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Oral history interview with Peter Shire, 2007 September 18-19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a digitally-recorded interview with Peter Shire on September 18 and 19, 2007. The interview took place at the artist's studio in Echo Park, Los Angeles, California, and was conducted by Jo Lauria 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.

Peter Shire and Jo Lauria have reviewed the transcript and have made corrections and emendations. The reader should bear in mind that he or she is reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JO LAURIA: Interview with Peter Shire for the Archives of American Art, at Peter's studio in Echo Park, [Los Angeles, California,] Tuesday, September 18, 2007. This is disc one beginning interview with Peter Shire.

Peter, for the record, would you pronounce the way you'd like your name to be heard.

PETER SHIRE: Peter Shire [Shy-er].

MS. LAURIA: And tell us when and where you were born.

MR. SHIRE: I was born in Los Angeles at Queen of Angels Hospital in 1947, December 27. It was a cold, rainy night and a train was coming down the track - no. [They laugh.] Next.

MS. LAURIA: It sounded like the beginning of a poem by Edgar Allan Poe.

MR. SHIRE: I think it was right before 12 o'clock. In fact, I can tell you. That way, if anyone wants to do my astrology. No, maybe I better not. [Lauria laughs.] They might know too much. Oh, it was right after 12 o'clock.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, then it was the very early morning - the beginning of the day.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. And my middle name is Anton, which was my grandfather's name. And my mother, being very modern, didn't want me to have a middle name at all, so she hadn't thought of one. But the Queen of Angels was a Catholic hospital, and, as such, the nuns really bugged her about having a middle name. So she fished that one off the top of her head, because I guess they had talked about it or something.

MS. LAURIA: Well, that leads us into the next question, which you already began to answer, which is, describe your childhood and your family background. It has been said of you in many interviews by many writers that you are quintessential L.A. So do you think that's a true statement?

MR. SHIRE: There's a joke in there somewhere. Well, inevitably.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you're a native.

MR. SHIRE: I'm a native. I'm fourth-generation Californian on my mother's side. And I was born in Echo Park area and have lived here all my life, and, you know, yes, my dad came here from Brooklyn in the mid-'30s and moved into Chavez Ravine in that area. You know, there's sort of the long version and the short version, right, of what growing up was, and there's sort of - you know, and there's a version we always tell, right, you know that -

MS. LAURIA: You tell a version of the version.

MR. SHIRE: Well - or that - you know, we all invent our history to some degree or represent our history, and we tend to have a take on it that has to do with whatever agenda or whatever you want to call it or whatever view of ourselves, et cetera. And -

MS. LAURIA: Well, I might tell you we have enough disc space to go through all the versions but you can -

MR. SHIRE: Let's see where we go with it and I think - yes, and then there's stories that you always hear yourself tell, right. And you go, well, should I tell 47? That one's good. But in thinking about it, that certain things are recurrent and that there's actually been some kind of - a lot of reference to that, because within this neighborhood there's an obvious pressure from the real estate boom. And what that means is that a lot of longtime residents are pressurized, principally Mexican-American residents, whose parents bought in in the '50s and '40s, late '30s, and who I grew up with, or their parents.

And then there's a whole group of - you know, people always used to say, well, what's Echo Park? You know, the man in the magazines and blah, blah, and my pat answer was it's a group of people who chose alternative values and that tended to be sort of a funny group of, sort of, WASP working class, which was a lot of what L.A. - almost entirely. And then there's all the Aimee Semple-ites, you know. Is that an obscure reference for the Smithsonian?

MS. LAURIA: Yes. I would explain what you mean by that.

MR. SHIRE: Aimee Semple McPherson was one of the early, if not original, radio evangelists, you know, a media evangelist. We call them a televangelist now. Well, she's a radio [evangelist], and it's phenomenal, this history. It's just so - you know, the tabloids have nothing on this woman. And in fact, we got to go into her house. One of my friends is a building inspector, and it now goes under the umbrella of a religious group called the Dream Center, which features rock-and-roll sermons and all that sort of hooey, and they actually have taken over the Queen of Angels Hospital, so it's a pretty big combine. And of course, with the holdings of the temple, there's blocks of property down on Echo Park off of Sunset there, and she built her main temple, and that all related to the red car.

Every time you see pictures and things on the red car - you know, they show the temple for two reasons. One is it is such a remarkable landmark and it's still there, and the other is that she built the temple there because of the red car. She built it where people could get to it. She's very, very conscious of that and they've got this huge bill - the temple itself is wacky, with this big dome, with a kind of bad rendition of the sky and clouds on the top, and it holds quite a few people. It's one of those big old - yes, down by the lake, right off the lake and Glendale Boulevard in that little transverse that was to take the red car up, is right there, and then it goes off into the valley and downtown. It was quite a hub.

And so she - [laughs] - so they got this big - then they've got this huge building. It's deceptively big. It doesn't look as big. You know, thousands and thousands of feet on this multilevel thing, and he was inspecting all of them. And it's a typical concrete construction that was so prevalent in L.A. The Shrine Auditorium and all of the high schools and the Olympic Auditorium and the [Memorial] Coliseum, you know, where you go in the basement and you see the patterns from the boards where they formed it up.

And her house is on that property, and you never quite realized it. It's, sort of, this Georgian, Colonial style mansion façade that wraps around the corner, about a hundred feet long. It looks huge and it's fantastic - only about 15 feet deep. Oh, maybe 20. You know, it's just really, really shallow and it's all façade. I mean, she was like this Hollywood person to the nth degree and even her house was a set.

MS. LAURIA: So you got to go inside of it.

MR. SHIRE: Got to go in the house and in all of these buildings, which I'd never - and actually, the dirt that my parents' house is built on, the back part where they did fill, was from an excavation of dormitories at Aimee's temple. [Laughs.] So we're all connected to Sister Aimee, and I guess it's pretty easy to look up that kind of crazy history and all of her scandals and whatnot. And -

MS. LAURIA: Were you aware of that growing up? I mean -

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. Yes, my mom had been a student of comparative religion, as well as premed, and she was fascinated by her, because she had been fascinated by Mary Baker Eddy, who really went off her nut and had this thing -malicious animal magnetism - and she wrote these books, and each one got deeper and deeper, to the point where she believed that it lurked in the mailbox and the mailman brought - [laughs]. She wouldn't go get her mail, and her followers went into the Library of Congress to destroy the final copy and actually ran out destroying it as the guards chased after them.

So Sister Aimee's right up in there and I mean it. That was - my parents were political. They were involved in the trade union movements of the '30s and the '40s and into the '50s, and they met that way. We have a picture of the first time they met. The literal moment they met because - yeah, that's unbelievable.

MS. LAURIA: Was it a political rally?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, it was a political rally. He was working for I.A.T.S.E. [International Alliance for Theatrical Stage Employees] and they were on strike, and she was a longshoreman - a member of the longshoreman's union. She wasn't a longshoreman herself, and I guess she was a white-collar portion of that, and she's doing what they call "having a table." I don't know, I guess it was one of the things that they had a jargon for. So she had a little card table and the literature was available on this table, and my dad is bringing their magazine. This was fabulous, right.

MS. LAURIA: And somebody shot a photograph at that moment?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and gave them this unbelievable - I mean, this 8x10 - he must have had a Speed Graphics or something. The 8x10 is so clear that we had it blown up to 4x5 feet for a - I got it up at my house and it's perfect.

MS. LAURIA: So your house is on this same property that we're in now, where your studio is?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, no, we're about six blocks from my house and about six blocks from my parents' house.

MS. LAURIA: So you worked and lived in this same neighborhood?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes.

MS. LAURIA: - within the same 10 blocks.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, absolutely, and I never went to school more than four miles from my house.

MS. LAURIA: So I'd say you're pretty much a locked-in resident of Echo Park?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, you know, it never was meant to turn out that way, but somehow that's what - you know, commitment isn't a word that springs to mind in my early years, but somehow that's what happened. So anyway, they have this picture, because this guy that was taking them and giving them to everybody as a, you know, a souvenir, was giving an equal copy to the FBI. He was actually - turned out to be working for the FBI.

MS. LAURIA: An informant.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, a stoolie. That's what they used to - that was the word that was used in those days, was a "stoolie." Good thing none of them were medical. So anyway, there is this picture, and they met, and it's really cool because once we blew it up, we started looking at it. And the magazine looks like it is dated January '47, and I was born in December - [they laugh] - you know. And so anyway, and my dad was here in Echo Park, and this was always, sort of, reputed to be area of political activity or political - sympathetic people or whatever you're going to call it. And it was, I mean - and the magazines ask - they always ask these two questions. One is, what kind of people buy your work? You know what they want you to say, you know, rich fools. You know - [laughs] - people with money that they don't know what the hell you are or something that appeals to the tabloid in them.

And the other is, you know, what is Echo Park about? And you know they'd love you to say, well, it's always the hot-bed of communists. Couldn't believe, you know - and pipe bombs at the corner store, you know, or whatever - Molotov cocktail. It was always bizarre because they'd see these shows, *I Led Three Lives* [1953], and then he'd go in these alleys and a door would open, and the dark alley and the ray of light would - and he'd have to do the password and there'd be these communist cell meetings. And I'd go, what is this, you know? I see these people. They meet in my parents' living room and they're all our friends. Am I going to school - and that's why I had a very unusual situation growing up, because being a - you know, I think arguably the apex of the postwar baby boom, 1947 - '48, technically, I'm in school with the people that are born in '48.

I had a whole group of my parents' friends that were my friends and that were - that there was this understanding, and we didn't talk about our political heritage because, you know, that's the term, right, "red-diaper baby." Have you ever heard that one?

MS. LAURIA: I have.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and it sounds so gory and we've got to think of something better. You know, red-diaper - he was bleeding from his parents' - in his diaper from his parents' beliefs. But, you know, you might be born a Catholic, especially in the view of the Catholic Church, but you are not born a communist or a whatever, a socialist. And so, you know, we definitely didn't talk about that stuff. You know, that was understood. And the FBI following my parents' home occasionally and coming to the door in suits was a real deal.

MS. LAURIA: These are very vivid memories for you. And although someone looking at your work today might think it's totally devoid of any political reference.

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: The symbology, the iconography, though, is very related to your location.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, absolutely.

MS. LAURIA: But I think maybe the political reference is very imbedded but not so obvious.

MR. SHIRE: You know, yes, there's - oh, God, every time I see a story. But in regard to that, I remember Matsumi Kanemitsu saying, never talk about politics, you know. Hey, and a couple of the teachers and - of course, like I say, we were encouraged by our parents not to let the cat out of the bag, or not to reveal this aspect of our existence.

MS. LAURIA: Because it was dangerous at the time.

MR. SHIRE: There was a danger and a - I mean, the stories are so amazing. We had a neighbor, and I'll say that our neighbor was this guy Bob Hayes, and Bob was a real hot-rodder. He was the real deal. And our street and principal - but a lot of Echo Park had a lot of Glendale people. So that was the alternative. There are all these kind of, you know, Glendale people. And Glendale was the closest thing to a reactionary bastion they could imagine. You know the history of Glendale at all? To make it short, up until '33, they were incorporated as their own city and black people were not allowed on the street after dark.

MS. LAURIA: I see. So they were reactionary.

MR. SHIRE: They were reactionary even before the John Birch Society headquartered there. All this lily white, is what the expression that used to be. And very, you know, with a lot of covenants and stuff. And some of them were really nice people and some of them were real jerks. But they were what they were. And Bob was a hot-rodder and I really learned a lot from him. He's really operative in a lot of the stuff that I'm doing. He'd take me in the garage and show me how he was finishing stuff and show me -

MS. LAURIA: A real hot-rodder meaning that he actually worked on hot rods?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, he'd have them up there at the house. You know, he was the guy that had four cars. After the war, nobody had cars, you know, and of course, that's the thing, you know, like that memory and looking at the pictures. There's nobody parked on the street but a couple of Bob's cars. He had cars in the garage and he had cars in his little curb area and he had a couple of - you know, he had four to five cars at all times. A Hudson Hornet convertible with a hot engine and he'd rigged up the gas flap, you know, the little panel over the gas can - you know, the gas spigot - on a spring so that it could pull a lever in the car, and his big joke was to wait until service station attendants went to go open it and he pull the thing. You know, that kind of stuff.

MS. LAURIA: Was he 10 years older than you?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, he was my dad's age. Yes, his daughters were my age. Lynn was a little older, and they were all both really goodlooking girls. And Lynn was always pretty - she was almost rebellious for that era and she was, you know, a tough - not tough. I think we use that term now in a way, but she was a vital and outspoken kind of kid, not in a political way, but she, you know, had some power. And she always reminds me that she was brought home in a police car one night, probably for throwing gum wrappers on the ground or something. You know, I think very '50s, but that was big deal, right, and Lynn was out there in that way. And she called me a couple of years ago and told me this story that was clearly really important to her, and she had to tell somebody and I was an obvious candidate.

And there was a guy named Fred Franchi, and I knew my parents' knew him because it seemed like - just like the art world. Everybody knows of everybody if they don't actually know them, and that that whole political thing was also a part of their social milieu and what my friend Michael Phillips called social sorting. He goes, how do you find people, you know? Maybe you live near them. Maybe you like to dress the same or shop at the - or whatever. And in the art world -

MS. LAURIA: And there's some connection. So their connection was political.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and, you know, your dentist tends to be - you know what I mean? I mean, it's all part of that, right? I mean, now there's the art dentist, and then there were guys that were involved in my parents' social, political milieu.

MS. LAURIA: And we're talking about the early '50s now?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, early '50s, and so now we're into the, sort of, probably late '50s. She's in high school at John Marshall. Now, this was big deal because our district is really Belmont, which was an inner-city school. And, oddly enough, it was authentically integrated. Pulled from Chinatown, an area called J-Flats, which was a Japanese area by Virgil. Down around Temple there was a black ghetto, and right over from Temple in Union was the Filipino center of L.A. at that time, and then there was miscellaneous white kids and Mexican Americans. So it was pretty interesting in that respect but supposedly not as good a school. Marshall was the white, middle-class school over in the Silver Lake/Los Feliz area.

MS. LAURIA: But your boundaries are cut so that you are supposed to go to Belmont.

MR. SHIRE: Right, exactly. And most people that were of the mind would lie. They'd tell a story. And so she was going to Marshall, and so she called and she said, you know, my best - I forget her name, other than Franchi, obviously - was this girl, and my dad pulled me aside and he was really scared. And he said, you know, the FBI came to see me at work today and they told me that you hang out with this girl and you can't be with her any more. You can't hang out with her. You can't tell her anything. You got to just stop. And so she did it and it caused quite a ruckus, from what she said, quite a furor among them and their friends. You know, what's wrong? What gives? She couldn't tell them. It was pretty bad. You know, of course, it completely -

MS. LAURIA: Destroyed the relationship.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, destroyed the relationship. It completely alienated this young woman from her and each other and she lost her friend and blah, blah. That's not actually blah, blah. That's a, you know, an extreme thing and that's the most important thing. And when Ava went to Immaculate Heart, which was really -

MS. LAURIA: Ava, your daughter?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, our daughter. Thank you. [Laughs.] Yes, Ava Shire - you know, which was really odd because I go, my daughter in Catholic school, forget it. But I justify it by saying it's very retro to wear those little uniforms. But anyway, the gal that was the head of the place, named Ruth Ann, came on at the orientation and said, well, you're probably asking all these questions like, you know, will my daughter be ready for college and so forth, but really, there's only one question that the kids ask and they're there on that first day and they're all standing there and they're looking around and they're thinking, will I have a friend? And I said, oh, things were going to be all right, you know, and so then when we were dealing with something on that level, right, and this girl had to tell this other girl to - with no explanation, that's a weird setup, right? And so, she said she, you know, she hadn't talked with her since.

MS. LAURIA: And did her father ever reveal to her what the purpose was that she couldn't speak to her? I know the FBI was -

MR. SHIRE: Well, the purpose was that he worked for Lockheed [Martin]. He worked for Lockheed with high security clearance and he, as a - he was a trip. Bob was a trip. You know, he had these Chrysler Hemis. Then he'd buy, you know, as the new models progressed - and his big deal was to race the company helicopter up to Lancaster, up to the Skunkworks, and beat them. He beat the helicopter, right, and -

MS. LAURIA: And this is Lynn's father, Bob Hayes.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, he was a metallurgist and a special metals problem solver. I mean, he said some amazing things to me over the years, not the least of which was, you can't believe how inexpensive something is when it's mass-produced.

MS. LAURIA: Which figures into your thought processes and your work later on.

MR. SHIRE: In working in sequence, I think that that doesn't come from Bob. That comes from another place. But what that does engender in me is the idea that a new car really costs about $1,000 to make.

MS. LAURIA: Because it's mass-produced.

MR. SHIRE: And we are - and so $20,000 - $30,000 - I mean, you know, one of my friend's great comments about the Mercedes Benz was it's the best $25,000 car you can buy for $50,000. But, I mean, how much more does it really cost to make a Benz than a Chrysler? You know what I mean? Most of the features are nothing. You know, they're incidental. And so, when you get to that idea, you look at a corporation that's able to do immense advertising. Where does that fit in? And you've got these dealers who claim that they're not making anything on a car and they've got the biggest, best real estate on the strip, you know, and they've got these factory recalls that go one forever that cost them thousands and thousands of dollars on most cars and they're telling you that they, you know, that they produced it.

MS. LAURIA: Capitalism.

MR. SHIRE: Well, it's an interesting equation. So anyway, she called because she had run into this young woman.

MS. LAURIA: Still lives in the area? Both of them?

MR. SHIRE: Yes. Lynn's up in Malibu area, but she ran into her somewhere and said she tried to talk to her and it just, you know, it was a disaster. And I think that that's why she needed to talk to me and kind of get some kind of - you don't want to use all kinds of words but basically be let down a little bit.

MS. LAURIA: Sympathy.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. Let off the hook a little bit, you know.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you did say that you were -

MR. SHIRE: Completion and resolution and, you know, all these psychological things. But basically she just needed to, you know, release some of the pressure.

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you think you were somewhat a victim of your times, in a way? Victim might be the wrong word. I mean, obviously you were affected by -

MR. SHIRE: Well, I think that - yes, let's bring it back to that idea of how, you know, how does it manifest itself in the work? And one thing is that most work that's overbearing, politically overbearing or politically sort of proud of itself or something - I mean, I'm giving it a pejorative semantic. Isn't that interesting? And it isn't about the - I mean, I think one of the things about what my parents were up to, and their friends, is that they had an idea and what they called it was a "better standard of living." You refer to a standard of living, and this is extremely interesting, because this is what we're really doing. This is the crux of the craft movement, as I heard it at our symposium. You know, having, living with handmade objects - reaction to - and my parents, for their interests - and many of their friends were interested in the, you know, the design, and Danish modern came in and it was quite a deal, and, you know, they had that orientation that that was part of the picture. But there was a moment in America, which we are soon quick to forget. When things were pretty bad, you know, and -

MS. LAURIA: The standard of living you're referring to.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I mean, we're just talking about basic - and although we hear that it's bad in many aspects now, you know, I don't know what we think about that.

MS. LAURIA: But there was a time, especially when the European émigrés came here, as well, during World War II and settled a lot in the Los Angeles area, and there was a design movement at the time that was predominating that said good design could lead to a better life. Meaning that living with aesthetically appealing -

MR. SHIRE: Obviously the crux of the Bauhaus.

MS. LAURIA: Yes, but there was a great belief in that as well. If you had integrity, if you made objects by hand, you know, the sort of nostalgic way of thinking about handmade objects, maybe, in a way.

MR. SHIRE: But I think there's both. I think they're almost two separate things, and one of the bizarre parts about my work is that I attempt to combine them.

MS. LAURIA: Right, and do you feel you got that influence from your parents?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, absolutely.

MS. LAURIA: - directly or maybe even subliminally. But that they instilled in you a respect for things, which would be handmade, or things which were well designed.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, absolutely. We were snobs.

MS. LAURIA: What kind of -

MR. SHIRE: Snobs?

MS. LAURIA: [Laughs] No.

MR. SHIRE: Really, really aggressive. [Laughs.] No. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: What kind of house did you live in?

MR. SHIRE: For instance, you know, a lot of the stuff that's floating around that's, you know, for S-50s - [Joseph] Eichler homes were strictly kitsch. You know, now one of the things that fascinates me - I love this - is, you know, things that we all agree on but we don't know what they mean.

MS. LAURIA: Or they mean different things to different people.

