he never taught. The visiting artist thing is very common now. At that time it was not so common. I mean, every major university has visiting artists now.

So there were the visual seminars, gallery exhibitions, exchanges between faculty and between faculty members and students, reviews, and those things. So it was very alive.

MR. SMITH: How long were you there?

MR. MASON: I was there from '67 to '74. The last year, I was chairman of the department. The department was going through some changes. It had been, up to that point, pretty much the baby of the dean, and there was a desire for more independence.

And then New York, teaching at Hunter [Hunter College, New York, NY].

Now over the years I'd come to know Ray Parker, a painter that taught at Hunter College. And periodically he came out to L.A., and he taught at [U]SC. We became friends and on occasion I would visit him in New York.

And anyway, I was getting a little frustrated with L.A. It seems as if things were not moving quite as quickly or as interestingly as they could. So I was thinking about New York as another step. So I talked to Ray. What is the chance of coming to Hunter College? And he said, no, no, that isn't going to work now, and I said, well, just keep it in the back of your mind.

So I guess about '71 or '72, he calls me up and said, John, how about coming to Hunter College? I said, Ray, look, I just made a change not that long ago, and this school is new and I have some obligations here, so I can't do it right now. I said, I'm still interested, but the timing is bad for me. I don't know if I was chairman then or if we were just going through some other kinds of things.

So I thought, well, maybe that will never happen. Then later I found out they hired Susan Peterson. That probably takes me off the list, right? Well, I found out it didn't take me off the list, that they were still interested.

And Susan left USC and moved to New York and set up the ceramic department in the basement of an old high school which was part of Hunter College. She got it all going. And so when the time came, I took leave from the University of California, Irvine, and packed a bag and moved to New York and started going down to the basement. It was a pretty difficult working situation. I was used to-by this time-much more supportive and pleasant areas to work in. But it was there, and in New York.

And at that time Hunter had an open enrollment policy; anybody could sign up for a class, and if you could make your grades, you could then become part of a program. And they tried that for a while; eventually they found that it was too much, and they went back to the more traditional requirements for entry. But for a year or two that was it.

And then the city got into big financial problems, too. And there were several months they said, guess what, guys, you're not going to get paid for three or four months.

MR. SMITH: As you really spent most of your early career in Southern California, coming to New York, I'm sure, was quite a new experience on every level. The environment and the new community of artists-did you find that refreshing, exciting?

MR. MASON: Both refreshing and exciting, and a lot to assimilate. I guess I was like any newcomer. There was so much to learn that that seemed to be the dominant thing you were doing, was learning about the city and how things worked and what was there and what the culture was. I mean, the social culture, political culture, all of that.

And I had a position at Hunter which did not fully acknowledge my standing in the academic world, which I was not too happy with but said, all right, I will deal with that later.

But then there was the question of where do you work? And in what kind of studio space, and what is available? Well, most everybody I knew leased spaces, and many of them were downtown, and they often fixed them up. It was a tenuous situation, generally, between the landlords, the building department, and other things. So I did. I sublet in the beginning; I sublet a number of spaces. I eventually leased a space-what they call a raw space, industrial space-and fixed it up on Greene Street, which was in SoHo. And that was certainly an area that was in transition.

My relationship with the college was that I came and went, on the subway usually, and went back to my loft. And I did not spend a lot of time, socially, with the faculty except for required meetings and things of that sort, although I did get to know a few people.

And whenever it came up to renewing a contract and improving it a little, since I was a full, tenured professor in California, I found I was at the back of the line as far as the department was concerned, as if, who is this new kid anyway? So politically that was difficult, and it did mean I would have to do a lot of appeals, which were all successful, but it took a lot of energy. I was welcome but I was not welcome.

MR. SMITH: Did you meet some of the New York artists during your stay here?

MR. MASON: Did I? Yeah. I met people. I knew people when I came. I knew Barbara Haskell. I knew Coplans, who was now in New York. Irving Blum was in Blum Helman Gallery. I saw those people; I saw all those people. And, yeah, I met other artists, too. And I had met artists-New York artists that had been at Irvine.

But mostly it was about making the transition. And I still was going back and forth on occasion to Los Angeles to take care of the building there, which I had purchased in 1970, an industrial building. So I had those obligations.

I was still pretty active with exhibitions. I had just closed a major sculptural exhibition at the Pasadena Museum. In fact, it was the museum's closing exhibition before it became the Norton Simon Museum. It was curated by Barbara Haskell, who also wrote the catalogue essay. And it included some firebrick work. I had a number of pieces in various exhibitions at the Whitney [Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, NY] before I came and after I was there. The Hudson River series of the firebrick installations in six museums across the country occurred while I was there in 1978. And I had that idea-I had done firebrick things when I was still in L.A., and I had shown some of them at the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art and some at the gallery at Irvine.

But I had a concept for the series that would be in different museums, that would be installation pieces that would come from local suppliers of firebrick, and the brick would either be borrowed or rented, and after the installation, the brick would go back to the supplier. So then the work would be photographed, and a catalogue would come out after the exhibition. I asked Rosalind Krauss to write the essay for that catalogue.

