Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Howard Ben Tré, 2007 July 7

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.

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Howard Ben Tré on July 7, 2007. The interview took place in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, and was conducted by Josephine Shea 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.

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

Interview

JOSEPHINE SHEA: This is Josephine Shea, and I'm interviewing Howard Ben Tré, at the artist's studio in Pawtucket.

HOWARD BEN TRÉ: That's it.

MS. SHEA: Which is just two houses down the road from Providence, Rhode Island, on July 7, 2007, for the Archives of American Art.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Which also happens to be Live Earth Day.

MS. SHEA: Oh, it's supposed to be a very auspicious day, seven-seven-seven.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Seven. My son's in Rome at the concert, at the Vatican of all places.

MS. SHEA: Oh, my gosh.

Well, the traditional way to begin these things is I guess, at the beginning. And the first question that I have for you is when and where were you born.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I was born in Brooklyn, in 1949, May 13.

MS. SHEA: May 13.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, on a Friday.

MS. SHEA: Oh, Friday the 13th.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Absolutely, I always thought it was a lucky day.

MS. SHEA: And were you the first child?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, I'm the second. My brother is almost five years older.

MS. SHEA: And I read that both of your parents were immigrants. Is that true?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, my dad actually was. My dad was born in Poland, some town I don't know of outside of Warsaw, and he came here when he was 16. His father came here 15 years earlier, so my dad actually came many years later with my grandmother.

My mother was born here, of Hungarian descent.

MS. SHEA: In New York City?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, I think she was born in Brooklyn somewhere.

MS. SHEA: In Brooklyn?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah.

MS. SHEA: So what languages were spoken, did they speak at all?

MR. BEN TRÉ: English and Yiddish.

MS. SHEA: English and Yiddish. Okay, so no Hungarian and no Polish.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, English and Yiddish, which you know is an Eastern European sort of Jewish, Eastern European-English mix.

MS. SHEA: And the neighborhood, I think, was it called Park Slope?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, actually I mostly grew up in Rockaway Park, which is the New York City part of Long Island. It's the most western part of Long Island, and actually if you could remember to '01, when that American Airlines plane came down, right after 9/11 it came down into Rockaway Park, about three blocks from where I grew up, and although I was born in Brooklyn, and lived there until I was two or four or something like that.

MS. SHEA: And that was another one of my questions: Did you pretty much live in one home, through —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Pretty much growing up, yeah. My earliest memories are in Brooklyn, in a carriage under the El, and then growing up in this area of Rockaway Park, which is a peninsula, and it's very narrow. We grew up half a block from Jamaica Bay, and about three blocks from the Atlantic Ocean, so it's really kind of a suburban neighborhood.

MS. SHEA: And what was — was it one particular ethnic group, Italian or Jewish or mixed?

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know, actually, it was kind of mixed. It was, the area of Rockaway Park that I grew up in, was mixed, sort of middle class and working class — middle-class Jewish, working-class Irish Catholic. Not far away, in the grade school I went to, would have had more — it was quite a few years ago — so not sort of the upper class like we think upper class today, but sort of upper middle-class Jewish, but in the school was upper middle-class Jewish, working-class Jewish like myself, and working-class Irish, but there was a big Catholic Irish school right, like, nearby. And they used to wait for the Jewish kids and beat us up. Well, that's just what it was. [They laugh.] Well, that was it, they used to wait for us and beat us up. So I learned how to fight early. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: Was religion very important in your parents' lives or in your grandparents' lives, or your lives?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, in my grandparents' lives on my father's side, it was very important. They were Eastern European, very orthodox. My grandfather prayed, or what, davened is the term for it, three times a day.

MS. SHEA: Is that spelled —

MR. BEN TRÉ: D-A-V-I — I don't know, you'll have to Google it. [They laugh.] Which basically meant that he prayed in a very orthodox way, three times a day, you know, sunrise and sunset, and in the middle of the day. And then my grandmother always walked behind him when they were out in public.

MS. SHEA: So kind of a traditional, conservative —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Very Eastern European orthodox.

On my mother's side, it was — I had this conversation with Wendy's [Wendy McGraw's] son. I mean, being Jewish isn't about necessarily always being religious; it more transcends that idea; it's a cultural aspect. So on my mother's side it was more a cultural thing than it was a religious thing. And then, we moved between going to orthodox shul temple, to a conservative temple.

But yes, we didn't go every Saturday evening, but the high holy days. But then when my mother died when I was 13, I became the designated person to go — in the Jewish religion, if someone dies, and if you are more orthodox or conservative as opposed to reform, you go every morning and every morning to say the mourner's kaddish. And my brother was in college, and my dad was working, and so I became the designated person. So I went, for 11 months, every morning and every evening, to go to these services, which would be a more traditional — they just do a morning service and the evening service, and then within that you would participate in saying the mourner's kaddish.

MS. SHEA: Now, your mother died very young in your lifetime —

MR. BEN TRÉ: I was 13, and she was 45.

MS. SHEA: That seems very young.

MR. BEN TRÉ: It seemed like it at the time. [They laugh.] Yes.

MS. SHEA: And then your father, I read, was very involved in fine carpentry, or woodworking?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yep, yep. He wanted to be an artist, he went to Cooper Union [for the Advancement of Science and Art, New York City]. Like I said, he came over here when he was 16, and then he — and this is of course what I know from my remembrances, because after my parents died everything sort of got very weird and estranged. But he went to Cooper Union for awhile, and then I think basically met my mother on the boardwalk in Coney Island; had my brother, went off to World War II, came back, had me, and then became a carpenter because he really couldn't sustain himself as an artist.

MS. SHEA: And I was interested, did he either have a woodworking shop at your home, or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, in the basement. We built the house I grew up in. So he built that, and I was very young, I was maybe four, like I said, when we moved there.

And yeah, he was a meticulous craftsman, and that was a kind of aesthetic I got from him growing up, although all his drawings and his books of drawings were all in our basement, and they sort of got destroyed by floods over the years because we lived in this little peninsula that would flood when there were hurricanes. So they all are gone.

MS. SHEA: That's really sad.

MR. BEN TRÉ: It is kind of sad in a way. But, you know, he was a great draftsman. When I think back about what I saw — I mean, I can draw, but I can't draw the figure. I mean, he was — at that time period he could've been Mark Rothko, but he was not an abstract artist. He was a figurative artist. So that's what we have.

MS. SHEA: And was all his formal art training in the United States, at Cooper Union?

MR. BEN TRÉ: I have no clue. Yeah, I have no clue, whether some of that came from Europe, or whether it was all here. You know, so much of that history's gone with the people who are gone, and I wasn't interested enough at the time when those people were alive, and like I said we had — once my mother passed away, her whole side of the family kind of disappeared and my father's side of the family was never really much around anyway, so.

MS. SHEA: I was wondering if you worked at all with him, or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: You had no choice. [Laughs.] It was not like did I want to work with him. [Shea laughs.] No, that wasn't the point. I was American, you know, he spoke with an accent, and he sort of wrote phonetically. He didn't really have a lot of formal education, and basically it was — I was actually telling somebody this morning, a guy was doing some work on our condo — that my dad came home in his station wagon. Now, probably people listening to this have no idea what a station wagon is. But there was a moment before SUVs and minivans that there were things called station wagons.

And we only had one car, and he would come home at the end of day — six o'clock, seven o'clock, eight o'clock, nine o'clock at night — with a load of lumber. And I was just told to pull the nails. So did I work with him? Yes. Did I want to? No. Did I have a choice? No. Those were the days where you didn't have a choice.

MS. SHEA: And did you help him at all with the business side of things, like communicating with clients?

MR. BEN TRÉ: I did, actually. When my mom died — before he remarried, he really couldn't bill. He didn't know how to do any of those things. And so that's what I did, actually. When I was 13, I wrote his invoices and his letters, and used to argue about it, the way I was saying it, and of course at 13 you're arguing with your parents anyway. So you're arguing with your dad, and now you have some power in that argument because you think you know more than he does because you can write. And yeah, actually I did own a little typewriter, I remember doing that, typing out his —

MS. SHEA: So you have kind of a benefit, in a sense, in the business of art or creation —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh yeah, I would say, definitely making things from the get-go. And it's interesting because my brother, who is, as I said, about four and a half or five years older — I mean, I worry about him and a hammer. They shouldn't be in the same room. It's just not his calling. [Laughs.] But he never was — I always liked making things, and I built things in my room from the beginning. It was kind of interesting, although I always thought, God, I'm never going to work this hard, I don't want to do this, I don't want to work with my hands, never going to be this kind of — I mean, my dad left at six in the morning and got home at nine o'clock at night and I thought, this is not the way to live your life.

MS. SHEA: Right. Very long hours; very hard work.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Which is, of course, what I do. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, I wonder if there's a symmetry in that.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, exactly. It's perfect. And my son does it, even though he said the same thing: I don't want to do this; I'm not going to do this. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: I was curious about, maybe, your earliest exposure to art. And I read that it wasn't necessarily in your home until later on with your stepmother. But I wondered, did you at all, in your few moments of free time, go to museums, or did you have you have any art classes?

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know what, we did stuff — at that point, before No Child Left Behind, we did have those things. You know, it was the '50s, so we went to the Brooklyn Museum, and in fact — this is kind of full circle in a funny way, I went to the Brooklyn Museum, and in the basement, or in the lower part of the museum, was this plaster model of New York City, all made out of plaster, to scale. And I came home and told my dad about it, and he said, I built that.

MS. SHEA: That must have been an amazing moment for you.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I said, you built that, and he said, well, yes. He was in the WPA [Works Progress Administration], and he built it in the '30s.

So what was really an amazing moment was, in the '80s, I wound up, for some reason — I don't remember what context it was — was being with Bob [Robert] Buck, who at that time was the director of the Brooklyn Museum. And I think we were at a dinner party or something. I said, you know, I remember very vividly being — I don't know what, 10 or nine or 12 or something, probably closer to nine or 10 — and being in the basement, or the lower floor of the Brooklyn Museum, and seeing this model, and my dad told me he built it during World War II. And Bob looks at me: Yes, and we still have it, would you like it — [laughs] — I've been meaning to get rid of it.

And I had no place for it — I should have taken it, actually, and maybe I'll get back in touch with who is there now and see if it's still there. But I thought how interesting that was, how full-circle that was, that as a young kid in a grade school, going to a museum, I see this thing my dad built in the '30s, and then, many years later, the Brooklyn Museum buys a piece of mine, and Bob Buck tells me — [laughs] — he'd like to get rid of this plaster model — [laughs] — of the city of New York.

MS. SHEA: Were there any other exhibits that particularly fascinated you?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, not really. You know, art was never talked about in our house. My dad's stuff was in the basement. I remember probably working on a couple of, you know, probably grade school projects, and then where we made some things out of clay.

You know, I think the thing that most fascinated me, which sticks in my mind, is that one time we went down into our basement in Rockaway and made lead sinkers together. And I just loved that whole idea of we melted these blocks of lead, and then poured them into these molds. Of course, now you would not want to do that. [Shea laughs.]

But, you know, art was never discussed in the family. My mother's side of the family was in the rag business, you know, they were in textiles; they were all born here. Art was not — it was really not part of our growing up experience in any way, except through school if we took an art class or something. But I wasn't really much interested in it.

MS. SHEA: And then —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Sports.

MS. SHEA: — your focus was in sports, and particularly football. Other sports, or mostly just football?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, it's what I was best at.

MS. SHEA: And what position did you play?

MR. BEN TRÉ: I was an all-city halfback at Brooklyn Tech. I mean, the big art — the big part of art in my life really came from going to Brooklyn Technical High, which was one of the five magnet schools in New York. And it was an industrial arts high school.

MS. SHEA: And did you purposely chose that, or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, you had to take an exam to get in.

MS. SHEA: So you must have wanted to go there.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No. My brother wanted me to go because you couldn't — at that point it was, grade school was one through K — one through six — K through six, rather. I don't even know if there was kindergarten back then; it was probably one through six. Junior high school was seven through nine, and then the normal high school was sophomore, junior, senior. Brooklyn Tech, you could go in the ninth grade, you took the test in the eighth grade, and then you could play football.

MS. SHEA: What kind of test?

MR. BEN TRÉ: You took, you know, an entrance exam.

MS. SHEA: Like testing your ability to — I'm trying to think what — like a technical school would —

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, it was like, sort of like an SAT —

MS. SHEA: Reading, writing, history —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, I.Q., or SAT. My I.Q. was pretty good; it was up there, so it was like — and my brother said you should take this test. And I said no, I'm going to Far Rockaway High, which is where he went. And he said, no, you should take the test for Brooklyn Tech, because then you can play football in ninth grade, as opposed to waiting to go to Far Rockaway and play in tenth grade.

MS. SHEA: Get that extra year of football in.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Get that extra year of football in. So I took the test, and I got in, and then I went. But you know, it was an hour subway ride to get there, and then I had to go to temple in the morning, at sunrise, and then get on the subway and take the subway for an hour. And then I tried out for the team, and I was a freshman but I got on the varsity team, and then we practiced til, you know —

MS. SHEA: I would think about five?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, my God, no — we got out of school. You know, it was a real — most high schools at the time, you graduated, I think, with 60 or so credits. I graduated from Brooklyn Tech, after four years, with 140 credits. It was a real — you started at 8:30, and you went till 3:30, and we would practice, and get out at 6:00 or 7:00. I'd take the subway home; get home at 8:00.

MS. SHEA: So you already had your father's —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Work ethic. [Shea laughs.] And my brother's the same way. And my brother's exactly the same way, it's very interesting. We definitely got the dad's — and that was the thing, work hard and you will be okay.

MS. SHEA: And I read that you didn't actually graduate from high school?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, I didn't. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: Now how'd you manage that to get to —

MR. BEN TRÉ: We're getting really in-depth. [Laughs.] To Missouri.

MS. SHEA: To Missouri, of all places. [Laughs.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, no, I didn't graduate high school because at a certain point my dad remarried, and my stepmom Pearl, and we moved up to the second floor in this house my dad built, which was sort of a big, low ranch house with flagstone, and very '50s, cork floors. And we moved up to this apartment that they used to rent out, and rented out the first floor.

And there was a — the family that moved in had this very beautiful daughter, who, when I was 16 or 17, started to see, and then my senior year I just — you know, her parents went to work, my parents went to work, we didn't go to school. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: Played a little bit of hooky. [They laugh.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: Played a bit of hooky. And, you know, you also got to realize, 1967 we had calculus. We had to pass calculus in high school in 1967. That was very unusual, and I just didn't pay much attention. So after football season ended, I just didn't go much to school, so I didn't graduate.

But my dad didn't have any money, so I didn't have good enough grades to get into a city school like Brooklyn College, and we didn't have any money for me to go to one of the Eastern schools that are, you know, if you

have money you can get into, they're all over the place. And so somebody told me about this school in Missouri, [Missouri] Valley College [Marshall], and I applied and got in, even though I called the coach and said I didn't graduate. But you're in Missouri in 1967, you needed one year of English, six months of math, no physics — [laughs].

MS. SHEA: So in their world you had graduated.

MR. BEN TRÉ: So in their world, I had graduated when I was twelve. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: So that must've been a real culture shock.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, my God. It was a real shock.

MS. SHEA: And how did you actually — did you drive out there the first time, or take a train?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No. Actually, the last time I saw my dad was my dad took me to Staten Island, and dropped me off with some older classmen, there were maybe, I don't know, sophomores or juniors. Because there were a lot of East Coast kids who went there, who couldn't get into those East Coast schools, played football, and they got scholarships and so that's where they went — Missouri Valley College, in Marshall, Missouri.

And so he dropped me off in Staten Island, and you know I can remember, I don't even think he ever gave me a kiss goodbye; it just wasn't who he was. He grew up without a dad; he really didn't know how to be a father. So that was it. And then that was the last time I saw him.

So I wound up in Missouri, at a school where, you know, they had required Sunday service. And I went one time and I went, I'm not Christian, and so I went to see the president of the college. And he said, well, it's non-sectarian, and I said, there's no such thing as a non-sectarian Jesus Christ. This is Christian.

MS. SHEA: Well, Sunday, you have already made a certain choice right there. [Laughs.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: It's not even Unitarian. [Laughs.] So I got excused from going to service, but I remember it was quite a shock.

MS. SHEA: And this is something that I was interested in: In a lot of business schools, they make this whole analogy of —

MR. BEN TRÉ: And you have to promise me that this isn't going to go any further than here, I don't need any more rap in Detroit than I already have. [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: A lot of business schools, or whatever, seem to look at football as learning how to play as a team, work as a team, succeed as a team, the whole structure with the coach, the quarterback — have you seen that at all in your life, and do you think that particular — no, okay.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, I don't really think — I think, you know, for me, I do remember my dad loved to fish, he loved to garden, we had these amazing gardens in this little suburban town, and he had figure skates. But it was European; it wasn't like — he didn't play football, baseball, or basketball; that was my brother. And since my dad was never around, I had this older brother, and sports were just sort of he and I — you know, let's have a catch, let's do this and let's do that. So I think I gravitated towards sports, and I was particularly good at football because I'm a fairly ambitious, aggressive person, and so football was kind of perfect. It's an aggressive sport, you know; it's like you want to bang somebody, right.

No, the teamwork part of it wasn't really the deal. I mean, what we do in the studio is that I try to encourage people in the studio to realize that we help each other: They help me make the things that I want to make, and I help them however I can — you know, they want to borrow the van, you need tools; you want to come in and work when we're not making art, you want to use the studio to make your own work, it's all yours. But that's more my '60s political idea of how we build community, and I don't know if football influenced that, so much as the '60s did.

MS. SHEA: I was just curious about that. But you didn't graduate from —

MR. BEN TRÉ: High school, and I didn't graduate from Missouri Valley either.

MS. SHEA: Missouri Valley either. [Laughs.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, I spent a year there, and I realized I needed to leave. I think that myself and one other person held the first antiwar rally ever in Missouri, and that was kind of frightening, as we had people limp across the stage with no legs, and talk about why the war was good — this is the Vietnam War, not the Iraq War.

So my hair got long. I got kicked off the football team because I was found smoking cigarettes — we're not even talking pot, although I'd been smoking pot for awhile — and then, you know, got my nose broken playing, sort of early on in spring practice, and I just sort of started thinking, you know, this is not really what I want to do with my life. This is not. I was a history and economics major. So I got my grade point up, got into Brooklyn College, and left.

But it was an interesting year. I learned how to shoot a rifle and a shotgun, and ride a horse, which were things I still do. So I love to ride, and I don't do a lot of shooting, but I have over the years, and so I did learn some things. I learned also that if I paid attention, I could get good grades — I got a 3.9, Dean's List.

MS. SHEA: So a real turnaround on the academic front.

MR. BEN TRÉ: A real turnaround on the academic front. And it did give me some confidence to realize that if I paid attention, that I actually could do calculus and physics, and not just be blank when it showed up — oh, my God, that I could do it. And that's an important thing.

MS. SHEA: And you said the last time that you saw your father was maybe when you went away to college, so he passed away when you were —

MR. BEN TRÉ: He passed away in, I think October. He was out fishing, out on Sheepshead Bay, on a charter boat, blue fishing, and I guess he was reeling in a bluefish and had a heart attack. And you know, it was a different time again, it was '68 — he was so far away from the shore, they didn't keep defibrillators on boats, and it probably took him three hours to get in.

MS. SHEA: But you didn't leave college and come back at that point.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, I did. I remember very much the call from my stepmother, in the dorm room. And then I came back and went to the funeral, and then went back —

MS. SHEA: Went back to school.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Went back to school. Yeah, finished the year.