MR. SHIRE: Or, you know, or strictly we're getting it. I mean, people don't - I don't know what you mean but I know what you meant by when, you know, whatever.

MS. LAURIA: Like mid-century modern tends to be one of those icons.

MR. SHIRE: Mid-century modern and dingbat really float around. But, I mean, just simple stuff like "platonic." A platonic relationship - everybody used it in high school and even after. You know, what does it mean? Oh, I don't know. It means some - some, it's close, and some of it's way off, but by and large, you know, when you're in high school, it meant no, we're not getting it on or whatever. We're not something.

MS. LAURIA: You're not intimate.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, at least intimate or even trying to be. And then kitsch, of course, is another one.

MS. LAURIA: Is kitsch a German word?

MR. SHIRE: Essentially German. And, I mean, I could probably ask you. What do you think kitsch is?

MS. LAURIA: Well, I just refer to Clement Greenberg's idea of what kitsch is, which is highly decorative. Something that, in his view, does not meet something that is the canon of modernism's definition of being directly austere and without ornament.

MR. SHIRE: And it almost just completely circumvents any real notions of what it was about. I mean, it touches a little. I asked a kid named Charles Phoenix. I say a kid because he's probably in his mid-30s, but you know Charles?

MS. LAURIA: He wrote the book on Los Angeles [*Southern California in the '50s: Sun, Fun, Fantasy*. Charles Phoenix. Santa Monica, CA: Angel City Press, 2001].

MR. SHIRE: He specializes in kitsch and -

MS. LAURIA: And Googie architecture?

MR. SHIRE: Well, you know who designed Googie's? Your buddy, John Lautner - John did Googie's.

MS. LAURIA: Yes.

MR. SHIRE: He disowns it.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, he never takes credit for it. But he did Googie's and it's genius. And I would say that that Googie's Restaurant on Sunset Boulevard is absolutely one of the biggest influences.

MS. LAURIA: The John Lautner.

MR. SHIRE: Which turned out to be a John Lautner.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. SHIRE: Partly, probably because somehow in there you knew it was. But the whole idea of just - and that's the California deal. Taking a group of stuff and amalgamating it.

MS. LAURIA: Well, when you say kitsch, I mean -

MR. SHIRE: Okay, so kitsch.

MS. LAURIA: I would say that it was on the border, for me, a folk art, in a way, a way that somebody procreates something and makes that very much their own.

MR. SHIRE: But that isn't.

MS. LAURIA: But for me, kitsch isn't a bad thing, and there's a lot of people that use it.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, so Charles Phoenix says, oh, I know what kitsch is, you know, having this great part gambit. And he says, well, you know what that is, kitsch - everybody knows kitsch means quality. [They laugh.] Of course, we were saying that it's the antithesis. Kitsch is an insult and a -

MS. LAURIA. Yes. It's a lowbrow.

MR. SHIRE: It's a lowbrow but - okay, but these are all kind of skirting some kind of essential overlay or

definition. And I looked it up in a number of dictionaries, over the years, and the best one I found is the substitution of spurious values for real ones, i.e. -

MS. LAURIA: It's philosophical then. It has nothing to do with -

MR. SHIRE: Well, no; plastic flowers.

MS. LAURIA: Oh. Interesting. Great example.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, see Ettore [Sottsass] walked into that store, Industrial Revolution, if you remember.

MS. LAURIA: Ettore Sottsass.

MR. SHIRE: Ettore Sottsass. Remember Industrial Revolution? And someone said, what do you think? And he just said, it's all kitsch, and walked right out, you know. And in that sense, for him especially, you can see that it was a substitution of real values for spurious ones. And so, you know, that's the bottom line, what's real. That's the essence of the craft movement and probably a lot of what's involved in the art world. But when I heard that - you know, everybody was like, it was a handmade. Really made. Real wood, you know. This is made for real reasons.

MS. LAURIA: And they also used the word "authentic." Meaning, sometimes translated as original. Sometimes translated as being hands-on, that you actually went through the whole process.

MR. SHIRE: See, and that was the thing that the guys said about [Auguste] Rodin at the end of the book. He said, well, you know, what was the value of it coming directly from the master's hand? Did the little models actually have more poop than the ones done up by his atelier?

MS. LAURIA: Well, they do get stiff when things are in mold form. I mean, it's true that -

MR. SHIRE: Or something.

MS. LAURIA: Right. Well, they're different.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. Well -

MS. LAURIA: They're a generation away.

MR. SHIRE: And they're a generation away and they're often blown up by the - but Ettore Sottsass had a great gambit on that at one of the conferences. They said, well, each thing has a different thought. The first thing is one thought, and the next thing must be another thought.

MS. LAURIA: Well, I'm glad you said that because that brings me to the issue - there's always this hierarchal level where one thing is privileged above the other, and it depends on what thing you are referring to. If it's craft, something that is designed by, made by the same maker and even sometimes marketed by the same person has the highest integrity. If you're talking about design, a designer generally either works on a drafting board or makes a prototype and then gives it over to a production method. But it doesn't mean the designer is not involved in those various levels of production. He or she can be or cannot be, but there's always -

MR. SHIRE: Well, and then you got [Peter Paul] Rubens.

MS. LAURIA: Right, and you also have everything in between, limited production, or a craft person like Sam Maloof who may do part of -

MR. SHIRE: Or got things like - what was that - Rookwood [pottery].

MS. LAURIA: Right. A ceramics factory.

MR. SHIRE: Where there was a group of maestros and they had their own identity within the atelier.

MS. LAURIA: And it's a workshop environment. But the one thing that is, I think, in the way that you work that, for me is very political, is I think your work is very democratic.

MR. SHIRE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: Would you like to expound on that, on whether you agree with me or don't agree with me, but that's what I see.

MR. SHIRE: I always thought of it as populist.

MS. LAURIA: Well, maybe that's the same thing.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I mean, it sort of even suggests that it's more something - what would we say - more grassroots, more sort of folksy, more -

MS. LAURIA: Connected.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, more grassroots. And democracy as we know it is so fraught with silliness and corruptions and -

MS. LAURIA: I don't mean that kind of democracy. For me -

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - democratizing art means making it accessible to many levels of the population.

MR. SHIRE: See, I knew that meant something. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: And the way in which your studio functions is you've -

MR. SHIRE: Well, that's the whole deal. The teapot, you know, my orientation, partly by my father, is to really address art, often fine art, in a way - or what we call fine art, which are and, again, a very confused term, because fine art really refers to sort of almost a Victorian, you know, Napoleonic Empire, et cetera, kind of version of art. You know, conveying the finer sentiments and that of high society.

MS. LAURIA: Which at that time did not include the idea of designed products, anyway. I mean -

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - fine art mostly referred to painting, sculpture, drawing.

MR. SHIRE: It did, because it was addressing these sort of etiquette notions, social interactions, you know, voyages to Scythia [referring to the area of Scythia in Eurasia in Classical Antiquity whose nomadic tribes relied on symbiotic relationships with those around them for survival] and, you know, so forth. And also, I mean, it's hard to articulate quickly but it - you know, there's a great joke that the Impressionists taught the middle class how to live well. But before that, the middle class were essentially - there wasn't much of one and everybody was pretty well excluded, so the audience - the discussion outside of the church and art was about the morals and ethics and, should we say, social values - probably a better word, of the nobility, which whatever that - you know. So that was -

MS. LAURIA: They were the ones who commissioned art.

MR. SHIRE: - protracting. Yes, and they were the language, you know, and there's a whole discussion about the languages of so-called fine art or mainstream art, even today, that is exclusive and designed for marketing.

MS. LAURIA: Would you say your work is mainstream? You were on a thought about what your father had taught you.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. So there was a moment in Chouinard [Art Institute, Los Angeles, CA], in art school, at Chouinard, where, as ceramists - you know, my vision was really to be a potter.

MS. LAURIA: And your -

MR. SHIRE: My fantasy, you know. Yes, my fantasy. My high school identity. This is, again, the part of the story that gets told a certain way and what that is, is what my friend and I say, is I didn't graduate high school; I escaped, you know. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: And that says you got your B.F.A., bachelor's of fine arts, in 1970 at Chouinard Art Institute.

MR. SHIRE: Yes and probably, technically, '69, sort of late '69.

MS. LAURIA: And that's when Chouinard was located across the street from Otis [College of Art and Design] around the MacArthur Park.

MR. SHIRE: Technically, it was across the street from Westlake Park or MacArthur Park. See, I wanted to get that retro because we always thought, you know, what a dick. You know, why would you want to have anything named after [General Douglas] MacArthur, you know? Again, that's probably our - and remember, in 1955 you couldn't get anything else on the tube. They took *Beany and Cecil* [1962] off or whatever it was, and every channel had the dedication of MacArthur Park, you know, to have a little sort of semicircular -

MS. LAURIA: Auditorium stage.

MR. SHIRE: No, it had a little bas-relief stage set with this lake with, I guess, with him walking across the Philippines or something, you know, stepping on the Philippines and a sculpture of this guy, you know, a life-size replication. And of course, in our telegraphing within a family, whatever values, you know, MacArthur was a goof. He was not a good guy. I think - oddly enough, I think Ike [President Dwight D. Eisenhower] was a good guy.

MS. LAURIA: Eisenhower.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. He was an honest person and he wasn't fooled by the manipulations of the CIA and the industrial-military complex because he was -

MS. LAURIA: He was the first to actually name it such, wasn't he - name the industrial-military complex?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, one of his guys. Yes, was. Exactly right. But we, you know, of course, he ran against [Adlai] Stevenson, who was the darling of everybody. And I forget what the problems were, because he, you know, he burped at the wrong time or something and really - maybe Ike was just so popular as a war hero, but Stevenson - and of course, there's a lot to say about - would you really want to know anyone who wanted to be president anyway? [They laugh.] What kind of person does it take, you know?

MS. LAURIA: But you wanted to be an artist. Did you know you wanted to be an artist in high school or from before then?

MR. SHIRE: Yes. Well, there was something where we said, you know, I'd had a sense of something, which was that there's certain things you don't want to talk about if you want to try to make them happen, you know, that there's a difference between the two, and I didn't. And I think that that - this is what I think, because at the time, who the fuck knows, you know? You're swimming around in the soup, you know, trying to keep from sinking. And I was terrible in school, that part, whatever you want to say, and it was very confusing to the elementary school because I tested well and they'd always have me in the office giving me these weird tests, which I could never figure out why because I just didn't - and I was - my mom actually diagnosed me as being dyslexic from an article in the *New Yorker* magazine when I was in the late fourth or fifth grade. And she took me off to a reading guy and he taught me to read phonetically. "See and Say" didn't cut it and I just couldn't do it. Plus, I hated it. I thought they were lamebrains, you know.

MS. LAURIA: Of academics per se? I mean, the kind of system you did not -

MR. SHIRE: I don't know if you'd really call it academics. You'd call it the L.A. City School System. [Lauria laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Oh, well, the system of going through the school. It probably did not interest you much.

MR. SHIRE: No, and I'll tell you a story that I never have told on any of these kind of things and that is when we were in the fifth grade - and this is the deal, I think even in kindergarten and first - and I know definitely in first grade, most of the kids had really divided up into identities even then. And there were the art kids, which being how we were, were quite a few, and there were the science kids and the math kids. I don't think it went off into English or anything. But I remember I was clearly one of the art kids, and that went on. And then there's all sorts of little conflicts along the way, but in the fifth grade, we were pulled out and Lucien [Drazkiewicz] and I'm not sure who else, but it was me and Lucien and someone and then Robin, who was Bob Hayes' daughter and a very, very high degree of hand skill, real skilled person, and a couple of the other girls.

Now, we were each to make these scrolls for either side of the little entry as you walked into the main entrance of the elementary school there. Probably about eight or 12 feet long - 10 feet long. Yes, probably a good 10 feet. They were pretty high ceilings.

MS. LAURIA: So you were asked to draw on them?

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Design a graphic for them?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and then you were told to do this sort of repetitive -

MS. LAURIA: Border.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, exactly. A border-type pattern for - you know, the girls on one side and the boys on the other. And I looked at it and I - [laughs] - got these guys - I said, I mean, look at the shape. It doesn't have anything to do with this. Let's, you know - I'm sure I didn't use these terms, but the idea was I said, let's respond to the

shape. And I got them to do this deep-sea scene where there's boat on the top and the diver's line all the way to the bottom and the fishes and this diver at the bottom. And it probably was pretty fucking cool because, you know, it was funky.

MS. LAURIA: Well, did your parents have Japanese prints in their house, or were you aware of the perspective that the Asians -

MR. SHIRE: I have no idea.

MS. LAURIA: Because that's very much the way that Asian scroll paintings are done.

MR. SHIRE: Well, I'll tell you, I'm still dealing with that format, partly because of it. So what these so-and-sos did was they didn't ever say to us - they never said, hey, you know, you went outside the box here and we need this to be a pattern. They just didn't tell us shit and got the girls to do the other side because they did bunny rabbits with cotton puffs, you know, in a repetitive pattern going down, you know, pink and blue. And I came in, you know, a couple of days later, there's the two sides. You know, all right. I wasn't the type to go and storm, you know, say, what the hell gives? Where's my painting? You don't understand vision. [Lauria laughs.] Did that get your ear? I bet that got that. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, that would be fifth grade. That would be actually a very mature reaction to have had in fifth grade, if you did in fifth grade.

MR. SHIRE: At any time.

MS. LAURIA: Right, to think that, you knew -

MR. SHIRE: Well, they always did that kind of stuff.

MS. LAURIA: Right, that you wanted the recognition, and if you were somehow outside of the margins, that you're not going to get the mainstream recognition, which is interesting, because now your work would be considered by a lot of art critics and art writers to be extremely mainstream. But it's always been outside the margins. So has the paper shifted or has the border, you know, gone more towards the middle? I mean, is it that we're more accepting of -

MR. SHIRE: Well, the way I view it occasionally or what I'm going to try and hook up to that is that, as a dyslexic person, as a left-handed person, as a person who didn't function within the format, there was a point where I said, I am worth something. You know, I said, to hell with youse. And I said youse in the plural, you know, Brooklyn style. You know, the hell with youse guys. And I said - you know, and that's the classic. Now the media calls it reinventing yourself, so I had to invent myself. It's like the same thing, like, you know, finding a way that I could make printing that didn't look like somebody had melted it with, you know, with my left hand. I don't write with the traditional hook. I've got that different idea about that. Although, when I tried to do handwriting, it's still pretty gnarly. And that's the deal. You know, if you can make yourself worth something, figure out a way.

MS. LAURIA: Well, it's also finding your identity. I mean, you definitely established your identity, even early on, as an art person.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and also - yes, there's so many things to say about that, because in coming out of school, we saw a lot of my classmates really latching onto an identity, an image to market, to get it on, to get on with it. And myself, feeling that there was a very deep need not to do that and to try and develop in a different way and maybe a more traditional idea or older style idea. But also, again, like you say, there's a certain part of the identity. They're the hand that's inescapable; that's always there and was, you know, always there. And I think this is - one of the keys things is sort of saying, well, I don't know. It wasn't just a matter of keeping at it, although that's key. You know, there was a thing on NPR [National Public Radio] where they're talking about sports, child sports.

MS. LAURIA: NPR, radio program.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and there will be other references to that. You know, my friend accuses me of not having knowledge outside of NPR, which is -

MS. LAURIA: National Public Radio.

MR. SHIRE: He's probably right. But there was a thing on sports and the pressures on kids and the idea that, well, you just have to practice harder. And it doesn't work that way. Certain kids are going to be exceptional and very few others, and there's a point where that just breaks apart. And there's a lot of pressure on the kids, a very false pressure. And so, you know, we're curious about the emphasis on art, and this is one of my pets and, you know, one of my darlings, and it relates a lot to everything we've talked about because, obviously, that's

what we do. At one point, we were a society, a culture, an anthropology of people that made things.

MS. LAURIA: By hand.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. Well, whatever by hand is, you know.

MS. LAURIA: And make things out of necessity.

MR. SHIRE: With a chisel, with another piece of rock, whatever, but we made them. You know, you made arrowheads. You milked cows. You needed shoes. What you needed - and there was an interesting bit on Ettore, again, in one of the books, that Italy, before the war, was a very regional area without industry. You know, and of course, the joke that goes along with that, unless you call Fiat an industry, you know. [Lauria laughs.] You know, Fix It Again, Tony. [They laugh.] That's what it is. [They laugh.] But, you know, it's sort of this - and it still is, in a way, but - and there was -

MS. LAURIA: Pre-industrialized societies as opposed to industrialized societies.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. Anything worth making. Anything worth doing. In other words, anything that people need on a broader level is worth doing industrially.

MS. LAURIA: Well, then that would exclude or include art, depending on how you define art.

MR. SHIRE: Well, see this is the deal and this is what's up. You know, here's a group of human beings that have this characteristic, and by what we accept these days, a lot of that is DNA or some such and inculcated deep memory. And we have this urge and need and [Karl] Jung said, you know, making things is being in contact with God and working with your hands, and so forth. And so, what's left, you know? [Laughs.] And most of the people that call themselves artists now, well, they're making things.

MS. LAURIA: You said that you shied - well, maybe - that you don't use the word commitment much, but you had to be committed to the fact that you wanted to be an artist in order to go to Chouinard?

MR. SHIRE: Well, that's what I'm saying, is it isn't a word that - you know, it's sort of something that you'd hear from politicians and go, oh, yeah, yeah, you know. And one of the favorite jokes, when we used to go to these political rallies and it was always applied in different situations, was the president - whoever it is, goes out on the lawn and there's a little kid out in front of the White House selling puppies. And he looks at them and approaches him, you know, a moment of - you know, a photo op. They didn't use that word then. Approaches and says, you know, how much are the puppies? And the kid says, a dollar. He says, oh. He sees them the next week and he's still got a few and he says, I was thinking of getting one those puppies. And the kid says, but they're five dollars this week. And the president or whoever is at stake here, says, how come they're more? And he says, well, last week they didn't have their eyes open. [They laugh.] You could probably figure out a way to apply that. But anyway, yes, commitment is something that was real and that wasn't about talking.

MS. LAURIA: Right, but you don't have to use that word. It's very loaded. But let's just say you were on a path and you might have said to yourself, silently, I'm at, you know, this point on the line, and I want to get to that point. You know, from A to B, and what's the best way for me to do that? And at some point you must have said, well, even if you didn't acknowledge that you want to be a career artist - there's a difference I think -

MR. SHIRE: No, I'm with you.

MS. LAURIA: - that in order to do that, you needed to go to some sort of place, be it a school, be it an apprenticeship, where you would learn skills.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, sure.

MS. LAURIA: And you said that you thought you were going to be an artist.

MR. SHIRE: Well, there's a number of factors that were operative in that. The first one, of course, is that, like art schools today, Chouinard had a Saturday program for elementary school kids to sort of get them next to it, you know, to get them to smell the paint. Get them to -

MS. LAURIA: And many schools still have that.

MR. SHIRE: The first time's free, kind of deal, you know. Yes, exactly. It's a time-honored way of getting people on the boat. And there was actually something that happened when I was in art school and I went and worked at the county of L.A. during the summer as a clerk in the [L.A. County] Hall of Records [Norwalk]. And one of the guys said to me, oh, look at the girl over there. Oh, man, you know, had started to describe some bit of her locomotion, and he said - he caught himself short and said, I'm going to go over there and talk to her. If I keep

talking about her, I'll let the steam out of the pot.

MS. LAURIA: Right. The energy.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, you know.

MS. LAURIA: That energy dissipates.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. So I think that codified that idea at that point, and I always say - and, of course, at that time, more than now, people said, that's fine, but what are you going to do to make a living?

MS. LAURIA: And they still say that.

MR. SHIRE: And they still say that. Less so, though. And, of course, the, you know, the revenge is that all my little nephews on Donna's side - so these kids are Japanese on top of it - are all going to art school, and all of a sudden the aunties and uncles are looking at me like, you know, the goose that laid the golden egg or something, or you know - not the goose that laid the golden - but you know what I'm saying. They're kind of looking at me a lot differently.

MS. LAURIA: That it can be a viable and profitable career.

MR. SHIRE: And also, you know, I'm not just reprobate. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: On that note, let's end this disc before it runs out.

[END MD 01 TR 02.]

MS. LAURIA: Disc two, interview with Peter Shire for the Archives of American Art, at Peter's studio in Echo Park, Tuesday, September 18, 2007.