So there was a question of who was interested in that concept. Turned out the man who was interested in it was Richard Koshalek, who at that time was at Yonkers, at the museum in Yonkers [The Hudson River Museum]. I had met him before when he was in Texas, and had been in a group show down there and knew him. And he had both the interest in the concept, and he had been involved directly as part of the NEA at one time, so he knew the workings of how to begin asking for support for the idea, and he put it together. He also got some help from James Demetrion, who was at Iowa and who I had known in L.A. And he taught art history at Pomona for a short time before he went to the Des Moines Art Center. So I don't know quite what that relationship was, but Koshalek was the main person that put it together.

MR. SMITH: The Hudson River series obviously became identified with the Hudson River Museum.

MR. MASON: Well, the point was-and the concept was interesting, because I had already made a decision at the time I went to Irvine to stop making fired clay. I was teaching ceramics, but I was not making ceramics. And I said, I could continue on this track that I'm on for the rest of my life, but I don't really want to do that. I want a new challenge and I want to consider some ideas, utilizing modular structures. I now was conscious of certain aspects of symmetry from my conversations with Dick Ballard and from the reading and investigations that I did, that I could employ.

And so while I was at Irvine, I did several arch pieces. They were large catenary arches. One for the gallery there, and one for the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art in a group show. And I had done a piece for the University of Syracuse in the museum there.

MR. SMITH: Everson Museum

MR. MASON: Yeah, Everson. James Harithas was there at that time. And I did a firebrick installation there, too.

So I had some examples in the beginning, but I needed to come up with a whole series of concepts for six different museums that would not repeat any of the pieces. And I was in New York and I was in rented space and I said, how am I going to do this? I couldn't draw them because I didn't know what the hell I was drawing. Then I said, well, what has always worked in the past is maquettes. So I found someone that could make miniature firebricks to scale for me out of particle board.

I started working with these miniature bricks, formulating ideas. Most all of them had to do with rotation. Rotation is a form of symmetry. The most common forms of symmetry are reflection, which most people think of as bilateral; rotation is another form; inversion is a third form; and translation, which is just moving an object in a line, is the fourth form. And so the new work began to incorporate the various forms of symmetry. But the thing about symmetry is it's invisible. It does not proclaim itself. It's there, you know, and it has a structural reality, but in terms of conceiving the ideas for the exhibitions, symmetry was really an important thing.

So I had time in New York to work with my miniatures. I took some time off and I had some time off for summer. Yeah, that's what it was, mostly summer, I think, in L.A., that I could begin to formulate these concepts.

So it comes the time to go and talk to the curators and the people in charge of the various institutions. I had acquired, basically, the exhibition in the form of miniature bricks. And the plan was to go to each of these institutions with my satchel of miniature bricks, which I then took out and displayed on some surface and said, this is the piece for you guys. [Laughs.]

MR. SMITH: You were a good salesman. [They laugh.]

MR. MASON: That was, you know, the way it worked. And then Koshalek and his staff made the contacts with the brick suppliers and arranged the loans of the bricks. And the photographers were chosen. I said it's important that they be really professional. Each area had a specific photographer. And there was the question of who would design the catalogue and all that stuff. So that was all arranged.

And, of course, the show began at Yonkers, and it came down to the question of what to call it. It was obvious it was all temporary installation. And there we were next to the Hudson River, and some of the pieces people thought were kind of like a flowing river. So I said, okay, that's the name.

MR. SMITH: What other museums participated?

MR. MASON: So now I can just read this. [Laughs.] I think the series started at Yonkers at the Hudson River Museum. It went to Corcoran-

MR. SMITH: Des Moines Art Center [IA]?

MR. MASON: Yup. We're going to consult the catalogue here. This says it went to Des Moines. Then it went to Corcoran [Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC], then the Minneapolis Institute of Art, then the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and finally to the University Museum, University of Texas, Austin.

They had two pieces in that installation at Yonkers. Corcoran had four pieces. Minneapolis had one piece. San Francisco Museum of Modern Art had one piece, and the University Art Museum at the University of Texas had one piece. At one time there were three installations that were on at the same time, but often there was only one. But it meant I was really doing this circuit from here to there to set them up. That was interesting, too, to see the firebrick on all these different surfaces, because you had carpet, you had granite, or marble; you had a lot of parquet.

MR. SMITH: All these installations took place while you were still here in New York?

MR. MASON: Yes.

MR. SMITH: While in New York, I understand you married Vernita [Fay Hall Widmann].

MR. MASON: I met Vernita in New York. We were married after we left New York. She was a student at Hunter College, and her interest was psychology, but she also had a minor in art. She was interested in art.

MR. SMITH: And you have two children from-

MR. MASON: Yes. I have a daughter, Jairlyn, and a son, Stuart. They are both in their 20s now. And Jairlyn has graduated from Cal State University in Long Beach. She has a B.F.A. in fiber and is currently interested in costume design. My son is at San Diego-University of California, San Diego-in mechanical engineering. He has a few more years to go. They're both pretty independent people.

MR. SMITH: Sounds like they take after their father. [They laugh.] So in '85, then, you retired from Hunter, I understand, and you moved back to L.A., and that is where you have been since, creating your own work. That was sort of the end of your teaching career, right?

