



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Rosanne
Somerson, 2006 August 7 and 2007 June 22

Funding for this interview was provided by the Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America. Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National Park Service.

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Rosanne Somerson on August 7, 2006. The interview took place at the Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island, and was conducted by Thomas Michie 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.

Rosanne Somerson and Thomas Michie 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

THOMAS MICHIE: This is Thomas Michie interviewing Rosanne Somerson at the Rhode Island School of Design [RISD] library in Providence, Rhode Island, on August 7 [2006], for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc number one. And it's a pleasure to be here.

I think for consistency's sake, maybe we should have some biographical detail. I wonder if you'd mind just filling in the blanks of where you were born and describing your childhood and background and sort of where you came from and how you identify that.

ROSANNE SOMERSON: First, I should just say, it's a pleasure to be involved in this project, especially with Tom [Michie] and with the Archives.

I was born in 1954; it seems really like a long time ago when I hear that date.

MR. MICHIE: It was. [They laugh.]

MS. SOMERSON: In Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. And I grew up outside of Philadelphia for all of my childhood. Then I moved to the New England area, first, actually, to come to RISD in 1971. And I've been in New England ever since. So I'll stop there for now. Should we just check and see if this is recording?

[Audio break.]

[NOTE: There appears to be missing audio here.]

MR. MICHIE: We are back. This is Thomas Michie interviewing Rosanne Somerson at the Rhode Island School of Design library in Providence, on August 7, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This is the disc number two. And we—

MS. SOMERSON: We left off talking a lot about teaching, I think. Would it make sense for me to go into the history of the program starting up?

MR. MICHIE: I think it would be really valuable. That's a major accomplishment of yours. It would be interesting to know—we've spoken already, I think, about your passage through industrial design into the woodshop, furniture major. You alluded to a graduate program in furniture design. But it would be helpful to hear about the offshoot from industrial design to create a major at RISD, and what it is and what it was and how it came to be, and also its teaching philosophy.

MS. SOMERSON: Okay. Well, the graduate program that I was—I mean, we'll go back, I think, [to] more of the career stuff—but when I was graduating from RISD, I was out for about nine years before I was asked to come back and teach. And that was in the graduate program, the M.F.A. program in furniture design, which was a part of industrial design.

They had two graduate degrees—one was an M.I.D., or Master of Industrial Design; and one was an M.F.A. in furniture design. And it always seemed like a strange anomaly to me that there was this furniture program grafted into this industrial design department, although there were lots of people interested in furniture and industrial design.

But from my perspective, there was a clear and growing interest in furniture design that I didn't see being addressed in the existing curriculum in industrial design. There was no, sort of, sequential way to study furniture design, and the furniture studios, which were at the advanced levels, were by lottery. So a student that wanted to come in and actually study furniture couldn't be assured of a—in my view—proper curriculum in furniture design.

So I was asked in—let's see—it would have been about '93 or so, by the provost at the time, to think about—there were issues around the interior architecture department. So I was asked to think about a combined program in interior architecture and furniture design. So I did quite a bit of research in that and came back and said, I actually don't think it makes sense to create a new department with those two disciplines, although they have a lot of overlap. But they are distinct fields and disciplines with different accreditation issues and so forth. But what I do think is that it's time to talk about [is] a department of furniture design, which was not the answer that they were looking for, I think. But I did quite a bit of research and presented a very strong case for creating a separate department of furniture design, essentially taking the M.F.A. grad program out of industrial design, and complementing it with an undergraduate curriculum.

And because of my connections and friends in the field, there was a lot of support in the field on the part of collectors and others to actually support something like this. So I was able to tell the school that I thought I could get some funding toward this as well, which was a big factor. And so I spent a long—and I won't go into the politics of it, which were fairly brutal—but a long and complex experience of trying to put this through. And in the end it went through with overwhelming support of the faculty, except for just a few dissenters.

We started the program in '95, first with just the graduate students. Then we were able to advertise it that year as a new major, and then started the sophomore, junior, and senior curriculums. And in the process of creating the department, [we] had a wonderful opportunity of looking at what makes a good curriculum and deciding—we sort of did it backwards—deciding where we wanted students to end up and then design[ing] the curriculum that would get them there.

And shortly on, we had some of the core faculty who were teaching in the grad area come into the program. John Dunnigan, who was teaching interior architecture, came in and helped form the curriculum. And a number of people who had been associated with the graduate program in various ways—we put together a terrific team of faculty that, from the beginning and still, function very much as a team. It's an incredibly good collaborative group. The whole department functions that way. So we had this very collegial, exciting, dynamic group of—initially we were projecting about 35-40 majors, and we've been pretty much at high 70s or low 80s since we had the full number of levels. So it's been very, very successful.

MR. MICHIE: Is there a compact version of when furniture isn't industrial design, or how your hopes and dreams for the training and products differ from what an industrial designer studies - which is sort of getting at the nature of perhaps studio furniture versus production furniture. And yet, as we'll—I hope—talk later [about], you've actually embarked on a production furniture line as well. But I'm wondering, in your precept for the department, how was furniture going to be different and not industrial?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, in fact, it can be industrial within the department. Industrial design still does teach some furniture classes, but we wanted to look at furniture design as a whole. We specifically didn't create a wood program; we created a furniture design program. What we thought was really important was that it cover the whole breadth of the spectrum of furniture design, from highly conceptual set design sort of pieces to mass manufacturing in industry. And with, you know, studio making somewhere perhaps in the middle. But what we really wanted was the bridging between all of those areas to have a scholarly conversation, because that wasn't happening anywhere.

MR. MICHIE: And on a practical level, if it was no longer just wood, that meant that's quite a costly proposition to have studio space prepared to go forward in all different materials.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, we started a metals curriculum at the same time as the wood curriculum, and then a curriculum that allowed for experimental materials of all sorts. So we've had students working in fiberglass and plastic and bamboo and composite materials and everything you can imagine. So what we tried to do was take it out of the material basis, which is something that is in a little bit of deference to the craft movement. We felt that in an academic institution, it was important to think of the content, and then devise the studio in the making around that.

And the other issue too, again, was that we sort of describe that there are all these components that have to come together, which is skills, theory, and context. We didn't want to separate them. The making had to be in the context of understanding the theory and history, and also design principles, and those things couldn't be separated. To be really strong, they had to flow together. And that was where the curricular design was a challenge.

But the success of the work that our students have been doing is so amazing, and the number of opportunities that we've had for external shows—just incredible opportunities for the students—the number of awards they're winning and so on has really just reinforced that we made a good decision.

MR. MICHIE: The work in this department in particular has moved on to an international stage.

MS. SOMERSON: Absolutely. We've shown in several international exhibits and been written about in magazines all over Europe, Russia, the East. So it's been a very high-visibility department.

MR. MICHIE: Do you think, in time, students from all over the world will come seek out this program as a result of this exposure?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, it's happened already, particularly in the graduate area. We've had graduate students—there was one year that we had—out of 13 grad students, I think six of them were from foreign countries. And specifically because of exhibition - they'd seen it overseas - or the reputation of the department. So it's happening, and we're trying to maintain that now and grow that.

But the faculty in the department work unbelievably hard at being exemplary in our field. And I think that we also have international faculty now; we have two faculty who are not American-born out of four full-time faculty. Two of them; one is from Germany, and one is from Australia. So that has helped to broaden our exposure as well. And so it's been terrific.

MR. MICHIE: I don't think most mortals could possibly understand what is required to establish a new department at an art school that is 125 years old. So it's no mean feat to have passed that resolution, then to create something and to have it succeed and flourish; and it's a remarkable thing that you've done.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, it certainly wasn't alone. There were a lot of people working together. But I would say that this is one place where my drive really was required, because it was—I mean, there were times I used to talk to a friend of mine who is a professional counselor, and I'd tell her things that had gone on during the day, and she'd say, I just don't know how you're not in a fetal position in a ball on your bed crying. I just didn't have the energy to do that at that point. I had a vision in my mind; I was completely determined to see that vision happen, and the rewards of the students and the comments they make about the education they've received through this department are just completely worth everything that went into it.

But at the same time, trying to maintain my own professional career was really a balancing act, and particularly in the department—maybe it's good to back up now and talk a little bit about the gallery years. The department formation happened just really at the end of the period when the Peter Joseph Gallery [New York, NY] was coming to a close.

MR. MICHIE: When was it - 1995, did you say?

MS. SOMERSON: Ninety-five was when the department formally started, with the undergrad curriculum added in '96. And I should know off the top of my head what year the gallery closed, but I'm thinking—was it '91 perhaps —

MR. MICHIE: Seems like it was later than that.

MS. SOMERSON: No, it was later than that. That's a wrong date. Yeah, I'll have to think about that a minute.

MR. MICHIE: But in the early '90s.

MS. SOMERSON: But in the early '90s. That's right. Maybe that's when it started actually, was '91. It's amazing how I can't remember dates. But my first real gallery experience was showing at a gallery in Philadelphia called the Richard Kagan Gallery. That was the only sort of high-end studio furniture wood gallery in Philadelphia.

Dick Kagan was a furniture maker who started this wonderful show space on South Street in Philadelphia, and I was able to show—it was a very select group of people that he was showing. And I showed him a piece that I had made right after getting out of school, and he accepted it, which was a big deal in those days, and then sold it.

MR. MICHIE: Even better.

MS. SOMERSON: Which was even better. And it was very different from the work that he had there. So he became interested in showing my work, and so I was fortunate to show there from an early stage. And then shortly after that, I guess, the Workbench Gallery began to get an interest in showing contemporary furniture, and they approached me about being in a show of women woodworkers.

There were a key group of us who were all friends and interested and supportive of each other's work. At the time, they didn't have the reputation that they eventually did, and I was sort of thinking, this is a gallery in the basement of a furniture store. Is this really the right career move? But meeting the people and hearing their vision of it, and the fact that it was in New York on Park Avenue and all of that was very exciting. And so I decided to go for it. I also liked the other artists whose work they wanted to show.

But I was a little reluctant always to be kind of categorized as this “woman woodworker,” because I really felt like it just so happened that I was a woman. Early on, I wanted to sort of deny that and just be like anyone else in the field. Later, again, I reversed that decision and actually realized how much of the content of my work does come from my being female. That was sort of something I grew into. But at the time, it was an opportunity, and I had the show, and it was a very successful show. I sold a number of pieces and then got about two years’ commissions out of that show. So it really sort of launched my career.

And I also was lucky to get a couple of NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] grants in that period. So I had a lot of opportunities very quickly that allowed me to get my studio work going. And for about nine years, I worked pretty independently, self-employed, very successfully running my studio, doing a number of exhibitions and commissions.

MR. MICHIE: You were everywhere, because it was hard to see an exhibition or publication you weren’t part of. It seemed to me, as a young curator, that your work was in many different contexts and being shown widely. So it’s true that you had a pretty high profile among woodworkers, male or female, early on.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, there were so few of us that were actually able to sustain it that those of us who were really pushing to continue to work in our studios and get work out there, I think, were very lucky. And particularly, it was actually an advantage in many ways being a woman and having work that sold and that galleries wanted to show because, I think, politically, people were trying to balance out women and men. I think that a lot of the men who were working were working from a position of, sort of, technical virtuosity, trying to show off their extreme, fabulous technique, and I think women were bringing more, kind of, emotion and content into the work. And a lot of people responded very strongly to that work, so it became very, very well received; not so much because of the gender, but because of the different ways that the work read. And it wasn’t women who were buying it.

So I think early on, I was very fortunate, and then eventually, we got a network of galleries from the Snyderman Gallery [Philadelphia, PA] and Pritam and Eames Gallery [East Hampton, NY], which were both real strong supporters of the field. Pritam and Eames formed 25 years ago and was determined to be a very selective, high-quality gallery that really got involved with their artists and showed the best work that they could find and that they personally liked, and launched a number of artists’ careers very successfully.

MR. MICHIE: I think their exhibitions were better than most museums’ presentations were. You could learn more and see more beauty and quality and variety than in any—well, almost any—museum that I’m aware of. It’s an amazing thing.

MS. SOMERSON: They were 100 percent committed to the studio furniture field and to showing excellence in that field, and at the same time, there were museum exhibitions going on to try and sort of define this field. Ned Cooke’s work - and Jonathan Fairbanks and others really got excited about the notion of an American studio furniture movement and wanted to really showcase the dynamic work that was going on - because it was really a field that was moving very quickly, and very exciting, and to which the public could relate. You could still go to a museum, see something, and afford to buy it at that time, which was not true of a lot of other media. So it was a field that was meant to flourish, really, and did flourish very, very broadly at that time. I was in the right place at the right time, very lucky to be a part of it.

The other nice thing was that the main leaders in the field were all friends, and very supportive. There were other craft media where I had good friends who were artists in those media who would just talk about the incredible competition between this person and that person. And in the wood field, I don’t know whether it just attracted a wholly, kind of, nice group or what, but—

MR. MICHIE: The warmth of wood.

MS. SOMERSON: - it was a very collegial group. And the openings were like reunions of friends. So we had a great time watching each other’s careers grow. There was enough distinction and development of people’s work that—I mean, there were some exceptions, but for the most part, people carved out a clear path of what their work was about, and other people would do other things. There was plenty of room for growth because there was like a floodgate of opportunity that opened in different areas. So there wasn’t that direct competition.

MR. MICHIE: Do you think any of the galleries you’ve mentioned—I mean, most are on the East Coast and the eastern seaboard - was there a kind of regional picture? Because I’m thinking, in the back of my mind, there is also a West Coast scene taking shape and playing out at the same time. And I’m wondering if that is still viable; was it palpable then? Is there merit to the idea of an East Coast versus West Coast style that you felt you were part of?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, I definitely felt much more part of the East Coast style, because the West Coast style, although there were schools—Wendy’s school being one of the strong ones at San Diego State [University, San

Diego, CA], Wendy Maruyama's program—there were some aesthetic differences in the work. Before Wendy started teaching, particularly, Larry Hunter was there. His work was much more out of what some people have called the kind of California round-over style, which was a very organic way of working that dealt with much more, kind of massive pieces of wood, heavily carved and shaped, and not as complex systems of technical structures and engineering as what was going on in the East Coast. And so there were some stylistic differences.

There were galleries that showed work successfully in California and the Southwest area. I showed with some of them, and my work was not as well received out there as it was on the East [Coast]. And the shipping costs and so forth, it wasn't worth it, when I had a hard time keeping up with the need here. So I felt like more of a fit here.

But in the '80s, when the Program in Artisanry started at Boston University [Boston, MA], that was a real leap for a kind of technical virtuosity that hadn't yet happened in the academic area. Krenov was one of the original faculty there—James Krenov—but he only lasted the first year. Krenov and Dan Jackson were the original faculty members—

MR. MICHIE: - at Boston University.

MS. SOMERSON: At Boston University. Dan didn't make it—I don't think—very far into the picture. But he brought Jere [Osgood] on, and Alphonse [Mattia] came in. Jere and Alphonse ran probably the strongest program to date, in terms of the leaps that work took in that 10-year period. And they were very lucky to have an unbelievable group of students, many of whom became—Peter Joseph.

MR. MICHIE: Defined the field.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, that defined the field, exactly. So it was a very special 10-year period. It was a real misfortune when that got shut down. And it was, again, part of the reason I felt so strongly about starting something here. And then there were also strong programs at Rochester Institute of Technology [Rochester, NY] and to some extent, Virginia Commonwealth University [Richmond, VA] and University of Wisconsin, Madison, and a number of other programs. But I think that when the Program in Artisanry shut down, the artists who were trained there became leaders in other ways, and their work had a lot of visibility and a lot of impact, particularly in the gallery scene. And whole collectors group grew around a number of those artists and launched the field in a very interesting way.

MR. MICHIE: And in the gallery sense, I suppose Peter Joseph Gallery was the culmination of all those trailblazers and forerunners, because it capitalized on the momentum that had been building for a decade, I suppose, at that point.

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely. I just felt very fortunate to be part of Peter's stable, because for the first time, somebody was actually investing in my career, rather than just kind of partnering.

MR. MICHIE: Literally.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, he was literally investing. He was giving us stipends to create new work against our sales, and so we had the ability to hire assistants, to buy the best materials, to do really grand-scale pieces. The most ambitious pieces of my career are the Peter Joseph pieces, because I was able to afford to build them. And I felt so fortunate to have had that opportunity.

And he did really beautiful catalogues for every show, with designers like Pentagram. He also was very concerned with bringing in a new group of writers to write about the field, so that the essays in some of those catalogues are some of the best ever, and brought a level of interest in writing and scholarship to the field that it was sorely needing at the time.