Peter, when we left off, you were just going to speak about going to Chouinard. Could you tell us about your experience at Chouinard, what is indelible about -

MR. SHIRE: There's something else I wanted to say on the other one but -

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. SHIRE: - I forgot what that was.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you were talking when you left -

MR. SHIRE: Oh, you know, about you can't make a living at that but - and I didn't know - I think that was one of the ideas of being a potter as opposed to whatever else.

MS. LAURIA: That you could make functional pottery and that it had a marketplace. Someone could sell it.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, it was still a trade. You know, it was clearly a trade vision of an arty, bohemian milieu and I use the word "arty," too, on tape, good. And one of the big memories is we were madly in love with Citröen 2CVs, and they were available in L.A. at that time, and the little kiosk that was selling them had these fabulous brochures. And, of course, that further nailed it, because they were very graphic and they were really, really good, and one of them was all these different people, you know, I'm a housewife, I'm a this, I'm a that, and they could all use this car, and one of them was a potter. He's standing there by his - you know, clearly some part of France - this old kiln, and he's standing in front of it and saying, I can take my pottery to the local market, or whatever the devil he's saying. And so that was a great group of images. Everything was connecting in that respect. And I was very - I had a fabulous moment, and, you know, here I am in high school, and I was at this inner-city school, which I was just nuts for when I went. You know, we all wore these clothes that were out of this world. You know, continental clothes. In fact, I've been doing these drawings about them and - [laughs].

MS. LAURIA: What do you mean by "continental clothes"?

MR. SHIRE: Well, continental was a style and it might have been, you know, almost described as what the Rat Pack would wear. You know, continental pants were tapered and pegged and sometimes highish waist but - no, not necessarily a high waist; they had no belt and there was a little flap that was a continental flap/pockets -

MS. LAURIA: I remember that.

MR. SHIRE: - and so forth and shoes. And, of course, there were all these black kids in school and they were just wacky, and the Oriental kids were into it, and everybody had their own little take on it. You know, and the

Beatles, they hadn't come yet but people were already wearing - you know, everybody goes for the Pierre Cardin-designed, the suits for them. Crappola, the - [inaudible] - shirt shops had those suits, you know, at what we called the narrow collar and then they took the little top off of that and was just - and you were these - they'd have velvet collars and black velvet on sort of sharkskin gray and the tie and the pearl tie tack, and the tie was about a half an inch wide.

MS. LAURIA: What we would refer today as English mod -

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: - of the '60s.

MR. SHIRE: Right, or yes, the late '60s. And even more so because then the suit started - you know, they came with a belt. You know, you had to keep upping the ante and it was happening very fast. And there was this kid, Hank Jacobs - Henry Jacobs, he played organ and he was amazing. He even had a gold tooth. And he would stand out on the corner on Belmont Avenue and Beverly to have everybody admire him like a hood ornament. And he had this suit, and he not only had a belt on the back, he had three belts to the back and - [laughs] - three on each side. Of course, my mother dropping me off took one look at him and says, don't ever let me see you come home in anything like that. [Lauria laughs.] I couldn't wait. I went up to Hank and I said, where did you get that suit? And he said, my mother made it for me. He actually had a couple of records that are really good.

But anyways, so this was going on and we were listening to Motown. Motown was just cranking and rhythm and blues and all of that. And I just loved - I mean, that was really where my heart was. Musically, even then, was a big part of it and I was not a Beach Boys guy or a whatever, if they were even on the scene yet. But you, you know, I love rhythm and blues. I like the Heartbeats and the Five Satins and whoever else.

MS. LAURIA: The Platters.

MR. SHIRE: Platters were copper pop.

MS. LAURIA: Were they?

MR. SHIRE: Were pop by comparison. Yes, they're really good and I'm totally into them now, but at that point, they were sort of pop. And we're talking about, you know, kind of, very -

MS. LAURIA: Southern.

MR. SHIRE: No, very - actually, it was actually very New York.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. SHIRE: But there were a couple of West Coast groups: the Hollywood Flames, and Jesse Belvin was out there. That's another story, is to name off that kind of stuff.

MS. LAURIA: But these are part of your experiences, seeing the hot rods that -

MR. SHIRE: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: - Mr. Hayes was showing you.

MR. SHIRE: Now, this is the thing and this is the bottom line.

MS. LAURIA: I'm just trying to connect the dots.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and the dot is - your word - authentic. And you listen to these guys and you're going, that is not commercial, you know. And it's all the guys that, you know, Pat Boone was scoping off of and all of those things. Where they take the black guys and cover them and it just didn't have the ring of truth.

MS. LAURIA: Raw.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, or raw. And some of it was really raw, and it's just unbelievable, and we loved that and that was the group. And what's funny is, I can even go up the street when I ride my bike or take a walk home, even today, I can hear those same records coming out of people's houses here, you know. Maybe not for long with the real estate but, you know, anyway. There's something that's going on and I remember that, you know, we would say, what's happening? You know, what's happening? And you'd go down the hall and these guys - you know, everybody was cool. And cool always seemed like kind of - besides being something that I essentially didn't have, it always seemed kind of limited.

MS. LAURIA: Or manufactured? Maybe not then.

MR. SHIRE: No, because we're talking about a different kind of cool. We're talking a little more ghetto and a little more street. But, I mean, street is a weird word because I don't think we thought that way. You know, they'd say, what's happening, and they'd say, all right. All right, you know, and they'd say, all right. What's all right? Man, you're going to - you know, you're going to be lucky if you work for the gas company digging trenches. What are we doing here? You know - and I'm going - and I'm clearly not going to be working for IBM, you know - [they laugh] - or anything. You know, where are we going with it? I mean, we're not going to be listening to "My Girl" when we're 40 or - I mean, here we are. You'll turn on KRLA or whatever it is, and they play "My Girl" twice a day.

MS. LAURIA: So you were thinking.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, that was a very cognitive thought, and I said - and so I was in this class. I went and took pottery, and I knew what pottery was, you know, weed pots and all that stuff, and I made some stuff. And there was this kid, David Kurakani, and David was an odd guy because he was Hawaiian-Japanese, so he was little, kind of louder, and he wasn't - he was cool but he wasn't out of the same mold as the, you know, the regimented mold as the other, you know. And they used to say, cool [pronounces it "coo"]. He's cool. He's a cool man. I mean, he - and he had these little glasses like David Ruffin wore, but he parted his hair.

He didn't have a pompadour, and he knew how to pot. He knew how to throw because he lived next to guy named Ken Starbird, and Ken would take him over to Cal State [California State University, Los Angeles]. So he came into this class knowing how to throw, but he didn't really care about it. And I remember he was hustler, and he would get these teachers, and his locker was near mine. I see him and he'd go, hey, Mr. Christian, Mr. Christian man, come over here, man. Come and buy one of these pots, and he was trying to sell his little pots to these guys, which was completely off-kilter to me. But it was amazing and I did pretty well. I could obviously walk right into slab building. We'd had a lot of classes as kids and all that.

And I started to get the hang of throwing, which, of course, is the smell of it, the romance, the - you know, it's the - in trying to say some something, it's sort of the arch-illusion of pottery and maybe a holy grail of sorts. But it's a trade. It's a skill that one must really endeavor. And so this guy that was the teacher of this class was a guy named Anthony Scaccia, and Scaccia was - there was something going on with him. He bordered on being psychic. He had every kid nailed. He'd tell these kids, what were you doing at Hazard Park last weekend? And they'd go, you don't know I was there, Scaccia. And he'd say, yes, and you're selling reds, aren't you? And he'd say -

MS. LAURIA: Reds being barbiturates.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, reds being a popular drug of the moment. And they'd say, you don't know that. I mean, it went on and on. I mean, I could just tell you Scaccia stories for months.

MS. LAURIA: And this was at the inner-city schools?

MR. SHIRE: Yes. He had been - I don't know where he came out of but he knew Ralph [Bacerra] and he knew Ken Price and he knew everybody.

MS. LAURIA: And he knew Ralph Bacerra?

MR. SHIRE: Yes. He used to - probably shouldn't put this on tape, but he'd say, oh, yes - Otto Heino always dragged him to all the parties, you know, but he always opted for teaching school. He was somehow - I don't know what was going on with him sexually, if he was celibate, he had been married or what, but I think he was dying. I think he knew he was somehow - I mean, if he wasn't just depressed. He didn't like teaching high school, but he had gone for security. And he had a student before me named Gonzalo Duran, who - I don't know, do you know of Gonzalo at all? Gonzalo went to Chouinard also, and he and Juanita were an item at that time. And Gonzalo - you digged Gonzalo's stuff, man.

Gonzalo was right out of the early '60s. Cats with big eyelashes, with polka dots on the end. The cat could draw. You know, he looked like Elvis in those days. And [Don] Benigno [Barron] - I mean, this is all this weird stuff. Benigno works for me now, who is 80-plus, et cetera - teamed up. He was brought here by the people - a gal named Amparan, whose husband [Carlos Amparan] owned Nova Color [Culver City, CA]. And Nova Color was doing ceramics pigments, and she was a ceramist and she had Gonzalo and Benigno working for her. So Benigno came here when he was about 40 from Mexico as an import to, you know, to be a hired gun, you know; a professional potter is what he always was.

And Gonzalo was in there, and Gonzalo - well, you can edit this if we have to, but Gonzalo was sleeping with Amparan, with this gal, and broke the whole thing up, and Benigno's still pissed off at him because he said he

wasted it all, you know, which he probably did. But, you know, he was a - this is one of the things that I always noticed is that the kids that really came out of the ghetto didn't have the equipment, didn't have the furniture, so to speak, to put the whole thing together.

MS. LAURIA: The bits and pieces.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, to make a full construct. There was a kid named Jesus Cortez who was very similar. Could draw hands, heads, feet, but he couldn't do a whole body, and Woelfer and everybody were forcing him to do whole bodies. But it never connected. Another one, Anthony Richmond, you know, these kids came through and they were more talented than any of the other kids, but they just didn't have the middle-class - upper-middle-class long view.

MS. LAURIA: And you mean Emerson Woelfer?

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Was he teaching at the inner-city schools?

MR. SHIRE: No, he was at Chouinard. I've moved into Chouinard for a minute there.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, sorry. So we're now at Chouinard.

MR. SHIRE: Sorry, and that's my fault. But no, so Scaccia and I took a look - I took a look at that, and I took the class again. I took it in the beginning of the eleventh grade. Scaccia and I - you know, so I went in and Franklin, who is sitting there - I knew there was a reason he came - was always a darling of - because he was a natural student. He hated it. He hated himself, because he said, I always know what to say and I don't know whether I believe it or not. I just know what to do, you know.

And so, there we are, and I had Scaccia's number by now. And what he would do is he would keep everybody from working for three, four, five weeks if he could because he didn't want to clean up after them. And so I knew this was going to happen, so I went in and I said - with a little bit of the David Kurakani approach, said, Scaccia - and he'd go - and there were these rows of cabinets, wooden cabinets, and he would go and look in his cabinet as though he didn't hear me. And I'd go up and say, Scaccia, let me start working.

And he'd look out of his cabinet and he'd say, what did you say your name was again? [They laugh.] Right? This is the dance. This was a definite - you know, and I was there for it. And I said, Peter, man. It's Peter. Let me start working, and he said, well, let's talk tomorrow. So this went on for about a week, and Franklin was going out of his mind. He said, how can you let him talk to you that way? And I said, no, this is what we've got to do. And so, I was working within a week.

MS. LAURIA: What did he talk to the students about if you weren't actually hands-on working with clay?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, he'd have them do paper cutouts of things they might make.

MS. LAURIA: So it was not clay. He didn't want to clean up the mess.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. And he was very funny because he - you know, they had these sort of ABS [Acrylonitrile Butadiene Styrene] stands with all the little holes and all the little scissors, right? And they'd come back, there would always be one or two missing, and he'd say, okay, who's got the scissors? And nobody would say anything, and then he'd just say, so-and-so bring the scissors up, you know. [They laugh.] It was really fabulous. And so I was busy working, and we had these kick wheels that were a box with a little panel on the side that you rested your hip against and then kicked with the other foot. And so, you know, you rested your elbows on the thing. So I'd be there throwing on one side of the room, Scaccia at his desk, and then the rest of the class. So this was my show, you know, and watching Scaccia do his thing.

And I remember one of the great ones was he came in with this black girl and he was literally towing her by the ear and she was saying, Scaccia, you can't go in the girl's bathroom. And he said, I can if you're smoking, and she said, you didn't know I was smoking. And he said, I caught you, didn't I? [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: Is Scaccia still -

MR. SHIRE: No.

MS. LAURIA: Did he die?

MR. SHIRE: He died shortly after that. It's one of my deep, deep missing things. And there was a nurse named Cynthia Folette, and Cynthia was a beautiful, high-yellow - you know, she was a black woman with a very light,

high-yellow tint, and she was the school nurse. And she had a Porsche. So she'd park in the alley between the building and the shop buildings, and we'd walk by this darn thing. She had, you know, one of the last model Porsches. Yellow with green interior, and I was just - and of course, we were mad for Porsches because the seats went all the way down, and we just could imagine we could [get] girls in it. But besides that, it was just - you know, I was into it.

MS. LAURIA: A thing of beauty.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. This was the top. And Bob Hayes had a Porsche. He bought a '56 Porsche, and he said, you know, it's the only thing that could beat the Alphas, you know. He went on and on. And so, I was, you know, already very aware of it. We were all aware of that European stuff in my clique, which included Pat Ray and Ralph Schuckett. And which is a story in itself because Pat - he and I immediately went for each other in the seventh grade and -

MS. LAURIA: Went for each other artistically, you mean?

MR. SHIRE: Yes. No, it was people. Just like, I know who you are. There you are.

MS. LAURIA: To hang with?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, for no, you know, no reason that was laid out on the table or articulated. And it turned out that we had, you know, radically similar aesthetics, and his father had bought him a printing press. Now, my dad had done a huge amount of work for a guy named Saul Marks in the '30s, and Saul is and was one of the premier book printers in the world. And so, we'd print on this little press, and we'd do kissing permits and we'd do people's business cards and -

MS. LAURIA: What is a kissing permit?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, it's something that said - in fact, Pat's got a standing offer. I probably could bargain for just about anything, like a full book, if I could actually find one. He's a printer today and he inherited - through buying and through experience - Saul's press and monotypes and the whole deal. But anyway, it was something that said something to the effect of, if you smile that you'd get a kiss, and if you don't smile, you get a kiss or, you know, one of those kind of businesses. And kids would buy them for a dime, and then you could buy this little piece of cake for a dime or burger for 15 cents, and that's how we went through junior high school, you know, making enough to make nutrition money. And "nutrition" being a term for that brief period before lunch that, you know, morning break. Not knowing what we were being served. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: Yes, I had nutrition, too, in what we used to call junior high, which is now middle school.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, that's the one. And so - where are we going with - oh, yes. The Euro stuff - and so Cynthia turned out to have been a potter, also.

MS. LAURIA: Cynthia?

MR. SHIRE: Folette, the school nurse.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. The school nurse with the Porsche.

MR. SHIRE: Right, who incidentally, probably let me out of school half a dozen times just on her good graces. You know, she says, oh, you have a cold, get out of here, you know. And I ran into her probably seven or eight years ago and I - yes, I run into her probably every seven or eight years, so I'm due. And I asked her, did Scaccia know he was dying? And she said, yes.

MS. LAURIA: Did he die of cancer or -

MR. SHIRE: I think - so that's when I said, what was it? And she said, oh, I'll tell you sometime. So that's the way that went. But I think it was some kind of liver something-or-other. It might have been a cancer. You never know. I don't know. All I know is I only saw him a few times after I got out of school because I was off and running, and I owe him. So, the upshot of this story is fucking amazing. My brother and his friend Frankie -

MS. LAURIA: Your brother Billy?

MR. SHIRE: My brother Billy went to Belmont, and there was an arts teacher that was partially there when I was but really took over from Scaccia - although, I don't think they offered ceramics again - named Shawqua [sp], and Shawqua was a motorcyclist, as was I, and he would buy - we would steal motorcycles and he would buy them from us. And so, at one point, we're delivering this motorcycle and he looks at me and he says, what were you and Scaccia doing? And I thought - [laughs] - well, what do you mean? And he said, well, you know, we

finally cleaned out his room - his lockers, and there were hundreds and hundreds of pots of yours.

MS. LAURIA: Wow.

MR. SHIRE: You know, well, see, I didn't tell you the rest of the story.

MS. LAURIA: Right. So you were throwing in the corner for about a whole year.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, well, that was the first year. Then in the twelfth grade - and I was completely disengaged from the student body at that point. They thought I was gay, and I thought they were morons, you know. And so he said, you know, if you take music appreciation and gym after nutrition and before lunch, and take my class before nutrition and after lunch, I can summons you out of those other two classes and you can work straight through.

MS. LAURIA: That's amazing.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, see, so that's my father's Brooklyn. He's sneaking in there. And so I worked five hours a day in my senior year in ceramics, and then I'd go back every night to night school, which Scaccia taught, and work for another three, and then I'd go to Chouinard on Saturdays.

MS. LAURIA: And Chouinard had a program for high school students?

MR. SHIRE: Right, with John Karrasch, who I loved. He was a great, great guy. And I loved him more because -so here's, you know, my psychology. When we went, it was $40, but they were giving scholarships, which you had to compete for. And I thought, you know, these kids are all going to be great. You know, to the Saturday class.

MS. LAURIA: At Chouinard.

MR. SHIRE: At Chouinard, and, you know, my mom gave me $40 and I enrolled. In fact, I remember going in with my mother, which was a little awkward. I don't know if embarrassing is quite the word, but I felt, you know, awkward, and Juanita was there. Juanita Jimenez, with her round Philip Johnson glasses and, you know, cute Chicana. And she kind of smiled at me like, yes, there's your mother, you know. [Laughs.] But not bad, you know, nicely.

MS. LAURIA: Was Juanita another student?

MR. SHIRE: Juanita was - yes, Juanita was, you know, probably two years ahead of me at that point. You know, she was in the lab. And the big deal in the Chouinard lab - oh, we'll get to that, about the setup there. But anyway, so the second semester I didn't bring my $40 and I kind of kept coming and no one said anything, and after a couple of weeks, I said to John, I said, you know, I'll bring the $40. And he said, oh, you don't have to. I enrolled you.

MS. LAURIA: Just gave you the scholarship.

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: That's great.

MR. SHIRE: And so, that was what I was doing in my last year of high school.

MS. LAURIA: So you were extremely prolific.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, so Scaccia - so see, this is the magnificent, very heartbreaking thing is that he kept every stitch of that work.

MS. LAURIA: In the cupboards.

MR. SHIRE: I don't have any of that, and I didn't have the presence of mind to say to Shawqua, well, fork it over, bud. You know, at least give me one. And Scaccia was a devotee of Marguerite Wildenhain, so he did a lot of cutting things apart, you know, and all of that.

MS. LAURIA: To show the students how you throw properly.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and make sure the walls were right, you know. And which, obviously, I got over also, because we - you know, footed bowls. You know, it's very of that kind of Gertrud Natzler, '50s, European, graceful footed bowls and whatnot. And, you know, which is really weird, right. It's sort of like a baby gestating, you know. First you're a fish and then you're a monkey, you know. [They laugh.] But anyway, yes, so Scaccia kept all of that,

and there is obviously this immense connection, and I'm not sure - this is something I've never articulated, so I don't have a pat word for it, but sort of a continuum or a hope or something like that.

MS. LAURIA: Well, did it give you a sense of accomplishment or recognition?

MR. SHIRE: That he kept all that stuff?

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

MR. SHIRE: Well, obviously at the time, I just was sort of - I didn't register it all together.

MS. LAURIA: It must have been somewhat validating. That it was worth keeping, or you didn't think that way? Or did you just think it was weird?

MR. SHIRE: I thought, we've got this stolen motorcycle and we're unloading it, let's get on with, probably or even - if I thought more of it, I would have said, God, could I see them or whatever, you know. I think it was more I was moving too fast at that point. Moving, you know, moving forward too fast to deal with things that way.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you weren't reflective because you were a teenager. I mean, that's not a -

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and even strategic.

MS. LAURIA: But you knew you wanted to continue doing pottery, because now you're at Chouinard on the weekends. You're throwing all the time during school.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, I was very -

MS. LAURIA: Committed.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I was very hopeful, and I think one of the key things continuing, and we talked about this a lot, is that there was a group of guys that were a little older than us that, you know, most of whom had been at Chouinard, who'd seen -

MS. LAURIA: Such as Billy Al Bengston.