MR. MASON: Right. I thought so when I did it. I thought it was the end of my teaching career.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE A.]

But I have done quite a number of visiting appointments since then. When I came back, I got a call from Tony De Lap at UCI, who said, do you want to come back for a quarter, work with the graduates? And then I've been in and out of UCLA quite a number of times. I mean, Adrian Saxe has periodically asked me if I wanted to come in for a quarter. And I taught several semesters at USC, so I still did a lot of teaching after that.

MR. SMITH: Obviously, you have found it a rewarding experience.

MR. MASON: Well, I have. At various times, there were certain things that interested me. At UCI, because there was that flexibility in structuring a class, I often had a seminar with certain books that were assigned, and that's basically what we did was sit around and talk. Some of the students read the books; some of them didn't. [Laughs.] The books were not about art. They might be [Jean] Piaget's *Structuralism* [New York: Basic Books, 1970], or they might be Claude Lévi Strauss, or they might be-there are quite a number of different things-whatever I thought would put people on a different track, give them something else to think about.

MR. SMITH: Was there any favorite teaching position, in terms of the different schools that you were at?

MR. MASON: Well, I think those depend really on the sum of the experience and where you are in your life. I must say, being at Berkeley was very interesting. Each one of them-I mean, Pomona was, too. What I've found was that I could never make any one institution my home. And for various reasons, probably most of the shortfall was me. And Irvine in the beginning was great, you know. It got a little difficult at times, but that was primarily the administration. It was not the faculty. I was very fond of that faculty. And Hunter - I expected more than what I found there. New York was great. And the experience of Hunter, I think of it as positive, but it's not the top of my list.

[Audio break.]

MR. SMITH: This is Paul Smith, conducting an interview with John Mason on Monday, August 28, 2006. Taping is taking place at my New York office in the afternoon.

John, in this session I would like to have you talk about your work from the early '50s up to the present. In looking at some of the written material that you had sent me, I found this article by John Coplans regarding an exhibition at the Los Angeles County Museum in 1966, when you had an exhibition of sculpture. I thought he made a very interesting observation at that early stage of your career when he said, "Mason is never a repetitious artist. His work is singularly various. Not only is there a high degree of individuality implicit in each piece, but in the relationship of one sculpture to another; there is an obvious diversity of imagery." I thought that was a very good summary of your impressive work over the years, as I've looked at it and seen how many different directions you have gone, and yet how focused you were in each series.

So, could we go back, and could you speak about how your work evolved stylistically and what led from one thing to the next?

MR. MASON: That quote is from Coplans's essay in the exhibition catalogue designed by Ed Ruscha for my show at L.A.C.M.A., which Maurice Tuchman curated.

Okay. When I came to L.A. in 1949, I came without a clear idea where I would end up, except I knew it was somewhere in the arts. Once I got really involved in clay, it was pretty obvious that was going to be a major part of it. And my first and early experiences with that led me to the potter's wheel and to the challenges of the potter's wheel, which was to make pots. And certainly, through the time that I was at Chouinard with Susan, that was the primary thing I did. I made pots. I had sometimes referred to myself as a potter. I didn't know what I was. I was trying different titles. [Laughs.] But I didn't really see myself as a production potter. I knew there were other things I needed to know about.

So through my association with Pete Voulkos-I think I talked before about the three options. The Alfred idea of what you did if you studied ceramics and you were not an engineer-you taught; you designed for industry; or you opened a studio and you were a studio potter. Peter said, you can be an artist. And that's the one that seemed to stick for me. I said, ah-ha. [Laughs.] I've been waiting to see that appear. And although I continued to explore the vessel for awhile at Otis, when I went back the second time, my real focus was, what can be done now that we have this studio on Glendale Boulevard? We have a large kiln; we have a clay mixer; there is an easel to make walls, murals, whatever you want to call them. So the challenge was there. I mean, it's all here; use it. Do something; make it happen.

And make it happen, for me, was to make sculptural pieces and to make big walls. There were no prescriptions for any of this that I knew about. It was, do it and see if it works. And if it doesn't work, change it and make it work. But the whole question was unresolved; it was the challenge.

So what transpired with the pots was a series of forms that were still pots, but they were rather strange-looking pots. Some of them had big slab feet like a shoe on the bottom, and they twisted and they torqued, and they moved in and out. And you couldn't quite call them a sculpture, because they were obviously a hollow form with an opening on top.

But once we were in the Glendale Boulevard studio, the thing was, let's make some sculpture. And Pete started making sculpture, and his method was to make a variety of thrown forms, to let them cure to the leather state, and then to begin to assemble them, construct and stack them. What am I going to do? I don't know what I'm

going to do. And I'm going to let it develop as I go. So the first big sculpture I did was in 1957 and it became a simple monolithic form. It looked like a projectile point of some sort. But it had two areas which were colored. The rest of it was pretty gray. There was a blue-grey shape on one side, and a more gold-brown shape on the other side. It was five and a half feet tall, and it was hollow. But it was totally closed.