MR. MICHIE: We were speaking earlier about the merit of those essays, independent, really, of the exhibition. They were essays almost—[inaudible]—about the nature of furniture and creativity and so forth. And it's interesting to me that there is a commercial gallery operating on the level of an art museum, and playing a role that, again, few museums other than Boston, really—maybe RISD on occasion—Boston Museum of Fine Arts [Boston, MA] comes to mind - that those catalogues are exemplary and the likes of which hadn't been seen before and, really, sadly, haven't been seen since.

MS. SOMERSON: I think Pritam and Eames has done some nice catalogues since then of some of their shows, but Peter just had a vision of, sort of, always being at the pinnacle of everything that was actually—in some ways, some negative reaction to that, because people felt that there was an elitist, privileged group and that prices got so high that collectors had to drop out of the field.

MR. MICHIE: So did curators.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, that's right. But I think that Peter's intention was to give the field the same credibility as was going on in the fine arts, and to do everything he could to ensure that the artists were getting the full appreciation for what they did. And he was so enamored of the work and of the individual relationships he had with artists that I think his intentions were wholly good. I think that there were some very positive side effects and some negative side effects.

But when I look back on that period and think about having the opportunity of that beautiful showplace right in the center of New York, with solo exhibitions that were daunting in terms of filling that beautiful, large space, I just feel so fortunate at having had that opportunity and that support and belief in my work, which I never had by anyone since then, even though I have good relationships with a number of galleries. That sort of commitment and investment was unparalleled.

After the gallery, it actually was hard with some of the relationships with other gallery owners, although I tried desperately to create a position for myself when I signed on with Peter that would allow me to have certain galleries that were not in the exclusivity agreement that I had long relationships with. And Peter agreed to those, but I think there was hostility during that period, so those galleries didn't really work with me during that time. But hopefully, since then I've rebuilt some of those relationships.

But it really—after that, I actually kind of rethought my own career, and without the opportunities that Peter provided, I sort of stepped back and wanted to really simplify things. And I actually, for a long period, just worked independently with clients on commissions. I really missed the direct relationship with people, because the interaction is so important to me. And doing a lot of commission work, I felt like I really wanted to be able to—I never had problems working directly with clients; it was only working on commissions with galleries and clients that I had problems. But when I worked directly with clients, it was always a wonderful experience.

MR. MICHIE: Did the Peter Joseph years bring you, expand patronage? Did it bring other opportunities that hadn't existed before?

MS. SOMERSON: It definitely did. But I would say, equally, it lost some relationships, because the prices went out of the realm of some long-term supporters. So in a way, when it ended, I had to sort of reinvent my own view of my career, and there are certain people, like Ron Abramson, who I just adore, who was - in a similar way that Peter took us on as artists, Ron took my work very seriously as a collector when I was just starting out. And just the most wonderful collector in the sense that he would call up and say, you know, I'd like to get a new piece of yours. What are you interested in making? He wouldn't say, I need a this or that. He'd say, what haven't you had the chance to make that you'd like to make now? So he was a true patron and still is and just a wonderful person.

MR. MICHIE: So it was as much about you as it was about the work.

MS. SOMERSON: Completely, about building your career and giving you opportunities as an artist. And that's very rare. So those relationships have continued and stayed on. There are other collectors who, understandably, just want a table. They want a table with your name on it to round out their collection, or in some cases, they want to see three artists' visions and choose the table they like. And that's all fair. But you know, the most meaningful things for me have been the relationships that have been longstanding. And I miss that in a way with the gallery—with Peter's gallery being gone. But it offered other opportunities of kind of reinterpreting how I want to move forward.

There was some pressure in making what felt like masterpieces for major shows all the time; it was exhausting. I probably couldn't have continued teaching and working at the pace that I did at RISD, and doing that at the same time, without—and having a family and all the other things in life without—the intensity of all of them was fairly daunting.

MR. MICHIE: But now you're in a position where you can pick and choose, I imagine. Projects come to you, and you have the stature now to say, yes, thank you, or more or less choose where you want to go, what you want to do.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, that is true to a certain degree, although I am not good at saying no. I really like making—again—the work accessible to a large audience of people. So someone will approach me who is someone I know, is another artist or something. And I always want to figure out a way to make the job work or the commission work. So I lose money a lot that way, but there's a satisfaction of putting this much energy into something and knowing that it's really going to be appreciated at the other end. So some of that is financial and being in a position where I've had a full-time job teaching, and I need to make my studio support itself. But it's given me some freedom that other artists haven't had.

MR. MICHIE: It liberates you to a certain extent. I think that's been true for a hundred years that those artists who teach—it liberates them in a way to, in some ways, take risks or produce work that may not have to be commercially viable. So it's kind of liberating. In fact, I also imagine, though, it has the opposite effect, in that it is a job, and it is more than full-time, and it takes its toll on freedom time.

MS. SOMERSON: Time is always the enemy, because I've had to say no to a lot of career opportunities because they weren't realistic in my time frame. And that's the one thing that I'm pretty adamant about with working with people, is that I just have a particularly tough time frame. And I certainly don't think I could work much harder at any of it, but I've just had to turn down certain opportunities because I knew I couldn't meet the deadlines. And that's frustrating.

MR. MICHIE: Can we talk about some of the commissions that you look back on or look forward to with particular excitement or satisfaction? Maybe you can't name names, but I'm wondering if there are entire projects or rooms, interiors that you were invited to conceive or individual pieces that were particularly challenging or satisfying? It would be interesting to know, because those may not be in museums or environments where people can just go see them. Only you know about them.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, well, there's been so many, because I've done so much commission work. But some of the most interesting ones were the work with Kohn Pedersen Fox [Associates, New York, NY, and worldwide] when they were Kohn Pedersen Fox and Conway, and they brought together a number of artists to work for a big private house in Pawling, New York. A number of us got a number of commissions. And it was so exciting having artists brought in at the conception of a house—

MR. MICHIE: And many artists in the same house.

MS. SOMERSON: Many artists in the same house. And it was a 21,000-square-foot house, so there was a lot of room for us. But they brought in the drawings and models and material samples of the house, and let us kind of conceive the work together from the beginning. And that was a really unique and special opportunity. I've never actually been in the house and seen it.

MR. MICHIE: Was it all furniture designers, or glass and textile and other media involved, too?

MS. SOMERSON: I'm sure there were other media. But I was only involved in the furniture presentation part of it. A number of us got several pieces in rooms.

And then I ended up doing a commission for their headquarters when it was in New York, the original chair that became the one that was then commissioned by the RISD museum—the new version of it.

MR. MICHIE: I was going to ask you about that. That's where that is.

MS. SOMERSON: That's where.

MR. MICHIE: I never went to see the boardroom.

MS. SOMERSON: It was in the lobby. They decided that rather than use the more traditional painting and sculpture that lobbies often present, they wanted to use furnishings as art objects. So that was where that chair was originally designed—for that setting at the corporate headquarters. And that's, I think, why I kind of used a headrest idea for the chair. But that was a really satisfying thing, again, partly because of the rationale that this was putting furniture in the same category as other kinds of art.

MR. MICHIE: It also explains, in a way, why it's monumental and like architectural furniture rather than necessarily about comfort and ease—

MS. SOMERSON: - and the more residential kind of things. I mean, it was meant to be sat in but not for long. And hopefully, comfortable. But it was a waiting room chair, so it wasn't something that you'd sit in and read a good novel or something.

MR. MICHIE: And being one of a set also explains its kind of stance or stature too. It's not a stand-alone object, although the museum now presents our single chair as one. But it's helpful to know.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, I did one for the lobby. And then I did a pair that later got put into another corporate space; and then one again for the RISD museum. And they were all a little different. But that was just a nice opportunity.

And then, I mean, there have been so many commissions I've done with—I recently did a commission for an apartment in New York that was coordinated with Dennis Miller and Agnes Bourne, both people that I have a lot of respect for, beautiful space with amazing presence and beautiful views. I'm doing a second commission for

that same client. And you know, the thing that is most interesting is the thing you're working on now or the one you're about to start. So it's hard over the years to think of, because I've done so many commissions.

But I've liked the balance of commissions and exhibition pieces. The commissions are usually based on older work. Someone sees something and says, I'd like something like that. And depending on the client, you have a certain amount of latitude to build work in a new direction. But there is some responsibility to not make a disaster. So you know, it's a little limiting, but less daunting than museum shows, where you try and make a masterpiece, and there's no worse formula than trying to make a masterpiece.

MR. MICHIE: That's a good point.

MS. SOMERSON: The discipline that I've had—

MR. MICHIE: The premeditated masterpiece seldom is.

MS. SOMERSON: Exactly. It's always a disaster. I've learned over the years to really get that thought out of my head and work from a very simple place. The pieces that have often been the most successful ones are the ones that pop into my head fully formed. They just sort of come from who knows where, and I make them and they work. And the ones that I've had to develop over a really long period of time to try and solve certain problems are sometimes successes, but they can also be overworked. And I think I said earlier that as my career has gone on, my main emphasis has been an editing process of really trying to get to the simple idea that still reflects the bigger principles. And that's been kind of the challenge of this phase of my work.

MR. MICHIE: One thing that's always struck me is much of your work is very sculptural. And it seems that's a dimension of furniture that is hard to plan in advance. You may know it's going to be that way, but the execution of a sculptural form is constantly chipping away or carving or so forth. It doesn't just proceed from a drawing the way an industrial designer would have the linear plan of its execution.

I'm wondering about the role of drawings in your work. I think it begs the question of assistance also, the execution of these forms. If you're not wielding the chisel and hammer each time, how do you get a shop assistant to execute a form—a sculptural form—that is in your head and heart?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, model making helps, or even making a part—one part—and saying, duplicate this part four times for four legs, or whatever. But to be perfectly honest, it doesn't always work. The best scenario that I've used with assistants is to be close enough to be able to go to the studio and work with them or have them come to my studio and work with me, so that there is constant intervention along the way. And those things are generally successful. Most pieces that involve a lot of sculptural forms, I have to do them that way. I very rarely have had success where I've sent off a drawing and something comes back. In fact, I've had a few things that have been real disappointing.

MR. MICHIE: I can imagine.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, and sometimes I'm forced to work that way just by the nature of the project. But I also choose the assistant or the project around the availability of the assistant. I've worked only with a few people over the years, and I know their working styles. I mean, I've probably worked with a handful, maybe a hand-and-a-half-ful of people. They know my style, and we can communicate well. But it doesn't mean that everything is always a success. Sometimes things get past the point where you can actually make exactly the correction you want to make. And then you just have to decide whether you can live with something.

MR. MICHIE: We'll never know which those were.

MS. SOMERSON: Which pieces those are. Yeah, I won't say those. But I can picture them clearly in my mind. But I've been very fortunate to work with assistants who are so gifted and skilled that—some of the Peter Joseph pieces, I would have never been able to do if I did them all myself. There were just way too many hours in those pieces. And even some of the more recent commissions, there are teams of people working on them in a shop, and not just one. Maybe under someone's guidance, but they're not completely—they're time-consuming. So just to be realistic and be able to make these things so that the price is in the reach of the client, there are certain business decisions that one has to make. And that's why I really enjoy having the chance to do exhibition things, which can be much simpler and more kind of exploratory and balancing those things out.

MR. MICHIE: Before we get to the new line of furniture for production, I wonder if we could speak a little bit about the studio environment that you work in. Artists' studios are a topic in themselves, in the way any room or house or creation of work reflect the personality of the person working in it. Can you paint a word picture of your studio? You've had the good fortune to establish and create more than one, I think. How have they changed, and how does it work for you that way?

MS. SOMERSON: Sure. The first studio was a 900-square-foot barn in Boston, two-story barn that Alphonse and I shared. We had, at many times, assistants in there with us, and we literally had to climb over each other's work to get to the table saw. But it was a great first studio, very low overhead, which allowed us to take on some ambitious projects.

And from there, we moved down to Westport [MA], where we built a studio out of an old barn. It was a pretty perfect studio in a beautiful cornfield with nothing around it but natural landscape. It was about a 2,300-square-foot studio with a beautiful pair of benchrooms and a really nice machine room. And through a long series of—we were there for 19 years—and through a long series of complicated things, ended up having to lose the house that was part of the property. We had to sell our house for a long story reason, which I won't go into here.

MR. MICHIE: Kept the studio.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, we kept the leased studio, and then just this last year, that sold, so we were having to move our studio, which was fairly traumatic. We decided that this was an opportunity to go in a very different direction. And so with two friends who also were losing a studio, we went together and just leased a big mill space in Fall River [MA] and actually are just wiring the machines this week.

So we have this fantastic new 10,000-square-foot space where the four principals, which are Charlie Swanson and Eck Follen and Alphonse and myself, all have kind of the corner studio spaces. And then we have a large woodshop, metal shop, finishing room, and gallery space. And then we're leasing out seven spaces to other artists. So it's a whole new venture.

MR. MITCHIE: Fantasitc.

MS. SOMERSON: It will be, for me, looking out at the Battleship Cove and the industrial bridges of Fall River, a very different feeling. I'm curious to see how it will affect me. When I moved from Boston to Westport and started working, it was like a valve had been turned on that had been turned off for years, just unbelievable sensory information from the landscape and the quiet and the beauty of Westport. I really thrived on that a lot, and it influenced my work just so directly. I could see the influence of the forms and the boatyards and the things around me. And I'm very curious to see how this new kind of industrial landscape—

MR. MICHIE: Girders and rivets—

MS. SOMERSON: Exactly. I'm going to get out the erector set and start building some furniture.

MR. MICHIE: Well, maybe it's too soon to tell, but there must also be that dimension of having the studio adjoin your home. Now, you travel, and it's a separate workplace you can leave behind. Is that something you look forward to?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, it is. For years, because I had small children, I had to have a studio close to home so that the kids could play outside, and I could watch them, or they could come inside and work. They always had little workspaces in the studio. And now that my younger child is almost nine, it's at the point where she can come in and bring a computer or something and play, or I can actually, while she's in school or doing her stuff, I can actually go to the studio and work. So it will be a new chapter, and I don't know how it will play out, but a very exciting one.

And also the space - I mean, the studio will be the best studio I've ever worked in. We've really put a lot of effort into designing it and figuring it all out with all of our joint experience and equipment. And so the machine room was bigger than the one at RISD for 10 people, so it will be a whole new thing. And I'm excited about it.

MR. MICHIE: And the same kind of cross-fertilization of working under the same roof with a very disparate group of designers and materials. It will be like RISD East.

MS. SOMERSON: It will be, and a lot of RISD alums are going to be there, a couple of textile artists and one painter, and then some designers who are working for other companies, and then some studio furniture people. So it's going to be a big range.

MR. MICHIE: Can I also ask about—this is getting personal—but the way that you live with furniture? I presume you live with many things you've made, and Alphonse Mattia and his work. And how that works in the process of creating and inspiring—I mean, do you take refuge in very different kinds of objects, or do you live with things you've made?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, up until the past couple of years, we never had any—or very little of our own furniture other than things that we made for just sort of practical reasons. But we have a few pieces in our home now, perhaps not by choice. But usually, these are things—there are a lot of pieces that were sort of traveling around

in exhibitions, never sold, and they ended up back in our studio—

[END TAPE 1 SIDE A.]

—and it's really just a handful of pieces, considering the number of pieces over the years. But up until about five years ago, everything was sold that was made, so we didn't have furniture in our home.

And now, particularly since our studio has been under renovation, all that stuff has literally been in the house. It's been very interesting to live around it and with it and see the different things you see. For one thing, how careful one has to be with it, which is hard in a house with kids and elderly people visiting and so forth. So I've learned a lot about experiencing day-to-day being with the pieces. But it's also kind of like there are these friends in the house. I don't know, you get these kind of reactions back from the work that you've been so involved in creating and really seeing it from a different perspective and in a different lights. Different from above and below and around, and that's been really interesting.

MR. MICHIE: Have you collected work by friends and colleagues? Do you live with other artists' work?

MS. SOMERSON: We've been given a lot of pieces, particularly by former students. We can't afford our work, to be honest. And so there are a few things that we've made for our house, but in general, we really—it's so expensive to make this stuff, and the material costs are so high, that we pretty much have to sell everything. So if we are living with something, it's because it hasn't sold, and it's not—except for a few pieces—it's not really by design. I'd love to actually make things for my home, and I wonder, would they be different?

MR. MICHIE: The Wharton Esherick model.