MR. SHIRE: Obviously Billy, and Joe Goode, whose ex-wife came back to school as a potter. Ed Ruscha, Larry Bell, Ron Cooper.

MS. LAURIA: Robert Irwin, was he here?

MR. SHIRE: No. Robert Irwin actually came and lectured, but he didn't register that way because he was older than us. And Ed Moses, too, didn't register that way. In other words, we could see them. We were close enough to see their back and the others. You know what I mean? I don't know if they -

MS. LAURIA: Well, did you have much connection with Otis at that time?

MR. SHIRE: Otis was déclassé.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. SHIRE: Otis was a county school and it smelled of it. You know, it had class A breaker bars on the doors, which, as my dad was also a carpenter, so he - you know what I mean? It was institutional. It clearly - you know, linoleum floors. There was connection, but I don't think I knew anyone from there or had any interaction other than a girlfriend of mine went and modeled over there.

MS. LAURIA: For, like, the life drawing classes?

MR. SHIRE: For Charles White. And it was very funny because she and I would always fight. She liked to fight. I think it's a Japanese - that's what Scaccia said to me. He saw me one night when my girlfriend at the time dropped me off for night school. He said, you like those Japanese girls don't you, Pete? And I said, yes. And he said, don't let them fool you. They're not as sweet as they seem. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: But the whole -

MR. SHIRE: I didn't forget that either.

MS. LAURIA: The whole mystique that came out of Otis, which people - revisionist history somewhat - always read about the time Peter Voulkos was there and John Mason, and how that was the center of everything going

on. That had already passed by the time you were in Chouinard?

MR. SHIRE: Yes. We weren't even concerned with that. I mean, I think Voulkos was clearly a guy who had set in motion this sculptural idea.

MS. LAURIA: And he had already gone to teach at Berkeley [University of California, Berkeley].

MR. SHIRE: Oh, long gone. And you know what John told me? John told me that -

MS. LAURIA: John Mason?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, John Mason - that Voulkos had actually been fired - that Millard [Sheets] was a lame duck and that he fired Voulkos out of spite, to take him with him.

MS. LAURIA: I see.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, which you can get John to clarify, obviously. You know, anyway, but, you know, that it wasn't the famous confrontation where Millard, you know, fired him and he came storming in and said, you know, I quit anyway, and Voulkos got whatever kind of severance was available at that time, which wasn't what we think of now but still, it wasn't -

MS. LAURIA: Out the door you go with nothing.

MR. SHIRE: A, and B, you've rattled the halls of art too much. You've upset the foundation. Now, see, I had trucked with Millard, too. Adrian Saxe got me a job teaching over at Franciscan, which was then called InterPace.

MS. LAURIA: Right. The factory. The ceramic factory.

MR. SHIRE: The pottery factory. Yes, he had worked there in the summer on that big rainbow mural. So one of the guys -

MS. LAURIA: Millard Sheets did?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, that - [inaudible].

MR. LAURIA: Because he was -

MR. SHIRE: Yes, Millard came in and he pumped all of his ceramic murals through InterPace. All the police department stuff, so he was golden boy over there in the tile department. And I'll never forget the first time I saw him. You know, and we knew of him, and, of course, in my parents' circle, he was considered pretty much of a cop-out because he had come on as being sort of politically oriented and so forth, and then he would - you know, I mean, he arguably is L.A.'s early premier public art person.

MS. LAURIA: And he did 60-something of those murals, which were installed at the former Home Savings and Loan. Well, anyway, he did a lot of public work.

MR. SHIRE: And Sam Maloof is very - yes, he was public. He did real public art and shitloads of it. And I remember at the time, this guy comes in. Now, Millard's coming, you know, after I had been there for a couple of months. You know, everyone's in a dither. And this guy shows up and he's wearing a three-piece suit with a watch fob and a fraternity key on it, and he drove a Buick Electra, which was sort of the WASP's Cadillac, you know. And you know, he's really, really out there and I just thought, you're kidding. And so at one point, he came to me - and this is a subject of pride on my part - and he said, I can't afford Harry McIntosh's stuff anymore and I'm doing a Home Savings and Loan. I need some pots for up above the something-or-other. Bring me some drawings.

MS. LAURIA: So he was actually contracting out for some of his murals with Harrison McIntosh?

MR. SHIRE: No, for pottery. You know, to decorate some part of offices or something.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, I see.

MR. SHIRE: And so, I mean, that's that whole Claremont Mafia, right? And -

MS. LAURIA: I don't know anything about the - if there's a Claremont Mafia.

MR. SHIRE: Yeah, Harry [Gamboa, Jr.] and Millard and Sam. And I don't know who else but -

MS. LAURIA: There's Rupert Deese.

MR. SHIRE: And Rupert, right. Rupert Deese, who worked at Franciscan at that time in the dish design department. And I brought in these drawings and he looked at them and he said, I don't even know what this is. And I said, you got it, buddy. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: So I take it you didn't get the job.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. [They laugh.] I went for something better.

MS. LAURIA: Well, anyways, those stories are sort of legend. They become apocryphal a lot of times.

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: The idea that Peter Voulkos set the shed on fire at Otis.

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: The kiln shed, and that he was fired by Millard. And, you know, you read them and you're not really quite sure. You really have to have a first-person report on people that were there.

MR. SHIRE: And even that is one side of the story, as we know.

MS. LAURIA: Well, just like that Japanese movie -

MR. SHIRE: *Rashomon*[effect].

MS. LAURIA: *Rashomon*, but in any case, you are feeling when you are at the summer program - or is it the Saturday classes we're speaking about? The Saturday students, are they different than the full-time students who matriculate at Chouinard, or is it one and the same? I'm not sure how the Chouinard system worked. Could you kind of explain that? Was it a two-year -

MR. SHIRE: Well, Saturday classes were all high school.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. But now you're out of high school, right?

MR. SHIRE: No, wait, let's stay with and go with that.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. SHIRE: But we, in the ceramics room, which was almost a different region, in many ways, is a very different ethic, because fine art you could do at home. You could do - and it was a little more about sitting around the patio drinking coffee and acting tough and stuff like that. Whereas ceramics, it either came out of the kiln or it didn't. And it didn't if you didn't watch the kiln, so it was a very - you know, you're in that room. And so we had contact with a number of the lab students or the, you know, second-year or third-year students - third- and fourth-year students, I mean.

MS. LAURIA: At Chouinard?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, so the way Chouinard worked was the first two years were general classes, which meant painting, drawing, design, and some kind of a materials class, and then that sequence was repeated again, and then you went into your specialty, which they referred to as lab.

MS. LAURIA: So you'd say that the first two years were like foundation courses.

MR. SHIRE: Right, yes.

MS. LAURIA: And then you got to specialize.

MR. SHIRE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

MS. LAURIA: And the third and fourth, you were specializing in ceramics?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, then you moved up to your major. And so, a couple of those - you know, Juanita was one and another gal named Susan. I forget, but, of course, Susan had her eye on John, and later they had got married. So, you know, I think that brought her in on Saturdays, too. And, you know, Juanita was her friend and so forth. And I don't know if the Smithsonian - if we can dish too much for the Smithsonian, but I'm not telling all. [Lauria laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, they're more interested in your experience than anything.

MR. SHIRE: Well, it is part of my experience, you know. I mean, that's what I'm saying. You know, like those design guys in the tents and all that, yeah, right. They were just talking about higher ideals.

MS. LAURIA: And you're referring to the people who would go down to the beach, the potters from Architectural Pottery?

MR. SHIRE: Well, I mean, that whole - I bet you could get Gere Kavanaugh to tell you some stories if you worked on her. Maybe if you turn the tape off. You know, that whole crowd, that early, sort of, design clique, that was a very small world and a very tight world at that time. There weren't that many hipsters, as we say now, or, you know, people that are fellow. That's an old communist term. "Fellow travelers" is what the FBI called people who weren't communist but were around the scene, or liberals or whatever. Fellow travelers, but anyway, yes, they're that many people that were sort of around the scene that were really in it. It was really pretty hardcore and pretty cool.

MS. LAURIA: Well, the people then, that you got a chance to observe or work with, they could be second- or third-year students at Chouinard even though you're on the Saturday program as a high school student. So you have the benefit of the -

MR. SHIRE: The school was almost closed. You know, it was pretty deserted but yes. There were kids around, and more so, probably, in ceramic.

MS. LAURIA: It almost closed, what was it, 1968 or something?

MR. SHIRE: No, I mean almost closed because it was not part of the regular week. You know, barely - deserted.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, I see, because of Saturday.

MR. SHIRE: Saturday.

MS. LAURIA: Because Chouinard did close soon after that.

MR. SHIRE: Sixty-nine - well, actually probably around late '71. You know, the final students that were in the actual building were either moved up to Villa Cabrini [Burbank], which was the interim CalArts [California Institute of the Arts, Valencia], or, you know, graduated.

MS. LAURIA: So can you then talk further about the experience there and how you jumped from being a Saturday student into a matriculated student?

MR. SHIRE: All right. So that was something else, and again, I was a terrible student. I graduated high school with a C-minus average, and you consider half my classes were hard, which I got As in, you know. And so, I was a mess. I was a mess, no doubt about it. And Scaccia and my mom decided that I should go to [Los Angeles] City College. Take my art classes and take my academics, and kind of come up to speed somehow.

MS. LAURIA: So your mother was concerned about your future.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes, no, we were - there was definitely an ongoing discussion within our family at all times and a lot of which I didn't come forward for, but, no, they were - my dad was very funny. He'd get mad at me. And he was from Brooklyn, but he really taught himself to speak without his Brooklyn accent. But when he got mad, he'd lapse into it. I remember once him having me cornered in the kitchen about something that I was up to, and he said, what are you, a whore [pronounced who-er]? Say? What are you doing, say? [Laughs.] That's Brooklynese for, what are you, a whore?

MS. LAURIA: I got it. But he was concerned that you were not fulfilling your potential and that -

MR. SHIRE: No shit. Yes, I was definitely - my two epitaphs were, he's not working up to potential and he's incorrigible, which I probably still am, both.

MS. LAURIA: Are your parents still alive, Peter?

MR. SHIRE: My mom is. My dad passed away about 20 years ago, which was, you know, pretty bad for us.

MS. LAURIA: And does your mom still live in the area?

MR. SHIRE: My mom - actually, she does. She's at a rest home over in Silver Lake. You know, a nursing home, because she's in that stage, unfortunately. Which, you know, we're not able to cope with. But anyway, they decided I should go to City College, and so I went, and it was quite an adventure.

MS. LAURIA: L.A. City College.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, Los Angeles City College on Vermont. And there's all kinds of fun stuff, like we could go and work over at the Braille Institute by serving the blind lunch and they'd give us lunch. So we'd go do that at times. And I remember there was this one kid, who was just the coolest guy in the world, named Eddie. I forget Eddie's last name. Eddie and my old friend Lee Klein was there from Belmont. [Laughs] and then I said, there's Eddie, and I went up and said, Eddie, what's going on? And he said, my name isn't Eddie. It's Drew. And I said, oh, you look just like this guy Eddie I went to high school with. No, I'm not him. I'm Drew. So, I went to Lee and I said, you know, it's the damndest thing, that guy looks just like Eddie. And Lee said - [laughs] - it's so funny - Lee said, it is Eddie. And I said, he told me he's not Eddie. Told me his name was Drew. And Lee said, watch, and he yells out in the courtyard, Eddie, and the guy turns around. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: And was that his Muslim name?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, his black-awareness name, you know, or whatever that was about at that point. You know, they were all, you know, kind of cool.

MS. LAURIA: All the Black Panthers movement thing.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I don't know if it was quite - yes, it was moving up to that, right, in some way, and Eddie was always cool. So he was ahead of the curve, and, of course, everybody bought their clothes across the street, even in high school, at Zeidler and Zeidler's. And Eddie had a full rack of Zeidler clothes when we were in high school, which was totally enamoring. It was a clothing store that was owned by a guy named Marvin Zeidler and his brother Harris and his brother Leyland. And they just were cool.

They had it wired. They had really good clothing, good style. It wasn't necessarily that great, but good, you know, really had it wired, for a price, and they were really keyed into what was going on around in the black community and in the white community that was opened-minded. They even had Lenny Bruce do commercials and trade for clothes. It's on his compilation, Lenny's compilation. But you get the picture. They were out there. And of course, the funny story about that is Marvin turned out to be an art collector, and he's given me a lot of support over the years. And at one point, Ed had a girlfriend, and I'd gotten a pair of shoes at Zeidler's - you know, we referred to it as Zeidler's - you know, good old Jewish merchant. You know, good Jewish *schmatta*, but it was cool, right? And this girl's brother who was full of piss and -

MS. LAURIA: And vinegar.

MR. SHIRE: I was going to say snot - [Lauria laughs] - but, you know, he looks at me and says, where'd you get those cool kicks, man? Where'd you get your kicks? You must be an eight, you know. And I said - I figured I had it knocked, right? I was flying. I said, got them at Zeidler's. He says, oh, not Felipo Verde's, huh? So I told that story to Marvin some years later, which sent him into hysterics. And I said, I mean, I know it's funny, but it's not that funny. And he says, oh, yes, it is.

MS. LAURIA: Because he used to sell to them?

MR. SHIRE: No, he says, I knew Felipo Verde. His real name is Phillip Green. [They laugh.] He works downtown.

MS. LAURIA: That's funny. [They laugh.] So that's the first beginning of branding.

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: The idea of branding it to a European sort of mystique. Well, so you, as young kids - I mean young being in high school. You're very aware of the culture around you. Obviously the Echo Park then was what we would now say was on the edge of being very edgy and avant-garde. I mean, it was different from other sections of the city. That you guys had here a community of sorts. Maybe it was not a community like an organized one, but it was something that you share in common.

MR. SHIRE: You could even say that, as well as the - there is some word for it in sociology. But you know, the color of it, the texture. I think that's the word they use. But it also was enforced. What you're describing was enforced by the topography.

MS. LAURIA: Because of the isolation?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, it's a valley. I mean, it's bordered. It's very clearly where it is. And when you're away, you know, when you leave it, you very clearly leave it at Sunset, at Glendale Boulevard. You go over the mountain and you're on the other side of the valley. In fact, it's a great influence on the gangs of all eras, because the kids that went in for that were much more peaceful, especially when they were up here, than most of the others, because they were in what would be called a gauntlet, and no general would bring his armies into a boxed canyon. And I

mean, I saw it operate a couple of times where kids would get off the beat and get into this territory and they were in deep shit.

MS. LAURIA: Right, the castle walls would not come down.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and we were one of the few areas that had a castle to deal with it.

MS. LAURIA: With a moat.

MR. SHIRE: With a moat. Yes, so, so that enforced it, you know, and then there was all this stuff, and people went to the local school in those days. You know, now, most of the kids don't. That's a whole story in itself but a neighborhood story. But, you know, we all went, no matter what our economic, sociological kind of background was. And we were all, you know, in the Cub Scouts and the Woodcraft Rangers, respectively. And -

MS. LAURIA: I'm surprised your parents would allow you to be in the Cub Scouts.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, they stopped at the Boy Scouts. The Boy Scouts really hit the wall there, and I was with them, which was actually articulated, as the uniforms are too military.

MS. LAURIA: Military, right, because they're very militaristic the way in which they organize all of their activities, and it seems like your parents would be very opposed to that.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I think, at that point, the Cub Scouts were fairly innocuous.

MS. LAURIA: Like the Brownies for the girls, until they got into the Girl Scouts.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, right. And it was a meeting place, and that all of our friends were in it again, or most of them. In fact, I have my Cub Scout picture. I'm the only one goofing off. [Lauria laughs.] And our den was the art den, and my mother, you know, devised these projects and, you know, for the den meetings where we did art projects.

MS. LAURIA: They would now be called arts and crafts.

MR. SHIRE: Well, they probably would. I won't even go there with you.

MS. LAURIA: I know, but I mean that's what the kids do at schools now, is they call them the arts and crafts projects.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I can't remember what enough of them were, but, yes, they probably had to have a format, like you say, and all that. So, anyway, yes, we did that and I kind of think about that. I figured out how to pass the inspection and get the prize. There were two tricks that nailed it.

MS. LAURIA: For the Cub Scouts?

MR. SHIRE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] One was you cleaned your nails.

MS. LAURIA: I was going to say you have to be neat.

MR. SHIRE: I mean, there were certain things that everybody got their ass kicked on and you could, you know, nail it. One was cleaning your nails, so my mom got me a nailbrush. And the other was how you rolled up the scarf. Most people just took the scarf and put the pull -

MS. LAURIA: Bow tie or whatever that is.

MR. SHIRE: There's some word for it. Yes, it's sort of a bow or sort of a clasp or whatever that you slid on. And what you did was you laid the scarf out, and you roll it up and take it with it still rolled and pull it around, and then the edge banding made chevron.

MS. LAURIA: So you had figured that out.

MR. SHIRE: I don't know where I figured that out or how that - I mean, I don't think I figured it out from reading Leonardo's memoirs or something, you know. But anyway -

MS. LAURIA: Maybe through observation.

MR. SHIRE: Maybe. Who knows? Who remembers? Maybe I noticed that the den master - the den leader - the pack leader's, that's what it was - son did it. Now I think that's how I did it. But anyway - and they couldn't give him the prize every week or every month.

So City College. So I get into City, and my dear friend Ralph Schuckett's there. So there's Ralph and Pat -Ralph Schuckett, Pat Ray, Ralph Gilbert, and myself, and this is a real core of people whose parents were artists, and now that was a touchstone that we didn't realize when, you know, when we started to love each other. And Schuckett, who had gone to Marshall authentically - his parents had sold their house and moved -

MS. LAURIA: Lived in that district.

MR. SHIRE: No, they saved all their lives to move over there to get him in and that's a story. And so, Ralph was there, and Ralph was another guy who was a natural student, you know, and could cruise through his studies, and so they liked him and all that. And we went into this class with a woman named Barbara George, and the guy that was head of ceramics was guy named Clyde Kelly, and the two of them were carrying on. They were in, you know -

MS. LAURIA: A relationship.

MR. SHIRE: They were in a relationship, which we didn't call it a relationship in those days. We called it having an affair. And she was kind of a weird woman, and she had us doing these weird projects that were really, you know - and I was going, you know, towing the line. I was doing my best to do them. With one of them, I remember, was taking a Speedball pen, and instead of drawing the line, you had to go back and forth constantly. Like push into and make these - and I'm doing the stuff, and she kicked Ralph out, no reason. Oh, fuck, man, there goes Ralph. And Ralph was really a good drawer, too, as well as being a natural academic student and a self-taught musician and all of that. And so, I thought, I'm keeping my head down. She kicks me out. I was in tears.

MS. LAURIA: Did she give her reason?

MR. SHIRE: No. And she didn't give any reason, and Ralph went down, and Ralph having been used to being a good student, et cetera, approached her and said, I don't understand - you know, they could kick someone out in the first two weeks without an explanation. And Ralph went down and approached her and she was with this guy Kelley, and he told him, you better pick up your marbles and get out. It's education at work, but boy they could nail him to the cross for that today. But anyway, he was the ceramic teacher, and you had to take these two drawing classes that this gal held to get into ceramics.

I was knocked out.

MS. LAURIA: So you were banned then. I mean, you couldn't move forward without taking the drawing.

MR. SHIRE: I couldn't move forward. I couldn't move forward in that situation so in effect, she effectively got me out of City College and into Chouinard, so I actually owe her a lot, and again, I was - you know, being rejected in that situation is certainly a kudos or whatever one would call it. What would you call it?

MS. LAURIA: Well, it was opportunistic in a way because it propelled you to the next stage.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, exactly. Well, and also, it - what I'm saying is that, you know, I wouldn't want to be part of any club that would have me, and there a quite a few that wouldn't have me that it's an honor to be rejected from. [They laugh.]

It was an honor is what I'm saying, is that it - it spoke well about my work.

MS. LAURIA: Did you only spend one semester at City College?

MR. SHIRE: So I finished out the rest of the classes and enrolled, you know, and put - Scaccia and my mom were allied and pulled the wagons in and said, you better get into Chouinard. Scaccia told my mom, you better get him in. So I pulled together a portfolio. Pat's father came over and shot my work, which is one of my great frustrations that I don't know where those photos are. And Pat gave all his father's photos to the Sacramento, to the Library of Congress up in California. So who knows, maybe the negatives are amongst them, but that's another story. And I, you know, rushed to make some kind of drawings and submitted it. And they didn't like my drawings. They asked me if I wanted to enroll, that I would take what they call the qualifying class.