And it took me a while to build that clay up. And actually, you know, I think back on it; it's the only one I ever made that way. I threw a big cylinder, which was the base. And then I began to shape it. And then I threw other big cylinders and I cut sections out, which became the walls that I put on top of what I had already done. And between each step the material had to dry a little. But I was actually throwing the slabs, big cylinders that I cut and flattened out, that I built the piece with. And I did that all the way through to the end. So it is a thrown form, but you would never know it by looking at it. But if you look carefully at the base, you will see maybe there is a hint that it began as a thrown cylinder. And that's the only sculpture I ever made that way, and it was the first big sculpture.

What evolved for me then was to return to the easel and start working on what became called clay walls. And I did some early ones, which I actually made out of handmade clay tiles that were put on the easel. And then I added more clay to them. But I didn't like that result very well. So I said, no, I have to smear the clay on the surface and do the whole thing as one piece, and then cut it up. So subsequently, that's the direction I went. And it took awhile to evolve, and I did several, and one or two of them got destroyed, either by me or by negligence. But I didn't feel it was a loss.

It wasn't until I started to work on the floor that I began to just cut and slam clay down on the floor and then take pieces or parts of slabs and add them to make a more linear organic form. One of the first was the blue wall, which was over 20 feet long and eight or nine feet across. I used the only big empty space in the studio. Otherwise, it would have been bigger. And then, as it began to set up, following the contours of the piece, I cut it into sections, so it could be fired. So that technique developed, and I did a number of pieces and several commissions, including the Palm Springs commission, and I won a competition for a commission in a Tischman building downtown.

Then some pieces I did on the easel were more massive. They used a thicker slab of clay, and the first of those was made in 1960. It was a gray wall, and a certain texture began to develop in the way I was applying the clay, after I had laid the first layer on and I was coming out further. I liked the way the application was beginning to reveal certain possibilities. And so that developed. And when the time came, it was cut into big tiles by hand. And it was coated with an engobe, which had a kind of elusive color, a kind of gray, blue illusive color. But it all held together.

And then I found certain people were starting to say, well, Pete makes the vertical sculpture and you make the walls. And I said, well, that may be the way you see it, but I've got some ideas I haven't done. So I started to make these totemic or vertical forms. I compacted clay around an armature-a wooden member. I figured out how to do that and to be able to remove the wood after it reached a partially dried state, a leather state. I could build these forms, which I call vertical sculptures, and they had very interesting surfaces as the result of my manipulating the clay.

So I did-I don't know how many-quite a bunch, I would say. I don't think it was a dozen, but it was probably pretty close to a dozen. I did that over two years. I made the first series in '60-'61. I made the second series in '62. And these pieces were much easier to move around than some of the other things. You'd fire a number of them in the kiln at once. And both the gray wall and some of these vertical sculptures were shown at the Ferus Gallery, probably in '61.

So what did I have? I had, at that moment, three ways I worked. I worked on the floor; I worked on the easel; and I worked around this armature in vertical form. So then I said, well, I want to make some bigger things. And I liked this form I had called the spear. I had made some early pieces when I was still throwing on the wheel that I combined to make this form. I said, I don't know what these are. But anyway, so I set that challenge to make a really big kind of shape, projectile shape.

So where did this imagery come from? I thought about it. I mean, obviously, you can say it was a projectile point from previous cultures. It doesn't quite look like that. At that time, I was very interested in certain primitive art. And I did look at a lot of pre-Columbian art, and some African. And I responded to some of these objects. I said these are really mysterious and powerful objects. And there's no way you can copy that stuff. But you can say, well, where does my stuff fit? Does it get any clues from some of that stuff? I said, it was like Louis Armstrong on his trumpet. What the hell does that have to do with a visual artist? It is a standard.

So I felt I wanted to see this form materialize, so I made a seven-foot spear. I could not fire it in the kiln; it was too tall. I had to cut it. But I found a place I could cut it. So that seemed to be working. So then, I made this other form, which became the *Black Cross* [1961], done the same way. And people had always said, do you wedge

your clay? I said, I never wedge clay. Well, doesn't it blow up? I said, no, it doesn't blow up. Well, you can't make it very thick can you? I said, how about 18 inches or more. And they'd say, how do you do that? I'd say, well, it has to be dry and it depends on your firing schedule. You fire too fast, you're going to blow it all up. So I knew that instinctively and I set up the methods to do it. So I didn't have problems with completion, with firing and things.

So the second big tall piece, the *Black Cross*, was about seven feet high. I wasn't quite sure what it was going to be, and I also found that as it began to dry, that I liked to carve on it. I said, the surface isn't what I want. So I got my little hatchet out and started chipping away at parts of it. And then the more I looked at it, the more I said, well, those sort of shoulders look almost like a cross form. They imply-they're not real-but they imply a cross form. So that's what I called it, the *Black Cross*. And that was '61.

We're getting into something else-'62. Irving Blum called me up and said, you know, Sterling Holloway is building a new house in South Laguna, and he wants to know if you can make ceramic doors. I said, I don't know. He says, well, go talk to him. So the house was not built yet. It was still in the plans. So I talked to the architect, and we came up with a solution for suspension of the doors and for opening and closing and all that. And I went to work to make some tile, and I did that on the floor. And I had set up a grid with a stainless wire, so once it was finished, I could just pull the wire up through it and it would cut the tiles.