MS. SOMERSON: Right, yeah. But I wouldn't want all of my stuff. That would be like walking into your journal or something; it'd be a nightmare. I love having work of friends around, and you know, our own furniture is pretty—the stuff that we bought or have been given—sort of Salvation Army picked up—it's like a shoemaker's kid. It's not like we've designed this fabulous space and created a life around it. We're just too busy to do that. So we kind of live in a very simple way, and I think sometimes people are surprised that our house doesn't look like the homes of our collectors, but it doesn't.

MR. MICHIE: What do your children make of all those things? Do they run in the opposite direction?

MS. SOMERSON: No, they're very, very proud. They think furniture making and designing is the easiest thing in the world, and they have fabulous sketches in their own sketchbooks of ideas that I wish I could make, because they're just ingenious. But they're very, very proud of it. We recently had a solo-pair, Alphonse and myself, exhibition at Milton Academy [Milton, MA], where my daughter was a senior, and they have a fabulous art program and art gallery. It was one of my favorite shows that I've ever been in, because it was, like, 20 pieces of just our work, and watching my daughter and her friends experience that work was just a whole other level that was really, really nice to see.

MR. MICHIE: I can imagine.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah. They're very proud. And they think that making things is just what you do. So they see no obstacle in creating anything they want, and they've been very empowered, I think, by growing up around a studio like that.

MR. MICHIE: Well, that's wonderful. Sometimes, you expect that children of artists will become accountants.

MS. SOMERSON: Right, well, they may still. I think the little one is going to look for a small country to be a dictator of. That could change.

MR. MICHIE: I think we've referred earlier to what seems to be a contradiction, but in all this highly personal, expressive, emotional, or romantic element of furniture that you now are distilling forms, you and John Dunnigan and Peter Walker have initiated a production company. And here we sit in the building, in fact, that is the mother church. But can you say something about the practical inspiration behind this, and then what you see in what you created?

MS. SOMERSON: Sure. Well, I've always been interesting in designing for productions, but I never felt like I had the right product. And if one's going to see a lot of something, it better be designed right, you know, because there's nothing worse than a lot of a bad thing. So it's been a challenge that I've talked about doing for years and just never had the right opportunity. I did try earlier on, many years ago; designed something for a small company called ARC International [Arques, France], which was trying to produce kind of artist editions of pieces that they could mass-produce. And I designed a prototype for them, and it—the business never really worked the way they had envisioned it. But I liked the intrigue of it, although that was a fairly high-end piece that I

designed for them.

And I've done editions on my own where I'll do, like, 13 of mirror or something and, kind of, artist editions. But the idea of high-volume production of something, that really appeals to me, and I think, also, in the process of watching the field sort of change, and sales be more complicated, and collectors kind of falling in and out of the field, in a way - or their homes are all fallen, and there isn't a generation of collectors coming by. I really was interested in finding different markets.

And so RISD actually approached me to advise them, because they were renovating this beautiful building into 500 new beds for dormitory living, and said, would you be involved in a committee to help select the furniture? And I said to them that I'd be delighted to, but that I kind of knew what was out there, and I didn't [think] there was anything of the grandeur of the design, or the building, the intention of the building, so would they take in consideration letting some faculty design it? And I would be in charge of getting that going. And they were sort of dumbfounded and said, well, you know, we never thought of that.

They said, well, I don't think that's going to work. There has to be a very clear budget and a time frame, and it has to be all, you know, guaranteed and warrantied and [all] of this. I said, well, none of that is insurmountable. What about if we make a proposal to you?

So we did make a proposal, and it was a good example [of how] naiveté is why you step into new ventures. But I talked to the other two—at that time - two full-time faculty in furniture, John Dunning and Peter Walker, and said, you know, do you want to take this on?

And so we formed a little LLC [limited liability company] called DEZCO [DEZCO Furniture Design, LLC], which was sort of a design company in shorthand, and the name also came from another story. But anyway, we were commissioned, essentially, by RISD to design two lines of furniture, which they could then review with a number of design review committees.

And then we said we would take on the task of finding a manufacturer. So we went through the process, interviewed students, did a lot of research, visited a lot of new dorms, and eventually created two lines of dormitory furniture that fit the prescription of what we needed to come up [with]. And interviewed—when we finally got the results from RISD about which one they liked, which was a combination of the two lines, we designed a third line. We then interviewed manufacturers.

And one of the exciting things about this was that it was a chance to show our students—within the furniture field there are real distinctions between the production market [and the] studio furniture market, the, you know, fine arts market. And one thing that we always said in our teaching is that if you just had the right principles and the right awareness and understanding and knowledge, you can adapt to different markets. And we believed that very strongly and had seen students do it, students come through and have, you know, studio training and end up being events planners or graphics designers or sneaker designers, you know, using the education for all different things.

But we hadn't really shown it ourselves. So we thought, here's a great opportunity to mirror our teaching mission. So we came up with a platform of concerns about materials. We wanted the materials to be green, because they were going to be in large volume, and we wanted them to have a good environmental impact. We wanted them to be manufactured in the States, because we felt that manufacturing was leaving America, and we didn't want to contribute to that. And we wanted to have the flexibility of students personalizing their spaces within a degree, so we didn't want the furniture to be too outspoken and to have flexibility about use, and also just some other specific design things that we put into them that we wanted to be fairly innovative in terms of the actual function of the pieces. And we came up with a line that - we interviewed five manufacturers, found one that we felt was willing to work with us, and developed the line. And it's now in production and 500 students sleeping in it, you know, every night. So—

MR. MICHIE: That's fantastic. Does it also have a retail life beyond RISD's dormitory?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, we hope so. We've actually—there was a part of the line that the manufacturer didn't take on, which was the upholstered stuff. And we've sold some of that on our own since then to other universities and—

MR. MICHIE: How do you distribute that kind of thing? How do you make them aware and ship and deliver and—

MS. SOMERSON: Yes. Because there has been a lot of publicity about this, so they've read an article and contacted us, and the manufacturer that made the upholstered work also will continue to work with us. So we sort of did that on our own. The case goods - which is the main bulk of it—we had hoped would have a, you know, vast life, because there's nothing really like it out there, and we thought it was fairly clever in its solution of certain problems, based on our research.

And we've gotten an incredible response from the public, but for some reason it hasn't take off from the company. So we're not sure if the company hasn't marketed it the way that we envisioned, or if schools—what they've said is that purchasing agents now are not so much designers or even specifiers—it's coming more from the business ops, and they're just looking at the bottom line, and this is a little more expensive than the bottom line, although it's very economical. So we're not sure.

We have a lot of ideas about different ways we could go with this if this relationship doesn't work. We've had a number of kind of large, very large-scale stores approach us about doing some work for them, so we may—you know, we're going to sort of sit back and give this first path a chance to go, and if it doesn't go, we have some ideas for other places to take it. But it's been very rewarding working from a place of the very high-end and kind of, you know, a limited clientele, to working to a place where anyone could afford to buy this work. And that's what I'm more and more interested in doing.

MR. MICHIE: And as you say, in a way, it's practicing what you've been preaching all these years, that it's the design ethic and approach, which may take many different forms, but, in fact, it's viable, because it's grounded in sound principles.

MS. SOMERSON: Exactly. Yes.

MR. MICHIE: I wonder if there are aspects of the furniture that make it more costly and therefore less affordable, but that you don't want to compromise—and I'm thinking specifically about sort of green materials and whether that's actually cost effective at this point, or is that a luxury, which requires a commitment on the buyer's part?

MS. SOMERSON: It is a luxury to a degree. It definitely made the pieces more costly, but our hope is that as these materials become more widely used, the cost—it's really the suppliers where the cost is high - that the cost will come down. But also, because we had a fixed budget from the beginning, we made design decisions that actually eliminated a lot of other costs to try and balance them out. So for example, we used materials that didn't require other kinds of edging or other kinds of finished treatments, that they could just be used in their state, as they are, unfinished, immediately, so that we saved cost in other places. And it was a real design challenge to come up with a way to use expensive materials economically.

MR. MICHIE: Can you actually identify what some of those materials are?

MS. SOMERSON: Sure.

MR. MICHIE: I mean, are they recycled? Are they composites? What are they?

MS. SOMERSON: Sure. The main materials in the line are bamboo plywood, which is a very—had gotten from a source from a managed forest in China, so it's a very good—not all the bamboo is well managed, but this is. A material called Valchromat, which is a—it's touted as an environmentally friendly kind of particle board, a kind of MDF, medium-density fiberboard, but it's much stronger than standard MDF, and it's got color all the way through it. And it supposedly uses nontoxic binders, although it's interesting, as we do more and more research, it may not be as green as we first thought, but it's definitely better than the standard formaldehyde bleaching, you know, composite boards.

MR. MICHIE: Yes.

MS. SOMERSON: And then we used beech from a certified forest in Europe, and then rubber. And then the fabric on the upholstered stuff was a recycled fabric that was—it's a green line of fabric that the fabric company has come up with that doesn't have [the] same chemical treatments and things as other fibers.

So we made an effort, anyway, to find the greenest materials we could, and we recently did a lecture where one of the points was, how green is green? And you could keep going deeper and saying that, in fact, what you think is green, so-called green, may not be as green as you think. How do you know the wood is from a certified forest? How do you know this binder is nontoxic? And it's complicated, but certainly, compared to the palette of materials in most furnishings in this line, this is the greenest line out there.

MR. MICHIE: Sounds fantastic. It seems in the newspapers almost every other day there is coverage about green architecture and green design, not all of a sudden, but it's maybe gaining momentum now, certainly public awareness. And it seems to be more and more viable, which I guess is its own reward, because as more people do it, doesn't the cost go down?

MS. SOMERSON: That's right. Yes.

MR. MICHIE: So maybe people need to commit to pay for it, but eventually it ought to sustain itself.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, what we found in our research was that students were the driving force in academia for this. And that it was coming from the bottom up, and now it's being actually mandated by administrations, so it's coming top-down. So the students have actually had a big impact, and coming from my roots in the '70s, that's pretty satisfying to see the students making that kind of impact. And also, you know, getting into the complexities of what we're doing to the world right now.

As a designer, feeling like I'm not part of the contribution to the good side of that would be just horrendous because it's a way, in a sense—I mean, it may be early on some of the issues were more, sort of, gender-based in terms of politics, and now, you know, preserving the world for the next generations is a responsibility that I really believe makers and designers have to invest in, and that's becoming much more of an issue for me.

There's certain woods that I just adore working with - pear wood and certain exotic woods - but I'm more and more trying to use domestic woods from my own region. When I was in Australia, I really was taken by the fact, particularly in Tasmania, that the artists were so tuned into the materials that surround them. It was very inspiring for me to think about using—I know I live in an area where there are plenty of beautiful materials, you know, within a couple hundred miles of where I lived, so using those materials as a primary source has become more and more important to me.

MR. MICHIE: Interesting. When art has a social agenda, it's not about style in this case; it's about materials and the artist's responsibility to the materials. That is, in fact, a highly political message, in a way. I don't know whether it's visible or legible, but at least you're true to those ethical considerations in the things you create. And I'm sure it's true that students now are far more aware of that than they were 20 years ago.

MS. SOMERSON: They are. I mean, again, the consistency is the hard thing, because students will come in and say, I'm only using recycled materials; I'm only using this or that. And then you actually look at how they're living, and there's a lot of inconsistency with the kind of, you know, throwing out of clothes that are perfectly good. So if you go down the list, it's not necessarily a consistent platform, but just the fact that people are more aware of the issues is a start. And the students are always very idealistic and always wanting to have an impact on the world. And if this generation doesn't get around the environment, we're sunk, because certainly our political leaders aren't.

So I'm really hopeful, and encouraging students to be deliberate in their choices about using materials and also in making work that celebrates this awareness. A lot of students are doing just that, so it's very exciting to see that awareness in that generation.

MR. MICHIE: The warning signs have never been more clear, and it's hard to imagine someone who's aware and in touch not addressing these issues in their work. And that must play out in every department, really, in an art school.

MS. SOMERSON: I think so. Yeah, I think that it's very broad-based here. It's hard because a lot of art practices use materials that are not safe, and so we've had to go through a whole thing about what materials are allowed on campus and what solvents could we use, and what finishes, and all those things. And it's a constant learning curve, because some of those really beautiful surfaces are not easy to achieve with environmentally safe materials—

MR. MICHIE: Exactly.

MS. SOMERSON: —so it's a challenge and a balance. And I think that there is a balance point that's reasonable. There are ways of working with materials, even materials like solvents that just - you know, dispose of them properly and wear the right safety stuff, and you can still use them, but you just have to be conscious in the way that you use them.

MR. MICHIE: My impression from seeing some of the furniture that DEZCO has designed is it's very simple, to the point of austerity. There are nothing but straight lines and distilled forms. Did it devolve to that, or was—it had cost implications obviously, to be simple. But can you elaborate on what solutions you might have rejected or some of the processes—

MS. SOMERSON: Sure.

MR. MICHIE: —on how they came to look the way they do?

MS. SOMERSON: We have a couple curves in there, but they're mostly straight lines. But a lot of it was function and assembly.

MR. MICHIE: Okay.

MS. SOMERSON: But we also—we had one line that had a lot more bold curves and that kind of unorthodox forms, and it was clear, as we talked to manufacturers, that it was much more costly. So a lot of it was cost, but we also wanted to make something that was quiet enough that the students would be able to have their own sense of personality in the spaces. There were a couple of design innovations. One was the flip bed, which is—you know, some students like to have their beds high and lofted, and some low like a residential setting, and that usually involves a lot of ugly and expensive hardware or very complicated adjustments. And we were told that we couldn't have, really, any exposed hardware, because those things at RISD tend to disappear and might show up in projects elsewhere.

So we designed a bed that just - the proportions had a deck that you could flip the bed over and have it either in a high or low position without any adjustments, so that the mattress would go on the other side of the deck, and in one position be lofted and in the other be low. And was a new thing that no one had ever done or thought of, so it was real breakthrough in the field for us. It's a very simple thing, but no one thought of it. Often the simplest things are things no one has thought of. So that became sort of a starting point for the line.

And so we designed a lot of things with that sort of flexibility that, you know, appears very simple, but actually it's highly engineered or thought through. The chair that goes with the desk and the dining table has what would be considered a backwards seat. And new ergonomic research shows that the concave seat that is typical on a chair actually is influencing long-term health of the spine in a negative way and that, actually, people tend slump because your pelvis is—yes, sit up straight.

MR. MICHIE: As we both sit up.

MS. SOMERSON: Your pelvis—right. Your pelvis is compressed whereas, if you had sit on an upward curve, where your sit, bones are actually engaged; it helps your muscles to support the spine. And over the long term, you get a stronger spine and better posture. So since we're dealing with 20-year-olds, we put that kind of a seat in and really worked to make it comfortable. And we'll see; I don't know how we'll tell, but it's a new approach to seat design.

MR. MICHIE: I'm thinking a patron or collector who's just spent lots of money on an object is going to be too polite to tell you ultimately what they really think about it. But now you'll be lurking and overhearing your primary clients, so you'll get a feedback that you probably didn't expect to.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, we've heard really interesting things in the elevators. We thought the students would be the worst critics, but they've been very positive. I did have a meeting with a student, recently, in my office about wanting to create some special program for himself, and at the end of the meeting he said, and I want to ask you a question. Who's making decisions about the stuff that RISD's buying around here? And I said, well, there's, you know—and I sort of explained the processes, and he said, well, I just want to say something about that dorm furniture. It's just like—who bought that? It is so ugly and so bad. And I just thought, well, here I've been working with you for an hour to create this special program for you. And I just said, well, that's interesting. I'll pass that on to the designers and, you know, never said a word.

MR. MICHIE: You dodged that—

MS. SOMERSON: But that's been really the first negative, and he's a case in particular, that particular student, you know; I sort of gauged the source. It's important for us to hear both sides, but in general, people have been thanking us because they love—the dorms have a waiting list to get in now, and they've been extremely popular, so the students seem to really love living with the stuff.

MR. MICHIE: Fantastic. Also, in the commission work, you alluded earlier to a growing simplicity or a distillation of forms that you see in your later work versus earlier work. That sounds like a conscious decision, and I wonder if you can describe what's going on with that kind of growing simplicity?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, there's nothing harder than making something simple, so it's something, I think, as my work is maturing, that I'm beginning to understand how to do better. I will confess that there's nothing I love more than sitting for hours, inlaying eggshell on the surface and getting every little piece of eggshell in the right position and that sort of obsessive work. I did some work recently with glass tile that I had gotten made in Venice - it was mosaic inlay - and I just loved, you know, doing this kind of methodical work for hours on end.