MS. LAURIA: Which would be like what we'd call today a contingency or maybe a prerequisite. If you could make it past that, then they would allow you to go into the next class.

MR. SHIRE: That's right. In other words, it was distinctly geared towards developing a portfolio, which we could then again submit.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. SHIRE: And so the teacher's name was Jack Cling. And Jack was - you know, it's not a famous name or anything, but it's an important one. And Jack was a guy who was, again, not that much older than us. He was 36 at the time. He had gone back to school and just graduated, and he was on probation also, and he was very psychologically oriented. So he was into kind of group therapy and doing stuff together and he was on trial and we were on trial, and it was a very different kind of beginning class for Chouinard, because most of the drawing one classes were conducted by a guy named Watson Cross. And Watson was a latter-day devotee of Rico Lebrun and that whole group and that whole epoch of L.A. art and Chouinard and Otis that, you know, preceded our arrival and preceded Bengston and Ruscha and company.

And L.A. Finnish fetish, which really broke away with Voulkos at the lead with the Abstract Expressionist pushing L.A. into a national vocabulary, or attempting to, instead of a regional. And Rico did all those huge charcoal drawings, sweeping charcoal drawings, walls of paper, with ink washes that dripped. You know, flourishing swaths and whatnot. And so Cross would have the kids pin up huge rolls of butcher paper and run at it in that fashion, which always looked great but didn't mean much most of the time. And he was crippled. He had some kind of those arm braces, and so he would sit there and do whatever he did. I don't know. I never had his class, but I did know that most of the kids walked in and out at will and walked up to the roof, most of the time, to smoke dope and so forth.

And, you know, there was not a disciplined or focused situation, whereas my initial leap into Chouinard was super intense and we were ultra-involved with each other. Several of the people I'm still friends with today, which I guess people could say about any place. You know, we really were together all the time.

MS. LAURIA: And this is in your prerequisite class that you're talking about.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, right. Yes, I mean, the one thing - I could never handle the group things and I'd always bug out. I just don't like to be working on the same drawing with a group of people or things like that. But, you know, Jack was really aggressive in his teaching and getting us to do stuff and, you know, all the typical stuff of going to the wholesale market in the middle of the night and drawing, and we'd go to the park draw all day. And it was just a magnificent moment and, you know, pushing the models and, you know, the models responding to all the kids, really being there all the time, you know, not walking, you know, et cetera. So we all passed. We all got in. Jack was in tears when we came back.

He was very emotional. And one of the things that I always noticed is that he didn't have any front teeth, and he slept with almost every girl in the class. [Lauria laughs.] The only ones he didn't was because he didn't want to, and which really freaked this one gal out. She had very large knockers, but she couldn't understand how anyone could resist that. And, you know, he was really great, but he got in - somewhere in the interim, either that year or the next year, he taught a couple of those classes and then moved on. He got his teeth fixed or got new teeth. And I've always noticed that people are much more fun when they don't have their teeth. [Lauria laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: That's a great observation by Peter Shire at the end of disc number two.

MR. SHIRE: Or the other one who was like that is Adrian. Adrian had really buggy teeth when we were in school and shortly - it wasn't until he got to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] that he could get them fixed. And he was so much fun.

[END MD 02.]

MS. LAURIA: [Disc] three starting. Interview with Peter Shire at his studio in Echo Park, on Wednesday, September 19, 2007.

MR. SHIRE: So Chouinard was four years. There was, at the height, which was around 1968, there was 700 people, which was a big enrollment for them at that time. It was involved with the conservatory of music, but we never saw them except at registration, which was at the Elk's Club, one of these grand, you know, wild meeting rooms with all this maroon, velvet drapery and these stanchions on the seat ends that looked - lightning and stuff. It was really, you know, very mystic, kind of groovy, middle-class men's stuff.

MS. LAURIA: So the art students did not have much connection to the music students.

MR. SHIRE: No, not at that time. And CalArts was in the mix, and when I was in the qualifying class, there was a young man named Allan Shiloh [sp]. And Allan was from some part of Louisiana and his whole town had, like, clubbed together to send him to Chouinard, and he was amazing. He was really just the nicest guy and he was really smart, but he had one problem. Everything he drew was extremely powerful. He was a true primitive in a funny way. It's like, no matter what he did - I mean, he wanted to be an animator. He wanted to draw Mickey Mouse. He came to be an animator. He was staying at the Hotel Barbizon. I'm the only person he ever showed where he stayed. And he went through the first two years and he stayed in a flophouse just to go through school. He was really a clean-cut guy. And he was black, which should be said, and we had English together and we had

all kinds of classes. You know, Shire and Shiloh, we were always right next to each other.

And I was crazy about him, and he loved to have fun with me because his syntax was so different, and we'd be, you know, analyzing the poems and whatnot in English, and he'd come at it from a completely different angle, and then he'd end up in the same place. And he thought that, you know, he was just leading me too, which was very funny. We got out of senior screening. He went there two years. I mean, he drew everything perfect. Beautiful arm, you know, it was all right there. But for some reason, his hand always did this thing that anybody would give hundreds of dollars for. It was just beautiful. He was just powerful. And I said, how'd it go, Allan? And when he was coming out, he just looked kind of down. He said, well, they said I can't go into animation. I said, what did they say? And he said, well, they want me in the fine art program. And I said something to the effect of, let's go. And he said, no, I'm going back home. And I said, why? He said, I came here to draw the mouse. And that's the last time I saw him.

And I tried looking him up on the Internet and I tried looking him up - calling Louisiana, because I figured they only have one area code, and I still haven't found him. But I have this imagination that he's off somewhere on some - making birdhouses or something that are totally, you know, beyond - anyway.

MS. LAURIA: Well, so how did that affect your continuation of school?

MR. SHIRE: Well, I didn't know I had my senior screening, and I saw Juanita and Mineo [Mizuno] at that Tiny Naylors that was right on Wilshire and Lafayette Park Place or - you know which one I mean? Or Commonwealth. Right down by Bullocks Wilshire. For some reason I went in there, and Juanita says, I'm on your panel tomorrow. We're going to have - so I just grabbed a bunch of stuff out of my room. Actually, Stefan Von Hune had edited my portfolio as part of my drawing, you know, my second drawing section.

MS. LAURIA: When you say senior screening, is this to continue on to the next level?

MR. SHIRE: Right. That's to go into lab, and yes, that's -

MS. LAURIA: To specialize after the foundation courses are finished.

MR. SHIRE: Right, exactamo.

MS. LAURIA: And that's Mineo Mizuno and Juanita -

MR. SHIRE: Jimenez.

MS. LAURIA: Jimenez. Okay. And they were both teachers at the time?

MR. SHIRE: No. They -

MS. LAURIA: No, they were students.

MR. SHIRE: Juanita was teaching because she was out of school and Ralph had gotten her a job teaching one of the auxiliary, you know, beginning ceramics or something. And so they said they wanted me to either take - you know, my drawing again, didn't come through, and so they asked me to - it's so funny because I just grabbed all this stuff, and one of the things I had done was when we were in high school, we were totally fascinated by flasks. And you know, it's just like, I don't know, one of those things that you -

MS. LAURIA: The form of it or the mystique of it?

MR. SHIRE: No, the sort of gentlemanly, having your own liquor, whatever, you know. Something probably like fishing creels and pipes and Norfolk jackets and all that sort of stuff, you know. Being, you know, sort of a life that was never going to be any part of any reality for us. But at any rate, and of course we were fascinated by Plexiglas and plastic. And you know, that's that -

MS. LAURIA: New material.

MR. SHIRE: Well, I guess that's the jargon you use, but it really is what gave L.A. its Finnish fetish look because, you know, that's what it was. It was, you know, aerospace, plastic, Plexiglas, hot rod, you know, stuff and - you know what I mean, that's coming out of what's swirling around.

MS. LAURIA: Right, but the artists started to use it. I mean, it was -

MR. SHIRE: Yes, well, always. You know, it's always - everybody goes, oh, artists are the weather vane, you know, the harbinger of change and going - we're about 50 years behind technology, you know.

MS. LAURIA: Well, in that case, it wasn't 50, though, because -

MR. SHIRE: Probably 100. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: So you were intrigued with the use of -

MR. SHIRE: Oh, man. Anybody who had a Plexiglas frame on their stuff was just killing. And, you know, Larry Bell figured out those boxes. He managed that machine and all of that. And so that - my buddies took me down to Temple Street and down on Temple - Temple was - I mean, L.A., you know, changes so fast, and Temple was completely different, and that was sort of a little artists' enclave, because it was about to be wrecked and it was really amazing. You know, these guys had old theaters and stuff, and it took me around the corner on Beaudry to see this guy Doug Edge. And Doug is a little older than us, and, you know, he had a family already and he was - you know, the young artists sitting around the living room, which was just a living room, and they said, go upstairs. And then they were all kind of - had that look like, you're going to get it, you know. And -

MS. LAURIA: Enticing.

MR. SHIRE: More like they're trying to act like nothing was going to happen because they were going to work one on me. And as I go up in this, you know, this pull-down ladder up into this little garret, in this old Victorian on Beaudry Avenue. And he's got it all fixed up. The white walls, everything is tufted out, and he's got five or six of his works up there. You know, so this was complete antithesis of the rest of the house and, of course, that was the deal. And one of the things he had was a Plexiglas chair, so, you know, he's already five miles, you know, ahead on that. And it was a reproduction, or a facsimile, I should say, of a typical kitchen chair, with that kind - I forget what you call the slats in the back but -

MS. LAURIA: Slat-back chair.

MR. SHIRE: Slat-back chair, and the top one sort of had a little rise in it. And he had taken that area and what was called a high-resolution silk-screen print, printed on it the "Bikini Blast." The atomic bomb going off. Oh, it was just like this guy just - that was it, you know, this big connection.

MS. LAURIA: And you found that inspirational.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. You know, and then sometimes I've told other people, who shall remain nameless, about that. Oh, we don't want to hear about an artist that's not famous, you know. In fact, the word that was used was "failed," and Doug is, you know, and Doug is around and he's a peaceful guy. As he put it, my work is simple. And he had these chrome - remember how people used to get their shoes bronzed. They had these chromed army boots. You know, his bronzed army boots in a plywood box. So we were all very - and, of course, seeing [H.C.] Westermann at the [Los Angeles] County Museum. Saw Westermann and he just tore me up. I mean this cat - everything about it. The -

MS. LAURIA: H.C. Westermann.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, yes. The amount of work, the depth of the work and what the work was itself.

MS. LAURIA: And that was at that the L.A. County Museum in about 1969 or something?

MR. SHIRE: *Mas o menos* [more or less], right. And Bengston had a show right next to it and it was - you know, Frank Gehry did the exhibit. And I went in, you know, I don't think I - I don't know what, if I went to see Billy's show or just happened to go. I didn't know anything about Westermann at that point, and went into Billy's, you know, expecting something, and it was nothing. It was joke. I don't know. Have you ever heard anything about - I mean, it was like -

MS. LAURIA: It was the work of the chevron painted on canvas, or on aluminum panels?

MR. SHIRE: Well, that's what I'm trying to figure. What work was even there?

[END MD 03 TR 01.]

MS. LAURIA: So Peter, when you saw H.C. Westermann's work and also Doug's Plexiglas chairs, these were powerful moments for you that resonated, that you might have then thought, this is sort of the path I want to take in my work, or something like that.

MR. SHIRE: It's only something like that, yes. I don't know that I thought this is the path I want to take. I thought, this stuff is great. This is killing me, you know, and this is, you know, inspiring.

MS. LAURIA: It was exciting.

MR. SHIRE: It's inspiring. You know, we can use big words like - broad words like that. And you think about what appealed and they're very similar. You know, they're media driven. They're about craftsmanship, both of them. Both of them entailed making something. They're both objects. They're both funky and, you know, they were fun and they were funny and they were interesting.

MS. LAURIA: But they were also ironic in a way. I mean, H.C. -

MR. SHIRE: Well, I guess. I don't know that we thought - I just thought the shark fins in the table were the funniest fucking thing I ever saw, you know. And so I started making them in ceramic because I said, you know, put them in the living room and stuff and -

MS. LAURIA: But did you make it through your senior screening? Did you -

MR. SHIRE: Well, yes. But also, they said, you know, drawing or ceramics takes - because I'd never taken ceramics one. I was sort of in an interim, semi-advanced class. This is a wild deal because I told - how did that work? Oh, they still wanted me to make it up, but I'd already gone through a year of lab. I was in my third, going into my fourth, year and I had to take this class as part of my due diligence.

And so I approached Ralph and I said, well, I think drawing would really - you know, it's really important. And he said, well, I'd like to see you take ceramics one because I want to see you continue what, you know, what you're working on, right, and I'd hate to see you break down on that. However he put it. Something to the effect of, take ceramics one because I want you to keep your direction. And Juanita was teaching that class and, I mean, I was past it. I was not a ceramics one student. But she wanted me to tow the line and do shrink tests and shit like that.

You're dealing with a 20-year-old kid who's, you know, smelling his own piss and is not going to do shrink tests.

MS. LAURIA: But you wanted to keep going forward, and you felt this -

MR. SHIRE: I had my area in the lab already. You know, I had my area and I was working on this, you know, big project. This grandiose project that we all tend to -

MS. LAURIA: Which was?

MR. SHIRE: Well, this chess set made up entirely of penises, which is to say that's the only shrink test I was interested in. [Lauria laughs.] And, yeah, and all these other really weird machines that revolved around this cast I'd made of my penis, because in art school, you know, is pretty much the bottom line. You know, dicks and pussies. And - well, because we weren't suffering, you know. What other subject were we really concerned with? And had something - maybe even something to say about - although that's up for grabs, too.

See, when you start on that, everything becomes a joke. So anyway, there I was with Juanita.

MS. LAURIA: I resisted.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, exactly - thank you. I didn't. Yes, so Juanita, you know, really, really took it as an affront to her authority. And I tried to get Ralph to intercede, and Ralph wouldn't stand up to her, for whatever that was all about. So she gave me a D-minus in this class.

MS. LAURIA: For not completing the assignment.

MR. SHIRE: For not complying period, you know. And that course, I could go on with it. A couple of times I had to correct her when she made me sit in, and I couldn't resist. And, you know, she had some duress, whatever that was all about.

MS. LAURIA: But it wasn't an optimum situation for you to continue your work then.

MR. SHIRE: It didn't matter.

MS. LAURIA: It didn't. Okay.

MR. SHIRE: I was doing fine.

MS. LAURIA: So you could still work, but you were given the D-minus. So how did that affect your going forward in this work?

MR. SHIRE: You know, it probably didn't affect it at all.

MS. LAURIA: Okay.

MR. SHIRE: I mean, it probably didn't help my GPA, but what's that about anyway? It caused a fair - I don't know. It wasn't that bad. You know, Juanita took it pretty hard, and we had a couple of arguments later on, and she was, you know, sort of doing a girl thing, which - there, I said it on tape. It was politically incorrect but, you know, you know what I mean.

MS. LAURIA: Well, it didn't stunt your -

MR. SHIRE: It was an issue. No, it didn't stunt anything. In fact, it actually encouraged it, because I - you know, I had made this giant A as part of it, because I knew she was going to go gunning for me. So I'd put that out on a table - [laughs] - that sat about three feet tall, and we still have it. Now we say that it was because I knew our daughter's name was going to be Ava.

MS. LAURIA: So did you successfully graduate from Chouinard?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. I graduated. I went the whole route, which is very interesting because out of our qualifying class, there are only two of us. Myself and a girl named Patty Haynes, a young woman. And Patty actually, who was a terrific draftsman, you know, really natural, easy draftsperson, switched to ceramics. I think in one of the, you know, ceramics electives, she got involved with a guy named Terry Tokuda, and they'd get drunk underneath the pugmill and eventually lay out along with the clay, and they ended up getting married. The Smithsonian doesn't care about that. [Lauria laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: But you did find -

MR. SHIRE: But everybody else does. You should have - no. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: But you found that experience to be helpful to you going through school? Because one of the issues that we ask, as interviewers, is how do you think - if there is a difference between a university-trained artist and one who has learned his/her craft outside academia?

MR. SHIRE: Well, there aren't too many of them now, the latter. But I think when you're talking about Chouinard and what was going on, there was a whole group of kids that were more or less upper-middle-class kids. They were very aggressive, very career oriented, were busy cultivating the older guys, which was something that I was not capable of. I didn't have that kind of social mobility or skill. And they were very aggressive about finding a product and settling on groups of things that they made to get it out there.

And that, coupled with looking at that clique of older guys, gave that mind-set that this was viable thing, and as people know, my work and my body - my physical position in, you know, in the map of L.A. - are removed. You know, I purposely stayed away from Venice, which was where that was located. And I would not only remove my imagery and, kind of, gone for ways around and alternate ways but also my body. But I'm very aware of that activity that - I'm struggling for a way to say it. You know, that clique that was -

MS. LAURIA: It was a community of artists that more or less begin to have an identity.

MR. SHIRE: And they also had a guild. They'd pass the collectors among themselves and were very - for whatever their rivalries were - were very interconnected and inter-protective and exclusive and did their best to fuck anybody else they could.

MS. LAURIA: Well, when you had graduated from Chouinard, did you feel you were ready to go out in the world and become a professional artist, or was that just not on your mind?

MR. SHIRE: Well -

MS. LAURIA: I mean, you did observe -

MR. SHIRE: Well, there's one thing to mention that nobody has talked about - that's you and I at this point - and that's there was a war going on, you know.

MS. LAURIA: The Vietnam War.

MR. SHIRE: The Vietnam War, and I had gone in for being a conscientious objector straight away, and it was a very organized effort. And they'd give me my 2S, my student deferment, just to keep me away from really confronting the application for conscientious objector, and sort of string it out - not that they wouldn't give me my 2S anyway, but I don't know. And a lot of guys, you know, tried to take too much sugar all at once or whatever they did.

MS. LAURIA: Because we're talking about trying to evade the draft.

MR. SHIRE: Right, or whatever. But I think that there was a - you know, with my background and so forth, there was a need to take a very principled position and confront it directly. And it was largely about nonviolence and it was also about imperialism and a stupid action and an aggressive wrong action. And it was also about - very much about - nobody comes back from the army. Nobody comes back. They're all in bad shape no matter what. It's about submitting yourself in a degree that's - essentially you could call it unhealthy. That's probably being euphemistic. You know, it's perverse.

MS. LAURIA: So did you feel you had to continue on in school because of that or -

MR. SHIRE: No. That was - I loved it. I loved going to Chouinard. I loved going to school. And I think that, again, my parents' and my dad's ideals, that there was a strong identification with a discipline and all of that and that - I don't know. I liked it and I had a great time and, you know, which isn't to say it wasn't without its conflicts, obviously, on all fronts. But in the end - so Ralph - you know, we're graduating and Ralph approached me in the hall between the two ceramic rooms there and said, well, I think you've earned more than a car one day, which was a rare thing. We went somewhere and he said, well, what about graduate school? You know, he was planning graduate schools for me. I think he wanted me to go to RISD. I remember that being mentioned.

First of all, at that point, it was simple. And so on that second go-around, I said, you know, I really have one thing on my plate here and that's staying out of the army. And he said - you know how he kind of - sometimes his voice kind of cracks and he kind of gulps and then he says, well, what's wrong with the army? I was in the army. And I said, you know, fuck you. You were in the army in 1958. You went in with Elvis. You wore shorts the whole tour. You lived in San Pedro, taught night school at Chouinard, you know. I mean, this one - you know they're looking at me and they're going to go, yes, let's have him drive an oil tanker in the jungle, you know. That's a good target, you know.

And so, of course, a month out of school, I get my draft notice. And in the meantime, I had taken a friend of mine down - I don't know if this - anyway, this is Vietnam stuff, and, you know, we were all deep in it, and it was a different era. And you think about protest to this war now, which has similarities, and you think about then and you think about the kind of protesting we were doing as a demographic and how it's sort of not present the same way. And I was thinking about how there's a guy that I know that's my age that was a Berkeley guy, and he and Art Goldberg, who is another guy that age, will go stand on the corner of Echo Park on Sunset on Friday afternoon with a sign, you know, Get out of Iraq. But, you know, it's like them, and cars honk every now and then, but - you know, I mean, there were hundreds or thousands, you know. And it was a different investment because they were saying - we were not only saying it's wrong, but were saying, you've got the wrong idea about what we're thinking about with our lives.