You had to figure the shrinkage. You had to figure where the two doors came together so there was no interference there and that they meshed nicely. You had to figure out how you fasten it. Because the architect says, well, we'll use a solid wood core door, and the core will be white pine-that's dimensionally the most stable. And you figure out how you attach it. And as I'm into it and I'm thinking about hardware, and then I say, what about the inside? Well, we could just put some standard hardware on the inside. Then I thought about it. I call Sterling up and said, how would you like some clay on the inside, too. He says great. So then I did a more free-form pair of shapes on the two doors, and that became something you could grip to open the door.

Well, what about locking and latching? The hinges were, according to the architect, what they would use on lead-lined hospital doors for X-ray rooms. He said it'll support plenty of weight. And then he figured the rest of the structure. And then we talked about the outside. It had an electric lock, a key, and the doors opened in. These were really for show. They were not your daily entrance. His gallery was on the same floor where the doors were, but the entrance into the gallery was off the carport. So that was not an issue.

Anyway, I did that commission and it was successful. It was well received. And I still feel it was a good solution. That was '62.

Sixty-three, I decided, after thinking about it very seriously, to make some ceramic crosses. The X and a cross form had been important to me as imagery in some of the pottery and pottery constructions I'd made. In '57 I made a piece called the *X Pot*, or *Cross Pot*. Fifty-eight, I made several more. So I said, making a large ceramic cross is a trap. But the imagery is powerful imagery. So I did it. The first one I made was an X form that I eventually called the *Desert Cross*, because I felt a real affinity for the desert in that piece. Then I made several others. And you know, they were not totally solid. They had a lot of clay in them and they had some compressible material inside, so they had some support when I was making them. I had to engineer all that stuff.

MR. SMITH: Did the crosses have a religious association?

MR. MASON: Well, see that was the trap. Because I said, the cross and the X predates any of those associations. They are really a primitive form. What is simpler than making that mark? And I am not a religious person. And I knew that most people who were would find them rather offensive, because they did not follow the conventions in any way. And Coplans said to me, boy, you're into funny territory here. He did tell me that. But I went ahead. I had an exhibition, and the biggest cross was purchased with Ford Foundation money by the Chicago Art Institute. So that was interesting. That was '63.

Sixty-four is when I went to Berkeley. Now, I'm at Berkeley, but I'm also sometimes back in my Los Angeles studio. And it's hard really to be doing big ceramic work while you're commuting. So I've been thinking about when I did work in that period of '64 and '65, and what months and how I managed to do it. The monoliths began to appear then and they were all fairly flat. I mean, the two opposing surfaces reflected a lot of what was on the other side. The sides were not identical.

And the first piece that appeared in '64 was another cross called the *White Cross*. It was more massive. And then that was followed by another piece, which had some crosslike characteristics. It was more flat than anything in the past. And it had an opening right in the middle, which was almost like a keyway. You could see through the piece.

Okay, that was '64. In my mind, there had been this reoccurring idea, which was to make a really massive wall

on the easel, and the biggest possible tiles I could make that would fit in the kiln. And that idea ended up being about 14 feet wide and seven something tall. And the depth was 18 inches down to six or eight inches. But it was a lot of clay. And the center of it was a cross. It took a while to make it and it took a long time to dry. Those pieces took about nine months to dry. And then there was the issue of what the hell are you going to do to fire it? I had to cut it, since it was taller than I could fire. I had to make a horizontal cut. And then I had made the vertical cuts. And I had five vertical cuts and one horizontal cut. And the top section-the top tiles-were much smaller than the bottom tiles.

Well, I had known from my experience with the gray wall that I needed some mechanical assistance to move it. So I had previously gotten a Big Joe lift. But now I knew I needed a forklift, so I went shopping for an electric forklift. And I could move the piece with the forklift over to the kiln. After you got it over there, you still had to slide it to get it into position. So we went through those actions, and I did not have regular helpers. When I needed something, I called somebody. I had friends and people that I had hired or had volunteered to help me. So when I had to move stuff into a kiln or out of the kiln, I had to have some help. So that was '64.

So what happened in '65? Another big monolith that also had an opening. But the first one was vertical; this opening was horizontal.

The first one that I spoke of that has the opening is in the collection of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, and it's been on display recently in their permanent collection. The other one is in the collection of the Museum of Contemporary Ceramic Art [Shigaraki Prefecture, Japan].

But I did that monolith and I did the second big wall, which was the *X Wall*. And it was more massive than the *Cross Wall*. *Cross Wall* actually had some glaze on it. The *X Wall* has a very dry glaze. Most places, it doesn't even look like a glaze.

So I got that out of my system, and we had a new curator at the Los Angeles County Museum. Maurice Tuchman had been hired. And Irving Blum had a very good relationship with him. And Maurice had done an exhibition of Peter Voulkos on the patio, I think it was '65. So they approached me about an exhibition while I was still going back and forth to Berkeley. So I said, okay, but it was down the road a little ways.

But I had these ideas; I wanted to make something new, something different. And I had the concept for some geometrics, and so I began that series, they're really very blocky, flat surfaces. I made some rectilinear prisms, and I made a cross, and I made the *Red X* and the *Yellow Cross*. And these are the two pieces. And I was under a lot of time pressure to get these things ready for the exhibition in '66.