But, number one, it's not always easy to get paid for that work, and it's my own sort of—it's therapeutic relaxation. So sometimes I just do it because I love to do it, but I've been trying to see how I can say the same thing that takes hours and hours in a simpler way. I wouldn't say I'm only doing one thing or the other, but I'm finding myself trying to move towards what feels to me like a more sophisticated expression of the same ideas and always pushing my work forward and seeing, kind of, what you can strip away and still have the essence there. That's been the phase that I'm in now. I may not stay there. It's not necessarily a trajectory that will continue in one direction.

Looking back on a lot of the complex work that I made, I'm so pleased that I had the opportunity to do that. But I want to know, what did that work teach me, and how can I take what I've learned from that into a place where it doesn't require, you know, costing that much or taking eight months to build a piece? Is that realistic?

There are so many more opportunities for people—there's so much more competition. There's so many more places to buy furniture now that people really have choice. If they want something special, there are many, many, different kinds of choices they can make. Whereas, when early on in my career, if someone wanted something special, you pretty much had to have it made. There's a lot more option out there now, so it's important to put the emphasis on the quality and care but not overdo things, because they become—you know, it becomes unnecessary to a certain degree. So—

MR. MICHIE: Do some of these simplified forms include upholstered furniture?

MS. SOMERSON: I'm working a design for an upholstered chair right now. I've always wanted to do more with upholstery. Part of the difficulty is relying on—unless it's very simple. [I] don't do the upholstery myself, so it's relying on someone else's work, and that is either extremely expensive or sometimes unreliable. So when I do upholstery, I try and do fairly simple upholstery so I don't run into those problems.

MR. MICHIE: The tall back chair we spoke of earlier, that there's one in the museum and others in the lobby of Kohn Pedersen and Fox - it strikes me that that is one of the most intricate and elaborate upholstery projects that one could conceive. It's convex; it's layered; it's integrated into a design. It's the most remarkable thing. I often wondered if anyone ever really understood what they were paying for there or fully understood how complicated and sophisticated that was. It's an amazing thing.

MS. SOMERSON: I'm not sure. There was stitching just to make the fabrics come together, before it was even upholstered. And I was trying to call on my sewing roots when I thought about how to do that. And also just the play of the two patterns in beautiful silk. I just love that silk on that chair. But what I'm doing now in the face of it is trying to think of, okay, how can I express that without it being so laborious? Is there a way to get the same feeling across in a simple way? And I'm not sure I've gotten there 100 percent yet, but that's sort of what's driving the challenge of my work right now.

The last two years I've been working—well, the last year and this upcoming year—outside the department. I've been in administration at RISD as interim associate provost, which is a whole other thing. So I've put off [my] sabbatical for two years, which I will have the year after this. And I'm really curious to see where my work takes me, because I really want to focus on the studio in that sabbatical, and in a way get to know myself and my work again with an immersion that I haven't been able to do for the last number of years.

MR. MICHIE: It seems to me that, at the moment, you have almost three full-time jobs: as academic administrator, as full-time professor, or full professor, and then also a studio life on the side. It seems almost incomprehensible that you could sustain all three.

MS. SOMERSON: And then there are others that you don't even know about. [They laugh.] No, it is—many people have said they could never do my life, and how do I do it? And I don't know what the answer is. I bounce back and forth from one thing to the other and I'm pretty efficient, and my mind works at a fairly fast clip. But I have—this has been a particularly difficult year because I'm dealing with a lot of family issues—illness and things from family members. So that's really draining. But it's important to be actively involved in all that, too. And I have felt it more this year, I think, than in the past, but I do—

MR. MICHIE: But the end is in sight.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, well, I hope—this sabbatical will be really important for me and to be in this new studio, this new space. And I'm trying really hard not to take on a lot of commissions for that, if I can afford to, and just really work with getting to know myself in the studio again full-time, which I'm so looking forward to. And I'm sure I'll do some traveling as well. Travel has been a big influence on me in the last few years, and I've been fortunate to do a lot of traveling.

MR. MICHIE: In the course of your work, or in the course of RISD itself?

[Audio break.]

MS. SOMERSON: I was just saying that, in the last year, I've done quite a lot of traveling, some of it for RISD and some related to grants and speaking engagements. So I've been in the last 12 months to Kyoto [Japan], Australia, London [England], Jerusalem [Israel], Paris [France]. I'm forgetting something, but it's been quite a year of travel, which I've just loved.

Obviously, all the things about seeing new landscapes, new cultures are remarkable, but in some of the travel—

in Australia, I was there for six weeks. I was part of the artists' project [Arts Project Australia]. And I was actually in the Aboriginal lands for 10 days, which is something that you can only get into by permit, you know, if you're not an Aboriginal. And really seeing another slice of life that was completely outside of my realm, and very troubling and very complicated—and you can't enter into an experience like that and come home unchanged. It just really makes you rethink everything about the way you live and the way you're raising your children and the way you're doing your work, and, you know, honoring your parents and all your values. Those are really important things for me.

And then being in Kyoto, where the attention to every little detail is so extraordinary—you know, women out in the morning sweeping around their bushes on the ground to take every little bit of debris and every little fallen leaf off. And when you go into a restaurant, someone lays down a cloth for you to put your bag down on before it touches the floor, and just this unbelievable level of care and detail about every aspect of life that is just, you know, jarring compared to going into the streets—

MR. MICHIE: More informal ways.

MS. SOMERSON: Yes. So all of those little things have really been extraordinary for me and eye-opening and reminders in thinking and moving forward.

MR. MICHIE: East and West, north and south, temperate, arctic. That sounds like fun. An amazing concentration in a rather short period of your life. That's a huge change. And this also ties into RISD's own exposure and positioning around the world, too. For example, there have been furniture fairs you said you'd been a part of; so these are institutionally sponsored events, as well as your own personal travel.

MS. SOMERSON: Right. In some cases, like in Kyoto, I was looking at a campus that somebody was offering up to RISD. But in Jerusalem I was there as a speaker at a conference on women in design and taught a master class at an art and design school there. So, it's been a mix of things, you know.

And it's amazing to be in a place like the Middle East right now - and I was in Turkey, as well, on that same trip - and then hear the world news from just such a different perspective. I mean, I just think travel is so important, particularly as an artist, where you—well, for anyone—but I just benefit so much from it in terms of opening my exposure to even the way things are displayed or worn. It's just so stimulating and exciting. I really hope that during my sabbatical I'll have some chance to do some more of that.

MR. MICHIE: I wonder if we could return to another topic, just for the record: your association with other art schools or training programs—Haystack [Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME], for example. I wonder if you could speak to that, speaking of different parts of the world that have their own inspirational beauty.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, Haystack is certainly one. I've probably been to all of the summer programs that have had—I haven't been to a lot of the special glass ones, but I've certainly taught at, or been a visiting artist at Penland [Penland School of Crafts, Penland, NC] and Anderson Ranch [Anderson Ranch Arts Center, Snowmass Village, CO] and Haystack. And my early association with Peters Valley [Peters Valley Craft Center, Layton, NJ], and I've visited Arrowmont [Arrowmont School of Arts and Crafts, Gatlinburg, TN], and I've visited the Center for Furniture Craftsmanship [Rockport, ME].

But I've had the longest and deepest relationship with Haystack. I was on the board for nine years and ended up chairing the board in the last period of my boardship, and I'm still very devoted to that school. It's a wonderful, magical place where incredible people come together in just an idyllic spot and produce beautiful work and exchange ideas.

MR. MICHIE: And a part of the magic there is the beauty of the setting.

MS. SOMERSON: Absolutely. The setting is—for me, I really, over the years of going there have gotten such an affinity with the setting. It's a very creative space for me when I get there. They run something called New Works, where faculty who have taught there in the past every other year get invited to come and just work in the studios for five days, with no expectation of anything. Every time I've done it, I've come out with a sketchbook of things that have turned into pieces. Often I sketch things that don't go anywhere. So something about that environment is very productive for me.

I also like the approach that they have about the studios, which is, sort of, just enough and no more. It's about the idea of being able to make within certain limitations. Certainly the beauty of the environment is limitless, but the studios don't have, you know, nine of everything and the most up-to-date thing, yet people produce beautiful work there. And I think that's a good lesson.

MR. MICHIE: Is it a fixed group of people who are there for a time, or do people come and go? Do you enter with

a group of compatriots, so that you grow and evolve together over that time?

MS. SOMERSON: There are sessions, and they're short. The New Works things are four or five days, but the general sessions are usually two weeks. There are a total of no more than 90 people there, and you dine together, and so by the end of the time, you know a lot of the 90 people, if not all.

The design of the campus by Edward Larrabee Barnes was very smart, because it's a series of decks kind of hovering over a very fragile landscape, and so it connects the community both figuratively and literally. Because if you're walking on one of the decks, and someone else is walking in another area, you can almost feel the vibration of that person. So it's an intentionally connected community, the way it's designed. And it works.

And the director, [Stuart] Stu Kestenbaum, is an amazing director and just brings great people together. He has a very good sense of chemistry about how ideas will complement one another. It's a place that everyone should go to.

MR. MICHIE: It sounds ideal and idyllic, in a way. Are there things we haven't covered that you wish we had? Topics that we haven't talked about that you were hoping we would talk about?

MS. SOMERSON: I'm not thinking of any immediately. I guess in a way I feel like we haven't talked about the development of some of the pieces, but it's hard to do without work in front of you. And I think in an overview we've kind of covered that anyway. Let me just look at the list a minute and see if there's any area that I feel we've really missed.

I started to make one point earlier, that maybe I'll just finish on about the notion of the female issue and gender. When I first started working, I was not exactly denying that I was female but trying not to make that the focus, even though in some ways it was giving my great advantage. In my later years, I've actually realized that everyone's identity, regardless of whether it's gender orientation or whatever the issues are, are so much at the heart of their creative process that it's actually important to acknowledge that the work is being made by a woman. There's something that I bring to my work as a woman that's different than other women, but certainly than men, and that should be something to celebrate rather than to deny or ignore.

Speaking to the conference in Israel recently about women in design, I've come to look at that notion of being a female designer with a different kind of intentionality than I probably did when I was younger and trying to prove that I could do anything that anyone else could do. But that's been sort of a revelation of late.

MR. MICHIE: It strikes me, having observed you in crits [critiques] over the years, that it's not so much about gender as any individual's voice. And it seems to me, perhaps because you're a humanist, that in a crit situation you always have that ability to not just criticize but to couch that in the terms of the person whose work is being discussed, so that the prescription is not just dogma, but it's from their point of view. I think it is a gift you have to draw people out, or at least to guide your comments and instructions to their wavelength that has meaning. I'm not expressing it very clearly, but it sets you apart from a lot of other RISD professors that I've observed interacting with students. So those are the issues in your own work, but I think in your work and in your work as a professor, as a teacher, you have that commitment to the person. We talked about that in terms of expression, personal expression, and how important that is.

MS. SOMERSON: We have.

MR. MICHIE: Furniture as a discipline or a medium often works in such subversive ways or even subliminal ways, very few people who aren't in the field get to articulate what it is about the furniture—because it's about comfort and posture – it's how the furniture makes them look and how they feel in it. Those are things we don't take for granted in this field, but most people never get to express.

MS. SOMERSON: That's right. Well, I think just the terminologies are so interesting. And we've talked about this before with students, but the idea that chairs have arms and legs and backs, and the relationship to the human body is so symbolically embedded in furniture objects, you know, chests and—

MR. MICHIE: Legs, feet, hands, arms.

MS. SOMERSON: Exactly. It comes from a really clear interaction with the human body. I've been asked a lot to define "furniture," and it's so hard to come up with a succinct definition. For a while I was just saying, you know, objects that the body interacts with. And someone said, well, that could be jewelry. And so it is true that it's not a specific enough definition, but I do like to think about furniture that way—that it's about—whether it's a physical interaction sitting in something or opening a drawer, eating at a table, it's also a visual and a tactile—all the senses are interacting with these objects in their use or even in just the appreciation of them.

Even in a museum setting where you can't necessarily use the furniture, you still can imagine or imply a kind of

use and experience that can be very vivid. And I love that about this medium—that it's always implying the human that's somehow in scale with the object. Or, if not in scale, you know, if it's a miniature object, that even gives you another sense of yourself.

I remember seeing the Thorne Rooms [Mrs. James Ward Thorne Miniature Rooms, Art Institute of Chicago, IL] in Chicago years ago, and they just blew me away because I felt like this giant looking in at a whole scene of these beautiful little objects.

MR. MICHIE: They are so well done, it actually is possible to enter them in your imagination.

MS. SOMERSON: Magically.

MR. MICHIE: Because they're consistently well done in every dimension and material.

MS. SOMERSON: Every dimension and detail. They're fantastic, and that was a real experience for me because it—you know, I talk to my students a lot about training your eye when you encounter an object, almost like a zoom lens, where you can zoom back and see the overall, and then zoom in very close in the macro mode and see the finest little detail. And the Thorne Rooms were that experience of being able to look at furniture from that broad perspective of being giant and away, and it is constantly with that notion of being able to see deeply and overall and then to come in very close and focus on something. It's that David Pye thing, too, that he talks a lot about, different levels of encounter as you get closer and closer to objects.

MR. MICHIE: Picking up one thread before we close—I'm interested in the degree of collaboration, or opportunities for collaboration, and your mention of upholstery makes me wonder if these are fabrics you've designed or worked with other designers—those other aspects that go in to furniture. Are these things you enjoy working with other artists on, or have you, or don't you like to do that?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, I've done very little real collaboration, other than one piece that Alphonse and I did together, which was quite a difficult experience.

MR. MICHIE: What piece was that?

MS. SOMERSON: It was a large, standing, tall cabinet with the mosaic inlay. I don't know if you've seen pictures of that, but it was not so much that it was difficult working with Alphonse; it was just a complicated commission situation. But anyway, the collaboration with DEZCO was fantastic, because we all brought very different things to it, and that was a really win-win all-around situation.

I haven't designed my own fabrics, yet, although I'd like to at some point. But, by combining fabrics, and stitching them the way that I did in those tall chairs, that was as close as I've gotten, you know, to doing that. But, again, it's about the scale of production and whether it would be a one-off thing, you know, using the Jacquard loom or something here, or something for mass production. And I haven't had the opportunity or the need yet to do that, but certainly I wouldn't rule it out.

MR. MICHIE: I'm wondering if your new studio environment, thrown in with 10 other artists all working, will present some opportunities.

MS. SOMERSON: It may. It very well may. I'm eager to leave it very open and see what happens.

MR. MICHIE: And ready for sabbatical in general.

MS. SOMERSON: The time to do that.

MR. MICHIE: Well, maybe we should leave it at that.

MS. SOMERSON: Okay.

[Second Session recorded June 22, 2007]

MR. MICHIE: This is Thomas Michie interviewing Rosanne Somerson at RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI] on June 22 [2007]. And this is the would-be first disc.

I had jotted down a couple of topics because what was missing in our conversation last time really was the formative years. And all of this, really, is a preamble to your arrival at RISD, which I think we can discuss again, if you have other thoughts.

MS. SOMERSON: Okay. Sure.

MR. MICHIE: I think just for posterity, it would be helpful to know where you came from; home, family life, upbringing that may have led you or propelled you to where you are.

MS. SOMERSON: Okay. Well --

MR. MICHIE: Where you grew up and so forth.

MS. SOMERSON: Okay. Well, I grew up in a suburb of Philadelphia called Wyncote [PA]. And I had two brothers and my mother and father, and at many points -- well, a certain period of my life -- my grandparents living with us as well.

I lived in a house that my father had built. My father was an attorney, but when he was still in law school, on the weekends he and my mother started building a home in what was an old farm that was divided up by various functions of the farm. So different people bought different lots in the farm. We bought the cherry orchard and so grew up with all these cherry trees in the backyard.

MR. MICHIE: What year would this have been? When are we talking?

MS. SOMERSON: Let me think, because it was before my birth --

MR. MICHIE: In the '60s?

MS. SOMERSON: -- so it probably would have been -- my parents were married in '49, so early '50s, I would say. My brothers were alive. So --

MR. MICHIE: So it was a rural area that was being developed.

MS. SOMERSON: It was a rural [area] that was being developed -- and now the city just encroaches on it. It's just a whole different environment. But at the time, it was nice, and different families all had different parts of the farm. So it was a pretty --

MR. MICHIE: Did they all know one another?

MS. SOMERSON: They didn't beforehand. It wasn't like a commune or anything like that.

MR. MICHIE: Okay.

MS. SOMERSON: It was just individual landowners.