MS. SHEA: Finished that year.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Came back, and lived in Rockaway, where our house was and where my stepmom was, and went to Brooklyn College, and then dropped out of Brooklyn College.

MS. SHEA: So an interesting academic pattern.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Lots of colleges. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: It sounds like; at that point, my understanding is that you got pretty involved with the antiwar movement.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yep, antiwar movement, civil rights movement, SDS — Students for a Democratic Society, for those young people who'll read this and not know what that is.

MS. SHEA: And that's how you ended up going to Cuba.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yep, absolutely. Went to the SDS meeting in Chicago where things split up, with the Weather Underground — the Weathermen left SDS and created the Weather Underground — and most of us who were all part of the Brooklyn scene and SDS were involved in thinking about working, going into factories and organizing working people, as opposed to the Weathermen, whose ideology was that the revolution would occur from African Americans, unemployed, you know, the nonworking proletariat. And they were more involved in the violence.

I mean, I had friends that blew themselves up in a town house in Manhattan, and who decided that the approach was to create this sort of movement which would be, pick up the gun, bikers, that element would create the revolution. And then there were a group of us who felt like, eh, no, we're go into factories and talk to people and create a movement which will change society from the proletariat —

MS. SHEA: Fellow workers.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Which of course never did happen either. And they're sending their kids to Iraq, which I'm always scratching my head about, like, and who are you voting for? [They laugh.] The guy that lets the rich people not pay taxes.

MS. SHEA: It's a little puzzling.

[Phone rings. Side conversation.]

So, you went down to Cuba as part of a — I guess it was an anniversary, something, for a sugar cane —

MR. BEN TRÉ: It's the Venceremos Brigade, the first one — they still actually go — was the first one, it was the tenth anniversary of the Cuban revolution, and Fidel [Castro], in his wisdom, was organizing this event to cut 10 million tons of sugarcane, which was to, quote, "Take Cuba out of underdevelopment."

And SDS organized a trip. There had been some — and there were groups who went from all over the world, the NLF [National Front for the Liberation of South Vietnam] from Vietnam, Russians, you know, Czechs, you know, mostly, obviously, Eastern blocs and left countries. And this trip was organized by some upper people in SDS who organized this trip, and this would be, in a way, the breaking the blockade, because the United States has this economic blockade, which it still has, which is — yeah, let's trade with China; let's deprive 8 million people of toothpaste — [laughs] — this is really an intelligent idea, right?

So we went down, there were 100 Americans; some were 16 years old, some were 80 years old. They were as wide spectrum as the Weather Underground, Black Panther Party, SDS, American Friends Service Committee, Quakers. It was sort of every gamut of the left — or if you want to call the Quakers left; that's just sort of just pacificists — that were there. And we lived in a camp outside of Havana, and we were paired with about 110 Cubanos, who mostly spoke English, who were obviously handpicked by the Cubans, and we worked; we cut sugarcane.

MS. SHEA: Cutting sugarcane is supposed to be very hard work.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Very hard work, they thought that we were a bunch of wimps and wouldn't even pay our own way — untrue — and we went out every morning. We'd get up very early in the morning. Over the loudspeaker: De pie, Latino America — wake up, Latin Americans. And we'd go have breakfast.

MS. SHEA: With good Cuban coffee.

MR. BEN TRÉ: With good Cuban coffee and yogurt — we had good food, food that most Cubans didn't have; there was no doubt about that. And we would go out and cut sugarcane, and then we'd have *meriendа* — we'd have snack, at 10:00 or something — this really cold yogurt, which was amazing. And then we'd cut, and then we'd come back in, and we'd have lunch in this giant, thatched-roof, open-air meeting hall. And then we'd take a little nap, because it was too hot, and then we'd go back out at three, and we'd cut sugarcane again 'til six — only cold showers, no hot water. And it was cold there at night, it was January, I think I was there November through February.

MS. SHEA: So it was a really long time, it wasn't just go down and —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Three months. Oh, my God, no — we worked for about two months, and at night we would either see Louis Buňuel films, or Charlie Chaplin films. One day Fidel came to address us, and I had gone down with this hat, with all these power symbols, and just inspirationally I just got up and walked to the stage and gave my Fidel my hat, and he gave me his hat, which is somewhere in our archives. So you know, I mean, it was — we would be taken to Havana, and would be told to come back in — you know, the bus is going back at eight o'clock at night, and we were on our own.

Americans have a very naïve idea of what it's like to have been in those countries in the eastern bloc, or in Cuba, they think you're being followed everywhere. Oh, my God, it was hardly that at all, I mean they just dropped us off in Havana, and we walked around, and we knocked on people's doors and went in. We went to the Chinese embassy, and the Chinese and the Cubans — because the Cubans were being supported by the Russians — did not get along. We went in, we walked all over.

So we cut sugarcane for about two and a half months, and then maybe for three weeks we were on a tour bus, going all around Cuba to see, you know, Santiago de Cuba, to — but on the weekends they would take us to a farm where it was all run by women. And so for us, because there was the women's movement, the African American movement, we were just so elated, we just thought, oh, of course, this is perfect. This is what it should be.

I mean, of course there were a lot of negative things happening at the same time that we would have been too naïve to — not so exposed to. But certainly the manipulation of our visit was — you know, Fidel is very smart. He realized that if you suppress the intellectuals, you get the Cuban Revolution of 1959. So he never suppressed the intellectuals, and never suppressed the artists. Cuban artists, as you probably know, show all over the world, and make a fair amount of money. And they do a lot of anti-Cuban art, a lot of anti-government art. And they never

— I mean, because as far as Fidel's concerned — they represent the freedom of Cubans, art in, you know, I mean, art in the biennial in Venice.

So it's very, it was very enlightening, and great, and that's where I met Gay, my first wife. Cutting sugarcane.

MS. SHEA: And then did the two of you come back together, or just kind of kept in touch after that?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, we came back together. I had dropped out of Brooklyn College, and Gay was going to Sarah Lawrence [College, Bronxville, NY], and she was about six months away from graduating. And then she dropped out, and she moved to Brooklyn, into this apartment that I was living in with this friend of mine, Ronny Kleinhandler. We had both gone to Cuba together, we had met at Brooklyn College, and we had already been out of school, now starting to look at Oregon, where we were going to work, to organize. And I think I may have already been working for Con Edison [New York].

And Gay moved in with us, and Gay got a job as a secretary in Manhattan, and Ronny and I started organizing. I mean, we were in this area of — [unintelligible] — area in Flatbush. And it was a dead-end street with all these apartment buildings with a lot of kids. And we organized a food co-op, so that the kids would go around and collect money from anybody who wanted to participate in the neighborhood, and then we would rent a van and go up to Hunt's Point — which was at that time the wholesale produce market, and we would buy whatever people wanted, and as much as we could get — come back and put it in bags in the church on the corner, and then the people who paid would come and get their food; or the kids would deliver it to them, if they were elderly.

We started doing antiwar program at the church.

MS. SHEA: And which church was it?

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know, I don't remember. It was on the corner, I don't — I mean, it obviously probably wasn't a Catholic church, it was probably something more like Presbyterian — [laughs] — or something kind of like, you know.

You know, and we started working with kids in the neighborhood, that were African Americans, and our block was primarily Italian, there was a lot of contention between the groups. And we tried to like, work with that and create these neighborhood block parties, all of that stuff. There were a number of police officers who lived on the block, who used to — we lived in a little, first-floor, one-bedroom apartment — I mean, you know, Ronny slept in his bed, and Gay and I slept in our bed, and the police used to come out in the morning and clean their guns in front of our window.

MS. SHEA: Wow, a show of force. [Laughs.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yeah, a show of force. And then the church got threatened to be bombed, because of their involvement with us. And things just sort of — you know, by that time, in 1969, a lot of things had imploded. I mean, white America was finally getting hip to the fact that the war in Vietnam was not a good thing; their kids were coming home in a box, so middle-class America — remember there was a draft.

MS. SHEA: I was going to ask about that, and where you were in terms of age, and were you ever impacted by the draft?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, I wasn't impacted, because — I would've been impacted, I was 1-A when I was at Brooklyn College. But then, when I went to Havana, I wrote my draft board and told them I would be in Havana for three months, and if they wanted to contact me they could there. And they probably figured out I was not the person that they wanted — [laughs] — they weren't sure who I'd shoot. And then, luckily, I got a very high lottery number because you know, they decided that the way to do the draft was by lottery. Because really, it was not that different than the Civil War.

You don't see [Vice President Richard] Dick Cheney's kids in Iraq, do you? Or [President] George [W.] Bush's — you know what I mean? You don't see any of those people there. I think there's one son, out of all the congressmen and senators, who's in Iraq right now. So, you know, it wasn't that different during the Vietnam War; if you had money, you could buy your way out.

MS. SHEA: You could find a way out, either through the National Guard or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, like our president. National Guard, who never went, never, you know.

MS. SHEA: Or, I guess, if you were college, or got married.

MR. BEN TRÉ: You had a 1-A deferment if you were in college. If you were married, you also had a deferment. My

brother was deferred because my dad was gone, and so he was like the head of the family or something like that.

MS. SHEA: So at some point, I guess maybe as things were kind of imploding with the whole project with the church thing, you decided to go to Oregon? Or were you working on that already?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, no we had just decided, you know, and our little group got sort of fractured, and things just kind of fell apart. I mean, it had its moment, and I think it had a great moment in the history of America because it actually did — it's not perfect, but the role of women in our society is much better, because the women's movement from the '60s. The role of African Americans in our society is much better than it was, not to say that it's any close to being good, if you consider the poverty and things that happened in the black community. But it had its moment, and then we weren't sure what we going to do. Gay's folks were living in Evanston, Illinois, and we just decided we were going to leave. And we packed things up, and put them in storage, and flew to Chicago.

MS. SHEA: Okay. I was going to ask, is this, you know, in a Volkswagen minibus? [Laughs.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, actually, we flew to Chicago, we bought a car — a used Volvo — and just started driving. And we had friends — we were actually heading to Seattle, because at that point Seattle was like, where a lot of stuff was happening. It was the home of the Wobblies, it was the home of Big Strike in the early 1900s; and so we just had this fantasy in our mind that we should go to Seattle.

But we wound up driving across country. We had friends of friends who had been in the Venceremos Brigade, who were in Berkeley; we went to Berkeley and we decided it was a liberated zone — that's how naïve we were: we thought, this is already liberated, we can't do anything here. [They laugh.]

And so on our way to Seattle, we wound up in Portland, Oregon, and stayed, again, with some friends of friends from the Venceremos Brigade. And we just liked it, and we wound up staying, and we lived there for nine years. And Gay got a job eventually, in Pendleton Woolen Mills [Portland, OR] — I think she worked in a variety of sewing factories — organizing women.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, it sounds like that would be — if that was the goal of organizing that group —

MR. BEN TRÉ: That was the deal. And she, you know — and she figured out, fairly early on, that they knew what the score was, they just didn't think they could change it. It's just about realizing you have power, and they didn't think they had power. And she started a little magazine called *The Dirty Sew-and-Sew*, and tried to raid the shop, and basically she was taken outside, and someone said we're going to kill you. It got pretty — we've had various intensities of like —

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, it sounds very intense.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, I mean when I was at Brooklyn College, I was, you know, arrested and thrown in jail, the Tombs, Manhattan Tombs.

MS. SHEA: That would be another way to get out of the draft, too, wouldn't it?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well it could, I mean eventually the charges were dropped, because there was nothing they could really get me on. But we had a strike at Brooklyn College, and they arrested — I forgot what it was — like, 13 black kids and me. And basically, I was moved around from the Manhattan Tombs, to Bellevue, to Riker's Island, so that no one could figure out where I was, so they couldn't get me out, you know what I mean? They couldn't raise bail. But it was much more serious for these guys, basically they were just trying to scare me. And eventually they figured out where I was, and I got bail, and they dropped the charges because there were no charges — attempting to throw the government by violent means, I mean, I was 19 years old. So it's not 9/11, you know?

And, but the black kids were brought up — they had raided their home. They waited for me — got me on campus. They raided the black kids' homes at three o'clock in the morning. Well, they weren't coming to my home in Rockaway Park, white middle-class, at three in the morning. That would have been uncool. But they had no problem going to these black kids' homes, you know, in Bensonhurst or whatever it was, at three in the morning. And they arrested them, and they found cotton balls in their medicine cabinet, and alcohol, and things you could make bombs out of; and so they really, they did a number on those guys. Me, they just basically wanted to scare. Yeah, they just wanted to scare me so I'd stop, yeah, see if I'd go away.

MS. SHEA: And while Gay was working, what were you doing?

MR. BEN TRÉ: I was in construction work, eventually for the city of Portland. Trying to talk to these guys, and — [they laugh] — little naïve on my part. But basically I did construction work, and we kind of grew up, and we, you

know, bought a house, and fixed it up, and then — I grew up in New York, so now I had my second culture shock.

I'm in Portland, Oregon, in 1970, before there was any place to eat, there's nothing to do; and one day I look up and I see these five mountains out my window and I go, that must be what people do here. So Gay and I became very involved in hiking, and camping, and cross-country skiing, and snow camping. The whole outdoor thing, and that's pretty much, eventually, what we wound up doing. And I wound up going back to school, Gay became a registered nurse.

MS. SHEA: And then, what made you decide to go back to school?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, you know, I just decided I couldn't do what I was doing anymore, you know, it's just not — I mean, I could do it, but you know, for most of those guys, who were really good friends, and would take me fishing — and they were older, their life was, what to do on the weekend. And I'm not that kind of a person, I need to be engaged every day, all the time. I mean, I could relax now, but back then I couldn't.

So I really needed to find something that I was passionate about; and having gone outdoors a lot, I thought, well you know what, maybe I'll become a veterinarian and we'll move to Alaska, let's do something extreme. Not, I'll become a veterinarian and take care of a poodle — [Shea laughs] — I'm going to move to Alaska to take care of moose. [They laugh.] Seals, something like that, but that was even before they knew about seals.

So I decided to go back to school, and I started going back at night.

MS. SHEA: And which school was that?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well then I went to Portland Community College at night, figured out my calculus, conquered the calculus —

MS. SHEA: Which I thought you'd made some progress at Brooklyn —

MR. BEN TRÉ: I did, yeah. [They laugh.]

Yeah, well back then it was mostly English, but yes, no, I conquered the math and physics at PCC [Portland Community College]. And then I got, I decided to matriculate, and I went to Portland State University.

MS. SHEA: And that's, obviously, also in Portland.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yep, PSU, it's right downtown.

MS. SHEA: A state college.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yep, yep.

MS. SHEA: And you matriculated in —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Biology. I was six credits away from a degree in biology, because I was going to become a veterinarian.

Now, we get to the art part.

MS. SHEA: I don't know if we should —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, we're fine, we have a few more minutes. Now am I giving you too much information?

MS. SHEA: No, no, not at all.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I told you, you wouldn't have a problem asking.

MS. SHEA: I take it that all these different, little — quote, unquote, little — experiences, or different experiences, I think they all —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, they make you who you are.

MS. SHEA: — come together.

So then, you continued on the school trail?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, I was going — Gay was a registered nurse, and you know, she went to wherever she went to become a nurse, and the idea was that you could enroll as a LPN, and if you wanted to become an RN, at the end

of that first year — or second year, whatever it was — you could take the third year and become an RN. And there were a lot of African American women, as I remember, and Gay signed up for her third year, and these African-American women signed up, and they wouldn't let them do it.

MS. SHEA: And that was 1960 —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Seventy-two. And she got a lawyer —

MS. SHEA: Good for her.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yeah, she's fabulous — she got a lawyer, and she worked with these women, and stayed night after night and tutored them in all the sciences that they needed. And they brought a class-action suit, and these women became RNs.

MS. SHEA: That's a happy ending.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, she's great. So anyway, I went back to school, and I was taking biology classes, and I started taking art classes because my dad was gone, and at that point I was whatever — 25, 26 — and I thought, you know, I wonder who my dad was. That sort of happens to you, or it can happen to someone. And so I started taking these art classes. So I started taking sculpture classes, art history, painting, drawing; and I got kind of interested, you know.

And one night — which is the turning point, in a way, if there is a turning point — I'm walking across the campus to go to a class, and I see this ball of fire moving. And it's in a parking garage, under a fairly modern building on campus. And I went, what the hell is that, you know, this thing. So I walk over, I look at it for awhile, and there's some guys in there with blowpipes. And I knock on the door, and I say, what are you doing here, and they said, we blow glass. I said, excuse me — I had never heard of this. And I'm watching them, and I sat there —

MS. SHEA: And it was like, in a garage?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, it was in a — you know, imagine a tall, you know, like a six-story building, where the first floor would be a parking garage, and this is chain-linked in. And that was the glass studio at Portland State.

And it had been started because this guy Ray Grimm was a ceramics teacher there, and he had gone to Toledo [OH] to see one of the Harvey Littleton workshops. And then, eventually, he started this little futzky thing, you know — I mean, he's a very nice person, but not much of an artist — and he started this little crafty thing, which then kept growing, and it was part of the ceramics department. And I don't know why it wound up in that parking garage, I think they probably got some money — I think it was the environmental services building, or something like that.

And so this guy Tony Parker, Anthony Parker, was a graduate student in ceramics, and he ran the glass shop. You know, never, ever one to worry about skipping class, I just stayed there and went, well, this is kind of interesting. And, you know, I just kept going back, and they just would let me fool around. And that was the beginning.

And then, at some point, the life sciences building was taking over that parking area, and they gave money to the ceramics department to build a new glass shop — again, sort of with a tin roof, and chain links, because the weather isn't that bad there — in a different area across from it. And this guy Tony Parker — I liked to build things, so Tony Parker said, oh, do you want to help me build the furnaces. So I built furnaces, I learned, I melted glass; I learned about all that stuff.

And at the same time, I'm taking biology, and science, and art classes, and then — and the defining moment, again, was, I was in a chemistry final, in a big lecture hall, with, I don't know, a hundred, 200 kids, and a blue book. And the graduate students were taking pictures of everybody. And I raised my hand, and said, what's this about. And the professor said well, a lot of you are pre-med and pre-vet, and we have to make sure that you don't have somebody in here taking your exam for you. And I looked at myself, well now, do I want to go to veterinary school and be with a bunch of people like this? That this is their view of life? That you have to worry about who's cheating? Or do I want to be an artist? [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: You could be having more fun.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Having more fun — can't make a living, but having more fun. And that was basically it, and I closed my blue book and I walked out.

MS. SHEA: At that —

MR. BEN TRÉ: At that moment.

MS. SHEA: So you didn't even take the test.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I never took the test.

MS. SHEA: So that's why you ended up —

MR. BEN TRÉ: That why a bachelor of science in art, because I actually have enough credits in science. And I went home and I said, Gay, I've decided I want to become an artist. And she's like, sure. Because that's what we always did; whatever you wanted to do, we supported each other. So that's the defining moment.

[END OF MD 01.]

MS. SHEA: This is Josephine Shea, interviewing Howard Ben Tré at the artist's studio in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, on July 7, 2007, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Okay, we left off and you'd seen the light, specifically the light in the garage.

MR. BEN TRÉ: The light in the garage. [Shea laughs.] Back there yeah, the light in the garage.

MS. SHEA: And decided that the world of veterinary medicine was not going to be yours — the seals would have to save themselves — and decided to go, basically the art route. Did you finish up that at that school in art? Because I know you were taking classes with, was it Ray Grimm?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh yeah. [Laughs.] Well, actually, yeah, I mean what happened was I just did then a huge concentration in art studio classes so I could get a degree in art. And because of this moving of the glass studio, it turned out that I wound up, eventually — Tony Parker graduated and wasn't hired to be the professor of glass which he had hoped for, and then as sort of a slightly older student, being whatever I was, 26 or 27, I wound up running the glass studio at Portland State and trying to get as much of a concentration in studio arts so I could actually graduate with a Bachelor of Science in art.