MR. SMITH: And the *Red X*, I believe, is in the collection.

MR. MASON: Yeah, it is. And the *Yellow Cross* is in the collection of the Oakland Museum. So that was pretty much the clay work. In '64, I did a bunch of platelike forms I called plaques. They weren't too big, and I had various ways of manipulating the clay, a lot of impact and other manipulations. And many of those had low-fire glazes on them. And when I did the geometric series, I did know I was going to use some low-fire glazes, which meant a second glaze firing. So the *Yellow Cross* and the *Red X* both had cadmium low-fire glazes on their second firing.

So anyway, I was trying to figure out where I was in terms of what was next. And I found certain of these involvements working with these really big, massive amounts of clay a little bit frustrating. And I said, I think it's time for a real change. And a real change means don't turn on the clay mixer; don't turn on the kiln. Do something else. And that's when I decided that I was really interested in some modular possibilities because of my interest in symmetry. And so I made some firebrick arches, and one of the arches was shown at the Whitney. Another was shown at the Pasadena Museum of Modern Art. And one was shown at UC Irvine in the gallery.

What do I do with the brick? I normally had firebrick around, but I went down to the supplier and bought a number of pallets of brick. I said, I can't draw this thing because I don't know what it is. So I guess I have to move the brick around. I had a new studio, which I purchased in 1970.

MR. SMITH: Is that your current studio?

MR. MASON: That's the current studio. And it was four or five times the size of the old studio, maybe even six times. But I had big floor space, and so I started moving the brick around.

MR. SMITH: What year was this?

MR. MASON: Well, this was in the early '70s. And it was back to square one. I didn't quite know what I was looking for. I tried lots of ways of piling and stacking brick. And they all were of limited interest to me. But then I began to focus on a couple simple ideas. The arches were real simple because they were catenary. I had a

catenary form that I made out of plywood. And the catenary has a long history as a supporting arch. And it's even used in some kilns, you know.

The thing that's interesting about standard firebrick is if you put two of them together, they make a square. And before too long, that's what I got interested in. If you put a combination of those squares together, you can get squares of different sizes and squares of different heights.

So moving the brick around on the floor, I came up with a piece that eventually I called *Grand Rapids*, because that was the first place it was shown. And part of it was a flat platform of brick. It had a ramp form that came down the center. That piece was eventually shown at the Whitney in another show. It was first installed in the "Sculpture Off the Pedestal" exhibition in the city of Grand Rapids [MI, 1972]. And I also did another firebrick installation in Syracuse at the Everson. I was having some success of a limited nature in developing these concepts. But I couldn't really visualize where to go.

But now I really wanted to do something, and I was in New York, and I wasn't going to move the brick around on the studio floor anymore.

[END TAPE 2 SIDE B.]

MR. SMITH: The Hudson River series.

MR. MASON: The Hudson River series. So I've already talked about the Hudson River series and the modular scaled brick, the small brick that I used to visualize these things with.

All right, in time, I really understood what was there, and I could make drawings. And I made some that were part of the exhibition. Since each museum only had their piece or pieces, the ink drawings showed all the pieces in the series.

After the Hudson River series, I knew that there was information there that didn't have to be on the floor that could project up into different kinds of configurations. And I was involved in one commission, that was never realized, for the city of Monterey [CA]. I spent a better part of a year working on proposals and drawings. I really got into drawings and to using drawings to investigate the kinds of figures that would develop from some of the ideas and from some of the simple forms.

I have to go back a little bit. My sister lived in this community near Fallon [NV], and she at one time asked me if I would give something to the new library. I did. I gave one of the crosses, the one I called the *Desert Cross*. And I had the foresight to write in the contract that if, at some time in the future, they didn't want to display this, it would be offered to another nonprofit institution. Well, whoever was in charge of the library moved on and somebody else came in that hated the piece. So it got moved to somebody's garage and eventually became part of the collection at the University of Nevada, Reno.

[Audio break.]

MR. SMITH: This is Paul Smith conducting an interview with John Mason on Monday, August 28, 2006.

John, I'd like to continue with the evolution of your work.

MR. MASON: Okay, in 1979, I was talking to Walter McNamara at the University of Nevada at Reno. And he asked me if I was interested in having an exhibition, since I had some history with Nevada and that area. I said yes. And I said, you know, we can do an exhibition, but I also would like to build something. I have an idea. So as a result of those conversations and a visit, I built, with the help of volunteers and Walter, one of the first steel pieces I made, which is called the *Peavine Installation*.

It was a series of twelve modular units. They were double frames, open frames. They were eight feet tall. And there was a counter rotation between the two modules along a sight line. One module was white and a little smaller; and the bigger one was black. And they changed sides in the middle of the 12 units, and the white one went to the opposite side that it had started on. Anyway, basically what it did was frame the environment. They were frames, but there was an action within the sculpture itself, which developed another dimension. So that was the outcome. It was called the *Peavine Installation*. It was really named after the mountain, Mount Peavine.