But my whole childhood growing up behind what was our property, in the orchard, there were always horses. There was a big pasture with horses, and I spent a lot of time in the barns and so forth growing up.

MR. MICHIE: It sounds fantastic.

MS. SOMERSON: So it was a nice place to grow up.

MR. MICHIE: How close to Philadelphia? How close to the city?

MS. SOMERSON: It was about -- well, there was a train that was about a 20-minute train [ride]. So it was about a, you know, half-hour drive or so into the city. And my dad worked in the city.

MR. MICHIE: So he had a desk job.

MS. SOMERSON: He had a desk job.

MR. MICHIE: But he was very handy. He built --

MS. SOMERSON: But he was the kind of man that felt that you could do anything if you just studied it. So he got a book and a -- you know, a plan - and decided he could build a house, because he didn't have a lot of money. And so on the weekends they would go out -- and they hired a carpenter, too, but he was sort of the contractor and general overseer of everything. And so as a result, we had a little handyman shop in the basement. And you know, I think eventually it led -- and I can get into that in more detail later, but it led to my comfort in sort of veering to the woodshop at RISD, because I knew the sounds and smells of machinery and --

MR. MICHIE: Were your brothers older or younger?

MS. SOMERSON: Older. I was the youngest.

MR. MICHIE: So were they even more involved in the kind of house-building phase or not?

MS. SOMERSON: My oldest -- my older brother was a little bit. I mean, there are pictures of him in the wheelbarrow, you know. But he was pretty young.

MR. MICHIE: [Laughs.] That's not quite what I meant.

MS. SOMERSON: No. [Laughs.] Right. No, they were pretty young.

MR. MICHIE: I see.

MS. SOMERSON: But it was an ongoing process. You know, home-built homes don't finish quickly. So throughout my childhood, there were still renovations going on. And my father was incredibly resourceful and ambitious and courageous, but he was not what I would call a craftsman. So every light switch was a little bit askew, and you know, it definitely had the feeling of a home-built home. But --

MR. MICHIE: He learned as he went along?

MS. SOMERSON: He definitely learned as he went along. He was fairly unstoppable. And my mother, too. My mother was -- they were sort of -- you know, looked like pioneers in the old photos.

MR. MICHIE: So they never became frustrated or disillusioned with the process.

MS. SOMERSON: No. I think they were thrilled by it, in a way. The windowsills in my home were cherry from the cherry trees that were cleared, and there were windowpanes that they made that were from the trees that were there before. So it was kind of nice.

MR. MICHIE: That's very appealing.

MS. SOMERSON: And I still have -- well, I don't know if I have it anymore, but I did at one point still have some wood from the house, and I made a couple of mirrors that went to my family members that were from the cherry trees on the land. Wonderful memories of my middle -- the middle child, my younger brother, you know, for hours out in the cherry trees every summer just, you know, eating away.

And I just looked this morning. My parents, whenever we bought a house, always bought a pair of sour cherry trees, because they do better in pairs. And so I was just looking as I was driving out this morning, and the cherry trees that were planted in the house that I live now, for the first season -- because they're pretty young -- just have cherries on them. So it was kind of a nice continuum.

My mother was also very artistic, but it didn't come out until later in her life. She had her hands pretty full.

MR. MICHIE: What did her skills turn out to be?

MS. SOMERSON: She ended up becoming a fairly accomplished weaver and spinner and dyer. She liked the whole process. And my mother is a brilliant woman, and she has a really great mathematic mind. She actually was studying to be a chemist at the time when she got married, and ended up leaving college and finishing it later. When we were in our growing years, she did it part-time and ended up getting her degree eventually at night school. But she has a wonderful mathematical and literary mind and still, in a very advanced stage of her age, with very bad health, still does the New York Times crossword puzzle every day.

MR. MICHIE: That's impressive.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah. I mean, I can't -- could never do it. So it's very impressive.

MR. MICHIE: And arithmetic skills, or mathematical skills, are all essential to weaving, the counting and --

MS. SOMERSON: Exactly, yeah. She can look at a pattern, you know, a knit pattern or a woven pattern, and just figure it out mathematically instantly, and so was very involved in the technical aspects of weaving and dyeing. And her color sense was a little frightening sometimes, and her --

MR. MICHIE: That was the period.

MS. SOMERSON: Yes, definitely. And her design sense definitely, you know, could have used some more official training, but she, again, was just fearless and dove in and did things, and made most of the blankets in our homes and a lot of table goods and towels and things like that.

MR. MICHIE: Did any of your other siblings go into creative pursuits or the arts?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, my older brother did a lot of creative writing and was a writer for many years. He did sort of publishing -- he was involved in the computer publishing industry. So his --

MR. MICHIE: So more verbal than visual, then.

MS. SOMERSON: Yes. But he did fiction writing and always has. Has never had anything published, but has always worked on fictional books. He's had books published, but they're technical books on computing. But he continues to write fiction, which I think one day will do something. And my middle brother, who was an alternative[-medicine] physician, also was very involved in building things and did a lot of building in his own home and, again, not at a high level. He was a better craftsman than my father, but, you know, the design aspects were definitely not his strength. But his sense of being able to do and make anything, I think, came from my father.

MR. MICHIE: I remember you said the last time we spoke that your own children felt somewhat fearless about designing or creating something because they'd grown up around a studio. And it sounds like you also grew up in an environment where anything was possible or could be made, because everyone around you was just diving in and making what they wanted to.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, I think that's right. I think my parents definitely approached it from the posture that it was an intellectual pursuit, that you could figure out anything if you just set your mind to it and got the right books. It was all about getting the right books.

They were also of a generation -- it's interesting when students talk today about this big interest among students about recycling and reuse. And when I look at my parents and the generation before them, you know, that was just a natural part of what they did. Nothing was wasted. Everything had a purpose and was reused. So I sort of have a bit of amusement about this generation, which is such an affluent generation, talking about the idea of repurposing something, when everything -- I mean, I grew up in hand-me-downs. We were the ultimate recyclers.

MR. MICHIE: I think that explosion of consumption really happened in this country after the war.

MS. SOMERSON: Yes.

MR. MICHIE: Whereas for the previous 200 years, it happened logically and naturally, much more sensible.

MS. SOMERSON: Part of life. Exactly.

MR. MICHIE: It's interesting, it had to grow out of control before common sense could be reestablished, almost.

MS. SOMERSON: That's right. I think that's right. And we could get into a whole conversation about what lifestyle changes people are willing to make to actually make it integrated into their own lives now, but that's sort of a different discussion.

But one of the things, I think, that really influenced my becoming a visual artist was living with my grandfather, who, for many years when I was quite young, we shared a bedroom, and he was blind.

MR. MICHIE: For his entire life?

MS. SOMERSON: I think after the point -- in his 40s, I think, he began to lose his vision. He was a boxer, and he was a baseball player of some renown in Philadelphia in a kind of minor league team for a while. But he sort of did everything, and nothing quite succeeded for him. I think there's a story that at one point he was offered the contract to own all of the neon lights in Atlantic City [NJ], and he thought it was a fad that would never take off, so he turned that down.

MR. MICHIE: That's a shame. We wouldn't be here today --

MS. SOMERSON: That's right, exactly. I'd be endowing a chair at RISD instead of teaching here. But he was a boxer, and I think there was some talk that some bad hit he got or something had something to do with the nerves in his -- between his eyes and his brain. But he was blind, and we were very close. And I just felt enormous empathy for his lack of vision, and so I spent a lot of my childhood really dedicated to describing what I was seeing to him.

We would go to the movies together, and I would sit through the entire movie with my hands cupped to his ears describing everything that was happening on the screen. And I think through that process, I got such an enormous reverence for vision and being able to see things and describe them and reinterpret them for someone else to enjoy. So --

MR. MICHIE: It's so amazing, the image you mentioned -- being the eyes for someone --

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah.

MR. MICHIE: -- so you not only have to see for them and through their interests but also articulate --

MS. SOMERSON: And articulate and interpret -- and he used to call me, you know, his seeing-eye dog. He did have a seeing-eye dog at one point in his life, but when he got older and moved in with us, I sort of became that, played that role for him. And I made him some things that were finger fancies. I made him a little carved stone, which was just all designed around something to put in your hands and just sort of experience through your hands.

MR. MICHIE: Purely tactile.

MS. SOMERSON: Purely tactile. So I think I spent a lot of time as a child interpreting visual and tactual experience for him.

MR. MICHIE: What was the difference in your ages, then?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, this was when I - you know, probably before puberty, because I'm sure my parents wouldn't have wanted us to -- probably until the first brother moved out and went to college, and there was another bedroom in the house, so it would have been up until probably I was about 12 or something, and he was -- he died in his 80s -- mid-80s or late 80s, so, you know, there was quite an age span between us. I can't do the math. I'm not my mother, but -- [laughs] --

MR. MICHIE: You think he regarded this as a necessity, or was it an endearing lark in a way that he encouraged?

MS. SOMERSON: It was definitely a very special relationship. I had a relationship with him that others didn't, and he with me. He was a very difficult man to the rest of the family.

MR. MICHIE: I see.

MS. SOMERSON: We had a very special kind of rapport. He just loved the attention that I gave him and vice versa. He was very kind with me.

MR. MICHIE: Was he your mother's father or father's?

MS. SOMERSON: My father's father, yeah. And my grandmother, who lived with us also, had a series of strokes and was very disabled from that, and increasing amounts of paralysis throughout her life. So there was this whole environment of catastrophe and health and issues and hospital beds and oxygen and all that stuff, throwing up --

MR. MICHIE: And caretaking for others.

MS. SOMERSON: And caretaking from -- yes, definitely.

MR. MICHIE: So no room for self-absorption.

MS. SOMERSON: No, no. And I'm at a point in my life where I've sort of -- I'm in that role now, so I definitely came from it naturally.

MR. MICHIE: Yes.

MS. SOMERSON: But I do think I was much more of an academic in my younger years. We had terrible art classes in our public schools, and I wasn't so taken with those or so talented, I must say, in those. And really, the first artwork that I did were the drawings for my application for RISD. I was much more interested in literature and some creative writing. I liked writing a lot. And coming from a family that really stressed, sort of, the literary aspects of things, it made sense.

MR. MICHIE: Did you parents ever take you to the Philadelphia Museum [of Art, Philadelphia, PA], for example --

MS. SOMERSON: We went to the museums all the time. I went to Winterthur [Museum, Gaarden & Library, Winterthur, DE] frequently, because my --

MR. MICHIE: As a child?

MS. SOMERSON: -- as a child, because my grandmother lived in Wilmington [DE]. That was sort of our Sunday once a month -- we'd go to Longwood Gardens [Kennet Square, PA] and Winterthur frequently, but I didn't

connect to it the way that I did when I was older, although I did, I think, develop an appreciation for it - and lots of art and lots of theater and some travel, you know, to Europe, and got to see a lot of real masterworks as a child. So there was definitely an appreciation for the cultural aspects of life; that was deeply ingrained from my parents.

MR. MICHIE: So to pursue art was never a kind of betrayal of anything? It was a natural thing to have been interested in and to pursue?

MS. SOMERSON: I would say so. It was a little bit of a surprise for my parents, because they expected me, I think, to go in a different -- my father really wanted me to take over his law practice and --

MR. MICHIE: I see.

MS. SOMERSON: -- but was very encouraging that whatever my passion was was what he would help and support. My middle brother was a photographer and had a darkroom set up in the basement of our house, and actually was traveling around for a while with a lot of the big blues bands, taking photographs of them. He traveled with Junior Wells and Muddy Waters and B. B. King and a number of really significant blues artists, and did photography for them and actually ended up doing photography for Woodstock [Woodstock Festival, Bethel, NY, 1969]. He did the cover photo for the Woodstock catalogue.

MR. MICHIE: He should be endowing chairs at RISD.

MS. SOMERSON: That's right, yeah. [Laughs.]

So he was quite involved in photography. And through that, I got a little bit into the music scene in Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Folk Festival. I worked part-time in the summer for, you know two cents an hour or something, writing biographies of all the artists and helping putting the programs together for things like the Philadelphia Folk Festival.

But my brother took me down into the darkroom at one point and showed me how to make a print. And for me, it was just this unbelievable moment of magic, seeing an image come out of the pans of chemicals. And I decided that I wanted to get involved in photography. So that was sort of my first artistic pursuit.

When I finished high school - I actually finished high school a year early. I was so sick of school at that point that I did 11th and 12th grade credits in one year and managed to graduate after 11th grade. [I] had applied to college and gotten into college in 11th grade, but I decided that I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. So I took a summer and actually found this little advertisement in the back of the New Yorker for a photography and creative writing program in Denmark and somehow talked my way into it --

MR. MICHIE: Excellent.

MS. SOMERSON: -- yeah - [laughs] -- and ended up in the northern country of -- in Jutland, which is a very rural part of Denmark, in a thatched-roof cottage, studying photography and creative writing in a program that was pretty amazing. It was all large-format work, four-by-five and larger, and it was so technical that we didn't even use store-bought chemicals; we mixed all our own chemicals. We'd go to the pharmacy and get all the ingredients and made the chemicals.

MR. MICHIE: Amazing.

MS. SOMERSON: So it was fantastic technical training, and I loved it.

MR. MICHIE: Were the other students typically Americans?

MS. SOMERSON: They were all Americans. It was a really strange place but quite wonderful. And, you know, we lived in, literally, this old thatched-roof farmhouse that had been renovated for sort of dorm rooms, with great darkrooms. It was a beautiful place to shoot images. And I was pretty fascinated by the technical aspects, because this was sort of the focus of the school.

So I spent a lot of time in the darkroom and put together a pretty good portfolio, and then didn't want to leave yet. Because I wasn't going to go to school that year -- and I didn't really know where I was going to go to school. So I managed to get a job in Copenhagen working for a commercial photographer.

At the time, my brother had just had a child, the first grandchild, and I decided that I wanted to come home and see the baby and get some college applications in. I did some research and decided to apply to RISD. So I came home to do that and spent a month at home and then was planning to go back to Denmark. And sold everything I owned in order to have the money for the ticket. So I, you know, sold my bicycle and just my worldly possessions.

And when I got back to Denmark, the photographer that I was set to work for had had some catastrophic business loss while I was away and couldn't offer me a job anymore. So there I was, and so I decided to just make it work somehow. I found a room that I rented in someone else's home for, I think, \$50 a month, and had a budget. I remember it: my budget was four dollars a day for food. It was pretty slim pickings. And we would - a friend of mine came over for part of it, and we ate a lot of oatmeal, and on special occasions would put some chocolate in the oatmeal.

But I managed to find a woman who taught weaving, and so I took some weaving courses with her. This is before my mother was actually weaving. It was part of what convinced me to convince my mother that she would be interested in weaving. And I did that and it was really wonderful, and managed to spend a year there.

MR. MICHIE: Did you speak Danish at this point? Had you learned?

MS. SOMERSON: I had learned Danish, and I had learned a very rural kind of Danish. When I moved to Copenhagen, people would ask me where I learned to speak Danish like a savage. [Laughs.] But I could really get around to the point where if I was hitchhiking, which people still did in those days, it would -- I would have to tell someone I was American.

MR. MICHIE: That's impressive.

MS. SOMERSON: You know, at that age, your mind still works [laughs], and I picked it up pretty quickly.

So that was an amazing year of just going to museums, hanging out, weaving, learning another culture. And again, I still wasn't at the point where I was really interested in furniture or design, which was a bit of a pity, because I was sitting in a great place for that, but came to that later.

I think when I eventually got back to RISD, and I got into RISD, and got back here, I came as a photographer. My portfolio was photographs and then my first three drawings that I had ever done, which were required for the application.

In my first semester, I just felt overwhelmed by -- with lack of ability. You know, everyone around me was drawing these beautiful figure drawings, and a friend in the dorm floor that I was living in was just a beautiful figure drawing master. I was asking her for help at one point and said, you know, I just can't make these drawings look like anything that is anything, and she said, "Well, let me help you." And she took out my newsprint pad from the day. And I'd been drawing a male nude sort of side view, and she said, "All right, well, just orient ourselves. Let's just look at this. And which is the front of the figure and which is the back?" I mean, she couldn't even tell from my drawing.

And it was very, very frustrating for me --

MR. MICHIE: Isn't that typical, though, a foundation - baptism by fire? I'm wondering if your experience, although alarming, was fairly common.

MS. SOMERSON: I think there were others in my position, but definitely the minority. I mean, most students who were there were the best artists in their classes and had come -- many had come from schools with much better art programs than mine. I was definitely at the bottom of the barrel, I must say. But by the end of the year - I mean, the foundation program was so good. By the end of the year, I was drawing really beautiful -- or not beautiful but, you know, acceptable figure drawings. I really learned how to draw in that year.