MS. SHEA: So that was your first degree, right?

MR. BEN TRÉ: That was my first degree after, I think, three or four colleges.

[Shea laughs.]

It was the sixties.

[They laugh.]

And there were like two things that happened other than the fact that I used all my sciences to help understand how to make glass colors and things like that, there were actually a couple of pivotal moments and I don't know if you can ever isolate them to one, two, three or four, because everything builds on itself, but at that point in the Northwest, there was a company called Bullseye Glass [Portland, OR], which is still there. And these were three guys who were in partnership, at least one of which had come from Wisconsin and had studied with Harvey Littleton. I'm assuming you'd like this background data, right? So, he still owns Bullseye Glass and — Daniel Schwoerer — and he had Ray Ahlgren and I forget the other guy's name, they started this little stained glass company out in Portland where they actually had this furnace and they were melting glass and taking a scoop of this color and that color and hand-rolling it using like a rolling machine to make what stained a glass — colored sheet-glass.

You know, it was very crude, it was not beautiful German, hand-blown, delicate stuff; it was organic, earthy, very Oregon-like, you know, Birkenstock you know? And at that point in time, we're talking sort of mid '70s, '75, there was a lot of construction going on in the Portland area and then sort of home-grown organic kind of stained glass windows were being used.

MS SHEA: Like the cedar and the —

MR BEN TRÉ: Yeah you got it, absolutely. And so their business was flourishing. There was a fellow whose name now I have forgotten who had worked with Dale Chihuly and helped set up Pilchuck [School of Glass, Stanwood, WA] and he came down and — do you want all this minutia? Okay, well, his name will hit me. He came down and started working or another stained glass company, another company, you know like, a couple of guys, that was trying to produce roll-sheet glass for the same market and somebody who I had met who worked at Bullseye — I'll have to go my database to remember these guys' names, which is really a shame — Kerry Longaker, who worked at Bullseye, knew the fellow who had come down from Seattle to work with this other glass company. And Cary started hanging around —

MS. SHEA: Essentially with his competitors?

MR BEN TRÉ: They were competitors, these two sheet-glass companies, but Cary met this guy and he started hanging around the glass studio at Portland State and he brought in — geez, I really am sorry I can't remember his name [Robert Adamson], I can look it up because he eventually opened something called The Glass Eye in Seattle [WA], this other fellow, who had helped Dale set up Pilchuck. And he came in one day, and he said, you know, Dale Chihuly's coming to Seattle, you know for like 150 bucks, he would come down and give a talk. So this has got to be I'm saying 1975, and so I went around and I went to all these different student organizations and I raised the money, passed the hat, raised the money because the guy — Ray Grimm — I mean he did really nothing so there was no point in going to him. So I raised the money and Dale came in and did this talk, Dale being Dale he was very energetic and showed all these things that he had made.

MS. SHEA: Did he show slides?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Showed slides.

MS. SHEA: Showed some of his work?

MR BEN TRÉ: Yeah, showed his work, talked about Pilchuck. Now, you have to remember it was 1975, maybe Dale had just done the cylinders, maybe not, I mean you know, at that point it was pretty craft oriented for Dale. And he was really just getting going. And he did a talk and then — geez, here I'm trying to, I will remember his name — said the guy who brought him in, who knew him from Seattle, said would you like to go back to the airport with us and drop Dale off? And I said, yeah, that'd be great. I never met anybody who is as high-energy as I am and who, you know, was just doing it.

And so, on the way to the airport I said, well, how'd you get the money to do that stuff? He said, it's not about the money, you just figure out what you want to do and then you go get the money; the money doesn't stop you from doing what you want to do, you just go get the money. Well, now this is an interesting concept, which certainly Dale has proven in his career. So, I met Dale and he invited me to go to Pilchuck.

MS. SHEA: And you had been — do you remember what year?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, '76.

MS. SHEA: Okay. Bicentennial year.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Either '75 or '76, it could've been the summer of '75, I don't remember. I'd have to go in my archives to look it up.

And I go up to Pilchuck, and now I'm with all these pretty, you know, not to say anything bad about Portland or the art scene there, but you know it was a lot of sailboat painting. It wasn't really — it was at the other side of New York. Mary Beebe was there, who did the Portland Center for the Visual Arts, PCVA, which was pretty interesting. It was like the most cutting-edge thing; she eventually went down and ran the collection at La Jolla, at UC-La Jolla [University of California, La Jolla]. Gee, I forget the name of that collection [Stuart Collection], but which brought in a lot of sighted artists to make things. So that was pretty interesting but, you know, it was a pretty backwater town; it wasn't even Seattle.

So, all of a sudden I go up to Pilchuck and I met all these young kids who were mostly from RISD [Rhode Island School of Design, Providence, RI] and they're pretty interesting and they're making pretty interesting things. And I went up for a three-week session, I paid for it —

MS. SHEA: Do you remember how much it cost?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, God, I don't. It couldn't have been too much because we didn't have any money. And then I met a lot of people there who became friends. And I met Italo Scanga, who became a mentor to me, and was there for three weeks. And because I worked, I mean the best thing you could do was to get up — Dale would blow like from six to whatever, eight, and then Dan Daily would from like eight to ten — and so the best thing to do was to get up at five and be there when they showed up.

MS. SHEA: They started work that early in the morning?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yeah, Dale works. Oh, yeah, and that was the thing and so that was the deal. You get up. And I'd get up and I'd be there, need help, can I help you? [They laugh.]

And so I got to know these guys and whatever you asked me to do, I did. And because I had been building furnaces and melting glass, they asked me to stay for another three weeks and become the technician for the second, or third whatever it was, session. So I stayed and I started melting glass and I met Italo and Italo said,

can you make me a red? And so I made him a red, and that was forever Italo's moment for me, you know? If you asked Italo, if he came back from his grave, stood here, and he said, how about the red? He would be, ah, the red, Howard made me this red like blood in the soul and the —

So I met these guys and I was completely like, this is it, this is what I'm going to do. And while I was there, see I had foundry classes in high school, it was an industrial arts high school.

MS. SHEA: It all goes back to Brooklyn.

MR. BEN TRÉ: It all goes back. I had four years of architectural drawing; that's why I draw the way I do.

MS. SHEA: At the —

MR. BEN TRÉ: At Brooklyn Tech.

MS. SHEA: So, all the way back to high school.

MR. BEN TRÉ: All the way back to high school. I had four years of architectural drawing. I had three years of pattern-making, of making wood patterns. I had a year of foundry; I knew how to make sand molds; I knew how to make patterns; I knew how to draw. It all goes back to Brooklyn Tech or to football with my brother saying I should go.

[Shea laughs.]

Totally completely. I mean all of my — well now I can't say all of my skills, my skills have obviously grown over the years, but that was it. And then I looked into that furnace one day, everybody was blowing glass, and I just looked into it and I said, this is a liquid, you can pour this. You know, the problem with glassblowing, for me, is that whatever you do to the outside is what happens to the inside, okay? So if you imagine this, if you take a balloon and you poke it, you get that shape on the inside. There's not really a conversation; there's not a dialogue there, there's just a reaction. And it wasn't that I was a bad glassblower, but I was never going to be Lino [Tagliapietra] or some great glassblower. And my ideas were just moving way ahead of what the skill set was.

You know, Dale's baskets are brilliant — basket group of work — they're brilliant because they merge this imagery with what glass people would like to say is a canvas. Well, it's not a canvas; a canvas is a canvas, this is a vase. But he merged that imagery onto it and it was very beautiful. And the weaving of those strands of colored glass and the way in which they were picked up and heated and moved were really all so perfect for that moment in glass-blowing and imagery and form. And none of that was going to happen for me; all I was going to do was copy him or something else like that. I mean, I remember meeting — I won't mention his name; he actually teaches at CCS [Center for Creative Studies, Detroit, MI, now College for Creative Studies] — many years ago, he's a very nice guy. And he made this work and I was like, it's an impressionist painting on glass and he said, yes, but no one's done impressionist painting on glass. I said, I know but people did impressionist painting in 1880. What the hell are you doing an impressionist painting for? Who cares if it's on glass? It's not interesting.

So there's this whole thing about people working in glass and doing things; it's like Pete [Peter] Voulkos — yeah, he's doing Abstract Expressionism but he's doing it 10 years after it's been done in painting. So who cares if you're doing it in ceramics, unless you work in ceramics? Because basically, it's got nothing to do with contemporary art! You know what I'm saying? And so I really was not that — I was looking for some other way to express myself and one day I just looked in there and I thought, this is a liquid I can pour this.

And so I very distinctly remember, there was some — the only sand-castings they were doing up in Pilchuck, they were using bentonite and sand — bentonite's a clay body — and I knew it because we did it in high school. And you mix the clay with the sand and then you add water and you create a binder, and then you can ram this into a mold. And then if you add corn starch to it, you can create a core — let's see, corn starch yeah, corn starch — it gets —

MS. SHEA: That's funny, I've never heard of corn starch before —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, you bake it in the oven, just like you bake bread, and it gets hard. So I had been very interested in Chinese bronzes — you know the ancient tripod Chinese bronzes, been very interested in ancient architecture — and was thinking about how to fuse this idea of the monumentality of architecture and the spiritual nature of these bronzes. That was my thinking at the time. And so I built this little wood form, of which I have yet made many others in the closet. And I built this little wood form which had a negative space and I got out the sand and bentonite and I built what's called a cope and drag —

MS. SHEA: Now, what does that mean?

MR. BEN TRÉ: It's a two-part mold. The cope and drag is, you know we're going back to Detroit. Yeah, yeah, yeah in a way — more inside a two-part mold is the designed the — [inaudible] — yeah we don't do any of the fusing, that's all new. But basically, a cope and drag is — what you have is literally like you've got here except you have another one above it, okay?

So now you have these two parts, they're just, if you were to look in plan view, they're just wood frames. And you put your pattern in there and then you ram the sand around it; you ram the bottom half, you put a parting compound on it —

MS. SHEA: What is a parting compound?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, like talcum powder. So it will release, and then you put your top wood on top of it and maybe half of your pattern sticking out into the top half, and then you ram it. Now, you have to have taper on your pattern so when you go to pull it apart, it releases and it leaves you with a negative shape in these two halves of sand. In the top half, it's open so you can pour the glass, okay? And then, if you want your form to be hollow, you make a little — [cell phone vibrates] — sorry —

MS. SHEA: All of our technology is going.

MR. BEN TRÉ: — you make a core and you stick it in the form, and when you pour the glass you get a hollow opening. It's really not that complicated.

This won't do anything for the Archives, but it will help you.

MS. SHEA: For the listener, well, we can kind of describe the shape.

MR. BEN TRÉ: So, here's a form, a positive, just like those pieces out there. And it's tapered. So you take your box, put your box down, you ram some sand in, you put this on it.

MS. SHEA: You ram more sand around it.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Sand all around it. So now you put your other box, which would be about half way because this is what gets poured through. And then, it would take another form — this is not the right one; it's too big — but you might take another form which you would want to be — the hollow in here. Okay? And you ram this with the corn starch and you back it. Now you have a solid thing.

So you take this, take your cope and drag apart. Pull this out.

MS. SHEA: It's cope? C-o-p-e? Cope?

MR. BEN TRÉ: I don't know. That's just — Google it on like foundry practices.

MS. SHEA: Cope and drag.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Cope and drag. And you take your two halves apart. You pull your pattern out, your top half will come off because of the taper. You'll tap this, pull it out, now you have this shape as a hollow. And then you take your little corn starchy baked-bread shape and you put it in the hollow. So when you put your top piece back on, you know, the sprue to pour in, when you pour the glass in, it makes the shape. But because you have a core, it goes around the core and that's how you get your hollow.

So that's how you get the early, early pieces which were called Burial Boxes.

MS. SHEA: And how did you learn about that? It's an ancient technique.

MR. BEN TRÉ: That's a foundry technique that's probably gone back 2,000 years. I learned about it in high school.

MS. SHEA: So, that too — it's amazing to me how much it all goes —

MR. BEN TRÉ: It all came back to high school. Even though I didn't hardly go, it still went back to high school.

MS. SHEA: So the first things are Burial Boxes.

MR. BEN TRÉ: The first things are called Burial Boxes and they were this sort of idea of melding you know, this idea of what is architecture, what is ancient architecture, why are they spiritual? What it is about them that people made these vases, that — you know, I mean we didn't know what we were talking about whether it was

Mayan ruins or whatever, pyramids or — you know, what it is about that? And then this idea of these very ceremonial Chinese bronzes, which of course I was all studying about these things in art history. And they were just sort of really interesting to me, and you know, on the personal level, Mom was gone, Dad was gone, I was sort of trying to — '60s, you know, we were very looking, we were searching for ourselves. You know, that's what we did in the '60s, search for self, you know, I wasn't necessarily Timothy Leary, but —

You know, I was not a hippie; I was a yippie, I was a political person. But within all that we were very much involved, all of our friends, were what is it about? Why are we here? What is this going on? We were really trying to create a revolution, not just in the government, in the way people treated each other. We would have these very serious meetings where people would say, I don't like — why are you talking to me like that. This is how I feel. I mean, it was very '60s.

And so, part of that was now who am I? What does this mean? Where's my connection to the past? How can I create a future? And so, those were the first pieces, the Burial Boxes. And, I will tell you, I was in Pilchuck trying to make these things and people were saying to me, what are you doing? And I said, I know how to make this and they were like, you're crazy. This isn't ever going to work. What are you talking about? You're making what? I mean they watched me, time after time, do this over and over, and it would come out cracked or this wouldn't fill in all right, you know.

MS. SHEA: Because after you do the firing, after you pour in the glass, then you have to take it —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Out. You have to anneal it.

MS. SHEA: Anneal it. And is that when most of the problems happened? Or is —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Combination. How hot's the glass? How strong is the core? How big is the sprue?

MS. SHEA: And the sprue is the little thing that —

MR. BEN TRÉ: The little thing that goes in and then we would cut off. How, you know, how long is it annealed for? Nobody was doing this. Nobody, you know? So, how long is it annealed for? What do we do? When do you take it out? It's in this mold. If you take it out too soon, it's still liquid and it misforms. You take it out too late, it's cracked. How do you figure out when you take it out? A lot of stuff.

MS. SHEA: And, did you mostly learn by — it sounds like trial and error?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, mostly trial and error.

MS. SHEA: Reading? Or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, but nobody was doing it. Nobody was doing it. And we were so distanced from industry.

MS. SHEA: That was kind of my question, did you go in, like, engineering —

MR. BEN TRÉ: We were, no, you know what? We were so distanced from industry back then. You know, when you think, I mean this is my take on it. If you interview Marvin Lipofsky he'll have his own take on it, but, you know, Harvey — Dominic Labino came from industry. So, Harvey —

MS. SHEA: Right. Johns-Manville [Fiber Glass Coproration].

MR. BEN TRÉ: O-I [Owens-Illinois Clariton, OH], maybe Harvey came from O-I, I think maybe Harvey came from Corning [Glass Company, Corning, NY] and Dominic Labino came from Owens-Illinois. And I think Harvey's father worked for Corning.

MS. SHEA: I didn't know that. Because I kind of tuned him in when he was in Wisconsin, so —

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, no, I think that's the lineage. And then he meets Dominic Labino. Dominic Labino works for Owens-Illinois and he starts this little glass shop in his garage.

But, you know, there is a much bigger picture to all of this, which is that it's the '60s. People in ceramics want to dig their own clay. After World War II, we've got the industrialization of everything in our society, I mean obviously it started way earlier, you know; I mean the French never refrigerate mustard and ketchup and cheese and we do because we industrialized everything in our life. But after World War II we had all these new products that were developed for the war; so, all of a sudden, everything in our house is — you know, ketchup is actually Chinese. And the British brought it back, and it's a kind of sauce, but it's a homemade sauce. And until Heinz comes around in America, people made ketchup in their home and they had their own home recipes. Heinz comes along and all of a sudden, it's industrialized.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, I don't think I know anyone that would even know how to make ketchup.

MR. BEN TRÉ: That's right. And they made all kinds of ketchup; ketchup is really not just tomatoes. That's this iteration of it. In China, it wasn't tomatoes because they didn't have tomatoes. It was soy and all these other things. But there's a derivation of their word that the British brought back and started making these sauces. And then here in colonial periods, until Heinz, everybody made them in their house. It didn't exist in a bottle.

So, you know, the further industrialization of our lifestyle is the '50s, where now we've got all these molded, which I own, I mean I went through the mid-century modern; I had a house, so we have all these molded things — the [Charles and Ray] Eames people making these molded splints for people who were wounded in the war. Everything, your dishes, your everything becomes mass produced.

So, in a way, the '60s is a reaction to that. All of a sudden you have these artists, these craftspeople, they want to dig the clay, they want to make the clay, they want to build the fire, they want to raku — you know what I mean? You want to go hiking? Why do you want to go hiking? So you can build your fire, so you can cook your own food. And the glass movement is just a part of that. It's just, you know, Dominic Labino says, we're going to move this out of industry into people who can do it in the service of their own hands. Before that, there's no — Maurice Marinot, okay, great. That's who the glass people hold up. But really before that there was designers and craftspeople, that's it. You know, if you're in Venice someone shows you the drawing and you make it. You're in Sweden, someone shows you the drawing and you make it. This is the way it was.

So this is an attempt to kind of be that hippie back-to-the-land, we're going to create our own drinking glasses — and cheap energy. You couldn't make that happen now. Cheap energy, like it costs nothing. All these schools start glass programs because it's cheap. Two thousand and seven they're shutting them down. They're closing the glass programs at the universities; too expensive. So you've got a combination, you know. Mao [Zedong] didn't make the revolution in China. Harvey Littleton and Dominic Labino didn't create the glass movement; it's socio-political-economic with a couple of people thrown in. Okay?

Now, I don't know if they'll like this at the archives, but this is the deal. [Shea laughs.]

MS. SHEA: This is the big picture.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well this is a bigger picture. There's always a big picture. It's not Dominic Labino just, Harvey Littleton just, Dale just, it's a lot of other things going on in our society and in the '60s there was all that hippie, back-to-the-earth social movement. Wow, I can build my own glass furnace, Dale goes — I mean, Dale is a hippie, Jamie Carpenter is a hippie; they go up to Pilchuck, they get, you know, John Hauberg to loan them some land: They build a furnace, they live in a tent, they build tree houses. This would not happen today. These kids are too busy with their portfolio, you know, they're going to New York, they want to like join a hedge fund, seriously, it's a different time period.

So I started casting and then I went back to Portland after the summer was over and I continued making more shapes, more forms, casting. I lived at the time about 25 minutes outside of Portland and we didn't have any of these digital controllers that they have now. So, we had annealing ovens and, you know, I'd do eight or 10 of these little castings — I mean, they're not very big — 27-feet tall, they're not very big. And I put them in the annealing oven. And then, I'd go home and I'd drive back in 20 or 25 minutes every three hours to turn the oven down. Go back, sleep for an hour or two; drive back in, turn the oven down.

And they would come out and they'd usually be cracked. And you know, all the people who were glassblowing were telling me to throw them out because they're cracked. And then one day I thought to myself, well, you know, they're not decorative, they're not about being a vessel, who cares if they're cracked? It's about making art; it's not about making this glass thing. And then once I hit that, I went, cool. So I just kept working, I just kept making things and I have more and more of these — I'm sure you can find them all over the web and stuff — but more and more of these little castings. Made more forms and I got better at it and eventually I found out that the school had like a supply place where they had, you know, the state would like give the school their throw-away things and they had a cam-operated controller.