MS. LAURIA: Right. So you felt that it was very - the whole war issue for you was very conflicted because you knew you definitely did not want to be there. But you had to be involved somehow in the protest aspect of it, so do you feel that -

MR. SHIRE: No. I think that that was not a conflict at all. I think that what was - it wasn't necessarily a conflict. It was what, you know, euphemistically people would call a mature decision, which was instead of to trying to take them on on the philosophy of the war itself or the army's strategy for turning people into abeyance, that we'd take it on as a kind of a quasi religious-philosophical issue. And I don't look at it, because I figure I'll look at it when I'm 80 or 90 or something, but, you know, I wrote these essays for them, you know. And I did read them awhile ago and I thought, well, that's pretty much how I think now.

MS. LAURIA: You wrote these essays for -?

MR. SHIRE: About our position in the universe. I mean, it was that simple. It was that kind of stuff, you know. What are we doing? You know, what does it mean? Why aren't we - why do we make certain actions with our bodies and our lives, and what do we become when we do them and so forth. And so, I mean, on and on and, you know, reams of this stuff, and I was not an easy writer, as we've talked about. That was not easy for me. I really had to work at it. And so the upshot of it is my brother, who is nuts, you know. I mean, my brother didn't wear shoes until he was 35, and he'd go to the gift show, you know, and they were all wearing those leisure suits. You know, like the polyester maroon, matching pant, white shoes, white vinyl belt. Billy, no shoes, you know. They just couldn't believe it. Donna's mom a was buyer for the SC student store for a while, and she said she saw him at the gift show one year and there were these people that just wanted to touch him. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, is Billy younger or older than you are?

MR. SHIRE: There's the question. I knew you'd ask it that way. What do you think?

MS. LAURIA: I think he's younger but -

MR. SHIRE: You're right. But he doesn't look it.

MS. LAURIA: No, but just because you talk about him as a younger brother, as someone that you would speak about as a younger sibling. But in any case, your brother, too, has taken on an art career.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes.

MS. LAURIA: And neither of your parents -

MR. SHIRE: He won that Levi denim art thing. He was out there. He was - but anyway, so he was a high draft number. So he wasn't likely to be drafted, but they still pulled him on his conscientious objector. I mean, they took a look at him and said, well, between the fact that they weren't going to get him anyway and, you know, just who he is, which is to say totally intractable. They - 1AO, he got full conscientious objector. So I go in, and they'd asked me to go in for my physical, and I talked to my advisor and he said, go in; don't do what you don't want to do, but go in to show good faith, you know.

So I go in and they wanted to draw blood, and, you know, that's something that's - I'm not a needle guy, so I refused. So basically the minute you refuse to do something, it totally invalidates even going in, but, you know, I just said, that's what's up. And then they wanted to check us for hemorrhoids, and that was a strange thing, to be the only guy not being checked and watched how they did it. They made everybody line up in a circle facing out and then bend over, and the guy goes around in a circle looking at everybody's butt.

MS. LAURIA: Maybe that's why the artist who did that similar sculptural piece, Charles Ray, who was articulating a very similar idea.

MR. SHIRE: He didn't want to be drafted. But anyway, the upshot of it is I go in for my interview, and they ask me all the philosophical questions. The big trick question was, if you don't believe in violence, what would you do if your mother was being beat up in an alley or your girlfriend was being raped? And the trick answer is, to prevent it is not an act of violence.

MS. LAURIA: Were you tipped off on that?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. That was, you know - that was big one, you know. But, so anyway, we go through all of that boogey, and then they look and they go, well, we see that you didn't submit to a couple of the things on your physical. And I said, yes, well, I went in to show good faith and that I'm not trying to antagonize you, but there's certain things I'm not going to do. That was it. You know, all the reams of dialogue about secular religion and the universe, and, you know, that was it. That was the bottom line.

MS. LAURIA: So you would not follow their rules, is what they said.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, they saw a guy that could cause trouble. I could get in there and start a newspaper or start talking to the guys, or I wasn't going to do something or whatever, you know.

MS. LAURIA: So you basically got out of the draft then?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, that was the moment. And so then they gave me my conscientious objector status and I was on another track. So in the meantime, I was, you know, farting around in my bedroom with making these little ceramic boxes. I didn't know what else to do.

MS. LAURIA: Were you still living at home?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. I lived at home until I was 28. You know, just to have different girlfriends. You know the old joke, what do you call a musician who has broken up with his girlfriend? Homeless. [Lauria laughs.] And so, you know, what do you call an art school graduate? I mean, you know, a lot of the guys did whatever it is they did, you know, whether it was working some kind of job or selling narcotics or whatever, to stay in the studio or teaching.

MS. LAURIA: So you were just trying to survive.

MR. SHIRE: Well, I was sort of floating. I was sort of spinning my wheels. You know, I was just sort of looking where - you know, kind of gently floating down to the ground like a maple leaf.

MS. LAURIA: But you still wanted to do your art?

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. No, there was no -

MS. LAURIA: No question about that.

MR. SHIRE: No, I didn't want to - you know, I don't think there was an alternative, and I certainly wasn't going to be a secretary or a clerk or anything that took those kind of skills, or go back to be an attorney - go back to school, because I, you know, wasn't cut out for it. So, I got a call from Connie [Saxe] and Adrian [Saxe]. I think Adrian - I forget which one of them called me. I should probably ask. But Connie said, well, come on down and have a drink. And so we went down, and Adrian had that amazing studio down on Second Street, and he said - I knew something was up. I had a feeling they were going to give me a chance to rent space from them, and that's what was up.

And so I worked in that studio for a year making things, and at that point my parents and Billy and myself - Billy and me - Billy and I - have to work through that one. The correct one is I. You know, Billy and I started the Soap Plant, which was an offshoot of the Body Shop of Berkeley, which was started by my aunts up on Telegraph Avenue in a place called CK's Body Shop, which was a building not unlike this, which was a body shop or a garage.

MS. LAURIA: And the Soap Plant originally was on Melrose, wasn't it?

MR. SHIRE: No, it was originally on the Sunset Junction. That was our power spot. That's when we went down there. We tried to duplicate what my aunties had done, which was more or less have a booth within a larger structure, but no one wanted to give up any - you know, no one wanted to take us in, so we ended up renting a little space right on the apex of Santa Monica. And then a year later, up about two blocks - which was a turning point. And so, Billy and I outfitted the store and started developing - I started doing some product stuff, because the soap couldn't carry it in L.A. like it could in Berkeley. You know about that?

[END MD 03 TR 03.]

MS. LAURIA: So the Soap Plant -

MR. SHIRE: Put that in a bumper sticker. My aunt Jane lived next to a chemist named Hank Libby. He developed all these formulas but had no place to go with them. He was doing contract work for other cosmetic firms. He offered Jane and Peggy, to supply them product if they ran the store and took care of everything else. They started it up in late '69, and by Christmas, two months later, they were in the black with a line around the block. They featured biodegradable soap and biodegradable haircare products and skin products and refill your own bottles. A concept that just hit the deck running in Berkeley.

And so they named it the Body Shop because it was in CK's garage and, you know, so forth. And then Peggy called my mom, and my mom was starting to go try and work after 25 or 30 years as a housewife, whatever it was - 25 - 20 years, 20-plus years. And, you know, it's awful. She was doing phone stuff and that was really degrading, and so this was something that caught our attention. And Peggy asked Billy and I to go up there and outfit the new store, because, like I say, by three months they'd already outgrown their first counter. And she's very clever. She knew if she got us up there, we'd go back and report and get the feel for it.

So we did, and we started this store and, you know, again that - my mom named it the Soap Plant after the California plant that the Indians used as soap. Do you know about that? It's a lily, and they'd pull the bulb and the bulb would lather; so I forget the official name for - but anyway, that's the - it's not like the Soap Factory. The Soap Plant is - and we did it and it was a bigger store and plus - but it was $100 a month. That first Christmas, you know, we're counting on trying to make $100 in one day, and it rained. Just full-on rain. You know, I remember standing at the door looking at this sheet of rain.

But we survived, and, you know, Billy and I outfitted the store, and my girlfriend at the time, a woman named Wayna [Kato]. Her father's name was Wayne. That's a cruel thing to do to a child, but Wayna Kato was her name, and Wayna had worked at a store downtown. A kind of a harbinger of a personality or design, almost, kind of store, and so we knew where a lot of the sources were and had a rough idea about that.

And then a couple of the kids that we went to school with - one guy did these silk-screen T-shirts with carrots and tomatoes on them, you know, respectively. And I was making pottery over at Adrian's, and Billy had just started on his leatherwork, and then we went downtown. And actually, then, by then - okay, so then in the interim, you know, when we outfitted the store, we actually worked down at the Second Street studio making the furniture and whatnot for it.

And then when we got to that point, Adrian got a call from a guy he'd worked with on the mural saying, do you know anyone? We need someone in the tile design department as a gopher. He didn't use the word gopher.

MS. LAURIA: At InterPace, you mean?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, at InterPace. So by then I was working at InterPace, and I took $100 of my own money, went downtown to the showroom of a place called Marcel Sherman, and bought $100 worth of stuff. And I was always

into the idea of buying wholesale and access to industrial sources. So I already had acquired a resale number and a business license actually a couple of years before that. I remember my interview with the woman at the state board and she said, what are you going to do? I mean, what business are you going be in? And I said, monkey business. [Lauria laughs.] And she thought that was very funny and gave me my license.

And so, you know, we went down and bought, you know, all this Beatrix Potter stuff. There was some really neat stuff at that point. So, again - I mean, I'm trying to hook this up, and what I'm trying to say is that there was a - now here we've got an awareness of design of art, and all of a sudden an extra awareness of being a merchant.

MS. LAURIA: Merchandise.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, being a merchant. Just straight up, you know. And of resale, of selling of, you know, going downtown and seeing these places that had product lines and their reps. And so I think that strategy - you know, that's really where popular culture lives. That's where all the kitsch stuff that's filtered down and, you know, all of that is going to be.

MS. LAURIA: So that was an event, experience that you thought of when you started your own studio here?

MR. SHIRE: I think there's always a fascination with some kind of inner stats kind of factory. You know, I remember as a child getting packs of gum and taking my blocks and making structures and passing the gum through it as though it was being manufactured. You know, there's something about repetition.

MS. LAURIA: So you never really felt in any part of your schooling that there was, at the time, any kind of definite divide between what was made by an artist as a unique product and what could be made by an artist that could be mass-produced. I mean, do you feel like -

MR. SHIRE: No, I don't know. I think that I'd go somewhere else with that. I think that everything is different, first of all, even things that are mass-produced. You know, we know that with cars, but the - what it was - and I'll tell you, another seminal event was going into the school library and they had *Domus* magazine, and I didn't know what it was, and that was early, see? That was '67, '68.

MS. LAURIA: Did you read Italian then?

MR. SHIRE: No, and that's what was so enthralling, because I didn't know what I was looking at, and they took all those - I mean, that was during the time when Gio Ponti was still running it. I didn't know that, of course, but now I do, and that they didn't have any advertising. You know, this was my kind of deal, and the shots of stairways or whatever were about the composition. It wasn't about showing a staircase, you know, that some decorator did. It was about what we are and, you know, then weird angles and details, and so you felt like you were flipped over and flying, you know. And I loved that. I was just going crazy, and, you know, I saw the shapes that they were using. And what was interesting and funny was to get to Italy eventually.

And Ettore Sottsass, at that point - we could talk about him as long or forever, but there it was in the office, you know, and they had this little office on a street called Borgonovo and it was sort of a basement. There's a lot to say about that to give dimension, but the basic thing was sort of a basement so that it had these transom windows and you saw people's feet going by. In other words, you know, they were -

MS. LAURIA: They were below ground.

MR. SHIRE: They were below ground in a space that probably wasn't meant to be used for an office or any habitable endeavor, you know. And the other was that, you know, there was an aspect of his cycles, where he was starting up, and he had just started the Associati with Marco [Zanini] and Matteo [Thun] and Aldo [Cibic]. There was actually another guy there, another Marco [last name?], and they had this secretary who was just outrageous. She was older, you know, whatever that meant. You know, there's a certain point where you don't judge these things. You just know they're on the other side of being older. And she was very proper bourgeois-Milanese and she talked [speaks in high pitch] like this, only in Italian, and I said - at one point we came back from wherever - Billy went with me the first time. We went for a month and it was wild.

MS. LAURIA: And were you invited to go?

MR. SHIRE: Yes. And we were - and Matteo Thun came, and he and Aldo were in the studio. They'd come for *Casa Vogue* to do a California article. And Matteo looked around, and he has this huge neck. This neck of a thoroughbred horse, you know, and he kind of looks at me and he said, you must come to Italy. Not, hey, you ought to think about coming to Italy, or you want to go to Italy? You must come. He said must.

MS. LAURIA: And this is when they came to the Soap Plant.

MR. SHIRE: This was at my studio.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, they came to the studio.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, they were in my studio, in my little studio up the street. That was all of 600 feet. And -

MS. LAURIA: And how did they get to you? Because they were doing an article for *Vogue*?

MR. SHIRE: They had seen my things in *Wet* magazine. Ettore had seen the things, and he said, this guy is one of the guys I want you to look up, which I didn't know for years until Ettore got very drunk and expansive one night. And I said, how the hell did you know? And so, anyway, he looked at me and said, you must come. This is your moment. [They laugh.] And I said, whew, if this is it, man, I hope it doesn't go down here from here, you know. [They laugh.] But anyway -

MS. LAURIA: Did you know anything about Italian design at that moment or that they were very cutting edge?

MR. SHIRE: I knew that whatever it was, I dug it. But I'm kind of thick a lot of the time. I didn't think, oh, yes, I've been reading *Domus* magazine in school and I've been - you know, and I didn't think - you know, and one of my friends, Jim Waterson, went to New York a few years before and had seen that domestic landscape show and brought me the catalogue, which, of course, was wonderful. It was eye-opening. But I didn't think all of that. I just thought, you know, these guys are wearing the kind of clothes that I'm always trying to find in the stores. You know what I mean? Those tennis shoes. Those are the ones, you know.

And then I thought, well, if it's my moment and I must come, send me a ticket. Some of the guys and gals we knew were getting that kind of offer from things. And then I thought, well, who am I, you know. At least I'll know people. I'm going to go. And April Greiman and Jamie Odgers and myself were going to go. Oh, yes, we're all going, yeah. And so I bought a ticket, because I said, you know, if I don't buy the ticket and I don't own it, something is going to happen. And sure enough, you know, the time came and they didn't do that. They went, oh, we've got a, you know, whatever it was, and I went.

MS. LAURIA: And Billy went with you.

MR. SHIRE: And Billy went with me. And that was very interesting because for some reason, you know, like I say, I'm kind of obtuse on certain things, and Billy just completely zeroed in on Matteo's snobbery. He's what they call over there aristocrat-ish, you know. And he and Billy were ready to kill each other, and I was kind of - all of a sudden I realized something was happening. What's going on? He said, he's a real prick, you know. So we took off and went over to Florence. But in the meantime, here we are in this basement, and about a quarter of it was cordoned off with this partition and it was this closet that was full of Ettore's archives of stuff. And I'd go in there and see all that stuff I'd seen in *Domus*, you know, years before and I thought, you know, 12 or 15 years before, and I thought, oh, man. And those shapes were really, really - this is one of the things that is so critical, and that is that I think that - I'm not like a natural talent. Like, I'm not like Michelangelo [Buonarroti] or something, where I came out and I did the arm when I was 12 years old and everybody worshipped it, you know.

MS. LAURIA: That you had an epiphany when you saw the -

MR. SHIRE: Well, I think that what the epiphany is - if it's that, or the dénouement or something - is that I always had the feeling that there was an elusive vision that was hidden around a corner. And, you know, I used my head as though there's these partitions in there or something and I know what's on the other side and I can feel it. I can sense some part of it. Maybe I see a corner of it, and that the whole deal is about attempting to find it and pull it out and, you know, and so forth. And that there were aspects of that that keyed, you know, to it that were excruciating.

MS. LAURIA: Well, this was the early 1980s?

MR. SHIRE: When I went?

MS. LAURIA: Yes.

MR. SHIRE: We went in late '79 -

MS. LAURIA: And did you know anything about what has since been named the Memphis Movement?

MR. SHIRE: No. And I'll tell you how that went down. We got on the plane. We did a couple of trunk shows. One with a guy named Ray Gray, who was a decorator here and then moved to New York. And one with a guy named Todd Shore, who was an illustrator and is now, you know, a whatever, kind of ghoulish - overcrafted painter, Billy shows. You know, outsider art or whatever. In other words, we could go on about that, too. And then Billy and I packed everything up and went on to Italy.

But on the plane going over, there was a joint called Art et Industrie, and they had pulled over a whole slew of

the Alchymia things, and I saw that. And they had gotten an article in the on-flight magazine, right, so I was already getting it and it was like whoa, that's hot. That just turns me on. That's something special, and I was really excited and I went over in there and talked with Rick, and he says, we're doing a show. He was a nutcase. I saw him drink 20 cups of coffee at a sitting. He was a mess. Rick Kaufman, Art et Industrie. He was something special, and, you know, he had this concept where there it was, right, the art gallery format for wacked-out, extreme furniture.

MS. LAURIA: And that was here in Los Angeles?

MR. SHIRE: No. That was in New York. I landed in New York, and there it was. I mean, New York was - you know, you know how it is. It's like there's a feeling that happens to you at times where everything feels like it's expanding in you and it's spring and the sky is clear and God only knows, you know. And so, there we were and then New York was different, man. Michele [de Lucchi] and Ettore had just done that big showroom for Fiorucci and there was -

MS. LAURIA: On Fifth Avenue?

MR. SHIRE: Wherever it was. So that was astounding. You know, so all of a sudden we're in a different environment, right?

MS. LAURIA: It sounds like there's a conflation of all the different kinds of - well, I wouldn't say disciplines; that sounds very formal, but different kinds of art that is suddenly about fashion and design, and new industrial products.

MR. SHIRE: Well, if you're talking art talk, you say strategies.

MS. LAURIA: Well, but different kinds of objects. I mean, there were objects that were being used in the service of commercialism. There are objects that were considered objets d'art and, you know, real art objects.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, you mean that this was really going around.

MS. LAURIA: Side by side.

MR. SHIRE: And I mean to the degree that, when Billy and I went to Florence, we walked down the street and in the window of one of the bookshops is a facsimile of [Fortunato] Depero's big book. You know, like the original crossover artist, the original fine art guy doing ads or vice versa. Whatever, you know, you want to call it.

MS. LAURIA: But it seemed like Andy Warhol predates this by 20 years.

MR. SHIRE: Well, Andy Warhol -

MS. LAURIA: He's not somebody in your consciousness. We don't have to talk about him if he's not somebody that you were looking to as a model of any sort.

MR. SHIRE: I didn't give a fuck about him.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. All right. So let's go back to -

MR. SHIRE: And furthermore - [they laugh] - no. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: Let's go back to Ettore then.

MR. SHIRE: I mean, the Pop artists are clearly in there. And, of course, being in art school between 1966 and 1970, we were completely bombarded by [Frank] Stella and then the rest of the Pop Art crew, you know, with the soup cans and all of that being very ironic, if you will. But, you know, being very smart and very good-looking.

MS. LAURIA: But, for you, it didn't have the juice, the thing that -

MR. SHIRE: Well, I think maybe what we're saying is that the rest of the gag didn't have any allure for me at all. The kind of queen, social, bitchy kind of weird, you know, disenfranchised deal. You know, I'm not interested in that. I'm more - you know, this is for the tapes. We've got to say it. I'm more interested in a much more personal, humanistic view.

[END MD 03 TR 04.]

MS. LAURIA: This is disc number four, second session with Peter Shire, on Wednesday, September 19, 2007, at Peter's studio in Echo Park.

Peter, go ahead and tell us more about your experience working in Italy and what it was about the objects that you saw, or the art that you saw, or the graphics, that you found really exciting and stimulating.

MR. SHIRE: In Italy one of the things that was astounding was, you know, 15 centuries of great stuff, which sort of said, you don't mess around. If you're going to make something fresh - you know, actually make something; here's the rest of it, you know. [Laughs.] And a lot of the guys that are there spend their - you know, don't make art, they restore. That's like their version of hanging drywall or something. All the guys go out and they do, kind of, carpentry or they make drywall.

But over there, you restore stuff, and so there was a different attitude, and I came back with a much higher criteria on my own work. And what was it about those guys? I mean, I don't know. I think - I don't know if this is the place to discuss these things or, you know, what my feelings were about people here, but there - even in art school, I liked the so-called applied arts - the people - more. They were more fun. They were more open. They weren't as pretentious, you know. An art party at Chouinard was all the guys acting tough, standing around being aware. You know, watching everybody walk across the room critically and shit like that.