MR. MICHIE: Who were the leaders of the foundation then? Who were the sort of stars that you were trying to please or had to work with?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, my teachers that I remember, some of them, up until this year, were still teaching -- Merlin Szasz, LeRoy White, Hardu Keck - and they were terrific teachers -- Gracia Melanson, who was the drawing teacher. We did calligraphy, which was required then, and -- there's a fly that's going to add to this soundtrack, I think - [laughs] -- a little wildlife.

But it was a remarkable year. And at that point -- it's a little different now, but at that point, we were able to try a class of the intended major, and I did try a photography class. So I did take photography. Harry Callahan and Aaron Siskind were teaching here. Of course, I didn't have them, but I had Paul Krot, who was a -- became a renowned photographer.

When I applied for RISD, my mother was working part-time at that point, and through her work, she knew the photographer Paul Caponigro, who she somehow was able to ask if he would review my portfolio and see if he thought I had any ability to go to art school. And he wrote me a really wonderful letter of reference and saw something in my photographs that was very -- what's the word -- you know, gave me the idea that maybe -- it

was very encouraging to me that I actually maybe had some capability as an artist, because I really saw myself much more as an academic person than an artistic person.

But the foundation year and the time in Denmark, which was a very creative experience, was really kind of the foundation of my art background.

MR. MICHIE: If you saw yourself as less of an artist and more as a scholar, why RISD? Was it because there was still a very strong liberal arts component here that was promoted?

MS. SOMERSON: Probably, although I didn't think of it in those ways at the time. I just was really excited at the time about photography. I just thought it was magic, and I felt like when I got -- and probably again because of the experience of my grandfather, I felt like the camera was sort of the same filter for me, that I could frame things and arrange things and describe them through the camera the way I was to my grandfather.

MR. MICHIE: Did you ever work in color photography, or was it all black and white?

MS. SOMERSON: I did a very little bit, but I was really interested in black and white. And I loved all the technical aspects of the large-format work and the -- all the chemistry of the darkroom, but I realized -- when I got to RISD, and I was working here with graduate students, the work seemed to me sort of steps behind what I had done in Denmark, and I got bored very quickly. And I had this sort of moment when I realized that I was going to be spending my entire life in a darkroom with chemicals, and I just didn't like that image. Although, of course, knowing now what photography has become, it would have been very different, but at the time that's how it felt.

And we had something called winter session here, where one was able to try different media outside of your intended area of study, and there was a woodworking course that was taught at the time by a guy name Hans Wolfe [ph]. Tage Frid, who was the normal person who would have been teaching, was on sort of a semi-sabbatical. He would take winter session off and go to St. Croix [U.S. Virgin Islands] or somewhere. And so Hans Wolfe was teaching. And I was partly interested because, I think, of the -- I felt so much like a fish out of water in art school, and there was something about the woodshop that felt somewhat like home, because I had grown up with this shop in my basement.

And also this second tier of this Danish teacher -- and I was just coming from a wonderful Danish experience, and I wanted to speak Danish, so I came in and introduced myself and asked if I could get into the class, and he was very kind and let me in. And it was for sure the most difficult thing I had ever done in my life. And I really liked the challenge. I liked the difficulty. I liked the fact that school was very easy for me, and I felt like I could, you know, do the paper on the way to school and still get an A. So I wasn't an outstanding example of a great student, but my grades were good, and this was the hardest thing I had ever done. I felt like it used every aspect of my brain. It was creative; it was challenging; it was physically hard; it was the connection between, you know, hand and brain; and it just set up a number of challenges that really were quite exciting for me to encounter. And I think part of it, too, may have been kind of the social aspects of being female at the time and wanting to feel like there was nothing that would stop what I wanted to do.

When I was in junior high school, the girls went to home economics, and the boys went to shop, and I had tried in junior high school at one point to get into a shop class. I don't know why -- I wasn't trying to prove anything at that point; I was just really interested to see -- I knew how to cook; I had learned how to sew. I could sew really well. I made all my own clothes in high school, and I felt like I wanted to learn this other thing, too. So I tried to get into shop, and I was really chastised for that and, in fact, almost suspended for being radical, you know? It was a pretty conservative school system. So I backed off of that, and --

MR. MICHIE: Was shop always woodshop?

MS. SOMERSON: It was woodshop -- well, they probably did a little bit of metalwork, but it was primarily carpentrylike woodshop. It wasn't really fine furniture in the school that I went to.

MR. MICHIE: Was it unusual at RISD for a young woman to be in woodshop?

MS. SOMERSON: It was. The population at RISD was very different. Now it's, I think, 70 percent or maybe even more are female, but at the time, it was much more gender-balanced, and there were not -- the woodshop was primarily male. There were one or two other women trying to take courses there, but I sort of felt like this was my chance. I had had that earlier interest, and now there were all these indicators kind of leading me into the shop, the kind of comfort with home, the Danish thing, and my own feeling about sort of beginning to develop my own authority as an adult and feeling like, you know, nothing would stop what I wanted to do. So maybe somewhat like my parents in building their house.

MR. MICHIE: But you were also well received from the outside by Hans Wolfe --

MS. SOMERSON: Yes, definitely. They were very open. They were completely -- I think there was a little bit of -- I can remember just the faintest shade of, you know, a question about this girl coming in and wanting to do this, kind of, man's work, but it was -- there was no stopping me at all. They were very welcoming. And so I took that course, and then I wanted to continue on, because I liked it so much.

MR. MICHIE: But at that time, had Tage returned?

MS. SOMERSON: Then Tage had returned in the second semester, and I worked to get into the woodshop a little bit more. He was encouraging, and let me start taking courses, though I can't remember if I actually was able to take one in my freshman year or not. But I know that we had to declare majors, and I had met with Tage and introduced myself and showed him the work that I had done and said that I really wanted to continue on. And he told me that the way to do it [was] sort of through the back door -- at the time, there was no furniture department, so he said, go into sculpture. I know the head of sculpture - who at the time was Norm Schulman - and he said, he'll let you take courses, take your major courses here in the woodshop.

And so I signed up for sculpture, and in the summer between my freshman and sophomore year, the head of sculpture changed to another head. So I signed up for all the beginning sculpture courses, and was doing the prerequisites for sculpture, and the new head said that -- he evaluated my work at the end of my sophomore year and said that he wanted me to stay in sculpture, that it was good sculpture work. I had a really very easy time with 3-D ideas. It was much easier for me than 2-D ideas, and I felt very comfortable making things in sculpture.

MR. MICHIE: And was that mostly in plaster, or were you working in wood at all?

MS. SOMERSON: We did a lot of -- we did plaster; we did papier-mache, you know, a lot of kind of simple 3-D material, some of which we had started in the foundation year.

MR. MICHIE: I see.

MS. SOMERSON: But I did have an experience in my foundations class where we had to build a birdhouse for a bird and have that species of bird actually move into the birdhouse. That was the sign of success. I made a bluebird house out of a log, because I had read that they liked natural materials the best. So I had managed to get back into the woodshop and spent, I don't know, a horrendous number of hours with a hydraulic carving thing that was just this noisy, horrible thing. I'm sure everyone in the woodshop just hated me. I spent hours hollowing out this log with this hugely noisy, obnoxious tool --

MR. MICHIE: That damn birdhouse.

MS. SOMERSON: -- that's right - [laughs] -- and hung the house in Roger Williams Park [Providence, RI], and in a way, through that process, met some of the graduate students and eventually Alphonse Mattia, who, you know, I later married. And he helped me hang this thing in Roger Williams Park.

MR. MICHIE: Today, you'd be arrested.

MS. SOMERSON: That's right, exactly, from the -- on many counts. [They laugh.]

But that was sort of a further entry into getting to know the woodshop a little bit.

MR. MICHIE: If the woodshop wasn't its own department, how was it structured then?

MS. SOMERSON: It was part of industrial design, and that was tied more closely into architecture than it is now. Things were not as separate. The school was smaller. There was more crossover, which actually, interestingly, again is cycling back, where we're getting a much more interdisciplinary curriculum now than we were when I was a student and even in the last periods of time that I've been teaching here.

But the sculpture teacher told me that he wanted me to stay in sculpture very badly, but I couldn't do functional work in the sculpture department. There was this big divide between function and nonfunction. I was really drawn to furniture partly for the functional aspects and the interactivity side with people, so I decided I had to transfer out of furniture [sculpture] and go into industrial design. So I --

MR. MICHIE: But it may have been very good advice. I'm thinking how sculptural your work is and how often your work includes sculptural elements. And it seems that Tage's advice was -- worked out just fine.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, in the end, it was a great combination of things. Because, you know, if you were designing, as I later got the opportunity to do, a furniture curriculum, the sculpture aspects and the industrial design aspects were both so key, and I had immersion in both.

It was a little frustrating, because I had to do a lot of prerequisites that felt like they were in the way of the work I really wanted to do. I had to take a geology course or something to understand, you know, land formation, for -- which was more of the architecture curriculum. But as an industrial designer we had to take that and structures and things which, again, all had benefit to a furniture designer engaged in learning the basics of any kind of design/foundation work. But it was keeping me from making things, which was what I really wanted to do.

So I did a whole year, basically, of prerequisites in two different departments and then, by my junior year, was finally able to get into some studios, where I could begin making things and working more closely with Frid. And Tage and I had a really wonderful rapport. I think, when I began working with him, he called me 10 Thumbs, and I was 10 Thumbs. I had never used any machinery other than a sewing machine, you know, before getting to RISD. So it was pretty terrifying getting in on all that power machinery.

But I again felt like nothing was going to stop me from making things I wanted to make, so my fear was overcome by my desire to learn these things. I made a big mahogany chest, like a blanket chest, that was all dovetailed. Hank Gilpin, who was graduate student at the time, really helped set me up with an efficient way to work on the dovetails. He was a great mentor in my beginning stages in the woodshop and was very kind in setting me up. Alphonse was a little more distracted with his own work, and he was maybe not as outgoing as Hank was.

So Hank really helped me start to understand how to do working drawings and things that Frid didn't teach very readily at that time. The graduate students were much more involved with helping the undergraduate students. Hank set me up with a system for making all the dovetails, and somehow I was under the impression that if I didn't cut them all right away, the boards would warp horribly, and the piece would never go together.

So I worked sort of round the clock to cut this series of big panels into dovetailed corners. And when Frid came in and saw that I'd done them and that they fit pretty well, he said it was at that point when he began to take me seriously and saw that I had some potential and began to work more with me.

MR. MICHIE: You had only two thumbs by then.

MS. SOMERSON: I had two thumbs by then, yeah, and all 10 carrots, as Frid used to call them. He said, "Every day when you go home, count your carrots, man, and make sure they're all there."

But that was a real turning point. And interestingly, I had wanted initially to carve decorative panels on the sides of the chest, and Frid wouldn't let me. [He] said, you can do that over the summer -- you know, it's a waste of time -- just keep learning construction. Frid was much more about efficient design, and the idea of taking an elaborate amount of time to carve some decorative thing was just foreign to him. So I still have that chest assembled in my studio with the panels waiting to be carved, because that summer never came.

MR. MICHIE: [Laughs.]

MS. SOMERSON: So it was a good lesson to me as a teacher to hear students' individual interests a little more sensitively.

MR. MICHIE: Or not to postpone them?

MS. SOMERSON: Not to postpone them and say, you know, "Do that later," but really to look at -- because I was very passionate about it, but I was also not going to go against Frid, because I had so much respect for him. And I understood his point. He wanted me to learn all these other techniques, and I certainly needed to do that.

MR. MICHIE: Did he have projects going in the shop of his own work, or did he just circle around, going from bench to bench, supervising student work?

MS. SOMERSON: He didn't have his own work going on at school. He had his own shop, which we were able to visit. Sometimes in the summer and on vacations he would get some things going at the shop with some of the more advanced students, but most of that work went on in his own shop at home.

MR. MICHIE: I see.

MS. SOMERSON: We did have a few -- over a spring break, we all built workbenches once. We set up a production line, and Frid designed the workbench, and we all took a specific part of the process. We made a number of workbenches. And I still have that workbench.

But he was really concerned with running the students through a series of technical exercises. We had to learn joinery. We had to learn steam-bending and veneering and lamination and, you know, carcass construction, frame and panel construction, drawer making --

MR. MICHIE: Turning -- was that part of --

MS. SOMERSON: Turning was a part of it, but Frid was, by today's standards of turning, was -- he could make any shape on a lathe. Frid could make anything in wood that he wanted to. But his turning was pretty crude. He was a scraper, not a -- you know, he did show the difference between gouge turning and scraper turning, but he taught scraper turning, which is not the highest form of lathe turning.

MR. MICHIE: Yeah.

MS. SOMERSON: So we learned a kind of crude way of turning, but again, you could take his basic information and adapt it later to anything that you needed to know. And in fact, one of my classmates who was a year ahead of me, Mark Sfirri, became quite a renowned turner and now is known in the turning field as an expert turner.

MR. MICHIE: A virtuoso.

MS. SOMERSON: And we actually, a few years ago, did a retreat with Mark with a number of faculty in our department, where he actually gave us [a] turning week, where he taught us advanced turning skills.

MR. MICHIE: I thought you were going to say, "He gave us wonderful candlesticks" and all that.

MS. SOMERSON: [Laughs.] No, no.

MR. MICHIE: You know, he gave you --

MS. SOMERSON: Well, he did give us a few nice things over the years.

MR. MICHIE: [Laughs.]

MS. SOMERSON: But he became quite a great turning expert in his own career.

MR. MICHIE: If Frid taught you -- you just mentioned all the various technical skills that go into cabinetmaking that Frid imparted. What about a sense of design? What were you drawing on for design sense?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, he was very much a proponent of design around the construction and using the wood, the material, well and understanding the natural properties of wood and also the expansion and contraction, seasonal changes that wood went through.

So the design was really geared around, kind of, a Scandinavian aesthetic, I would say, because that was his background. But he was all about efficiency, efficiency in terms of the wood used, the construction, making construction that was really quality structure, so that the furniture would last for generations. We'd bring him ideas, and he'd say, "Man, you are designing a time bomb." He would help us to understand better systems for construction that would actually make a long-lasting piece of furniture.

But the aesthetic sense was really coming out of other courses. I mean, he loved working with art students, but I don't think he -- he had a sort of innate sense of design that he would -- he would critique things not so much in terms of aesthetics but just in terms of if it looked good or not. I mean, it was very simple with him about the aesthetic side, but he really appreciated the aesthetics that others, that students brought to the table.

But I was pretty frustrated by not being able to, kind of, immerse myself in building, because I had all these other courses that I had to take in industrial design, and barely could get into the wood studio. So in the second semester of my junior year, I took a leave of absence from RISD and went to Peters Valley Craftsmen in Layton, New Jersey, which was a kind of crafts school where some RISD -- a RISD graduate, Dan [Lawrence] -- oh, gosh, I'm going to have a moment here where I'm not going to remember his last name, but it will come back to me -- was a resident, and another guy, named Wayne Raab, who was, I think, from RIT [Rochester Institute of Technology] -- I'm not sure -- I think he had gone to RIT, but I did a full semester just making things in a woodshop there.

And when I came back and showed them to Frid, I asked him what he thought, and he said, "Well, I'm not exactly dancing over them." But, you know, he gave me credit for the semester. So he recognized the work that I did. I don't think he liked the designs that much, because they were a bit more decorative than what he was involved in here.

MR. MICHIE: But he must have admired that you took yourself out and pursued independently this course to gain greater skill.

MS. SOMERSON: He did. Definitely. He really recognized my passion for this and took me very seriously and

realized that I was one of the -- there were sort of, quote-unquote, majors, even though we were in industrial design, that were kind of the wood people. And I was definitely in that circle. He had a great deal of respect for my dedication to it. And I got good comments from him on my evaluations and so forth.

MR. MICHIE: It's often said that the mark of a great teacher is when his or her students' work looks nothing like their own, that they impart skills, teach skills, but don't control the outcome. And that must have been true of Frid. It's certainly true of you, I think. But having heard the names of your fellow classmates, that is a kind of snapshot of the woodworking world of a generation, none of whose work really resembles the others.

MS. SOMERSON: No, Frid was really wonderful that way. He was very much about giving you the tools that you needed to come up with your own work, and he didn't want anyone making work like his, and he didn't show us his work. I mean, his work was much more commercially oriented. In his own shop he was into doing big jobs, making money. When I was a student, he was doing restoration projects for the Hospital Trust Bank, which is now one of our dormitory spaces and our new Fleet Library. And he also was doing work for Mystic Seaport [CT] doing renovation work, and also doing a lot of kitchens and, you know, big commercial projects.