MS. SHEA: And that is —

MR. BEN TRÉ: That was at Portland State.

MS. SHEA: But what is a cam-operated controller?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, in other words, instead of my having to drive in every two hours, it was a controller to control the oven that would be on a cam. But I had to build all of this equipment, we didn't have any money. So I used to go to the Goodwill and buy like an arm full of bed frames for two dollars, come back and weld them all up myself.

MS. SHEA: For the steel.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Sure, for the steel.

And then I'd go to the ceramics department and steal bricks and steal chemicals. Oh yeah.

MS. SHEA: Where were you getting supplies to make the glass from?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Recycling, hence the green. Sure, that's why the green is there. It's all recycled glass. And that's why the first pieces are all green. Except actually, some of them are colored because I was stealing chemicals from the ceramics department — stealing is probably not a good term —

MS. SHEA: Borrowing?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Liberating.

MS. SHEA: Liberating! [They laugh.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: And cadmium or selenium or cobalt. You know, magnesium, that's what's used to sort of mask the green in glass. You know, green in glass comes from iron.

MS. SHEA: It's naturally, usually always —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, it's because of the iron in the sand. So, if you're looking for a Steuben, really clear optical glass, you use a really high-quality sand that doesn't have any iron. But if you're making models, you use the sand that has iron in it. And then if you're recycling it, it's going to be green. And so the standard procedure was to use something called manganese dioxide to be a complementary color to mask the green. It isn't that the green's not there, it's just that you don't see it.

So, I mean, a really funny story, some years ago, and I want to say, I don't know, maybe late '80s, it's got to be after Patterson Sims left Seattle, I was taken on a tour of the Seattle Art Museum with some curator there, was at the shows. And she shows me these two goblets of Dale Chihuly's which were really funky, you know. They were from, I don't know when Dale started, late '60s? They look like they're from late '60s, I mean they're funky, you know?

And she starts on this rap about, you see the beauty of the color, the purple color and how Dale swirled it through the shape. And basically, it's the end of the day and the manganese dioxide's heavy and it goes to the bottom of the tank. And so when you're blowing glass, or you're casting, you're at the bottom of the tank, that's what happens.

It was really — I mean I didn't say anything but I was just like — yeah well this is why they have jobs. They just created a story out of nothing. That happened because it was the end of the day and it was the bottom of the tank, not because Dale wanted it to. [Laughs.] But, you know, that's the way art is, that's the way things happen. So, that was it. And then I hopped this fence and I borrowed these two controllers and put them on the ovens and —

MS. SHEA: Cut your commute?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well yeah, but you know it, was so touchy, if you had a little nick in it — but whatever, I don't think I really exactly knew what the annealing should be or there were other issues with the glass or whatever. But eventually that's what I was making. I applied to RISD and —

MS. SHEA: And tell me about that process.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, that process was pretty much because Gay and I tried to have kids and couldn't and we thought we were so much in control of our life that we could just do whatever, whenever and so, then we couldn't — and that was pretty hard on both of us and I just thought, well, you know, I have no past because my folks are gone. I need to have a future and art should be it. So, I asked her if she would move and she said yes. And so we rented our house out there. We had a few acres in this beautiful spot. And I applied to PCA, Tyler School —

MS. SHEA: Pacific College of —

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, no, Philadelphia College of Art [PCA]. Well, actually at that time it was Tyler School of Art, it's now part of PCA and Italo was there. I applied to RISD and I applied to MassArt [Massachusetts College of Art and Design, Boston] because I knew Dan Dailey and Dale was here. And I went out to Tyler and I stayed with Italo and, at that time, his wife Stephanie. And, you know, I went to see this guy Jon Clark who was the head of the

glass department there and he said to me, he said Howard, you're not going to be happy here because we teach craft and I don't think that's what you're interested in. So, good for him realizing that that I was not interested in craft.

I went to MassArt and Dan was very gracious and has been a friend for many years and probably stayed with him and, you know, it just wasn't that interesting and I came to RISD and here were all these people I had met at Pilchuck who were so interesting.

MS. SHEA: And that's when Dale Chihuly was teaching here?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh yeah, Dale was here. No, absolutely. Yeah, yeah, Dale picks me up at the airport. There was a student's show, takes me downtown to get a lobster roll at the Haven Brothers Diner — now, I'm from New York so I don't really quite get Providence, Rhode Island — takes me downtown and I have my bag in the car, he's got a Saab. Dale was very fond of just leaving his car running no matter where it was, and so we get out of the car and I say, Dale you have to lock the car, I got my bag in the car. And we're only going across the block to this diner which you could go see tonight called the Haven Brothers', it comes in, sits next to City Hall, it pulls in at 6:00 at night and stays there until 6:00 in the morning, it's a very Rhode Island thing, right? I had never seen anything like this — to get a lobster roll, before we were going to see the students who were setting up their show.

I make him lock his car. We get our lobster rolls, we come back; he's locked his keys in the car. Now, he's pissed off at me right? I say, just give me a minute Dale and I go in and it was early enough, I find an open store, and I get a coat hanger. I'm from New York! And I make a little hook out of it, I slip it down there and I pop the thing. I was in; that was it, I was accepted. As soon as I did that — I had never said anything to him, but I know he looked at me and he went, you're in! [They laugh.]

MS. SHEA: So did you go straight through grad school or did you wife work to support you or how did that —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, that's how it started. We came here, we moved. We rented our house and we moved here. It was a bit of a shock, you know, beautiful little A-frame with a creek and pond out in the middle of nowhere and it was beautiful and we came here and Gay got a job working at Rhode Island Hospital in, I don't know, surgical intensive care or something like that, you know, as I said before she's a very brilliant person, as intense as me, and went right for — we lived in the south part of Providence near Roger Williams Park, which is very beautiful, because we were looking for something that wasn't quite just right in Providence.

MS. SHEA: Like one extreme to the other. From living in the country to living in —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, so we did that, and I started graduate school and we had no — well, actually what happened is we went to Europe for the summer. We moved and then we put out stuff in storage and we went to Europe. I had never been there, it was 1978, Gay had been there when she was at Sarah Lawrence, she was in a program in Florence or Rome, Firenze or somewhere I don't remember which city, I think Florence, outside of Florence. And so we did sort of a little Amsterdam, Paris; I had met this young woman at Pilchuck, Veronique Monod, and we had become friends and so we visited her in Biot — actually she was living in Paris then and then we visited her brother outside of Nice — but the main goal was to visit the Libenskýs [Stanislav Libenský and Jaraslava Brychtová] to get back to the art part of it.

I mean, I went and visited [Cristallerie] Daum in Nancy [France] at an invitation from Dan Dailey who was designing for them. So we did — we tried to tie that all in together, of course I went to see all these menhirs in Bretagne [France], all the, you know, the standing stones and all these things because that was my interest. And, but eventually we wound up in the Czech Republic visiting the Libenskýs which was a great thing for me and they were so open and welcoming, and we became good friends. I mean, we were really, at that moment, and I would say for many years the only artists who were really sort of looking at this as sculpture and having a certain kind of aesthetic; it was not decorative, that wasn't really the deal. So we hit it off right away and they were fabulous to us and then I came back sort of late, which pissed Dale off because I wasn't there when school started, I was like a month late. We wound up eventually house-sitting for Anne Wharf, who is now back to her original name, Anne Wolf, in Sweden while she went to Japan for some art thing. And we were there for a month and house-sitting and I worked a little bit at the factory there, you know one of the famous Swedish —

MS. SHEA: Like Orrefors [Glasriket, Småland]?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Like Orrefors, exactly, it was Orrefors, with Jan Erik [Ritzman] who was a master-blower at the time and now he is an artist in his own right. And then came back; Dale was kind of angry at me for not being there. And then within two weeks all the furnaces fell apart, so we had no class. And Dale wanted me to rebuild the furnaces and I was like, I didn't come here to do that; I came here to be an artist, not to be a technician.

And so, we did, as a team, build them, but he had said part of the reason he hired me, he just said, okay Howard

can unlock the car, he can build the furnaces. He was the tech at Pilchuck — but not exactly. But it was fine and everything worked out and then we had — and I started working and started casting small pieces and I was still blowing a little bit. And Italo — Dale was great, I mean, you know, Dale did a lot of great things for a lot of people and he was very generous in his spirit, I don't see Dale very much anymore.

But he would always have all these visiting artists in all the time and it was a particular moment, again, at RISD. It's pretty institutionalized there now; it just doesn't run the same way. You know, it'd basically be like, Dale would be like, yo, Howard, here's a hundred bucks, go buy the wine — yo, you go buy the bread and the cheese and the sausage, it's at your house tonight at eight o'clock but whatever. Stanislav and Jaraslava are coming into town at five, you go pick them up at the airport; I mean it was that spontaneous and it was that — always, every week we had some artist in our department, especially when we didn't have glass.

We always had someone there, something was going on, when we had glass there was always some artist. Thomas Bang, a sculptor, knew nothing about glass, Dale had met him somewhere; come work; always somebody and for as long as they wanted to stay, very spontaneous. Whoever wanted to work with them worked with them. Not like that anymore. And it was very open. And we had about, you know, about 18 people in the glass department, eight of which were graduate students.

MS. SHEA: So you had 10 undergrads?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Dale was a very sharp guy. He had a department of like — big budget, he got a big budget to run these furnaces, right?

MS. SHEA: You would think he would need that.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, so what you have is — what Dale did was he had glass one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Glass one, two, three, four were stained glass. You had to buy your own stained glass. You had to buy your own glass cover. Okay? But, you know there were 90 people in the glass so he had 108 people in his department then right? Only 18 in the hot glass department; everybody else was paying their own freight. Now, Dale might dispute this but I don't think so. And so, yeah — and then to get into the glass department as an undergraduate, you had to have a pretty good portfolio or be pretty — [they laugh].

MS. SHEA: Pretty good or pretty?

MR. BEN TRÉ: And all the people in the glass department didn't come from glass. I mean they came from painting and sculpture. They never started out as glass majors.

MS. SHEA: Or ceramics?

MR. BEN TRÉ: He wanted —

MS. SHEA: Okay, that's interesting. Because, you know, there has been kind of — some people start off in ceramics and then —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Always, that's how the glass started, like Ray Grimm. That's why all that glass was decorative in the beginning and still mostly is, because they came from the dec arts. They came from ceramics. And then they started making glass or working with glass. I didn't come that route, see, so it was a different thing. But yes, that is how it started out and that's why all that glass, all that work, I hate using that word, in a way, because it's not —

I mean you don't call Richard Serra a steel artist. What is it? If you're a painter, you're a painter; you can paint with oil paint, you can paint with water color, you can paint with acrylic. This idea of a glass artist is the stupidest thing, which I do appreciate you wrote me, sorry to say that. Yeah, I mean it's wrong. It's a commercial metaphor. It's a commercial thing and it's artists who don't want to have their work evaluated in the rest of the art world; and it's the art world's prejudice against materials. I mean, it's you know, it's the art world is as much to blame, you can spit on a wall and call it art and it will be in the Whitney [Museum of American Art, New York City]; if it's made out of glass it's not going to be in the Whitney. So, it's a prejudice that I actually blame on curators as well as art dealers as well as artists. And there's enough blame to go everywhere.

[END OF MD 02 TR 01.]

MS. SHEA: Now I'm guessing when you went back to school, you were like an older student? I was wondering if you were even older than Dale.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, Dale's got about six years on me. Dale's got about six years on me, so I'm 58. He's, you know, got to be 64. Just that, you know, I did have a bunch of years off.

MS. SHEA: Right, when you were traveling around.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, and believe me, when I came at RISD and there were kids in the department; kids, because I was already 28, I graduated when I was 30. I had my son when I was 29.

There were kids in the department who were 19, who had been going to the Whitney program in drawing from the time they were eight years old. I mean, they were good. They were good artists. They just didn't work very hard. They were good, but they just didn't work very hard; we're back to that. You know, there is something about that. You don't do it, you know, the night before your crit. And so Italo comes into town, he's the visiting artist, and he does the crits because Dale never did crits.

MS. SHEA: And just so that everyone knows, crit is the critique of a work.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, critique. Yeah, you know, what happens is that you every, whatever, part of the semester, there was a critique. And you all sit around and you bring your work out and faculty, visiting artists, and other students will critique it.

MS. SHEA: All weigh in on what they think is good, and what they think is maybe not so good.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Right, and why, or I don't buy that.

And you know, and one of the good things coming from the '60s is I had gone through all these criticism and self-criticism sessions. So I learned to hear the content and not the voice. So it can get pretty brutal in there, and I just tried to hear what people were saying, not the way they were saying it; you know, because it was either because they didn't like me, or because — you know, I mean like Dale said something at one point to me, and I knew that he had a point in what he was saying. It's just what he would have done with the copper on the piece is not what I would do, and so what I needed to hear was not exactly what he saying, but what he was sensing. There's some move I had to make; not the move that he was telling me to make, but that was his move, not mine. And it was great, because all my '60s listening was perfect.

And Italo comes into town, and I'm still, like, blowing some things, and I have all these castings. And he says to me, you know, you see these blown things, they're shit. They're shit. They suck. Everybody's done this. These things, these are you. Make a thousand of them. Make a thousand of them; that was it.

MS. SHEA: That was a very valuable critique.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I never picked up another blowpipe. Oh, I did in 1980 when I was at Haystack [Mountain School of Crafts, Deer Isle, ME] and having to teach people, and I didn't have any money and I blew a bunch of vases to sell, so we could have gas to get home. That was it. And Wendy [MacGaw] bought one of them. [Laughs.] Yeah, I've never been back, no, never. And it's a beautiful thing. I have no issue with it, it's a beautiful process, and the whole idea of it is started by the Venetians in the 1st century A.D.; I mean, this whole idea of, you know, using your air and then putting your thumb in the blowpipe and letting the air expand into it, I mean, it's a ballet. I think it's a fabulous thing, it just was not for me, a way for me to be an artist. So I never did it again, and I just starting casting and casting and casting. And Dale, my second year there, Dale went on sabbatical; second year at RISD.

MS. SHEA: Yikes, you probably didn't know that was coming —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Nah, I didn't care, what the hell do I care. I mean, you know really, I invented all this. Well, I don't know if I invented it; maybe you never invent anything and it's all just there to be discovered. But I used my skills to start casting. There was nobody to learn from; I did it.

And so I just kept doing it, and so Dale said, "Look, you're the oldest person here; you're going to be in charge of the department. Here's the purchase order book. You'll be work-study, write yourself whatever hours you need. I'm bringing in two people, they're going to come in every other week, one every other week, to talk to the students."

And they had Ron Onorato, who's an art historian, who teaches at University of Rhode Island [Kingston], who actually his specialty was sited art — Alice Aycock, Dickey [Richard] Fleischner, all of those people — but he loved handmade objects. I don't know where Dale ever met him; I never talked about it with Ron. And John Torreano, I don't know if you know John; John actually went to Cranbrook [Academy of Art, Bloomfield Hills, MI].

MS. SHEA: I was wondering if there'd ever be a Cranbrook connection.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah. John uses glass jewels in his paintings, he's pretty well-known. He actually shows with Suzanne [Hilberry, Suzanne Hilberry Gallery, Ferndale, MI]; he had a show with Suzanne two years ago that I went to, to the opening.

So they would come in. Ron one week, and John the other week; and they'd just both talk about art, and they'd look at your work, and I ran the department.

MS. SHEA: And was it still about the same number, 10 undergrads?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yeah, it was the same number. And I ran the department, I had the office, and the freakin' faculty wanted me to go to faculty meetings. I'm paying to go school here — [laughs] — so you give me a parking sticker, so I can park in the parking lot of the — and basically it was great because the kids at the time, all the students, they were great. That was when color Xerox started; they just color-Xeroxed me a parking sticker. All the talking heads who went to RISD used to come to play at PPAC [Providence Performing Arts Center, RI], and they would color Xerox tickets.

You know, I don't know what the students are like now, but they were pretty sharp, they were pretty sharp. They would've been good artists no matter where they went, it just happened that RISD had this reputation.

So my deal with Dale was that I could build an oven and hook it up, then I'd run the department. So I again got the bed frames, stole the brick, borrowed the bricks from ceramics — [cross talk] — and built this oven, because my work got bigger. My work got substantially bigger; certainly not like it is now, but for then it was big unless you were, you know, casting radiation windows at Corning. It was pretty big.

And hooked it up, and the big breakthrough that year was figuring out that I could put the casting and the mold in the annealing oven. Because before it was cast it, figure out how hard it is, break it out of the sand, and put it to anneal. Well, these things were big enough, and there's one in the other room there, that you could — it was going to slump, really distort, or it was going to crack because it was now thick and thin, parts of it were too hot, parts were too cold. And then one day it hit me: Why don't we just throw it all in?

Now, you know we're pushing, because we had a piece of glass that weighs a hundred pounds, and a sand mold that weighs 250 pounds; I needed help. So I recruited my classmates. We'd cast, and then I built all these little armatures and like, you know, carry them like you would, you know, like a slave.

MS. SHEA: Like building the pyramids.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, and I'd carry it and stick it in the oven and it'd be really hot, and that was the next phase. And I had gone down to New York in '78, maybe '79, the spring of '79, dug up my portfolio, went to three galleries, one of them gave me an exhibition at the Hadler / Rodriguez Gallery [New York City; Houston, TX].

MS. SHEA: Say that name again?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Hadler / Rodriguez. H-A-D-L-E-R. Well, they're gone. AIDS. And Warren Hadler and Nicholas Rodriguez and actually they had started as a textile gallery, showing textiles, and they were sort of supported, I think, I'm pretty sure, by — oh, God, what's his name? From Long Island who is a really famous textile designer?

MS. SHEA: Jack Larsen.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Jack, I think, got them going. And Phillip Maberry, who is a ceramicist, if he's still around, lived in the back bedroom. And I had a show there in May of 1980.

MS. SHEA: That was, it sounds like that was your first commercial show.

MR. BEN TRÉ: My first commercial show. You know, one of the things that Dale did was — so I get there and I go, in 1978, where's my studio? He says, what studio? I said, well, I'm a graduate student. Don't I get a studio? And he said, no. Go get a studio. I said, well, I'm married. I have a house I'm renting. He said, who told you to rent a house? Go rent a studio and live in it. Okay, so there were no studios. We had no equipment. You don't understand. We had no equipment. Now, it doesn't sound like much now. RISD is $40,000 a year now. In 1978, it was $8,000 a year for graduate school and there was no equipment. The furnaces didn't work. We had no cold shop. We had no cold-working equipment.

Eventually, he gets a donation from a brick company, we build this continous melt furnace. Now, we have a furnace. But unless Dale used it for his work, it wasn't there. Michael Glancy, who is from Grosse Pointe [MI].

MS. SHEA: That name is familiar.

MR BEN TRE: He's from Grosse Pointe. He gets the Glancy Foundation, comes from some wealth, to donate a sandblaster because Michael wanted a sand blaster. We had nothing. We had like one little flatting wheel, okay? Dale didn't use it, we didn't have it. So Michael gets his foundation to donate a sandblaster, but Dale won't buy grit. So Michael puts on a little coin-op thing like when you go to —

MS. SHEA: Like the laundromat?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Like the laundromat! You get 15 minutes for a quarter, and that's how we buy grit. I mean, can you imagine? You're at the Rhode Island School of Design and you have got to pay 15 minutes to use — you have to pay a quarter for 15 minutes to use the sand blaster. [They laugh.] It was so Dale, you know?