The next steel pieces were commissions-one for the city of Sacramento [CA] and one for the city of Boise [ID]. I was in L.A. when the Sacramento one was fabricated on the East Coast by the Lippincott Organization. The Boise sculpture was fabricated in Oakland while I was in New York. So it was quite a little travel back and forth to complete those two large-scale steel sculptures.

The Boise sculpture had a number of funders, including the NEA and local organizations, and it was very political. I am amazed that it got made. It was moved from its original site, and it's now at the Boise Museum. Those

sculptures came from drawings and concepts that began with the firebrick Hudson River pieces.

Well, during the period that I was doing the firebrick work in the very early '70s, as I said before, I turned off the kiln, turned off the clay mixer, and it didn't get started again until about '82. In that period, there was no fired clay. My interests were in other areas.

When I came back to Los Angeles and the studio, I knew I was going to start to make some new clay sculptures. Again, I could not foresee what they were going to be. I just knew that it was going to happen and I said, how do I get into it? And very often when I'm about to start something and I don't know where it's going, if it's in clay, I do something small. And it may or may not relate, but it gets me going. So I say, I'm going to do some vessels and they're going to be slab vessels. So when I came, I ordered a power slab roller, which I modified by extending the tables and putting some rollers in the tables so that I could now make a slab that was seven or close to eight feet long and about 36 inches wide. I also ordered a pneumatic extruder. So I did start working with that equipment.

With the extruder, I made a few geometric forms-triangles, squares, rectangles. And those were mostly installation pieces, although there were a few individual pieces. But on the other hand, I knew I wanted to make some new vessels that were quite different than anything I'd done before, and they were to be planar constructions. They were going to be constructed out of slabs made on the slab roller.

They all had a twist. And I really referred to them as torque vessels-the noun rather than the verb "torqued." The concept actually came from a conversation with Mark Del Vecchio, and he said, why don't you call them "torque?"

Anyway, to get on from that, what I found frustrating for me was many of the materials I normally used were no longer available. So I immediately had to do a lot of research in clay bodies and glazes. It took a fair amount of time.

But I did begin to make these new vessels, and I also worked on the surface. What I was really interested in then was the challenge I found working on the surface of these new forms. Now, these forms had sharp angles, and they could have had a triangular, pentagonal, square, or rhombus base. So I found working on the surface of these forms was totally new, was unlike any other graphic experience I'd had.

In '86 I had a show at L.A. Louver [L.A. Louver Gallery, Venice, CA] of some of these pieces. Many had torque. The big challenge was, how do you visualize the construction of that shape?

So how'd I do it? I went back to the maquette. I took some thin cardboard and began to cut shapes to see what kinds of forms they had to be to fit together to make the image I wanted. I made many maquettes of different sizes, some of them were cut from four-by-six [-inch] cards-some of them were full scale.

Anyway, so that opened up new areas, new experiences for me, both the technology to be able to visualize and to realize the form, and also, with what to do with the surface and how that was different than it had been before. In that involvement, I began to realize there was another way the forms could intersect that gave me a totally new image. And you know, I'm sure there are people that understand that, but I didn't and when I saw it, it was sort of like, wow, you know.

That opened another door. So I began then to make new ceramic, torqued sculptures of a different scale. I could make them as big as the kiln would fire, and they reflected my interest in symmetry. The simplest ones use one template to make the whole image. Others use combinations of templates.

And the form-it's illusive, you know. It's there, but it isn't there, and then you see one aspect of it, then you look at it awhile and you see the other aspects of it, but then you lose it again. I did not put anything on the surface of most of these sculptures. I just wanted a simple glaze so the emphasis is actually on the structure and forms and the way the thing goes together.

And so again I went through vertical forms, I went through spear forms and cross forms. Some of the vertical forms began to suggest figures to me. So why not? So then I made figures, and, most recently, I made orbits, which are circular forms. And the orbits I call trans-orbs because there is not a bottom or a top. There are multiple ways they can be displayed or viewed. Most of them have what I call a tracer drawing on them. They are linear bands that connect one surface to another surface. So as you begin to move and look at it, you see that connects here or that connects there. Oh, and then you see a figure within a figure. If I took that line drawing and made it out of something, it would be a structure in itself. But, as it is, it's just on the surface.

So all of that has been renewing to me. Renewing the energies and the insights, the understanding, and solving technical problems. You know, I do a lot of that and I enjoy it.

MR. SMITH: It's very interesting to hear your articulate, detailed explanation of the process and how important it has been on the end result of your very successful work. I think a lot of people look at a work and they don't really understand the thinking and the technical ingenuity. Your discussion about this, I think, gives new insight to your work.

So that brings us up to the present. I would like to now begin into a summary phase of this interview, and ask some questions that are quite general in nature and give us an overview of your very impressive career.

We haven't talked about the role of galleries in your career, and from the late '50s you had had a number of very good associations, both with regional galleries in your area and those around the country. Rather than get into every single gallery and every show, what would you like to say about your relationship with galleries?

MR. MASON: Generally my relationship with galleries and with gallery owners has been good. [At the top of my list is Frank Lloyd and Frank Lloyd Gallery. Frank and I have had an excellent working relationship since he opened the gallery in 1996.] I talked about Ferus before, which was very important to me.