His famous quote was, "Baby, it's cold outside." He wanted you to know that you had to make a living from this, and so you had to be efficient. That's why he was frustrated when we would spend hours, you know, decoratively shaping something or inlaying something. He respected it, and he admired it, but he was worried that we would never be able to make a living.

MR. MICHIE: It wasn't going to pay the bills.

MS. SOMERSON: Right. And I don't know if he ever separated female or male in that. I never got the sense that he did. And he would do imitations of us. He would characterize us. His imitation of Alphonse was, he would have an imaginary rasp in the air and be shaping something endlessly for hours. But yet he had great respect for the work that he did. So he had sort of a double edge about it. And I think he was quite excited that there was this incredible intensity in the woodshop of really passionate students, and we had quite a good community that, you know, became our life at RISD.

MR. MICHIE: Were there craftsmen or makers who inspired you, that you looked to as the ideal, the things that you turn to often for inspiration, other furniture workers?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, Frid sort of tried to get us to not look at furniture for our inspiration. I was very aware of Wharton Esherick, and he was a huge inspiration for all of us. And Sam Maloof to a degree, although there was a little bit of, you know, not competition between them - I think there was respect - but they were from different schools of thought in terms of their construction approaches.

There was a guy named Robert Strini, who was a sculptor, who came and taught a winter session course. He was a Californian, a sculptor, who was an amazing maker of incredibly elaborate things, and came into the six-week workshop with us on lamination and inlay, but not traditional inlay, more, kind of, pieced together inlay, and just completely turned the shop upside down with enthusiasm about this work ethic. He expected us all in the shop at 6:00. We'd go out for breakfast, we'd be back at 7:00, and we'd work until we went to sleep. We did this for six weeks. And I think it was a kind of artistic lifestyle approach to work that was very appealing to someone, you know, 19 years old, whatever we were, 20 years old. So he was very inspirational at that time.

Dan Lawrence was the name I was trying to remember earlier, sorry.

MR. MICHIE: Because of your experience in Denmark and language skills, you must have formed an unusually close bond with Frid.

MS. SOMERSON: We did.

MR. MICHIE: You'd become the daughter they never had.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, Frid did have a wonderful daughter, but I was definitely somebody that he would look to to help with -- I mean, I understood his English Danish perfectly. A lot of people couldn't understand him, and for me it was always very easy. I had so much respect for him and was so awed by him as a person, and I think I felt comfortable with him because I recognized the Danish cultural core of both Tage and Emma, and just really admired them and felt so lucky to know and work with Tage from the beginning.

And he started to recognize some of my abilities as a kind of organizer and writer. He once took me into his office, and, you know, I needed a reference for something. He said, "Well, just go ahead and write it, you know, and I'll sign it. I'm sure you'll say something good." I said, I can't do that, and I said, give me some pointers on what you want me to say. And he said, "Oh, just -- you know what I would say. Just write it." And I wrote the letter, and I kind of held back because I was embarrassed to do this. And when I showed it to him, he said, "Oh,

you sound really good, don't you?" He always had this sort of cynicism, but yet he respected us enough -- and he did that with several us -- enough to let us do that.

He was a little awkward about his writing, and sometimes I would help polish up things that he wrote. And eventually, having sat through his lectures time and time and time again, I could almost recite them verbatim, and when Fine Woodworking [magazine] formed, which was in my last year of RISD --

MR. MICHIE: Taunton Press.

MS. SOMERSON: -- the Taunton Press publication -- they had asked Tague to come on as a consulting editor or something. I don't remember the exact term, but he was an advisor to them and was writing one of the first articles for the first issue and asked me to actually write it. And I knew his lectures so well at that point that I could sort of write it out for him, and then with my background in photography, I started photographing the steps for the article and eventually found that we had this really good working relationship for helping him to write his articles.

MR. MICHIE: To articulate his --

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, so I became involved with helping all of Tague's writing there, and then eventually -- which they don't actually feature in their own history, but I was hired as an assistant editor at the beginning and worked part-time with them on all of Tague's work and then eventually Tague's whole first book, where I did essentially all the transcribing and kind of putting into language his writing and did all the photography except for maybe two photographs in the book or something [Tague Frid Teaches Woodworking: Joinery: Tools and Techniques. Newtown, CT: Taunton Press, 1979].

So --

MR. MICHIE: All of that in your spare time?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, this was after I graduated, the first year I started working with Tague on that project, and worked for Fine Woodworking for quite a while as sort of a book editor helping review some books and helping find other artists for them to write about and kind of in an advising part-time capacity, worked for them for a number of years.

But Tague really turned the field around with his books. I didn't work beyond the first book because it was just a - - it was a big commitment, and I got through the first book, and then there wasn't time because I got into my own stuff.

MR. MICHIE: I can remember when those were seminal articles, regarded as the most important text, and step one. Are they still regarded that way?

MS. SOMERSON: They're still very well read, and they've been translated into a number of languages. I don't know how many books have been sold, but it's a huge number. And the subsequent ones, I think, perhaps what had been combined into -- I think a couple of them have been put together into different forms.

But interestingly, when the field began to expand and grow, and a number of other makers who were very renowned began to have a lot of influence in the field -- you know, Frid's particular approach was very solid but really geared towards commercial studio, home studio woodworking and the, kind of, solo shop proprietor approach. There were other craftsmen who came on board, like Jere Osgood and James Krenov and a number of other makers who began to work at a much more precise precision level of woodworking that became very attractive to those of us who were developing our careers at that time.

It never diminished what we thought of Frid, but it introduced a number of other perspectives and a level of craftsmanship and expectation that was much more, kind of, high end than what we learning from Frid. So we were able to expand into another whole realm of craftsmanship and aesthetics that Frid provided the foundation for, but we were able to evolve.

MR. MICHIE: Interesting. So, far more detailed and --

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely. Yeah. And we began to distinguish ourselves through our different approaches to form and decoration and technique and detail, which was something that was outside the realm of the philosophy that Frid really taught us.

MR. MICHIE: He must have been well aware of that, because he was providing the foundation --

MS. SOMERSON: He was.

MR. MICHIE: -- and that was the point of departure for a half a dozen different talents.

MS. SOMERSON: He was, and I think he was very proud of being part of that. Even though it wasn't his aesthetic or his own goal, he recognized the level of achievement and the work that his students went on to do and was very proud of that. He would criticize us a little bit for our overindulgence in what we were doing and, you know, the, kind of, fussiness of the work, but he also admired it.

MR. MICHIE: You would've been disappointed if he hadn't --

MS. SOMERSON: I think that's right, you know, yeah, exactly. I mean, he certainly was not a teacher that was trying to make clones of himself. I think he really wanted to make successful artists working in wood and furniture design, and he certainly did that and was very proud of that.

And I think the other thing that was part of that was that the respect that we all had for Frid came back to him, so that we felt like our achievements were his, and we shared those with him, and I think he got some great satisfaction out of that.

MR. MICHIE: That's been your *modus operandi* as a teacher, also, I would say. And that is what a great teacher does, just provide the tools and then watch the student flourish.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, and I certainly think that many of us who are teaching in the furniture department now were students of Frid's, and I think his philosophy carried on throughout our own teaching and our own -- I mean, when I started the furniture department at RISD, it came out of my own experience of frustration.

I was teaching an idea -- I was hired about nine years after I graduated. I had my own studio at that point, and I was working very successfully in my own studio, and I was asked to apply for a job to take over the graduate program because Frid was retiring. And --

MR. MICHIE: Was that in the early '70s --

MS. SOMERSON: That was in the early '80s, actually.

MR. MICHIE: The early '80s.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah.

[END DISC 1 TR 1. BEGIN DISC 2 TR 1]

MR. MICHIE: I'm off by a decade, but you were then enlisted to help form the department as Frid was stepping out.

MS. SOMERSON: Right. Well, actually, not exactly to form the department. I was actually hired to teach the graduate program in furniture design and industrial design, which was what Frid -- it's a little bit complicated, but there were two masters programs in industrial design -- an M.I.D., Master of Industrial Design, and an M.F.A. in furniture design. And it was just sort of -- there was nowhere else to put this thing, and so I taught for 10 years in industrial design, learning the graduate program, and eventually, as Frid retired, took over his teaching role.

And then, I was asked by RISD to look at the idea of combining interior architecture and furniture design into a new department, because interior architecture was having some difficulty at that time. So I did some study about it and came back and said that I actually thought it was a really bad idea -- that they were distinct fields with distinct educational needs -- but I did want to bring forth the idea of creating a furniture department. And needless to say, anything like that in a school created an enormous political brouhaha, and it was quite a battle. But through a series of undaunted attempts, [I] finally got approval for a furniture department.

John Dunnigan, who was teaching in interiors at the time, joined forces with me, and we worked very hard together to create a new department. Alphonse was involved. He was teaching here part-time at that point. Charlie Swanson, who had been one of my graduate students, was also involved. And a number of us sort of came together and, anyway, eventually got this proposal through the school.

So we started a full-fledged furniture department with an undergraduate curriculum, and had the great opportunity to create a curriculum based on all of our own professional experience. So we built a curriculum -- you know, a purpose-design curriculum for furniture design, which I don't think had quite been done in the same way anywhere before.

MR. MICHIE: It sounds also as if it is unlikely that that could have taken shape without the background, that common training or, I guess, sympathy that you all had for one another, the perfect ingredient to have evolved

into an independent department.

MS. SOMERSON: Absolutely. Yeah, we all were professionally successful at that point and had very strong professional alliances and a strong philosophy and were somewhat mature in our own work, so we could bring something to it which was very much about the time that were in, which was -- this was in '95. So it was a -- the timing was right; everything was right. We were able to get a lot of financial support from outside, you know, collectors and people that appreciated our work professionally and saw the need for a department like this.

And one thing that we did differently than what was happening before was that we did not make it a wood department; we made it a furniture design department. So we designed something that had a metal component and a research component, with expectation with other materials; we added an upholstery component. So we tried to design a really rich, full furniture design curriculum.

MR. MICHIE: Is that typical, that a fledgling department needed to find outside funding? Why wouldn't the school commit financially to --

MS. SOMERSON: Well, it was political, because, you know, there were a number of departments that wanted a bigger piece of the existing pie, and to throw in a new department -- one of the things that I had said to the administration was I felt like there was outside interests, and I could get some funding to help with the initial start-up costs of the department. And this got interpreted to the faculty meeting by the then-provost as, "Rosanne has committed to raising all of the funding for this new department." So in one false statement I was, you know, on the line, but we eventually did raise all the money for the start-up costs of the department.

Then once we had the students set, it paid for itself, and it's been very successful. And our alumns, our students and alumns, have gone off to do unbelievable -- have had incredible success in the 10 -- or more now -- almost 12 years that we've been a department. We've had just a huge impact on the college and on the whole world. It's been very rewarding.

MR. MICHIE: Where does enrollment stand now?

MS. SOMERSON: We're actually in a little bit of a low enrollment right now because of the construction that's going on at RISD and the way the department is divided. We're at about 77; normally we're between 80 and 85. But our original projections were for a department of about 35 to 40, so we've doubled our expectation; we can't really take any more than about 85, because there just isn't room.

MR. MICHIE: Is there any other new department that has followed this model?

MS. SOMERSON: The only other department was the Digital Plus Media -- it's called -- department at RISD, which is a graduate-only department, and -- but this was really the first time that a full undergrad and grad curriculum was written and approved and a new department was created at RISD in many, many years.

MR. MICHIE: Since we last spoke, you've -- or are just about to step down from your administrative responsibilities.

MS. SOMERSON: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MICHIE: And does that mean that you'll return as full-time faculty devoted to furniture and design?

MS. SOMERSON: I will. I'll return after my long-needed sabbatical to be department head again, and professor -- I mean, I'm still professor of furniture design, but I'll go back to teaching the graduate students and running the department.

MR. MICHIE: You must be spoiling to reimmerge yourself --

MS. SOMERSON: I'm very excited about it. I've been the associate provost for two years, and it's been a -- it's a great job; it's a great opportunity. It's just not my job. I really miss being with the students, and the students have still managed to convince me to be on their graduate committees.

I've still been working with students informally, but I think, as an practicing artist, it's very hard to do administration well because it's a 12-month position, and I've worked really hard to build a career that involves making and working and designing. I've actually managed to do a surprising amount of work in this administrative position, but not very efficiently. I mean, in my own studio, I've managed to do commissions and some exhibitions and some writing and some lectures and panels and stuff, but it's been very, very hard, and I really miss having summers and the kind of flow of academic life that allows me to do my own work.

MR. MICHIE: And I imagine you miss having students also.

MS. SOMERSON: Well, that's why I'm here. I mean, I could just run my own studio and probably make the same amount of money; maybe not the retirement benefits, but I love teaching, and I really miss it. And I think I'm so invested in what we've built here as a department that to be out of it, it's very hard. It's like, you know, stepping outside your own family for a couple of years, and I've missed it a lot.

MR. MICHIE: Has the faculty composition of the department changed or evolved?

MS. SOMERSON: It has. We have four full-time faculty now. We originally only had two -- John and myself -- and then we were able to hire a third, Peter Walker, a maker from Australia, and then just last year hired Lothar Windels, who is the fourth full-time faculty member. And then we have 14 part-time faculty members, who are very dedicated, very good faculty members.

MR. MICHIE: Fourteen.

MS. SOMERSON: And some of them -- Peter Dean and Alphonse and Charlie have been here sort of from the beginning. Dale Broholm, a number of people that have been here -- Jim Cole has been here in the metals area from nearly the beginning. And then there are a number of people that have taught a little bit less who are also key members of helping the department to be what it is. So we've had -- we have a very dedicated group of faculty that works extremely well together.

MR. MICHIE: Okay. Sounds fantastic. What an amazing team. And you must have your pick of talent, in a way, because it's a desirable place to be, and an attractive group to be part of.

MS. SOMERSON: It really is. I will say that being a good designer and/or maker doesn't necessarily mean that one will be a good teacher. We have had some people over the years that have been less instinctual about the role of teaching. The people that are here now are all fantastic. But teaching is a whole other skill set, and our particular approach in the department, where we're really marrying the making with the intellectual process and the theory and the contextual stuff, with the history and the relationship with the museum, and all the components that we've put together, is almost like a, you know, a religion in a way or something. It's a definite philosophical foundation that we are very careful [about].

When we did our full-time searches, the first search took three years to fill with Peter Walker. We did not want to get the wrong person here, and we were so lucky that we got Peter and that we were able to go through that process.

MR. MICHIE: I remember.

MS. SOMERSON: And then Lothar is just fantastic. He's a phenomenal teacher and maker and energetic person, and he's also a great designer who has worked in production in European companies and understands the production side. And so we've put together a really dynamic team.

MR. MICHIE: And he works in different materials as well, right?

MS. SOMERSON: He does. He works -- he's --

MR. MICHIE: He's not just a wood person.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, he works in a lot of metal and plastic and upholstery. And we have a big research component in the department, which he's often involved in.

So we work with a number of other kinds of materials. We just finished a big project with Swarovski [Swarovski Wattens, Austria, crystal company], working with crystal. You know, we've worked with bamboo and with Corian and a number of materials. So it's been great, and we may be doing something with concrete coming up in the future.

MR. MICHIE: So the reach of the department is -- actually, the engagement of the department is really international and across all media. That's pretty exciting.

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely, and we show internationally. We have students from all over the world. It's become quite a successful and broad-based department.

MR. MICHIE: And the department -- the talents you mentioned can accommodate all these different things that students bring to it. That's pretty exciting.

MS. SOMERSON: We hope so, and, you know, the students are being selected for the Cooper-Hewitt [National] Design Triennial as young designers, and they're getting their own work into production and winning all kinds of awards and grants and recognition. It's really exciting. It really is a vision of something that, if I knew what I

was getting into -- you know, naiveté is a wonderful instigator. I had no idea what I was setting up myself to do, but it surpassed what I had hoped it would be.

And so now the challenge is, how to keep it going at that level of excitement and achievement, and what are the needs now? And how to adapt -- we're constantly adapting the curriculum for where things are now. And obviously, the whole influx of the digital world in every kind of artistic and design practice is huge. And so now we're looking at how we really integrate that into our curriculum.