The good thing about it was that my second year, we moved, and I got a studio. And it was good because you need to get out of that little environment, the whole college environment where people are walking by and talking to you, what are you doing? What do you think about this? Well eventually, you're going to have a studio, hopefully, and you ain't going to have anybody. And you've got to learn to be alone. You've got to be in that room with a white wall and some pencils. You know, that's it.

MS. SHEA: And do you remember where your first —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, oh yeah. It was two blocks from the school in this sort of semi-abandoned building up on the second floor. And I sat there for awhile before I thought, well, you know, I think it's time to make things. And that's it. And I drew. I just made bigger patterns, went to the — I used every department at that school. The faculty hated me. I used the wood shop. I used the foundry to make molds. I used the metal shop to make graphite cores for pieces. When Dale left, I applied for the job and someone told me, nah, we're not going to hire you; you're just going to use everything. I was like, okay. It's a good thing. Teaching is not really my thing, so —

MS. SHEA: So, when you graduated, then were you focused on selling to galleries?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, yeah. First show in New York was this — the guy, Nick Rodriguez comes up. I go down, I show him work, which is basically these smaller castings I'm making at RISD; they're maybe six inches long, five inches high. Great, I'm going to give you a show. He doesn't know I'm a student and I don't tell him.

He comes up to visit me in Providence. He walks into my studio. Now, all of the sudden, it's much less refined. It's these big castings — big for the time, that look like geometric parts to machines, you know? And he walks in there and he goes, hmm. And then he starts in and he says, are you a student? I say, yeah, I'm a graduate student. Well, you didn't tell me that. I said, well. And he looks at everything and he says, you know, we're not going to sell any of these. And me in my naïveté said I didn't know that was the equation. I just didn't think about it, you know.

My wife was working as a visiting nurse. I was taking care of Benji. We were swapping. She's work at night, I'd work, take care of him. We just did whatever we had to do. And so, then I had this show in May in New York, in May of 1980.

MS. SHEA: And what was the installation like? I mean, what, is it like the classic, white-walled gallery?

MR. BEN TRÉ: It was, but it was on *East 20th* Street, off of Park, not really a gallery area. It was a traditional, white-walled gallery, but I did something very different.

Which again, maybe you can include in the Archives. [Walks out of the room and returns.]

So this was the work and I did this, built a pedestal, a big — didn't want little pedestals.

MS. SHEA: That is a huge pedestal. It looks like maybe 10 by 20 foot long.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, 10 by 12 or something. I just built this big platform and we put the work on it. And then I had done some wall pieces that were actually cast in wood, which no one had done. These were actually just wood two-by-fours and with copper pipes, sand in the copper, so that the glass wouldn't collapse the copper. And these are all these, somewhat industrial looking, but also they could be architectural forms. And that was my first show in New York. And we sold like a piece to Corning [Museum of Glass, Corning, NY], and a piece to—

MS. SHEA: So his pessimism was unfounded.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Whose pessimism?

MS. SHEA: Nick Rodriguez's.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yeah. We sold a couple of pieces. We sold some to a collector in Washington, D.C. And then, that was it. And then from there, it went to Habatat [Galleries, Royal Oak, MI], in Detroit

MS. SHEA: In Farmington.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, no.

MS. SHEA: Were they in Detroit then or?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No. I don't know if they were in — were they in Southfield?

MS. SHEA: Lathrop Village?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Maybe Lathrop Village. Went from there to them. There to Seattle, from Seattle to Hadler / Rodriguez in Houston, Texas, and I got it to New York. New York had to pay for the shipping, to ship it to Detroit. Detroit had to pay to ship it to Seattle. Seattle had to pay — every time we'd sell a couple of pieces and every time, I'd make a few more things, and —

MS. SHEA: So how did you meet Ferd [Ferdinand Hampson, owner of Habatat Gallery]?

MR. BEN TRÉ: I met Ferd in '78 at the Corning show, 'cause Corning had this show, which really sort of was, again, the tipping point for the commercial part of the glass capitalism. That was really the tipping point was, Corning does this big show called "New Glass" in 1978. And they actually own a blown piece of mine and one of the castings. And that's where I met Ferd. And then, I went back out to Pilchuck in the summer of '79 to be a teaching assistant. Gay was pregnant. And I stopped off and they were, he and Tom Boone and Linda Boone. Linda is Ferd's sister and she has the Habitat in Florida. She was married to this guy Tom Boone and they had all gone to high school together. And they had this little funky gallery, I want to say along Northwestern highway or somewhere.

And it was — they were showing painting and sculpture and Jasper Johns ceramics or, you know, additions, and things like that. This is before they hit the glass thing. And the glass thing was just on the cusp. And then I met Ferd at Corning and then that was another kind of pivotal thing. When I went down to look at galleries after that show — it was probably the spring of '79 — I went in to see Doug Heller at the Heller gallery. That time, he was on Madison. And, you know, it was really — it was all of this blown, decorative stuff. And I showed him my little castings, slides of them. And he was like, well, did you do anything blown? And he said, well, I think this is too sophisticated for my clients. [Shea laughs.]

And you know, that really was a pivotal moment because I thought, well, I need to make what I need to make. That's why I'm going to be, that's why I want to be an artist. I don't want to make what your clients want and that's not what I'm making. So I thought, you know, I need to find a gallery that doesn't show glass, that hasn't classified itself as a glass gallery and that's where I — and so I picked up Hadler / Rodriguez and actually, the show after mine — mine was in May, the show in June — was George Woodman, who is married to Betty Woodman. George was a pattern painter at the time. Pattern painting was very big in the city back then in the early '80s. So they showed a lot of different things. Yeah, yeah, like Charlie, who I show with now, Charlie Cowles.

It was a lot of different things. I was the only person who worked with glass. Dale left Charlie, I don't know, 10 years ago. I'm the only person who works with glass that shows at Charlie's. You know, he shows [Toshiko] Takaezu, Dean Schwarz with ceramics. He shows painters, photographers, sculptors, James Surls. Charlie's just been a very eclectic is just not really what Charlie's interested in. It's never been a media-specific gallery. And I never wanted to be in any of them. I mean, Ferd was sort of it. And Ferd and I are dear friends. I went to his 60th birthday party — [they laugh] — two weeks ago.

But, you know, actually I stopped showing with Ferd because I said, Ferd, I'm not going to do this. You just show glass. Why don't you — you know? It's not where, what I want to do. But I showed with Ferd for many years and I have to say, he was a great supporter of mine, sold a lot of work, and even when he didn't sell work, he would send me money. There aren't many dealers out there like that. So he is a very generous person and he has always been a good friend even when we had our little falling out over my not wanting to show there. But now, we're back as friends and have been friends for many years.

But that was it. I had that show, and then it just sort of started. But it was very — basically, Gay was working then as a visiting nurse and she would leave at 6:30 or seven o'clock in the morning. I would take care of Benjamin until she got home at 3:30 or four o'clock. Sometimes, she'd come home for lunch and I'd run to my studio for an hour, but at four o'clock, I was gone. And I was gone until three or four in the morning every day. And then, when we'd get a little bit up. I mean, we never got out of debt, but we'd just get a little bit to make a body of work. And then, I had two shows with Hadler / Rodriguez in New York, two in Houston, two shows at Foster White in Seattle. By then, Charlie, in '84, had called me and I started showing with Charlie.

And that was really when we could get to the point where Gay didn't have to be the visiting nurse and I kind of couldn't do that anymore. So I just, if I'm going to do this, I need to do it full time. I can't take care of Benjamin eight hours a day, nine hours a day, and then basically sleep for two or three hours. I mean, even when I was in graduate school, I would work all, go to school, come home, and write letters until four in the morning. Gay didn't really start getting involved in the art part of our life until maybe '84, '85. Before that, I wrote all the — I'd

come home and just write letters to galleries on the typewriter, on the Selectric.

We finally could afford a Selectric that would erase. You don't remember them. You are too young. But there was at some point an IBM Selectric typewriter with a ball that actually you could — there was an erase key. That was a big deal and we had to buy a used one. Who could afford a new one?

MS. SHEA: You didn't liberate that.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, we didn't liberate that.

MS. SHEA: So, you mentioned that you really didn't go the teaching route, which so many artists, to really support their work.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I got out of RISD. I went to — I taught in the summer between, after I got out in 1980, in a little school in Tennessee, the Appalachian Center [for Craft, Tennessee Technical University, Smithville]. I didn't like it.

MS. SHEA: Did they like you?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Uh, probably not. [They laugh.] You know what I mean? I mean, probably not. I had all of these students who wanted to learn how and I just wanted to talk about why. I don't mind the how, but —

MS. SHEA: Because you did get the how, but you didn't want to teach the how.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I taught myself the how.

MS. SHEA: Well, right, but going back, thinking back about the technical training that you got —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, in high school. Yeah, but I taught myself the how in glass. I use that, but it had never been done in glass before. So it was me teaching myself, but I think that sometimes, I don't want to speak for other artists, but I think that there comes a point where it's like you're learning to draw, and then all of the sudden, you don't need to learn to draw anymore. You just need to draw.

So yes, I taught myself the how. I got the how at Brooklyn Tech, but then I taught myself how to make the how in glass. But I don't need to pour glass anymore. You know, people will say to me, do you miss pouring glass? No. [Laughs.] I know that part of the how. I don't need to do that. I didn't mind. I would teach people how to do things, but they didn't have a — you know, again — and then I taught, I taught at Haystack.

MS. SHEA: How many times?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Just once. I taught at this school the Appalachian Center for like six weeks or three weeks. I don't remember. Benji was not even a year old. It was outside of Nashville, Tennessee, Nashville. It's a good thing I had gone to Missouri. I wasn't completely shocked.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, that might of helped it, the Missouri experience. [They laugh.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: But you know, we didn't have any money. We were really broke. We actually, that summer, lived in Dale's house here in Providence. He was at Pilchuck. He said, why don't you live in my house? Like I said, Dale's been a very generous person to me. So, I did that and then the next thing that same summer was teaching at Haystack.

MS. SHEA: And how was that experience?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, let's put it this way. We had a show of the students' work after the three week session. And we install it and this person, I forget what her capacity was at Haystack said, you know, we've never had anybody make sculpture here. The students were making sculpture. That was their deal. They weren't making vases. I mean, it was fine in its own way. You know, my son was on a tether. Have you ever been to Haystack?

MS. SHEA: No.

MR. BEN TRÉ: It's beautiful. It's up in Maine. It's in Deer Isle and it's on a ledge. And we had to like rope the kid because he'd be done on the rocks if you didn't, you know? It's great. It's where I met Wendy and Wendy always — I mean, it was very granola-ey, especially that guy who was the director. And I remember the first night. Now, because we were a family, we had our own cabin. We didn't have to live in a dorm and the first night, we all had dinner and the faculty was supposed to introduce themselves by making the sound of an animal. Yeah, that's right. [Laughs.]

Well, I just went like — [clapping] — and he said, well, what's that? I said, a cricket. [They laugh.] And that was the end of my relationship with the director, whose name was also Howard [Evans] and who, coincidentally, now that Gay is an acupuncturist and a doctor of herbal medicine, he's an acupuncturist and she met him at some conference like four years ago. So it was okay. Again, it was very beautiful and the first thing I did was I had all of my students blow little vases to put flowers — I gave it to the kitchen staff to put on all the dining room tables so they could put flowers in them. So it was an instant hit.

The food I couldn't handle, so I'd go buy steamers, or mussels, or lobsters, and I'd take them into the kitchen. And because they, I had made a hit with the vases, they'd cook them for me, and we'd have these parties at our place because we had like a real — we had cabin and we'd have these parties and wine and — so you know, I had a very nice — ask Wendy when you see her some time. She was just — I mean she hated it. She would leave every weekend to visit a friend in Blue Hill. But it was fine.

And then I taught one summer I taught a class at RISD. And basically, my problem was that I really wanted to make work. I really didn't want to teach and then, if I was going to teach, I wanted everybody to be as intense about making art as I was. I remember when I taught I gave some kid a C. He had come from Ohio for the summer program. And he said, you gave me a C. And I said, yeah, you didn't do the assignment. [Laughs.] I said, this isn't what your assignment was. He said, so what's the matter? It's just summer. I said, I don't think so. That's not the deal here, you know? You got a C. But it's just the summer, we're drinking beer! I said, I don't think so.

So, but it wasn't bad that summer. I had Eric Hopkins, who was the guy from North Haven, who was a graduate student with me. And I had Eric come down. I invited Eric to come down. Eric brought like 20 lobsters. We put them in the fridge in the sculpture department secretary's office because we were going to go — he had a portable furnace, so we took his furnace to the beach, to the RISD farm. And we did sand castings in the sand, you know?

And, but I get a call from the secretary at some point. Howard, are these your lobsters? Because she opened the fridge to like get her milk and there were like shelves, just sitting there going k-k-k-k-k-k-k-k. I say, yeah, Shirley, they are. I'm sorry. [They laugh.] Then they took my key away from the sculpture office. [They laugh.] But you can see. That would be sort of my way of doing things.

But that was it. That was my last time. And I don't even — I don't like doing crits either. I just did a project for the Hood Museum [of Art] in Dartmouth [College, Hanover, NH]. And I did this installation. I mean, we made them. They were commissioned, these six small little seating elements. And they wanted me to do crits and I said no, but I had lunch with these knowing students, sculpture students, which I had no problem with. It actually turned out to be a very good way to do it. And Wendy, I wanted Wendy to join me, and she didn't want to. She said, it's your thing. I said, well, eight of the nine are women, so maybe you ought to come.

MS. SHEA: Was that inspiration?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, which actually turned out to be great because you know, Wendy is someone who is an artist, continues to make work, but doesn't support herself. And so, she got into it and we had this very nice counterpoint of, you know, what's the different ways that you can be an artist in our society. I mean, Wendy has a very successful company and packs and ships art and she's extremely knowledgeable because she's around all of these things, whether it's, I don't know, 18th century porcelain or you know, John Singer Sargent, she knows. I mean, she can look at textiles and I don't know any of these things. I could talk to you about Richard Serra and [Constantin] Brancusi, but she knows a lot. And it's great to be around her because of that. So it actually turned out to be a very nice thing because I think the students got a lot out of the different ways in which, you know, I mean, I've not taught just — and Wendy taught at CCS for 10 years.

MS. SHEA: I didn't know that.

MR. BEN TRÉ: She taught at CCS for 10 years. And Ted [Lee Hadfield] started Artpack [Services, Inc., Farmington Hills, MI] with another Cranbrook grad. And then, the Cranbrook grad, his partner, didn't want to do it anymore and it was like a pick-up truck. And Wendy got passed over for tenure for not the right reasons — woman, and not — so, she quit. And that's when she joined up with Ted and they did Artpack and started, actually didn't start, but made Artpack Artpack.

MS. SHEA: Now, you briefly mentioned Brancusi. And I know in some of the things that I've read, he's one of the artists that you really cite as being, I don't know what the right words are. Maybe you can tell me.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, you know, I mean, Brancusi is really the 20th century modern sculptor, if you, you know what I mean? I mean, the work becomes abstract. It's no longer figurative. So I think to — I don't know about young artists today, but certainly artists in the '40s, '50s, '60s, '70s, he's the sculptor of the 20th century in much the way that [Pablo] Picasso is the painter.

And I actually had a great opportunity in ‘95 I was invited by the Romanian government to come and be a part of 12 artists from around the world to come back to Romania, to Bucharest and then to visit Târgu Jiu and see all of Brancusi: *The Endless Column* [1938], and *The Gate of the Kiss* [1938], and *The Table of Silence* [1938]. So, but I think [Isamu] Noguchi is also as much —

MS. SHEA: And did you ever meet him by chance?

MR. BEN TRÉ: I met Noguchi very briefly once, but just like, he did a talk and I said hi, and that was it. But, you know for me, in some ways, Noguchi, because there was that sort of almost spiritual quality to the work — I mean when you go to Romania and you walk — I don’t know about now, but when I went — and you see this sort of historic park which has old, you know, houses, their version of the [Edsel & Eleanor] Ford House [Grosse Pointe Shores, MI], but it’s like a 17th century village house, right? You know what I mean? Thatched or whatever, and you look at the fences. Well, those are the sculptures. [Laughs.] You know, I mean, there was this folk art element that he transferred into his sculptures. So you just go, oh. [Laughs.]

But I think Noguchi in some way had a more direct influence because there was a spiritual quality to some degree. He traveled all over the world. He went to all of these sites because he didn’t have a home, you know? He was Japanese-American. His father was Japanese. His father disowned his mother and him.

MR. SHEA: I didn’t know that part.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yeah, his father disowned his mother and him. His father was a big supporter of the Emperor during World War II. So when Noguchi went to Japan, his father really did not want to be with him. When he was here in America, he was Japanese-looking. So from my readings of his biographies, you know, he was searching for his place. And that was one of the reasons why he traveled to all of these, to the pyramids, to all of these great monuments. And not to make it sound too sentimental, but certainly there’s a point in my life where coming out of the ‘60s, I definitely did not feel like I was an American. You know, the values of the culture. It’s a little hard today to feel like you’re American, especially, certainly not with this administration, I think, you know? [Laughs.]

So for me, I was sort of looking and searching. And I’ve traveled all over the world looking at ancient sites. And I think, to some degree, the other thing that really attracted me to Noguchi was that I don’t really care whether you call it sculpture, or you sit on it, or it has water. To me, it’s all art. I don’t have any of that hierarchy BS that’s in the art world. You know, it’s not about what it’s made out of, it’s about what it’s about. And so, Noguchi was someone who made fountains, made lighting, and did them brilliantly: made sculpture, made parks, made landscape, you know? And those are all the things I do now. I have done lighting. I have done seating. I do fountains. I redesigned the town center in Warrington. I made community.

So you know, to some degree, you know, that really is the artist that I most identify with. Anish Kapoor is a fabulous artist. Martin Puryear is amazing. Richard Serra is amazing. There’s a lot of great artists out there. I don’t know that I, you know, I don’t identify in quite the same way because the work looks different, you know? I don’t do anything like Richard Serra does, or Anish Kapoor, or Andy Goldsworthy or you know. So that’s — you know I’m not saying that these works necessarily look like Noguchi’s, but I think you can more readily tie them because they are sculpture as objects; they’re not, you know, that other kind of work. Maybe Martin’s and my work is the most alike.

MS. SHEA: You said that you travel around looking at different sites and architecture. Do you also go looking at, I don’t know, ancient vessels or is there any type of particular —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Sure, no, I mean I look at everything. We look at it all. Wendy and I look at it all. We’ll go everywhere. We don’t care. You know, it’s a funny thing. Over the last four years, I think the thing I’ve looked at least is contemporary art. We go to New York, we’re more likely to go to the Asia Society [and Museum] or the Met [Metropolitan Museum of Art] than we are to Chelsea. I mean, we went to see the [Donald] Judd show when it was at Sotheby’s. You know, we will go look at things. There’s a big Joseph Cornell show up at the Peabody [Essex] Museum [Salem, MA] and maybe we’ll try to make — on our way up to Maine we want to try and make a detour to go see that. So, you know, we do go look at art all the time, but, you know, just a lot of contemporary art doesn’t speak to me. You know, it’s just, sort of like Bruce Nauman did all the video stuff in the ‘60s. It’s been done and it was there. [Laughs.]

So, you know, I just am not that, I just — I would go see the Serra show at MoMA [Museum of Modern Art, New York City]. I’m sure it’s — I haven’t seen it. It’s fabulous, I’m sure. And if it’s up in August, we’ll be in the city in August so we’ll go see it.