The illustrators, the graphic designers, you know, had fun. They went to a party, they danced, they talked to each other. Everybody was getting along, and I liked that better. So there was a strong rapport in that respect. You know, there's a lot of stuff that ties in. My dad graduated Pratt [Institute of Art, Brooklyn, NY] in 1932 in illustration, you know; his crossover to fine art, and his, kind of, enthrallment with it was tempered equally with loving groups of graphic people.

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. SHIRE: With the Rockwell Kent, Eric Gill coming in real strong.

MS. LAURIA: So your community - you felt more in alliance with the applied arts.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, with basically everybody CalArts eliminated. To, you know, to give it a parameter. Not that I don't have friends in the fine art department yet.

MS. LAURIA: Sure. But have you always wanted to work three-dimensionally? Because a great body of your work - although, there is a lot of drawing that goes on, and I can see here on your studio table that you constantly and continually draw. But I think the outside world, meaning the art world, probably recognizes you as an artist of three-dimensional objects.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, sure. No, absolutely. And one of the sound bites on that is that when people see my work, they usually think of the object as the finished product. Now, that became evident quite early, you know, that discipline and even the drudgery or, you know, whatever it takes to actually finish it, a lot of it is just - I mean, there's a pleasure in doing it, but, you know, the action already took place, so to speak. There's what are called creative - or there are decisions that are made along the way, and even gains or things that grow out of it even at that moment, but by and large, doing it is a matter of doing it alone, and that's where we start to get into the things you've asked me about, having people make things, you know, et cetera.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you don't restrict yourself to any particular mode. For instance, you engage all of the spectrum of drawing, of flatwork, of objects, of furniture, of different materials.

MR. SHIRE: Right. I do my best.

MS. LAURIA: So, in a way, you think -

MR. SHIRE: I'm the radical outcome of being an elementary school underachiever.

MS. LAURIA: [Laughs] Well, but you don't limit yourself to say, I am -

MR. .SHIRE: Well, so far I've been able to do it. I mean, that's the deal, right? I mean, if you can't, then that settles it.

MS. LAURIA: Let me approach the question at a different angle. If someone asked you, Peter, to describe who you are, your identity, would you say, an artist, a craftsperson, a designer, a painter?

MR. SHIRE: Well, the obvious answer is, it depends on what I'm doing.

MS. LAURIA: But you do it all.

MR. SHIRE: Well, at a given time.

MS. LAURIA: I thought you were going to say the obvious answer is, it depends on to whom I'm selling. [Laughs.]

MR. SHIRE: Or what I always say is, the obvious answer is, to who doesn't like me. [Laughs.] If they don't like designers and they don't like my work, then I'm a designer. [Lauria laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: I know these are just labels, but they're helpful labels in one way.

MR. SHIRE: No, I think that it's critical, and the way I define a designer is referring to that aspect of when most people or craftspeople are practitioners. You know, blacksmiths made horseshoes and you needed one every 20 miles, et cetera. That, you know, a guy made things. There were experiential and practical considerations to how it was done, and every now and then there was a guy who had something extra and that showed in whatever way, and maybe he ended up in the palace doing horseshoes for the king or something.

And, you know, that's a story in art history in the Renaissance. Development of merchandising also. When we morphed into an industrial world, as part of that transition, people who knew how to make things had to show the machines what to do.

MS. LAURIA: And oftentimes they had to make some of the tools and the equipment by hand that the machines would then use -

MR. SHIRE: I mean, there's so much to say.

MS. LAURIA: But we don't have to get into that, because that's a huge story.

MR. SHIRE: Well, the point is that a designer is a craftsman who doesn't use his hands other than to draw, and disseminates that information in a conceptual way. So there's a little bit of a split, you know, and, you know, you get the American craft movement. You get sort of inundated with a funny aesthetic or a language or a look or a whatever you're going to call it. The way that the things actually look when they're finished and the vocabulary and groups of meanings become sort of kitsch in my field of vision, you know.

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you feel you are outside of that American craftsman movement?

MR. SHIRE: Whenever I can, you know. It's very funny, you know, when I first met Garry Knox Bennett. Wendy Maruyama, wanted me to go over there, and Wendy is real sharp, you know. I saw her stuff and I said, that's very original.

[END MD 04 TR 01.]

MR. SHIRE: You know, I said, on top of that a Japanese woman. Wow, what's that about, you know, having my propensities.

MS. LAURIA: Referring to Wendy Maruyama.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, so I met her and it was great, you know; she's really nice and we got along and she liked my work. Actually, she called me and said, I'm going to come through L.A.; can I come over? And, you know, we had a nice time. We went to dinner and all that, and I was already married, so to hell with it. [Lauria laughs.] And then we were all up in the Bay Area and she said, you got to come over and meet Garry Knox Bennett. You know, Gary is in a weird netherworld. He's, you know, something else. Well, I don't know if I want to meet - okay, we'll go. We went over and we didn't really hit it off, because at that point I didn't drink at all. He wanted to drink Jack Daniels, and you know how it is with people that drink and play cards. If you don't drink or you don't play cards, there's something suspect about you or whatever. And so, you know, we didn't really hit it off, but I know it was okay. And he has this great place and I still - he's a character. I mean, I don't know if I'm supposed to critique his work or defend it or denigrate it but -

MS. LAURIA: But was there something about his work that caught your attention?

MR. SHIRE: Well, it was something about him.

MS. LAURIA: Something about him.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. I mean, I was crazy about him. He's just - you know, I mean, who he is and - which leads me into the work and that's good. I think he goes way off the deep end in his - you know, sort of a refugee from a psychedelic poster a lot of the time, which may in itself be of extreme value. But some of the work is totally - I mean, it's all amazing. Here's this craftsman guy, and I think that whatever it is, I can kid him. You know, he's got a sense of humor and, like I say, being led into the work by that aspect, whereas before I wasn't. I just looked and I said, no, this is a guy who is a craftsman and, you know, got too much craft and not enough else. And then I started to look, and I think that some of the work, he really does see shape. He does see volume.

MS. LAURIA: And he also refers to historical forms quite a lot, which is, if you know the historical forms, it's another layer of interest and engagement.

MR. SHIRE: Well, that's okay. You know, that's not my starting or not my jumping off point. I'm thinking principally of those Alley-Oop tables and stuff, where he really kind of cleans up his act and gets rid of the little curly cues and the arrows, which is - but that's San Francisco, too. And of course, you know, he's a working class hero, which greatly appeals to my background.

MS. LAURIA: Well, he makes a variety of forms, as well. I mean, he does not restrict himself to making chairs or tables or furniture. He has a broad range.

MR. SHIRE: Well, I think that's where we started with my work and with talking about it. But just to reiterate, and what I think would be an interesting thing about me as well, is that that touchstone is that he's not from an upper-middle-class family and he's a working class kind of guy.

MS. LAURIA: How do you think, though, that is relevant when you get an objective person looking at the work? Would that come through? I mean, it's relevant to you.

MR. SHIRE: I always wonder about that.

MS. LAURIA: Because I'm not sure I could tell any of your political orientations from looking at your work, or your background or your economics.

MR. SHIRE: No, I don't. That gets into a very sort of psychi-karmic [sp] kind of conversation about what gets in between the lines, et cetera, in anybody's work. You know, I have another idea that we're completely influenced by what we listen to and even things - you know, that we sit here, you know, we're receiving, you know, 500 T.V. stations, and 400 radio stations are all going through us, and that these things are all part of - maybe you could say, you are what you eat or something or, you know, how you feel and the moods that are in the work.

And what I strive for in my work - and this is an ongoing thing, and that is the key element of making a pot is, A, volume. In short, the space that's contained or what isn't there, you know, the void inside the pot that creates it. And the other is that it, you know, it lifts, right? You don't want it sagging on the table. While we're talking, you know, you're smiling because you had Ralph for a teacher, too. And he had Otto and Vivica and so forth and so on, right, and -

MS. LAURIA: The elevation.

MR. SHIRE: The elevation. And then you come back to that scroll in the school hallway and then my own vision of myself as being a fuckup that's had to rail against people that would have sent me off to wherever and my insistence that I can do it somehow, even though I'm not equipped.

MS. LAURIA: But you have done it. [Laughs.] I mean, we're -

MR. SHIRE: Well, you know, that's the thing, is there's a part of you that never thinks that, and there's a part of me that looks around and goes, damn. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: Can you talk a little bit about how you feel being in certain -

MR. SHIRE: What I love is when kids come in here. You know, the 20-year-olds and they're out of art school and they're - we're looking for a studio. And they look around at my place like, what the fuck are you doing in my place, you know, and then they go, I designed a this-and-that for, you know, bohunk and I'm just going - I mean, it's amazing how many of them haven't heard of Memphis that even consider themselves design people and whatnot and how many - you know, and I like to lay for them sometimes. Sometimes I'm in an evil sort of a mood and I like to sneak up on them and go, oh, well, you see this, you know. And I know what this is, and then, you know, look at what's under the carpet here. Why, I did that before you were born. [Lauria laughs.] I'm your parents' age.

MS. LAURIA: Well, can you talk about -

MR. SHIRE: They're younger.

MS. LAURIA: [Laughs] I know that you're preparing to have a show in a couple of weeks and it's a show featuring your chairs.

MR. SHIRE: So there's a what I call transcendental aspect, which is classic American, right. You know, whatever you want to say about it, whether you invent yourself or you, you know - and maybe it's an aspect of existentialism also, but I don't understand that. I understand that even less. But its this idea that you don't have

to be what people told you, and you can be better. And, you know, I put ladders in the things all the time, which are kind of a symbol of that, and that long format is a symbol of that, of -

MS. LAURIA: Transcendence?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, of a form of - you know, it's self-reliance and all that stuff that [Henry David] Thoreau, who was thoroughly funded, was into, you know. [They laugh.] I'm independent. Did my check come this month? [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, you said something actually off tape that I wrote down that I thought was a really interesting idea. You said the nature of art as a business has radically changed. I wonder if you could just expound -

MR. SHIRE: I forget what I meant when I said it at that moment, but I'd probably say the exact same thing. The nature of art has changed. I think for one, art has always been attached to money, so the [John] Ruskin idealism - and as Quentin Bell said, there's enough that's been said about Ruskin's sexuality, and then he proceeded to do another chapter. But, you know, that was the short version of how this guy got to the starving artist and the pure vision and the altruistic need to create beauty and so forth. We have included the middle class, and even, at times, we're giving some sort of service to - lip service or real service to, including the working class and even the - lump in proletariat. You know, whatever we're going to call the remaining.

MS. LAURIA: So you think the art world has to widen to include more -

MR. SHIRE: It has widened and narrowed, and, I think it's hard to - you know, there's an old saying, the more things change, the more they stay the same or vice - more things - yes, that's how it goes. And it's hard to say what was, because I wasn't there necessarily. But, you know, we see the art schools pumping out students at a record rate for whatever - and, you know, I'm sure that they don't bother, you know, with a qualifying class anymore. "Drawings aren't strong. Well, you got tuition?" You know. I mean, I was at Otis a couple of years ago. Have you been there lately?

MS. LAURIA: I haven't been to any classes. But I've been -

MR. SHIRE: Well, I mean, seven floors of people. It's gargantuan. It's got a parking structure, you know.

MS. LAURIA: Indeed, it has a gallery, too.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, well, and galleries - I mean, a big gallery, right. Now normally, they all have galleries but -

MS. LAURIA: Well, I mean, a gallery where they do national and international exhibitions.

MR. SHIRE: Well, I think that we saw, when you talk about the '70s, we saw Pop Art happening. We didn't know much about it, but there were a number of books shortly thereafter, right. *The Art Crowd* by Sophie Burnham [New York: D. McKay Co., 1973], was the one that I read, where they talked about how a group of collectors came in and pumped the art market into a different department financially. And, you know, we look at California, you know, and people say, oh, I go park there.

The artist has always been - you know, there's artists and on and on. And there were, but they were guys that sort of hung out together. They had sketch classes on Wednesday nights. My dad - I went to them and, you know, and people in the garage, and it wasn't about selling. It was about doing and knowing each other and identifying as bohemians, perhaps, but not, you know, not necessarily being able to support oneself this way, you know. At least that's the way it seems here, and you can - I mean, it just wasn't, you know, wasn't a lot people that even expected to sell something.

MS. LAURIA: But even though you have been -

MR. SHIRE: And the key word there is expect.

MS. LAURIA: Okay. But you have - maybe you didn't expect your life to be as traditional in the way that it has somewhat become, which is that you now are a recognized artist. You have relationships with dealers. You do public art commissions.

MR. SHIRE: See, now, there weren't that many dealers.

MS. LAURIA: Well, no, I just want you to talk about the idea that there is this system of qualifying in the art world, which is, first you're regionally recognized. Then you're nationally recognized. And then, you know, you're at the top of the rung when you receive international recognition and you become identified as a part of - I won't say a part of the Memphis group, but certainly people associate some of your influences having had that experience.

MR. SHIRE: Well, what's the question?

MS. LAURIA: The question is, even though you have this outsider view of what it is to be an artist, I mean, in a way, don't you feel like you're living the life of what an artist - seems in a traditional sense?

MR. SHIRE: I, at this point, knock on wood and all that, am a full-time artist. I work in my studio every day. Sometimes it's just watching everybody or picking my nose, and I do business that relates - everything I do relates to that endeavor. You know, in other words, whatever being an artist is, I are it. [Laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: And you have, I think, gotten some great opportunities and taken advantage of them. For instance, I always recall seeing some of your work that you did for the Olympics in 1984.

MR. SHIRE: And that's that design crossover.

MS. LAURIA: And that was brilliant, because think of all the people that were exposed to your work.

MR. SHIRE: Well, you know, I didn't think much of it, you know, at the time. I knew it was cool because I was actually getting paid, and it was very interesting because with that situation, it was all stage sets. It was a totally L.A./Hollywood deal. You know, they were joking at one point that the painters had to shut down because they'd rented every bit of scaffolding between San Diego and Santa Barbara. And it was the first Olympics that made money because they -

MS. LAURIA: In 1984, correct?

MR. SHIRE: Uh-huh [affirmative], L.A., because they didn't actually build anything. And on top of that, I was - you know, I came in, and I make things, you know. And I didn't know how to conceive it any other way, so I made a bunch of stuff that became these tableaux and -

MS. LAURIA: And you did these still structures, too, didn't you? Stacking -

MR. SHIRE: Those were the scaffolds.

MS. LAURIA: Oh, those were the scaffolds.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, that's how they did it. They hung banners and suspended balls and whatnot, and the basic look was, you know, was referred to as new wave at that point, was what I had been around and been at for a few years before, so they really came in. A young woman named Debra Valencia, who is really neat and we've actually done things with, and she really picked up and did some great treatments on the scaffolds with these balls and whatnot. And we all got new cars, and, truth be known, and we realized we didn't charge - what seemed like a lot wasn't as much as it should have been.

I mean, it was wild. You know, they made $150 million, and they were supposed to pay $50 million in stipend to some of the small countries that really couldn't afford it, and they tried to stiff them. But by the time the count came in, they actually had made $200 million, and so they had to go for it. But anyway, again, you know, Robert Fitzpatrick came in, and he'd been head of that, and he called up Koshalek and asked them to do a one-year thing for the stuff. You know, to reassemble my bits as something.

MS. LAURIA: And Robert Koshalek at this time was the director of the Museum of Contemporary Art of L.A.

MR. SHIRE: Right, of MoCA [Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles]. And so that went off, and then we got some money from the LAOOC [Los Angeles Olympic Organizing Committee] to install it and all. And so they kept my stuff when they did their auction. They sold all the stuff that - well, you know, the balls and the banners, but mine they didn't. So then it remained and we reinstalled it and we actually - it was really cool because then what I was able to do was to use it as a sculptural tableau instead of a decoration of two discothèques and assert what we are - you know, the stump we were all pounding, which was that we're really making sculptural elements and interpreting them in this way.

And that became very interesting later when I did a show in Italy where the guy - that was the gallery for Memphis, and there we are, and he was a piece of work. And he says, but I don't want art furniture, and I said, well - who could resist? And I said, what do you mean by art furniture? And he says, I don't know, but I don't want it. [Lauria laughs.] And then Barbara Radice, who is supposed to be a writer and an articulate spokesperson and all that -

MS. LAURIA: And she wrote the book, which is titled *Memphis* [New York: Rizzoli, 1984].

MR. SHIRE: Right. And she was et cetera. And she was curating the show and she said, but Peter, don't do any art furniture. We don't want any art furniture. And I said, wow, lightning strikes twice, and I said, well, you know,

what do you mean by art furniture? And she said - she went into a dither, you know. Well, I don't know. Don't ask me these things, you know. And she was totally out of it.

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Okay. So she was totally out of it and inarticulate and then, I don't know, I had this roll of plans that I had been doing and brought over and whatnot. And I'm going up this hallway - by then, Ettore had the basement and the third floor of the building.

MS. LAURIA: And this is in Milan.

MR. SHIRE: In Milano. And I catch him on the stairs and he's, you know, running around with some millionaires, you know, busy, and he's wearing this full-length navy blue cashmere coat. You know, Milanese stairways are the dankest. I mean, it's right out of - sort of like, too bad the bombs didn't hit this, you know, the tritest of fascist architecture. And here he is, you know, sort of this bleak winter light and this guy in this coat and we're on the stairway, and I had learned by then that you didn't wait for the right time, especially with Ettore but especially with these guys because everything was on the run. And on top of that, they liked a show, you know. You didn't wait for a private moment to look at things and talk about them. If you could roll them out at a dinner or in the hallway where everybody is passing, they loved that shit. They're Italian.

MS. LAURIA: Demonstrative?

MR. SHIRE: And demonstrative. Yes, and frontal and, you know, and all this. And so anyway, and he says, what are you doing? And I said, look. You know, stop. You know, please. My love bug. And so he rolled these things out on these banisters for the stairway. You know, these large cement balustrades. And he says, oh, this is good. This is not so good. I mean, this cat's amazing, right. He is just right on it. Completely seized it, you know, and nails it, all the time. And he - that, that, that, you know, do this, do that. Do this, do that. This one's going to be good, you know. Then he looks at me, and as I'm rolling up the plans and he's about to chase after his clients, says, and don't do any art furniture. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: Third time is the charm, I guess.

MR. SHIRE: You bet you.

MS. LAURIA: So you felt compelled to do all art furniture didn't you?

MR. SHIRE: No, so I said, what do you mean art furniture? And he said, when you approach it, approach it with the strategies of design, not the strategies of sculpture. Show how the thing was made in the way that it is presented - you know, in the way that it looks. Explain how it was made. And, you know, I'm probably missing some part of what he said but that was the gist of it. And - [laughs] - then he said, as we were parting, he turns back to me and he said, besides, the aspects of art are too sophisticated for this gallery and too complex. [Laughs.] That was off the record, right. So you get the picture. So that was very interesting because - then I'm on the plane going back and I'm in this torpor of, you know, the big flight and all that and being on an airplane coming back from a couple of weeks of, you know -

MS. LAURIA: Intensity.

MR. SHIRE: - intensity and all of that, and trying to sleep and I'd come in and out of sleep and do these sketches. And I saw this table that was a product of how it was made, and it was like it flipped out and it had these cans that attached it. And it was really cool because not only did it look great but it could be disassembled and stacked flat for storage, because you could reach right up under these cans and screw it together. So I finally got back to Italy and the thing was made and it was really cool-looking, and this guy Godani, who was a goofball, says, but you really made one terrible mistake. Well, it was one of many in his view, but, you know, he gave them to me one at a time and he said, you drew it so the cans were open on the bottom and you could see how it was made, and it was really hard to make so that we hid all the fasteners. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: And that was opposite of what you were aiming for?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I mean, he just didn't get it.

MS. LAURIA: Didn't get it, right.

MR. SHIRE: And the finished product looked exactly the same.

MS. LAURIA: Well, how would you describe the chairs? I'm just going to bring this up to contemporary time because, obviously, there's only so much time we can talk and I want to give you the chance to really tell us how you feel about this show that is opening in a couple of weeks, which is just called "Peter Shire Chairs."

MR. SHIRE: By Frank Lloyd Gallery.