MR. MICHIE: Because I was also a museum curator, I'm tempted to ask, knowing the strength of RISD's historical collection, what links you see between the curriculum and this enormous museum with 2,000 years of furniture sitting right beside you. Is that an important component? Does that have meaning to students?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, we're so fortunate. We're in the museum all the time with our students, and we teach courses there. And if we're not teaching courses there, we're dragging the students up there. Unfortunately, we lost our fabulous curator of decorative arts --

MR. MICHIE: Who was that? [They laugh.]

MS. SOMERSON: -- who's interviewing me, and really haven't -- it has not been the same since, I will say. And it's actually quite --

MR. MICHIE: Well, the museum's been in great transition itself.

MS. SOMERSON: -- transition, yeah. And it's such a loss to our department. I can't even tell you.

John, in particular, knows the collection so well, that he's still able to really use the collection.

MR. MICHIE: But intellectually, in the curriculum, the historical past is an integral part.

MS. SOMERSON: Absolutely -- we really want our students to know the context within the field in which they're working. And as I said earlier, we try to have students look for inspiration to things other than furniture. There's such a wealth of everything in the museum, every kind of decorative art and textiles and costume and prints and photography and painting and sculpture and, you know, our Buddha and just amazing treasures.

So we use the collection widely. But we certainly have such treasures in furniture that it would be a huge missed opportunity to not have our students in there all the time, so they are. They're in there drawing; they're in there studying. They're in there analyzing works and really understanding the foundations of their field.

MR. MICHIE: I was going to say, it's like its own foundation program -- everything but furniture going into a design process.

MS. SOMERSON: Absolutely, yeah, and the students get it. They totally get the connection, and they understand that it doesn't mean they have to make things like that. But they understand that those objects reflect something about the time in which they were made and the culture in which they were made.

And so we ask them the question, what can you do now that is reflective of your own time and your own culture and your own material capabilities? Looking at manufacturing advances in, you know, the late 1800s, what are the manufacturing advances now, and how can you incorporate things? Here's a [John Henry] Belter piece, and look at what that turned around and what it opened up in his time, and what can you do as a designer that's similar but of your own time?

So the students get this huge resource of -- plus, it's just so inspiring to be around real objects like that. When you're in an art history class, and you see these slides or images or, you know, digital images now flashing up on the screen, it's very wonderful. But when you're standing in front of something, and you can actually see this object in real time and real space, it's a whole different experience.

MR. MICHIE: It was always a healthy corrective, as a curator, to realize that young artists cared nothing, really, about who made it or why, and the criteria that curators are focused on had very little value to artists, whose primary concern was, how was it made? Was it successful? How did they do that? And it was always helpful to me to look freshly at a piece without the conventional art historical, you know --

MS. SOMERSON: Criteria.

MR. MICHIE: -- criteria.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah. Yeah. It's true.

Well, on the students, somebody's already done all the selecting for them -- not to say that everything that's in the museum is the right thing, but we really have the cream of the crop of, you know, 2,000 years of objects. And so what a nice thing for someone to already have decided, well, these are the things that are important for you to have interaction with. Rather than them having to sift through warehouses of awful things and find the gems, all the gems are in one building. It's truly remarkable.

MR. MICHIE: In your own work, do you dip into the past? Do you continue to browse in areas that have always resonated for you in the history of furniture?

MS. SOMERSON: It cycles. I want to know a lot about the history of furniture. And as my own life evolves, I see things differently, looking back into the past. I certainly in earlier parts of my career did look at furniture -- at historical pieces of furniture - more than I do now.

I'm actually evolving my work away from where it's been. My own work is evolving, as, you know, work always does, and I'm sort of bringing a lot more -- I think because the times that I get to work are so restorative, I'm looking at my own work much more from a personal perspective again. I had sort of done that and then not done that, but I'm back there again and having been through a lot of difficult changes in my own life in the last few years, finding that working is a really wonderful place to kind of resolve your own stuff.

I am interested in not working so much with wood at the moment, although I will work with wood. But I am interested in just finding material in its most basic sense. It doesn't matter if it's precious wood or something fancy. I'm just as eager to work with paper or anything that comes my way, and just sort of start thinking about the next phase of what I want to make, particularly on my sabbatical.

MR. MICHIE: It strikes me as a statement by a mature artist, who actually works back, distilling ideas and processes to the most basic -- it's a kind of simplicity that only comes after a lot of experience intensively. And so it's a remarkable kind of reverse process, where I think often historically -- often artists' mature work becomes more simple, more basic --

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely. The last piece I made -- I think it was the last piece, or maybe two pieces ago -- I tried an experiment where I tried to take out every single detail that was unnecessary, so that I could take what was kind of a Rosanne piece and edit it to the absolute simplest thing I could do and still make it look like my work.

And it was quite an interesting exercise. I had designed it originally with a lot more -- and I just kept saying, "It doesn't need that, and it doesn't need that." I just kept paring it away, and it's sort of like, you know, starving --

MR. MICHIE: Sort of editing a text.

MS. SOMERSON: -- starving the piece. But it was definitely an editing process, and it felt really good and reminded me that I could do that. And part of my goal was to make work more affordable.

I also have decided in the last few years, I think from my experience traveling in Australia, that I really want to use local materials, so I'm not -- not that I don't have great admiration for certain woods, and I will make exceptions for woods, like pear wood, which just, you know, I love working with when I can, and sycamore and certain woods. But in general, sort of as the core thing, I really want to work in maple and cherry and ash and oak and the things that are my own hardwoods and from my own area.

MR. MICHIE: Do issues of sustainability inform that choice? Is that a concern?

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely. Yeah, definitely. It's not about being exotic. At a certain point it was, because these woods were unfamiliar. When I made my Ever Wonder How You Look With Bangs? mirror many years ago, which was lacewood and holly, that was the first time anyone had seen those woods, and particularly used together. I mean, now lacewood is everywhere, but that was -- I mean, people looked at that and said, "What is it? Is that wood? Is it leather? Is it -- you know, is it ceramic?" I mean, it was that unfamiliar.

So there was something about introducing the exotic, and I was seeking out what no one had seen and showing something new. That was really exciting.

But that's all happened, and now I think the real challenge is to make something really true or, hopefully, beautiful, but at least true, in the materials that are my materials, my local materials. And it may come way back to having the cherry windowsills in my house from the trees that grew on the land there. I like that connection.

Traveling in Australia and seeing artists who really do work with their local materials was very inspiring to me. I felt like, you know, I'm fortunate to live in the Northeast, which is a fantastic place with beautiful lumber, and

coming from Pennsylvania; so I sort of include Pennsylvania in that mix. Just celebrating the resources that are here is a really nice thing. So I'm going to be focusing more and more on that as my work evolves.

But I'm also interested -- I've been doing things with eggshells and just various things that I find around me. Of course, I'll contradict myself immediately by, probably, the next thing I make, but it's definitely something that's of more appeal to me.

MR. MICHIE: It sounds like shark skin can't be far behind.

MS. SOMERSON: [Laughs.] Yeah. Well, if I can find it on the beach, maybe. My daughter did go out with a fisherman, a commercial fisherman, last week and said she hauled in a couple sharks. He was a friend of hers. Anyway, so --

MR. MICHIE: Eggshell as a kind of marquetry surface, inlaid surface?

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah. I've been putting eggshell -- and not as well as the people did in the '30s, but I like it as a material. I like working with mosaics.

And the reason I'm laughing and saying I probably will contradict myself is I recently, a few years ago, made a piece with some mosaic tile from Venice. I went to the factory and saw how it was made, and then it was all shipped by gondola to UPS to me and into this project. It was unbelievably expensive and beautiful material. You know, that was as far from New England as one could get. And I loved that, and I still have a lot of that tile left. So I may slip some of that in there, too. But I guess as a general kind of awareness, I'm much more interested in thinking about where I come from, what the resources are here and how I can work with those.

MR. MICHIE: What took you to China recently? Was that work related?

MS. SOMERSON: It was a lecture at a conference.

MR. MICHIE: Did you have a chance to see architecture, buildings, furniture, handmade things all over?

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely.

MR. MICHIE: Were they impressive?

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely. Very impressive. Very remarkable, beautiful. Although China is changing so quickly, and lot of historical past is disappearing rapidly. But I think China has the right to be modern, too, and so it's interesting to see what they preserve and how they preserve it.

MR. MICHIE: I wonder if craft traditions are also passing as quickly from the scene as rural life and older buildings.

MS. SOMERSON: It's very threatened. The whole craft tradition is in real threat there. I was reading in the newspaper about attempts to preserve some of the traditions of both the buildings and the knowledge that went into making buildings and objects.

I did go to a town that was 1,500 years old, and it's sort of halfway between a -- you know, sort [of a] Sturbridge Village [Old Sturbridge Village, Sturbridge, MA] site museum, but there are people living in there still. And in it there's a bed museum. I can't remember the name of the town, but I could look it up. But in it there was a small series of buildings that were a bed museum, with a whole range of just unbelievable beds, from various historic beds to beds that were reproductions, that were all exquisitely beautiful and a very different form of bed than the Western bed. And for specific things. You know, there was the young daughter's bed, and there was the marriage bed, and different imagery on them for different strata of life. And it was beautiful. It was really beautiful.

MR. MICHIE: That's not a form you often see collected together, because they take up so much space, in the West.

MS. SOMERSON: Yes. It was really interesting. It was in almost a warehouse display. It wasn't at all a formal thing. It was just somebody's collection. I don't even know how it got there. But it was pretty exciting.

The architecture, the woodworking and the architecture in the Forbidden City [Beijing, China] and the Temple of Heaven [Beijing, China], it's just astounding. So it was very inspiring. I had my nine-year-old daughter with me, so it was great to see it through my eyes and through her eyes and see the difference.

MR. MICHIE: Are there Chinese students enrolled here who come from that tradition or who are interested?

MS. SOMERSON: We do have one graduate student from China at the moment and a number of students from other parts of Asia. And our student from China is wonderful. She is just extremely talented.

MR. MICHIE: Through students and alumni, you've formed links around the world to other programs, and that's an exciting thing that just takes time, I suppose, to establish.

MS. SOMERSON: It really does. And I think there are international exhibits, too. We've been getting a much more international audience. And that's been really exciting.

I think part of what I want to think about on my sabbatical is just some reflection on that, too, about the kind of larger world and what's out there. I've been able to travel a lot in the last few years, and travel is one of the most inspiring things for developing ideas. And I have a little notebook full of just observations of things that I want to think about in my studio.

MR. MICHIE: You mentioned Australia and China. Are there other parts of the world that you've traveled in that have traditions that were new to you?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, I was in Kyoto [Japan] and Istanbul [Turkey] and Israel and London [England] and France all within the last, you know, 18 months.

MR. MICHIE: You have gotten around.

MS. SOMERSON: I have gotten around a lot. I've been very lucky.

MR. MICHIE: India remains.

MS. SOMERSON: India remains, and I really want to get there and will get there. Yeah, and I would like to go back to -- I would love to go to Vietnam. I understand the craft tradition there is still very prominent, and I'd love to see that, and I'd go to Australia anytime I'm invited because I love it there.

MR. MICHIE: Can we talk about your new studio venture?

MS. SOMERSON: Mm-hm. [Affirmative.]

MR. MICHIE: Because the last time we spoke you were just putting finishing touches, I think, on the new studio space in the urban environment, having worked for years in a bucolic, rural --

MS. SOMERSON: - corn field.

MR. MICHIE: Yeah. And how is the New Bedford [MA] studio working out?

MS. SOMERSON: Well, it's in Fall River [MA], actually.

MR. MICHIE: Oh, sorry. Fall River.

MS. SOMERSON: Fall River, yeah. It's fantastic. It's the best studio, you know, in terms of equipment and setup that I'll ever have worked in. It's 10,000 square feet in an old factory building, and it's surrounded by industrial highway. You can see the battleship of Battleship Cove [MA], and it's just a really different and vibrant landscape image -- a very urban landscape instead of what I'm used to. And I don't know, because I haven't really started working there. We've set up all the shop; everyone else is moved in; I'm moving in July first.

MR. MICHIE: You've been too busy.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah. So my stuff is all there, but I haven't actually physically worked in it yet. That's the first part of my sabbatical, is just setting up my space.

MR. MICHIE: We'll have to come back in a year.

MS. SOMERSON: You will, definitely, and see what's going on. You have to come back and see it; it's a fantastic studio.

But everyone who's working there -- we've assembled a really nice group of people -- just is so happy with the physical space. Fall River, it's interesting being in an industrial city. It's a very interesting city to work in.

MR. MICHIE: How far from Providence?

MS. SOMERSON: It's about 15 minutes.

MR. MICHIE: Drive?

MS. SOMERSON: Drive, yeah.

And you know, you were talking earlier about Frid and my connection to his lifestyle there, and think about his workshop in a barn, you know, and --

MR. MICHIE: And solitary.

MS. SOMERSON: And solitary. He did have partners in various points, but at the point when I was spending time at his shop, he was pretty much on his own there. There were horses outside the door, and Emma's in the kitchen making lunch, and it was just a whole, sort of, lifestyle. It was very appealing, but --

MR. MICHIE: You had that lifestyle for a time --

MS. SOMERSON: I did. Yeah, we did. We really emulated that for a number of years, in Boston first. We found a house that had a barn attached to it in the middle of the city and had a really nice situation and then for many years in Westport. And it was great when my kids were little, because I was at home, and I could be close to them and still able to get a little bit of work done.

But now I think it's much more exciting to be in a community of artists and designers doing interesting work and having access to shared equipment that is really top of the line, and having just the ability -- actually, for me, I have people that have worked for me, some of whom are in this studio, so I can job certain things out to other people there. We can work very collaboratively that way.

MR. MICHIE: You can also run ideas by people whose work you admire --

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely.

MR. MICHIE: -- or seek advice.

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely. As we work into new and unfamiliar materials, everybody's sharing information and certainly, even computer presentation issues that are ranking -- you know, ramping up at every turn. Every time you learn something, you have to learn something else. And having a lot of younger artists there who are much more expert in those areas, that's been very helpful. And we can do a lot of knowledge sharing.

MR. MICHIE: Are they all designing furniture, or are they different kinds of designers?

MS. SOMERSON: Different -- one guy doing product design, a few sculptors, one actual painter, and one person, Emi Ozawa, who does accessories -- not so much furniture, but more, kind of, boxes and clocks and things. So it's a nice mix. Eck Follen, who's been also teaching here, who does furniture but also interior design consulting, and she has a very interesting business going there. And so it's a nice mix of people.

MR. MICHIE: It sounds like a very nice mix of temperaments and also of talent.

MS. SOMERSON: Definitely, yeah.

MR. MICHIE: That's really enviable.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, we brought our first tour through, a group of Austrian designers who were coming down to see the International Contemporary Furniture Fair in New York, and came to RISD on the way, and asked if they could see our studio. They had heard about it, and they were really amazed to see, first of all, the space and the equipment.

I mean, we have a machine room for 10 people that's larger than the whole furniture department here and a metal shop that's got better equipment than what's at RISD and so -- and a whole spray booth and finishing room and a gallery, and --

MR. MICHIE: Watch out, or it's going to become an extension of the department.

MS. SOMERSON: Right, that's when I retire. [Laughs.]

MR. MICHIE: And the sabbatical year, it just comes to you. You don't have to apply with a project?

MS. SOMERSON: You do have to apply. But my project -- I think it was two lines. You know, the first one was, I want to work in my studio. The second one was probably a justification of that.

MR. MICHIE: No more meetings.

MS. SOMERSON: Right, exactly, but I was supposed to have the sabbatical two years ago and then agreed to do this, sort of, service to RISD.

MR. MICHIE: I see.

MS. SOMERSON: So there wasn't really a question about my getting the sabbatical.

MR. MICHIE: And do you expect to stay very close to home?

MS. SOMERSON: I think so. I have a little bit of travel planned, but -- I'm not doing any extended travel. I have a situation with my mom where I need to be close by, so -- and my daughter's only nine, so I can't drag her out of school all the time.

MR. MICHIE: No more horses, just battleships on your doorstep.

MS. SOMERSON: So it's -- that's right, yeah, exactly.

And I'm really just so eager to get to work. But I don't know what the work will be. I want to do some writing and some other things that I haven't had a chance to do.

So I'm not putting huge pressure. I have a couple of commitments, a commission and a show, that I'm doing. But I really want just some freedom, and just see where my mind takes things at this point in my life and career.

MR. MICHIE: It sounds well deserved, especially if it's two years overdue.

MS. SOMERSON: Late, yeah, yeah.

MR. MICHIE: My goodness, wow.

I think that really covers the territory we had hoped to.

MS. SOMERSON: Yeah, that's great, okay.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

Last updated...January 6, 2008