And we haven’t really — I haven’t done that much. My life has been very complicated the last few years, although I spent a lot of time in Israel and so I went to a lot of sites in Israel. We went to a lot of places to — gee, why can’t I — the name again. Wadi Rum. We went to Wadi Rum, and, you know, this fabulous site in Jordan,

who — the Nabataens who are the spice traders, that —

MS. SHEA: That is built into the wall, the wall, and —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, yeah, yeah. That is terrible, but it's just slipped my —

MS. SHEA: I don't remember —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Slipped my — yeah, yeah, we went to see that, which was unbelievable. And Jerusalem is pretty amazing.

MS. SHEA: Are the places that you haven't been to yet? It sounds like, I mean, you —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, I'm sure there is lots of places in India I haven't been to. I haven't been to India.

MS. SHEA: And is that kind of on your list of —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, it could be. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: I was curious if you had ever gone to Poland.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, no.

MS. SHEA: No.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, but, you know, it's a funny thing because when I went to the Czech Republic for the first time — I keep wanting to say Bora Bora, but that is Indonesia and I have been there. Why can't I think of the name of that? We're going to have to stop and I'm going to have to go look it up because that will really bother me. And Jordan was fascinating. No, you know, but the first time I went to the Czech Republic I looked around and I saw these other short, squat looking people, and I thought, looks like my father. [They laugh.] You know, it's Eastern European. You know, it's just kind of, like — [laughs] — oh, that is why he looked like that. And my grandfather looked like that.

MS. SHEA: So you went to — did you ever, gone to Hungary, or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, no. I have never been to Hungary. I have just been to the Czech Republic. I worked in the Czech Republic for quite some time from '01 to very recently.

MS. SHEA: I was going to ask that because I know that it said that you have cast in different places. I guess kind of briefly — what was called Super Glass [Company, Brooklyn, NY]?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, 18 years at Super Glass. I never wanted the furnace. That to me was the albatross. So I never wanted it. I mean, it just wasn't, again, how I saw myself. I saw myself as an artist. I mean, I have had this question over and over again, and I would say, you know, no, I'm not in glass; I'm an artist; that is what I do. Actually, if you were to really look at the last eight, 10 years, there is probably more work made out of granite than any other material, but I have always worked with lots of different materials. So I never wanted the furnace.

When I got out of RISD, I met somebody who was actually designing for Blenko Handcraft.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, West Virginia.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Milton, West Virginia. And he was interested — his daughter was going to RISD and somebody invited him to come give a talk on design, and he was an architect at the glass department and I met him. And he was interested in casting. And so we sort of made a deal where he and I would build — I would build the oven. He would give me half the money for it. It would get installed at Blenko where he was designing vases. And he would make that happen. And then I'd cast and he could cast, and then we'd figure that out. You know, we would just take turns. So the guy who is just turning 50, Gregg Morrell, who is on my screen there, had just graduated from RISD, and he was a metalworker and a pretty damn good one. And he helped build the oven.

Basically what happened was that I got two collectors and Ferd to kick in $3,000 each with no idea of what I was going to make. One of the collectors, George Saxe and his wife Dorothy were actually in the Blue Ridge Mountains when I was leaving Tennessee that summer.

MS. SHEA: From the Appalachian store.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] And we drove over to this little crafty town in the Blue Ridge Mountains. I don't know, Greensburg, Greensville — you know, people who know craft know it; I don't. And I met with him.

And I said, you know, look, I have got this opportunity; I need $3,000, and I can't tell you exactly what I'm going to make, but — are we all right?

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I think we might be running out of disc time.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, I probably talk too much.

MS. SHEA: No, no. This is good. Why don't we change discs?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Okay. You change your disc and I'm going to —

MS. SHEA: Return your phone calls?

MR. BEN TRÉ: I can't believe I can't remember where we just were, like, five months ago.

[END MD 02 TR 02.]

MS. SHEA: This is Josephine Shea and I'm interviewing Howard Ben Tré at the artist's studio in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. It's Saturday, July 7, 2007, for the Archives of American Art.

And Howard has just come back and said that the town is Petra in Jordan that he went to visit.

MR. BEN TRÉ: We were at the glass place.

MS. SHEA: Yes, you were talking about your —

MR. BEN TRÉ: So I raised this money —

MS. SHEA: Yes, but you were talking about your visit also with —

MR. BEN TRÉ: George Saxe.

MS. SHEA: In Virginia or West Virginia —

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, in the Blue Ridge Mountains in Tennessee.

MS. SHEA: As you were leaving —

MR. BEN TRÉ: As I was leaving Tennessee we went from teaching at the Appalachian Center, went across to meet them and have dinner, and that's when I proposed, that I needed, you know, I would make you — it's like, I'd gladly give you — if you would give me hamburger today, I would then — and I had three, George, a collector in Washington, D.C., and Ferd, all bought in and that gave me the money and my friend, Gregg, built the oven to be paid for his labor when and if I sold whatever I made.

And then Ferd calls me and says, well, when are you going to go cast? And I said, well, I think we're scheduled like in three months. He said, no, no, no, *Life* magazine is doing an article on four artists and you're one of them and they're taking pictures of you working in three weeks. And so Gregg and I stayed up night after night after night after night and we built this oven and I made all these molds — these were the sort of the beginning of the first column pieces — and I rent a rent-a-wreck van because we don't have any money. You're not supposed to take it more than 75 miles out of the city of Providence —

MS. SHEA: Or use it for business —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, and we're taking it to West Virginia.

And we load this oven, and we load all these molds in, and the springs are bent the opposite direction. We do that Saturday, get up Sunday morning to leave and I have a flat tire. So I call the rent-a-wreck people, they finally come out, give me another tire, we get on the road. Sunday afternoon, it's raining like unbelievable. We get like middle of [Interstate] 95 on Connecticut and Connecticut. And we blow a tire.

MS. SHEA: Yikes.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well it's way over-loaded you know.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, I'm surprised the rent-a-wreck people didn't say, what have you got in that van?

MR. BEN TRÉ: They don't care. And so, we get, you know — I don't know how much of this you want to hear — I walk in the rain — then there were Howard Johnsons along the road. And I call on people, I finally get some guy

who comes out and he won't sell me a tire; he'll sell me a tire and a rim, put it on, it's like $250 and it should have been like $80. All the money I have in the world, I give it to him. We drive to the Howard Johnson and we go in, have a cup of coffee or something, go back out, now the van won't start because we've had the flashers on the whole time. Van won't start.

But you know they had a garage there and everything and I turned to Gregg and I said, you know, Gregg, I'm done. I just can't do this. And he says, he reaches under his seat, unbeknownst to me, pulls out a bottle of Scotch and says, you can't quit now. We're almost there; you can't quit now. Got a jump and there we went. We got to like 50 miles outside of the factory and blew a tire.

Fortunately, it was like in the Ozarks with like no one there. And the guy like took a check for some reason, I have no idea. But that's how it was. I mean that's literally how it was. And I cast, I mean it was very hard on us, Gay and I, because it was a 20 hour drive down and I'd be gone for, you know, two weeks at a shot and so I probably cast there at least three or four times. By then, I wanted the work to be taller because they were columns and if they were columns, they should be tall; that's what columns are. And so we built an extension and lifted the roof on the oven. And it was a whole learning process, you know, thing blew up on us once.

And then, it was too far and it was kind of killing me and Jamie Carpenter, who is a pretty well-known designer, I somehow ran into him and he said, oh, you should go to Super Glass, it's in Brooklyn.

MS. SHEA: Ah, that's a lot closer.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I would say it's about a mile from where Gay and I had our first apartment.

MS. SHEA: Oh wow, and it's so close to back to where you started.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, to everything, you know, actually yeah really close to Brooklyn at that.

So I went down there and the owner, Bernie Friedman, who actually live in Rockaway, about 15 blocks from where I grew up, and he had lived there the entire time; he wasn't there that day. So I met with his son Howard Friedman, who is probably about 10 years older than me. And I told him what I wanted to do; I wanted to come in, build an oven, install it, and cast, and I would pay him for every time I cast, which is what I had been doing in Blenko. So, he says, great no problem and we find out where to put the oven. So what am I at this point, 32? Howard's 40.

So, I go home. I sold the oven that was at Blenko to this guy, Don, the designer, I said, it's all yours, just give me my half of the money. Go home, build another oven, show up on a Friday night to install it. Next thing I know there's some old, gray-haired guy looking at me in a white shirt, what are you doing here? And I said, well, I'm Howard Ben Tré and Howard Friedman said that I could build an oven and put it in and cast. And he said, well I'm Bernie Friedman and I own the factory. And I said, well, okay. He said, go ahead but don't put it here — and that was just purely he was in control — so he makes me move it to another spot which then two years later makes me move back to the original spot.

So he says then, I'll see you Monday. So I said okay. So I go see him Monday morning, tell him what I want to do, tell him what I do do, and I think the only reason he really let me do it was because he thought I designed for him; I told him Jamie sent me. So he says, so how much do you pay at Blenko, and I cut the price in half.

MS. SHEA: Which he probably knew.

MR. BEN TRÉ: He doubled it. [They laugh.]

He said, well, I'm going to double that. I said, okay. [They laugh.]

And I worked there for 18 years which was very, very difficult. When we started they had ten furnaces, they were blowing 10,000 vases a day.

MS. SHEA: Ten thousand? Wow.

MR. BEN TRÉ: [Unintelligible.]

Bernie came from — went to Alfred, started this little glass factory, in ceramic engineering, started this little glass factory in a quonset hut in East Flatbush. At one time they made 80 percent of the glass swizzle sticks used in New York bars. And he had built up this business where they made vases and glass lampshades. And you know, by the time they closed, China and India had killed them.

MS. SHEA: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: It just is not tenable. But I used to go in on a Friday night, I'd drive down. First I had a couple of his guys helping me; then he didn't want me to do that anymore, I had to bring my guys; then it was his guys again. It was always — Barney was going to get his pound. Best thing to do was to stay out of Barney's sight because I'd come in and he'd say, you've been casting every three weeks; I have to charge you more. Then you'd see him like three months later, he'd say, you haven't been coming very much, I have to charge you storage. [Shea laughs.] Whatever it was, the best thing was to stay out of Bernie's sight. And it was really a very nasty place; you know, the bathrooms —

MS. SHEA: Gritty and —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, no toilets in the bathroom, just holes in the floor. Pretty rough neighborhood and always with any of these factories I've always been economically responsible; so, like with Super Glass, I would come in on Friday night and we prepped everything, turn the ovens on, I would cast all day Saturday and the things would anneal for six to eight weeks and I owned it. I pay him no matter what. One time, they shut the electricity off because they were fixing the air conditioner; they never turned my electricity back on, everything was broken. I owned it. I mean that probably happened — if we cast every three weeks there, so what's that? Maybe we cast 15 times a year? I'd say three out of those would be fiascos where I owned it all, just throw it in the garbage, start over: all the patterns, all the molds, all the casting.

MS. SHEA: Wow.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Pretty standard. It's not like, you know, it's not like going to a bronze foundry.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I was going to say that seems very different than I would have envisioned.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Joel Shapiro picks out a couple of big 20-foot logs; not to denigrate Joel's work, he's got a few popsicle sticks taped together, they're this big. He gives them to the bronze factory, addition of five, six feet tall. You're just not seeing anything here because it's Saturday. I'll take you downstairs; I'll show you the rest of what we do.

So, you know, we make all these patterns that are here, you know, I do my drawings. My guys have made all of these. They're pretty amazing. I mean, if you look at them they're pretty amazing. And so I just owned that. I've always owned it. When I worked in the Czech Republic, they would send me broken things and I owned it.

MS. SHEA: I was going to ask about that experience.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Not that great.

MS. SHEA: Was it language or tradition or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Culture.

MS. SHEA: Culture.

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know, I started working there because Super Glass closed, I think I cast like once in a factory in New Jersey, they were emptying their tanks. Somebody made a connection for me; we spent all the money to move the ovens from Super Glass down to New Jersey. And basically, they pulled the plug on their ovens and the glass came out and so did all of their furnace pieces. So I had to deal with all this crap in my castings and then I never went back and the ovens got thrown out because the factory changed, I mean, it's just —

So, it was 2000, I think, or 2001 and I was at a panel in New York City and this couple, Steve Polaner and Karen LaMonte who actually did a talk at the DIA [Detroit Institute of Arts, MI] a few months ago.

MS. SHEA: Yeah, I heard her talk.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh you were there? Okay.

So, she got a Fulbright [grant], went to the Czech Republic, wound up working at the little factory — you could hardly call it a factory, I mean the place is half the size of this, it's a little workshop — that was started by the Czechoslovakia, when it was still a Soviet pawn, to make the Libensky's work. It's in Železný Brod about literally 1,000 yards from their house. And it was started by the Czechoslovakian —

MS. SHEA: The government.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, by the government or that, you know?

So, in '93 when they had their, not really revolution, but you know when the [Berlin] Wall came down, it became

privatized. One of Stanislav's students bought it. And Stanislav and I and Jaraslava were always good friends from then on. From when I met them in '78, they would come visit me here, I would visit them if they had a show in Miami or Detroit or New York or whatever. We had great respect for each other. So, but you know, Stan had been sick for a while and now Steve and Karen were there; Steve kind of runs Karen's career. And he approached me, would you like to work at Pelechov? That's the name of it. Zdeněk Lhotský is the guy who owns it [Mold Melted Glass Studio], it's called Pelechov. I said, well, that could work. And at that time, the dollar was sort of at parity or maybe a little up on the Euro. And so I went and I met these people and I thought, okay, let's try this.

You know, Steve was looking for a way to keep this place alive because without it, Karen doesn't have any place to make her work. Stan was ill, he hadn't passed away yet but he was pretty ill and it was kind of obvious that without their work this place was going away. So I said okay, so I went out and they tried making some things for me but, you know, I actually brought one of their main guys over here; I paid for him to come here and live here and work here in the studio with Eric [Portrais], my main person, for a week because I would send them a drawing and a pattern.

Let's just say I wanted an 18-inch diameter disk, three inches thick. So I send them something that's 18 inches in diameter, three inches thick and a drawing that says diameter and Steve's supposed to be doing the QC [quality control] on it, and I get back an oval. I get back an egg. And I'm like well what's this, you didn't even send us a template? Just make what the pattern is, what the drawing is, it's the diameter. So we would have to make templates for every possible nuance in the shape for them — everything, and still have to fix it. It would come in and we'd still have to fix it.

So it wasn't great and then the dollar makes it untenable now. You know, I mean this is George Bush's idea of a way of keeping our economy afloat; let's get all those tourists to come from Europe here because it's cheap. The few things that are manufactured in this country are cheap on the European market, they are.

MS. SHEA: I didn't realize that.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Of course, they're cheap. It's — I didn't look today but was at 1.34. So, you know, it's like going to Canada. It's like what used to be like going to Canada.

MS. SHEA: To go to Canada.

MR. BEN TRÉ: That's what it used to be like. So, Europeans come here; it's like we used to go to Canada. It's 33 cents, 33 percent less, so I had commissions and commitments to people and all of a sudden it didn't cost $100,000 to make it, it cost $135,000 to make it.

So between that and then their lack of performance, it just didn't seem worth it anymore, so I found a guy in Brooklyn who's doing some work for me and I've known him for many years and you know, his own career isn't what it used to be and so we're trying to work together to have him make some things for me. But that's always the issue.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say it sounds like it.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Always. There isn't the history of working with glass in this way. And so —

MS. SHEA: Do you think there used to be up until the Great Depression?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, never was.

MR. SHEA: No?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, I mean the history of glass is first, if you believe Pliny the Elder, whatever his name is, that you know, there were these sailors who had some soda ash and they propped it up to build a fire on some beach and you know — the history of glass is that there were glazes for ceramics. And they were used to imitate precious jewels in Egypt; the blowpipes, the Phoenicians. Then after that there are core vessels, right? So that's how that's made, right? You got your history there? Did your homework?

MS. SHEA: I have a core diagram here.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah I know, they're core vessels. So, even those they are not blown nor are they cast. They're basically make-up sand core right? Same thing. Sand, clay and water, and you dip it in this pot of glass, and then you trail some other color around it. You let it cool, you dig the sand core out, you put perfume in. That's it. The Phoenicians in the first century A.D. invent the blowpipe. Then you have a glass industry because you need containers. And you can sort of tell how big the industry is when you see how many thousands of years later and they're still finding this crap, right? They're still finding these little blown vessels in Mexico. You know, we don't

know how they got there from, right? But they're like Phoenician vessels in Mexico, right?

So that's an industry; casting ended with core vessels. There was no need for, there was no reason. You know, it came about again Carter — you know they cast this Indian [ph]. I mean there have been some castings. But everything is driven by industry so there was no reason for it. The only big castings really that are done nowadays are telescope mirror blanks only because they have a material which has a zero coefficient of expansion. Like Zerodur. So when this mirror blank is up there in space, and it goes around from one side of the earth to the other and it all of a sudden it's in full sun and it's changed in temperature 600 degrees Celsius, it doesn't expand or contract. Because if it did, it wouldn't work. So they cast 24 foot diameter mirror blanks.

MS. SHEA: Which government, I assume, supports that.

MR. BEN TRÉ: They do at Arizona State University. Corning used to do it, Schott Glass Technologies does it in Germany and then the U.S. government decided to stop paying them so much money and supports the program at the University of Arizona in Tucson. But they don't use glass that looks — I mean they use opaque glass, they don't even care because they're not using it because it's translucent or transparent, they're using it because of it's coefficient of expansion and there's nothing else like that.

And then there's radiation shielding windows. So if you have a nuclear submarine or a power plant, they use a lead-based glass and they cast things that are two feet thick by three feet by four feet. That's it. They don't cast shapes. You know, I mean if you look at glass it's going to other way, fiber-optic. It's going small.

MS. SHEA: Smaller and thinner and tinier.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Tinier. And everything is, like in your little, this little thing which used to be a tape recorder. So there's no history for doing it. Pelechov is pretty unusual. They cast it and they finish it. There's not a lot of places like that around, you know, I mean people have said to me, oh why don't you go to Portugal or China? Well they don't make anything like this. You know, if you're in Mexico and they're hand-blowing vases or in India or in something, and they're not even hand-blown anywhere; they're all machine made. They don't have furnaces. Schott's very unusual — this place that I work at in Pennsylvania. Schott Glass Technologies is a German company but they make the Zerodur product.

MS. SHEA: What is that?

MR. BEN TRÉ: That's the zero-expansion glass.

And they make laser glasses. They used to make, when I first started in '95, they used to make eyeglass glasses. They made all the Ray-Ban. It's all plastic now. That business is gone; it's all plastic.

So now they make laser glasses. They make very, very high-tech optical glass so that all those little missiles that they're dropping in Iraq, they all have that glass in them. They don't use gyroscopes anymore; they use a laser glass, it's all digital. That's where it's made. [Laughs.]

So you know, no, it's very — and I never wanted the furnace, and I never wanted even — you know one of the things that's really changed, the people working with glass who are making art, is that this idea — again, this did come out of the Czech Republic, and that is that at Pelechov, Americans started going there and hanging out; and they came back and they had this other technique. My technique has always been: mold, hot glass out of a furnace, ladle scoop, pour it in. It's hot, it comes out of a little spigot.

What they do in the Czech Republic is they make a mold out of plaster. They fill it with chunks of glass, cold. They put it in the oven, they heat it up so it all melts together. And then they cool it. It doesn't necessarily look exactly the same but it's pretty close. It's pretty close. So, if you were to go to 1978 and look at the Corning catalogue, you'd probably find me and maybe one other person with something cast. If you were to have that same show today you'd have a third of it cast, but by that other method. Which is good, it's smart; you don't need a furnace, all you need it a big oven.