MS. LAURIA: At Frank Lloyd Gallery on October 20, 2007 [through November 24, 2007], and how - I mean, Frank, in his press release, says that you have been "working since the 1970s at an intersection," meaning, he goes on to explain, "where craft, fine art, and industrial design collide."

MR. SHIRE: And popular culture, which would be merchandising.

MS. LAURIA: Okay, well, that's not here, but he does mention that you've had "forays into architecture, furniture, and ceramic sculpture, and the recent chairs continue your blend of influences, boldly presenting planes of color, visible structure, and balanced tension." So did you think of all of that when you were drawing out these chairs, or has it become so intuitive for you that you can sit down and think of things? Obviously, there's some connection to the chairs. I think color palette.

MR. SHIRE: Well, at this point - it's really interesting because, you know, when you're young and you do one thing and you figure out a way to advance it and do another thing, it's so big because that's the second thing or maybe the third or fourth. And now, as you're saying, it's the seventieth or hundreth or whatever.

MS. LAURIA: But it's still an evolution.

MR. SHIRE: It's still an evolution, but, you know, you might compare it to the difference between a five-year-old and one-year-old. You know, they're five times older, but a 95-year-old and 100-year-old, right, so, you know, you don't feel the same way, and you don't feel it the same way. But a lot of the strides are much bigger, actually, and that's hard to identify, and it's different, you know.

MS. LAURIA: Maybe I can get you to talk a little bit more specifically about your work by asking you this. Somebody walking into the gallery - into Frank Lloyd's gallery - and they're going to see your chairs. I don't know how many, probably 20, maybe more.

MR. SHIRE: Maybe less.

MS. LAURIA: Maybe less, but it's -

MR. SHIRE: Ralph [Baccerra] is going to curate the show and set it. Did you know that?

MS. LAURIA: No, but it's a body of work, and let's say they don't know you. They don't know your work. What do you hope that this viewer will get from observing - just seeing your work in this gallery setting?

MR. SHIRE: Okay, check it out. You got Bergamot Station, which is a broad destination with 30 or 40 galleries, all different, which means that you're inevitably -

MS. LAURIA: You're talking about context, though.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, but it is context, because you compare that to the sculpture at the state building up here. You know, they have these Armenian guards. I'm standing there with the operations guy, who is black, the Armenian guard, and myself this morning, and some kind of middle-America Glendale blonde is walking through. And the Armenian guard, who is kind of a funny guy, kind of a clod, yells at her, do you like this sculpture? And she says, no, I don't like it at all. And the - [laughs] - and the operations guy says, this is the artist.

You know, and you can see her going, I can't say I don't like it now. I can't be diplomatic now. I have dug myself in, but let's see what I can do. And basically, I get a hold of her. You know, she says - you know, she's completely indefinite. In other words, she didn't want to say - I said, well, would you like to see a bronze sculpture of CHP [California Highway Patrol] officers in here? You know, that's the classic bane of public artists. You know, the bullshit. And she goes, no, I don't think that'd be - I'd really like to see something bronze. In other words, she doesn't know what the fuck she thinks other than it's not her taste. And she says, it sort of would be better in a kid's room, or, it's a toy. I think they led her a little bit and said, it's like toys. She goes, I think it would be better somewhere else, and I said, like a museum. I couldn't resist, right, and she says, yes. [Lauria laughs.]

MS. LAURIA: All right. So back -

MR. SHIRE: So in other words, people say - they know it's good, they know it's great, but they think it's not for them, and that's one of the deals in my, you know, challenge in public art, is to raise their expectations. So the context in - yes, I'm very aware of that and I'm thinking it's a very competitive, visual environment.

MS. LAURIA: At Bergamot Station.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and it's an experiment that has both succeeded and failed in terms of the idea of having a

shopping mall of art galleries and a forced alternative audience that you might not get if you were alone in the field and people came straight to you and that's that. And I want to get their attention. I want them to come in and say, wow, that's neat. That's something that I can love.

MS. LAURIA: That's certainly valid.

MR. SHIRE: I don't know how else to phrase it, but, you know, Philip Guston had a whole thing where he's talking about the force of a work on a wall, you know, and so forth, and there's a bit of that. I think that there's a great deal of force in the amount of energy, and I've often been concerned with that, and if I could bottle it and sell it, or if I could figure out where to go get it, I'd pour it all over everything.

MS. LAURIA: Well, have you had a review of your work or a feature article?

MR. SHIRE: Did that get at what you're trying to talk about?

MS. LAURIA: Well, I think so. I gather that you really want people to be engaged with the work. You want them -

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I want them to come in and not say, oh, more paintings and ahh, I don't quite - ehh, you know, or whatever they say.

MS. LAURIA: Well, museum studies show that people only look at an object for three seconds, and the idea is to get them to linger longer. And there are several ways to do that, I mean, by having just an astounding work and shocking work or an overcontextualized work. Something that is very didactic, and then people feel compelled that they have to know exactly the points which are being visualized.

MR. SHIRE: Sure.

MS. LAURIA: So in -

MR. SHIRE: We should talk about this afterwards.

MS. LAURIA: But your -

MR. SHIRE: Or you can always put a sofa in front of it.

MS. LAURIA: [Laughs] But your work, you want people to linger longer, obviously, but to feel connected with it. That to have a dynamic connection in the sense of the exchange of energy.

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: And how you accomplish that could be in several strategies, and if you want to talk about how you do that - I mean, your work is colorful - mostly is colorful - and I think color is a big draw for people. And is it something about its playfulness or its whimsicality? A lot of your work feels very animated, as if, you know, it would go off and walk on its own if it could.

MR. SHIRE: And that's that Constructivist-Cubist influence, Futurist, you know, movement stuff, and not to mention cartoons. And there's a lot of cartoons, and the - well, we want to be admired. I mean, that's what being an artist - that's often what starts it, don't you think? I mean, for whatever reason.

MS. LAURIA: Well, it's an expression of who you are.

MR. SHIRE: An expression, and you've got to do something to get on in the world and see - you know, you're drawing attention to yourself, and that's got to be part of your desire, or you're in the wrong biz.

MS. LAURIA: Right. But I was asking a question about the publication only because - have you read something - have you ever read something that someone said about your work that you really felt was -

MR. SHIRE: Right on the money.

MS. LAURIA: - right on the meaning? I mean, that they got it, and if you have it, if you could share that with us, or you say that Ettore is so on the mark all the time.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. His little essays that he's done for me are that way. And of course, you know, he's not an average guy and he's - even in an Italian sense, you know, which is to say that he's flamboyant and luxurious amongst a group of people that are flamboyant and luxurious. And he's able to see things in a way that generates the love and generates the way that people are. And there's always a big discussion of, if it's a cup, you have the feeling of how people have been around it, then how it has a history and how people would come

around it and things like that. And how it, you know, all of these long-range things, and we are a group of people - and it isn't a new thing, but it's certainly enhanced by the industrial era - that get meaning and tell stories through objects.

Objects tell stories. You know something about the owner, or you imagine people who've owned it, and what they've been to it and why they would own it. And, you know, again, that's that big question, that big magazine writer's question. What kind of people buy your work? You know, assholes. But what kind of people buy your work, and what they want to hear is, you know, well, Jennifer Lopez bought it, you know, or something or - you know what I mean? Kind of weird descriptions, and then they want to hear something like, oh, you know, extravagant, frivolous people that, you know, you aren't -

You know, like you, the Glendale lady with a bad hair job or, you know, but the upshot of it is that the people that are interested in these things - we come right back to the beginning of our conversation - are people who are looking for something that is authentic. Something that has the hand - the mark of a person's hand - on it in some way and something that brings into their life groups of thoughts of excitement. These are exciting things. My take on this gal in Glendale is a cross between wanting go after her and chop her head off because she's a dope and wanting to bring her along and -

MS. LAURIA: Or to understand why she feels -

MR. SHIRE: No.

MS. LAURIA: No, you don't care.

MR. SHIRE: Understanding is only a strategy to figure out how to get her on the bus.

MS. LAURIA: As the Japanese say, *hai* [I hear you].

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I understand. Well, *kaerimashita* [went home]. Yes, and I've done it occasionally with people that - Memphis was like that. A lot of people got really alienated by it because they didn't think they were included. They weren't invited to design for it. It got too much attention for them. You know, that they perceived themselves as not getting - things like that. And they needed to feel included. And by a little attention, I could often help, and that's very interesting. And I think in trying to, you know, understand this person, which we're applying in a broad sense to what we talked about before and what kind of people buy this.

A lot of people are very afraid. They're afraid to feel. They're afraid to be too excited. They think - you know, they're repressed, in short. That reaction is an action of asserting their repression over themselves. You know, if that's not trying too hard to - but you know what I'm saying, that there's a lot people who say, you know, I feel like shit, but I know how I feel. [Laughs.] And I'm comfortable with that because - well, it's the devil you know or something. So I think that there's something that I like, and that's that thing that I was looking for around the corner in my imagination of excitement. I want to be excited. I want to see things that I haven't seen.

MS. LAURIA: So, Peter, as to the future, where will this take you? Have you thought about, you know, 10 years down the road? Do you see yourself as working in the same manner? Do you see any other big leaps that you might want to make? Do you want to do - would you like to have a big survey show of your work and all of its aspects?

MR. SHIRE: Well, one of the things that I think about that probably I should never put on tape, too, is what would bring people to a show? I mean, I don't how other people work. I'm sure that a lot of these guys are very cunning that we know of, but certain things are of interest to people. You know, this guy Gerard O'Brien [owner of Reform Gallery, Los Angeles, CA]. Do you know Gerard O'Brien? You know Gerard. Well, what he says, well, I had 30 Schindler furnitures all in one place and barely any people came. And he says, when will it ever happen again, and when has it ever happened?

But I couldn't - you know, that alone should have been an impetus. And the simple fact of the matter is if Brad Pitt and Angelina Jolie had showed up there, everybody would be interested. It's like this weird celebrity deal, and I don't know that it's any different in any era. You know, there's those that are in the know, and in the past, as we say, that was probably more separated and people didn't care as much because they didn't hope to make a living in that way or they didn't - you know what I mean. They didn't hope to because it didn't happen that way that much.

MS. LAURIA: Well, you also have another aspect of your career, which is that you're often asked to do public commissions, and I think -

MR. SHIRE: Not only asked, I throw myself in the way of these things.

MS. LAURIA: I experienced several of them myself by going down to the L.A. Public Library or being at the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising [Los Angeles]. There's nearby a wonderful tile sculpture by you.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, you know what? It's one of my imitators'.

MS. LAURIA: It is?

MR. SHIRE: Yes, that was done by fucking - excuse me, you probably have to bleep - that one doesn't belong to me.

MS. LAURIA: We don't have go there, but you do public -

MR. SHIRE: That was done - actually Marlo did one.

MS. LAURIA: Marlo Bartels.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, which, of course, I'm totally in favor of because I love him and he's such a character.

MS. LAURIA: But this is also a viable way to have a career.

MR. SHIRE: Well, it's turned into one with Joel Wachs's little gambit.

MS. LAURIA: One Percent for Art [U.S. General Services Administration Percent for Art program].

MR. SHIRE: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And, of course, you know, I think for some reason - well, not for some reason, but I'm cut out for it. I can handle the bullshit and I can handle the bureaucratic stuff without going nuts. And I can make the things so that they can actually afford to be made, you know.

MS. LAURIA: On the budgets that they have.

MR. SHIRE: Yes. And I've got a great sense of not only what art is and can be and what I want it to be, but also what can cross over and, hopefully, bring it to people. And that's - of course, that's the classic gambit of the functional work and including sculptural - you know, making them as sculptures but as functional things. A lot of that came out of Adrian [Saxe] one day saying to me, you know, you can make a teapot that pours out of the bottom, you know. [They laugh.]

And then he said, well, you know, if you can do that well, why not make it into a sculpture? And of course, you know, we had that strong drive, and Ken Price was off and running with cups, and there was not much room left in cups after that. And in retrospect, there was also a drive for me to make a central object. It not only had more parts and, you know, not only a functional challenge, but a challenge of parts. You know, more elements. But it also is the center object. It's the social object. The cup is the completive [sic] individual object. And then when I started doing furniture, I went straight to tables.

MS. LAURIA: Because that's a gathering place.

MR. SHIRE: Exactly. That's the central object. And the chairs have a whole different thing and, you know, I've made chairs. I've actually always made cups. I've got hundreds of cups that I've never shown, because people don't really want to see cups from me.

MS. LAURIA: Well, maybe they don't think it's the grand statement.

MR. SHIRE: Oh, yes. Well, there's a lot of that. You know, and that's the deal, again, with the drawings and the finished object. The activity is in the drawing. The moment, the footprint in the sand that you've caught from the air.

MS. LAURIA: That generates the actual object.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, right.

MS. LAURIA: And when you have a show, and I think it's a wonderful thing that - well, Frank [Lloyd] does it. I don't know about other galleries, but generally there are the drawings displayed along with the objects.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, I insist on that.

MS. LAURIA: And I think that's important because it shows people the thought process that goes into art.

MR. SHIRE: It not only shows them the thought process, but, you know, again, I'm still pissed off they didn't like my drawings. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: Well, that brings us back to disc one.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, exactly.

MS. LAURIA: But since we are going to be running out of time any minute, why don't you talk a little bit about what you hope the future of your art will be. I mean -

MR. SHIRE: Isn't that interesting? Well, this is a big question right now because I'm 59. I'll be 60 in a matter of months. December 27, as we said. And, you know, you look at that and you always think of, you know, of the possible demise of one's body, and I'm very glad. And sometimes when I'm in bed at night and I'm about to go to sleep, I say, if there's a God - seeing as I'm a conscious objector - if there's a God, thank you very much. [Laughs.] Thank you for not giving me a bad liver. Thank you for - you know, it's on the litany and, you know, there was a groove. You know, today was a good one. Whatever happened, because I wasn't sick and I felt good.

And you look at that, and, you know, there's attitudes of our generation being very large and certain dialogues being ubiquitous. There's aspects of our time where we're aging differently, et cetera, and there's that aspect of the fact that my dad was a health faddist. That's what they used to call people who went in for health food and stuff. And before - which was a very California thing, but a very - I mean, there was no Whole Foods. Whole Foods is bogus, besides which. And, you know, we went to these strange places. They're almost clandestine, and I could go on about that. That was amazing, and there's a real, you know, funny kind of part of California. Doctor Rauscher [ph]. He had this guy, Doctor Rauscher, who baked cookies right over here on Glendale Boulevard, and we'd go in there on the way home and get these fresh cookies. Oatmeal with honey, you know. Oh, man. Oatmeal with honey is something special.

And so the point is that - you know, my friend Leonard Corin once said to me, I don't eat health food because I think it's going to make me live longer; I eat it because it makes me feel good at the moment, which was a very, kind of, Leonard thing to say, but you do both, and I have had that experience, so maybe I have a good chance of going on for a while. But you think, well, 60, 60 to 70, 70 to 80. You know, and then it's sort of up for grabs, and they're saying that we're going to live a lot longer and that our children will even live longer than us. But we're starting to see people pass away. People die around us. It's like that doesn't happen. You know, all you do is put a new carburetor on. Well, they missed that with him, you know. But people aren't machines.

MS. LAURIA: But do you feel a sense of urgency because -

MR. SHIRE: Absolutely. I see things in a more organized and more frustrated way than I did. And I see - one of the ways that it manifests itself is looking at the drawings, because I can draw, you know, however many ideas, but as far as actually producing them, maybe one out of a hundred. I mean, look at that whole box, is full of chairs. Which one?

MS. LAURIA: Chair drawings.

MR. SHIRE: Yes.

MS. LAURIA: Which one do you -

MR. SHIRE: Well, it's full of chairs.

MS. LAURIA: Right. [Laughs.]

MR. SHIRE: You know what I'm saying?

MS. LAURIA: Right.

MR. SHIRE: You know, for me it's full of chairs, and the question is, which one is important? Which is the one? And that'll make you crazy.

MS. LAURIA: Well, do you rely on somebody externally to tell you that, or do you just -

MR. SHIRE: Yes. I talk to my wife and - you know, who has a graphic design background - and I ask my friend Franklin, who we know. Who is sitting here with us, because we both like -

MS. LAURIA: In the photograph.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, we both like Oriental women. I know I'm supposed to say Asian. And we like Oriental women, and I said, Franklin, why do you think that is? And fucking Franklin says, it's our working-class sympathies. [Laughs.] Well, all right, so, you know - I mean, Franklin knew more about Marxism than I did. He was a better student, but the real deal is, A, they didn't look like my mother. B, they didn't act like her. C, they looked really

amazing. I love black hair. And the other is that when you start to look at it, the whole aspect of aesthetics is not something for faggots. You know what I mean?

MS. LAURIA: [Laughs] All right.

MR. SHIRE: I mean, I'm kind of putting it in a shorthand there, but, you know, what we're saying is that, just like this gal from Glendale, she said, well, something good isn't for me. You know, not every day. You know, in museums it's okay. But the Japanese say the opposite by and large.

MS. LAURIA: That aesthetics should be part of their everyday experience. But okay, Peter. So if you wanted to say something -

MR. SHIRE: So I tell my wife - I say, what do you think of this, and then I can usually gauge whether I should do it or shouldn't, but that doesn't mean that if she says I should do it, then I say I should do it. So she always says, why do you ask me, because you never do what I say anyway, and I say, but that's the whole point. If you say not to do it, I know it's a good idea. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: What would you like people to - if you could choose your legacy, which, of course, we can't, but let's say -

MR. SHIRE: Isn't that interesting?

MS. LAURIA: In a fantasy world, if you could choose what people would remember about your work or about you, in a nutshell, what would you like them to come away with? Contemplating Peter Shire and Peter Shire work.

MR. SHIRE: I don't know if I - maybe if I had more time or it was a different thing, I could put it on an abstract example. My example would be specific. It would be Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera. You know, here was this guy with a very large everything. Large career. Large work. You know, totally radically competent, fabulous artist. And here was this woman who was sort of crinky, you know, sort of did these things, but somehow she connected with something that carried so much further that it really alluded - it sort of snuck in there. And I think I would like to be that person, and I think that, you know, from my point of view, I'm always doing that. I mean, the whole deal with going to Italy, you know, was basically sort of under the radar for everybody here. They didn't have - you know what I mean?

It was sort of this thing where I went outside the parameters and didn't have to play by their rules and did something that had a broad meaning and that the applied arts, the furniture, and all of that stuff really connects to people's lives and that if I can bring the emotional and the strategic - not only historic language and idea - you know, fine art is called fine because it addressed the fine sensibilities, but I don't think that's me. I'm kind of goofy and not quite crude. I'm actually not crude at all, but I'm kind of awkward. I think that there's an - in other words, the emotional impact and the funk of art, you know. In other words, if, to me, if art is really good, if it's really functioning, it conveys feelings and brings you into a space and has a key way.

MS. LAURIA: And that should be in perpetuity. It should not be dated.

MR. SHIRE: Well, that's a whole deal. You know, that doesn't happen if it's not good, that's all, you know. If it's totally of its time, then it'll never be dated. You know, that's what people say when they realize that something was kind of - wasn't that great. And so if it connected that way, if it connected as a key way, as a passage through to a space that's hard to reach -

MS. LAURIA: Then it has functioned properly for you.

MR. SHIRE: Yes, and it has functioned, right? You know, that's one of those kind of places you can end. But you know, Evelyn Waugh had a great quote in *The Loved One* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1947], where he's talking about Aimee Thanatogenos, who was a takeoff on Amy Semple McPherson, you know, and so forth, and he said, she was the sort of person that had sparse mental furniture. [They laugh.]

MS. LAURIA: That was very affecting and effective.

MR. SHIRE: Not Amy Semple McPherson but Aimee Thanatogenos, who he used, and she became a beautician in a mortuary because they always did what she said, you know, which was - [Lauria laughs] - they didn't talk. She didn't have to talk to them. And on and on, but, I mean, you know, he was ruthless in his satire of L.A. at that moment. You know who - oh, this is art conversation. We could go on forever.

MS. LAURIA: Well, let's end the tape there then.

MR. SHIRE: Well, so the idea is that function isn't just utility.

MS. LAURIA: No, it isn't. It has a lot of different aspects to it.

MR. SHIRE: And that we really do build our lives and our ways of thinking and our feelings with the ephemeral - with thoughts and with objects and visions and visuals and metaphors that we continue. And hopefully, like you say, we're very much hopeful that we'll add something. You know, leave more than we took.

MS. LAURIA: Thank you, Peter.

MR. SHIRE: And I want to take a lot.

[Lauria laughs.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]

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