MR. SMITH: That was your first gallery.

MR. MASON: That was the first gallery, right, and from that I have had quite a number of other associations, and they've all been positive. There were periods when I had no galleries. When I was doing large-scale work, the only place they would go is in a big space, and once the Ferus closed and Irving went to New York, there wasn't a space for the bigger work. So, fortunately, I was in some museum shows. The firebrick pieces were not gallery pieces. If you scale them down, they look ridiculous. The whole concept was scale, which had to do with the relationship of the space, but also with the relationship to an individual. It was a spatial experience.

MR. SMITH: The most important thing is the fact that you are represented in many major museums, art museum collections, and a lot of private collections. I think that is a tribute to your accomplished work.

In terms of people and associations, you had already mentioned many individuals who you have associated with or have helped you in your path along the way. If you were to single out a couple individuals that you consider your real mentors who have really been pivotal, could you do that?

MR. MASON: Well, I think I've already mentioned Susan Peterson and Peter Voulkos. They were there at the right time for me.

MR. SMITH: And each helped you in a different way.

MR. MASON: A totally different way.

MR. SMITH: In terms of your influences, you also have talked about both primitive art and other things that affected your work, but in notes that you had sent me, you mentioned your interest in architecture and specifically your interest in Louis Sullivan, Frank Lloyd Wright, and Buckminster Fuller. Could you reflect on that?

MR. MASON: Right. I don't know quite how it happened, but shortly after I came to L.A., I did get interested in Frank Lloyd Wright and Louis Sullivan. I don't know who pointed me to some of the books on architecture, and certainly there are quite a number of Frank Lloyd Wright's structures in L.A. I was interested in theories, and there often were young architects from the USC school of architecture dropping in, and they were curious about what was going on in the studio. They would chat about things and try to educate me a little bit about the history of architecture. And I really was interested in it, that could be another life. I mean, to be an architect.

I said, that's not practical for me, but I had talked to Walter Hopps about it and he remembered it, and at various times he'd say, well, are you still interested in architecture? I did not follow that interest or that fantasy but-you know, architecture is such an important part of our environment and our environment is shaped so much by individuals now. It does not have that collective, cultural structure that earlier times often did have.

MR. SMITH: When I look at the body of your work, a lot of it has an architectural quality, and as you talk about your elaborate construction techniques, I think, in your own way, you are an architect of clay.

MR. MASON: There's a lot of structure in the work, and one of the people that has been really important for me has been Buckminster Fuller. And I knew about him before I ever came to California. I met him and I heard him talk on occasions. Paul Laporte was one of the art historians at Otis, and he also taught at a Catholic college, Immaculate Heart [Los Angeles, CA]. And Buckminster Fuller was a friend and fan of some of the sisters there, so he would come in and talk to groups of people at that college, and Paul Laporte invited me to some of those lectures. It was just a room with some people in it and Buckminster Fuller standing there, saying, well, ask me something. Then somebody would ask something and he would talk the rest of the time starting from that point. [They laugh.]

MR. SMITH: For several hours sometimes. [They laugh.]

MR. MASON: I did collect a lot his books. I've read rather extensively, and I have been amazed at the breadth of his knowledge and his curiosity and his vision. I think periodically about what he said. He foresaw many of the changes that we have experienced recently. He also said that new technology gets assimilated immediately, and that the world we know is constantly accelerating.

I sometimes quiz my son, and I say, can you remember when there was no television? Of course, he couldn't. [They laugh.] Well, I guess I asked him if he could think about what it would be like.

MR. SMITH: Yes. He's correct. We accept things so quickly, when we think of the computer age and e-mail and Internet.

I would like to ask you a general question about what changes you have seen in the art world since the 1950s. I realize that's a very big question, but it is over a half a century of time. Is there any thing you would like to express on that point?

MR. MASON: That's the toughest question you've asked me. [They laugh.] Well, there's been constant change, and it's accelerating.

MR. SMITH: What do you find exciting about our new century?

MR. MASON: Well, I suppose there's work to be done, and the challenge is really global. I mean, people that need to make things will continue to make things, and people that need to acquire things will continue to acquire things. [It's true the chip and the Internet have brought us into the digital world. Yet, I think the role of the artist and the creative individual remains the same. New tools, new challenges.]

MR. SMITH: Do you have any dreams for the future? New projects?

MR. MASON: Oh, I always have new projects, yeah. I don't really think of them as dreams. I mean, it's how you spend your day.

MR. SMITH: So every morning you wake up with some new ideas.

MR. MASON: Oh, every morning I think, it's time to wake up. [They laugh.]

MR. SMITH: Well, John I want to thank you so much for this fascinating and interesting illumination of your brilliant career. You've been very helpful in supplying me with material beforehand. Your very generous time here today, to share all your reflections of the beginning of your career, has really been important to give insight to your work. I've known you since the '60s, have followed all the things you've done, and had the privilege of representing you in several exhibitions. This was so enlightening to me to understand more about your work. I just want to personally thank you for your generosity in sharing your insight to your wonderful life.

MR. MASON: Good. It's good talking to you, Paul. I want to thank you and acknowledge our association and friendship that goes back forty-some years.

MR. SMITH: Okay. Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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