So, Bullseye Glass, if we go back to the stained glass people at Bullseye, yeah they still make stained glass but that's not what they're really selling. What they're selling is kiln-cast billets.

MS. SHEA: Kiln-cast —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Billets.

MS. SHEA: Billets.

MR. BEN TRÉ: They're selling this.

MS. SHEA: So now are you showing me both a —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Round, six-inch diameter or a five by ten eight, they're all both about a half inch thick.

MS. SHEA: Of frosted, opaque glass?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, yeah, yeah, they actually give it to me, they sell it to me clear. I sandblasted them because I wanted to make sure the color was right when I got done with the piece, okay? But they sell it clear.

MS. SHEA: And that's called a billet?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, it's called a billet and you've got your mold and you just stack them in there. If you don't want lines maybe you break them up and stack them at odd shapes. And you bring the oven up to the appropriate temperature, 1,600 degrees Fahrenheit probably. You leave it there long enough for all of them to just soften, fuse together. It's called kiln-casting. And then you have an object, and you anneal it.

And that's very different than going to a furnace that's hot where the glass is at, let's say, 1900 degrees Fahrenheit, we'll scoop; or if it comes out of spigot, you know, and you fill your mold up and then you put it in the oven and cool it. It's a different process. Actually this kiln-casting thing is much smarter because you don't have to have a furnace.

And the problem with the furnace is that, you know, casting glass is a little like being on a highway. You're going to have six lanes. But when you get to the toll booth, everything starts to back up. So you can have a furnace that holds 1,000 pounds of glass let's say. It could hold 10,000 pounds, but let's just say 1,000 pounds of glass. Great, you fill it up, you cast five molds that day, you put them in the oven. They have to cool for two months. Well you can melt another 1,000 pounds the next day, but what are you going to do with it? The toll booth is the annealing of it.

So then what do you do with your furnace? You're paying the gas if you shut it off; it's very hard on the brick, on the refractory.

MS. SHEA: Oh I didn't know that.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes.

MS. SHEA: So it's constantly kept warm?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes. You turn it down. You actually call it banking the furnace. Which means you put money in the bank instead of into the furnace. But it doesn't matter, what are you going to do? Bank it for, you know, for four weeks, for six weeks, for eight weeks? My work at Schott takes ten weeks to cool. What are you going to do with that? So, you know, the furnace is a bad idea. And this kiln-casting is actually a much smarter thing and I think it's allowed more younger artists to cast. Because you see if you're blowing, it's no big deal. You fill up the oven, you fill the furnace that night; you come in the morning, you pull the stuff out of the oven and you work again. It's like six, eight hours to cool down things that are eight inch thick, it's nothing.

MS. SHEA: As opposed to ten weeks?

MR. BEN TRÉ: As opposed to ten weeks.

And then of course the real secret is that you fill these things up and you come back in ten week and you don't know, are they broken? Or are they even art? They could've just been an interesting idea. What you don't think I went through all of that when I first started? You draw and you draw and you draw. And then you make and you look and then you go cast and you come back and you draw and you make and you make more molds and you then you go back to get the first stuff and you don't even know what they look like. And you cast before you even get to see them because they're in sand and you're working. And all of a sudden you're three months into a body of work and you don't even know if it's art.

MS. SHEA: But you're expecting it would be —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Who knows? It's not like, you know, I got to get out of here, I'm really taking your time. This is not like, you know, you do a painting or part of a painting and you get lunch and you come back and you say, too much red I'll paint over it. [They laugh.] Doesn't happen like that. It's a very different process. And it's like this, this is supposed to be my show in New York and I mean at this point I have a pretty good idea of what I'm looking at but none of them are made yet.

MS. SHEA: And those out there, are they plaster molds or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, they're Styrofoam covered in plaster. We basically use a blue insulating Styrofoam they use around foundations of houses and then we put joint compound or plaster. In this case, 99 percent of them are round, so we actually have a little method that I devised for spinning them; which is actually not that different than a banding wheel that you would do in ceramics.

MS. SHEA: Right, right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: But we would, I mean I can show you that when we get done with this.

MS. SHEA: To get back to — do you read at all — maybe it's better to think about this big picture. If you were giving, say, an artist or someone who wanted to be an artist just starting out, or let's say you're going to establish your own art school.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No.

MS. SHEA: What would that look like? In other ways, basically, what would you recommend, what would you advise, what has been important to you? What do you think would be helpful to others?

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know yes, of course, I've read a lot over the years. And I used to read a lot of artist biographies, you know, Eva Hesse, I mean I just — the whole, you name it, from the Renaissance throughout because that was really interesting to me. I think I advise being around other working artists. I think that the disservice that happens in many art schools is that the faculty don't make work. And even if they make work, they don't exhibit it.

And it's the GI Bill, that's why we have all these art schools. You know these guys came back from World War II and the GI Bill allowed them to go to school and some of them decided they wanted to be artists; but then they need to hire people. Mark Rothko used to teach, all these artists all of a sudden started teaching art. But they were making art at the same time. And they were showing art; they were exhibiting.

I think we're in a very different situation now. Now we have a lot of faculty who don't make anything anymore. I mean, they did at one point, then they got their teaching job and then sort of part of the way through their career they stopped having their career. You know, I mean I think Gerhard [Richter] has always made things and that's not true for him, but I think that's the one thing, if I were to have a school, it would be back to publish or perish.

And that was the greatest lesson for me, was being around somebody like Dale who did it. He did it. Every day, no matter where he went, he was always drawing or, you know, whatever it was, he was consumed by it; maybe a little too much, but he was consumed by it. And so that would be the main thing, is teach people how to be artists by being around artists who work.

MS. SHEA: At least in some ways, make your living with art?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yeah, I don't even know. You can teach but you need to work.

MS. SHEA: To be making.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I mean, my God, you got your summers off; you have all those holidays off. You're only teaching two days a week. I mean they're teaching two days a week at RISD, two and a half. I mean they're not teaching brain surgery; they're saying, how do you feel about this painting? [Shea laughs.] I mean, that's what they're doing. So what do you do in the rest of the time? Mowing your lawn? You know, you should be in the studio and you should have students in the studio. You know, at least that was, for me, the fundamental difference in my life, was going and being around these people and seeing it.

I mean, I remember, you know, sitting there with Dan Dailey or Dale [Chihuly] and he's got the*Sunday [New York] Times* magazine — when it was interesting. Just looking at the ads. But what do you think about the typeface? But why do you think they use that color? Where's the lighting coming from? How'd they light that? That was it. All day. Everyday. The way the cans were — the way his tomato paste was arranged on the wall. Everything was visual. Everything was aesthetic. And that's the school I would have. I'd have it where we were all just there working together. [Laughs.] Forget how do you feel about your feel about your painting. [They laugh.]

There's a great story about Italo, who passed away a few years ago and, you know, I think he was the first Italian to teach at RISD because, you know, it's pretty kind of Yankee around here. They didn't let Jews or Italians teach there for a long time. And there was this great story — it's before my time. They eventually let him go, I think, over this because he was giving a crit on the fourth floor of the Metcalfe Building and he just starting taking work and saying it was shit and throwing it out the window.

He would just toss it out the window. This sucks. Boom, out the window. [Laughs.] You know, I don't know. Maybe it's not politically correct but maybe we need a little bit of that, too, you know. [Laughs.] It's different now, you know. Now I mostly read about food. That's mostly what I read.

MS. SHEA: What is your kind of take on the current gallery market?

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know, it's just a different world. I mean, I don't think the art world is any different than the rest of the world. I used to think, in my naïveté, that some how being part of the art world was like, you know, in that Dada era, right.

MS. SHEA: Well, like you didn't realize that selling was, you know, part of that. [Laughs.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, you know, Damien Hirst just did this thing with this skull [*For the Love of God*, 2007] — I don't know if you know about that — that he had jeweled — with diamonds. The entire skull, he had like replica of a skull, a human, with all these diamonds encrusted in it and it's like for $5 million or something. [Sold for $100 million in August 2007.] You know, to me, well that's the art market a lot today. I mean, I'm very fortunate. I've gotten to do some really great projects: my project in England. my project in Israel, private clients, public clients, Target's plaza, plaza down here, which is really about building community and building spaces where people go into the space and they're experiencing art without going to a museum.

They don't even have to think of it as art but it's something that brings some of what art does to your life, you know. So, I pretty much have watched the art market reflect, you know, what our society is. You know, it's extremely commercial. It's who you know. It's marketing, you know. When Mary Boone started her gallery, she got involved with [Charles and Maurice] Saatchi and Saatchi had the largest advertising agency in the world [Saatchi & Saatchi]. And so, within a year, Mary's gallery was in every — there was an article about the Mary Boone Gallery in every magazine that Saatchi & Saatchi were the ad people for, you know.

If you're on the board of the Whitney and you're collecting David Salle and it's whatever, 1988, he's 26 years old, he has a retrospective at the Whitney. It's not any different than the rest of the world. It's marketing and it's — now, that doesn't mean there aren't collectors out there who love art. There are and there are great patrons and we're lucky for it. I think sometimes that everybody seems to forget that without the artist, the dealers would be selling cars or refrigerators.

The collectors would have nothing to collect and the magazine people would have nothing to write about. So, you know, sometimes artists get a little lost in the shuffle here. If you're not commercial successful, it's very hard to have any power in the art world. If you're commercially successful, it's like anything else in our society. You've got push. Same thing in the gallery system. You know, if you're hot — I mean, if you look at what happened — the term I always hated was stable, but if you look at the modern gallery system since the late '40s, you had these stable of artists. But by the time you hit the '70s, you have free agency just like you have in baseball.

You put your time in and then you have really good show, there's no loyalty. You jump to the next gallery. You show at Gagosian [Gallery, New York City] one year. You show at Pace [Gallery, New York City] the next. Used to be you were at a gallery. That was it and there was loyalty on both ends.

MS. SHEA: I was going to say, on both sides.

MR. BEN TRÉ: They don't sell; you don't show. [Laughs.] Unless you've got a very unusual dealer or are very young in your career and people have a little belief in you that in a certain point — it is a business.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I mean, I do tell young artists — again, this would be part of the school, you need to make what you need to make because if you make it because you think it's going to sell and it doesn't sell, then you don't have any money and any integrity. But if you make what you want to make and it doesn't sell, you still don't have any money but at least you have your integrity.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: And you had the reason why you wanted to be an artist, you know. So, that's, you know, when I got to give talks or once in a while to young people, that's what I tell them.

[END OF MD 03 TR 01.]

MS. SHEA: I think there are some questions about commission work and you mentioned some of your more major commissions. As I kind of look at your work, I get the impression that that's becoming a bigger portion of the picture. Is that true?

MR. BEN TRÉ: It is.

MS. SHEA: I was wondering if that's partly economic because of what you were describing about for this kind of scale.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, you know, it's economic in the sense that, yes, well it's really nice if you're making something and you know that it has a home and you're getting paid to make it. But it wasn't, you know, it wasn't done for that reason. I think, you know, all sculptors would like to control the environment in which their work is in. We all want to do that. I mean, Mark Rothko as a painter would choose the color of the room that his client would hang the painting in. So we all want to control that environment. I started out sort of in, I want to say '86 or so, and did a commission — outdoor commission in Washington, D.C. [Artery Plaza, Bethesda, MD] and then did the park at Post Office Square [Boston]. I did the fountains there.

MS. SHEA: And that was working with the government, right?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, that was private. The park at Post Office Square is private. It's the Friends of Post Office Square.

MS. SHEA: Okay, because I heard post office so I assumed —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, no, no. It's just the name of Post Office Square. It's in downtown Boston and there is a post office on the square but it just happens to be the name. And it was pretty amazing. Norman Leventhal, who is a developer in Boston wanted to give something back to the city and, you know very briefly, he put together a consortium of 11 corporations in that area. It's the financial district. And they bought an old parking garage, tore it down, built a five-story parking structure underground and a beautiful park above ground. And I did two fountains, which one of them includes a bunch of granite seating and paving and it's won just numerous urban design awards, numerous.

It's — in the landscape architecture field it's known everywhere in the world. A lot of books. It's in all the books. So that was my first really like now I have this site. Then I got the commission actually many years later, to do the plaza here in downtown Providence, where I did all the paving, all the granite seating, all the landscaping, fountains, lighting, everything and made these three different energy zones.

As I was finishing that up, I got the project in Warrington [Warrington Town Center, England]. Now, the project in Warrington is, you know, sort of Renaissance-scale. I redesigned 10,000 square meters of paving. It's two 500-foot long streets and the town center. There's 12 gardens, 22 sculptures, you know, two fountains, numerous seating areas. And I had a landscape architect from London, John Hopkins, that I worked on that and he did mostly the grading things and, you know, it was basically my conceptual idea. And that's in that other book. You see the new little one I gave you, that's in it.

MS. SHEA: This one right here?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, that's in there. The model is in there as well as photos. That has more of the public projects. And then soon after that, I did Target Plaza, which is Target's main headquarters in Minneapolis. I did their plaza. But I've done some other things for private — Siebel Systems [Bridgepointe Campus, San Francisco, CA]. I did a GSA [U.S. General Services Administration] project down in Las Vegas with these big granite — and there's no glass in that [Lloyd D. George United States Courthouse]. It's just granite and paving, seating elements. I did a little plaza here at Brown University. So now I'm looking at doing that installation in Michigan but I've always, all along, made sculpture. It's just that these things — I mean, I showed in New York every 18 months from 1980 to 2001.

MS. SHEA: Tell me. That's quite a —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yes. Every 18 months. And in between, I showed somewhere else. That's how much work we made all the time. And it's not easy to make and we did it all the time. The last five years, things have just changed a little. [Laughs.] You know, I just decided I needed to take another look at my life and make sure that I had some other things going on in it and Wendy being one of them. And so, we still work pretty hard but I just have two guys in my studio and I had at one time, had eight. I hated it.

I decided I'm doing that. I don't need that. And Wendy Baker, who's my personal assistant and takes care of everything. But I just don't need — we'll pickup another person for this project in Michigan as that moves ahead because we're going to need another person. But Eric has been with me 17 years. Basically, he runs the studio now. I mean, I draw and I travel, but I couldn't do that without him. I mean, he really runs the studio. And I have this young man, Thor [Dieringer], who's been three years; he's fabulous. I mean, he's great. And they all get along. We all get along and yes, I can basically say to Thor, you know, I want it to look like this. Add two inches, take three inches up in here, and he just does it.

But the commissions are both good and bad. I mean, they're good because, you know, you don't worry about having to pay your electric bill. But they're bad because they do take a lot of time and they take you away. I mean, I'm working on two private commissions right how. Just sculptures for people's homes because I don't ever have any work in the studio.

MS. SHEA: Yes, I was wondering about that.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, there's that one piece there and that's it. [They laugh.] Well, usually it comes in and it leaves, which is not bad.

MS. SHEA: So it's a good thing.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, Charlie has a couple of pieces in New York. I actually — Ferd has a couple of pieces now of — that I gave Ferd. So, it's not bad. It's just different, you know. And now I want to make this whole new body of work so we're supposed to have a show in October. But if we do Michigan — that's just not going to happen. It's not going to happen anyway.

MS. SHEA: Timing-wise.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes. It's too much.

MS. SHEA: You said you've started off your first — the first ones were called —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Burial Boxes.

MS. SHEA: Burial Boxes. And then you've had different series like Figures, Primary Vessels, Basins. Do you keep returning to them or do you feel like sometimes you've done as much as you want to do with them and never go back?

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, that's usually what happens. I don't usually go back. I mean, I have remade pieces that got destroyed. You know, like I sort of got done with Columns and then, you know, at some point I remade a piece because it got destroyed in an earthquake and I thought it was a great thing and I wanted it. So I made it and kept it. You know, like it was in someone's collection. Primary Vessels. No, I usually — just moving ahead. Usually it's — like these are new.

Now, I would venture to say that if you took these and you took them all down to the Polich [Tallix, Rock Tavern, NY] Artworks, the bronze foundry — I use that an artist — a curator would walk in and say, oh, those are Howard Ben Tré's. Not that they look like anything I've ever made before, but there's the nuance of form that's specific to the way I see. And I've had that happen all the time. I've had, you know, the foundry, Dick Polich, who's a good friend and does my bronze work. And I go down and say, well, you know, I've been looking at these bronzes that he's making for me. And he said, you know, I just had an artist in here, took one look at those and said those are Howard Ben Tré's, aren't they?

So, you know, it does happen. I mean, I think you get — I always hated this idea. I knew this artist once who told me, oh, I want you to come see a signature piece of mine. And I thought to myself, well now, that's a bad idea. I mean, if you have signature piece — [Shea laughs] —

MS. SHEA: Whatever.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, and what does that mean?

MS. SHEA: There's only one.

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know, it's that discernable. But I think that there's enough similarity of form and enough way of seeing that people would go in and, even if it's not made in glass, is what I'm saying. If it was made in glass, it's an easy tell. Somebody walks into that space at the University of Michigan Business School and sees those pieces, whether they're six feet high or they're 27-feet high, they're going to know exactly whose it is. There's no doubt in that one. It's just that, you know, that's 30 some odd years later. It's just, you know, I've been working for so long that they're going to see these big cast glass pieces. There's no one in the world who does that. There's no one in the world who has ever done that. There's no one in the world who put glass outside the way I have.

MS. SHEA: I was very interested in that. I did read that you do have to use different kinds of glass.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, we use a low expansion glass, not dissimilar to the mural on Rockefeller Center, which was done in a Corning B plant in 1933 in Brooklyn.

MS. SHEA: Wow.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Okay, not that dissimilar but it's a low-expansion glass. You're familiar with Pyrex?

MS. SHEA: Right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: So, it's that, to protect because of the integrity of the diurnum, changes in temperature from night to day.

MS. SHEA: [Inaudible.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: But you don't see that anywhere in the world. If there's a big thing like that outside, it's mine. There's no one who has done that before and no one who is going to do it for long time. It's too much work. [Laughs.] Sorry to get back to my childhood but my dad would very proud right now. [They laugh.] I have a funny story about that. My son, who is 27, works in real estate. He worked in New York for three or four years and, you know, he called me one Sunday around three in the afternoon — he knew to call me here because where else would I be, right. And I said, hey Benj, how you doing? He said, oh, I'm okay, dad. I said, what are you up to? He said, oh I'm at work. And I didn't say anything and he said, oh you love that don't you? [They laugh.] I'm gone. [They laugh.] And that's what he does. He works very hard. He's in Rome right now.

MS. SHEA: You said celebrating Earth Day, but is that why he went over there or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes. One of the things he does is he trades carbon credits. He has a company with another young man called Ethos Investments. And they work with a company called Planktos and Planktos generates carbon credits by seeding bays with iron minerals to create plankton and by planting trees. And Planktos gave the Vatican, of all people, enough carbon credits for them to be green for a year. And as part of Live Earth Day, which is today, the Vatican composer is composed a movement of a symphony he's been working on that's being played in one of the Vatican chapels today and is being, you know, linked to the Live Earth concert. He called me yesterday on the Skype phone to say he arrived okay.

MS. SHEA: Amazing.

MR. BEN TRÉ: It is pretty amazing, I have to tell you. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: Do you feel that you're involved with any particular — and I don't really love the term, but art scene, either in New York or they have national —

MR. BEN TRÉ: No. I think, you know, my work is not very hip. If that's the right word, you know. I mean, it's just not part of what is being generated as cutting edge of, you know, of the art world and the art scene. So, I mean, I think if I were to think about artists like myself, I would think about Martin Puryear or, you know, somebody like that. There are other artists who work in the same realm. You know, they make sculpture out of materials but, you know, I don't really see myself as part of any kind of art scene or movement. I mean, I think there was, at some point, a movement of artists like myself, Tony Cragg.

You know, artists who make sculpture that's object-oriented and use not things that were found on Canal Street in New York but actually — or cast out of bronze or cast out of steel or cast out of glass or, you know, or fabricated or, you know, or Martin's stuff is often wood. But they have a certain quality to them and I think there are a number of artists who work like that but they certainly, although I think we all have pretty successful reputations, I don't think that we're certainly a part of some kind of scene. We're not in that genre.

We don't make big Cibachrome prints or, you know, I mean, that's more of what is the scene now. I think there will always be a place for us but we certainly are not, you know, putting dead sharks in formaldehyde or, you know or — you know what I mean, doing things that generate a lot of publicity. I think probably the person that's gotten the most recognition, and deservingly so, is Anish Kapoor, for having done these big, stainless shapes in Chicago and in Manhattan. That he's gotten a lot of good recognition for that.

MS. SHEA: We talked a little bit about the impact of technology on your work. How do you kind of see that — it seems like that maybe the basics are still the same but the peripheral things that go into the making of —

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know, really they're not. I mean, the peripheral — the technology really doesn't affect any of the making. The technology really only has affected the initial creating in the sense that I use — I don't draw on a computer. I draw by hand. So, you know, any of those shapes that I was just having copied, I mean, basically they were drawn full scale.

And then, the digital part of it was that I wanted — I needed to figure out how much they're going to weigh and so I wanted to reduce them to a scale like an inch to a foot. So I had them scanned. I do scan things and manipulate them. As we said, I use a digital — excuse me, architectural rendering company. And they do take

my hand drawings and then turn them into digital renderings for me to show to a client. Before, we used to make models. So we would take my drawings, I'd give them to Eric, and Eric, as the ones you saw, Eric would turn them on a lathe or carve them out of acrylic and then I would hand color them so they'd look green.

Now, what we do — or red or whatever they were going to be. Now what we do is I draw them. I take them to the render. They render them. I tell them it's not translucent enough, it's not the right patina color or I want to put a gold shape in here. I want this to have water. But that hasn't really changed the way we make things. It's only changed the way people see what we're going to make.

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MR. BEN TRÉ: And I use it myself sometimes as a way of seeing for myself, you know.

MS. SHEA: And has the Internet impacted you?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, I have website. We did a website last year. Nothing ever really came of it. I mean, people can go see it. You know, people aren't surfing. I mean, people who know about me know about me. So, you know, there was always plenty of stuff on the web because I'm in a lot of exhibitions. But it hasn't really affected — you know, I use it as a tool. I use it as a tool to source materials. I use it as a tool to buy materials. I use it to check on the [Boston] Red Sox. [Laughs.] You know, really. I mean, that's it.

I mean, it's a kind of funny thing because, as I said earlier, you know, if the computer goes down then we can't even write a letter in here anymore, you know, and we're just an artist studio. Imagine what it's like at IBM, you know. [Shea laughs.] So, you know, and it is great having that because, like I said, I could be in Israel or in Jordan at Petra, at the hotel. And if I'm working on a project and I want to look at a rendering or if someone wants to e-mail me and ask me a question, or my fountain consultant, you know, we always have that ability to communicate and that does help. I definitely do — but like when I got to Michigan to spend time with Wendy, I have a drawing board there. An electric eraser, a bunch of pencils, T-square, you know, parallel, triangles, ellipses, curves.

MS. SHEA: Do you have shapes like the —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Sure.

MS. SHEA: — car designers use.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, sure. Oh, well that's a ships curves, flexible shapes. Sure. I use all those tools because it's one thing to draw it first freehand, but you need to get a hard line in order the guys to make the pattern. [Laughs.] You know, it's not like Richard Hunt's work or something or something that's a little funky here, a little funky there. You know what I mean; it's pretty crisp.

MS. SHEA: Crisp, right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: It's pretty specific to, like, within an eighth of an inch. Everything is within a 16th of an inch. I can stand across the room and tell the guy that's wrong. I know it. And, you know, they'll measure it and the guys used to curse me. How'd you see that? I said, well, that's what I do. [Laughs.] Things to a specific, you know. I mean, I might have looked at it for days and then say, you can see that right there. See that blue piece right there on that — here go ahead. You stay there. It's okay. They don't have to hear me. One up here and there's one down there.

And that was added like one day. I just walked in and I went, there's something not right here. I want you to try this, Thor; cut me this, cut me that, and stick them on there. And so, you know, and that's just sort of the way it is. I mean, that's what I do. I draw everything. The guys make tracing from drawings because that's my really big drawing board there. I just don't have any drawings up right now but that's my big — where the stairs are in front of it in that yellow thing, which I built. That's a big drawing board.

And then I draw full scale, usually, and then the guys take tracings from that and then we can go into the workroom. They make cardboard templates and they shape all the pieces to those templates. And then I look at them and I change things and then, we'll make molds from the shapes. And then when the glass comes back or the bronze comes back, we'll change it. We stick things together and then I say, nah, I don't want to do it. And then that's what we do, you know, and then they just work on it. And that's all, you know, that's all pretty traditional. That's not really very —

MS. SHEA: Right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know, it's not Sol LeWitt. It's not Minimalism. It's not Judd. Like, here's the drawing, go make it, because the drawing is the drawing. It's not that. There's an aspect of that to it but that's not it. It's

handmade but it has that kind of aesthetic, where it has a lot of purity to it. And that's why I say, you know, there are other artists who work like that, just not a lot. And I think we came out of that Minimalist genre but wanted our hand back in there. We wanted the hand of man back in there. So it has a kind of very elemental aspect to it but it's not about being reduced to something that could be made in a factory and become anonymous.

You know, one of the thing that's always been, is people always wondered why I don't sign my work.

MS. SHEA: I was going to ask you if you do, and I thought maybe not.

MR. BEN TRÉ: No. No, you know, I mean, works on I on paper I do and I only did that because one dealer told me, they said, no one's going to buy this unless you sign it. Howard, would you please sign it. And so I said, okay, I'll sign. But in the beginning I didn't sign them either and I think some of it is just that certainly in the beginning, the forms were so universal and archetypal that it almost seemed antithetical to sign them.

MS. SHEA: Like signing the Acropolis or something.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes. [Shea laughs.] Yes. You know, you have these sculptures, which are attributed to these Greek or Egyptian —

MS. SHEA: I was going to say it seemed that the red paint or the — different but —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes. They're attributed to. It would be more like to signing the Lascaux cave [France] or something like that. And so I just thought, you know, I'm not going sign these things because that would be antithetical to what they mean, to what they're about. And so then, where would you sign these? Would you sign them on the bottom? What are you going to do tip it over to find it? [Shea laughs.] But people know it's my work. I've never had an issue where somewhere said whose is this?

There are some artists out there who have tried to make things that look similar but it's never quite — people know. They go, oh, that's not Howard's.

MS. SHEA: And speaking of your name, it's a name that you adopted.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes.

MS. SHEA: You said from Vietnam or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, it actually was the first city in Vietnam to fight against the French and then against the Americans.

MS. SHEA: And is it a Vietnamese word or is it —

MR. BEN TRÉ: You know, I'm sure its derivation is French.

MS. SHEA: French. I was going to say it's not a —

MR. BEN TRÉ: But it is a city in Vietnam.

MS. SHEA: Right. Right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: And they actually are well-known for a certain kind of candy currently because I have had friends who have gone to Vietnam and brought me back candy.

MS. SHEA: And that was one of my travel questions. Have you been to Vietnam?

MR. BEN TRÉ: No, I haven't. I didn't really — that wasn't really it. You know, Gay and I met in Cuba and then instead of getting married, we decided that we would change our name. And in our moment of '60s — what's the right word — impassioned logic — [laughs] — we said we'll pick Ben Tré. It's the first, you know, it represents this new beginning. And also, when we were Cuba, there are a couple of things that sort of pushed it in that way was that one, we came from all over the United States to go and we met in Mexico City. And we went on a little prop [plane], 100 of us, and we had a plaque on it that said Cuomo in Vietnam, like in Vietnam. It was a Cuban plane that had just come back from Vietnam bringing supplies to the Vietnamese.

So, of course, you know we go down to Cuba and we have great solidarity there because it's a changing role for women, which is very different from what it was before. You know, it's a Latin-Catholic culture. Women, all of a sudden, were in the military. Women became doctors. Very different. A lot of Cubanos left because of that; a lot of men. You know, they talked about how we're all black. We are all people of color in Cuba. We have a history

of inter-marriage and we don't believe in — so they were against the war. What could be better, you know?

Nineteen sixty-nine radical. I mean, how much better could you get, right. So and I met Gay there and then one of the things we did was we went to go see this new city, which was called Ben Tré and it was this city the Cubans had built.

MS. SHEA: In Cuba.

MR. BEN TRÉ: In Cuba. They had built this city and, you know, it was like this model city because before the revolution, you know, all the entire focus was in Havana or Santiago de Cuba. I mean, they were in the cities and the peasants lived in the countryside and starved. And, you know, it was an American protectorate. You know, I mean Americans — we were taught growing up that it was the, you know, Spanish-American War. Well, actually, it was the Cuban-Spanish-American War. The Cubans had been fighting the Spanish for a really long time, for independence.

So, you know, we went to visit the city in this new village that was built with a new hospital. It was small. And they did this whole performance, this multimedia performance with film and fireworks and dance and music. We sat on this hill and at the backdrop of the back of this small village, with all these whitewalls; these Cuban artists did this thing. I mean, it was very remarkable and very moving. And so then, we decided instead of getting married, we would change our name and we would start something new. That we'd create a new kind of family and that's where the name came out of. It turns out to be a great name as an artist. [They laugh.] No, that was it. It was a very beautiful, romantic notion, and I've gone back. Gay and I have gone back to Cuba many times.

We didn't go for a long period and then on Vinalhaven [ME] — there used to be something called Vinalhaven Press, which was started and run by a woman named Pat Nick and she had offices in Manhattan and she used to bring up artists to come and make prints. And, you know, very well-known artists. And one summer, she brought these five Cubans from Cuba because, you know, the Cuban artists travel all over. And so they had known we had been there. I think this has got to be early '90s. I'm guessing. Maybe mid-'90s. And so, we had this big party. Mojitos and, you know — and I was talking to one of these Cuban artists and I said, oh, I was there when you were very young.

He said, no, you were there when my mother was very young. [They laugh.] And I thought, you know, this is great. I love this. This is kind of an interesting idea. We should go back. So, we went back and had an amazing experience. I don't know if this relative but it was really so fabulous. We went back and we wanted to look up some different people that we had known when we were there originally in '69. Cubanos who had been in a camp, who are our — you know, peers.

MS. SHEA: Oh. Who taught you how to cut —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Cut sugarcane. Yes. And one of them was sort of like a minstrel kind of person. He always had a guitar. Alberto. And so, once we decided we wanted to go back, it wasn't hard to find people who had been going all along because, you know, we just stopped. We went and we left and that was that. But there were people on the brigade who went all the time. Continued to go and, you know, developed friendships and so it wasn't hard to find some people who knew what was going on and how to get in touch with people.

So we went. And let's see, maybe it was '96, -seven, or something. And we find out that Alberto is a musician and he's got a band and he's going to be playing at this national theater in the upstairs area in this small club area, and it starts at 10:30 at night, which would be typical Cuban on a Sunday night. [Shea laughs.] Because there'd be typically Cuban. You know, they party all night. I mean, I was 19 when I went there. It was dead at three in the morning. These are medical students partying to six and then go class, you know. So we were there with Gay and I and Benji and I think we brought one of Benji's friends and we go to this theater on a Sunday night. Someone said you should get there early, get there at 10.

So we get there and we see this —now, it's many years later. You know, it's like 30 years later. Twenty-eight. There's this long table. We figure they're the musicians because they're all drinking rum. And we see this young guy who looks like Alberto and we're thinking like, well, he's too young. He can't be Alberto. And we see this older guy down at the end of the table who looks like a Berkeley professor. He's got a gray beard and gray hair. And he gets up and he starts to walk table to table and speak to people in Spanish and tell them about the kind of show that they do and what they're going to hear.

And he comes to our table. He has no idea we're there. Haven't seen him in 30 years and he starts speaking to us in Spanish and then he realizes that — you know, Gay speaks Spanish — and he looks at us and we say, Alberto? And he says, Howie and Gay? [Shea laughs.] He knew exactly who we were and then we hadn't seen him — I had a beard. I had long hair. I wasn't bald. I mean, it was so amazing. And so, what we did eventually was we created a winter session program for the Rhode Island School of Design. And for years and years, RISD students during the winter went to Havana and studied at the art school and did charettes and traveled around

the country.

And for my 50th birthday, we had a fundraiser at a nonprofit here and brought a Cuban artist to Providence for six months to work and we spent the millennium there. We had a lot of great sort of reconnection. I haven't gone back in probably five years, when things started getting a little rocky with Gay and I and then we sort of just haven't gone back. And it's pretty tough, I'm sure, with this idiot in the White House, you know.

MS. SHEA: Right. [Inaudible.]

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, he clamped down. It's very hard to go now. People were going. I mean, you know, Europeans have always gone. The Europeans never stopped going. It's only the United States and it's not illegal to go. It's only illegal to spend U.S. currency there. And that's not even illegal. You can spend up to $200 a day. Now, I was the U.S. representative to the Havana Biennial in 2001 so I had every reason to be able to go. You know, and you can go but this government has made it much, much harder.

In fact, even in Miami, Cubans are angry because they cut off the amount of money they can send to their relative in, you know, Cuba. This guy's kind of stupid. I mean, it's 99 percent literacy. You want to do NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement]?

MS. SHEA: Yes, Michael Moore dealt with that in the *Sicko* [2007].

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, he went to — *Sicko*. Yes, I heard he went there.

MS. SHEA: I haven't seen it.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I haven't either but I guess he went there.

MS. SHEA: But I guess they're still, you know debating this back and forth but that their child survival rate is better than —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yes, infant mortality rate is much lower than the United States, 99 percent literacy, more doctors. The problem, the real problem is, yes, great, so you get out of school and then what do you do? It's better to be a cab driver than a doctor because if you're a cab driver then the tourist picks up. You have two currencies: pesos and dollars. All the tourists trade in dollars, okay.

So, when you go to your hotel, you pay in U.S. dollars. You don't even pay in Swiss francs. You pay in U.S. dollars. So what do you give the cab driver? You give the cabdriver a two-dollar tip. You pay him dollars and you give him a tip. He's just made more than a doctor makes in week. I mean, everything that the revolution succeeded in doing has been undone. They got rid of the prostitution; it's back. Well, because people can't make a living.

MS. SHEA: Right.

MR. BEN TRÉ: The only place to make a living is in tourism. So all the things that happen with tourism are back and all they really want — you know, when this woman artist came here to be in AS220, which is an alternative space, Gay took her to a drug store and Gay started apologizing because you walk into CVS and there's 40 different brands of shampoo. And the woman turned to her and said, why are apologizing? This is what we need. I mean, that's all they wanted.

Look at what happened in the Soviet Union, blue jeans. Blue jean diplomacy. All they want are jobs. Get rid of the blockade. Fidel will be gone in a week. [Laughs.] You can't tell me that there is a less democratic country out there than China and yet they're part of the free trade. They get preferential status. It's just you got a little island with 8 million people and it makes it look good — it's really a crime. It's really a shame. It's just a crime, these people in this situation, you know. Anyway.

MS. SHEA: So at one point you were very involved in politics. Do you feel that you're still involved in politics in a different way or —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, you know, I feel like that basically by being able to make these community spaces that's about it. You know, I just try to take that idea of creating a collective environment and allowing a place for people to have a certain kind of level of discourse and communication. And, you know, like when we do the piece at Post Office Square, primarily male committee, wanted something very tall. Something they could see, quote, unquote, from Cape Cod. [Shea laughs.] And, you know, I expressed to them that, you know, these people are coming out of these really tall buildings and what we really want to have happen in the North Plaza is create a seating environment, where people are not looking up but are looking at each other and create this kind of personal dynamic. Let's get rid of some of the anonymity in our culture and society.

So, I guess you could call that a kind of politic in a way and so that's what I try to do. That's what I try to do in my work, you know, and create a lot of human references. And I don't do too much on that other side. There's no left in this country anymore. I mean, when people say Bill Clinton's left, I mean, you have to gag. Left of what? Left of Ronald Reagan or left of Dick Cheney? There's no left in this country anymore. That went away.

I mean, I think it exists probably in some of the unions, some of the hospitality worker unions, things like that. Some of us old people went into that but basically there really isn't that kind of orientation. I mean, I vote. You know, I weigh in when I can. You know, I was on a jury to pick on a competition for new park in downtown Providence and that was fairly political.

MS. SHEA: I can imagine.

MR. BEN TRÉ: [Laughs.] But as far as, you know — I mean, I think about it a lot and I think, you know, creating that situation with AS220 was that kind of a situation with RISD to bring kids there that was, you know, was like overtly political as I can really do. I can switch the channel. When Bush gets on — my stepmom is 99 years old and she's in a nursing home or assisted living home up in Ithaca [NY] and I go and visit her a couple times a year. And she told me one time when I was there, she said, you know, I have the cleanest television screen in the entire place. I said, Pearl, how is that? She said, because when that Bush comes on, I spit at the screen and then I wipe it off. [They laugh.] How's that?

MS. SHEA: That seems like a — [they laugh].

MR. BEN TRÉ: She's 99. So, yes, that's about as political as I get nowadays.

MS. SHEA: Well, it's been great.

MR. BEN TRÉ: This is okay? I'm sorry, I probably took a lot more time and the game is about to start.

MS. SHEA: I really, you know, appreciate what you were saying about communication and I really appreciate you being willing to communicate about your work, about your thinking, about your projects —

MR. BEN TRÉ: Okay.

MS. SHEA: — for the future, hopefully.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Well, hopefully. You know, or somebody will listen to this maybe and go, what's that guy doing here? [Laughs.] It's not there. Well, you know, it's always interesting to kind of go back too, because it does — you know, I think about those years. Cuba and of course it's been a very — Gay and I were married for 34 years. It was very hard on us. Our breakup was very, very difficult for both of us. And to us, it somehow seemed like a failure.

We both just thought that, you know, we could do anything together and so it was a very sort of tragic and very difficult time and that's really when I said, well, maybe I need to take another look at everything. I better enjoy this while it's here. And it wasn't really because I work a lot. I mean, it wasn't about that. It was really more and Gay just really turning 50 and who am I and, you know, I need freedom. You know, it's funny. I think, actually, I would wonder — I didn't have the mid-life crisis. She did. And I really wonder if it isn't more common among women. [Laughs.]

MS. SHEA: Not understood or thought about.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, you know, like I raised the kid. I raised the kids. You know, I'm done. [Laughs.] You're gone. So we're very good friends.

MS. SHEA: Well, good.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, yes. We're still very good friends but it really was a very difficult time for both of us. And now we're, you know, now I have this lovely person to be with.

MS. SHEA: And that's wonderful.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Oh, she's fabulous.

MS. SHEA: Well, congratulations.

MR. BEN TRÉ: Yes, she's a dear. I love her so and I know she called me and left a message. But she knows we're doing this so —

MS. SHEA: Okay.

MR. BEN TRÉ: I’m sure she just was wanting to say hi.

[END OF INTERVIEW.]